

## **Mothering Day: The Trials**

The sun had just peaked over the horizon to the east of the Healing Temple, creating hot orange splashes on the bright blue of the Lagoon of Lights. An athletic red-headed woman, tall and straight-backed, stepped out of the Temple entrance and onto the podium that hung above the waters of the lagoon.

"Children!" She clapped her hands, the sound reverberating off the surface of the waters. "Children, line up behind the pennants of your chosen Guild. Guild of Builders--violet and black-- on my right. Guild of Gardeners--rose and--gold--on my left. Center, Guild of Healers--cyan and indigo."

A very tall, gangly teenage girl spoke out to no one in particular. "It's purple and black, not violet. But I'm not lining up behind it anyway."

"You're not?" a smaller version of herself clung to her side. "But Dianire, we're Clan Redourine; we're Builders. That's our Guild."

"Yes, Alope, but I'm going to be Healer. You just watch."

The redheaded woman looked over the milling youngsters, focussed her gaze on Dianire Redourine and spoke forcefully. "You, in the front. You're blocking the flow; choose your pennant and move along."

Dianire Redourine, born to be a Builder, gently separated herself from her younger sister, then proudly threw back her mane of night-black hair and marched to the center, first behind the pennant of the Guild of Healers. Just behind her, a dozen angelically beautiful violet-eyed blondes conferred among themselves, until the most serious looking among them made a series of quick hand gestures, stepped out, and lined up behind Dianire.

"My name is Rintiala of Clan Tiala, and I think you're in the wrong line," she said quietly to Dianire.

"No I'm not, Rinnie. I know who you are. I can beat you at soccer, and now I'm going to beat you in the Temple."

"That's a very bad attitude to start with," Rintiala responded. She turned her head and shrugged her left shoulder. At this signal, the other eleven visions of earthly loveliness marched forth, now sure of themselves.

To the left of the redhead a huge throng of mothers and children began to arrange themselves. Ten times the number of the blonde Tialan girls, the aspirants to the Guild of Gardeners, ruled by Clan Demetra, lined up quietly. They were short and wide, blunt and round of face, altogether a different breed of Nueguan.

"I can see Clan Demetra knows its place in the scheme of things" the redhead said. "Come along children, we need to make sure you are all tested today, and these tests take time. Mothers, grandmothers, please take the babies and the little ones to the pavilions provided for your Clan. Only the aspirants may enter the Temple proper".

She raised her arms, directing the shuffling feet of the children until they had assumed the places proper to those young women--mostly twelve years old--some a year older, some a year younger--all who desired strongly to become Sisters of Nuegua, to receive the power and prestige of serving the Pregnant Virgin.

"Children, someone very special has asked to take charge of the testing today. Today, all of you will come under the gaze and decision of Oldest Sister."

A wave of hushed whispers passed through the entire assembly. "Oldest Sister!" some said, "She's five hundred years old!" "She fought and defeated the Sky Wanderers herself!" others added.

"She's just a myth," said Dianire Redourine.

"No, she's not; at least, not to the Guild of Gardeners," a young woman of Clan Demetra, more svelte and curvaceous than the rest and clearly much older, stepped forward, looked at Rintiala and asked. "May I join you?"

Rintiala looked over her shoulder to her fellow Tialan aspirants and made a quick hand gesture. The other eleven made gestures of assent.

"Certainly. It's not a very long line compared to the Guild of Gardeners," Rintiala said.

"We have our first three aspirants," the redhead announced. "Remember always proceed in groups of three. Wait in your group until a Healing Sister comes to guide you to your place of testing." She looked down at Rintiala, Dianire and the Clan Demetran. "Your name?" she inquired.

"Berylia of Clan Demetra," the curvaceous one said, "I have been prepared by the First Sister of the Clan herself," Berylia added, raising her chin as if that would help her short stature. She was a head shorter than the Tialan or the Redourine girls.

"I see." The redhead looked at this first trio and said. "I don't understand why a Builder or a Gardener has decided on their own to attempt to become a Healing Sister. I was not informed by the other Guilds."

"That's a good point, Mother," Rintiala said non-committally. "You should have been notified."

Berylia looked at Rintiala in shock and mouthed silently. "She's your mother?" Rintiala nodded her head in reply, a sardonic smile quickly crossing her lips.

Her mother, Alatheia of Clan Tiala, First Among First Sisters, looked down at her eldest daughter. "Expect no special treatment, least of all from me. You will be tested equally, as thoroughly as any other aspirant. That applies to all three of you."

Behind Alatheia, dozens of Healing Sisters began to line up: some Firsts wearing the three colors of white, indigo and cyan; most were Second Sisters not yet complete in their training who wore only white and indigo. They split into two lines, coming down off the podium from right and to left, organizing the aspirants with graceful waves of their hands.

"You first three, come with me." Alatheia said brusquely. She turned and began to walk into the shadowed depths of the Temple's main entrance. Both the aspirant Builder and the Gardener looked up in awe as they passed under the eyeless animal head and short neck that led to spread wings wider than the Lagoon of Lights. Rintiala never let her gaze be diverted from her mother's steady stride.

