



# **The Guardians of Br'thn**

## **Divergence**

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# New Atherton

“Home at last dear! You need to rest. Wait here and I will check out your room.” I have seen lots of evidence that at least one group of people had been here. They did not disturb much at least in this area of town. One sector closer to San Jose looks like it was trashed completely. Someone also took care of the bodies. There must have been a few. We were among the last ones to leave and there were still people here. Now we will never know who made it and who didn't.

I open the door to Lisa's room and peer in. Everything looks just like we left it. Of course we never expected to return, so anything of sentimental value or small enough to carry had gone with us. Now gone forever. At least we were alive. Everything is dusty and smells stale, but the servants and air processors will take care of that soon enough. Hope we get a new servant. Nothing can be taken for granted any more since the Chinese took over. At least I was still useful to them and was allowed back. Too many friends died in route to China.

HelperV spread through the ship just like it did everywhere else. We were foolish to think we had outrun it. Lisa and her mother both became ill one week out. As one of the few not showing symptoms, I was isolated with the other non-infected. We watched slowly with horror on the monitors as one by one loved ones died. Most of the crew died. Fortunately the ship could be controlled from the mainland and by redundant computers and bots. I volunteered to help, being my area of specialty, but there was little to do and we could not go into the infected areas anyway. They had designed this ship well. Lisa's mother died within a few days. We had divorced twelve years ago. Paths that moved in different directions. Lisa was very lucky and recovered as if she had just had a normal seasonal flu. No apparent permanent damage or 'other' signs of change. She tried to help others, but only three passengers and one crew member survived of the infected. Now of course, they know much more and could have saved as many as ten. There is even talk of a vaccine. The sequence has been known from the beginning, but as it is a retrovirus, it was hard to pin down a cure.

We spent one month at sea and then two months in dock. We were never allowed to leave the ship, for fear that at least one of us might be a carrier, even the non-infected. We had to cook and clean for ourselves of course. The crew was all but gone and the one remaining was still isolated even further in the infected section. Together we figured out

enough to stay alive. We could get Chinese broadcasts, but my Mandarin was not that good. Fortunately there was one English channel and we all listened to that hopefully each day for the two hours it was on. No net access, but no one to contact anyway. We heard about the devastation in Europe, America and the nuclear wars in Pakistan/India and the Middle East. Being on the east coast meant we were about as far as we could get away from the fallout. Radiation detectors on board showed only a slight increase in background levels.

We had heard rumors from the dock workers that something weird had apparently happened to some of the survivors, they had developed strange abilities. We did not get much more information than that with our limited Chinese and fear of being overheard. There was nothing on the official broadcasts, so we were pretty sure that it was just some story making the rounds. At about two months in port though, we were awoken to loud speakers telling us to line up on deck with our hands on top of our heads. Military personnel with full hazmat gear then went and searched the entire ship top to bottom. Another person came up to each of us with some sort of sensor checking for something. He or she poked each of us with a sharp needle, read the instrument and then went to the next person. Apparently satisfied they all left. After a few minutes we decided it must be ok to go back below. Two days later a new crew came on board. We were all packed into a few cabins, four to each. The rest of the ship was taken up with peasants and laborers at many more to a cabin. We stopped complaining and set sail back. Turned out to back to the USA, but we were never informed as to their intentions. The new crew did not interact with us at all and we were confined to the stern of the ship. At least Lisa and I were together again.

We soon figured out we were heading due east. What were we going back to? The ships to either side of us looked military. Was this an invasion? On the third day out a jump ship landed on our deck and a group of three men in dark suits came out. We were interrogated one at a time over the next week. It was not torture or anything like on the netvids, just questions about what we did before the plague. After consulting some sort of AI, they would ask questions specific to the area we said we were trained in. Trying to catch liars or determine the extent of our knowledge I assume. I could only not answer a few with confidence and admitted as much, so I think I must have done pretty well.

One week later they called me in again and had me run simulations on an isolated computer they had set up. Again, this was no problem and I was allowed to return. Being head of IT for New Atherton kept me on my

toes and also the main reason I was so late getting out, trying to secure everything before we left. There were constant attempts to break in and not all from the outside. Some of the residents decided it would be easier to steal from fellow well offs than fend for themselves. Lisa, being only 17, had not finished all of her training yet, but was pretty good with autodocs and other medical equipment and she had good people skills. Being my daughter was probably her biggest asset, but she could pull her own weight. She would learn too. She had the best schooling we could afford and she was bright.

A week before we arrived I was called in one last time. This time they had maps of New Atherton up on the screen. Not very accurate and not up to date, they must have been the original design specs. A lot of changes were made as they went along and new residents redid their homes to fit their changing tastes or status. I had remodeled our own home several times. Even IT people get bored and kids grow up. I explained in detail where the major changes had been made. They seemed satisfied and excused me back to my room.

We docked in San Francisco, not far from where we had left months earlier. There were no lights in the pre dawn foggy landscape. They must not have the power grid back up or expecting trouble, lots of troops coming and going. That and the fog lent a sort of nightmare feeling to the whole thing, even though nothing violent appeared to be going on, yet. We were all moved onto a shuttle bus and taken to New Atherton. We were at least allowed to return to our homes, though we were also informed that there were likely to be changes as new people came in and status was worked out. When we came in I saw one limousine with a Chinese male with long dark hair and the fancy robes of nobility. He would not be here unless they intended to keep this area under Chinese control.

I went back into the living room and escorted Lisa to her room, tucked her in and turned off the lights. In my own room, my collection of antique view cameras was intact. It would be some time before I would be able to get to use them again I am afraid. Time to get some rest myself. Welcome to Xin Zhong Guo [New China] as some were beginning to call it now.

# Hotevilla

“I think we need to get back to the elders. This is not just our decision alone. In fact, my first impulse is to leave, but I don't think that is right either.”

“What about Br'thn? How will she find us? We have never left her alone before.”

I point to the southwest. “With Sauron out of the equation, Br'thn is fully linked to me. I always know where she is and vice-versa. She will catch up when she is ready. And remember she is at least TK9 and perfectly capable of taking care of herself. I doubt there is anything a human could do that would surprise her. Remember, she saw us formed from very different ancestors and had Satan as a teacher.”

“Amazing that she did not turn out more like him then. 'thn blood must be very strong to compensate for that.”

“They don't have blood.”

“I know that. I was speaking figuratively.”

“I am not getting any stronger standing around here.” Yes Dr. Snake.

“Right. Ok, end of discussion, let's go. Bubble up.”

We proceed without a ship, just using TK, down the mesa to the Navajo meeting area where we had first arrived, just outside of Tuba City. Feels a little like flying naked, being so used to Silver Ghost, but kind of liberating as well. No more hiding. Sauron is not with us, nor did he come back with us, so we really have no idea where or what became of him, just that he is in a happier place and unlikely to cause us further direct harm. All of us are wearing TK robes, including Running Snake. We wanted to make it clear that she is part of our group with full rights and privileges.

Upon landing safely I motion everyone to remain silent and I lead our group on foot to the elders lodge. A few meters outside the lodge we stop and sit. All facing the entrance. Kids playing nearby stop and watch us. When we appear to be doing nothing they run off to play elsewhere.

*Perhaps it would be better for Daniel to handle this exchange.*

*Not this time. I have to start acting my part. Daniel will have his time soon enough. This one is mine. I started it by putting the question to them which delayed their participation and lead to Red Bear's death.*

*I cannot blame you for his death. It was our own cultural stupidity and his bear head that caused his death.*

*We will see. They are inside. Sooner or later they will come out.*

It took them two hours before one came out to use the facilities. I thought old men had to pee more often than that. No prostate problems in this bunch unfortunately. We remained silent, he ran back in squawking up a storm. Another peeked out. They knew us alright. A few seconds later they all come out carefully composed. We remain silent. Running Snake is at my side, alive and well, no thanks to them.

Embarrassment is a universal human condition, but I owe Running Snake enough to keep silent and force them to make the first move. To their credit they come out and sit facing us, silent also, but with heads down. Shame is also a universal human condition. We wait again. This is hard on Qaletaq and Little Deer, but the others help out using TK to massage muscles and use TP to talk with them. Since coming back, we all have some TP ability. Certainly helps with group communication. The cats are cleaning themselves and nosing at holes in the ground.

“We thought you had all left.” Silence. More waiting.

“We're sorry. What can we do to help?” They are good. Not sure my previous culture would have picked it up that fast.

“Dr. Snake has filled us in on what she knew as of a month ago. What has happened since?” I purposely refer to her as 'Dr.' to rub it in a bit and remind them I am not a push over and will not play games.

“The Chinese have not tried to go beyond the Central and San Joaquin valleys, but are bringing in more troops, workers and supplies. We tapped into the satellite systems with help from the Idaho nest. They have decided that the Chinese are more of a threat now than the TKs, who have been minding their own business and leaving the nests alone. No one wants another Sacramento. Utah nest has disbanded and joined up with the local Mormons. We may be able to enlist their help as well, but they are still suspicious of the TKs. They are not convinced yet that TKs are not of Satan.”

“Most humans respond better if offered a choice between the plum and the stick. At the moment the Chinese feel they own both. A large portion of their farm land was contaminated with radiation from the nuclear conflicts. They need farm land desperately to feed their population. Hungry people are desperate people.”

“You could take them on single handed. You could reclaim the land for us.”

“For you? You still do not get it. We are not your saviors. We are not here to play favorites. We belong to all of earth, not just the Native Americans, not even just humans. We have all taken an oath to not kill

nor deceive. We will not be your warriors, if that is the route you choose.”

More waiting.

“You do not have to kill to get them to leave, just make it very hard for them to do what they are doing. When they see that it is not worth it, they will leave on their own. No one hurt.”

“And what happens to the hundreds of millions of people denied food? Do you want to be responsible for their deaths?”

More waiting and discussion among themselves.

“We do not need California. We are self sufficient where we are. Oh, the tech was nice while it lasted, but we all knew that was to be short lived. It is about time we got back to our true beliefs.”

“But as you are, without tech, you are defenseless. You could not stop 18th century tech, you will never stop 21st century tech. You are afraid that it is happening all over again.”

“We are not totally defenseless, we have at least one nest on board. They have nukes.”

“Yet another group fighting your battles? Do you really want to start that? Earth would be destroyed, at least North America, when they retaliate. You would be killing Mother Earth, just like we attempted to do, only much faster.”

Waiting, and heated discussion.

Finally they give in. “Then what?”

“I don't know. That is what we need to work out. We need a solution where there are no winners and no losers. If you attempt to subdue a group you create an enemy. We do not need any more enemies. We need friends.”

Ghost finds a mouse and goes for it, tearing apart a tunnel. He reaches his goal by ramming a paw down the hole and snagging his prey, then wolfing down his victim in a few gulps. He finally notices that we are all watching him.

*Food?*

“Sounds good to me. Tired of duped food too.” Not that mouse sounds good.



# San Francisco

If I had thought the first three months after HelperV had hit were hell, I was wrong. The last three months have been complete hell. First I am stranded on the space station New Hope, or rather a shuttle next to the station, trying to fend off crazy people trying to kill me. I am, or rather was, an astronaut/pilot in the Chinese space program. I was on a legitimate scientific research mission at New Hope, when the refugees from earth showed up and took over. They falsely assumed that they could survive the plague away from earth. But without surface support we were all on a death sentence. It did not take them long to figure out that less people meant more air and supplies for the remaining ones or one. I managed to escape to a shuttle and barricaded myself in. This only bought me time. I knew I was dead as well, as soon as the air ran out. I watched in horror as the side of the station blew out and all those people died. A week later I was debating a less painful way to die than slow suffocation. The next instant a strange craft with no obvious means of propulsion shows up, 'beams' me to their craft with seven people all in robes from all different races, a couple of cats and a glowing sphere. Next I am sitting on a street here in San Francisco all alone. I should have chosen Hong Kong, but I did not want to risk showing up there without authorization. They were shooting people on sight in Hong Kong according to the broadcasts I picked up in the shuttle.

San Francisco was no picnic either, being a lone female, with no family support and no means of protecting myself other than my wits. Why couldn't they have left me with a weapon. Ok, I probably would have shot one of them, so I understand, but still. Too old for the pleasure houses I worked as a servant for a local bully until the military arrives from China. It was easier if I did not resist his advances. A number of bruises, no food or water for three days and split lip convinced me of that. All astronauts are sterile, eggs in storage in Beijing if we ever decided to have children, so at least I did not have to worry about getting pregnant. The radiation we received out there was not worth the risk to the next generation.

The city was a mess, but I had never been to the US before and only knew the stories from the net. I did not know what was recent and what was the result of the earlier riots. Chinatown was isolated and did not suffer as much as other parts of the city. At least this time we were not blamed for the plague. I remember my history lessons about how unfair

Americans were to my people. I heard strange rumors about people changed by the plague. People, who could move things with their minds, even levitate, but nothing close to what I had observed. Discrete inquiries brought only stares. I stopped asking questions, as my position here was too fragile.

A month ago the Chinese military arrived. My bully captor kept me hidden, not sure if my original story was true or not and not wanting to take the chance I would turn them in. However, I did not become an astronaut because I was dumn. As soon as they let down their guard, I escaped. I had the pleasure of executing Mr. Bully myself, no questions asked. He took a very long time to die. I enjoyed every minute. And I was not alone in my desire for revenge. I had a cheering section urging me on. I was sick for days after wards, but it was worth it.

I lied about how I got back to earth. I had learned my lesson and did not admit I had help of a seemingly supernatural kind. I claimed instead that I had risked it and crash landed in the ocean. When asked why I lost the ship I explained I was alone in flying a ship that normally had three crew and support from the ground. They did not have the resources or time to investigate and accepted my story. I was restored to my rank of major and was put in charge of security for San Francisco, figuring I knew more about what was going on locally than they did. Not much really, as I was kept inside the entire time, but I could speak Cantonese as well as Mandarin and some English, so I was still an asset. Did not take long to figure things out. Most things you let go, figuring this was war time and things needed to get done, but you held firm for what you thought was important and let people know this was the case.

“Major, two men have been captured who claim to have been on New Hope during the plague.” The guard was grinning like he found this totally unbelievable.

I sigh and grin back, shaking my head. “The airlock was destroyed before I left. No one else could have survived. Bring them to me. I will interrogate them personally to put to rest their claims.” I only saw two men left at the station before I was rescued and they were separated. The only way they could even be alive on New Hope was by engineering the deaths of the others. Without the airlock and space suits stored there, there was no chance they could have gotten to a shuttle. And not being shuttle pilots they would never have survived re-entry. If these were the two, then they were rescued the same way I was. They would expose my lie if they were believed.

Two middle aged Asian men in rags were brought in and seated before me. They had burns from the sun and something else all over their heads and arms. No hair. They looked familiar. They could be the ones, but the ones I saw at the station looked nothing like this. What had happened to them?

“I am Major Ying. I will decide your fate. Convince me you are useful and you may live.” Standard opening line we had been taught. Simple, but usually effective.

The two men looked at each other and then at me. The one on the left spoke. “We were saved the same way you were, but we obviously fared far worse. We were set down near what was left of Sacramento. The loss of hair and burns that you see are the result of radiation poisoning. If we had not worked together we would have died for sure.”

“You know nothing of what I have endured. You two are the murderers of those people and deserved your fate. When I left the station the air lock was destroyed. You could not have taken a shuttle down.”

The men laugh and then choke. When they finish coughing the one on the right answers. He has blood on his hand where he had coughed. “No shuttle left the station and you know it. Why do you hide behind a lie? There is no one in this room to deceive. You may think us bold and presumptuous, but we are dead men. We learned to cooperate too late to save ourselves. We have at most a few days left. Already it is impossible to eat or drink anything. He warned us this would happen, but our hate for each other was too strong at first. We spent too much time in the hot zone. Don't make the same mistake we made. Our people need to know of this man and what he can do. Separately we would not be believed, together we have a chance. Do not wait too long to make your decision.”

“I have heard that large amounts of radiation exposure makes one delusional.”

# South Florida TK Enclave

Red Serpent Gang

“Order, Order! The court of the right honorable Judge Otis Hooper is in session!”

“Bailiff, bring in the prisoner.” A man is dragged in with obvious signs of abuse and barely able to stand, nearly collapsing several times.

“You have been charged with aiding and abetting a normal. How do you plead?”

“Just make it stop. I’ll do anything, just make it stop.” The man finally collapses to the floor.

The crowd starts chanting, “Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!”

“The court of popular opinion has found you guilty. All that matters now is the punishment.” The judge looks again to the assembled crowd.

The crowd roars, “Death by a thousand blows!” they chant over and over. All present are TK2 and death of a thousand blows refers to being pelted by TK blows till you are dead. The gavel falls.

Some seek cooperation, some seek revenge.

# New Atherton

“Here kitty kitty. Where are you Princess? Where is Snuggles and Wet Nose and all the others? Here kitty kitty. I have food for you.”

Oh God, Mrs. Reynolds is alive and next door to us again. When did she get in? She was not on our ship and I had hopes that she at least had not survived. I am truly in hell now. I roll over and cover my head with the pillow, but it does not work. I get up and take care of business. Our clothes have been replaced with uniforms of sorts. In the interests of efficiency we are all color coded. I am light brown and Lisa is dark green. Browns are technical workers and greens are health care. The lighter the color the higher the rank. Black is the lowest, the day laborers, who can be ordered by anyone to help move stuff or dig trenches, whatever. I imagine Mrs. Reynolds in black and grin. White silk is the highest, only the head of this sector is allowed to wear that color. Of course the leader of Xin Zhong Guo can wear anything he wants. It is also his prerogative to decide who is allowed to have a full head of hair. Most of us wear ques, an old custom brought back to specifically humiliate the Americans. We made the choice to have our hair follicle genes changed to produce black hair to protect us from UV, so our ques look authentic. They said it was to remind us that they were the ones in charge now, just as the first Chinese here wore ques when they arrived to work on the railroads. Only we did not enforce the wearing of ques, it was the Manchurian emperor who did that. No matter, one did what one had to do to survive. Lisa was having a harder time with it. It itched at first. They imposed the regulation on women as well. Women’s liberation it was called, but they laughed when they said it.

We did not rate servants, live people being a premium and we being white devils and all. I fix a breakfast for two and Lisa shows up shortly. We are only allowed five minute showers, though there is no water shortage. Just a power game. If the servants did with two, we can do with five. We also have room mates as well, a newly married couple from the ship who used to live in Sacramento, which does not exist anymore. Something about TKs destroying it. Maible and Henry Strumweld, ages about thirty, are both commodity brokers and wear medium red. They work in the warehouses helping to coordinate supplies as they come in. With Sacramento gone, New Atherton has become the seat of power. Regent Hua lives in the high end section of town with his wife, three concubines and a large number of servants. All Chinese and all without

ques, even the thugs in black silk. We do not order them around. We do not look them in the eye. Mad dogs if you ask me.

Lisa asks, "Why does she keep calling for the names of her cats that are long gone?" I remain silent. I don't have a clue, just anger. Why did they have to put her back next to us. Her cats used to pee on everything. At least she could have gotten them neutered. Weren't even show cats, just strays that she rescued from above.

I rise and check a mirror to be sure everything looks alright. Appearances are very important if one is to maintain any credibility. Lisa will do the dishes after I leave.

"Wait a moment Pop."

"Huh?"

Without looking at me she says, "OK, it is ok now." I shrug. She has been saying weird things like this all the time now. I walk out the door without paying much attention. A bike whooshes by just missing me. Startled I pull back. If I had left when I was supposed to I would have been hit. What was a bike doing here? A seg I could imagine, but a bike? How did Lisa know? I am wide awake now and make it in to the CPU to begin my day. At least most of the hackers were taken care of with the plague. Now it is more of a case of rebuilding and adapting. It will be a long eight hours, but I do like this work better in a way. Get a greater sense of accomplishment out of building things than maintaining them.

When I get back, I hear a "Yoo-hoo! Hi George!" It is Mrs. Reynolds. She is wearing pale yellow silk. Now what could she possibly do that would gain her that rank? It was well known that she became what she is by her looks, not her brains. She has a kitten in her arms that she is massaging behind its ears. I like cats just fine, as long as they behave, but I don't like Mrs. Reynolds. I wave back to her, but duck in as fast as I can into my own quarters. It is hard to think of it as home under current conditions. I hear a "Now don't you disappear on me like you did last time Goldie." Great, a wanderer. Lisa has a later shift that I do, so won't be back for an hour. I start dinner. Not used to working with GM soy, but it does not taste that bad, at least compared to what we were down to on ships rations coming back.

I turn around to put things on the table when I nearly trip over a small yellow kitten looking up at me and the food. "What the!" and the cat disappears. Did not think they were that fast. Must have followed me in. Now where was it? I searched the rooms but found no sign of it. When I get back to the table, it is obvious that someone has been eating at one of

the plates. There is a knock on the front door. I go to answer it. Mrs. Reynolds.

“What may I do for you Doris?”

“Have you seen a small yellow kitten? The one I was holding when you came in? She disappeared a few minutes ago.” She is obviously worried and indicates size with her chubby hands. She has not lost that much weight in the last six months. I don’t care what the fashion is for the well off, fat is fat, yuck!

“Now how could a kitten get into this house with the door closed Doris?”

“This cat is very sneaky. If you see her just let me know please.”

“I will Doris. Good day.” Sneaky? Great!

I scoop the portion ‘Goldie’ had been eating into a small bowl and place it on the floor and adjust the proportions on the plates to compensate. All of us eat together at night, Maible and I take turns cooking, according to our shift schedules, so it probably will not be noticed.

“Hi Pop, I’m home!” Lisa comes into the kitchen. She sees the bowl and asks me, “Why is there an empty bowl on the floor?” Empty? I turn around and sure enough it is licked clean.

“We seemed to have picked up a house guest, a small yellow kitten named Goldie according to Mrs. Reynolds next door. She has cats again, though I have no idea where she got them from or how she, the kitten that is, got in here. This one at least is very sneaky. Never seen a cat move that fast.”

Lisa describes her day. She is exhausted. They are getting more people in each day and everyone goes through a thorough medical exam before being assigned quarters. Maible and Henry arrive and we all eat dinner. Lots of supplies coming in and grain going out. They must be setting up for the long haul. Lisa retires after doing the dishes.

The three of us talk small talk for awhile, how things have changed, some of the more pleasant memories from before the plague, that sort of thing. Amazing how fast it all happened and at the same time how long these last six months have been. I feel like I have aged ten years. Everyone is tired and we all start making movements toward leaving the table when we hear heavy pounding on the door next door, Mrs. Reynold's place. We pause to listen. I jump when we hear a scream. “What was that?” Next we hear muffled shouting and then silence.

Pounding at our door. I motion the others to get into their rooms. I am the highest ranking individual, though that did not appear to help Doris.

“Coming!” I bound to the door and open it. Two thugs in black silk come barging in, pushing me aside bruskiy. I say nothing. They could have me for lunch without blinking, no point in asking for trouble.

“Have you seen a small yellow kitten?”

“Only for a few seconds. It stole some of our dinner, but then disappeared again. Fast little thing. I have no idea where it went or how it got in here. I searched the entire..” That is all the excuse they need. They tear the place apart looking. No cat, but it will take days to get the place in order again. Finally they give up. We are all together at the entrance now.

“If you see it, report to us immediately. Failure to do so is capital. Understand?” We all nod and they depart.

We put the food back as best we can and then help each other put our beds back together and retire. The rest can wait. A capital offense over a kitten. What was that thing and why was Doris in charge of it? Chinese were into those small yappy mutant dogs, not cats. This is all very strange.

The thugs broke most of my cameras. Probably spite. I should be able to repair some of them. We saw no more of the kitten for three days, then again at supper time, there she is begging for scraps. Being a trained scientist I want to know more. I place a scrap of GMsoy strip in the counter. She can see me place it, but cannot see it after I have placed it. She looks at me and then disappears completely! I was watching closely. I did not blink. It is gone! I hear a sound and look up at the counter and she is there licking her lips and the soy strip is gone. I walk down to the end of the counter and place another strip. She walks over to get it, but I pick it up before she gets there. “No, I want you to teleport for it.” I put the strip down on the table, well out of reach of a young kitten. I can see both the strip and the kitten this time. She disappears from the counter and immediately appears next to the strip. No wonder they want this cat so much. I pick up the kitten and it starts purring. Now if I can get her back to Doris before she disappears again.

I am careful to keep the cat's attention, talking to her and gently rubbing behind her ears. She seems content to be treated this way, so I slowly make my way next door and ring the bell. Doris answers and seeing the cat is ecstatic. She has bruises on her hands. Her fast movements almost scare the cat into disappearing again. Doris calms down and talks in a whisper. “You have saved my life George. If I had not retrieved Goldie they would have been very nasty to me.”



“Yes, they explained to us the other day. I was supposed to report the sighting right away to them, but figured they did not need to know I brought her back to you. Very unusual cat if I may say so. Would you tell me what is going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doris, I have seen Goldie in action. I know she teleports. Probably how she got away from you. Given the mind of a cat, I don't know how they expect you to hold on to her. An impossible task.”

She sits down on the porch. “I was told not to say anything to any body, but seeing as you already know.... I do not have fancy skills like the rest of you. If I had not accepted this assignment, they would have sent me to the farms! Look at me! I would not have lasted a week on a farm. I know cats, as I am sure you are aware from before the sickness. So, I was given this one opportunity. They found these kittens in Merced. Two litters and a total of thirteen kittens. One died before they got there. They have given one kitten each to twelve people to raise and observe. I was given Goldie. I thought I was seeing things when I saw it the first time. Now I guess I had better tell them all that I know, leaving you out of course. You saved my life, I owe you that much.”

“Thanks, but it would be better to just tell them everything Doris. There is no way you will be able to hold onto this kitten without help and understanding on their part. Do it now. Do not wait for her to disappear again. They need to see this themselves to believe it. Did you hear rumors of people doing strange things? I wonder if this is related?” Doris just shakes her head confused. I hope she does not suffocate the cat before they get here. “Do you want me to call them and tell them I just saw you pick her up and go inside?” She nods yes.

I go back to our apartment and call security. Of course they know nothing about what I am talking about. “Look you stupid bureaucrats, it is a capital offense to hinder this knowledge. I have done my duty by reporting this. When they come down on me, you will go down too.” I hang up. Thirty minutes later there is a more gentle knock at the door than we experienced the night before. I am going to be late for work, but answer the door.

“Mr Huntington, may we speak with you?” A man and a woman, both wearing light gold jumpsuits. No idea what rank they are, just probably higher than me. I wave them inside.

“I am going to be late for work.” The others have all left for work. No point in all of use getting into trouble.

“We have already called them. You will not get into trouble.”

They proceed to tell me what I have already surmised and what Doris has told me. Then add, “These kittens are the result of a mating between a normal female cat and a pair of special male cats that passed through Merced on their way east. A group of very powerful human TKs were with them. We don't know if they 'made' the special cats or they were affected by the HelperV virus same as they were.” Now I am totally confused. They have to explain to me that some humans came through the sickness changed. TKs as they were called were a milder form of the crazy TKs that ravaged some communities after HelperV hit. All were considered very dangerous and to be avoided. They handed me a sensor that would chirp inside my neural implant whenever one was around. The kitten would also cause a chirp, but in lower note. The higher the note, the more powerful the TK. They then hand me three more sensors. “These have been tuned to each of the other three living here. Please inform them as to our needs. Remember, help Mrs. Reynolds with the kitten and report anyone you suspect of being a TK. These people are very dangerous. They may try and prevent us from farming this land to feed all the hungry people back in China. I don't think any one wants to see millions of people starving just to hang onto an empty land. China owned most of California before the plague anyway. We aren't helping them steal anything, just making use of what is rightfully theirs to begin with.”

“Hey, I am just happy to be alive myself. No complaints here.” Right. They did not go into any details about what these humans could do, nor did I ask. If you had told me a week ago, I would have laughed at you, but now having seen the cat, I was not so sure.

# San Francisco, Chinatown

Not knowing where the seat of power was, we decided to go where the most activity seemed to be centered, San Francisco. Since we knew the Chinese were in charge, we selected Chinatown. I waited till no one was about and then DS to Grant and Stockton. The same place we had dropped the astronaut off, but on the sidewalk this time, and waited. We got a lot of stares, definitely out of place. An old white man dressed in a dirty gray robe leaning on a staff, a fat gray cat cleaning himself and a young Native American wide eyed with anticipation and in clothing that did not fit in and of course Br'thn, whom they would not recognize even if they could see her in my pocket.

Some one motions for us to move aside and points up. A jump ship is coming down on top of us. We scramble off the sidewalk into the nearest doorway. We watch to see the military aircraft land and a bunch of troops get out and go down the street before it takes off again. They paid us no mind at all. Military mind in action. The 'enemy' could land in your lap, but if not ordered to do so, you do not see anyone.

I take Br'thn out of my pocket. She has assumed the shape of a ocarina. *You have become addicted to being played Br'thn. It feels good, tickles.* I have to smile at that. I start to play. Need to learn the pentatonic scale if I am to fit in here.

**More military coming.** This is more for Qaletaq's benefit as I have also picked them up.

We hear sirens, followed a moment later by shouted orders and military types surrounding us with weapons aimed. People scatter to avoid getting caught up in whatever we are in trouble for. I stop playing. We remain calm and wait. One continues to talk into a communicator.

About fifteen minutes later a commander of some sort, judging from her bearing gets out of a jeep and walks up to us. I greet her, "Ying Mei, nin hao ma?"

"Shi de. Yingui, ni hao?" She smiled. So, she did remember me and responded in the more friendly from of hello, how are you. She also used my name, so she has been briefed by someone. I got her name from TP. We each have our means.

I raise one eyebrow and bow, "Shi de. At this point I request we switch to English, if that is ok. My Chinese is horrible." And using telepathy gives too much away too soon.

“Of course, but your accent is excellent. You need to learn more while you are here. I would be happy to teach you.” She waves the guns down and away. “And who is this fine young man?”

“I am sorry that I do not know your official title, but Mei Ying, this is Qaletaqa. Qaletaqa this is Mei Ying, someone I helped earlier in our journey, before I met you.” They shake hands. Qaletaqa is confused, but remains silent. “Qaletaqa is my apprentice and under my protection. You need not worry about him getting into too much trouble, though a teenager, he is a level one. Ghost, the cat, on the other hand, is a cat level three and causes trouble all the time, even before the change. Each species is different in their levels. He does not have TK ability, so does not move things around other than himself. Might be because cats do not have possessions and don't think that way. They are not manipulators like we are.”

*Stupid monkeys.* He starts licking a spot on his flank. Mei looks at me wide eyed. I roll my eyes and nod.

“Food usually quiets him down. The dreams at night are the worst part. Sometimes think I have run fifteen kilometers chasing mice and birds when I awake.”

She laughs, “I can imagine. Titles are not important between us, but I am a major for future reference. Astronauts don't take rank as seriously. They have placed me in charge of security here, at least till the space program starts up again. Not my first choice, but as you can guess, all shuttles are grounded for the time being. We need to get a few things in order down here first.” I nod in agreement.

“How come you say her name reversed in Chinese?”

“Ah, so he does talk. In Chinese the family name is more important than one's personal name. In English, as you are so individualistic, the personal name is first.”

Something to think about Qaletaqa.

“Who are those people in funny hats?” He points to one group. I think we have opened the gate.

“Those are farm laborers. The hats are made of rice leaves and keep off the sun.”

“So they are ecological, inexpensive and effective.” Bright boy.

“Are you hungry? I know this little place a block away that serves good yum cha.”

“Excellent idea! Qaletaqa has never had tea lunch, definitely something he should experience. And Ghost will eat anything as you can guess.”

*Food?*

“Yes Ghost, food. Good food. So you had better keep up with us and stop sniffing everything in reach.”

*Cats, many cats here. Females too!*

Oh great. “Be careful, this is not your territory.” Though he does have a significant weight advantage. He had already been warned not to DS with humans watching. Needed to keep a low profile for now at least.

We walk about a block, a little more actually and enter this little hole in the wall place with somewhat dim lighting and lots of noise from people talking and eating. I notice that people move aside for us. My guess is that the major is known. The smells are wonderful. We are soon stuffed on various bow, gindoi, lobago, mango pudding, goha and many other delights. It was worth the trip just for this. Qaletaqa is a little unsure at first and does not like the same things I do, never having been raised on sweets or shrimp, but at least tries everything. He has trouble with the chopsticks of course, but they still have forks and offer him one. Ghost ate Qaletaqa's shrimp and then disappeared. He was not born near an ocean and ate mostly mice. Do shrimp taste like mice? I will have to ask him. Don't smell the same, so maybe that is not important.

There are three plainclothes at the table next to us. They used to have guns, knives and other assorted weapons. I slowly dissolved them to air during our meal so as to not surprise them.

“It is against my beliefs to put anyone knowingly into danger. If someone thought they had weapons and did not any longer, they could be in much danger.” The men slowly place their hands where their weapons used to be. I give them credit for being cool though or they were briefed well. And this means they know or suspect much about me. They do not make a scene.

“Why did you not remove my weapon as well?”

“It would not look good for a major to be humiliated in that way. Besides, that is not my only trick.” I smile, but I do not think she is amused. “You must have many questions. I am glad to see you are well.”

“It was not easy, but it was my choice. I chose San Francisco not you. But thanks for your concern. I am well now at least. Let's go for a walk.”

“A least allow me to pay.” I turn the rest of my tea over and change it into a few gold coins of about thirty grams each and place it on the table.

“That is at least ten times what the meal was worth.”

“It should pay for the other's meals and their lost weapons as well. I would guess that they have to pay for them out of their own pockets.”

“You are very kind.” She nods to them and as we leave they settle with the restaurant and pocket the coins. Then they follow us as at a discrete distance. I left their communications intact and it does not take long for more to show up to replace these. It is just as easy to dissolve their weapons while they are concentrating on us.

“You know there is a limited supply of those. They are needed elsewhere too you know.” So, Mei is tied in with her implant.

“I would not want anyone hurt in the cross fire. I know that I am scary to your people and to you, judging from your elevated pulse, serotonin and adrenalin levels.” She nods and then smiles, but also calms down. She then touches her forehead for a moment. The 'extras' fall back and leave us alone.

“Thank you. I would be most happy to meet with your superiors after our talk, but I feel I owe you an explanation first. You had enough weapons on the shuttle to easily take out the other two, could have even rammed their window, but didn't. You are not a killer. Nor did you run when I appeared this afternoon. That means you have a cool head and can think under pressure, no doubt qualities needed in an astronaut. These are qualities we all need right now. Our world is very different that it was a few months ago and wrong decisions can have far reaching consequences. It would be better if we can find some way to work together. There has been enough death. I know there is a threat implied in that statement, but even though it would not come from me, there are many others who could fulfill that promise.”

“What are you?” To the point.

I sigh, “I don't know. I was certainly human till the fire plague. Sorry, that is what Qaletaqa's people call it. HelperV to the rest of us, though I like their name better. Anyway, I have no idea what I am now. Changed certainly.”

“You are certainly TK, those guns did not disappear on their own, but you do not even register on our sensors. Qaletaqa and Ghost do of course and we know they did not do it, too low. What level are you?” Actually Ghost could have DSed them, but would not think to.

“If I had come in with full TK strength showing, I doubt you would be allowed to take me to lunch nor would we be having this conversation. Knowledge can be used as a weapon by some. You can make a rough calculation from what you have observed so far. That should be enough for now.”

“Thank you for showing discretion. I believe you may be right. Everyone is on edge and a high level TK showing up might have set off a huge mistake. You saw how many showed up for even a strange TK1 with a cat and an old lowfan. So, why are you here?”

“I am here to talk. To find out what are your intentions, that is your government's intentions, and explain the concerns voiced by others who share this continent.”

“Surely you understand we have the means to take all that we want.”

“No, you do not. You only have what has been allowed. We are aware of the food situation on the mainland. I could not rest knowing we had allowed that many people to starve to death.”

“They have nuclear weapons and more.”

“Now you are saying 'they' and not 'we', so you are not totally in agreement. Be careful, I don't want to see you hurt in all this. We can neutralize nuclear weapons and the psiotic ones you have developed. Yes, I know you have been looking for ways to neutralize this fear of TKs. I probably would have done the same. Hang onto that knowledge though. It might be needed later. There is more at work here than just the two of us. Much more.”

“You want us to continue our research to destroy you?”

“Of course. We both learn more from your efforts. Much of what I know comes from examining psiotic devices. I will certainly look forward to seeing what else you have come up with. Diversity is not something to be feared but embraced. I have no problems with you being here and wish you all the best. I may even be able to help.”

“Why do you think this way?” Because I am crazy.

“I have seen much. Let us just say that humans are definitely, most definitely NOT the only sentient beings in the universe. And are definitely not the most intelligent or the strongest.”

“Oh!” [Just how far has he been. The space station is one thing, but other stars?]

“Yeh.” And one of them is with me right now. Oh, and those puny psiotic neutralizers trained on me are dead also. I really did mean they would be of no use.

“Where are they? Why are they not here in force to make us do what they want?”

“Several reasons. Humans are not that important. They prefer to watch to see if we will become smart enough and more importantly, wise enough, to join them as equals.”

“Oops, as you would say. We have a ways to go on those fronts.”

“Yeh.” A long way and you don't want to know what they do to ones whom they see as a threat.

“So, that explains you, but why is Qaletaq and your cat here? Ah, where is he?”

I laugh, “He is definitely not 'my' cat. No one owns a cat. He is in the alley investigating the scent of a female in heat at the moment. Our concerns are not interesting to him I am afraid. We are just 'stupid monkeys' to him most of the time. A old joke is that the cat word for human is 'can opener.' Cats live in a very different world from us. But, Qaletaq is a witness to all that we do and say. I will say this only once. Harm him and it will be all over in ways that you cannot imagine. There are forces here way beyond comprehension.”

“I think it is time we take this to a higher level. I am only in charge of security for San Francisco. I do not represent nor can negotiate for the Middle Kingdom, the Chinese people. You do not appear to be a threat to this city at least.”

“And give up a source of yum cha? Certainly not! But you are also a witness. If you are not present, I will leave. Partly this is to protect you. I understand politics can get nasty. But, I also trust you. Not completely of course. You will not like the alternative solutions that have been worked out. I do hope we can be friends when this is all done. If we both survive that is. Even we cannot think of everything. This is a dangerous game we play. I would rather approach this discussion, not with threats and counter threats, but with the positive aspects to cooperation. With your tech and our TK abilities we can explore the depths of the oceans or the stars themselves. We can advance medicine and science to heights unimagined. Think of the arts, architecture, music, everything that we do that is good and noble. I know this sounds corny, but I think you know what I mean. Let's not repeat the same mistakes. Let's try for the stars this time.”



# Tierra del Fuego

“It was so nice of Br'thn to set us down in the middle of nowhere. I thought it was cold in Tahoe in winter, but this is insane! Wish we had better TP ability. The little that Br'thn was able to boost into us was not much.” The wind makes their speech barely understandable.

“Enough to translate. I may know Spanish, but they are likely to use native dialects here. If this wind gets any higher we will be using it just to talk to each other. She could have set us down closer though. It is still half a kilometer away.”

“You can see quite a ways. She was worried that the two of us appearing out of plain air would get us into trouble. It is only a little ways further. I can see smoke coming from the second house down to the right. The only one with lights coming from the windows.”

“Ah, why are we here again? Another one of Yingui's crazy attempts to 'do things right'. Nesters, pears, Native Americans, talking cats, dinosaurs come back to eat us, galactic center, 'thn, and I don't even want to think about our 'neighbors' galactically speaking. The cats were right to be scared. Now we are down here at near the bottom of the world looking for more trouble.”

“Rachael, South America is the only place we have not accounted for that we know has a large number of TKs, but spread too thin to sense much of what is going on. We need to know where they will fall into the equation. They have a right to have a say in what becomes of this world too. Are they being persecuted? Used? Hunted as we were?”

“Yeh, I know. It is just that this becomes too much. I am so tired. I want back to my simple life. I understood being a courier. I was good. I would never have thought it then, but I actually had more freedom then than I do now. Oh, I do not wear slave bracelets made of steel any longer. These new ones are made of responsibility instead. But they are just as strong or stronger and chaff just as much.”

“So philosophical Rachael! We'll make a human out of you yet! It's starting to rain. We need to get inside or we will be found out for sure. Norms don't use TK bubbles to keep dry.” She smiles.

We make it to the doorway before we get too wet and knock. “Come in!”

“English? Who?” We open the door. Kind of weather beaten and sticky. Creaks like an old horror movie. All we need is lightning. CRASH! BOOM! Right on cue.

“Come in. Come in. Please set yourself down. Tea coming right up.”  
British accent.

“Welcome. My name is Dorothy. Please sit down. Be with you in a moment.” Old British accent. A 70ish lady scurries about setting doilies down before placing a saucer and cup in front of each of us. Next comes hot tea. Smells like Earl Grey. Only pears can afford that. I now that smell from some of my deliveries. Her hair is gray though, not black and her skin is very white, not yellow at all. Scavenger?

“This is Rachael and I am Susan. What is an old Brit doing down here where hell froze over?”

“Well deary. I could ask you the same question could I not. Biscuits will be just a moment.” Thunder sounds and shakes the house. Close. “Don't mind the weather. Just a light storm for this area. Should last for a few days.” She pops back into the kitchen and out comes a wonderful smell. Homemade biscuits. No offense Yingui, but Dorothy knows how to bake!

“Marmalade is in the crock.” Hot tea and biscuits, marmalade, comfy chairs and a warm house in a storm. What is this place? Have we DSed to England or heaven? I look out the window. Hard rain against the pains. From this side it sounds wonderful.

*She is TK I think. Not getting a clear reading.*

*Neither am I. We will have to ask. My turn.*

“Dorothy. You are so isolated here. Did the plague reach here?”

“Oh my goodness no dear. I know of what you are talking about though. There have been visitors after it died out and I have a sat com when I can get the dish directed properly. Storms raise havoc on alignment this far south.”

“How do you feed yourself then?”

“So many questions. I receive shipments twice a year. Last one is over due, but I always stash extra in case it is late.”

“Dorothy, there won't be any more shipments. We estimate that at least three fourths of the world population has died of the plague or its after effects. More are dying every day from the radiation, new wars, etc.”

“Well then I guess that means that I am leaving with you when the storm breaks. Not likely to get any more visitors am I?”

*How are we going to carry her without notice? A pear at that! Ok, maybe not a pear, but what?*

“We need to travel fast and light. Where we are going is also likely to be very dangerous. We can take you to a city if you want, assuming we find transportation.”

She just smiles at us. Holding out.

“Dorothy, we are not 'normal' any longer. We were affected by the plague. Others are likely to hunt us once they find out.”

“Yes dear I know.” Still smiling at us. I feel we are being played with.

“The tea and biscuits were lovely Dorothy. Thank you so much for taking us in. We would be happy to have you travel with us.”

*What?*

*You haven't figured it out yet?*

“What? What is going on here?” I am getting pissed folks! You know I don't like to be played with.

“Rachael dear. I am a natural enhanced. You can't sense me easily because my abilities do not follow the same 'wavelength' or something like that.”

“Just like we could not sense Sauron.” Now Dorothy is looking questioningly at us.

“Sauron, also known as Satan. We had some close encounters with him.”

Dorothy stands up. “Then we must hurry. He can sense any enhanced and either uses them or kills them for fun or to eat! They used to call them witch hunts and sacrifices, but this is all bullshit, please excuse my language. He enjoys it. We have to get out of here. Any place there are more than two strong enhanced ones he will come.”

We smile this time and Susan answers. “Satan has been dealt with. He will not be coming. Not that there are not other dangers out there we do have to worry about. At least he is one we can stop worrying about.”

“How? We have been hiding for centuries. You can't believe how hard it is to raise a family when no more than two can be present. We were all raised by a sympathetic network of the non-enhanced to keep the number under three. It is also why we live alone in remote places. To make us not worth the trouble.” Where ever more than two are gathered. Sounds familiar.

“It is a long story that began a mere sixty five million years ago. You obviously are aware of the TKs, as we call them that were accidentally formed. All the net casts talked about them. We were among those thus formed. We both met up with other groups and eventually our groups joined. One among us kept going through further enhancements from a then unknown force. Any TK caught up in the enhancement process was

similarly affected. Eventually we did meet the ones responsible for the enhancements. They are not from earth and are not human. Not even remotely like life as we would recognize it. Our most enhanced one defeated Satan in a test and Satan's extra abilities were taken from him as a result. We don't know where Satan is now, but he is not likely to pose much of a threat. Even his network has been heavily disrupted, by the plague mostly.”

“My, my. That is some tale. Considering the consequences of making a mistake about you two, I am afraid that I would want some proof of what you way.”

“As would we. Others still hunt us, at least in North America.”

“Well, being an old lady and out numbered, I have the least to lose, so I will go first. My abilities are a bit eclectic and not like the ones resulting from the plague. Of course I know nothing about any further enhancements. The TKs, as you call them, are of several levels here. Most can lift their own weight with ease and even travel that way at about twice walking speed if necessary. Though of course this is not so good to try around the non-TKs armed with guns. There are a few that can only lift small objects and I have heard of a one that can lift ten or more people or small vehicles if necessary, though I have never met her.”

“Yes. We number the levels with the weakest TK being level one, the most numerous are the TK2s and the rare one you mentioned is likely a TK3. Each level also has additional abilities associated with them. A TK1 can only lift or move about 10 kg mass. A TK2 is ten times as strong and adds the ability to 'scan' in the dark or through walls at about one hundred meters distance. A TK3 is ten times that in moving and scanning and adds the ability to manipulate materials at the molecular level. A TK3 can separate water from salt water for instance. Oh and we call the non-enhanced 'norms', short for normals.”

“Naturals do not follow the levels as you call them. I can move small objects.” She helps herself to another biscuit using TK. “Some can hear some especially intense thoughts, scan through some materials and my own particular talent of sometimes knowing when things are going to happen. Like your visit here. It is easier to 'see' unusual things than normal happenings. I run into things a lot, so I don't normally see in advance that this is going to happen. But, your visit was very unusual, so I have been feeling it for weeks. When you ah, landed or whatever you did, it became very intense. That was when I started the tea and biscuits.”

“Your TK ability has been demonstrated, but we will take your word for the other abilities for the time being. I hope you have kept some of

your abilities to yourself. After all we only met a short time ago. We would not expect complete openness from the start, especially considering your history. We could be Satan's minions for all you know. Trust takes time and shared experiences.” She nods with a smile. We are not likely to ever be introduced to her network. Too much training to ever reveal that I am sure. You did not survive this long by giving up information so easy.

“TK4 adds the ability to manipulate at the atomic level. The philosopher's stone, so to speak. TK5, biological healing and restructuring and psiotic ability. TK6, the ability to shift through different dimensions to take short cuts. TK7s are telepathic. We are not sure of levels above that. Sort of a need to know thing that we have not been informed about yet. As to proof. Taste your tea. Not poison. If we were talking death threats you would have never known.” She tastes her tea cautiously. More chocolate now than tea.

“We have been developing a code of ethics. We will not kill or harm another being. Most of us are becoming vegetarian, at least as far as what we will chose as food, though we are allowed to eat what is offered. Accidents can happen, but we do try to avoid them. Next, we will not deceive or lie, even when that puts ourselves or others at risk. We can withhold information though, especially if the information would harm others. We lost our sexual feelings during the change, which in a lot of ways is a relief. It is too dangerous to consume intoxicants, so we avoid those. We have really had to keep our wits about us. Chocolate is ok though, thank goodness. Lastly we will not steal. Of course, we have no reason to steal, as we can duplicate anything we find, though that has been more difficult with so many people gone. It is sometimes hard to know when something is still owned and not just abandoned.”

“You follow the precepts!”

“The what?”

“The five precepts of ethical Buddhist behavior.”

“I knew it! He managed to do it to us! That swine! Bet my father was in on this one.”

“You will have to excuse Rachael. She tends to rebel against authority and religious thinking smacks of authority to her. She will get over it. The precepts, as you call them are really just common sense for people to get along with each other. No big deal.”

“I thought North America was Christian. Why didn't you pick the ten commandments?”

“The core of our group came from California. Buddhism made big inroads the last forty years. Also, our group is a bit eclectic and to pick the ten commandments would mean picking one religious belief system over another, whereas the five precepts are universally agreed upon.”

“At least by constructors.” We look at her quizzically. “Constructors and destructors. Good and evil.” Ok, that makes sense.

“We are definitely on the constructor side, though Yingui would claim there are no sides, just ignorance. The problem being that we don't know which side of ignorance we are on. He tends to be overly cautious.”

“Yingui is your leader?”

“No, we have no leader. We listen to all and come to consensus. Takes longer, but more likely to gain full support. He is the oldest one though, excepting Br'thn of course. He is about your age.”

“Br'thn, that is an unusual name. How old do you think I am dear?” We hesitate. “Come on, we are all women here. Don't be shy.”

Susan looks at me and then says, “I am guessing about seventy.”

“Oh, that is so sweet. Well, it is getting dark. We should bed down for the night. I assume we will be leaving tomorrow? I am packed already. Light, don't worry. Our kind has always been ready to flee at a moments notice and are used to caring for our own needs.”

# Salt Lake City, Utah

“The rooms are comfortable enough. You knew this was not going to be easy. Relax and stop pacing the room please! Religious groups always take a long time to come to decisions, especially if it involves change. Even our own council meetings are boringly long if you are not directly involved in the discussion.”

“Well they are testing my patience. We have been here a week and nothing but talk.”

*There is no reason for all of us to be here. Why don't you go for a walk or something James?*

“Is it wise to break us up? That may just what they want. Divide and conquer. No, I will stay till we know more about which side they will be on.” He slumps down in a big chair looking out the window.

Someone knocks at the door.

“Enter”

A gentleman in a dark suit comes in and introduces himself. “I am Tran Vu Nuygen, the minister of security. May I ask you a few questions?” Barb motions for him to be seated.

“What can we do for you Mr. Nuygen?” Good job on the accent Ron. I can never say that name correctly even though I had Vietnamese neighbors growing up.

“There are a few things holding up the elders in their decision and I was asked to come and consult with you to gain more information.”

“Go ahead.”

“First, would you accept the authority of the elders over all your actions?”

James answers, “Would you ask this of the Chinese ambassador?”

“The Chinese ambassador would be asked to leave all weapons at the door so to speak. You three cannot do that if I understand your abilities correctly.”

“We have all taken oaths and are willing to reaffirm those oaths in front of the elders if need be to not harm others intentionally, to not lie, to not steal, to not take any substance that affects our judgment and of course the sexual thing is not a problem. That comes pretty close to leaving all weapons at the door does it not?”

“Mr. Nuygen, we do not seek power, land, resources, or people. We are not trying to convert anyone. We cannot make TKs out of normal people. We want to help, not harm. Where does your fear lie?”

“You could do something, that seems quite reasonable to you that would be unholy or horrible to us, without even intending to.”

“How would having control over us prevent that? If we thought something was that reasonable, we probably would not even think to ask permission first.”

“Look, as we have said many times already, we are here to share knowledge and do research to try and understand these abilities better. The Chinese are most certainly doing this as we speak. We know our abilities are related to the field of psiotics, in which they are far ahead of us. They could easily develop weapons of unimaginable power, now that they know they can take the field further. They are already in California, a very short distance away. Do you want them DSing poisons, plagues or bombs all over Utah? They could take over in a day without a shot being fired.”

“We are not without resources. We have as many TK2s as we can use. People who have already sworn loyalty. And don’t forget that Armstrong Salt Lake is with us. We can go back into the Armstrong facility any time we want to start it up again. There are some ‘interesting’ resources there to say the least.”

“We have one advantage; we have higher level TKs than they or you have access to. We saw your almost intact research facilities as the logical choice to help us balance the equation. You will not succeed with TK2s. They are just too weak to come up with more than popguns by comparison. And Chinese tech is way ahead of what made it to even the Armstrongs.”

”So, you are advocating a war with the Chinese?”

“No, we want to avoid a war. The way to do that, we believe, is to work with all people, but from a position of strength, as equals, not as slaves.”

“If we reject your proposal, what will you do?”

“Leave. You may have all of what was formerly Utah, assuming you can come to an understanding with the Native American populations, which do out number you by a slim margin. You will be totally on your own in dealing with the Chinese however. We will return to Arizona and decide what to do from there. There is even talk of going off planet. Some feel that we are too different now and that ‘norms’ will never accept us as friends and partners. The three of us and many more in other locations, feel that this would be a waste. We can do more through cooperation than competition.”



“Would it be possible to try this ‘cooperation’ on a trial basis, say a few months, and then see if it is meeting both of our needs?”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you for your time.” He gets up. “Someone will let you know as soon as a decision has been reached.” He leaves the room and the door closes behind him.

“Well Barb, what do you think?”

*They are certainly scared, but of both us and the Chinese. They are trying to decide whether it would be better to side with us or open negotiations directly with the Chinese.*

“Someone arrived in a limousine this afternoon. I could not scan their car completely, as it has some kind of field around it preventing us from seeing clearly. I suspect they already are talking to the Chinese. I do know that there were five people in the car, along with gifts and tech.”

“That would be wise on their part. Who will make the best offer? We offer nothing other than cooperation in research. We have not offered weapons, food, tech, or treaties. The Chinese could offer them all of the above, even tech to help defeat or control us. That would be very tempting.”

*They would want proof. They are a suspicious people, especially of those not sworn to the elders. The Mormons have been tricked and deceived many times in the past. They would not trust the Chinese any more than us. I would not be surprised if they are not asking the same questions of the Chinese ambassador right now.*

“But we follow a path of non violence. That has to feel safer?”

“Not necessarily. The people in India, following Gandhi, certainly gave up that concept fast enough. What will we do when backed into a corner?”

*Should we get ready to depart then?*

“I think they will play both cards. There is the old saying, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. They will want a way of knowing what we are up to.”

*So we become a source of information?*

“And hostages, if the Chinese tech proves useful. They can already hide themselves from a TK6 scan to some extent. Seeing as how they have access to only TK3 that is impressive.”

*But not necessarily from a TP6 scan. If we ever get in the same room, I could go exploring.*

“Is that not like stealing, taking something that was not offered? Is it ethical, even under the circumstances?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I for one need to get some air. It is highly unlikely they will come to any decision quickly. I figure we have at least a few hours. I am going out. Anyone else coming?”

“Sure why not? Barb, lets go. Not safe to be alone, probably not ever outside Hotevilla.”

*Though I do feel funny wearing these blue solid circles on our clothing. Feels too much like a target. Didn't they make the Jews in Nazi Germany do something similar?*

“A Star of David in their case. At least the Chinese have to do the same and it is not just because we are TK.”

“It's only 75mm in size, not that bad. Says we are ambassadors and to treat us nice.”

*Right. There is a park a couple of blocks down. Roses should be blooming still.*

“Sounds good to me. Anywhere but here.”

At least being black is not my problem any longer. TK is much worse. All I have to do is give someone the evil eye and they almost die on the spot. Give it a break people. Good to get out into the sun again, even if we still have to wear protective gear. Maybe Yingui and Br'thn can restore the ozone layer. Probably have to spend months if not years though. How many kilotons are up there and how much more would be needed?

*There are people following us.*

*What did you expect? Freedom?*

*At least we will not have to go far to inform them of our leaving.*

*There is a restaurant up there on the right. Feel like a cool lemonade?*

*What do we use for money?*

*Gold?*

*How will they know it is real?*

*Who says they are still using money? Have you seen anyone with a bracelet on and ours are back in Hotevilla. Not the values stored on them would mean anything.*

*Can't hurt to ask.*

We go inside. Only light is from the windows, but the place has enough windows and a light enough interior that it is easy to see. Our shadows do not follow us in. Expect they don't want to be that close.

“What will you have folks?”

Ron holds up his empty wrist, “This is somewhat embarrassing, but we don't have any idea what you will accept for money?”

“Them blue circles take care of that. I'll just have you sign the check and the government will take care of it. Order whatever you want.”

“Three lemonades please.”

“Coming right up.” Friendly enough.

“He was not upset at all about us. They must be getting strangers from all over.”

“Probably just happy that we are 'labeled' and he does not have to hassle a stranger that has just come into town and does not know all the rules or the local currency.”

*Trouble coming anyway. High alcohol level in the two coming in the door. They have weapons.*

*Shields up. I don't want to die to a stray shot after all we have been through. I got the bullets in the guns.*

“Who runs this joint?” I hate drunks and addicts. Ex military judging from their soiled uniforms.

“Gentleman I will have to ask you to leave your guns outside.” He does not say this with much conviction.

“Oh yeh? And just who is going to make us? You look old enough to be my old man. He don't look so good either, on account of he is dead. If you get my meaning.”

Sigh. I stand up. “I would be happy to make you leave if you can't behave.”

“Well, looky here, a darkie, a cripple and a pretty lady. Maybe the little lady would like to give me a kiss?” His buddy laughs at this thought. None of them has taken a bath in days and smells of booze and urine. Not everyone in Utah was Mormon, though they must be the majority now, being better prepared for the plague. These two look like they must have been nesters. Wonder if they have police and I should stall till they get here. What happened to our shadows? Lot of good they are.

“Do you know what a TK is sir?” I hold up my staff to bring home the point. Right, not everyone knows about the staffs. People in the restaurant are backing away now. “OK, why is a TK scarier than a drunk with a gun?”

“Ah, a TK don't bother me none. Can't stop bullets and die just like everyone else. You gonna hit me with that little bitty staff?” He raises his gun and points at me. Not too steady. If it goes off, we are covered of course, but not necessarily those around us. Though with no bullets that isn't going to happen.

*End it James. Quit playing with him.* Barb turns her back and so does Ron.

I turn to the manager. "This is your place and your call. I can take care of the problem without harm to anyone or I can let it be and you can deal with whatever happens." He nods in the affirmative and then sits back to watch with a smile. So be it. I did not survive this long by being stupid. I turn the weapon into water. He stares at his wet hand in shock, while reaching for his other gun. I dissolve that as well, wetting the side of his pants.

The other one snickers till I dissolve his as well. The first one decides that his fists can do the job and takes a swing at me. I let the barrier soften just enough to offer resistance, but not allow him to hurt himself. Like hitting a giant invisible mattress.

*Ron, if I may have your assistance. I want to remove the alcohol from their systems. Do you remember the formula?* Ron TPs the formula to me visually. *Thanks. You take care of the other one, I will do number one.* We remove the alcohol. It will take a while before they notice of course, but they will sober up much faster this way.

Barb TPs to the three, *Leave now before the police arrive and you might avoid a night in jail or worse. So far his is just playing. You really don't want to piss him off.*

"What the shit? She's talking in my head! Let's get out of here." As they leave, the other patrons applaud. James takes a bow and sits down. The manager brings over the lemonades.

"Well, you earned your drinks. You don't have to sign anything. Those two come around about once a week to cause trouble. At least there are three less guns for someone to get hurt with."

"How come no one has done anything about those nesters before?"

"They are not from the Armstrong facility. We don't use the 'nester' term around here. Plenty that came out are right nice people. As to your question though, we don't have much of a police force at the moment. We lost some of our best to the plague, the ones most likely to go around and check up on others. These two have always managed to get away before help came, so we finally just stopped trying. They bust a chair once in a while, but there is no liquor here, so they leave after awhile." He tips his hand and goes off to help others.

"You ham!" Both Ron and Barb are grinning though.

*Wetting his pants was a good one.*

*Yeh, better than New Jerusalem at least. Everything out in the open. May have even gained some respect for TKs today.*

*Nobody hurt and no lies.*



# New Atherton

Now that most of the net and com services are up and running smoothly again, at least in this area of California and to China, I was transferred to the 'cat' project and worked with the scientists to try and understand what exactly they were doing. I had Lisa working with me also, as she was good at operating the psiotic imagers. I spent most of my time interfacing new pieces of equipment together in new ways and more or less managing the project. The scientists were from the mainland of course. Flown out here in a hurry. Most of their experience was with the human TKs, so this was a challenge. I suggested that Doris might be of help and so she was brought in as well. She was reluctant at first, as she did not like the idea of scientists around her cats, but when it was explained that there would be no surgery or torture and that the alternative for her was the farm, she acquiesced.

"Cats sleep eighty percent of their lives. There is only so much you can get them to do before they fall asleep on you." Doris is holding Goldie asleep in her arms.

"If the positive incentives do not work, they try the negative ones."

I come in to her defense, "Then we would have no idea where they had gotten to and the positive incentives would no longer work. It would help if we had more than three of them. We could do more rotations. I do believe we are making progress. That was a good idea to slow them down with drugged food. Much easier to see what is going on."

By having them teleport within the psiotic imager sensor field we now had a recording of the whole process. The imagers were designed for human med scans. All we had to do was place a barrier between the cat and the food. Something they could smell through but not push through. Their own psiotic field warped the field around them till it snapped open a sort of door. Part of their field then went through the door, trying various outcomes before the entire cat went through. Sort of an astral projection preceding the teleportation. We could even see the 'finger' as we called it, coming out as a small dot in various places near the food. Next step was to use psiotic amplifiers to try and duplicate the effect without a living thing.

That was where I came in, as this was going to take a lot of computing power. By hooking everything in the lab and surrounding offices together in a grid, we finally were able to push a paper clip past a barrier and land some ten centimeters away.

“Look, the cats are living beings. They have to maintain their own psiotic field at the same time they are moving themselves through the door. If we concentrate on inanimate matter, we can simplify the equations dramatically.” Said Harsha, our expert programmer and mathematician from India. She was lucky to get out before the plague and war, though I imagine she lost a lot of family. Everyone had.

Within a week we could move something weighing several kilograms a hundred meters, or something heavier a shorter distance. Accuracy was still a problem, especially at a distance. The cats must have some way of 'seeing' where they are going, that psiotic finger I suspect. Also, these are kittens, with the usual kitten clumsiness and such. What would an adult with these abilities do? What would happen if we put a small psiotic imager through the teleport device? We had already done light imagers and gotten nothing. We still had no idea of what was actually going on either. Just as our ancestors used fire without understanding combustion and such. Another problem is that the computers and psiotic devices to do the transport took up half a room. We had a meeting with Regent Hua this afternoon and we were expected to give a demonstration. We need more time.

At five minutes before the demonstration was to occur, Harsha comes up to me with a suitcase sized device thrown together rather quickly. “Where did you get the case for that?”

“It was an old 64 bit digital Intel based computer. We gutted it of course. Main thing was that the case was metal. You place the object you wish to transport on the balance pan here and then set X, Y and Z in meters here. Push the button and 'poof' it's there. We will add limiters in the production model to automatically determine mass and distance capabilities.”

“How much mass can it handle?”

“Only one gram per 100 meters so far, but I know I can get a factor of a hundred more out of it with refinement and time.”

“If someone wanted a secret weapon, this would do. Give me a second.” I find an old insect pin in the drawer. Not sure why I have them except I thought they looked neat. I rip off a section of paper and make a crude dart for demonstration purposes. A pipette tip would have been better, but no one uses disposable plastic anymore. “How far could you TK this thing?”

Harsha picks it up, “Less than a gram, so maybe a couple of hundred meters, but unless it is moving when it enters the field, it will not be

moving when it comes out, so what's the point of something in the shape of a dart?"

"Excellent idea! Help me set it up over here across the room." We get everything into position just when Regent Hua's assistant announces his arrival. We both quickly adjust ourselves and prostrate ourselves on the floor facing the door and looking down. No one moves or makes a sound.

"You may rise." I rise and then immediately bow in his direction without ever looking directly at him.

His assistant then directs us to show Regent Hua what we have done. We demonstrate first with the live kitten, Goldie is our favorite. She aptly moves from one platform to the next now, even without a treat. We next take a stuffed kids cat toy and place it on the transmitter platform and make it do the jump to the passive receiving platform. We start to set up for the next demonstration.

The assistant speaks up, "Make it go back to the first platform like the kitten did."

"That we cannot do, the toy is totally passive and does not generate the field itself. That is all contained here. So far we can only push objects to a location, not retrieve them."

"That machine is too large to be practical."

"We agree, though it could move a ten kilogram object across this room, or through an equally thick reinforced wall. The intervening mass is of no import. As a weapon mounted on a transport truck, you could move a small explosive charge into a totally secure area with no trouble at all. Past a wall that a tank could not take out. But we agree, Harsha has come up with a scaled down device that may be of move interest to you."

We move over to the table where the smaller transporter is resting. Harsha picks up the device and turns it around to show that is truly portable. She then places a small piece of candy on the transmitter platform and moves it across the room, where it appears and then falls to the ground.

"Exploding candy?" All the assistants laugh at the Regents remark.

"If that piece of candy had been a cyanide capsule a tenth that size and we had materialized it inside your heart or stomach, you would not be laughing." They are paying attention now.

"Or a high explosive, to use your example, materialized in your mouth." Decapitation the hard way.

I bring out my metal tube and paper dart while Harsha sets the controls. An almost invisible bluish field appears on the transmitter pan. "If I were to use this childhood toy and just blow through it, I might



obtain a few meters distance, but using the transmitter, any object that is in motion when entering the field will be in motion when it leaves at its destination. If you will be so kind to assist us, could you place yourself between the transmitter and the picture on the wall over there.” The first assistant to laugh is told to do as I say. I take aim at the nervous but cocky assistant. “This dart is not sharpened and contains no poison.” The assistant smiles but does not laugh. Just when I am ready however...

“Halt.” Another assistant brings over a cigar sized tube intricately carved of some kind of reddish wood and lacquered, at the direction of the Regent. “This is an old family heirloom, you will please use this instead of your toy.” I open the tube and inside is a beautifully crafted pocket blow gun. “The poison dart on this one is deadly. Many have died in its use. Please continue.” Now the assistant is sweating and VERY nervous. I look at Harsha who nods. If I fail the assistant will die followed closely by the two of us. Oh well. I take aim and blow as hard as I can in a giant puff. The dart flies to the field and disappears. The assistant's eyes roll up in his head and he faints. The dart is stuck in the picture across the room. The Regent rises and we prostrate ourselves on the floor till they awaken the fainted one and all leave the room.

The next day we are given an order to continue our research and are allowed anything we need, people, equipment, etc. BUT, it is to be kept top secret. That puts limits on both then. The more people we have the greater the possibility one of them is a spy for someone else. The more equipment we order the better chance someone else has of figuring out what we are doing. But unlimited resource means limited time to produce results.

# Regional Galactic Center

“Daniel of Earth, the problems of which you refer are universal in this current incarnation of the universe. However there is no universal answers to those problems. Each must find their own way. We have been coming here for several million years and we still have bullies, inequality, unhappiness, not to mention old age, sickness and death.”

“So you have given up trying to solve the problems?”

“Oh, no. We are constantly improving, updating, and trying new ideas whenever we can. But new ideas create new problems. Life is change. Many who used to come here, are here no longer. Nothing, not even the ‘thn are forever. You learn to accept your own death, your cultures death and your species death. I am Zywyrthn, but only one of three Jirju still alive. Like your Sauron, we now represent a new intelligent psiotic species that has evolved on our home world. He chose a dark path, but even those of us who follow the light are no more successful.”

Too many ideas at once. “Thank you Darvic of Zywyrthn.” He nods to me as I leave, well, as much as a tentacled Jirju can.

Back in my own quarters, Marm is conversing with a smaller species, more his size anyway, sort of a cross between a cat and a bird with VERY sharp front talons. Something a cat can respect I would imagine. I nod and leave them alone. He was supposed to put a sign outside the door, but the cleaners get everything eventually and I cannot read cat that well, my eyes are better than my nose. I head for the observatory. A TK sphere with an aquatic species passes me in a hurry. I bow to its presence, but it is in too much of a hurry to notice me. Usually things run VERY slow here. The Galactic center is as much a philosophy university as anything else. Other than our clothing and food needs, we are not allowed to bring anything else through the DS gateways. Sufficient mass is provided to make temporary quarters and such, but as soon as we leave it will be all recycled for the next group coming in. If you forget anything, it is gone forever.

