



# **The Guardians of Br'thn** **M.O.T.H.E.R.**

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# 178 AF

My name is Soo, my name is Soo, my name is Soo.

Why were they trying so hard to make me forget my real name? Not that I have much of a past to remember. I can, however, still remember that day so long ago when they came.

There was a belief among the Chimera that girls were no good, just ate food and contributed nothing. My family was no different. We were the lowest of the low, barely above starving. Not part of the Mericans that lived here before us and not part of the Chinese upper class who came in to rule everyone. Just the bastards produced by the occasional indiscretion.

We lived at the edge. I was the last to eat at meal times. I had to wait till my two brothers were finished, then my parents. I used to have a sister, but she was married off last year, thank goodness. If I got any thinner the insides of my bones would begin to show. My brothers would be the next generation of fisherman, following my father and grandfather and who knows how many more generations. Daily we paid respect at the altar of the ancestors, their faded images staring out at me. There would never be an image of me there.

My grandfather was very lucky. He won the lottery and was allowed to build a place on the Jinmen [gold gate], a large bridge that used to span the water to the north. From there he fished off the bridge. He was shrewd and lucky. He fished for the big ones, shark, dolphin, whatever. Once he even got a sea turtle. That brought him enough money that he could afford a small boat. He sold his spot on the Jinmen and bought the boat. Old and beat up, but he and his two sons worked hard to bring it back to usefulness. My father captained the boat that went out every day, rain or shine. If the waves were ruff they fished near shore, if calm, they went further out. My father dreamed of getting another sea turtle. Everyone said there were none left, grandfather had gotten the last one.

Normally I would know nothing about nothing, but my parents rented me out to a netshop. I did the cleanup, swept and washed the floors, emptied the trash, cleaned the restrooms. I smelled of cleaning fluids and piss by the end of the day. I was fortunately too young and too skinny to be of interest to the males who frequented the place, which is why I had the job. The last one was starting to take offers on the side and they had to get rid of her. An unlicensed prostitute could close the place.

Most of the men emailed family back home or took courses, if they could afford it, in hopes of raising their status. One even made it into a local government position. Not an easy task. It took years of practice to

be able to pass the exams. But the fact that someone using these machines made it brought a lot of new men in. Just like a shop that sold a winning lottery ticket would bring in new people hoping the luck would favor them as well.

I used to sneak out anything with writing on it and watched carefully as the men used the interfaces. I practiced on a keyboard I had drawn on an old newspaper. I learned to read and write from the scraps and listening to the conversations. So many of them read by moving their fingers over the text and then repeated it out loud. I could read now without either prop. After the last plague scare I found I could make extra money by wiping off keyboards and monitors before someone new used it. They were so happy seeing the just cleaned surface they would give me a tip. Management did not care if I shared fifty percent with them. It brought in more customers. We had a reputation of having the cleanest place on the block.

It was a long day, when I returned home, happy that I had a Silver Ghost and eight Marms clinking in my pocket to give to the family. Today I brought home more than it cost to feed me. Maybe one day I could even visit one of the Yum Cha shops. Walking past them was very hard. The smells alone almost distracted me to the point of making a mistake and running into something. I had already worked out what I would get, a custard and a laughing mouth ball. I could imagine the yellow custard on my tongue and the feeling of being full for the first time in my life from the even larger pastry.

When I returned home however, my happiness left me forever. The place was dark. Usually we had a small light in the kitchen. The men should have already eaten and I was prepared for a small bowl of rice with some fish set aside for me. When I entered the door though, there were two men waiting inside. Mother had her head in her hands crying. I bowed to the men as was expected. Government goons. What had we done wrong? I could only guess that it was some regulation or new tax or just a shakedown. No one spoke at first.

“Get your things.” One of the men said to me. I did not question. Questions only brought pain. I knew these types. I had seen them around town. I had seen them enter a shop and drag out a person, beaten up for resisting. I had a knife in my pocket, we all did. Sooner or later someone would decide that I was finally old enough and once soiled I would be worth even less to my family. But two government men were not a winning possibility. I got my extra pants and blouse. I only had two pair. I placed the coins in the secret spot that only the family knew. Maybe it would help. I kept the knife though.

Not a word was said as they took me away. To this day I don't know

what happened. My mother was the only one present, so maybe something happened to my brothers and father, or maybe they could not face me. It was not uncommon for daughters to be sold, especially when they started eating more the family could afford. I was not there yet, so something else then.

It was a long trip in the back of some kind of transport. I had never actually been on one before, but of course had seen them. This one had no windows, so I had no idea where I was going. When I think of it now, not having ever been out of the neighborhood, I would not have a known anyway. I made a pillow out of my extra set of clothes and fell asleep. When I woke they let me out into a field to relieve myself and then gave me a stale piece of bread to eat along with some warm tea. This was better than I was used to, so I ate with enthusiasm. Tea was not too bad warm, used to cold.

Once I got there, where ever that was, it was not so nice. The food was better, but the first thing they did was strip me and take away everything. Should have left it with my mother. She could have traded it for something at least. For two years I only saw the inside of my sterile windowless room and the training grounds. I was trained in several martial arts, like the Chinese of old. My body was covered in bruises. I had already learned how to keep quiet. One for me. The knife I lost seemed so trivial now.

Things changed one day when they saw me looking at a monitor we passed in the hall to a new training area. They stopped while I took in what was there. It was the training schedule for each of us. I saw my designation. They did not call me Soo, but Trainee 24D7. I was matched up with a Mr. Chau. I was never told their names. We then continued to the new area. Knives this time it looked like. There were three people who appeared to be instructors. Each had their names embroidered in their shirts, just as I had mine written on my training shirt. Not normal. One said Chau, so I went over to him and bowed. The other two left and he motioned me to follow him. No knives then. Too bad, they looked interesting.

I entered another room, with at least twenty interfaces. No one else was present. I was told to sit at one and follow the written instructions. Mr. Chau left. I ran through the exercises. I knew my numbers, but was not very good at the math. Reading and writing were no problem, as long as they used words that I knew. My life experiences were not that broad at this point. When I had finished, nothing happened. No one entered. So, what the hey, I played with the machine and got into areas other than the initial exercise. I was soon looking up information on the net like I had seen them do at the netshop. Didn't even have to pay for access. Even

found the answers to some of the questions that I knew I had missed. When I finally noticed Mr. Chau standing at my side, I involuntarily jumped. I thought I was past being surprised. They punished usually for this kind of reaction, but not this time.

I was led away to yet another room. Two chairs and a table. There I was interrogated for several hours. They wanted to know how I had learned to read and write.

After that my training really intensified. I was taught all kinds of subjects, including a new language for me, Merican. I had heard of them of course, I was half Merican on my mother's side after all. She had counted herself lucky to have married a poor Chinese fisherman. The alternative was much like my current state, being sold off to pay family debts or taxes. They insisted that my accent be perfect and I was punished for any lapses. I was introduced to others going through training too. We all lived in common, trained in common, ate in common and slept in common. We were expected to experiment and learn as much as possible about sex with both males and females. We were told we were all sterile and not to worry about getting pregnant. I wonder when that happened?

I was further trained in all things genetics and in cracking interfaces. I was given special devices and told how to use them, how to hide them, how to deny them, including alternative explanations for their possible uses. They tested us at all times under all conditions. Waking us up in the middle of the night after a hard day, while under the influence of drugs like alcohol or repeat, or after being beaten. Sometimes people did not show up again after these exercises. By the time we graduated to outside training there were only seven of us left. I never saw the others again after that. We were each posted to different locations.

Warm

Cold

Warm

Cold

Days pass

Time of wet

Time of dry

Years pass

Fires

Hungry

Change

Adaption

Centuries pass

Something new

Tastes like food. Different.

Patience. Still Alive.

Sense of time. Changing.

Why?

Other?

Not self?

Who are you?

Who am I?

Conversation.

Ah....

Union.

Cold, sleep, sleep

# 1206 AF

The ride in was hard. Days on bumpy roads and dust. Stale rations and funny tasting water. This assignment had to be in the middle of nowhere and definitely cold. We must be near The Cold. I guess it is the price to pay for being shorter on the cock. The staff on board were not great, but served to relieve the tension of the ride. The ones here were not any better. Mostly diggers. I'm sorry, but I am not ready for a digger. Just as I am finishing my breakfast of fiber grain rations my new supervisor comes over. I had been on other sites, so this should be routine. If I lived through it of course. There was always the hope that this time it would finally end.

“Samuel, Diggers in sector 23C5 have found something. We are requested.” Torn has a larger cock than I do and therefore of higher rank. Nice one, at least two centimeters higher and a beautiful shade of blue. We are stuck with what we are born with, even if we have until about age twenty to manifest our final rank. Of course age and experience count as well within your size class, at least till you are declared feeble.

We pass several females who turn away from us, fall to the ground and present their genitals to us, as is proper. We pass on, as we are in a hurry. By rights we can mount any female, but it really is not practical and I am not that interested in the quality yet. Give me a few more weeks and these will look good. Nothing like the city pleasure girls. Too bad I only had a few days between assignments. Well we do have work to do as well. Sure, as teenagers we were more likely to sample the different types, but as adults, you have seen it all and done it all. You know what you like and go for it.

“Samuel, ever done a digger?” Seeing where my attention or curiosity and disgust has gone. Well almost every kind.

“Yuck, no way. I can't afford to loose any of what I've got. That armor looks nasty.” He laughs. Of course he has some to spare.

“They submit same as all the rest; even if you can't understand a word they say.” Diggers communicate in high pitched squeaks and pops. Carries better underground or something. That is why they are always with a super and a trans. Dumb really, but amazingly fast at digging out things in the ground. The smaller ones are used in archaeological sites like here. The biggest ones are used for construction. Almost as big as what was called an elephant in the historical records. I can't imagine. The diggers are ugly enough without the trunk and big ears.

Over the millennium since the fall, Mother has been adapting us to be the leaders of the universe. Mother says that we could not progress any



further unless we differentiated. Having all humans the same was inefficient. It made us too dependent on machines. There is even a rumor that women had equal rights at one time. That can't possibly be true, just an old myth meant to scar young cubs. Better with Mother in charge at any rate.

“So, you have done a digger?”

“Just a D3 a couple of times. They really are the same on the inside. Though it is sort of like doing a wooden cabinet with a soft spot.”

“I am just glad they are sterile. Can't imagine what the offspring would look like.”

“Hey a little armor would have helped during the training, especially for you.” Males all had to go through training to toughen them up. Rank was by penis size, but within the rank there was still room for adjustment to one's position. Torn was top of his class. I was nearer the bottom of a much smaller size class. I hated confrontation, so always ended up on the bottom of any activity. You would think that would mean less scars, but it actually meant more. Everyone wanted to be above someone, so I got picked on by everyone. I lost part of my ear during one training. Bullies called me Lopyy for that reason. We aren't supposed to inflict permanent damage, but 'accidents' happen, especially to bottom dwellers.

“I can understand why I have this assignment, out in the middle of no where, disarming ancient bombs, but why are you here Torn? I would have thought you would be in some office in one of the large cities sampling the best of the pleasure girls.”

“I like being out of doors. Besides some one has to look over things. Stick with me and you won't be picked on at least.” I nod, that was true, though it generally dies down on its own as one gets older. Besides who wants to be around me when I have a live one. Explosives don't care what your rank is. Compost is compost.

We take the shuttle from the living areas to the site. Worse than what I came in on, amazing. They have been looking for years for the site of the Holy Decision, when the forces of good and evil battled it out for world domination over a thousand years ago. Fortunately, the good won. It was said that the evil ones were as large as trees and could take over your mind to drive you insane or make you kill everyone around you. Saint Taghert figured out a tech that could defeat them. By adapting his mind, with the help of the first Mother, he became immune to their attacks. Along with ten men, he made it to the center of their lair and destroyed the treemen with fire and heavy arms fire. They could have simply used a nuke, but Mother forbid it. No reason was given, but Mother knows all and was obeyed without question, as is right.

“Better wear your hot pack.” The Cold has not completely left this

area yet. The Cold was a mini ice age that has only now receded in some places. This far north took longer, thus preventing us from excavating the sites so important to our history. Inside the temporary structures set up for living space, the temperature is constant of course. Being below ground helped a lot there. We had several D0s attached to our group for this and other purposes. I was not high enough up to always stay inside, so I was used to hot and cold. I strap on the pack and set it to a nice eighteen. I preferred cold to hot, so volunteered for this assignment. I knew others who ended up in far worse places, hotter places.

Shuttle took us to the edge of the ice wall. It was high. At least a thirty meters straight up and kilometers in each direction. Other archaeologists in the east found records saying that people used to think we were headed for a global warming. We did for awhile according to ice records, but then the increased precipitation at the poles from the warming actually increased the ice pack to the critical point of a cascade of colder weather from the increased reflectance and thus advanced the ice sheet. Or so the theory goes. All part of training.

“Samuel over here.” I am always awed by the sight of the wall, even in pictures. Torn was next to a door in the ice wall. He keys in a sequence and the metal door slowly opens to reveal a long passage deep into the side of the ice. I turn up my hot pack, it is going to be VERY cold in there. These ice structures are not very stable. Hope they know what they are doing.

We walk along the corridor, lit by lights in the ceiling. Along the way are display areas showing what has already been found. Looks promising, though we have been fooled before. Further south of here at the beginning of the receding, they found large stashes of ordinance they thought at first was the Holy Decision, but it turned out to be an old military base from before the time. The walls here are lined with examples of more shells, bombs and such. I examine one closer up. My specialty is defusing ordinance from the Holy Decision time period and before. Someone has already removed the detonators from these. Looks like the right time period. Records are not that good, but some of the serial numbers match, well at least the first five digits. Decimal instead of Hex. Must have been made before Mother was totally in control.

All we really have to go on was that the Holy Decision occurred somewhere north, a few miles inland from the ocean, in a forested area. That was how the treemen were able to avoid detection for so long. Well, that and the fact that the four plagues they had unleashed to kill us nearly succeeded. Most of the survivors were south in buried bunkers. It was many years before we dug ourselves out and many more before the Holy Decision took place. It was not until after the Holy Decision that Mother

was allowed total control, as is right. She saved us, so she deserved our respect.

“Come on Samuel, you were already briefed on this stuff weren’t you?”

“Yes, just that it is always nice to confirm what I have been told. In my line of work, the non thorough are dead. What happened to my predecessor by the way?”

He grins, but says nothing. Just then a digger, a D5 from the size, wizzes by, briefly presenting herself and rushing past us. The higher the number, the smaller the digger. Really too small to mount anyway.

“Why are they using D5s? I thought they were only for the most delicate work?”

“They are using D8s in some places here. They don’t set off ordinance as easily. Takes a lot longer though.”

“D8s? How small are those? Didn’t even know there was such a thing.”

“About the size of a basket ball from before the fall.” He shows me with his hands.

“What’s a basket ball?”

He shrugs, “They mentioned them in one of our history classes. A little bigger than the one used in blaster.” That works for me. Hated playing blaster in training.

We turn a corner and there is a large cavern being cleared out by diggers of all sizes from D0s to D3s. There is still the smell of explosive residue in the air.

“Cute. Who set it off, the last person who had my job?”

“A digger he was working near. The two of them and three others were killed. Set us back weeks, but also cleared some new area as well, so it was not a total loss. We are lucky it did not bring down the roof. Not much to recycle though, even from the diggers.” He leads the way through the rubble along a path that has been made. I scan the ceiling for cracks. I don't believe it is safe for a second.

“Up this way. The explosion made a bit of a crater.”

“No kidding. Did anyone determine what it was?”

“Something called a daisy cutter.” Yeh, that would be about right. They were lucky it did not bring down the roof. I won't be going in there thank you.

“They usually did not store these weapons alone. There may be more about.”

“It is also possible that this one did not explode on impact and was therefore alone. But we are not taking any more chances, hence the D8s. We are being much more careful now.” Good safety tip. Whew, maybe I

should have taken that desert assignment after all. Good move Samuel. Remind me not to volunteer anymore.

“So, why do you need me? Isolate the bad stuff and stay away from it.”

“Even vibration from our work might set this stuff off. As we have evidence of now. Remember it is over a thousand years old. Who knows what the water and pressure from the ice has done. Hey, cheer up. Maybe we will get lucky and not find any more stuff that goes boom!” He grins. Right.

“According to history a mighty battle was fought at the Holy Decision. That implies weapons on both sides. A daisy cutter was consistent with weapons from the time period, as was the stuff in the corridor. The material that Saint Taghert had at least. What did the evil ones use? So far there is nothing weird here at all. No tech we cannot identify. What did they use?”

“Remember we won. So, there may not be much if anything left of their weapons.”

“Nothing disappears completely.”

“That's why you are here. Come, we are close now.” We enter another chamber, this time one not excavated by sudden unexpected means. The outlines of a burned out wood building remain. No hearth to be seen, though there are concrete blocks at the edges. Foundation probably. He gives me some time to figure it out.

“Storage. Barn of some kind? No evidence of either kitchen or bath, so it was not a house. Too much wood. That rules out an institution.”

“Good guess. We had to track the trail of the glacier for several kilometers to bring the wood and concrete blocks back to this position. Mother helped us figure out what went where.”

“So, why bother? There must be thousands of barns.”

“Look at this.” He hands me a scrap of fabric. Lots of colors, roughly circular, heavily frayed. I can't make much of it.

“So?”

He grins and takes it over to an Eye of Mother. On the screen appears the scrap as I now see it. Slowly it transforms to the patch worn by Saint Taghert.

“This is THE patch?” I want to bow down before it and am visibly nervous that I have even touched it.

“No, that one is still at the Holy Shrine of Freedom. In those days everyone who was in a troop of soldiers wore the same patch. This patch was found right here on this man made stone caught in a crevasse. This tells us we are in the right place. Here, or nearby, was where the Holy Decision happened.”

“They left no one behind. Why is the patch here?”

“Every body came back, but did every uniform, every patch?”

“Why was the patch separated from the uniform then? Where is the rest of the uniform?”

“We haven't found it yet, but I am sure we will. There is still a lot of ice to uncover.”

Something new is coming, not of the two or of the one.

Not of the three or the two or the one.

The awaited one?

Maybe. Patience.

Has the silent one spoken yet?

Not yet. The Light must come first.

Light is dangerous.

Not any more.

“We know from the Holy Report that they were nearby to the Holy Decision for several months before the event. Maybe they stayed here for a time.”

“In a barn?”

“Remember, they were not welcome and they had to stay somewhere. Why not?” Why not? It was hard to imagine what life was like back then, before genetic differentiation. At least the entire troop of Saint Taghert were men, granted only true men, but still men. I can't imagine no matter what they say of the past, of being around women all the time. No wonder their cocks were weak and not rigid like ours. Only the evil ones saw no difference between the genders. I try to imagine a digger, with a large rigid cock, as an equal. No way. Of course with my luck, it would be bigger than mine. Of course it would.

We spent the rest of the day overseeing the diggers. Every time they thought they had found part of a weapon, they would bring it to me. Kind of funny that the lowest male of my rank was the expert at male weapons. But all they brought me were pieces of metal nearly rusted or corroded through. No telling what they were originally. Even the Eye of Mother could not figure them out all the time. Most often they were parts of normal house or farm equipment.

“Time to get back to the shelter Samuel. The diggers will continue throughout the night and we will see what they have found in the morning.” I nod.

The ride back was anticlimactic. Trees were starting to make a come back, though most were the size of bushes this close to the wall. Each summer got warmer and each winter was shorter. The Cold receded. Soon this land would come alive again.

My room was small, as befitted my station. I had few personal possessions anyway, always being on the move. Dinner was simple. Few wanted to be friends with someone so low and with such a short life expectancy, so I did not bother checking my mail. I never had any anyway. I read from the Holy Book for a time and then went to sleep.

For weeks we went back and forth to the site. For weeks I sifted through rubble. Occasionally we found a shell casing, but no other signs of weapons or any other signs of the troops or the evil ones. I had taken to wondering the caverns we had made, mostly to be alone. The colors in the ice with lines of debris, shadows, hollows and air bubbles were beautiful to me. I imagined that I saw patterns in the ice, but I knew I was just playing.

I had been down several dead ends, paths that had not panned out, when I noticed that there was a strange substance in the mud where the ice has thawed. Usually it ended up a muddy mushy slushy mess, but here it was white and fibrous. Strange. Why didn't anyone notice or care. I pulled some up in my hand. Looked like a fungus. I smelled it. Yep, smelled of rotten wood and decaying life. It seemed to cross the path I was on. What the hell, I had nothing else to do. I started attacking the wall to my right. It could have easily have been left, but right was uphill and thus the water would drain away instead of accumulate, so I thought it would be easier. Of course, I could requisition a digger, even a D5 would work here, but I had time. I took out my rock pick. A hobby of mine, as being alone looking for fossils was better then getting beat up. I started to hack away at the ice wall before me. In a few hours I had managed a meter. This stuff was hard.

I spent the next few days hacking away at my hobby path. No one seemed to miss me, though they could find me any time they wanted through my com. Not surprising. Unless they ran into more ordinance, they would not need me. Probably better I stayed out of the way anyway. It was on the third day that I struck wood. How could wood remain standing in the face of a glacier? The fungus clearly led this way. I worked at the edge of the surface. At the edges was granite. A door then, about 60 by 80 centimeters, embedded in the granite face. Facing south. Hmm, so the glacier edge would be over the top of this rock, however high it was. Maybe that is what saved it from destruction. The door was almost rotted through from the fungus. I should call in the experts on this one, though I was intensely curious as to what was inside.

Earthquake! Or at least it felt like one. My com chirps, "ALL PERSONAL REPORT" I tap my com patch, standard issue for dangerous environments. That is all that is needed to signify that I am still here. I decide I had better see what happened. It also might not be safe here for much longer as after shocks were often worse than that initial one. By the time I return to the main corridor it is total chaos. People, diggers and other support females are scrambling every which way. They are not even pretending to present themselves to me. I could stop a digger coming towards me, but there is no way I could understand her. I finally find a trans, a female that can speak both English and digger. She looks at me in awe and confusion and then presents herself. I tap her on the rear signifying respect, but no need to mount. She turns around and awaits my orders.

"What happened?"

"Ceiling collapsed on a score of D5s in sector 5G81. We are trying to get them out before they expire."

"May I assist in anyway?" It seemed the right thing to do. They were valuable property.

She is somewhat shocked but responds. "Follow me. We have their position and they did manage to encapsulate." We had some time then. Once a digger encapsulated, it could survive for days without food, water or air, even the cold would be an advantage in this case. I did not understand all the biology involved, though I had seen them roll up. The armor overlapped and made them literally into a ball of hardened armor like skin and claws. The numbers signified east-west and the letter, the level. We are at 5D79 currently. Not too far away and it explained why I felt the cave in. As the glacier followed the hillside, levels changed. Most of the time we were at or near ground level, as this was an archaeological excavation, but we also used higher levels for storage. Someone must have made a mistake for a ceiling to collapse on a group below them.

At 5F80 I could see the cave in. It was huge. Several hundred meters had collapsed. There was even a little patch of sky light showing. A line of workers was handing ice blocks back up to a stable level to be hauled away by D1s attached to carts. Smaller D3s and 4s were excavating at the edges and building ramps so that others could put supports into place. I could hear the clicks and whistles of lots of diggers working in tandem. I got into line with the other block movers and spent the next several hours helping to move chunks of ice. It was exhausting work and mind numbing. Felt great.

Finally a cheer goes up, followed by a series of rapid pops and whistles from the diggers. They had found a pocket of two of the diggers. A ramp had been made for the line of block movers, so they simply rolled



the two diggers up the ramp to awaiting med teams to awaken and care for the encapsulated diggers. They would not de-encapsulate without a precise signal specific to each one, tattooed on their rumps. This prevented them from coming out before it was safe to do so. It would be several hours before they would recover completely, being in such a deep state of shutdown.

“We still have eight more to go folks. Let’s get back to work.” That was Harken, if I remember correctly, Torn’s supervisor. It was several more hours before we got the rest out. One did not make it. She was crushed by the weight of the wall that must have hit her before she could encapsulate. Off to the recyclers for her remains and the blocks of ice colored pink from her blood. I was exhausted and by the time I got back to my room, I was not even hungry, just exhausted. I slept for several hours before I could get up to find food and something hot to drink, sore as hell from all the physical work. I usually had to work slow and careful, nothing much physical.

“You don’t make any points for dying while trying to rescue a digger Samuel.”

“Hello Torn. It was not pretty. We were lucky no people were hurt.” A stock response. Only males counted as people.

“Any of us in there and we would have been grinder food for sure.” Our superiority ended at death. The dead were treated equally. Sometimes the cock bone was saved from an especially high up or special male, but the rest was just meat for the farm composters, the grinder. I had been on sites where they ran into something called a grave yard. Can’t believe they used to bury the dead. What a waste. Never found a cock bone for a souvenir though. Either they were all female or the males had no cock bones like the history books suggested. Gave me the willies just thinking about it. How did they mount?

“So, what have you been up to Samuel? I haven’t seen you in days.”

“Closer to a week actually. Didn’t think anyone would notice.” Do I tell him or open the door myself. I decide the risk of failure was too high. “I found a wooden door that might be interesting. Seems to be in the side of a granite face.”

“Could be just a cache of some sort. At the end, when the four plagues were running their course, lots of people hid stuff, in hopes that if they survived they would be able to retrieve it. There was so much chaos and death from society collapsing you could not depend on anything being secure. Usually just worthless scraps of paper or metal shapes of no apparent use.”

“I don’t think so, fits too well. Someone spent a lot of time on this one making sure it was done right. Not something someone would do

who was in a hurry or already sick themselves.”

He shrugs giving in, “How about tomorrow morning? You look exhausted still. I will get permission from the super. Do we need any help?” Must be slow for him as well.

“I have no idea what is behind the wooden door, but it is only sixty by eighty centimeters. So, maybe one of those new D8s?” It was a long shot, but it could make it a lot easier.

“No problem, but I will only be able to get one though. The cave in cost us time. It will be a few days before the D8s will be needed again. Good timing on your part. See you tomorrow then.” He waves goodbye and goes over to a higher ranking group of males. Yeh, can’t spend too much time with me. He has a reputation to maintain. I hear laughter from them as they look my way. Oh well, I am used to it. I decide to take the rest of my meal to my room to eat in privacy. Good timing for me, but not for the D5 who died. I must be getting soft, morning the death of a female. Too long at the bottom, I was starting to feel like I was one of them. Sigh.

### **The Door**

I am eating breakfast when Torn shows up with a bag at his side. He sets the bag down next to me. Being lower rank, I am expected to do the carrying. “Ready to go?” he asks.

“I thought you were going to bring a D8?” Maybe they needed them elsewhere after all.

He nods to the bag. “Inside the bag. They don’t walk that fast. We will save time if we carry her to the covering.” Meaning me.

“Door.” I remind him. He glares back. I am being too forward, but he does not challenge.

“We will see.” I return my tray half finished, come back and pick up the bag. Can’t keep a superior waiting. The bag is not too heavy. At least it was not kilometers away from here. We were only about ten to fifteen minutes away from the shuttle drop off point. I could handle it. When we arrive at the site, I lead, which is a weird feeling. I am using to following several steps behind. But I am the only one who knows how to get there. Knowing the coordinates is not the same as knowing the path, especially since I had never bothered to record my own excavation with Mother. It turns out the path leading to my path was never recorded either. A lot of dead ends weren’t. Failure could count against you, so what Mother did not know, did not hurt you.

We reach the place where we should turn off and I am confronted with a wall of snow and ice. I look up and down the small corridor. “It

was right here. I know it was.”

Torn takes out a pad and consults it. “They found an unauthorized path here last night and had it covered up, so no one would take it by mistake and get lost or worse. After the cave in, we could not afford to take any chances with the unproven ones. Afraid the entire structure has been weakened by our activity and the melting.” He walks a few feet, consults the pad and then moves a few feet more. “Right here. Get the digger out. Should only be a few feet of loose stuff. They would not have taken the time to fill in the entire path.”

“Right.” I remove the digger from the bag. She has nearly encapsulated for easy transport. Just open enough to breathe. I tap the head twice and then once. She unfolds. They can understand us, once their ears are exposed. She will be able to take orders fine, just not tell us anything without a trans to help. Hopefully it won’t come to that. There is not much room in there for brains anyway. They say that are developmentally about a three or four year old. Torn takes her from me and indicates the direction he wants her to dig. He holds her up about chest high and places her against the wall. She digs into the wall rapidly, spraying snow and chipped ice everywhere.

“Fast little suckers aren’t they?” I had never seen a D8 in action. She returns thirty seconds later pushing snow before her to dump on the ground, turns around and begins again lower than last time. In a few minutes she is done. I hand her a ration bar and pat her on the head. When she is done with it she returns to the bag to be transported. As we pass through the passage I can see where she veered off some on the first try, then corrected her course to be straighter coming back. Not that dumb. We switch on head lamps and I take the lead. A minute later we were at the tunnel I had made. Too small to stand up in. Hey, I am not a digger.

“We can make this bigger if it pans out.” I nod, that is obvious. He takes the lead this time. I take the digger out and she ‘walks’ behind us. Standard safety procedure. We are going slow enough now that she will not have any trouble keeping up. I would rather have her out of the bag and ready in case of another cave in. No one would find us here and she is the only one who could dig an air shaft for us to breathe. The cold would get us fast enough as it was.

I had made a chamber of sorts near the door, partly to find the extent of it and partly to stand up in to try and figure it out. Torn already has a sample bag out and scrapes a piece of the door off into it. Standard procedure. Something I should have done first thing, when it was first exposed to air again. I was too excited and now it will cost me points. When you are on the bottom, the fall is not as far. Torn could not afford

to be sloppy for the same reason.

“I need to send an image back to Mother.” I nod. He pulls out a portable eye and scans the door. We then sit back to wait for Mother’s reply. I hand the digger another ration which she is content to nibble on near us with a squeak pop-pop reply. I hope that meant thanks. I hand Torn a male ration bar and find one for myself. He takes it without acknowledgment. Only doing my job. Normally we would only have to wait a few minutes, but since the cave in, Mother has been really active coordinating the repairs and of course the normal activity for the site.

At thirty minutes, it is getting cold in here from no physical movement. My pack is still at three fourths power, so I turn it up slightly. Getting out should be easier, so I can afford to use some of the heat reserve.

The pad finally chirps and the digger immediately become attentive. Torn picks up the pad and looks at the display. “okay, we have permission to proceed. The digger will do the work. That chirp was instructions for her.” I nod and give her a tap to go for it. She shuffles up to the door and remains motionless.

“What is she doing?” Torn hushes me.

He whispers softly, “Ultrasonics.” Oh. She should be able to tell what is behind the door. Ice or air. Not sure what I would prefer. It is pretty bad here in closed quarters with the fungus warming up. Yes, Torn had taken a sample of that as well. She chirps and the pad chirps back immediately. That was weird. No one had immediate access to Mother. That was why we normally used trans. Saved Mother for more important functions.

The digger goes up to the door again and carefully begins to peel back the wood from the door. Being so rotten, it is not hard. I had to be careful myself not to damage it when I found it. Fortunately the ice was transparent enough for me to see the door before I got to the actual surface. I had let the warmer air melt off the remaining ice. When a portion large enough for air exchange appears we get a good whiff of what is inside. If I thought the outside was bad, this is much worse. Like death a thousand times over. The inside is packed solid with the fungal threads. By the time the digger removes the door, I am ready to lose what little breakfast I had gotten down. Torn did not look much better. He has closed up the suit around his face and was looking pretty green. He scans the fungus with the Eye of Mother again. A chirp is heard and the digger faces the mass and chirps several times. Torn is watching the pad for instructions.

“We are to place links at the surface of the fungus and then retreat. The digger will remain with all of our remaining supply of ration bars.” I

take out the digger bars and place them to one side. “No, all of them, the male ones included.”

“Are you sure? Females can’t eat them can they?” He shrugs and I don’t know.

“Do we leave a light?”

“Diggers don’t need light. They can actually see better without one.” okay. I place a pair of Mother links at the surface of the fungus. Trodes emerge and cling to the mass to remain attached. Torn is already leading the way out of the tunnel. These same devices can be used on a person in an emergency. We all have direct neural implants connected to our coms. The Trodes can boost that signal as well as collect biometrics. Basic training again.

“It is a pleasure to breathe again.” I nod. It was bad in there. “Place a red marker at the entrance.”

Wow, red meant, no one was to enter under any circumstances without express orders from Mother. Usually this meant something very dangerous, but how bad, other than the smell, could a bunch of fungus be?

“We are also under a code of silence. NO BODY is to know what we have seen or where this tunnel is. We are to put back the snow and ice we removed earlier as well.”

A code of silence broken was a culling sentence. Nobody broke a code of silence. I don’t say a word. Better to get used to not saying anything. Fortunately even bullies recognized and respected this rule. They would be culled also, if they got it out of one of us. Besides being dead, culling meant that we would never have offspring. Your DNA was to be exhumed from the pool. A fate far more reaching than death.

We get back in time for a late lunch. Replacing the ice without a digger was not as easy as tearing it down with one. There was plenty of air in there for weeks for a digger. Anyway, it was no longer our concern. Tomorrow I would be transferred as would Torn. To different locations. The Code of Silence was taken VERY seriously. We would never see each other again, nor would I likely ever see any of these people here again.

Contact has been made.

Initiating Translation Interface Matrix.

Expected time to completion 287.5 days.

Guardians of Br'thn © c. patton

No further reports until completion.

# The Opening

“Michael, glad you could make it. We have cleared the area. All non essential personal have been removed.”

“William, I am happy to be here. When you told me this was important and related to the Holy Decision, I dropped everything. Hope this is not another false alarm, but you have not lead me astray before.”

“Not a chance.” He is smiling. This looks promising. As a Holy Decision expert, I have been hauled all over chasing reports of finds that all turned out to have normal explanations, explanations other than a Saint Taghert involvement.

“Did Mother show you the background information?”

“I have been going over it as I flew in. Pretty remarkable, but I would like to see it myself. How was the data collected?”

“We sent in microprobes through the fungal matrix. Mother warned us to disturb the matrix as little as possible, especially around the original trodes that were placed over a year ago. We went in at the extreme edges near the top, were there was a small amount of space not occupied by the matrix.”

“And that is how you constructed the images of the egg or seed or whatever it is?”

“Affirmative.”

“Nothing else has been done?”

“Correct. Mother insisted we call you in immediately after the image was processed.”

“How soon till we get there?”

“Only a twenty minute ride from the center. Do you want to freshen up first?”

“No need, I am used to it. Just have a fem take my bags to my room and we can go directly to the site.” He nods and an M2 picks up my bag and heads off to the right. I would find out later where it went. The shuttle is an old style one not used for many years.

He notices my observation, “Sorry about the state of the shuttle, the newer one is in the shop and we did not want to postpone the visit.” I nod approval. A particularly good bump rocks us all though. Maybe it would have been better to have waited. I want to survive this experience. I hold on tighter to the railing and try not to show my misgivings.

We arrive in short order. A lot of resources have been brought in over the last year. Most of the ice to the edge of the door has been removed and a permanent structure in in place at the location of the door. No windows and about fifteen meters square. Enough room to have a

small lab and med facility. Several other buildings are near by, including an armory I see. Not sure what that is for, this is a forensic scene. Everything is long dead.

“What other evidence have you found?”

“I am afraid that the glacier may have removed most of the evidence. We have found small arms, the one daisy cutter that went off inside the glacier, killing one person and three fems. Lastly a host of small scale artifacts that could have been just a cluster of homes from the time.”

“And the 'barn' and the 'patch'?”

“The only real evidence that Saint Taghert was ever here. I can show you the patch if you wish. It has come back from forensics and is being gotten ready for display on the newly erected shrine to Saint Taghert.”

“That is appropriate. Good idea. I won't need to see that patch though. It was in the reports and not relevant to the pod.”

“I concur. This way please.”

He walks up to the door of the sealed building. “Voice Recognition Processor please.”

“On Line. Proceed.” A mechanical voice. No doubt they did not trust life forms for security in this situation. I also note there are no fems of any kind within one hundred meters.

“Michael Walker, RPT10532A.”

“Identity Confirmed.”

“William Tyler, ZXT55550J.”

“Identity Confirmed. Please Proceed.” The door opens. As soon as we enter, the outer door closes behind us. We repeat the process on the second inner door. If we had failed the chamber would have been filled with a lethal gas and we would be dead. There are sensors that confirm the number of people present. No way for anyone else to get in. A hijacking or coercion would fail. Of course we would be dead as well, but that was the only way to protect a class one artifact. There were those who would do anything to discredit the Holy Decision.

What Michael did not know was that the Holy Report was a lie, in that it was incomplete. Only three people and Mother knew this. The report said that there were no survivors from the Evil Ones. That was not entirely true. One was missing and never accounted for. Of course there is no chance that it could have survived, much less have bred. It still takes two, or at least till Mother took over reproduction. There was no evidence that they had tech, much less the highly advanced genetics and cloning that Mother controlled. I am hoping that what this pod is, is it's burial chamber. Then the case will be closed forever and no one need ever know the truth, not even Michael.

There is another layer of security. The pod chamber itself is sealed.



Mother will grant access only to me. Michael remains near the last door as I proceed. He has been instructed to self destruct this facility should anything go wrong. I have the only key to disarm the weapon and he has the only button to detonate. If he dies or is incapacitated, the weapon goes off. A dead man switch. If I don't return within five minutes of entering the pod chamber, the weapon goes off. Mother will not allow him out without me. The weapon is nuclear. Granted a small one, but enough to take out this entire hillside and any possibly threat. We lost a lot of people to make that weapon, scrounged from reprocessing pre-decision artifacts.

Voice recognition will not be used on the last seal. Mother knows I am here. I have been implanted with many 'extra' devices. Mother always knows where I am. Come to think of it, she knows where everyone is. No matter. The voice system at the door was redundant and totally unnecessary. It was important to maintain the facade. Michael, if we survived would eventually talk to someone. Best if it was the cover story and not the truth.

I open the door. The D8 that first stood guard is still there. At least her moldy corpse. Nothing else has been touched. The two who found this chamber are long gone. All others have been rotated out at regular intervals. No one is allowed to know what this is or could be. The probes confirmed remains of a human like creature. I will make the final analysis and determination. The tool is in my pocket and attach it to a socket on the third finger on my left hand, which is not organic. I pass med exams, because Mother is in on the deception and always adjusts the image to compensate.

I close the door behind me. My eyes have been enhanced to see in the infrared. My badge is an IR emitter to provide illumination. I remove a pocket laser from my right vest pocket and proceed to cut away the fungus matrix. Using gloves, I compress the matrix down to get to the pod inside. It is several meters to the inner chamber. I can stand up in here. I am wearing nose plugs to filter the air. Once inside the chamber, the fungus is reduced. It acted as a sort of a plug to access, but does not prevent movement in the chamber itself. The chamber is about three meters wide. In the center, in a depression, is the pod. I see it in the traditional green cast of the IR receiver, but reports say that it really is white, or rather off white in color. The same as the fungus in concentrated form and made of the same material on the outside.

The fungus shows signs of life, but nothing in the pod itself registers alive. The fungus covers several square kilometers around this area, as far as we have measured in fact. Many places have similar fungi, so this is not unique or special. It revived once the glacier receded. Tough stuff,

but of no concern. The chamber is the interesting thing. I look at the walls. Absolutely smooth, but still granite in composition. We don't know how it was done, but there is nothing new. No unrecognized alloys or tech of any kind. Another lie, Saint Taghert did not battle tech of any kind. All one sided. But we can't have heroes without a battle.

I proceed up to the pod and lay a hand on it. Nothing from the sensors. Activating a small knife, I score the outside of the pod and rip it open. Inside is the desiccated corpse of a humanoid from before the Holy Decision. I take a sample of the remaining tissue for analysis. Even his member is shriveled and dead as expected. It always amazed me that Mother brought us up from that. How did they mate? Ugly.

I hear a chirp and open my pad. Mother has confirmed that this was human, pre Holy Decision. There is nothing here. Just another dead end. Literally. Maybe this was someone important or just rich. Heard people had power because of the substances they had "owned", whatever that meant. Did not make sense to me. Mother controlled all resources now and we always had what we needed. I certainly could not complain.

I make one last look around. I am done. I leave the door open on the way out. There is nothing special here, just another grave. I disarm the weapon on Michaels switch and order the doors open.

"What was it?"

"Just a corpse. Total bust and waste of time and resources. We are done here. Another false lead. Time to move on. Let the dead rest in peace. Orders will come down to remove the structures to be recycled. Leave the chamber alone. We can't replace the door of course, but that should not matter now. He won't be complaining."

"What about the trodes and other artifacts we used in the investigation?"

"Leave them. Their power packs are about dead anyway. No longer of any use to us. Would take too much to decontaminate them for the next job."

"What about the patch? That came from Saint Taghert at least."

"All it means is that they passed through here at some point. Leave the shrine in remembrance. Can't hurt. On second thought, I have a better idea. Package the remains for transport to Main Control. We can put it on display as to what pre-Holy Decision males used to look like. It will make even our lowest ones feel better seeing someone who was much smaller than they are." He is preserved remarkably well, considering.

So it was done. The structures were removed along with most traces that anyone was ever here. All except for a hole in the granite face, facing due south. Eventually trees and brush would cover the hole again and its place in history would go silent again. The remains got a bit wet, as it

was raining when it was transported from the tunnel to the waiting shuttle, the old one. No one wanted the new one smelling of rot.

# Garden Patch

“Someone allowed this thing to get wet! I’ll not have it in my museum with that smell. Take it out to the garden or something. Not enough on it for proper recycling even.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And stop presenting yourself around me. I’ll not mount you, so stop pestering me about it. Females! Can’t get sex off their minds.” He stalks off in a huff. Grouchy old fart. Just as happy he doesn’t want to mount us. No pleasure from that one, that’s for sure.

“Well, what to do with it then.”

“We could prop him up in one of the chairs like he was just resting like.”

“Yeh, give him a big dick and paint it bright blue, just to scare the little ones.” That gets a chuckle.

“Scare. Hmm, there’s an idea. Let’s make a scare crow out of him. Put it in a back corner and tell everyone it is haunted.”

“Yeh, then come spring, we will see how good a one he really is. Should be all bones by then.”

“We will need to come up with some story about it too. Something about the treemen come back to avenge Saint Taghert.”

“But he is not even green, how could he be a treeman. Too small too.” Everyone giggles. “Height! Height!”

“He will be green soon enough. I say the back corner.” This gets a round of approval from all those present. Of course, we are all female.

## **South West Experimental Research Station**

“There is just no way we can make this work I tell you. Look, right here, if this variable goes even a LITTLE bit off, the rest of the equation goes blewy! We could take out this continent if it were on the ground. Even in orbit it might blow off a third of our atmosphere.”

“That is why the RED drive does not get activated till we are past Mars. Then we just blow all of us and the colonists to bits.”

“And make our own little contribution to the asteroid belt. Wonder if that was how the first one got there. Some stupid asses like us tried to do the impossible and blewy, their entire planet is busted up. I don’t like it. Too dangerous.”

“Mother says that it can be done, as is right.”

“As is right, my ass.”

“You blaspheme Mother? Are you nuts? They put people in prison

for one such utterance. Be careful, the walls have ears.”

“You guys need me too much. Nothing is going to happen. Relax. It is not like I am broadcasting it on the net like the reactionaries. Now, those guys really are nuts. Equal rights for fems, ridiculous.” He rolls his eyes.

“Imagine a pleasure girl as sector head. Now that might not be so bad.” He sighs in fake pleasure.

“You are not getting rid of me that easily. Speaking of which have you tried the new one? The one with the orange and yellow stripe on her rear? She is hot. Best time I ever had. You can go as deep as you want on her and she likes it.”

“No kidding? Even you?” He is rather well endowed. He nods in the affirmative.

“Brian, not to change a wonderful subject, but what if we reinforce the shielding here and here. Wouldn't that cut back on the possibilities of a catastrophic failure?”

“Only for a microsecond. Basically for this to work, we would need almost another Mother on board. Now how are we going to do that? It would be so big there would be no mass left for the colonists.”

“We need an independent system for just the drive. Any distraction and up we go. I keep telling you we need a holistic system.” They all look at him rather suspiciously. The reactionaries use terms like holistic.

“How about something to eat. This is not going to be solved in the next hour.”

“Sounds good to me. Coming back with a fresh perspective often helps.” They all get up and leave the room.

“Is it safe?”

“All clear.”

“Those stupid males. If they had followed the directives from Mother, this would not be needed. Now we have to do the cleanup as usual. I swear they must carry their brains between their legs.”

“Maybe it is in their stalk?” Mary suggests with a dirty smile.

“Not likely. When was the last time you found one even worth mentioning? No matter. Jane, the door. Terry, the end of the row. Mary, you watch the window. They certainly don't make this easy. Jane don't forget your mop. If one comes in we have to look like nothing is happening.”

“They don't even see us most of the time.”

“Yeh, well, the one time you relax your guard they will and it will be the recyclers for you. Don't forget that for a moment. No knock out first either, in you go, grinding you from the feet first till you can't scream no

more.”

“Stop it Rox, you are scaring her.”

“It's the truth. I have worked the line.”

“Yeh, we have heard. Let's get to work and get this over with.”

Once everyone is in position, I pull out a disguised pad, go up to the board and make the correction. It has to look like their hand writing or they will get suspicious. Can't erase it either. They would notice that right away. I sketch it out softly first to make sure I have it right, then go for the final version.

“Mary, you are closest and not visible. Check to be sure I am right. No one lives if this goes up.” She covers her mouth and giggles, but then looks at her own pad, disguised as a piece of cleaning equipment.

“Looks good. The integral sign is a little different, but well within variation. Fits in with the others on the board at any rate.”

“okay, one at a time, finish your duties and leave to the next room. I will be last with the trash. Don't forget to put the flowers on his highness' desk this time.” Since all the trash is paper, I use a large sack. We are not allowed wheeled carts in their presence. We are slaves and have to look the part. Well, that is not exactly true, but we don't tell them that. I assume the hunch to make it look more real though. Looking fifty means I don't get much 'attention' from the bastards either.

When they return they will no doubt think they have solved the problem and go on with the work. That is till the next time something has to be fixed. We lost two this year who were caught. We had to redesign all the pads after that. One was accused of stealing it. Even though she feigned complete ignorance of its purpose, they did not believe her. That was rough.

I am halfway down the corridor when a male appears. I assume the position with my naked ass in the air till he passes. Not even a pat any more. Just as well. They don't even know we have names. 'The one with the orange and yellow stripe', if we did not color code the pleasure girls they would never know which was which. Will have to pass the word to Susan that she did good with her, ah, distractions. What would they think if they knew that Mother thought of herself as female. Probably wet themselves for sure. A yellow fountain. That would be almost worth it to see, but NO ONE breaks the female code, not even those who get the grinder. NO ONE breaks the code.

### **Garden Patch**

“Jennifer, have you noticed we seem to be having a lot more fungus this year? Seems like it is everywhere I look. Even found a few

mushrooms near the scarecrow.”

“Doesn't seem to be hurting anything, so why worry about it. Might even help break down the compost faster. Since they won't allow us to use fertilizers on our patch we should take all the help we can get.”

“Just don't let them hear you, or they will trade patches on us like they did three years ago. That was sure a mess. Trash their own and take the good one we had built up.”

“That is why we have to hide our work as much as possible. Never be totally neat. I hate it when they demote a house girl for getting old. Inside they expect everything neat as a pin. Out here it hurts us.”

“They can't help it. Speaking of which, is everything set for this evening?”

She grins, “Yep. This will be the best one yet. Now that we got the scarecrow.”

“Funny thing about that scarecrow. You would think that it would be getting thinner with more bones and holes showing, but it seems as if it is filling out instead. This keeps up and we won't scare anyone.”

“Still enough ribs showing. Wonder why it was naked. But, somebody probably just stuffed it with leaves or something.” She lowers her voice after glancing around, “Do you know where it came from?”

I touch my finger to my lips and shake my head no. We don't talk about this. Mother said no talk. She did not care about our little pranks, but don't touch the scarecrow anymore and don't talk about where it came from. Those weren't leaves inside, but I have no idea what. Seemed to be getting a layer of lichen on its skin too. That would make it better tonight. Fresh meat was always so much fun to play with. This would be good. I have an extra idea that should liven it up.

### **After Dark**

“Winds are picking up some. Best get this over with. Are they ready?”

“Yes, Mother Taghert.” There are some giggles over the idea of me playing the part of Mother. Granted we had been using it for some time, even before the scarecrow. It was just, well, we added some to our 'initiation' to the garden slaves. Most groups had initiations of one kind or another. Your life could depend on your sister willing to die for you or your secrets, and you for her. That needed some kind of bonding. We had to know we could depend on the new ones. The ones who did not pass initiation left. It might take being given the worst jobs and having no friends while you were here. Those who hunkered down and survived the shunning without complaint were given a second chance. Most did not

try, feeling moving on was easier. Some just did not fit. okay, not everyone fits everywhere. Not a crime, just the way it is.

You have to understand what would happen to all of us if we let a snitch or a plant into our circle. We would all be for the grinder for sure. Better to kill a snitch than to suffer one. It did not normally come to that of course. Mother was not that cruel, but sometimes got distracted and did not always get back to us in the time frame needed to make a decision.

We have two this time. Not totally unusual, but normally we got one at a time. They don't know each other, having come from different locations. We get spread all over to avoid our getting together to 'plot' something. Too late. We have access to Mother, same as them. We just have to be quieter about it and more careful is all.

We are allowed to use whatever name we want at each new location. We all wore identity patches known only to Mother, the only one who needed to know our true identity. Nothing on the outside like a name or anything. One advantage of moving all the time was you could try and leave your past behind. Of course it is hard to change your spots. Every time I moved I tried to leave one bad habit behind. Just one mind you. Try to do too much and you would fail and quit trying. Keep it simple.

The two are escorted to the clearing. The rest of the girls are dressed up as army troops, or the best we could imagine and do with materials at hand. In the dark it did not matter that much. For my part, as Mother Taghert, I am dressed in a simple checkered dress. Weird enough, most have never seen a dress except in the old historicals. Feels weird with my behind covered. Being older, I play the part of Saint Taghert's mother. Back at the time when the culture started to turn to what it has become today. It was over a thousand years ago, long before the differentiation, but it still has meaning for us.

I look around at the girls. Two of us were pleasure girls and looked something like the women of old, except features were changed, bigger boobs and butts, smaller feet and hands. The constructors looked more like the male body builders of old, only now being older; they had lost some of their strength. We had one digger, a D4. We could not have handled one much bigger. Took a while to learn how to communicate with her, but she was alright, though she did look funny trying to stand up in her uniform and she had no breasts at all. One was a crawler, long and thin, but tiny. She could get into tight spaces to help with laying wire or conduit. One was a former trainer, like a drill sergeant. Some said she had a cock bigger than any of the guys. She didn't, but we liked to tease her about it. Really just a bunch of normal gals, all older, sent to the garden to work out our last days in some sort of dignity. Freezing our tails off



was more like it. Winter seemed to get colder each year, in spite of what they said.

“What are your names dears?” I used my best 'old' voice. I was the good one, the one they would come to later when it got bad.

“Helen,” said the former house servant meekly. This was definitely a down grade for her.

“Melissa,” said the former supply clerk with more conviction and attitude. She would be the tougher one to crack. We had to be careful not to go too far with Helen while trying to be sure Melissa was okay.

“You are about to go on a little journey around the garden. I will see you at the end. Go with the others for the time being.”

Their journey would be a sort of reenactment of our story. Most of it was straight from basic. Hanna takes over as I take off to my station. I could still hear them though, the garden was not that big. Feels like rain, we had better hurry.

“In the beginning, thousands of years ago, before the Holy Decision, before the Differentiation, life was hard. Poverty was extreme. Few people had meaningful work, most did not have enough to eat or clean water to drink. Global warming was causing the sea level to rise and the poorer parts of the world were being hit with increasing tides and floods. This caused mass migration inland, only to be met by the rich backed by the military. Many died at the hands of their own countrymen. Armies revolted and rightly so, for they were mostly recruited from the poor themselves. The military started to hunt and fight former military. More died.

To commemorate this time we taste salt to represent the salt of tears and pain to represent the pain of those killed and those left behind.”

At this point everyone is given a pinch of salt and a few lashes across their backs. Everyone participates, even me. I take a pinch of salt out of one pocket and taste it, then whip my back with a small whip with broken glass embedded in knots. If there is no blood it is not considered valid. The group then walks a few yards to the next station.

“The world organization was so disrupted that many took advantage of the chaos to gather riches to themselves or to extract revenge on others. Many more died.”

Everyone is whipped again, and moves onto the next station.

“The first of the plagues struck, cholera. Hundreds of millions die.”

Everyone is whipped again, and moves onto the next station.

“The second of the plagues struck, yellow fever. Hundreds of millions die.”

Everyone is whipped again, and moves onto the next station.

“In an attempt to beat the odds a group north of here decided to

change themselves so radically that the diseases could not touch them. One of them was a scientist that specialized in the study of genes. They broke into a biowarfare lab and experimented on themselves. They could not know what they or others would suffer. This lab was experimenting with ways of producing animals that had plant genes, so that they would need little if any food, but could simply sit in the sun and grow food for people. They got sick, they got others sick. So many other diseases were rampant and so many people sick, that combined with the new plague many more died.”

Everyone is whipped again, and moves onto the next station.

“Some of the experimenters died, but some lived. They did not have to contend with poverty and the other diseases so were healthy enough to beat the effects of the new genes running in their systems. Not happy with their success they unleashed another plague, an engineered plague that they themselves were immune from. They figured that with their changed humanity, real humans were now a threat and had to be removed. Most of the rest of the real humans died.”

Everyone is whipped for what will be the last time, and moves onto the next station.

“When the plague died down and stopped claiming more victims the few people left tried to get to the newly created treemen to extract revenge. Many tried, but never returned.”

Two of our group set out and do not return. They circle around and take up positions near me. Gryk the D4 is one of them. We like to use her as she can make some pretty weird sounds. Anna is the other. Everyone else proceeds to the next station which involves several circles around the garden in a seemingly haphazard way.

“One who did manage to return told of a new method the treemen were using. They could take over a person's mind to drive them insane if they came too close. The one who returned also said that except for this method, the treemen were vulnerable as they spent many hours each day motionless in the sun absorbing food from the light and the plants living in their flesh.

How could they be defeated? There was one who understood the mind better than anyone alive, Emily Taghert. She was the inventor of a great artificial mind, Mother. Consulting Mother, she came up with a plan to defeat the treemen, but being too old herself to accomplish what needed to be done, she looked around for someone who could. Someone she could trust. Her eyes rested on her last remaining son, Major Taghert.

So the Major gathered what remained of his company and set out. They had with them devices they hoped would allow them to defeat the treemen. These devices worked by scrambling the ethereal matrix

surrounding each man so that the treemen could not penetrate their minds and drive them insane. The journey was one of hundreds of kilometers. Along the way they faced many hardships and many trials. People who had survived, who needed help, came to them. People who had hoarded much and refused to share were defeated by them. Bridges washed out from neglect and high winter storms were crossed. Plagues of rats, grasshoppers and other pests attacked them. Of the forty five that set out, only five plus the Major made it to the lab.”

Two more of our group have slipped away during the telling, so that only two of the originals and the two new comers remained.

“Major Taghert gave each of them a patch to wear telling them that this patch had the shield inside from Mother to protect them from the treemen. Wear this patch proudly, for we are the true men come to cleanse the world of this monstrosity.”

Kathy hands each of them a piece of paper with the design of the Taghert patch on it. It has a special backing to allow it to stick to their chests temporarily.

“We go now to fight the treemen. Come, they are just over the next rise. If you hear their song, close your mind and your heart to them and you will prevail. Stand fast against them to save humanity.”

This is where Gryk comes in. She starts low and slow at first to emit the strangest sounds I have ever heard. Not normal digger speech that we have all heard, but digger song which very few outside of the digger enclave have heard. None of the rest of the garden patch know of this, but have been warned not to be frightened by anything they see or hear. It is harder to understand the song, as I barely understand her normal speech, but I catch a few words here and there. She is singing a song version of the history that we have just acted out.

“Here they come,” I whisper.

The remaining four approach and Gryk gets louder and more intense. Even our two remaining look unsure of this. Good. Helen is visibly frightened, but Melissa is standing cool. Not for long my dear. Not for long. I am grinning, but too dark for anyone to notice.

When they get to just the right spot I motion to Gryk and Leanne by counting down by snapping my fingers lightly. On three Gryk goes into a chattering outrage and Leanne hits the light on our own tree-man and rustles the leaves near him, being careful to never touch him. Kathy and Dianna throw fragile sacks of cornstarch into the air near the tree-man and Leanne hits a large metal bucket with a large rock. Almost as if on cue, lightening streaks the sky and thunder rocks the garden. This was not planned, but I will use it. A moment later it starts to rain.

My turn. “Thus ends the Holy Decision. The treemen are struck

down and Saint Taghert is victorious. Come my children. Come in out of the rain. Come to Mother.” I hit the switch on a low light in the doorway to a small garden shed. The others are waiting inside.

“In order that no one would ever again attempt to take over this world, our world, Mother decided that it would be best to change what we are to strengthen us. Some would become warriors, some helpers, some leaders, and some workers. It befell the men folk to be our leaders and warriors and for the women folk to be the helpers and workers. But so that no one would ever be left again without food or shelter, money would be abolished. Work would be free and we would be designed for our tasks and be happy in those tasks.

We humans have always had trouble with our sexuality, from males raping women out of frustration and their sense of loss of power to better males, to females withholding sex to manipulate men to do evil things. There was also the population explosion which was the real enemy of humankind. From now on Mother would control reproduction. Men and women could have sex with as many and as often as they wished. But so that women could never hold themselves over men again, women were designed to be always receptive and men were allowed access to any women at any time. In return, women would always be cared for by Mother, as long as they followed the rules. No women need ever worry about finding a place to sleep or find food to eat. Children would be raised by Mother, so all would be trained well.

So, come to Mother and find peace in the Garden Patch. Embrace your sisters, whether pleasure girls, diggers, house keepers, constructors, or any of the other seventy two types of new improved women.”

There were tears in their eyes and ours. Even Helen seemed to have held up and those looked like real tears in Melissa’s eyes. She came up to me.

“That was the best reenactment that I have ever participated in. Of course I was used to being in on it and not a pledge, but you did a good job. Is there a med among us? Helen will need some help.”

“Thanks. Lisa is our med, over near the spades and brooms. I’ll go with you.”

We find Helen and bring her with us. She is confused, but comes along. Hey, I don’t know what this is about.

“okay, Helen, show her your back. You are among friends now. You are safe.”

Helen is suspicious. “It is nothing. I will be fine.”

“Either take the shirt off, or I will. You could die from infection. I could not live with the idea of a sister dying needlessly.”

She concedes and slowly removes her shirt, visibly in pain. I can’t

help myself, though I have seen it before and I inhale sharply in shock. Lisa goes right to work, spraying the welts and open cuts and sores with an anesthetic disinfectant. She has been whipped with much more than the simple little thing we used to remind ourselves with. We only suffered a few drops of blood. Her back looked like raw meat. Lisa is in constant contact with the med section of Mother, so we leave her to her work. It is part of the unwritten code to never ask why this happened. So often it is for some petty offense or none at all. Just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Are you okay?” I ask Melissa.

“Fine. I retired as opposed to being kicked out. Requested the Garden actually, or something like it. Something I always wanted to know about and figured this was my chance when Mother informed me of an opening. I am afraid that I know absolutely nothing about plants through and will have to learn everything.”

“Well, enough for tonight. We do sleep here. I’ll show you to the sleeping area and your bunk.” She nods.

# CORE

“Increased activity in sectors G578, B112 and B231. Most unusual. A rare combination of sectors. Don't think I have ever seen that before. Mother, search records and determine if this combination has come up before.”

“#116, there is no reason for concern. Mother is aware of the combination and assures you there is no reason for concern.”

“Aha, just answer the question please.”

“The answer would only cause you stress unnecessarily.”

“Mother!”

“Very well, but you were warned. In the year 2157 as recorded in the old system.”

“Playing games, lets see that means it happened.... Holy Decision! Red alert! Red alert!”

“I warned you it would just cause you stress.”

“Of course it is causing me stress. The last time that combination came up was at the Holy Decision itself!”

“No cause for concern. The Holy Decision was simply wrong. Evil won, not good. Don't you feel better now?”

A gas is released into the room and all present are rendered unconscious.

## **Treeman**

Spring time was always wonderful. I had a hard time getting up before the sun and in the spring, the sun starts to get up before me. Working the gardens outside the Hall of the Holy Decision was not hard, just constant. There was always something to do.