They passed through, under and around the Great Altar that rose halfway to the vaulted ceiling of the Temple. Alatheia pointed to the first curved passage on her right.

"Go in there. You will see three Training Mothers arranged in a spiral. They will become aware of your presence. Each one will choose an aspirant, so don't be alarmed by their movements."

"Why would I be afraid of a big cactus?" Dianire asked. "Our Builder Mothers are too big to fit in that room, and I've used them already."

"I'm sure you have, but this is the Healing Temple. Our Mothers can do things and give you experiences you will find no where else in Nuegua."

"Will you tell us anything else about what to expect?" Berylia asked concernedly.

"For you, young Gardener, yes. Remember that the Serpent Mother will always guard her eggs."

"And that's supposed to help?" Dianire asked, her pitch rising.

Alatheia turned, made two slicing motions in the air and then left the way she came in.

Dianire and Berylia both turned to Rintiala. "Now what?" they asked simultaneously.

Rintiala took the lead. "That's my mother, you two. See how much special treatment I got from her?" She squared her shoulders and entered the training chamber. Long lines of flowing lights in the blue and green spectrum popped into existence. Berylia ran her fingers along the inner wall of the alcove that the three found themselves in. As she touch one of the lines, it stopped, backed up, and started flowing again. "Those are termites!" she exclaimed. "They're like our Little Gardeners, but they glow." Rintiala smiled at Berylia's exclamation of wonder. "The whole Temple is like that from top to bottom. We call them the Little Doctors; they are a different color for each level of the Temple you are on. Once you learn their pastel shading, you can tell which of the Sisters is in control of them."

Dianire surveyed the small circular chamber. She took another step toward its center, only to jump back when a curvilinear structure began to emerge from the floor, coming up to Berylia's waist. Three teardrop-shaped extrusions grew out of the structure, and began to rotate sunwise. Once each teardrop--the size of a grown woman--had passed each aspirant its color began to change. Finally there were three teardrops: one indigo-and-cyan; one purple-and-black; one red-and-gold.

"Well, it's time to get started, unless you would like to argue with my mother." Rintiala said, pulling her poncho over her head. She was wearing the standard Nueguan outdoor clothing of a tight top, loose short-legged pants, and knee-high leather boots. Dianire began to disrobe in the same fashion, as she was wearing essentially the same outfit plus a thin belt from which hung small precision tools.

"Berylia, let's go." Dianire insisted. Berylia turned her back to the other two girls and removed her poncho. She was naked except for a pair of ankle-high shoes of soft deer leather.

When she turned around the two other girls drew in the their breath. Berylia was no girl at all, but a voluptuous woman, with a full growth of pubic hair.

"I didn't know the Clan Demetrans had pubic hair," Rintiala said matter-of-factly. "No one in Clan Tiala does."

"Or Clan Redourine either." Dianire added. "And we don't accept women into the Guild. Just how old are you, anyway?"

Berylia threw her shoulders back, emphasizing the size of her bustline. "I'm fifteen, and I'll beat both of you today. Just watch me," she said looking up at Dianire and Rintiala.



"We can all argue about that later," Rintiala said. "Here, just beside each training mother is a place to store your clothes and boots." With that she began to pull off her left boot and set it in the shallow scoop that was growing out of the structure.

Rintiala then went to her Training Mother--the indigo and cyan one--gave the top a delicate touch and then turned to the other two. "Just give it a minute, it opens up like a clam. In two halves."

Dianire and Berylia moved over to their respective Training Mothers, studiously avoiding each other's gaze. At their touches, the living machines responded by opening their tops outward.

"Just climb in and get comfortable," Rintiala said, doing so. "Nothing will happen for a minute or two. Then expect a surprise."

"It's not fair that you can pretend to know nothing about all this, and then suddenly you know everything about all of it," Dianire complained.

"It's not fair for you to judge me, just because I'm older than you," Berylia countered.

Dianire lifted herself into the Training Mother by sheer strength. When she had snuggled herself into the living machine, the top slowly closed about her, translucent and warm. She could not discern a seam of any kind in the top after it closed.

A breeze as gentle as a baby's sleeping breath flowed around her, a smell a mixture of sage and cinammon. She found the fabric (or was it skin?) to be as smooth as New Spanish silk, although no one in Nuegua would admit that they had ever owned or even touched New Spanish silk, the Nueguan opinion of New Spaniards being as low as it was. Against her own caution, she found herself luxuriating in the feeling.

*I'll just close my eyes for a minute, Dianire thought. I'm starting to feel a little claustrophobic, and that should help.*

Dianire shut her eyes for what she thought were a few heartbeats.

Dianire opened her eyes to the semi-darkness of the Training Mother, doing her best to control her breathing, to bring her claustrophobia to a reasonable level. There was simply no way she would allow that snotty Rintiala to show her up; the problem was there was nothing happening except the slightest itching in her nose and eyes, which was probably imaginary. She thought the Healing Temple would be a place of wonder and light; instead it was drab and bit spooky. Perhaps she needed to reconsider her desire to become a Healing Sister, if this place was going to be her future.