I never tire of watching the stars. Maybe I have some of the Star Trek lust that Yingui suffers from. I was in the military between Vietnam and the Middle East, so did not see any action as a lieutenant. It was afterwards, when I was a civilian in the diplomatic corps that I saw more death than I thought I would ever see, in the Middle East of course. Amazing to me how a group of people can hold onto hate for so long, generation after generation, as if it was part of their genetic makeup. Of

course HelperV or the fire plague as the Native Americans call it was much worse. And the crazies that followed and the much worse rogue TKs. Amazing that anyone survived at all, yet some communities survived almost untouched while others are completely gone. I remember reading that it was similar during the black plagues of Europe.

But the plagues were different, not fueled by hate. Now the Chinese are making a try for California. Will they stop there? Can the new UNA [United Native Americans] hold their own? Anyone born in the Americas was an automatic citizen as long as they obeyed the rules. They were still working on those, but it looked like the more aggressive native tribes might succeed in turning the tide back for a time. No money, you can own nothing more than you can carry for a days walk. No paper or any other object can represent anything other than itself. This was to cut out deeds, stocks, etc. You can't carry a house or piece of land with you, so you could not own it. All else was held in common, to be shared and administered by the community. This still left open the possibility of bullies and gangs appearing, but at least they could not take over the world like the last time. Council members at the local levels were chosen by vote of those affected. The council elected one person to represent them at the next higher level and so on. Grievances could be forwarded up the levels to the UNA congress itself, or the parties got tired of waiting and worked it out themselves. The latter I bet will be the more common.

And then there were the TKs. They followed the same rules, but were not held to the authority of any of the smaller councils except their own. Only the UNA congress could dictate to us. It will remain to be seen how long that will hold out. Our numbers are growing, 3126 at last count. Hotevilla is becoming a TK center of sorts. In spite of the fact that Hotevilla is sacred ground, we may be allowed to build structures out of the local rock soon, with a little TK help. Insides can be fully modern, but outsides must be authentic. Water is being made and crops being grown. But of course we cannot reproduce ourselves and are totally dependent on the ones that show up at puberty to continue our population. If we are not beholding to the people, these children will be hidden from us till we are no more. TK5 or above are essentially immortal, except for accidents, but there are very rare at that level or above. I would not want to live in a world where we were not wanted anyway. The problem is that the norms want the TKs to make life easy, doing a lot of construction projects, health care, etc. We would run ourselves ragged if we answered every request. There is still a sort of love-hate feeling towards us. 'If you can

save my child and choose not to, that makes you evil.' We would be turned into slaves overnight if we gave in.

***Daniel, you must have patience. Everything is still new to your species.***

"Qr'thn! I am happy to see you! Sorry, it is just there are so many problems and so many people suffering. It can overwhelm me at times."

***There will always be suffering Daniel.***

"Yeh, I am beginning to get the message. Just talked for an hour with Darvic. But how are you doing? Any word from Br'thn and Yingui?"

***I am concerned about Br'thn. She is becoming too close physically to others. Physical affection is not normal to our kind.***

"It is very normal for our kind. Some of us would even die, or wish we were dead, if denied affection. Children brought up without affection are monsters."

***It has progressed beyond normal touching and caring. It is not a subject that we are comfortable talking about.***

"Sex? But she is only a child. How could she even know enough to participate?"

***She is unable to reproduce at this time, but she requests with more frequency for Yingui to 'play' her.***

"Ah, what exactly do you mean by 'play her'?"

***She assumes the shape of a hollow potato with holes in it, an ocarina, and Yingui blows through one of these holes to produce sound vibrations. This is sexually stimulating to a 'thn.***

"Are either of them aware that this is what is happening?"

***No.***

"Why not?"

***We do not like to talk about it.***

"You mean she is sixty five million years old and you have not had the birds and bees talk yet? Don't you think it is about time?"

***We do not normally reproduce until the age of two hundred and fifty million years. It was thought there was plenty of time.***

"Parents! You are always so naive. Even babies can have these feelings. This is not sex, this is simply masturbation. I doubt very much that Yingui is aware that this is what is going on. He would never abuse a child or any living creature, if he knew. And Br'thn is simply exploring pleasurable feelings. She is also probably not aware of why this feels good to her. You need to tell both of them. If you only tell Yingui, Br'thn will feel hurt that he is ignoring her and will seek 'affection' from other sources, probably not so nice. If you tell only Br'thn, she will not be able

to call on Yingui for help and understanding. He has been through this stage of life remember. It is a very difficult stage for human males, especially socially outcast nerds as Yingui, Ron and Barb were. He can help. Come to think of it, with her TK ability, she could probably be taught to take care of herself. This is a very common practice with humans in need of this release. She will need alone time. Even in our sex crazed species, these feelings are best expressed in private.”

***Thank you Daniel of Earth. You have been most helpful.***

You would think a parent over five hundred million years old and with four other children would know this stuff. These problems really are universal. I will also say a prayer for Yingui, he has never been the parent of a daughter before. I shudder, Rachael was certainly not easy in this particular area.

# New Atherton

“WHAT!”

***Qr'thn says that I am not allowed to be played as an ocarina anymore because it brings on sexual stimulation.***

“I am incapable of feeling sexual feelings any longer. You know that no TK2 or above has these feelings in humans. What does she mean?”

***Not humans. In me.***

“Oh my God. I am sorry Br'thn. I did not know.” I am VERY red in the face.

Br'thn sees this and copies it becoming red herself. ***I did not know either, only that it felt good. She said you will be able to help me sort out the feelings.***

“I am not 'thn of course, but I will help in anyway that I can. Did she offer any suggestions?”

***She said that I need to learn to play by myself if necessary.***

“Hmm, that is only part of it. The most important thing is to learn what is sexual and what is affection. It is still safe for you to share affection with friends. You only need to keep the sexual feelings to yourself for the time being. When you are older, you will know more of the rules and procedures and be able to participate as an adult, before then is not really safe.”

***Will you hold me?***

“Yes of course.” Her spherical surface is wet. She has learned to cry as well. Not sure all of these human emotions are good for her. I will have to ask Qr'thn. I have never raised a 'thn before. Not that I ever wanted to be a parent for even a human child.

***Br'thn pain?***

“Yes Ghost, but this is heart pain, not body pain. She will be ok.”

***Food?***

Qaletaqa comes bursting in, “Yingui, they want us in the great hall!”

“So, it is time. How do we get there?”

“Mei Ying will take us.”

“Time to get ready then. Please put on the robe I made for you and the sandals and don't forget to brush your teeth and hair and don't forget Ghost as well.” Ghost loves the brush, but then usually cleans himself and undoes all the work right after wards. Takes us about ten minutes.

“Ah, why do I have to wear this stupid robe? I like my Paiute robe better. Besides we don’t normally wear these fancy ones. Is this not a deception?”

“You raise some good points, but would it also not be a deception to force them to understand us in a cultural context that they have never experienced? Would it not be better to meet them in their own cultural context first?”

Knock at the door and Mei Ying enters, “All ready? Not a good idea to keep Regent Hua waiting.” I had already worked out a safety measure with Br’thn and she has DSd out of the room. I did not want the two of us in the great hall at the same time. I smelled a trap and she concurred. We did not know which hall was the great hall, but knew that they have been moving psiotic devices around all day.

“Mei Ying, what is the Regents full name? Just curious.”

“I am surprised that you have not figured it out from the posters of him all over. What does Hua mean?”

“Well, it is one of those nice Chinese words that means many different things depending on context and intonation. Can mean brilliant or flower or any number of other things, but there is always a black flower in the background, along with the eyes of a creature. I am guessing a dragon, as this is a powerful symbol for the Chinese and frankly an overused one. So, that would make him something like Hua Hei Long, or black dragon flower.”

“Very good Yingui, you are catching on. I believe you are correct, judging from what I have seen and heard of him, the name would fit. However, I have never been told. To us, he is always Regent Hua. To know someone’s name is to know something of the person, something you may not want your enemies to know.” We round a corner and come to a grand set of carved wooden doors. More Celtic in style with knots and such, but definitely elegant and befitting an important person. My guess is that this was a meeting hall for the former tenants of New Atherton.

“When we are called, I will enter first. Follow about three steps behind me. We will walk in slowly and then prostrate ourselves on the floor before him. Only when he says, do we rise. Never look directed into his eyes, as that is an insult that could result in your death.”

“You do what you must Mei Ying as you are under his authority and we will do what we must as we are not. I will not embarrass you, but we are not slaves or in any way under his rule.” This makes Mei Ying very

nervous, but we do not have time to debate it before we are summoned by the doors slowly opening.

*Qaletaga, bow, but do not show fear. Hold Ghost, use TK if you need help holding him that long. You do not need to look him in the eyes, but try not to look around too much. Everyone will be watching us. We want to pretend like we know what we are doing.* I wink at him and he smiles and nods back.

***This chamber is surrounded by psiotic dampening chips. We were correct in our surmising this as a trap. There are also devices around the periphery with DS gates and projectiles ready. They appear to be aimed at the center of the room. There is a device with a high concentration of 3H several floors below us.***

*Yes Br'thn. I am sorry they chose this path. You know what to do. It's show time! I hope she is fast enough.*



# Hotevilla

“We have most of the western states Native American nations on board. No one wants to go back to the way it was. These tribes are the ones with the largest concentrations of people. The east coast tribes will be harder to contact as they lost too much of their lands and way of life. They can no longer keep us on the reservations, but our time is not infinite. They will attempt to box us in again. We need to move. Saps are joining up in near unanimous numbers. They rightly see that the way we propose is a good one. We assured them that they could keep their own religions and need not adopt ours. Heck, most of us are Christian now too or at least partially so.”

“There are still revenge killings of pears going on, with both tribes and saps independently and together participating. This needs to stop. Much knowledge resides with the pears. We can't afford to lose their knowledge or skills.”

“On the other hand, they can never again be allowed to rule over us.” Lots of whoops and hollers are heard. “Never again.” Is heard in a chorus around the room.

“What of the Bearer and the Holy One?”

“The Holy One has told me that they are at this moment about to enter the great hall of the Chinese Regent Hua for opening discussions. She needs to concentrate now and will inform us later what has happened. This is a process that may take weeks, if not longer. We need to be patient as well as watchful.”

“So far they have kept to the valleys of California, but people and troops continue to come into San Francisco in large numbers according to the satellite images. It is likely they will take control of the satellites soon. Already there are attempts being made to crack our encryption codes. As they have more resources and people to devote to this, they will eventually succeed.”

“We have redundant communication links in place and have ground observers in position. The Idaho and Nevada nests are in league with us, seeing the Chinese as the invaders. Utah is thinking about it. We are not totally dependent on the satellites. As the nesters were born to this land, we have extended to them full rights as Native Americans. Being part of a military unit, they are well trained in working for the common good and not being obsessed, as the pears were, with material things. We have

grown lazy in our years of confinement and humiliation. We could learn much from them.”

“What about the nest outside of Phoenix? The Western Apache are the closest tribe. Have they made contact?”

“Contact has been made, but the Arizona nest, like the Utah one is concerned about the TKs. The years of witch hunts and science debunking the spiritual have taken their toll. They do not have the advantage of our history and beliefs in accepting this new form of life.”

“What do they need to let them join up?”

“They would like to meet a contingent of TKs aligned with us to reassure them of our sincerity.”

“We sent three Guardians to Utah for near the same reason. Who do we have left to send to Arizona?”

Running Snake stands up. “I will go.”

“As will I.” Pushy Paws also stands up. There are murmurings from the group.

“We cannot afford to risk the Gateway to the Holy Ones and neither of you is young enough to make it on your own.”

“You had better get used to it. You excluded both of us, not believing what was right in front of you. I will not be here forever at any rate. Soon you will be looking for the next gateway no matter what happens. I am also not proposing we go alone. Neither of us is TK in the sense Arizona means and wants to meet with. I propose an honor guard of TKs willing to go.” At this a dozen or more immediately stand and others follow, shouting over each other their willingness to go.

“We can't leave ourselves completely defenseless either. You can't all go. Ten should be enough.” Others nod their approval.

# Tierra del Fuego

“Ah, do we have to get up? Why can't we just hide here for the rest of our lives?”

“And when the food runs out? Do you want to live on duped crackers the rest of your life?”

“Sigh, how about another hour in this nice warm bed with these wonderful comforters? If this is how pears live, I could handle it.”

“Ah, so you want to become one of the oppressors now? Where did all that idealism go? Come on sleepy head, time to weather the storm.” A pillow fight ensues.

“Girls! There is fresh bread, eggs with peppers, onions, cheese and salsa, and coffee. Are all you new TKs so lazy?” She is smiling, but there is a little sarcasm in her voice as well.

We roust ourselves up and stumble into the dining area. “This is weird, you have done all the work. I am not used to being waited on, much less by a pear. No offense.”

“What is a pear? I do not understand your context dear.”

“Maybe that term did not make it down here. You are out of the way. Anyway, pear is a term that we saps have given to the rich. Saps stands for severe acute poverty syndrome. Pear is short for parasite. In our culture the rich are thought to do nothing other than drink the live blood of the poor.”

“And you think me a pear? I guess from a financial point of view you would be correct, but I have no servants, own no companies, at least not directly. On the other hand, you are also correct in that I do not contribute much either. I just spend my days helping out in the local orphanage and weekends helping at the hospital for the poor. Nope, no contribution at all. You would be surprised how many orphans there are now, after the plague that is.”

“Open mouth, insert foot. Sorry Dorothy. But then you are not the norm either, being both rich and enhanced.”

“I did not inherit my wealth either, but earned it. Of course I had an advantage and got in on the ground floor, so to speak, of many enterprises. I was conservative, but could take the long view. By the time this last collapse hit, I was very comfortable and did not suffer much. Oh and you were right, I was born in England and immigrated to the Colonies with my step parents. It was thought that the new world might be safer for my kind.”

“We have been the United States for a long time. I have never heard someone refer to them as the Colonies before. Is that what you British still call us?”

“Well, that is what they were when I arrived in 1770 dears, as a little girl of course. I am three hundred and fifty eight years old. You can close your mouths now. Not sightly for such young ladies. It is likely, baring accidents, that you will be in a similar situation not too long from now.”

“But...”

“I don’t look a day over seventy? I expect that I will live another hundred hears. It is normal to live close to five hundred years for our kind and I am in good health. Who do you think kept civilization together all this time? Before the enhanced we humans were just a bunch of savages. It took a group of people with a longer view to make sense of it all and help steer things away from Satan’s plans for us. We made mistakes of course. We had to be subtle and very patient. Not to mention always moving as one’s age did not match one’s physical features. Got much harder when they went to implants and bracelets. That was part of the reason we are scattered in the more undeveloped areas at the moment. If what you say it true, it might be time for us to reveal ourselves and come to your aid in a more overt way.”

“Then we are not alone? We don’t have to do all this from scratch?”

“Of course not dear. Don’t be silly. Now come help me with the dishes. Susan, if you would be so kind as to make the beds. We will scatter the food for the animals and leave everything else as it is. Someone will eventually find the place and make use of it.”

Turned out we were not exactly in Tierra del Fuego, at the end of the world, the last of the natives having died out some thirty years earlier to leave the place abandoned to all but crazy scientists and archaeologists, but on an old sheep ranch outside of Punta Arenas. Turned out a lot of sheep farmers ended up there from England and Dorothy was not that strange. We arrived in the city proper by the early afternoon, using an old pickup truck with poor shocks and stinky exhaust. Dorothy driving of course, neither one of us could drive a stick shift, though I watched carefully to try and figure it out. We spent the next several hours going from house to house, saying goodbye to survivors that Dorothy knew. At each place we were expected to sample food and socialize. My Spanish is not as good as Susan’s, so I kept quiet and tried to follow along. No mention was made to anyone of our “condition” and no questions were asked. You would think that two people showing up out of no where would have raised questions, but as long as we were with Dorothy there

were no problems. I have no idea whether these people were part of her network or not. At the last house, the Gomez residence, we bedded down for the night. Must be past midnight, and of course we were expected to eat again. At least we did not have to participate in the drinking. I was never so stuffed in my life.

Being October and down under, it was their spring. We heard rustling very early as people got up to go out into the fields to tend crops just starting to come up. Everyone was a farmer now. Those that did not know how were apprenticed to those who did for a few years with the understanding that once they felt comfortable, they would go out on their own and stake out an abandoned farm. They worked hard in exchange for their apprenticeship, but so did everyone. I woke around nine. Hard to sleep with sunlight coming in the window. Still too stuffed to eat anything though.

“Do you have a shower or something?”

“Baths are bad for you. They wash off all the essential oils off your skin and leave you open for sickness. We only take baths on the weekends. Two more days.” Great. And I thought two minute cat baths were a hardship. Definitely going to keep my hair short. OK, I can do a TK bath, but it is not the same. Part of the reason for taking a bath is because it feels so good.

“Rachael, we have kitchen duty. Bread making!” I am a total klutz in a real kitchen. Sure I can throw together a meal from GMSoy packets, but baking bread? I make it to the kitchen to be overwhelmed with the most wonderful smell of yeast bread rising. I could almost get drunk on the smell.

“Dorothy, do you ever get over how good this smells?”

“Not really. Nice to be going back to the old ways too. Nothing like preparing bread by hand. Here, you can help me punch down this dough.” She shows me how to fold and knead the dough, but not too roughly. She takes over when it looks good and does the most amazing twists and braids before setting it on a counter to do the final rising. “Another half hour and everything goes into the ovens. Come help me get the fires going.” The ovens are out back in the open. The coals are still warm from the previous day, so all we have to do is add more fuel to get them started again. Preheating takes on a whole different meaning here.

“Dorothy, I don't mean to be rude, but are we going to meet any of the rest of your network? We came all this way to meet the South American TKs and so far all we have been doing is partying and sleeping.”

“I thought you understood, all the people whom you have met are part of the network dear.”

“But, they don't register as TKs and no one is using their abilities!”

“Of course not dear. Why should they? Life still needs to get done and it has certainly been fun making the bread. You have to remember, that for most of us, using our talents out in the open was a death sentence. And we have never been able to meet like this in groups. It will take some getting used to before people will open up. Also, our network was more normal people than enhanced from the beginning.”

“How many are new TK then?”

“Oh dear, let me think. When we first heard of them we quickly took them aside and introduced them to our ways. They have adapted pretty quickly. Most of the population does not know about us, so to them a TK is a witch. Not safe for even the new TKs to show themselves. Especially since most are formerly 'pears' as you would call them. Just remember, like you, they did not choose this existence and all have lost people they loved.”

“Huh? Up north, most of the new TKs are saps. The pears hid from the plague and so were not affected as much. What happened down here?”

“There was one group up north that was not affected as much as well, even you said that only a few of them even got sick.”

“The natives? Some sort of natural immunity we figured. Most are naturally at about TK 0.5 or something like that. Hard to quantify. So, you have natives here too?”

“Dear, most of the working population down here are natives or at least have some native blood in their veins and were thus saved from the sickness. The well off are almost all white. Of course, some had fallen on hard times and ended up at the bottom. A lot died in the plague. I would guess that at least half of the new TKs were formerly well off. Our estimates are that about one third of our population has survived.”

“One third! Wow! One generation could fill in that void. Let me think. Hmm, that means that maybe as many as two billion people could still be alive, though it is hard to tell how many survived in India, Pakistan and the Middle East. The hard part will be filling in the infrastructure.”

“It will probably mean abandoning the cities for the time being dear. Going back to the land. We have been taking steps to lock down libraries and other sources of information, to keep feral animals and humans out. At least till we can make use of the knowledge again.”

“Libraries? As in books? We don't have libraries any more, just net centers where saps can have net access. Some of the pears had books, but only as ornaments for their homes. With the net mostly down, we have had a year of little access to information, just email. Some places are starting to come back up, but it will be a long time before full access to the databases is available again. As to cities vs farms. We are still in conflict there. Cities offer advantages by concentrating abilities, allowing people to work together in a more efficient way. Farms are best for growing food. For us though, the farm was one step away from death. Only the really desperate worked on farms. We no longer have the ability or the means to do much beyond a small plot outside our living space. Most of our farms are automated by bots anyway. Even after the fall, you could see the tractors still planting and taking care of huge fields. Part of the reason the Chinese took California for themselves. The plague hit before spring planting, so no one was out there to do the work. Now we are near harvest time and if not for the bots, we would have no food this winter.”

“What happens when the bots fail? They will you know. Machines breakdown eventually. We have yet to make a self repairing machine better than a human. Sounds like you could use farmers more than TKs.”

“Or some mix of the two. The US used to be a big sheep and cattle farming area. I am sure lots of people here would fit right in. Even the natives prefer sheep to cattle, though there is talk of bringing back the buffalo. Harder to make cloth out of buffalo fur though.”

She laughs, “I would imagine. Well, we are done here for the time being. Let's join the others on the patio and I will introduce you to the fellow enhanced.” A third of the people present had some ability. About a third of those were new TKs, level two for the most part, though some of the kids were level one.

“You should be aware that a child has a relapse of the plague sometime during puberty. They become infectious for a couple of weeks. Anyone that has not been through the initial 'trial' can become ill and possibly die. If someone becomes sick, give them lots of liquids and let them rest as much as possible. Cool them if the temperature gets too high. They have trouble regulating their internal temperature, but with careful attendance, most will survive. Most of what killed everyone the first time was lack of people to care for others and fear.”

“Thanks, we will make sure that knowledge gets out.”

“If we could meet with the TK2s for a bit, we can teach them what we know about how best to use the abilities for defense and being helpful in

general.” Oh boy, more glass ball practice. Only now we are the teachers and not the victims. Wah-ha-ha-ha!



# Florida Enclave

“Julio, this way! Come quickly!”

“Jose, they are coming. We can't outrun them. No one has ever outrun them. We are doomed!”

“Keep running. We have only one chance. The old hospital.”

“We are alone. We stand out to them like flares. How can we hide? Anywhere we can go, they can see us. Even the night will not help and no wall can hide us. I can't take it any longer.” Julio stops at the corner panting heavily.

Jose comes back to get him urging him on. “It is only around the corner now. The runners can only see 100 meters. We have to stay ahead of them. I know a place. Come, come quickly.”

They continue running and enter the old hospital. “This way.” They weave down corridors, turning left, then right. Down stairs around corners. It seems to go on forever.

“Julio, I will never remember how to get out, even if they don't find us. We are doomed!”

“We are almost there. See! There it is. In this door. Come on, quickly” A door slams down the hallway and voices are heard. They enter the room, all black and close the door to be plunged into total darkness. “Stay totally quiet,” Jose whispers.

“My heart will give me away. I would not be in this mess if I hadn't listened to you!” Julio whispers back, but then stays quiet. They hear nothing inside the chamber and time passes slowly. Hours pass. “I have to piss Jose.” his whispers.

“Go in the corner then, but keep quiet.” More hours pass.

“How long do we have to wait? Surely they have gone by now.”

“No, they never miss one of us. They cannot afford to lose face now. We wait till they think we are dead.”

“How come they can't see us here? What is this place?”

“A special room where they did med scans on sick people. If we succeed, we need to get a tech in here to figure this out. If we can use this tech for ourselves, we have a chance to fight back against the TK gangs.”

“Marta!” They say in unison. They remain in the chamber for several more days before they finally emerge, nearly dehydrated to death. It takes them several days to get out of the gang's sphere of influence. But this time they have knowledge they can use.



# Salt Lake City

“This is getting us no where. They keep asking questions and then more waiting. I say we leave. They are just stalling.”

“The Chinese are up to something. Salt Lake is not the best farm land, so to say that they will not invade Utah means almost nothing. Think about it. What do the Chinese want and what do they fear?”

“Control. Everyone seems to want control. Even the Mormons want control or they would not ask us to be under the authority of their elders. The farm belts further east and north of us all look attractive. This could be a good staging area for further invasions.”

“Corn! I did not even think about it. With the Middle East gone, so is all the oil. They will be going after the fuel corn as well.”

*And don't forget they fear us. They fear TKs worse than the nesters did. Of course this is a control thing again. They can't control us, so they fear us. They assume we want to control them and can't imagine why we would not. Interesting how we have a tendency to project on our 'enemies' those traits that are the worst in ourselves.*

“Taking that line, what do we want? Is not our vision of a peaceful cooperative world just another form of control?”

“Maybe. We are certainly talking about steering the world in the direction of our vision, whether or not others share those thoughts. Cooperation does not work if people do not buy into the vision you are proposing.”

*Don't forget that we are trying to negotiate with the Chinese as well. We are no different than the Mormons.*

“We are not trying to control the Chinese and we are not afraid that they will ever control us. We were told to come here first, as they are the closest to the growing UNA movement, but there is much east of us that should be explored.”

*Fewer natives there though. Who do we unite with? Our own group may feel if we invite too many non-native groups they will get diluted out.*

“Look at this map of the tribes Running Snake made for us. We need to go north east to the Lakota. That is were we found Br'thn. They will likely be more understanding of our new ways.”

“First good idea we have had all day. Good one James! From there we can spread out to the Crow, Cheyene and possibly the Chippewa, though the Lakota might not like the last group.”

*We could be with the Lakota in a few hours if we leave now or we can wait till after dinner when the sats and other surveillance can't see us as well.*

“I vote the latter. It will be a long time before we have chocolate cake again and I hear that is on the menu for dinner.”

“Agreed!”

We had dinner in the common room with the others staying here. Mostly government employees, which in this case meant Mormon Church officials. The meals always started with prayer, which was fine with us. We know how to bow our heads as well as the next person. Some of the commentary on the scriptures was even good. Made you think. No harm there. Of course, no one wanted to sit with us. Everyone was still afraid of us, though we had done nothing to warrant those feelings. They had their share of rogues during the plague times, but just as not every black man was out to kill you, not every TK was evil. We saw the Chinese group sitting at one table also, but several others were there as well. Since so many Mormons had done missionary time in China, there were enough locals who could speak Chinese and understood the culture well enough, that they were not something to be feared. Of course Barb could carry on a ‘conversation’ with anyone on the planet, but we did not advertise that fact. They were more than enough afraid of us as it was. After dinner we found Mr. Nuygen to say our goodbyes.

“I don’t understand why you are leaving us? I am sure we can come to an understanding soon.”

“We do not share your optimism; it has been weeks with no progress we can see. With time, you may come to learn we are not a threat. Actions speak louder than words. I hope you fair as well with the Chinese. There is much in North America they need and they have the resources to take it with the core TKs out of the picture. We came bearing the gift of friendship and our abilities. We do not need you, you need us. We can set up and live anywhere on or off this world. Our primary loyalty is to the human race, but if we are not wanted, we will leave. Someone will check in eventually to see how you are doing and if anything has changed. You can reach the UNA on the net and they will find us.”

We grabbed what little we had, robes, staffs, etc. and walked out to the court yard. Tran Vu walked out with us and shook our hands goodbye. We each handed him a little gold charm with our names in Vietnamese on them. Barb had figured this out by scanning the necessary

ah, databases. We smiled, stepped back from him, bowed, bubbled up and took off at high speed. That ought to give him something to think about. We had arrived walking on foot so as to not attract attention, but we had nothing to lose now. It may even remind him of what could have been theirs or if we were evil, what kind of power we could have used against them. Lack of action is a way of making a decision as sure as choosing is.

# New Atherton

*No matter what happens, remain calm. You have seen me at work before. This will be no different. You will be safe.*

*Merow?*

*You too Ghost.*

Major Ying walks several paces ahead of us, bows and prostrates herself on the floor near the center of the hall. We walk in, stop two paces behind her and bow, but then remain standing. A minute passes before a signal is given and Mei stands and walks to one side facing the Regent. At this point I slowly raise my hands to a cupped position in front of me and DS the gift that Br'thn and I had worked out to my waiting hands. I bow again and offer the gift to the Regent. Because this was not expected there are several guns pointed at us by nervous guards. We had been through metal detectors before even entering the building, but that means nothing to a TK. I know the polite thing to do is wait for the Regent to initiate conversation or acceptance. We wait.

Several minutes pass before he gives a signal to Major Ying to retrieve the gift. She comes over, bows to me. I return the bow and hand her the gift. Upon looking at it, her eyes are confused at first and then widen. She looks at me and I nod in the affirmative. She slowly turns and hands the gift to the assistant near the Regent. The Regent asks the assistant something, who then asked Major Ying. She tells the assistant whose eyes widen. He then tells the Regent. Who says something else to the assistant. The assistant comes forward.

“The Regent wishes to thank you for the wonderful gift. He would like to offer you a far simpler less worthy gift in return.”

I nod and speak for the first time. “The gift given was of no consequence and therefore I am sure your gift in return will be of much greater value. You should be aware though that the dragon is more than it appears. We also know something of the psiotic arts. The eyes will glow whenever it is in the presence of artificial TK devices that are powered up. It is only a sensor and does nothing more, but it might prove useful at some point.”

The assistant bows and hurries out the door to return a moment later with a glass ball holding a small yellowish kitten curled up sleeping on a satin pillow. When the container gets within range of the dragon stone the eyes glow red. The assistant bows and offers the container to me. I bow and reach through the glass and retrieve the kitten by phase shifting my

arm through the glass, bypassing the psiotic dampening fields holding the TK kitten inside. I let Ghost sniff the kitten. The kitten takes this all in stride and does not cry out.

*Marm's, not mine, female.* Ghost goes back to being attended by Qaletaqa and ignores the kitten.

“Ghost says that this kitten is his brother’s spawn. Must be from the Merced batch. Thank you very much. I wondered what became of them. You have trained her very well.” I bow to the Regent. Of course I know that I was not supposed to be able to retrieve the kitten in this way, nor tell the gender by consulting another cat. They are watching the kitten and the glowing red eyes on the dragon stone, made of moon rock, which Major Ying had recognized. The device is working just fine. Br’thn fetched some moon rock for me to play with last night. Her absence was of course less noticeable. I twist the power source of the cage with my mind to turn it off and set the container down using TK. The eyes stop glowing. I hold the kitten and stroke it gently.

Still watching the dragon stone, the Regent nods and the eyes glow again, very brightly and then go dead. He turns and looks at me.

“I am aware of the psiotic dampening devices surrounding this chamber that you attempted to activate. They no longer work. I am aware of the psiotic projectile devices aimed at us. They will no longer work. I am aware of the hydrogen bomb below this chamber. It no longer contains any explosive material. The guns that your guards have aimed at us are no longer functional. I tell you this so that no one comes to harm thinking the devices are still functional.”

I TP Qaletaqa and we both bow to the Regent, then turn and leave, TKing open the locked doors without any outward sign. I close the doors behind me. As the doors close I hear the Regent shout out in perfect English, “Who is responsible for the bomb under this chamber?” He obviously was not happy to have heard about such a device that he was not in charge of.

“Are you hungry Qaletaqa?”

*Food?* Only one says this, but both are attentive. The kitten was conceived before the TK upgrade to Ghost, so maybe he will not become telepathic. The kittens born at Wind River are interesting. It is obvious that the upgrades affect more than the minds of the participants.

“Yes Yingui. Thank you for not getting us killed today.”

“You are welcome. I believe the kitchens are down this way if my reading of Ghost’s nose is correct.”





# Great Hall

“What happened? Why did the devices fail? You have brought great shame on this house. If you want to die quickly tell me what you know, or I assure you, your deaths will be slow and painful. You, go downstairs and search the rooms below. I want to know if such a nuclear device is present.” One of the black silks bows and leaves the room at a run.

Major Ying speaks first. “You are dealing with a TK of immense power and ability. He does not show up on any of our monitoring devices, yet can retrieve material from the moon that was not with him when he entered this room. Our science can only 'see' to the TK2 level and our only experience is with rare individuals at the TK3 level.”

“What level do you estimate he is at?”

“Before the dragon stone demonstration I estimated his strength at level 7. Now I no longer know, but possibly level 9 or 10.”

“How did you come to this conclusion?”

“He was the one who rescued me from the space station. The shuttle is still present next to New Hope. He used the teleportation technique to bring me to San Francisco, as well as transfer me from my craft to his. Using the distances and masses involved it would take at least a level seven to do this.”

“So you lied to us about your rescue. Why should we believe you now?”

“Before today, would you have believed that anyone could stop a dampening field ten times stronger than any TK3? Would you believe that anyone could sense twenty passive teleport devices that had not even been turned on yet and disable them? Would you have believed that anyone could pass his hand through solid glass to rescue a teleportation capable kitten in a dampening field, much less retrieve, carve and craft a working device from moon rock capable of sensing non living TK fields, without ever leaving this room? And let's not forget that he does not even show up on our sensors at all. Not even normal human psiotic activity while he was in this room just now. How would anyone here have reacted to my telling you that he rescued me from two cold blooded killers on a space station 200 kilometers above us?”

The black silk comes back carrying a metal sphere about twenty centimeters in diameter and places it on the floor bowing to the Regent. The numbers flashing on the screen indicate that the device had been activated and should have gone off.

“Excuse me Regent Hua. But I think you ought to know about the intricate pattern on his robe. I recognize it now from reviewing the recordings we made. It is the psiotic pattern of a dampening field as seen in two dimensions. No indication that it was an active device, but it shows he knew even before he entered this room all about such devices.”

Lisa speaks up, “He could have destroyed this entire complex with a thought had he wanted. Maybe we should hear him out?”

“I do not usually take advice from one so young, but this time I am inclined to agree. No more traps. AND I WANT THE HEAD OF THE ONE WHO PLACED THE BOMB UNDER US. Understood?” They all nod. “Now where is he?”

One of the black silks comes forward and whispers in his ear. “What?” The Regent stands up, “He is helping in the kitchen washing pots and pans with his young native companion?” The black silk nods. “Who is this person?”

Major Ying yelps and suddenly disappears.

“That’s it. Everyone present. I want the bomber in 24 hours or you are all ghosts. Do you follow me? You have work to do, if you want to live.” The Regent marches out of the room, but is temporarily stopped by the locked door. After pounding on the door, the guards open it and he continues out swearing in Chinese.

## **Kitchen**

The Regent comes barging into the room and everyone immediately drops to the floor and prostrates themselves. “Get up. Get up. Where are they?” One of the cooks points to the back. There Yingui and Qaletaga are splashing each other and washing pots and pans, rinsing them and placing them on the rack. The cats are on a counter eating Beijing duck with relish.

Ghost looks up and TPs, *Better than mouse! Giant bird!*

The Regent looks at Ghost. “Great, a talking cat and I thought it was bad when they just teleported.”

I turn around, “The dreams at night are much worse. You wake feeling like you have been chasing things all night. Took us awhile to teach them it was in their best interests to not transmit thoughts all the time.”

Qaletaga squirts me in the back of the head. I just roll my eyes, “Teenagers. What can you do? Are you hungry? We saved a plate from the cats in case anyone came looking for us.” I hand him an exquisitely

laid out plate of delicacies. He hesitates for a moment, but then accepts the plate and sits down on the counter with the cats, eating the food and offering tidbits to the cats. The kitten is purring up a storm and batting at his hand to let go of the morsel.

“Yingui, I suppose if you were going to kill me, it would already have been done. What I can't figure out, is what you could possibly want from me.”

“Hei Long, I come representing the United Native Americans who are concerned that you will attempt to take over all of what was at one point the United States.” No one calls the Regent by his first name! The cooks all stop what they are doing in fear.

The Regent looks over at them and cracks up. “I do have a first name you know?” Then he turns to me and asks, “What else?”

“Imagine what we could do together? I am very impressed by what you have been able to come up with on the artificial TK front in such a short time, the kitten container is truly exquisite, and all this without the ability to see what you are doing in enough detail to possibly understand it all. We could reach for the stars if we worked together.”

“You want to work with us? After what I just tried? And I really did not know about the H device.”

“It was no one in the room, if that helps. I scanned their minds when it was obvious you did not know. Somebody is watching you. That is to be expected of anyone in power. You have been carefully watching me, as you should, as there are also much more powerful people watching me at this moment. But, I do not fault your actions. No harm was done and I understand how difficult it would be to accept my presence. Still is difficult for me. But I am patient. You will learn that I mean you no harm. However, you will not be allowed to go beyond California. At least not yet. Yes, I know about your people in Salt Lake City. I received notice of them this morning.”

He spits his food out, “What people? I have no one in Salt Lake!”

“Sorry, I have done it again. I generally will not read someone's mind without permission and then only under extreme conditions, such as happened today with the bomb. There is a Chinese delegation there trying to come to an understanding with the Mormons. I doubt they will succeed, the Mormons are very careful and well versed in your culture and ways.”

“Would you be willing to work with the scientists that figured out how the kitten teleports, on a trial basis?”

“The fact that you call it teleportation means you do not understand it yet, but are only able to duplicate it. But, yes, I would be happy to. Would tomorrow be ok?”

“I will send them around to collect you. Nice talking with you.” We bow to each other and he turns to leave. “Oh, I almost forgot. Do you know where Major Ying is? I assume that was you who moved her out of the room.”

“She may be in her room. She was not part of any of what went on in the Hall and I did not want her to suffer on account of my actions. I dimension shifted her, we call it DS for short, to the hallway. She really knows very little about me anyway, but she will be happy to help I am sure. One of the reasons I chose moonstone was because I hoped she would recognize it for you. For what it is worth, any who are in my presence are under my protection. Just like this black widow spider is in the corner of the room. I will do everything possible to ensure their survival, your self included. The sensor in the moonstone may save your life at some point. Others are likely to learn of your science and try to use it against you and I can't be everywhere. I really want your people to survive and prosper. The world needs your knowledge, skills and culture. We need everyone for the next part of the human adventure, as I have been told. On the other hand, except for what happens near me, I will not interfere in your internal politics. You have a right to be different and I cannot say with certainty that my way is better.” I DS the spider to the surface and away from humans who would most certainly harm it. The Regent leaves.

We finish the pots and pans, bow to our hosts and thank them for a wonderful meal. They bow in return. Tongues will be wagging tonight. “Come on you two overstuffed cats. Hmmm, maybe I should carry Ghost and you, Qaletaga, can carry the little one.”

“I am not that weak, old man. I can carry the fat one.” He smiles when he says this, but I am not convinced that Ghost took it as a joke. Qaletaga has to use his minimal TK talent to help reign in the paws and claws. The little one sits on my shoulder and quickly falls asleep. She is still at the 'velcro' stage and can easily hang on. Good thing I can repair the skin damage so easily later.

Upon exiting the kitchen we are met by one of the gentleman we saw in the Great Hall, who must have run most of the way, as he is out of breath.

He bows to us, “My name is George. My understanding it that you are called Yingui and your assistant is Ka laa ta kwa. It this correct?”

“Close enough, yes, and this is Ghost, but we don't know the name of the kitten.”

“Ah, she has been called Goldie by her caretaker. I am sure you will meet her soon. It was decided that maybe it would be easier if you moved in with my daughter and I. You will be working with us on the 'dimension shift' project?”

“You were the one who worked out the projectiles?”

“I am the science manager. My expertise is more in computer systems and logic. Harsha, whom you will meet also, is the expert on putting it all together. My daughter is the one in charge of the psiotic sensors and imagers, being more medically trained.”

“I hope that not all that you do is weapons related.”

“I am not allowed to comment on that subject. The walls have ears, as we say.”

*Well, they cannot hear what you think can they?*

“Huh? Was that you?”

*Just think normally. I will pick up only that which you voice in your mind as if you were going to talk to me out loud.*

*Chattering monkeys let me down.*

*That was Ghost. You can let him down Qaletaq. Don't get into any trouble Ghost. We want you to survive this visit as well. Ghost pops out of the sight and generally ignores us. A moment later we hear a scream down the hall. I scan. He has found more food. Ghost, please do not steal. Remember our vows.*

*Garbage. Monkeys waste much good food.*

*Can you hear me? Do you ever get used to this way of communication?*

“Sure, but maybe you should lead us to your apartment before people start to worry.”

“Yes, sure thing. This way.”

*Yingui, why does he have funny hair?*

*The que, as it is called, is a Chinese custom meant to designate a servant. I suspect that this man was a 'pear' before the plague, so it would not be polite to mention his hair.*

We reach the apartment in short order. It is easily large enough to house twenty saps. “There was another couple here, but they have been moved, so it will be easier to talk without worrying about secrets getting out. Before the plague, this was our modest apartment alone, but even we admit it really was too much for our needs. I do not mean to pry, but I am sure, judging from your appearance, that we were of different classes

formerly. So, this must seem huge by your standards. In fact it is one of the smaller apartments. Probably the reason we were allowed to return here after our trip back.”

I laugh, “Yes, I was a sap, but at my age I was around before the class structure was so pronounced. Some of my best friends were ‘pears’ at one time.” He looks concerned at first, but then lightens up when he sees that I am not taking this seriously.

“Ah here she is. Lisa, I would like to present to you Yingui, the TK master you saw in the hall today and Qaletaqa, his assistant. Yingui and Qaletaqa, this is my daughter Lisa.” We bow to each other. There is something different about her. Her psiotic field is not that of a norm.

“Are you really a native?” Her eyes are wide. Ah, see Qaletaqa, it is not all about me.

“My mother was Paiute and my father Shoshone, but they both had some hairy one in them. That is why they both died of the fire plague.”

“Fire plague, you mean HelperV? My mother died of it along with many others on the ship to China. Is your name really Qaletaqa?”

“That is a name that Susan gave me. It means guardian of the people in Hopi. In my culture it is common to change ones name at times in your life that important changes occur. I was formerly called Mouse, in your tongue.”

“Qaletaqa is better. You are no mouse.” Ah, a diplomat.

Qaletaqa smiles and bows to her, “Thank you. Actually a very strong and beautiful TK already has the name Mouse, so I acquired this new one to avoid confusion. Not that we look anything alike.” He blushes at this thought.

“Come, I will show you around. You too Yingui.” She is not awed by power at least. Probably used to being around the rich and powerful.

“You two go ahead. Your father can show me in a bit.” The two run off. I pull Goldie from my shoulder and place her on a pillow on the couch next to Ghost, where he starts to clean her. I turn to George. “I hope it is ok to put her there. Some people do not like cats on their furniture.”

George just laughs. “That cat goes where ever she wants. Spoiled already at four months I am afraid. Come I will show you to your room and show you where things are.”

Of course I had seen parts of New Atherton six months ago, when it was abandoned and empty. Now it was alive and vital again. The tour went quickly, but we avoided the kids, so as not to embarrass them. George rushed past his own room, but I caught sight of the cameras. “Do

you use the view cameras, or are they just for looks?" This stops him in his tracks.

He looks at me confused, "Now why would you know about view cameras? Digital I could understand, but not the old large film based ones."

"Well, I am old. My favorite camera is a nice wooden field view camera, like Zen meditation. Very beautiful. I had 5x7s and 4x5s. Nothing too rare mind you, just a very old Eastman and a Wista I picked up used. I would have loved to have had an 8x10 Deardorff like yours, but I could never afford the film or the weight. However, I notice that yours have seen better days."

"A misunderstanding with the management. I am repairing them in my spare time." OK, this is obviously a sore spot.

"Sorry. Maybe we could go out together some time. Point Lobos must be nice now that the tourists are gone. The clouds should be good soon. I might also be able to help in the rebuilding process."

"The images in the living room are from Point Lobos. It would be wonderful to go there again, though it is unlikely we would be allowed to, nor afforded the transportation for such a non-work related activity."

I laugh, "Transportation is the least of our worries and I am sure I could swing the necessary permissions."

# Outside Winslow, Arizona

## Walnut Canyon National Monument

The group is halfway from Hotevilla to Phoenix. It has been a quiet journey. The weather is cooling in preparation for winter with clouds in the sky most of the time. People are scarce. Never very populated in this area, now, unless you were incredibly self-sufficient it probably would not be safe. Pushy Paws remembers this spot and wants to show it to the others. As they pull up into what used to be the parking lot for the visitor center they see it.

“What in creation is that thing? Looks like a Winnebago on steroids. Must be fifty feet long. Sorry, I don’t know what that is in meters.”

“I could do the conversion, but I get the point. Those ‘wing’ like things look to be solar cells. I doubt they are enough to power it down the road, but probably provide all the other needs.”

“It doesn’t look abandoned. Wonder if anyone is home?” Pushy Paws goes up and knocks on the door. “Anyone home?”

“Well if we are going to spend the night here I want to know who our neighbor is.” She yells, “TKs get over here. We need your help.” Slowly with some reluctance ten TK2s dressed like warriors come hovering over, up from out of the canyon itself.

“You should see it mam. The ruins are still there. It is awesome.”

“Do me a favor and scan this thing. Want to know if anyone is home.”

He glances at the motor home a moment. “Nah, nobody home. Looks like a scientist’s pad though. There is an old fashioned microscope and lab type stuff inside. Want me to get us inside?”

“No thank you. Just keep a look out for anyone else in the area.”

Another one flies up and debubbles. She has war paint on and some pretty scary looking markings on her robe. All TKs wear robes, but they are allowed to decorate them anyway they want. The younger ones all took to trying to look as fierce as possible, even if the code of ethics and personality spoke otherwise. “There is a white man about two hundred meters that direction and down the side a bit. Looks like he is collecting something from the trees.”

“Don’t scare him. We can wait. Tell the others to stay out of sight till we know what’s up.”

“We already flew right past him and he didn’t even look up.”

“Sounds like a scientist alright. Yingui would love this. He will come back when he gets hungry. Let’s set up camp.”



Areas are designated for the latrine, eight males and two female TKs get to work setting everything up. Running Snake and Pushy Paws sit it out, a prerogative of age. One pair of TKs has gone down to the stream and filled the water containers. It has taken a nice slow leisurely week to get this far. No one was anxious to get back to Hotevilla for the harsh winter. If they timed it right, they would be in Phoenix for the first snow and miss it getting to spend the winter in Phoenix. Show them we are not a threat. Hmm, might have to do something about their costumes before then. At least the war paint should come off. Only a third of the group is Native American, but all have adopted the surface culture quickly.

Soon the camp is set. Tents are up and people are gathering in groups to prepare the meal. Food cooked over an open fire always tastes better. There must be some kind of lingering racial memory of the “old” days, and hard saps in the desert brush makes it taste even better. The smell must have gotten his attention. Soon our scientist is coming towards our camp, which is judiciously placed a hundred meters further away from his home. He pays no attention to us at all, even though we are all watching him. He goes into his home and shuts the door.

“Right neighborly of him, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh rather!”

“Wait.” Running Snake shushes everyone.

Sure enough about ten minutes later, after much bumping around and commotion, he emerges, dressed in better clothes, a proper hat and eyeglasses. He starts down the steps, changes his mind and goes back in, but leaves the door open this time.

“What now?”

“Wait.”

He comes out again, a bit disorganized, then apparently comes to some decision in his head and comes towards them. Running Snake and Pushy Paws are in the center seated with the TKs standing behind them in an arc.

“As it looks like we will be neighbors for a bit, allow me to introduce myself. I am Edwin Ramsey Hershel the third, Ph.D. Whom do I have the honor of addressing.”

“I am Dr. Running Snake of the UNA and this is Pushy Paws, Gateway to the ‘thn. The rest are our assistants for our current expedition.” The ‘assistants’ take a bow in unison. Hey, it was the best I could do on short notice thinks Running Snake.

“Dr. Snake and Ms. Paws. It is indeed a pleasure to make your acquaintance. What brings you out these ways? I am afraid that I do not

see many in my line of work. Come to think of it I have not seen anyone at all for almost year. No wait, last people was during the winter, about January or there about. Seemed to be in an awful hurry.”

“We are curious Dr. Hershel. What is your line of work?”

“Oh, do call me Ed. The formal stuff rather bores me. I am a lichenologist.” The TKs all look at each other, like who would want to study rock and tree scum.

“That explains the observation of Angpetu seeing you removing something from a tree an hour ago.”

“Yes, most interesting. *Usnea arizonica*’s range has been growing further and further north. Further evidence that the global warming is not over yet I am afraid. That was a particularly large specimen I was observing. I needed to collect a small fraction of it to test to be sure I had the correct species.” The others are starting to get a glazed over appearance and start looking around a bit for an excuse to be doing something else. “Um, sorry, I can get carried away at times. Funny though, I did not notice anyone, but then, when I am concentrating I tend to block out all else. Still, I would have thought I would have heard footsteps on the dry leaves.”

“She was not on the trail Ed. Have you heard of the HelperV plague?”

“The what? What do you mean? I am afraid that when I am out in the field, for up to two years at a time, I tend to lose touch with goings on. Let’s see, I started out this time in October of last year, a Wednesday I believe.”

“Ed, have a seat please. We need to talk with you.” Besides being a scientist, he was obviously a pear, with the dark hair, yellow complexion and fancy motor home. He takes a seat facing the two.

Pushy Paws addresses the assistants, “He’s ok. Bring some food over for our guest and then you can have the rest of the time to yourselves.” They quickly scatter, all but Angpetu, who elects to stick it out. Curiosity getting the better of her. Soon a hot plate of food is brought over for each of them.

“Let’s get a start on this before it gets cold and then we talk.”

Vegetarian, mostly of stocks that the higher TKs made before departing for parts all over. Ed eats his with abandon, barely pausing to breathe.

“There is more if you want Ed.”

He looks up confused, “Oh sorry. Always eat fast. Usually because I want to get back to work. It really was good. Better than the canned stuff I usually eat. The spices were a bit unusual though.”

“Wild sage collected from the high desert and the food was duped. Not quit the same.”

“Duped?”

“Part of the story. The HelperV plague took out three fourths of the planet Ed. Most of the United States is gone. The Chinese have taken over California. There were nuclear wars in the Middle East and India/Pakistan. A nuclear bomb also took out Sacramento, California. Native Americans had some immunity to the plague and did not suffer as much as others, but we weren’t doing so well before hand. Groups of military holed up in underground complexes to wait it out. The Sacramento one was the one that went up. Some of the survivors were changed by the plague. Some more than others. These new people were hunted by both ‘nesters’ and ‘norms’ who were afraid of anyone different. A group of these people, called TKs, met up with the Shoshone. That is where Running Snake came in. She trained a special group of surviving TKs as much as she could about being a Native American. The group came to her believing that learning the ‘old ways’ was essential to further survival of the human species. They were on a mission, that they were unaware of, yet predicted by prophesies carefully handed down for over ten thousand years.

Ed, there are no saps or pears. There are no norms or TKs, cowboys or natives. Only survivors.”

“What do you mean these people are different?”

“That is all you are worried about? Don’t you have family? Friends?”

“Nope. I was married once, but she left me for someone more exciting. Wouldn’t take much. My work is my life. What you have told me, though I am sorry so many suffered, is something I can do nothing about. I am out here because I enjoy being alone. I see no reason to stop.”

“How about for supplies?”

“I have stock piles. Never expected the human race to last this long. I am prepared. Don’t expect to last that much longer myself. I did not go in for the age enhancements, just the UV protection, because of the nature of my work. Now what is a TK?”

“OK, if you will help me Angpetu. Give our guest a demonstration.” She smiles.

“My English name was Alice Garcia. Angpetu means radiant in Hopi. Most of us have taken Hopi names in honor of the prophesy. TKs come in different levels. It is on something called a log scale. You would

understand that as a scientist I expect. Anyway. A TK2, which is my level is ten times as strong as a TK1, which are pretty rare, only really among the young ones. People under 25 or so. A TK2 can lift and move 100 kilograms at one meter per second. Or lesser amounts at a faster rate.”

“So you are stronger than a normal person now.”

“Not exactly.” She smiles and lifts herself into the air one meter and sits there waiting for a response.

“Oh.” He finally remembers to close his mouth.

“Now, I do not weigh a hundred kilos, so I have some left over.” She raises about ten pebbles and orbits them around herself at increasing velocity. They are soon a blur. Finally she lets them go and they hit a rock at full speed causing quite a blast. “I was careful not to hit any of your lichens. I hope this convinces you that we are different.”

“How high do the levels go?”

“For a fluidic, I believe that nine is the limit, but for a solidic it is thirteen.”

“Whew.” He sits and thinks for a moment. “I almost dare not ask, but what is a fluidic and a solidic?” He has a little trouble pronouncing the terms.

“We are fluidics. That is our basic makeup is liquid, at least internally. We are not alone in the universe. Though most of the beings that we are aware of are fluidics, there is at least one race of solidics that we have met, the ‘thn, or the Holy Ones to most of us. They look different from us of course. All the races do. All the old sci-fi programs that showed other beings as basically human in shape were wrong. Anyway, the ‘thn are clear spheres about ten to twenty centimeters in diameter. They are psiotically energized and use TK to get around and manipulate their surroundings.”

“Psiotic, as in psiotic sensors and images used in medicine and biology? Developed by the Chinese?”

“The same.”

“So, does this mean we are under the rule of the solidics now?”

“Br’t hn is our helper, but she is just a baby by their standards, only being 65 million years old, give or take a few years. No, we are free to make our own mistakes. ‘thn are conceived at TK8 and born at TK9 and go up from there. So, they really are not powerful enough to ‘take over’ the entire planet, though I suppose she could make a real mess if she got pissed.”

“This makes what I do seem pretty unimportant now doesn’t it? I need to get in to take care of the samples I got today. I bid you ladies good night.” He gets up and now obviously elsewhere mentally, goes back to his home and goes inside.

“Did I scare him away? I did not mean to. I was as gentle as I could be without withholding the truth.”

“You did fine Angpetu. He has lived an isolated life and now has to make some choices. His work, though important to him, probably did not mean much in the larger scheme of things. So, he needs to decide to continue with what he loves, knowing that it is even more meaningless, or chose another path. Any other path for him would be very scary. What talents does he have in the real world? What would he do?”

His door open and he shouts over to us. “Excuse me. What is duped food?”

Angpetu answers, “Higher level TKs can duplicate food with their thoughts.”

“Thanks.” He goes back inside.

“Oh, Yingui would have fun with this one. Well, in the morning I will show you where my ancestors lived.”

### **Next Morning**

The camp wakes to the smell of coffee brewing. A smell relegated to ancestral memory for all but Running Snake and Pushy Paws. Like zombies coming to fresh meat, they awaken and move to towards the smell.

“Might as well use this up. There won’t be any more for a long time, and I doubt we will need it where we are going anyway. I hope that I am not presuming too much, in my desire to join your band.”

“Not at all Ed, you are more than welcome. Just surprised that you would be interested.”

“I figure it this way. You will need to set up a center for learning at some point. There was a lot of knowledge the last civilization accumulated. We need to preserve and pass on as much as possible, if for no other reason that to avoid the same mistakes. Also, not a small part of my knowledge of the lichens in these parts comes from the natives. It is time to return the favor.”

“Ah, what good are lichens anyway? You can’t eat them.”

“Look at your robe. Half the colors in it are from lichen extracts. And the right lichen can be used in medicines or to patch a wound. Lichens

are also an indication of pollution or changing environmental conditions. Lichens are my specialty, but I am versed in other arts as well. Classical music for one. I play the oboe fairly well.”

“What about your home? We can’t take that with us easily. Roads are not all passable for something that large.”

“No need.” He pushes a button on his bracelet and the entire structure folds up into a hard shell over the doors and windows. “Everything has gone into hibernation mode till I return. It can last that way for centuries if need be. All I need for myself is in this backpack. Records are in the bracelet memory. I often spend days in the field and know how to travel light.”

“Welcome Ed!”

# South Dakota

“This is where we found Br'thn. So now what? There are people, but no one near by.”

“We could set down here and set up camp and wait for them to show up or we can go hunting. Running Snake said that they had been told we would be coming, but not when. There is a different relationship with time among the Native Americans I have noticed.”

*Even saps inherited an anal obsession with clocks. We are free. Let's enjoy it some. There is a creek down there with pool that looks deep enough. I say we set up there and go swimming.*

“What about the wind? It will get cold here at night, we are further north now.”

“We had better move it then.” They set down next to the pool, strip off their robes and jump in. Ron's leg has been repaired, but he is not that used to using it yet, so he uses a TK assist to effect the same thing.

“A bit cool for my taste, but refreshing. After being holed up in that hotel in Salt Lake all this time, it is nice to get out.”

*We are not alone. There are fish in here with us. They say they have not seen many humans this season and wondered if we brought any food with us.*

“They like cheese if I remember right.” Ron TKs some out of a pack and grabs it as it comes his way. He breaks off some small pieces and drops them into the water.

“Hey, save enough for us to dupe at least!” The fish splash the surface competing for the morsels.

“How come they are not afraid of us? I can feel them swimming between my legs. Hey! That's not food!” He pounds the water and the fish scatter.

*She was only tasting you Ron. Don't be so sensitive. That's how they get to know you. I told them we were vegetarian, but I doubt they believe us now!*

The all climb out, dry off using TK and then put on their robes. With all sexual feelings gone, there is no need to oogal your neighbors.

It was easy enough to set up a simple dome using TK to make a foamed rock like syntrofoam, about five centimeters thick and four meters in diameter at the base. Any mass would do, so they did not need to mine the rock to form it. It would provide strength and insulation from the cold night to come. They made the exterior water proof, but keep the color

natural, so as to fit in with the surroundings. A hole in the top center for the smoke to exit and the entrance facing east to see the rising sun. Barb situates herself to the north, Ron to the south and James, being the oldest to the west. This was how Running Snake said to set up a home native style. The wind is more or less continuous. Nice to have a fire, even if only a small one.

Dinner was a simple bread and sheep cheese affair with fresh water from the stream, bugs both big and small removed first. After that an hour of sitting meditation in front of the small fire while the sun went down and night came upon them. Blankets weren't really enough. Fortunately, thanks to James they had the TK insulation method and they could all do it now. Barb, being the Dr. Doolittle of the group made sure that the other life forms understood they were to avoid the place.

"I am beginning to actually miss those furballs. Wonder how they are doing." [the cats]

"If Ghost gets any bigger he will explode. The last report from Br'thn said he was being treated to Peking duck and other delicacies."

*I would like to see the kittens from the Shoshone reservation. They must be a couple of months old now. I hear they can DS and TP just like their parents.*

"Hmm, since Princess could not TP, it must be a dominant trait."

*Actually more likely a cDNA molecule. If it does not integrate into the genome, it could be lost in a few generations.*

"Huh? Where did you learn all that mumbo jumbo?"

*At the lab of course. It was a lab devoted to genetically modifying blue greens for commercial purposes. Granted I only programmed and handled the net, but still, I picked up some of the ideas, just from being around them all the time.*

"I want to know what Yingui was like back then. You know, pre-TK."

"We were all different pre-TK James. That is not really a fair question. You would never have gotten me out in the middle of no where sleeping with a man and a women at the same time, pre-TK, that's for sure."

"Nor I. But at the same time, our pasts do direct our futures to some extent."

*He was very human James. Old and worried about getting sick and dying. Worried that he would no longer be needed soon and put out to starve somewhere alone like so many other boomers, as his generation was called. At the same time, he always tried to help, often anticipating needs or going the extra mile to make life easier for those around him.*



*He also hated confrontation and would accept more work than he needed to just to avoid the possibility of being told off by an unfair boss.*

“We all had to be that way to some extent, just to survive. Hope he is not afraid to use his abilities if it comes to it.”

*He saved my life several times. Though he did not mean to kill the rogue, it is equally clear that he intended to prevent harm to me by someone who most certainly would have killed me. I was certainly in no condition to resist. You know I worked with the APES to stir things up for the pears. I never participated in any of the lethal doings, but I could sympathize with them. Yingui, being Buddhist will try to avoid killing though. That might prevent him from action, even if only to hesitate.*

“Why be so obsessed and why make us all promise to be the same way, not that I don't feel good about it?”

*He feels that beings only inflict pain on each other because ignorance. You don't kill someone for being stupid. You try to prevent them from harming others and you try to teach them the truth so they no longer want to kill. Killing only pisses people off and makes them more likely to fear you and try to find some way of killing you later. You become a threat.*

“So he does not believe in evil? Even Satan, whom he took down.”

“Look how he did it though. Not by killing him or harming him, but by sacrificing himself instead. He showed he could work with his heart and mind instead of his strength.”

*You still can't believe it worked. Sauron must have known of this strategy. He raised us from rat hood. He trained us. He knew all our methods and thoughts. Why didn't he see this coming or at least prepare for it? Don't count Yingui out. How many of us would have even tried his method. He had to risk his own death. He did not have time to practice this remember. He had to be willing to die and lose everything.*

“Sound more like a death wish at times. Just hope he does not take us with him.”

“I disagree. Rather I think he did not want to live in a world where Sauron/Satan had won. So he bet the farm in the supreme hope of making it.”

### **Next Morning**

We awake early not needing much sleep, and in fact often went without sleep. It is a native tradition to greet the morning sun,

individually usually, but if necessary, as a group. Being in a strange place we elected to stay as a group and went up the nearest hill to wait.

*It is definitely coming this way. Four male humans and a dog.*

“How do you know that? You can't scan that far. Here comes the sun! Glorious!”

*I can feel their minds of course. Look at all the colors! So beautiful out here.*

“Ah. Old pickup truck. Gasoline vintage but converted to run biodiesel. Twenty plus years old I would guess.”

“Beat up pretty good. Paint coming off. Right door getting loose.”

*Ok, you two quit showing off before I have to tell you all about their sex lives. Or lack thereof.*

“Ouch. They will be here in a few minutes at this rate. Sun is up. Best prepare our reception.”

The truck drives up to find our three sitting in front of the TK lodge, waiting. They get out. One comments. The dog sniffs them and then wanders off. The largest one comes forward. “We are here to place the three of you under arrest and escort you back to the tribal council for sentencing.”

*Not even a trial. Interesting.*

“May we know the charges?”

“As outsiders, you have no right to know anything. But I will be generous. You are trespassing on Lakota Tribal Lands, without permission of the council. Further you have stolen a sacred object of importance and contributed to the degradation of the Lakota culture.”

“Interesting. We are here to meet with the council. Though this was not exactly the reception we expected.”

“No discussion. You are to come with us now.” They cock their rifles and the dog comes back to growl at us. No doubt smelling the cats finally.

“I hate bullies.” Barb gives James a dirty look.

*We can leave any time we want, this is not the time to reveal ourselves. Play nice.*

“The two of you in the back and the lady in the front.”

“We stay together. Believe me, much safer for you that way.” James gives him an absolutely evil grin. There are limits to what he will tolerate. They hesitate and then motion all of them to the back of the truck. The oldest gets in with them and the rest pile into the cab. With a whistle, the dog jumps in the back and growls at them before settling down with the man.

The trip to the council is bumpy, dusty, windy, reckless and dry. Several times TK is necessary to prevent the truck from turning over, but is done subtly to avoid detection. Everyone remains emotionless and pretends like this is just a normal trip down a normal highway, instead of a dirt path in the middle of nowhere.

Finally after what seems to be hours the truck stops and the men get out of the cab. While covering them with the weapons, the one in the back motions the three out. "We walk from here." They walk for another half an hour or so. The structures are well hidden.

*I thought the Lakota used tipis?*

*That was a hundred years ago. Things change. What good would a tipi be on a reservation where you never moved?*

They are escorted into the largest structure. Made of tree trunks and rammed earth. A fire provides the only light inside. They are made to sit near the entrance. An insult, as only enemies, and dogs are made to sit at the worst spot in a lodge. The four thugs remain outside with their weapons ready.

*When do we leave?*

*Patience. We have been through this before with the UNA council.*

*Can't they just talk to each other instead of doing this to us each time?*

*Apparently not.*

They have not moved a muscle during this conversation. Still they are left waiting for some time. All part of the game. Humans!

Finally one speaks, "You will return the property you stole."

James is the elder so he gives the response, "A living being is not property. She decides herself where she goes, not us or you."

"You know not of what you speak. Return the object."

Right on cue, Br'thn appears in the center of the room glowing brightly. The three bow their heads and say nothing. She speaks to all.

*I give you thanks for the many years and many lives you sacrificed to keep me safe from Dragon. Dragon is no longer of concern, thanks to these three and five others. Together, they constitute my Guardians and are to be treated with respect. They have much to learn and you could use their help. Teach them.*

She disappears as abruptly as she came and the room is plunged into temporary darkness as everyone's eyes adjust again to the fire light.

"You command the Holy One?"

James laughs, "We may make requests, but we have been assigned to be primarily her guardians, her servants if you will. We did not have a say in this any more than you did for your part. We all play a role."

“What do you want?” This was said with disgust.

“To save Mother Earth from destruction.”

One gets up, spits on the ground and then leaves, brushing past us, making sure to kick dust on us.

Another speaks, “You are the problem, not the solution. Leave at once.”

“The Chinese have taken California. They have designs on the rest of North America. They need food and fuel. We would be very happy to leave you alone. The world is wide open now and we can go anywhere, but that is not what has been decided by the United Native Americans, whom we serve. If you wish to go it alone, so be it. It worked so well the last time, I am sure you will have no problem this time.”

“You know nothing of that time! You cannot possibly understand what we have lost. What we endured. You have already stolen our culture, what more could we give you? Why did you come? Why didn't they send someone else?”

“You mean a Shoshone warrior? What could one warrior do to convince you? We know of the great Lakota warriors and the animosity between tribes or we would not bother. And if you think a black man knows nothing of lost cultures you are really gone.”

He laughs, “Look at us, we are not warriors. We are fat old drunks with no dignity left. Everything is gone. The young left long ago for the cities and a chance to survive.”

“In case you had not noticed, the cities are gone. We even noticed coming in that some of those settlements were intentionally destroyed. Not that it matters. Mother Earth would have done the same eventually. There may have been some things worth saving though. Not ALL that the oppressors did was evil. I notice that you wear normal clothing, not skins, drive trucks not ride horses or run, and carry guns not spears and bow and arrows.”

“We will adapt. Time to return to the old ways.”

“Those old ways were very hard and we are all soft as you yourself have pointed out. The Chinese are not doing the same. They have tanks, planes, bots, nukes and all the rest of the poisons from the fourth age. More importantly, they still have the attitude that tech over nature is the way to live. If you thought the 19<sup>th</sup> century tech was too much for the ‘old ways’, imagine what 21<sup>st</sup> century tech could do.”

“And you three do not share those beliefs?”

“We were clearly part of the oppressor culture, but we were all saps, the underclass. We have not been oppressed as long as you, but we know

the underside of their heal well. However, things have changed, now we have no need for tech. We are largely self sufficient.”

“Then explain this.” He holds up Ron's pack stuffed with tech.

“The idea is to use the good of the tech culture and reject the bad. These two are experts at repairing communication and net gear. We were going to offer help in that area IF and only IF you wanted it.” I don't think they are convinced.

“How did you get here? There were no tracks leading to your camp.”  
*Sigh, time for the dog and pony show.*

“We are wind riders and spirit talkers.” Let that sink in a bit.

“You use our terms, but are not of our kind. We have been deceived many times. Many have come to learn our ways and end up teaching our children half truths and lies in exchange.”

“We have brought proof. We have the instrument that defeated Dragon and offer it as a gift.”

“Where is this gift? Nothing so small could have defeated Dragon except the Holy One.”

“It is in the red leather bag in the backpack. We are forbidden to touch it ourselves. Your shaman may also have to be careful, but normal people should be unaffected by its power.”

One comes forward and retrieves the pouch to hand it over to the speaker. He cautiously removes the transparent sphere from the bag. He looks puzzled. “This is not the sacred object which you stole? It looks like it to me.”