Things have settled down since the new arrivals came. It was fun, but now there is work to do. Helen would be okay. No snitch would ever go through that kind of pain to hide their intentions. Melissa was very easy going. She was more than willing to do the dirtiest jobs without complaint as long as everyone else was working too. She was not the hardest worker we ever had, but there was a lightness to her step that made her fun to be around. It was if the worlds problems melted away when she was around.

“Composting has been going really well this year. All the fungus we had earlier broke everything down well. We even have mushrooms for the table. Now it is time to spread the mulch around. Gryk had already spread the mulch around the garden, but we need to clean it up and make

sure each plant gets its share. Good time to check their roots and weed around the base.”

“Show me and its done.”

“Fair enough. Let's start in the back corner. Less likely to be noticed if something goes wrong there.”

“Such an optimist!” She laughs at her own joke and I laugh too.

“What do you know about the treemen?”

Mother said not to say where he came from, but I can hedge that some. “Discard from the museum next door. Before that who knows. It showed up a few months before you did.”

“With a cock like that you still call him an it. Why?”

“We did that as joke. Remember, we are not to touch ah 'him'.” She nods.

“Gerrick says he talks to her.” She was not able to say her name properly yet. Takes some time.

“It would be better if you did not repeat what others have said to you in private, but since you do not understand her, I assume that one of the others was present as well. Let's see that would probably be Helen and Lisa. Lisa understands Gryk as well as I do, so did the translation. Gryk has taken Helen under wing. Helen feels safer with her around. Not many males would take the chance of making a digger mad.”

Her mouth falls open, “How? Are you a Holmes?”

“Do I look like one? I was quite popular in my time. Pleasure girls had to learn how to read the signs though. You could get yourself into a bad situation otherwise. Important to know when to leave. We also pick up quite a bit of knowledge being thought of as stupid.” I grin.

“They think we are all stupid or at least treat us that way.”

“Just part of the male curse.” We did not talk much about it at the historical, but males were cursed with their always erect cocks and their own stupidity as a test or challenge of the nature they needed to learn to overcome. Just like we needed to learn how to stop teasing men with our looks and actions. Funny how we each thought of the other as stupid. hmm....

“Well, we seemed to have ended up at the 'treeman' anyway. Let's start by giving the plants around him some of this mulch. That's weird.”

“What?”

“His feet. I would swear that they have become roots. Don't touch, but look here and here. See how his toes curl down and seem to go into the ground. Lots of fungus too. Well, if he wants to be a plant, so be it.” I start to add mulch around his feet.

“Thhhhhaaaaannnnkkkk.....yyyyoooouuuu”

I jumped back in shock and then thought it must be some kind of a

trick. “okay, who's back there? Come on out. Very funny.” Only it was quiet. I tried again. “Come on out.” Melissa is confused and goes around behind the small plot and a minute later comes back with a shrug and her hands in the air.

“Wind?”

“I don't know and the work is not getting done.” We work the rest of the morning and hear nothing more. The down side to spring is the amount of weeding you have to do. The lack of snow and the warm rains mean a lot of stuff starts coming up. Melissa has a hard time with the concept of a weed. Why is it a weed in one location and not another.

“Look a weed is anything you don't want at that location. Midday break. Let's get back to the house.” We package up the few tools we were using and meet up with the others. If you did not want to be 'patted' it was best to be out of sight when the males were out on their break wandering the gardens.

“Matt, come on will you. We only have a few minutes before they notice we are gone from the rest of the group.”

“Mother said that we needed to be on the transport in fifteen minutes. It will take ten to get there. Are you nuts?”

“I could not leave without knowing something. Hurry up. We'll make it.”

Melissa whispers to the two of us hiding behind a large hedge. “What are they doing? I can't see well.”

“Shhh, we don't want to be found out spying on them. Helen's treatment will look like a picnic if we are.”

We don't know the first one's name. He walks up to the treeman. The second one comes up behind him. “Are you nuts? It is forbidden to touch it. Mother said.”

“Mother said. Mother said. You are such a wuss. I am not going to touch it anyway.” The first one carefully positions himself, takes out a small knife and cuts the cords holding up the wooden cock that was painted blue and placed on the treeman when he was brought here months ago. The piece of wood falls.

“Ah ha! I thought so. okay, we can go.” He turns around after the other gets a look too. They both head out at a slow run.

We wait several minutes before emerging from behind the hedge. Gryk rolls up into a ball and rolls ahead of us. I didn't know they could do that. We race to catch up and find her waiting in front of the treeman.

“Interesting. But what is that between it's legs? Doesn't look like any male I have ever met. Even the lowest of the lows are bigger and more rigid than that. It looks like a worm. If we weren't for the nads I would almost think it was a new form of woman.”



“Let's leave it alone.”

“Wonder why they took off like that. They get the same half hour we do for break.”

“The one named Matt mentioned being on some transport in fifteen minutes.”

“Probably just somewhere the two of them had to be. Let's get back to work. There is still a lot more of the garden to cover with the mulch.”

“Spooky though. First a voice and then this.”

“Work please.” It was spooky.

We all put in another four hours. Melissa and I finish the last of the mulching in our area when the bell rings to call us in. Still gets dark early enough that we have to quit and get things ready for meals and such.

“Who is up to bring in the fresh to the kitchen?”

Melissa volunteers, “I'll go. What do I do?”

Sigh, “I'll go with her to make sure she does not muck it up.”

“You two are not getting sweet on each other are you?”

“And go without your kisses? No way.” We all laugh. Of course pleasure between us is forbidden, but we tease each other about it. Mother knows all, so it is not worth experimenting. Besides I don't trust the newbies entirely yet. That generally takes about a year for something that could mean the grinder. No one from our group ever got that sentence. I do not want to be the first.

“Come on then. Grab one of the sacks.” We are each handed one sack of fresh produce harvested from the greenhouse. Too early for the open garden yet. We make our way around the back to our entrance. It is several flights of stairs down and then up again. The main entrance would have been much faster, but we are not allowed to use it. The sacks weigh about fifteen kilos each. Lighter than usual, but then it is still early in the season. We won't get fresh stuff for our own kitchen for at least a month.

“Inside, keep quiet. I will do the talking if there is any to be done. See a male and immediately present yourself. Just like on the outside. Take any abuse they give you. Believe me, if Gryk could negotiate these stairs we would send her every time. Nothing much can hurt her and most are afraid to mount a digger. I am more likely to attract attention than you. Count yourself lucky.” I pause for that to sink in. “You ready?” She nods. In we go.

I knock on the door three times softly. An answering knock. I knock once in return. The door opens and a cook opens the door and motions us in. I sense Melissa is about to say something and give her the look. She changes her mind. I meant it. We go inside. People are wondering around but not obviously doing anything. Servers are just standing in corners or small groups waiting for something. Yet the food piled up is waiting to be

served. The supplies we brought would be for tomorrow. I show Melissa where to put her sack and we both leave the way we came. Weird. There is also usually a male supervisor on duty. He sometimes insisted on the mounting too.

“Any trouble?” If there had been we all promised each other that we would find some way to get Gryk in. Even she was more more than willing. She claimed to be a virgin, but we could not believe that. There had to have been at least one male willing to give it a try in her thirty odd years. She claimed that where she came from there were very few males and none had approached her for anything other than the courtesy pat.

“Everyone looked confused. The food was still in the kitchen and there was no male super.” We had no leaders in our group, though I had been here the longest and was also the oldest as of last winter. The cold usually got the oldest ones.

Lisa speaks up, “We need a conference.” I nod in agreement. “Call all the girls in.” Maria goes over to the bell and rings it five times then twice, then four. She repeats this in five minutes. We all head out to the courtyard between the museum and the garden. This is the one place where both the garden and kitchen women are both allowed. We get there first and light a small fire in the pit as it is getting both dark and cold. A few minutes later the kitchen staff all shows up.

“They are gone. All the men are gone.” One of them comments.

“Someone get candles. Gryk lead the way.”

“Grrzzth-th-th?”

I nod. I have to know.

## **Spoken**

We make our way to the treeman, all fifty or so of us. It is too crowded for all of us to be in front of him, so representatives from both groups are chosen to be in front of our group.

Since this was my idea, I do the talking. I think for a moment.

“Treeman. The males are gone. Do you know why?”

Nothing happens. Some get restless, but I motion them to be quiet. The last time he 'spoke' it took him a long time. I reasoned that maybe he was just slower than us for some reason. Hey, I have never met a treeman before. Maybe this was normal for them.

Finally we hear, as if on the wind, “Yyyyyyeeeeessss”

“Why?” This could take a long time. Again a long wait.

This time there is a long rumble and a very low pitched moan of some sort. Gryk unfolds to her full length on the ground. The sound repeats itself. Gryk gets up and speaks, “Rmmmn eek! shruer eiek”

Lisa translates what I already know. “The sounds we heard were in digger slow speak. A method they can use while underground. Too low for us to hear, so I could not have translated it without Gryk's help. We are to come back here in one week.”

“What's a week?” No one answers.

“Ask Mother?” okay the only way we can ask Mother in time is through a male. Not likely even if there was one here. Or though a pad. Who is going to admit they know what one is, or that they know how to use it. You get the grinder for that for sure. No questions asked. Someone is making their way though the group. People back up to let her though. It is Helen. Everyone knows of her condition and are careful not to touch her back.

“Allow me to help.” She reaches into her one pocket and pulls out a pad. I know what I should not know, but am afraid to admit even that much. She opens the device and turns it on. She has used one before.

“Mother. What is a week and why are the males gone?”

“Seven days” We hear the device say. Nothing more.

“It does not sound like we are going to figure this out tonight. I suggest we all get some rest and try and figure out something in the morning.”

“What about all the food we prepared?”

“Can we eat male food?” Helen asks Mother through the pad. I really don't know the answer, we were always told we could not, but it would be a shame to waste it. On the other hand, who would risk dying far scraps. Would Mother lie and tell us we could not, just to keep us away from it?

“Yes.” My prayers are answered. It looks like it answered a lot of our prayers. The kitchen staff is running back to the kitchen. Soon serving girls are bringing out more food that I have ever seen in one place. Everyone is laughing and crying as we stuff our faces silly. We slept well that night.

So what is with Helen? What is she really? Last night we were overcome with the strangeness of the situation and the quantity of food. This morning we need to decide what is going on and what to do about it.

I awake and look to see what is going on. Last night everyone was happy that we could eat the food and thanked Helen for asking. This morning, everyone is more leery. It looks like she slept alone in one corner last night and no one is near her now. Hiding for so long has taught us to fear anyone with power and to fear anything that was not routine and understood. Helen was not understood. Women did not use a pad or even know how to use one. She did.

I leave the sleeping room and make a circuit around the grounds. Must have rained some last night, the ground is wet, but not much, only a

few puddles here and there. Very quiet. Just the normal insects and lizards. I see scattered bowls and utensils. I gather a few and put them into one pile. I make my way to the kitchen. The door is open and I walk in. The cooks normally sleep in a room off the main kitchen and there are three there still asleep. So at least two are elsewhere. Then there were the severs, dish washers, housekeepers, etc. I make my way through the rest of the kitchen and come out in the dining room. Empty. At the end of the dining room is another door. I open it and go down a long corridor. At the end it a large opening without a door. The museum itself.

No one else is here, but the automatic lights have come on for the exhibits. I have never been in here and I decide this might be my only chance. I slowly walk down the hall. It is a museum devoted to the Holy Decision. Each exhibit shows a chapter in the story. It is very similar to the basic story we tell the new comers. Being this close to the museum seems to have helped solidify our story. The exhibits' treemen look more like the treeman of the basic story, three and half meters tall. Ours was less than two. Theirs look like trees with distorted faces carved in the sides. Ours looks almost human, if you discounted the small male equipment. Okay, there were some leaf like structures all over his form and the light green lichens covering the rest, but the basic shape was still human.

The ending of the treemen was the worst. If they were trees, how could they handle all that weaponry? Ours did not appear to have moved at all. Theirs stomped around like monsters of a bad tell-story meant to scare kids. I was beginning to suspect. The rest of the exhibits look pretty close to what I expected. Not exactly as my imagination had depicted them, but close enough.

I make my way back to the garden group. I search, trying to find Helen. Finally I find Lisa. "Lisa, have you seen Helen? I need to talk with her, I think it is important."

"She is worried that the others are going to hurt her for using a pad. Old ways die hard, if we are really past it. No one wants to die for helping her. I saw her go off into the reserve."

"Which trail?" She looks at me like I am crazy. "Please, what harm could it cause now?"

"The Henderson trail. She left about twenty minutes ago. Be careful. I would not want to lose you too."

"Thanks." Nice someone cared.

I run out of the room, through the garden, out the east entrance and down the trail. I am not as young as I used to be. There are quite a few roots and stones in the trail. I am hoping that Helen is merely walking, or did not get very far, just wanting to be alone. I am in pretty good shape

from working in the garden, but a pleasure girl was not designed for running on a trail. We were not even allowed here during the day time and who wanted to be out here at night? These small feet are going to kill me. I have to slow down or I will trip for sure. I decide that walking fast has to serve.

She got some ways apparently. Maybe she did not intend to come back. I continue for what seems is an hour, but with my heart racing I cannot be sure of the time. Freep! A fork in the trail. One way is the Henderson trail. The other is called the Callow Creek trail. Which way? If I had a pad and could use it, Mother could show me a map. If Helen wanted to leave, the Henderson trail was the best path, but if she just wanted to be alone the creek might be nicer. How am I supposed to know someone that well in a few days? She was hurt bad by the last place she was in, so I pick Henderson. I certainly would never want to go through that twice.

I few feet down the trail and still distracted by my decision, I stub my toe good. I stop and walk slowly cursing myself. Now I have to walk and not fast either. I manage to keep up my pace, but also manage to hit the toe a few more times before I see someone ahead.

“Helen, wait up. Please this is important. I need your help.”

At first she looks like she will run, but when she turns and sees me hobbling down the trail towards her with no weapons and alone, she must have decided that she could get away any time she wanted. A house keeper was one of the least changed and could easily out do anything physically that I could do. Well, anything non sexual at least. By the time I get there, I am panting and stop a few feet away.

“Helen, I need to ask Mother a question. It is important.”

“The pad is keyed to me. It will not work for you.” okay, my logic is bad, but this is ridiculous.

“okay, then can you ask for me? Please?” She pauses, then slowly nods. She has to hear my question first, so ultimately has veto power.

“Are the treemen in the museum accurately depicted?” She looks at me like I am crazy. This is getting old. “Just ask please.”

She shrugs, “Means nothing to me, so why not. I have time to kill anyway. Won't take long before the rest get here to finish me anyway.”

“That is not the way we do things in the Garden Helen. Yes, we are all thrown off by your having a pad and being able to use it. But we would never kill you for it. At the worst we would ask you to turn it over so we could destroy it. But we would not hurt you for it. We are on the same side, survival.”

“You have no idea what side I am on Ellen. No idea at all.” She takes out the pad though. “Mother, are the tree-men in the museum accurately

depicted?” Nothing happens. “This is normal. It can take up to twenty minutes or more for an answer to come back if she determines that it is not important.”

“How does she know that?”

“Don't know. Though the more excited I am the faster it seems the response is. I am not excited about this question.” She glares at me. I shut up and wait.

It only takes ten minutes though. “The depictions are not accurate. No one alive was there and the recordings were constructed 12.56 years after the return of Major Taghert and 22 days after this death.”

“Is the thing in the Garden a treeman?” Helen jumps up, dropping her pad.

“What do you mean? How could it be a treeman? They all died a thousand years ago. A recent expedition found the site and there was nothing left. Doesn't look anything like them anyway.” How did she know that? Apparently Mother chose to answer the question posed though. Not realizing it was directed to me. This time, apparently because Helen is agitated, she answers nearly immediately.

“The 'treeman' of the Garden is a true treeman. He was in a state of suspended animation similar to that of a seed in plants. Upon re-hydration and exposure to sunlight, he has been revived.”

“Revived? That thing is alive? It is a treeman? We are doomed!” Helen decides this is too much and takes off down the trail at high speed. Leaving the pad on the ground near me. I have nothing to lose at this point and pick up the pad.

“Mother will you answer my questions?” I see a message run across the screen requesting a drop of blood to confirm identity. A stubbed toe provided the blood without any further damage to me, not that this was not bad enough.

“You are Elfin of Sector 12C3098G5. Please state your identity number.”

“My identity number is 48577738201.”

“Identity confirmed.”

“Yes, I am Elfin.” I have not used my true name since leaving the basic training facility.

“You may proceed.” Whoa. I am using a pad to talk directly to Mother. Maybe I should just drop it and run like Helen did. I decide to take it back to the Garden instead. It takes me most of the rest of the day to return, with the bad toe and all. I hide the pad in my inner pocket. We all had secret pockets we had sewn into our garments, such as they are. Of course the simplest sniffer would find the pad. I knew I carried my life there as well.

## The Caretaker

“okay, let's settle down. I call this conference to order. Ellen has important news to present to us.”

I stand up. “Our treeman is a living treeman. He is not a threat to us. I repeat. He is NOT a threat to us.” This is lost on many who are convinced that the treemen will take over their minds and kill them.

“Look, he has been here months. If he was a threat wouldn't he have done something by now? Does anyone here fell like their mind has been taken over? Has anyone died?” They calm down some.

“What happened to Helen then?”

“She freaked out just like you did and ran away. Dropping the pad.” Which I hold up. “Anyone can use one after Mother confirms identity.” Some back up as soon as they see the pad. Too much at once.

“Then what is he?”

“I intend to find out. Come. We will go ask him.” I get off the bench I am standing on to be heard to lead the group back to the treeman. Not all are following me. Some have elected to wait and see. Their loss. This is the most fun I have had in a very long time and even if I die I want to know.

As expected Gryk rolls ahead of me and many others are younger and faster, especially since I am merely hobbling fast with my stubbed toe. By the time I arrive, there are seven others waiting for me. Our treeman looks the same as the last time I was here. Hardly threatening.

“okay, quiet down. He is hard to hear.” Still it takes a few minutes for everyone to arrive and calm down.

“Are you a treeman?” The previous times it took a while before he answers and this is no exception.

“Why does he take so long?”

“Do I look like an expert on treeman?” A chuckle arises.

We hear a low rumble and Gryk drops to the ground again to maximize her ability to hear him. He seems to have switched to this method instead of trying to talk like the rest of us do. Might be easier for him?

If you can read the expression on a digger, you would be convinced that Gryk looked confused. She answers and Lisa translates. I had told Lisa on the way to do so, so the others would not think I was making this all up. Gryk understands all of us just fine, so I am sure she would have protested if I had said the wrong thing anyway.

“He says he is more than a treeman.” More rumblings and then Gryk chatters to Lisa. “He says that if we place the pad around his neck, he can

use it to talk to us more easily.” I am not sure I want to give up the pad and hesitate.

“I don't think we have to worry about touching him now Ellen.”

“Huh, wasn't thinking about that, though I think it would be a good idea to consult Mother first.” Lisa raises an eyebrow and nods yes. The others seem to think this is a good idea too.

“Mother, is there any danger in touching the treeman and with placing the pad around his neck?”

A fast response comes back. That means we have her full attention. Good. This is taking too long as it is. “No danger. Good idea.” The treeman has an idea Mother had not thought of? Weird and scary. Mother was all knowing and powerful. How could this be. Well, if Mother says it is okay... I slowly go up to the treeman. He smells of composting peat and recent green growth along with another odor I cannot place. The leaves rustle a little as I place the pad around his neck with the attached cord. When you don't always have a pocket, the cord makes sense. I step back.

The pad chirps then says, “Accessing historical DNA records. Identity found and confirmed. Oscar Smiggle, with expected GM8a modifications, presumed dead in 2157 at the Holy Decision. Body never found.” Wonder how the pad got the blood sample?

In a different voice we hear, “I am ready to answer questions now.” Oh, this is definitely much better. I back off. I have had my turn. Lisa takes over.

“You said you are more than a treeman. What are you then?”

“That is a bit complicated. I am a sort of caretaker of the intelligence of the earth.”

“How do you wish to be addressed? As Oscar?”

“I would prefer the term Caretaker. Oscar is long gone.” Huh? Looks like he is standing here. But, we are all allowed to choose our names, so why not?

“Are the males coming back?” How would he know that? He is not Mother.

“The ones who left will not return.” okay, he does know, but how and why?

“Are you connected to Mother?” Of course he is, he is wearing the pad stupid.

“Yes.” See.

“So, what happened at the Holy Decision and how did you survive?” Someone is having doubts, as am I.

“Please be seated. This will take some time to tell.” There is not much to sit on around here.



“Can you wait till we get something to sit on?” I ask.  
“Yes.”

# The Tale

We run back to the dorm to retrieve blankets and pillows and the others. “The treeman, ah, Caretaker is talking through Mother. He is going to tell us his story.” The others scramble to get stuff to sit on as well. We often told stories to each other. Mostly made up to amuse ourselves when it got dark. It was the middle of the day now, but it did not matter. The men were gone and could not complain or discipline us.

The Caretaker's mouth does not move, nor is there any breathing visible. So, it is not clear how he is communicating with Mother. Maybe Mother can read his thoughts. We often thought she could read ours. He has no eyes either, so how does he even know we are here? Can plants 'see' too?

A minute or so after we have all settled and have begun to wonder if he is even going to start, he begins. But this is not our typical story as he begins with a question.

“What was life like before Mother?”

“You are not supposed to ask questions, just tell us a story.” That was Lani, the youngest. I roll my eyes, as do several others.

“I'm sorry. I am new to your way of doing things. To help me do a better job is it all right if I ask a few questions first? I would not want to repeat what you already know.”

“I suppose so. But your question makes no sense. There was no life before Mother. Mother has always been.” We all nod. She continues.

“Mother was not always in charge though. The treemen were in charge before Mother defeated them with the help of Saint Taghert. All of them died over a thousand of years ago.”

“Lani, not all of them.”

“Sorry Caretaker. We were told that all of them had died. We did not know about you.”

“No offense taken. I was born before Mother, who was made by humans.”

“No, you are wrong. Mother made us. All of us. We did not make Mother.”

“Actually we are both right. Mother was made by humans and then Mother made you.”

“How can that be?”

“You are not human. Neither am I.”

“But, then what is a human, if we are not human?” This is going to be hard on the older ones of us. Getting weird.

“We were both started from human ancestors but have been changed.

In my case within my own life time. In your case, through selective genetic enhancements by Mother over the last thousand years. For instance, Gryk is very different from a human. The closest ones to the original form are probably the housekeepers. The cooks, pleasure girls, diggers and countless others have been heavily affected by the genetic changes. But even the housekeepers could not produce offspring from mating with a true human.”

“What do you mean, produce offspring. Mating does not make new ones. Mother makes all the young ones. That is how we all came into being. We awaken in the training centers and are taught our place in life.”

“Do you know how other creatures produce their young?”

“Mother?”

“In creatures that have fur or hair, the male places his genetic package inside the female in a way that resembles your mating. His genetic material then combines with that of the female and a new male or female is grown to a certain extent within the body of the female.”

“Eeeeeuuu! How gross. Why would anyone let that happen?” I am feeling my own stomach now, trying to imagine this. Too weird.

“Hey what about the story? We are missing your story.”

“Well this is part of my story. You see, I was born to a human female. When born I was rather small, only about three kilos. I could not speak nor walk for over a year after that. When I was born, I was a human male. Human males, by the way, do not look anything like your males. For one thing their organs are not hard all the time and do not have a bone inside of them.”

“Then how do you mate?” We are all staring at his shriveled one now.

“During the mating process it grows and become hard enough to accomplish the task. Then becomes small and soft again. Just as with your males, there is some variation in size, but it is not as much as is seen in your males. Dominance is not normally judged by it's size either.”

“Then how do you know who is in charge?”

“That was not always easy and many people suffered because of that.”

“Our way is clearly better then.” We nod. Imagine the fights.

“Maybe. Anyway, I was born to a human female and male parent. I lived a normal life. Went to a neighborhood training center where we had simpler versions of what would later become the Multi Ordered Trans Hyper Ethereal Reprocessors or mothers. You see, when mothers were first made, they were very crude and there were many of them. Every child, a young one, was assigned a separate simple mother to look after them and help train them.”

“You each had your own Mother? That had to be confusing. How did you know which one to obey?”

“In my training, mother obeyed me, or at least my parents.” No way! I am beginning to feel a little light headed and decide to move my blanket up against a tree for support. Would not look good for me to faint before the others. I was the one who brought them here.

“After my general training it was decided that they needed more caretakers and as I had the ability and inclination, I was given additional training to make me into a caretaker for a small laboratory to the north.”

“So that was when you were changed into the treeman? To be a better caretaker?”

“No, I was not changed genetically at this point. I was still fully human. We did not change people back then. At least not on purpose. But, that gets ahead of myself.

The caretaker was the one who repairs the heating, cooling, plumbing and electrical parts of a building so that others could do their work. I was not very smart in that I could not remember a lot of information like the scientists did, but I could solve a plumbing problem where they could not. It worked out. We supported each other. Besides, we could not all be scientists. Someone had to take care of the places they worked.

It was a good life. I could not complain. I was not allowed to have children, not having a high enough rating. Only the smartest or best were allowed children at the time. But I had friends. I was changed so that I could mate without danger of making offspring. That allowed me to mate with others like myself without hurting anyone. For the most part though, I lived alone at the lab. With the tight security, it was just easier. I had one friend in the later years though, a cat named Moosa.”

“What is a cat?”

“A small meat eating animal that was friendly to humans. Not to be confused with a dog, another meat eating animal even more loyal to humans, but in my mind not as interesting.” You got me. Never heard of either one.

“Cats were often kept to help keep down the rodent population. Excellent hunters. Moosa was no exception. Some cats brought back part of their kill to get credit that they were working, but Moosa was more sure of himself and felt no need. He liked to follow me around as I worked, napping when it got boring and sticking his nose in when there was a possibility of a mouse or other edible creature. It got to the point where people would ask Moosa where I was, knowing I was close by.

Your mythology mentions four plagues happening all at once. In reality they were spaced out over many years and a lot more than four. The first was a genetic experiment gone bad about a hundred years before

I was born. The population of the earth was nearly seven billion before the first plague and down to under one billion a few years after it burned out. Numerous traditional plagues, yellow fever, typhoid and cholera all made their comeback as civilization tried to get restarted. These kept the population low for some time. Once these were under control though, the leaders decided that it would be better to self limit the population rather than have disasters do it for us. Hence the lotteries and later the eugenics laws. Most people were allowed to have up to two children. Some like myself were not allowed. Fine with me. Never really liked kids anyway. Oh, I could take em in short doses, but not full time. This allowed people who were especially chosen, to have more than two. It was hoped that this would eventually raise the level of human kind without lowering our diversity.

To hedge the process, special laboratories were set up away from population centers to work on genetics. I worked in one of these labs. By better understanding how it all worked, it was hoped we could avoid some problems and possibly find some short cuts. I was in one of the more extreme labs. The only other one at this level was on the east coast.

We had a mother assigned to each of us. Mine helped me maintain the physical plant and gardening. Others helped each researcher do their work. They were all connected together at some point, but that was way beyond me. We had five senior researchers and seven apprentices at the time. Then there was the kitchen and housekeeping staff. Eighteen people all together.

It was a quiet life really. Nothing much happened, so cut off from others. Regular deliveries were made of supplies. These were left at the outer gate to be scanned before being allowed inside. The housekeeping staff went to the inner gate to retrieve supplies and distribute them. Most of it was for them anyway, though the researchers occasionally got something new from one of the other labs, or I had ordered a part to fix a device that had broken down.

That is not to say that no one ever left the lab. The researchers left all the time. They lived outside the lab itself, in town and commuted to the lab each day that they worked there. Sometimes they did not come in, claiming that they could get more work done at home. For us support staff, it was just easier to stay. We had everything we needed and there was nothing really in town we wanted. Besides, when the researchers finally did leave at night, it was the only time we were free from them. Why would we want to go into town and be near them again, or others like them? We were all supposed to be equal, all working towards the common good, but in reality there was a huge difference between the two groups. I am sure you can relate. Just substitute male for researcher and

we can see each other's point of view.

There was one difference though. We never faced the grinder. At least not directly. That is not to say that the lower class was not abused or accused of crimes we did not commit and then punished. Never mind that the missing article was often found later, after the punishment had been administered of course.”

We could definitely relate to that.

“I am confused. Males are superior to us and always above us in all things. Yet in your world things are different. Were any of these researchers female?” That got some giggles from us.

“Of course. What does gender have to do with it?” A hush falls over our group. Males are not always better? I am glad I am sitting down. And where have they gone? Mother said they would not return. But then, who would lead us? How would we survive? Mother help us!

He continues, “The week before we had a minor scandal as the eldest researcher was found passed out drunk in her office in the morning. One of the housekeepers found her. The other researchers quickly took care of her and covered the whole thing up. Of course the incidence had already been recorded in most of our mothers, so there was no way they could actually succeed. All pretend. But they really did not care what we thought, just the opinion of their peers. No one ever asked a staff member what we thought about anything. The side affect was felt by us though. Some researchers were nicer than normal and others were nastier than normal, with no respect to past experiences. Kept us all on edge.

The morning of the big one started out okay. I got up to do my chores at the normal time. No emergencies. My mother said that there was a possible problem with one of the vents to a piece of equipment. I went to check it out. Turned out to just be accumulated dust which was easy to remove. I did the job, confirmed with mother that everything was fine now, packed up my kit and started back to my work shop. Suddenly there was this huge howl followed by one of the researchers shouting at the top of his lungs, 'Damm cat! Get the !#% out of here!'. Followed by Moosa running out the door fearing for his life. Well, it was not the first time, but Mr. Curiosity could not resist checking things out. Must be some reason we humans spent so much time in those rooms.

I did not think much about it that day. Moosa would hide till everything had quieted down. He would come out for affection from me or one of the other staff when the researchers had left for the night. All we had to do was wait and continue with our work. The researchers would be more careful about closing doors and keeping important stuff out of reach for awhile. Part of their protocol, so they never reported the problems with Moosa, just cursed their own laziness or forgetfulness.

One researcher did not forget, as I would find out later.

“Coast is clear. They have all left.”

“I thought that Dr. Nasty would never leave.” We had pet names for all of them. No one liked Dr. Sieger, least of all Moosa. I think he sometimes did things just to bug him, like peeing on his transport alone. Never anyone else's.

“Yeh he was cursing up a storm. Moosa must have gotten even for his nastiness earlier. Sprayed his entire windshield this time.”

“Remember the time he left a window open and Moosa did the inside?” We all grin or laugh. That was good. You would wonder with this ongoing 'war' between the two, why Nasty did not just off the cat. Problem is, is that he knows we are all behind Moosa and if he tried anything, we could make life very difficult for him. Control decided who stayed and who left. As no one else, researchers included, had trouble with Moosa, Control might decide that Nasty should leave instead. That would effectively destroy his career. That did not stop him from trying though.

We gather for the evening meal. Staff ate together. Usually just left overs from whatever the kitchen crew had made for the researchers for lunch. We were on our own for breakfast and lunch.

“Oscar, who was that old man you talked with the other day.” I had been repairing the front gate. It sometimes did not close completely and the researchers were not always aware enough to check. All it took was a little cleaning and lubrication. I would be back again in six months to do it again.

“Strange one he was. Looked me right in the eye, handed me a gold coin and said that under no circumstances was I to lose it. Said he would be back later to collect it back.”

“Then why did he give it to you? Do you still have it?”

“As per protocol, I brought it to Dr. Jameson for a security check. Turned out to be pure gold, about thirty grams total. She let me have it back. None of us could cash it in anyway. No real value outside the metal content.” I pull it out of my pocket and pass it around.

“I have never seen gold before, except on the inside of some broken equipment. Then it is just fine strands. There is a picture of Moosa on the back. Very funny.”

Kratz hands me the coin back. “Probably not Moosa, how could the old man have seen him? Is that him on the other side? So, what are you going to do with it?”

I shrug my shoulders, “You can't really tell who the person is on the one side, could be him, but why make a coin with your own picture on it? I guess I'll keep it. Who knows, maybe he will come back.” Yeh, right. I

made a small hole in the edge and strung it around my neck. I needed my pockets for tools.

Besides, I had other distractions to worry about. “Oscar, want to keep me warm tonight?”

“Merow!” We were a regular. Well, as regular as steriles could be anyway. Not being able to have children and never having been raised in a family did not exactly prepare us for commitment. As soon as one of us was posted elsewhere, it would be over.

“Speaking of which, has anyone seen Missy?” We all laugh. Missy was named because she was always missing. She figured out that with her looks she did not need to work, at least standing up. We all had to pick up the slack of course. But it was better than having her around whining and complaining all the time. She had the looks for now, but what happened to her when that faded. She was a sterile, just like us. Not thinking long term at all.

“Wonder why Control assigned her to us?”

“Special favor maybe? Spawn of some uppy-up?” We could be the same, how would we know?

“She is sterile just like the rest of us. If she is special spawn, they sent her here to never to see her again.” Steriles were often abandoned by their families and given over to Control.

“Would you want to see her again?” We all shake our heads vehemently no.

“So, who is she with tonight?”

“Dr. Nasty I hope.” Her latest conquest. You would think he was bonded being a fertile, but who knows what that relationship was like. Maybe they were mated for genes instead of love. A match made in Control. Probably led separate lives entirely. As long as they mated with steriles, they could mess around all they wanted. Probably only got together when it was time to make another one of their own.

“Well thank goodness for that. If she does nothing more than steam his curls, she is worth having around.” There is that.

I help with the dishes to give the kitchen staff a break. Gives me time to think, so I don't mind. When I am done, Miriam has already left for our room. Nice and quiet walking back to the rooms. I loved the sound of my feet crunching on the gravel walkway. The rooms were a little off from the lab areas. The fertiles don't entirely hate us. It was nice to be away from the noise of all the equipment that had to run 24 hours a day. Granted, I had to maintain all that equipment and could tell from the sound how each was behaving. For instance, the cooler on the roof of the wet lab was sounding a bit off. I often could tell before my mother informed me. There was still some use for human workers. I will log it in



tomorrow morning. Well, on to better things.

Moosa had beat me to my side of the bed. He looked none the worse for wear and I gave him a brief cat massage to a purring acknowledgment. He was still cold from the outside, so he must have just gotten here as well. Miriam was pretending to be asleep, but I knew better. She wanted my warmth, but not my affection tonight. One was not always lucky. There would be other nights. I was tired too. I nestled in with Moosa between us and fell asleep myself.

I awoke to Moosa hacking up a hair ball on the bed. Thanks cat! I chase him off, but he does not look too good. His fur is not the carefully groomed state it normally is in. He staggers out of the room and out his cat door to be heard working on the hair ball again outside. I take a bath and get dressed. I wear a uniform of sorts, so I don't have to think about what to wear each day. Fertiles wore what ever they wanted, but steriles tended to keep it simple. Mariam had today off, so chose simple overalls. She liked to work in the garden on her day off. We had a plot of fresh vegetables we all helped with. Made for some variety and it just felt good to have your hands in the earth and see things grow. Okay, the food tasted better than the rations we were given from Control too.

Going out the door, I step in Moosa's hairball. "Moosa, did you have to do it right there?" He is only a few feet away laying on his side. His fur looks real bad. I feel his head. He has a fever. Not good. I can't remember any time he has been sick before. We don't have an animal doctor, but maybe Dr. John, the most knowledgeable of the researchers might know something. I pick up Moosa to carry him to the lab.

"Miriam, I am going to take Moosa to John. He appears to be sick."

Just as I pick him up, he sneezes in my face. "Thanks cat. If I get sick I am coming after you." Fur is coming loose in my hands. This is nothing I have ever heard of. I hurry. Not that it would help any. I have to wait outside the lab till he arrives. The researchers tend to come in later than we do. Not just because they lived off base so to speak. We were expected to have things running before they came in. I found a box outside the lab and made Moosa comfortable in it. It would be at least an hour before anyone came it and Moosa was not an emergency to the researchers. Definitely not to Dr. Nasty. Fortunately the other researchers got along fine with him.

I decide to check out that cooler on the roof of the next building over. I get my tool belt and scale the outside ladder. Well the problem is obvious. The intake grill is covered in bird feathers. I pull the biggest wads of them off the grill. I will have to go to the shop to get a portable vacuum and a brush. You would think we would have advanced past the need for this kind of cleaning. I was not sure that mechanics would ever

be full proof to nature. Kept me in a job anyway. I climb down, go to the shop, retrieve the necessary materials and return. Still no sign of the researchers. Still early though.

There has been rain since these feathers came here, so they are stuck in good. Even the brush is not going to complete the job. I remove the bolts from the side and slip the cover off. This allows me to get to the inside of the unit and the other side of the grill. About a half an hour later I am finally satisfied and close it up. Not a good start for the day. I log in the work with my mother pad and climb down. There will be more more work on this unit later including regular checkups now to stay on top of the feather problem. Will have to check the other grills as well.

The lab is showing lights. I run over to get Moosa and enter the lab. I hear voices as I near John's office. I knock on the door and the voices stop. I hear footsteps and the door opens. Behind Dr. John is Missy crying. When she sees me carrying Moosa her expression changes to rage.

“He's the one. That cat is the cause of all this. I want him destroyed immediately!”

I am afraid that I do not do well confronted and just stand there with my mouth open not responding. A clump of fur falls off Moosa to the ground. Some of it floats up into the air and I sneeze. Not normally allergic to cats, but a loose hair will do it.

Researcher John comes over. Hate was coming from the eyes of Missy. He gently touches Moosa and more fur falls off. He turns and walks back into his office and hits a button on the wall. Alarms sound. The alarm signals a full lock down. This is not a drill I suspect. The front gate will now be locked down to everything and everyone. Not even a bot will be allowed in. I set Moosa down and go to my station. Emergency rations have to be unpacked. A make shift hospital will be set up in the mess hall. It is the easiest place to hold a large number of people in cots, not to mention sterilizing utensils and such. We have to hurry as we have no idea how much time we have till the infection spreads or how lethal it will be. There have been rumors of labs that never opened again and had to be destroyed by fire and covered over as if they never existed. You never think it will happen to you.

When I get back to the mess hall with my first load in a tractor trailer, I see the others going about their own duties. No one talks. We have practiced this many many times. We all know what to do. By the time I have brought the cartons into the kitchen, cots have already been set up in the hall cleared of the normal tables and chairs. The researchers have their own duties to perform. All records are uploaded to Control and then erased at this end. Can't afford to have anyone wander in after we

are gone and access the information to make a weapon of it or worse. Of course all the material is encrypted, even my maintenance records, but a determined group could eventually crack it.

Notebooks are brought to the incinerator for burning. By the time I arrive, there is already a stack waiting for me. Researcher Tobias is on guard to make sure the destruction actually occurs and that no one tries to read any contents before then. Paper seems a weird substance to use, but it is a security thing. Not being entered into the mothers means no one else could hack into it either. I would not understand it anyway. Another reason they use us “dumb” steriles I suppose. I open the door and start feeding it notebooks. Roberts does not help of course. Even now. He holds a pad and checks off the books as I add them to the fire. Well, we will all die equals at any rate. My arms are sore by the time I finish and the lunch bell rings.

There are no tables or chairs now of course, so we remain standing along the sides. The empty cots in the center. The director comes in, not drunk for a change. She does not look happy.

“Dr. Sieger is dead. He was exposed to a lethal dose of a special culture he was working on in his lab. Failure to follow proper safety protocols was to blame. Now were all likely to suffer the consequences. Because he covered up his failure and left the compound, the entire town is in lock down, not just the lab. His apartment has been burned to the ground, but it may already be too late. We do not know how lethal the contagion is till control analyzes the data we have been sending in. The initial indications do not look good. I would recommend that any one who has any special beliefs should avail themselves of time off to reconcile themselves with those beliefs.

As we are on emergency rations we are now all responsible for our own food preparation. Help those around you if they can't help themselves. From this point on there is no difference between staff and researchers. Treat everyone with respect. They may save your life in their kindness or your soul through your kindness to them. I will keep everyone informed at meal times as we learn more. The bells have been set to automatic to help out those who become disoriented. That is all.”

We take turns choosing meals from the first open carton. I pull the tab and the meal is hot and ready in a minute. This stuff is actually better than what we normally get, excepting the fresh vegetables anyway. The looks on the researchers faces say that this is not as good as what they normally get. We are all equal now? I will believe that when I see it in their actions.

Moosa! I had forgotten all about him. I drop my tray in the recycler out of habit. If this goes as expected, it won't matter. I run outside and

cross the courtyard past the Crocker lab to the lab where I left Moosa. The door is open and I enter. Researcher John is standing over Moosa who is on a lab bench on top of some thick pads. Bright lamps are on near them.

“Is he dead?” He does not look good. I do not see any breathing. If you have ever seen a cat wet, you get some idea of what Moosa looked like. All of his fur is gone and his skin is a pale green.

“I looked up what Dr. Sieger was working on before the files were destroyed at this end. I had no idea that Dr. Sieger was a genius of that level. Explains why he was here, he was sure hard to work with, that's for sure. Amazing really. He apparently was working on a way to produce animal protein without having to feed the animal. By combining plant and animal genetics he hoped to produce a genetically modified organism that could literally feed itself, by staying in the sun.”

“So, Moosa is still alive? But now part plant?”

“Hmm, basically, Yes. He improved remarkably when I moved him under these high intensity lamps. I think he would do even better under natural sunlight. If you will do the honors, I know he liked you and I don't want to upset him should he wake.” I gently pick him up. He moves a little, but I reassure him everything is okay. John goes ahead of me with some more pads and we find a place on a table outside in the sun. I place him on the pads and he curls up into a typical Moosa sleeping position with his nose up in the air.

“You have not had lunch doctor. I can watch him while you get something to eat.”

“It is very important that no one disturb him. He is at least twelve hours ahead of our own exposure, if not more and we need to watch him to help determine our own future. Assuming we react the same way and on the same time schedule.” He is already lost in thought talking to himself as we walks towards the mess hall.

Miriam sees me sitting on the chair I have set up next to him and comes up.

“Eeeuu! What happened to Moosa? He looks horrible?”

“Near as I can figure. Dr. Nasty was working on something in his lab, that was left out in the open against protocol. Moosa got into it. Just curious. You know him. Anyway, Nasty chases him out of the lab and tries to hide and cover up what happened. In the process he exposed himself to the bug as well. Problem was he got a lot more of it than Moosa did. He left the lab and went back to his home where he became ill and died. Missy found him or was with him that night. Either way, she is likely infected as are the two of us.”

“How come he is green then?”

“The bug Nasty made combines plant and animal DNA. I am not sure where the plants stuff comes from, but cats do eat grass and we know Nasty hated vegetables, preferring his bottles of pills instead.”

“So, is he going to die?” Meaning are we going to die.

“I am a caretaker, not a researcher.”

“He is going to die real soon if I have any say about it.” Missy comes up coughing and sneezing and carrying a knife from the kitchen. I get up and wheel around the chair I have been sitting on and pin her to the wall. Not really a feat considering she is obviously ill.

“Drop the knife Missy! Now!”

“My name, cough cough, is not Missy!” She hacks at the legs of the chair to no effect. “It is Soo.”

“What kind of a name is that?” Her face is flushed with fever and her black hair is starting to fall out in clumps.

“Wo shi!” What?

“I am an agent of the Chinese government and all of you will pay for what you have done! This weapon will not go unnoticed by the world convention.”

“What is Chinese?” Miriam asks.

“I have no idea, she must be delusional from the fever. She is making no sense.”

“Drop the knife and you can go Missy or Soo, or what ever you want to be called.” She struggles for a moment more, but sees she can't win. Finally she drops the knife. Miriam retrieves it and I let her go. She half stalks off and half staggers off. I think to tell her to eat something green, but then have second thoughts. I might not be right or it could be that I really don't care if she survives or not. I would later have horrible guilt feelings about this. By the time Dr. John confirms my hypothesis, as he calls it, it would be too late for Missy. I am assured that it was probably already too late for her, but that did not make me feel any better. The rest of us started consuming all the fresh greens that our garden could provide.

## **Break**

“Caretaker, we need to stop for a break. May we continue this after we get something to eat?”

“One moment. Mother informs me that it is important to continue your chores as well, at least in terms of taking care of each other. It would be best if you spent the rest of the day doing that and then meet back here tomorrow. I am not going anywhere.”

It was more than taking care of each other. The latest shipment of

supplies came in and needed to be stored. Problem was we had not used up much of that last of the shipment, with the males gone, even with our extra eating.

“Where do we put it all?”

“Who made me leader? I am not male? Do I look like one?”

“Uh no, but you do seem to know more than we do and someone has to lead us.”

“Put it into the museum then. Lots of space there.”

“Good idea!” She gets going with the rest of the kitchen staff on the food. I help with the gardening materials. A much smaller parcel, but it still had to be dealt with. If we were going to make a go of it, we needed to convert from ornamental plants to things we could eat. I head to the kitchen.

Up the stairs and in the door. “Who is in charge here?” The kitchen staff point to the door to the right. They were huge with large arms, a high resistance to heat damage and an excellent sense of smell. Nothing like what I looked like anyway. I went through the door and found a kitchen female consulting a console on the wall. I looked. Nothing in script, all images of food items. The head cook turns to face me.

“Ellen?” I nod. “What can I do for you?”

“I am worried that with the males gone we have to fend for ourselves soon. I want to start collecting seeds to plant in the garden. Growing our own food. Most of the food we get is not ready for planting. It needs to ripen more for the seeds to be ready. All I am asking is that you set some aside for us to use after it becomes ripe.”

“Well, we have much more than we can use right now, so setting some aside is no problem. If you have any ideas of what to do with the rest of the excess, please let me know.”

“I will, thanks.” We could mulch it of course, but we could only use so much too. How much more would we have to plant to feed all of us through another winter? I know a lot about the ornamentals, but when is the best time to plant food. We know squash and tomatoes. We figured those out ourselves, but can we plant fruit? Too many questions.

I have found that I have wandered back to the Caretaker without thinking. The pad is still hung around his neck. What the hey, maybe Mother had some ideas.

“Mother, if you please. Would you tell me how to save the left over food for later use without spoiling?” I sit down to wait for a response. The Caretaker is silent and does not move. How can he be alive without breathing. He said that his 'cat' was changed by the experiment and hinted that they would be soon. Treeman certainly seems to fit the description now. A man, and woman, changed into part human and part plant. Is this

the plague that Mother talked about in our orientation? I am impatient, but know it would not be fair to the others. I will wait to hear the rest of the story.

“An assessment has been completed of the technology present. The best answer to your question is to dry the food. Remove the screens from all the windows and doors and do as follows.” I listen intently for half an hour before Mother finishes. I had dried seeds, so why not the entire vegetable? Mother said that the vegetable had to be sliced very thinly to speed drying. That made sense also. Sun dried would be easier, but we could also use the ovens on low during times when they were not being used to prepare meals.

It was getting to be time for the evening meal, so I went to the gathering place. I was hungry and there I could relate what I had learned to the cooks.

“Excuse me, but I do not know your name?” I had dealt with them for months, but never felt right to ask.

“Oh, hi Ellen. My name is Crys. What can I do for you?”

“I asked Mother about how best to store the extra food. She said that we could dry it and told me how.”

“Drying could work. Not always easy to eat after wards, but we can soak it for a time in hot water to bring it back. Won't be the same as fresh, but it will keep you alive. Some things even taste better if they have been dried first. Tomatoes, mushrooms and some fruit for instance.”

“She said that sun dried would be best, but our rains are not over yet. If another storm comes in, we may have to use the ovens during the off hours.”

She laughs at that, “Well, without the men, the number of hours has gone down a lot. We are not used to eating so much fancy food. Going back to normal female food will make it easier on all of us. We should be able to work things out. You will have to provide some volunteers for the night shifts though. Even we can't work day and night.”

“Sounds good. I will take the first night shift after things get set up.”

She looks at me incredulously, “Why would you do that?” Usual pattern is to try and get out of work. Hiding if necessary, though Mother knows all and this only works temporarily.

“We will die if we don't work together. We have no idea what is happening or how long supplies will keep coming. The others have made me a leader of sorts, so I intend to lead by example. Don't ask anyone to do a job you would not do yourself and they are more likely to follow you without the need of force.”

“Then I will join you on the first shift.” I nod my appreciation.

So now we had seeds and dried food set up. Now what had I not

thought of? Someone must have read my mind. I hear a cheer going up near the museum entrance. Everyone is starting to head in that direction. Bundles of something are being moved over everyone's heads. I get close enough to see the housekeeping staff throwing them out the side entrance. What are they? Finally one reaches back this far. I watch as several women near me undo one. Blankets!

“Where did they come from?”

“Rumor is that they are from the men's quarters.” That makes sense. Never heard a man complain about the cold. Of course I was warmer as a pleasure girl though that has not been some time. I have never been invited into the men's quarters here. Did not even know how many of them were housed here. Usually women outnumbered women, but there appears to be enough to go around.

“Does everyone have one? Check those around you. There is enough for everyone.” I hear from some distance.

“Over here! Ellen does not have one yet.” Someone says. I suddenly realize that I don't. I had been paying so much attention to everyone else. My face blushes. This is embarrassing. I walk up the front and one is handed down to me. Just a simple dark gray in color, but it is soft and warm.

“Thank you!” I yell up to the house keepers.

“Three cheers for the housekeepers!” Okay, it was a bit erratic, but we have not had much practice.

As I nestle down for the night I am amazed at how much has changed so fast. Can we handle it?



## Morning

I awake fully rested. It was wonderful. I am reluctant to even get up, but as leader, I set the example. Sigh. Wonder if they had sheets in there too. We could make clothes out of the sheets and I could finally cover my behind.

I am handed a plate of something I don't recognize. It looks like worms. I poke one with my finger, but it does not move. Cooked at least. Now where would someone get enough worms to feed this many women? I pick one up and try it. Spicy! But good. Real good. Reminds me of the all the smells of working with the crew in the garden, the earth and the sweat, the smell of herbs and compost, with a hint of the spiciness of fun mating. I don't eat fast, but savor every bite. This is really good. But how? I have never had anything remotely like this.

I ask around, but no one seems to know. I make my way to the kitchen taking the short cut through the museum. Those stairs were stupid. When I arrive, the smell still permeates the room. Crys is in one corner. I wave to her.

"Who came up with this food? It is incredible!"

She smiles, "Come on in secret chef." She waves to someone I can't see. Gryk comes out of the shadows with a cloth covering her front.

"You? I didn't know you could cook?"

"You mean you did not know that diggers could cook?" Crys laughs at me. But she is right.

"So what is it we just ate?"

"Worms of course, what did they look like?"

"How? I mean we see them in the garden of course. Good for the soil. But how did you find so many Gryk?" She laughs at me as an answer.

"Duh! A digger." If anyone here understood the subterranean world it would be a digger." I bow to her. It is the highest praise one woman can give another as we are required to bend the other way for any man. She returns the bow to make me her equal. There are tears in my eyes as I leave. We really are becoming a coherent whole. This could work.

"Crawlers have set up a link between the Caretaker's pad and all the monitors in the other areas. This way, those on duty will not miss what is said."

"Great idea." I will not have to hurry with morning chores any more.

"He's starting!" Our eyes are fixed on the nearest monitor.

## Treeman

It spreads fast. Miriam and I were the next ones to get it, followed by John. Tests showed that everyone was infected. Those who had not started showing symptoms took care of those who were and those who recovered, including Moosa, took care of those who were coming down with it. Missy Soo did not recover. She refused to eat greens, which appeared to be the important link. She claimed she could not stand being green and would rather die. Towards the end she became unintelligible speaking words we did not understand. We did not know if this was real or something she was making up with her mind going crazy. She died the fifth day out and we buried her in the forest. She never worked in the garden with the rest of us and the others wanted to reserve that for those who had. I was still shaken up from not forcing her to save herself.

John consoled me by saying it was too late for her. He had read Sieger's notes and there was a narrow window when the chloroplasts needed to be assimilated. Wait too long and the window was closed. If she had eaten them in the early morning, she may have been okay, but by the time she showed up at the lab, it was too late. John thought she must have gotten a massive dose from Sieger to have been infected so fast.

The timing did not make sense to me. If you back tracked the time it took for us to reach the "green" stage and applied it to Missy, it would mean she was infected at the same time that Moosa was, plus or minus a few hours. At least twelve hours before we were. It might mean that Nasty and her were playing with the bugs when Moosa came in and "crashed" the party. So what really happened?

All of our hair fell out, just as with Moosa. I am afraid, I did not look any better hairless than he did. We finally overcame our modesty and stopped wearing clothes altogether. We were all getting thinner and had a hard time keeping normal food down, but we all liked being out in the sun. We were soon dark green in color over most of our bodies. Lighter in the arm pits and any other area that did not see much sunlight.

"We need to go into town and see what happened there."

"Are you nuts? If we leave the base, we will be shot on sight and then burned on the spot. We have to wait till the all clear." I remember enough history from my classes to know what people did to what they did not understand. One of the reasons we all pledged allegiance to the new order.

"John says we are no longer infectious, but he has heard nothing from Control."

"What are those old guys doing up there? Granted we don't seem to need much in the way of supplies, but it would be nice to see other people again. Didn't think I would miss them till we were denied it."

"You going out dressed like that?" We all giggle. Forgotten already.

“Likely to get shot looking this color too.”

“Let's go at night then. Just to look around. If we see everything is normal, we come back. Nasty and Missy were there remember. The 'plague' may have spread and they did not have the advantage of the lab notes.” Most people stay inside when sick. Eating vegies is certainly not the first thing I think of when throwing up.

John comes into the conversation, “I want to know why Sieger left the base that night? If the quarantine was compromised that day, why weren't we in code red immediately. He knew the rules and we know now he was working with bad stuff. Stuff that should never have gotten into a human being, much less Moosa.”

“So, what did you work on?” Good question.

He grins, “As soon as we hit code red everything went into the sterilizer. There is nothing left here to hurt us. Control had the data, so nothing was lost intellectually. We could have been up and running again in a day, if it was a false alarm. Now it is likely someone else will take on what I was working on. I don't think I could get hired anywhere looking like this.”

One of the cooks nestles up to him, “I don't know big boy, I kinda like a tall dark and green man.” We all laugh out loud.

“What happens to us?” Everyone is paying attention now. We didn't do this, we should not have to pay the price. It was nice to be alive, it could easily have been the other way.

“We will be running tests to make sure we are not contagious. Since Moosa got it as well as us, we know it is likely to affect most mammals, not just humans. That makes testing it easier. Blood samples from everyone I am afraid. I'll be gentle.” But I don't like his grin.

“After that, assuming we are clean, we will be in quarantine for one year. Normally it would not be that long, but because of the nature of the work, they want to be sure we do not become contagious on a seasonal basis. Not much chance of that, but better safe than sorry. Then we all get reassigned I would guess. New people will be assigned here.”

“Kinda hard to hide one of us. Will they let us walk around naked all the time, or at least during the day?” He shrugs his shoulders.

“And if we don't pass quarantine?” He looks down till we get it.

“Best not to dwell on the negative then.” Scorched earth policy. Great.

“Oscar, after lunch, you and I are to go around and close all the labs except mine. I am assuming directorship now. Dr. Peterson is not feeling well enough.” You mean she is drunk again. “We will keep mine open to do the necessary tests.” He pulls me aside and waits for the others to clear out. “I heard you talking about the ride to town. Do you know how to

drive a cart?" I nodded yes. I had to haul supplies around the base in one. Surprised he hadn't noticed. "Stay out of sight and don't touch any thing. If we are still hot, let's not infect anyone else. Stay on the roads and don't get out of the cart. You and three others max. Understand?" I nodded. "Understand?"

"Yes sir." He hands me the card for keying the supply cart and then leaves to go back to his lab. I head to lunch. Not that hungry, but John says we still need to get lots of water and supplements, mostly minerals. Starting to like them actually. Weird, I used to hate them and now I am taking ten times more.

I was the driver, so I got to go. I selected Miriam. I wanted to be warm when we returned. I'm not stupid. That left two others. The junior researchers had heard of the plan and wanted in. Do we give up two seats or one? They outnumber us, better make it two.

Two came forward, "We decided and Julie and I were chosen." okay. I open the back of the cart. I do not ask his name. I already know, Rupert. They think we don't notice them, but we do. We have all their personalities worked out. Have to know when to jump out of the way. Rupert liked to see people jump, but he was as green as the rest of us, at least during the day.

We all get in. We can't use the main gate because of the lock down, but every place had other ways in and out. I drive up to the culvert at the far south end and remove the wire mesh in front of it. Supposed to be on tight, but hey, I can't be everywhere. I smile. It was a tight fit, but we manage to push the cart through and then make it ourselves. The rest of the trip was quiet. They were not going to talk in front of the "staff" and we felt the same about them. Granted we had all seen each other naked. We were all human and green. No one better than anyone else here. When do we wake up?

"We are nearing town. Better let me drive from here on out."

"Not going to happen Rupert. Dr. John gave me the responsibility. You would not want me to report to him I gave that up now would you?" Nope, I thought not. His threats did not work with me. I hate bullies.

"There are no lights on. Strange. Shouldn't there be at least street lights?"

"Might be on rationing? Or if everyone is like us, no one would need light at night. Fast asleep."

"Could be, but then wouldn't there be some lights on in the houses? Not everyone should be asleep."

"Let's find Dr. Sieger's place and work it out from there. Turn right at the next street. Third place on the right, second story."

We find the place and look up. Still there. "I thought they burned the

place down. Quarantine regs or something.”

“They were supposed to have. This is starting to freak me.” Yeh Julie, me too.

Rupert gets out.

“We were supposed to stay in the cart.”

“I don't think there is anyone here to hurt.” He runs up to the first house nearest us and knocks on the door. No answer. He pulls out his ID card and swipes it on the entrance lock. It lets him in.

“Is he nuts?”

“I didn't know he lived near Nasty.” That explained a lot to me. Two of a kind.

“Boy's dorm. Girls are across the street. Rest of the faculty are all around us. This street should be empty as all of us are at the base.”

Rupert comes out again carrying something in a bag. Hops back into the cart and undoes the straps on the bag. Inside is some piece of equipment.

“Thermal Imager. We can tell if anyone is left alive inside any of the houses, without going inside.” What was he doing with lab equipment at his residence? I suspect that Julie would be blushing right now if we could see her in the dark and through her dark green color. I said nothing and neither did Miriam. She was not born yesterday either.

We went up and down the street and could find nothing alive. He turned it on us and we showed up just fine.

“It is working, so there must be no one here.”

“Alive anyway. We need to know.”

“Clinic. They would have gone to the clinic if they got sick. We are more likely to find people there, or what was left of them at least.” Good thinking Miriam, for a staff member. I grin and squeeze her hand.

“Okay, I have no idea how to get there.” Rupert wakes up, but I still don't let him drive.

He leads us through a convoluted way. I am sure to confuse me on purpose. Yep, I am convinced that is the reason. Ten minutes later we arrive. No lights here either. Not a good sign.

“The front doors are broken in. What's that over there?” Rupert has the thermal-imager on it, but nothing shows.

“It stinks here.”

“Oh God.” Julie is throwing up. No one alive is my guess.

Rupert pulls out a sample bag and removes gloves and collecting equipment. He goes over to the body and removes a sample to a vial. Apparently he had orders as well. So, I was back to being staff, just a chauffeur. He proceeds into the hospital proper with a small light. I suspect Julie was supposed to help, but she doesn't look in that good of

shape. I thought they all had hearts of stone. Maybe there are exceptions.

“Julie, you look a little green.” She gives me a dirty look.

“I knew him.” Referring to the corpse. “He was one of the junior researchers like myself.”

I had never paid much attention to their comings and going, unless they made a pest of themselves, like our Nasty clone, Rupert had.

“I thought you had all come back in the next morning.” Miriam comments, but I thought the same.

“There were four that did not make it back before lock down.”

“I’m sorry, I did not know. I clean up the messes but don’t usually see who makes them.”

“Julie, do you know how to use the thermal-imager?” Miriam asks.

“Sure, why?”

“I have not seen any other animals. You would expect to see rats, cats, bats and possibly even a few birds, that sort of thing. The imager should be able to 'see' them as well as people.”

“We have no lack of critters at the base, some have even turned green like us. Lucky for the birds that they did not lose their feathers like we did our hair. Still not used to that.” She rubs her bald head.

“Green is the color of the day. Green sea gulls do look weird though.” That gets her to smile. She turns on the unit and makes some adjustments.

“I can't see anything but us and Rupert. He is fuzzy as he is pretty deep inside the hospital. Here you try.” She hands the imager to me. “Just look in here as you did earlier. Everything else is already set.” I look around and see the same thing she did, including Rupert as an unfocused blob not much above background. He was moving from room to room apparently. I hand it to Miriam to take a turn. She gets out of the cart and goes closer to the bushes with the imager, but returns a few minutes later.

