

# THE THUNDER GAMES



By A. Pääbo

# The THUNDER GAMES

By Andres Pääbo

Written and first published in 2014 in a pdf file onto the internet  
at [www.paabo.ca/thundergames/index.html](http://www.paabo.ca/thundergames/index.html)

Copyright 2014 Andres Paabo

Contact info : A.Paabo, Box 478, Apsley, Ont. CAN, K0L 1A0 -  
[andres2010@paabo.ca](mailto:andres2010@paabo.ca) - [www.paabo.ca](http://www.paabo.ca) - 705-656-9387

As always in artistic works, the author/artist reserves all  
copyrights/trademarks to the original creative work including the use  
of the words 'Thunder Games' and 'Green Lung' used in a similar  
context without permission.,.

# PREFACE

You have probably heard of the term ‘Climate Change’. There is a great debate going on today in 2015 about what to do. There is the fossil fuel industry that makes money from fossil oil, fossil gas and fossil coal, that would rather do nothing that would stop the extraction of it from underground and public consumption of it. There are political leaders who like it when the fossil fuel industry profits and stimulates employment. There are governments do not want to spend money on measures to lower greenhouse gas emissions, if other governments are not doing so. The world is fragmented with many different interests all going in different directions, and nobody – other than the scientists who are watching the change – wants to acknowledge it as a serious problem. Humankind, I think, cannot act unless they are actually directly experiencing the consequences. And even if humans do act, the problem is global in scale, and local piecemeal actions will achieve little. The following story sees little being achieved for centuries after 2015, until the global “Green Lung Initiatives” was begun around 2700. I welcome the reader to the story of a teenager living in this world, and becoming involved with the *Thunder Games*, an event to honour the giant bird of the weather, the Thunderbird.



PART ONE:  
RIIA'S WORLD

# 1. The Storm

My name is Riia Greenthistle. I am 17 and a high school student in my senior year. The village here beside the mountain wilderness is very small and our highschool has only three classrooms and no more than around a hundred students. My family once lived closer to the east coast. We came to this rural location five years ago, as refugees from the greatest storm humankind has ever seen, ever since the climate warming began many centuries ago – they say a thousand years ago. Ever since the Green Lungs Initiatives things have been slowly improving but now and then we still get some extraordinary weather events. One such event happened to us.

We had originally thought it was just another storm and it would pass, but that proved not to be the case. It was soon clear we were not safe in our home, even if it was built to the latest design to resist the forces of the worst of our extreme weather events.

I remember how the wind-driven water was all around us. The rain was driven so hard by the wind that we could not see anything out the window. It was scary.

Our home could have endured rain and wind but there was a further threat we could not escape. The news report on our livingroom screen was telling us

that a storm surge, a wall of water, was now travelling up the river known as Huddon. A storm surge had never travelled as far as our location ever before. We had always thought we were safe in this location, but soon our livingroom screen was flashing instructions that everyone in our area had to evacuate. The wave would still be ten meters tall even after a hundred kilometers from the sea. The screen showed views of the weather system from a satellite, and it was nothing anyone had seen in any weather report in more than a century.

“Three hurricanes coming up the east coast of the Lantic have converged, and become one,” said the reporter on the screen. “We are predicting this will be the Hurrigeddon of the century, maybe even millenium!”

Our government was already prepared with evacuation procedures from centuries of experience evacuating cities along the coast from earlier extreme hurricanes and the rise in sea level from polar melting.

“We’ve got to leave, children,” said our father. The flashing instructing us to evacuate was a local instruction. That meant people in this area. We had to act. “They estimate we have no more than a half hour,” our father continued, getting up and taking charge of us. “We’ve got to gather together everything we want to take, and head up the road to the evacuation trains at the railway terminal here, before

the flood reaches here. We have a half an hour to get there. Get together everything important to you, and that you can carry and we'll leave immediately."

I was only twelve at the time. My brother Russ was nine, my brother Reed was seven and my sister Riddle was five. I remember hurrying to my room downstairs, and trying to decide what I couldn't do without, what was important to me. I grabbed first the obvious important things – my memory sticks that contained all my accumulated videos and photos, my communication devices, the many small knickknacks I had crafted, my most favourite clothes, and the most rugged jacket I possessed to deal with the storm.

In my rummaging through my possessions, I stopped when I saw my favourite necklace. My tiny silver Thunderbird. I had become fond of this necklace. Everyone knew how the descendants of the Native peoples, or "Innat" peoples, revered the Thunderbird in this world of extreme weather. But you didn't have to be part of an Innat community to know about their traditional symbol bird of storms, and to relate to its meaning in today's world.

I turned it over in my hand. I had always seen this necklace as a good luck charm against extreme weather. It was a naive idea, but I felt more secure wearing it. And now was a good time to wear it. I put it around my neck, and continued packing up everything I could take.



With all the bags I could put over my shoulder or carry in my hand, I hurried back to the others upstairs who were also returning to the livingroom. We checked each other to make sure we were all set to head out into the driving rain. I made sure my sister Riddle had packed the most important things, and included warm clothes. And our father checked what the boys had gathered together in their packs.

“We can’t take more than we can carry,” our father reminded us. “We have to push through the rain and wind for about a half kilometer to get to the emergency evacuation trains. It will be very windy. We have to connect ourselves together by the cord.”

The cord was designed for such storm emergencies. It had clasps that attached to belts on our jackets. And we headed out into the weather.

Our neighbourhoods had been designed with structures to provide shelter at street level from the full impact of weather. Otherwise the wind could have picked up Riddle, and carried her into the air. The wind and rain howled all around us. Others were making their way to the evacuation trains too.

Before long, we made it into the terminal. We joined the crowd of people already there. Everyone was drenched with rain, dripping puddles onto the floor. The train being loaded was getting packed. As late-comers, we had to get in the last car, standing room only.

The electric train carried us and the other evacuees towards the west, towards higher ground. It deposited families at various interior towns where evacuation centers had been set up, usually in local arenas or community halls. At each town along the railway line, the train only opened doors for as many cars as the town evacuation center at that location was designed to handle. Being in the last car, we ended up going furthest inland, a town close to the mountains, called Traynton. Traynton was established already centuries ago inland and on higher ground in the century of the rebuilding of towns and cities, after the rise of the sea level from the melting of polar ice.

At the Traynton evacuation center, we were given cots and supplies to make ourselves at home. A large screen on the wall was always on, giving updates on the storm. On the screen we saw scenes of the destruction on the coast, updates on evacuations, maps showing the progress of the super-storm, and expert analysis. The announcers repeated over and over the word "Hurrigeddon", and the expert opinion that this was the storm of the century, and maybe even the storm of the millenium.

"Throughout the centuries of the warming of the climate have we seen a storm like this," said the announcer. There had been many giant storms in the past millenium, but this was the worst so far. They mentioned it so many times, it became boring.

Thus, along with fifty other families, we huddled together there for several days until our fate was more clear. My family wondered how our home was, how our community was. Would we be able to return?

I wished our mother was there. She had pursued a career with the World Space Agency, and had shortly before, joined a solar system expedition as a mission specialist, on a seven year mission. At this particular time they were travelling in the direction of Jupiter. We had not been entirely without her since she left, since we had been able to transmit videos back and forth through the WSA. It was a long distance marriage that our parents had, in which our father had elected to be the primary parent for us children.

“We won’t transmit anything to Mother, yet,” said Father when Riddle suggested it. “Not until we know our fate. Besides it would be difficult to connect with the WSA from here, without our own communication service.”

After four days lingering in the evacuation centre, the government was ready to deal with us. Father joined a line-up to speak to an official at a desk that had been set up. The official had on his computer device, all the information for each of our cases including where we have come from, and what our property had been. And now he had more information.

“Mr. Greenthistle,” said the official to our father as he read his screen, “news about your property is not good.”

The official told him that the area where our home had been located had been completely destroyed, washed over by a wall of water striking the hill where our house had been located. Even though houses were massively built and with a low profile, apparently the storm surge washed away the soil, and overturned many buildings. The government decided the area was not worth rebuilding but that it was to be abandoned to wilderness. In Nomerica, as elsewhere in the world, the policy was and is that if people lost property to a hurricane or flood or other extreme weather, the area was *not* to be rebuilt but to be returned to nature. It would become government property, but the original owner of that property could take an equivalent amount of land from the government-controlled interior wilderness reserves – those wild areas created by the Green Lung Initiatives in the last few centuries.

The Green Lung Initiatives is a program begun three centuries ago when finally humankind became united to take action to repair the damage caused by centuries of indiscriminant polluting of the atmosphere, and to restore denuded areas to healthy green wilderness in order to boost the reduction of

carbon dioxide from the atmosphere that was done by green plants.

We already learned as children the principle that by drawing carbon dioxide down, the greenhouse effect in which the atmosphere captured too much heat, would be reduced, and hopefully the earth could be returned more to how it once was before humankind began using fuel from under the ground and outside nature's processes.

The official suggested our family could most easily choose an amount of land on the edge of the North-Eastern Mountain Wilderness Reserve that lay only some 20 kilometers to the west of Traynton. "It would be easiest to choose a property in the nearby Wilderness Reserve. We have put maps up on the wall. The parts along its edge shaded blue are available."

The family gathered around the maps and we discussed our options.

We didn't have the luxury to go to the sites to inspect our possible choices, so we simply chose from a map the property closest to a village that had both a lower school and high school since all us children were still school age.

"This would do us fine," said Father, pointing to a blue area where there was a small village nearby. "The village has lower and higher schools for you children. What more do we need?"

“But there is no train to there,” I said.

“Well there is a train to Traynton which is where we are now, and is about 20 km away.”

In the beginning we lived in a tent, or accepted the hospitality of Samon Thomasson who operated a commercial ecofarm outside of Greenville. We children began school right away as Father made all the arrangements to get our new house constructed. The lower and higher schools are side by side – it made sense for such a small body of students to share facilities. For example the high school part is so small that they have only three classrooms for three levels – junior, intermediate and senior – and only a handful of teachers covering many subjects.

While Greenville, being near the mountains, is sheltered from the most extreme weather, it still uses the established building styles. They are low to the ground, only a single story above ground, but can have additional floors below ground. One can tell that there have been a few strong storms in the past centuries since there are quite a few oaks that have been gnarled by strong winds. In general trees do not grow very tall anymore. Tall ones get blown over before they become mature.

Anyway, it is now the anniversary of the fifth year since we came here. I have never regretted our moving away from the urban environment and losing many of the luxuries and conveniences we had. In the

last five years we have acquired a nice home and adapted to our new rural life. But we children became especially excited in having the Wilderness Reserve on our boundary. We grew up learning a great deal about nature when humankind leaves it to go wild – which was the whole idea behind the “Green Lung Initiatives” program of restoring all the lost jungle and forests of the planet, since green plants breathe in carbon dioxide – the major greenhouse gas that has made our planet too warm. It is expected in some centuries it will cool down the atmosphere and return earth to how it once was a thousand years ago before humankind became insanely obsessed with using fuels from underground and inside atoms – neither of which occur in nature’s processes.

It is early summer. After five years going to school here in Greenville, I will be graduating. I am constantly wondering what my next step in life will be? Will I have to now go elsewhere? Go to university like my parents did? I really don’t want to return to a city environment.

It is Saturday morning. I have gone to the ridge where I like to go to reflect on things. There is no school Saturday - except there is an archery competition this afternoon in which I am involved.

Our small archery team is taking on the Hillstown High School archery team. It will be the last

competition of the year, and because I am graduating, it will be the last one I will be involved in.

I dread having to leave this wonderful wilderness area. I'll miss hiking and hunting if I go away.

I am right now perched on a cliff within the Wilderness Reserve. It is one of the few places with a good view over the wilderness to the south. After several centuries the Northeast Mountain Wilderness Reserve has flourished and all cleared land has returned to forest. With the regrowth there are few places on earth anymore where a person can look out over the landscape, unless one climbs a tall tree, or finds a naturally treeless ridge like I found.

Our Wilderness Reserve is a more northerly kind of forest. It consists of a mixed deciduous and coniferous forests and northern types of wildlife. It is all wilderness that has been allowed to go completely wild since three centuries ago. Not only were all cleared parts of it allowed to reforest, but all human activities were terminated, communities removed. But the government allows people to visit it, even to hunt wild animals, as long as they don't make any permanent changes that cannot quickly return to the wild. After three centuries humankind is used to it and there are no more attempts to break the laws. With all the satellites scanning the earth from above, it is difficult for anyone to get away with anything



illegal. I suppose the satellites could even focus on me right now sitting at the top of the cliff.

The phone-ring, or “Phring” on my middle finger produces a tinkling sound. I lift my hand closer to my ear and answer.

“Chip!” It is my neighbour and classmate, Chip Thomasson, son of Samon Thomasson with whom we have been close friends for the last five years. Chip is in my class, and he will be graduating this year too, but he knows his future – he will be continuing in his father’s business.

. “...I’m at the cliff. The place where I often go to look out over the mountain wilderness and meditate... What about?...About the next stage in my life, you know – after I graduate next week. Did you know it was five years ago today that my family acquired the property? The last five years have gone by too fast. I would like to continue to stay here. I would like to live here, hunt in the wilderness, and to continue in highschool forever....”

Chip was at this moment at the high school, helping prepare for this afternoon’s big archery competition with Hilltown High in the neighbouring town.

“...The view is wonderful here,” I continue, as I gaze at the blue-grey silhouette of the distant mountain on the opposite side of the valley. “It’s a calm afternoon. I can see the blue of the sky. But there are

white clouds. It's hazy though. A thunderstorm could erupt later today. As we all know, haze means the air is filled with water, and there is considerable potential energy...."

At that moment, I noticed something. There is a silvery sphere floating past. Then I see some more floating in an easterly direction above the forest tops.

"....I can see a flurry of spheres floating by....They're the kind that contains helium and that float with the breezes and collect information for the World Climate Monitoring. You know the kind. I don't think they have any propulsion – they just float with the winds and collect information. Here comes one floating towards me. I'll grab it."

With my Phring hand still at my right cheek, I reach out my left hand and grab the sphere. It is the size of a small ball of the kind children play with. I turn it over in my hand. "It is a silvery," I tell Chip, "but I can tell the surface has photoelectric cells so it must collect energy from the sun to power the transmitting of the information it collects....Well it's all for the cause of the Green Lung Initiatives. These aerial devices are measuring everything going on in our atmosphere, and how productive the wilderness reserves are in absorbing carbon dioxide....I'd better let this go back into the current..."

I gently tossed the weightless sphere back into the breeze to join the others floating by.

Although there is plenty of monitoring of the earth, nobody has stopped me or my family from picking wild foods, or hunting. Cutting down a living tree requires a permit; but burning wood already dead is permitted, since the gases from burning wood are the same as from decay, except faster.

The main principle of humans taking energy from nature, is that as long as humans simply place themselves into the energy flow, and don't introduce new energy, such as from underground or atoms, then the behaviour of nature is not altered. For example centuries ago, when there was electricity made from nuclear reactions, all the heat from engines and heaters using that electricity added new heat into the atmosphere, whereas electricity made from the energy of winds simply harnessed what nature was already creating, and for which it was adapted. And let us not forget all the heat from fossil fuel burning, which added heat from combustion on top of increasing the greenhouse warming from introducing new gases!

It is important we learn these things, and we are taught already in early grades in school how nature works and how our ancestors wrecked it all.

"Well, continue preparing for the archery competition this afternoon, Chip," I finish. "I'll be over there soon. I'll grab a bite to eat at the house and see you there. Bye."

I stand and cast a final glance over the valley from my rocky perch. I notice another cluster of floating spheres further away. They have different colours but are shiny. Maybe each colour represents having different instruments. Maybe after graduating, it would be interesting to pursue the field of Monitoring. It would be interesting to understand what data is being collected and how the data is used.

But it is time to hurry back home. It is only a ten minute walk. I come here so often, there is a well worn trail from here to the house.

My father, brothers and sisters are elsewhere, so I grab a bite to eat from the kitchen and before long I am on the way to the Greenville High School. My older brother Russ, is part of our archery team, so I expect he will show up before the competition begins.

I walk towards Greenville, down a sloped dirt road with a canopy of tree branches overhead. In our world, where the amount of green plants has to be maximized in order to consume carbon dioxide, we always have green above our head, even over roads. There are no open spaces, except if they are natural like the rocky slope where I was sitting earlier, or forests recently flattened by wind. It is the law that the tops of buildings have to have parks or gardens. Furthermore food is grown in ecosystems that are like jungles of edible plants. There is no clearing of vast areas of land and no monoculture – no single plant

covering vast areas. And it was established centuries ago that the best way to produce food was for every family unit to have their own ecogarden. And that is the case. Everyone grows most of their own food – except that there are city people who still need commercial farms to produce food for them. Chip’s father operates such a commercial farm. They transport vegetables regularly to Traynton where the train takes it to the cities.

In only 15 minutes, I was walking through Greenville. It is such a small town that everyone knows everyone. I waved to Mr. Smirth, a shopowner, who was outside his shop, sweeping dirt off the sidewalk in front.

“Howr you doing Riia?” he asks, glancing at me going by.

“Fine, Mr. Smirth.”

“It’s Saturday. You don’t have high school today.”

“No,” I say. “I’m heading to the school auditorium for an archery competition we are having with the team from Hillstown High.”

With the road and the town covered with a canopy of large oak and maple trees, sometimes I miss being in the sunlight – when it is clear and sunny, and this is one of those days. Shafts of sunlight however come down through the branches, giving the street pleasant patterns across the ground.

But deciduous trees still lose their leaves in the winter and there is a more open landscape at that time. But right now, the environment is rich in greenery.

Like most buildings in our world of occasional violent weather events, the highschool is about  $\frac{3}{4}$  beneath the ground. We learned in class how in around the year 2050, there were thousands of tornados flattening thousands of towns and villages. The practice back then was for people to flee to storm cellars or basements. When the houses were rebuilt, people said "Why not build our houses around the basement?" Thus the main floor was at basement level, and additional floors went even further down. Soon villages were much like they are now. The main floor is fully or half below ground. If there is a floor above that, above ground, it tends to be a very strongly built floor for utilities. And the flat roof is covered with plants, creating a parklike or gardenlike cover.

So you can imagine that the town of Greenville is no more than a floor high with roofs covered with plants. For example, to enter Mr. Smirth's glasswork shop, you have to go down a stairwell. Light is piped down onto the main floor with mirrors.

And the highschool is similarly mostly below ground level. But the above ground portion was strongly built, and two stories high where the

auditorium is situated. Its flat roof has the gardens where students learn to tend to ecogardens – a skill important in a world where most people grow most of their own food.

Arriving at the school, as I climb down the steps and enter the floor of the auditorium, I see Chip. My brother Russ isn't here yet. Our teacher of Atmosphere Sciences, Mr. Sculler, is out team supervisor and supervising this competition. The supervisor, team and spectators from Hillstown has not arrived yet.

## 2. Our Archery Competition

By the time I and Chip have set up the archery targets in the gymnasium our archery team teacher-supervisor, Mr. Sculler, who also teaches us the Atmospheric Sciences, is there too. He and a teacher coming with the Hillstown team will be the supervisors of the competition. In addition there will be students from our school to cheer us on soon, and similarly from the other school.

I enjoy archery using the standard manufactured bows and arrows, but I like using a proper bow and arrow in real situations in the forest better.

Chip's father, Samon Thomasson, helped our family get set up and oriented in those weeks after we acquired our property five years ago. He is half Innat. Innat, I learned long ago is a word developed from combining "Indian" and "Native". It refers to people who are descended from communities that were established many centuries ago for people who originally lived in the wilderness areas. Even though they could no longer live in their traditional ways, in those communities they tried to keep connected with their origins, and kept the philosophy that humans should live in harmony with nature's established system and not add anything new from outside nature's processes – which by definition is "pollution". I remember already when I was ten,



having a teacher show us a piece of wood charcoal in one hand and a lump of fossil coal in the other. She asked us “Which one is pollution? Which one adds something that nature does not know how to deal with? They both look the same, and can be used for cooking. But one is pollution which will add greenhouse gases that nature cannot balance, while the other is natural, and nature can handle it.”

The answer was that the piece of hardwood charcoal was fine. “Because this piece of hardwood charcoal spent some 50 years as a tree that was absorbing carbon dioxide from the air – since trees breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen – then when that tree is made into charcoal and burned, it is balancing what it did before. It is neutral in our natural systems. This piece of coal from underground on the other hand was *not* recently a tree. It has *not* done anything to balance it. It is *not* neutral. Every gas and even heat added to our atmosphere when it is burned, is new gases and heat, adding something from outside nature’s system.”

Then the teacher took into one hand a glass beaker of biodiesel – oil from plants - and in the other hand a glass beaker of fossil oil from underground. She asked the same question and the answer was the same – the biodiesel oil was made from plants that had absorbed carbon dioxide and therefore was balanced by nature’s processes, while the gases and heat from

the fossil oil was adding something new beyond what nature could handle. "Pollution," we learned "is something in nature's system that nature cannot normally handle. Since nature cannot handle it, whenever we add something to nature that is pollution, we have to ourselves create the balancing processes that deal with it!"

Indeed. Today we are very sophisticated. If manufacturers create something that is new to nature's system, then they also have to have processes that will digest it naturally when it is old. Naturally when manufacturers were made responsible for the entire lifecycle, they were motivated to manufacture goods that returned to nature easily.

Civilization learned the hard way that the principle preserved in Innat culture had always been correct and we should never have forgotten it. And because all the "Innat" communities of the world had celebrated the principle of living in harmony with nature, they became leaders in the revolution to bring the earth back to a balanced state. With mass media connecting them together, they have become a major force in the world as a whole, restoring earth back to the way it once was.

I learned a great deal about the Innat traditions from both Mr. Thomasson and his son Chip. Everyone in my family visit the Thomassons often. Sometimes

we children worked at the commercial farm, picking the vegetables they send to Traynton.

Samon Thomasson has an appearance that reminds me of old pictures of Innat peoples – brown eyed, dark, high cheekbone. But Chip is blonde from his mother. No hint of “Indat” origins at all in him.

I and Chip converse as we set up.

“Like I said earlier, it is today five years since my family arrived here. Your father was very helpful to us in the first months when we were getting started.”

“Yes I remember,” replies Chip. “You all stayed with us a while as your father arranged for contractors to build your new house.”

“I remember your grandmother was still living here – before she returned to her Innat community after her husband died and she missed her sisters back at the community. I remember your grandmother noticing my necklace with the small thunderbird, which you treated like a good luck charm. She then explained to you what the thunderbird meant.”

“She explained it was quite an important symbol for storms going back in her people for a thousand or even two thousand years. The Thunderbird was very real to Innat peoples. Her people saw it in every storm. He was like a great big eagle-like bird who when flapping its wings, it caused winds and the sound of thunder....”

“Yeah, and when the weather became more and more violent over the centuries, the Thunderbird has become gigantic and important throughout the Innat peoples around the world. It is now the most important symbol or even spirit. He is feared and superstitious Innat people will even worship him as a deity.”

We set up the bullseye targets at the opposite end of the auditorium, measuring the distance to get it correct. Some of our spectators were arriving and taking seats in the balcony.

Chip continues: “In earlier times people talked more about the Creator and Mother Earth, but now it is the Thunderbird who rules the world in the minds of Innat peoples. The Thunderbird is now the most ever- powerful, ever-present, spirit in Innat culture. They write stories and even perform legends about him in dance, I hear. But I don’t visit my grandmother very often. It’s 100 kilometers to the north.”

When we have set up the bullseye targets, Chip and I return to the other end of the gymnasium to take a couple practice shots before the Hillstown group arrives. That’s the advantage of hosting – we get trial shots before our competition arrives.

I take my shot and hit the bullseye.

“The Thunderbird,” I add to our conversation, “is a symbol that has gone beyond the Innat peoples. It is why I naively bought this chain with the little

thunderbird to wear when I was little. The eagle soaring in the sky has always been appealing to all humankind throughout history."

"That's true."

I guess the subject of the Thunderbird arose from my associating archery with Innat peoples, although I know that in history all humankind developed the bow and arrow for hunting, and later for war.

I go to fetch my arrow back from the target.

Just then my brother Russ arrives. He has fetched his equipment from the sports equipment lockers, and joins us.

"Sorry I'm late," he says.

"Without you," I tell him, "we don't have a team. We are already only a team of three."

Some more students from Greenville enter the hall to increase our cheering contingent.

The Hillstown archery team and a dozen supporters arrive just then too. I take a break when I hear them, and step outside to watch them arrive with their larger team and noisy supporters.

They come in the school's plant-oil diesel bus. Apparently they grow the plants in their rooftop garden and press their own oil. Electricity is more common though, for energy. It is plentiful since there is so much energy in the weather to divert to various batteries. What is expensive is the battery needed to

store electricity for vehicles. It is much easier for trains, which take their electricity directly from rails.

Hillstown High is our rival, ten km to the north. Our schools often compete with one another. This time it is in archery. Archery is one of the physical education activities in many high schools.

Everyone knows about me already. The visiting team likes to trash-talk me.

“Riia Greenthistle! the famous archer of Greenville High School! Today you will lose!”

While Greenville High School has only three classrooms, and three levels – junior, middle, and senior, Hillstown High has twelve classrooms and the grades are more divided. Being larger, as a result they have a more decent size archery team of seven. Not that more archers will make them any better!

The competition is designed so that the lower scoring competitors are eliminated. It does not matter if we are only three, and they have seven or whatever. If you are the lowest score you are out. So a three person team simply rotates more often.

My turn comes up. I concentrate on the bullseye target. I have to remind myself that this archery bow and arrow, manufactured from fiberglass or something, is not my own. My own is made of wood with the imperfections of hand-crafting. If I don't bear this in mind, the arrow will fly differently than I intend.

The Hillstown spectators watching from the balcony continue the trash talk. Someone shouts: "Riia, Chip, and Russ... where did you leave the rest of your school team? Oh, you only have three? You are the smallest archery team in the world. If you were smaller, you wouldn't be a team but a couple. Ha, ha, ha."

"It doesn't matter if Hillstown has a hundred archers, if none can shoot!" shouts students from our school in the balcony on the other side, in reply.

I try to concentrate on the target.

This competition is between individual archers, and, as I say, the poorest scoring archers are gradually eliminated. The one remaining in the end is the individual winner. Additionally the winning team as a whole is determined from the average score of each team - for us the highest scores totalled divided by three.

Soon the competitors are weeded down. Finally it is between me and the champion of the Hillstown team - Archie Bower. The competition is now tense. We are the final two in the contest. The highest score now will be the winner.

First me. I fire and hit the bullseye.

My arrow is removed by the coach of the other team who acts as referee.

Now Archie Bower's turn.

He shoots and hits the bullseye too

We have a tie that has to be broken so we go again.  
I shoot and hit the bullseye.

He hits the bullseye.

Mr. Sculler, who is officiating along with the teacher from Hillstown, takes a chalk, walks to the target, and draws a white circle inside the black bullseye of the target.

“The target is now the chalk circle,” he says.

“Finally,” I think, “a real challenge for a change.”

If we were outdoors, they would have moved the target further away, but there is only so far you can move it in a small high school gymnasium.

I aim carefully and let go. Right in the centre of the chalk circle.

The spectators begin to shout, my school trying to distract Archie Bower, and his school shouting encouragement.

Suddenly a middle aged woman comes running in from the entrance from the rest of the school. She is followed by our school principle, Mrs. Primm.

“Riia Greenthistle! Riia Greenthistle!” she is shouting earnestly as she runs towards me.

She is a neighbour I know a little, Mrs. Shermock, who has some small children. She is a heavy woman with brown curly hair. Anxiety fills her face. Archie Bower does not take his shot.

“Riia!” she says as she reaches me. “My eight year old Billy has disappeared. He has been gone a while



and is probably lost. My girl says his toy Whirly was caught by wind and flew off and he decided to follow it into the wilderness – the Mountain Forest Reserve we live beside. It is so wild there, I wouldn't know where to go. But we know you go into the wilderness regularly. You know all about finding your way about in there. Nobody else does. You will be able to find Billy”

Principle Primm arrived beside her and added. “The Wilderness Reserve is so wild and dense there will be no other way to find him. An aerial search will not be able to penetrate the forest.”

“Alright,” I say, “take me to where your girl said he headed into the wilderness.”

As I head off with Mrs. Shermock, Principal Primm addresses the archery competition attendees. “All you students remain here. This is an emergency. We can't have a crowd there, disturbing any trail Riia can follow.”

“My brother Russ is good at tracking,” I say. “He should come. And Chip too. We all know the forest beside the Greenville area well.”

Thus Russ, Chip, and I put our archery equipment aside and follow Mrs. Shermock out of the school and we head west up a road to where she lives. Principal Primm and a fellow who tends to our school gardens follow behind.

Mrs. Shermock, like my family, has property just adjacent to the Eastern Mountain Wilderness Reserve.

Normally people do not go into the Reserve, and I'm unusual in liking to go there, catch animals and gather wild plants. In our advanced world nobody is lacking of food and things to do, and few people find the time or reason to even hike in the wilderness. The exception is the Innat people, of course, for whom the wilderness is at the core of their cultures.

With all the trees overhead, it is difficult to see the sky, but I noticed an *Inflaplane* floating overhead. That vehicle is like a balloon, but it is shaped like a fat triangle. The flat underside provides a surface that can provide some added lift when it is propelled forward. Human pilots and passengers are inside the lighter-than-air gas enclosure, inside a second inflated container, but this one with breathable air. They can look down through a transparent floor.

"Who alerted the aerial vehicle?" I asked. "Nobody will be able to see through the tree cover."

"It has a loudspeaker that can call down and ask Billy to shout out," says Principal Primm.

"It will interfere," I say, angrily. "It may confuse him. Let me go first. He could be nearby."

"Hurry!" exclaims Mrs. Shermock as she leads us to the location where her Billy was last seen chasing his Whirly into the wilderness.

Once we arrived, I saw immediately Billy's footprints in a patch of mud. The pattern of his shoe would be one of the things I had to look for.

"If he was chasing his aerial toy," I say, "that toy will not have gotten far before hanging up in trees. Billy is probably delayed from trying to find ways of getting it down from a tree."

I headed into the woods, Russ and Chip following me. Principal Primm motioned everyone else to stay back.

If the toy was taken by the wind, I had to judge the direction of the wind a short time ago. We head in the general direction the breeze is blowing, looking for his footprint, broken twig, bent grass.

I was correct. In only ten minutes, we find Billy trying to climb a tree. His toy is ten meters up in the tree. The tree is great for climbing, but the lowest branches are two meters up. Russ gives Billy a boost to the first branch. Might as well let him succeed in fetching his toy. It is like a small hover-vehicle called *Flyhicle* – with propellers so it can hover and be controlled remotely. A toy version of it. Before long, Billy is back on the ground with his toy. We won't know if he could have found his way back, though.

Billy points up into the tree. "There's a big one up there," he says.

We look to where he is pointing. It is a large professional Flyhicle. It is caught in the tree too. Where did it come from?

"I'll climb the tree to get it," says Russ.

"Lift me up to the lower branch first," I say. "It is large and will need two people to handle. I will reach you a hand, Russ, to pull you up. Chip you have to stay on the ground to receive it when we bring it down."

Russ boosts me up until I can grab the first branch. I climb the trunk up to the branch, and once I am secure on that branch, I reach my hand to Russ so he can scramble up too. We continue up the ladder of branches. It is a gnarled oak and easy to climb. Reaching the Flyhicle, I and Russ loosen it from the branches and we begin to manipulate it down through the branches. We then lower it to Chip's arms. It is large but not heavy. It is like a meter-wide mosquito. Russ notices it has a camera.

Once we are on the ground we stand around contemplating it.

"It is the kind of thing they use for aerial surveys. Does anyone have anything like this around here?"

"No," I say. "It is far easier to use balloon technology if we need to get an aerial view of something. It requires less energy and electronics. This kind of thing is connected to an operator, and controlled remotely. The operator would know it

crashed. Maybe the operator is far away and hasn't had time to track it down yet."

"I hear that video production people use this sort of thing," says Russ, "to get aerial shots for their videos. Is there any media production going on around here?"

"I know of none," says Chip. "Nobody comes here. We are 20 km away from the train line. Unless there was something special they needed videos of. We can take it to my father's workshop. He has electronic equipment. Maybe there is something in or on it that will help us identify it."

"There is a camera," says Russ. "If it was taking video footage, we could retrieve the memory and run it to see what it was recording."

I, Russ, and Chip carry the thing out of the forest, Billy following along.

Mrs. Shermock is beside herself to see her boy back safe and sound. We explain what we had found.

"Chip's father has electronic equipment," I tell Principal Primm, "so we can take a closer look at it to determine who owns it or what it was doing."

"What about the archery competition?"

"We forfeit," I say.

"Yeah," added Chip. "Let Hillstown win this time. We win so often, that maybe it is fitting Hillstown win the final competition of the year."

Yes, we have a more important task now – to determine what this Flyhicle is all about. We take it to Chip’s father’s electronics workshop. Chip will wait for his father to come home from Traynton, before they look at it.

Meanwhile I and Russ return home. It is now late afternoon, and it will be suppertime soon. Mrs. Shermock phones me to thank me for finding Billy. I had already forgotten about it. It didn’t seem like an emergency. But normal people don’t go into the wilderness. Why hike when there are no nice paths? And why hunt when it takes a great deal of time and knowledge to find the animals in the first place? Everyone knows I am different. They don’t know why but don’t mind it. Everyone knows about my always heading into the woods, and of my having made a proper bow and arrow following a traditional design from the woodland Innat culture. Years ago, Samon Thomasson got for me a very old video and book from his mother’s Innat community that showed how to make it. We are the only family around here that will eat wild meat from the wilderness. Everyone else eats farmed meat. Since our world forbids large animals like cattle, since they need open meadows, and they are one of the reason past humanity cut down the forests. Monoculture is another practice that in the past cut down all the valuable forests. Neither is allowed, since it is only through promoting rich green

forests that humankind can bring the carbon dioxide levels down. Accordingly the animals people raise for meat are small ones including unusual ones like worms and ants.

As I walk back by the road I came, I notice again the mature maple trees hang their giant branches overhead. I imagine how their leaves are breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen. Similarly when I go into the wilderness, especially when I go to the ridge where tall trees do not naturally grow – where there are low bushes and grasses only – I like to look out over the misty blue silhouettes of the low forest-covered mountains and their vast expanse of wilderness, and think of it all breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen. A great big green lung. I should add that all the greenery also blunts the heat of the sun. Trees are very valuable.

### 3. After School in the Forest

I often like to contrast the life we have here at Greenville, with the Northeast Mountain Wilderness Reserve nearby, against what my mother is experiencing in space. By comparison to her high technological environment, ours is decidedly primitive. Is that strange? I don't think so.

Even though technological capabilities have grown exponentially in the last 1000 years, humans intrinsically have not changed much in 100,000 years. But being technologically advanced does not mean technology will be applied in everything. We could have technology inject our required nutrients directly into our body, but we don't do it. We raise food in gardens or I go into the wilderness to hunt, and spend time preparing it and eating it at the dinner table because that is how we have been made. Life is about being human, about being who we are. And I think that for me hiking, hunting and gathering in a very direct basic way is like that. There is nothing more deeply primordial than actually walking through the wilderness, like I am doing right now!

With bow in my hand, I climb over a large fallen mature tree. Its trunk is close to a meter in diameter. Must have been a couple centuries old when it rotted and fell. I suppose there was a time after the world



governments began the restorations of the wilderness when the logging industry would have wanted to at least remove mature trees for lumber, but the government did not want industry to disturb the wilderness reserves in any way. History has shown that it has never been good for the wilderness. Now trees for cutting down for lumber simply have to be farmed the same as growing food, with all removed trees immediately replaced by new greenery.

So all trees on the ground are either mature trees that died and fell, or blown down by a thunderstorm, or killed by forest fires. It is okay for individuals to collect dead wood from any wilderness for firewood for personal use since burning wood produces the same gases as decay. Both are oxidation processes.

Hence Russ and Reed collect deadwood from time to time which we use for cooking – unless we cut up one of our own trees when mature and dying. You might think that with all the thunderstorms, that forest fires would be erupting all the time from lightning strikes. But in reality, with warmer atmosphere more water evaporates up and falls down. So the additional water creates lush wet rainforests that do not burn easily.

While it is illegal to cut down trees in the wilderness, except with a permit, collecting edible things from the wild for personal use is permitted.

A rotten part of this tree trunk cracks under my foot and I stumble a little. I can hear my brothers somewhere behind me. I like to forge ahead and give them a challenge to simply keep up with me.

I hasten forward along a well-worn path.

Over the years I have established the best routes in our area for hunting and developed trails along them. This one is a relatively short circuit that can be done in an hour.

I see plenty of squirrels in the trees and hear plenty of their chattering. They do that to tease predators and cause them to pursue them so that they can lead the predator away from the area. They don't know that I have no intention or ability to chase them through the trees.

I know the wilderness around our property well. I have been dealing with it since I was 12 when I first explored it out of curiosity. A great deal of what I have learned about handling myself in the wilderness came from Chip's father, Samon Thomasson, who we first got to know when he helped our family become re-established. I think that the wisdom he has transferred to me actually comes through his Innat heritage. But he never revealed that is where the wisdom came from. I simply absorbed what he said and then opened my eyes when I went into the wilderness and saw that it was true, and added my own observations to the wisdom.

Mr. Thomasson and Chip haven't had much time going into the wilderness because of running the business. But they hunt in the fall and I've gone along. I've learned a lot on those trips.

When once I asked Mr. Thomasson whether eating only plants is better than eating animals, he said that picking and eating plants is no different than eating plants. To believe that killing and eating plants is better than eating animals is to judge plants to be less important in nature than animals. In reality plants may be more important. Without plants animals would have no oxygen to breathe.

What then is the morality? We have to be true to ourselves. Watch a wolf catching and devouring a rabbit. Because the wolf is a full carnivore that only eats meat, he eats animals with as little sensitivity as humans eat vegetables or fruit. It is all in how Nature has made us. But humans eat more than plants. They are omnivores. So, humans can eat meat too, although not with the same degree as wolves.

Mr. Thomasson said to me: "If you cut salad greens from your garden, you can imagine the spirit of the living plant departing, and giving you a gift of food, just as much if you kill an insect, fish, bird, or mammal. But because Nature made us mainly for eating plants, we eat leaves, nuts and fruits very coldly without any moral qualms. It is how we are

made, Riia. What is correct is that we are true to who we are, and do not depart from it.”

I think I was only 12 at the time. Samon Thomasson had a mischievous side that liked to tease me in ways that made me think.

I also learned back then, that people in the area did not go hunting in the wilderness.

“People around here don’t need to go there for food,” he told me. “Nobody suffers for lack of food. Rural people have their own eco-gardens. Around here people are just used to getting their food from their own gardens. It is cultural. They grow up with it and there is nothing to make them want to hunt or gather in the wilderness. You are very unusual in that respect Riia. Somehow, you have become interested in the wilderness without having any Innat roots.”

“Maybe it’s because I was originally raised in the city. In the city we had neither a proper food-garden, nor any wilderness nearby. I could have gone either way, but chose the wilderness because it was right here next door.”

“In the Innat communities it is different,” continued Mr. Thomasson, “If you visit one of the Innat communities, once called ‘reserves’, you will find wilderness traditions kept alive, because it is part of the Innat identity. And so that is why in my mother’s community, people go off to the nearest wilderness whenever they can, and bring back wild

food. Thus, just as the gardening culture remains alive in the rural people, so too the wilderness culture remains alive in the Innat communities. It is all in the cultural circumstances in which you are born. We are obliged to be who we are."

"What about you, Mr. Thomasson? You are from both. Your mother is from an Innat community and your father from around here."

"Intermarriages will occur, Riia, and in the last thousand years there has been a steady stream of people moving out of the Innat cultural circumstances into the mainstream. But what has counted is that at least someone remains behind to keep the Innat community going."

Over the years I have become increasingly aware how unusual I am for always heading into the wilderness. Maybe I like being different. My mother too is unusual. How many mothers travel through space? Am I going in an opposite direction to her. She is inside high technology in space, and I am getting down to the nitty gritty of the natural earth from which we all came. I've tried to interest young neighbours in my interest in the wilderness, but they don't understand it. To them it is just a hike in the woods. Only Chip understands. Happily, my brothers have taken to it too, following my lead. Increasingly they are asking to join me. Right now they are somewhere behind me. I can hear them thrashing

through the bush - scaring away all the animals. They have to learn to be quieter!

I continue onward along the path, staying ahead of them, challenging them.

Nature is a complex web of interconnected systems. You can take any cycle in nature and trace it to every other. And that includes the weather! Storm systems behaviour is connected to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and carbon dioxide is connected to plants and animals, ...everything is interconnected! The objective is to keep it all in a strong dynamic equilibrium.

Equilibrium is why plants and animals eat each other. Excess has to be balanced. If there is too much of a plant - and we call it a 'weed' if it is excessive - then very soon other plants and animals will adjust to suppress that excess. The truth is that in a true complex wilderness there are no 'weeds'.

Ancient farming, where the same plant covered vast areas of land, in effect created fields of edible weeds. Being weeds, it invited predators to come to restore balance - insects, viruses, birds. All living things eat whatever prey is in abundance, simply because energy seeks its lowest level, so all predators try to obtain their requirements like food in as lazy way as possible. And all living things understand this. Perhaps they actually sense when their population is too large. In the animal world when there are too

many rabbits, mice, or ground squirrels they become bolder and more reckless, as if deliberately tempting wild dogs or cats to come after them. Does humankind sometimes unconsciously provoke war when population pressures are high in order to kill off some of each other?

“Nature requires that we hunt or gather that which appears to be in excess,” I tell my brothers often. “Therefore if we see an abundance of a particular plant or animal, then that is what we go after.”

Russ has accompanied me often into the woods, and is getting quite good at some wilderness skills. He knows some of the edible plants and is quite good at fishing, and making traps and snares. Reed is young and learning. I am the big sister who is constantly teaching them.