“And I thought only the shaman who died knew of her presence. It was intentionally made that way so as to deceive Dragon. But, for the last time, we stole nothing. SHE asked for us to come and rescue her. Her MOTHER prepared us for the task. Upon rescue we returned her to her mother where she was officially accepted back into the tribe from the stars called the 'thn. This is not her whom you all saw a moment ago. This was the device used to trick Dragon who also wanted Br'thn and intended to use her to rule the world in the ways we both recognize as being evil.”

“The last time I saw the object, I was five years old and there was no glow, no life in it at all. To expect us to believe the glowing one was the same thing is pushing it.” He motions to the back.

A man comes forward. He is OLD. Very old. No teeth left, white hair and skin like a prune and wearing a baseball cap. The object is handed to him. Upon contact his eyes light up. He slowly and carefully reaches for the leather pouch and places the object in it where upon he is surprised

again. He whispers to the speaker. [the sphere removed his powers on contact and restored them upon release]

“He believes you and understands why you cannot touch it yourselves. He senses you are very different from us, but possibly similar to himself. Please explain.”

The council member, who left, comes running back in and goes up to the speaker.

“We all go outside.” They get up and walk around us to leave the hall. We are the last to leave and follow the others out. Arrayed in a perfect half circle with the largest in the center and in order to the sides, are all the tribe's horses. As soon as Barb shows herself, they all do the horse equivalent of kneeling with heads down. Three wolves appear and lay down at her side. Birds appear, all quiet and land on her shoulders. Squirrels and other creatures appear and sit waiting. Finally, in keeping with our hosts most sacred of animals, the eagle appears and lands in front of her, bowing her head. This is all done in perfect silence. As soon as the eagle lands, the wind stops. The quiet is deafening. It is like the world has stopped.

The shaman comes forward, bows in front of Barb and offers her a ceremonial knife. She accepts it, hold her hand up for all to see, but instead of taking the eagle in sacrifice she neatly cuts her left palm and lets her blood drip to the ground. As the first drop hits the ground, ALL of the animals turn and face the assembled elders, as do Ron and I. She waits a moment then nods once and first the eagle, then the horses, wolves and other creatures depart, never making a sound. The wind returns, the cut heals and the blood disappears from the ground and the knife. A single eagle feather remains on the ground with a red tip.

I speak, “You shared the role of keepers of Br'thn for countless ages. Keeping her safe from Sauron the Dragon, the one the Christians would later call Satan, who in fact largely ruled their culture. It is we who honor you by placing in your hands the means to undo us. We ask you to keep this sphere in sacred trust to be used against us should the need arise. If we forget the ways of Wakan Tanka, do not hesitate.” I reach over and retrieve the eagle feather, stand up and hand it to the speaker. “This is your sword. Your shaman has the means.”

Tears are running down his cheek. Minutes pass. He gets up, retrieves the red pouch from the shaman and places both before us. “We stole the Holy One from the Shoshone two hundred years ago and lost her to the hairy ones fifty years ago. We are not the ones whom you seek.”

Ron's turn. "Hear our story, for we are no better than you. Though not pears, any of us, we were part of the culture that oppressed you. When I am done, we would be most honored if you took back up the sword and means." He goes on to tell our tale. The sun is close to setting when he finishes. Ron is not the same as Daniel, but quieter, more sacred in a lot of ways, a good choice for the present moment. Maybe the Lakota, the Shoshone, the Navajo, the Hopi really were our brothers and sisters. Though they reacted the same at first to our coming as the nesters and norms did, they at least do eventually see the possibilities of working together.

In silence we all witness the setting of the sun. We are offered a place of honor to sleep in the lodge at the west end. So as not to offend our hosts we pretend to sleep, meditating most of the time and conversing among ourselves using TP the rest of the time. Barb thanks all the creatures who assisted her, one at a time, including the bugs I was not even aware had participated.

The next morning, one by one the males leave the lodge to bathe at a nearby stream. Ron and I join them quietly. All are awake to greet the morning sun as it rises on a new day.

"I am Red Cloud, since I sometimes show more anger than I perhaps should." He has a sheepish grin.

"In the ways of the earth, I am called Badger, he is Squirrel, and our spirit talker is Turkey." They each bow in turn.

He hesitates for a moment, "Honorable names. Come, you must be hungry. You do eat? I noticed that you sleep little." So much for our game. Yingui warned us not to deceive but do everything in the open.

"Oh yes, we eat just fine." I am suspicious of that hesitation. I am still not convinced that "badger" is an honorable name. After a breakfast of meat stew of some kind, we insist on hearing their story. A story of before the hairy ones, of how they used to live and what was done to them when the hairy ones arrived with guns, disease and crazy ways.

# Airspace over Chile

Dorothy has told Susan and Rachael that they need to see someone in Costa Rica named Jesus Jose Maria Gonzales. They are somewhat skeptical; Jesus is like Smith in Latin America. There must still be thousands of them running around. They set out this morning with lots of fresh bread, that they had helped bake, lamb stew, marmalade and a bottle of wine for this Jesus they were to meet. Carefully stowed in their packs the two set off till out of sight of the others and then took off into the skies. A dog fight of sorts ensued that had them racing from the ocean's crest to the mountain peaks and down again. After chasing each other like fireflies in heat all up the coast of Chile, then finally settle down in northern Chile to a deserted beach to lay in the sand and bask in the sun.

“Hey, we have to come back with a tan. No one would believe that it is summer down here if we don't. They will think we hid in a cave and never came out till our time was up otherwise.”

“We could have gotten the same tan working in the fields helping others at least.”

“All over? I don't think so. Most still cover up to protect themselves from the UV. Haven't you noticed that we are never sick any more? Moles that I had are gone. My digestion is fantastic. Nothing upsets me any more. I am stronger and more energetic than I have ever been in my life and I was pretty fit from being a carrier. Being TK6 is definitely a benefit.”

“Add to that the enhanced senses and I agree. I have never been more alive. I certainly hope that this is not all a dream and I wake up back in San Jose in that pit where I lived, just having lost my teaching job and facing the farm as my only choice.”

“Too bad we can't open the wine because of our vows. Oh well, can't have everything. Race you to the water.” The two play in the warm waters near the equator for a few minutes before gathering their things and progressing in a single bubble this time to Costa Rica.

## **San Jose, Costa Rica**

“Why did this place have to be called San Jose?”

“Doesn't look like the last San Jose we were in anyway, though the amount of signs in Spanish seems the same.”



“But no Chinese at all.”

“There is that.”

“Third house on the left from here, number 507. Looks like an old warehouse. It is the middle of the day and no one is around. Have we missed something? Everyone is inside asleep it appears from scans.”

“Siesta! Of course, the most civilized contribution the Latin culture ever made.”

“Well, it would be polite to wait it out, but where?”

“There is a cantina around the corner to the right. At least it is shade. The sun is hot here.” They proceed to the cantina and make themselves comfortable. Meditation at least was possible anywhere, even in this heat and humidity. Not much else is.

About an hour later we are greeted with a, “Buenos dias seniorittas.” After he had our attention he continued with a “Vene conmigo porfavor.” Of course Susan could understand him without any trouble. I am continually kicking myself for never having learned more Spanish, but Chinese made more sense as they were largely our new masters.

I ask him sheepishly, “Do you speak English?”

He responds with “No senioritta. No hablo Anglaise.”

*He wants us to follow him.*

*Right, I figured that was the case.* I smile at Susan and gesture her to lead.

We head straight for 507 and then go down the alley between it and the next building. We enter a garden courtyard where we hear children starting to play again after their nap. A woman goes past us carrying a heavy load of laundry and our guide says something to her I do not catch. I start to smell food cooking. I may not speak Spanish, but I love the food. Well, maybe not the hot peppers as much as Yingui. I can hear running water, a small stream perhaps and notice that part of the back wall has fallen, probably into the stream. Some evidence of mud on the floor near the fallen section. A flood?

More people are going about their business and nod greetings to our guide. Finally we stop before a man dressed in a white robe remarkably similar to ours kneeling over a child laying on a makeshift bed. He has dark hair and dark eyes like everyone else here, but not the facial features. More like someone from the Middle East or there about. A little more sun and I will fit in as well, so I am not complaining. The sun did feel good. During the long march through Utah we had to cover up, but a few days of sun will not kill me now. The child coughs a few times,

opens his or her eyes and seeing us exclaims, “Los angeles!” A little girl then, from the sound of her voice.

Susan responds, “No, nina, no angeles, sol a mente personas.” We both smile at her. She rises and gets up to join the others at play. The man smiles at us and motions for us to follow him.

*Welcome*

No translation problems then, using telepathy. That makes it easier.

*Are you Jesus Jose Maria Gonzales?*

He laughs, concentrates a moment. He has let down his guard, he is not just TP but TK as well! A strong one at that. Only Yingui and possibly Daniel can shield themselves that well. We can hide from TK2 and maybe a 3 but not from sixes like ourselves. That makes him at least a six.

*Who are you?*

He laughs again, “Who do you say I am?” So he knows English. I know that phrase, but a quick glance at Susan sees her on the ground kneeling and shaking.

“What? What is going on? Susan get up, he is just another TK like us.” She shakes head adamantly no. Ok, I am even more confused, but Susan will not get up.

“It is alright Susan, you can get up. We don't stand on ceremony here. You do not see anyone else kneeling. We could not get very much done now could we?” She rises but is visibly shaken. “Come. I have been expecting you. We need your help.” Susan is totally shocked and confused now.

“Ok, what is going on? Who is he?”

“The one.” She whispers.

“The one what?”

“You know, THE ONE.” She crosses herself and looks back at me like I totally daft.

“Shit, you don't mean?” She nearly faints when I say shit. I am afraid that our host is nearly in stitches now and others have gathered around to witness this exchange.

“He is Jesus Christ.” She finally gets out.

“No way!” But I look at him and he smiles in the affirmative. The rest are giggling now. He waves them back to their work. My mind is reeling. OK, if Jesus was a high level TK like Sauron, or rather Satan, said he was, he could have pulled the Yingui trick on him. And if Satan never found out, that would explain why Yingui got away with it too.

“Ok, if you are THE Jesus, how did you fool Satan all these years? He has been hunting naturally enhanced all this time according to last enhanced we met. Surely someone as powerful as you would have peeked his notice.”

“I would like to meet this Yingui, for he is the only other human to have beaten Sauron. The Daniel Webster thing being a myth, though he was a nice man.”

“Are you God then?”

He laughs, “No, just a human like you, blessed with a wonderful gift. A gift that speaks of God's magnificence and mercy.”

“And the Apostles?”

“Men and women I chose for their righteousness and their TK potential. All the naturally enhanced, as you call them, are decedents of the original twenty or so people I boosted.”

“We noticed that the cat's offspring are enhanced as well. But, all of our high level TKs are celibate.”

“Ah you are indeed blessed then. For few are given the gift.”

“Even I will admit it is nicer without the 'curse' of those feelings. Our male counterparts are particularly pleased.”

“Yes, it is harder on males. Some never get over it.”

“Wait a minute, you said men AND women! The apostles were not all male?”

“Of course not. You know as well as I do that women are just as capable. It was the male hierarchy that decided that the wives did not count later.”

“They were married?”

“That generally is a requirement for descendants, yes.”

Even Susan is laughing now. “So, what happened? What we have been told is nothing like what you are describing.”

“Ever play the game of telephone? Same thing happened with me that happened with Buddha, Confucius, Mohammad, and any other hero you can mention in any culture you can mention.”

“So, you are not the Son of God?”

“We all are dear. We all are, at least those who open their hearts and stop thinking with their fears or their egos.”

“That rules Yingui out then. He would be the first to admit that most of his life has been ruled by fear. I have more of a problem with ego.” Sigh. I was the best courier and I beat the nesters. I was proud of it.

“It is a wise person who knows and admits their own shortcomings.”

“What about Satan? Yingui defeated him in a sort of duel. Well, not really a duel. We were told it had been decided even before it happened. All he had to do was survive. Ah, that was how you defeated him too, right?”

He raises his finger to his lips and shushes me, but smiles. “Not everyone would understand.” Then winks at me.

Then he gets serious. “Satan is not totally out of the picture yet.”

“His influence is likely to haunt us till the end of time.” He nods, but I think there is something more. What does he know?

“Hungry?”

“Sure” We follow him to the kitchen area where people are making rice and beans. A warm bowl is handed to each of us. “No chili peppers.”

“In Costa Rica they are not into tortillas or chili peppers.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” I remove the bottle of wine from my pack. “From Dorothy, the naturally enhanced who took us in, in Punta Arenas. She said to give this to you.”

He laughs and then uncorks it, “Smell.” He hands it to Susan who sniffs it and then hands it to me.

“Water? I never thought to scan it. It’s just water? We carried water from Punta Arenas? Why?”

“Smell again.” I do so and it is clearly wine this time.

“She was afraid that you would not figure it out. How is she? Still making those wonderful biscuits with marmalade?”

“They were good.” Susan and I both nod and smile. He is such a pleasant person, nothing like the judgmental GOD you get out of most churches.

After our snack of rice and beans we are set to work helping him to repair the wall of the house, reinforcing the embankment and helping with the sick. We are exhausted by the end of the day and are shown to a small room with two makeshift beds.

Surprised I slept that long, I wake very early in the morning, before the sun has started to show. I notice that Susan is already gone. I scan for her, as we know each other’s ‘signature’ fairly well by now. She is with Jesus on a small hill overlooking the town. Christianity was not that attractive to me, but I know it is very much a part of Susan’s life. Part cultural I suspect. Having met him now, I could easily be a follower. He is very charismatic in a gentle sort of way. He laughs so easily and nothing seems to upset him for long. Not a pessimistic ‘Eeyor’ like Yingui. It would be good for Yingui to meet him. At least the weight would be more distributed, not all on Yingui’s shoulders like he thought.

On the other hand, I do not see Jesus taking on nesters, the Chinese, etc. etc. Not his way.

# New Atherton

“Try it again.” Harsha, George and I are working on a means of converting psiotic energy to electrical energy. My thinking is that if we can find a way of providing the energy needs the Chinese will need, they are less likely to go after the fuel corn fields in the rest of the country.

George throws the switch and immediately a safety fuse is blown to bits.

“Better, but we need to find a way of restricting the output.” We had found that by mixing the ideas from the amplifiers, the DS projectors and the dampening fields we could induce an alternating current in a wire. The psiotic device was formed around the outside of the wire. The length determined the voltage and the cross section determined the maximum amperage. Frequency was the hard part, that required a feedback mechanism that was precise and worked the same way under different loads and temperatures.

“Look I know you like using room temperature super conductors, but maybe that is not the way to go. Life did exist before them. Also, maybe if we used a lower voltage, like say 12 volts, it would also be easier.”

“But then we would have to re-engineer everything, I agree it would be better not to have to worry about frequency and high voltage. DC is clearly easier to deal with, but AC transmits better over distance.”

“Why do you have to transmit it? Most devices in the last ten years or so here in the USA actually run off of 12 VDC. We used transformers at the last point to make the DC from the AC line voltage. When was the last time you saw a computer, cart, etc. run off AC directly?”

“That may have been true in the saps quarters. There was a strong fear of the saps. That is why all the power was transferred by low voltage inductive means. No one could plug directly into the power feed. We always had control. But you are right. What if we made them small enough to replace the transformers and inductors? They only came in a handful of sizes and configurations to make manufacturing easier. How small would one be to run, say, this slate here?” He holds up a flat screen about half a meter in length.

Harsha grabs it back from him, “You do not experiment with the one all our data is on. I will find you an unused one to play with first.” She marches out of the room to our amusement.

I whisper to him, “Still want to go to Point Lobos George?” He looks around and then nods. Regent Hua wants us working on the project full time of course, but all work and no play....

Harsha returns with an older model slate, but it will work for our purposes. Settling on 12VDC allows us to proceed much more quickly. Harsha is a very good engineer, though it took her a while to get used to the idea that anything she could think up and explain to me could be made more or less instantly. Sometimes that was a handicap, because there was the impulse to try an idea out before you had really thought it out fully. We went down many dead ends that could have been avoided had we thought it out thoroughly first. Oh well.

I think that Regent Hua was happy as long as I was not causing trouble elsewhere. I was well aware of his troop movements towards the east, but said nothing for the time being. If the psiotic generators worked, it may all be mute and no one would be hurt. Ghost and Goldie kept to themselves most of the time. People got used to the idea that they were around and spoiled them silly. Goldie was going to follow in Ghost’s form factor if she was not careful.

However, I did remind him he did not control me. Every morning I ‘disappeared’ for the morning sun greeting ritual with Qaletaqa. The cats came most of the time, they have been worshiping the sun long before our kind did. I always chose a different place on the surface, so they would not pick out a pattern. I always returned to a different location. The first of our hosts to join us was Lisa, as might be expected, but George and Harsha now participated as well. Nothing was said. We each kept to our own thoughts. Ideally we should be doing the sun setting ritual too, but I did not want to push my luck. The Regent came in to the lab at one point to ‘check on progress’, but also to tell me to stop the morning ritual. I told him it was a condition of my working with him and he stormed out, politely, but I could tell by reading his physiology he was pissed.

In another week we had a working model and began production on three sizes of inductor replacements. A small size with inductive feed for computers and other small appliances, a medium size for small cars/carts and such and finally a large size, enough to power a small apartment. I refused to make ones that would fit military equipment. Of course it would not take them too long to adapt, but I did not want to make it too easy for them either. Mil spec was also pear spec. This new tech was all based on saps spec. More importantly, I was the only one who could make them. The level of resolution was way beyond what they could see

with their current technology. Besides, even a room full of the devices was nothing compared to the need.

The UNA now had a trade item, even if it felt more like extortion. We supply them with power modules that never ran out and they agreed to not attack us. What happened when they had all that they needed? What would we 'buy them off with' then? Of course we could use the new devices also, if the UNA agreed that they did not conflict with the natural laws. I had told them of my intentions before leaving, but that was before we were successful in actually making the devices. They would need to see and use them for a bit before a permanent decision could be made. Often there are far reaching consequences we don't see at the beginning.

### **Point Lobos**

The cats take off immediately. So many smells and I am sure there are mice around somewhere. Ghost insisted on teaching Goldie the finer points of being a cat. That meant hunting more than garbage which did not bite back.

"Why do you think I insisted on our morning ritual so adamantly? They are used to our disappearing every day at this time. This time we just take a little longer getting back. Besides we deserve a break. We may have solved the energy crisis that has plagued humankind for millennia in just a few short weeks."

"Here, here!"

I DS everyone and all the equipment to Weston Cove.

"Ah it is so beautiful here, the waves, the birds. I can even smell the pine trees. It is like no human has ever set foot here before." Lisa is pleased at least.

Qaletaqa pokes at the ground, "Not completely. There is asphalt under a thin layer of needles and sand. And over there is the remnants of a garbage can I believe."

"Party pooper!" Lisa gives him a gentle shove and that starts them both running down the beach trail. The two of them had grown close, but I stay out of it. He had to learn some lessons on his own. They come from very different worlds. At least he stopped whining about Little Deer. Ah to be young and stupid again.

"Don't be too long. We have to get back in about an hour." I shout after them.

I had chosen the Deardorff. With TK assist, the weight of the 8x10 was no longer a problem. Besides I had always wanted to try 8x10.



George was working with a 5x7 Linhoff Technica. Mostly metal, but very sturdy and excellent lenses. We were using ISO 100 film made in Croatia. Made the OLD way. The formula used lots of silver, instead of the almost all dyes in the modern stuff. Of course, I had to dupe our film. No place to order it from any longer. No wind, the clouds were perfect, present, but not changing the light much. Wave height was not a problem, enough to provide interest without causing a safety hazard. We had purposely chosen a low tide so as to expose all the interesting rocks that George and I were interested in. The others did not care, they were just happy to be free for a few hours off.

Harsha decided to prop herself up on top of a tall rock formation and just sit watching and feeling all that was around her. Even with her black hair and brown skin, I insisted on a hat as well. Being underground in New Atherton, one tends to forget about UV. Even an enhanced pear will eventually get sunburned and she was not enhanced.

George call out, "Over here! I told you I knew exactly where it was."

"Weston Rock. It must have been close to a hundred years since he did this rock. Changed some though. Look at the big chunk taken out of it right there. Looks like someone whacked it with another stone."

"Could have been wave damage. I have seen the waves move boulders weighing tons during a storm."

"Or saps, no offense. They did not always care for such things and thought it was good to destroy anything beautiful that we liked." So you restricted access, so even those saps who did appreciate beauty would never get to see it. The sword cuts both ways George.

"I am going over here. I love the way the pebbles stand out against the harder stone here. I will have to hurry before they dry out completely." We both start to set up our cameras on their heavy tripods, ducking under the dark clothes to start the initial focus and composition.

### **China Cove at Point Lobos**

"The water is so blue green. Almost like a dream."

"What's that brown plant out in the water?" Qaletaq dips his hand into the water to taste it. "Salty!"

"This is the ocean silly. You can't drink it. The plant is called seaweed. I love the way it curves back and forth with the waves. Oh look! An otter! I thought they went extinct. Let's go swimming!" She promptly removes her clothing and dives in, only to surface a moment later shivering. "Cold! Come on, it won't bite you." But she turns her back to

him to afford him some privacy. Qaletaqa hesitates and then removes his robe, but not his loin cloth. He would only remove that if he was among all men. The rules were very strict about relationships with women. Even this was not allowed, but hormones are hormones and it was hard to resist. The cold water did not bother him. He was used to bathing in the coldest winter streams. They used to have contests to see who could stay in the longest. He never won, but he was not the first out either. Usually second or third.

He swims up to her and takes her hand, but she splashes him and swims a few meters off closer to shore. Under water he can see her completely. So beautiful. He is glad the water is so cold.

When they get out, he offers her his robe to dry off and stay warm with. "Aren't you cold?"

"We are taught from early childhood how to resist the cold. I am fine." They look into each others eyes. The obvious thoughts are there. Their faces drift closer and just as they are about to kiss for the first time, they hear a yeowl like a beast being torn to shreds.

Lisa's eyes suddenly widen and she pulls away, "What's that?" Ghost and Goldie come DSing out of nowhere chasing a large rat down the beach towards them. Lisa clamps on tight to Qaletaqa.

"Just a wood rat. He won't hurt you." Qaletaqa uses his minimal TK ability to steer the rat away from them and the cats go bounding after it down the beach. Pretty evenly matched. Ghost being weight challenged and Goldie being so small. The mood has been broken however and Qaletaqa turns aside as Lisa gets back into her own clothes. Qaletaqa then dons his slightly damp and sandy robe. They slowly walk down the beach towards the disappearing cats hand in hand.

Br'thn appears out of nowhere about ten meters in front of them. They immediately let go of each others hands, slightly embarrassed. Qaletaqa bows to Br'thn. "Holy One, to what do we owe this honor." Everything and everyone seems to be conspiring against them.

***Qaletaqa is being silly? You need to go back to New Atherton. The Regent is looking for everyone.***

Lisa suddenly doubles over moaning "No, No!" over and over.

"Br'thn, get help! Please!"

***Qaletaqa, there is nothing physically wrong with her. My scan was quite thorough.***

"Then just bring the others here please."

Br'thn takes off while Qaletaqa comforts Lisa. She comes back a moment later with Yingui, George, Harsha and cats. Ghost sniffs Lisa, but she keeps on moaning.

“Br'thn is right, there is nothing physically wrong, but her psiotic balance is off. George, do you want to tell me more about how Lisa changed after she recovered from the plague or do you want me to guess.”

Qaletaqa asks, “What do you mean? Can't you help her?”

“Qaletaqa, there is nothing wrong with her. She has a form of TK, one that I am not familiar with, but Susan and Rachael reported that there are other forms even among humans. She may be a precog or something else. What did she say before she passed out?”

“She just kept saying no over and over.”

George is showing concern, “I think it best we get back to the lab at least. Being out here when we don't know what is going on is too much. Please don't tell anyone about her condition. The authorities would take her away at the least and might just kill her.”

I laugh, “That will not happen while I am around at least. I will watch over her.”

# Miami, Florida

“I could have stayed there forever. Why can’t we have a nice simple peaceful existence like they have?”

“What, sitting on the beach sipping a cool one. You would get bored soon enough. It takes a special person to sit still that long always taking on everyone else troubles and dishing out just what they need, not necessarily what they want. Oh, we could learn a lot. No doubt about it, but we also have a responsibility to our own group.”

“At least we now have a goal of how things should ultimately be. Granted they still had troubles, but the way they all worked together without complaining was incredible. It takes us days to come to a decision about the simplest thing.”

“And it is usually the wrong one for all the time wasted.”

As we approach our destination I get a weird feeling. Like fluctuations in the TK field. Not enough to cause any problems, but definitely noticeable.

“Do you feel that? What’s going on down there?”

“It seems to be centered a few kilometers north west of where you said you wanted to go. Do we check out your uncle’s place first or the disturbance?”

“Let’s go to the orchid farm first. Whatever is down there has probably been going on for some time and it might be better to approach on foot than by bubble. I would rather meet whatever it is on solid ground.”

“Your call.” We circle around, with me following Susan’s lead. Things look different from the air than when they did when she was 13 years old.

“Maybe if we get down to street level it will help. I know it is around here somewhere.” We start a pattern of going up and down various streets, but it has been thirty years. A lot can change.

“This looks familiar. The stores are different colors, but the basic design is the same. Everything seems to have faded.”

“Who could afford paint? I am scanning a green house like structure one block over.”

“Got it. That could be it.” We hop the houses and settle back down and debubble on the sidewalk, or rather what is left of it. Lots of cracks and damage. No city maintenance here in a very long time.

“Las Orquideas Blanca. That’s it!”

I am not holding out much hope though. The place is a mess, maybe a hurricane or just vandals. I do not sense anyone alive in the vicinity. "Are you sure you want to go in there Susan?" We have all seen lots of death, but it is always harder when it is someone you knew and cared about. There is a smell of death and rot inside. Most of the plants have died from lack of care, along with scores of rats, bugs and who knows what else. Without the power grid, the automatics could only do so much. And then when the solars went, the last of them went too.

We go up and down the isles crunching glass from broken panes above us and slipping on rotten yuck, vegetation and spilled soil and bark pieces. "Maybe we should travel by TK. There is no one here to see us anyway." I bubble up and slowly continue.

"Over here Rachael." I go towards her and she is kneeling besides a well decomposed corpse wearing blue jeans and red plaid work shirt. The hair was grey, but not enough of the face to recognize. The clothes are not much better, being rotten and torn to shreds. Even a little mushroom colony in one corner.

I point to the rings on his fingers. "Is it him?" She nods. "I will prepare a place outside to bury him. Come out with him when you are ready." She nods again with tears in her eyes.

Ten minutes later a hole dissolves in the wall and a coffin of sorts levitates out through the opening. Susan comes next holding a white orchid plant that somehow had survived. The coffin goes into the hole I had prepared and we both cover it over. She places the potted orchid on top.

"This variety should make it on it's own in this climate." We remain silent for a few minutes. Susan gets up and goes back in and retrieves another smaller orchid in a tiny pot. "To remember him by." I nod my understanding. It will be some time before we can leave all the death behind us.

Upon coming out of the nursery I spy a few bicycles leaned up against what used to be a store of some sorts. A little rusty from being outside, but I can fix that. Not my choice of style either, but rideable. "We only have to go a few kms, why not?" Susan smiles. That is good. This will be like the start of our trip when we all left San Jose California with Yingui. Only this time we are not being hunted by nesters and norms.

As we get closer the TK disturbance gets more intense and we begin to hear sounds. A battle of sorts is going on. I can sense TK2s on the side nearest us with the disturbance further away. Sounds of gun fire and

explosions with flashes of light. The TK disturbance is not even. Almost nothing and then a sudden intense pulse. Sometimes more than one.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but there are fellow TKs in trouble here. I intend to help.” I go rushing off ahead. Using a little TK assist to make the bike go faster but not give myself away.

“Wait Rachael! We don’t know what’s going on yet.” She follows, but is more cautious, falling behind somewhat.

The TKs are holed up in a shattered building hurling debris back towards the disturbance. There are norms at the center of this disturbance. What is going on? I reach the first building and am immediately inundated with a cloud of pebbles going at hyper velocity. When I deflect them easily, they stop. All action on their part stops. However the TK disturbance does not stop. I drop the bike and enter the remains of the building. There are five TKs with bandages, bruises, etc. all frightened out of their wits staring at me. “Ah, hi guys. What’s up?”

“Help us! Please!” A pulse gets through and rumbles the walls that are left. I turn and face the disturbance. Scanning is tough, looking into the barrel, so to speak, but between pulses I narrow it down to a weird looking piece of equipment being operated by three norms. I dissolve the device and the pulses stop. The norms, after a moment’s hesitation, high tail it out of there.

I am being stared at by five sets of eyes. Finally one gets the courage to ask, “What are you?”

“I get that a lot. I am a TK, just like you.” They all shake their heads. No not like them. Susan comes in through the passage way and they hunker down even more, if that is at all possible.

Susan asks, “Do I look that scary? Does anyone want to tell us what’s going on here?”

Their apparent leader looks over the others and then turns to them. “I am Baylor. Squad leader for this sector.”

“Hi Baylor, I am Susan and this is Rachael.” We offer them our hands and after some hesitation they get up and shake them one at a time.

“We have been having trouble with the norms as of late. They have built some new kind of device that can take us out in a direct hit. Does a lot of damage to masonry too, as you can see.”

“And do you know why they are doing this?”

“Cause we are TK.”

*This is not much to go on.*

*Nope.*

“Susan and I have orders to contact and link up with fellow TKs. If you are organized, that makes it that much easier. Care to ‘take us to your leader’?”

“No mams. We have orders to stay put, in case they try and get through. Though with these TK canons, we are of little use. Thanks for taking that one out.”

*I am sensing a TK concentration N-NE of here, about one kilometer.*

“Well, we can find our way. Anything we should know, so we don’t get blasted by our own kind?”

He smiles, no doubt thinking that anyone who can take out a TK canon has nothing to worry about. He would be wrong, but we say nothing to dissuade that belief. “The color of the day is magenta. Just remember that if asked. And be prepared to prove yourselves TK. Would love to see their faces when you do that.” The others are smiling now. Glad we made their day.

Susan hands them a sack of food and a bottle of water. “Figure you could use this at least.” They nod thanks and we leave. All is quiet on the western front as they say.

We proceed to head quarters wearing a TK2 signature. Normally we travel fully shielded to hide our nature. Here it would be a good idea to broadcast it, but being above TK2 would also attract attention we did not want. Yet at least. Only takes few minutes, though we have to TK over a number of obstacles. Part of the test no doubt. No norm could get through without revealing themselves. We are met at an old bank building by three heavily armed guards. “Color?”

“Magenta” They let us pass. Their community must be pretty large to let strangers pass, even with the code word. There are a lot of people sitting around on the floor in small groups, some sleeping, some eating, and some dying. At least the dead have been removed. A guard walks around and nudges the ones lying down to be sure. The leader appears to be the one at the back on some sort of throne. Don’t like thrones. Means someone is not sharing power. We are stopped a few meters out. We wait. Mr. Big stopped talking to an adviser or whatever on his left and motions us to come forward about another meter. He holds up his hand to stop us, confers with another person before addressing us. We still appear to be TK2 to his TK3, so he sees no threat. It also explains his power over others. Not that a despot ever needed personal ability to rule.

*Hear him out before you decide Rachael.*

*I will, but I don’t trust him either.*

*Different people have different forms of government. Some prefer that the strongest leads. Does not make them bad.*

“We thank you for your help just now. Do you wish to explain how you took out the TK canon, so the rest of us can benefit?”

“I was the one who did it sir. It is a knack I have. Nothing special, but I don’t know till I try if I can teach it to others.”

“Can she do this ‘knack’ also then?”

Susan speaks up, “Don’t know, never tried. We don’t have TK canons where we come from.”

“Ah, and where do you come from and why are you here? Your accent places you further west I suspect.” Everything is further west just about. He gets a chuckle from his aids.

“California. Just here to help. Trying to bring all the TKs together. We too have had some ‘trouble’ with norms and nesters.” Susan offers a sly grin on that comment.

“Long way California. How did you get here?”

“Flew.” This gets a chuckle. *This is getting boring.*

*Hang in there.*

“Well, we don’t have any trouble with nesters. They never hatched here, but heard about some of the other nests over the netcoms. Sounds nasty. But if you would oblige us to take out the canons and show our people how to do so, we would be most grateful. Oh, and do you two know anything about this Yingui character? Heard he was out west somewheres.” News broadcasts, such as we were able to bring back up again anyway. Thank goodness the sats still worked.

“We have heard of him.” This may be a lie technically, but something is fishy here.

A woman comes running in covered in dust and breathing heavily. She salutes the guards and they let her pass. She drops to her knee and bows. “Sir, they are breaking through in sector five. We can’t hold them off much longer.”

“COWARDS!” He bellows. His aids scatter. A leader with a temper. Not good. We hold our ground. “Ok, you two.” Pointing at us. “Come with me and we will see what you are made of. Has to be better than these rat fleas.” He marches past us and we follow. The rest follow at some distance. He does not bother TKing over barriers. He just smashed them with his mind. This is not lost on the rest. Where ever he goes everything stops.

*This is not your Jesus approach to a problem.*

*Remember the diversity imperative. We are not the judge.*



No, but I can decide for myself whether or not to participate.

When we get near the front line the TK pulses from the canons get louder and louder. If I had to give a value to them I would say they are around TK3 or so in strength. So, yes they would be too much for a TK2 and an even match for our Mr. Big. Lets see what he does. He starts barking orders to those he finds and they scatter in all directions. We wait a moment. Mr. Big grabs a shotgun shell and TKs it high into the air and then explodes it. That is his signal. A barrage of missiles comes from all directions towards the nearest TK canon. When the pulses stop briefly we see Mr. Big concentrate and the canon is disabled. Not destroyed, just tweaked inside. If they have brought spare parts, it will not take them long to bring it up again. However as soon as the canon is down, the TK2 descend on the emplacement and kill the occupants!

I shout, "What are you doing? You didn't need to kill them!" Mr. Big turns and looks at me confused.

"What do you mean? This is war. What did you expect? We are not playing football here lady." He comes up to me and stares me down about ten centimeters from my face. I hold my ground. "Well, at least you have more balls than the rest of them. Just how would you suggest we take these things out? Remember they have killed over a hundred of our own people." As if to make the point a pulse hits the building across the street and shards of concrete start to fall on the people below. Without moving a muscle, I extend my TK and deflect the shards so they miss the people. I want to blast this bastard to hell, but restrain myself for now.

"I took out the last one I met without hurting anyone and the people simply left."

"Yes, I heard. Dissolved it and you were well out of range of any TK2 that I know. That is some knack you have sister." Oops. Right on cue though another pulse hits nearby, this time with nothing but dust to show for it.

*Susan, lets do it. This has to stop.* She nods her head.

We move to the center of the open space and stand back to back. A few minutes later, all of the TK canons are silent. We turn and face Mr. Big. This time unshielded and showing our full potential. To his credit, he does not flinch.

"Send out the word. No one gets hurt. The killing stops."

He flicks his hand. "I have no problem with that. For now. Can't promise it will stay that way after you leave and they bring more on line though." He has us here. He can wait us out. We have tipped our hand and he knows it.

*Now what?*

*I want to know the other side. There are always two points of view in any conflict. Why go to this trouble to kill TKs when a bullet would do and why are the TKs staying around instead of just leaving?*

*What about him?*

She grins like a Cheshire cat. Of course!

Susan motions Mr. Big to come over, like a cat would to a canary. He is visibly upset now and starts to resist some. A TK bubble lifts him off the ground and brings him over anyway. Each of us a thousand times stronger than he is makes his struggles pointless. I place a black carbon cover over the sphere. No point in making this easy. We take off at supersonic speed leaving a sonic boom to rock the square. A scan back to where we were shows people cheering in the streets with upraised arms. Interesting.

Finding the norms' head quarters proved to be more difficult. We never saw more than three people in any one location. Most moving away from the TK center as fast as they could. With no defenses now, I don't blame them. Though I do not think the TKs are in any mood to hunt them, they don't know that. We finally set down in the path of several coming towards us and shield ourselves to emit no enhanced TK. Dorothy taught us very well thank you. We cover Mr. Big as well. No surprises.

Two women and a boy come towards us and are shocked when they see us. We appear to be two middle aged women with a large male in tow with a leash around his neck. Glancing back they hesitate for a moment, checking something hanging from their necks and then motion us to follow them.

*Mr. Big is going to have trouble keeping up.*

*He is rather fat. Probably would get along with Ghost just fine. But if we show any TK, their sensors will tell them and we will never know.*

*He is not going to deal with this sitting down. An adjustment is in order. Nothing permanent, just temporary.* She cuts his vocal cords gently and painlessly. Probably does not even know it happened. I pick up on her cue and administer a little narcotic to his blood stream. Not enough to knock him out, but enough to keep him compliant and not try anything TK for the time being.

Our leaders notice our lagging and slow down till we catch up. Mr. Big is out of breath, but we are doing fine. He sure became pear shaped in a hurry. I am sure there is lots to tell. A few kilometers more and we are passed on to another group of three, all boys about eleven to thirteen

this time and we run for another few kilometers. We are going around in circles sort of but gradually spiraling out of the area. I do not let on though. I suspect they are trying to disorient us and wear us out at the same time. Good luck. Thanks to Running Snake and other's training, we can go on like this for days. Mr. Big however cannot.

*He is likely to die of a heart attack if we keep going.*

*All right.*

"Hold up! While we appreciate the exercise, our captive does not and his being dead helps no one."

We all stop and the youngest asks, "So why are you here then?"

"Just two people trying to help. Trying to figure out what is going on here, so we can help the right people at least."

"Well, you are not one of them" pointing in the direction of the TK center "or you would have done us in already. So, what's to tell?"

"Look, we are from California, just got into town. Assume we know nothing of your conflict and start from the beginning."

"You know about the plague right? It did reach California?"

"Yeh, and we know about crazies, pears, TKs and rogues. So?" Susan did not add that they killed TKs just because they were TKs out west and for no other reason. No reason to encourage them.

"Ok, what happened here was the special people were all goodie goodie at first. Helped everyone without a thought. We accepted them. They could not help the way they were, so why hassle them? Anyway. Some big hot shot comes into town and says that the 'TKs' have to live separate from 'norms' from now on. Something about special needs that we would not understand. Nobody knew what he was talking about, but after he conferred with the special people as a separate group they all came back and said they had to go with him. That it would be better this way. Ok, it was a new world people had a right to do what they wanted right? Well, it did not take long before help from the TKs was rarer and rarer, but we were expected to keep helping them. We had to give them food, build and repair shelters, etc. It did not take too long for us to figure out the arrangement was very one sided. So, we stopped.

That's when it started. People who spoke out the loudest started showing up dead or their houses burned down, or their adopted children missing. Things started disappearing on their own. Turns out that TKs can see in the dark as well. Soon, we were nothing more than slave labor for them. For most of the summer we labored. We were left with very little food. They took almost everything. There was nothing we could do to stop them. At least till two boys found out the secret."

“That ultimately led to the TK canons you mean?” He nods.

“Now what do you suppose made all those NICE TKs suddenly turn bad?”

“Some say the stranger was a more powerful TK and he threatened them with death if they did not play along. We even saw evidence that they preyed on their own kind. We found bodies so pulverized as to be barely recognizable as having ever been alive. Any TK that helped one of us ended up the next day like this. Could only recognize them from their clothing, so we were never sure. Could have been a pig or anything after they were through with it.”

“So, what would happen if this ‘bad’ TK were suddenly taken out of the equation?” I sneered at our prisoner, but he was asleep. Too much narcotic and too much running.

“Well, some of the better TKs would be very happy I would expect, but not all. Some went along with him, for power, or whatever. They don’t have sex you know, so there were never any rapes or that sort of thing. Some crave power though. I suspect that they know who the bad ones were and being largely outnumbered they would have to run or face the remaining ones.”

“My thoughts exactly. Has anyone come after you since the canons stopped?”

He looks concerned for a moment, thinking. “No, no one has come after us. Very quiet in fact.”

“I think you will find that the TKs are no longer your enemy and can be worked with as before. But I would impress on them that you still have the technology to destroy them if they ever get out of line again. Keep this hidden from them. And don’t make slaves out of them in return. They were victims of this mad TK just like you were. You don’t kill the horse that the thief rode on.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well I think we can leave now. Our work is done. Now were did you leave your orchid Susan?”

“Why, I think it is just outside of town where we left it. Best go get it before someone else picks it up.”

“Yes, that would be a good idea.” We slowly walk out of sight, tugging at our roped TK the entire time.

*You don't really think a few hours here will solve their problems do you?*

*Not a chance, but I could not see leaving him there either. At least the equation is a little more equal now, and there are people who want it to work as well. Everyone had given up hope before today.*

*I am beginning to understand how Yingui felt about the space station duo. Where should we put him. I can't kill him, nor do I want to live with him.*

*Good question, one for which I do not have an answer yet.*

# Hotevilla

“It is nice to be home. Is anyone else back yet?”

“Squirrel and Turkey are here, but Badger elected to remain with the Lakota for further training.”

“Now what further training could James want with a bunch of Sioux warriors?”

“Maybe we have to find some more bots for him to practice with?”

*How are you two?*

“Barb! Glad to see you!” They all hug each other.

“So what's been happening? Where are all the others?”

*Ron is with the council relating our story. I will be called in next. We just got in this morning ourselves. We have not heard from Yingui and his team, nor have we heard from Running Snake and Pushy Paws, but it is still early yet. Heard you brought someone with you.*

*“Yeh, but he has a permanent anti-TK implant for the time being. The TK3 ones are actually pretty small, only about two centimeters in diameter. He will hardly notice and no one is likely to cut it out of him without killing him, so we should be ok till one of us removes it for him.”*

“Not likely. I hear he is having the time of his life learning the 'native' way. Have we been assigned rooms yet?”

*They have started to rebuild Hotevilla. Once a few more are up we will be allowed to duplicate them ourselves using TK. Until then we are in tents I am afraid. Not so bad.*

“Where are the rest of the TKs who came with us staying?”

*Hey, I just got here myself. Besides you can scan better than I can.*

“Alright, alright time to wonder around. Has the chocolate shipment arrived yet at least?”

“It had better get here before Yingui gets back, that's all I have to say.” We all crack up at that thought.

The tents were comfortable enough, but noisy whenever the wind comes up. Most of us used our tents for storage and only occasionally stayed in them. The rest of the time was spent talking with people, relating our ideas and stories. Basically trying to figure it all out. Days turned into a week and still the rest had not returned. Not even Br'thn had arrived at random intervals to tell us what was going on. The problem is, we had no way of contacting them. There was talk about sending out teams, but there was fear that if something dangerous was out there,

could we afford to lose more teams. Some talked about evacuating in case the danger came back here.

“But what if they are hurt and need our help? They could be trapped or dying and we sit here on our hands doing nothing!”

“If they are in trouble, it is likely all over by now. We need to know. For the evil not known is imagined worse than one known.”

“Well, where do we start, south to Phoenix or west to New Atherton?”

“Do we all go? Do we get James?”

*We are the Guardians. Is it not our duty to all go?*

“She has a point. Ron, you feel up to collecting James? Barb and the two of us can get things ready here.”

*What about Daniel? How are we going to retrieve him?*

“Till Br'thn and Pushy Paws show up we can do nothing.”

It takes Ron a few days to collect James. Something about participating in a Sun Dance. When they return, James has some new scars healing on his chest. He could heal himself easily but chose not to. Men are so stupid at times. He would not talk about it. Ron would say nothing either having watched whatever had happened. The good news was that the Lakota have agreed to join the UNA and would try to get neighboring tribes to join as well.

A Navajo brave comes running up, panting, poking his head in our tent “All TKs are to report to the council chamber immediately!” He proceeds to the next tents.

“Now what's that about?” But we all get up and proceed to the chambers. Not so big yet. The largest tent can only hold about a hundred people. This means a lot of people outside. They have opened the sides of the tent on three sides so all can hear. We had requested permission to build something more fitting and much larger, but there was the never ending discussion about the proper rituals and rules about how things could be built. Switching from the material world to the spiritual one has not been easy on us. Very frustrating at times.

“Are we late?”

“No, just further out than most. Sit anywhere you like, no time for formality.”

Oh yeah, then why are they beginning with the burnt sage and evocations to Great Spirit? This goes on for fifteen minutes then stops. Ok, maybe they are being less formal. Cow with Limp gets up to address the group. No idea what he did to deserve that name.

“The Chinese have crossed over into Nevada and are proceeding towards Utah or here. We can expect planes and bots shortly.” He sits down. Shit.

I stand up, “Daniel, Yingui and Br’thn are all missing or unreachable. This also means that whatever happened, they no longer see Yingui and Br’thn as a threat. If they can neutralize them, we don’t stand a chance. It may be best if the TKs leave, so as not to endanger everyone else here.” I sit.

Another stands, “For two hundred years we were bullied and oppressed by the white ones. I will not stand for the same treatment from the yellows, even if that means death. I call upon the special ones to help us in our time of need and not run off like dogs with their tails between their legs.” Hey, I am a ‘yellow’ one, but I understand the sediment. There are murmurs of support in the audience.

Some start chanting “Rohomti!” over and over.

*Barb, what does that mean?*

*Fight or resist in Hopi.*

*Did not know they had a word for that. Thought they were the peaceful ones.*

*Everyone has a right to defend themselves, even the Hopi.*

James stands and all fall silent. He is the eldest of the TKs now and speaks for us in the eyes of the council. Word of the Sun Dance has gotten out. Most of the people here have heard at least rumors of what that entailed. There was talk that he did it the ‘old way’. To make this point, he lets his robe drop to his waist. Yep, the old way. His chest bears the fresh scars to prove it. So male of him.

He draws out the silence to his benefit, slowly turning so all can see him.

“We defeated nesters and you call us cowards. We defeated Dragon and you call us cowards. At your insistence we all took an oath to never kill another being. We can only count coo and you call us cowards. Rachael says we should leave so as to spare your lives, but not our own, and you call us cowards. Go back to your tents and your stone shelters if it shames you to stand at our sides in battle then. But to battle we will go, cowards or not. Wolakota wa yaka cola!”

*Peace without slavery or in Klingon, it is a good day to die. Sounds more like you Rachael.*

“War council meets here in five minutes. Everyone else prepare to move out. I want the Guardians and the TK3s to stay. The rest of the TKs help out where you can and await orders.”



Everyone disperses. Lots of work to do. I stop a TK2, “Pass the word. All TK2s are to carry as many small pebbles as they can and still lift themselves easily.” She nods and leaves. I see her starting to tell others on the way out. It might be a good idea to convert those pebbles to diamonds. Much harder.

### **War Council**

James is already at it by the time I return my attention to the council.

“We can do a lot without killing anyone. The main thing that the TKs can do is take out their tech. Even a TK1 can stop a bot with a fast moving pebble. TK3s can change them permanently. The four TK6s can do all of this from some distance away. Nothing heavy, just disable. Once their tech is gone, they are no match for even bows and arrows and the courage of our braves. The Guardians have seen what you can do there and it is impressive. Add to this the flying TKs and special effects and we can do much to scare them as well. Remember a battle is won when the other side perceives that it has lost. Perception is key.”

Cow with Limp speaks up, “Location is key. We have worked with the TKs, so we know what they can do. Our enemy does not. It is important now that we pick the time and place to maximize what we have and minimize the lack thereof. Everyone dig deep down into your traditions and stories of battles won and lost. When did we win and why? Win did we lose and why? We have tens of thousands of braves, but only a limited number of TKs. We can't move everyone at once, nor should we place everyone in one place. On the other hand if we spread too thin we are lost also.”

I speak up. “Don't rely too heavily on the TKs. Something has taken out the ten we sent to Phoenix and more importantly Br'thn, Yingui and Qaletaq who were with the Chinese. If they have developed a weapon stronger than what we faced in Florida, the TKs may be taken out rather quickly. I don't say this out of fear, but out of practical concern. Susan and I took out the TK pulse canons by ourselves. We will be on the front lines with you. The Florida norms were far less advanced technologically than the Chinese. Initial reports from Br'thn reported that the Chinese have developed DS capability. So far only small stuff, but enough to kill. We have to keep our eyes open. Even a TK shield will not protect anyone from a DS attack, unless we get the projectors before they fire upon us. You need a backup plan.”

Another stands, "I suggest we break up into smaller groups and brainstorm, then come back together to discuss what has come up idea wise."

Cow with Limp gets up again, "Ok, groups of no more than ten. Try and use people from different tribes. We need to maximize the ideas. Our existence is at stake. No more room for ANYTHING else." He glares at certain groups as he says this, they become uncomfortable and split up. No time for clicks or rivalries. The remaining Guardians break up also and circulate till we are pretty evenly spaced.

What we hadn't anticipated was how fast the Chinese would move. During our discussion I was getting bored and so do a scan at my extreme. "Jet coming in, loaded with bots. No special weapons that I can scan. You have two minutes to assign the TKs locations so we can spread out fast and you are able to find us again later. GO NOW!" The Guardians get up and leave the tent. We are all actively scanning now. It will only take another ten minutes or so for them to get within dropping distance for the faster bots and TK seekers. We need to be gone or all is lost before we start.

While outside a brave comes up to each one of us and tells us where we are to go. They are our guides and go between for the languages and methods we will learn on the way. James wants to take out the jet first, or the entire community is at stake. We can't move everyone that fast. We take off at supersonic speed in all directions, taking evasive action to confuse them as to our ultimate destination, but circle back to meet the plane while it is still far out. It circles around to confuse us or just make sure it has the right place. As it comes back, James takes point and we come in behind him to back him up. He is good. He shuts the engine down, dissolves the cockpit. The pilot ejects and Susan dissolves his seat which is too heavy to deal with and is no longer needed. She then guides the pilot safely to the ground. Meanwhile the rest of us turn the falling craft away from any settled areas and allow it to crash with its bot payload. Can't be sure none of the bots survived, but they are far enough away to be effectively out of the equation. Lastly we DS to confuse them more as to where we are going. We have not had to use DS much since returning from the Galactic center, but then we have not been chased till now.

Barb remains behind at Hotevilla to act as a sort of communications center and to try and contact the missing ones. We really need Br'thn and Yingui. I am assigned Salt Lake City. At maximum speed, along with DS, it will only take a few minutes. Going to wake some people up. I

change my shape to a more aerodynamic one. Susan and I did this over Chile till we perfected it. There is going to be a mess to clean up from my companion who has remained quiet. Not really fair to her. They assigned female companions for Susan and I and male ones for Ron and James. I hope they gave James their bravest. Anyone else is likely to die of fright. He came awfully close to the first jet.

## **Salt Lake**

When we reach Salt Lake, we hear James going overhead with a large boom. I land near the government house and dissolve the bubble. Shining Leaf promptly falls on her butt. I TK her on her feet, but she is not too stable. I clean up the mess and I see a thank you form on her lips. People are rushing towards us and there is lots of activity.

“Rachael, I am Colonel Davis. An American jet did a flyover a few minutes before you got here, but going too fast to drop bots. It is circling around and should be back in about ten minutes.”

“Do you want me to wait for hostile action or bring in the pilot and ditch the plane?”

“So far they have only threatened. May be testing us. Can you tell if they have nucs on board?”

I pause for a moment while I scan. “Negative, just a load of bots. It has slowed down and appears to be scattering some west of here. Probably info and antipersonnel. OK, it was doing that. The plane is down and the bots are toast. James has taken them out. Hold on a second. He has the pilot. He set the pilot down about 80 kilometers north west of here. He is continuing on his former course. Do you want me to retrieve the pilot?”

“Yes. We may be able to get some answers about what is going on.”

I nod and concentrate. I form a bubble around the confused pilot and bring him in with DS. I set him down next to us after dissolving his weapons. He has fallen unconscious. “I’m sorry but flying by TK Air takes some getting used to.” I catch Ms Leaf smiling out of the corner of my eye. Oh well, have to have some fun. I create a glass of water and splash the pilot with it and he sputters to life. Not Asian, maybe a nester? Colonel Davis takes over.

“Nice retrieval. Thanks.” He’s cool. We never told him about DS. He turns to our guest. “You want to explain what’s going on? You have invaded the sovereign territory of the UNA without permission while attempting to plant robotic devices.” So, they did finally signed up. Must

have been just as the jets were approaching. Nothing like a threat to force a decision.

“UNA? I was told there were only scattered remnants left. I was dropping surveillance bots to try and find out what all was going on. Utah seems to have one of the highest concentrations of survivors. No harm done, they aren't lethal bots, just collectors.” I don't buy this for a second. May have been what he was told though. I concentrate again. There must be a few that James did not get and there are not many things out there that scan like bots. Takes me about five minutes to find an intact one, so I miss some of the conversation. I find one just as they are escorting him away.

“Wait up a second.” I bring in the bot to get a closer look at it. “Stand back in case it's armed.” I bubble everyone just in case. As soon as I set it down it unfolds, centers on me and fires a dart that I catch against my shield. The Colonel and the pilot both hit the deck. Shining Leaf stays standing. Good for her. It fires three more before folding up again to play dead. I enclose it in a bubble and examine the darts. “Cyanide and notice it only fired at me, even though all of you were equally close. The fact that our pilot ducked only after it fired the first time would indicate that he was not aware of its purpose. It is a TK killer. I got hit by one of these in Sacramento earlier this year, only it was trunk instead of cyanide.” I neutralize the power supply. They may want to examine it later.

“From the report we got about the jet over Arizona just before you got here, it looks like they were trying to take out the TKs on the first run. After you were gone it would be trivial to herd up the rest of us, if there was any resistance left at all. We have radar and sat up again and everything is reported on my implant. I was in the Salt Lake Armstrong. From his insignia, our pilot here was from Samuel Clemens. Surprised he did not recognize you from your first encounter with them.”

“It has been over six months. They may have given up. Besides with the Chinese coming in they had enough on their minds. Samuel Clemens was particularly anti TK, any chance this was purely their doing?”

“Flying over New China airspace without permission. I doubt that very much. No, the Chinese knew about this. They would not have tried this unless your peace mission there had failed.”

“I know. We have not heard from them.” I couldn't help it, a tear escapes my right eye. Thankfully the Colonel does not comment.

“Let's get inside and try and figure out what is going on.” Turning to the pilot. “Captain, do you agree to place yourself under my command?”

“Yes, sir!” He snaps to attention and salutes. “Begging your pardon sir, but who IS she?” Referring to me.

He breaks a sly grin, “Captain, the TKs we know are among the nicest, kindest people you will ever meet. She could have had you for lunch with a blink of her eye, but I never heard of one even hurting a fly. They could have taken over Salt Lake like no bodies business, but left us completely alone to make our own decision and have accepted whatever decisions we have made. Unlike the Chinese who both tried to bribe and threaten us. Remember that Captain.”

“Glad to be aboard sir!” He salutes again and follows the Colonel. Shining Leaf and I follow them.

“You going to be ok now?”

“Grandmother told of wild tales about coyote and eagle and the rest. Never thought I would be alive to witness the stories for real.”

“We do live in interesting times.” I have no idea where Ron and Susan got posted. I suspect that James insisted on being with the Lakota judging from his flight path.

# Hotevilla

*Welcome back Susan. Did Ron and Grey Wolf make it alright to Wind River?*

“No problems. Probably too small to be worth it for now, but will be a good look out should they decide to swing north and try and come in that way. You should see the kittens. Almost cats now. They sure grow fast. Princess is doing fine too. The dogs I am afraid are totally fearful of cats now and jump anytime one gets anywhere near them. I am afraid that Little Deer wants the gray and white one really bad. I had to drag her away. We came back on an orbital path to appease her and avoid any sensors they may have set on the ground.”

*Good idea. How is Little Deer doing?*

“Not sure her heart is in it. She would rather spend time with her boy friend than doing lessons. She does seem to be taking some interest in teaching and she likes children. We will have to start up schools again at some point.”

*Schools are not the native way of passing on information. But we can't forget all the tech and doing that teaching one on one would take far too long.*

“We are all going to have to compromise to some extent to make this work, drawing on each others strengths.”

*Excuse me. Reports coming in. I concentrate to 'hear' better.*

*Rachael says James took out another jet near Salt Lake. Rachael retrieved a bot that James had not gotten and it fired lethal darts at her and no others. She is fine, but we should be aware they are trying to take out the TKs.*

“That would make sense from a military point of view, only cost them two planes and they could have won the entire war in one stroke. Think of it as a test of our resolve. What will they do now that they have not succeeded though? You need to let the other TKs know to always be shielded now. Those bots are sneaky and they have many ways to deliver them. May already be some here in hiding.”

*Good idea. I will also request that the lower level TKs scan for them and take out any they find. You need to concentrate on anything long range coming in.*

“Yeh, no rest tonight. That is when they are likely to try again.”

I made my broadcasts. I can reach pretty much every TK in the UNA area and especially the Guardians as I am tuned to each of them. Both

Yingui and Br'thn have been off line now for weeks. Something happened. I can't reach the TK2s we sent south and they should be easy. This is getting really scary. I can't reach Pushy Paws either, though I am not as well tuned to her. TKs are easier to read than Gateways which tend to be like black holes to TP. I should be able to sense her darkness, but can't. Well, time to rest. Unlike the other Guardians, I need at least two hours of sleep a night. Maybe after I am upgraded to TK5 it will be easier. TP6 is not the same apparently.

My tent is a mess. Ron left most of his tech with me as everyone was in a hurry and he did not want to leave it somewhere unoccupied. Theft was rare, but curious children and animals could sometimes take things without thinking. Especially anything unusual or 'shiny'.

I wake from my nap as the sun is starting to go down. I need to stay awake tonight in case something happens. Everything seems eerily quiet and full of anticipation. Time goes slower and everything seems more real than even I have gotten used to with TK and TP. I have heard that people about to be executed go through this. Some of Yingui's pessimism has rubbed off on me.

When I go outside to the central open area people are standing around, including Susan and Little Deer. Everyone is watching something at the edge of the mesa. Must be further than my minimal TK scan, as I don't scan anything out of place.

*What's up?*

"Weird vehicle making its way over from second mesa. Just passed Old Oraibi, should be here in a few minutes. Word is Running Snake is with them, but the guard's English is not that good and Running Snake would not know Hopi. There is a yellow jacket driving."

*Why aren't you there already?*

"They will be here in a few minutes. I only sense three people and Pushy Paws is not one of them. And older female, probably Running Snake, a younger one, possibly one of the TK2s that went with them and an older male, the yellow jacket, who was not part of the group that left here."

"Here they come!" Yells one of the council members nearer the road. Braves with guns line up and are ready should the pear driver prove hostile. It would be the first time that a male pear, a yellow jacket, took hostages of women and children.

A large camper like contraption with broken solar collectors hanging on the sides, mostly ripped off, comes into the open area and stops. Running Snake gets out of the passenger side.

“We need help.” She spots Susan. “Angpetu has been hurt.” Susan comes forward and goes into the vehicle. The male gets out the other side after setting the brake and shutting everything down.

Running Snake comes over and introduces him, “He is ok! This is Edwin. A lichenologist we met on the way. We are all that made it back. Pushy Paws is dead, along with the other nine TK2s” The braves go about their other duties.

*What happened?*

“We should go inside before it gets too cold out here. Are you two hungry?” They both nod. Good idea.



# Running Snake's Tale

Running Snake and Edwin are fed first. Angpetu has a broken arm and leg. Susan is doing her best to do repairs and ease the pain. Fortunately neither break broke the skin, so there is no infection, just a lot of swelling and discomfort. Running Snake and Edwin did their best to set the bones, but with no x-ray machine they had to do it by feel. Going over roads I am sure did not add to the comfort level. Angpetu is still unconscious.

There are only a few people around to hear her tale as so much is going on at the moment. She will undoubtedly have to retell it many times, if we survive.

“We met Edwin in Winslow, near the cliff dweller's ruins. He was not aware of the fire plague or anything else that had happened. He came along in hopes that we would want to start up something like a university again and could use his help. Also I think because there really was no need at the moment at least for a lichenologist to be out in the field practicing his craft. The TKs took to him real fast calling him Uncle Ed and the name sort of stuck.

Our next stop was Flagstaff. We hoped to scrounge some supplies if we could and we had agreed to meet the Apache group there as well. The town was pretty much deserted except for a few pockets here and there of scroungers like ourselves. People would come into town when they needed something but preferred the safety of being away from everyone else. With no law and order any longer, everyone and everything was fair game. Murder happened, frequently. Could even be something trivial, like a cart, or even a fancy jewel someone saw and took a liking to. To us, the 'wilderness' is not wild, but the city was. Water we could get easier outside of town, but we managed to find some canned goods still intact and grabbed those. All the TKs had to do was sling a few pebbles at anyone who even thought of coming near us to dissuade them.

Only one large road going south out of town towards Phoenix, so it was not hard to find the Apache encampment. Two braves met us, I don't remember their names, and escorted us in. They were amused by Ed having long black hair and such yellow skin, but otherwise looking very much the white man. Surprised they had not seen a yellow jacket before. They saw him as the Apache equivalent of a mutant I suspect. They stared at him a lot to see what he would do under different circumstances, till he got up and cut his arm on purpose to prove to them he was not a

spirit, just a man. They were very impressed by this, thinking that all white men were wimps and gave him an eagle feather to wear in his hat.

The most important one we met and the one we should have listened to was their medicine man, Henry Soft Hide. Henry warned us that there was something very strange going on in Phoenix. It made his skin crawl and stomach nauseous just to go near the place. He was held in high regard by the others in the tribe. Another indication that we should have stayed away. Unfortunately, we had all had our fill of natives who thought they knew more than we did and told them that we had no choice, that we already had arrangements to meet with the nest's leaders and intended to keep that promise. A matter of honor. Damn honor anyway.

They escorted us several kilometers outside of town and then returned to their camp. It took us less than a day in the car and with the TKs flying to get near. Everything had been stripped clean. No crops, no metal of any kind. Hinges were missing from doorways. It was like a massive scavenger hunt had gone on to remove it all. There was a line we seemed to pass. I suspect now this was done to discourage anyone even wanting to come near them. One side we would have been safe, on the other dead. But nothing told us where the line was. Birds still sung, lizards still crawled. A few kilometers from our goal, I yelled for us to stop.

There in the road were three full grown rattlesnakes and ten babies all sunning themselves. We stopped the car and I got out to sit on the ground to listen to them. All but one of the babies scattered. One adult slowly made it to the side of the road and rolled over and played dead. I have never seen a rattlesnake play dead. The one baby left I noticed had a crooked tail. When they were sure we would not leave, they all went off the side of the road to let us pass, but now all the rattles were going at full strength. I got back into the car and we proceeded.

The others all wanted to know what that was all about, but I really did not know at the time. Still, even I was troubled now. We progressed more slowly, keeping an eye out for trouble. Angpetu staid near us floating only a few feet off the ground. The other nine went on ahead to scout.

Pushy Paws felt it first. Just like the medicine man, she said that her skin felt funny and stomach was upset. Power of suggestion? All of a sudden we hear screams as the other nine TKs fall from the sky to their deaths. Angpetu falls from a more modest height and only breaks her arm and leg, as you saw. Pushy Paws falls over in her seat in a faint. There was nothing we could do about the other nine as they were just too far up when it happened, but we got Angpetu in the car and wrapped her for

shock. Ed turned the car around as fast as he could and headed back the way we came. I got up over the back and managed to get the trailer unhitched to lighten the load. That nearly doubled our speed, but without fuel we would not get that far. We got past the effect whatever it was and Pushy Paws came around, but still weak. Angpetu was in a lot of pain and kept coming and going.

The car ran out of fuel about the same time the sun set. We pushed it into some brush so as not to be so visible. We could see lights on the horizon south of us. Someone was coming out to see what they had done. Pushy Paws could walk some and being native trained knew how to walk without living a trail. Ed carried Angpetu on his back, but we would have to come up with something else soon. Ed still had his pack, which saved our lives. Inside he had emergency rations and special thin blankets that were as good as our thick ones, but of course could not be made any more. Big problem was that they were highly reflective, so we were ok at night if they did not do a fly over, but impossible during the day. We camped as soon as we were out of range of the road. We heard them pass by in the night.

We set and restrained Angpetu's leg as best we could, but there was a lot of swelling now and not sure how well we did. They were clean breaks, but none of us were medical trained. Morning was very cold with clouds in the sky. Normally I would have stopped to admire their shapes and thank Great Spirit for another glorious day, but today I was cold and for the first time since childhood, genuinely worried for our lives. Pushy Paws was beginning to stumble more. Hard for even me at fifty seven, much less her seventy one years. Ed was also having a hard time carrying Angpetu. When we came on a ranch house we stopped. Nothing left in the house, but relief from the cold. We all fell asleep on the carpeted floor.

I awoke to Pushy Paws screaming her head off saying no over and over in Hopi. Then she just up and died. Just like that. One moment she was screaming and then she was dead. Ed and I were in total shock. A few hours later she was stone cold, so it was not just our imaginations brought on by fatigue. We buried her outside in what must have been the vegetable garden. There were already two other graves there. Probably fire plague victims. No other bodies, but then the animals may have dragged the survivor away, if he or she died here too.

Ed was pretty handy with tools, being largely self sufficient and on his own most of his life. He managed to rig together a tricycle of sorts that we could lay Angpetu in and cover her. Still we decided to risk staying

there for a few days to let Angpetu get some strength back. She was eating again at least, but could not put any weight on her arm or leg. Since both breaks were on her right side, I managed to work out a crutch of sorts by sawing off a broom handle, making a T at the top and covering it with towels. Even Ed was impressed. Not in his league, but not helpless either.

On the fourth day after the attack, we left the house and Pushy Paws to her rest. It took us a week to reach Flagstaff. What had taken only a few hours in the car, but going over land walking was not that easy. Nearer to Flagstaff we decided since we had not seen any sign of nesters or anyone else we could risk the roads again. Angpetu was awake more and could scan a hundred meters anyway and kept us safe from people hidden in ambush. We also let her have a hand full of pebbles on her lap which she had to use on more than one occasion when she thought she scanned something. Mostly just animals, but once we were sure there had been someone there.

When we reached the place where the Apache encampment had been, everyone was gone. They did a pretty good job of erasing traces that they had been there, but Angpetu could scan beneath the ground as well and found their garbage pit covered over. We knew we needed to get back here, so headed out for Winslow and Ed's camper. I really liked Pushy Paws and was beginning to miss her a lot, in spite of our being concerned about staying alive. We had spend many hours awake at night trading stories and events from our lives. Her Hollywood times were fascinating.

Just as we were reaching Winslow and the cliff dweller's a jet comes out of no where screaming down the highway. We all duck for cover and manage to dump poor Angpetu at the same time, but she was getting stronger and managed to use her TK to prevent any harm. We abandoned her tricycle and made our way through the brush and trees to the parking lot to all pile into the camper as Ed got it open. We did not wait for the wings to fold up completely as we heard the jet coming back for another run. Most of the solar cells were ripped off against the trees on the side of the road. We heard the jet crash and decided to hide out till things calmed down. We ducked into a well shaded area and turned everything off. The insulation from the camper itself should mask our IR signatures if they decided to look for us that way. We really did not know what was going on.

The next day we made it here.

Now you need to tell me what is going on. How is Angpetu doing? What happened to the others?"

Susan comes in and fills us in. “Angpetu is fine. Good thing that Yingui had us all memorize the lidocaine formula. She will be walking around tomorrow. Remember when Yingui fixed Monique up?”

*Pushy Paws is dead.*

She pauses out of respect then asks, “How will Daniel get back then?”

*I don't know. Maybe the 'thn will do it on their own if we don't show up for him soon. If Br'thn is found, maybe she will know. No more planes or other activity?*

“Not yet, but I can only scan out a 1000 km. They can cover that distance in less than an hour easily.”