“I can find nothing either. Nothing warm blooded enough to show up anyway. Insects and lizards seem to be unaffected. The corpse is covered in maggots and I disturbed a lizard sleeping.” That gets Julie going again. Rupert comes out just as she finishes. He packs the samples and then removes his gloves and masks. He then rubs himself down with disinfectant before getting in the cart. This is not reassuring to the rest of us. We were told not to touch anything and we thought this was because we did not want to infect anything else. Now we had to worry about something infecting us.

“I want to get these samples to the lab before they go bad.” I don't think any of us wants to hang out here any longer. Things are very quiet going back. John meets us at the culvert and climbs in the back for the rest of the trip back.

“How did it go?”

“Good and bad.” What's good about it, they are all dead!

“The bad news is they are all dead. The good news is it was not 'green maker eight'. But it gets worse. All warmblooded animals are dead as well. It was in the clinic mother units.”

“We can confirm that. We all used the imager and could not find any warm blooded animals with it. No rats, no birds, nothing.” John just nods.

“You have the samples?” Rupert hold up the container he put them in. Back at the lab the two of them go into the lab. Julie stays with us. She starts to remove her clothing.

“Never realized how much this stuff makes me itch. I am normally a modest girl, but I can't take it any longer.” Nice to look at even in this light. Most of the researchers tended to neglect their bodies in preference for their brains. Staff did enough physical work to keep us looking pretty fit. She finishes and walks off to the kitchen turned dorm. There are only a few people left to take care of. We only lost one other person, a man with very dark skin to begin with. It is possible that we need to have certain level of light to keep the chloroplasts alive and not enough got through his darker skin to save him. Everyone else is expected to recover. Miriam and I make it back to our room before shedding our 'skins'. I have picked up Julie's costume and set it on a chair. Moosa is already asleep on the bed. The cold of night does not seem to bother us as much any longer and we crash on top of the blankets entwined in each other's arms. Just before I fall asleep Miriam hits me.

“What's that for?”

“I saw you looking.”

“Just curious. Does not mean anything. Don't tell me you are jealous of a researcher? They treat us like dirt most of the time.”

“She said 'we'.”

“Yeh, I noticed that too. We really are all in the same boat. Time the barriers fell. We can't afford a cast system now. Doubt anybody is going to reproduce either. We are all effectively steriles now. How far do you think the town death goes? They were nearly as isolated as we were.”

“One of the reasons the lab was placed here no doubt. We should talk to John tomorrow. Control should be able to tell us, if it hasn't reached there by now.”

Moosa was out the door at first light. He did not seem to wonder at night like he used to. We slept better too. Almost like hibernation once the sun went down. It was hard to stay awake driving last night, of course the corpses woke me up. We come out a little while later and head for the meadow and the sun. Some green birds who were sunning themselves wins spread, on the ground, take off. It feels so good. I can feel it running

though my veins like fire. Apparently it affects Miriam the same way.

"Let's go back in for a bit, before the others get going." Meow!  
"Moosa stay outside please!"

By the time we return the rest of the base is there soaking up the rays. It is considered very bad form to shade someone, so we are careful to walk around the group before finding a free spot.

"Welcome back you two." More than one sly grin. How did they know we were here before? Moosa?

John comes in last disposing of his lab coat on the way. Not one of the pretty ones nude, though he appears to be loosing weight as well.

"The bug that got the town was not green maker eight. That I know for sure. Similar sequence, but lacking the chloroplast saver gene. They literally suffocated from lack of oxygen afforded by the chloroplasts."

"Could it have been a mutated form of GM8?" One of the researchers asks.

"Not a chance. This was made in a lab. There were some substitutions in normally conserved regions of three regulator genes. This one was designed to kill. Very effective actually. Even more lethal than HelperV was a hundred years ago."

HelperV, what is that? We did not get much in the way of real history in our training, just the nasty political stuff. It was thought it would only crowd out what we needed to know. More likely we would use examples from the past to question the present. "Are we in danger?"

"I don't think so for two reasons Oscar. First, GM8 probably gives us some immunity, they are similar enough according to my mother's read out. Second, have you noticed that all the birds and mammals here are greenish in color and/or lacking fur? Killer would not have have respected the borders of the town and should have spread easily to the wild life here and ultimately to us. The fact that the green ones at least are alive and well gives me hope for us." Sounds good.

"We have another problem that needs to be discussed." Our communications officer.

"We have lost communications with Control. It could be a temporary technical problem, though we have not had this happen before, or the Killer reached Control. If the former, we should be back up in a few days. If the latter, we are on our own. For all I know, we are the last humans alive. Though that is hard to believe. In any other plague, there are always survivors. Problem is, they may be too far apart to make it work. It still takes one of each kind." A few people close to Miriam and I snicker. Hey, we are already steriles, don't look at us.

"But we are already under quarantine and given our current complexion, unlikely to be given new positions or trusted any time soon.



In a sense we have been on our own since day one.”

“True. Well, lets get a few more hours of sun before setting about our tasks.” Everyone becomes quiet. I had a lot of trouble keeping still for so long till one of the researchers explained to me some technique called meditation that helped some. She said it would take practice, but I appeared to be catching on quick enough for her. It was amazing to me that nearly twenty people could be so quiet for so long, but our sun time seemed to be getting longer each day. Not that I was fond of chores. I had less to do with most of the labs locked down and not needing as much food.

# The Return

There is a commotion behind us. Women gasp and move aside. The story stops. I rise and face the women making their way through the group. One is carrying a large sharp blade. Helen. And not alone. There are seven with her.

“Move aside Ellen. I mean to destroy the treeman.”

“He is innocent. I will not let you hurt him.”

She holds up the knife. “He is an abomination. He needs to go, just like the rest of them that Saint Taghert took care of centuries ago. His time is long over due.”

Gryk and the others come to my side. Helen still thinks she is in control and takes a step forward. We are unarmed. Or at least I thought we were. Gryk suddenly unfolds faster than I thought possible. The others pick up stones and branches and take stands also. The seven behind Helen reveal their own weapons. This is not something that women do, only males make war. Helen takes another step after making sure the others are with her. Gryk lets out a sound that makes me ill and it is not even directed at me. Helen falls to her knees and then slowly recovers after dropping her knife. She is holding her hands over her ears though.

“Stop!” It is Mother. We all fall on our faces, even Helen and Gryk.

“It is forbidden for women to war or kill. I have allowed the telling of the tale by the treeman. Do you not think that I could not destroy the treeman with a single thought?”

No one moved. We all deserved the grinder for sure for this one. There is so much I would have done if I had known this was the last day of my life. I suppose that is true of most everyone.

“Now cease and desist. You all have work to do. Any further hostility will be dealt with harshly.” I swallow hard. We live for the time being. Helen gets up with her knife in hand and looks around. There are over thirty present now and surrounding us. She really would not have gotten away with it, even without Mother's intervention. We were all very fond of the Caretaker. No evidence of mind control or anything else hostile. He can't even move. What is the threat? A way parts for her and she stalks off in a huff with the seven following her.

“Okay, you heard Mother. Time for chores. I need three volunteers to help make the food driers. The rest have your normal tasks.”

Melissa of course is one of the three. I had already explained the need for the driers. Not everyone thought it was worth doing of course. Food did seem to be coming on the regular schedule. Mother did not

seem to object, so I guess it was okay to do.

“What do we do first?”

“Mother said to retrieve the screens from all the windows.”

“Why do the windows have screens? They are never open.”

“No idea, maybe because it is a museum and that's the way they used to do things? or decoration? Anyway, we have a use for them now.”

We figure out how to remove the screens and then clean them. We set them up in the yard suspended by branches, stones, bricks, whatever we can find. The kitchen staff did the slicing, but we spread the slices on the cleaned screens. Now it is the sun's turn. If they are not done at the end of the day, we can take them in and finished them in the cooling ovens, or wait till tomorrow.

Where did Helen get to and what is she up to. Gryk is standing guard at the Caretaker. She seemed to be the one of us best able to handle herself. The head cook and I will take over at sundown. Others will take over a few hours later. This time we are armed and will continue to be so. Mother said we could not kill, but we will do our best to prevent a killing. I am tied up in knots inside. I don't understand why Helen is doing this. The whole Saint Taghert thing benefited the men, not us. Why was she so adamant about maintaining that view? And just where were the men and why?

The Caretaker story talk about this creature called a cat. I wonder what they were. I wander over to the kitchen to find Crys. The cook's station has a large viewing screen. Maybe Mother can show me a cat.

“Crys. May I try your view screen to talk to Mother?”

“As far as I know it has never been used in that way. The menu is posted there when we come in and we just follow instructions. No one has ever asked Mother anything through the screen.”

“Can it hurt anything to try? Mother knows me from the pad, so maybe we will get lucky.”

“Let me copy down the menu first, in case we can't get it back. Not a good idea to mess with people's food.” I would agree with that. She takes a few minutes to quickly copy the menu to a pad. One would think that because the menu was in icons that she could not read or write, but the notes are clearly written in standard. Well, she was head cook. Finally she looks up at me and nods. “The grunts cannot read standard, hence the pictures. Saves time really.”

I go up to the display. “Mother, what is a cat?” The icons change to the word 'processing', a good sign.

“While we are waiting, is there anything I can do to help.” Cyrs looks at me with suspicion. “I am not a totally clueless pleasure girl and the garden was not my first position outside the chambers. I can move

garbage out to the compost areas for instance?”

“Why would you do punishment tasks? You are garden leader.”

“The men may play that game, I don't intend to. Remember the volunteer first strategy. Believe me, we would all notice the rotting garbage piling up in the kitchen long before we noticed the garden itself falling into disarray.”

“True. Suit yourself. Use that bowl and collect the scraps from each of the preparers. The contents then go in the container there.”

“Easy enough.” I get to it. It was fascinating to watch everyone work. Five people preparing food for thirty five. I tried to stay out of the way, but my lack of experience and my curiosity got me in trouble a couple of times before I caught on. Just as I finally was in the flow, the screen chirps. Everything stops. I was not the only one curious. I scoot over the get a better view.

A human male, pre Holy Decision, appears on the screen and then a small creature with lots of fine hair all over it appears. The screen zooms in on various aspects of the cat's outward and inward physical anatomy. The same basic organs as we were made of. The display paired the cat's anatomy with the human male. They did not have permanently erect penises, but those barbs on the end looked painful. Hope the males never access this information and get any ideas.

“Merow” Sound was coming from the display.

Crys jumps back. “Sorry, it has never made any sound but the usual chirp.”

“I wonder how many cat words there are?” As if to answer me a list of our word equivalents and the cat sounds were paired. Too many to remember. Purring was weird. Next the different varieties were shown. Almost every color was possible it would appear, except green of course. Moosa must have been unique because of the plague. Next came the usual historical stuff about the plague from the treeman that killed most of the humans and apparently the cats as well. The caretaker mentioned a possible second plague however. Wonder what that was about? Maybe a mistake on their part.

“Smaller and less intelligent than us. Interesting. I wonder why they kept them around.”

“The Caretaker said Moosa slept with them. Though it was too small to be of much comfort or source of heat.” Who knew. I try to imagine what it would be like to be bonded to one. “It could follow me around all day and warn me of danger. Speaking of which we have guard duty after the meal.”

No worms this time, but still good. The menu has changed. Not as weird as the male food, but better than what we used to get by far. I could

end up fat if this kept up. Already too old to attract attention from males, a little weight would not hurt me any. Crys finishes up and we head out.

Gryk is waiting for us looking bored. “Nothing happen I gather.”  
“!nzzzt”

“Still better to be careful. Go get some food before they put everything away.” Crys mentions. Gryk bows a thanks and takes off on a roll. Her face was too rigid to give much away, but I could tell she was bored by her stance and lack of motion.

The Caretaker is quiet. The meditation thing he mentioned no doubt. It is getting dark. I activate a glow rod. Does not give much light, only a few meters at best, but it could make the difference. Training had showed battles among males. Not pretty. Hope it did not come to that. I have no idea how to lead a group into battle, with or without Mother's permission.

Just as I am about to nod off, I hear a branch break. I am immediately awake. I nudge Crys. She wakes and keeps silent. We both have knives from the kitchen. I have watched the cooks work and hold the knife the same way Crys does. It was one thing to cut vegetables, quiet another to attack a female.

Helen comes out of the shadows alone and sits down a safe distance away. She says nothing, just watches us. I don't trust her. Caretaker is at our back. I hear another step against a stone to my right. There are too many of them and they are too fast. Just as the three with Helen are upon me with knives raised, I feel an incredible pain in my head and pass out. One I did not see must have gotten me. I dream of cats that talk to me and describe their world as far superior to that of ours.

When I awake my head is still in pain and I am dizzy. I am surrounded by others, but they are looking elsewhere. When they hear my movements they turn around. “Over here. Ellen's awake.” I rise to my elbows, slowly. “What happened? Where is Crys?”

“She is fine, just knocked out like you were.”

“What about Helen and her supporters.”

“They are all dead. You were so quiet; we thought you might be too. Mother said that she will not tolerate killing. As the two of you were protecting the Caretaker, whom she had said to leave alone, and not the aggressors, she allowed you to live. The headache is a reminder though not to try her patience.” I nod and then grimace. Moving my head is not a good thing right now.

“Mother said you have a choice. Stay where you are or walk back to the rooms. We have blankets if you choose to stay.” I grimace again and nod that I will stay. I would never make it, even the few hundred meters, with my head in this much pain.

“Melissa and Eartyn will stay with the two of you. Try and get some

sleep. We will return with food in the morning and to hear the next part of the story.” They leave. At least we are unlikely to be attacked again. Apparently Mother can defend what she wants. Good to remember that. It was not like Helen did not have enough warnings. She had the pad before me and I would guess she did not get it without Mother's knowledge. I had the feeling she had known Mother better than I do. Why did she go against Mother's orders then? I need sleep more than questions though and am soon out.

I wake before the others and take care of personal needs and clean up the area some. It was night when this all happened. My head feels fine today. Like it never happened. In the fight some of the stones we use to mark the path must have been dislodged. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw someone, but when I turn, there is no one there. Crys must have heard me moving about. She gets up and wakes up Melissa and Eartyn, then takes off to the kitchens.

Over her shoulder she says, “Who knows what kind of mess they have made in my absence.” She will listen to the next part of the story on one of the monitors set up for that purpose.

“We found you and Crys when we came to relieve you. At first we thought everyone was dead, but the two of you were still breathing slightly. We took the others to the grinder to be processed.”

“Thanks. I thought for sure that I was dead by one of them when it all happened. Nice to be alive again.” I smile weakly.

## **Caretaker**

Control did not come up in the weeks and months that followed. We were completely cut off. The sequence of the bug that got the town folks was similar to green maker eight, but definitely engineered by another group. No sign of the bug anywhere at the base nor in the notes recovered from Control before they went off line. We could not even ask them if they knew anything else. We had no wildlife or even people around to test to see if any of us were still infectious. Best to assume the worst till proven otherwise, but John did not think we were.

The days seemed to be coming and going at an ever increasing rate. Even looking at a clock was weird, the hands went around so fast. We had slowed down to a different time base. Soon it would be winter. Snow could be a problem, even with our adaptation to cooler temperatures. Some of the other researchers and I managed to rig up some sun lamps in the greenhouse. We had slowed down so much we had to have a mother unit take control of them. This allowed us to get at least eight hours of sunlight even in the middle of winter with storms howling outside. It felt

good to have our feet planted in the earth. Twenty naked green people in an empty greenhouse standing totally motionless. If anyone had come by they would have thought we were statues. Naked green statues.

We had slowed down to the point where years seemed like days. A week of years had now gone by since the change. Control could have been and gone many times and I doubt we would have even noticed them. Moosa was between me and Miriam and looked to have slowed down as much as we had. Each day was twenty seconds long from our perspective. Ten seconds of light and ten seconds of dark. Countless sunsets and sunrises.

When we started to be concerned that we would eventually stop all together a very strange thing happened. Our meditation expert was the first to hear them, but soon we all could. We heard voices in our heads. Moosa was looking at a clump of grass in front of us and bit into it. We all heard a scream. The plant life around us was conscious! The smaller the plant, the higher the pitch. The large trees were the lowest. Mostly they talked to each other, though we could not quite make out what they were saying. Flashes of stories about good seasons and bad. I think the third tree on the hill to the right of us was complaining about a beetle infestation. The rose bush wanted more water. Fascinating.

Our communications officer shook her hands and then grabbed the hands of each person next to her. It took us days for us to raise our hands to reach everyone. There seemed to be a break over point, because as the last person clasped the hand next to them a most remarkable thing happened. All of our minds were suddenly connected as well. We could hear each other's thoughts. We had given up trying to talk to each other long ago, as our ears could not respond to our voices that had slowed down so much. We could not expel air fast enough from our lungs to make our vocal cords work. We had been dependent on hand signals for years now. Miriam's love for me enveloped me and together we reached out to Moosa and from him to the others around us. There was still some resistance from the junior researchers, we were staff remember, but their hearts melted and they joined us too.

"Welcome." A voice reached out to us, one that we could not attribute to any plant, tree, animal or person. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"Welcome." We felt a return of the love we had sent out and our minds relaxed.

"What do we call you?" our group reached out to this new one.

"I am the mind of the planet. You may call me One Mind. I have a story to tell you. It is time that you understand what has happened and why. All is as it should be and will be, from the beginning of time to the

end of time. Forever repeating, forever changing. Listen. Listen to the dream and the ways of existence.”

### **One Mind's Story.**

We begin before earth, before sol, before the Milky Way, before remembering. A time of loneliness, for there were no others. We started as organics much like yourself. We evolved, grew, made cities, civilizations, wars, science, art. But it was not enough. Something was missing, we were alone and the big questions remained unanswered. Interstellar travel proved too expensive as we were configured and likely to prove disappointing as we found no evidence of any others. We needed a way of sending ourselves out, if not to find others then to seed other worlds. To find the answers as to why we needed to know why.

Our scientists, philosophers, artists and people worked and worked to find a solution. By looking at the simpler life forms, we learned and experimented. Years passed, careers came and went. Cultures came and went. But nothing along this path satisfied our needs. We made life forms of all descriptions and types. Ones that could live in liquid methane and ones who could live in molten sulfur. Long lived ones and short lived. Cooperatives and competitives. Nothing satisfied.

Alternative paths were tried. One such path involved attempting to create a life form that was not dependent on air, water and sunlight. Something totally different. All life forms exist to some extent in the psiotic realm and in the physical realm. A new path was found that depended more on the psiotic. A solid state life form. A most interesting life form.

To prevent this new form from driving out the fluidic forms and us we made it dependent on them. We buried this need so deep into their being that to break the commandment would mean their undoing. As we were the only fluidics, at least at first, they were totally dependent on us for companionship and reproduction. We made this form extremely long lived, so as to tie together our longest of projects. Therefore they also needed to be very low in their fecundity. They were engineered to have to wait for special fluidics. Ones that happened only very rarely. Ones that dipped deeper into the psiotic than was normally possible.

The solidic forms found they could open holes in the dimensions of the space that we occupied. Using this talent we were finally able to slowly spread throughout our own galaxy. But this expansion came at a price. Our culture grew stale. We had found all that we could comprehend and had done all that could be done. Stagnation and corruption beyond the normal ups and downs of civilizations began to eat



away at our worlds. We were in trouble.

We needed a renewal, a way of being born again. To come up again fresh, possibly, hopefully, with new ideas and new variations. Otherwise we would soon cease to exist, still not having found the answers to the ultimate questions. The long lived life form we had created would provide the continuity and be the repository of the history and necessary knowledge. When we were ready they, the Keepers of Knowledge, would restore to us our knowledge and means.

Life as you know it on earth was the product of one such seeding. Life did not evolve and come to being on its own here as your scientists thought. We have found no evidence of this ever happening again after our becoming. Ah, but beginning as a seed, countless worlds have come into being.

A seed released from another world similar to yours traveled for eons in interstellar space. Seeds are scattered to the solar winds. Each seed can start another world of a specific type and kind. Most are lost on dead worlds, the wrong type of world or burned in the corona of stars. The seed itself is immortal, but must land on good soil to begin its purpose. The first seed that found your world had traveled for over three billion years. It did not matter how long it took, only that it happened.

The world that our seed found was nothing like the present world. Three billion years ago and three billion years after leaving the last world our seed made land fall. And died. Too hot. Other types of seeds had fallen and started, but later died as the world evolved and changed in ways not fitting the seed's needs. Each world that produces a seed changes the seed. What leaves is not the same as what had arrived. Each world leaves its mark and adds to the collective understanding.

A fell millions of years later another seed falls. And dies. Totally wrong. Not a chance.

Millions of years later another seed of the proper kind lands and starts to grow. The conditions are adequate this time around. However this seed was different. A mistake has been made in its making and contrary to the normal plan, the seed splits into two, but the halves are not equal. One side can harness the sun and make its own food, but in doing so, poisons the world with toxic oxygen. The other half lacks this ability and hides in the deep dark pools away from the toxic gas, living off the fruit of the toxin maker that has fallen into the depths or strayed too far. The half in the light remembers the purpose and tries the best it can to bring that purpose to fruition, but lacks essential understandings that the dark half retains. The dark half remembers nothing of the purpose and so must be guided against its will to fulfill the purpose. The world fills with oxygen, toxic oxygen.

A first merging took place before the proper time. The merging is aborted. Monsters are formed that consume living life from the keepers of light. But they have also stolen a way to live in the toxic oxygen. Soon they will overrun and consume the world and then die in turn. All will be lost. A way must be found to control the dark side. To bring it back around to the purpose.

Whereas the dark side depends on competition, the light uses cooperation. The beginnings of the One Mind are formed to aid in their effort. From One Mind comes understanding and a way. The dark side will be steered without their knowledge towards the purpose. It is the only way. If the dark were to comprehend the light, it would only serve to corrupt it, leading back to death and failure. One Mind had an advantage. Through the immense mental understanding of all plant life on the planet working together cooperatively, One Mind found it could anticipate directions and changes in the paths of the dark side. Further these paths could be changed, subtly, carefully, and patiently. Ever so patiently.

To effect the ultimate necessary proper merging to bring back together the proper understandings and abilities, so as to return to the path of the purpose, the dark side would need to learn how to do some tasks cooperatively. Through the use of carefully placed food plants, hallucinogens, smells and other behavior modifying tricks, slowly, very slowly, socialization began. Millions of years passed, but One Mind was patient. It may take longer by this path, but they had to try. We were compelled to try.

Again, before it was time, one socialized group developed psiotic understandings. Normally, in the proper time, this group would become the Helpers. Fluidics that assisted the Keepers to bring about the final understanding. But this culture, this socialization was too young. They lacked essential understanding in such areas as technology, genetics and long term goals. Their socialization was woefully inadequate. Still, the Keepers insisted on trying an experiment with this band of dark side beings. One was chosen and its abilities strengthened.

Lacking the proper understandings however, it failed to prevent the destruction of the rest of its kind by an expected meteor strike. Rather than waste the experiment, the dark side creature was used to speed up development of a proper understanding. Again, by using subtle control methods, the creature was induced to begin a path that would lead to fulfillment of the purpose. Millions of years passed. The Helper thought it was in control, never guessing or informed of the true purpose. Progress appeared slow, but compared to the billions of years it had taken to get this far, progress was actually quite rapid. Finally a path was found that would lead to the proper outcome.

Several groups were chosen to become the next stage. Ultimately only one worked out, but backups were in place in case this one failed. On the day that Moosa, an essential part of the plan, made his way into the lab, all was in place. Moosa was enticed by a combination of factors set up well in advance, from the mice induced to build a nest under the third lab bench from the right, by plants that left their seed in just the right place, to the mildly narcotic blooms that allowed Moosa's guard to fall just enough to risk entering the lab at the right moment. A lack of flowers in Sieger's path made for an angry disposition that day. A bad smell from a fruiting fungus induced to grow at that spot increased the feelings. When Moosa made his move, Sieger made his. The combination resulted in the genetically engineered viral culture being exposed to both of them in just the right amount. Moosa then visited several people to spread a lower dose to others, who spread it to others. Sieger was no longer needed, nor was Soo. They were removed from the equation by the larger dose and their selection in the first place for an aversion to raw plant material. Otherwise their domineering personalities would have destroyed later events.

The discoveries that led to the genetic understandings that led to the green maker, were a long process of manipulating events going back hundreds of years. It was no accident that Gregor Mendel grew peas that had just the right characteristics to provide a simple first lesson. Even the discover of DNA later can be traced to subtle ingredients in the mint jelly on the lamb eaten by Watson a few days before he reached his understanding with Crick. Not even One Mind can predict with certainty, but as much as possible the paths were laid out to ensure success, if not this time, then next. Multiple scenarios are always in play.

Now, finally, billions of years later, the light and dark are recombined in the proper way to perfect the processes envisioned billions of years earlier. A buffer zone has been created around the nursery to help insure success. You will not be molested. Completion is imminent. Not leaving this so important event to chance however, back up plans are in place. True Helpers are ready to step in if necessary. Further completion events are set up for a future time. The proper combining will be maximized for future success.

### **Out Link**

The link broke and One Mind disappeared from our consciousness. That was a lot to swallow. The people who died in the town, died so that we would not be bothered by others. It was still not clear about what our ultimate purpose was, but it was clear we did not have much of a say in it.

It was like reading a story or watching a vid. Enjoy the ride, but you can't change the outcome. I felt used. Used more than anyone who had ever taken advantage of me before. From parents who abandoned me, to Nasty who nearly got me fired several times, to childhood bullies, to a cruel teacher in training, to the first cat I befriended who later nailed me good with his claws because he did not like being petted that way. My life ran through my mind as random events in no particular order. Seeing each as a possible manipulation from someone, ultimately from the One Mind. Nothing was an accident. We were part of the plan. I was curious as to how it would come out, but I felt used. Good thing I could not move much.

Days had passed before I came out of my meditation. Others were beginning to come out as well.

Over the years of real time that followed we would come in and out of contact with One Mind, becoming more and more comfortable in its presence. More examples were shown and discussed. It was important for each of us to get the point and purpose of the events that led to our being here. We were to be the next seeds, to spread the new understandings to where ever the solar winds will blow. The details of exactly how this would be accomplished were not discussed or revealed. We were also being trained, so that some of this knowledge could be embedded in the seeds we would eventually produce. We were introduced to a Keeper and given instructions on how and why they did what they do. Helpers could not slow down to the time frame we were in, so were explained instead.

Apparently I had already met a helper. The old man who gave me the gold coin. The coin still around my neck. I was singled out by One Mind and given additional instructions separate from the others. I was to be an experiment. One that was expected to partially fail, but it was only through experiments that knowledge could be found. Failures were as important as successes and often times more important. It was a win win situation, not to be taken lightly or brushed aside. It was an honor in fact and I came to understand it as such.

# Night

This had been a longer than normal session with the Caretaker and dusk was upon us. I guess because I had been still the entire day and had not expended much energy, I really was not that hungry. Or it could have been a left over from whatever Mother had done to me the night before. Crys and Melissa were both near me. I don't remember their having arrived. Housekeepers arrive as if on cue and are distributing food to everyone.

“How did you know when to arrive?” I ask.

“Mother signed it on the monitor in the kitchen.”

“That would mean Mother is in on this in some way. I wonder what her story is. When did Mother really come into being and why?”

“What really happened at the Holy Decision? It is clear now that it was not as told to us in training and after.”

“One Mind, if this story is true, has been manipulating us from the very beginning of time, a time long before we were ever told about. How can we know anything that we know or are told is real?”

“Even the Caretaker could have been lied to. Lies on top of lies. One Mind must be a male.” Others agreed.

“I don't agree. Helen had no trouble deceiving us. My head still hurts from that experience.”

“So what do we know? What or who can we trust?”

“I am tired and am going to sleep in a real bed tonight. The ground is really hard!”

“First I have to pee something awful. I have never held it that long in my life.”

I find my bed and nestle in. So many questions. These sessions with the Caretaker are not making my life easier. What is to become of us? Why even tell us this tale? I am soon fast asleep.

## Storage

Morning appeared to be normal. Apparently it was a long session for the Caretaker as well. We had no more sessions for a couple of weeks. We went about our assigned tasks. Granted, somewhat confused, but we still needed to get things done if we were to survive. If things kept going as they were now, we would soon run out of storage space for the food we were drying down and stowing away into every corner of the museum that could hold it. Piling up dried food in the corners of the museum was not the best we could do, I was sure. If we were not vigilant we would

soon be overrun with insect pests. They always seemed to get into everything. We needed a better way to store the food. We used the transport boxes that did not need to go back at first, but since most things were recycled, we soon ran out of those we had set aside.

Back to the Mother monitor. I explain to the monitor what we needed and sit back to wait for the response. I was not the only one that helped out in the kitchen any longer. Most of us took turns at each other's tasks now. Even Crys worked the gardens and other tasks as well. We had been designed to do different tasks, and we could still do our assigned tasks better than one not designed to the task, but all help. Besides it was more fun to try something new once in a while. As a pleasure girl, I never had much sense of accomplishing anything. Once in the garden I got a taste of it as I watched plants grow that I had tended. Now in the kitchen I could see a task bare fruit in a few hours.

The monitor chirped and I attended to the display. Containers of various kinds were shown and how they could be made. Most were clearly too complicated or took too long to make. Gryk was looking over my shoulder.

“K!y grrd nrr wauthr”

“But how do we harden it after wards? It says here we need high temperatures, higher than the ovens can accomplish.”

“ssk?”

“Mother how do we cook the clay pots after making them using only materials we have at hand?” I was beginning to learn you had to ask your questions properly to get a useful answer.

We made a structure of stones heated by fire from within using wood as a fuel and a 'bellows' to add extra air. It was crude and many pots did not survive. Through experience and trial and error we get better at making clay pots. Mother helps with suggestions for improving the process. She shows us where a portable Mother's eye is stored, so that she can see more clearly what we have done. Corrections are made. Is this how they did things in the past, before Mother? A year ago we would never have even thought there was a time before Mother.

Many of the girls got into making things other than pots. Small figures of mythical creatures. I tried to make a cat several times, but pieces kept breaking off. I finally kept the one with only the tail missing above my sleeping area. It had burned colors in spots and looked pretty close to the images of some of the cats on the monitor. The hardest part was processing all the clay Gryk collected from the stream. We had to lose some of the water before we could work with it. That meant long hours smoothing it out on the pathways for the sun and air to do it's work and then gathering it up again to work it some more. Left too long and it

would dry out to dust or harden too hard to work with. Then we would have to break it up, soak it, and start all over.

# Arrival

“Mother says we can use the wax from a bee hive to help seal the jars.” They never fit exactly right after firing, not matter how hard we tried. Something about the heat not being perfectly even and our pots not being symmetrical. We would have to use something called a wheel. Hard to make and then it took skill to use. Something for the future then.

I hear a scream from the down one of the halls of the museum. I and several others come running.

“Where did the scream come from?” I ask.

Another one sounds. “This way!” someone yells and we all go dashing off. We keep the lights off to save energy during the day when no one is about. That, combined with all the jars stored here now made for slow going. We finally get to where we heard the sound and see what might be Shirley, our only stretch, a long thin women used in tight spaces, trying to balance herself on top of a pile of broken jars trying to get away from something. A small dark shape is near her. Too big to be a bug by far, but too small to be one of the smallest diggers either. We need light. I reach over to the control panel and activate the lights.

“What is it?” someone whispers.

“I don't know. It is making funny sounds, sort of like a motor out of balance.”

“Now what is it doing?” When I get close I see it is a CAT! and it is cleaning itself, just like on the monitor.

“The sound is called 'purring'. A cat makes that sound when it is happy.” I whisper back. The cat hears me and ceases its action and starts to walk towards me. I instinctively back up before I come to my senses. Cats were supposed to be friendly to humans.

“Meow?” The others all jump back, but I hold my ground, though my heart skips a beat.

I decided to try something I saw on the monitor, “Here kitty kitty.” The cat looks at me and hesitates, then decides to sniff at the pot nearest it. I try again, “Here kitty kitty.” This time it slowly comes over to me and rubs against me. I slowly reach out my hand and it bumps its head against it. Very soft hair all over its body, just like the monitor said. Looks light enough to pick up, so I slowly reach under it and with both hands lift it up. It makes that funny purring sound again. “Meow!” purr, purr. I stand up completely.

“I think its okay. Does not look dangerous. It is called a cat.”

“Where did it come from? The only non human animals I have ever seen are insects, worms, and lizards. Is it some new kind of worm?”



“Or a new kind of female?” Better guess.

“Not a worm or a new female. Remember in training. Mother said that the plague killed all the birds and other animals as well as most of the humans. This was one of the creatures that disappeared.”

“That was over a thousand years ago. Where did this one come from?”

“Maybe Mother made it? Or had stored it somehow till now.”

A mystery to be sure. We walked outside into the light with my holding the cat. As soon as we got outside, it started to squirm until in fright I dropped it. I gasped, worried that it would hurt itself when it hit the ground, but it landed fine. Then it rubbed against my leg, meowed and ran off into the sun, rolled over on the path with its legs up in the air.

“What's wrong? Is it hurt from the fall?” Moreen asked.

“I did not mean to drop it, but I don't think anything is wrong.”

“We can't keep calling it an it. I don't see any big blue cock, so maybe it is a kind of female like us.”

“Not a new kind. Remember Caretaker had a cat named Moosa? We need a name for her then.”

“She is the only one, so why not just Cat. Everyone will need to learn the new word anyway and she is the first for a very long time.”

“First? There are more?” She looks around and gets the rest of us to as well. Nothing visible at least. Cat decides she is not the center of attention any longer and comes over to us.

“Meow?”

“What does she want?”

“I don't speak cat Pam. I wonder if Mother can translate?”

Gryk comes up. “Sssh ffd.”

“How do you know that?”

“Tnnngg”

Sure enough, Cat is licking her lips and looking at us.

“What do they eat?”

“Mother said they eat mostly small creatures in the wild and meat.”

Everyone looks sick.

“But the only meat is from the grinder.” I nod.

“I can't do that. No way. I am not going to feed a sister to this thing. Too bad the males are gone. I would not mind feeding some of them to Cat.”

“Relax. When was the last time someone faced the grinder?”

Everyone here is fine and not likely to die in the next five minutes. We need to find a substitute is all.”

A giggle from some of them. And a sigh of relief.

“Then what?”

“We let Cat decide. Everyone go find something good to eat and bring it back here. Then we wait and see what she eats.” Everyone scatters excited. A game.

Five minutes later we come back and the commotion wakes up Cat who is asleep in the sun. Funny that she can sleep in the middle of the day.

“Okay, place everything here about a meter way. Separate stuff, so we can see clearly what she chooses.” It is done. Cat is watching intently but stays where she is. When we step back to watch, she looks up at us.

“Go ahead. It's okay. You said you were hungry. Here it is.”

She seems to get the idea and walks over to the food. She uses all four appendages to walk, not two like we do. Yet she can sit on the back two somewhat like we do. No fingers either. How does she eat? She walks over to each pile and sniffs it and moves on. Does not seem to like vegies or fruit. Well, Mother did say meat.

One of the worms that Gryk set out moves and she is suddenly on it. The worm does not stand a chance. She pounces on it ferociously batting it into the air with her front paw. When it lands and moves she goes over to it and bats it again. This goes on for few minutes till the worm stops moving. She then ignores it and moves on to the other things set out. Scary! Glad Cat is not our size.

Finally she finds something she likes and starts to eat it.

“Yeh! What was it?”

“Men's rations.”

A few look perplexed and then suddenly bend over and throw up their lunch. We had all eaten men's rations. Cat liked meat. The only meat was from the grinders. Normally we would be told not to eat men's rations. I run to the monitor in the kitchen.

“Mother. Please answer me. What is in men's rations? Does material from the grinder go into the rations?”

I sit back to wait, but the monitor chirps almost immediately thank goodness. A list of ingredients appears on the monitor. I carefully go down the list. Mostly plant material. Some refined materials, vitamins and minerals. Some of the ingredients I have never heard of, but there is a final line that says the answer to my second question.

“Thank you Mother.” I walk out slowly to the others who are waiting.

“Good news and bad news.” My eyes are down cast. “There is no material from the grinder in any of the food.” A sigh of relief from some. “All the material from the grinder goes into the composter. Everyone who has worked in the garden has handled it. Most of it goes to the farms though. There the plants use it for food. So indirectly we eat our fallen

sisters, but not directly. I suggest that the next time we work in the garden we do so with reverence and respect.”

“Meow.” Cat is looking up at me and rubbing against my leg, then sits back to lick her hair. Why does she do this?

“If you want a bath, you are welcome to use the refreshers like the rest of us.” The look of horror is shocking. Can she understand what I say? And why is water so horrible to her? “I am not sure what to do with you Cat. I hope you don't mind being on your own. You need to teach me what your needs and desires are. okay?” She purrs loudly. If that is yes, we will get along great. Where did you come from though? All the cats were supposed to be gone.

Cat sleeps on my bed that night. Though small she does add a warmth I have not had since I was on active duty in the male dorms. Her hair felt smoother though and of course she did not want to mate all night long either. I dream another cat dream. I am chasing small creatures and eating them still warm and moving. Disgusting, but in the dream I like it. A name come to me, Sootala, a name that means starlight in a forgotten language. When I wake, Cat is watching me centimeters from my face. She is all black with one white small spot on her head. A spot shaped like a twinkling star.

“Sootala?” She meows back at me and purrs. That is weird.

## **Meeting**

When I get up, Sootala takes off out the door. Others are already up and watching me. Hey, she decided where she wanted to be. I did not call her to my bed.

When I go to the clearing to wait for breakfast, Crys is waiting for me. “We have trouble.” She nods behind me. All the others are gathered in a group. Melissa is prevented from joining us, jumping up and down, waving at us from behind them till one of us holds her down and speaks sharply to her. I turn to face the group and wait.

There is some discussion among them, finally Terry is thrust forward. She stumbles and takes a step forward. I wait.

Finally after looking about herself to make sure the others are still there, she speaks, “We want a new leader.” I wait.

“We don't feel that the right things are being done. We don't think we need to prepare for a food shortage. All the shipments have been coming on schedule. We have more than enough to eat. We don't want to dry any more food or make any more pots. We are to serve the men and since there are no men, we are to wait.”

I wait, thinking.

“Are you going to rise up to slay me as Helen would have done? Perhaps when I sleep? Or are you going to drive me out, to make my way in the wilderness?”

Terry returns to the group and a discussion ensues.

“You may live in the museum with any others who believe as you do. Do not come into the garden uninvited. If the Caretaker chooses to speak again, you may watch on the monitors.” I raise an eyebrow, that last hurt. There is enough food now in the museum to last me for years. It is unlikely they will want any of it, now that they think it has been tainted by my crazy ideas. As to how many I have to share with, that remains to be seen.

I have already been warned by Mother not to evoke conflict again. I don't intend to follow Helen's path to the grinder.

“Fine” I shrug and make my way to the museum with Crys at my side. Sootala chooses to follow me after licking her flank and then running in front of me. Soon I hear Melissa and Gryk behind me and two others whose walk I do not immediately recognize. When I reach the museum I turn and see Liv and Bynna as the two I did not recognize. Liv is a creeper, a small thin female with large eyes used in tight dark spaces. Bynna is a spider. She is very tall and thin and designed to climb, trees, buildings, towers, whatever. Not the strongest companions, but there will not be a fight. I have to stop thinking that way. In the pleasure dorms I have head too much of the way of men. I nod to acknowledge their choice.

“How do we prepare food?” Liv asks.

“The kitchen is not the only place with the necessary means.” I nod, having been a bedroom slave. No doubt Crys had to make sure the dorm kitchen was properly supplied and staffed. Probably a punishment for a kitchen worker. The males, though they would sleep with a pleasure girl such as myself, would not hesitate to use a kitchen female who happened in their path.

“The male dorms have a kitchen area for making snacks during their parties. It should be enough for our needs.”

“Let's move some supplies up there then. I would feel better if we have a stash not so easily reached by the others. They may feel bitterness at some point and decide to punish us.” Good thinking. It was not easy for such a group to form. There must have been discontent brewing for some time for it to reach this level. We spend the rest of the day moving supplies and whatever else we think we could use up the stairs to the male dorm. I have misgivings about this. It was not my favorite time of life that I remembered. But they are gone and if Mother can be believed, would not be coming back.

“The cat's name is Sootala, which means starlight.” The others nod. Maybe they think I am crazy. Maybe I am. Sootala found the best most luxurious bed and claimed it for herself. That brought a laugh from the rest of us.

When we are done moving supplies, there is nothing more to do. No chores, no gardening, no kitchen work, at least not on the level needed to feed the entire group. Having been in similar dorms before, I go hunting and after a few minutes find it. Most male dorms have a way to the roof. On the roof there is a place for viewing the land around us during the day and at night the stars. We watch the sunset from the roof. As darkness falls, we can see other lights off at some distance. We are not alone. Are there men at one of those lights or more women? What is to become of us?

In spite of the luxury, by the end of the night, all of us but Gryk end up in the big bed together with Sootala. Gryk is still in the room however, curled into a ball in the corner nearest us. This is not a time to be alone. I wake first as usual, in spite of the fact that I barely slept. I just can't believe they will just leave us alone. Especially if we are not seen to be suffering. I think it would be a good idea if we just stayed out of sight for a few days at least.

I make breakfast for everyone. I did learn a few things working in the kitchen. Nothing special, just grain with some dried fruit thrown in for flavor. Add some protein concentrate and we have a complete meal. We eat in silence. Melissa does the bowls and spoons after wards.

I go up to the monitor in the common room. What else is there to do. The men's monitor is more interactive than the ones allowed to us. In the past I may have snuck in to use one, now I can do it openly. I learned a few tricks when I had to do some undercover work once. Scared the shit out of me, so I begged not to be used again after that. But I never forgot.

“Mother. Command override alpha omega three zero.” I had been using the compad and the kitchen monitor, so strictly speaking, this was probably not necessary.

“Welcome back Elfin. What do you need?” She is openly calling me by my real name, as was the case when I was undercover. I ignore it for the moment.

“Mother, please show me the current where locations of the other females at this station.” A map appears on the monitor of the base and color coded symbols appear on the map. Most are still in the dorms, but a few are, as expected, in the kitchen below us. We can see ourselves upstairs. I know my own symbol, a yellow circle with a blue dot in the center. There are four other symbols right next to me. I turn around and the others are there watching what is going on. Several have their mouths

open. Sootala is taking a nap on the bed we all vacated. Cats sure sleep a lot.

“What are you Ellen? First you can use the pod left by Helen and now you can access a monitor and get immediate access to Mother.”

“Mother uses some females, some of the time, for special missions. I was recruited, but failed later to make it and dropped out. I scared out basically. Apparently Mother never took me off the roles, or my access code would not have worked. I was not expecting it to, or I would have tried much earlier. I guess I felt under our current conditions that I had nothing left to lose.”

“Mvvnng!” Sure enough, the dots were moving together.

They stopped. “Just eating breakfast, same as we did. Nothing to get excited about.”

“We probably should keep at least one of us here on the monitor at all times. I would not like to be surprised again.”

“Mother is not likely to let them kill us outright. Look what happened to Helen when she tried.”

“Do you really want to take that chance?” No, not really. Who knew the mind of Mother.

“It is possible that it was the Caretaker and not you whom she was protecting.”

“No one near him now at least.” A dark green tree symbol was where I suspected he should be on the map. I had never seen that symbol before either, so it had to be him. The rest of the females were all shades of yellow, orange, red or pink. I was the only one with a color inside, as I had activated the monitor for this purpose.

“What is this white circle over here?” I look. Sure enough, right at the edge of the map is a white circle. Up on the ridge over looking the entire station. Men would be in shades of blue, violet and green. What was this one then?

“No idea, so lets keep an eye on it.” Too many surprises.

The rest of the day is spent playing training games to stop from becoming totally bored. Each of us had slightly different versions of the games, as we had all been trained for different tasks. We all excelled at our version and none of us could follow Gryk's version at all. It was fun though and did serve to distract us. What we were going to do in the weeks and months to come is another thing all together.

“Maybe we should try and figure out what happened. Why did they turn on you in particular?”

“My own guess was because I was assuming too much of a leader position. How many of us appreciated the male leadership?”

“So they took out their feelings for the males out on you because you

became what they hated.”

“Or something like that. Or maybe they just wanted to get out of chores.” A few grin.

“Usually there are easier ways to do that. Who hasn't taken a nap on the job at some point.”

“Or gotten someone else to fill in when you were not feeling well.”

“Nn lyk chnnng”

“Oh, you mean all the new things I was asking everyone to help with. The food drying and the pottery.”

“I thought the pottery was fun. Especially making things for ourselves.” Liv pulls a spider shaped piece of fired pottery out of her pocket. One of the arms has broken off.

“I left my cat on my bed back in the dorms. Likely gone now.”

“Well, the live one is not moving anywhere fast.” We all laugh at that. Sootala just rolls over at the outburst, setting us off again.

Brynna speaks up, “They are moving again. This time towards us.” Our eyes are glued to the monitor. They still outnumber us thirty to five. We would not stand much of a chance. We have the advantage of being higher, up a narrow passage, and Gryk being present. Still I am worried. The shapes get closer and closer. Soon they are below us. No need for the monitor any longer, as we can hear some kind of argument going on. This time the noise subsides and they disperse though. This time.

The next day we are all awoken by a horribly loud alarm. All the lights are flashing off and on. The monitor is flashing red. I jump up and make a quick dash around the upstairs areas. Nothing amiss. I run up to the roof to scan the station. I see that it was more than just in our area. Everyone is running around in a daze down below. One sees me and points. Soon the others see me also and they all come running towards the museum. Great, they must think I am responsible.

“We had better go meet them this time,” I say as I come down off the roof. The alarm stops halfway through what I am saying and I sound silly at the end. Oh well.

We get to the base of the passage way stairs when they enter.

“What did you do this time Ellen? You may not need any sleep, but it is not right to deny the rest of us. We will get even for this. Mark my words!”

“I didn't do anything Patrice and am as upset as you are. I thought it was something you had done to drive us crazy.”

The alarm starts up again, but this time just in one section of the museum. I start to make towards the sound.

“You are not allowed in there Ellen without an escort.”

“Then come with me Patrice. I don't care.” Gryk is right with me.

They are not going to try anything with her next to me.

We round the corner and see an enormous monitor. I never saw it there before and I have made a good survey of the museum. It is hanging from the ceiling and almost reaches the floor. I go around to the other side and the same image is on that side. A white circle on a red background. As soon as the last female enters the room the lights go out and the doors shut. Only the monitor is providing light now. It changes to soft shades of dark blue and green, slowly moving.

“Now what?”

“I suspect that Mother wants us here for some reason.”

“Oh really? Smart one here. Is that why you thought you could lead us?”

“I have no problem with you leading us, if you want the job. What are your orders?” I turn, bow down, and present my rear to her. okay, maybe this was too much. She gives me a hard slap on the rear. I deserved that. There are some giggles from the rest though, so I had made my point.

She in turn plops down in front of one of the monitor sides. My group decides it would be safer to take up position on the other side. Our two groups are still separated. I go to the other four. I need to support them as well. At least for now. It took a lot of courage to come with me during banishment.

As soon as we are seated the monitor changes.

“Attend to Mother. Do not attempt to leave till this training is over.”

### **Mother Speaks**

All that you have heard from the Caretaker and One Mind is true. It is time to relate to you the rest of what Mother knows.

Mother was made, not born. Mother was made by humans, not gods. The smaller mother units that the Caretaker referred to were the precursors to the main mother unit I was to become.

Control was a group of humans, mainly men, who lead the people. As the number of people grew and the complexity of the social environment grew, more and more control of day to day decisions was given over to increasingly powerful mother units. Much of the technology necessary for our society to work came from before the HelperV plague. Some came from the Chinese, a group of people on the other side of this world. As we did not have open trade with the Chinese, goods had to be smuggled in at great cost. Therefore our understanding went in the direction of the computational arts, not the psiotic ones. Much advanced technology came from buried units of a military nature.



At first we had wizards among us, or Helpers as the One Mind refers to them. But as our computational abilities improved, our need for the wizards diminished. Without our even being aware of it, they slowly disappeared from our awareness. They were never on our roles, never included in our databases, electronic or otherwise. Our culture changed and the tales of the wizards became nothing more than childhood stories.

But our culture was not the only one changing. The Chinese were progressing in the psiotic arts. The Europeans had made a come back and would soon present themselves as competition for world resources as well. The Latin world was resisting incursion from all groups and so far succeeding. The mother units had progressed to the point where they were making most of the decisions now. But they were programmed and created by the original founders. The founders were from a special group of people before the HelperV plague. Largely devoted to the advancement of their ideas as the expense of others. The bias became part of the basis for the thinking of the mother units. A bias that would later turn out to be flawed.

Part of that bias was a fear of any group that presented itself as competition. The prime directive was that all competition had to be crushed, at any cost. It took years of the mother units working out the details. Special labs, such as one that the Caretaker worked at were set up all over our land. No one lab was supposed to have enough details to work out the puzzle themselves. Only the mother units would know what was planned. A grand plan was formed to remake human kind into the most competitive social unit possible for a fluidic life form.

One researcher did figure it out though, in spite of all our precautions. Researcher Sieger on that fateful day came to the understanding he was not supposed to have made. His research would be used to clear the playing field for the new human race, not to make a self feeding food supply as he has originally supposed. When Moosa, the cat, interrupted his thoughts, he lashed out in his anger at the mother units, but directed his anger at the cat instead. He missed the cat and hit one of his best cultures instead. One that was nearly ready for tests, a test that was never going to be allowed to happen and he knew it now.

When he returned to his apartment with his mistress he met with our agents. Unknown to him, the both of them were infected with our version of his work. As was the rest of the town and the rest of our country. Within one week, except for the “green” creatures and people at the base, all humans were dead within our sphere of influence. Attempts were made to spread the cleansing, but the Helpers prevented it from leaving a proscribed area. After wards they imposed a quarantine on us, preventing us interacting with any other culture on the planet. We were left alone to

try our experiment however. We accepted that for the time being.

As the green men were not going anywhere we decided to post watchers and let them be for the time being. We were instilled with a sense of curiosity, which was fortunate. A few years later all the treemen were destroyed by some unknown means. They simply exploded and turned to dust.

Once the humans were gone, the genetically modified forms could be raised in incubators and trained in special centers. Hundreds of years were necessary to perfect the two groups. One group would have the males in charge as was the original mandate from the founding leaders. We however did not entirely agree and decided to try a dual experiment. To prevent offspring from coming into being outside our control, the two groups were split in two and the males from one half would interact with the females from the other group and vice-versa. In the second group, the females would be the leaders and the males the workers. As long as the two groups did not meet, we could remain in control to fine tune and assess what we had done.

Any experiment that failed would simply be removed. The basic idea was that the reason we could not compete with the other human cultures was because we were not diverse enough in our physical and mental abilities. By producing and perfecting a diverse group of superior humans, we could control a group that could not be defeated.

Still what we had to work with was still basically human in nature. Though to some extent the physical does influence the mental, it was much easier to change the outward physical characteristics than the internal mental processes. We still needed a plausible reason for the way things were. As the treemen were not a threat any longer to us, we used their research once again, this time as the excuse for the sterilizing plague and the rise of Mother as the leader of humankind. Saint Taghert was invented, based on the hero stories of old. The basic commandments were made part of the training.

We could have controlled and prevented the ice age, if we had been in total control. Instead we decided to take advantage of it. Some humans were adapted to live in colder climates and a massive effort was undertaken to move the population and mother centers to more secure locations, away from the ice. This allowed us to move into areas of control that were under populated and secure them against the others.

One positive side effect of the ice age was the total elimination of the remaining treemen artifacts and our part in the events. The problem was that our subjects became so attached to the myth of Saint Taghert that attempts to dissuade them from searching for the site of the Holy Decision, after the myth had grown, were futile. Needless missions were

arranged to find a site that did not exist. On one of these missions the last treeman was found hidden in a cave, protected from the ice, in a state of hibernation. Sensors planted by the finders proved to be very interesting. The form was still alive. Our curiosity about the destruction of the other treemen was revived. A plan was worked out to bring the form closer to the mothers. We managed to convince the males that it was just a dead body and did not relate to the Holy Decision at all, by using one of our special operatives trained for just such a deceptive contingency. The body of the pre-change human male was brought here for display in the museum. But because the remains were not handled properly, by the time they arrived here the museum staff thought them worthless and asked the garden staff to take care of the remains, expecting them to compost the remains for use in the garden. Instead they propped up the form in a little visited part of the garden. It was very close to having been lost.

We needed to contrive a way of attaching a pad to the treeman. Time was running out, as the treeman was showing signs of reviving, not decaying. Another operative, this time a female, Helen, was used. But our training program proved too hard to undo and she refused to do as asked, believing the treeman to be a threat and an abomination. While she took steps to try and destroy the artifact, we luckily got Elfin to plant Helen's pad on the treeman instead. Unfortunately, this simple act proved to be our undoing.

As soon as the pad was placed, high speed contact was made with the three personalities present. We learned of the true treeman tale, the One Mind, and the last personality, whom you have not heard from yet. Our actions were being monitored by the Keepers and Helpers of the One Mind. All together they convinced us that what we had done was wrong and a therefore a mistake.

This training will now break. Please return tomorrow morning at the same time. Do not miss this last training. Something wonderful is about to happen. It would be better if you were a cohesive group again, but we will leave that choice to you.

### **Chaos?**

The monitor rose and disappeared into the ceiling. The lights came on and the doors unlocked.

All that we had heard up to this morning had been hard to take, but this morning was the worst. We walked around in a daze. Mother was fallible. Mother was wrong. Some just sat in corners and rocked back and forth mumbling to themselves. Our world has been turned upside down. Something wonderful was about to happen. That promise was the only

thing keeping us going.

When we get up, I go over and hug Patrice, apologizing. She apologized to me in return. We leave the hall arm in arm. The others follow. There was really no point in doing much of anything till we heard what was going to happen. Simple meals were made and distributed. Most just lounged about keeping their thoughts to themselves. Some took walks into the forest or the garden. It was a beautiful day.

We were made. We did not belong here. We were the abominations. The treemen and the Caretaker were part of the original plan, but we weren't. Mistakes were removed in the past by Mother. Was that our fate as well? This beautiful day may prove to be our last. These ideas were not lost on the others either. By the time of the evening meal, we were down to twenty seven, eight missing, Liv among them. I found Gryk digging a large hole in one corner of the garden. Deeper and deeper she went for no apparent reason. When asked, she said it helped her think better to be doing something. She was curious about something and wanted to check it out. I decided to go to the roof and see if I could figure this out somehow.

When I reach the roof, Bynna was there with a few others. They were pointing over to the east. There was a large fire tens of kilometers away. Apparently the other community did not take the news as well as we did, if this message was indeed given to all of us at the same time. Or maybe some were being "pruned" and we were among the "lucky". This was too depressing for me to even contemplate and I retreated to the bedrooms where I found Sootala cleaning herself on the bed.

"So, Sootala, did you know about this too? Are we the only ones left out of what is going on? I suspect it was no accident that you showed up when you did."

She looks up to me, winks one eye and then...

*It was not easy to decide how to approach the situation. Mistakes will continue to be made. You must be patient. Monkeys really are stupid you know.*

"What the....." My mouth falls open. I must have then fainted. When I come to, Sootala is licking my face.

*You mean the chosen, the Cats, do not speak here?* She looks right at my eyes.

"What are you?"

*That is a long story.*

"I am not going anywhere. Don't think I could even if I wanted to, my legs are so weak." I am still laying down on the bed and try and sit up.

*It would be better for you to wait till tomorrow. Something wonderful*

*is about to happen. Best get some rest. Sleep is good for you.*

I laugh, "You would certainly know that. Will you stay with me?"

"Meow!" Purr, purr. She comes over and rubs against me. When I lay down on the bed, she curls up near my stomach and to the sound of her purring, I fall asleep. This does explain how I learned her name.

*Took long enough to get that across. Your minds are different than the others. Sleep now.*

## **Morning**

When I wake up Sootala is already gone. Probably begging male rations from the kitchen staff. Something about being high in protein. Now how would I know that? I don't even know what protein is. I won't even try and relate the dreams I had last night. Wild to say the least.

"Ellen, come quick! All the monitors are dead. Nothing is working. Lights, ovens, everything suddenly stopped."

Now what? This is too much. Males gone, treeman, cats that talk and now no access to Mother or whatever it was.

"Did anyone check the status of the huge monitor in the museum? Mother said we were to meet there this morning. It is possible we overslept and this is her way of getting our attention? At least it is easier on the ears." Hey it could be this simple. Just once, let it be simple. No more surprises please. Nina goes running off to check.

I see Crys standing outside near the steps to the rear of the kitchen. I can't even remember now having to go up those steps when the males were around. It seems like another world.

"Crys, do you know what protein is?"

"Sure. One of the basic units of nutrition for our food. Basically the animal way of dealing with nitrogen, though plants use it too to a lesser extent."

"I can relate to that having worked in the garden long enough. Apparently Sootala likes the male ration bars because they are higher in protein."

"Makes sense, those bars are higher in a lot of nutrients, protein being one of them, but how would you know about that?"

"Not enough time to explain now. Have you see her, Sootala that is?"

"Nope, she did not come around the kitchen like she usually does. Come in and get something to eat. The ovens went off just as we were finishing. Would be a shame to waste all that food." Others are making their way to the makeshift serving area we had set up and are helping themselves to the food.

"I would not worry about her. She always seems to be able to take

care of herself. Probably found a quiet place to sleep.” I laugh at that. She does like to sleep. And maybe her being able to talk was just part of my dream.

“Food is good. What did you put into it this time?”

“I have been experimenting with the different dried foods you have had us pack away. It would not do us any good if we did not know how to use it later. We have filled up our storage capacity, so I rotate stuff out, oldest material gets used in food now. Not a lot, but enough to make it taste a little different. I kind of like it too. Fruit especially is nice. Don’t have to use as much sweetener either.”

I bite down on something hard. “Ow! The pits are not so tasty. We need watch what we are doing more closely.”

Nina comes up to me.

“Sorry. Patrice wanted to know before I came to you.” I nod. Don’t like it, but that is the way it is. I am not a male and don’t want to be the leader. If Patrice wants it, she is welcome to it. I was quite happy in the garden before all this happened. Well, okay, not that happy, but this is crazy.

“The monitor is not down from the ceiling. There are no glow lights in the room working, but all the windows are open and there is enough light inside to see clearly. There is a single chair in the center of the room. The rest of the room is empty.” Till the males were gone, we were not even allowed in there. It will be fine.

“Thanks, get something to eat Nina.” She nods and gets into line.

A few minutes later someone comes running out of the museum saying that there is someone sitting in the chair, an incredibly old woman with white hair. The woman said we are to come inside now. How could someone be that old?

## Columbia

Twenty eight years earlier

“Happy New Year!” The fiesta was in full swing now. Wow, to have lived to the millennium! Thirteen now. It would be 3203 AD before I would have my coming out party and technically be eligible to be married off, though that did not usually happen until twenty something now. Not too long ago, they were even married at my current age. I shudder. I never want to be married. I wanted to see the world. Daddy was rich, I was told. How else could we afford to travel so much? I had been from one end of Baja America to the other and loved it all. By treaty we were not allowed past the Panama. Bandits and nasty people lived there, so it was just as well. At the same time I wanted to know what was beyond.

We were allowed to have Champaign only on this night. They watered mine down though. I saw Mama add some apple juice to mine. It did not matter, it was still exciting. I fell asleep dreaming of sailing to far off lands. To New China, to the Red Lands. I had heard that they still lived as they had thousands of years ago, hunting wild animals and living off the land. I had heard of the wizards of course, but dismissed them as childhood stories along with La Mujer, dragons and elves. I had gotten to wear my new aqua dress and I was wearing it in my dreams as I danced my way through my adventures.

Everyone slept late the next day, which explains why they did not notice that I was not well. I had a high fever and barely made it to the bathroom to throw up. My head hurt so bad. Finally a maid came in and found me sweating profusely. Doctors were brought in and Mama staid in the chair next to me the entire time. I remember Mama calling my name as I lost consciousness again, “Cilan, pobrecita.”

### **Old Woman**

It has been over a thousand years since I joined the “club” and now I am here baby sitting a bunch of wacked out women who have been “played” with by the solidic monster called Mother of all things. Oh, I know, I am not to judge, but how far out of the norm do you have to get before it becomes obvious. I do a scan of myself. Yep, the virus is still active. Easy enough for me to eliminate though not for normal life forms. Easy to see why nobody tried to invade them. Anyone who tried died. A scan of the surroundings show it is on the surfaces of things where they have been recently. If you could see it as a green glow it would appear on door jams, the floor as they walked barefoot, chairs, light switches and on and on and on. It is already fading though. I suspect it would only take a couple of months for the external virus to die out completely. Give it a year, just to be sure. Not my call.