Suddenly a grouse breaks out of the fir tree ahead of me, I raise my bow, and put an arrow in it, halting its flight. Russ runs forward and fetches the fallen grouse. He is carrying with a strap over his shoulder, the game bag into which we put the food we catch. And after removing the arrow for me he puts it inside. Today we are after some meat only for this evening's supper. It is far more meaningful to hunt animals to eat immediately, as then we can connect the meal with the experience of catching it, thank the animal, and understand the morality of it.

“Grouse are the chicken of the wilderness,” I say as Russ hands me the arrow. “And there are plenty of them. But one is not enough for feeding all five of us. We need a couple more, or something else.”

“Can I try your bow, Riia?” asks Reed.

“You have to make your own,” I say as we continue. “Russ too.”

Russ has wanted to make a bow, but hasn't gotten around to it yet.

“You always say that, Riia.”

“The bow and the hunter,” I continue, “should be at one with each other. You can't achieve that unless you make the bow yourself. Mr. Thomasson said when making it yourself, you can speak to it, develop a close relationship. If I let you try the bow, it would be like me letting you try on my hunting trousers. It will not fit you.”

“Mr. Thomasson has an Innat mother,” says Russ to Reed. “He thinks of everything having a spirit, even the bow. You have to ask the bow if you can use it, Reed. Not Riia.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And since I made all the arrows myself, and each one has different feathers and point, only I know from experience how each will fly. If I were to borrow someone else's bow and arrows, the results will be unpredictable. Other than the archery bows and arrows that are manufactured exactly the same on an assembly line. So both of you, Russ and



Reed, must make your own handmade bow and arrows, and get to know them well. Then you and the bow and arrows will become one.”

“Yes, Sis,” says Reed. “But that means someone has to show us how.”

“You can learn by trial and error like I did, and asking Mr. Thomasson for pointers, and to look at that very old video he has of an ancient Inni bow and arrow being made. It took me four times over the years before I got it right.”

We get over a rise where the collapse of some over-mature trees has created an opening now filled with small trees. We see a giant bear browsing on berries.

“Quiet!” I whisper. Nobody wants to tangle with a bear. Fortunately it will not go after us unless it is very hungry or thinks it can get us easily. It is summer, and I doubt it suffers from hunger. “We only have to be quiet and keep our distance. He won’t want to eat us unless it is very hungry and we look an easy catch,” I tell my brothers. “You have to realize that the funny thing about animals in the wilderness is that they form a community. Predator and prey can coexist if the prey is not hungry. Animals become dangerous only when they are hunting you. Hunger drives it all. Otherwise if you respect their territory, their food, and their young, there is little to fear. If it had been

hunting us, it would have followed us throughout our hike looking for opportunity, and then charged us.”

Our arrival back to our property from the forest is not one of coming out of a forest into a clearing as you might expect, but more like moving from a rather chaotic wilderness, to a more organized, gardenlike or park-like wilderness, in the centre of which there is our low profile flat roofed, thick-walled, rock-and-concrete house.

Riddle comes to meet us. She has been busy in the kitchen. She wants to know if we brought home any food.

“Yes, some wild berries and a grouse,” says Russ.

“Great,” says Riddle. “It is always great to have some wild food at meals. I will make the grouse into soup so it will serve five. And the berries join the dessert.”

Riddle wouldn’t mind going into the woods either, but she likes dealing with our home ecogarden more, and making food.

The main part of our house is built in the typical way houses are built these days. They are made with massive walls using local rocks and earth, or concrete, in order to store the earth’s heat, but mainly to withstand strong winds from the extreme weather. This kind of low, massive, building developed naturally over the centuries after extreme weather flattened traditional buildings and rebuilding was

pursued. Build it flat to begin with. How can you flatten a town or city that is already rather flat? The house where we lived before, was built low and massive in the typical fashion too, and might have resisted winds, but in that case it was destroyed by the storm surge which basically washed it out of the earth and turned it over. That is how our father explained it once.

When we came here five years ago, Father didn't copy the design of our earlier home, but had our new one built to suit our new situation. This one is built more in keeping with living closer to the land in a rural area. He imitated the neighbours in developing our food-garden and keeping a few animals only for eggs and such. He indulged in the freedom of not having to obey the restrictions found in urban areas in the east.

Like our neighbours, our eco-garden with its wide variety of food plants is put together in wise ways to create a density such as found in nature. Trees, bushes, shrubs and ground plants are all connected to the same piece of ground but spanning space vertically and not just horizontally. A ground plant that does not need much light for example is fine in the shadow of shrubs and bushes that will in turn grow in the shadows of a tree.

We also keep a stack of wood near the house for the cooking stove only. We burn it for cooking. We

fetch dead branches from the forest. It isn't necessary, I suppose. But humans do not do everything with high technology. There is something nice about experiencing a real fire. Short of genetic engineering change in human nature, I think, human societies will always be a mix of basic natural behaviour and high technology. We can travel through space, and still yearn to sit by a real fire.

Collecting deadwood is encouraged because loose deadwood suppresses plant growth below it. But if the wood is wet and on the ground, it is better for it to decay. Whether wood decays or is burnt, either way it produces greenhouse gases, but this is something natural, not like when in the past, burning fossil coal, oil, or gas from underground was not neutral since it had been plants millions of years ago.

We also have a chicken coop for the egg-laying chickens. We've also had a pen for a sheep we used to get wool. Such animals are nice company, like pets. Our neighbours have them. And we sometimes exchange animals. Large farm animals like horses and cattle are no longer raised in today's world, except in places that are naturally open and grassy as a result of climate and terrain, and there is no better solution. And you have to get a permit. The last thing our world wants is for forests to be cut down just to have grass for cattle!!

We have sometimes had injured animals from time to time that I have brought in from the wild. When well we have let them go. Why bring them back to health on the one hand and hunt them on the other? It is part of the paradox I mentioned to Russ and Reed earlier. When animals are not hungry, not defending territory or their young, they are supportive of one another. From an evolution perspective it is very simple to understand. Predator wants their prey to prosper, and the prey has adapted to wanting the predator as population control. I can imagine that if I were absolutely starving, I would not release an animal I nursed back to health, but say "I'm sorry, but I will have to eat you because I am starving." There are many such truths in nature that on the surface seem like paradoxes but when considered in terms of nature's systems, and evolution, are not paradoxes at all. Nature's whole is very intelligent, even if parts of it are hard to understand.

I have by now taken off my quiver and leaned by bow against the wall of the entrance to the house. From the front entrance we have the kitchen area to the right, which opens towards our eco-garden towards the back, and up onto the roof. The kitchen is continuous with our living room towards the interior, with only a long counter dividing. On the other side of the kitchen , on the outer wall there is another counter with a sink. There is a kitchen window at eye

level there. The kitchen and main floor is partially below grade and bermed so that three sides are partly below grade, while the fourth side, the side with the sliding doors of the living room, is at grade at floor level. The idea of the low profile homes today, is to have as little as possible that wind can catch and cause destruction.

Russ puts the game bag on the kitchen counter. Reed adds the container into which we picked several handfuls of wild strawberries.

Riddle is happy to receive the wild food I get, or I and my brothers as the case may be, as it adds variety and challenge to the meals she makes. Riddle, only 10, has assumed the role of the cook in the family, and taken full control of the kitchen in spite of her young age. She now takes a wicker basket to head to our ecogarden to get some vegetables. I will clean the grouse in the meantime.

When it comes to the kitchen, we let Riddle boss us around. She'll tell Russ to fetch wood for the stove, or our father to fetch for example some potatoes or carrots from the garden, or me for some meat or plants from the wilderness. Riddle has totally been inspired by our mother from when she lived at home five years ago and took charge of all things connected to the kitchen and gardening because in space she was never able to do that sort of thing. There they eat artificial food! So Riddle was used to seeing her

mother taking interest in real food when not in space. It occurs to me that the reason our family likes wild food so much could be because our mother is eating artificial food in space. And the reason I am so fond of the wilderness is probably because our mother is in quite the opposite – a completely artificial manmade environment in space. I guess that is what defines us.

I've finished preparing the grouse for Riddle. I take the skin with the feathers for myself. I keep skins and feathers from our wild meat. I can make interesting things that can be traded and sold at a market. There is a big market at Traynton. City people come there. Actual currency can only be procured when selling something to a visitor from the city, and then that money can be used to buy some kind of fancy manufactured electronic item. Once ordered, rural people get the delivery by a small robotic Flyhicle machine that comes down from the sky.

Whenever I bring home something from the wilderness, I consider everything that can be used of the animal after the meat is removed. But not everything. Whatever is left like bones, and cannot be used by us, becomes food for Bowser.

“Do we have something for Bowser to eat?” I ask Riddle working nearby.

“We have some bones from the ground-hog you got yesterday,” she say.

“I’ll take out the bones to him.”

I take the bowl of bones and sinews Riddle hands me, outside for Bowser’s dish. They are from a giant groundhog we ate with yesterday’s meal. There are enormous groundhogs in the wilderness – as big as a hog! Such leftovers from wild animals is all Bowser has known since a puppy, and he loves it.

I pet Bowser as he lies down to leisurely gnaw on a bone with a look of great pleasure on his face. I am sure in his own way he is thanking the groundhog for that joy.

“Mmmm,” says Bowser.

I leave Bowser to his savouring the bones and in a minute I join Riddle again. Our father has arrived in the living room and settled into a couch facing the wall television and turns it on. Russ and Reed join him.

“By the way,” Father calls to everyone. “Your mother has transmitted a video to us through the World Space Agency. It’s come from the colony on Mars where her ship is stopping for two months.

“She’ll probably have taken some shots of the colony, and the Mars landscape,” says Reed. “Did you know that if outside you have to wear a pressure suit even though there is an atmosphere?”

“What if you don’t?” wonders Riddle.



## THUNDER GAMES : 4

“The atmospheric pressure is too low for humans. At body heat, the water in our bodies will boil. Imagine your skin and eyeballs bubbling, Riddle.”

“Eeww!”

Reed enjoys teasing Riddle with gruesome images - like brothers do at that age.

## 4. Riddle Rules the Kitchen

I listen to the news coming from the wall screen that Russ, Reed, and our father are watching.

I am right now hearing a typical weather report .  
*"...in the northern regions, expect intermittent thunderstorms and tornados throughout the day..."*

"Did you know, Riddle, that in ancient times, a typical weather forecast might speak of 'intermittent showers' not 'intermittent tornados'? A thousand years ago thunderstorms and tornados were rare. Listen to the TV. I think it is now talking about an enormous flood hitting Lundyn."

"Where's Lundyn?" asks Riddle as she pours chopped vegetables into the stew pot.

"It's in Ropa, in the north part. It was flattened by a super tornado centuries ago, and rebuilt. Then there was some flooding from the rise in the oceans from the melting of the polar glaciers. And then there was major flooding of the river, which is called Tems. But people kept wanting to rebuild Lundyn rather than abandon it. Same with the city of Nyark over here. In ancient times big cities developed alongside water because water was used for transportation. So when the weather became stronger, and storms dropped a year's worth of rain in a few hours into a water system, the lower part of the rivers overflowed their banks and reached through the lowlands where the

cities had developed. But people do not want to abandon an established big city, so they try to rebuild, even if they have to turn the city into a Venice. And then along comes another storm. They never learn. Finally after a few centuries the big cities near the coast or in the lower parts of river have to be abandoned to nature."

"Thank goodness," Riddle concluded, "we live here high in the interior, where the wind is dampened by the hills and wilderness and there is no river or low land to be flooded. I thought we might get a thunderstorm today, Riia, but nothing has arrived yet."

"I studied the sky from the cliff earlier. It is hazy and storms are forming. As the day has progressed the weather was increasingly humid. We may see a thunderstorm, this evening yet."

In our world, with the massive buildings with low profiles, people can wait a few minutes or hours for the storm to pass and then it is back to normal. What we really fear is getting caught in a storm and unable to find shelter.

"Are you sure you don't want me to do anything, Riddle?" I ask when I have finished with the grouse and provided Riddle with the meat and bones.

"No. I'm fine," she replies.

"Then," I conclude, "I will go downstairs to my room, with the grouse feathers until supper is ready."

I gather up the remains of the bird. In this house, like many, we do not go upstairs, but like in most houses, downstairs, since second floors are below, not above the ground floor. It leaves less above the surface to be impacted by a storm.

Downstairs in my room, I lay out my grouse feathers on the long wooden worktable I have in there. I also have a desk on the opposite wall where I do normal stuff like schoolwork.

Since our bedrooms are below the ground level we have no windows. Mirror tubes funnel daylight down from the roof. In my room they bring daylight down to both my desk and worktable. The mirror tubes are sealed with glass at both ends so as to prevent dust build-up.

My bed is between my desk and worktable, against the far wall. I cannot say that my room looks very feminine. I have many of the furs, feathers and skins from my hunting all on my wall, at various levels of handling, from needing treatments to preserve it, to representing the beginnings of projects. I keep whatever I find pretty or practical, to make something from them. It is what I do for the animal in exchange for it giving us meat. I collect the pelts, furs, quills, and whatnot that comes from the animals, organize them in a cabinet of many drawers, and then make things from them for my family or to sell in my spare time. Things like hats, mitts, bracelets, belts. I

have arrow shafts too, ready to take feathers and points and arrowheads. Since I learned long ago how to make arrowheads from chipping flint, I also have a drawer full of chipped flint pieces. I have accumulated sinew and leather thongs for bowstrings and binding arrowheads to the shafts.

Chip thinks I have become very Innat, even though I have no idea if there may be an Innat ancestor somewhere in my ancestry. To me it is a very simple explanation: I simply do not want to throw anything I bring in from the forest, away.

The first step is of course to clean and wash what I bring home. You never know what kind of insect may be hiding in the fur or feathers.

There is plenty to occupy me at my worktable. Time passes quickly, as I do some organizing of my projects. Before long, Riddle calls us to the dinner table.

I return to the first floor and find everyone already at the table, and Riddle proudly scooping groundhog stew onto our plates. She has made the grouse into soup as a first course. Don't get us wrong. We all want to help Riddle, but she is determined to be independent. The youngest in a family always lives in the shadow of their older siblings and has something to prove. And it is far better to compliment her independent achievements rather than the ones where someone helped.

“Very good, Riddle,” I say. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“We should first thank the groundhog and grouse,” she says. She has learned it from me, to respect the animal who gave us the food.

“That’s right, Riddle,” I say, “We cannot praise the cook before we praise the source of the food itself.”

“Ultimately we must praise the sun,” says Russ, “since everything owes itself to the sun.”

“And that,” I say, “makes the sun a good symbol for the highest god. The sun is the highest spirit. The Greatest Spirit, according to Samon Thomasson, Chip’s father, whose mother is Innat.”

“The weather comes next, I think,” says Reed. “The sun causes weather and the weather decides if the sun shines down on gardens, or creates destruction.”

“That’s true.”

“So,” Father asks, “should you pray for the sun to bring good weather, or to the weather to be nice, or to the animal’s spirit for its sacrifice? What do you think, children?”

Father has strong dark eyebrows and eyes that often smile even if his mouth doesn’t. It betrays a mischievousness. He likes to ask questions that make us think. It is the reason I am able to debate well.

“It’s a hierarchy, Father,” I say. “We can pray to the Mother-of-Groundhogs for this stew, or we can

pray to the Mother-of-Plants that groundhogs eat, or to Mother Earth for producing Life. We can choose which, or pray to them all in one go."

"Don't forget," added Russ, "praying to the god of weather, not to destroy our food source by flooding a garden or crushing it with hailstones, or drying it out."

"These days," I add, "I can understand how humankind might want to pray to the god of weather to calm it down."

Indeed. All the religions of the world that had a deity connected with the weather, now highlight that deity. For example there is once again the fiery man with the great beard waving a sceptre out of which comes lightning bolts. But especially there is the Thunderbird of Innat cultural traditions.

"I wonder how widespread the concept of the Thunderbird is around the world," I say.

"Maybe," suggests Russ, "although it originated in North America, it is such a good concept, that with the mass media connecting all surviving aboriginal cultures, I am sure they have all adopted the concept - especially now that there are thunderstorms everywhere, even in the arctic and tropics. Thunderstorms are universal. They occur everywhere."

"Yes," says Reed. "I heard that there are thunderstorms even at the north pole - which is now sea."

"You're right, you guys," I say. "Everyone can relate to the idea. Even if you are not Innat. It works for me."

We always have such interesting discussions at the dinner table. Our father keeps an eye on us and offers guidance and wisdom and works hard at keeping our lives happy. We could have fancy technology but we tend to live simply like our neighbours. Our father has become fond of this kind of rural life that is closer to the earth, more self-sufficient, than our earlier life in the east with its high technology.

Russ changes the subject.

"I wonder if Chip's father has determined what that Flyhicle we found is all about yet," he says.

"Chip phoned me," I reply, "and told me they have retrieved the memory but haven't had a chance yet to run it to see what it was video-ing. He says we should all view it together to determine what it was video-ing. We'll go tomorrow."

"I can't wait to see," replies Russ, "what it was shooting."

We hear the rumble of thunder in the distance.

"We may still be due for a sudden thunderstorm before the day is out," says Father.



"I hear some pitter patter on leaves outside," says Riddle. "It could be starting."

We continue eating, now silently, listening for the sounds of rain and thunder.

"There's the thunder again," says Russ.

We aren't very worried. In this area, extreme thunderstorms that produce hail and winds that can blow down trees, is rare. At worst we will get some branches coming down, which the boys then cut up to use as firewood. But one would not want to be outside.

"The thunderstorm will not be here," I say, "until Bowser starts howling. He is so afraid of thunder."

Bowser is tied to a very long rope as usual, just to prevent him running off into the wilderness. His purpose is to keep predatory wild animals like Dogotes or Tabbynxes away from our several egg chickens and milk goat. I will explain these creatures later.

"Owwwooww!"

"There's Bowser howling now," I say. "He senses that a thunderstorm will hit this area. I'll go and fetch him indoors."

I leave the table and hasten across our park-like yard to where Bowser had been relaxing from his gnawing on groundhog bones. Our apple and walnut trees are rustling overhead in the rising wind.

I release him from his long rope, and bring him into the house to where we are. Immediately he heads under the sofa.

“What a fraidy cat,” Reed says.

“Fraidy dog,” Riddle corrects.

Bowser is a medium size brown short-hair dog with floppy ears. He is a mixture which includes hound.

We do not have a cat, because feral cats wander onto our property all the time, and consume any rats they find. Our only concern is for the chickens, since the more wild of the visiting cats have interbred with ancient bobcats and lynx and are quite large, looking like tabby cats, but the size of lynxes. I sometimes hunt such creatures. In winter they have thick coats and when the snow is blowing outside, I spend my time making them into jackets that are prized in the city. I have one myself. I thank the Tabbynix who gave up their lives for my warmth and the stew we made from their meat. I should add, raccoons have overrun the world too. Raccoons and Tabbynxes are rivals and there are many fights between them. But raccoons hibernate in the winter

Unlike cats, dogs on the other hand are social. They need to bond socially with their human family, or with other dogs. Domesticated dogs have been with humanity for a very long time. Centuries ago the world population of dogs exceeded that of humans,

and with the destruction of cities by our extreme weather, great numbers went into the wild. Here in Nomerica, they interbred with coyotes and wolves, and through the process of selection and adaptation, became what we call the 'Dogotes'. They combined the breeds in the best qualities that suit our wilderness. That means longer fur for winter, ability to chase down prey, ability to swim to catch ducks, sharper teeth and stronger jaws. But they are not as large as the ancient wolves since their prey is mostly rabbits, groundhogs, chipmunks, turkeys, raccoons, Tabbynxes, and other smaller game. They form large packs roving the forest in search of prey.

Because they are social, it is rare for a Dogote to come onto our property like the Tabbynx will. If they come, they will come in a pack, but we humans are large and our environment is strange to them. They see Bowser as a leader of these large strange bipedal creatures that we are, and withdraw back into the forest.

The rumble of thunder is closer, wind is picking up in the trees outside. But we continue eating supper. There is no evidence yet about it being very bad. It usually isn't, but I think all animals, including humans, have an instinctive fear of thunder, a fear that is always there, even if we rationally know we are safe.

"Owww" howls Bowser from under the sofa.

Suddenly lightning flashes all around, thunder booms, wind picks up. Bowser wimpers under the sofa. No point in trying to comfort him. Nothing will comfort him. He had quite an experience when he was a pup and has not forgotten.

We pause in our eating and listen to the progress of the storm.

“Crack...crash”

I go to a window to look in the direction of the crash.

“The wind has brought down a large branch from the walnut tree onto our rooftop part of our garden,” I say.

“Well at least it hasn’t uprooted a tree,” says Father as he gets up to see. “We’ll have to get up on the roof again, later, Russ and Reed, and fix the garden. The branch then becomes cooking firewood.”

Gardens are vulnerable to storms. Hail can completely crush vegetables – which is another reason the new approach to growing food is to have tall trees sheltering shrubs and ground plants below. The branches and foliage of the trees take the brunt of the hail and dampen the deluge of rain. People can also add bars or screens over the top of the garden to take the force of wind or hail. Or it can be covered with very thick glass, a glass pane deck, like we have. Those panes are several centimetres thick and can withstand large hail.

I return to the table. So does Father. Our low profile, semi-underground, massive earth and concrete home is extremely resistant to storms. There is nothing to be flattened or damaged.

In a matter of minutes, the wind, rain and thunder are less already. This thunderstorm has not given us great concern – other than for Bowser. I think it has caught us only on its edge and the centre of it was further north.

“See, Bowser?” I call to him. “It is always over in some minutes.”

“It....Scarey,” says Bowser.

Oh, I forgot to say that centuries ago, some genetic engineers created dogs who could form words like humans do, so that for that breed or mixes with that breed, now instead of wagging a tail, or saying ‘woof, woof’, it can say meaningful sayings like “Me happy”, “Me excited”, and so on, if trained to do so. When feral dogs from this breed mated with those in the wild, this skill was no longer relevant in the forest life, but sometimes one will meet a Dogote in the wild, whose natural ‘woof’ actually sounds like it is made by a human mouth.

“Don’t be scared, Bowser,” I say. “Behave cool.”

Bowser comes over and says “Bowser behave cool. Okay. Try.”

# 5. School's Out: My Future?

The next day is Sunday. We are free from school today as well.

I tell everyone in the morning that I can't wait to see what Chip and his father have recovered from the memory card of the Flyhicle.

Riddle doesn't care about that. "I want to see the video from Mother that came in on the WorldComm from the World Space Agency," she says. She is especially fond of seeing our mother on screen because she was only five when she had to leave on the seven year expedition.

Father has downloaded it and we will all view it on the screen when everyone is free from their activities.

We, like most people around here, have a satellite dish that allows us to connect to the WorldComm in order to send or receive communications. Since we receive and send these videos every month, I think we now take it for granted. Our schoolmates are quite amazed we are making contact with distant locations around the solar system. It reminds us that it is very special to have a mother who is a mission specialist in space. We are an unusual family indeed. We have one foot in nature and another foot in space!!

Before I head over to Chip's I stay to view the video from Mother.

Her latest video reports how their ship has now landed on the colony on Mars, and she took videos of the landscape and the colony. She shows how it is easy to jump twice as high than on earth because of the low gravity.

Our mother always intended to devote herself to a career in space, but then met our father, and they decided a long distance relationship was possible even if, from time to time, across the solar system. In this latest mission she is away for seven years – so two more to go. Earlier she was away only a few months or at most a year at a time, but then she had the opportunity of joining a seven year expedition following the trail taken by earlier robotic expeditions.

The atmosphere of Mars, we learn, is mostly carbon dioxide; but unlike Venus, it is not hellish because the gravity is low and the atmosphere not very dense and atmospheric pressure is very low.

Russ is interested in such things and brings it up after we finished viewing Mom's video.

"What if Mars was originally covered with ice and water, which can be held by low gravity, and over time it all evaporated and because of the low gravity, all the water molecules escaped into space, except for water or ice locked under the surface."

"Yes, Russ," replied Father. "There could have been a short period when life was possible, but then

when the water vapour escaped from the planet, plant life lacked water, and it was all over."

"That's what I figure, Father," added Russ. "Mars is a dried up planet. It warmed up for some reason and all the ice melted and flowed all over the place, but eventually all the water evaporated into space."

"Maybe the warming was caused by carbon dioxide," I offered. "I imagine there could have been lots of volcanoes spewing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The greenhouse effect then melted the water, and the resulting water vapour added to the greenhouse effect, and warmed it more, so that the water vapour was lost into space, and all that remained was the remains of the carbon dioxide – mostly – from the original volcanoes."

Riddle video'd our conversation, and it became part of our transmission back to Mother. I also mentioned to the camera that I was now graduating.

Graduating! What am I going to do with myself?!

Five years of going to the local small Greenville school and all the school activities and social relationships I developed will end. Many of my graduating classmates already have plans - whether to continue to some kind of higher learning or to stay around here, get married, whatever. What I will do is now uppermost on my mind. I haven't thought much about it before. My city born parents went to university. Should I do so as well? It might mean I'll



have to return to a city environment, and be separated from my cherished wilderness.

My father says I should take my time making decisions about what I can do next after graduating. "Take your time. Explore your options," he says.

While I worry about what I will do after graduating, Russ, Reed, and Riddle are joyfully looking forward to the summer vacation from school. But they will be returning come fall, and I will be doing – what?

"Alright, Russ," I say. "Let's go over to the Thomassons and view the video on the Flyhicle."

Since the Thomassons place is a km to the other side of Greenville, we both take our bicycles.

We arrive fifteen minutes later, and Chip receives us. He is excited. He has set up the memory to play the video, and seen some of the initial footage. He has resisted playing more until we arrived.

The Thomassons have a low house like most people have, but there is a large glass-covered greenhouse behind it, and an open ecogarden that is some five times large than a normal single family ecogarden. A sign identifies "Thomasson Commercial Ecofarm".

In the past students have found work here for the summer. That includes me and Russ. I remember well working here. That is how I know a little about the operation. Instead of a great deal of one food, there is

a little of everything. Workers gather them by hand into baskets and the baskets are emptied into crates, and the crates put on wagons. The wagons are pulled by an electric vehicle to the railway station at Traynton. Electricity in our world comes either from natural mechanical energy in waterfall, wave, or wind energy which is valid since it simply moves around energy that nature produces anyway. Or it comes from direct capture of sun's energy in solar panels. Nuclear energy was outlawed after it was understood that, like fossil fuel, nuclear energy was introducing new heat into nature, and actually adding to the heat in the atmosphere. While one heater or engine did not produce much heat, when an entire city used nuclear energy, the resulting new heat released was quite substantial. It did not make sense to add new heat into the atmosphere when the whole idea of promoting a reduction of greenhouse gases was to reduce heat!! So there was nothing unusual in Thomasson Farms having both windmills and solar panels to capture energy for electricity, which was then stored for use as needed. They have a large vertical windmill with vertical vanes that doesn't look as ugly as the propeller type. The energy is stored raising the water level of a large pond, and then recovered by running the water to a lower level.

But enough about this interesting place. We were here to see what the Flyhicle had video'd.

In a few minutes we are in their livingroom looking at the wall screen. Chip runs the Flyhicle's memory card.

What we see are sweeping shots of the Wilderness Reserve from above.

After a few minutes I say "It looks like the valley south of us, the one I view when I sit at the ridge. But what is it doing? What is it recording? Why?"

We all watch with questions going through our mind. There seems to be no logic in what it was video'ing.

It goes on and on – views of the valley from above the treetops.

Then we see it flying over a long lake.

"That's the lake down in the valley," I exclaim. "I can see it from the ridge sometimes as a narrow band of blue!"

Just then Samon Thomasson, Chip's father comes into the livingroom. He stops to view the screen, and adds.

"Yes, Riia. I think that is the narrow lake in the valley. I have seen it too."

"Have you been there?"

"No, when sometimes I've gone deer hunting, I've gone far, but not as far as the lake. That would take several days on foot."

He stays to view the video with us. We all watch for something more that we can identify. Nothing.

There is nothing but scenery from the valley. Forty five minutes later we are no wiser what it was all about. When it is over all we can do is express our opinions.

“What do you think, Russ?” I ask him.

“What stands out is that the shots are quite artistic. I think that it may be a media production collecting attractive shots for a video. I can see how someone could cut some of those attractive swoops into a larger production.”

“But why?” asks Chip. “What do you think, Dad?”

“I don’t know,” answers Samon. “But it certainly makes me long to go there. One day it would be nice to go further than we’ve ever gone before, and see what’s there. If that lake has fish, it would be nice to get some fish.”

“Maybe when I’ve graduated and school is out for the summer, we should make a journey there,” I propose.

Russ is all for it.

“What do you think, Samon?” I ask him.

“It may do you good, Riia. I hear you cannot decide what to do now that you have graduated – whether to go to university or stay here or what. Chip is clear about his future – he wants to stay here and develop this commercial ecofarm.”

“I wouldn’t mind getting away to where I can think. I go to the ridge of the cliff often but it hasn’t

helped me come to a decision. Maybe it has lost its magic from going there so much.”

“Then go, Riia. You know how. You’ve been going into the wilderness since you arrived when you were twelve. You just have to plan to spend some more nights in the wilderness and go further.”

“I’d like to go as far as that lake,” I say.

“I don’t know if I ever told you,” continues Mr. Thomasson, “but in the Innat tradition, at least among the Innat communities around here, when a young person comes to a stage when they have to make decisions about their direction in life, they go by themselves into the wilderness to meditate and try to receive insight. They call it ‘Vision Quest’. My mother told me that it is a practice that could be thousands of years old.”

“I can see how it is a custom that cannot be forgotten,” I say. “All young people reach that point in life when they have to make the transition. All young people have to go through that, whatever it is called. It is universal.”

“And so, it seems to me, Riia,” he continues, “that you have come to that stage now. What could be better than to journey into the valley and go to where you have never been before. It will put you into another frame of mind, and you may discover clarity.”

It strikes me positively. I am inspired. That is what I must do.

Chip and his father keep the Flyhicle in case they could figure out its owner from a serial number or something. It seems the transmission part of it – the part that interacted with its distant controller – had been destroyed when it crashed into the tree, so it would not be possible to transmit anything. In other words it was not possible to sit in front of the camera and communicate with its owner.

“I think that is why nobody came to fetch it,” says Chip. “The radio connection between it and whoever was remotely operating it was lost when the transmitter was destroyed.”

Electronic stuff is what Chip is into. I am happy to leave the mysterious Droper with him.

When later Russ and I are back at home and at the supper table, I describe to Father what was on the video – nothing but scenery of the valley. I then added that Mr Thomasson has encouraged me to make a journey of discovery to free my mind to determine my future.

“I don’t want to go back to a city, such as I may have to if I go to a university,” I say, “but what can I do staying here? I will just remain the same and grow old. Mr. Thomasson said all young people come to this crossroad and need to get away to make their decisions.”

“Yes, I agree,” says Father. “It is a major decision. What you decide will affect the rest of your life.”

“I want to go to the long lake. I want to go to what my eyes have been gazing at and wondering about for years when I’ve sat at the ridge above the cliff.”

“Then do it, Riia, but don’t forget the purpose of it – to reflect and come to some decisions. But I don’t think it is wise to go that far alone. The wilderness reserves have no habitations nor industry so no communications services are available there. If you get in trouble you cannot contact us. Maybe Russ will go with you.”

“You could get a satellite uplink,” says Russ.

I reject that idea. I don’t want to be tied to technology. You cannot get away if you are still linked to the world. “No technology. Russ can come with me if he wants.”

“What about me, Pop?” asks Reed. “Can I go?”

“Russ is already experienced going through the wilderness with Riia. And you’re a little young”

“I was thinking perhaps three overnights going,” I continue, “and then looping back three overnights back. I estimate we can reach the lake and look around with three overnights.”

“Let’s think in terms of a week then,” Father says. “If you haven’t had an accident in all your five years going through the woods, alone, or with Russ and Reed, or with Samon Thomasson and Chip, you aren’t going to suddenly start having accidents. If you need to get away to decide on the next stage in life,

then go. We can manage without you and Russ for a week, just fine.”

“I will go right after the graduation ceremonies,” I conclude. “But I want to keep quiet about it. It helps me to be reflective if I don’t wonder about what other people are thinking about it.”

It is settled then. In this time of uncertainty I have made a decision. I have a plan. Whether something comes of it or not, it will at least be an adventure.

In the coming weeks, I begin preparing for the journey. I’m excited. Russ is three years younger and still has some years of high school. He doesn’t need it like I do, but he is all for the adventure of it!

We keep our plans a secret, except for Chip and his father. They wish us well.

It is only for about a week.

We’ll be back before anyone else knows we had gone.

Our graduation day comes. Since everyone in Greenville knows everyone else, it was almost like a family affair. Riddle takes a video record of it with her little camera, to include with our next transmission to Mother.

I and Russ are prepared that the day after my graduation, we will head out, first thing in the morning. The weather reports predict quite good weather for the next few days.



PART 2:  
THE JOURNEY

## 6. The Journey Begins

Even though Riddle and Reed are not coming with me and Russ, they like being involved with the preparations. They are up at the break of dawn to see us off.

Riddle and Reed look on as I and Russ assemble things that we need to take on our journey – all the while trying to keep it as light as possible.

“What if you run into dangerous animals out there, Riia?” Riddle asks.

“We know how to handle bears or wolf-dogs,” I tell her, “All animals will be aggressive if threatened, but no animals, even a pack of wolf-dogs will hunt something that is unfamiliar especially if larger than them.”

“What about camping?” asks Reed. “You need to cook and to sleep the night. What have you planned for that?”

“I’ve been overnight before,” I reply. “We’ll have what is needed - especially a pot to boil water and some cups. A tarp in case there is a downpour of rain. But it’s not necessary to carry everything needed. When I went with Mr. Thomasson and Chip once, and we stayed overnight in the woods, we made everything from nature. It is surprising how soft and dry a fir bough mattress can be if it is nice and thick,

or how waterproof a lean-to is if it is built properly with overlapping branches like thatch."

"What if you are hit by a thunderstorm?"

"Well then we'll have to find shelter," replies Russ, "so nothing strikes us and the wind does not blow us away."

"If there is a shelter or a hole in rocks or ground," I continue, "you lie flat in it. If not, you can lash to the lee side of the base of a tree trunk - not the tallest tree as that may attract lightning. You know the drill from school. But it is a matter of probability. Thunderstorms are not giant weather systems like hurricanes, and if we're lucky we might not encounter one at all for a week. The most important thing to take on a wilderness expedition is our wits. We have to be smart."

"I wish you had a device to communicate with, Riia," said Reed, "so we could follow you along."

"You heard what Father said - there is no communication service in the wilderness since there are no people there. We'll leave any devices at home."

"You could take some video for Mother," suggested Riddle.

"We're not going to become videographers, Riddle," I say. "We'll be too busy trying to find our way and catch food. Besides a video would consist of nothing but shots of forest and us doing stuff - which is what we do every day when we go into the woods."

Besides my main purpose is to get a Vision as in the Innat Vision Quest."

"What about food?" asks Riddle.

"For food, we will take my bow and arrows, a hunting knife, fishing line, hooks, and string for making snares – the usual stuff – to catch our own dinner. And of course a pot for cooking and of course containers for drinking water to carry when we are journeying. As light as possible. We don't want to be lugging a very heavy backpack."

"For food, " adds Riddle, "you should pack some snacks to eat as you go - at least for the first day. I'll pack for you some salted smoked fish, and some dried apple pieces, and whatever else we have that keeps and is easy to snack on."

"That would be great, Riddle," says Russ.

I hand Russ all the food-making items we will take, and he puts them inside the pot he has selected, and then the whole pot, filled with food-related stuff goes into his backpack.

"We can put snack things inside the pot," he says to Riddle. "There's still some room."

"Won't it become lonely after several days?" asks Reed.

"Of course not, Reed," I reply. "The wilderness is the least lonely place there is. It is full of life."

When I first went into the wilderness when I was little, I was afraid to be alone. The trick is to include

wild animals in your sense of community. If I thought of a squirrel, wolf, wild cat, deer, rabbit, fish, and so on as a being who was part of my community, then I never felt I was alone. Whether the animals are actually friends or not is another matter. Even if your community consists only of humans, you still have to deal with unsavoury characters as well as friends, with predators as well as supporters. It is having the sense of belonging to a community that counts. And a member of your community can be nice at one time and dangerous at another. And so, for example, a squirrel can regard a bear as a fellow member of his community and be friends with it under normal conditions and a threat when the bear is hungry. Thus in nature it is possible to be both a friend and an enemy – a friend when not hungry and an enemy when otherwise. And animals can sense when a familiar predator is in a benevolent state and when it is in a dangerous state. Other than the fact that animals have different outward appearances and behaviour, there is no difference between animal communities and ones consisting only of humans. Thus, if you know nothing about the wilderness, then you can feel very alone in it; but if you are aware of all that is going on, all the species interacting with one another, then there is nothing lonely in it. You only have to make yourself part of it.

It is time to go. Riddle and Reed accompany us to the edge of our property and say goodbye.

“See you in a week, guys,” I say as I wave goodbye.

We begin on familiar paths leading away from our clearing. No hunting or trapping while we are on familiar ground. We want to make good time. We have the snack food and water bottles to drink from when thirsty while we hiked. We will make camp at the end of the day, and see to obtaining food from the wild at that time or continue to consume for a while the dried and salted food that Riddle has packed and given us to take. There are also wild berries to snack on too if we came upon them. At this time of year – end of June – many wild berries are becoming ripe.

I am familiar with all the trails I usually use and lead the way. I have to choose the trail that leads furthest away – the trail to where I camped with Mr. Thomasson and Chip last fall.

“We’ll head there first, and camp there,” I tell Russ. “From there, we’ll proceed into new territory in the morning. That’s when we’ll have to take compass readings and take notes of natural landmarks.”

“Yes, Sis,” says Russ. “Lead the way.”

I am the boss here. He is after all only 14 to my 17. He can sometimes be annoyed at me for it; but usually he just nods and agrees.

Without doing any hunting or collecting the whole day is mostly a great deal of hiking, stopping once in a while to drink some water from our water bottles, or eat something for a snack from what Riddle packed for us.

The day is a mix of sun and cloud from what we could tell from ground level. The mature forest is everywhere a dense canopy of green and it is difficult to see the sky from the ground. Humidity is down, and the journeying cannot be more comfortable.

We see a Tabbynx, but it avoids us. I am not going to chase it. Another large animal, a little like a cat, is the raccoon. There are large ones and very intelligent. They will look at you and size you up more than any other animal. I expect that at night we will be visited by raccoons. We have to put all the food we carry out of their reach. They have little hands that can manipulate things as well as humans can. They have fingers that can even untie knots.

And then there are the wild dogs too, the Dogotes. We have to keep our eyes open for those. They come in packs and can be dangerous as a group.

At midday the temperature rises dramatically. I can see blue through the trees above, meaning it is clear, and when it is clear it is hot. Because of the greenhouse gases, the air will warm rapidly so a clear sky can become moist and cloudy by the end of a day. It can then rain and the sky becomes dry and cold

again for the next morning. Such swings in temperature is another reason our world prefers massive walls that are partly underground.

“We totally forgot, Russ, to consider that when camping in the open there will be those swings in temperature we don’t experience when we sleep in our massive semi-buried house.”

When it is so hot as it is now, it is nice to remove some clothes, but when one does, one exposes the skin to mosquitoes. Even thin clothes are no obstacle to mosquitoes. Fortunately, since mosquitos need the blood of animals to reproduce, their populations are proportional to populations of animals. If the animal populations are normal, the mosquito populations will be too. Anyway it is wise to find a path to walk that receives a breeze.

“I should climb a tall tree and have a good look at the sky,” I tell Russ by the afternoon. “to read the clouds. Also to take bearings now that we are quite far from home by now. We have hiked all day and never found an open ridge yet from which we have any view of the valley or sky.”

“It would be good to know if any thunderclouds are forming. Go ahead. I’ll rest at the base of the tree.”

I look for a very tall oak. Oaks are easy to climb. Their branches are like rungs of a ladder. I often climb trees when I need to keep track of the weather. If I am unable to go to the roof of the high-school or climb



our own tower, there is no other way to see the sky in this deliberately overly-overgrown planet.

Leaving my backpack and bow and arrows on the ground, I scramble up the next tree that is suitable. Since these forests were not logged, mature trees – shortly before they die – can be exceptionally tall. Of course now and then a thunderstorm will blow areas flat, but some places manage to evade the thunderstorms and grow some very tall trees. It took some minutes to reach the top and find a view of the sky and valley. There were already some dead branches up there, suggesting this tree was an reaching its old age.

Perched like an eagle I scan the scene. I now see more of the blue of a long narrow lake in the distance. It is obviously part of the drainage of the valley. There are probably creeks feeding it from above, and a creek draining it below. We are heading to the below side, the east side.

The sky.

I can understand why it is so hot. The sky is perfectly clear, and the sun is blazing down at maximum strength. But a clear sky can also mean when the sun goes down, it will become quite cool. New clouds are billowing up in the west.

There is a little breeze up here, so I decide to rest a few moments to enjoy it. I hear bird shrieks, and turn to see that I am sharing the top of the tree with a nest

of eagles some meters away. Almost-mature eaglets are ready to take their first steps to fly. I wonder how their mother will take to my being so close. Maybe she will swoop at me. Never mind, I will return to the ground.

“What did you see?” asks Russ when I leap the last two meters to the ground.

“I saw a good direction to go, Russ. There is a long lake. We could circle the lake and return. I took compass reading for the location of the lake. We want to head to the east of it, to access the other side. We don’t have any boat.”

“What about the weather?”

“Clear sky – blazing hot in the day, will become cool tonight – unless the billowing cloud system in the west moves in overnight.”

