
BREAKING
SILENCE
P. N. SIMPSON

B R E A K I N G
S I L E N C E

P.N. SIMPSON

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Star Explorer Books

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To Graeme

Husband and father who encouraged

and inspired us in our writing.

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My Testimony

My out-loud name is Mirra. I am one of the Quiet People, the Saltanke, and lived my first ten years in a village of telepaths. My people didn't use out-loud talk or writing among ourselves.

We remembered everything we saw or heard, and could see each other's memories. We didn't need writing to keep records or share memories, or believe memories could be lost.

If there was a time in the far past when this happened, it wasn't common knowledge. Even if adults avoided thinking about such a horror, the hint of fear would linger and I would remember the taste.

But I learned that fear when I was exiled among mind-deaf people who only have fragmented memories, and can't see the memories of others. Then I discovered how such people save and share memories.

Writing.

Writing allows memories to be shared across time and among worlds, to survive even the loss of all but one soul from a small village.

Now I'm seventeen and seen as an adult on my new home world, and want to share some of my memories. How I lost my people, and my struggle to adapt to life in an alien world that has few people like me.

That word 'some' is the key to understanding this writing, because words can't capture every part of memory. That's the difference between seeing memories in another mind, and reading written words. Words are crude things that must be carefully chosen, or they will obscure or even distort the truth.

People lie all the time with words. Sometimes the lies are unintentional, since words are only symbols that can't capture every nuance of thought or emotion. But people often deliberately choose words to hide or twist the truth.

I've done my best to choose words that portray the best picture of the truth. The word I have found that best describes this is testimony. Here I've tried to give true testimony, but as with all writing the reader must decide whether I as the writer can be trusted.

My testimony is the first part of the story, where I have first-hand memories. The rest is written as stories usually are, as if by an unseen watcher.

Here begins my testimony.

Chapter 1

Moonlight still bathed the houses of Elaterra in silver as I walked up the river path, though a hint of sunrise traced the curve of the far-off hills. A mother vole chittered, hurrying her brood to their burrow, to be safe from the day-hunters that scanned the fields for prey. A shaggy guard-canis with the grass-eaters turned to see if I was a threat since I was so quiet.

I touched her mind and sent a whisper of thought, '*It's just me, looking at the morning*,' as the path turned into the trees lining the riverbank.

The sun burst free from the hills as I reached the cave. Spring floods had undermined the riverbank here, releasing a cascade of crumbling rock and soil to reveal the long-sealed entrance to a large cave.

My older brother was with the surveyors who found it when the floods subsided, and I tagged along with the elders when they went to look. They entered the outer chamber with torches to explore the shadows beyond where the sun reached, but went in only four hands of paces before they turned back.

"A temptation to go further," the lead Elder said out-loud when they emerged.

"But we don't know how far the water penetrated below the base. We'll send to Alocha village in the autumn. Ask for the loan of one of their miners this winter to help us explore further. In the meantime, we want everyone to keep clear."

Everyone agreed, and I saw the memory of a horrific mine collapse in the mind of another elder. He came from Alocha, but met a local girl on a trading visit and settled into life in a farming village.

I tried to be obedient for once, but after a few days I gave in to temptation. Early that morning I slipped away as I often did to visit the

small wild Speakers in the fields. Surely it would be safe to look if I kept close to the entrance.

At the mouth of the cave the elder's memory surfaced, as I peered beyond the sunlit floor into the shadows. Pushing his memory away, I took a step inside and was instantly entranced by white crystals glimmering in the half-light. They encrusted every surface I could see in this marvellous cave, carved by nature from the white lima rock that pushed up through the soil in some of our fields.

The glitter of a loose crystal caught my eye, but as I bent to pick it up, terror slammed into my mind, with an image of black orbs falling from the sky. I stumbled against the wall as shrieks of agony followed, then cut off leaving an instant of aching silence before everything disappeared in a flash of pain.

* * *

When the world reappeared, I was still in the cave, splayed on my back looking up at the ceiling. My eyes could see the rough surface of the rock with the light from the cave opening. My ears could hear the water tumbling over the rocks in the nearby river. But I was alone, I could only feel my own thoughts and jagged pain in my mind.

