



The Guardians of Br'thn Emergence

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Montana, 64,973,226 BC

Spring day, morning.

Steam rises from small pools of water in a lush jungle environment filled with ferns and small varieties of the newly arrived flowering plants, though the colors are wasted on most of the occupants. Large dragonflies zoom by and hover over unseen prey. On a small dusty hill devoid of plant material, hollows hold sleeping pairs of the people; a juvenile mega cockroach 20cm long scurries about looking for scraps of prey left over from last night's feast. The sun has already been up for several hours.

“Sauron, come back to bed and keep me warm. I will be ready to lay soon.” She offers suggestively. “Tempting, very tempting, but it is past time I got up to keep an eye on things. We both know that a commander is only alive by their wits and unless you want to end up someone's dinner, I suggest you let me go. Cover my back, I'm going out.” She raises her head to look around. Though his kind mated for life, clinging was not appreciated. He needed a strong mate. Life could be shortened, if necessary.

He remembered what it was like being a junior, one who had not reached breeding age, before the abilities came. Not pretty. Lost part of his tail when two older juniors decided to take revenge for losing to him on the practice field; the tail grew back, but his assailants did not. All that mattered was winning. There was no way of telling from a juniors fighting abilities how strong their other abilities would be after the change of course, but in his case they were even better, much better.

His kind was not so good in closed quarters and a hollow could be a trap, but he was not about to mate in front of the others, too high class for that. Let the younger adults show off their “skills” in public before they were mated for live. He was not worried about anyone using his mate either, life and death were close friends and he had never failed on the field of honor or off. His “extra” abilities were far in excess of the others. Some saw this as cheating, but he was only one of many with these skills. He just happened to be the strongest, the strongest by far.

A messenger came running up, displaying the proper submissive signals. Not showing the proper signs could be a death sentence, as others had found out when he was in a bad mood. “Sauron” he said, baring his throat with his arms down, “A floating orb has appeared in the center of the Field of Honor and speaks to our minds about Sauron. It has requested that Sauron come at once.”

“I am busy. Tell it to go away and come back after the midday, at third quad. Perhaps then I will meet with it.” Right, a floating orb, pretty lame. What ruse would they try next? More than one commander was overthrown by a made up emergency that later turned into a trap. He himself had depended and succeeded by virtue of his other skills, much more honor than a mutiny. There had been rumblings of course, every commander had to deal with the discontented. Nothing he could get a clear fix on though. He knew that Zag, the former matriarch and commander was not happy with her fallen position. She was lucky to be alive, but he needed strong commanders and could not afford to lose one to internal politics. The tribe to the north was getting braver in their foraging into our territory. Something would have to be done soon to set an example.

Stepping back one pace the messenger continued, “This unworthy one Begs your Honor to consider that it has also said that it will destroy this entire valley if Sauron does not arrive within one quad.” To Beg to ones Honor was a sacred request. It meant that the messenger was his to kill if he felt that honor was not satisfied. Not a casual request. He must have lost the draw to make such a request. It also meant that the rest of the troop believed this thing capable of carrying out its threat. He could make a good mess of the valley himself, given enough time and rage, but destroy it all at once was beyond even his special abilities.

“Tell me more about the orb.”

“It is about one junior hand in width and floating in the air at about Sauron's eye level. Light shines through it easily. Some of the juniors tried throwing stones at it, but they always missed even though the orb never moved once. They then threw stones at each other, not believing their skills were lacking and never missed. Three are nursing wounds now from lacerations caused by the ensuing fights. One tried to bite the orb and died without harming it.” Juniors could be so stupid. Well, better to weed them out now before they became either a threat or a liability later. And more importantly, the orb could and would kill if provoked.

“How much time do we have left?” The whole valley meant everyone here and at least two other tribes that he knew of. He had slept late, having had first pick of the fresh kill from yesterday. Still not up to fighting someone if he could avoid it.

“About three sects Sauron.”

“You are dismissed.” The messenger bowed and backed away, careful never to raise its hands and no doubt relieved that Honor had been satisfied. Sauron gathered up sharp obsidian triacts and glack dust into

special pouches arrayed on his honor belt. He would go prepared, even though there was no honor in using the devices of the lower classes. He would only use them as a last resort. Who was to say what was in his pouches? No one was likely to ever find out without killing him and then it would not matter. He did not know of anything as small as this “orb” that could take out someone his size, much less the entire valley. But to consult others this late would show weakness. Advisers were really only useful when you already knew the answers and wanted to gather support for a group effort. Furballs were about the size of this orb and could be nasty, giving a good bite before being eaten whole, but there was honor there. There was no honor in destroying everything before an unprovoked enemy. He was no coward, however; not to show up would have been beyond his comprehension. This was an adversary unknown to the people, but he was their leader. None of the long seers had ever spoken of orbs; best to prepare for the worst.

He took the Honor Way to the field, as was his right and his alone. Others scurried out of his way and took their places. He would at least die with dignity. He noted that the commander Zag had a gleam in her eye that was unmistakable as she stood rock steady with the rest of the sub-commanders and others lined up in rank. The juniors were arrayed the furthest away from the Way and always gave way to a superior or suffered. They would have to work their way to the front, same as everyone else. He saw Kwest, a strapping 12 year old. She had promise. It would be worth keeping an eye on her if she survived, but for now, no recognition betrayed either of them. Good, she knew how to keep her mind, better than Zag did. He moved his head and tail in a slow sway as to get a better idea of the distances involved and to let the others know he intended to fight to the death. The tail was like a whip and could take out an adversary unawares. The orb was forty paces ahead and looked like a quartz ball about a junior hand width and at his eye level, just as reported. He could sense a strong mind force, far stronger than he had felt before. This must be the reason they believed what it had mindspoke to the others. Still he showed no sign of recognition. He was not a junior; he would not be so easily taken in, no matter what this thing was.

He walked to the center of the field to meet the clear orb and stopped three paces out. He knew that he was already closer than the others had dared, at least those who still lived. He knew his rivals well. If this thing asked for him they would let him take the risk and then clean up the spoils afterwards. Cowards! “Here I am,” he declared defiantly, so the troop could hear as well that he faced death with honor. He stood at the

ready. Nothing happened. His head started to hurt behind his hearing pores and then, just as suddenly, the pain was gone. Still he stood with no outward sign or movement. At some point he would look foolish if he did not do something. He reached out with his mind to push the object, but it was if nothing was there. The object was shielded well. He doubted he could do as well. His current opponents did not give him much reason to hone his skills. At least if he survived he would be stronger from the experience. He thought, how could this thing, which he could not push nor read with his mind, do damage to anything? He started to turn his back on it, the ultimate insult. Only someone not worthy of fighting could be insulted in this way, someone who was absolutely no threat. A calculated risk to provoke a response.

Identity and psiotic level confirmed. You are entitled. Do you accept the gift?

He turned back to face the orb. The mind speech was not loud. "What gift?" he said softly. He did not intend to share. He took the risk and he would gain the rewards. "And why?" There was always a catch when an enemy offered something for free.

Whenever a sentient being reaches a specific level of psiotic ability, they are entitled.

"Would you have destroyed this valley if I had not come?"

All your kind as a necessary precaution, not just this valley.

"Why?" No answer. Well, he did not always give an answer either, at least not one that would help his enemy. He could respect that. "How do I know that this is not a trick?" No answer, a test. "What do I have to do?"

Touch the sphere before you.

Ah, so this was either a test of bravery or a test of detecting deception. He could detect nothing about the orb. He would have to take a chance with almost no evidence. Not something he had done in a long time. The young could afford a few misses, his tail bore witness, but as a leader, no slack was allowed. At least he knew not to try and eat it. Stupid junior.

He touched the orb. It gradually became so white as to be impossible to look at, nor could he remove his hand. He would not make a spectacle of himself however; he remained composed till he blacked out. At least he would die with dignity. His dreams were of flying above the valley, not something he had ever imagined before. It was incredible. He now knew where all the other tribes were. He could see their nests, their training grounds. He could estimate how many of what strength. Attack would be easy with this information. Was this the gift? But of what use

was it to meat, a dead one?

When he awoke he was alone at night on the field with an orb in his hand. He rose carefully. No damage he could see or feel in the dim light of a full moon. He was not dead. He raised the orb and looked at it, smaller than the last one, "So what are you?" Not expecting an answer, but then the orb last time had contacted him mentally. Could not hurt to ask.

Br'thn came the answer loudly.

No smell that he could detect. Not shielded like the other one either. Appeared to be simple rock, like some of the crystals near the hot place. "Are you the orb I touched?"

No.

"You mind speak too loud, others will hear you and come."

No.

"The other orb said I would receive a gift."

Br'thn is assigned designation of this power sphere.

"What can this power 'sphere' do for me?"

Pi² increase in psiotic strength while in vicinity of the sphere.

What is Pi? "How close do I have to be?"

Power decreases with square of distance from center of sphere at this time in development.

More funny talk, what was a square or psiotic? He would have to practice with the sphere to determine what this meant. Practice he understood. No warrior ever won by doing something the first time in the midst of battle, except out of desperation or chance. Right now he did not intend to part with the sphere for any reason. From what he had seen so far it was enough to give any enemy the advantage.

He reached out to scan his surroundings. His heart missed a beat. Amazing! He quickly identified the location of all of his rivals, including Zag, giving his mate, Bezel, a hard time. Never had he scanned in such clarity! So far she was holding her own as befitting the mate of the commander, but they were in close quarters and Zag was bigger, stronger and more experienced than most females of breeding age. He reached out with his mind and crushed the rival's head. No second chances Zag. No one had the right to take out his mate! No one! The look of astonishment on Bezel's face was priceless. Less than a sect later he waltzed into the enclave and met Bezel at the entrance to their sleeping area. She was already ripping up Zag with her talons for consumption. Old Zag had been trying to find a way in for a long time. She must have figured that with Bezel out of the way too, the last of his power base would collapse.

He should have done something much earlier to impress on Zag of that impossibility. Now he had lost a good sub-commander. "I saved what is left of her head for you, as is your right Sauron." She bowed with hands down at her side and throat bared.

"What Bezel? It is still me. Just stronger and better." Much better. He did not tell her about the sphere he had in his pouch. No one could be trusted that much, not even Bezel. Mating was for life, but life could be shortened.

"You have been gone for nearly two quads of days and now you return much different. When the sphere grew so bright we could no longer see, you disappeared. Your neck feathers are lighter, almost white, though I can't see well in this moon light. You have changed."

"Still want that egg quickened?" He said with a leer that was returned with a low growl of affirmation.

A few months later

No one was even remotely close to him in 'psiotic' power now. He had a name for these extra abilities now and he would use them. He ruled absolutely. Whatever he said was law. He could scan well outside his tribe's previous area of control. The information he had learned from his dream was real and his scanning abilities matched what he saw there. Rival tribes started to move away or moved to join theirs. They would be tested of course. Only the strong, regardless of their previous rank would live. Their warriors who has some psiotic ability could no doubt sense his open scanning and knew they were no match. The troop need never fight again. This was the down side. His people would get fat and lazy. If a power sphere could be given to him, it could be given to another at any time, though he did not sense another one and the sphere said that it was the only one here, for now. Trust no one. He trained his people even harder than he had before. He would not be caught unawares. He sent them out on patrols without his apparent protection. They needed blood sport to keep fit and honorable. When others of his kind were not available, they took on the larger predators, playing with them first of course. No honor need be observed for those not of the people. Even the stinky carrion eating tranos, dumb as they were, their sheer size had made them a threat in the past, always stealing their kill. No longer.

A few years later

"What is that thing? It smells horrible?" She pantomimes retching.

“Too small to be a carrion eater.”

“You are one of the new recruits from the outlying area or you would know. That is Smiggle, the lowest most cowardly creature ever to walk or crawl on two feet, not worthy of being of the people. We normally do not see him in the daylight and all have the right to “train” him in manners as one sees fit. Only don’t kill him. Sauron keeps him around as a reminder of what happens to those who do not meet his standards on the battlefield or the Field of Honor.”

“I would rather die with honor than end up like that!” Smiggle is cowering behind a large tree and staying low to the ground, with head down and eyes wary, ready to run. Scars, some still fresh, from previous “trainings” are evident.

After they leave, Smiggle comes out talking to himself. “Smiggle not honorable. Smiggle not worthy of night soil for food. Smiggle show them all. Smiggle knows the stars are important. Not all is fighting and blood lust. More to existence than pain. Much to see and understand.” Smiggle watches a new star. “How can there be a new star? Very pretty star that does not follow the path of the other stars and is getting brighter. Not one of the four holy wanderers either, the red, the white, and the larger and the smaller, hiding near the sun. Something new. How can this be? Smiggle must be careful. Not possible to be any lower and still survive. Insects and smelly furballs are barely enough. Smiggle already weak. Smiggle must endure.”

Boardroom, Oct 2001

A man of undetermined age with long white hair tied in a pony tail with a white feather, high forehead and no wrinkles is fusing with some kind of mechanical contraption at the end of a long flawless black teak table with gold and abalone inlay. The walls are lined in priceless woods and the fixtures are solid gold, not plate. An assistant enters, "They are ready sir."

Without looking up he says, "Let them wait a few more minutes."

He goes back to the contraption. "Ah ha! Finally!" After making a slight adjustment he flicks a switch and the contraption starts to move with a whirring array of gears and levers. He sits back and the assistant moves it to the table behind them, still moving. Still not clear what it is. The board members enter and are seated without comment or expression, none looking at the man at the head of the table.

"All right, send him in."

A nervous middle-aged man with graying hair and not in the best of shape enters. There is no chair for him and after looking about, he remains standing at the other end of the table. He looks at the board members, trying to read their thoughts as to what this is about, but without success.

"Ken. It is time. Please leave these papers on your desk where they can be seen." The assistant places the papers on the table in front of him. Ken looks at them briefly.

"These will destroy me!"

"Ken. That was the agreement was it not? You knew this was coming. We have given you a good life over the last twenty years. You will still leave with more than most of your peers have and far more than the employees at your business."

"But..."

"You were never a player, only an employee, don't reach beyond your station and don't make this any more embarrassing than it has already become. That will be all."

He starts to go, then turns back. "What do I call you? In all these years, I was never told your name. At least let me leave with one dignity."

"We will never meet again, but you may think of me as..." He pauses, "Jack."

Ken turns and leaves the room. 'Jack' nods to the assistant. "All

Enron stock was successfully sold over the last month to third parties who sold it again in smaller lots, drawing no attention to ourselves.” He nods his approval. “Plans are also proceeding for the long term project to incorporate New Pebble Beach. We have bought up three more properties in the area and have leans on two more.”

“Excellent” *One more Smiggle gone and soon my new headquarters will be a reality*, he says to himself. He turns his back as the board members and assistant leave silently and he goes back to his mechanical toy. A moment later a dart suddenly springs from the device and passes through the spot where Ken had stood and splats a poison package against the wall.

New Shanghai Marine Lab

2023

No moon, 130 kph winds, torrential rain nearly horizontal in flight, waves pounding so hard against the sea wall that it sounded like a battlefield. The place is a small marine station on the west coast of the USA, now a second world country at best. China is top dog again and America is a hired mercenary with a mostly agricultural and military economy. The “recession” of the early 21st century slid into depression. The housing bubble burst, unemployment rose to 30%, whole communities collapsed. The wars in the Middle East, going it alone, continual terrorist attacks on US interests, lost friends, boomers all retiring at the same time and pulling their money out of the economy, diseases collapsing other country's economies, all contributed to the end. Health care is only for the rich. The rest depend on the net for advice, with any drug you wanted over the counter, as well as ample ads selling snake oil, i.e. drugs you did not want. A broken bone is a life sentence of pain if no one around you knows enough to help you. Cars, when they exist, run on either hydrogen produced by genetically modified blue-green algae [GMBG] growing in small-enclosed ponds scattered haphazardly about a decaying infrastructure or some other bio-engineered material. Those that could get out did, back to the home country or if you were lucky, to China itself, the Middle Kingdom. A reverse brain drain on a massive scale. Funny, as most of their older scientists were trained here. Riots of '11 and '12 tore apart many cities causing a diffusion of corporate structure, so no disaster, human or nature could take them out again. Buffer zones around areas where the rich lived usually made into farm land or private reserves. There is little or no middle class, there are the rich and there are the poor. Poor are divided into poor and really poor. Really poor lived by poaching, stealing, handouts, any way they can. The poor lived as I did, servants to the machinations of the rich, not that this was any different that it had ever been, just that the standard of living had fallen as of late.

I always preferred a simple lifestyle, so this was no big deal to me, but many suffered. The Hopi prophesy warned this would happen. Oh well, I was too old and way too far down the ladder to get a permit for China, so I continued my work at the station as a sort of Jack-of-all-Trades. Tiny as we are, no specialists need apply. Starting at the station in '78, I was now 68 years old with no chance of retirement in sight. When I

started we had 7 faculty members, rose to 9 at the turn and now down to five “sub-directors,” as we are no longer part of an academic institution. About twenty support staff, depending on how you counted part timers and transients. We were bought out by the Chinese in '15 and went from a decaying teaching/research institution to one devoted to genetic engineering, specializing in materials too dangerous to risk on the mainland. Life expectancy was not too good for the temps, but the pay was much better. Staff all cut to 50% time and happy to have it, slow starvation being the alternative. Of course that was on paper, we all work 50+ hour weeks, but that is the game, take it or leave it. In America you starved, farmed or joined up, if you were young and strong enough. Of course there was also prison, but no one sane would want to end up there. Prison population was actually down, as it was more likely a death sentence now. We live at the station itself. No one can afford to rent what few houses are worth living in. Any space at the station not covered by buildings is planted for food or GMBGs for the generator and the director's car. The station moved to this site in 1917, when most rode horses and the director had the only car. Now the director has the only car again, but lives in more comfort than the previous director did in the small caretaker's cottage, having taken over the entire top floor of one the lab buildings for his private residence. I used to work in that lab. We have come full circle, except that bicycles replace horses; they eat less [and poop less too fortunately]. My father died of a heart attack and returning prostate cancer at 75, but alas, a lot of bike riding and a simple diet have taken that way out for me. I am old, tired, cold and most of the time in pain, but still breathing.

I am asleep dreaming of dragons, wizards and a crystal sphere, chasing and being chased. Hmm, dark storm clouds. Must be our current reality creeping in. Not a nethead mind you, just an avid reader of sci-fi and fantasy. The new Chinese wave is more into Lords, secrets, forbidden love and the ghosts of ancestors delivering the moral directives. Not my thing, but the net has almost everything and I find enough to keep me from facing reality too squarely. I am old fashioned though and prefer to read rather than role play.

“Grid down, gen off line, freezers warming up! Suit up!” Director Lao Shu's latest lackey called down the hall of the singles dorm. OK, his real name is not Director Rat, but that is how we thought of him, especially at the moment. Nephew of the owner, you know how that goes. I get up reluctantly, grabbed rain gear and pushed Bob out of his bed. Pissed, he groaned and got up. We collected the box and waded

through the storm and floodwaters, part fresh, part seawater, to the generator. Water is tricking down my neck and every other surface at a rapid rate. I hated that. Bob pulls the cover off the control panel and yells "Coolant leak" over the wind and surf abusing the seawalls. "Need some clean water to refill the tank." I walk to the tap on the cistern next to the library turned lab and carefully fill the carboy. All information is online of course. Libraries are only seen in museums or reading rooms of the very rich. The newest generation does not even know what a book is. That was 20 less liters for drinking. Hope the storm fills the cisterns this time. Drought last 3 years brings doubt. "We need to do a pressure test to find the leak." Cap is tight, lines look good. "Pressure will not reach max till temp is over 90C." At 85C, water appears around the site glass. We kill the generator and Bob walks back to the shop. He comes back a few minutes later with an old half-inch line cap. Generator was from before the total conversion to metric in '13. As a scientist it was easy for me to switch, not so for a lot of people. "This should fit." Generator back on line, we return to the dorm to get dry, warm and report in. No spare parts for this beast any more. Will have to replace it before too long. Would be nice to have one we did not have to kick, hit and bite every other day for some problem or another.

This was not good cat weather. I missed my cat. He was born wild and some of the other techs were the first to tame him as a kitten. At first you had to be introduced to be accepted, but cats can't count too high and when it got over ten, he gave up and liked everyone, if you did not move too fast that is. Kids were out for that reason, but we didn't get kids too often in a lab. He died of cancer twenty-two years ago. He used to watch me work at an early computer and slept outside my office waiting for me to show up or come out and play. We weren't allowed pets of course, so he had to stay outside, even in bad weather. I slipped him treats, which probably helped him survive four times the average life expectancy of two years for a feral cat. A lot had changed in twenty-two years. No wild cats now, likely to get eaten around here. And the director was a dog person anyway. Having the right breed of toy dog was a status symbol in the current Chinese/Rich culture. A lot of dogs ended up abandoned and eaten as the fashions changed. Lower life expectancy than a feral cat. Having been bitten too many times, I did not have much sympathy for these neurotic genetically modified monsters.

Storm continued throughout the night, blowing and shaking the building. Not much sleep and my dream did not come back to comfort me. I awoke tired and stiff from age and humidity. Breakfast was always

rice porridge, “zhou” with “seafood” which I call glop, from the sound it makes when served. Still not sure what “seafood” is either, not sure I want to find out. The Chinese word for seafood is sea fresh, note; there is no mention of ‘food’ in the word. I am open to most things and even like jellyfish with chili peppers, but I miss oatmeal or even brown rice. A little fiber would go along way to alleviating certain, ah, problems. Being old is a pain. At least it’s warm and I never tire of Jasmine tea. I am always the first up, besides the cook. He was of Hispanic background and chose to learn Chinese cooking rather than go back to the homeland or starve. We have an understanding of keeping quiet till 7 when the rest wander in. Not the director of course. He eats in his residence and we never see him before noon. A house servant serves the directors family later. Early morning is my special time, for meditation, quiet reflection, or even getting something done that requires more concentration than can be had later. This morning I just sit quiet, sipping hot tea and trying to wake up.

Bob staggers in wiping the water from his face he missed from his shower, hair still wet. I tell him, “Should get your hair cut like mine. Would dry faster and be warmer. Less problems with the ‘friends’ too.”

“You can’t grow hair longer than you do, so don’t give me that line.” He says grinning. We have this exchange most days.

“Hot glop, no waiting,” I answer back. Bob gives his face a contorted look. Not so happy either with the same thing every day. Bob’s half Chinese, the lowest of the low, despised by the Chinese “lords” and not trusted by any “white devils” who don’t know him. I know him and trust him with my life, but prejudice runs deep in human society. We are always looking for a way of boosting ourselves at the expense of others, even among the poor. “Have a seat Bob, rounds in 5 minutes.” Always amazes me how some people can eat boiling hot food without waiting for it to cool. I have a “cat’s tongue” and have to wait till it gets nearly to room temperature before I can go for it, hence another reason for my early arrival here. Come to think of it, peasants in the middle ages worked fewer hours [no lights] and ate about the same thing, hmmm.

Rounds consisted of checking on all the main systems, generator again of course, net, water recycling/desalination, seawater manifold, and heating and ventilation. We had no need for air conditioning. Fortunately New Shanghai has a moderate climate even after the recent effects of global warming blamed on the greedy USA. Storms are more exciting, but rainfall, though more erratic, is close to normal if averaged out. The drought should break this year or next. Already made a good start with

this last storm. Cisterns are common, to help even out the variations. Though we had our own cisterns on site, we also shared labor with a water co-op a block a way that collected water off the hill. The net is our lifeblood and for some, their downfall. With transportation so expensive, the net is our primary means of communication, except for rare packages. Letter mail does not exist any longer. Some however find the on line reality better than our own depressing reality, easy to understand. It takes a surprisingly short period of time for someone to become addicted and then die of dehydration and malnutrition. Not pretty. Just like the Roman Circus-Circus, the net is free to appease the masses and keep them from rioting again. Also safer than other drugs like crack, repeat and alcohol, as it really only hurts the one person. Riding high on the net did not endanger others on the "road" either. Of course the fallout to families is never pretty with any death.

The generator is our first stop. I take measurements to manufacture a new sight glass. We have a full machine shop; electronics; wood working, etc. and I have carved out a small space for the more esoteric arts, like glass blowing, plastics, and small parts fabrication. Bob does the bigger stuff. We get by. Everything goes to support the gene labs. Creature comforts, personal space, possessions are secondary. Backups have more to do with repair abilities, than actual physical equipment, finances and time being limited. If something goes out, it could be weeks before a replacement can get through the paper work and the twice a month train shipment, longer if it is something weird, and scientists live on weird. Fortunately the sight glass looks simple, flat glass, 3 mm thick by 12 mm wide, "piece of cake". Can get that done before lunch, don't ask. The Chinese who have "adopted" us live on chicken broth and rice. Of course the "chicken" is more likely GM flavoring. Additional flavoring is whatever has been molding in the cook's pots, traditional Chinese actually. OK, some of it is quite tasty, especially when we smuggle in flora and fauna found in the tide pools and near shore, but I don't want to know. Because of high blood pressure, I can't cover everything with soy sauce either. OK, soy sauce on rice is like ketchup on French food. I get some points for not following the rest of the white devils. Now hot pepper sauce is another thing altogether. Mmmm! Hey think Szechwan, that's legal.

Next stop, net control. I only check panel lights and log. Without the net, we are dead in the water with no access to the gene banks. We get hacked several times a day and sure enough a computer in one of the labs shows a red light, unexpected bandwidth use. Barb's job is full time, but

no one can be on 24/7 and the logs provide a way for Barb to get some sleep without losing all contact with the system. We rebuild the system once a week from swapped out memory cores and with daily security downloads, just to try and stay ahead. Totally clean backup is off site, in China of course, we are owned by them after all. Twice we have had to rebuild from there. Expensive time lost. We are still on one 1 GB feed, as we are not high enough priority to rate more. Took two days each time to move the info back. Director was really ah, upset. Barb got a real tongue-lashing and no freeday for two weeks. We had all been there for one reason or another and had the emotional scars to prove it. It wasn't her fault, but it didn't matter. Someone had to take the fall and it was never the director, who as far as we could tell did not actually do anything except entertain "clients". That's why he gets the big bucks.

Flow control for the fresh and sea water systems is in the same room, with the actual valves outside [sea water and electricity don't mix]. Bob's the master here. Knows plumbing systems and heating/ventilating forward and backward. Good thing too, not many can figure the ancient ladder logic control systems any more. Fire alarm control is here also. First Chinese village at this site was burned out in 1906. The fire hydrants were not working that night, funny thing about that. Just like a large part of the city next to us burned during the riots, the only non-rich area to burn. Hmm. Not that the corporation, who shall remain nameless, who wanted the land REAL bad both times, knew ANYTHING about it. No way! We moved here in 1917 under a swap for a piece of land they liked even more. We would have been a rich persons summer home complex but for the luck of the Chinese buying us out a few years ago. They have been burned out before and racial sediment is no better this time around. They were the scum before, but now they are the "lords," much worse. There is still this stupid idea that America is the greatest. Oh, come on guys, any student of history knows better. Everything cycles. What is great falls, what is low rises. Work with what you've got and quit your bellyaching. The decadence that caused our fall was our own greedy fault in my humble opinion.

"We got poachers again," yells out one of the subs. She has a lab on the second floor with a good view, though we all are required to be on the look out. We all have "bracelets", permanently attached PDAs with terabyte memories and transponders, but yelling works just as well and is not recorded in the log. One thing good about working for the Chinese is access to the latest tech. I run back to my cubicle and grab my latest toy, a Xian3000XLS, 100X zoom, 50megapixel, true color camera. Heavy,

but the weight is an advantage with that zoom, steadier in the hand. Of course it has the latest image stabilization, but that only goes so far. And don't think for a moment I paid for this. A year's salary, I'm sure. Convinced them we needed it for the lab. Cost me a lot of brownie points for that. Gringos again. In '78 it was the Vietnamese boat people who scoured the rocks looking for anything edible, but now it's pretty much anyone who thinks they can get away with it or doesn't care. I get the image, full face with fish in view, tiny things, pathetic really, and email it wirelessly to the powers that be. A few minutes later they arrive, fresh printout in hand. The poachers will lose their boat and land themselves in "re-education" for 6 months, but it beats starving, barely. With nothing to lose, we get a group every few days. Of course 'boat' means anything that floats. We really don't care about what's out there anymore but our charter says we are in charge of the refuge area or we lose the right to work here, so we do the minimum to stay on the good list. Did I mention that only the insane end up in prison? Over twenty percent of the population has "visited" the place. Few repeat offenders, if you survive the first time. But desperate people do desperate things. After the riots I mentioned, the powers that be are very careful to stamp out any socially deviant behavior. Before the riots they let us kill ourselves with lawlessness and gangs. Of course the riots finally happened, as you recall, when the lottery was exposed as a scam. The pressure beforehand was huge. That was the last chance most had of getting out of poverty. The spark that lit the fuse. People were mighty upset when even that slim one in a million chance was taken away. Oh, they try once in a while to bring it back, but fool me twice....

Seawater manifold is Bob's baby; I am just the sidekick on this one. He can tell by the sound what's going on. "Time to clean the intake traps" and I nod in comprehension. Good eats tonight. The intake traps get chuck full of little clams, mussels and lot of other stuff that goes in the pot, fresh, not moldy! We valve the seawater through the alternate line and wait for the pressure to drop. Open the lid and empty the strainer into a waiting canvas bag. Not much this time, but enough. People are always nicer when they have full stomachs. Bob takes the goodie bag back to the cook and I head for the glass blowing bench. An old piece of broken windowpane is the right thickness, nothing gets thrown out. I use a template to score a circle with a diamond pen and carefully break and grind the edges off the circle I want. A little polishing to smooth the edges so it won't cut through the O ring and we are set. I won't have to put it in. I drop it off on Bob's workbench and retreat back to my closet

cubicle.

A few minutes of free time, I slap a monitor from the rack on to the wall, we have inductive coils buried in the walls for power and data transfer. Putting those in was a major disruption. "Keyboard please." A keyboard is projected onto the bench surface. Some had wireless interface to neural circuits, but I am too old for the five year break-in period and I like the privacy of a keyboard over voice control. After wacking all the pop up ads, mostly porn, I see an email from mom. My own mother is still alive at 89 and if not for the net, I would never hear from her. It took the postal service killing letter mail to convince her to get on the net in the first place. But 2000 km is the same as in another galaxy, so there was really no choice. Usual aches and pains. Her cat lost his left eye to cancer a few months ago, but after the operation [there goes my inheritance, meow!], is doing fine. He has as much energy as a kitten again but is 12 years old. Not what mom needs right now, but at least the cat is not suffering any more. Don't know how she can afford to feed it, but she has always been real good about doing for herself. Quit my father some 40 years ago and moved up north to get away from the crowded California that had gone nuts during the boom years. Well there are a lot less people here now. Most moved out when the economy went bust and California was hit real bad. If it weren't for agriculture we would be a ghost state, the military having left during the boom when it was too expensive to house troops here. Used to be the 5th largest economy in the world, now we aren't even on the list. A 50 square meter house used to cost upwards of \$600K at the turn. Now of course it'll be half that, but the house will be worthless and your salary will still not allow you to buy it. Main reason the land was recovered for farm use. Makes more sense to me anyway. I used to think that maybe when my inheritance came in I could afford to buy a little privacy, but pop died penniless and mom will outlive me. Besides, most low-income homeowners have to rent out half the rooms to make it, so you're right back where I am now. Not that bad really, broken nose from when I was five causes me to snore, so they put me in the "closet." At least I am not claustrophobic like my mother. "Save please." The message is saved to my slave bracelet for access later when I am ready to respond.

Bracelet is a nice term for what the device was. It was really your life. Without one, you were not employable. It had to be charged at least once a month and ONLY employers had the chargers. All your records were on the device and when the power failed, like in being unemployed for longer than a month, so did everything you owned, your images,

diary, stored information, bank account, everything. Some places routinely furloughed their 'employees' for up to three and a half weeks, just to instill in them a sense of fear and hopelessness. Without a bracelet, you starved or worked on a farm. Not pretty in either case. Being old is a handicap. I lost my bracelet to some street thugs once, but I was lucky and people who knew me tackled the two and recovered the bracelet almost immediately. We watch out for each other. Being without friends is worse than being without a bracelet. Most of the 30% unemployed depended on them. The concept of the bracelet was not lost even on us saps. There were rumors of another riot about to start over the abuse they allowed the pears to inflict on us.

I jump over to the Xinwen site, that's news for the rest of us. Giving things a Chinese name is a current fad, brown nosing if you ask me. Not that I am any better, preferring my Chinese name to my English one. Anyway, I skim past the daily, "China is Great, America is Shit" captions. I like the comics and the tech section. Comics are still the only allowed way to make fun of the government; by having animals do all the talking in a "disguised" way. Right. A mouse with the name, C'fut Lung is the chairman of a small community of animals. C'fut Lung is asshole in Cantonese. But the Chinese don't get it as to them an asshole is just food for the pot like everything else. Loses something in the translation fortunately. Anyway, the chairman has a scheme for getting most of the peanuts, but the crows [death bird in Chinese, and our part in this drama] are putting up a fight. No relation to our current economic / social situation at all, Right! Sort of like Hogan's Heroes for those of you older than time. Totally unrealistic, but makes you feel good for a few minutes each day.

In the tech section there are the latest patches to the People's Operating System, Barb will take care of those. Someone is always finding a way to hack in, a downside to the net being free and a lot of people unemployed. Anything done by committee is likely to be too big, too complicated and full of holes. But we have no choice. There used to be an operating system by a company known as Microsoft, but that fell apart when the free Linux OS finally pushed them out after lots of bumps and starts as corporate kept trying to claim it for their own. People's OS is an offshoot of Linux and the pieces of salvaged from Microsoft. Gates should be about my age, bet he is not suffering from SAPS [severe acute poverty syndrome]. Another breakthrough is announced in using a GM flu virus that attacks brain cells to patch a missing gene into the brains of Parkinson's victims. It doesn't spread because of an absolute requirement

for a microsporin amino acid that is not normal for mammals to produce. So the patients have to be given a supplement for the system to work. Once it has done its thing, the supplement is withdrawn before the virus can harm the neurons and it dies. Sweet really. I worked on microsporins in tunicates a long time ago. We are still not allowed to use stem cells like the rest of the world, the last legal line having died out in a mysterious fire some eight years ago blamed on the riots, so we come up with novel ways to get around the problems. Of course there is black market, but that is only for the wealthy willing to take the chance, or near death. Only in America. The station is more concerned with GMing BGs [blue-greens] to produce needed pharmaceuticals and supplements. Using strains that grow in seawater has been a plus with the shortage of clean fresh water. Not many viruses for BGs, but I tag the article for one of the subs to read later and track down the original reference in the scientific journals. I have to wonder what the military apps for a neuro gene splicing virus would be. I am a depressionist, always looking on the dark side of life. Could be used to splice, say, some good docile genes in, not that the economy and prisons hasn't already done that effectively. The rioters were shot for the most part. Instant docile genes or mad aggressor genes for the military. Wonder if they would bark like domesticated dogs then? [Adult foxes bred for good human interactions bark like puppies, even when full grown][Or worse, act like the human equivalent, teenagers! Aaaaagh!]

Well, I still have a quarter hour before I am back on duty. I used to have to play piano as a kid, but hated it. As an adult I played the flute, as there was no way they could make you sing along and it was portable. But, I could never reach the highest octave and it needed maintenance and care. Lastly I took up the ocarina. Portable, I could get all the notes, no moving parts or pads to wear out. Very low tech, they have found working ones ten thousand years old in archaeological digs from all over the world. I just loved the haunting sound. I practiced some very old folk songs from the 13th century. No one had stereo units and CD collections; the music industry went bust over fighting about copyright in '07 or there about. If you wanted music, you did it yourself, much better in my opinion. Your bracelet could record a "performance" of course, but most of us preferred a live version. It was as much fun to play as listen, something they lost in the 90s and 00s and have since regained. Maybe poverty was not a total loss.

"Yingui, you and Anita are up for the grocery run." I put away the ocarina and exit the back way. Bracelet told me where to find her. When I

arrive, she is in the Wong Lab annex swearing at a sample that was not doing what was expected. I had been there so often myself. Life does not do the expected, except when you don't expect it of course. Life must have been planned by Uncle Murphy.

“Let it go, we have grocery duty. You will feel better and be clearer when we come back. I'll help you by checking the alignment.”

“Si, Senor Fantasma Plata. We go.” She says grinning. Making fun of my Chinese name. Her English was fine, but we all picked up some Spanish as over half the state was of that ethnic persuasion.

Anita was wired, a necessary requirement for driving the station vehicle and doing an increasing number of technical tasks. The car was fuel celled, as we produce hydrogen for the generator and other uses. Others used ethanol, methane from composting, vegetable oil processed into a sort of diesel fuel, anything that would work. No more gasoline after the embargo. The USA was cut off by the rest of the world after refusing to sign the second Kyoto accords. We responded with an arrogant “Whatever” and have been slugging away ever since. Plastics had to be imported from other countries, as we did not have enough oil to make them here. Anyway, the only way to operate this car was by wireless neural implant. I had no implant, so had to give up driving. My reflexes were not that good anymore anyway. I feel more comfortable on human powered transport, can't take out more than, oh five people that way and unlikely to be fatal.

I bring my hood up over my head and adjust my face mask. Dual uses of preventing air born illnesses from spreading and protecting from UV, now that the ozone layer is almost gone again. I hitch the wagon to the back, but leave the top off as no rain is expected today. Technically this was the director's car, but he let us use it for errands that could not be done on bikes. Built from a kit, but painted black and red with smuggled in solvent-based paint. Only catch was we had to run it in hybrid mode, something he never did of course. This meant we assisted by peddling the generators on board as well. We will be picking up ten sacks of rice, soybeans for the tofu maker, gai lan, a Chinese veggie, the director liked and I hated and so on. I loved fresh tofu Japanese style with fresh ginger on top, but ginger came from Hawaii, too expensive for saps like me. Powdered was not the same, no way. Ok, I lived through the boom times and have some fond memories. We grew some veggies on the spare land at the station of course, but not much grew in the fog salt spray belt besides zucchini.

I adjust my sunglasses and we are off. Few could afford cars but

there are lots of bikes on the road. The co-op was only a short distance away. There was the usual group of Savers outside waiting for any victim they could snag.

Anita asks, "Why do they try so much? They are out here every time we come this way."

"I don't know, but suspect that it is the human desire to find some justification for your own beliefs. If you can convince one other person, that strengthens your own faith, that maybe you are not crazy after all, and if you can convince hundreds, then it just has to be true. Sort of like a pyramid scheme. Otherwise everything you have done to accept and practice your belief will have been a waste of time and resources."

"Sort of black and white then. Not much room in there for thoughts."

"A friend once said fundamental meant no fun, a lot of dam and very little mental."

"So, does this mean you do not believe in God at all?"

"I make a distinction between beliefs personally held and group behavior forced on others. Some people like to be in large groups, others, like myself like small groups. Jesus said that wherever two or more were gathered, there he was in the midst of them. You do not need a priest, pastor, etc. to be in the presence of God, only have to be with one other person."

"Like what we have just done."

"Exactly!"

"You are weird Senior Plata."

"I know."

We parked the car and went inside. Carl was on duty and directed us over to receiving where we each put in two hours of service as part of our co-op commitment. Heck, as a college student I did this in Santa Cruz, felt like old times, except for my aching bones anyway. We finished and then put our own order together in the car's trailer. They were out of chocolate as usual. Not unexpected. We should be up for a ration next time. Chili peppers looked good so I was smiling when we left. Payment was automatically deducted from our accounts based on the identity on my bracelet. No checkers, no theft either, if my account did not have the necessary funds, I would not have been allowed out the door. Director was supposed to reimburse, but that did not always happen and was why we all took turns doing these runs. None of us had accounts big enough to get out the door more than once a month. There were a few years before the co-ops got started when everyone still thought they could make it on their own, but hunger eventually convinced us that we needed to work

together to survive. And the riots convinced the rich that we should be allowed to. Of course there is always some new scheme tried once in a while to get the last few pennies away from us.

We met Roger near the wharf. Anita dropped me off to pick up a few kilos of fish as she and Roger headed back to the lab to assist in unpacking. No restaurants on the wharf any more of course. Fishermen were a breed apart. A few of the dirt poor hung out with nets trying to catch a few hungry seagulls if they can. If you can imagine fifty kilos of fermented fish guts, you can start to imagine what it smelled like here. We cooked the fish well. Refrigeration was a luxury, even with the new more efficient peizo designs. I had been taught how to recognize fresh though. Our cook was good. Smell first, check the eyes to see if they are clear, and then push the flesh to see if it comes back to normal shape. Only then do I accept it. Of course they tried to distract me and slip in scraps or weigh down the scales, but I am not stupid and they depend on repeat business. We could spread the word quickly and they would be out of business in a few days. I trusted Mac and paid more than I would with the other stands. I have had food poisoning enough times to want to avoid it now.

I walked back through Cannery Row. No canneries now, not for fifty years. The public aquarium next to the station replaced one of them and then was bought out by the same Chinese firm that bought us. We used it's large tanks for mid sized production runs. A young couple, oblivious to the world, walks by and I step off into the gutter to let them pass. No point in hassling people. When I pass by one of many SUVs, now used as a homes, I hear a "Psst!" I check it out. Paul pokes his head out. Paul was a middleman for 'redirected' supplies from the rich side of town. Death sentence if he got caught, but he had been doing it for five years successfully. All the saps knew him and did not care. No love for the well off.

"Got some H, good price." Hawaiian sugar, not hydrogen in this case.

"How about African?" Chocolate. Costa Rican, or organic chocolate would never be a possibility.

"Naw, they keep that under lock and key, you know that." Oh well, worth trying for.

"How much?"

"Cent" One hundred dollars a kilo. A good price, maybe too good. Chinese New Year coming up and Cook liked to make something special for us if we got the materials to him in time. A good servant anticipates

the master's needs.

"Let me see it." He brings out the bag after looking about carefully. I rub the powder between my fingers, a little too much powder. I taste it. "No thanks. Don't ever try and fool a scientist Paul." It had been cut with cornstarch. Not uncommon, but Cook needed pure for his creations.

"How about 50?" I just wave him off. If he was willing to cut the price in half, it probably was worth nothing. I spit to remove the taste from my mouth, might have more lethal ingredients as well. People get desperate all the time.

Only the ocean front has much in the way of buildings, holding mostly servants for the rich next door, till you get to the station and the edge of New Pebble Beach. Most of the homes around here were torn down and converted to fire wood or farmland. Small plots of specialty stuff in green houses to satisfy the rich next door to us and cheap stuff for the rest of us. A few of the larger houses were kept as dorms, putting up to ten people in each room, farm workers. Pot man goes by on his overloaded bicycle, clanging away. He makes a living converting old car and appliance parts that have not already rusted away, into useful cooking utensils and other stuff. Sometimes when the wind is right we can hear him pounding away on something back at his small shop. He is getting old and will need an apprentice soon or we will lose his skills.

Just as I reach the Station a black PT Cruiser limo drives by heading for New Pebble Beach. I have not seen one of those in years and stop to stare at it. Exhaust smells like it still has the original gasoline powered engine. Amazing. Wonder where they got the fuel. Oh well, the rich are in a different world. I drop the fish off with Cook and take out the accumulated scraps in the dump bucket to Zhu Ba [pig eight]. We are only allowed one pig and ten ducks on site, being next to New Pebble Beach. Ducklings did not count. Smell and noise being a major concern I guess. Used to have a lot of deer and geese, but they got eaten long ago. Besides Chinese were crazy about pork and duck. The staff were limited to the fish, assorted invertebrates we caught and tofu. Fine with me, I certainly could not afford an organ replacement. And the thought of it coming from a fellow desperate sap trying to bargain away his life to save his family sickened me.

Anita was back at the psiotic microscope and moves aside to let me have at it. We had nothing like this till the Chinese took over, but I am good at working with equipment and quickly figured this one out. I used to run the electron microscope facility before it was abandoned in favor of the psiotic one. Based on old Chi master's perceptions, scientists in

China finally figured out what was going on and developed the tech to sense Chi. This led eventually to Chi scanners and imagers and finally to microscopes. We used this one to check on the condition of the blue-greens we were testing and growing. DNA was only half the equation and the PM allowed us to check and confirm the nurture side. Without the proper growing conditions, it did not matter how good the genetics was. Scientists showed almost twenty years ago that even perfect clones could be very different at maturity, depending on how they were raised, in the womb and out. “Ah, here it is. The phase compensator was out of alignment again. Wish we could afford the newer model with automatic compensation. Try it now.”

“Gracias! Muchos gracias Senor Plata.” Grin! Sigh.

I check my mail, “Freep! Jury Duty” It is all done on line now. They time you to be sure you have read all the material and seen all the vids. They never tell you if you were selected or not, just being called means you have to render a verdict on a case. Only a couple of times a year and only takes a few hours each time, but I don’t trust the system and always vote not guilty by reason of poverty. We never sit on juries for the rich or I might be tempted to take it seriously.

Gene lab in New Hong Kong

“Hackers-R-Us! Hey, Wong Fa, get in here!”

“Wasss uuuupp?”

“Shut it, that's so turn retro. You spend too much time with your father. Check this out. Remember that re of neuro gene splicing? The seq is hid of course, want all royals. Peep this. Hacked tech's com at home base, whole ball is there!”

“No way! Stupid shit! Can you get the entire?”

“Fliting now.....got it!”

“BM pay DieH” Hands slapping together. [Black market will pay lots of hydrogen credits for this, the major unit of exchange.]

“GuanXi!” [Chinese for Jackpot. Actually refers to all the favors they will be able to extract.]

Fujimoto HQ, Tokyo Japan

“Gentleman, we have been handed a chance at a prime sequence. Neuro splicer V. Was used to help cure Parkinson's disease in the USA, but can easily be adapted. We need this sequence. Bids are up to 10M Universals. I propose we double that. Our honor will be restored. No longer will we have to pay reparations to the Chinese barbarians!”

Fujimoto Lab, New York City

one week later

“Dr. Heinrik welcome. We hope you will be able to help us. Do you wish to rest?”

“Not necessary. I want to see the facilities immediately. It is very unlikely you are the sole owners of the sequence, no matter what they said and if we don't come out with patent fast, others will take it from us. Those gene jockeys worked overtime for this, lets not waste it.”

“Does the Parkinson's lab know they were ripped?”

“No indication yet. Nothing on the net, but that is normal. We have watchers set just in case.”

“Good. Have the new sequences been confirmed?”

“Only in short tails so far.” [genetically modified hamsters with a host of human genes to make them more compatible for pre-human trials]

“But there are no contradictions.”

“Are we ready to proceed with trials? No problems with the microsporin locks?”

“None, and we have 'volunteers' standing by. We can proceed when you give the word.” [Poor, who are near death from starvation and will do anything for a meal. There is no welfare any more.]

“Combined with Dr. Vale's research, we should be able to bring 'happiness' to millions. All those suffering from depression from social conditions will be able to work again.” At slave wages that is, before they die an early death from exhaustion.

“Proceed with variants one through ten as soon as possible.”
Whatever you say Dr. Heinrik, whatever you say.

“No civilization can exist without grunts at the bottom. The collapse killed American businesses, but the Chinese were ready and bought up anything of value before they could rebuild or farm on for its huge population, including most of California. Japan would have liked it and even tried to the first time in the 80s, but it's own long-lived recession left it without the capital to pull it off. Now Japan has the means of making it's own workforce to compete with any on the planet. HelperV will give us them a perfect workforce, the perfect military. They will rise again! Bonsai! Bonsai! Bonsai!”

In the biohazard lab downstairs.

“I hate this work! I need to get back on the net. I've reached the crystal palace with three life points intact. No one has done that before. I need to get back. I will lose my place to some dweeb.”

“Stupid work, Igor get tubes, Igor fill tubes, Igor label tubes. Nose itches, but can't reach it in the monkey suit.”

“Shit, does this label go on this tube or the next one?”

“Gotta get out of this monkey suit, sweating like a pig.”

“Hey dog shit, get those vials up here pronto!”

“Oh well, who gives a fuck! Gotta get back on the net. Dweeb will jack my spec. Gotta get on the net.”

Labels are very important Igor, more important than any game on the net. More important that you can know.

Two weeks later. HelperV trial lab.

“Bring in subject #ST125J please.”

“Right this way sir.”

“How do you feel?”

“I was sick with the flu for a few days last week, but otherwise I never felt better. Good stuff Doc. Happy to be of service. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Bring in subject #CH938P please.”

“Right this way mam.”

“How do you feel?”

“I was sick with the flu for a few days last week, but otherwise I never felt better. Good stuff Doc. Happy to be of service. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Bring in subject #YW782A please.”

“Right this way sir.”

“How do you feel?”

“I was sick with the flu for a few days last week, but once it ran its course I was back to normal. Depressed as usual. Just my old cheerful self again. I thought you said this would make me feel better. All I got was three days lost wages. You owe me!”

“Bring in subject #GH561K please.”

“Not possible Doc. #GH561K was found dead in the foothills yesterday.”

“Have you bagged?”

“And sealed in vault 12”

“I want a cranial MIV scan ASAP. I need to know what killed GH561K.”

“Looks like contact with a car Doc. Head is a puddle Doc.”

“Fire it. Who's next? Come on folks time is money! Let's prep the next batch with variants 11-20.”

The Bronx.

“Cap'n Bill back yet? He been gone long time. Where be he? I hurt so bad. Ow, I hurt! Somebody help me! He was g'on to bring jack from d'ng reesrch, where be he?”

“Mrs. Walker crying up a storm again. How am I going to get any rest. I can't afford to miss another day.”

“Honey, you're burning up, get back to bed please. I'll bring you some nice cool lemonade?” Don't feel so good myself. I'll just rest for a bit.

New York headquarters of 3rd Regiment “Peace Keepers”.

“Sergeant Leven, has Corporal Black reported in yet?”

“No Major Liu.”

“Did his wife call in?”

“Not yet. Not like them either. Always good about letting us know. Never happened before. He did report being sick three days ago.”

“Send Private Jenkins out to check up on them. We need everyone ready for Operation Spider Silk.”

“Yes mam, right away mam.”

Till the AIDS virus burned itself out in '09, it managed to kill over a billion people, mostly in Africa. Every trick was tried; pharmaceuticals of all kinds, vaccines that worked for a few months and then lost it. Nothing worked long term. Then for some reason, still not explained, it changed and went non-lethal. Sort of like sickle cell that lowered ones ability to work, but with resistance to malaria that kept you alive. Only in this case it conferred resistance to the lethal forms. Now we have a low grade HIV infection in the population that is hard to spread, but provides resistance to the full-blown form and the low-grade form could be given to those suffering from the lethal form. Gone in 3 years. Mutations are wonderful things.

Mercy Hospital Emergency Care.

“Dr. Northrup, we have eight cases now, all walk-ins, of what appears to be the flu, but with some strange symptoms.”

”Like what?” To walk in meant REALLY desperate as you could be in hock to the hospital for the rest of your life.

“In seven of the cases, temperature of 40C for three days, five died till we learned to hydrate like crazy, then back to normal, but they behave weird. They don’t talk, but try to get out of the room anyway possible, out the door, the window, even if on the 5th floor. The first one we tried to restrain, but when we did she was dead an hour later. Now we let them roam under supervision. We don’t really know what to do.”

“What happened to the last one?”

“Well, he had the temperature, but when it fell he became very cooperative and in a weird way, very cheerful.”

“High temperatures can cause hallucinations and even brain damage. We don’t have the resources to treat walk-ins. Let the healthy ones go home and keep me informed of the status of the others. Release them as soon as they are no longer an immediate danger to others. Fire the

deceased and post a notice on the net for any relatives.”

Fujimoto Lab

“Sir, we are getting reports of a strange flu in the Bronx that sounds like our HelperV, but some of them are dying, actually most of them are dying.”

“How many Carol?”

“Hard to say, our sources are 12 hours old, but looks like upwards of a hundred cases with an initial survival of one.”

That’s weird, sounds like variant SC1201C, but that should never have left the lab. We were saving that one for bio-warfare possibilities. Our culture still had the microsporin lock on it. It should not have been infectious without the supplement. Of course, we probably don’t have the only copy of the sequence, so it might not be related to us at all. Better to keep quiet and see what happens. I finally have a house of my own, thanks to Fujimoto Labs; I am not going to risk my career over someone else’s stupidity. We have all been vaccinated, so no personal risk. I'm sure it will burn itself out like all the other ones have. If it was that variant it is highly unstable and should mutate like crazy with no way to trace it back to us.

Cut to the Chase

The HelperV variant did mutate in almost every way imaginable, except for its lethality, before a stable variant surfaced. As a neuro splicer, it picked up random instructions from bits of DNA and caused a large variety of people to become mentally ill, that is, before they died. It did still contain a partial microsporin lock, at least at first, but among the poor, food was food, without much thought to source. The cheaper supplements were contaminated with all kinds of foreign substances, including certain red algae and tunicates, sea squirts, both of which either make microsporins or concentrate them, thus no block. By the time the country's poor, comprising most of the population in any given area, were infected or temporary carriers [the surviving 0.1%] various mutations without the block occurred. And the poor serve the rich, so they were not out of the pot either. It was suspected that some of the poor even knowingly infected their “masters” out of revenge. Now, you would think that with transportation being what it is this would slow down the spread. Two facts worked against this. A person becomes infectious within three

hours of contact, but does not show symptoms for up to a week. And the rich still traveled, a lot. For some reason beyond comprehension, rich people think they are either immune or can out run any plague. This was true in the Middle Ages against the Black Death and it is equally true now. The HelperV plague went global within one week, but no one knew it. As each vector reached a new population center, over crowded conditions allowed it to spread at an incredible rate. The Chinese overlords trying to run ahead of the plague spread it back to the mainland of course. Oh, and that vaccination. No good. Might have worked against the “benign” variants, but against the mutated lethal ”bio-warfare” version, it did not take long for it overwhelm the defenses of any heightened immune system. So, our nethead with more “important” concerns and our irresponsible department head were both infected in the second pass and died within the normal two weeks. Our nethead committed suicide by “flying” off of a “castles keep” with the power of a wizard, NOT. The department head went home to infect his wife and daughter where all died screaming their heads off in their nice new home. Fujimoto execs kindly took the infection back to Japan to start their “new workforce”. And the US military, finest fighting force money could buy, well, you can figure it out.

Let’s also remember that surviving was no picnic either. With 99.9% of your fellow bedbugs out of the way, so was the fragile infrastructure. No net, no shipments, no food grown, no water collected, purified and saved. Civilization went back 200 years in 2 months time. All that is except for the exceptionally efficient ways for one human to kill another, as in guns [outlawed, but still around, thank you NRA], poisons, bombs, pieces of pipe, etc. all still worked just fine. Desperate people will do desperate things, especially if “everyone else is doing it” and “as long as you don't get caught” were the rules. No police force, no rules. Mutations are a wonderful thing. There was one positive aspect. Had this happened twenty years earlier it would have been much worse. People were used to co-oping, farming small plots, working together for survival now. During the boom times, nobody helped anybody.

New Shanghai Marine Station

We knew it was coming, as it started 5000 km away in New York City, with daily news reports and nodes on the net failing one by one. An old fashioned map in the conference room with pins also showed the progress. We stopped eating “tide pool stew” to avoid microsporins and secret stashes of chocolate and other goodies came out of nowhere, but no one thought it would matter. Most said final farewells to friends and colleagues and made what peace they could. Some partied or were simply never seen again. San Francisco started it's own plague center a few weeks ahead of schedule. Probably someone trying to get to China and buying their way past security. The lab population dropped to under ten even before the plague reached us.

Being a depressionist, I never thought to live this long, nor wanted to. I had been warning everyone for years that a war, plague [several started but did not get very far, HAGIS (hyper acute gastro intestinal syndrome thought to have spread from sheep) was the worst, though not particularly fatal. You just wish you had died.] or a comet/meteor was bound to get us. Any evolutionist will tell you that no species is forever and as a species we seemed hell bent on destruction, self-destruction. My personal beliefs about death were eclectic drawing from most of the worlds traditions. I liked Jesus immensely but have had a lot of problems with what became of his spirit and words, Christianity, the religion. Buddhism is great for understanding the mind, and so on. Also, being one of the oldest members of our little community is a constant reminder that your time is almost up. The waiting is the hardest part, but is almost over now. Last I heard from my mother was to not worry, she had led a long life. The net went down in Oregon before I heard the final result. Just hope she went quick and did not survive to be killed by the crazies and thugs who survived. Some communities actually dissolved before the plague reached them. People took off with what supplies they could carry hoping to hole up somewhere till it burned out. Other communities literally burned out from hydrogen explosions and/or riots. We could see fires on the hills around us and heard explosions occasionally. Scientific ignorance is bliss I guess. Normal cold and flu viruses can live for a long time outside the body on surfaces and clothing. Returning to caveman times did not exactly excite me. My father used to force us to go camping as kids, but I was never into it. I like real bathrooms and clean water you don't have to purify first with a ceramic filter. To me a two minute cat

bath was still better than an ice cold stream out in the open.

No one at the lab had a gun when this started, but scientists are a resourceful lot and it did not take long to convert a host of scientific and infrastructure hardware into useful defenses, including electrifying our perimeter fence. Of course this was almost pointless, the lab was small and there was no way we could isolate ourselves completely. We still needed food, where it could be had from local farmers and our own small plot. We lost two techs to errand runs. Never came back and we could not afford to send anyone after them. Farmers gave it away for free to anyone willing to harvest it themselves. I guess they figured it was all over anyway, so why take the chance someone would shoot you for it. We had regulars we went to and offered them trade in seafood and a place to stay if they wanted. They took the food, but stayed where they were. Most would rather die in familiar surroundings I guess.

A subson was the first to show symptoms, fearless leader having left two weeks earlier, so we figured we were all infected and it was just a matter of time now. Still, you could die of starvation or dehydration in two weeks. The netheads knew this one first hand [which was down of course, so that way out was gone too]. We gathered enough supplies for two weeks and closed the gate with a sign to warn others that the plague had reached the lab, which also dissuaded looting, at least till we were all dead. We came down with the early symptoms of massive headache and general body ache about a week later, pretty much all on the same day. At least we would not have to watch our friends die around us one by one till it was our turn. Being a lab that manufactured drugs, we had a ready supply for those who wanted an easier way out or something to ease the pain for themselves or their kids. I retreated to my "closet" to wait it out. Did not feel like doing much else anyway. Buddhist thought was that it was important to face death with as much consciousness as possible, great. I was already adept at lucid dreaming, but did not have much practice while under a 40C fever and severe headache. I used to have this dream of a vast plain with raised wooden platforms every hundred meters. On each platform stood a single victim and his or her executioner. Complete with ax, dark hood and chopping block. Every once in a while someone would be picked and "thock", lose their head. Of course I was also on a platform. Best prepare myself, my executioner is sharpening his blade.

The Fever

This was going to be a good one; I ached so badly with the fever starting to rise and my head was driving me crazy. Getting the chills, but my forehead is hot. Drank as much water as I could hold, knowing I would sweat most of it out in the next few hours. Three days to go. Maybe I would be lucky and die early and miss the insanity stage, some did, especially the old and the young. I qualified. I slept for a few hours, but then had to pee something awful. Got up to go and nearly fell down. Dizzy. Made my way to the head, but hanging onto everything I could. Bob was already there. Hope I looked better than that. He was puking like he was trying to evert his stomach starfish style. I didn't care. Staggering back to my room I almost made it. Too tired to get into bed, I collapse on the floor.

Nightmares. I always get the same one with a fever; two spheres that get closer and closer till my essence is slowly squeezed tighter and tighter and tighter. I heard screaming, but did not know if it was next door, me, or both. The spheres started up again.....and again....

Morning light, felt a little better and the nightmares had stopped. Everything quiet. Heat was not on. Did not hear the fan. Maybe the generator is down, too tired to move, I fall asleep again.

Fever hits again in the afternoon. I hear a voice over the image and pain of the spheres. Can't make out the words. Don't remember the next day. Pain, heat, chills, pain.

On the third day the fever is gone. I think it is the third day. I sleep. No luck on dying before this is over. The voice is louder now. I can start to make out some of the words. Soothing words, ***Don't worry, you will be alright.*** Yeh, and when do I learn how to fly. I sleep. All kinds of weird like instructions in my dreams that are words, but do not make sense. Talking about levels and what can be done at each level. The voice appears to be talking to someone else I can't hear. Something about the 13th level and spheres, yuck, then lapses into a language with strange pops and squeaks, more like an old modem line. Not human. Great. I'm loosing it for sure. Please Lord, just ick me and be done with it!

Loud noise outside my room and I am suddenly awake. I am cold and everything is wet and smells like... ok, we won't go there. Not pretty. The clatter continues. I make my way to the door. Takes me forever. I peak out slowly. Getting dark. Roger, one of the techs in the Hyatt building, is staggering down the hall and falls out the door. He is carrying a small knife used to open mussels and clams. Bob is lying face down in the hall. I go over to him. Knife wounds all over his back, but no blood, already dead. Roger must be hallucinating. Best to stay out of sight for now. I

make it to the restroom where I find two more bodies, one with blood. OK, now things are not pretty at all. At 68 and just getting over a fever, I am no match for a hyped up 26 year old that has apparently already killed at least once. The reports had warned of people going crazy. Only ninety-nine in a hundred died from HelperV itself, the rest died from accidents caused by the hallucinations and from the attacks of others.

Clattering has moved to the pump house. Won't be there long, pump house is real small. I hear a large thump and then swearing and more clatter. Now the sound is from the Luger building, excuse me the "Wong" lab, name change, side door. That will take awhile for him to investigate.

I shuffle out the back towards the cook house, still too weak to walk well. Legs are really wobbly and my arms are not doing any better. I hear another person and duck behind a corner. Barb comes out with nothing on and a real mess, matted hair and stuff smeared all over her. OK, I admit, I am not totally dead down there, but something about one murderer lose and the possibility of more, including yours truly being the next victim, does something to at least this old man. Though, she does look good, even after three days of flu. No knives at least. I whisper loudly, "Barb, Barb, over here!" She pays no attention and walks towards the control building. I say more loudly, "Barb, nets been dead for weeks. Not safe outside." She pauses for the longest time and slowly turns towards the ocean. I don't like this. There is a three meter fall between us and the beach. Oh, well, I wanted to die anyway. Or maybe this is just another hallucination and I am still lying in my own excrement back in my room, er, closet.

Just as she nears the edge, I hear the voice again; ***Send out a thought with your mind to prevent her from falling.*** What? I'm losing it for sure, but what the hey, must be a dream and in lucid dreaming you can do anything right? I think to prevent her from falling and she runs into what appears to be wall; only nothing is there of course. OK, if that works, maybe..... I think to pick her up slightly and bring her more inland. She slowly rises, a little wobbly and then jerks towards me and falls to the ground. Ok, must remember to breathe. I scramble over to her taking my shirt off to cover her with. It stinks, but so does she.

When I reach her, she is mumbling something unintelligible. I shake her, "Are you alright?" Left over CPR training. Duh, of course she is not ok. Behind me a rock crunches from someone stepping on it. I turn around and Roger is coming towards us quickly with his knife held out. His eyes are glazed over like no one is home. Without thinking I PUSH. Roger lifts into the air and flies about 50 feet, sorry 15 meters, and lands

with a crunch, folding the wrong way over a railing. This is not good. I will admit to having broken some of the commandments in both Christian and Buddhist thinking, but never thought I would end up killing someone ever. Even in my worst nightmares I don't actually kill the "monster" just stab repeatedly with no effect. It does not ease my mind that he was walking dead anyway and maybe I even just saved someone important, Barb and someone less important, me.

I finish covering Barb with my shirt, but not before I see more than I wanted to. OK, if this was a dream I would be "reacting" right now. Nothing. I try raising her to her feet, but even at 43kg, she is too much for me right now. Heck I can barely rise myself. I sit down with her in my arms. Now what. Stop, pull and push all appear to work. I think lift. A pile of rocks and sand all around us shoot up into the air and then rain back down on us. I am bleeding and in pain from one of the larger rocks, but Barb appears to be fine, just covered in sand and dust. ***Try enveloping with your mind first.*** That voice again. It's weird though, feels too real to be a dream. Pain is good in this case, I think. Can't remember having felt pain in a dream before. Usually I dream in black and white, sometimes in color, but this was like super hyper hyper color, a peak experience ten fold stronger. Visualizations are part of any spiritual training, so I close my eyes and imagine an envelope around us. I slowly try to move the envelope up. I feel movement, freak and open my eyes, to be rewarded with a 10 cm drop to the ground. Ow! It works, but I need to do better than that and I need to keep my eyes open to see what is happening. Zen style, I keep my eyes open, imagine the envelope and then slowly lift us up; 5, 10, 15, 20 cm. That is enough to clear the rocks. Don't want to press my luck. I slowly move us over to the door of the cookhouse. Breathe! 1st lesson in meditation practice, breathe. I move us to the ground.

Barb is waking up, sort of. Her eyes are the same glazed over look as Rogers were. I drag her up the two steps, not feeling good enough with my "flying" ability to negotiate a door just yet. Inside things are a wreck. I order PUSH. Pots, pans, utensils, pots of moldy and decaying food all go flying to the other side of the room. Great, I really need to concentrate more. But at least it smells better than the dorm, though not by much. I set Barb up in one corner and get up to investigate. I wash my hands in the sink, no telling WHAT they have been in. At least there is still water running. Cisterns are not drained then. I check the fridge. Still cool, must not have been that long since the generator went out. I grab some cold rice and ice tea [only the rich can afford soda]. I don't touch the "home

brew”, being from a long line of alcoholics. Though I am not sure that would matter now. I offer Barb some tea, but she is too out of it. Not sure what I am going to be able to do if I can't feed her. A cook's thick smock is off to one side, not too soiled. I add that to the covering on Barb. I swallow some tea. Dehydrated from no water for three days. I remember not to go too fast. Systems have shut down and it takes a bit to bring it all back up. I eat a few handfuls of rice and another swallow of tea.

Now what? The immediate threat appears to be gone. Bodies to deal with. Hmmm, maybe not. I am not up to digging graves and I am sure this is the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Once outside the station, bodies must number in the millions. But it will get really bad before they take care of themselves ‘naturally’ and lots of nasty things can grow in nutrient human soup, smell not the least of which. So, I need to set up some sort of base with food, water, heat, shelter and maybe transportation, depending on how this flying thing works out. Still don't know how the energy equations balance with that. There is always a cost somewhere. So tired. I flop down in another corner. Can't keep my eyes open. This has to be a dream, even with the pain. I am as wacked out as I think Barb is. Who knows what she is thinking.

Barb is gone. Not sure what I could have done, but even dignity can be important at the end. Getting dark again. No point in looking I guess. ***Use your inner eye.*** What's an inner eye and what IS that voice? No response. First telekinesis and now the “inner eye.” This is definitely getting weird. Maybe HelperV did weird things to you just before death takes you. I understand that you are confronted with all your demons, fears and desires, the bardoes according to Tibetan Buddhist thought. Guess I passed the desires test, did not touch Barb or hunt out the chocolate stores. Hmmm... might have to fail that one. Doomed to another life of desire and samsara. Ok, inner eye, inner eye. I close my eyes and concentrate. I visualize myself sitting in the corner of the kitchen. Rising above myself I spread my consciousness outwards. I can see the rest of the station's buildings and their interiors at the same time. Looks like most of the station personnel can be accounted for that had not already left. All dead. I push further. In a corner of a courtyard against the fence and building I sense Barb standing trying to go through the fence. The gate is only a few feet away, but the ocean is in the direction of her apparent travel. I had heard that the plague did this to the ones that survived the fever. They get fixated on something and then pursue it till they die from some kind of accident. Not good. I open my eyes and grab another swig of tea and handful of now room temperature rice. Tastes

funny, probably starting to mold, but too dark to be sure. I don't appear to have either the fixation syndrome or the "yes sir" syndrome, just the flying idiot syndrome, but then there is no one around to give me orders, unless you count the Voice. But s/he seemed more helping than ordering. But what was this telekinetic scanning stuff? Never heard of that on the reports.

I am not dressed that great myself. Dark now. I feel around and grab another cook's smock. In this mess there would be no way to find a flashlight, even if one was here and working still. I reach out with my mind and everything lights up in a weird pseudo light, all evenly lit, not real, B&W too, no color, sort of like an old SEM image. I walk down the steps and follow the path to the courtyard. There is Barb bumping herself against the corner. Need a place to set up temporarily that is warm and can be closed against Barb's wondering, with no bodies. I sense that a sub director's conference room is empty, close by and reasonably intact. I slowly guide Barb around, through the door and into the room, setting her down in a chair. I check the sink, still water. That won't last I'm sure, though we have an advantage of being at the bottom of the hill. Must be leaks all over the place from faucets left on. I fill a thermos and a couple of coffee cups sitting on the counter. Can't hurt. I am still too weak to handle filling carboys.

I need to get some water into her or she is toast. What is it, a week at most without water and the fever must have sweat a lot out of us. I tilt her head back some and trickle some water into her mouth. She coughs, but swallows. Try some more. Taking this better. Let her have a half a cup for now. I finish the rest. We both fall asleep in the corner of the carpeted room.

Morning. I quickly glance next to me. Barb is still there, "purring" slightly. Men snore, women purr. I drink another cup of water. Real hungry now and wide awake. Doesn't feel like a dream anymore. With enough light to see somewhat, I check the cupboards. Lots of crackers, cookies, tea, and "coffee." Any chocolate? Not here. Secret stashes of this rationed substance are usually hidden better than this and most disappeared before the fever struck. My own stash lasts only a few minutes upon receipt, so nothing to hide. The crackers are stale and not crisp. Cook makes them fresh, can't afford even the co-op ones. They are not packaged airtight. Still it's something. I down a half dozen with some more water.

The Voice tells me, *Hold still*. Huh? I black out hard. When I wake, it must be nearly noon and I am crumpled on the floor. Glad I was not at

the edge of a cliff. Apparently I am not through having “fun” yet. Barb is gone again, but so are some of the water and a lot of crackers. Good, if she can feed herself, she must be getting better. I hear the toilet door open, always had a squeak to it. Must be her, I hope. Sure enough, the door slowly opens again and she walks in wearing some jeans that don’t fit that well and a pullover. She throws me some of the same and leaves again. I dress quickly; grab the rest of the crackers and water. OK, I took a cookie too, all right? Confession is good for the soul.

Barb reenters the room. I ask her, “How are you feeling?” She shrugs but does not say anything. Pretty quiet person anyway, but these are not normal times. I ask her, “Can you talk?” She shakes her head no. At least she understands. It is possible that the fever and such did some brain damage. Hope it’s temporary. “I scanned the station and no one is left alive but us. Roger was alive, sort of, but died in an accident.” She looks at me weird. I was not about to tell her so soon that I killed him, even in self-defense. Might not be understood. I added, “For what it is worth, I stopped you from drowning yourself, but did not touch you otherwise.” She nods slowly that she understood. People do crazy things when they think they can get away with it, but I will never resort to rape, even if I am the last male on the planet and the species is doomed. Freep, she would not know what I meant by ‘scan’. Oh well, she would find out in time, IF any of this is real.

“Things are a real mess. This building seems to be ok for shelter, but we will need to worry about food. Water we can get from the cisterns for a time. Most of the other buildings have corpses or were trashed by Roger before he died. I’m afraid that I added to the mess in the cook house. Was not doing so well myself at the time. Have no idea what’s happening outside the station. Also, some weird stuff has been happening to me, at least I think so. Just wanted to warn you, but I have a Voice in my head that offers ‘help’ occasionally. I need to check something out to make sure I was not just imagining the whole thing. Please watch so I have confirmation that this is real. I am going to move the coffee cup on the counter.” She looks at me quizzically and slowly nods, probably expecting me to get up to do so. Probably figures that she is the only sane one left alive. Can’t blame her.

I concentrate, but don’t move myself. The coffee cup comes shooting off the counter and I quickly stop it in mid air, spilling remnants all over myself. Must be gaining some ‘strength’, was not expecting that much of a reaction. Well, duh, a coffee cup is lighter than a person. I carefully and slowly lower it to the table. Whew, that takes a lot of concentration. Hope

it gets easier with practice or it will still be easier to do things the old fashioned way. In the mean time Barb backs up quickly against the wall and slowly moves to the door. “Don’t worry, I am not nuts. Just something that happened to me because of the fever. The fever took away your ability to speak, but for some reason I don’t understand gave me some new abilities. Try it yourself. The virus did mutate all the time, maybe we got a weird strain.” I decided not to further her fear by mentioning that the Voice told me about the abilities or my ability to see into other rooms, including locked ones. “I am not well practiced in this art yet I am afraid. I was not even sure it was real till just now.” And grin sheepishly. She relaxes some, but remains cautious. She stares at the cup, but it does not move. She turns back to watching me with a shrug.

Barb makes a question mark with her hand. “I don’t know. Being a sci-fi/fantasy nut from way back probably explains why I am not more freaked than I should be. Until this moment I still thought I was living a dream, still back in the closet dying from the fever and hallucinations. Maybe I still am.” She shakes her head no. Well, that’s something. “Never had a dream this detailed before anyway, it is like hyper real, I see such detail in everything, or this long, so I guess it’s real. No idea why. We have the psiotic sensors and the psiotic microscope, but neither can be used to move stuff, just read the condition of a life force. Who knows? Radio waves would seem like magic to someone who did not grow up with them.”

“Anyway, you don’t have anything to worry about from me, I am not a murd...” I stop. “OK, I might have been the one that killed Roger, but it was an accident. I was helping you to get to shelter and had paused to rest. Roger came after us with a mussel knife. I had seen him earlier stabbing a dead tech and evidence of having killed someone, Jesus I think, who was still alive. I fully expected him to kill us. So, I ah, PUSHED. He flew into the air and landed on his back on the guard rail, breaking his spine and/or neck. I did not mean to do it, but was too weak to get up and defend myself and was still not thinking straight. I’m sorry; I really did not mean to do it. You know me; I rescue spiders and flies and put them outside. I never kill anything.” She relaxes some more, but does not move. “The only other change seems to be able to ‘see’ without light or from a fixed location. That is I can move my point of reference about without using my eyes. I call this scanning for lack of a better word. You heard me mention it earlier.” She tenses again.

“God, I hope you are able to talk again soon. Stroke victims usually recover some. This whole thing is the worst possible nightmare. Not

getting feedback from hearing another human voice is not helping any.” I have my head in my hands.

Weeks passed. Barb is starting to be able to “speak” in grunts, small sounds and hand gestures, sort of like a baby learning how to talk again. Sounds similar to a stroke, and that may have been all that it was, a fever induced hemorrhage of some sort. Otherwise she seems to be healthy, luckier than most, if being alive is lucky. I have her remove my bracelet, figuring that part of existence is over with at least. Won't be able to us it soon with the power out anyway. But mostly it is what it represents that bothers me. I want some distance from that life. The cisterns are still intact, so we did not need to worry about water. With cisterns all over town, all we had to do was make sure the water was not somehow contaminated [usually with dead things or animal droppings] and we were set for years if not longer before they cracked or failed in some other way. Probably would be a good idea to set up a circuit of maintaining some of the closer ones to be sure. For food we depended on dried and canned goods, not trusting anything that used to be fresh. The co-op was well stocked, albeit in disarray. Wild animals and pets gone wild were a problem. Dogs reverted to pack behavior and rats breed VERY quickly. I insisted that Barb carry a gun at all times. A pack could take down a human no sweat. Twice she needed to use it, but would not tell me the particulars. We tried to see if she could write, but all language ability seemed to be gone except for understanding what I said. Her voice was ok and could scream a warning if needed though. My own “abilities” continued to strengthen and get more refined as I practiced them. I depended on them rather than carry a gun, which I have always abhorred after my brother died at the hands of one. Little blessings. But I really had to practice, devoting most of my free time to it. One thing I worked out was to form some glass with TK into a hollow sphere, add some water to the interior, add a spot of crystal violet dye from the histology lab at the top and then seal the whole thing. This allowed me to practice making such a structure and then practice fine movement by adding enough water to be just below the dye. Any sloshing and the dye colored the water. And with my ability to restore the colored water back to dye and water, I could practice as much as I could stand. Got to the point where the glass was less than 300 microns thick and the water nearly to the level of the dye spot.

I did not want telekinesis to be a substitute for manual labor, heaven knows, I needed the exercise more than these new talents. We both continued to ride bikes most of the time. In a months time we did not see

anyone else, but saw lots of evidence of nasty endings. Best to put that aside, at least for now. We marked houses with corpses with a red "X". I could scan a house, so we never had to actually enter one thank goodness. Even clothes from a death house stunk real badly. The blackouts seemed to be related to my growing abilities. The last blackout appeared to open the ability to see and manipulate matter at the atomic level as well as strengthen my existing ones. This meant that I could "refine" a mixed material, like make fresh water out of salt water or remove the dye from water in the practice balls. We had plenty of water, so I was not sure what this would mean, but like the other talents, I practiced them figuring there must be a reason for it. The Voice continued to offer tidbits of suggestions once in awhile. Became sort of like a second consciousness, just another part of my new existence. Only one-way though, questions were never answered and I never knew when a suggestion would come in.

I know what you are thinking. Barb was in her 40s and still quite attractive [not that that mattered to me, I valued friends more for their minds and personalities.], but I did not pursue it and neither did she [I mean, I was old enough to be her father!]. At the station, small as it was, you did not inquire about people's personal lives. People sometimes left the station at night and did not return till shift the next day. You did not ask. We all had demons we had to live with, ruined relationships, mistakes. I was not her master and she was not mine. As long as we each did our share of work, neither of us bothered the other. Since I could scan up to about 10 km now, we worked out a deal that if she ever got into trouble she would scream in a particular way. I would sense her and come to help, flying to the rescue. Otherwise, she could be gone for days at a time, but I did not ask, nor worry. Workload was actually quite light. In a hunter gather society, only an hour or two per day was needed to get what you needed and for us groceries were only a block or two away. This was very different from our insane recent culture of 50 hour workweeks, plus personal errands, etc. After 40+ years, I was finally getting a vacation. "Civilization" seemed more like a justification for slave labor from this perspective, with the benefits going to the rich of course. A lot of people called them pears, short for parasites, for that reason. Speaking of which, New Pebble Beach was next door to us, but we generally avoided the place. I could scan it and knew there was no one left alive and very few bodies. Rich were known for having sub lethal and lethal ways of protecting their property. Not worth taking a chance, even for chocolate. However, I had no such feelings about raiding the director's upstairs digs.

Made me sick to see all the waste and opulence. Used to be a functioning lab, now it looked more like a bordello. I did take the precaution of scanning all internal and external sections of his rooms before entering. He was the closest we had to middle class and far above us. There were small sub-lethal reporting devices hidden, so it is apparent that he never entirely trusted us. He could always fire us, a much greater and more cruel threat than some trap. His abandoned monster dog had torn the place up before it died of insanity or dehydration. Not sure which came first. The rainbow goldfish were belly up and moldy too, other monsters that also would never have survived in the wild.

You would think that this would mean less stress and in a lot of ways this was true. However, what happens when you have a problem with a tooth or other medical problems? I am not 28, I'm 68! Pain is a daily companion, but is it something to be concerned about? Not a doctor or medic in sight, not that I could ever have afforded one. But no net meant no info. We did find some older texts at a doctor's office. But med scans are out of the question, unless you counted my new talent. Barb appears to be able to read, but not write. Input works, output doesn't. I'm no neurosurgeon, you figure it out. At least she can scrounge a can of peaches instead of beets, yuck! All that training in computer science is not much use now. Sure we can get a few machines up, under solar and H gas, but without the net, what's the point. So, Barb being the younger one with nothing to do, was the more adventurous, the explorer. She found most of the stashes of food and supplies. I handled the "heavy" transport for items that could not be carried on a bike. Neither of us knew how to operate a H powered vehicle, except in emergency mode and that was too slow, so did not bother. Funny, you would expect her to be wired, but she insisted that she was not. I was polite and did not scan her. Dignity was important for what may be the only other living human from my perspective.

"Hey Barb, I was thinking. You are around so little that listening to me is not going to help bring back your language skills. Think you could fire up a com unit and download language lessons from the directors machine to a player. You could carry it around while exploring and listen to it and practice speaking in privacy. I have tried to learn German, Spanish and Chinese. I know how humiliating it is when you are first learning."

"Sur, Chin assent"

"Yeh, that could be a problem. You could record me reading stuff and use that?"

“Sur, feek assent” Grin!

Wait a minute! She could still use a computer! Dumb, dumb, dumb. She could use a small com to type in questions and such. She had spent so much time on a com, that it must be redundantly recorded in her brain. The stroke had not slowed down her computer skills much. Of course the only person to talk to was still me. Might not be worth the effort. We could not be dependent on pads anyway, they would break down sooner or later.

I was eating lunch a week later, fried “spam” with mustard, dandelions and GM tomatoes from the lab garden, dash of seaweed, Jasmine tea, partly cloudy skies and beautiful. Who knows what Spam was made out of now anyway, eeeuu! Certainly not meat. Barb came running in exhausted. “peep! peep!” “Where? How many?” She held up her hand, eight fingers. Three fingers and then one pointed up from her crotch. 3 males and 5 females then. “Where, how far away?” Two hands up, then one hand. 15 km. “You know I can't scan that far. I can't help you if you are out of range.” She gestured pointing to her eyes, saw, then hands fluttering up, smoke. “Still, could have been very dangerous. You saw all the nasty stuff. Did you meet them or talk to them?” She shakes her head no. “Ok, we have time. They have survived this long; they can wait till we get there. Let's do this right and be careful.” She nods in agreement. Other people! This is exciting. We were not alone any longer!

15 km is an easy bike ride, even for me. I get Barb to show me on a map where they are. She had walked cross-country, which wouldn't work for bikes. If we go up 68, cross over Thimble road, by pass the Hutchins place [still smells really bad there, whole bunch of people had holed up there with livestock and the stock could not get out once the people died]. Shouldn't take us longer than 2 hours, assuming not too many obstacles, like over turned trucks, barricades and the like. Best if we waited till morning though. No idea what kind of reception we can expect. They may not want or allow visitors. After what Roger did, I could not trust any stranger either.

Next morning we pack two packs with enough food for several days and some fresh fish, no fear of being caught poaching now, not that there was much out there to catch. Figuring they might appreciate something different to eat as they are inland from us. I could TK us there, but that might really freak them and I am not talking about my “accent” either. Best not to expose what I am until we know what's up.

Hold still. FREEP not again!