We soon reach the place where last fall we – the Thomassons and me –made camp. The circle of rocks that surrounded our fire last year is still there. As far as I know there is no objection to individuals making a campfire. Forest fires are not a problem around here. Here, the mountains lift the air and cool it - that promotes condensation of moisture into rain. Mountain forests tend towards being what is called ‘rain forests’. But then the air, with moisture dropped in the mountains, is dry when it continues eastward. Satellites watch the forests and if the fire seems not to expand, they let it burn itself out.

It is easy to set up camp. I remember how it was set up the last time. We won't bother with any lean-to. We merely take stock of our surroundings and make sure we know where we will take shelter in case of a thunderstorm.

The role of making the fire falls to Russ. We have no food to cook, but we need to boil some water into tea to replenish fluids lost during the hot day. It is unwise to drink unfamiliar water from nature without boiling it.

Russ knows the art of making fire by friction on wood, and by striking a knife on a piece of flint, but why do things the hard way if it isn't necessary? At home we don't even use matches. We follow the practice of preserving an ember from the last fire in the middle of ashes. The ember remains alive in the ashes and can be used to ignite tinder to start a fire later. In this case, Russ has brought an ember from the cooking fire at home in a small metal container.

Before long he has a pot of water hanging by its handle on a stick holding it over the fire.

Consuming water as boiled tea, is probably one of the oldest practices of humankind. Tea acquired a reputation of being a healthy way of having water long before anyone knew that boiling destroyed bacteria in water from unfresh water sources. I expect drinking flavoured boiled water could be a custom that dates back to the beginning of the use of fire. Hot

water is tea from some kind of leaf or berry added for a little flavour. There are several kinds of wild leaves that serve the purpose well. Of course the tastiest is to add some wild berries – it adds some sweetness too.

For bedding it is enough to cut a large pile of fir boughs to make a nice soft mattress.

“Cut off just the ends of the spruce and fir boughs, Russ,” I instruct. “That way you won’t find yourself sleeping on a hard part of a branch. Cutting only the ends also barely affects the tree.”

Russ fashions a spruce bough mattress to his liking for himself, and I fashion one for myself. We orient each of our mattress-piles so that our feet point towards the fire. Since it is obvious there will be no rain, there is no reason to fashion a lean-to. But as the sun goes down, it will become cool. We did not pack sleeping bags, so we sleep in our clothes - minus cumbersome boots and maybe jacket.

With the small smoking fire giving something to look at, and producing smoke to drive away mosquitoes, we fall asleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night feeling quite cold.

“Frost!” I exclaim when I can see my breath.

The fire has gone out, and I get up to blow the fire up again to get some warmth. Russ awakens and has a similar reaction. We have gone from very hot in the day to very cold at night. Here in the mountains,

where the terrain and air movements vary greatly there can be unusual microclimate behaviour.

“Dammit,” I say. “It’s cold.”

“I wonder why.”

“Who knows. Maybe we’re in a location where cool air from a high elevation flows down. We are dealing with microclimates adding to the irregularity of the weather in the mountains overall.”

With fire built up, Russ and I lean back in our piles of fir boughs. I notice that I can see the stars. The sky is clear where we are. I notice an unblinking star not far from the moon. “See that bright star near the moon, Russ?”

“Yes.”

“That’s actually Mars. Imagine - that’s where Mother is right now. It makes you think, doesn’t it?”

“That one?”

“Yes that one about 40 degrees above the horizon that isn’t twinkling. That’s Mars. Maybe she is looking back at us. I think she probably keeps track of where earth is, and it helps her think of us.”

“She probably has a telescope. She’ll see a very green earth. Even deserts will look green, ever since the projects that irrigate deserts from the sea.”

“And grow land plants genetically combined with ocean seaweed, so they can handle salt water.”

Once the fire is up and we are warmed up, we fall asleep again and before we know it, it is morning.

## 7. Day Two of the Journey

The rising of the sun is heralded by bird song.

I straighten out my clothes. Both of us had merely removed our boots, and used our backpacks for pillows.

“Rise and shine, Russ,” I say, as I pull on my boots. Russ stirs in his pile of fir branches. “We need to be off. We didn’t look for any food yesterday, but we can eat biscuits that Riddle made for us, and then as we go, watch for something to catch to eat for this evening.”

Russ pulled on his own boots and checked the fire. The pot in which he had boiled more water last night had cooled. “Here is some water for our water bottles for the hiking today,” he says. I hand him my water bottle and he fills both our water bottles.

“The more we can prepare the morning’s food and water in the evening,” I add, “the less time we need to spend in the morning with breakfast and so on.”

After Russ had made sure the fire was out, we set off.

We are now entering forest I had ever seen before. Which way should we proceed? Even if no humans went through a place, there are still numerous trails made by animals. Their trails usually go towards water, and link locations where they feed. I can read a

great deal from trails. If we get near water, we may find beaver trails. Beavers climb out of the water to fetch the poplar saplings they eat and drag them into their ponds. Trails made by bears are sure to lead to berry patches. The most useful trails for us humans to follow, if we are trying to move quickly, are trails made by deer and moose.

I see and follow a quite well trod path.

“Moose and deer use this, Russ,” I say.

“How do you know?”

“Well there are hoof-marks. And they are tall animals. They break the higher branches above the trail. Humans, being tall too, can easily follow such a trail. We might as well follow this. It is a good trail for orientation, since it will continue to be used, still be here for years, and not be overgrown.”

We follow the path for a while. It leads to higher ground opened up by the collapse of mature trees, which lets down light that promotes grasses and new young trees of the kind favoured by deer and moose.

“This deer or moose trail is generally going in the southerly direction, which is the direction we want to go.”

I keep my eye open for something we can have for supper this evening.

We thought that as the day progressed, the cool of the night would subside, but it was still cool, even cold. Looking up, I see the sky is now grey and not

clear. But it isn't easy to see what is going on in the sky from the ground.

"Brr," said Russ, "pulling up his collar. I think a new weather system has moved in or some new microclimate and microweather."

"Cool air usually means a downdraft from a high elevation. I'll climb another tree to get above the forest cover, and check the weather."

"I can climb," says Russ.

"But do you know how to read the weather?"

"Okay Sis. You go."

This tree is an enormous maple. It is easy to climb too, if it is large enough.

When I near the top, I experience some white flakes flying about. "Snow!" I exclaim. "In midsummer?" As I scan the sky and the silhouettes of the mountains, I can feel a cold wind blowing down into this valley. It is grey and clouds are moving about rapidly. I have no idea what is happening. When I return to the ground, there is snow in my hair.

"Guess what, Russ," I say, "It is snowing up there."

"I saw. Some of it drifted down through the trees."

"I don't think it will last, though. Some kind of peculiar phenomenon going on. Maybe cold air from the night-time meeting moist air. The sky is grey, but who knows what is going on above the ceiling."



We continue on. I am right. It is a temporary phenomenon. In a couple hours it is hot again, a little more what we would consider 'normal'. The going is pleasant now.

Next we come across what appears to be an area that was flattened by a thunderstorm many years ago, and now it is overgrown with small trees and ground plants. Deer and moose like such areas - the foliage they it is low enough to the ground for them to eat.

"Shh!" says Russ, "A moose!"

It turns its head cautiously towards us, but is not particularly afraid. It continues to feed, turning its head towards us only if we seem to move sharply.

I have never pursued a moose for food, but Mr. Thomasson has when he hunts in the fall. There is the major chore to process it afterward - all the butchering, skinning, and storage. We let it continue feeding on the aspen leaves and pass it by through this open region, until we re-enter the mature forest.

We continue on, moving generally in the southerly direction, now going off the deer or moose trail,

We come to an open area, open from being rocky and with poor soil. It is filled with grasses and low bushes. This area will never become forest. Too many rocks. We see something moving some distance away.

"Look!" whispers Russ, pointing. "Black bear and cubs! Feeding on blueberries, I think."

We stop. We haven't been detected by them yet.

"Just move very slowly," I say, "and we'll go widely around them. Don't want to get between a cub and a mother bear."

So we move slowly and calmly as if we were a deer or something, in a wide circle around them. They notice, and mother bear lets out a "wuff" and the whole family moves off a small bit – not wanting to depart from the blueberries. Once we are past, they are fine with us again.

"Animals tolerate one another. They are part of the same community," I say. "Unless we are deliberately looking to eat, we respect one another, keep a respectful distance. If the animal is not hungry, what is its reason for killing any prey? It applies to eating plants too. Who is to say that a plant is any less important than an animal? We pick a vegetable, we hunt a vegetable. But when our stomachs are full, and nobody is hungry, we are all family."

"Good point," says Russ. "I can imagine that if all animals had food taken care of, they would all live in peace."

We head back into dense forest.

"Yes, Russ. How nice it would be if the animals and plants we eat were brought to their death in some other way, like getting hit by a tree. Then all the animals would scavenge the dead stuff."

“Isn’t that what food markets do? Someone else - the farmer or slaughterhouse - kills the plants and animals we eat so we who buys the dead stuff does not have to deal with the morality of it.”

“I saw a video once where in very ancient times, when people slaughtered farm animals, they did it in a ceremony to a god or goddess, and it was called a religious offering, but it was really a way to take the edge off slaughtering the animal, since the god or goddess only got a prayer and the smoke from burning the innards, and the humans consumed the rest in a feast. It was just a way of dealing with death when the animal you killed was one that was already in your hands and you didn’t have to hunt it. So in a way, hunting is honest. We have to deal with it all. We can’t mask the killing side of obtaining food.”

“Hunting is easier the more starved you feel,” Russ notes. “Hunger suppresses the intellectualization that trips us up. “

“It is part of the scheme of nature. There are all kinds of clever schemes going on in the wilderness. The role of bees in spreading pollen in exchange for collecting nectar, is one of the best known schemes. Rabbits reproduce rapidly and if nobody eats rabbits, rabbits die anyway from starvation. A quick death in the jaws of a predator is maybe preferable to the slow agony of death from starvation. I think in some

instinctive way they know it. Speaking of bees, I think there is a hive in there."

I point to a shattered tree trunk left over from the collapse of a mature tree.

"Are you sure they are not wasps?"

"No. See them as they fly by. They are bees. They are probably attending to the parts of the forest that have been levelled by storms."

"If we had netting to protect us, we could get some honey to sweeten out tea."

We go closer to it to inspect it.

"It looks like a bear has clawed at it not long ago," I say. "I'll cover my head with our mosquito netting, and see if I can grab a bit of a honeycomb."

"I don't know, Sis..."

"I'll put on my gloves, and seal my sleeves and cuffs. You take my bow, quiver and backpack, and go ahead and get far enough away. Be prepared for me to come running."

"I don't know, Sis," says Russ, but he does as I say.

I first put on a hat, and then hang mosquito netting down over it. I tuck the mosquito netting into my hunting jacket collar. I tuck my trouser legs into my boots, and my sleeves into my leather gloves. I move close to the broken stump – the remains of a mature tree trunk – and can see part of a honeycomb. I'll just reach in there, and tear off a piece of it.....I try to do it slowly so as not to excite the bees too much.

I got a piece loose and I can see it contains honey. I back up with it and brush away bees with my free hand, and then when I am some distance away, I brush away more bees and then run to get rid of any that are following me.

“Russ, run ahead of me and lead the way,” I call.

In a few minutes we have shaken off any bees following us. I remove the mosquito netting and we study what we’ve got. It isn’t very large, but enough to snack on. You just bite into a chunk and suck at the honey and chew the wax. The beeswax is useful. When we’ve sucked and chewed it, we put the wad of warm beeswax into our pocket. Russ puts what is left of the honeycomb in one of the metal cups we have for tea, which we can use later.

Where are we now? I have become a little disoriented during the episode with the bees. With so many tall mature trees here I am tempted to climb them to get another view of the land from above the forest canopy. But we continue where there is some evidence of another trail used by some animals. Tracks are too old to make out.

Finally Russ sees something significant.

“Tracks of wild dogs, of Dogotes,” he says, pointing to the ground. “I think sometime this morning.”

“That means there must be prey in the area,” I say. “Let us track them to see what they are hunting.”

Before long, I see a porcupine in a pine tree.

"Perhaps the Dogotes treed it, and some of them have quills in their nose," says Russ.

"I would imagine that this pack is already aware of the quill problem. I don't think that is what they were following. See here. Tracks of turkeys. Turkeys feed on the ground. They were probably after seeds in the more open ground, and the pack of Dogotes drove them into the forest."

"We have to begin thinking seriously about getting something to eat for supper this evening," said Russ. "A turkey would be perfect."

I have been walking with my bow around my shoulder. I remove my bow, and put an arrow in it to be ready.

We now proceed very slowly and quietly. We come to another opening in the forest, once again caused by the fall of a mature tree. The grey sky has vanished and sunlight is shining down to the forest floor, here consisting of grasses, ferns, and berry bushes. And there in the middle of it is a flock of wild turkeys. A couple of them are aware of us, and move away. That causes others to move away.

"Here's our supper, Russ," I say.

Before they retreat into the underbrush, I aim my bow, shoot, and hit one. The rest fly off. I rush up to it. If it isn't dead I have to twist its neck. As always I give it a moment pause and say thanks to it.

“Why do you do that, Sis?” Russ asks as he comes up behind me.

“What?”

“You pause when you reach the animal and sometimes touch it.”

“I don’t know. It is like saying goodbye to someone passing away. Goodbye and thanks. I saw Mr. Thomasson do something like that once. I do it because it feels okay. Something dies, and livingness goes. We have to be saying goodbye to something. It is not as if I am shooting down a mechanical device like a Flyhicle, or shooting at a bullseye target. So you have to acknowledge the departure of livingness, which we can call the spirit.” I sweep my free hand towards the bushes. “the spirit of the turkey is flying off into an invisible other-place. Hunting is not like archery at school. We have to deal with something real but intangible. To not do so is like treating animals like lifeless objects. I know there may be hunters that do, but it makes it cold. You don’t feel part of nature.”

“And they also dress up in all kinds of expensive gear and use high technology.”

“Right - they separate themselves from nature and it becomes like a target shooting game in an arcade.”

The spirit of the animal is now separated from the body, and the body is now just meat, and I am now thinking of the bird roasting beside tonight’s

campfire. Still, that spirit could be watching, so that body has to be respected. I guess I may have learned that from Mr. Thomasson. I can't tell how much of my beliefs has come from him and how much from my own experience....I place the bird into my game bag. I will clean it when we are ready to make camp later in the afternoon.

We continue on, now thrilled with the prospect of a turkey dinner later. Russ talks about how we should prepare it. Like me he is thinking of our dinner.

There is plenty of daylight left, and we can continue through the forest for a couple more hours.

I keep oriented by watching the location of the sun. But orientation by the sun is only rough because the sun is moving. I often take out my compass to take a more accurate understanding of north, south, east, west. I can then also determine the position of the sun relative to the four compass points and refresh my understanding of the position of the sun - it is easier to orient to the sun when it isn't cloudy than to have to stop again and again and take compass readings.

By late afternoon, we are on a rock ridge, and it is nice following it because ridges have fewer trees and there is a breeze that blows away mosquitoes and flies. Furthermore it is possible to find vantage points on a high ridge where one can view the lay of the land.



When we arrive at a place with a view, we decide to sit on a rock and stop for some water from our water bottles and to snack on something from our snack supply.

“How about the smoked fish Riddle packed for us?”

I hand Russ one of two small smoked trout. It was made in the smokehouse our father built, and which we regularly use to preserve meat whenever there is enough extra. He has also done smoking for neighbours.

I take for myself the second. They were salted and smoked with skin and bones in it – it helps hold it together – so it has to be eaten by hand, pulled apart.

It is always nice to sit and be able to look into the distance. It is probably an instinct that developed long ago when humans had to keep watch out for predators like lions. Where are we? Right now, I generally only understand from where we have just come – the turkeys are still in the woods that way, the bear and her cubs further up in that direction, the moose browsing some kilometres further up....But what is going on in all the other directions, hidden from view? The directions we are going?

“This ridge is a good landmark, Russ,” I say. “I can recognize some of the tops of hills, and I have a sense of where we are in general.”

“What’s your plan?” Russ asks me.

“According to my scouting from the top of the tree, if we continue south, we should come to a creek or something that drains the long lake on its east end. We can cross the creek and then turn west and walk around the lake and then return. That should take us a couple of days.”

“Why cross to the other side of the lake?”

“We want to know how to cross, Russ. Otherwise it will be a barrier if we don’t know how to cross it. I suggest we cross to the south side of the lake, and hike around the lake and return, learning more about this wilderness.”

Having finished the smoked fish Riddle packed us, I toss aside the bones, take a mouthful of water from my water bottle and motion to Russ that we continue on.

The ridge ends and we head back into dense forest.

“Since we need a good source of water for our campsite this evening,” I say, “let’s proceed down-slope and in the southerly direction until we find water that is draining the lake, and camp there.”

The slope is still generally going downward anyway as we came from a higher elevation down into the valley between the mountains.

We continue a half an hour. The mosquitoes are vicious. It suggests we are moving closer to low marshy ground, since mosquitoes breed in water.

“When we have reached roughly the bottom of the valley, we should find creek, marshland, and even ponds or lakes soon,” I tell Russ.

I am right.

Now we are in a marsh. I find a trail of another moose. Moose is also an inhabitant of wetlands, as it can feed on aquatic plants. If we follow a moose trail in a marshy area, it will lead to a water body.

The moose tracks in the soft ground are deep, and our own tracks sink deep into muck in many places. But we keep at it, and the trail does come to a body of water – a pond. I throw a twig into it, and it moves at a good rate eastward indicating moving water.

“This pond is the local widening of a creek draining water from the west,” I decide. “Let’s follow the shore up creek for a bit. Let’s make camp when we find a good spot. This is probably the lowest elevation of the valley, and the long blue lake is to the west. ....”

“Sounds like a plan,” says Russ. “Let’s find a place to camp beside moving water if possible.”

We find a higher drier spot. It is somewhat open since it is beside marsh overgrown with marsh grasses. It is open enough that we can see the blue-green mountain tops in the distance.

Once again, Russ makes a fire and sets water boiling in our pot. Meanwhile I set to work cleaning

the turkey. I leave its innards on a rock for the raccoons I expect hunt along the water at night.

I find the feathers of the turkey to be attractive. I cannot throw them away as if garbage. I'll carry them home, add them to my drawer filled with feathers, and make something with them sometime. Some of the larger ones are ideal for arrows.

I bring the turkey meat, divided into a few pieces to make the cooking faster, to the fire. I put sharpened sticks through the pieces and arrange them to be roasted. Russ moves the boiling water aside, adds some wilderness tea leaves, and some honey from the remaining piece of honeycomb, and leaves it to simmer.

The sun is sinking in the west. There is a crimson sky. Sunsets are always elaborate in today's world, since there is always so much more going on in the sky. Whatever peculiar weather system moved through earlier, it is gone. But weather can change quickly, so we never become complacent.

Russ pours tea from the pot into the two metal cups we brought with us. I take one cup and he takes the other. I take a sip of tea and put the cup to one side a moment while I study the lovely turkey feathers. Some smaller ones are attractive. I look for ways to attach them to my hunting jacket. I can't really find a good way to do so. With the tip of my knife I then cut a slit into the end of a small turkey

feather and put some strands of my hair falling down at the side of my face through the slit to tie the feather to my hair. I do it to a strand on the other side too. I do it a couple of times on each side. I'm not intending anything by this. It is nothing more than something to do while we wait for supper. We have no mirror. I have no idea how it looks. I suppose if Russ is not laughing, it looks okay.

Russ attends to the roasting of the turkey meat, taking a sip of tea every now and then. I begin to cut branch tips from nearby small firs for making our fir bough mattresses for the night.

We can already taste the turkey as we watch the pieces roast in the heat of the fire. Hunger makes it all as it should be. Hunger makes the killing of plants and animals and consumption of them correct. Soon we are tearing the roasted pieces apart with our teeth as the fire flickers in our faces.

It is a large bird with enough meat for two and some left over for tomorrow morning.

The sun sets and Russ lets the fire die to smoking coals. Smoke keeps mosquitoes away. A small breeze coming from the west off the lake helps too. We remove our boots, and use our jackets like blankets. Settling into each of our piles of fir branches, we slip away into slumber land for the second night.

Russ promises to wake and rebuild the fire during the night if it becomes cold again.

## 8. Dogotes and a Road

I am awakened during the night by a sense of some kind of animal being nearby. I see several wild dogs at my feet. I was awakened because one of them nipped at my feet.

“Get out of here!” I shout. It awakens Russ. “Russ – we’re the centre of attention of a pack of Dogotes. Don’t run. They are investigating us and testing us. If you run they will be emboldened and go after you.”

“What’ll we do?”

“Act strong and cool. They’ll nip at you to see how you react. So just wack them when they do. Grab a good size stick from the firewood you collected. I’ll use my bow.”

It is dark. The fire has gone out and there are only some embers and smoke coming from it. The weak light however illuminates their eyes. They look scary but I know they are no taller than an average domestic dog or the ancient pure coyote. When, long ago, domesticated dogs interbred with wolves, coyotes, and foxes, the most successful breed was the smaller size aggressive form since the most common prey for carnivores in most northern wilderness is smaller animals, from rabbits to turkeys to raccoons. Thus, what Russ and I are dealing with are extremely aggressive medium size dogs with snarling teeth, and

sinister staring eyes. Individually they are no threat, but a pack of them is quite dangerous.

“So keep something handy,” I continue, “with which you can wack any who tries something, and meanwhile slowly put your boots and jacket on. The jacket will prevent them from getting teeth into your arm, and with boots on you can give them swift kicks. But do everything aggressively and firmly to show who is the boss. They are, after all, dogs.”

“How many are there?” asks Russ as he pulls his boots on. I am doing the same.

“I don’t know. From their eyes, could be eight or ten.”

With boots and jacket on. I stand up slowly, pretending to ignore them. I grab my bow to use as a club. Suddenly one of the little rascals tries to bite me in my boot ankle. I wack it with my bow, and then kick it into the darkness. We hear its howling and wimpering.

Another is bold and comes at me, but I jab it in the nose with the end of my bow, and it retreats.

Russ is now dressed too. The dogs have not given him any attention yet. “What now, Riia?”

“Strike any that lunges towards you before they reach you. Once one gets hold of any part of you others may join in. So prevent it. They are dogs, Russ. Discipline them. Don’t engage them in a fight. Think of them as bad dogs. So be ready to strike, but act

normally. I suggest you slowly build up the fire again. Get a good fire going.”

With my two painful wacks at the lead dogs, the dogs retreat a little, but continue to circle us in the darkness. I can hear their movements from the crackle of leaves and twigs under their feet.

Russ has the fire blazing now. That helps keep them at bay for now.

“So I guess we’re up now until morning,” says Russ.

“Fraid so. Those dogs will circle and study us for the next hour or so. If we lie down again, they will become bolder and test us again.”

We sat staring at the fire. I search for something to talk about to pass the time. How about dogs?

“Did you know Russ, that a few centuries ago, when the dog population in our world exceeded the human population, there was a cult that believed dogs were superior to humans, and that humans were actually their servants without our knowing. After all we were providing for their every need. And so this cult was lead by a man who called himself the Son of Dog, and had people worshipping a Chihuahua, and wrote a bible called the Book of Dogma, and claimed that God was really in the image of a dog, and that the truth was hidden by reversing the word ‘dog’ so that humans would speak of ‘god’ and falsely believe in human superiority.”



“It sounds stupid,” said Russ. “The word for the high deity, was not ‘god’ in other languages, and reversing them did not produce any word describing a dog.”

“But Russ, by then English was, as a result of centuries of mass media, the standard language of humankind as a whole, so there were many people not aware of ancient religions in other languages where the deity name was not ‘god’ and the word for the domestic canine was not ‘dog’. So the invented religion caught on and is still around. The fact that genetic engineering created a dog breed that could mouth human-sounding words, helped the cult forward. A talking dog was put on a pedestal and the congregation did not sing hymns but howled and barked. The dog in front on the pedestal spoke human-sounding words. It was really weird, but you know how humans are – easy to be made to follow like vermin after some new cheesy fad. So this Dog Cult was at odds with the ordinary world. The leaders of it managed to take over a government, and there was a great war between the believers of Dog and traditional believers of God. Finally the believers of God managed to overthrow the believers of Dog, and overthrow their president, who was known as Top Dog. That was just a blip in the history of the past thousand years, but it was a harsh blip. The Dog Cult is now just one of many kinds of craziness and

silliness like often emerges out of the cities. I was reminded of all that just now. We learned it in history class.”

“Is there a moral?”

“I think the moral is that it is better for humans to live closer to nature so it is not necessary to replace nature artificially with pets. City people, are deprived of interacting with the original wild plants and animals and having to bring artificial ones into their artificial environments.”

We tried to nap sitting up and with one eye open. Soon it appeared the Dogotes were gone, and we managed to get an hour or two more sleep before it was dawn.

The sun rises with the sounds of frogs somewhere along the shore of the creek nearby.

There are Dogote tracks all around our campsite.

“So why didn’t you shoot an arrow at one, Riia?” Russ wonders.

“Those creatures wouldn’t understand that I caused it, since the arrow flies through the air. They would have seen it as an accident. But if I directly give them a wack they connect it with me – I will cause pain if they come close. An arrow would be better to stop a single large committed attacker who is no longer testing me.”

We had planned to eat leftovers from the turkey for breakfast. Russ had put it in the pot last evening,

and put the pot in the creek with lid on it to keep it cool. He had weighed the lid down with rocks.

“I may have attracted the dogs here with the turkey innards,” I say. “I left it for raccoons, but probably the Dogotes got wind of it. So I guess I am somewhat at fault.”

When I go to the water to remove the pot and its turkey contents and put water in it instead, I notice that the turkey innards I left for the raccoons are gone, but then I notice there is a raccoon up in a nearby tall oak. What is the story behind this?

“Treed by that pack of wolf-dogs, are you?” I inquire from it. I was now its new danger. It won’t come down until we have left.

I splash water on my face and notice in my reflection the turkey feathers hanging from my hair on the sides of my face. Looks pretty cool. I’ll leave them there since they seem not to have gotten damaged when I slept. Indeed feathers are resilient. After all, turkeys often fly through branches and their feathers remain in good shape. I had tied them to my hair with a secure knots. They were not going anywhere.

Returning to the fire, I bring back the pot of water in one hand and the leftover turkey in the other and put the pot over the fire Russ has made by building up last night’s fire, and hand him half the leftover turkey. We have tea and some cold turkey for breakfast.

Time to review our next step.

Being surrounded by marsh grasses, it is possible to see the tops of the mountains and the sky. "The sky has clouded over again. I wonder what that means," I say. In our world it is rare for weather to remain the same day to day. I turn towards the sky above and say, sounding more seriously than I intended, "Let the god of weather be good today!"

"I read that a long time ago," noted Russ, "the weather could remain similar for several days, even a week, at a time. Predictable weather. That must have been nice. Weather forecasts were pretty good. And then weather forecasts deteriorated and instruments and computer programs were as good as human intuitive guesses."

"We've covered maybe 30 kilometres in two days. I think we should go for another day and a half in the southerly direction before we loop back in a clockwise fashion around that lake I saw. One more night before turning back. That would then make it six nights of being away. We can probably be away a further couple more days before a search party is sent for us."

It is likely that the creek and marshes drains the lake and we would reach the lake if we went west. We want to cross this wet region where it is dry, and get to the other side, the south side, before beginning to loop around in a westerly direction and then heading back north and homeward.

We find a beaver dam by which we can cross to the south side. We continue through damp ground until the ground begins to rise and makes the going drier.

Suddenly we walk out onto the remains of an old overgrown road. What is this? An open, grassy, space extends a considerable distance to both sides of the road. Grasses and weeds, and maybe wet sandy soil has prevented the growth of normal forest here.

We both stand speechless, wondering what this is.

Finally I say “ Maybe it is an old re-forestry road from a couple centuries ago when the Green Lung programs were restoring this wilderness, and they needed to help many denuded areas to return to the wild state with planting of seedlings.”

Russ kneels down and studies the road surface. “It looks like it once had pavement, and then it was broken up by weeds. It could be a hundred years old or more....But look at the tramped down weeds, Riia. It seems there has been some more recent use of it, and not just years ago, but hours ago. See the tracks of carts and bicycles , and boots!”

“That is a puzzle.”

“What should we do now, Riia?”

“Well, we’re close to as far as we wanted to go southward, so we might as well begin looping back. The old road’s oriented west. Let’s follow the old road

and the tracks to see where it goes? It is also a good landmark for later reference.”

And that is what we do next. We begin walking west along the broken road. Sometimes there is soft dirt and the footprints are clear. Who are these people and where are they going?

We go on for a half an hour. Walking the road is uneventful. It just goes on and on. We notice the right side, the north side to our right, is all grasses and low bushes and seems to be extending towards water behind. I can see the blue. Although the sky is billowing with clouds, there is enough blue sky to reflect on the lake.

I sense that there may be birds in the low bushes. “I have a feeling we might find pheasants in those high grasses and bushes.”

“And I think we are also near shallow water with reeds on the east end of the lake,” adds Russ.

“Let’s check it out, Russ. Walking along the road shows us nothing but the road. I’m bored. We can move parallel to the road or the lake. It would be good fortune if we can get a couple of pheasants for supper from those bushes.”

With my bow and arrow ready, we begin hiking through the grasses beside the road. I intend to throw a stone where I think there are pheasants, to cause them to fly up. I quickly check to see what arrow I am using, I need to know its behaviour if I am going to hit

a flying bird accurately. I know that this arrow I pulled from my quiver tends to have a bias slightly to the right, and I will adjust my shooting accordingly.

But our progress is interrupted by voices.

People laughing and chatting.

We turn towards where it is coming from and we see a group of people coming up the road travelling west on the road where we have just been. Some have backpacks, other have carts loaded up with supplies. All are making a happy determined progress up the road. Who are they and where are they going?

“Any ideas, Russ?” I ask. “I didn’t think there were any people, or even any old road in this whole wilderness. I always thought this vast mountain wilderness reserve was uninhabited and used for only one purpose - being one of the green lung wilderness of the earth – removing carbon dioxide to reduce the greenhouse effect, and reduce the resulting extreme weather .”

The people do not seem to notice us or if they do, they do not act as if we are out of the ordinary.

I notice stirring coming from the low bushes...“I think there is a flock in there, Russ. Throw a stone and see if we can flush something out.”

He does, and a flock of pheasants flies up. I track one through the air with my drawn arrow, let the arrow go and bring it down. Success. I scurry through the grasses to fetch it, pick it up, and return to Russ. I

notice that most of the travelling group has passed. But some have noticed my shooting the pheasant, and paused for a moment to watch us. I am puzzled that they do not seem to consider our presence to be unusual. Curious. In my experience in this wilderness I rarely see anyone else, since rural people are more interested in their private gardens, and I would have expected that this group would have equally found our presence to be curious. Why did they take our presence as normal? The question remains in the back of my mind.

“We have something for supper, Russ. We can try for another one.” I put the lovely bird into my game bag. “We’ll have to wait for the flocks to settle down again. In the meantime, let’s investigate that way where there seems to be reeds and a lake. I can see the blue.”

“We can follow along the lake and see what kind of lake it is,” suggests Russ.

We come to shallow water with sandy bottom filled with marsh grasses, reeds, and lily pads.

“It would be interesting to investigate the water for fish,” says Russ.

Lacking a canoe or boat, we decide that if we followed the shore, we may come to a place where a line and fishhook can be tossed into deeper water from shore.



Russ rummages through his backpack for line and hook. He cuts a small pole from a branch, and a piece of bark for a float. We proceed roughly parallel to the shore. When he finds a place – a large driftwood log along the shore where he can crouch – he throws the line into lilly pads.

I clean my pheasant on a dead log, washing the meat clean with water from the lake. Russ waits so he can take the innards to use as bait. He then puts it on the hook, and throws the line out into the water.

Suddenly, as I finish the cleaning, I hear him shout “Got one! A big one!”

He pulls in the line and in a minute he is holding a good size bass on the end of it. He brings the fish over to me.

“That’s a nice one,” I say.

“If you’re done, give me the large knife?”

When we finish cleaning our respective catches, and have enjoyed a fifteen minute rest in the breeze coming off the lake, our curiosity about the road and what lies west along this side of the lake, the south side, draws us to continue west, but following the south shore of the lake. It appears the road goes parallel to the lake anyway.

We could have lingered and tried for another pheasant or fish or something else, but there is always a pressure to moving forward. Besides, our hunting or fishing is limited to procuring food for supper and we

now have enough. There is still a few hours before the need to make camp and prepare our pheasant and fish.

“I wish we had a canoe or boat,” I say. “A canoe would be useful at this end of the lake. It would be good in the fall. I can imagine there are ducks or geese landing here in their migrations. Maybe we can make a long distance journey to here in fall.”

We push on for about a kilometre. The entire shore has marsh grasses. It suggests that the water level of the lake goes up and down through the year, and when soggy prevents proper forest growing close to the shore. The water is low now, and we can walk through open ground with marsh grasses. Willow-type small bushes and trees that are fine with wet sand, grow out of the marsh grasses here and there.

We come upon good habitat for pheasants again, and we accidentally make the flock take flight. We already have our dinner, so it doesn't matter I was unable to take a shot. My stomach rumbles, and I cannot wait to eat.

“It is getting close to evening. We should think of finding a place to camp and make a fire.”

Where should we camp?

Where we are now, there is a breeze blowing through the leaves of the trees and grasses. But I think I am hearing more than the sound of the breeze. There seems to be sounds of people again in the distance.

“Listen!” I say.

“People!” Russ agrees. “Could be the group that went past us on the road a few hours ago.”

“Sounds like a lot of people, not just that small group we saw. Let’s hike in that direction and see what it is.”

We now move inland from the lake, wondering if we will cross the old road again, and then we can follow it again.

The ground slopes upward as we move away from the shore, and perhaps if we had continued we would indeed have encountered the road, but when we come over a rise, we are stopped by a remarkable sight.

A wide open area filled with people.

PART 3:  
THE  
THUNDER GAMES

## 9. Stumble onto a Festival

From our vantage point, the lake is to the right, which is towards the north. It is a long narrow lake roughly oriented east-west. To our left, judging from many columns of smoke rising up from among bushes, are campsites. Straight ahead is a small valley and we can see a considerable distance from our high vantage point. We seem to be looking down into a kind of valley.

The valley was probably made by an ancient creek that descended from the hills into the lake, but then the creek slowed down - maybe as a result of drainage patterns changing upriver. What remained was a sandy valley sloping towards the lake, too wet and sandy for regular trees, but suitable for the marsh vegetation - the same as we found along the shore. Higher up there are trees that can handle wet sandy soil, starting with willows, and then higher up, on either side of this valley, the marsh grasses become dry-ground weeds, grasses and bushes, until finally there are pines and oaks that blend gradually into dense forest.

We have just emerged out of the dense forest to this spectacle in the valley below us to the west. The open area before us is filled with a crowd of people very much like ourselves. People. Lots of people.

The crowd is facing west, as are we, towards a small rise where there is a large outdoor stage. There are people on the stage and something is going on or about to begin.

Because the people on the stage are farther from us, I don't expect Russ and I would hear any of what was going on. But then we hear the crackle of loudspeakers. It appears there are loudspeakers set up in many locations on the grounds and there is no problem hearing what is going on even from here on the east edge of this open area. The voice of a man on the stage booms through all the loudspeakers. The man is almost a dot to us, but there is a giant screen behind him, on the back wall of the stage. The screen is showing still images, starting with a dramatic graphic of a thunderbird, which I soon realize is the graphic symbol for this event.

The loudspeaker blares the man's voice throughout the grounds.

*"As the current elected High Chief of the world's Innat peoples the duty has fallen on me to welcome you all to the 70th annual Thunder Games to be carried on here in the middle of the wild forest of the northeast part of the continent of Nomerica. You all come from the many aboriginal or Innat peoples of our Mother Earth, most coming from close by, but some coming from a great distance. Those who could not come will see a summary of*

*the Games in a few weeks on our Innat International Television Channel,"*

"There is an Innat channel?" I whisper to Russ.

"There are hundreds of channels on the WorldComm," he whispers. "Dad has only subscribed us to the main Nomerica channel. I suppose Innat communities get this channel."

After a pause, the speech continues:

*"In the past thousand years humankind has suffered the consequences of the adverse behaviour of civilization not respecting Mother Earth. Civilization allowed greenhouse gases to go beyond the point of no return, and we have been suffering the consequences of it for the past thousand years. Hurricanes, tornados, and enormous storms have ravaged our lands and cities. Droughts have made forests turn into deserts. The ice melting in the arctic has raised the sea and drowned our coastal cities. Few places in the world have been spared the destruction by the extreme weather."*

The giant screen – which is large enough for me and Russ to see even at our distance – is showing images one after the other of the destruction he mentions. Such scenes are familiar to me and Russ. We're used to the disaster stories every day on our television. I am realizing how much we have all been numbed to it all. It is only when they are contrasted with how things were once, that we grasp how much the ancient use of fossil fuels has destroyed our planet. The images continue, with a map of the world

showing in red dots the ancient cities that have been destroyed.

*“Metaphorically speaking, when the storms come, when the Thunderbird flies, he comes with great anger. His wings beat so hard, traditional houses were flattened, forcing the building of new kinds of houses that are heavy and close to the earth. His wings also swirl into tornados. Rain comes down like a waterfall and sometimes it is balls of ice that breaks everything. The great cities of the continents of the world - Nomerica, Somerica, Ropa, Panasia, Fricia, and Ralia - have been destroyed. Millions have died from the anger of the Thunderbird. He tells us that we have not treated our Mother Earth with respect. The builders of the civilizations have ignored warnings given by even their own scientists and did nothing already 1000 years ago, until the scientists themselves said it was too late. Like a child not heeding a warning not to touch a fire and then having to learn the hard way, civilizations needed to actually experience the destruction in order to learn finally their lesson - the lesson that nature is greater than the arrogant human, and must be treated with respect. But then even with the elimination of the use of energy that is not natural to the Mother Earth, like energy from inside the earth or inside the atom, processes had already been started that continue the rise of carbon dioxide and methane. Only in recent centuries humankind has taken steps to absorb the carbon dioxide by promoting the green plants on all land, and phytoplankton in the sea; but it is*



*not known yet if it will be enough or if earth will become a lifeless oven like Venus - the planet next to Mother Earth,"*

He pauses as the illustrative images behind him catch up.

His voice is gentler now. The next image shows an ancient picture of peoples known as 'Pilgrims' being shown by Innat peoples how to plant corn. It is followed by ancient black and white images of Nomerican Innat people, as they were originally, wearing feathers and loincloths, and these images fade into images of today's Innat, dressed like ordinary people of today - indistinguishable from us, except for being connected to an Innat community that has preserved the traditions of old in their enduring communities.

*"When the Ropas came here to the continent of Nomerica before a thousand years ago, it was our ancestors who helped them become settled - taught them how to survive in the cold winters, how to hunt and fish, and even how to build and use canoes. Throughout the last thousand years, even as our people have married and mixed with the Ropans, we have in our individual societies preserved our traditional identity with its reverence to Mother Earth, the Creator and his son the Thunderbird, and we understand what has been happening from a spiritual point of view. And now, once again, it is up to us to come to the aid of the Ropans, and others who joined them, by taking steps to*

*soothe the angry spirit of the Thunderbird that rules all the weather of the Mother Earth."*

The images that appear now seem to be the many historic depictions of Thunderbird among the different Innat peoples, from the top of totem poles to rock carvings to more recent depictions in art.

*"It is up to us Innat peoples of the world - Innat being a word brought into use many centuries ago that combined 'Indian' and 'Native'. And it is done through gatherings like this and our prayers, and our holding these games in celebrating and honouring the Thunderbird and quelling his anger."*

The images on the ten foot high screen now show a montage of shots of Thunder Games over the past centuries – the gatherings, the competitions, the dancing, and so on.

*"And so it has been in the past centuries that every four years we gather at one of the wild locations of Mother Earth to which most of our nations can reach relatively easily, to hold ceremonies, dance, but mainly engage in physical competitions – 'games' – characteristic of the host nation of that chosen location – arctic games one time, equatorial games in another, and this year woodland games of the Innat peoples of the northern part of Nomerica – such as hunting with the bow and arrow, fishing, trapping and the cultural activities connected with them.*

*"The Thunder Games are in honour of the Thunderbird, whose spirit we have invited here to look down on our*

*performances and competitions from the sky above. He will see performances of beauty and feats of strength and skill - all stemming from our Innat traditions which test natural human strength and skill, and not that of our high technology of civilization that has brought humankind to the brink.*

*"Here we have no competitions between guns, nor even bows and arrows made of fiberglass or metal, which cannot be made by hand. Our only technology here is the television cameras that will bring these games to Innat communities around Mother Earth through our collective Innat International Television Channel."*

Now we see a montage of shots of television cameras, interviews, and the logo of the Innat International Television Channel.

*"In the next days, each of your nations of the woodland traditions suited to the theme of the 70th games, has brought here the best of their young people to demonstrate their artistry, skill, and physical strength in a wide range of competitions. Your young people have been training for the past four years, knowing only the theme and general location - the final location kept secret until a month ago, according to tradition. The best of your young people have already been selected by each nation for particular competitions such as bow skills, canoe racing, spear throwing, fishing, drumming and dancing and have been sent here to compete."*

.The images show shots of young people in competition. And the slide show ends with the symbol or logo with which it began – an ancient graphic depiction of the Thunderbird.

*“So for the next four days, let the competitions and performances proceed. Welcome. With the lighting of the bonfire in the center of our field by the grand winner of the last Games, the 70th Thunder Games of the Innat peoples of Mother Earth will be declared open. Let the bonfire be lit, which will continue to burn and around which visitors will dance and socialize, according to their custom, throughout the next five days.”*

A large pile of dead wood in the centre of the field below the stage is ceremoniously set on fire. This lighting is met by cheering and applause. What follows next are dance performances and traditional drumming. Neither I nor Russ understand it from this distance. Nor do we know very much about Innat cultures. But we watch with fascination for quite some time. People closer to us who notice us looking on do not show any surprise. They assume we are visitors too. We look like everyone else. Mainsteam people and Innat are remarkably similar from what I see. After many centuries of mass media and movements of people from one part of the world to another we are all a mixed race with only individual variations now. The original divergence of humankind into races has long disappeared. Our

differences lie only in what culture fate has chosen to place us. It is what culture we grow up in and identify with that determines how we define ourselves....

