

Beauty is only Zlin deep

By Eliza ambrov Halwyn

“He’s in the deferment suite, he went in there this morning”.

Never had Sosu Georgina ever seen anyone so pleased to see her!

“These stupid trains!” she divested herself of hat and gloves and shook the snow out of her coat. “Leaving a first order channel without a Donor somewhere like this! Talk about cutting it fine!” She handed over a blue assignment card without comment.

The Second Order Donor who had greeted her lead her off towards the awaiting Channel. “Tell me about it, I was terrified I was going to have to give him transfer myself! He has been on edge ever since turn over - without a First around, it’s been tough.” He stopped outside a well shielded door and signalled for entry.

Georgina took a second to compose herself before opening the door. Inside, a short, thin, young and very scared looking Channel sat. He was beyond seeing, beyond feeling anything except the drain of selyn out of his system as he sunk into attrition. Georgina immediately took control of the fields in the room - easily as she was carrying the most selyn within miles - and gave out a warm nageric~ Your safe, here for you, not going to let you go ~ .

The young Channel trembled with relief. He leant heavily on her field, reaching for the promise of her selyn. And it was there, instantly for him, warm, golden - but most importantly - plentiful. Still fearing that it might be removed at any moment he wrapped his tentacles gently around her wrists. With practiced experience Georgina raised his intil until any movement on her part would have triggered an attack - and then leaned forward to complete the circuit and allow him to start the flow of seyln, the life giving force, from her to him.

The Transfer was over in a second. The young Channel fell forward to lean on her plentiful bosoms, sobbing with relief. Soothingly Georgina patted his hair in

a motherly fashion, crooning “It’s alright, you are safe now, let it all out, I’m here for you”.

Finally it occurred to the Channel that he had never even met this woman, he didn’t even know her name. He sat up and looked at her - and could not help startling at what he saw.

There in front of him was possibly the ugliest woman he had ever seen! While all gens could be considered large when compared to simes, this woman was the fattest he had ever seen. Her features almost disappeared under massive cheeks, and her chins were multiple. Her lips were thin, her nose was enormous and her eyes were small. Her hair was grey and thin and plastered to her head from removing her hat after wearing it for so long. When she opened her mouth to talk to him her teeth were crooked and several were missing! Never had he seen anyone like her before.

Georgina noticed his shock and sighed. Normally she was both zlinned and seen before transfer, a Channel knew what was coming. She had no illusions about what she looked like. She was as she was and that was that, nothing could change it! But she also knew that she was a very special Donor. Not only was she one of the rare “Firsts” but she usually worked with problem cases and by the time they left her care, they no longer had problems. It was a talent that made up for her physical appearance.

But here, and now, this kid, this young Channel, was going to have to be reminded that there was more than just physical beauty.

“As one First, to all Firsts....” she said softly.

The Channel blushed. “I’m sorry Sosu. Thank you, I was really worried this time”.

Georgina frowned “”This time”? How many times have you been late? You are so young! You can’t be very far out of first year even!”

The young boy looked uncomfortable “I’m 3 months out of first year, I changed over early - I’m 12 natal years”

It was Georgina's turn to be shocked. "And they left you here, by yourself? Doing work a channel much older should be doing? And without a Donor at hand?" Although low field from her transfer, her horror at his situation was obvious. Seeing his discomfort she relaxed.

"You probably don't remember, my name is Sosu Georgina ambov Halwyn. You can call me Georgina if you like, or even George - I'll answer to anything. And, according to our assignment card, you are Hajene Benedict - are you called Ben?" She smiled warmly at his nod. "Now, let's get you out of this miserable little room - you need some food in you!"

Georgina heaved herself off the lounge. "Which way to the dining room?"

"This way," Ben said as he headed towards the door, watching her over his shoulder in fascination as she stood. Never had he seen a woman, of either larity, so tall! He held the door opened for her and marvelled at how gracefully she carried herself, despite her great size. Remembering his position he pulled himself together - all 5 foot of him. "I'm sorry that your trip here was not a good one, and that your greeting was so rushed. I hope that the rest of your stay will be more pleasant."

"I intend it to be. I'm suppose to be leaving again in a week, they only asked me to stop in here because the Donor that they had for you caught sick. I'm suppose to be going to the hospital in Bane, but there is no way I'm leaving here yet. Right now, however, I want a meal, a shower and a good sleep, in that order!"

Ben was still a little stunned and overwhelmed by the enormous gen. He took her to the dining room in silence. Because of the odd hours that they kept at the Centre, there was always some form of food available. Ben helped himself to a small salad while Georgina piled a tray with stew, bread and fruit. She led the boy to a table and unloaded her tray. Then, once Ben had sat down, she took his salad and placed the stew in front of him. Ben's mouth opened to voice a protest, but the large Donor quickly interrupted.

"Uh uh! You are a growing boy, and you can't grow much on salad." She rifled through her bag and pulled out a notepad and a pencil. "Now, I'm going to write

out a menu that you are to keep to. Every morning you are to have either cereal or bread, I want you to stop for half an hour every day and have a rest and a piece of fruit, and every night you are to have a meal - but make sure that you don't just stick to salad every night!"

Ben looked at all the food in dismay. "I can't eat all this!" he exclaimed. But even as he said it, he realised that it really did smell good, and that he was hungry. He picked up his spoon and started in on the soupy stew.

Georgina smiled at him, remembering when her own sons was that age. "I know what it's like, especially at your age. You feel like you don't need to waste the time to eat. But think of it as something you do for your health, like brushing your teeth, or doing your Channeling exercises."

Ben listened intently, while he spooned the food into his mouth. "How did you lose your teeth?" he asked.

Georgina stared at him, open mouthed. "Well, you have me speechless! I can't remember the last time that happened! Not backward about coming forward are you?"

Ben dropped his spoon "Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to pry! I just... You mentioned teeth.... It just..."

Georgina laughed out loud. "It's ok! It's ok! I don't mind, it's good to find someone who is innocent enough to speak their mind these days. Just took me by surprise, that's all!" She pushed aside the now empty salad plate. "It was many years ago now. I was in a rather bad accident. It's kind of a long story, but it involves a group of Distect raiders and a run away carriage. I was inside, the driver was pushed off, but the sime that did that pushing got pulled off too, and the horses took off. Next thing I know I was flying through the air - the carriage had tipped over and went down into a steep embankment. Both horses had to be put down - I broke my leg and lost two teeth, but they let me live! Lucky I'm not a horse, hey?"

She smiled at the boy and he smiled back. "That sounds like something from a book! What happened then?"

“Ha! Silly fools hadn’t bought any Gens with them. I slammed every sime in zlinning distance. That was before I discovered that I couldn’t move! So there I was, stuck in a carriage, stuck in a gully with two dead horses. I knew that eventually the pain would get to me, I didn’t know how bad the damage was at that point. I thought I’d have to wait until the shenflecken Distect would wake up - a Distect channel would be better then no channel in that circumstance, believe me. But I didn’t have to. I was pretty high field at the time and with my broken leg it was as good as a flare gun. Before I knew it help had come. They captured the group that had attacked, and took me off to get healed. But you can’t regrow teeth, which is why it’s important to eat a healthy meal - so you don’t lose yours before you have to! Now, finished?”

To Bens surprise he found that not only had he finished the stew and the fruit, but that he didn’t feel overly full.

Georgina grinned at him again. “Well, I’d like to see my room please, and then I’d like at least eight hours uninterrupted sleep. What time do you want me to start work tomorrow, Hajene?”

Ben was somewhat taken aback by the sudden change in her manner, from friendly and motherly to serious and business like. “Ummm, I don’t know, I’ll have to ask Toni.”

Georgina radiated surprise “Who is Toni and why do you have to ask them?”

“Toni is the Second Order Donor who was looking after me before you arrived. He has been doing up the shifts and I don’t know who he will want you to work with.”

“Nonsense! I’m working with you and I’ll make sure that I’m with you for at least another month. Who else would I work with up here?”

Ben looked at the resolute expression on the face of the mountain of a woman who sat across from him, and decided that he wouldn’t want to try to cross her. He thought she was probably capable of handling anyone, sime or gen, if she put her mind to it.

“Well, I don’t start work again for another…” he checked his internal clock “eighteen hours. So I guess then. I’m doing collections then for six hours, then transfers for 6 hours, then I’ll probably be needed in the hospital for awhile.”

“That’s quite a day! Do you usually have a rotation of Gens? How many Donors work here anyway?”

“There’s Toni, he is the highest 2nd we have. Then Marle, another 2nd, and we have three 3rds, Jem, Able, and Twist - that’s not her real name, that’s just what we call her. We have another 3rd, Beau, staying here temporarily with a 3rd order Channel, May, who is working here for a few months as well. And we have me, Joh, who is a second, and three third order Channels, not counting May; Ruth, Leona and Edwin.”

Georgina’s mind was swimming with all the names and ranks. “You might have to introduce me around tomorrow. I didn’t sleep well on the train, I really need my bed.”

Ben jumped up “Oh! I’m sorry, you said that and I’m being thoughtless! I should have seen how tired you are, without zlinning…”

“You can’t zlin this close to transfer, hey? Some Channels can, some can’t. You can learn to you know. I’ll show you some exercises. We can work on it.” Georgina stifled a massive yawn. “Tomorrow”.

Chapter 2

Ten hours later Georgina was back in the dining room eating breakfast. She had just finished her two boiled eggs and was on her second cup of tea when Toni, the 2nd order Donor who had greeted her the previous day, came in.

“Good morning Sosu!” He said cheerfully. He looked like a man who had had a

restful night sleep after a trouble had been lifted from his shoulders - which, of course, was exactly what had happened.

“Good morning - Toni, right? Just call me Georgie.” Georgina leaned over and pulled out the seat next to her. “Put it there. Would you like tea?”

“Thanks, just black, no sugar thanks. We need to order more trin, we ran out last week. We seem to regularly run out of things up here.”

Georgina poured the tea and handed over the mug. “I’m glad you came in, saves me having to go looking for you. I’d like to send a telegram this morning, I’ll need someone to take me to the office. Then I’d like to work with Hajene Benedict through with donations. Who will be helping him with transfers and in the hospital?”

Toni looked a little surprised at being asked so many questions so early in the morning. “Uh, I was going to work with him this morning, but if you want to, that’s fine, I’ll take the afternoon. The thirds work rotation in the hospital, there are usually two on call at any time. I don’t usually schedule any specific Donor for hospital time. Unless there is an emergency it’s pretty quiet in there anyway. At the moment we only have one patient, a Gen farmer who had a timber from a barn roof fall on him.”

“You do the scheduling?” Georgina finished her tea and put the mug down.

“Usually yes, unless I’m needed to look after Hajene Benedict or Joh..”

Georgina’s mind lit up with the mention of the names. “Ah yes, Hajene was telling me last night. Let me see if I remember. You have three sets of thirds, two sets of seconds, and a floating pair of thirds just visiting. How come you have a single first order Channel with no first order Donor?”

“That is the question indeed! Originally there was one second order Channel up here. I’m suppose to qualify first, they were sending up a first order Channel - but then Hajene Benedict was the one that they sent..”

Georgina looked at the other gen in surprise. “And? You don’t trust him to

qualify you?”

“Well, there is no other first here to see how close a match we are. I know on paper it all works out - but.... Shen! Have you SEEN the lad? I’ve never seen anyone out of first year who is still so much a child!”

“He is small, I’ll give you that. But I think he will do a lot of growing very quickly, both physically and mentally, especially if he is given stimulation. That’s why I want to send out a telegram. I’m requesting that I stay on here for another month or two.” her tone made it obvious that “requesting” was not what the giant gen was planning to do. She didn’t say that she also planned to call in another favour - she would keep that one as a surprise.