It's almost dark. I was out longer this time. It has been so much time since the last one I thought it was over with. Too long to still be the plague and plague does not give you a warning. Something else is at work. Wonder what "gift" if any I received this time. Barb knew what to do; she left some sweets next to me. Chocolate? Where did she get that? Hope she did not chance the rich homes. I wolfed down the three pieces of chocolate first. Wonderful! Heaven! But, we had lost a day. There was a piece of paper next to me with a picture of a bridge on it. Barb's way of saying she was in the conference room, our bridge in nautical speak. I finished the rest of the "snacks" and slowly got up. Still a little woozy, but better than the previous time(s). Sugar seemed to help. Chocolate didn't hurt either, grin. We had lost a day, but they weren't going anywhere. Still, it was a disappointment. Again that sensation of having just WOKEN up. Everything seemed somehow more real.

I checked in with Barb, "Sorry."

She shrugs, "Wat nu?"

"I don't know yet. I am sure instructions will follow, sigh.... I should be fine tomorrow for our trip. Going to go rest now. Sorry again." Not like I had a choice in the matter.

We set out early, not so much because we had to, but because both of us were excited about the possibilities and nervous of the hazards. According to the reports that I had read before HelperV reached us, there should have been more than just the two of us who survived. Just was not sure how many people died in the aftermath. The first few kilometers went by without incident. The fields were going wild without constant slave labor tending them, but with only a few of us, we should still be able to harvest enough this year. We had both been here many times in the last month. Lots of blue jays this time of year. Always loved to watch these clowns. They would get within 2 feet of a cat without fear and the cat would ignore them. The blue jays squawking up a storm and the cat trying to get some sleep. Apparently the cat had learned that there was no way it was quick enough to get one. Well the cats were not so slow any more, much hungrier without the GMSoy handouts.

They weren't the only things that were hungrier, we were starting to see rats out in the open now. That meant there were thousands more hidden. Maybe the corpses would be taken care of at least. Barb spotted a dog up ahead and made a hand movement indicating jaws. She undid her gun. She had gotten pretty good with it. Quick reactions on a keyboard were not that hard to translate to accurate motions with a pistol. And

there was lots of ammunition in hidden caches that could be used for target practice, thanks to the NRA and my scanning abilities. Never thought I would thank them for anything. My long dead brother was a member. I worried at first about using my talents out in the open, but after seeing no one for a month I had gotten less cautious. Now I had to be cautious again, people had been spotted. It would be better if Barb handled the dog or dogs. If the community had scouts out, they may be watching. I caught site of another dog off to the side, behind a bush. Where there are two there is an entire pack. Most likely 5-7, but can be as many as 10-15 if it is ready to split.

A third and a fourth dog appeared, they were not staying hidden anymore. Barb shot the one directly in front of us and three more appeared. We were peddling as fast as we could, but it was an uphill climb. Dogs aren't dumb. If we turned around to take advantage of the hill, they would be on us, as most were still behind us waiting, just loping along. I had little choice. I did not want to kill any more. Something had to keep the rats in check and mountain lions were scarce just yet. I did a quick scan of the area to see if I could sense any humans. There was one dog within a few feet of me. It was now or never. I gave it a gentle push, nothing too obvious. As soon as I did, the rest of the pack suddenly moved back 10 meters, flying high. I threw up a mental shield around the two of us immediately. Yes, being a cautious person, I learned defensive uses as well. Had Barb throw rocks at me as hard as she could to test it. We did not test it with the gun. I stopped my bike and waited. Barb stopped also, gun ready, though I had warned her that a gun would be no match for a TK. A fellow TK should not be able to penetrate the shield, at least not easily because of the distance difference, I being closer to the shield. The dogs that could, scattered, and the rest limped away as quick as they could. One sniffed at its fallen comrade. No doubt remembering where it was for dinner later.

Two men and a woman came out from behind a low fence laughing. The woman was the TK, unshielded now. "Come out of your bubble, you are safe. We know better than to attack you." I lower my shield, but am fully alert. "We know something of your strength, having seen what you have done at the station. Moving a few dogs is very hard for me, but possible. I could not however move concrete walls around like playing cards." All smiles. I smile back. Oh well. Barb puts her gun away and comes closer to me. Together we walk our bikes to meet the three. "I am Susan, this is Xing Jun, who we call Julian and peach fuz is Michael." Tossing his hair to tease him. He squawks in protest.

“I am Yingui and this is Barb. I use my Chinese name as I have gotten used to it over the last 6 or so years.” Handshakes are exchanged and Julian looks at me in horror, part of the reason I like the name. No one goes by the name of 'ghost' much less 'silver ghost' in China. Being a powerful TK with silver hair and beard doesn't hurt that impression. Hey, they don't know that I still rescue bugs.

Michael, the younger, comments, “You sure looked funny when the dogs flew. Was not sure you were still alive or not. No expression AT ALL.”

“Shut up Fuz, he could have you for dinner without even blinking, don't piss him off. Remember the rogue,” reminds Julian.

I look at them quizzically, guessing they meant people like our Roger. “Nothing to worry about from me, but what is a rogue?”

“You haven't run into a rogue yet? A rogue is a TK with a bad attitude. Killed one of our TKs and two others in an ambush before we learned to shield ourselves. James, our other TK and I got him before he got anyone else, but it was close. James is real good at net games so had some strategies worked out that actually worked.”

This was worse than Roger. “How do you know I am not a rogue?”

“A rogue doesn't wait to ask questions and be polite and someone as powerful as you would have been flattening houses for a block trying to get us, if that was what you were. Would not have set up a home spot with a non TK as nice as you did either. You're no rogue.”

“Well, thanks.” Barb nudges me and points to the packs. “Forgot. We brought some fresh fish to share that should not be sitting out here in the sun for too long. How do you want to proceed, assuming you want to be our guests or vice-versa?”

“Hmmm, fresh fish would be a treat, but it would be better to share. Assuming you have enough.”

“We have enough for twelve. Barb saw eight, plus the two of us and some extra in case there were more that she did not see. But mixed with veggies in a stir fry, it could be stretched further.”

“Well, our bikes are around the corner, we could be back to Plumcreek in about two hours.”

I look at Barb and she nods yes. “Sounds good to us, we can talk along the way. Just remember I am an old man, no matter what my 'talents' are, so take it easy.” I grin at the three. Hey, exercise is good for me, didn't say I liked it. “One thing. Any other people around?”

“As far as we have investigated, not till South San Jose and Santa Cruz up north and San Louis down south. South San Jose is the bigger,

maybe 30-40. Pretty rough, lots of fires, toxic materials from chips and biots going up. Won't bother us, too busy dealing with their own problems. Lots of APE activity before the plague too." APE was a guerilla group out to get the rich, whom they called pears, short for parasites. APE stood for American Parasite Exterminators. They formed after the riots from what remained of the gangs and disenfranchised tech workers. They showed that the rich were vulnerable. They left a characteristic monkey logo wherever they had been. Their name came from a netcaster who referred to rioters as apes. Our front gate got hit once. Being next door to New Pebble Beach had its disadvantages also.

"How did you find this out?"

"We sent out people in pairs, one TK and one norm. Helps with hiding and other things." Grin.

"We have known of you two for some time, but left you alone as you left us alone and did not appear to be interested in world domination or anything else funny. But now that you have come out of the shell..."

"But, we have just barely gotten our own act together, how did you do so much?"

"Easier in larger groups, division of labor. Wait till you see what we have done. Could use your help on some of the 'larger' projects though. Been hoping that you would start looking around."

"Well, here we are, lead on McDuff."

"Huh?"

"Old literary reference, you know from books?"

"Man, you are so retro, books! My grandma talked about those."

Pretty much how the conversation went the entire time. I was the 'old man' telling tall tales and they were hinting at what they had accomplished in so little time. Ok, they had only us to compare too, so it was not much. I figured we had all the time in the world to get our 'act' together, for all I knew we were the only ones left alive. Oh well, let's see what's up with the Plumcreek dozen.

We came over the hill and coasted down to a group of wood framed houses with fires going in fireplaces. Two kids, about 12 and 7 came out to greet us. This was the first that I had heard that any children had survived. "Hi Susan, hi Julian, hello Fuz! hee-hee!" Michael got off his bike and went running after the two, who were squealing the whole time in excitement. Nice to hear laughter again after so much death and destruction. Three more adults came out. "They're here, they're here. Their names are Barb and Yingui. Yingui's a TK stronger than Susan or James."

“Welcome, I am Denise, he's Will and she's Jenny.”

“I am afraid that I will not remember, never been good at names, so help me out when I get stuck. Thanks for inviting us. Nice to see new faces and know there were other survivors.”

“Will, where are the others?”

“James and Juanita are still out on patrol, the rest of the girls are in making supper.”

“We brought 3 kilos of fresh fish you will want to add, not GM either, caught in the bay by Barb.”

“She don't talk much, something wrong?”

“She had a stroke during the fever and is only slowly getting her speech back. We are both still overwhelmed about seeing so many people again.”

“I'm sorry, come inside please. You must be tired after your ride.”

I look over at Barb to gauge her thoughts. “Barb's not, that was just a short 'pleasure' trip for her, but I could sit awhile.”

“Barb, why don't you come with us, we can show you the net connection we restored.”

Barb's eyes nearly pop out of her head and she is pushing her way past them. “ware? now!”

I nearly die laughing and then explained. “Barb was our netadmin. Eat, breathed, and lived the net. Thought her purpose and life were over when it went down. You have a friend for life for saying those simple words, hope you can back them up.”

“Well, it is not full access with so many nodes offline, but people were so used to the net, and most concentrations of people were also near nodes. Enough hackers, crackers, netheads, etc. survived that a rudimentary net has resurfaced. Only 17 nodes in a line so far in CA, but we hope to get more on line as time passes. You being on the edge, near the sea, we were hoping you might be able to help us with the sub sea cable out of New Shanghai.”

“Amazing. Maybe there is hope. Thought we were going back two hundred years. Not sure what can be done about manufacturing when we run out of spare parts though, but it is a start. We could cannibalize some to keep others going I suppose.”

Well, I did not need to worry about Barb anymore. She is old enough to take care of herself, and there is no way she was going back to the station, unless we somehow brought the net back with us. Something to worry about later. In spite of the fact that I spent nearly my whole life next to the ocean and at the station, I really preferred the forest. Just

being among trees again was a pleasure, the air, the rustle of leaves and branches and the smells, wonderful. At the station, it was either bushes or Cypress, as it grows fast. But also has a nasty habit of falling down in storms and putting out an enormous amount of pollen in the early spring. Not great for allergies. Was wondering were I was going to get meds when the current stocks expired.

Come to think of it, I had nothing there I wanted either. Oh, I used to be really into photography, but as of two months ago, it was the furthest thing from my mind. I had to dump all my analog film and cameras some time ago because of space limitations and toxic silver wastes. That was my real love, a rosewood view camera with 5x7 inch film, wooden film holders and an apo lens. 100+ years old and would have still taken better pictures than anything digital. I could probably find a lens somewhere. That was the hard part to make. Then the box, holders and maybe even the film could be made with my new 'talents'. Just might be worth pursuing. I guess it all depends on how much free time I have.

Wait a minute, I could make meds too. I already knew that I could rearrange atoms, should be able to make meds. Silly. Still not used to the idea of extra abilities. Well, it had been only two months. So many possibilities.

Armstrong Subterranean Facility

New Haven, CT.

“All sections have reported in and are fully isolated Sir!”

“Thank you Sergeant. Each section has taken all precautions to insure no cross contamination. We can only hope that at least one survives. You can go back to your family now. That will be all.”

“Thank you Sir.”

There was always the possibility of a large-scale outbreak, either natural, or more likely from the military mind, intentional. A good military has contingency plans for almost any possible scenario. The US Military was the best, why else would every first world country hire them? If an Armstrong facility could take a direct hit from a high yield H-bomb; it would handle this. Buried nearly a kilometer below the surface, it had taken five years to dig through all the rock layers. Massively reinforced with titanium steel beams. Triple redundantly filtered air and water supplies from twelve hidden locations, two for each sector, now isolated from each other. No mixing of personnel, air, water, sewer, or supply lines having occurred at any time in the last month. Each facility had upwards of a thousand people, military personnel and their families who all entered by separate routes from separate initial locations spread across three adjoining states. Each section was color coded with instructions to shoot to kill ANYONE not wearing their color. No extra fabric or dyes, natural or otherwise were allowed. Time locks set for two months. Four times longer than initial reports showed would be needed to detect any infected individuals. Each section was given full authority to do what ever needed to be done, no questions asked, to insure it's survival within it's own section. Sections further subdivided themselves into six more sections, giving approximately 25-30 people per subsection, depending on family groupings. Symptoms should appear within 7-14 days. Any subsection showing symptoms within that time period was to be destroyed with chlorine oxide gas guaranteed to kill any virus or person within that subsection. Cameras controlled by adjacent sections were monitored at all times. Taking a camera off line was grounds for gassing that section. No communication between sections for the first month was allowed, punishable by gassing. There was no way to talk your self out of being gassed. Most considered this a blessing, having read the reports of those infected on the surface.

In the first week, no symptoms, but one fatality. A newly minted

private went berserk and took out a camera. Others in his subsection immediately sealed the room he was in and only that room was gassed. Lots of psychosomatic symptoms, but none confirmed. If you had a headache you kept it to yourself. With all military personnel armed, it was best not to arouse any suspicion. In the second week one subsection in each of two sections, yellow and green, were gassed. Children seemed to show symptoms first. In the next week two more sub sections in section yellow were gassed. Nothing more in green. At one month, all but one subsection in yellow was gone. No other cases. At the end of two months, no new cases. The plague had been contained. The monitors were shut off as soon as the “gas” button was pushed. Hard enough to kill the enemy, but to kill fellow Americans was a different story. NOTHING could live in a 10% Chlorine Oxide atmosphere; there was no need for confirmation.

One hundred and sixty five people had died. At least that was what the record showed. You can't learn much from the dead. The monitors in the director's office were still functional. And no one died from Chlorine Oxide, except viruses on corpses, at least not right away. What are the odds that anyone would survive at all? At least a thousand to one, or a one in seven chance that one person out of the 165 would survive. Out of that, another one in twenty chance of a TK level one. Bingo. One person survived, contained in one room. A cot, toilet, sink, small fridge and a cupboard with food. A monk would be ecstatic.

“Captain, we have a survivor in Yellow C16.”

“Interesting. Maintain surveillance corporal.”

“Yes sir.”

Why am I still alive? Tired, so tired.

“Corporal Rutledge reporting for duty, how's it going? Any change?”

“None, he has been sleeping all this shift. Drank a little water around oh-four-thirty and now is out again.”

I need more water. What the? How can that be? “OK, who's playing games? Where are you hiding? Are you watching this? Not enough that you didn't gas me, now you are playing games with my mind huh?” Or maybe this is the hallucinations they warned about in the briefings.

“Captain, he is awake. Something weird happened and now he is blaming us, ranting and raving like a mad man. Could be a crazy sir.”

“What happened corporal?”

“A cup of water flew across the room into his hand, Captain. We didn't do it Sir.”

“Oh really, I thought you were a marine and could do anything.”

Give me a break, now we have comics. “Give me feed, I want to watch what's going on.”

This must be some kind of test. Ok, I know they can't read my mind, so I have to do something they can't anticipate. I know. They would never open the door, so if I did.... On the other hand there could be gas outside that door. Better think of something else. They might be able to move things, magnets or something, but they can't move me, especially if I'm naked. No wires, etc.

Now what's he doing. All the rest hallucinated if they survived the fever. Probably forgot all about the camera. What the.... “Corporal, I want all chambers in all directions from YC16 flooded with gas NOW! That means on all sides, above, below, diagonal. Hell, flood every thing in Yellow, except C16.NOW CORPORAL!”

“ah, yes sir, right away sir. Gas confirmed sir.”

“What's his name corporal?”

“Henry sir, a civ.”

“Give me sound to C16.”

“Yes sir. You have sound.”

“Henry, this is Captain Fontane. How are you doing?”

Henry falls to the floor. “Oh, I'm just fine Capt'n. Just fine. Now what the hell is going on? What's happening to me?”

“We are trying to find out Henry. Do not try and leave your room Henry. Got that?”

“I understand sir.” He was right, gas outside that door.

Briefing room.

“Captain Fontane give your report.”

“General. As you can see Henry is a male, 32 years old, grease monkey married to Private Grenwald, now deceased. Had a daughter Carol, 5, also deceased. Only survivor out of 165 confirmed cases of HelperV. Most died of the fever. The rest died of dehydration or self inflicted wounds provoked by hallucinations, crazies. Those who died of dehydration were unable to find the water or figure out how to use the sink. Henry has telekinetic abilities at least powerful enough to hold himself to the 2.4 meter ceiling for 20 minutes. He then has to rest for a few hours before he can do this again. However, smaller tasks can apparently be done without exertion.”

“What do the air samples show?”

“No HelperV present, but of course we cannot be absolutely sure.”

“HelperV is supposed to be a neurosplicer correct?”

“Yes sir, it might explain the behavior of those who survived the fever and went crazy.”

“I want someone to volunteer to guide our TK to a psiotic scanner.”

“Yes sir, I will get suited up right away sir.”

“Thank you Captain.”

Outside YC16 30 minutes later.

“I am outside C16, clear the air in this hallway only.”

“Clearing air sir.”

“Air confirmed clear.”

“Henry, can you hear me.”

“Yes.”

“I am outside your door. The hallway has been cleared of chlorine oxide gas. However, I am still wearing a biohazard suit. I did not want you to be alarmed. May I come in?”

“Suit yourself, I'm not going anywhere.”

“Good afternoon Henry. We want to do a scan of you to try and understand what happened. Will you cooperate?”

“And if I don't? What if I rip your suit with my mind?” Silence. “I understand sir. Lead on.”

Briefing room.

“General, the test results are in. Henry is not 'normal' by any stretch. The resolution of the scanner is not enough to be conclusive, but the psiotic pattern is incredibly complex. Some kind of infinite fractal pattern, disappearing below our resolution.”

“Is he hostile?”

“No sir, but he does understand the consequences. We don't know if he would jump without constraints.”

“Then he is rational? No hallucinations?”

“Rational and no hallucinations that we are aware of sir.”

“And Captain Fontane?”

“He is in isolation at his own request. He asked to be there for the entire two months.”

“Good man Fontane, good man.”

“We have a problem. Judging from reports that have come in, we can expect that very soon the world population of roughly ten billion will fall

below ten million. How far it falls below that will depend on how fast we can get an infrastructure set up again and essential services back on line. The population is likely scattered. Reports indicate the concentrated areas, cities, were the hardest hit, not by the plague itself, but by the crazies created by the plague. We don't know how many outside the Armstrong units are of people never exposed. Ninety six of the 112 Armstrong facilities have reported in. Not all are out of the first stage of quarantine yet of course, we were nearest the epicenter, but the others had the advantage of more advanced warning. America having gone largely agrarian and military sets us up nicely to survive. We have food that even a scattered population can make use of and we have the infrastructure and discipline of the finest military in the world to bring this about."

"What I really want to know is how many of these TK things are out there? Are they all the same? Is there a way of identifying one before it is too late? An n of one is not enough to go on. What are we going to do with Henry Roberts? I propose that we recruit Roberts into a new branch of the special ops. He is not strong enough with the new abilities to do construction or much of anything that we can't do by some other means. But, with proper training, he could get into almost any facility and take out any force with his 'bare hands' so to speak. That is, IF he really is not infectious any longer. I propose that we send in three 'volunteers' to assess and train. What are your thoughts?"

"What if Roberts does not go along?"

"We still have a subject to study, but he will be kept in ultrahigh containment. We can't afford to eliminate him or let him go. We need to know more, but it would not be pleasant for him if that is the path he chooses."

"Captain Fontane has already voiced a willingness to help in anyway he can, and he is trained in special ops."

"OK, what is Fontane's story? I am about as gung ho as then get, but this is going beyond reason."

"Captain Fontane is/was part of the permanent force stationed here. He had just come back from leave when the plague hit and he was locked down before he could get to his family. Reports from Hazmat teams that went into the Bronx where his family lived were not pretty. His wife and new born apparently died of the fever, understandable, considering the condition they were in, but his five year old daughter survived the fever. Cause of death was septicemia from mutilation of the genitals. It took her days to die sir. Best guess is that the crazies got her with no one left to defend her. He took it hard."

“Is he a threat to Roberts?”

“No sir, his hate is purely for the crazies and he will use any means to prevent them from getting any more children.”

“But there are no more crazies out there correct?”

“Presumably they died or killed each other, but we really don’t know. Captain Fontane has been a VERY careful observer of the people in Yellow sector. He knows more about the crazies than anyone. We don’t know if HelperV is done either. It could remain dormant for a while and then resurface.”

“I still want two more.”

“I recommend Specialist Gamer and Sergeant Burns. Gamer is the best ops we have, willing to do what ever is needed to get the job done, no questions asked. She does not do so well in confinement, been in three fights already and confined to quarters. Getting her out would be good for all concerned. Burns worked in a forensic lab before enlisting, extensive training on causes of death and with his ops training, on how to cause death.”

“Good, make sure they volunteer.”

“Henry, you have been given a rank of Telekinetic Specialist One, or TK for short. You will be referred to officially as TK Roberts. We are confined to floor two of yellow sector. Floors one and three are still filled with gas. The three of us are your trainers, but we will use your special ability to as large extent as possible. Any ideas that you have should be voiced. This is new to all of us. We have three weeks till we pass isolation. Three weeks to become a team. There are no individuals, only the team. At that time we will exit Armstrong. We are the front line in determining conditions outside.”

“What happened to my wife and kid, ah Sir?”

“You are the sole survivor of yellow sector TK Roberts.”

Telekinetics seem to follow an equation of simple momentum, $p = mv$. There is also a time component; a great force for a short period of time or a small force for an extended time. Taken together this means that a TK can accelerate a small pebble at several times the speed of sound, repeatedly, or move a truck for a microsecond once in an hour. The TK need not see an object to move it, but it helps with the concentration. With a stash of pebbles at hand, a TK can replace an entire battalion firing M20s, WITH the ability to change the trajectories IN flight. A TK can smash through most walls, but then is out of it for a while. Part of a team, a TK allows for a very mobile, very powerful force, able to throw up a shield, cross a ravine without a bridge, and take out a force twenty

times it's size from all directions. In short the perfect compliment to our special ops. We need more of them and ALL attempts to recruit should be tried. All online Armstrongs are to be informed.

We still don't know or understand where the TK force is coming from, but seems to have something to do with the psiotic pattern set up in the mind. Attempts to force this pattern in volunteers have resulted in temporary TK ability of a very limited nature. Not practical, as it takes three hours to impose the pattern and it wears off in 10 minutes. Limited, means grains of salt pushed across a table. HelperV apparently made permanent changes in the brains of the TK survivors. It is possible we could achieve more with the new experimental scanner at MIT. We might even be able to use a positronic unit to allow a portable TK device that could be used by anyone; control circuits are the real mystery at the moment. And this would never be as flexible as a 'home grown' unit and may not be cost effective over current hardware. We don't believe that the TK ability is hereditary as HelperV only attacks neurons, not germ cells. It might be possible, with the proper lab, to engineer a HelperV with a larger yield and less fatalities, but HelperV is the only known way of producing a TK at the moment.

"General, your daughter, Major Parker, has checked in Sir. Armstrong Samuel Clemens 30 clicks due east of New Shanghai has passed isolation. Reviewing their tapes, they had one, but she, the TK, was killed by crazies before she could be isolated. We have apprised them of what to look for and to attempt recruitment. From the information we have received from other facilities it looks like all TKs are at least thirty years old, but can be of either gender and of any ethnic group Sir."

"Thank you Lieutenant, that will be all."

That means out of 112 facilities, most in the USA, but 13 scattered throughout the world, 96 have reported in with a total of 5 TKs of which all are "cooperating". They would not have entered a military isolation facility if they did not at least have some bent in that direction. One of the TKs in Armstrong Singapore, the daughter of a Chi master, apparently has the ability to see and scan for objects or people with or without light, even through walls and TK abilities that are much stronger, able to lift several people at once. Hope there is not too many out there or they are willing to join up before there is a confrontation. At least it appears this is the rare exception.

Hatching Time

Starting at Armstrong New Haven working outward, each of the Armstrong facilities slowly started to send out recon parties to scout the areas around them. There was about a 40 day lag from New Haven to the furthest facility in the US protectorate of Iraq. Those sympathetic to the order that the military offered agreed to be under their protection. This offered some protection from bandits and rogues, but required “tribute” of food and materials scrounged in return. Approximately 900-1000 people per Armstrong “Nest” of which roughly one third were actual combat trained. This did not leave much to work with in terms of a police force or in establishing order. Therefore, expansion was slow. Nests tended to be near urban centers or bases due to the necessity of being able to fill them quickly with the key personnel needed. Urban people were much more dependent by nature and training, needing a strong infrastructure. Those not sympathetic, mostly the rural groups used to being on their own, moved out of range. Each nest controlled an area of about five kilometers in radius, somewhat dependent on terrain. Its influence could be felt out to 15 kilometers in terms of trade and drawing in those interested in joining up. Each of the nests was in contact with each other by high-speed satellite and redundant ground connections not connected to the civilian net. [Security]. Therefore knowledge of hatching nests was largely limited to word of mouth, as most areas were still off the civilian net. And, being only human, not all nests reacted the same to the news that there really was not much left. Those that did not report in were ones that either were all dead or decided to dissolve upon hatching with everyone going their own way. Most wanted to see if friends and relatives made it. In one case this decision was forced on the commander by way of mutiny. There was no state or national borders any longer. It was a time of change and a chance at renewal.

Plumcreek

When we were the only two humans left alive with no possibility of maintaining the species, I did not have to worry about the future. I did not have to worry about whether or not we were doing the right thing, as our passing would have very little impact on the future of the planet. Now I know that there are other survivors, possibly millions worldwide. And I have been given these “gifts.” What does that mean? Are we to go back to our old selfish planet destroying ways, armed now with even greater destructive abilities and new power elite? I am afraid I have not been much fun to be around the last couple of days, keeping mostly to myself, sleeping a lot, getting settled in, and thinking. The people were nice, all saps like the two of us, so were already used to cooperative behavior. I did my part as well.

It was nice to be free from all the flies. With all the dead bodies and the weather warming up, flies happened. We buried all our friends and colleagues at the station out of respect and necessity, and here I did use my abilities to full advantage, not wanting to touch week old decaying corpses. As a biologist meat is meat, even if it was someone you knew a week earlier, but any dead life form can get pretty rank in a weeks times and it took us longer than that to get everything cleaned up. But there were the thousands outside the station. With decay also came the rats. They were just beginning to become visible as we left. At least here in Plumcreek, it was already done for us. They had enough people, who gathered here from elsewhere, including two others from New Shanghai, and Plumcreek was a small enough community to begin with, that it did not take too long to clean up. Probably why they chose this semi-isolated location. Plumcreek, as you might guess from the name, still had orchards and farmland. Good place to set up a new community. The talk was as if we would be setting up the same thing that was here before, albeit, it would take generations, but the same style housing, the same energy sources, etc. Is this truly a second chance or more of the same? Granted saps lived closer to the land and would not be paying a tithe to the rich, at least not at first. Would that change also? Where were the bullies? Sooner or later the parasites always made an appearance.

“Yingui, James and I would like to talk to you about your special abilities. We don’t need to know about your past. There is sort of an unwritten code that we don’t ask people where they were before the fall, but we don’t know much about you except that you are a stronger TK

than us. Is it ok to ask questions?"

"I figured that you would want to know at some point. I will not discuss this without your word that until I decide to reveal myself, you do not do so for me. I do not know the people in your community nor the ones likely to join. We do not know what we will encounter in the future. Holding some cards back may save us later. And what you don't know, you can't reveal. So, do you agree to my terms?"

"You must have been hurt in the past. I guess at 68 that is almost a given. You have certainly seen this country change a lot in the almost 70 years. We were just kids and so pretty much went with the flow. We share your caution however. None of us knows what else is out there. There are bound to be pockets of people very different from us and some of them are likely to not be nice. However, having a small group of people who know could be a benefit. At least we would know what was possible when a situation arose. James, what do you think? I know we have discussed this among the two of us, but Yingui should hear your thoughts also."

"I grew up in a highly competitive environment, which I hated, whereas Susan works more from consensus which I am seeing a lot of strength in. Whatever we decide, this is too important to leave to majority rule. I agree with both of you. The knowledge should be kept out of the wrong hands and there is benefit to having a select group that knows what is possible. At the risk of producing a me/them split, I recommend that the select group be those with TK abilities, BUT like our former form of government, there should be some sort of balance coming from the rest of the community. I don't know if this means that there is one or more 'norms' elected from the population as a whole or what. My family has had to deal with racism for countless generations. We should not give another excuse to hate."

"OK, Susan, James, I also would prefer to work from consensus. I am no saint and don't know all the answers. There is strength and can be intelligence in numbers. Could you live with just the three of us knowing for now, with your word that others are not included without consensus from the three of us? You should know that Barb knows some of what I can do, but not all, as she was away on gathering most of the time I was practicing, but I do trust her with my life. She could have ended it any number of times had she wanted to. I will explain if you agree, but she might make a good candidate for inclusion."

"Yes I agree. If you trust her that much I'll go along."

"Ah-huh, no problem. Her net abilities might be useful anyway, if we

can ever get her off of it that is.” She smiles.

“Let’s go for a walk. Up that trail to the overlook will be fine.” We walk a couple of hundred meters to the top of a small hill overlooking the community. I know that there are no other humans around for at least that distance and I know how to defeat the shielding of those at a lower level than myself now that I see how it works. I have been practicing with Susan and James.

“This is what I know, or what I think I know. I do not know why it works, just some of the characteristics. I am trained as a scientist, so I tend to think that way. Please interrupt if something is not clear. It is VERY important that you understand this. OK, there are quantum levels, er, discrete levels to abilities and they follow certain rules. An average person can take a kg weight and maybe throw it at say 1 meter per second. Of course, it will soon fall to the ground, but it leaves their hand at that speed. Now a level one TK can take that same weight and move it at 10 meters per second OR a ten kg weight one meter per second. Simple momentum equation, $p=mv$ or power equals the weight of the object [more precisely the mass, but weight will do for this discussion] times the distance per second. Level one = 10kg m/s. Try to do more than that and you wear out fast, real fast.”

“Lost me for most of that, not good at math, but I get the general idea.”

“So, how come you are much more powerful than that?”

“Hold on, I'm getting to it. Each time you jump up to the next level, you gain approximately ten times the ability. So at level one you have 10 kg m/second, at level 2 you have 100 kg m/s. This is the easiest way to determine a person's level. Of course they can do LESS than that, so all you really know is that they are at LEAST at this level. All right so far?”

“Ok, that makes us both about level 2 and you are at least, let me see, at least a level 4, right”

“Based on what you have told me you have seen so far, that is correct.”

“Now, there is more to levels than throwing stuff around. You also gain new abilities at each level and these abilities also progress each time you jump to a new level. Level 2 adds the ability to 'scan' and 'shield'. A level 2 can scan 100 meters for other TKs or any object they can identify, usually people. A level 3 can scan 1000 meters and a level 4 10km.”

“So how come you did not know we were behind the bushes when you were playing with the 'puppies’?”

“Because I did not know about that type of shielding. Once I

understood, then I could gain the ability. Just like you probably didn't know about your abilities till you happened on them, right?"

"Yeh, I was mad at Susan and accidentally TKed a stick at her, which she stopped in mid air. Freaked us both good."

"A level 3 adds the ability to do TK at the atomic level and level 4 at the subatomic level."

"So? What does THAT mean exactly?"

"At the atomic level you can purify or rearrange material, like remove gold from an alloy or salt from water or the reverse. At the subatomic level you can rearrange matter itself to be different, like lead to gold. The mass will be the same, but the material will be fundamentally different. Now this can also be extremely dangerous. Take something as dense as lead and convert it immediately to tritium and you have a hydrogen bomb and you go up with it believe me. No TK is fast enough to shield or outrun a hydrogen bomb, even a small one."

"Shit, never thought of a down side to this, was always just fun, excepting the rogues of course."

"Now there are two other things you need to know. Fewer and fewer people will be found at each level up. That was why I was surprised when I learned about you. Two level 2s at one place is very low odds. You two have really beaten the odds. I figure about one in 100 are TKs among surviving norms, and 1/10 at each level up from there, but this pure theory, no evidence to back it up. Now, a TK has a better chance of survival against the crazies, as Barb and I are proof of, so the ratio is more like one in 20 at level one. The second thing is that when you move from one level to the next, you black out for a time, longer as you move up."

"Wait a minute, neither one of use blacked out, but we are level 2."

"Ah, but you did, the first levels are short blackouts and probably happened when you were in the fever, least that is what happened with me. When you are blacked out, you are totally at the mercy of the situation. You black out in the middle of a fight, at the edge of a cliff, well you get my drift."

"So how come we haven't jumped to the next level."

"Don't know, but I suspect that the fact you have not by now suggests that you won't. It might be age related also. Have you noticed that all of us are over 30 in age?"

"Yeh, the ones we have talked to on the net have noticed this also. So, that means there will be stratification even among ourselves."

"I am afraid so, that is why we have to set this thing up right. Checks

and balances.”

“Yeh, Imagine a Bush or Rice at TK5 or greater. Who could take them out?”

“Speaking of which, what about the rogues? How come a rogue did not accidentally blow us all up?

“Same reason you can’t. Not a high enough level. But remember, even at your level, you can scramble someone's heart or brain, and they are toast.” Not so nice either. “My best guess about the rogues is that they are an aberration. You know the crazies of course. There is a possibility that some of them, just like some of us, also gained these gifts, up to level 2 during the fever. Just remember what happened to the rest of the crazies. Chances are the rogues will, if they have not already done so, will burn themselves out. No guarantee, but a reasonable guess. And since it takes time and apparently age to move up levels, there are very low odds that any made it to higher levels.”

“That's a relief at least.”

“So are you done moving up?”

“Don't know till they stop for a long period of time and that hasn't happened yet. I also have some idea that this is not an accident, that there may be a conscious mind behind this, at least in my case. Have either of you received 'instructions' about what to do?”

“You mean like someone tells you what to do? Or like voices?” I make no response. “Ok, can see why you did not want to exactly talk about this. How much does Barb know?”

“She knows about the blackouts, even left me chocolate after the last one. Sugar helps get your strength back after wards and I am a chocoholic.” Sigh.... “But she does not know about the extent of my abilities. I did not want to frighten her, nor encourage her to get too cocky, thinking I could save her no matter what happened. She is real good with a gun, real good, but I could lay down fire like an entire battalion in a microsecond, if you get my meaning. However, being Buddhist, I will not take a life easily. Even if threatened myself, or if someone I love is threatened. I will always look for a non-lethal way out of a situation first, and that takes time and thought. I will not go off like a bomb under any circumstances, understand? You should also know that I did kill someone accidentally when I first came out of the fever and was still weak physically and mentally. A crazy came at Barb and me with a knife. I had evidence that he had already killed at least one other and attempted to kill others who just happened to be dead before he got to them. I PUSHED him when he came for us, just intending to keep him

away, but he landed on his back, breaking his spine. Not my intention, but that was the consequence.”

“That really sounds more like an accident. I am not sure I could kill anyone easily either. We had to do the rogue, as you know, but I was sick for hours after wards and still have nightmares about it. Might even be a good idea to make it part of our code of ethics if we are going to have one.”

“Agreed!”

“Let's get back before they think something is wrong. Have you had any trouble with rats or mice yet?”

“We will, there is a lot of food out there, probably by summer or fall at the latest. Mice can have a litter of eight and be sexually mature in two months. Laws of exponential growth work real fast with them.”

“We started to see rats when we left New Shanghai, there is no doubt that they were living on corpses and stored goods. Estimates are that under 'normal' conditions there are approximately the same number as people. So, in New Shanghai with a population of fifty thousand before everyone left or died from the plague we can estimate fifty thousand rats. Now with a litter every two months....”

“So, how come there were not fifty survivors?”

“As I said a lot of people bugged out before it hit. But, still I would have expected at least 10-20 people. The funny thing about statistics is that they only work over the long run. Local variations can still be pretty extreme. You said that Michael and Mei came from New Shanghai also, that makes four of us. Who knows? Maybe they went in another direction. Just a guess though.”

“Ah, ok, whatever that means. We work with what we have.”

Cats had gotten scarce, who could afford to feed them? They weren't good for guard duty, and hungry people probably already hunted anything edible down that a cat might want or even the cat itself. Amazing what someone will eat when hungry enough. I had seen one or two cats around Plumcreek, farmers still kept them to help with vermin, a low-tech mousetrap, but they kept to the shadows. The new tenants weren't sure what to do with them, so when they found out I liked cats they got to thinking. The first to respond were the two kids, Kathy, and the older one, Lisa.

“There goes the young gray one now, bet the old man would like him, he always wears gray. He's so boring.”

“But I like the orange one.”

“You are such a baby.”

“I am not!”

“Look do you want to help or not, you can have the orange one and we take the gray one to him.”

“OK, How are we going to catch ‘em?”

“Uncle James said cats eat meat or drink milk. So, we need to get something like that and put it out where we can watch.”

“I like apples, do you think they would eat apples?”

“No dummy, meat, like dead birds, rats, or fish.”

“Eeeuuu! How about mice? They are sort of like small rats. Lots of mice under the steps next door. They was complaining about em getting into the flour. Left doo-doo’s all over.”

“How do we catch a mouse? Need gloves, they can bite back. Let’s run to the shed and get gloves. Race you!”

The rest of the afternoon the girls try catching mice and completely forget about the cats. Squealing in delight every time one runs past them or over them, eeeuuu! The mice must be thinking that their current home was not the best choice. Covered in flour, dirt and who knows what else they finally collapse on the steps to take a nap. Meanwhile the young cats decide that finding a quieter place to pass the heat of the day would be on the bed of one of the rooms left open, Yingui’s bed.

I wake up from my afternoon nap, prerogative of being old, to find two cats curled up next to my stomach. I gently pet them and carefully separate myself and let them be. My assigned room is three times the size of my closet but still small by pre fall standards. Facilities are just around the corner. More space out on the farm I guess. Looks like this room was once bigger and they split it at least into two and added an outside door. Still, it was more than enough for the cats, a small pack and me.

“Mr. Silver have you seen the cats?” Yingui being too hard for them to say.

“Have you looked in the barn? Lots of places to hide there.” They run off, lost in the next period of fantasy and play. Over the next few weeks, the two cats, whom I have called Marmalade and Ghost, decided to adopt me as their monkey of choice. My room was sanctuary from Kathy and Lisa’s constant attempts to tame them, as they were not allowed to enter with out permission. Julian was turning out to be good with wood working, found the necessary tools in the barn, and made the customary cat door of the adopted. The “gift” I had received from the last blackout was the ability to see and manipulate matter at the sub atomic level. This was useful for medical purposes. With the gifts and my training as a biologist I could do some but not all procedures. I was

dependent to a large extent on people telling me what was wrong so I knew where to look and having a “healthy” person around to compare to. I soon spent more time as the dentist, converting decay to healthy calcium phosphate, and doc, than I did “lifting” concrete and such, which was just fine. “Norms” are not really comfortable watching a TK do the big stuff, scary. Being older, people were more comfortable with me. Being discrete meant I could be trusted with personal problems and questions. Already have two pregnancies to watch, never mind who the father's are, I'm not telling. People did strange things just before and after the HelperV plague. I was not going to judge them. Weird though, as I really hated pre-meds in college and took classes in invertebrate zoology and non-seed plants. Not a pre-med in sight in those classes. Now I was Doc Silver to some.

Spring was in full bloom, the orchards and hills awash in color. The air was not too hot yet, though would get warmer in the summer according to Michael, the only one to have lived in Plumcreek for part of his life before his family moved to New Shanghai for work. I was taking a break on the porch, playing the ocarina and watching April and Mei punch down dough for the evening bread, talking about their growing bellies.

Hold Still.

“Get Barb Now!” And I collapse. The ceramic ocarina falls to the ground and breaks.

I wake in my own bed with Ghost and Marmalade waking up next to me. Barb bursts into the room and the cats disappear. No I mean disappear, right in front of me. They did not move, they are gone! Well, TK is not “normal” either, so I motion Barb to be quiet and wait a minute and then I say “Marmalade, Ghost it is ok, everything is all right.” A moment later they are back looking at me and then Barb, finally settling down to clean themselves. Old cat motto, when in doubt lick.

“I wonder where they got that from. The virus is not supposed to have affected other species.”

Barb says “dey wid you ho time.” She holds up one finger, “wun day, dis time” and she leaves the room.

I look at the two again and they look back at me as if saying, “So what's your problem?” I concentrate and can see their psi patterns superimposed on what I sense to be their minds. I turn the sense on my

own mind. Same pattern, only smaller in their case of course. Somehow, being with me during the blackout affected them as well. That would further suggest an outside influence. I also have an idea of what my new gift is, not having been able to see the psiotic patterns directly before, kind of pretty actually. So, why did they “pop”, teleport or dimension shift instead. Maybe more useful to a species that depends on stealth. What need would they have to TK or see psiotic patterns, make the mice come to them, no honor at all. Welcome to level 5, another factor of 10. Just for yuks I reach out with a gentle scan, approximately a 100 km range now. I start with Plumcreek and gradually work outwards. People working in the orchards and fields. Scattered people in small enclaves. They may have even missed HelperV. I can see the lab. No new residents, unless you count rats. I switch to the other side of Plumcreek, “Freep!”

Armstrong Samuel Clemens

“Major, report!”

“Sir, we have acquired a TK from south San Jose, the burned out sector. The modified psiotic sensor worked like a charm. She was alone but managed to hold us down for two hours before becoming exhausted. We have her under pharms to keep her unconscious in Green A12.”

“Have you done scans?”

“Yes sir, as soon as we arrived. They compare to the New Haven scans. We have confirmation of TK status.”

“Let's hope that we can convince her that we are the good guys and she will join us. Must have been hell out there the last two months.”

“Yes sir, hell.”

Green A12

Were am I? I was fighting some grunts in uniforms, passed out. Must be at their place, but where? Nothing loose to use as a weapon, hospital gown. Hope they got a good look. Rations on the table. No way I'm eating that crap. What's outside this room? Gas, bad gas. All around. Wall wort watchin too. Time to play dead.

“She's got to wake up some time, just to piss if nothing else.”

“They had to pump her plenty just to keep her under. May be another couple of hours.”

Gas valve in suspended ceiling outside room. Must be an alarm circuit also. Ah, there it is. Wall worts in corridor also. Lots more to map. I've got time, I hope.

“OK, wake her up. This game needs to be gotten over with.” Loud peizo scream goes off in room. “Time to wake up Ms.”

“Kill the noise or you get nut'in” Quiet.

“Glad you could join us. Let's start. What is your name?”

“What's it to you? Why are you keeping me? I've done nothing to you.”

“We know you are a TK. There is chlorine oxide gas in all directions, you can't get out. Are you hungry? What is your name?”

“What's a tee-kay?”

“Telekinetic, you can move things with your mind.”

That's not all jerk. Now where are you? Come on out little mousy. Ah, there you are, hee-hee! Always been their weak point.

“Aaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Now's my chance, valve off, clean air on, unlock door, kill surveillance, repeat as necessary.

“Sir, she just walked out. We were distracted by Captain Meyer's er, accident and she somehow opened the doors, defeated the gas, and walked out.”

“More to these TKs than we thought, especially when they don't cooperate. New Haven and Singapore say they are worth it, but I am not convinced. Unless they walk in and surrender, I say take them out. Conventional weapons are fine with me.”

“Yes, sir!”

Plumcreek

“Yingui what is it? You look horrible!”

“I just woke up. There is a group of military only 15 km from here. Approximately a thousand people in a deep underground shelter with some on the surface.”

“Yeh, we know. They have not bothered us though. Just got another netcast about them from San Jose in fact. The nesters, as we call them, took one of the San Jose TKs when she was out on patrol in the burned out sector, but she escaped the nest. They have some kind of sensor worked out for TKs, beeped like crazy every time it was brought near her. They got her by wearing her down over two hours. Took twenty of them to bring her in. She escaped by crushing a leaders balls and circumventing the poison gas system set up around her holding cell. They never said who they were or why they wanted her. After this, they will not be so ‘nice’ I am afraid.”

“No I don’t think so either. People fear what they don’t understand. We had better hold a meeting to decide how to deal with them. They are too close. They will be here very soon I am sure. We need to either move on or confront. I am not sure that I could handle them without loses. What if there are more of them and they are linked? Armies usually have very good redundant communication systems in place. I personally prefer to run, gathering more information before we decide to confront. Last thing we need is another war. Too few people now and after all we have been through the last 10,000 years, do we really want to start that cycle again? Who knows, we may even need the talents that the nesters have and to eliminate them would be to lose those abilities forever.”

“Aren’t you over-reacting a bit? I said they have not bothered us.”

“And what exactly were they doing hunting TKs then?”

“Curiosity?”

“Curiosity is when you ask politely.”

I walk to the kitchen. Have to get something to eat. Blackouts always drain me. A bit wobbly, I go up the steps and see the remnants of my ocarina on the table. I concentrate, pulling the pieces together, bonding them again and then filling in the missing parts. Good as new. Probably should make one with the talents out of something less breakable. Could even make one out of diamond, but then it would show all the ‘spit’ inside as it collected from condensation of my breath. Black diamond would work. Nah, something so fragile that can produce beautiful music

is part of their charm. Later, I smell cinnamon rolls. Home cooking sure beats GM and glop!

Town hall meeting

“Order, order! Let’s settle down, everyone will get a chance to speak.”

“Susan, will you give the TKs report.”

“Thank you. As we know there is a military 'nest' near us. What we did not know was that there are approximately 1000 soldiers and civilians, presumably the family of the soldiers. They rode out the plague by hiding out deep underground in a facility built in six sections. In this way, we suspect that if any of the six were infected, the section could be isolated till death took care of the inhabitants, without infecting the rest of the sections. Our guess is that there is more of these facilities scattered at least through out the country, if not the world. There is certainly nothing special about this area that would suggest that we were different from the rest of the country. This nest is approximately 15 km due east from our current location. The nest has ‘hatched’ and is sending personnel out from their location to scout the area and enlist locals, presumably in rebuilding. They seem to especially want TKs as they captured one using a force of 20 soldiers in South San Jose. The TK was able to escape and some of this report is based on her account. We assume that the original purpose of these nests was to start our country over again with an elite remnant. They probably have tech, seed stocks, lots of useful stuff we could use. They may have not expected any survivors outside of the nests. They most certainly were NOT expecting TKs. From their reaction to the San Jose TK, we can expect them to be especially hostile to TKs and likely to any communities harboring them. There is no indication that they know of our settlement yet, but we cannot assume that don't. The military has in the past had many technologies other than visual recon to scope out an area ahead of troops entering it. They may or may not know of the three of us, TKs that is.”

“These are fellow Americans, why should they be hostile?”

“Again, I don't think they expected there to be any survivors. What the military cannot control it tends to eliminate, unless under specific orders from a higher authority. There is no higher authority any more. We all heard the reports, the President was one of the first infected. Most of the rest our government followed. They were in highly public positions, shaking hands with lots of people. Good vectors. This means the nests are

working solely on military logic and local command structure. This was never intended when our military was envisioned and set up. The militaries in other countries turn into dictatorships when the civilian power is missing. The idea is that once order is restored, power would then be turned over to civilian authority again, but additional crisis tend to follow. Power is hard to relinquish once gotten. A lot of innocents can die in the mean time. Free thought is not part of the military way and they don't know how to handle it. I for one do not want to go back to having rich oppressors over my head.”

“Here, here!”

“Don't we need a military, especially now?”

“May I answer this one?”

“Yes, please.”

“Yes. It is likely that in other countries their military have succeeded in taking control. Once in place military frameworks tend to expand till they reach boundaries. They could easily expand over us. With India and Pakistan taken out by their own stupidity, China was the most populace country before HelperV and likely still is. With that high of a concentration of people it would not take long to set up an invasion force to rival none. We are sitting on prime farm land and space, well worth seeking and controlling, especially if they still have a hungry population to feed.” They owned us before and will want to again.

“So you are saying that it would not be a good idea to eliminate this nest.” Chuckles from group. None know of Yingui's abilities.

“We may actually need them at some point.”

“Remember they might have TKs also and our TKs do not have the military experience or training. A force with both TKs and military will have a very large advantage.”

“There is lots of land, why can't we just move out of range?”

“Tech still exists. Road, cars, planes all exist. Where would out of range be? And don't forget sat recon, etc. There is no place on earth that is out of range. Sooner or later they will come to investigate and control.”

The discussion went on for several more hours, but I did not stay. If we ran, we could not run for long. With my revulsion to killing, just ‘taking them out’ was out of the question. But I really dislike the military. Not the people, but the structure and way of thinking. The sort of ‘must control at all costs’ attitude. Kill em all and let God sort em out. There just has to be a better way than doing the same old stupid game all over again. I feel, especially with these extra gifts, that we have been given a second change. There has to be a better way, but we need time to work it

all out. Ghost comes up to me wanting to be scratched and petted. Sigh, you poor baby.

“Susan have you seen Yingui? I think we need to talk with him, this discussion is going no where.”

“He slipped out about an hour ago. I’ll help you look.”

They try obvious first, kitchen, rest rooms, his room and finally find him up the hill where they had their first discussion about abilities.

“Yingui, there you are. We have been looking all over.”

“Apparently not here, ha-ha. What’s up?”

“You. What are we going to do?”

“As I see it, TKs are a threat to any community that harbors them. Sooner or later, this nest or another will attack to try and eliminate us. The military hates what it can’t control and perceives as a threat. If we stay here, we bring danger to all. If we leave, then the nest will leave everyone alone or incorporate them. Either way, you will still be alive.”

“Aren’t you being a bit paranoid? They are Americans just like us. Anyway, you could take on this nest easily. You could take them out without a single loss of life I’m sure.”

“Maybe, but what about the next nest, or the next? The military will devise a weapon against us, the more they learn. If we remove the source of learning, we can gain strength and knowledge ourselves, till we are ready to deal with them on our terms. Oh, I thought of walking into their camp, showing them they had no chance against me or that I was no threat. But that knowledge would have spread to all the other nests even before we finished talking. I don’t think like the military. I don’t want to compete with them. There must be a way of cooperation. I just don’t know what it is yet. I need more time to sort this out. I am going to leave tonight. It would be best if you left too, but that is your choice.”

“I am going with you. It is hard being a freak with everyone trying to figure you out all the time. People want to go back to the way it was, families, homes, quiet. They really don’t want us here. Oh, it was ok at the beginning when we could help and we were a curiosity, but now we are going to be more of a hazard than a help.”

“I agree, but the main reason I want to leave is that I want to see more. I want to see what happened, what other communities have done. My ancestors were slaves and we have all been slaves to the rich the last ten years or more. I want to see what is over the next horizon. For the first time in my life I am truly free.”

“What about the TKs in other communities? If we send out a general alert, then non-TKs will know also, which means the nests eventually as

well. Though I think we have an obligation to warn of what is going on.”

“San Jose is already doing that, they told us didn’t they? We are only three among many. Send a message to San Jose telling them what we know of the nest and what response we are taking, that we are doing it to protect our communities. I would recommend NOT engaging the military in any way, they are likely to be heavily armed. Do not give them any more excuses to hunt us down. If we just slip quietly away, maybe they will forget us for a while as they try and sort things out and get things set up again. I propose we set out for the mountains, the Sierra Nevada. It is harsh enough up there, especially in winter, a place that most would not pick as a place to set up a new settlement and with our abilities we should be able to make do where they can’t. I feel an urge to get to higher ground. The cat in me I guess.”

An hour later we all meet at the front gate of Plumcreek [not a real gate, just a sign post painted like one]. Still dark, but that was not a problem for any of us. Each of us has a small pack, warm cloak and a bicycle. We have decided to bike most of the way, so as to see more and be less conspicuous. We can always TK if we need to. Right now it is more important to think about what where we are going and what we are going to do.

“What about Marmalade and Ghost?”

“Or Barbara?”

“They will come if they want to [I had a basket on the back of my bike for them to sleep in.] No one ever told a cat what to do and the girls love them so. I doubt their limited ability would get the community in any trouble, though it might get them shot. As to Barb, I don’t think you could tear her away from net access with a thousand TKs. I did leave a message for her though. I owe her that much.”

“Then which way?”

“I would like to pick up or talk to Rachael if we can or her group at least. Presumably she is in San Jose again. She is the only one of us who has been inside a nest and her info could be helpful. But, first I want to understand what this TK stuff is. Back at the lab we have a piece of equipment that I should be able to scan with my new abilities to get some answers. I feel that psiotic instruments like the microscope and our TK abilities are somehow related. The military has sensors and may soon have other abilities I think are based on this and I want to be prepared.”

“The lab it is.”

On the Road

We get back to the lab in a little over an hour. Using our scanning ability at night while riding a bicycle takes some getting used to. A few km out and I feel the weight of the cats on the back of the bike. This probably saved their lives, hope they stick with us.

We ride into the silent station and I steer us towards the building housing the microscope right away.

“It will be helpful if you two stand guard for both people and rats. There were a lot of them starting to show up when we left and I sensed a few on our ride here. Seeing the psiotic field is a real advantage in terms of sensing whether or not an object is alive.”

“What do you want us to do with them?” James does not look happy at this request.

“Just push them away. They will be more scared of you than you of them.”

“I doubt that very much.” He gets a chuckle from Susan and I for that comment.

OK, the scope. I still have my Leatherman; could not live without one. The blade is well worn from sharpening so many times. In a few minutes I have the side panel off and can see the sensors and dampeners. I remove one of each and pocket them.

“Let’s go. If the nesters reach Plumcreek, someone will tell them I came from here and they are likely to come looking. I don’t want to be anywhere near the place when they arrive. I will examine the devices later when we are not so pressed for time.”

“San Jose? That’s a long way by bike.”

“We should be able to get to Moss Landing before sun rise. Should be some farm house there we can crash in and hide during the day.”

We rode for a couple of hours to put some distance between Plumcreek, the lab and us. Doubt the Plumcreek people will even notice we are gone till morning. Just outside of Moss Landing James recognizes a house.

“Hey, slow up! We can stay here during the day. Julian and I have used it during far patrols. Five bedroom house with no bodies inside. At least not anymore.”

“Sounds good to me. This old man is not so used to being in the saddle for extended periods of time.” I guess I had better get used to it though. “How about something to eat first? Any stores of food?”

“Yep, and a wine cellar. High class. Good stuff is gone, you won't find any more chocolate either. That was good!”

“You pig James! That's all right, we'll just eat canned spinach.”

Everyone makes a face at that suggestion. I pass on the booze. Don't need it to sleep and coming from at least four generations of alcoholics, I certainly don't need to start now. As soon as I get into a bed that looks at least partially clean, I feel the familiar nudging of the two cats. Didn't think they would have any trouble finding us. Means they can scan as well as shift. Makes sense in a way, shifting being a sort of advanced scanning, moving your physical body to where your mind has already seen.

That was a nice bed, slept real well. Getting up was harder to do. The cats are gone, but I hear something being batted around and get up to investigate. Marm has a fancy ring of some kind with a huge ruby in it and he is batting it and then DSing to capture it again for another round. Guess they had to practice as well, but where did he find that ring? I scan the house. There is a hidden space between two rooms. I go into one room and then into the closet. Using TK, I punch a hole in the wall. Out tumbles jewelry of all kinds. Nothing seems to match, there is no theme, so this is probably not a collection. “Hey guys check this out.”

Susan and James come over and exclaim. “Did not know we were in a pear's house.”

“Don't think we are. When you first got here you hinted it still had bodies. I think we have a case of hoarders. They probably scrounged this stuff when the plague hit and hoped to ride it out here.”

“But what good is it? You can't eat it and some of the newer holographic stuff looks prettier if you are into that junk. Now if you find a neat sword or knife, let me know.” James simulates attacking an enemy with a sword. We let the cats have fun batting stuff around and leave the room.

“As long as we are a team, there are some things that you should understand and practice about TK.”

“But what can you show us that we can do, we are a thousand times weaker than you?”

“The basic principles still apply. I spent weeks working things out and practicing when I was at your level. I figure you could practice on our trip. We may need it before the end. Even the best awareness cannot cover everything at once. Yes, I can sense a fly at 100 km, but how would I know to look for that fly out of everything else going on? We will need to cover each other's back. Even I need to practice the newer gifts more. For instance, I should probably scan all of us for cancers and other problems.”

“Eeeuu! You’re not seeing me naked!” he’s grinning. We both know this generation is not shy about being seen without clothes, privacy was for the rich.

“James, I can scan through your clothing any time I want. We really should check out that mole on your...”

“Hey, we don’t talk about that! I want client patient confidentiality or whatever it was they used to do.”

“You’re such as wus James. You can scan me anytime you want. Never could afford a medscan and who knows when anyone is likely to again.”

“Back to practice. Were do we start?”

“I will make us some special practice globes. Very thin glass half filled with water. On the top surface is a spot of dried crystal violet dye. If the water comes in contact with the spot at any time the entire water will be colored purple. I will demonstrate.” I make a globe with TK and very carefully pick it up and gently shake it. Instantly the water swirls and goes deep purple. “Now we can move things two ways with TK. The first way is the most intuitive, grab an object with our minds and move it.” A second globe crushes on the spot and glass shards and water go everywhere. “Gently is the key. You are used to using rocks and pebbles as weapons, you need to learn the gentle touch also. This time I will move it around in a circle and stop it back where we started.” I move another one to demonstrate. The water is purple and swirling. Pretty. “This first method I call enveloping, as we are only holding it from the outside, like in our hands, the most intuitive. Now there is a second method, which I call inertial. Here we do not just grab it, but hold the entire structure, inside and outside, throughout, in our minds.” I make and move another globe in a circle and stop it in front of us. The water is still and clear. “If this were a living thing, ourselves included, it would not feel any acceleration or deceleration. Pay attention! This is critical, with living things. You have to be very gentle. They still have to breathe and carry on normal body functions. If you dampen ALL movements, you will kill them! But using this inertial method means that you will not flatten your subject with acceleration either. Now you try it. I have set up two arrays of 24 globes on the dirt behind you and a pole to go around. You will have to be back to back to do this. This is not a competition; you both have to learn this. Have fun!”

I settle back to watch. This is something you have to learn by doing. It took me awhile to get the knack; it will take them time also, even with my prompting. Marm and Ghost come up to watch also. Anything

moving is exciting to them. Susan gets one off the dirt, shacking as she tries to be gentle. The shacking causes the water to reach the dye. She swears and the globe bursts. “Try again. This is NOT easy!” Ghost decides to get a better angle on things and shifts to the corner of James’ array, sniffing and starting to reach out to bat at one of the globes. I envelope him and bring him back to me. With an envelope barrier around them, they can’t shift as easily. I can’t think of why other than it disorients them. Maybe they need full concentration to shift. “No Ghost. Here are some smaller globes for you and Marm to play with. See, pretty colors,” and unbreakable rubber too. They start batting one of the rubber balls I’ve just made around and go darting off, running and shifting randomly. The ball does not have a chance. Meanwhile, James’ turn. The first one crushes before it even gets two inches. Maybe this is too hard to start, but they have 23 to go and no indication that they think it is too much. Yet.

“Try just moving the globes without worrying about the mixing at first. Get used to lifting something gently and then move on to the inertial aspect. Once a globe is mixed it can still be used for envelope practice remember.” I leave them to it and start a perimeter scan. I want to know what’s out there before we run into it. We are still close enough for me to scratch the edge of the nest’s influence and I use that as a reference to orient myself. Paper maps are very rare and grossly outdated, so even if we find one it will be of little use. The rest of the maps are all on line of course and thus gone for all practical purposes. We can restore part of the lines used to communicate, but we can’t turn back on all the servers used to store the information. I will have to map our route in my mind at the same time scan for washed out roads and people. The two cats are back next to me giving themselves a bath and getting ready for a nap no doubt. Sounds good to me.

I awake a half hour later to more cursing. They are able to move the globes without breaking them at least. “Ok, time for a break. How about a snack?” The cats are immediately attentive, especially Ghost. We find some crackers and some canned artificial fish paste made from real GM soy to which fish genes have been added to give it an authentic ‘fish’ flavor. NOT the same as the real thing, but edible. Even Marm and Ghost sniff at and then lick some of it up.

“Where to from here?”

“I think we can make it to Gilroy, formally the Garlic Capital of the

World. Still smells of garlic if I remember right.”

“Won’t going over the pass be a pain? Doubt we will make it there by morning.”

“We will be using our TK ability to assist us. My levitating ourselves slightly we can make the load light enough to easily get up the hills. You don’t want to do too much though or you will have no traction and can get into trouble from the momentum.”

“Huh?”

“You will see. Pretty flat for awhile yet. Will give some time to practice.”

We load up the gear and head out. “I am sensing an odd individual here and there. My guess is that people are still spooked and would rather be alone than take the chance. It’s only been about three months now. Sooner or later they will have to come out for food or some other kind of help. No other TKs so far. It is interesting that there appear to be more TK2s than ones.”

“So, why it is taking so long to learn how to move the globes?”

“Not taking so long. Remember I was practicing for months. You two are picking it up much faster than I did, but then you do not have to work it all out either. I am hoping that you go beyond me and learn even more. Three minds are better than one.”

“What about the cats? What makes them tic?”

“Not sure. I suspect that each species will pick up on different traits more quickly than others depending on their temperament and starting psiotic pattern. Or it could have been just a total fluke. They are fun to have around though.”

“Wash out ahead, probably from the winter storms. Water level is low enough that it should not be a problem to wade across.”

“Why can’t we TK across?”

“Well, I can think of two reasons. 1) you can’t move a simple globe without mixing up the contents and 2) do we want to attract attention? I don’t sense anyone near, but I don’t trust those military types. On the other hand, we could turn this into another training exercise....”

“Ah, we can wade. Still burned out from riding this far. Using TK and cycling at the same time is not that easy.”

“Now who’s the wus?”

We get to the edge of the brook. “Go for it big guy.”

James concentrates and then jumps and flies across the brook, flailing his arms and legs and lands in the sand bank at the other side with a whump.

“So graceful!”

“Ok, hot shot, you try it.” Susan walks to the edge, stops, and then carefully and slowly lifts herself up and moves slowly across the water and lands quietly at the other side, then takes a huge breath.

“Yeh, breathing is important.”

“Now 'master', your turn.”

“I will do this for demonstration purposes, so this will be overkill for such a small distance. First I sit back to a comfortable position, holding my body up with TK. Next I form a protective barrier around myself in a spherical shape. You taught me something similar. You can certainly sense it, but you should also be able to see it as a slight shimmer turned up this high. That is important because norms can see this also. Gives you away, but so does being suspended in the air. Does warn others that you are shielded. Then I move to where I want to be. Note the maneuverability possible. I am using the inertial method which allows more freedom of movement.” I move to the middle of the water, about 1 meter above, then slowly turn upside down and then rotate 360 clockwise, re-invert and move to the far edge, slowly stand upright again, dissolving the bubble at the same time.

“Wow! I bow to you oh great master. Even your hair did not move, not that you have any, har-har!”

Susan points, “Look at Marm and Ghost.” The cats walk up to the water and sniff it, watching us questioningly. “Come on guys.” They suddenly appear on our side of the water as if nothing happened, walk up to my leg and rub against it then disappear again.

“Ok, that is cool. They win!” We all laugh.

We reached Gilroy just before sunrise. We rode past long abandoned fruit and garlic stands with peeling paint and faded signs. Twenty years ago these were a common way to attract tourists, but when transportation became so expensive, no tourists meant no business. The non-profit aquarium next to the station went the same way. The Chinese finally bought it to grow commercial quantities of BG in. The main part of town appealed more to the agri-business interests. Feed & seed stores, plumbing, lumber, etc.

“Boy, nothing looks like a place to spend the night, unless you like a cold hard floor.”

“The hardware store should have blankets, etc. we could make do. At least there should be no dead bodies in a store. Most people preferred to die at home.” The first store had its window busted in and a lot of contents looted. Found a smaller one on a side street that fit our needs.

We park the bikes outside.

“Looks like we might get some rain, maybe it would be better if we brought them in as well, or at least cover them.” We decide to bring them in. No point in advertising someone is here. We park them in the office strewn with papers. Sleeping would be no problem, and they had portable stoves that used hydride canisters for fuel. Found the canisters in the safe house out back. The lock was no problem for a TK. A heavily fortified concrete structure in case they blew. Safety regulations.

“Now the most important thing, FOOD!”

“merow!”

Not going to find much to eat in hardware stores of course, but the coffee shop was another possibility. We wandered over, looking in the other store windows on the way. The coffee shop was intact and locked. TKed it open. Really musty smell with a hint of rotten eggs. I headed for the back. In college I put in my time in greasy spoons to make money for tuition. Found flour, baking powder, powdered soy milk, oil. No sign of rodents, so we were lucky there. Now eggs were out, but they had a powdered substitute. Must be for when the local hens were not laying enough. I knew the eggs in the fridge were the cause of odor. BUT APPARENTLY JAMES DID NOT!

“Don't open that....” Too late. I grabbed my sacks and headed out the back. James was out front throwing up. You would think he would have learned from raiding houses and such.

“You OK?”

Wiping his mouth, “Yeh, did not realize there would be that many eggs or what used to be eggs in one place. Sure you could get a good whif from a home fridge if they had one, but this was something else again!”

“James, a restaurant goes through cases of eggs in a day. Think about all those pancakes, fried eggs sunny side up, etc. etc. etc. I have what we need to make pancakes, let's get back to Susan.”

Susan had found some needed pots, pans, and utensils. “What happened to you James?”

“He met with some bad eggs, ar-ar-ar.” We were all set. Never really thought of taking stuff with us, besides the weight, there always seemed to be enough supplies at each stop to make do, so why carry it? We have to start thinking long term at some point. Nothing is forever. A lot of this stuff would eventually decay, rust or otherwise be unusable soon.

Marm and Ghost show up as soon as we start cooking. I offer them a piece of pancake. Ghost sniffs it and then licks the oil off. With no one

else around, I could use a decent or indecent amount of oil to make the pancakes with. Marm watches Ghost and bats his piece away, looking up for something else. “Why don't you two check out the feed section in the back? Saw mouse droppings there earlier. Go, that way.” I point out the direction and they take off.

“They understood you!?”

“Of course. They understand a lot of English; just choose not to most of the time. Can't resist sashimi mouse though.”

“Ok, I DON'T want to know, eeeuuu!” but she is grinning when she says this.

“Come later you will be glad we kept these two 'intact'. Have to find them some lady friends to keep it going though. Rodents can play havoc with any food storage system.”

“You could make metal bins to store food in.”

“So, my whole life from now on is going to be making stuff for others? And what happens if something happens to me? No, we need to be more self-reliant than that. We should hit the sack, long day tomorrow. Should reach south San Jose. There are more people up that way too.”

“Hit the sack?”

“Old term, before your time, means go to bed.”

“Oh”

Everyone heads off to separate rooms. I wonder briefly about Susan and James. About the same age and both attractive. One or both could be gay of course, but I am sort of curious to know if there will be a next generation and if so will there be any TKs. Wonder how April and Mei are doing in their pregnancies. Both concerned are norms and both conceived after the fall, but we don't even know if that will work. Retro viruses hide well.

The cats return and sniff my face as I lay in bed. Nothing worse than mouse breath, but they are content, purring loudly and cleaning themselves. Hope that does not go on all day, lick, lick, lick. Maybe I should become a dog person.

South San Jose

We set out in the early afternoon. No electric lights means you pretty much run with the sun if you are a normal person. We can 'see' in the dark of course, but our bodies still respond better to real light. We are all jet lagged from riding at night and sleeping in the day. James is the worst. Too bad coffee is so hard to find. Chocolate, coffee, sugar, all of our third world goodies were in high demand and thus expensive. Few people left stocks behind. One big blowout at the end I guess. No more passes, so we start to see the city as evening approaches. We hit the edge of the burned out section first. All of us are scanning at full strength. I handle the far stuff and Susan and James the close, fore and aft. No surprises. It is truly a mess visually. Looks like an atomic bomb hit, collapsed buildings and twisted metal. Like working a maze to get through. Most roads are blocked with debris, intentional or natural we can't tell. Of course some of this is left over from the riots of ten years ago, but not all. Rats! They are cute as pets, but not when wild. One building has a huge monkey painted on it. APES has been here, but it looks old. Must have used a skyjet to get an image that big up in time before the authorities arrived. "TK up ahead two kilometers. Let's move to intercept. Must be on foot, going slow and through places we can't go on a bike."

"More likely hiding in the shadows."

A few minutes later. "Some people in the ruins too." We hear a bang, bang, bang, silence, bang, bang. Metal on metal.

"People are starting to move towards us."

"Lets get out in an open space. I want to see what's coming as well as scan it. There is a school yard up ahead on the right."

"I see it. Will get dark soon."

"Head for the center of the baseball field."

We reach the center of the field and align ourselves so we are each facing to one third of the open space.

"Shields up." I let Susan and James shield themselves and then I put one around us all, none too soon as a shot rings out and is absorbed by the TK5 shield. Doubt they will come out and show themselves now. Little bit harder to see through the shimmer, but we don't depend only on our visual sight.

"I can sense him now. The TK has reached the edge of the field. An older man and shielded also. Waving at us."

The man takes something out of his pocket and throws it up in the

air. Pebbles. They are suspended above his head. TK all right. Suddenly, one of the pebbles shoots off at near the speed of sound and hits near one of the hidden people near by, shattering a hole in the concrete. A second pebble goes. The people are moving off.

James' tongue is hanging out, "That's cool!"

"Takes lots of practice." I grin.

"Hi, my name is Daniel. Is one of you Yingui? I have a message." He is not dressed that well and not that well fed.

"I am Yingui." I scan him, no weapons or metal of any kind, of course with those pebbles he is obviously armed.

He TKs the rest of the pebbles back to his hand and puts them in his pocket. "We only have a few minutes, the norms will be back and here in numbers soon. They don't take to TKs any longer. We are hunted in this sector. I use the pebbles to keep them at a distance, not to kill. We don't need any more animosity than we already have. Follow me, I know a safe place." He heads off the field to the right.

"Could be a trap. Stay alert" We pick up the pace but remain a few meters behind him. He goes between two classrooms and into the office complex. We follow. As we enter the room, we see him lift up the carpet. He uses TK to unbolt a trap door and lifts it. "I can't hold this long, let's get inside. Your bikes too or they will be gone when we come out." Tight fit getting down, but opens up below. He bolts the trap door behind him and I sense the carpet moving back into place.

"The norms can't get into this place without TK ability. This is one of seven safe houses we have set up in this section. So far they haven't even figured out exactly where the room is. My name is Daniel. Ah, I already said that didn't I? Oh well. Welcome. We got your message over the net then by sneaker net. Only a few TKs left in the city as watchers. We hoped you would come this way on the way to the hills. Expect you are looking for Rachael also."

"I wanted to know more about the nest."

"Nests, plural now, we have found another one outside of Sacramento. Rachael went with a group trying to scan it from a safe distance and see if her aunt survived. So far we know that there is at least one TK on the inside. Don't know if he or she is there voluntarily or not."

"Daniel, this is Susan and James. Thanks for taking us in. There was no guarantee that any TKs we met would be friendly. You have to excuse us for our caution. Have you heard of TKs turning hostile?"

"You mean other than the rogues that burned themselves and most of this section of town to the ground? Not that it looked that good after the

riots. No, not yet at least. Being a TK makes you a freak instantly. Not likely to be taken in by norms to then turn against others of our 'own kind'. Rachael is my daughter by the way. We are the only case of two survivors in the same family, much less TKs that we know of. We are a lot alike, personality wise, though she would never admit it, so maybe that has something to do with it. We weren't in the same town when it hit. I lived in the retirement center about 3 km from here and Rachael lived in Gilroy, but came up here looking for me after the plague hit. I think I may be the oldest survivor of the plague too. I'm 65 years old, feels like 90 though."

"We were just there this morning. Still smells of garlic. You are now officially the second oldest I am afraid. I'm 68."

"Don't look 68."

"Not much sun in New Shanghai and rode a bike a lot and wore large hats. Otherwise I am sure I would be dead now from skin cancer. You must be rich to have been able to retire."

"Inheritance from my folks and pure luck with investments. Not a lot, but enough to get me into a retirement place in the bad part of town. Good bars on the windows at least. Took TK to get out. All the doors were locked! Wanted us to die I guess or didn't care."

"Or they thought it was not safe outside and wanted to protect you from the violence."

"Don't matter now. They are all dead and the place burned to the ground a week after I woke up. Rogues or crazies, don't know."

"So, how long till we can leave. I sense no human within half a kilometer now."

"Oh, sorry, we can leave at any time. They scatter as soon as we are out of reach. Waiting for the next sighting. This way."

"What? Not up the way we came?"

"Oh no, that was just the entrance. Past this 'door', another TK block, and we enter a tunnel complex that leads all the way to the center of town. Wide enough for bikes, er, if you have one."

"Come on, you can sit in the cat seat."

"Cat seat. For what? I don't see any cats."

"You will." The three of us laugh.

"Where did these tunnels come from?"

"Hey, doesn't any one care there are no lights down here?"

"You can't scan?"

"Well, yeh, but it is still, you know. It's not the same."

"Ah, ha. OK, the tunnels, a little of this or that. Remember we had

three months before your call to evacuate to play. It was too weird to practice above ground in front of the norms, so we retreated underneath. When we realized that we could connect various tunnels, sewer lines, water lines, etc. together with a minimum of 'changes' we did it. Partly because we could and partly because we thought we might need it at some point. We did. If you had not called for the evac, we would have had to do it ourselves before too long. Humans do not take to anything different. Oh at first they were amazed, as were we. Even enjoyed our help. But when they finally gave up hope that they would also change, they started to resent us. It ate at them, little things at first, a scowl or dirty look when we did something that they couldn't. We started to be more secretive. Doing our duties, but mostly out of site. Doing as many norm things as we could, trying to 'pass'. Trying to forget when we were among norms that we were different. However, they could not forget. Down here in the Bad Lands there is no longer any pretense. They hunt us down and try to kill us. Not easy to do and no successes yet, but they try very hard. We have never hurt a one of them in return, but they worry that we could. Not really sporting when you think about it. Rumors going around that we started the plague to take control."

"We heard the banging."

"Yeah a code they worked out for distance and direction. Only gets them within a couple of blocks. Metal bang carries in an empty quiet city quite a ways. We also found something unnerving. More when we get there."

"How did they know we were TKs?"

"Didn't till you shielded, just knew that you were strangers. If they had caught you, they would have put you to the test."

"Ok, what is the test?"

"Ever heard of the witch hunts in 17th century New England."

"Ah, no."

"I did. They would press a suspected witch down with weights, under water. If they drowned they were not a witch."

"Cute."

"Anything not understood is immediately suspected of being evil. So much for innovation and new ideas."

"Where are my manners. Daniel, are you hungry? We have some left over pancakes from breakfast."

"When exactly was breakfast? It is about four o'clock now."

"Sorry, we have been riding mostly at night, so breakfast was about noon. None of us are wearing bracelets, so don't know for sure."

“I’ll try one then. Don’t get much down here. Scrounging getting pretty hard. What the!” Ghost appears in Daniels lap. “Where did you come from?” He scratches Ghost’s ears and he starts to purr loudly, hoping to mooch some pancake no doubt.

“That is Ghost, he likes to lick the oil off of pancakes. Ok, he eats them too. Marmalade, Marm for short only likes to play with them, well at least most of the time. Speaking of the devil.” Marm appears on Susan’s bike rack, trying to maintain balance them pops to the ground, trying to look dignified.

“How did they get here? Are my eyes playing tricks? Did he just jump or what? I didn’t see them come in. We did not let them in the tunnel entrance. I would have seen or sensed them for sure.”

“They dimension shift. Can’t TK, but they can sneak up on anything REAL well.”

“Strange. Oh, forgot to tell you. I have notified the others. They will meet us up town.”

“How did you do that? Do you have telepathy?”

He laughs, “No, radio. Walkie Talkies, er I think the modern term is Handies. They do have those where you come from right? Hey, no one said we couldn’t use tech.” We crack up laughing again. So easy to forget.

Takes most of the rest of the day. I am curious about the “unnerving” and what that can mean. I am scanning and sense all kinds of tunnels and caverns, but never having scanned a city before I don’t know what is normal and what is weird. I mean, we usually do not see the underground. Sort of like the underclass, completely oblivious to the upperclass. During the ride we compare stories of what has happened to each of us the last three months. Daniel obviously knows that I am stronger than the others, but says nothing.

New Atherton

Underground TK center.

“Here we are. Just past that wall. I am afraid that at this point I have to ask you to do the honors. Though I have no doubt just based on your attitudes, your shielding, scanning in the dark, even James did not run into anything, and the er cats.”

“Merow?”

“Hey, I resent that statement.” He is grinning too.

“That's weird, they usually are so quiet. Look at Marm, he is sniffing up a storm. There he goes. And there goes Ghost.”

“Guess we need to see what's on the other side ourselves. Is this part of the 'surprise'? Let's see. Hmmm... eight interlocking bars with channels horizontal and vertical. A puzzle, but why? You did not make this, it is too old. It has been here for a while. Meant for pre-TK people, who obviously cannot be expected to scan the internal configuration. There are three people waiting on the immediate other side.” Many more further back, but I don't think we are supposed to be able to 'see' them. “So we have to be able to scan and move the bars in the correct order to make this work.”

“Piece of cake.” James moves one of the bars and a note sounds.

“Or we can do it a new way. Do we need this wall after we enter? I mean, we are all going to evacuate correct?”

“Yes that is correct, but I would not recommend trying to blast through. Even a TK can't take out a wall that thick. Made of class 10 concrete with titanium reinforcement. And you are right, we did not make this door, nor is it the only one.” My first temptation was to cut the Gordian knot so to speak and dissolve the door into gold BBs, but that would draw a lot of attention to myself and may not be wise just yet. However, it would be best to start from the beginning and I move the bar back that James moved. The same note is sounded again.

“Interesting. Do you see the pattern Susan, James?”

“Ah no, just looks like a complicated mess. Sure, it would be easy enough to move the bars that are free, but then they block further moves.”

“I don't get it either, but I have never been good at puzzles of the physical kind, just the net types. Why did they set up the door this way? This goes way beyond just a test of TK ability.”

“You have guessed correctly, this is more than a TK test.” I take out my ocarina and start playing a melody. Daniel grins. “They had to be able

to remember the tune themselves to use it, whoever 'they' were.”

“Note that each bar is a different length.” I play the tune over again.

“Oh, I see it, look James. And you do know how to do puzzles, just like all those adventure games you played. Each bar is a different length and therefore a different note, normal western scale of C. If we follow what Yingui is playing we will get the correct sequence!”

“Ah, you’re right. Clever, but why?”

“Maybe we should open the door first. I believe we will be told the answers on the other side. If you will James.” As each bar is moved it sounds a musical note, replaying the melody heard earlier. Kind of cute really. He would never have succeeded without TK or at least lots of patience. Presumably this would have not have been allowed pre-HelperV.

“Now your turn Susan.” Susan gently swings the door open with TK.

“I believe that we have each passed this test. By voicing our thoughts out loud, you can see that each of us would have eventually gotten it.”

Daniel nods and grins. “Come meet the others and welcome to New Atherton!”

“I know of Atherton, used to be near Palo Alto before the riots. Lots of rich people lived there. Weren't they burned out though?”

There are three people waiting inside. Two women, one in her thirties and one in her forties and a male also in his forties. “May I introduce Mei Ling, Freya and Jaime.” He whispers to Mei Ling, “Yingui was the first to solve the puzzle. Just as with us, it was his musical abilities that were the key.”

“Where did the cats go and who is this fluffy thing hiding under the table?”

“Let me introduce Princess Diana the seventh.”

“Ah, a GIRL cat. No wonder they were so excited. But where are they now?”

“They blinked out as soon as the door moved.”

“Marm, Ghost, it is ok, sorry to have frightened you!”

“Don't worry, they will show up. Especially since Princess is still here.”

“Yingui, look behind Princess.”

Two sets of cat eyes deeply under the couch peered out. “Wusses!” I remove my hand from the couch. This is not the couch of a saps. No way. I don't think we are in Kansas anymore Toto.

“If you will follow us, we can join the others.”

“There are others? Good blocking!” For TK2s anyway.

“There are twenty five of us ready to move out now that you have arrived. We have learned how to combine our abilities.”

“That could be useful, very useful. Let me see. I have watched James and Susan, their abilities usually cancel each other out, not surprisingly.” Tongues stick out at me from both of them. “But what if one enveloped an object and the next one enveloped the first.”

“He's good! real good, first the puzzle and now this. How do you combine scanning abilities?”

“Haven't a clue, but let me think about it.”

“You do that and let me know. We haven't worked it out either.”

“Gotcha!” grins James.

“Other women TKs! Was beginning to think I was the only one.”

“But you have been on the net, you knew there were others.”

“Yeh, but the net is not real, this is real! You never asked, but I was part of a women's collective. That is where I learned about consensus decision-making. Never felt so alone when I was the only one that survived and then to have survived different from everyone else.”

“You are not alone now. Never were.” The women's collectives that I had heard about allowed no males, at least not their bodies. A certain something was still needed for reproduction, though they were working on ways around that. I did not have the heart to tell her the fate of most species that went to asexual reproduction, extinction from lack of diversity. Not my business anyway.

“Look at the size of this chamber, must have held hundreds at one time.”

“We have TKs from a five county area, one hundred and thirty one to be exact, two from as far away as Marin County.”

“By my rough calculation of a starting population of two million, we should be seeing a little over 200.”

“Some of those were rogue of course. The rest either have not shown themselves and gone another way, chosen not to leave where they are, or were killed by crazies before we formed up. We have been lucky to not lose anyone since, but there have been close calls. Several have been wounded and a few broken bones from recent falls. We did the best we could to treat them, but they will be scared for life I am afraid.”

“Any among the people here?” I could fix broken bones.

“No, we sent the less able on ahead. We may have to move fast and we did not want to leave anyone behind. We scattered our movements, so as not to attract attention from the nest in Sacramento, but we can't be sure we haven't alerted them. They may be ready for us.”

“Have you heard from Rachael and her group?”

“Oh, you know about her. I supposed Daniel told you. The proud father.” She then whispers to me, “She is behind in reporting in. Don’t tell Daniel yet please.”

“I understand.”

“Any chance of a bath?”

“No running water and no power. Still doing cat baths ourselves.”

“Too bad, what I wouldn’t do for a five minute shower again.”

“You got five minutes! Suffer, suffer! We were lucky to get two!”

“I’m more of a hot soak person myself.” Everyone looks in shock at James. “Just kidding. We only got two minutes also.”

“Well at least we don’t have to lick ourselves clean.” Didn’t bother the cats any.