*Nothing from the others either. Too quiet. You don't just send two jets in loaded with killer bots and then nothing. They are up to something.*

“They are testing us to see what we will do. They want to know if we will come after them now. Never fight an enemy in a location of their choosing. Wait for them to come to your perfect location.”

*We don't have one!*

“I know, but anything has got to be better than their choice at least.”

We head back to the council tent to see if they have come up with anything. Running Snake and Edwin have already gone in.

## **Two Weeks Later**

I am going to go nuts if this keeps up. The Chinese column has stopped in the middle of the Nevada desert and is not moving towards either Utah or us. Out of range of a TK5, but not a six. It is almost like they think they know our range. Supply trucks or something we can see on the sat images go back and forth, but they do not appear to be building anything. We have a TK6 on them most of the time, but we have things to do too. It is entirely possible they are watching us, but what can you do?

We have already had two snow storms and a light blanket covers everything. Each year it seemed to be getting later and later according to the locals. Thanks to global warming. The Chinese have been going over highway 50 to get over the Sierra's, soon that will become increasingly difficult. They have a lot of people though. Estimates place California's population at over two million people spread out over the farm lands, if you count survivors and new immigrants. A lot more left behind. What do you do with two million people in the winter with no crops to attend? Turn them all into soldiers? Now I am starting to get paranoid. Yingui

talked about anxiety attacks, is this how they start? I need to do something.

I decide that going for a walk would be good. I hear too many thoughts and though distance does not help much, I need it anyway. Well, ok, using TK is allowed, at least here, till the Chinese take over. Sigh. Just go already even! I go over the edge of third mesa and head out to the southwest, away from the Hopi and Navajo, away from the cities and towns and all the human thoughts that whisper in my head. I find a quiet spot and settle in. I bought a blanket out, some water, food. I can bubble against the wind and cold. I greet the new sun facing east. This is one native tradition I really like. Though not as religious about it as some, I do miss it when I miss it. Of course I am not alone and many come to see this strange human who does not try to eat them and hears their thoughts and concerns. They come to the edge of the blanket and no further. The sun rises and the tears fall.

“Koyongo wake up! We need your help. Please wake up.” [Koyongo is turkey in Hopi] I must be dreaming, but when I open my eyes I see a very dirty thin pair of teenagers looking and dressed like natives and a thin gray cat peering down at my face. The cat licks my face.

*Monkey bring food?*

*Ghost? You sure don't look like Ghost? You're thin! What happened? All of you are so thin.*

*Food now! Safe Place gone.* [Safe Place is Ghost's name for Yingui]

*Sorry Ghost.* I break open my pack and hand him some soy sticks. His purring is incredible. I hand some to the other two as well as my water bottle.

*Qaletaq, are you going to introduce your friend? And what the hell are you doing here in the middle of no where? Where is Yingui and Br'thn? What is going on? Now!*

“I believe that Yingui is dead. Br'thn is in my pack, only Ghost can touch her she says. She told me that she had to go into a state of stasis or something like that and we were to get her to the gateway any way we could. So here we are. This is Lisa, the daughter of the one who worked with Yingui. His name was George.”

*Find Great Lap.* Ghost is looking straight at me. His name for Pushy Paws.

*There is no gateway any longer. Pushy Paws is dead as well. They may be related. Sorry Ghost. You need to tell me what happened. Do you and Lisa know she is likely TK as well? Not the same as us, but definitely enhanced.*

“We have suspected it. We need to tell the others as soon as possible. No more shifting.”

*Dimension shifting? We hardly ever do that as there has not been a need, at least not till recently. Why do they have to stop?*

“Br'thn said so. Very dangerous. It is how Yingui died.”

*I had better warn the others then and I can wait till we are all together at the mesa for your story.*

I concentrate and send out a message to the others not to DS and to come home ASAP, Br'thn is in trouble and Yingui is likely dead.

*We had better go as well. Finish the food and water, there is more at the mesa.* I pack the blanket and we all arrange ourselves for a bubble flight. Qaletaq explains to Lisa, who has apparently experienced DS but not TK flight. I will not be as fast with three people and a cat, but we will get home in a few hours. Glad I had decided not to do my picnic further out.

# Hotevilla

By the time we arrived, all the rest were already present. Hey, you guys could have come and gotten us. We have all developed a different sense of time, but this is ridiculous.

*I hope that you have given Lisa some training on what it is like here. I don't want her embarrassing herself, understand me. I give him the evil eye, but I doubt after what they have been through it will have any effect any longer. This also means that you will be treated as adults and will have to stand up before the council to give your story.*

Gulp. Yep. That old public speaking thing again. This will be harder on Lisa as she does not know what to expect.

*Time to go in. All ready?*

## **Ghost of a tale**

Lisa starts, “Hi, my name is Lisa. I am going to take a chance here that you are not frightened by people who are different.” This gets a good laugh actually. If you were to look over the audience you would see every race of human kind represented and most of the western tribes were wearing traditional or ranch wear. Add to that the TKs interpretation of native art mixed with punk, rock, sci-fi, crash, wacked and imaginations run wild and you get the idea.

“Apparently I am some sort of TK, a new kind. I know when bad things are going to happen before they do. Koyongo says this is called precognition.” Very good, took me longer than that to learn my name in Hopi.

“I was always warning my father before he would have run into something or something would run into him. Sometimes all it took was to distract him for a minute and the time line would change and he would never know. Weird stuff was frowned on by the Chinese. Anyone who survived the plague was suspect and kept under observation. I soon learned to use my talent to avoid situations that would expose me. Because 'PC' was different than they had seen before their sensors did not pick me up I guess. Because I was med tech though, I learned how to tweak the psiotic sensors to prove to myself that I was not just imagining it. By the way, I am a pear by your standards. Hope that does not offend anyone. I really have no desire to hurt anyone, saps, native or whatever.



Guess that makes me different too.” Another chuckle. If this was not so serious, she would go far.

“I was in the hall the day they arrived at New Atherton. I will admit that I was not impressed. An old man, a young man my age and a very rotund cat.” *Meow!*

“Well, you were at the time Ghost. Anyway, they came into the hall very cool. The hall was set up to intimidate, from the 'throne' for the Regent being higher. Dragons everywhere. Armed guards all around. Low lighting. Subsonics meant to put people on edge who did not know. Lots of lackeys in black ques, myself included. The Regent really liked putting us formerly well off in that position. He never let a chance go by to remind us of the reversal in fortunes. He believed in ruling the old fashioned way, by fear. We all learned to fully prostrate ourselves till he gave the word. Failure to obey was very nasty. Usually a week in solitary, loss of position for months, etc.

My father was part of the team that came up with psiotic weapons. We thought they were to be used for defensive purposes, but I suppose we should have guessed he would try an offensive tactic. The entire room was a dampening field, DS projectiles arrayed throughout. They came in and did not prostrate themselves like the Major did. Merely bowed politely. Pleasantries were exchanged and the old man, called silver ghost in Chinese handed over a gift to the Regent. Exchanging gifts was common among equals, but with the Regent it always went one way. The gift was a special sensor embedded in a moon rock apparently. The weird thing was, was that it only sensed artificial psiotic fields. The idea was that our sensors could not distinguish and therefore this demonstrated his ability to produce tech in advance of ours. Moon rock was a good touch. They went crazy later trying to determine if the moon rock came from a collection here or gotten post plague. It was post plague.

He then proceeded to inform the Regent that the dampening fields and DS projectiles were no longer operative and neither was the hydrogen bomb below us. That got the Regent really good. He was not aware of the bomb. Meant that there was someone higher than him watching him. He was not amused. When the lackey came back confirming the explosive that should have gone off, he was really pissed. Then Yingui just walked out like it was no bodies business. He was not dismissed, he decided and did it. The doors were locked but they opened for him. The Major disappeared with a yelp. I may have the order wrong, but Yingui assured the Regent that everything was fine and no body was hurt.

I heard later that both were found later washing dishes in the kitchen with the cats on the counters. This is not the way that the most powerful human in existence was expected to behave. Something about working for their dinner. They never expected a hand out. That night they moved into our quarters. We were instructed to keep an eye on them. I picked Qaletaga, figuring I could relate to him better. Though we were very nervous at first, they soon convinced us that they were really just ordinary folk.” Another laugh and a smile from Lisa as well.

Qaletaga gets up and continues, “Lisa and I learned of each other's cultures.” Hoots and sneers this time. “While the old ones worked on their tech. By the way, Yingui noticed right off there was something different about Lisa, but kept quiet to everyone but me. Ghost knew too of course. They continued their research and I learned every inch of...” He paused for effect, “...of New Atherton. They have much tech we had never heard of on the reservation. Most of the original people were gone because plague of course, but now the place was busy again with people gathered from California and specialists from China. They were generally very suspicious of anything TK, but did not worry too much about me with Yingui and Ghost wondering around. Ghost kept raiding garbage cans and complaining that 'stupid monkeys were wasting perfectly good food'. George and his assistant Harsha kept Yingui pretty distracted though. And who could not love Ghost and his nephew, Goldie, a kitten conceived in Merced by Marm and brought to New Atherton to learn about DSing. George, Harsha and Yingui were working on a way to produce electric power using psiotic devices. It was reasoned that if the Chinese had a power supply of their own they would not need to invade the rest of the UNA to take the fuel corn and other power supplies.

It took weeks, but eventually they succeeded after a fashion. Their device would not power a city but could be used to power individual devices. They made three sizes, the smallest to power small appliances like handies, small computers, etc., medium to power cars and carts and finally large, which was enough to handle an entire apartment. Of course they did not need any of this in New Atherton itself, but imagine how useful it would be in the rural sections of either California or China or here. It was such a hard push to get the devices working that it was decided that we all deserved a break to celebrate. We had been doing our morning greeting of the sun at Yingui's insistence and gradually the rest joined us. He used DS to place us at different locations each time. So, when we disappeared at the right time to do the morning greeting, the guards thought nothing of it.

I am not sure what the big deal about this 'point of the wolves' was. We never saw a single wolf. But the ocean was incredible. It was like a lake with no end with waves as high as a man. The water was salty though and not possible to drink. The place was covered with strange gray and white birds called seagulls that I am told are not good to eat unless one is starving. Crows were plentiful also. Ghost and Goldie found a rat to play with just before Lisa had an attack of some kind. It was just after the Holy One showed herself to say we had to go back because the guards were looking for us.

Everyone met at the beach to help take care of Lisa and it was decided that it would be better to take her back to the lab as no scan showed anything physically wrong with her. Yingui suspected something, but only said that her psiotic balance was off. Normally DS is a very easy way to get from one place to another. Almost no sensations except for a momentary blackness. This time was very different. I was holding onto Lisa, yet felt bumped from one side to another like a bad truck on a dirt road. Normally we hold our breath for the instant of transport, but this lasted so long that I passed out from not being able to breath.”

“I was the first to awaken. My father was unconscious near me and I tried to wake him up, but he only moaned and would not wake up. I was not too stable myself and had trouble rising. There was a large black thing in the center of the lab with smooth sides about the size of a coffin only more rounded. Qaletaqa was waking up on the other side of the lab. Harsha was starting to stir also. Finally my father started to wake up coughing. We were VERY lucky no one was hurt. Ghost had pushed a clear ball over to Qaletaqa. Goldie was with father. Yingui was missing. I had never been introduced to Br'thn and did not remember her telling us to go back. What made me faint was a feeling that this disaster was about to happen. When Qaletaqa picked up the ball, which was in fact Br'thn, she spoke to all of us. She said that she had to go into a sort of stasis mode to conserve energy. We were to do whatever was necessary to get her back to the gateway. Qaletaqa told me later what that meant.

My father came to some sort of decision. He told Qaletaqa and I to take Ghost and Br'thn to the gateway. He would deal with whatever happened here. Qaletaqa would not go without knowing what happened to Yingui. There was no sign of him, but there was this strange black shape. Harsha and father wheeled some psiotic bio sensing instruments over and told me to work the controls. Some of the equipment had been damaged by our landing, but we managed to adapt and get it working. This was a lab set up to do psiotic research, so this was not too difficult

for Harsha. Qaletaqa helped with the lifting, but not being trained with equipment could not do much else.

We started at one end, which turned out to be Yingui's feet and worked our way to the head end. No one said anything, but we were all sure this must be Yingui's body at least. It was alive, but just barely. When we got to the neck there was something that appeared to be coming out of it and extending beyond the black shape. The sensors themselves were preventing us from seeing what it was. Harsha and father then adjusted everything and moved the sensors back one meter. We all had to done protective clothing. Sort of like spacesuits. Qaletaqa did not like this at all. We placed the cats and Br'thn in a protective cage. Now Ghost was upset, but we explained to him that in moving the sensors this far away from the surface of the object we could be hurt if we did not take steps to protect everyone. Ghost held onto Br'thn and remained quiet.

They ran the sensors over the area where we had seen the structure go beyond the shape. What imaged was something truly horrible. Some kind of creature was attached to Yingui through some sort of hard tube. The creature was definitely alive and moving and about one meter in length. The easiest way to describe it would possibly to say it looked like a large tic. The weird thing was, was that there was nothing visible there. We could pass a hand through the image on the screen, seeing both the creature's and our psiotic images, but there was nothing physically there. How could we remove something that was not there?

Harsha had a theory. She said that Yingui had said that the early devices that she and father had made, they had called teleporters, but Yingui had corrected them saying that they were dimension shifters, not teleporters. What if this creature existed in a different dimension and the only reason we were able to see it at all was because of the psiotic energy it was sucking out of Yingui? Father then had the idea that maybe a psiotic dampening field might prevent the creature from feeding. So we all grabbed part of the shape and got it onto a gurney. We then wheeled it into a large dampening chamber. The best we could do was slow down the process. If we went too far we could kill Yingui, but this was not far enough to dislodge the creature or allow Yingui to wake up. We could see the creature was upset, but it was the best we could do.

At this point we heard pounding on the doors. Father insisted that Qaletaqa, Ghost and I leave at once. I know New Atherton better than the Chinese, having grown up here. I knew passages and service areas that only the servants knew about. Children are like that. We all knew ways to hide from grownups when we needed to. So I grabbed Qaletaqa's arm and

made him retrieve Ghost and Br'thn. I kissed my father goodbye. I knew those were guards outside the door, but I saw no way to prevent what would happen." There are tears in Lisa's eyes.

"I held Ghost, who held Br'thn. We ran down one corridor and the next. Sometimes seeing servants, most of the time not. In a few minutes we had reached the car pool area. We decided to take the one with the new experimental energy cell enhancement. Lisa would drive as she had the implants to do so. Ghost and Br'thn went to the back seat. It was a risk, but with no filling stations what could we do? The problem was that it had all kinds of warning labels and such all over it so no one else would mistakenly take it for a spin. I asked Lisa where they did maintenance here. She pointed over several stalls. It made sense that they would be near the work area, it was an experimental car. I grabbed some thick black grease and smeared it over the labels. Best I could do on short notice.

At the gate Lisa tried to convince them that she was just taking me out for a spin. They asked about Ghost and I explained that the cat was asking for fresh mice to eat. This clearly amused the guards, but they let us pass saying something about pears and their wacky priorities. This time I did not complain. I am also glad that George had insisted on a sports car instead of a delivery truck. They would never have believed that. Yingui had wanted something more practical, but George convinced him that they needed to know more about what the limits to the tech were. There would be plenty of time later for utility.

It was not as fast as TK or a plane, but we reached speeds of 200 kph in the open areas. As a TK1 I could not scan at all and warned Lisa to be careful, most roads were not passable any longer. She insisted she knew how to drive. We had several close calls before we settled down to a more modest 100 kph. Last thing we needed was to draw even more attention to ourselves anyway. We had to abandon the car south of Merced. Someone had blown the road to bits and there was no way for us to get the car around it without back tracking quite a ways. Lisa thought we could take back roads to circle around, but I insisted that this car was too visible and who ever took out the road would have thought of that anyway. We needed to find some other way."

"Qaletaq placed Br'thn in his pack. We still had on our packs from the Point Lobos trip, so we had some food and emergency gear that my father had insisted upon. I said a prayer of thanks for his foresight. I did not want to think about what happened to him when the guards broke in, saw everything and found us missing. They did not know about Br'thn,

but would suspect something by the mere fact that we ran. Anyway, we walked and walked and walked. Finally when the sun had set too low to see any longer were stopped at an abandoned farm house. Qaletaq had kept insisting that we drink lots of water, which made me pee like crazy. Hey I am a spoiled girl. I admit it. I liked clean bathrooms and toilet paper and NO BUGS. But when we reached the farm house, I was so exhausted that I just brushed the beetles and other creatures aside and collapsed on the first soft surface I could find.

My blisters had blisters when I woke the next morning and I could barely walk. Qaletaq had anticipated this and had placed a bowl of water to soak my feet in, some fresh socks and hiking boots that looked like they would fit me. I smelled something good coming from the kitchen and went to investigate. There was some kind of stew in a bowl on the table with a large spoon next to it. I did not wait, but dug in. Had an unusual taste, something like chicken, but I as so hungry I did not care. After I had my fill I slowly went looking for him. I was not going to be able to do much hiking today.

I heard some hammering and swearing coming from the barn, so hoped that was Qaletaq and not the current owner, if there was one. There were skins of some kind of scaled creature tacked out on the side of the barn to dry. I did not realize till later that this was what went into breakfast. Upon entering the barn and allowing my eyes to adjust to the light I saw Qaletaq half in the engine compartment of a very old beat up pickup truck. I sat back to watch and a few minutes later he emerged, slammed the hood down and started the engine. At first it was rough, but after warming up some it evened out some. Noisy though. Nothing like the electric motors in the sports car. Someone was going to be really pleased to get the sports car I am sure. Never runs out of fuel. This piece of junk however.... Hey, at least I don't have to walk.

He piled some hay and other farm looking stuff into the back and supplies in the front. Ghost decided that breakfast could be had in those hay bales and jumped in the back to sniff around. Br'thn was carefully wrapped in cloth and put into Qaletaq's pack. We were off. Besides the boots, Qaletaq had found me some clothing that made me look like a farmer's wife. I really had no choice, as my other clothes would make me stand out like a flashing sign. When we got on the highway of sorts he handed me some makeup and told me to cover my face and hands with it. It was brown in color, made for someone much darker than I was. The idea was to make me look anything other than a pear in saps clothing, to put it his way. yuck. I decided on my own that the que had to go as well

and cut it off with a knife. Not perfect, but if questioned I could claim I was just starting to grow one on orders from the Chinese. Most saps had short hair, so this might work. That and the fact that the Chinese were only starting to make it down this far.

When we reached Bakersfield, Qaletaga drove around till he found what he was looking for, a bar that served natives. He told me to keep quiet and he went inside. He came out a few minutes later with several men. He told me to get out of the car and I grabbed the packs. Ghost jumped out of the back. The men got into the truck and drove it off. I was confused, but Qaletaga explained that we were being sought by the Chinese authorities. They had found the sports car and had started to widen their search. An agent came in here yesterday asking about us. We needed to go the rest of the way using the network. When I asked what this was, he said that the tribes looked after each other, especially when authorities of any kind were after one of their own. It would not be easy though. Everyone expected us to pull our own weight. From now on we were under the network rules. We went when and where and how they said. Right now we were to walk out of town till picked up. Great. So much for my feet.

Fortunately we were picked up almost immediately. The man was in his forties I would guess, though with that much time in the sun it was hard to tell. He did not say anything, just gestured to get in the back. Qaletaga explained that the less each person knew the less they could 'accidentally' tell the Chinese later. Shit.”

“Our brothers the Kawaiisu brought us to the Mohave by way of trucks, donkey carts, walking and sometimes horseback. We slept in barns mostly, hidden under hay or behind bales or out in the open. We helped muck out stalls and round up sheep. Never did we reveal our mission, nor were we asked. I own a great debt to our brothers and sisters in the struggle. The Mohave brought us to the Yavapai who brought us to the Apache who led us to the edge of the Navajo. From there we walked. We had no further trouble with the Chinese. Nor do we know what happened to Yingui, though I believe he must be dead.”

“I agree. Trained to be a medical assistant and helping my father at times on the psiotic project had led me to believe that the parasite would eventually win. My guess based on what Br'thn told us, is that it is not safe to DS while these parasites are around. The last reading on the parasite showed that it was pregnant. By this time, they may have hatched or certainly be ready to. They do not appear to enter our dimensional space. It may be they can't anymore than we can stay for very long in

theirs. I am sad to hear of your loses, but I do not feel fear of the future here. For some reason this feels like home. My father is likely dead. All of my other relatives are gone. If you will have me, I agree to follow the ways and means of the UNA and place myself at your disposal, to help in anyway possible.”

“Lisa has proved herself to be a capable person. Not what you would expect from someone pear raised. She worked along side me and all the others without complaint, no matter how distasteful the task must have been to her. She has much to learn of our ways. I have started that instruction as best I could, but more instruction will be needed. I also ask that she be admitted and allowed to stay.”

An Elder rises, “Lisa, what have you learned.” He sits.

She hesitates and paces for a minute before answering.

“I was raised a pear. I admit it. I was afforded some of the luxuries of that station in life, though not all. There are levels of class in the pear hierarchy. We were near the bottom. We actually had jobs and worked for a living. But all the same, I never thought about where food came from, where energy, water, anything that was necessary for my life and comfort came from. Water was always clear and 18C for me. The temperature was always 20C for me. I have visited almost every major country on this planet, yet I can tell you nothing about the people who lived in any of them, not even here. I knew nothing of the 'saps' as you call them. I must have seen them, but do not recall. Till the plague, my life was very easy and safe.

I lost my mother, whom I loved as any would love their mother, to the plague while fleeing to China. Other relatives I know nothing about, though I assume they are dead.

On the ship to China, I faced death myself and saw death for the first time. I felt grief for the first time. It was nine months ago, but it seems like years.

Working with Yingui and Qaletaqa and now the journey this escape has entailed, I have seen where food comes from, where water comes from, where manure comes from and goes and am grateful for all three. I am ashamed of the life I formerly led, but I can claim only ignorance as an excuse, though I had access to the truth any time I wanted to look. I have experienced pain, grief, sunburn, frostbite, heat exhaustion, and blisters on places I did not know I had. This has been a journey for which there is no return path, but also one for which I would not hesitate to take again if I were given the choice to do so. I even like the taste of fried grasshopper and snake now.



Before I met Qaletaga, I had never seen a native. I still don't believe I have. For now I see only people.”

“Let me see your hands.”

She is not sure of the point of this, but complies. She carefully unwraps the bandages to reveal cuts, bruises, broken blisters and calluses. There was not a dissenting vote on her being accepted.

### **Now what?**

“We could try and resurrect Br'thn like we did the first time. True there are fewer of us, but together we may still have the necessary strength.”

“And if she sucks us all dry in the attempt, then we have nothing left to defend ourselves and the others with. We have to take care of the immediate threat first.”

“It will be no worse than if this whole TK thing had not happened.”

*Yes it will. We are being hunted because we are TK. These people around us will die because they are with us. Yingui said that the Chinese are not to leave California. They have. Was that an idle command, or did we mean it?*

“There is much we could do without harming anyone. Just taking out their tech would give them cause to return to California.”

“We are past first snow. Returning without benefit of tech would mean a death sentence for many.”

“Don't forget we are further handicapped by not being able to use DS.”

“Wrong. We can use DS, just not to transport TKs or ourselves. These are psiotic parasites from the description. They need a strong TK presence upon which to feed. A normal is not an inviting meal, nor is inanimate matter. We should of course test that to be sure.”

*Do the Chinese still believe in dragons and demons, ill omens and that sort of thing?*

“Ha, not that they would admit. They are a modern technological society you understand. But the Regent's hall was filled with images of them. They still burn joss sticks and have altars to the ancestors every where you look. They still burn paper money and images of food and other needs whenever there is a funeral. We were forced to attend whenever it was a person from the mainland, no matter how low their station. It was almost like they blamed us for the death. The Regent still

has a court astrologer on staff, though he claimed never to consult him and only kept him on for appearances. They still believe deep down.”

*Wonder how they would react to Apache and Navajo ghost warriors?*  
She grins.

“And Sioux. Hmm, Yingui taught us how to make virtual ears to hear with when we were scanning. They were just air held still, but what if we made use of the dust on the desert as well.”

“How is this not deception?”

“The 'thn had a way of looking at this. If the enemy was not your equal, but of lesser ability. You could only use what force was necessary to prevent harm to self and others. However if the opponent was of equal or greater ability, then you were allowed whatever means you had at your disposal.”

*So are we greater or lesser than their ability? They outnumber us, but they have nothing like a group of TK6s and others.*

“They have one clear advantage. They have no problems with killing. We can count coo only. So whatever we do we may not harm intentionally. I say that puts them way ahead of us. They can destroy the earth if necessary to stop us, whereas we cannot. We are fighting with one hand behind our backs.”

“But they know that. Surely Yingui told them they would not come to harm while in his presence.”

“And why do you think they attack now? It is no coincidence that this happened when Yingui was taken out by the parasite. But they do not know we all took or will keep that oath. The other braves have not taken the oath either remember.”

*What if we just DSed them out of harms way. For all practical purposes they are 'dead' from a strategic point of view. We could use the braves to act as prison guards.*

Many more ideas were discussed and then presented to the council. They had their own ideas as well. Together we had a chance.

## **Practice**

“Ok, they know we are ready and willing to take out any jet or vehicle that gets too close. They may suspect that those capable of doing this are limited in number. So we can suspect that they will come next from several angles at once and in large numbers. That is IF we wait for them to come. Taking out the roads between here and there will not help, as

most of this is desert and flat and hard enough to be passable even with roads. And with GPS3 units they will not get lost.

What we need to do is convince them that it is not worth it. That what they face is so horrible that no one would want to live here even with all of us gone. That is where the 'ghosts' come in. Those of you dressed as Kachinas will be the models for the Guardians to copy using the dust of the desert. Combined with glowing eyes and such we can expect quite a show. As soon as it is dark in a few minutes we will practice.

Snake team you are up next, so get ready."

One Kachina is paired with one Guardian. I provide the 'mental' effects. Since there is only one of me, we will have to use my talents carefully. I can become invisible to humans, but not to machines and I am not as able to defend myself. So, I will be paired with James and his Kachina for this exercise and we will be the last to go.

First up is Ron. He wants to get this over with and then learn from the others. From the waist down, except for the clothing they look more or less human. But the heads are something else again. His Kachina starts dancing near him so that he can scan, sense and see the likely movements. He concentrates and uses a swirl of dust to raise his figure from the desert floor into a figure about fifteen meters tall. We all decided that size was important for the distance work. His golem starts to dance, shedding sand and adding sand at the same time. Impressive. Not something I would want to meet on a cold night. The figure comes toward us, closer and closer till in a fit of rage it smashes its arms and head down on the people in the front row and disappears without a trace. A round of hoots and hollers are heard in recognition of a job well done.

Susan goes next. Her Kachina is started from several points of dust appearing and disappearing, almost natural looking at first, but becoming more and more solid and then not. Finally it assumes a very solid looking form. It turns and sees us, raises its hands and marches towards us at an every increasing rate, jumps up into the sky just as it reaches us, disappearing completely out of sight. People start to hoot when they hear something behind us and are startled by a figure laying down behind us with a head ten meters tall, crouching and blowing hot breath on us. Again it disappears without a trace. Excellent Susan!

We turn to face Rachael and she is gone. A wind picks up and people cover themselves with their blankets. The wind becomes a howl and a moan. More intense and louder till it is almost a scream. Then silence. Drums start. They pound out a simple heart beat, tha-thump, tha-thump. A flash and for a moment our eyes see three Kachinas standing still out in

the desert some distance away. The colors are spectacular, just like the dolls. Another flash and they are closer. A third flash and they are tens of meters away. The drums become louder. A fourth flash and one is right next to the person furthest out. When our eyes adjust, we see the person is gone. A fifth flash and one Kachina is standing next to three new people. They are gone as well. When the next flash comes people scream, but nothing is there. Then sudden and total silence. No wind, no sound. When people start to squirm wondering if it is over, the winds starts to howl again. Rachael announces from behind us, "And so on and so on. You get the idea. If you spread the episodes over several nights the tension will be even worse. No set pattern, except the wind and the drums before the flash a sighting of the Kachina and someone disappears." The crowd goes crazy and the disappeared come walking back to join the others.

Now James. He stands and grins. He bows to the others and leaves at high speed. A small light far away appears and zooms towards us flying erratically. Another and another appear. All slightly different in pale colors. Soon there are hundreds slowly making their way towards us. They reach us and fly around as if investigating everything, people, structures, plants, etc. They are only about one centimeter in diameter and very cute as they come centimeters from your nose as if looking at you. Finally someone sticks a finger out and one comes closer. They poke the light and there is a loud bang and they all go out at once, along with every light on the mesa. Silence. A strange scrapping sound is heard, coming closer and closer. Bugs, thousands of beetles, grasshoppers, centipedes and lots of flying things come up over the edge of the mesa. They crawl everywhere, all over the ground and us and then suddenly are gone. Quiet. A squeaking sound is heard that gets louder and louder till it is almost deafening. Rats! Thousands of rats come running as fast as their little legs can carry them. They run past us screaming. Again silence as the sound recedes behind us. A wolf howls, then another. Barely audible there is this incredibly low growl that shakes the earth itself. A serpent like shape of red and gold comes out of the low lands up towards us flowing around the cuts and bends of the mesa rock, appearing and disappearing. The howling stops, but the growl become more intense. It looks like a dragon now. The scales can be seen and it undulates across the sky getting closer and closer. It disappears below the edge of the mesa and then reappears right next to us, it's head breathing noxious fumes and glowing plumes of colored gas. It roars, "Leave now!" It raises it's head high into the sky and come down fast, biting off a huge chunk of the edge of the mesa in front of us, with deafening sounds of crunching rock. It

raises it's head again, "Leave now!" even louder than the first time. It raises it's head. The edge of the mesa is only meters away from the front of the group and they are visibly shaken. The head comes down and covers the people in front and then vanishes. The lights come back up. The mesa is intact, there is no evidence that anything at all ever happened.

There is total silence in the group. I am glad the children were not with us. They would be having nightmares for the rest of their lives. The silence continues. No one stirs.

"Boo!" James is behind us and we all jump as one. A few pass out. *I would have to say that was a success.*

"Yes, I think so. Though only a few fainted. Will have to try harder next time."

Rachael, Ron and Susan come up to him all demanding to know how he did it. "No TK6 could do all that!"

"I did nothing other than leave and return. The rest was Barb and your own imaginations. Ask around, what did the dragon say exactly?"

There is a murmuring in the crowd. Everyone heard it in their own language. If the Chinese had been here, they would have heard Chinese.

"Now my turn?" People look back at him shocked and horrified. If the direction continues it would only mean that Jame's turn would be the worst.

"Is that wise? They know we are not going to hurt anyone, but someone could die of fright if we are not careful."

"Don't worry. I will pass, but I want to say this. Think about what you have seen and how we can improve on it. Maybe by combining some of the methods. Having a few people actually going missing each night would make it very scary. They would soon not know what to believe and what not to. Remember, our imaginations are far worse than actual reality."

"I have been thinking. We have assumed that using Hopi 'demons' would be the best strategy, but maybe Chinese ones would be better? Or a mixture of different things from all traditions."

"Imps and snakes that go in and out of things, including people."

"Things that come to life, chairs, boxes that sprout legs and mouths and go about eating things."

*I think it might be important to leave some things changed. If they see it all as imaginary they will soon stop being frightened and even see it as entertainment. Remember they know some of what a TK can do.*

“Good point. Leave teeth marks on things. Have things go missing at random or just moved. A week of this with people gone missing and they will go nuts.”

“Especially if we target the leaders.”

## **Morning**

No clouds today, but still cold. Everyone gets out of bed in time to greet the sun. There is a feeling of optimism in the air after last night's practice session. It may be possible for us to pull this off. It will still depend on locals gathering intelligence though. That will be dangerous, but without some idea of what to target, we will be harassing at random and only be a nuisance instead of being effective. The Paiute near the Chinese camp will be the scouts. They can blend in with the local population or even ‘volunteer’ in the camps themselves. Walker River reservation is the closest with enough of the right kind of people willing to do the job. The Chinese have set up camp just north of Tonopah City and are avoiding Nellis Air force base because Armstrong Las Vegas has declared for our side, but only because they don't like the idea of China taking over, not because they suddenly like TKs or anything. Along with Armstrong Utah, they have been forwarding information to us about the Chinese movements and we have been letting them know what we learn. We can scan the camp, but without DSing in and out, we can't really make sense of what is going on. The old needle in a hay stack situation.

“Elders say we will have snow late this afternoon, so we need to batten down things in preparation.”

*Are you going to tell me how they know that?*

“Weather sats I assume.” He smiles at me and I roll my eyes and smile back.

Tents are not the best form of housing in a storm. Sure we can TK bubble it and keep the wind off, but it takes away from our concentration. It is back to the waiting game. When will they make their move? When do we get the go ahead to try the scare tactics? The rest of the team has been working on more details. Hope we don't really scare someone to death. I think we should start slow and work our way up. That way we can gage things and compensate.

We have cars, carts, horses and even an occasional bicycle coming and going all the time. Especially from here to Tuba City and back. So, one more coming up is no big deal. I went about my business. After breakfast we have yet another meeting. I wish we had better net access up

here. I could hide out there and at least feel like I was doing something useful.

“All guardians report to the elder's tent ASAP. All guardians report to the elder's tent ASAP.”

Now what? Only a couple of hundred meters away, so I take my time. The others are coming faster. We all pile in more or less at the same time. There are five elders gathered around a person covered in a blanket. After we settle ourselves the oldest elder asks us, “Have you met this woman before? If you will miss.” She drops the blanket. She is pretty messed up. Bruises, dirty, shivering with a slight fever and very hungry.

*She is the one Yingui and the rest of us rescued from the space station months and months ago.*

“We know her. We helped her get off of the space station New Hope. From reports from Br'thn she was very good to Yingui and Qaletaq in New Atherton.”

*I have asked Lisa and Qaletaq to join us. They will be here in a minute.*

“Did you ever notice that our Sauron and his obsession with smiggles is very similar to Tolkien's Lord of the Rings Sauron and the Gollum named Sméagol? I wonder if Sauron ever met Tolkien?”

“And what exactly Ron does that have to do with our present situation?”

“Nothing, just wondering.” We all roll our eyes. Nerds!

Lisa and Qaletaq enter and upon seeing her run up to her and hug her, which she returns. All three have tears in their eyes. They obviously never expected see other again.

“Mei Ying, how did you ever get here?”

“My story can wait. We are all in grave danger.”

“We have scans going constantly, plus reports from Utah and Las Vegas Armstrong facilities. Everything seems really quiet at the moment.”

“Las Vegas is not on your side. I don't know about Utah. The Las Vegas group shot me down when I told them I was trying to defect to the UNA. It was only because it was at night that I escaped.”

“So, that was you. They claimed that they lost a jet doing training runs. But this does not make sense, our scans match what they have told us in reports.”

“It is what they haven't told you that is important. They know you can scan, so of course they have to match. The Chinese have developed some very powerful anti-TK weapons. They have used the Phoenix Armstrong

unit and a group of free norms in Florida to test lower power versions of the TK disrupter and TK cannons respectively.”

“I wondered how the Florida group developed the tech so quickly.”

“Low power versions? Those low power versions killed a lot of people, including ten of our own and a hundred TK2s in Florida. How much more powerful are the high powered versions?”

“At least a factor of a hundred. I was working with Yingui, George and Harsha. I am sorry, but all but Harsha were dead when I was demoted to private and shipped to Tonopah to assist in the invasion. Once Yingui was declared dead is when everything went forward. Till then they were not sure they would win. I stole a jump jet in Tonopah and escaped. Demoting a person does not erase their knowledge of how to fly a plane.”

“We know the disrupter can take out at least a TK2, so a hundred times greater means at least a TK4, but that may all depend on how close a person is to the field. Do you know how they work?”

“No, but that is not why I am hear. The invasion is eminent. They have already set up the disrupter field around the mesa. Don’t scan for them. They will go off if any are disturbed now. The jets you meet from now on will have TK cannons on board. The parasite that got Yingui was pregnant. They are keeping the ten young alive by artificial psiotic means and they are growing. Really dumb, no more than insects really. But with ten fold increase at each generation, every 34 days, it will not be long before they have enough to wipe out all TK from the planet. And if one can kill a TK8 or 9, then all of you are easy prey. Once you are gone, they can keep the colony going as long as they need to insure that no more TKs are formed.

Also, if that were not enough, they are ready and willing to hit this place with tactical nukes. They have thousands. Just like they wore down Rachael in south San Jose, they will wear you down. One will eventually get through. They don’t need Arizona. No food and no fuel corn. The reason they got Las Vegas too. Except for the Colorado River, which they think they can avoid contaminating, they threatened to take out any Armstrong that did not cooperate.”

“Gee, isn’t this like taking out a harmless daisy with a sledge hammer. Way overkill. Why didn’t they just talk to us?”

“They don’t want to talk. They want to control. You would always be a treat to them, no matter how cooperative. Would you allow oppression of billions of people to go on un-challenged? No way. Therefore they have to take you out.”



*How did you get this information as a private and why are you here then?*

“I was not always a private and did I mention that I am not dumb. I was an astronaut. We have to be able repair all kinds of equipment in space, much less on earth. Not that hard to break into systems and ask questions. But it would be better to ask why there aren’t more here. As an astronaut, I lived to reach the planets and the stars. Pre-plague I was actually up for the first Mars mission. I want what is best for humankind. I don’t want to go back to feudal lords and peasants. The current Chinese attitude takes us backward, not forward at least for the former America. Some call it revenge for all that the US did to us during the cold war years.”

“But, I thought they were actually more capitalist than we were at our height?”

“No, it was never capitalism. It was always controlled. Remember taking over an empty continent is a little different. They are falling back to the tried and true method of total domination. Never trust Regent Hua. He only appears to be playing along. Yingui, George, Harsha and peripherally, myself, we working to make energy free. They actually succeeded in making powerpacks for small devices, cars and small buildings.”

“Yes, we heard. Lisa and Qaletaga told us they used a car powered this way to get part way here. It would have revolutionized the world.”

“But, you can’t control people, if they have that much freedom and independence. By making power centrally controlled, you can control the people who become dependent on it.”

“Ok, what do you expect us to do? With our best TKs gone, there is not much that the few of us left can do. We could scatter, but that would only buy us time, and I suspect not much of that.”

“They would still nuke this place, because they cooperated with you as an example to others. I am hoping that you can call for help. Yingui hinted that there were forces off planet that are watching.”

*Oh, I feel so DUMB! Of course! Stupid, stupid, stupid. We can’t GO to the galactic regional center, but we might be able to send a message! I can’t believe we did not think of it. I feel so stupid!*

“Well, none of us thought of it either, though I don’t follow how you would do this.”

*Here is what we have to do...I think....*

# TK ARRAY

“Qaletaga, you and Lisa go get Br'thn and be careful. Ghost you watch over them. We need you to make the final transfer. The rest of you round up every TK2 or above we have.”

“With their staffs!”

“Right, with staffs. Be quiet about it. No point in getting everyone upset if this does not work.”

*I need to get mine also. We all meet back here in five minutes.*

I run back to my tent. In a way if does not work we are all likely to be dead. The Chinese will sense something wrong and hit us with everything they have. I look around. I have nothing to show for this life. No material things and all the people left who would know of the good that I have done are in the same situation as me, right here with me. I wish Yingui was here. I would thank him for all that he tried to do. I wish I could have met Jesus with Susan and Rachael. But none of that matters now. A little mouse pops her head in to say hello. *You best be gone before this is over or Ghost will have you and your family for dinner.*

“Ok, Barb, this is your show. What do you want us to do?”

*Susan, you know how to arrange us and adjust the power of the array to even it out. I want you on point. Rachael, you go where Susan puts you but hold out till the last minute to keep an eye on the Tonopah group. I want no surprises.*

*Ok, The guardians are the center circle. Ghost, you sit in the center with Br'thn. Lisa and Qaletaga, I want you on the edge of the array. Do not participate directly. I want you up on that rise watching over all of us. Let Susan or I know if you think anything is wrong. Lisa we really need your talent on this one, so concentrate with everything you have. The rest of you, TK3s are the next circle and TK2s the last. TK1s sit this out, but be ready to join in if we need you. Let's move it people.*

Susan takes over, “More TK2s to the right please. Jeremy, move away from Tampali, she is distracting you. I know she is your sister, but we are all in this together. Our own desires are immaterial as of now. This is going to take a lot of fine tuning to get right with an array this big, so please be patient and do as you are told. This is not a game. The fate of the entire world may depend on this working. Let go of you egos. You can pick them up again if this works, and if it doesn't you won't need them.”

Lisa shouts out to us, “The pattern is wrong for sending the message. This way results in a huge buildup of power and a lot of people hurt. Think more like a broadcast array, not power array.”

Ron speaks up, “I think she is saying that the focus point is off. Let Br’thn be the transmitter with all of us being the lens or radio dish that projects the message outwards. Right now we are too focused on Br’thn.”

*Ron visualize what you had in mind and send it to Lisa, Susan and I.*

He concentrates and a new pattern emerges.

*OK, people staffs straight up in the air. No staff should be touching another staff.*

Lisa shouts again, “Not it either, now it is too weak to send the message.”

*Lisa send me a visual image of what you see working.*

*Ok, TK3s staffs straight up in the air. TK2s touch the bottom of the TK3 staffs and each other's staffs if you are further out. Guardians I need you to follow me higher in the air. Your staffs will touch Br’thn on my go as will the tip of mine pointing down to all of you.*

*Susan, are we lined up well?*

“I want to direct the TK1s into the array to fine tune this.” She points to the TK1s and has them fill in specific locations.

Rachael sounds a warning, “Something is happening with the disrupter array. It is starting to power up!”

Lisa yells at the top of her lungs before passing out, “Go now!”

*Guardians on my mark, touch Br’thn. Everyone start concentrating. Three, two, one, Mark!*

**QR’THN COME! QR’THN COME! QR’THN COME!**

The disrupters come on line and the TK1s and 2s drop out, but the message has been sent, if it can be at all.

*Guardians, take out the disrupters.* Their staffs are turned outwards and a series of explosions can be heard at some distance. A moment later the TK1s and 2s are starting to wake up.

“We probably only have a few minutes before they scramble their jets and come after us.”

*Br’thn seems to have recovered some, but is remaining quiet.* She is a meter off the ground now, on her own power. I pick up Ghost and thank him for his help. He has only had a few days to add more meat to his bones, so is still pretty thin. He starts purring at the prospect of warmth.

James, as our ‘war chief’, assumes the command, “We have to assume she knows how to take care of herself, but let’s stay here with her here

just in case. We need to be ready to defend ourselves and her when they come.”

“The storm is nearly here. Look over there, to the west, you can see rain or snow already falling.” The wind is picking up. “Maybe that will dissuade them some. Hate to fly in that stuff myself.”

“Only slow them a little. Everyone but the guardians take cover, OFF the mesa top. Best if you stay low to the ground in case some of the smaller stuff gets through.” People scatter. Evac drills have been practiced, so this is not as disorderly as it sounds. There have been many times in the past when this mesa was invaded, first by neighboring tribes and then the Spanish and lastly the Americans. It was the hustlers that finally did them in though.

“Jets coming in from Tonopah, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Nothing from Utah, so it looks like they did not succumb to the Chinese pressure. Shit, one jet is headed in the Salt Lake direction.”

“All it takes is one. Barb, alert them to the danger. That jet is carrying tachs.”

*Right. I concentrate. They are aware and have scrambled their jets as well. Asked what we did and who is Qr'thn. Seems everyone on the planet may have heard us.*

The Chinese certainly know something is up now. “Tell, them she is a dear friend.” *Right. I hope she understands the human definition of friend.*

### **First Arrival**

It was eerily quiet for the next ten minutes or so. We really had nothing to do but wait. If we started attacking the jets, all hell would likely break loose, yet we could not let them attack us. Until they fired they were just like everything else in the sky. No one owned the sky, the earth or the waters. It was only when they claimed them for their own did they break the UNA code. Technically we should have waited for them to drop the bots the last time, as they did in Salt Lake. So far not a word of communication, not even the decency of declaring war on us. Maybe we were beneath even worrying about in their minds, just vermin to be eliminated.

“Heads up. There are only three jets coming this way. Do not do anything till they fire. It may happen real quick. Rachael you have the left one, Susan the right, and Ron the center. I am backup and will be looking

for sneaky tricks. Barb inform the pilot that they have entered UNA airspace and should turn around immediately.”

They never like it when I talk in their heads. You could sense the jet veer off course slightly. But he is back on course. They don't know what happened to the first two jets that came here, only the wreckage. No point in telling him the other two are alive and well, as I am sure he would not believe me anyway.

Something hits us like a fist. A direct hit from a TK cannon. We are well shielded and nothing happens short of frayed nerves.

“If all three open up on us like that and they can fire the thing rapidly we are in trouble.”

*Something is happening above us James.* The other TKs had their heads outside their tents looking up. The planes are still too far away for them to sense or see in this weather.

*Not now Barb. Rachael watch out there is a live one coming in.*

*Got it boss.*

Another pulse hits us and Rachael temporarily loses the missile, *Got is again boss!*

*Just take it out, we don't need to save it. If that thing had hit the ground we would have been toast even from here.*

Suddenly all three jets are gone. No trace. Totally disappeared. Rachael's missile is gone as well. Ok, did they get DS down to the point where they can do that to their own jets? Why remove the bomb or did Rachael do it?

“Full scan 360 now! I want to know where they are.”

I grab James' shoulder and force him to look up. *Scan that for me please. You have a longer range.*

“Holy Shit!” You got that right. The storm had been getting worse. Rain and snow in a sort of slush had been falling. We did not see the lightening directly, but the clouds sort of glowed when it happened. But one lightening storm flash did not stop glowing. Slowly the clouds parted. There is one very small point of light very bright with twenty five or so creatures bubbled in a perfect circle coming down towards us. When she gets within range, I can sense the light is Qr'thn.

“The cavalry has come.”

“We don't think that way ourselves,” says Running Snake.

“Ops, sorry. Was not thinking.”

“You have so much to learn yet Badger.” But she is smiling.

They land. Qr'thn immediately goes to Br'thn and both of them disappear.

Daniel debubbles and we all rush to greet and hug him.

“Did you guys have to shout so loud? Half the galaxy must have heard your call. The ‘thn even want to know what you did. Could come in handy at some point.”

“Later. I see you brought some friends. Irvin and Ryxz I recognize.” James bows to the two. They respond, but not exactly a bow. No need to explain right now.

We proceed to bow to the others to give them honor as well.

“A few things have happened while you were gone.” Daniel lets Marm down who immediately goes to Ghost. They greet each other in the traditional way by sniffing each other’s butts. Marm is probably jealous of Ghost having had mouse more recently than he has. They both disappear.

*Hey guys! No DSing! You know the rules.*

Daniel looks confused, “Why not?”

“Daniel, Yingui is dead. Some kind of psiotic parasite that gets you when you DS through their space. Mei Ying, whom you will remember from New Hope, saw it on scans. Does not show up in our dimensional space at all. Pushy Paws is gone too, as well as nine other TK2s. The Chinese are raising the parasites to kill us. They also have a disrupter field that can take out at least a TK2 from several kilometers away.”

“And psiotic cannons of some sort that can take down a TK4 if they are close enough. The jet coming toward us was firing on us with one. Those jets were carrying tactical nukes. They intend to eliminate us from human history.” Rachael adds.

*Lisa come meet Daniel. He is a TK7 and a few years younger than Yingui was and one of the original TKs in our group.*

*Daniel this is Lisa. She helped Qaletaqa and Ghost bring Br’thn back to us after the parasite attacked Yingui.*

“There is something different about her. TK of some kind?”

“Sir, I am a PC1 or so I am told. A precog one. I sometimes sense things that are just about to happen. Usually bad things I am afraid.”

“She helped us align the array to contact Qr’thn. Rachael and I have also met someone rather special the rest of you will want to meet, if this all works out.”

“Any hints or do I have to guess.” Susan crosses herself and grins.

“NO WAY!” Both she and Rachael are grinning now. “How come he is not here helping?”

“He would really be of little use. He is totally unskilled in the ways of war. He is the kindest gentlest person you could imagine, very charismatic. We almost did not come back.”

“Ah hum. I think we have more important things to worry about. There will be more jets coming soon or just plain old fashioned hypersonic missiles. We should consult with the elders. At least an evacuation of Hotevilla is in order.”

“And I think Marm's and my ‘friends’ and I should pay a visit to leader of the Chinese group. Oh, at least three of our guests are Marm’s doing. He is actually making a pretty good diplomat, though I would have thought that Ghost would be better, as he would eat almost anything in a social occasion.”

“Meow!” We all laugh.

“That won’t do any good.” Mei Ying pipes up. “They did not believe Yingui when he showed them all up. Why do you think they will believe you and a bunch of TKs in what appear to be costumes?”

“They are not costumes, I assure you. How would you fit a man into K!’s body for instance.” A sort of slime mold type creature splits into two and reforms, finally taking the form of Daniel smiling just to tease him. “Cute K!, real cute. Don’t forget that I am the weakest one here. Eighteen are all TK8s like Yingui was and the rest TK9s, the highest a fluidic can achieve.”

“And all of you can be taken out by the parasites. They may have over a hundred or more of them now. If they have figured out how to bring them into our space, you are all toast as soon as they find you. You will not even need to DS to be caught. I don't see your precious 'thn helping now either.”

Daniel smiles. “No one tells an adult 'thn what to do. They have their own agenda and time frame, but I would not count them out.”

Lisa asks, “I can’t help but notice that some of your friends look like Kachinas without the human bottom part. Are you sure they have not visited here before.”

*She’s right. Ryxz, have any of your people been here before? You look just like the Kachina we were practicing with the other night. Maybe they influenced the Hopi a thousand years ago.*

*Possible. Much exploring, this species does. First time this one however.*

“Practicing?”

“We had this crazy idea that we could ah, influence, their decision to not attack with some special effects intended to scare them a little.”

“Might still work, only this time it will not be illusion. No more New Jerusalem.” He pauses, “Yillg has the ‘Regent’ spotted in a hall of some sort in New Atherton. I assume he is the one who wears black and red, whose name means something like Black Dragon Flower? Funny name.”

“Not a funny person. Be VERY careful. He is sneaky to say the least. You should know they also have DS projectiles that can be set to poison you from some distance away.”

“K!, you have my permission to eat this Regent one. Sounds slimy enough to go down nicely.” K! forms a laugh in his Daniel imitation. I think they have been around Daniel too much.

Marm and Ghost go up to one of the really nasty looking ones. It has razor sharp spikes all over its surface of armor like chitin. The poison dripping off of them is something I don’t recognize with my limited TK scanning ability. No idea if it would work on humans or not though. Very different ecology. Looks like the three of them are talking using TP.

Daniel notices me watching them. “That is a cat like predator that Marm has befriended. You should see it in action.”

*It?*

“It is from a neuter warrior class.”

*I hope you intend to follow the vows we took, no killing. So far we have avoided it believe it or not. Hasn’t been easy though.*

“I would imagine not. I will stick to the vows, but I can hardly expect our new friends to do so, if they are attacked, now can we?” His grin is evil. Doesn’t help that K! is still copying him.

I shudder at the thought. I can still visualize the sight of Yingui being torn apart by Sauron. This would be much worse.

“I want to go with you.”

“Mei Ying, you have no TK ability at all. You would only serve to distract us while we attempted to protect you.”

“Don’t then. I will take my chances. I should have died many times over since this whole thing began. Besides I know Regent Hua better than anyone here.”

*Shit Mei Ying, HE raped you too?*

“You had no right to read that thought.” One pissed astronaut.

*I have every right when the future of humankind is at stake. And I have also been 'taught' this way.*

“All right, then I will put it this way. Think of how ‘distracted’ Regent Hua is going to be when I walk in the room ahead of all of you, just like I introduced Yingui the first time, only this time, no bowing.”

Daniel has the evil grin again.



“We want to go then too.”

“No, Qr'thn will be coming back. You are needed here to receive her and bring her up to date on what is going on. Barb. I want you in constant contact with me. Here is what I want the rest of you to do.” He proceeds to inform them of their part of his plan. Does not make sense to me, at least not yet.

# New Atherton

Regent Hua and his advisers are consulting a wall screen of the situation.

“I want answers now! Three jets do not disappear on their own. They only have TK6s left. They cannot DS a jet going over 1000 kph.”

“There was some disturbance in the sky above the mesa. It showed up on phase scan radar from the satellite, but then disappeared. The disrupters are out also.”

“Wasn't there redundancy built in?”

“The backups are gone as well.”

“You know what happens to people who fail me!”

“Yeh, but who are you going to get to do your work next? The rest of the scientists are all dead. The cooks certainly can't do it. You still need us as well.”

“I want that one in chains. He lives, but not comfortably. Now, any other ‘complaints’?”

“I have one. You are a slime ball of the worst possible kind and need to step down and let humans rule here instead, no offense to K!” In walks Major Mei Ying in full military gear, immaculately dressed and in perfect health. Thanks to the TK healings. She was right, the look on his face was priceless, but though he quickly recovers, the others have seen as well. Not that strong a leader after all. A chink has shown itself in the armor.

“You look well Major. Didn't I make you a private and send you to the front.”

“You did. Good memory Hua. I was having so much fun though that I thought it would be awful if I did not share it with you. So, I switched sides and brought the front to you. Well, not really. I was really on their side all along, just did not realize it.” Right on cue, Daniel and the others phase shift through the doors without opening them. A TK8 thing, so Daniel has to be helped in this part of the entrance, but it comes off flawlessly. If you thought Hua's expression was good when Mei entered, you should see this one. Daniel has his staff and leads the other twenty four. Some are bubbled because our air does not agree with them. Just as well, we would not want anyone to lose their lunch.

Daniel comes to the front, “I don't believe I have had the disgusting honor your sliminess. I am Daniel, a mere TK7 and the only one in this room bound by the do not kill oath. If you do not believe me, try

something on any one of our guests. I assure you these are not fakes, costumes or illusions of any kind as I am still bound by the do not lie vow as well.”

Marm growls. There is a stuffed cat on the arm of the throne. It is Goldie. The Regent makes a minute gesture and a sword bearing thug goes for Marm's favorite 'standing' next to him.

“Oh, bad choice Hua.” The alien does not move till the swordsman is a micron from itself. With incredible speed and flashes of red, the swordsman is sliced to ribbons. There is little but hamburger left of him. Even bones are unrecognizable. Surprisingly, blood is minimal till it starts oozing out of the pile of meat.

My turn. I phase shift through the door and enter the room. Even Mei Ying is taken back this time. “Ah, your bulliness. You have not changed a bit. Still a real stinker I see. Forcing others to do your dirty work and then paying the price.”

“But, you're dead! I cut into your corpse myself. I held your dead heart in my hand. You're dead!” There are tears in Mei's eyes and her hand rises to cover her mouth, but then she lowers it to show the biggest smile.

“I am impressed that with your primitive means you were finally able to get into the container. Took you long enough though.”

Another gesture. Doors open up in the walls, but nothing appears to come out. Suddenly there are flashes of light. At each flash a small, 20 cm tick like parasite is revealed and then destroyed near the 'neck' of each TK in the room. Black ash falls to the ground near each TK. This goes on for nearly a minute till the supply of parasites is gone.

Explosions and muffled screams are heard in adjacent rooms. An aid comes running in out of breath, bows and then runs up to the Regent.

I lower my cowl and reveal a plate made the of the very high atomic number substance the 'thn used in their regional center, wrapped around my neck. I tap the plate. “Your pets have been destroyed and we are fully protected should you find any more. We are free to go anywhere we want. You will find that your psiotic cannons won't work either your putridness. Your damping fields are ineffective and the DS projectors are out, as in the first visit. And no, there is no bomb to rid you of me either this time.

You have met some of our friends, now it is time you met OUR masters. I would HIGHLY recommend you bow to them, because unlike your ugliness, they do have the means to enforce it.”

First Br'thn, then Qr'thn and then nine other 'thn enter glowing. We all bow, even the visitors to our world. Hua is the last to bow, defiant to the end.

Br'thn speaks, ***You have one hour to vacate New Atherton. Any action taken on any sentient being here or outside California in retaliation will be taken as an act of war as you understand it.***

Qr'thn speaks, ***You are to dismantle any and all anti-psiotic weapons you have world wide. We will know if you fail to perform this task. You have ten days. You are to dismantle all weapons of mass destruction world wide in one year. All of your troops and other people are to be withdrawn to the west of what you call the Sierra Nevada mountain range within three days.***

“What is your definition of a weapon of mass destruction?”

***Failure to do any of these edicts will result in all metals being removed from their current form.***

“I am sorry what does that last mean?”

“I will demonstrate.” The throne he is sitting on dissolves and he falls to the floor in a puddle of liquid metal at room temperature. He passes his hand through it amazed. The various metals are mixing together producing swirling patterns.

“The metal will re-solidify in a moment.” He gets up off of the puddle.

“How do I know you can do this to the entire planet? And how do you expect me to convince Beijing?”

“In one hour New Atherton will suffer the same fate as your chair. It is not I who will do it.”

“Why are you doing this to us?”

As a chorus the 'thn answer him, ***You were given multiple opportunities to cooperate. No hand was ever raised against you, yet you killed ten TKs on a peace mission and many others without provocation. You could have even chosen to sit this one out and remain neutral. Instead you chose a path of fear and aggression against the innocent. Further, by purposely developing the anti-psiotic weapons you threatened the 'thn. Just like the psiotic parasites were destroyed for threatening the 'thn, so you will be restrained. Being 'sentient', in the loosest interpretation of the word, you are allowed to live for now. Further acts of aggression will be dealt with accordingly, up to and including removal of all life from this planet.***

“They can do that? Those little balls?”

“Each one of those ‘little balls’ is at least a TK9, most are 10 to 12, depending on age and maturity. There are several hundred thousand ‘thn that could be here in a moment if necessary. They have the ability to totally remove this planet from ever having existed. The only thing we really have going for us, is that being so long lived, they are patient.”

We leave using DS to go back to Hotevilla. In one hour New Atherton collapses without the metal in place to hold it all together and being underground, below sea level and weakened, the waters seep in. Three people die for their failure to get out in time; probably fortune hunters trying to gain one last treasure. The ‘thn had removed them once along with several people locked up in cells in the basement, but they returned immediately. The ‘thn did not repeat the removal process. Future archaeologists would find a large solid mass of metal at the bottom of a sink hole that was once a city for the richest of the rich.

“Daniel, I have a bone to pick with you. When Qr’tbn said a suitable mass would be needed for my new form to be made from, did you have to insist the rest of the group provide horse shit?”

“They were all out of bull shit.” He grins and so does K! next to him. We all crack up.

# CONVERGENCE

## San Francisco

“They did it just like they said they would. New Atherton has been destroyed. It was amazing just how quiet it was. Not an explosion, just a gradual implosion. The seawater coming in muffled a lot of the sound.”

“I want those TKs!”

“Regent, they can destroy entire cities with a thought.”

“So can I and I think it is about time I started. I want the mesa hit with everything we have.”

No one moves.

“Now!”

Still no one moves.

“It is over Hua. Don't make this any more embarrassing that it already is. Beijing has decided to replace you.”

“Don't talk to me like that. I will have your head! I AM THE Regent! Who challenges me? Who would dare?”

The others shake their heads and leave, closing the door behind them. No one has any power, except that which is given them.

This is not to say that Beijing believed everything they were told, all powerful spheres and dissolving metals, aliens from outer space, but it was clear even to them that Hua had disgraced them. The iron fist approach had failed. It was time for a different way to the same end. But the clock was ticking.

# Washington DC

“Mr. President, here is the current situation as we understand it. The Chinese have pulled back to the west of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. We don't know if this is just because of the winter weather or if this is permanent. Armstrong facilities in Nevada and Arizona have been locked down and evacuated, they are not responding to coms. Utah and Idaho joined up with a native American group calling itself the UNA, short for United Native Americans. They accept anyone currently in their range, no questions asked, as long as they agree to their leadership. Not sure yet what that means. Talk of strange high level TKs having some sort of influence. We have no evidence of anyone above a level three and all three of those in our sphere of influence are accounted for. A joke really. They have only two Armstrongs on their side and the nukes have been deactivated from here. At most they have a couple of thousand troops with small arms and a few planes. The Montana nest never woke up or they evacuated, so we deactivated them as well.

Canada is largely a wilderness again with the cities being abandoned. Mexico was not hit as hard and there is concern that some of the population will start to come north as their population grows again. The growing desert will be hard to cross, but they will find a way eventually. The border bots are down and there is really nothing to stop them once they harness the proper tech. It is interesting that there is no talk of any TKs in Latin America. We don't know if there aren't any or they have been exterminated.

Florida had a large concentration of TKs near Miami, but that community has apparently dispersed after locals developed some kind of weapon to use against them. A swamp cannot support a large population anyway, so it was bound to happen that people would have to leave at least the southern area of the state.

That leaves our current network. Most of the east coast to the Mississippi and from north of Florida to southern Canada are with us. That gives us adequate food and fuel for the current time, thanks to the corn belt. Without the intensive fishing, it is hoped that the coastal area will come back and help out.

What was formerly Louisiana and parts of Mississippi have decided to go it alone for now. They have made Cajun the official language and will only talk to us in that language. Fortunately we found someone who had

moved north and had survived the plague. A day laborer named François Dubre.”

“Make sure he stays on the payroll. Louisiana won't last. As soon as the next hurricane hits them, they will come running. The place is practically underwater now for heaven's sake. No great loss, from what I had seen in my travels. Not even enough tourism to keep them going. Chili peppers and bootleg whiskey. Nasty stuff.”

“Where do we stand militarily?”

“Pretty sweet. All of the Armstrongs in our area are on board.”

“All twenty six of them?”

“Yes sir, twenty three in the former USA and three in south eastern Canada. Once we had a majority, the rest came on board. Fear they would be hit by the others. The rest of the non Armstrong bases are a mess however. We should take steps to secure the weapons stored at each location as soon as possible. If it hadn't taken so long to get ourselves together again, we would have already taken care of it. Most are being left alone though, only the curious. The lockouts on the vehicles and firearms discourage them. So far only food has gone missing. Most people just want to stay alive and are concentrating on staying warm and dry and of course food and water.”

“Have to be pretty desperate to eat that stuff. Amazing what saps will eat. What are the threats from the outside?”

“The Chinese are the biggest and the strongest of course, over half their population survived. Pretty nasty measures I heard, scorched whole villages at the hint of plague. They did not take any chances after SARS3 and were ready. They were stronger before all this as well, so it comes as no surprise. We have had no contact with them, nor do they appear to be interested in us. We have satcom, but they do not answer our inquiries.”

“Keep trying. Keep your enemies closer they say. What else?”

“TKs are all registered and accounted for. They are being cooperative. Africa and the Middle East are toast of course. Africa from pneumonic AIDS just as they were climbing out of regular AIDS and the Middle East from H bombs. That leaves Europe and Russia. They appear to be in about the same shape as us. Russia has more area and they will have a harder time pulling it together. Europe is likely to go back to a feudal system for a time.”

“It would be easy to go that way here. It has some merits really. Saps can't govern themselves. Let's make sure we are in charge of the armament. King Reynold the First has a nice ring to it, don't you think?”



We could even bring back the King's privilege.” He says this with a lecherous grin.

# Beijing

“Where is Hua now?”

“He had a most unfortunate accident Premier Chou. Had he accepted his new role he would have come to no harm, but he was like a mad man, very unseemly.”

“Any more about these high level TKs he kept insisting were responsible?”

“No.” He grins.

“What about New Atherton? How do we explain that?”

“Structural failure and shoddy American workmanship. A sea wall failed and the entire structure imploded. We have recalled the troops from Nevada, just as a precaution. Winter would have made it hard anyway. Nothing really worth having till you get further east anyway. California is the gem we want. We can wait on the rest. We still have two more days till the next deadline, when all psiotic weapons are to be have been destroyed.”

“And have they?”

“We have taken the precaution of partially dismantling them and hiding the pieces in different locations, but nothing permanent has been done. We could be on line again in thirty minutes. Practice drills have been done extensively the last two days. We still have to worry about the occasional TK2 showing up to attempt something.”

“Very good. And the nuclear, nanotech, biological and chemical weapons?”

“Nothing has been done so far. There is still time and we thought we would wait to see what happened.”

“Excellent. Anything else?”

“You have a meeting with the agricultural minister at three this afternoon and the Regent's ball at nine this evening.”

“Is my gown ready?”

“It will be. They are still working on it. At the last minute someone found a stash of black pearls that will enhance the effect quite nicely.”

“Good. Reward the finder with something will you? Have my maid come in on your way out. It is too cold for this outfit and I want to change.”

# Hotevilla

“Ok, how did you do it this time? It was at least a month between your ‘death by parasite’ and your resurrection here before the visit to New Atherton.”

“I didn’t do it. One instance I was battling the parasite without being able to see it beyond a vague psiotic shape and the next I am being told to reform my body from the mass provided. Everything else was a blank.”

“Nothing?”

“Nada. I owe my life to Br’thn who somehow managed to ‘store’ me in her own essence. And of course to Lisa and Qaletaq.”

*Me too.*

“Yes, and Ghost, though you still look a little thin to really be Ghost. We will have to find you some more mice quick.”

*Now!* He quickly scans the immediate area on hope.

“Soon Ghost. I was never conscious though. I had to be filled in along with Qr’thn and Br’thn. Missed all the fun I see.”

*Oh yeh, lots of fun. Not over yet either. I don’t trust any of the groups we have dealt with. Well, maybe the Lakota and the UNA, but none of the others.*

“I agree. We are still being targeted by nearly everyone.”

“I think we can trust the Latin groups. Especially Jesus. They seem to have come to some sort of accommodation with their differences. They could act as a model for what we do here.”

“They are not dealing with armies like we are and they are still somewhat underground. Not totally out in the open.”

“So, that is why you were willing to resort to deception again, even after our failure at New Jerusalem? He has dealt with plenty of armies in the last two thousand years.”

“We were desperate. We really thought this was the end.”

“They only came after you because of your TK nature. If you had made it clear you had left, would they not have left these people alone?”

Mei Ying speaks up, “No way. Hua would have nuked this place just for the pleasure of doing so. He killed George and Hashra without a blink. And they were the tip of the iceberg as you say.”

“Do you think it is inherent human nature to be so mean when you have power?”

“Seems to be for some. Some succumb to the pleasures, some to the power. Not easy being the leader. Committees are not always better either

as we have experienced. We just have to be willing to admit our mistakes, make amends as best we can and try to do better next time.”

*So what is next time? What do we do now? I really don't like the idea of a standing army. Does not fit in with the UNA way.*

“Scouts do though. If we have good communication and good observation, we can always call in the superheroes to come to the rescue.”

“I notice you did not use the ‘C’ word Dr. Snake. Good idea, at least for now till we figure something else out.” James is grinning.

“So, do we split up so as not to be all in one basket, or do we stick together?”

“Didn’t seem to work for us to be split up. We all ended back together to fight the bullies here anyway.”

“Oh Great Diplomat. What do you think?”

“Are you talking to me or Marm?” *Merrow?*

*Scratch, bite and eat all enemies, or run faster than wind.*

“Ok, that is one method and it may still come to that Marm. I have found that you ‘catch more flies with honey than with vinegar’ though. How about we start living the way we think it ought to be done and go from there. If it works they will come and learn from us. If it doesn’t, we haven’t pushed a bad idea on others.”