Trembling, I got to my feet and staggered to the cave entry. It was still morning, so for a moment I thought little time had passed. But my mouth was dry and I was hungry.

I caught my breath. Maybe I had been asleep for a long time. It could be the next morning, and no one knew where I'd gone. And if I couldn't see them in my mind, maybe they couldn't see me. They would be so worried! I stumbled down the path to the village as fast as I could.

When I emerged from the trees, the grass-lovers were gone, and I saw a shaggy black mound in the grass. Sitting in the fur was a small brown scavenger who studied me with beady eyes before it skittered away.

It couldn't be … it was Watcher. That's what she called herself in her mind. The guard-canis I'd passed on my way to the cave. Now she was dead, with her eyes in the belly of a lesser Speaker, and the flock that was her life was gone.

Tears came, and I broke into a run despite the jabs of pain in my head.

I came over the hill and jerked to a halt when I saw a huge metal wagon in the center of the village. It towered over a cluster of people in strange clothes. They were staring into a large trench dug across the commons, and as I watched, a man climbed on the machine.

Then a giant scoop mounted to a thick beam on one side of the wagon, dumped a mound of soil into one end of the trench. I ran down and tried to push through the strange people to look in the trench, but a man pulled me away.

There was a flash of light, and the walls of a nearby house crumbled, joining other walls already reduced to piles of rubble. I tried to call out in Quiet Talk, but the pain in my head kept me silent and I couldn't feel any other minds.

The strange man knelt to look in my face, and I asked him with my tongue stumbling over the out-loud words, "Where has everyone gone? Please help me find them. My mother?"

The man put his hand on my shoulder, and said some out-loud words I couldn't understand. Another man picked me up and carried me through the piles of rubble to a grey metal box raised up on stilts which had crushed the grain in the field.

It was one of the flying wagons we sometimes saw far up in the sky. He took me up a ramp to an open door, and set me down in a room filled with Youva nomads. Families. Everyone huddled on the floor with the children crying, and a few men lying still to the side.

Then a woman called out, "A Saltanke child from the village!"

I recognized her. A few days ago, she'd come with her sisters from the Youva summer camp down the river to barter with my aunt. She took my

hand and led me to sit with her family as I told her, “I can’t find anyone, and the houses are gone.”

She pulled me into her arms and touched my face.

“She’s burning with fever,” she whispered. And then called out, “Please, some water for the child. Have a little pity!”

One of the strangers standing at the door handed her a water flask, and she let me drink in slow sips. Then she held me close and rocked me until I drifted off to sleep. I jerked awake a little later when the flying wagon moved with a deep buzzing sound, but my eyes closed and I went back to sleep. I was so tired and alone, and my mind hurt so badly.

The Youva woman woke me when the flying wagon landed, and a man yelled out-loud orders for everyone to stand. They herded us down the ramp onto a wide, hard-paved space. The hot, dry air made it hard to breathe, and the bright light hurt my eyes.

Next in the series

Finding Refuge

P.N. SIMPSON

Finding Refuge begins when Jeremy Bridger is taken to a rehabilitation center that may be less about treatment than disappearance. When he escapes, he is rescued by a team of ex intel agents led by Fargon, who he had met taking one of their survival courses.

Taken to their home base in a compound in the wilderness, he forms an instant bond with Fargon's daughter Jul, as he is transformed into Mic Riger, a young man whose old name is too dangerous to carry.

They travel to their base in the city to organize Mic's escape to sanctuary on Narevak, a refuge in the unaligned zone, where Mic's black sheep uncle had formed a deep friendship with a powerful Naraveki. But then disaster strikes when Jul is assaulted in a night club and is forced to fight back.

Her attacker, the son of a powerful oligarch, sends his enforcers to pursue Jul with a vengeance. Jul must now flee with Mic, but his planned route would be too dangerous for Jul to follow. A rival oligarch discovers their predicament, and approaches Fargon with an offer to help Jul and Mic find their way to Naravek.

Finding Refuge is a story about identity, recovery, love, and the difficult freedom of belonging somewhere by choice

Find out more