“I’m hungry and from the looks of Daniel there must not be much to eat around here.”

“Actually I am thin by choice and a fast metabolism. Didn’t want to give away part of the surprise. We have lots to finish before we move out. Can’t take it all with us. Would be a shame to leave it for the rats or the norms. A departing feast has been prepared. Come, come!”

We go through several more doors and corridors till we arrive in the servants section of a large kitchen complex.

“Wow, look at all the food.”

“Welcome, I am Hans. I would introduce the others, but there will be time for that later. Set your things down over there and come join us. Everyone, listen up. Susan, James and Yingui from San Benito and Monterey Counties.” Murmurs of Yingui are heard. What had Barb told them on the net? I sit at a place offered.

“Hi I am Grace and on your right is Kathy. Welcome.”

“Thanks. I have a question.”

“That can wait, dig in. No formality here.”

Ghost pops his head up from appearing on my lap. “Ok, if the cats join us?”

“Surprised they could tear themselves away from Princess.”

“She will not come into heat for another month, so I am sure they are just curious so far. Two males though, that could get ugly. She is the only cat we have and are so happy that Marm and Ghost have chosen to join us. I am a cat person myself and was worried about our ability to continue them in our new location. I am sure there will be no feral domesticated cats in the high country. But eat!” I dig into mashed soy potatoes with low fat GM gravy.

“Where did you get the thyme and sage? This is wonderful!”

“We have live plants and seeds. Taking some with us, so don’t worry. This is not your last good meal.” I pass on the home brew and just drink water. James is one table down talking to Daniel. No doubt he wants to learn how to do the pebble trick. Susan and Marm are across the hall, laughing and meeting with her two new friends. We are not alone!

When we are finished Daniel gets up and announces, “Time for the tour.” Now I would find out what is going on. My scanning around this area did not make sense. The rest are all attentive also.

A few TKs open a panel on the side of the room that normally would be opened by electric motors. A very large opening appears, but is dark beyond. I sense a very large cavern of some kind and a lingering odor of death.

“We did not believe it either till we saw it. Alex, if you will.” A man gets up and fires a boat emergency flare up into the open chamber.

“Holy Shit!”

Armstrong Sacramento

Oh shit! Not again! This is really getting to be a habit. Still in my own clothes at least, no 'nightgown' this time. Well, play dead and scan the room and surroundings. Sigh.... The door opens and a woman enters, early thirties and in a military uniform, a captain. Sits down.

"You can sit up Rachael, we know you are awake. They monitor heart and brain activity on all collected individuals."

"How did you know my name?"

"The clip says that is your name. Is that correct? Should I change it?"

"Ok, how does the clip know my name?"

"They have access to records, being this close to Sacramento. DNA matches a Rachael Watanabe from Gilroy, CA."

"Yeh, that's me. Care to give me your name, or is that a secret?"

"My official designation is TK Smith, but you can call me Pam if that makes you feel better."

That explains the weird insignia. "My feelings count? Didn't the last time I was here."

"Where do you think you are?"

"From the surroundings it would appear I am in a nest again."

"Nest?"

"What I call your military hidey holes buried in the ground to avoid the plague."

"Well, you are at an Armstrong facility, but above ground. I am afraid that all military housing looks pretty much the same. And you can quit pretending not to know more. We know you are TK, as am I. No poison gas surrounding us, but you know that. Your records say that you did not have a good experience at Armstrong Samuel Clemens, to be specific. Captain Meyer has recovered by the way."

"I didn't squeeze that hard, just enough to distract his attention."
Grin!

Even Pam comments smiling, "They do seem to need that once in awhile don't they? Being TK puts us on even footage at least. Brawn alone is no longer an advantage."

"So, how did you get me? I was well out of range of any people."
But definitely not where I was supposed to be. Hope they did not get the others.

"I can't say, because I don't understand tech real well, but the military loves sensors and bots of all kinds, as I am sure you were aware

from the net press.”

“I knew I missed something. Just assumed that everything tech went dead after the fall. Must have been a passive sniffer bot with trunks. So, now what?”

“I get you something to eat and then show you around.” I hold out my hands for the cuffs.

“What? Oh, no restraints, they wouldn’t hold you anyway, so what’s the point. Get up. Your jacket is over there, but you probably won’t need it. Nice spring day outside.”

“I’m not going anywhere till I understand what’s going on.”

“OK, this is the poop. We are a military unit. Security is still a primary concern, as we still don’t understand what’s out there yet. Our perimeter is patrolled by bots and meat. The locals know this and know the proper procedures to interact with us. If you had talked to a local, they would have told you and you could have walked in the front door, so to speak. We have not had to kill anyone since embarking and don’t intend to start now unless provoked. We are all Americans, we are supposed to be on the same side.”

“That was not the attitude of the last nest.”

“Each facility is under a different commander, with full authority to do what they feel needs to be done. Some spook more than others. We’re human. Our commander, Commander Hamilton, took a more cautious approach. She has a philosophy of wait and see if they are dangerous and don’t assume everything out there is from the get-go. We realized that the TKs did not pose an immediate threat, a gun can stop one just as effectively as a normal person and they could even be enlisted to help. She set up the current system of each new TK found, and normally this is with a conscious person, being paired up with an already enlisted TK and given the tour and speal. I was in the reserves before the fall, so this was easy for me and probably why I am in recruitment.”

“So, I am free to go any time I want?”

“Basically yes, good idea if you stuck around for a day, just to be sure there was no problems with the anesthetic. You’re young enough I am sure there will not be a problem, but we would feel bad if you left and then collapsed outside to die somewhere.”

“SO would I.” Ha-ha.

“Well I supposed I could stay for the 10 cent tour and a free meal. Assuming it is not those MREs left over from before the turn they offered me the last time.”

Chuckle. “Yuck, we were forced to eat those during training and the

recent encapsulation. No, we have real food. Good farm country and we get fresh stuff from the locals. Hope you like Thai food. Chinese from before the fall was getting old, even for us, so we have been experimenting some. Might even try Gringo food, pizza or enchiladas, as soon as the tomatoes come in. Pay attention to where you are. This is your assigned room till you choose to leave. 'E' for external, 'R' for red and 08. You'll figure it out quick enough. Mess hall is only a couple of hundred meters. Can't make the new ones walk too far till we toughen them up." Whatever that meant. I normally rode hundreds of kms per day, even after the plague.

We walk to the mess hall. Everything laid out in a grid with the mess hall and admin in the center. Logical, but boring. Typical military mind. Oh well, I will be out of here soon enough.

"After you."

"Thanks." Takes a moment to adjust to the light. My eyes scan the room. Mostly empty tables with small groups of people in uniform eating and talking.

"Hey Smith, who's the new recruit, she's kind of cute?"

"Tucker, back off, this is the one that got Meyer, not in your league at all." Tucker covers his front and backs away feigning fear, but smiling.

"Does everyone know my story?"

"Pretty much. You can't imagine how much you did for TK moral when an untrained, that is military trained, civilian TK breaks out of a maximum, and I mean maximum, security facility she knows nothing about with twenty people watching, with only a gown on. Oh yeh, that gave us a lot more respect. Showed them we could think as well as act. You are part of all TK training now."

I smile; it is kind of funny from that perspective. "So, how many TKs are there?"

"You mean here or in general?"

"Both I guess."

"We figure there are maybe ten thousand in the US, most of those level two, but a few level ones and very few level threes. And I can't tell you how many are here, military mind you understand."

"Didn't figure I would get that info, but what's a level?"

"Measure of ability. Level ones are hard to detect, as they are so weak, maybe there is even some ability in all people. Most are level two, like you and I. A few make it to level three. They have approximately ten times the strength of one of us."

"Whew, would not want to meet one of those in a dark alley."

“Not to worry, I said they are rare. Only know of one so far and he is nowhere near us. Actual number is conjecture based on what the geeks have said. Can’t say where the one is of course.”

“Of course. This chow is not bad. Do you have to pull kitchen duty often?”

“TKs don’t do grunt work unless they volunteer. Good idea to, mind you. Don’t want the non-TKs to think we don’t belong. And don’t use your TK ability to make it easier, they resent that.”

“Yeh, I know something of what you mean there. South San Jose was not pretty.”

“So, what made you leave San Jose? Our reports say there were enough survivors to make a good start in the north of the city. Sacramento is a long way on foot or bike.”

“Actually only takes a couple of days on a good bike and if you are in shape. Dodging crazies and rogues makes you in good shape or you are dead. Real motivator. But, basically I wanted to see what was left. What survived, before I decided where I wanted to be and Sac is the capital of California and in good farm country as you said, natural place to start.” I did not tell her the real reason of course. “What happens if I leave and then decide to come back?”

“No problem. Most do. Want to collect a few things, check in with others, etc. In fact we encourage it. Spreads the word that we are not dissecting TKs or anyone else. Good adverb for us. We are here to try and put things back together. That was the reason the Armstrong facilities were set up in the first place and we fully intend to carry out that mission.”

“What about Clemens, that doesn’t look like their mission?”

“We hope they come around when they see the positive experiences we have had. Another reason to enlist as many TKs as possible. Your escape set us back in that way, scared the shit out of them actually, but I’m still glad you did it. No one should treat another person that way. Bet they never even said who they were or what they were doing, right?”

“You got that right. Just started shooting. For all I knew, I had run into a rogue nest not a US military one.”

“Rogue nest, I’m going to use that one. Makes the point very clear. Let’s do the rest of the tour, unless you are tired.”

“Hell, I have been out for 12 hours, I want to stretch some. Let’s go.”

“By the way, do you have showers here?”

Smiling, Pam answers, “Sure, right this way. Take as long as you want, no water shortage here. Even have composting toilets with negative

air flow.” 15 minutes later. Heaven, a girl could get attached to this place real easy. Haven’t had a ten minute shower in ages, much less 15.

“Well, you almost look human now, hee-hee!”

“I almost feel human, assuming that is a good thing. Sorry for the hold up, but I had to ask, been too long. Sponge baths are not the same.”

“What’s a sponge?”

“Sorry, old term my father used, a cat bath. A sponge was the skeleton from a marine organism. They used those till scrubbies were made of synmat.”

“Eeeuuu, does not sound very good to me. How do you know so much historical stuff?”

“My dad was a history teacher till the net put him out.” Not really, but I was not going to tell her I knew more about the military than I did, Why wasn’t that in their records?

“My father was a carpenter till the re-forestation act of ’13. I understand. Ok, next is R&R, t-sims, and control.”

A group of grunts march past us in formation. “Don’t worry, the basic we TKs have to go through is all done on sims now. The real fun starts when you go through TK training. They will teach you stuff you never thought we could do. Amazing, really.”

“Like what?” Pam just looks at me.

“OK, secret till you sign on the dotted line.”

“Dotted line, where do you get this stuff? I assume you mean commit.”

“Didn’t you have any schooling?”

“I was a web artist, though not very good. Mostly did contract for advers. And mil t does not include much history other than military history. I like to try and figure how stuff works even when it disses me from my real work. Being able to scan with TK has been wonderful. They are always catching me staring at a wall. They can’t see what I see in all the inner workings. I am afraid you have found me out. Recruiting duty is not high on the esteem list of duties. Right up their with KP really.”

“You know you could be free, you don’t have to stay here.”

“Hey, who’s trying to recruit who here?” We both smile.

“We have a full gym, ball courts, pool, netgames, almost anything you want.”

“Where’s the pool, only seen one of those in history class and on the net. Ours were all full of GMBG of course.”

“You do have a thing about water don’t you?”

“We always want what we can’t have I suppose. Where does all the power come from to maintain all this? I didn’t see any BG outside.” She gives me that look again. That means she is not telling, but history tells me that means nucs. Pool is probably heated from the cooling units. Better not scan while in her presence though. Probably shielded anyway. She did not say how many TKs they have but I bet they all put in time shielding. I also noticed a lot of buildings we did not go into with strange acronyms and numbers on the outside. And there was stuff hidden under tents further out. Too far to see. Probably shielded also.

T-sims was the usual room full of pods, nothing new there. Pods were still not as good as the real thing, but did give you a head start and took care of base or review. Did not think she could show me much of control either, and I was right. Another room full of pods all linked together presumably. Nothing to see unless you logged in. “Do you get to spend time in control?”

“Not much, still are no TKs above Master Sergeant. Most controls are Captain and above. We do part of our training linked in of course, but we only get a taste. Well, what do you want to do the rest of the afternoon?”

That’s strange, her insignia say captain, is this a test? “Am I allowed to walk around?”

“If you were non-TK, your badge would be enough to keep you out of restricted areas, but I am afraid that as long as you are on base you are not allowed out of quarters without an escort, me in your case.”

“Does that mean you sleep with me too?”

She smiles, “Not unless I am invited. We are civilized here after all.”

“I did not mean that, no offense, you are cute, but I never ah, at least not so fast at any rate. I meant do you have to be with me 24/7?”

“What for? I am TK, I would know if you moved, shielded or blocked. I have quarters next to yours, but only for convenience to you. There are coms in all rooms. You have been assigned rwatanabe as a user name while you are here and I am tksmith or tksmith@asac.mil if you are trying from the net outside. Yes, we know the net is partially back up. Not all nodes will work of course, but it gets better every day.”

“I could use a nap.”

“Effects of the ‘trank’ as you call it, PSL2R37 to us. We all had to experience it in basic so we knew how it felt. You will be fine tomorrow. Those that get into trouble start showing symptoms by now. Part of the reason for my being with you. I monitor cog while talking with you. Nothing recorded, just gut feelings. Pretty obvious anyway. Anyone

would have noticed something was wrong. Here we are. Have a nice nap.”

“Thanks see you in an hour or two.” So many questions and no answers. Well, I wanted the tour. Wished I had known I could have avoided the trunk though.

The bed was soft. I crashed hard. Closer to three hours before I woke hungry again. I need to let the others know I am ok and then decide what to do. Do I stay to learn more or do I leave with the others. Tempting of course, everything is taken care of for you here. Luxury even compared to pre-fall. Maybe this was the way to rebuild. Need to talk to others. Too easy to see only one side here, the side they want you to see. Never trusted the military, especially after the Clemens nest. Pam was cute, but there is plenty of that around if you wanted it. Though having both of us clean was a plus. Hmmmm...first order of business was to set up showers and sauna when we get to the Sierras. Maybe make use of the hot springs. That would be real nice. I have had my eyes on Brian for some time. I need to get my mind off this! Sure they are still monitoring.

Pam coms me “Sorry, forgot to mention, one of the side effects of PSL2R37 is that it makes you horny, it will pass. Tempting as it is, I would never take advantage of you knowing this. So, relax and enjoy the glow.” Well that was enough knowledge to ruin the effect. I get up and straighten myself out. Running water in the sink, I wash my face and check my teeth. Decide to brush them; what the hell might as well be presentable. Don’t want them to think everything in the bush is wild. I have been thinking about scanning. If I do something overt, besides being rude, they may take offense. What if I just send out a very short pulse? Since I am the sender, I am expecting the return image. Might be too short for someone not expecting it. Pam is waiting outside when I emerge from my room.

“Hungry?”

“Does trunk do that to you too?”

“Ah, no, dinner time does that to me generally. Come on, if we get there early the food is in better shape. Not the scrapings from the last of the pan.” I do a pulse scan of Pam, just to see if she notices. It works, no reaction. Better not do it too much. She is weird though, a lot of stuff on her. Considering she is only in a light uniform, this does not make sense. Another person walks by and I do a pulse scan of him. Just the usual wireless neural com, well, maybe a bit heavier. Is this something unique to TKs or just to Captain Pam?

Dinner is some kind of stew, soy gravy and veggies with chunks of

“burger”, probably more GMBG of some kind. Oh well, it tastes fine and is filling.

“How about some dessert?”

“Chocolate?”

She smiles and leads me to the dessert section where there are pieces of double dark chocolate fudge cake. “Don’t need to ask me twice.” While Pam is distracted by my enthusiasm for chocolate cake I do another pulse scan. She has a really weird shaped ceramic sculpture in her pocket, almost flat with smooth projections like fingers, eight of them. It feels somehow familiar, but I am sure I have never seen one of these before. There is a lot they are not telling me.

“Listen I have been thinking of taking off to go tell the others about this place and what you are doing here. Could I leave tonight?”

“Sure, if you want to, but why night? I would think morning would be easier.”

“Several reasons; people are expecting me and I don’t want them to worry and it is actually safer at night for TKs. Norms, as we call them, can’t see well in the dark and not all of them are friendly. That gives me an advantage and lastly, this has been such a positive experience, no one is going to believe me. I am excited about the possibilities. This could work, we could actually get it going again.” Minored in acting, ha-ha.

“Well, no problem. Do you want an escort out to the main highway?”

“That would be nice. Don’t want another run in with a trunk bot, no matter how good the food is.” Grin!

“I’ll just go get your things, bike and pack and some food for the road. Just be a minute. You alright waiting here?”

“Next to the chocolate cake? Are you sure you trust me?” Grin! Ok, maybe too much on the grins. Have to be believable. Pam takes off. I am not alone of course. They could not allow that. I slowly eat my cake and do pulse scans of as much of the facility as I can, last chance. Who knows if anyone else here is TK, so I don’t risk a real scan. There is a huge area underneath me, in the core, that is permanently blocked. I know it should be there, from my observations of the other nest, but it comes back as solid. Something is up. I can only scan so far, so there are lots of levels I can’t reach. More questions.

Pam comes back with the bikes, hers and mine. I check the packs. Everything appears to be there along with crackers, tubes of stuff to put on them and water. “Basic field rations I am afraid, but they keep better and don’t need any prep.”

“Fine by me, better than rat or pigeon.”

At this Pam screws up her face. “Yeh, I remember too well from survival t.” We walk out to the main gate, clear night, no moon, and lots of stars now that most of the lights are out. “This is as far as I go. If you continue on this road it will intersect with Highway 80 in about 8 klicks. There will be a guard there, but they are expecting you and will let you through. Pleasure meeting you Rachael. I hope you come back. Bring lots of friends. We are serious about making this work.”

“Thanks a lot for everything, especially your kindness and the chocolate of course!”

The bike has been tuned up and repaired. No squeak in the right pedal anymore. Faster too, less resistance from old grease, etc. Tires pumped up hard. I reach the gate in a short order. “You Rachael? Let me see your badge.” I take off the badge and give it to him. He places it in a reader of some sort and hands it back to me. “Keep the badge if you want to return. Saves a lot of hassle and time at the gates. Good Evening” He salutes me. I wave back and continue on. Wonder why they did not use the bracelets that were used everywhere else before the plague. Maybe they have reverted to badges as a lower tech route. Maybe they can't replace bracelets anymore.

That was just too easy. I scan ahead. Nothing for the next 100 m at least. No one. Thought being this close to Sacramento and the base there would be someone. Doesn't sound like they want people camped that close to them or people don't want to be that close. Either way is not good. All that talk of rebuilding is bringing up questions. What exactly is their goal? What is their image of the future? More of the same, pears on top and saps on the bottom, or some new image?

“TK Smith report!”

“Yes Sir!”

“What do you think? We have all the scan results of course. She is normal level 2, but we know she is smart enough to break out of an Armstrong, so she is not dumb.”

“Permission to speak freely sir?”

“Granted, I want your honest assessment.”

“It is not what you have sir, but what you can do with it. I did not feel a single attempt to scan the entire time, except for a brief couple of seconds when she was first waking up. Part of this is an unwritten code not to scan a fellow TK, but it goes beyond that. I would have expected her to scan as much of the facility as possible. She is either stupid or can scan in a way we can't detect. We could learn a lot from her. She could

be made into one of the best we have.”

“What do you think the odds are there?”

“Hard to say, she likes chocolate, warm showers, soft beds. I did not get a sense of any negative feelings at all, except maybe when we passed by restricted areas or when we did not linger long in control. But that could be natural curiosity. She is a survivor. Captain Meyer was stupid. You get more flies with honey than with vinegar. You make more enemies when you assume everyone is your enemy. We have recruited dozens of TKs in short order here whereas they have none.”

“We will see TK Smith. Are all the tags in place and working?”

“Yes sir, I placed the external ones myself and double checked all of them. She did not seem interested in tech, so she may not even notice them.”

“Good TK Smith. That will be all. Dismissed.”

“You heard all that Captain Meyer?”

“Yes sir. Don’t trust Ms. Watanabe sir. Her father was in the military, not a history teacher. She is smart. I doubt very much she was taken in completely. Too easy. If she comes back, which I doubt, be VERY careful.”

“I intend to Captain. We can’t jeopardize this operation for one plum, no matter how sweet. Dismissed.” Now if she brings back others, this was all worth it.

Stockton

I spend the day in Stockton. Spring time, but it can still get hot in the day. Better to stay inside in the shade. Now, before I reach the base camp, I want to see what other presents they have given me. Let's start with a thorough scan. Something funny inside the tubing of the bike. Definitely not part of the bike. Can't get at it unless I take the entire bike apart. Not enough time. I need a new bike. Something not left out in the rain. Now the packs. I throw the food out right away. Too easy to be drugged. I bet it was no accident that the trunk made me so happy. I don't do drugs, alcohol, coffee, repeat or nothing that affects my mind. OK, chocolate sometimes, but that is so hard to get, not usually a problem. Had a bad experience as a kid. Got stoned and raped in the same day. Not the way I wanted to lose my virginity. And now it is even more dangerous. They caught the two who did me that time. Now they would not even miss my body. Here is something interesting in the pack. Black, about 2 cm long tube. No markings, sticky. Not even hidden well, expect they wanted me to find this so I would not look for the other. Best if I could pass these onto someone else, so it keeps moving. There should be survivors here. Maybe out in the fields at the moment. I decide it would be best to abandon everything and start looking for new transportation and clothing. Prop the stuff up against the building and walk away. Someone would find it and take it home.

About two blocks down and to the right I spot a clothing store. Second hand. Perfect. Fancy clothes always make you stand out. Pear written all over them. Blending into the background is better. I find some earth tone pants that should fit if I roll up the legs or cut them and head off to underwear and shirts. Only takes me a few minutes to get everything. The pack is going to be harder. I really liked that last one, had just the right size pockets. Leather will be too heavy and hot, even if it wears longer. I need to get home first. I find one smaller than I would like, but usable. Colors clash, but beggars can't be choosers. Now, where do I get a bike, something that will fit me. Curse my Japanese ancestors. Short legs are not easy. Can cut the pants, but not that easy with a mag frame.

Spend an hour wondering up and down streets before I finally find a bike shop with smaller sizes. A mountain bike would be more practical in the long run, but one built for speed would be better for me right now. I check in the back. They usually kept the good stuff out of sight, only for

the best customers, ie pear or courier like me. Oh wow, look at that one. Real smasher. No wheels. Could spend another hour getting that together right. What about that black one in the corner? Looks ok, tires could use some air. That is to be expected after this time. Hmmm, there! I find a hand pump and pump up the tires and add the pump to my pack along with a tire repair kit and a spare chain. Heavy, but out in the middle of nowhere you could be dead without them. I decide to catch a nap here, in case I think of anything else. Couple of vending machines in the employee lounge, but with no power the ID is not going to work. Couch looks good though, old and with holes. Something scratched up one corner real good. No matter.

Late afternoon when I wake. Now I am hungry and thirsty and not horny. Drugs must be wearing off. Surprised the chocolate was not drugged, but then it was with their food supply too. Lots of metal in a bike shop. I make short work of the vending machines. Warm nutri-shake sucks, but what choice do I have? At least it was in a hermetic pouch and not likely to have gone buggy. Grab a few more for the run. Easier than trying to find separate food and water stocks. Grab a few things for private needs and use the toilet before heading out. I hear and sense people coming and slip out the back. Hope there are no TKs here. Luck is with me, only two people obviously tired from working all day, probably not used to all day farm work. At least they are thinking about their futures. Can't scrounge for much longer.

On the road again. Hour or so out I sense someone coming and turn off the road and hide down in a ditch. A car comes by without lights on. Guess they are trying to conserve H. Won't do much good if they die in a crash, but there is still a glimmer of twilight. Hope they make it. Back on the road. If I push I can make the enclave before light.

New Atherton

“Welcome to New Atherton!”

The flair lasts for about thirty seconds, but is enough for us to get our bearings and understand what scans have been telling us, but we could not believe. Built by the rich after Atherton was burned out in the riots. Totally underground. None of us ever knew it was here. Never mentioned on a netcast. A complete city of the rich and for the rich. Wonder if they killed the slaves afterwards to keep it quiet. Crystal and gold columns. Solid gold that is. Silk, leather, impossible architecture held up by carbon nanofibers. A monument to decadence.

“New Atherton was for the richest of the US pears and follows the design of a facility built in Germany. Totally self contained. Everything you could want, spas, tennis courts, video conferencing rooms, food prepared by the best chefs, intimate rooms, you have it.”

“Intimate rooms? I thought they were too fat to reproduce? This is obscene. While we were living on GM and 2 minute showers twice a week, they were here. We all know how this was possible. They funded this off our labor, slave labor.”

“Please close the panels.”

“We had pretty much the same reaction. Oh, we investigated and took what we needed, though not much was useful for real life. Funny, after all the dreaming of being one of the pears ourselves, all we could do is cry. Oh, that door you decoded in a few minutes, took us several hours the first time. Apparently these were used for a sort of saps entrance, for when someone had to leave to get supplies, etc. They could change the tune as needed to prevent a disgruntled sap from re-entering. We haven't investigated enough to find the main entrance, probably needs power to work.”

“They must have been running out of tunes to use that last one.”

Everyone laughs. Pear was a term the APES used, short for parasite, but as we could all sympathize, we did not comment. But, were we doing it all over again, separating the human race into good and bad? Pears and nesters on one side and saps or norms and TKs on the other?

“If this place was self contained, why did they leave, and why isn't there power?”

“Our best guess is that the plague reached here and everyone bugged out. We found a few bodies desiccated behind locked doors. A few that had obviously killed each other. As to power, could be anything. My

guess is that the residents did not know how to do anything and when they banished the saps for fear of contagion, things started to run down, or were even sabotaged. I would have.”

“Parasites! Filthy parasites!”

“Indeed”

“Now what?”

“Sleep would be in order. You must be tired from your trip. We have rooms you can use.”

“No silk sheets I hope.”

“We live in the saps quarters, more comfortable. Amazing how ridiculous fashion can be.”

“Lead on.”

Early next morning

“I say we go look for her. What if she is holed up hurt somewhere?”

“And just where do you start? California is a big place. We need to make a decision soon. Would rather have Rachael's info, but we can't wait much longer. She's been gone two days longer than we expected.”

“If we follow Rachael's route we might find her, but we might also fall into the same trap.”

“There are twenty eight of us now, not too many traps hold that many. And there is Yingui also.”

“Unless you count the nest itself. That holds a thousand or more. Armed with pebbles, even super sonic ones, is not the same as a unit with M20s, bots, pharms, jets and tanks.”

“Pharms are illegal.”

“Right, you want to take that chance. And so are guns to saps. Who's going to stop ‘em. They got Rachael with one the first nest we found. She knows the plan. If she comes back late, she will follow us up to the mountains.”

“Let's ask Yingui.”

“Can't hurt.” They find Yingui just as he is talking to Maggie.

“Maggie, there is a lone TK about 3 and half km from here on route 680 heading our way, if I remember my highways. Been coming in from Stockton since last night.”

“How can you? Could be anyone what made you pick this person out?”

“Not many people travel at night alone without light.”

“How close can you read someone from that distance?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let's start with height and weight.”

“Hard to tell height when someone is on a bike, but short legs and small in general. Weight about 40-45 kg, Asian, judging from hair, eyes and bone structure, birthmark on right shoulder. Smallest two toes on right foot fused together.”

“She's alive! You've found Rachael.”

“Can you shield her till she gets in?” They all rush to the outside to wait.

“Looks like she is doing fine, but I'll keep a lookout. What's she stopping for? Not safe out in the open. Norms will see her.”

“She will be ok, we can shield her from here if necessary. She appears to be writing something on some old packing material.”

“What's it say, my eyes are not that good. I need to find new glasses in my prescription.”

“Try these specs, 8x helps a lot.”

“Never thought of that, hand them over. Ah, it says 'May be chipped. Keep quiet’”

“Heck she should have been able to sense a chip or tag, what's she worried about.”

“Go get Yingui, he saw her coming in, he certainly can scan better than we can.”

“I assume a tag is a locator, but what's a chip?”

“A chip is a locator with a lethal payload. Used after the prisons were dismantled. Stray outside the approved space and you were toast. No more need for walls or barbed wire.”

“Cute, I just thought they did not bother with anything other than a bullet, after they worked you to death of course. I bet many knew exactly what they were doing when they crossed the line.” Death being better than slavery of the worst kind. I walk out into the sun and slowly over to Rachael, stopping about 5 meters out when she starts waving her sign frantically again. I nod my head in understanding, even I can read from 5 meters. I sit down to begin a thorough scan of her. First I look for something big, as big as a grain of rice or larger. Something that size could transmit a lot of info. Takes a minute or two. Strange, she has fillings. She is in her late 40s, but would have thought she would have missed that unique experience. Most her age got bad gums not cavities and they would be ceramic, not metal. That is not a filling! Got ya! I signal for Rachael to open her mouth with hand gestures and opening my own. She complies and I remove the filling from her and replace it with a

ceramic one converted from air. She feels the puff of air moving and looks at me quizzically. I hold up the filling and then examine it more closely. It is dissolving in my hand. Nanos! I vaporize them on the spot. Not squeamish about bot life forms only about organics. I motion for Rachael to hold still again and this time I go for a sub-cellular scan. Skin cancer in several places, easy to remove, an occupational hazard of being a bike courier I imagine. Ah, hiding in the blood vessels attached to the walls. I adjust my thoughts and set up a concentrated conversion of the nanos to water. Not enough of them to worry about osmotic balance. I hold up hand indicating 10 minutes. Good, she knows how to hold still. I begin the scan conversion. Still it is harder with everything moving. Basically I set up a filter at the aorta to catch anything 'swimming' and then go for the attached ones.

“Ok, you are safe now. Nanos in your blood set to congregate and form a transmitter in your teeth where they look like a filling. Now you need to come in and tell your story to the rest of us.”

“I don't have any fillings.”

“You have one now. I replaced the nano trans with ceramic and zapped the rest in your blood. How did you know you were tagged?”

“You must be Yingui, we have heard about you. Didn't know, but found two others on my bike and pack, which I abandoned. Figured that was too easy and they did something else as well. But I had to let people know I was ok. Planned on leaving again to draw them off track. When did you get in?”

“Yesterday with two others.”

“Rachael you are all right, we were so worried about you when you were two days late.”

“Two days? I am only one day late. What day is it?”

“Fire day of course.” [Fashion was to use the Chinese designations for the days, Friday]

“Shit, they had me out for an entire day, not just a few hours like I thought.”

“Who had you?”

“Nesters! Again!”

“It is likely they know where we are. Even though I was careful not to say anything, I am sure the nanos transmitted at least location up to the time Yingui got them. We need to leave now!”

“We have been ready for a week, now is as good a time as any. Are you rested enough?”

“That won't matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gather everyone here with their bikes. From here we will go out into that open space there.”

“In broad daylight? Are you crazy? We will be seen for sure. We should use the tunnels to get as far out as possible first. Not all our bikes are built for cross country anyway, especially loaded down.”

Daniel speaks up, “Takes too long. First will come the bots. Should be here in less than one hour. Troops will follow the next day. Same strategy they used with the Saudis fifteen years ago, when I was stationed there. The dust was the worst part. They have that problem here.”

“Not now Daniel. Why do all that for a few TKs, we aren't worth it.”

“Listen, I was in the Sacramento nest. They are up to something, something big. They talked about having recruited a lot of TKs, but I only saw one. Lots of areas shielded or their nest is solid rock. And I know it isn't.” It takes another ten minutes for everyone to assemble.

“Ok, everyone here?” A young male, well, young by TK standards, thirtyish, comes floating out carrying and dropping tech gear by the handfuls, trying to get it together. His left leg is a mess, which would explain why he is using mostly TK to get out. Common enough with no medical access. Must have had a wheel chair of some kind before TK.

“Who is that? I thought all the disabled went ahead of us?” Daniel turns to where I am looking.

“That is Ron, our only surviving TK techhead. He was the one who solved the 'doors' for us, but took him longer as he did not have any music training, only logic.” He motions for Ron to come over, “Ron this is Yingui. Yingui, Ron.”

“Ah, hi. I am not disabled. Get around just fine. Used to have a neural prosthetic, but TK is better.” Looking at Daniel, “Do you know how far we are going and where we will end up? That will help me decide what to bring. I want to be ready to be of maximum service.”

I interrupt. “Ron you need to lighten your load by quite a bit. You are not working for the rich anymore.”

“Can't. No, can't. All this stuff is essential.”

“Ron, scan me please. How much tech do you find on me?”

Distracted he looks at Daniel who nods and then he looks at me. I feel his scan. He looks at me like I am a freak. “None, not even wired, not carrying anything tech either. Of course you are old, no offense. Amazing. Did not know there were any like you still around, no offense.”

I laugh, “No offense taken if you forgive me for thinking you disabled. You still need to lighten your load though. For this next

operation to work, you need to be able to lift yourself, your supplies, and your bicycle under your own TK ability. For a TK2 that means 100 kg max. I estimate that limits you to just a few of those devices you are carrying currently.”

He swallows hard and looks at Daniel again in an obvious state of horror, “Bicycle?”

Daniel explains, “Ron was an inside sap and with his leg of course, he does not know how to ride a bike.”

I think about this. There is still the cat seat on my bike. “Ok, he can ride with me with the cats on his lap.”

“Cats, as in more than one?”

“Sorry, no, just Ghost. Others are carrying Marm and Princess.”

“I am not actually going to be riding the bike right? So I should be able to handle it. But why have one at all? TK means I am not limited anymore in travel, why go back?”

“We still need to give people the perception that we are normal most of the time.”

He shudders and then nods. So, he has had a run in with the norms also.

“Is everyone else accounted for then?”

“All accounted for, even the cats, though that was not easy.”

“I can imagine. Shield Marm like I showed you and offer food to Ghost and there should be no problems. Now gather in closer. You may have heard all kinds of rumors about me and I have been pretty quite since getting here. I do not like to draw attention to myself. Still not comfortable with all this, as I am sure you can relate, only in my case it is much worse. Anyone who does not want to leave right now should go back into the safe house and wait a few minutes before coming out.” No one moves. “Ok, with a group this big, we will not be going fast, but we will outrun the bots. What I want you to do is to bubble up. James and Susan will go around and help anyone not comfortable or knowledgeable about this technique. They just learned a few days ago themselves, but caught on quick. Then together we will move out. I will be assisting, so don't be surprised if we move a lot faster than you have done by yourself. Go ahead Susan, James. Everyone bubble up. James to your right, Maggie is having trouble. Susan behind you about 7 meters, help Ron. A little more to the right. It will get easier once we get going. I will start out slow. Raise your hand if you are having problems and we will get to you.”

I don't want to get close to the nests if I can avoid it. Not yet at least.

I don't believe for a second that most of the TKs in the nest are there by choice, but now is not the time. They will be freaked enough without my poking around. I take the group straight out into the central valley, straight shot to the mountains. I don't intend to take us all the way, just far enough to stay ahead of the bots. Over these eastern hills should be enough. They could have satellite cameras, but it will take them awhile to figure out we are not here and then to begin a sweep. Not sure I like what they will see, but maybe they will think everyone is doing it on their own. Better to not go too fast. I slow to about 100kph, faster than a normal rider, but might not be noticed by a satellite right away. I stick to the roads. Any image of us is likely to just show a bunch of bikes on a road. Nothing weird there.

Armstrong Sacramento

“She abandoned the bike, pack, and clothes in Stockton. Told you she was smart. Didn’t think she would find the ones in her clothes. The nanos have reported in and we triangulate that she is approaching Santa Clara County.”

2nd report

“She has stopped in Old Atherton. Still burned out, nothing left there. Could be a rest stop. Nanos just went off line! I repeat the nanos just went off line.”

“Pinpoint her last know location and send a recon bot out there ASAP.”

“Shit, how did she get the nanos? Well the ones in her blood should regroup and set a new transmitter in a few hours. Last one was on line for twelve hours before she found it, but the next time she will be watching.”

“Record all nano transmissions from now on, it may only be a microburst we get next time. Alert Armstrong Samuel Clemens too. They are closer now and may get a better fix.”

“Yes Sir!”

One hour later

“Bot reporting in. We have visual. TK sensors on maximum. Nothing sir. They could be hiding and shielding themselves, but we should pick up the shield. Beginning a sweep spirally out form last known location.”

“This part always makes me dizzy.”

“Yes sir. Takes some getting used to sir.”

“We have confirmation of a TK one. Shall I order the bot to investigate sir?”

“No don’t bother, probably someone trying to pass as normal. We get that with TK ones. I want the big fish, not the small fry.”

“Yes sir, continuing sweep.”

Two hours later

“10 km sweep completed sir. Nothing above level one and only three of those sir.”

“Very unusual. Would have expected upwards of a hundred TKs to be in the area. We were counting on them to supply Clemens. What happened? Let's start to bring up satellite recon images. If they made a run for it, I want to know in what direction. Also, send bots into New Atherton. They could be hiding underground.”

“That could take some time sir. We still don't have full access and bandwidth on the sats yet sir.”

“Do the best you can. This is important corporal.”

“Yes sir.”

Three hours later

“Nanos come on yet?”

“No sir, nothing. Bot found easy access to New Atherton. The doors were wide open. Doubt the residents did that. Some evidence that people were camped there, but nothing alive there now.”

“We've lost her. But how? No TK has been able to sense the nanos much less do anything about them.”

“Yingui?”

“That is just a myth. Does Yingui sound like a woman's name to you? No confirmation whatsoever. I mean they have this character moving mountains. Moving a mountain does not get nanos out of your blood. If half the rumors were true we would have been ash by now. No, Yingui is a myth. I suspect a malfunction. We did not have enough time to field test these new nanos before the plague. Could just be an unlucky accident.”

“Yes sir.”

“What about the satellite images?”

“Nothing sir within 100km. No way they could bicycle that far or even get that far in a car under current road conditions. We have seen groups of bicycles further out, but in farm country. People often travel in groups to the farms, safer.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Yes sir.”

“You didn't say anything about that group near Merced who was 2 meters off the ground.”

“Nothing, not even a TK can ride a bike fully laden even one meter off the ground, much less 2. I am not going to take the hit for some computer glitch.”

“Hey, don't look at me, I'm not going to tell him. I'm hoping to be

rotated to surface duty. That's where the good food is served. Heard they even have chocolate cake."

"Now you are dreaming private."

"Yes sir, I am!" Both laugh.

Merced

“We are nearing a city, taking us down. Ok to de-bubble now.” Some are little shaky getting their land legs back, some of the roads I followed were tiny country ones, very windy. “Wow, can’t believe that happened. Who are you?” Lots of murmuring and talking.

“I really don’t know. Hopefully this will work itself out eventually. James and Susan, let’s get everyone together. Wind is picking up. We may be in for a storm.” They start to round up everyone. Some have gone off road to take care of personal needs. Sounds good to me.

Daniel speaks up, “May I have your attention? Two things. One, please do not pass what happened on. It is better for all concerned that the fewer people who know the better. We are dealing with a group of people, formerly our own military, who will use ANY information they gather against us. Even if you think you are doing the right thing, ask first to be safe. Two, Yingui is not our leader. He may be the strongest TK, but admits he has no leadership skills, nor does he want the job. All he has done here is to do his part to get us out of a jam. As we all have done. We need everybody. Frankly, I like the consensus model just fine. Thanks.”

“We are about 3 km outside of a farm community formerly known as Merced. There are norms about. Best if they do not know we are TK. Same as in San Jose till we know differently.”

“I second that and add that it is likely that they will not take kindly to our breaking and entering for supplies. We will have to negotiate some sort of trade for supplies, mostly food and water. Among us we have a lot of expertise. The best trades are going to be food for labor. Talk to me if you think you can help and we will work something out as soon as we know what they will trade for. Let’s saddle up. Want to get there before dark. People don’t take kindly to strangers after dark and we don’t want there to be shooting. Farm folk are likely to be armed, especially now. Keep all your eyes open.”

Ron comes up to Daniel, “I hope you don’t mind, but I left the musical doors open to New Atherton. I figured we were not coming back and the norms had a right to see what we had found.”

“Good idea, I had not thought of that, but let’s listen up, this could be dangerous.” Kids are so easily distracted.

“Lets spread out a bit. If they take to shooting, drop and it won't be so easy for them. Shields in stealth mode. They can see us, but not scan

us.” We approach walking our bikes with people on either side helping Ron so he does not have to TK it. They have erected a barrier across the main street with a guard posted. Not a friendly sign.

“Hello, good afternoon. Whom do we talk to about trading for food and water?”

“There are a lot in your group.” Too many for comfort he means.
“Why are you here?”

Daniel acts as spokes person, as he knows everyone in our group and being thin and elderly, is far less intimidating. “Hello, my name is Daniel. We are just passing through. Just wanted a place to bed down out of the wind, cold and bugs, any empty room will do, a little food and water and we are gone in the early morning. Don't want any trouble, just passing through.”

“There is nothing here to pass through to. Where are you headed?”

“We are not farmers, city folk all. Oh we can do a small plot or two, but can't handle a large spread. We were hoping to get more into the foothills, fishing, not as hot in the summer, maybe even mine for gold or other materials people will trade for later. Tired of pouched food and was hoping for the real thing. We have trade, don't want a hand out.”

He shouts to the man a few doors down watching the whole thing, “Tell Garcia to get the boss.”

A fiftyish lady of heavy build comes out to the gate. “My name is Mary. What can we do for you?”

“As I was telling him, we are just passing through to the hill country looking for a place to bed down out of the cold and bugs and a little food and water. We have trade, not interested in handouts. Life is hard for everyone; don't want to make it harder on you. If this is not possible, then we can camp outside and leave in the morning.”

“How come you haven't just broken into the houses you have already passed and taken what you want?”

Daniel gestures to all of us, “That is not our way. We had a hard time in the city; saw a lot of death and destruction. Don't ever want to see it again. There is no way of telling whose house is lived in or abandoned without asking. Figured it would be safer for both our groups if we were where you could keep an eye on us. Nothing worse than someone getting jumpy with a gun.”

“Speaking of which, don't see any hardware on any of you. Not very friendly to be hiding out on us.”

“We have no firearms, they were much more anal about the no gun rules in the city, but we have a lot of skills among us, people good at

mech, tech, fixing and making things. There must be stuff you lost the ability to take care of that you really could use.”

“Farmers are pretty self sufficient, not much we can't take care of.”

“And what catalog are you going to order the spare parts from? Any electrical engineers among you to fix the coms in your harvesters? This is not the good old days Mary and we are not dumb to be taken advantage of. Sorry to have troubled you. We'll just back off a few kilometers and not give you any more grief.”

At this point Marm and Ghost can't take being cooped up any longer and make a break for it, on foot! They run up to Mary and give her the charm. Meowing and rubbing against her legs, purring up a storm. “You have cats! And by the looks of these two, both healthy intact males. Maybe we can do some trade. All our males died, spooked, or were neutered, but we have a few females left, two of which are in heat. With no bot catcher replacements we are going to be in trouble real quick.”

“We actually have three cats, but Princess is napping just now and is not the jealous type. What if we offer to look at your rodent bots as well? Bet we could get more working again.”

“Bots are pretty messed up. We had a crazy person who went around smashing everything and everyone that moved and bots move. Most bots are scrap, but if you could get some sensors or screamers going again it is a deal.”

“We brought our own tools, so all we need is a flat place to work and some light to see by.”

“We have H lamps. BG grows good in this sun and heat. One more thing, we have been fooled in the past. Need to pat you down for weapons, no matter what you said.”

“Understand, we too have been fooled. We are not completely defenseless either. We don't mind being patted down, just would like to keep the contents of our packs to ourselves. You can lift them to see that nothing as heavy as a gun is there. Farmers can be thieves as well as city folk.”

“Agreed. If you will come by single file, Mat will do the gents and I will do the ladies. I will assume the cats are not packing heat any place but their loins.” She smiles at that.

Does not take us long to pass through, all a charade though. Mary is a TK and has been scanning us since we came up. Easy to spot. Not much training, probably the only one in town. Hard survival and an exchange of ideas have made a big difference in our own group. “Daniel, I would like to take Mary aside and give a few lessons. Could mean the difference

between life and death for her and the others later. I figure I am the logical choice as there is no way she can over power me and no one is going to go jealous of me being alone with her for a bit. She is way too obvious. If we were not nice, we could have done her as soon as the first scan. I will not tell of the rest of us.”

“Makes sense. Sooner or later the nesters will be here. If she can't hide, then they will be getting info on us quicker than we want. Be discreet, others in her group may not know about her.”

I pick up a pebble from the ground and face Mary so that no one else can see. I suspend the pebble about 15 cm above my hand till she notices. “Mary, can we talk? I believe I can offer some advice that may save your life.” She pauses for a moment. Probably thinking whether it would be better to expose me or talk to me. She motions me over behind a parked truck. “No one knows. That crazy had the gift too, if they found out, I would be dead before morning. Have to sleep sometime and there are too many.”

“I have no desire to turn you or get myself in trouble either. I felt your scan and figured that if I could someone else could also and they may not be offering lessons the easy way. There is a nest of military in Sacramento and another one outside of Salinas. They are VERY hostile to TKs, what I call this gift. Don't be deceived. They have worked out sensors and will use ANY means to get you or trick you into their control. Kill you if that does not work. Sooner or later they will be here. You need to learn a few things to survive.”

“Do your people know about you?”

“They know some, but not all. They are not hostile to TKs, they really are peaceful if not provoked. They had trouble with rogues, crazy TKs, and know how to deal with them though. You are right, a bullet will stop a TK as well as a normal person.”

“Ok, let me tell the others we will be talking together for a bit.” I have learned how to hear sounds while scanning, by forming a virtual ear near where I want to hear something. So far I have not been able to teach this to Susan and James, it might be a TK5 thing. I keep an ear on her. She is true to her word and does nothing to give me away. Comes back in a few minutes.

She only knows about mini-missiles, deflecting and scanning. I teach her about pulse scanning, thanks to Rachael, shielding and most important, how to turn off the reflex. It is likely that she will be questioned at some point. Someone will see something or a sensor will pick up something. If she cannot take a hit without reacting she will be

dead. Surprised no one has noticed anything yet. Guess she is lucky no one has taken a shot at her in front of others. Chances are, even with what I could give her in a few hours, she would eventually be found out. “We are heading for the hills, come with us or come later if you get into trouble. Not everyone is a plumber, not everyone is a TK. We all have different skills and gifts. Not everyone is going to be hostile to us.”

“Thanks, but I'm no saint and would not fit in with your group.”

“We aren't saints either, just survivors trying to find a better way. I will not tell you exactly where we are going, but if you head in the right direction, I will find you.”

“I understand, we had better get back, I have my reputation to maintain after all. Storm coming too.” She smiles and then looks at the sky concerned. A local has now confirmed my own prediction.

When we get back to the designated workshop, we see lots of tech all over the place. “You did not have to take apart the entire town!”

“Huh? Oh this. Only a few things. Lots of pieces in one of these things. Been showing them how to trouble shoot as well. Since we are not staying they will need to know how to do this themselves. Can't give them a decade of experience in one night of course, but any bit helps. They catch on quick, like they said, they have learned how to be self reliant. Good thing I brought the right tools.” Ron gives me a dirty look.

“Food is over there. Mostly fresh veggies, hot house this early in the season, but then they are not supplying the pears anymore. We supplied some GMSoy to help make a stew.”

“How are Marm and Ghost getting on?”

“It was VERY noisy for some time, lots of caterwauling for seemed like hours, but all quiet now. Figure the deed is done.”

“Speaking of which, where have you two been, huh?”

All eyes are on us now. “Just talking, just talking, too old for that kind of exercise.”

“Uh huh, sure, what ever you say.” Everyone is smiling now.

“I told you we had to get back, now look what you have done to me. I am a ruined woman.” She plants a big one right on my lips. Everyone is laughing now. I turn bright red and everyone starts howling. Oh well, not the first time.

“Look, the storm coming might be a good one. No weather reports any longer, so we don't know how long, just our own experience in this area to go on. Most of the rain will go to the hills and then come back in the streams, but the wind will be intense. Best if everyone stays inside till morning. We have lots of blankets and will be staying here as well.

Already notified the rest of our group by handies, cells and net are all dead as I am sure you know.” Mary comes up to me with a big smile and says loud enough for everyone to hear, “We will have to bundle together for warmth.” That gets cheers and laughs from everyone. As soon as we settle down with the lights out, the cats appear and snuggle between us. Natural chaperons not that they are ones to talk. Bet they sleep well tonight. Poor babies.

The storm lasts most of the night, a lot of wind, some rain and a lot of noise. Even a building as big as this one shakes when hit hard enough. The locals are the first ones up. City folk are used to a more leisurely waking and we were worn out from all that happened yesterday. I am just happy that this time it was not ugly. Tired from even before the fall of all the stupid things we humans have done to each other and the planet, tired from the stupidity of the nesters. Oh, I know, just ignorance. I falsely assumed that the fall would shake some sense into everyone. Our own group seems to be getting it. We will see what happens when we are no longer fighting for our survival on a daily basis though. Cats are gone, probably going for a quickie before we leave. Mary is gone also, but I hear her voice giving orders off to one side. I stretch and slowly make my way out from under the blankets.

“We have tea and pancakes for everyone. Hope you’re hungry.” I hear James having a discussion with one of the locals, something about a football team and whether or not they would have made it to the finals, if the fall had not happened. Never understood sports myself. Why pay grown people to play kids games on netcast? How do we know if it is even real. Rumor has it that there are no actors and actresses anymore, just computer generated realistic animations. Oh well, pancakes smell good. Ghost shows up of course, wherever there is food. Hope no one notices his way of getting around. He’s going to grow into a fat boy if he is not careful. Looks like Ron has put some kind of hot sauce on his. For breakfast?

“Tulle fog this morning, sure you don’t want to wait till it burns off?”

“We need to get going if we are to find a place to camp tonight. Do you know if I5 is open?”

“Was fine at least till Fresno a week ago. Some of us have family in Madera that survived, so we make regular runs and some of them make it to Fresno. Lots of supplies still in Fresno. Good place to stock up.”

“Thanks, we’ll keep that in mind.”

Marm walks in the front door when someone opens it carrying a large dead rat. Cheers go up from the farmers. Marm looks like he is

thinking, “What’s the big deal, just breakfast?” He takes his meal to the corner. Ghost is right there waiting for a piece. Go get your own Ghost, hisses Marm.

Daniel pulls me aside and whispers, “Why I5? I thought we were going east?” I make a hand gesture like something crawling. “Mary is right, picking up supplies in Fresno might not be a bad idea. We don’t want to disadvantage this community any more than we have.”

“For those of you not used to Tulle fog, stay close. It can get so thick at times you can’t see more than three meters in front of you. We will call role regularly to make sure that everyone is here, but you can help out by remembering the people around you and not changing positions in the group.” We say our goodbyes to everyone we have met. The cats have bedded down, much warmer in the basket under a nice blanket. We start out. I purposely ride close to Rachael. After a kilometer I motion to her with the bug crawling sign and she nods back. She has sensed them too.

“Ok, hold up here for a moment. Want to do a check to make sure everyone is with us. Rachael and I will check in with everyone to help you make sure everything is secure.”

“They got us with nanos also, though those will take a few hours to mature into transmitters.” Except Rachael and Ron, our tech engineer that is. Indian and Japanese ancestors. Why are they different? We go among the group, checking packs and people. Some are cold and moving through the fog adds a chill factor. I suggest that a moderate shield might help keep the cold off.

“We are out of range now, feel free to shield. Ok, everything checks out.”

“So Rachael, how many did you find?”

“Everyone had several bugs, all in easy to put places. What made you suspect?”

“I didn’t. I was completely taken is as well, though I suppose looking back, I should have been suspicious. Needing the services of the cats was a poor excuse to suddenly let down your guard. They wanted us in to gather info and bug us. Good thing that no one except me showed TK.”

“When did you do TK, I did not see anything?”

“I showed Mary a few tricks, which we can assume the military knows now.”

“They would have figured it out eventually anyway. They are ruthless in their pursuit and this only confirms. What about nanos?”

“All except you and Ron.”

“We did not have raspberry jam on our pancakes, must have been in

the jam. All of them ate it as well, but they may not care, or have some means to remove them later.”

“I will be removing the nanos as we move along. They have not gotten to our teeth yet, so I have some time. They will of course notice that the rest of the bugs have gone blank. We need to go east again rapidly. I hope to be safely settled in Yosemite by dark. I am sure they are looking for our group, but may not have guessed till just now that we were the group. They have some kind of sensor worked out, but don’t know if we set it off all the time, or only when we use the gift. We really can’t take any chances.”

“I agree, I will tell you more this evening. Have not had a chance to check in with you with all the norms around and us running.”

“Ok, listen up. We are going to move quickly again, just like yesterday, only this time cross-country. Bubble up and follow my lead. I will be assisting again.” From here I take us north-east towards Yosemite. In this fog and with our own shielding, we should evade satellite and other surveillance at least. Glad there are only 28 of us. More and I would be totally exhausted.

“STOP! Monique has just de-bubbled and dropped out of sight!”

“Got her, about 50 meters behind us in trouble.”

Some one yells, “Yingui, we need your help now!”

“Several broken bones and a lot of scrapes. You were lucky. Your head is harder than we expected. Good thing you were wearing a helmet. This is not going to be painless. I have to set the bones and then mend them. Feel free to faint and/or scream. No one around to hear us. Ready?” She nods. I do it. She screams and then faints. I have to learn how to do pain killers. I don’t like causing pain in anyone or thing.

We redistribute supplies so four TKs can help carry Monique and others carry her gear.

“It’s weird.”

“What?”

“Smell!”

“Smell what?”

“No death! We are finally beyond the dead bodies. The air is clean!”

Yosemite

Yosemite used to be one of the premiere vacation spots, a jewel in the park service. Now that transportation is so expensive though it has fallen to a local backwater. Closed completely during the winter, about six months out of the year. Only the “pears” can afford to visit in the good months. More of a private resort now. Food for the rangers is stocked up before first snow. One year it did not make it in time and two rangers starved to death rather than depend on trapping. The wildlife being so sacred that they gave their own lives to protect it, never mind that the rich hunted those same animals. Now all that remains of their effort is a memorial bronze plaque. It is cold and snow is covering the ground. We find an abandoned ranger cabin and file in. Sylvia, the Mom of our group tells us, “Monique in there. Put the bikes in this room. Cooks to the kitchen, check out the facilities and let us know what we need to look for. Some of the guys look around for firewood, H or whatever they were using for fuel. You group of three with nothing better to do, check out the latrine situation. I am not asking you to clean anything, don’t look so shocked, just find out what’s here and where it is.”

“There is one composting toilet in here,” pipes up someone from a back room.

“Good, but with a group this big, we will need more.” More orders are given and pretty soon most people have work to do. “You and Rachael hold your meeting after checking on Monique. I don’t think any one wants any more surprises.” Monique is fine. Resting well. She will heal much faster than normal with the bones already bonded as good as new with TK. We retire to one of the side cabins. The cats pop in and head for the bed. They are all wet from the paws to head. I guess this snow stuff did not agree with them. I take a moment to help them dry off.

“I think this means we are ‘security’, you because you have direct experience, abilities and temperament and me because of my greater TK abilities. First off, I don’t trust the nesters any more than you do. Never liked the military way of thinking and in New Shanghai, I was surrounded by it most of my life. A necessary evil some say, but I am not so sure. There must be a better way. However, I am more interested in avoiding than confronting, unless we are given no choice.”

“I have been around the military my whole life, part of the reason that I was able to thwart them as well as I did. I used to believe that they

were the way to go. Almost joined up myself when I was younger, but then I got a good job and it never happened. Not any more. My father, whom you have met, was in the diplomatic corp, what we called the bull shit corps, for 10 years and he might be a good person to include. He knows how they think, but is out of date in terms of tech and never had to shoot anyone, though he did spend some time on the front lines in Europe. Ron might also be a good person to include, he is a real wiz at tech, eats, breathes and sleeps the stuff.”

“So, I have seen and you both avoided the raspberry jam nanos” I laugh.

“More cultural. The only sweet I like is dark chocolate and Ron comes from India, more into spicy than sweet. He is a good cook by the way, if he can find the right ingredients that is. Samosas are hard to cook without oil, and most oil goes into vehicles now. If they had offered mango chutney for the cakes, he would have been hit also.”

“I am going to like him fine. Hot peppers are the only thing I like more than chocolate. But I’ll have to build up my tolerance again. They did not grow in New Shanghai and after the collapse it was hard to get good ones, habaneros that is. Doubt they would grow here either. Oh well”

“You actually ate those things? How long do you think we will be here?” James is impressed. Hard to do.

“Yes and don’t know. We should be ready to move literally at a moments notice. We have no idea how much they know about us, if they know where we are, etc. I would not count on even the notion that we fooled them completely.”

“Very wise. I would even go so far as to assume that they know where we are but have to wait due to indecision in the command structure. They will want to gather more information first. Usually send in bots to determine our strength and weapons status.”

“Tell me about your visits to the nests.”

With the nest near Salinas it was obvious that they were newly emerging from isolation and knew very little about TKs except for what they had heard over their communication network. As soon as they recognized that Rachael was TK they took action to capture her alive. They were not freaked, they took careful measured actions to subdue and obtain her. That means that they had some info on TKs. First recognize a TK by actions no human could do. Then they knew to wear the subject down. A lot of TKs did not even know that was possible. Being scientifically trained, I carefully trained myself for months to find out

what the limits were. Next they took careful actions to contain her, behind locked doors and poison gas. Apparently the same method they used to contain their own people after possible infection with HelperV. This means that they had not yet worked out TK specific methods, but were hoping that something strong enough to contain an unseen enemy, a virus, would be enough to contain an altered human they could see. Rachael was very resourceful in getting out. Anyone else probably would not have made it so soon at least. And you can bet they learned from this mistake.

At Sacramento, they did not even offer the pretense of containment. No locked doors, no gas, no guns pointed at her. However, whatever the bot was that got her, it was programmed to hide its presence till just the right moment. It knew in what direction to fire. And it had not been used up on game in the area. This meant it had the means to sense a TK specifically, even when they were not active. I could run a psiotic brain scan, a TK level 2 could not. That meant that either they had the help of a higher level TK, or they had something on hand that could already be used to sense the fields, possibly some medical device similar to the psiotic microscopes I had used. Then they had to have the technical ability to use that knowledge and make a bot capable of sensing a TK. Aiming and firing could be done by more conventional, heat seeking, motion detection, etc. means. They knew how long the tranquilizer would work on a TK. They knew that a TK would likely scan the area. They knew how able a TK would be in scanning. They knew that TKs were human and could be appealed to in a human way, hot water, good food, secure life, offers of sex, etc. They knew what not to reveal, though this was probably simple military logic for any new recruit. They knew whom they had, Rachael Watanabe from DNA scans. This meant high-level access to a large database. Not clear if they hacked a civilian database, or they had a military equivalent. Most likely the latter. It was clear that there was more than one TK present though only one was introduced. The rest were hidden or in use shielding and who knows what else. This was clearly a 'honey pot' setup designed to lure unsuspecting TKs into service. The drugs used were intended to give a gentle sense of euphoria, to cloud decision-making without being overt. They were good.

Then there were the tags. The one in the pack even a norm could find and maybe deduce its purpose. A decoy used possibly to convince a suspicious subject that they had been found out and neutralized. May have even been a dummy. No point wasting resources on something you intended to throw away. The second decoy hidden in the frame of the

bike was one only a carefully scanning TK level two or above would be likely to sense. This was probably their primary tag. Using the metal of the frame to help hide its presence and act as an antenna, but allowing for a large enough tag to give location and range of information collecting abilities. Maybe have even been capable of some video through a pinhole lens in the frame of the bike. The last tag was the most devious, very high tech, probably experimental, hopefully in short supply. This one was undoubtedly not capable of being sensed by a TK level two or possibly even a three. And it was capable of replacing itself from reserves in the blood stream if the first hit was found. I suspect that they probably thought that when it went down, it was because of some glitch or failure on the part of the nanobots and not because it had been found. I suspect that ALL TKs and possibly all personnel were 'infected' with these for at least purposes of location. Rachael again showed her stuff by assuming that she was tagged by some method she could not detect. She did not want to endanger the rest of the community. No names were mentioned while the tag was active. It is likely that the only information they got from the tags was the last location before they died.

That left Merced. Was Mary really that ignorant or was she playing a game. Was she taken in by the desire for power or reward, or was she forced into her role of deceiver and betrayer? Apparently she was set up some time ago. We neither saw nor sensed any other people entering or leaving, nor mil-tech devices. We sensed no other TKs. She could have been playing stupid TK in order to get any potential TKs to reveal themselves. She could have been genuine in her fear that she would be found out by the norms, this would certainly been a good basis for blackmailing her into action. She was probably told to tag us from stores of devices already on hand. That would mean that the nests have a greater range of influence than we imagined. Or, she was in the reserves and activated only after the fall. That also means some form of communication with nesters desperate to find us. Otherwise she would not have used so many tags on us, nor infected so many of us with the nanobots. It is likely that she used all of what she had on us till she is replenished. It also means that they know we can detect their devices and neutralize them. No possibility of a glitch that many times. May also explain why most of us were infected this time. They had no idea how reliable the devices were in the field. It is one thing to test on carefully monitored military personnel all eating the same food and exposed to the same type of environment, quite another out in the real world. It is likely this is pre-fall tech pushed into service. Too sophisticated to come up

with in only a few months. It was also likely to have been developed in China. There were no nanotech fab facilities any longer in the USA that I knew of, though certainly labs all over used them for various purposes. But nothing as ingenious as a twice self assembling transmitter delivered to someone's molars. That was really sophistication.

What were they shielding and why was it so important to shield it 24/7 from all known forms of external sensing, including at least TK2s? Even effective against the pulse scanning that Rachael had figured out. I still kick myself for showing Mary that technique. I am sure it would not take long for them to adopt it, improve on it and guard against it. Back to the secret, any numbers of possibilities present themselves, from weapons, to sensors, to new energy sources, to new forms or uses of TK itself. I would very much like to know what they were up to. But short of walking in and declaring myself as a TK5 and leveling the place to get out again, I saw no way.

"You forgot one thing, the device she had in her pocket. She was also heavily infested with tech. What we used to call a cyborg, part human, part tech. No indication that these were prosthetics. She appeared to be healthy and in no need for the devices."

"Where were these devices located?"

"One was near her heart, the rest on or about her head and spine."

"No idea, unless they could be some sort of control device. I would imagine that the military would want some way of taking her out without killing her if possible, in case she turned on them or even contemplated such. She probably knows all about these devices and their use. It would not be anywhere near as effective a control device if the subject were not aware of it. Remember, they had what for them was a bad experience with you. Ok, not so good for you either. But, you were able to escape what they thought was an impossible situation in less than an hour from waking. Imagine multiplying that horror by the number of TKs likely to be in the USA alone. They would want control above all else."

"And what exactly are they afraid of?"

"Remember the riots? Anarchy scares people, especially the controlled mind. Imagine what a hundred determined TKs could do and then multiply that by the military imagination."

"The device?"

"Sorry, describe it for me as well as you remember."

"Externally it was weird. Sort of a flat oval slightly bowl shaped with eight symmetrical finger like projections."

"Wait a minute, this could be important, this shape sounds familiar to

me. Could you draw it?"

"It felt familiar to me too. Give me sec to find something to write with. With the entire tech down this could be a problem. Help me look for something." Took more than a few minutes, but we really lucked out and found a tablet with some power left in it. I saw solar panels on the way in. If we had a clear day we could probably recharge it also, might even be some fuel cells around. All the vehicles were gone however, probably used to evacuate everyone, though that meant over snow. I would guess that after the two died of hunger they worked out some sort of emergency evacuation plan. I sensed no bodies. The transports would have contained fuel cells for sure that we could have cannibalized. Anyway, we turn on the tablet and chose a simple drawing program to help me visualize what Rachael saw.

I was right, the shape was familiar. It was the same shape in much lesser detail as the psiotic pattern in a brain capable of TK. This was highly troubling. That confirmed they had the capability of sensing the TK psiotic patterns in someone. This might explain how they sensed a TK with something as simple as a trunk bot. Would not have to be very accurate to differentiate a TK from a norm, might be very simple in fact. "Go on, what was inside the device?"

"That was were it got beyond me. Highly complex patterns of silicon and gold on what looked like a diamond like substrate. 3D and way beyond my ability to see much of it, especially with a pulse scan. Remember I could not be sure that she could not sense what I was doing. I did want to survive this experience."

"I am not faulting you, happy to know about it at all." I pull out the parts I scrounged from the microscope. "Scan these and tell me if they are similar."

"Not the same shape of course, but the same basic makeup. What are these?"

"Parts from a psiotic sensor from the lab I worked in. This confirms that we are talking about a psiotic device. I want to try something, but it will mean telling you more about myself. I had not wanted to reveal anything till I was sure. I have been fooled too much in the last three months."

"That, I can relate to. I promise not to say anything to the others. I will leave that for you to decide if and when. I figure with all the scans you have done of me, at clearly better than anyone else can do, I have nothing to hide from you either."

"Thanks. Oh, I removed several small skins cancers when I scanned

you in Atherton, forgot to tell you in all the confusion.”

“Thanks, but I did feel it. Thought it was something to do with the tag removal, I guess if you can see nanos, you can see cancer. Scary though.”

“I am used to the old fashioned concept of doctor patient confidentiality, so nothing to worry about from me.”

I proceed to tell her that I am not a level two, but of course she could have guessed that from my helping to transport everyone at 100 kph at once and the ridding her of the nanobots. I did not tell her everything, but enough to explain what I wanted to do. I was going to attempt to replicate the device. What I did not know was which substance followed which internal pattern, but figured it was similar to the parts from the scope. I did know from Rachael’s description that the overall pattern was of a psiotic field of a TK. The differences between the levels were a matter of degree of complexity, sort of an expanding fractal pattern. I could scan Rachael's field and my own to clue in on details. Most of the device was silicon, mass wise, maybe ceramic. Silicon was a semiconductor of course and most ceramics were based on silicon dioxide, sand. That left the gold and carbon in the form of diamond strands. They still had trouble making diamond strands, even with nanotube precursors so I guessed this was the least used element of the design. It took me two hours of patiently scanning Rachael and working on the device. Must have been close to midnight when I finished, exhausted. Rachael had checked my progress and it seemed to conform to what she had remembered.

“Ok, I am pooped. I am going to need to rest.”

“I have an advantage over you. I am younger and I was sleeping during the ride I gave you.”

“Wait a minute, you could stay bubbled and sleep at the same time?”

“Sure, we all can, well ok, Monique messed up some, can't you? You are so much more powerful I thought for sure you could.”

“Tell me, could you always do this, or did someone teach you?”

“I was taught. Had to be taught most stuff at the beginning. Only when I was under the pressure of being captured that I came up with stuff on my own.”

“Well, I had to practice a lot too and have learned a lot from this group and others. So, what is the secret?”

“It is a variation on something I have been told is lucid dreaming.”

“That makes sense I learned about lucid dreaming during meditation workshops. Means I have something to practice while I sleep. And it means you have something to concentrate on while I am out.” Pointing at

the device.

“Is it a sensor, a directional damper or what?” This also showed me that a group of TKs was much more powerful than a single one, no matter what their level. More minds meant more of the details could be figured out. Of course they were all TK2s, so I was alone at the higher levels, but maybe some of the same principals could be used. Besides, as far as we knew all the nester TKs were also two. I hope.

Next morning was clear, but a fresh layer of snow on the ground, very beautiful. I was in my dreamland. Tall trees, sound of waterfalls, snow all around. I sat looking out the window draped in icicles and crystal patterns. Marm and Ghost are buried deep under the covers. “Princess will beat you to the food.” No response. “Might have to fend for yourself in the snow.” A head pops up. “Come on, time to get up.” I throw the covers off and find two heat drunk cats stretching and yawning. I get dressed and do my usual morning stuff, then head out to the other cabin, carrying the two cats, one under each arm so they don’t have to deal with the evil snow. They should have been able to shift far enough. Lazy bums.

Rachael hears my voice and comes quickly into the room and talks quietly to me. “Whose pattern did you base this thing on, yours or mine?”

“Yours. Did not want to start with an atomic bomb till we understood it more. Probably won’t do a thing anyway. Been thinking that the devices embedded in Pam herself might have been part of the device.”

“Nope, got it to work all right. Spent most of the night fussing with it. Wasn’t till I was mad with frustration that it happened.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It doubles the power of my TK and scanning abilities. I am guessing that basing it on my pattern it adds to whatever I can already do. I have not noticed any new abilities.”

“I never know what my new gift is either at first, but I usually go up by a factor of ten on previous gifts, so this is doing something different, or I do not have it fine tuned or accurate enough. Since you never witnessed her using hers, we don't know.”

“I don’t think that is it. I think it just adds to current strength, an amplifier. You can sense much better than any machine they are likely to have come up with. We might want to try some variations though, just to be sure.”

“I am not going to make one based on my pattern just yet. In the wrong hands it could spell the end of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will explain later when we have more privacy. I think it best to get a security group together after breakfast. Keep this quiet for the time being. Can I leave that in your hands?”

“Sure. Looks like yours are already full anyway.”

I realize I am still holding the cats and set them down. “Sorry guys. Go into the kitchen and start your begging routine.” They pop out of sight as I point to the kitchen.

Monique walks in with a slight limp, but smiling. “I have never broken a bone before, is it always this easy to recover from one?” She is greeted with hugs and smiles all around. “Hey go easy, the bruises are real, even if the bones are fixed.”

Daniel motions for our attention, “Listen up. Sylvia and I have done an inventory with everyone’s help of what is here. Looks like with the 28 of us, and the three cats, that we only have enough supplies for about a week. There were only two rangers here through the winter, though they did have extra food in case something went wrong, but split 28+ ways it is a lot less time. I imagine they did not want a repeat of the ’12 disaster. So think of this time as a slight respite in our journey. Do not get too attached to the place. Had the Merced connection not turned sour, we might have set up trade with them, but that is out now. It is unlikely that anyone will be here in the foreseeable future; so don’t worry about fixing things or using things up. Nature will finally have this beautiful spot to herself again very soon. Take it easy, get some rest, and write in your journals if you have them. Kitchen and latrine duty rosters are posted near the front door, EVERYONE is listed.” Noticed that they had me up for latrine duty first thing. Good, always enjoyed doing the Zendo toilets and this set the example that I was not special or at least deserved special status. We are a team and need each other as I am continually being reminded of by circumstances.

I find the cleaning supplies and find the other two scheduled, Susan and James, imagine that. Wonder what trouble they have been up to. “So, how did you two get this duty first thing?”

“We were asked to come up with the list and being new to the group we figured it would be best not to push our welcome too far. Which one do you want, one station for each of us?”

“Makes no difference to me, here is as good a place as any. I got the cleaning supplies, brushes, detergent, etc.” Susan grabs what she needs and then James does. “All goes back into the closet over here when you are done.” They nod their understanding. The thing about doing the toilets is that it puts you in your place. It reminds you that we all produce

shit and piss and that no one is above anyone else. We will all grow old, get sick and die. This is a good reminder, sort of meditation on the burial grounds, and we have all had enough of that to fill a lifetime. Kind of nice to be in a place without the smell of death for a change. Plays another part in that everyone has to come here, and doing a good job means that everyone benefits, that everyone's day is a little happier. No one wants to sit on a dirty toilet. In some ways this is more important in one's daily existence than all of the TK and nester logic or anything else combined. One moment at a time, breathe in, breathe out. This is not a race or a competition, but a meditation. I am slow and methodical, getting every nook and cranny. I hear the others return their supplies to the closet, but that does not matter.

"We do need you for other things you know Yingui? Wow!"

"Not to worry, I was once a perfectionist, but I am over that now. Really I am. Enjoy!" I give a monk's bow and return the materials to the closet. Bowing is another pleasure I miss. I spent some time in a Zen monastery. When in doubt bow, another excellent form of meditation. Shows respect, whether for someone who cleans the latrine, or for even having a latrine. It would definitely be much worse digging a hole in the snow. And a hole in the snow is better than not being able to take a shit when you need to real bad. On and on, show respect for life's little pleasures and take nothing for granted. The next person you bow to, you may never see again, you or they could die in the next minute. The next time you do your business it may not be as nice, so bow to the latrine, a nice quiet way to say thank you.

I go back to my room to find the cats, all three this time, fast asleep on the bed. I tiptoe out so as not to disturb the royal highnesses. As I am closing the door, Rachael, Ron and Daniel come walking or floating up as the case may be. "Has Rachael filled you in?"

"On all that we know or suspect about the nesters, Yingui, why were you shielded most of the night? Do you know something we don't?"

"No Ron, just practicing. Did she tell you about the device?"

"Yes, but she said we had to wait till we were all together. Is this going to help us defeat the enemy?"

"This is important. Pay attention, there is no enemy."

They are all looking at me weird and confused. "Defeat the nesters?"

"There is no one to defeat but ignorance. What you call the enemy is simply a group of people with different means to fulfill their mission that happens to interfere with our method. What do you think the mission of the nesters is Ron?"

“To kill all TKs eventually, even if they have to use TKs to catch TKs. Ultimately to control everyone.”

“You are wrong, you want to take a try at it Rachael?” She nods no, confused. “Daniel?” Daniel bows to me and I bow back.

“Ok, no Buddhist secret society crap,” Rachael says.

Daniel continues, “Their mission is to dispel fear, their own fear. Control is the means they believe they need to use to accomplish this task.”

“What is our mission then?”

“To dispel fear, our own fear of death, of the unknown, of ignorance. We are currently running to try and dispel that fear.”

“And what do all beings seek?”

“Happiness and freedom from suffering.”

“Think about this Rachael before you respond, this is not Buddhist crap, but down to earth truth.”

“Says who?”

“Says life, says experience. Look around you. Name one person who does not want to be happy. Name one person who does not fear something, at least death. This is universal.”

“But because of ignorance, on our part and on theirs we make wrong choices. We are not the judges, the God. We have no more right to exist than they do. They may even be more correct in their methods. I don’t think so, but it is possible. Who are we to stop them by killing them?”

“So that is why we run every time instead of standing up to them. Cause we are chicken?”

“Rachael, I have never needed to run from them. Right now, from here, I could destroy them in an instant. James and Susan will confirm that. What would it accomplish? Some would survive and there are certainly more nests that we don’t know about. We would become the great evil to be overcome. We would become the oppressors of freedom, because we decided it was our way or die. Tell me something, how come you did not kill that man you got the attention of in the first nest? You got his attention, but no permanent damage. Why did you not kill him? It would have made no difference to the outcome.”

Rachael stops and thinks for a bit. “It was not necessary and killing without cause is wrong. He was not threatening my life at that moment.”

“Always? Certainly they had the means to kill you many times over, there was poison gas outside your room for heavens sake, why did you not defend yourself by killing them first? Are you chicken?”

More thinking. “We have been given a special gift. Just because we

are different does not mean we should take advantage of it. We all pulled our own weight when we were with norms, when we were normal. We never held it against them that they could not do the same things that we could. Nobody can do all that another person can do, norm or otherwise. Even when they started hunting us, we did not kill, even when we thought we were going to die.”

“Then why now? Why do you want to destroy them now?”

“I was betrayed twice, no three times!”

“Rachael, you have been betrayed your whole life, from the parent who offered you a reward and then forgot to give it, no offense Daniel, to the friend that asked for something back they have given, to the teacher who punished you instead of the person who really did it. Even our entire society betrayed itself in the end, in the form of HelperV. People saw this as a great way to accomplish some task, to help Parkinson’s patients and many others. Life is a constant set of betrayals. Why is this one so important that you have to kill thousands to appease your anger?”

“It isn’t. Not that important.” Her head is down now.

“Ron, I used Rachael for this demonstration, but I could have used anyone of us, myself included and ultimately gotten to the same point.”

“I believe you, I believe you.” I give Rachael a hug, “You are very beautiful Rachael, and we all love you very, very much. You have brought so much knowledge, skill, determination, and laughter to brighten all our lives. It is doubtful we would even have survived without your help. So all this is not a put down. I have felt the same urges as you. I have plotted in my mind how to take them out. I am equally blind at times. I have spoken to all of us when I have said these words. We need to be sure of our own motivations and desires when we work in this way. Otherwise we will again ultimately bring the great fall down on human kind. It may not be for a millennium, but it will come. We need a new way of seeing life. A new way of facing our fears and we need to help others. Above all, we need to help others. BUT, from a position of freedom, not as slaves, a position we all know well.”

Susan brings in her understanding, “It is important that we work as a team. It needs to be one that works on consensus. I have found on questions that affect so many people, that it is often that lone voice, that hold out that is the correct one. Do voice your concerns. For in those questions comes wisdom. We will most certainly make mistakes. We may even fail. But I for one want to leave this life true to my beliefs and knowing that I did the best that I could, even with the failures.”

Daniel senses a good place to change direction. “What about this

device or are you doing to drone on for another couple of days? Or do I have to put in my two cents worth and bore you all to tears?" He is smiling when he says this. We all laugh. This is important to me and circumstances have pushed my button. Oh well, live and learn.

"That is why you did not want to make a device at your level."

"Correct. Rachael first noticed a device on the one TK she was allowed to see in Sacramento. Understand that she was not shown this device, but rather she was able to examine it by the new technique she worked out what we now call pulse scanning. From her description and help and my own understanding of the psiotic materials back at the lab, I was able to put together a facsimile of the device that actually works. We don't know if it works as well as theirs or better. This is the first prototype. Much more work needs to be done." Rachael pulls the device out and hands it to the eager hands of Ron.

"This is not tech, this is something else entirely. Ceramic like shell, but inside.... this is beyond my ability to scan. Gold, carbon in diamond form? More silicon of course. Very intricate pattern that makes no sense to me."

He hands it to Daniel, who looks at it but makes no comments. "So, if this is not tech, what is it?"

"It is tech in a way, just psiotic tech not your normal e-tech. Rachael if you will demonstrate. How much do you think all three of us weigh?" Ron looks us over carefully, "Well, Daniel and I are small and fairly light weight and you are pretty solid. Lets see, together about 170 to 200 kg."

"So, Rachael should not be able to lift us without a great deal of effort and only for a very short period of time correct?"

"You mean all of us together, all three of us? No way!"

"If you will all gather around me please." They look at me suspiciously and then at Rachael, but finally come closer. "Rachael, your turn." She smiles and effortlessly lifts the three of us a half-meter or so into the air, while yawning and looking at her nails.

"How long can you hold us?"

"Since you are under the new maximum, for as long as I want."

"New maximum. How much is that?"

"Roughly twice previous."

"But you did not move at all, you did not even touch the device. How does it work?" Ron is turning the device over in his hands looking at it.

Rachael lets us down and then explains, "It works by concentrating your own focus, refining and tuning it to a higher degree. It does not give you any new abilities as far as we know. It does not appear to work for

Yingui. We want to have one of you trade with me to see if it works for you.”

Ron immediately jumps forward and trades places. “What do I do?”

“Concentrate on the center of the device, you don't actually need to be holding it, as you saw. It only needs to be near enough for you to sense and concentrate on. Next, from this concentration point direct your attention out as you normally would to do what you want to do.” Ron's brow frowns as he concentrates. We slowly rise again, a little shaky, but it works.

“So why doesn't it work for you?”

“Levels are not a matter of being different so much as degree, a fractal degree. I am tuned to a much higher degree than you or this device is. Raising TK2 abilities to twice is still less, much less than my abilities. So, no visible increase.”

“So, what level are you?” I remain silent. “Ok. Can you make a device at a higher level? In other words would a TK3 device give a level TK2 three abilities?”

“We have not tried yet.”

“Can you make more at this level.”

“All ready have. I have one for everyone.”

“Any choice of colors?” Rachael gives him a gentle wack on the back of the head.

“Each one is different in some way, so you can tell them apart, but functionally they are the same and interchangeable. I did this because, marking on them in anyway diminished the pattern unless you know precisely how to do so.”

“Any possibility this would work with a level one or less, a norm?”

“And how many of those do you see around here?”

Rachael wacks him again, “For a genius techhead, you sure are dumb.”

“Hey, it is a reasonable question, you might have had some other way to figure that out, or it might have been inherent in the design.”

“He's right. Sure you are not going sweet on Ron?” I smile.

“Aaaaaagh! That creep! No way!”

Daniel and I nod to each other. “Ok, you two stop that right this minute!” Now even Ron is laughing and eventually Rachael joins in. “Ok, let's get serious again, we all have to work together.”

“Yes sir!” We all salute Daniel at once and crack up again.

For the next couple of days we experiment with different designs. It can be made in different shapes, but the new shapes are either less

effective or harder to carry around. Making a TK3 device does give more strength but no new abilities and one very serious disadvantage. A TK2 cannot control a TK3's intensity. Nor could a TK3 device be used at TK2 or anything in between. Several small trees were knocked down and all of us were covered in snow before we finally abandoned that idea. This was good in a way. It meant that we were not likely to be meeting many TK3 enhanced TK2 nesters either. Training of the others went well. Only a few mishaps of people lifting each other and being distracted and then dumping their payload in the snow. We finally found a few boulders the right weight to practice on instead.

"We are running short on supplies and we need a consensus of where we should go next, obviously back down into the valley is out. We can assume they are ready and waiting for us there."

"Any big town or concentration of people is likely to notice us and possibly turn us in. I propose we keep to the back country away from others."

"But what about supplies? We can't eat pine cones." Actually you can, many parts of edible you know, but I keep quiet. I bet Daniel got that one too, but I can't see his face from here to confirm.

"The next park down is King's Canyon. We can at least mooch off of ranger stations for awhile till we figure something out."

"And if there are still rangers there, not as much snow the further south we go?"

"Do we know where the other nests are?"

"I cannot sense any from here. We are out of range, but I remember there was a lot of military activity in San Diego and in the Nevada desert, so I expect there might be one in each location. So that means we can't go too far south or east from here."

"Well, north is within range of Sacramento, west is San Clemens, south is San Diego and east is Nevada. So what does that leave us, up and down?"

"They did set these things up to pretty much cover the country. It is the way the military mind thinks."

"I sense three norms coming up the main road."

"Confirmed."

"Not enough time to bug out, so what's our story this time, San Jose all over again?"

"Why wasn't anyone scanning?"

"We didn't think..."

"No matter now. We need two people to go out and greet our guests."

Susan and Henry in the kitchen. Duty starts early, let's get some hot tea and grub fixed up.”

