

The Seed

By
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Gillian knew her parents wouldn't approve, but she couldn't turn back.

It happened the summer she turned fifteen. There was a big to-do at the MedCenter where her folks worked, and she lucked into a two-week visit with her Uncle Frank. He was not merely the black sheep of the family; to hear her father tell it, he was leading a plot to subdivide the meadow. She knew her dad was being melodramatic, but it only served to heighten her curiosity about Uncle Frank.

She was a city kid. Having grown up in the midst of the vast coastal sprawl called Los Angeles, Gillian knew how to make the best of the free services offered to residents of Mexamerica's regional capital. That included not only transportation and communication, but education as well. School was fine, as far as it went, but to her it felt confining. She got this odd gnawing sensation from time to time, and lately she'd begun to realize that it meant some part of the lesson was being omitted. Usually it was just a simplification that was cleared up later on, but occasionally it was more mysterious. She tracked down the ones she could, and was learning to live with the ones she couldn't. Sometimes they were marked, 'proprietary', at others 'security'. With Uncle Frank, however, it was 'family secret'. And this was her chance to ferret it out.

At the moment, however, she was starting to be a problem for her uncle. Today's expedition had been presented to the kids as a nature walk, but she was more interested in the geology they were walking through than in the plants her uncle was so fascinated by. Gillian could hear her younger cousin rattling off everything she'd been told in school about the changes forced upon the wild world by climate change, but neither Peg nor her uncle were in view. They'd started down into the canyon just past the ridge Gillian was studying, and had paused for the umpteenth time to finger some plant or other. Rocks, to her way of thinking, told better stories than plants. But that was about to change.

"Gil!?" her uncle called.

She ran a finger along one of the strata in an exposed boulder while waiting for the echo to fade. “Be right there,” she said.

The crunch of an approaching flurry of footsteps never broke through her intense examination of that rock, because the next thing she knew, her cousin was poking her in the ribs.

“Ow! Stop that, Peg,” Gillian protested.

Pegwin straightened. “C’mon, rock hound. There’s plenty more of that to look at down below. My dad said there was a slide near here, but when I asked him about the swings, he—.”

A sudden crack split the rush of wind through the trees. It was followed closely by the unsettling sound of something being dragged, a hollow thud, and then silence.

The two girls looked at one another, and then ran off towards the sound. An old rotted tree stump had given up its perch atop a rise, slalomed along a gully and jammed itself headfirst into some animal’s burrow. They were picking their way towards its severed root when Uncle Frank arrived.

“Sure it’s dead, Gil,” he said, “but it won’t be a fossil for some time. What’s your interest in it?”

Gillian studied her uncle for a moment. Frank’s resemblance to her mother went beyond the usual comparison of features or build. They both naturally tended towards the lean side, both exuded an air of intensity that at times bordered on the manic, and each was steadfastly rooted to some secret core of certainty that they used to guide their lives. They just used it in different ways, that’s all.

“Gil?” he repeated.

Smiling impishly, Gillian pointed towards the broken main root that was now the highest part of the tree. “The rocks it took with it. It dug them out of the ground for me.”

He huffed. “Yeah. I should have known. Look, I’ll make you a deal. If you tell me the story of the rocks, I’ll tell you what this tree says about the environment around here. Deal?”

She nodded, and then launched into a lengthy monologue about the history of the continent. After describing the ancient mountain-building periods, her tone changed, and she related the effects of the devastating quake near San Francisco at around the turn of the 21st century, the one that opened a path for the Pacific to fill in a suddenly lowered central valley. The fact that there were people involved made it much more real to her, even though it happened over 250 years before.

While Gillian spoke, she kept an eye on her young cousin. Uncle Frank listened carefully and supplied those non-verbal cues we all need to let us know we’re being heard. He stepped over to examine things as Gil pointed them out. In short, he was a model audience. Peg, on the other hand, was showing signs of exasperation and annoyance. She feigned disinterest, appeared to study some plant or other, or watched the clouds. Clearly, she craved attention.

In the silence that followed, Peg wandered back over, sighed deeply at her dad, and glumly said, “Your turn.”

He frowned. “You’re bored, aren’t you, pumpkin? I think I’ll take my turn on our way back, if that’s all right with you, Gillian. Right now, let’s continue down to the streambed. I want to show you something.”

The rest of their descent was punctuated by the girls' renditions of various popular songs. When there was no further to go, the three stood for a few moments and looked back up at where they'd come. Going down was always easier, but the climb back had home at the end of it. Down here the main attraction was the stream. You couldn't even hear the wind through the trees anymore. But it did echo nicely.

"Okay," Gillian said flatly. "What was it you wanted to show us?"

Uncle Frank sat down on a rock beside the stream. "Well," he said, "your cousin told me about that feeling you get when you're on the trail of something."