After she had sent the telegram Georgina returned to the Center, half frozen, from walking through the snow, and tired. It didn’t seem to take much to tire her out these days. “I must be getting old.” she thought. “Hell, who am I fooling? I’ve been old for years!”. She smiled at herself as she took off her outdoor clothing. She’d love a cup of something hot, but the clock on the wall, put there for the sake of the Gen staff, told her that it was time to go to work. With a sigh she headed off towards the side of the building that gens would enter to donate. As she walked past the entrance she startled the one person sitting there, reading a magazine. She smiled encouragingly and kept going. Hajene Benedict “Ben” was in a room with the door open. His tongue was partly out and over one side of his mouth as he laboriously filled out a form in front of him. It was thick with different coloured copies, with carbon paper between each one. Carefully he signed his name and then looked up.

“Hello, I thought that Toni was working with me this shift?”

“We swapped,” Georgina told him. “I wanted some rest, and there is nothing more restful than working donations when the weather outside is as bad as this!” She laughed, her huge chest bouncing up and down. “Actually, there is one person in the waiting room. Shall I go get him?”

Ben jumped up. “Oh! I didn’t know! I hope that they haven’t been waiting long.”

Georgina frowned. The door was wide open, the boy should have zlinned the gen

as soon as he came in. “What’s wrong? Didn’t you zlin him?”

Ben flushed a bright red. “I still can’t zlin after last night’s transfer.” he confessed.

“What? You can’t zlin? But, how do you expect to work with gens if you can’t zlin? And how on earth do you expect to give transfer? Much less work in the hospital?!!!”

“Oh, once I start work I’ll be fine. I often can’t zlin right up until after all the paperwork is done, before I take a donation.”

Georgina becked him over with a meaty hand. “Come over here, I want to try something.” She held out her hands and Ben took her wrists and loosely wrapped his tentacles around them. “Right” she said, “that’s fine with me, but I really want you to be a little firmer - you can hold a gen tightly without hurting them, you know. We aren’t made of glass.”

Obediently, but uncertainly, the boy tightened his grip slightly. “OK,” Georgina directed him, “now the laterals”. The Channels small, pink laterals made contact either side of her wrists. “Now, we are going to make 5th contact, I want you to go into healing mode.”

Ben leant forward and made 5th contact. Instantly he could zlin. He blinked rapidly, and broke contact. “Wow, that was quick!” he said. Then he frowned. He had zlinned something that was hanging just on the edge of his consciousness, like a word on the tip of his tongue that he couldn’t quite grasp.

“Right! Good lad! Next month, try it sooner, see how quickly you can zlin after transfer. You never know, one day it might save your life! You don’t need a Donor with you either, you can go into healing mode on your own.” Georgina heaved herself out of the chair. “Now I’ll go get that wonderful person who came in to donate even with the weather like this. He ought to get a medal.”

The wonderful person turned out to be the brother of the farmer who was in the hospital. He came in once every few days to let his brother know that the farm was still standing, and had decided that he may as well kill two birds with one

stone and donate while he was here. “Setting in your waiting room is better then trudging in the snow, anyhow”, he explained.

Being an old hand at donating he had no qualms about rolling up his sleeves and letting Hajene Benedict get to work. When he was finished and was rolling his sleeves down again he did have a chuckle. “Pardon me folks, but I do have to say that, what with you being so small youngster, and you being so big mam, you really do make a pair!”

Georgina watched his retreating back as he headed out of the room.

“Well,” she said, “It does one good to know that one can bring such joy.” She looked at the tiny Channel and chuckled. “You know, he is right, we do look a pair, don’t we? Well, I figure I’m too old to be losing weight, but you are going to start growing like a weed any day now. How about we have some hot tea while we wait?”

Ben smiled at her “Would you like some trin?” he offered

“Trin! I sure would! But I thought you were out up here?” She made herself comfortable in the chair again, always glad to remove the weight from her legs.

“We mostly are, but I have a small hidden stash that I keep in here, in case there are any stressful donations. But you can have some, if you like.”

Georgina was touched by his kindness. “Only if you have one with me lad.”

The boy jumped up and put on hot water, then climbed up onto the cupboard, reached around the back and pulled out a brown paper package. While he made the tea, Georgina talked.

“You know, I have 4 sons, all much older then you, of course. I have 3 daughter too. Two of the girls are Channels, 2 of the boys are. The rest are Donors. All firsts. Proud as punch of all of them I am! No grandchildren though. You’d have think that I had enough what with 7 of my own, but I would have liked grandchildren.”

Ben handed her a mug “Why didn’t they have any children?” he asked

“These days the Tecton has us running hither and yon, never staying any one place long enough to make a relationship last. When I was a youngster it was a bit slower. They had this big drive to get Firsts to have children, so if you were willing you got a pretty good deal and they gave you plenty of time in one place.”

“What about your husband?”

“Oh toots boy! I was never married!” Georgina laughed her big booming laugh. “I had plenty of help raising the kids, every Center I worked in had a creche, and I spent a fair amount of time during those years working with other pregnant mums, only they were all Channels, of course. We were one big happy family. Now though, it’s “go here, go there, here is your transfer for this month, you were needed there yesterday and then go somewhere else tomorrow”. No time to think about kids. You watch though, in another few years they are going to slow down again and ask for Firsts to start thinking about children again. You keep that in mind for yourself.”

Ben blushed bright red again. “Maybe you will have grandchildren then” he said

“Maybe”.

Ben could zlin the sadness in her nager, but knew it would be impolite to mention it, so he changed the subject.

“Looks like it’s going to be a quiet shift.”

“Yes, it certainly does. How about we play some games?”

Ben looked very confused “What sort of games?”

“Well, nager games - you try to keep up with me!”

After an hour of “games” that were really exercises, many that left one or the other of the “players” laughing out loud, Georgina called a halt. “That’s enough! Have mercy on a poor old woman!”

Ben jumped up to make another cup of trin. He felt lighter and happier than he had since - since he could remember.

Before the water could boil, however, a tall, rather thin woman opened the door without signalling. If her wrists hadn't been bare Georgina would have suspected she was sime. Georgina frowned at the lack of good manners, and judgement, shown by a gen walking uninvited into a treatment room, but Ben augmented to rush over to her. "Yes Sosu Marle?" he said.

"A girl has been bought in, they suspected change over, I suspect that they are right. I thought you would want to know." She turned to Georgina and introduced herself "I'm Sosu Merle. I was off duty when you came in last night. If there is anything you need, please just ask for me."

"I'm just fine, thank you. We should go see to our new Sime to be." Georgina stood up as gracefully as she could. While she accepted the fact that she had not been given physical beauty, and while she was big enough of heart to enjoy it in others, she felt that Merle was not one of the others that really deserved it.

"I'm sure that the thirds can handle it" Merle said, supporting, with the use of titles instead of personal names, Georgina's suspicions about her personality. "However, if you wish..."

"One thing that I was taught is never to take change over for granted. It's always possible that a new sime is going to have a greater draw than a third, or even a second can handle. Not all kids mention that they feel that they are going to be Sime - you might even have a new Channel on your hands. The number of times I've heard that a Donor or a Channel has been drained or burned because it was taken for granted that they would automatically be higher rating than a change over." She looked at Merle, but her nager told Ben that she was talking to him as well "ALWAYS have your highest rating Channels and Donors on hand, just in case."

Ben nodded. It sounded like a wise idea to him. Merle sniffed. "Of course, Sosu, your great - experience can only benefit us here. Come then, I'll take you to the hospital." Ben started to follow the Donor out.

“I’m sure that Hajene Benedict can do that. Perhaps you can find whoever is next to take donations and work here with them for the rest of our shift?”

Merles back stiffened. “Oh,” Ben said, “Sosu Merle doesn’t work with donations!”

“Really?” Georgina said. “How strange. Still, I’m sure that she will do this for you now.” the “for you” had been rather pointed.

“Of course, I will look after things here for you. Good luck with the change over”. Merle turned on her heel and went to find Hajene Joh, who would not, by the look of it, have a good shift.

Chapter 3

The girl was indeed in change over. She had been placed in a special room in the hospital part of the building, one with very thick insulation.

Georgina kept her nager very quiet and focused on Ben as they entered the room. It was too easy for a new sime to become attracted by a gen nager even before breakout. She looked at the girl and only kept the shock out of her nager by way of years of practice. To one side of the room, shielded by one of the third order Channels that Georgina had not yet met, was a sniffing gen who must be the girls mother. Georgina went over to her side.

“You must come outside with me now, my dear.” The channel gratefully let Georgina take the mother outside, the woman unable to protests from the sheer pressure of Georgina’s physical bulk and motherly personality. Georgina sat her down on a chair, and handed her a tissue. “Now, you are going to have to leave your daughter here, the Channels will take good care of her. But tell me - how old is she?”

The woman blew her nose noisily on the tissue. “Marhget is 18, I just assumed she had established! We thought she was just sick, but she insisted we bring her in, and she just kept getting worse!”

Georgina's heart sank. The chances of the girl being able to survive change over at that age were very slim.

"Is there someone here to take you home?"

"Can't I stay? I want to be here for her. She is my only child you see, we've never been parted, not for more than a day!"

Georgina's heart sank further. "Of course you can stay. I'll get someone to stay with you. I'm going to go and help look after your daughter - Marhget. You must not come back into that room until someone comes and gets you, you could hurt Marhget a great deal if you do. Understand?"

Marhget's mother nodded and looked hopeful. Georgina went back into the room where the poor girl lay in a pool of sweat. She turned to the other channel in the room "Can you go and get one of the gen staff to go and sit with the mother please?"

The Channel looked uncertain, looking from Hajene Ben to Georgina, but even low field Georgina still outranked him, and he left.

Ben was with the girl, wiping her head with a damp cloth. Georgina noticed that he had not made any effort yet to do any diagnostic zlinning, which was probably a good thing, unsupported as he had been. She provided the support and he looked up at her in surprise. Why, she thought, does every little thing seem to surprise him so?

"I'm ready Hajene, you can see how far she has come."

Ben made full lateral contact with the girl and his head bowed as he concentrated. "She is pretty far along, she has very little selyn left, but she is nowhere near break out."

"I asked her mother. She is 18" Georgina left the comment hanging.

"18!" exclaimed Ben, almost dropping the girls arms as he stepped back away

from her.

“Well, we will have to do what we can, won’t we? First, slow down her selyn use, let’s see if we can’t give her body a chance to develop enough on its own.”

The young channel took the girl into contact again, and concentrated. Almost immediately she stopped writhing in pain and her breathing slowed from a pant to a more natural breath.

“That’s good, now just hold her there, and see if you can focus on her tentacle sheaths, especially the laterals. All we need is to get the laterals developed enough to get some selyn into her. Focus there and use the same technique that you would use with a rensime who is focused on a gen. You want to offer selyn and draw away slowly, offer and draw, offer and draw...”

Georgina’s quiet voice gave the Channel something to keep him duo for, while he concentrated on trying to split his attention between the suggestions she was making, keeping the girl quiet, calm and out of pain, and enticing the tiny under developed laterals to grow.

Georgina kept up the quiet patter of soothing suggestions, while at the same time taking over the job of wiping the girl down with a cool, damp cloth, and keeping her focus on the Channel so that he could work.

It was the first time in his short Channelling career that Ben felt in control. He knew that the chances of bringing this girl through changeover were short, she was just too old. He knew that he would probably end up with a corpse - the first patient he had ever lost. But at the same time he was doing the best that he could possibly do, and he knew he was doing well. He had a very competent Donor working with him, balancing him, he felt like he could do this forever.

Suddenly he felt Georgina’s attention waver. It was like walking down a flight of stairs, taking a step and not having a stair there. He looked up at her to make sure that she was ok, only to find her looking at him with a blank expression.