As mesmerizing as the events going on below us may be, we know that we cannot stay.

“That’s enough observing of these events, Russ.” I say. “We have to set up camp for the night. We have to head back into the wilderness and find a good camping location.”

“It will be difficult to find a campsite in the wilderness that will be far enough away from this gathering of people,” Russ cautions, “and it is getting late. Why not stay here? If we look like we belong, we could borrow one of the campsites – one that is vacant, that nobody has taken. “

“That sounds creative,” I reply. “We’ll make our tea and cook our meal, rest for the night, and be off tomorrow morning. Nobody who has seen us watching have seen us as being out of the ordinary. Let’s do that, then.”

We pick up our backpacks and proceed towards the nearest campsite area hoping to find a campsite we can ‘borrow’ for the night.

The campsite grounds are located on a slope where the land rises from the lake towards the mountains. It becomes progressively less grassy and includes more and more bushes until there are

prepared campsites that are in the shelter of pine trees.

The campsites appear to have been prepared in advance. Areas have been cleaned and circles of rocks mark fire pits. The deadwood cleaned from the ground has not been taken away but piled up for use as firewood. There are signs reminding users about the proper handling of fire, and each campsite is supplied with a pail to be used for water.

The camping region as a whole is crisscrossed with marked paths through the grasses with the most used being trampled and expanded by foot traffic.

My sense is that most of this area was wild before this festival and will revert to its wild state after it is over and the crowds have left.

Russ and I don't want to get in the middle of the activity and draw attention to ourselves, so we search around the perimeter of the campground region. Almost hidden under several small pines, at the edge of the grounds on the lake side, we find a small site that seems to have lacked preparations. We would have to do some clearing away of grass around the fire pit and seating area.

"We only have to clean it up and we are set," I tell Russ. "We can pile up grass to lie on for the night. Let's clean it up and start a fire."

# Chapter 10 - Elina

We're happy to have found a place to camp for the night. Nobody will notice us. Nobody will think we don't belong, And we will be gone first thing in the morning. But now we need to eat. We have a pheasant and a fish. I can already taste it. My stomach grumbles.

Russ proceeds to build a fire in the fire pit. There is plenty of dry wood around. Many lower branches of pines are dead and dry and perfect. When he has the fire going, we need to get water into our pot. We've consumed the water in our water bottles by now.

"Here, Riia," he says, handing me the pot. "Figure out where to get water."

"I expect it is where the campers get water. I don't see them trekking to the lake."

I head onto the marked path with the pot and I think I seem to look confused because someone shouts to me "You can get water from the large steel tank in the middle of the campsite area. It is marked 'Water'."

Thank goodness the grasses and bushes on either side of the trampled path are less than chest high. I could see the tank from here, with its side marked "Water".

I shout "Thanks", and proceed to the water tank, passing by a number of campsites with campfires going.

Meanwhile, it seems the opening of the festival is basically over and some of the audience in front of the stage appears to be retiring to eat and socialize. Only some, though. Casual activity continues around the stage and in the middle of the grounds around the bonfire. There is distant music, dance, shouting, laughing. I have never experienced such a large meeting of peoples before. There are ten times more people here than the entire population of our town of Greenville.

As I search for the 'Water' tank, and absorb everything going on around me, I can't help reflecting on the speech and wondering what exactly is going on here. The opening ceremonies are over, but what has it opened? In the opening speech the High Chief said, *The best of your young people have been selected by each nation for particular competitions such as bow skills, canoe racing, spear throwing, fishing, drumming and dancing.* The term "games" in "Thunder Games" does imply it is mostly about competitions rather than simply presentations. Russ and I have come upon this by accident. This has come as a complete surprise. We have no connection to the Innat people – other than remotely through Mr. Thomasson, and even he lives away from his mother's Inni nation and doesn't know everything that goes on. Through Mr. Thomasson I learned years ago to construct a traditional bow and



arrow of Innat peoples of the Inni past of this region, and learned some hunting ways. But that is about it.

I try not to be too curious about this Innat festival because I clearly don't belong and we'll be leaving in the morning. But still, I can't help but wonder how I would do in competitions, for example with the bow and arrow, since I am very skilled with the bow and especially in bow hunting in this wilderness. How would I compare to the young people from Innat communities? Will I still win like I have in the school archery competitions?

Well, I'll get the water, we'll make tea and consume our fresh bass and pheasant, go to sleep and continue our journey in the morning. There is no time to linger. We have to be back home after four or five more nights. There couldn't be a clearer plan!

I join others lined up for water at the water tank, fill my pot with water, carry it back to Russ. He has the fire going by now.

We boil the water into tea, grill our meat, have a wonderful meal of pheasant and fish, lie down to sleep, and try to have a pleasant slumber in spite of the murmurs of people and activity in the campsites during the night. I am referring to the people who stay up to talk, people who have to go to the washroom, and people who cannot sleep.....Well, it is better than being in the middle of a pack of Dogotes like last night!

The night is good this time. No cold, no heat, no rain. We are still able to sleep in the open just fine. We are lucky not to yet have had a need to use the tarpaulin we carry for the eventuality of rain, or the rope to lash ourselves to a tree to prevent being blown away.

When morning dawns, we want to get going as soon as possible. I get up and hurry to where the water tank is located to fill our pot with water, at least to have some tea, and fill our water bottles up for the journey.

But at the water tank, I encounter a young woman of my age ahead of me in line, with straight blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, and high cheekbones.

“Hello,” she says. “My name is Elina. Where are you from? Have you come from far? Are you one of the competitors? You must be. I recognize you. I saw you when my people came by the old east road yesterday. I saw how easily and skillfully you shot that pheasant in flight. You must be one of the contestants for the bow skills competitions! I am also in the bow competitions. I’m one of four competitors from the Woli nation, Woli is a short version of an ancient longer name. Oh, I like your hunting jacket, and you look very attractive with the turkey feather decorations in your hair. “

I do not know how to respond to this friendly young talkative woman. And I have completely

forgotten I had fashioned some of the smaller attractive turkey feathers into my hair for fun a couple nights ago, and never taken them off – they are knotted into strands of my hair.

What to do? It would be rude to ignore her and walk away.

As Elina fills the fire-blackened pot that she has brought from her people's campsite, I wonder what I should say. Should I say I am not a competitor? She has seen my skill with the bow and arrow so to her I seem like a competitor. If I answer honestly about how Russ and I came upon this place by accident, there would then be a long discussion about where I was from, etc. I decide it would be enough if I basically agree with her. So I say. "My name is Riia. Yesterday I was hunting to get some supper for us. I am.....yes of course I am a competitor."

I expect her to nod and we would go our separate ways. But Elina says: "Then we should go together to the bow skills games sites. They allow contestants to practice in the mornings. The games go on in the afternoon, and the prizes for the competitions for that day – first, second and third – are presented on the stage in the evening, and then there is the socializing and bonfire, if you are into that. But I guess you already know that."

"No, I...I haven't had a chance to learn about everything that's going on," I say.

“Well then come with me after you have had your breakfast, and we can practice together.”

She is so generous and sincere I search for some way to disengage from her and continue on with the plan I have with Russ. What can I say? “I haven’t come in a large delegation. There is only me and my brother...” I stutter.

“Then you must have come from an Innat nation far away, who only have enough money to send one or two contestants – usually a girl and boy. Such contestants have to come by air travel and their nation can only afford to pay the way for two contestants. It doesn’t matter that there isn’t a large contingent. The Thunder Games will be broadcast later on the Innat International Television Channel, and your tribe at home will see the performance of the contestants they sent – you and your brother – and be proud.”

“I’ve started to notice all the little cameras,” I nod. I have already wondered what the tiny metallic boxes are that are affixed to some of the sign posts and other structures. They are cameras. I realize that everything is being recorded.

“Yes, Riia. There are small cameras set up at every competition site too – stuck in trees, attached to structures, all managed from a central location with wifi. See up there in the air? They even have the small Flyhicle-things with cameras to get overhead and long shots. It’s amazing isn’t it? Hundreds of hours of

video from all the cameras will all be edited later into a two hour broadcast.”

I looked where she was pointing and sure enough it was one of those hovering birdlike things I and my brothers saw a little while ago which Russ said are very popular for filming and television as well as surveillance. Previously I have only experienced the larger kind that delivers shipments – ‘hovair’.

“They are like large flying insects,” I say, “It is hard to imagine high technology here since this is in the middle of the wilderness.”

Elina has finished filling up her campsite’s container, and waits as I fill up my pot.

“The host nation here have this place as a summer destination for their annual gathering what is called ‘pow-wow,’” continues Elina. “But now it has temporarily been made ten times bigger for being chosen as the site of the 70<sup>th</sup> Thunder Games. This time all the Innat communities whose culture is familiar with woodland arts and skills, send delegations and competitors here. When it is over, all the tents will be gone and it will shrink to how it was before, used only as the festival site of local Innat nations, and the expanded part becomes rough and wild again.”

I watch the hovering mechanism in the air and wonder if at this moment it is videoing me.

“Well,” continues Elina, “when you have had your tea with your brother, my delegation is at campsite ‘Otter’ up there.”

It appears that all the campsites are identified by names of familiar wilderness animals.

“Come over,” Elina continues, “and we’ll go and check out the bow skills competition site, and get in some practice.”

She was so nice, I simply could not force myself to reveal the truth. I can go to her campsite and disappoint her right when I and Russ are ready to leave, and apologize. Anyway I have about a half an hour to think about it as Russ gets the water boiling with some wilderness tea leaves and honey, and we have dealt with breakfast.

A half hour later when we are sitting with our tea mugs in our hands, I say “Russ, what if we stayed?”

“What?”

“A girl my age who saw me from the road when I shot that pheasant yesterday, thought I was a contestant, and invited me to accompany her to where they have the bow and arrow competitions. She said that in the mornings contestants can practice.”

“Well you are not a contestant.”

“It is just a practice situation. It would be interesting to see how I compare. I’ve won almost every sport archery competition with nearby high schools. I wonder how I compare with the competitors

here using actual traditional handmade bows and arrows.”

“You should have explained everything to the girl.”

“I couldn’t, Russ. Well, I did explain there was only me and you and then she said that Innat nations far away who can only come by air will often only send a couple of contestants since crossing the ocean by air is expensive. And sending only contestants is fine, since their people will be able to see the coverage of the games anyway on television. One competitor is all they need to be represented, but a boy and a girl competitor is what distant nations usually send. So she immediately assumed that was the case with us – that some distant Innat community had sent us and that is why we are in the area.”

Russ has to give it some thought. “Well if you want to practice with her, I’ll wait. But after the practice you have to explain it and we have to go.”

“Or I could pretend I am a competitor and then when the officials don’t find me in the paperwork, I will pretend there was a mix-up and then I am disqualified and I can say goodbye and we can continue on our journey.”

“I wouldn’t make it more complicated than it needs to be, Sis....” He was obviously not finding my proposals very wise, and I got the message.

“And while I am doing that,” I add, “why don’t you check out this place in more detail just for fun. There seems to be some interesting things getting started over near the lake. Tell me later what’s going on over there.”

He shrugs but agrees.

I get up to go. “So I’ll go with Elina to the bow and arrow competition site. Her people are at campsite Otter. I think our campsite is called ‘Muskrat’. I saw a sign somewhere around here.”

“Alright.”

But I can tell he is not really believing it is alright.



# 11. Staying to Compete

When I arrive at campsite “Otter” where the Woli nation delegation is camped, Elina is keen in getting under way. She doesn’t want to waste time introducing me to everyone, since practice time is limited to the morning. That is fine with me. If I were to linger here, I am afraid I would be grilled about where I am from, how was the airplane flight, and other questions I could not answer without making it all up. And lying leads to more lying and finally a morass from which there is no escape. It is better to say nothing and let there be temporary ‘misunderstandings’ than to lie.

To be honest, as we head off to the practice place, I am intrigued by it all. I look forward to checking out what competitions there are and how I would do if I were actually a competitor.

With our bows and quivers of arrows in hand, Elina leads the way.

The morning is becoming alive as visitors are getting up, attending to breakfasts, and checking out the grounds. On the way we pass a row of vendors sitting cross-legged on the trampled-down grass, with their crafts spread out on colourful blankets. Elina is momentarily distracted by one vendor. “Look. Jewelry. I’ll have to come back to look. They look very traditional.”

“Very pretty,” I agree, stopping too.

“ What Innat girls did in olden times is what you did with the turkey feathers in your hair, Riia—celebrated the wild animals hunted by using beautiful things from them, putting them in their hair, clothes, neck, arms and so on.”

“I have forgotten I had them on, Elina. I haven’t seen a mirror. I think some feathers look beautiful. I collect feathers when I hunt. I sometimes use them to make something nice to sell at a marketplace near us.”

We hurry on. No time to get sidetracked by beautiful things on vendor blankets.

I am now seeing buildings. But they don’t look like part of a community. Elina notices me studying them and answers my inquisitive look as we walk. I can tell she has been here before.

“This place is developed for annual gatherings, Riia,” she says. “Not really for living. Like I said, it is shared by several nearby Innat nations – those whose actual communities are within a day or two journey from here. So they ordinarily have the minimum of facilities – those are the buildings you see - since the nearby people will come here for a short time and afterward it goes back to how it was, growing wild. That’s how it was a long time ago – families and tribes wandered in the forest all year and then gathered to see each other every year for a week or two in the summer. For all the additional people for the

Thunder Games they have added facilities with lots of tents.”

I nod as if I already know. “With all the restoration of wilderness, in the last centuries,” I add, “there is now plenty of wilderness where Innat people can revive ancient ways. But you say there is no actual community right here?”

“It’s too isolated. And there are no communications. I think the organizers have a satellite dish here though. No tribe is still nomadic in the wilderness. Or if some have returned to the wild, they are wise not to be found. Civilization still has people with prejudice against living in the wild. So we try to survive in the world as it is, and remember our origins and remind ourselves by holding such gatherings in places with true wilderness. You’re right, Riia. There is now so much wilderness now. I expect it is the same where you come from? The program of returning denuded places back to wilderness has been carried out throughout the world.”

“Yes,” I say, elaborating from my lie. “My people across the ocean have the gatherings too, but a bit different.” I don’t want to make things up, but I don’t want to disappoint her. Change the subject. “So you’ve been at this smaller annual gathering here before, Elina?”

“A couple years ago with my family. It takes three days getting here. First on foot, then by the electric

train to the nearest large town served by the railway, Traynton, and then on foot again pulling our carts of baggage. We can't come with any vehicles larger than what is allowed on the train. We could rent transportation at Traynton, but it is traditional to go by foot."

We stop at a post with many signs with arrows pointing to the different competition setups.

"We want to go to the bow skills competitions area," says Elina. "There it is – 'Bow Skills Competition Area'....We go that way...." She starts off.

"Wait," I say, "I want to look at what else is going on...."

Reading the sign, I am amazed how many different kinds of competition there is. "Animal tracking, woodland trails marathon, spear throwing, fishing, swimming, wilderness culinary arts, wilderness legend interpretive dance,....."

"Come on Riia! Come on!" Elina is pulling on my arm. "You don't have to decide on what competitions you will enter right away. Even if your nation has registered you as a competitor, you can decide on what you will compete in up to an hour before it is held!" Elina finally pulls me away from the signs and we continue.

"Are you going to be in any of the other competitions than bow skills?" she asks me.

“I...ah....”

“You and your brother should try everything you can, if you are the only two representatives of your nation. If you are an actual hunter which I think you are from what I saw yesterday, and are not just shooting at targets, then you will be very good at following trails through the wilderness, and other such things you do in actual wilderness hunting. You will probably also be good at a marathon in the water, because if your body can go a long time along trails, it can also go a long time in water – if you already know how to swim. I’m going to do the swimming marathon because I am good at running marathons and have the endurance. So if you have not planned yet what competitions you will be in, Riia, I think you should put your name into all those that you have had experience with from your hunting. I am guessing you are a hunter for your people. Are you?”

“Yes,” I say, this time not lying for a change! “I have been hunting for wild food for my family since I was 12, that is, five years ago now. My father is too busy with other things, and my brothers are just learning. You’re right that I have wilderness skills. But I saw on the sign there are arts too. Like interpretive dance.”

“They divide the Thunder Games between ‘Wilderness Skills’ which are usually ranked by time taken, and ‘Wilderness Arts’ which are ranked by a

panel of judges and the reaction of spectators. Our nation came with four competitors, but only me and my cousin Roam will be doing Wilderness Skills. Our remaining two, Ulma and Growl, are in the Arts."

"I do have some creativity, though," I add. "I like to make nice things, especially fashionable things to wear made of fur and feathers to honour the animals I hunt, like I mentioned. I'm not very good at cooking. My sister Riddle has become the cook in our family."

"There we are," says Elina. "The Bow Skills Competition grounds!"

We find ourselves in an open but wild grassy area backing onto the wild forest. Bullseye targets like the ones used for the sport of archery have been set up, and it feels familiar to me from my high school archery competitions. I learn they are designed with a surface that will accept hunting arrow points.

The first lane has the bullseye targets set at 10, 25, and 50 meters. They are staggered so we can choose whichever one to practice on.

The second lane tosses simulated birds. It is like what they call 'clay pigeons' in gun sports, but these birds are soft – burlap bags packed with grass, I think, and not all the same – so that they resemble a natural bird like a grouse taking flight. The shooter has to judge their speed and trajectory from their initial few seconds of flight.

The third lane is part of the rough wild landscape. Remaining behind a line, the contestant has to find a good angle to shoot through the bush and hit the target. This is the hardest because here an arrow can easily strike a twig as it flies and be deflected off course. It is most like real hunting, especially since the targets are cutouts shaped like an animal - a deer, a bear, a rabbit - situated in different locations. The contestant is given fifteen seconds to try to hit all three targets.

First we investigate the easiest – the straight target shooting in the first lane. But there is a lineup of young men and women waiting their turn to get three practice shots each.

“See?” said Elina. “You have to come early or there is a lineup – especially for the competitions held this afternoon - which is the straight target shooting at different distances.”

“A still target? Nothing to it.”

“You get three tries,” continues Elina. “In my practices I often get all 3 in the bullseye one after the other at ten meters. The 25 meters, and 50 meters are obviously more challenging. I sometimes miss.”

I have my bow and arrow out and am anxious to find a target to shoot at.

Elina is surprised when she sees my arrow tip. “You don’t have metal arrowheads...”

“Well archery arrow points are useless for hunting, and for steel arrowheads I’d have to get a blacksmith to make them, and I have to pay him. So I make them in the oldest way – by chipping flint. It takes a while to learn, but it only takes flint and some time .”

“Oh I wish I knew how to chip flint into arrowheads! You are so talented!”

“Since the simple bullseye target has a lineup behind it, Elina, could we try one of the more difficult lanes that aren’t until tomorrow?”

“The most difficult lane would be the third one that puts targets into a natural wilderness context.”

“I can see the brown silhouette of a deer from here,” I say. “I wonder if I can hit it from here.”

“It’s way too far to shoot from here across the lanes. It is 50 meters when you shoot in the lane, but from here across the lanes it is 100 meters. You’ll miss and have to hunt for your arrow, Riia.”

Impulsively I rise to the challenge, raise my bow, draw the arrow, concentrate, and let the arrow fly. The arrow flies up in a high arc, begins to fall, fall, and....thud, right into the center of the deer target.

I’m pleased but I think it is just a lucky shot. At this distance even a small breeze can throw the arrow off. But those in the lineup who caught my impulsive action have another response. A hush comes over



everyone in the entire area. All eyes turn in my direction.

What have I done?! Maybe I have broken a rule. A tall fellow with a tee-shirt saying "Official – Bow Competitions" calmly but firmly comes over to me and says loudly so that other competitors will hear: "You must practice from the proper location. It is not permitted to shoot across the other ranges. For safety reasons. To shoot at that target, go to the head of that lane."

"I'm sorry," I say. "It was impulse..."

"Well, don't let it happen again." He returns to his table under a canopy.

Elina takes off running to fetch my arrow from the deer target, as I coyly stand with all eyes still on me, feeling embarrassed. I wait for Elina to return with my arrow. When back, she gives it to me and I put it back in my quiver.

"The bullseye target competitions in the first lane are for this afternoon," says Elina. "We might as well get in that line and wait our turn. We each get three shots. For practice we can put one arrow in each – 10, 25, and 50 – or shoot at whatever one needs practice. I will shoot all three at the most distant one, the 50 meter, since it is the most difficult."

Everyone is still staring at me, watching my every move. As I and Elina approach the lineup, the contestants, in awe of me, step back and motion me to

go to the front. They want to see me do more. I shake my head 'no, no.' But they insist. So, reluctantly I go to the front of the line. I aim my arrow, release it, and hit the bullseye 50 meters away right in the center. Silence. I feel uncomfortable. I dislike the attention on me. I glance towards Elina.

"Practices allow you to shoot three arrows," she says. "Shoot again."

I pull another arrow from my quiver. I glance at which one it is since the properties of each hand-made arrow are slightly different from one another. I am starting to hope I miss so that the attention on me will end. But my own determination to succeed in anything I do prevents me from deliberately spoiling my shot.

"Please miss, please miss!" I say in my mind. But I know I will not. I release the arrow. Up up up it flies then down down and whop! A centimeter beside my first arrow.

Dropped jaws.

"Do it again, Riia," says Elina. "You get three practice shots."

"I'll hit one of my arrows and ruin an arrow! A blade point can split an arrow. It isn't like an archery arrow...oh well..." I aim and shoot. The arrow rises, rises, then falls, falls and whop. But it hits the end of a previous arrow and spits the wood, like I feared.

“Oh damn!” I say. “I’ve split an arrow! Now I have to replace its shaft!”

I shrug and head to the target. I pull out my arrows and collect pieces of the broken one. I carry the broken one back as if it is a wounded bird.

When I return, this time someone starts clapping and the entire group erupts in cheering.

I motion the next in line to carry on, and show my broken arrow to Elina. “I guess the feathers and point is usable.” I knew the arrow well. Even if I reuse the arrowhead and feathers it will behave in a new way. No two handmade arrows are exactly alike.

The tall man with the “Official” t-shirt comes over to us again. “Don’t worry. In the competition, our staff removes arrows after every shot, after the score is recorded. It won’t happen in the actual competition. Are you registered yet for this afternoon’s competition?”

“No,” I say.

“Go register, Riia,” says Elina. “I’ll stay here in line to get my turn. I will register after I’ve had my practice.”

I’m trapped...! I think.

I follow the official to a table with assorted paper on it – booklets, rules sheets, general pamphlets, and of course the competitor registration computer. I am forgetting in the excitement that I am not legitimate. Too late....

## 12. Telling a Lie

“Name?”

“Riia Greenthistle.”

He scans a computer screen for my name. “I don’t see that name...”

The registration area was not inside anything. It only had a canopy over it to shade from the sun or any light rain that could come.

The next words I speak change the course of my life.

“Maybe my name was advanced to you late and didn’t get in your computer system.”

“Perhaps. Your shooting ability clearly demonstrates you are a genuine competitor. We must have you. The office will figure it out.”

“I understand,” I said with a gulp of guilt.

Do I belong in the Thunder Games of the Innat peoples? Do I believe in the Thunderbird and things like that? I barely knew anything about it. We don’t learn in school more than that there are Innat communities that have preserved their culture to some extent for centuries, in spite of also adapting to the surrounding mainstream civilization. Otherwise, I guess I also learned things through Mr. Thomasson and his son Chip. Maybe he taught me some Innat ideas he learned through his mother, without me being aware he was. I also knew a little about

aboriginal peoples around the world that preceded the world civilization. Anyway, I am trapped in my lie and there is no turning back.

“So I will take down the missing information. What Innat nation are you from?”

I remember how Elina said that Innat nations far away who cannot send a delegation, will at least select a boy and girl competitor to travel to the Thunder Games to compete in as many competitions as possible, then watch with pride when the coverage is aired on television.

“Northern Ropa,” I blurt out. I don’t know why I said that, other than that it is far away – across the ocean – and I knew from geography there were similar forests and animals in northern Ropa, and that the world-wide wilderness revival initiatives have been carried out everywhere.

He looks up at me with a bit of surprise. “You’re from across the ocean? An Innat nation from Ropa? We never expect many Innat nations to participate if the Thunder Games is located on a different continent because it is expensive to send a delegation although sending just a competitor or two reduces the expense. But I know that northern Ropa and northern Panasia has forests like here, and has descendants of aboriginal people, and therefore they belong to Innat peoples.”

“Because of the expense, as you said, my people only sent me and my brother Russ.”

“Then Russ will register too?”

“No he hasn’t had enough practice with the bow. He is only 14. But he is good at most other wilderness skills.”

“Then I expect we will see him in some other competitions.”

Quietly I think – not likely. In reality, there is still a chance we will leave by the end of the day!

“Alright, what is the name of your Innat people and your community over in northern Ropa.”

Uh-oh! I didn’t expect that question. What did I know about northern Ropa? What have I learned in school or from television news or from videos? I know there were people there who came from aboriginal peoples, but they are part of the mainstream civilized world now. I don’t know if there are any who considered themselves as Innat, and who have kept ancient ways alive in their culture. What can I tell him? What more do I know about northern Ropa? I remember I learned in school about how about 3000 years ago, around the year 1000 or so, northern kingdoms called the aboriginal people “Finns” and the northern wilderness where they were was “Finnmark” or “Finland”. But I don’t think these people continued their old ways – except for those furthest away who tended to reindeer and were later

called "Saami". I think I remember learning that the "Finns" further south encountered Ropa's civilization peoples much earlier than here in Nomerica, and that means there was much more time for old ways to be forgotten and for all peoples to melt into the mainstream. I wonder if there really is any community over there in northern Ropa who still remember traditional ways. Maybe there are arctic people who tend to reindeer who still keep their ancient identity but this Thunder Games is about woodland skills, not arctic. So what to say, what to say. If I say "Finn" that would be too general because once there was an entire nation formed that was called "Finland". And their connection to aboriginal times was mainly their language and of course the sweat lodge thing they called "sauna" ...What could I say that was not so general and broad....? I remembered something...

"Cwen or Quan," I say.

"Cwen or Quan? I've not heard of them. So tell me a little about them?"

I think. Where did I hear that name? I think maybe I saw a video about it made by International Geographic. I blurted out the story. "Around the year 1000 or a little earlier, a fellow from arctic Ropa named Ohthere or Odatara or Ottar, sailed to Brittnia where he told tales about where he came from to the king he traded with, and the king had the tales written down. He wrote that people called "Cwens" came out

to the coast with skin canoes. They were native people who found newcomers coming up the coast to be invaders and wanted to chase them away. Anyway the Cwens crossed back and forth between the Lantic and Altic seas by a large river. Later others called them "Quans". They belonged to the general designation called "Finns". According to the Odatera person, the Cwens had small canoes made of skins they could portage and lived in the central forests of Scandnia....I am from them."

The official regards me with questioning raised eyebrows. So much information had not been necessary. He says: "There remains a community that is descended from these historic Cwens you describe, then? And you are from them?"

"Yes. They are deep in the new reforested interiors of Scandnia where we can still practice our old ways."

"How should I spell it?"

"Today we simple spell it CWANO." I like my invention because it sounds close to 'canoe'.

"Very well – CWANO, descended from Cwens or Quans of history, middle of Scandnia." He typed it into the computer.

"We are also related to the people who further north left rock carvings at a famous place called Alta, but we came from the interior. It was like a big festival place. Tribes came by sea too. Maybe they had



something like Thunder Games there already 8000 years ago.”

I should stop talking, I was blurting out things I had seen in video documentaries sometime in the past. Bite my tongue! I shouldn't say more than what he needed for the computer file.

“Finally, what is the campsite you are located so we can find you?”

After Elina had told me her delegation's site was 'Otter', I had noticed a sign on a post where I and Russ camped that read "Muskrat".

“ 'Muskrat' ” I say

“Oh yes the tiny site right at the back towards the lake under the trees. Our volunteers missed cleaning it in their preparations. It is easily overlooked.”

“We cleared the weeds and grasses around the fire pit ourselves. It is fine for two people.”

“I expect you will be entering all the bow skills competitions judging from what I saw of your practice. We might as well get you registered for all three now – the straight target this afternoon and the two hunting-simulation competitions tomorrow – , instead of you having to come back again to register for tomorrows' .”

“Sure.....” He is signing me up for them all?!

He types into the computer. Then he prints out for me a badge that reads “Riia Greenthistle – Cwano Nation, Middle Scandnia, Muskrat campsite”

“This badge will be good for all competitions,” he explains, “When you register for other competitions they do not need to give you another badge. You are generally registered and you now only need to register for the specific competitions you want to enter an hour ahead of time. Since there are always many competitions going on at the same time, both in the Wilderness Skills and Wilderness Arts categories, contestants choose the ones they feel best at and where there is no timing conflict.”

“Thank you.”

“And here, take a sheet on the rules....Do you have a brochure of all the events? And, you can pick up even more detailed information for other competitions at the other registration desks at their sites.”

My excitement overtakes my guilt about my lying. What if I actually compete now? Who will get hurt? I will have fun competing and then go home.

“Next!” says the official, motioning the competitor waiting behind me to move up to the table.

When I return to the bow shooting range from the registration table, Elina is up. I let her know I am back. She has already shot one arrow that came close to but missed the bullseye. Now is her second try. The arrow flies up up and then down down and whop – bullseye.

I clap

“But, you were better than me, Riia,” responds Elina. “You hit it every time....Are you registered?”

“For all the bow skills competitions. They gave me a badge. Look. I am now good for signing up for other competitions in other locations.”

“Good,” she replies as she pulls back her bow to fire her third arrow. “I’ve got to register and get my own general competitor I.D. badge too as soon as I have shot this third arrow.” It flew up, up, down, down, and....bullseye.

“Another bullseye!” I exclaim. “You’re not that bad. You’re probably among the leaders. I’ll fetch your arrows. Go line up for the registration desk.”

Elina gets in the registration desk lineup, while I fetch her arrows from the target.

When I return there are three young men and women ahead of her in the lineup for the registration desk. I will wait for her. That will give me some time to observe the contestants and also read brochures.

As I observed earlier, even though they are from Innat communities, the contestants all look like everybody I’ve known, all look like young people from my world. The Innat features we see in old photos, such as straight black hair, high cheekbones, and wide faces, might be only a slight amount more frequent here. So I don’t really feel foreign there – in fact I have some of those characteristics too. My hair is

dark and straight. I don't feel out of place, practically speaking.

This might be a good time to study some of the materials I picked up from the registration desk – brochures and so on. I read some of the competitions out loud to Elina. "...woodland trails marathon, animal tracking, wilderness culinary arts, making a fire, wilderness interpretive dance,.... What's wilderness interpretive dance, Elina?"

"I think that is where dance groups tell ancient legends about animals through dance. They perform on the stage, and the winners are chosen by audience response and judges. That belongs to the Wilderness Arts competitions. But the main focus of the Thunder Games is on the Wilderness Skills, since traditionally if you did not have food and shelter, you didn't have a chance to make culture."

"Next," said the fellow at the registration desk. It wasn't Elina's turn yet so we continued to chat. A nice breeze blew through the area. It was remarkably nice this morning. But in our world we never become complacent. A sudden change in weather could be just around the corner and the registration area canopy would be collapsed, to cover the table, and hold everything down.

"Okay, Elina," I say, referring again to the list of competitions. "Here are some more competitions:

wilderness cooking is probably about making delicious food using only wild ingredients.”

“Yes, competitors go into the surrounding forest to collect edible wild plants and make something good. They are given meat to use – I think moose meat. All your ingredients are checked by the judges first. If you happen to pick a plant that is inedible or poisonous, you are immediately disqualified and required to take a seminar on identifying edible plants versus inedible.”

“I never pick any plants unless I am absolutely certain it is edible,” I say. “I’m not much of a cook, though. My sister, whose name is Riddle, is the cook in our family, like I said before. However, I know what parts of an animal can be used for food, what parts are best used as a meal for the family dog, and what parts can be used for making interesting things to wear.”

“Then you could enter the Wilderness Fashion competition. Contestants are given a basic deerskin garment to modify and lots of furs, feathers, and so on, and have to create a fashionable costume from it within a couple hours.”

I continue reading the list of competitions out loud. “I see here that there is a competition where a three person team has to make a small single person canoe from a pile of birch bark over three days, then put the canoe in the water and show it works. ...The

canoes that work then have a race to determine the final winner.... There is fishing from canoes too... Swimming too. According to this, there are two kinds of swimming competitions – the sprint and the marathon. For a sprint you have to be able to apply lots of strength over a short time, and for the marathon have endurance.”

“ I couldn’t do the sprint,” says Elina. “But if you are good in the trail marathons, you will also do well in a swimming marathon. You have to swim several kilometers around some buoys around the lake. “

“I could do that.”

“We should decide to do some of the competitions together, Riia. Even though we are competitors it is fun to do a competition with someone you know.”

Finally Elina’s turn at the registration table comes. She gives the registrar her name, Elina Mistymarsh, of the Woli Innat community several hundred kilometers to the east.

The official at the registration desk is now talking to Elina: “I see the Woli nation has come with two Wilderness Skills contestants and two in Wilderness Arts along with the chief and some families.”

“Yes, we’re not a large delegation. I’m one of the two Wilderness Skills contestants,” Elina says. “My cousin Roam is the other one. We’re at the Otter campsite. I will register right away for all the bow competitions, like Riia did.”

So Elina gets her badge and with the ribbon puts it around her neck , and we are free to do something else. I feel so much a part of the Thunder Games now, that I really do not want to pack up and leave yet.

## 13. To Stay or to Leave?

It is midday and I first think I should return to my brother, but Elina insists I come with her to campsite Otter so she can introduce me more properly.

“Only on one condition, Elina,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about where I come from and all that. I told the official at the registration table I came from the ah... ‘Cwano’ nation of Scandnia in northern Ropa and he did not find anything about me in the computer. It is possible I might not be able compete, if somehow the general registration letter from the Cwano nation never arrived here.”

I am secretly wishing what I say is true – that I will be disqualified – because then it will help me finally to take the step of packing up and leaving.

“Nonsense,” says Elina. “They cannot exclude someone who is so good just because of a bureaucratic mix-up. But I promise to avoid talking to the others about where you are from. We’ll only talk about how we will register in many of the same competitions.”

“Thanks.”

The Otter campsite has several tents. One is a large fancy tent complete with a mosquito net at the doorway. Another is a large tarp hung over a horizontal pole, with ends weighed down. The third is a traditional tall conical one that was used by northern Innat peoples around the world. And there



are a couple of ordinary small individual manufactured tents as well I guess for sleeping only. There is a fire going in the fire pit and some pots hanging over the fire. Some have brought folding chairs so it isn't necessary to sit on the provided improvised seats made of driftwood logs or local rocks.

Elina introduces me to her parents, who are in charge of their camp, then to an elder who is a mayor or chief of their community, his wife, and then to the three other competitors from their group, one of which is Elina's cousin Roam. She tells everyone my name, that I will compete along with her, and that I have a brother who is also going to compete. Elina explains to me that some delegations are quite large and take up several campsites. They bring competitors who specialize and train just for specific competitions and therefore excel in them – sometimes as many as 10-20 young men and women. Her nation, whose shortened name is Woli, is not very large and had to come from three days away, by train and road, and only came with the four competitors - Elina, Roam, Ulma and Growl.

“The number that a participating nation brings is only limited by the expense of making the journey here,” concludes Elina, “and of course their wealth. Some very wealthy nations may come by their own aircraft, landing in the water, but they don't come as a

large group because the number of people fitting in a single private air-vehicle is limited."

Elina invites me to stay for midday tea and meal.

"Can I fetch my brother?" I ask. "It would spare him making something to eat all by himself."

"Certainly."

I follow the paths back to campsite Muskrat to check on Russ. I find him sitting back against a log reading Thunder Games brochures.

"I wandered around the grounds," he says, "and picked up some literature about these Thunder Games. How was your morning, Sis?"

"Look," I say, pointing to my badge. "I am an official competitor!"

He leant forward to read it. "Cwano Nation? What's that?"

"Somehow, I don't know how it happened, I said I came from a people in northern Ropa. I heard in a history lesson or documentary about a people called Cwens or Quans once, but I don't know if any people like that still exist who preserve their traditional ways. But I pretended that maybe a community of them preserved their old ways all the way up to modern times in the forests of central Scandnia . Well if someone asks, we are from descendants of those people sent here to compete in woodland skills and arts since forests there are similar to here. But better

still, don't answer. Just change the subject. I said you are entering some competitions too."

"Wait, now.....! I don't want.....!"

"It'll be fun. Don't you want to see how you measure up in wilderness skills?...You're pretty good. You've gone out into the wilderness often since you were 12. Anyway, right now, we have been invited to campsite Otter for tea and something to eat. I've come to fetch you. You haven't eaten have you?"

"Not yet."

"Come then."

I start off and he follows.

"I told Elina," I continue as we walk, "that the registration desk could not find a record of Cwano Nation registering as a participating nation and that we might be disqualified, and for that reason she should not to talk about where we came from, so you won't have to worry about it. Don't worry Russ, we might head home today after all. We can be disqualified if they fail to find any Cwano nation in their files."

At campsite Otter I introduce Russ to everybody. Russ is a young man of few words. He gets by easily with a handshake, smile and nod. He leaves all the talking to me.

There are many campsites in the campsites area. There are campsites called Moose, Chipmunk, Beaver, Bear, and so on. There are as many campsites it seems

as there are common animals to name the sites after. I think some campsites come with tents already erected for the user. After all, it is good if pilgrims coming from further away to the Thunder Games are not weighed down by having to bring tents. But I think there are charges for the tents and 'extras' which I think they store in the permanent buildings I saw earlier, when the place is not in use.

Provided or not, tents vary greatly from manufactured complex ones, to simple shelters under tarpaulins, to traditional conical or dome ones. Many are under trees or surrounded by bushes and are not visible from the common paths. The hidden ones are revealed only by the numerous columns of smoke from fire pits rising up through the trees and bushes. I learn that everyone has a strategy in place in case the area is hit by a thunderstorm. For the most part it involves plenty of ropes and strong stakes to tie everything down.

After lunch, Elina seems to have my afternoon planned. She says: "We should leave here early, Riia, and register for the trail marathon later this afternoon, before we go back to take part in the target shooting competition. We can win two competitions today if we want."

"Trail marathon?"

“I assume that is another good one for you since you hunt in the wilderness. We can do it together, even if we are competing.”

“Alright. Maybe Russ can enter that one. Just to get Russ started. What do you say, Russ?”

Russ is just going along with what I say; but I can tell he is intrigued by all this. Remembering what he read in the brochures, he asks, “Is that the one where competitors just follow blazes and other markings on trees in a winding route through the forest?”

“Yes, Russ,” Elina replies. “Competitors leave two minutes apart, to avoid their being side by side, and the winner is the one who does it in the least time. It’s around three kilometers in total and it takes about an hour.”

“Alright,” says Russ. “Sounds like fun.”

“Tomorrow, you’re on your own, Russ,” I say. “Elina says that it is unwise to have two competitors from the same tribe in the same competition instead of putting each in separate competitions, the best ones for each. That way the tribe is represented in more competitions.”

I know Russ is thinking: Another day?!! Will we ever leave?!!

We search for the site of the Trail-Running Marathon to sign up ahead of time. It is well into the woods, beyond the open area of the bow skills competitions. We just follow the signs.

Once we were at the site, the registration desk is easy to find. Like before it is a table underneath a canopy. Elina registers first. With her information already in the computer, it takes only a minute. Same with me. They note the question mark beside the Cwano name but I say it is being looked into. I am registered.

“This is Russ, my brother, from the same place,” I add. “Could you put his name in the computer? This will be his first competition. He needs his badge.”

Since I am registered they have no reason not to give Russ his as well, using the same information.

“This competition begins at 3pm,” we are told. “Be here at 10 minutes ahead of time and competitors will draw their order from a hat.”

Now we must head back to the bow skills competitions, which are about to begin.

“Alright, Russ,” I tell him as we leave the registration area, “you can wander around, or come see me and Elina compete in the bullseye targets.”

“Sounds like a plain archery competition,” he says, “I’ll wander around instead and see what else there is going on.”

Thus, Russ goes away on his own, while Elina and I head for the bow skills site for the first competition – the simplest one with the bullseye targets, the one that is like the familiar archery contest except with hunting bows.

Arriving at the bow skills field, we draw our order from a hat. The competitors will shoot at the target in that order, taking three shots each for each target distance. After the score is recorded, officials pull arrows from the target and run them back to the competitor.

I am aware again that there are small cameras mounted on poles and trees everywhere, capturing the action and feeding it to a central control room somewhere. Some cameras can pan and zoom. It makes me feel a little self-conscious. I am being recorded for their television program that will be aired later. Will I be recognized? I expect, however, I will just be the mystery competitor from across the ocean.

The best competitors, including me and Elina, manage to get perfect scores for the 10 and 25 meter distances. It now comes down to the 50 meter. As I did this morning, I get my arrows into the bullseye area three times. Elina is four competitors later than me in the order, so I have time to give her advice.

“You have to watch how the arrows fly for the previous contestants and how the leaves of the trees are behaving and judge the breeze. Watch for the leaves to be still. Then you know the air will be still and the arrow will not be blown sideways. Most contestants never think about the gentle breezes.”

Whether Elina needed my suggestion of not, she does very well. Her score is only a point less than mine. When everything is tallied, I am first and Elina is second from among as many as 20 competitors. The third place goes to a woman named Ikka. She is a fierce-looking woman of about 22 who seems to resent being behind teenagers – I am 17 and Elina is 16.

