

Special Weapons and Ordnance Research Directorate dossier:

delta2.TH02.Romeo1.sigma2.Zulu3

Augment Designation: Twilight Huntress

Group Affiliation: Lodge of the Wolf (Founder)

Background: Unverified; provided by subject.

Excerpt begins:

Coppertop. That's what they called me. Both sides. It wasn't a compliment. Half Native American, half it didn't really matter. I got Dad's shining cascade of midnight hair and his cheekbones. I got Mom's pale skin and blue eyes. Some people would say the best of both worlds. Those people didn't grow up split between two cultures that don't understand each other and, at least in my case, had little interest in trying.

I'm not generalizing or trying to speak of all Cherokee, all Native Americans, or all of anyone else. There are people everywhere, good and kind people, that see everyone equally regardless of their heritage. Unfortunately, far too many only care about differences. Usually not in a positive way. That's the sort I learned to know and loathe.

When I learned more about Dad's people, I began to wonder if, even back then, my future as an Augment had been a factor when I was born. There's no way to know of course, but maybe that future had already been written in my aura. At the time I didn't much care about "why".

My parents died fighting fires out west when I was still in school. I shuttled around between relatives for a while and it got pretty ugly at times. Not from my family; they did the best they could. No, it was kids at school, in the playground, and 'friends of the family' where my life varied from cruel to condescending to ostracized. Didn't seem to make a difference if it was on a reservation or in a city. I was always the one that didn't look right, didn't fit in. Anywhere.

It wasn't much fun for me or the family I happened to be with at the time. I wasn't too young to realize what the arguments behind closed doors were about. When I couldn't bear my pain and their pain any longer, I headed to Cloudcatcher Mountain outside of Aurora City. Maybe I'd read too many books or heard too many stories; all I knew for sure was I was tired of being a burden. Cloudcatcher Mountain, not that he called it that, was a sacred site of power for Dad.

I was tall for my age and could look older if I worked at it. Wasn't that hard to bum rides, maybe work a little for food and traveling cash. I was determined that, somewhere on the Cloudcatcher, I would find what I was supposed to be or die trying. I was pretty dramatic even for a teenager.

Anyway, I made my way to and through the Tsalagi Grove Preserve. It wasn't hard to avoid the standard ranger patrols. Each side of the family assumed I'd run to the other, so there wasn't a woman-hunt until it was far too late to track me. I knew how to find good water along with fish and plants to eat. More independence seeped in each day. I made small snares and cooked small critters over a small fire. The smell of conifers and honeysuckle flavored my meals. The only person I had to deal with was myself. The little rustlings of chipmunks and the chattering of squirrels were all the company I needed.

All of which is fine until you get past the treeline. I won't lie, the first few weeks I spent wandering about the Preserve, appreciating the wildness. After a while, though, I decided it was time to quit screwing around and get it done. So I headed up. I had the advantage of a sleeping bag and a little tent, but it still got pretty cold. I kept going up. Each night I felt the stones stealing my warmth, but they gave me part of their strength too.

Eventually I found a flat-topped rock projecting over the forest below. Dusk had deepened into a silver twilight that gave me a whole new appreciation for the mountain. I understood then what Dad, in his own way, had tried to tell me.

I can't say I was serenely awaiting my demise while I listened to the songs of the nightbirds, but it certainly was peaceful. And beautiful. I thought about Mom and Dad, closed my eyes and offered my spirit to the mountain and the sky. I put my palms flat against the immovable stone, trying to absorb its ageless strength for what came next. I listened to the special music of the twilight until I heard -

“What do you think you're doing, idiot girl? Get your scrawny hide off that rock before you fall and kill something important, like a raccoon. Yeah, you heard me right, you silly bag of bones. Get over here or I'll come over there and kick your bony butt off the mountain myself!”

The logical inconsistency in that tirade didn't occur to me at the time. I did damn near fall off the rock in shock. I jumped up and spun around, too surprised to be furious. The man screaming at me was way more furious than surprised. He had long black braids wrapped in leather hanging down his chest. His narrow shoulders barely filled out an armless vest of deerskin. Black eyes glared at me from either side of a nose that could split wood. An intricately beaded belt held leather breeches, barely, around a waist as skinny as a pine sapling. He was all sinew and hardwood and bad attitude.

I got over my surprise and gave him a well-considered, mature response.

“And who the hell are you, you spindly legged, wrinkled up loudmouth?” I stomped over to where he waited with his arms crossed.

“Everybody calls me Grandfather Stone. Mostly 'cause I'm old and live up here. That and ain't nobody knows who my family is 'cept me. Which is now you, you half-sized, addle-pated, froze up fool!”

“What's that supposed to mean, you completely insane, one-quarter-sized runt?”

“It means you're a Stone now.”

“What...,” I stuttered.

“Was that too hard for you? Should I say it really slow? Maybe write it down? Tattoo it on your forehead? Nah, too hard for you to see. Maybe on an arm. Use whatever that is you call a brain and work it out. I'll wait, but supper's gettin' cold.”

Just to prove how wrong he was, I dazzled him with a brilliant reply. “What the...”.

He just sighed and stuck the prow of his nose at me. “It means get your stuff together and follow me. You gotta lot to learn.”

And he was right. I miss that old man something fierce.