“Oh! Shen I’m sorry!” she said, and quickly resumed her support. Fortunately it had happened so quickly that it had made no difference to the girl on the bed in

front of him. Despite the loss of attention from the Donor he had managed to retain almost all of the control he had.

It was not long after that that the girl started to cry out again. She started clawing at her arms, and it was only by augmenting a little that the slim boy managed to stop her from damaging herself.

Georgina was reluctant to touch the girl, but it was likely that she would die anyway, and if being fixed on a gen were the worst thing that would happen to her... well, it was worth the chance.

“I’ll take her arms, you see how her selyn use is, see if you can lower it still further.”

Obediently Ben shifted his hold, letting the gens large hands gently but firmly take control of the girls arms, carefully avoiding any area that might cause damage to the developing tentacles.

“Normally I wouldn’t advise that any gen be used to speed up a change over. I’m low field at the moment, so I’m going to have to work at it, but even a low field gen is more attractive than a high field channel to a new sime, you will find. If we can just get her laterals...” Georgina was half teaching, half talking just to hear herself talk and to try not to think of the probable outcome of this changeover.

Although it was too early the girl started to have contractions. Her arms tensed as her muscles cramped. It was pointless - there were no tentacles to force out. “We have to stop the contractions Ben!” As the Channel focused on yet another task, the girl regained consciousness. Georgina cursed to herself, she had been hoping that the girl would remain out of it until the end - whatever the end would be.

“It’s ok pet, you are safe. You are at the Sime Center and Hajene Ben here, well, he might look small but don’t let that fool you. He is one of the best Channels you will find. We will look after you. It’s good you woke up because now you can help us!”

Georgina dampened a cloth and wiped the girls face again. Marhget's eyes followed the large gen as she moved. "Here we were thinking we were going to have to do all the work without you. Now we are only about half way there, but you are expending too much energy, we need you to relax. So, I want you to breath with me, ready? In.... hold for 2, 3, out slowly, 2,3, wonderful! Again, 2, 3, hold 2, 3, out, 2, 3. Again..." While she talked Georgina held Marhget's eyes with hers. Even before the girl felt it Georgina felt the muscles in her arms start to tighten. "Ben - stop the contraction" she said calmly. Ben tried, fighting the girls body for control. There was so little selyn in her system that he had nothing to work with. While he couldn't stop the contraction totally, it was only small, and easily controlled with breathing.

"Check her system again, that's it Marhget, just relax, Georgina is here to look after you, we aren't going to leave you alone."

Ben looked up at the Donor with tears in his eyes and shook his head. Georgina nodded "You are doing well Marhget, just rest now, you should be able to sleep now, just for a little while. When you wake up we will still be here, we aren't going anywhere. Just rest my love, rest a little, everything will be alright soon..."

Ben kept a hold of the girl, zlinning until he could feel the last dynopter of selyn leave the still body. He broke contact "She has gone, Sosu"

Geogina stopped talking and a tear rolled down her face. "She was just too old, there was nothing we could do. She was dead from the moment it started." She wiped a stray bit of hair back from the girls face, straightened her up, and drew a sheet up to her chin.

Ben watched her hopelessly. "Will you be alright telling the mother?" he said

Georgina turned slowly to look at him. "Hajene, I will certainly come with you, but as highest ranking Channel, it is YOUR job. Many duties here that should be done by you are being done by others, in regard to your youth, but you will never grow up if you don't start assuming responsibility. This can be your start."

All the colour left the Channels face, but there was no arguing with the Donors

resolve, and he was use to deferring to Donors.

“But you will come with me, right?”

The little boy voice almost broke Georgina’s heart. “Of course I will. This will not be easy, I have to tell you, this was her only child, and, I’d say, her best friend. We must be very gentle.”

Together they went into the room where the mother was waiting. The Donor who was with her knew, from the look on their faces that the news was not good. But the mother looked up hopefully. “Is it over? Is she alright?”

There was a moment silence before Ben realised that Georgina meant it and that she wasn’t going to say anything. “I’m so very sorry mam, but I’m afraid...”

Before he could get further the woman screamed “NOOOO!” and threw herself into the arms of the Donor who had been sitting with her.

The next hour was a bit of a blur for Ben. He had to fill out forms so that the woman could take the body, he had to help her arrange for a neighbour to come with a wagon. Most distressingly he had to once again make lateral contact with the body, this time with full 5th contact, so that he could honestly sign the death certificate.

All through it Georgina stood quietly at his side, a wall of support. But it didn’t help, he just wanted for none of it to be happening.

Eventually it was over. Neither could eat, and Georgina didn’t try to make him. He couldn’t sleep either, but eventually Georgina had to, and left him with Toni. There was so little work, nothing to take his mind off the events of the day. Eventually, he did manage to shower and go to bed, to get one hours sleep before waking again to another day.

As he walked uncertainly towards the dining room, not sure if he could really stomach food, no matter what Georgina had said, he met Joh, the 2nd order Channel, looking upset and zlinning a total mess. “What is it? What’s the matter?” Ben asked him.

“It’s Mrs Thoms, the mother of Marhget - she committed suicide last night!”

Chapter 4

For the next couple of weeks the Center was collectively glum. People moved quietly, in funereal silence. The Gens were affected by the attitudes of the Channels, and the Channels were affected by the sorrow of the Gens.

Finally Georgina realised that she must pull herself, and therefore Benedict, out of the slump.

“Hajene, it’s been almost two weeks since our transfer. You must be thinking that turnover will be just around the corner.”

Ben nodded glumly. He hated turnover and always had a bad time. Rarely had there been a First order Donor available to be with him in the middle of his cycle.

“Did you know that there is no need to go through any stress with turnover? It’s actually mostly psychological, not physiological. I mean, do I go through anything when half the food in my system is gone? Of course, you could say that I eat so often that I’m never in that position!” The Gen laughed, “but even so. No. So now we will work on some exercises that will help you with that. I call them “Apple turnovers”.

Ben smiled, for the first time in almost 2 weeks. Georgina’s growing field was certainly having a cheerful effect. It was still uncertain if he would be having transfer with her again this month, but she was HERE and NOW and that was the main thing.

“The very easiest way to prevent turnover, it’s so obvious but no one ever thinks about it. Just balance your fields before it happens. All you need is a Donor to lean on. But you can even do things by yourself to help yourself, there is nothing worse than a lazy Channel who can’t do anything for themselves without a Donor around! So, now, let’s just take some of the selyn from your secondary system and put it into your primary, then move it back. OK?”

Georgina held out her hands, thick arms crossed, allowing access to her arms.

Ben took them, a bit nervously.

“You know, I’ve done this when I was at First Year school - but I’ve never had to do them outside of that.”

“So?” Georgina said in surprise “You haven’t forgotten how, have you? Just make contact, go into healing mode, you will find that it’s there for you and you will do it almost automatically.”

Ben leant forward and made 5th contact and found that indeed, it was easier than he had remembered from his training exercises.

“Some things are easier once you have been Channelling for any period of time. Your secondary system has been active, so it’s easier to access than when you were still at school. Nothing like practical use to make things easier. Of course, the downside of that is entran.”

“That will ease off any real problems with turn over. Your system has been “primed” and moving selyn around, so when turn over comes it won’t be that big a shock. Now let’s look at some things you can do without a Donor to lean on.”

They worked together at exercise for about an hour, exercises that involved meditating in healing mode, and exercises that involved a lot of physical movement. Ben suspected that Georgina just threw them in because she was always at him to take more physical exercise. “You don’t want to end up looking like me, do you?” she had said, and then burst out in roars of laughter that had him joining in.

After about an hour Ben zlined the older Gen’s tiredness. “How about we go in for some trin? A shipment arrived, it will be lovely and fresh. And I happen to know that we also have some chocolate chip cookies.”

“Ooooh you know my weakness!” Georgina walked alongside him to the dinning room. “You know, there is something else we have to talk about. I haven’t wanted to raise it before, because of the way everyone was feeling. But why doesn’t Merle help with donations?”

“Merle doesn’t like working with Gens you see” Ben explained, as if this was totally acceptable.

Georgina stopped dead in her tracks and burst out laughing. “Of course she doesn’t! She can’t control their fields! And she is allowed to get away with this?”

Ben looked uncomfortable. “I hadn’t thought of that. Merle and Toni usually do the schedules, and it always seemed to work out ok.”

“Well, I’m afraid that is going to have to change. I know you feel unready to assume your duties, but I think it’s about time you put your foot down and stopped letting these gens push you around, don’t you? You are the highest ranking Channel here, basically THAT makes you the boss, and they can’t argue about it. BUT,” and she paused, holding up a finger “That doesn’t mean that you do all the administration. But where matters require selyn movement, it should be your word that is law.”

“But they are older than I am, they have more experience, they just KNOW so much more!”

“My dear young Channel, what an innocent you are. You can zlin deeper, further, for longer, than any other channel here. And a 2nd order Donor should have very little effect on you, and they should not be arguing any point - after all - THEY can’t zlin at all! So, after we have a break and something to eat, we might go and look at the schedule and see how it is set up and if it needs re-arranging.”

Before they got to the dining room however, Ben zlined something totally unexpected. An unknown Channel was coming into the building.

“That’s odd,” he said “We aren’t expecting any visitors?”

“Visitors? A Channel?” Georgina said, but before the words were even out of her mouth the largest Channel that Ben had ever seen bolted around the corner. Automatically Ben augmented to jump in front of “his” Donor - his Gen! He almost snarled, then felt incredibly foolish when the Channel slowed down, said

“MUM!” and the Donor said “Donny!” and he slipped out of the way just in time before these two huge people hugged in the middle of the hallway.

“Oh Ben, I’m so sorry! This is my son, Hajene Donald, Donald this is the Hajene Benedict.”

Ben was looking bemused at the newly arrived Channel. Although as slim as a sime usually was, this one certainly had more muscle mass than he was used to seeing, and he was taller than his mother by several inches. As well as his physical appearance, he was obviously a strong first, zlinning very powerful, and adding these two things together - his very presence was somewhat awe inspiring.

“Hajene,” Ben welcomed him “Welcome to our Center. I apologise for my reaction. It is not the way I would have wished to greet you.” But despite his polite words he did find that he was somewhat jealous of the way that this stranger Channel was handling “his” Donor.

Both Donald and his mother realised that they were causing some upset, and moved apart, both physically and nagerically.

“Don’t worry about it, and call me Don, or Donny. Is it ok if I call you Ben? Mum mentioned you in her telegram, and I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

“Of course, Don. Where is your Donor?” He could zlin a gen still in the waiting room, removing boots somewhat more slowly than the Channel had. He frowned, this could not be right. He zlinned deeper and looked at the other channel in growing horror.

“You came up here with a 2nd?”

“Yes, that’s right Ben, at my request” Georgina felt so sorry for the poor lad, who was trying not to panic at the thought of possibly losing her as his transfer partner.

“I don’t understand”.

“How about we go sit down, I need that tea and I’m sure that my son and ...” she looked enquiringly at Don

“Sosu Rapnie” he provided

“Sosu Rapnie,” she continued “Could do with refreshments as well. Why don’t you go greet her, and we will meet you in the dinning room?”

Ben was reluctant to leave “his” Donor with another Channel, but obediently went to collect the other Gen as quickly as possible.

“Was I ever that young?” Donny took his mothers hand, affectionately running his tentacles over her wrists.

“No my darling, you were born old. This boy has so little self confidence. I don’t know what they are teaching them in first year, but it is not getting them ready for the real world! The gens up here boss him around dreadfully, and he doesn’t even know that he has the right to say “no”.”

They entered the room and sat at a table for four. “We were about to have a look at the schedule book - but I think that your arrival might have put that on hold for now.”