“No TK activity except Yingui, and I want you to scan them VERY thoroughly and stay out of sight. Let's present a lower profile, most of us out the back. Rachael, you're with the greeting committee as you are most likely to recognize our 'friends'”

“Ok, places everyone.” Everyone goes to his or her assigned tasks.

Two men and one woman. The men are armed with rifles slung over their shoulders and hunting knives on their belts, but nothing else. I guess that would be enough for most people. No bugs, nanobots, etc. on any of them. Everyone is on snowshoes of some kind. This is probably normal for mountain survival this time of year. “Hello, welcome. We saw you coming and have prepared a hot meal.”

“We did not expect to find anyone here, but the lady insisted on coming and she has done so much for us that we insisted on helping. So here we are. She is looking for someone, but we can't make out the name.”

“Come on up, easier to talk inside.” They take off their snowshoes and stamp the rest off of their feet. The lady is hooded against the cold and none can see her face.

The men are young, in their mid twenties and the woman un-hooded is in her mid forties. “Well Ms. who are you looking for?”

“She don't speak too well.”

“Never mind, just do your best.”

“Yeen gway” You have to give them credit for being cool. Without emotion, my own heart racing at hyperspeed, I wait unseen.

“We have heard of this person and may be able to help you. But first, food. We have hot tea and fresh muffins with jam.” Susan and Henry serve tea to everyone present and then bring out steaming hot muffins.

“Oh, those smell real good. You certainly aren't suffering up here.”

“There were some supplies left by the rangers that abandoned the place.” They eat the food with only minor small talk and pleasantries.

“Well, we need to get back before it gets dark. Will you be alright with these people?” The woman nods.

“You have been a great help to us, never would have gotten that node working again without you. Now we don't feel so isolated. Not knowing was the worst part. You are welcome back any time. Thank you!” She nods acknowledgment. The two men are show out and helped with their things. Henry gave them a cloth bag with several more muffins, for the road. The next time these two come up here to check on things after the

snow is gone, we will be gone as well.

She waits a few minutes till they nod that they really have gone out of earshot. “Yeen gway!” Marm and Ghost pop into the room and immediately rub against her legs purring very loudly and meowing up a storm. Suddenly sobbing she squats down and pets the cats and then collapses on the floor with cats all over her.

“Gee, you would think they were part dog, shameless.” I say out loud as I enter the room with tears running down my face. She rises and we hug for the longest time. “How did you ever find us?” I did not need to signal that it is ok. Susan runs over and hugs Barb also. “James is here too.” Susan should get an academy award for her performance. Serving tea when she knew who it was. Barb kept her cool also, seeing Susan and knowing that her quest was possibly over. Living on the run does hone your ability to not show emotion.

James comes in and sees Barb for the first time. Totally shocked he looks twice and then hugs her too. “How?”

Barb's Tale

“Rachael, does the tablet still have power?”

“Both are here in the next room and working, but interfacing, that sounds more like Barb's domain if she can repair nodes all by herself.”

“Barb was our netadmin at New Shanghai Marine Lab. If it can be done she can do it. It will make it much easier to communicate.” The two go off into the next room and come back in a few seconds.

“Well, if I had known it was that easy.” Rachael shakes her head. “How do the rest of us see it?” Barb has already unrolled a large monitor on the opposite wall and interfaced the tablet to it. This was a resort for the rich, so it makes sense they would have a large screen. “She is good, but won't that drain the batteries?” She pulls an extra power pack out of her pocket and attaches it to the tablet, grinning at all of us. My face is in one of those I told you so looks.

“Look at her go. Are you sure she is not plugged directly into that thing?”

“No implants either, programmer's fugue. They literally become one with the machine they are working on. DO NOT interrupt. Crashing that state of mental concentration is very draining and likely to piss her off totally.”

“How do you know that?”

“I used to program some, little stuff, so I have experienced this state

myself, but look at your own activities. Everyone of us has this ability to some extent or we would not be able to control our TK gift.”

“Then how come she does not have TK?”

“We can concentrate, but she REALLY can. I suspect that it has to do with balance. When I look at the psiotic pattern of norms vs TKs they are different. TK brains are very well balanced. Right and Left brains are equally developed. Unfortunately balanced doesn't work unless you are sap. Takes real concentration or creativity to get out of the hole. In Barb's case she is extreme in the left-brain, but very little in the right. She can plug into a logic environment in a way beyond our understanding, but she has little artistic or musical ability. Oh, she can mechanically master an instrument, but she cannot 'feel' the music. She can put together parts of a logic puzzle in creative ways, at least they appear creative to us, but she will never create an abstract painting from scratch. Machine consciousness is the extreme left and we do not mistake that for life. So she is not totally left brained.”

“How come she was at the lab then, why wasn't she a house sap like Ron? Ron sticks his tongue out her.

“Have to ask her.”

“Outline complete. Beginning narrative mode.”

“Here we go, pay attention, this will go fast.”

“Concurrent translation mode verified.”

“Psst, what's that mean.”

“Translating from Nerd to English, since Ron and I would probably be the only other ones able to read it otherwise.”

“Oh.”

Narrative:

After you left I became the scapegoat for everything that went wrong. If I had not fixed the net we would not have heard about Rachael's experience and you would not have been worried about the nesters and left. This eventually degraded to my being a virtual slave, doing grunt work and occasional net maintenance under supervision, like that would stop me. They are as likely to understand net mechanics as the would TK ability. No matter, I was not about to ruin your escape. Fortunately not everyone agreed with the treatment that I was receiving, Juanita in particular.

Three days after you left I escaped with Juanita's help. She kind of fell asleep while I was on net duty, and there was a full pack and bike

parked just outside. The rest of the people were out in the field. I nearly made it to the highway when I heard an amplified voice announce that if everyone cooperated no one would be hurt. I crept back and watched. Not much I could do. My colt was not in the pack with the rest of my stuff, they had taken that away from me right away. Military had arrived and were rounding up everyone. I assume nesters. They held some kind of device up to everyone as if checking for something.

“Ok, where is she? We want the one called Rachael.”

“There is no one by that name here.”

“Sergeant, I want a house by house search. Town’s people are to stay here in plain site. Any sudden moves will mean death. Anyone caught harboring a TK is to be shot along with everyone else in that house. You have until my sergeant returns to turn over the TKs.”

You were certainly right to worry about these people. I got out of there. Not sure why they did not know about me already. But, it was only a matter of time before they widened their search or someone in town realized I was gone and remembered I was friendly with TKs.

Got all the way to south San Jose without incidence. A few kms out I found some clothes and another bike. If they decided to go looking for me, I did not want to be easy to spot. San Jose was very quiet, too quiet. I remembered that this was where they first picked up Rachael, so I kept my wits about me. The problem was, in New Shanghai there are no buildings above three stories. Here they went all the way to 40 or 50. I was not used to looking that far up for possible lookouts or even attack. They dropped a net on me from several stores up and then hit me with a trunk of some kind. Wonder if they learned that one from the nesters?

I woke to a circle of people wearing hoods to cover their faces. They have an interesting way to determine whether or not a person is TK. They throw increasingly large stones wrapped in heavy cloth at you till you pass out from the pain or show TK ability to ward them off. Low tech, but you would have to tell me if it would have been effective. They are careful not to hit your head or other vital places, at least if you do not respond in a TK manner. I am sure even a TK2 could not hold off 20 missiles at once. [We could, but not forever] I am afraid that my speech did not convince them either. For what it was worth, they did apologize after wards. I was escorted out of their section of the city immediately. No doubt to diminish their guilt.

I holed up in the nearest abandoned space to nurse my wounds. I woke on the second day very sore and alone, bruises covering most of my body. Something was entering the structure. I hid in a corner and waited.

Couldn't do anything about the bike and stuff strewn about. A middle aged man entered. He had a limp and a cane. I came out of hiding and asked if I could be of help. He nearly died of a heart attack judging from the sound of his breath being inhaled so quickly. I told him I was sorry for scaring him. He must have understood me as he apologized profusely as he did not realize that anyone had taken up residence here. I said that I was leaving that day and would soon be out of the way. I asked him if there were any TKs about and he said that no one had seen any for two days. Very strange too. They had been increasingly scarce as some of the non-TKs had been actively hunting them, but we heard them at night. They can see in the dark you know. I did not wait to see what the 'others' thought of me.

I figured that you had gone east, as that was the message we sent out together before you left. All TKs head for the Sierras. Only two real cities east of here in the right direction, Modesto or Merced. Modesto was too big, especially if they were hunting TKs, so I headed for Merced. Found a sporting goods store on the way out that was not totally ransacked and found a small pair of binoculars. Took two days to get there, being careful and staying out of sight. Used the binoculars a lot to judge the road ahead at regular intervals. Slept in abandoned houses at night and ate what I could scrounge.

As I approached Merced I saw a few buildings on fire and evidence of nesters. Watched from a distance and saw them head south. I went around Merced on the north side, across fields when I had to. Counted on them not caring about a loner as I am sure they could have seen me if they cared. No more TK tests for me. Took longer to go around of course. Camped several kms outside Merced on Highway 140. Another abandoned farmhouse, but there were still some dry goods in the pantry. Famished I ate and then fell asleep. In the morning I looked around and found another bike in decent condition and did a trade. Also changed clothes again. Really didn't want to get stopped again.

Next day I make it almost to El Portal before my legs give out from going uphill for so long and from the previous injuries. Lucky they did not break any bones. I don't know why I chose the directions that I did, your note was not very specific. Logic rules my decisions, or at least I thought it did. Now I am not so sure. I just kept feeling the urge to go in the directions that I did. Took me most the morning to make it the rest of the way to El Portal. There were people walking down the sidewalks, a few bikes and one car pulling a cart with produce and supplies. Except for the numbers being lower you would have thought nothing was

different here. I decided to brave it and ride into town like I belonged there. There was a cafe open with a few people in it, so I parked the bike and grabbed my pack and went in. They asked what I wanted to eat, just like that. Stunned I said I had no money. Took a few times to be understood, but I am used to that. They said they no one had money and they would work out something I could do afterward and not to worry about it. I was not picky about what they were serving and shoveled it down in a hurry. Several people said to slow down, that I really was safe here. I guess nesters had not reached this place. Yet.

After I finished I immediately asked what I had to do, being prepared for latrine duty or worse. The lady behind the counter politely asked what I did before the fall and how long I expected to stay. I explained I was leaving as soon as I could, but though I was a netadmin before the fall, I was not against honest work of any kind, even latrine duty. Figured it was best to get it over with. She called over to one of the young men and I heard net several times. If I could fix their node I was free and clear. Lead on.

The node was a mess. Maybe some crazy got in or people just got pissed when it didn't work. I started to work, pulling out what looked functional from what was fried. Started to put it back together. Had to rebuild one of the machine OSs, copied from parts of a dead one. Took most of the day without a break, but that's how I work. They would not have the capacity of the pre-fall town, but they could handle the traffic from the number of people I saw and then some. About midnight I had it back up and working. Being in a remote town was an advantage in this case. They had sat feed instead of fiber. As far as I know none of the sats have fallen. The one above them had not at least. My young escort was asleep in the corner. I figured I would take this chance to check things out.

Most nodes down of course, but found more than I expected, especially in the urban areas. More than we had heard about from San Jose, so people were getting things going again. Saps did most of the work anyway, so I guess I should not have been that surprised. Of course most of those would go dead as soon as the food ran out and the people left, but that must be at least a few months away yet. From a few remaining nodes in the larger metro areas I pieced together a story. Nesters take over an area very quickly and cut all communication lines but their own, or take over a node. As soon as a node is recognized as compromised though the uninfected nodes have been cutting them out. It is a good guess that they have not found them all, but all the same most

messages go encrypted. Took me awhile to break the code and enter the conversation. All kinds of atrocities are being committed. The excuse seems to be the terror of the TKs. TKs are the new terrorist threat and must be eliminated or controlled at all costs. Nodes not infected have been telling their TKs to get out of town. A modern witch hunt. TKs were blamed for the plague. They existed from long before the plague and it was all a huge conspiracy to take over the US and ultimately the world. If a town is found to be harboring TKs it gets treated real bad. A lot of nodes were sympathetic to the TK plight. People knew some of the TKs pre-fall and post fall and knew they were the result of the plague not the cause. They knew that these were good people who did not ask for the curse and only wanted to help like everyone else. It did not matter. I spread the message, encrypted, that the TKs should head to the Sierras, Lake Tahoe specifically, figuring that would be easier to find. But it could take months under good conditions to get from one side of the US to the other. Thank goodness for spring. There are a lot who have been taken or killed by the nesters. Probably thousands by my estimates.

I crashed for a few hours and woke to a number of people crowding into the small room. They apologized for waking me, but everyone was excited about the node being up. Everyone wanted to check on relatives and friends, hoping against all hope that someone they knew had made it. I guess not knowing was worse than the worst that could have happened. I was treated to a heroes breakfast. Someone else immediately got my bike and started fixing it up and cleaning it. I said that the deal was for one meal, but they would hear none of it. I decided to trust them and told them that I had to get to Yosemite. Looks of concern came over their faces. There was snow still on the ground here, between buildings and the like, keep going up and it was only passable on snowshoes. Well, I had never used snowshoes; New Shanghai only gets a centimeter of snow a decade. They told me not to worry; they would get me there. Too late to set out today, so they fed me the rest of the day and I got a bed to sleep in that night.

Next morning the two young men you saw me with and I all piled into the open car, no cart this time. Had to leave the bike behind, too heavy to carry over snow. As soon as the car could go no further, even with snow tires, we set out on snowshoes with light packs. I knew they were not intending to spend the night so wondered about the packs. They said emergency gear in case we don't make it for some reason. Made sense. We might want to think about that for ourselves. In any event you know the rest. No one came forward as a TK, so either there weren't any

or they were keeping them secret. Since they did not bring up the subject, neither did I. Maybe the nesters would not get here, this close to snow and in the middle of nowhere.

Our Turn

Numerous people pieced together our story up to this point. “Why did you come? Why travel all this way, not that we are not glad to see you, but I would have thought you would have been a lot safer away from us?”

“No chois. Someding goin on. You need me soon.” Barb had always been around during a gift download, maybe that was it. It was getting close to time. I had not heard the voice in so long that I had forgotten about it entirely. Too many distractions.

“I’m glad you are here. Each time I am out is longer than the last.” She nods that she knows. “Let me scan you later though, there may be something I can do about your bruises. Want to make sure there is nothing more serious.” She nods again.

Daniel gets up, “Well, it looks like our decision about where to go next has been decided for us. Lake Tahoe it is. Could not live with myself letting any more TKs be captured by the nesters.” General sound of approval.

“Do we take a vote?”

“No, not a vote, this should be by consensus. Now is as good a time as any. Does anyone object?”

“What about the Sacramento nest. We get awfully close to them. No point in all of us getting killed or captured.”

“Think then. What could we do to minimize the hazards?”

“Travel only at night?”

“What about infrared sensors then, even satellites can pick up IR?”

“Is there anyway we could mask our heat?”

“Yes, I believe I could do that. It should be testable at least. Does the tablet have a camera on it?”

“Yes but how will that help.”

“Cameras based on silicon can see in the IR and black plastic transmits IR. Put that black plastic over the lens and see if we get any illumination from the lamp here after I shield it.” We get everything in position. “First with the light.” A fuzzy image of the light appears, the plastic was definitely not optical quality. “OK, we know it can see in IR, now I will shield it with a layer of black diamond. Carbon in this form

should absorb IR.” The light goes out.

“How are we going to see?”

“Stupid, it's night, what did you expect to see?”

“Hey, I'm not a scientist, give me a break.”

“Great, now which route do we take?”

“How about the staying east as long and as much as possible. That puts the Sierras between them and us. Not likely they will want to mount a force over the snow even if they detect us.”

“Good idea and I can sense for nesters on this side with a clear view. They will be expecting us to go south to get away from them, not north. Any more suggestions? Nope?”

On the road again

We pack quickly. Alas, Marm and Ghost were a real pain to catch. We finally got them by everyone looking for them and then throwing a bubble around them as soon as they appeared somewhere. “What about all the evidence we were here?”

“Knowing we were here does not tell where we are going. They still can't figure out straight up, as even most TKs would not try that for very long.”

“Good time to try out the amplifiers. Bubble up!” Barb was with me of course, as she could not move on her own. She was wonderful in calming down the cats who finally decided that sleeping was better than complaining. After we clear the trees I shield us. Nothing but trampled snow below. I took the precaution of dissolving all of our trash and waste, human included. Bikes had to go also. I wanted to have the ability to travel faster and bikes would not help us on snow and do constitute unnecessary weight. This was the third time we were relying on my TK abilities for transport, it was time to drop the pretense of using or needing bicycles. Maybe they will think we left days ago or did not stay at all. I am counting on them being in a hurry and careless. It's worth a try anyway and only took a few minutes.

I took us along Highway 120 up to Tuolumne Meadows and then over Tioga pass to Highway 395. So unbelievably quiet. Traveling this way did not entail much if any wind resistance, which also kept the sound level down. Most had gotten the hang of shielding while asleep, so there was a minimum of chatter. Barb though she calmed the cats fine was not so sure of this. She could not see outside the IR shield and there is almost no sensation of movement, but I don't know if that helped or hurt. Every

five minutes for the first hour, she would ask me where we were now, but she finally went to sleep too. I am sure it has been a long day for her. Amazing that she was able to find us. Most were able to use their amplifiers. Guess it was rather intuitive. This helped our rate of speed. It had snowed lightly for several days but now was cold and clear. Even being careful to stay hidden and going slow, we should make it long before sunrise.

Mono Lake was starting to make a comeback, since Los Angeles was forbidden from stealing its water any more. Soon all the rock and salt formations would be under water again and it would cease to look like an alien landing site. The road was in a state of general disrepair. Partly because it was little used before the fall and partly because storms since had caused some damage and no one was around any longer to repair it. Nature was taking it back, one road at a time. I can remember being carsick every time we went into the mountains so I was cutting corners wherever I could. Really, just wanted to get there. Tired of running.

Passed through a couple of small long abandoned towns. So many died where there were no longer tourists to feed them. East side of the Sierras was much drier, less snow pack. I did not even think of it till now. Black was going to show up like crazy against snow. I added a thin layer of titanium dioxide to the outside to cover us white. What else had we or I overlooked?

Barb was asleep, so this might be a good time to look at the damage done by the stroke almost four months ago and the stoning more recently. I still had to 'drive', so I could not give full attention, but enough that several minutes later I had located the problem area, small cerebral hemorrhage had killed part of the brain tissue, probably induced by the fever itself. Not sure what I could do at this point, would certainly require more than I could do right now. I felt it would be nicer to ask for permission first, as this was not life threatening any longer. Maybe I could get some stem cells made to fill in the gap. She would have to relearn and chances are other parts of the brain had already done that to the extent that it could. I was clearly not a neurosurgeon, even with my new talents. Several small cracks in ribs were easy to repair. Skin tissue would take care of itself. The bruises were already changing color.

I was starting to sense Lake Tahoe now and it's surroundings. There were still people in Carson City and a few scattered in small groups around the edge. Not too many people would choose to winter over. Some of these, being so isolated, may not have even been exposed in the first place. Where were the rest of the New Atherton group? I could not

tell from here whether they were norms or TKs, as most were asleep and thus probably not projecting anyway. However, I did not want to try to explain how twenty eight people suddenly appeared out of now where, when all of the roads had snow on them nearby at least. I found a clearing well away from others and set down. I was within range of a TK2, but out of range of a norm without tech. Those who were awake roused the others. We needed some form of shelter and food. Some of us needed sleep. I could shield while asleep now, but not drive.

Just off the clearing was an abandoned cabin. Footsteps in the snow suggested that someone had checked it out and decided it was too much trouble. From the looks of it, it was some time ago. That green and brown paint everyone up here seems to like had pealed off most of the structure. Inside was a total mess. Clearly animals of all kinds had gotten in, though I only sensed some sleeping squirrels and such in the attic and basement. I guess they decided the main room was too open. Dried feces, fur, urine, torn apart furniture. I was ready to give up when Daniel called everyone to order.

“OK, we need to make quick work of this. Open the doors and windows and everything not tacked down goes out. And duck!” Instant chaos. The level of laughter was amazing. Guess I was not the only one feeling beat up by all this.

“Yingui, we need some hot water with bleach if you please.”

“Aye, aye captain!” Grabbed some of the flying debris and formed them into the necessary buckets and solution. I made hydrogen peroxide instead, as I could not remember the formula for bleach. Should work as well and not stink as much. Opened a closet and found a couple of brooms that the squirrels had not found yet and fashioned them into mops instead. Now how did that ditty go for swabbing the deck of a pirate ship? Oh well. A few minutes later we had the place cleaned out. A few minutes more to sort our stuff out from the debris that landed on it. Hmm...

I am a worry wort. I am constantly trying out scenarios in my head to try and figure out what could happen, might happen, or likely to happen. I did not think for a moment that the military did not know of the message for TKs to come up here. If Barb could decrypt a message, they certainly could. I did not think they had the necessary supplies to move lots of troops in on such short notice, but there are lots of other interesting things in their arsenal, and some new stuff if Rachael's information was any clue. Not that they ever shared information about abilities with saps. Oh, we have the netcasts of glorious victories, but how much of that was real?

We had detected the nanobots, but did we find everything? I thought of changing my name, since I suspected that they were already looking for Yingui, but that would only last a few minutes till they interrogated one of the people who knew me. I could take out their tech, but that would be a dead giveaway that I was here and then they would really zero in. I would become a real threat to them and they would likely retaliate with everything they have, jets, rockets, even tac-nucs or worse. I am feeling more and more that the less of a threat we pose the less likely they will hunt us down. Maybe I am being too optimistic. On the other hand, let them think I was no different from any other TKs till it was really needed. No reason to give away the goose. I know these decisions are not mine alone, but if they were looking for Yingui, it was my skin. I looked around. The only evidence of a TK greater than two was the shield I had made and I had dissolved that upon landing. Even a TK2 could travel bubbled, just a lot slower, but it beat walking over snow.

Now that I was closer I reached out and scanned the area. Most of the people in the Tahoe area were TK with a few norms. The norms tended to be separate from the TKs, so they may be locals. May not have even been exposed to HelperV being so isolated up here and in the winter. That should not present a problem as no one was apparently contagious any longer or the nests would have been taken out long ago. That brings the number of TKs in this area to over one hundred. Need to get us all together. I was thinking that a TK beacon of some sort might work, but it would be better if a TK2 did this so it would be more believable. Maybe working in concert with two TK2s and two amps, concentrating into a narrow beam, they could reach the necessary distance. Slowly rotating 360 should draw attention to this location. If caught they could explain how it was done. The nesters had amps, though I would be bet they would be surprised we had them. That was one thing that would be hard to explain. Ours will not scan the same as theirs, theirs being made in a shop, and not with TK5 abilities. This is an assumption of course. TK2s could not scan them very well, so unless they broke one open to compare they might not figure it out. I hope that the scattered TKs are the Atherton ones.

Ron comes down from upstairs and reports, “One of the rooms upstairs must have been a library. Whole room is filled with books and what must have been books. Lots of damage, but still a lot intact. We might want to go through them to see if there is anything useful.”

“Sound good. No net means that these piles of books we come across may be our only information sources for awhile. Good ahead and start

seeing what's there.”

Armstrong Sacramento

“More reports are coming in. We have located isolated pockets with no casualties. The plague missed them completely before it burned itself out. Estimates of world population now stand at over 30 million, three times previous estimates. Because the pockets were not exposed, they also have no TKs either. We intend to keep it that way. Our goal is to have every existing TK under military command or eliminated. They are too great a threat. If they can break out of a maximum-security facility, they can break in. Operation Harness has been going very well. Over 90% of the TKs picked up so far have been successfully added to the program. The other 10% either died under the medical procedures or in the field. A small percentage tested the limits of the harness and died by the internal lethal release of the ricin payload. Operation Honeypot has not been showing as good of results. Initially the figures were close to 100% success, but word has gotten out and now no TK will come close to an Armstrong facility. Which is good from a security point of view for the bases, but does make it harder to round up the strays. It was decided to bring the honey to the flies. Harnessed or HTKs have been sent out to areas of likely TK infestation. Using HTKs and bots with TK sensors we hope to make quick work of the last of the TKs out there.”

“Thank you Captain Meyer. What about the group from San Jose? Have they been located yet?”

“When we got to Atherton there were no TKs above level one present. We did get a report from a sympathetic, but not yet harnessed, level 2 from Merced matching their description, but the supposed macro tags supplied by us for this purpose have gone missing along with the nanotags. The macro tags were activated briefly 10 days ago, but went off line 30 minutes later only 1 km away. The nanotags never activated and cannot be found in Merced. Empty supply containers were found, but it is possible they were simply transferred to another container. The ‘friendly’ TK in charge did not survive questioning. I conjecture that she sold the tags for profit. It is simply not possible to trust a non HTK.”

“Captain Jacobs, what is our progress with the larger concentration gathering at Lake Tahoe?”

“We have five HTKs in place. There appear to be over a hundred TKs at present with more coming in all the time. I recommend that we allow this to continue for at least another week to collect as many as possible.”

“We don’t even know if this operation will work yet. I would rather have scattered TKs than a high concentration of them so close to Sac. We don’t know how long our HTKs will go undetected. Also they could not have brought much food with them and will have to move soon.”

“Do we retrieve our HTKs?”

“That is a negative, don’t want to alert the other TKs that something is up. We can sort them out after wards. They may be ok however; the bots have been programmed to miss anyone with a harness. Is it possible to somehow get the TKs together? Last report showed them scattered over a 100 square kilometer area.”

“We may be in luck there sir. Apparently some TK has figured out how to send a TK beacon. The groups our HTKs are in all want to meet up at the beacon. This is the third report mentioning some mythological TK referred to as Yeen-gway or something like that. No one by that name in the database. The translators says it is could be a Chinese word for ‘silver ghost’.”

“Any ideas?”

“No sir.”

“When the HTKs report visual sight of each other we move. We may not get another chance. Trankbots first to soften things up. Then I want a flyover by the stealth fighter to assess the situation. We don’t have enough troops to spare for a manned assault. If the tranks do not work we drop gas, followed by quarter ton TK seekers.”

Lake Tahoe

We found a stack of wood that was cut to the right length, but needed to be split. Good time to test out a theory of mine. I set one up and concentrate the TK into a sort of axe formation and have at it. Thock! It works! So, it is possible to shape the force. “James, come over here for a minute.”

“Hmm, looks like work to me. What's up?”

“Try shaping the TK force. I want to make sure a TK2 can do this.” The first attempt knocks the wood off the block. “Try again. Think axe head.” Thock! “Great, it does work. Your karate experience probably helps. Gather up some others, we have heat!” Maybe my toes would thaw out. At least the cats should be happy. Soon the sound of cursing and thocking could be heard, as everyone wanted to try and learn how to do this new thing. Kept your mind off the cold anyway.

“Listen up. Based on information given by Rachael, at least five of the many people our beacon is bringing in are tagged from a nest. Be on your best behavior. Do not engage the five, single them out, or even let them know we know. Remember, they are the ones when pulse scanned, show cybernetic implants on the spine and heart. There are no known medical devices that use both of these locations and very few with prosthetic implants survived the fever anyway. Let them see that we are harmless and just want to be left alone. If there is trouble, defend yourself, but do not injure anyone not directly involved in conflict and try not to do that. This is NOT a time to get even. Remember, they believe in what they are doing, just as we do. If anyone asks, we will not be staying in the area, but moving away from the nests. We do not want conflict. If necessary we will even concede to being on a reservation like the Native Americans were until the fall. At least I hope they are finally free. One last thing, remember, we do not talk about Yingui, he is our trump card, that we will hold till necessary. He does not like this either, never having been comfortable with secrets, but until we know which way the nests are likely to go we want to play it safe. The security committee meets upstairs in five minutes. Everyone else check in with Sylvia as usual. If you are not actively needed, act as greeters and stay warm.” Giggles are heard on the last statement.

All three cats come in to see what Barb and I are doing. When they see everyone else they decide that this is going to be boring and curl up for a nap. We are all close together to conserve heat. Our shielding was

effective against wind chill, but inside it did not seem to help. Though we were able to get pot bellied stoves going, it was still very cold at dusk up this high in elevation. “Most of the people from Carson City are here. We still have a few groups from around the other side of the lake that have not arrived yet, but they are moving towards us. Not everyone has figured out how to bubble to make moving over snow easy, even at a walking pace. One of the further groups has managed to get a large snow mobile with a cabin working and are coming in style. We might be able to use that vehicle later for the sick or injured who cannot bubble themselves. Some of the people are from our group in New Atherton, but not all have made it yet. They also encountered 'problems' on their trip here. They split up into small groups so as not to draw attention to themselves remember. This was before we knew of the Sacramento nest though and it is possible some were taken in there. Passing by Sacramento was the most obvious route to take. They should have all been here by now, as they were a week ahead of us, though did not travel via TK air like we did of course.”

“We did spend a lot of time in Yosemite though. Do you think the nester TKs will try anything?”

“I don't know. It is clear they know we are here or they would not send in spies. So far the two we have met, having gotten in less than an hour ago, have not declared themselves. Maybe when they feel it is safe they will do so and make their sales pitch. We should be far enough away from a nest in a hard place to bring troops so we should not have to worry about that. It is also unlikely they will sacrifice their own people unless they feel we are an immediate threat. Yingui will be monitoring to make sure they don't start tagging all of us again. So far, nanos have only been sensed on the five, no others.”

“If we have to defend ourselves, what do we do?”

“I would prefer we run. If we fight, we give away our strengths and weaknesses, as long as we run, they won't know. I for one am not up to killing. Have seen enough death these last couple of months.”

“I have found an emergency sat uplink in the same room with the books. The rodents have made a mess of the wiring, but I think it can be repaired. I found one book that might help us come up with alternatives to our 'past' setup and a map of the local area.”

“Good Ron, we really need to tell others what we are finding out. No more secrets!”

“That sounds contradictory, we run so as not to give stuff away and then get on the net to give it away. Which way is it?”

“It is one thing to hear about it, quite another to see it in action. It is also the question of intent. In spite of all of our knowledge and abilities, we choose not to inflict pain or death. That says something about us. But you can't really shout in the middle of a battlefield. 'I could destroy you if wanted to.' as you are running away.” We all laugh at that thought.

“Merow?”

“How about if...”

Make a shield of this configuration now and prepare to hold still.

“What the? Bubble up now!” I make the shield according to the directions, using the furniture and air outside our bubble for mass, and then blackout.

“Attack now!”

Hatching

I awake to the feeling of falling and quickly stabilize the shell we are in. We are about a meter off the ground; we were about four meters off the ground. The shaking causes everyone else to slowly wake up. The cats freak and all three disappear, but quickly reappeared still wild from fear, but now covered in snow. I hear a voice in my head, *hide hide!* Oh great, at least one of the cats has been upgraded to telepathic ability. This could get annoying. I scan the area. One thing still gets me. Every time I go through this it is like waking up to color, as in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy comes out of the house into Oz for the first time. She had been living in a dreary black and white world in rural Kansas. My perceptions are so much clearer; I can't imagine what it was like before and how I could have survived. Barb is the last to waken. *Where are we and what's going on?* Oh good two voices, one sounds human at least.

“Who said that? I heard a voice talking in my head”

“At least one of the cats and Barb are now telepathic, TP for short, as long as we are using acronyms. Welcome to the other side of an upgrade. Each of you can expect to have received a gift of some sort. Since I cannot ‘hear’ you and you cannot presumably hear me, I assume that we have not been upgraded in that way. But since we are all human, you probably will follow the same path I have been taking, Barb being the exception because of her different psiotic pattern.”

“So where are we and what's going on?”

“We are about a meter off the ground. I did not wake up fast enough to prevent us from falling some. The house no longer exists. Looks like it was hit with a bomb or missile of some sort. There is a shallow crater where the house was. There are at least five bots watching the place and lots of pieces of bots scattered south of where the house was.”

“There are bodies out there, seven scattered among the twisted wreckage of a few tent poles.”

“I sense TKs coming this way, not cyborgs. Wow, I can scan much further now!”

“This is still a very dangerous place. They need to be warned.”

“Barb, I know this is still very new to you and you do not have much control yet. I am going to set the shell down, not dissolve it. I don’t want those bots to see what’s inside. When I do, shout as loud as you can for all TKs to leave the area immediately, extreme danger, nesters are killing TKs on sight, leave now and pass the word.”

“Wait! James is outside the shell waving in the trees. He does not look that good.”

I SHIFT the bots watching and they all disappear at once. Well I know my upgrade at least.

“Barb tell James to come out, the bots are gone and wait for us in the flat place where the entrance used to be.”

You don’t need to say anything out loud for future reference and no I can’t read every thought, at least not yet. Only those on the surface intended for broadcast. We need to experiment when we have time. The cats are the easiest of course as it is two way though there is a language barrier that even my abilities cannot always overcome.

Cats plural, this is going to be a nightmare, sigh... But dear, they are so cute and may be VERY useful for recon, who ever heard of a cat that can ‘talk’? *Cats always talk, stupid monkeys.*

Great. “James anyone, now please!” Barb sends her message to James and I make a hole in the bottom of the shell and pass over him, dropping down to pick him up.

“Cool a flying saucer!”

Barb sends or rather SHOUTS her message out that the TKs at Lake Tahoe have been decimated by nesters, leave at once and warn others. Very succinct, programmer’s skill.

“They are moving off, but you probably should repeat the message at five minute intervals till we leave.”

“That’s well past 100 meters, so it appears you have been upgraded to at least TK3, possibly 4 for Daniel. I think it may be somewhat age

dependent, Daniel being older. Not to mention the amount of time we were out. And yes, looking at Barb, I am going to use voice so everyone can hear. We will save the hidden method for when we need it, though I don't expect you to go back to fumbling with the spoken word. Best to play mute around strangers though."

Agreed.

"It will not take them long to bring more sensor bots here and I am sure the sat is still watching. I am also sure a 'saucer' that could survive their bomb is going to be a REAL interest to them. There are so many up there, no way of knowing which one is our spy and we don't want to take them all out, at least not yet."

"Daniels right." Another range extension for me as well, should be close to 1000 km now if the curve still fits. That's a lot of info to take in. Reminds me of what a famous cell biologist, Daniel Mazia, I worked with once said, "Fixation is not preserving everything, but selective extraction." In other words, filter the mess before trying to make sense of it. Of course, it could mean missing something also. Do the best you can.

"You shifted the bots out of here, you could do the same to all of us?"

"Do you know where the bots are?"

"Ah no, thought you would know, you sent them."

"Haven't a clue. Don't get worried, with the cats help, I am sure I will learn, just not all of us on the first day please, unless something really nasty is after us. Don't want to end up in the center of the planet."

"Good safety tip." We all nod.

"Together we should be able to really make this shell move and it already looks like a flying saucer as James pointed out. They don't know what we are, so may not connect us with TKness." I remember James and give him a quick scan, some bruises, but basically just dehydrated and infested with nanos. I make a cup of water for him. "Thanks, how did you know?"

"Not so fast, slow sips, so your body can absorb it better. Too much at once and you will get cramps. You are also heavily infested with nanobots. Hold still." I can clean up someone even faster now. These were different than the last ones. No outside ports, just one pore and a lethal payload of botulin toxin.

"Thanks"

"Where to?"

"Glad you asked that." Ron pulls out a map of California and Nevada and a book, which he holds up, In the Absence of the Sacred by Jerry

Mander.

“Good book, where I have gotten a lot of ideas on the way I think things ought to be. Surprised you remember how to read a linear device of such antiquity.” Grin!

Grin back and tongue stuck out for measure. “Found them next to the uplink. Flat maps still work best in an emergency. No meth needed. [short for methanol, used in the fuel cell batteries of most portable devices] A few years old of course, but should basically be correct. I was sitting on them during our blackout.”

We all poor over the map. “A lot of the ideas in the book come from what Native Americans have worked out over thousands of years. Rather than reinvent the wheel, how about asking the experts? There are two reservations only a short distance away according to the map.”

“Yeah but there are five others in Nevada, do we want to be that close? They will come looking for us for sure.”

“The ones close to ‘white mans cities’ are likely to be the most contaminated culturally as well.”

“You should know that there is another nest outside of Las Vegas.”

I was going to suggest Tonopah till we got our bearings, but how about New Jerusalem instead, looks big enough for supplies as well?

“We need to hear James’ story before we get too jumpy.”

“Agreed”

Agreed.

“Barb, can you TK?”

I have been checking. Only little, small things like James’ cup but nothing as big as a pack.

“Ok, TK1 but unknown TP level, possibly a two as two seems to be the normal starting point for a major ability. That means you should be able to read anyone within about 100 meters. Your shout obviously got further, just like we can go beyond our abilities for a short period of time. Can’t be sure though, as you are one of a kind. OK, that puts you with me. Let’s bubble up and move it.” I take us straight for a spot about 10 km outside of New Jerusalem.

“Whoa, we are really moving!”

“Every time one is upgraded, you receive a new gift and previous ones expand about ten fold. It is the way the fractal nature of this seems to work. And we have a smaller group this time and don’t need to go slow, though I am keeping us below the sound barrier to avoid waking the dead out here and drawing even more attention to ourselves.”

Ron breaks in, “Actually it is closer to pi squared, by my

calculations, based on my new scanning ability and distances on this map. Roughly 9.86.”

“Ten is close enough for me.”

“Anyway, I thought we did not affect the air and such the same way when we moved. We should be able to max it out. Something about inertia being different?”

“We’ll check that out later. 900 kph should be good enough for now.”

James’ tale

“I will take it from just before you went under. Up to that point you should remember. All of you had just gone upstairs for your security meeting. I was downstairs awaiting whatever chores awaited me.”

A muffled cry from upstairs and then the entire cabin shakes violently. “What was that! Like a huge implosion. The windows upstairs have all blow in and why did the security committee just bubble up into a shell of some kind?”

“Scan! Something set them off.”

“What are those?”

“Bots, thousands of them. Hm, more like hundreds.”

“Gee they’re fast! No wonder we did not sense them.”

“Look outside.”

“Bots! Lots of them! Look at how they work. Hit the ground as balls, then unfold and take off. Crawlers, hoppers and flyers. All different sizes and kinds, sort of like insects really. Bubble up and get everyone inside now!”

A puff of smoke comes from several of the bots. People start to fall. “The bots are shooting everyone! Just saw someone go down, another, and another! This is madness we weren’t hurting anyone. SHIELD YOURSELVES AND GET INSIDE NOW!”

“It is madness outside. Tweaking the insides of the bots, takes them right out.” We concentrate on taking out as many bots as possible to the sound of darts hitting the walls and occasional boom as a dead bot hits the outside at full speed, but they are so fast we miss most of them. Hard to depend on TK sensing alone.

“Keep the bots away from the windows. I am going outside to put up the one storm shutter we left open. Cover me!” The door opens and I dart out as quickly as I can. “Get inside! Get inside! You, help me close this shutter.”

“Now get inside.” This looks like fun. I remember Daniels use of stones and have been practicing. Also used the 'AX' technique as it was hard to find pebbles in the snow and pine cones have too much wind resistance. I set myself up in the center of the open spot, concentrate and put on my game mind. Just like net games only more real! I tweak insides of bots, I slice through them with concentrated TK, I stay shielded and darts are bouncing off of me from all sides. “Yeeha!” Start directing their flight subtly till they take each other out. I must have kept it up for five minutes or more till I feel a tiny, tiny one on the back of my neck and then blackout.

Should have paid more attention to Rachael’s experiences. They wear you down and take advantage of the first available opening. It was fun though, sigh...

I did learn a little from Rachael. When I wake, I remain motionless. Butt cold, hungry and horny. Great, a trunk bot got me. I am on some kind of makeshift litter using tent poles bundled together and tent fabric. Henry and Thomas are bearers with Monique and Susan close by. I am covered in blankets, but clearly not enough. Others are cold too. Dark with a light snowfall. We are traveling along a trail roughly north. Don’t know how I know that. Anyway, I shield myself very close to my skin as a means of providing some insulation, a variation on our traveling shield. I am detected.

“Halt. Ok, you two, let him down, he’s awake and can walk now.” I arise groggy.

“Walking will help get the stuff out of your system faster. This is the game plan since you missed orientation. Good job with the bots by the way, as good as our best and they have been practicing a lot.”

“Might have something to do with the incentive of fighting for one’s life.”

“I am TK Smith and you are on your way to transport in Carson to be taken to the Armstrong facility in Sac. Before you try anything, you will notice that all your friends are still here. There is a reason. You have been given a nano device with a lethal payload, botulin toxin. If you are not back to Sac in three days you are toast. Got it?” I nod. I recognize the name, Rachael’s ‘friend’. “You will notice, if you have not done so already, that you have no tags on you. You are free to leave any time you want. They don’t care if you make it to Sac or not, just that you are taken out of action. If you want to live you cooperate and come back with us. Got it?” I nod again. “Oh and no talking, even a level 2 cannot not stop hollow points at this range.” But a tree can.

“Was that TK Pam Smith?”

“I don't know. She did not give her first name and Smith is a common last name. Didn't matter anyway. Not a lot of choices available.”

I know they can sense me as far as I can sense them, make that twice as far. They have amps and ours are all missing. So the main problem is the gun. I continue my skin shield. Even take off my coat, as it is getting too warm. Others notice. Good. There is a pause and they seem to catch on. I feel others starting to shield in the same way. At least I can make it more comfortable for the group.

“I told you this group was good. One just showed the others now to protect from cold. We can get lots of work and ideas out of them. Well worth the effort and expense.” Apparently hooked into a com of some sort. I need a distraction. “Yes sir, the tranked one came out about 15 minutes ago. We have 43 walking at present count sir. Our ETA at Carson is three hours sir.”

Only 43, there were hundreds at Tahoe. Maybe there is more than one group of us. I need a distraction. We are on the side of a snow-covered hill with lots of trees. I fake tripping and yell “What the! Everyone down now!” and blast up lots of little piles of snow all around like gunfire and few big ones for effect. Quickly I roll down the side of the hill and get behind the trees. The others have caught on and starting to raise their own snow flurries, but no one follows me. I hear the gun go off and everything goes quiet. Someone just died so I could get away. I dart among the trees till I am well outside the 200-meter sensing limit of a TK2 amped. I throw up and then get moving. I have one chance, to get back here to Yingui. He is the only one besides a nest that can remove the bugs in time. No one was going to make a slave of me again.

The trunk must not have been a strong one, or all the moving about really did clear it faster. I had no idea where I was, so I doubled back and found our trail about a km back. Lucky the snowing was light and how not covered our tracks yet. Thirsty I grab some snow to eat and then think that might not be a good idea right now. I cup it in my hand and gently warm up with TK till it is liquid that can be quickly slurped down. Still cold, but not frozen. The trail is clear and I am running out of time. No idea how far away I am from the cabin. I start out at a slow run and run till I see the sun coming up. It must have been yesterday night we were hit. I hope so or I am not going to make it. If I am a day and a half out I will not make it. I am moving faster than the group marching though. Then what happens if you are not there when I got back? You were only out for 24 last time. Not seeing anyone you were likely to leave and not

risk staying there. Shit, I keep running, but very tired. At least I got some rest from being out for some time.

There is a bear up ahead sniffing the trail. People usually means free food to bear. Should not be out so early though. Maybe all the commotion got it up early. I make lots of noise and raise snow flurries and it ambles off. I see tracks from all kinds of things. Not a tracker, so I have no idea what. Slipped a few times and ended up to my waist in snow. Soon learned how to get out without making it worse. Snow is sort of like quick sand if you are not careful. Patience and TK is key. But I also lose time.

I sense a cabin and my hopes go up, but is not ours. No evidence of anyone there recently. I break in and find some food stores and a blanket worth keeping. Give myself away for sure running around in the dark with no obvious protection. Probably some rich persons summer cabin. The food was weird canned stuff I don't even want to guess what it was. Just ate it, warmed and drank some more water, take a crap and got out of there.

“Does he have to be so graphic?”

“Hey at least I am not telling you about the consistency.”

“eeuuuu!”

“Go on please.”

I run that day and when it starts to get dark I think, day one or day two? A few minutes later I sense another cabin. This one is guarded by five bots. I lay back. Run a scan. The shell is still upstairs. This is the place. I wait for a few hours to see if you will come out tonight. The bots are not sensing my presence or don't care. I need to find shelter. I am not as good at doing TK while asleep and I need sleep real bad by this time. The battlefield is a real mess. Seven bodies. No one I know, but still one of us. One is near the trees. I go over to it and remove the thick winter coat and boots. A bit loose, but better than nothing. A tent would be harder to get. I am not sure what the bots will allow me to get away with. Decide not to chance it. There is another cabin about 90 meters away, not in a clearing like this one. I promise not to tell the fire marshal if you don't, I think to myself.

A hippie den of some kind, squatters most likely. Our cabin looked abandoned. This one looked like fugitive druggies died here. No bodies, but reeked of stale booze, cigarettes and dope. Wonder where they got the cigarettes? No matter, it was a dry shelter. Out in a few seconds.

I awoke the next morning to a screaming jet and then a horrendous explosion! Debris broke out all the windows, shook the cabin and made

me deaf for hours after wards. Oh no! I was dead for sure now. I ran out the cabin to the edge of the trees facing our cabin. Bots were just coming back in and I squatted down on instinct. Shields up. But they ignored me. I looked from behind the tree. The cabin was gone. Only a crater was left. Most of the tents had been blown away, but pieces of fabric still clung to some of the trees, which have a lot of leaves missing. There were thirty or so before the explosion. The shell was still there! What did you make this thing out of? Anyway, 4 meters in the air, unmoved, eeriest thing to see. I remembered to close my mouth finally. The bots had taken up position again. Then they moved back to prop themselves up in trees. Conserving power I guess. I went back to my cabin and finished the rest of the 'food' I had stashed. Sturgeon eggs. I almost lose it again. Why couldn't it have been simple old GMBG paste or something else edible? The crackers were stale, but I ate them anyway. Probably as nutritious as cardboard with no GMsoy in it. Oh well, it was filling.

Hard to tell when I got my hearing back, the place was so quiet after that. I went out to check. The bots were still there. It would be easy to take them out, but that might set off something worse, especially since they were out of range or just in range and I would not be able to do all five at once. Hard to judge 100 meters exactly. I grabbed all the coats and blankets that I could carry and set up shop just at the tree line to wait it out. You had not bubbled in Plumcreek, but the 'ship' was in the right location to have been you. It was my only hope now anyway. Too late to even make the transport in Carson City. With one person dead, I am not sure I could face them again anyway. I am sure they are all in tanks in Sac now. Nothing I could do. At least the one who died did not suffer. Hope it was Susan or Monique. I liked them and would not want them to suffer. No, not in that way. The tanks had worn off long ago. Though pre HelperV.... Well anyway.

I woke with a start to see the ship had dropped three meters to just off the ground. I jumped up and waved to try and get your attention. When I heard Barb's message in my head I nearly jumped out of my skin, but finally noticed the bots gone as well. I went to the clearing as directed when you came over to me. Talk about alien encounters! But boy was I happy to see you guys. Forgot all about my payload of nanos till Yingui cleaned them out. Thanks again for that."

"Your welcome, happy to be of service. Well, sounds like we have all had enough rest for a while at least. You did not save any of the caviar did you?"

"Huh?"

“Sturgeon eggs, eeeuuu, remember? Always hungry coming out of an update.”

“Sorry I was so excited to see you I left it with the blankets and stuff.”

“Too bad, not as good as raw uncooked sea urchin eggs, but it would do in a pinch.” James mugs up his face and we all laugh. Hey, sushi was not that bad once you got used to it. Though sometimes I wondered if they served things just to see if they could get the gringos to eat it. Har-har! Marine biologist humor.

Outside New Jerusalem

I settle our ship about 8 km south of New Jerusalem. Dark now. I fashion a lamp made of iron, glass wick and octane. Brass would have been better, but I don't remember the proportions of metals. I chose octane because I wanted something that would burn with light and it had to be something I remember the chemical structure to. Mostly low brush and few trees. Mountains north of us, just hills here. I change the outside of the ship to match the surroundings and make a 'door' of sorts.

Everyone scatters to take care of business, even the cats. I ask Barb to warn them to be careful; there are lots of things out there that eat cats. They stop in their tracks and look up at us. *Mice? Smell mice!* Barb shoots back so they get it, images of coyotes, snakes, scorpions, Gila monsters, and a few imaginary ones to set the point. Hey, not sure I want to go out there now. I find them a tarantula to play with, but as soon as it lifts its front legs in a defensive manner, they decide it would be all right to stay inside instead and pop back into the ship. Barb reminds them to use the cat box first. They turn and reluctantly, with full awareness, go slinking off a few yards to a soft spot. You can tell they are ready to pop at a moments notice.

Ron comes up to me. "That is pretty crude don't you think?"

"You mean the lamp? Yeh, but I need a pattern to make something better. I don't have total recall on all the specs of every instrument that I have ever held."

He laughs and pulls out a portable H lamp with auto start. "How about this?"

"Why didn't you show us that earlier? I knew that you and Barb were packing gear, but assumed it was mostly tech stuff, you know, tools to work on nodes and stuff."

"This is. Have you ever tried to read something in the dark with just TK scanning? Can't see colors. Can't even read black on white. Wrong color wire could be lethal, so we always carry these. Getting low on fuel though."

"That I can fix. Hand it over." I refill his lamp and study it for a moment.

"Can we scale this up?"

"Sure, but make the hydride chamber the same density. Too low and the H can go up on us spontaneously."

"Gotcha." I make a much larger one with the lamp housing meant to

be upright. “Stand back and shield.” I start it up and it puts out as much as the tiny pocket lamp.

“Adjust the aperture up a bit till you get what you want. We can work out a manual adjuster later, and make more of the little ones for the rest.” Lots of sand around to use for starting mass. Nothing comes from nothing. This trick would not work in the vacuum of space, or would it. $E=mc^2$, could I convert light into mass and what density of light would it take? Probably a lot judging for the effect of converting mass into light, ie an atomic bomb. Chuck that idea. I have had enough with explosions for a while. Amazing that the shield held. Yingui scatted all over the snow did not appeal to me just yet.

Light from a lamp will carry quite a ways out here. I throw up some sandstone walls around us at about a 50-meter radius from the ship. Everyone is inside that area already, but several people come back running. “Hey, warn us next time you do something like that. If I hadn’t already done my business you would have been on laundry duty!”

“Sorry, wasn’t thinking. Tired still.”

“What do we do for food? I don’t think it would be wise to waltz into town at this time of night. About 200 people there.”

“Good Daniel, I purposely set us down within a TK4 distance to test your ability. As to food, I need a pattern to work from, or you will not like what I come up with.”

“Huh?”

“Candy, crackers, etc. will work fine. Otherwise I can scan this area for something and then dup it, dead of course.” Picking up our new pet, “Care for some spider soup with crunchy scorpion flakes on top? Or I could scan our own blood serum, or...”

“That’s enough, we get your point. Barb is turning green, even in this light. Here are some hard candies she shared with us earlier. Saved mine as I am not much into candy.”

I put down the spider. “I remember, you did not touch the nanobot jam in Merced either. Now if we only had some of that around.” I am immediately pelted with small pebbles and grass. The cats who were finally finding some courage pop back into the ship. After the giggle fit dies down we manage to scrounge up some crackers, the candy, and a very small tin of GMBG with too high a salt content. I use these items as masters and dup them, enough for everyone. Was going to cut down on the salt, but figured it would get warm enough at noon to need the salt. Lots of water to go around, as I did not need a pattern for H₂O. “Save the originals for the next time we need them.” They look at the stuff in front

of them and then James, the impulsive one, digs in. After he does not die of poisoning in the first thirty seconds, the rest of us start in as well.

“If any one runs into an old paper copy of the Merck Index, grab it. I can make lots of stuff from the info in that.”

“Where are we likely to find that?”

“Doctor’s office, lab, library, if there is such a thing anywhere any more.”

Barb reaches into her pack and pulls out a bracelet and hands it to me. I never wanted to see one of those ever again and pull back noticeably.

Not a spider, take it. It is yours anyway.

“But the memory is dead and the power gone, what use is it except as a reminder of the pain we all went through?”

Huh? Memory is never gone, just not accessible, except by employers. They take any funds still left on one when they rehire you. I hacked it and recharged it for you.

“Yet another thing they lied to us about.” I think of all the people who were blacklisted and starved unnecessarily or at least lost their savings. At least I had access to a Merck Index and other resources again.

For the cats I corralled a nest of mice. Being Buddhist, I could not kill them, but cats have to follow their cat nature and I could not fault them for their need. Even cats can’t live on GMBG paste forever. Best to keep up their battle skills. Mice have teeth. Besides this might make them a little less afraid of their own shadows, build their self-esteems back up after the scare Barb gave them. Poor little guys. A coyote howls and they pop out. “Wusses!” I bury the left over mouse parts. Would not want to step in that later. Not really enough room for everyone to sleep inside. Might have to change that later. A group decided to build lean-tos outside against the ship. I help with materials, duping material off of coats into large sheets. Poles were easier. They clear the ground themselves and then ask for a concrete base. “Hey spiders and snakes need warmth too!” They all look at me horrified. “Ok. Everyone is turning wuss on me.” I say this smiling. Don’t think anyone would be crazy enough to try a practical joke on me, but did not want to test their limits. It will not be a soft surface, but then neither is the inside of the ship where Barb, the cats and I will stay. I am staying in the ship away from the wildlife. I will rescue one, but don’t want them crawling on me at night! Never liked camping for that reason among others. Scan the inside to make sure no one has decided to get even and there are no other residents. Just to be sure.

Morning

I am a morning person and usually the first one up. Let's see, crackers will do for flour. Calcium carbonate and citric acid [formula in the index] are easy enough to make, so I have baking powder. Need oil. I scan my own plasma membrane and come up with oil high in omega 3 and omega 6. The aracidonic acid should give it a pork like flavor. People taste like pork for that reason. A little GMBG for protein and vitamins. Next is the frying pan and plates. Pan is easy, straight iron. Cast iron always cooks the best in my book. None of those fancy alloy surfaces for me. I shudder. I am starting to sound like I like camping! Yuck! Plates I choose to fuse sand, silicon dioxide, quartz, so not much needed to be changed there. A little iron impurity for color, gives it that nice pale green color. Spatula was easy, aluminum this time with a wood handle scrounged from some dead brush. I set these aside for when they wake up.

Tea is not in the index, but caffeine is. Citric and ascorbic acids, sugar, serve hot. Should help everyone wake up. I fashion a shower complete with a tank of hot water over head from a concrete base exiting to the outside of our enclosure and more sports fabric for the shower curtain. And in this corner a composting toilet. Ok, a stand with the necessary hole in it and a pit underneath. More fabric for modesty. I was comfortable being seen naked, as were the others, but still wanted privacy when doing my business. I put this in the farthest corner. The male cats were gone when I woke up. Out hunting or getting into trouble no doubt. Princess elected to sleep in. Three, three and a half weeks into her pregnancy. Seven kittens, if everything went well, in another 4-5 weeks. I had not heard Princess in my head, but she appeared to TK now as well as the boys. One gift per upgrade I guess. Cats seemed to understand things just fine without this gift of course, but it did help us communicate with them. Spoke too soon.

No cat, safe. No cat. Where are they? I scan and find them outside near a corner of the ship away from the rest of us, stalking another mouse hole. They were using their TP ability to convince the mice that they were not there. Come on guys. You already have the dimension shift ability. There is no honor in this. I started to move towards them and elected instead to watch VERY carefully. Sure enough, instead of pouncing they shifted. Only this time I see more of the shift. Well I have to try this myself at some point. I shift. NO AIR! I close my mouth and

convert the CO₂ in my blood to O₂ and my lungs calm down. Every time I move my thoughts I see out of what looks like a different picture window of our camp ground. Sort of like scanning with only a 2D view presented. I try moving and the scene shifts again. OK, I TK through an image I see and stumble on the ground a few meters from where I started. Lucky I did not break anything. Will take practice, but very interesting. The cats had come out from behind the ship to watch me stumble and are looking at me quizzically. “Ok, I bet the first time you did this you were not so graceful either.” *Cat graceful, monkey not.* Great, cat critics.

“What’s all the chatter?”

“Cats teaching me how to catch mice the new improved way. Breakfast ready in a few minutes.” That got me a dirty look. Mmmm, mouse pancakes. I look at the pile of wood gathered for the fire. I do not have a flint nor am I going to rub two sticks together. James stumbles out of the tent and notices me staring at the wood with frying pan in hand. Immediately a burst of flame starts in the pile of wood. “Natural extension of the water warming trick.”

“I saw that, let me try!” The fire goes out from a shield cutting off the oxygen supply and Rachael walks up closer with nothing on, not that James is wearing much. They had all slept together in a sort of cat ball. I would find that very uncomfortable as I toss and turn all night. The fire starts again.

“Well, since you are already undressed, you can be the first to use the shower over there. Hot water and everything.” She looks to where I am pointing and takes off at a run. James is yelling, “Me next, me next! You did not think to make a..” I point off into the other direction. “Hey, maybe we should not get even for last night after all.” I hope not, don’t like surprises. Gun shy enough as it is.

Daniel comes out more modestly dressed. Generation thing I guess. “Oh my bones. I am not used to such a hard surface.”

“You have to wait your turn, but there is a shower and privy now. Maybe the hot water will help.”

“Thanks. What are you making?”

“Pancakes I hope.”

“Could use a place to sit, or do we have to eat standing?”

“I have to think of everything? What do you think we need? Keep in mind that we are not staying.”

“You are right, I can stand.” He leans against the ship anyway and it moves some. “Pretty light weight. How did it survive the blast?”

“I am guessing the shielding. This is really nothing more than a shell

to hide us. At least I hope that's what happened."

"What are you thinking?"

Barb comes out and TPs to us, *The only other explanation would be some other conscious force watching us.*

"That's scary." Uh huh. But where were the upgrades, updates, or whatever they were coming from?

In this light it is also interesting to note that Barb's hair is changing. She has blond roots. All this time I thought she was a brunette. In my time most of the blonds were not real, everyone wanted to be one. Now, the only blonds were "party favors" and no body wanted to be blond if they were not of that ah profession. That could explain her choice. No hair dye out here. I should be able to make a substitute if she wants.

They were not the best pancakes I ever made. Could use a little salt and real maple syrup, not duped candy liquefied. But have you ever noticed how good things taste when you are camping? Can eat stuff you would not touch with a 3-meter pole back at home. They used to have special foods just for camping. Freeze dried and dehydrated. Talk about YUCK. Even GMBG in a tube tastes better than that stuff did. But when you carried it 20 km into the high country on your back along with everything else you needed for a week, suddenly it tastes good. There were no complaints and James and Ghost even asked for more. Ok, it was a given Ghost would ask for more, sans sugar of course.

"What's the matter sashimi mouse not enough for you?"

"Sashimi mouse? Who ARE you talking to? Oh hi Ghost, did not see you pop in."

Stupid monkey.

"Look Ghost, we can hear you now. If you don't want to end up as the next meal, keep your thoughts to yourself. Got that." Ghost pretended to not understand. Barb nods to me, concentrates and Ghost REALLY wakes up, starts to squirm and pops out. I give chase this time and reappear on the other side of the ship where he had gone. "That won't work with me any more, remember that? Monkeys learn quick."

Remember what? He starts cleaning himself, purring. Looking the perfectly innocent cat.

I come walking back from behind the ship. "Barb, do you think it would be possible to direct your thoughts, so that only the person intended gets it instead of every one?"

Definitely, but the person needs to be in line of sight to direct a thought. I do not have scan capability. I have to be in physical contact to hear deep thoughts. Surface, intended stuff, I can hear from at least 10

meters away. I suspect that I could hear a shout from much further, just like the other TKs heard my shout.

“So, could you teach this to the cats, I am sure I was picking up their dreams last night and also so we are not totally demeaned from being called stupid monkey all the time?” Everyone laughs.

I will try Barb TPs smiling. Barb was a very private person and I was not picking up her dreams. Cats may not care though. Who ever thought that they could control a cat was really a stupid monkey.

Ron and I clear out the inside of the ship. We probably should give it a name. “How much bigger do you think it needs to be, keeping in mind that weight slows us down?”

“You seemed to have no trouble moving us yesterday. Was that your top speed?”

“No, not at all, just was afraid to move faster than sound thereby attracting attention.”

“Well assuming some margin of safety then. Hmmm, it would be nice if everyone could sleep here if necessary. Not all the time, just when there is heavy rain, snow, bots, and other ‘natural’ stuff to worry about.”

“I can see you are enjoying this.”

“Might be nice to have some sort of in flight privy. Thought I was going to explode yesterday.”

“Me too. Privacy or no privacy?”

“All of us younger ones have seen pretty much everything there is to see, it is only Daniel and you that seem to need privacy.”

“Only when taking a crap, the smell alone should convince you of that.”

“Need a poo-poo sniffer then at least, but that can be near the base. As long as there is negative pressure so the flow is into the hole and not out, we should be ok. Everyone but Barb can handle that on their own.”

“She can probably move that much air on her own. She has at least TK1 abilities I think. She could also drown us with sweet smelling thoughts if it got too bad.”

“Oh, so you really did put mouse into the pancakes today!” Ghost pops in.

“No Ghost, no mice here. I knew they understood us! Little rascals! What about reinforcement? In the movies I always see support struts and such.”

“Good idea. If for some reason we take a hit while not shielded, I would want some degree of backup protection. The shell itself seems pretty solid. What did you make it of?”

“Carbon nanotube reinforced diamond matrix with a variable color layer between the shell and the diamond surface layer.”

“Whew, you did not mess around. And you did that all in the blink of an eye?”

“Oh no, just the inner layer when we blacked out. I added the outer layers before we moved out so I could change color easier.”

“Let’s see, there are six of us. Assuming we might have a passenger or two at some point. Make it nine sections with the privy in one section.”

“Lets make it eight, Buddhist thing. Passengers can double up, or I can make a side car.”

“Side car?”

“Before your time. Make the passenger section double for the door also.”

“Agreed. Would be nice to have some independent sensors and windows also. Remember, we can’t see color with the sight, only substance.”

“Do we need whirring lights too, just for effect?” We both laugh. Seems James’ flying saucer idea has caught on.

“Might not be a bad cover story actually. Aliens from outer space. Could explain our abilities.”

“So, you want to end up on alien autopsy do you?”

“Ah, no. We will want some tech though. Sat uplink would be nice, so we are not dependent on outsiders all the time. Too bad the nesters took out the one I was working on. Still have part of it, but not enough without the dish and matrix circuits.”

“I could probably fashion the dish. We need to tell Barb especially to be on the look out. Doubt the rest of us would even recognize one. I knew of one at the station, but that was really out of date.”

“We are not going to find up to date out here I assure you.”

When we come outside there are benches around the fireplace. “How did you do that?”

“We moved stone over then used the heat ability to fuse them together. Don’t sit on them yet, still hot.”

“James, have you ever taken glass blowing or worked much with ceramics?” I shield it just before a bench splits in half, falls down and explodes into a million pieces. “That’s why. The only way to do this is to heat everything up to nearly the same temperature and then SLOWLY cool it to room temp. Can take days to do that properly. Good thought though.”

“Oh.”

“Native Americans and many other cultures just sat on the ground. We probably should get used to it ourselves unless you think we should leave a trail of latrines, showers and benches all over the place to tip off the nesters we were here?”

Even I blush at that one. I fold up my blanket many times over so it is a 15 cm high pad to sit on and then sit down. Others watch and follow suit.

Tribal Council

“I want to know why are not going to rescue the rest of our group. We are going further and further away. They would not have abandoned us.”

“Yeh, we know from Rachael it is likely they are not being treated well.”

“Oh, do we? Rachael, did you see any evidence at all of a TK being mistreated?”

“No direct evidence no, but..”

“Thank you, point made.”

“You did not let me finish! You know something is going on in there. Something that is not right. If you do not want to help, then set us down close to there and we go ourselves.”

“You saw what they did to the cabin. What makes you think even for a second you could defend against that? Look what happened to James. He could not even defend against the bots, much less a thousand thinking military personnel, equipment and who knows how many TKs under their control. They have gotten much stronger. Too strong. You would not last 5 seconds now. I will not send you to your deaths.”

“We could if we had your help.”

“Maybe, but only if we use our minds not our guts. You know how I feel about killing. There has to be a way of minimizing or preventing anyone from being killed. These people are fellow sentient beings, even if they think we no longer qualify. They are acting out of ignorance, not malice. They are not evil!”

“Ok, we get the point. No more lectures. But if we come up with an idea we go for it.”

“Agreed.”

“Now what?”

“We have to assess their weak points and our strengths.”

“Numbers, equipment, tech, organization, fear, TK knowledge, the

list is endless. There has to be something we can do?”

“Rachael, you know the inside of the nest. Ron, you and Barb know tech. Barb can communicate without words and she is unlikely to be perceived as a threat, being only TK1. She can even send images. I saw what she did with the cats. James, you are the master of the game, you even admitted that TK Smith was impressed. Daniel, our finest bullshit artist. Myself, with so many abilities I can't even keep them straight, much less figure out how to use them. Even the cats. Who ever heard of a cat that you could communicate with and who could dimension shift. Ok, from now on DS, easier to say.”

“Their biggest strength is also their biggest weakness.”

Their tech of course!

“Yes, their tech.”

“Go on. What about their tech?”

“Too much for me to take out all at once. The mass alone must be horrendous.”

“We don't have to remove it, just disable it. All tech is based on three principal elements, carbon, in the form of nanotubes, silicon for power transducers and germanium for high speed switching. Oh, also gold for contacts.”

“Carbon is out, we are based on carbon and too much mass. Silicon is the most common element in the soil, so too much mass again. Gold and germanium have potential though. Are all tech devices based on these two elements? That is, if these elements were changed would that take everything out? What about weapons, like hand guns, rifles, and such?”

“Not all tech has germanium and gold, but taken together, they compromise 99.9%, including weapons. See, each hand gun or rifle is set to be operable only by a qualified person. Prevents an enemy from using a weapon against you. That means sensors and tech. Not even hand grenades work without tech any more. You saw how much they rely on tech, the bots. Didn't even risk their own personnel, only the TKs. Probably even have slogan now, the only good TK is a dead TK.”

“What was behind that shield that they did not want Rachael to see? Could they use TK as a power source?”

“Yes, I suppose they could power a turbine with TKs pushing the thing around in some organized way.”

“Why would they need to? They all have reactors in their cores. Sac for sure, it was near a functioning nuclear power plant even.”

“Good point. Well, they are good at organizing.”

“I think it is something else. We have seen how we can combine our energies, for transport or other tasks, like melting rocks.” We all smile at James.

“Oh come on guys, how was I supposed to know?”

“That is our problem. What we don't know. Say we liberate the TKs, how do we know they want to leave. We need to give them a choice. Right now with the implants and lethal nano, they don't have a choice. And who is to say that can't send out a signal and activate all those nanos at once. I could not save any one then. There is something comforting about organizations. People feel more comfortable in a world that is easy to understand, a black and white existence.”

“I have a question. It is personal.”

“What? How could we hide anything here among us?”

“How many of you have had sex since the fall?”

“That is personal! What bearing does that have on our discussion?” I remain silent waiting for a response. No one raised their hand. “With the exception of when you were under the influence of the tranquilizer, how many have even desired to have sex with anyone? You all sleep together nude, surely that would normally bring up thoughts at least.” A big sigh from the group, all heads were down except mine.

“The cats, they have had sex!”

“Are you a cat?”

“They are obviously different than us. They did not get TK ability only limited DS and now limited TP. They did not go through HelperV either. It is only because of the upgrade cycle that they are involved at all.”

How come I am affected then? I have not even cycled since the fall.

“It is possible that the fever pushed you into an early menopause. Or when you went crazy from the fever, you were really an aborted TK. It could explain why you did receive TK1 and TP ability during the upgrade. I have certainly observed norms that were not affected. Helped two women who got pregnant after the fall. That does not happen by itself.”

“Why are you asking this? What difference does it make?”

“We cannot reproduce. Only norms can. All of us here are sterile. I was from before the fall because of a vasectomy a long time ago, but no one here has sperm or eggs anymore.” Ron and James squirm nervously.

“I think sex is overrated, totally mechanistic. Arranged marriages were better as they worked for the most part on logic not unreliable emotions induced by pheromones. Surely you have noticed the tendency

to fall in love with people who are not good for you. I for one am happy it is over with.”

We could all relate to that.

“So what happened to us is temporary in terms of human history.”

“It would appear so. Not that we could have depended on HelperV to create more TKs anyway.”

“That means that no matter what happens in a few short years we will be gone and the planet will return to the norms. I do believe we are here for a reason, but I believe that that time is limited. The window of opportunity is narrow. SO, what do we do with it? The military is proposing one way to climb out of the hole. Are we offering another choice, a dead end or even a hindrance?”

“So we get our people and leave to a remote location. Cut us out of the equation. I don't like the idea of norms using TKs to control other norms. That is the kind of bullying that brought our world to this disaster in the first place. Look around you. We are an ecological mess. The gap between the rich and the poor, pears and saps, was huge. The over population, encouraged by the high priesthood of money, was exploited to further their own pleasures and power. Remember New Atherton. The nests will continue this scheme for sure. That is their mandate, what they have been told to restore at all costs.”

“That may have changed, most are saps remember. After the black plague in the 14th century, rights came back to the people because there was a labor shortage. They had to treat people better to get their help. It will be the same case here soon. If the military gives back their power to the people that is.”

“What power do the people have? We ceased living in a democracy long ago, when the multinationals took over everything. Did any of you ever have any say in your work? Did you ever get a vote?” No one answered. “We make a big deal out of consensus now, but will that end when we get out of trouble? Will we dissolve and go our separate ways?” No one answers.

“So we have a window of opportunity to do something or not. To whom great power has been given, great responsibility follows. No matter what, live or die, we have a responsibility to do the best we can. None of us asked for these gifts, but it happened, so live with it.”

“So no matter what happens, if we kill norms or nesters, we kill the future of humankind as well.”

“Correct.”

“Might not be so bad. We had our chance and we blew it. So which

way kills less of the norms, in the long run, to leave the TKs alone, to be temporarily exploited to help them rebuild anyway they can, or remove the TKs and the possible organizing force needed desperately to get things going again and prevent a long dark age.”

“The answer is not so easy. That is why I have not been so eager to rush in with TK blazing. I have thought of all of the ideas presented here tonight, long ago. With each upgrade I grow in abilities to do something truly horrible or something great. The gap widens with each passing day, with each new understanding of our abilities. Do I care about our friends captured and possibly being tortured? Of course! I cry daily, wishing it was me instead of them. But, I need more wisdom, not just ideas. Wisdom to do the right thing. I feel we have been given a second chance, to do it right this time. Time to let the planet recover. Time to learn how to do it right this time. We are in a war, but not against the nesters or the norms. We are in a war to save the planet from wrong action, and the enemy is ignorance.”.

“Ah, since I was in the military, maybe I can help us understand it from their perspective. A year ago, pre HelperV, things were quiet and going smoothly, at least from their perspective. They had a clear vision of responsibility. They had housing, food, good jobs. Only occasionally went to a battle zone. All and all a good stable life. You could get married, have kids, raise a family. They were much better off than we were. The military life was in a way the perfect vision of the way life should be.

Then HelperV. They hide to wait it out, with only a few reports coming in as to what was going on, and it was not pretty. Riots again, cities burning, 99.9% of the population dying. Upon hatching, as we call it, they emerge to a totally alien world. Quiet, nothing moving. Rats and insects have taken over in some places, VERY few people, and all of them just saps. Not a leader in sight. Net is dead in most cases. Real quiet. Everything is gone. What happened in other countries? Are they about to be attacked? They have a massive task ahead of them.

Then one nest after another encounters something new. A new type of human. Looks normal from the outside, just another sap. But these 'things' hide an awful secret. They can move pebbles at supersonic speed, as fast as any bullet, larger objects, even themselves, over a building if necessary. They can see through walls a hundred meters away. Move valves and operate switches from behind locked doors. And these mutants are starting to organize, to get together for some unknown purpose.

Then when they are trying to take this in, they hear rumors of someone else. A mutant so powerful that he or she can move walls or heavy vehicles, heal the fallen, see from kilometers away, a hundred or a thousand times stronger than the others. What was this thing? What was its purpose or goal?"

"Scary, when you put it that way. But, as we have seen Yingui would not hurt a fly, even to save his own!"

"What about us then, the five of us here beside you? Are we sacrificial lambs too? Do you leave us behind when the nesters get one of us or all of us?"

"Fair question. No, I do not leave you behind period. Each of you I feel has been chosen to be here. Each has a special talent and way of seeing. I need, we need, each and every one of us. We are the core from which this will work or not. If one is missing it is over. I will not kill, but I will try everything else."

"That's reassuring I guess."

"We need to set ourselves up as a different choice from the nesters. Humans work by symbolic logic. Signs, slogans, visual clues, all are important in distinguishing these differences. We are both TK, we can't change that, except in how we use it. I need your pledge that you will not kill no matter what happens."

"Even to defend ourselves."

"Even then."

"Do we have time to think about this?"

"Yes. At least till the next crisis. Without luck that could be any minute now."

"But you have killed, how can you ask this of the rest of us?"

"That was an unintentional accident, but I will take the pledge as well and will keep to it as is humanly possible."

"What else?"

"Three of you still carry amps, please give them to me." Ron, Daniel and Rachael, reluctantly hand them over. I grab a rock and smash them one at a time.

"Congratulations, you have just given us a severe disadvantage."

"Rachael, you and Ron are now TK3 and Daniel is TK4, how much more of an advantage do you want?"

"Oh yeh, forgot about that."

"If we are to use amps, we need a different shape, something visible and at the same time ordinary. I was experimenting with the fractal nature of the psiotic field and found it can be folded into other shapes. By

inverting and stretching it, the fat spider look becomes a staff.” I materialize a staff and hand it to the others.

“Ooo, this works for me. Could even be used as a non lethal defensive weapon.” James takes a few swings and hands it to Barb.

Light weight enough so even I could retrieve it with TK. She hands it on.

“If it was too heavy, none of us would want to carry it. We will have to travel very light at times and the less weight the better. And a mere stick is less threatening.”

Ron asks poking at the top if it, “What are these eight projections at the top? Looks like they are meant to hold something.”

“I don’t know, just the way the fractal unfolds, just like the spiders had eight fingers, might be nothing other than that. I will have to tune a staff to each of you. Same problems with using a staff above your TK level and no point to using one below, except as a staff of course.” I make one for each person and an extra one that I hang onto. “I would recommend personalizing your staff. You cannot drill or carve the staff in anyway without reducing the field, but you should be able to hang and tie stuff to the projections on top. Chose your artifacts carefully, something that is important to you.”

“Food would be nice.”

“On your staff?”

“No, silly, but we can’t live on your pancakes forever, not that they were bad or anything.”

“No offense taken.”

“I am not going to live off of field rations like the cats do either.”

“Well, we can’t exactly fly into New Jerusalem in the ship without setting off all kinds of concerns or alarms.”

“We don’t all have to go and certainly not in the saucer, 8 km is not that far to walk.”

“What about bikes. No pattern, no bikes. Not that there would be room for them in the ship.”

“For which we need a name. We used to call an old ’57 Chevy my father had, Betsy.”

“Quaint, but I was hoping for something a little more modern. What does your name mean again in English?”

“Silver Ghost, but we already have a cat named Ghost, speaking of the devil. I swear I am convinced that cats learn their names because they think it means food, at least Ghost behaves that way.”

Food?

“No food Ghost, go find your own snack, if you have not already cleared out this area. Go on.”

“How long are we going to have the ship? No point in naming it if we abandon it right away.”

“Good point, but I don’t know.”

“I vote we call it Silver Ghost anyway.”

“Me too!”

Sigh, “Ok” Concede the minor points, save your energy for the important ones.

“Don’t we need to christen it with Champagne or something?”

“I have never understood the need for rituals, but here you go...” I make a quartz bottle and add some carbonated water to the inside. We are not going to drink it and I certainly do not have a pattern for champagne being a non-alcohol person.

“Hey this thing does not have a cork.”

“We are going to break it over the side of the ship, not drink it, what does it need a cork for?” I add some fracture lines to the bottle, no point in damaging the ship. “Daniel, if you would do the honors, I doubt these younguns know the proper wording.”

He laughs, “Gladly. All rise.” Then he looks at the ship. “Something missing.” Bright red bows appear hung on the perimeter with ribbon in between.”

“Ok, this is going too far. Glad to see you are starting to use your abilities though that is not really ribbon.”

“Hey, I am new to this. It’s for appearances anyway. I hereby christen thee Silver Ghost. May all your voyages be long and safe.” He breaks the bottle over the bow.

“Here Here!” we all shout and clap.

“Ok, enough with the ribbons.” They go up in a show of sparks.

“James!”

“What?” Grin!

New Jerusalem

“I think we should only send two to New Jerusalem. Unlikely to know what is there and sending more may seem a threat. Under no circumstances should we show TK ability until coming back and checking with the rest.”

“Which two?”

“James and Rachael have shown they can get out of a tough situation and Barb is the least powerful TK and least likely to be detected. And being a TP she could read someone’s thoughts if necessary.”

“On the other hand Daniel is a good diplomat being old and frail looking he does not pose much of a threat.”

“Rachael is real good at detecting hidden dangers and working her way out of puzzles.”

“We need Ron and/or Barb to get us some tech for Silver Ghost, but would need to use TK to get there.”

“Hey guys, we can’t all go. Think about possible pairs then.”

“A father daughter pair seems pretty low key to me. Anyone else and they will wonder what the relationship is.”

“Daniel and Rachael also put together a good array of talents.”

“Are you two willing to go together?”

“Well, I am used to going it alone, but if you send Popsie I suppose I should go to keep him out of trouble?”

“Popsie?”

“Why, what did you call your father?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Ok, what do you two think you need? Remember, no TK, so think like a traveler without TK ability and what would they likely to be carrying.”

“Backpack, water, food, clothing.”

“Pocket knife, hunting knife, string to set traps.”

“Gold dollar coins for barter, a map of some kind, compass.”

“Sunglasses, hat or a cloak with a hood.”

“Extra set of shoes maybe.”

“Don’t get so loaded down you can’t move. You will only be going 8km, but you have to appear as if you have come a lot further.”

“We need to dust them down!”

“Hey I just took a shower, no way!”

“And just where out here are you likely to get a shower?”

“Strip down you two. Get the dust guns ready Sergeant.”

James throws a salute “Aye aye Captain.” Soon everyone is TKing dust at each other. In the mean time I work on the knives and other supplies requested. Extra shoes should look different, so I try and make them newer looking than the current versions and not quite the right size. No perfect fits any more. Scrounging is not easy.

“Daniel, if you think of anything else you need, make sure you are not within several hundred meters of anyone, not just TK. Use pulse scanning if necessary. We need both of you alive, so don’t take any chances.”

“So what are the rest of you going to do while we are gone, lounge around sipping Margaritas?”

“Let’s put it this way, they will wish they had gone instead you if makes you feel any better.”

Rachael grins, “Oh, it does make me feel better, yes indeed.”

“Now get out of here before I TK you there the hard way!”

“Yes SIR!”

“Now the rest of you bums, we have a very full day of practice ahead of us. I will not have anyone getting into trouble because they cannot use their new talents. James you missed the upgrade, so you are going to be our coach, be imaginative. I want us to be ready for anything. That includes you three as well.” Looking at the cats.

You would think James’ face was going to split in two the grin was so wide. “Oh this is going to be fun. Survival camp and boot camp all rolled into one.”

“Maybe I could get Rachael’s position with the nesters.” Rachael and Daniel leave the camp waving and shaking their heads.

“Well Popsie, what do you think? Do we have a chance of doing this? Turning society around that is.”

“It’s a long shot that’s for sure Pumpkin, but something has to be done. I certainly don’t want to know we just started it all up again the way it was. I was lucky being ah 'retired' and all, but you really did not have much of a chance with unemployment so high and the only choices being military or tech. You never could follow orders, always questioning authority. Only the very rich could afford to send their kids to the schools producing leaders. The rest of us are all grunts at the bottom. Even Yingui worked over full time for half time pay.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“From the horses mouth dear. He's ok really. The task before us is immense and the tools are weird. He is being too cautious for my taste,

but then I am not in his shoes. We have no history with such tools, except maybe in fairy tales. We have to figure it all out for ourselves. Not easy. We really are at a turning point. Small differences now will be huge differences later. Works in the same way that a tugboat can move an ocean liner, you have to think way ahead for it to work.”

We walk in silence for some time. A lot to think about. Everything these last few months has been too much. The fall, TK, nesters, norms coming after us, Yingui himself, even the cats. Who would have guessed. Extreme culture shock as they used to say. I almost wish I was back schlepping stuff on my courier route. In some ways it was good that our economy was doing so bad before hand. Most of us knew how to get by on little. The country had dropped to less than 1% of the population in farming. Just before the fall it was back up to 10%. Learned that from the online school. Soon I bet, it will be close to 90+% again. Sure capitalism sucks. Never helped me, that's for sure. I sense a shift towards the Native American culture in our group at least. Never believed that noble savage shit myself. Nothing noble about savages. Been on the street too long to believe different myself. But maybe there was something there. Overheard Ron and Yingui talking about the fact that they had succeeded in being in balance with nature for at least 40,000 years. We screw it up in 400. Have to read that book Ron found. Don't read much, never needed it, but I could at least try. Lots of younger ones don't even bother. Just enough to get by on the net. Only seen a book a few times myself. Too expensive. Or were.

“We are coming up on the outskirts of town. Let's start paying attention to details. Looks like most of the stuff out here has been abandoned and scavenged clean. See how the doors are all open. You would expect to see some cars in a remote area like this. City folk don't need them but out here you could be dead without the means to get around. Too many hills for a bike, especially in winter or summer. Here we are at the end of April and I bet it gets up to 25C today.” We climb up to the top of the next hill. From here we can see the town a few hills over. There is a large cross erected in the center of town, tied down with guy wires.

“I don't like the look of this Popsie. Last thing we need is some fundamentalist camp. Never even like the smilies waiting on street corners for victims.”

“They are just trying to make sense of all this, same as we are. They are all right if you use the word Jesus as an article and say it every other word.” We both laugh, but it is not a hardy one.

We stop on the last hill outside of town. It looks like all of the entrances in or out are covered with wrecks of cars, tractors, trucks, whatever they could find and move into place. “Remind you of any place? If Mary comes to the entrance I am going back fast, by whatever means I can.”

“We'll just sit here and watch for a bit.” Occasionally someone comes out with a flatbed or on foot with a tool and heads off to the fields around the town. A quick pulse scan confirms about 200 people. Where are they all? Looks like most are in one building near the center. A few scattered around in other places, mostly at the entrances set up at both ends of town. They are armed with M18s. Retired issue, but still lethal, and lower tech. Anyone could fire these. Our method of taking out tech would not work here. Good lesson to learn. There are many levels of bullies. Popsie whispers to me, “Two coming up on the right side, act surprised, but don't say anything.”