A shadow passed on front of the flowing cyan lines of Little Doctors, ceaseless in their duties to the Pregnant Virgin. Then another shadow, and some muffled talking. *That's it, I'm going to get out of this thing and see what's going on.*

Then she realized that she was standing outside her Training Mother, and that the other two living machines had disappeared back into the floor. The itching in her nose and eyes increased, and she felt a bit of vertigo. There was no one around, and no sound coming from the front of the Temple, an odd thing since there should be hundreds of people milling about in the morning sun. And that was another thing, the light outside the doorway to this training room was dusky. Could she have slept the entire day away?

She began to walk toward the doorway, feeling what a disappointment all this Healing Temple business was. At that thought the doorway melted in front of her like fine sand, as did the walls of the alcove. The sand slid away to reveal that she was standing at the edge of a gigantic indoor grotto most of the floor of which was a shallow lake, where cyan-and-cerulean crustaceans were coming and going in schools of thousands. In the center of the lake, on a raised dais that pulsed green and blue, sat a very pregnant young woman, deep in meditation, her knees raised to touch her protruding belly, her hands in fists above her breasts, her eyes closed.

Dianire looked down again. She was standing on a circle as wide as she was tall, it was the end of peninsula that wound around the dais of the Pregnant Virgin, ending on the opposite (*which way was east? west?*) shore, where the two other Nueguan girls were waving their arms and hopping up and down.

"Hold on, I'll be right there," Dianire shouted back. She began to run along the peninsula until she reached a point where it nearly touched the dais, though it had been quite separate a moment ago.

The Pregnant Virgin lifted up her head, opened her left eye a smidgin, and said quietly "Not so fast, young Builder". The peninsula disappeared, the waters of the lake deepened to darkest indigo, the crustaceans fleeing to the shallows. From the depth three monsters arose: a sea scorpion; an improbable animal combination of wolf and alligator; a large water python. Each moved in a whirlpool the center of which held a large leathery egg such as an emu would lay, bobbing up and down in the water, held in place by the power of the whirlpool. Each egg was a different combination of colors: red-and-gold; purple-and-black; indigo-white-cyan.

Alathea's cryptic phrase came back to Dianire. "The Serpent mother will always guard her eggs." Dianire deduced that she had to snatch the eggs of the sea scorpion and wolf-alligator and deposit them before the water python. Or was Dianire herself the Serpent Mother? Did she have to take all the eggs for herself? Already the eggs were bobbing lower in the water; soon they would sink out of sight, and Dianire's opportunity would be lost.

*Option one it is.*

Dianire positioned herself so that her back was to the water python. She bobbed and weaved, expecting the attack from the other two monsters that was sure to come. The water python was so close to her she could hear its hissing in her ears, but it did not strike or try to wrap itself around her.

*First guess was right.*

The scorpion was connected to its tentacle by its abdomen, which gave it the ability to crawl up and down, positioning its tail stinger, looking for a successful strike. Dianire decided that it was the most dangerous of the three, and did her best to force the scorpion to strike across the wolf-alligator. She leapt across to the tentacle base of this monster, grabbed the purple-and-black egg from it, and jumped back to her island platform. The scorpion struck at her, only to land its stinger in the neck of the wolf-alligator; while it writhed, trying to remove its weapon, Dianire leapt to its tentacle base, snapped its tale clean off, grabbed the red-gold egg and jumped back to her platform. She then turned, and deposited both of her

prizes in at the base of the water python. The eggs did not sink, but remained bobbing in the water. *Got it.*

She had forgotten that she had not killed the wolf-alligator, instead she had saved it from the sea scorpion. The wolf-alligator chomped down on her right forearm. She heard bones crunching; her right hand went limp as the pain surged through her torso. With her left hand Dianire caught the creature by the neck, held on tight, and dropped down to her platform, using the twisting motion of her grip and her body-weight to break its neck. The wolf-alligator spewed foul-smelling spit and then stopped moving.

"Done!" Dianire shouted. The peninsula reappeared as the Pregnant Virgin lifted up her head, both eyes wide open. "Well done," the Pregnant Virgin said. "A bit more violent than necessary, but successful." Dianire marched over to Rintiala and Berylia, who were clapping their hands in applause. "Um, Dianire, no offense, but all you had to do was wave your hands in a figure eight pattern in front of each monster. That freezes them solid," Rintiala said.

"That's what Alatheia was trying to tell you," Berylia added. "I figured that out right away."

"That's great for both of you, but I've got a broken arm," Dianire shot back, visibly angry with the other two Nueguan girls.

"You do? Where? Let me see," Rintiala offered.

"I don't see anything either," Berylia said.

Dianire looked down at her arm. There was still throbbing pain, but no bite marks, and no bruising indicating broken bones. "It was just there a minute ago," she complained. "This place is crazy."

"This place is wonderful!" Berylia exclaimed twirling around. "I've never felt so good in all my life."