Ben and a tidy young lady entered the room. Georgina liked her on sight. She was pretty and trim without being overly fussy about it, and she had a smile that lit up the room. Georgina bet that her nager lit up the room too, and wished she could zlin it.

Ben, however, looked worried and a little cranky. He was zlinning the cheerful nager, and, sweet as it was, it was not what he wanted, and it was not sufficient! He was beginning to worry that this couple had arrived to steal his Donor away, and he would have another month of being shorted, just when he had become use to having Georgina around.

Sosu Rapnie came up to the table without sitting down. “You have a lot to talk about” she said, “shall I get the tea?”

“What a lovely thought, thank you!” said Georgina. “And there are some chocolate chip cookies somewhere, although you will probably have to ask in the kitchen for them.”

Ben scowled. He had asked the cook to make them as a special treat for Georgina, and he didn't like the fact that she was giving them away so easily. He decided to take the bull by the horns.

“Hajene Donald, what bring you to our Center? We certainly don't have enough work for two firsts.”

“My mother actually. She telegraphed that she required my presence, I came.”

Georgina put her large meaty hand over Bens tiny white one. “Ben, trust me, ok? Believe me, I know what I'm doing.”

The young Channel zlined her and found only fondness, truth and trust in her nager. “OK, but what do you have planned? Are you leaving already?”

“No! I said that I would stay for a couple of months, didn't I? But, we have a Gen here who is ready to qualify as a first, he has been for several months. He is wasted as a second and should qualify. But you have both been putting it off because there was no other First Channel here to supervise. Now you don't have that reason any more.”

Fear shot through Ben as he realised that he had been right, she wasn't going to have transfer with him again this month.

Quickly Georgina took hold of the nager and soothed him a little. She left him rattled enough to think clearly. “Ben, Ben, it's ok. We won't do anything to endanger either of you. There is plenty of time, if it isn't going to work, for Donald and Rapnie to return, and I'll give you transfer. But, if there is no reason not to, I fully intend for Toni to give you transfer this month, and I'll give transfer to Donald when he is due.”

Rapnie returned with the tea. She looked so calm and cheerful that Ben could have murdered her. Here they were, plotting to put him in danger of having to

suicide abort, or worse! Becoming junct, and she cheerfully put down a tray of tea and cookies as if the world was a safe place!

Oh god, he thought I wish I were a third!

Chapter 5

Donald wasted no time taking control of the situation. As soon as they had finished their tea he suggested that they adjourn to one of the shielded transfer rooms and call for Sosu Toni. While they waited he looked at the charts, both for Toni and Ben. Toni entered with curiosity in his nager. He was stunned to see an unknown Channel in the room, and Georgina quickly did the introductions.

“Now Toni, if you will allow Hajene Don to do so, he will be able to quickly ascertain how closely you are matched and if you are ready to qualify on your next transfer.”

Realising that he was stymied, Toni sighed and held out his bare arms. Donald, who although sime still towered over the Gen, bent to make 5th contact. He held it for a moment then carefully let Toni go.

“You seem to have plenty of storage, possibly even higher then what you are presently on paper. It’s a wonder that you haven’t been feeling shortened. How satisfying have your transfers been?”

“Not very,” Toni admitted.

“I’d like to check your speed rating, but first, Ben,” he signalled for the younger Channel to come over and take Toni’s place. The two channels took transfer position with full lateral contact, and Donald zinned the small Channel deeply.

As they disengaged he chuckled, “I think mum might have stretched you a little. You are higher then on paper as well. But you are holding well too - do you realise that, according to the time you had your last transfer you should have be through turn over a few hours ago, but you haven’t go through it yet?”

Ben had been caught up with the activities of the last few hours and the awaited time for turn over had come and gone unnoticed.

“Don’t worry, working with Mum will do that too you. Has she taught you the Apple Turnovers yet?” he chuckled again.

Ben smiled and nodded. “Just before you arrived we were working on them.”

Toni looked confused “Apple turnovers?” he asked.

“Exercises to help with turnover,” Georgina explained.

Donald wrote down his findings. “Toni I’m glad to say that you should have the capacity to give transfer to Hajene Ben here without any problem, and you aren’t too out of step, although I’d like to arrange it a day early for both of you - that is, if your speed matches closely enough.” He checked the charts again, and turned to his mother with a question clear on his face.

Georgina shrugged “We didn’t have a Channel monitoring. I’d say about 70% of my speed.”

Ben was stunned. He had no idea that she had outclassed him that highly. How had he been assigned to her?

“Hmmm.” the tall Channel tapped his teeth with the pencil in his tentacles and looked at the two charts.

“Don, stop tapping your teeth!” his mother snapped at him, flicking him lightly with her nager at the same time.

Donald smiled at her. “Yes mum”. He turned to Toni. “With your permission I will withdraw a few dynoptors from your system, don’t worry, it won’t affect the outcome.” He held out his hands and waited. Resigned Toni placed his hands onto the Channels arms, sliding them up into transfer position.

Suddenly Toni felt a draw faster then anything he had ever experienced in his life. It was over so quickly that he wasn’t even certain what he had felt. If the Channel hadn’t been holding him his legs would have given way with shock.

“You ok there?” Donald asked him, zlinning him to make sure.

“Uh, yes, right. I just didn’t expect that”. Toni felt slightly foolish.

“I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I’m going to let this go ahead. The bad news is that Toni rates a little slow for you Ben, you are going to have to slow down your draw for this transfer.” He placed a large hand on the small channels shoulder. “Believe me, it will be fine. You aren’t that far apart. Probably, in a few months, Toni would be more then capable of keeping up with you. You are both young and flexible.”

Ben felt like crying. He hadn’t realised how much he had been counting on another good transfer with Georgina. He pulled himself together with some difficulty. He realised that Georgina was offering only a little support, and he felt hurt. Georgina looked at her son, and unspoken communication passed between them.

“Well, Donald can certainly look after himself without my help. I will continue to work with you, if that is alright with you Hajene?”

Ben felt such utter relief. “Thank you Sosu, I have been learning a lot from you. Were we still going to go over the schedule?”

Toni looked surprised. “What are you going over the schedule for?” he asked. “It’s fine.”

“Hajene needs to see how things are done, he has left it in your hands for too long and it is time he took over some of the administration work.”

Toni set his jaw and Ben cringed slightly. “There really is no need to go over work that has already been done. If Ben wants to help next month he can be with Marle and I when we do it and we will explain our method.”

Donald had quickly cut off the nageric slap that Toni had given, buffeting Ben from most of it. He was not amused, and it showed.

“Sosu Toni, are you in the habit of using your nager as a correction to Channels?”

Toni looked startled and a little afraid. He had totally forgotten about the older Channel in his rush to defend his position.

“Hajene, I, I mean we, I mean, no. I just wanted to say, I didn’t mean to, I wasn’t aware I was...”

“That’s good then. It means that all you have done is to forget everything you have been taught. That can be fixed. My mother will work with Hajene Benedict until it is time for your transfer - I will work with you.”

Oh good, Georgina thought. Just wait until Donny cops a load of Merle!

Chapter 6

And then - Donny met Merle.

To Georgina’s dismay the Channel seemed to be totally taken in by her act. Unlike Toni, Merle never forgot who she was dealing with, and her nager was school perfection. She flattered the tall Channel, soothing him with her nager, teasing him, flirting with him.

Georgina groaned. *I should have realised, she thought, it’s GENS that Merle doesn’t like, of course she would like Donald!*

She planned to have a chat with her son about the problem, but her hands were full with the younger Channel. As she had predicted, Ben had started growing. It was so fast it was noticeable - after turnover he grew an inch! As well as growing physically his self esteem had risen with the new responsibilities that Georgina was insisting he take. He had gone over the schedual with her, and, with some gentle suggestions, and made some first, tentative changes. Merle now worked donations with one of the thirds, a short shift, but it was a start.

There had been a very tense moment when Ben had confronted Merle with the

fact that she would not be having transfer that month.

“So you see, Sosu,” he said, showing her the adjusted schedule “we are up one second order Donor this month, and as Rapnie is young and still growing, where as you have levelled off, she will have transfer with Joh this month.”

Merle’s mouth dropped open and the shock rang in her nager, but Georgina had the ambient in control and it did not affect Ben at all.

“But...” Merle started to protest

“It is only for one month, Sosu, and I am sorry. I’m going to have to take your field down, there is no other option.”

Merle thought hard for a second. “Would I be able to have Hajene Donald take down my field, if it is all the same to you?”

Through his own surprise Ben felt Georgina’s firm “NO”. However he could really think of no good reason to refuse her request. “Ummm, that would be fine, I’ll ask him...”

Georgina sighed. It had only been a few weeks, after all. You don’t go from boy to man in one step, it takes lots of little steps.

Merle looked very self satisfied. Her transfer with Joh might have been snatched away from her at the last minute, but honestly she had been tired of him for some time. Donating to Donald might not be a good as a transfer, but at least he was new - and, she had to admit, exciting! He had inherited his hight from his mother, but, thank goodness, not her nose! Yes, she thought she could make something out of this.

“It’s alright Hajene” she smiled at the young Channel encouragingly, “I’ll ask him myself, you need not trouble yourself further on my account.”

Before Ben could answer she gave a slight wave and turned and hurried out.

Her mind was racing. Her transfer with Joh had been scheduled for that night, so

she was high field and should really have it taken down now. Hajene Donalds transfer with his mother (as long as everything went alright in Toni's qualifying transfer) wasn't scheduled for another week, after the younger Channels transfer. But that was alright, she could make it work. Like many Donors Merle had thought of having a child to a First, but honestly had never met one she cared enough about. Now her biological clock was running out, and this very tall, kind of good looking (enough anyway) First had been placed in her path. The only problem was that she was probably wasn't going to be fertile when he was Post. But maybe - well, practice only made perfect, and the rumour was that he was going to be staying on for at least another month, and then go with his mother (that horrible woman!) to the hospital in Bane.

She enquired as to Hajene Donalds whereabouts, and was told he was taking collections. Well, that wouldn't do. She did not want to be just another gen donating! She went to the dinning room to wait, she knew that after his shift he would accompany whatever Donor he had been working with, probably Toni, to have something to eat. The man ate more then any other Sime she had ever met! But she had to admit, he did look good for it.

She was on her third cup of tea and starting to feel that if he didn't show up soon a trip to the bathroom was going to be called for, when the Channel and Toni turned up.

She put all the misery she could gather about her predicament into her nager, thinking of how uncomfortable it would be not to have transfer, and how much she disliked this backwater Center. She even threw in a little bit of bravery - "tolerating it all for the Tecton". It hoped it worked, as a Second she really didn't have any sensitivity to what Channels were zlinning, but his head did turn in her direction. She bowed her head towards her teacup, and allowed a tear of self pity to fall into the empty cup.

Donald came over to her side "Sosu, what s wrong?" Toni followed him, carrying a cup of hot tea.

"Oh Hajene! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you!" She quickly calmed her nager so that it showed no trace of emotion.

“Please, don’t trouble yourself. Tell me what is wrong?” He sat down next to her, and she was pleased to notice that he was now totally ignoring Toni.

“Hajene Benedict just informed me that he doesn’t have a Channel for me to have transfer with this month. I know I’m only a second, but this will be only the third time in my life that I’ve missed a month - I guess I just feel a little, lost.” She managed to give a realistic sob. She was, after all, feeling pretty sorry for herself as well as anxious.

“I see. I’m sorry.” Donald felt glum for her. How many times in his life had he been told that there was not a suitable Donor for him, and he had to take someone much under his rating, and be careful not to hurt them? There was no joy in a transfer like that, but it was better than no transfer at all.

“Perhaps you would like me to take down your field? Make you more comfortable?”