“Now looky here. Two Chinees spying on us.”

“Jesus is Lord, but you scared me!”

“Our ancestors may have come from Japan but our hearts belong to the Lord. What Lord do you follow? Is Jesus in your heart or is Satan?”

“Jesus is Lord in these parts. Why you spying on us then?”

“Even Satan can put up a cross to deceive the righteous my bothers. But nobody can say Jesus is Lord but a follower of the Lord. We have seen many a tribulation, yes sir many a tribulation. Just spent nearly 40 days and 40 nights in the desert to repent for our sins. To purify ourselves for the coming of the Lord. For surely these are the last of days. Amen.”

“Amen brother. Doesn't the little lady speak?”

“She does what I bid and nothing more. She knows the father is the head of the household, as God Almighty is the Father of us all.”

“Well come with us and we will take you to meet the others. Sounds like you will fit right in, yes sir. Always good to meet brothers and sisters in the Lord.” I give Father a dirty look when I am sure the other two have their backs to us. He just keeps smiling like he is high on dope. Now what are we walking into? Nesters give me less creeps than holy rollers, I know what to expect from them.

We all walk up to the entrance done up like some kind of large wrought iron monster. “Look at this Ruth, we have reached the Pearly Gates, for surely this must be heaven at last.”

“Well not quite heaven, but at least a safe refuge for those of the Body from the evils of Hell.” One of the people hidden behind the wrecks throws a knife at Popsie and he moves just enough so it sticks in his robe

instead of his heart. He pulls it out. At the same time a second one throws several rocks at me. I reach out with both hands and catch them and then drop them to the ground as if nothing has happened, lots of practice on the streets.

“Well that is not exactly neighborly. I assume you have a reason for this?”

“She is fast! But you two pass.”

“Pass what? The only true test is when we sit before the Lord on Judgment day itself.”

“We have had trouble.” He whispers into Popsie's ear “Witches”

“Get behind me Satan, witches you say! Say no more all is forgiven. We too have had our experiences with these foul demons. She grew up in the streets of Sodom itself she did. We are missionaries just out of San Francisco. I don't even want to remember what it was like there when the Lord threw down his mighty sword and smite those evil spawn from Hell.”

With horrified looks one asks, “Why were you there! Are you insane?”

“I go where the Lord directs son, not where I want to go. He told me to go unto Sodom and rescue as many as I could before the fall. So I went unto Sodom and on every street corner preached His mighty Word, the Word of the Lord. I would have been thrilled to have found even one in such a foul place, but I came back with not two, not three, but four souls seemed fit to be saved by the Lord.”

“God is Mighty. Where are these poor souls now that we may greet them also?”

“Alas, they may have been of some merit unto the Lord, but their sins still must be washed clean before they can join the Body proper. They await their time in the far desert, where we ourselves have just come.”

“You must be thirsty, come, please come. Meet our Shepard, Master Robert. He will be so pleased to meet another man of the cloth.”

“Nay brother, I am not a man of the cloth, for I would be but a wolf in sheep's clothing compared to your Master Robert, I am but a humble missionary doing the Lord's will, nothing more.”

“Come, please come.”

We walk through the wrecks, which must be at least 10 meters thick. Hard to imagine how all these cars got into place with so few people. But the pyramids were built by humans too and they have had several months, if this was not all set up before hand. We all walk up to a shady

spot where the two of us are handed metal cups with what appears to be water in it. A quick pulse scan reveals that there is more than water here. Ethanol and tranks. Shit not again! I hold onto mine looking at it and waiting for Popsie to act. He takes a long sip and then spits it out violently. “Get behind me Satan. Devils brew! Don’t you people know the evils of alcohol?” He runs out into the center and waves his staff about to ward off all who would confront us. “Come Ruth, these be not of the Body of Christ, but of Satan. They stick us with knives, throws rocks at the innocent and try to poison both of us. Come daughter, let us be gone from this evil place.” He makes a great show of stomping his feet to remove the dust. A man dressed in a white robe and hood comes out into the open. Up this close it is obvious he is a TK2, well shielded. No wonder he fears ‘witches’ so much. Competition.

Popsie stomps his staff into the ground and faces the man. A brief look of fear passes the man’s face, but disappears. So he knows we are TK also and more than a match for him, much more. Of course he has 200 followers, but we could cause a lot of damage and force him to reveal himself. With the built up antipathy to witches he has generated, even he would not stand a chance against his people all descending on him at once, just as they must have done with other TKs. A people betrayed are not pretty. His followers are all on their knees. We remain standing.

“Peace be with you Brother, Sister. I am Master Robert. May I have your names?”

Popsie appears to relax. “I am Brother Francis and this is my daughter Ruth. Are you here to test us also?”

“No Brother. No more tests. You have to forgive my flock. They tend to be overly protective, but not without reason. Just yesterday we were beset upon by two witches, but the power of the Lord prevailed and we were victorious.” A follower comes out holding the two heads of the witches they vanquished. I recognize one of the heads as one who had entered our Lake Tahoe camp before the nesters had attacked. Bad enough we were being hunted by nesters, now by fellow TKs as well. If this was meant to intimidate us it does not work. We remain silent.

“Nice staffs, where did you get these, if I may ask?” Right, he knew what they were, he was carrying a Spider himself, heaven knows were he got that, as he was not otherwise encumbered by nester tech. Maybe it was a trade off between nesters and him to keep his skin or he got it off a dead one. Kill all other TKs and we let you live, at least till the others are gone. Never make a bargain with the devil.

“We spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert.” Pointing back the way we came with his staff. “Mighty tribulations befell us. On the last day, I saw a vision appear in the sky, a vision of angels almost too beautiful to behold. A voice called out to me, ‘Take up the staff of the Lord and go north to the city before you. For there is an evildoer masquerading as my servant. Cast out this evil doer and crush his instrument of power.’ ”

Hang on, we are coming. Be ready to play along.

At this Popsie’s staff started trembling almost beyond his ability to control it and it slowly turned towards Robert. “You sir, are carrying an instrument of Satan.” The staff is still shaking and pointing at Robert. Are you nuts Popsie, this will get us killed or at least a lot of people hurt trying to kill us. Hurry guys. But Robert slowly pulls out the Spider and holds it up. “Cast it down!” He throws it down to the ground in a mighty show of force, where upon it breaks into a million pieces, lots of intricately delicate pieces. This is no ordinary object. The people take note. Popsie’s staff stops trembling. Amazing that they did not turn on us. Probably awaiting orders. Strict obedience is not always a good thing.

The people are aghast at what has happened, start chanting, slowly at first, “Off with his head, Off with his head!” At least they were not saying ‘their heads’ yet.

“Listen unto me!” Popsie commands with a voice I did not know he had, “Not all who have what you call the signs of the ‘witch’ are demons of Satan. For even Angels of the Lord can perform miracles. Behold, Angels of the Lord.” Popsie points his staff upwards. Yingui, Ron, James and Barb appear barefoot in flowing white robes and sparkling gold about 30 meters above the crowd, their heads and hands pointing to the heavens, marking off the four directions of the compass. “Many have entertained Angels unawares and many are the tricks of Satan. Know this, all agents of Satan with the power to appear as angels carry this sign, they carry the Spider you just saw destroyed. Study the parts carefully, so you know how to recognize this evil tool. If they refuse to show you they are free of the Spider, cast them out. Even without the Spider, they are dangerous, so be careful and vigilant. The Angels of the Lord will deal with them in good time. You are mightily blessed. You have passed the test of the plague and of the lean years before that. The Lord is pleased with your sacrifice, but now calls upon you, the remnant so often referred to in the sacred scriptures, to rebuild your lives, to love one another as God loves you. Offer not the fist, the sword, the gun, but the open hand and the open heart, for the next visitor could well be an Angel. Woe unto

thee who treats an Angel of the Lord with unkind acts.” Popsie lowers his staff and slowly makes a circle, pointing it at all present.

“Come Sister, time to ascend to our rightful place. Arise evil one to face your judgment.” Our robes slowly change to white and gold and Robert’s to black with smoke arising from all about. Nice effect guys. We slowly rise up to the other ‘angels’ whereupon a great light too bright to look at surrounds us and then slowly disappears leaving the sky clear. We alight about a kilometer north of town behind a hill, so as to be unseen.

Rachael immediately stomps off raising a huge dust cloud around her. Impressive what a TK3 can do. She is pissed! We let her go. No way to talk to her till she calms down anyway.

“Please do not kill me. I repent, I repent!”

“Get up Robert, we are neither angels nor devils. Nor are there any witches, as I am sure you are well aware, only people with a gift like yourself.” Much more than he had, but he remains silent.

“When did the military get to you?”

“About a week ago a ‘TK’ named Smith came into town. I was the leader of this group, performing small ‘miracles’ when needed, mostly just helping out. I am native to these parts and most of the people knew me, at least by sight, from before. We are and were a pious community, so it was easy to fall into the trap you saw us in. A lot had happened, what with the fall, the plague and all. I did not intend for it to go this far. Smith made an offer I could not refuse. Follow along their way or they would destroy the entire town for helping Rogue TKs as they called everyone not of their group. I could not let everyone die, not after having survived all this. I am not a strong person, never have been. We are isolated here and had no one else to turn to.”

“I would suggest that you go in any direction other than back into town. It is unlikely they would take kindly to someone who had lied to them. People generally behave better when you tell them of the problems. But just so you do not get any ideas of playing this game again on someone else, here is a present.” Robert’s mouth opens in pain and he looks down at his right hand. A pentagram is burned into his palm. “No one is going to mistake that symbol for anything holy.” He relaxes as a black char blows away from his hand. The pain is gone, but an angry red scar remains. “We will also be watching you. The best way you can repent is by your actions. Tell everyone you meet that we did not kill you as we had every right to do, but let you live so you could warn them of the nesters, of Spiders and what they will do to TKs AND normals alike. No one has the excuse of killing the innocent because a bully told them

to. Go back to your original plan, use your abilities to help others, not hurt them. You owe us your life as you have a new life this day. Use it wisely. Now go.” We wait silently till he has passed over the hill to the east at top speed. We collect Rachael after the dust cloud has settled and DS back to base camp in one jump.

Debriefing

“YOU PIGS! Why didn’t you tell ME about your little secret? I was scared to death when Popsie goes all Holy Roller on me and then marches us right into the middle of them. I would rather face a hundred nesters than an angry mop under the direction of a lunatic. ARE YOU ALL NUTS?” We let her vent for a few minutes more.

“We did not know.” It was the truth and the simplest answer we could give.

“Yes, we could see the cross, but a lot of communities have those. Until someone went in all we had was a group trying to reorganize. It could have been any of us who went. We selected together the pair to go. No collusion involved. No one knew ahead of time.”

“You could have told me about the TK at least.”

“Before you left a scan showed he was outside the town a few km away working in the field with everyone else. We had no reason to suspect him. By the time he moved in to be in the town at the same time as you, Barb was out of range and we could not contact you without alerting everyone with a TP shout. We only got there just before you did and still did not know what to expect.”

“We decided to wait and see. Those TKs you saw were not just killed. They were tortured first, made to confess to being Satan’s spawn to further the people’s disbeliefs according to Barb’s TP reading done AFTER this was over. A TK2 with a Spider is as powerful as a two TK2s, and add a mob of two hundred, they did not have a chance coming in one at a time. Robert could perform a miracle and then block the other TK from doing the same or anything else, assuming they even got past the front gate.”

“But you said no TK and no interference. So why now, without telling me do you change your own rules?”

“We did not know! We were with you the whole time and did interfere when we felt we had to. But this could have played out any number of ways, including nothing happening and you two leaving with nothing but a bad taste in your mouths and hearts. Barb did not scan their

minds till AFTER we grabbed Robert. Line of sight remember?"

"Imagine how the people there must have felt, being powerless against a TK. It was a lesson for us all, as we were all watching. It is so easy to take the righteousness route, so easy. We humans all seem to desire an easy black and white answer to things. We also need to practice more than our TK abilities. Daniel and I thought after we did our scans, that this was a perfect opportunity; a small, mech armed community. Now we know nesters pushed them, but all the same, it was in a direction that none us could really tolerate. We had to do something. We had to protect the two of you, get you out of there and at the same time figure out what was going on."

"What did you do to the PIG?"

"We gave him a little gift to remember us by and sent him on his way. You can scan for him off to the east."

Rachael concentrates for a moment and then smiles. She approves of the gift. Have to remember not to cross her again, accidentally or on purpose.

"I suggest we will wait here a week and see what happens. If they get into more trouble, we will ALL try and work to fix it, you and Daniel included this time. Who knows, it might be Ron or James on the hot seat next time."

Rachael grins at that thought. "How did you learn to talk that way Popsie? You were something else."

"I was worried that I was putting it on too thick, but they took it right in. There is a lot about my life you are not aware of."

"Yeh, I have been kind of distant and none of us has encouraged thoughts of before the fall. Now about that 'retirement' you spoke of."

"As long as we are being honest, you are right. I was not in retirement per se. I was in rehab for 'repeat' abuse. The doors were locked to keep us in before the virus hit. Ok, happy now oh loving daughter of mine."

"Hey, we all have pasts we are not proud of. Let's not drag this out any more than we have to."

Good idea James, hmmm....let's see what's in here.

"Hey stop that!" We all crack up.

"I have a question. How could there be 200 people there? The town could not have held much more than that before the fall."

"My guess is that most missed the selection process entirely. Isolated in little pockets, HelperV burned out before it got to them or we are seeing an accumulation for the entire area."

“Why angels?”

“We threw that together at the last minute literally, but the cross gave us the idea. Figured, same as Daniel did, that they were probably fundamentalist Christians. Understand ALL groups have fundamentalists or can have. I have seen it in Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Evolutionists and Capitalists. Any one can get to this mindset. You also have to think how a single TK could control them so well. They had to have a predisposition to the idea of miracles, angels and demons.”

“So, is this the method we will use to take on the nesters?”

“We will see what happens. I think we can consider this as only a trial. Not all groups are going to be the same. Even this group is likely to change if they open their minds and hearts to TKs and others that are not bent on controlling them. I certainly would not want to be the next nester TK that shows up on their doorstep though. We told them not to kill, but that will be a hard vow to keep after what has happened and their own guilt over killing innocent people.”

“A sort of displaced aggression.”

“Exactly.”

“I for one am not comfortable manipulating people with lies.”

“Yeh, there is that. It was the first thing we thought of that would not give us away. This means that we need to work on our own reflexes and thinking some, especially in a crisis situation. Old habits of deflecting blame are hard to break.”

“What about PIG?”

“Daniel and I will take turns keeping an eye on him. Right now he has to worry about his own survival. He is alone in a wild and cold place. He needs to find water, food and shelter. It is also likely that the Shoshone are outside their reservations now. Not sure about that part of the equation they fit. So many bad things were done to the first residents of the Americas, I would not blame them one bit for making it difficult for white men to start it all up again. He also has a lot to think about. I don't doubt that he sort of slid into the role he was in. In way over his head. Otherwise he would have put up a much bigger struggle, denouncing us, which is what I expected actually. Oh, don't worry Rachael, a TK4 was more than a match for him even without your help and we were watching the entire time. Did you notice that they had guns? Even a TK has a hard time stopping a bullet as James related to us. I am sure those made him plenty nervous. He could not be absolutely sure they would not turn against him or he would be hurt in a showdown. He took the safe way out of a sticky situation, trusting us more than his own

people.”

“Glad they did not shoot me as the TK test.”

“Amen!”

“We didn’t even get something new to eat when we were there.”

“Speak for yourself. When everyone was watching Daniel I had a few minutes till the finale, so I DSeD into the kitchen and duped some bread, veggies, canned goods. Even had cat chow, though I doubt these spoiled ones would eat it over mouse.” Ghost appears looking quizzically. “I see you quieted their TP. No more dreams of chasing mice thank goodness!”

Can’t promise they will remember when they are asleep.

“Tell them they have to sleep outside if I pick anything up.”

“Merow!” At least dinner will be better.

“Ron if you are through with the book, let Rachael have it next.”

“Sure thing, though I warn you it is depressing.”

“Good, just what I need to add to my sense of foreboding.”

“Since it took you some time to walk to town, Ron and I fixed Silver Ghost up some. Sleeping for Seven, privy, storage, windows and places for tech as we accumulate it. You are all welcome to sleep inside tonight if you wish.”

“Someone snores, so I will sleep outside thank you.”

“Hmmm, I should be able to do something about that. Thanks for the reminder. Physician heal thyself!”

Dinner was good, with a little sage added for seasoning. While James and I cooked, Daniel and Rachael took another shower. Can’t blame them. Must have been pretty awful covered in dust all day. I DSeD some water and food in a small pack with other supplies to where Robert would find it. I did not want him mad at us and I am not going to dis someone for doing what they felt compelled to do. Not sure I would have done better under his conditions, different, but not better. I watched with the 3rd eye. He guessed who left it and bowed in our direction. Good, there was hope for him. Cats even went without mouse tonight. Guess everyone welcomed the change. Princess was getting bigger and hungrier. She would be bossing the other two around in no time. Ah the married life. As to my nocturnal noise problem, shrink the uvula, clear out the sinuses and fix that broken nose I got as a kid on the monkey bars. It would be sore for a few days, but I would live. I added a layer of felt to the inside of Silver Ghost, just to be sure. Rachael elected to stay with her father this night and Ron with his new love, Silver Ghost, as most of the changes were his ideas. Barb never complained. Wish I had that ability.

Sometimes I think all I do is whine about everything.

Though I was the first up today, I elected to sit out and play the ocarina some after dark. It's haunting sounds seemed appropriate for the near desert like surroundings. I needed to learn the Native American fingering for this thing. One of the oldest instruments known to humankind. Wonder if it extended back to the third age. A number of Indians nations believed that we were currently in the fourth age. I would say the twilight of the fourth age judging from recent events. 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.' I hope so. It was weird, but though I did not know what anyone but Barb did before the fall, I could not identify anyone I had met as from the upper classes. What happened to all of them? Did they high tail it for China when the going got tough? Or did the lower class take revenge and burn them out, what few who survived? What has happened to the rest of the world? What's going on with the nesters? I could sense a large number of TK in Sacramento, in spite of their best efforts to shield, but could not figure out what they were doing from this distance. But Samuel Clemens did not have any such shield. No TKs at all in fact. Wonder if they too were trying out various scenarios to see what would work under what conditions. I am convinced that they are able to communicate with one another. A big advantage over our little isolated group. Were there any other TK6s out there? Was I finally through being upgraded? So many questions worry wort! Sigh...

In the middle of the night we hear this horrendous howl and cats fighting. We are all awake in an instant. The cats are not with us. I scan the surroundings, but others are out of the ship before me, including those who staid outside.

“The cats are fighting something resembling a skinny dog.”

“A coyote no doubt.”

“They seem to be holding their own, using DS and TP to confuse the poor thing.”

“Poor thing foey! They eat cats normally!”

“Ooo, not so pacifist now are we?” Everyone is grinning at me.

A few seconds later the cats return as if nothing has happened and scans reveal the coyote high tailing it out of the area. Hope he tells his friends to stay away too.

“Did you fix the snoring problem?”

Yes he did thank goodness!

“Great, I think I will come inside now.” The others nod a similar sediment.

“Coyotes have been known to eat babies, but not full grown humans.”

“Just nibble on their fingers a little” Daniel cannot keep a straight face and soon we are all cracking up. But, we all also sleep inside, cats included.

Practice

“Ok wusses, since we did not get much practice done yesterday with all the fun and games we are going to do double today and no one gets out of it. Where are the cats?”

“Sleeping of course, they went in and out all night long. And if they keep me awake another night with their persistent licking I am going to lock them in the shower till they are soaked to the core.”

“Now Ron, they are only cats being cats. Be glad they could not sharpen their claws on Silver Ghost.”

“What, they wouldn't dare!” The rest of us laugh. It's his baby all right.

“TK1. Very low power, the element of surprise is important here. Most people will not even think that someone is at this level, but rather expect a TK2 or nothing at all. So you can play it two ways, pretend to not have any abilities till you REALLY need it, or use your ability all the time, like it is your normal way of doing things. They will not know that you are using all that you have if you are graceful enough. Grace is something we all could practice. James is familiar with this practice.” I bring out the practice balls and place them before everyone. “James if you will do the honors.”

“Not the same without Susan. Hope she is ok.”

“We all do.”

“Now pay attention.” James takes them though the routine. By now he is a real expert and makes it look easy. This should be easy for Ron and Barb, who are used to doing things precisely. Rachael is about as subtle as a bull in a China shop and Daniel is not used to using his hands much less his TK with fineness, depending on his acting and diplomatic skills instead.

“So, if a mere TK1 can do this a TK3 and 4 ought to find this easy.”

“Not that easy.” Rachael gets mad and sends one against the wall. “Why do we have to do this anyway?”

“Lots of reasons. You may have to move something quietly or though a difficult path. A lot of chemical reactions are binary. You don't

want them to react till you decide. And lastly, being good at this level will make it easier to be delicate and precise at the stronger levels.”

“All right even, I'll do it.”

“Barb, since you got this exercise so easily, see if you can concentrate enough to start a fire.” Being the weakest one in the PUSH arts, I wanted to show her that she could still do a lot. With her power of concentration this would be an easy task, if it was possible at all. I create a candle with wick for her to practice with. Dry leaves would also be good and gather some lying around. As a precaution I scoop out a sand pit for everything to reside in.

“TK2. James, you are our only TK2 at the moment, having missed out on the upgrade. When you battled the bots I bet you still moved your hands, arms and body to do what you did with your mind, am I correct?”

“Sigh, yes. Too much time on the netgames and dojo, reflex.”

“You need to break that habit. It is better if no one can anticipate your next move. If you use your body to react, they will have visual clues as to what to expect and you will be limited by what your body can do, not your mind. I want you to sit on your hands for this exercise.” I make some hollow metal spheres with holes. “When you hit one of these it will ring like a bell; don't cut them in half. Ready.”

“Have at it!” I TK two into a simple figure eight curve.

“Too easy.” Ding, ding, ding, ding.

“Can you keep it down over there?”

“You have to be able to concentrate under adverse conditions, so learn to work around it.”

“Thanks a lot!”

I add more spheres and make them more erratic in flight. Takes him awhile to catch on, but he gets these too. “Ok, no more Mr. Nice Guy.” I add DSing to the flight paths, so they come and go without clues and I add projectiles coming from them.

“Ow! What was that?”

“Forgot to shield did we? Just like last time.”

“Ok, try again.”

“Daniel, help me out. You take over the smaller white ones and I will control the black ones. Grace is NOT what we need here on our side of this test.”

“Gotcha.” Soon the others are watching the new game. Even the cats are trying to follow the flight path.

“Barb, warn the cats to stay out of this. I don't want them hurt. Here, let them play with these smaller ones.” I create a few 3 cm diameter ones

and TK them over to Barb. A half hour later, James is getting tired and making more mistakes. “Ok, don't just hit them now, but take them out.” A few seconds later they are all lying in pieces on the ground. “Anyone want to take on James, one on one?” No one answers. “Remember, this is a lowly TK2, but a skilled one. A TK2 with skill could probably take out a TK3 who was weak. Don't make the mistake of becoming complacent because your opponent appears weaker.”

“Never forget your shielding! A simple twist to your heart and you are toast. There will be NO warning from someone willing to kill unless they see you as very weak. Then they may play with you for sport.” Not a nice thought.

“TK3. Ron and Rachael front and center. Please sit down back to back. Ron you are better at fine detail, Rachael with brute force and speed. Therefore this exercise will require both. I have hidden five balls all 2 cm in diameter in front of each of you. One each gold, copper, iron, silicon and the last, frozen air. There is obviously a time limit on the last one. You are to find each sphere, bring it to the circle in front of you that has a 2.1 cm diameter hole. You are to pass each sphere through the hole without touching the circle itself and then place it, in order on the stand to your right. Everyone is to shield, including the participants. This is likely to get wild. The rest of us will pelt the participants with pebbles at random intervals to try and distract them.”

“Shit!”

“You got that right.”

“Rachael, stop scanning. I have just moved all your spheres”

“Cheater!”

“All is fair in love and war deary.”

“Go!”

Ron goes for the air ball first, as this is the hardest to detect. Rachael goes for the gold to get it out of the way. Ron takes longer to find his sphere, but spends less time passing it though the hoop. Tie, round one. Pelting begins. Instinct causes Rachael to waste time swatting at the first few. We are not pelting hard enough to pass their shields, but it is hard not to react. Ron gets the silicon ball in first, but just barely. Rachael brings in the copper with the iron right behind it, holding both before the hoop and passing them through right after each other.

“Show off!”

Ron brings in his iron ball at too fast a speed and over shoots his hoop and bounces off of James' shield. He makes a quick recovery. Rachael is having a harder time now. Silicon is the most abundant

element in soil, but never exits in the pure state. Ron brings in the copper, slower this time. He only has the gold to go. Rachael finds the silicon and brings it in. They are now tied, both searching for their last one. Odds go to Ron, but he is showing frustration.

“Where is it?”

Meanwhile Rachael finds her air ball, but has to shield it as it is almost gone. But being smaller, easily fits through the hoop and wins!

“Ok, where is the gold ball?”

“About 10 cm directly in front of you, covered in dirt.”

“Shit!”

“Scanning at as distance is great, but you have to remember to cover close up as well.

“Now one last task, one last ball.” A glass of water forms in front of each.

“Yuck, salt water.”

“Correct. Remove the salt ball and pass it through the hoop.”

“There is no salt ball in there, only salt water.” But Ron is already concentrating and a minute later pulls a salt ball out of his water and passes it through the hoop.

“Ok, Rachael, you still need to do this. A TK3 can separate or combine molecules. You need to form a ball out of the separated salt.” Being on the spot, she is sloppy and the ball is not exactly round, nor 2 cm in diameter, but she succeeds after a fashion.

“Ok, now drink your water.” Rachael takes a sip and spits it out. “If that had been poison instead of salt, you would be dead now.”

Ron drinks his down. “Ah, just what I needed.”

“Don’t rub it in, these were hard assignments. I am sure you can think of ways to practice on your own. Ron, don’t overlook what is in front of you and Rachael, being sloppy can be deadly.”

“TK4. Daniel, front and center. Barb, if you could convince the cats to join us.” I make a few mouse flavored cat treats. *Treats!* Ghost appears first of course, but then decides that there is an itch he simply must get at and proceeds to lick and bite at a spot on his flank. Princess is next and hungrily starts to chow down.

“Almost gone.”

Marm finally comes sauntering over, no DS and looks up at my face. *Mouse for breakfast, anything else?*

“You will notice the unusual collars on Princess and Marm.”

“Interesting, an eight stranded, intricate pattern interleaved with gold, diamond and silicon. A Spider?”

“Let’s reserve the Spider term for the tech manufactured ones that the nesters make. Amp can be the generic term, but yes. You will notice that Ghost does not have one.”

“Ah, my assignment.”

“Correct. Have fun!”

“What about Yingui? So far all he has had to do is think this stuff up. Not exactly a challenge.”

“Hey, I had to make all the equipment you used.” Rachael makes the whoopee sign.

“Let’s go over here and come up with something. You keep the cats in place so Pop can work on them.” Soon the sounds of animated whispering, gestures and laughing ensue. They are going to get even, I can feel it. Finally I hear, “Agreed, this will be good!”

They come back and sit beside me silent, intent on watching Daniel and watching me squirm. He has formed an iron base collar upon which to build the final pattern. Good idea. Putting a collar on a cat that has never worn one is NOT an easy task. Barb is helping to convince Ghost that he should sit still and that he is not going to die. Low merows are coming from his throat occasionally. Big baby.

“Maybe if Ghost cannot sit still he should go on a diet?” He hunkers down, obviously pissed, but is quiet. No one is giving any clue as to what my task will be.

“I hear an applause and look to see the collar completed and Ghost scratching at it with his hind paw.”

“Diet?” He stops.

Daniel speaks up, “You will notice that the collar matches Marm’s, with a little more ah give in it. Princess does not have TP, so making a collar based on hers would not have included the amp configuration for the TP field.”

“Correct and well done.”

“Ok, what do you have in mind for me? I hate on the spot tests, prefer take home or writing a paper.”

“Too bad, but I think that Barb should teach the cats how to use their new collars first.”

Should not take long, cats are very good at concentration when they want to. She takes them aside and I see her concentrating and the cats looking at her and then sniffing each other’s collars. I think they depend on smell more than sight sometimes. In the mean time the others fill Daniel in on the details of my torture.

“Due to her delicate condition, Princess will sit this one out, but we

thought it was important to exercise Marm and Ghost as well as Yingui. You will notice twenty 2 cm soft plastic balls scattered around the yard and a basket here at the center. All in sight, nothing hidden. The cats are to gather the balls and bring them back to the basket. And Yinqui is to try and catch them, WITHOUT using TK to block them, the balls or the basket. The rest of us shall retreat to the corners to stay out of the way. *GO!*”

I watch to see what the cats will do. They pop out and scatter about the field. I decide my best strategy is to act as goalie. The problem is that the basket is in the center of the field and they have access 360. Both of them get balls in before I give up on that strategy. I could always sit on the basket. That would prevent balls from going in, but would not let me catch them either and they might be able to DS directly to the basket. I am dignified enough to not go chasing after them. A cat is near impossible to catch unless it wants to or is cornered. Then I had an idea. Oops, there goes another ball. Marm seems to be the best at this. Wonder if they rubbed mouse on the balls to make it easier for them to spot, they do seem to sniff a ball before grabbing it. I am not allowed to block the basket or shield anything with TK. This does not mean that I can't change anything not directly associated with the game. I pop into between space. Normally you just hold your breath and pass through. I am sure, from watching the cats that this is what they are doing. I have an advantage. I can change the CO2 in my blood back to O2 and so can remain in here where they are not expecting me to be and where space and time are very different. Gotcha! I grab Ghost, admittedly the easiest target. I deposit him in the closed ship to effectively take him out of the action. Princess is already there and greets him with a meow.

I pop back to normal space and pop around as if chasing Marm, just to wear him out and distract him some then suddenly hide in between. Gotcha! I deposit him in the ship. *Pissed*. Didn't know they even cared, still some kitten in them and I thought they just liked to play. Wonder what they were offered in exchange for beating me. I pop back to the outside.

“You were VERY lucky, only one ball left on the field. Got harder for the cats once the density of balls went down.”

“You were gone a long time. What did you do?” I explain to them. “So, you can hide there for some time and still see what is happening. That could be very useful, though how is this different from scanning at a distance?”

“Faster to respond, I can see colors and obviously I can BE there as

well as scan it.”

“That would be a big help. We are all together for the next upgrade for sure.”

“Can you take others with you to this place?” Ah James, you are always the first to stick your neck out.

“Hold your breath.” I pop both of us in between. I only stay a few seconds and then come out again.

“Well, what did you see?”

“Nothing at all. Pitch black. Looks like only those with the ability can use it. Too bad, with a bunch of us in there at once, we could cover a lot of angles.”

I really hate exercise, though I admit all of the bike riding really did me good before the fall. Too much TKing around lately though. Not that our diet has been that good. We continued to invent games and strategies for the better part of a week. Finally, even the duped food was getting old and boring. Duping food killed all the bacteria and fungi, so it tended to keep better. Not sure I wanted to get to the point where I could dupe anything bigger than a virus. Between space is kind of weird. It is not a vacuum, yet you cannot breathe. No sense of temperature either, neither hot nor cold. Not sure what was going on. My best guess is that you are enveloped in some kind of field while present. Not possible to leave anything in between either. Every time I tried to separate myself from an object, it popped out into the window I was pushing it towards. Of course you could store stuff well away from the final destination in real space. It might be interesting if my range ever gets bigger to try something definitely in a different temperature situation. Do I feel the temperature of where I was or where I am going?

Mission

I don't feel comfortable with how we left the people in town. They have a right to know the truth.

“Let’s put it before the others. I have also been feeling uneasy about it and I am sure Rachael has.”

“Hey guys, Barb and I have just been talking. Neither one of us feels good about leaving the town in the dark and wanted to get your opinions on what we should do, if anything. Please speak up. Nothing will happen till we reach consensus. That includes you Rachael, especially you, since you were not in on the original thrown together at the last second concept, and will have a more unbiased perspective.”

“The question as I see it is do we leave them in ignorance in hopes that this will be the way to steer them and potentially others towards some kind of accommodation of TKs and just plain outsiders in general, while at the same time being leery of nesters.”

“Nesters could change strategies, if they have not already done so.”

“I say leave em. They killed innocent people and deserve anything they get.” Never thought Rachael would take this stance. I am puzzled now.

“Hold on a second. Scanning.”

“A nester TK is before their blockade. They have asked her to be patted down before being allowed to enter. She is questioning why, but that many guns trained on her, she can’t object. She concedes. They have found the Spider and have crushed it. She must be really scared now. That is half her power gone. Something is being said, but no idea what. Too far away for me to make a virtual ear easily. She is turning and leaving. They are letting her go.”

“This adds more to a sense of urgency. If she comes in and they decide to take out this town as an example we have created a worse situation, not a better one.”

“She does not know that they are only turning away nester TKs or all TKs. Remember, our people taken at Lake Tahoe had spiders also. Their original instructions were to kill non nester TKs. Heck, we don’t even know what they would do with a non-nester TK. She could also have scanned and seen that Robert is no longer there. It is possible that the town is no longer of any immediate interest.”

“We are painting our selves into a corner again. Are we the magnificent seven, or rather six, riding into the small-undefended town to save them from the bullies? Do we teach them how to fight supersonic jets and bots while we are at it? How to we defend all the towns that we meet from now on? At the SAME TIME!”

“She has a good point. What exactly is our mission? We need a mission statement I think before we go galloping into every situation without thought to the consequences.”

Agreed! Everyone is quiet for a moment.

“We might have to come up with a code of ethics for TKs while we are at it. But please, while we are having this discussion, scan the area for jets and bots. I could not live with myself knowing that we had caused their destruction.”

“I want to know how the hell the nesters always seem to have reached some place before we do. They are so few, how do they do it?”

“Remember they have satellite scanning capabilities with IR pinpointing locations of people, and the overall population is low. It is natural that they would seek out concentrations of people.”

“Doing an effective, fair, mission statement is going to take time. Not something we are going to come up with in a morning discussion. I propose that we continue our oath not to kill and continue to reflect on these ideas.”

“Agreed!”

“How does everyone feel about telling the town about us, not everything mind you, but generalizations about TKs in a non threatening way?”

Rachael glares at us, “I think we should walk in. No more shows of force. I understand you did not have much time to prepare and you tried to gear it towards the specific audience, but it was still a deception. What pissed me most about the nesters was their secrecy. They never gave anyone a chance to make up their own minds. How does what we did make us any better than the PIG deceiver Robert?”

“We do not kill the innocent.” Nor the guilty if we can avoid it.

“And if these people die today because they did not know the truth, how does that clear us of not killing?”

“Ok, you made your point. We go and we walk in.”

“Agreed!”

Are we allowed to deceive the nesters?

“And what is the difference between deceiving and withholding information.”

“Ron, do you try and explain everything you do when working on a tech project?”

“No, of course not, would take to long if possible at all and not necessary. Most people do not want to know the specifics, just that something can be made to work the way they want.”

“I have a feeling that the more open and casual we are about ourselves, the more we will not be perceived as a threat, but just as a group of people with potentially useful skills here and willing to help.”

“At the same time, we do have an obligation to protect ourselves as well, telling people all of your strengths and weaknesses would not be wise.”

“Often times, telling someone you can do something says that you will do it. Not the same at all, but implied or assumed. Only tell people what you are willing to do, not what you can do. Be careful, even the most innocent action can have far reaching implications.”

“To sum up then, we do not kill and we do not intentionally deceive. That means no more special effects. Some of the stuff we do is going to appear as a special effect no matter what we do, but I think you understand the intent here. And lastly we have a right to protect ourselves by not saying what we can or cannot do.”

“Agreed.” *Agreed*

“What about Robert and any others we find like him?”

“I have certainly thought hard about removing the scar, but I think that it is too soon. He has yet to prove he has given up that path and it will take time to convince me. But as to the larger question, do we have the right to judge another TK? In this case the evidence was clear, he was killing or having others kill TKs for personal gain, even if only to appease a bully. Which makes it not so clear does it. Even the nesters are acting out of fear. We did not kill him, which we could obviously have done and he even expected us to. We did not hamper him from continuing to live, just slow down his ability to do harm. He could still kill other norms and TKs. How far are we to go in defense of our beliefs? And do we have the right?”

“Lot of questions.”

Back to New Jerusalem

“We will need to be especially careful. We do not want to alert the nesters we can’t afford to lose any more of us. They are undoubtedly watching this place, even if only with bots and sats. Normal clothes, shoes and gear. Nothing other than our staffs. Fortunately the staffs do look fairly ordinary from a distance and emit no TK field of their own. Another TK would have no trouble seeing what they are, but we will know if another TK is present anyway. We could always pop the staffs back to Silver Ghost if necessary. That also means no TK unless we need to do so to defend ourselves from the nesters.”

“Or shotguns!” Many nods there.

The walk to New Jerusalem is largely silent. Lots of questions to find answers to.

“Most of the cars and such have been taken down. That’s a big improvement. Would not have stopped a determined person or group anyway.”

“I would suggest that when we get close, we remove our hoods. Yingui your head will survive a few minutes of sun, even if the rest of us will be blinded as a result.”

“Ha-ha”

“Breathe, better to not appear tense.”

“They are likely to recognize ‘Francis and Ruth’ of course.”

“Do we use our real names? Word could get back to the nesters and heaven knows they want Rachael bad enough.”

“Word is likely to get back eventually anyway, but I hope that we can explain the situation to them as best we can. Maybe it will not be a problem.”

“We have to start being honest sometime. Scary, but I think we should start now. Besides it will not hurt to spread the legend of us.” Everyone laughs. I bet the stories get amplified in the telling. Who knows what will eventually get back to us.

“Greetings. Would it be possible to talk with your council, leader or whom ever helps run your town?” The two men, one in his thirties and the other in his late teens look at us quizzically.

“Large group. We require a pat down inspection before entering. No weapons of any kind. Be aware that people are watching and they are armed. If you don’t like these requirements, please just leave.”

“We have no problems with the requirement. Go right ahead.” One

signals for a lady to come over and together they pat us down. We are not carrying any knives or metal objects of any kind, so it goes quick. “What about the staffs?”

“They are ok, lots of people have them to help on long walks and those don’t look like they would do much damage. The main office is the one three buildings down on your left. Green door. Knock and ask for Martin.”

“Thanks.”

“They must not have seen us the last time we were here. Maybe they were in the field or something.”

“Seems strange that they would not recognize the staffs at least. Surely they filled in the missing when they returned.”

We approach the green door and knock. “Enter”

“Ah, we were told to ask for Martin?”

A startled man approaches visibly upset and nervous. “Welcome back Brother Francis and Ruth. I see you brought company this time.” Daniel is up front and addresses Martin.

“Relax Brother Martin, this is just a social call. We just wanted to give you some information that might be important to you. Is there some place we could meet with you and your top people, or everyone if you would prefer. Last time your, ah, governmental structure was a little different, so not sure about how you handle things now.”

“We are still in transition. Trying to take in what you said the last time you were here. Hope you noticed that entering town was more, relaxed. We even threw out one person with Satan’s Spider just this morning, like you said.”

“Yes, we are aware of that. We wanted to give you more information on them and on us. I am afraid that we may have given the wrong impression last time.” He looks at us concerned, but says nothing about it.

“Let’s go meet in the Chapel. Sister Evelyn, could you signal someone to ring the meeting bell?”

“Sure thing Brother Martin.” She runs out of the door and soon we hear the bell clanging in the distance.

“We best get over there ourselves. I would offer you water or something, but don’t have any in this office yet. Water pressure went out with the power.”

“Quite all right. We live simple lives ourselves.”

People are visibly taken back when we enter. We insisted that Brother Martin lead the way. Some get down on their knees and look

down as we pass. That would change in a few minutes. We reach the front of the room and all but Daniel takes a seat. Murmurs run down the isles. Who ever heard of Angels sitting, or for that matter walking? Where are their glowing white robes? Are they here to punish us for our part?

“Greetings.” All fall silent. “Though you may remember me as Brother Francis, my real name is Daniel. The last time we came here the situation was very different and we used different names to protect our identities in case everything went wrong. Robert is ok. We did not harm him, but admonished him not to repeat what happened here. He is forbidden to return to your town, so you need not fear his showing up unannounced. He seems genuinely repentant and we all hope he is able to make a new life for himself elsewhere. Currently he is near the border of Nevada, some ways from here.

But first things first. We are not angels. We are not witches, demons or devils either. We are mortal human beings that have been blessed with a special gift we hope comes from God. We are convinced of that anyway. As with all gifts of God, including our lives, there is a catch. We have free will to either use the gift as it was intended, to help people, or turn from God and do evil. We have chosen to do good to the best of our ability. Others, as you are beginning to see, have chosen evil. I am convinced that they do so out of ignorance and not malice. More on that later.” He pauses to let that sink in.

“Why are we supposed to believe you this time? Why shouldn’t we kill you all as Satan’s spawn, as deceivers?”

“Fair question. Brother Martin. You would not succeed for one, unless we let you. Will you take your pocket knife out of your right pocket please.”

“How?” But he hands it over.

“Question, do angels bleed? Anyone?”

“No” someone finally answers.

“Not very sharp Martin.” Martin grins sheepishly.

“I can take care of that.” A slight pause and then Daniel runs the knife across the palm of his hand. Not too deep, but enough to draw a small amount of blood. “Is there a doctor in the house?” A nervous giggle ensues.

“I am an itinerant medic.”

“Please come up here and tell me if this is really blood.”

“Sure thing.” The man comes to the front and looks carefully at Daniels hand, then touches the blood and rubs it between his fingers, then

finally tastes it. “Well, I don't have a microscope here to be sure, but I would certify that this is blood.”

“Please take a look at the wound. Does this look like a normal wound?”

The man makes a show of looking at the wound and opening it even further to check the edges. “Yep. I am afraid to tell you, but you appear to be human.”

He then hands Daniel his handkerchief. “Thanks doc. You may be seated.” The man waves his hand and goes back to his seat.

“You lie! You are all witches! What you have done with our Shepard? This is all just more lies and deceptions.” He raises a gun to fire it when it suddenly dissolves. “What the?”

“No guns allowed in the Lord’s house, even Robert kept that commandment. Please be seated and hear me out before you pass judgment. We will not be hurting anyone or judging anyone here. We are here only to pass on information and then leave. We want nothing of you but a few minutes of your time. It is unlikely you will ever see any of us again. Does that sound like the actions of a witch or demon?”

“Now I know that some of you would not even be convinced if I were to drop dead on the spot, but you will have to wait as I don't intend to die just yet.” More laughter now.

Martin asks, more relaxed, “So, what are you, or rather what happened?”

“Part of the tale you already know. The ruined economy and greedy attempts to make a buck at any cost. A few mistakes made in a lab and the HelperV virus is unleashed. At this point communications start to break down as everyone scrambles for a safe place. Looks like your group did pretty well here. A show of hands. How many came here after the plague passed through and it was safe to travel again?” Everyone’s hand goes up. “I assume then most of you never went through the fever then, as Robert did.” Nods seen throughout the audience. “Well, as I am sure you heard the fever was a horrible thing. I shudder to even try and remember it well. But that was not even the worst of it. In areas where the fever swept a whopping 99.9% of the people died. Of those who survived, most recovered with no lasting effects. Some went crazy, destroying property and unfortunately killing everyone they saw and could catch. They were running on overload and the victims were still weak from the fever. Many died at the hands of the crazies. A few however were given the gift. Of these few a few went crazy, or went Rogue as we call it. They were crazy and they had the gift. These few

individuals really razed havoc. In a lot of cases it was the sane ones with the gift that finally brought control, some at the cost of their own lives. Fortunately there are no more crazies or rogues running around. They all died, often at their own hands or in an accident. A few crazies were even saved by the gifted and are almost normal now. They recovered from the mental illness, but are often afflicted in some other way. Our own Barb is a case in point. She has trouble speaking properly, not that unusual. Other than that she is perfectly normal and we have learned to understand her and accept her as one of us.”

“At first the gifted, which we call TKs, pronounced tee-kays for plural and tee-kay for a single individual, short hand for telekinetic, got along just fine with you 'norms', short for normals. The gift was something of a curiosity and even helpful at times. The problem was two fold. One, some people without the gift grew to be jealous of those with the gift. Differences are feared among us. Look how long it took to get over racism. A hundred years ago, my beautiful yellowish complexion could have been grounds for a lynching in some parts just by itself. Secondly, those who survived the fever were not the only ones who survived. Our military, in an attempt to insure the survival of the nation, built facilities, Armstrong facilities, deep underground at I am guessing at a hundred or so places across our land. This is kind of smart in a way. Plague is only one of many scenarios where these facilities would be needed. It could just have easily have been nuclear war like what happened in India and Pakistan. But, because the military did not go through the fever, they did not suffer as much from the effects. Few if any went crazy, few if any were given the gift. To the military mind, the gift was something new and potentially dangerous. Rogues certainly were proof of that. The military mind likes to control situations. No surprises. At first they welcomed TKs into their areas, more to study them than anything else, or even to use as a new military tool or weapon. A few were captured against their will, as one in our group was on two separate occasions. Later they learned how to implant TKs with neurological devices that would kill the TK instantly if they did not do exactly what they were told. They even went so far as to try and lure in TKs by bribes of food, comfort and sex. When that started to fail, they either took them by force openly or killed them outright. Our group is a survivor of one such missile attack that destroyed the cabin we were in.”

“You had one TK among you, Roberts. At first he was a curiosity, he had survived the fever that you had missed, then he began to do miracles, helping in ways that no mere mortal could. At this time a TK under

military control came to town. They hate lone TKs who are not under control, they hate lack of control in general, but instead of taking Robert back to the 'nest' as we call it, they decided to use him to try and catch wondering TKs that might come into town. The rest you possibly know better than I do, but it goes something like this. Robert began to preach. He talked about God. He talked about Satan. He was on fire with the Holy Spirit. He convinced you that anyone displaying certain traits was a witch. Anyone who could deflect a knife thrown at them, or rocks, whatever. These people thus identified were to be killed as demons and witches. It has been pretty scary out here after the fall. What with the power out, services cut, the unknown, rogues, crazies, and the gifted all running around with no law and order. I bet even some normal people took advantage of the chaos to do some nasty things. It is easy to see how you were all taken in. Robert probably even convinced himself that he was doing the right thing. But Robert traded his own safety and possibly yours, for he wanted to stay in your midst and any town harboring a TK was to be put to the flames unless the TKs cooperated and gave themselves up. A false safety bought at the lives of innocent people who never did you any harm, nor intended to.” Very quiet in the hall.

“This morning you had a visit from one of those military controlled TKs. Probably the same one that visited Robert some time ago, come back to check up on him. You took her Spider, which by the way is an amplifier that effectively doubles a TK’s strength, and destroyed it. There are no other TKs present in your town. We can sense one another most of the time. So I am guessing that the reason she agreed to leave was because you were no longer of any interest to her. Am I right?”

A man stands up in the third row. “I was one of the men at the gate at the time. After we got her Satan’s Spider and destroyed it she asked what happened to Robert and we said he left. She asked where and we said, we did not know, he just left. Doubted she would have believed the Angel story had we told her. Then she simply turned around and left herself. Didn’t ask for nothing else. From what you just said, she must have known he was not here any more and since we were not in on Robert’s secret she had nothing to worry about. Though I suppose she wondered why we destroyed her Spider, but twenty guns and shotguns surrounded her and she did not pursue it. I imagine that would have stopped her had she tried anything.”

“It might have or it might not have. They have all had military training, but my guess is as I said before, you were no longer of interest to her. She probably did not care about the Spider either, as she could

easily get another one and at least you were destroying Spiders from anyone else that might show up with one. See, we used to have Spiders also, but gave them up when we saw they were being used in the way that the military was using them. The extra power was not worth the taint that went with it. This was the reason why I asked Robert to destroy his.”

“I am Tiny, the strongest man in town.”

“Never understood why the biggest guy is always called Tiny.”

Everyone giggles or laughs.

“I want to know if there are different strengths to you TKs or is there one size fits all and we don't have to worry about anything worse that what we have already faced.”

“Good question Tiny. Just as the number of people who received the gift was very small, the number who received a double dose is incredibly small. So, yes there are different strengths, but you are unlikely to meet anyone of those, just too rare.”

“So, what strength are you?”

“You were not listening Tiny. Think VERY, VERY, VERY RARE.”

“Ok, I got it. You're not going to tell us.” He laughs.

“You got it. Would you tell me how many of your fifty-five rifles and eight pistols are outside on the porch because this is a house of God and not allowed in here? Didn't think so. Everyone has a right to defend themselves if they so choose.”

“Now as I see it, you, as a community have a choice. You can apply the scriptures and treat everyone as your brother or sister until their actions prove them otherwise, for many have entertained angels unawares, or you can cozy up to the military and risk possibly going to Hell for killing the innocent. You are let off the hook this time because of ignorance. You were trying to do the right thing. You no longer have that excuse. You know now. They will be back, you can bet on it, if for no other reason than because they like to control things and people. As long as you don't have any TKs present, they will probably leave you alone. After all they will need people to plant farms, build buildings, etc. to start it all up again. This is a pretty safe bet. Probably the one that I would follow if I were in your shoes. The last choice is to actively help the good TKs to reach safety, a sort of TK underground. Even we do not know where that is yet ourselves. We intend to find this place and if this if what you decide to do, we will let you know where to direct people who come in. You need not do more than give the TKs some food and water and send them on the right direction. Minimal risk. Just don't tell the military where the spot is please.” Another laugh.

I stand up. “We, as humans have been given a second change, and I include both norms and TKs. Daniel referred to all of us here as a remnant as is so often spoken of in the Holy Scriptures. What do you do with a second chance? Last time we nearly destroyed the world given to us in trust from God. Do we go back to the same old ways? Or do we chose a new path, where the lion lays down with the lamb and we live in peace, and not war with ourselves, with our neighbors or with our world. We will leave you now the same way we came in, walking on our own two feet, just as you do. We go to try and find a place where everyone can get along and where we can build a new world free of hate and greed.”

“We want to come with you!”

“Please, please, you do not know what you ask. The military is actively seeking our group. There are bots on their way here as we speak. If we are found in your town when they arrive, they will likely call a missile strike on this town, killing everyone here. They will continue to hunt us down after we leave. This is not the life you want for yourselves, and your children. Stay here, build a better society, so that when this is over, when they stop chasing us or we are all gone, you will still have a safe place, a good place to live.”

We walk down the isle to the door. Someone shouts, “Good luck! May the Lord be with you!”

I turn and answer, “And also with you!” We all wave good-bye. My Catholic side showing.

As soon as we are out of sight, I summon Silver Ghost and dissolve our campsite. Not enough time to return it to a native state, the cats ate all the mice anyway, but at least we don't leave any evidence of our abilities. “Where to now?”

“Good question. I was thinking that I would like to talk with the descendants of the people who were able to live here for thousands of years without destroying the place.”

“Indians? There must be hundreds of tribes, which one?”

“Thousands at one time actually. Many have died out, dissolved into the mainstream or combined to keep up a critical mass. The last hundred and fifty years have not been easy. The last economic collapse hurt tribes dependent on casinos horribly, from feast to famine in a very short time. The traditionalists were hurt by land deals and shysters. The only good thing I can say from the results of my scanning nearby, is that most have a natural immunity to HelperV or were never exposed, so most survived the plague it appears. Finally, those who know best have a chance to

reclaim the land for the sake of us all.”

“Aaaaagh! WHICH ONE?”

“Who has the map?”

Armstrong Sacramento

“Is everyone present?”

“TK Smith is late getting in. She lost her spider to a community that lost its Queen Bee. The community apparently knows about spiders and is now afraid of anyone with one, crushing any that they find. She should be in shortly. Bots have located no TKs in the immediate area”

“Let’s proceed. Jacobs, bring Smith up to speed when she gets in. In general, how is the Queen Bee program working?”

“Just like operation Honey Pot, we have had an initial success but as people become wise, the success falls off. New Jerusalem is not the only place to lose its Queen Bee. Some just leave, as apparently happened in this case, some kill themselves, and some are killed by their towns.”

“That is to be expected. We have to keep adapting and coming up with new strategies. There are still TKs out there and I want them. Any more on this Yingui character?”

“We are convinced that he or she is a myth, a legend to keep up the spirits of the remaining TKs or to scare children into behaving. We did find the remnants of a camp 8 clicks outside of New Jerusalem, but nothing unusual to report there except there were no small animals within a 25 meter radius of the fire pit. Could have even been an Indian camp. They have been straying off the reservations now that the infrastructure has collapsed.”

“You think they eat rats and mice?”

“Had some in survival training, not that bad, but too many bones.” A chuckle passes through the meeting.

“No more reports of our missing flying saucer?”

“No sir. It seems to have disappeared completely. We are beginning to wonder if it was some kind of a software glitch in the bots, but as they are missing also, so we cannot confirm.”

“Possibly the TK who escaped the Lake Tahoe roundup took them out if he made it back to their camp.”

“He is dead now sir and will not cause anymore problems. The poison we released a week or more ago should have done the trick.”

“I hope you are right Major and this is not another case of disappearing nanobots.”

“How is the ATTF (amplified telekinesis through fusion) program going?”

“Very promising, we are ready to proceed with the first fusion from

level 2 to 3. TK Smith has volunteered to be the first test case.”

“Did I hear you all talking about me behind my back?” as she enters the room.

“Have a seat, Jacobs will fill you in on what we have discussed so far.”

“TK Smith, what happened to the TK at New Jerusalem and the lost one from Lake Tahoe?”

“Sir, no body has been found, but I assume Lake Tahoe is dead. We have not had a single failure of that simplified ultra nanobot. We don’t have the personnel or bots to cover that large of an area just to find a single TK body. May have even frozen to death before the bots got him or wild animals have disposed of the remains. The NJ Queen appears to have high tailed it out of town. The civs were pissed, so either they found out they had been duped or he did something stupid. Even if the civs at NJ only take out Amps, it will be a benefit to us, so I recommend we leave them alone. Resources are stretched pretty thin. If we were not the closest facility I would even recommend that Armstrong Las Vegas take over the Northern Nevada territory. They know how to work better in semi arid to desert terrain better than we do.”

“What about Boise?”

“Same problem as us, not used to the terrain. Ok as long as we are on highways, but off road is a problem. Lost two transports to gully washes the drivers did not see and did not show up on maps only a year old. None of the TKs captured can fly here, so we have no choice but to transport them.” That gets a chuckle.

“ATTF will do what for us Smith?”

“We now know that ATTF will boost the abilities of a single TK up to ten fold. If the Amps cannot handle this, we still get five fold greater than current abilities.”

“Will it last?”

“Too early to tell. Full psiotic brain scans will of course be done at regular intervals. We should be able to monitor any changes and tune the effect for the next run.”

“The new TK recruits are working out?”

“We lost two who did not believe we were serious. A couple of them are showing interest in full cooperation and I am slowly granting them more responsibilities and freedoms. So far none have abused the privileges.”

“Has ATTF been tried on a normal subject yet?”

“We have had one trial. It was not successful, the subject went crazy

and ultimately had to be put down as she was a danger to self and others. Some evidence suggests that the subject's brain has to be naturally inclined to start with. Our best evidence is coming with level 1 raised to level 2, two trials and two successes. Of course, we don't need any more level 2s, they are the most common, but it shows promise that the procedure will work to raise a level 2 to level 3."

"Good luck TK Smith."

"Thank you sir."

Shoshone Reservation

By process of frustration we finally just chose the closest one. Based on what was learned here, we would decide the next course. It was tough going for her as she had never read an entire book before, but Rachael finished the book in tears and refused to even talk with anyone for hours. Much the same reaction that Daniel and I had when we read it many years earlier. That left only James and Barb. Barb was picking up on everyone else's shouted thoughts and feelings, so I suggested that James be next.

"How could they?"

"They? I am sorry dear, but your forty or so odd years here have also contributed indirectly. By never learning and never doing anything, we all contributed to their fate. A lot of it was racism, which I am sure we have all felt to some extent. Even me. I remember in the college I went to, the worst possible thing you could be was a white male nerd. It was the lowest life form imaginable. Even kids in high schools for years and years afterward would rather be called anything other than a nerd. Outside the college it was much different of course, but inside the liberal ivory tower, we were the ones responsible for ALL of the worlds problems, just by sucking air, imagine that. A sort of reverse judgment process whereby you were responsible for what your collective ancestors did. Twenty years after I got out, the ultimate being was the white male nerd, in the form of a software company founder. Also soon to be one of the most vilified, but you know that story. People, for some reason I cannot fathom, like to have a scapegoat for their problems. They like to feel superior. When people are in pain, they vent their pain on other people, and if racism is socially acceptable, so much the better. Then there are those who want to lead the savage to enlightenment, to the European cultural version of it anyway. These people are amazingly totally unaware that they are imposing a cultural standard not a spiritual one. Many have suffered and died under these compassionate people who thought they had the right and moral duty to do what they did. Then there are the greedy that saw easy pickings from a people who do not approve of nor understand the capitalistic madness. The whole concept, as you learned in the book, of the ownership of land is so antithetical to the core of being for these people. Imagine how different our lives would have been if we treated the planet as our mother and not as something to be used up and dumped on."

“Actually the biggest cause was the smallest thing, the smallpox virus. Reached most tribes even before the white man, killing off 90+% of the population without a shot being fired. But it really was all about greed. They had land, the white man wanted it, so they took it, by whatever means possible.”

“Yeh, even if that meant giving them smallpox infected blankets.”

We left Silver Ghost and the cats a couple of kilometers away from the people we sensed, well away from any roads or paths. I changed the color again to match the surroundings. “Lots of mice here guys. Happy hunting.” You would think they would get tired of mice, lizards and insects. Oh well, to each his or her own. I remember canned cat food, yuck, maybe mice were better.

“Are we ever going to have bikes again?”

“Find one for me or Daniel to pattern off of and we will, though it had better be a mountain bike in this terrain.”

“I sense a trail off this way a couple of hundred meters.”

“Have you ever been on an Indian reservation before?” The younger ones had not. Both Daniel and I had, but so much had changed and it was not this one anyway. Each place and people is different, best not to put preconceived ideas into heads.

“Just hang loose and be open.”

“Will they say profound things in a sort of Indian double speak?”

“Sure, like one who only looks ahead steps in it.”

“Huh, oh, eeeuuu, yuck. Come on guys help me get this off of my shoes.”

“Just wipe it on the grass, it will wear off before we get there. Only horse poop, not as bad as dog or human. And pretty old stuff at that.”

“Eeeuuu!”

“Remind me not to let her work on any farm we set up.”

“You could TK it off you know.”

“Oh yeh.”

As Rachael is dealing with her shoe, I hear a whoosh and then a stabbing pain in my left thigh. “Bubble up now!” A second and third whoosh are heard with arrows bouncing off our shields. “Cover me, I have to deal with this arrow.” First some lidocaine, formula gleaned from the bracelet and made from the mass of the arrow itself. Ah, that’s better, I will have to memorize that one. Next I scrub out the wound, and knit the tissue. This takes me at least ten minutes of intense concentration, biology at the cellular level being the hardest new ability to use. It will take some time yet for the lidocaine to wear off, but I can stand again.

When I look up, I see two Indian males bubbled in front of us about a meter off the ground, devoid of any weapons. Their look is hard to determine, pissed and confused I would imagine.

“Let them down, no harm done.” I dissolve the blood on my robe and knit the fabric. “See, good as new.” Well, at least till the anesthetic wears off, then we will see how well I did.

“We got them pretty soon after you were hit. How come we did not sense them before hand though? And why arrows?”

“If we had sensed then, they would not be very successful hunters now would they? Most animals are better than we are at reading the 'winds'. Arrows don't make much sound and are something you can make yourself. Not tech dependent. Worked against us, we would have picked up guns easily.”

“They are good and without TK of any kind that I can detect. But why shoot us? Is everyone going to hunt us? Are you sure this is what we should be doing? Maybe we should just get out of here, away from everyone.”

“Let's find out. Let them go please.” The two are de-bubbled, but do not run and remain with us.

“They could still cause problems. Are you sure that is wise?”

“James, we are not here to cause problems ourselves. This is their home not ours. They have a right to protect themselves.”

“But we didn't threaten them in anyway. We have no weapons even.”

“We do speak English and you obviously know nothing. If we wanted you dead, you would be. How did you do all that stuff? ”

“Gifts left over from the plague we think. Most died of it, as I suspect you are aware of.” We introduce ourselves. They give their names as Smith and Jones. Right. Well, there were a lot of marriages outside of the native population. I suspect most Indians have some white blood in them by now. They are wearing normal clothes, but for occasional silver decorations and jewelry. I am amazed that the designs I would associate with the Navaho would be found this far north. on the other hand, we are a totally unknown group with strange abilities, why should they give themselves away?

“Now what? Do you want us to leave? We will do so, if you say so.”

“Really? Wait a minute.” They converse among themselves. Daniel shakes his head at Barb not to read their minds. She may have anyway, but says nothing. Finally they say “Follow us.”

We walk along. Tons of questions, but we are the guests, so remain quiet. Just outside of town, we see a very fat naked male hanging from a

tree and very dead. Signs that he had been tortured before and after death. Some of the marks did not show blood.

“Looks like a pear in a tree. He is still wearing a fancy no-feet mask, not a plain white one we would have been forced to wear in his presence.”

“Yeh and whoever saw a sap that fat?”

“Not all saps are thin numskull. But scan him. He is loaded with tech. Worse than the nester TKs. Half his body seems to be artificial. You can even see metal poking out in a few places. No sap would could afford that kind of surgery.”

“Unless his was a guinea pig, but look at his hands, no calluses. His hair is long and black and his skin has a yellow tint to it. Genetically modified to protect from UV. He did not need to wear protective clothing. He is a pear alright. Also notice that the tech is as much enhancement as replacement. He would be super human with all that was in him.”

“This one killed three of our men, a woman and child before we stopped him. The ‘pears’ as you call them think they can hunt us with impunity now that the social order is gone. All the tribes we have made contact with since the fire plague scourged your cities and towns report similar occurrences increasing. But we outnumber you this time.” He grins. A small poetic justice for the smallpox plague and we brought this one on ourselves. Fire plague huh? Might be a better name than HelperV, which was obviously not much help.

“This is horrible. So, they did have cause for concern. But we are saps, we don’t look anything like pears. And I have never heard of a pear traveling alone. Shouldn’t he have had buddies or servants at least?”

“We don’t look like saps or Indians either, with these robes and gleaned clothing. And we are certainly not from their tribe. Who can take chances anymore? No ‘authorities’ to run too, not that they did much good before the ‘fire’ plague.” Ah, Ron caught that reference also.

“There were three servants with him, no other pears. When we shot him they immediately fell on him and finished the job. Most of what you see was their doing. They died a few minutes later, turning blue and gasping for air. Smelled of almonds for a few seconds afterwards.”

“Cyanide. Dead man’s switch. They died when their implanted devices activated and killed them. Helped to insure loyalty and insure his own survival.”

“No wonder they were so pissed at him.”

“We thought that too. Buried them with honors. This one will rot

however.” No one objected.

“Dogs barking up a storm, but it does not appear to directed at us.”

“Look closely. The cats followed us!” Marm and Ghost were giving the village dogs a real workout. Between acting totally cool and popping anytime one got near, the dogs were hysterical. Local residents had started to come out to see what the commotion was.

Marm, Ghost, come here now!

“Thanks, this is not the way I wanted to make an entrance you two rascals. I thought they understood they were to stay with the ship?”

Like cats ever take orders seriously.

“Right. Might be time to remind them of the nasty things that can happen to them when they disobey.”

Right!

We are all smiling at the two hiding behind my legs. One of the women says something in their native language making wild gestures at us.

“What did she say?”

Go away now and take the ghost cats with you, I think. Not everything translates well. More emotion than anything.

“Let's go then. This must not be the place. Thanks anyway.” Daniel bows to her and the others. The rest of us follow suit and I pick up the cats and we turn to leave. I hear ‘Smith and Jones’ talking to her heatedly. We get about sixty meters when I hear her call, this time in English.

“Wait.” I guess please is not an English word she knows. But who can blame them. We turn to face her and then sit down to wait. We had all gotten good at making seats out of extra clothing. None of us says anything. She speaks again to Smith and Jones and turns to see we are not leaving. She runs inside one of the run down structures barely able to be called a building. The collapse did not affect the reservations much. Might have even helped. Alcohol was harder to get now unless you made it yourself. There is a vehicle parked next to the first structure. Slight smell of corn chips. Must run on corn oil diesel. Looked about the same as I remember the last rez I had visited some 25 years earlier much further south of here, like the worst third world village you could imagine.

“I thought this was supposed to be arid country. They have quite a bit of plant material growing.”

“I believe global warming may have affected the climate. Much dryer south and wetter north.”

She leaves the first structure and runs to the second. This repeats itself several more times.

“Wave action was getting real bad at the coast of California. We had seawalls and sump pumps to keep our buildings dry.”

Soon about twelve to fifteen women are coming our way.

One asks us, “Are you spirit movers?” I am guessing she means TKs.

Daniel answers, “Yes.”

“Come with us please.” I stand corrected, they do know that word.

We follow them past the first structures and go about 25 meters more to what looks like a meeting hall of some kind with a metal roof, aged wood sides, and concrete foundation. We follow them inside.

“Please remain here.” We sit again. Dirt floor. Our eyes adjust to the light. We see that all of the windows are open to let in air and there are several entrances. At the center is a permanent fire pit with stones about 20 cm high. Open in the roof above. Good safety tip. The women come in till there are approximately thirty present. They are all facing us.

A woman wearing a red vest speaks to Smith, I believe. He points me out from the rest of us. Another older woman comes up to me and gestures to have a look at the place the arrow had hit. I raise up my robe and show her, but there is nothing left to see. She quizzes Smith again, but he is emphatic that I am the one. She goes back to her seat, obviously not convinced. She makes a gesture of someone drinking and a few chuckle acknowledgments.

“We predicted the fall of the white man's culture long ago. Decades of your own scientists predicted the same. Now it has happened. Why should we have anything to do with you? Who is your tribe that we should take notice of you at all. We will take everything back now and you cannot stop us this time.”

We can offer no answer. A group of them gets up and leaves the building laughing and insulting us in their language and spitting on the ground. Don't need TP to understand that and Barb does not translate.

After things calm down, another speaks, “Who is your mother?”

I tap Barb on her shoulder and whisper to her. “Do not read the answer. We either get this one on our own or we should not be here. I think I know the answer. Please read my surface thoughts and link us together.” Barb relays the information to the others and I get permission to answer. “Our Mother is the one on whom we sit.” The others and I make a show of removing our improvised chairs and sitting directly on the ground. All of the women do the same, removing blankets and such and sit directly on the earth. Buddha did much the same when he

answered Mara by touching the earth.

“Whom or what do you seek?” This is a tough one, as we have not talked about this, nor is it mentioned in the book we found. I know some things that are incorrect, money, tech, power and growth. These can be derived from the readings and common sense. I don’t think they want a long answer. Keep it simple and sweet.

I fall back on my Buddhist training and the others are good with it, “The end of our ignorance.” This indicates we are the ones in error and makes no judgment on their state and it is the truth. We don’t have a clue what we are doing.

“Why are you here?”

“Wisdom resides here.”

“How do you know wisdom resides here? New Agers before you came seeking wisdom and then corrupted the teachings, bringing more shame on us, as we were blamed for being stupid, not them.” We converse telepathically. Do we trust them? Have we taken a wrong turn and are painting ourselves into a corner? Rachael suggests we just ask, no more deceptions or guessing. Good point. We do seem to have a habit of painting ourselves into a corner.

“There are some who seek our deaths. We do not give away our story or secrets easily. You will be put in great danger for even knowing this. In fact it would be safer for you to ask us to leave now.”

“We have always been in danger from your kind.” Ouch.

“Will you hear our story?”

They converse briefly; I suspect that this is a sacred obligation from what I have read and not to be taken lightly. I did not suggest it lightly. Many have died already. “Yes.”

Daniel relates our story. He is good. Every time we hear him or of him giving a story we are amazed. This time he tells the tale as if around a campfire at night with the wind blowing and coyote howling in the distance. Not in the Indian style of animal characters, that would be offensive, but in a true story telling spirit. We almost sound mythical. There is quiet for some time after he finishes and sits down.

“Will you be tested?” Duh, I would do the same. Maybe I did too good of a job on the wound. We could have made all this up, but I am sure that how the two males who hunted us outside were treated was some indication of our abilities, but there is no proof now to their tale. I can't imagine what this will entail. I remember the Hollywood versions and they are not pretty. Hanging by hooks in your back and calves in the hot sun for days.

But before I can frighten the others, Daniel again answers, “Yes.” No way out now. I take a deep breath. They converse among themselves and then two women push a heavy cannon ball across the floor with a great deal of effort and place it before us. Of course, they just need to know if the tales are true. I relax. Worry wort!

“Move the iron stone.”

Ok, about 10 kg, too big for Barb, but any of the others could. Barb moves the ball anyway. It slowly rolls a meter. Of course, they did not say lift it or send it through the roof at supersonic speed, just move it. They acknowledge Barb. How did they know? I sense no TK ability among them. Either they have some other means or have had TK for so long that they are very well practiced in its arts.

“Change the iron stone.” Daniel and I are the only ones who can do this, I nod to him to go for it. The cannon ball changes to crystal clear quartz. Good choice. Can't fake that easily. One of the women gets up and examines the sphere. Gives it a roll. It is still real, not illusion.

“This ball killed an entire family 150 years ago. Please remove it from our sight.” My turn. I could DS it to another location, but it is time to heal old wounds. Though I did not cause them, I feel the pain it caused. I carefully reduce it in size but keeping the spherical shape, till it is gone, converting the mass to simple water which now wets the ground as tears would. Tears are also running down all of our faces. Rachael is openly bawling and rests her head on Barb's shoulder. All the men, myself included, are crying but maintain eye contact and silence. We acknowledge our ancestor's sins and take responsibility. We remain silent for quiet some time.

Two men enter carrying a stretcher with a young boy on it and set the stretcher before us. The women are upset that these men have entered, talking among themselves, but allow it to happen. This was not apparently part of the plan. The air is cool in here, but the boy is running a fever and sweating profusely. I walk over to the boy without a word and sit at his head, resting my hand on this forehead. Fever alright. This will take concentration. Most fevers are caused by viruses and I have never tried to remove a virus from someone before, the nanos were small enough, but much bigger. I will be totally vulnerable during this operation, I TP Barb to tell the others. I do a psiotic scan. He is in trouble and will not live out the day if we do not do something. A lot of tissue and nerve damage already.

“Daniel, I will need your help as well. Barb, ask them for the help of their Shaman or whoever normally helps people who are sick. I am

hoping that this person will be able to help restore the psiotic balance while we work on the physical needs. He is messed up good and will die soon otherwise.”

Daniel comes over and one of the women leaves out a side door. “I am going for the virus that is causing this fever, but I need you to watch his fluid levels, pulse and breathing.”

“I am not a biologist or doctor. What do I do?”

“My concentration will be taken up following the virus. Just watch, you don’t have to do anything. Let the others know if there is a problem. Barb, see if one of the women will assist by giving the boy more fluids and stick around to help with their shaman. Do whatever she asks, even if it seems wrong. You will have to use your intuition.” She nods to me and turns to the women to make her request. I wait now.

A very old woman arrives using a cane and barely making it herself. She sits at the boy’s feet. I bow to her and Daniel and Barb follow suit. “Wise one, this child will die without your help. I will attempt to remove the virus causing the physical symptoms, but unless his spirit is restored, he will lack the will to survive. You know this child and are better able to treat illnesses than we are. We are not doctors or wise in the way of life. Please take over and advise us what to do and when.” Barb takes a moment to translate using TP.

She nods her approval and begins chanting. She opens the boys mouth and places something on it from a leather bag she carries, continuing to chant. The boy relaxes. Cool moist towels are placed on the boys head and chest. She nods to me to begin.

The easiest place to find the virus is going to be the blood stream and I concentrate there. It is like a battle zone with large numbers of white blood cells and antibodies trying to fight off the infection. They appear to be out numbered as I make out the virus particles. It looks like a flu virus all right. RNA center and protein shell. Naked RNA would be quickly neutralized outside the cell, so I attack the protein coat. First I memorize the shape and structure and then begin scanning his entire body to convert that shape and pattern to simple water. It will not be enough water to have any measurable effect, but won’t hurt him either. My concentration is so intense that I am totally unaware of anything else going on.

Next is the RNA sequence itself. I isolate one the few remaining virus particles and take it apart. I scan the RNA core and begin to read off the sequence. I am no molecular biologist, so I can only hope that there is only one virus and this sequence is not used anywhere normally in the body. Not a good assumption, as most viruses have some sequence in

common with the host. Several thousand base pairs in, I feel I have enough to risk scanning all of his cells for the sequence. I do not have to destroy the entire virus, just enough so that it can't reproduce any longer.

One of the women apparently knows some science and suggests you go a few hundred more base pairs on this sequence to effectively neutralize it.

I am in no place to turn down a gift of help and did not realize that I must have been saying the sequence out loud. I follow the suggestion, finish with the virus and slowly back out. It will be awhile yet before his body calls off the attack, but with rest he should pull through, assuming he wants to and we got there in time to halt any permanent brain damage. I begin to become aware of the woman's chanting as I come back up to full awareness of my surroundings. A fire has been started in the pit. As I open my eyes two people place him closer to the pit. He will need the warmth from the fire to help his exhausted body maintain balance. The shaman looks pleased, so hopefully she was successful as well.

"How long?" My own throat is dry and someone hands me a metal cup with water in it.

"About three hours." I nod and then lie down and crash. I only need about 30 minutes to break the fugue.

I awake to a huge clatter of utensils and pans. Marm and Ghost again. This time apparently chasing something. This breaks the ice and we all relax. "Come here guys." Marm looks up and TPs *Mouse!* Then Ghost looks up and TPs *Mouse!* They are no longer paying any attention to the real mouse, if there ever was one.

One of the older ladies speaks up, "Mouse is missing. Go fetch her." It is time. Barb and I stand up slowly, bow and leave the room. I hear the others talking in confusion. Who is mouse and what do they mean? Where are they going?

"We need to do this as quickly as possible and I am still tired from the healing. Alert 'Mouse' that we are coming in about two minutes. I need to get my bearings again. That was a rough one."

Barb pauses to concentrate and she announces, *Done. She will be ready.*

We walk along the path, back the way we came, rather quickly. I change our clothing to dark robes instead of the lighter one I had been wearing and the normal clothes Barb had on. "Hoods up. I don't want them to see our faces." This is very scary to me. I don't like to DS into a place I have never been. Ok, I admit DS is still scary to me period. Full shields up, I DS us at one minute and hang in the DS space watching.

Very subdued light. I see Mouse and check around to be sure there are no others about before I enter her space. Smells of sweat and urine, sounds of clanking metal and people. Good timing. Back in normal space, Barb can see Mouse now as well, she is wearing a long yellow robe with a hood also. I remove the nanobots from her and we depart. Everyone in the room is facing us as we walk back in the door slightly more than three minutes after we left. All is silent. Even the cats are quite and attentive. Mouse moves to the front and kneels before the women. We had filled her in as best we could of what has already happened recently in the minute we had together.

“Will you be tested?”

The hooded figure nods. “Lift this stone.” It is a pebble of no more than 30 grams. The stone lifts off the floor, shaking, and stops at about one meter. It is turning slowly then suddenly falls to the ground at the same time the hooded figure collapses in a heap. I did not know she was this weak, being exhausted myself. Barb rushes over to get some water out of a barrel near the door and proceeds to assist the collapsed figure. She removes the hood from the figure's head. I am already crying as I know who this is. The others all gasp as they recognize Susan. Rachael rushes over and then falls apart again. James simply faints, he thought she was dead. Many hugs and tears. This is getting to be a habit. At this point the women also get up and join our group. Everyone is hugging everyone. Our story was not faked, we really have suffered for this journey.

Susan and I finally meet face to face. “Private Mouse reporting for duty sir!” People settle down and take seats again. Susan and I sit down near the center of the now intermixed group. I am holding both of her hands and the cats, all three of them now are nestled in or about her lap. Princess must have been lonely. Dogs still bark occasionally outside. Pissed they are denied their quarry no doubt.

“Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes, just pooped from all the TK activity I have had to do recently.”

“I can relate. Feel up to telling your story?” I check on the boy, but there are people with him and he is breathing well.

James comes to. “You’re alive too?” Susan says. He just nods, not sure this is real and touches her hand to be sure.

Susan's tale

“Yingui, Barb and I had worked this all out before Lake Tahoe. Monique was backup.” James looks at her and she shakes her head no. I was not sure if he was going to faint again, but he acknowledges the answer and remains silent. “We figured that sooner or later they would catch up with us. He put us through all kinds of exercises to tune our observation skills. Come on Yingui, fifty observations on the burning of a candle?” Several of the women nodded approval. I had picked Susan because she was one of the people I knew the longest and one that I thought was most likely to get through this alive. James was too impulsive. Ron was too inquisitive and could not fake being a non-TK with his leg. Rachael was likely to be shot on sight and Daniel we could not afford to lose; well we could not afford to lose anyone really. Monique was Susan's idea, a back up. She was from the woman's group that Susan had gotten into quickly at New Atherton.

“The security committee had bubbled and shielded hard. The rush of air actually blew out the upstairs windows. Then the bots were attacking the TKs that had gathered and were also trying to get into the cabin. James ran outside to put the last shutter up, but then decided to play macho man and started wacking bots like crazy. We were all too stunned to work the latch from the inside with TK. A few minutes later two TKs from outside brought James in unconscious.”

“That was some show, do you know this guy? Never seen someone take on so many bots and last that long.”

“He is one of ours.” They know about bots?

“Is this all of you, or are there more upstairs?” This sounded weird. If they were TKs, they could scan.

“These are the ones that we know of. Someone could have climbed in an upstairs window in desperation of course. We heard a crash upstairs, but assumed that was the bots doing.” Never admit abilities to strangers. The sounds of the bots are receding. One of them goes upstairs but returns a few seconds later.

“What is that thing upstairs?” We all play dumb. They remove their coats. Both of them are armed with handguns. No TK2 can stop a bullet at this range and they know it. I pulse scan them. Nester TKs. I assume the others know as well. We had all been heavily trained on pulse scanning after what happened to Rachael earlier. We wait silently.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way.” They were obviously

responsible for the deaths outside and could undoubtedly start it all up again.

Someone answers, "The easy way."

"Good choice. My assistant will move among you and give you each a tiny pill. Swallow it. We can tell if you do not. Failure is a death sentence. And don't get any ideas. We die, you all die without ever making it out of this room." We swallow the pills.

"Good. Each of you has swallowed a little gift. We are going to take a walk. We are not going to guard you. You are free to run if you wish. Just understand that each of you has swallowed a time release lethal poison. Only our destination has the antidote. Failure to reach there in 48 hours means death. Understand?" We all nod. "Good let's move out. Times a wasting." The assistant gives James an injection. I assume this is the same thing as we got in pill form. As soon as we go outside one of the two plays with some instrument and sets it on the ground. All the remaining bots come together and form themselves into a sort of ball around the device. She picks it up and hands it to one of the other TKs to carry.

[James is turning green. He had made it only by minutes and had nearly forgotten to tell Yingui to delete the nanos in time. They had told him three days. Guess they did not want to take a chance with someone who could take out that many bots. If he had believed them, he would be dead now, which would have suited them just fine.]

Dusk is falling, but we do not stop. Have to take a leak, go ahead, just catch up, or not. Two men are enlisted to carry James with an improvised stretcher. There were a lot of bodies we walked past when we left the cabin, but no one commented. We can see in the dark of course, but only the nesters knew where we were going. A long day traveling and getting to the cabin and now a long night walking to who knows where. We were not moving very fast in spite of the incentive. About an hour before dawn, James wakes up. The nesters sense it before I do and order him to his feet and fill him in on our situation. In spite of the obvious cold, he appears to be warm, even takes off his coat. I pulse scan him, he has a shield very close to his body. This is helping to keep him warm. I try it too and immediately warm up. Others are picking it up too. After freezing all night this is a very welcome relief. The shields we had used earlier worked great against wind chill, but we were not moving fast enough here for that to be a factor. Even the nesters are impressed. A few

minutes later, or at least it seems like a few minutes, there is a sudden explosion of snow. James is making a break for it. The rest of us shield him and try and distract the nesters with snow explosions of our own. There is a shot. We walk on, leaving the body where it lies. They don't care one bit whether we live or die. They ignore James running through the trees. In a few hours we reach Carson City and are herded into a room. A toilet at least. Not a time for modesty. We hurriedly take turns. Hard to piss when you are that tired. Some are curled up in corners sleeping already.

“Transport is ready, let's move it.” The sleepy ones are roused by those still standing. Transport is an old rusty local school bus with Tahoe High on the sides. No heat, cramped, bad seats, noisy, no shocks, but we all collapse anyway. Everyone is out but our guides. Must have been on NoSleep or saps helper as we called it. We are woken a few hours later, judging from the height of the sun. We have arrived. We are let out of the bus in a fenced in courtyard. Barbed wire and large insect like bots patrolling the perimeters. They are sure ugly. There is a crowd to watch our arrival. Norms I would guess. “Strip for delousing! Now!” We know none of us is infected with anything. Yingui would have taken care of that ages ago. And the guides are not stripping, so this is purely for degradation purposes. I know the kind, lots of pears acted the same way. I immediately strip down with no expression on my face. “Walk forward ten paces.” This puts us within centimeters of the fence and right next to the audience, who is now cheering us on with catcalls and cruder stuff. They keep their distance. TKs can kill and no one wants to risk that. They obviously intend to break us or weed out the troublemakers. Some around me are getting edgy, but I have no way to warn them. Another shot goes off. Another death. Just waiting to set an example. Henry this time. Not that it matters. I would not see anyone I knew till I arrive here today. Everyone is rock straight and no emotions now.