"That's not necessarily a good thing," Rintiala observed.

A smooth alto voice right behind them said: "The testing can now begin".

Dianire turned around, only to see the Pregnant Virgin far off in the center of the lake, her eyes closed, her pose of deep meditation.

"Did the Pregnant Virgin just speak?" Dianire asked Rintiala.

"Yes."

"How can she sound like she's just behind us, when she's a thousand strides away?"

"Get used to it."

"I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it."

The same alto spoke again. "Ahem, it's time for the testing to begin. Get on with it, please."

"It seems the Pregnant Virgin has a sense of humor," Berylia suggested.

"A sense of humor? I don't know about that, more like a sense of purpose."

The same Pregnant Virgin was now standing the midst of them, wearing a poncho of shimmering color over her protruding belly. Otherwise, she was barefoot, testing the sand of the shore with her toes. Dianire turned back to the center of the lake, and the Pregnant Virgin was still meditating.

"It's called bi-location. When you're ready, I'll show all of you how to do it." the dressed Pregnant Virgin said.

"What are we supposed to do?" Berylia asked.

"Rintiala knows what to do, don't you?" the Pregnant Virgin answered, a liling smile on her lips. She had long luxurious black hair with streaks of violet in it, down to her waist. To Dianire's eyes, she was no older than eighteen.



"Yes, I'm to build a new Healing Temple, with the help of the other Guilds. That's why the Pregnant Virgin allowed you two to enter the Grotto."

"No way!" Dianire objected. "I decided this all by myself!"

"I doubt that," Berylia countered. "I know that I am simply following orders from the leader of my Guild. O Pregnant Virgin, how must we be doing this sacred task?"

The Pregnant Virgin smiled broadly, looked at Dianire and said: "I love it when they get serious and formal. I don't suppose I'll get that from you, will I?"

"No, what you will get from me is results, not incantations. So what do we do?"

"All the three of you have to do is to sit down on the sand and hold hands. The rest will happen by itself."

"Let's get started, then," Rintiala said. The Pregnant Virgin's clothed persona had vanished, leaving the three. They found themselves all wearing the same kind of garment that she had worn. Rintiala pulled at the shining cloth. "I don't recognize this fabric or weave. Do either of you?"

"It seems like some kind of dyed silk, but whatever kind of dye they used is hard to see," Dianire answered.

Berylia took each of the other two girls' hands in hers and pulled Rintiala and Dianire down, to sit in the sand. "I wonder what will happen next?" she said.

A shuddering passed through Dianire as her hand touched Rintiala's, it made her shoulders twitch. When her hand touched Berylia's, a second shuddering more in the pelvis and more convulsive than the first made Dianire writhe in her cross-legged sitting posture.

"Look at me, both of you, and don't turn away," Rintiala ordered. Her eyes became clear as glass--violet irises with no sign of white--and then the centers of her eyes began to glow a bright cyan. "I need to know why the Pregnant Virgin chose each of you."

Berylia uttered a small "Oh!" Dianire found herself in two places at once. She was sitting cross-legged on the sand at the edge of the lake in the Grotto of the Pregnant Virgin, while at the same time she was creating irrigation ditches around her home at Clan Redourine. She was laying on her back in a large Building Mother, watching the icons of the Little Builder termites laying down sand and pebbles and then gluing them together with their feces. It was delicate work; the cacti and the termites themselves needed to

be guided along the blueprint that existed only in Dianires' mind. She thought to herself how nice it would be if the termites could read the diagram themselves so that she could turn to other less tedious work. At the same time she was looking over Berylia's shoulder while the Clan Demetran girl was teaching the Little Gardeners how to capture and eat the slugs and snails that were invading her portion of the Garden at Clan Demetra. Dianire could hear Berylia talk to herself, wondering how she could come up with a way to speed up the learning process as the Little Gardeners were putting up a resistance to mollusc that they had not eaten before, and therefore had no instinctual memory of. Berylia looked up from her work and said to Dianire: "You're intruding. Go away."

"Sorry," Dianire replied. And then she was back sitting in the circle of three on the sand. Rintiala was smiling at both of them.

"How did you do that?" both Dianire and Berylia asked.

"I don't know. I've just been having a lot of dreams about the other Guilds recently. To tell the truth, I've never actually been in a Cactus Mother like you two have. You two have the advantage on me; they're everyday tools for you, but here in Clan Tiala we don't enter the Mothers until we are twelve, on Mothering Day. Today."

"We Clans really don't know much about each other, do we?" Dianire said.

"That's part of the problem," Rintiala agreed. "But it goes deeper than that. It has to do with the radix."

"The what?" Berylia asked.

"For once, you don't know the answer," Dianire chided.

"Stop it, you two. This is going to take all the concentration I've got." Rintiala said. "The radix is the basic number structure for the Cactus Mothers. How they connect and work together."

"In Clan Demetra we work in groups of ten," Berylia said brightly.

"In Clan Redourine we work in groups of two. We don't need eight more helpers." Dianire countered.