Merle raised wet eyelashes to him. “Oh, yes, please.” and because he was going to find out anyway “I had asked that I be allowed to ask you, I was a little - upset - when Hajene Benedict first told me, and I’m afraid I may have over reacted. After all, I am only a second, and it’s not as if under draw would be a problem.”

“It’s alright, please don’t worry yourself at all. Toni is due for a break, so why don’t we do it now?” he turned to the other Donor. “If you don’t mind eating alone, Toni?”

Toni, who knew Merle better than anyone else there, winked at her. “No, that’s alright Hajene, I’m fine here now. I’ll meet you again later?”

The tall Channel nodded, his attention on the Gen in front of him. “Shall we then?”

Merle stood up. “Oh thank you! But is it ok with you if I meet you in a few minutes? I need to wash my face.” Three cups of tea were making their presence felt.

Donald smiled “Of course. Where would you like to meet?”

“Transfer room 6” Merle said without hesitation. She knew it would make little difference to the Channel before his own Transfer, but she did look good in the purple décor of that room.

Donald escorted her to the door of the dining room, where they parted company for the few minutes that it took her to freshen up, which included brushing her teeth and combing her hair, as well as the more urgent need for the bathroom.

She entered the transfer room a few minutes later, radiating excitement, which was in no way put on. She felt as giddy as if she had been given a new transfer assignment, instead of this consolation prize.

“I really appreciate this, Hajene”. She said. She moved towards him, holding out her arms.

He smiled. “I think we can do more for you than just a donation, if you allow me.” he said. She hesitated, wondering what it was he had planned.

“Trust me,” he said, stroking her arms with his tentacles, “I’m a Channel!”

She giggled at this old chestnut, a joke from way back when, the Tecton equivalent of chickens and roads.

Donald held her firmly with his tentacles, and she felt a thrill as his laterals made contact with her bare skin. He lent forward and his lips touched hers, for a second. As she expected, she felt nothing, and as he leaned back she waited for him to remove his tentacles from her arms.

“No,” he said, “I was just zlinning. I haven’t taken your field down yet. Are you ready?”

Merle wondered why he was asking. During a donation the gen felt nothing. Even as a trained Donor a donation was much slower than a transfer, and she should feel no selyn movement at all. She nodded.

Again the Channel leant forward to make 5th contact. This time Merle DID feel something! Faster than she had experienced before but below her pain threshold,

her selyn was stripped from her system. As the Channel once again leant back she was left gasping, lower field then she had ever been.

He smiled at her. “There is no reason that a Donor should not enjoy donating, if there is a higher rating Channel around. Donors are use to feeling selyn movement and expect it and enjoy it”. He carefully let go of her arms, making sure she was totally steady on her feet first, and moved over to wash his hands and arms at the sink. “For gens who come in to donate we must be slow and careful that they feel no movement in their system, but to do so with a Donor is unnecessary and cruel. I hope that you enjoyed that?”

Merle stood staring at him. How blind could he be! He sounded just like his mother, lecturing, always lecturing. It was lucky she was low field so he could not zlin how she felt at that moment. There he was, smiling at her, so sure he had done her a huge favour.

There he was, totally inaccessible for at least another week - and he had left her raging Post!

Chapter 7

It was a week after Donald had arrived before he got any real time alone with his mother. She had been working with the young Channel, Benedict, he had been working with the potential first order Donor, Toni. But now it was time for Benedict and Toni to start working together, the more time they spent together from now on, the more their fields would mesh and come in line with one another. His mother had even insisted that Toni start sleeping in Benedicts room, to make sure that the Channel got at least a few hours sleep a night.

Now his mum sat with him alone, finally able to have a quiet chat.

“Donny - how have you been?”

Georgina smiled fondly at her tall son, remembering the little boy inside the man.

“Toni has been helping me with entran, which is good practice for him as well. There really isn’t much work up here, is there? But the entran is levelling off now, which is a relief.” He leaned back on the bed, looking at his mum in the one comfy chair in the room. “What about you mum? How are you now?”

“Mostly good. I’ve had a couple of spells, but I don’t think that they are noticeable yet. Keeping busy does me good, and having these youngsters to train - really takes me back. I always loved working with youngsters and teaching.”

“If you hadn’t been so good at problem changeovers and Farris allergies you would have made a great teacher!”

He stood up and walked over to kneel by his mums seat. “May I?” he asked, hands out, tentacles reaching.

Georgina put her hands in his and waited patiently while he made contact and zlined her deeply. When he finished he sighed.

“After we have had transfer, when you are low field, I’ll see if I can help some more. But there is so little we can do about the brain. We just don’t know enough about how it works.”

“Don’t you worry about it love. I’ve accepted it. Live each day to the best of your ability, and if you can teach someone something useful, you have had a useful life! I really feel blessed with my life, I really do.”

Donny turned his back on his mum as he walked back to his bed. He needed those few seconds to set his features and regain his composure.

“Is Ben ready to deal with Toni, do you think?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Physically, yes. He could be a very good Channel. He needs more self esteem and he needs to learn that Gens can’t be allowed to push him around. His mother was a gen, you see, he is use to deferring to her, she apparently was a very bossy woman.”

“Oh! I can relate!” said Donny with a twinkle in his eye.

“Cheeky!” Georgina smiled affectionately at him. “Then he went to school, where he learnt to defer to teachers, then he came here, and Toni and Merle both treat him as if he were still a child. This should be the time he is given support to grow, instead they take all the responsibility and just tell him what he should be doing and when. But I think things are improving. Hopefully by the time we go he will be able to stand on his own two feet.”

Donny could zlin his mothers reluctance to leave.

“One more month after this transfer, that’s all we can give him. But I’d bet that two months with you will do the boy more good then a year with any other Donor!”

His mother wrapped her nager around him like a soft, warm blanket, gentle but firm and full of promise.

“I do hope that his transfer with Toni goes well! It has been years since I gave you transfer!”

Don’s lips tightened. She had last given him transfer only 4 months ago, not long before she left Central. He said nothing, however.

“I think it will. Toni can relax totally on command all barriers dropped. He carries plenty of selyn, even though it will be two days early for him, it will be one day early for Ben, so neither should be overly stressed. And if it doesn’t work, you can have transfer with Ben, and I’ll take Toni, and then next month they will be fine together.” He paused thoughtfully. “I had even considered doing it that way from the start. Qualify Toni with me, you have Ben for another month. But they are so close, and it would be so good for Ben. Toni would then have a different view of Ben as well - you always do have a different relationship, with the one who qualifies you.” and he grinned “That is, unless it’s your mum.”

“If all goes well this month, or even if it doesn’t, how far apart is Toni from you for next month?”

“It would hardly be ideal, but I’ve been shortened before. I’d just have to go on a shorter schedule. I can live without being post for a month. I’m sure that my transfer with you this month would more than make up for it!”

“Really? Like that is it? And who, may I ask, is she?”

Donald laughed “Oh mum! You have such a one tracked mind! Well, if you must know, I’ve noticed that Merle has a certain interest in me. And you must admit, she is very easy on the eye.”

“Humph. On the eye, I’ll give you that. But love, she has no heart. You know she refused to work donations because she doesn’t like working with gens? She can’t control gens! Don’t you be fooled, she might only be a second, but add her nager to her feminine wiles and I’m pretty certain she could twist any male sime around her fingers!”

“Believe me, I realise that mum. You should have seen the act she put on yesterday when I took her field down. But she is still…” and he whistled and winked at his mother. She knew full well that it was impossible for him to feel any physical attraction to anyone at this point in his cycle, and he was just teasing her.

“You live your own life, don’t you worry about me!” She said, pretending to sulk.

“Don’t make me come over there!” the tall Channel threatened, throwing both of them into laughter. It had been his mothers favourite “threat” when they were all young, before any of them had changed over or established.

Donald remembered his childhood with pleasure. He was sure that no other family had such a unique education. All four of the children who had become Channels, as they knew that they were going to be Channels from a very young age, were given special education from their mum. Even before changeover she had schooled them in such exercises that a pre sime could do, meditation, concentration, logical thinking. All of them had daily exercises for change over, even the 3 who had subsequently established to become Donors. When they were children, even through they did not have that special “knowing” that a Channel does, that they will be sime, it did not mean that they might not change over.

They may have become RenSimes. A family of 7 kids, with no RenSimes in it at all, was remarkable.

All his brothers and sisters had qualified first very quickly, Channels and Donors both. Those that had gone through change over did so easily, thanks to their mothers coaching. And all of them were tall, healthy and strong. And only one of the girls, and two of the boys, had inherited her nose!

Don pulled himself out of his memories to find his mum looking out the window. “Mum?” he said softly. She turned to look at him, with such a blank expression on her face it broke his heart. “Mum, I’ve let you get too tired. You come, lay down on the bed. I’ll sit with you until you sleep.”

“Yes,” she said, as she moved over to the bed with his help. “I could sleep for awhile.”

Chapter 8

The morning of Ben’s transfer was crisp and clear, the snow was starting to melt, and the steady “drip, drip” of the melting snow off the roof and nearby branches added a pleasant percussion to the day.

Toni had only slept the night before due to Donald’s insistence. The older Channel showed Ben how he could help a gen sleep, which surprised Ben - he thought that they slept enough as it was. Nothing could make Ben sleep, however. A combination of awakening need and nervousness about the qualifying transfer was guaranteed to keep him awake. Georgina was asleep, so Donald stayed with him and kept him busy.

Once awake, the two Gens had breakfast. Georgina was, for once, uncharacteristically quiet, keeping an eye on the young Donor.

“All ready for your big day Toni?” She asked, finally able to keep the silence any longer.

“Is it worth it Sosu?” Toni asked.

“Is what worth it?” Georgina said, taken aback.

“Being a first! I mean, you hear about underdraw and how the Tecton moves you around all the time and how much harder you have to work. Not to mention that you are constantly working with First order Channels who need you to concentrate all the time!”

Georgina laughed. “Is that what you are worried about? Yes, it’s worth it! Yes, of course the work is more demanding, but at the same time it’s more rewarding. Your hours might be longer, but, on the bright side of things, a good Donor can always work in their sleep! Of course, the pay is better, and you get more respect, and that’s nice too. But the nicest thing about being a First Order Donor is always going to be transfer. Darl, you aren’t going to know what hit you until you have started stretching that system of yours! Living up to your full potential, that’s what’s important in life!” She slapped her hand down on the table to emphasise her point. “But you can’t go into this with any doubts in your mind at all. You have to make up your mind NOW to either go into this 100%, or not at all.”

Toni looked up from his uneaten cereal, straight into the eyes of Merle who was standing at the door. For a moment their eyes locked, then he looked at the huge woman sitting across from him. Physically they were as different as the beauty and the beast. But he was coming to understand that there was more to beauty the looks.

“I want to do this. I really want to do this!” He said, and Merle scowled and left the doorway.

Georgina smiled at his enthusiasm. “Then let’s go and find your Channel, shall we? We can all do some work together and have a few laughs until it’s time.”

Toni doubted that he would be able to laugh, and he had yet to see a Channel nearing need who could.

Georgina asked one of the RenSime staff if they would please find Hajene Ben or Don and tell them that they would be waiting for them at the transfer suits.

They entered one of the rooms and left the door open. “Now let’s see, where did I put those cards? Ever played snap with a sime?” She burst out laughing again, and he found himself smiling at the thought of it. “Here is what we do, we need two chairs at the table - move those other two right out of the way. Now, have a seat and I’ll shuffle while we wait.”

Ben and Donald arrived together. Don took in the set up at the table “Snap?” he said.

“Snap!” his mother agreed. “Now Ben, you haven’t played this before, so this is what you do. You and Don go and stand over there, against those two walls. Toni and I will throw the cards. You zlin us, and when you zlin there is a pair, you augment over and see if you can beat us to them! Got it?”