I am taken to a cell. Must have been like the one Rachael was in the first time. Definitely underground. There are weird patterns of shielding all around me. Even the next cell is shielded. “Shield at all times. Failure to shield results in loss of rations for that day.” The door slams shut and the lights go nearly out. In a few hours I am taken to a room with other TKs all hooked to some sort of device. I am made to lie down on a cold metal 'bed' and electrodes are positioned all over my body and in every orifice. The later I am sure was more of the baiting as they certainly had non invasive means to collect the information they wanted. “Count off starting here.” I hear a number one, two, three, four, then my turn, six,

seven, eight, nine, ten. We are arrayed in a star pattern around a central core with our heads in. There are five males and five females, alternating. We are left there for a few hours. Someone finally talks. No answer. A minute later someone walks in shoots that person and then replaces them with someone new. Don't even bother to clean up. Wonder how many have died in this bay. We can't see color in the dark, but we all know what the sticky fluid and copper smell under us is now. Someone lets lose his or her bladder. No one cares or comments. A few more hours pass and then I am led back to my cell.

For the next several days, I think, we are moved back and forth from cell to array at seemingly random intervals. Sometimes we are asked to concentrate on certain spots on the ceiling, sometimes on shapes, sometimes on a person in the core. Sometimes nothing. No pattern to speak of. I dare not even pulse scan here. With this many TKs concentrating it was just too big a chance. The shapes seemed to be variations on the Spider design. At first this was no big deal, but as they got more complex it got harder to concentrate on them. Something was wrong. The shape was off, like a bad cord in music or an un-tuned instrument. This was very frustrating and draining. Left everyone in a bad mood. You could feel the emotions in the air it was so thick. Of course no one said anything. We had learned that lesson well enough. Finally I could not take it any longer. We were asked to concentrate on yet another flawed design. Instead of just concentrating, I pushed as well. I pushed hard. Suddenly the shape shifted and fell into a stable harmonic. Peace. Energy flowed. It felt wonderful. I had lost my shielding but did not care. I was euphoric, and then passed out.

I awoke in my cell. I expected to be without food for a while, I did not care, and the dissonance was going to kill me. But real food appeared instead of cold amorphous tasteless glue. I sucked it up in a microsecond. Never knew when this would happen again. What game were they playing now? I was exhausted and collapsed again. When I woke there was an orange jump suit at the door. I remembered to shield and then pulse scanned the suit quickly and nervously. Nothing there. I expected we were infected with the nanobots that Rachael had, but they were below the resolution I could achieve. What the hey, I put it on. A knock on the door. That was really weird. Had I suddenly become a person again? "Enter" None of the doors were locked. A TK could defeat any lock in a second. Instead, death was the sentence for being outside your room when not allowed.

A nester TK entered. I had not seen one since entering this cell. I

instinctively stood at attention. “Relax, I just want to talk.” It was TK Smith according to her name tag. She sure gets around. They did not want to take any chance we would recognize anyone else, or this is her baby? Or are all female TKs called Smith?

“Did you change the Amp?”

“What's an amp?”

“Right. I believe you call it a Spider. Did you change it?”

“Yes Mam.”

“Why?”

“Permission to speak freely?”

“Oh, sorry, yes of course. Nothing said will be used against you. We are just trying to understand what happened. Sit please.” I sit, but am still tense.

“Dissonance Mam.”

“Explain.”

“The shape was wrong Mam. Like a bad chord in music only much more intense. It was driving me crazy Mam.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I pushed as I concentrated till I thought I was going to die.”

“Why push that hard?” I remain silent. Motivation for failure to carry out an order had been made obvious. They never used corporal punishment, just a bullet. She pulled a Spider out of her pocket and held it out to me.

“Scan this please.” I did not reach for it, but scanned it in her hands. A TK3 amp. I immediately withdraw and backed up a decimeter. “You recognize it then?”

“Too powerful for a TK2 to use. Only causes trouble, bad trouble.”

“This is the shape you concentrated on today. It was a modified level 2 Amp when we started. The weirdest thing is any TK can see it is different, but our scientists insist it is the same as yesterday.”

Shit I had just helped them in a big way. “I'm sorry. I did not intend to do it, just was the only way to stop the pain from the dissonance.”

“No Susan, you have done good, real good.” She gets up to leave. I am not number 5 any more and she knows my name. That means DNA scans and a database, just like they did with Rachael. Well, we wanted to know what was going on here. I was not going to find out as number five on a slab in the basement pit.

A few minutes later one of the storm troopers comes in and says I have to leave this cell. I follow s/he, can't tell gender in those clothes without a scan, and go up one level to a much cleaner cell with a toilet

instead of a bucket and a sink with running water. There is a clock on the wall in 24 hour format. On the door is a duty sheet with indications of where I am supposed to be and when.

“You mean the place we rescued you from was the cleaner place?”

“Oh yes, by far.”

“eeuuu!”

I notice that I am due for KP duty in 10 minutes. I take a cat bath and try to look neater than I was. No mirror, so I don't worry about hair. I always keep it short anyway. Glad now that I had. I wait for the door to open as I watch the clock. At two minutes to 18:00 I am getting real nervous. Finally someone comes in panting. Another TK in a similar orange jumpsuit.

“Sorry, you must be new here and don't know where things are. We both have KP duty so follow me and hurry.”

“What about the rules of no one outside their cells unless escorted by a guard?”

“Huh, where have you been?”

“Hell I guess.”

“No one escapes from Hell! That's where they threaten to send us if we don't follow the rules.” We snake around corridors and through several doors. “Don't worry they rearranged my duties to be similar to yours. I am your orientation guide I guess. You'll get the hang of it.” We both arrive panting. Others are already at work, so we are assigned the least favorite duty, opening tins of GMsoy and adding it to a large pot. Not hard work and no one pushes us faster. After that we sweep up from the mess made by the vegie workers and clean out the kitchen bathrooms. Beats sweating on the slab or freezing in your room.

“Why are you always shielded?”

“Huh, you mean we don't have to be?”

“No, what for?”

“You don't know much about Hell do you?”

“Just that no one ever returns alive.”

“Close. Failure to shield at all times is a capital offense.”

“But what about when you sleep?”

“Even then. Lucid dreaming practice is what saved me.”

“Shit!”

“You got it.” Afraid I was making the myths even more real for them.

I am given two days to adjust to the routine, or for them to digest what I have told them. I never did learn my helper's name. My duty

roster told me I am to report to command by 07:00. I reach command after a few missed turns and take a seat. Ten minutes later TK Smith comes in and motions me to follow her. "We have been trying to duplicate your effort and have failed. We would like you to try again under more controlled conditions." This was not a request. The implication is that they can always return you to Hell, permanently. I follow her through another maze of corridors. I guess one reason to make things this way would be to confuse enemy invaders. They probably have more direct routes in emergencies. "You are never to try this route on your own. Always wait at command for an escort. They shoot anyone found alone in this section, myself included. We will always enter and leave together." I nod that I understand.

This time the array is covered in fake leather and has headrests. No smell or bullet holes either. The others are already present, sitting on their respective beds. "Everyone this is Susan, the one who made the first TK3 amp." The all respond in unison, "Hi Susan." and then crack up laughing.

I respond with "I don't think I am in Hell any more." This brings more laughs.

TK Smith takes her place on one of the beds after placing a TK2 amp in the receptacle. "Susan if you will talk us through it."

"Ok, I'll try, but the motivation is a little different here."

"I can get a gun if that would help." She is not kidding.

We start with concentration practice on the amp. Starting at low energy. First nothing and then slowly the dissonance grows. "Can everyone feel it?" Everyone responds, "Ok, can anyone not feel it?" Silence. "Fine, this is about one one hundredth of where are going."

"Shit!"

"You got that right. We will continue to concentrate more. When it gets to maximum dissonance, I will attempt the PUSH to TK3. Watch as best you can, as I doubt that I can speak at that point." We ramp up till I hear screams. Wusses, they would not last a day in Hell. "More!" I yell. Just when I think I will loose it, I yell, "Now!" and PUSH with all my might and black out.

It must have been only for a minute as everyone is over me looking concerned. "Give her air please. Someone fetch some water." I remember that Yingui always wanted sugar after an upgrade, preferably in the form of chocolate, but I don't think that was relevant, so I ask for something sweet also.

"It was too relevant!" Everyone giggles.

I am given water in a plastic cup. Tastes great. Someone else hands

me some cookies. I wolf them down and sigh.

“Ok everyone I want your thoughts.”

“I could see it happen. Amazing. It was hell with the dissonance, but then everything just sort of flowed and snapped into place.”

“I think we should try it again. Only this time when Susan says go, we all push at the same time. I am betting that when we all contribute it will not be so bad.” It works. By the end of the session it takes only 30 minutes to rest between trials and then ramp up for another go. We manage to make three more TK3 amps that day. “Very good everyone. I think it might be time to move to human trials.” Huh? Before I could think about it, I am escorted back to my cell. I collapse into total oblivion.

I wake a little early still feeling pretty whipped. I check the roster first thing. FREEDAY. Now I wonder what that is here. I decide to make my way to the dining hall after cleaning up. Not sure what I am supposed to do, I ask the first person I sort of recognize. Someone I had met on one of the other work duties. “What is freeday?”

“Freeday? Not sure, where did you hear that?”

“It was on my duty sheet for today.”

“Go ask Mohammed, the guy next to the coffee urn. He has been here the longest.” They have coffee?

“Before I forget, here is something I snagged for you.” I hand a chocolate to Yingui. He smiles and bows a thank you to both me and the heavens. “For your next upgrade.” He shudders. Not fun is it.

“Freeday is a day of rest. Very rare. Only had one the entire time I have been here and I enlisted freely. Most spend time in the library, third door down corridor blue.”

“No chance of seeing sky I suppose?” He slowly shakes his head like I am a lunatic. Hey, it was worth asking. Too afraid we would escape I suppose, but where could we go that they could not track us. I finish my meal and head to the library.

There is no one on duty, but I see a sign saying that under no circumstances is anything to leave the library that was not brought in. No books of course, except in a display cabinet. Those are probably off limits anyway. I hear the work bell ring and a minute later someone comes in. “Oh, there is someone here. You must be on freeday.” I nod. “Is there anything I can help you find?”

“Ah, this is my first time here. How do I log in?”

“Just look into the terminal for a few seconds with your eyes open. Biometrics will let you in if you are approved. You will not have full net

access, depending on your security clearance. Most of us are at the bottom of the list I am afraid. Lowest login level that is.”

I sit at one of the terminals. “Access confirmed. Voice or keyboard.” I touch the keyboard initiate key, more private. A search input appears. Where to? I had not gotten to read the book Ron mentioned he had found upstairs, so I make several attempts to find it before I finally succeed, not remembering the name exactly. So they thought this was not a problem book and it had been transferred to the net. Pretty old, 1991. Oh well, there must have been a reason. I scan the contents. Whew, pretty hairy stuff. Really surprised they let this one pass, especially with the Sierra Club as the publisher, but then it talked about living with less, so maybe this was a good thing for saps to read and not desire to get about their station. I remember now that the Sierra Club was banned at some point. Maybe they did not know about this book or the approval lists were set up before the fall and/or plague. Probably way too much information in here to do a thorough reclassification after wards and too many other things to do. As this may be my only chance to read the book, I scan a lot of it and read only the interesting stuff more carefully. No way are they going to let me back here. Pretty sure they are monitoring me.

I decide I should dilute the effect that reading that book is going to have on my visit here by purposely pulling up and studying 'politically correct' stuff as well, you know, anti environment, etc. The librarian comes over to me, “Lunch time. We have to leave the library for one hour.”

“Wow, lunch already? Freeday is going fast.”

I get some chow and find Mohammed again. “Is there a gym here?”

“Sure, door 7 corridor red. Going to try everything out while you can I suppose? They have a cinema also. Mostly old stuff from the 20th century. Re-mastered of course. Door three corridor yellow.” The paint on these corridors looks fresh to me. Only the blue corridor looks like the original color.

“Thanks. Thanks a lot.” I work out for two hours. I did what I could in my cell of course, but it was nice to be in a pool and weight room again. Then I am off to the cinema. I find an old John Wayne western and climb into a pod. That should cool their jets as it is about as anti Indian as you could get. Dinner was ok. We are not given a choice of food mind you. We were not that high up the ladder. Beats glue though, even a small portion of chocolate cake.

[Yingui groans and the others near him pelt him with dust.]

Duty roster says command. Smith picks me up and as we walk to the chamber she quizzes me about my freeday. I knew they were monitoring. Probably monitor everyone, the paranoid SOBs. "Yeh that first book was so bad I had to read a Glouster and see a John Wayne movie to wash the taste out of my mind. He was nuts! Give up tech. Yeh, right." I did not want to play it too obvious so I left it at that.

"Why read it in the first place?"

"I heard some TKs talking about it at Tahoe, so was curious. Not any more. Why do you ask? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, just curious also. As you can guess we are set up here to monitor each other. Sort of a fail-safe system in case any one goes wacko, but you seem ok. I would not worry about it. How did you end up with the rest of the TKs?"

"Only thing going and the norms were hunting us. Survival I guess." No more Mander for me. At least while I am here.

"Your records say you were a teacher before the plague. It shows."

"Not much to teaching with most courses on the net, but some things are still easier to learn in a group."

Duty is back at the array. They do seem to be obsessed about this. We have a new person today. She has been filled in already. Probably yesterday while I was on freeday. She is nervous and unsure of herself. She is sitting on the bed where Smith was two days ago. Bet she is a newbie like me. She keeps feeling the surface as if expecting something horrible to happen. Hey it is not metal and we get to wear our jumpsuits without probes. "Shall we begin? This time I will be in the core and Margaret will take my place on the array. The idea is to concentrate on the TK2 amp and then transfer that concentration to my psiotic pattern just when the time to push arrives. Places everyone." We make several attempts, but each time we get ready to move our concentration it falls apart. After the third attempt it is obvious this is not going to work.

"It is too hard to make the transfer when we are near passing out ourselves."

"We succeeded with TK1s, why not now?"

"With TK1s we were only bringing them up to our own level. No dissonance to contend with."

"Suggestions?"

I speak up. "Two. Either physically move your psiotic pattern into the proper place mechanically, so we don't have to change our concentration or remove the dissonant TK2 amp entirely. All of us,

except possibly Margaret, have had a very good look at the TK3 amp. We know the pattern.”

“She is experienced with the amp.” That would explain her nervousness. Bet she has some bruises under that jump suit to boot.

“It will take at least a day to rig a mechanical unit, so we will proceed with Susan's second idea. Anyone want a fresh look at the TK3 amp?” We all nod no emphatically. So they are all aware of its potential. When Yingui upgraded from four to five he was out for a day. Barb told me he was out for half a day going from three to four. That would suggest that Smith could be out for six hours. What will they do with us when she passes out? “Places everyone.” We will soon find out. Ramping up was a lot different. No dissonance and this was a living psiotic pattern, not a dead one. There were subtle changes going on. We slip off mark and I yell, “Cut.”

Smith comes out of the chamber. “What happened? Felt weird, all tingly inside my head, so I knew you were doing something.”

“We slipped out of pattern. We are not dealing with an inanimate object this time. I need to be able to fine-tune this. With apologies to Margaret, I think we should count off. It would take too long for me to learn everyone’s names in time and be able to hold that info during peak.” Smith nods slowly. I am probably being too good, seeming to know more than I ought to. No time for that now. Take it or leave it.

Margaret is nine and I am ten. She is visibly shaking now. “Margaret, you are not in Hell any longer. They don't shoot you for failure here if you give it your best. Understand?” She nods slowly. “This is a new frontier. None of us knows what is going to happen. It may not even be possible at all. Are you going to be ok?” She nods again. We take our places. We start to ramp up and I tune the upward pattern by yelling numbers off as that sector falls behind. We are not machines and it is highly unlikely we would be synchronized. When we did the dead amp it did not matter as much, as stronger ones would compensate for weaker ones. Here I had to push up neighbors to get a more even pattern. “We are getting close. On my mark.” Closer and closer. “PUSH NOW!” I scream and I black out. I was not the only one screaming.

I am the third to wake up. Everyone is very concerned. Smith is still out cold. The three of us get her out of the chamber and rest her on one of the beds. Margaret is waking up next to me. “If I am correct she should be out for about six hours.”

“THE CHAMBER IS SEALED. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE.” Margaret faints again. Hadn't planned to. A clock starts

ticking backwards from 6 hours. Great, no margin for error on this one, except for the time I was out.

“I said ABOUT six hours you dummies!” The clock does not change. Everyone is awake now. Margaret has lost it. Huddled and crying in a corner. We each have a cookie and wait it out. At 00:30 I bring the remaining cookies over closer to Smith. “She is likely to be disoriented when she comes out of it. I recommend that we all back off a ways so as not to frighten her. Is we succeeded she will be as strong as everyone in this room combined.” Thank goodness the TK3 amp was no longer present.

At 00:10 on the countdown clock Smith starts to stir. I go over to her, but motion the others to stay back. “Are you ok?”

“What? Where am I? Susan?”

“Yes it is Susan. Try and sit up a little.” I help her to a sitting position. “Have a cookie.” She slowly takes one looking at it like she has never seen one before.

“Whoa! This is amazing.”

“We have succeeded folks!” A cheer goes up and Margaret faints again. Girl, is she a wuss. How did she last this long?

We are released and I walk Smith slowly back to command. “You probably should be checked out by the meds. I am sure they will want to run scans and such.” When we reach command, they are already waiting. Nervous people. Don’t like being in a room full of TKs, especially one that is super charged I would imagine. From here I am safe to be on my own and head back to my room exhausted. There are sheets on my bed now. Robe in the corner, tooth brush, etc. I collapse in my jump suit. Rewards for good behavior, wonderful.

I wake about 10:00 the next day. Way past time for duty, but see the duty roster has Freeday again on it. Do they have elves or something? I never see anyone else in this room. Must wait till you are out before entering. Are we that scary? Or is this more mind games. I change into my robe after taking a cat bath and brushing my teeth. That feels real good after so long. Still exhausted, I decided to stay in my room. I helped them! I wish I could die. I sit on my bed for the longest time. At about time for lunch I get a TP message from Barb to get ready for pickup. Didn’t know you could do that Barb. And how are you going to get me out of here?

Last upgrade caught me too.

Ah, that explains it I guess. Decided I would rather have the robe than the jumpsuit, so I don't bother changing. Running out of here in an orange jumpsuit would be a bit obvious. Transfer the chocolate and toothbrush and toothpaste to the pocket. I am sure they have monitors on me 24/7, so not sure what they will see. It happened really fast. Suddenly Barb and Yingui are in the room with me. How did they do the cat trick? Yingui says quietly to hold my breath and I am whisked into total blackness. We are in total blackness for a few seconds and then emerge a few hundred meters outside this meeting hall. Girl, was the sun bright! Barb and Yingui filled me in as best they could about the young boy.

"I am truly sorry for having helped them."

Debriefing

I scan the boy to monitor his progress, but he is sleeping soundly and looks like he will be fine. The shaman is smiling at me. We share a bond now. I am sure they would not have brought him to us, if their own could cure him. We were a last ditch effort. I shudder to think what would have happened had we failed. Glad the others were here to help or I surely would have.

Daniel explains to our hosts. "At this time we usually hold a debriefing session to try and understand the implications of what we have heard. Of course more ideas will come up later, but this gives a basis for possible action. Everyone is free to speak, so please ask questions or make comments. Any help is appreciated."

Some of the women converse among themselves for a few seconds and then stand up. "Lunch anyone?" Ah, so they know English. Real advantage knowing a second language. Maybe we would have to come up with a TK language so we could converse without others knowing what we were saying.

"I could go for that, I have not eaten anything since yesterday."

"Me too."

"Well, if everyone else is going to." I walk up to one and ask, "You seem to know us and even expected us. How can that be? We did not even know till this morning we were coming here. You are also not shocked by anything we are saying or doing. Most norms, as we call them, are scared to death of us."

She looks at me and remains silent for sometime. "Turtle, there is much you do not know that we do. Be patient, all will be explained in the

coming months.”

“Months! And I thought Zennies did things slowly. I need to slow down a lot more. These last several months as you call them have been a nightmare more than anything.”

“Yes. Death and re-birth is always painful.”

“Huh?” But she guides me to an outdoor area where everyone else has gathered. Fry bread I recognize from the time I ate it at a restaurant on the Hopi rez. Beans, lamb, which I avoid, greens of some kind, probably squash and hot herbal tea made from something I do not recognize. People are slipping the cats pieces of lamb. Ghost started this I am sure. Marm is suspicious. “Think large mouse Marm.” He tries it and then looks for more. Saps can't afford cat food, so he has probably never tasted lamb before.

I sit with the one I talked to. “I hope the cats are not a problem, but they are part of our group and it does not seem right to leave them anywhere. I hope I am not being rude, but I don't know your name and why do you call me Turtle?”

“Mouse catchers are not a problem. Dogs are tied up. Good that dogs do not think they own this place. What is that you wear around your neck?”

“I pull it out. Just a piece of jewelry I got on the Hopi rez some 25 years ago.” It is a Hopi turtle done in silver. “They had said it was appropriate for someone who worked at a marine station. Water symbol or something.”

“Yet you still carry it. You are Turtle.”

“Well, it is certainly not a good luck charm, but I have always felt it was part of me. I assume this means you also know the others as well as you called Susan, Mouse.”

“This is so.”

“Part of the explanation you will tell us in the coming months.”

“Yes. My name is Running Snake, I will be your guide for the next part of your journey. Important that there are eight of us. Much danger ahead.”

“Great. Fry bread is good. Thank you.”

“Have some more.” She hands me a second piece. Hate to think how many calories are in this. It has definitely got a lot of oil in it.

I feel a small earthquake. Strange. I did not think they had them here. I am used to them, having lived in California my whole life. Even survived the big one of '89 and the '08 one that flattened parts of Los Angeles. Could feel it even up in New Shanghai. Maybe I am just tired

from all that has happened. “Do you have earthquakes up here?”

“No, not earthquake. Something evil.” But she is not agitated, so no immediate danger to us I assume. I think I am going to have a hard time understanding all these coded messages and will likely step in it a lot, just as Rachael did. Just for laughs, I do a quick sweep at the extent of my range. I collapse to the ground in shock.

Sacramento no longer exists. “They nuked it!” And not a small one either.

“Yes.”

“How did you know?”

“There is much that we know that you do not. Patience Turtle. Is that not why you are here?”

Barb picks up on my extreme sorrow and broadcasts it to everyone. Everything stops. Besides all the people that must have been there, we know there is no way we will ever rescue the rest of the group we came out of San Jose with now. These were people we knew by name. War is personal now. Always is in the end.

“After a moment of silence we should have that debriefing.” I am going to dehydrate from all the crying this day and can’t take it. I walk off a ways to be alone. They let me go and continue with the discussion.

“Do we need to wait for Yingui?”

“No, he needs to be alone.” Running Snake understands.

“It would appear that our worry about TK Smith and her project are over.”

“We don’t know if she was there when it happened. We can only surmise that something she did after we left caused them to think that there was enough of a danger that they needed to take this drastic of an action. For all we know it could have been Smith that set off the bomb. Certainly a TK three could have done that from a kilometer away. If she was in a hardened shelter, she could have survived. Or used an old fashioned timer and have been even further away. It has been at least a few hours since your rescue. She had time. And she knows that she does not need any devices to make more TK3s.”

“I doubt very much that she would want any more TK3s produced. She sounds like someone who likes power and does not want to share it. If she set this off it was to cover her tracks and prevent others from pursuing this line of research.”

“I concur. When you showed up missing, her plot was exposed. She ran scared at that point. Anyone powerful enough to get into and out of a maximum security underground facility in a few seconds has got to be a

threat to her.”

“Or the others. I still think they did this to stop her. Let’s say she was not satisfied with TK3 and wanted four, but something went wrong. She goes rogue and that signals the bomb. There must have been some failsafe mechanism to take out their own facilities in case of take over or some other catastrophe.”

Running Snake comments, “Do not think that your adversary is gone, he is not.”

“He? It is very unlikely that they would be successful at making a TK4. It would be way beyond their capability to make a dissonant TK3 Spider to push into a TK4 configuration. It is also unlikely that Smith made the necessary TK3s to assist her. I doubt very much she could push the necessary upgrade onto herself. If she tried, she most certainly would have gone rogue. Also understand the Military mind. Any notes she took on any machine. Any meetings she attended. Any other people she worked with. All of this went onto a world military net and the information was saved if not shared in multiple places. I know, I was one of them remember? They never do research of this kind in only one place or if they do, it is HEAVILY recorded. Chances are what she discovered was immediately shared worldwide. Running Snake is correct; our adversary is still very much alive, even if Smith is not. They may have even nuked the place because they did not need it any longer and it was the quickest way to deny others access to a large pool of TKs and their records. Would not be surprised to hear of other places destroying all TKs not absolutely loyal to their cause now they know the secret. Though they may hold off till they have evidence we can reach that far.”

“In other words, our rescuing Susan may have set off a panic that resulted in the deaths of potentially thousands of innocent TKs. So that’s why Yingui is so upset and why he is so afraid of doing anything?”

“Possibly. And this same panic would have happened no matter how we rescued any of the people. Number one rule. If you cannot defeat your enemy deny them any and all resources that would make them stronger. They suspect we now know how to make more TK3s or don’t even need TK3s. However without a supply of TK2s, what good would it do us, we are so few?”

“Maybe our rescuing Susan scared them into believing she was helping them too much.”

“The entire time I was there, I felt that they must have suspected something, that I knew more than I told them, but they never asked for more. Which is just as well, not sure I would hold up to torture.”

“No one expected you to. One of the beauties of your rescue, it that you never knew where we were so could not tell them that at least.”

“Is there any chance at all for us?”

“Only Running Snake knows and I believe it is a slim one. From what little she has told us, our task is not so much time dependent as understanding dependent. Am I correct?”

“Yes. You came seeking wisdom and that is what you need most. Mouse is important to this understanding. I too grieve for the lost ones, but it was unavoidable.”

“Just as you lost many to keep these secrets intact.”

“Yes. Do not think only of your ancestors, though they were by far the worst. What the white people did was only the last injustice before this new one. This secret has been passed down for over ten thousand years, if your scientists are correct about when we came to this continent. Many have tried in that time to discover and use these secrets for their own power and gain. For that reason none of us knows it all. We must leave now to pick up all the necessary pieces. You will have a new guide for each part of the journey, as the guides themselves are not allowed to know the whole. We keep the secrets for the next time they are needed. To know all would be to risk those secrets. I do not even know the number of parts you will need. We will give Yingui a few hours to be with his grief and then we go.”

Safe Place

How can I vent off this grief without destroying all that is around me? I borrow a hole in the ground and hollow out a cavern about 10 meters in diameter and spherical in shape, lining it with titanium carbon fiber steel. I sit in the center, scream in rage and collapse sobbing.

An hour or so later I get an idea. I make a ladder to get out again, so I am not dependent on TK abilities. I remember how the psiotic microscope works and have an idea. I line the chamber with duped psiotic damping chips. We had these in the microscope to prevent the psiotic field from the operator from swamping out the specimen. There is also a polarity to them, so pointing in, they only affect what is in the center. I climb out of the chamber to make the final connections linking them all together and then descend the ladder again. Nothing! I cannot scan! It works! Not exactly portable, but it works. I now have a safe place I can retreat too when I am feeling dangerous and I can make as many of these chambers as I need.

An hour of total peace later I hear people outside. “Yingui are you in there?” They can sense the sphere, but can’t sense my TK, being shut off.

“Yeh, come inside, but don’t use TK to get in, use the ladder.”

“How come?”

“You’ll see.” They slowly descend. The effect is immediate and one after another they all exclaim.

“But why? I feel blind.”

“Safe place. Rachael, I would expect you to understand. Needed a safe place where any one of us or I could go to vent off steam, or in this case grief, without the danger of hurting anything or anyone.”

“Isn’t this dangerous? You would be totally at the mercy of any enemy down here, especially with all of us down here at once. I’m getting out.”

“Not that dangerous. All I would have to do is break enough of the fragile dampening chips and TK would return.” When we reach the surface we see Running Snake looking at us with great concern, but she says nothing. I cover the hole and mark it so we can find it again if necessary. There has to be some way to make it smaller.

Names

“So, do you know where we are going? Are the cats coming with us?”

“No and no. They will be fine here. Princess is getting rather heavy, would not be good for her to travel now.”

“Will we ever see them again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do we trust these people?”

“We have no choice. You want to go back and take on the nesters?” They use H-bombs now! Crazy!

“No.”

Running Snake comes up to us. “Please deposit all tech here.” She points to a large sack. “All watches, GPSs, radios, net links, and bracelets. In fact anything with metal or plastic in it.” Ron is in a state of horror. “Don’t worry, you get back at the end of training if you still want them.”

“Clothing too?”

“Clothing ok for now. We take care of that later.” She grins evilly.

“What’s so bad about tech?”

“We will see.”

“What about Silver Ghost?”

“Others take care of sky ship.” Finally Ron makes a rather large reluctant contribution to the sack. He is so thin; he must use TK to assist carrying all that stuff in addition to himself.

“Where we go, no use. Gets in the way. May even cause you to fail.”

“First the fall and now this. This may even be harder for me.”

“Barb you do not seem upset by this.”

No, net was way to make a living, not important here. My skills are in my head not in what I carry. Tools are replaceable.

“What about you Yingui?”

“I have not carried a watch in over thirty years. There were always clocks where they were needed. TK makes a knife and other tools redundant. I am happy with my cloak and staff. Used to wear eyeglasses, but TK took care of that need also.”

“What about your flute?”

“The ocarina? I have you there. The ocarina is an instrument over ten thousand years old. Definitely not tech.”

“Can you teach me the ocarina then? I feel so naked without something to hold onto.”

Running Snake searches the ground for a moment in intense concentration, bends down and picks up a small pebble and hands it to Ron. “Essential that you have this at the end of the journey. Sacred pebble. All is lost without it.”

“Ha-ha, ok you have had your fun.” He drops the pebble. Running Snake picks it up again and hands it back to him.

“Try to hang on better or journey might take forever to complete.” We all laugh, but no grin on Running Snake's face. Ron looks concerned now and puts it into his pocket.

“What about the staffs? They have metal in them.”

“Staffs ok. Not taken from ground. Not made with tech. You must learn something very fundamental about our spirit. Shoshone and most if not all us have a totally different view of life than you have.” She draws a hexagon in the sandy soil and then links all the points. “Each point represents a different life understanding. We start with Spiritual, then add Mental, Logical, Physical, Fundamental, and finally Emotional.”

“They appear to be lined up as pairs of opposites, Emotion is the opposite of Logical, etc.”

“Each way of understanding life has properties of all points, but usually reside near one or two main points.”

“This looks pretty obvious. Our culture is heavy into the physical and

logical. Everything is an object, including people. Even our sense of self, our consciousness, has been explained by neuro-chemical signals between cells made up of genes and biochemistry. One of the reasons they could justify treating us saps the way they did. Social Darwinism to the extreme. We are just machines programmed by genes and experiences. Disposable and replaceable.”

“Yeh, even morality boiled down to whatever you could get away with, as there are no 'God given' laws of behavior or eternal consequences.”

“What do you mean by Fundamental though? It does not seem to be the opposite of mental.”

“Black and white. Human tendency to try and simplify everything to easy answer, even if this make no sense.”

“Ah. That makes sense, no mental there. Nothing is black and white.”

“So, we know where we are coming from, where are we going? Where is the Shoshone understanding on the map?”

“We reside here near Emotional and Spiritual. To us everything has soul, has spiritual significance.”

“Everything?” She nods.

“Whew, no wonder there have been so many misunderstandings. How can the two cultures even communicate at all. That would mean that nothing can be owned either, land, animals, even clothes or food, correct?” She nods again.

“Not easy. I suspect that TK is a monkey wrench in the works. How does the logical physical world explain us? Might explain why they fear us so much. We don't fit in the western physical/logical understanding at all.”

“Yet, no one here is having any trouble accepting us. We fit into the local way of thinking. But this map and thinking about thinking does not sound very native.”

“A construct to try to explain our ways in a way you might understand. True, no native would use such a thing to explain our feelings about life. Mother earth and the Great Spirit would be explanation enough.”

“Is the Great Spirit God then?”

“Great Spirit not explained so easy. More than western concept of God. West separates God from creation, separates and catalogs everything. Great Spirit and creation are one. West very obsessed with numbers and putting everything into a box.”

“You are holistic. No separation as they say in Zen.”

This will not be so easy to adjust to. I suspect that we need to go through an awakening of some kind to 'see' this understanding. It will not be logic that gets us there, but an opening of our hearts.

It is late afternoon by now. "Do we spend the night or leave now?"

"We go. Better if nesters not find you here. Not worth the risk to others."

"Lead on."

We walk for several hours before stopping beside a small stream. James rushes to get a drink.

"Wait."

"What for?"

"Must thank sister stream first." Ah, very Zen like. I am going to like this journey. Running Snake begins a long chant with lots of bowing and strange words.

When she finally finishes James asks, "Ok now?"

"For me ok, but you have not given thanks yet."

"Oh, no I am not going to try and repeat all that every time I need a drink of water."

"No one said to thank the same way, only that you give thanks. Each to own their understanding. Not here to teach you to become Shoshone, only to guide you on the path of understanding."

I walk up to the stream. "Thank you brother stream. May I become worthy to receive your sacrifice." I bow deeply and slowly, then kneel and sip the water. Very good, lack of chlorine and pollutants is a real benefit, with just enough minerals to give it flavor, unlike the pure distilled water I had been making, yuck. Then I remember about Giardia and other bugs that could be in it and give a quick scan. Ok, this time. Have to remember to check first.

"That I can do." James does a quick imitation of what I have done. Running Snake pushes him into the stream when he kneels.

He comes up sputtering, "What was that for?"

"You are not sincere Brother Badger." James dries himself with TK quickly. Wet clothes could get you into trouble this close to dark.

"No smiling Brother Turtle. You were here once too. Have you forgotten?" I wipe the smile off my face. The rest offer their thanks in slow careful movements.

"How do we get across?"

"We walk, not deep." She strides the water. Comes up to her knees and continues on the other side. Cold, but feels good on my feet. Not used to walking so far in bad shoes. Rode a bicycle because of bad feet.

Never was into running like my peers before the collapse. I will have to do scans to see if I can do something or I will definitely be holding up the group before too long. I am already called Turtle. Don't want to add any more reasons to justify that name. Three of us have been named so far. Wonder what the others will get.

Just as the light is nearly gone Running Snake stops. "We camp here under the small trees away from the stream." She smooths out a hollow, packs it with pine needles, puts her blanket on top and lays down.

"No tents or Tepees?"

"Did you carry one with you Ron?"

"Use your TK to make something then."

"And what happens if we get separated? We are here to gain wisdom. This is not a pleasure hike."

"But I'll freeze and bugs and creepy crawlies will get me. What about wolves? I am hungry too."

"LTBs gets them every time."

"Huh?"

"Lions and tigers and bears!"

"Oh my!" I crack up. From the Wizard of Oz.

"Gatherer of many things. You must be Brother Squirrel. You will survive without your nuts for one night." I suppress a smile. Daniel feels sorry for him and helps him to set up a comfortable bed. Well, not that comfortable. A mosquito lands on me for an evening snack. As it is drawing it's meal in the dimming light, I watch the psiotic patterns. Interesting.

We all survive the night. Glad I had a cloak now. It was cold even with James' trick of keeping warm and no movement to keep muscles warm. Not entirely temperature, something else. When we get up Running Snake has already gathered wood and started a fire. First order of business, bugs. Knock them out of your shoes, robes, hair if you have any. Glad I can scan now. Hate camping.

"Can we eat now?"

"Eat whatever you want Brother Squirrel. No one is stopping you."

"I have no idea what is edible out here?"

"Watch what others eat then and try that."

"What others?" We are all empty handed.

"Too much chatter." I watch the birds for only a few minutes and see and hear them going after berries on a bush about thirty meters away. I casually walk over and gather a hand full and walk back slowly eating them as I return. Not all things that birds eat we can, but these look like

normal bush berries.

“What, where did you get those?” He looks at me and then from where I came from. He floats quickly over to the bushes. After some poking around he figures it out.

“Color Squirrel. Check out the color before eating.” We hear an “eeeuu” spit, spit.

“The dark red ones.” The others are awake and watching this whole exchange.

How did you figure this out?

“I watched the birds.” She concentrates for some time with her eyes closed, then takes off. She comes back a few minutes later loaded with stuff. Dried fruit of some sort, nuts, berries, vegies of some kind. She sets them before us all. “You read their thoughts.”

Yes. Quite interesting really. Never thought of ‘wildlife’ as being sentient, but all the normal concerns are there. Just trying to survive with the least amount of suffering, find a mate and raise a family. Not sure I can eat them any longer. Not sure at all.

“Now you understand why I only eat meat if it is offered to me, dead already. You can not judge other people's beliefs, but I agree it is hard to eat someone you consider your equal on some level. Try the just not killing rule to begin with. Being totally vegetarian is hard to do in our world. Of course, TK, can make up for that to some extent, but even I would not want to depend on it. Can't be sure we are getting all the nutrients we need when food is duped.”

“I am not going to touch that one. Running Snake, how are you picking the names for us?”

“Not picking names. Names already known. Just matching names to Prophecy.”

“Oh no, not that mumbo jumbo. Can't go there. No way.”

“What's the matter Brother Badger? There is definitely more than one way to perceive reality. Don't be so close-minded. Would your careful modern understanding have predicted TK ability?”

“No, only happened in netgames, not real.”

“Hers did. Not so specific in the popular culture, but certainly in the prophecy. But even the better known stories talk about moving without wings, shape changing things and even oneself.”

“Oh”

“No one is saying that when all is done you have to be Shoshone, but try and keep an open mind. It will undoubtedly save our skins at some point. We certainly have not been doing very well against the nesters our

way.” A tear wells up in my eye. Not good at all.

“True,” he says this with eyes downcast. Even he could not stop all the bots on his own.

“Ok, so how do you assign the names to each of us and why such wimpy names. Mouse, Turtle, Badger, Squirrel. Those are all wussy creatures. Why can’t we have strong names, like Eagle, Mountain Lion, or Bear?”

“Meet Bear later. Must be white genes in there somewhere. You think like white man. Every creature is a strong creature. Only perception is flawed. A mouse can bring down a whole village by stealing its grain. Squirrels smart enough to save for an entire winter while other creatures have to forage in snow. Turtle can withstand attacks from the strongest beasts. Never met badger or you would not question, but would stand proud for being allowed to share such name.”

“She’s right.”

“So what are the rest of us to be called?”

“You are Sister Weasel. Can fool the wisest nester or norm. Father is Brother Ant, because he is very patient and works tirelessly without complaint. She is Sister Turkey as she only gives and never asks for anything in return.”

Thank you.

“You’re welcome. Only one to be thankful and yet being called a turkey is an insult in your culture. You could all learn much from Sister Turkey. She is a prime example of our mission.”

“What do you mean? What is our mission?” But Running Snake only smiles.

“You know about genes, white or otherwise?”

“Of course Brother Ant. Ph.D. in biology, Northwestern, Class of ‘87, tech level 5 in current terminology. That sequence that Yingui chanted over my grandson was HelperV.” Whoa, even I did not know the sequence was HelperV, just that it was what was causing harm. How could anyone have gotten the virus this late and no one else around stricken with it? And why did a native get it, I thought they were immune.

“Then why do you talk so funny?”

“Because I have found that people who do not know the native cultures expect us to talk and act like ignorant savages. I have found that it helps me to gain more knowledge about people, as most never figure out my guise. I will have to be more careful.”

“I am beginning to see how you received your name Dr. Snake.” She

just grins and we all crack up.

“Now that we can stop playing cowboys and Indians, things should go a bit smoother and faster. Up for some running?” I had worked on my feet last night. Time to see if I did it right.

“Remember some of us old folks can’t run fast or long.” Three of us have robes on; great last night, but not for running in, trip hazard. I hitch up my ‘skirt’ and take off after Dr. Snake. Afraid she is stuck with that name now. Feet aren’t so bad. We will see in a few hours. We are loping more than running, an easy pace of maybe 8-10 kph. Nuts and berries are not going to be enough to keep this up long. It’s weird, but I can’t remember any of us having been sick after the plague. That was bad enough, but I would have expected the normal flu and cold season stuff. Is it because the TK balance gives us extra immunity, or is it simply because we are not around that many people? Now that I know the boy had HelperV, I don’t have to worry about all of us getting that flu at least. We should be immune to HelperV for at least one season. All diseases have slowed down considerably from less mixing of people, with the severely reduced population now it should be a lot slower if even still possible. May even be parts of the world that are just now being exposed to HelperV, more than four months after we were. Hey, I haven’t had any allergies yet either. Pine and oak pollen normally set me off good. Even forgot to look for meds. Forget the TK gift; this would be worth it all by itself! I hated sneezing my head off, scratching my eyes out and the lower energy levels.

We spent the next ten days wandering around learning how to live off the land. The training took much longer than the doing. If we had already been skilled, it would have taken only a few hours each day to gather all we needed. There were some complaints about the hunter gatherer existence, but when you compare it to shopping it really was not that different. You still needed to know which stores carried which products, what was in season, getting to supplies before everyone else did, etc. Once we caught on it was not bad. Rachael and James proved best at hunting terrestrial game, Barb and Susan at fishing (they had the patience), Daniel and Ron at finding materials and building shelters and finally myself at basket weaving and pottery. My mother was a professional seamstress and passed on her ability on boring afternoons. Of course you could not learn a lifetime of skills in ten days, but it was meant to show us that the hunter-gatherer existence was possible even in the 21st century. There were some real benefits. We had always been taught that only poor malnourished savages lived this way. We had much

more free time than we did when we were working for a living as saps and we saw some remarkably beautiful country. We watched nature coming to life as spring unfolded this far north. We learned the ways of many animals and how strategies animals had discovered could be used by us to solve specific problems as they came up. The answers were all around for the observant one.

Only down side was the day it rained all day. Our shelter skills were not exactly up to snuff yet. Wet and miserable, Dr. Snake finally got tired of everyone's whining and let us use TK to dry off and keep dry. Some cheating during hunting also. Hmmm. That thrown rock did not exactly follow a curve I would expect and forget bows and arrows, which would have taken too long to master. Making a good flint point was frustrating to say the least. Every time I got close, one more whack, and it would split in half. There was still a need for skilled artisans, even at this level of existence. And of course we did not need to deal with medical problems. I could easily take care of cuts, scrapes, bruises, etc. We were lucky no one was more seriously hurt. No more arrows in my flank at least. The arrow wound only caused me to be a little sore for a few days. Again we were lucky.

"Listen up." We all pay attention immediately. We have learned, usually the hard way. "I want each of you to go off by yourself for the day." She hands each of us a pouch made of animal skin with a drawstring. Each is unique. When had she made these? "On this day journey, which we make usually at puberty, and for us it lasts from a week to a month, you will find yourselves. Into your medicine bag you are to place sacred objects of great meaning to you. You know some of our ways, now is the time to learn the spirit world too. Do not bring or eat any food today. No water either. You do not have to wander, just out of sight and hearing of all others. You must be and experience being totally alone. Before and after the plague, you have always been with others. Need quiet time to LISTEN as well. NO ONE will ever know what is in your medicine bag. This is the most personal thing you will ever do in your life. Not even a wife or husband knows what is in the other's medicine bag. Choose wisely, as these objects will affect the rest of your life in more ways that you can imagine."

We each walk off in a different direction quietly. I will not relate anything that happened here, being of a personal nature. At dusk we each return and go to bed without comment. Truly a sacred time.

The next morning, Dr. Snake has prepared a meal for us. She was apparently busy herself yesterday. Rabbit, snake, berries, some kind of

bread made on a stick, all cooked to perfection. Of course after a day of fasting even the snake looked good. After giving thanks to Great Spirit, we eat with a minimum of chatter and a maximum of smiles.

“What did you hear yesterday?”

“So much, it would take forever to describe. Even the sounds of a beetle walking on sand is amazing.” We all nod in agreement. Barb is quiet. She of course could hear the thoughts of every creature as well. It would not surprise me at all if she reached enlightenment in this lifetime.

“Sound is an essential part of our understanding of the world. Today, I want each of you to make a musical instrument and learn how to play it. Cannot make something out of TK, must be natural materials. Everything in our lives is sacred. What you formerly thought of as 'Indian Art' was and is not art to us. We have no concept of art as you think of it. These instruments are to be sacred to you, not just noise makers.”

“Can we use TK to help fashion it?”

“Only to speed things up and be prepared to justify your actions. You do not need to be quiet today and may help each other, but again, each of you must find your own sacred sound. A sound that says you inside and out.”

So again we take off in different directions, but this time with a purpose in mind. People leave camp at different times as each gets an idea of what they will do and what material they will need. We know this area pretty well now and have come across many things that could assist us in this task. I was the only one who carried a musical instrument, but everyone had some ability. Natural for saps to do something along this line as none of us could ever afford the audio equipment of the pears.

When I return Daniel and Rachael are already sitting in the circle that has become our base camp. Rachael has a large array of thin flat rocks gathered from a nearby stream bed, supported by other rocks in a sort of makeshift xylophone arrangement. The sound reminds me of a Zen Han more than an actual xylophone of course. Daniel does not appear to have anything, but we will see. I have fashioned a flute out of a thigh bone of a long dead deer. Long and thin it makes a haunting airy sound. Nice complement to the ocarina.

James comes back with what looks like a hollow log about ten centimeters in diameter and about two meters long with the center burned out in some fashion. Barb comes back with a series of bells made out of scrap metal. Ron has something that looks like pan pipes made out of reeds hardened somehow. Several hours later Susan returns with something obviously under her cloak.

We eat simply this time, leftovers basically and dried meat and such collected earlier. “Ready to show everyone else?”

We bring out our instruments one at a time and demonstrate that we know how to make noise at least. Susan’s turns out to be a tambourine like instrument, but with intricately carved sides in animal designs reminiscent of her Spanish-American heritage. To her it was not just an instrument. I am somewhat ashamed. We were told that these were to be sacred instruments, but she is the only one to make hers so. We were all very impressed and started coming up with ideas of how we could enhance our own constructs. I am thinking of a scrimshaw pattern for my flute. Finally Daniel, who elected to go last with no instrument. “I will use the oldest instrument know to humankind, my own voice and body.” At that point he proceeds to chant while keeping time with his hands and feet. Sounds like a Japanese Zen Buddhist chant with a blues beat. Rachael starts keeping time with her rocks and scraping, James starts a background sound with his didgeridoo. The rest of us gradually get it and add our voices and sounds. Even Dr. Snake comes in on the chorus with Shoshone words of some kind.

This was all great and fitting for the setting and the feelings we all had, but I was starting to get nervous about time for another upgrade and whether or not this was the best place for it to happen when Ghost pops into camp. “How did you get here?” We were not supposed to use our TK without permission, but I did a quick local scan and saw that we were only a little over a kilometer away from where we started. We had been going around in circles. Of course, Dr. Snake would have to take us to a place she already knew well, her own back yard, so to speak.

Dr. Snake notices Ghost and realized the gig was up. “I hope you’re happy giving away my secret. Come here if you want a back rub.” You did not have to say that twice. Ghost was in her lap in a microsecond. Ah, cat massage. He was in heaven, could hear his purring ten meters away.

“Where’s Marm?”

“Behind you.”

Food?

Funny it is usually Ghost that begs. “Didn’t you get enough mice to eat while we were gone? We had fresh fish, rabbit, squirrel, pheasant, snake and all kinds of things. You guys missed all the good stuff.”

“Yeh, like beetle grubs and ant tea.”

“That wasn’t so bad, after your stomach was clean of everything else you had that day.”

“Prefer mine fried.” Susan gives Marm some left over rabbit jerky.

Tough, takes him awhile to soften it up enough to get it down, but he comes looking for more.

We make it back to the village in one piece about late afternoon. Princess is getting close to her time. The rest of the men are here this time. Dr. Snake pulls one gentleman aside and introduces us to her husband, Red Bear. Must have had some honky ancestors in there somewhere; his hair had a reddish tinge to it. I also notice a few pickup trucks. “Where do you get the H to run those things?”

“We use a methane converter that uses the methane produced from compost and also solar cells electrolyzing water. Not a whole lot, but enough to get by. Combustion, not fuel cells though.”

“How come he gets a power name like Red Bear and I get Badger?” We all laugh and pelt him with pebbles. Not this argument again, but he is smiling also.

Red Bear is BIG. He slowly walks over to poor Badger, looming over him. “Want to wrestle for my name Little Badger?”

“Badger is a good name, really is. I like badger just fine.” Everyone is cracking up now.

I can’t resist. “Hey, pick on someone your own size!” He turns to me. “You, skinny old man?”

“Bet you can’t catch me!”

“Oh yeh.” He comes running towards me, but not like a giant, more like someone who knows what he is doing and expecting me to jump sideways. Still, it takes him awhile to get to top speed. Just before he gets to me, without moving a muscle, I pop behind him and wait for him to notice. I learned this trick from the cats playing with the dogs.

“So, it is not just the spirit mouse catchers. The tales I have been hearing are true.” He looks around at us. “You are the seven. The prophecy is true. Amazing. Thought that was just a bunch of traditionalist crap.”

He gets down on his knees. “Oh, no! Not that.” I don’t even have to say anything to the others, we all get down on our knees facing them. “We are not to be honored in this way. You kept the faith for a VERY long time, through countless generations and persecutions. It is we who should honor you, not the other way around. We have been given certain gifts, but we did not ask for them, nor earn them in anyway. You have earned our respect. It is about time we awakened to the true ways, the ways of Mother Earth.”

Daniel smiles at me. “Not bad for a beginner. We will make a diplomat out of you yet. Come stand, we walk together as brothers and

sisters. There is much that still needs to be done and it will only happen if we work together. There is still much ignorance in us and in the rest of the world. A long path ahead of us. Your wife, Running Snake, has made a good start at putting us on the right track by teaching us essential skills and understandings we will need later, but a few weeks is not going to replace thousands of years of learning the hard way. And others need this wisdom too. That will be much harder, for many will resist this knowledge, preferring the comfortable path they already know that led to this current destruction. Let us strive never to repeat what has happened in the last five hundred years.” Nods of agreement all around.

“We need helpers in the kitchens and in the pits.” The women go to the kitchen and the men to the barbecue pits. Though women are treated with respect and have an equal say in government by way of the women’s council, there is still a separation of roles. We will have to think carefully whether or not we want to take the whole package or not. There are arguments for both ways. I can’t imagine Rachael in a kitchen, whereas Ron and I have always enjoyed cooking. On the other hand, it has worked for them for thousands of years.

Running Snake comes up to me sensing my thoughts. “Each tribe is different. You have to find your own way for it to work. Diversity in nature is the best strategy, why else would Great Spirit have made so many different animals and plants? This ensures that all the skills and ways are available when needed.” Good safety tip.

Fireside

Dinner was great. Mostly the same stuff as last time, fry bread, deer this time, beans, squash, etc. but fresh herbs and wood smoke add something special to everything. Afterwards we gathered around the central fire pit, which had been lit with a small bonfire. The entire community is present, fifty-eight adults and forty-five children of varying ages. Red Bear is their chief of security for this task. Their system is set up such that the best person for a particular task is chosen for the time needed. You could be chief for a day, or a month, for a small group of people doing a single task, or for the entire community. This is what made it hard for greedy gringos to “steal” their land at first. No one had authority to make treaties. That level of decision-making could only come by consensus from the entire community. Not easy. The US government tried to get around this by setting up bogus tribal councils to deal with. A lot of people suffered.

“We have two problems; safety of the seven and safety of the people. The two are linked. If they do not succeed it will not matter what else is done. But if we do not survive, they will return to an empty landscape and fail also. Sooner or later the nesters and others will arrive or we will reach them in our expansion back into our native lands.” A lots of whoops and hollers at this statement. So, they did intend to move back to their traditional areas. Good for them.

“The closest nest is just north of Boise. So far they have left us alone and we should encourage that. Of what use or threat could a bunch of dumb starving Indians be?” He grins. “We need to use coyote logic to redirect their thinking.”

“Our appearances could be changed to match your outward appearances, but none of us speak Shoshone, nor are we likely to be able to fake it or learn it so fast.”

“Sister Turkey could convince them that no matter what you said it sounded like us.”

“That may not work. They are likely to record everything. When they play it back, they will know they have been duped and come back even madder.”

“What about during the upgrade itself? We are likely to be out of it for up to four days this time.”

“What about Silver Ghost? Not to mention Marm, Ghost and Princess.”

“Do they need to be part of the upgrade? They are such pests already. Adding more talents could be a real problem. Also, Princess is getting closer to her time. She does not even DS any more.”

All I sense from her lately is thoughts of motherhood and asking Great Spirit for her time to come soon.

“Chances are they would not even believe what they were seeing or hearing in their heads.”

“It is likely they have vid on Turtle and Turkey rescuing Mouse. They know about DS. Seeing the cats would be a real tip off something was up.”

“I have an idea.” James presents his idea and afterwards we have a good time demonstrating our musical abilities to the group, who reciprocate with instruments and chants of their own. Afterwards we listen to tales of coyote, rabbit boy and other famous characters from their past.

Armstrong Boise

“I want a full report on what happened in Sacramento and congratulations on your promotion.”

Colonel Meyer gets up to speak. “Thank you General. This is what we know from data transferred just before it happened. If I may direct your attention to the wall screen. They were the sole facility working on the ATTF (amplified telekinesis through fusion) program. It was decided that it was simply too dangerous to try in multiple locations. Besides, Sac had the largest concentration of TKs in their hold at the time. The basic principle is that it might be possible to use a linked array of level 2s to boost a subject level 2 to a level 3. The different levels are a matter of refinement of the psiotic pattern produced in the mind of a person. Most of us are level 0. That does not mean no pattern, but a very limited one. We have all had hunches that later proved true. This is level 0 stuff. The levels are based on a log scale, so that each rise in number represents a factor of 10, much like the earthquake Richter scale. Does everyone here know about the amps? Good. An amp only doubles a TKs ability, addition rather than multiplication. TK Smith’s scientists found a way of partially making a level 2 amp into a level 3. Problem was that it was very painful for a level 2 to concentrate on. Even in an array of 10 level 2s, the participants would pass out before anything useful could be accomplished.

That was of course till the Lake Tahoe TKs came under our control. There were 43 to start with. Five were lost during orientation. It was one in particular. Here is her image. Susan Juanita Perez. Mixed blood, 42 years old, father from Mexico and mother from San Jose. She was able to push through the pain, what she called dissonance and change the internal psiotic pattern of the amp to a true level 3 amp. She then taught the rest of the elite array to do the same. There were able to produce up to four level 3 amps in one day. Understand that a level 3 amp cannot be used by a level 2 TK. Too much power, they can’t control it. We needed a level 3 TK to match the new amps. A few days later, again with the help of Ms. Perez, TK Smith was boosted to level 3.”

“And this is when the trouble began?”

“Not right away. Our scientists could not see what was done to the bad amps to make them now work. They were beyond our ability to scan the devices with current psiotic tech. Similarly they could not see any difference in the psiotic pattern of TK Smith, though her abilities were

clearly a level 3. This matches results from the Singapore scans on the natural level 3 they have there. She could move herself at 20 meters per second and she could see the differences between the two different amps now. Before she could not. The problem happened here. This is surveillance in Ms. Perez's room. Note how she suddenly pauses, then changes her mind, grabs a few things and puts them in her robe, HERE. Happens too fast to even see clearly. If I freeze these few frames."

"There are two others in the room with her! Then they are all gone."

"Correct. They did not pass through any doorway, pass by any sensor, nothing registered their presence besides this vid. And it is only on a few seconds worth of recording."

"We can track her surely, with the nanos?"

"Negative. NO signal at all ever was received outside this room. We did wide area scans as soon as we knew. Nothing on this continent."

"That can't be!"

"Go on please."

"As soon as the alarms sounded that a TK had escaped, TK Smith went into action. She could now scan up to one kilometer. She went nuts looking for Perez. She turned the place upside down. Did over flights of the entire Sacramento area. We told her not to go. We could not risk level 0s seeing someone flying under their own power all over the place. We already have enough problems with the myths about the level 2s. She finally came back in and locked herself in her room. You see the entire program now depended in Perez and she was gone, by means unknown. That meant there were forces stronger than TK Smith out there. She became obsessed. She wanted to find a way to boost herself to level 4 and beyond. She beat the scientists into finding a way to make a dissonant level 4 amp to 'pattern' off of. But they could not even see a level 3 psiotic pattern, much less make a level 4 device. In the mean time, her team took turns boosting themselves to level 3 in anticipation of being needed to boost Smith to level 4. We now had eleven level 3s at Sac.

She finally could not wait any longer, remember, this is all on the same day Perez disappeared, within hours actually. Smith had the level 3s work on her without a pattern. They did not come out at all. They were all dead except for Smith. The array chamber started to dissolve before the eyes of the vids. Smith was boring her way out of the complex under TK ability. She had gone rogue. We think the TKs were just too exhausted from boosting each other and had not had time to rest and get used to level 3 before being forced into this action."

"Rogue?"

“The wild TKs term for a TK that was crazy.”

“We had no choice. It was the only way to contain her.”

“Thank you Colonel Meyer. Please be seated.”

A corporal comes into the room and hands a report to General Phillips. “Gentleman, and Ladies. They have found the saucer device missing from Lake Tahoe or one just like it. It is on the Duck Valley Indian reservation in southern Idaho.”

Duck Valley

“Sat and vid showed the one in Lake Tahoe as being black. This one is beige with what look like Native American markings all over it. Have you got me out here on a wild goose hunt Sergeant?”

“Chase. No sir, structural analysis is consistent with the Tahoe saucer.”

“Hmm, must have adapted it to the surroundings.”

“How did you find it?”

“Sat images showed people milling around it several days ago and it matched the size and shape of the Tahoe saucer, so computer control sent bots out to investigate. They did the initial analysis. This one is slightly larger than the Tahoe one, but still shows the invisible radioactive tags we left on the Tahoe one right here and here. We believe it is the same one.”

“There is a door now. Was there a door on the Tahoe one?”

“No sir, but what ever was in there had to get out somehow.”

“What’s inside now?”

“We don’t know. We waited for you to arrive.”

“Sensors show anything?”

“No sire, we still can’t penetrate the outside and the cracks for the door are too tight for even a nanobot to enter.”

“Who is this child?”

“Her name is Lone Deer. She was here when we arrived.”

“Lone Deer, do you know how to get inside?”

“Yes.”

“Will you show me?”

“It easy, just touch right here.” She does so and the door pops open and drops to the ground. The military backs off with guns raised and cocked. “It’s alright. We store potatoes and other veggies in here. Bugs and critters can’t get in.” She walks right into the saucer and returns holding a potato and a goose neck squash.

“When did you find the saucer?”

“You mean the flat head? About a month ago. No one went to it for a long time, but Spider Legs dared Sees Far and he accidentally opened the door. Come inside. Nothing in here will hurt you.” The two shoulder their weapons and go inside.

“What a mess. I want tech in here on the double. And get this stuff out of here.”

“Yes sir!”

“Is there a problem here?” Red Bear has come up to them.

“This child says this arrived a month ago. Is that correct?”

“You sirs are on the land of the sovereign nation of the Shoshone Tribe. You have no jurisdiction here. Please leave.”

Pointing a gun at Red Bear. “This gives me jurisdiction.”

“Same old game then. Hoped it would be different after the fall.”

“Look either you tell us what we want to know or the kid gets it and then we work on you. I am not here to play games.”

“A month ago.”

“See any one with it?”

“Nope.”

“Get the stuff out of there or we throw it out. That means now.” He calls in for a truck to take the saucer and for bots and personnel to search the village.

“Interference will not be tolerated.”

Red Bear goes back to the village with Lone Deer after taking the food out of the saucer and tells everyone what to expect. “Just vacate all the buildings and leave the doors and windows open. Take anything valuable that is fragile out and sit next to it, so they can see it is not something hidden.”

“What about the death house.”

“Leave that as is. If they want to go in there that is their business. We can’t stop them without someone being hurt. They believe they are the ONLY authority. They do not respect any one. Get in their way and you are dead.”

“We have guns, we could fight them off.”

“Till they come back with a jet and nucs? Best they see nothing is here and then leave us alone.”

An hour later a jet drops the bots. They go scurrying everywhere with not a thought to dignity or privacy. Even check out an outhouse to the discomfort of the occupant. A few hours later the troops arrive. “Nice, they are all lined up. Done this before I would imagine.”

“Good afternoon. I have been assigned to be your guide in case there are any questions. We have left all the doors and window open, cabinets as well. You should be able to make a thorough and quick search. May I ask what you are looking for?”

“Just stay out of the way.”

They are thorough. Takes then two hours for 20 small nearly empty buildings. They finally come to the death house, outside of the main part of the village for obvious reasons.

“I thought you did sky burials or something like that.”

“Apache do that. We are Shoshone. Inside are the people who died of the fire plague as we call it. Only ten, but they should be pretty ripe about now.”

“Captain said every where that means everywhere. Corporal, take Johnson and check it out.” They open the door and immediately fold over gagging.

“Private, go get the CBC masks out of the truck.” He returns a few minutes later. The two assigned troops don the masks and enter. They come out ten minutes later. One wipes his knife on the grass. “Only dead bodies Sir.”

“OK, let’s move out.” The saucer is on the back of the flat bed at an odd angle, as it does not fit exactly. The troops pile into the truck behind it. Without another word they leave. The bots leave soon after.

Red Bear makes a gesture with his hand indicating ‘bugs’ “Let’s try and get everything back into place and then eat.” Life continues at a normal pace. Planting needs to be done if they want food for the next year. Repairs need to be made to structures damaged during the winter and the raid. Three days later, at night, a group of seven Indians comes out of the death house holding their breath and close the door. They head for the showers first and then a change of clothes. In the early morning they head out on foot with little fanfare. They leave behind a hundred kilograms of gold coins with Ghost’s face on them, several new cisterns hidden in existing structures. The last item was heavily debated, but after much prayer and giving thanks, it was decided that this was not technically mining and could be done. They leave the bugs intact. It would only draw attention to them if they were suddenly removed, though they did have to be shielded to prevent their doings from being detected. Princess stayed behind to have her kittens in peace any day now. Marm and Ghost were driving her nuts using TP to try and talk to the unborn. Ok, the rest of us were being driven nuts also. It will be interesting to see what abilities the kittens are born with.

Now What?

“We know the nesters are still after us, possibly even more so, now that Sac is gone. That must have really scared them.”

“What is so maddening, is that every single action we take, no matter how non-violent, with respect to them, makes them worse. For a facility that was designed to rebuild infrastructure they seem to have been sidetracked into persecution of TKs instead.”

“If they had been working WITH people instead of controlling them, they could have accomplished so much more by now.”

“We have been attacked by Samuel Clemens, Sacramento and now the Boise nest. They are definitely communicating with each other to our detriment. What would happen if we took out their sats?”

“How do we know which ones are theirs? I can sense hundreds of objects large enough and thousands and thousands of things smaller.”

They would want to have something stable, so that limits it to ones in synchronous orbit, but that would also include weather sats. Taking those out could be a real handicap later. Not to mention the comsats used for the net.

“What if we did not take them out, but just moved them.”

“Or shielded them.”

“We don’t know how they would behave under those conditions. The military ones are likely to have self destruct capabilities. That could be dangerous to the other sats nearby.”

“Or we can use that to our advantage. Anything shielded goes off line permanently, problem solved.”

“They would not put all their eggs in one basket, in case an enemy got the destruct codes or something. There are still landlines, radio and microwave com nets.”

“So, it is unlikely, short of taking out all tech, to stop their communicating.”

“Yeh.”

“The advantages we have are our small numbers and our speed. Hell, we can even go straight up if necessary. They have nothing that can go a few thousand kilometers straight up in seconds.”

“Ah, in case you don’t remember, that is a vacuum up there and they have Silver Ghost.”

“Remember, the first draft of Silver Ghost was made in a few seconds before two upgrades ago.”

“Things are happening too fast. I can’t keep track of abilities gained two months ago much less current ones.”

“All I know is that it is even more essential that we don’t get separated. We are too few in numbers to make it alone.”