"I'm going to ignore your statements if you aren't more helpful, Dianire."

"Sorry."

"Okay, ten and two and....three. In Clan Tiala everything is done in threes. It's the most efficient and creative at the same time. That's why Clan Demetra and Clan Redourine girls have to come to Clan Tiala--the Healing Temple--for assessment. Deciding who is going to become a Sister is the hardest task there is in Nuegua; so hard that the Pregnant Virgin was created centuries ago to do the work."

"How do you know all this?" Dianire asked. "And, really, I'm not trying to be a pest, I just want to know."

"My mother told bedtime stories to my sister and I since we were old enough to talk. Lots of the stories seemed fantastic until I woke up here."

"And now they are all true. Same thing in my Clan, my Guild." Berylia added.

"We have big hard-working Builder Mothers to show us how things are; we didn't need bedtime stories." Dianire said.

"But you need to listen now," the Pregnant Virgin said, standing just in front of them, drawing a diagram in the sand with her left big toe. A curved basket with three eggs in it formed from her efforts, which then took shape and floated in front of the three. "Three times threes times three times three...all singing together. A world you can engineer, a way of life you cannot imagine."

"Thanks, I was just getting to that," Rintiala objected. "We can do this ourselves."

The Pregnant Virgin got down on her hands and knees, and looked Berylia straight in the eye. Berylia flinched. "You have had many...experiences," the Pregnant Virgin said. "Your test will be the greatest."

Berylia looked at her defiantly. "And I am up the challenge!"

The Pregnant Virgin got up, brushing the sand off her knees. "I will not interfere again. If you have a problem, call on Oldest Sister, but I will allow you to only call her once. After that, what happens to you in the Grotto is your own doing, for good or ill." Before any of the girls could answer, she vanished, or more accurately perhaps repositioned herself on the dais, returning to her meditative pose.

"As I was saying, it's all about the radix," Rintiala continued "What Nuegua needs is a new structure--a web, you could call it--that ties all the three Guilds together. Right now, three Healing Sisters work on one thing that comes up, then another, but they don't all work on a single thing together. And as for eighty-one of us..."

"Three times three times three times three," Berylia responded.

"There aren't that many First Sisters in all Clan Tiala. You'd need the best of each Guild, working through the Healing Mothers to create this web you're talking about," Dianire posited. "And even then that might not be enough; if I'm having trouble with this crazy Grotto, I doubt an older Sister Builder would want to tackle the problem."

"Then you'd need a Sister Gardener or two, and the old ones don't like anything new. Only our First Sister, and she had to fight to get me here," Berylia admitted.

Rintiala frowned. "Perhaps I was a bit short with the Pregnant Virgin. She's in a huff, now, I'm afraid. You see, to make this work, I'm going to need nine of me, twenty-seven of you Dianire..."

"And eighty-one of me!" Berylia laughed, clapping her hands. "Don't worry Rintiala, I know how she does it. It's in her gaze. She focuses on where she is right now, then snaps her head where she wants to be. And suddenly she's here and there at the same time."

"Well, don't get a stiff neck doing it," Dianire commented. "Let me see you do it, then I'll give it a try. Rintiala, you should go last, in case we make a mistake."

"Last chance to back out then. If you want you can just wake up in the Training Mother..."

"And spend the rest of my life a failure? Never!" Dianire said.

"For once we agree. I'm not going anywhere." Berylia added.

"Funny you should say that, because I want both to you to imagine Clan Tiala as it was hundreds of year ago, just the mesas, the Gila River, and the San Carlos Reservoir above and behind you. Then I want you Dianire to build a new kind of foundation: an 'X' at the bottom; a 'D' in the middle; a 'Q' at the top. Berylia I need you to grow eighty-one cactus mothers in a 'U' shape, with the open end facing south, the entrance to the new Healing Temple. Each cactus mother will connected to one leg of the 'X' base; the other leg will connect to the 'D', which will connect to the tail of the 'Q'.



Any questions?" Rintiala looked at both of them, her eyebrows arched.

"No, just a request," Dianire replied. She turned to the Clan Demetran.

"Berylia, time to put your talents where your mouth is. Eighty-one versions of you, please."

Berylia stood up, and began to twirl on her tiptoes in the sand. She looked down between her feet, and then suddenly looked up over her right shoulder, her right arm and right first finger following the movement. "There! There! There!" To the shock of both Rintiala and Dianire, three identical Berylias were twirling in the circle a thousand paces south of them, while the walls of the Grotto were melting away to reveal the Tialan home as it was four hundred years ago. And then Berylia was no longer standing beside them. The first three made three more each, and those made three, and finally twenty seven Berylias made three, until eighty-one Berylias were dancing and humming tunelessly. When they spoke together, their voices were a chorus of thunder.

"I can do anything!" she laughed. Suddenly all eighty-one Berylias turned and pointed their left first fingers at Dianire. "Your turn, and don't fail," she hinted darkly.

"I suggest you step back a bit. I'm going to be excavating," Dianire shouted at the top of her lungs over the thunderous choir.