We are given certificates for our wins and I learn that we have to show up for the medals ceremony at the stage in the evening, where all winners of the day in all the competitions are given actual medals to put around their necks –gold, silver, and bronze. But we don't have any time to think about that right now. Elina and I have to proceed to our other competition for today – the Woodland Trail-running Marathon.

For this there is a small open area for the start and finish location and bleachers made from old driftwood logs for spectators to witness the start and finish of their favourite contestants. Contestants will run through the small open area and into the woods and then in a while emerge from the same woods and run to the finish line.

Competitors are arriving and spectators too are now gathering to watch and cheer their favourite competitor.

Russ is already at the site when we arrive.

“How did you spend your last couple hours, Russ?” I ask him.



“I explored the place. Did you know there is a dock and a beach on the shore? There are people from Innat nations of all kinds and from all over Nomerica – from poor nations who walked for several days through the mountain range, to rich nations who sent delegations that came with their own flying craft with floats that they tie up at the docks. There are also some very old roads to use to reach here – roads abandoned when the programs to revive wilderness got going. And, you know, if you have money or something to trade, there are vendors selling smoked meat, dried berries, and other good things that are natural. Manufactured things are not allowed here. If we had money, we could eat whatever we want here.”

“I know,” I say. “I’m sorry we didn’t bring any money. Who’d have thought there’d be need for it? We were only exploring the wilderness. You should enter a fishing competition and catch a big fish to eat.”

Elina overheard. “What do you mean, Riia?” It doesn’t make sense that a nation would send competitors without money.

I have to think fast. “I mean, it is so expensive to fly back and forth across the ocean, that it was decided we would hunt for our food rather than use money to buy it.”

It made sense – an impoverished nation far away already spends enough to send two competitors... “Don’t worry about hunting or fishing,”

says Elina. "You are welcome at our campfire, and my people's cooking. We have brought plenty food. But let's not delay... We have to now draw names from the hat for this competition— well it is actually a birch bark box – to determine the order we will head out."

In this case there was no practicing because the test is about how competitors handled running through a wilderness that they did not know anything about ahead of time, just following blazes and other trail markers.

The official explained the competition in more detail. "Each contestant goes by themselves in the order of the number they have drawn from the birch bark box. Each contestant starts two minutes after the last to minimize two contestants interfering with one another. Your arrival time will be subtracted from your start time, and the winner is the one who runs the course correctly in the least time. Cameras along the route will ensure the course is run correctly."

The random draw makes Russ the third to start and I am the 5th. Elina will not run until the 9th. The first goes. The first 30 meters is in the clearing. Each competitor getting a rousing sendoff from the spectators until they disappeared into the forest. Two minutes later the second goes. Then Russ is the third to go. Then the fourth....

Fifth...Now it is my turn. I put my hunting jacket on a bench as it is certain to get hot and sweaty. I run

in my T-shirt. I hope I will not scratch up my forearms too much.

The start is signalled by an air gun that makes a boom-crash sound like thunder – appropriate for the Thunder Games. I run across the field and into the forest.

I don't know how Russ is doing, but I can describe my own experience. The course begins easy and becomes increasingly difficult. It is designed that way.

At first there is running through relatively level forest hopping over branches and logs.

The forest floor is sloping upward. It is initially a mostly deciduous forest with dead leaves crunching underfoot. Then comes a thicket of new growth in an area that was flattened by a storm sometime in the past. It is difficult to push through.

A small ridge follows. Normally one looks for a detour around it, but the rule is that I have to follow the marked trail, and it goes up a steep rock incline, and requires some difficult climbing. I notice a small camera on a branch following me as I go by. Every time I see one of the small cameras, I realize that live video will be showing on large screens for spectators back at the start, cutting from one camera to another, as well as allowing the judges to view all camera recordings at once. Later it will obviously be edited for the final broadcast in some weeks to capture only the highlights. The footage of the winner is likely to

dominate in the later edited program. I am wondering if I want the attention on me. I almost want not to win so that I can get lost in the background. But my competitive spirit simply will not let me lose on purpose.

The top of the ridge is followed by a downward slope to a wet gully. My boots sink into soft ground. The footprints of the previous four contestants are obvious. I see that someone slipped and fell into some water. That means a loss of valuable seconds.

Shlop, shlop, shlop ...my leather hunting boots are ankle deep in mud and moss now.

In five minutes the slope rises and I'm out of the gully.

The slope rises again. I now face a thicket of young spruce. Getting through the dense branches is nearly impossible. Fortunately those ahead of me have broken branches and made it easier for those who follow.

I can hear contestant four somewhere in the bush in front of me, crashing along and panting heavily. It means I have gained on them.

Now the trail proceeds through a dense young evergreen forest of firs, spruce and cedars. Young cedars are dense, and the designers of the trail have put the trail through some dense cedars.

Another ridge.

Trail turns to follow the ridge.

Careful not to lose balance hopping from rock to rock. Higher ground means bushes and grasses.

Oh, blueberries! I stop for two seconds to pick a few blueberries, and pop them in my mouth as I go. Who cares about losing only two seconds?

The ridge descends gradually towards a long swampy bay of the lake.

The trail now goes through marsh grasses, reeds and bulrushes. I have to hop from clump of marsh grasses to clump of marsh grasses to have solid footing and not step into water. There are dead driftwood logs across the more water-filled areas.

As much as one might want to step in the water and wade, valuable time would be lost if one did so. Much better to hop from solid footing to solid footing, from one clump of grass, or piece of fallen log to another. Hop, hop hop. Not fall off. Not fall off. Must think at lightning speed. Contestants for this competition must be experienced to be as surefooted as necessary.

I now come across contestant four, fallen off and knee-deep in the water trying to get back on the trail. By passing him I am obviously two minutes ahead since I departed two minutes after him at the start.

I give him a wave and continue on. Go, go, go.

The marsh is wider than I thought. Crossing it is a continuous dance for fifteen minutes.

I see contestant three in the distance. Three? That is my brother! Hey, let's see if I can catch up to him. An inspiring challenge for me. Sibling rivalry you know. If I caught up with him that would put me four minutes ahead given each contestant left two minutes after the last.

But he is far – he has reached the opposite shore of the swampy bay. The trail ahead of him is now following the shore.

I reach where he was when I first spied him. Heavy bushes such as grow along the shore, and bulrushes six feet tall. Here it is necessary to go through water. Lift feet high. Hop. Do not drag feet through the water.

Then the trail turns inland. Soon the trail hits a very old road – maybe part of the overgrown road we encountered yesterday.

And the trail turns to follow the road. I see the trail markers – now they are stones arranged in a line – continue along the road as far as the eye can see. There is probably a camera positioned for a view down the road. I take off like mad, sprinting as fast as I can. This is where a contestant who can sprint well will gain many seconds.

I realize the trail markers do not continue. A row of stones in an L formation shows a turn – that the trail turns back into the forest. I expect there will be some contestants who will miss the turn, have to come

back, and lose valuable seconds. The course has tricks in it.

I'm off the road and in the bush again. I suspect the trail is now looping back to the start which is also the finish. Must be more than half way now.

Now there is a deer trail. I follow it like a deer.

Turns off the deer trail. Now comes to a wide creek. Trail crosses creek over a beaver dam. Notice freshly gnawed stumps. "Beavers here," I think.

I imagine that I am chasing a swift animal. Or I imagine I am being chased by a bear. A bear hot on my heels. It gets my adrenalin up. Imagining real situations where I must run with all my might.

I see Russ ahead a couple times more. I am enjoying this. Blueberries again. Grab a few as I pass. Refreshing. Sweat pouring from my body. Forehead and bare hands glistening – also scratched plenty by branches.

Come up over a ridge. Open deciduous forest again. Can see my brother down below.

"Hey Russ!" I shout. "I'm coming at you!"

We burst out of the forest into the clearing at the start/finish area, one after the other. The spectators cheer.

Both I and Russ collapse on the grass beyond the finish line to recover.

Because I left four minutes later than Russ, I obviously beat Russ by almost four minutes. But where does Russ stand?

Elina, ninth to depart, is in the course now. I see video shots of her on the large screen. When Russ and I finally have our breath back, we see Elina burst out of the forest hit the finish line and similarly collapse on the grass.

The results are not known until all the contestants have run the course. Times are put up with chalk on a board as well as entered into the official computer.

I am surprised I won. A fellow with thin legs is second, Russ is third, Elina comes in fifth.

"It's okay," says Elina. "I fell flat on my face into the marsh and lost lots of time."

"In this course, one trip-up can cost dearly when all the times are close," I say.

First, second, and third are entered in the official books, and we are given official certificates.

"Congratulations, Russ," I say to my brother. "You won a medal!"

"Yeah," he says. "Kinda cool."

I will be on two podiums this evening, I realize – the bow targets and this trail run. Gulp! But I am not a legitimate contestant. I invented my origins!! And here I am winning two gold medals!!! Can I remain anonymous and vanish now that I am officially a double winner? What have I gotten myself into?!



**THUNDER GAMES : 13**

What have I gotten me and Russ into? We're like party crashers!

## 14. Staying Longer

Evening.

As a medal winner, this is the first time I am close to the stage let alone on it.

They employ a very old practice of having the first, second and third place winners standing on a podium with three levels, the first being in the center on a high step, and the second being next lower and to one side and the third being next lower on the other.

All the competitions of the day are honoured now. Besides the still target bow shooting, and the wilderness trail marathon, there was swimming sprint, canoe racing, fish spearing, and wilderness arts such as drumming and wilderness cooking and such. I think there were 10 competitions in all today. I couldn't believe I had won gold in two of them!

At least, with so many events and so many winners I wasn't feeling so conspicuous. Still, no other competitor won two gold medals.

I, Russ, and Elina are all part of the medal-awarding ceremonies, since I and Elina had won first and second in the target shooting, and I and Russ had won first and third in the trail running marathon.

The winners of the bow competitions are called to the stage first, and directed to our places on the podium. I get up there in the highest first place spot. Since neither I nor Russ had packed a change of

clothes, we hoped we looked alright. After supper with the people at the Otter campsite, I had dusted my clothes, and cleaned my hair and face as much as I could for these medal ceremonies. Elina had helped with my hair and I with hers. Instead of the simple way we tied our hair back with bands, we tried to give it interesting braiding. She insisted I leave my small turkey feathers in my hair, as they had an effect similar to earrings and worked well for me.

"You look like a woman hunter should look," she had said. "Tough but feminine."

The rest of the turkey feathers are in my backpack, and I fetched a couple for Elina. She ties her hair differently from me, but we found a nice place to put a few feathers.

Thus I look reasonably good from a distance. The audience will not see the stains on my hunting trousers or scratches on my hands.

With traditional Innat music in the background, a dignitary puts my medal around my neck and shakes my hand. I study my medal. The medals show stylized thunderbirds in gold, silver, and bronze attached to ribbons. Text below it reads "70th Thunder Games - 3014". I think, I do not deserve this. I don't really have a people far away who will see me on TV and feel proud. I am taking a win away from someone that does. Elina received the silver medal and in her

case, she had a real nation to feel proud of her, and she could have had gold if I had not come here.

The ceremony is repeated a little later for my other win in the trail running marathon. Russ gets his bronze medal for this. He thinks it is cool.

There is a lot of ceremony, congratulations, speeches, praise going on. It all becomes a blur to me. Too much going on at once. I only remember how the words are amplified by loudspeakers and echo throughout the grounds and how several thousand people are looking on from the field below and often clapping and approving.

Then the medal ceremonies are over, and I feel relieved to be off the stage. The medal ceremonies are followed by interpretive dance by some troupe presenting themes connected with nature.

I and Elina and Russ linger to watch the performance a while, and then withdraw to our campsites for the night. Russ' third place win is inspiring to him. He is now raring to go with entering further competitions tomorrow. He is finding an attraction to Elina, even though she is almost two years older than him. She is pretty, after all.

Night comes and I build up my grass mattress under the pine trees. Now as the day comes to a close and I am alone with my thoughts, my earlier feelings that I don't belong here are returning. I begin wishing I and Russ had taken off and headed home. But

everyone, starting with Elina, who saw me shoot the pheasant yesterday, is saying I belong here as a competitor. My demonstrated skills with the bow even swayed the official at the bow skills registration table to overlook the absence of my invented “Cwano Nation” in their files, and see it as a bureaucratic oversight or mix-up. I take a deep breath. Be calm. It’ll be alright.

We have so far slept without any tent covering. I have not worried about sleeping in my hunting clothes, minus boots and jacket – we had never anticipated any other situation than rough camping. But now I am concerned that with further physical challenges, if I win again, with all the sweating of competitions, my clothes will smell at the medal ceremony. But maybe I won’t win any more. Maybe we will leave tomorrow, for real this time.

It is too much to expect that the good weather would continue for three nights in a row. In the middle of the night there is a deluge. Russ and I tear the rolled up tarpaulin out of our backpacks and throw it over top of us and our grass bedding. We had affixed ropes to the tarpaulin for just such an eventuality, with the plan to tie them to trees to prevent wind blowing it off. Russ quickly ties the ropes to nearby trees and stakes we had driven earlier, before we climb under it. The rain then comes as if we were under a waterfall. Then comes the wind, once or

twice lifting the edge of the tarp and giving us a blast. There is thunder, but it is distant. Evidently we are not on the direct path, and are getting the milder treatment on its edge. It doesn't last for more than a half an hour. Then there is no more for the rest of the night. But in half an hour there had been so much water that in the morning there are small ponds everywhere. It will soon be absorbed by the grassy and porous ground.

Elina arrives at our campsite when the sun has barely risen. Elina peers under the tarpaulin to wake me. "Good morning, Riia. The weather forecast says we will have a few intermittent waterfalls. But get up. It's stopped and we have to get to practice for today's bow skills competition. The earlier we arrive there the fewer of the other competitors will be there practicing."

Russ and I lift the tarp aside and gather our boots and jackets together. First stopping at the campground washrooms tent, we continue with Elina to her campsite where Elina's cousin, Roam, is tending to a pot of wilderness porridge and a large pot with wilderness tea. Roam, who is about 22, is tall and well built. He is registered for many of the more physical challenges. The plan is we eat quickly and then head out to get practice.

Ah! It is nice to get porridge in the stomach. This gruel contains much that comes from the wild such as

wild rice, flour ground from certain edible water plant roots, some dried blueberries for flavour and more. Then there is the tea to get fluids inside in anticipation of another warm day of activity.

“Russ,” I say. “While I and Elina go to the bow skills site to practice today’s competition, why don’t you go with Elina’s cousin Roam, who is also here to compete, and get registered for more competitions.”

Roam being 22 to Russ’ 14, they are not exactly a good match, but Elina has arranged it, and Roam motions Russ to follow him, as I and Elina go our separate way.

“You’re silent Riia,” says Elina as we go. “Something is troubling you.”

It is true. My guilt is getting to me - not about deceiving the officials, but deceiving Elina. She has been nothing but kind and generous to us.

“You should have won gold, yesterday, Elina. Not me.”

“Why are you saying that? You were clearly better than me.”

“Because I’m not a legitimate competitor,” I reveal.

“Just because they couldn’t find any Cwano Nation in the records is their error not yours. They haven’t disqualified you, so you’re fine.”

“I lied. There isn’t even any Cwano Nation. I made that up.”

“What?!” Elina turns towards me, studies my face, and then laughs. “Explain.”

“I wasn’t thinking. I only wanted to see how good my skills were. I never thought I would win. I and Russ were going to leave yesterday morning.”

“Where are you from then?”

“About 30 kilometres that way.” I stop and point to the northeast. “I hunt and hike in this wilderness, but have never come this far. We came on this gathering by accident. And then you invited me to practice.”

Elina doesn’t know what to say. She eyes me up and down, and then bursts out laughing once again, and hugs me.

“Well all that really counts,” she says, “is the actual skill. These are all wilderness skills that go back a thousand years, and anyone who can still do them is legitimate. There are some youths that train all year and come to get a medal, but I don’t care about medals. I like to compete and I like being challenged by someone who might be better. I think you belong here. Stay, Riia. See how well you will do.”

Her response was unexpected. Instead of her getting angry and telling me to leave, now she is encouraging me to stay! Now it will be impossible for me to leave even if I wanted to!

“Leave it up to the officials, Riia,” she adds. “If they want to disqualify you, it is their decision. Maybe



they will think you are good enough too, to stay. I'll keep quiet about it, and leave it up to them. Now enough worrying, Riia. We have to get to practicing! I want to see how good you are. Maybe you'll win against me again. I don't mind if you win over me. Don't hold back just to let me win over you. Come on!"

I am relieved it is out in the open. My positive spirits have returned. I am no longer deceiving Elina. It now remains to be seen what the officials do about me - if they even discover the issue.

When we arrive at the bow skills grounds, we are first there. Not even the officials have arrived.

"We might have to wait for staff to arrive, Riia, because they have to operate the device that tosses the fake birds up into the air."

"We can look at the other one."

"We can do that. They have set up the three targets. Of course they will change their positions for the competition, but we can get the feel of it."

"Alright, Elina. Give me a 'go' and count fifteen seconds."

Elina says 'go' and begins to count. I shoot and hit the model of the deer easily. Then I shoot and hit the moose target. Then my next arrow it's a twig, and the arrow misses the bear target.

"You have to analyze the trees and bushes situation right away," I tell Elina "and see every twig,

and generally understand the landscape will be constant and only the targets are in different locations. Well I missed one this first time. It seems to me that there is some luck involved here. My last shot was deflected by a single twig. I could easily fail this one.”

Elina tries as well, and she misses two.

By now staff arrives and we are anxious to try the flying targets.

“The good thing about these two competitions is that only the first ten finalists from yesterday’s still-target competition qualify. There aren’t as many contestants and the two competitions get done quite quickly.”

In the flying targets competition, bags filled with grass straw are ejected into the air like a pheasant or a duck flying up from some bushes. A staff member fires the air cannon.

“Fire!” I shout and a bag shoots up at an angle. I miss. Elina elects to retrieve arrows. I am familiar with birds flying up from bushes. But these are not real birds. Real birds are accelerating as they rise, while the bag is slowing down and falling.

“You have to think of the bags as if they are birds coming down rather than flying up – slowing rather than speeding up,” I say.

Once I understand, I hit them every time.

Elina does not do well. I have to fetch many of her arrows from the field behind.

“It is because I’m not a hunter like you Riia. I’ll let you beat me in this one.”

By now, other competitors are arriving to practice.

One of our major competitors is Ikka, a woman in her early 20’s with a stern narrow face, long sharp nose, and black hair she ties into a knot so that it is tight to her head. She looks intimidating. Elina and I just tie or braid our hair at the back just to keep it out of our face. In fact there are men too who have long hair and tie it at back. Most men however like to cut their hair short. But there are a few here who shave part of their head, to create an impressive or intimidating look for the competition.

Ikka doesn’t like being beat by us teenagers. When she arrives to practice she shouts at us. “The marvellous Riia! The new celebrity of the Thunder Games! Winner of the target competitions, and the Trail-running Marathon. Today is when your winning streak will end!”

Ikka is not taking my wins very well. She was unable to get better than third place yesterday and sixth in the trail competition.

“It’s nothing personal, Ikka,” I say. “It is just a competition. Let the best one win. I apologize in advance if I will be ahead of you again today.”

Having had our practices, I and Elina have to let Ikka and her friends take their practices. We don’t particularly like their company. She and two men

with her are of the kind who practice all year and come purely to get medals, preferably gold.

Elina is now keen to determine what other competitions we will enter today. Sitting where spectators will sit later, and watching others practicing, we investigate the literature.

"I don't want to get sweaty again today," I say. "After the bow competitions, let's do something artistic if there is something in the late afternoon. Here is a competition that appeals to me. Wilderness Fashion. The contestant is supposed to use prepared leather, fur, feathers and other natural things they give to the competitors, to create fashion ware for women. That is something I have done. When I return from hunting with pretty feathers, furs, and other things, I always make something with them, mostly decorations for clothes. It says in this guide that the contestant is supposed to make it for themselves, and model it for the judges. They are judged for skill in workmanship, practicality of the item, and its aesthetics."

"I'm not very artistic," says Elina. "But I'll be happy to just look on and cheer you on. Our Wilderness Arts competitors, Ulma and Growl, take care of the artistic competitions, but I don't know if Ulma will enter that one. We have to enter the ones in which we are likely to do best. Nobody can enter everything because there are so many going on at the

same time. Me and Roam are the Wilderness Skills competitors for our delegation.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t try an artistic competition,” I say.

“Of course you should if you are good at it. Try anything you like, anything that you may do well in.”

“Alright. I’ll do the Wilderness Fashion. We can also squeeze in something else that is more physical we can do together.” I continuing to scan the list of competitions. “One of the swimming competitions is the marathon. I wouldn’t be good in a sprint, but a marathon doesn’t need speed, just endurance.”

“I already suggested it. If we have lots of stamina, lots of endurance, in running a trail, then we will have it also in swimming.”

“We can swim the breast stroke together leisurely and steadily and chat as we go. We can do it for fun and not necessarily to win.”

Now we have a plan! I don’t know what Russ is doing, but we will now both register for the marathon swim, and I will also register for the Wilderness Fashion competition.

These two competitions will occur close to the shore, and we walk there, past lots of people enjoying performances on the stage, past vendors selling things from blankets on the ground. But we don’t linger to study the scene, since we have to hurry back for the two bow skills competitions at 1 pm.

Thus I quickly register at the registration desk for the Wilderness Fashion, and both of us register at the registration desk for the Swimming Marathon. And then we hurry back for the actual Bow Skills competition for today.

Back at the Bow Skills competitions site, we once again select our order from a hat – actually a birch bark box – and line up. When the actual competition begins, I can tell that every time I hit the targets, Ikka and a couple extremely competitive men become increasingly resentful towards me. It may have been this resentment that makes them do poorer and as a result I win first place in both competitions again. Ikka placed either second or third, but felt she deserved first, not the 17 year old mysterious unknown girl from across the ocean that I was to her.

I could feel Ikka's anger at me when I won both, and the moment I was given the certificate for first place, I and Elina hurried out of there. Two more competitions lay ahead for the afternoon.

# 15. My Marathon Swim

After the bow and arrow competitions Elina and I head first to the Wilderness Fashion competition area so I can learn in advance a little more about what that competition is about. It will take place later in the day after the Marathon Swim event.

The Wilderness Fashion competition, I discover, will be held under a canopy near the stage; where there are backstage change rooms, mirrors, etc. that can be used by the competitors. Elina and I visit the site before heading to the Swimming Marathon that will occur first. I see rows of tables under the canopy divided up into work stations, each competitor getting a work station. At the registration desk I pick up some further information about the rules of the competition to read as I and Elina now head to the beach where the Marathon Swim event will soon begin.

“It says here, Elina, that to be fair to all, all contestants must begin with the same short deerskin robe, which contestants then alter for ourselves into a skirt or dress or whatever – adding items supplied by the competition, all of which come from nature and have been prepared for use. There is even dye that can be used to put color on the deerskin. Later we keep what we create. That’s very generous. I know how difficult it is to hunt a deer, let alone tan it and prepare it. And they will let contestants keep it?”

“It is a wealthy worldwide festival,” says Elina. “Probably it has sponsors that finance this one. Besides, if they have contestants bring their own materials it means they have already designed it in their minds, and on the other hand if they don’t supply the materials, few will enter. And if they don’t let contestants take what they create they’ll have lots of outfits they can’t get rid of, since not many will be fabulous. So obviously they will provide everything and let you keep what you create.”

“It makes sense.”

“So,” Elina continues. “if everyone has to begin with the same deerskin you basically start in an undergarment or a swim outfit and try it on as you go.”

“Yes. The instructions say that contestants can constantly check the look of their progressing outfits at the backstage dressing rooms mirrors. It is a two hour challenge, and then the contestants model their outfits on the stage, and the judges also take into account the responses of the spectators.”

As we cross the grassy field towards the docks and beach, I wonder what to do about the changing in and out of my design. I can’t keep getting in and out of my hunting outfit. And I don’t have any kind of undergarment that is wearable in public. But first, I have another problem. What will I wear for the Marathon Swim competition? I didn’t exactly arrive



with a wardrobe. I have no swim suit with me. I have nothing to change into.

I keep this to myself as Elina leads me to the Marathon Swim competition desk to register our arrival. It is located near the dock. There are people in boats and canoes out in the water and children on the beach. The Marathon Swim, not needing lanes is to start simply by leaping from a start line when the start is given, and then after doing a large circuit around buoys set up around the lake, arrive back at the same line.

I whisper to Elina: "What will we wear? We can't swim in our wilderness outfits."

"That crossed my mind," says Elina. "No time for me to run back to the campsite to find something to wear. We could swim in underwear, but that won't look elegant. We can't forget that there are cameras everywhere and we might appear on television. I don't want to look stupid. We have to wear what the others wear."

"Yes, we should wear what is fashionable for swimming," I agree. "I notice that the common practice for swimming is to wear fashionable, colourful, loincloths."

A loincloth is a long piece of fabric put between the legs and tied by a belt around the waist. They hang down almost to the knees, in order to achieve a good display of the designs printed on the cloth.

“There are vendors over there selling them,” Elina points out.

We go there to see what they have. They are attractive swimming loincloths with colorful graphics. They are fashion statements. We browse their extensive selection.

“This is pretty,” I say, as I hold up one in front of me, “but I have no currency, no money. We have lots at home but we never expected we’d need any for our hiking in the wilderness.”

“I’ll pay,” says Elina. “We gotta look good for the cameras.”

When we sign in at the registration desk, we are assigned a locker for our rugged clothes, and now with our fancy loincloths, we go behind some privacy screens and slip into them.

In our world, wearing something on top is optional, just as it is with men; therefore Elina and I do not need more than our fashionable loincloth. I loosen my hair and let it hang down. “The swim will wash the dirt and dust from our trail run out of it,” I say to Elina, and she does the same. For a marathon swim the drag of hair in the water is irrelevant compared to sprinting.

We head to the start line – a rope in the shallows – and are amid other young men and women, competitors for the marathon, all very physically fit,

and some very bronze from the sun, all looking very attractive for any cameras that may be watching.

I can imagine later television coverage having announcers making comments on the fashion represented in the loincloths of the swimming competitors. I can already hear the comments being made of the ones I and Elina are wearing. "And there is Riia Greenthistle and Elina Mistymarsh who we have so far seen in rugged wilderness gear, now looking very elegant in their colorful loincloth swimwear, quite the opposite of how they looked for the Wilderness Trail-running Marathon yesterday."

I and Elina are technically competitors to each other, but we have decided to swim together and not stress ourselves. If we win we win, if we don't we don't.

We line up with the other competitors behind a rope in shallows at the beach.

Starts of competitions are signalled by the air-gun that creates a thunder-like boom.

We leap over the start rope and the swimming competition is under way.

I and Elina proceed strongly but do not strain. We chat and pace ourselves. The breast-stroke is best as it allows us to keep our heads above the water comfortably all the time so we can chat. This event is not about speed but endurance. Sprinters will exhaust themselves and we will overtake them down the way.

“So tell me about your tribe and your family Elina,” I say, starting our conversation.

Between taking breaths in time with her strokes, Elina begins. Imagine her taking a breath after every sentence.

“What is there to say. We are the Woli nation. Our community has been around forever. I think it has continued for maybe two thousand years. It hasn’t grown because people have been leaving for centuries. You know how marriages are - you don’t marry the boy next door because he seems like a brother. So marriages always reached outside the community and sometimes the married couple went to the community of the bride and sometimes the community of the groom, and sometimes they went their own way. So the reality is that the Innat community was continued mostly by the marriages that remained in that community. And then their children grew up with the Innat identity and traditions. When they grew up once again - half leave and half remain. In the long run we come to look just like the people of the larger world around us, except that we identify with our Innat traditions and that is how the Innat traditions continued, even when the people looked like any other. Notice I have blonde hair...”

“But you have high cheekbones, which might come from your Innat genes.”

“Anyway, when civilization finally learned the only way to deal with Mother Earth was to harmonize with her, all Innat people felt validated and empowered, and there was a great revival. All the Innat communities like ours, having forgotten a great deal over the centuries, dug into our archives and brought to light all kinds of photographs, books, and videos and valued them. And the many communities around the world who now revived their identity, used the world media to become united.”

“That must be when they began the Thunder Games 70 years ago,” I surmise.

“Before that, pow-wows and such had become local festivals. This one was international, and it borrowed from how mainstream civilization had something called the ‘Olympics’”

“Those games faded away, I learned, because they kept adding technology, until they had electronic games, and manufactured devices, and the original concept of testing naked human strength and skill in the original ancient Olympics had faded into the background.”

“Yes,” agrees Elina, “I guess humankind in general lost touch with the real natural foundation of things, and the Innat world was the one to reconnect when it was suddenly so important to return lost forests back to how they were originally. Imagine! Humans living in harmony with the natural planet like it was in the

beginning, was suddenly relevant. It was very affirming and validating for Innat culture. We can use technology, but we have to make sure its entire life cycle fits harmoniously into nature's systems."

"Yes, I know," I reply. "That is what we learn in school. I learned that a thousand years ago there was little life-cycle thinking. If there had been, they would immediately have seen that using plant oil in vehicles was far better than using underground oil, since plant oil spent an earlier life being plants that absorbed greenhouse gases - well carbon dioxide anyway - while fossil oil had an earlier life doing nothing but sit in the ground for a million years."

"Now you have to tell me more about you, the real you, Riia."

"We live just outside the small town of Greenville. I have another brother and a little sister too. Our father looks after us. The only thing unusual about our family is that our property happens to have the wilderness on three sides. That is why I got to know the wilderness so well --- oh and another thing. Our mother is a mission specialist on a seven year expedition visiting colonies around our solar system. She's on Mars right now. If there is a clear sky, look to the left of the moon. The bright star near it right now is the planet Mars"

"Your mother is in space? Seven years? And she married and had children?"

“Well this seven year expedition is a special one. Earlier she’d go away only for a year or so. Anyway she and our father decided together that they would have a long distance relationship, and he would be the main parent to raise us.”

“Don’t you miss her?”

“Of course,” I reply. “We send videos back and forth, so I mainly miss experiencing the real person. But it’s fine. We have our father all the time.”

“It is amazing to think your mother is on Mars right now and we are swimming in a lake on Earth.”

“We didn’t know how special it is to have a mother who is selected for space missions, until the children at our school said so. We grew up with it. .... Hey, I think we have to head to that buoy ahead. Someone has reached it.”

“Yes, we turn left there and head for the next buoy. I’m not worried that there are swimmers already going around that buoy. They are sprinters and will slow down. Let’s just keep our pace and watch, Riia. We’ll soon be beside them.”

We are settled in a steady rhythm - stroke, kick, stroke, kick, stroke, kick. We come to the buoy and turn. I notice a camera on the buoy that turns to follow us around. I lift a hand and wave to the camera. Elina resumes the conversation:

“So, as I said, Innat people enjoy all the useful electronics and such - but we judge them according to

their life cycle. It's like when you buy a toy for a child - you want to know that there isn't poisonous paint on it. Thank goodness the government requires full disclosure of not just its ingredients but their whole life cycle. In our community, we watch television a lot. How the television, when old, is taken apart and recycled is important. And if something is really difficult to recycle on earth, it has to be shot towards the sun to be consumed by the sun. The main difference between our Woli Innat community and the surrounding communities is that in our high school we learn much more about history of Innat around the world - how the civilization came and tried to extinguish us everywhere in the world. How civilization thought they could conquer nature. How every nation or industry was arrogant and selfish, and quarrelled with each other like children while the earth was being ruined."

"Yeah, we really had idiotic and childish ancestors!!! Look at the mess we have had to clean up!!!"

We continue silently for a while. Stroke, stroke, stroke. Finally I break the silence again.

"If we don't win, Elina, I am enjoying the swim. Much better than sweating through the woods like yesterday isn't it? And the scenery, with the blue mountains towering all around us, is amazing."



“Yes, nature is beautiful, Riia. Isn’t it? Well around here anyway. I guess there are some places that are getting the droughts and floods and they don’t look so good. My teacher at school asks again and again why in the world did civilization a thousand years ago feel a need to destroy such beauty.”

“Civilization makes people into machines, I think,” I say “Civilization people in the cities are slaves to machines even if they don’t realize it. That’s what I think, Elina. My father didn’t like being a slave to machines. We only watch one television channel, even though we can subscribe to more, and we cook with wood, and we have only a few solar panels for giving us a little electricity for electronics and small lights at night.”

“Same with us. It feels uncomfortable to not have at least one’s feet firmly planted in nature.”

Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, stroke, kick. On and on we swim, side by side, occasionally breaking into conversation like this.

When we come around the next buoys, the camera on it follows us around them again.

Slowly we gain on competitors ahead of as they tire out. Still, we are enjoying the lake, the mountains, and the swim. If we don’t place, it won’t matter. But half an hour later, in the final stretch, we notice that we are pulling ahead.

I and Elina arrive together at the finish, located in the shallows at the start rope. We are tired of course and we both lie down in the shallow water of the beach to regain our breath. Others begin to arrive and to cheering spectators, we climb out of the water and head to the locker they gave us to retrieve our clothes. We carry them in our arms as the sun dries us off. I shake loose my wet hair, which reaches well below my shoulders, so it will dry faster. So does Elina.

When the times and places are put up on the score board, we see that the judges have assigned both Elina and I first place because we arrived together. We are given the certificate describing our win now. We will receive the medals this evening just like yesterday.

“That was refreshing,” I say to Elina as we proceed in the direction of the Wilderness Fashion competition site where I will compete shortly. I notice all the people on the beach, especially children splashing in the shallow water. “I almost wish I hadn’t registered for the Wilderness Fashion competition. Look at all the people enjoying the beach. Wouldn’t it be nice to spend an afternoon here?”

Carrying our hiking and hunting clothes in front of us we become aware of how dirty they have become, especially my cotton trousers. “Is there someplace here I can get them cleaned, Elina? I don’t think I can receive medals in them again. I and Russ

travelled light. We didn't bring any change of clothing."

"My wilderness outfit is stinky too," replies Elina, "but I do have a change of clothing. But I can see if I can get them cleaned. There must be a laundry around here – even if it is just washtubs and a table. I doubt if they will have any high technology cleaning services here if they don't allow the sale of any manufactured goods here. Let me take your clothes and mine and wash them while you do the Wilderness Fashion competition. Don't worry, I know how to clean those parts that are leather. I'll be back well before your two hours are up. Since you will be creating clothes and they will let competitors continue wearing what they create, by the end of it, you will have a new outfit to wear anyway while your original clothes are drying."

"That would be wonderful, Elina, if you will do that. Can you take my boots away too? I won't use them in my design."

Elina takes my filthy hunting clothes and my undergarments, and boots, and heads off in her swim loincloth to find where it is that people can do laundry. I continue to the Wilderness Fashion competition area. Here too, if I don't win, it won't matter. It will be a lot of fun and I will be doing something I have always done anyway as a hobby.

In fact I wouldn't mind not winning anything more. I don't want to stand out and be noticed. Still,

my competitive side will not allow me to deliberately hold back.

## 16. My Wilderness Fashion

As I said, the Wilderness Fashion contest takes place under a large canopy. Each contestant is given a work station with traditional tools. I doubt if any others of the young women wears hunting clothes. Other competitors are lightly dressed too, some even just in swimwear like me, to make it easier to get in and out of the outfits we create to assess progress. Being able to put the outfits on from time to time to gauge the effect in the mirrors is very important since we are not designing something for someone else.

Our supervisors are older women who obviously are experienced in clothes making that is fashionable yet with Innat roots. The chief supervisor addresses all the competitors – all young women – teenagers or in their twenties.

“Welcome to the Wilderness Fashion Design competition of the Thunder Games. You have two hours to develop a fashionable outfit using natural wilderness materials. We have already prepared the materials in traditional ways so they are ready to use. You will begin with the short deerskin robe we provide, to keep the competition under two hours, and then you modify it into dress or jumper or whatever you wish, and add to it. For you to use, there is fur, leather, and traditional fabric woven from wilderness fibres. For decoration we provide dyes

made from natural plants, feathers of birds with attractive feathers, quills from the porcupine, beads made by slicing up thin bird bones, shells, seeds, and so on, into which we have already drilled small holes, and much more. The smaller items are all laid out on the long table at the side. As the rules say, you will design something that you can continue to wear this evening at this festival. We are not designing a costume for the theatre, but usable summer fashion that reflects the woodland Innat heritage..

“As you proceed, you should try on your costume often to look at it at our wall of mirrors. At the end of the two hours you must stop, put on the outfit and present it on the stage for spectator responses and inspection by our judges. The several women supervising are here for technical help. This competition measures your artistry and creativity more than technical skill, therefore younger competitors with less technical skill can still surpass older competitors with much experience and technical skill if they are very creative. Make it nice, because you will be permitted to take away what you created. Good luck.”

I am starving to proceed. I wonder what can I create that will fit in with summer, the wilderness, and this location?

There are full length mirrors around the work area where we can get a quick look at our reflection, as

well as the backstage dressing area where we can seriously deal with our appearance in detail.

I notice when I look at myself in the mirror wearing the robe – which is at the start like a short sleeve thigh-length deerskin shirt – to get ideas. I realize that I have to deal with tying up my hair again soon, because I want to put small feathers in it, like those turkey feathers which are still tied to the front strands of my hair. I must have tied them very strongly for them to not come off. I decide to use them as the anchor and inspiration for my new design. They remind me of my entire experience up to now, since leaving home. Somehow they also seem to describe who I am. They also honour an animal I know – the turkey I actually shot and ate recently – whereas all the other things on the table we can use are anonymous in that I don't know anything about the animal and who caught it.

I have never learned anything about current Innat fashion or even traditional. I am just a country girl who has been in the woods every day and have a high regard for everything in it. I realize I am approaching this assignment totally naively, totally originally.

With my own turkey feathers as my anchor I add to them. What should I add and how? Even though I don't know where they came from, I am still inclined to only use those natural items with which I am familiar, and which makes me think of my experience

with them in the wilderness, and in making things at home. Every item I use has much connected with it. Unlike manufactured things, like plastic beads, every item from an animal evokes the spirit of that animal. For example when I wear the deerskin I think of how the buck stands proudly on a ridge. It makes me stand proud too. Each item on the table that we can use, connects to the animal or plant from which it came, and so I am arranging my design also according to something not visible. For example, would claws from a wolf fit beside the skin of deer? It seems that would evoke the predator vs prey drama. I realize that whatever I do, I will not just be combining textures, colours, shapes and so on, but also describing a story of the relationships between the plants and animals from which the elements come!!! If I use woven fabric, then that will bring humans into the drama. Since humans are only a small part of the wilderness, I will limit my use of the woven fabric. I can attach it across the top of the deerskin, cutting away the top first. I want to make it sleeveless.

If Elina were here right now and not scrubbing our competition clothes, she would probably say “Riia, your fashion must reflect who you are. You are the huntress of your family.” Yes, my costume must be a statement of who I am – a huntress using a bow, mostly hunting rabbits, grouse, turkeys and pheasants.



I take off the deerskin and set to work first adjusting it. I decide to pull it in at the waist to fit my body better. I will then put it on again, and then imagine putting some color on it with dyes, and then to add decorations and accessories to it. Finally I'll top it off with details such as jewelry I can fashion from materials available. Then I'll figure out my hair. I have a rough plan to begin with.

Since I realize I can only use elements from animals I know well, I consider what animals I want to honour most. I owe greatest debt to rabbits. How many rabbits have become stew? Many. Maybe hundreds over the past five years! Then there are turkeys, grouse, pheasants, mostly.

How will I add rabbit fur? It is summer and so my design cannot use fur for warmth. It has to be decorative. It is easier to imagine how I would use feathers. I like feathers. I shoot arrows. Arrows use feathers and are like swift long birds, predators with sharp beaks. My dress has to speak of arrows and hunting. A few claws and teeth would reflect the predatory side of being a huntress.

Decisions, decisions. I take a long time to get going. Starting a creative project is always the hardest part; but once you have a good vision and get going it goes quickly. I have my basic outfit by a little more than one hour, and then I begin to refine it. Finally I have to tie up my hair in a suitable way, probably

with braiding, and add some more accessories in it. I think of adding more feathers.

I should note that since Elina took my boots away earlier too, I fashion deerskin slippers from the part I cut away from the deerskin robe adjustment. I add some dye to them. For my feet and legs, I also create ankle bracelets. Any girl that comes out barefoot I think is not fully dressed. I also repeat the feather theme in a necklace and wrist bracelet.

“Riia!”

It’s Elina’s voice among the spectators. She’s back. I read her hand signs. She has left the wet garments at our campsites to dry. She herself is now wearing a change of clothing from her campsite. Since I will be wearing what I create, my garments can be left to dry till the end of the day.

Finally the supervisor of this competition, the woman who introduced the competition at the start says: “Fifteen minutes left. Dress yourself in your fashions and make all final adjustments. In fifteen minutes we will have the fashions presentations on the stage. The reaction of the spectators present for the show will be part of the evaluation.”

All competitors get busy putting everything on, fixing their hair and adding accessories - to achieve a presentable result even if one does not think it is entirely finished.

Spectators migrate from outside the competition area to the front of the stage as us competitors, dressed in what we have created, file our way up some steps to the back wall of the stage where yesterday I saw dignitaries sitting in a row.

We all line up along this wall and wait for our name to be called. With some drumming and flute sounds in the background, we walk in turn to the front of the stage, turn and walked back. The spectators react with clapping and more. I must say that some of the designs look gawdy and more like costumes for theatre than wearable fashion. Others seem to use the decorations in a haphazard way. Maybe, I think, you have to understand the wilderness and the animals whose items you are using, to really know how to put them together.

Judges have already walked around and judged us to some degree during the competition. And now it is to judge the result. And the reaction of the audience to each presentation counts too.

And then it is my turn. I can identify Elina's cheer from the audience. I set off towards the front of the stage.

I have no way to judge my results relative to any existing styles or fads or even ancient traditional ones. I have created my design entirely intuitively based on my experiences with the animals from which the raw materials have come. I used only things from animals

or plants that I knew well and combined them in comfortable ways. For example I created jewelry that combined small pheasant feathers and seeds on a string. Pheasant beside the seeds they eat, seemed appropriate.