Ben was bemused. While still technically a full day from hard need he didn’t think that augmenting around a small room with two high field gens, even if they were Donors, was something that the Tecton would approve of. He looked at Don, who winked at him.

“Well, alright.” he said, and took position.

Toni and Georgina threw down their cards, one at a time, Toni cautiously, Georgina with abandon. Finally, as statistics demanded, a three was thrown which was followed, a split second later, by another three.

Instantly, before either of the gens could move, Donald was there, with the pile of cards in his hand. The swift augmentation of the sime startled Toni, and some of it leaked into his nager. Ben felt a sudden panic “MY GEN!” but quelled it.

Don smiled at his mum, shuffled the small pile of cards in his hands, and handed them to her.

“Again!” Georgina cried and threw down a card. Again the pile between the two gens started to grow, until a Jack was throw which was followed by another Jack. This time, ready for it, Ben reached the table a split second ahead of Donald. As he picked up the cards he felt a pride and satisfaction that far outweighed winning

a hand at a simple card game. He shuffled the cards and gave them to his Donor, smiling as he did so as if he were giving him a gift.

They played again and again. Just once did Toni manage to grab the pack under the pair before either of the Simes could. He held the cards up high and got up and did a victory dance. "I got them! I got them!" and Ben came over and swung him around in joy and they laughed.

An hour went by so quickly, every one was having so much fun that no one noticed. Finally Georgina called an end to the game "You youngsters have far too much energy for me!" she said. "How do you feel Ben?"

Ben realised that he felt wonderful. He was flushed with the fun and exercise, and the little bit of augmentation that the game called for had used up some selyn and he was primed and ready for action. He also felt need as something that was still a long way off, and that he was totally capable of standing on his own two feet, without having a Donor to lean on. Which was just as well - Toni had been having so much fun that he had totally forgot about giving any support.

"I'm fine! I'm - ready. We can do this Toni, really, it's not going to be difficult at all!"

With a touch of guilt Toni realised that he really should have been looking after his transfer partner, but the Channel did not seem to be suffering at all. It was still early, he wasn't in hard need, after all. Toni looked at the young boy in front of him and smiled fondly. He encased Ben in his nager and Donald signalled for his mother to back off.

Toni approached Ben slowly, his arms out in offering. "I'm ready too, whenever you are. Let me help you" Gently he took the Channels slim arms and with a touch as light as a feather, began to stroke the tentacle sheaths. Ben looked at him in wonder, then went hyperconscious and zlinned the plentiful field in front of him. He had never really zlinned Toni in such a way before, never saw him as a potential transfer mate. Now he found that Toni's field was strong and focused, there for him and concentrating on him solely. The touch of the Gens high field hands on his tentacle sheaths caused his laterals to seek for more, and ronaplin coated them ready for transfer.

Georgina was pleased, she hadn't expected for Toni to be able to raise Ben's into so quickly. As she kept her attention on her son, so as not to interfere with the ambient nager of the room, she watched Ben lean forward to make 5th contact. Toni leant forward too, to meet him half way. Time seemed to stand still, even though it was really only seconds, before the lip contact was broken, and they stood, resting forehead on forehead Ben's tentacles still around Toni's arms.

"A first has opened..." Donald prompted very quietly.

Ben took a deep breath and said "Repeat after me..."

"A First has opened me to my own First level"

Toni had tears in his eyes as he repeated the words.

"The price of freedom is obligation; the price of attainment is I stand not alone. As one First has been to me, all Firsts will be to me. This is the foundation of my being, unto the Tecton forever,"

"Amen" said Georgina quietly before stepping forward to lift the newly qualified first in a bear hug. "Congratulations Toni! Now we can party!"

Interlude

The day after Ben and Toni's transfer Georgina and her son spent alone. Even meals were taken in to the transfer room for them so that they would not be disturbed.

Ben was feeling too wonderful to be curious. His transfer with Toni was not personally 100% satisfying, as he had not been able to draw at his full speed, but now he had a permanent member of staff who was able to give him transfer, and who was also in step with his cycle. He had also done something very big and important, something he had never done before. He had qualified another person as a First! That was worth anything! He hoped that he would have the chance to

do that again, maybe many times, in his life.

Toni was also feeling wonderful. He had never known that transfer could be like that! He had felt like he had opened up totally, that all the dark and hidden corners of his being had been bought out into the sun. And he knew that it would only get better each time. Never again was he going to let himself get caught being less than he could be. Especially because of what outside influences told him.

And talking about the outside influences, Merle was feeling less than wonderful. She wanted none of the men who were available to her, and was feeling restless and itchy. She was angry that Toni had qualified First. When she had been young enough to maybe go further she had decided that it was too much work, she did not want to chance the pain of a possible burn, and she had settled as a low second. Until now she had never regretted that decision, but now that it was too late she realised that she could have been more than she was.

Fortunately however, Merle was low field, and she could do little to spoil the cheerful feeling of hope that rang like bells in the ambient.

Chapter 9

Donald sat in the dark room, holding his mother's hand. He did not require light, her nager was a bright flame. Georgina did not require light, she was asleep. As she had always told them "A Donor can do their best work while they are asleep."

He smiled fondly at her. It was true, too many Gens worked too hard at making Channels feel safe and supported. Too many Channels relied too heavily on Donors to be there for them all the time, instead of learning to stand on their own two feet.

People did not realise, when they first saw his mother, just how precious she was. They looked at a woman so ugly in feature, so overweight in figure and they did not bother to learn more. The exception to that of course was Channels, and too often they zinned her nager and did not bother to learn more - a nager like that was enough to make them happy.

But there was so much more to her. She had raised a large family by herself, and all her children were successful and happy. All excelled in their positions, and it was all because of her. She taught as she breathed, passing on lessons of common sense that she had learned in her life - she never let a lesson pass her by, she remembered....

He stopped that train of thought.

And tomorrow he would have transfer with her again. Nothing in the world was more precious to him than the times that he had transfer with his mother. She had given him first transfer, qualifying him as a first that very first time. Since then they had been allowed together by the Tecton at least once a year. Every time was like the first. He remembered...

He had been 14 and had started to feel ill during the night. He had gone into his mothers room and climbed into bed with her. She had woken up and felt his forehead with her hand, so large and comforting even then. "It could just be that you are coming down with something, but I think this might be it. Just lay here with me and rest, no need to wake anyone yet." and she had sung to him soothingly. Some hours later she had taken him down to the infirmary. The Channel on duty had tried to berate her for not bringing him in sooner, but she had soon put them in their place. "Not much point in bringing him sooner, nothing was going to happen, was it?" The Channel had checked him, confirmed what they had already know, that it was, indeed, change over.

Instead of the fear of pain and sickness that he expected, the attending Channel had been surprised at the excitement and joy that both mother and son had exhibited. Nothing he could do, short of picking her up physically and carting her away, would get her to leave the boys side. She had taken him aside and told him that her transfer partner that month was just going to have to live on Channels transfer, if they couldn't find another Donor suitable, because she was going to give her son first transfer, and wasn't it lucky she was high field? And he better get going and let them know so that they could do something about the other transfer. His changeover had gone very quickly, he knew exactly what to do, he had been training most of his life for this! His mother coached him through it, and the attending Channel, when he returned, had the sense to stay out

of her way and let her work.

When it was over, when he was sime, a Channel himself, sitting there zlinning and switching from Duo to Hyperconsciousness with no control over it, he was vaguely aware of the attending Channel saying to his mother “Sosu, I wish you had been there when I changed over!”

That was many years ago now. Now he had been the attending Channel for changeovers many times, and he had been in the position of having to remove anxious mothers from the room and knew how hard it was. Every time he did so he was grateful that his mother had been there for him! Of course, that wasn't usually possible, but whenever the mother was a Donor, or a Channel, no matter how things were going, he always let them stay. Sometimes it made his work much more difficult, but even when they were causing a riot in the ambient for him to sort out, he recognised that the child going through change over was almost always comforted by their mothers presence. Of course, that wasn't always the case. Occasionally you got people who just dumped their children and left. But that wasn't even the worst - the worst were the children that you never even saw.

He could feel the selyn that was feeding his body slowly depleting. It wouldn't be long now and he would need to wake his mum and have transfer. But not yet, let her sleep a bit longer, she was so peaceful there. The hours ticked by, and he rested and thought about what was, and what was to come.

He felt his mum start to wake up. She rolled over, stretched, and looked at him.

“Oh! Hello Don! How long have you been sitting there?” she looked around the room “Where...?”

“It's ok mum” he said, sensing her confusion. “You are in Kingston Center, you are my transfer partner this month, remember?”

“Yes, of course I remember! I'm not doddering yet!” she rolled onto her side and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “Go, go on, I've got to get dressed and get ready for work. You go get my breakfast ready, I'll be down in a few minutes.”

Don found he was reluctant to leave the security of her nager, but pulled himself together and did as he was told. There was still time before his transfer for her to have breakfast. Naturally, he didn't want to eat just now, but would no doubt make up for it afterwards.

When Georgina met him in the dinning room she was fresh and breezy and immediately linked with him in precise atunement. Don gasped slightly. It was so easy to forget that his Mum was a Fanir. Except when she was working she stopped herself from affecting those around her, she had always taught her children, and every Channel under her care, that it was the Simes job to stand up by themselves, and not be influenced by the nagers around them.

Every time he felt that "perfect pitch" he marvelled at it again. Every dynoptor of selyn his body used was now matched by a dynoptor of selyn that her body was producing. It did not matter what happened now, they were linked for transfer. Don was a bit surprised that she would engage his field in this way before they were in the security of a transfer suite, but was grateful for the instant relief it gave.

Georgina ate her cereal, then had a piece of toast, then a cup of tea in unaccustomed silence. Her son was mostly hyperconscious and wouldn't have heard her anyway. They needed no words, they had had a lifetime of words.

Georgina smiled at her son. Although she didn't normally let herself influence simes in any way, sometimes it was nice to wear the nager in the household. Simes were stronger, faster then gens, able to do many things that a gen could not. But, poor lambs, they really were as helpless as kittens.

She gently bought him duo. "Don, it's time we went to a transfer suite"

Instantly he was beside her, ready to help her out of her chair. He kept one hand on her arm, tentacles wrapped loosely around her wrist. Once inside the room and with the door closed she disengaged her field slowly. The Channel groaned.

"It's ok love, just for a moment let me go so I can sit. Let's enjoy this!" She settled herself on the lounge and he came to sit beside her, not willing to let her

out of tentacle reach. She meshed fields with him again, her stronger field surrounding him and easily attaining Trautholo.

Part of Dons mind told him that this wasn't a good idea, but the more base part of him, the inner sime, latched onto her nager. He reached out to grasp her arms and they were there ready for him. Quickly he wrapped his tentacles around her, holding her immobile while his delicate laterals snaked out to touch her skin. Then, unable to wait any longer he leant forward to make 5th contact.

Selyn poured into his system. He drew faster and faster confident in the fact that this Gen he could not possibly hurt. Finally he could hold no more, and bowed his head, breaking lip contact. His laterals remained in contact, and he went into healing mode and zlinned the now low field gen. Now that she was not holding so much selyn it was easier to see the areas that were making selyn at a normal rate - and those areas that were pulsing at a much slower rate. To his distress he found that there were some areas that seemed entirely dark. He focused on those areas, projecting towards them a fake "need" which her body nevertheless reacted to, and eventually the dark areas began pulsing with life again.

Georgina sat quietly. She knew what he was doing. Every Channel she had transfer with for the past year, with the exception of the boy last month, who didn't know, had done the same thing. Eventually it would no longer be of any use, but by then she would be at the Hospital in Bane, and they would know how to look after her.

Finally Don slipped back out of healing mode and duo once more. "Thank you for a wonderful transfer, Sosu." he said, formally.

