

Perched across from me, Harry leans forward to get my attention. He wiggles his fingers, palm up, signaling that now is my time. I waver, squeeze my fist again, and grab a deep breath before arising.

Standing up, that's all it takes to hush the crowd. Fay hovers beside me, ready to translate my words. But what words will they be? I've never been any good at speeches; hell, I could be the poster child for stage fright. Plus, I'm still pissed at Harry for making me do this. Oh well, here goes nothing.

I try to keep my voice measured, since that seemed to work with the media back home. First, I focus on a spot in the distance. I lean forward as if reading a message, etched across the sky in cloud formations. I'm afraid that if I engage anyone in eye contact they'll see through me and the whole thing will blow.

I try to convey how Luz and I discovered each other's fascination with the iris stone, how I willingly assumed the risks involved with scouting the mountain, how we found the stone, more than we could dream of, how the mountain rumbled, raining down giant boulders. Out of the corner of my eye, I detect faces hardening or weeping.

I gulp and stand straighter, ready to deliver the coup-de-grace. "It gets worse. I discovered more bad news this morning." I light on the girl. Her face registers surprise, probably wondering what else could go wrong. My eyes jump away once more, now unable to come to rest on anyone.

"Radioactive." I stretch the word out, leaving Fay slack-jawed, unable to come up with any way to translate this. "There is no word for it in your tongue. It is a poison that seeps out from the stone, forever. It will kill you if you are close to it, but slowly, without any clue. It gives no warning that you can see or hear or smell or taste. In your hand, it feels the same as any other rock."

I reach into the bag by my stool and hold up the yellow meter. Its red needle wavers to and fro. "This device measures the poison."

As I pick out a sample, there's the sound of women sucking their breath through clenched teeth. I flip the meter's switches on. The needle jumps, and the box emits a noise like a crow's caw, squawking loud enough to startle even those sitting in the rear.

A lot of the women sport jewelry made from the iris stone, but I'm hoping they are confused enough by the whole premise so that they don't connect the dots. No such luck. The ones wearing jewelry spring up and tug at their dresses, their ears, necks, and wrists, ripping off their pieces in a tortured frenzy, elbowing each other aside to thrust them at my meter. Most of their gems light it up, and their owners throw them on the ground in disgust. They storm off, howling, but not before several of them pause to scowl and spit at me, the bearer of bad tidings.

The good news is that I seem to have convinced the two people who matter. Harry's Adam's apple bobs up and down as he surveys the crowd. Buck keeps his eye on the needle of the yellow meter, engrossed in the Chinese technology more than its implications.

Now with the tribeswomen and my chief pissed, I cast around, looking for my own private hole to crawl into. How am I going to get out of this mess?