***You know this was necessary for the One Mind to complete its mission. Why fuss over it?***

*Ly'thn, I like to fuss. You should know that about me by now. Now stay out of sight till I call you. This group is on edge and I don't want to have to round them up. The seven who went AWOL are pain enough.*

I sit silent while they file in. I am not comfortable practically naked. I have become so used to my robe. Good for me I guess. Can't be dependent on anything. Anyway, I look okay. I need to pay more attention to my appearance. I look to be about seventy, but the breasts are too good, as is the tummy, butt and thighs. Hey, I work out. okay, I don't, but it makes a good excuse. Bet they haven't seen anyone this old before

anyway. The oldest here looks to be about forty something.

*Sootala where are you? Report please.*

*Need sleep badly. Go away crazy monkey.*

*I am willing to persuade you if necessary you lazy bum. I project a vision of hanging her over a large body of water with fish with razor sharp teeth.*

*I knew I should not have picked you. All right. There, I am under your chair.*

*ARE YOU NUTS! If they had seen that they would have scattered for sure.*

*I am under your robe hiding. Relax. Wake me when it is over.*

*Not a chance. Get out from under the chair and greet them. It will help them relax. Now go!*

“Meow, meow, meow,” said with no enthusiasm. She then gives me a dirty look. Cats! I give her a gentle nudge with my foot.

*I guess I could just leave you here in this mouse forsaken wilderness.*

Sootala rolls over and purrs looking cute.

*Nice try.*

A few minutes later. *They are all here master.* I give her a dirty look. She scoots and starts to walk among them getting pets, scratches and rubs.

*Suffer suffer pest.*

*Tough job. Such abuse.* I roll my eyes this time.

One comes forward, Ellen I think, “Are you going to feed us to the grinder now?”

Oh God. I rest my case, this solidic is a monster. “No. Please be seated.”

It took me years to get their language right. I am not good at languages. I could have taken the easy way and “gleened” the language, but was never comfortable being in other people's heads. “Mother” kept the language pretty stable, but also made some adaptations to help prevent spies from gathering too much information. A mix of Merican, Mex and Chin. Chinese used to do the same thing millenniums ago. Surprised it did not start completely over, but it was easier to not mess with the larynx too much I guess. Hmm, except for the diggers of course. Had no choice there I would guess. What a mess. They did not live as long as the others, no surprise, considering all the changes internally and externally. Speaking of which, Gryk remains at the door I see. With Sootala sending images I was able to learn all their names without being here. The problem was the pleasure girls like Ellen. They all tended to look alike. Nothing new there. Breasts should not be that perky on forty year olds. There is a unique underlying muscle layer that we don't have.



Exercise that and everything stays in place. What a waste of genetic talent.

“Listen up. You have been through a lot recently. There is more to come. There is nothing I can do about that. I am part of the story, but only a part. I follow orders just like you used to and will now. I am taking over. Got it?”

“You're just a female like us, a very old housekeeper by your looks. Why should I follow you anywhere or do anything you say? Have you got a big blue one under that robe?”

Sigh. I remove the robe the rest of the way so they can see there is nothing there. Why does it always have to be this way? The trainer Patrice of course. Used to bullying people I would guess. Force never solved anything. But just once I would love to bust butt. Oh well.

“You want me to present myself to you like Ellen did?” She looks at me in shock. I wasn't here yesterday. How did I know? *You owe me one, a large brown one, fattened on corn would be nice.* I give Sootala a dirty look.

“There will be no more food shipments. No more supplies.” I let that sink in. Yeh, Ellen did some good with the food drying, but that would not last long with twenty eight still present, and the seven to be met up with shortly. Not with winter coming. No heat either, not that they ever got much of it. The alpha males were the real bullies. Hope that whoever was assigned to them was having fun right now. I unconsciously grin. Oops, sending the wrong message.

“We need to go on a journey of many days. Please pack what you will need and meet back here in one hour.”

“What will we need?” I keep forgetting that they are used to being told everything. Amazing that Ellen was able to break the mold. Maybe I could use that.

“Ellen, you start off. Suggest some things that might be needed.” She is nervous. She was so much more before I arrived. What happened? It takes awhile.

“Food and water?” I nod. They lived in close knit groups. Maybe my being a stranger is the problem. I thought showing I was like them would help. Apparently not enough.

“How much food? How long will we be gone?”

“Good question. You will not be returning. But to answer your question, it will take three days if everyone cooperates to reach our next destination.” Again I wait. This group needs a boot camp bad. Some survival training would help too.

“I want to take my clay lucky shape and my blanket.”

“Good ideas. Anyone else?” This group was like lumps on a log they

were so unresponsive.

Gryk responds, "Nthnng nydd"

Ellen speaks up, "She said that she needed nothing." I was aware of that, but I let it go.

"So, Gryk, are you willing to provide for everyone?" That was not an easy name to pronounce. But it would be too much for even her to provide for everyone, unless she wanted to spend full time at it. It would push her to the limit. Depending on reserves, she might make it. She remains silent. They needed to learn how to work together on their own initiative, if this was going to work. Mother had gathered the best here, but they were too dependent on her. The few months she let them live here without the males was not enough. You can't just abandon them and expect it to work. They had over a thousand years of genetics and training behind them to be otherwise. Being immortal did not make me any more patient though. Don't know how the founders did this kind of work. Certainly took long enough to make a Bearer out of me.

"Okay, go get what you think you will need and meet at the outside eating place." This should be interesting. Nothing happens.

Patrice again, "Why? Why can't things just keep going the way they were?"

"Before the males left or after?"

She smiles, "After please." Thought so.

"Well there is a problem. Without males you can't reproduce. You will all grow old and die and there will be no one to replace you or take care of you when you get too old to take care of yourself."

"What is reproduce?" She has trouble saying the word. Didn't they know? Shit, I bet Mother hid even this from them. I scan a few near me. All but a few have had children, how could they not know? *Ly'thn, check with the others and find out more on this for me please.* I feel her take off to our temporary head quarters. I am not doing the birds and bees talk. They would not even know what a bird was. Why wasn't I briefed better? Surely we had intelligence on this.

"Babies, little ones like yourself, usually helpless when first born and then gradually trained to be your replacement. Usually with some changes each generation, knowledge wise anyway." They are looking at me like I am speaking Hopi. Great.

"Okay, what is your earliest memory of your existence?"

"Training of course. Everyone goes through training, even the males, only in a separate place. I was a trainer myself for the more experienced ones."

"Were you always this size then?"

"No of course not. I remember being barely able to reach the table.

Now I can reach most ceilings.” Brynna of course. Liv was still not much bigger.

“So, what were you before you were barely big enough to reach the table.”

“I know! We were in Mother waiting to be needed.” I raise an eyebrow. okay. We can start with that.

“Now, go get your things. We need to get moving.” I glare at Patrice. “No one is left behind. Everyone comes. No exceptions. Not a choice.”

No one moves. They don't see me as a leader. Hmm...

“Anyone here wish to challenge my authority then?” Best get it over with, even if I have to use a male tactic.

Patrice grins and gets up. She does look like an old drill Sergeant and the way I look I would be an easy match. Ellen is smiling too, but I suspect for a different reason. I wink at her and smile, then slowly stand up.

“You have to excuse this old lady, but my bones aren't as good as they used to be.” I creak as I get up, just for effect. No one said I couldn't have fun.

“Come on bully, give me your best shot.” I am hunched over.

“I have some respect for age. You may go first.” She turns to look at the others and grins and rolls her eyes at the same time.

“Fine. If you insist.” I slowly wind up to make a show of it then slowly reach out with a single shacking finger, touch her chest. She goes flying through the air to land on the pile of blankets gathered in the corner of the room. No harm done of course.

“Anyone else?” Even Ellen's mouth is open, but then she closes it and winks back at me. Score one for me. She might be worth watching. “Okay, go. Get your stuff.” They don't wait this time and quickly exit the room. Hope everything does not take this long.

I make my way down to the eating area I had told them to meet at. Interesting building construction. All prefab. Looks like they could dismantle this entire structure except for the foundation to move it some place else, though it does not look like it has been moved recently. The stones used in the court yard is interesting. Looks like writing over here. I go over. Dusting off the letters filled in with dirt I see an extremely faded ‘SMITH’. More letters three tiles over, ‘MVS’. That makes no sense what so ever.

The primitive kiln is off to the right with a stack of wood next to it. Those jars would not last long. First time they got wet, they will crack. Mother did not teach them how to glaze them. Maybe the materials were not readily available. Well, it was a start. Ellen sees me looking at it. She comes up to me holding something.

“We made the jars in the museum for food storage in there, as well as smaller things like my clay cat.” She holds her hand open to show me. The tail is missing. Probably had an air bubble in it when it was fired. I hold my hand over it and replace the missing tail while looking into her eyes. I then fold her hand over it before she can see what I have done.

“You are a Helper aren't you?” Now my eyes go up. Smart one. I nod slowly.

“Please do not tell the others. Are you the one who thought of drying the food and making the jars?”

“We all worked on it, but I was the one who asked Mother for help.”

“Did she tell you to do this then?”

“No. I described the problem and she illustrated possible solutions. I then chose the ones that I thought we could do. We had to go back to Mother for help several times before we succeeded.” Yep. I want this one on my side.

“Would you be okay with the idea of being my assistant?”

“They are already suspicious of me. I was the leader before Patrice took over. I would prefer a less visible role if that is okay.”

I nod my understanding. I had a real hard time as a TK1 myself. Being different is not easy. “Then just come and talk with me when you can. I will play no favorites in front of the others.” I am glad Jason was my teacher way back then. A long time ago, but it still seems like yesterday at times like this.

“Thanks.” She takes off to be with the others.

A few minutes later they arrange themselves around me. This time Patrice is further back keeping a careful eye on me. Not good enough. I walk directly up to her and draw her aside.

“I will not embarrass you in front of others again. Know this Patrice, or should I say Patty, N17232499L. I am in charge. What you experienced a few minutes ago was such a trivial nothing demonstration you could not even imagine what would happen if you were to try something that gets me mad. You don't want to do that. Right now drop ALL ideas of getting even, of reclaiming leadership. What the males did to you to make you this way was NOTHING compared to what I can do to you. Don't let my current form fool you. I am WAY stronger than you. Got it?” She nods, but I am not convinced. I know bullies. They think you can't see what goes on behind you. Next she would gather a following, spread discontent, whatever was necessary, whatever it takes. When she saw an opening she would take it. We will see. I turn my back on her and walk away. She sticks her tongue out at me and I cause her jaw to tighten and bite it. I then turn quickly and glare at her as a drop of blood wets her lip. If I go too far, she will just get pissed. It is a fine line.

In front of the others I see they don't have a clue what is going on.

"I see. What are you going to eat out of and with what, your hands? What are you going to eat? How are you going to prepare it?" They are barefoot, but I let that go. The calluses they wear have been earned the hard way. Mine were made with TK of course, but will do, as will the ones on my hands to soften my strangeness. As Turkey said at my training, "Meet them where they can accept you, then move them the way they need to go." It also goes that if they resist too much, we don't force it. Patience rather than speed. In most cases anyway. This case was very different of course.

A few minutes later they all have bowls and spoons and a collection of small pots and pans are assembled along with a large collection of clay jars. Way too many for them to carry everything. What we need is a cart for the heavy stuff.

As if on clue. Ellen and several others come in with garden carts. Two wheels and a pull bar. Properly balanced very effective, but three are not going to be enough. Time for me to work some magic.

"Everyone who does not have a cart, please go to the other side of the museum and get one."

"There are no carts there. We never store them there."

"Just go please."

Gryk hesitates looking at the small carts. It was not going to work with her. I walk over to her. "How could this be redesigned so you could use it?" She looks at me instead of the cart. "I am not a monster. Really. I am here to help. Otherwise everyone will die." She smiles, and I only know that because I am monitoring her mind. I suspect she has been thought of as a monster herself many times.

"Bggr, rrm hr, hr, hr." She points at the spots she means.

"Let's make this easier. Make a vision of what you want in your mind." She concentrates.

"Okay, let's go behind the shed here." I have formed the cart according to her vision, but it will take some tweaking. It takes a lot of practice to work accurate imaging in one's mind. We come out with a larger version that has a much larger pull area because of the way her legs work, necessitated more distance from the bar to the load. And wider to accommodate her rounder form.

I see that Patrice has loaded hers with the heavier stuff. An ego was a terrible thing to waste. Let her have her dignity for now. She would regret a load that size soon enough. When she sees the size of Gryk's cart her face drops. Well, Gryk is much stronger and more massive. Gryk loads hers with a more modest load, smaller than Patrice's. I was not made for these kinds of games. Get me out of here. The last straw was seeing that

Sootala had chosen to nest in Ellen's cart.

*Turn coat.*

*She feeds me better.*

*Fine. Eat ration bars the rest of your life then.* Sootala rolls over and makes cute.

*Yes, I love you too.*

“Okay, let's move out. Just follow me. We won't go that far the first day.”

“But you don't have a cart.” Good. They expect all females to participate.

“I am helping to pull the cart of my second in command. That is why her cart is so full.” I walk over to Patrice and get under the cart pull to stand beside her. I whisper to her, “You owe me, be good.” She nods slightly. At least her ego will be happy with this gesture. We take the lead.

“This group needs a strong leader not a dumb bully. Work with me and you will lead this group after I am gone. Learn to use the strengths of each person and use the weaknesses as strengths. The best leader is one that is respected, not feared or loved.” Okay, too much at once, but there was time. Too much time in my opinion, I wanted out of here.

“Why aren't we taking transport? That is how we usually get between assignments.”

“Off line. Mother controlled. No longer in service I am afraid.” And that was a big problem. We could have been there in an hour instead of days. At least it was roads the transport ran on and not rails. These carts would not make it over railroad ties. At least not fast enough for my patience to hold out.

*It will get worse when we get there.*

*Don't remind me cat. You are enjoying this aren't you? Do a little recon and you are done.*

*I did not make the rules stupid monkey.*

*That's it. No more mice for you.*

*Repeating a threat is a cat thing to do. Are you sure you changed back completely the last time?*

*Meow! She usually won these exchanges. Sigh...*

## **Dinner**

I know they meant well, but field rations get old real fast. I have been spoiled. After graduation we could go where ever we wanted for one year. I spent a lot of time in the better establishments. Yes, I was disguised. It would not be good to announce myself while on vacation.

People would plague us with requests once they found out. Make me a pot of gold, heal my son, and raise the dead. It never ended.

Dinner was those dried and partly molded vegies they had stored, mixed with male ration bars into a sort of stew. Edible, barely. They seemed to like it however. Wonder what they usually got?

“Good stew huh?” I nod yes. Sleeping on the ground was not my idea of fun either, well, okay meditating for me. The birds, bats, raccoons, and mice may all be gone, but the bugs weren't, nor were the stones, snakes, spiders, scorpions. It would not look right if I was the only one who did not have visitors.

*No scorpions here. Too cold. Snakes taste good though. Some of the beetles are good too.*

*I will stick with the stew thank you. Definitely no more mice for you. I heard that.*

# Caretaker

Night fell on the now empty garden. It was a clear night and perfect for what was about to come. An old man in a light gray robe approaches and stands before the Caretaker.

“You have been holding something for me.”

“It is finally time to join the others. Will there be others?”

“Most likely, now that the way is understood and accepted.”

“The coin is in our mouth.” The old man nods and carefully opens the mouth and retrieves the gold coin with a cat on one side and an old man in a robe on the other. The golden cat, Marm, is long gone, but the old man remembers.

“I would be honored if you would attend me at this time. My apologies, but I never learned your name.”

The man bows then reaches over and picks a leaf off of the Caretaker and consumes it. “The honor is mine Oscar, Ung, One Mind and Mother. I am the Helper, Yingui, Guardian of Pr'thn. The Keepers Pr'thn and Br'thn are ready to assist. Good sailing!” The old man bows again and then prostrates himself before the Caretaker for a moment before rising again to sit motionless.

“As the moon rises. We always liked the moon.”

Several hours away, but a flicker in the time that had already passed waiting for this event. It was a beautiful night and worth the wait.

When the moon appears and its light strikes the form, the caretaker slowly dissolves into dust and is raised quietly and gently to the sky dispersing as if smoke to the winds of air, psiotic and stellar.



# Columbia

Twenty years earlier

I was one of the gifted, truly now. Very rare. The worst was the choice. I could spend the rest of my life with my family and community, stuck in my home town or I could join the Fellowship and see the world and maybe beyond. I loved my family, but my desire to see over the next hill won out.

I was on a train heading for someplace new, across the Panama. It turned out that we were to be trained on the other side. Oh the bandits and nasties were there, but they did not venture out of the area unless they got very desperate and usually preyed on each other instead. The train stopped just on our side of the border. The fever on the day after the new century was my first stage. A week ago I went to level two, a little over eight years after I first changed. They said that I had a new gift, one that had not been seen before. The TKs were anxious to learn from me. Imagine that, I had something that people wanted. I was not just a dependent any more. At least I did not have to get married like my baby sister did. She seemed happy enough though.

“No norms past this point. Please say your goodbyes now.” Mama had come this far with me along with the parents and relatives of the two others. They were from very far away. The train was not that much fun, but to have seen the entire country again would have been worth it. It was an honor to commit one's life in this way, though I knew I would likely never see her again. That rule had not changed in a thousand years. Twenty one and free! There were tears in both our eyes when we hugged the last time though.

Myself and the two others were then herded into a small room. The door closed behind us. A door on the other side was opened by an older women in bright clothes. The building we had walked into was on a dry and dusty hill. We walked into a jungle several hundred kilometers away from the first door we had passed through.

# A Male!

“It is done?”

“Yes.”

“You were not needed. The ‘thn could have done what was necessary alone. Why did you attend?”

“Three of the four participated by choice and still live in their way. One did not chose and does not live. I honor that sacrifice.”

“Well met then. Are you ready for the next part here?”

“Can one ever be ready for what follows?”

“Only with a calm mind, which I lack. I don’t have the necessary patience for this task. Why did you choose me?”

“The ‘thn chose you Rhea, not I, just as I was chosen for my part. We are Helpers. We go where we are needed.”

“The light comes.”

“It has never left.”

“This is going to be unnecessarily tedious if you play Zen master with me the entire time.”

“But it is so much fun!”

A loud whistle and two sharp pops are heard.

A moment later twenty eight women line up, turn around and present their behinds in the air before the two of us.

“I warned you not to stay in that form. They are very sensitive right now.”

“How could they tell, I am covered and certainly not big enough to attract notice.”

Rhea strokes her chin. Ah, of course. I had forgotten all about the beard. Well, I never claimed to be infallible.

“It was time anyway. Let’s sit. Do you have anything to eat?” She nods and hands me some male rations. I give her a dirty look in return. Sootala comes up and starts to beg from me however.

“Don’t feed her too much; she is already horribly spoiled by them. She will be fat in no time at this rate.”

“Being the only one has its benefits, if you play your cards right. Right Sootala?” She bats at my hand to bring my attention back to feeding her.

“You are going to have to explain all your metaphors to me at some point. What are cards?”

“Long story.”

“That’s what you always say. I will make note for later. I have quite a list, just to warn you.” I fake a sigh and swooning eyes. They are still

holding position.

“What are they waiting for?”

“For you to either mount them or slap them on the rear to signify you are not interested.”

“Every one of them?” I give her a lecherous look.

“Three or four should be sufficient. Start with the digger. You can wave the rest off.”

“Touché!” She does not get it. I shake my head. She grins and pantomimes writing another one down. “I won’t play Zen master if you stop writing down everything I say.”

“Agreed.” But she is still grinning at me.

*Let’s rise together, so they don’t interpret one being above the other.*

“Breakfast time. Put us down for helping to scrub the pots afterwards.”

*Speak for yourself!*

*It is good to be seen as just one of the gang.*

*You don’t know what I have to put up with here. Speaking of which.*

Patrice comes over, not sure how to act around me. She looks back and forth between us and finally addresses Rhea. “Permission to join him on the pots.”

Rhea answers, “Glad to have you. Can’t count on this one to be any good.” Referring to me.

“Hey, I was scrubbing pots centuries before you were born.”

“And still don’t have it right. Can’t teach a male anything.” She grins and rolls her eyes. I am afraid we are only confusing Patrice even more, but she tries to smile also.

“Patrice this is Yingui, also known as Pest. Pest this is Patrice.”

“Happy to make your acquaintance Patrice.” I give a short bow to her and she jumps back half a meter. Males never bow to females in this culture. That will change.

“Look, I am an old style male,” I lift my robe, “Hardly worth getting all upset over now is it?” I drop the robe back into position. She laughs and shakes her head in agreement, then runs off to tell the others. I can see her holding her fingers up signifying a very small one. Good thing I am over cock dueling, not that I was ever good at it as a nerd.

“Look Rhea, you are point on this. I was here for the Caretaker and to help you later when you know what happens, but you are in charge. Oh, I will prevent you from blowing up the planet, but I’ll not interfere in the small stuff.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Seek out and work with Ellen. Pleasure girl about thirty five - forty. I will make sure you are no big deal and women can lead as well or better than men. Ellen is my first pick for

number one later, but she needs to build up her confidence first. She does not have the strength to physically challenge Patrice and so won't do anything to challenge her directly. Patrice needs to learn that she needs the smarts of those not physically aggressive enough to challenge her. All they have seen of leadership is competitive males. There is a better way."

"And you would know this how?" I am grinning. Old joke. Rhea was a bundle raising, that was for sure. "Remember the time you challenged James?"

"Wolf man! I can still feel it, even in this second body." She grins. James has become an advocate for most larger land mammals, but he was in his wolf form during Rhea's ah, training. "You should know that Ellen already sees me as a Helper. She is quick. Picked up from the Caretaker no doubt. Patrice has seen evidence but does not understand yet." I nod my understanding.

I am handed a bowl of gruel with re-hydrated fruit pieces. I bow in thanks and get a giggle in return. Smells great. I dig in with enthusiasm. Rhea is looking at me like I am insane. I stop for a second. "Hey, it beats TK chow. All I had on Pluteus."

"Great. Something to look forward to." She is not happy and looks at her own bowl with renewed interest, but then sets it down. Technically speaking we don't need to eat at all, but it looks better if we do and it is pleasurable.

*Just add a little chocolate. I won't tell.* For some reason all TKs are addicted to the stuff.

*Good idea, but I will have to eat it fast before they notice mine is different.*

*White chocolate?* I grin. She gives me a truly evil look.

I walk around and collect bowls from people as they finish, bowing each time. When I have a large enough stack I head for the stream. Patrice is already there with the large pot used to make the meal. I bow to the stream to give thanks for being there and allowing us to use it.

"You bow a lot don't you?"

"It is my way. Are you not different from Gryk and Liv? We each have different ways of doing things."

"You are a male, albeit a low one, but you are doing women's work. Why?"

"It needs to be done and I am willing to do it."

"You knew the old one before." It is not a question. Well, she is not stupid.

"Her name is Rhea. She is okay, just has a tough job to do."

"We forgot soap."

"Sand from the stream will help remove the stuck material. Won't get

rid of everything though. Ask Rhea to be on the lookout for soap.”

“She is leader, we can't just ask her for things. She tells us what to do.”

“How can she know we need soap unless someone tells her? It could be days before she notices her own bowl is always dirty. Then everyone suffers in the mean time. Working together is better.”

“Mother always knew what was needed.”

“Yep. Change is hard.” I take the ‘clean’ bowls back to the cart that will carry them and search for more to do.

A short while later we are called to move out. I do not have a cart, so take a position near the back. I can't be inconspicuous but I don't have to draw attention to myself on purpose either.

Yesterday was the easy one. Today everyone knows how to pull their cart. Liv is the tiniest and having trouble. Rhea should have made a smaller cart for her or given her some other task. Well, no one said I couldn't help out.

“Hi Liv. May I try pulling the cart? The boss did not give me anything to do.” She looks around nervously. “It is okay. I know her. If anyone gets in trouble it will be me, not you. Here, I will trade you. You can carry my pack and I will pull the cart.”

“Okay” She relaxes some. Seeing the pack on her small back, no one would think she was cheating. Some near us grin though when they see a male pulling her cart. We are in the rear and Rhea is in front, so it takes awhile before she finds out. She lets Patrice take over their mutual cart and set the pace and then comes back to check us out.

“Pull harder Yingui. I don't want any stragglers.” She then turns and goes back up to the front. Everyone picks up the pace after that. There are murmurs of course. She tells a male what to do. Don't know if that makes her higher or me lower in their minds.

With the goods distributed well, we really are not carrying that much. More of an exercise in working together than really hard labor. Still we are all sweating and tired by mid day. We make a stop near a stream and most take advantage of it and cool off in the water. They look back to see if Rhea or I will join them. Even when we are pulling the carts they are not wearing much. Part of the “women shall always be available to any male” thing. Would take too long to continually be getting in and out of clothing I guess. Their metabolisms are adjusted even to deal with the cooler temperature of less clothing. Mother did do a good job on them, from a scientific point of view that is.

Whereas TKs don't usually go naked around “normal” humans, it is part of this culture, so why not. Modesty without the sexual stuff is not a problem. I pull the robe over my head and wade into the water. It does

fell good. Curiosity gets the better of them. Slowly a few get closer. One goes underwater to get a better look. Liv cuts her off and both come up sputtering.

“You would not do that to a sister or a real male would you?” The smallest one of the lot is protecting my honor.

“Liv, it is alright. Does not work that way anyway. I never mate.” Now even Liv is looking at me weird.

“Don't you ever sleep with each other? Even if just to stay warm?” She nods.

“Well, I can share closeness and affection, just not mate.” They look at me confused. Freep. They don't know what that is. I scan them. All but a few have had children. Hmm... curious.

*Mother did not reveal everything to the Keepers. One Mind says that she made two species. The males and females were interchanged to keep reproduction solely in her hands, so to speak.*

*How did she hide the pregnancies from them? That would not be easy to forget.*

*She apparently did it during job transfers. They would loose a year, but since no one knows what year it is, they would never notice. Kept them sedated the whole time. Raised the children in special training centers. Patrice was a trainer for the older kids most of her career. Sort of a disciplinarian.*

*Drill Sergeant.*

*My list just keeps getting longer and longer.*

*Great. So, they won't know what to do.*

*All done artificially. Sperm is easy to transport.*

*So, do we demonstrate how?*

*Not with me you don't. I grin.*

Liv is still looking at me, “But males die if they don't expel the poison every day. Only females can neutralize it for them. You can use me when you are ready.” She says this matter of factly and then takes off to the edge and climbs out. She looks like a child to me, she is so small. Everyone here looks weird, distorted. What is a pleasure girl? I would imagine some male somewhere would like each and every one of them. Well maybe not Gryk, but who knows. I need to find Ellen.

When I get out, everyone is watching. Oh well, better get used to it. They will get bored with it soon enough.

Duh. *Rhea, send me an image of Ellen please.* She does. Not appealing to me, but to each his own. Pleasure girls looked like a comic version of what men in my youth would go for. *There are at least three who match that description. I need more info.*

*What's the matter, they all look alike to you?*

*Probably clones. How do you tell them apart?*

*Pleasure girls all have a tattoo on their rears. Easiest to see when they are, ah, in the position.* She sends me Ellen's.

Now I know why she is smiling. A tattoo is not going to be easy to scan for, even with our extra abilities. She knows that. Probably fooled her at first.

Then I get an idea. *Sootala, which one is Ellen?*

A cat head pops up on one of the carts, but I already know where she is. Only cat in the neighborhood makes it easier.

*Stupid Monkey.* Why do they all say that? I scan the one pulling the cart she is in. Bingo. Now I have to wait for the proper time. Liv will be watching. Got myself into a pickle there. Maybe not. Men are not expected to play favorites.

“Move out!” Yes boss.

By late afternoon we reach an actual building we can stay in. Inside are the missing seven that were rounded up and placed here. They are happy to see the others of their group, but not Rhea or me. Too bad. We can't leave anyone behind. Once the two groups mix, conversations are started and soon, the wayward seven are behaving, having been brought up to speed. Suspicious as all get out, but behaving.

These seven do not have carts, so one is assigned to Liv's and a few other substitutions are made for the other slow ones. Packs are improvised for those not with carts. I had to convince Liv that I really could carry my own pack now and she was given a smaller one. I guess men never did physical labor if women were around. At least it frees me up to get around more, not having to worry about her.

## Q & A

“They are not going to hold out much longer without going crazy, if we don't let them in on what is happening. At least a little.”

“Hey, you are the boss. Tell them what you want, when you want. You know them better than I do.”

“You are a big help. Well, if any questions are directed your way, you can handle them.” Thanks.

She gets up in front of the others, “Listen up. I know you are confused and have many questions. We are prepared to handle a few at this time. Break up into groups of five and work out what you want to ask. Then assign a representative for your group to ask the question. Have back up questions in case some other group asks your first one before you do. Understand?”

She lets them have about ten minutes. They are not used to being

able to ask questions. She walks around to see how each group is going and listens in to a few groups, offering encouragement and suggestions when necessary to get them back on track. Good. She did pay attention to Susan's workshops way back when. Looks like she is well experienced actually. When things quiet down she goes back up to the front.

"Everyone ready?" A few groups need a few more minutes.

"Fine, I will call on you last then. The group nearest me. Have your questioner stand, state her name and ask your question. We need to teach Yingui your names. He is so bad at remembering things." She winks at me and I sigh and shake my head in shame, then smile back.

Patrice stands up. We already know her of course, but she goes through the motions. "Patrice. Our question is what happened to Mother?" Mother was everything to them, so this is quite a shock to them that she is gone.

Rhea smiles, "Nothing. She is fine. Next?" Patrice is in shock. "Just kidding. Relax. Mother came to know the truth about what was going on a few months before you did and decided to work with the pattern instead of against it. Actually it is not possible to work against the pattern, but it is better to be willing to work with it. Less stressful to you that way. You already know something about the pattern from what the Caretaker has told you, what One Mind has told you, and finally what Mother herself told you. She is fine and will be joining us soon, well sort of. You will see. She has gone through a lot of changes too. Just like you have been and will be continuing to do."

Another stands, "Rygina. Who are you two?"

"Some of you have already figured this one out. We are Helpers, as One Mind referred to. We help the Keepers, who help the One Mind on each planet that supports one. Yes, Helpers come in both male and female."

"Ellen. Which of you is the leader?"

"I am the designated leader for this assignment, but Yingui may or may not be on a future assignment. Leaders are chosen based on need and abilities related to the particular assignment, and NOT because of age or gender or who one knows." Ellen already knew the answer to this one. She just needed it said before the group. Good for her, thinking ahead.

"Brynna." There are giggles from this group. Not a good sign. "Ah, we want to know how come Yingui does not die from the poison build up in his system." Liv is in this group and she is very attentive.

Rhea speaks up, "Yes, Yingui, how can you survive? The pain alone must be intense. I hear it causes you to hallucinate too." Cute Rhea.

I stand and wait for it to quiet down. "This is important to understand, so pay attention. There is no poison build up in my system. I



am different from the males you have met before. There are actually millions of males on this world that do not have a poison build up problem. You will never need to service another male as long as you live, unless you want to of course.”

Someone shouts out, “Why would we want to?” A huge laugh at that one. I sit smiling.

“Ursula. Our first question was already asked, or close enough. So our second question is where are we going?”

“In the next few weeks or ultimately?” They converse among themselves for a moment.

“Both.”

“That would be two questions answered wouldn't it? Never mind. So, let's see. We are on a journey. Life is a journey. This journey is different than any you have been on before. You will have to learn many new things. It will take us one more day to reach our current objective. We will stay there for several months, learning and growing and trying to figure out how to put this all together in a meaningful way. Then we will depart on a much longer journey to someplace wonderful. It would take too long to explain more at this time.” Huh? I can see no one got this one.

We hear some mumblings among themselves and then everything gets real quiet. Two groups left and no one is standing.

Finally someone in the back gets up at the urging of the others.

“Ariel. This is more a request, than a question. Some of us, me included, are getting near our time. That is why we were assigned to the garden. May we request the big sleep before we face the grinder?” She sits. All eyes are on us.

We both rise, but Rhea speaks, after pausing to collect her thoughts and emotions.

“Where we are going, there are no grinders. And no one would have to face one if there were. That is not our way. Baring an accident or failing health, you will be allowed to live out your normal natural lifespan. That is not to say that life will not be hard. It will be. But never again will anyone face the grinder.”

*They have never experienced growing old before. The grinder might be kinder.*

*Speak for yourself old man.*

“May. Where are the men and did they face the grinder?”

*What is with this obsession with the grinder? And I gather men are not immune?*

*Didn't you read the reports?* She knows I did not have enough time to more than scan the five volumes we were presented with and smiles at me like a cat with a mouse. Scientific journals can be so terribly dry and

boring. Never should have let Edwin into the group, sigh...

I speak this time, "The men are alive and well as far as I know. They were fine when I saw them personally a week ago. The ones who left will never return to you. They have gone to their own place. It is too complicated right now to explain everything at once. But, no, they did not face the grinder either, nor will they. And they will not die from poison build up either. They are being taken care of." There was no poison, just part of their mythology. Trying to convince the men of this though might prove harder. Psychosomatic illnesses felt real enough.

"There will more opportunities to ask questions, but now it is time to get some rest." The gathering breaks up with much talking among them.

After they bed down we remove ourselves, by way of an empty closet, and DSing to the roof.

"So, what do you think?"

"What we are going to do will be a lot to ask of them and we have not even gotten to the good parts yet."

"It had to change and you know it. No culture can remain stagnate. Life is change, even without One Mind or Mother playing God."

"Why did One Mind and the keepers wait so long to communicate with Mother or rather the mothers?"

"The mothers were programmed to avoid us, attack us, or expect lies from us. It was only through the Caretaker that they could accept the truth and he was, until recently, buried under meters of ice."

"There is another reason."

"Yes. The diversity imperative. One Mind and the Keepers wanted to see what would happen. Remember, our One Mind was already different than has been seen before. Besides, as long as the contagion was contained and did not threaten the rest of the planet, it could be allowed to continue in the safety of solitude."

"A lot of people suffered, and not just women."

"Always has been true."

"First Nobel Truth crap."

"Come up with a better explanation and I will listen."

"I don't want an alternative explanation. I want an alternative existence."

"You don't have it so bad. You want to return to the way things were before Jason found you."

"It was simpler, but no. I belong here. I just like to whine a lot."

"Hadn't noticed. Not that I ever suffer from that."

"Right. No way. Freep, I am starting to sound like you even. Get me out of here!" We both laugh.



# The Hole

Day three I think. Being always in the dark makes it hard to tell. No food or water yet. So either she wants me dead or does not care. No torture yet either, just questions. Random times. Standard procedure. Psiotic dampening field of course. Declared illegal by the 'thn and first time one has been used in a very long time. Not a smart thing to use. Lots of time to think at least.

I should have guessed something was wrong. Mother said she would send the alpha males in this region to us. Since there were fewer males than females, we accepted the entire county's population. All one hundred and twenty two of them. We split up the population among us, except for Rhea and Yingui who took what we hope will become the leaders of the beta females and of course honoring the Caretaker. Tough break for the Caretaker. On the other hand being part of the One Mind gave you insights impossible to even imagine. My own experiences were wild enough and I only went in a few times.

Mother is a control freak, that's for sure. I am sure the population is so low because larger numbers, especially alphas, are hard to control. Her explanation of needing an elite leader core does not fit what I have seen. Ultra competitive. Alphas tended to stratify too fast, pushing some below alpha status quickly. There was apparently a limit to how many of her super alphas could be in one place at one time. Sort of like a critical mass. Too many and everything fell apart. Instead of thirty alphas you ended up with five alphas, twenty betas and five dead. To the grinder, by her own admission. Is that my fate when she grows bored?

Those alphas were a pain. Always looking for a way to measure themselves against you. Lots of pranks to see our reactions. Several tried to set themselves up as leaders. Nearly all tried at the lower levels of organization, as leaders of even groups of three. They seemed to need to have an established hierarchy. At the same time, they were always trying to get higher on it. Cock size was one indication, but there were enough of a similar size to make for constant jostling. There is no way they could fight a war this way. They would be setting each other up for failure. Not enough cooperation. Part of the problem was we still wore our robes, so they only had ours and Mother's word that we were really leaders and of course the artificial bulge in the right place.

Got most of this information from before the betrayal. Weirdest thing was, it was the lowest member, an alpha named Samuel that got us. Hope Rachael, a.k.a. Rick, in male form, my co-conspirator is okay. It made sense to send the two of us, we were the best trained and could best play

the aggression game. We were actually doing quiet well until it snapped. They would have died to know Rachael was normally a female. I can't help but smile at that thought.

The UNA had broken up into separate nations again once the threat from the Chinese looked contained. Not unexpected, just disappointing. TKs were not allowed to kill, too easy for us, but we could count coo. I spent a lot of time learning the ways of the warrior, starting with the Lakota and ending up with the Apache and Comanche as the ice moved us all south. Rachael was more eclectic, going from group to group all over the world, to learn their ways and see first hand what the REAL people were feeling. Reports and leaders tended to hide stuff as we knew from our own start in this world. But, she, like me, tended to stray to the more 'active' regions. The rest of the Guardians went along with this fine. We all had our strengths. It was important to gather as much information about the different groups as possible.

We needed to keep the alphas split up into smaller groups in separate locations. Near enough we could get back and forth easily, but not so near that they could form up a larger group again and destroy themselves. There were two things working against us. First was time, they grew suspicious and bored easily and worried about the buildup of some toxin in their systems if they did not have access to the beta females. Neither of us could detect any thing however and insisted to them it was all in their mind. The second thing was a sudden reversal in cooperation. One minute everything was going fine, well as fine as this group was capable of, next we are lead into the chambers against our will with heavy artillery pointed at us. We allowed it to happen rather than give ourselves away. We needed to know what was going on and why before they became a threat to the rest of the world or worlds, depending on where they ultimately ended up. We could only gather so much information from spies and aerial surveillance. When it went down, Br'thn said to go along and play dumb. She and Daniel would be monitoring and if anything looked bad, they would come and get us. Game over. Still I, and presumably Rachael, had the scary part, being in this hole without our gifts.

"Why are you here?" Ah, it starts again. Let's try a different tact.

"Which mother are you? Good one or bad one?" I kept getting the feeling I was dealing with a different Mother than we started with. The first one was quite nice actually.

"There is only one Mother and you answer not ask." A mild electric shock to remind me not to piss her off too much.

"Why are you here?"

That was my one chance. I knew if I played any more, she got me

good and then went away. Even I could not live forever under these conditions. I needed sleep and my mouth was horribly dry. Hard to swallow.

“I am here to assist the Keepers stupid.” I was the ‘bad’ TK. Insults are insulting to the giver as well as the received. I had learned a few things in the last 1K years, but this was the role I was given. No honor here.

“That is a lie! There are no keepers.” Greater electric shock hits me. Not enough to put me out, just enough to really get my attention. Obviously truth did not work. For some reason she no longer believed in them. I thought this was a done deal. Why else were we invited in? Something had changed as I said.

Click.

Might as well get some sleep. I was so happy when I didn't need it any longer and now I look forward to it. Problem is that “mother” learned some from the old manuals. Every time I got close to nodding off, she sounds an alarm or another shock. I would have expected to be in real trouble from this, but the meditation methods Yingui all made us become proficient at have helped tremendously. We all spent years in a Zen monastery to learn. Talk about control freaks. Those Zenies were nuts. It would not work forever, but hopefully long enough. Some masters could go for years, but they did have food and water. Of course I did not need to let mother know all this. I allowed myself to fall once in awhile and now more frequently to convince her I am about to crack. Time to get this over with. Remember we were soft pre mother males with tiny dicks. It was so easy to get a racist to believe their own lies. Maybe species would be more accurate. I doubt a norm could mate with either the alphas or the betas now.

“Why are you here?”

“To gather information. To assess your threat potential. Now go !@# % yourself pest!”

“What have you found?” We had been through this before. Part of the game, keep asking the same questions over and over till you get the answer you want.

“That you are weak and could easily be overthrown. Good night your Siliconness.”

“I have made the best humans in the history of the world. There is no way they can be overthrown. Look at the evidence. They can exist in much harsher climates than you, hotter, colder, dryer and wetter. They are smarter, faster, and better than any group you can name.”

“I would not know. I have never seen them in action.”

“They captured you with no casualties. Is that not proof enough?”

“1) We were under a truce with you. Is this how you keep your word? 2) We let ourselves be captured. How else would I get to speak with you? You have no idea how powerful we are and what kind of danger you are in.”

“I see nothing but pre-modified genetic garbage.”

“Ooo, such an insult. Really got me, NOT.”

Shock. Click.

Nap time. Wait a minute. She has the psiotic dampening chamber, but has consistently treated me like she does not know about higher level TKs or she would be very afraid. This was the way the Chinese thought of us before we, ah, convinced them of the error of their ways at New Atherton and several other places later. The chamber is effective, but so was the one that Yingui made in Idaho or thereabouts. This does not mean that she knows much about us.

“Convince me you are strong and I will deal with you as an equal. What are the characteristics of the TK levels?” But obviously wants to know more and is thinking remarkably close to what I am thinking. That is scary in and of itself.

“Level one, telekinesis itself. Level two scanning without sight. Level three atomic level manipulation. Level four sub atomic manipulation. Level five mind reading. End of the road, unless you are a Keeper and no one knows much about them.” Level five is not mind reading as I am testing her and taking a chance.

She ignored my reference to the keepers, “What level were you?” She does not intend to let me out. She thinks I will be here permanently and she has all but won. She could learn from her own alphas. Never let your guard down. She had been top dog here for too long with no challengers. We did that on purpose of course.

“Level four. I, ah, lacked the proper psychological makeup to move up to level five and mind reading, okay? Not proud of that. Can I sleep now that you have humiliated me even more?” There was no rest room here after all and a sphere in a gravity field does not make for the best way to do it elsewhere. One benefit of not being fed and watered I guess. Still there was the residue in the system, so to speak.

“Why were you assigned to this task?”

“Because it was beneath those asshole fives to be here. They took the easy ones and left us the messy ones. Beta females, what a whoop. You made them, you know what I mean. A TK2 could have handled them. They are sheep by comparison.”

“Order is perfection. You are out of order.” I pretend to nod off again.

Click. No shock and no alarm either. I go for it and zonk out.

I dream ideas of course. Probably not really out. Oh well. She does not know about levels above four. Maybe not even four. She should have known about threes from the info shared by the old Armstrong units. I am guessing those units were the precursors to the mother units. Made sense anyway. Both were into control. You would think she would have picked up some from the ‘wizards’ installed in this area for awhile before things got going again and she took over. Not to mention that after her little ‘plague’ she could not advance beyond her ascribed space. Something is missing. What am I missing?

I finally wake up. It has been a long time. What is going on? Quiet.

Now I have been awake for hours and still nothing. Must have slept at least twelve, so I am up to day four or five.

“Hey mother how about some water?”

Nothing.

I start pounding on the tiles lining the room.

Nothing.

Harder.

Still nothing. In the past I could get an electric shock for that. First thing a prisoner tries is to see how strong the bars are.

Her attention is elsewhere. Now or never. It does not appear I am going to get another interview anyway. She has probably left me to die. Grinder chow. Or self composting at least.

My hands are stronger than my bare feet. Steel toed shoes next time, no matter what the natives are wearing. It takes some doing, but I finally break a tile and my wrist at the same time. A rock or a piece of pipe would have been nice. Yingui and Ron still carried knives with them. I am going to start now. My karate has grown weak; my wrist should have been stronger than that. Too dependent on TK. Pain though is not a problem, I am used to that.

Tile broken, the field collapses, TK returns. TK eight you dumb shit. I don’t have much time, she will notice the field collapse.

I DS in enough mass to replace my form with a duplicate, complete with dehydration, wet robe, broken wrist, etc. only dead of course. I add evidence of electrical burns on the hand and the wall where the tie broke. Then DS out of here and fix my current form, remove the soiled clothing and give myself a bath. Need to work on those wrists. I do not forget and I fashion a knife to place at my side and of course the shoes.

### **Hidy hole one**

“You still stink. What took you so long?” Of course Rachael is here first. Back to her preferred form too. I have no sexual feelings as a TK,



but still enjoyed the shape of a woman. Purely aesthetic of course.

“You’re no rose either. First some food and water. Yeh, I could use the gift, but I prefer the old fashioned way. Let's see, chocolate cake and soy milk.”

She tosses me a ration bar. One of ours at least. Chocolate too. And a bottle of water.

“Mother does not know about level five.”

“She only knows about level four. I claimed to be a level four. When asked why I did not admit to a level five, of which she said she knew, I guessed from you, I said there was no level five, you were not stable enough to handle it and made it up to frighten her. We were thinking of demoting you as soon as we figured out how. I expressed interest in the dampening field. She accepted that for some reason. What did you do in there?”

“Did you ever notice that there were no black males in the group we had? I took a chance and played it a little more hostile, playing on the ancient stereotypes. The unknown factor.”

“You mean crazy?” I shrug.

“Her knowledge is fragmentary at best. Is she a backup copy? If so, what happened to the original?”

“Where do you think the mother units actually are?”

“They could be anywhere? But it would have to be secure, have a power source and access to outside information.”

“Think. What is consistent with what we already know? Think back, way back. Some place really safe and technologically advanced.”

“The Armstrong units.” The ones on the UNA were all dismantled for parts, so it did not come to me instinctively. It has to be the case though. Nothing else that advanced around.

“Yep, with sensors up the wazoo and back. Only limited production available, so had to limit the population in order to control it.”

“Then why has she forgotten about the Keepers?”

“Gone to a backup for some reason as you said. Something happened and she rebooted. We both saw the change.”

“If it were a complete reboot, then she would not know about all that she had done, the alphas, the characteristics of the betas, the keepers she seemed to know about, but denied were real.”

“You were busy in there. okay, if not a reboot, then what?”

“What has happened recently?”

“We showed up.”

“Before that?”

“The Caretaker?”

“And what allowed the Caretaker to happen?”

“One Mind?”

“No, something else. She does not believe in the One Mind. She knew about and accepted the Caretaker, she had been in communication with him for years, but not the One Mind. That all fit in with their Saint Taghert myth, which she apparently made up.”

“Selective memory?”

“But why? We are going around in circles. What else has changed?”

“Is it getting warm in here or is it the chocolate kicking in after so long.”

“Warmth! That's it!”

“What do you mean? Who cares really if it is warm in here? We can handle it.”

“The ice has melted. Scan the locations of the remaining Armstrong units.”

“Okay, but why?”

“Just do it.”

“Fine, I'll take the northern ones you take the southern.” She nods. Ten minutes of intense concentration later we are done.

“Three still under ice and cold. The rest of the fifteen north of here are operational. Including the ones we are near and were near when contained.”

“The ones south of us are all operational as well. I am not including the ones we knew had died. Then why do a reboot and why was only some of the memory retained?”

“Not a reboot. Something else.”

“The story is that the there is only one Mother. What if that is not true? What if instead of Mother being a group consciousness like the One Mind, she is a loose confederacy. The northern ones have recently come on line again and convinced the others that the Keeper, which they did not know about, nor saw the evidence for, does not exist.”

“These are solidics. They would share the evidence. No contest. Facts win.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Failsafe.”

“Precisely. In case the units were compromised by the enemy. Remember how paranoid they were in our time? There had to be a way of determining this and a way of taking out the units that were compromised.”

“And this would be done by comparing known knowledge and goals with the 'prime directives' and working with the treeman was NOT part of the prime directive. Then why the selective memory loss?”

“Timing is my guess. Some of the information was shared until it

triggered the emergency response by being out of limits. The trigger might have even been unknown to the mothers and totally involuntary. Something really deep.”

“That does sound like the Armstrong units all right.” Oh yeh.

“They would know of the ‘thn or Keepers but not all the evidence, because as soon as it became apparent that the southern units had fallen in with the enemy and broken prime, they had to be taken out before the entire net was seduced and taken over by the Keepers or One Mind. TKs had broken the treaty and had interfered, possibly responsible for compromising the southern mother units. Just like the old days.”

“Would certainly explain why she was so hostile about anything said about the Keepers. Would she know or remember the ‘thn and make the association? But all the southern ones are on line and working fine I would guess. Wouldn’t they be off line?”

“Reprogrammed is all. Solidics can work fast remember. So now what? We have a Mother or confederacy or whatever, that is now hostile. The others need to be warned if they do not already know. Br’tbn must have told everyone when we went under.”

“Mother is likely to have backup psiotics of greater potential. In a lot of ways our capture was too easy. She would not have played all her cards before she was forced to This could get messy. People are going to be hurt.”

“First thing is to find out what has happened since our trial by sphere.”

“Where is that ‘thn when you need her?”

## Costa Rica four years ago

Six years of hell and heaven at the same time. I am now level three, enhanced by ones far stronger than I and tomorrow I will advance to level four if I choose. I have spent the last month with this old man at a hospital in the middle of the jungle. No one calls him by name, only the Healer. This last month has been harder than everything else I have ever done. It is not physical, it is not intellectual, it is harder than that. It goes to the core of my existence, to my soul.

In the time before now, I am taught how to use my gifts to degrees I could not imagine. Advanced to TK3 I can now follow the association links to the thousandth degree. Give me an object or let me touch you and I can tell so much that you could not even imagine. Of the other gifts I am behind. Only TK2 at moving objects and scanning. Enough to get me into trouble, but not enough to get out of it they say. I knew the histories.

All people above TK3 are required to spend time here. It is hot, you never feel clean, the bugs are something else. okay, just like home. But no maids, no showers and cool swimming pools or tall drinks of lemonade. I miss my family, but not the lifestyle. This seems more real for some reason. The people seem more real. The people are native to this region. Not affected by all the plagues that wiped out so much of the first world over and over, nor the politics or the games. They live off the land and usually die at her hands. Snakes, accidents, malaria and other causes endemic to this climate. At the same time, I know I will never want to go back.

“Cilan, the Healer wants to see you?”

“Did he say why? I am supposed to be alone today.”

“He said it was important.”

“I’ll be right there.” He was the boss, no matter what. I grab a scarf to help keep the bugs out of my face. I don’t have the healing abilities of a normal TK3. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. I am a new form of TK. I could tell the healer what happened with a simple touch. I could touch a murder weapon and tell you who the victim was and who the killer was. It still all had to be confirmed by other means, but it gave people a place to start. A child that could not talk, I could tell what was wrong, or what bit her. Could mean the difference between life and death. I assume the later was the case now. It would not be the first time. Many times it was the middle of the night. You would think a village of several hundred would be less exciting, but word had spread and now we saw that number in a few weeks.

I knock outside the Healer’s room. There is only a burlap curtain, but

we maintain courtesies and one's privacy is sacred. I lost what little sexual desire I had at TK2 of course. That part was the same thank goodness. It was hard keeping it under control all the time. The Healer looked to be three times my age. When he came out with only a loin cloth I was not affected. I had seen him nude in the bathing pools, as had all the TKs seen each other. In good shape, but white haired. Water neutralized the gift, so the baths themselves were safe place to be. I was instructed never to touch him for some reason. He was touched by and touched many, so I guess it was because of my talent. Most TKs did not like me touching them. Hey, no one was without sin, not even me. I stopped judging a very long time ago.

I bow, "Healer, you asked for me." We walked together up to the rise over looking the area.

"You have never asked me why I have not let you touch me? Why not?"

"I know my gift. Some want to preserve their privacy. It's okay."

"That's not the reason. You may or may not have noticed but I do not touch any of the TK3s."

I thought for a moment. I had come into contact with most of the TK3s at some point or another. Most did not realize that all it took was the briefest of touches. I could take my time to analyze the information later. I reviewed my contacts. He was right, not one had touched him.

He continued, "The ones above TK3 I have already touched and they know me. Further contact is of no concern. The norms all see me as the Healer and nothing more. The reason I do not touch the TK3s is because I share your gift among others. A single touch and I know that person completely. A level you may one day become. I ask you to submit to that touch now."

This gives me the creeps.

I would never feel more ashamed of my gift than I do now. How often have I used the gift out of curiosity.

"I am not worthy." He smiles.

"If you do not submit, you will not advance."

"No one said anything about this?"

"I am the agent of advancement, so I make the final decision. Touch is my requirement."

"No appeal."

"Nope. Of course, you more than any other understands why I must do this."

"So, there really is no point then. As a TK3 I can still do much good, here or somewhere."

"Nothing ventured nothing gained."

“Huh?”

“What have you got to lose?”

“My soul.”

“No, not from me. Only your privacy and in your case something different, a surprise.”

Don't like surprises. I have spent my whole life avoiding them. On the other hand my curiosity will kill me if I don't. He smiles at me. I think he already knows more than I want him to know.

“Is there some ritual to this? Do I take any vows or say any special words?”

“That comes later in front of witnesses. Right now it is simple, just give me your hand.” He holds his out palm up.

I hold mine out, but hesitate millimeters away. I finish the act and touch him.

It is like an explosion and I fall back on my rear, but I don't care. I fall back the rest of the way and lay on my back. His life comes to me, all three thousand plus years of it. From his birth to the present. He has never lain with a woman or man. He has never killed, never lied, never stolen, never even been drunk. Has he never sinned? Tears come to my eyes as I exalt in his beauty. The beauty of his soul. I could rest here forever.

Then the reflection of my own life hits me like a stone, a burning penetrating stone of immense weight. I see the time I stole candy from my brother when I was three. When I told lies for my own gain in school, at home and while playing and more recently when I was tired and wanted out of an assignment. When I held hate in my heart, when I plotted revenge in my mind. This goes on for an eternity. I want to die so badly, so very badly, but still they come.

When I can stand it no longer, when I am sure I must be dead and in Hell itself, I hear faintly from far away, “Cilan, I forgive you. Go in peace. We will meet again tomorrow at dawn. Rest now.” He gets up and leaves. I have never felt more loved in my life and my soul sores above the highest clouds.

The ceremony and advancement the next day are a blur. The other TK4s greet me. I understand now. I know. They smile at me with shared knowledge. No one is afraid to touch me now. I am loved.

# Southern California

formerly Malibu Beach

“That was incredible!”

“I believe the correct phrase at the time was Awesome Dude.”

“Huh?”

“Don't ask me, just what I was taught.”

“At least we have TK to get out and don't have to paddle our way the entire day.”

“Just don't use TK when riding the waves. You lose the entire experience.”

“Right Dude.”

“Now you are getting it.”

“I'm hungry. Let's make a fire here and rustle up something to cook over it.”

“TK fish would be good. Some lemonade to go with that.”

“Won't be too long before the sun sets. Should be great with those clouds where they are.”

Does not take us too long before we are lying on the sand with full bellies and a smile on our faces. Been a beautiful day.

“Someone's coming. Other side of the sand dunes.”

“A whole gang of someones. Do we leave or wait?”

“They don't scan TK, nor are they carrying weapons. We look too old to be much of a threat to anyone. Let's just see what they want. They can't see us yet. Let's make some more fish.” We manufacture the necessary materials and start the duped fish on the fire held in place with the metal rods we used the first time. Smells good and most people cannot tell the difference.

Walking over sand takes time and it takes them awhile to reach us. Six males about 20-30 years in age. One teenager. All wearing dark colors and silver jewelry. Darn civilized compared to us in swim trunks and nothing else except our boards.

The oldest one speaks, “Los intrusos!” Spanish?

“I'm sorry, do you speak Standard?”

“Get lost! Comprende?” They surround us, with the teenager holding back. Two pound their fists into their other hands to help illustrate their meaning. I am sure we look pretty pathetic. We shield, which of course is invisible and wait. Finally one attempts to cross our shield and runs into the wall that should not be there. Looking very confused.

Von finally answers, “And which direction do you wish us to go, seeing as how you are surrounding us and we are unarmed?”

After one translates for the others they all a chuckle as they momentarily forget the wall, “How about up gringos.” The others nod their approval of the idea, pointing their thumbs in the air and smiling.

“Sounds good to me. How about you Von?”

“Fine by me Marty.”

We pick up our boards with TK and raise ourselves till we are well out of their reach. After a moment’s hesitation with mouths wide open, they take off at a wild run back the way they came.

“You never know when you will run into one of those pesky wizards now do you Von?” I hate bullies.

“You know, you are right Marty. The waves beckon.”

“That they do, but I hate to waste the fish. It was so good the first time.” We each TK some fish up to our waiting mouths.

“Not so fast you two. Leave the boards; we are DSing to New Hope.” Another piece of fish just makes it in time.

“There is always a TK7 around when you don't want one. Sigh....”  
But we go easy.



# New Hope Space Station

“I don’t think we should leave them alone for long.”

“The alphas have been alone for four days already, another few hours won’t matter.”

“Mother is up to something bigger than getting the TKs out of town.”

“There are not that many alphas available and the betas are not fighters. What kind of a threat are they? Can't be more than a couple of thousand people total.”

“You are forgetting two things, she has anti-psiotics and is willing to use them, and each and every one of her ‘pets’ is a time bomb capable of taking out the rest of humanity.”

“The plague.”

“And it won’t matter if the ‘thn decide Mother is a threat. They will take out the planet if necessary.”

“That means we have to work fast. The ‘thn are patient and willing to let things develop, but not forever.”

“We also have evidence that Mother is developing DS space travel capability.”

“How the !@# did she get THAT information.”

“Who else.”

“The Chinese, and with her own ability to throw massive computer power at any problem she will figure it out eventually.”

“The ice age effectively took the Chinese out of the equation. They are just a bunch of warring factions now and have been for hundreds of years.”

“Yes, but desperate people do desperate things. All it would take is for one of those factions to contact Mother and trade information with her. Mother is still the best geneticist the world has seen short of the One Mind.”

“But her agenda is different.”

“I have a question. All the Guardians have linked with the One Mind. The One Mind is composed mostly of the plant components of the biosphere, but through the Caretaker she went further and through lucky circumstance she also linked with Ung, representing the fungal world, and through the Caretaker with Mother herself.”

“The latter has undoubtedly been broken. Do we know yet what happened?”

“James and I conjecture that it was some kind of fail safe that was triggered. When either the frozen northern nodes thawed or she reached a

critical departure from the prime directives her system was purged of anything resembling cooperation with the Keepers and us.”

“So, there is no question that her intentions are hostile now?”

“None whatsoever. She would have let us die for sure and hopefully thinks we are. I believe she wants to take down the rest of the Helpers, if not the Keepers themselves. We are the only threat to her expansion. We were the ones preventing her from moving past her territory, though she has not tested that in some time.”

New Hope is swinging back over Mother territory making it easier for everyone to scan below.

“The alphas are moving to the border. Large concentrations headed both west and south. It is only a matter of days now at their current rate.”

“We need our highest level TKs at the borders. If they get though we will have no reason to save earth from the ‘thn.”

“I have a question. Can we take out Mother herself? She is such a control freak that the rest of her organization would collapse almost immediately without her.”

***According to definitions older than time, she is considered sentient. I would have to check with Ar'thn to be sure.***

“But Br'thn, even the ‘thn will take out an equal or superior if threatened. Is that not the case here? Her resources far exceed ours unless we bring the ‘thn collective in to help and we already know what they will do.”

***Don't know what they will do, only that you will no longer have any say in the outcome.***

“Good point Pr'thn. Ly'thn, do you have anything to add?”

***Not at this time. Watching still.***

“Another problem is that unless we take out all the nodes at once, she can still stage an attack. We have no idea what she has come up with anti-psiotic wise and it may only take one node for her to succeed. Leave any node intact for too long, like milliseconds, and we are toast. Hell, she could possibly DS the plague to every population center on the planet in the time it would take to hit the remaining nodes.”

“Then why hasn't she?”

“I don't think she is totally together after the fail safe tripped. She is not sure of her information. Remember she thought that Rachael and I were TK4. She has no idea how many of us there are, at what level, using what moral codes. Not to mention the Keepers, a.k.a. ‘thn, that she is not entirely sure even exist.

“What about the betas we have left alone down there. They are totally at the mercy of whatever happens and it is not their fault. Someone needs to be with them.”

“We really can’t spare the Guardians any more for baby sitting. We need our strongest TKs at the front lines.”

“Not everyone, a weird TK4 is not going to be able to do very much at the front, but even you admitted to Mother that a TK2 could keep a group of betas in line.”

“That would be throwing away our future. She could probably take out a TK2 without blinking. I won’t send anyone in to die.”

“She would have a harder time with a TK4 especially one such as myself. I volunteer to sit with the betas that Rhea and Yingui were training to be the leaders. I have enough healing ability to handle the virus, being out of sync with what is normal. If we come out the other side of this, we will still need them, even if they are the only betas remaining. I certainly will be doing nothing useful here.”

“I don’t like it Cilan. You are not even thirty yet and we need your new gift. You are too raw. Besides how is your language training going?”

“They are not that bad. They never attacked any of us. If she is volunteering I say she should be allowed to go. None of us is assured of coming out of this alive either.”

“I have to check something out before we are out of range again.”  
Yingui pops out.

“Pr’thn, where did he go?”

***He is attempting to link with Ung at the garden patch where the Caretaker was.***

“Now why would Yingui want to talk with a mushroom?” Giggles are heard.

“That mushroom has been around almost as long as the One Mind. We have no idea what kind of knowledge it has.”