Georgina laughed and playfully slapped at him, "I'll "Sosu" you! I take it you will be off duty for the rest of the day?"

"Mum, don't pry. But yes, I thought that I'd go look around now that the weather has improved." he stood up and went to the sink to wash the ronoplin from his arms, and bought a damp washer over to his mum and wiped her arms down as well. "And then, well, we will see!"

"Hummph!" was all Georgina replied.

Chapter 10

Ben was giving transfers with Toni's support. As one very satisfied RenSime left the room he zinned one of the third order Channels outside. "Leona?" he said, recognising her field "Come in"

Toni stood to one side, almost perfectly picking the position in the room where he could best balance fields, and was rewarded by a smile from Ben. Since his qualifying transfer he had found this easier and easier to do.

Leona hurried in, wringing her tentacles. "Hajene, there is an emergency in the Hospital. A gen has fallen, but she won't let anyone touch her. Her family bought her in, and she is yelling blue murder. Please, can you come?"

"Of course!" Ben had come a long way since he had qualified Toni as well, however... "Could you please find Sosu Georgina and Hajene Donald and let them know as well?" it wouldn't hurt to have experienced back up!

As he entered the hospital he could immediately zlin what had happened. A high field gen was injured, a broken bone, a large one, femor or - no, it was her hip. She was also yelling out at the top of her voice.

"I ain't never had no sime touch me, and I ain't about to start now, at my time of life! Have some respect! Get away from me! Where's Dr Thornsburg? He was always Dr enough for me! I don't want anything to do with these newfangled "Channels". It's all a ploy, don't you see? Get away from me I said!"

Two third order channels were as far as they could get away from her while still being in the same room. Both of them looked as if they were being confronted with a giant killer gen from legend.

Toni stepped forward which his arms out to show her that he was gen. "It's alright mam, I'm gen, like you."

The woman stared at his arms and looked up at him suspiciously, as if he might grow tentacles at any moment.

“Why can’t I just see Dr Thornsburg?” she asked.

“Mother, Dr Thornsburg died 10 years ago, remember?” A large male gen who had been holding her by the shoulders spoke up. He looked at Toni “Mum slipped on the path. I told her not to go outside because everything is so cold and wet, but she got it into her mind that she had to get something from the shed, and she is too stubborn to ask for help.”

Toni looked over his shoulder at Ben, who was shielding the two thirds from the woman's pain.

“It’s her hip, her right hip, it’s broken” the Channel told him “I can probably fix it, but not when she is high field and not unless I can touch her.”

“I heard that! I heard that!” the old woman yelled “I know what that means! I never let a sime touch me and I’m not about to start now!” and she was off again. Between her yelling, her anger and her pain there wasn’t much that Ben could do to help her, and he wondered what on earth he should do next.

At that point Georgina came into the room. “What’s all this noise? I thought this was a hospital?” she bellowed, drowning out the smaller, older woman on the bed. Low field as she was, there wasn’t much she could do to shield any simes in the room, and she looked at Ben to make sure that he had it under control.

Ben felt profound relief. If anyone knew what to do, it would be Georgina. And if Don were around, then he was off hook and could go back and relieve Leona with the transfers. But Georgina had come alone, and she was low field. He clung to the hope that Don would join them, any minute now.

Georgina moved over until she was beside the woman and put a large hand on the woman's skinny arm.

“Now, what have you done to yourself? Hajene Ben over there says that you have broken your hip. Fall did you?”

“He isn’t to touch me! No dirty sime is going to touch me, ever!” The woman’s bottom lip started to quiver.

“That’s ok. He doesn’t need to touch you. Will you let him treat you if he says as far away as - let’s see, this chair here? I’ll stay here with you the whole time.”

“He won’t come no closer?” The woman looked at the chair half way across the room , then back at Georgina’s face

“I promise!”

“Well,” pain overcame caution “As long as he comes no closer then that!”

Georgina turned to the others in the room and became very business like “Right! Can someone please go and get Hajene Farris, we are going to need her. I don’t know why she isn’t already here.”

Everyone looked blank. Finally May, one of the third order Channels said “I’m sorry Sosu, but who?”

Georgina froze. “I’m sorry, my mind was elsewhere. Ummm, who is in charge here?”

Ben took a half step forward. “I guess I am, if Hajene Donald isn’t here”.

Georgina looked at the woman on the bed and said to Toni “Could you get me some fosebine please?”

Toni moved over to the cabinet on one side of the room, carefully measured out a dose of powder into a cup, and added distilled water. He handed it to Georgina, who, much to his surprise drank it quickly. “Ugh. Thank you. I think that perhaps our patient could do with some as well, don’t you think?” Toni made another dose and went to hand it to the injured gen.

“I’m not drinking any of your poison!” the old woman said

“Come now, you just saw me drink it! It will help the pain. Tastes awful too, so you know that it’s good for you!”

Pain won. “Well, alright.” She snatched at the cup and smelt the contents, then cautiously drank it. “Ugh! I’ve never tasted anything worse!” she said, and then lay back as the fosebine, started to do its work.

Georgina tuned back to Ben. “May I see you outside for a moment, Hajene?” she said in a manner much meeker than usual.

Ben nodded and left the room, Georgina followed and closed the door behind her. “Oh my god, I’ve rightly messed things up, haven’t I?”

Ben was confused. “I don’t know what you want me to do, Sosu. I’m not sure I’d be any use at all, from half way across the room. But if you tell me what to do, I’ll try.”

“I’ve dropped you in it, that’s what I’ve done. Forgot where I was for a moment. No offence boy, you are going to be a fine Channel when you finish developing, but you ain’t no Farris. And I’ve promised her! We can’t even give her anything to knock her out and do it on the sly now. Why didn’t I keep my big mouth shut!”

The large gens distress was obvious, even as low field as she was. Ben was uncomfortable. He had never been put in the position of having to comfort a Donor before, and Georgina had always been so self assured and certain of everything she did.

He reached up and patted her on the shoulder. “It’s alright Sosu, she wasn’t going to let us touch her anyway. You didn’t do anything to change that, and at least she has agreed that I can get closer. Unless - maybe Hajene Don would...?”

“Don? Don’s here?” Georgina lit up with joy, and then it faded as quickly as it came “OH! No, he isn’t here. We had transfer this morning, I remember now. He’s gone out. When he comes back I’m sure he can help, but we should start something now.” She took a deep breath, her huge chest rising and falling. “I’ll talk you through it, we will just have to do the best we can.”

Together they went back into the room.

Georgina turned to the Third order Channels and Donors. “Could you clear the room please? Hajene Ben will be here for awhile, so please go and take over his other duties.”

They fled, gladly.

To Toni she said “Thank you Toni, we need as few people in the room as possible. But if you see my son, can you send him up and come with him please?”

Toni nodded and left as well.

Then she turned to the son of the injured woman. “I’m afraid you are going to have to go wait outside. Or, if you prefer, you can go home and return this evening to visit your mother. She is going to be here for at least a few days.”

The man looked uncertain, but his mother did seem to be more comfortable, at least she wasn’t yelling any more. “That ok with you mum? I’ll come back after chores tonight”. The old woman nodded, floating above the pain on a sea of fosebine.

Once she has the room clear of any interfering nagers she motioned to Ben to sit in the chair. She stood between the patient and the chair to block the womans view, and kept her occupied by talking to her.

“I’ll just put this sheet over you, so you don’t feel the chill. They always have it a bit chilli in here, I always think. There, is that better? Now you just rest and close your eyes, I won’t let anyone touch you if you don’t want them to.” The woman closed her eyes and nodded.

Georgina kept talking quietly, this time to Ben, without turning to look at him.

“Can you zlin her hip?”

“I can zlin it, but I’m not sure what I can do to it from here” He said, concentrating hard to separate the pain in the womans nager from the actual break.

“Can you control her pain? We should put a bit of traction on her leg, pull the leg away from the hip.”

Ben nodded, and Georgina went to the cupboard and fetched a roll of bandages. “Now love, I’m just going to wrap your leg a bit. How’s the pain?”

The woman nodded “I’m coping” she said quietly.

“Good, now I’m just going to wrap your leg, Hajene Ben there is going to stay right where he is and help you with the pain.” As she spoke Georgina wrapped the bandage around the womans calf, down towards the ankle. “Now I’m just going to go over here and get this bottle and put a little bit of water in it, then I’m going to tie it to the bottom of your leg so it hangs over the bed end.” She held the bottle and slowly and gently lowered it until it was hanging.

To Ben she asked “Is that removing any pressure from her hip?”

The Channel concentrated, and shook his head. Slowly Georgina added a trickle more water to the bottle. The woman gave a groan of pain and she stopped. Ben tried to mesh fields with the old lady, to keep down her pain, but it was very difficult and his face was covered in sweat. The elderly patient had never even lived around simes, she had never had any control of her own nager, and every time he tried to link, it slipped away from him.

“This isn’t working, Sosu. We might have to wait until Don comes back.”

“You think that’s the answer do you?” Georginas voice was calm and gentle, but there was steel in her nager. “And what would you do if there were no other Channels around? Would you just give up? You have a job to do - and you can either do it, or say that it’s too hard and turn and leave. But if you give up and walk out on a gen that needs you” She used the word “need” deliberately “Then what right do you have in asking a gen to stay when you need them?”

Ben cringed under her attack, gentle though it was. “I can’t mesh fields with her! She keeps slipping away from me!”

Georgina sighed and went over to stand behind Ben and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Ben,” she said “You are a First order Channel. That there is a gen, one that has never even donated. Don’t ASK her to mesh fields, just do! Here, pretend that this is happening. Stop doing anything to start with.”

Ben obeyed as she spoke.

“Now pretend you are walking along some street and you see a berserker fixed on some poor gen. The gen is terrified. What do you do?”

“I..”

“No, don’t tell me, do it!”

Ben didn’t see how this would help, but he projected a strong gen field. Instantly the woman in the bed relaxed and drifted off into sleep.

“What happened?” Ben kept projecting gen, a slightly confused gen.

“She is scared of simes, you removed the “sime” from the room”. Georgina explained.

“But she is a totally untrained gen! There is no way that she can possibly have any sense of fields at all!”

“Don’t you underestimate gens my lad, or for that matter, renSimes either! Everyone has a sense of whether someone else is in the room or not, well, mostly. She knew that there was a sime in the room, because she saw you. We got her as relaxed as possible, with the fosebine and removing some of the pain, then you removed the sime from the room as well.”

Ben wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen it. “But I can’t heal her while I’m

doing this.”

Georgina hesitated. The Farris she had called for before had done this as a matter of course, but she didn't know how they had accomplished it.

“Well, she is sleeping now, try again and see if she wakes up”

Ben switched back into healing mode and zinned the lady as well as he could from that distance.

“The pressure is off the break, now you have pulled her leg away from the hip.” His eyes lost focus as he went totally hyperconscious. He could zlin the area where the hip had broken, more like shattered. It wasn't a large area, but the bone there was very old and fragile. He automatically started to bind cells together, but although he could see it, it was hard work. After only half an hour Georgina bought him duoconscious again.

“That's enough for now, you did very well. I think we are just going to have to let her sleep for now. I'll get the Gen staff to move her into a room of her own. If she won't accept healing when she is awake, we can get the Channels to stay with her while she is asleep. If only I hadn't promised that no sime would touch her!”

Georgina was feeling very upset with herself for such a silly mistake. She should never have made a promise that a Channel was going to have to keep.

Chapter 11

During the next week Georgina was conspicuous by her absence.

Her son had taken over her role as teacher, in between bouts of entrain that were barely held off by the small work load at the Center.