“Excellent!” Edwin is really excited about this idea. “How about a university?”

“But add the new 'sciences' of TK and Native American philosophy and spirituality, as requirements of course.”

“What was it that Dr. Snake taught us? Mental, Spiritual, Emotional...”

“Logical, Physical...”

“And Fundamental, though I don't like that term. Must be something better.”

“Hey I only made that all up to make the point that we think differently than did your previous culture.”

“But it is a good one. Capitalism as it was practiced forgot the people and the planet. Too much was sacrificed so a few could live very well. Way beyond what the earth could accept in fact. We need to balance it out. We need to watch our population so it does not get too big again. That will take tech. To just tell people not to have sex is unrealistic. To starve people by limiting the food or other resources is very cruel.”

“And the problem with my culture, besides being bull headed and proud, was that it neglected tech completely. There is more to life than

the spiritual. Spiritual is so personal, you end up with 1500 tribes in as many years. There is a need for humans to know, to figure things out, and to see what is over the next ridge.”

“Or the next solar system. With TK we can explore the universe. To learn from K!, Rynx and the others.”

*Or even our fellow inhabitants on this world. Using Marm and Ghost and TP we can learn so much.*

“Let’s not forget the arts, music, philosophy, theater.”

“But no movies and netcasts. Yuck. Live theater is so much better.”

“Hey, there was some good stuff. What about role playing to learn lessons in life without the danger? You normally only get to die once in life. Yingui being one exception apparently.” James grins. “Do we limit the net to just com or do we bring back games, search engines and knowledge bases?”

“There is a need to do something bigger than yourself, your family, your tribe. Social cooperation without slavery or serfdom.”

“We have the start of a TK branch of this university, but what about the rest? We need more expertise. We need to go forth and recruit.”

*And break us up again? How about using the net this time? We concentrate on getting the infrastructure set up and let the net bring the people, both students and professors.*

“How do we know they are legit? No one has paper work on them any longer.”

“And isn’t there a problem that we are telling everyone what we are doing? The Chinese and others are bound to find out.”

“We want them to know. Better they know we are building a university than a military.”

“There is that.”

“Books. We need books. We need to save the libraries that still had them and the private collections that hoarded them.”

“Stories. The old ones are dying and their stories are not being written down.”

“Ooo, sounds like the perfect student teacher relationship. The student writes down the stories.”

“And becomes the next teacher in the process.”

“Ok, Running Snake, this sounds like something we could use the UNA for. We need to round up any books that we find and gather the elders of all cultures to have their stories recorded. We could begin with these two old geezers here.” Daniel and I put on our best ‘who me’ looks.

“Paper or electronic?”

“Paper, you learn more when you have to write it down yourself. Electronic is too easy.”

*We will need council approval for this.*

“Ok, that gives us a week at least. How about a vacation?”

“You mean this was not a vacation? I was having so much fun.” Ron gets pelted with a barrage of pebbles.

“Where to?”

“I was thinking how much I missed Silver Ghost.”

“What was Silver Ghost? That's your name in English, so how can it be a thing, or am I missing something?” Mei Ying is confused, not having shared our history.

“The name of the ship we picked you up in. Only we need it to be much bigger this time. We have a few extra passengers. Let's see, Running Snake and Edwin, Lisa and Qaletaq, Angpetu and Mei Ling. Did I miss anyone?”

“Pushy Paws is missing, but she never got to ride in the first two versions. Do we know yet how to find the next gateway? Your friends all went back with the other 'thn without a gateway, but my understanding is that Br'thn is not old enough to do all this on her own yet or can she? Where is she by the way?”

*She and Qr'thn have been spending some time together, mother daughter thing I suppose. What ever that means for 'thn.*

“She has been through a lot. No telling what it did to her to have me inside of her for so long.”

“Hey, we are getting off track here. What about Silver Ghost III and where are we going?”

*We have seen so much death and nearly became dead ourselves. I want to go someplace where there is life. Africa or the ocean. Either or both would be nice.*

“There are people on the moon.”

“What did you say Mei Ying? When? No one ever said anything. Nothing on the netcasts at least.”

“It was top secret, but there are no secrets among astronauts. There is no way back for them, though they should have enough supplies to last years if the hydroponics hold out.”

“Do the Chinese know about them?”

“Hua didn't, but it is likely Beijing does. Nothing they can do about it. There is no space program now. Too much was destroyed by the plague and disorder. It could be a decade before they can afford to reach the moon again.”

“Well, it sounds like we have another rescue mission. Mei Ying, we especially need you this time as someone there is likely to know you.”

“And hearing Chinese spoken is better than in your head. No offense Barb.” She nods and smiles.

“I want to know why they are there and how many there are?”

“That I don’t know. I know at least three of them, but there are likely to be more than just astronauts. Likely there are scientists or military or both.”

“Both would be my guess. Scientists are not very good at the secret thing. They prefer to share ideas.”

“Just like astronauts.”

“Yue liang ji di he mu, Moon Base Harmony, though that is not the feeling I get when I think about it.”

“Where is it, the moon is a big place?”

“Dark side, near the south pole. They did not want to be visible to anyone on earth. Inside Schrodinger Crater. Where exactly I don’t know. They couldn’t tell me everything. It is 320 km wide, but with your scanning abilities, it should be possible to sense it. This is the only one moon base with humans that I know of anyway.”

“Well, I don’t think anyone but the Chinese could have pulled it off, so let’s hope you’re right.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Approximately 400,000 km away, give or take, depending on where it is in the elliptical orbit.”

“No trouble finding it at least. If everyone else does the lifting of SG3 and I do the DSing, with a TK8 that means a maximum range of 100,000 km per jump. Should only take a few seconds, if I went all out.”

“Whoa, that is near the speed of light! Can we go a little slower so we don’t run into anything? What’s the hurry? There are sats around the moon I would not want to hit.”

“Good safety tip!”

“What about spacesuits and all that? There is some heavy engineering in those things we can’t just make up. Even if you make a bubble one meter in diameter, that is still approximately 30,000 kg of force at normal atmospheric pressure of approximately 1 kg/cm<sup>2</sup> trying to get out.” Ron adds.

“Do you always do that kind of math in your head? The fetal position is neither comfortable nor dignified.”

“The TK6s and above can handle it, but what do we do with everyone else? I vote for some kind of hard shell, diamond or something.”

“I know I am new to all this but what about air? Don’t you need oxygen tanks or something?”

“No Lisa, we can take care of that with just TK alone. Not a problem, we are very practiced and good it.”

“Titanium. I saw the Gemini booster rocket when I was a kid. Very thin, you could push it in with your finger, but incredible tensile strength.”

“Man you are old!” Ron has his mouth open.

“The carbon fiber nanotube composites are better anyway. Like we used on Silver Ghost itself.”

“Hold on, this all way over my head. Keep it simple. We don’t need to walk on the moon, we don’t need airlocks. We just need to get close enough to DS in. We don’t even have to be visible to do that.”

“And scare the shit out them Rachael? A year ago how would you like to be in the middle of nowhere when all these people suddenly appear out of nowhere and talk in your head instead of using a language you know?”

“It would get their attention, but you are right. I remember too well how I felt when you showed up to ‘rescue’ me and you didn’t even appear in the shuttle with me.”

*Council first, then build SG3, then go. Simple, stop talking and start doing.*

“Yes Turkey!” Another round of pebbles at each other. Sigh. The cats wake up and pop out to avoid being hit.

*Stupid Monkeys*



# Moon Base Harmony

“There is no way they can help us Chi, give it a rest.”

“They still have those precious nuclear weapons. Surely they can afford a few ships to send us supplies.”

“But they don't have the necessary engineers to put it together nor launch it. Millions died, billions world wide. We are just too tiny to be of concern. Just another statistic of the plague.”

“But we didn't die of the plague.”

“Neither did many who survived to die later from crazies or lack of infrastructure. Give up. We need you in hydroponics.”

“I am too tired to do the heavy work any more.”

“We all are, but we can't give up.”

“I should just die so the rest of you can live.”

“Come on Chi, none of that talk. We all discussed it. We all go or none of us does. We do not repeat what happened at New Hope.” Good thing they locked up all the weapons and no one is strong enough to wield a knife any longer.

“No com any longer. Nothing for six months.”

A loud speaker announces meal time in the mess hall.

“Oh wonderful. Watered down soup again. If I lose any more weight I could be a super model. Seems like those six hours between meals is getting longer and longer though.”

“Hey, recycled piss is not that bad. Besides your feet are too big. If you ever decide to ah, shorten them, let me know. Looking very tasty right now.” He smacks his lips for emphasis. Chi throws a pencil at him, but it falls short.

## Mess Hall

“Chi what's that smell? It smells like food! Come on, hurry up! I don't want to miss this, even if I am only allowed to smell it.”

“I'm coming. I can still smell your ugly body and it doesn't smell like food to me yet.” She hesitates. “What's that?”

“I told you, come on.” Normally it is improper for a male to hold the hand of a female in public, but this is important. Sum helps Chi down the corridor to the mess hall. When they open the door it is chaos. Everyone is there waiting in anticipation.

“Hu, what's going on? A blow out bash of the last reserves? Is this our last meal?”

“I don't know any more than you do. The smell is wonderful though. I could stay here all day. Here I could die in peace.” He rests back in his chair taking in a big breath.

“Attention!”

The hall quiets down and people straighten up in their seats. Ok, some are drooling and lots of stomachs are growling.

“First to put your fears at rest. Yes, we are having real food, but no it is not the last of our stocks. We have ah, visitors. That can wait till later though, first the meal. There will not be a lot, none of us is used to eating, so we will go slow. There will be meals at three hour intervals for the next two days till we can get back on some sort of schedule and work out some details.”

The food comes out like it was delivered fresh from a Dim Sum shop in Hong Kong. Carts are wheeled by just like in a restaurant and steaming bamboo and stainless steel containers are placed at each table. Another person comes by with steaming hot jasmine tea and pours for each of the people at each table. Mouths are open in disbelief and tears are freely falling.

“You may begin. Please 'dig in' as they say in English.”

The spell is broken and the food is distributed at each table by the person closest to each container. Everything is quite at first and the first bites are taken, then moans come forth. The food disappears slowly, every bite is savored. Another cart comes by with mango pudding. The smiles are something to behold. After all is eaten, gone and each bite is remembered for eternity they wait for the reason.

“If I may have your attention I would like to present to you someone some of you know, Major Ying.” Whispers are heard.

“I would guess that you did not hear the ship land this morning? Actually we came in about fifteen minutes before the meal was served. Took awhile to convince your commander we were for real. Hope you liked the food. It was made in San Francisco about thirty minutes ago.” She pauses for effect. More open mouths and stares of disbelief.

“No really. Thirty minutes ago. I timed it. I am sorry to hear about Tran, he was a good astronaut. Glad to see Xue and Fa Ba are still here, though maybe we have to change your name to Low Ba now that you have lost so much weight.

I am no longer with the Chinese, the ones who have abandoned you. In a few days you will be given a choice. You can be taken back to

Beijing to live out the rest of your lives with what is left of your family and friends in China, but probably never return to Harmony or space. Or, you can, as I have, join a group that is newly formed in the former United States called the UNA or United Native Americans. We intend to form a different kind of society if we can. Sort of like the former communist setup, but without the hierarchy, secret police, pollution, lack of freedoms, space, food, etc. and we hope to have a space program started real soon. Ok, not much like Mao's set up, but not capitalist either. No one will be a CEO. There will be no stock market, no money in fact. More like what you have here, people working in common for a common purpose, though there will be many groups working on many different things.

There is no way that I can relate it all in a few minutes, but fortunately you do not have to decide all at once. If you elect to come with us, it is not a permanent decision. You can be returned to China at any time you want. Though I suspect the longer you stay away, the harder it will be. They simply will not trust you. For that reason, we offer the opportunity to go any where on Earth you want with enough resources to get you started.

I am sure you have questions and I can take a few at this time.”

“How did you get here!” General nods of approval.

“I had help.” She grins. “I suppose you would not accept the rest of the tale if you don't understand the answer to that question. The problem is that it is a rather long story and would be better told by the people who lived it themselves. I played a part as well, though a small one.”

“We aren't going anywhere. I am staying till the next meal arrives. You have three hours. Will that be enough time?” Laughter.

“This will be a bit strange for all of you. Believe me, when I first met them I was scared to death and any of you who went through basic with me will know this is not easy. You heard of the plague no doubt.” Heads nod yes. “Well some people were changed by the plague.” Again nods.

“The Chinese in their wisdom decided this was a threat to their rule, so ah, removed them from concern in China. It was a bit messier in the US. More people died because no one was willing to do what was necessary to contain the plague. So be it. A small group, through a process you will hear about in a minute went through further changes. This group has abilities far beyond what we call normal human abilities. What you are about to see is not an illusion. Know also that they have taken very serious vows to tell the truth and not kill anyone.” An inhale of breath and nervous laughter. “May I present the Guardians of Br'thn”

The seven of us come out on stage in our TK robes. Not really a stage, just a slightly raised platform. Ok, so far so good. Now the hard part. I don't really speak Chinese. Everyone here is supposed to be able to understand English, but...

“Ni hao? Wo bu shuo zhong guo hua. I am sorry, but my Chinese is not so good. Mei Ying has been trying to teach me more, but things keep getting in the way of my lessons, like being dead for a couple of months. More on that later. I am a TK as are most of the rest of our group in one way or another, though we do not discriminate against you 'norms'.” I smile to break the ice, but there is only silence. Ok. “I am going to turn over the podium to Daniel, our spokes person.”

It takes Daniel about an hour to relate our tale. The rest of us try and look interested and stay awake. We have heard it too many times. He is a little weak on the last details, but related a few good details about the galactic center I had not heard.

“Thank you Daniel. Now I suppose you will not believe any of this without some evidence. Granted we brought you all this food, with more in the kitchen, but there are conventional ways that could be faked, though your commander does not look like the kind of a person who would lie to you. I am not really a theater type of person, so I don't have a show prepared for you. How about some of you ask for what you would like to see and you can put me to some tests.”

“If we go back to either place what are the chances of our getting the plague.”

“There are two aspects. Getting the plague and surviving it. It turns out that when a young teenager goes through puberty and if they survived the plague previously, they will come down with a second case on their own. It remains dormant till the hormonal changes sets it off again. At that point they are also infectious to others. Because the Chinese were so 'effective' at squashing the plague, the chances of your getting it in China are very low. On the other hand, once you have had it you can't get it again and can go anywhere without that fear at least. Certain people are naturally immune also, some Native Americans for instance. They get only a mild case at worst. This is why so many survived in the Americas, both north and south. Now, let's say that you get it. What are your odds? Most of the deaths were caused by fear, not the disease itself. We know what a patient needs to survive now and with healing TKs called in, or Shamans, both are effective, the odds are very low that you will die from the disease. The odds of you becoming TK yourself are about one in a thousand for level two, somewhat lower for level one and one in a million

for level three. Since you have fifty eight people here, the odds are that if everyone came down with the plague, all would survive and none would develop TK ability. No one present here in our group is capable of coming down with the plague any longer, if that helps with your fears.”

“What about staying here? If you are serious about wanting a space program, why not keep the base going and work from that?”

“That depends on what your original mission was. If it was compatible with our new understanding, or can be adapted, there is only one problem. People still hunt us. They see us as a force they want to either control or eliminate. What if they succeed? In a year, you would be right back to where you were this morning before we arrived. Not a pleasant thought.”

“Our mission was secret and we are still in contact with our government. They could still retaliate.”

“Yeh, they could not rig one to send us supplies, but they are still willing to destroy us.”

“If we decide to stay, but not go along with you. Sort of a worst case scenario, what will you do?”

“We would do what we could to help insure your survival, at your discretion, and then leave you alone.”

“No bombs, you would not destroy us?”

“What for, you are no threat to us? We have scanned you pretty well. You have no weapons beyond minimal defense, small arms, anti ballistics that would work equally well against meteors and such. There are no anti psiotic weapons and believe me, we would know, even if you had dismantled them. That leaves only bio weapons, which we could scan for eventually, but you lack the labs to support that type of research. No level four containment rooms for instance.”

Mei Ying gets up, “That is not to say that we would not set up our own base on the moon, at a respectable distance of course, say the north pole where the other reserves of water have been found.”

“When you are slowly starving to death, you have a lot of time to fantasize and dream. We have grown accustomed to the freedom and closeness we have here. To go back to China and never be in space again is hell to us. To be among people we do not know or understand would be equally hard, at least on a full time basis. Our mission, such as it was, is mute now, so telling you imposes no great security risk.”

Rachael gets up, “Wait, there is one more thing you should know before you tell us. We don’t want you to get into trouble with China. The ‘thn have imposed a deadline on earth of one year to rid itself of all

weapons of mass destruction. You might want to wait till that year is up. We can easily leave enough materials to last till then, even if your hydroponics were to fail completely.”

“These ah, ‘thn. What would they do if someone fails to comply?”

“We don’t know. We are the Guardians of Br’thn, one young ‘thn of a mere sixty five million years, give or take a few years. We have come to know her pretty well. She is just as likely to be our guardian as we hers, having saved my life. It is likely that the weapons would be taken out by the ‘thn and or us. Beyond that are many options, up to and including sterilizing Earth, though that is rare and not likely to be the first option unless someone comes up with a direct threat to the ‘thn. This was the reason that New Atherton was destroyed. They were purposely raising parasites to the psiotically enhanced. The parasites are gone and we have a defense against them as well. But humans are ingenious and with time, someone, somewhere, may yet develop another threat. The ‘thn are patient and not usually quick to act aggressively. Some are as old as the current universe. They have time on their side.”

“Is it possible to meet one? A ‘thn that is.”

“There are only two currently in our solar system and are indisposed at the moment. If you stay in contact with us, you will likely meet Br’thn at least. She is with her mother at the moment, but travels pretty widely on her own. She is a TK9, so don’t mess with her is she shows up at some point. She communicates exclusively by telepathic means, just so you know.”

“May we see your ship?”

“Sure, but it is not much to look at. If you will go to the observation window, I will bring her over. We purposely left her out of sight so as not to cause alarm.” They turn their chairs around and some one pushes the button to open a blast door to reveal a large picture window. The scene is a quiet moonscape in shadow at the moment, except for the tops of the internal crater rim some kilometers away. I bring SG3 over the rim and set her down in front of the observation window. Larger than one or two, but not much so. No blinking lights, over protests from Ron and James. View ports at regular intervals are the only visible signs on the surface.

“All of you fit into that tiny little thing? Where is the propulsion? Oxygen tanks, water, food, etc.? How were you going to rescue us?”

“We would create a larger ship to accommodate you, if that is your wish. Remember we don’t need a propulsion system, TK suffices. We take care of the oxygen requirements ourselves similarly. We did not need anything else, as it took less that a minute to come here and find

you. Most of the space was taken up with the food you just ate in fact. She could have been even smaller without the cargo space.”

“You said that you could leave supplies for us for a year. How would this be done?”

“Give me an example. What would you like?”

“Cho ku lic!” Someone shouts and the rest laugh nervously.

[Chocolate in Cantonese]

“Well that could be a problem.” I smile. “You see that is my own favorite substance.” I get a laugh finally for that one. “How much would you like?”

“Well, I am not greedy. We share here. How about say, oh, ten kilograms?”

“You can think larger than that. What kind? Extra dark is my favorite, though some like milk chocolate better. I refuse to make white chocolate as that is just not chocolate to me. How about I make you some of each?” Another laugh.

“Make?” The requester picked up on that one fast.

I smile and clear off the table nearest to me by hand. I create fifty kilograms, twenty five of each. Not wrapped, but bars of 100 grams each, alternating dark and milk. “Of course, I cannot create material out of thin air. Not enough mass in this room. So I borrowed from the lunar surface. They look out the observation window to see a hole in the surface shaped like a larger version of the bars, complete with ribs and dents. Mouths are open now. So far it has been all talk, now they see we are for real.

*Show off.* She tights beams me, so others don’t hear.

*Hey, I have to have some fun! You don’t have to eat your share if you don’t want to.* She gives me an evil look.

I pick up one of the dark pieces and start to consume it. “I would hurry before the rest of my team gets here. They are not as good about sharing.” Some of them are licking their lips to increase the effect.

A few get up and pick up several pieces and then bring them back to their tables to share. Soon others are returning to the table to get more.

“There is another meal coming up soon. Don’t worry, we will leave this behind when we leave. Well most of it.” I grab a few pieces of the dark and pass them around to our group.

“We would be honored if you would join us for the next meal. We wish we could offer something in return. How about a tour after the meal?”

“Sounds good to me. We could offer suggestions of where we could help at the same time.”

The next meal was more formal, starting with chili jellyfish, followed by shrimp and walnuts, my favorite, then bok choi and mushrooms, crispy fried flat fish and other delicacies. We ended with the traditional noodles and fried rice dishes followed by warm and sweet red bean soup. We of course would not normally eat meat, but this was all duped, so legal technically. They did not need to know it was not “real”, it certainly tasted great, especially after nearly starving to death. The kitchen staff came in as well, as all they had to do with this meal was reheat it. We split up and each of us ate at a different tables. There they could ask questions of a more private nature. Of course, we could not leave this kind of food behind, at least not in the prepared form.

“Well, Lisa what do you think? Bet you have never been to the moon before.” Qaletqa nudges her and smiles. She sticks her tongue out and then jumps and bounces off the ceiling.

“Be careful. You still have the same mass, so can hurt yourself easily. You notice we do ‘moon walk’, a slowed down more careful walk than you earthlings.” Offers one of the ‘moonies’. “On the surface in a suit, we can go all out, but still have to be more careful. At least no ceiling to bump into.” Lisa nods and rubs her head.

“Dr Snake, what do you think? Do we open a branch of the university here? It would be a great place to teach physics. With the lower gravity and vacuum outside, students would not be so likely to fall back on common sense. It would be easy for the TKs to add more buildings to adjust for increasing enrollment.”

“Ed, we would want to screen students carefully. Too many would sign up, just because of the ‘gee wiz’ factor. I really want to see the hydroponics. I have some ideas for why they are failing.”

## **Hydroponics**

Angpetu was of course in the lead. Her curiosity will get her far or into trouble. Time will tell. Glad her experience with the Arizona nest did not discourage her for long. We did not use TK, so as to put our hosts more at ease, though in this gravity it would have been easier than learning the moon walk. Susan, James and Rachael decide that they want to try something out on the surface and take off in another direction with a couple of locals in tow. Hope the locals have good stomachs, they just ate remember.

We tour the various areas and labs, including crew quarters. Really quite spacious compared to the New Hope space station, but then it is



easier to put up a new structure here. Most of the rooms are below ground and carved out the lunar rock itself. Even the energy storage system is a compression chamber where gas is compressed when the sun shines and then run back over turbines with they are in shadow. A second larger chamber provides the pressure differential.

“We can make our own fuel and oxygen from the water we have mined, so we are not limited there, but for some reason, we can’t seem to keep the gardens going. They do fine for a couple of generations and then this malaise sets in that we can’t explain.”

When we reach hydroponics you could tell right away something was wrong. The smell was off and the plants looked different, droopy. I turn to my psiotic senses and whoa, these are real sick puppies. The leaves are all perfectly shaped, but the plants are truly sad, like they have given up a reason to survive.

“I thought lunar soil was supposed to be great for plants. What happened?”

“It was great. You should see the first generation plants from newly sprouted seeds. They are twice as tall as Earth versions. We never had enough soil to try subsequent generations back on Earth though.”

“Reason is obvious.”

“This is Dr. Snake, Ph.D from Northwestern, a member of the UNA council and Shoshone Tribe.”

“Thank you Dr. Snake for coming. Please elaborate.”

“You have no bugs. No predators.”

“Of course not, we want to the plants to eat ourselves or to produce oxygen ultimately. Anything else eating the plants would only take away from that purpose.”

“Dr. Ma, how to you train an athlete or warrior? Do you not put them through rigorous physical and psychological exercises to prepare them? You need to do the same here. These plants are not challenged enough to want to work at living. They have become lazy, just putting out enough effort to stay the course, but no more.”

“Living couch potatoes. I’ll be.”

Dr. Snake gives me a dirty look. “You can go help out in the kitchen with Qaletaq if this is too much for you.”

“No, this makes sense. My psiotic scans show the same thing now that you give the reason. You are correct in your assessment.” And she did it without my abilities. The old style medical doctors were the same way, a few thumps and they could tell more than any med scan.

“Could we simulate bugs by plucking parts of leaves? We could have the bots do this easily enough. To bring in bugs would be a nightmare. Each plant would need its own variety and then we would need to bring in predators for the bugs and so on.”

“Yes, you would need to develop a stable ecology. Not easy, took the earth billions of years, but the only way if you want your secret project to succeed.”

“We are not allowed to discuss that.” It was obvious now. There were entire buildings here not being used, at vacuum even. What was their purpose? It was beginning to make sense. This was not a military project. This was a pear project. These were to be luxury accommodations or escape hatches for the very rich, in case all else failed on earth. Sort of a super Armstrong unit.

“SO, why didn’t they come during the plague?”

The director looks at me and thinks for a moment before deciding to answer, “The gardens are not working. We could not take on any others. Anyone who came would starve to death just like we were doing.”

“Bots won’t work. Would take more energy than they produce in helping the plants. Not efficient enough and not the same. The plants would know the difference.”

“Energy is not a problem; we have lots of sunlight for half the month and storage for the rest as you saw.”

“What about when they break down? No manufacturing facilities to replace them.” Got you there.

“Then we are doomed. It would take a facility several times this size just to support the current population. We are still highly dependent on earth. Besides, where do we get the ecologists to help out? Earth has its own problems to work out now.”

“Making a bigger facility is the easy part. As to the ecologists, I can think of some natural ecologists that might want to help out. That is if you don’t mind that they don’t have degrees and you can learn to understand their way of seeing life. Some of our elders in fact would love the lower gravity.” Dr. Snake is grinning now as is Angpetu.

### **Lunar Surface, sort of**

Each of them has one pilot in tow. There has been nothing much for the pilots to do with the inability to get all of them back, so they are looking for anything that includes them again. They are all standing at the

observation window. There is about a hundred or so meters between themselves and SG3.

“Plenty of material to work with. We can even use SG3 to dupe the material from.”

“Dupe?”

“Anything we can scan with our abilities we can reproduce or adapted.”

“Anything?” He holds his stomach and looks concerned.

“Not living things, but you saw Yingui dupe the chocolate and you ate some of that alright. So did we. Nothing wrong with it. Can even be better, as we don’t usually dupe the insect parts that are allowed in the real thing.

“Stop it Ron, you are going to make him sick.” Rachael swats him on the chest.

“Yingui, that is his name? As in Chinese for Silver Ghost?”

“Sure, that is why we call the ships that. He was the first to make one, and as they are sort of silver in color and go real fast, it made sense for us to call them that as well. But, we are getting distracted. I want to know what it is like to fly in a vacuum under a lighter gravity.”

“We can borrow a surface scimmer if you want to go outside.”

“You have not been paying attention. No need.” James fabricates a small two seater out of moon dust in a swirl of dust that takes form outside the window. The left over quickly falls back to the surface. Susan and Ron follow suit with slightly different shapes each.

“No air resistance stupid, you don’t have to be streamlined.”

“I know that, but it is fun if they are all different so our co-pilots can tell the difference. Notice that mine has a large observation window so she can see where we are going.”

“Duh, forgot about that.” Rachael and James add windows. They have been so used to flying under TK scanning ability.

“What do you mean by co-pilots? We can’t fly those things and how do we get out there. They have no hatches to get into them and way too small for suits anyway.”

In chorus, “We don’t need no stinken suits!” Each DSs themselves and their partners into their respective vehicles. A minute is allowed for their guests to adjust to their new surroundings.

“There are no instruments. What about air? How did we get here!?”

“You really need to lighten up a bit Ming. Ready for a ride?” He never gets to answer as James ‘punches it’ and takes off straight up to a

couple of hundred meters above Harmony. The others are there in a few seconds.

“How come I don’t feel any acceleration? This feels more like a video game on one of those old 2D monitors.”

“Believe me, you don’t want to know how much practice it took to get that down right Tao. Yingui had us practicing for hours each day till I got it right with the practice balls. It was weeks before we were allowed to do this with people other than ourselves. Don’t worry, I have hundreds of hours of practice in this baby.

“How do you communicate with the other two? There is no radio or anything in here.”

Rachael points to her head and TPs Chung, *We are telepathic as well.*

*We have people watching. Susan why don’t you go down and reassure them we have not just taken hostages.*

*We should all go down, on the count of three, in formation. One, two, three!* The three of them swing in from different direction and hover a meter off the ground and a meter from the observation window so people inside can see them.

“Wave to the looky loos Tao.”

“What is a lookie lu?”

Sigh, “The people in the mess hall looking out at us.” Tao nods and then waves her arms and smiles. Doesn’t do any good. “Shit, I forgot we have no lights.” Susan makes a glow sphere for the inside of the cockpit and attaches it to the ceiling, then makes another one for the outside, to rest on top, green. The others catch on and follow suit, each making theirs a different color on top.

*Anything else?* Rachael has turned her ship upside down and is making faces at the observers.

*Stop that Rachael, they will all want a ride after this.*

The next few minutes they zoom nearly out of sight and perform acrobatics, looping over and around each other in what would be impossible in a non inertial dampened craft. Finally James shoots straight up at top speed, returning a few seconds later.

*Top speed is the same as far as I can tell. Gravity does not make a difference.*

*So, that would mean that our abilities are limited only by mass, not by our surroundings. Interesting.*

*What if we combine DS with TK?* Rachael takes off again, but comes back with a green looking Chung. A bit bumpy, hard to do it frequently enough to smooth it out.

*Rachael, I think we need to reserve the experimentation for when we have no passengers. If something goes wrong and you DS out into the vacuum, someone could get hurt. Only takes 15 seconds in a vacuum to kill someone.*

*I knew there was a reason why I liked Earth better. Sorry about that Chung. I will be a good girl now.*

They come back in and park the craft outside the observation window and then DS back into the hall. Of course they are behind the others as everyone is at the window watching allowing them no choice.

“Over here people.” Their new friends are a bit wobbly at first but recover in time to preserve some dignity. No wet pants or full barf bags in spite of the recent meal. These are the pros.

Chung comments, “You guys are crazy! When can I go again?”

“Hey, you have to wait your turn Chung. In other words, I go next.”

### **Administration**

“Daniel, you say you have met others in this galaxy.”

“That is correct Director Li. Between Marm, the cat, and I, we have befriended twenty four other sentient beings. They were here recently to help us out at New Atherton, but have returned to the regional center.”

“Is it possible for non-TKs to go to this regional center?”

“Yes, but not without a TK6 or above present. The TK is necessary to supply food, air, water, accommodations, etc. The center only supplies mass, we have to make everything we need from that. Usually left overs from the last group to be through.”

“What are the others like?”

“That is a short question that would require hours, if not days to answer. I probably developed closer relationships with K! and Rynx. K! is a slime mold like creature that can assume any shape. He particularly likes to mock me in exaggerated form. Really quite funny at times. A TK9, but rarely needs to use his/her ability. Hermaphrodites that can self fertilize if they need to. We would be overrun with them in this galaxy if they weren't so slow to reproduce. They are strict vegetarians that developed TK because of their need to defend themselves from some pretty nasty predators. Then the TP ability allowed for a social order to develop. Sort of the reverse of our situation where TK developed after we had the rest. They are very peaceful unless threatened.

Rynx has four main legs and two accessory arms near it's eyes the he can use to manipulate surroundings. TK came very late in their

development, after their civilization had risen and fallen many times. They have the unique life history whereby they purposely eat their young. It is a culling process that removes the weaker ones, so the stronger have enough resources to do well later. During times of plenty they relax the standards to allow for more variation and experimentation and during harsh times the standards are more strict and depend on what is most needed at the time. Species of fish use this method on earth. Not that strange really.

We met other species that require three sexes to procreate. Others have neuter classes. We mentioned the one in the story that Marm had befriended and the Regent's henchman had an unfortunate ending with. There seems to be a balance needed. Species that are very peaceful and harmonious take a very long time to develop TK, if they do at all and species that are too war with their own or others are too intent on survival to allow the necessary time for TK to develop.

It turns out our own situation is very unique. We should have had TK much earlier in our development, pre-tech in fact, but Sauron intervened and postponed most of our development until the plague accident. TK developed several times on earth, with the last two being Sauron's species and ours. Very unusual. Normally once a species develops TK they become the overseers and protectors. Sometimes this can lead to a new TK developing, but normally not. It is hard for a TK to allow suffering, but suffering is necessary for the gift to develop.”

“And the ultimate overseers allow this? The 'thn?”

“They have rules that they live by as well. The most important is the diversity imperative. The idea is that each species has a right to develop to the TK level on their own. Once there, they are given an opportunity to join the 'thn community. The only exception is any species that directly threatens the 'thn. They try pruning at first. If this does not work, they gradually apply more and more drastic procedures till the species behaves or is eliminated. We are being pruned at the moment. Groups that can't behave will be brought down so they do not dominate others that want to work with the 'thn. We are not allowed to participate and do not tell the 'thn what to do. We are under a sort of probation and answer to Br'thn for our actions and she answers to her mother, who is the ultimate judge of our species.”

“Will they allow us to develop a space faring ability?”

“As long as we do not threaten others. If we did it on tech alone, we would be allowed almost anything, including xenocide, but it is VERY difficult to get out of our your own system on tech alone. Most species

have to develop TK first to succeed. Then we are under their rules. As long as we allow other species to be what they are and don't interfere we will be ok. Think of it as being observers but nothing more.”

“It will be hard for us not to try and impose our own beliefs on others. I can only imagine what the 'do gooders' would think of Rynx and his kind. Eating their own young. Amazing.”

“Why? The Greeks exposed children they did not want. Every culture has abortion or other means to rid themselves of the unwanted. Even in China, rather harsh methods were used to bring the population down. If we stick to those that already have TK representatives and agree to work under their TK leaders, we will be fine. Main thing is to ask first, then act carefully.”

“So, you allowed the alien to kill the henchman? In spite of your vows?”

“That was a trick to give Hua one last chance. He failed. The henchman was not alive. Never was. Just a meat puppet of Yingui's. No life psiotic field at all. All of us knew this ahead of time, we even knew which one the golum would go for. It was intended to be spectacular and was. I would never want to meet Marm's friend on the battle field, even with TK.”

“So, it was working under your direction, just as you would if visiting it's world.”

“Correct. And of course knowing that the golum would not actually attack it allowed for more of a show that it would normally have done in a battle situation. No need to make hamburger out of your opponent, just stop it. One cut would have sufficed.”

“You have given me a lot to think about Daniel. How can I know that all this is true?”

“Be patient. Only time with us will convince you that we are honest and true. Same as any relationship. We are trusting you was well. Knowledge is power and we have given you a lot of material. We have been abused and hunted in the past, as our story relates. Don't cross us. You may decide to not join us, that is fine. Not sure I would in your shoes, but don't cross us.”

*Daniel come back to the mess hall please.*

“I am being called. I need to get back to the mess hall. Can you direct me?”

“Sure, down that hall to the right, right again and then go fifty meters till you find the larger door on your left. Is something wrong?”

“If it was an emergency I would already be gone. Come with me, I suspect we will be leaving soon.”

### **Mess Hall**

“Director Li, Yingui has been asked to return to Earth and though we could return on our own, we all feel it is time for us to conclude our first visit as well. Is there anything you need to hold you over for at least several months.”

“Food mostly, not that we expect anything like the last two meals. I understand that was special.” He smiles.

“And chocolate I would suspect. I notice the first pile has gone down considerably.”

“Actually it would be better if we did not develop a need for such ah, substances. What you have already made will be enough if we ration it carefully.”

“You have many empty buildings. As the expected occupants are not likely to need them in the near future, I would make use of them anyway you can. The two nearest will be filled before we leave with food stocks. Mostly GMSoy strips and other saps food, but we lived on it for years and still do to a large extent. That meal was special for us as well. You can reach us at this net address if you come to a decision about what you would like to do.” I hand them a slip of paper with the address. We DS out to SG3 and head for home.



# Hotevilla

“Welcome back! How was it?” exclaims Limping Cow of the council.

“A nice place to visit, but I would not want to live there, ha-ha. A very sterile environment. No trees, no sky and the air smelled of PEOPLE really bad. Glad the two guys did not come with us, they would have been complaining the entire time. Speaking of which, where are the two rascals?”

“A couple of people found a nest of mice and they are passed out from eating too much.”

“So, Ghost is working hard to get his figure back I see.” We all laugh at that thought.

“Two others found those responsible for placing the disrupters. I believe you know Smith and Jones? It was apparently an inside job. We took care of it.”

“Thank the two for me. I don’t want to hear how you ‘took care of it’, just glad it is over.”

“Oh they are not dead, we are civilized now.” He grins. That does not make it better.

Br’thn DSs in and comes up to me. I stoke her and she emits a purring like sound.

“How did you learn to do that!?”

***Ghost taught me. Said it was the best way to voice thanks.***

“You are being corrupted Br’thn, be careful what you learn from those two. Next they will have you hunting mice for them.” Suddenly I taste raw mouse on my tongue. “Ghost stop transmitting now!” The taste goes away. “Cats!”

*Stupid Monkeys!*

***We have much to discuss and much to do. Please gather the Guardians.***

Most scattered once we landed, but Angpetu is still near me watching us.

“Angpetu, could you find the other Guardians and bring them back here. Just the Guardians please.”

“Sure thing.” She runs off to the closest tent that she saw Barb go into.

*Guardians, please report back to the landing site.* Barb TPs all of us. Very efficient Angpetu, but I could have done that.

*No you couldn't. You still lack the tight control. You would have broadcast to everyone on the mesa.*

*You are probably right. I can do one on one and full broadcast, but a select group is still hard for me.*

The rest either walk or pop in.

“What’s up? We just got back and have not had a chance to unpack. Not to mention it has been a long day.”

“Don’t know, Br’thn asked us all to be here. All I know.”

James finally sees her, “Br’thn, how’s it floating?” And they high five.

“Sssheesh, everyone is corrupting her.” I shake my head, but I am smiling. “Ok, let’s settle down and hear what she has to say.”

***Tomorrow at 11:43 local time, the ten days will be finished for the removal of psiotic weapons. There are two groups that still possess these devices. The Chinese in Beijing and the Florida group that Rachael and Susan know about. The Florida group does not know about the ban, so Susan, Rachael, James, Ron and Daniel will go there and explain to them what is going on. Most important that no matter what, the weapons are destroyed and the means to make more are removed as well.***

“I don’t understand. Why all the fuss? They are not powerful enough to do much damage. We can take them out easily at any time. Nothing more than pop guns really.”

“From pop guns do cannon grow. I think the ‘thn are worried about the precedent. Remember ‘thn know us well. We have a tendency to always be pushing the line.”

***True. Yingui and I will go to Beijing.***

“What about the rest of us?”

***The university needs to be started. Work with the council to work out the details. Please send out a netcast before we get back.***

“What’s the rush? No one is going anywhere.”

***As ‘thn, I am expected to learn how to recognize turning points in a cultures evolution and help direct that development. This is a turning point, but it will not last. To wait would entail much more effort than acting now.***

“Ok, Ed, Angpetu, Lisa and Qaletaqa, you are with me. Let’s get to work.”

*I think I will be needed with them as well, to help in the netcast.* I nod to her and Barb takes off to catch up.

“Susan and Rachael know approximately where the group is, so follow their lead. There is still about an hour of light left in Florida, if I am reading the sun correctly. That should give you a chance to do some night surveillance to determine where everything is before going in.”

“Good safety tip boss.”

“I am not the boss Rachael.”

“Ooo, excuse me, starting to sound like one to me. Are you sure that Br’tbn is not corrupting you?”

“I think everyone here has the sillies. Fine, do what you think best.”

“Great, ok guys, here is what we will do. We leave now and do surveillance, so we know what’s up tomorrow.” She grins at me. Daniel rolls his eyes. I feel sorry for him. It is going to be a long trip.

Lisa comes running up to me with tears in her eyes.

“Lisa, what’s wrong?” I have come to take her seriously now. I should have listened the last time.

“Yingui, just remember that you will be ok. And so will Br’tbn. No matter what happens, you two will be ok.” She then turns and runs back the way she came. That gives me reason to pause. I will have to be careful now, though I have no idea what she is talking about. Such is the ways of a precog, nothing specific, but just enough to get you going. Aaaaaagh!

# Florida, just north of Miami

“Did you notice that there seemed to be fewer people around?” They landed in the dark after spending some time on a deserted beach till the sun went down.

“It's night stupid, of course there are fewer people around. Boy this place is a mess. Looks like another hurricane came through.”

“No, I meant at home, at Hotevilla. You're right. It was not this bad when we were here last.”

“Probably out working somewhere. That's a lot of people to feed. Can't afford lay abouts, even TK ones. Winter is nearly here.”

*Over here. Is this one of those psiotic cannons you saw?*

“We did more than see them Daniel. Looks like one, but this one has been open to the elements. Lot of water damage and rust is beginning. Doesn't look like anyone has touched this one since we left. Wonder if it still works.” Ron comes over and dries it out with TK and flips a switch.

“Power supply looks intact, but too complicated to take a chance on firing it without knowing more about it.” He shuts it down. “Looks like they rigged this together out of scrap, no way of knowing if it would work, or did when they left it here.”

“Ok, assuming it was functional or salvageable, why leave it? I thought you two said that they needed it for defense and were going to save them just in case. They had a pretty rough time with that nasty TK3. If I was them, I would have kept it in working order.”

*Someone is coming. Act cool.*

A man in his forties and a girl in her teens come up hand in hand. Disgusting. “May we help you? Are you lost?”

Daniel takes his hood off, “Nope, just curious about this contraption. What was it?”

“My names is Manuel and this is my oldest daughter Marie. Why don't you join us. We were heading to the ah..” He turns to his daughter, “Como se dice [compound] en Anglais?”

Susan responds, “Compound. Gracias. We would be happy to come with you.” He tips his hat and smiles then turns and we follow. He does not walk fast.

“Nice night no? First clear day in a week. Only a little ways.” We walk the rest of the way in silence looking at the stars and the quarter moon. You can see so much more without all the street lights. We come to a clearing where people have made make shift shelters in a large circle.

There is a respectable fire in the center and people are milling around. Manuel opens a simple gate and lets us in and then closes it again afterwards. “Keeps the alligators out at night.”

We are greeted almost instantly with smiling faces. Manuel turns to us, “Como se llama?”

Susan answers for us, “I am Susan, this is Rachael.” I nod. “James, Ron and Daniel. They do not speak Spanish, so it would help if you could address us in English if possible. Otherwise I can translate.”

“No problemo Senoras e Senors. We speak English.” Right. “Come, you must be hungry from your journey. Come and eat. We were just about to start ourselves.” He hands each of us a metal plate that looks like it might have been a hub cap at one time and spoons made from some other nondescript metal. Just like home. We get in line with the rest. There was an attempt to push us to the front, but we waved them ahead of us. I am served a steaming plate full of rice and beans with some kind of barbecued meat in large junks. Smells good at least. Spicy! Not wussy like the stuff we had in Costa Rica. I nod my approval as do the rest of our group. The plate is getting hot, so I set it down on a rock and sit down on the ground to better able to eat. Everyone else is doing something similar. Some of the more macho guys standing wrap their hands in their shirts and hold the plate that way. Good stuff.

“What is this, if I may ask? Very tasty.” I ask Marie who has elected to remain with our group. At least I suspect she speaks English.

She answers, “Alligator.” She smiles waiting for my reaction.

“This is very good alligator. We could not afford such good alligator where we come from. Mostly had to eat old dogs and leather shoes.” She looks surprised at me.

“Rachael, this really is alligator. Look over towards the fire.” I see the remains of the head and skin.

I shrug, “Still better than dog.” Not going to get me that easily. I look up. Hey, I was on the moon this morning. I do a gentle scan of our surroundings and stop. The tall male, late twenties, talking with two others, is a TK2. I scan the rest of the group. Only one. He does not appear to be the leader. When an older woman comes up to him and gives him an order, he runs off to obey.

*So, you noticed him too. Interesting. Is he hiding his ability or do they not care.* Daniel is next to me.

People are starting to gather around the fire. I wash my plate as the others have done and hand it to the person collecting them. They are all

stacked on shelves behind the serving counter. The helpers come out to the gathering also.

An older man sitting down next to Manuel gets up to speak. Apparently he is one of the elders. "A few short weeks ago we were slaves, normals and TKs alike, to an evil man with the will and power to kill those around him. A man so intent on control that nothing would stop him. Hundreds died at his hands and those who served his purpose. People lived in fear and hunger, as everyone bent to serve his will. Over the net came plans for a means to fight this cruel dictator. We built the device and began to use it. It was pretty close to even. We had some successes and some failures. The evil one was able to take out the devices one at a time. Faster than we could build more. You will notice there are no factories producing more tech.

We decided on one final assault and used all the devices at once. It was better to go down fighting than die a slow attrition. We fired on the center of his area and he fired back with his TK taking out one device and killing the operators. We concentrated on where we thought he was, when suddenly all our devices failed at once. No one moved, but no one died either. We turned and ran. An hour later two strangers appeared with the evil one on a leash. They led the pair and the evil one on a spiral course away from the others till the pair suggested that the evil one would die if they continued on this path.

The two explained that the one on the leash was solely responsible for their misfortunes of late and would no longer be around to cause anyone further harm. Well, you can imagine that any two who could take out the evil one by themselves must be powerful indeed. They explained that they were a thousand times more powerful EACH than the evil one. They then went on to explain that TKs did not normally seek to destroy or control, only help. The TKs that were under the evil one's control were victims just as much as we were. The ones who willingly went along with the evil one were being dealt with by the remaining TKs or had already left the area. We would find that the remaining TKs would rather live in peace and form a harmonious community based on cooperation and equality. They then left with the evil one by forming a ball around themselves and shooting faster than a bullet into the sky.

What they said has proven to be true. TKs and 'norms' live as one now. We remember the two who brought peace back to our community. We recognize them by their robes and their staffs."

All eyes turn on us. Oops. Daniel nudges me. Susan and I rise and take a bow and then attempt to sit, but the crowd will not let us. Someone

grabs my hand and I follow them up to the center space. Susan is next to me.

“We have been hunted for most of our journey. Those who would destroy us were the ones who sent you the plans for the devices. They used you to test their new weapon far enough away from us, so they thought, that we would not find out. If not for the fact that Susan’s Uncle used to live among you before the plague, we would never have come here. The Evil one was an aberration. We have found no more like him so far, nor will we allow such a one to wield power over others should we find more. We are very happy that you have found peace. This is the way it should be. May it always be so for you and your people.” I sit down and let Susan speak.

“South of you, in the rest of Latin America are people who, like you, have come to embrace their differences and work together. You may want to make contact with them at some point. The temperature of the planet is still rising. Mostly because of uncontrolled fires. The waters will rise more before they eventually fall again. This area is really not a good place to live. Come summer the insects and floods will be worse. Come fall the hurricanes and flooding will be worse. Your food supplies are nearly gone. You cannot raise enough crops to sustain yourself. We will help with the food problem before we leave, but consider moving.”

Daniel rises, “Those of us you see here make up a group, along with a few others, called the Guardians of Br’thn. We are sworn to help out and protect a being that was born on Earth, but is not of Earth. Br’thn is of a life form like no other you have seen, a member of a race called the ‘thn. The ‘thn have been around since the beginning of time as we understand it. They watch over young sentient races such as ours till we are able to join the galactic community. We have been to the stars my friends; we have seen some of these beings. They even made a brief visit to Earth a few days ago to help us out. We are not alone in the universe.

We have been given a new chance at life because of the death the plague has brought us. This may sound confusing, but it is true. Our world was headed for destruction. Run away capitalism was hurting our Mother to the point where soon we would prevent the Earth from being able to sustain us any longer. Our air, water and land have been polluted. Rich ruled us with an iron fist, leaving us fewer and fewer scraps, while they lived in unimagined luxury, all at the expense of the other beings with which we share this world. Yes, even the alligator. Tasty though. I suspect they say the same of us.” That gets a laugh.

“We have a choice. We can go back to the old ways. For many, this is all they know, so they follow the same rut in the road not knowing any different. Or, my brothers and sisters, we can follow a new path. Respect each other, respect the earth and she will respect you. Don’t let leaders amass wealth and power again. Everyone should live at the same level. Everyone should respect our fragile existence and work together. Take care of each other.

How this will look, we don’t know. Feel free to experiment. Knowledge that you find can be shared on the net with others. Somehow we will succeed. We will learn a new path. As Jesus said a time will come when the lion will lay down with the lamb. That time has come. Let’s begin.”

A cheer rises from the crowd.

James rises, “We have one small request before we leave. The ‘thn have asked us to ensure that all the devices are gone. The devices represent a path that, like capitalism, would lead to destruction.”

The elder rises again, “No problemo. The last working device is in that shed over there. All the others no longer work. We only kept that last one as a reminder. One such device would not stop even a determined group of evil TK2s, so is of little use to us.”

We rise and concentrate on the shed. Out of it flows rice and beans, enough to feed the group through the winter at least. Supplemented with alligator of course. Tasty. Another cheer rises from the group. The all come up to us and give us hugs and kisses. This is certainly different. I could get to like this. Just as we are about to leave little girls and boys come up to us and present us with wild orchids as a parting gift. Susan is crying now. Remembrances of her uncle and her childhood here no doubt.

We took our time going back. We flew over the eastern US to do some surveillance. Looks like the Armstrong units are intact and functional. Their nuclear arsenal is intact at any rate. Food is being gathered and stored in the cities for the winter. Some of the buildings are beginning to resemble castles of old. Strange. We sense TKs, but none in concentration. In the south this meant integration, but up here? I have a bad feeling about this. From paradise to what?

We follow the rising sun back to Hotevilla. Slow for us, but very beautiful. I had only flown on a plane once as a kid, so doing so now was still a treat. Quieter though, Ah, TK Air! The only way to fly.



# Hotevilla

*The tents are gone and so are most of the TK2s and all of the 3s. Wonder what is going on.*

*We will soon find out. Land near the spot where we first used the gateway. I sense Barb and the others still there.*

“Barb what happened? Where did everyone go?”

*We have been asked to leave.*

“What? What happened to the plans for a university? For this to be a TK center and training area?”

*The council decided that we were too dangerous. That all the recent problems were because we were here and it was only a matter of time before someone else, if not the Chinese again, would try and take this place. By dispersing the TKs over a large area they are less of a threat to anyone.*

“What about us? Do we leave too, and where to? What about Br’thn and Yingui?”

*All of us.*

“Running Snake, Edwin and the others too?”

“Anyone TK2 or under has a choice of where they would like to go. They have been offered places with the Shoshone, back on the reservation where we all started, but all of the core group would rather go with you even if we are not TK3 or above, if you will have us. We have come too far to not see this to the end. They abandoned me once when they did not believe me. They have used up their chances as far as I am concerned. The weird thing was, was this was all done behind our backs. Not one of us was consulted. This is not our way of doing things. Something is going on.”

“You think there was some sort of outside influence?”

She nods yes, but then adds, “Not everyone was happy with the councils decision to limit tech. Most of the tribes allowed pretty much whatever you could afford. Net access, fuel cell carts, and the latest hunting weapons are all common. Not to mention alcohol. So, the governing council was also looking for someone to blame for why things have not gotten better.”

“Everyone does that. No one wants to accept responsibility or that this is the way it is, work with it.”

“Well I think we should wait till Br’thn and Yingui get back. I hope they don’t expect us to abandon them as well.”

*They have no real power over us. We can push our will on them if we wanted, so it is more of a request for the core group. I personally don't want to stay anywhere we are not wanted though. It should not be too much longer. Was actually surprised you got back before they did.*

“I agree that we should leave, but where? Lisa, are you getting anything?”

“Not yet. The future is still too fluid according to what Br'thn explained to me in passing. PC is normally at TK9 ability on our scale, so she is just learning herself.”

# Beijing

It is just after dawn when we arrive. Weird how the time zones mess you up so much when you can travel this fast. Technically it is tomorrow, but we are nine hours ahead as far as the sunrise is concerned in Hotevilla. Anyway the deadline is geared to New Atherton time which is eight hours different. That puts the deadline at about 6:43 pm local time today. I have to trust Br'thn on this, as I no longer carry any tech. At least it is not the middle of the night and there is still enough time for them to fulfill the request.

Br'thn takes off, so we are not together. No parasites this time or any other surprises I hope. Lisa said we would be ok. Hope she is right. She would not have been crying though if it was just routine. I walk up to the Premier's office complex. There is the usual grand hall inside, which is where Br'thn says she conducts most of the office state visits. Two guards at the entrance. I disable their weapons. When they see I am intending to go through their door, they point them at me, bayonets attached. They are expecting me. How sweet. I dissolve the weapons entirely. They pull their handguns. I dissolve them. They pull knives. I dissolve them. I am walking slowly, but do not adjust my pace. When I walk past them they try and grab me on both sides, but are prevented by a TK barrier. I open the door by hand and enter. Two more guards inside. I don't play with these and just dissolve anything metal around me. The doors fall off the hinges and falls down the steps. I use TK so the outside guards are not hit.

I reach the hall and open the doors with TK before walking through. No one here yet. I create a zabutan and zafu, sit and raise a 'thn barrier around myself to wait. Nice to do morning meditation in a hall again. Hope the doan remembers to ring the bell on time. Various people armed and unarmed swarm around me. Someone finally stands back and fires a weapon at the barrier to no effect. It is important in meditation not to let your surroundings get to you. You should be able to meditate equally well in a quiet monastery or a busy street. Time passes. That doan is definitely asleep on the cushion. Two hours pass before the Premier shows up with her entourage. As soon as she enters the room, I rise, bow to my cushion, dissolve it, turn and face her and bow again.

As soon as she sits I speak up, "You have until 6:43 pm to destroy all psiotic weapons." I use TP at the same time, so there is no misunderstanding.

An untergrunt speaks, “We have no working psiotic weapons.”

I would not be here if I did not already know your game. Br'thn and Qr'thn have already been through here, read your minds and found the pieces you attempted to hide. I have confirmed their location. I say nothing. Just stand facing the Premiere. They are in fact stalling as they reassemble several of the weapons and make them ready to fire on me. I dissolve the two thus assembled.

“You deny us the right to protect ourselves?”

“From whom?”

“From you psiotic monsters of course.”

“And how have we harmed you to be called monsters?”

“You destroyed two reconnaissance jets over US airspace, three jets over Arizona and the entire city of New Atherton, including three people who were still inside. You have threatened us with annihilation if we do not cede to your demands.”

“The pilots of the first two jets are unharmed. They were removed before their lethal payload of TK killer bots reached us. The bots and jets have been destroyed, you are correct. The second three jets were carrying nuclear warheads, one of which was fired directly at us. The people in New Atherton were removed before the scheduled time of liquifaction, but chose to ignore warnings and went back in. The city was destroyed because Regent Hua was raising anti psiotic parasites with the intent of destroying us. We had lent him every opportunity to work cooperatively with us, yet he chose destruction instead. We also have the right to protect ourselves. Just now two of the banned weapons were trained on me ready and capable of being fired. So, I ask, who is hunting whom? I am here to insure that this stops. You comply and I leave and never return unless you threaten us again or invite us.”

The Premiere talks to an aid and then rises, “This was not the report we received from New Atherton. The ones who reassembled the psiotic cannons are to be disciplined. They did this without my knowledge or authority. We were told by Regent Hua that you had threatened him from the beginning of your visit there, saying that if he did not do as you said, you would destroy the entire planet if necessary.”

“You should know that I am the messenger, not the one in authority. Like your servant, I have to be careful not to overstep what is allowed of me. I have been told to come here and re-inform you of the deadline. That I have done. I should not have answered your questions. It was wrong of me to extend to your that courtesy. It was not I who liquified New

Atherton. It would not be I who would, if necessary, destroy this world. May I speak as one human to another?"

She nods.

"We can argue till the end of time, both believing we are in the right and the other is wrong, but it does not change the fact that the edicts will be enforced. It is not because of the damage that the weapons could do to TKs or even fellow humans that these edicts were presented. If all I had to do was die to prevent millions of us from dying, I would do so without hesitation, but, understand, I had no part in these decisions. I was not asked, consulted or given a choice. The reason for the edicts is because our actions as humans, as sentient beings, will ultimately threaten the masters of this universe, the 'thn."

"Who are these 'thn that we may speak with them directly then?"

"They are of a race that is as old as the universe and possibly older. They chose where and if to present themselves. I cannot order them about. Frankly they really don't care if we destroy ourselves. Many cultures through out the universe have chosen that path and they have let them do so without intervention. But they will not allow us to progress to the point where we threaten the 'thn directly. Apparently they feel that our possessing knowledge of anti psiotic weapons and other armament would ultimately threaten them. Remember, they think very long term. Our current planetary master 'thn is over sixty five million years old and she is just a child. So, whereas neither you nor I believes we are an immediate threat to them, they feel we will be in the future and it is best to stop it now before our world is lost. They need us for some purpose I do not yet understand, but they will sacrifice us to save themselves."

"Then why not simply remove the TKs, or at least the high level ones? Then we would have no need of such weapons and therefore would not be a threat to them."

"I cannot say, for I do not know. The Guardians, as we are called, are sworn to protect the 'thn with our lives if necessary. One of the reasons you are speaking to me instead of Br'thn. Maybe they want us for other reasons. It is necessary for part of their reproductive process to have the assistance of a high level fluidic TK, of which I am not qualified, before you get any ideas, and for which Br'thn is too young. It is a relatively simple thing to remove the weapons, but it does not remove the ideas or the knowledge to make them."

"Without the weapons around, all the knowledge in the world is unlikely to result in more powerful versions. As a former scientist, yes, we have a file on you, you understand how human knowledge progresses

through experimentation and trial and error. As long as the weapons cannot be used, we cannot improve on them and are therefore are no threat.”

“That was the argument, or a similar one, behind the stockpiling of nuclear, chemical, biological and nanological weapons. There were never intended to be used. But one was fired at us recently and would have gone off if the 'thn had not destroyed it. Just as one went off in Sacramento at human hands, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well. A weapon made will ultimately be used. It may be seventy or more years before it does, but it will be used.”

“It would seem that at that time, it would be justifiable to then step in and enforce these edicts.”

“Being as old as they are, I would suspect that the 'thn have a better idea than you or I as to when the best time is. Remember, they have seen countless species rise to sentience and fall again. The fluidic that assisted Br'thn into coming into being was one such species. They are extinct now, but as they lacked the technical knowledge we possess, they were never a threat to the 'thn and were allowed to follow their own path without interference.”

“You mean Sauron. We have heard the story. Seems far fetched that one being could do so much to steer our evolution. I suspect that he took more credit than was his due. In a lot of ways, we are still rats at heart. We are very curious, greedy, likely to bully if given the strength advantage. A lot of similarities. Well, maybe not quite as randy.” She smiles.

“It is a shame that TK2s and above lose that part. Oh well, I do believe you are right about Sauron though.”

“Usually along with the stick is offered a carrot. What is the carrot in this case?”

“I was personally burned badly by the Regent Hua experience. You will forgive me if I am going to wait awhile to see more proof of goodwill before I help extend benefits.” She nods. Not a madman like Hua. She keeps her head, at least in front of me.

“We will make your deadline. Will you join me for breakfast? I was rather rushed getting here this morning.” I nod. She gets up and offers me her arm which I accept.

“Your English is quite good Premiere, did you spend time in the states?”

She smiles. Actually she smiles a lot. What has she got going? “The alternative means of communication would be for you to read my mind. I like this method better.” Ah. Do not take that which is not offered.

Breakfast was not porridge fortunately, just tea and plates of small bow, custards and other delicacies. Miniature versions of what I had seen and enjoyed in the San Francisco Chinatown. This new body does not need much, so I am slow to eat. Each time I get better at making one. No more aches and pains from arthritis, digestive dysfunctions, memory losses.

“What are you thinking?”

“Sorry, this is my third body. I am still getting used to it.”

“Have you ever tried taking other forms?”

“You mean like a tiger or something?” I grin. She laughs. She rises and I quickly follow. I bow to her, “Xiexie [thank you]” She bows back to me.

“I must go. I hope you succeed in removing the anti-psiotic tech before the deadline. The ‘thn are very strict about time for some reason.” I DS out to a space several kilometers above the hall. Br’thn is waiting.

***She intends to destroy the actual devices, but not remove the knowledge of how to make them.***

*I suspected as much. It could be on a thousand nodes by now. Once knowledge gets out with humans, it is very hard to contain. I recommend you let it go for now. The next deadline is almost a year away, which is wise, as it is not so easy to destroy those weapons.*

***We could offer to remove the weapons for them. All they would need to do is admit where they are.***

*It may come to that. But there is some honor in doing it yourself. There will be a fear that they will be disarming, but others with these weapons will not be. This is likely to also occur at the last possible moment.*

***We need to go some place quite and private to talk before the deadline.***

# Tibet

This should certainly be private enough. I don't sense anyone around for a hundred kilometers. I would not have thought that the plague would reach here, but maybe it was normally this thin. I increase the amount of red blood cells in my body to help compensate for the lack of oxygen.

“So, what's up?”

***I need for you to sit quietly. You were not unconscious while you were with me. Qr'thn put a temporary memory block on you till we could be in a quite place together. I will release the block now.***

“What do you see?”

“Your voice appears to be coming from a child. I am in a large room, all white, with a bed, again all white. I am without any clothing. You are on the other side of the room and appear to be a female, also without clothing, about nine or so. You are very pale, almost albino, with white hair. You are looking at me.”

“This is how your mind has chosen to interpret what it is receiving. This is not the way things really are. This is important to understand.”

“Where am I Br'thn?”

“When we DSed from Point Lobos your body was attacked by a parasite, living in the ninth dimension, that lives on psiotic beings. The creature cannot receive energy from the psiotic field directly, so removes this energy from those who can. It is also a fluidic being and cannot directly attack a 'thn without its destruction. An adult 'thn would be seriously hurt in this interaction, but a child like myself would likely die. I have removed the core essence from your body and am storing it in mine. We are currently outside New Atherton being carried by Ghost. Lisa and Qaletaqa are assisting.”

“Can you show me what my body and the parasite looked like?”

“Scanning.”

A three dimensional representation appears in the center of the room floating about a meter off the ground. I can see my prone form and the parasite attached behind my neck. Seven legs, three on each side and one holding my head still. I walk closer to the image. A large proboscis is inserted into my neck and attached directly to my spinal cord. The creature is transparent enough that I can see that she is already pregnant and has ten small ones growing inside her abdomen.

“We need to conserve energy as much as possible. I cannot draw too much psiotic energy with those things around. Ordinarily they only attack



when we cross their dimension, but now that they know which dimension we are in, they may be able to attack directly. Carrying you at the same time is a great risk.”

“Then don't take it Br'thn. Let me die. Don't risk yourself for my sake. You are too important.”

“The decision has been made and is mine to make. I love you Yingui. I will not see you die. We must rest. Please come to bed.”

“I cannot sleep with a child, especially one without clothing.”

“Parents do this all the time. Remember, this is only how your mind sees the situation. What you see is not reality. You are inside of me, so sleeping next to your thought of me is of no consequence. We must rest.”

I reluctantly get into bed next to Br'thn. When she puts her arm around me and snuggles closer I almost bolt. It will not be easy for me to rest this way. As I am thinking of all the horrible trouble I could get into with Qr'thn I fall asleep.

There is no night or day. When I awake, it is the same gentle light as when I first arrived. Br'thn is still next to me, but awake as well.

“Hello Br'thn. What is happening?”

“Time is experienced differently in this state. We are in the Mojave desert in southern California. We are in a knapsack in a hay loft with Ghost asleep next to us. Lisa and Qaletqa are doing chores to help compensate the owners of this barn for their keep.” She passes her hand through my chest hair. “In our normal shapes I cannot do this. Interesting. Do all these appendages and projections ever bother you?” She reaches lower and I instinctively pull away.

“No, don't touch there please.”

“Why not? I am aware of the functions, but you do not have those feelings any longer, so what is the harm. I am just curious.”

“I may no longer have the feelings, but it still represents that aspect of our existence. You said that this is not real, but is it not true that you are curious about sexuality? Is this not what your action represents?”

She thinks for a moment. Her facial mannerisms are not that of a nine year old. “You may be correct. Just like the playing of the ocarina brought on feelings.” She sits up in the bed, legs spread. “Tell me then of what it was like for you.”

“You mean the first time or in general.”

“There is a difference?”

“Yes. The first time is almost always a disappointment, especially in my culture. So much is pumped into our heads about it, from friends, relatives, the media, that the expectations are so large that when it finally

happens, it happens so fast as to be more about being nervous and doing everything right, about not embarrassing one's self. There is really not much room for thinking about what you are actually doing and enjoying it. Later, after it becomes less an impulsive action, you can begin to see the art and pleasure in it. About giving pleasure to the one you are with, which in most cases, is one you have fallen deeply in love with, though this is not always the case. The urge to reproduce is so strong that sometimes the need outweighs logic and emotions.”

“Is it always about reproduction? You mentioned pleasure and caring as well.”

“It is both and neither. The act itself is evolution's way of getting you to do something that normally would eventually lead to reproduction. In humans, it sometimes works the first time, but usually requires repeated attempts. Most of the time though, the participants are not actively thinking of reproducing at the time of the act and may even take steps to prevent that outcome. They are more interested in the giving and receiving of pleasure. Sometimes this is with someone they care deeply for; sometimes it is just for the pleasure aspect alone. People who are in love with each other usually form some kind of formal bond, so that they are recognized as a couple to others. In this way others know that they will only be mating with each other to the exclusion of all others.”

“We love each other. Why cannot we share in this way?”

“I love you very much Br'thn, but it is a different kind of love than between a man and a woman. With humans we are forbidden to share sex with someone who is under age, that is, with one who is seen as being too young to reproduce, and also with one who is closely related. You are underage for a 'thn, and I am in a way your uncle and therefore too closely related.”

“This is not true for all cultures of humans. You said that this form of affection can also be shared for the giving and receiving of pleasure, because you care for the other person and want to make them happy. If reproduction is removed as a possibility, where is the harm? I would like to make you happy.”

“Remember when we got in trouble for 'playing the ocarina' with you as the ocarina? Your mother was very upset. If something that simple got us into trouble, what you propose would likely get me killed. The risk is too great.”

“I do not believe it was trouble, but rather concern. The diversity imperative allows almost anything that does not directly present a danger

to the 'thn. The problem is that our situation is unique and no one knows how to proceed.”

I have to stop seeing her as a nine year old. There are brains behind that image and sixty five million years of experience, most of them with Satan as the teacher.

“So, you see Sauron as totally evil? That everything he does is wrong?” I have to remember she can read my mind as well, probably even easier in this condition.

“I see Sauron as ignorant, not necessarily evil. He did not set out to be evil; it is just how he comes across in our culture.”

“But you saw your own culture as evil.”

“Remember, Sauron had specifically formed that culture to his needs. Let us take a different tack. The sharing of pleasure in this way will involve a great deal of energy, probably psiotic energy. We are likely to draw attention to ourselves, either from the parasites, or from the Chinese looking for TKs.”

“But it is unlikely we will be able to share in this way again once you are back in a separate form.”

“You say you love me and are willing to take a chance with your own existence to save me, yet want to do something potentially lethal to both of us. That does not sound like love, but rather an obsession with wanting to know more about sex. It is natural to want to be close to people you trust. And, I am sorry, but I do not believe that this is the only chance we will have. We are likely to be spending millions of years together. So, far it has been less than one year. There is time to work this all out.”

