



Dream Us a Game or Ezra's Daughter

by Kate Duffy Raper

"They no longer play with us," the children chorused to the grandmother. "Will you teach us new games?"

The grandmother, newly assigned to the outpost, looked about her new shelter. It was a grey cement box, which held the family safe, underground, away from the enemy's splintering, throbbing bombs. Grey cement walls, which looked warm and porous, coldly shrugged off human touch when approached. The grey cement floor was devoid of covering, and out of it rose the cement block table and benches on which the family ate meals, and the high cement slabs on which they slept. Bars of white light at the juncture of ceiling and wall illuminated every angle of the cell and its cement furnishings. The shadow's space was eaten up.

The father sat on the only non-cement chair at his computer terminal facing the grey wall, punching keys and watching lights correspond softly green, yellow, green, orange. He muttered and clacked the keys. He looked up at the grandmother and back at the keys.

The mother lay on her sleeping slab near the wall opposite the computer. Her eyes were closed, her hands folded across her breast. She slept. "What kind of games do you play here?" asked the grandmother.

"I have received transmission from the other outpost operators," the father announced at the next meal on the cement table. "We have determined the enemy's strength at seven strategic points, and have calculated that we have the power to kill each individual 99.732 times."

"A new game!" cried the children. "We shall kill them 99 times!"

From the far wall came a rustle and a sigh, one almost indistinguishable from the other. The mother rose from the slab and joined the family at the cement block table.

"You're awake!" the children were ecstatic. They turned to the grandmother. "She hasn't been awake since before you were assigned to stay with us."

The mother encircled her children in her arms, and her long soft hair fell upon their faces. "I had a dream," she told them in a conspirator's whisper. "We all became tall slender young women, and we danced around immense purple flowers . . . flowers taller and bigger around than this table, and colored so deeply and richly they breathed like the sea. And as we approached each flower, it became wreathed in squares of blue lights. Each blue light became the entrance to a miniature city, and we reduced our size to travel and explore each one."

"The flowers are dead," said the father, seating himself once more before the terminal. "The seas have dried up, and we have no blue lights—just white and green and yellow and orange."

"But I dreamed it," the mother looked up.

And dreams are not real," replied the father.

"Now will you play with us?" questioned the children.

"No, I must sleep again," and the mother climbed once more upon her slab.

"A new game! A new game!" sang the children. "We will dance around purple flowers and kill them 99 times!"

The enemy's bombs fell around the many shelters, and the outposts remained in contact with each other reporting each new attack. The father continued to monitor his terminal, pausing only to eat or rest briefly on his slab. The children amused themselves with games, or joined the grandmother and occasionally their father, at the cement table for meals. The meals were synthesized by the computer, as was the freely circulating sweet air which filled spaces between the grey walls and didn't smell of bombs. At regular intervals, the father punched the terminal key which dimmed the bars of white lights, and the children and the grandmother slept on their slabs.

The mother, however, slept long and alone. When she awoke, it was with a dream on her lips. She no longer left the slab, but let the children gather around her to learn the new game. Shortly after the children had finished a meal, their mother sat up laughing.

"You've had another dream!" they rushed to her slab.

"Yes, my darlings, another dream," she smiled.

"What was your dream about?" the children flocked about her stretching their necks, pointing their noses upward.

"Horses."

The father groaned from his keyboard.

"... beautiful white horses, white like powder and big as the wind. They galloped past our shelter singing, and we grasped their manes and rode them to the sky."

"No more," said the father from the terminal. "No more dreams." He turned in his chair to face them. His chair squealed, and his pinched face reflected the pain. "Dreams are not real. I will show you what is real."

He punched a key on the terminal and on the dark screen above it bright green lines began to spider across until they had created a flickering skeleton map. He punched another button and foxfire glowed at intersecting spots on the map. The skeleton pulsed.

"At each of these points," his finger jabbed against the hard screen leaving smudges to dull the fires, "the enemy has wiped out shelters just like ours with enough power to destroy each occupant 500 times. We must up our fire power to 600 strength, or we will also be destroyed, just like all the horses, and the occupants of those shelters. And that is real."

The mother rearranged her glossy dark hair over her breasts and breathed into it, "But I saw horses ... big as the wind."

"Horses!" screamed the children, as they pranced around the shelter. "We are riding white horses!" They stopped suddenly to turn to their mother and ask her what horses were like, but she was once more asleep.

She did not sleep long, but suddenly sat up straight on the slab. Her eyes opened on both sides, and stared not forward, but back into the endless corridors on the other side. Gradually they travelled back through the dark, closed the memory door behind them, and sought the grandmother.

"He was here. He almost spoke to me."

"There was no one here. Who was here?" queried the children.

"Her father," replied the grandmother.

"He was here," the mother repeated.

"Your father was not here," came the voice from the terminal. "You had a dream; your father was not here. Your father is dead."

"How many times was he killed?" the children wanted to know.

"Only once." The mother turned her face to the wall.

Fascinating. The children pondered the complexities and finality of this new game. It was more difficult to play.

"No!" the father clacked angrily at his keys. "According to this data, the enemy has destroyed the outpost in the next sector. They used enough fire power to destroy each inhabitant 1,027 times! We must boost our power to 1,050!"

"We must boost our power!" the children joined hands and circled their mother's slab. They circled and sang, then sat and watched for their mother to wake and tell them a new dream game.

The mother continued to sleep. The father leaned forward over his terminal, straining as new lights came on green, yellow, orange. He punched more keys and the anxiety ran through his fingers into the keys and appeared as wavering green numbers on the screen. The numbers worriedly, self-consciously regarded each other on the screen, inadequate to the demands of the father who ran his hands through his hair urging, "More power! More power!"

"More power, more power," the children chanted and swayed as they sat

around their mother's slab.

She stirred on the slab, she moaned. Tears ran from her closed eyes. The children leaned close to watch.

She rose slowly. Her eyes were wide and wet and dark, and they saw neither in nor out, but somewhere else. Her voice was a shivering whisper of an echo from the caverns of her eyes.

"He is here."

The grandmother closed her eyes and saw also.

"Where? Where?" the children looked around. "Does he bring purple flowers?"

"The flowers are dead!" the father frantically punched his keys.

"Does he come with blue lights?" The children spun in circles looking for the lights.

"Green lights, and yellow, and orange!" shouted the father to the screen.

The mother trembled.

"Does he ride white horses?" the children climbed on top of each other in their frenzy.

"No more horses!" the father pounded the keys with his fists.

"He speaks," hushed the mother, and the grandmother joined with her.

"Women are strongest, but truth is victor over all things."

And then the enemy's bombs found them, and killed each of them 1,035 times, so that they multiplied amidst wreaths of blue lights, blossomed upward like the petals of immense purple flowers and caught the manes of the huge singing white horses, and rode them, a chorus of legions, into the sky.