Gillian's gaze drifted towards Pegwin. "What did you tell him, peanut?"

Peg shrugged. "Only that your bloodhound sense got you into trouble at school."

When Gillian looked back at her uncle, he asked, "Do you know what it is?"

"Not a clue. Why?"

Frank smiled. "Because I do. And I'd like to help you learn how to use it."

"My dad won't like that," Gillian said. "He says you're a bad influence. He only agreed to letting me visit because they had no other choice."

Frank spoke quietly. "What do you want?"

She was silent for a time, and then looked over at her cousin. "Can you keep quiet about this?"

Peg raised her right hand. "Blood oath."

"Then tell me," Gillian said. "What is it?"

Frank thought for a moment. "A seed."

"A what?"

"A starting point. We can use it to grow your tree of psychic abilities." He leaned forward and touched a leaf. "We can start with this weed."

Gillian stared at the leaf, and imagined it staring back.

"All living things have an energy field," he said gently, "and everything's alive. Psychic abilities are nothing more than ways of recognizing and interacting with that energy. That sense of yours is like this leaf. It's the tip of a growing thing, but there's more to it. You can find the root that nourishes that sense, and help it to become a vital part of yourself. Just like I did."

She studied her uncle for a bit before speaking. "What do you do, exactly? I've asked my folks, but they don't tell me. Or rather, what they tell me triggers that sense."

"I'm a Healer," he said. "What do you know about them?"

She shrugged. "Not enough. I've read about how the courts defined when a person is to be treated at a Hospice Center instead of at a MedCenter like where my folks work. They say it's nothing but quackery with good lawyers, and that people who go there are fooling themselves. I know that people have been using alternative forms of health care for centuries, and that there's plenty of evidence supporting both sides of the argument. What I don't know is how it works."

Frank motioned his niece to sit beside him. "I tell you what. If your sense goes off about anything I say, let me know so we can fill in the gaps. That way you can start using it to guide your exploration. Will you do that?"

"Sure. So now what?"

"Well, what do you want to know?"

Gillian smiled. "I'm a scientist at heart, Uncle Frank. How do you use it to collect data?"

“You could say it’s like radar.” He held his right hand out in front of him with the fingers spread, and slowly moved it left and right. “Decide what you want to detect, and how you want to be made aware of it, and then trust your intuition.”

She laughed. “That doesn’t sound too rigorous to me. How can you know if you’ve imagined it? How can it be validated or reproduced? For that matter, how can you even quantify it? What can you write down?”

“All good questions, too. And that’s what the training is all about. It’s also why Healers have to be licensed and to take an oath. Not like the one your parents took; a different kind of oath. The Healer’s Oath has more to do with respecting your patients than with not harming them. How am I doing?”

Gillian looked puzzled.

“What does your sense tell you? Am I holding back? Disguising the truth?”

She smiled. “No.”

“Next question, then?”

She thought for a moment. “Okay. Say you’ve collected your data. Diagnosed the patient. How do you do something about it?”

“Truth is,” he said, “sometimes you can’t. The first thing a Healer has to decide is whether to send the patient to a MedCenter. That’s not something they do where your folks work. And that’s my personal fight. Getting them to start.”

Gillian stood up and stretched. “I’m getting stiff sitting in one place. Can we do this while we walk?”

Pegwin, who had been quietly staying out of their field of view, came skipping around from the left. “It’s about time you thawed out, rock hound. I was beginning to think you were going to fossilize on that rock. Which way?”

Frank held his hand up to stop the action. “Here’s your first lesson, Gil. We can go upstream or down. Tell yourself that you’ll know the answer when your palm tickles, then hold it each direction and ask yourself which way will be more interesting.”

She hesitated at first, but then Gillian did as he’d suggested. She repeated the process several times before saying anything. “Upstream? I think?”

Her uncle laughed. “Say it as a statement, rather than as a question. That way you’ll start gaining confidence in your psychic decisions.”

“Upstream, then. Definitely.”

The three set off on a rambling exploration of the canyon floor. Gillian and her uncle pointed out signs of the area’s history to one another from the geological and biological perspectives. Their chatter was punctuated by wild flights of imagination as Pegwin latched onto odd bits of the discussion. The afternoon was starting to cast shadows over their adventure when Frank slipped on a loose rock and landed on his butt. Peg’s laughter was cut short by an unfamiliar warbling coming from her father’s backpack.

“What’s that, daddy?” she said.

He frowned, and opened the pack. “Nothing good.”

The girls waited while Frank pulled out his handheld and pressed a few buttons. “I think I’m going to need your help, Gillian.”

They breathed in frightened silence as they drew closer.