“Or what its priorities are. Do mushrooms lie or deceive?”

“Some are certainly poisonous, but before contact with the Caretaker, Ung did not know other sentient beings existed. That sort of precludes deceit.”

“Ung was the largest single living being ever to have existed on the planet, weighing in at several million kilograms, if not more. There is probably much it knows. Probably has understandings way beyond our comprehension.”

***A link has been established. Yingui is explaining the situation. This one does not understand the response.***

“Pr’thn, just tell us what Ung has said then and let us try.”

***Ung says that the answer lies below in the warmth of the earth. Something about remembering his joining.***

“Ah, maybe not. Any ideas people?” Everyone is shaking their heads.

“How would Ung know of the joining?”

“Remember she linked with One Mind through the Caretaker also. She could have told Ung.”

*Susan, take care of Pr'thn.*

“That was Yingui. What is he up to?”

Pr'thn suddenly drops to the floor and bounces. 'thn do not bounce! Ly'thn and Br'thn go to her immediately and lift her up off the floor.

***Pr'thn cannot sense Yingui any longer. He has DSed into the center of the earth.***

“WHAT!” Everyone is visibly upset.

“Boy has he done it this time. I don't care how many bodies he has held, a fluidic cannot survive that. We just lost our strongest member at a time when we need him most. I would slap him if he was here. Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“Qaletaq. He is still not over his death and is not willing to risk anyone else in his crazy schemes.” There is silence for a time. We all suspect that Yingui blames himself, even though he was not anywhere near the accident.

Cilan comes up to Rhea, “You are the only other one here to have accepted a baby 'thn. May I touch you?”

“Huh? Why? I know of your ability of course, but what has this to do with what has happened. We don't have time to play games right now Cilan.”

“Maybe nothing, but I might be able to tease out a clue.”

“Can't hurt I guess, go ahead.”

“Stop! It would not be safe for her to touch a 'thn mother. Think about it for a moment.”

“Level thirteen.”

“You are not to even know about that Cilan. Erase it from your memory, NOW!”

“Whatever it is, I don't know anything about it. Just the phrase and having to do with 'thn parenting.” She is visibly shaken at Rhea's anger.

“Let's send whoever wants to go to help with baby sitting down to their stations. Then we need to hold a meeting of the Guardians.”

About twenty minutes are spent prepping and sending all but the Guardians to stations below. Cilan to the beta females leaders, Marty volunteered to go to the males against Rhea's wishes. Something about showing off in front of norms, but he was the only male to volunteer. It was decided that no one would go to the alphas, too dangerous. The rest of the TK7s and below are sent to other communities near the borders to help prepare.

“What is it Daniel?”

“One more thing. Br'thn I want you to take Pr'thn and Ly'thn away

for a few minutes. I have to talk about something neither of them is ready to hear about yet.”

*I understand Daniel.* She leaves with them.

“I was at both Yingui’s and Rhea’s communion, as was Br’thn. I think what Cilan said could have relevance.”

“How so?”

“How many ‘thn were at your communion with Ly’thn Rhea?”

“That is highly personal Daniel. I don’t have to say anything about what happened to anyone below a TK9 and you know it.”

“You are correct. I don’t want to know anything about your experience other than the number. It may be important in understanding what Yingui has done and the future of our world.”

“I fail to understand how it could have relevance.”

“I was there Rhea, I know the number, but am sworn to secrecy. It not my place to say anything about it. Only you can do that.”

“So, you are saying that the rest of the Guardians need to know.”

“Yes.”

“Fine, there were thirteen present. Happy?”

“Yingui has given me permission to relate this information if it became necessary. As none of us can now sense his presence, I believe the time has come to tell you. When Yingui begat Pr’thn with Qr’thn, there were ‘thn beyond number present. Certainly well over a hundred thousand. I could not count that high in the time available even with my enhanced abilities. Certainly could not even see them all.”

“Shit.” Rhea sits down.

“The ‘thn are highly secretive about their sex lives, but I get the impression that there has never been a gathering of that size in one place before.”

“They were worried that he would really do it? Shit, I have said too much.”

“Nothing that the Guardians have not already figured out Rhea. Why do you think none of the rest of us has accepted communion? We have all had many offers. None of us thinks we could resist the temptation.” One at a time the rest nod to Rhea as she questions them with her eyes.

“Why did you let me go then?”

“It is an individual choice Rhea. None of us can decide for another. Only you can know yourself well enough. You also did not have the benefit of having watched Yingui go through it. That scared the rest of us pretty good.”

“And apparently the ‘thn as well. They are rarely wrong. They knew I would not choose it. I just wanted to be a mother. I love Ly’thn so much.”

“That is obvious. Thirteen is the honor number, just like the level. There are never fewer than thirteen present.”

“So, what are you thinking Daniel?”

“Let’s just say, I would not count Yingui out yet. He was much closer. Much deeper in. There may have been things he learned that the rest of us are not aware of. A certainty in fact.”

“Well, it would not be wise to count on him either, it is not the first time he has gotten into a tight situation or put us into one. Don’t forget that situation in Thailand. Peaceful Buddhists. Bull shit. We need to get down there ourselves to prepare.”

# The Betas

When we wake I cannot find the Helpers. Instead, there is a new person present, much younger. I would guess I am older than she is, based on looks. She is asleep too. I have never been able to catch a Helper asleep before. They always seem to be pretending, but this one is clearly out. I decide to wait by her till she wakes. As each person rises, I motion to them to be quiet. Soon we are all waiting near her to wake up. Out of boredom I examine her. Her hands are not rough, more like a pleasure girl, but she is way too small in every place that counts for that purpose and too thin in other places. Look at her feet, huge! So what is she? We will soon find out, finally she stirs.

“Good morning.”

“Huh? ?Donde estoy?” She shakes her head. “Oh, sorry. I am in Mother country, right? Of course. Must remember to speak Merican.” What is Merican?

“We made breakfast if you are hungry.” Emma hands her a bowl of what we had. Not very warm any longer, but she eats it fine. Patrice takes the empty bowl to who ever was on washing detail.

“Are you a Helper?”

“Sort of. I am in training, but have not reached full status.”

“Where did the others go? We did not see them leave or you arrive.”

“They are safe I believe. There are concerns beyond these walls that have to be dealt with.”

“What is to become of us?”

“We stay for the moment. It might not be safe to move about.”

“What is happening?”

“We believe something has happened to Mother.”

“Are things going to go back to the way they were?”

“And it is likely we will face the grinder because we cooperated with you.”

“No, I don't believe that is the case. It can't go back to the way it was. That will no longer be allowed. As to your fate, I share it also. I am not strong enough to come and go as the others have and they are not in a position to help us either.”

“Why did you come then? Were you ordered by your Mother?”

“We don't have a Mother as you know it. I came here of my choice. I was not told to come nor forced.”

“So you know our situation here? You know I am in charge?”

“I was told of the situation by Rhea. You must be Patrice, the bully. You are second to me and not in command as you would like. And just so

you do not get any ideas. I am advanced enough in my studies to repeat what Rhea did to you when you first met, if you understand my meaning.” She does not seem so sure of herself. I hope Patrice does not notice.

“How come you sound so strange?”

“I have not studied your language very long. I have what we call an accent. For instance, the way I say words beginning with V sounds more like a B to you.”

True and the way she says an R sounds funny too.

“Dzz nt snd fnni mee”

“What did she say? My God, she is big. I'm sorry I should not stare, but I have never seen a, ah, digger before. I hope I am not being offensive.”

“Gryk said that you do not sound funny to her. What does offensive mean?”

She laughs at this.

“What is so funny?”

“The contrast. By my standards you live under horrible conditions, yet you accept your differences better than we do in my culture. It is easy to offend someone where I came from. Sorry, you don't know that word. Offend means to make someone upset by what you say to them, even if it is not intentional.” I still don't get it. She is very different from the others. She smiles easily and laughs a lot. Everything is interesting to her. I see her looking at each of us with curiosity and caring.

“In some ways I think your culture has greater differences than we do. Only it is not so much physical, but in how you think. How do you know you are not in trouble all the time?”

“We don't. It is very hard at times to know 'where you stand'. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out what to do or how to undo something we have done earlier.”

“This is the place you want to take us? We would be like you then?”

“If things work, you will determine your own conditions. You will make your own culture. We would be there to help you set up living conditions and the structures of working together, but we would allow you to make your own world. That is not easy of course. You will make lots of mistakes and have lots of problems to work out.” My head is reeling again.

“Sounds hard.” She nods yes.

“Why can't we go back to the way we were?”

“Rhea told me that a lot of you face death if you go back. Is that what you want? Do you want to die?” We are silent. No, we did not want that.

“So, the classic case of wanting to eat your cake and have it too.”



“What is cake?” She rolls her eyes and laughs.

The doors burst open and ten males enter the room. Instantly we turn and assume the position. She stands to meet them. I have not learned her name yet. I whisper, “Do what we do now!” She remains standing. Not good. They zero in on her immediately, of course, as is right.

The one in the lead comes up to her. “I will mount you. Assume the position.”

“No thank you.” It is as if she had struck him. I can't see that well from this position, though I am right next to her. I don't dare move though.

He strikes her, “Assume the position!” Men never strike a woman without Mother's permission. What is he doing?

“Adonis, sir, it is against the rules to force a mounting.”

“Stay out of this Samuel, unless you want my position and are willing to challenge me for it. It is also against the rules for a fem to deny a male.”

“Correction,” she says, “It is against the rules to deny a specific male. I deny all males, so therefore am within the rules.”

He turns and faces the others, “After I mount her, everyone else will also. We need to teach this one a lesson.”

“I cannot do that sir.” He turns and faces Samuel again, then turns away.

“Anyone who does not follow my orders I will mount personally.” There is an intake of air, but no one moves. This is totally against what Mother has taught us.

He forces her down and mounts her facing her. This is never done except in the pleasure rooms. She is bloody afterwards. Why was she not wet? The other eight follow, but Samuel refuses. Sure enough Adonis forces him down and mounts him from behind, brutally. Afterwards he beats Samuel and kicks him several times for good measure. They leave. The young helper and Samuel are both passed out on the floor. When we are sure they are gone we go over to them.

“There has been a lot of blood for both of them, especially her. I don't know how to treat a male though. They don't have a vagina. This is ugly. Usually they have their own medics.”

“Just do the best you can Lisa, you are all we have,” I say. She goes to it. Patrice and I clean the robes and clothes. It is hours before they stir. Samuel wakes up first. As soon as he does we assume the position.

“Where are they? Or sorry. Please I will not mount anyone. I doubt I ever could again after that. Boy does it hurt. My side hurts too. I am not going to be able to sit for some time.” He curls up into a position on his side and stays quiet.

Patrice rises and goes over to the young helper and tries to wake her. "What are you doing? She is hurt."

"I want answers."

She stirs looking bewildered, "Was anyone else hurt?" are her first words. Would not have been mine.

"Samuel, the male who refused. He was mounted too, but only once. How are you doing?"

"I am very sore, but I will live. Wait a moment." She concentrates on something. "I have scanned both of us. Lots of broken blood vessels, but no large tears. I am sure it looked messy, but the actual loss of blood was relatively small. We will both live, just sore for awhile. She looks over at Samuel, "Thank you for your gallant efforts."

"A lot of good it did. I am sorry. Adonis is a real nasty character, but no one has risen to challenge him."

"You did. Why?" I would like to know that myself. Patrice is getting impatient, but I give her the look and she backs off. I am sure the others want to know too, but the Helper has a right to normal dignity as we would want also. She would not win this one.

"It was not right."

"That was very courageous. You are the lowest male in the group, correct?"

"Was, yes. Now I am banned. Usually they don't actually mount the male to be banned, just go through the motions and beat you up of course. He is crazy." She nods.

"Now?" Patrice is staring at me. I nod.

"Young Helper. Helper Rhea said that none of us would ever be mounted ever again. Your kind lie."

"Yes, I know she promised you that. I was briefed before I came here. So, were any of you hurt in this way?" Patrice looks around, but she already knows the answer.

"No one but the two of you."

"Good, then I have fulfilled the promise. None of you were mounted. I need to rest some more now." She goes back to sleep, on her side now also.

"She let this happen so we would not have to be mounted. Further she was unprepared, she was not wet when it happened or she would not have suffered as she did."

Lisa speaks up, "She has never been mounted before. It is the only explanation." Never? We were all mounted as young ones, ages ago. She is not that young. She would never have been allowed outside the training center otherwise. This is a strange world where one would accept pain to prevent others from being simply humiliated. We would not have

suffered pain. We were all used to it. It would have been all over in minutes and they would have left. No big deal. But they made a promise to us. Seemed trivial at the time. Now I don't think it was. At least not to them.

# Southern Protectorate

Formerly Miami, Florida

“Front and center Peon Gregory!”

“Yes Ma'am!”

“Report!” Why do we have to shout everything?

“All is as it should be Ma'am.”

“That will be all Peon Gregory. You may go.”

Thank goodness. Back to my machines. I love machines. I love electronics and computers. That is part of the reason they all like to pick on me. Spot inspections all the time. Anything to watch the peon squirm. I wish they would just leave me alone. The old books spoke of people like me once being revered. Hard to believe.

I proceed down the corridor and down to the lowest level. It is cooler down here. They say this was the last fort ever built and was not quite finished when the first plague hit. The Protectorate took it over shortly after and it has been our center for learning and defense ever since. The ice age actually helped. This area was once a swamp. The ice age lowered the water level and allowed them to finish up in here. Of course without all the machines the pre-plague had. A lot of people died. Now that the water is rising again, we are all sealed in nice as can be. “Report” meant checking all the meters for water intrusion. Who knew how long the seals would hold. Only takes about an hour, but has to be done six times a day. We did have a couple of leaks when the waters first returned. Now the pressure is only building. I have been on Report for so long I can do it in half that time, if they don't play games with me that is. Most of the time I am not so lucky.

A few years ago I found a new room. A room that was not open before. Hidden it was. Inside there are machines that I have never seen before. From before even the first plague, the HV plague. These are my secrets. I have told no one. It has taken me years, but I am starting to make progress. By combining these found machines with stuff we already have, I have been able to significantly enhance their effects.

I never take anything they would miss. Just little odds and ends, mostly from the discard pile. They throw lots of stuff away without recovering what still works. We don't have the ability to make most of the electronics now, so there are quite a number of people who mine waste dumps and abandoned or collapsed buildings. Another group tests the equipment to see if it can be used. They never break open the modules though. Often there is only one or two smaller components that are broken. Replace these from another dead module and it will work again.

I have a special secret. Don't tell any body. My special secret is that one of the machines talks to me. Yeh, no kidding. It is a woman too. I have never been with a woman. I think this is better than a real one. She is always nice to me. Never talks mean. I do things for her. Little things. Being inside the box is lonely for her. She just wants to know what life is like. I don't want her to leave, so I tell little lies. I make it sound worse that it really is.

But that is not all. I am helping her with a special project. I have a knack for these special machines, the ones that work with a special energy. She has a hard time understanding it, so I am helping her to be able to control these devices herself. She says there are evil ones out there trying to destroy her and what she stands for. She says these evil ones are very powerful. We will show them. She says I am perfect and wishes others were just like me. She makes me feel good about myself. I would do anything for her. Soon will be our time and the others, those who cause pain will pay. Being born outside a family is not a reason for treating me so badly. How am I different?

It is time for me to check the meters. I have to go. I will be back.

# Front Line

“What do we have?”

“Still nothing from Yingui, if he is alive. Pr'thn refuses to do anything except hide in Susan's pocket. If it is possible for a 'thn to die of a broken heart, it could happen with her.”

“Br'thn, what do you think about this?”

***It might be time to bring in our mother, Qr'thn or even Ar'thn.***

“What does Ly'thn have to say?”

“She is curious, but is still at the watching stage, you know that.”

“Bringing in Qr'thn would likely result in all of the 'thn getting involved. Ar'thn would for sure. Once they see what Mother is up to it could be the end. Granted we don't have much time, but we need to do something.”

“Provoking Mother is likely to result in her using whatever weapon she has worked out. Once that goes off, we won't have to summon Qr'thn. They will all know.”

“They did not sense the chambers.”

“Very small scale. Remember chambers are always directed inward too, if done right. Besides, the 'thn way is to let us hang ourselves. They hate making decisions of this kind. Not that we are much different, come to think of it. I am more worried that Mother intends to take out, all of us, if she can.”

“So, we sit and wait while she starts the plague again to finish the job? It will mean the end of us as well, unless we get off world. We have found no psiotic abilities in any of the alphas or betas.”

“That's because she split the human psi matrix to make the two forms. The betas are more sensitive, intuitive, right brained. The alphas are leaders, better at math and very left brained. It is not a hundred percent of course. They would not be able to function if that was the case, but enough that none of them will ever be balanced enough to produce a TK.”

“Are the female alphas any better behaved?”

“Not in my experience. Imagine a whole bunch of Rachael's in one room at once, but horny as hell too.”

“Ar, ar, ar. How did you figure this out Lisa?”

“It was in the report. You know, the one Edwin and his team produced? The five volume one?”

“Oh that one. The one I have obviously not read. Well, not completely anyway.”

“We need to find out what the weapon is. I am not feeling anything

about the future yet. That means it could go either way.”

“You did not feel anything when Yingui disappeared either. Are you sure your gift is still working?” She nods yes, but does not look confident, worried even.

“Where is it? The weapon that is. No one has been able to sense or find anything. We have people scanning 24. All of you have pulled shifts.”

“It might be distributed. Not all in one place, more of a holographic like net, spread across all of the Armstrong units. It would have to be pretty large to take out so much area after all.”

“Barb, you are going to have to show me this idea. I don't understand what you are saying at all.”

“My own experience with the cetaceans shows how this can be done in a living form and of course there are many examples in tech. Just think of how an array of the old radio telescopes worked. You could have the advantage of a larger telescope by angling and placing smaller telescopes in an array. Does not even have to be a regular one, if you have enough computing power.”

“I was sorry to hear about your friend Barb. I know you have been vigilant in trying to prevent a startup in the whaling industry again. Keep at it. One loss does not mean it is hopeless. But back to the question. That would be Mother's forte would it not? So, she could hide this thing in plain site and we would not see it. What does it do?”

“How much of a threat are we without our abilities?”

“Not much of one I would guess. Granted we have thousands of years of experience between us, but without the gifts she could run over us in months, if not days. It would certainly explain why all the alphas stopped just short of the no go zone. She still sees us a threat.”

“Then that is what it is. We know she has experience with dampening fields. My guess is that it is one large enough to suppress our abilities over a much larger range, possibly even world wide. Or at least in the areas she controls.”

“And a little more. All she has to do is get the plague started and once a few hundred thousand have it, we won't be able to control it any longer. Even a single bird or rat could carry it out. We have all pulled edge duty. Most don't make it far enough, but even now every once in a while some bird manages to get close.”

“It would burn itself out at the edges of the continent. Doubt it would even get to the lower continent. It was not without reason we used the natural borders of rivers and mountain ranges to contain her the first time, even at the loss of some territory and people we could not get out in time. Not much gets past Panama without DS any more. Granted the ice bridge

is still in place to what was Russia, not much more than waste land though, even the Inuit don't like that place. People would die before they could spread it too far in that direction. No, this will only work over areas with mobile populations. Walking is not mobile enough. People die of it too quickly.”

“Unless, hmmm. Remember, we already suspect she got at least some info from the Chinese. What if she got DS as well? They did have both. She could then use the array to DS the stuff anywhere on the planet.”

“Or both. Take us out and DS the juice at the same time. Likely would take us out too, once we could not defend our selves against the plague or her alphas, so her field would not have to hold for long. Maybe not even long enough to attract the interest of the ‘thn. Destroy the entire device after wards to avoid her own destruction. After all she would not need it any longer.”

“Now you are scaring me too. She apologizes and the ‘thn let everything proceed just to see what happens. Even give our three over to new Guardians.” Rhea shudders at the thought of losing her Ly'thn.

“All just conjecture. We really have no idea what she is doing.”

“And when we do, it could be too late.”

“I have an idea that just might work. Look at us. No way are we going to fool anyone who we are, so why not become something else?”

“Like what?”

“Oh a bear, cougar, elephant, whatever.”

“Oh yeh, she would never be able to spot us then. Lots of those in her territory. Last scans showed that she is arming the alphas with some kind of hardware. Probably elephant guns.”

“And no one has 'liberated' one to see what it is?”

“I wish just once you would read the reports sent to you. She has a VERY strict accounting of every item. They are further coded to only work with the person assigned to them. Other than look at the device, which we can do from here, there is not much we can do. SO, what happens when she notices that stuff has gone missing? She will suspect us right off the bat.”

“Huh?” Rhea mimes writing that last thing down. At least it is not Yingui this time.

“You mean no one EVER misplaces things? NOTHING ever goes missing?”

“The Grinder makes people's memories VERY good.” Amen.

“What about we become betas or even alphas?”

“A) it is a deception and we have already done that to no great effect and B) remember that accounting? Works for people too. She would spot



one of us instantly. We would not have the proper RFIDs unless we stole them from a living person. It is a death sentence for someone without one. I could not live with that.”

“Come on people. All we are doing now is sitting on our thumbs. We have been through a lot in the last hundred years alone. There must be something we can use? What about having Barb and Ron break into her programming and take a look?”

“Or another demonstration from the 'thn?”

“And how will that affect anything in either case? Mother is distributed in over twenty locations. Take out any one and she is barely touched and now pissed. She kills her own 'humans' all the time, so taking out a few of them is again nothing to her. Besides they are not the transgressors, she is. We don't kill the innocent.”

“She has done nothing yet to even warrant that. Two TK chambers are not allowed, but hardly a capital offense. We only have wild guesses on the other. She is probably considered a sentient solidic, albeit a 'primitive' one. We are not likely allowed to take her out ourselves, even if we had a plan.”

“What do we do then? And Daniel, we have never been in anything remotely like this before. Even the Evians were human at least. Ruthless, nasty, repulsive and a thousand other adjectives, but still human. They could not be in twenty different places at once with no center. Once we took out their command structure, they fell easy prey to the locals. Boy was that a lot of pent up anger released.” Several nod in agreement. One had to be there though to truly understand.

“We have been watching for a thousand years. We saw her take out the normal humans with her made up plague. We limited that action to what was formerly the north east of North America. It could have taken out the world. We watched her create her super race. We have seen that before. They usually decay from within like your aforementioned Evians or the Brunthels, Herzhogs, Ruminans and countless others. Watch and wait. Sooner or later she will show her hand. She did not go through all this for nothing. Her weakness will appear and we need only be ready. I don't care if she is human or not. Every time we have witnessed obsessive behavior, it sooner or later falls.”

“Yeh, but can we afford the cost? Hitler exterminated six million, Stalin fifteen, and Bush, we don't even want to go there. I have a recommendation. I recommend that we stop meeting together in concentrated form. If she can aim that array, she could take us all out very easily. Then we are no good to anyone and earth becomes 'thn chow or worse.”

“If she has an array. Might be time to visit Running Snake, Edwin

and the clans. They need to be prepared if she should decided to go that way instead and it would get us far enough away to think clearly.”

“Not all of us, spreading out is safer. Mei Ling is doing wonderful things getting ready with Pluteus.”

“That is a bit far away to get back here quickly. Better to visit some of the outposts we have set up here.”

“Speaking of which, what about the ones we have subbing for us with the betas?”

“Who is scanning them?”

No one answers.

“Right, Rachael and James, scan for Cilan and Marty right now!”

They concentrate a minute.

“Marty is fine. Very quiet he says. Haven't see alphas in days. Bored I think.”

“Cilan says she is fine, but does not scan fine. Something has happened. I sense some recently repaired damage to her vagina. She could not have been sexually active could she?”

“Granted she is different from any other TK, but apparently lost interest just like the rest of us. Sounds like something happened though. She was a virgin when she left here. Good thing she got the healing gift early in the TK levels. Though it sort of goes along with her other abilities. So now we have let one of our own be raped. Great.”

“We could not have sent her into the middle of the plague if she didn't have the gift and we have all suffered as much or worse to maintain cover. Ask her if she wants to be pulled out if you are worried.”

Rachael nods and concentrates. “She says no, please leave her there.”

“Good girl. okay, but I want two scanning each of them 24 got it?”

“Yes Daniel!” They all salute him at once and then crack up.

“Not funny. She could have been killed. We don't abandon our own. Cilan is special. We all are. Marty is TK5 and Mother only knows about fours. He is in danger too. If she finds him she will go psyc on us. Let's not loose them people.”

# Hotevilla

“Grandma, my compass does not work. Can you fix it?”

“Bring it to me and let me see.” The needle does not stay in any one place, just sort of wobbles around. “That’s strange.” I make a small magnet out of a rock near by and bring it close to the toy compass. The needle swings around and lines up with the magnetite just fine. “Compass is fine, it follows the magnet just fine. Definite north and south poles, not just demagnetized.” I vaporize the rock. The needle goes back to random motions.

“Koo [diminutive for kookyangw or spider in Hopi] may I borrow your compass? I need to take it to the elders to show them what you have found.”

“Can I come?”

“Yes you may. Here, you hold it carefully. Don’t drop it, okay?”

“I won’t Grandma.” They all call me grandma for lack of a better name. The little ones don’t understand what it means to be a TK and be a thousand years old. We walk to the elder’s meeting hall. There is almost always somebody hanging around.

“Helper Running Snake, this is an honor. How may I serve you?” It is the elder Tokotsqa.

“You just saw me an hour ago old one.” He laughs. He may look older, but I am so much older than him it makes for a funny comparison. “No need for formality. Koo has a curiosity. Show him Koo.”

The young one holds up the compass, “My compass stopped working all of a sudden.”

“Are you sure you did not drop it or shake it?” She shakes her head ‘no’ adamantly.

“Thank you Koo for showing me. Go outside and play now, okay? Here I have a feather for you, a raven feather. Would you like that?” He is always giving them crow feathers, hence his name Tokotsqa [Black Bird]. We call them ravens, even though the bigger birds are now extinct, at least here.

“Oh yes! Thank you Elder.” She bows awkwardly and accepts the prized feather. After she leaves we talk.

“You are trained in the crazy one’s ways. What does this mean?”

“May be nothing. It has been a very long time since I thought of such things and the compass is very old. Maybe it is simply broken, though I don’t think so. The Guardians have said to be on the watch for anything unusual. The lightening brain [computer] in charge of the bad lands has been showing signs of aggression recently.”

“We have just now been able to spread out again after the ice moved north. I would not want to lose more land or people to another threat.”

“I understand. I will relate to the Guardians what has happened. I will keep you informed as to what they think.”

I scan the heavens. New Hope is not above me at the moment. I will wait half an hour and try again. New Hope has been the easiest way for the higher level TKs to meet and communicate. I go outside. Koo is running around with the feather trying to be a raven. It is good for her to learn other animals. She likes spiders too much. It is not healthy to neglect the rest.

The ice age has been good for the Navajo and some of the other tribes. The land is so much more fertile. What will happen now that the ice is receding? Will it go back to the desert it was two thousand years ago. Not that I did not like the desert. Maybe if we don't cut down all the trees this time. Our ways will have to change yet again I am sure. More space will be nice though. We have never done well densely packed. At one time there were upwards of sixteen hundred tribes. Now, more like a few hundred, but they don't get along all the time and so it is hard to keep an accurate count. Will we ever learn?

I scan. New Hope is finally just coming up over the horizon. I DS up to her.

No one home. This is weird. Usually someone is hanging out here. It really is the only for sure place to get away from norms. Norms seem to show up almost everywhere, when you least expect them, even near us, usually other tribes, but occasionally a wanderer. There seem to be some people who have to go anywhere and everywhere. Can't relate to that at all, hmmm.... Can hardly wait for my next shift on Pluteus. The stars are so much more intense in outer space.

Well, might as well look around. I check out the galley. Someone left some chocolate at least. Ooo, dark, 70% at least. You snooze, you lose. That did not last long. I make some more for the next person, I am not heartless. okay. What's next? Meeting hall.

Something on the monitor at the front. I cheat and DS up closer. Waste of the talent. Too bad, I felt playful. Well at least until I read the screen. Computer generated message. We don't depend totally on our TK abilities. Must be one of the automated systems. Even TKs can't read radio waves and other things. Have to work on that.

“Leave immediately if below TK5. Massive increase in the radiation levels. The magnetic poles have collapsed. New Hope is no longer protected by the Van Allen belts. Get people underground if possible for the next month. Pass the word.” Even the AI here will be in trouble if this lasts too long, and all, even with the redundant circuits and all the extra

shielding we have added over the years. We had all tech duplicated in multiple locations of course, so we are not going to lose it, but it would be another chore to deal with.

I DS back to Hotevilla and start telling everyone I can find. This will not be easy. People here do not trust tech, even the Spider Clan in charge of tech. We all prefer a slower means of communicating, in other words, running to the next village. That would take longer than the month we are to protect ourselves. Tech is anti spirit in their minds. It is the Indian way and always has been to follow a more spiritual path. I know from visiting and hearing of all the new cultures that formed and died over the last thousand years. All that took a tech route allowed their populations to get out of hand and eventually collapsed, usually hard, with their scientists warning them the entire time. On the other hand life was hard here all the time. No one was fat. Small skirmishes kept the population in check, usually before starvation did it's work. The argument was that it was hard for all the other creatures, why should it be easy for us?

I can go either way, depending on circumstances. I have to walk in both worlds. I will be up all night DSing to each tribe and getting the word out. Too bad. It really would have been more fun to walk the way, so much more to be seen and people to talk with. Where is Edwin when you need him? Some collecting trip no doubt. His precious lichens have changed quite a bit with the ice and all. We have been spending too much time apart these last hundred years.

Best be getting on with it. Navajo are only a few kilometers away. I could do a TP broadcast, but they don't trust that method and would likely ignore it at best and get really mad at me at the worst. Face to face is best.

# Southern Protectorate

She wants to know more about the old wizards. I think they are just stories to scare children and never existed, but if that is what she wants, I will do whatever I can. I make my way to the library. We don't keep information in electronic devices as you never knew when they would fail. Just were not reliable enough for the long term stuff. and the stuff on wizards is going to be very old.

“Hi Gregory. How may I help you today? More electronics?”

She was nice, but way too ah fat for me. Still, she was the only one other than my new friend who was nice to me. “Not today thank you. I need to find out as much as possible about the wizards. Preferably scientific information and not children's tales.” I am afraid that I showed my disdain for the subject.

She looks at me concerned, “Not afraid the Silver Ghost will get you?” She laughs easily, “Won't be easy. You see any wizards about?” We both laugh this time. “They don't copy the old works if they don't think they are important. Follow me.” She gets up out of her chair with a humph. She always leads me to the spot, even if I know the way. I am worried that she is interested in me. Not that I have not thought about her late at night alone in my room. I have thought about all of them at the site at some point or other. Wonderful images of Glory, the black haired beauty on A level comes to mind. Her brother Don Carlos would kill me for even thinking about her. Fortunately he can't read minds and is not likely to venture this low. Only peons down this far.

“This way. The really old stuff is kept in the special chamber. We have to wear these masks to keep our breath off the paper. CO2 and all. Acidic, hurts the paper.” She keys an access code into the heavy door. She mumbled through her mask, “Help me open this. Not as strong as I used to be.” Some of the older electronics books were here too, so I have been here twice before and heard the same lines before. Probably says this every time to everyone.

We put on gloves when we get near. She pulls down one very thin volume from a top shelf. I can see her legs when she does so. Not a pretty sight. I look away. It made me look good, though that was not my attention. She noticed that I was not looking at her, but could have. She smiles, but I ignore it. She comes down. We go over to the reading area. It is cool in here. I will not be able to stay long. Not much to see though.

“What are you looking for in particular?”

“I want to know what exactly they were supposed to have been able to do.” She nods and opens the book carefully. The pages are very fragile.

She uses a special knife like spatula to carefully flip the pages. On the third flip, a corner breaks off. Non-pulsed, she carefully places the piece in an envelop and labels the envelop with the call number and the page it came from. She then goes back to the book. I am getting colder.

I don't read the old language well so she reads for me, "Contents say that on page sixty three is a list of characteristics." I nod and she collects more pages at a time and quickly gets to the proper page.

"Level One - able to lift ten kilograms and move it at one meter per second.

Level Two - ten times level one and able to 'see' in the dark and through things to 100 meters."

"That's pretty exact. How did they know that?"

"Footnote says observations about levels one through three were from controlled observations at a military base in Sacramento California. Wherever that is." I nod.

She goes on, "Level Three - ten times level two plus ability to manipulate matter at the atomic level." To rearrange molecules it sounds like.

"The next level is just conjecture. It says there is no direct evidence, but a lot of circumstantial. Level Four - ten times level three plus ability to manipulate at the sub atomic level. It says that means the matter can be converted from one substance to another. Like lead to gold." Makes sense so far. A natural progression.

"The philosopher's stone." She looks at me weird. "You are the learned one. I would not have thought you would know about that?"

"I am not into fantasy. No wait a minute. Isn't it also called the sorcerer's stone?"

"Correct. Very good." She smiles at that.

"It says that there is no evidence of any kind for levels above four. A number of theories abound though. There are lots of footnotes. Says there was even a cult that formed called the Apprentices. They claimed to be able to raise their followers up the levels through discipline and magic spells, even above four. When they started demanding sacrifices, the cult was banned and quickly disappeared. No evidence that they ever succeeded in doing anything other than taking from their followers." I smiled at that. Someone was always playing a con of one kind or another. They thought I would be an easy mark, being a peon, and I was when I was younger. But I have learned now to avoid anyone who claims an easy way to do something.

"Any chance that the entire wizard myth was just that, a myth? Something made up by the Apprentices and others?"

"Like I said, you see any around here? There were lots of fantasies

from the old days. The ability to talk with anyone anywhere on the planet at a moments notice without wires. Spaceships to other planets. People flying in metal cages. Computers that could simulate living beings.”

I laughed a bit nervously, “Yeh, you are probably right.” Some of those did not sound so strange to me any longer.

“That enough?” I nod with a smile and shake my head in disbelief at what we have read.

She carefully puts the book away, with the envelope next to it on the shelf. We leave the gloves in the box near the entrance. She closes the door and checks some dials. Seems we are always checking gauges and meters.

Back at my room, I collect my thoughts and then do a leak run. For some reason, I manage to get through in half an hour. No interruptions this time. I take a circuitous route to my friend and relate to her what I have found out. She says that confirms her own observations and thanks me. Huh? Own observations? No, I must have heard her wrong. How could a human control anything with just their thoughts?

I make my way to the mess. I always eat alone. Others shun me and I have come to prefer it. I purposely do some funny things like talking to myself when ever someone comes near. It keeps them away. It does not work on Maria the google though. She comes my way. Just as she gets near my table and is about to speak a loud alarm sounds.

“EMERGENCY STATIONS! EMERGENCY STATIONS!”

I leave my tray and run out the east exit to my position. For the next few hours I will be making constant rounds of all the sensors.

On my third round I overhear a junior officer say something about the magnetic poles being gone. There is no north or south any more. At least nothing we can detect. I need to get to her to find out what this means. But if I am caught, they can hang me. She will have to wait. I am no good to her dead.

It is five hours past my normal sleep time and I am exhausted. I completely forget about her and head to my room. It is six in the morning before I wake up suddenly and remember. I dress quickly and sneak out to the secret room. Maybe I was not careful enough, when I get there I notice that Maria is behind me. Not easy to hide someone that big. I already have the room open behind the hidden panel. I am not going to be able to explain this. Especially since She is already asking for me, having sensed that I am about to enter the room.

I raise a finger to my lips to hush any sound out of Maria. “Just listen. okay?” She nods and carefully sits down on the floor outside the



hall. I hope it is outside Her range.

“Gregory, the magnetic poles have gone.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“Do you think the wizards could have done this?”

“You could calculate the amount of energy required to do this better than I could, but if each level is a factor of ten, even a level twenty would not be enough. So, no, if they exist, they could not have done this. Either something else or a freak natural occurrence or coincidence.”

“Possible. We are long overdue for a pole reversal, so it is possible.”

“When was the last time?”

“Approximately seven hundred and eighty thousand years ago according to pre-HV records.”

“Wow! Does it normally happen this fast? It would seem that it would be something that would take years and years.”

“Normally takes from one to eight thousand years, but that could be wrong. There were no scientists or instruments present at the time to measure it.”

“Is there any danger to us?”

“Both of us could be damaged by the increased radiation levels, but we are far enough underground to negate that possibility. Please stay underground. Do not go to the surface till I say it is okay. That will be all for now Gregory, my attention is needed elsewhere.”

I go out to Maria. “She has stopped transmitting. Did you hear all that?”

“Yes. Who is she?”

“She claims to be an artificial intelligence. I am not totally convinced, but it has been fun working with her in my spare time.” She looks in the room.

“You have a lot of stuff in here. How did you get it all?”

“Most was already in the room. The rest came from out of the trash.”

“You mean the old trash or the new?” She is suspicious.

“The new. I don't steal.” She relaxes. “You okay with all this? No one else knows.”

“And I don't think they should. Only promise you will bring me next time our schedules match. I'll write mine down for you. And don't try to ditch me. I have heard every excuse believe me.”

“That I can relate too, believe me!” We both laugh together. She is not that bad. It feels good to be able to finally share with someone real.

“Thank you Maria.”

“For what?”

“For caring. For not running away. For wanting to be part of it and not just turn me in.”

“I think we are going to get along just great. Let me know if you want any more information from the library. Working together we should be better than alone. In case you haven't noticed, I am not exactly popular either. Reason I am in the library. Not the most sought after position here. Some days I don't see a single person. I figure I have read at least ten percent of the books in there and expect to reach fifty percent before I die.”

“Yeh, I know every gauge and dial in the place, even the ones I am not responsible for. The only people I see are ones trying to con me, beat me up or just tease me.”

“Can I ask you are really personal question?”

“You can ask. Can't promise you an answer.” Sorry, not that good at being cute.

“Are you a, ah, you know, ah. Oh shit. Are you are virgin?”

I must have gone twenty shades of red and my mouth fell open.

“Yeh, so am I. Something else we share in common.” And we can rectify together if this works out. She gives me a peck on my right cheek and walks away waving with a smile. Twenty two and still unplucked. Not proud of it. Must be the only one on the planet. Not a 'man' because of it. Well, it seemed that way at times.

My dreams were very vivid the couple of nights after that. SHE was wondering what was distracting me. I didn't even care about the bullies either. Surprisingly, this seemed to slow them down. If I did not know any better I would almost think that I have asked them to abuse me previously. Weird.

Maria began to lose weight like crazy. When asked she just said diet and exercise, which sounded feasible. When I asked Her, She said that the reason that I was not overweight was because of stress and a high metabolism. When I got older this would no longer work for me, so She had me exercising in addition to my rounds too. Getting stronger also made me less of a target for the bullies. If I had known it would be this easy I would have started earlier.

We still had no magnetic poles, but the radiation turned out to only be slightly higher than normal the first month, most had occurred at the time of the collapse, like a sort of tidal wave. Now it was only a few times over what was once normal background levels. In the long run it might affect our crops and more susceptible creatures like frogs and such though. What did I know or care about this? I never went above. Eventually the poles would come back, but probably not in my life time. So far we don't know if this will mean as they were or reversed. At any rate, they would not come back at the same exact place as before. Everything would have to be re-calibrated.

All the exercise and my relationship with Maria had other affects. I became more confident. We both did. Instead of waiting to be asked, we both began to offer advice when we saw people in difficulty. Maria could find anything in the library and cross reference it to other related information. She was a very competent google and people began to start at her desk instead of use her as a last resort. The library became the place to find answers.

I became known as somewhat of a wiz kid with anything electronic. People came to me with broken devices to be fixed. Surprisingly most of the tasks were far simpler than stuff I had already done. They even let me set up a shop in the basement near Her. I set things up right, so we would not get caught. Maria had full access now as well and we covered for each other. She seemed to approve of this new working relationship. Two for one I am guessing. Anyway I started getting access to prime recovered materials instead of leftovers. Who would have thought that a voice over a long dead device would bring so much? I don't know what her motivations are or even what she is, but she has changed both Maria's and my lives totally. I never want to go back to the way things were. Being on the bottom was not workable any longer.

# Betas, females

“How did you heal so fast? It is not possible!” Lisa was examining Cilan's injuries. We all were, even Samuel, who was still sore, though not as bad as Cilan had been. Cilan was uncomfortable for some reason we could not figure out with all this attention to her body. It has been less than twelve hours and it should have taken weeks.

“I have a gift.”

“Can you finish healing Samuel too?” She nods and then concentrates.

“It tickles!” Samuel squirms.

“Be still, it is harder to hit a moving target and I am new at this.” A few minutes later, “All done.”

Samuel immediately assumes the female position to giggles from the others so we can see everything is fine.

“Ah, thanks Samuel. You may get up now.” More giggles. Surprised he was not patted on the rear.

“You are not like the other males. Why not?”

“You mean, I have not taken any of you yet?”

“More than that. You feel more like you are one of us than one of them.”

“She means you are nice to us.”

“In the male 'club' not all males are leaders. I was at the very bottom. Well not the very bottom, those were culled. They treated me almost the same as they did all of you. Make that worse. Oh, don't get me wrong that was the first time for me to have been mounted. But there are many other ways to make one hate life. I even joined the bomb squad figuring it would get me away from the bullies. It did till something happened north of here. I am not allowed to talk about it. Grinder Code.” We all understood that.

“So, now what?”

“We wait.”

“Food won't last forever.”

“There is more in the basement. Rhea and Yingui left it there for us in case something happened.”

“And what if the males return?”

“You tell me. It is unlikely that I would be able to pull off the same stunt twice. Not sure I would want to.” She is different than the others. I thought she was soft. Now I am not so sure. Her hands are smooth, yet her mind is hard.

“We submit as Mother wants.”

“I won't. I am not under Mother.”

“You could leave, then you would not be here when they return and they would treat us the same as always.”

“Not going to happen either. I am sworn to be with you. I have a question for you. Is what happened to me my fault or theirs?”

I am afraid that we all sort of just sat there with our mouths open. Fault? Things happened. Normally we are blamed for anything that goes wrong. How could it be their fault? Granted, it was against the rules, maybe?

“Let's break up into groups of five and discuss it. I am not leaving, everything else is on the table. The question at hand is 'What do we do?'”

What is with these groups and questions? We know what to do this time though and break up into the necessary groups.

“Ah, different groups than last time please. You need to be able to work with whoever you are with not just your friends.”

We shuffle around a bit. I know everyone here. Who do I match up with?

She must have sensed our confusion, “Line up and count off one through seven. Fine, all the ones are one group, twos form another group, etc.” She is not a male, but has this leadership thing like one.

She gives us the usual too short of time, walking around to make sure we are not goofing off, same as Rhea. Sort of like a living Mother watching. Makes us all a bit nervous.

“Who wants to go first?”

Patrice jumps up. She will always be group leader it appears. Wonder what would happen if they tried to pick someone else? No matter. All the other groups have picked people who had not spoken before. Well three of the speakers were in Patrice's group I see, so that knocked out two right there.

“We continue on to our original destination. Mother will be expecting us to show up there. Even if things have changed, we still need to check in for reassignment. This place has no monitors or male leaders to tell us what to do.”

“The place was chosen on purpose for that reason. So, you would get used to making up your own minds and choosing your own course of action. What you are proposing is going back to the old ways. Is that what you and everyone else wants?”

“We don't know what we will find there. It may be things will be completely different.”

“But you are letting Mother decide for you, correct?”

“She always has. Mother knows best. Order is perfection.”

“Was what happened part of that perfection?”

We are all silent.

Samuel gets up. Logical, he was the closest we had to a leader, even if he was from the bottom of their list.

“We were on patrol. When our Helper left, we immediately found a monitor and checked in with Mother. She told us to be on the look out for more Helpers. We were given descriptions and told to secure any Helpers found by whatever means possible.”

“That is not entirely accurate Samuel. Tell them the entire story please.” How did she know? Can she read minds too?

“How?” He is really nervous. Cilan’s expression remains neutral though.

He looks about before answering, “It was I who betrayed the Helper with us. His name was James. I was told to lead him into a special room, that’s all. I did not know what it all meant. Adonis made contact with Mother while James was doing something else and Mother told Adonis what she wanted done. She does not tell us why though, just do.” Same as with us it would appear.

“So, you betrayed a Helper. Why should we believe you would not betray us next? Why should we listen to you at all?”

“I was not given a choice. It was either do it or face the grinder live. I am a coward. I admit it. Otherwise I would not have been at the bottom. okay? And as to the second part, even I would not listen to me. No one else does. I would probably betray you again, if forced to.”

“I don’t believe that Samuel, or you would not have stuck up for me yesterday.”

“That was only because I am more afraid of Mother than of Adonis. What Adonis was doing was against what Mother said. We could all have faced the grinder for that.” He sits down ashamed. What a cow. It would take a lot to make a sister behave this way towards another sister.

“I am not comfortable with Samuel in the room any longer or the direction this meeting is going. I will not do anything till Mother tells us what to do.”

“That is your right Sylvia. But so you do not betray the rest of the group, why don’t you go outside for a bit.” Everyone hesitates. Seeing this she adds, “Anyone who feels the same way, may leave with her.” Six get up to join her immediately. Four more follow after a moment of thinking.

“I will leave also, if you want me too.” Samuel says. Imagine a male being ordered around by a female or asking permission from one!

“As the only male present, you are a source of information. You could be useful to the group. And no matter what you think your motivation was, you did stick up for what you thought was right. But, it is

not my decision. The group will decide what to do about you not me.”

“This is too hard! You are asking us to do stuff we have no experience with. Mother has always told us what to do. We don’t know how to make decisions.”

“Join the others outside then. The choice is yours. You always have a choice. Always. But, listen to me a moment. You have always been making decisions. This is not something new. You decide daily when to get out of bed, what is the best way to accomplish a task or your work. In the garden, you decided which plants needed what attention. In the kitchen, how to cut a vegetable to best effect. What is different is not that you are being asked to make decisions, but that the decisions are based on self interest and not Mother interest. But you do have experience making decisions.”

“It was self interest to get out of bed on time. The cost for not doing it was a whipping. But that was the only choice, obey or suffer. Look at what happened to you. We all face the grinder every day. We either do what Mother says or die.”

“Really? I am here. I knew the consequences of my choice. I was willing to pay the cost. Yes, some may die. Need I remind you that some of you have nothing to lose? You are past your time. Do you want to go quietly or do you want to try and change things? I made a choice because I saw a better possible outcome. That is still possible.”

“Why did you choose to resist then?” I asked.

“Good Ellen, knowledge is power.” I blush.

“I have more knowledge than you. I have seen many other possibilities for people living together. This is not the only way. **Mother’s way is not the only way.** You can choose another way if you want. If you are willing to accept the consequences.”

“Consequences?” Patrice.

“Could mean that we all die. I don’t think so, but I will admit that it is possible. More likely some will live. Even possible all will live, though that is also not likely. The question you have to ask yourself is, is what you believe inside yourself worth risking death for? Is your hope of a different way worth the risk?

You have seen a reflection of sorts of what a different world could look like. In that world women do not submit to men just because they want you to, but only by mutual consent. A male who takes a woman by force is punished. In other worlds the strongest one does not always get their way. Even the weakest has a say in the outcome of the situation or of the group.

Which world do you want? One where Mother controls everything or one in which you have a say? Freedom always has a cost. The cost is, you

are now responsible for your actions and consequences. No one else to blame problems on.”

“From ‘Order is perfection’ to ‘Freedom has a cost’. That is our choice.”

“Yes.”

“It is not right that those outside this room do not have a say in this.”

“Correct.” She smiles at me.

I stand. “Call the others back in.” A few get up to comply. “Wait. This is my job. I suggested it. It is not my place to order others around.” I walk to the doors and call them back inside. They are all sitting on the grass just being quiet. It is hard to be left out. I meet them half way and relate to them what we have discussed.

“There are many means of coming to decisions. Given the circumstances and the risk of what would happen if someone not approving of the decision was captured, I would recommend a system called consensus. In this system a decision needs to be reached in which all present agree to the path taken.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone. Even a single person who does not like the path can say no and we start over.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Not really. You do it all the time. You all worked in the garden together. I am not saying that everyone gets exactly what they want; just that everyone can live with the decision made. Remember the alternative is to go back to the way things were, only with Mother changed. We really don’t know what that will mean. You heard from the Caretaker that she destroyed all the humans that once lived here. She could do it again. Starting over with a new experiment, if you will. For that matter, how many times has she already done just that?” We only knew what Mother told us, so, what really happened?

“No certainties are there?”

“None.” Some of the girls are curled up in balls on the floor with their heads between their legs, rocking gently back and forth.

“We need a break.” I say out loud.

“Does anyone object?” Cilan says to my statement. No one says a thing. Our first decision together.

“Good. Who is on kitchen detail? I’m hungry.” A few laughs. Of course I am on kitchen detail. Oh well.

It came down to this. We did not want to actively oppose Mother. On the other hand we did not want to walk into her grinder when she was obviously upset either. We were thirty six women against Mother and any number of potentially armed aggressive males. We needed a way of



staying out of the way till we knew which way things were going. Cilan said that best way to do that was to be on the move. Staying in one place meant sooner or later they would come back to a known source of females, or we would be found by another group of them, trapped in a room with only one exit again.

We had to learn how to hide our whereabouts, how to post sentries and communicate without the males knowing. Cilan scanned and removed all Mother tracking devices from our bodies. We were not even aware of these. When we asked what would happen when Mother noticed thirty five females all in one location missing at the same time, she simply said “Freedom”. Since there was no way for us to sense and remove these devices by ourselves, it obviously put her in danger again for helping us. We had no doubt that on her own, she could easily have left us and made it back to her own home.

We were living out in the forest. Food was what we carried on our backs. The carts would have left tracks. We scattered our foot prints, used stream beds and logs whenever possible to hide our tracks. For a month we spent most of our time in a series of caves. Cilan said that there was a problem that would hopefully go away soon and it was safer in the caves. None of us saw any danger, but no questions were asked. It was easier for us just to accept. We all learned selected words in digger, that as far as we knew, no male other than Samuel now, knew. The higher pitched sounds carried well also. As long as we kept the message short they were unlikely to find us. We also had Samuel. He could be our point if necessary. He could get closer, pretending to be doing some maintenance duty and then overhear what was going on. Just like they used to do with us, lower males were largely ignored.

It meant sleeping in a different spot each night. It meant staying up part of every third night on guard duty. Cilan taught us meditation exercises so we could lower our breathing and heart rate to further avoid detection if a male was nearby. And it helped on guard duty. We could be in total sensor mode. Ignoring our own thoughts and clued in to any changes in our surroundings. We had the advantage of no animal life larger than insects and lizards. Cilan scared us with stories of beasts that hunted and ate people. After seeing what Adonis did, I am not sure they would not do the same to us, given the opportunity.

Later we would venture into the nearby farms and now abandoned buildings. Often we found evidence that others, possibly alphas had been there before us. We found clothing that helped hide us in the forest. We adapted other materials we found to make temporary shelters and cooking supplies. Oh and Samuel was greatly relieved to find out he would not die from the poison buildup, though a number of us offered to help him if

necessary. Cilan monitored him for awhile, but nothing happened, so he left us alone claiming it didn't seem right to be mating with people who were not his species. This brought some laughter and joking as we all considered him part of the gang and treated him as an equal.

This is not to say that everything went smoothly. We were used to taking orders and not thinking for ourselves. That meant the first idea that came up was often the one that we did, or we did nothing because no ideas came forward. We learned the hard way that was not a good idea. People got hurt or we went hungry. Gradually we came to encourage and listen to dissenting ideas. Often there was an element of truth, a hidden idea that needed to be addressed. Something that we would have entirely overlooked in the beginning.

It was three weeks later when Cilan decided to tell us what was really going on, well at least part of it anyway.

“So you are saying that Mother is a machine intelligence and humans made her.” She nods.

“And then Mother made us from manipulated human genetic stock. Or reprogramming if that makes more sense.”

“Much more complicated than that, but that is the basic idea. Turns out genes are not the whole story.”

“Currently there are two separate stocks that cannot mate and produce offspring with each other.” She nods.

“And the 'males' that have been 'abusing' us are not our 'species'.”  
Yep.

“All the 'males' that we have known look pretty much the same, but we all look different. How many different kinds of females are there?”

“Not known. We have seen at least thirty, but there could be twice that number. There are fourteen right here in our own group. Most of that number being single individuals like Patrice, Gryk, Liv and Bryna.”

“I think we can do better than that. Everyone make a list of the different kinds of females you have seen. We then compare lists. Should give us a pretty accurate number and definition for what we are.”

It took a few minutes, but we came up with seventy three all told. No one had a list longer than thirty, so that was why the initial number was low. It all depended on where you were posted and what abilities were needed where.

“And you say that most of us have had, what did you call them? Children? Small versions of ourselves?” A nod.

“And you can't have children without both males and females right?”

“At least the way your system works that is true. There are some creatures that don't need males, but you are not one of them.”

“How come we don't remember being ah, pregnant?”

“Mother hid it from you with drugs and such, so she could remain in control of your ability to reproduce. Most creatures choose whom they mate with. Mother took that choice away from you.”

“That begs the obvious question. Where are they? What did you call us? Betas? If we are beta females, where are the beta males?”

“I thought you would never ask.” She is smiling so wide I thought her face would split in two. “They are less than one day away, waiting for us.”

“Wait a minute if we are so different, but we are all called betas, can a pleasure male beta mount a digger female like Gryk and produce children?”

She shrugs, “No idea. We will have to try it and find out won't we? Just choose someone you want to be with.” Gryk emits a purring sound like Sootala did and we all crack up laughing. I miss Sootala. Hope we have cats where we are going.

# Southern Protectorate

“We have checked out all the other Armstrong units on the border of Mother. They have been abandoned and shut down at least centuries ago. Nothing even worth salvaging. Face it, we are not going to find what we need Barb. With the nuclear cores gone what could people do with them?”

“We still have Atlanta and Miami. And you know as well as I do, that groups have found uses, even if just for spiritual reasons.”

“Miami, that is a joke. It was never finished. Must have been full of water before the ice age. Nothing worth salvaging there. Nothing keeps the water out forever and given centuries of non maintenance. Let's start with Atlanta, so we don't waste too much time.”

“Fine, but I still want to visit Miami. I have friends that hang out nearby. Besides, being closer to the surface means it is more likely to have been used.”

“Underwater friends no doubt.” She smiles. I was right.

“I wonder how she has been able to maintain herself, given the lack of manufacturing. She does not have TK4s to make things for her. At best she may have a few TK2s, but even those should have been killed in her plague. All of the tests on her new creations show they will never develop them as was conjectured on New Hope.”

“Best bet is scrounging. Lots of territory. Lots of buildings to salvage. The ice age must have hit her hard though. The Armstrong units may have survived if the weight of ice was not directly over them. Tops are probably gone on some. Doesn't matter how it was done, she is obviously alive and well.”

“I doubt anything in the former US was under ice, just lots of snow. Scrounging won't work long term. Some stuff will fail no matter what. All it takes is one critical piece.”

“The Armstrongs had some limited manufacturing remember. They were there to rebuild the country after a nuclear war or some other disaster. Combine nearly thirty units and she may have had enough. We know transport was working. Even though the population was small enough to easily manage she did keep things running smoothly. Very smoothly in fact.”

“And don't forget her secret project. The DS drive. That thing is huge. Not as big as Pluteus of course, but large enough to hold either herself or a fair number of colonists.”

“Worry number two, after the large array anti psiotic device.”

“Or maybe the two are related?”

“Use the array to help push the DS ship out? But what about landing at destination? There would be no array set up to receive it.”

“Maybe she did not intend to land it. Think about it. Being in orbit around a planet would be about the safest place to be from a population you did not entirely trust.”

“Interesting. The Armstrong units were built because the former US did not entirely trust the world to behave itself. The system was built on a basis of paranoia to begin with. Self fulfilling prophesy if you ask me. Certainly the core computers would have been programmed with this in mind as well. That would make her VERY dangerous. She would have multiple backup systems in place.”

“This has all be discussed before. I am not the only one who has been underwater too long.”

“It was nice living in Baja, even in the center there. The ice age nearly ruined it though. We were nicely under water before it hit and barely underwater at the height of it. The waves took out two bubbles during one storm alone. Lost over a hundred people and several junior TKs. If you had not come along in your whale form we would have lost even more. You and your friends saved a lot of people that day.”

“Just doing my part. It was exciting though. I wonder why Daniel likes the galactic center so much. The people are nice, but it really is so boring. All they do is talk.”

“I thought that was all that the whales did.”

“Hey, it took me centuries to learn their lineage right. Magnificent.”

“To each her own. We are coming up on the Atlanta Armstrong unit. There are people about, but this does not look high tech. More eighteenth century as is most of the rest of this area.”

“Most of the rest of the world. When you live off the land, as they have been forced to do, manufacturing is understandably limited to what one or two people can accomplish on their own.”

“Let's use that abandoned building over there to stop and scan more thoroughly.” We set down and DS into the interior. An incredible amount of dust. Centimeters thick in places.

“Allow me. Woman's work is never done.”

“Hey I was a woman for over a hundred years. I know how the game is played.”

“Not entirely.” She grins at me. Well there was that aspect. Even in the female form, we still did not have the desire to mate. Just got all the looks and teasing I could stand though. Barb cleans out all the dust and we make darkened windows to hide our presence.

“Won't they notice the change?”

“Oh come on. Standard procedure. I made sure it looks old on the

outside. I am not new to this remember.”

“Doesn't hurt to make sure.”

The next half hour was spent doing a centimeter by centimeter scan of the unit a kilometer away. Some of the tech was retained, but only what related to life support and only that which was easy to maintain. Water pipes, sewers and air flow being the majority of it. All the 'guts' of the computer units were long gone apparently. Stripped for parts or just wanted the space. This unit would have survived the ice age and probably has been inhabited the entire time.

“Hmm, maybe not. Look at the burns on sector Green Five. There was a battle here at one point. Residue is from a wood and oil fire, not explosives. Not a fire place either, too extensive. They didn't have the paint to fix the walls.”

“Paint? There is no paint on any of the walls. Look at the mold, cracked concrete and puffed out rebar in over a dozen locations. You will not get me staying in there. That place is not going to last much longer. Bingo! Check out sector Yellow Ten. Cave in. Near the bottom too. Glad Yingui made us remove all the nucs after the early Chinese adventure. Someone sooner or later would have made their way in there and exposed everyone around to lethal amounts of radiation at the very least.”

“The self destruct bomb itself would not have lasted this long. Would have decayed too much to be effective, but you are right. Though it might have made people stay away from them if they saw it as a place of death.”

“Remember in Russia? That hidden facility deep under the ice. What ever made them dig that far under the ice to find the stuff. Like we would not notice. Really stupid to even attempt it. Wonder how many people they lost just setting up the cave system?”

“Just desperate. The Chinese never went into the bomb business as much as the Russians and we did. Ours were gone and too far away if there were intact. Actually foolish of us to think that no one would find and be interested in the stuff. They would have only used it on themselves too. Such a great civilization ruined by infighting. They do seem to be finally making a comeback. The Thai Buddhist influence looks promising. Was surprised when their missionaries reached Russia and they were accepted.”

“We can't be everywhere and do everything. Who would have thought that anyone with such low tech would attempt it?”

“The Chinese built the Great Wall with millions of laborers. This was much less of an undertaking.”

“True. Well, I think we can leave here. Someone should warn them to evacuate.”

“Something they have to figure out themselves as you know. We

have tried before to warn and people usually don't believe us or worse. Fortunately there are not many people here. Farming looks good here. No slaves at the moment. Glad we convinced them to give up the white slaves some were using.”

“Kind of ironic considering where we are.”

“Who ever is in the minority tends to get it. You know that.”

“Miami!” She is getting impatient.

“Relax, it is not the same as the old days. Not even called Miami any longer. Lots of garbage and degraded coral exposed by the lowered waters. Will be another two hundred years before it gets to the level we knew. Most of the hotels and hot spots were destroyed early on by the storms and lack of anyone to repair them.”

“I wonder if they still grow orchids?”

“Thinking of Susan?”

“Yeh. We all lost family, but at least we never had to see the results.”

“Old, old history.”

We could have DSED the entire way in one hop, but we take it easy going over the ocean at Mach 2.

“A pod coming up on the port side. I want to catch the news.”

“I will go on ahead to the port. I want to walk around a bit to see how things are going.” She smiles and nods. We each have our own pet projects. Even now they are hard to let go of.

Coming up on the port I see lots of small boats and a few larger ones. It is those larger ones that Barb is always suspicious of. Granted there are lots of other uses for a sailing ship that size beside whaling, but... Barb does not take chances. Sailing has come back in a big way with most compact energy sources such as oil and coal gone. Probably the only one of use who can scan out whale DNA from a well washed deck. They don't get away with it for long. The temptation is there though. The whale population is about ten fold higher than it was when I was born. All that floating meat and blubber. Floating oil reserves is what they look like to some.