“Agreed.”

~~~ *come quickly* ~~~

“Who was that?”

“One of the cats? No, they are with us and asleep as usual. They have gotten good at sleeping in a backpack. Lazy bums.”

*Felt like it was coming from the east. I have been picking it up off and on for a few weeks.*

“Well, you are the most sensitive of us, but why did you not say anything?”

*Too weak to know if it was real or just my mind.*

“I think we need to investigate.”

“Agreed, Running Snake said that our next contact was at the Wind River Rez and that is east of here.”

“How do we get there? The message said quickly and that sort of rules out walking the entire way.”

“Ah huh, someone trying to get out of exercise I see.”

“Why walk when we can go in style?”

“So, Silver Ghost II or something more substantial?”

“I hate to get back into the disposable goods trap. Last thing we need is to litter the landscape with empty saucer shells.”

“We don’t need to dispose of it. We may not want to take out comsats or such, but why can’t we park the saucer up there when we don’t need it?”

“Good idea, then they will think we are being invaded from outer space and try to shoot it down with space lasers or something.”

“We survived Duck Valley by being right under their noses. Rather than a saucer that has to be hidden, how about something we could leave in plain sight, like a bus?”

“A flying bus? That would sure stay hidden. I am getting claustrophobic here folks. Is there a counter argument to every action?”

“Park it way up and use stealth tech, sharp angles, carbon radar absorbing surface, black, etc.”

“Worth a try.”

We spend the next several hours hashing out a design. With another ten-fold increase in abilities we can afford a slightly more luxurious setup. Nothing like the Star Ship Enterprise, but at least more storage and I am definitely not ready for warp engines. When I worked in the lab, the profs were always designing labs without storage, as they wanted as

much work space as possible. Then when it was done and they moved in, they universally complained that they did not have enough storage space. The only tech we had now was what we retrieved from Running Snake after our walk, and being out in the middle of nowhere we were unlikely to find more. A big debate about weapons ensued. Not something like a gun, but supplies of steel ball bearings or something that could be launched at a moments notice at high speed. We decided that we would rely on our TK alone. Tweaking a bot at a distance was as effective as shooting it down and probably safer. No chance of collateral kills.

James is getting bored and starts playing with his new abilities. It does not take long to come up with something. “Hey guys watch this.” He holds up his hand and a bolt of bright blue light 50 mm wide comes out and shoots off and hits a rock, which explodes in a shower of sparks. “A variation on the fire trick, only now I can heat the air in between to the incandescent state. Cool huh?”

“Too many net games James. That is sure to draw a lot of attention. Save it for when we need special effects. It is a deception and I would rather deal with truth. But sometimes in ‘negotiations’ it is better to appear more powerful than you are. Work with Daniel on this. Tweaking something from a distance does not connect the tweaked with the tweaker, but the blue light makes the connection for an observer at least.”

“Oh does that make us tweakies then?” Another pelting with pebbles ends that discussion. We are all going to have to remain shielded at all times is this form of retribution is kept up.

## **Wind River**

We purposely take a circuitous route with occasional DS so as to throw off the sats watching and arrive early morning to an empty village. Scans sense some people in random assortments in small structures scattered about the landscape. “Must be primarily ranchers now. Twenty years ago they might have depended on tourists for income, selling kitsch and putting on shows, but with the tourists gone it is back to subsistence living. Same as in New Shanghai. This is open space though and would not do well for farming more than small plots, not enough water and growing season is too short. The land would not support a large population and they would have to spread out. Probably only get together for festivals and holy days. Bet it gets real cold here in the winter too in spite of the change in climate.”

“Dr. Snake said that we were to ask for a cousin of hers, Chenoa or

White Dove in English.”

“The nearest person is that way about 800 meters.”

“Can’t hurt to ask. Shields up though I don’t want another arrow in me or anyone else, they may not be used to strangers. I scan that they are armed. Probably mostly used against wolves, but I would rather not take the chance.”

“Don’t know about all of you but, I feel like walking, let’s leave the ship here.” We set out on foot, with just robes and staffs. We have all adopted robes after the time in the wild with Running Snake. Which is just as well, as it hides the fact that Ron is not actually walking. If we need to move fast, we TK. We are not dependent on borrowing from other life forms, as in skins, fur and leather, so we are not bound by designs that favor those materials. No pretenses of looking like natives either, no matter what we did to fool the nesters.

We maintain a conversation so as not to catch someone unawares and sure enough, as we get close we are confronted with a shotgun and suspicious eyes. We remain a respectful distance and ask, “We are looking for Chenoa or White Dove. Can you tell us where to find her? We come from her cousin Running Snake.”

“Three miles.”

That’s all we get. “I have forgotten, how far is three miles?”

“Too young for standard? We need to look about five kilometers southwest from here judging from the direction the gun pointed. Scan reveals several structures in that direction and a total of seven people.”

“This is getting to be a longer walk than I intended.”

“What’s the matter old man, six Ks too much for you?”

“We will see how you feel in twenty plus years junior.” We are all smiling. Nice day, not hot and not cold. This time we SEE much more, birds foraging and starting to raise young, lots of rabbits and an occasional fox. And I am not just talking about the upgrade either. Thank you Dr. Snake.

Rachael pokes at a rotted log and pulls out some grubs. “Breakfast?”

“Ah no thank you, I will stick with jerky.”

“Suit yourself.” She pops it into her mouth like an old pro. I still can’t get over my revulsion of eating insects. I dupe some bread left over from Duck Valley and slowly eat that. The sashimi grub probably would have been better for me, nutrition wise.

We cross a small creek, but no fish in this spot. I scan and sense some in a deeper pool up stream. So quiet, only a gentle wind and bird calls for company. No flying insects, i.e. mosquitoes, bothering us yet.

Further on we come across a dead deer, half eaten and gone with maggots. A few mice scatter and the cats are on them. Part of life. I decide this is the perfect setting to play, so I take out the bone flute and just play random notes, just for the feel and sound. Seems to blend into the landscape. Feels right. “I see the structures about thirty meters ahead.”

“Let’s wait; I am sure they heard me playing. The last place did not seem so eager to talk with us.” I start to play again. Soon I hear an answering flute. I am not good at dueling banjos so I quiet down and stop. We all listen to their melody. I love the haunting sounds of Native American flute music, a different scale than western music. When they stop all is quiet for a minute or more and then someone emerges. When they come up to us, Daniel takes over.

“Good morning. We are looking for Chenoa or White Dove.”

“Long way from home. Please follow me.” No tech at all at this location. A few tools with metal in them, but everything else, including the structures they are living in look obviously hand made. We gather outside with, two couples, an older woman, and two children. Marm and Ghost come out and the kids are delighted.

“Be good you two. These are not dogs you can tease.” We pull out what food we have and offer to share. I dupe more of the bread before removing it from my pack. I have to do this carefully. The mass for the bread has to come from somewhere, so I either have to turn my blanket into bread, or use air. If I choose air there will be some sound as bread is much denser than air. Well, I can make a new blanket later. Seems to be pretty universal to share food as a way of greeting guests. The Chinese at the lab were sure obsessed about it. We forgot Chinese New Year. Last year was the Tiger, so this year must be the Rabbit. I certainly feel like a Rabbit, at least in being hunted all the time.

The Older woman introduces herself as White Dove. “Thought you would never get here.”

“We only left Duck Valley last night. When did you expect us?”

“Many years ago was the hope. Before the tourists stopped coming would have been good.” The others nod in agreement.

“At that time all of us were leading normal lives and had no idea we were part of the prophecy.”

“Yes.”

“Your cousin, Running Snake gives you her best and asked me to give you this.” Daniel pulls out a carefully wrapped skin covered with Indian designs and markings, very old, and hands it to her. Tears are

welling up in her eyes as she looks at the skin.

“So the time has really come. We must wait till nightfall to tell you the story. Let us eat first.” Two of them go inside and come back with fresh fish and stir up the coals to start up the fire again. Barb links us together so we do not embarrass our hosts.

*We should do something for them. How do we do anything and not destroy their dignity. Why do you presume they even need anything? This may be the way they have chosen to live. Remember your lessons with Running Snake. How about we just ask? Daniel, you feel up to it?*

He nods. “Along with the prophesy, we were given certain, ah, gifts of skill. We would like to share of the abundance of those gifts in a way that would respect your beliefs. Is there anything that you need of a material nature?” She looks at our packs and us. I am sure she thinks we are poorer than she is.

“We notice that you are skilled in the old ways and use only what you can make or find. Not stealing from Mother Earth what was not intended for our use. There is much honor in this choice. We are trying to learn these ways ourselves for we believe that the survival of all humankind depends on this. These gifts of which I speak are still new to us and we are not very skilled in their use yet. Especially in terms of what is proper and honorable. Running Snake taught us much of the ways as people without these skills would behave, but even she did not know the answers to our concerns and she only had a few weeks to try and undo hundreds of years of programming from our culture. She said that she hoped we would find the wisdom on our journey.”

“As means of a demonstration, could one of you bring me an arrow you would use for hunting?”

One of the men goes into the closest house and comes out with a single arrow and introduces himself, “I am Helaku or Sunny Day. I was born on a sunny day in the middle of winter, after many storms. This is my best hunting arrow. It has brought much food to our family.”

“Great. What makes a good arrow, so that I may fashion one myself?”

“It must be light weight, yet strong. It must have sharp point of hard steel or obsidian rock. It must be absolutely straight. The feathers must be of an eagle’s wing feathers.”

He concentrates and before our eyes an arrow appears with a rush of wind. It is hollow carbon nanotube fiber construction in the shaft, black diamond tip, absolutely straight and duped eagles wing feathers for the end. “The tip is very sharp, please be careful.” He hands the arrow to

him. He lifts it up and examines it. He carefully runs the edge of the tip cross ways perpendicular to his skin. Even in this direction it takes a layer of surface skin off. He sets it down and walks into his home and returns with his bow, takes up the arrow and feels it as he stretches the bow out to it full tautness. He releases the tension and then looks for something to aim at. Quickly he draws the bow and lets the arrow fly. True and straight it flies and hits a tree with a soft thock. He walks over the 50 meters or so and examines the arrow in the tree. It is buried up nearly to the shaft, yet pulls out easily. "Good arrow. Very good. Magic?"

"No not magic, just the gift I have been given. It would take too long to explain in scientific terms."

"Scientific? Not all of life needs to be explained in scientific terms. There is much that cannot, no matter how hard they tried."

"My name is Lazy Fox in English. Can you all make these arrows?"

"Not in the same way. All but one of us could fashion useful arrows. The last of us has other skills which we value highly."

"Do you also know where we could use such arrows? I am afraid that my tracking skills are not so good." I doubt that, but I decide not to test it.

Daniel answers, "There is a small herd of antelope just over the ridge near the stream in that direction." He points N-NW. "And a growing herd of buffalo in that direction. Many new born calves." He points almost due east. "The antelope are closer." One nods to the other and both set out towards the antelopes. Sunny Day carries the new arrow.

"I am afraid that you will soon be out of mice. Ghost, the grey one has an enormous appetite." He is getting rather heavy. I shouldn't talk though as I am not riding a bike much anymore and fry bread is good. Good thing there are no scales here. We did lose some weight with Running Snake in survival training though. Maybe I will not die of a heart attack this week. And yes, I have been running scans on myself and cleaning out arteries, etc.

"He is more than welcome. We had a lot of trouble with mice over the winter. Pottery is one of the skills lost or never known from our Plains Indian ancestors."

"There are several ways we could help there." Teach a man to fish... I lead White Dove and her daughter to a stream several hundred meters away and teach her where to look for good mud to use as clay, as Running Snake has taught us. We collect several kilograms in a woven basket. Water is dripping out of the basket. She looks concerned. "No, this is good. When first collected, clay is too wet to use. We need to let it dry some."

When we get back to their homes I proceed to describe how this all works. I speed up some of the processes, such as drying, so that I can show them all the steps in a short period of time. "The most critical step is the firing. This will take practice and you will suffer many broken pots at first. Use dried buffalo chips and build a very hot fire." I demonstrate how to place the newly formed pots in the fire properly and explain about patience in letting them cool slowly. "It is better to have many small pots than a few large ones. These are easier to make without breaking and if one does break later, you will not lose all that you have stored.

White Dove's daughter, Tama, asks, "We can't possibly carry all of this when we travel. Too much weight."

"You don't need to. Save grain in these pots and bury them in the ground for use during the winter months. You must seal them very well or the mice will get in. Marm and Ghost will not have cleared the entire earth of mice, as much as they will try." Everyone laughs at that thought. "A narrow neck is best for that reason. When you make the pots also make stoppers. Use your normal leather bags and such during your times of travel, as you do now. If you develop a talent for making pots they also make good trade items. But be prepared for someone else to develop this talent also and don't depend on the trade items. Better to be as self sufficient as possible." Who was I to lecture a native on self-sufficiency? I make them about a dozen one-liter containers to get them started. "These were made with the gift and are horribly plain. You should be able to do much better. Decorate the outside to help you remember the contents and for the joy of creating something useful."

"Much seed goes bad from rot before we can eat it."

"Thanks, I had forgotten that point. Make sure the grain is absolutely dry before sealing it in the pots as any moisture will likely lead to fungus rot. You can even toast it over a fire first, if you do not intend to plant it later."

We go outside and see what the others have been up to. The darker skinned woman is named Koko or Night. She and her son have been working with the others to learn some rudimentary farming skills. They have the hunter-gatherer skills of the Plains Indians down pretty well, but will need as many skills as possible to survive. None had hunted as children, nor had their parents, but the stories they heard passed down from countless generations now served them well as a starting point to relearn the necessary skills. One more generation and it is likely that even these stories would have been lost. Netcasts, radio, etc. all seemed more exciting than listening to grandma tell a story from the old days. Koko

also showed our group which local plants were edible and which could be used to medicinal purposes. Hope they and we remembered all that. I could not have without a notebook and camera. Sigh, never been good at memory work. Would have failed anatomy for sure had I been pre-med.

The men come back with an antelope each over their shoulders, both grinning. They look at each other and then crack up, along with the women and children.

“What’s so funny?” Ron does not look hurt, just curious.

“You seven. Running Snake told us to test you to see if her training had stuck. Most of it has. You still make too many assumptions though.”

We hear an electronic squawk from some device. “Eagle One come in.”

He pulls a handie out of one pocket and answers, “Eagle One here. They made it fine. Did pretty well on the tests for greenhorns. Come on over, fresh deer meat.”

“Roger that, be there is an hour. Over and out”

“Had to hide the handie over the hill so you would not guess it was ours. Your arrow was great. It did not bounce off the hide, flew straight and came out easily from the deer afterward, ready for use again. Almost as good as the ones we get from Wal-Mart.” He hands one of those over. Nearly the same design, but with a titanium steel tip. “This tip can be resharpened and does not break if it hits rock or bone.” He looks at Daniel, “This is a white tail deer by the way. Antelope were all killed off by the white hunters I believe you call pears?”

“Hey, did we get anything right?” James queries.

“You are trying, more than most would have done. Don’t stop, even our oldest elders say they are still learning and relearning. I need to get this deer dressed. Why don’t you help? I can explain the differences between the different types of game we have around here.”

“Good idea.”

“Do you mind if we come too?” Indicating Ron and Daniel. He waves them over too.

I ask White Dove, who is pulling food out of Tupperware types of containers, so much for clay pots, “I have heard of Indian jerky called pemmican or something like that?”

“Only with buffalo. We use berries to help in the drying and it gives the meat a sweater taste. Good. We have some left over from last year if you would like to try it, but gets pretty tough after this long. Tourists would eat anything with that name of course, so we used to make it out of almost anything, just to see if they would buy it and eat it. Made five



bucks on a bet once, when I got some family to try possum pemmican.” She grins.

I laugh. I am sure the Japanese sushi chefs played this same game. “Hope you won’t try that on us. I am sure we will do fine with what is being served tonight. Everyone has been quite busy. A feast tonight!”

“Meow?”

“Hey I thought you two would be full of mouse by now?” Like that was even remotely possible with Ghost.

“I did not hear that meow in my mind. How come?”

“Oh, they still know how to talk cat and they know we understand some ourselves. They have trained us well.”

### **Dragon and Coyote**

I had to explain that I could only eat meat if it was offered to me, because of my Buddhist beliefs. Now I am stuffed with too much. Certain this will play havoc with my intestines later. Oh well, in the service of humankind one had to make sacrifices. Forgotten how good well prepared cooked and smoked meat tasted. Maybe I will be a cat in my next life, a big cat. Ghost certainly did not seem to be suffering. White Dove’s daughter was giving him a cat massage. Poor baby.

“It is time. Only two people alive know this tale, my daughter Tama and myself. She normally lives several kilometers away for that reason. With the time of the telling, she and her family came to be witnesses. No white man has ever heard it. The only Shoshone who have heard the tale were those in the line of keepers. For to tell this tale to the world, would be to risk Dragon finding its egg. If that happened, all would be lost.” Everyone quiets down. “I am afraid that I cannot tell this tale in English. I learned the tale by memorizing it from listening and repeating it in Shoshone and the only way I can recall it accurately is in Shoshone. Tama however, can translate for you.”

*This tale comes from a time before remembering, a time before people. A time before we came to this land or any had come to this land. This is the tale of Dragon and Coyote. You have heard of Coyote no doubt, for many a tale have been told of Coyote. Dragon you have not heard of, nor will you till the end of days. Only the keepers and the intended ones of the prophecy will hear this tale. All present are now part of the prophesy unfolding.*

*Dragon had complete freedom in the land. He ate what he wanted and when he wanted it. He used the lakes to bathe in and the fields of soft*

*grass to sleep on. He sharpened his claws on the mountaintops and you can still see the effects on all the mountains in the land. This was the time before man when no one was strong enough to stand up to Dragon. Not bear, not snake, not wolf and not buffalo. All feared being eaten by this beast with an uncontrollable appetite. Best to hide. But Dragon would range far and wide in his search for tasty things to eat and none were truly safe.*

*Moons came and went. Winters and summers came and went. Eons of time came and went. Still Dragon ruled, still all feared being eaten. None dared venture in the light of day, except the very small, those too small to be of interest to Dragon. After time without remembering they even forgot why they did not venture out in the day. It was just the way things were. At this time, as in times to come, Coyote could assume any form he wanted. So during the day, he would be a mouse, a squirrel, or even a turtle. In this way Coyote ranged far and wide in search of adventure, food and lusty mates. But none would come out in the day to play with Coyote. This seemed strange to Coyote, why should he have to be a mouse in the day and could only satisfy his lusty nature at night. (Even to this day, it is the beginning of night that brings out the romantic nature in man and beast). So Coyote asked Mouse, "Why can't the larger animals come out in the day?"*

*"I don't know. At night I must hide for the larger animals all like to eat me." This seemed odd to Coyote, so that night he turned into a deer and asked brother Buffalo why he only came out at night.*

*"I don't know, it is the law. I only know that those who break the law do not return the next night. No large animals in the light of day."*

*Now Coyote was very curious, what if there was some lusty babe waiting in the day for just such a one as he? Did the animals all disappear to live in paradise and only the strong and fearless dared take the challenge? So this day he became Eagle to fly far and wide. He would find the lady of his dreams and take her to himself. Coyote flew as Eagle for days and days, but saw nothing, for not even Dragon could be everywhere at the same time. Finally on the third day, when Coyote was about to give up hope, he heard a terrible noise. He quickly dived down and clung to the top branch of a very tall tree. From here, with his Eagle eyes, he could see far and wide. At a distance almost too far to see, he saw a most unusual shape, for he had never seen a Dragon before. This is most peculiar, what beast is this? He waited, for Dragon appeared to be getting closer and closer.*

*Though Coyote could turn into any animal he wanted, but he had to*

*know the true nature of the animal he was to become before he could change into that creature. He must learn more. He had visions of being so big that all should fear him. Imagine the love making at such a size. His loins nearly burst at the prospect. Soon however it became obvious to Coyote that Dragon was a very well built male. No matter, it is as much fun to trick someone out of their secrets or valuables as in a good time in the grass. But how was Coyote to get Dragon's attention without being eaten? Too large and he would be eaten for sure. Too small and he would not be able to attract Dragon's interest. Something new then, a curiosity, would be needed.*

*Coyote had traveled far and wide, unlike Dragon, who being fat and lazy was content to eat and nap most of the time. Coyote knew of a beast that Dragon might not have seen before, the race of Man. Smaller than Buffalo or Bear, but bigger than Owl or Weasel. Coyote waited till Dragon was asleep in a field and then approached Dragon carefully.*

*"Good afternoon Dragon. Nice day is it not?"*

*Dragon woke with a snort and moved his head back and forth to see who dared talk to him while he was napping, but saw no one.*

*"Down here." Finally Dragon looked down and saw Coyote in the guise of Man wearing only a loincloth.*

*"Who or what are you?" Dragon bellowed.*

*"I am Man."*

*Sniffing at Coyote, Dragon asked, "Are you good to eat?"*

*"Nay fear some Dragon, too many bones and not enough meat. See how my ribs stick out and how bony are my knees."*

*"Then go away and leave me alone" And with another snort Dragon resumed his nap.*

*Coyote was not one to give up easy, for such a beast must have big secrets as well, magic or gold maybe. Coyote knew of the ways of Man and knew there was one secret that Man held that no other beast did, the magic of fire. Coyote knelt down and finding a piece of willow branch and a section of oak, proceeded to twist the willow branch against the oak piece till he had started a small fire. Next he tricked a rabbit into his grasp and quickly set the rabbit over the fire to cook for his lunch. The smell of rabbit rubbed with wild sage and thyme was overwhelming. Soon the smell reached the nose of the sleeping Dragon and he awoke again. Again he looked around and saw nothing, but remembered to look down this time. He saw Man was still there, but now had a marvelously shiny fire with a wonderful smell emanating from above it. Dragons love shiny things, just as Crows do to this day. And they especially love the*

*smell of food.*

*Coyote offers the rabbit to Dragon and Dragon inhaled the rabbit with a single snort. "You have potential Man. Climb up on my back and I will take you to my lodge and show you many things." Coyote saw an opportunity and did not waste it. He climbed up on Dragons back and held on to the scales on his neck. Dragon rose high into the sky, higher than any Eagle could fly. The air was thin and cold, but what a view, vast plains, mountains and rivers. A wonderful land, except who could enjoy it with Dragon ruling the land? Coyote became more determined and held on even more tightly. Finally they arrived at a mountain cave high up on a tall, tall mountain.*

*Shivering, Coyote climbs down and complains to Dragon, "It is too cold up here for my kind. I will surely freeze to death." Remember, Coyote only had a loincloth for warmth.*

*"Come inside and I will show you a new way to make fire." So, Coyote followed Dragon inside his lodge. What a mess thought Coyote, bones and debris scattered all over the place. Crystals of all shapes, colors and sizes, some the size of bears, some the size of fleas, gold and black diamonds too. Everything mixed together. The smell was the worst though, the smell of eons of dragon poop, from when Dragon was too lazy to emerge from his lodge. "Turn around little Man, for what I must do is only for Dragons to know." But Coyote was not dumb. He turned around, but noticed that he could see everything in a reflection on a crystal off to his right. He pretended to close his eyes, should Dragon see his intent. So, with his eyes open the barest slit, he saw dragon pull a perfect sphere of crystal clear quartz out from under a pile of straw. Remember this was from the time before Man, before the time that Spider Woman taught Man how to weave blankets, baskets and other useful things. Dragon held up the crystal sphere and concentrated on it intently. Suddenly a blue white line of fire emerged from the sphere and set a small patch of straw on fire. Dragon quickly hid the sphere again. "Here is your fire. Quickly, gather branches from the dead trees outside to feed the fire." Coyote did as he was told and came back with an armload of branches to keep the fire going.*

*Over the many moons that followed, Dragon showed Coyote many things and told many tales of eons past. A time when there were many Dragons and Dragons ruled the world. He told of the great finding of the ways of the spirit that only Dragons could command. He told of the coming of the star from the heavens that tried to destroy the earth to prevent the Dragons from ruling the heavens as well. A great cold came*

*upon the land and only he was able to survive, by holing up in this cave and using the ways of the spirit to keep himself warm and fed. An eon passed, and when Dragon finally emerged he found a new world, a world full of tasty furry things, but none his equal. For the longest time Dragon contented himself with eating and sleeping and dreaming the dreams of Dragons, but soon grew lonely. He longed for the time he could share what he knew with someone smart enough and wise enough to understand. He looked at Man and sniffed again. Could this be the one? So puny, but clever to have figured out fire.*

*Coyote got restless, Tired of living off the leavings from Dragon's meals and no one around to lust after. He finally came up with a plan, as is the way of Coyote. He proceeded to sort and arrange all the crystals in the cave. He sorted by shape and size and color. He cleaned out the fresher Dragon poop and made benches out of the hardened older material. He swept and washed all that he found, except of course the corner with the straw and the hidden sphere. At first Dragon always insisted on Coyote coming on the hunts and never left Coyote alone in the lodge, but soon Dragon, as is the way of Dragons, became lazy and left Coyote alone in the cave for longer and longer periods of time. Dragon reasoned where could Man go, so high up the mountainside? Man could not fly, so could not leave without his help. Even if Man were to find the sphere, he could not leave with it. And Man could always be eaten, if necessary, bones and all.*

*Coyote began to experiment with the sphere when he thought Dragon would be away for a sufficient period of time. He was almost caught several times, but was always clever enough to distract Dragon or make up some excuse, like the wind or the earth moving to account for small differences in where the sphere lay. Coyote concentrated and concentrated as he had seen Dragon do and slowly, ever so slowly began to understand. Here was the source of Dragon's power. He learned how to put out fires and how to start fires. He learned how to make things with the will of thought alone. He even thought that the sphere had spoken to him, in a secret language. He finally decided he needed to escape with the sphere, for here was the real treasure. He began by learning how to use the sphere to fly as a Man. For though he could change to an Eagle, the sphere was too heavy for an Eagle to carry. This was very awkward at first because he had to have the sphere near him to be able to use its power. But Coyote, skilled in the ways of Man, was clever and fashioned a backpack out of left over bones and skins from all the animals that Dragon had brought back for him to eat.*

*The day and the time arrived to leave. Dragon had gone off on his weekly hunt and would not be back for several hours. Coyote put the sphere into his pack, along with some of the more interesting smaller crystals and bits of gold. He looked over the edge. A long way down. Though Coyote had died many times, it was not a pleasant experience and did not want to repeat it so soon. He finally summoned up his courage and concentrated on the sphere on his back. Soon he was lifting off the ground and starting to move out over the edge. As long as he concentrated he was fine and flew out over forests and lakes. Now he was in control. Where to hide? Surely Dragon would come looking for him. Someplace small, a place Dragon could not get into.*

*As he thought more about what he was to do now, he lost concentration on the sphere and began to fall. In the mean time, Dragon had returned early, having found a deer much more quickly than he expected. Man was not there. In panic he searched the straw. The sphere was still there, but when he concentrated to use the power of the sphere to find Man, he realized that he had been tricked. This was ordinary quartz and not his sphere at all. Enraged he flew from his cave and started a search for Man. Now Dragons have very good eyes and keen smell. He knew the scent of Man. It did not take him long to get a bead on Coyote. Roaring with anger he descended on Coyote.*

*Hearing the roar, Coyote knew that his time was up and seeing Dragon so close, he panicked and lost his concentration. He fell with Dragon pursuing him. To save his own skin, Coyote changed into an Eagle and let go of the pack. All of the contents came tumbling out and fell into the lake below. As an Eagle he was soon lost in the trees and evaded Dragon easily. Dragon splashed into the lake and started to search for the sphere, but the lake was deep, and even though in his landing much of the water was splashed out of the lake, it still remained too deep for Dragon to find the sphere. For countless days Dragon looked and looked, but to no avail. There was another problem for Dragon though. He had depended too long on the sphere for strength. The longer he was away from the power of the sphere, the smaller he got. Finally he was too small to search the lake any longer and became a Lizard as we know him today. Even lizards today will search for the sphere when they are not too lazy from basking in the sun and eating insects. You will often find them looking in nooks and crannies and along the edges of streams and lakes.*

*Coyote went on to have many more adventures, as you have no doubt heard.*



# Br'thn

White Dove sits quiet for a time after the telling. “How did you know the animal names that Running Snake gave us?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then she must have known this tale.”

“She could not have.”

*Br'thn, the name of the sphere is Br'thn, she has said her name!*

Daniel slowly speaks the name out loud. “Br'thn is calling. She wants us to come to her.”

“Only the prophesized ones could have known her name, and the fact that she is a living being. Different from us, but definitely alive. You are the ones! Finally!”

“If the tale makes sense then that means that the nesters are being used by Dragon. Even I was wondering why our own military was behaving so badly. We don’t have much time. Where is Br'thn?”

“Each of us only knows a part. Running Snake and other sentinels knew how to identify the seven. I knew the tale and so was the second part of the leg on this journey. Br'thn is still alive, but I no longer know where she is. Fifty years ago when the white man battled the Lakota for control of Black Mesa, knowledge of the location of Br'thn was lost. There was much argument with traditionalists who would not let the coal companies into the scared grounds and the more progressive elements that wanted the money for their starving people. The arguments got heated with the help of coal company alcohol and bribes. Two people were killed before it was all over. One of those was the keeper of Br'thn. The keeper’s son was not old enough to be able to accept responsibility yet and so had not been told. You need to find Br'thn as soon as possible, if it is not already too late. With the keeper was also the last part of the tale, now lost forever.”

“Ron, we need your help on this one. The signal is too weak from here to tell us anything other than a general direction, too vague to find quickly.”

“Triangulation. Simple. We need two ships spaced out several kilometers apart. We use Barb’s and Yinqu’s new limited TP abilities to communicate. TP is always stronger and more discreet between two TPs than if we used a more general broadcast. And we certainly don’t want Dragon overhearing.”

“I hate to split us up again, but I agree with Ron, we have no choice.”



That means James and Susan are with me, as you will need the rest of your combined strengths to operate a ship without me.”

“The second ship need not be elaborate. Smaller and more maneuverable would be best. Yingui can compensate with his extra abilities on the larger ship. Call it Silver Ghost II.”

“We need to move.”

I do a rough shell for Daniel and the others to fill in the details and then bring over the first ship. Our hosts are getting an eye full. Making arrows is one thing, but making whole saucers and flying them about at will is orders of magnitude more impressive. Silver Ghost arrives and I lower the door without landing all the way. We pile aboard. Always wanted to do that. Yee-ha is what James would say. Daniel is still new to flying a ship without me. I should have let him have more practice. He gets off to a wobbly start but is catching on. Take offs and landing are still the hard part even with a TK powered craft.

*Barb, do you read me?*

*Loud and clear Captain! Ron says that we need to space out more at this stage of the journey and then get closer together as we get closer to Br'thn.*

*Roger that. I move SG2 further away. We don't have time to play nice. Let's see what these babies will do. Stay within sensor range and keep track of each other. I can barely sense Br'thn, but have the faster ship, so I will go ahead. I boost the TK and easily pass the speed of sound. That will give the nesters something to worry about, but will also draw attention to us but that can't be helped now. If they get to Br'thn first, all is lost.*

An hour later we are flying circles around Black Mesa trying to get a fix. It made sense that she would still be here somewhere. The keeper would not want to risk not being able to get to her in a hurry. Black Mesa was a holy place for the Lakota and the argument was over the coal companies tearing it apart. Barb is flashing images and seeing if this fits with the directions I sense. This goes on for a few minutes before we get a location, a small supervisor's shack on the edge of an open coal pit. Boy have they made a mess of this place, huge open sores in the land with really bad pools of water. I suspect that 'replanting' went out the window when the economy collapsed and we could not longer afford Middle East Oil.

“She is definitely in that shack.” We walk up to the door and try it. Locked and scanning, barred with cabinets up against the door and a badly decomposed body. Someone made their last stand here, probably

died of HelperV. I carefully dissolve a hole into the side of the building. If I knew what exactly she looked like I could have used DS to get her out, but a 10,000 year old legend is not always accurate in all details.

“We have company! Two stealth fighters coming in fast.”

“Let’s give them something to chase.” I send SG2 straight up at super sonic speed.

“Where are the cats?”

“Freep, I forgot about them!” But we hear meowing from inside the shack. Why didn’t they TP? Ghost has got his paws around a crystal clear globe about 10 cm in diameter with Marm right behind him. “That does not look big enough. Ok, Ghost give it up.” He hisses and swipes out at me, nailing me good on the back of my hand.

“What’s his problem?”

“Time folks, they will give up on SG2 when they can’t go as high as she can. Bingo, they are turning around and coming back this way.” I don’t know what’s going on, so I bubble both the globe and the two cats. “Can we all fit into the smaller ship?”

“Tight fit, but hey we are all family.” I don’t like that grin. I missed out on packing VWs and phone booths as a kid. Although we did get eight people into a Fiat for a donut run once.

Tight fit indeed. “This is how we are going to do it. Daniel and I are pilots. Ron and Rachael are in charge of converting CO2 back to O2, or we will all suffocate. Barb is on the com. Talk to Br’thn, make sure we really have her. Nobody touches the sphere till we are safe. There is some reason why they are guarding it with their lives and why they can no longer TP. Everyone else, scan and fix cracks or leaks in the ship. Hang on!”

“Warp Speed Captain!”

I take us straight up again, but at even faster rate.

“They have let fly missiles!” Rachael yells, “I’ve got ‘em!”

“No explosion, what did you do to them?”

“Hey this is not Hollywood. I removed all the electronics and then pushed it out of our flight path. Last thing we need it that thing taking out a village or something when it goes off.”

“We are out of range now, way out of range. Is the air getting thin to you?”

“We are losing air! Scan and fix any holes no matter how small. I will convert blankets to air. If we do not fix the holes fast we will have to go back down.”

“Or arrive naked.” James is grinning.

“I think we are ok now. Only needed a few blankets.”

“I have never been in space before. Wish this thing had windows.”

“I doubt any of us has. Only very rich Chinese could afford the tourist flights to the space station.”

“Do you think anyone is left alive on the station?”

“Depends. Someone might have thought it would be a good place to hide from HelperV. They may all be dead from the infection or from lack of supplies. Can’t breathe in a vacuum as we almost found out.”

“Don’t you think we have a moral obligation to find out? Who else has the ability to even check on them?”

“It might not be pretty. But then again, what we have seen downstairs was not pretty either.”

“It is kind of tight in here folks. No offense, but if someone farts, we all die. How about finding SG2 and DSing us over to her.”

“I have never tried that in a vacuum before, this may not be the time.”

“How about a test first?”

“You volunteering?”

“No, I meant a practice ball or something.”

“Good idea Rachael, I know you loved those so much, you are trying to get even aren’t you?” She just grins.

Finding SG2 was not much of a problem; I put her there after all and there was certainly nothing else like her up here. I raise both of the ships to a synchronous orbit. Last thing we needed was to be falling at the same time we were doing this. Weightless of course, but we are so cramped it is not a concern.

“Daniel take over the cat’s bubble, so I can concentrate of this.”

*Br'thn's TP is very weak. Must be close to death. I will try and find out what she needs.*

I make a practice ball and DS it over to SG2. It explodes! “There is no air over there. No one to fix leaks. Sealing the leaks now. Next I am going to convert some of the stashed cargo to air. Ok, time to try another sphere. Here goes.” I make another sphere and DS it over. “This one appears to be intact on the other side, but I will bring it back to be sure.” Comes back fine. “Ok, who is first?”

“It was my idea, I’ll go first. I am the least needed anyway.” Rachael puts on her best sad puppy dog face, but only I can see it.

“No one is expendable. Not even a weasel. Barb keep in contact with her. I want to know as soon as possible if anything goes wrong.” I DS her over.

*She is fine and glad to have the space. Suggests the rest of us stay here.*

With the ships practically touching I can TP that far, so I shoot back a *Too bad, here comes trouble.*

This time I DS the cats and Br'thn. This is dangerous, as I have to have Daniel remove the bubble just before sending them and Rachael has to bubble them as soon as they arrive. Weightlessness helps here.

“Go!”

I DS them over. “Barb, what’s going on?”

*Wait. OK, took Rachael a second to collect them all again. When you pushed them through the DS they had some momentum that had to be compensated for.* Have to remember that when it starts to get more crowded there.

“Ok, Daniel you are next. I want at least one pilot on each ship.”

Over he goes. We each have assigned positions on SG2, so it was easiest just to put each person in their slot. Ron comes up with the idea of safety belts and Velcro to help us hold our positions. As there is no mass to draw from in a vacuum anything he makes is at the expense of something else. This is severely limiting, especially after what I have already removed to patch holes and make more air. Finally I come over. The cats are the least happy about this weightless stuff. Not being able to land on your feet is very undignified for a cat I would imagine.

“What is going on with Br'thn?”

*She will be ok for a while if we can give her some light. It was dark in that little shack and no one to talk with.* The universal energy source for life. Rachael moves the cats and Br'thn near a window. Come to think of it, cats worship the sun also. Daniel turns the ship around so that sunlight is coming in that window.

# Space Station New Hope

We were lucky New Hope was within my new scanning range. As it was, it still took us over an hour to scan and find it and another hour to get close to it without running into anything else. Too many Star Trek movies, you think everything will be easy to find and quick. Even something as big as New Hope is VERY small seen from ten thousand kilometers away. Everyone on the ship was needed to contend with this latest adventure. Shielding and heat transfer to stop one side from freezing while the other side cooked, the air conversion, etc. Good thing we were not having to deal with eating and it's ultimate end point. Fear of being hit by something meant that Daniel 'drove' while I scanned. Something coming at us at 30-60,000 kph or more was not a game. We were all pretty shook up from last second course corrections, even though we avoided the inertia problems a standard ship would have had to contend with. TK was proving to be equal pain and helper.

"We have visual. Something is floating around outside the station and station itself appears to be damaged on one side."

"Those are a lot of somethings and they are people without space suits!"

"The classic lifeboat philosophy question. I always hated that one whenever it came up in a class. Who do you save and whom do you sacrifice so that some may live? ALWAYS gets ugly. There is no valid answer from my perspective."

"Best we pay attention then, we could be in the same situation if things go bad for us."

"Susan's right. With power goes responsibility and not everyone will like our answers."

"There are a number of shuttles up here as well. Only one appears to have anyone alive in it. The others appear to be empty. Possibly they were the escape routes for when it was safe to return to earth."

"Then why the bodies? At least let them go back to earth."

"Given the kill ratio earth side, and they must have received com from all over the planet, they probably chose a quick death over a slow one. Remember those shuttles could not just land anywhere like we can. Probably could not have landed at all without ground support. When that was gone, why bother. Three times shuttles burned up either on take off or reentry with the US fleet, though China never lost one. Not a nice way to go. And the remaining people could use the supplies and oxygen for a

while.”

“Since they launched from China they have probably not been here more than 2-3 months.”

James asks, “Let’s get closer to the damage. I want to try and figure out what happened before we take on survivors. Don’t like surprises.”

“But I always thought you liked the danger James Bond. Too bad there are no bots up here to bat around.” Grin.

Daniel maneuvers us over to the damaged side of the station. “Explosive blowout. No sign of heat damage, that means decompression.”

Ron is our engineer, “Best guess is somebody brought a gun with them. Whoever fired it is dead now along with the intended victims. A single shot is all it would take to go through the thin metal and cause it to tear like this.”

“Ok, let’s let whoever is in the shuttle see us so they don’t panic any more than necessary. Take us by an open window.”

“Female, heavily armed.” She probably did not like the decision and chose to take her chances alone than with someone who could get her when she slept.”

“She has her head pressed against the window with her mouth open. She has seen us.”

“We don’t look like we came from earth do we? And our windows are too small for her to see us. Can we bring one of our windows up close to hers?”

Rachael interrupts, “I want everyone shielded and the ship too. She may still panic and take us out with one of those toys of hers even if it means dying herself. People go a little nuts all alone with no chance of making it.”

“Can we remove the weapons before we retrieve her?”

“This is silly, Barb talk to her please.”

*Hello shuttle occupant, can you hear me inside your head? Don’t be frightened. New tech. Do you need any assistance? She is speaking Chinese, I will translate. Ok, I won’t translate that! Yes, she wants help. Claims the others are trying to kill her. Has been alone in the shuttle for three months. Running out of air and supplies.*

“Good thing it was designed to hold more than one or there would never have been enough air for her. Tell her we will not bring her on board with her weapons. She will need to stow her weapons first.”

“Think she will do it?”

“She really has no choice. She will not last much longer as she is

now.” She stows most of her weapons. I dissolve the remaining hidden knife and toxic pellet gun and DS her to the center of our ship. Our ears pop from the sudden increase in air pressure.

*Welcome aboard Silver Ghost II.*

You can almost see the wheels going in her head, there are seven people aboard this craft that looks like it should only hold one or two. No tech of any kind on board and how the hell did she get here? She slowly moves her hand to where the knife was. Not there sweetie. “Let’s make this quick, find out where she would like to be let down. It will have to be somewhere near to where we are now.”

“You speak English. I speak, not so good. I want go San Francisco or Hong Kong.” We are currently coming up on the west coast of California. San Francisco was hit several times by terrorists, mostly the financial district, but Chinatown should be intact. I scan below. Still a mess near by in the financial district.

“Will Stockton and Grant do?” She nods slowly. There are a few people about, so I aim for the center of the street. No cars. With no BG ponds in the city, this is not surprising. Probably used up their H a long time ago getting out of the city. “Please take my hand.” I reach out for her, but let her make the final move. She slowly, not understanding what or why this is necessary, takes my hand. I DS us to the center of the street. We are sitting of course. I let go of her hand, stand up and bow to her politely, then sit down again and DS myself back to the Silver Ghost.

“So what happened to her?”

I scan below. “She is still sitting in the street. Rubbing one hand on the ground and looking at the one I held. Oops, just fainted. Others are coming to her aid. She will have quite a tale to tell. At least she does not know who we are.”

“The Magnificent Seven of course!”

“Who are they?” Daniel and I sigh, before their time.

We swing around to the undamaged section of the station and look in. The Chinese at least appreciated a view and the windows are larger than were on the American stations. Of course titanium glass helped. There are two people left alive in the station, both men, both armed, both locked in separate compartments with stashes of materials blocking both sides of a door that separates them. Classic. We are running out of time ourselves. I am worried about Br’tbn. I know she has been alone for long periods of time, but we really know nothing about her yet.

“Let’s just leave them, serves them right.”

“I vote we just do it. Set them down someplace without weapons and

then let's get out of here."

"Good enough!" I assume a squatting position. Dissolve the first one's weapons, DS over; grab his arm before he can figure out what is going on and DS him to the surface. Come back up to SG2 to get my bearings, and then repeat the operation for the second one.

Upon returning to the ship I am immediately asked, "Well, where did you take them?"

"I took them to the tallest structure still standing outside of Sacramento and placed them together facing the epicenter. They will not survive unless they cooperate to get down and out of the area soon. Not much radiation from the immediate blast left, but enough to kill them or give them cancer later if they don't leave. I made sure they understood that with my limited TP. The view was impressive. Should make them think for a very long time." Everyone is quiet for a moment.

"I thought you did not believe in harming anyone?"

"They have a better chance now than they did and neither will be harmed unless they choose it."

"So where do we go? Everywhere we turn, the nesters are there or soon thereafter."

"We could go back to New Hope?"

"There is something about Br'thn that the cats have tried to warn us about. I think we need to be on solid ground and in a safe place."

"Outside Sacramento. They would never expect us there."

"They nuked Sac because of a TK infestation, they will likely monitor the place for some time. May have even seen me drop off those two."

"Then they are likely dead now. I had not thought of that."

*How about home?*

"Home? We all come from different places. Where is home any more?"

*Lab.*

"She means the New Shanghai Marine Station. Where the two of us came from."

Daniel reminds us, "We are too far away now and will have to wait for the next time around."

"Two times around. I want to scan the place real well before we attempt to land there. Best if we come up with an alternative site."

"Some place well away from a nest. How about back with Running Snake. She at least deserves to see Br'thn and may even be able to help us



again.”

“Have you forgotten so soon. We left that place in the middle of the night with bots scanning everything that moved. Likely they are still being watched. How about White Dove, she at least knew of Br'thn and should be told that she still lives. Only place recently that we have not drawn nester fire.”

“Any objections?”

“Meow!”

“I think that means food, coming from Ghost. It has been awhile.”

“He is still holding onto Br'thn real tight. Let's get going.”

When we come around the west coast of California again, I scan the lab and Plumcreek, where we met Susan and James, just after the fall. Plumcreek is very quiet. I do not sense anyone there, nor are there any fires lit. Being after dark there now, I would expect something to show. What happened there after we left? Barb mentioned that the nesters had arrived. The lab is quiet also, no one around for at least a mile. If anyone at Plumcreek talked though, they would know that Barb and I came from there and I at least was a strong TK. I microscan the rooms we spent the most time in. This is exhausting. I ask Daniel to scan Wind River so I can concentrate more. Something does not feel right. There! nanobots! “The lab is out, infested with nanobots. Sort of like tics questing for prey. Touch one of those and they borrow into your skin, reproduce and then report in. Larger than the ones that got Rachael, you would feel these doing their thing. I am sorry Susan and James, though it appears that Plumcreek is deserted, I don't feel good about being that close to a known nasty nest.”

“That's ok, just a stopping point for us really. We were not from there originally.”

“Only got there a few weeks before you did. Hope everyone is ok.”

I help Daniel finish scanning Wind River. Dusk for them and it will be dark before we come around again. Took me awhile to remember exactly where they were, not being used to the landscape from this angle and not having seen it on a map. All seven are where we left them. A careful scan does not reveal any unwelcome guests.

“I am really getting tired of the nesters.”

“I don't think we should risk White Dove and her family till we know for sure it is safe.”

“Scan around the area and look for someplace hidden behind some hills with lots of trees and brush.”

Daniel pipes up, “Gorge two km from White Dove. Water, trees,

swimming pool, caves in a cliff.”

“How big are the caves?”

“How big is the pool?” Good idea, a nice soak would be welcome.

“One over hang is big enough for Silver Ghost and the smaller ones go in further. Don't know how far from up here.”

“Let me try, show me in your mind where you are looking. Barb help me out with this.” With Barb helping, I see where he is thinking. The smaller caves could provide cover from rain and overhead recon. Not quite large enough to stand up in, but then neither was Silver Ghost.

# Wind River Gorge

Every one but Rachael and I take a short nap. She is still shielding the cats and Br'thn. I have taken over the air supply duty. When it is time I speak up, "I am going to take us straight down, but slower than the speed of sound. I don't want to attract any attention this time. I have changed our skin to black. No lights or other special effects please." I am looking at James when I say this. He has worked out with Daniel's help on how to make shielded bubbles that fluoresce as blue green light. He puts the light out with a pop. I am sure he is grinning. I take us down slowly, using both DS and TK, so nothing can get a fix on us. When we are getting close, I have Barb link Daniel and myself. Three sets of TKs scanning are better than one.

*There.*

A red light overlays my thoughts where the caves are. "Cute, a TP white board. Next you will be doing Power Point presentations in our minds."

*Nothing so crude I hope, I have professional standards after all!*

I brush a few branches trying to maneuver between the trees, but nothing too loud or serious. The diamond skin means Silver Ghost will not be hurt. "We are down." I replace the windows with carbon fiber window mesh to let some fresh air in.

"James and Daniel, if you please, I would like a light globe and show me how to do it this time." We all pay attention. A TK4 is needed to make the necessary materials, but a TK3 can take over the shielding to hold it together afterwards. Daniel makes one for James as we all intently watch. James plays with the globe, making it do tricks and zooming all over the place.

Ron has an idea, "Hold onto the globe. James, where is your staff?"

"Locked into the supports in the ship just like everyone else's."

"May I get it?"

"Sure, but what for?"

"You'll see. If it works." Ron ducks into Silver Ghost and comes out a second later with James' staff.

"Place the glowing globe on the space at the top of your staff." It fits perfectly and sort of clicks into place.

Even James looks shocked. "I am not shielding it any longer. It is doing it by itself now!"

“He's right.” Rachael and Ron run and get their staffs, practically pushing each other over.

“Get everyone’s staffs please.” They come out and hand everyone their staff. Good thing we personalized them, they look practically identical, even to a quick glance by a TK.

Rachael and Ron both make glow globes and attach them to their staffs. Click, click. “Mine too!” This works for the staff of a TK3 and 4, what about Barb's staff. Daniel makes one for Barb. I want to watch more closely what happens when it interacts with the staff. He makes one, nice blue green color and slowly TKs it over to Barb's waiting staff. He slowly places it in the waiting arms. No click, but something is happening. The light sputters a bit and then abruptly changes color with a swirling effect to a greenish yellow instead of blue green. As soon as this happened, we hear a click and it locks into place.

“Interesting. Is this because Barb has not been through as many upgrades, or because her gift is primarily TP instead of TK?” Everyone has a globe now but me. I scan Barb's globe, sodium instead of potassium, krypton concentration is about the same. How did it do the elemental change though? Need at least a TK4 to do that.

I make a globe, nice blue green color, mostly krypton with a touch of potassium vapor to give it a richer blue color. I bring it over the staff. Everyone is watching now. I put it into place. Again no click. The light sputters and fades, then suddenly VERY BRIGHT.

“Hey turn that thing down!” But I hear a click and it locks into place. I can't figure out how it works, so I make a black carbon neutral density filter and cover the globe with that. Optical Density of 3 to get it down to a light level comfortable in the darkness of night. I would not want to read with it, but clearly makes our surroundings visible along with the rest of the globes.

*Food!*

*Barb?*

*No, Ghost.*

“Ghost?” He comes popping into view followed moments later by Marm. He has his abilities back. And he is not clutching Br'thn.

We all yell in unison, “Br'thn!”

Susan is the closest to the ship now and darts in. “Come look!” We all slowly file in and take our usual spots. Br'thn is in the center of the ship about 25 cm above the deck, glowing in a swirling pattern of colored lights, blues, greens, yellows, reds and a wonderful shade of purple.

*Br'thn says we need to touch our globes to her all at the same time.*

“Why?”

*She does not say, but is clearly feeling stronger.*

“Well, what's one more mystery at this point?” Each of us holds our staffs with both hands. We slowly lower them to meet at Br'thn. Just when they touch each other and Br'thn there is a flash of incredible light and psiotic energy and then blackness.

## *Br'thn's tale*

“Whoa, how long have we been out this time?”

**You have been unconscious for eight revolutions of your planet.**

“Great, another upgrade.” I look around. Everyone’s globe is out except mine. Where is Br'thn? I can hear her fine now, loud even.

**Br'thn is with the bearer.**

“The what?” I look again at my globe. It is not a globe like before. My eyes are still fuzzy, so I scan instead. The globe is Br'thn. “Everyone. Try to light your globes.” In random order six lights come on. At first bright white and then lower as each adjusts their brightness.

“This is a big improvement.” All of our ‘globes’ match now.

“Where are Marm and Ghost?”

**hunting as is the nature of their kind.**

I reach out with my mind. “We are not alone people.”

“We are not in the gorge any more either, but on an open plain. How many people are out there?”

**one thousand, five hundred and thirty eight.**

“I am going to dissolve the ship. Everyone presentable?” Some minor adjusting of robes ensue. I dissolve the ship and we all slowly rise, turn and face the gathering. All are standing and facing us. It is clear that some have been here for several days. There are small campfires and bedding materials laid out. Most appear to be Native Americans, but not all. Many are dressed as for war.

“Br'thn are we going to war?”

**not known.**

“Can they hear you.”

**others cannot hear Br'thn unless is it wished so.**

Marm and Ghost come prancing up to us. Each has a scrounged handout and sits at our feet to eat. “You call that hunting? All hail the mighty hunters!” We all laugh. That breaks the ice and the others relax also. “Is White Dove here?” A hand waves from near the back. “White Dove, please come forward. All must hear the story of Dragon and Coyote.” She nods and approaches.

“Please be seated. Be comfortable.” Everyone sits as White Dove comes among them. She offers greetings to everyone she passes. We make a space for her and then sit ourselves.

*Dawn breaks as White Dove finishes. The sky is bright and clear. There are bison in the distance and birds everywhere. It is almost as if*

*we have been transported back 500 years, back to a time before the European invasion and the rise of the tech culture. Not that the ever-ubiquitous disease, famine and war were a picnic. I had thought for some time that our tech evolution was way ahead of our spiritual evolution. Tech is not evil, but we never accounted for the true cost, the waste products, raping of the earth, changes to our own behavior as we adapted to tech and not the other way around. The millions of people laid off at every change. There has to be a better way. I would certainly miss chocolate though.*

*Food!*

“Ghost, if you get any more food, you will be in serious danger of exploding. How about you let the rest of us eat first. Go catch some mice and work off that fry bread gut of yours.”

“Look who we found.” Dr. Snake is before me.

“Oh, I am so glad you are here.” I give her a big hug.

“Not so dignified for the Bearer of Br'thn.”

“Hey, I am still human in my heart. If we can't laugh and play and love, we have gained nothing have we?”

“Good that you understand and not get a fat head.” She raps her knuckles on by hairless head.

“You need to tell your story as well.”

“Already have, many times, as has White Dove. What do you think we all did while you were out?”

“So they didn't need to hear her again. Sorry about that.”

“Always need to hear the story again. Many times. Must be remembered as part of our culture now. Can you remember any story you have only heard once Turtle?”

I laugh, “No, I can't even remember a person's name I have only heard once. Who are you again?”

“I for one want to hear Br'thn's side of the story and know what this all means.”

“Agreed!”

“Let me guess, you have already heard the story while we were out.”

“Nope. No one presumed to ask her.”

“Aaagh! I am not going to understand all this. Ok, Br'thn, will you tell us your story?”

***Br'thn is not a being, as you understand beings. Br'thn is of a solid-state matrix, a solidic, not a fluidic one as you are more familiar with. Br'thn is approximately 64,973,226.156 of your years old and is just now reaching birth as you partition your existence. None of her***

*kind has ever died of old age, so it is not known what the possible lifespan is. There have been 'thn since before remembering. A 'thn is born of the fusion of the psiotic energy from an adult 'thn and a fluidic psiotic pattern of at least a TK8. During incubation the psiotic pattern of the fluidic being is transferred temporarily to a solid state matrix. This results in the loss of psiotic ability in the fluidic being till transfer is complete. Any psiotic action therefore must concur with communication with the unborn 'thn.*

*At the time of Br'thn's becoming, what you call dinosaurs ruled the world as the largest, most intelligent and social of creatures. To one such species/social group a TK talent was born. His name was Sauron, the one of whom the prophecy and tale later refer to as Dragon. He was unbeatable in battle, using his TK abilities to full advantage. Dragon is a description of his physical and mental states, war like. Though Sauron's people were social, they were also highly militaristic. Worth was determined in battle for both genders. When Sauron reached TK8 a 'thn council was drawn up and a gateway opened to allow the council to judge the worth of Sauron's right to join them as a bearer of a 'thn. Being a bearer is a great honor, but also eventually affords the bearer great power, that of a TK9. Selection is strict; as such power is not to be used abusively on other sentient beings in the universe. As Sauron was unaware of other planets and stars owing to the low tech nature of his society, it was allowed that Sauron could be a bearer on a trial basis. This proved unfortunately to also be his down fall. It is forbidden for 'thn to interfere with a culture in the making, therefore when a comet was about to strike your planet, as many had done in the past, it was allowed that this should happen to test Sauron.*

*By the time Sauron realized the trajectory of the comet, it was too late to do more than prevent it from hitting his own social group and self. He had the necessary knowledge in his culture in enough time to prevent impact, but he chose to ignore the individual with the necessary knowledge. As in the past, the comet strike raised great amounts of dust into the atmosphere resulting in a cooling of the surface temperature of the entire planet for years to come as well as massive tidal waves and other damage. Sauron was able to save a small group of his kind in a deep underground structure of his and Br'thn's making. But the numbers were not enough to ensure eventual survival in such a small, enclosed ecosystem. The bearer is protected from death, but one by one, over the next three million years, the rest of his social group and their subsequent offspring perished from lack of genetic diversity and*



*increasingly homozygous genotypes. Again Sauron made mistakes in assuming that his own genetic stock was the best and did not allow lesser males to mate.*

*Following his emergence from the underground, he experimented with what creatures he could find. There were none even remotely related to his own kind any longer, only small lizards. He decided against reptiles, as he did not want competitors to his rule, but subjects he could control. First he tried birds, as these were capable of limited flight already, and were closest to his own reptile understanding, but their minds were not able to hold more than a limited psiotic pattern because of the size limits related to flight. He also reasoned, correctly, that this time he needed a more technological culture to prevent the next comet or asteroid from destroying his work. Finally out of desperation he turned to the small mammals and instituted a very long-term program. By removing the largest carnivores that developed intelligence and working on selecting the more intelligent smaller mammals he gradually used a selection process to bring a rat like line up to that of early primates. Once early primates rose to the understanding and ability to produce fire on their own, he knew he was on the right track. He needed a species that was capable of manipulating its environment.*

*But with intelligence also comes danger. Eventually one of the early Man type hybrids he was working very closely with stole Br'thn and hid it where he was unable to find it. Remember at this time, before Br'thn's coming of age, his psiotic pattern was intimately linked with Br'thn and separated from Br'thn he was greatly diminished in abilities. But Sauron was patient. Nothing was likely to arise that could hurt or kill a 'thn. Also, it had already been 64 million years and he was starting to make very good progress. He continued to work on selecting and training Man. What he concentrated on the most were the principals of war, as this is where his own knowledge was most developed. Man being of a more curious nature developed tech on it's own. At first this was very slow, taking many generations for change to occur, but in one section of the world, Sauron sensed possibilities for even greater effort. By using war to weed out the weaker cultures and to force them to constantly innovate, he brought the Northern European culture to where your own history starts to make historical records.*

*Sauron suspected that Br'thn was somewhere in North or South America. He could not be sure where, as tens of thousands of years had*

*passed. He decided that his tech culture was finally at a point where it could easily take on the non-tech culture of the Americas that had not had his assistance. In doing this he hoped to force the revealing of Br'thn before a sufficiently powerful TK evolved and survived. On his side of the planet, he even persuaded non-TK people to hunt out and exterminate people with TK ability. This was not hard, as his Man was very suspicious by its nature of anything not understood. This was the result of years of always trying to get the best of an enemy with the non-suspicious ones dying and their offspring with them.*

*In the mean time, Br'thn stayed true to the 'thn code of ethics and did not interfere with the evolving culture. Here as in Sauron's side of the planet, Man was war like. However, without the interference of tech, Man never developed the means of whole scale genocide. There were always enough survivors to keep a cultural line going. The people may have to move and may have to learn new plants, animals or skills, but they survived. The culture of the Americas was more centered on the spirit of the planet as a whole, where as Sauron's cultures were centered on the individual and individual accomplishment. Where ever Sauron's culture types went the native types were either destroyed or assimilated. Also, TKs were not weeded out here and great shamans were to be born at times, but none as at a high enough level to sense Br'thn and make use of the possibilities present.*

*There were two things that Sauron did not count on.*

*First was the tenacity of the Native Americans to hold on to their culture. He tried everything to wipe them out and reclaim Br'thn, but they resisted. Many died on reservations or in jails. Many were killed outright or by early forms of biowarfare using smallpox infested trade goods. Very few assimilated and never ones with knowledge of Br'thn. He even took their children and raised them in the Sauron culture, but enough returned to keep the Native cultures going. Sometimes tribes would combine to survive, but they did survive.*

*Second was the unforeseen recent collapse of the white culture in North America. With this collapse eventually came the inevitable careless mistake in the lab in New York that let loose HelperV. HelperV was a neuronal virus of great power. The white miner contained much knowledge in his head before he died. Sauron, not being tech himself, neglected to keep up on tech issues, or he would never have let HelperV come to fruition. Now he had an entire nation infested with low-level TKs. Never mind the normal people, he did not really need them anymore anyway. But these TKs would eventually find Br'thn. He had*

*to do something quickly. He infiltrated the Armstrong complexes and convinced them that TKs were evil and had to be either controlled or eliminated. The white culture had a long history of suspicion of the psiotic, so this was not hard to accomplish.*

*He was well on his way to controlling the TKs in North America when things started to go wrong. There was a small group of TKs that always seemed to evade capture. The highest TK he had was an occasional TK3, but this group acted as if they were much stronger. They defeated his best AMPed TKs. They found very advanced nano tech devices that none of his TKs could see and neutralized them. He always seemed to be just one step behind them. He took a chance. He let enough knowledge slip out to one TK under his control that she attempted to raise her abilities to a level that would help Sauron find these pest TKs that kept evading him. Or, better yet, he would have himself boosted to the point where he did not even need Br'thn any more. But again something went wrong. A prize captured TK that was advancing the research at a remarkable rate disappeared. This followed a shielded group of wild TKs disappearing before he could get to them. When his boosted TK showed signs of going rogue, he became worried and destroyed his experiment rather than take the chance of the information getting to the evasive TKs.*

*The number one thing that Sauron could not fathom, the thing that was beyond his comprehension, was why did these seemingly advanced TKs not attack him. He was so steeped in his own culture of war he could not see alternative strategies. Surely they were powerful enough to think they could take him on. He would have done so in a second had the roles been reversed. He threw bots at them, missiles at them, Special Forces, TKs, he had satellites tracking them and hunting for them. Always they left without a trace as to where they were and he had to begin his search all over again. The pest TKs kept going to isolated places, away from tech. This did not make sense. Eventually they found and retrieved Br'thn, the one thing he had been searching for, for over ten thousand years, and they did so, not by attacking but by disabling missiles so they could do no harm and then disappearing again. They were not even on the planet! How did they find Br'thn when all of his Special Forces were unable to do so? He had sensors, he had bots, he had TKs. No matter, he still had one last hope, he had to get to them before they figured out how to activate Br'thn safely, for anyone who touched Br'thn without the proper sequence and method, would instantly have their TK ability absorbed by a weakened 'thn needing*

*psiotic energy desperately. Even the activation was tricky; they would be disabled for days. This he knew from the experiences of his own bonding.*

*He had not counted on there being seven high level TKs. In the past, there was never more than one at a time. Br'thn could draw on this enormous reserve of psiotic ability and energy to shield them and lift their TK levels at the same time. It took eight days, but there was never any danger that Sauron would find them thus shielded. Nor was Sauron a match for Br'thn.*

### Questions

“May we ask questions?”

*Yes.*

“Did you select us to be your bearers?”

*Process selected. Not Br'thn.*

“Were you responsible for the upgrades we received?”

*Only the last one.*

“Where did the earlier upgrades come from then?”

*Not known.*

“Did you know about us before we met?”

*Br'thn knew of TKs, but not specifics.*

“But your story told of us. How was that possible?”

*By absorbing your own information and knowledge of Sauron. It is expected that this conjecture will be verified.*

“So the message asking for help was a general one.”

*Yes.*

“Weren't you worried about Sauron finding you?”

*No difference to Br'thn only make difference to Earth.*

“So this was all a test of some kind?”

*Yes.*

“Merow?”

*Meowpht.*

“What was that all about?”

“Right, not our question.”

*Correct.*

“What happens next?”

*Gateway.*

“What is a gateway and where is it?”

*You already posses that knowledge.*

“Huh? We do?”

“Yes, I think I know what Br'thn is referring to. She read our minds remember.”

**Correct.**

“Are we going to have any more trouble with Sauron?”

**Likely.**

“Will you help us against your bonded ah, fluidic?”

**No longer bonded. Yes if asked.**

“So we are still alone in the decision making?”

**One thousand five hundred and sixty two people present.**

“I thought you said thirty eight?” Ron the math major.

**More have arrived.**

“Are any of Sauron's people in this group?”

**Yes.**

“Are they still loyal to Sauron?”

**No.**

“Then they are welcome.” I turn to the people. “No one is to take revenge. They acted out of ignorance, not malice. All is forgiven. Please help them to understand. If you were formerly one of Sauron's please ask questions. There is much you need to learn and unlearn. Please see either Susan or James at some point to have your tech removed. Sooner would be better if you intend to survive. Sauron can activate the lethal bots at any time.”

“Is there a time limit to how long we have to get to the gateway? Are we in a hurry as in previous times?”

**Never was need for speed. Different paths take different amounts of time.**

“Are all the people here capable of TK?”

**No. Native Americans never selected for TK ability by HelperV, some native capability.**

“What levels are present?”

**1353 TK0, 159 TK1, 41 TK2, 9 TK3 not including the Bearer Guardians and the Bearer of Br'thn.**

“Who are the guardians?”

**The six supporting the Bearer of Br'thn.**

“That's us. What levels are we?”

**1 TK6, 2 TK5, 2 TK4, 1 TP4 and 1 TK8**

“I thought you said that the bearer had to be TK9.”

**Only upon mating, Bearer can be TK8.**

“Ooo, one step away from paradise for you Turtle!”

**Correct.**

“Is Br'thn smiling? I could swear I sense a smile in her.”

“At least a blush.”

“Hey guys, ease up, she is just a baby after all.”

“A sixty five million year old baby. Imagine that. Hate to be her parent!” We are all smiling. Hope she can see we are kidding her.

**Br'thn well aware of human emotions and humor principles.**

“I guess being the Bearer means no privacy.”

**Correct, though Br'thn forbidden to tell others your thoughts without permission.**

*That's good at least. Are you allowed to help me learn, or do I have to ask every time?*

**Depends on what is needed. Br'thn cannot make decisions for you.**

*No one can make decisions for another. Including for you.*

“May I set down a rule for our working together?”

**Yes, as long as it does not conflict with 'thn ethics.**

“Ok, here goes. This is part of our own ethics as human TKs, never kill any sentient being. Please advice or warn if there is even a possibility of harm to another sentient being by either of us.”

**No conflict. Br'thn will oblige.**

“Now what do we do?”

“Daniel and Running Snake think we have to have a council of elders. Consensus should still be our rule.”

“Agreed. Who should sit on the council?”

“There are clearly too many people now, and there will be even more later. Not everyone can sit on the council.”

“That means some form of representation.”

“I nominate Daniel to represent us.”

“But, I thought you would be our leader? or even Br'thn?”

“You are missing the point of an elder. An elder is not a leader but a representative. Being the Bearer of Br'thn is a full time job and in no way am I qualified to be a ‘president’. Leaders should be chosen for the task at hand and then removed from leadership. The tech culture got into a lot of trouble by allowing its leaders to have too much power for too long covering too many areas of influence. It may take longer to make decisions this way, but in the long run it will be better.”

“It is certainly worth a try. I agree that the previous model sucked big time.”

“Susan, such language and from a mouse and school teacher at that. I am shocked!” Grin.

“Hey, remember I worked with the hormonally challenged. I learned a lot of interesting vocabulary from them.” Grin.

“What about Br'thn then? She is clearly the strongest and most knowledgeable one present?”

***'thn may only serve in advisory role at this stage in development.***

“Ok, so much for that idea, but she is definitely part of our group then, right.”

“You don't have a choice on this one Br'thn, you are part of us.”

***Accepted***

A few hours later. “Br'thn have all the nester TKs been treated?”

***Yes.***

“I am worried about Sauron and the nesters. Is it possible to set up a shield around us that prevents any active tech from working within oh say 100km of our location?”

***Yes. This will put people in danger.***

“How so? People with tech necessary for life died in the plague.”

***Not all, also some people are operating tech such as cars and small planes that upon ceasing would cause injury or death to fluidics in close proximity.***

“Is it possible to send out a warning using TP, say 10 minutes in advance of our being in their area? I am assuming that we will be moving soon.”

***Yes. Some may still be hurt, but it will be by choice and not directly of our doing.***

“Please make this happen.”

***Warning going out now.***

“I want to know of any potential casualties because of this policy, even if they choose to ignore our warning.”

***It will be done.***

“Do you have any questions of us that you have not already read in our minds?”

***Not at this time.***

Not everyone leaves with us. Most of the Shoshone stay behind and only representatives are coming for the entire journey. Most of the TKs are coming though. This is their spirit quest as much as it is a fulfillment of the prophesy.

By tracking those few foolish enough to disregard the tech warning it was easier than dealing with a whole lot of nesters, bots and bombs, coming at us from all angles. There were a few. People caught sleeping in locked areas that only tech could release, that sort of thing. Thank

goodness anyone who relied on tech for biological survival, like an artificial heart, kidney or pancreas was either dead from the fever or out of the country or could survive long enough for us to pass through. One good side effect was that nester TKs that were within the field were free of their death sentence. I made sure they understood that if they caught up to us they were free to join us and have the tech permanently removed. Another mistake Sauron made. He did not treat TKs very nice at all. They came in large numbers for the chance of being free of their leashes. There would be need for a period of readjustment. Even if you do not approve of what you are being told to do, it has a way of configuring your reflexes in the way they want. Meditation and other awareness practices should help.

By that evening we had a council of elders. They met till the wee hours of the night configuring duty rosters, setting up sentinels at our periphery, latrines, sleeping arrangements, all the stuff you needed to handle an encampment with this many people. Food was largely replicated to avoid having a huge impact on the local populations and environments that we passed through. That did not stop Marm and Ghost from having their own impact on the rodent population though. Fortunately there was no shortage of mice now that farmers were not actively poisoning them. Selected individuals, good at greeting and offering orientation, were chosen to handle new comers. We did have some children, none of whom were over TK1 in ability and those were all post puberty. There did seem to be some sort of age minimum for advanced TK abilities. Why were there no TK2s under thirty otherwise? Maybe when the children reached thirty they would upgrade?

Though Native Americans had not been at war with anyone physically in a hundred years, they still had the warrior spirit and a lot of pent up aggression that needed to be addressed. I was uncomfortable with the harming of any sentient life, but traditions of most tribes allowed for the sacrificing of animals for food, clothing, or shelter. NOT for greed, hoarding or sale for profit. I did hold out for no offensive or defensive actions that harmed people. We needed to learn how to work cooperatively with all people. We may go too far in one extreme or another at first till we get our bearings, but I did not want to start off like we were before. There was enough space and resources at present to easily accommodate current populations and a diversity of opinions and life styles. Let there be peace, even if only temporarily.

### **Moving time**



“The council has decided that we will walk. This will allow bonding among the various groups and allow others to catch up to us both physically and spiritually. All TK3s are to report to the Guardians immediately for instruction. Be ready to move out at first light.” No one has a watch, and first light means different things to different people. Some teenagers think it means high noon. Last thing we need is for our group to be spread out over kilometers.

“Are all nine present?”

“Last one coming in now.”

“Sorry I am late.”

Daniel, our council rep explains, “Being TK3 is a good thing, but with it go certain responsibilities towards the group. TK3s and above are our primary defense against the nesters or other tragedies that might befall us. The responsibility of the TK3s will be to the group. TK4s and above will be taking care of the Bearer and Br'thn in addition to the group. Right now the nesters are watching us. They do not know what is going on, but they are a very paranoid group led by a leader that is an expert in the ways of war. So far their attempts to get close are failing because of an anti-tech field around us. However, they still have sats and those sats can see us right now standing in this field. That means that except for non-lethal defense, there are to be no extravagant displays of TK. We don't want to scare them nor let them know what we are capable of. Hopefully it will not come to this, but you must be willing to lay down your life to save others, enemy or friend. The Guardians are already committed in this way.”

“Enemies too? Isn't this crazy?”

“Think about it. If you were on the other side and your enemy rescued you when your own did not, whom are you going to follow after that? Even if it just makes them think, it might be enough to save all of us. There is no US or THEM. This is critical to understand. They just are not aware yet that they are already part of us. So, I ask again, any one not want to be here?”

No one answers, but I am sure they are all thinking. Hard nut to swallow.

Each is issued a brown robe and a staff and given instructions on how to use it. Globes are reserved for the Guardians and Bearer who are in dark grey robes. No other symbols of rank. Rank does not have privileges. “According to the duty roster, as soon as we camp the next day, we ALL have latrine duty.” General groans are heard. “It is not as

bad as you think. We dig a pit, TK can help, add a simple structure for privacy and the following morning we dissolve the privacy structure and cover the pit. It is good practice for your talents and in using your staff amplifiers. It also shows that we are willing to be like everyone else. No special treatment. We stand in line for food or the latrine like everyone else. DO NOT accept any special treatment. We are all part of the same team and all of us are needed. Yingui in the entire time I have known him did not once accept special treatment. In fact he is one of the best toilet cleaners in the group. And this was done without TK at all, as we were afraid at the time of being detected. Get some rest, long day tomorrow.”

“Do you think they will catch on?”

“It is new paradigm for everyone, the concept of no formal head or boss. We have become so used to waiting for orders to take action and then not offering feedback or suggestions. People have to feel safe to express themselves.”

“We need to be on the lookout for bullies. They could stifle this idea real fast.”

“Bullies get their power from surrounding themselves with people willing to support them in exchange for special privileges. Hitler, Bush, and all the rest were powerless on their own. Break up their power structure and they collapse. The nesters are a prime example. I can’t believe that everyone under their command likes or approves of what is happening. But as long as it appears that you are the only one against so many, you keep silent. Self-preservation. It would help if people see the ‘staffed’ ones as people they can always go to for help.”

“There are likely to be people who see this as an opportunity to whine all the time or attach themselves to a particular person to gain status or power.”

“In the Catholic church they used to rotate the priests for this reason. Hard to get attached to someone who would be gone in a year or two.”

“A year or two may be too long right now. Our group is still small enough that a determined person could seek out someone and limpet themselves too easily.”

“I have an idea. This comes from Buddhist practice as it is practiced in Thailand and Burma. Mendicant monks. That is, they are not allowed to prepare food for themselves. They are wholly dependent of what others offer them. Each day at dawn, they go forth to the neighboring villages and wait for food to be placed in their bowls. In this way they not only learn humility, for who is going to give food to a bully or hateful person, and they are no better than the people they serve, eating what they eat. If

the community is suffering, so should we. No special treatment.”

“That would be hard right now, as we are needed to dupe food in the first place.”

“We could dupe raw ingredients and never ready to eat. Also, never eat at the place you have duped food for.”

“Remember the browns are not capable of duping food anyway. So, this idea has merit. We will have to propose it before the council.”

“I believe that is Daniel’s job.”

“What about your feelings about eating meat?”

“I am forbidden to kill or prepare meat, but if that is what is placed in my bowl, then that is what I am supposed to eat.”

“What if someone tries something funny, especially teenagers. Someone might try to see what we would eat, shit, poison, rocks, etc.”

“Then we do not return to that group till the situation is rectified. They lose honor and extra help. It is a two way street.”

Daniel put it before the council and they debated it for a couple of hours. It was finally decided to try it out on a trial basis, but with the added conditions of, except for meetings and training, we were also to work with and sleep in the communities we served, but never more than a week in any one location or group. We are to own nothing other than our robes and staffs, all else, including bowls, is to be provided by the communities we stay in. Having begging bowls is not part of our culture and they felt it was too undignified. We are to have no permanent structures, monasteries, churches, etc. Lastly, people in the community want to have robes also. They are all part of this group and want to identify themselves are part of the new understanding, but, and this was insisted on by all members of the council, everyone is free to decorate or modify their robe in anyway they see fit, as long as it does not contain any words or images offensive to another. During this time when we are called upon to provide food and water, we will present these materials to a central stores area, whereupon it will be distributed from there. No special requests for materials are to be accepted by individuals, only by the council of cooks and builders. This later requirement will help prevent a system of special favors from being started.

The biggest discussion was over the color of the robes. Everyone had a special color they wanted, beyond what was to be added on an individual case. Those skilled in the old ways finally brought up that if we made the robes out of natural materials, they could be dyed with naturally available plant dyes. This insured that the colors were of the earth, nothing too garish, and would always remind us of our connection

to the earth. This was unanimously approved. So, we duped natural off white cotton and wool robes for everyone and steaming hot pots were set up with different dye combinations. Soon every shade of earth tone was visible and all blended with the natural landscape. One might get the impression that too much time was spent on such a trivial detail, but it went a long way into how we were to work together in decision making and what basic principles we were to follow and it certainly was easier to start with the small stuff.

“By my calculations it will take us most of the rest of spring and all of summer to reach our location. We have chosen a path that keeps us well away from concentrations of nesters and norms, but we know they know where we are. If they are determined, they will seek us out.”

“You can count on that. Sauron knows the power of Br'thn, so he will be careful. He would expect a counter attack of much higher intensity if he tried anything. So I am guessing that he will try subterfuge instead. He will try and infiltrate our ranks and take control or gather enough intelligence to plan some other offensive.”

“Should we get Barb and Y'ingui to 'scan' people, especially converted TKs from the nests?”

“Is that the way we want our society to be? You might as well scan everyone on a regular basis, because sooner or later, someone is going to be pissed at a decision the council makes.”

“If we are to be judged by our thoughts alone, we are all doomed. Even me.”

“Isn't there a difference between extreme times and calmer times when this is over?”

“Will it be over? Or will there be something new that threatens us that we must proclaim WAR against?”

“And let us not forget what happened here at the height of the Bush terror, when no citizen was safe from extreme scrutiny. Are you perfect? Have you NEVER made a mistake and are flawless under a shifting standard?”

***There is a person that needs your attention.***

“Who and where?”

***There is a lightweight aircraft with a single male on board headed toward the barrier. He is too high to achieve a safe landing.***

“Show me where.” Br'thn shows me the man in an ultralight, probably self-made, about my age, appearing frantic. He has apparently heard the warning. He has pulled up but will hit the barrier in a few seconds. There he goes. Engine is off and he is falling. I envelope him in

a bubble and set him and the craft slowly down on the ground. He passes out as this is done, but revives when he has landed. He has no supplies. This is a one-way trip. No outward sign that he is TK.

***It is unlikely he will survive out there without help. Currently 95.4 km from our location.***

“So, do we TK some food and water and send him on his way, or do I ask if he wants to join us?”

***Give him a choice and wait.***

“Good idea.” I make a small pack of supplies in front of him, food, lots of water, space blanket and salt tablets. No one in the military that old, so unlikely to be a spy, but I suppose there is always the chance that they picked him for that reason and they have some hold on him. He is walking this way, not back the way he came, well sort of, without being TK3 at least, he could not know where we are exactly.

“So what do you think? Do we rescue him? Leave him be?”

“This could be a trap. If one of us goes out there and he takes us, or others just outside the barrier take us, we become a powerful enough hostage to try and trap you. If you DS him here and he is infected with some designer bug, we all could be dead within a couple of days.”

“On the other hand, just leaving him there, out in the middle of no where is likely a death sentence.”

“Br'thn, can you scan our lost one and determine if he is carrying anything harmful?”

***Scanning.***

“There are likely to be more at some point. We can't go crazy over every one. We need a policy statement. That means another one for the council I think.”

***Scan complete. He has a fungus infection of the nails, hardening of the carotid arteries at 70%, mild alzheimers arrested at 10%, beginnings of prostate cancer, stage 2, slightly overweight, some evidence of recent alcohol abuse, skin cancer in seven locations and a level two sunburn on neck and face. Nothing contagious.***

“Thank you Br'thn.”

“Let's take it to the council, he has supplies to stay alive long enough for their decision.”

“Are you sure? They take a long time to come to decisions.” We all laugh at this thought.

Their decision did not happen till several hours into our morning walk. “The council does not want to restrict access at this point. All who agree to our way of life should be allowed whether or not they are TK

and irrespective of their past affiliation or ethnic makeup.”

“Ok, assemble a welcoming committee at lunch time and I will bring him in.”

“I still don't think he should meet us till he is checked out. And maybe not even then for a while.”

“I think you are being paranoid Rachael. If and when Sauron sends a spy, it is unlikely we will know who it is. He has been a TK for a very long time and likely to know everything possible to do with it. Best to always be careful what you say in front of others, even the council. I hate secrets, but our primary responsibility is to prevent Sauron from taking Br'thn.”

“Br'thn, what would happen if Sauron regained possession of you?”

***Judging from past experience, Sauron would institute severe test of remaining people to select group of people closest to his standards, then work to constantly improve stock. All TKs above level two would be destroyed instantly as possible threats to authority. TK2s would be used as enforcers of authority. He would be absolute and total ruler of earth. Nothing would matter other than domination of planet and ultimately the stars. He intends to get even for the 'thn council letting the comet hit the earth and destroying his people. He would sacrifice all life on this planet to achieve that goal.***

“Br'thn, why would you let him?”

***No choice. Whoever is the Bearer has total authority over Br'thn till the time of awakening.***

“You mean when you are recognized as an adult?”

***As 'thn, adult much later***

“So this means you are a virtual slave to whoever is the Bearer?”

***Yes. Not allowed destruction of Br'thn. Much else possible.***

“As Bearer, may I set you free?”

***Br'thn cannot allow that because of oath Bearer required of Br'thn upon accepting bonding to current Bearer.***

“Huh?”

***Oath said Br'thn not allowed anything cause harm. Being free would cause harm to Bearer and Guardians of Br'thn.***

“Oh. Why could you not do both? Why could you not be free, but still satisfy the oath by watching over us till Sauron was no longer a threat?”

***When Sauron no longer a threat, Br'thn may be set free if Bearer wishes.***

“I ...”

“WE!” I nod to the others.

“We do so wish it Br'thn.”

*Accepted.*

I bring in the plane and occupant to the reception group formed. I am not present, preferring some distance. I have obligations now.

“My name is Bill Jackson, but people call me Wild Jack. You be the Spirit Movers I have heard so much about?”

“Possibly. What can we do for you Wild Jack?”

“Like to join up, I do. Been among the Injuns most of my life and anythin that helps them, I is for 100%. Raw deal them Injuns got and I aim to make amends for my ancestors, iffen I can.”

“What skills do you have Wild Jack?”

“Wood and Iron. Make anything outta wood n iron. Carpentry and blacksmith at your service. Anything mech, I can build. Built that there plane I did. Something about tech not working here? Knew I shouldn't have used those fuel cells, but I was inna hurry and makin an engun from scratch woulda taken too long.”

“Why here Jack? The closest rez is back the way you came. Why aren't you there helping?”

“My brats locked me up they did. Said old Wild Jack no longer right in the head or somethin. They jus wanted to get their paws onna my gold they did. Greedy buggers. I fot em good, but court sided witha dem and put me away. When fever break, all the udders died. So, I high tailed it outta there and headed dis way. Figured I would run into somethin soona or lata. Was outside Boise when I overheard them atalkin about tee-keys going rogue and stealing somein of the boss mans. I hate them gun jockies. Dun trust em one beet. Convinced me good when they ah said you was workin with the Injuns to get to someplace south of here. So I snuk out real quiet like and scrounged me the stuff to make that there aer-o-plane. Never made one bafore, but knew I could do it. So here I is. Weird how you got me here though. How you do that?”

“He seems ligget, but quite a character. If what he says is correct the nesters will come for us. They seem to know where we are going and why. More than we know on both counts.”

“He didn't seem too pleased to find out that there is no booze here AT ALL.”

“And he wasn't pleased either when we told him no killing. Sounds like he would like to seek revenge for Wounded Knee all by himself.”

I DS the plane itself to our camp to look it over carefully. It does look handmade. Unlikely the nesters would go to that much trouble.

There is a leather satchel of tools in the back, real leather. Not sure what use we could make of Jack yet, but I see no harm in giving him his tools. Ron would be the obvious choice to work with him. I wonder how much it would take to make this thing run without tech?

Weather was still cold at night, but getting quite warm during the day. People having trouble keeping up were given a TK lift. No one is to be left behind. We continued to add to our numbers. Weird thing was they would be waiting for us with camp already set up and fresh non-duped supplies. Does everyone know where we are going? The nesters shadowed us for awhile, but when they figured out they could not get close enough to gather any useful information they took to going over our camps after we left. We started dissolving all traces of our having been somewhere. And I mean everything. Latrine duty was not as pleasant as it once was.

“How come the nesters have not tried anything? You would expect at least mines or something. They know where we are going and could set all kinds of traps to annoy us.”

“Two things prevent that, there are people ahead of us. They would likely set the traps off first; even if they could set them with people looking on. And second was fear. How would we respond? Sauron must know we could destroy him utterly at any time or at least his goons. If he makes too much a nuisance of himself too soon, it would be all over from his perspective. No, I think he is waiting for the right moment to make his move. He has only one chance.”

“Rachael, what happened to your robe? I never knew you had this in you!”

“Well, it is boring sitting around the fire at night with nothing to do. I took to watching the others embroider their robes with designs and such. I could not resist. Of course TK helps speed the whole thing up.”

“But you look like a Klingon warrior.”

“They were my heroes going up. Honor above all, and today is a good day to die.”

“Well, I hope it does not come to that.”

“The waiting is the worst isn't it?”

“Yeh, you know it is going to happen, but not how and when. None of us can run on full shielding forever. Sooner or later a weakness will appear and then he will strike.”

“Don't even think of it. We are not striking first.”

“It was not me that pulled the fast one in New Jerusalem. I have not advocated striking. There is lots of room now. Why not wait a bit before



hitting each other. Most of the community experiments will likely fail on their own. Then there will be no need.”

“This is not the same thing. Sauron is not after pushing his life style, he wants it all.”

“I know, just wish it was over that's all.”

“So do I.” I give her a hug. “So do I.”

Br'thn has been working on me, training me to use my talents more effectively. There were a lot of ideas that I had never heard of. I suspect that some of these were ideas that Sauron had come up with, but because of their close association, Br'thn knew them as well. For instance, Br'thn did not need to take the shape of a sphere. She could be any shape, including animal or plant shapes if she wanted. For all intents or purposes, she would appear real to any examination you could define. If Sauron could also do this, he could be right next to me and I would never know it. Bump off Rachael, and assume her form. Unfortunately Br'thn did not know how much ability Sauron retained or regained in the ten thousand year separation. She was very weak during the time between her separation from Sauron and her linking up with us. She feeds on residual psiotic energy at this stage in her life and needs some contact with other TK beings to stay fully able to scan, move, change, etc. For most of the time it was only low TK shamans that kept her fed. At the end it was nothing for several years. She could gain something from feeding off of the earth's spiritual residue and on sunlight, but this was definitely starvation rations.

Another thing that Br'thn found interesting was my total lack of the need to wipe out Sauron. She was so steeped in Sauron's thinking that to now be dealing with a being that was almost sacrificially pacifistic was hard to comprehend. I explained that as a student of history, I had read and experienced many wars and other stupid acts by human kind. Now that I knew that many of those were the direct result of Sauron and his manipulations only made me more adamant about my beliefs. I did not want to survive in a world that depended on the survival of the fittest. There had to be something better than that.

“TK1s still have sexual feelings right?”

“Oh definitely. Haven't you observed the classic mating rituals going on? Quite comical when you don't have the feelings yourself. Some even try to come on to us. Attracted to power I guess. They soon figure it out and go back to more receptive game. At one time I would have been flattered to get so much attention, now it is just annoying.”

“Then we should also be experiencing jealousy, revenge, assault,

etc.”

“We have. Where have you been?”

“I am afraid that I have been spending too much time alone with Br'thn.”

“All the usual things that humans do while under the influence of hormonal control have been going on.”

“It has not come up at any meetings that I know of.”

“Handled at the local level, within the small groups of about twenty or if between two groups, both councils get together and work it out. Sometimes that means the two groups just separate by enough of a distance to keep the parties apart for a while. Sometimes the people exchange vows and that ends it.”

“That means pregnancies.”

“That is the normal outcome, yes.”

“How many?”

“I would imagine we have twenty to thirty pregnant women by now.”

“Thirty! Yikes! Is that wise considering our circumstances?”

“Like they have a choice? No corner pharms any more in case you hadn't noticed. You can really be dense about some things.”

“We can make anything we can pattern off of. Surely there was some pharms with intact derepro applicators left. We pass through deserted small towns all the time.”

“Most Indian cultures don't like artificial means and the rest figure that we need to start things up again anyway. We have been through a kind of severe population loss of late. Kind of romantic camping our under the stars with no lights to expose everyone.” Sigh, this was one I was not going to beat.

I decided that I needed to be with the people just like the rest of the Guardians and Sentinels. “Dr. Snake, Is it possible for me to stay with your group tonight?”

“About time you come off your high horse. Of course. You get no special treatment though.”

“I would not want it any other way.” Ok, a cliché answer, but valid. I had already been doing my share of latrine duty. That was important for the Sentinels to see. “Dr. Snake, why do you still speak in broken English?”

“Not broken, just the way I like to speak. You have problem with that Turtle?”

“No Ma'am.” A teenager is watching this exchange and I wink at her and smile, then roll my eyes up like I am suffering horribly. She cracks

up and runs away to tell the others.

“Now look at what you did. They think I order Yingui around when I want to now.”

“And how is that not the truth?” I give a look of pure innocence. She bops me on the side of the head. “You behave yourself. They don't know you the way I do Turtle.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

“You call me that one more time and you get garbage detail tonight. Got it?”

“Yes Dr. Snake.”

“Good, now go help in the kitchen. They need the pots scrubbed.” Like this was a vast improvement.

“What are you in for?” I ask the young man helping me wash the pots.

He looks at me kind of scared and squeaks out, “Chasing Little Deer around the tents earlier. We were just playing.” Everything is quite for a moment.

“I mouthed off to Running Snake. I understand how you feel. If you let that soak a bit it will come off easier.”

“Can't you just, you know, magic it off?”

“That would be cheating. I am not allowed to cheat. Would just get me into worse trouble. Besides this beats doing the latrines even with TK. And it is not magic, valid scientific explanation for all this.”

“Really? What?”

“Beats me, I just work here.” I quirt him with some soapy water and soon we are getting each other whenever no one is watching. Of course we both show up to Running Snake later soaking wet.

“Hmm, never been on pot duty before. Need more practice. You can do the rest of the week Turtle.”

“Yes, Ma'am, ah, that is Running Snake.” She gives me a dirty look, but lets it go.

“She calls you Turtle!”

“Yeh, that is my part in the whole prophecy thing I am told. No one calls me Yingui unless I am in REAL trouble.”

“Yeh, I know what you mean.” He is smiling. I have made a new friend.

The next couple of days went quickly; or rather blended together they were so monotonous. I was not sleeping any more. Br'thn worked with me at night or I scanned all night. Morning, I helped with the pots, then removed latrines, walk forever, set up new latrines, help with the

pots, Br'thn and or scanning again.

Wild Jack and Ron got two 'machines' working. Ron had duped the one that Wild Jack and he had made together the hard way. No tech, or rather no electronic parts, all mech. Ran off alcohol, denatured, so Jack would not drink it. He was not happy about that, but the device looked scary enough and loud enough as it was without his being drunk at the same time. Jack looked like he had been flying one of these things every day of his life, Ron on the other hand. Let's just say that if he was not a TK5 he might be dead several times over now. After several days of wondering if that would even be enough, he seemed to get it. The two of them flew regular fights over our sphere of influence, as a way of visually confirming scans the rest of us did. Sauron knew everything there was to know about TK and would likely know its strengths and weaknesses real well, but as there are species differences and fire plague was an unknown, he just might not know everything. We were still being shadowed, but if others were waiting like they knew our exact route, then it was likely the nesters knew it as well. My guess is that they needed time to make weapons that would work in non-TK ways. That meant making from scratch or modifying existing ones to by pass all the tech aspects. A grenade or gun was still very lethal without the tech, maybe not as accurate, but still effective.

Some of the TK3s decided that hang gliders would be safer and very quiet. The motorized airplanes could be heard the entire time they were on patrol from a very long way off. They took to decorating the gliders with faces of monsters and wild animals. Each of the tribes competed to come up with the scariest designs at the same time keeping to their own traditions. The non Indian TKs competed for the best artists to do their glider. Some of the braver Native Americans and all of the TKs would soon be flying instead of walking rounds if this kept up. Council finally stepped in and demanded two TK spotters for every one in the air. Even a TK3 could not stop a bullet. Having three working in concert might save someone's life. Our population was approaching three hundred. That was a large number by post fall standards. We had to take extra steps to not appear hostile to local norms. Jack fashioned old style wooden carts that could be pulled or pushed by several people. This worked two ways. Kept the younger, stronger ones active and worn out so they stayed out of mischief and made our appearance to be that of refugees rather than an invasion force. At first we appeared to be some kind of religious cult, with everyone in robes, but later, as they became more personalized, we still looked weird, but friendly. Jack was still seen as stranger than most,

but he had so many other abilities, that people quickly accepted him as one of us. I suspect that the nesters had done a real good job of turning the locals off to having any dealings with TKs. The TKs that joined us were from several adjoining states. They were the most ecstatic, having made it to what seemed to be a safe way of life and a purpose. Some left though, when they found out we would not be attacking the nesters. Bad memories and visions of revenge would be a hard way to live.