“I have a neural implant that manages pain for me. It was installed when Peg was a toddler.” He scooped up his daughter and looked into her eyes. “My body sends

spurious pain signals, Gillian. Enough to have laid me up shortly after your aunt and I first met. Learned biocontrol techniques are the usual solution, but not for Healers. They're fine for people in other fields, and we tried to use them initially, but they made it impossible for me to focus on my patients properly. We tried targeted gentech meds for a while, but they so affected my psychic acuity that I couldn't work. Finally, we agreed to the implant." He glanced at the handheld. "Unfortunately, it just reported that it's failing. And we're out of range, so this thing can't call for help."

Gillian took a deep breath. "How can I help, Uncle Frank?"

"Well, we have two problems to deal with. First, there's the pain. I'm okay for the moment, but I'll be having increasing waves of uncoordinated pain signals shortly. When it works, the implant monitors the pattern of neural pain signals headed up my spine, turns down the volume, and chooses which ones to pass based on its assessment of where that pattern is in my normal neural attractor. Then—."

Gillian's expression was not promising.

"I've lost you, haven't I," he said.

She nodded vigorously.

"Okay. Try this. Close your eyes and imagine looking down on a forest on a breezy day. The wind is ruffling the leaves, and some of the branches are swaying gently. Now, instead of watching the leaves, try to see the wind itself. Look for patterns in the motion of the trees as the breeze goes past. First it moves one branch, then another, right across the forest. Focusing on the wind is like examining a patient's energy fields. How are you doing?"

Gillian opened her eyes and grinned. "That's easy. And in a way it's like reading the history of the rocks, rather than just examining the strata. So now what?"

"Well, an attractor pattern is like the kind of wind you'd like to have going through your imaginary forest. It doesn't matter which way the wind blows, or how the gusts trace their way through the trees, but if the wind gets too strong or the gusts too violent, they can break off branches and even uproot trees. What the implant does, when it's working at least, is to play with the wind. It watches for high winds or erratic gusts, and calms them, but other than that allows it to blow as it wants. I guess you could describe it as sculpting the energy field."

She looked doubtfully at her hands. "You want me to sculpt your pain?"

"That sounds so funny," Peg said with a giggle. "What does it feel like?"

Uncle Frank shrugged. "It's different for everyone, pumpkin. Then there's our second problem. We need to get out of this canyon so we can call for help. The longer it takes, the harder it will be for me to move safely without your help, Gillian. If I slip on the rocks, I could tumble downhill and really get hurt. So we need to get started. Ready?"

"I guess. What do I do?"

He winced, and rubbed his left leg. "Before we start back, I want you to find and feel the energy field you'll be working with. It'll be getting worse as we go, but right now it will at least be close to normal, or rather the normal we want to keep it like."

Gillian grew more serious than she ever recalled being. And she had a feeling she couldn't quite pin down, a feeling that this was more important than she knew.

"While it still works, I can set the implant into a special state that makes my pain level vary in a regular pattern. This is so someone without training, like you, might be able to help in an emergency. It will be uncomfortable for me, but tolerable, so tell me

when you have found it. Start by closing your eyes like before. Only, this time imagine that you can reach inside the back of my neck, and into a flow of water going up into my head. Tell yourself how you'll recognize it, and trust your answers. The flow will be doing a three-step pattern: a long peak, and then two short ones. I'm turning it on now."

Frank shuddered a few times, and then settled into a subtle involuntary twitch of his shoulders, following the pattern he'd described. One... two, three. One... two three.

After several cycles, Gillian shook her head, wrinkled her brow, and nodded slowly. "Okay, Uncle Frank," she said quietly. "I have it."

"This is the tricky part, Gil," he said between shudders. "Keep focused on the flow while I reset the implant. You'll need to be able to touch back in without the target pattern. Ready? Now." He tapped the handheld and visibly relaxed.

Gillian smiled confidently. "I still have it."

"Good. The next step is learning what you'll be doing until help arrives. If you're imagining that flow as something you can stick your hands in, now imagine that it's also alive. Gently stroking it, like you would a cat, helps to calm the energy down. I'll start the target pattern again, and you can practice calming the first beat of each measure. Stroke it as it goes past. Just make it quieter, don't try to stop the beat, because the implant will fight back."

Frank watched his daughter petting an imaginary cat for a moment, and then tapped the control again. Gillian floundered a bit, but eventually got into the rhythm. Slowly, the pattern of her uncle's twitches changed to something more like 'pause... two three'. And he tapped it off again.

"Good," he said. "You're a quick study, Gillian. I think we're ready to go, now."

She smiled. "Thanks."

Frank closed his pack, shrugged into it, and stood up. After retracing their path back downstream, the three started uphill along the trail they'd originally come down. Partway up, Frank slowed and then stopped. His face was pale and he was moving stiffly.