The old woman with the broken hip, who's name turned out to be Edna Efsteiner, turned out to be a blessing, as the two firsts took it in turn to sit with her during the night and put in a few hours in healing mode. Both were frustrated, however,

by the promise not to touch her, and the healing went much slower than it should have. Every evening her son, Bob, visited her and answered her questions about the chickens and whether he had locked the house up securely.

It wasn't until 8 days after her transfer with her son that Georgina surfaced and announced that she was ready to go back onto the work schedule. Ben was adjusting the schedule when Don came in.

"Hajene, may I speak with you please?" Ben was surprised by the other Channels formal attitude.

"Of course! Come in and sit down."

Donald entered and, again to Ben's surprise, shut the door after him.

"You are working on the schedules?" Don asked.

Ben nodded "Yes"

"Then I have to request that my mother not be assigned to the hospital during the rest of her stay here."

"Alright" Ben agreed, "but may I ask why?"

The tall channel opposite him looked very uneasy, but nothing showed in his nager.

"I will tell you, but I must insist, on your oath as a First, that it will go no further than this room until and unless it becomes necessary."

Ben was both curious and anxious. "I swear as a First to a First" he said.

Don took a deep breath and let it out before continuing.

"My mother is sick. She isn't on her way to the hospital in Bane to work, she is going there as a patient. She has a form of dementia. It's in the early stages yet, but we are starting to see it interfere with her work - as you might have noticed in

the hospital last week.”

Ben was stunned. “What can we do? How do you heal it?” he asked

Don smiled sadly. “We can heal so many things, but the brain is still a mystery. You can sometimes zlin dark spots that will respond, but mostly there is little we can do.”

Ben took this in in silence, before asking quietly “What will happen to her?”

Don looked down at his interlocking tentacles while he answered, unable to look the other Channel in the eye. “At the moment she can still work. Eventually it will become too dangerous for her to give transfer as she will be likely to shen during transfer, and with my mothers field, that would mean shidoni. However, it won’t be allowed to come to that, and she will be placed in a ward with only Gen staff where she can’t hurt anyone.”

Ben was shocked. “But, underdraw...”

Donald nodded. “Yes, that will be the mostly likely end.” He put his hand to his face, hiding his eyes from the younger Channel. But he did nothing to hide the grief from his nager.

“How long?” Ben asked.

Don calmed himself and even managed to get his nager back under control before he answered.

“We don’t know. However - I hope you understand, but there is no way that I can now let you have transfer with her again this month.”

The horror of the news finally hit him. Realisation of what this incredible woman was about to endure was just too much. She would be separated from the Simes in her family - a danger to them, unable to even visit with them. All her work would stop, as she would be too dangerous for any sime around her. A Channel might have entrain if they had insufficient work, the gen equivalent was underdraw. It only happened with high level Gens, who’s selyn systems had been

stretched by their years of work with the Tecton. A Gen such as Georgina. Although he had never seen it, he had, during his training, learned about it. Such a gen would burn themselves out from the inside as their governors were unable to keep up with the selyn production, and finally stopped working. The Gen would finally go insane as their body would give them no rest. It was not really a problem in today's Tecton, where high order Donors were in short supply. The cure for underdraw was just transfer with a Channel who was a close or higher match. Even should one not be available, it could easily be controlled by drawing off the selyn as it was produced, until such a transfer became available.

But what if all contact with simes be forbidden? The underdraw would run unchecked. And if that wasn't the worst that could happen, at the same time her memory would be going, she would have no idea what was happening or why it was happening to her.

"Oh god," Ben whispered. "Does she know?"

"Yes, she knows. We have known for the past 12 months. Things have sped up in the last 4 months, and it looks like it's getting worse quicker. I think it would be best if I took her to the hospital in Bane as soon as possible."

Ben hesitated. He had become very fond of Georgina, and did not want to lose her. But she was not his responsibility, he had known her for just over one month. Hajene Donald was not only her son, but a higher ranking Channel, and therefore had the right to decide his mother's treatment.

"Don, I'm so very sorry. Your mother is a wonderful person, and has taught me so much. We will be sorry to see her leave."

"We will all be sorry to lose her" Donald replied.

Chapter 12

They threw her a huge party at the town hall. All the renSimes and Gens that donated or had transfer regularly at the Center were invited, and they all came, even if they were uncertain as to why the party was being held..

Georgina was delighted. They had cooked her favourite food (everything chocolate) and there were even presents for her.

“I’ve never had such a nice going away party!” She exclaimed “Must be because you are all looking forward to getting rid of me!”

Everyone laughed, and denied it. The ambient was happy and relaxed, no one, except Donald and Ben, and of course Georgina, knew the reason that she was leaving so early.

One of the renSime guests had bought along a shiltpron and was tuning it up. Rapnie turned out to be a good singer and joined in. As she was also a Donor who was high field, it turned out to be a rollicking good time.

After everyone had danced, and eaten their fill the music became quieter, and Georgina excused herself to go to bed. “You youngsters all stay and enjoy yourselves, this old lady needs her beauty sleep!” This earned a round of laughter “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do - that is, if you can FIND anything I wouldn’t do!” The laughter was even louder - much portsan had been drunk by many.

Ben followed Georgina to the door “Let me escort you home, Sosu”, he took her arm, his small hand looking somewhat ludicrous under hers.

They walked in silence until they arrived back at the Center.

“Ben I...”

“Georgina I...” Both spoke at the same time and stopped at the same time. “After you.” said Ben.

“I just wanted to let you know that I really do think you are going to be a great Channel, in fact, I think you already are.” Georgina paused. “I have something in my room I’d like you to have.”

Ben followed her into her room, which already showed signs of being packed up.

Georgina went over to the table beside her bed and picked up a very old and battered notebook.

“Ever since I first established I’ve been keeping notes on things I’ve seen or experienced. All my kids got a copy when they established or changed over, and they keep notes of their own as well. This is the original, it’s up to date as of last week. I don’t think I’ll be keeping any more notes. I’d like you to have it.”

She thrust the book at the boy, and he held it in his hands reverently. He opened it up at a page at random. “Apple turnovers” it said in strong capitals at the top of the page.

He felt his eyes fill with tears, which overflowed down his cheek.

“There there pet, don’t cry!” Georgina enveloped him with her nager and her arms. “As long as you remember me, I’ll never really leave you. And every time you use one of my exercises, I’ll be with you. Teach others, and let me live on in them.”

Ben put the book on the table and threw his arms as far around the giant gen as he could reach. There was so much he wanted to say, he wanted to tell her how much she had done for him, how, in one short month she had taught him more than anyone had during first year. He wanted to let her know how beautiful his transfer had been with her, and how much he appreciated her forcing him into transfer with Toni. He wanted to explain to her how he thought she was the most beautiful women in the world.

But anything he said would sound trite, because what he really wanted to say, more than anything was “Don’t leave me!” and that was something that no one had any control over.

“It’s ok. Don’t talk. I know, I know everything you want to say.” Georgina’s large arms supported him so gently. “You have such a wonderful life ahead of you, please, don’t spend any time mourning me! Instead, be happy, I’ve had a wonderful life too, I’ve enjoyed ever moment of it. Please, I want you to be happy! Please let me see you smile.”

Ben swallowed and took a few slow breaths. He stepped back and did the best he could to smile, although it was more of a grimace.

“There’s my brave Channel!” Georgina said, her nager singing praise. “Leave me be now. I have things to do before we leave tomorrow.”

Leaving the room was the hardest thing Ben had had to do in his life to that date. His felt like his heart was physically breaking. He carried the book close to his chest, a miracle of a gift. He went to his own room and put it reverently on his desk. As he turned, wondering what he was going to do, the ambient outside was shattered by a running gen.

“Hajene! Come quickly! A changeover, but she has been hurt, oh she has been hurt! They have cut her arms!”

All other thoughts were put aside. Ben hurried after the Donor to the room where they had carried the poor girl who was bleeding from multiple wounds in her arms.

Ben looked at her in horror, then heard a voice in his head “*Don’t rush, just stop the bleeding. First things first!*” He zlnned the wounds. “It’s alright, they look worse then they are. She is only in stage 2 and the cuts haven’t interfered with the development of the tentacles. We have time to heal the cuts and slow down her selyn production before breakout.” He concentrated on the girls arms, but, before going completely hyperconscious sent for Toni and Joh and Merle. He was in charge, but two Channels could work quicker then one.

It was a long and arduous changeover, even with two Channels. Everyone was very relieved when breakout finally occurred, and Ben had given her first transfer. “*Always have the highest order channel available for first transfer...*”

When he finally left the girl with the safe hands of the Donors, he realised that it was after 1 o’clock. “Georgina!” he through and ran towards her room. He threw the door open, but it was empty.

Without waiting to put on a cloak he ran out into the street. Not caring about what people thought he augmented towards the station. The trains were always

late - please let the train be late!

He slid to a stop at the station to find the platform empty. He zlined as far as he could, trying to sense her field. There was nothing. She had gone, and he had not even been able to say goodbye.

He choked back a sob. It would not look good for the Director of the Kingston Sime Center to be crying in the streets. *“You will never grow up if you don’t start assuming responsibility”* the voice in his head told him. He smiled at the memory and held his head higher. He might be short, but he was still a First order Channel, and he had once had transfer with the most amazing person who had ever lived. There was much to be thankful for in life.

Epilogue

Hajene Ben sat in his office, filling out forms showing how much selyn had been taken by the Center in the last month, and how much had been given back to the local renSimes. Each form was made up of a booklet of many coloured pages, with carbon between each one. Next to him on his desk was a tattered and old notebook.

It had been 5 years since Sosu Georgina had left his life. He thought of her often, but he knew that he would not be able to visit her and she would be unlikely to remember him. Even if she had remembered him, she might not have recognised him. He had grown 4 inches, and, because he ate at least twice every day, he was more solid than many simes.

Her book had become his bible, and because of what she had taught him he had decided to specialise in problem change overs. He enjoyed bringing new simes into the world, and wherever he could, he taught them “Apple Turnovers”.

He smiled and sat back, picking up the old notebook and thumbing through the pages. While he was so occupied there was a signal at his door. He walked over and answered it to find an unknown Channel there.

“Hajene, I am Hajene Thea Farris. I work at the Bane Hospital. I was asked to deliver something to you.”

Bens heart skipped a beat. “Is she...?”

“Yes, Hajene, she is at peace at last. I have a letter for you.” Thea handed him an envelope.

“Please, come in” he said “do you mind if I read this?”

“not at all,” the other Channel replied, taking a seat.

Ben tore open the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of paper. It was covered in small cramped handwriting, nothing like the strong clear writing in the book. He read it with difficulty.

My dear boy. I don't too many good days now, but when I do, I think of you. I know I forget things, but I have never forgotten you. You were the last of my children, even if you are not of my blood. I don't have much in the way of worldly possessions, but there is one thing that I want you to have, with all my heart. While it has not been possible to take my selyn for many months, I know that there will be one time when it will be safe for a Channel to approach me again. I wish I were able to share in the joy of a Channels touch one more time! But I'm afraid that when the time comes, I will not be able to feel it.

As one first to all first, but my boy, you are the first of my heart. The Channel who delivers this note to you, and I don't know who they will be, also has my final donation. Please take it and use it in your work in bringing new simes into the world. Yes, I have followed your work whenever I could, and I am so proud of you!

I know that when I'm gone, my life will live on, through you. Please, remember my love as well.

With all that is mine to give.

Georgina Tigie

Ben stared at the letter for a long time. Finally, he looked at the other Channel, who was watching him carefully.

“Hajene, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Ben,” the Channel said his name quietly “It was her dying wish.”

She moved closer to him, offering her arms, ready to transfer the selyn she carried in her system to him. Ben closed his eyes. He could almost zlin Georgina standing in front of him.

“I’m here for you” she said “I’ll always be here for you”.