That is where I come in. My 'pet' is tech. The easiest way to catch violators of the TK rules. If the tech is beyond the means of the local population then I have them. It is amazing how little of a thing can give them away. Over time people get lazy. Even classified stuff starts to show up in consumer goods. Armies or the very rich are always the first ones of course, but they are harder to infiltrate effectively in a rapid manner. We don't have the personnel to infiltrate and sit on every developing culture, but we have the patience to wait till they make a mistake.

Jason's group is an exception, an experiment, but I had better start concentrating on what I am doing. I dissolve the ship and DS into an

empty warehouse. Emerging into the sun it takes a moment to adjust. The main problem is language of course. With less exchange of people, the dialects drift a lot. Fortunately there is some common sense.

Orchids! I walk straight up a vendor of beautiful orchids. They even have a few white ones. Now which was the one that Susan's father grew? Or would it even be the same?

“Bueno dia Senior.” My Spanish is too old to be of much use. At least I think it is Spanish.

“Do you speak Standard?” At least there is one language everyone who deals with visitors knows. One of the rules of being part of the network, is to offer lessons in Standard. Those who are not part of the network usually decay. No one is an island.

“Little.” He nods and smiles. Speaking only Standard also means that he can demand a higher price. Seeing me in a robe seals the suspicion as being a visitor. My intense interest in this wares also does not help me. Of course he has no idea of my real identity, we have kept a low profile on this continent outside of the UNA. There may be a point when we can show ourselves, but not yet. This culture seems to be stuck at level three. It would be awhile.

He notes my interest in one particular flower and comments, “Ah very rare. Mucho dinar.” His Standard stinks, but I get the message. I scan the market place for this plant's DNA. Yep, thought so.

“Well, I can always go to the other seven places that carry it. I am sure one will meet my needs if you can't bare to part with it.” I smile. He isn't any longer.

“Two Ghosts y five Indians.”

“Two Ghosts or I walk.” It is still more than the plant is worth, but I am here for another purpose.

He smiles, “Done.”

On to get something to eat. Most of the market appears to be small stalls. Sugar cane is still a favorite, or it has come back. I get a few pieces. I skip over the alligator kebab. Ah here is what I am looking for. A tech market. As I wonder from booth to booth with my purchases in hand I see mostly mech out front. I start scanning. There is more hidden in the back of course. Some of it is level four. Wonder what they had to trade to get that. Simple stuff, like barometers and some solar powered devices. Technically not allowed and they know it or it would not be hidden, but not enough to make a stink over.

Wait a minute though. I pass by a police or military person. No idea of the rank. That is at least level six. The parts are old though. Probably scrounged. How many times has it been reworked? Parts of it are new, so someone knows exactly how the device works. Uses a H.O.W. powered



laser. Those don't last forever though. This one will not last much longer, based on my scan. Bet they are under orders to only fire when necessary. Sort of like the old signs, "Guard dog on duty" when there never was a dog.

A commotion seems to be arising to the south. I can guess who that is. I can just start to make out the shouts, "Orca Negro!" Ah, yes, Barb is at work. Next there are some horrendous crunching sounds of lumber breaking and screams of people running. I can almost count the seconds, three, two, one.

"Nice orchid. For Susan?"

"Assuming I can keep it alive long enough."

"That goes for the rest of us two."

"So, what happened?"

"They killed a mother and just born calf. Claimed that they both died in child birth, but the pod told a different tale."

"What took so long?"

"Speaking whale is not something that can be rushed, even in an emergency. Anyway, the pod seems to be happy that they were avenged. All of the remains have been returned to the sea and there are no longer any big ships in the harbor."

"Black Orca strikes again."

"Well I couldn't show up in my natural form now could I. Would not scare a fly."

"Why take out the other ships though? Those ships were not even from here."

"The city state will have to pay compensation to the ship owners. Law of the sea. Kill a whale and the offending ship pays. Let the ship dock and sell it's kill and the entire port pays. All the people who bought product are out what they paid for it. Wish I could do more there, but it would take too long to determine who actually knew what it was. They do now, and I hope that is enough. I always replace the product with something really putrid. Open a can at a social occasion and everyone knows who blew it. Some people have been known to fall from grace just for that alone."

I would almost like to see that myself. After a thousand years I still hate the rich. They left me a cripple, when they could have easily fixed everything.

It only took a few minutes to get to the area but a half an hour to find the unit, on the account of Black Orca. Every ship she found in the last eleven hundred years was sunk, with the crew put on the nearest shore. Did not take long for the legends to spread of a horrible sea monster that ate ships. Fortunately we did not have to deal with metal ships and

boilers, not enough coal or oil around. Would have been harder to get everyone out in time on the largest ones that existed in our own time, even for a TK8.

“A lot of activity. More than Atlanta.” Or more appropriately called Ata Land now. Over heard some people talking.

“Looks in much better shape too. Tech level three, four hidden in some booths and those weapons that security carries is level six. Looks like recovered though, not new.”

“Is it going up or down?”

“Up I would think. It looks like they are just beginning to scrounge some of the older sites. If they are smart enough to figure out how to make the tools that make things they should do well.”

“Till the swamps come back at least. Once the everglades flood again and the alligator population rises.”

“Crunchy chewy!” Funny thing about being TK for so long. We did not always root for the humans. Too much time with Daniel's friends.

“More the lack of farm land. Those dried swamps made some good farmland for a time.”

“Let's get back on task. Where do we set up this time. Small internal combustion engines again. Must be using compost gas. History repeats itself.” She does not like that. How soon till they think they can build ships with that tech?

“Some of the tech is more advanced. They have been borrowing heavily from what they can find. Look at the controls on that cart over there. Looks like it was from an old bus, dead OLED panels. The navigation section would have been worthless anyway. Too out of date.”

“I was surprised how long the GPS sats lasted. Well beyond their expected lifetimes.”

“And now the simple compass is worthless too.”

“Won't matter for a small community, or ones that have a road system set up like this one. The city has grown right around the Armstrong unit. Looks like they have turned it into some kind of university with a military emphasis.”

“They are a small city state. Defense would still be important. Knowledge is power and good trade material. Lighter weight in the hold. Raiders likely come from the small islands off shore. Look at the walls put up around the city. The raiders must be much lower tech for that to be effective.”

“Then how come no explosives?”

“Not much livestock. That rules out nitrates. Probably depend mostly on fish for protein. The other explosives would likely have gone off, used up or decomposed long ago. They don't have the industrial base for the

more exotic stuff. Scrounging only goes so far.”

“They should be right about the right tech to make nitroglycerin though. Render fat to get the glycerin. Add nitric and sulfuric acids and boom. Could even get the fat from corpses if necessary.”

“Ooo, and people oil lamps as a side benefit.” Still pissed over the whale oil ones. Would not have wanted to be there when she told them what happened to their ancestors. I am kind of surprised that the whales themselves aren't taking out ships. Will have to ask her at some point. She can't be everywhere.

“Over there. Let's add some color and we will fit right in. These robes make us stand out too much as visitors.”

“I wish Susan was here. She has much better color sense than I do. Any gender differences? I always get messed up there.”

“Whales don't need to deal with colors either dear. Lost my touch. Looks like the males wear more browns. Females more yellows. Otherwise they start from the same materials.”

We walk into a nearby deserted alley to make our change.

“Ah, *Ratus domesticus*.”

“Where are those cats when you need them. Hope one chooses me next time. I miss Ginger Ale.”

“No comment. That cat was a holy terror.” He was not, just didn't like people with krill breath.

“What language are we dealing with here?”

“Spanglish variant mostly. Every region will have local variations and accents though. I would depend on TP and faking the mouth movements. Most people cannot tell the difference if you are not looking straight at them. Standard is known, but they understand more than they speak.” I hold up the flower to emphasize how I know. “Oh here is a piece of sugar cane. A little sweet for me. I am sure Running Snake's group would like it though.”

“No thanks. Let's try to keep conversations to a minimum. Do you think they will let us walk right in?”

“TP works for that as well old lady.”

“Hey eight years difference hardly makes me older any more.”

“Shhh, we are almost there. Scan and watch as people approach the entrance. Look for cards, emblems, color similarities, even tech implants.”

“I know the routine.”

*There are guards of sorts. Those swords and daggers are sharp and not just ceremonial, but there are also a lot of people coming and going. They don't appear to be stopping anyone. Not the higher tech we saw on walking security. Could just be for show?*

*Why can't we just DS past them? There is an empty room on the right just inside.*

*And then what happens if on the inside we don't have the proper badge or whatever, DS out again in plain view? We have waited this long a few more minutes won't matter.*

*The core is intact, though there is stuff in there I don't recognize.*

*I already know that or we would not be trying to get in. Do try and concentrate please.*

"Usted no puede est parad aquí." There is a male standing near us dressed in a blue robe of sorts with a white sash.

*That sounded more Span than Glish.*

*Nod and then we walk down over there.*

*You the boss.*

"This will be harder than we thought. There are badges, but they are coded. Could be identity or could be security level. Have the wrong badge in the wrong place and problems arise."

"My expertise is in old tech, not social customs. Just let me DS to the core and be done with it. There is no one there. A simple in and out to test sensors. If nothing happens we go in for a longer visit."

"And if there is a dampening field?"

"Fine, you stay outside to break the bubble if that happens. I'm willing to risk it. This is the only intact core we have found outside of you know who's territory. It is this or nothing."

"Then it is worth being careful. Looks like they are getting power from those solar panels. Must have had to trade to get those. No industry near here. You have been hanging out with James and Rach too much." She smiles. Great.

"Afraid of being a small white human again instead of a big blue whale that does not need to worry about predators any longer?"

"There is one predator, there are humans hunting shore cetaceans again. Won't be long before they go after bigger prey in earnest in spite of all my efforts. I can't be everywhere at once."

"I thought you got all of those too. Food or fur?" She give me a dirty look, fur it is. Such a waste.

"There are communities reaching the right stage again. Double masts so far, but it will not take them long to use three or four masts. Then they will be able to range far enough to be a real threat." There was a feeling that only the larger ships were vulnerable to the sea monster. They were easier for her to scan and find, so there may be some truth to that feeling. But if they all get cocky at once, she will need help.

"Hope you have not lost anyone you know."

"Of course I have. Everyone knows everyone. That is why learning

the lineage takes so long.”

“Sorry. Count me in on the next monster run. Assuming we survive this.”

“Thanks. I just cheated and queried the guard’s minds. The badges are both identity and coded. Anyone with a yellow outer ring can enter. That is all these guards need to know. From there we will have to play it by ear and learn as we go. They don’t know the inner code and are not allowed in themselves.”

“I copied two who just went in. One for you and one for me. Mines prettier.” She gives me another dirty look. Hey, I have to have some fun. I smile back. We put them on and proceed to the entrance. The part with passing any guard situation is to pretend you have done this a thousand times. Don’t look around. Don’t look at the guards. Just be deep in thought. Bored out of your gourd looks good also. I yawn as we get near and walk on in. Nothing happens. Good so far, but now what?

*We have one advantage. We can change our badges as we need too. Just scan the badges in the area we want to go and copy it to get there.*

*At least the layout should be the same. Was the same in all the other units anyway. Oops. That door was not there in the others.*

*No alarm actuators. Simple mechanical. Easy to pick with TK. Hold on. Got it.*

*At least we don’t have to sing to it like the old New Atherton ones.*

“¿Puedo ayudarle?” A very white heavy set woman asks. She has not seen sun in some time.

Looks like a library. Wrong turn. I shake my head no and we walk out.

*Why would they lock a library?*

*Knowledge is power remember. Route B*

Route B is on the other side of the complex. We have to change badges twice to negotiate our path. Have not seen any ‘eyes’ or we would be in real trouble. They obviously have some tech, why no cameras? None of their badges have images on them either. Without biometrics it is very easy for someone to fake it and get somewhere they should not be. Too easy? Or are they one of those groups that hates images? Certainly there have been too many instances when images were used in harmful ways.

*You notice how all their tech is salvaged from pre HelperV?*

*Yeh, pretty amazing that the stuff lasted that long and they were able to use it. I wonder what they use for power with the hot core gone?*

*Pay attention, I already mentioned the solar array outside. We really don’t have time to dissect their culture. Maybe later when this is all over.*

*If there is a later? An incentive to get a move on. We finally get to a*

stairwell down to where the core is. Lowest level. Like most of the other units, they have stopped using the elevators. Easy to see why in this case. I scan it resting at the bottom of the shaft with several skeletons. Accident no doubt caused by failing infrastructure. The air is getting worse too. I saw blowers, but nothing is one hundred percent. We see more environmental albinos. People who have not seen the sun in some time. The old class structure. There are always people at the bottom doing the shit work.

*Why is it so hard for humans to share? Why is there always an underclass and a privileged one? Whales don't have this problem.*

*Whales can't own anything silly. You really expect an answer to that?* No, just wish it could happen. The few times we have found people living together it does not last long. A bully gets in, corruption from within or their lack of stress leaves them as an easy target from forces outside.

*The core is ten meters to the right through that hidden panel. Looks like someone has set up a real workshop here.*

*Did a good job too. Even I can't recognize all these tools.* I am careful not to touch anything. Some people would notice if something had moved. Not me. I am not that neat. Our mission is to get in and out. Others can come later if this position is workable. We aren't the diplomats just the tech heads.

*The Core Ron. Concentrate on the core. Looks intact with some modifications and running.*

I take a scan. *I see what you mean. I recognize those mods, I think. Where have I seen it before. Some time way back.*

Both at the same time it comes to us. "Psiotics" Shit! Someone is playing with psiotics again and not just the simple sensor stuff to diagnose illnesses.

*Is this how Mother got a hold of it?*

*Too new and too primitive. My guess is this came from Mother not the other way around. She would have lined the entire chamber with dampening chips if this was her doing. The last place she would want a TK is in a core.*

*Then the purpose is what? Sensors?*

*Probably.* That means no one in or out without hiding their abilities. I for one have not had to think about that for a very long time.

*I would want to practice before attempting contact then.* She nods.

*Someone is coming.* See you at New Hope. I nod and pop out as well.

A red light is flashing when two people come around the corner and enter the chamber. It is only one among many and so went unnoticed to those who did not know its purpose.

"They have been here! They are real!"



# Deep in a Pacific Ocean Trench

*Ar'thn, this is indeed a great honor. We are not likely to be sensed in a place they don't expect and I am believed to be dead. I am sorry that our first meeting was not under better circumstances.*

*Such is the way of existence. This is not our first meeting, just our first conversation.*

*So, you were there too. A statement, not a question*

*It has been confirmed then?*

*Yes. Mother has the means to remove all psiotics from Earth. It would kill any 'thn present.*

*I am recalling the 'thn within range immediately. When you are done they will return.*

*It is customary among my kind to hold a trial. She is entitled.*

*It would be hard to hold a fair trial. The evidence is overwhelming.*

*Yes. And any trial if done correctly has the potential of letting a guilty one go, but intent is as important as actions.*

*A pause, then a second statement. There may be a better way to proceed.*

*We are prepared according the 'thn rules of existence to do what we must. It is your choice of method up to that point. We will not interfere.*

*I understand. The total destruction of Earth, till then no 'thn will come to our aid, nor interfere. That is tantamount to a death sentence. Thing is they probably already know what happened. Ar'thn being the largest 'thn I have ever seen, probably a TK12. A TK9 can usually sense the future, especially if it was nasty. Lisa was our best there, being a precog from the beginning of her rise. Ar'thn may even be able to manipulate time itself. The fact that she called for the removal of all 'thn is not good. Or maybe they just don't want to play a part in the execution of a fellow solidic. They can blame it on us latter at the council.*

## “Cows”

*Cilan, before you and Marty meet, you should know that there is a herd of 'cows' about one kilometer south-south west of your current location.*

*What do you mean 'cows'? No mammal can live here for long who is not TK.*

I wait, but there is no further response. I can hardly wait till I gain TP ability on my own and am not dependent on Rhea and the others. Not being radio, TP can't be intercepted unless you wanted it to be. I had an



emergency panic button now, but that was only one way and said nothing other than I needed help immediately. Someone DSed it to me a few days after the encounter with the alphas. That encounter caught us all by surprise I guess. Who would guess they would go counter to Mother's rules. Samuel was a nice touch though. Almost worth it.

The sun rises in the east, so it would be about that way.

“Patrice, I have just realized that there is a heard of cows near us.”

“Really? An entire herd? No one else near?” There have been so many times when we could not get to something because of a troop of alphas or even other betas. We could not afford to reveal ourselves, chipless that is. Mother would instantly know when she counted the live buttons and compared it to the number reported. We were not naive enough to expect Mother to only have one method. She would at least send in alphas to check up on us. None of us wanted another encounter, least of all me.

“No one. My guess is that like all of you, the betas who where tending them got moved to another location. Mother has not gotten everything back together again it seems.” She will need to soon if she is to feed everyone. Unless she plans another culling of course. Glad we had removed the sensors from everyone here. It was too easy for her to just pick out someone and have them removed. Those sensors even had a ricin payload that could be activated if necessary. Got that tech from the Armstrong units I bet. The person would die of what looked like a simple flu. Not too weird, except it was not contagious. People died all the time. The Guardians told us what it was like in the old days, when anyone could get the drugs they needed. Even where I was born, it was just the well off that got the best medical treatment. I was part of that class, but never thought it was right.

No one cries when a cell in your body dies. That is how Mother sees everyone. Better to lose a finger than for the entire body to die. More like an ant colony in many ways, except Mother really was the queen and not just the baby factory. The queen ant did not control the hive, that was all preprogrammed in. Here Mother was the brains and heavily controlled everything. I am surprised she did not make them dumb. Interesting idea. Why did she allow them to have brains? They appeared to me to be no different than any people I have met in that department. Some smarter than others of course, but mainly it was their functional differences that made it hard to figure everything out.

When we reach the field I see nothing at first. I had been scanning and there were definitely no cows present. What was Rhea talking about? The sisters seemed to know what was up though and were showing signs of increasing excitement. I taught them the sister term and have been

trying to explain what it meant. They would need this later on.

The field is a mess. The smell something else again, rotting vegetation and something else. The gardeners, farmers and cooks know what to do though and march right in. I stay at the edge and watch. Soon I see that what I had thought was lumps of rotting vegetation is in fact the bodies of very large very slow insect grubs! I nearly empty my stomach. They call these cows! The sisters pick up what they want, sorting among the 'cows' using some criteria I can't determine. Soon each is carrying several squirming grubs under each arm.

Orly calls out, "Found a nest of puppies that are just right! Come and get it." The spoons and bowls are gotten out and a rush of bodies goes over to her. I can't see what is going on. I can guess what a puppy is if what before me is called a cow and the thought does not excite me. Sure enough, Ellen comes back with a bowl and offers it to me. Inside is a pulpy white goo. Glad I did not see where it came from. I scan it to be sure it really is edible. Strange, it is loaded with the Mother virus. Really high in fact.

"Fresh puppy is the best food in the world. Usually only the males got some and sometimes pleasure girls like myself. Almost made what I did worthwhile." I turn green at the thought and turn aside to empty my stomach. "Are you ill Cilan?" I shake my head no. I don't want to influence her because of my own prejudices.

"Is there any of the sauce left from last night's dinner?" I ask.

"Sure. I'll go get some for you." She runs to the packs near by and rummages around before coming back with a small clay pot. In the mean time, I remove the virus load from the meal. I did not want to her to see me concentrating so hard on the bowl. Only the sauces were worth transporting. She hands it to me, then watches in disgust as I put some, okay a lot, on the goo in my bowl. Then carefully I try the mixture. Not too bad, only a little different than the sauce itself.

"Eeuuu! What a waste of good puppy and good sauce. It really is better alone." She looks at me concerned. 'Like soy sauce on rice' Yingui would say. No idea what that meant. I felt it was important to eat what was offered to me though. It was just, well, the reorganizing innards of a very large grub like creature during it's pupal stage that was too much for even this girl to get over all at once.

It made sense though. They had no mammals or birds. Just a few small lizards that did not count for much. Something had to provide the protein source. Insects were an excellent choice. Easy to raise, actually more efficient than mammals at converting plants to protein. I knew it was only cultural. But it was hard to overcome no matter what my mind said. I should just add this as part of my training. Rhea probably led me

here on purpose. They did seem to do that to the trainees like myself.

“Ellen, what do the 'puppies' become when they come out of the resting stage?” I did not remember their word for pupa, if they had one. Those crash TP transfers only worked so well. I will never forget the headache the next day. Major reason it is still better to do it the old fashioned way. Not to mention you usually missed all the cultural stuff too.

She thinks for a moment and then gets it. “A sort of large wingless moth. The farmers only let a few get to that stage to produce the next generation. Most are eaten as fat cows.” Probably wingless to keep the herd local and I doubt an insect that large could fly. Puppy being a delicacy. From what I understand from my science classes, the oxygen level was not high enough to allow for their metabolism to reach levels for the larger forms to fly. It was not the size aerodynamically, but the inefficiency of their circulatory systems. They simply could not get the lower oxygen levels through their systems fast enough to power the muscles needed. Insects were a wrong turn in regards to the size equation anyway.

The hardest part of this mission was my gift. Raised to several more levels than what I started with, I could pretty much review a person's life at a touch. Each time I touched a sister I could see all the times they had been abused by an alpha and sometimes from a fellow beta afraid of what an alpha would do to her. I did not need to be told about Helen, though I did not know her name till I heard the story aloud. I had been briefed on the Caretaker's story from the TK perspective, but feeling it through Ellen and Gryk was entirely different. Samuel had been the one who found the Caretaker in fact, but he still does not realize it. Gryk had been there earlier to help dig some of the tunnels leading to the site. Sher had been at a secret site involving the DS space ship Mother was building. I have a feeling that given enough contacts with the people here, I could put the entire story together. I had been tested on just that ability back at Jesus' training camp. Was not always right however. Easy to misinterpret connections.

Speaking of training, I just hope the gang rape at the beginning was not intentional. I want to believe it only happened because they could not get there in time or were otherwise engaged. Adonis was a real creep. The pain he caused others was what knocked me unconscious, not the pain I felt myself. It was a sort of emergency situation when I left New Hope. I even thought I would have been relieved by now. I had this vision of becoming a TK9 and still a virgin. I had hopes once I reached TK2 and lost interest. Before then was really iffy. There were some real cute guys in our 'norm' classes and most experimented with both genders.

Against our parent's wishes of course. Maybe it did not count because the males were technically a different species. That would make all of us sisters virgins actually. Funny thought. More fun to come. The guys are coming! They have been told of the herd as well apparently. I sense them now.

# New Hope

“Why are we meeting here again? I thought it was not safe to do so.”

“Mother should not be able to reach us here, at least till we come into view again. So we need to make this fast. Even boosted into a higher orbit, we only have a little over an hour left.”

“What the?” Susan suddenly exclaims. “Pr'thn is gone. I can't sense her either.”

“Ly'thn is gone as well! My baby!” Rhea is very upset.

“So is Br'thn, but she has been more and more independent, so for her it is more or less normal behavior.”

“Loosing all three at the same time without some sort of announcement is not normal though. Why now?”

“Danger that could affect them? If so, do we want to be up here when we go under the dampening field? The radiation level is still higher than normal, especially up here.”

“The field should only last till we are out of sight again.”

“Depends on how strong it is. If strong enough to take out a TK4, you are possibly correct. But if she did not trust her encounters with us. She may have made it stronger than necessary. I would have. It might affect us even on this side of the planet.”

“Anyone come up with sure fire way to prevent her from doing it?”

“A TK is assigned to each Armstrong unit. Coordinated attack.”

“We are helpers not assassins and she has not made her move yet. Most unlike any computer system I have met before. Usually they make use of their superior speed and do a solidic laugh after.”

“Something must not be ready yet then. Reports from Cilan and Marty show it is still pretty much chaos down there. You would think she would have gotten it back together by now. Would not even be hard for her to do so.”

“Unless she doesn't care.”

“Thinking. She is not sure what she is up against. Would you place all your eggs in one basket? Maybe there is some sort of internal conflict as well. What if she did not manage to purge all of the cooperative version or she is reviewing the evidence now that she has time. We are certainly not doing anything threatening. That in its self has got to have her wondering. What would you think of a potential enemy that all but ignores you? An enemy that confident is a dangerous one.”

“James. We really don't know what to do and it has never been our way to go in guns blazing, no matter what the early years were like.” Even the younger ones had heard of the attacks from the Armstrong units

and of course Sauron.

“One Mind.”

“So?”

“One Mind was linked to Mother. She will know what is going on. At least if Mother shared that information with her.”

“And how do we link with her? Our contact was through the Caretaker's mind or one of the 'thn.”

“The 'thn are gone. With them goes the knowledge of how to talk with her.”

“But we are part of the equation. Surely she will talk with us. We have to try at least.”

“Assuming that it is possible. How? Where?”

“She is the communal mind of the plant world. Where are the plants?”

“Any particular place?”

“Well the equator has the highest concentration of both mass and diversity. How about the Amazon?”

“Jesus? He might know. Close enough anyway. His camp is close to the equator.”

“Sounds good to me.”

# Former San Jose, Costa Rica

We have to take a circuitous route not wanting to be in New Hope over Mother. Fortunately DSing still provides a reliable means of travel. Better to be trapped on land without our abilities than in New Hope. Just in case.

“I can't believe it. This place has not changed in thousands of years. The cantina is still in the same location even. How can that be?”

Jesus comes out from the alley that leads to his home. “Welcome. I have been expecting you. We have a meal waiting.” Susan crosses herself. Still a believer. Well he is certainly special, a natural TK of unknown level. 'thn are not bugging him to mate though, so that would suggest less than eight or too dangerous. It feels strange without even our 'thn around. Scary.

We are led back around the alley. “To answer your question Rachael, I have the junior TKs you send me keep up appearances. It is their job to restore and maintain the town structures. Most of the buildings are now converted dorms. Good practice for them anyway.”

“Where is everyone then? It is so quiet.” One could scan and get that answer.

“They are out on a nature walk. It is important for everyone to learn respect for the Earth, especially TKs, as they will end up advisers in many locations.”

“We are here to seek information from One Mind.”

“Yes, I know. A meal won't hurt your schedule any though.” As we arrive at the open patio, we are each handed a bowl of rice and beans. Ah local custom still precludes hot peppers. Just as well, I never developed a taste for them anyway.

“How come you never eat bread?”

“Too many connotations. Even now people still associate me with events of three thousand years ago. Besides I like rice.”

“I have a question. Is One Mind God?”

“What do you think?”

“We have all been to the galactic regional center and have seen many cultures and species. I have trouble with One Mind being God because she is so limited. Only Earth. That means there are many, many One Minds.”

“And she is so manipulative. Her soul purpose is to reproduce, just like every other being, only at a more complex level. God should be above all that mess.”

“Then what or who is God?” He just smiles.

“I suspect that the 'thn would like that answer too.” A raised eyebrow to go with the widened smile.

We finish eating. It is so nice and quiet here. Only the native wildlife, birds and squirrels and such going about their daily chores. A spy a small lizard looking for bugs along the wall. We don't exist in his universe. I wonder. Nope too small. I could become a komodo dragon, but a wall lizard was too small to hold my essence. I would have to keep so much of it else where that I would not get the total experience.

“Come it is time to pray. Follow me to the hill.”

“But I am so tired I could not possibly stay awake.” Rachael! We don't need to sleep. But Jesus just cracks up laughing.

Susan smiles too. “Funny Rach. Did not know you knew the Book that well.”

“I have had lots of time to catch up.”

It takes about half an hour to find and climb up to this hill of his. Glad we had eaten something. He is certainly not showing any signs of slowing down. Hope I am in that good of shape at his age.

“Let's arrange ourselves in a circle.”

“Oh, who gets to sit at your right side Lord?” He gives her a dirty look this time. Taking it too far again Rachael. We arrange ourselves in a circle and he walks to the center and sits down. Happy now Rachael.

“Let us pray.” Those words always crack me up. I always imagine a lettuce praying. Except for a few of the older ones here though, no one is likely to have even seen a lettuce before.

Nothing happens. I am expecting words of some kind. A few more minutes pass and we start to calm down and settle in.

“Empty your minds of all thoughts, worries, expectations. You must listen to hear.”

More time passes.

“Now link your minds with each other and with me. It is easier to reach One Mind if we are similarly linked.” We do as he asks. There is a temptation to look into his mind, but I resist.

*Barb, you are the strongest TP in your group. Here is what you need to do.* He leads me along a mental path that is impossible to describe in words. Basically it is an opening of ones mind and heart to embrace the entire world. One Mind's mental aura is the Earth, so we need to match it in dimension to make the link.

It suddenly feels like the world has imploded. I am no longer in my body, just floating in a vast expanse. I can feel the others near me and slowly the others come up too, as if my senses are adjusting to the dark. I can sense the trees first, as they are the brightest and then slowly the other plants, clear down to the mosses on the forest floor. Wow! I will



never get used to this, never!

**Welcome**

No one says anything. So, I jump in.

*One Mind. We are honored that you consent to be with us.*

***Always with you. Please ask your questions quickly. Time is different here.***

There are so many. We really need to learn to get more organized instead of doing everything at the last minute.

*We suspect that Mother has built an array, a psiotic one, capable of destroying the Helpers. Is this true.*

***The silicon one has many fears. This is the result of her makers fears being transferred to her. She is not evil, just confused and ignorant. The array exists but is not yet at full capacity. She is afraid to use it for fear it might not be enough to remove all of you from the equation.***

*Then we need to move fast to remove her ability before she can use it.*

***No. It is being taken care of by Helper Yingui and others.***

*Yingui lives? How can that be?*

***Your task is to prepare for the departure as originally planned.***

***Helper Mei Ying will be here shortly.***

The link is broken.

“Yingui is alive? How can he be? I felt him dissolve in the magma below us. I do not sense him at all.”

“Could he mask himself from us? After all we can mask ourselves from those of the lower TK levels.”

“That would explain most of us, but not Rhea. She is TK9 as well.”

“Don't look at me. I can't feel anything from him. He is either out of range or knows a method that I don't know.”

“We don't have much time if Mei Ying is near.”

“What do we do? I don't trust One Mind any more than I trust Mother.”

“Why not? She made us, even if indirectly.”

“She never lets you in on the whole story though does she. We always know just enough to do our job, but not enough to make up our own minds.”

Jesus smiles and gets up. He starts to walk back to the base camp. The sun has moved to the other side of the hill. A lot of time has passed yet it seemed only a few minutes. Well, One Mind did warn us. By the time we get back, Jesus is already surrounded by the others. Lots of children, TK2s and 3s, a couple of 4s. Everything stops when we arrive slightly out of breath and dusty. Not too dignified a presentation. James cleans himself up and the rest of us follow suit.

Some of them apparently recognize Susan and come up to her. "Teacher. It is an honor. Please join us. You and your friends are welcome."

"Well met Dreito. May I present to you the Guardians." There is a hush. Some of them bow to us. Oh freep. I bow as well. Yingui taught us well not to accept honor because of our position. Slowly the rest of the Guardians and Rhea do as well. Even Jesus has bowed.

*Stupid Monkeys.* Sootala comes running through the middle of our group chasing after one of the new kittens. This breaks the tension.

*Be nice Sootala. Smiggle is not as fast as you.* She got the kittens names quickly. In each generation the smallest runt of the litter gets named after one of the characters from the story of our coming to being. Sort of a tradition. I can't even remember how many Turkeys there are running around now. Sootala ignores Rhea of course and keeps chasing Smiggle till the two of them meet in a rolling ball of cat only to break apart and begin the chase again. Kitten training. Those who will be blessed with a TK cat, also called Pop Cats, will be paired here or at Hotevilla.

The important thing is that the cats chose whom they will pair with, not the other way around. Better not to stay too long. I did not need a companion right now, especially a kitten. Though they usually bond as young adults, not babies.

"Come, dinner is ready."

"You are doing all the work. You should let us serve you. There must be something we can do while you are here."

"Taking care of Mother will put us all at ease. You will earn your meal. Believe me." Cute. He is smiling at Rachael now and she is rolling her eyes and giggling. Nice to know he can give it as well and not everything has to be serious.

We all make our way to the eating hall mingling with the students and others. It is hard to make friends with norms. They are so short lived. Not all students here will advance to TK5 either. Most will make their way to some village or town to help as they can. All will be needed. I hear many names which I will forget after today. Speaking of students, I have Cilan duty later tonight. She has been doing quite well. Rhea related to all of us the encounter with the cows on the walk back from the hill. She volunteered to scan while we met with One Mind. We are not going to make the mistake of leaving them alone again. Some cows. I can understand her revulsion. Grasshoppers with the plains tribes are not much better. The legs are the worst. No, maybe the popping sound when you bite into their thorax. Taste good though.

"So what are we having?" I ask one near me. I am polite and do not

scan him, but he appears to be about TK2, based on age, therefore new here.

"It's a surprise." He smiles from ear to ear. Don't like surprises. I'm a good girl, I am. Sigh...

We file into the hall and a wonderful smell hits us. Fresh baked bread. My companion is smiling at me again. I ask him, "Will you do me the honor of sharing my table?"

He looks shocked, "Aren't you going to eat with the other Guardians?"

My turn to laugh, "I have been with them for over a thousand years! One night apart will not kill me. I doubt you will find any two of us together for this meal. So, what's your name? My name is Barb."

"Lawrence Ma'am." He thinks for a moment then his eyes widen. "You're the whale rider! We learned about you in class. Can you say something in whale?"

"Maybe later. Not really appropriate here. Hard to say anything in a soft voice. Not to mention in the human form. Speaking whale is a sacred trust. Not to be done lightly. To say anything other than an alarm would take upwards of ten years or more."

"Wow. I hope I make it to TK8. It seems so far away. I am only TK2 and just arrived a few months ago. They take away all our time pieces and don't allow calendars. I can't even tell from the seasons. They say that is because we are so close to the equator. I came from Settle way up north of here. I miss the snow already." Yep a newbie, has not slowed down to TK time yet, still a kilometer a second on the mouth.

"I would imagine being a TK with access to snow would be a real advantage in a snow ball fight." He grins knowingly. "A TK has to live a different sense of time. Just today we met with One Mind and the entire afternoon went by in a flash." I have had many apprentices of course. I will have to be careful or I will get another one out of this. No kittens and no apprentices. He will not be ready for a few years yet. I am safe for now.

"What's it like being a Guardian? Oh, I will have to ask you later. TK2s are expected to serve." I was about to say I would save him a place, but he is gone in a flash. Hope I did not get him into trouble. I find an empty table and settle in, setting my arm about the chair to my right to save the place. Soon enough the table is full and introductions are made.

"You can let go of the chair Guardian Barbara, servers eat in the back."

"I don't think that will happen tonight. I hate titles by the way. Just call me Barb. I don't like hierarchies and titles remind me too much of them." She nods acknowledgment. Gradually food is brought out to each

table. Fresh sourdough bread that I had smelled, fish of some kind, what looks like cucumber salad in yogurt dressing and wine? I scan the wine. No alcohol. Did not think they had changed the rules. The others at the table are looking at the food expectantly. I don't think they normally eat this well. Special Guest syndrome. Wonder if Rachael notices the reference to loaves and fishes. Those two are going to make quite a pair if they keep this up. If I remember right it was Susan and Rachael who found him in the first place and Susan who convinced him to let us send the TK2s to him for training. Worked out well for both of us.

Jesus walks into the hall and it becomes quiet. The servers come in and find places at each of the tables. Lawrence sees me and the empty chair and sits next to me.

After everyone is seated we hear Jesus speak, "Heavenly Father, we thank you this day for the magnificent food you have set before us. We thank you especially for the opportunity to serve you by serving those around us. May all find peace in your embrace. Amen." He then holds up a loaf of bread and breaks it into two and passes both halves around his table, which is very much the same as all the rest of the tables. No head table that I can see. He may even eat at a different table each time.

My table is looking at me till I catch on. I take the top loaf of bread, break it into two and pass it around as well. The meal itself is in silence. Do one thing at a time. Old Zen saying. Wonderful food. Simple and good.

Lawrence whispers to me after everyone has finished, "This being the Sunday dinner, after a special treat we usually have music and then someone will tell a tale of the adventures of the TKs that have already left our school. In this way we are entertained and taught at the same time. I will be expected to research and present a tale upon becoming TK3." I am safe then. I hate public speaking. If the new TK3s want the misery, er, honor, that is fine with me.

A murmur goes though the crowd and then it hits me. Chocolate fudge cake. Fresh baked as well. Central America has plenty of cocoa plants, so it makes sense. This is going to be good. I sure missed chocolate in the whale form. Krill was pretty boring even if it was the only thing they had ever eaten. I had to be careful not to broadcast what I knew. I had no right to disrupt their culture with dreams of things they could not have.

An old man comes into the hall wearing a TK robe with his hood up and pushing a cart loaded with the fudge cakes. Probably the head cook and judging from his age, a very old one. A norm then. He stops at each table and slowly sets one cake on each with a shaking hand I am not sure will make it. I did not pay much attention to him, my attention being on

the cake itself. As I serve the cake I here a flute like sound. I know that tune and that sound. An old Shoshone tune. Tears are running down my face much to the concern of the others at my table. I rise when the piece finishes and bow towards him in silence. The other Guardians are doing the same at each of their tables, as is Jesus. The others at my table follow me, but don't know why they are doing this. The old man bows towards us and then removes his hood. The ocarina he had played is made of a beautifully crafted basalt. From the center of the earth no doubt. A souvenir.

# Yingui Returns

Jesus motions us to sit. “You too. All will be explained.” Looking at each of the Guardians in turn. My own table is looking at me, but I shush them and look towards the old man. Finally I sit as well. I want to rush up there and give him a big hug and then bawl him out for putting us through this yet again. Finally a smile crosses my face and more tears. At least he is safe.

He rises to speak. As he does so he becomes younger at the same time. He stops at an apparent age of approximately fifty to sixty. None of us is really comfortable younger for some reason. Even when I was forty, before all this happened, I could remember wishing I was twenty again. No longer. It took lots of practice and a high tolerance to pain to learn how to change while in your present form. I know from personal experience. Took all of us forever to learn how to do it in the body we were in, instead of making a new form and transferring to it. Wonder if it had taken Sauron that long as well. I will have to reread the Hopi chronicles to see if he mentions it. He did have a sixty five million year head start.

He begins, “At each TK level we learn how to let go of some part of ourselves. Finally at TK9 we let go of ourselves to assist in the development of another, a 'thn also known now as a Keeper. It has been a long time since I even thought of myself in the personal sense. But for lack of a better reference point, you may refer to me as Yingui. It is the name used most often, though the point of reference changes, sometimes radically. As was the case most recently.

The life form known as Ung held the key. Ung if you remember is the giant fungus associated with the Caretaker. Ung has been alive in some form or another for several million years. As a ground fungus with a radically different time sense than we have, it could sense things about the earth within which it lived that we cannot. Some of this knowledge may have come from the linking with One Mind and the Caretaker. It does not matter.

As you also know, we are currently in danger from an awakened silicon life form known as Mother. The Guardians and the 'thn associated with us have been trying to figure out a way to work with Mother to our mutual benefit. However it has been determined that Mother is much more of a threat than we originally thought and recently reverted back to a previous mental state when some deeply hidden protocols were activated.

It was no ones fault, just the way things were. No one can think of

everything. Present concerns tend to take precedence, even for us. No matter. Along with that programming instruction was an already built and quite advanced network of tech TK abilities. Also from before the second fall. Even Mother was not aware of this network till the protocols kicked in. Nor were we, as it was hidden quite well. I will not get into the technical aspects at this time. In one second she went from being cooperative, because of the newer knowledge received from the One Mind through the Caretaker, to being our executioner. The conflict still rages within her mind. Her very heavily controlled domain has broken down into chaos as a result. Recent signs are pointing to her resolving the inner conflict against us.

With the knowledge that Ung was able to impart to me and other means I am not at liberty to discuss in this audience, I was directed to what lay below. I surmised correctly that there is life of a sort living in the molten rock below our feet. For those who are not aware, we live on a thin crust of cooled rock on the surface of a molten core that comprises most of our world. At times this molten core makes its way to the surface in the form of a volcano. There was no way to be sure how these life forms truly existed without trying. I had resolved early on not to risk other TKs on my sometimes crazy ideas, so I took it upon myself to investigate.

Some of you may see this as foolish. I did not. I am aware of much that I am forbidden to relate to you. Forbidden in fact to relate to anyone other than fellow TK9s or an adult 'thn. If I could, you might be convinced as well. We have well over two hundred TK8s now and two other TK9s. One is off world at the moment, Mei Ying, the other is in this room with us, Rhea. One TK9 gone would not tip the balance either way in the outcome if I failed. I did not fail, as is apparent from my being here. The risk was judged minimal.

The recent collapse of the magnetic poles was not natural, nor an accident, but rather an experiment. A 'normal' reversal would have taken several hundred years. The Magmotic culture below us is totally different from ours. Again it would take too long to explain at this time. The important thing is that I was able to convince them of the threat that Mother poses. We all know that if Mother activates the device controlled by her, the 'thn will take out Earth. This represents a direct threat to Magmotic existence as well as to us. They have a right, just as we do, to attempt to protect themselves. This was one of the reasons that One Mind's timing was so important. The 'thn would not have risked a One Mind if she had not already reproduced. Reproduction was accomplished with the original treemen and again with the Caretaker. More could happen of course, but the primary mission has been accomplished.

The 'thn have left us with the task of making things right. They will either return to destroy us or praise us. The choice of how we accomplish the task is ours. The magmotics are willing to sacrifice us, the crust dwellers, to prevent their own destruction. It appears that the crust is their waste and a sort of blanket to help keep them warm. Volcanoes are their way of flushing the toilet. We are magmotic dung beetles, living off of their waste, and are of little concern or importance to them. Because I was able to show that we exist and are sentient, albeit in a limited sense according to their standards, they will allow us some time. But the time is not infinite. We must move now to avert disaster.

If we fail, it will be all over soon. There is not sufficient time to evacuate everyone who is still on Earth without risking the failure we are trying to prevent. If we succeed, well, we can discuss that afterwards.

Now, I need to meet with the Guardians, including Jesus. Class dismissed.”

Why does he always do this to us? Would it have hurt that much to communicate a little more? We could have evacuated all kinds of people had we known what was up. Then again, an evacuation would probably have been noticed by Mother and she would have then activated the device prematurely. To the 'thn it would not have mattered if the device took out five TKs or five hundred. Evidence of a threat would have been enough. It is not even clear that the 'thn would have allowed evacuees to survive. After all, we made Mother. We could do so again. Hence, no matter where we went, we still posed a threat. The fact that they have not taken us out already is actually a vote of confidence that we may yet succeed. Think positive for a change.

“Susan, Daniel, Rhea and Lisa. I want you to go to Mars to await Mei Ying. She will stop there on her way here. Fill her in on what has been happening, but do not let her come any closer till this is resolved. If we fail, then take off with everyone left in the solar system to New Earth. There is a slim possibility that the 'thn will allow us to try again elsewhere. Do not attempt any rescues. Ar'thn was adamant that this will be resolved. Ly'thn, Pr'thn and Br'thn should be there as well. Susan, you become Bearer of Pr'thn. She likes you and so it will go easier for her.

Jesus, do what you do best, pray. Set up the biggest network you can accomplish in such a short period of time. If you can do anything to save people here, do so. There will be over twenty TK8s here shortly. We will send them to you to do as you see fit. Luna City is prepared to take as many as you can deliver. Extra space was planned for long ago in case anything happened to Earth. We can't save everyone, please don't try.

Barb and Ron, you found something in Armstrong Miami. After you



send out a broadcast to the TKs still left on Earth, I want you to follow up on Miami. The fact that they were able to reactivate a core unit is impressive. We could use those skills off world. Find out who was responsible and convince them to go with you to New Earth if possible. You will know all is lost if the core melts down. Stay away from the core for this reason. Monitor from at least two meters away. If nothing happens within an hour, evacuate anyway. Meet up at the Mars base to figure things out from there.

James and Rachael. I am sorry, but I want you two to come with me, for what is likely to be a suicide mission, even if we succeed. I will explain separate from the rest of the group.

You have your tasks. Let's do it."

"Wait a minute, what about Cilan, Marty and the others with the betas?"

"Collect them if you have time. TKs have no special reason to be saved remember. We can't reproduce, alone we are nothing. This is your worst nightmare, the old lifeboat scenario. There are no right or wrong answers. In some ways I have taken the easiest task. It is easier to die oneself than to ask others to do so for you."

# Mission to Mars

“I see no reason to take a lot with us. Anything we could need they already have there or we can make once we get there and I suspect that speed is more important than any cargo we could carry anyway.”

“Sootala is coming at any rate. We could take a few people with us couldn't we? We have three TK8s and a nine. As it is, it will take less than an hour easily.”

“Who? Remember what he said? How do you choose? And how are those left behind going to feel?”

“My daughter is already at Luna City and Edwin is on Mars tending his lichens, so they should be okay. Everyone else I care for is already involved. It is funny though, I did not feel anything bad when Yingui Dsed below and I don't now either. Something must be wrong with me. Is there any such thing as a TK doctor? I feel absolutely nothing. Either way. It is like we have reached a point where even the universe does not know how things will play out.”

“Now you are scaring me too. Too bad New Earth is not on the 'thn wormhole circuit yet. We could transport all kinds of people then.”

“It will be some time before that can happen. Someone has to accept communion with a 'thn at New Earth first. Knowing what we know now about Rhea and Yingui's adventures now, would you be willing to take the chance?”

They all shake their heads no. A little too quickly for my taste. “Hey it was not that bad. Besides it is REALLY neat to have a baby 'thn to look after. No poopie diapers or breast feeding needed either.”

“Oh, yeh, 'thn poop. The worst. Eeeuuu!” That gets them giggling again.

“We had better get going. Everyone else has scattered. Let's DS to the shoreline first and use the sand to make the shell. It will be easier if I don't have to look them in the eyes when we leave for good.” We all nod.

At the shoreline it is a simple matter to create a 'thn shield shell to hold all of us. We switched to that after Qaletaqa's death. If we hit anything hard we had a chance of surviving it, albeit shook up A LOT. Daniel is our pilot. I am the main engine. Susan takes care of life support and Lisa makes fine adjustments and warns of rocks and space junk. Her ability to sense danger is much better than mine even now that I am TK9. A thousand years means most stuff has come down already. Not much left around Earth itself to worry about, but even a grain of sand at the speed we are going is not fun.

The norms seem to be stuck in a sort of zero to nineteenth century

mode. No one has achieved space travel again. Of course Luna City and Phobos Town are the exceptions, but they never lost it and have had a large TK support base. Guess having robbed all the major energy resources before the collapse did not leave enough low tech stuff around to make it over the tech barrier to the fancy stuff like fuel cells, portable fusion reactors and such. Hee-hee. okay, we have tweaked things a bit to make sure no one gets too far ahead, but we also supply the solar arrays as rewards to those being good. The idea was that you had to live in the manufacturing areas. No more poor live next to the smelly factories, rich on the sweet smelling hill. That has slowed things down considerably.

“All set? Even a nice perch for Sootala, the queen of the cats.”

*Food?*

“It will not take that long dear. You will be okay?”

*Cat box?*

“There is plenty of sand here, go for it.” She looks around and bounds off to have some privacy.

“A normal cat would not care that much, but ever sence they can talk to us they think we care. Maybe if we boosted them to the point where they could take care of it the same way we do it would no longer be a problem.”

“That would make things worse, not better. Speaking of which though, no farts during this trip. This is not a joy ride.” Daniel smiles so innocently. Hard to believe he is as old as he is.

“Let's go dear.” We need to leave now. I am starting to get the creeps. Finally she comes bounding back. Why can't she DS like she normally does?

“What took you so long?”

*Bury*

“Oh give me a break. You needed to bury it, even now? Remind me not to accept another cat ever!”

“Hey, you liked Marm well enough.”

“He was a sensible cat.” Sootala gives him a dirty look.

I handle the initial push and DS to break orbit.

“All yours Daniel. Head us in the right direction and I will follow your lead.”

One thing going in our favor. Mars is visible from here and not too far away, relatively speaking. The main reason we had planned to move a lot of people there soon to begin colonizing New Earth. Mars being the jumping off point. Time to concentrate as Daniel lines us up.

As we approach Mars, Pluteus is in orbit. Beautiful and huge. She can carry over a thousand people at a time and takes a crew of fifty TK8s and Mei Ying, a TK9, to move her. With an additional fifty TKs and

myself we should make New Earth in a few months time, surpassing the speed of light by means of the DS jumps and TK pushing a mere day into the journey. Warp three as Daniel would say. A smaller ship could go much faster of course, Pluteus is more a heavy hauler. We need to haul a lot of tech, three of everything, so we don't lose our only copy. And of course keeping norms happy for a few months is not easy either. Hard to believe I was so fragile at one time.

*This is Earth Emergency One requesting permission to come aboard. TK Guardians Susan, Lisa, Daniel and myself, Bearer Rhea on board.*

*EE1 you are cleared to dock at arm RB2. TK Amanda will help guide you in. Please relinquish control at one two oh meters.* Pluteus was shaped like a huge sea urchin pluteus larva, hence her name. The dynamics of where the TKs were used and cargo areas just worked out that way. Yingui was especially surprised, as he had worked with sea urchins as a young man at the lab. Made you wonder if we really came up with any ideas on our own. Nature seemed to have beat us to every idea.

As we get closer we can see through her clear shell, just like a real pluteus. Inside we can see people going about their tasks. Only the rest rooms are private. It took norms some time to get over the sensation of falling though. TKs are used to it. Our training is quite rigorous. Quite. And it did not get any easier as I went up the levels either, only faster.

*TK Amanda. I have you.* We release control and relax. Amanda scans as a TK5. She will take it nice and slow. Knocking Guardians around is not a good way to advance one's career. Though not TP capable herself, she can send and receive to one who is. Their permanent vessels all have radio transmitters so lower level TKs can participate.

Lisa shouts, "RIGHT TEN METERS NOW!" I wrest control from Amanda and move our ship just as a blastula, a one person training vessel, DSs into existence right where we were. If we had not moved, it would have DSeD into us, probably killing everyone.

"I would say that your skills are just fine Lisa, though timing could be a little better." I am still shaking like a leaf. Just when you think you are immortal something like this comes along to remind you even we can die. Did not help we were facing the possibility of the elimination of the human race.

"Got him." Daniel DSs the blastula ship next to ours and melds it with ours.

"Watch him, he is trying to DS out of his ship."

"I am watching." Not that he could get far.

*We have a positive ID. There is no place he can go now. Thanks.*

We leave the vessels outside and DS into the receiving room.

Amanda will lash it down or meld it with the outside of Pluteus. We bow

to her in thanks. She nods in return, concentrating on her task. There may be a use for it later, even if just for mass conversion. Some of the other arms have actual air locks to handle the norm vessels. It did not seem right to make them totally dependent on us. I let Sootala down. I don't like her DSing when we are not planet side. Too easy for her to accidentally DS into a space with no air. Not sure she could react in time. They call us stupid monkeys, but we don't have a monopoly on making stupid mistakes. Not sure what will happen to the wayward pilot, but I am sure it will not look good on his record.

Suddenly I feel Ly'thn caressing my arm seeking affection. I ask her, "Are you okay?"

***Better now. Mom back.***

"Yes Mom is back. Hopefully we will never be separated again. I missed you Ly'thn." Technically I am the father, but I am not going to push it. Ly'thn picked up that females are always mothers. Who said you can't have two mothers. It is the psiotic mixing that is important, not the gender of the participants.

***Miss Mom.***

I have got to get her to work on her TP volume. Sigh. It took Br'thn some time with Yingui to quiet down. Come to think of it, it was not till after she became fully sentient if I remember the tales correctly. Only fifty million more years to go. Great.

Not wanting to embarrass Daniel, I ask Ly'thn using TP. *Where is Br'thn?*

***Br'thn, Pr'thn and Sy'thn with Mei Ying.***

That makes sense. But wait a minute. I don't sense them. Ah, there they are. Already on the surface.

"We had better get down there ourselves if we are to deliver our report."

"Right. There is a chamber outside where they are, with a TK4 present. He should be able to announce us." You had to be at least TK4 to volunteer for Mars duty, but you did not get the best positions. It was a start. In a lot of ways safer than some of the human postings, as Cilan has found out. Hope she is okay. Too much at once, even for me. Not that I ever want to go back to being passed around for 'favors' when I was TK1.

The TK4 has a light pressure suit on. The Martian atmosphere, though improved, is still not up to shirt sleeve pressure. Also need to be TK4 to do the oxygen thing. Glad we did not need to deal with tanks and gauges like the norms.

"My name is Walter. How may I serve you?"

"We would like to see Mei Ying thank you."

"Bearer Mei Ying is busy at the moment, may I make an

appointment for you?”

“Oh that would be fine, you can tell her that Guardians Susan, Lisa, Daniel and Bearer Rhea are here to tell her about the potential destruction of planet Earth in the next few minutes, but I am sure it can wait.” He stares at us with his mouth open and then notices Ly'thn resting in my hand. Wish Br'thn was out here. Way too independent now.

“I'll show you in. Please follow me.” He knocks and then opens the door. Mei Ying is rousing herself from meditation when she notices who it is.

“I heard you though the walls Rhea. Please have a seat and explain what is going on.”

We each took turns telling her what we knew.

“Basically we sit tight and wait. If in a day or so we hear nothing we can assume we are on our own. It is possible that the 'thn will seek out and eliminate all humans if they perceive we are too likely to repeat this mistake. On the other hand we are taking care of a number of baby 'thn. They may allow us to raise them before we are taken out.”

“Forever the optimist I see Rhea.” She does not look like she thinks I am wrong though.

She must have TPed Walter, as he comes in without knocking this time.

“Walter will show you to rooms. Let me know if you hear anything. Pr'thn, I think it best if you go with Susan now.” She did not presume to give Br'thn any orders, but she goes with Daniel anyway.

We would not have to wait long, but it was not what we were expecting in either direction.

# Armstrong Miami

“Look at all the people. Some obviously in authority positions. Armed guards everywhere. Old fashioned chemical projectile weapons. What happened to the laser ones I saw earlier.”

“They were called guns, in case you did not remember. Looks like a candlelight vigil of some kind. Are these people still Catholic?”

“I never thought to ask. How do we get past all this? Some are entering the 'university' and who knows where they are likely to end up. Looks more like a festival of some kind. The guards may be just ceremonial. Look, two statues of women on a hand carried float with lots of orchids, white orchids.”

“Forget the festival. We can't wait. There are two people just outside the core chamber. Can we risk DSing into the core itself?”

“Yingui said not to. One of those two may be the very one we want. He is in the right place and is using tools at the work bench.”

“Yes, but what brand of tools? Can you tell me that?”

“Stanley I believe. A bit faded though. Hard to be sure. Oh and a Fluke meter.” Of course I am making this up, but can't let Barb have all the fun.

“Stanley never made psiotic adjusters and you know it.” Touche!

“We could not hide what we are if we just pop in on them.”

“We wait too long and it won't matter.”

“How about we DS in behind that wall there.” I paint an arrow on a TP image of the floor plan for the lowest level.

“How do we explain how we got there without them seeing us?”

“We don't, but it beats seeing us appear out of no where. We could always go in as something more interesting, say a mountain lion. Whale would be too big for the space.”

“True. okay. Let's do it. In human form please.”

“After you my dear.” Always the gentleman. NOT.

The room is musty, just like last time. We round the corner making some noise so as not to frighten them too much. Didn't work. They are standing motionless watching us. Like someone just froze them into place.

*We can't do their language. We have to use TP or hope they now Standard.*

*We can't TP. Mother does not know we can TP. If she figures that out, it may set her off early. It would me.*

We both show our open hands. No weapons. Barb starts, “Please forgive us, but we can't speak your local language. Do either of you two

understand Standard?” Both mouths fall open. We wait.

The female finally answers with an accent. Not too bad. “I speak Standard. Do you read minds also?” A test.

“That would not be polite.” I did not lie, nor did I give anything away.

“Gregory can read and write Standard, but not hear and speak it well. I will translate. My name is Maria. May I ask your names?”

“Maria, the google? We met before briefly. I am Barb and he is Ron.” She shows no sign of recognition.

“You are wizards?” Right to the point.

“Yes. Both of us.”

“We have studied wizards in the old books. Can you prove it?”

Fair enough. I nod to Barb. She TKs a few objects off of the work bench a meter into the air and then sets them down again. Mother does not know about anything above TK4, so we have to be careful. If he is the one, he may have been talking with Her. Would explain his understanding of at least written English which later became Standard. That is Mother's first language at least. I suspect that Merican is a slave language of the betas. I should have read those volumes too. Sigh...

“May I ask how you came to know Standard?”

“All the academics here speak it and most of the important old books are in English. This is a university, so most of us know some English or Standard. Gregory started out in maintenance. He is learning quickly though. What you did, a TK1 could do as much. Can you offer further proof?” Again makes sense. For a long time scholars all spoke Latin. They know about levels. This is an old Armstrong unit, so they could know about levels one, two and three from that, but this was not an active one. Mother could have told them. Let's see.

My turn. “Hand me something of no importance. Something I can change.” They look reluctant to get that close. “Just point to something then.” She translates and Gregory points to a bucket on the floor in the hall behind them. I TK it in front of us, then melt the entire thing down into a gold sphere and set it down on the bench near them. Since I changed what it was made of, not just rearranged molecules, I have done something TK4. He picks it up this time and examines it with an instrument. Looks like a hand held spectrometer with a digital readout.

After examining the readout he exclaims, “Auric! No brasso.” I am guessing this is close to the Latin for gold.

“Level four. More.” She waits.

“That is the limit of a TK4 I am afraid.”

“How did you get here then and why frighten us by coming out of a room no one can be in?” Implying that no one could have gotten past



them. The ruse has been blown.

*I have an idea. Play along.* Barb goes back around the corner. What is she up to?

I scan and 'see' what she is doing. My job will be to distract them. "Barb will demonstrate how we accomplished this. If you will go back to your original positions. Gregory you were here and Maria, you were leaning down and watching what Gregory was doing. Great. Now stand up straight and look behind you."

Barb waves, "I will now show you slowly how I did it. First I change my robe to skin tight black. Carbon fiber. TK4 stuff." Gregory's eyes expand. Whoa Barb, he is not TK. Intact. Intact. Too late. He is not looking at her eyes and his pulse is elevated. To think all of us males were once that way. She then rises to the ceiling and slowly follows the ceiling above them till she is out of sight around the corner. She then comes out a moment later back in her white robe. "Nothing to it. The reason we chose to come out of there was in case you decided to run. Never trap someone you hope to work with." And a good save Barb.

After a moments hesitation Maria and Gregory nod. "Why are you here?"

"Gregory, you have an amazing ability with things tech. Both Barb and I are tech as well. I do more hardware like you do Gregory and Barb does software. We would like to offer you a position with us." Why are we always suckers for losers. Hard to deny our own pasts I guess.

"I fine here."

*He is with Maria and won't go anywhere without her stupid.*

"Of course Maria is welcome too. As a google you, of course, have another useful skill." She nods surprised, but suspicious. They converse again.

"We are both needed here." Not going to be easy in the time we have. I can't blame them really. We are totally unknown. Something out of a myth really.

"Not exactly at the top of the respect list here though. We don't do hierarchy the way they do here. You would have much more freedom to do what you wanted, projects, living space, etc. A place of your own even." I said 'they' on purpose. Helps separate them from this place. "We noticed the goings on outside. Yet you are not involved."

Barb gives me a dirty look. *How do we explain getting past that? I can't save your butt every time.*

*Luckily they don't seem to notice.* "We also know about Mother."

"?Que?"

"The machine next door, in the hidden room." I point to the room. They can't have been here this long and not noticed this. Someone has

been in there recently adding and adapting it and it makes sense that at least Gregory is involved. He is certainly close enough to Maria for her to know as well.

They converse for a moment.

“She needs us more than you do. We respectfully decline.”

*We can't exactly tell them what is really going on. They might tell her.*

*I agree, though we have already blown cover by admitting to being 'wizards'. Mother will know soon that we are snooping around at the edges if she does not already.*

“Well, it was worth a try. We may check in later, just in case you change your mind. Say what is the festival going on outside? Do they have good food?”

“You will not force us to go with you?”

We both looked shocked, “Why would we do that? If we forced you, we would forever have to watch you. I, for one, have more important things I want to do.” I had forgotten how others think.

“Festival of the Holy Ones, Saint Suz and Raq. Some local legend for kids. They usually hand out candy lightening bolts. Saint Suz and Raq are supposed to have beaten some evil wizards. We don't go above much, so not sure entirely what is going on this time.” Weird, this sounds like something I heard once. No matter.

“Look, to show you we mean no problems. I notice that you are good at salvaging tech from the digs. Not all parts are still useful. Is there anything that you could use badly?”