"Okay, Gillian," he said. "It's time. I can't keep it in check any longer. See what you can do."

She pressed her hands together briefly, then closed her eyes and reached out to locate the place she'd found earlier. Nothing. She tried again, and failed.

When Frank saw that she was frowning, he said, "Take your time, Gillian. Stop for a while, then try it again."

The third time, as they say, was the charm. But things were different in there now. It seemed like the psychic wind her uncle had described was now howling, like a heavy storm blowing through his energy field. There were eddies and crosscurrents as well. She took a deep breath, and started to massage the turbulent fluid she sensed, but nothing happened. It just blew through her fingers and around her imaginary hands like they weren't even there.

"I can't," she said tightly. "Nothing happens!"

Frank cupped his hands around hers. "Yes you can," he said gently. "Try it again."

This time, she started differently. Instead of attempting to quell the storm, she focused on the gusts within it, and stroked them. Amazingly, they responded. Soon, the storm had lost its chaotic feeling and acted more like a heavy wind.

Frank's breathing eased. "Thanks, Gillian. Stopping those stabbing pains helps a lot."

She stared at him like he'd just told her she could stop flapping and glide through the clouds for a while. It was an exhilarating feeling. A whole new world was opening.

They continued up the trail, but Gillian was only paying partial attention to where she was going. A growing part of her was still watching her uncle's storm. And something about it was beginning to bother her. "Uncle Frank," she said at last, "what's the stuff being carried by the current?"

"What stuff? Do you see something?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Feel it, really. I keep thinking there's some dirt or sand blowing on the wind. Do you know what it means?"

"No. But we can investigate it further after we get back. Is it bothering you?"

Gillian was silent for a moment. "Not me," she said, "my bloodhound sense, as Peg here calls it. It's important for some reason."

Pegwin perked up at the sound of her name. She wobbled around the path ahead of her father like a spun-up top.

"Pumpkin," he called. "Stay close, okay?"

It went on like that for a while. Every few minutes, Gillian calmed another swarm of her uncle's stabbing pains. When she wasn't doing that, she was mulling over the mystery she'd unearthed. They were rounding the last switchback before the place where the rotted tree had landed when Frank sank to the ground, removed his shoes and started massaging his feet.

Gillian stood beside him. "Feet hurt?"

"I know there's nothing physically wrong with them, but that's where the pain seems to be coming from. Want to take a look? Psychically, I mean."

She started as before, but then traced the wind back from where it came, hoping to somehow end up in the vicinity of his feet. When there was a split in the current, she used the trick she'd learned earlier to select one. As she went, she noticed that the sand was getting less pronounced the further she went, as if it was being scraped off of something along the way. And then it struck her that the dust itself may have something to tell her, just as the pebbles torn away with that tree's fractured roots did. So she stopped thinking about the wind, which represented the nerve impulses, and focused instead on the dust, to see what kind of a picture that made.

"Uncle Frank," she said carefully. "What would something that looks to me like rock strata mean?"

He scratched his head for a moment in thought. "Well, since it's your imagery, it has to be something that makes sense to you. How would you read rock strata?"

Gillian looked around. "Out here it tells about the history of the ground. Tales of volcanoes, mud collecting under still water, mountains built by plate tectonics; things like that. In there...?"

Pegwin put down the leaf she was fiddling with and said, "I'm hungry."

"She may have a point, you know," Frank added.

"Food?" Gillian asked, momentarily perplexed.

"Seemingly random events are sometimes clues," Frank said as he started putting his shoes back on. "Ideas are food for the mind; love is food for the heart; music is food for the soul. Where does that take you?"

She thought about it for a while. “Well, if bits of what you eat can end up clogging your arteries, what can bits of what you know clog up?”

He smiled. “I like that. If our bodies are the physical manifestation of our images of ourselves, then what you’re seeing is like that image weathering out. Psychic erosion. Do you think you can filter it out?”

Gillian was beginning to feel more like a colleague than a trainee, and she rather liked it. “I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

Once she had re-established the image of his internal psychic wind, she switched on her mental geology lens and the blowing sand froze in place; it stood out like it was carved in bas-relief. She smiled to herself for a moment, and then imagined that everything in the carving suddenly vanished, leaving just a smooth plaster wall. When she opened her eyes again, she found her uncle gaping at her.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked hesitantly.

He took a few short breaths. “I... I don’t think so. In fact, I think you made the problem go away, at least for now. I don’t hurt!”

“Can we get dinner, now?” Peg asked.

“You bet, pumpkin. And I think we need to get something else as well.”

“Dessert, daddy?”

Uncle Frank laughed. “Sure. But we should also get a license for your cousin. She’s a Healer, now.”