I have no idea what the spectators see with their eyes. I only know that what I saw in the mirror before I went on, felt right for me. I am not striving to win. I really don't care about the competition part of it at this point. The experience itself is enough. I feel honoured to be part of it, even if I might turn out not to be a legitimate competitor. It's fun. Today has been a fun day, first with the bow skill and swimming endurance competitions, and now being creative.

Apparently, as I learn later, I stand out because I am so naïve and original. I have not had any preconceived ideas from other examples in the Innat cultures. I have simply created what I feel was me in relation to all the animals represented. The peculiar result makes the audience and judges take special notice and perhaps the judges, who know more about the animals represented in the designs, also see the interplay of animals in the design that I have unconsciously or aesthetically woven into the final result.

I can't believe it! I am the winner of the first prize! The judges explained why when the three podium finishes are announced. "Riia Greenthistle has not

followed any of the trends in Wilderness Fashion Design but come up with something remarkably unique and original. She has done things we did not expect. But more than simply being original, doing it entirely in her own way, the result is very aesthetic, very artistic, and in some intangible way, honouring the animals from which the decorations have come. All our judges, along with the spectators, have decided Riia Greenthistle merits the gold medal for this contest.....”

I am so surprised I don't even notice what outfits received second and third place.

“Winning contestants!” the official added to the winners. “Do not forget the medal ceremonies will begin in less than an hour. You are advised to remain in the vicinity of the stage wearing your design, for the medal presentation. We applaud the rest of the contestants. You may continue to wear your designs too, if you wish.”

After they have given me the certificate giving me first place, I run off the stage to Elina and exclaim: “I can't believe it!”

“You're so lovely! I can't believe how you look! You look like a hunter goddess who stepped out of the forest!”

“They let competitors keep what they have made, so I will be wearing this for the rest of the evening,” I say.

“Your trousers and T-shirt and all other fabric things are hanging on the lower branches of the pine trees above your ‘Muskrat’ campsite. They should be good for tomorrow. Tonight you’ll wear this outfit for the medal ceremony. Oh, your brother won a second in something today. I think he went in a fishing competition. He will receive a medal tonight too.”

There are some ten competitions, more or less, to have medals awarded this evening. I have won first place in four competitions today. It is hard to believe. I had won the first two in the bow skills, then with Elina, the ‘Marathon Swimming’, and finally the ‘Wilderness Fashion Design’. In all of them, the gold.

This time, I stand on the podium for the bow skills competition, dressed in my fashion outfit – a sharp contrast to the rugged and I think stinky hunting outfit I wore when I stood here yesterday.

Both I and Elina stand in the first place spot for the Marathon Swimming medal.

And of course I stand in the first place spot for the Wilderness Fashion competition.

Russ stands on the podium in second place for a fishing competition..

When it is over, and four more gold medals depicting Thunderbird hung around my neck, we all head to our campsites for a good night’s sleep. I’m too tired to watch the performances that continue at the stage afterwards.

At the campsite I remove my fashion outfit, fold it and put it in my backpack. I add to my backpack four more medals to the two already there. As much as I don't want to be noticed, I am now standing out. I have a total of six gold medals now!!!

Since I now have nothing to wear, other than my swimwear, I check to see if any of my garments are dry. The heavier cloth of my trousers is still damp, but my T-shirt is dry. I put it on. Elina leaves us and soon returns with a small wool blanket for me, to shield myself from mosquitoes, and cold if it becomes cold.

Throughout day the weather has been warm, and it is hot and humid by the evening. We hope there won't be another downburst as the sky releases the moisture. But in general, people are not terribly scared of weather here. It is in a mountain valley and sheltered. A severe storm could occur only if somehow it came down the length of the valley traveling west to east over the lake. But such a precise trajectory would be rare.

"See you in the morning," says Elina when she leaves.

Alone again, I begin thinking again about my winning gold medals and how I may be depriving legitimate contestants of the honour. Elina doesn't think competitors here absolutely have to come from an Innat community and that it is the skills that are

measured not the community with which you are associated.

I felt good when I came clean with Elina. Now I would feel better if I also came clean with the organizers. Maybe they will have the same reaction. Not knowing how they would feel bothers me.

“Russ,” I say.

He is facing the other way on his grass mattress a meter away. “Yeah?”

“I told Elina that we’re really from nearby, and she’s wasn’t angry. In fact she doesn’t care where I came from. She thinks I have to be here because it is about testing a skill not where a competitor comes from. She says she’ll leave the problem of my lying, up to the officials. So you don’t have to hide anything from Elina. But we can still get in trouble with the organizers. I keep thinking we should come clean, given I have now won six gold medals. I would feel better.”

“Okay,” says Russ, barely opening his eyes. “I thought Elina was behaving a little differently. We can still just leave. Whatever you want.”

“Tomorrow, the final day, are the big three person team competitions between the medal winners from the past two days. I owe it to Elina to stay and be part of a team with her, and you can be the third member. I think we have to stay for that. I’ll decide at the end of tomorrow..”



“Okay.”

“Tomorrow,” I add, “maybe you can figure out some way to get your wilderness clothes washed too. You are starting to smell.”

“Maybe I can get Elina to wash them,” he replies smartly.

# 17. The Day of the Finale

I awaken the next morning when it is only starting to get light. I have a sense of anxiety. Today the Thunder Games present the grand finale team competitions, where the best of previous individual competitions compete in complex all-around competitions. And then tomorrow are the closing ceremonies and in the afternoon all the crowds begin to depart.

Today, the winners - those that placed first, second, or third - form teams of three to participate in a 'Wilderness Skills' finale or 'Wilderness Arts' finale.

Elina and I have already decided that I will lead a team in the 'Wilderness Skills' grand finale, and our third member will be Russ. He placed in two competitions. We considered Elina's cousin Roam for the third, but Russ seemed best because he is very experienced running after me in this very wilderness, while Roam didn't have as much experience. Besides I and Russ are used to working together in hunting rounds.

The way teams are chosen, according to the literature, is that if a particular nation happened to have acquired three winners, they could form their own team. But if one nation or another has only one or two contestants who placed, then they would

negotiate with others to form the three person team. That was the case with us. Elina made up the third of a team including me and Russ.

My anxiety awakens me early, and I doubt I will get back to sleep so I think I will head early to the WC or washroom tent at the base of the campsites.

With Russ still snoring, I pull on my boots, and then in my white tee-shirt and fancy loincloth, plus Elina's small blanket over my shoulders, I make my way along the path to the washroom tent. It is so early there is hardly any movement about. It is chilly. The sky was clear during the night and I was happy to have the blanket from Elina. It is clear still, with some high clouds, pink in the morning light.

The toilets or washroom tent is subdivided into many stalls. There is only a small light in there at night, and since the morning is still dim, that is all the light there is in there.

There is also water and a row of mirrors for washing, so that before leaving I check my face in the mirror. I still have my hair in the way I had it yesterday in my fashion walk. I had left some of the feather accessories in my hair during the night, and they are still fine in spite of sleeping on them.

"They look cool," I think. "I'll leave them on."

As I leave, I note mist over the lake and the valley. It is very quiet and peaceful. It will be quite the opposite in a few hours.... Then, suddenly I am rushed

and grabbed from behind by four young people, and I struggle against their grasp. My blanket falls to the ground.

They have blackened the region around their eyes with what is probably black from the bottom of fireplace pots, so that it is like a mask, so I cannot identify them. I suspect however that they come from among my competitors. They are minimally dressed – also not to give away their identity from their clothing. Two are obviously men since they are shirtless. Two have bare legs, meaning they wear a loincloth or shorts. A third has a tee-shirt. The fourth is more covered than the others.

A hand is over my mouth to prevent me from calling out. Another begins beating me with a stick. It is clear he is trying to injure my arm.

I struggle against three strong bodies. And the fourth is saying urgently to the one who is not holding my mouth or body but a club or baton: “Her arm, her arm – get her arm...!!” My eyes connect for an instant with this fourth person. The black charcoal mask did not help them. I recognized Ikka’s eyes. This ambush was obviously designed to disable me, disable my bow arm, my right arm needed for aiming, for today’s grand finale.

But I am stronger than they thought. I manage to migrate the tussling among us backwards into the toilets tent, and all of us are rolling on the dirt floor.

The interior is divided by panels into stalls as I said already. Visitors did their business into pits. I roll and the men are now rolling with me. The fourth, evidently Ikka, is becoming exasperated and trying to regain her control with commanding and urgent whispers. Two of the partition walls separating the stalls crash to pieces and one of the men steps into the goo of one pit, and the other falls ass-first into the neighbouring pit. The third with the club decides to give up and heads out of the tent. "I've had enough," he says angrily to Ikka. "Do it yourself!" Ikka runs after him.

The other two are partially in the poo of the pit and gladly let me go. I get up dirty only from the dirt floor, and flee from the tent, and as I leave I see the fourth, which is Ikka, shouting for the third man to come back. I pick up the blanket and run, holding my throbbing right forearm.

They had managed to give my forearm a couple of good hits, but not the strong blow that I believe was intended. They probably wanted to cause a fracture. It hurts. I hope it is alright.

By the time I've returned to Muskrat campsite, Elina is arriving with a pot of morning gruel. Elina sees me returning, grimacing in pain, and runs towards me in alarm.

"What happened? What happened?"

Russ is awakened and listens in.

“I was jumped,” I say rubbing my forearm. “They wanted to injure my bow arm.”

“Who?”

“They disguised themselves by covering the area around their eyes with charcoal – but I recognized the eyes of Ikka. She seemed to be in command. I got away.”

Elina was as furious as I was. “Ikka and two men are probably her team for today’s all-round grand finale. I can see how she must resent you with all your first place wins, and is determined to win the finale at least. Let me see your arm.”

“They only got a couple of wacks at it,” I say to Elina as she feels it, “I hope it is only bruises and nothing got broken.”

“It doesn’t feel broken,” she says.

“Perhaps all that will happen is that in the next hour I will have a couple of black-and-blue areas and a bit of swelling. That will not stop me.”

“You must have got some punches off too.”

I explain how two of them fell in the pits. We all laugh.

“Well from now until the team competition, we have to be on our guard. We can’t go anywhere where we will be alone for a moment. And we can expect dirty tricks during the grand finale competition, once we are out of sight of the observers.”

“Not really, Riia,” says Russ. “They will have cameras covering most places along the competition route. They will have to trick us cleanly. That’s why they had to make their move this morning in the dark, waiting to ambush you.”

Elina wants us to get breakfast into us so we have strength to last all day. We each use spoons to eat the gruel directly from the pot Elina brought it in.

I retire from the fire to pull my dry and clean hunting clothes from the pine branches and put them on.

Russ pours out tea into our two medal cups. I share my cup of tea with Elina.

“Let us review what is ahead of us today,” I say. “My team will be me, and you two. The ‘Grand Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’ team competition is designed to involve all kinds of skills. We can expect anything and everything thrown at us.”

Elina adds what she knows about it. “Yes it mixes up everything from the individual competitions – bow shooting, following a trail, dealing with many wilderness situations. It is intended to show which team has most all-round skills and works together well. All members of the winning team get the same prize. For example if the team comes in first, then every team member gets a gold medal and three points. Gold medals, you know, count for three

points, silver for two points, and bronze for one point. At the end of it all, all the points are added up to determine where individual competitors rank overall."

"Really?" I say. "That means since I've won six gold medals, I have a total of three times six or 18 points."

"And if our team wins today, you'll have 3 more points, totaling 21. That's pretty high. You could end up the highest ranking single competitor, Riia."

After breakfast we head off to officially register our team at the main registration desk near the stage, and the officials check to make sure that we qualify – that each of us have placed at least third in skills-related competitions.

The 'Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon' competition starts and ends at the stage so as to be seen by the large audience of spectators in the main field. Once the 'Wilderness Skills' teams have taken off, preparations begin for the finale for 'Wilderness Arts'. Here too, teams will face challenges that call on a wide range of abilities. I learn that the teams there will be challenged to put on theatrical performance celebrating Thunderbird, involving original costumes, music, dance and storytelling which they will have already begun preparing in practice facilities and equipment provided. (Technically I could have been on a team for the arts



finale because I won the Wilderness Fashion Design competition. But I can't be in two places at the same time, and I would need to have two other winning competitors to form a team.)

These two "grand finale" competitions are the final two competitions of the Thunder Games, involving the best of the best, and will last a good part of the day – as much as four hours each. The spectators will watch everything on large screens, and then afterwards for the performances, directly on the stage.

When we have some time to spare, we go over to talk to some of the teams in the Arts side. I am fascinated by the costumes they have already prepared for their dance or play. I am also fascinated by the painted backdrops their artists have painted for their performances.

Some of the teams recognize me from having won the Wilderness Fashion competition.

"I'm more of a physical person," I tell them. "Artistic things are secondary for me - diversions. But I suppose for you it is the reverse – you are artists first."

We return to where the Wilderness Skills teams are gathering and size them up. Who are our competition?

I wonder what lies ahead for me and my team. What kinds of strategies would we need to use? Who was our competition? What did they excel at?

I have no doubt that Ikka's team consists of three of the four people who jumped me early this morning. "You should pretend your arm is sore, Riia," Russ says, "to give Ikka's team a false sense of security. Let them think you have been handicapped."

"I don't have to pretend. Haven't you noticed my avoiding using my right arm?"

Ikka seems to have noticed, and comes over to me and my team grinning in a sinister way: "I see you have bruises on your arm, Riia. Are you able to shoot your bow?"

"It's nothing. Just something that happened. I can deal with it."

She gives me a silent grin. "Something happened?"

"You know," I add loudly. "Shit happens."

She realizes I have connected the assault to her somehow.

"Riia," adds Elina loudly so Ikka can hear. "Is there a toilet-tent somewhere near here? I smell shit."

Ikka stalks away. I and Elina snicker.

## 18. The Competition Begins

The two concurrent grand finale competitions begin in late morning and will last into mid-afternoon.

Before the start, supervisors check to make sure competitors do not have more than bows and arrows, knife, fish hooks, and other basic items that were permissible in the individual competitions earlier.

Each member of a team gets an arm band identifying their team by colour. The colours are selected at random. Our team gets one with a green colour. Other teams get blue, yellow, purple, and red. There are five teams in the Wilderness Skills finale.

In addition, tape of the team colour is put on each of a total of six arrows to be used for six bow challenges, since the competitors will not retrieve the arrows themselves (except if they miss and try again). Since both I and Elina shoot bows, we each keep three arrows each in our quivers and leave the extras we have behind.

We are also given coloured tape to attach to anything we create if we need to identify it as ours. However the cameras will usually identify who did what.

To begin the grand finale competitions, the elder statesmanlike High Chief of the Innat peoples, Abe Overman steps to the front of the stage and addresses

the crowd below. His voice resonates over the grounds through loudspeakers.

“The final day has arrived, when the best of the best – those who have placed in the first three – now get together into teams lead by a gold medalist, to compete in the grand finale competitions that call on their combined talents. On the ‘Wilderness Arts’ side, teams will create a performance dedicated to the Thunderbird using the combined talents of their team members. On the ‘Wilderness Skills’ side, teams will proceed through a number of wilderness challenges set up in the wilderness. I will now leave further description of the competitions to our Chief Official of the Thunder Games this year, Cliff Goldmeadow.”

Cliff Goldmeadow steps forward and takes the microphone. I have seen him before too, probably during the medal ceremonies.

“Thank you Grand Chief Overman. First of all, I will summarize the ‘Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’ competition. It is designed so that teams will be required to perform a number of challenges connected with traveling in the wilderness and hunting, such as our ancient ancestors did. Teams will be required to run from one challenge to the next and be scored 3 if completed properly and 0 if failed or deliberately skipped. If a challenge is completely missed, that represents an incomplete run and there is no score given till found and completed. At the finish,

the first, second, and third team finishing will receive three, two, or one point. The winning team will be determined from the highest total score of a complete run. If all teams finish all challenges perfectly, then of course it all comes down to the first, second, and third finishing. The audience on these grounds, moreover, will see team performances of challenges on the large screen, and the accumulated score for each team as they proceed.

“On the arts side of the Thunder Games, the ‘Grand Finale Wilderness Arts’ competition is designed so that each team is given the task of creating a fifteen minute performance dedicated to the patron of the Thunder Games, the Thunderbird, using the creative talents of the team members, and the materials and equipment we provide the teams. Their teams will begin developing their production backstage to be ready for presentations when the Wilderness Skills competition had finished. They will be ranked by the judges, as influenced by your spectator responses.

“First up is the ‘Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’. The five teams are standing on this stage behind me. With the start signal, let the teams sprint up the path marked by ropes from here towards the woods where they will enter the woods and follow the marked path from challenge to challenge.”

A start and finish line has been laid on the stage beside a tall tower-like sign that reads "Start & Finish". This is so the audience can see the start and finish from the field below.

With the boom of the starter air-gun, we all leap from the platform and head up the slope between the roped path, into the wilderness behind the festival grounds. Our departure is accompanied by cheers from spectators in the main grounds and on both sides of the ropes until the trail enters the wilderness.

This initial sprint is in itself a challenge. In the beginning all five teams are together. There is plenty of jostling one another to get in front.

Once we enter the forest at the marked entry spot, we have to follow the blazes and other signs that mark the trail. Although in this competition it is not illegal to go off the marked trail, the danger is that by going off the trail a team may miss a team challenge station and learn later they did not complete the run and have to search for the one they missed.

"Watch for the first challenge station, Russ," I say.

"What does it look like?"

"They explained that it is a box that contains scrolls," says Elina.

The team challenges, we learned earlier, can take different forms. Birch bark scrolls with challenges written on them are picked up by the teams when they encounter them. There may be a judge there

watching who approves the current challenge before they can get the next one. Otherwise the challenge-completions are observed by the little cameras set up on trees all the way along the route and judges watching monitors back at the stage will note if something is done wrong. But the team will not be told, so they better read the scrolls carefully, or else get a zero for that challenge. Reading the instructions correctly is in fact part of the whole challenge. Nor will a team be told if they miss seeing a challenge, but the challenges are numbered so a team can see they missed one when they seem to skip a number.

We decide that Russ will go in front to make sure we do not inadvertently go off trail and get lost, while Elina and I will keep an eye on our competitors and whatever task is at hand.

The first five minutes consists of aggressive jostling between the five teams and then we begin to spread out purely from our varying sprinting ability. Being at front might seem to allow teams that followed to copy the leader in identifying the trail, starting the tasks, and figuring out challenges; however, being in front allows opportunities to the team in front to lead the following teams astray if they blindly follow.

I explain this to Elina and Russ and we agree – if we are able, let's get out in front and look for an opportunity to punish those teams who are not

observing, not thinking, and who are only following and imitating the leading team.

When Ikka's team, which is currently in front, see us wanting to go in front, they let us. They are happy to just follow us for a while. Ikka's team is "Team Yellow" after the color that they drew. But we are soon just calling them "Ikka's team". All her team is from the Hawk Nation. Having entered a large number of competitors, they had many competitors that placed at least third place in the previous individual challenges, so all of her team are Hawks.

The next team behind Team Yellow is Team Blue. Its leader is a tall man of about 23 named Swift. We were all soon calling him Swifty and his team the Swifties. All members of his team are from the same Innat nation too. The fourth and fifth teams are Team Red and Team Purple, and we don't know much about them. We are soon calling them just "Reds" and "Purples". We don't experience them enough to give them any descriptive label.

We are now in front, thanks to Ikka's team deciding to follow us and not challenge us – until later of course. As we follow the path markers, we watch for the first challenge.

We have to be aware that cameras are watching and judges are judging. I notice those little cameras. Some appear to zoom and pan sometimes. Because they are small it is easy to forget that the entire



competition is carefully watched and crowds are viewing us on the large TV screens around the festival grounds. While the cameras have blind spots, there is little incentive to try a dirty trick, because nobody knows the exact placement of cameras watching them.

Soon Russ spies a birch bark box. He opens the lid and takes one of the five birch bark scrolls inside. He unravels the scroll and read *"1. Bow Skills Challenge. A member of the team must shoot an arrow into the target in the bushes from anywhere along the marked trail for 3 points. Stepping off the trail or missing the target, you have to retrieve your arrow and try again or continue with a zero score."*

In this challenge, there is a bullseye target in the distance amid the bushes. An arrow must be shot into it from the trail. The arrow, marked by the colour of the team, is left in the target. If the archer of the team hits the target, the team can be sure they get the 3 points and continues on. If they miss, they have to fetch the arrow and bring it back to try again, and that can cost a minute in time, or skip it and get 0 for that challenge.

I have three arrows in my quiver and Elina has three in hers.

"Elina, you take this one, " I tell her.

Elina shoots and hits it easily. An easy score of 3.

We continue on.

There is always the possibility that a team behind us would miss, and then have to search for their arrow, since they only have a total of six arrows for six targets. But in this case no team has an arrow that misses and no team misses this first test.

After about 15 minutes, following a trail that goes up and down, over ridges, down into wet gullies, we come to the next test. There is a birch bark scroll box in front of a long narrow puddle of marsh water.

Russ takes a scroll and reads it.

*"2. Cross the water without wading through it."*

"Obviously," I say, "we just have to get a pole and vault across."

I send Russ into the woods to use his knife to cut down a long slender maple sapling and make it into a pole. Ikka's team arrives, and, not knowing what we have in mind, since they see Elina and me just standing around resting, begins to drag a fallen rotten log to the water to improvise a bridge.

They are struggling with the log, when Russ returns with the pole. We stick the end of the pole into the water, and one by one vault over the water. I go first, and send the pole back when I land on the other side. Elina vaults next, and then Russ. It takes less than a minute. We pull the pole along with us for a while so that Ikka's team cannot use our pole but have to continue with their approach. Ikka is fuming

because it took more effort finding and dragging a long enough and strong enough log.

We don't know what went on there, because we were well ahead, but later I learn that Ikka's team crossed and then attempted to destroy their bridge, but it was too heavy and the rest of the teams were able to use it.

The next challenge is not an explicit challenge. In an area with mature oaks the markers for the trail go up the trunk of a large oak. The first marker is a sign attached to a large oak with an arrow pointing upward and the words 'sky trail'

"This is strange," says Russ. "It seems they want us to climb the tree for some reason."

The tree has plenty of branches and is not hard to climb. But then the trail follows one of the larger branches, and suggests we have to transfer to another large tree, and then another. A squirrel sees us scrambling from branch to branch and protests with a loud chatter.

After scrambling through about five large trees, the sky trail returns to the ground. I'm glad. My knees are sore.

Back on the ground, we run on fairly clear forest floor. When we are still under canopies of large trees, it is easy going as the canopies block sunlight from reaching the ground and the amount of growth on the ground is less.

Another 20 minutes later we come to the third challenge. This is also a bow skills challenge.

Russ reads the birch bark scroll. *“3. Bow Skills Challenge. Each team must put an arrow into one of the five targets dangling in the branches of the tree above. You cannot shoot into a target that has an arrow from a previous team. Shoot carefully and have all other members track the arrow, because if you miss you will have to retrieve the arrow from the forest or get a zero score for this challenge.”*

We look up and high above we see the five targets on branches above, swaying in the breezes.

“Here is an advantage of being in front, Russ. I am able to choose the target that is moving least in the breeze.”

I shoot and hit the target right on. Perfect. We rush onward. I and Elina have now used up two of our total of six arrows. There will be four bow challenges left.

Later I learn that Team Blue miss the dangling targets, and are faced with searching for the arrow. But they are smart. They shoot a new arrow with success, and then leave their weakest team member behind to search for the lost arrow. He will catch up after he finds it.

Right now we, Team Green, are well ahead. After leaving Ikka’s team behind at the water-crossing challenge, they seem, by the noise behind us, to be catching up.

Everyone is now quite exhausted and judging from the sun's position, it is midday. The next challenge allows the teams to rest and make some tea.

This challenge is situated on high breezy ground that has no tall trees. There is a ridge and lots of bushes including blueberries growing out of crevices.

Russ has by now established himself in the role of trail-follower and scroll reader. He locates the next box of scrolls. We notice a short distance from the birch bark box with scrolls there is a man sitting under a tree looking on. His role is obviously to keep an additional human eye on this challenge.

Russ reads the scroll:

*"4. Make a fire with flint or friction. Choose one of the five fire pits where each has a pot waiting. Fill the pot with water from a spring you have to find, and boil it into tea flavoured with a handful of nearby blueberries. When water is boiled, visit the observer in the shade of the small oak for your next challenge. It will be wise but not necessary to drink what you made to replenish your fluids."*

I anticipate we will be in this area for maybe a half hour for this challenge. Great, because we are all quite sweaty and exhausted. I toss my jacket off onto the rocks. The air is cooler and windier now.

From here there is a view down over the valley. From one spot we can see the lake stretching before us from our left to right, which is roughly west to east. The sky is filled with billowing clouds but it does not

look ominous. But no time to appreciate the view. With Ikka coming, we have to hustle to find the best of the fire pits and set to work.

# 19.Strategies

“Everyone is going to catch up and be together here,” says Elina. “We must finish making the fire and boiling the water first and be on our way first.”

“You and Russ start the fire,” I say, “while I search for the water. The scroll says there is a spring nearby. It is a test for understanding how underground water flows. It will come out where there is a drop in grade, and the groundwater is able to reach the surface before it curves downward. Russ, I don’t think there is flint here to strike with a knife to cause sparks. I suggest you let Elina use her bow with a straight dry stick, to turn the stick and cause friction, and get the starting coals, while you gather the wood to build up the fire. I’ll take the pot they provided and search for the water source.”

I head off. Water...water....I think. I have to go down the slope to lower elevations and keep my eye out for wetness. I analyzed the hill and ridge, trying to imagine the underground water levels relative to the slope. I try to remember what I know about springs. In my excursions into woods I have come across springs now and then. I have some understanding. I’ll just have to walk around the base of this ridge and look for wet ground. There will be moss and ferns growing there.

“There we are!” I say to myself, as I come across a highly likely location. I walk around the area, pushing aside ferns to see under them, and finally I find a very small stream coming out of one spot. I put the pot under it and fill it up.

Other teams may be arriving at the ridge around now. I would be wise to return with the water from another direction to throw them off. I realize some teams will not buy it but some might be fooled.

I walk several minutes on lower ground around the base of the ridge, bearing in mind Russ and Elina will be taking a while to build up the fire. I arrive back from a completely different direction than from where the spring is, and find the next two teams have arrived and begun their fire-making.

In spite of Elina trying to hide her using her bow to turn the stick to make fire by friction, Ikka’s team saw it and did the same. It simply involves putting the bow string in one loop around a thin dry thin stick and pulling the bow back and forth to spin the stick – there are plenty of dry branches in this exposed, dry, area to use.

Ikka’s team just got their tinder ignited now; but Russ and Elina have a good fire going and are ready for my pot of water. We do not have that much of a lead. And Ikka’s team is not deceived by my coming with water from another direction. When they set out to find water, they leave in the opposite direction



from where I have come, and then they too return from another direction to throw other teams off. But the third team is fooled and lose some minutes looking in the wrong area.

When our fire is going and our pot of water being heated, Elina and I head to the nearby blueberry bushes to obtain some nourishment. We consume some, and bring two handfuls back to Russ, where he has brought the water to a boil, and toss them in.

We carry the tea to the observer in the chair to get from him the next scroll. We then sit on the ridge as the tea cools a little and contemplate the new instructions. Russ reads the next challenge.

*"5. Using the view from this ridge, look for a dead pine tree with a silhouette of an eagle in a top branch. Evaluating the path you have to take, make your way to it, and climb the tree until you find the box of scrolls in the tree. Leave the eagle shape alone."*

"No trail markers now, Russ. We have to use the sun and landmarks to make our way to that tree. But where is the tree? We have to survey the treetops below to find a small eagle sized black shape in a dead pine tree."

We are not going anywhere yet. Not until we see that eagle-shaped object. We all sit down on a rock passing the pot of blueberry tea between us to drink and scan different parts of the forest below, looking

first for dead pines, and then for a silhouette of an eagle as if perched in it.

The other teams are still busy with their task and wondering why we are seated on top of the ridge scanning the forest below in the direction of the lake. They will find out as soon as they finish and collect their scroll.

“I see it!” I whisper. I am careful not to point so as not to reveal the direction to the other teams back at the fires. “Don’t all look or point at once,” I say. “Look in the direction of the top of the mountain in the northwest, and then look straight down into the foreground just below the blue of the lake. When you see it, nod.”

“We should then pretend to look in another direction,” adds Elina, “to throw others off who are watching us.”

“Okay, I see it.” says Russ. “Let’s be off. “

“I see it too,” says Elina.

We gulp down the last of the tea and leave the pot on the ridge.

“Follow me,” I whisper. “I will start in the wrong direction, and we’ll circle around in the bush. Be very quiet once in the forest.”

Meanwhile Ikka’s team has finished. They have obtained their next scroll and are reading it. Seeing us leave, they realize we have spotted the tree, and decide to follow us to save the time of locating the tree

themselves. It is a risky move for them. If they lose our trail they will have to return to the ridge and locate the tree with the fake eagle themselves.

“Oh, no,” I whisper. “Their strategy is to have us lead them to it. We have to do something to throw them off.”

“They didn’t finish their tea, either, ” says Elina. “That may have been a bad idea if the next hours are a lot of sweating.”

“Let us try not to leave a trail or make a sound,” I whisper. “Do not rub against any branches. Instead bend them away with your hands. Avoid stepping on twigs. Walk on rocks if possible. No footprints. We have to be both quiet and not leave tracks.”

I wonder if this section of activity is getting captured by cameras since there is no marked trail. If there are cameras they are positioned along likely routes teams will take, I expect.

Instead of barging along like before, we walk carefully.

I get an idea when we came to a high part of ground. I take out my knife and grab the straightest sapling I can find, cut it into an improvised arrow, notching and feathering the end, and put it in my bow. I shoot it into the air to the east. It does not need to fly properly, as long as it travels a good distance. It sails fine through the trees and we hear it come down about 50 meters away.

I whisper to the others "If Ikka's team heard it, they may think we have gone in that direction. It could throw them off."

"Great idea," Elina whispers. "Let's cut another dummy arrow and do it again in a while."

"The breeze is coming up from the lake," whispers Russ. "I hope one of them does not have a keen sense of smell.."

As we move along carefully and quietly, we listen to sounds they may be making behind us, and soon we don't hear anything other than the sounds of the forest.

Where is the tree with the eagle? I have a very good sense of navigation. I seem to be able to constantly keep oriented to the location of the sun. Also where there is a dead pine or two, there will be more light coming down from above. I scan the canopy above for signs.

We find the target tree in a half hour. The dead pine has lost its needles and so it is not hard to look up and see the shadow of the cardboard eagle silhouette.

We continue to listen for anyone following and hear nothing. Russ climbs the dead pine. It is easy because the dead branches are like rungs of a ladder. Half way up he finds the scrolls that teams must fetch, takes one of them and starts down.

Nearly at the bottom, his hand slips and he falls the remaining couple meters to the pine needles below. He lets out a yelp.

“You alright?”

“Sorry I yelled. I hope it wasn’t heard.”

“Let’s get out of here. If someone heard, let’s throw them off.”

Russ reads the new scroll as we run: *“6. Make your way to the shore of the lake and find the marker for continuation of the trail,”*

“Down the slope, towards the water then,” I say . It is easy to head for the lake – one just travels downhill, and before long the blue of the lake breaks through the trees and then we emerge into a marsh-grass area where trees have difficult growing.

Crossing the grassy area to the shore, we look left and right for a marker for the continuation of the trail.

“There!” shouts Elina, pointing to a cone of grasses tied together.

We see no instruction when we get close. Only a clutch of grass stalks bent to point towards the west along the shore. I’ve noticed a few posts stuck in the ground with small cameras on the end, reminding us that this is all being captured. I now also see one of those hovering things in the air over the open area beside the lake.

“Look!” I say, pointing. “They’re getting an aerial view of our progress now.”

Russ turns and waves. We all wave to the small flying device.

“Let’s go!” says Russ and takes off.

We follow a trail marked by crushed or bent-over clumps of grasses or reeds.

In about fifteen minutes through a path through the grasses, we come to a challenge station marked by the familiar birch bark box of scrolls. Russ takes one out and reads it:

*“7. Bow Skills Challenge. Below the rock out in the water, there are five fish-shaped targets, anchored to the bottom and floating like fish under the water. Using your bow, hit one of the targets, but not if it already has an arrow from previous teams. Repeat until successful, or leave with a zero.”*

“That’s an unusual one,” I say. “One does not normally catch fish with arrows – normally you use a hook or long spear.”

“It seems too easy,” says Elina as we stand on a rock jutting out into the water and study the situation. “I see the fake fish targets down there, and they are only a couple meters away.”

“The trick, Elina,” I suggest, “is that water bends light. The targets are not where they appear to be. If you aim directly at them, you will miss. And if you miss, you will have the problem of fetching the arrow. Who wants to swim after the arrow?”

“So which way does the light bend?”

“Russ, you fish a lot. What is your experience?”

“I haven’t paid much attention. But I think the object in the water is deeper than it appears, further down than its apparent location.”

“I know how to find out,” says Elina. “I have the second dummy arrow we cut from a sapling in case we needed to throw off Ikka’s team. I’ll fire it directly at the target and we’ll watch if it actually goes over the top.”

“Go ahead, Elina,” says Russ. “Try it.”

She aims the dummy arrow at a target and lets it go. The arrow indeed goes over top of the target, proving that the target is deeper than it appears. But by how much?

“Alright,” I say. “Now shoot a real arrow lower than where the target appears. Someone get prepared to swim for the arrow if we miss.”

Elina guesses how far lower to aim, lets the arrow go, and ... hits the target!!

We are pleased. We see a team emerging from the forest in the distance behind us. If Ikka’s team got lost and had to return, it is probably Swifty’s team.

Onward. We continue along the trail for about ten minutes and come to a deep bay filled with driftwood logs, such as one always finds in bays on the southeast side of lakes.

“I see a challenge scroll box,” says Russ. The birch bark container with lid flap is mounted on a

weathered bleached root structure sticking up into the air. Russ fetches a birch bark scroll and reads it:

*“8. Use driftwood logs here to fashion a raft to cross the bay to the opposite side to the white flag there. Use natural materials and not anything you are wearing. The entire team must be carried by the one raft. If the raft does not reach the other side in one piece , the team must swim back and start again.”*

“That means we can’t each straddle a log and go across individually,” I say. “We have to create a working raft. But how will we hold the driftwood logs together? We weren’t allowed to bring rope with us.”

Russ has an idea: “Since we only need to connect one log to the next, we only need short pieces. We can achieve short pieces of rope by twisting long reeds or grasses. There’s plenty of it around here.”

“Good idea,” I say. “Russ you start pulling a couple driftwood logs side by side, and Elina and I will cut some grasses or reeds – whichever works best – and start twisting them or braiding them into lengths of rope.”

Using a long narrow length of driftwood as a pole, Russ sets to work loosening logs and pushing them into deeper water, and then moving them side by side. He leaves one large log extending into the water to serve as our dock for boarding the vessel.



Both I and Elina are practiced in braiding our hair, so we decide to braid the long grasses together. Elina overlaps grass strands so that the braided grass could be made longer than the length cut. She delivers the first length to Russ, and he begins connecting the one log to the next. I deliver the second length to him, and he does the other end of the logs. He then uses the pole of driftwood to move another piece of floating driftwood beside the first two. Elina and I hurriedly cut and braid grasses, and when each length is done, toss them to Russ.

Soon we have six irregularly shaped long driftwood logs bound together. We all crawl on board, keeping our centres of gravity low. Russ uses the pole piece to push off. I and Elina have somewhat flat pieces of driftwood to use as paddles.

The wind has picked up. We can see grey clouds moving by overhead.

We are half way out in the bay when the team behind us arrives at the challenge. Each team after us will find the challenge more difficult. Plenty of floating wood has accumulated on that side of the bay, but later teams will have to fetch them from further away and use poorer pieces. Here is a good example of the advantage of being out front.

Out in the middle of the bay, the wind and choppy water threatens to pull our raft apart. I try to pull together ropes that seem to be coming lose. We are all

on our knees, trying to keep poling or paddling while holding the logs against the waves, fighting to prevent the raft breaking apart. The wind contains rain, or maybe it is just water droplets coming off the choppy water.

“The raft has to be whole or else the team has to swim back and start again,” Russ reminds us. “You and Elina work on keeping the bindings secure. I will work at pushing it against the waves. Otherwise we could be driven far into the bay.”

“It’s more important to stay in one piece than to make speed,” I suggest. When the logs seem secure, I take the piece I use as a paddle and help Russ push forward. “You use the pole to use the bottom to resist the wind, Russ, while I use the paddle to push it forward.”

As we approach the white flag on the opposite shore, I can see a small camera on a tripod near the flag watching our arrival. I can visualize the large screen back at the stage and the audience is cheering.

The coper thing has been recording us too. But now that we are successfully reaching the opposite shore, the Flyhicle thing returns to get an aerial view of the other teams coming from behind. I can imagine how interesting it can be to audiences to have the television image cutting between the ground level views and aerial ones.

We manage to make it across with our raft in one piece. There is a beach on that side, and we drag the raft onto the beach. I tie green tape to our raft to identify it as ours – made by Team Green.

The shore we have reached is also the edge of a wide marshy meadow of water grasses and reeds. I think trees don't grow because it is mostly wet sand held together by the grass roots. Trees of any height will fall over.

"There's the next scroll box," says Russ, pointing to it, located next to the white flag. He takes one out and reads it out loud.

*"9. Bow skills challenge. From here, hit the moose-shaped target back in the marsh grasses."*

We scan the marsh grasses and I spy the typical moose shape in a dark brown target, half hidden in the grasses close to the edge of the trees. It is possibly 50 meters or more away. Part of such a challenge is accurately judging the distance since that would determine the angle to shoot the arrow upward.

"I'll take this one, Elina," I say. "My second last arrow. Then we'll each have one arrow left."

I take an arrow from my quiver and glance at it to identify it and remember its characteristics. There is a breeze blowing from the lake. I take into account its direction and how it will affect the arrow flight. I will be shooting downwind which is good, but not exactly in the direction of the target. This is a very difficult

shot. I have to assume that the wind moves smoothly between me and the target. I judge the distance from my familiarity with the size of a moose – I assume the cutout target is to correct scale.

“This is a real challenge,” I say as I aim. “I can already see how more than one team will miss the first time and have to run to the target to fetch the arrow.”

I take aim very carefully, very carefully, my subconscious mental computations turning like crazy. I let the arrow go and watch it. It goes up, up,.....then down....”Just missed. Damn wind!” I shout. I immediately take my final arrow from my quiver and shoot again while Russ begins to run to fetch the arrow that missed. I made the slight adjustment needed this time, and it hit!

“Got it!” I shout. Russ is half way to the target now.

“Let’s go!” says Elina. “Russ is fast. He’ll catch up.”

Russ finds the arrow that missed and is already turning back with it.

I glance back, and the team behind us is close enough that I can see it is Ikka’s team. Somehow we failed to throw them off earlier.

“It’s Ikka’s team behind us! They seem to have finished their raft and are pushing off!”

I wonder if they twisted grasses into rope. Another method would be to weave thin logs together in two dimensions.....

After a minute Russ catches up and hands me the arrow. The final arrow for me. Elina has an arrow too. That means there are two more bow challenges.

As we continue, there is a shallow shore with reeds and sand to our right, and an expanse of marsh grasses and bushes to our left ending with the forest edge and the slope into the interior some distance away .

We are all huffing and puffing and sweating profusely. The camera Flyhicle returns in a while to see how we are doing, and then returns to the others. Someone is at a consol somewhere operating this device.

## 20. The Final Leg

After a while, I get a sense that there are some kind of animals travelling in parallel to us through the grasses beside the edge of the trees.

“Wild dogs! Dogotes” I tell Russ and Elina when I realize what it is. “There is a pack of them moving through the grasses this side of the trees. They are checking us out and will gradually become bolder.”

We continue on. In five minutes they are close enough that now and then we get glimpses of them.

“How are we going to handle them?” asks Elina as we go.

“Russ and I have dealt with such wild dogs. The alpha will make the first moves to attack the prey, and then that incites the others to do the same. The key is not to let the first one get hold. So let us pick up some nice big clubs. Try to hit any dog lunging at you before it reaches you. It is that first hold on a leg or arm that incites the rest.”

When we come across some driftwood branches in our path, we stop to break branches into handy clubs.

Just in time. When we are about to continue, one of the Dogotes comes snarling out of the grasses. I wack it on the nose and that drives it back. This one had floppy ears, like a domesticated hound, but heavy jaws like a pitbull and eyes like a wolf – thus combining ability to track by smell with crushing jaws

and instinct to kill. The wilderness has bred them. These creatures are adaptations that blend qualities in traditional breeds that best suit living in this wilderness. Unsuitable pet dog characteristics have vanished in them. No small lap dog characteristics here!!

“We have to warn the others,” I say. There is a team at the last challenge, Ikka’s team, I think just finished with the moose target. Everybody shout and wave to get their attention.”

We all shout whatever loud sounds we can. Russ raises a wolf howl.

I take my last arrow, rip a piece off the birch bark scroll and scratch into it a message. I wrap it tightly around the arrow.

I shoot the arrow at a steep angle to get the maximum distance. It rises high into the air, travels a good eight seconds, and lands in front of the team.

When they unravel the piece of scroll, they will read: “CAUTION: PACK OF WILD DOGS IN GRASSES - PLEASE RETURN ARROW”.

I know they got the message because the arrow comes flying back to us. I had taken a risk that the arrow wouldn’t be returned, but the cameras are watching and it is difficult to be evil in this competition when all the crowds back at the starting area are looking on. It fell a little short, and I ran back

to fetch it. I put the arrow back in my quiver and we were off again.