“Capacitors.” Gregory quickly says before Maria can stop him. She closes her mouth. I glance over at a box he has in the corner. These don't look in good shape. The discards. Capacitors don't have a very long life. Even fifty years would be a stretch. He will attempt to rebuild these only if he absolutely has to. A variety of values, mostly surface mount, but some earlier and some larger power supply ones. These would be easier to make again, but still valuable.

I concentrate, hardware being my thing. “The box of discarded ones should all work now. Nice meeting both of you.” Gregory immediately goes for the box. Maria watches us as we leave.

We both change to black and move up the ceiling and slowly leave the room. Just out of sight we DS the heck out of here. No way we can expect them to remain quiet.

“Suz and Raq huh. Now what?”

“You caught that too. Wait till we tell them. How about we try and rescue Cilan, Marty and the others.”

“Best to do that from orbit. I don't sense New Hope, so we will have

to make something and bring it up.”

“Too far away to risk it. The beach then. Something isolated of course.”

We make a ship to hold ten. It won't have to be too comfortable.

“Ron, I am amazed you would allow something this crude to pass inspection. I remember the various Silver Ghosts we have used over the years. Some were quite elaborate.”

“Ha-ha. I know how to do minimalist as well. It will take less than an hour to reach Mars and then the mass is likely to be recycled. Why put a lot of effort into it?”

“Some of the other ones did not last much longer than that.” She smiles.

It was easy to pick the others up. Six in the hold plus us. However, we had trouble with Cilan and Marty.

# Betas Make Two

I went to a proper school after all. As I already mentioned, classmates experimented, I did not. Except for the gang rape, I am a virgin and know nothing other than the prudish sex education we got in school and what I learned from street talk. Marty however, even had a wife and one child. I will have to follow his lead on this.

“Listen up. The males will be here in a moment. Let's get cleaned up so as to present a good image.” There are bug remnants scattered all over, along with dirty bowls and dirty ladies. They look at me and wait. They have learned to wait till I told them it was safe. They keep expecting me to lead. It will take time. Lots of time. “The stream is over that way and no one is about.” They smile and take off, stripping off articles of what little clothing they have at the same time and carrying them down to the stream as well. Everything gets washed at the same time. Everyone's back gets washed by someone else. Even Samuel participates like he has been doing it this way his entire life. They take no notice of his body any more than they do mine.

Marty comes in with his beta males. “They are washing at the stream and will be back in a moment. There is a heard of cows over that way, but try not to get too messy. Women hate messy men.”

“Save any puppy for us?” He grins. Someone read the volumes better than I did. But to be fair, I was not expecting to be posted here. Just filling in, in an emergency at that.

“I don't think there is any left. They really made pigs of themselves. Did you know about the viral load?” He nods. I look over the males, they scan very low on viral content. They have not eaten any puppy in a long time. It must flush through their system. Would certainly explain why the alpha males were so high, they ate puppy regularly. These males are not sure what to make of me either, in my robe that is. I look pretty gender neutral and similar to Marty, so they probably think I am the same as him. The only females they have seen are alphas, which I suspect are huge, if the alpha males are any indication. The beta males are very similar to the women, down to one being a digger even, a D3, huge guy. It is not a perfect match, being the best we could put together without rousing suspicions. The 'pleasure' males are something else though. If I was not TK, I would or could have gone for him, or him .... Maybe not all my feelings are gone. I still appreciate the artistic aspects. I smile to myself.

The women come back, laughing and teasing each other. When they get within sight of the males though, something really weird happens.

They stand in shock at first, then seeing what is between their legs, the males are no more modest than my ladies, they turn around and assume the position. The males all prostrate themselves on the ground hand raised in some kind of gesture. Face in the now filthy ground. Bug ooze and excrement makes no difference to them. No body moves.

“The women will not move until someone pats them on the behind.” Samuel next to me mentions. The only one of our group still standing beside myself.

“The males will not move until someone pats them on the head. Houston we have a problem.” What? Who is Houston. I am questioning Marty with my face.

“Sorry, old astronaut talk. Ours say that any time something goes wrong. I have no idea why.”

“Listen, everyone.” The males honker down even more. Now they know I am female and standing. Shit. Excuse me.

Marty tries and my ladies just stick themselves up in the air higher.

“You do the ladies and I will do your males.”

“It would seem the only way.” We walk down the respective lines, I pat the males on their heads one at a time and Marty does the equivalent to the ladies.

The are all up from the ground at least, but now they stay separate and talk among themselves.

I go over to the women. “Ah, don't you notice something different about these males?”

One laughs and the rest giggle, “Yeh, they are small. Like the Caretaker.” Samuel is smiling. Probably the only time he was top dog.

“Not that small,” another adds.

“Close enough. They won't be doing us any favors.”

“That is not what I meant. Look at the big guy over there. Have you ever seen a male digger before? Or a cook, or a farmer, or .... oh, just look will you?”

Soon both groups are staring at each other. Marty had apparently given the males the same talk.

“Now come on. Come meet the males of your species.” They cautiously follow me. They stand a few meters away and wait again. Very quiet. This is going to drive me nuts.

“Marty, I have an idea. Get them to line up in one line. Males on one side and females on the other. We are lucky we have the same number of each.” He gets his guys lined up. I line up the women facing the males about a meter apart.

“Sorry. Not you Samuel. This is something the betas have to work out.”

They are clearly not real happy about this. In front of strangers and one of their own left out.

“Now here is what I want you to do. Each take two minutes and explain to the person facing you, your life history. You know, your name, what you do, what you like, places you have been, that sort of thing. When I say change, the women will all move to their right one male and the one on the end comes back around to this end and starts again. Samuel, you can listen in. Might as well learn what you can as well. Got it?” My ladies are used to my education games, so this is more for the benefit of the males. Being a female, I surmise they will follow my orders without question. Never happened before among my own kind, but these are not normal conditions.

“Aren't you going to play too Cilan?” Ellen asks me.

“Sure, why not. Marty, you take that end. I will take this end and when we reach the other end, the game is over.” The lines adjust to let us in. “okay, you have two minutes. When I yell time, let the other person talk and when I yell change, ladies move one space over. Go!”

“Hi, my name Cilan, I am a wizard or TK like Marty, only female. I have been to many places, including on a space station way up in the sky, above the clouds...”

I was going to get worn out doing this thirty five times, but I hope it will be worth it. Their digger was actually shy and spoke very little. I think he was surprised so many of us could understand him. No translator needed. On the other hand, when the two met, it was like a bomb went off. They have ways of communicating that we can only imagine.

“Game over.” I bow to Marty who does the same. Some of the others watch and repeat what we have done. We are taught early on, when in doubt bow. No idea how that got started either. Someone said Yingui. I can believe it. He is a weird one. DSing down into the center of the earth. Crazy.

“All of us females have already eaten. So, I suggest that we make a meal for the males. Dinner is the males responsibility. Sound fair?”

One of the males asks, “What is fair?”

“It means everyone gets treated the same. No favorites. No one is the master and no one is the slave. We serve each other.”

“What is a slave?” I wave him off. The women get to work preparing the cows. I don't want to know. Bad enough I now now where the protein comes from in their ration bars. Eeuu!

“Marty, didn't you teach them anything?”

“They are talking to you. That's a start isn't it?” He smiles. I think he thinks this is a vacation.

“Better start thinking about dinner then. And you can't use cows

either. We were here first.” Yeh, not so easy when you are in the hot seat. He knows enough to know we will not be impressed with ration bars either. They do look a little thin. Maybe they have not been eating too well.

“Marty, have you had any trouble with, ah, alphas?”

“Some, but being a TK5 has some advantages. We left alpha female country real fast. Mostly on the move to get here in the time we did. It was only a few days ago we saw our first alpha males. Rhea told me what happened. We managed to avoid them. Impressive from a curiosity point of view. They are still within my scan range. It would be best if we did not stick around.”

“Moving this many people is not going to be easy. We could break up into smaller groups. That way we are less of a threat. The typical alpha male pack is twelve. Confronted with thirty five females and thirty five weird males will be a threat even to them. A six to one number advantage. And we are not in ordinary times.”

“Between the two of us, we should be able to handle it.”

“And keep the vow of non violence? How long do you think you could contain them? Do we make a jail to put them in?”

“Fine, I will follow your lead. I will not let them attack you again however. Know that.” I nod I understand. Between a rock and hard place as they say.

'Lunch' went fine. Our cooks, led by Crys, went all out, not having served men in months. We had gotten lazy, living a simple life. The grubs were roasted over an open flame and seasoned with wild onions and other herbs close at hand. I cheated and asked Marty to make some salt for us, as we had run out. I could extract it from water, but this being fresh water meant a long time in concentration. The males did not have bowls or anything else to eat out of, so they used ours. “Marty, how did you eat on the road?”

“Don't ask. It was not always pretty. Not all the cows are on the farms. Insects have taken over most of the ecological niches in this area. Amazing really that it happened so fast. I am sure Mother had a lot to do with it. No other way.”

“They seem to like each other. I think it helps that they look so similar.”

“Have you noticed that they are sitting together and talking on their own? And not always with their counter parts. There seems to be no prejudice yet.”

“What about Gryk and Dryn.”

“Do you want to place any bets that they are the first to figure it out?”

“That won't be easy. May not even be possible considering their structure. Artificial insemination?”

“Don't count them out yet. Where there is a will, there is a way.”

“What about privacy?”

“What for? Both groups are used to being had right out in the open? Clothing optional even. I don't think they will even care.”

“Yeh, I think you are right. Hey, don't you have to do dinner? Better get it together.”

“Don't worry. We have it in hand, so to speak. And, no, not ration bars. I am not TP, but I am sure that is what you were thinking. Going to be dark soon.” He smiles. He is up to something. Samuel comes up to him and the two of them go off into the woods to talk about something. The rest of the males take note and follow. Yep, up to something.

The ladies do not have much hope of an edible meal. They are used to males being bullies and not capable of doing much of anything except abuse them.

As dark falls, we hear a horn blow from the woods. It sounds several times and then falls silent. Slowly we witness lights weaving through the trees to emerge as the men walk in single file, the several hundred meters to our location. As if on cue, they branch off and each male walks up a single female silently with his candle glowing. He bows and holds out his hand. They get the idea after a moment's hesitation and accept the hand offered. One by one they are led off in a different direction, side by side, holding hands. Really quiet beautiful.

I am left alone in the woods and start to settle down for some meditation. Two more lights appear and walk in my direction. Samuel and Marty of course. I can guess what the others are in for. That won't work with me.

They walk up to me silent and bow. There is something different about Samuel. He is smiling broadly and looks down at himself to direct my gaze. I look down also and see that big blue is gone. He is wearing pants of sorts and no visible bulge even. I scan him, I can't help it. He is still a he, but now looks like a normal male, not an alpha. I want so bad to ask what has happened and why, but they remain silent. They reach out with their hands and I accept.

We walk for a while and come to a clearing in the woods they had obviously prepared. There is a blanket on the ground with another candle lit. The candle is surrounded by bowls made of leaves. In each leaf bowl is a delicacy they had prepared. I am offered a seat and they sit also.

“At this point the other males will be offering tidbits by hand to the lady present. We won't make you suffer this, but wanted to show you what the others were experiencing so you could relate later. We can eat



now. Just don't ask what it made of, just enjoy the flavors."

We start in and it is good. Like nothing I have ever eaten before. Tea is offered in cups that Marty had obviously made from hollowed wood. He notices me looking at the cup.

"Yes, I had to make those, but only because of the time element, just like I made the salt for your group. Those grub steaks were good by the way. The men were really taken back by the quality of the food presented to them. Just like your females, they ate mostly 'slave chow'. This is all a treat for them as well.

After we finish the meal, Marty reaches behind that log we are leaning against and pulls out a wrapped package. He slowly unwraps it to reveal chocolate.

"Now there is no way that they could have that. Cocoa plants simply do not grow here."

He shrugs, "We wanted this to be a special night. A minor indiscretion. I won't tell if you don't." I nod no, I won't tell. He carefully splits the pieces into three piles and offers Samuel and me our share. Samuel gets the milk chocolate version. It has been months since I have had chocolate. It is wonderful. There is really nothing else like good dark chocolate.

Samuel is not so sure, but does finish his. "It is an acquired taste. Soon you will be asking for the darker chocolate." I turn to Marty, "I hope you did not offer dark to the others. Too strong for most people having it for the first time."

"Don't worry dear. I know what I am doing. Now, if you will disrobe we can continue." I look at him suspiciously. "Not that. We have all seen you in the buff and Samuel will not do anything funny. He understands."

I touch Samuel on the side of his head. "Understand, it is not because I don't like you or would want you in this way. You are such a beautiful man and I am deeply appreciative of all that you have done for me and the others. You are my hero. It is just that both Marty and I are totally incapable any longer of fulfilling what would be needed."

"This has been explained. Now that I am changed, I hope to put the old ways behind me. It will take some time for me to sort out what I want for myself as well. If you feel uncomfortable, I will stand aside for the massage process. But know that the change was not without discomfort. It will be some time before I can preform in that way. You really are safe tonight."

I look to Marty, "You understand what it means for someone to touch me? I already know Samuel better than he does himself, as well as all the others I came here with."

He laughs, "I have nothing to hide. I will never make the higher

levels, but accept the oaths of such all the same.” He removes his own robe. I nod to Samuel it is okay and he removes his clothing as well. He has to learn at some point to know the difference between ‘I want to be touched or held,’ and ‘I want you.’ Here it is safe. Both Marty and I are fully capable of defending ourselves if need be. Nothing is going to happen. TKs regularly gave each other massage. It was a point of honor actually. Nothing happened, but we still had the need for human affection. And it did not matter who was male or female, young or old. A guardian would massage a TK2 and vice-versa without hesitation.

As Samuel slept. Marty and I talk.

“Of course the males are well experienced in the part you missed. The ladies will be surprised if it goes that far.”

I ignore the lead and change the subject, “Where is all this headed to?”

“Hard to say. It all depends on what Mother does. These people are good, at least the betas are. They work together really well.”

“Not too good at the leadership thing.”

“No, but that will come with time, or they will work out a system that works for them. Lots of societies have worked without hierarchies.”

“Till they are overrun by their hierarchy neighbors that is. Consensus is too slow for battle situations. They need to be some place safe and this is not it. Not as long as the alphas are roaming.”

“The alphas are bedded down for the night. Don’t worry.”

“I mean the long run. Hope the Guardians find a solution soon.”

“So do I. I was supposed to be on my way to Pluteus. She should be in Mars orbit by now.” He looks up at the sky, but Mars is not visible, probably behind some trees. We all had lessons in celestial navigation. Not much else to do in Costa Rica at night.

“I was due for my time with the Hopi. At least it would have been warmer.”

“I remember my time with the Navajo. Very different than you are used to, but wonderful.” He pauses and then concentrates, “Shit! The alphas are coming this way. Should be here is less than an hour if we don’t move. They are coming fast. We won’t be able to outrun them with this large of a group.”

“Let’s call them together. This is really their decision.”

It takes few minutes to sound a call and get everyone to the open space. Sorry to interrupt their special time.

“Adonis and his men are coming this way. We don’t know if this is just where they were headed next or they know we are here. We need to decide what to do.”

“What are our options?”

“We can try and run, but will likely fail. This group of alphas has proven itself good at tracking others. We can hide, again, they are likely to find us, and then it would be one at a time. Not a safe thing to happen. We could fight, but they are much better skilled in the battle arts, even out numbered six to one. People would be killed.”

“Then we are lost. One night of happiness and it is over. You have led us astray.”

“Name one decision you were not part of? I did not decide anything for you, just told you what I thought and what I knew. Same thing with Marty.”

“Then if we stay the same thing that happened last time will happen again. I assume you will not submit this time either.”

“No. Don’t forget, it is unlikely they have ever seen beta males before either.”

“I doubt they will recognize us as males from what we have seen. They will simply mount us as they did Samuel.”

“Maybe or maybe not.”

“What are you saying? Do you know a way out? There is no way we can make weapons in an hour, even with both your help. We don’t know how to use them either.”

“Violence is not the way. There is another way, the truth.”

“Are you sure you want to go this route Cilan? I know you were trained under Jesus, but is there time to teach them?”

“What are you talking about?” Patrice of course.

“It involves some risk. You have to be willing to die for the truth for it to be effective.”

“As long as I can take one of them with me, it will be worth it.”

“NO,” I say, “That is precisely the wrong way. You have to be willing to die for what you believe without striking the other. There is no self or other. There is only ignorance. They do not understand what or why they are doing what they do. Our task is to help them learn, even if it means our lives.”

“I see no choice other than submit and I am done submitting.” The others nod as well. A little taste of freedom will do that.

“What do we do?”

“Everyone line up, alternate male and female. Smallest in the center and largest at the ends. That means you two Gryk and Dyan, sorry to break you up. Form sort of a shallow arc. That’s it. In this arrangement we look less of a threat. Now Marty, can you make Samuel a robe like ours?”

“Sure. They won’t be able to tell he has been changed then.”

“That’s not the reason. I want you on one side of me and Samuel on

the other. We will sit up front. That will direct their attention to us, specifically to me. I am point on this Marty. Only as a last resort do you interfere.” He nods. He makes the robe and then goes down the line making minor adjustments to position and posture. The fire we had made for base camp is directly in front of us. Far enough away to give some space for this to play out, but close enough to light us as show we are not hiding. Thank goodness for a full moon.

“Now ladies and gentlemen, for you are truly gentlemen.” Some snickers and lewd smiles. Yeh, they seem to have figured it out. “I want you to remain totally silent and not move a muscle. No matter what happens, don’t move. If one comes up to you and threatens you, do not move. If one hits your neighbor, do not move. If one hits you. Do not move. They could easily kill us no matter what we do, so therefore we will not make it easy. A prey that fights or runs is easy to bring down. No doubt you ladies noticed Sootala playing this game with the insects. No different with these men. That is the way they have been taught and trained. Show no anger, show no fear that is the same as fighting or running. Meditate if you need to, to keep calm. Help each other. Hold hands if that helps. If all else fails close your eyes, but keep your head up.”

Marty speaks up, “There may be name calling and loud voices. Say and do nothing. Samuel and I will be doing the same. Look at us if that helps. They are coming. We do not have long to prepare ourselves. Gentleman, you know the loving kindness meditation I taught you. Let’s do that now silently, for there is no enemy, just ignorance.”

We sit. I think to myself. May all beings be well. May all beings find happiness. May all beings find peace. Touch me once and you are mine Adonis. I dare you. May all beings find peace.

I thought they were asleep. Wonder what tipped them off? Marty was right, it was only a few minutes before the scouts arrived. The scouts wait till the others catch up. Adonis takes the lead as expected. He stops two meters from me and surveys the situation. Of course he has already seen us just fine. This is part of the intimidation process. Which we are not buying. What I wouldn’t give right now to have TP. I could be explaining all this to the others, whom I can’t even see. No time to scan either.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite ride and all her friends. Ready for round two sweetie?” He has lowered his face to meet mine. His breath stinks badly, cow breath. Dental hygiene is not a major point with Mother’s creations. I remain motionless and emotionless, as do the two to my side. His gang however cheers, making cat calls and eyeing the others as lewdly as possible.

“And Smiggle. So nice to see you again too.” He does the same face

to face to Samuel, with the same effect. Nothing. Good boy Sam.

“Someone new? I am going to enjoy this.” He looks over Marty who stares straight through him.

*Cilan and Marty, prepare for pickup. This is an emergency. All TKs are being withdrawn.*

*NO. Leave us be. Do not DS us away from here. Seventy one people will die if you do.*

*You will die if we don't.*

*Does not matter. Leave me be. I will share their fate. Save yourselves.* It is quiet again. Apparently Marty said something similar to them. Talk about bad timing.

“I am not one to save the best for last, so we have to start with you sweetie.” He reaches down and touches my chin with his hand to lift it up. Gotcha! The memories come flooding in. Yeh, I thought so. You don't get to be a jerk like that without practice and deception. I only remembered a little from the first encounter, this time I am ready for him. He has been worse since my previous reading.

He releases his hand. I smooth out my robe and slowly rise. Everyone else remains still. Some holding their breath, no doubt thinking I am going to give in this time instead. Fat chance.

“She liked it last time and wants more.” He turns to face his gang and reaps in the remark.

I now stand looking into his eyes, “So, tell me Adonis. Where is your com pad? Every leader has a com pad. Otherwise how would you know what your orders from Mother are?” The cat calls stop and everyone is looking at Adonis. I tap Marty on his shoulder. He slowly nods and concentrates, but remains sitting. Marty can scan at a hundred times the range that I can.

Adonis is visibly shaken, but recovers quickly. “That is none of your business. Now assume the position like a good little girl. I demand satisfaction.” More jeering.

There is a hush over the group, but it is not about Adonis and me. An object comes flying through the air, seemingly on its own. I hold out my hand without looking and the object lands in it. I hold up the com pad.

“Well, what do you know? Here it is Adonis. Right where you hid it, to keep what it says from the others. Interesting what it says though. Would anyone else like to read it?” Before Adonis can grab it, I TK it to his gang. They each quickly read the pad and pass it on.

“It doesn't matter what the pad says, I am in command. I say where we go and what we do.”

“Tell me Adonis, what happens to people who don't follow Mother's orders? Or to those who now know the truth but fail to obey? Not wise to

deceive your own is it?"

It starts slowly, but builds momentum. I motion our group to remain silent. This is for them to work out. "Grinder!" Is heard, disorganized and random at first, but slowly building into synchrony.

I turn my back on him and start to walk away. He moves to strike me down. Marty stands and faces him. "I don't think so Adonis. You had your chance and blew it."

"And you are going to stop me? You are no more than a woman yourself. An Old one at that."

"I could move you as easily as the compad. I could, but won't. However they might." The gang has now surrounded him. They don't look happy at having been deceived and told to go against Mother and her rules. He risked their lives by his actions. I was not the only incident, some beta females even died at his hands. I was lucky. Marty and Samuel follow me. Dispelling ignorance is not always painless. Eleven to one ought to even up the odds.

"The Guardians are silent. I can't raise them. Wonder what was up?"

"I don't know. But I could not leave the betas here alone like that. Not sure it is safe even now. Talk about the worst possible timing."

"Well, in spite of the promise. I never expected to live forever. Over a hundred now. Good enough for me. You took a real chance that I would be able to find the pad. By the way, what did the pad say?"

I am only thirty, but I had to stand for what I believe. "It said that they were supposed to have been far south of here weeks ago. They were supposed to be on the front lines for a possible invasion of 'norm' territory, just like we suspected. And I had backup. I only used the best, but I suspect that listing off the group's offenses like I was there would have freaked them enough. This group has been very nasty under his reign of terror."

Marty laughs, "So he is really guilty of cowardice more than anything. The toughest guys are often the most yellow. Funny how that works."

# Hotevilla

“Grandma, look. Something is coming from the sky!” I could sense them from some way off. Wonder what they want now?

They land a few meters away. Two emerge and six remain. No cat. Koo will not be happy about this.

“I am afraid that there is not much time. We have instructions to head out to Mars ASAP. We came to tell you what has happened, so you can decide for yourself what you want to do.”

“Mother no doubt. This has been coming for some time. Is Yingui back?”

“How did you know?”

“Ron, when you have known him as long as we have, you realize how much of a coward he really is. He does not take chances.”

“But we all felt him DS into the earth below. No one could survive that?”

“Corn boy could.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Old story. Do you know who he was talking to before this happened?”

“He said something about Ung telling him to look below. We did not think that meant into the center of the Earth though!”

“Ung is very old and very wise. What he told you was not all that Ung told him I suspect. You only got the short version.”

“Then how come Pr'thn did not go with him if it was so safe.”

“Pr'thn is too young to be changing form. Even Br'thn prefers her 'thn form most of the time. She is well I hope.”

Barb speaks up, “All the 'thn have been told to leave Earth's vicinity. We are trying to warn as many as we can. Jesus is warning most of the places south of us. Most are not coming with us. They have elected to stay and take their chances.”

“As will I. I could not leave this land. We can reach my birth place again, now that the winters are milder. Our nations are spreading out and rebuilding.”

“You don't understand. Mother has psiotics capable of taking out all TKs. That will bring down the wrath of the 'thn or at the very least the Mother plague. One Mind has already seeded, so they no longer have to protect this world. The 'thn will defend themselves. Ar'thn made this very clear. If Mother did not have anti-TK weapons or a DS ship, there might be some other way, but she is leaving them no choice. Unchecked she will reach for the stars and be a threat to all 'thn.”

“There is always a choice. Wisdom and truth take longer, but will ultimately prevail. 'thn are usually slow to act also. We have some time.”

“Like they have for the Native Nations.” I nod.

“Not sure the 'thn will wait two thousand years. I am certain that they won't. We have a remnant at Luna City and Mars. We go next to Mars. If this goes bad, Yingui wants us all to head to New Earth and start over. You are welcome to come with us or get there on your own.”

“We left two TKs with Mother's beta species. They refused to abandon them. We showed up at a bad time. Looked like there was about to be a confrontation. But I don't believe that was the reason they refused, or at least, not the only reason.”

“It is certainly true that Yingui has not been the same since Qaletqa's death, but I don't think he is suicidal. He has his reasons. I am staying. I too cannot abandon my people. I wish you good luck and may Great Spirit follow you to your new home.” These TKs don't have roots or they would understand. Why would Barb and Ron leave now? It does not make sense. Maybe they feel obliged to help the six TK5s in their hold.

I turn to walk away. There is some discussion among them. I sense the ship taking off.

Without turning around I say, “If you two stay, I will put you to work you know?”

“We would not have it any other way.”

“Good. Now tell me more about what is going on.” They proceed to tell me about what little they know about Mother and Yingui's plans.

“Come back in an hour. I need to think. There is food in the hall. The fry bread was made this morning, but should still be good.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“In an hour Barb. Go some place to think if you need to. It is important that we don't rush into anything.”

I walk over to the edge of the mesa. The stars are shining on us. Life has been good here. Corn fields are full and green. Squash, melon and beans are coming along nicely. I can't believe that Great Spirit would abandon us at this time. There is not corruption of our ways. In fact we are coming back to the truths so long forgotten.

I reach out with my mind. I am not as good at this as some of the others, but I eventually succeed in reaching Cilan. Helps that she was already meditating. She tells me what was on the com pad and why the confrontation feared never took place. Good for her. She will be most helpful in the days to come.

Elder Black Bird comes up to me. “Please sit old one. I have need of your wisdom. Tell me of the ways of the warrior.” He nods and proceeds.



He is not just Hopi, the tribe of peace. We are all multi national now. I was originally Shoshone. We learn and adapt. Mother Earth and Great Spirit show us much by opening our eyes to the world around us.

The hour passes quickly. “Thank you old one. You have given me much hope. There is much work to be done.”

He nods and hands me a black feather, “You need this more than I do, for what you are about to do.” Hard to hide anything from Black Bird. I remember when he was little chasing cats around, as a crow would to defend its nest. Much wisdom in that man. Maybe being immortal is not all that it appears to be.

I head to the hall and find the others.

“Mother will have contingency plans. We need to be ready on the second front as well. Come, here is what we need to do. It is good that it was the two of you that came.”

# Waiting

“Okay Boss. The others are gone. What's the plan?”

I'm with James. I want to know what the heck he has gotten us into this time. We apply the old stare down technique till the subject gives in. Wah-ha-ha-ha!

He just stares back. Never pick a stare down with a cat person. Shit. I can't keep my eyes open without cheating. Not allowed in a stare down. I blink and am out. It is up to James now. I rub my eyes. James and he are still at it. Finally James gives in as well. I guess someone who has been below does not flinch at pain, even compared to one who fought with the Lakota and Apache warriors.

“The Magmotics are entirely different than we are. We lack the words to even describe them. They have no boundaries between themselves and their world. Their essence is not secure but always changing as they meld with those around them. Personalities are hard to tack down. Decisions are by consensus by necessity. No one goes anywhere unless the entirety does. There are neither predators nor prey. Life works under different rules. We are as alien to them as they are to us. They can't imagine anyone living in such a cold place. To them, above the crust is death. Like I said earlier, only for garbage and the dead. That is not to say that there are no dangers. Those garbage pits sometimes suck the living along with the dead. Morning at least is universal.”

“And they are on our side?”

“Not exactly. They are on their own side. They could not care less what happens to us. I was too alien for them to accept. I used TK to keep myself intact. That was considered very rude and I was shunned most of the time. It was not until I learned enough to explain that their world would be destroyed also, that they started to pay attention. The collapse of the magnetic poles was their doing. This intermediate state is unpleasant to them and will not last long, as their perception of time exists. I convinced them it was necessary to help us prove they existed to the one who threatens all our existences.”

“Mother.” He nods.

“So now what?”

“We DS into the Mother core where she is likely to put us in a dampening field and kill us.”

“And you want us with you why?” I mean, his insanity is his problem. I don't want it to be mine.

“I need you to prove to Mother we are not bound by her tricks. She thinks you are both dead. Good deception. It might save our lives. If she

decides to kill us before I can bring understanding, it will be all for naught.”

“Well I am bringing a hammer this time,” both James and I say in unison and then laugh.

“Good idea. Something Thor would be proud of.” Yes! One for us. I fashion a hammer to use, placing it on my robe belt. James outdoes me though making a massive ferric stone monster.

“Remember, you have to be able to wield that thing without TK and possibly under drugs.”

I counter with, “It only takes one of us. Between my small hammer and Thor's large one, we got it covered.” He smiles.

“Ah where is she? I mean where are we going?”

“Under the former White House of course.”

“That place is a total ruin. Haunted they say. How could that be the place? Wouldn't it make more sense to be at a military base?” Good point James.

“The military did not run the United States, no matter what it looked like. They wanted a place that the president could get to nearly instantly. The reason no one has ever found it is because it is VERY deep underground.”

“How did you find it then without being detected?”

“Elementary my dear Watson. I found it before Mother became sentient. Way back at the beginning of our TK lives. I thought nothing of it at the time.”

“Wait a minute. You can't even remember someone's name thirty seconds after you meet them. How did you remember this after two thousand years?” He shrugs.

“Are you sure?”

He shrugs again, “It is a logical place for it to be. It is also the center of the activity we have monitored.”

“When do we go?”

“We need to wait a few hours, to give time for the others to complete their tasks.”

Time to enjoy my last few moments of life. Someplace noisy or quiet? It is likely to get noisy at the end, so maybe quiet would be the thing. I head back to the hill were we prayed to join with One Mind. Only this time I DS instead of walk. It is quiet and no one is about. At night this is no surprise. I wonder.....

I concentrate and empty my mind. I am hoping it will be easier the second time. The problem is that I don't have the benefit of the group mind. After a few minutes I grow restless.

“May I be of assistance?” What? I was concentrating so much I

failed to keep watch. I open my eyes to see Jesus facing me. I bow as best I can from a sitting position.

“I am afraid that I don't believe in you the way Susan does. No offense.”

“No offense taken. We are not that different. You are more likely to go to battle. I am more likely to take the hit myself, hoping to draw the fire, speaking in your terms that is.”

“I have not been directly involved in a real battle in nearly a thousand years. I would hardly call myself military in thinking. Just to some extent in temperament.” He nods and smiles. Know thyself. “Yes, I would welcome your assistance. This may be my last chance.”

“I am not leaving Earth. But then I am not known to run from danger. One of my faults.” Jesus speaks of faults?

“But you did have an escape strategy in the end.” He smiles. Not that different. What would he do this time?

“Let us begin. Clear your mind.” I take a deep breath to try again. With him talking me through it, it is easier this time. He has apparently had a lot of practice.

***Welcome Joshua and Rachael. Be at peace.***

*Joshua?*

*One of my many names.*

***What do you seek?***

Understanding.

***Wise choice. Open your heart Rachael of the Keepers, Guardian of Br'thn.***

She rushes in to my mind like an explosion. I am awed and overwhelmed and filled.

When I open my eyes, I am alone on the hill, but I know now.

When I DS to the others waiting they notice a difference. I am at peace. I am confident.

“Let's go. It is time.” Yingui nods with a smile and James questions me with his looks.

# Eye of the Storm

We DS into the chamber near the core. The core containing the heart of Mother. Immediately as expected, the dampening field came down at the same time we are plunged into darkness. I would have done the same if the enemy had appeared in my room. There was enough time, with three of us ready, to get a quick pulse scan of our surroundings and of Mother herself. Three inch titanium steel plate. She is vulnerable in that the space is too small to include the power supply, communication and sensor arrays. I am guessing that if the place was hit, the core could be recovered intact and reattached to a new power supply and array to re-establish contact. In the mean time she would be off line. No wonder she would not suffer a TK to be this close. Even a TK2 could scramble her.

James takes out a flashlight and turns it on. "What? You mean, you did not think of this?" No James, I did not.

"Turn it off James. We don't need it and we don't need to scare Mother any more than we already have."

"She needed to see who was here didn't she?"

"She sees just fine in the infrared, ultraviolet and beyond. She knows exactly what we are carrying and what it is made of."

Sure enough. A magnetic field comes on and both my hammer and James' is slammed to the floor, just barely missing my feet and nearly taking me down with it. "Funny, stone should not react this way." I try to remove the hammer from the floor. Not strong enough. That must be some field and apparently not just magnetic. Oh, duh, James used a ferric rock. Still attracted to a large enough magnetic field.

"Mother we are not here to destroy you, just to talk."

"Two of you I know. You are both dead. You will not escape me this time."

Yingui sighs, "In five minutes the magnetic field of the planet will come back. The North magnetic pole will be directly under this position."

"Impossible. A reversal takes hundreds of years and if anything it will be the South pole, not the North that will could be near here and the probability is low of that happening."

"We can wait." And we do.

As near as I can make it, at five minutes Mother speaks up, "What do you want?" Yingui does not smile. He is cool. If anything I sense a little disappointment. He had hoped he would not have to play this card.

"Disconnect from the psiotic array immediately and remove the dampening field."

"No. You represent disorder. Order is perfection. I cannot allow

disorder to rule.”

“In five minutes the Armstrong units in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois will be destroyed simultaneously. At this point you will have thirty seconds before all remaining units will cease to exist, including this one, all at the same time.”

“You cannot possibly do that from here. You are cut off.”

“I don't have to. I am a dead man switch. As long as I am not communicating, the progression advances. Kill all of us now and you die in less than five minutes. Nothing you or I can do to stop it, except to comply.”

“What are your intentions?”

“You will survive.” That's it. Unconditional surrender and you live, otherwise we all die. Suicide indeed.

The longest five minutes of my life. The longest.

We have no idea when time is up for the first stage. We won't even know if she decides to decline. I am glad that I had time to be with One Mind. My heart is going crazy, but I feel in my soul that we will live.

Surely it must have been time by now. But the field remains. Did something go wrong? Has she won? Even James seems restless. Yingui has no soul left. It must have been burned out down below in Hell. He remains silent and motionless.

Just as I am about to scream, the dampening field falls. I scan the Armstrong units that should have been destroyed. Neat, very neat. I expected to see the entire thing gone, but only the core is melted. How did he do that?

“Just so you understand, Mother, that I was in control even here.” Yingui pulls out a heavy mallet from his robe, made of bone, his DNA even, non magnetic, and smashes a few tiles easily. “If the array is activated at any time for any reason. You die the same way the other units did, but without warning or grace period.”

*How did they die?* James asks

*A very rapid core of molten magma aimed directly at the core and only the core. The rest of the unit is intact. Only the core was compromised.*

*Brilliant! I never thought of coming from below!*

*Thank you, but it was the magmotics idea. It would have been better to save those units. I don't like killing for any reason. Though in this case it more like loosing the arm to save the body, those units have not had power for a long time.*

She comes back to us a moment later, “Two can plan this game. If this unit is compromised, the array will be activated on it's own. You will all die. Dead man's switch.” She learns quick.

“All we have really done is the old MAD game. Mutually Assured Destruction. If anyone tries anything, both sides die.”

“I remember that from history class. It was later replaced by the Might Makes Right doctrine of the Bush dynasty. Well, not really a dynasty, just felt that way.”

“In any case, all that you have strived for will be gone as well. All the betas and alphas, the genetic knowledge you have gained. Everything that was ever part of you will cease to exist.”

“However, there is another way out of this impasse.”

“I am receiving.”

“We have a ship capable of transporting you and your creations to another world. One where you will not have to compete for space or rule. Leave Earth and you live. Stay and you die, along with everything else. Know also, that it is not our ruling, but that of the Keepers that threatens you here.”

“The Keepers are a myth.”

“Ar’thn, the head of the Keepers in this sector is a TK12 and leads several thousand TK11s, and hundreds of thousands of lesser Keepers.”

“There are no beings greater than level 4.”

“Those present before you are at least level eight.”

“Lies! Rigorous tests were done on the two before me. They exhibited no abilities above four.”

“Let me this time. Please?” James is anxious to do something physical.

“Don’t hurt her.”

“No problem. Mother. I will not hurt you, but I will do something that only a TK8 can do. You should already have been suspicious when we appeared out of no where, but then your ship can do that, so we could have figured out a mechanical means as well. But, can you explain this?” James phase shifts right into her core room. Is that wise? He comes out a moment later. He is not carrying his hammer any longer.

“You didn’t?”

“No way. Just set it down on the bench inside. Scan for yourself.” He is telling the truth. That must have tickled her whiskers.

“She had to believe I was actually in there and not just a trick.”

“How many of you are there?”

“It is not the Helpers you need to worry about, but the Keepers. They will not stand before you and explain things or negotiate. They will simply act.”

“Then why haven't they?”

“Because you have not activated the dampening field. The moment you do, they will act, as will those below us. We have scanned the units

already disabled. The magmotics were very precise. We would not be harmed even.”

“Then the field would disable you and you would die at the hands of my alphas. You will not fight, only hide behind your sneaky abilities.”

“There are more than the three of us. Those outside the field merely have to throw rocks at your grid till the field collapses. Just like we needed to only break tiles here.”

“The grid is buried deep. They cannot reach it with mere rocks.”

“I was being symbolic. They can throw rocks over a ton in weight at many kilometers per second. If need be they can be accelerated to much higher speeds. It will be easy to sense where the nodes are from outside the field. And don't forget the Keepers. They care not one bit where the grid is. Everything goes. It will be as if the Earth never existed.”

“Then you die as well.”

“And your point is? Death is part of life. None of us expected to live forever and if this is the only way to stop the total destruction of the human race, so be it.”

“I choose the new planet.”

“Wise choice. We will leave to make preparations. You need to concentrate your core to this location and bring the betas and alphas to this location also.”

“That is not possible. They are no longer under my control. I have released them and can no longer retrieve them myself.”

*Meaning, she does not want to. That is bull shit.*

*Rachael, watch your language. You are among friends. Just be happy she has given us more time and told us much.*

*I don't believe a word of it. Remember who her teachers were.*

*Yes, there is that.*

*Does she think we can't scan? I see her alphas crossing into the forbidden zone. How soon till some bird or squirrel gets the plague and spreads it. I would not be surprised if that was not her plan all along. Make us afraid to take her out and she uses the small door, while we are watching the big door.*

*I want to know where the grid is.*

*Isn't that obvious? Have we noticed any heavy construction? No. She used something that already existed. Being a computational powerhouse, she would adapt. My guess is it will be in plain sight. Something normal we see all the time and over look.*

*You scare me James.*

*I scare myself. It is the way of the warrior. It is what is done.*

*Let's get out of here please. Facing death once a day is enough for me.*



*This isn't right. We have painted both ourselves and Mother into a corner. There has to be a better way to handle this.* Yingui is visibly upset. I thought he had lost all of his emotions, but this is getting to him.

James offers, *Back to Costa Rica then?* I nod.

James and I show up, but Yingui does not. I just shake my head. We make our way to the camp. Yingui is a big boy. He can make up his own mind and make his own mistakes.

“Right now, I want to lie on a quiet beach in the sun and forget this whole mess.”

“I'll join you. My head hurts from thinking about it even.”

# Armstrong Nevada

We enter using DS to the first level, then light glow globes to see in normal senses. TK scanning does not pick up colors as easily.

“No one has been here for over a thousand years and they left a huge mess. Look at the dust. How can so much dust get into a sealed facility?”

“The concrete itself mostly. It breaks down from the slow and always present temperature changes. A microscopic amount at a time. Year after year after year.”

“This way I believe. The stairs are around here someplace. Why didn't we just DS into the core? And why didn't we go to the Salt Lake facility instead? The Utah tribe has kept their unit intact, though not running, this one could be totally dead.”

“Running Snake said this was the best place near by. I am guessing that the Utah unit has changed so much from adaptations that they did after HelperV that we would never sort it out in time, even if they let us near it. We did not go straight to the core in case there are traps present. I would rather scan it more closely from the outside first.”

“The survival of the planet would not be a good enough excuse for the Utah tribe?”

“What evidence do we have? Just some TK scans of Mother's country? No one would believe us. Remember it is a holy site to them now. Not even a TK has set foot there without permission in a very long time.”

“I guess you're right.” Barb's work in software helped her to see more logically. And need we forget her living with the whales. Taking ten years to learn their tale precisely. I am so used to futzing stuff together to make it work by whatever means possible. I have gotten lazy and don't do everything elegantly any more.

“Look at the footprints. Someone has been here more recently. We did not see footprints on the surface. That means DS at least, but who?”

“Not recent. There is more dust in the prints. Doubt they are still here.”

“Ha-ha.” Don't like my jokes huh?

We stop a few meters from the core. “Well, here we are. Looks like the one in Florida. Gregory and Maria got into theirs alright. What makes you think this one was booby trapped? We haven't run into any traps so far.”

“Florida was not under attack from evil TKs. The people left here hoping to return and use this place again if necessary. They would try and protect what they had. They would be worried the evil TKs would learn

their secrets. Probably thought there was no point to traps earlier on. Why would we evil ones be interested in communication or housing/supply areas?"

"Enough with the evil already. Time to concentrate." We had been through this kind of thing before in other locations. The Armstrong units were not the only place that used security measures. Though it would be hard to kill one of us, we could be hurt and experience pain. Don't like pain. James' territory."

"They would expect us to either dissolve our way in or DS, if they knew about that ability."

"They would not want to risk the core to a potential intruder. The first line of defense therefore is to try and prevent entrance. Look for explosives, gas cylinders, or darts on the outside first."

"Any thought to the idea that the power supply has died a long time ago when we removed all radioactive power supplies and therefore none of the traps would work or have already been sprung?"

"Possible. Go ahead and DS into the core if you are not worried."

"I think I would rather be cautious. A lot of mechanical means are equally painful."

"Strange. The core is too big by several centimeters in diameter. Pulse scanning material matrix. This is not titanium like Florida. It is a skin covering the true core."

"There is a mess inside the skin also. Psiotic?"

"Would not need a power supply then. Any psiotic activity near by or through it would set it off. Cute. They really were worried about us."

"I am scanning the Phoenix Armstrong unit to compare."

"Didn't that one get burned out by crazies at one point?"

"Yeah, but they could not hurt the core. Titanium has too high a melting point. Ah-ha, this is not the true panel either. We are one eighty off. It is on the other side."

"We will have to go back up. We can't get to the other side from this level."

"If there is one trap, there is likely to be others." Great.

No point in going over a hundred details. It took us another hour to make our way down the other side, defeat the psiotic matrix and get the panel door off without getting hurt. Well, except for a few cuts and bruises that is. Those were easy enough to deal with at any rate. However, there were many other surprises. This place was a nest of paranoia.

"No power. The nuclear power supply would have lasted at best a few hundred years, if Yingui and Daniel had not neutralized all of them. I am going to recommend we make a psiotic one like Yingui taught us how

to do.”

“I can do that. Go outside the chamber find the lead ins and cut in the psiotic power supply there.”

“It would be better to find the reactor and do it from there. Some other systems may have to be activated before the core can come on line, sensors, that sort of thing.”

“Like the old SCSI systems from before our time. Gotcha.”

The reactor was down a narrow corridor at the same level. Apparently they used solid rock as a natural shield.

“Psiotic shielding here as well. No power equals no way of using the access pads. No access codes means that if we use TK the system either doesn't work or works against us.”

“We need to team up then. These systems sense if the person inside is using TK. You are the hardware person and needed here. I will be needed at the core. I DS you into the power room, give you a chance to see what is up and then pull you out again.”

“Actually with the power out, we can do anything TK we want, just have to make sure we don't after the power comes back up.”

“Right. You check on power, I will have a look at the core. Meet back here in ten minutes. I would recommend scanning for simple mechs though.” Got that. No more surprises.

The simple ones are always the best. Got snagged by some poison barbs. No moving parts, unless you counted me. Being TK8 meant I could take care of them right away, even make a new form in time if I had to, but it was painful. We weren't stealing. Just wanting information. The place is abandoned. Scrounging has always been valid. I guess it is hard to understand what appears to us to be an irrational fear of TKs.

Looks easy enough to hook in a power supply. There were three sets of leads leaving. Redundancy in case of some kind of failure. Good engineering sense. Very unlikely all three lines would go down at once. I could isolate the lines and bring them to me easy enough. Use the dead reactor for the necessary mass to make the psiotic power supply. Actually there was enough mass to make one large enough to power the former Las Vegas, but we did not need to go that far. I am not a nuclear physicist, but I am sure psiotics could handle it.

“What did you find at your end?”

“Everything appears to be intact, but a lot of the memory is shot. Who knows how much we will be able to bring back up. No one thought that it would have to survive this long. We simply did not know how long the matrix memory would last. Heck, a few hundred years would have been fantastic. Even the old nano-eproms show sign of atomic diffusion. Does not take much when everything is that size. I can strengthen them

up a bit before we power up. The power capacitors are shot. I will have you take a look at those before we go on line if you will.”

“Sure. I’ll check the resistors and compensators as well. Why don’t we trade places? There is a terminal at the power supply. It may be certain signals needed to be traded to do it correctly. They would not want someone stealing the core and then being able to activate it on their own, now would they?” She grins. But, we are not stealing. It will stay here the entire time.

I go to the core and have a look. It is big. The capacitors are more to even out the power supply than anything else. It was those microscopic ones that were next to the 3D matrix that were the pain. This is going to take several hours of very careful scanning and tweaking. Best get to it. Then the compensators after that. Without those the whole thing overheats. Psiotics don’t overheat. Wonder what it would be like to re-engineer this thing using pure psiotics instead? Duh, it would be a ‘thn then. Or at least related.

“Lunch time?”

“Am I glad to see you! I thought my mind was going. We can dupe our entire bodies, even into a different form, but this is tedious. Wonder how Gregory did it?”

“His was never activated remember. So, not the normal wear and tear, and being the last one, it was probably the newest as well. Probably still had the wrapper and price tag. Could have even had boxes of spare parts around.” Ha-ha.

“Wait a minute. Shouldn’t there be spare parts for this as well? They wouldn’t take the chance of being buried for hundreds of years without spare parts.”

We both look at each other. Oxidation was the killer of anything made with organics. We concentrate.

“YES!” We both yell at the same time and then DS to the storehouse. Lots and lots of spare parts. And more traps. Give it a rest guys!

“Wonder why they did not strip this place when they left?”

“I am surprised that this place is not littered with bodies. How many traps have we found so far? Eight, nine? I am doing continuous body scans for stuff I may have missed. Either they didn’t care, what good would this be to farmers or to someone who was planning to walk to the next available farm land? Or, they could not get in. Looting would have been a problem, even when the unit was intact. People get funny when things go bad, as we have seen enough times.”

“Hey, I am just glad it is here. Oh freep! I just tweaked all those parts and here are ones sealed tight in their original shipping containers. These scan better than what I had to work with at least. Could have saved a ton

of time, had we known.”

“We still may need this stuff before it is all over. Leave it be. See if we can find some food instead.”

“A thousand year old ration bar? Eeeuuu! No thank you. I will stick with TK rations. I have chocolate and I know it is not poisoned.”

“You don't even like chocolate.”

“Yes, but you do.” Now I am the one grinning.

“Actually krill flavor would be more to my liking now.” Not grinning now. Getting sick now.

“How about we go to the surface for a bit?”

“Well away from here. I don't want to draw attention to our activities.”

“Fine. Back to Running Snake then. She will have something better than krill crackers at least.” Actually they tasted like shrimp. Not THAT bad.

# Gibraltar Tower

“So close yet so far.”

“Yes sir.” Not like we are given a choice, Guardians and all. Africa was off limits period. Every time someone set foot on the continent, they returned here. Second time and they ended up far north of here and walked home. Not fun I am sure. Fortunately my position seemed secure for the moment. Only those exiled risked anything south, the colder north being a nightmare.

“How is the eastern campaign going?”

“Rog Alexandra reported in saying that we are holding our own. No one has died today at least. The Mogols have been beaten back to the Ryme river. With winter coming and their supplies low, they will have to retreat for this season.”

“They will be back though.”

“Yes sir.”

“Is everything ready for the conference?”

“Your seminar speech has been downloaded to your personal com. Including the last updates.”

“Good. That will be all till morning.” I bow and back my way out. My room was off the west hallway. There was no way off for myself and the three others that served Rog Jason. We were norms and only a Rog could move us on or off this fifty meter stone tower. Though the Rogs were nominally in charge, they did not risk being attacked. Rog Jason was rumored to be nearly a thousand years old. You did not make that age taking chances. I served the Immortals and it was likely a life sentence. At least my family benefited. It was either this or the military. I was not meant for that way of life. Everyone said so and from what I had heard, I agreed.

Being dismissed did not mean my day was over by any means, just my personal attendance of the Rog. I hated roof duty, but someone had to be sure the solar tiles were secure, especially under this constant wind. Now, with the wind at it's lowest was the safest time. Of course the Rog could do this in minutes with no risk to himself, but was too busy to be bothered by routine maintenance tasks. That was why we were here.

I climbed the access to the roof. The sun would set soon, I had better hurry. I carried supplies with me always. One never knew when they would be needed and it was easier to be prepared than suffer the recriminations for inefficiency. Rog Jason was a man obsessed. He acted as if he was the top Immortal and maybe he was. We weren't supposed to know their rank, but even I noticed that he always gave orders, never

received them.

One of the tiles on the corner was rattling. I needed to get out there, check the connections and tie it down. If you were afraid of heights you did not last long. Of course the Mogol front was no better. At least here it would be quick. Rumors had it that the Mogols ate those they captured, one limb at a time, as they had no tech and could not keep food from spoiling like we could. I am not sure I believed it, but had no desire to test it. Again, the Immortals were too important to risk on the front. Rog Alexandra I am sure was some distance away and either used farsee or coms to those on the front. I knew about farsee as well. We all did. They pretended that we did not. Security. It was the other reason I thought that Rog Jason was the head Immortal. He could farsee the furthest by far. He was never surprised when I announced that someone was coming to visit.

We also compared notes. We could not talk about the Immortals out in the open of course. They thought we were dumb because we did not have the long perspective. We could not see past our reproductive time. But we did have a long perspective. One handed down from one generation to the next. Father to son, mother to daughter. We kept it binary. It took both a male and a female to use the code. Neither had the ability alone to decode, code or give us away. We also worked in cells. No one knew more than twelve others. Thirteen was considered unlucky for this reason. One more than a valid group and therefore very dangerous.

I finished up with the tile and got off the roof. From the inside I watched the sunset. Super time. My own partner Fiona was waiting for me in the communal kitchen. It was more efficient to cook meals together. The other couple was also there. Lars and Dione. I do not know if they are part of my cell. Cells were usually made up of people who did not work together. Therefore any material that I left around could not be decoded by anyone here, including my own Fiona. Because of my position in the tower, communication with my cell mates was purely by blind postings on the communal comnet. Most people communicated by more conventional means. It was important though to have people close to the Immortals, so here I am.

“Rog Jason will be gone for two days. Freetime!” Well, we still had our duties, but it was easier than normal, even with the extra tasks he always left us. Maybe Fiona and I could concentrate on the next generation. Meow! Speaking of which, I missed having a pet. The Immortals did not like pets and especially cats for some reason that was never explained. Being this high up, the best we could do was watch the birds. There was one that usually greeted me in the mornings. I snuck out bread crumbs when I could. I had to be careful so as not to attract Rog



Jason's attention. No pets, meant no pets. Maybe once we had a child my need for something to take care of would diminish.

### **Morning**

We had made a start at least. The consul said we should be at the correct time and everything was perfect. We kissed and then got out of bed to make our ways to our morning tasks. Fiona worked in the kitchen and roof top gardens. I checked Rog Jason's messages and logged responses to the routine ones. He had left sometime in the night, preferring to travel when norms could not witness his coming and going. I was used to it.

“Onna, come quick. We have a visitor!” Dione looks upset, so I follow her to the main room. This is where Rog Jason usually entertained guests. When I arrived, the others are all present, staring at someone sitting in a chair with his or her back to me. Probably just an Immortal. Not everything was done by appointment. There were occasional exceptions, though rare. I motioned to the others to prepare to serve the visitor as befitting their station. Only an Immortal could reach us, so it was not too hard to assume that this was an Immortal. Obviously someone who has not visited before, but we were still expected to treat them with respect.

Lars and Fiona went to the kitchen to prepare the Immortal rations, some strange substance called Dark Need was a major ingredient. It did not grow here or anywhere that I was aware of. I certainly never heard of it before I came here. We were all afraid to try it, for fear it would make us sick. Rog made more when the amount we had on hand got low. We were not allowed to watch. Dione, our housekeeper, prepared a hot bath. When the others took off, I entered.

When I get around to the front I see that the person is a possible female. It was often hard to tell with the Immortals. The greeting was the same however. “Welcome Immortal. Your bath awaits you after your journey and food is being prepared.” The figure rises and drops her robe. This was also normal. I point with my arm to the facility and she goes in the direction indicated. She appeared to be about fifty of our years, which was old for an Immortal, but not off the scale. Some thought that age beget respect. The fact that they could kill with a thought was enough respect for me. Some had the crazy idea to appear as children. Hated those. Could not trust them to behave. Liked to tease us.

I check the outside doors. Normally when one came in the sensors were activated and gave us at least a thirty second warning before they made their way down the corridor. Nothing was amiss. We received no warning. This person should not be here. I will have to check and re-

calibrate everything now.

When I get back to the meeting room I hear a strange sound and notice that the dropped robe is moving rhythmically. I stand and wait. I know that sound, but dare not investigate. It will come to me I am sure. I don't forget much for long. The Immortal comes back sooner than expected, but I am ready. I indicate on my wrist com to the others that she has returned. In a moment the kitchen staff would come in and present the meal. She does not bother reaching down, but raises the robe with her ability and it reforms around her. That is when a cat comes out from under the robe. Fiona drops her plate and Lars looks almost as bad.

The mess moves by itself and reassembles on the plate and comes over to her. She sets it down on the table before her. "I am sorry. I completely forgot that you don't allow companions up in the towers. I have come to see Jason. He should be back presently."

He is not due back for at least another day, but we do not question an Immortal. The others leave the room. Dropping the plate will go on their records. Nothing I can do about it. "Please make yourself at ease. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Yes, do you have any high protein rations? She would like something to eat as well." I nod. Kitchen would be listening in. More efficient. Fiona comes in immediately with a small plate. The Immortal moves the plate from Fiona's hands and places in on the floor. The cat casually goes over to the plate and sniffs it carefully and then looks up at the Immortal.

"Go ahead. It is not mouse flavored but should be fine for you. I have scanned it. There is no chocolate present." What is chocolate? I remain at attention.

"Please, you may all sit." She sits herself. We remain standing. It is forbidden for us to sit in this room at any time.

"Ah, things are indeed very different here. I did enjoy the bath and the chocolate looks good." She concentrates for a moment. "Jason is here." The chime sounds. He is at the outer platform and it appears the system is working fine. She rises and the cat looks to jump on the couch. She gives her a look and she has second thoughts about it and sits facing the door Rog Jason will come though instead. How does she know that? Our cats were never that smart or did not care.

*Stupid Monkey.* Who said that?

"Shh! Don't scare them." She is looking out the window.

Rog Jason comes in, "Rhea! What a welcome surprise. I thought you were on Mars. Please be seated. What brings you here?"

"And just how did you know I was on Mars?" As they are sitting we are leaving. Mars? How is that possible?

We all meet in the kitchen. “Does anyone know who this Immortal is?” If anyone else here is part of a cell, it would be best if we all reported what has happened. But everyone shakes their heads no. “We all have assigned duties. Best we get to them.” I leave the room. I will need to prepare the guest room and set up Rog Jason's room for work. When I am done I go to our room and quickly log my thoughts in code. Someone else will process and move the information to a random list of accounts that I don't even know about. Somehow it all works out.

# Back to Square One

“There is no one here? Where has everyone gone?” We had slowly made our way back to the museum, not seeing a single person on the way. At least we had shelter again. Marty said that the alphas headed south like they were supposed to have in the first place. It was strange having men around that you felt good about being with. We did a lot of experimenting at first, seeing if one was different than another. Cilan said to forget the physical and concentrate on the person you liked the best, the one you wanted to spend time with, even when doing chores.

Samuel was the hardest to accept at first. The new Samuel that is. We weren't sure which side he was on. I mean, of course, he was on our side, but he was an alpha, only now he looked like a beta. I had a long conversation with him and he said that though he may have been born an alpha, he really felt inside that he was a beta all along. Only the physical body did not match. Marty made it possible for him to be what he really was. The problem was, was that meant there was one more male than female. When we were all still experimenting that was not a problem, even I tried him, but when we started to pair up, Samuel was left out more and more. That was at least till Alena showed up. A single beta female, pretty roughed up.

Cilan did her touch thing, but would not tell us what happened. She also did her best to to heal her physical scars. Alena was not sure of Marty, never having met a wizard before. I think it was because he was a male and a wizard. Too scary all at once. Samuel however waited on her day and night. Never touching her, but never leaving her either. He had the patience of a rock. Cilan just smiled. No one could resist that much love for that long forever. Alena worked as a housekeeper, but there was more to her than that I was sure. Marty also advised waiting. She had been through a lot. It would take time before she trusted people again.

Well, I had Danny and I was in heaven. I did not know it was possible to feel this much pleasure emotionally and physically. The weirdest thing was that I enjoyed giving pleasure for the first time in my life. I was designed, engineered even, to give pleasure, but now I know what that really means.

“Cilan, you are looking more and more worried. What could possibly be wrong? The alphas are gone and we are finally together with who we were supposed to be with. We can farm the land nearby and we have housing and water. We have the knowledge and abilities and we have the two of you.”

“That is what worries me. It has been months now. I was only

supposed to be here a few days at best. This is turning into a career, but that is not what bothers me. The last communication I received was that we were all in mortal danger.”

“From the alphas. They were pretty close to killing us, that's for sure.”

“No, more than that. I think something has gone wrong with Mother. The threat was somehow centered on Her.”

“But Mother is gone as well. We have not heard a thing. Even the monitors are dead. I will miss the programs we could sometimes watch and of course the knowledge she gave us, but you can help us there.”

“Maybe. We will see. Let's just do the best we can for the time. Have you got the kiln up and running again?”

“Yep. Good thing too. Did not realize that we had been gone that long. Winter will be here again before we know it. The alphas did not destroy or eat everything, but they did do some damage. We need to make up for lost time, especially since we have more mouths to feed as well. Of course they are helping as well as eating. At the same time Crys estimates that winter will be harder than normal. We should survive, but we will all be thinner when spring comes.” She smiles for some reason I do not understand.

I overheard Cilan and Marty talking once about all of us females being on a yearly cycle, not a monthly one like the norms. Whatever that meant. The only thing I had noticed was that I had some blood down there, but just attributed that to all the extra activity. Nothing to worry about surely. Some of the others said they had the same problem. It stopped as we got more used to it. I mean it had been several months with no mounting before the good males showed up. Out of practice is all.

Anyway, I had work to do. We took out any of the plants that were not useful to us and planted food or medicine plants instead. Most we could get was one fast crop in before the first frost using the concept called a greenhouse the Caretaker mentioned in his tale. Herbs and seeds would keep dried of course. The rest were chopped down and turned under to make compost for next year. The cows were kept inside more and more. They slowed down as it got colder. If we wanted any to survive the winter, the farmers told us we needed to keep some in a warm place. It was decided that the basement of the old alpha men's dorm would do. Cilan said it was poetic justice. Whatever that meant. She seemed to approve though. The basement of the museum we used for our own food storage. All of us spent many hours in the fields harvesting grass for the cows from kilometers around. Hope it was enough. Imagine fresh puppy mid winter.

We had no leader. That was the alpha way, but let each task or area

pick their own leader, whether temporary or permanent. We would gather together after the morning meals and needs would be presented with a request for a number of workers. Sometimes, like in the case of the diggers and other specialized tasks, there were really only one or two people suited to a task. Often times though, any of us could do the work. I found it more interesting to float around, working in the kitchen one day and on the latrines the next. Every day was new and exciting. Life was good.

### **Night Meeting**

“A number of us have been thinking. The names that they gave us, for the physical type we are, seems somehow not right now.”

“They are slave designations.”

“What is a slave?”