Utah was a strange place. Quiet. We avoided the towns where ever possible, but this meant crossing over private property at times where we were dealt cold stares. All tech going out ahead of us did not help, but to not travel that way was a death sentence. Scouts kept ahead of the main group and warned people that we were coming and that we were not a threat. The tech would come back on when we left. We had a lot of people with us, enough to intimidate even a pre-plague community. With most of our group still Native Americans, old racial fears resurfaced too. A surprising number of people appeared to have survived. Well a large number for a near desert that is. Actually very few people out this far from Salt Lake City. I guess the Mormon idea of at least a year's supply of food was a good one. Their community retreated to their homes and waited it out, keeping in contact with a coordinated relay system of handies, shortwave and ham radios when we were not around. Word spread quickly and well ahead of us. In some cases we were able to refill cisterns as payment. They would be a force to reckon with. They controlled most of Utah before the fall and plague, now they could expand and take over neighboring states without much effort. No sign of nesters either. You would expect a nest in Utah someplace. Maybe we will be lucky this time. I scanned and sensed something outside of one small city, but it was deserted. Could be another one of those rich enclaves like New Atherton. They look the same when the weapons are removed, at least by scanning at this distance. Of course the Native Americans were still largely around also, as our growing group illustrated, and they knew how to live off the land. Hope they come to some understanding. I did see them talking with people on occasion, so maybe it was already starting.

Took us weeks to get through. Hot during the day, so we traveled at dawn and dusk and rested or hung out the rest of the time. We set up 'swamp coolers' using TK during the hottest part of the day to allow everyone to sleep who needed to. Latrine duty got simpler and simpler as people got more used to each other and modesty became less important. I was transferred to water and tent duty. To keep weight down we

dissolved the reflective shade tents between times. Seemed like a waste to me. I remembered the stories about tribes taking tepees behind horses and this was without wheels. Tepees made of animal skins were also heavier. All of us had gotten soft from tech. The justification from the council was that time was not infinite and we had too many different people and customs to accommodate. At this rate it would take us six months, well into winter. Not fun folks. Especially if we keep partying each time a new tribe joined up. Halfway through Utah we met up with the Southern Paiute and that party lasted for several days. There seemed to be some competition to see who could do it better than previous groups, or the stories of the previous ones anyway. Of course we all had to tell our story over and over and over. I still liked Daniel's version the best. He was a good story teller.

Br'thn was with us, but Sauron was still around and could strike at anytime. We were not out of the woods yet. Roads were still good so we did not need to forge a trail or spend time figuring out directions. Why couldn't we ride bikes then? But again I was overruled by the council. They said there was value in walking. Seemed contradictory to me, but then life was not always logical. Glad I had TK to fix my feet and make better shoes. [yes, I helped others as well] Saps usually ended up with bad feet from improperly fitting worn out shoes and to walk over a thousand kilometers would have been a nightmare.

The biggest problem was the wee ones. Snakes, spiders, scorpions, mice, fire and harvester ants. Seemed like everything was out to get us. Heaven forbid anyone intentionally try to kill one. Barb would be all over you in a second, calming the poor creature down and carrying it off somewhere safer. A regular Saint Francis or Doctor Doolittle. We finally surrounded groups of people with TKs at the edges using lucid shielding to give everyone a rest from the critters. A few people limped from previous encounters with the beasties. I did my best to remove the poison, but with a group spread out so much, it was often an hour before they got to me and the damage was done. There was also a need to try and work things out yourself. To be tough. Personally I was not into pain. Chocolate was more my thing. To each his or her own.

# The Trap

“Storm coming up. We need to get to higher ground. Flash flood would be hard to deal with even for us and in dealing with a flood we might cause much harm to the earth.” The local Paiute Indians know best. We detoured to reach higher ground. All the higher-level TKs were scanning the area fervently. Don't like surprises.

“ALL fliers are grounded because of the winds. That leaves us partially blind.” Only Daniel and I can scan via the dimension shift technique and that is much slower than by more conventional TK scanning. For one thing, we had to be motionless when we scanned, whereas a normal TK could scan while moving at any speed, just like you could not open a door while walking, but could watch your surroundings while running easily. Another disadvantage of a DS scan was that it could not see into the nature of things like a TK scan. With a level 3 or above, one could see what things were made of, not just what they looked like they were made of. They used to sell artificial flowers in stores. They got to the point where, from a distance, they looked very real. That was the point of course. No watering, fertilizer, bugs, etc. Same principles for use of camouflage. The military got to be real good at it and that scared me. But we had lots of TKs scanning and so the two of us used the DS technique to see things in color that the TK scanning could not see. We hoped that together we would be forewarned at least.

The sky gets darker and darker. This was not your California storm. The effects of global warming were not helping either. All those SUVs that were finally banned, or no one could afford to feed, but too late to help us. Besides, corn diesel produced just as much pollution as dinosaur extract. A crack of thunder after a flash of lightning. Impressive. Reminds me of the time I was in the Netherlands back in '74. We had stayed up all night watching the display. Only then we were inside in a nice warm house, well protected from the rain and lightning striking the ground near us. Not like now. We were out in the open. Our staffs would probably conduct enough to attract lightening. Not sure I could prevent it. There was a lot of power in a strike. I bubble up and surround those around me. The other TKs follow suit. Lightning strikes near me, popping the TK shields like a soap bubbles, but not harming the people beneath at least. They shield again after a moments shock. Now we know something that can take out our shield, a very high voltage concentrated electric field.

A scream breaks the silence between claps of thunder. TK scanning

active now, this is close, DS does not offer an advantage. Several hundred meters away a young teenager is covered in blood and broken glass. Someone yells, "Freeze! Don't move a muscle. The place is rigged with trip lines and gas grenades. It's a trap!" What's a gas grenade? I scan the remnants. Weak acid and baking soda on glass. Remnants of tissue paper. A fast scan of the area reveals several that have gone off from the wind or animals. Thought it smelled weird here, but I was so worried about the storm I was not paying attention. There are thousands of these all over the place covering an area kilometers wide. These are not normal glass bottles, but shaped like pineapples with sharp points hidden in brush. Military! How did we get in without setting them off and how do we get this many people out again? Who was in the lead? Did we have betrayers? All the materials were common in the environment, so easy to overlook. I had admonished Ron for not seeing what was close to him and now I had failed the group for the same fault. Glass looks like rock to a TK scan, but that is no excuse.

I DS Jack to my side after clearing the area of anything foreign. "Help me out here Jack. What's going on."

"Don't do that! Now wawt you got and why me?"

"Seems we have been booby trapped and you are our expert at low tech mechanical things."

He bends down and examines one at the side of the clearing I have made. "Yeh, Best if you get everyone out without tripping any more. Could just as easily be cyanide instead of baking soda. Nasty."

"Hey, you are taking normal."

"Always could, just got more sympathy with the Wild Jack speak, no point to it now though. Spent a tour in Nam just before the fall. They were experts at traps. Could make one out of anything. You never would have seen those."

"I had heard. Missed the draft by three days myself. Lucky on the draw." Jack did not look old enough to have served a tour in Vietnam. Br'thn is with me acting like a lamp on the top of my staff.

*Br'thn I want to DS everyone out of here.* My thoughts are directed to Br'thn only.

***To where, surrounding hills not safe either?***

I scan the camp we were in the previous day. Troops with mech weapons there now as well, so we weren't going back. Must be the Utah nesters I could not find earlier. They have been very busy and following us as well as anticipating our movements. I scan the clouds more carefully. Silver Iodide. These clouds were seeded to purposely rain on



us. Jets are coming this way as well. How did they know we were stuck? No radio could work here, assuming our betrayer had one. The jets themselves could not fly in the no tech zone, but a missile could coast quite a ways and detonate by mechanical means.

*Estimated time of arrival seven point five minutes.* Missiles would be sooner.

Back to our original path? We could disable the gas grenades before we got there, assuming we found them all. Only a problem here trapped in the middle of them with so many people, but they are already advancing there as well. Soldiers were not tech and could come in loaded with mechanical guns.

Jack is getting nervous and hyped up, “You have got to stop thinking like a norm. You can do stuff they never dreamed of and Sauron would not expect you to try. You are modern, creative and crazy. Use it.”

“Everyone get down, but do not move. Bubble those around you. There is going to be a lot of wind.” I dissolve an area large enough for everyone a hundred meters from where I am. It is like a hurricane, but I can scan with my eyes closed. Down to bedrock. Glass smooth. No more traps to go off on that slab any longer.

I direct a TP to Daniel, *Daniel, DS everyone to the slab as fast as you can, Br'th and I will be doing the same.*

Very slippery when wet. No one was going anywhere on their own power. Still, it takes a few minutes even with this short of a hop.

*Everyone is here. Come on over.*

“Damm! One got me.” Jack exclaims. Looks like a scorpion has gotten him on his hand as he had lowered himself to watch everything and keep out of the wind. He is sucking his hand. I reach down to see better. He makes a grab for the sphere on top of my staff. I grin and DS over with Jack. Jack is unconscious with a sphere 10cm in diameter in his hand.

“So, it actually worked. We have Sauron.”

“Br'thn has confirmed. We have Sauron.”

“How did he hide his TK so well?”

“Remember he has had 65 million years to practice. And he is a very different species, that means different TK talents. Some were probably ones we have never even heard or thought of.” I had worked this out with the Guardians and Br'thn over several weeks. I did not know it was Jack till the trap was set for us on the hilltop. Having raised the human race from infancy, he would know every mechanical trap in the book. Probably taught humankind a lot of them, though his own method of

warfare was more honor and direct confrontation than creativity. Wonder if he was responsible for the Bushido code in Japan, sounds so much like him from Br'thn's description. Maybe the ideas really came from people, those crazy curious monkeys. He had to have a situation whereby I would need his particular talents, so he could get close enough to touch the sphere to claim it. I had stayed away from the new comers, including Jack to help force his hand. It worked greater than he expected. Here he was alone with Br'thn and myself on a hill top and no one dared move. It was now or never for him. Feigning the scorpion sting was a nice touch. Once we had DSed everyone over but the three of us, he made his move while I was 'apparently' distracted and concerned by his wound. He grabbed for the sphere on top of my staff, assuming that this was Br'thn. I even leaned it a little ways toward him to make it more tempting and easier for him.

He did not care in the slightest that the missiles would kill many people when they hit with no high level TK to remove them, which is what would have happened if he had gotten the real Br'thn. Sauron had spent his whole existence on the offensive. He could not imagine why anyone would want to have a powerful enemy survive an encounter. I am sure he scanned the globe on top of my staff. It had been ten thousand years and a lot can be forgotten and a lot changed, especially if Br'thn was not a being deserving of respect or much notice, just an object of power. He scanned and saw the characteristic pattern of Br'thn, right down to the subatomic level. This was not a trap, a bomb, poison, whatever he was expecting. He really thought we were naive enough to leave the obvious out in the open. I reached down into my pocket and retrieved my ocarina. Its shape shifted back into the familiar globe.

*Thank you Br'thn, you did not need to do this, to deceive your former Bearer.*

***Br'thn know.***

*Before he wakes up, let go of the no tech field and resume your new shape. He will expect us to have to deal with tech without your help. And let me know, so I know when I have to take over.*

The sphere was actually an adaptation of the psiotic chamber I had worked out on my own. Br'thn had mentioned how initial contact with a 'thn caused a similar reaction, only more intense, rendering the subject unconscious at the same time, just like all of us were when we contacted Br'thn. Wonder why Ghost was not knocked out? Br'thn said something about species differences and that Ghost was too low level to affect a true bonding. Anyway, by working together we worked out the sphere. Of

course, it was untested. Who could we test it on without giving away the secret or risking ourselves. There was no cyanide in Sauron's trap, but the globe that Sauron reached for was a trap. Not a lethal one, but one that would drain all of the TK abilities from someone who touched it in a microsecond, even me. But the rule was he had to touch it to claim it. He had no choice and did not realize that the trap even existed till sprung. Had he seen Br'thn for what she really was, he would have known that the globe was not real and instead looked for her elsewhere. Now without Br'thn he was further reduced to a TK0 and trapped in this current form, a 65 year old man with a failing liver and not much time to live. I fixed the liver, but I could not make him immortal. By the way Sauron, ALL the locals call you Dragon, never Sauron. Only a few know your real name. And nobody speaks like Wild Jack, at least not in a hundred years. Thinking you are smarter than everyone, much less the entire Guardians combined, all raised on Hollywood, was your mistake. Of course we gambled humanities future that this would all work too. It could still fail. All Sauron had to do was let go of the sphere when he awakened and he would have all his abilities back, just as I had my abilities back when I left the null sphere in Nevada.

I made a new ocarina out of thin air and started to play. Off key, needed to make some adjustments. That's better. A little lower in tone than the last one, but a nice sound. Crystal clear and shaped as close to a sphere as I could get with the need for a mouth piece. *Thank you Br'thn.*

“We need to do something. The nesters and jets are still coming.”

With Br'thn's help I open a DS tunnel that we had also worked out and DS the closest jet 300 km away from us. We can do that as many times as necessary till it gets the point that it will not get within striking range. “Daniel, I want to dissolve all of the booby traps. We can't leave them around for the locals, both people and animals, to get hurt by. You take the middle range ones. Get the others to do the near. I will handle the father ones.”

“The grunts will be within range in a few minutes.”

“Barb, I want a message sent out to the nesters. Lay down your weapons and no one gets hurt. The jet is not coming, the traps have been sprung and we are in full control of our abilities.” She nods and sends out the message.

I wait a minute. There is a pause and some confusion, but they keep coming. “Br'thn, how many have tech implants?”

***All within defense perimeter are so encumbered.***

“So that explains it. If they don't fight, then they are dead. Pretty sad

way to run an army.”

***Do you wish the implants removed?***

“Yes please. You are starting to anticipate and suggest, this is great.”

***Done***

“Barb, let everyone here know that we are fully shielded and the nesters cannot harm us. Have everyone sit at the edge of the slab, so we can be seen. Please let me know if this is getting to be too much for you.”

*No problem so far.* She grins to be sure I believe her.

They come within firing range and raise weapons. No one moves. I stand up and slowly TK down to them. There are several hundred troops surrounding me with weapons trained on the two of us, though it is unlikely they know of Br'thn in my pocket. “How may I help you?”

One person comes forward, without scanning I cannot tell gender or ethnicity, nor do I care. She removes her face mask. They are carrying gas grenades with some kind of nerve gas. I change the grenades to carry water instead. The land could use it. She asks me, “Are you the leader?”

“Nope. Are you aware that a flash flood will pass through here in a few minutes? You are welcome to join us on higher ground, if you leave your weapons here.”

“We can't do that.”

“Your nanobot implants have been removed.”

“We have no way of confirming that.” She is cool. Never a flinch.

“Are you aware of what we can do?”

“Only rumors meant to scare little kids.”

“They are not rumors. One of you come back up with me to see the hill top here and tell me if you know of anyway of doing what has been done here.”

“Corporal Mendez, go with him.”

“What do I do?” He looks scared to death.

“Just stay close. You don't have to do anything else.” I slowly TK us back up to the slab with a visibly frightened 20 year old, but give him credit, he did not faint. “Stay near the edge, so they will know you are alright.” He sees all the people. They are smiling, some wave. They certainly do not present a threatening appearance at all. We have no visible weapons of any kind, but I am sure he has been briefed on TK abilities, maybe even given a demonstration at some point. The other six have light globes providing extra light. He reaches down and feels the surface of the slab we are on.

*Sauron is waking up. Defenses going down now.*

*Thanks. Barb, let the others know to be actively scanning now, that*

*means everyone TK3 and above. Have the TK2s bubble everyone around them.*

*Got it.*

“Glass smooth. Very smooth.” The globes provide enough light for him to see that the surface extends hundreds of meters.

“I am going to make steps for easy access. Please do not worry. There will be some wind and water produced to make up the mass exchange.” I make a series of steps leading back down. Mendez and I walk side by side back down the side of the hill.

“Report!”

“It is like nothing I have ever seen before Captain. Absolutely smooth. As smooth as glass. There are hundreds of people up there. Most are sitting or milling around. I see no weapons of any kind. Just carts, blankets, packs, etc. Six have light globes on top of staffs like the unlighted staff he has Captain. They have Colonel Meyer. Saw him in some kind of disguise.”

“Thank you corporal. That will be all.” [How did they get Colonel Meyer? They never tell us anything in command. No coms is a drag.]

The storm is nearly upon us. Lightening still fills the air and it finally starts to rain at our location. The problem is the rain that fell elsewhere and now comes to us as the flood.

“I am going to make a container here at the foot of the stairs. You may place your weapons inside of it. After the storm, you will be free to retrieve them again. We have no desire to endanger your safety.” I make a stone sarcophagus. As the troops file pass, they place their rifles and hand guns in the container and proceed up the steps. They are still fully armed with knives, grenades [dead, but they don't know that] and their own abilities. We don't need them so frightened they do something stupid.

When all reach the top, the last trooper looks behind and sees a growing trickle of water pass by where they had been. Daniel has shielded the top of the slab so the rain falls off the side and not on everyone. Everyone is quiet. Actually, except for the intensity of the situation it is quiet beautiful. Always loved the sound of rain on the Zendo roof.

A few minutes later we hear a huge roar. Even the ground shakes some. “Get people away from the edge. The banks are eroding.” cries someone.

A trooper comes running up, “Captain, the weapons container is under water.”

“Thank you sergeant.” She turns to me. “What will you do with us.”

Daniel and Running Snake come forward and I meld into the crowd.

“Your weapons are fine and you may retrieve them after the waters have passed or you are free to join us. Up to you. We will do nothing to impede your way. Enough have died, it is time to rebuild.”

She turns and faces her troops, then turns again to face them. “What about Colonel Meyer?”

“Who?”

“Your prisoner.”

“She must mean Jack, but he is just an old fart, not military, is he? He did something stupid and was knocked unconscious. I have been told he is coming around fine. We have people watching him to make sure he is alright. He is not a prisoner though. Has been with us the last several weeks.”

“Apparently he is more than he appears.” So, not just Sauron and Jack, many identities.

“We would like to take him back with us.”

“His choice of course, but he has said that he wanted to stay with us.”

“We would like to go home then.”

“You are free to do so. In the mean time, would you like something hot to drink?”

“That would be nice.” People start getting out pots. TK3s fill them with hot water and some of the guardians make extra cups. The people who came with us go first, to assure our guests that we are not about to poison them. Slowly they mingle among the groups and accept offered cups of hot tea.

“We have incoming! That direction.” Daniel points north west.

No time to open a gateway. “We need to take out the missiles. Convert them to water. They will be underneath the wings and bodies.” Daniel says.

“I have the two on the left, you take the one on the right. Watch it, he is swinging around. Rachael and James, watch for strafing and smaller stuff.”

A minute later the jets roar overhead minus all their ammunition. A few bullets make it to the ground and scare us some, but nothing is hurt but one pull cart. Our military guests have all hit the deck, but come up cautiously after it is over. All of our people have remained standing. Good for them.

A half hour later the rain has stopped and the waters have receded. Rachael uncovers the container, but as the troops pass, they do not retrieve their weapons. After all have passed and are out of visual range, I

dissolve the container and the weapons. Standing where the container was, Daniel comes up to me. “The council thinks it might be time to finish this journey.”

“Yes, about time we moved. I can DS people in groups of about ten to the open meeting grounds outside of Tuba City. Just have them line up here with their things.” Three hundred people is still a lot of people and it takes several hours to transport everyone that far. Organization is not a skill our group has. It is not that DS over distance takes longer, travel wise, just that like hitting the bull’s eye from ~300 km is harder than hitting it from 10 meters. Takes time to be sure they are going where you expected them to go. The early arrivals have already set up camp and the TK3s have finished with the outhouses when I arrive last myself. This time Qaletqa is with me, a bit shaken from the entire experience. I am sure he has lots of questions, but will need time to sort it all out. He had never seen us in ‘action’ before today. This was not anything like latrine duty.

# Tuba City

No one was talking. It is like when a test that you have been fearing and dreading since forever is finally over. Still weak in the knees, but feeling as light as air. For the rest of us, it is a relief to be away from the storm, troops and traps on a cold wet hill top. Jack, as that is all he is now, is never out of sight of a guardian. No one knows but the Guardians and the council members so far. He is still clutching the sphere as tight as Ghost did when he had Br'thn. The sun is beginning to peek up over the horizon on a clear day. People were here to greet us when we arrived apparently. Barb had TPed them to expect us, but they are still amazed at the size of our group.

“That was a nice way to travel and not have to be packed in a saucer like sardines again.”

“Thanks Rachael, glad you made it. It was scary for me too. One of those 'life flashes before your eyes' kind of things.” I am grinning when I say this.

“It was that for sure. He would have killed us instantly if we had failed.” Yup, sure he would have and likely eaten us as well after he morphed back to his natural form.

“You know we are not over with the nesters. They did not know who Sauron/Dragon/Jack/Meyer was and are likely still on the war path. Especially if the Captain reported in as expected.” I scan our ultimate destination. All the small buildings, buildings that had existed for nearly a thousand years were gone. The last insult. There was no one there now. Just an empty mesa of strewn rock. Gone were the elders, the wise ones we needed so badly. Had any of their children's children survived? Did they have the knowledge? Were any alive to show us the way? Had we come all this way to find an empty cold end? Where was the gateway? Did it still exist? How do we find it?

“Why so low Turtle?”

“It is all gone, nothing but rubble, the nesters beat us to the gateway. If it was there, they found it. They can't use it of course, but they could destroy it or prevent us from using it. It looks like they succeeded.”

“Do not count us out yet. Prophecy not so easy to die.” She looks worried though.

We spent the next few days setting up camp and meeting with our hosts, the Navajo, the largest extant tribe in North America. Also the most reviled for having sold out their mineral wealth just to stay alive.



This caused the water supply on the mesa to disappear or at least fall so low the non tech, non mech culture could no longer retrieve it to water their fields of corn, squash and beans. According to Crazy Eagle, no one has lived on the mesa for more than ten years. Looters long ago having raided and stolen all that could be moved, even parts of the homes themselves. All the sacred kivas were trashed, literally. They were now garbage pits filled with the trash of tourists. Such a waste. The last insult was the military a few weeks ago. They trashed what little was left.

Daniel comes up to me. "It has been decided that we should make a pilgrimage to Hotevilla to pay our respects."

"Yes, that would be good. How many will come? I am not up to a huge crowd."

"Two groups. Guides, council and us, followed later by whoever wants to go. So far that appears to be most of whom came with us and a lot of the locals."

"Good, I can go with that. When do we leave?"

Pre-dawn, while I was in meditation my fellow pot scrubber comes up and sits quietly beside me till I stir. "Yes, Qaletaga. May I help you?"

"Master Scrubber, they are ready to leave."

"Ah, will you be coming with me as my aid?"

His eyes light up. "Really?"

"It is about time that I took on an apprentice or two. You certainly held yourself well during the rain. You are TK1 and about, what 15?"

"Fifteen and a half." Been a long time since I worried about half years. Decades even seem to come and go. I would be sixty nine very soon. Really had no idea what the date was.

***May 17th, 2023, by your method of time keeping.***

"Thank you Br'thn." I said quietly under my breath. Ten more days then.

"You talk to her?"

"Sure all the time. She can read my every thought or yours, as I could also if I so desired." He does not look comfortable at this idea at all. "I was fourteen once too, I know without reading your thoughts what they are. Little Dear is your sweetheart, or at least you wish she was. You are not sure she even notices you. She spends a lot of time with her girl friends. Oh, and there must be another boy, who is stronger and faster than you who thinks he can have whoever he wants."

"How did you know?"

"Adolescence was not invented with your generation. These are universal tests that all must pass through."

“Like the manhood ceremony.”

“Yes, but harder.”

“Harder? Do you know what they are going to make me do when I turn 16?”

“I have a good idea, and believe me love is harder.”

“I am not so sure I want love then if it is harder than that.”

“I am afraid that you will have little choice. Love strikes us all whether or not we want it. But you are at very distinct advantage if you can hold off a bit. You may not end up with the prettiest or the most popular woman, but you will find the best one for you and you for her.”

“Ah, finally Yingui. Is your friend coming with us? I thought were limiting this to Guardians and Council members and guides?”

“Mr. Pots has agreed to be my apprentice. When you address him, you address me. He comes.”

“Welcome Mr. Pots and second apprentice. Wish someone had told me this was going to happen. Couldn’t you come up with a better name?”

“Psst, is everyone going to call me that now? Not that Mouse was much better.”

“We already have a Mouse. Let me introduce you to her.” We walk over to Rachael, Daniel and Susan who are helping to get the packs together. Not too heavy, as we can find much on the way and TK the rest. “Susan, I would like you to meet a fellow rodent. This is my apprentice, formally known as Mouse. We need a suggestion for a new name if you have one.”

“How about Qaletaqa? Means guardian of the people in Hopi. Pleased to me you Qaletaqa. I believe you already know my apprentice, Little Deer.” He turns white and is about to faint.

“Breathe, breathe, it helps you to think better. Get used to the idea of women being at least as good as a man.”

“You knew about this?”

“Of course. We all are plotting against you to make you look silly.”

“Don't need any help there thank you.”

“I can see why you chose him, he is wise beyond his years.”

“We will see. Still a lot of moss between those ears.” Now he is red. Ah, the young are so much fun to play with.

We go at a leisurely pace as this is a time of reflection as much as anything. What do we do now? I was not so sure what the gateway was even, but figured it was important for Br'thn to make contact with her people. She was quiet on this matter, preferring for things to play themselves out before telling me what was going on. I was as much her

apprentice as Qaletqa was mine. I suspected I would be her apprentice for a lot longer though. Any being with the patience of sixty five million years could afford a few months or years. No rush decisions, as I had been forced too many times to make these last few months. James and Ron traded off taking care of Jack. Susan and Rachael would have been too apt to take revenge. Though Ron had abandoned the two mech fliers back in Utah, the TK3s were still adamant about using hang gliders. We could see several riding the currents near the mesas as we walked. We had seen no evidence of the nesters at all. Maybe they did have the gateway and were waiting for us to come to them. Or they had destroyed it and knew we were now alone and no longer a threat.

Having been raised on Star Trek and the like you would think that I would be more comfortable in Silver Ghost or in being 'transported' by DS or whatever, but, maybe it was my age, there was something more satisfying about the sound of crunching rock and sand under one's feet. You certainly saw much more. Running Snake, now a councilor was good at making us more aware of the world around us. I found I could recognize the tracks of many animals with ease now. Every time I saw a lizard though I could not help but think of Dragon and Coyote. Why did Dragon chose a rodent to start over with and not a reptile. The excuse was he needed tech to complete his mission and might even fear his own brought back, but there is a natural tendency to work with what you knew best. Pots had fallen back to talk with Little Deer. Was I now responsible for the 'birds and bees' talk? Both his parents were gone in the fire plague, being only half Indian themselves. He did have aunts, uncles and cousins still alive, but they had no objection to his being my apprentice. I may have some Indian blood in me, on my mother's side, but it was very dilute. I need to get focused. Even without the gateway, I needed to go on with life. There was still much we could do.

On the third day we reached the foot of the mesa. Coming from this side was much easier. I remember my first visit here some forty plus years ago. Some friends of mine had lived in the Flagstaff area. He built eco-friendly housing and she worked with the blind children on the rez. Wonder if she ever learned Navajo like she was trying to. Hard language to learn. They were the ones that introduced me to the Hopi Prophecy and the then coming collapse of the fourth age. Anyway, the road up the other side was very steep, ok in a car, but would not want to walk it at this age. Very dry land and very beautiful. Can see why so many artists and others came to Arizona and New Mexico to live, work or retire. Most had to work again in their old age when the economy collapsed though,

effectively killing the middle class. You were either so rich you did not need to work at any age or you were so poor that you could not afford to ever stop working. The rich did work, in a way, lording it over the poor and whining a lot. If you were really hot, you went to China or the second choice of Europe of course. There was still a middle class there and the rich from here ended up middle class there because of the visa restrictions. Just deserts for what we did to the Chinese laborers a century and a half earlier. It was said that no civilization could exist without some form of slavery. Oh, they called it by many names, but when you had no choice about where you worked or lived or even to a large extent what you thought about, it was slavery. I suspect that some of the burned out sectors we passed in towns and cities were the remains of where the rich once lived. Looted first no doubt or maybe not. You could not eat gold. The riots all over again.

“Qaletaga, I can't help but notice that everyone is broken up into groups.”

“Crow do not like the Shoshone who don't like the Navajo. And everybody hates the Apache.”

“They were getting along when we started this trip. What happened?”

“I don't know do you want me to go ask Running Snake?”

“Let's both go ask Running Snake.” It takes us a few minutes to find the Shoshone group. We wait patiently as they finish their conversation. “Is it possible for my apprentice and I to talk with you?”

“When we finish Turtle.” No one had said anything for about a minute. hmm...

“No matter we will go talk with Crazy Eagle. Sorry to have troubled you.” We make as to walk off towards the Navajo contingent. Soon Running Snake is following us. “I thought you were busy and it was rude of me to butt in. Really not important. We will be ok.”

“Turtle you stop right there and tell me what you two are up to.”

“Oh-oh Mr Pots, I think we are in trouble now.” We both stare at her with grins.

“I am failing in my understanding and Qaletaga was not able to help me. He suggested we talk with you, as you always seem to know what is going on.”

“Cut the crap Turtle and out with it.”

“Dr. Snake, have you noticed that every tribe is sticking to its own and not walking or talking with other people in other tribes?” I put on my best stupid look, Mr Pots is a natural, because he does not have a clue what I am getting at. Some advantages to being young. “We started out

together. What happened?"

"We started out 90% Shoshone and now we are a minority. It is easier to get along with your own people."

"Funny, I have never been able to do that."

"You white Man, so you don't understand."

"That is why we are here, to gain from your wisdom."

"There are long and terrible histories between our peoples. Haven't you ever wondered why there were over a thousand Indian tribes?"

"It certainly made it easier for the 'White Man' to put you all on the reservations didn't it?"

"Yes, it did! If we had been organized, like you were, we would have driven you back into the sea!"

"So, what's stopping you? Give the word and I will gather up everyone you find offensive and personally, along with the entire Guardians, leave this continent."

"That is not enough! What about the millions slaughtered? What about the cultures destroyed?"

"Seems you were doing a good job of that already. I found you in Idaho. Where did your people come from Running Snake?"

"What you call Wisconsin. We were driven out by the Sioux, who were driven out by the Chippewa, who were driven out by the Iroquis."

"Pushed ever west by the white man."

"Sioux, that is not the name they call themselves, your name for enemy, if I remember correctly. Where did the Navajo come from then?"

"Alaska."

"No white men there at the time and they drove out all kinds of people before them on their path no doubt."

"Yes!"

"Seems you have a real problem then, now that the nesters, the organized white nesters and of course the pears, think it is open season on Indians and TKs alike."

"Yes."

"Why did you come with us, the Guardians?"

"The Prophecy!"

"Must have burned inside real good when you saw us then. Every other race, but not a single Shoshone, not a single Native American among us. Why even help us at all? Why tell us where to find Br'thn? Why help us against Sauron?"

"the prophecy."

"And now that the gateway is gone it is all over is that it? The

prophecy has failed. It is all over and back to every one for themselves. You outnumber the white man again. What will you do this time, go back to fighting each other and let the nesters win again? or try something new?”

“WE DON'T KNOW HOW!” She is visibly crying now. I am close to it. Can't help it, was a cry baby growing up.

“The white man came and destroyed the people and the land, just like they had done to their own land before they came. But I contend that the only reason it was not the you that did this was because the constant fighting among yourselves prevented you from developing the tech and organization skills to defeat this enemy from across the waters. Had you developed the tech, would you not have used it against Mother Earth as well? Just like you adopted horses and guns fast enough. Would you not, in search of power and fame have used every trick as well? Oh the elders might have held off, as the traditionalists tried for so long, but the young, the restless, who could have stopped them, you? Did you know that in the 13th century, a blink in time to Br'thn, that the average Native American and the average European lived in the same conditions? Peasant families living off the land, in harmony with the land, because to do otherwise was a death sentence. Tech only postponed that sentence. We have seen this in the fever. Those of you who think that your people were immune, ask my apprentice what happened to his parents. They had as much native blood as most of you and maybe even more. If you had not been so isolated by the reservation system and poverty, by the lack of tech, it could have been you dead in the grave as well. Surprised that your grandson did not set off a second run of the plague.”

“He did, and we lost many in the first run, just not as many as you.”

Everyone has stopped and is listening to my one sided rage. “I am sorry for my outburst, but I did not want to be here any more than you wanted me here. I was quiet happy waiting to die in the lab next to the sea. But I am here. I am sorry I am a white male nerd. I was born that way and had no choice. Wake up! We have been given, for the first time in the history of the human race a second chance, and it is only a chance, to do it right. We have seen the Europeans use tech to advance knowledge for good and pain. They have done some remarkable things, even landed people on other planets. They have cured illnesses that used to kill millions. They have stretched the boundaries of physical knowledge beyond our imaginations. We have also seen them slowly kill Mother Earth. Had they your understanding of the sacredness of the planet as well as human life, maybe it would have been different.

Representatives of the Native American cultures, you had the spiritual understanding, to see the interconnection of life. You were with the buffalo when she gave birth to a nation. You are with the eagle when he soars the skies and you know the ways of the coyote, but you lacked any technical understanding and most of all, the ability to work together longer than a single hunt. This severely limited your understanding, even of the spiritual.

So my question to you is this. Will you allow Dragon to win? Will you allow the nesters and others like them, that he created and trained, to regain this earth and shape it in HIS image AGAIN, an image that will once again continue the slow and painful death to Mother Earth, like a snake without a head continuing to crush its prey? Or will you stand together to make a new understanding? To make a slow careful use of tech in a highly cooperative way for the good of all, without hurting our Mother? Yes, the gateway is closed to us for a time. I for one don't believe this is forever. There will be no quick and easy solutions to these problems and many others we will face. No miracles from the heavens to take away our pain, the pain of birth, the birth of the fifth age. Or is this a still birth, with no survivors? Say the word and we will leave, gladly. For if your choice is to continue with old hates and old revenges and old ways, we do not want to be here either. If you want to do it right this time, possibly our last chance to do so, then we will stay, not as your oppressors, not as your leaders, not even as your saviors and not as your slaves, but as your equals. For ONLY through cooperation and careful thoughts and actions will this work.”

“You know nothing of us, how dare you preach to us in that way!” She turns to leave.

“I only know what you taught me Dr. Snake. I KNOW we need you, but I cannot force you to participate. So, the guardians go to finish what we started. We go to the place of the gateway, even though it is no longer there. We go to offer respect to those who, with no chance of seeing the end, gave their lives to the prophecy anyway. A prophecy that was given even to this white male nerd without prejudice. The prophecy is not a thing, a tale, a place, a chosen people, or even a string of events. The prophecy is a hope in your mind and in your heart. No one can take that away from me, for I will fight to my last breath for the prophecy, with or without you though I have only known of it for a month and still do not understand it.” I turn and continue up the trail to the top of the mesa. Qaletaqa hurries to catch up.

“Don't look at me that way Qaletaqa. I am not a monster, just tired of

the games and excuses. A life time of them.”

“You don't look much like a turtle any more. I will follow you to the pits of hell.”

“Hopefully it will not come to that, but you are not allowed to walk behind me, only at my side.”

We walk side by side to the mesa, arm and arm. The rest of the guardians follow in pairs. Yingui has really put his foot in it this time. We will see.



# Hotevilla

Hotevilla was the site of the last of the traditionalists of the Hopi elders. They were the last hold outs against a world gone tech mad. They finally succumbed when the progressives sold out their water rights to stay alive. With the sale of the Navajo coal, went the water necessary to maintain even a subsistence living up here on the mesa. No life up here at all. No plants, animals, insects. Nothing. Just wind and dust. Totally foreign environment on earth. For even in the depths of the sea, there was life. In the frozen north and south there was life. Before the climate changes that had occurred centuries before global warming there was even a forest here. Tech was not responsible for its disappearance, but even after the forests were gone there was still enough water for a group of Native Americans called the Hopi. Since 1100 AD, they lived in these parts growing corn, beans, squash and melons. It was not a luxury existence, but a largely peaceful one and it did not hurt the earth. I was hoping beyond hope that they would play a key role in the rebuild. But they are all gone now. The last knowledgeable elders died in the last century. Their children did not know all that they needed to know. The Hopi part of the prophecy was written down and published, but even that met with a lot of controversy. The progressives denounced it as total trash. The author was only here for one month. What could this white man who had not been born among them know about closely held secrets never revealed before? He read a few newsletters, talked to one crazy old man and made the rest up they said. I had read the Hopi prophecy some 20+ years ago and even then knew I could not live without tech. There were too many people to feed for non tech to work. And the published prophesy did not talk about us, TKs, dragon and Br'thn. Not all was told. Now, the population was down to a manageable level for at least a while. With my new abilities I did not need tech at all, no matter what. Was I being selfish? Did I want this change because I would be needed and not just a sap lost in the rat race? Even I could not be sure of my motivations. I am no saint. I made a lot of mistakes and had good reasons to suspect my own thoughts.

We reached the ruins at dusk. To be able to use all our senses, both new and old, we set up our staffs with globes lit. Br'thn remained in my pocket and as quiet as if we were at a funeral. Without a word, we descended on the remains of a home that looked like it might be repairable and started to move one stone at a time back into place.

Qaletaga fell asleep as did Little Deer. We covered each with blanket and continued our work. None of us had built a house out of loose stone before, so I am sure it did not look great. The roof was the real problem. I did not remember how they had done it in the past. We saw some remnants of charcoal, but no actual beams or covering. I knew that the pueblos used logs as beams and then covered that with a thatched roof. Well, no wood or thatch up here now. We were going to have to use TK to make the place livable if we intended to stay.

*Gather up all the charcoal over here.* Speaking seemed to be out of place and we did not want to wake the kids. With the charcoal, we could use all that was left of the old ones to work on the roof. We make a clear diamond shell with ribs and then TKed it into place. By raising our staffs to the peaked ceiling we made a beacon on the mesa.

Rachael is losing it, pacing back and forth. We have seen this before. “I have to know. Wake up Jack. He has to remember something of his former existence. I want to know what his justification is for all this.”

# Sauron's Tale

“Ok Sauron, no more games, let's have it!”

“NEVER! You will never get the power sphere from me again, rat's spawn!”

“Rat's spawn?”

“Our ancestors were rat like creatures.”

“Ah, Ok lizard breath we don't care about your power sphere, we can make light without it now. I want to know why you did all this. So out with it.”

“Or what, you'll eat me? You don't have the guts to. I have been your master for too long. Cringe in my presence smiggle droppings!”

“This is definitely not the Jack that I knew.” Ron is very confused.

“Imagine how powerful he would be if we joined him. We don't have the answers anymore, now that the gateway is gone. How do we know what he was doing was wrong. Lets hear him out.”

“There is no gateway camel vomit. Smiggle's can be so stupid. The power spheres come and go. We stay. Take it or leave it, this is it. No 'savior' will rescue you. There was one before you who tried your path. He was worse than you. Thought he had the answers he did. At least you admit you don't. Well, I showed him, even a TK5 can die! Then I turned his precious movement of peace to hate. It was so easy and the results were so glorious! Time is on my side shit for brains. I can wait out any plan you have, turn anything you do to my way. Hell, I can even wait for your puny species to be long gone and start again. There are any number of species that I could use, now that genetic engineering has advanced. I can even have Man make his own successor. Wouldn't that be lovely?”

“But why all the death and destruction? What is the point of that?”

“Survival of the fittest my dear. Only the strong are worthy of resting in my shadow. Peace is for cattle. Good to eat! Another day for the cycle to complete and I will be stronger than ever! Another day and all of you will be my dinner!”

“Why can't we eat you now and end this whole thing?”

“You can't hurt me bat brains. I have the power sphere now. It protects me during the bonding cycle, just like it did for all of you. Oh yeh, I knew exactly when and where that happened. Every TK on the planet felt it. But now it is mine dog pus! I will never let you have it again! NEVER!”

*He thinks...*

“Shhh!”

“For ten thousand years you hid it from me, then I let you find it for me. Was not even that hard to take it back. Smiggles are so stupid.”

“What is a smiggle? You keep mentioning that word.”

“You are not worthy to even be speaking to, but I will be generous, I have a few hours to kill, before I kill you all. Ahhh, victory is sweet!

“Smiggle was the lowest of the low, not worthy to be of the same species as the People. What you would now call a scientist. He cared nothing for honor, only for stars and other such trano-shit. We kept him around for amusement. That was till the comet came. He knew about it for months and said nothing! Nothing! We barely got out of range of the tidal wave and blast in time. Our world was changed overnight. Granted it had been getting colder for generations and we moved south gradually to compensate. Now we had to head north rapidly. We were not designed for the cold. My special abilities and the power sphere allowed us to survive, but it was not easy.

I was immune to the death that gradually came to everyone else. For generations we tried to hold on, but the cold was too much. Accidents and the sickness, which I understand now comes from too much inbreeding, eventually left me alone in this world. For eons I wandered. The power sphere informed me of what had happened and the likelihood of another strike. I had time, but it was not forever. I needed a plan. The power sphere came with a great deal of information, but almost all of it depended on tech to accomplish, smiggle stuff. As I was not going to get my claws dirty, I had to find something to do it for me.

I started a series of selected breeding programs starting with what was available at the time, mostly fur balls, what you call mammals, sky shrieks, what you call birds and the remnants of distant ancestors to The People, what you call reptiles. It proved to be too cold and too low of an oxygen level to bring dinosaurs back up again. Lost the larger insects too. Too bad, the green dragonflies were very tasty. Sky shrieks could not support the brain mass necessary, nor were they equipped to manipulate their environment in the ways required of tech if I made them earth bound. Oh I tried. Made some fantastic killing machines, but they cared nothing for tech. They advanced to the level they could hunt socially, but no way were they ever going to create the tech I needed.

That left the fur balls, rat's spawn, as I refer to you as. For that was from which you came, dirty smelling, conniving rats, but with one trait I needed, they were intensely curious. It took countless millions of years and many false starts and parallel experiments, but I finally achieved

early Man. That name is a bit of an inside joke actually, means fermented shit in my language. No matter. It took an impossibly long time for you to achieve fire. I had to practically rub your noses in it to get you to see its possibilities. I was all but ready to give up again. Your kind had spread through out the world, like evil weeds, wrecking destruction on native populations where ever you went. I could not be everywhere at once and lost track of many groups. Agricultural societies became too conservative and resistant to change praying to false gods and offering sacrifice, such a waste, and warrior ones too unstable to support tech. Took quite some time to find the right balance, mostly by playing one group against another. Some of the battles were glorious! No matter, at least till one of you evil rat turds stole the power sphere! I looked everywhere, but with my diminished abilities from the loss of the sphere, I could not seek revenge till the sphere was long gone and hidden too well for me to sense.

I had time. I knew it was on this continent and if I could not gain it back directly I would find another way. A group of your kind in the steppes of what is now Russia were proving to be very interesting. I encouraged them in the proper ways. They knew of honor and of battle. They had the blood lust! Finally, here was a group of beings I could use. By carefully matching one group against another, I tested and forced them to invent ever increasing tech to stay alive. It was horribly slow at first but then things progressed at an ever increasing rate. I was not even convinced that I needed the power sphere anymore, so did not pursue it as intensely as maybe I should have. These new humans spread their ways to the far corners of the world and forced others to invent tech to compensate or were simply assimilated. By as short a time as four hundred years ago, I was ready to try and find the power sphere again. I sent my forces back to this land to retake it and to find it.

For hundreds of years and with a tech culture exploding with ferocity, I pursued my plans. The fact that I am the richest being on the planet is a given. I made you. Who could understand your ways better than I? I have taken many names, but perhaps you know me best as Satan, a diminutive of Sauron in my tongue.”

“You were responsible for an incredible amount of death and destruction. And all this was so you could have this sphere back again. Amazing! Such a waste!”

“Waste? You fools! Without me you would still be stealing corn and waste offal from lesser beings than you are now. Do you know that the greatest artists that ever lived, Leonardo and Michaelangelo both lived in

a time of warfare and violence? Your greatest technological achievements and advancements all happened during these intense times. What did the Swiss, your prime example of peace ever invent, the cuckoo clock? Ha! That is waste if you ask me. All your medicine, arts, science was because of me. I controlled it all! Without me you were ignorant savages, much as these friends you gather around you, that have not advanced much in ten thousand years. Even given the tools on a silver platter, they refuse them. They had the warrior spirit, but threw it away on spirit quests. Bah! A total waste!”

“He makes me sick. Everything that has happened to us, the wars, famines, plagues, slavery, everything, was because of him. He could have used his abilities to save us, to allow us to work cooperatively to build an incredible scientific and spiritual understanding. Instead we have a broken world near the end of human existence. He does not care about us, he only uses us. To be discarded as soon as we are no longer of any use. Billions and billions of lives manipulated and destroyed, just so he could have this thing? Amazing. Beyond comprehension. All it is good for is to light our staffs, which we can do ourselves anyway, so why all the fuss? Such a waste.”

“I want to know, why so much animosity towards the TKs specifically? I assume you were responsible for the witch hunts, the debunking of all things paranormal and the current TK hunts?”

“Simple. I needed you to find the power sphere, but not a group of beings so strong as to threaten me. Nothing personal. That was the reason I had that one TK5 nailed to a tree and poisoned others. Even whole communities had to go at times. There is a genetic element to these abilities. This is, as you say it, a dog eat dog world and I intend to remain top dog. Oh, I will still have use for your kind for a time, but with the proper genetic manipulation I intend to break up your species into 10-20 sub species, specialized to do different tasks. I have learned also. There is some value to tech and carefully controlled social behavior. Definitely need a smiggle class. But something that is totally dependent, so they can never attempt to take control again. You need not worry; your deaths will be quick. I will enjoy eating your flesh raw. The best way really. Too bad you are all to squeamish to try it. But as TKs, you are far too strong to be allowed to roam free, spreading your filth. HelperV was a mistake, but accidents happen. Best one can do is to make use of them.

And don't think that I don't remember and recognize you Maggie. You have let your hair go blond again. Very good. Maggie was one of my more recent experiments.”

“Who is Maggie? No one here by that name.”

*I am Margaret, nicknamed Maggie, but I have not used that name since I was 17.*

“Yes, when I took steps to turn you to my purpose. I needed a group that would keep the 'pears' as you call them strong. Worked for awhile, but your species seems hell bent on self destruction through self indulgence. As soon as things get easy you go fat, literally. I will not make that mistake again. My next creations will be sleek and strong.”

“What's he talking about?”

*I was working as a corporate hacker. I was raped at 23 by my 'boss' and two of his 'associates'. I took revenge and destroyed their business by hacking their servers, corrupting their data and apps, so that they were later implicated. No trial. They just disappeared a few hours after it was found out, as did I. Hacked my bracelet, changed my hair color. Yes, I have known for a long time how to 'fix' bracelets. Anyway. I drifted for awhile and ultimately ended up at the lab, where the director was happy to get someone that good for practically nothing and knew better than to ask questions. Come to think of it, there was a fourth person in the room, but he did not participate in my 'education', kept to the shadows. I know I should be mad, but I am not. I like and prefer being a straight sap to being a pear servant.*

“Very good my dear, but do tell them about your 'extra' activities.”

*During the time I was drifting, I linked with a group that became the APES after the riots. It was not enough that I got revenge on those who hurt me. I wanted to bring down the system that made them think they could do this to any one and get away with it. It was why the APES never hit the lab, except when I thought the gate should be replaced. I was in charge of teaching hackers. What I spent every freeday on.*

“Wow, you are a Trainer! I want to know everything! APES were my heroes growing up. I never got past packet monkey level three. Going mech instead. I thought your work looked familiar. This is so exciting! We were promised so much by our yuppie parents and when the collapse came, we were denied everything. The APES antics kept a lot of us going. I remember the time you took on...”

*Later Ron, someone is coming.*

“Huh, I don't scan anything.”

*Listen.*

“Well it is about time you showed up Cringing Cat.”

Oh god, it couldn't be. Barely speaking I voice “Pushy Paws?”

“Well just who else would call you Cringing Cat, huh? You

expecting rain? That clear roof will not do much when the sun comes up. Gets VERY hot up here in the summer. You don't need a greenhouse. Nothing grows here anyway. No water."

"Yeh, we noticed." We hug for the longest time, cats included. They were all over her like she was made of catnip or something. "Hey you guys, give her a break."

"Yingui, hate to be rude, but who is this?"

"Sorry, I know this sounds cliché now, but Pushy Paws is a friend I never expected to see again, even before the fire plague. I have known her since we went to college together in the early seventies."

"She is not TK, how did she know we were here and how come we did not sense her. After the Shohone shot you I have been much more careful. Even seeing her standing here, I still do not see her with the TK ability." I introduce the rest of the Guardians, but not Br'thn. She looks quizzically at Rachael who is still wearing her 'Klingon modified robe' and mumbles something about too much blood wine. Rachael grins. But, even with friends you had to be careful with the fate of the world and of course with Satan watching. I did not want Satan to know or suspect that what he had was not the real thing. The others already understood and were being careful also.

"Satan huh. Nice to meet you face to face finally. I have certainly struggled against you long enough. Aren't you supposed to have horns and pointy tail?" She turns to face the rest of us, "I started out earlier than the rest this morning from a different direction. Not so young anymore. Where are the others, they should be here by now? I am not that old."

"I ah, gave them a choice to make. They are still near the base of the mesa figuring it out."

"You didn't!"

"I did. Should keep them busy for some time." I grin. "You mean that you knew I was here and said nothing."

She grins. "That would not have been any fun."

"Well, some of us need sleep, even if you don't and there is only a few hours of dark left. If she is not trouble, I recommend we adjourn, clear roof or not."

"Oh she is trouble, but not the kind we need to worry about tonight." The others go inside, the cats, Pushy Paws and I remain outside for a moment. Rachael takes 'Jack' back to his pile of rubble and sits near him to guard him. "Do you have any special needs I can help with?"

"Are you sure we are not too old for that?"

"Pushy Paws, nothing has changed has it?"



“And your point is? I am able to take care of myself just fine all these years thank you.” She goes in and finds a place against one wall.

***Are you going to mate with her?***

*Br'thn, you know TKs don't have those feelings.*

***Sauron and the cats do.***

*We are not the same as Sauron or the cats. Affected us differently I guess. Besides, I am too old.*

***There are documented cases of ninety year old males producing viable offspring. Also, high level TKs do not age.***

*Huh? Please Br'thn, Pushy Paws and I have a different kind of relationship. Oh, we have talked about it from time to time, but never with the intent of having children, more because we deeply love each other and enjoy sharing affection. Sex is not necessary at all for sharing affection. We both had other relationships when the other was free. Just never worked out for us to be together in that way. When the collapse happened, it just made it that much harder. She was in LA and I was in New Shanghai. We conversed for years and years via the net, but time and distance took their toll and eventually the messages got fewer and fewer and finally quit.*

***Do you miss her?***

*Very, very much.*

# Pushy Paws' Tale

The cats slept with Pushy Paws. I feel slighted, but she always had a way with cats. They slept in late while I set up the latrine and prepared breakfast. You may have noticed that I usually had breakfast detail. Since reaching TK6 I did not sleep any longer, so it was natural. Besides, the others were better at the other meals. Ron, because of what his mother had taught him, was actually quite good at any thing Indian and vegetarian. Rachael and Daniel could make a meal out of anything scrounged. I shared a love of hot peppers with James and so on. I washed my hands and got to work. The Hopi were corn people, so in their honor I prepared fried cornmeal mush. Choice of hot peppers or sugar. I chose the hot peppers myself. I figured the rest, except for James, would go for syrup.

Pushy Paws is the first up. Ok, Ghost was the first, waiting for the first hot ones off the grill. Even new love could not separate him from food. Besides, there were no mice here. "You could go on a diet you know Ghost." He looks at me like I am speaking Greek, but is quiet. I guess jokes get old even for cats. I point out the facilities for Pushy Paws.

She returns and joins me at the fire. "You guys really know how to suffer don't you. Composting toilet and hot water for showers. Maybe you could use this as well. As long as you are roughing it and all." She tosses me something wrapped in foil.

I open it up. Chocolate powder! "You remembered. How did you get this?"

"I have my connections." I dupe it and prepare hot chocolate to drink and chocolate syrup for the mush. It does not take long before the rest are walking out to the fire like zombies before fresh meat.

"Chocolate! Chocolate!"

"Shower first, that way." They know the routine, though it is easier with just the twelve and not the three thousand of a few days ago. Quieter too.

After everyone has showered and eaten they gather around and wait quietly. "Polite aren't they?"

"Well trained, though I have to warn you they are very persistent as well as very patient."

"Best get it over with then I guess."

"Yup, that would be best." I lay back to a more comfortable position.

Ghost is with me and Marm is with Pushy Paws. At least one appreciates the hand that feeds him though I envy the other being rubbed gently by those hands. Sigh....

“Before this starts, what is your totem animal?” James can't leave it alone.

“That is Badger, he has been whining the entire last two months over the animal given to him. Black belt and net game champ feels slighted.”

“Badger is a strong totem, what is wrong with Badger? What does the prophecy say?”

“No one remembers.”

“You really need to pay more attention. My totem animal is the bear.”

“No, I mean that part of the prophesy has been lost. The person responsible died before they could pass it on. Happened about fifty years ago we were told.”

“Wait, the last one to be here and she gets the power animal! This is not fair!”

“You do not know what the bear symbolizes. Bear is healing, inner knowing, strength, introspection”

“That fits you quite well.”

“Thank you. Remember, none of us choose our animals. They choose us or were assigned to us by someone more knowledgeable. We are too close to ourselves to see ourselves well. Sometimes a totem animal is what best describes us, sometimes it is what we should strive to become.”

“Yeh James, you really need to be more badger like. Would be a big improvement.”

“Watch it weasel!”

“Ok, you guys, can it, let's hear her story.” Daniel the diplomat.

“I worked odd jobs for the movie industry, script writing when I could, transcribing and grunt work when I couldn't. Reality shows and then the switch to computer generated net casts took their toll. Finally in frustration I returned to the rez, but there was no one left. I took up with the Navajo, as we have had good relations with them for some time. Lived by myself and two cats for the longest time, clones of Edwin and Jasper, whom Cringing Cat remembers. Not really clones of course, saps could not afford that, but close personality wise. No net on the rez of course, so that is why we lost contact again. Did keep my weight down though, near starvation does that for a girl, even one in her late sixties. I was city trained, but I adapted with the help of my neighbors. The last cat died two years ago. He was fifteen, old for a desert cat. I just could not

catch enough mice at the end.”

“No wonder the cats like you best. Could not have it any easier than to have a human do ALL of the work for them.”

“Well your guys have it pretty easy, what with telepathic and shifting abilities. Don’t think I did not notice that you guys.” She points a finger at Ghost who sniffs it for food possibilities no doubt. “It was a few months later that I started to have visions. I consulted with the Navajo elders and they guided me through a series of spirit quests. I was seeing seven people of remarkable talents take on forces many times their size and knowledge. I thought I recognized one of the seven, but suspected that was wishful thinking at the time, figuring CC was long dead. When the fever struck we listened on radio for a while. No one visited the rez any more. When it looked like it would be total, we stopped listening. The tribal council decided it would be best to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the rez just in case. Two men were killed who attempted to enter. We have heard of ones called rogues that act out in very violent ways, but our concern was more from the fever itself. We waited several months before venturing out.

The first we met were a military unit out of Flagstaff. They had holed up like we did to prevent exposure. They were actively hunting people with telekinetic abilities. As we had never been exposed, we could not have any TKs among us. At least not ones high enough to be a concern, something about level ones being harmless. They insisted with force that we open up the rez for inspection. We reminded them that we still had a force of twenty thousand. They reminded us they still had nukes and were not afraid to use them. They could not care less either way. We let them in. Nasty buggers. Destroyed everything they touched and then left with never a thank you. They were particularly interested in the Hopi ruins for some reason. Really trashed them. Left all kinds of tags too. We left them in place for about a month, they slowly stopped working one by one. All at once would have aroused too much suspicion. When questioned, we could come up with all kinds of excuses about weather, children, suspicious elders, curious wild life and of course my favorite, the kochinas. They never investigated. We weren't worth the trouble. We left them alone and they left us alone.

We heard from runners and short wave, that seven special people were coming this way with a host of thousands. No reason was given, but I suspected from the news that these were the same seven I had seen in my visions and the elders concurred, too many similarities to be coincidence. It was then that I was told of secret knowledge only

formerly known to the Hopi. I knew about the Hopi prophesy if course, talked with CC on the net any number of times about it. This was more though, hidden information was transferred to the Navajo elders just before the last Hopi elder died. At first the elders were skeptical, but respected the Hopi elder's last request and maintained the information. I was not filled in on that information from the elders I had known myself. Guess I was too progressive at the time for them to trust, living in Hollywood and all. We all learn the hard way I guess. For purposes of keeping the white anthropologists, scientists and other tourists that would burrow into our culture worse than a blowfly larvae, an abandoned kiva was designated as the 'official' gateway that the last age, the 4th, emerged from. Fake ceremonies were conducted there yearly to maintain appearances. Thousands of Kochina dolls were produced to further dilute the stories and legends. Sold to tourists. This amused the elders to no end. Crazy white man would buy anything labeled Kochina. Provided a meager income and a way of getting even at the same time.

When you arrived a week earlier than we expected they had to rush things a bit, so that was why I was not there to greet you when you ah, landed. I heard you made a rather spectacular entrance. Never did things halfway did you Cringing Cat?"

"Hey, how did you know that was my doing?"

"No one else would have even thought of something that far fetched. Three thousand people appearing out of no where. No tracks, no ships, nothing. Don't you think that was overkill? You could have found a quieter way. For an entire day afterwards we waited. Feeling for sure the military would show up. We could not risk it this late in the game. I would have been secreted out if necessary to preserve my component of the prophesy. Nothing happened. Do you know why?"

"We have our suspicions. You met Satan last night. It really is him. Also know as Sauron, Jack, Colonel Meyer, Dragon and who knows how many other names. No doubt you have heard the tale of Dragon and Coyote by now?"

"Several times. As I have heard several versions of your tale. So, now what? What do you intend to do with these new abilities? World conquest and a world made in your own image or ideal?"

We were not the only ones holding back and making sure.

Rachael speaks up, "We don't know. Yingui wants to play it safe. He thinks that even a small difference in action now will make a very large difference later. I am not so sure. I think the world is more resilient than that. We have been hunted almost from the time our abilities showed

themselves and I am getting really tired of it. I say we either confront or leave. Either no one wants us around or they want to use us to dominate others. I can't let that happen.”

“I share both concerns. Being older helps me see Yingui's point, but it is getting really tiring to be always hunted and never defending ourselves, except by running. But I am not as convinced that we are either powerful enough yet or know enough to not really blow it. New Jerusalem was an eye opener for us. We went in thinking we could finally do something and even Rachael would be the first to agree we did not do so well.”

“I am usually the first to act without thinking. We need more information. In the net games, you had to be patient and learn the ropes before you could succeed, same with martial arts. It takes a lot of time and practice and we do not have the luxury of multiple lifetimes. We can travel very easily now, so why not do so. Check out the planet, see who is still here, in what numbers and what level of tech. We already suspect the Chinese of having largely survived. Yingui can scan that far now. Who else? We need to find out.”

“I would also like to know if the gateway is gone forever and we just have to make do or we just have to remain patient and a new gateway will come about somehow. That was our mission, to find the 'power sphere' and get it to the gate. Is that over or do we need to fight Sauron for the world. IF it is gone forever, what then? There is a lot of built up momentum from Sauron's actions, genetic and cultural. That will be very hard to overcome.”

“Speaking of which, James would you mind getting Susan and our guest?” He nods and departs and a minute later the three of them return.

“Dragon is here.”

“Good, he is still needed.”

“You want to explain that to us?”

“The gateway is not a device or door or structure. And you do not need to go looking for it.” She says grinning from ear to ear.

Oh shit. I look carefully at her. “You are the gateway? That is why we cannot see you with TK scanning?” She nods.

**Correct.**

*You knew also?*

**Br'thn know much.**

“So, now we are eight, a good Buddhist number, Yingui should be happy.”

“Every number is a good Buddhist number from what I have read.

And we are nine, plus two if I am counting everyone here.”

“Plus Satan and of course the cats, so your point is?”

“I have never been able to keep anything from you Pushy Paws.”

“But you keep trying.”

“We are taking the cats? Wouldn’t they be safer here?”

“They saved our butts. They deserve this chance as much as we do.

Who knows, maybe they will be the next sentient race and they are beginning their oral history here.”

*Stupid monkeys.*

“Watch it you two. Remember the monsters. Now what happens?”

They hunker down again, but are watching carefully.

“Cleanup.”

Daniel announces, “The people are moving. The rest have caught up with the council. The TKs are now out in front, not as beholding to the council I would suspect and have forced the issue. The rest are following. They are moving much faster than we did. I don’t think the TKs see this as a sacred quest any longer and are just curious.”

“How much time do we have?”

“Half a day at least, more likely not till evening. That many people do not move THAT fast, and it is all uphill. They are likely to tire. But we want to get out of here before the TK3s can sense us.”

“It is also possible that some may scout ahead.”

Pushy Paws takes over. “Get rid of the crystal cathedral please. Mourning time is over. They have been dead or gone for decades. It is our time now.” It takes us about an hour to satisfy Pushy Paws. Boy is she picky. We remove all traces of our having been there and a large part of the military mess. We remove the latrine after some last minute users. We remove even our footprints. “You guys need to switch to moccasins, less distinctive and don’t hurt the ground as much.” Hey at least we were not using the old waffle stomper shoes of the seventies.

Of course the only way to remove all footprints was to be levitated. Easy enough to do for us, but now what? Pushy Paws directs us so that Jack is in the center, Br’thn is above hidden in Pushy Paw’s wrap and the rest of us are arranged in a circle at the bottom holding everyone up. The two cats are on Pushy Paw’s lap. “Why is Sauron in the center?” He does not look happy about this. He is starting to suspect something. Does he need to be in the center for this to work, or is he in a cage? Of course, he does not believe in the gateway, so trap is more likely with this many high level TKs surrounding him. Will the power sphere protect him even now?

“You will see if my understanding is correct. I am taking a legend passed on over thousands of years, plus dreams I have had over the last several months and translating it into a modern understanding. Not so easy.”

“All we can do is try.”



# Through the Gate

“How did you catch Sauron?” I shake my head.

*Not now PP. Later. I TP to just her.*

*Food?*

“I think you can guess who that was.” A chuckle as everyone relaxes a bit and adjusts position.

“So you understand that there are different psiotic patterns? In fact each species and each psiotic ability produces a different pattern. As your own group shows, there is even variation with a species, as the cats and Sauron demonstrate. The combinations approach infinity. I am not anti-TK, but a psiotic door. This door opens to a special DS pathway that has only one destination if my understanding of what I have learned is correct. But it needs enough psiotic control ability present to be used. That means a TK9 or a group such as yours of lesser abilities. The power sphere is already at TK9, so we are a bit redundant.”

*The Galactic Center is our destination?*

“That was Barb, she is also our math expert.”

“I really have no idea Barb, I have no math ability at all.”

“We each have our own gifts.”

“Er, then why are we here? Little Deer and I are only weakly TK.”

“You are essential as well, for you are our witnesses. Everyone else here is out there as far as normal people are concerned. You are much closer to them and so they will be able to relate to what you see and understand better. Alright to be scared. I am too.”

“Yeh, ok.”

“Are we ready? The power sphere will initiate the transfer.”

“So the 'thn are not born like us, totally ignorant?”

***Not ignorant, carry genetic, psiotic and essential historical knowledge. Please shield weaker travelers.***

“Wow I can hear her too.”

“Little Deer, we need you to be quiet and concentrate, ok?”

“Ok” We shield everyone. I place a separate bubble around Sauron. But I have no doubt he could break it if he let go of the sphere he was holding. Just a little while longer.

***Concentrate on Pushy Paw’s minus-psiotic field. This power sphere will initiate the key. Do not try and understand, only 'thn can do this.***

Sauron is looking intently at the sphere he is holding. Not sure if he

is confused or pissed. Concentrate. It feels a bit like falling. Blackness.  
This is normal for DS. Stars? Not stars, the twinkles are structures, sort of  
like very spiny sea urchins.

*Fractal inversion of a star.*

**Correct.**

I knew that.

# Tribunal

I wake with Br'thn on my staff. All of our staffs are lit with Br'thn providing light from mine. We are enclosed in a shield of unknown structure. Outside is vacuum. Sauron is in a separate bubble, but something is happening to him, he has finally released the power sphere he was holding and is starting to figure out our trick. He is going to be pissed for sure now! Glad we got through the gate before he could mess it all up. The others are already awake and watching also. "He is growing!" Sure enough, almost double his previous size and morphing also. He is returning to his original form from 65M years ago. Dragon seems more appropriate now. Definitely reptilian with a long sinuous neck with white feathers. Could he have been the original serpent in the Garden of Eden? Satan looks more and more appropriate. Glad there are two layers of shields between us. He is definitely pissed.

*You are lunch meat rat spawn!*

Guess he has his other abilities back as well.

*Give it back to me thieves!*

It? I am guessing he means Br'thn. He does not know her name or gender or care. He does not know she is alive. This confirms what I suspected. How could the one who caused us to be, be so naive? Sauron continues to rant and rave, but is no immediate threat or would have already have done something. I don't think our hosts would have allowed it anyway.

***Correct.***

"Is it possible to cut off his TP ranting to us?"

***Yes.***

"Ah, much better."

"Br'thn are you allowed to talk with us? Answer questions that is."

***Yes.***

"Where are we and what is going to happen?"

***Regional office of the Galactic Overseers. All judged.***

"Yourself included."

***Yes.***

"I gather this is serious or we would have not come all this way."

***Correct.***

"When does it start?"

***Started sixty five million years ago.***

"For yourself and Sauron, but what about us?"

*Same.*

“So it is not we specifically, but our species?”

*Yes and more.*

“We are toast then.”

“I am inclined to agree with James on this one.”

“Same here.”

“Br'thn, what method of capital punishment is used by the Galactic Overseers?”

“You had to ask that?”

*Two methods are commonly used. Sterilization of world by Overseers or self-sterilization is allowed to occur.*

“Some choice.”

*No choice, Overseers choose.*

“As I said, we are toast. Nice knowing all of you.”

“Gee and I thought I was a depressionist.”

They let us stew in our own juices for several hours. I chose to meditate and eventually most follow suit. The cats were out long ago. It was the hardest on our apprentices. I wonder why they are here, though it would not matter in the long run. Sterilization of a planet is a pretty thorough sounding thought. They have as much right to be here as us, maybe even more so. If we, by some miracle, are allowed to continue it will be their world, but what will they inherit? After my last upgrade I had scanned the rest of the world with Br'thn's help. A lot of people are still alive in China. Africa was toast from AIDS and the other diseases long before the fire plague of course. Pakistan and India finally nuked each other with some of the fallout reaching China. Europe looked pretty much the same as us, scattered survivors minus the large American Indian immune populations. China was rather ruthless and managed to preserve whole areas by killing all life in infected areas. That meant most of the newest arrivals from the USA that had fled HelperV. That also meant that their tech survived largely intact. It would not take them long to be a world power again, with all the old problems and thinking intact as well.

A sphere about twice the size of Br'thn appears outside our bubble.

*Welcome.*

I recognize that voice! Though I am used to her saying 'hold still'. I have not heard her in quite some time. Daniel was fastest on his feet, so to speak, as in a weightless condition that is relatively arbitrary.

“How are we to address you your honor?”

*Qr'thn.*

She continues to wait outside our bubble.

“This is Br'thn's mother.” I then address her directly. “Thank you for allowing us to know your daughter. It has indeed been a pleasure, no matter what is to become of us.”

***Did you restrain Sauron in anyway?***

“Br'thn and I created the psiotic sphere in his bubble, but otherwise we did not restrain him, no TK bubbles or any mechanical means. All he had to do was to let go of it to have his full abilities back. He apparently thought he had Br'thn and chose not to let go, for fear of loosing her again. However we did nothing to dissuade him from that thought either. It was not our intention to bring dishonor to the 'thn, just to protect ourselves and Br'thn without doing harm.” A risky method to be sure.

There is nothing for quite some time. I was beginning to think that I had either not been heard, or had said something incredibly wrong. The sphere leaves our bubble and goes next to Sauron's. He is obviously still mad, though judging a dinosaur's gestures, I could be entirely wrong. A minute later Qr'thn leaves.

“Qr'thn was the one responsible for our upgrades. It was her voice I heard before each time we went under. I am guessing that she sensed that her daughter was in danger or trouble and used us to rescue her. She may be in trouble herself, if this was not a legal action.”

“Well, Br'thn did nearly die of starvation. That should count as trouble by most parents.”

“Yes, anyway, I am guessing she did the upgrades to us in hopes that we would rescue her daughter. I don't think they were expecting there to be anyone other than me or Sauron. It was pure accident that the cats were caught in the second one that I was aware of. No one had a choice on the next one. It was not till the one following that we intentionally included everyone.”

“That explains our spread in abilities.”

“It also explains our success. No one of us, not even Yingui could have done this on their own.”

“I agree.”

A 'thn of the same size as Qr'thn arrives at Sauron's bubble. Could be her again. I can't tell till she speaks.

***Telepathic barrier down.*** Br'thn informs us.

***What claim do you make on the sphere currently in the human's container?***

*I told you the last time you were here. The sphere is mine by rights granted to me when I received it. I earned the right to it by virtue of my*

*abilities. Return it to me immediately. I demand to speak with someone in authority now!*

“That's weird, this is not the same 'thn and yet Sauron does not seem to know or care.”

“Is he that stupid?”

“Or that arrogant?” I wonder if all 'thn are female, or if this is just the way my mind is interpreting the TP. The 'thn comes over to our container. Daniel gets ready to answer.

***The Bearer only will answer. What claim do you make on the sphere in your container?***

I take one clue from Daniel. “Your Honor, We make no claim what so ever on Br'thn, daughter of Qr'thn. She is totally free to do as she wishes. Always has been as far as we know.” This 'thn disappears.

“You did that well, I hope.” At least we told the truth.

Four golden 'thn arrive and equally space themselves around Sauron's bubble.

***Do you accept the judgment of this tribunal Sauron of Earth?***

He is visibly shaking now. Has he seen this before? Or reacting on his fears?

*I, Sauron, hereby appeal to the Mercy of 'thn.* This does not sound to be in keeping with Sauron's personality at all. Something is up. He also used the word 'thn, so he knows more than he lets on.

***Who are the 'thn?***

He has no answer. He has seen so many die; all of his own kind, countless others that he has caused the death of. His pleading has no honor or dignity at all. The bubble he is in gets brighter and brighter and then disappears entirely. The four 'thn come and enclose our container.

***Do you accept the judgment of this tribunal sentients of earth?***

The cats are wide awake watching the proceedings. In unison, Marm and Ghost TP, *Yes.*

Didn't know cats knew that word. Daniel then answers for the human contingent, “Yes, Honorable 'thn we do as well.” We all do our best to bow in the weightless condition, more of a folding than a true bow. The light gets brighter around us but we remain silent.....dignity is important at one's death.

# Council

I awaken. I am on a hard surface in an empty hall of some sort. There are intricate patterns on the walls about 10 meters in height, sort of like psiotic maps in 2D, possibly a psiotic cage or barrier. We appear to be in the center. The others are waking up around me, including the cats. I scan the surface. It is of the same material as our previous container. I look more closely. Interesting, very high atomic number, in the thousands. No wonder we never found this one on our own. Who would have guessed a stable isotope at this distance from hydrogen?

*Are we alive?*

“Appears so. Wonder if Sauron is also?”

“Did you see the expression on his face? Priceless.” I scan for Br'thn, but she is not near us and I can't sense beyond the walls.

***All except the Bearer proceed to the edges of the room.***

Pushy Paws whispers to the others, “No matter what happens here, do not react. Things are not always as they appear.” She trusts me more than I do. She gives me a wink. Pots and Deer are hiding behind James and Susan. The Cats are with Pushy Paws of course. I am sorry this is so scary to them. I have expected death so many times, it ceases to be a fear, just like getting over public speaking if you do it enough. Sauron suddenly appears next to me but does not immediately react to my presence. The cats growl, but are quickly silenced by Pushy Paws. Good show guys, but you are no match for him. He is behaving himself, a miracle in itself. Br'thn and Qr'thn appear above and to the front of us. I am so well tuned to Br'thn that I always seem to know which one she is and it feels good to have her back in my mind. I bow to the two. Sauron makes no move.

***Sauron has appealed to the 'thn as is his right.*** How did he know this was a right or did he just guess?

***For the right to the sphere the two of you will fight to the death for there can be only one Bearer.***

Is life so cheap to the 'thn? Sauron outweighs me three to one at least. And why do they keep referring to Br'thn as an it? We face each other and I bow to Sauron. He remains motionless.

***Begin.*** The bubbles around us disappear.

I immediately sit down into a meditation position and start projecting Meta, or love with all my might. I have no intention to start killing now. Too late to change my mind anyway. Sauron's response is to swipe at me,

but just misses me as I am now sitting, but as he swings completely around his heavy tail hits me on the side of the head, knocking me down. He is heavily shielded and could have used TK, but this is obviously personal for him. When I start projecting again, he is thrown back a step but then snarls and suddenly and viciously rips me to shreds. The last thing I hear through the pain is a gasp from Barb and a whimper from Little Deer.

Pushy Paws raises a finger to her lips to silence any more outbursts.

*It is mine. I have won! Give it to me!*

Silence. When nothing happens he looks around and seeing the eleven others and starts towards them, smearing my remains all over the floor and licking his lips with my blood on them. Though tears are running down everyone's faces except Pushy Paws, no one moves.

*Your precious leader was a total smiggle. There was no honor in his death. Hopefully you will present more of a challenge and choose to die with dignity.*

A barrier stops him at the last second. He concentrates, but nothing happens. He roars! Still nothing.

***The Bearer called Yingui has won the right to the power sphere.***

A look of total astonishment comes across his face. He looks quickly around and at himself. He has no wounds, how could he have lost. This was to the death and he is not dead, Yingui is, he tasted his blood.

***Come forward and claim your prize.***

He is really perplexed now. I assumed correctly that he did not bother to count the number of the group and did not notice a late addition.

I remove my hood and walk from the end of our group into the center of the hall, brushing aside the barrier with my thoughts. Enraged Sauron rises to strike again. This time I enclose him with the barrier material.

"I claim no one. Br'thn is free to do as she chooses, as per our agreement, as it has always been."

Br'thn explains so everyone can hear. ***To the death only meant that one must die, which has been fulfilled. We did not say that the survivor was to be the winner. The Bearer, Yingui, asked Br'thn to agree to a most unusual condition BEFORE he would accept bearership, which he always assumed was a protective and temporary role only. He said that under no conditions was Br'thn to ever kill any sentient being and to warn him if any action on either of our parts was even likely to put another into a position of possible harm for which there was no***



*obvious route of escape for the individual to choose. He further made Br'thn agree that once our mission was over, when we had passed through the gateway, that Br'thn was totally free of any further obligations to him or anyone ever again, other than the ones Br'thn freely accepted. Br'thn was the one who insisted on the mission being the point of freedom, Yingui wanted it to be immediate, but relented so the group could work better together.*

There is a pause here lasting tens of seconds.

*That I accepted. At no time did he ever ask me to do anything against my will. I was always treated as an equal in any and all group discussions. I was always treated with the respect due any sentient being.*

A pause. Br'thn comes close to my face.

*Why are you crying? No one is harmed.*

Barely able to speak I choke out, “You finally referred to yourself as I, instead of in the third person.” I sit on the floor no longer able to stand, tears freely flowing, but with a huge smile on my face. The others all come over to me. Daniel removes the mess my former corpse has made. A little trick that Br'thn and I worked out in case I might needed it. In a sense I was also free. I could become anything I could imagine. This new body certainly had improvements. I only looked 69 on the outside. Maybe my name should be coyote now, as coyote has tricked Sauron yet again. The rest of our group is confused, but Pushy Paws understood. I don't know how, but I learned long long ago not to question her sources. The cats come over and climb into my lap, licking up the tears on my face. “Salt-aholics!” That cracks me up and now I am laughing and hugging everyone. We each touch Br'thn affectionately in turn. Giving her honor for choosing to be part of our group. Qr'thn cautiously comes over to us.

*Affection is not part of our understanding. We are totally mental creatures.*

“We understand and don't require you to participate in a way that would bring you discomfort. We are all happy and thankful for all the help you have given us and your daughter.” I bow to Qr'thn.

She hesitates, but she then joins in cautiously. Swirling around all of us and Br'thn. We are careful and do not touch her more than once each. She seems to accept that.

The walls of the hallway dissolve. Beyond is the most remarkable array of beings ever imagined. The cats freak! Too much like the images that Barb had imagined and threatened them with during our journey.

Very similar in fact. More was at work here than I understood. I bubble them separately, so they can't hurt themselves and let Pushy Paws hold them and comfort them. Some of the beings are in protective bubbles, no doubt because our atmosphere or temperature or something is harmful to them or us. Mr Pots notices first and taps me on the shoulder. I bow to them as well. The others see what is going on and follow suit. James demonstrates how a protective barrier can be made just at the surface of our skins. Most here are TK5 or above, the rest follow suit and cover those who can't do this for themselves. Pushy Paws TPs with Barb's help, *Takes some getting used to, breathing being such an instinctual thing.* We are taking care of our own air inside our lungs. I sense the other beings doing similar things. I project loving kindness again and ask them to join us. They respond by coming over. Anyone from the outside would wonder what has happened. Using TP, we introduce ourselves and they do the same. There are sentient beings from all over the region. None of them humanoid, but that does not matter. We are not alone. All those years of sci-fi movies and books wondering just this question and here we are, probably the first humans to see them. We receive many offers of help that are gratefully acknowledged. Some are very fast moving and some are very slow. There are all colors present, tentacles, arms, and who knows what. Qaletaqa is going to have trouble keeping his eyes in his head. He is grinning and looking at everything with intense curiosity. The cats and Little Deer are not so sure and take a more cautious view.

Finally Qr'thn ascends over our heads.

***Today is a day of great joy, for my daughter Br'thn is born!***

*Born? She also finally used the first person.*

***Only allowed in front of the born, so as not to confuse the younger ones. We are not considered sentient till we acknowledge self. This is my birthday, be happy Yingui!***

*Sauron?*

“There is one among us who is not happy. What becomes of Sauron?”

Br'thn slowly goes over to Sauron and dissolves the barrier. He does not reach out to her, but rather humbly lowers himself. At least he has dignity.

***I, Br'thn of the 'thn am hereby appointed your judge. Do you accept my judgment?***

There is a long a pause, an intake of air and then a grunt.

***Tell me Sauron, when were you most happy?***

He is taken back by this, expecting that finally they would carry out

the ultimate sentence. He would have for any of his subordinates who had done a fraction of what he has done to us. He speaks in his own tongue, which we cannot understand, but I think I know the answer. A bright light takes him away.

We spend days or weeks here, we don't know. There is so much to learn. We hear of vastly different ways of life as each takes a turn telling the group their story. Whereas we care for our young and see this as a "superior" trait, especially for an intelligent species, others spawn their young to the wild to fend for themselves. Only the strong return for more formal education at a later time. Some species simply split into two or more parts, each having the memories, experiences and abilities of the once whole organism. Some have vast cities and some are nomadic spending most of their time in solitude cruising the stars. Using TK shape shifting ability some adapt, rather than using "crude" and slow genetic dependencies. It was later explained that we are seeing the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, of the sentient races. Others exist in vastly different time frames or environmental conditions that could not attend here safely. Apparently a fully grown 'thn can exist in all time frames and environmental conditions. Interesting.

*Br'tn*

***Yes Yingui.***

*All that we went through came down to a 'duel' with Sauron at the end?*

***Not at all. The outcome was decided before the 'duel' as you call it. The final test was only a formality required by Sauron's appeal to mercy.***

*Then I did not need to go through the test?*

***You still needed to survive the test. But I was confident you would not fail, as were the other 'thn.***

*Why was I chosen, certainly not because I was any 'better' than Sauron? He did have first claim after all. We were and are rat's spawn as he would have said.*

***Sauron had nearly 65 million years to bring me to full consciousness, but never even attempted it. Fifty million is the average time to birth. He still does not recognize 'thn as living beings, grasping only after power as was aptly demonstrated by the simplicity of the trap used. The door was wide open, yet he did not take it. Qr'th chose you and Pushy Paws before your births for your roles as rescuers, but our entire small group accepted me unconditionally from the beginning. That was a major point in your favor and the reason Qr'thn did not***

***suffer any recriminations from her actions.***

*But, we have been raised on sci-fi/fantasy. We have been through race wars and class wars, albeit, probably started by Sauron, but never the less, we have learned to accept any intelligence, which you certainly are, as potential equals or even superiors, which have a little trouble accepting though. Even fifty years ago, we would have just as likely tried to destroy you as accept you. And I have to give credit to the Native Americans, who sheltered you for so long and clearly accepted you as a being worthy of protecting. I also believe that you were close to self awareness on your own and did not need our help.*

***Possibly. At the same time you do not give yourselves enough credit. Many of your species have chosen to embrace Sauron's path and do so willingly, for power, wealth, personal gain, even pleasure. I saw this among the natives as well as in Sauron's memories of times past. None of your group need have remained as poor as you were. You would never have been rich, but you could have carved out easier existences, if you were willing to sacrifice others to do so. Ask yourself this question. Would you have died to save me? Even though you did not know or understand the reason for all this or even what I am? Then ask yourself, would Sauron have? As you have seen, 'thn are not above protecting their young.***

*Or the Universe. Imagine Sauron with even more power. He would have eventually proven to be a threat to the entire Galactic Region.*

***As were his intention after the comet strike and the sole reason from raising your species to sentience. Time to go home.***

*I thought this was your home? Among your own kind.*

***I as formed on earth and have spent my entire life there, earth is home for me. I know more about humans from first hand experience than I do about 'thn from racial memories.***

*So, you are in a sense our guardian and ambassador.*

***Yes. As you are for me as well.***

# Home

“Hey you two, time to go back. We have work to do!”

“You don’t have to be so happy about it.”

“You want to eat duped food for the rest of your life?”

“Ok, I’m ready!” Daniel bows to the being he is 'talking' with and joins us.

“How do we get back?”

***Being born in the ‘thn sense, means an upgrade for me this time. You will still need the gateway for coming here, but we can go back even easier. I have spent most of my life on Earth and I will always know where in the universe it is.***

“Does this mean we need a new classification called Native Beings as well?” Ar-ar-ar.

“What do we do?”

We gather in a circle around Br’tbn, elevate a meter or so and then ‘poof’ we are back on the mesa.

“This sure beats getting car sick, se sick or air sick, ‘thn Air, the only way to teleport!”

“Dimension shift.”

“Whatever.”

It is early morning, sun not quite up. Air is still and quiet. Lots of footprints on the ground around us, fire pits are cold. Someone lost a coat or left it behind. Manufactured, but that does not mean anything. No one makes their own clothing any more. looks like it has rained judging from the patterns of drops in the dust, but not for very long. There is no mud left or paths etched into the ground from water running.

“Everyone scan. No surprises. They may not know or care that Sauron is gone.”

“A single person 60 meters to our right, behind that outcropping. Lot of people past 10 kilometers.”

“Older female, facing away from us. Sitting up, but breathing slowly. May be asleep or meditating. Do we disturb her?”

“Let’s wait a bit. How would you like to be suddenly confronted with this many people coming out of no where?”

***We need more information. I will attempt to collect.***

Br’tbn disappears. “Well, I guess she has to start acting on her own. Are we still her guardians? Teenagers are so much harder to keep track of.”

Daniel smiles, "Don't know. I am at a total loss as to what to do now. Lots of ideas from the galactic cultures, but each are different and each being also reinforced the fact that the decisions are ours to work out. Something about the Existence Imperative, whatever that is."

"Well, this mesa will hardly support life the way it is now even with the little bit of water it got. We could bring more water and such here of course, but do we disturb sacred ground?"

*I don't think any of us is comfortable with that, picking up on the emotions I am feeling.*

"Speaking of water, it did not take them long to find it." Rachael slaps a mosquito.

"Wait, there is one more on you. I want Daniel to see this. Daniel, look at the psiotic wavelengths."

"Yeh, they do not just suck blood, they also are acquiring psiotic energy as well. I wonder if all parasites are this way."

"OK, you guys, back on the subject. We need someplace people can get to if they need us and at the same time, it can't infringe on any one else's claim."

"Embassies could take care of the access problem. We could certainly barter materials for small amounts of real estate."

"It is funny, I thought of myself as a forest person, but now that I am away from the sea, I miss it. No one lives under the sea itself, so it is unclaimed property and there are not enough of us to make a significant impact on the local flora and fauna. I am wondering if we could set something up there. We have the TK to handle our needs, including transport. It would also give us the privacy to work things out."

"Have you forgotten your oath so soon Turtle?"

"Dr. Snake!" I did not realize the person near us was her. We all stand up to greet and hug her. "Ok, who was not scanning and let her in?" I am smiling when I say this. She is very weak and thin. Not good.

"I deserved that. What made you come back and where is Br'thn? Have you forgotten Sauron too?"

"So many questions. Br'thn took off to look about. She is free, even by 'thn standards now to do what she wants. Sauron is no longer a direct threat, though his influence will probably be with us forever, genetically and culturally. But what about you, you look horrible?"

"Water would be nice." Susan makes her a glass full of water with some essential minerals and sugar in it as well. Running Snake sips it slowly. She is very dehydrated.

"What's been happening here? Or are you here just because you like

the view?”

“The view is nice, especially in the morning like now. Gets hot later though.”

“Let’s sit.” James looks around for something to sit on. Marm and Ghost curl up at Running Snake’s feet. Funny how they can always tell who needs them the most.

“Oh, go ahead Badger. Make some benches. Just be sure to clean them up after wards.” We all laugh at this. The last ones, remember, did not fair so well. We all fain being suspicious of our seats as we sit.

“Plastic this time, ok? Give a guy a break.” Ah, oh, poor choice of words! Now we all have the sillies. There are intermittent bursts of chuckling.

“Red Bear is dead.” Well that ruins the mood.

“Nesters?”

“No, they have left us alone, though I do not know why. Nothing out here worth taking really and too many of us. Infighting and politics were responsible. When we finally reached the top of the mesa, we of course found all of you gone without much of a trace. The ruins looked neater than the nesters had left it earlier, so we knew you had been here. There was a lot of ‘discussion’ and finger pointing as to who was to blame for scaring you away. Most of the blame fell on me as I was with you the most the last couple of months. That last discussion we had did not help me either. I was brought before an adhoc council and essentially accused of treason. Red Bear, bless him, could not accept this.”

“I hope not, you did nothing wrong from our perspective. Heck, we did not even expect the gate to be here.”

“You have to understand, your group was supposed to be our saviors. You were to free us from the evil white devils and oppressors. For so long we had suffered. Then you all showed up. None of you natives. You represented not our saviors, but our oppressors. Oh, you fit the prophesy to a tee, except for your skin color. Hell, even some of us are whiter than you in our actions, you saw the trucks, guns and tech on the rez, so we really could not blame you for that.”

“What about Pushy Paws? Without her, all would have been lost. She is certainly as important as all the rest of us.”

“Thank you Ron.”

“She had no TK ability, no strengths that we could identify, just some visions. Visions are common among us. All of us have them from time to time, some more than others true, but very common. It is part of our existence, our spirituality, our way of perceiving the world. And

when she said that she knew one of you, all credibility vanished. She was part of the problem now, not the solution. Oh, we treated her politely, but when she wanted to come up here with the rest of us, we could not allow her to. Later I heard that she somehow eluded her guard and disappeared. We figured she made it up here somehow or died trying, she is old, but as we out numbered all of you, we did not worry. We could prevent her from causing trouble.

But, as I was saying, when we got here you were gone and I was blamed. The council decided that I was to be placed under house arrest till they decided. There was talk of execution, the old way. Even I don't want to know what they were thinking. Red Bear was furious and tried to break me out. He was shot to death by a too young guard who did not understand what was going on. I think the elders would have preferred that I was spirited away and never heard from again. Would have saved a lot of embarrassment for everyone.

"Guns have been the ruin of many of us. My brother died by one."

"After that tempers calmed down and I was shown more sympathy, if not respect. Still a wrong had been done and they needed a scapegoat. It was decided to leave me up here with two weeks worth of food and water and not be allowed back. A slow death sentence if you did not return, which would have confirmed their sentence. I stretched the water out for three weeks, slept most of the time, and always kept in the shadows. Just when I thought it was over, it rained. It has not rained up here in decades, but it rained. I was too weak to do much, but I gathered enough water for a few more days. I was doing my death meditation when you arrived. You have been gone nearly a month."

"You are very lucky to be alive. We could have returned sooner had we known. We certainly do not hold you accountable or responsible for anything that went wrong. It has been more luck than anything that has gotten us through. We thought it was over too with no sign of the gateway. Pushy Paws is the gateway. Who you thought was just a nuisance was the key to our success."

"Nice thought, but I don't agree. I had a bad discussion with Yingui the last time I saw him, but I don't agree. I had a bad discussion with Yingui the last time I saw him. Most of you overheard. I blame myself for the bad thoughts generated. I should have told you all the problems from the beginning. Not knowing of Pushy Paws' part, I too was disappointed at there being no natives among you. Oh, I did what was required of me by the prophesy, but no more. Hollywood ruined our culture too. It was always the 'Indian' dying to save the white hero, never the other way around. We are all jaded against the idea of a white hero."



“I disagree. If we were natives, we would not have had to spend the month in the wild with you learning your ways.”

“Most of us no longer know those ways. Even I had to learn as an adult, just as I learned to speak Shoshone. The white man’s schools, the promise of the cities, the rise and fall of the casinos, starvation, suicide and alcoholism on the reservations, has been too much for our culture. It could also have been a test from the prophesy itself that we had to prove we remembered the old ways. It was what I was accused of most in the tribunal. I was accused of not being Shoshone enough to pass the test. The degree in biology did not help any this time and you calling me Dr. Snake only reminded them of my white credentials.”

“I am sorry. I have noticed that about most cultures and people. Look at the Muslim cultures. We seduced them as well, even though the 'terrorists' tried their best to stop it. No, with rare exception, you usually do not find the spiritual life till you are an adult and understand the world a little more. The age from 13 to 30 is the time of the immortals, the time you do not believe you can die. Maybe there is something hormonal there that causes us to take chances and have offspring when logic tells us we shouldn't. Maybe that is why there are no TK2s below thirty. Anyway, you were no different. There is no shame in coming back as an adult, as long as you do.”

“There is more. The Chinese have invaded California in force. They claim most of California as New China now. Granted they had bought up most of the state before the plague, but now they claimed it as part of China itself. They needed the food judging from the emphasis on farming regions. Over half of them survived the initial fire plague and they were heavily dependent on US food supplies before the plague and apparently still are.”

“Shit! Or they are anticipating a future need and an enemy too weak to resist at this time. Easy pickings.”

“It gets worse. They shoot anyone not Chinese and with the proper papers on sight. Apparently when a young boy or girl goes through puberty, just as my grandson did, they have a relapse of fire plague as he did and are contagious for a few weeks. We had three more people come down with the sickness that we did not tell you about. They died before you got here. Only our natural immunity prevented more deaths. They are not taking any chances and assume anyone still alive is a carrier. They have closed all borders. There is no communication with them at all. They don't dare nuke us for fear that the fall out would hurt them or the land they will try for next, but I would not put it past them to use some

other means, chemical, biological or nano soon. They are very good at nano, as we have seen recently.”

Ron takes a now smooth pebble out of his pocket, rubbing it softly, “So, it begins.”