“We need to rest again. May I still snuggle?” She is pouting.

“Yes, of course.” She is rougher than normal finding a comfortable position.

This time I awaken to Br'thn shaking me. “Wake up, wake up. We need to get ready. They are forming an array to send a message to mother.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Pushy Paws is dead, so the gateway is gone. You are here and therefore cannot help as intended either. We cannot get to the center as we now exist. They are setting up an array using us as a transmitter to send a message to mother to come and help us. She will know how to get you back into your fluidic form.”

“I was beginning to think you did not want that. But we are too vulnerable in this condition and others clearly need us. What do I do?”

“When Barb sends the message, amplified to us, we repeat the message and send it out to the array of TKs to be transmitted.”

Minutes pass, though time is weird here. Weeks have passed on the outside during our time together, though it appeared to me as only a few days.

“They miss aligned the array. Lisa is having them change the layout. Susan is adjusting to fine tune. Get ready! Jets are coming in. They have nuclear missiles.”

**QR'THN COME.** Repeat. **QR'THN COME.**

“Shit I bet the entire galaxy heard that one.”

“Likely” Susan, Rachael, Ron and James are dealing with the jets. They want to be sure their intent is hostile, before taking them out. I am reading from James’ mind that they had an earlier encounter that was less hostile and only centered on killing TKs.”

“Nukes kill more than TKs. They need to disarm the missiles. What are they doing out there? Are they crazy?”

“Mother is coming. We will be immediately taken to the center for processing.”

“I can feel the existence of a parasite close by. It is searching the dimensions nearby for us. Keep quiet.” Shit.

Coming out of the memory replay, “Whew, Br’thn. I can see why your mother wanted to suppress those memories.”

*Actually it is not that bad, but I believe she did not want you distracted by what might be. You have a habit of always seeing the dark side. That would have strongly shaded your interactions with the Regent and Premiere. You were in a place with a strong likely hood of choosing self destruction. There is more that I need to relate to you. Mother and I have talked while you were otherwise engaged.*

“I would imagine. Am I in trouble?”

*No. You tend to forget that I am much older than you and have experienced much that you have not, if not directly, then through Sauron.*

“What about Sauron? What was he like in this regard?”

*For one thing, I never felt affection for him, nor him for me. I was simply his precious, his tool for power. His sexual habits were different also. He did not lose them to TK, like you and the others did. He tended to equate sex with power and only chose to mate with those he saw as being above a certain standard, power wise. For that reason he rarely mated with humans, even when he was in his human form. Also the reason why he did not participate in Barb’s rape. He used people to suit*

*his ends. There was no give and take. No feelings of love or caring for others. He would never have laid down his life for another, nor even risked it unless there was much to be gained for himself.*

“This is certainly consistent with what he did to our culture. Even rats are social animals and show some affection for others. How come you did not turn out different? If a fluidic adds something of their psiotic matrix to the equation to help form a new ‘thn, I would have expected you to have some of his traits.”

*Part of it was because he left me alone and only used me when he wanted something done. This gave me plenty of time to see things for myself. Gestating ‘thn are great observers, our primary function. It is not the matrix of which you spoke that has the greatest influence, but the social environment. His species only lasted another three million years in a very small pocket of a few people helped constantly by his psiotic interventions. The reptile brain does not concentrate much on caring for young, though the social group as a whole keeps the young fairly safe from harm. Most of my experience has been with the societies of mammals actually. Also, don’t forget that the last ten thousand years I have been on my own with a group less influenced by Sauron, the Native Americans, specifically those who would later become the Shoshone and Lakota.*

*I was able to observe the deep affection that two people could have for one another. I was able to observe sorrow and loss. I was able to observe honor that allowed one to die for another, even one you did not know. I know what it means to live for an ideal that can possibly never be attained.*

*In your mind, you interpreted my being as a nine year old female. Your mind could not comprehend the idea that I am over sixty five million years old. I have experienced much more than you have Yingui, but not with you. There is still much we can share and learn from each other.*

“What about the direction the affection was taking? How does your mother feel about that?”

*There is concern, naturally, but know that there is no way I could help produce a child, nor could you. Neither of us is mature enough for that to work. We both need to experience and learn much more. Our psiotic levels are also too low. A ‘thn must be a ten and a fluidic can best accomplish this at level nine. The uncle analogy also fails. Psiotically you could not be more different than Sauron and still be a*

*living being. All life has needs, to survive, etc. You should not fault yourself for those feelings.*

“But, I make so many mistakes.”

*Everyone does. Even a level twelve ‘thn will admit to making mistakes. That is why we share our experiences with each other, to learn from each other. And no one goes through the maturation process without learning in this way. Mistakes are what make us alive. Only the most primitive solidics are near perfection, but they are not self aware, they cannot reproduce nor interact with other beings beyond the mechanical level. Your best computers are close to the simplest solidics in form and function if that helps in your understanding. No one would blame a computer for making a mistake. You blame the programmer or the input or yourself. Life is mistakes that are compensated for and learned from.*

“You are certainly giving me a lot to think about. Am I still allowed to share affection with you?”

*We are allowed whatever we decide to do. Parents have to allow some degree of freedom for their children to learn and we are in a new situation that no ‘thn or human has ever been through before. We will make lots of mistakes, but we will learn and we will be able to help others because of what we learn. In time mother and the other ‘thn will come to trust us and accept us into the greater community. We are BOTH still children in their eyes.*

“In other words, lighten up Yingui.” And I thought seventy was old. Now I am just a baby. Way younger than Br’tbn in so many ways.

*Yes.*

*Time is up for Beijing. We need to do a scan and meet with the Premiere again.*

“Thank you Br’tbn for putting up with me. I am sorry I thought of you in this way. I am not your parent, just your friend. I love you.”

# Beijing

This time I sit on a bench outside the Premieres office building. It is nearly dark, but some of the flowers that bloom at night are very fragrant. That and the moon on the pond make a great scene. It does not take long for her to come out.

“I thought this was a better setting than the formality of the hall.” I hand her a replica of a jasmine flower made out of diamond in one piece. No way to make that by human hand or machine. “Why are there no people. I thought your population survived largely intact?”

“We were expecting you.”

“Ah. I am not used to be so scary.”

“That was not the reason.” Now I am confused. She moves closer. oh.

“You know that TKs are changed?” She pretends to smell the diamond flower.

“Of course. People in power are largely sexless. It goes with the territory. But it is still fun to play the game, even if just for a moment. But we can get down to business. I assume your scans came in clean and that we are in compliance.” And you have no intention of giving up research into this area. Br'thn is right. We will not eliminate psiotic weapons, just re-direct the effort.

“There is still the one year deadline. That will not be as easy to achieve. You should know that it will be enforced world wide and is not negotiable.”

“I would hope that was the case and you were not treating me, ah, special.” She is still playing. Really looks funny when it means nothing now. Is she going to roll around like a cat in heat next? I am sure her charms must work on some men. She is still attractive for someone about fifty, but I have a new love now and I have no intention of cheating on her. Especially because there is no way I could get away with it.

***Your logic makes no sense. It is not possible for you to mate with her.***

*Just playing Br'thn. Not everything is serious. Let's go home.*

I rise, bow to the Premiere, bubble up and slowly rise into the air, waving to her. She blows a kiss and watches me disappear.

# Hotevilla

The group is all waiting for us at the top of the mesa when we return. “Are we late? I did not know we were supposed to meet at a specific time.”

“We have been kicked out. They want us to leave. All the lower TKs already have.”

“Did you have some sort of meeting while I was gone? What did you say to piss them off?”

“We were not at the meeting, none of us here were. They decided while we were gone. No one stood up to defend us.”

“The reason is apparently because it is too dangerous for us to be here for them. They are afraid that we will get them all killed, or a least enough that it would not be worth it.”

“Where to then?”

“There is another problem. Ghost and Marm have disappeared. Yes, we scanned, so that means they are out of range or hidden someway.”

*Br'thn can you find them?*

***They are outside Albuquerque New Mexico on a reservation.***

“Let's go. Do you have everything? Ron, all your tools? Ok, then, bubble up.”

“Just like that? You are not going to talk them out of it?”

“Running Snake, help me out. Would there be any point to trying to talk to them at this point?”

“They need time to feel the implications. This is the second time they have abandoned me and by inference, us. There have been no consequences. We need to let them find their own way. Too strange and new for them, for most humans. We need a private place, a quiet place where we can get our act together.”

“First the cats. Let's go already.” We salute James and crack up. We are free again, but together this time.



# Eastern Keres Reservation

“Lisa how are you holding up?” We are walking along a path that will lead to the reservation headquarters or at least where the cats appear to be and also the largest concentration of people.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? Am I that strange? Besides I am more worried about you.”

“Yes, but we all are strange. We are always checking up on each other, but because I do not know you as well in this situation, I need to build up my database of 'normal' behaviors to the point where I do not need to ask, but can see for myself, just by taking it all in.”

“Huh?”

“Once I know you better, I will not have to ask, I will know.”

“Oh. Is this because I am, or rather, was a pear?”

“Partly, but mostly because you are new. Qaletaqa may know you well, but we don't. You did good on the array though. Thanks. You helped save our lives and maybe the world.” This makes her quiet. “You get used to it. Saving the world and all. Gets easier with practice and accumulated experiences.”

“Do you always talk like this?”

“Yeh, he does. Give her a break Dr. Philosophy. We don't want to scare her away when we are in the middle of no where.”

*This is not the middle of nowhere. We are in the longest known continuously settled place in North America.*

“How did you know that Barb? No net here. At least I am not picking up anything.” Ron taps his head like something might be wrong with his implant. She looks at him like he is stupid and slowly points to the sign that says what she just said to us.

“I knew that.”

“So did I” We all walk past Ron like were are superior to him in an exaggerated way.

“Here kitty kitty. Come out come out where ever you are.” Susan has the sillies now. Great.

Takes us half an hour to get there, where we are obviously expected. There are ten elders waiting outside a pueblo looking our way. Ghost and Marm are on two of their laps fast asleep. Ghost is being stroked by the elder whose lap he is on. Suffer suffer Ghost.

I DS a GMSoy strip out of my pack and hold it up and wait. Right on cue, Ghost winks out and the strip disappears. “Didn't think he was that asleep. So, why did you guys come here?”

*Pain giver.*

“Who is that? You are protector. Pushy Paws was great lap. Barb is listener. Who is pain giver?”

*Sauron?*

“I doubt that. More likely someone who tried to hurt them while we were gone. Not everyone likes cats. Especially these two.”

*We are being impolite.*

*She's right Boss. Rachael of course.*

I bow to the elders. “Do you know why we are here?” One nods, but says nothing. Everyone is still. Another makes a gesture to sit.

*We are to sit. Make chairs like theirs for yourselves and the others. Keep your hoods up, this sun will fry us otherwise even in the cold. Or at least the un-enhanced at any rate. One elder raises an eyebrow. They don't know who we are. Must be the youngest one who blew his cool.*

*Fix wires*

*Huh?*

*Fix wires. Promise.*

*The cats do not understand tech. Wires is their term for all tech, so it could be anything.*

Ron and Barb rise. One of the elders moves aside and lets them enter the pueblo. The rest of us wait outside.

### **Meditation time.**

Barb comes out fuming. *POS 3! I can't believe there is even equipment still around that can run that dinosaur.* She takes her seat shaking her head.

### **Meditation time.**

Ron comes out smiling and motions to Barb, who gets up and goes back in with him.

### **Tummies are growling.**

They both come out and sit.

*All done. Ron had to make some parts by duping existing stuff before I could reboot. Had to rewrite part of the operating system. It is a patch work job, but it works.*

An elder gets up and goes in. He comes out a minute later carrying a small device and sets it down before Ron and Barb. He then goes to the others and says something. All their eyes are open now. He sits and all is quiet again.

“Well how was I supposed to know this was what they wanted fixed?”

Qaletaga cracks up, “Ask next time?”

Ron picks up the device, looks it over and hands it to me. “I don't do toys.”

A toy? Except for a few dents it looks fine. Easy to fix. The battery is deader than a doornail. Whatever a doornail is. Hmmmm.... I replace the battery with a psiotic one, like what George, Hashra and I had worked out. Now where is the on switch. Not obvious. I start to scan it.

I little girl comes running up and stands in front of me, but I am too concentrated to notice.

*Yingui, in front of you.*

“Huh?” Then I see her. Oh. I hand the device to her. She grabs it and runs back to the elders and hides behind one of them. When she sees she is safe she starts to play with the device. It turns on and she is ecstatic and goes running off skipping to one of the other buildings. Sounds of other children can be heard.

The elders get up, so we rise also. They motion for us to follow. We are headed out of town towards the hills.

We walk for most of the rest of the morning. Dry and cool, so easy walking, but it is uphill. I have an advantage as I still have a boosted blood supply I made for Tibet. Edwin is happy to be outside again. He keep stopping to look at some lichen and then running to catch up. Running Snake rolls her eyes each time. They are getting very close. As are Lisa and Qaletaga of course. Problem there as both of them are on the TK track. Oh well, they have few years to enjoy it.

*Br'thn you are being very quiet. How come?*

***We are headed for some sort of danger, but I have not figured it out yet. Still too distant from this time frame.***

*Br'thn senses something Lisa, do you feel anything?*

She turns to look at me and then remembers she does not need to do that. *Nothing yet, but I will keep my sense open. How are you and Br'thn doing?*

*It will take time, but we will do whatever needs to be done together at least.* She seems pleased by that statement and runs up to Qaletaga to hold his hand and lean against him for a moment.

*We have slowed down.* We are in an open area surrounded by rocks tens of meters high. Only one way in or out unless you count up.

*Food?*

*Ghost is back to normal, but why are we here?*

*And why are we TPing instead of talking?*

*Because the elders have not said anything.*

*Maybe they don't speak English?*

The elders stop and motion us to sit. This we know how to do and we roll something up to sit on and plop down where we are.

Ok, now what?

Ghost is nudging my leg and looking up at me. *Food!*

I pull out the bag of soy strips and pass them around. Ghost follows the bag, but no one gives him any. Marm just waits patiently. I give Marm one because he has been so good. Ghost DSs over to me and tries to paw one out of my hand.

“Be nice Ghost and you will get one. You don't see Marm begging do you?”

He looks at Marm, back at me. *Stupid Monkeys.* Then walks towards the elders.

They pull out a bag of their own and pass it around. No one hands one to Ghost either. He DSs to the center of our gathering looking alternatively at each group. Finally he comes over and sits patiently in front of me. I hand him a strip. He then walks over to the elder on whose lap he was sitting when we arrived and he does the same. He receives a piece of jerky.

The elder speaks, “Smart cat.” So, at least one speaks English. That helps.

Daniel speaks, “Why are we here?”

“Don't know, you followed us.” The rest of the elders nod.

“We really need to work on our communication skills.”

“Do you know why the cats are here?”

“They showed up yesterday. Strange ones. We started calling 'em popcats on account of their habit of moving the way they do. Nice to know they have names and people who care for them.”

“Ghost has saved our lives several times. He is certainly not ordinary.” I hand him another strip. Lisa offers him hers and he goes there next. Slowly.

“Already had too much Purina sap chow Ghost?” Huh? I look at the strip in my hand. I scan it. Cornmeal, soybeans, tons of additives, beef flavor.

“She's right. This is equivalent to plain old dog or cat food. I have been eating them for so long I never thought to scan them except to dupe them. This would not even pass for the good stuff. Though to give them credit, we can digest corn better than a dog or cat. We should stop feeding them this stuff. Not good for them. Likely to become diabetic. Should be ok for us though.” I eat another piece. Everyone else looks at their pieces and set them down.

“How did you know that Lisa?”

“Common knowledge. You didn't know? Why would you eat something that you did not know what was in it?”

“We are going to have a long talk at some point Lisa. We need to know more about what pears did to us without our knowledge.” The others nod, so do the elders. They come over to share some of their jerky. I accept one piece and then use some of the rocks on the ground to use for mass to dupe some more for everyone.

“You can make chairs, food and talk without words. Do you change shape as well?”

“We each have different talents. Not all of us can do what you say.”

“One of us is on his third body though, so it might be possible.”

“We would consider it an honor to help guide you.”

“You can do this yourselves?” I sense no TK among them.

“Third elder was once a bear, but we usually use this form. Most practical one.”

“How do we begin?” Rachael is always the most adventurous one. Followed closely by James.

“Only those who wish to learn this art should remain. Everyone else should leave. This is sacred knowledge to us and we do not share it lightly.”

“We all stay. We tend to get into trouble when we are separated. Especially Turtle.”

“He was once a turtle then?”

“Still is in some ways. No, Running Snake gave some of us animal names to match our personalities.”

“May I have an animal name too dear?” Edwin asks the question but Angpetu and Lisa are also paying attention.

“I think I may have started something. Let's see. Angpetu you are so curious. A number of animals are curious, so that only helps a little. You like flying and the color blue. How about Blue Jay?”

“I love them! They are so much fun to watch. Does this mean that I have to collect food and hide it all over now?” We crack up over that image. Angpetu flying all around hiding sap chow.

“Now Lisa's turn. Beautiful and courageous, rarely complains, tall and thin, analytical and smart, and very adaptable. Of all of us, you have had to go through the most in terms of a cultural change. So, someone who can change their skin when they wear out their old one. That would make you a snake, but not just any snake, something special. Not a poisonous one, I have never seen Lisa harm anyone. A king snake.”

“Good choice. Very bad luck to kill a king snake, but is Qaletaq ready for a king other than himself.” He gets teased for that one and lots of snickers from the males feigning being hung and such.

But he takes it well. “She will always be my queen.” He bows and offers his non existent sword to her which she takes and knights him in return.

The rest of us get down on our knees, “All hail Queen of the snakes.” So, her name becomes Queen Snake.

“Last but not least, my love. I feel I am too close to you to decide. Quiet and courageous like Lisa, curious like Angpetu, to the point of distraction most of the time. Very happy for days at a time alone in the middle of nowhere, yet soft and gentle as well.”

“Oooooo, kissy kissy!” Edwin rolls his eyes and Running Snake blushes and leans against him, her hand in his.

Rachael and Ron start chanting, “Puma, puma!”

“Wait a minute. If Ed gets Puma, I want a new name.”

We all yell at the same time, “James!”

The elders are confused, “What is your animal totem James?”

He mumbles, “badger” They don't hear him, so he says it louder, “Badger”

One of the elders gets up as if ready for a fight, “And what is wrong with Badger?” Obviously his totem or name.

James comes back with, “Nothing, sigh.”

*I want to know how long this will take.*

We had not directed any of our thoughts to this point at the elders, though this left Barb out of the equation. They had heard the cats, but this was now a fellow human who could potentially read their thoughts as well.

“Can all of you do this, mind reading and mind speaking?”

“Most of us, but not all. We still want to know how long.”

“Normally this takes around twenty years.” The mortal contingent sucks air. “But I suspect that with this group it will be much faster. Maybe only a year or two.”

“Well, it is not like we have anything else to do.”

“We will need to set things up better than this if where we are going to live.” The elders nod.

*Do you have any problems with our using our abilities to set things up? Other people would not let us change rock or soil into structures and materials.*

“We make our own homes out of rock and soil, so why would we object? You are not going to change the entire mountain are you?”

“No, this small clearing should be enough.”

“How cold does it get in the winter and how warm in the summer.”

“We have snow in the winter and too warm to work in the summer.”

Ron pulls out a bracelet and snaps it on to do some calculations using his neural implant. “This area has sufficient mass to provide shelter. Nothing luxurious by pear standards, but it will be comfortable.”

Daniel gets up. “Relay what you have in mind to all of us, including the elders, so they can tell us, if what you have in mind, breaks any taboos. Lisa *and Br'thn* let us know if you sense any danger.”

“Right.” Ron concentrates and a vision comes to us of the top of the clearing covered over with a semitransparent rock like fascade. There is a fire pit in the center, fountain and bathing facilities off to one side. Entrance facing east. Sleeping areas in hallowed out spaces in the rocks themselves.

“The rocks themselves provide thermal buffering so the temperature will not change much, in winter or summer. We can fine tune with TK. We could do more if we allowed solar, passive and active, but that would draw more attention to ourselves. A sat could pick us up easy.”

“Tired of being hunted, so let's avoid making ourselves visible.” The others nod.

Daniel gets up. “Let's get the main structures in place and then worry about details. We have only so much light in a day. TKs to here, all others should stand back. Keep clear of the walls or the center where we are.”

We assemble ourselves. The elders look a little confused. They will learn.

Ron takes over. “Daniel and Yingui, you do the roof. The rest of us will work on the sleeping areas, the bathing areas, and the fire pit.”

One of the elders speaks up, “We will need a sweat lodge. Does not have to be very big.”

“Let’s see. We could either make it similar to the sleeping area, or we could go down. How about an entrance near the fire pit, so hot stones can be moved easily.” They look at each other and then nod to Ron.

“Here we go then.” We sit down and concentrate. As the sleeping areas are excavated Daniel and I convert the mass to carbon nanotube fibers and weave a pattern in the sky above us to settle down onto the tops of the rocks. The pattern is complex, so as to blend in with the surroundings. I paint the top to look like the scene below, so that a sat from above would see little change. By tweaking the surface materials, it will give the correct IR signature as well. The carbon fiber naturally absorbs microwaves, so radar should be confused as well.

Meanwhile the others finish the fire pit and have a crude fountain outlined, the sleeping areas are on several levels. The non-TK on the lower level and the others above. Steps are cut into the side to allow non TK to reach the TKs in an emergency or to just visit. We can’t see inside without scanning, but there is enough room to afford some privacy, but not enough to weaken the rock structure. This takes all of about ten minutes. Seemed longer to us, we were doing the concentrating after all. To the others it must have seemed like a nightmare that crystallized into a dream.

After they close their mouths an elder asks, “Where will the smoke go?”

“We can’t afford to be sending smoke signals, so we will us TK to remove the smoke from the air when we have fires. We can always add baffles or some other structure later if this is too much of a hassle.”

“Those bathing areas are still too rough. I think we can do better than that.” Susan looks at them with a critical eye.

“May I try. I helped on the baths at Tassajara.” She nods, not sure what I have in mind. I close my eyes and take over. The fountain becomes three tiered. There is a wall behind the fountain. I make it appear to be fine Italian blue tile with gold inlay. The bathes are behind the wall, The men on the left and the women on the right. I add a pumping system using the TK power source an an electric motor buried in the rocks behind to make it as quiet as possible. The thermal mass of the rock helps keep the motor cool enough. On the face of the wall I add



a stylized image of Ghost, like I did for the coins I used in San Francisco. This time no Hua on the other side.

“The rules at the monastery were that men were never allowed in the women's area. After dark and before light women could choose to be on the men's side if they want. We can try it to start anyway.”

“Now, as to the sleeping areas. They need a lot of work. Not much more than holes right now. Come on girls, we have work to do.” Oh no. We are called in one at a time to voice at least our veto power. Not much else is allowed. The elders are first and we soon see a pueblo style take shape, complete with post like structures poking out of the walls. James' looks sort of like the lodges used by the present day Lakota. He has really taken them to heart. Rachael looks old and modern at the same time. Maybe a Dali version of rock, if you can imagine that. Will be interesting to see the interior.

When they get to Lisa's a lot of giggling is heard. I feel sorry for Qaletaq. I suspect he will be spending time there. I don't even want to know what a former pear thinks a perfect living space should look like.

Barb wanted a simple open place near the entrance, so she could be with whoever her new friends would be. Lots of room inside for them when the weather got bad. Her bed is carved into the side of the rock inside about a half meter off the ground and about a meter high. Piles with blankets it should be comfortable.

They save me for last. “Come on old man, you can't postpone this forever.”

“Just keep it simple. Think monk.”

“Ah ha. Does your partner have anything to say about this?” Some sort of exchange goes on between them and Br'thn, but I am not included. She has staid out of sight. We don't really know the elders yet.

A few minutes later, I am called over, or rather up. They have placed my room nearly at the roof level, not that Daniel's is much lower. I feel sorry for the non TK. They are going to have a long climb. Must be thirty meters to the entrance. I can DS there in a microsecond, but I still remember my old fear of heights. I decide to take the stairs to get a better appreciation of height and scale of the entire compound. Everyone else remains at ground level. Br'thn is back in my pocket, but remains silent. I can almost feel her grinning.

I have to go around a couple of turns, similar to the entrance only narrower. A large person will not make it through here. Inside is light. The ceiling is of the same transparent fake rock as the cover Daniel and I made over the entire compound. The walls are painted white and look

familiar. Yep, right where it should be is the bed. No covers or blankets, just a simple soft place to lay down. Br'thn has recreated the vision in my encounter with her while I was in her mind. I clack my tongue. Excellent acoustics. Perfect for flute music. There is more. At the other end of the room is another opening. I go through it. After the same twists and turns it opens up to an outdoor patio and view of the entire mountain range to the south. I can view the sunrise or sunset from here easy. There are no barriers to falling off, so a non TK would not be very comfortable here, but for me, it is very freeing. I look back to see how we did on the roof. I touch up a few spots we could not see from underneath.

***Do you like it?***

*The room is a bit scary, but I know it is something I need to work out. If it weren't for our shared experience I would love it. You all did a good job. Thank you.*

***We need to get back to the others.***

*Yes.*

“Mei Ying reminded us that we had forgotten toilets. We put them over here, so as to be away from both rooms and baths.” Between two of the rock rooms down a small path. Privacy is assured.

“That is for the women, the men's is on their side in a similar fashion.” The entire compound is split into male and female halves. Men to the north and women to the south. Elders to the west. My place is above the elders, but along a path that starts from the men's area. The baths are between the Elders and the women. They reversed the order, so that the men are now to the right and women to the left. The elders are happy that they are this close. At least without flush toilets, no one is going to make enough noise to wake others in the middle of the night.

“We also added stuff around the fire pit to be used as a communal kitchen. I suspect that we will be eating together for at least one meal a day. Speaking of which, what do we do for food. The elders say they are really too old to hunt and we don't eat meat.”

“Most of us don't anyway. I notice the cats have been scarce since the area was disturbed and the local residents decided to evacuate. Hope some of them made it. Too much to ask that all made it with those two around.” People smile at that thought.

Mei Ying speaks up, “Ok, I have seen the way this works. Let's get organized. Everyone empty your pockets. Come on, everyone includes you elders also.”

They look at us. One speaks. “We are not elders. Just a bunch of old men hanging out in front of the pueblo. We are not even all the same

tribe. Keres women rule in these parts. We do appreciate the wonderful place to hide from them though. Your secret is safe with us.” They all nod enthusiastically.

“Well, empty your pockets anyway. Food items of any kind, no matter how small is what we are looking for. You need not show us personal items.”

Quite a collection is brought forth. Some of it useful.

“Looks like beans, rice, corn, jerky, sap chow, candy, remnants of chocolate, tea, raisins, peanuts. That's it. We could use some vegetables.”

“We know what is edible locally, though with winter so close, it will not be much. We should be able to come back with some squash seeds and several root vegetables.”

“That should do it for now. I propose that we split the cooking duty into teams. We have twenty two people here.”

“What about the ten of you. Won't your people miss you? Come looking for you? It would not be hard to follow our tracks here. We did nothing to hide ourselves till we got here and we are not that far away.”

“Don't you want to learn of our knowledge? How to transform? We will leave word that we are on a spiritual quest. Should not be a problem.”

That was not entirely true. Ten left the next morning to gain samples we could dupe. Four returned the following day. We were ready to bolt yet again. Even brought SG3 closer and hid it under a rock like wrap.

# Four Elders

“Sorry we took so long. Old wives can sometimes be a problem. No one will talk. We brought more food for you.” They bring out several kinds of jerky, many kinds of nuts and seeds, herbs, some leaves of some kind.

“Are these seeds still viable?” Mei Ying hands them to me. I pick out several that are still alive using my psiotic sense.

“These should sprout.” Susan takes them from me and carries them away.

“How did you get raisins? This is not wine country.”

“Rich do crazy things. They will not mind. All dead of plague. Try the chardonnay.” He hands them a lighter colored one.

Edwin and I check out the herbs. Some smell like wild sage, others mint, some I can't identify. Wild mushrooms are in here as well. Hope they know what they are doing. I don't scan anything weird. It would be hard to poison a TK, our systems seem to know what to do, but the non TK could be in trouble till we get to them and figure out how to neutralize or remove the bad stuff.

“What are we going to use for vitamin C?”

Edwin smiles and pulls out something from the herb collection, “Rose hips. Makes a nice tea.”

“Roses too? Must have been quite a pear colony. Where? Outside Albuquerque?”

They nod. “Just south of here. May even be able to see it from up top of the rocks.” I can scan it from here.

I mention, “From the balcony you made me, I can see the Keres rez to the east and some houses spread way out to the south. That must be them. I noticed some were burned.”

“People have gone over them pretty well, not much left. Some died in the traps. We burned those houses. Bad when people are even greedy in death.” We all nod.

“We saw many tracks on the way here, all leading in and out of the first cave.”

“That would be Barb's place. She is our Dr. Dolittle. She talks with the animals. Only place the cats are not allowed when she has visitors.”

“Can you call a specific animal and keep it calm?” She shrugs and nods. No big deal to you Barb, but none of the rest of us can do it. I can

talk with them, but do not have the way of exuding trust the way she does.

“Good. We go to cave place under fire. No sweat yet.” We follow them single file down into the chamber. Takes a moment for our eyes to dark adapt. The interior is done in a sort of adobe finish with rugs on the floor and a ceramic lined pool in the center for when we want steam. About five degrees C cooler in here than above. People start to take off clothing as our bodies warm up the space. We are soon down to t-shirts and shorts. Br'thn is hidden in my robe next to me. I have opened my mind to her, so she can see what I see. I have been able to do this for some time, but it is even easier since the time I spent with her.

“Call in your first visitor please. Please to remain quiet.” She nods. We are silent. Soon a creature comes waddling down the steps, sniffing here and there to be sure there are no traps. It sounds like it is complaining with slow growls and grunts. I open my mind to it, a male badger. I grin. James is going to go ballistic over this one.

*The elders want me to link my mind to ^hffgt and transmit his thoughts to everyone here.*

He has a name for himself, or at least for his kind. Interesting.

Whoa! I am seeing through the eyes of the badger, which are not that good, though better than mine in the low light, B&W, but the sense of smell is fantastic. Incredible! The smell of human is overwhelmingly horrible. I can smell the remnants of soil we brought in. I can tell which plants each and everyone has stepped on. Some people stepped on wet ground, probably from the baths, faint odor of soap. The old leather of the teachers' clothing. Spilled food from days ago on one pant leg. I could go on forever. There is so much here. Sounds. Each person here has a different rhythm and pattern to their breathing and I hear the birds outside the chamber and know not only species, but individuals. The rumble of Ron's stomach. James has gas which he is holding.

*Mice promised?*

I locate some mice, dupe them and DS the duped ones into a pile in front of him. Still warm, but not alive. He sniffs and locates them easily. I can taste the mouse much worse than when the cats were TPing us. Yuck! ^hffgt is very pleased with the meal and I feel pleasure coming from him. ^hffgt goes over to James and curls up resting on his leg and goes to sleep. James carefully places his hand on ^hffgt's back and I can feel the warmth of his hand. It feels good.

Dreams come. Of finding a mate, based on the smell of her in heat. The emotions are overwhelming and I am a little uncomfortable in the

nether regions. A battle ensues over a rival and muscles twitch as I find myself rolling and feeling the claws and teeth of the other badger. I am victorious and claim the mate for myself. Elation. Later the smell of dead young. The rage and sorrow of kits eaten by a coyote. The suspicion and ultimately the pleasure of finding the two legs who listen and offers good food. Deep sleep.

Barb releases her link. We just sit until ^hffgt awakens and goes back up the stairs.

“Wow!” I can't add to that.

“Next time we go deeper. Still feel human judgment in experience.”  
But I really don't like the taste of mouse. Next time find a vegetarian.

*Do you feel this all the time with your friends Barb?*

*^hffgt was one of the easier ones. His emotions are very intense.*

James is barely able to speak. “Badger is a fine name.” There are tears in his eyes, but he says nothing else. He got it anyway.

It is late afternoon when we emerge into the blinding light, like moles coming out of a burrow. For some reason everyone heads immediately to the baths for a long soak to try and remove the human smell from our bodies. The teachers are amused, but say nothing.

With Barb's range, we really do not need to bring each creature into the sweat lodge, but it helps us to be in a dark room to concentrate. Easier to loose your sense of self, as it were. As good as Barb is, our teachers are complaining that we are still retaining too much of our sense of being observers and not participants. But heck, the animals are still the ones making the decisions, not us. What do they expect? Even Barb never controlled anyone, she just asked.

Males and females, on alternate evenings, use the sweat lodge as it was intended. Hot rocks are placed in the basin and water is poured over then, with herbs adding various smells. Some of the smells are not unlike what we sometimes get from our host creatures. This is meditation time. We are told to try and visualize and imagine what it is like to BE a particular creature. What is worse is that we are no longer allowed to cook any of our food. We have to eat everything raw, just as others do. I long for corn bread and beans cooked over a smoky fire.

The worst time though, by far was when we saw the world through Ghost's eyes. From his perspective humans were totally loony. We never slept enough. Dream time was vital to understanding the universe. We ate horrible tasting food most of the time. Vegies were for trying to get rid of hair balls, no cat ever wanted to throw up. We spent so much time plotting and planning. We complained about cats playing with their food,

but then we play with our entire lives. We did not understand the need to hunt, the exhilaration, the sheer pleasure of outwitting your prey. We did not give honor to our prey when we hunted either. Dragging out the hunt so as to not to dishonor the prey was vital. Only a very hungry desperate cat did not take the proper time to honor their prey. Oh and our obsession with water and clothing. A good tongue was better than any pool of water. Water was for drinking, not getting in, unless there were fish present of course. Clothing was for lying on, not in. Being naked, with no fur was impossibly ugly. And so on. I think the TP/DS ability has raised their intelligence, just as it has with us [memories for details especially]. Ghost knew what were doing when we ‘became him’, so it was more a guided tour than a peeping tom feeling. Our teachers were very pleased with Ghost and rewarded him handsomely. Spoiled would be my word.

### **Lisa and the Pears**

“Lisa I want to try and understand better what was done to us, so we can set things up so as to prevent it from happening again.”

“If I tell you what I know, which is not that much, you will all hate me.”

“Is this something that you feel with your sense, or just your emotions?”

She thinks about this for a moment, “You are right. Just my own fears. I feel nothing but love from everyone here. At least in our group. The teachers I am not so sure about.”

“We won’t include them then. Let’s go up to my balcony. That way Br’thn can participate as well.”

***Thank you. It has been hard to stay hidden for so much. Though being a cat was fun.***

*Fun? You like the taste of mouse?* Ron sticks his tongue out like he is trying to get rid of something. We all laugh.

“The next creature on the list is the wolf, they eat mice as well.”  
Great.

“I am not the only former pear. Edwin should be able to add material that I miss.” He nods.

“Please, this is important to me. I am no longer a pear, even the low one that I was and given a choice I would never have been one. I abhor the pear culture and will help in any way possible to prevent it from happening again. At the same time, when I did not know any better, I was

in the culture and accepted it as natural, even though I know now it was anything but.”

Qaletaga squeezes her hand, “It is ok, you are among friends.”

“In the 1700’s we inherited a class system from the British, but our version was less obvious. It was still possible for a poor person to become one of the rich. A slim chance granted. And even after they achieved it, they would not be accepted into the social circles entirely, though their children often were. It took us nearly two hundred and fifty years, but before the plague, we had achieved a very strong class structure. No sap would ever become a pear now, though it was possible for a pear to become a sap. That was the threat to keep us in line, the ax over our heads. Of course you all know the fallacy of the lotteries. It went much deeper though.

New Atherton was started ten years before the riots burned out Atherton. It was all planned in fact. The fires were set by pear employees and not saps at all. Professional instigators were hired to start the riots at first. Everything was carefully controlled. With the excuse of the riots, much greater controls could be passed and enforced. And the burned out Atherton provided good cover for what was underneath.

This was the way it was with all pear activity. Saps were serfs, slaves, not even thought of as human. Anything that helped put them into their place was valid. Impossible situations were set up all over to deprive saps of money and power to do anything. Prices, interest rates, stock markets, bonds, real estate prices, nothing was off limits. Since the pears knew ahead of time which way things were going, they placed false hope in an area and then removed the rug. Soon saps owned nothing and pears owned everything. And any pear that did not play along was simply left off the ‘to know’ list and they fell with the rest. Some were lucky for a time, but eventually all fell who did not play along. It did not start out as an outright conspiracy, but it soon enough became one as communications became better and better. Entire computer systems were set up to keep track of the complexity. We even stopped using money at all among ourselves some eight years ago. We were all part of some huge organism. Ideas were the best way to go up the ladder now. Ideas on how best to oppress the saps that is.

At some point, so much had been taken from the non pears that they could no longer afford the products they produced. A fundamental decision was made to let them fall as far as possible and reap the benefit of a cheap labor force. This labor was used to be servants, construction, specialty farming and most of all, warriors. All the things that pears



valued could now be had easily. The markets were exported to where the labor was once exported. The roles were reversed, but the pears stayed. With all the land now belonging to the pears, they could do what they wanted with it. Saps had to live crammed three to a room. Houses were torn down to make flower gardens and open space.”

Edwin adds, “And this producer consumer labor force dichotomy could be switched back and forth as a generator for pear power. You did not need to have a computer to predict when a culture was ripe for a switch in either direction.

There were no import restrictions for the rich. All made up to give an excuse to deprive the poor. Gasoline, banned by the Kyoto accords for the US market. No problem. Cars that got only kilometers per liter. No problem. We had our own gas stations underground and protected. It finally got to the point where I could not stomach it any more, so I bought the camper and took off. Out in the wild, everyone was equal. I ran away rather than face reality.”

“Didn't they come after you?”

“What, an old eccentric in the middle of the desert? Why bother? In some ways my choice actually helped them, because I could actually do this as a choice, it reinforced pear power.”

“Our schools were separate, our grocery stores were separate. Before I met Qaletaq, I had never really talked to a sap, didn't even know the term.”

“I was never a sap. I am a native. Very different. We were poor and oppressed long before the saps came along.”

She smiles. “The bracelets you figured out, but there were hundreds, if not thousands of ways saps were controlled. And if you rioted, no problem, just gave an excuse to kill the trouble makers and oppress the rest even more. With the increasing tech coming out of China, more and more tasks were being done by bots. Soon the only saps that would be needed were servants, which were really only kept for appearances. Birth control substances included in the food were already reducing the population to about half the peak value. Also, steps were taken to disperse the population, so there would never be enough saps in any one location again to start anything. Highways were used to bus saps from one work site to another. Never having a permanent home and forever mixing up the workers, so associations could not be formed.”

“Don't forget the military. Wars were planned to exterminate as many saps as possible. Countries would even work out an agreement in advance to put up so many troops. A gentleman's agreement. There was no actual

war at all. A game if you will. Pears were never hurt. Newsreels were faked. Sap towns that were getting too uppity were targeted. Nothing was off limits. If the soldiers themselves figured it out, they ended up on the front line, or nano hit, as your story has already alluded to.”

“Shit.”

“Pears from all over the world bought second and third homes in prime locations. The Chinese owned most of California, except for New Atherton and the extended Pebble Beach. Europe took over most of the east coast. Pears from Latin America owned the south. The only places nobody wanted were the native reservations. That was why they were there in the first place of course. Nobody wanted that land.”

“Why didn't they just shoot us? It would have been simpler.”

“It was a game as much as anything. The rich get bored very easily. What do you do when you can have anything you can imagine? Reaming the saps was entertainment as much as anything. Sort of like big game hunting. They could turn on you at any point, so you had to be careful. You had to be sneaky. And once you succeeded, you could brag to everyone else for years to come. It was almost a contest to see what you could get away with and with how many people.”

*So I was entertainment as well?*

She nods. “Rape was a very common form of ‘entertainment’ for the men. Not that women were the only victims. Orgies were a fad for awhile, but one on one was still preferred by most people.”

“What about the roaring 90’s when saps could become instant millionaires with dotcoms?”

“Well, you saw how long that lasted, only a couple of years. Even before the height, they were already exporting and setting up the infrastructure outside the US to move the jobs overseas. India and China both controlled their techs. With so many people, they could insure that the wages never got out of control like they did here. They would purposely graduate more than they needed in any given area to keep people down. Then you basically needed connections to get a job, which cost money, which also kept you down. Nobody but the rich won.”

“So we saps never had a chance at all.”

“Nope, pears held ALL the cards.”

*With our abilities and history, we could do the same all over again if we are not careful. It would begin as being the most expedient way, then a habit and then the only way. We have to be very careful.*

“Br’thn, how much did Sauron play in all this? Hard to believe even he could have been controlling the entire thing.”

***Remember, I was here with the Shoshone and Lakota, so I missed the most recent events. Before then Sauron was heavy into influencing events, but he could not predict everything. Mostly he just tweaked things or played with people for amusement. Humans already had the basic ability to be greedy, blood thirsty, etc. It did not require much to make an event happen. Notice how easily the group in Hotevilla was turned. We don't know by what or whom, but they went from supporters to hostiles in less than a week, but it is my guess that he was working this angle for much longer, probably the entire time he was back.***

“And they never even bothered to confront us with whatever arguments they were dealing with.”

“Lies depend on the truth to work. Don't forget they feared us.”

“Huh?”

“A lie only works if it is largely true or believable. People falsely assume that if 90% of an argument is true, then the remaining 10% must be also, even if there is evidence to the contrary. We could move mountains, so it would have been easy to destroy them. They decided, along with Sauron's lies that they were better off without us. They could not take the chance.”

“Oh, that hurts.”

“It is how propaganda works. You can make an itch into a major ailment in no time.”

“And advertising. Which is even weirder, because everyone knows ahead of time that the ad is basically an exaggeration if not an outright lie, yet people buy the product anyway.”

“Br'thn do we even have a chance? I mean, given what we are, human, is it even possible for us to be different, to do it right this time?”

***This group is different. Haven't you noticed that most of the people with TK ability are different even without their TK ability? Yingui noticed this almost from the beginning. The psiotic pattern is different. The fact that you are even asking these questions makes you different. Look around you. Every community is basically just trying to get by. Food, water, shelter, children, the basic necessities of life. They are not worrying about their form of government, moral truths and reason for life and the universe.***

“So the ‘norms’ are likely to do the same thing all over again, no matter what we do?”

“You can't enforce morality. Never works. You have to change people's hearts. Very hard to do and likely to only affect a few out of a thousand.”

“Then we are dead. Even the UNA is likely to be hunting TKs now and suppressing new ones. The best that can be done naturally is a TK2 most of the time. The TK3s will be seen as too dangerous and eliminated or expelled.”

*Br'thn, given that we can recognize or learn to recognize the ideal psiotic pattern for someone to become a TK, can we make them ourselves, as in the case of Susan and the array?*

***Of course. You have had this ability for some time, even before we met.***

“What? We were always afraid that we would drive someone insane, create a rogue or something. Now you are saying that as long as we screen for the proper pattern we can boost others to higher levels or even to TK without the plague virus?”

***Yes. I thought you were just being cautious about too many people with the abilities diluting your power base beyond your control.***

“We are not talking TK8s here. Even a few more fours and fives would be a big help.”

“Question? Do we have our act together enough to boost more people? We don't even know what we are about yet. We are here, in the middle of nowhere, learning how to talk with and be animals for heaven's sake.”

*There is much knowledge we can gain from them still Rachael. They are our roots. By understanding the basics we build a foundation for a strong structure.*

“That is not to say we can't speed up our training some, nor practice boosting some of our non-TK friends right here. Assuming they want to of course.”

*Br'thn, I assume the one month schedule was there for a reason. Except in a few cases, James and Daniel, we always did one level per month beyond level two. Should we still follow that pattern?*

***It would be best. As you all know, it takes time to adjust to the new abilities, even with the fore knowledge that you now have.***

## New TKs

“We have talked it over and have decided that we want to wait. Having the increased abilities would be great, but losing our desire for each other would be a strong minus to us right now.” A slight blush appears on Lisa’s face.

“No problem, this is not just a one time deal. When and if you are ready, let us know. Remember, you are likely to jump to TK2 on your own sometime between twenty five and thirty.”

Susan and Running Snake push Angpetu forward. “Please Yingui, I would like to try it. I don’t have anyone I need to be with and being already TK2 means that I never will.”

“I would not say that Angpetu. We are all close here, often sleep together and always lots of affection, towards you as well. Do you really miss the sexual feelings?” She shakes her head emphatically no.

“Neither do I. Yes, even seventy year olds have those feelings normally. Well almost seventy anyway. My mother still talked about it at ninety. At that point it is really the need to be hugged and loved in an intimate surrounding more than sex and you are not giving that up. Ask around. None of the TK6s have given up nor want to give up affection.”

Susan comes up. “I think we need to add some ritual to this. It feels like at each TK stage we give up something of ourselves in a way. It would be nice if this was clarified and made part of the vows or whatever you want to call it.”

“Go on, what happens at each level in your mind?”

“I have worked on it some, in my spare time.” She pulls out a piece of paper.

“You have spare time? Where did you get that?” We all crack up. I want to know where she got the paper more though.

She sees me looking at the paper, “I used to teach my class how paper was made. Very easy really. Add TK to the equation and it is trivial.

OK, TK 1, you give up the idea of being the same as everyone else. Not really strong enough of a TK to do anything, but you are not the same anymore.

TK2 – reproductive ability. This is a biggy, as Lisa and Qaletqa realize. Whatever you are going to do has to be done before you become TK2.

TK3 – lively hood. We are no longer teachers, carpenters, etc. We are TK only. Even the TK3s that were spread out by the UNA are doing to find this to be true.

TK4 – possessions. We give up the idea of owning STUFF, since we can make whatever we need and then let it go.

TK5 – sickness and death. This is not trivial. This means the only way out is accident or choice. As you progress up the levels, even an accident is increasingly ruled out.

TK6 – home. Like TK4, but now we have no permanent place we can stay. Not even here, as nice as it is. We all know we will be leaving. This is one of the hardest actually. Giving up the idea of your own family was hard, but this gives up the idea of being in a permanent human community.

Four of us are sort of TK6 plusses. We have very limited TP ability. Just enough to communicate with each other, but I do not pick up animal thoughts, except for Ghost and Marm of course.

TK7 – personal thoughts. Having TP at this level, means you are always hearing everyone else's thoughts, including other life forms. You can never really be alone any more.

TK8 – material substance. We have seen Yingui in three bodies. Is he really here in material form any more?

TK9 – self. You belong to the world now. It is no longer your desires, your wishes. It is what does the world need?"

This makes everyone quiet.

"So, you want to make these formal vows? How literal does this become? The force of law? And what do you do if someone does not follow the rules."

*I think that they should be like the bodhisatva vows, more the ideal you aspire to, rather than a law you can't break.*

"Here here!"

"Rachael? You did not get upset by a 'B' word. Are you feeling ok?" She sticks her tongue out at us in response.

"Can I go back to being normal?" James gets pelted with dust, not too many pebbles here. "Just kidding!"

"Some cultures repeat all the previous vows when there are levels like this."

"Great Idea!"

Angpetu comes forward. "I vow to accept that I am different from others. I vow to not reproduce myself in any form, but depend on the charity of others to replace me when I am gone. I vow to be TK only and

use these special gifts in the service of others.” Very good Angpetu. Very good. Susan is writing what was said down. I can see we are starting the ritual thing again. Oh well.

“Lay down Angpetu, as this will make you unconscious for a few hours.” She lays down on the ground after moving a few small stones and a twig out of the way. I sit near her head. “As the community of TKs we accept your vows and I confer upon you the rank of TK3.” I concentrate and adjust her psiotic pattern to match that of a TK3 and then watch for a few minutes to be sure it will hold.

“Susan can you watch her and let us know if anything changes? You understand this upgrade stuff better than I do in some ways.”

“You were very gentle. Not like ten TK2s and an amp trying to boost a crazy person at the threat of a bullet. I would be happy to watch over her.” I think this is going to be part of the ritual now as well. At the first sign of a rogue or other problem, it can be dealt with before the person wakes up and need never be a danger to self or community.

“Do we wait till Angpetu comes around or do we do the next person?”

“Is Yingui the only person who can do this? I get the impression that it need only be someone at least two levels above the person’s current level and at least a TK5, so they can see the psiotic pattern.”

“In other words, you cannot boost someone to your own level. That makes sense. Can Br’thn do this as well?”

***Yes, but ‘thn have to have a very good reason to do this. We generally try not to interfere in your decisions in this regard. Or’thn only did this to Yingui so as to save me from death. It would also not be wise to boost someone before they are mature enough to handle the extra responsibility.***

“In other words, the community needs to accept the idea of the person becoming stronger before it actually happens and not just because the person asks to be boosted. That makes sense and I doubt anyone here would want to see it the other way.”

“Another reason to wait at least a month to see how the person reacts to their new abilities. Power can sometimes go to a person’s head.”

Mei Ying comes forward. “I agree with what Ron just said. For that reason, I feel I should wait. I still have nasty thoughts about what was done to my self and all of you. At the same time, I very much want to be part of your group in mind and spirit.”

“Mei, how about we just boost you to TK2. This is not powerful enough to ‘go after’ anyone on your own, yet will allow you to feel you are truly part of us and could save your life at some point. If, after you

have tried this for awhile, you feel you can handle more, we will reassess and determine what to do then.”

“Hmmm, I was only kidding when I said that I wanted to be normal again, but is it possible to ‘demote’ someone at either their request or that of the community?”

“You saw what we did with Otis from Florida. The limiter implant works pretty well, though it is an all or nothing proposition.”

“And the first TK3 or good surgeon that comes along and undoes the deed? All or nothing is a bit harsh for someone who is just having a difficult time and does not want to start from scratch.”

***Unfortunately, this is the only means known at this time.***

“Can’t have everything I guess.”

“Wait a minute, how was Sauron taken care of? If he has a limiter and managed to get it removed, we are in a heap of trouble.”

“Ok, I would rather have TK2 than nothing if there is even a remote possibility that Sauron is still around.” She lies down. “Level two, so I accept that I am different from others and I accept that I will not be able to reproduce. Easy there, as that is already true. This just gets rid of the monkey as well.” I sit down next to her head and do an initial psiotic scan, as she has never been TK, I want to be more careful. Everything looks ok, so I proceed.

“Ok, I need a watcher. Who is my volunteer?” Rachael steps up and assumes position where I was. We now have two people and two watchers on the ground of the balcony.

“Next” I look towards Running Snake and Edwin, who are hand in hand. “As you are older as well, you will likely go to TK2 as Mei Ying will likely also.”

“Can we both be done at the same time? Daniel can do me and you can do Running Snake.”

“I don’t see why not.” We all assume positions. I scan Running Snake and she looks fine. No surprise there. I look over at Daniel and he looks worried.

He comes out of his concentration. “Double check him for me will you?”

We trade positions. I start my scan.

“Ok, I believe that it would be dangerous for us to do Edwin. His genetic and other pear enhancements have interfered with the psiotic balance. I would highly recommend not continuing.”

Running Snake gets up onto her knees. “Then I don’t want to be done either. I want us to be together, not different and separate. If it comes to



the point whereby we would be in danger without my being boosted, then I will reconsider, but for now, I will wait.”

“I am sorry Edwin. It may be possible that if I work with you some, we can remove the enhancements and see what that does to the psiotic balance. There is some risk there that I will be able to remove the enhancements, but it will not matter. Then you would lose the benefit of the enhancements as well.”

“How come Lisa does not have this problem?” Qaletaga asks.

“I could scan you if you want Lisa. There is no danger in that. Maybe because the enhancements were largely done before you were born and Edwin’s were done after he was already an adult. Or it could just be personality. The latter I find hard to believe, because Edwin is a very gentle person. On the other hand, you are not TK, but PC. It would have been helpful to have known what you scanned like before the plague.”

“We have time at least. No one is after us at the moment. Things are pretty quite.”

“Winter does that and the next dead line is some ways off. Speaking of which, how do we warn the rest of the 'owners' of such weapons?”

“Or do we even bother? Just like the Chinese, they will try and find someway to hide them. If we give no warning, but just convert them to something harmless, they will not have the means to play games with us.”

“Well, we can't get them all at once, even with all of us working together. Remember, they have an excellent communication system. And don't even think about it. If we take out their com, they will assume they are under attack and send them flying even faster. Easier to take out while they are still in the ground at least.”

***You forget. The weapons are a threat to the 'thn as well. We might have some help.***

Only the nuclear weapons are a threat to you Br'thn. The chemical and biological ones will only kill others and they are harder to detect and find. A gas cylinder enough to take out a block looks just like one with something harmless inside until you scan it carefully. Given all the places that used those cylinders, that is a lot of places to search carefully.

“This is too depressing. They are going to be hungry when they wake up. Best rustle up some grub.”

“Grub? Are you taking on the local dialect now?”

“Or is that what's for dinner? Birds are great when they are in the air, such freedom, almost as much fun as TK, but insects and grubs are not my cup of tea.”

“They taste good to the birds. You are putting too much of your own judgment in the mix.” Edwin tries to smile like the teachers do.

“Speaking of our teachers, they are likely to wondering where we have gotten to. Some of us should go down and look normal.”

“Everyone but the watchers get out of here then. Shoo! Now! I am right behind you.”

“We need to work out a way for those two to join us ability wise as well.”

“It would help if we had some more pears to compare to. Too bad the ones here are gone. We could scan them from here.”

***Not all gone, just hidden. Scan the population in Albuquerque. I sense at least three with enhancements.***

“Well, it was very unlikely that ALL of them got it from the plague and being outnumbered meant that it would be best to hide fast. Albuquerque was big enough that not everyone could know everyone.”

A teacher looks up from a pot of tea on the fire. “Time for more work. Goofing off too long. Winter here, much less wildlife around awake to draw on.”

“I would imagine that a sleeping bear would not be that interesting.”  
Shit, why did you have to say that?

Sure enough, tonight we peek in on a sleeping bear. Ok, it was not that bad. They do dream. Mostly about eating fish, grubs, squirrels and whatever else they could find, including garbage. Though the feelings they had for their young were sweet. The bonding starts long before the cubs are born. Wonder if they ever suffer from post partum depression? They don’t like pears though. Senseless killing of young and old alike and then leaving the body to rot, only taking the head.

Mei Ying and Angpetu are with us. They woke up in time, though the smile on their faces as they see the world a new makes me wonder if we were that way too. Hmmm, maybe theirs is a better experience as they know they are in a safe place. I was scared to death that I had gone crazy or was still in the fever just before death. Yes, this is better. That makes ten out of twelve with some enhanced ability.

A teacher hits me on the side of the head, “You are not paying attention.”

“Yes, teacher. Sorry.”

The next day a large storm hits that lasts for several days. Lots of snow. Even with our enclosure, we spend a lot of time next to the fire, in the baths or in the steam room. I have to adjust the roof color several times to match what should have been underneath. Fortunately from the

height of a satellite it is hard to see elevation differences that fine. Besides, it is unlikely they have the time to be looking for us. As long as we stay out of the way, they will leave us alone, I hope.

This afternoon we experienced a white rabbit trying to find food in the snow when it is chased, caught and killed by a mountain lion. It happened so fast. One moment 'our' tummy was growling, desperately looking for ANYTHING to eat, then panic as it realizes that it is being watched by a predator. Too close! Run, run! Dodge, behind the tree, across the open space. The sound of the thumping weight of the large cat as it is getting closer and closer. PAIN! EXTREME PAIN! Then gentle quiet as the world fades away. We all come out of it startled and shaken. No more that day thank goodness.

The next day we experience it from the mountain lion's perspective. The many failed attempts. The hunting alone in a cold world. Feast or famine, the pendulum swings. The smell of humans as she comes into our compound looking for food. Desperate enough to investigate what might be around for the taking. She is an older mountain lion, probably seeing her last winter. No cubs this year. She sniffs at the lodge entrance and then comes down. I have a pile of duped mice waiting for her, which she greedily wolfs down. It may be too little too late though. She lies down with Barb comforting her. There is an old wound on her hind quarter, from a rival or a male. Very thin. Dream time comes. Images of successful hunts, of cubs born, raised and then gone. Of fights and constant vigilance of one's territory. Of encounters with MAN, usually bad. The smell of sheep and man comes to mean pain.

When she dies we are all in tears. After she becomes cold, we carefully and with great dignity and total silence bring her up the steps. We dig a hole in the compound soil and bury her with a large rock on top, so scavengers cannot find her. A last request granted a noble hunter.

"This is going to tear me apart if we keep going on like this. I was thinking that all this was a waste of time. That we should be out there fighting for TKs all over the world. But these experiences really bring life down to earth. Humans are certainly no better and in a lot of ways worse than any of the animals we have been these last two months."

# Transformation

“From our understanding of your abilities, the TK6s and above should be able to transform, BUT for a TK6 it would take days to make the transition and the changes are not without pain. Therefore we will start with Turtle, followed by Ant. Prepare yourselves. Tonight we do Turtle. Get some rest, you will need your strength.” Great.

I go back to my room where Br'thn is waiting. She has taken to lying on the bed when she wants affection and talking with.

An hour later we are all in the lodge waiting for the teachers. They come in and light the ceremonial fire in the basin and add sage and other herbs to fill the room with fragrance. We have come to associate this smell with the practice, which I guess is its purpose.

“So we begin. We have experienced the lives of many creatures. But something is still missing. You need to know what it feels like to BE a creature. An observer is one thing, but to live the creature is entirely different.”

“How will he get back? How will he know how to get back, or even that he is really human?”

“That is why we are all here and why he must not be allowed to leave this room. We are here to insure a successful transition. It is also why, until this has been practiced many times, it should never be tried alone.”

“Will he have his TK abilities in this form? As a TK8 he could be anywhere on the planet in seconds. There would be no way to contain him.”

“He will be a normal creature with normal abilities. Otherwise there would be no point in this exercise.”

“Why again are we doing this?”

“To be native, means to understand life at the most intimate level. We have tens of thousands of years of experience, but you of the western culture have none. This is a 'crash' course in being a native. You will understand that even when we take a life, we give honor to that life. You will understand why we greet the sun each morning and each evening. You will understand what it means to be alive for the first time in your life. Not the half dead walking corpses you have become in your culture.” I suspect they have become half dead from that same culture. I don't know where they found the alcohol, but there is still some in their systems.

“Yingui, lie down here. The rest of you gather around and lay your hands on him. Physical contact helps.” We do as we are told.

“Have you chosen a creature?”

“I want to start with something close to my size and intelligence. I have chosen the mountain lion.”

“You are deceived by western concepts. Intelligence does not reside in the size of one's brain. Even a simple mouse can outsmart a man. It does not matter. The puma is fine. The recent experience will help us to visualize.

Concentrate on the puma image and project that towards Yingui. Visualize him being the puma.”

I can feel the intensity of the image being pressed on my mind. I concentrate on the necessary biological changes using the pattern being presented. It seems like hours have passed, but I am still me. The pain is intense and growing more so. I must have screamed, but I no longer am aware of my surroundings. I concentrate and push.

Finally my body is changing. My legs become shorter and my arms stronger. I can feel hair coming out. My teeth are changing. The pain, the PAIN! But it is not just the physical. There are humans in this room and they are the givers of pain. I want to lash out at them! STOP THE PAIN!

Part of me knows that these people are my friends. The conflict becomes too much and I pass out. Changed only half way. A monster. Still alive, but caught between.

### **Two days later.**

I awake with a sharp intake of air. Where am I? What am I? My head clears enough to look around. I am back into my normal form lying on my bed in my room. Br'thn is next to me.

“It didn't work did it?”

***No. You could not complete the transformation.***

“Why didn't Lisa or you warn me?”

***You are fine. We felt that ahead of time.***

“Is it the method or the lack of experience? Will it work with more practice?”

***I don't believe so. The others are waiting downstairs. You need to go to them. You were still in your monster form when they brought you up here to me.***

“So you have saved me yet again.”

***You would do the same for me. You were still alive. You would have figured it out and completed the transformation back to your normal form eventually. There was little danger, unless someone decided to attack you while you were still changed. With half your TK abilities and part lion, it would not have been pretty. For them. I made the rest leave so that no one would get hurt.***

“Thank you Br'thn.”

I DS down to the courtyard where the others are. “What just goofing off? Let's get back to work.”

Rachael comes up to me and lifts up my robe to check. “Yep, he is back to being more or less human. Too bad, you were better looking as a half FEMALE puma.” Of course she already did a scan of me, so this was just for show.

I look down at myself, “You know, I think you are right. Set up the circle again. I want to go back to the way I was.” I put on my best indigent face.

*Yep. his sick sense of humor is intact as well. Too bad, I was really hoping that we managed to get rid of that at least.*

“I think we need to talk about this before any more attempts. The teachers wanted to try again tonight, but it is too soon. We bargained for tomorrow night. We have until then to decide.”

Back up to the balcony we go.

“What went wrong? From your perspective that is.”

“We saw you in agony, but the elders insisted we continue. We had all been told there would be pain. We concentrated again. It must have been at least fifteen minutes till the changes started to appear outwardly. You had rolled over on your stomach. I guess it was a more natural position for a mountain lion. Your legs and arms changed first, then teeth and hair. You became a half man, half beast. We dissolved your robe as it was binding you in places. You made the most hideous sounds and lashed out several times with your ‘paws’, but were only half conscious. Finally the effort was too much for either you or us and thankfully you collapsed and went under. Daniel immediately DSed you to your room where Br'thn was waiting and took over. She said it would take time for you to come out after the reversal. Mostly you needed rest. She was able to repair the damage rather quickly. I guess being ten times your ability helps.”

*It was very hard on your soul she said. People have voiced similar experiences when they thought they were on the point of death, but then at the very last second given a reprieve.*

“It was not as bad as the plague I will tell you, but it was bad. I knew all of you and Br’tbn were around, thank goodness. Not something I want to try the same way again though. It would have been nice if you had prevented me from doing this, or at least warned me.” I look specifically at Lisa, but Barb answers.

*Br’tbn said it was important for all of us to experience what had happened. We were linked with you, so we felt your pain as well, though not as intense. None of us wants to try, nor do we think you should do this again.*

“I don't intend to. The real question is, is this worth pursuing?”

“Could be useful when visiting other planets. The best way to understand another culture is to participate.”

“They stayed in their forms when they visited us.”

“But it was important for them to do so, to convince the Regent we were real in our demands.”

“Didn’t work though, did it?”

“They got back on track, maybe it was our approach. Every other time you changed bodies, you were in one, made the other and then transferred.”

“I was in Br’tbn the last time. Not exactly the same, but I get your point Ron.”

“What about Jesus? He was totally disembodied for a time.”

“Was he? We don’t know that he didn’t do exactly the same thing. Make a new body while on the cross, transfer to it. Remember he appeared to have died sooner than he would have been expected to. They move the body into the tomb. He repairs or replaces this one and transfers into it just in time for the rock to be moved. He had enough time between to gain his strength back.”

*There was another that knew how to do this.*

“Sauron! He was in human form the last time we saw him. He was very good at assuming other forms, different human forms at least and probably a lot of different beasts as he worked things out.”

“He had sixty five million years to work it out remember. He still may have used the transfer method instead of the transform method. We have never seen anyone do this in front of us, not even one of our so called teachers. I smell a rat.”

“So do I James and I think it is time we put some of your gaming expertise to practice. A test if you will of the true intentions of our ‘teachers’. We know almost nothing about them. They have not related

their lives, their stories, anything really. Bob, Roy, Frank and John? Has their culture decayed that far?”

“Except for a few recipes. Some of those are quite tasty at least.”

*But they expect women to make it and clean up afterwards. Have you scanned their quarters? Pig pens.*

“None of the native legends talk of using a second body though. What about that?”

“Their shamans are also experts at misdirection and slight of hand. It is only important that their patients believe and then the human mind takes over and heals itself.”



## Transformation II

“Are we ready?” They nod. “Then let’s do it.” We file into the lodge single file. I take my place at the center again. The teachers light the small fire and burn the sage and herbs. The fire dies down so there is very little light in the room.

“What creature do you choose?”

“I have decided to take your advice and pick something easier and potentially less dangerous than the puma. I have chosen the lowly rat for this attempt.”

“Good choice. Glad you are finally seeing to follow our advice.” The other teachers nod approval also. Like puppets on a string? We will see.

“At least the robe will not be binding this time.” That gets a chuckle. Our group looks nervous. We all remember the pain of the last attempt, especially me.

“It has been some time since we viewed the rat, so it would be best to proceed slowly.” I nod.

“Each of you bring up a remembrance of the rat. We will pool these thoughts until they coalesce into a usable form.” Coalesce? This does not sound like a common word. I am being too suspicious. Relax before one wacks me on the head again. Think Rat.

It is easy to see why our distant ancestors were rodents, if not rats. They are social and hierarchical at the same time. Bullies run things and can even cause spontaneous abortions in pregnant females just on the smell of their urine. On the other hand the more aggressive ones are likely to be picked off in fights and by predators. Lean and scared has some advantages. In a large colony, even the sneaky males sometimes get lucky. It is a rat eat rat world, literally. A fallen one is often eaten. Meat is meat. Shame to waste it. Contrary to popular belief though, rats are not dirty. Most take very careful care of themselves. Grooming takes time. When you are well fed there is time. Life is good. However when resources get low, as often happens during population booms and busts, life gets ugly. Just like humans. I guess the group is tired of the dark side and an image starts to form of a nice fat contented rat with little to worry about. Male this time, not that I was in any condition to notice the ah ‘changed’ equipment last time.

A rat is a lot smaller than a human, so a large reduction in mass is necessary besides the changes to skeleton and fur. From a viewer’s point of view, I begin to get smaller and more hunched over as I start to assume

the rat's posture. A wind is formed from the excess mass being converted to air. Easier than water in this case. The carpet would have been ruined. The process is rather slow, taking about an hour. This is not the same as it appeared in so many horror movies whereby the stricken one changes in mere seconds.

The transformation is complete. To test that this is so, a teacher throws me a peanut and I dutifully scramble over to retrieve the peanut and begin feeding on it, sitting upright on my back feet with the nut in hand and teeth working rapidly and whiskers twitching. Cute really. Pretty tame for a wild rat, but as it is nearly dark, I have the advantage over mere human night vision abilities.

With lightening speed, the teacher nearest to me reaches out and grabs me. I drop the nut and squeal loudly. All remain motionless. He inspects me carefully. Turning me over. It is the same form as the group came to a consensus on. The size and patterns are correct. Even down to the slightly chipped and yellowed right incisor.

“Good job, but forgot the fleas.” On cue, one jumps onto the teacher's garment, but is probably unnoticed in the low light. The teacher then does something totally unexpected. He bites the head off the rat and spits it out, dropping the body, bleeding to the floor.

“Losers! You were so amazingly easy to deceive. All of you! You are still mine. With the 'thn off planet, I will rule the earth again. Try anything and the rest of you are toast too. Your feeble attempts to control me were worthless. Losers! Look what you have. Hiding from everyone on the planet. Even the UNA, the lowest of the low has turned you out. You could not convince a robot with the controller in hand to follow you. Now get out of my sight before I laugh myself to death or decide to eat you too.” His smile is a mile wide and he is totally enjoying his triumph.

Nobody moves. He is confused by this and looks around and then back at the dead rat.

“I thought only smiggles ate rats Sauron?” I nod to Daniel from behind Sauron, a.k.a. ‘Bob’ and he DSs the other three elders back to their village. Before Sauron can move however, Br'thn pops in and forms a high atomic weight barrier around him. The same one that he could not overcome at the galactic center.

“Oh, by the way, the 'thn have not left.”