Wild dog packs are so common in Nomerica that I'm sure the other teams know how to handle them too. Some Dogotes still have an instinctive attraction to humans since their ancestors have lived so many thousands of years with us.

"Alright. Go, go, go," I say and we proceed forward again.

We sense the pack of wild dogs continuing to follow in the grasses to our left, and looking to make a move on us. The longer they do, the bolder they will get. We can't shake them.

"I have an idea, people," I pant as we go.

"What?"

"I thought I heard one dog with a human-like voice which means it has inherited speech voice from the genetically modified breed. It is possible that it may have some early experience as a pet. What do dogs bred by humans have in common?"

"What do you mean?" pants Russ.

"What is so common that it is probably established in their instincts?"

"I don't know."

"All dogs will chase a stick if you throw it and yell 'fetch!'"

We laugh because we realize it is true. Humans have probably done it so much in the evolution of



dogs that it might be in their instincts beginning many thousands of years ago when they were asked to fetch birds humans had shot down.

“So,” I continue. “Let us grab one of those pieces of driftwood along the shore, break it into short pieces, and then each of us takes three pieces, and we stop and get their attention, and then all together we yell ‘fetch’ and toss all of them into the lake as far as we can.”

“Alright, it’s worth a try. Let’s stop when we pass a bunch of driftwood.”

We see some, and wade into the water after it, all the while keeping an eye on the pack. We break pieces into throwing sticks and return to the marked trail each with three sticks in our right hand, and our protective club in our left. We find ourselves facing a row of Dogotes of many shapes and forms, by now quite bold, and studying us with sinister curiosity.

“What a motley group,” I say. “I can see a little of every kind of dog in them, but with the fierce carnivorous side dominating. Follow my lead.”

I face the row of dogs and wave one of the sticks. “Look, a stick! Who wants to fetch a stick? Who wants to, huh? Huh? Who wants to fetch the stick? Huh?”

The dog with the humanlike voice says “I do, I do! Arf, arf!”

I am right. One of the dogs has the genetically engineered characteristic of speech. And it also

understands my words more than the others, meaning he might indeed have been a pet when a puppy.

“Russ and Elina, copy me,” I say. “And in three seconds let’s throw all nine sticks in our hands as far as possible into the water yelling ‘fetch’. . . 1....2....3...throw!”

“Fetch!!!” we all shout in unison. The sticks fly out into the water, and with the talking dog being very excited and reacting instantly, all the others react as if remembering some long lost memory. In a few seconds the whole pack is leaping into the water after the sticks.

“Okay,” I shout “Let’s run! Let the next teams deal with them!”

We take off in a run. The dogs are completely confused. We have triggered a familiar instinct in which humans are kind masters, in conflict with their original intent to bring down some game to eat.

“Run! Run before they come after us with the sticks and want us to throw them again – let Ikka’s team deal with them!”

The trail now turns inland into the woods again,

“I think we are now looping around to return us back to the finish back at the main grounds,” I observe.

The trail does indeed seem to rise back into the interior, perhaps towards an extension of the ridge we experienced earlier. There is no explicit challenge

now – just a steep slope of broken rocks – a site of occasional landslides from a cliff above. Just climbing through it is a challenge in itself.

At the top is a ridge as I expected. We follow it a short distance and then we are back to dense forest with tall trees. We haven't come across another challenge box for a while. What have the designers of this competition come up with next? What's next is a mess of fallen and broken trees, the result of a strong thunderstorm sometime not long ago. It is very difficult climbing over, under, and around the mess. Fifteen minutes of it leaves us thoroughly exhausted, But then we are again in good forest.

We plod on and on, wondering when we can stop for another challenge.

Suddenly we are out of the forest and on an old overgrown road, possibly connected to the ones we experienced two days ago, or even when arriving. I now understand that such old roads are relics from years ago before the world began fostering forest growth and expansion. With no more logging activity, there was no more need of such roads. The only reason they are not fully overgrown is obvious. The original roads were paved and so it took more than a century for weeds to push through the asphalt and begin overgrowing them.

Russ, being the trail-follower, searches for trail markers along this road. He finds stones on the road arranged in the form of arrows.

“According to the lines of rocks marking the trail, we have to follow this old road,” he declares.

“A break,” I say. “The past hour and a half has been rough going. Running on this road is easy by comparison.”

We soon find a challenge scroll box beside the road. Russ grabs one of the scrolls and reads:

*“10. Bow Skill Competition: Along the road, back from it beside the edge of the trees, find a black target depicting a typical black bear. Shooting must be done from the road.”*

“Simple enough,” I say. “We just have to scan the open grassy areas on both sides of the road to find a black bear-shaped target this side of the edge of the trees.”

We walk quickly but do not run, since we need to recover a little from all the earlier running.

Five minutes down the overgrown road Elina thinks she sees the bear shape. “I’ll take this one with my final arrow.”

“That will leave only the final arrow in my quiver for a final bow challenge,” I say.

She loads her final arrow and fires. The arrow flies up, up, up and then down, down, down and ...hits the bear shape. But it turns out it is a real bear and she just put an arrow in its rump.

The real bear whirls around to see what has hit him in the rear end.. It tries to get at it, and that results in him turning in a circle.

“Oh dear,” says Elina. “That was not the target. That is a real bear beside the road.”

“It was probably browsing on ants or berries on the ground and not moving much,” says Russ. “But now you’ve lost your arrow.”

“We have to retrieve the arrow, Elina,” I say. “Otherwise we lose 3 points, and if no other team has missed a challenge, that means we will lose even if we arrive at the finish first.”

“So let’s go get the arrow out of its butt” says Russ.

“You’re kidding. How will we do that?” Elina exclaims. “You know so much about animals, Riia. How will we do it?”

“We walk up to him – Russ and I to get his attention, and then you, Elina, stalk up to him from behind, rush up and pull out the arrow when his attention is on us. So go ahead, stalk quietly from the right, from his behind, while I and Russ walk up to his front and get his attention. Wait for my signal. Go.”

Elina starts off through the grasses and low bushes in the direction of the bear.

“So, Russ,” I continue, “we must go very slowly and leisurely as if we are another animal also browsing. I will draw my bow with my last arrow in

case we're charged. Get a long pole to poke him from a safe distance."

Russ finds a dead tree and tries to break off a pole. With the bear being preoccupied with the arrow in its butt, it doesn't notice us yet. We continue towards it. "Do not run, do not seem afraid," I say to Russ. "And gently rustle branches as if feeding. We are just another animal passing by and not the cause of the thing in his butt."

The bear does not want to leave the area because we see it is filled with wild raspberries. It is inclined to leave the arrow in his butt and continue to feed. The long distance of Elina's shot into his massive butt ensured that it did not go deep. It shouldn't be difficult for Elina to remove it.

When the bear is looking at us, I talk to it. "Hello bear. We are neither threatening nor afraid. Continue eating your berries."

"So, Russ, " I say in the same soft voice, "if he starts moving towards me, poke him gently to distract him. If he gets enraged and starts to charge, wack him on the nose. I don't want to shoot the arrow. So let us keep this dialogue going on with the bear until we see Elina has arrived near its butt. Poke the bear at the instant Elina pulls out the arrow so Elina can run and he won't follow her, but if he wants, follow us. If he does follow us, wack him on the nose. I will only fire an arrow if things get dangerous."

There is some tension between us and the bear for some minutes. He is still trying to figure us out, conflicted by the pain in his butt on the one hand, and taking some action in regards to us on the other.

Elina is now at its butt, signals she is about to pull it out, and I say to Russ. "Get ready to poke it, Russ."

I signal an "okay" to her. Elina pulls out the arrow, and the bear wants to swing around to see what is happening at his rear end. I shout and Russ pokes it, and it becomes disoriented. I give an additional aggressive shout and movement and that sends the confused bear bounding away into the forest. For such a big bear, an arrow in its butt from so far away is nothing. Its minor wound will heal quickly.

With the bear running away into the woods Russ and I could now run back to the road and meet up with Elina who is waving her recovered arrow in triumph.

We now have to find the real target. Elina sees it in a couple minutes, a black bear shape that does not move when we shout at it. She shoots her recovered arrow in it and we are done with this challenge.

But the delay getting our arrow back has allowed other teams to catch up. All the teams probably bunched together in the part going through the mess of broken branches. We see all the teams running up the road towards us just as we are continuing on. And what is that behind them?

“Look!” I exclaim. “Behind all the other teams running towards us along the road, is our pack of Dogotes.”

“Let’s go! This way!” shouts Russ. “The trail goes back into the forests. This way.” We now head off into the woods again.

“I have a feeling,” I say, panting, “ that those dogs have reverted to their domestic character. They are not chasing the teams anymore for food, but to participate in the run.”

“Well do the teams know that?”

“One arrow left,” I say. “I have the final arrow. We were allowed six. We’ve used five. There is at least one challenge left, Russ. In our running, let’s not forget to look for the challenge scrolls box. There is at least one more challenge.”

We see no challenge box before we burst out of the forest into the roped path that will lead back to the stage and the finish line.

“Stop!” I shout to the others. “We’ve missed it! We’ve missed it! I have one more arrow. There has to be a total of six bow skills challenges. We have only done five!”

We stop in the clearing thinking we have to go back to search for the last challenge. What should we do? Spectators are watching us. Before we can decide, other teams burst out of the forest and run past us



each team trying to outrun the other in a sprint to the finish line a half kilometer further away at the stage.

I assume the others did the challenge and we missed it. We have lost, I am thinking.

The pack of dogs, then bursts into the clearing. They encounter hundreds of cheering spectators, turn their tails and head back into the forest.

Elina, Russ and I commence walking down the roped path, convinced we have lost.

"We've lost for not seeing the final challenge," I say.

"But," says Russ. "They couldn't have stopped for a challenge. They came out of the woods too soon after us."

"So what's going on?"

"The final challenge must be outside the forest!"

Right!

We go back to where we came out of the forest and study the sides of the roped path carefully. Indeed close to where the trail comes out of the forest there is a birch bark container sitting beside the ropes marking the final pathway. It could easily be missed if you burst out of the forest in a sprint. Russ opened the box, took a scroll and read it.

*"11. Proceed with this scroll to the column at the finish line marked 'Start-Finish' where a symbolic quiver is hanging. Place this scroll and final arrow in the quiver."*

Brilliant! I think. It is a good final test of awareness. Time now no longer matters for us. We will finish first even if we walk slowly.

“No need to run,” I say. “All the teams ahead of us have not completed the run, and therefore don’t have a score yet. They will have to return to this challenge box and do it, in which case the best they can get is second place to us.”

We leisurely walk down the path marked by ropes. We soon arrive at the stage. Teams are gathered around there waiting for the officials to determine final scores. They look innocent. Obviously an official has not yet told them they have missed a final challenge - that should be obvious since they all have an arrow left.

“Ha, ha, ha!” shouts Ikka as we approach. “We win.”

I study the post with the “Start-Finish” words on it. It has a large gold coloured bow and quiver emblazoned with the Thunder Games graphic of the Thunderbird. The symbolic quiver has no arrows in it. I wonder if anyone noticed even that. I take the final scroll from Russ, wrap it around my final arrow, and put it into this symbolic quiver.

“No you didn’t, Ikka” I then say to Ikka and the others. “None of you have finished. All of you missed the last challenge. You all have one arrow left. You are all incomplete and don’t have any score yet.”

The teams look stunned. They check their quivers and indeed each team has an arrow left. And suddenly they tear back up the roped path to search for the final challenge box.

Elina, Russ and I sit down at the edge of the stage to wait. "I could have let an official explain it to them," I tell Elina, "but I wanted to see the look on Ikka's face."

Instead of us sitting around with the crowds looking on and waiting, the officials motion us, the first place winners, to the front of the stage where we would be more visible to the crowd. We were always favourites from the coverage of us on the large television screens.

"The Chief Official, Cliff Goldmeadow, announces: "Team Green is the first place winner of the Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon. We will determine second and third when the other teams return."

A cheer rises from the crowd. The team that deserved to win has won!

## 21. We are Interviewed

We are celebrities for this win, but I appear to the most celebrated, since I had not just lead the winning Team Green in the final, but the rumour is that I had won most gold medals of all the young competitors in the Thunder Games. How could that be?

Elina explained. "There are only so many competitions that anyone can enter during the first two days of competitions, maybe three competitions per day, which is six. So then it depends on rank. If you win all gold - 3 points - then you can be a forerunner."

As the winning team of the 'Grand Wilderness Skills Marathon', our team is interviewed like a sports team by reporters for the Innat International Television Channel – questions like: "What did you feel when you discovered your team was being stalked by the pack of Dogotes?" "What would you have done if the bear had charged you?" Other teams are interviewed too about situations in the competition that appeared on the large screens during the course of it, but most attention is on us, Team Green. The on-the-spot interviews are also recorded for television by accompanying cameramen and soundmen. Since cameras are very small, they are hardly noticeable.

Just when I think all the attention is over, we are told that the Innat International Television Channel wants Team Green to be part of a discussion right away on the stage in front of the cameras. It is a panel discussion about the predicament of 'Mother Earth' these days, as a result of the past century of climatic warming.

Cliff Goldmeadow introduces it to the crowds.

"With the Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon over, we will now pause for a panel discussion for the Innat International Television Channel lead by Tommy Telair, featuring our winning team representing our youth and two distinguished guests who are leaders in their own fields. After that we break for supper, and the Thunderbird-themed performances of the Grand Finale Wilderness Arts competition will follow on this stage to complete the day's events."

Part of a panel? Right away? At least we are given some moments to clean up a little, as the stage is set up. We are hurried onto the stage still in our competition gear, and perhaps a little sweaty. Looks good for the cameras for us to look rugged and sweaty, I guess. Thankfully my wilderness clothes and Elina's got cleaned yesterday, and the dirt is just the new dirt from today, but Russ's look is a little embarrassing to me.

The professional interviewer from the Innat International Television Channel apparently, named Tommy Telair, introduces us as examples of promising Innat youth. We are motioned to sit on the left end of a long semi-circular couch where we see two other individuals already seated to the right. The interviewer has his own chair at the far right end of the long couch.

“Viewers,” begins the interviewer, the already introduced man named Tommy Telair. He is a slick, probably popular, media professional. Today he wears a comfortable light summer jacket. His dark straight hair is combed straight back making him look dashing. “For this discussion about our threatened climate and environment, the winners of the ‘Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’ join two other guests - a scientist from the University of Nyark, and the High Shaman of the Innat peoples. We will discuss the situation we find humanity facing with our climate and the overheating of our planet from the excesses of carbon dioxide. But first we will speak with the winning team of the ‘Grand Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’ competition.”

I can see from the screen in the field below, the camera pans across the couch with Russ, Elina, and me on the left, the scientist with spectacles in the middle, and at the right end, the shaman, an Innat elder dressed in fur and feathers and looking

intimidating. The video I see then cuts back to a closer shot of the interviewer.

He continues: “First of all, congratulations, Team Green - Riia Greenthistle, Elina Mistymarsh, and Russ Greenthistle. You just won the ‘Grand Finale Wilderness Skills Challenge Marathon’, and your leader, Riia Greenthistle – when we tally up the medals won in the many competitions – you appear to lead all the individual competitors of the Thunder Games. All your wins are gold medals, Riia. To what do you attribute all your wins?”

He is addressing me? I have to think of an answer. I try to block out the fact that this is being witnessed by a large audience and what that means. “From not training for the Thunder Games competitions, and instead being a hunter in my family, and competing with myself, challenging myself to always be better than before.”

“I am told that many young people prepare four years for their favourite competitions. You say you don’t?”

“Honestly, I think I only decided to participate because I loved the thrill of testing myself, to see what I was capable of – and Elina encouraged me and did not let me refuse. All this attention from actually winning in everything I entered is a little overwhelming.”

The interviewer and audience like my answer and applaud. Telair continues: "They say you come from a tribe named Cwano. For you to do so well here in this wilderness, the wilderness and animals must be very similar where you come from."

I grimaced. It was a question I did not like to answer since it required me to continue my deception. Why don't I simply say something general from what I know about northern Ropa, northern Scandnia,

"Yes, as everyone knows, in the northern world, below the arctic tundra there are conifer forests, and below that it becomes increasingly deciduous. Many larger animals are the same, with only mild species differences."

I notice Russ rolling his eyes to himself.

"And, Riia," continued Telair, "considering you won all the bow skills competitions, bow hunting must be highly developed there."

"Yes, the custom of using the bow and arrow is very old, universal across the early world."

"Indeed," says the interviewer, "the bow is one of the oldest hunting tools of all prehistoric hunting people, next only to the spear... Now next to our Team Green is Professor Wilken from the University of Nyark who is a specialist in Earth Ecology and Climatology. Professor Wilken, you view the natural world in a scientific way. Scientific ways have been followed now for a thousand years, and yet the



heating of the world climate also developed during that time, even after some of you scientists said that the situation was beyond the point of return. What is your comment to that, Professor Wilken?"

"Well," begins Professor Wilken, a narrow-faced white haired man of around 50, adjusting his glasses as he seeks a beginning for his answer. "The problem was that until things got really bad, humankind did not respect the knowledge of the scientists and their warnings were ignored - and only when they were proven right, was the scientific community empowered to take action, and today they rule the Green Lung Initiative."

"Yes, today, science is now in control, rather than industrial or political interests."

"In general, the common people are influenced in their thinking. Back then, even if the scientists knew what should have been done, the problem was how to get humans to behave in the required way. Yes, we have known what we have had to do since around the year 2000, a thousand years ago, but humans have only adopted some of the changes in behaviour and only when forced by immediate unpleasantness. Like children we do not learn that we cannot touch a hot stove - to use a metaphor - until we are actually burned by that hot stove. In the end humans are animals who lack the ability to react to ideas that are not in the immediate environment, too abstract, and

not already hitting us over the head. If we are not actually suffering, we cannot register the reality of it.”

Tommy Telair turns towards Team Green. “Now, let us get an opinion from our youth. Do you know much about the science, and what science demands of us?”

I look at both Russ and Elina to answer, but they obviously want me to do the talking. I am better at it than they. So I do the answering again: “It seems to me from my hunting that if humans live in harmony with nature, nature herself will make us behave correctly. We are after all the sons and daughters of Mother Nature just like any other species. Things go awry when humans separate from nature and are no longer naturally following the laws of nature but crazy customs and rules created by the artificial cities. The best way to hunt is to be like a natural predator. Animals that eat other animals do not want the animals they eat to disappear, and the animals who are eaten sense that their predators represent population control. Therefore nature has made it that if we are part of the world of predators we will always hunt what seems to be plentiful – then balance is restored. The same principle applies to plant life, the entire wilderness, and even the whole planet. The more we let Nature behave like Nature, the more it will regulate itself. Originally Nature was regulating the naturally produced carbon dioxide and

greenhouse gases with other systems - such as plants absorbing carbon dioxide. Nature was regulating itself. But then humankind discovered that coal and oil inside the earth would burn just like charcoal and plant oil found in Nature's system, so they began using it instead, adding something new, and interfering with Nature's system that had developed over a million years."

"Thank you, Riia Greenthistle. So the scientist says things are fine, if only humans would obey rational thinking rather than just instincts and emotions. And you are saying that we only need to submit ourselves to Mother Nature and let Nature be Nature, and not change it. How do you respond to that, Professor Wilken?"

He nods. "Miss Greenthistle is remarkably articulate on the subject for her age. There is truth to it. For thousands of thousands of years humans were just an ape with thinking and tool making and at one with Nature. But then he created industries and cities and began living away from Nature, and almost everything he did failed to fit in with the larger Nature around what he was doing. It would have been fine if every innovation had been designed to fit well into Nature's systems, but in fact the innovations were mindless. Today, under scientific authority, we have life-cycle evaluating of everything we do, so cities are now more responsible about harmonizing

with Nature. I have to admit I am not a fan of the way of life in the cities, but I was born into it and as a professor in a city I am part of it. I wouldn't mind living close to nature like many young people of Innat nations here."

Tommy Telair summarizes directly to the camera: "Harmonizing with Nature is the acknowledged ideal. It has taken a thousand years for that realization to make its way through humankind and be adopted, but that was a basic truth understood by humankind in the beginning when we lived humbly within Nature, and preserved at the core of the Innat cultures descended from them. We now want to hear the views of our third guest."

Telair turns to the next guest, the man nearest to him. He is elderly, maybe 60 or 70, has long grey hair tied back and held by a band with plenty of feathers. He wears a deerskin vest that is decorated with fur, feathers, quills, claws, teeth, and other parts of animals from which to draw power and insight. His bare arms present numerous bands and bracelets. Knee high bead covered moccasins cover his bare legs, and he wears a deerskin loincloth with painted designs. He holds a club or stick of some kind in one hand. A power-stick of some kind, I think.

"The third guest in our panel is Mr. Thundersky of the western Ikkola nation, who has been elected to

High Shaman for the Innat peoples. Mr. Thundersky, what is your view of what you have heard so far?"

This man is not able to speak in a gentle calm way, but every sentence is intense and emotion driven. Strong sweeping gestures accompany his speech.

"The scientist wants to describe the entire world as a machine. He even wants to think of the entire universe as if it were a big explosion, a big bang, in the machine. But what caused the big explosion? What caused the big machine? Scientists are wrong. The world, the universe is not a machine. It is a living being. A living being is partly a mechanism yes, but it is also a spirit. The world is both a spirit and a mechanism. It is both. And when something dies, the spirit leaves, and when something is born the spirit arrives. Science is fine for describing and making machines, but science cannot fully understand anything that is living because it has never learned to also look at the spirit."

"So," Tommy Telair summarizes to the audience, "Mr. Thundersky believes that humankind has been one-sided, seeing only the mechanical side of things, and ignoring the spiritual. How do our young hunters respond?" He again looks towards me for an answer.

Feeling inspired by now, since I have always liked this subject back at Greenville High, I respond energetically: "I agree. When an animal I hunt dies, I

can see it become lifeless. Something disappears. I can never see the animal as a machine and then the machine turns off. I can never see it like that. If I shoot a pheasant it is much more profound than shooting an arrow at, say, a hovering Flyhicle such as we see flying around here with cameras, and then pulling an arrow out of that device. Living things have something more than just being a more complicated machine. Science does not know what it is that comes and goes, and so does not get the total picture. It sees the forest reserves like large machines for draining carbon dioxide, but they are living as well."

Professor Wilken responds "It may be true that a pheasant is much more complicated than a flying vehicle, but what is a spirit? Science has never identified what a spirit is."

"But just because science cannot identify it," I reply, "doesn't mean it isn't there."

"Your response, Shaman Thundersky?"

Mr. Thundersky seems to continue my point but he adds the idea of a parallel inner universe. "Science cannot see spirit because spirit is inside. Science sees only what is outside. It does not see what is inside. Science cannot see a dream because a dream is in the spirit world. Science cannot see the dreams of a person asleep, cannot see the spirit of an animal, cannot feel the spirit behind the weather. The scientist can only see lots of machines, machines, machines!!

He sees only one side, the outside, the huge machine that he says began as a big explosion, but cannot see the spirit that gave life to the universe.”

“And how do you respond, scientist?”

“There is some truth to it, I guess. There are scientists who study how people dream. They can hook a sleep subject up to electrodes and determine when he is dreaming from the brainwave activity, but in order to determine what the subject dreamt about, he has to wake up the subject and ask ‘what did you dream about?’ So I suppose we can think of the existence of an inner universe in which we live as well, and which aboriginal people knew much better than our modern scientific and technological world does. Humankind may have become one-sided.”

“And how do the young hunters respond? Riia?”

“Maybe the only way to understand life is through some inner way. The Wilderness Skills bow competitions of the Thunder Games had artificial, that is dead, targets. We fire at lifeless targets. We do not have to deal with the live side of it. I learned once that when civilization had the sport of hunting, they turned the hunted animals into targets. It was cold. They could have used artificial animals. But Elina hitting the bear in the butt shows how complicated things become when you are dealing with real beings. How easy it would be if we ignored the bear’s livingness and treated it like a target. But I can’t. I still

hope the black bear does not suffer too much from the wound of Elina's arrow in its behind."

The crowd laughs since they saw it all on the television monitors.

I continue: "If there is a Thunder Games that involves real animals, I think the animals would have to be honoured afterward with a great feast. We don't need a feast when we shoot arrows into dead targets. We all know that. Wilderness skills are about physical skills. The spiritual side of it can only be learned with experience, and older hunters will have more of it, I think. And it is religious. The inner side of things is religious, I think,"

High Shaman Thundersky interjects emotionally: "Mother Earth will continue to die until humanity learns to see her from the spirit side! The science side has been used a thousand years. Nothing was done because not even scientists could feel the pain in Nature. Feeling for Mother Earth needs feeling it like a living being, not a machine." He stands and raises his power stick and shakes it to emphasize his point. Tommy Telair motions him to sit back down.

"There you have it, ladies and gentlemen," says Tommy Telair to the camera and to the audience assembled in the field below the stage. "Three different perspectives but all surprisingly similar in conclusion – that if we have failed to solve the deterioration of our climate and biosphere with



science and technology, perhaps it is time to look at it from the inner side – from within. “

Suddenly a crazy man in a grey robe rushes onto the stage and grabs a microphone. He begins to shout to the crowd below and his voice booms all over the grounds: “Those who do not follow Dog, are damned to eternal damnation as a servant of the Hellhound! Renounce your worship of the Thunderbird before it is too late! Salvation is found only in being a Servant of Dog. Follow the teachings of the Book of Dogma. Follow the message of Chihuahua, the Son of Dog, the son of Great Dog!!”

Security grabs him and drags him away struggling and protesting.

“Well,” jokes Tommy Telair. “We get a fourth perspective as well from the familiar Religion of Dog that has evolved from centuries of human affection for domesticated dogs ..... Thank you everyone for participating in our discussion.”

I am nervous about how the audience perceived me and what they thought about my contribution. But I realize that this panel discussion was not live to air. It was probably recorded and will be part of the later edited coverage of the Games.

Anyway I am glad its over and we can finally relax. Russ, Elina, and I leave the stage. Stage hands begin preparing it for the upcoming performance

competition. There will be a break while the crowds can go to have some supper.

“You were good, Riia!” exclaims Riia. “I could never discuss like that!”

“I guess I’m a bit of a nerd. I like discussions at my school. And our father too encourages debate in our family - around the dinner table.”

My only regret about the discussion is my continuing my pretence that I came from northern Ropa. It will appear in the television show later, and I think I will forever be embarrassed by it.

“Don’t think too much, Riia,” says Elina, when she sees me looking a bit too thoughtful.

## 22. Leaving Finally!

The officials have fetched all our arrows during the competition, and they are available to pick up before we return to our campsite. Elina comes with Russ and me to hang out at our 'Muskrat' campsite before she returns to her own campsite.

"You and Russ can come with me to the Otter campsite for supper," says Elina. "We can then afterward look at the Wilderness Arts Performance Challenge performances and see who are judged winners there. And then finally about 8pm are the medal ceremonies for both the Wilderness Skills Marathon Challenge, and the Wilderness Arts Performance Challenge winners."

"I just want to rest a little, for now, Elina," I say, stretching out on the grass.

"You don't look happy. You should be thrilled. We won."

"I feel so guilty, Elina. In the panel discussion I kept up the pretense about coming from overseas from a nation called Cwano. I think they didn't try very hard to check out my information because I was such a good competitor. If they had, they would have discovered, and may still discover, that there is no such thing as a tribe named Cwano in Scandnia in northern Ropa. Maybe such people did exist once, but

I doubt any ever preserved the culture down to modern times."

"Well, nobody disqualified you," replies Elina. "Maybe it won't matter. Let everyone puzzle over you. You will be the mysterious amazing contestant. "

I rested my face in my hands. "I think I would feel really badly when in the medal ceremonies they keep talking about me as the marvellous contestant who came from the other side of the world, from a tribe called Cwano. I know I will cringe every time a speech refers to me like that. I think I'm liable to blurt out it is a lie, and run off. Maybe it is time I came clean to them. Where are their offices?"

"Don't dwell on it so much, Riia. Maybe you can tell them after it is over. If you reveal the truth now, you will burst the whole wonderful bubble that has been created, where you are the wonderful youth from across the ocean - not many come from another continent - in the new wild forests of northern Ropa."

"That's true," I agree. "I could simply go away and then inform them by letter that I shouldn't have been part of the 70th Thunder Games, sending back all my gold medals. But there is still the medal ceremonies this evening. I hate to pretend I'm something I'm not. Maybe I and Russ will simply leave right away. Could you explain to them something like - they have to catch a plane flight back tomorrow morning and had to be on their way already this evening. Then they

would do their thing, without my being there. And you could stand on the podium for Team Green. You could accept whatever they give on our behalf.”

“Are you suggesting you and Russ would leave now - before the medal ceremonies?”

“Yes,” I reply. “Say we had to head home early. That won’t even be a lie.”

“ I suppose....”

“I think we must go now. What do you think Russ?” Russ shrugs. I continue: “If I am on the stage again, they may talk to me and ask more questions. The audience will want to know much more about me, Who is this mysterious young woman who has come from afar and where has she come from and what is her tribe like, and why there is nothing about her on the information net? The questions will keep getting more detailed, and there will be reporters for the Innat media, and ... “

“You’re right Riia. The more attention there is on you the more the audience will want their curiosity satisfied, and at least the television people will want to include the information in the telecast – maybe even sending a video crew to take shots of your home, and how your people think about you standing out from all the other contestants.”

Russ who normally just listens, is moved to let out a laugh. “Imagine media people trying to find where a ‘Cwano’ nation is located to interview its people about

their star competitor! They search Oogle and everywhere else, and come up with a blank! Because it does not exist!"

Russ seems to be mocking/teasing me about my inventiveness. He finds it all very amusing how I have painted myself into a corner.

"Oh, shut up Russ. Like you've never lied before! I never thought I would win anything. I just wanted to compete and see how I compare. I've been in archery competitions through high school. But winning gold in everything I entered I now stand out. I will be featured on their edited telecast, and if Elina is right that I got the highest score, that will be the worst of all!"

"That's right, Riia," says Elina. "The winner gets special attention in the closing ceremonies. It is normally an honour. All the competitors strive for it."

"That's it!" I declare, standing up from the fire pit log seat, "we're going Russ! Time to pack up and disappear. Elina, please do me a great favour and give them a good story about how the star competitor just had to go. You can even say that we never expected to win and our schedule was based on leaving this evening. That too would technically be true."

"Alright, Riia. I'll do my best. But I wish you had been a legitimate competitor sent by a real Innat nation and then it would have worked out fine."

“I’ll be beholden to you, Elina. You have also been a very good friend. I want to give you something.” I fetch the fashion outfit I designed yesterday, folded into a bundle in my backpack. “In return for being my friend during the Thunder Games, I want you to have the wilderness fashion costume I created and which they allow contestants to keep. When I return to my world, I will never use it. But you may have festivals in your Innat community, and be able to use it.”

I hand it to her. Her eyes are all alit. She has seen how it looked on me.

“Thank you, Riia. We are about the same size. It should fit me as well. But since it turns out you are not across the ocean, but only a few days travel away from where I’m from, you can borrow it back if someday you need it. We can share it.”

“It’s a deal. We’ll make sure we know where each other is located before I and Russ leave.”

Elina puts the folded bundle of dress and accessories in her lap, as we sit together for some more minutes in reflection.

“Yes,” I say finally in Russ’ quiet direction. “Now that we’ve decided, Russ, I can’t wait to get going. It is late and we have to find a good campsite for the night. We can make several kilometres before nightfall.”

“Okay, Sis,” says Russ with a tinge of exasperation towards his three years older sister. I can tell he would

have been perfectly happy if we had continued right away on our wilderness journey days ago, as planned.

Elina gets up. "Will you come to my campsite before you go? If you can't stay, I'll at least see that you have some food and water to take, so you won't have to hunt for tonight."

"We will. Russ and I will pack up and clean up around here. We will then come over to your campsite to say goodbye. Can you explain to your people the same story you will tell the officials at the ceremony?"

"I will," Elina replies. "See you soon. Thank you for the outfit. I won't try it on until I come across a full length mirror. No point if I can't see how I look in it."

With that, she returns to the Otter campsite carrying the bundle.

When Russ and I have everything in our backpacks and have left the campsite as we got it, we head first to the Otter campsite and Elina. Elina spreads the word that we have far to go etc, etc. and we absolutely must leave early and she will apologize to the organizers on our behalf. She makes it easy for us. Nobody feels compelled to ask us more questions. We shake hands with various people at the campsite – her mother, cousins, uncle, the other contestants, and generally the whole small delegation that came to represent the Woli nation community from several hundred kilometres away. We are given gifts of dry food for our journey. They think we will be walking



by the road to reach the town that has the train station - Traynton. In reality we will turn north in an hour and head in the direction of our much more nearby home.

“Goodbye, Elina,” I say finally, pulling her aside to speak privately and giving her a hug. “We can keep in touch electronically. One day we will meet again in person. If you want to find me, you have to go to Greenville. Ask anyone in Greenville for directions to the Greenthistle property. And if I ever get the chance to travel, I will look for you at your Woli nation community.”

“Goodbye Riia. We’ve had great fun. I’ll never forget it. Yes, let’s keep in touch.”

Finally. We are on our way. Besides, our father, Riddle and Reed expected us back in a week and we have already consumed five nights and it could be three more nights before we are home again.

We determine where the old road runs and begin by taking the road all the way back to where we first came out of the woods from the north. Then we head north, crossing the marshes and creek as before. Then we can modify our route back, travelling more towards the west, to observe more of the area between here and our home territory.

“If we can return within three days,” I tell Russ, “We will arrive home as planned – about a week – and nobody at home will be concerned.”

As we get further away from the Thunder Games, we are more and more returning to our original state of mind. Travelling now further west, we check out the marshy east end of the lake with more attention than before. After a couple hours it is starting to get dark and we find a nice place to make camp. I decide to build the fire for a change as Russ goes to the edge of the lake to fetch some water. We're not hungry because of the food Elina gave us. We boil the water and watch the sun set. There are clouds in the sky and the sunset is very dramatic and red. The weather has been remarkably consistent. But will it last until we arrive home? I am beginning to anticipate a bout of drenching weather soon. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. We are back to the camping routine. The only reminder of the Thunder Games is a load of medals in my backpack.

"If we give our medals back," I tell Russ, "I could simply say, it was an honour, but I would feel better if they were reused. They are probably expensive to make, even if the gold is maybe only gold plate." I turn one of the gold medals over and over in my fingers. I admire the graphic of the Thunderbird on it. I feel my hair to see if I still have feathers in it. I do. The small ones that I have securely tied on are still there. It will be difficult to remove them without cutting them from my hair. But they don't bother me. I leave them on.

We let the fire smoke in the night to make the area uncomfortable to mosquitoes. I study the clouds in the sky. As the sun sets, their red colours turn to purple and then dark grey. We are due for a storm soon, I think. The air has become increasingly humid over the past several days. We chance it as always. If a storm hits, we'll simply unroll the tarp we carry with us, tie the sides down, and crawl under it.

"Ahh," I say as I lay down in the fir branches and throw off my boots. "The smell of fir boughs instead of grass."

"And the quiet," says Russ from the other mattress of fir boughs, referring to the fact that the night at the Thunder Games campsite was never fully quiet owing to all the people there.

We were soon in slumber land and before I knew it I was opening my eyes to the morning. Nothing happened during the night. No Dogotes. No freak weather. Just very humid and whining with mosquitoes.

I visit the lake to splash water on my face. I remove my boots, roll up my trouser legs, and wade through the reeds. I see a large fish in shallow water and wish I had a fishing line or just a net. I try to grab it but fail. I tell of it to Russ when I return, and he takes his fishing line out to it to catch it. As he does so I search for berries or something. It doesn't take him long to return with the fish, quite large, and we have

fish for breakfast. We can keep what Elina had given us for the journey till later because it will keep.

With the fish and tea in our stomachs, Russ pours the remaining boiled water into our water bottles. We pack up to continue on our way. Russ puts out the fire....

Suddenly three men come crashing down on us from the woods. I recognize from their outfits that they are security guards or police from the Thunder Games. They have the same uniforms as the security men who grabbed the crazy man spouting about the Son of Dog, when he rushed onto the stage yesterday. They grab us. I keep asking what it is all about but they say nothing. They tie our hands behind our backs with leather thongs and command us to come with them. Two of the men manhandle us, pushing us forward, while the third follows, carrying our backpacks and my bow and quiver of arrows.

"What is this all about?" I demand again. As we go, it appears back to the Thunder Game grounds, I get an answer:

"We have been ordered to bring you back to the Thunder Games grounds. We do not know the reasons. I'm sure it will be explained to you when there. We are just following orders."

These men are Innat men, and obviously were knowledgeable in tracking and had known how to pick up and follow our trail. Being sent out at dawn to

find us, they found us by the time we were packing up.

In the next hour or two we first march to the old road, and then along the road, until we are back in the area we left yesterday evening.

Finally Russ and I find ourselves sitting on barren ground in a large traditional conical tent, with two of the security men standing outside the entrance. There is a hole at the top of this wigwam and light is shining down from it. In addition to the thongs on our wrists, more leather rope ties our wrists to a post. This appears to be a holding place for lawbreakers - for the rowdy people that are always found in any large gathering. But right now we are alone. Our only company are two of the security men who kidnapped us posted outside.

"I knew we wouldn't get away with it, Russ," I say with resignation. "It's probably regarding my deception, my lying. They finally figured it out."

"But what do they want to do with us?" Russ wonders.

It was quiet in here. We could however hear the events going on in the distance. There was drumming and music. There was the booming sound of a voice in the speakers. These could be the closing ceremonies events.

In a few minutes, Elina's head pops inside the entrance.

“They are letting me talk to you for a minute. You alright?” she asks. “I saw them bring you, and I knew something was wrong, and I inquired as much as I could?”

“What did you learn?”

“I want you to know I didn’t say a thing at the medal ceremony other than what we agreed – that you had left early. Maybe they figured it out and just want you to explain. Maybe they just wanted to get you back for that.”

“I doubt it. Our hands are tied. It is a little rough treatment for a simple request to stay for the closing ceremonies.”

“Anyway Riia,” says Elina, “tell the truth from now on. No lying. Maybe the truth isn’t so bad. After all you can’t fake your skills. You’re really good. The spectators think so. You are a celebrity. I gotta go. Their instructions to the security men don’t involve me. They’ll take you wherever it is they want you to be, very soon. I’ll be watching what they do. Talk to you later.”

Elina leaves and we are alone again.

## 23. The Shaman

Finally the two security men outside come in, untie us from the post, and motion us to get up and go with them.

They seem to be taking us towards the main grounds as the sound of the events and crowds gets larger.

They take us by a winding path to the back of the stage. To our surprise we are then taken up steps to the stage itself, and left standing near the front of the stage in front of the crowds. It is only then that the men also remove the bindings on our wrists. We are told to remain there, and our uniformed escorts move to the back.

I survey the stage. I see a line of seats across the back, which contain the dignitaries. I remember some of them from the various medal ceremonies. But there is no medal ceremony here. There is no podium with the three levels for first, second, and third. But it does seem like closing ceremonies are in progress or about to begin. Why are we placed on the stage in front of the crowds?!!!

Now I see near us and dominating the stage at this moment the High Shaman Thundersky who was at yesterday's television panel discussion. A man of about sixty, long grey hair pulled back and held at the back with some kind of headwear decorated with long

feathers. Very intense. Small man with very large gestures and movements. Long moccasins, bare legs, a loincloth, belt and deerskin vest to which is affixed tokens of furs, claws, teeth, and feathers from powerful animals. Around his neck are numerous necklaces and talismans.

This time over his shoulders is a colorful mantle made of feathers and fur. He looks powerful and intimidating. My impression is that he has already addressed the audience, and it appears we are brought to the stage as part of the agenda. We are, it seems, a problem that the entire Thunder Games festival has to deal with, hence needs to be witnessed by the entire audience.

This intense man strides towards us with his slightly bowed boney-kneed bare legs, stares at us with piercing eyes and begins: "And now you two..."

"Yes, sir," I grin, waiting for him to tear into me.

Even his simple sentences are performed intensely. Although sound men with boom mikes are hovering around to pick up voices, he does not use nor need a microphone to be heard by the crowd.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" he roars.

"I don't know what this is about," I respond.

"This is what this is about: Our High Chief Abe Overman, informs us that you stated to our officials that you are from a people called 'Cwano' in Scandnia in Ropa, across the Lantic Ocean, but that it appears



there are no 'Cwano' people today. And there has not been any application to enter young competitors into the Thunder Games from anywhere in northern Ropa."

I can't deny what he says. I remain quiet.

He paces around us, eyeing me and Russ up and down. He continues: "I know that there is something deceitful here, because I can sense your sense of guilt. You have deceived all Innat peoples who have come to these Thunder Games, and therefore we have to come to the bottom of this, in front of all the Innat peoples who are here and have been deceived. That is why you are before these crowds. It is to these crowds that you have to explain your behaviour. Speak in the microphone to the entire audience. Give us a good explanation."

His intense accusatory tone puts me on the verge of tears. I begin: "I wanted to explain, but I didn't want to disappoint the spectators when they appeared to want me to succeed and be a celebrity. I was even going to explain and give my medals yesterday morning. But I decided I can do it all later so as not to spoil these Games."

"Continue."

"Yes sir.... I and my brother came upon these Thunder Games by accident. We live about 30 kilometres from here towards the northeast. I hunt every evening after school because we live right next

to the wilderness and I learned to hunt already since I was 12, because our father did not like eating farmed insects. I and my brother Russ, were only exploring the forests further from our home where we have not been before to see what kind of hunting and fishing we might find further away. When the Woli nation delegation was arriving by the overgrown road, I was seen by them shooting at pheasants with my bow and arrow, and it was believed I was one of the girl entrants to the Games. When we discovered the Thunder Games opening ceremonies going on, we decided to camp in an unoccupied campsite, intending to leave first thing in the morning. But then Elina, one of the four contestants from the Woli tribe who saw me shoot the pheasant thought I was a competitor in the bow skills competitions. That is when I first began pretending I came for the competitions. But I didn't compete to win. I only wanted to test myself, to see how well I could do. One thing lead to another and I found myself in the competition, and I was myself surprised when I won every competition I entered. I have been hunting for my family regularly since I was 12 and I know this kind of wilderness very well. I am now 17. My brother here is 14."

