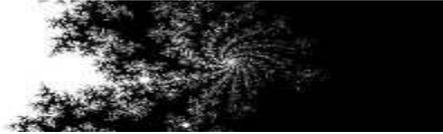


1



Light filtered through the tall trees and dappled the glade in the middle of ForestSide. There was neither breath of wind to disturb the foliage nor movement of shadows on the grass.

No birdsong, no flutter of wing.

No rustle in the undergrowth of small creatures scuttling by.

None of the regular sounds that gave life to the forest.

Just silence.

A fantail flitted into the outskirts of ForestSide. She had never been here before. She was happy. There were

no predators defending their territorial rights, poised to descend upon her in a flurry of feathers and vicious pecking beaks. The fantail danced amongst the light-beams and the sparse branches. She enjoyed the freedom and joy of flight.

She stopped to perch on a branch on the edge of the glade. It was only then she noticed the unnatural silence surrounding the clearing. Her head bobbed up and down as she peered around. There was nothing obvious to explain her unease. She hopped to the end of the branch to see more.

A curious sight greeted her. A large flat-topped rectangular rock rose in the middle of the clearing. The sides were coloured in blues and greens and reds and yellows that constantly flowed around the edges. The top of the rock was covered by a cloth with rainbow colours woven through. And the cloth was draped over something.

Something that was shaped like a human.

Curious, the fantail hopped off the branch. She flitted to and fro over the boulder. Now and again, a dark smudge would erupt then get washed away by a colour. Each time the black emerged she had a sudden need to be far away.

Yet the fantail also felt it call to her.

She had to obey.

She wanted to land on the cloth.

She needed to touch the dark spot.

Closer and closer she flitted.

A black blemish broke through the colours and a stringy tentacle reached up.

In a trance, she tapped it with her talon...

The crack of twigs broke the spell. The fantail tore away from the straining tendril. A piercing scream threatened to burst her eardrums. She fled up into the higher branches. But her curious nature made her perch to see what was happening below.

A human emerged from the shade of the branches, stopping on the edge of the glade to stare at the rainbow object. He was different from the others she had seen outside the forest; he was much younger than most, he also wasn't wearing a single-coloured jumpsuit.

He stepped into the clearing and slowly circled the stone platform. Occasionally he stretched out a hand to the cloth. In response, a black stain would flicker briefly on the fabric where his fingers lingered.

He stopped at one end of the boulder. He opened and closed his fists. Slowly he reached toward the fabric. Gently he grasped the cloth and carefully peeled it away from what was hidden beneath.

A girl!

She was black: face, cropped hair, hands. Very black.

Her jumpsuit was a bright, bright green.

She opened her eyes,

They sparkled, like stars on a cold night.

“Hello Raj,” she said.

The fantail launched herself back into the forest and flew from the glade as fast as her beating wings could carry her.