Dianire chose another focussing mechanism against Berylia's; she imagined herself kicking a soccer ball into the goalpost, and at the same time being the goalkeeper stopping the ball with her hands. She turned in a slow circle and created twenty-seven goalkeepers. As long as she didn't allow the goalkeepers to look at each other the trick worked. She then imagined herself inside the biggest Builder Mother she had even seen, and then expanded its capabilities a little bit more. She set the termites to two tasks: excavation and manufacture.

Sand and dirt, rocks and gravel, all flew from the edges of the new Temple foundation like twenty-seven tornadoes. Excavation was going well; it was in manufacturing that the termite icons went from green to red to purple and then to splotches of black. Termite feces would be nowhere near strong enough to create a building of this size, much less support the weight of the three stories.

"Rintiala, this won't work. We don't have a binder stronger enough to hold the sand and gravel." Dianire worried.

"Yes we do," Rintiala answered quietly, seeming to be just over the Dianires' right shoulders. "Take a deeper look at the poncho you're wearing."

Dianire stared at the poncho's folds over her navel, and found herself shrinking down the size of the worker termites. The cloth's fibres were the size of hemp cables at first; then she realized that they were woven together from something finer and surprisingly more clear and beautiful. "It's some kind of spider thread. Termites can't weave this kind of thing."

"Yes they can. This is why the Pregnant Virgin chose you. You have the power to change the termites, to make them into anything that you want. Imagine that they all have spinnerettes, and then put them to work. See what happens."

Determined not to be shown up by either Rintiala or Berylia, Dianire took the plunge, become for a moment the combined memory of a watching a spider weaving a web in the flowers near her dwelling in Clan Redourine, and a large termite worker gluing gravel together with its feces. The two memories overlapped, and now the worker skillfully wove the gravel together, tightening the bond as it wove.

For a moment, Dianire and all her copies nearly blacked out in vertiginous wonder. How could this be? And then something else stole over her: a sense of companionship, and a sense of shared fun the likes of which she had never known before.

"You are awesome, Rintiala. I never would have believed that I could do that."

"You are awesome, yourself, Dianire. It was in you all along."

In the meantime, Berylia had planted eighty-one cactus mothers that were quickly extending themselves and their termite colonies in a pinched U-shape around the foundation of the new Healing Temple. "What do you want me to do next, Rintiala?" she asked.

"As soon as you see the 'D' shape rise, start growing vines and leaves up the walls of the Healing Temple. I want the leaves to control how much sun and air it receives and processes. A building this big needs to breath, just like a big animal.

"I'm doing it," Berylia and her copies shouted. "Together!"

The vines and leaves moved of their own accord up the walls; Dianire's new building material formed itself almost instantaneously, rather than needing to cure. As she began to create the top 'Q' floor and arches, a problem presented itself to her that would not go away. "Rintiala, this is a living architecture. There is not nearly enough water in the Gila right now to meet its needs; and definitely nowhere to process waste water. How are we going to solve this problem?"

"We need to clean the silt out behind the San Carlos Dam, so it can fill up with fresh water."

"Rintiala. Be serious. To do that, the termites would need gills to breath underwater." Dianire said.

"So? Imagine what it would be like to be a termite and swim and breather underwater." Rintiala said gently.

The thrill of the possibility passed between Dianire's shoulder blades. Could she really do this? The silt would make an excellent building material; she was already visualizing how to transport that much silt over the top of the dam, to finish the the top floor and roof.

"Come on, Dianire," Berylia shouted, almost a taunt. "I need that top floor and roof up, right now."

"Just hold on. I've got to create a new termite worker, and an assembly line, and the roof, all at the same time."

But there it was! Faster than the eye could follow, the new Healing Temple took shape, three times the size of the present one. And then it was done. Dianire looked up to see only herself, Berylia and Rintiala sitting in front of the new massive architecture. The Healing Temple was golden as honey, with rainbow sparkles running through it from the silk that the termite workers had produced.

"Can I name my creations, Rintiala? I like to call this thread stuff 'Mothersilk'."

"It's your baby. Name it what you like." Rintiala said, putting her arm around Dianire's shoulder. She kissed her on the cheek. "Good work."

"What do you think of mine?" Berylia asked.

"Very good work, Berylia. But you have to give Dianire credit. She's done something no one in Nuegua has ever done before, twice."

Berylia's face was downcast. "You like her more than me. I'm too old to be your friend, that's it." Rintiala gently placed the tips of her fingers on Berylia's shoulders, but the Clan Demetran girl shrugged them off.

"Would you like it if I kissed you now?" Rintiala asked quietly.

"No!" Berylia insisted. "You would only be doing because you feel embarrassed."

Rintiala sighed. "Then what would you like?"

"Let me build something of my own, and let Dianire help me. But she can't be my boss."

Rintiala turned to the tall raven-haired girl. "Are you all right with that?" Dianire shrugged her bony, muscular shoulders. "Sure. What are you going to do, Rintiala?"

"What I intended all along. "

"And that is?"