When I stop, the Shaman contemplates what I have said. The audience does too. There is a lot of silence. Too much silence. The audience is confused I

guess. For the past several days they have been cheering me on. Were they deceived? Were they duped? Should they be angry? Insulted? Or forgiving?

After two minutes of silence and the High Shaman Thundersky pacing about in his intimidating fashion, he finally speaks again. His voice resounds in the loudspeakers throughout the grounds because the sound men are picking up his voice even if he has no microphone.

“You have no connection with any Innat nation, and yet you shoot the bow like a traditional expert. And I am also told your bow is finely made in the style of the ancient peoples of north-eastern Nomerica, the woodland Inni. The first question that arose among our officials was how it is that Innat people in northern Ropa would make a bow similar to that of the ancient Inni nations right here. Where did you get a bow like the one you possess?”

“I made it myself. I’m afraid I do not belong to any Innat community. My only connection is to a neighbour, Mr. Thomasson, whose mother is connected to an Innat community. I believe it is an Inni peoples’ community, but I can’t remember the specific name of the nation. It is a hundred miles away and I’ve never been there. I made the bow and arrows myself years ago. This is the fourth one I’ve made since I learned how, following an old book and video that was obtained by Mr. Thomasson for me to view.

Mr. Thomasson gave me pointers as well, because he had made one for himself when he was younger, and later helped his son Chip make one. Later I and his son went hunting with our bows of this kind many times and I learned all the ways of traditional bow hunting from Mr. Thomasson and I guess also from what I learned myself on my own."

"Well, you will know that you could have become connected to that Innat community of this Mr. Thomasson's mother, and they could have officially entered you. Why didn't you?"

"But I told you," I protested. "I never intended to participate. We came upon the Thunder Games by accident! We had no idea it was going on. I happened to have the bow because to keep our backpacks light, we hunted for our meals as we went. "

When I pause, I hear my voice echo through the valley from the loudspeakers. The vast crowd is quiet, listening to every word.

I continue, "School let out for summer, and I proposed to my father that I and Russ go on an extended hunting trip, to go further away, to see what hunting is possible further away. And that is how we came here. We came by accident. I didn't come to win anything, and would be happy to return all my gold medals so you can give them to the second place winners. That is the truth."

Mr. Thundersky paces around deep in thought. Then he says: "This is the hunting territory of the people who are the hosts of these Thunder Games. You must ask permission to hunt. Innat communities own the rights to hunt in this wilderness. It is written in an ancient treaty."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," I say. "I thought it was unused by anyone and just designated to go completely wild according to the Green Lung projects, to increase carbon dioxide absorption from the atmosphere to correct our weather."

"Perhaps the spirits sent you here," mused the shaman with a loud but lower voice. "RIIIA sounds like the cry of the eagle. And 'Greenthistle' sounds like the name of a plant. Perhaps you have some Innat blood. Half of Innat people are always moving out of the Innat communities and losing contact with them."

"After a thousand years, everyone must be partly Innat, and partly everything else too," I agree.

He is now ignoring me and turning his attention to the crowds in front of him. "RIIA, the cry of the eagle. The arrow is most like an eagle, swooping on its prey with its talons. Does the Thunderbird not fly with bolts of lightning in its talons? This RIIIIA has won all the bow skills competitions, and further wilderness skills competitions – all gold medals, and she is therefore, from the point of view of her skills, qualified to be the grand prize winner of all the young

competitors who were gathered here for the 70th Thunder Games. She only lacks the official connection to a registered Innat community. People attending the Thunder Games! Should we permit her wins to stand in spite of not coming in the normal way? In spite of inventing a people named Cwano? Does she deserve to win the grand prize for her skills as we had planned, or does her failure to come here through the proper process disqualify her?"

He has addressed the crowd and his questions are inviting their response. The crowd erupts in an approving positive roar. Why should the improper way she came to compete, matter? They adore me from what they have seen of me on the large screens! They cannot deprive themselves of what they thought of me just because of a technicality!

"But," the shaman continues, sweeping his gaze back to me and my brother. "It is not up to me or you the spectators, to decide if this competitor, this RIIIA Greenthistle should be accepted by the Thunder Games and permitted to keep her wins. It is not up to me or to you to decide whether this young woman should be given the grand prize of the Thunderbird crown and mantle for scoring highest of all the young competitors who came to the 70th annual Thunder Games. ...."

Thunderbird crown and mantle? That is the first I have heard of a Thunderbird crown and mantle.

He pauses and the crowd waits for what he is driving at. They are so quiet, you could hear the wind blowing through the tops of pines.

Walking around the stage and raising his arms to the sky, he proceeds to his conclusion: "It is not up to us. Since the grand winner of the competition is to honour the Thunderbird we cannot leave it to an arbitrary decision by you or I. Can we humans arbitrarily decide that this RIIIA is to be accepted among us if it is to honour Thunderbird? No! Can we humans arbitrarily decide to forgive her when the Thunder Games itself is designed to honour the Thunderbird, to honour the maker of the weather? No! We must look towards the sky for a sign from Thunderbird himself! The wind has risen all morning and clouds fill the sky. We have heard rumbles of thunder. Should we not let Thunderbird himself decide what to do with this competitor?"

The crowd cries "Yes!"

The humid weather of yesterday and last night has continued and the sky is now hazy and grey. So now when High Shaman Thundersky invites everyone to look up we see a dramatic sky of billowing grey clouds.

"Let us now perform a ceremony to Thunderbird and see what He says!" says the old Shaman. "If he approves, then Riia Greenthistle, you will be treated as if you were legitimate, deserving of all your medals

and given the ultimate crown that is given at every Thunder Games to the most winning competitor, and enjoy fame far and wide among all the Innat nations of the world for the next four years.”

I watch as the High Shaman takes from a small table a shaman’s drum and slowly begins a shuffling dance which also shakes bells and rattles attached to his outfit. He has his eyes closed and sings Ah-ya-ah-ya.

I whisper to Russ, beside me: “I think these are intended to get him into a trance so he can communicate with the spirit of the Thunderbird.”

Russ agrees.

Distant rumbles of thunder occurred earlier but previously the crowd didn’t pay attention. And now it is all-important since thunder is their connection to the Thunderbird. I learn later too that when a thunderstorm occurs during a Thunder Games, that is taken to be a blessing - the Thunderbird has acknowledged it, even if he causes plenty of damage.

Everyone on the stage, not just me and Russ, but the seated dignitaries in a line across the back of the stage – High Chief Overman, the judges, chiefs from attending Innat nations, waiting for their turn in the closing ceremonies - could do nothing more now than listen to the High Shaman chanting, drumming, rattling, dancing, shaking all the eagle feathers of his



costume that honoured the Thunderbird – and watch what was happening in the sky.

It goes on and on. His chanting goes louder and softer. His attitude becomes more animated and less animated. He is clearly in a trance state, becoming increasingly possessed, presumably by spirits connected to Thunderbird. The dark clouds in the sky intensify, blow over our heads close to the trees.

Coincidence?

Now the sounds of thunder are getting closer too. The crowd watches the sky with awe and trepidation. It seems Thunderbird is appearing, flying like a gigantic grey eagle over the treetops. It's as if the High Shaman seems to be bringing the Thunderbird down from the skies to the Thunder Games!!!

The stage being high up, on a knoll so as to be visible by the crowds on the main grounds below is not a good place to be during a thunderstorm. I learned since childhood that when there is a thunderstorm one must not stand at any high location. And here we are, on a stage on the highest point of the grounds near the lake.

And then the deluge of rain begins.

As the wind and rain picks up I do not know what to do. The High Shaman's performance dominates the entire scene, He continues, oblivious to everything happening around him outside. He is in that inner universe he mentioned at the discussion yesterday. It

is now very dark, and one can now only see the shaman stepping and chanting in the flashes of lightning. His chanting is drowned by the sound of the deluge of rain, and crashes of thunder. I grab Russ by the arm. It is all happening so fast there isn't time to think. I see in the flashes that even the dignitaries are scared and frozen to their spots. Everyone wonders what they should do. All the while the High Shaman is chanting and dancing, chanting and dancing. It is as if it would be improper for anyone to move while the High Shaman is still in the middle of his performance. Nobody moves. And since nobody else did, neither did I.

“Crash!!!”

I feel like I am hit by a sledgehammer. I see a bright light. I see all the animals I have hunted and killed. I hear all the animals thanking me for showing them respect. They say ‘You must continue. You deserve to be a hunter like the wolf or eagle, to keep the balance. We must give you luck.’

I fall to the floor of the stage.

I don't know how long I am unconscious – maybe only several seconds, but when I awake I am still in the downpour and the thunderstorm is still going on. My brother was similarly jolted and similarly comes to. We have both been hit by a lightning bolt.

I now glance around the stage. I see the High Shaman now finally sitting exhausted on the stage, his

performance over. His assistant, his 'Helper', an old woman, rushes to his aid. I learn later that all genuine shamans need Helpers, assistants, to help them come out of their trances and back into external reality. Otherwise they can get stuck there like being in a dream and unable to wake up. Now all the dignitaries finally react, ducking to the stage and then some fleeing from the stage into the shelter of tarpaulins behind the stage, or even climbing under the stage.

"Russ!" I shout crawling across the stage to where he has fallen. "Are you alright?"

"I think so. That was quite a jolt."

There is utter confusion also in the crowds. Half the crowd is cowering from the might of the storm going on – the driving rain, the flashing lightning. The other half wants to take some kind of action to get to shelter.

I check again the situation of the Shaman. Still seated on the stage, bent over, completely spent. His Helper, the old woman, is behind him and over him, speaking to him. She is his path back to reality.

I and Russ are still a little stunned from the jolt and remain on the stage. We are completely drenched so finding shelter will not be of any more use. We will stay as I don't think it is over yet. The rain lessens. The lightning flashes and thunderclaps become more distant. The storm passes as quickly as it came. Within five minutes the driving rain and thunder are

gone, and in ten minutes the rain has reduced to a drizzle. Great grey clouds are still blowing over our heads – the enormous tail end of Thunderbird, it seems. And then the clouds break up and we can see snatches of blue sky.

What is all this supposed to mean?

The High Shaman opens his eyes, recovers his strength, straightens up. At first helped by the old woman, he gets up to his feet. She retires to the back of the stage again. He still commands the stage. All eyes are on him. I and Russ have not gone anywhere, nor have most of the crowd and dignitaries on the stage. We stand as before, studying the shaman, looking for some direction. The dignitaries who have taken cover return to their places on the stage. Spectators who had scattered, return. Everyone knows that the High Shaman has not finished yet.

Indeed. He has not said what the Thunderbird has decided in regards to me and Russ.

He steps forward, and with raised arms, he casts his eyes towards the sky and says:

“Thunderbird has approved!”

The crowd cheers. I smile and wave to the crowd.

I suppose that if the thunderbolt had killed us, that would have indicated he had not approved! I think sarcastically.

The Shaman's work on the stage is now over. His contact with the Thunderbird spirit is, in the minds of all present, a profound accomplishment.

## 24. I am Celebrated

The lightning did not directly run through the stage structure, but through the drenched surface of water, first the flagpole then our drenched clothes. and then the wet structure of the wooden stage. Both I and Russ discover that some of our hair and portions of our clothes are singed or burnt from the current going over our surface. Better the hair and trousers get burnt than my flesh!

“Thunderbird only wished to make a statement,” I say wryly to Russ.

The sun breaks through, and the closing ceremonies will now resume, even if everyone is soaking wet. The air is warm, and being wet doesn't matter too much.

I and Russ are lead to the backstage as the activities on stage continue – speeches, dancing, music, drums. They let Russ free, giving back into his possession our backpacks and my bow and quiver of arrows. But they want me to stay. Several women surround me and take charge of me.

Elina joins us just then. She too is still a little stunned by all that happened, which she viewed from the crowds.

“Are you alright...?”

"I think so," I reply. "Maybe my hair is singed in places. Now they want me for something. They are not through with me yet."

"It is official, Riia. You are the most outstanding young competitor of the Games. You won all gold medals in everything you entered and as a result, your total score is 21, the highest among all the competitors."

"I guess they want to keep me for that, I guess," I say as I wait for what they want from me next.

The women motion for me to come with them. I say bye to Elina as they take me to the backstage area where performers prepare themselves for performances. I already experienced the backstage area a little when I was in the Wilderness Fashion competition and needed to work on my decorations in my hair.

"We'll hang around in front of the stage," Elina, calls after me, referring also to Russ.

It seems I am to be prepared for the presentation to me of the Thunderbird crown. These enthusiastic women around me, it appears, have been assigned for the task to make me look the part.

It seems they decide first of all that I am too dirty. My hunting jacket is removed. My manly trousers and boots too are departed from my body. I am shown parts of my trousers that were burnt. The older

woman in charge indicates I should remove my underwear too. I notice it too has burn marks.

"But everything was washed yesterday," I protest. "And I also swam in the lake in the swim marathon."

"Sweat Lodge," says the woman seriously. "It's to make you purified inside and out."

I know something about the widespread practice of the sweat lodge among many of the Innat peoples. It is not entirely new to me. Mr. Thomasson built one once when I went hunting with him and Chip. We sat together in a very small confined dome wigwam, sealed tight with a tarpaulin thrown over a frame of bent saplings. But we had something to wear for modesty sake. Here they have removed everything and want me to go with them naked.

"You want me to be entirely naked?"

"No men. Just go with the women. The young one, your age, Sirrah here, will accompany you inside and take care of you."

The other women remain clothed. I and this young woman named Sirrah, both naked, have large towels to wear as we go up a path behind the backstage area to the sweat lodge. It is a dome structure made airtight with skins, and less than my height. The heat is made by stones heated in a firepit outside, being rolled inside into a pit in the middle. If the recent torrent of rain had put out the fire, evidently someone had fired it up again as soon as the



storm was over. The stones would have been put inside by now and the inside heated.

The woman, Sirrah, is my guide. She motions or tells me what to do. This is not just a bath, I am told again, but a spiritual ritual, a purification ritual – to cleanse not just my body but my soul as well.

She gives her towel to one of the attending women outside, and indicates I should do so too. Then she indicates I should crawl in after her. The doorway is small, and covered with a skin, which has to be pushed aside. There is a blast of heat on my face. Inside, I see the glowing hot rocks in a pit in the middle. I am to sit cross-legged on one side of it and she the other. She secures the flap of skin that covers the doorway, and it is dark. As my eyes adjust to the dark, I can see from the faint red glow of the rocks, and make out Sirrah, the woman opposite.

Sirrah then speaks quietly in a language I have never heard before. In our world mass media has made English the world language, and most of the earlier languages have been forgotten - surviving only in recordings in archives. Perhaps she is speaking in an ancient language of her Innat people. If so, she would be one of the rare people who takes the pains to learn another language than the universal English language.

The heat makes me perspire. I remember how that one previous time I experienced this, Mr. Thomasson

told me it should be thought of like returning to the womb, and when emerging, you have a bit of a rebirth – cleansed and new. That is the objective of it - rebirth after cleansing away all the dirt and grime - both inside and out. I thought about cleansing away my guilt about telling them I came from a tribe called Cwano. It wasn't about being forgiven, but about cleansing it away as if it was grime in my mind. Oh how lovely it would be to be actually as pure of mind as a newborn baby. That would be the whole objective, I think.

After about ten minutes, and we are both glistening with sweat, Sirrah leads me outside. I find myself surrounded by women with pails of water. They pour the cold water over my shoulders, and scrub me with soap. Pores open, dirt washes easily away. Then I am wrapped up again in the large towel, and lead back to the backstage facilities. I presume Sirrah is doused too, but I have lost sight of her.

Wrapped in the large towel, I am seated down. I relax and let the women work on me. My hair is dried and combed. The singed parts are trimmed away. They remove feathers that I still had tied into my hair, as they want to design my hair anew. Feathers and jewellery are put into my hair and around by neck, waist and arms.

Once I have been thoroughly fussed over from top to bottom, I am given a gown made of traditional Innat woven fabric and deerskin. The women fuss over me. I am their work of art. They take great pride in what they are doing. I am their canvas for this Thunder Games. I suppose if the winner had been a male, the treatment would be different - more masculine - but I suspect it would still also begin with the purification in the sweat lodge.

An hour has passed before they are done and I am shown to a full length mirror and I finally see the final result in the reflection. I almost don't recognize myself. I have been miraculously transformed as far from the huntress in the hunting and hiking clothes as I can be.

All the while I have heard the events being carried out on the stage. Speeches, performances, whatnot. And now I am lead back toward the stage, surrounded by these women, these attendants. I wait in the wings with them until they are ready for me on the stage.

Then I am guided to the centre of the stage where High Chief Overman – the tall man who opened the games who exudes a sense of authority and warmth – is waiting, dressed in a ceremonial manner. The High Shaman Thundersky is now nowhere in sight, presumably completely spent and lying down on a cot somewhere.

As I am lead forward, High Chief Overman lifts from a table in front of him, and carries towards me, the Thunderbird Crown that is every four years granted to the overall individual winner of the Games. My female attendants withdraw to the background.

I have a chance to study it before he puts it on my head. It is a wonderfully elaborate headdress consisting of a gold band to go across my forehead and it has a sculptured depiction of the Thunderbird at the front – the same design as on the medals and graphics. This crown is topped by eagle feathers and is therefore also like a headdress.

High Chief Overman speaks to me. The microphone spreads his words throughout the grounds.

“Thunderbird in the form of a quite remarkable sudden storm has decided in front of all the Innat nations gathered here, that even though you are not formally part of the Innat nations, that he considers you, Riia Greenthistle, worthy of being the individual winner of the Thunder Games for this year, from among all the competitors who came here from far and wide. For that we give you the Thunderbird Crown and Mantle, and all the Innat nations give you rights to hunt in any of their hunting territories wherever such rights have been formally defined or later recovered in history. In addition, the Innat peoples are to offer you their hospitality and gifts in

the coming four years until the next Thunder Games.... “

He lifts the crown and places it on my head.

Next a woman elder, also dressed in a ceremonial manner, comes forward from behind me, and lifts a mantle of eagle feathers and beadwork onto my shoulders.

The crowd in the field below erupts in applause and shouts. It is a special moment for the Thunder Games.

I am lead by this woman to a raised seat of honour on the stage, just some moments ago installed, which is something like a throne, situated in the middle towards the back wall of the stage; and I sit there in my crown and costume as drumming and interpretive dance is presented in front of me, the winning group of the Arts finale, telling a modern legend of the Thunderbird.

It is about how civilization came to Mother Earth and poisoned the air, and how Thunderbird became not so much angry as in agony, thrashing about and creating violent storms around the earth. And then finally in the future the damage cause by civilization is reversed, and civilization learns again how to live in harmony with nature. Mother Earth is restored to normal, and the Thunderbird again flies freely without agony or anger, and humankind no longer experiences destructive extreme weather.

In about fifteen minutes the remarkable performance is over.

Then there is a final speech by the High Chief, and dignitaries. They seem similar to the opening ceremonies speeches but shorter. Like some kind of queen or princess, I look on. The closing ceremonies are designed to conclude in mid-afternoon so that some visitors can begin to depart immediately, instead of staying until tomorrow.

And finally it is over. The crowds are told that the next Thunder Games will be held in the continent of Ralia in four years, but of course the specific location is not yet known. Not many here will go there, though, since Ralia is quite far away. Perhaps some of the wealthier nations - those who came here in hover-vehicles which they parked at the dock - will send a handful of representatives.

After the farewell, and the crowds breaking up, the 70th Thunder Games is formally closed, and everyone on the stage becomes casual. Dignitaries, performers and medal winners all accumulate on the stage.

I am now able to get off my throne and mingle. I receive informal congratulations from dignitaries, officials, medal winners alike. Elina and Russ push through everyone to reach me.

“You look absolutely gorgeous!” Elina exclaims. “Like the daughter of Thunderbird you are! See? It worked out alright!!”

“I could have been killed by the lightning bolt,” I shrug.

“But you weren’t because Thunderbird looks kindly on you. Did you see him fly over? He must have been 500 meters long!”

I have to admit that when grey clouds pass by close to the tops of the trees, it can look like an enormous bird flying over.

One of my female attendants appears and approaches me carrying my hunting clothes they had removed, all neatly folded up in a bundle. I recognize her as the Sirrah, from earlier. I take the bundle from her, and Elina then takes the bundle from me, and she hands it to Russ. That’s what younger brothers are for – carrying stuff for their older sisters.

“What is to become with what I am wearing now?” I ask Sirrah before she goes.

“You keep the dress” she says. “The dress is custom-made for you in woodland people designs. Next time, Thunder Games will be in a completely different place. The host people will be different. The theme and culture will be different. The winner may even be a man. The dress is not easily used again, so it is given to the winner. But the crown and mantle you keep only for four years of your reign, and then

the next Thunder Games will give it to the next winner. It is now 70 years old. It is repaired and cleaned often. It represents the Thunderbird, and the Thunderbird is a constant since everywhere on earth there are big thunderstorms. Therefore, the crown and mantle are intended to be passed forward from one outstanding competitor to the next every four years."

"I see," I reply.

Sirrah wishes me good luck.

As Sirrah goes, I express to Elina my amazement that I get to keep the dress I have on. "But I wonder about the crown and mantle. What is the idea of it? What do I do with them for four years?"

"Never mind, Riia," says Elina. "They'll let you know. And they will make sure their records now show your true information, your correct address and everything."

Everyone is still coming up to congratulate me, and Elina gets pushed away. I see Russ come to her rescue, and they move off together. I have a feeling he is not minding Elina in the least! Pushed off to one side, they can only watch the goings on. But High Chief Overman, chances to recognize Russ and Elina, and goes over to them. He extends a hand to Russ. Russ frees his right hand from under the bundle with my regular clothes. The Chief says. "Congratulations to you too. I am told you won two medals as well as the finale, although not gold."



“Thank you, sir,” says Russ.

With warmth and authority he says, “If you are able to, enter again whenever it is again hosted in the northern woodlands.”

I can see Russ actually considering taking up the offer. One can only imagine how a male Grand Winner will be dressed up – perhaps like a warrior. As for me, I’m not the competitive type and can’t see myself wanting to repeat all this again. I don’t know I like the attention on me. I prefer the solitude of the woods.

But something is telling me I will not be able to return to my former life. Now that I am the Grand Winner and will appear on the Innat International Television Channel in a couple weeks, I have a feeling this is not the end of my involvement with the Thunder Games quite yet.

## 25. Back Home

In three days we arrive home. Riddle and Reed see us coming up the path that leads from the forest to our home and come running towards us. Bowser comes as far as his rope allows and barks "Hello! Hello! Hello!"

"You were gone a long time," says Reed. "We were starting to get worried."

"Only a few days longer than the week we planned," I say.

"What did you find?" Riddle inquires excitedly. "What is the forest like further away?" She then sees the fancy birch-bark box I carry in which there is the mantel I won, and the crown, and which has been too large to put into either backpack and which I carried separately. The ceremonial dress, which I get to keep, is folded in my backpack which is carried by Russ at the moment. I and Russ have of course been wearing our singed wilderness hiking and hunting clothes for the journey back.

"What's in the birch bark box?" Riddle asks. "Why is it covered with fancy stitching and designs?"

"A crown and a mantle." I say. "I only have it for four years. A dress they made for me I keep. It's a woodland traditional dress. It's inside my backpack."

"Riia won it as the prize for being the Grand Winner of the 70th Thunder Games," explains Russ.

“Thunder Games? What’s that?”

“It happened to be held in the valley about 30 kilometers from here,” I explain. “Grand Winner means I scored higher than anyone else in the competitions, although in my case mostly for hunting skills, especially bow and arrow shooting. Was there anything about it on television?”

“Maybe there was a mention of something called Thunder Games in the news,” says Reed, “but it was meaningless to us. I didn’t listen.”

“They keep its time and location secret from everyone until it begins,” I explain. “But anyone can find out the general part of the world ahead of time. It would probably be on their television channel. It’s because they don’t know much ahead of time where it will be held exactly, and it helps if it does not attract a general public who doesn’t understand Innat ways.”

I leave my bow and quiver, on the grass, and unbox the mantle.

“I can put on the mantle to show you ....” I unfold it, let it fall loose, and Russ lifts it around my shoulders.

“Neat huh?” I say.

Riddle and Reed are awestruck. I do a turn.

“They also gave me an Innat traditional style dress which they made for me, which I get to keep. I’ll put it on later. They began making it on the day before, when they knew who would be the winner.”

“That was before the organizers determined we were frauds,” adds Russ jokingly.

“But it all worked out well after the Thunderbird approved of us, apparently. And there is a crown that comes with it.”

The crown is also in the fancily crafted birch bark container that is designed for the mantle and crown. I remove it and carefully place it on my head. I parade around in both the mantle and crown just outside our house.

“Cool! Cool! Cool!” barks Bowser, jumping about.

“Yeah cool! Neat!” exclaims Riddle and Reed. “Tell us everything about it! How did it all happen?...”

“Later,” I say, picking up everything I had put down, to continue into the house. “We’ll tell our whole tale when we are together for supper. Where is Father?”

“He’s working with Mr. Thomasson. He needed him to repair something.”

“We’re totally exhausted,” I proclaim as we head inside, “both mentally and physically,... and hungry. We tried to return as quickly as possible, since we’ve been gone more than a week and tried to make as much distance as we could these past several days. Right now, I want to have a bite to eat and go to sleep in my normal bed. I’ve had enough spruce bough or grass mattresses for now.

“And unpredictable weather,” added Russ.

Russ and I stagger into the house and make our way to our rooms, to throw off our dirty hunting gear and lay down for some rest. We have been walking all day since dawn. It is now late afternoon.

Ahh! Back home! I am so happy to be in my bed in my normal world again and I fall asleep immediately.

Before long Riddle comes in and wakes me.

What? Who? Where am I?

"Supper is ready, Riia," Riddle says. "You have to get up or else you'll be awake at night. Father is back, and wants to hear your story. We all do."

"It seems like I've had a most amazing dream about competing in a great festival, or is it real....?"

"Of course it is real. Look at the really fancy mantle and crown or headdress you have draped over your chair! I mean - wow! How in the world did you get that!! Reed, me, and Father can't wait for you to tell us!!"

"Alright, I'll get up and come up for supper, Riddle," I say, dragging myself out of bed. "Since I'm undressed for bed and in my underwear, I think I'll put on the whole outfit for the full effect for you all to see."

"Father will be speechless!" replies Riddle. "I'll now awaken Russ and get him to supper too."

It takes me some time to put on everything, arrange my hair, add all the jewelry. When I finally

come up to the main floor, everyone is already sitting at the kitchen table.

Russ and Reed erupt in a cheer when they see me.

"Here comes the queen of the Thunder Games!" shouts Russ, reacting to the vision that I present to them.

Father turns towards me and does a double take. His wide eyes invite me to explain, and I say: "You won't believe what happened to us on our journey."

"It's best not to ask too many questions, Dad," says Reed. "We'll see it all on the Innat International Television Channel broadcast in a couple weeks. We have to make sure we subscribe to that channel before it airs!"

"Really?" replies Father. "Well I guess we will have to do that then."

"In fact," I say, as I take my seat in full costume at the table, where Riddle has already put out a plate and cutlery for me, "It is wise not to speak much about it to anyone till then, since the television broadcast will explain it all - from when I began winning the bow contests to when they finally gave me all this...It would be far simpler than me trying to explain over and over to people."

"Very well," says Father. "I'll see to getting that Innat Channel, and I'll try to be patient myself."

"In fact," I say, "we could have a viewing party and invite neighbours that we know well, especially

the Thomassons, who have the Innat grandmother, so that I can wear this full outfit and answer questions raised by the broadcast.”

“Very well,” says Father. “We’ll do that. But right now, can you give a brief explanation?”

Russ was quick to summarize it all. “We happened to get caught up in the 70th Innat International Thunder Games that were held in the wilderness where we went, and Riia won every competition she entered. Since we weren’t from any recognized Innat community that had registered, Riia was almost disqualified, but Thunderbird came along and made things right. That’s the brief version.”

“Is that right?”

“Well, I should add,” I say, “I had the highest score of all competitors, and they have a custom of rewarding and celebrating that person, and so after I got the blessing of Thunderbird...”

“He struck her and me with a gentle bolt of lightning..” interjects Russ his mouth half-full.

Meanwhile Riddle serves me some cuts of meat and some vegetables for my plate. I continue:

“...they had a ceremony where they had made for me this elaborate dress and jewelry I just put on to show you, which I may keep, and then put this mantle around my shoulders and the crown or headdress thing on my head, which I have to give back in a while. I am thus a symbol for Innat youth for

the next four years until the next Thunder Games, at which time the mantle and crown, passed down for years - cleaned and repaired each time - are given to the next winning competitor."

"Oh," replies Father. "You have this mantle and crown for four years? And what are you to do with them? Put it away in the closet for four years? Obviously there is a purpose to it, Riia. You probably have some kind of role to play."

"You're right Father," I say. "I sensed there was more to it. I have to play some kind of role for the Innat world for the next four years. What is it? "

"Too bad we're not Innat," says Russ. "I expect all the Innat youth who competed knew all about it and were pursuing this honour."

"You didn't read about it in the literature did you, Russ?"

Russ shook his head. "I was only looking at the list of competitions."

"Well don't worry, Riia," says Father. "I'm sure they will contact you shortly about it. Probably after the broadcast you are talking about has been aired."

"Maybe you will be asked to tour Innat communities and make speeches wearing it," Riddle suggests with gleeful anticipation.

"Maybe you are like a queen, a symbol, to inspire people," offers Reed.



“Oh, dear,” I say. “What have they designed for me...?!”

“Well, eat your supper, Riia.” says Riddle. “You don’t want it to get cold.”

“Alright,” I say as I commence eating. I look down at all the elaborate designs on the deerskin dress, and mumble to myself. “I’d better be careful not to spill any food on this marvelous costume.”

I think of taking it all off before eating, but decide not to - it would take too long. I like wearing it. I guess it really is an honour, even though I don’t quite understand. I expect in a while they will explain what I have gotten into. If Innat youth strove for the honour in the Games, it couldn’t be too bad...

# Epilogue

During the next weeks, I try my best to lie low and not speak to anyone about my experiences with the Thunder Games. My father, brother, and Riddle, try their best to respect my desire to keep it quiet until the big two hour television program summarizing the whole event, in which the editing is sure to feature me. Reed keeps bothering Father about making sure we get access to the Innat International Television Channel as soon as possible.

The only people to whom I reveal about my experience with the Thunder Games is Chip and his father. I learn that they have subscriptions to many channels and the Innat International Television Channel is one of them.

“We’ve had it ever since my mother was living here with us, when my father was alive,” says Mr. Thomasson. “We never removed it. I’ve watched it now and then - but who has the time to watch television here in the rural world where there is real stuff to do? Otherwise I might have known about the Thunder Games being somewhere in this area. But good for you, Riia! I knew you were good - you always go into the wilderness and have plenty of experience. You are unusual in that way.”

“I’m beginning to think it’s because my mother is up in space, “ I muse. “Maybe subconsciously because my mother is up in space inside high technology, it was important to me to be the opposite - to be close to the earth with low technology by contrast.”

“You may have psycho-analyzed yourself correctly,” Mr. Thomasson laughs. “Anyway, your family is welcome to come over here to watch the summary coverage of the Thunder Games, if your father doesn’t get the subscription in time. And I’ll let my mother know too so she can watch for you during the broadcast.”

Despite my best efforts to keep it quiet, Greenville is soon abuzz with rumours about my having been honoured somehow for my bow skills in an upcoming broadcast, and our high school teachers set about opening up the school gymnasium which is sometimes a community hall, for that day, since not many rural people subscribe to the Innat Channel, while Greenville High subscribes to all the television channels. They intend to put up a large screen and fill the gymnasium with chairs and want me to speak after the broadcast wearing all my regalia.

Oh no! I think. More attention! I squirm. When I tell Mr. Thomasson, he says “You might as well get used to it, Riia. As the winner and representative of Innat youth for the next four years, you will often be called to be in front of crowds.”

“Oh no! Why didn’t someone tell me? Had I known I would have tried my best not to win!”

Mr. Thomasson laughs. “You know that is impossible. You have a strong competitive spirit. You will not allow yourself to deliberately not do your best. If you like, I’ll accompany you to the gymnasium. Everyone knows that I am half-Innat, so it would seem appropriate. And I will make sure you honour the mantle and crown properly.”

I can see that Mr. Thomasson is proud of me too and looks forward to introducing the young woman, me, he mentored a little in the ways of the wilderness. He’ll no doubt speak about how years ago I visited him for some guidance on making a bow and arrows.

So in the end, when the day comes, my family and Chip are together at our place to watch the broadcast on our television, Riddle recording it to send excerpts to our mother in space, while Mr. Thomasson accompanies me to the Greenville High gymnasium and I watch it there. I squirm at many parts as I remember the events, and in other parts I feel rather proud of myself. When I see the excerpts of the swimming marathon, as I anticipated there is voice-over commenting on my and Elina’s swimwear fashion, and how lovely we look. I blush at that point and hope nobody saw me blush.

When the broadcast is over two hours later, Mr. Thomasson helps me put on my mantle and crown,

brings me onto a stage the school has set up, and guides a question and answer session with the proud Greenville residents - who now know a lot more about Innat culture, and me, than they did before.

Afterward I make contact through the Worldcomm with Elina, and we exchange our opinions about the broadcast - with both praise and criticism. I then ask Elina what she knew about the role - since the actual Innat youth would already know what the honour entails, and she explains in general how it means I would now travel around the world visiting Innat communities, and being a symbol.

"You'll see the world, Riia," says Elina through our Worldcomm connection. "Everyone is thrilled for you - except maybe Ikka and her gang, who probably now not only resent being beaten by teenagers, but also a girl who didn't even come from an Innat community. So watch out."

Then afterward, I await the inevitable - being contacted by the International Innat organization which will let me know what they have in store for me.

THE END OF BOOK ONE



# Background Information and More

## About the Novel

*The Thunder Games* depicts a future world in which a thousand years has passed since the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) said early in 2014 that *greenhouse gas emissions have grown almost twice as fast in the past decade as they did in the previous 30 years and called for a shift from fossil fuels like (fossil) oil to renewable energy to avoid rising sea level and an increase in extreme weather events such as storms, flooding and droughts.*

The response of government and industry so far is to deny things are as bad as the scientists say they are. The only reason there is any serious talk at all now to 'climate change' is that in recent years, there have been unusually extreme weather events that make it difficult to dismiss climate change as the cause. The melting of arctic ice, increase in severity of tornadoes, hurricanes, thunderstorms, floods and droughts is now undeniable proof something is going awry and humans are responsible.

*The Thunder Games* tale proposes that this slow response will be typical for centuries to come and the carbon dioxide levels keep rising and humankind becomes used to extreme weather rather than acting. In our tale, no concerted effort to bring down carbon dioxide in the atmosphere begins until 2700, at which time scientists are finally taken seriously, and they collectively launch the "Green Lung Initiatives" in which plant growth is promoted more than ever before (since plants absorb carbon dioxide) in order to achieve a net slow reduction of the accumulated carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.



## THUNDER GAMES : BACKGROUND

Accordingly, vast areas of wilderness are set aside purely to be carbon dioxide absorbing lungs.

Layered on this background, we have descendants of Native peoples. We assume that Native culture does not vanish but becomes stronger as the core idea of aboriginal culture - of living in harmony with nature - is proven the ideal! It inspires a festival in the tradition of aboriginal multi-nation gatherings dating back to prehistory. Also drawing inspiration from other 'Games' in their world and media coverage, this festival is called *The Thunder Games* and is dedicated to the ever-present mythological god of thunder manifest in the weather, which in Native North American tradition is the Thunderbird.

In the tale of *The Thunder Games*, it is now about 1000 years after humankind first discovered that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels was causing a warming of climate and making weather systems go awry with extreme weather events - tornados, hurricanes, floods and droughts.

The arctic ice has now disappeared, sea level risen, and the arctic permafrost melted, now adding carbon dioxide and methane that had been previously frozen in it..

Throughout the last 1000 years, humanity had not responded adequately to the climate change, because the oil and gas industry along with governments tantalized by short term economic gain, remained in continued denial and inaction.

Now there was only one solution – to develop ways to consume carbon dioxide and/or methane, to remove it from the atmosphere. The only practical way of doing it on a world-wide scale was to promote the plant life that

## THUNDER GAMES : BACKGROUND

naturally consumes carbon dioxide and breathes out oxygen.

All peoples of the Earth became united and introduced “The Green Lung Initiatives” to restore forests jungles and seas to their original form as the ‘lungs of the earth’ to draw down carbon dioxide in the atmosphere

It is now a couple of centuries into the Green Lung programs and vast areas of the continents of Nomerica, Somerica, Ropa, Panasia, Fricia, and Ralia, have restored forest wilderness, promoted plant plankton in the oceans, outlawed farming practices that used inefficient open fields, and generally promoted plant life in all places exposed to the sun.

Ancient wilderness ways are relevant more than ever before, whether using primitive or modern tools. The ancient aboriginal, the Innat culture of harmony with nature is increasingly relevant as a promoter of the philosophy of respecting and harmonizing with nature..

We go to the eastern edge of one of the Eastern North American (Nomerican) mountain ranges, now completely turned into pure wilderness again by the Green Lung Initiatives of centuries past.

The simple story here is of a young woman, a graduating high school student, who happens to have acquired wilderness skills from bow hunting in the adjacent Wilderness Reserve becoming a competitor in *The Thunder Games* even though she is not Native (‘Innat’ in our tale). - AP 2014

## About 'Climate Change'

The word 'Climate Change' means that the world climate is changing. Natural climate change would constitute events like the development of an Ice Age, or its disappearing.

But today science is united in the claims that the change today is not a natural one (although the deniers will try to believe the changes like the melting of the arctic ice are natural events), but caused by human behaviour.

When you think of it, you don't have to do any science to realize we humans are causing it.

Nature produces 'greenhouse gases' naturally all the time. The emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, and other gases into the atmosphere from natural decay, forest fires, volcanoes, etc, have been going on for a million years; but at the same time, nature also has developed ways of cleaning the atmosphere at the same time, so that there is a balance between greenhouse gases going up and greenhouse gases coming down. In this novel, we focus on the way green plants absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Thus if later the green plants die, decay or burn and emit greenhouse gases, that simply balances the many years when they were alive and removing carbon dioxide. Other ways in which the atmosphere is cleaned is for example how gases dissolve into moisture in the air, and then falls down to the ground when there is rain.

But what nature has never learned to handle, is greenhouse gases that have been locked underneath the earth in fossil coal, fossil oil, or fossil gas. Remember the key word is 'fossil' meaning it comes from underground.

## THUNDER GAMES : BACKGROUND

Nature has never designed itself to handle greenhouse gases coming from underground, from fossil fuels that have never been plants (except for millions of years ago, which is not relevant in the short timeframe in which our modern nature has existed.)

Anything brought into nature's established systems from the outside represent a burden on nature's established systems. This applies to ANYTHING, including introducing unnatural chemicals, etc. This is generally speaking called "Pollution".

It is important to realize that "pollution" means to add something new into nature's system because otherwise we will not recognize the pollution. For example if you burn wood or charcoal made from wood, you are NOT producing "pollution" because that charcoal was once a tree cleaning the atmosphere. But if you burn a lump of fossil coal from under the earth, then you ARE producing "pollution" even if the greenhouse gases from burning are the same! It is "pollution" because fossil coal was frozen in the ground for millions of years. It comes from outside the normal carbon cycle that nature handles.

The same applies to burning oil made from plants compared to fossil oil that has been outside of nature's systems for millions of years. Or burning gases made from decaying plant matter compared to burning fossil gases that have not been part of nature's normal cycle for millions of years.

The climate change comes from this added pollution greenhouse gases capturing more heat from the sun, and if nature does not have the ability to remove it, then these

## THUNDER GAMES : BACKGROUND

added greenhouse gases just keep accumulating and the climate just keeps warming up.

But let us not forget heat pollution. Burning fuels also releases heat into the environment. If the fuels are natural, then nature knows how to handle the heat. But heat from burning fossil fuels is obviously new heat and therefore polluting heat. It simply adds to the heat of the atmosphere on top of the heat gained by the excess greenhouse gases.

What other human behaviour will introduce new heat into the atmosphere – heat that nature does not normally produce. The most obvious and dangerous is nuclear energy. It unleashes heat from atoms. Nature on the earth does not normally release nuclear energy from atoms. Nuclear energy is used to generate electricity. The generation of electricity from nuclear reactions does so by generating heat that turns turbines that generate electricity, but next that electricity operates heaters and motors, all of which generate heat. 100% of energy generated by nuclear reactions is ADDED to the atmosphere.

Thus if we have one electric heater running on electricity from natural energy for example from windmills, falling water, etc, and another electric heater running on electricity from nuclear energy, which one is pouring new heat into the atmosphere? The heater plugged into electricity from the nuclear reactor. As in the case of greenhouse gases from wood charcoal compared to fossil coal, we cannot tell which is pollution from what it produces.

## THUNDER GAMES : BACKGROUND

If humans add new substances or heat to nature's systems, that nature's systems cannot naturally remove, then humans have to deliberately develop artificial systems to remove it artificially. If we produce new heat, new greenhouse gases, new chemicals, that nature cannot handle then WE have to remove it ourselves. It is simple to understand.

In the story *Thunder Games*, future humankind had to take deliberate measures to draw down all the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere artificially because nature was unable to do so. By overplanting the earth with green, humankind was giving nature the added boost it needs.

In the world in *Thunder Games*, humankind has learned to work with nature, to help nature. The principle of living in harmony with nature, a principle learned by prehistoric peoples who lived in nature, long long ago – on the small scale of the part of the wilderness in which they lived.