We DS everyone up to the compound surface. Mei Ying and Angpetu float and move Sauron in his bubble out the entrance to the enclave along with Running Snake, Edwin, Lisa and Qaletaqa.

I had remained behind when the others entered the lodge, merely animating a fake body to be my substitute. When the transformation on the fake was complete, I carefully DSed into the space behind the elders, being careful to DS out the proper volume of air at the same time. Only a slight puff announced my presence, but as the teachers were concentrating on the rat. I was fortunately not noticed, except for a swat, by one of the elders to ward off a supposed fly or bug, done instinctively and without conscious control. The transformation was not nearly as perfect as it had appeared either. Barb used her ability to control our thoughts to convince everyone that the effect was perfect. James came up with the idea, being a combination on the center one I did and on Barb's demonstration at Hotevilla. The 'rat' was one that she had tamed and had been living in her quarters for some time. He was never used during an exercise because she was worried that the teachers would have him killed like the rabbit as countless other creatures were, so they were not aware of his appearance. But it explained how we all came to the same 'vision' of the rat in our heads, as we had all met Herman before.

"I am sorry about Herman. I was not expecting that at all."

*Neither was I, but Herman was getting old and would not have lived this long in the wild. He had a good life and the end was quick. I nod with eyes downcast.*

"Ok, Br'thn you can help this time. You are better with the plants than I am. Let's get this place back to the way it was. When the 'teachers' come back here with their tale, I want them to find nothing that will give away that we were ever here. That should be sufficient punishment for their part in the deception perpetrated by Sauron. I am sure they were duped, same as us, into believing his lies yet again."

*And the people at Hotevilla as well. I wondered why they threw us out so abruptly. I 'scanned' Sauron after he was identified. He set the whole thing up. When we came back from the center, he was deposited only a hundred kilometers away, in a new Native American body. He took steps to appear to be older and then simply walked into the nearest settlement to begin his work of spreading lies and doubt. He is a master.*

"Br'thn, did you know 'Bob' was Sauron?" "Shit, I am accusing a 'thn of lying or withholding truth.

***I understand your concerns, but I only relayed Sauron's wishes to the other 'thn. It was important that I not know what happened to him, or we would have likely have taken action before this time.***

"I am sorry I mistrusted you Br'thn. I just did not understand how you could not have known. Why did the 'thn do this then?"

***I am not aware of the reasoning. History indicates that they often place obstacles in one's path to see how we will react to them.***

"A test?"

***More of a learning experience. They are not trying to harm us, but make us, or rather me, stronger.***

Great.

"Does he have any of his TK abilities still?"

***He does not appear to, though I did take the precaution, as you witnessed, of encasing him in the bubble.***

"It would appear that his strongest talent was not TK at all, but the ability to deceive and persuade others, even us."

"So it would seem."

"Why didn't he suspect the trap?"

"You remember how he was able to transform from human back to his natural form at the center? Not having his TK abilities and being separated from us for months, he was not sure how much Br'thn or we were able to figure out on our own. You did do a pretty good job, at least to the halfway point, of turning into a puma. How could he know that there was an easier way for us to do the transformation with our abilities?"

***Remember, Sauron's abilities were different than yours. He progressed on a different scale of talents than you humans did. Not all that I know about Sauron's abilities have direct correlations to human ones either. He could not be sure what your abilities were. His own eyes deceived him this time.***

We follow the path where the entrance formerly was and join the others.

"Running Snake is adamant that we return to Hotevilla and I agree." Qaletaqa states.

"They have been deceived twice by circumstances, if not more. They need to understand for their own education what happened."

"Are you sure this is not revenge? An 'I told you so' thing?"

"No, I am not sure." She is honest and aware of her own limitations. This is good. Wish I was better at it.

"Does any one object to going?" No one does. "Get the two cats then. Assuming you can wake the royal highnesses from their beauty sleep." I bring SGIII over and we all pile in with the exception of Sauron. The royal highnesses are TKed aboard still asleep. I drag Sauron along behind us. I really don't want to see his face right now. A little fresh air will do

him good. Ok, it is nearly freezing outside. He will survive. Too bad about that.

# Hotevilla

Ron looks puzzled.

“What’s wrong Ron?”

“I think I left a tile behind. One we used for the baths. I was intending to take it with me as a memento, but now I can’t find it.”

I laugh out loud.

“What’s so funny? What if they find it?”

“Oh they will, they will. It could not be more perfect had we planned it. Think. All the time they are going up to the former enclave, the three will be telling their tale. Only their leader is gone now.”

“What about the other six? They will corroborate their story.”

“Will they? They were not included and missed out. They may not even want to remember much of what they saw. They will keep quite, for the same reason they did not participate. They were already in enough hot water when they came back the first time.”

“But the tile will prove what they say.”

“Would you believe such a tale on the basis of one scrap of tile?” He grins. No way.

“It will only serve to reinforce their story as a tale, not the truth.”

“Precisely.”

“We need to do something spectacular to announce our return. I want to level the top of the mesa like you did in Utah.”

“Running Snake, what about the sacredness of this Hopi site? Won’t that be a desecration?”

“Qaletaqa is right. I am not going to help you get even by destroying. The Hopi who were not to blame.”

“Besides they probably already know we are here. I am sure they set up sentries to warn of our return. You know, white man always speak with forked tongue. They will expect us to try something.”

“We could leave Sauron chained to the top of the mesa here. I am sure with chains made of the ‘thn shield material, there is no way he could get free, even with help.”

“They would recognize him as the one who was among them spreading lies, but will they know that? They will only think he was right then. We found out and did this to the poor thing. He can still talk remember. He will simply start the whole cycle again.”

“We could kill him.” Edwin says mockingly.

“No different than the chains. Imaginations are as bad as words. Makes a martyr of him then.”

“Ok, then what?” Running Snake is not amused by our arguments.

*What would be the definition of Hell for the great deceiver?* Barb is grinning now.

“Br’thn, can that be done?”

***Stroke victims often suffer from the inability to communicate. The language centers are very precisely defined. Would be trivial to disrupt them without harm to the rest of the mind.***

“I want him to be able to still think, to know what is going on, just not be able to communicate or write what he wants.”

*Is this the right thing to do? Harming anyone in this way, even Sauron?*

“If anyone deserved death it would be him, but this seems like the best we can do, without actually killing him. He will still live out a normal lifespan. He just will not be able to plot any more plans of destruction.”

“He could still harm himself.”

“I am not going to break his legs and arms next. That is too far.”

“I have an idea. Based on an old movie I saw once with Jim Carey. Solves both problems actually. The people will find out the truth and he can never harm another person with his lies.” James comes through for us again. We needed Br’thn’s help and my ability to see the precise psiotic patterns and neuronal connections, but we succeeded. He cannot tell lies any longer and when asked he will always tell the truth. The movie was “Liar, Liar.” Stupid movie, but just what we needed. The 3D remake using his clone was even worse, but we won’t go there. And I used to think colorizing was wrong.

“People are coming. We need to get out of here.”

“Into the ship Guardians of Br’thn!”

“Aye, aye Capitan! Hoist the mainsail, swab the deck, shiver me timbers and all that rot.” Huh?

“Please, somewhere there are NO people. I have had my fill of these wusses.”

“We were taken in as well remember. It was only because the task seemed impossible that we started getting suspicious.”

“All the more reason, so no one will be around to deceive us any more.”

“Yeh, we do a good enough job by ourselves.”

*Ocean please.* Barb looks plaintively at me.

“Only three fourths of the planet is ocean. Anything more specific?”

“Away from land, but shallow enough we can’t get into too much trouble before we learn our way. A TK2 cannot bubble underwater. The pressure is too high.”

“Can we do something that floats then? Anything shallow is likely to have people near by.”

“A tropical island won’t always have people. We can at least look.”

“A lot of people will have likely thought of that when the plague hit. Remember pears could afford to own entire islands.”

“Then there is likely to be one that is already set up, but the people did not make it, or died later.”

“We have the time do we not?”

“I would like someplace that does not move. I get sick enough in the morning as it is.” Qaletaq blushes as Lisa says this. I smile but do not say anything. Those drugs were bound to wear off eventually Lisa. What did you expect?

“Ok, prepare for orbital insertion. Mei Ying I want you near the front view port. You are the one most likely to know your way around the planet from this angle.” She salutes me and smiles.

“No more saluting please, or I really will turn into a lion, and not a wussy mountain lion either.”

“Aye, aye Capitan!” They all shout in unison. Can’t win. At least they did not salute this time.

I take it slower than normal for Lisa’s sake. The jump to orbit is done with DS. No air friction to worry about, though it was never bad with TK, but there had to be limits.

“Southern hemisphere or tropical, winter is too cold. I need to warm up.”

“Well Edwin, you could afford to put on some more weight. Insulation does help some.”

*Food?*

“Go back to sleep Ghost. No food.”

*Stupid Monkeys.* He gets up, stretches out to about two times normal length, walks over to Barb’s lap, noses Marm, gets a low growl for his efforts, decides that is not worth it and ends up between Running Snake and Edwin. The latter of which starts to massage his back. Poor dear.

“Didn’t know Silver Ghost had a motor? Do you think something is wrong with the engine Capitan?” Even Lisa is giggling over that one.

“We are coming up on the South Pacific. It would be helpful to know which island you want.”



“Fiji!”

“Cook Islands.”

“Tuvalu”

“What is that?”

“Nothing, underwater at high tide anyway.”

“Tahiti”

“Tahiti would work. Easy to recognize and lots and lots of little islands to choose from.”

“Used to have good shopping in the duty free port too.” We throw articles of clothing at her.

We hover over Tahiti, which is almost two islands actually, with only the narrowest of land bridges connecting the two. There are people here, but we half expected that.

“Northeast of here are lots of little islands. We should be able to find something there.”

“I want the surrounding islands to be barren also. We don't need to have visitors on weekends.”

“Are we staying this time?”

“Can we allow someone this dumb in our group?”

“Qaletaqa, we have no home now. It is what it means to be TK.”

“Other TKs have homes.”

“For how long? And we are not other TKs. Having second thoughts now that a family is on the way?”

He looks at Lisa. “We will stay with the group.” She smiles and gives him a hug. “Besides, where else could I be and still visit the moon and the South Pacific in the same year? Not bad for a poor stupid native.” Yeh right.

Daniel announces, “We think we have found something. Good cover, big enough to have fresh water and no one around for tens of kilometers.”

“Beach or inland? Day or night?”

“We can DS down, so time of day does not matter. That leaves beach or inland. Inland will hide the ship better. We can always DS to the beach when we want.”

“Ok, scan for a landing site.”

A few minutes later we land in a clearing near the top of the island. Night.

“We stay inside till daylight. There are creatures out there that we don't want to meet unseen. Especially by the remaining non TK 1 and below.” I look at Qaletaqa in particular. But there are two who do not listen.

“The cats just popped out.”

“Well, they are adults and in charge of their own lives.” A minute later we hear a yowl followed by two very scared cats returning to their nest, eyes wide and fully awake, fur puffed out to maximum. “Cute guys.”

Mei Ying reaches out towards Ghost.

“I would not recommend that till they calm down. Likely to lose your hand.” She quickly withdraws the hand and the cats spook. This time they are in the commode.

*I suggest the rest of us try and get some rest. Meditate or sleep, just keep quiet please. We need to get adjusted to our new time zone, so, even if you don't feel like sleeping, stay still.*

# Welcome to Ghost Island

Ghost had a hard time adapting to the larger birds, larger lizards, larger spiders, cockroaches, etc. He spent most of his time hiding in the ship. Marm on the other hand liked investigating all the new smells and creatures that were not afraid of cats, never having seen one before. Usually the only way he could get to know a new creature was if it was bigger than him or dead.

But because Ghost was so funny in his fear, the island was dubbed Ghost Island. For the rest of us, it was a vacation and a time to decompress. I hadn't had a real vacation in over forty years, so a week off here was heaven. Lots of sun, rain in the afternoon and absolutely nothing to do. Looking back on the last week, what amazed me the most, was just how fast we all became bored and itching for something to do. All that is except for Lisa, who spent a lot of time bent over with morning sickness. She was only two months into her pregnancy so far. I hope it gets better.

"My problem is that I was not engineered to have children."

"That's crazy, what do you mean? You are human?"

"No, you don't understand. Pears did not have their own children. We contributed eggs and sperm and then a hired sap to actually carry the child. I was born to a surrogate as was everyone that I know. My thin frame and hips makes it impossible to deliver a child and no pear wanted a scar from a C-section."

"Boy, that takes the parasite analogy to the extreme."

"Wait, you expect us to perform this c-section you will need when the time comes?"

"Get a knife, we will do it the old fashioned way."

"Rachael, stop teasing her. Don't worry Lisa, I will help."

"Do you think it is safe to use DS? I mean, we can't leave a scar can we?"

"RACHAEL, can it!" Rachael decides to leave rather than incur any more wrath from the group. Susan follows till Rachael waves her off.

"What's gotten into her?"

"Her sister died giving birth to a pear child. She bled to death. They were more concerned with the child and sacrificed her sister because of a small chance that the child would be harmed. Didn't even compensate our family for our loss. Said it was in the contract."

"Shit!"

"Why did she take the risk?"

“They paid you a years wages and put you up in a home that was luxurious by sap standards, to insure the health of the child.”

“Anything else?”

“The woman had to be a virgin?”

“What? Why?”

“To insure that there were no diseases present. Pears thought that all saps were sick with something and they were especially concerned about STDs causing birth defects, etc.”

*SO, how old was she? I lost my virginity at fifteen. No, the rape was not my first time.*

“She was fourteen, the legal age of consent for the procedure. They kept lowering the age, as they were having trouble finding virgins. We did not know until she was already implanted. She knew we would talk her out of it.”

Lisa is crying. Daniel goes over and gives her a hug. “Lisa, we don’t blame you for her death and we will do everything we can to insure yours and Qaletaq’s child is born normal and healthy. Ok?” She nods, but the tears still come. She finally speaks in a low squeaky voice, “Never let this happen again.”

“How come we never heard of Rachael’s sister before? We know of her brother, but she never mentioned a sister.”

“It upset her bad, first her brother and then her sister. She said it was as if her little sister never existed. From that point on, she never said her name or mentioned her again. It was what caused my breakup with my wife as well. The entire family fell apart after that. I later became addicted to repeat, trying to recapture the good old days. Her name was Anne.”

“Well it looks like Ghost has overcome his fear of the life forms here.”

“Or he has finally found something small enough that it does not scare him to death.”

Ghost is chasing a baby rat across the sand. Surprised he is not using DS.

“Ah, oh. Watch out Ghost. That bird looks interested in you.” A huge seagull, well, it probably weighed half or a third of what Ghost weighed, but with wings spread, it looked huge, came swooping down on Ghost. He sees it at the last second and pops out with fur at full poofiness. The seagull expertly grabs the baby rat as a snack and flies off.

“Poor guy is going to go hungry at this point. Sap chow will start to look good to him again soon. Better save some for him.” Lisa is smiling again cautiously. It is a start.

### **Risky Business**

“I have been thinking about how you move to a new body. You make a new one and then and only then, move to the new one. Why couldn't we do this with Edwin? Make a new body minus the extras and then do the transfer. If the psiotic pattern is not right, back he goes before the old body goes bad.”

“And how do we do this transfer? He is not me. I don't know how I do it, so how am I going to be able to do it for someone else?”

“Maybe Barb and Br'thn can help. Set up a psiotic channel or something.”

“We could practice with an animal first.”

*So it's alright to kill animals so a human can have something he does not need, but only wishes he had.*

“She's right. We have no right to force anyone, not even an animal to do this against their will.”

“Br'thn what do you think? Is this possible or are we just fantasizing?”

***It is possible, but it is complex. Forming the new body is routine for Yingui and presents no problems. The transfer is the difficult part for a non TK8. Yingui should be with the new body. Barb and Daniel with the old body and myself between. I can help guide the soul to the new form.***

“Just like I resided within you for months.”

***Yes, only this time it will be nearly instantaneous with no one disabled during the transfer.***

“Then it is really up to you two. Take your time. The procedure is not without risk, though with so many of us present, we should be able to take of it.”

“Soul shifting is not exactly one of the 'talents' they told us about in school. Even tribal schools. Ok, the myths and legends did talk about it some. Come to think about it, it was remarkably similar to what you propose. There was always a second body, sometimes made and sometimes stolen.”

“I don't see myself teaching university any time soon and to be just a mere mortal among all of you makes me feel useless.”

“I would never characterize you that way Edwin. Certainly, Running Snake, similarly indisposed has been essential to our survival. Not to mention the understandings she has given us and others. Certainly no one would hold it against you if you decided not to go through with this. We will not think less of you. Just being with us is more than most people could handle.” Rachael pantomimes a 'who me?'

He looks over at Running Snake while holding her hand. “I want to do this RS.” She hugs him, “So do I. Thank you.”

“I know you are anxious, but this will be easier on you on an empty stomach. So, no food, only water until tomorrow. Get some rest, this is hard both physically and mentally.”

“What do the rest of us do?”

“I need your minds clear, in case something should go wrong. Meditation would be good. As will rest and in your cases a good meal. Away from Ed if you please.” Total innocence on their faces. Yeh, right.

The next morning we can see a storm approaching. We have no way of knowing if this a quick pass or we are in for a good one.

“We don't have sat reception here. I don't want to be in the middle of this and then be hit by a typhoon.”

Daniel steps forward. “Let me go up above and check it out.”

“Why not. You could use the practice and it is fun.” I am smiling. Daniel forms a sphere around himself made out of diamond. Strong and clear at the same time. Then up like a shot. He is out of sight in a second. Using DS and TK he can go a few hundred kilometers in less than a second without putting up a sweat.

In less than a minute he is back and DSs out of the bubble. No door and a shame to ruin it. “Just a small one, but it might be a good idea to either wait until it is over or make a shelter.”

“Shelter would be easy, but the noise could still be a distraction. If we had done this a hundred times I would say, let's go, but as this is the first time, I would rather play it safe. Let's wait a little while longer.”

Reminds me of waiting for a final exam in college. I was always well studied and did not cram at the last second. I preferred to just sit quietly and keep my mind off the subject entirely. No different this time. I watch the birds get ready for the storm by either flying out to sea or hunkering down in the trees. Animals are burrowing in or moving to higher ground. Ants really have no choice. It rains often, so they must be used to it. The rain comes quickly and rains hard for several minutes. There are no mountains to speak of to slow the storm down so it leaves as fast as it comes. A few minutes later we are in sun again and the water is quickly

seeping down into cracks are misting up into the air. The others are have stopped worrying about we are about to do and are watching the storm and clearing also.

“Very beautiful! Have you ever noticed how life is more intense just before you die?”

“Hopefully it will not come to that, but yes I have noticed that. Amazing isn't it?” He was not expecting that answer and laughs it off.

“Ok, I assume I lie down as everyone else did.” I nod. I have already piled up enough sand nearby to use as the necessary mass.

“Any last minute requests? Smaller nose, that sort of thing?” He smiles and shakes his head no. Running Snake is holding his hand at his side. Daniel and Barb are at his head. Br'thn is about thirty centimeters above and between us, halfway between heart and head. She will direct us.

***Begin with the new form construction, paying careful attention to the necessary changes we have discussed.***

It is much easier to do an exact duplicate, but that would defeat the purpose. I start with a near perfect copy and make the changes to the inert form before pushing my concentration to the limit to get down to the cellular level. This has to be a living body, not just meat for the table. I am sweating profusely. I get the heart beating and lungs breathing. Oxygen flows through the veins. The brain looks good and starts to take over the autonomic functions. This is like someone in a near death coma. The brain is a perfect match of Ed's. There can be no changes here or memories or abilities or worse personality might come out different. Technically the body is alive, but has no volition. The psiotic image shows a muted soft image. There is no fire of life here yet.

*I am read to receive Br'thn.*

***Ed pay attention. Close your eyes. Can you see the light I am projecting?***

Yes. Barb is providing TP support so this feels as comfortable as possible. If he were to freak at the wrong time, we would lose him. She is acting like guard rails.

***Stay as close to the light as possible and come with me.***

I match my form's breathing and heart beat to his.

***Follow the light. Feel your breathing, the blood flowing through your veins.***

Yes.

***Open your eyes Edwin. What do you see?***

“I see Yingui standing over me. So, I surmise that I am in hell and not heaven as I had hoped.”

“Ha ha. Lie still for a bit. I will tell you when you can get up. I want to make sure everything is working properly before we call this a success.”

***Don't turn your head. Just look straight up at Yingui.***

I TP so only Daniel and Br'thn can hear me. *You can remove the old form now. It would be best if he did not see it. Believe me it was very hard to watch my own being destroyed.*

Running Snake comes over and takes Edwin's new hand and he squeezes it back. Breathing is good and regular.

“So when do I get the upgrade?” He smiles weakly.

“Not for a week at least cowboy. You need to rest now. Running Snake will stay with you, but everything looks good. You cannot project your psiotic pattern as Daniel and the others can, so it will take at least few days to get used to the new form. Remember, you have no sun protection any longer and normal bones again. Stay out of the sun and no jumping off of cliffs any more. The memory enhancements are gone as well, at least till we can boost you to one of the higher levels” He nods his understandings.

Susan sets up a tent like structure over the two of them to keep the sun off. No more rain today at least. Ron brings some food over. “Thought you might be hungry after having no food for so long.”

“Right now, I just want to sleep, but RS can eat. I don't mind.” She nods and accepts a small amount.

### **Now What?**

“I could stay here for some time, just to stay away from the rest of the mess if nothing else.”

“Not me. This is boring. There is nothing to do here but lay in the sun and go for short walks. I have already been around our small island several times. On foot no less.”

“I don't think you are in any danger of being like Ghost James.” Rachael smiles at that thought.

“So, what do we do now? It is likely the 'thn will take care of the nukes, but there is a lot of bio, chem and nano stuff out there.”

“The nano stuff is the least of our worry. It has to be ingested and is not contagious. It can't spread. No one is going to have an accident.



Might as well ban rocks and sticks if you are worried about that stuff. Bullies don't need much and we are not likely to care."

"So chem and bio. Chem would be easier, how in the heck do we find the bio stuff?"

"We can narrow our search some. It should be limited to labs, military and secure industrial."

"Unless someone crazy has already broken in and stolen the stuff."

"We are not talking yeast cultures here. That stuff was under so much security there is no way a casual person could get it. Same with the chem. Even a lab setting will likely be very secure. That is not to say that they eventually will not find a way in. Nothing is forever, but it could take thousands of years. The bio is likely to be dead by then. The chem however."

"So you say concentrate on the chem and no worry about the bio?"

"More people are likely to die of natural plagues. We can expect yellow fever, malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis again. Not to mention sexually transmitted, normal flues and colds."

"Such a bringer of joy."

*Superstition will come back. Not to say we were all scientifically knowledgeable now.*

"I certainly am not. Barely passed my level 2s. High school in the old thinking. I have learned more hanging out with all of you than I ever learned in school or on the net."

"Likely much will be lost. Even the Native American knowledge is weak. So many elders are gone and it has been over a hundred years since anyone had to live the old ways. That's five generations. Languages can be lost in three."

"The Chinese have the means and will however. There may be other groups still organized enough. Don't forget all the Armstrongs. Other countries are likely to have something similar if not as complex."

"Stop with the negativity already even."

"Ron is right though. We do need to do something. The sooner we do, the less likely they will believe they will get away with it. The Chinese know of the one year rule, but that leaves a lot of others we can go for now. We can all concentrate on them."

"By that time, we will have boosted the others up to TK6 at least. That will help a lot."

"Not Lisa and Qaletaqa though. They are likely to hold out till the child is born at least. They are so young anyway. I am not sure that someone that young is mature enough."

“As one of the aforementioned individuals, I am inclined to concur.”  
She smiles.

“That is not to say they can't be raised to say TK4.”

“Thank you.”

*Meorow!*

“That did not sound like Ghost or Marm.” Everyone cracks up.

# **The Guardians of Br'thn Assurance**

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## 2081 AD, 57 AP [after plague]

Dukedom of Silver Spring

“Jason have you been in Rock Creek again? You can be hanged for being in the Duke's forest. Are you crazy? What will happen to us if you get caught? Think of someone other than yourself for a moment. And don't give me that crap about your 'gift'. I can move more with my right arm at fifty years than you can with your gift.” She gives me a swat on the side of my head. Not the first time. I tower over her by at least twenty centimeters, but she is my mom, actually she is my stepmother, but I call her mom all the same. “You have chores, best get to them. Spring is coming. That means lambs and new chicks. We can't afford to lose any to thieves or dogs. Too bad your talent can't help us with that. All this daydreaming all day, too bad you can't dream of a wife and bring more help into the family.” I roll my eyes, we have had this discussion too many times. I never want to get married. I want to be a wizard like the one at Silver Spring. Wizards do not have wives. He would not be a pushover though. He would show that nasty Duke a thing or two.

My brother Tom and half sister Mary, call out to Em, who is already in the barn. Em is talking care of the chickens. She will leave one egg in each nest and mark it. These will become the next years brood stock after we eat the parents. The rest she collects to take into Mom. She also gives them food and water. Tom did not change at puberty like I did. Though TKs tend to run in families, not everyone receives the gift. Mary is too young, but there are no TKs on her mother's side, so it is unlikely. Probably why Pop married her. I have been a disappointment. My Mom, the real one that is, was a TK, probably still is. Once she reached TK2 my parents separated. Pop stayed TK1 and did not lose his sexual ability. Mom stayed for awhile, but it just was not going to work. TK2s are allowed to get a divorce no questions asked. She was just gone one day. She never knew I had the gift since it does not appear until puberty. I figure I have a fifty fifty chance of making TK2. Already twenty six, I am running out of time. If I don't change by thirty and I will be stuck here the rest of my life. A fate worse than death from my perspective.

“About time you showed up. Help me with the hay.” Tom was the goodie two shoes. Not that our shoes were good. Being second, he tried harder. I guess when he did not change he made up for it by quickly becoming Pop's favorite. He is twenty now. They said that before the plague a women could have a child every year. Now the norm is more

like every five years. Six is not uncommon. Probably a good thing. They said the reason we had the last plague was because there were too many people on the planet and the lower birth rate might save us this time around. Not my problem anyway. Working the hay is hard work. Nothing goes to waste. What goes in, comes out as well. After we put food in the troughs, we muck the stalls. This gets mixed with earth outside to compost to fertilize the crops for the next year. Last snow was weeks ago and green is already appearing along ditches and loose soil.

Spring was a my favorite time of year. I loved going into the forbidden forest to sit and watch the birds, squirrels and other creatures. Families would begin soon. Babies were so funny to watch. Baby gophers were really curious and dumb. Easy for a cat or dog to catch. Birds had to be taught by their parents to beg for seeds from me. To fly. I heard that wizards can fly. I dream of flying among the trees and over the villages. Em comes up to me and tugs on my shirt to get my attention. She loves to hear about my dreams so does not hit me like the others. “Better get cleaned up for supper.”

People said that the barn was once a house. The outline is the same, but inside they have removed all the internal walls and the floor. Only a few posts in the center to keep the roof up, one made from a fallen tree shaped to fit. You can still see some of the blue paint they must have used on the outside in places. “Hey, Jason of the Clouds, help me with the tools.” Sure enough, wack on the side of the head. We wash, dry and oil the tools carefully. Metal was expensive and to replace a tool was a big deal. To replace this barn with a real one was way beyond our means. Easier to just keep patching this one. Tools too. The tines on the hay fork have been welded back on several times. Nearest blacksmith is three days away and demanded payment in either metal or meat. Both expensive. Rust was our enemy.

Supper was potato, carrot and broth soup again. Will be nice when we get in a crop of beans or when the baby chicks are big enough to risk eating a parent or two. Even a pigeon would be nice right now. It was illegal to eat pigeon though. They all belong to the royals. Banded so there would be no 'mistaken identities'. I always lost weight during the winter. Made it colder than it should have been. I never got used to the constant state of being hungry either. Spring was coming! Bet the Duke never went hungry, or any of his people. They were supposed to be our protectors, from what? We needed protection from him, not anyone else that I could see. I have to keep my thoughts to myself of course. Treason

was not just a hanging, but torture first as well. You notice how there is always a corpse rotting on the 'trees' in town?

Glad Em was not turning out to be a looker. I could get hanged, but what they did to the pretty ones was much worse. Pretty girls disappeared and sometimes boys. Wizards didn't have wives and I was not going to disappoint one by leaving her halfway through my life either. Pop was lucky to have found a widow willing to take him. Of course he did have the farm. Food was a good trade for the occasional romp in the hay I guess. My step Mom was ok. She did not hit me as hard as the others and was always fair with her judgments and portions. But she lacked imagination. I want to soar with my wings and my mind.

Candles were for special nights. Most nights we bedded down with the sun. Nights were getting shorter, best get some rest. Chores in the morning. I had downstairs duty tonight. That meant if I heard anything I was the first responder. We took turns, so that no one person was forever sleep deprived and tired all the time.

I awake a few hours before dawn. I can hear the sheep worrying about something near the barn. In a vision I can see the sheep moving away from the back corner and a pack of dogs trying to get in the hole I did not patch very well. Maybe it just my imagination, but better safe than sorry. I yell, "Dogs at the barn!" and go outside at a run. I instinctively grab a handful of gravel on the way out. I may be only TK1, but I can still often scare something away with gravel that does not fly in a straight line and always hits it's target. Right on the nose is usually effective. Not really safe to face a pack alone. I should wait for the others, but they are also likely to get into the barn before the others get here and it is my fault they have found the weak spot. It is pitch black, but somehow I can see anyway. Black and white, but I will take what I can get. Even the grass is a shade of gray. I can sense the dogs on the other side of the barn. Wait, I can see them through the barn! One is at the hole just like I guessed. He has a paw in and is working the board loose. I reach the barn and race around the corner to be confronted with the two lookouts. I throw the gravel into the air and then TK it as fast as I can at the dogs. There is a yelp and the dogs are thrown over backwards dead. What the?

I invert my hand and will some more gravel to come up to it. A huge mound of soil and dirt reaches my hand and nearly knocks me over. I concentrate and a group of smaller stones come up to my hand just as a big snarling dog comes running towards me at full speed. I don't think, but TK the stones at the dog's head. Just as with the first two, he is bowled over dead with a huge crunch sound as his head is destroyed. I

jump over him and round the corner. Two more dogs. One gives out a bark and receiving no answer takes off at top speed. The last dog is halfway into the hole it has made. I wait for it to make it's way out again. "Boo!" It takes off at a run too. I toss a few stones after it, not to kill, but to dissuade it from returning.

The others come around the other corner with a small lantern. "What happened? Where are they?" I point to the other corner. Tom and Pop go to investigate. I hear a "Shit Jason, what did you do?" then "Double shit Pop, look." After that I only hear mumbles.

Mom looks worried. "What happened Jason?"

I point at the hole in the barn. "Dogs trying to get into the chickens and sheep. The three died when I used my gift to throw rocks at them."

"I have seen you knock over bottles, but you could not kill anything bigger than a squirrel."

"It's the second change for sure. I knew you would do it." Em gives me a hug.

Pop and Tom come back with two of the dogs and a collar. "There is going to be trouble Jason." Pop holds up the collar to the lantern. A king's dog collar. "They will come looking for him. We can either turn him in or bury him. We are within our rights to protect property, even from a king's dog." I sit down. A king's dog. I am dead.

With a head in hands, I say, "Where is the proof? I was too quick. There are no dead chickens or sheep. No blood. Only dead dogs and a hole in the barn that could have been made by anything. Who are they going to believe? Their eyes or my story?"

"Best then if you turn yourself in. At least then they won't come after the rest of us."

"But he is my first born. I can't let him do that."

She just looks at him and walks back to the house with Em who has her head buried in tears. I help them bury the king's dog and dress the other two for curing. I go back to the house after cleaning up and pack my sack. Tom gives me the collar to include at the top. As soon as it is light I take off. No one says anything, but Tom and Pop both offer their hands to shake. That done, they turn and go back into the house. As of now, I no longer exist in their minds.

With nothing to lose, I take the path through the Rock Creek forest. The sooner the King's men find me the sooner this will be over. Going south, I should avoid the Duke's men at least. It would be humiliating to my family to have my corpse hanging in the village square. This way I will die among strangers and they will not have to suffer. Why did the

dogs have to choose last night? One night, either way, and the outcome would likely have been different. One day earlier and I would not have had the gift and I would have been the one hurt. One day later and I would have known about the change and had a chance to compensate.

The birds are singing the promise of spring, but my heart is not with them. It takes most of the day to reach the end of the forest of trees. I am already further than I have been before. I can start to see the forest of towers through the breaks in the trees as dark starts to fall. One more day will not matter I guess and I look for a tree to spend the night in. It would be ironic if I ended up being eaten by dogs at this point. There are also mountain lions to worry about. The King denies it, but I have seen the prints. I think he just uses it as an excuse to kill more serfs. A deer goes missing and the next day one of us is missing. I only needed to get a little bit further up when it happens. I hear a crack and I am falling towards the ground, bouncing off branches as I go. I concentrate and a few centimeters off the ground I stop. So the gift is now strong enough to support me during a fall. Bruised and scrapped I make my way back up the tree using the gift this time and strap myself in for the night. Cold.

The next morning I reach into my pack for the last of the stale bread. I soften it with my saliva or I would break a tooth. Not that it would matter. I expect to be dead by tomorrow. I finish the rest of my water as well. People said that there were creatures call frogs that lived in the stream I hear below. Nothing lives there now. Even plants keep well back from it. Drink that water and you are sick for days if not dead if you get enough of it. We always used rain water or melted snow for drinking. I float down to the ground carefully, still sore from my fall last night. Lucky I did not break or sprain anything. Not that it would matter.

Once down I try the floating technique to see what the limit is. I can go horizontally a little faster than a good walk. Not really that much of a use. I set down and continue my walk to the gallows. At the edge of the forest only meters from the forest of towers I hear, "Halt in the name of the King!" Can't get lost now. I stop and put my hands up in the air with the collar in one hand. "King's dog collar." Duh. "Drop your pack and turn around." I do as instructed. "Walk to that wall. Face against the wall, hands up and spread your feet." I know the routine. We all played Joe Friday of the King's guard as kids. Read em their rights Joe. They don't have any rights Dan. Ha-ha-ha-ha! He pats me down, but I don't have even a knife that the family could use. I was not going to need one, so why waste it? "Turn around and stick out your hands." I get a good look, he is about Tom's age, nervous. Would be easy to overpower him, but



this is not what I came to do, so best get it over with. He ties up my hands with a short piece of rope and then attaches a longer piece to act as a leash. At least it is not around my neck, yet.

“My name is Jason.”

“No talking. I don’t want to know you.” Yeh, why bother?

At the corner of each tower there is a check point to pass. He holds up the collar and they wave us through. Several more check points and about an hours walk and we reach our apparent destination. I look up. This tower is huge. We go inside, the place is dark with only a few small fires lit for light. He walks me up to the desk of sorts and hands over the collar and my leash. A big burly type sighs, gets up and takes me up the steps. Up and up we go. It is dark inside the space for the steps, but the guard seems to know the way. Probably from practice. I can ‘see’ just fine though. We go down some corridors and around several turns. All dark. This would make escape for a normal person almost impossible. Finally a door is opened and we are in some light again. There is an open door waiting for me and a number next to the door, 709. I knew my numbers and letters. Pop saw no point to it. We only had ten sheep and as many chickens, so why bother, but I knew that wizards needed to know, so I learned on my own, by asking questions and borrowing books where ever I could. Not that it mattered now. The door slams shut.

Bowl near the door, not too clean. Empty pitcher for water I guess. Other side is the pot. Definitely not clean. I head to the window. Using TK, I remove the last of the rope. They had taken the longer piece. Didn’t want me to do the deed too early now would they. Not much of view, just more towers. Pigeons have made a nest on one of the windows across from me and a little lower down. I can see into the nest, no eggs yet. Only half built really, but the parents are working on it. Window does not open. Sealing me off from fresh air and sound. It is very quiet. I decide it can’t hurt me now, so I scan the rooms around me. One person in each cell to the right and left. Corridor where I came in. And outside from this side of course. Up and down are empty. They want us isolated I guess or there are only a few of us this early in the season.

About an hour before sunset I hear noise outside. They are coming to hang me I suppose. I hear the door next to mine opening and then shutting. Maybe not. My door opens. Someone empties the pot and another fills the bowl and pitcher. Slam. Guess if everything is not in the right place it does not get done. Have to remember that. Would not want my food in the pot. Water is only half bad, but I am thirsty enough it doesn’t matter that my last water was this morning. Glad it is not

summer. Gets real warm here in the summer. Not that I'll have to worry about that again. Food is some sort of thick stew only warm not hot. No spoon. I could use my hands of course, but I have the time. Maybe some practice with this new ability would stop me of dying of boredom first. It was well past dark before I finished but I did not notice, my concentration is so intense. A lot at first ended up on my face, but TK could take care of that as well. The last little bit I tried from across the room. With a little more practice I would not need to leave my window seat. Getting cold. That small blanket is not going to be much use. I huddle in a corner and do the best I can.

By morning I as shivering pretty good. The same noises as the night before. Breakfast? The door open, the procedure is repeated, only this time is it a hunk of old bread instead of stew. The water is ice cold. I poor some into the bowl and dunk the bread into it till it softens. Hunger and cold are old 'friends' as it was pretty much the same on the farm. I make a mark on the wall behind where I sit next to the window using TK. One day. I see no other marks, so either others were not able to make a mark, or they punish you for doing so. I will have to remember to keep mine covered every time they come by. Hey, what could they do to me, hang me? Relax.

Not that I don't still jump each time the door opens, but I got to spending this time practicing with my gift. Using stale bread as projectiles I leaned how to manipulate several objects at once while in the air myself. I leaned how to float upside down without feeling gravity and getting increasingly longer hair in my face. Hmm, I should be able to cut my hair with TK. Pulling was more like it at first till I learned to concentrate in the right way to narrow the field to a razors edge. What to do with the hair? They are bound to notice my hair is staying short. If I put it into the pot they will wonder how I managed to cut it. I need to get it out of the room somehow or disguise it.

The TK knife can be made VERY sharp and as it takes up no space itself, it can cut through most anything, including the wall or the window. I make a small wedge shaped hole in the wall near the floor. Only a few centimeters wide at the outside, but it is enough to get the hair out and some fresh air in. I can hide the imperfections in the wall behind my back when they bring the food cart around. The wedge shape makes it easy to put the plug in and pull it out again. Heat is another problem. Nothing to burn even if I could start a fire. Burning hair is very likely to be noticed anyway. I already know how to shield myself from the crumb missiles.

Maybe I can shield from the cold as well. It works! Sort of. At least till I fall asleep. I need to figure out a way of doing TK while asleep.

Noise outside, a lot of it! Shit. They are coming for me, I had almost forgotten. A lot of yelling and swearing, sounds of metal against metal. The door opens next to mine and someone is shoved inside. I scan there are now two in that cell. My door is next and a big warrior type is shoved in along with another set of 'utensils'. He must weigh nearly twice what I do and most of that is muscle. About my age or a little older. He pays no attention to me whatsoever, but pounds on the door instead, swearing up a storm. There are now two to every cell in the area I can scan. All warrior types. Must be leftovers from some sort of battle. My roommate finally calms down, gives up on the door and turns to face me.

"My name is Jason."

"Bruce" he grunts, scoping out the cell. He points to my right. "That's my corner. Stay out of it." I don't move. I guess he figures I am already far enough away from it. He checks out the bowls and pitchers, and doesn't appear to care about the pots. He grabs the best of each and says, "Mine!" Feels like he has been in this situation before. It is a tense few hours of quite till the evening meal arrives. How am I going to eat in front of him? He grabs his bowl right off and uses his hands to dig in. Eating so fast he belches after wards. Seeing that I have not made a move he starts for the other bowl.

"No!" I can't believe I have said anything. He turns to face me with a smile on his face, like he will eat me after he eats the contents of the bowl.

"Oh, and exactly how are you going to stop me twerp?" Well, he was bound to find out sooner or later. I TK my bowl to my hands and proceed to feed myself in the new fashion with everything floating in the air. His mouth drops open and then shuts. He goes to his corner and covers up for the night. I really need to learn how to do TK asleep now. Nothing like a little incentive to get one motivated.

## **Bruce**

"What's a wizard doing in this place? I thought all of you lived with the Kings and such in luxury."

"I am not a wizard and now never will be."

He thinks a bit, "What are you in for?"

"Killing a King's dog that was trying to get at our chickens and sheep."

“That’s not capital or have they changed the rules here?”

“No way to prove I was in the right. Besides, they never asked me even my name, much less what happened. One look at the collar without the dog and here I am.”

“How did you kill a King’s dog? They’re vicious. Not easy to kill. Used in war to harass the enemy. Good at it too.”

“I TKed a rock through its skull which caused it to explode. Didn’t mean too, but I was not used to the new ability yet.”

“You just changed then. They don’t know?”

“Never asked. What are you here for?”

“Street brawl. I was not even part of it, but they lock up everyone they can find in a two block radius and figure it out later, if you are still alive. Been here before. Last time I deserved it. Drunk and disorderly. Gave me six months here for that. Best they don’t find out about your talent. That, along with the collar means torture by the wizard as well as hanging.”

“I figured that might be the case.”

“So, are you, you know, powerful enough to get out of here?”

“Sure, but what would be the point? They would just grab someone else at random and hang them in my place. I could not live knowing that.” He nods like this might not be his response to the same question. I let it go.

“So, what did you do before coming to the ritz?”

He laughs flexing his biceps. “Heavy lifter, hired muscle where ever needed. In spite of my appearance, I am not into killing unless I have to of course.” I could not exactly complain about that. Three dogs on my chart now and countless chickens and some sheep. Just no humans.

“I have been here nearly two weeks. I expected to be dead by now. And idea how long these things take.”

“You sound like you are looking forward to it. It can take years or days. Totally random. Sometimes they save them up for a big kill off, sometimes they just do one or two as an example. Doesn’t do good to do too many people however, they need workers now that we don’t reproduce as fast as rabbits any more. Also tends to scare people off from settling here to work the farms. All capital offenses have to be approved by the wizard. Usually a rubber stamp, whatever that is. Chances are you will never see him. Hope you don’t. They can sense another of their kind.”

“How do you know so much?” This is all new to me and I had tried to find out everything I could about them.

“Living in the city, such as it is, is much different than the farm. If we ever get out of here, I will take you around. Not likely your folk would ever let you back now anyway. If you hadn’t killed the dog, you were supposed to have presented yourself ASAP to the wizard for evaluation anyway. That is a one way ticket off the farm.” I nod, that much I knew. My mother made sure we all knew our responsibility in case the change came upon one of us.

“Do you know who the wizard in this area is?”

“They get new names when they are trained. So, a name means nothing. Can’t even tell if they are male or female as they can change their appearance at will. They are supposed to be interchangeable and impartial. What ever than means. King’s wizard will be the most powerful for this entire area though. Power seems to follow power.”

“Impartial means, no special favors or allowances for rank, etc.”

“That’s a laugh. King or Duke pays their keep. Who do you think they favor?” I smile. The wizard of Silver Springs was certainly in the pocket of the Duke. Never saw the wizard, but heard plenty of tales. Even if only a few were true, it was not someone I would want to meet right now.

“Well it certainly is nicer to have someone to talk to. Two weeks totally alone is a bit much even for me, and I usually like being alone. Sorry it had to be you, you seem nice enough. At least nice enough to not have deserved this.” He bows his thanks from his sitting position.

He asks, “So what do you do for entertainment in this place.” Laughing after saying this.

“Mostly I practice, for lack of anything better to do.”

“No one has come to check you out? They used to have sensors that could tell when someone was using the gift nearby. Regulations are that everyone who comes in here is supposed to be checked out, no matter the odds are extremely low. But it can only get you if you use your talent. Best practice how not to use it as well. They have ah, manual ways of telling.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” He takes a sudden swing at me, but I immediately raise a barrier and he is stopped cold.

“You just failed.” Hmm... “They usually test you when you are either tired or mad. Works every time.”

The next several weeks proved to be ‘interesting’. If Bruce could hit me during the night, I fail. If he fails to hit me during the day, I fail. For someone who is not a TK, he knows or figures out a lot. I am bald now. I needed the practice of close work with the TK knife, yet needed a plausible story to explain why I had no hair. SO it had to be VERY close.

No hair left undone. At the same time I had to let the beard grow. I never wore a beard before. No one would recognize me now that's for sure. Then there was all kinds of scanning and TK practice. I know the exact schedule for every activity on the cell block. I am still not sure where that term came from. Anyway, I can describe the appearance of every inmate, based on my black and white scans, so hair color, etc. is not known. I learned how to make a TK ear and mouth. Some of the guards think the place is haunted now. I don't push it too far or there is likely to be an investigation. I spend hours hanging from the ceiling and slicing invisible designs into the walls. I learn how to defeat an opponent without killing him. This part scares me. I like Bruce, I don't want to kill him, even by accident. Though I could certainly do without all these bruises. It turns out that I can shield both of us from the cold, but will not be able to do anything about the heat that will come soon. I would hate to be in a south cell block.

"Why are we doing all of this?"

"Scan around you. Anything else to do? What are our neighbors doing?"

"I concentrate. Not much. Eeuu! Glad I don't have those feelings any longer."

"So, our distractions don't seem that bad. This is the best time I have had in prison, that's for sure." We both laugh.

"Well, bed time, with a twist. This time if I fail to hit you in the night, you fail. You need to be able to decide under the circumstances which way to go." He says with an evil grin. I have been getting better, but not 100% and I have fresh bruises to prove it. More coming no doubt. At least I do not have to keep the barrier up all night.

## **Morning**

"You could have slept through an atom bomb. I 'nuded' you several times and you did not notice at all. Slept like a baby as they say."

"What's an atom bomb? I have heard the expression, but have no idea what it is."

"Search me."

I do my morning scans. I am late. "Something coming. Weird. Tech of some kind. No animals inside."

"Shut down now! No TK!" I stop. My heart is going a million miles and hour, whatever a mile is. We both retreat to our corners and I slow my heart. They can tell you are scared or guilty by that apparently.

We hear, rather than my sensing, the device come down the corridor outside. It stops at each door for a moment and then moves on. It stops at our door and I almost forget to breathe. Finally after what seems forever, it moves on. I let my air out. It stops, turns around and comes back. This time I breathe normally. I figure I am dead now, so it doesn't matter. I stand up and look out the window for the last time. Surprisingly it moves on.

“Good move Jason.” Bruce finally says. “That threw it completely off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Standing up to look out the window was a ‘normal’ thing to do. None of the other inmates would care one way or another about its presence. By behaving like a normal inmate, it could not sense any suspicious behavior.”

“It can see through walls?” He nods in the affirmative. “They use them in war to seek out enemy hiding places. Armored like crazy. No sword, knife or spear can get to it. You see one, you run for your life in all directions. Otherwise a bomb follows and you are all dead.”

“I thought you said you were not in the military.”

“Not, but as a kid I used to watch them practice. I wanted to be a warrior growing up. Everyone thought I would be. That was until I killed someone in self defense. I threw up like a baby. Never hurt anyone since. I don't have the stomach for it. I still had the body for it, so I went into the moving business. Been alright for me. My size means few people will mess with me. But because there is always someone bigger, I still had to learn the hard way, how to defend myself.”

“I would imagine that even a TK2 would make a formidable war machine.”

“That's why they are illegal. Use a TK or wizard in war, even when you are about to be overrun and everyone involved disappears, never to be seen again. Even the TK. Just poof! Gone.”

“Shit.”

“SO, why teach me all these techniques to defend myself with, as if I was going to end up in a battle field?”

“You might at some point.”

“I am dead remember?”

“Not yet you aren't.” We wacks me on the side of the head. “You failed.”

“Hey, that's not fair, I can't shield with that thing wandering the halls.”

He laughs, “That thing could not hurt a fly. Just some royal’s toy. Has a means of projecting an image back to their place. Could be used in war for surveillance, so they let the younger ones practice with them. Allowed anywhere in the city they want to go. Any city dweller would know that of course.”

“Of course.” Got me good that time Bruce. I shake my head and laugh as well. A lot to learn. Royals have tech. That is interesting in and of itself. As a wizard I would have had to know all about it. Sigh... oh well.

“Can they make tech as well, or is this just left over from before?”

“That I don't know. Think I work in the inner sanctum?” No, I don't think so.

“Are there ones I do have to worry about?”

“Yes, but it will be too late if you see or scan them. They will already know you are there. At least at your current level. That is why there are no TK2 wizards. Too easy to get you.”

“So a wizard is at a much higher level then. Why hasn't the wizard here detected me then?”

“What makes you think he or she hasn't?”

“I would be dead if they had.”

“Ah, there is a problem with that logic.”

“And that is?”

“That he or she wanted you dead.”

“Why wouldn't they?”

“Oh this is fun. Why would they? They could have you for breakfast in a blink of an eye. You are absolutely no threat whatsoever.”

“Ok, he or she knows I am here.” He nods. “But I am not worth the effort to deal with.”

“What makes you think they are not 'dealing' with you or you are not worth it?”

I think for a moment. Bruce is smiling. “Ah, you are not a wizard are you?” He nods no. “Is there a wizard near by?” He shrugs he doesn't know. Ok, what is left.

“Think it out, you are almost there.” He leans against the wall and pretends to be cleaning his fingers.

“Are you an agent of or in the employ of a wizard?” He smiles and nods yes, but says no more.

“Of the King's wizard then?” No.

“The Duke's wizard?” That would be a fate worse than death. He sees my anxiety and holds out for a few seconds and then nods no. He is playing with me now.



“That means there there is more than one wizard that knows of my existence.” He nods yes.

“I think it is safe to go for a walk now. Shall we? You can leave the blanket here.” I did not realize that I have been holding it. I drop it. He walks over to the door and opens it. Not locked.

“Did you do that?”

“Nope, never been locked.”

“WHAT? What do you mean?”

“You never checked did you?” I nod no. I just assumed that I was in jail and the door was locked. Shit! I sit down on the floor.

“You mean, I have never been in jail? This whole time I could have just walked out?”

“Oh, this is a jail, but you could have left at anytime. No one would have stopped you. You would have been expected to turn yourself over to the authorities and be taken to the local wizard named Moosa of course. Had you not they would have come after you. There you would have met up with me for training and escort to your next teacher. When you did not show up, I went looking for you and decided this was as good of a place as any to begin your training. You are quite good by the way. Best student I have ever had. Maybe I will do all of them in a cell from now on.”

“Moosa? What kind of a name is that?”

“Hopi native name for cat. All full wizards get Hopi names for some animal that matches their personality. Sort of a tradition or something.”

“Then you know about wizards, but are not one yourself?” He nods.

“Not even a TK1.”

“Why are you doing this then?”

“It's a job and it's fun.”

“So you like torturing young TKs.” He smiles and raises an eyebrow. Great.

“I had to go through two years of training with TKs all around me. That part was not fun believe me. Shall we go?”

I get up, leaving the blanket for the next poor guy. “We are pretty rare, when was the last time you had one of us to ah, train?”

“About two years ago. I really am a mover for hire. This is a side job that pays much more, both in money and in amusement.” I'll bet.

The corridor is empty. We walk to the door at the end. Dark inside, just like when I arrived, but this does not slow down Bruce. He has done this before. I can scan of course, so it is easy for me. The guard at the

desk pays us no mind as we walk out into the mid morning sun. Nice spring day. Takes a moment for me to adjust to the stronger light.

“Now what?”

“Follow me. I will show you the way out of town.” I follow. The guards don't care about people going out, just in. Takes me about half an hour to remember. Duh!

“What about the death sentence for killing the dog?”

“You were scanned. Wizard Moosa knows you were telling me the truth and are innocent. Good enough for everyone. Of course, the wizard does not let on you are TK, not even to the King. I was the only other person that knew. I was contacted, was available, and then was told where you were and what you looked like. And the cell number of course. The guards know me, but I put on a show to convince you that I was BAD.”

“Shit, I am supposed to check in with the wizard. I have to go back.”

“I may have to take back all the nice things I said about you. You were supposed to check in so someone like me could do the initial training and evaluation. We have done that, you passed. No need to bother the wizard.”

“Oh. I am sort of fuzzy from the shock I think.”

“Hmm, that would be a down side to doing the training in a jail cell. Have to remember that. Well, at least I did not have to provide you with meals.”

“You call that food?” We both laugh. Another half an hour and I am at a different road out than I came in on.

“Here is where we part. Just keep following the road south. The next trainer will contact you.” He shakes my hand and turns to go back.

“Thank you!” I shout back to him. He raises his hand in acknowledgment and keeps going. There are other people on the road, but no one that looks like a wizard whatever they look like. Come to think of it I have never even met another TK, much less a wizard, except mom of course. I shrug and start out. My family thinks I am dead. So, I have no obligations but to become the wizard that I always wanted to be. I have passed the first test! I have a feeling that this might have been the easy one though.

## **On the Road**

I walk for hours with no indication that I have been recognized. I am starting to worry about food and water. At least I won't freeze any more.

Just have to walk a ways out of sight and up a tree shielded. Might be able to find some nuts and such if I try. By the late afternoon though the sky is clouding up and looking menacing. Sure enough it starts to rain an hour later. Slowly at first and then picking up strength. There are no longer any people on the road. Everyone has turned off on other paths or pulled over with their carts to start a make shift shelter. I decide it must be time to do the same. I wonder a ways into the woods till I find a suitable tree.

I am thirsty, but have nothing other than my tongue and clothing to catch the rain with. Dumb! I look at a fallen log and carve off a chunk and then whittle away at it till I have nice looking bowl. I set it down to collect rain water. I need a pitcher as well. Something with a narrow neck that will not spill the water I collect in the bowl. Takes me another few tens of minutes to complete this task. I pour the water from the bowl into the pitcher and cork it with a branch carved to fit the opening. The rest of the water I drink. Tastes a little like wet wood, but that will change as it ages. Won't last forever of course, but will do for now and I can always make another.

Now food. I search for pine cones, but the squirrels have beaten me to all the good ones. There are some wild onions coming up and I pick a few of those. I won't be breathing on any one tonight. I grin. I try scanning. It works for seeing what is under the ground as well. I find some creatures living underneath the soil, but leave them alone. Wizards are supposed to learn how to be vegetarian when they are alone. First law, do not kill. I continue searching. Near the base of a tree, I spot what appears to be an abandoned pile of nuts. Being nearly spring any squirrel would have finished these if they were still alive. I carefully pull back the leaf litter and slowly dig with TK and scanning till I reach the nuts. Can't eat the acorns, but the walnuts, pine nuts and sunflower seeds are okay. I sort the good from the rotten and then dig in. I gather what is left into my pocket for tomorrow.

Dark now, I TK up the tree I scoped out. I have nothing to tie myself in with. Than means I have to use TK all night like I have been trained. I wedge the pitcher and bowl into notches in a couple of branches. I have used the TK shield to keep most of the rain off, but now I extend the shield further out till I am locked firmly into the tree. I have left an opening in the shield for air near the bottom. I fall asleep thinking about all that Bruce has taught me over the last couple of weeks. Quite a bit actually. All and all not a bad experience. Though I would have liked to have known I was not under a death sentence the whole time. On the

other hand, not even a wizard knows when their time will come. We are all always under a death sentence. We just pretend it is much further away and not something to worry about. I am learning to live my life as if this is my last day.

## **Morning**

I eat the rest of the seeds and nuts and drink some water. Time to get going again. I scan to be sure there is no one around, then TK down to the ground. Takes me a moment to get oriented. The light is coming from a different direction of course. Back on the road I head south again, with the sun to my left. Others are already on the road ahead of me. Probably started at first light. I should have, but this was the first day of freedom and I indulged myself with a little extra sleep. Not that sleeping in a tree is that comfortable.

There is an older couple that I thought I recognized from the day before ahead of me going slower. They are still wearing the same robes I saw last time. Lot of people wear robes. Easier to make than pants and more versatile. Can't be farmers though. There you need pants. I wave to them as I pass and they wave back. I wear the bowl on my head using some thin roots to tie it on with and carry the pitcher at my side. Hate getting sunburned. Will have to work out some sort of back pack. They took my other one, or rather I left it way north of here. For lack of anything better to do, I scan the ground ahead of me. Looks like this was a major road at one time before the trees and plants started to take it back.

I can scan concrete and rebar under my feet. Rebar would normally be very valuable, but is such a pain to extract from the concrete, most people don't bother, unless there is some sticking out someplace. Other metals are not as valuable as they can't be worked as easily with a forge I have been told. Aluminum in particular, unless you find a very large piece intact is more or less worthless. I could get the rebar easily now. I scan around me to be sure everyone is well away from me and focus on a spot meters ahead of me, so I don't have to slow down much. I cut the rebar into a length a few decimeters long and extract it from the concrete and soil, slicing off the cement that has stuck to it and then TK it to my hand. Might be needed for trade. Should be able to get some food for a piece this big. I replace the concrete and pat it down into the hole and scatter some leaves over it. As an after thought I draw some stone to my hand as well. I know, I got into trouble the last time I had stones in my hand, but I

am much better practiced at this level now and nothing strange has happened to me over the night.

By late afternoon I reach a small village. I hunt for some food first thing. There is a bakery closing up, having sold most of their goods earlier in the day I suppose. I come up to the counter. There are still a couple of dark peasant loaves left. I am about to offer them the entire hunk of metal for the loaves when I remember Bruce telling me to act normal if I want to avoid notice. It was easy for me to obtain, but it would not be for a normal person and they would want plenty for it. She has seen me.

“Good afternoon. What do you want?” I forgot that I am not dressed well. Probably thinks I am a begger.

“How much iron for the three loaves left?” Implying I have something worth trading for it.

“How much do you have?” I smile back, keeping my bar behind my back.

“She nods, scratches her chin. “One centigram. Take it or leave it. I am closing up and the pigs are as hungry as you are.”

“Those today's or yesterday's? No one feeds their pigs fresh bread.” I did come from a farm.

She looks huffy at me. “Fifty grams then. Final offer. And I get to judge the quality of the metal first.”

“Fair enough.” I slice off the end a generous fifty grams, probably closer to the one hundred she originally asked for and hand it to her.

“Old piece of rebar. Rusty too.”

“And more than fifty grams, take it or leave it.”

“Deal.” She reaches for the iron and hands me the loaves.

“How much for a spare sack to carry it in?” She waves at me and finds one under the counter and hands it to me.

“Just take it. Late getting home anyway.” I slice off a small piece and put that on the counter anyway. She takes it and nods thanks.

Leaving town I see the old couple ahead of me again. They are faster than I thought. This time I decide to be generous and as I pass, I hand them half a loaf of bread.

“Wait! What is your name kind man?”

“Jason.” I call back.

“Weren't you supposed to meet someone on this road?” What the? I stop and slowly turn around.

“Do you know me?”

“Never met you before.”

“Then why do you think I am supposed to meet someone?”

“We are the ones.”

“I will need some proof before I can accept that.” These two are not wizards, no way. The man looks at least fifty and the woman not much younger. He has white hair and hers shows lots of gray. Both are carrying thin walking staffs and have small back packs on. But Bruce was not a wizard either. Who knows how long this process goes on.

They catch up to me. “My name is Siiva and this is my partner Bernie. Do you mind if we walk together?” She nods my way. I bow and point down the road. It is wide enough to handle all three of us, so we start together. They manage somehow to match my pace. I am tall and have long legs and usually out pace whomever I am with. I look to my side and they smile back at me, like nothing is wrong. We all remain quiet for some minutes.

“So, you want some proof hum? Well let's see. You paid the baker with rebar. Not uncommon. But the problem is, while the sides had a layer of rust as expected, the ends were polished smooth and showed fresh metal with no marks from a saw of any kind.”

“Shit! I thought I was being so smart too. Then you know what I am?”

“A TK2 in need of much more training it would appear. That should be enough to satisfy you for now.” It is.

### **Another Addition to our Group**

We continue on for a couple of more hours. I have so many questions, but they remain quiet.

Later afternoon. “We should start thinking of a place to camp for the night.”

“Something better than a tree I would assume.” Bernie says. So, they might be wizards if they know that. The rebar they could have simply observed, but I was no where near anyone last night. She points to my pants. There are still scraps of bark from the tree attached. Can she read my mind or is she simply very observant? So may questions.

“We should be able to make the inn, if we pick up our pace some.” No problem for me and after a few hundred meters, apparently not for them. I have never met anyone this age who could walk this fast. They are definitely not what they appear to be.

In short order we reach the wayside inn. I can smell real food, not that the bread was that bad. “The Three Ducks. Never heard of it. I do not

sense a pond or anything near by that would interest a duck. I wonder why they called the inn that.”

“So, he can read as well as climb trees. Very good Jason.” Siiva smiles at me and offers me the door into the inn. Inside there is the usual assortment of workers, military and staff. “Allow me to make payment this time. Might be safer.” I smile sheepishly. Yeh, probably would be.

“I would like a room for three for just the night, and supper for same.”

“Welcome back Mr. Siiva. The other member of your party has already arrived awaiting you upstairs. Room 23 as usual.”

“Why don’t you go on up, you will like George. We will be up in a moment. And you can take off your, ah, hat now.” Oops. Forgot all about that. I must look the country bumpkin to the max. I climb the stairs and find 23 in the far corner away from the other rooms. I knock, but there is no answer. I scan, but there is no one inside. Must have stepped out. I slowly open the door and look inside. No one here. A black and white cat is asleep in the middle of the biggest bed. Local rat catcher no doubt. Probably belongs to the owner. The cat opens an eye and looks at me.

*I will have you know that I belong to no one and my name is George, thank you very much.*

“Who said that? Come out and show yourself.” This is weird. I scan no one, but maybe a TK can hide from another TK or at least a lower level one.

*Stupid monkey. You think you disgusting naked ones have a monopoly on thought. At least have the decency of looking at me when you open your mouth and emit noise.*

There is no one here but the cat, who is sitting up staring at me with full attention. No way, a talking cat?

*I would never stoop so low as to talk with the likes of you farm boy. Still smell of the prison too. Maybe you should go back there and save us a whole lot of trouble.*

It is the cat and he can read my thoughts. He admits his name is George and I was supposed to meet someone by that name. Not the first time they have played games with me. Hmm.. “Well, I could I suppose, but then I would miss out on giving someone a truly excellent back rub.” Two can play this game. I have reached the side of the bed and have purposely turned away, pretending to look at the rest of the room.

*Oh, very well, if I must.* The cat takes his time, stretches, slowly comes over to my side, rubs against me and starts to purr. I pretend not to notice at first. The cat emphasizes its presence by giving me a gentle bite on the leg.

“Oh, you are friendly then. Well maybe I could do a small rub, just to be nice in return.” I reach down and do a cursorily massage of his back. I finally do a scan, so as to see the underside. George is a male name, but then I wasn’t expecting a talking cat either. So, I am learning that I can take nothing for granted.

“Do you mind if I pick you up?” The cat looks at me in alarm. “Just to move over to that chair, so as to better give you the necessary attention.” No objection. I gently pick him up. Normal weight, healthy. Good muscles.

*If I wanted a medical exam, I would certainly have chosen a better doctor than the likes of you.*

“I good masseuse must assess the needs of his client before applying the perfect massage.”

When the other two arrive carrying a package, I am in the chair, with George on my lap in the state of total ecstasy.

“George you are shameless. What did you do to get that treatment?”

*He offered. Honest. I didn’t lift a claw to encourage him. Oh, don’t stop. Yeh, right there. Harder. Ooo. Purr, purr!* George's paws are kneading imaginary dough.

“Looks like you have a friend for life. Turncoat!” He is just kidding George, don't listen to him.

*Why would I do that?*

Everyone, except George rolls their eyes. Cats!

“Ok, we have some administrative details to handle before supper.” Don't know that word. What do you mean? This is neat never having to talk out loud.

“Remember what happened at the baker? What do you think people will say when we stop talking to one another.”

“Ok, what is administrative?” Sigh.

“I heard that. You know, red tape.” Now I am totally confused, what has the color of tape have to do with this? And if you can't read my face, you are not normal.

He frowns, then concentrates. “Things people who only think in right and wrong do to make sure others all others act the same way and in the same pattern only the pattern makes no sense, because it has been changed and added to so many times. How's that?”

“Oh, you mean tangles.”

“Hmm, okay what do you call it when you can't win no matter what you do. No way out, even if you had the resources.”



“Hooks and lines. The more you struggle, the worse it gets. What do you call it?”

“Catch 22.”

“Oh, yeh that is really clear. How old are you anyway?”

“One hundred and twenty eight at the end of May.”

“May?”

“Start of summer should be close enough.”

“Gee, you don't look a day over one hundred.” I am smiling now and continuing to rub George.

“Stand up please.” I am about to put George down when he disappears just like that.

“Where did he go? That was weird.”

“You mean tails of these cats have not proceeded them?” Arr, arr, arr.

“Cats that talk and disappear into thin air? No, we don't have anything like that. Probably get the owner burned as a witch.”

Bernie is upset, “You mean a wizard is perfectly ok, but even the suspicion of a witch is burned?” I nod yes.

“We are getting distracted here and there will be no food left if we keep this going too long.”

I stand up. “Now what?”

“As a TK we have two sets of vows we take. The first set is a collection of ideals. Something to work towards, not to get stressed over. The second set is a statement of what is and is dependent on what level TK you have just accepted. So, in your case, TK2. So we will all say the first set together and you will say the first two of the second set. Bernie and I will continue to reaffirm our own vows commiserate with our own levels, so you will know what the levels entail.”

No more fun and games. Serious time. I nod that I am ready. I feel funny about my hands. What am I supposed to do with them? Is this like church? I look to them. Siiva holds his hands together at his waist in a sort of overlapping manner. Bernie has hers behind her back. So, I guess it doesn't matter. I try and follow Siiva.

“So, repeat after me.

A TK does not kill.

A TK does not lie or deceive intentionally.

A TK does not take what is not offered.

A TK does not consume any substance which affects the mind.

A TK does not participate in sexual acts of any kind.”

After everyone has said these he adds, "Note the last one does not forbid affection. Most TKs are very affectionate and the third includes reading minds without permission. Ok, the level vows."

Bernie takes over. She has a very nice voice. Too bad she does not talk more.

"A TK1 accepts that they are different.

A TK2 accepts that they will never have children." I stop here. No problems so far.

"A TK3 accepts the TK livelihood as their only lively hood.

A TK4 accepts that they no longer own anything.

A TK5 accepts the possible end of old age, sickness and death.

A TK6 accepts that they will never have a permanent home, owned or not.

A TK7 accepts that they no longer have personal thoughts.

A TK8 accepts the end of their own material substance. "Siiva stops here. The means that Bernie is a stronger TK than he is. I am used to the male always being stronger. Guess that does not apply here.

"A TK9 accepts the end of the concept of self." That is a heavy one indeed. Not sure how that can even be.

"The levels become more understandable as you get closer to them. Don't stress about it now."

"Not a problem. I have already accepted the TK3 vow. I never want to go back to the farm. I have been dreaming my entire live of being a wizard. No way do I want to go back."

Siiva looks concerned. "You should know there is a catch. If for some reason, you are not able to fulfill the requirements of the level you have achieved, at the request of yourself or the TK community you can or will be sent back to level zero. No in between states. All or nothing. Be very careful before accepting the next level, no matter what it is. There is no dishonor in waiting till you are ready or in saying no and stopping where you are. Each level is a factor of ten higher in strength. We can't afford a person at any level above two with those abilities and not being able to handle them. The results could be catastrophic. We have seen it."

Bernie asks, "Do you still wish to continue?" She is cold. I nod yes. Slowly, but yes, I want to continue.