"To snoop around. Let's just see how closely the Pregnant Virgin is actually watching us."

Berylia stuck her nose up in the air, and began to trudge off, south and west. Dianire caught up with her in two quick strides, then slowed her runner's gait to match Berylia's shorter legs.

Berylia stopped about two hundred of her paces south of the entrance of the new, grander Healing Temple, and began to whirl in a tight arc, stopping only to point her finger where a Cactus Mother would be needed. Dianire watched her apply the radix rule; this time, only twenty-seven Berylias materialized. For each of her, a new Cactus Mother grew to maturity, a process that normally took several years. The Berylias were just about to enter the Cactus Mothers when Dianire called out.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Right now, create an aqueduct for all the fresh water we will need. Oh, and a drainage system for three outdoor pools. And a sewage system that doesn't waste water. After that, meet me inside, top floor, middle room balcony. You'll understand what I mean when I'm finished. See you then!"



"Rintiala is right," Dianire muttered to herself, squatting down and preparing to create nine versions of herself, to handle the civil engineering requirements of this new structure. "Feeling wonderful is making Berylia very strange indeed."

Dianire was forced to admire the speed and the detail of the work that the Berylia had begun. Nine heads, serpentine and bird-like at the same time, grew out of the ground, supported only by the strength of Berylia's Cactus Mothers, which were much larger with longer tentacles than anything Dianire had seen before, including her Builder's Mothers. Dianire's natural sense of engineering responsibility forced her to dive in, and to create the buildings from the living templates that Berylia provided, which only made the aqueduct work that much harder. Three of Dianire's Builder Mothers focussed on supporting these 'dragon' heads--that is what she thought they looked like, though dragons were only a myth--while the other six performed the herculean work of moving earth, stone and water to feed these mythical creatures.

The sense of joy, of creating something from nothing, was stealing over Dianire again, even while working with this obstinate little Gardener, someone Dianire would have ignored completely outside the Healing Temple. This 'Dragon Head' design was truly beautiful: three base structures, or 'dragon bodies'; nine dragon heads; twenty seven eyes. Each dragon head had three eyes arranged in an equilateral triangle; each eye was

a windowed balcony that held a room within with a high vaulted ceiling.  
*Eighty-one eyes.*

Dianire had barely finished the indoor and outdoor plumbing when she caught sight of Berylia standing on the balcony of the topmost eye of the topmost center dragon head, waving her arms at Dianire. Dianire tried to imagine herself in the same room, but the hidden presence of the Pregnant Virgin would not allow, though this time the organic artificial intelligence of the Pregnant Virgin was silent. Dianire understood, she had to lull the Building Mothers into sleep, then try again.

Dianire found herself standing on a diving platform cantilevered over the innermost pool before Dragon Head, craning her neck to look up at the topmost balcony. *Well, I can't fly, but maybe I can jump.*

That was something that the Pregnant Virgin allowed. Dianire found herself landing softly on the balcony railing, then walking along it, until she hopped down on the floor.

"Well, what do you think?" Berylia asked her, smiling.

"I think that it is very artistic. What is it for?"

"It is a meeting place for all the Guilds in Nuegua to come when they visit the Healing Temple, and for the Apache Traders as well. I'm going to call it 'Dragon Head'".

Dianire sucked in her breath. "I was calling it the same thing. That means..."

"Yes! The Pregnant Virgin had this in mind all along. That's why you and I need to talk, and I mean talk, not argue and fight like we've been doing."

"Fine with me."

Berylia leaned on the balcony railing, her arms crossed. "First. Rintiala is right; the Pregnant Virgin chose us to be Sisters; we didn't do this ourselves. Do you agree?"

"I don't like to think that way, but okay. Otherwise it is just all too mysterious for my tastes. I like building things; fixing things out in the open, not looking into shadows."

"Second. Why now? Everything in Clan Demetra is working fine the way it is."

"So is everything in Clan Redourine. And...?" Dianire put out her right palm, begging the next question.

"So whoever built Nuegua--I know now that Pregnant Virgin didn't, she's just another living machine, like the Cactus Mothers--planned into it a series of changes, most of which happened long ago. And...Rintiala is the key to all of it. Did you see how she brushed off the Pregnant Virgin?" Berylia turned to her left to face Dianire, her round Gardener's eyes widening.

"And...the Pregnant Virgin went along with her, just like that. While we got presents--these robes--for being good little girls."

"Nuegua is getting too small; it is a week's walk across, but even so, the Clans are getting bigger."

"And the Galiuro is filling up with junk."

"We'll get to that later. Right now, I think the Pregnant Virgin plans to unite all the Clans into one Guild under one Sister. And guess who that's going to be?"

"Okay, I get that. But why? We're perfectly happy and safe in Nuegua. We're right in the middle of Apacheria, and the Apache protect us from anyone who could harm us in the Empty Earth."

"Forget the Apache. I think the Pregnant Virgin is going to make sure that we rule all the Empty Earth soon."

"Why? The Hopi and the Pueblo never bother anybody; otherwise there's just those idiot Spaniards, and they're lost in their crazy religion."

"Oh, Dianire, sometimes you're too smart to see the obvious. The Sky Wanderers must be coming back soon. This time they'll wipe everyone out, unless Nuegua is ready."

"I'm sorry, Berylia, but I'm a Builder. I need proof that I can see and touch before I'm going to go along with an idea as big as that."

A voice spoke from inside the room that the balcony fronted. "Are you two done? I've got something important to tell you." Rintiala said. "I know how it works."

"How what works?" Dianire asked.

"All of it. And the secret is two words: 'wind spiders'".

"Never heard of them," Berylia stated flatly.

"When you woke up, inside the Training Mother, just before you entered the Grotto, did you eyes and nose itch?" Rintiala asked Berylia.

"Yes, and they still do. I just ignore it."

"How about you, Dianire?" Rintiala turned to face the Redourine girl.

"Sure. It's just some glitch in the Training Mothers, I figured."

"No. For both of you--all three of us--it meant that the wind spiders are moving through our bodies, changing them. Changing our brains, especially."

"I thought it was dusk when I got out of the Training Mother; but, I was so surprised at how quickly I got out that I put it out of my mind." Dianire noted.

Rintiala smiled at the young Builder. "That's because you saw them all at once. Good work, again."

"What are they exactly, and how come you can see them, and even understand them, but we can't?" Berylia asked.

"They are tiny, tiny, the tiniest version of a Cactus Mother that you can imagine. When your Mothering is finished, you will see them too. Then you will need to learn to ignore them. They are so thick in Clan Tiala, especially near the Healing Temple, that they make it look like it is always dusk, until you learn to put them out of your mind with your new Sister powers."

Berylia's eyes brightened and the pitch of her voice rose. "And that's why you were never in a Cactus Mother before today!"

"Very good, Berylia. The truth is that I've lived in Clan Tiala all my life. I've never been out of a Cactus Mother, probably even before I was born."

"So where were you snooping? And what did you find?" Dianire asked Rintiala.

"I was down in level 'D'. The new design kept the Pregnant Virgin busy, moving all sorts of things down there. Then Berylia built this...'Dragon Head'...and even the Pregnant Virgin was so busy that she couldn't see where I was or what I found."

"And that was?" Berylia asked impatiently.

"I found the first Cactus Mothers; they're over four hundred years old, and they're still alive. They were called the Birthing Mothers; the ones that can work on any kind of human, not just a Nueguan."

"So?" Berylia asked, nearly interrupting Rintiala.

"I can heal anyone of anything with them, once we're finally Mothered and out of this living dream. And that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to open up Nuegua to all the Empty Earth. Everyone who needs healing will come to us."

Berylia turned to Dianire. "I told you so. This is what the Pregnant Virgin had in mind all along. We Nueguans are going to rule all the Empty Earth. Hopi, Navaho, even the Spaniards will be our servants. Our slaves."

"No!" Rintiala objected. "They will come as equals needing our help and healing, and leave as our friends."

"Your vision of the future is flawed," Berylia said, her voice growing rough. "The reason we are all here together--now--is that the Sky Wanderers are coming back soon. We will need to put all our energy into that possibility."



"Are you sure? Perhaps the Sky Wanderers are just a myth. Maybe the Crowded Earth just got too sick to support all those people, and this is one of the places where people survived. It's a lot simpler explanation."

Rintiala said, her eyebrows furrowing.

"Rintiala, I thought the Pregnant Virgin was just a myth, but she's not," Dianire noted, trying not to take sides.

"I respect you, Rintiala for your abilities, but you're too young and inexperienced to make such decisions for the rest of us. My understanding is the correct one. And I'm going to show you the future. Let me show you what I have been doing as a Gardener. Let me show you my power. Right now."

Berylia held out her arms towards the south, where storm clouds were gathering off the Inland Sea. As she whirled from east to west, the radix formed again and again, using more and more of the power of the Grotto. Countless Berylias beckoned sick and wandering Apache, Hopi, Navaho, even the Spaniards. Mothers and children came to her, and she fed them with a pink Cactus fruit that Dianire had never seen before. They fell at her feet, and rose her slaves. Berylia bared her breast to the babies, making them forever her servants. With men and boys she threw away the tunic given her by the Pregnant Virgin and let them have their way with her, in any kind of perverse fashion they fancied.

"Stop!" Both Rintiala and Dianire shouted.

Berylia looked over her right shoulder at the two of them, her eyes no longer human, but flames of hot yellow and dark red. "Neither of you can stop me; I'm more powerful than both of you. I don't need you anymore."

Rintiala grabbed Dianire by the arm, moved to the left of Berylia, giving a line of sight to the entrance of the Great Temple. She pulled on Dianire to climb onto the balcony rail. "Are you ready to jump?" Rintiala asked her.

"It's too far," Dianire protested. "We would have to fly."

"It's too bad that you can't jump," Rintiala said matter-of-factly. "But it's a good thing I can fly for both of us." With that she flung herself off the railing, holding tight to Dianire.