"Good." She says. "Now strip. Everything off."

"What!?" No way, not in front of someone who is not family and a woman I barely know.

George pops in literally. Looks up at all of us.

“Don't worry. George thinks everyone without fur is an inferior being. Pay him no mind.”

I am still hesitating. Siiva finally speaks up. “Have you felt any sexual feelings at all since you changed to TK2?” I shake my head no. “Then what is the problem? We have not had these feelings for years and years. It is just meat. Nothing special at all. Both Bernie and I have lost count as of how many bodies we have had. Do you really think a person one hundred and thirty years old would look like this. A TK7 or above can change form at will. Ok, it takes a lot of practice. A lot of practice. But we have both been male, female, human, ryzx, !K, eagles, lions, and countless other creatures.”

“What is a rye-zik?”

“A sentient creature from another star. Don't stress it for now.”

“You keep saying that. It is not helping.”

“Sorry. I can get fixated on a phrase sometimes.” Bernie rolls her eyes and I crack up. And take off my clothes.

“Close your eyes please. Not what you think. We are just going to give you a bath. You stink and there really are not the facilities nor time here to do it proper.” I comply. Soon I feel a tingling sensation all over my body that lasts for several minutes. I could come to like this. “Don't even think this will be the way it is. Next time in the creek, cold or not. We are all in the same room tonight. I wanted to be able to survive the experience.” Ha, ha.

“Here put this on instead.” She hands me a robe like they wear. “This identifies you as TK to everyone. A plus or a minus depending on circumstances.”

I slip it on. Perfect fit. Somehow I would have guessed that. “Didn't know that myself, or I would have recognized you two earlier as my contact. Ah, Won't this be a bit cold.” They look at me weird. “Duh.” They smile.

“Supper.”

“So, how do we get there? Pop down there like George does.” That would be fun.

“And freak out everyone in the place. Our abilities are not for amusement of ourselves or others. We serve, period. We do what is necessary, but we respect the way others have chosen to live. Don't judge others. Serve them. Not what they want, but what they need.”

“That is NOT an easy task.” They smile and show me the door. I lead the way down the steps to the eating area. When I arrive, the others stand and applaud my entrance. Why?

*It is not often that one of their own becomes a wizard in training. Smile and thank them for their support. You have along road ahead of you.*

“Ok, I have a few questions then.”

*Later, upstairs. Not in front of the norms please.*

I nod I understand. So, mind talking is for when we have to talk in private and 'norms' are people without TK.

**Correct.**

Hey, I can tell which of you is mind talking. I was wondering about that.

“Come let's eat. They have prepared quite a feast. Don't worry about the meat either. We are allowed to eat whatever is served.”

“Even something poisonous?”

He laughs, “Don't worry, the food is fine, this time.”

It is. Never thought I would ever see this much food in one place at one time. Even during carnival or feast days, we had chores and missed most of it. Probably just as well, as we could not afford much. Siiva and Bernie sample lots of things, well, most everything, but do not actually eat that much. I try to control myself, but I am hungry and soon find myself eating more than I intended. I am good about staying away from the alcohol. By the time I stagger upstairs, I am stuffed and exhausted. I chose the soft chair and fall asleep almost instantly.

## **Morning**

“Ok, how come Wizard Moosa is allowed to do what he or she does?”

“He, we retain the pronoun of our original gender. You only know the rumors. How do you know the rumors are real? There are two factors you don't know. The truth and the time factor involved.”

“Ok, I admit that I don't know the truth, but if even one tenth is true, it is still bad. Now what is the time factor?”

“TK5 and above, live basically as long as they want, baring accidents. That means we can take a much longer view of life and societies. Since we have never had that perspective before, we also have to run experiments to find out what happens. We try not to break the vows, though sometimes circumstances beyond our control often dictate actions we would normally not perform. But, we try not to judge a society either. Right now, the culture you are most used to is a very harsh one. Life is cheap for those of the lower classes and the politics are more complex than an ant nest. However, this is a temporary situation. A few hundred

years and you will not recognize the place. We are trying to determine how to accelerate the process, but we need to be careful to minimize the number of people and ecologies hurt in the process.”

“Whoa!”

“Yeh, it is not just rushing in, saving the world and leaving again in a few minutes. It takes years and years. In a volatile place like this we purposely rotate wizards through, so as not to let anyone get caught up in the culture. We need people here with fresh perspectives. It would be too easy to think we have to work within the politics instead of outside them.”

“So, how many wizards are there?”

“We are not called wizards in all locations. Just seems to fit this culture. In other cultures we can be more visible, in some less. In China for instance, TKs are forbidden.”

“How do you work there then?” Where is China?

“Very carefully. Only our most experienced agents are posted there. Learning Chinese is but one of the hurdles. Can't use 'mind talk', which we call TP, there.”

“So, do you take me to some school or something?”

“Remember the vows. We have no home. There are places we helped set up where we are welcome, but there is no TK school, if for no other reason than our training never stops. To be a wizard is to forever be learning more.”

“So, you two,” Meow! “Excuse me, three, are the only others I will meet?”

“Oh, no, you will meet lots of others, norms and TKs alike. The most important thing is to stop right now about worrying what TK level you are at or anyone else is at. This is not a contest with others. There is no one you need be better than, than whom you were yesterday. Concentrate on right now, where you are this instance. What you can do in this situation. We borrow from whatever tradition works, from Zen to Shoshone, from Sufi to fundamentalist Christianity.”

“Why? What is our purpose?” No idea what they are saying.

“There are easy answers and hard ones. An easy answer is that we are here to help the sentient species of earth to commune with other such species through out the universe. To reach a level of maturity whereby we can be of help to others far beyond this small world. The hard answer is that we don't know and that our mission is to find out.”

“Species, as in more than one?”

*I am losing what little faith I had in you monkey. You really need to get over this concept that you ugly furless ones are the center of everything. Everyone knows cats are infinitely superior to your kind. Get used to it.*

“Ok. What do we do now?”

“We walk.”

## **History Lessons**

I am given a back pack similar to theirs containing a blanket and basic food and water rations. Enough for several days were we to become separated. Of course we can each fend for ourselves, so this is more a luxury than a strict necessity as far as I can tell. I tie my bowl and pitcher to the back.

“How come George does not have to carry anything?”

*Cats do not carry.* He walks ahead with his tail straight up and nose in the air.

“If he can't eat it, he is not interested. While we were fetching you, he earned his keep cleaning the inn of mice and rats.”

*Don't forget the cockroaches and occasional bird. Quite tasty actually.*

“True. Winter rations. Fried with a little flour. Good source of protein.”

“Remind me not to try and pull one over on a serf farmer again.”

Bernie smiles in an ‘I told you so’ manner.

We proceed down a leaf covered path, this time due west. Not as many people, we are going away from the main towns. Only one wagon wide this time. The last few people turn off to a farm we can see to our right. Looks like a good stead. Horses even. Wish we had had horses. Only the royals could afford them, but I supposed they had to be raised somewhere.

“School time. Traditional schools do not work for TKs. Each is different and we can't afford a failure.”

“At least not one that escapes notice anyway. Imagine a TK4 running loose.”

“So, today we find out how much you know about history. Let's say the last two hundred years.”

“I never went to school.”

“You can read. How did you learn that?”

“On my own. I was told that wizards had to know, so I leaned. I was not told I needed to know history, so I can only tell you what I learned through common knowledge.”

“Proceed.”

“I was told that I was born in the reign of King Richard II, two days before the fall harvest festival. So, my birthday tends to get celebrated at the same time. My brother and sister get separate celebrations, but then I have always been a disappointment to my family. Jason of the Clouds they called me.”

“History?”

“Before Richard the II was Richard the 1st and before him Charles the 1st. They were all basically the same, only each seemed to be a little worse than the previous and shorter lived. There have been attempts to take over the kingdom from time to time, but it only resulted in serfs getting killed and or their farms burned out. We just tried to stay out of their way.”

“And before the kings?”

“You mean before the plague? Some of the old timers said that their parents told them about those times. Slavery on a massive scale, worse than being a serf. At least as a serf you were given a farm to work as you saw fit. Before then people were loaded on something called a bus and taken from one farm to another. Most had little to eat. Others were taken off to wars with little training. There was more tech, but less actual freedom. They had something called pears, which were basically the same as our royals.”

“Before then?”

“Not a clue.”

“Where did tech come from?”

“No idea.”

“Where did TKs come from?”

“The TKs of the time caused the plague to try and wipe out the non-TKs, only it failed. Enough people survived in the military units to hunt them down and destroy them. New TKs have happened since that time, but there are identified early and prevented from organizing by having to report to the regional wizard as soon as possible. There they are evaluated and those who have tendencies to control are removed and those who support the norms and serve and are given training.”

“Interesting. Where did the first wizards come from?”

“Ah, they came from the west and appeared to Charles the 1st. They proposed the current setup. He saw the good of the idea and allowed it to

come into the being. We never learned where they came from, only that they helped bring order and peace to our land.”

“Did they say anything about these first wizards?”

“There were twelve of them, much the same as the twelve apostles. There was also a thirteenth, just like the apostles, but the thirteenth was of Satan and was cast down when found out, again like the apostles. But the twelve wizards, unlike the apostles, were both men and women. Also, they claimed no special knowledge of spiritual matters and said we were free to worship as we wished. They only knew about TKs and would only deal with the TK threat. Soon, every major kingdom or duchy had a wizard, keeping a lookout for anyone who became a TK2 and to defend against any who would use a TK for evil, including war. Even Bruce, my cell mate, confirmed that any TK used in war would result in all parties being destroyed on the spot.”

“Any thing about a race of beings called the ‘thn.”

“What is a thaan?”

“Ok, scratch that idea. Seems we have a lot of work to do to bring this one up to speed.” Bernie rolls her eyes. George stops in the middle of the path and decides to lick a spot on his flank. We almost trip over him. Wish cats did not do that.

*Wish stupid monkeys would watch were they are going.*

“Where did George come from? Are there others like him?”

“He is a tenth generation TK-cat. They seem to be getting smarter with each generation. It won't be too long before they are superior to us IF they continue on this path.”

*Already are stupid monkeys.*

“You will notice how his head is larger than a typical cat his size. There are also more convolutions in the brain. Some kittens have to be DSed out instead of born the normal way, because the size of their birth canal has not enlarged to compensate. The same convolution increases appear to be happening to us as well. You are third generation TK, your mother and grandfather both were TKs. To have learned how to read and write on your own is impressive as well as how fast you picked up lessons from Bruce and have learned about TK on your own. The problem is that the generation time for humans is roughly twenty years, for the TK cats it is five years. A little longer than a normal cat, but then they are not normal. TK seems to affect each species differently. TK stands for telekinetic, but the cats do not have this specific ability. They can dimension shift and are telepathic, but no telekinetic ability.”



“To answer your question, there are approximately 10,568 TK-cats at the present moment.”

“That is approximate Bernie?”

“More have undoubtedly been born that I am not aware of since my last census.”

“Is she always this precise?”

“Ask her yourself, she is standing right next to you.”

“I’m sorry. Bernie, are you always this precise?”

“Usually more so, but Siiva is teaching me to relax more and understand that precision is not always needed.”

“You have to be taught this?”

“It is not normal for my kind to be imprecise when facts can be ascertained with certainty.”

They look at each other for a moment.

“We should continue with our history lessons.” What does she mean ‘her kind’?

Over the next week, we continue our walking roughly west. Sleeping on the ground at night bothered me at first, but I was told that no wild animals would bother us. As if to demonstrate that, when I awoke one morning there were several squirrels curled up next to me. I was surprised that George did not eat them, but he explained to me that their fur was too long for the amount of meat inside. He liked mice and gophers better. There were never any of those around.

The history lessons continued, starting at the 'big bang' and working our way to the time of the plague. Whew! My head hurts from all the information. I am told that back in Siiva's day it took twelve years to learn all this. I was getting just the short form. The point from plague to the present was of course more interesting to me, but I did remark on how life was in the time thirty years before, when America was at it's height. Everyone owned and drove cars! Now, only knights and royals got to drive in cars or carts. The rest of us walked. Some had bicycles for awhile, but you could not get parts for them, so when they finally broke they were sold for their metal. Horses were becoming more common. Maybe it would become like Siiva said the 19th century was.

It was clear that after the plague we had been lied to. Yes, there were some pre-plague TKs, but they were not evil and only helped. They had nothing to do with the plague. The plague happened because of greed. Our history before and after the plagues was one of prejudice against the TKs and nearly everyone else at some point and place. How could something so good, be so hated? The plague did produce rogues, crazy

TKs, but that was temporary. Sauron was interesting. I could see how it would be easy for him to manipulate people. Humans liked to see the bad in others and only see good in themselves. A real failing. By playing on this misconception, Sauron had it easy. Made me take a closer look at my own life.

I asked for and received a day off. I wandered out into the woods and walked up to the top of a small hill. Below was a burned out town from years ago. Nothing was left. The people long gone. The dreams dissolved. Who knows how many died. They were people just like me in a lot of ways. They only wanted to be left alone to fulfill their dreams. Most had fallen in love and had families. Some were thinkers and some were artists and scientists, most farmers of course. All gone. What had happened to cause the fire. I went down to the town to try and find out, but any evidence was long gone. I found pottery, melted metal, burned out carts. Siiva mentioned that after the plague the hydrogen ponds sometimes exploded from lack of care and a stray spark. Maybe that was all it was. Serving as a crematorium for those who died of the plague.

When I returned it was getting dark. They had set up camp and had a small fire going. George was curled up near by to keep warm, but not so close was to catch a stray spark. Fur had its disadvantages as well. Siiva and Bernie were playing some kind of flutes that I had not heard or seen before. Very beautiful. I stayed back a ways so as not to interrupt them and listened. Bernie has the higher pitched one, Siiva the lower. Together they played off each other to form the melody and counter. I loved music, but there was never time to learn how to play an instrument that I could not afford anyway.

“You can come out of the shadows now Jason. That was the last piece for now.” I come down, Bernie is being very quiet and still. I wonder if she is ok.

“You mentioned a strange flute that Yingui played in the story. Is this one of those?”

“A lot of TKs have taken it up. Simple, easy to make again and very portable. Each person has a favorite range, so it is also individualistic. We are free to decorate ours anyway we want. Being ceramic, they can take a lot of individual interpretation without affecting the ability to play one. I would be happy to make one for you if you wanted.”

I think about this. “How low can they go?”

“The lower the sound, the bigger the flute and the more air it takes to play one. You are young enough, but the size makes it a lot less portable. Maybe something a little lower than mine to start. That way, I can play

along with you when you are learning.” He reaches into his pack and pulls out a dark blue, almost black one, like the sky after the sun has been down for an hour. There are tiny silver stars on the surface. He hands it to me. I accept it with the reverence due a sacred object. There are tears in my eyes. I sit down across the fire from Bernie and just hold the flute in my hands. Siiva starts up again with a slow soft melody that speaks of dreams.

When he finally stops, the fire has faded and I curl up myself with my blanket and fall asleep cradling the flute next to my body.

### **The Last Fifty or so Years**

I have breakfast duty, so I arise early to start the fire up again. Bernie taught me how to focus the TK to start fires without a match or hot coals. Neat trick really. I might have figured it out on my own in the jail, if I had anything other than hair to burn. George has gone looking for his own breakfast. Siiva and Bernie are sitting up meditating. I have not understood what they said about this practice yet. They said I would catch on later and not to worry. Breakfast was pancakes. Siiva was the expert here, along with pastries. Bernie preferred soups, stews and salads. I knew how to deal with meat, but we of course did not eat meat unless at an inn or someone's house. I am not even sure where the flour came from for the pancakes. Their packs seem to have no bottom.

Bernie raises an eyebrow when she sees what I serve her. She got the good ones. She should see what I set aside for myself to eat. I remember to save one for George too. Siiva does not care as much, he eats his with relish. Lunch will be left over bread and nuts. I will do dinner as well and should do better with it. Along the way I will pick out the herbs I will need. I will marinate the soy strips they refer to as TK chow, add some potatoes and carrots and cook over a low fire for as long as I can get away with.

Siiva cleans up breakfast and puts the things away into his pack. Bernie puts out the fire using water from a nearby stream. George just cleans himself after his meal. He sure pulls his share. Hmmm.

*That is one of many reasons cats are superior to monkeys.*

As we start out, Siiva starts up where we left off. “Ed recovered fine from his new body change and they were able to raise him and Running Snake to TK2. It was decided to bring everyone but Lisa and Qaletaq up to TK6 and the original TK6s to 7 to match Daniel. In the time before Lisa gave birth the group mapped the world for locations of WMDs as

Bush II called them. Later Bushes used the same term, so it stuck. The removal operation would have to be done as swiftly as possible. This was especially important in China, where they were most likely to notice the first ones disappearing and so retaliate.

Lisa had a baby girl which they gave the baby name of Taalawva which is the Hopi word for the dawn just before the sun appears. The entire group loved the name, as it symbolized their own feelings for the TKs as well. They were just at the point where TKs became a force in the world culture. Ghost and Marm were particularly attached to Taalawva and took turns watching over her. TK-cats will still do this for some reason no one has been able to explain, but only babies that will later become TK though. Norms they ignore. This has become a sort of early warning method in some parts. People will purposely expose a newborn to a TK-cat to see its reaction.

As was expected, when D-day came, the Chinese had not done anything. It was thought at the time this may have been because they could not believe that the TKs could really do anything about it. The host of 'thn appeared just before the deadline, over a thousand of them. Br'thn apprised them of the situation and they agreed to take out the Chinese nuclear force first, but with the added twist of removing anything that could fly. The Chinese needed to know that when a demand was made by the 'thn, it was a real one. This had the secondary affect of rendering the secret stashes of bio and chem WMDs useless. They could not longer be delivered to another country. This included what was left of the Chinese space program. The TKs were now committed to helping the colony on the moon. The people had been there so long now as to make the readjustment to earth gravity difficult if not impossible.

Next the TKs took out the bio and chem WMD in the rest of the world. Even though the sites were mapped ahead of time, it still took several months. It was important to be careful and not accidentally release some of the material during the conversion process. The easiest way was to make an impenetrable barrier around the site and then convert everything inside to water or something else innocuous. This left very interesting holes in places, like something had taken a huge spherical bite out of the earth."

"I have heard of those sites. There was one near Fort Andrews south east of where I lived. People said it was some secret experiment that went up after the plague because no one was around to watch over it any longer."

“Anyway, the group was still sore about being kicked out of Hotevilla, but needed someplace to work things out. The islands became a home for a while, at least till a hurricane kicked them off. Even that many TKs could not save the little island they had chosen from a direct hit. They could bubble themselves up and survive no problem, but the vegetation and shoreline were destroyed. Eventually it would grow back, but they decided that either someplace more stable was needed, or they needed to get used to the idea of moving all the time.

Barb was animate about seeking the wisdom of the whales and Susan wanted the group to meet with Jesus, as he had set up a stable way for TKs to live among norms. Being close to winter, the whales would be in Baja California and this would be close enough to Costa Rica for Susan, Yingui and anyone else who wanted to visit with Jesus easily. This time Yingui wanted to try something different and they worked on setting up an underwater city that could be accessed from several locations on the shoreline and a small island off shore through a transport tube. The structure made use of the transparent high atomic weight 'thn bubble material to prevent the domes from collapsing under the enormous pressures of the sea. In this way observation areas could be set up for telepathic communication with migrating whales and other sea life.

Using the psiotic generators that Yingui had helped with, they made transport cars that could go back and forth in the tubes. Locals became interested in all the activity and soon were integrated into the evolving community. Fisherman that had survived knew much about the sea life and its ways. They were of enormous help. By treating the locals as equals, the TKs were accepted in return. Soon there were over a thousand people, counting the farmers on the mainland. Additional psiotic power supplies provided power for water desalination for crops to support the population. Trade routes were step up with other local communities. Scholars interested in whale and dolphin communication were found and brought in from all over the world. The center's mission statement became the health of the seas. Never again would they allow humans to destroy the oceans of the world. Submarines were designed and deployed that could remain underwater indefinitely and communicate with home base via sats. They became the collectors of scientific and pollution information.

The most important thing for the TKs was to make the community self sufficient and not dependent on the TKs themselves. Whenever a TK was needed to do a task, a group of engineers was put on the task to come

up with a non-TK way of doing the same thing. It took years before they felt confident enough to begin new experiments in other locations.

The wizard experiment in the feudal states of the east coast of America was a priority, but no one knew how to proceed. Endless discussions with Jesus provided the answers that were put into practice. Several axioms came into play. No one converted anyone by force. The best way to communicate was by example. Work with what you have and adapt. Evil usually worked around key individuals, expose these people and the situation becomes workable. Accept your mistakes, learn from them and move on. A mushroom can come up through asphalt. It does this through persistence. Be persistent. Form a network that worked and stayed in the background. Never be in a position of power as an individual. Educate people anyway you can. Make knowledge freely available. Do not meet in large groups. The last one was one they learned the hard way in Latin America when Sauron was constantly hunting them. He was gone, but there were many that knew his methods and desired his power. Lastly, the pear enhancements would eventually dilute themselves out of the gene pool. This last statement surprised Running Snake, as she did not expect him to know about genes and such, but he said that he had kept current, just liked the simple lifestyle as a way to live. He said it was better for the planet and the people.”

“So, the fact that the royals are all living progressively shorter lives is part of this dilution process. Interesting. Soon they will be no different than any of us. How will they hold their power then?”

“They won't. Especially if we can get the education network functioning better. So far we keep getting found out and have to disperse. We will get there. The best method seems to be the apprenticeship method. The factory model of the classroom just does not work in a feudal system. Actually, not sure it works anywhere freedom lives. We are also placing more and more wizards in key localities. The royals, as you call them, tend to behave better when they know someone is watching.” He grins. As soon as I get it, I return the smile.

“I find it hard to believe that your, er, our group actually met and talked with THE Jesus. How did he feel about the underwater city and the lunar base? Was he anti-tech or just low tech?”

“My understanding was that he was appropriate tech. If it was important enough and it required high tech and the net balance was people and earth friendly, then he had no problem with it. Just that most tech tended, at least in the previous century, to be very negative. No one was accounting for the true cost. You had to take into account everything

from mining the raw materials, to the manufacturing and delivery, to the eventual disposal. Too much was ignored and left to future generations or the poor to deal with. With a true accounting, materials tended to have much longer life spans and were not replaced every year when a new model came out. In my mind the sharing of knowledge was THE most important aspect of what he recommended. With nothing hidden, it was very hard to pull one over on others. Oh, a charismatic personality could still do it for a while, but eventually they would fade or be found out.”

“Also, why we would have to be doubly sure of raising someone to the immortal levels. A manipulator there could be around for a long time.”

“People coming. We don't have much time.”

“I believe these are the ones we have been waiting for. Let's set up camp and make a good welcome.”

“We still have hours of light left, why don't we keep going? They could come along with us.”

“Different situation. Follow our lead and stay out of trouble. Most importantly, do not show surprise at what we do. You are one of use. You have heard the stories of what a high level TK can do. We will finish up your history lessons after we pick up the TK.”

“A new TK?” Bernie gives me a dirty look. Okay, get to work. We TK some dry wood over. Some goes to start a fire and the rest for feeding it later. Benches are made out of larger logs cut off to a good height. Food is prepared to heat over the fire. Water is made and placed into a barrel made for that purpose, enough to take a bath or water horses or sheep. Extra bowls are made for five more people.

“Ok, sit down and relax. We wait. Your assignment is to tell me which one is the TK.” I can not sense their own TK unless they let me, but this is supposed to be another TK2, so I should be able to sense which one. I can sense them about a hundred meters before they get here. They split up to surround us. This is not the way of a friendly encounter. They have knives drawn. One is on a leash of some kind and being led by another. The one on the leash is a TK! Weird. I could get off of that in a second.

*You are correct. Keep an eye on him.*

What about the others?

*Fear not, they can't hurt us, even if they think they can.*

Is is alright for me to shield?

*Yes, if it makes you feel better.* It does. Don't like knives or the people behind them.

Just before they make to attack us, Siiva addresses them, “Welcome gentleman. Please take a seat and have something to eat.”

“Hand over your money and no one gets hurt. Well at least not bad. The little lady might even like it.” Rape, my hackles are up.

*Remember she is a TK9 and VERY capable of taking care of herself. Back off. Do not interfere.*

“You will find that your plans will not yield fruit. For one thing, we have no money.”

“We will determine that for ourselves. Stand up if you will. And if you don't, even better. An old man and a farm boy are easy pickings.” I follow their lead and stand with hands raised.

“You too mam.” She just smiles but does not comply. It had to happen sooner or later. They were waiting for some excuse and so were we. This is where it got weird. They did not get any closer themselves, but released the leash from the TK. There was something wrong with him. He does not look altogether here. He rises above the ground and bubbles up to shield himself, should one of us pull a knife? I could easily sense a knife, so why can't he?

*Pay attention, he knows you are TK and are a potential threat. He is trying to figure the two of us out, since we are all dressed the same way.*

Ah.

George takes this opportunity to make an entrance. Tail high like there is nothing at all wrong. He casually walks over and sniffs the air near the pot of stew bubbling. He then turns and faces the floating TK.

*Hi Milo*

## **Milo**

“Kitty knows Milo's name. Smart kitty. Pretty kitty.” And a talking cat is not a big deal?

Milo returns to the ground, debubbles and walks over to George to pet him gently. George returns the compliment with loud purring and head bumping. Siiva and I have put our hands down by this time. Arms get heavy, though I supposed I could have used TK to keep them up.

“Welcome all. Please come in. We have bowls and stew enough for everyone, but alas no gold or jewels.” The other four are taken back, but really have nothing to lose and the stew smells good. I stand near the pot and serve stew to everyone in the wooden bowls and hand each a wooden spoon. Why didn't they attack us? From their point of view, they were



the stronger. I take a bowl to Milo to share with George, who is totally enthralled.

“So, Mark. How long have you been using Milo to steal from travelers?” And when did you stop beating your wife. I can’t believe he asked that straight out. I am used enough to mind reading from these two to know how they know their names, but they aren’t. Mark’s mouth drops open and then shuts.

“We never stood a chance with you three did we?”

“None what so ever.” Siiva and Bernie smile.

“We started on account of our little brother Milo, whom you have met. He is not so smart. This was not a problem at first. He being the youngest, he had his four older brothers to look after him. It was when he was given the gift that things went wrong. The first level was not so bad. We had spoiled him anyway, so when he took an extra muffin at supper, we all thought it was cute. Problem is Milo never developed a good sense of property. He liked shiny things. Rings, bracelets, coins, that sort of thing. We almost always found the stuff and returned it right away. Some people figured they could just pretend that something was missing, or everything that went misplaced was soon blamed on Milo. Our parents were old by this time and depended on us as well for their care. We couldn’t just take Milo and leave.

It did not take long for the decision to be made for us. When Milo turned twenty, the second gift happened. Young they say. Bad luck I say. He misjudged a lamp which busted against the ceiling and set the house on fire. We lost our sheep and parents in the fire. The rest of us were outside doing chores when it happened. Milo was close to the door, so we were able to rescue him. He does not know he was the cause. Please don’t try and tell him. It would break his heart. The fire was blamed on Milo and they wanted to hang him for our parent’s death, and because he was a TK they could not control. How do you hang a TK2? They can float up there forever and undo any rope and shield against any knife. So we were all run out of town instead.

We soon learned that the only way we could survive was to keep moving and prey on the passerby or sneak into places. The leash was actually Milo’s idea, he likes to play dog. Anyway, our story was that he was a ferocious animal that we could barely control, if people did not give up their goods we would let go of the leash. Well, you can imagine that a TK floating around and growling at them usually convinced them, not that the four of us are tiny. We have never had to hurt anyone. If the

ruse did not work, we just left. Of course Milo is VERY good at taking things, so we usually came away with something for our efforts.”

“Well, he would have a hard time taking George as he will soon find out if he gets any rougher.” Milo is bending George’s ears back and pulling on his tail. “The real question is where do we go from here? The three of us are part of a much larger group that is responsible for the TKs. All TKs, including Milo. As such we can’t continue to let Milo be used in this way. I see three options. Number one. We can make him non TK. This is the only path that allows you to continue to associate with him. I understand he is your brother and family ties are strong. You could even continue in your current lifestyle if you so chose, but without the benefit of TK.” They look at each other and no doubt are wondering just how they would make a living. They have no starter to make a new life.

“Number two?”

“Number two, is for you to give up Milo into our care. We can see what can be done to make his mind heal and allow him to ultimately live the life of a full TK in membership. As our colleague Jason here can attest, on becoming TK, we have all had to give up family and friends. No different for Milo, or for you had he been otherwise normal.”

“I hate to ask what Number three is then.”

“Number three is where we decide, because you have decided to take hostile action. We cannot let a TK run loose with his abilities, untrained, and being used in this way.”

“So, you are saying that #1, we lose the TK ability and hence our current lively hood, but with no means to start another one, but get to keep Milo close to us, his family. #2 we lose Milo entirely, but know that he is getting the help he needs. #3 we lose everything.”

“There is an added factor. Paths one and two come with compensation to allow you to begin a new life. Buy a farm somewhere far from here, so your past does not catch up with you or start a new career entirely. We can even provide transportation.”

“You said you had no gold. You lied to us!”

“And I don’t see or hear any horses or carts.”

“Not something wrong to do to thieves and robbers now is it, but no we did not lie. That is against our code of conduct. We have no gold currently about our persons. We can get it however. Very quickly. And we need no horses or carts to travel with.”

“We need a moment to discuss this among ourselves.”

“Certainly” They get up and go off into the woods some distance. Still within TK hearing distance.

*No Jason, they have a right to their privacy and we can accept any of the outcomes.*

One comes back, Luke. “We have a question. Is it possible with option #2 to visit Milo, or let him visit us?”

“Normally people make a complete break from their past. Going back to see how things have turned out can sometimes be very painful for both parties. It is not against the rules however and if Milo truly wanted to see you again, he would be told where you are. BUT, it is HIS choice and only his choice to make. You have no say in this.”

“Understood.” He goes back to the others. We can hear discussion, but not what is said. Would be hard for four brothers to agree on anything, but they have the advantage of having worked together for some time and are all about the same size. No bullies.

They come back as a group. “It would be helpful for us to have some demonstration that option #3 was really the worst of the lot. Just to ease our minds that we are not being tricked into this.”

Bernie raises an eyebrow and that gets them nervous. Siiva takes a different tact though. “Which of the other two is the preferred choice if #3 is out?”

Mark being the oldest speaks up, “Number two. We really don’t like abandoning Milo, but if this is the only way to get the help he deserves then that would be our choice. How different would the fixing him make him?”

“A lot of steps have to occur at the correct time in a person’s life for them to learn certain abilities and skills. My guess is that he would find it much easier to learn new skills, his memory would be vastly improved, but he may still have a hard time socially and he may never learn to read and write.”

“Hell, none of us can read or write either. Will he be happier with you?”

“I have no idea. If things do not work out and we feel that he is not going to make it with us, we can drop back to option number one and return him to you without the TK abilities. As to the proof, assuming number one or two you will need transportation out of these parts. We will provide that transportation before you give us your final answer.”

Mathew speaks up, “You are being most fair and kind about all this. As you can guess this is not an easy decision for us. Thank you for that much at least.” The others nod their approval as well.

“Where do you want to go? It can be anywhere on the earth. You really are not qualified for the Lunar base.” That gets a surprise and a nervous chuckle.

“How about Nashville? I have heard a rumor that music is happening there again.”

“Any particular place in Nashville? Center of town okay?”

“Don't we have to do through the edge of town before we get to the center?” Seemed reasonable to me.

“Nope. If you don't have everything you will need you had better get it. Jason, help clean up.” Bernie douses the fire. I gather the bowls, wash them, dump the rest of the water and stack them up on one of the stumps. Stumps can stay. Bowls will too. Next person to be through here can use them. We travel light and make what we need. Where is Nashville? I am already further away than anyone in my family has been in generations. How are we going to get there and not go through the center of town.

***How does George get around? Only a matter of scale.***

The four return. Milo had stayed with George. I suspect that unless George leaves the two will never be separated. They each have a small sack or pack. My eyebrow goes up, but I don't ask. I could scan, but decide not to. Not my business. What has been done is done.

“Are we ready? Ah, let's see main street ought to do.” In the blink of an eye we are there.

### **Nashville, Briefly**

The four are totally stunned and don't move a muscle.

“Now, if you can believe me now, I will offer the compensation as well.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a dozen gold Br'thns. I have only heard about them myself. Best I have ever touched was as silver Ghost. We usually worked with copper Marms. Each was worth ten times the previous. So ten Marms to the Ghost and ten Ghosts to the Br'thn. He gives each four Br'thns. Now they are really stunned.

Finally John, whom we have not heard speaks up, “That will be fine.”

They each give a hug to Milo, “Be a good boy Milo, George and Siiva and Bernie and Jason are going to take care of you now. They will do good things for you and when you are ready, you come and see us right here. Okay?”

Milo has tears in his eyes, but nods he understands. They have been his whole life. “George come with me?”

“Yes, George will come with us.” He brightens up.

“Time to go.” We gather around and just like the last time, in a blink we are in a different place. This time the trees are gone.

# Hotevilla

“The sun has moved!”

“We are two hours earlier in the day here. We are on the third mesa in the land of the people called the Hopi.”

“This is where it all happened! The stories are about here.” I am ecstatic. I want to see everything. I am looking around trying to take everything in. Several people come to greet us. They look like Benie, black hair and tanned skin, even in winter. The clothing is different. More like us. Or, rather what I once was.

“We are dropping Milo and George off here and then leaving again. This is where the people are that can best help him.”

“Can't we stay a few days? Just to let me see the place where it all happened?”

“You will be coming back don't worry. It is part of the training that you will go through. First we need to get you up to speed academically. It is not TKU, but it is the best we can do for the moment.”

“Now where is he? Late again.”

“It is the nature of a diplomat to be late dear. Make the other party squirm a little more.”

“But if they all do it, then, how do things get done?” I am missing something here. They just laugh like it is a private joke. The view is good at least. I can't help but look around a little. Hey, I have never been out of Silver Creek before this all started. The smells are different. The air is different. Nashville was not that different than ‘home’, but this is a lot different. Drier, that's it. No green means no water. Warmer too. Dry heat, not the humid stuff I am more used to. That reminds me that I am thirsty. I open my pack and empty the last of my water and put my bowl on top of my head. This place one could get sunburned really easily, even for me. I am a mut, a mix of seven nationalities as they used to call them, so I have enough brown to not turn red right away, but given enough time and anyone will feel the effects.

“Aanu, it is about time. K!, how are you doing?”

“Bad not I.” This is a weird one. White hair and brown skin. A wizard from the robe, but not like anyone I have seen before.

“I see you still prefer your own grammar K!.”

“German your similar is. Different not.”

“English different is.”

“Improved much.” He nods approval. Bernie is not going to get anywhere. I smile.

“Aanu and K!, this is Jason, one of the two TK2s George picked up this time around.”

“That makes twelve or thirteen for him?”

“Fourteen counting Jason, though Bernie and I saw him first to give credit where due. It was George who cinched the deal though. Made it much easier with the bible brothers too.”

“Think there is much hope for Milo?”

“We did scans. We can fix the genetic defect and do a lot for the neural pathways, but he has a long road ahead of him before he can lead even a normal TK life.”

“The cats have been a big help since they signed up and agreed to help us.”

“They help no one but themselves. George did it for the affection. Well, Bernie and I feigned ignorance of how to keep a cat happy, but Jason here gives excellent cat massage, or so I have been told.” Aanu smiles, K! always smiles. What is with him?

***This is not his native form. Be polite and stop staring Jason.***

I have noticed that when Bernie mind talks to me, she is louder, but then I have only the three to compare to.

*She is louder. Like K!, this is not her native form, so be nice. That must have been Aanu. Strange name.*

“He is a curious one, isn’t he?” Everyone is staring at me.

# Under the Sea

Our next stop was at the shore of a vast ocean. Farm land was all over, as far as the eye can see. The people that I am closest to are different than back home. They are happy. I even see robed ones like me. Everyone is working together for the common good, not the good of the lord of the manor, their king, or anyone else. They work for themselves and for each other.

“Come, we need to check in.” They lead me to some sort of tubular metal cart that is all enclosed, but has a clear top. I tap it, not glass, something else. I get in and it closes after us. I am pushed suddenly against the chair I am in. I have never felt this before, but Bernie and Siiva on each side of me accept it just fine, so nothing must be wrong. I can’t see the other two in front, but I hear no complaints.

“This is nothing compared to the old force rockets. Still use them at times in the asteroid belt. You will be fine Jason.” Can everyone here read my mind?

*It would be good of you to learn how not to shout your thoughts all the time.*

You can teach me any time, please! I receive a mental image of what I am doing wrong from four different people. Hey guys! One at a time please! Bernie takes over. Oh, so. That is easy, why didn’t they tell me before? No response. Better then?

When we get out of the cart we are greeted by a normal who does not seem at all worried about being in the presence of so many TKs. “Welcome. You are expected in the First Dome observation area in fifteen minutes.”

I must have looked startled as K! answers my look this time. “Precognitient she is. Normal not.”

“Then how come she does not wear the robe of the TK?”

“Wish not. Choice.”

“Only here and a few other places though, like Luna and Mars. Everywhere else we are expected to announce our presence in this way, the wearing of the robe. Not that they are uncomfortable, but it would be nice to go somewhere and not be stared at all the time.”

“I have noticed that.” At first I thought there was something weird about me, other than TK that is.

We board another older looking tube cart. This one has seen some use. I feel somehow more comfortable in this one. At what was once



home, everything was from another time. Almost nothing was new. Maybe that is why I don't trust shiny and perfect.

### **History Part III**

“Now where were we in our lesson?” Siiva pauses in his thoughts and words. “So, you can see for yourself what has become of this station. We are going to dome number one, the smallest and the first obviously. The largest is three times the diameter and there are nine domes at the moment. Present thinking is that this is enough and it would be better to start new stations than make this one bigger. I would have done that many domes ago, but each has to find their own way.

The group then went their own ways, as talents and interests drew them. They kept in touch and had regular meetings and chance ones as problems came up. Most you will never had heard of, as they were taken care of without notice by most of the human population, though, if they had failed, all of human kind would have been destroyed.

Anyway, we have centers all over the world, except Africa. By world consensus, Africa is off limits to everyone, TK included. We make regular overflights to be sure no non natives have snuck in, but we never land. Once a non native is confirmed, they are picked up by DS and TK and removed to a neutral location away from their own native land. There they assume new identities and are marked as thieves. They were willing to attempt to steal a land from others.”

“But why is Africa off limits? Shouldn't it be allowed do develop like everywhere else?”

“There are two reasons. One is that nearly the entire human population was gone. Only very isolated pockets barely able to survive remained. The result of the plague, phneumonic AIDS and the collapse of their infrastructure. Interestingly the smaller nomads of South Africa are making a strong comeback. Poetic justice in my opinion. Anyway, to let others in would be to repeat the cycle. The natives would be easily overrun or contaminated by the other cultures. And more importantly, the cradle of human kind and so many other life forms would once again be threatened. At first we were going to have TK outposts, but the world council decided that it would be best if there was NO outside source of contamination. Fair enough. We always do our pickups at night by the way and well out of sight of others.”

“What if the person is among others?”

“People have to sleep sometime.” Siiva grins. Or just maybe then can be induced to sleep if necessary.

“Won't the disappearance of these people cause alarm among the locals?”

“Remember the locals all know right off that these are not people from their area. They are also likely to carry tech or some other means to communicate with their home base. In most cases the locals or the wildlife catch these people before we do. Escapes happen and after a few days of looking, the locals give up and get on with their lives.”

“But what about the lack of foot prints, etc. Won't that arouse suspicion?”

“We do the best we can and so far it appears to be working. Of course, we try and get them before they get very far. Given enough time, people will stop trying.

Now Europe is very much similar to your home. With all the different countries and languages and sorted past relationships and hatreds, it was very easy to fall back into a nationalistic and regional system. We have the equivalent system in place there as well. Wizards where ever there is a concentration of people to watch over things.

Latin America is probably the most enlightened group at the moment. They did the surprising thing of reducing their tech voluntarily and then the unheard of thing of refusing trade with China. They felt that the influence that China would have in their culture by the process of trade was not worth it. They calculated the total cost of the trade, not just the immediate gain. With trade always go cultural expectations and changes to accommodate the items traded and the culture of trade itself. The united TKs have agreed to act as the enforcers if necessary. They have their own TKs of course and so our participation is limited mostly to hearing their reports at regular meetings. Like Africa, when it is working we stay out of it and learn from their example. Oh, the TKs are not called wizards in Latin America, but Los Ayudantes, the helpers. Has a nice feeling to it, don't you think?

Let's see, have I left anyone out?”

“Russia?”

“Thanks Aanu. In Russia, there was an ancient system of holy ones called Stares. They lived very simple lives of prayer. People from all over would come to them for advice on daily matters or matters of state. It was simple to start placing TKs in this position again. Especially since a TK5 can act as a healer as well. When the poorest person in the region is the most respected, it does change the feel of a culture.

China on the other hand, is a far different story. Most the TKs were killed outright in the days and months after the plague. Most of the people who caught the plague were killed before they died of the plague itself. Sort of a burned bridge mentality. So, those few TKs that did survive lived in fear and hiding on the fringes of China, away from central command and useful areas like sea ports. That meant the western desert areas. A harsh life. Just like Africa, we started DSing them out of harms way from orbit. Takes a team of three TK7s to do this kind of precision work from that distance. They had to disappear when they were alone and before someone found them out. The sudden shock to them was horrible till we started recruiting them to rescue their own when we raised enough to TK7. That way they could use regular speech instead of mind reading and speaking.

Meanwhile they did not stop their research in anti-TK. We did not expect them to. As soon as a new idea became possible, we removed it from service and let them start all over. We have a museum of all the different gadgets they have come up with. Amazing really. We have learned a lot about the psiotic arts thanks to them.

Luna did finally achieve a stable ecology, but it required a much larger system than had first been planned. It seems ecologies don't work until they become complex enough. Oh, a simple one will go for awhile, but it takes a complex one to survive changes and unanticipated disasters. There is a lot of redundancy and flexibility in a good ecology. This means especially genetic diversity, to help anticipate future needs and changes to the system. Can't plant all your corn from the same seed stock in other words.

Mars. Mei Ying did finally make it to Mars. They let her be the first to set foot on the planet. Nothing memorable was said if I remember right.”

“Oh my' in Chinese was what I remembered.” Aanu speaks up with a smile.

“There is talk of building a psiotically powered interstellar craft. Using what was learned from the Chinese about DS and Yingui's psiotic power source, they had the technology. Asteroids in the asteroid belt could supply the necessary mass for construction. The important thing was though TKs would be aboard, they would not be needed, with the possible exception of translating the thoughts of any others they might encounter. There was still a little of the Star Trek feeling in us, even after all these years. The desire to boldly go where no one had gone before and to seek out new races and new civilizations. K! is able proof that we are

not alone, but visiting the regional center with the help of high level TKs and 'thn is not the same as doing it on your own.”

What is Star Trek? “What about the gateway? How did you travel to the center without the gateway?”

“That was the funny part. As soon as Lisa was raised to TK4, it became obvious that she was the new gateway. Her daughter Taalawva was also, as was her daughter and so on. So far we have three living functioning gateways and two resident 'thn. Since it only takes a few minutes to do the necessary transport, no one is inconvenienced for very long. Qr'thn decided it was best to stick around and we convinced her that at least the transport to the center was in her interest. The more we learned how to get along with everyone, the safer her daughter would be.”

“And you want me to be part of all this? What possible use could I be to you?”

“Remember the first TKs in our tale? What were they?”

“You told me that weeks ago. You expect me to remember that detail? Whew, this is going to be harder than I thought.”

They all laugh. “I think we can help jog your memory some. We are here.” We pass through several doors and walk several corridors, finally taking a set of stairs up to the top of the dome. There are dozens of people inside. “Some one get the lights please.”

“Wow!” The sea comes to life as my eyes dark adapt. I can see the surface like a million kilometers away. Fish swim by I can barely see. A large one goes by. Close and if not for the light colored skin I might not have seen it. “What is that?!”

“Shark. They eat people when they can't get seals.” I shudder. Bad enough when the knights or dogs are after you.

“So, is everyone here?”

“Barb is late again. She has a different sense of time in this latest form.”

*I'm coming. Let me catch a breath.*

Aanu gets my attention and points up. I see a dark shape directly above us way off near the surface. It turns and starts to come down towards us getting bigger and bigger as it gets closer.

“It's going to hit us! It's huge!” I shout.

“It's ok. She knows what she is doing. Let's give her some space in the center through.” We all back up to the sides. It is cold in here. I TK my shield up to warm up. Everyone is quiet and watching the shape as it slows and levels out just above the dome. Out of the corner of my eye, I

catch a shimmering in the center of the room. There is a slight pull of air towards the shape. It is becoming more solid. A woman's shape comes into being. A very beautiful woman, with no clothes. At first the shape just hangs there, but first one arm and then the neck and head animate. I look up. The largest fish I had ever seen or imagined is fading to black and is gone. When I turn back the woman is standing on the floor and has the wizard's robe and staff. Applause breaks out among those present. Myself included. Incredible!

"Welcome home Barb."

She smiles and comes back with, "I have no home, but what is in my heart," then bows to the one who welcomed her and he bows to her.

Everyone then steps forward to give her a hug. Ok, everyone is hugging everyone including me. I have no idea what is going on, but the hugs feel good.

"How are your new friends Barb?"

"They are great. I will have to get back soon. It takes ten years or more to hear the complete story."

"What is the story?"

"Their lineage. They know where they come from, from the time they first entered the sea."

"That must be millions of generations! How do they do it?"

"By repeating the story over and over. They have an incredible sense of being."

"Speaking of which, too bad that Ghost and Marm could not be here."

I nudge someone next to me and ask, "Why not?"

"The cats were not affected by TK the same way and have not achieved the immortality shift yet. They still have time. Another hundred thousand years and they should get there. Part of it is because they don't see the point of living that long. Their culture will be very different than ours."

Another who heard our conversation speaks up, "We offered to have some descendants present, but they did not see the point." That gets a chuckle. "Cats do not see the point of a lot of things we consider important."

Everyone cheers in chorus, "Stupid Monkeys!" and then crack up.

"So are you ready Yingui?" Who? Here? I look around frantically to see who they are talking about.

Siiva speaks up, "We need to make introductions first. We have new ones among us who do not know all of us except by reputation." That gets a moan and a chuckle.

“I hope you did not fill yours with fantastic tales of heroism and greatness.”

“Not too much.” He grins. “First the newbies. Jason come forward please.” I come towards him and he has me face the crowd with his hand on my shoulder. “Jason, formerly of Silver Creek, near what was once Washington D.C. His first trainer was Bruce. He has passed all expectations and I propose that we advance him to candidacy.”

“Welcome Jason!” Each of the other new TKs is similarly introduced and acknowledged. There are about a dozen of us. We have been arranged in the center. Siiva motions us to remain in the center and he backs up to the edge.

“Now let us introduce ourselves to the new TKs. Let’s start on my right.”

“My name is Qaletaqa. Pre TK, I was a dumb stupid native starving to death on a Shoshone reservation in Southern Idaho.” My mouth falls open as I suspect do many others among us newbies. He is definitely not stupid in the stories. They continue around the circle as we shift position to be able to see them. Soon all of the original TKs we have heard about are introduced with their original position in life, and some we have not heard about directly. Even Mei Ying is present from Mars. That leaves Siiva.

“I am Yingui. Pre TK, I was a starving technician nearing death from old age and lack of will to survive, in a small research center on the coast of California.”

The world shifts around me and the next thing I know I am opening my eyes to people looking over me. “What happened?”

“You did it again Yingui. Don’t you realize that this is hard on the newbies?”

“But it is so much fun! It is important for them to realize that we started as no better than they.” He grins.

I have to ask, “What about Bernie? What is her true name? And where is she?”

“I told you he was quick. Jason, see if you can figure it out. Siiva means silver in Hopi, so I did not use a false name, just translated it into a language you do not know yet. Bernie, what could that mean, and who is missing from our group? Who could it be?”

“He is going to faint again Yingui. You stop that right now.”

I finally squeak out, “Br’thn?”

Near the top of the dome a glowing sphere appears shedding light on all of us.

“Is that her in her true form?” They help me to my feet. I am fully awake now, curiosity having gotten the better of me.

***It is time Yingui***

That is her alright. The same loud mind talk as I remember.

“Ah, can’t I wait a few million more years? No? Oh, alright then. Lisa, if you will do the honors.”

Lisa comes over and floats above us all, except Br’tbn who is still at the top of the dome. I feel myself being lifted about a meter into the air along with all the others. “It’s alright to sit. Actually a good idea for the first timers. Even the old timers choose to sit though. Concentrate on my image and clear your minds.”

# **The Guardians of Br'thn Ascendance**

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# Regional Galactic Center

I still black out and get nauseous briefly during a shift to the regional center. You would think that after hundreds of times, I would get used to it.

***Orientation problem Yingui. Same reason you got car sick all the time as a child.***

*And all this TK stuff did not correct that simple little problem?*

***Does not change your basic personality. You know that.***

*So, it is part of my 'basic' personality to throw up every time too. I want a new mind then as well! If 'thn could roll their eyes, Br'thn would be doing so now.*

Others are waking up around me. Daniel never blacks out any more and it already up helping others. Envy is one of the deadly sins. Ok, I snap out of it, get up and help those around me as well.

"Where are we now?" asks Jason.

"Regional galactic center. Help K! next to you." He turns to look, but K! has returned to his natural form, a large grey slug like creature.

Mouth open, "How, what? Is that you K!?" The shape moves, then slowly becomes a human shape again, an identical twin to Jason.

"Fine Jason person, K! is." It grins at Jason and I crack up.

"And you claim I am bad on the newbies. Change back before he dies of a heart attack." K! pouts.

*I don't think I have ever seen you do that K!*

*Easy not my kind. Much practice.* He then resumes the form he was in when we picked him up at Hotevilla. Watching him change is not a pretty sight. Like someone turning inside out.

"May I have your attention? We have about an hour before things begin. The 'thn are setting up. We are in the hall of communion, as in communion of sentient life forms. There are likely to be others we have met here arriving as well. They will be in their 'normal' forms. None will hurt you and most can mind speak, should you want to talk with them. Be aware that their cultures are VERY different than ours. Do not judge! Accept that different cultures have a way and right to be different than we are. No one is advocating that we become like any of them. So, enjoy the experience."

One of the newbie raises her hand, Joan I believe, "Mr. Yingui, I have a question. What ever became of Sauron?"

“You will find that we are reluctant to talk about that, but you have a right to know. It is better if one of the originals tells you. Refer anyone new to one of us and we will tell them.

Most of you should know that we left Sauron on the third mesa of the Hopi land, near to the Navajo land. He was met by the locals soon after we left for the south pacific, but remember he could no longer lie and had to tell the truth if asked. The whole truth. It was hard to keep him quiet once started actually.

We did not have any animosity towards Sauron. We did not hate him. He did what he thought was right. He tried to make the world, literally, in his own image. It was just that we have a responsibility to our kind as well. They had a right on the reservation to KNOW what we knew about him. Once they heard what he really knew, then they could make their own decision about which way they wanted to proceed.

Once one person recognized him as the one who had convinced their council to expel the TKs he was brought straight away back to the council. No one had asked him anything as of yet and he had remained quiet, accepting only food and water when offered. Before the council though he could hide no longer. It took days for the questioning and answers to be heard. A brief interruption occurred at the beginning when someone had the foresight to recommend that what was said be written down and the first words were repeated to be recorded. The entire story came out of how Sauron had helped make us, how he had guided human kind with deception and how he had deceived the council with regards to the TKs for his own gain and revenge.

The archives remain in a holy place on third mesa to this day. All who would read them may. Few have finished. It took incredible will to hear or read all the stories of hate, greed, cold blooded calculated murder on a single and genocidal scale. Much of what humankind thought was important turned out to be part of a larger plot to dominate and control.

The council was as if stricken with a fatal disease. One by one they dismissed themselves and left, never to be seen again. This was the same council that had banished the TKs so they took personal responsibility. Even the scribes had to take turns so as not to succumb themselves. Finally a single scribe and Sauron remained. When Sauron indicated that he was done, the scribe got up and left with the final pages of text. Sauron was left alone in the council chamber.

The manuscript is written in Hopi and only Hopi. It has been duplicated and the duplicate stored in a safe place, but the only way to read the document is to learn Hopi. It will never be translated. For that

reason Hopi has become the holy language of the TKs and all of you must learn it. To advance to TK7, you must have read the manuscript in its entirety. This is because to be TK7, the highest you can achieve, is to have such power that it is important to understand what Sauron did with the equivalent abilities. We will not allow it to happen again. Sauron was the only one so far at that level that had to be fitted with a limiter, but we are ready and will not hesitate to make and fit another, even on me, if it becomes necessary. Any who start but then fail to complete the reading of the manuscript are hailed as heroes for even attempting to do so. Those who do complete the reading are given a year off to do as they please with no responsibilities or commitments before their last upgrade. Many never come to that meeting, but return to their TK6 duties. It is important to be ready for all upgrades, but especially this one.

As to Sauron, he wandered off into the desert and was never seen again. Being in the human form has some consequences. It affects you. Br'thn can attest to this. She spends time in our form to better understand us. For Sauron though, it allowed him to feel guilt for the first and last time. True he had spent time in human form before, but not limited with no TK and not forced to tell the truth, even in his own mind. He had lied even to himself.

All TKs mourn his death, especially the TK7s and myself.

For you see, given enough time and decisions made in the field, we could easily be judged the same way he was. None of us is perfect. We have all done things we regret, even after becoming TK, at each level of TK in fact. There is no level whereby you become perfect and stop making mistakes. But as you advance in levels, your mistakes are amplified exponentially. Then add the cultural change. Sauron would have been judged very differently by his own culture, maybe even hailed as a hero for controlling the 'smiggle plague'. How will the next culture judge us? The TK-cats, whom most of you have met, have a very different culture. How will they judge us, should they become the next dominate TK form?"

"Stupid Monkeys" someone yells and we all crack up.

## **The Last Upgrade**

More of our galactic neighbors have arrived and our crew of experienced TKs goes to greet them. I stay with the newbies where I feel more comfortable at the moment. K! has chosen to stay with me as well. I am the reason everyone is here and it scares the shit out of me. I know it

needs to be done, but just as I have told them all to be careful at each upgrade; I also take that advice to heart.

“Never seen one ready more.”

“Thanks K!. Was it hard when you went through the last upgrade?”

K! is already TK9, the highest level a fluidic can achieve we are told.

There is a long pause. He is no longer smiling and looks very thoughtful instead. Finally he answers. “Very.”

“And you can’t tell me anything about it?”

“Different each. Talk after.” He smiles again. There is hope at least.

I hate tests, especially ones that are pass/die with no in between. In our vow, TK9 means accepting the end of self. That sounds more like die/die to me.

*That is the correct interpretation.*

“Rynx. Glad you could make it. Forgive me if I don’t give you a hug.”

Rynx is covered with razor sharp poisoned spines.

*The last statement does not translate well. To hug in my species is to invite mutual death. I assume you do not mean this?*

“Ah, yes. No hugs.”

Daniel, my second in command if you will, with Br’thn out of the room, comes over. Br’thn is really above me too, complicated. Once he has my attention he nods. He will be my second. If I should fail, he will assume my position as Bearer of Br’thn and be upgraded to TK8, as I am now. I was allowed to choose my own second, from among the TK7s of the original group. No one complained about my choice. We had all assumed Daniel would be the one and no one else wanted the responsibility.

“Br’thn will fill you in on her ah, needs. Don’t let her assume the flute form. You can play duets with her, but make sure she is holding and playing a flute herself. She can be tricky at times. Remember she is precog.”

“They want us in a different room. Br’thn is not allowed to attend. She will come back here after we have left to help with the ones still here.”

“She already knows too much about ‘thn sex as it is. I understand and agree with them.” Way too much.

“She will be a hard teenager for sure.”

“There is an easy one?” Daniel cracks up. His own daughter Rachael is over there talking with some newbies and introducing them to a cat/snake like life form. Barb is with an aquatic TK bubble. That is to be expected. Nearly ten years as a whale changes you. James is in his Lakota

version of our robe talking to a warrior species. Ron is hanging out with a technological solidic life form. Turns out that we were very close at one point in achieving the creation of a primitive solidic life form with our human tech. One of the fears of humans messing with anti-pisotic weapons lies in that direction. Virus equivalents are the simplest forms to create even in the solidic state. There is even some speculation that the ‘thn were created by a fluidic race a very long time ago. Why else are they dependent on us to reproduce. They accept this requirement as a safety precaution. I can see that too. Just like we are dependent on TKs coming from the normal human population, not being able to reproduce ourselves above TK2. So the ‘thn are dependent on the good will of TKs to continue their line as well.

Daniel and I DS to the room they want us in with a ‘thn to help, really just an open bubble in space. The meeting hall is the same, just has walls and an artificial gravity to make it easy for us fluidics to carry on normally. We are beyond visible distance of the meeting hall though. I can’t even sense them from here, so we may even be in another solar system for all I know or not. There is nothing that looks like a sun near by. Lots of stars though. With my TK sense I become aware that there are thousands and thousands of ‘thn nearby with about a hundred close by.

“Why so many ‘thn?”

“I don’t know. I was not told in the meeting about preparing you.”

***This will become obvious during the processing.***

We wait not sure what to do. Minutes pass, but nothing happens.

***You must choose from among the 98 ‘thn assembled within one hundred and thirty five point zero seven six two kilometers of your position.***

“Ever notice how they can be a bit anal about measurements. Glad we talked Br’t hn out of that.” Daniel grins.

“I choose Qr’t hn.”

Nothing happens.

***She is among those present. You are free to choose her if you wish.***

But you are not going to tell me which one is her. Thanks. It could take hours to figure out which one is her and how many ‘thn would I have to reject. That is not dignified even for a ‘thn. No, I only have one shot at this. I have to be correct on the first try.

Maybe there is another way. Qr’t hn broke with convention when she rescued her daughter. She should have gone through Sauron. She chose me instead and by doing so, chose the rest of us as well.

So, she has a say in this as well. Qr'thn was the one, in saving her daughter from Sauron, saved us from extinction at Sauron's hands as well. I take a few deep breaths and concentrate. I go into metta meditation, loving kindness. I pour my entire being into it, expressing the wonder and beauty of life, the universe, Br'thn and the others, and finally Qr'thn. Without you, my love I am nothing. I am dust on a remote world of no consequence. If you will have me, I choose you and no other. If this means my ceasing to exist, so be it. I will mate with no other 'thn, now or ever, so kill me now or come to me. No more 'thn games. I start to play a simple melody in my mind, a thirteenth century love ballad. Tears fall from my eyes and fall to my robe. I have closed my eyes to accept my fate. At least let my heart be filled with love when I go.

***I am here my love.*** 'thn do not usually use this word, so she has my attention. I open my eyes and an adult 'thn is floating a meter from my face. Good thing I fixed my vision. This was not a time to be far sighted.

*Qr'thn?*

***Yes.*** 'thn are not capable of lying to a direct question either. They can deceive by omission however, though even then it is not done maliciously. I am confident this is her. It feels like the same 'thn I have encountered in the past, from the upgrades till now. I can't tell from the way they look, but by the way she sounds in my mind. Each is a little different. That is why I could not pick her out from 98 without hearing her.

*What do I do?*

***You have assumed many life forms. Become 'thn using my form as your guide.***

*But you are TK10. Won't that be dangerous?*

***I am with you and share your fate. We live and die together as one.*** So, this is dangerous for them as well. A 'thn can die. They never mentioned this before.

***We don't like to talk about this subject.***

*Sex, right I remember. Daniel told me. Sorry. It is better experienced than talked about, I agree with you there.*

***Too much talk. Hold me please.***

Ok, now or never. I TK slowly closer to her and envelope her in my arms. As soon as we make contact, my body disappears. I am in the non-corporal state. I usually only experience this when switching bodies during a transfer. I enter her being. My mind explodes! So this is 'thn music! Vibrations of at least twenty seven octaves. Thoughts coalesce, we are one. We can see to the ends of the universe and back again. Life!

There is so much life! Everything is alive. The universe is alive! We concentrate on the nearest star. There are plasmotic life forms there that are born, grow and die in fractions of a second. Whole civilizations appear and disappear again in moments. We feel for those lost in battle or pestilence, for those caught in a sudden heating or cooling of the solar surface. In all their struggles though, they are not capable of TK. Their world is not at the correct time frame to interface with the psiotic matrix. They live and die too fast. All they wanted was to be happy, to understand.

We turn our attention to the colder worlds. Moons themselves are alive in a way. The slow turning around in the face of their star is like a breath or a single beat of a heart. Their slow solidic time frame is too slow to access the matrix and their time frame too long to come to consciousness in the life of the universe. Like a child sleeping they live on nearly forever. Breathe in breath out. The ultimate meditation.

We access the fluidic histories the 'thn have witnessed. We see fluidic species come and go. Countless life forms struggling against death. All trying to figure out what this all means. Only one in million develops TK ability and fewer still will rise to the TK level necessary to mate with the 'thn.

The 'thn. We converse with the first 'thn, thirteen billion years old with over two hundred children of her own. She welcomes us into the 'thn matrix of combined 'thn minds. The 'thn being so much smaller and tighter, run at a much higher solidic frequency. That is how they fit the psiotic matrix.

**The Question.**

**The Diversity Imperative.**

**The Question.**

**Why does the universe exist?**

**It exists to answer the question.**

**What is the question?**

**Why does the universe exist?**

**To answer the question.**

**Diversity is the key.**

**Countless dimensions working on the question.**

**Countless numbers of TK beings working on the question.**

**Someone, somehow we will find the answer.**

We come out again. I feel Qr'thn disengage from me. I am separate again, but still in 'thn form. I can 'see' her as she is meant to be seen,

down to the ultra sub atomic scale, down to the fraction of a fraction of a quark, smallness without end.

*You are very beautiful Qr'thn. I love you. You are my love and our mother.*

*Answer this question. What is TK?*

I concentrate. What is TK? I delve deep into the psiotic matrix. I feel myself soaring through abilities without end. Levels 10, 11, 12. I understand them all. There is a barrier. I approach the barrier, level thirteen. What is level thirteen? I sense countless 'thn around me.

*Answer the question. What is level thirteen?*

I look more closely. I could become level thirteen without a thought, but I don't. I sense somehow that the barrier is there for a reason. I stop thinking and start feeling. I open my heart to the point I think it is going to burst. No separation. Level thirteen means no separation.

**I know.** Is my answer.

The psiotic matrix fades away. I awake in the hall with the others in my human form again. I am holding a crystal sphere about fifty millimeters in diameter. A baby 'thn in the gestation state. It could be as long as fifty million years before she is officially born and recognized as 'thn. Whose gestation is it really, hers or mine? No separation.

I look up to the others, with tears in my eyes and seeing the equivalent in theirs, I announce, "Her name is Pr'thn. Isn't she beautiful?"

Qr'thn comes up to me. I could pick her out of a million 'thn now without hesitation.

***Who are you?***

*Surely you know me Qr'thn.* I am hurt. After that experience she knows me to the core of my being.

***No, who do you think you are?***

I think about this. I remember a Yingui as if some distance memory. But that does not fit. No longer important. I remember Qr'thn of more recent memory, but that does not fit either. In can see her in front of me. I look down at Pr'thn and all I feel is love, love and total helplessness.

"I am the Bearer of Pr'thn. Nothing more."

***So be it, Bearer of Pr'thn and nothing more.***

"All hail the Bearer of Pr'thn!"

"All hail the Bearer of Pr'thn!"

"All hail the Bearer of Pr'thn!"

I see Br'thn with Daniel. He has been upgraded to TK8. I speak, "All hail the Bearer of Br'thn!" I have a huge smile on my face. I am beginning to resemble K!, have to watch that.



The hall erupts and repeats my exclamation two more times.

“I do not envy you Daniel, you have yet another teenager to deal with.”

“I have had practice. Maybe I will get it right this time.”

Rachael looks up from Pr'thn and exclaims, “Hey! You got it right with me and don't you forget it!” She is smiling though.

*So, Br'thn, what do you think of your baby sister?*

***Scary to think I was once like her. Be good to her Bearer. I will miss you.***

“Like you are getting off the hook that easy? No way. I expect you and Daniel to be over a lot for baby sitting duty. Diaper changing is a must.”

The hall erupts in laughter. Imagine a 'thn with a diaper. Ok, I guess you had to be there.

*I love you Qr'thn. I love you Br'thn.* Turning to our new one, *I love you Pr'thn.* I tickle her, but only get random thoughts from her. Like a baby human in many respects. Only a few minutes old.

“She is part human remember. Just as Br'thn is part dragon. The dinosaurs were born more aware, so it was with Br'thn. Human children are not so lucky.”

“Or they are luckier. She can be anything she wants to be. It will be easier for her in some ways. We stupid monkeys have very good imaginations.”

“Oh, God. Bring back the 'thn. There has been a big mistake.”

K! speaks, “Humans weird.”

Daniel asks, “So, why were there so many 'thn there when you hitched up with Qr'thn?”

“Level thirteen.”

“That's it? Level thirteen? What is level thirteen?”

“I hope you are never asked Daniel. I really hope you are never asked. I still shudder to think about it. K! was right, it is something you have to experience to understand. Words are so empty.”

“Has anyone even been a level thirteen?”

“And survived? Only once in this universe that the 'thn know of.”

Daniel goes away confused, but Rynx and K! **know**, as do I. I wonder what Daniel saw of the 'sex'? What did it look like as an observer? But I have a more important question.

“K!, why was Sauron allowed to survive this test? Why didn't he take the bait and go for level thirteen to then be likely destroyed by the 'thn.”

“Or destroy the universe? This one yet born not. Say others, test is Sauron. Not told all. Not shown all. How know he did not?” Good question.

“Then how come Br'thn turned out the way she did? Was she not half Sauron?”

“Part you, is she. Sauron, Br'thn lost, time critical. Father good not. Pr'thn much different. See you will. Part Sauron you too.”

I must never forget that.

# EPILOGUE

## **The coastal range of California in a small monastery for abused women.**

There is an old man sweeping the path outside the meditation hall when I arrive at the location. He must be the one. There is no one else about.

“Excuse me. I have been told to report here.” I wait to be noticed. Nothing. Maybe he did not hear me.

“I heard you just fine.”

“Why are you messing with my head old man?”

“I am afraid that I do not know the dialect that you speak very well Rhea. It takes time to compose my thoughts.”

“How do you know my name? My true name? No one here knows that. It is not even the Chinese name the bastards gave me.”

“I know a great many things. I know of your ability. I know of your struggles and your past. I know of your fears and your desires.”

This is weird. I raise a handful of pebbles from the path with the ability. I am ready to attack if I need to.

“Please sit.” He points to a nearby bench. It is large enough for both of us and some safety space in between.

“Here, have some of this. For some reason TKs like it a lot.” He hands me a dark object and then eats one himself.

“Oh this is good. What is it? I don’t even know your name, yet you know mine.” I am so out of here. Never mind what the priests said.

“It is called chocolate. My name. Yes. It has been a long time since I used my true name. It would only be fair to use that name. My true name is Jason. Rhea, I have a story to tell you. A story of dragons and dragon slayers. Of many wondrous things, some of which I have seen with my own eyes. And, I hold the keys to your freedom. A freedom like you can not even imagine. Come and sit. We begin our story in a swamp millions of years ago in a time long before human kind.....”