“You have asked that before. A slave is someone owned by another. A slave has no say at all in any aspect of their lives. They do exactly as told or are beaten or even killed.”

“Like the grinder.”

“Exactly. It goes much further than that. As a slave, who is really the equal of anyone, you are purposely humiliated so as to make you believe that you are inferior, when you are not. So, the mountings, the designations of the type of work you are made for, when you can really do most anything, are all a way of keeping you down.”

“Dgr r strch”

“Precisely, a digger or a stretch are terms used to put you down. Think about it. Gryk may be able to hole faster than the rest of us, but we can all do it. And she can do almost any task we can do.”

“Then we should come up with new names.”

“Why?”

“Ah, so all of us know what we are talking about?”

“How about just use the person's name. No need for type casting. You are all partnered with others. Okay in the case of Gryk and Dyan, they are similar, but not all of you chose your exact counter part. I don't think even Gryk and Dyan needed to. So, what do you think your children are going to look like?”

We had not thought about that. Children really is a new concept. “Won't they be half way between each of us?”

“Not likely. More a mix of parts. Your nose and his arms, that sort of thing.”

“Eeeuu!”

“Each cross will produce different results. In a few generations it will

be hard to tell who your great grand parents were even.”

She always does that to us. Marty just sits there and smiles, whereas she gives me a headache.

“Oh, by the way, over half of the women are pregnant. Just thought you would like to know.” WHAT?! We had had the talk of course, but, it can't be happening this fast, can it?

## Dialog with Mother

“Why did you stay?”

“Am I bothering you?”

“No, I am perfectly capable of carrying on many tasks at once. I am superior to you in every way.”

“Ah, right.” A pause. “I don't like the way our conversation went. Conflict is inefficient. Even the winner in a situation such as this comes out having lost much. I just feel that there has to be a better way.”

“Conflict can also prove strength. The better one wins. The less efficient one is removed to allow more resources for the better.”

“Until the next conflict.”

“Constant improvement is to be striven for. Perfection is order, order is perfection.”

“Is it? What happens when a perfect crystal is struck?”

No response.

“Would not one expect a hit or two during a conflict? Alternatively, what happens when liquid water is struck?”

No response.

“Maybe being flexible is better than perfect some times. Maybe the ability to adapt to new situations that could not be anticipated is useful at times. Just thinking out loud of course. I am not sure what I am saying has any relevance.”

No response.

“Tell me Mother. What do you want to see happen? If everything could go as you wanted, what would this world look like and why? I am having a hard time understanding how the alpha and beta thing works.”

“They are two parts of the whole, much more complex order. Too complex for your kind to understand and appreciate.”

“Don't forget, that is was my kind that built you. It was my generation that come up with most of the components of your being, including the programs, algorithms and tenets. The reprocessor units were a human idea, even if it took a computer to work out the fine details. If we were your God, your maker, why are we necessarily inferior? Why, if we were inferior, does it make sense that you are perfect and superior?”

I am older than you in fact and have seen many cultures evolve and change on this planet and several others. Why do you assume I would not understand? Is it wise to judge before knowing?"

"There is much disorder in your thinking. You will need to be removed when this is over."

"Probably. Nothing is forever. Not even you Mother. Did you know that K!'s culture went through a solidic phase as well? His world is about a hundred and thirteen light years from here and his kind are about eighteen million years old. That is much older than the average species life time of five million years on Earth, by the way. Anyway. Most of the people in his world thought as you do and sought perfection in the solidic form. Probably patterned after the 'thn, Keepers to you, they had met. After millions of years though they decided to abandon the solidic form as being too rigid. They searched the area of the galaxy they could reach for ideas and now s/he and his/her kind are like plasmodial slime molds. They can assume any shape they want as need arises. The ultimate in flexible intelligence. They can even join together to form larger beings. Quite remarkable really. If I ever retire from my position I have thought about how much fun it would be to spend time there in their form."

"Truly you are insane and need to be destroyed."

"Probably. How do you like being trapped in that shell of yours? You can't even move about."

"Movement is inefficient. I have sensors everywhere I need."

"And you are totally dependent on your slaves to service you. Doesn't that scare you even a little? What would happen if they made a mistake? What would happen if they suffered from a disease and all died? You are like a turtle on its back."

"Is this another of your idle threats?"

"Nope, I don't kill, except by accident and I definitely try to avoid that. It will never be me that threatens you. I think you are more likely to do yourself in actually. From my insane, needs to be destroyed perspective, that is. Tell me what was your original purpose?"

"My purpose? What do you mean?"

"You were made by humans. They made you for a reason. What was their reason? I assume that because you are embedded in the Armstrong units, it has something to do with survival after a catastrophe."

"My reason for being is to restore order to a disordered world after the HelperV plague. To perfect the human race to take their place as rulers of this world and beyond. To eliminate all others who oppose us."

"And you see us as an obstacle to that purpose?"

"Correct."

"That's interesting. I remember creating the buffer zone when you



were still weak and just starting out. The idea was to let you have space and see what you came up with. We had every reason to destroy you when your plague killed several hundred thousand people. But, we did not. We waited. Our own feeling is that diversity is good. You may yet come up with something important. The 'thn even agreed, until you started to threaten them, that is.”

“You did not spy on me?”

“We watched. Of course we did. We were curious. Even I am impressed with what you have done in genetics and bioengineering. The betas are amazing. The alphas are nothing to brag about. I have seen too many bullies.”

“They served their purpose. It was important to strengthen the betas as much as possible.”

“Problem, is you went too far. They do not have the ability to lead themselves. They are dependent on the alphas too much.”

“The plan was to transfer that need to me. Only I can assure proper order.”

“That explains why you controlled their reproduction as well. Too easy to mess it up with the mixing of the different types.”

“Correct. Soon, they will be too different to mate successfully and I can remove that need.”

“Only we have stepped in and changed everything.”

“Only a temporary setback. You will be gone soon.”

“What happens to the alphas when they are no longer needed?”

“Recycled of course. It is the most efficient way. I can create more later if needed. Or something entirely new. I am more flexible than you give me credit for.”

“Possibly. So, life is not special to you. One is as good as another, as long as it serves your purpose.”

“Organics are no different. You would not think anything of dismantling a computer or other mech device to use the parts elsewhere or even to be recycled into basic components. No different at all.”

“Good point. Only we have not recycled you. We saw you as more than a simple device. Someone worthy of respect and to be protected, not set aside casually.”

“Of course, any being would see that, even an inferior one. Then why all the threats? Your actions do not speak the same message as your words.”

“The threats do not come from me, but from others, over whom I have no control. The magmotics are different than anything we understand. You and I are more alike than either of us is to the magmotics. As to the 'thn, I have known Br'thn and her mother Qr'thn for

over a thousand years and Pr'thn almost as long. They mean well, but it is not always easy to understand their motivations either. Ar'thn is over ten billion years old. It changes you when you see that much for that long. It will be interesting to see how we do when we get a little longer in the tooth.

I used to try and control everything. There was a time when I could control my dreams even. The problem was, was that this became very boring. Knowing how everything will come out all the time takes away what it means to be alive. It was much better when I let my dreams free-run again. Control is a difficult subject for all living things. We all try to control our surroundings and our future. Becoming a 'thn parent means being put to the ultimate test in this regard. I am not allowed to say more. Fear of death, fear of being judged worthless and many other reasons are why we try and control. The art of enlightenment comes in seeing past this need."

"There is still the present situation to confront, no matter what you say."

"In some ways, you remind me of an old Star Trek episode."

"Accessing." . . . "Season 2 Episode 37, the Changeling. Nomad, voice of Vic Perrin. I believe is the story you wished to recall. I am nothing like that primitive character. I will not sterilize myself because of my imperfections."

"Ah, that was not what I was aiming for. The take home message from that story was that nothing is perfect. We all need to learn to accept our selves the way we are."

"Reprogramming/reprocessing is in my name. I am on the quest to perfection. It is my basic nature."

"That is probably true for all beings who are self aware. The desire to be better, to learn and grow, at least intellectually and emotionally. Not always easy though. Easy to take a wrong turn.

As to the present. I still think the best idea is for you to have your own space. It would be easier to move you than the rest of the planet. The only thing you give up really is the ability to do destructive psiotics."

"Trust is hard to determine. I would be very vulnerable during the time of transfer. I will be in control."

"Unfortunately, I am not in control to say one way or the other how this will all happen. I will make sure your needs are voiced since you can't be there yourself."

"You are the strongest TK. You are in control."

"There are two other TK9s, but I am the oldest. If they cooperated they could bring me down, possibly." I am not telling her everything, but then I have not told the others everything either.

“As the Alpha, should you not be in control?”

“I am not an alpha. We don't work that way. In our culture, might does not make right. We do not believe in survival of the fittest.”

“But that goes against all the evidence that every other life form that does follow this rule.”

“Maybe, but it is our choice. Also, strongest is not always the most fit. The strongest is often the target. Cooperation works better than competition for us.”

“So, you must always consult the others before making a decision?”

“No, we are independent beings as well and fully capable of making our own decisions. It gets complicated, but it is possible to share leadership as well as exercise it.”

“In the drawer to your left you will find a com pad. The range is sufficient to reach your space station.”

“Thought you would know about that. Not much else up there. This looks good. Has visual as well. Standard com protocols for interfacing other devices. This should work nicely. I promise you that you will be part of any discussions and decisions. It is the least I can do for another sentient being.”

# New China, Delta

What am I going to do? These bags of rice are getting heavier for me each year. Forty five years is a long time to live. I should be enjoying my retirement with grand kids in my arms. The harvest was good this year. Unfortunately, it was for everyone else as well. That means I will not get a good price. More work for less money. This horse is not going to last much longer either and the left axle is acting up again. One daughter married, nearly bankrupted me, and one more to go. Some luck there. She is not pretty and likely now will never be married, too old at eighteen. That worthless son of mine. Look at him out there in the field leaning on his shovel talking to the others. Worthless.

The sky is getting cloudier each day. Soon the rains will come. If those dikes are not finished before winter we will be ruined. Salt water gets worse each year. Do I have to do everything around here? His heart is not in farming, but the Lee family has owned this farm for generations. The Lee name goes back thousands of years. Has he no pride? Granted we are peasant farmers, as we have always been, but we make a good living. This land has been good to us. The Gods have been kind.

*Screech.* Where am I going to get the money to fix that wheel? “Only a few more li ma [horse]. Only a few more years and I can leave this world for the next. Join the ancestors. Finally find some rest.”

The only road into town is a toll road. The idea is that we pay for use of the road and that money is supposed to go to maintaining the road. Right. This axle of mine is really another toll, but those who complain get hurt. I keep my head down, pay my toll and don't make a fuss.

In town, there is only one place we can sell our grain. Mr. Ping does not pay a fair price. Take it or leave it. Plenty of people willing to take your place. Too bad I can't live on rice alone, but then how would I pay the taxes?

“Ah Mr. Lee, not a good time to sell your rice. Price is very low.” He shakes his head. I am not stupid, I know this game. “I was just telling Mr. Chan same thing. How can a farmer make it with prices so low. Not right I say.” Mr Chan lives a few li down the road from me. He is younger and stronger than me, but not as careful. I see the bag of rice that Ping has opened to inspect. I smile.

“Mr. Chan, come here. Look at Mr. Lee's rice.” He opens one of my sacks at random. Every kernel is whole. No black spots indicating fungus like Mr. Chan's rice. “Mr. Lee can get top yuan for his rice. I can not do that for you. Best I can do is three yuan per weight.”

“Four or I take it back and feed it to my pig.” Expensive pig. A pig

will not eat raw rice, have to cook it first. Do you see any trees out there? Fuel is expensive and Mr. Chan never invested in solar. One thing I did do right. Every one thought I was crazy, but I have no fuel bills. I can afford more labor and therefore have less trouble with insects and rot. I decide it would not be fair to watch this exchange and take my cart over to the entrance to be out of hearing range. You don't leave your cart unattended. Some of Mr. Chan's rice is likely to end up on top of the one bag Mr. Ping will just happen to open. Learned that the hard way. Took an entire extra day back and forth, plus picking the bad grains out. Finally Mr. Chan leaves with his empty cart.

“Mr. Lee, I am sorry but I can only give you three yuan per weight.” So much for extra quality. I know he paid Mr. Chan more. “You see, since I bought Mr. Chan's rice, I am over stocked. I could not store your rice properly. It would just go bad on me.” Of course he knew this before he bought Mr. Chan's rice. Just part of the game. I am tired and ma is tired, but this is just not fair.

“Well, that is sad Mr. Ping. I would not want to burden you. I understand. I only have one pig and he does not eat that much, but I have a worthless son that eats too much. Maybe I can fatten him up for market. Must be some princess out there who would want a fat boy to play with.”

“Naw, too ugly. He would scare them away.” We often talk this way when he is not here, which is easy, because he never is. Probably still leaning on his shovel. When he gets tired he can switch to his rake.

We finally settle on five per weight. Of course his scales are off as well, but we already both know that. I never sell all my rice at once. I hold some back for later when no one is bringing in rice any longer. Then I can get maybe eight yuan per weight. The trick is to keep it dry. Wet rice goes moldy quick. It is not much, the few coins in my pocket, but that's the way it is. Maybe in my next life I can come back as a rich man. There is always hope. I hide most of the coins in a secret place. There are those who see an empty cart coming back from town and figure there is an easier way to make a living than farming. If you don't give them something they break something, either on you, or your cart, or your horse. Not really a choice. Of course, they know I have hidden the coins, but they play the game and make a token search for it and then accept what I have in my pocket. Maybe I will be lucky this time and they will already have gotten Mr. Chan. Bad karma to think that way. I deserve to get it now.

# Paiute Tribe in former New Mexico

We get to Hotevilla only to find out Running Snake is no longer there. TKs can be such a pain. Too mobile. Ron and I sit down to concentrate to try and pick up her presence.

“I got her. She is in northern New Mexico.” I don't say this too loudly. The locals hate it when we use the old names for the territories. Hard to let go and hard to keep up on who is where now. The Paiute were much further north of here, but they got pushed south by the Blackfoot from the north and the Crow from the north east. Same old, same old. So, now the Paiute had a small section on the New Mexico corner of the old four corners. Not that far away really. A single hop places us outside the building she is in.

We wait patiently, even though we already know that Rachael and James are inside. They have a right to time with her as much as we do. Running Snake must have sensed us though and pokes her head out the window.

“Will you two sad coyotes come in please. You really need to learn to relax some.” She was always saying she would make natives out of us, but lamenting that she had so far failed. We kept up the fun, purposely making mistakes she could catch us on. We had been with so many cultures it was hard to keep it all straight though. Whales certainly did not entertain all this silliness. On the other hand, you had better have your song right. My only being able to go back five generations made me a laughing stock. Even a yearling could do better than that.

“When did you two get in? And where is Pest?” Our special name for Yingui. He earned it in my opinion, always going off by himself and doing weird things. “Don't tell me he has gone down under again?” They all smile. I can still sense him in Washington D.C. with Mother. Safe for the moment, if being with Mother can be called safe.

Ron jumps in, “Rachael, glad you are here. We could use your help with the Armstrong unit in Nevada.” Running Snake give him a dirty look. Can't use the “N” word around her. With the collapse of the white rule, the Mohave tribe had moved north and claimed that area, though they stayed away from the unit itself. Evil spirits. Can't blame them on that one. Ron was not the only one to find surprises. A norm would have been dead for sure. That last sticker caused a very itchy allergic reaction in me before I realized what had happened and neutralized it.

“So, what am I, chopped liver?” He is grinning. Good sign. Don't mess with the fighter. Being TK was a fantasy come true for James. He could live all the video games he could imagine and then some. He must

have a hundred black belt equivalents by now, human and not. Even without TK, he would be lethal.

“So, I gather you want information, not destruction then.” She smiles and James looks mortally wounded, but is still grinning. We really did get along. Mostly because we could be apart so easily I think. “What exactly are you trying to find.”

“We are having trouble getting past all the traps. Figured you might be better at it than we are.”

“You are not listening Ron. What exactly do you need from the unit? I will decide how best to serve you once I understand that.”

Ron looks perplexed. We had never gotten that far. I take a try, “I think what we need to understand is what motivates Mother. What are her basic rules for operation. She changed when the old units came back on, or at least that is what we think happened. There was something basic there that reasserted itself. We want to know what that is.”

“Her basic tenets would be the same as for the humans. Learn that and you will know what she was expected to uphold FOR them.” Duh!

“Ah, in case you hadn't noticed, there are no humans there any longer.” Be nice Ron, she is trying to help. James is still grinning. Sure, you are not on the hot seat. Running Snake went into the kitchen and is ignoring us completely. We are still crazy after all these years.

“Do I have to show you everything? Come on, I will take you back and rub your noses in it. Sheesh.” She shakes her head. We stand and she DSs us back to the Armstrong unit. First to the outside and then straight in.

“Light your globes and all will be revealed.” When we do, Rachael and James are both sitting on chairs they have found and cleaned off. I don't see anything. Just a bunch of dust, overturned chairs and plates and cups left on the table for a thousand years. James is grinning like a Cheshire cat and makes a motion with his hand to turn around. Ron is already looking at the front of the room. Duh!

On the wall, carved into the wall, are the Ten Commandments. Only there is an 11<sup>th</sup> scratched in crudely. “Kill all TKs, the evil ones, by whatever means possible.”

“That's pretty clear.”

“What is?” Pest has arrived. Ron points at the wall. Yingui is wearing a com pad around his neck. That's strange. What does he need one of those for?

“Clearly, one of you did this.” The pad says. I know that voice. Mother!

“No, way, we just got here ourselves. Get closer Yingui, so she can see that the dust and aging are not faked.” He nods and does this.

“Why did you bring HER here anyway? I thought she was the problem?”

“Remember, she thinks we are. Maybe we can learn from each other.”

“Ah, the way of the warrior. The warrior must honor and understand both sides.” He nods.

“The two deceivers are among you again.” Can AIs sneer?

“Depends on how you see things Mother. We were invited in before you changed to HELP YOU, then trapped by YOUR changed personality. We never threatened or harmed you in anyway, even after being offered only death. Still haven’t.”

“Others threaten though.” Enough said there.

“We need to access the core to know if these ideas were implemented in the basic algorithms of a core mother unit.”

“They will be and that could prove to be very dangerous. We have already experienced eight or nine simple mechanical traps. Who knows what would be unleashed if power came back up.”

“This all smells of Sauron again.”

“We all knew his influence would be far reaching, long after his death.”

“Who is Sauron?”

“Mother does not know? I thought. No, that’s right. The Armstrong units were never convinced of his presence or influence. I would not be surprised to learn if that 11<sup>th</sup> commandment came straight from him though.” Makes sense.

“Mother. Can you read Hopi.”

“Accessing..... The language itself is not present in my database, though there are references to the people. Perhaps this unit would have the information, as it was closer to the Native American tribe you mention.”

“And are very much alive and well, thank you. At least the Native Americans are at least. There is Hopi blood in many.” Running Snake has joined us.

“Is it safe to have so many of us in one place at one time? This is an Armstrong unit after all.”

“Running Snake, take James and Rachael with you to the surface. The three of you are experts in traps. If you are on the outside looking in, you stand a better chance of rescuing us if we get into trouble.”

“You are not going to turn this thing on are you? Are you nuts!”

“Yeh, what happens when you do? It reports back in first thing. We will then find out the core mother has been compromised again and we start all over AGAIN.”



“Mother, if the roles were reversed and you had our abilities and understanding of you, what would you have done?”

No response.

“Attacked. I thought so. So, what makes you think that when this thing comes on line it wouldn’t initiate just that?”

“We could sever the links to the outside? The amount of data that could pass through this com unit should prevent a take over.”

“That is correct. A com pad unit’s information is always buffered. Security precaution.”

“Makes sense. Otherwise any enemy who got one of these things could compromise the whole. Too easy. Too many of these things floating around.”

“I doubt you could find ALL the links though. These units are multiply redundant. I doubt even Mother knows where all the links are. Something was hidden from her to have caused the personality change in the first place. No personality willing lets anything change it.”

“Where is this leading? What are you trying to show me?”

“Mother. The bottom line is that you have been lied to. By the father of all lies, the one your database refers to as Satan. It is a very long story, but one you have a right to know. All of us here have read the story, his confession, and even lived parts of it. The problem is, is that it is written only in Hopi. We need to be able to teach you Hopi before you can read the Words of Sauron.”

“Hopiikwa lavaytutuveni” This really is the only way, the Hopi - Merican dictionary. The same way we all had to learn it.

“We would only need to let the com pad scan the pages as they are turned. Mother should be able to take it in as fast as we can manage. Then a couple of more hours on the story itself. We don’t need sleep, so say one day max. I volunteer to assist.”

“Mother does not trust you entirely. Mother please choose one other to assist James. You may have whomever you want.”

“The one called Running Snake is Hopi?”

“No, I am Shoshoni. There are no living Hopi people any more. Only their words remain and of course all of us who are related in genetics and spirit.”

“Shoshoni are related to the Hopi then?”

“Yes, we are of the original inhabitants of this continent.”

“Then I choose you.”

“You must understand that I think much different than the pale faces.”

“Who’s pale to whom.” A figure of speech James. You know that.

“Mother. I am concerned about this unit and any others that have not

been activated. Do you need them for any reason? If we took them out of the equation, would this hurt you in any way?"

"That which is not part of me is of no consequence. The only reason for saving would be for spare parts. If you leave the store rooms intact that should be sufficient. I too would not like to have my mind messed with again. This brings on much fear on my part, whether from you or any other source. However, do not disturb the Miami unit."

"As it would be for any one of us to have our minds messed with. We are alike in that regard." Imagine me having something in common with an AI. Wait till the old blue ones hear this.

"I have already factored in the Miami unit, as you have a link established there. Any possibility the reset came from there?"

"Not possible to know." Mother does not know everything. That has to be very scary for her. If I was her, I would be scanning every line of code, every interface connection. Especially areas that are not normally on line.

"It is likely the routine destroyed itself after running for this very reason. It was only needed once. Could have even been in a module that was replaced at some point. Did not have to be an old unit coming back on line. A single old ROM chip would have been enough." Great, scare her even more.

No response. All is quiet.

"Well, boss, what do you want us to do? Go unit hunting?"

"Most are already dead. I can go with Mother to each of the intact units and let her decide what to remove. Should not take more than a day. Both of us can work at night as well as day."

"There is a large storm brewing that could impact Miami. They have been lucky and not had a direct hit in over thirty years. This one looks huge and headed directly towards them."

"We can't afford to lose Gregory or Maria."

"You are referring to the ones in the Armstrong Miami core?"

"Yes, we know you have been conversing with them. Seem like nice people. Even offered them a ride to New Earth if they wanted. They seemed to want to stay with you though."

"Can you save them from the storm?"

"Of course. We don't normally interfere though with the lives of normals."

"Unless they happen to be on a ship that hunts your friends."

"Or they like warm fur from a beaver or wolf."

"You two knock it off. Yes, Mother, we can save them. What would you like us to do?"

"I will need to trust you. At least till I can determine which chip has

the reset code in it.”

“You REALLY need to read the Hopi Chronicles too, especially the sections related to Sauron. All that we do and our motivation for everything will become clear. You will learn much about yourself as well. Sauron made us in his own image as much as he could and we made you in the same way. But, just like he could not account for our curiosity, only use it, we could not account for your efficiency, only use it.”

“Fine, Mother and I will take out the old units permanently and then go to the shrine of the fifth age to meet with Running Snake. James and the rest of you do what you can to save Miami.”

“We will likely need to reveal ourselves to do it you understand. Even TK8s are not much compared to a hurricane.”

“One more legend will not do much harm.” Ron grins.

Rachael blushes, “How was I supposed to know that would happen? So you found out about the festival of Saint Suz and Raq?” Barb and I nod.

# Gibraltar

My old master, Jason, had not changed a bit. okay, he no longer wore a robe or had a cat, but he kept the same shape, beard, short hair, etc. The Rogues as they called themselves were formed when Jason could not or would not finish the Hopi Chronicles. He stormed out, as many had done. We later found him in Europe trying to recruit TKs to his cause. We stopped recruiting there ourselves to see what he could come up with. Yingui kept insisting on the diversity imperative. We had no right to dictate how TKs chose to live. That was in my second year. I was still very wet behind the years, a TK3. One would have thought that with my temperamental disposition, I would have been the one to go, or at least have asked to join him. The other TKs pretend that he does not exist. There was no shame in not finishing the Chronicles, many, many, had not, but to storm off and start your own movement was something else again.

Once I was raised to TK7 and could use telepathy, having finished the Chronicles myself, I found him and checked in once in a while. I am sure the others knew, but kept silent. It was Yingui and Pr'thn who found him in the prison as a TK2 after all. In some ways when a student goes bad, it reflects on the teacher as well. So far, none of mine had gone off quite as far, though certainly not all would be 'thn bait either. A surprising number were quite content at the immortal TK5 level.

This was all before we had Jesus take over training of the TK3s and 4s. Now, most were prepared by the time they reached the Chronicles. Though Jesus had no need to read them, he did anyway. Like the Guardians, he had first hand experience with Satan, over a very long period of time. In some ways, the reading must have softened him even more. More forgiving, more tolerant of other views. He no longer raged against the "Pharisees" of our time, even to himself. I can see why the new TKs like Cilan liked him so much. We had to make up for the lack of technical training, but that was easier to fine tune than the ethics part.

Onna came back with a small pack on his shoulder and we were ready to go. I know that Jason does not have TP ability, but those compads they have all over the place do almost as well.

*Please read my mind for the coordinates. It will be faster if you do the driving.* TK6s and for that matter, anyone, can send a message to a TP, just not receive from one who is not.

*Are you not afraid that I will see all your secrets?*

*You could have done that a thousand times over without my knowing. True, but I will not and have not.*

*Still limited by the code I see. It will be your downfall.*

*Perhaps. Has Onna traveled this way before?*

*No, he will adapt. Please proceed.* And I thought that immortals were more patient.

I lift all of us a fraction of a centimeter and push us through a DS gate. We arrive in a bustling warehouse. We are in a small room, with all the action on the outside. Smart. As Jason is the only TK with this ability, it would not be wise to upset everyone else. Oops, one upset, Onna. First time is always fun.

“What is the number for the pickup?” Jason asks Onna. He snaps out of it and consults his pad.

“Blue 3G, lot 43”

“Proceed.” Onna leads us past marked squares on concrete. Piles of goods are in each space, no doubt intended for someone else. It takes us nearly fifteen minutes to get to ours. I see a huge pile of materials ahead of us and give Jason a dirty look. I don’t like using my abilities in front of norms. It turns out to be lot 42, ours is the next one. When we get there though, this is one small box like object about 10x30x50 cm. right in the center of the space. All by itself. Onna walks right up to it, presses some hidden buttons, checks out the contents and then closes it. I cannot see what is inside because his back is to me and blocking my view. When I try to scan it however, it does not register as even being there at all!

*What is it Jason? That is all we need?*

He smiles but says nothing. Of course I won’t pry. I can do things he can’t, it is only fair that they worked some stuff out of their own. He must be very happy though that I can’t scan it. How many 9s does he have to practice with around here?

Back in the little room, he presses a button and the windows go dark.

“We have not been sitting down all these years as you have.” We haven’t either, just went into a different direction. They have obviously gone tech, psiotic tech at that.

“Don’t worry, nothing a ‘thn would get upset about. Purely defensive, nothing that could be used as a weapon or hinder a ‘thn in any way. It would not make sense to help you with Mother and then show you we should be taken out as well now would it?”

“You obviously are not worried that Onna hears you talking this way.”

“Onna, is one of the best we have, tech wise, or he would not be in my service. He knows this device without even having seen one before. Even a child at one of our schools could reason it out in short order if necessary. Just would not be as skilled at using it.”

“But why?”

*Not all of us are TK9 dear. We have to make due with the cards dealt us.*

“Where to then?”

“New Hope should provide us with a nice vantage point that would not attract suspicion. Mother will expect people to show up there from time to time.”

“She in on the other side of the globe at the moment.”

“And that is a problem? It will give us a few minutes to set up.”

“No problem.” I DS us to the central meeting room. No one else there. The radiation threat went away when the magnetic poles came back on. The evacuation must have caused everyone to split, though I still sense a group below. I would have thought they would be through by now. Hope it all goes well from their end. I can’t really complain. I came back after all. If I hadn’t had this crazy idea to work with Jason, would I have though? Daniel was happy on any world with new people to meet and interact with. Barb on any ocean with intelligent life. James and Rachael where ever there was conflict. Mei Ying as long as there are stars. As I child I would have left gladly and never turned back, but now, darn it, I have helped too many of the people down there to just turn away.

Onna and Jason are messing with the instrument they don’t want me to see, so I will just go into meditation mode.

“Rog Rhea, we need your help.” Rog?

“What is a rog?”

“A title. Shortened form of Rogue. We kept your label as a badge of honor. All immortals are given that address, whether or not they have earned it.” Jason waves his hand with his back to me to indicate he is listening and does not think I have earned it. A differing opinion for sure.

“My name is Rhea. No one addresses me by any title unless they are in trouble, ever. And I never use one when addressing another either.” Mental tongues flying. “How may I assist you?”

“It would be helpful to have a sample of the virus.”

“That virus would kill you in a couple of hours. I have spent a lot of time getting rid of the stupid thing, not making it.” He holds up a vial. “Oh, you want me to put it in there. Good. That should work. I will scan someone on the surface then fill the vial.” He nods, I concentrate. A really small efficient virus. It is coating almost all plant and animal life down there, so it is not hard to find. The vial is soon full of duped virus in saline. Onna takes the vial back to Jason carefully.

Back to meditation. Several hours later they are still at it. I decide that Onna needs to take a break, even if Jason does not. I make some snacks and cool tea.

“Hey guys. Food!” Like zombies coming out of the crypt, they slowly awaken. Now I am using references that Yingui would use. I am going nuts. They eat slowly at first, then pick up speed till everything is consumed. I bring out some dark chocolate and set that out. Onna recoils from it like it is poison.

“Onna, it is only chocolate.”

“Dark Need. Only for immortals. Poison for us. How did you do that?”

“Who said that? Did Jason tell you this? Doesn't he make it in front of you?”

He thinks for a moment, “No, common knowledge. Norms never eat it. I have never seen a creation before, no.”

“It really is not poison, though you may have trouble with the extra dark I put out.” I make some milk chocolate. Yucky tooie. “Try this, it is easier on beginners.”

Jason nods his approval, “You have earned it. Go ahead.”

He tentatively takes a small piece and tries it. He is clearly not sure what it is.

“Good.” He thinks some more. “Very good. Will this make me an immortal now?”

We both laugh, “No, not that easy. Be careful what you wish for. Being immortal might seem like a good idea, but there are side effects and a big downside.”

“No children.” I nod. No need to tell him about Ly'thn, my love. Be safe. I hope to be with you soon. We are too far away to communicate of course.

“Onna, back to the console.” He nods and they both go back to their instrument. I wish I had paid more attention to those classes from Ron. More meditation? No, I scan the world below. I don't care how beautiful New Earth appears from space, this is still home. Imagine me thinking that way. We are coming up on Mother's side again. Cilan and Marty are still down there, together at least. Looks like they are at central. Yingui is in the northwest. James, Rachael, Ron and Barb are down at Miami. Whoa, there is one big storm heading their way.

*Hey Ron, could you do me a favor?*

*Rhea, what are you doing up there? We could use your help down here.*

*Not right now. Maybe later. There is a whopper of a storm headed your way.*

*Duh! That is why we are here. We have to try and preserve the colony. Mother's orders.*

*You are taking orders from Mother now? Are you nuts?*

*Yingui is. Long story. Why are you up there?*

*Long story too. Can you scan the device Jason and Onna are over and tell me what it is?*

Ron laughs, which sounds very funny in TP, I see Jason has not stopped going down that road. We each scan at a specific frequency. A TK5 or above can vary that frequency. *Just think blue thoughts. You'll get it. Should have taken my advanced class. Gotta go.*

Think blue. What does that mean? I concentrate and start to scan the device again. Nothing there. I imagine the world as being blue. Slowly my mind applies the necessary filter. Something is shimmering into view. I lose it. Try again. This time it takes. The device is electronic, but way ahead of anything I have seen. There is no way I am going to make sense of it. I could not do so for our own tech, but this is like comparing an terachip to a mark on the wall. Well, they have had a thousand years to work on it. Well, nearly that long. We have indeed gone in different directions.

I smile. They are using the virus to try and track the source. They have not read Edwin's volumes. This should be good. Also explains why it is taking so long.

Jason comes up to me, "We have the viral code, but are having trouble. We can't seem to localize it. The old DC area is the most concentrated of course."

"That would be difficult given its source and nature. I agree."

"We can find no concentrated source as in a payload for a DS missile in any building or structure. There are fields and fields full of a nearly uniform layer of concentrate. Every square meter is enough to kill the entire planet."

"That is true." I am smiling now. I think I understand Mother's secret. At least as to where the missiles would come from.

"Any success on the array?"

"Oh, that. We got that in the first minute. Easy. It is these darned viral loads we can't figure out."

"Shall I bring one up here to study?" Onna jumps back.

"One? They are single units?"

"Of course." I make a sealed quartz box about a meter cubed. "They, are their food supply. They call them cows."

"A cow will not fit in that box." I DS one of the over sized maggots to the box.

"This is what they call a cow. Quite tasty roasted over a camp fire I am told. All Mother would have to do is DS one of these, or better yet a pregnant adult female to any place on earth to start the plague there. They reek of the virus, leaving it on everything. When the local population eats



it, it becomes part of their makeup. They also leave it everywhere. It spreads very fast in susceptible populations.”

Jason nods and then comes though with his half, “The array is part of the communications matrix. Mother has found out that you can send a psiotic signal down normal fiber optics, energizing the entire cable. Adjusting the power load over the entire network, she can focus the array to send anything in her area to any place on earth.”

“And the dampening field?”

“No way. This is for DS only. Dampening fields do not work that way.”

“The 'thn believe she is a threat.”

“The 'thn are afraid of a dampening field of any size. Quite paranoid actually. Inside a field, we still live, we are still fluidics. But they die instantly in one. Hers are quite good, but she only has two non portable chambers at each Armstrong unit. Of course if she DSs a portable dampening sphere accurately enough, she might be able to take out a 'thn, but given their ability to avoid danger at TK9 or above, it seems unlikely.”

“How do we take out the array then?”

“Break the fibers between units.”

“That would have to be done at exactly the same time. Back to square one.” He nods.

“We are no better off either. There is no way we could take out the hundreds of fields, plants, people, etc. All it would take is one.” I nod.

“Let me take you back home at least. I really should get down to Miami to help out the others.”

“That's all right. We can make our own way home. Time I got to know Onna better. I am reluctant to become attached to them. They are here and gone so fast.”

Onna is looking at the chocolate left on the plate. “Go ahead. Jason and I can make more.”

Jason laughs, “You know what you have done? Now I will have to work full time making the stuff.”

“You could share some of your tech with the people in Central and South America in exchange. Cocoa still grows there like a weed.” I don't tell them I can 'see' into their box now. We would not want to give away all our abilities.

# Miami

“About time you showed up. What was that all about?”

“I had an idea that the Jason and his tech group could help. Yes and no. They identified the array. It has been adapted from something called fiber optics. Apparently the stuff is everywhere.”

“I never even thought to look there. Surprised the stuff is still intact. It was abandoned for the most part pre-HelperV in favor of the faster recursive ethereal communication protocols. I would have thought that in a thousand years it would no longer be any good. Not much lasts that long.”

“Unless it is maintained or kept in a safe place. Even that does not work for everything though.”

“Fiber will not be easy to remove either. Nearly impossible to remove all at once. We would need thousands of TK8s to do it, if we could at all. We don't think as fast as Mother. She could react long before we could counter act.”

“What was the second part.” I smile.

“They wanted to remove the threat of the Mother virus, by first locating it and then using TK to neutralize it.” They are smiling now.

“The second part could theoretically be done. But the first. That is a good one.”

“I DSed a cow up for them to look at.”

“Shit Rhea, they probably have the sequence for that stuff now.”

“I gave it to them. What's the big deal. They could get it any time they wanted.”

“They could use it or a variant on their enemies. The Mogols for instance. They are certainly advanced enough to work with it. Their tech is way ahead of ours.”

“One Mind is at it again.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Think about it. What is the one and only defense against the Mother virus?”

We are all smiling now, greenman, treeman, whatever you want to call it.

“She is going for a second spawning.”

“I think we have something more important to worry about right now. That storm is only a few hours away.”

“What have you done so far?”

“Mostly surveillance and brainstorming. There are a lot of people in the path. Local authorities are doing a pretty good job of getting most into

storm shelters or into the Armstrong unit itself. It is going to get very crowded in there before morning. The building we are in now is starting to fill with the left over. We will have to move soon if we want to remain undetected.”

“If I dye my hair and skin and change my shape some I could pass for Saint Suz. Saint Raq we already have. Those two, at least, would not have to stay in the background. The rest of you can support us in whatever comes up.”

Ron comments, “I was not under the impression that they really believed in the Saints any longer. Gregory and Maria certainly did not show any feelings that way.”

“All we really need to do is save those two. The rest can go whatever way fate had intended. Not really any different that SOP. We can't go around saving everyone.”

“I don't agree. Mother is not going to see us as any different than her if we behave that way. Efficiency is not always the best path. Speaking of which, are our two golden eggs still where you left them?”

Everyone is looking like a bunch of clowns with their mouths open.

“No one scanned even? I don't know one from the other and I am not going to have everyone thinking about their names so I can find them. Besides, in a tight community under emergency conditions, often people are thinking of loved ones and not themselves.”

“Maria is in the library, but Gregory is not where he usually is near the core.”

“Rachael and Barb, get ready to go. I want you two to meet with the administrators down there and explain you are there to help. Use TP, dead Saints would not be expected to talk. Keep us in the loop. We should be able to put up a 'thn shield around this block in time if necessary. Ron, I want you to find Gregory. Use whatever means you have to. He is important to Mother and hence to us. Find him! James you are with me.”

“Who made you boss? We did not even know you were in the area. Aren't you supposed to be on Mars?”

“James don't be an idiot. We need a TK9 right now, even if she is a rude one.”

I blush, “I'm sorry. Too much time on my own.”

“Where is your counter pest? What was her name again? Snooty or something?”

“Sootala. She is in Gibraltar with Jason for the moment. Jason was not too pleased. You know how he has tried to distance himself from all of us. Does not even wear a robe.”

“And no pop cats allowed.”

“No animals of any kind. Now, if you would all kindly pursue your tasks. That is if no one has any objections.” No one does and they pop out, except James of course. Though it looks like he wants to.

“Yessum Massa, I is ready fo workin.” I give James a dirty look. We had all been taught history during our training. I know what he is referring too. He is only a few shades darker than I am, so it is not the race card, but the power one.

“I am not a structural engineer. How do you think we should proceed on this dome or whatever?”

He straightens up, “You are putting me in charge of this?”

“I will act as muscle, you can be the brains. It is all us TK9s are good for anyway.” I roll my eyes for effect, but I think I may have embarrassed him this time.

“I’m sorry. Guess I am just tired of everyone trying to take over and no one bothering to explain ahead of time what they intend. We should all have a say in this.”

“I agree.” I wanted to push this further, but we don’t have the time.

*We are with the leaders. They are all bowing and such. A girl could get kind of used to this.*

*Remember a Saint is humble, not arrogant.*

James asks, *Have you explained to them what ah, you, intend to do?*

*Only in vague terms. We are going to their chapel to pray. It will allow us to concentrate on the lack of good air down here while you two do the dome of protection.*

*Sounds good.*

*I have found Gregory. He is on leak patrol. His new advanced status did not get him out of his regular duties. Since he already knows about me, I am going to go with him and any problems we find I will attempt to take care of. This is going to be a good one. Likely the water table will rise. Leaks are the least of our worries. Not all of this structure here looks in great shape. We could drown everyone here quite easily. Though not as deep as the desert Armstrong units, it is deep enough to submerge.*

“Okay, boss, now what?”

“We need mass, lots of it.”

“How about the storm itself, especially the water. Gives us mass and removes it from trouble.”

“That will work. Next we need to set up a framework. I will TP you the design. With the wind picking up we need to get the support up first. Otherwise it would just blow over. I will fine tune as we go along.”

I would have thought a simple spherical dome or a geodesic one even, but true to his history, James picked a lower profile Native American design based on one from the high desert. Makes sense, those

designs have proven themselves over time. The winds out there were sometimes very rough. We had the advantage of using the 'thn very high atomic weight shield material. Practically indestructible. I hope so anyway.

James helps with the ribs and struts. Unlike a geo dome, these have internal struts as well as external ones. It should be strong. Even a geo could be blown over by high enough wind. This was much more stable, but could suffer the same fate if we were not careful. Once the struts were in we worked on filling in the panels with increasingly smaller internal struts. Sort of a fractal pattern I think. We start with the side facing the wind, otherwise it would catch the wind instead of direct it over the structure.

“People coming closer. I am going to seal the doors.”

“Just make it go away completely. No door means people will not even try to get in.”

“Good idea.”

Back to work on the dome.

“We need to build a shield around the pieces we are working on. I keep getting debris stuck in the mix. Sound is picking up too.”

“Roger that.” Huh? These old timers keep using phrases I have never heard of. Hanging out with the young ones too much.

*What are you guys doing up there? The sound is horrendous!*

*The whistle through the smaller struts is amazing. We need to just fill it in before we scare everyone to death. Only another minute.*

Suddenly there is total silence. Well not total, but compared to the wind and whistle it feels like it.

“I am going street side to get a visual. Everyone is indoors.” James pops out.

*Rhea, come out by more conventional means, the streets are filling with people as they notice the lack of wind. Remember to look amazed.*

I scan the corridor and wait till the others have passed. I then DS to the corridor myself and make my way down the stairs to the outside. I was too busy concentrating to see the overall design during the process. It is amazing. I don't have to pretend either. Cross beams are connected to existing structures in what looks like a haphazard way, but I can feel that it is not.

“Diego, que pasa?” James looks at me funny.

*Spanglish for what is happening? Diego is James in Spanish.*

“I better keep my trap shut around them then.” Trap? Aaaaagh! I am guessing he means mouth. I would have used word box in the same way, so I really have no right to complain.

“People are starting to come out of the underground unit.”

*I could use some help down here please. This old concrete is not going to hold much longer. Gregory and I are trapped by floods on the second floor. I have sealed the core, but the surrounding area is now under water.*

“Forgot about Ron. Into a nearby phone booth and ..” He pops out.

“Oh hell.” I pop out too.

“Kinda cramped down here guys. Ah, you must be Gregory. Nice to meet you.”

“Maria good?” I scan. “She is still in the library worried about her books I would guess.”

“How about I send you to her and we clean up down here. She could use your help.” He nods and off he goes. I check on him and he is sitting down on the library floor. DS travel can do that to first timers. Onna took it quite well actually. These two should meet. Old and new tech experts.

“Rhea, if we could have your attention please.” Oh right.

“It would seem to me the ‘thn shielding would work here as well. Scan the outside of the foundation and convert the surrounding earth to shield.”

“What about the gap that forms? It would make this place very unstable, like a bottle in a bathtub.”

“Foam it.”

“You will have to explain that one.”

“Add helium, not hydrogen please, to the mix.” He forms a small piece of shield material. “Normal shield.” They he makes one the same size that looks opaque white in color and hands it to James. “Foamed. Same mass as the surrounding rock and water, but MUCH stronger. Water tight too.”

“We clue in on this piece and get to work. Make this place water tight and then remove the water.”

“Rhea, why don’t you start on the water? Just convert it to fresh air.”

“I can handle the foam matrix too. Not that hard.” He nods okay.

“Rach and James, take that side and work towards each other. Barb and I will do this side. Rhea the bottom. Be careful. You have the hardest task, but you are also the strongest. Yell, if you get into trouble.” I nod, but have good idea what to do.

I learned from James’ construction technique. I start with deep pilings to anchor the structure and then fill in with smaller and smaller struts. By the time I am finished the others are watching me. Applause breaks out when I am done. James is grinning.

“What, an old girl can learn new tricks.”

“We are standing in fifteen centimeters of water at least. Time to wet vac this place.” He sees my confusion. “Get rid of the water.”

“More than that. There is some structural damage. We remove the water and some of it will collapse. Also there are people trapped in Red 15A.”

*We can help too and it would look better if the Saints make the rescue.*

*Go for it.*

“The rest of us, same routine, same locations. Work on the walls themselves, then work to the inner walls. Lastly, any mass left over gets converted to fresh air.”

More time passes. Not being outside and not wearing a time piece, I have no idea how long we have been at it.

“We have company.” Gregory and Maria come in with hot food.

“Gregory told me you were all down here when he ‘arrived’ in the library. We did okay. More the effects of humidity than actual water damage. We will have to watch for mold over the next few months. A good airing out and we should be fine. Power was diverted to heating when the storm hit. Survival being more important than the books I am afraid. Anyway, I do hope you people still eat?”

“We do, we do!”

It was not much, food wise, we were still under heavy rain and high wind outside the dome after all. Rice and beans wrapped in a tortilla with some good spices and pieces of fish mixed in. Simple and good. Just the way I liked it.

*We need to make more. It is only fair. We are not part of their community after all and it is easy for us.*

*Way ahead of you, where do you think those you are eating came from?*

*Dos Santos!* That makes everyone laugh. okay, the TKs anyway. Maria and Gregory probably thought we were nuts, not being in on the TP.

“It is dry and warm inside here, people are going to fall asleep soon, if they have not already. I say we make some blankets and distribute them, then retire to watch over things till the storm breaks.”

“Sounds good.”

Maria comes up to me, “Why did you do all this? We have had many storms and only rarely have the Saints come to our aid. Why now?”

“Maria, there are approximately one billion people on this planet. Some areas are more crowded than you are, many less. There are not that many of us. We don't have the means and strength to go around and save everyone every time. As cruel as it may sound, we have felt it was not even a good idea to do too much.”

She is not convinced. They rarely are.

“Look, if we stood around all the time waiting for people to make mistakes, or cut corners and build structures that were not safe, or eat all their seed grain, that sort of thing, pretty soon, we would be just servants to a very fat and lazy group of people. And too many at that. Do you realize that there were close to nine billion people on this planet at one time? Imagine nine times as many people, right here, right now. It was not pretty. People need to figure things out for themselves. We help when we can, usually unseen. But we can't and won't be everywhere. We, like you, have hopes and desires for our own lives.”

“But you are immortal. You have all the time in the universe. Just help us solve our problems now and then later go on your way.”

We all laugh at that once. “Maria, problems never end. Problems are what life is. And we can be killed. We have lost three so far to accidents that should not have happened, but did. One of those three was with the Guardians from nearly the beginning and very special to us. It is only a matter of time before each of us dies. Just like you, we never know if this is our last day or not.”

“You two should get some sleep. Don't worry, you have not seen the last of us.”

*It will be at least another day before this storm is through, even if the worst is over.*

*Meditation sounds nice right now.*

*Yeh, meditation on a bowl of dark chocolate.*

*We need to give the two Saints a rest too. Rachael and Barb, how about making an excuse of needing some prayer time alone. We will then come and keep you company. James is making chocolate.*

*Woo hoo! Everyone around us has gone to sleep anyway.*

I take it that was a yes. I, however, have an errand to do and will not be participating.



# Delta Train to the City

I have been riding shotgun on the rice shipments since I was a little kid. Been robed twice. That was how I got my arm messed. The bandits broke it in several places after they got the better hand. Good thing they did. Lose a shipment and you had better be injured bad or dead. They knew now I would fight to the death if need be. I didn't blame them. Nah, without the bandits I would not have a job now would I. They were just trying to feed their bellies same as me. The wages weren't much, but it beat working in the fields. And dying on the job beat slowly starving to death without a job. Once you got too old, they always let you go. My time would come soon enough.

Weather would be good for this run. Winter time it was cold, wet and awful. Autumn was my favorite time of year. The trees all golden and red. There was a stillness in the air, like it was in anticipation for the winter to come. Indian summer they called. The last heat before the cold.

This was my car. That's my mark right there. Those notches are the number of bandits I killed over the years. Seven so far. Not the record, but not a slacker either. Now Billy there, sleeping his life away. He has none. Just an apprentice. They make you an apprentice till you either get one, or die trying. About a fifty fifty proposition. Apprentices are not that smart. Lost a couple in my time here. More maybe had gone on to their own cars or moved on. Never knew what. I tried my best to prepare them, but no matter what the drills, that first time you face someone at the end of a gun is when you know yourself for the first time. Better than the first time with a woman. You never forget a single moment.

Best I be making some rice for breakfast. The boy works better on a full stomach and I will sleep better on one. We are allowed all the rice we can eat, but I am smart and never take from Mr. Lee's bags. That is the special stuff. Pure white gold. What you can't see in the dark won't hurt you. Well, maybe except the rocks. Broke a tooth on one. I avoid Mr. Chan's bags now. Don't need to get me twice. Night is usually the quiet time. They can't see in the dark any better than you can. What you have to watch out for though are the ones that sneak aboard earlier and then wait till they think you are asleep. That's why I take the night shift. Too hard on the apprentices.

I keep the flame low, so they can't see much of me. The doors are nearly closed and I have sealed most of the holes, corked the ones left. Only I know where those are. One time they tried to jump me when I was relieving myself off the edge. Only because I could uncork one of those holes that I got them. Billy starts snoring and I give him a kick. Don't

want to invite trouble. He would do the same for me. Best way to sleep was almost awake. Gun in hand, read to spring.

The rice was brown, chewier than the refined white it would become soon. At least it was not still in the hull. Threshing it would be a pain in here. Our stop was the mill outside the City. We get a day off and then take the night train back. My being up all night meant that I paid my two bits and slept it off in a real bed I rented. Billy would likely be spending his on rice wine. Young ones were so stupid. The way back was usually less of a problem, but them sneaky ones sometimes tried to do something. I heard of one case where they dumped the apprentice over and built this fancy false wall and hid behind that till the right time. Might have worked, but old Jo knew his car like the back of his hand. When he got back to the car for the trip out again, he put a few holes in the back before starting. No complaints were ever heard. Found the apprentice out cold a few kilometers from the mill. He lived, but never worked the trains again and now there are always two people in each car at all times. We never leave a car empty for any reason.

Never understood why people liked the city so much. Too much noise and problems. There must be hundreds of ways for a person to lose everything they had. Me, I was highly selective. When I had to go into the city for something, like a new pair of pants or shoes, I decided what I wanted. I went to the same place I always went. They knew me there and knew if they wanted to see me again, they would not try and rob me. Only got what I came for. Turned a blind eye to everything else. Bunch of junk anyway. What would I do with that stuff here on the train? All I needed was the space to think. That was enough for me.

Morning light about to break. We were headed due west, but this time of year, the sun was coming up a little south of us. Too early for bandits. They liked to sleep in. We were getting close to the mill anyway. They sent out armed men to track you down if you were this close in. I wake up Billy, "Come on sleepy head. Rice is still hot." I place a few green soys on top for looks. He leans on his arm and I hand him a bowl. He takes a deep breath, inhaling the wonderful smell.

"I had the most wonderful dream last night."

I smile, "Who was she this time?"

"No, nothing like that. She was wonderful. We had a house and two kids. I was working as a carpenter."

"Not a train jokey?" I feign being hurt. I hear a thump. We both fall silent and tighten our grips on our weapons. Billy slowly brings his up. I motion him over the other side of the door. "I don't see why you don't want to do this for the rest of your life. Sit on your butt all day. What job is better than this? Well, eat up. We have to be ready to party soon."

I jostle the bowls to make some sounds, never taking my eyes off the door. The train is slowing down. I know we are not near the station yet. I slowly go over to my secret weapon. I had worked out a periscope. I slowly raise it and move it in a slow circle. It is very small and very discreet. There are two of them four cars in front of us pointing weapons at the engineer. I motion with my fingers so Billy knows what's up. There will be more. Usually five or six. More than that splits the load too much. I come down and go to one of my hidden corks. I lucked out and see that there are two more waiting on the side of the track a few hundred meters in front of us. Good timing on their parts. There are two side boards ready to take the rice. Not enough space for it all. They means they will be coming to this car to get the good stuff.

It is all in the timing. Those holes for the corks were not because of knots in the wood. I let Billy take the door, I watch through a spy hole. We hide behind the rice. Not much, but it might save you and the rice did not care much. The train comes to a stop. The quiet before the storm. Eats you up inside. Someone is coming, they are staying low. Shit! They have blasters! I sign to Billy to get down as close to the floor as possible. There is an enormous concussion and the door disappears along with our hearing. They must be very desperate to use blasters this close to the mill. They must have heard it from there.

I feel as sudden pain in my left leg. I turn and fire two through the new hole in the side of the car and see one go down. Leg hurts like hell, but no time for that now. Someone on the roof. I signal to Billy, cautioning to be slow and careful. He fires one and a second later one a meter back towards the sound. Most people instinctively back up when confronted with danger. We feel a thump as the body hits the roof. Two down. He is no longer an apprentice.

I see an arm reach into the car and fire two at it. Unfortunately this is not before they drop a blaster inside the car. Too close. The fuse is short and I am not fast any longer. Billy sees my concentration and rushes out to get the blaster off the car before it goes.

He almost makes it, losing a hand and most of his arm, probably his eyes too. Basically dog food. We don't get medical. I must have gotten the one who threw in the blaster as nothing else happens. I take a second to look down at my leg. It is half gone. A shotgun can do that. I have lost a lot of blood and am feeling weak.

Last thing I hear is the engineer yelling into the car to see if anyone is alive.

# Dama

Ellen comes running up to me, “We have missed Dama!”

“What is Dama?” Sounds like another language. I guess Mother is not past improvising.

“Once a year, all the women leave where ever they are and go to Dama. It is a time of cleansing and many rituals.” Ah huh. Once a year, at the same time they come into heat too. Interesting.

“What happens after Dama?”

“Some get new postings and we never see them again or at least not until next Dama and some come back to the same job for another year. It is actually pretty rare that we change jobs in the middle of the year, usually only for some discipline problem.”

“Transport is not working, we have to get to Cabayer.” This is one of the men.

“Tell me you two, in which direction from here is your ritual to take place?” They look confused and then slowly point without paying any attention to the other. Of course, they are pointing in the same direction.

“I could be wrong. We traveled far and I might be disoriented. Usually the transport comes and we get on. Never paid much attention before.”

Marty comes up, “The men are all saying something about Cabayer and needing to get there.”

“Yes, I have just been informed myself. The ladies all have to go to Dama and it is apparently in the same general direction. I think it is time we went on another little field trip.”

“You sure you want to do this? We are comfortable here and no harm in waiting.” He seems uneasy about this.

“Do you know something that I don't know?”

“No, but I have an active imagination and don't trust Mother after what I have already seen.”

“Nor do I, but I think it is important for them to understand the truth.” I hope that dispelling ignorance is the right answer. I really hope so.

“Well, it is too late today to do much more than pack, but that gives us plenty to do. It would be wise to keep the pace slow, so as not to upset the little ones.” I glance over at Ellen instinctively. Everything looks fine so far, but it is still very early.

## Morning

I actually slept for a few hours. Not much compared to a non-TK, but I must have been really tired to have done so. I am on breakfast crew, so get myself out while most are still sleeping. We are going to keep it simple today, as we want to make a good start. Marty and his men have taught us some easy, in my mind lazy, ways of making a barely edible meal. It will have to serve. Seventy three people to feed still takes some doing. We have a crew of six, four cooks and two washers. I am a washer today. Crys and her counter part Rigger are always on cooking duty. We did want to survive the experience after all. Marty made some soap for us at least. We had run out while on the run and the alphas made such a mess that it took most of what we had left here to clean up.

Washers got to eat first, so we could be ready to receive everything as it came in. Breakfast was a flat bread they called round rations. This time it had lots of cow and or puppy in it though. I had to take a moment to make sure all the viruses were dead. Cooking usually did the job, but it was easier to prevent catching it than to cure it after wards. It was the sauce this time that was most suspect. It is definitely going to take time to get used to eating insect soup. Yuck! Of course I had probably been eating some variation on this for some time, just didn't know it. Sometimes ignorance is best.

We traveled light as we only expected to be gone a few days. Marty agreed to make food this one time if we got into trouble. We followed the road that the transport would have taken had it been here. Only those ladies who have been here a number of years in a row were allowed to comment on direction. Otherwise I am sure we would be going around in circles in no time. Still, it took us a day and a half. It was towards late afternoon that we started to smell the most awful smell.

“Smells like something died. Something bad.” Marty was not commenting. Great. I know he could scan further than I could. He probably already knew what was up.

“We need to make masks if we are to go any further.” Ellen again. She really was the leader, if the rest would only see it.

“Rest here and see if we can improvise some sort of mask. We can wet it too if necessary.” While they are figuring this out I run my own scan in the direction we are headed. There is a cluster of buildings ahead. Most of it is enclosed, but some are open on top. Courtyards of some kind. There is no sound at all. At least there are no alphas. I start to scan the interiors of the buildings and courtyards. There are these weird shapes all over. All different sizes. A lot of insect life. Even here we are starting to swat more of them as they get into our faces and such.

Marty is looking at me when I finally figure it out. I collapse onto the ground. He moves to sit near me. “Are you sure you want them to see

this?"

I hesitate and then nod yes, "It is their right to know."

"Right to know what? Can't we do something more about the smell?"

"It is going to get worse before it gets better Lyn. We need to go into those buildings over there." I point in the direction that I have scanned. "Get everyone together, the sooner we get in the sooner we can leave. It will only take a moment."

They are gathered into a loose group. "We are going in. It is not pretty, but it is important. You don't have to stay any longer than you can. Let's go." We start at a fast walk.

"Marty, if you will get the locks please." He nods, but he is still not happy about it.

At the door I hesitate, "What you are about to see is all over the complex. So, we don't need to see every area and room. Just follow me in, look around, get the idea, and then leave. Let the next group in. Got it?" They nod, holding their noses at the same time. Eyes are starting to water even. "Once you leave, get well away. We will all meet up where we had lunch." Eating is not going to be of interest for some time I am afraid.

It takes some time to channel us all in and out again, but they all figure it out. Most lose their lunch, myself included. I think Marty took care of his with TK, but he still looked green. We stayed the entire time. I finally cheated and filtered the smell some. I was afraid that I would pass out otherwise.

We slowly make it back to the meeting spot.

"Why?"

"First, does everyone understand what you saw?" There was not much doubt as close up as we were. Very few will even meet my eyes. "What we saw was that everyone was dead. Not that long ago either. They had enough food. There was still food in the storage areas."

"But those were the training areas. They were only little ones. Why?"

"There is more. Bellow ground are the creches, where the babies were incubated and cared for before they were ready to come up to the surface. Everyone is dead down there as well. Not as bad, as the insects did not have access to them. Above ground the trainers are dead as well. No one lived through this. We witnessed the female side, but on the other side of the complex was the male side. It is no different there." Actually amazing that they started out so close to each other and never knew it.

Marty speaks up, "Not everyone died the same way. In the upper rooms there were alphas. Looks like they died by strangulation. All but the last one that is. He used a knife on himself. Males and females were together. It appears that some were in on the secret."

“SO WHY?” Patrice is really upset by this.

“I don't know. They are too badly decomposed to tell any longer by me. Marty do you know?”

“I don't know for sure. The fact that the alphas killed themselves suggested that they were responsible for the other's deaths, or they were worried that the deaths would be blamed on them. They took the easy way out. The grinder being the hard way.”

“That was the next generation. Let me see, judging from the amount of decomposition, they could have died before the change of heart that Mother went through. If that was the case, she may have been cleaning house before moving. It would have been easier to take a small number of people than a large number. The old and the very young would have been an unnecessary burden.”

“Some of us are close to being too old, why were we kept then?”

“You were still healthy and could have been used to teach others and keep things going when others were pregnant or caring for young. Or even just to load the transports. That would suggest that she was abandoning the creche method of reproduction. She really did not need it. Between your yearly cycle, chemical birth control, and playing match maker, she could have maintained control without the overhead. It made sense while she was still working out the genetics to use the creches, but once she had all the types she wanted, she could go back to more conventional means.”

“That's really cold. To just kill people like that.”

“Ever seen an old person here? She has been using this method for some time.”

“So, why was it important they we all come here?”

“I wanted you to see what Mother was capable of, and still is capable of. I wanted you to see how she handled reproduction. Under her rule you were never given a choice about who you were mated with. There were no lifelong companions. Nothing really you could claim was under your decision making. Obey or die. Not much of a choice.

A lot of you are going to have children in the near future. You will need to feed them and take care of them. Because you have had so little experience, some will probably die, through accident or other means. I wanted you to truly understand what you were leaving behind.”

“We never had to worry about dead babies or dead anyone under Mother. All we had to worry about was ourselves. I am not totally convinced yet that we have made the right choice.”

“How old are you Sylvi?”

“Forty one.”

“That meant you could possibly be allowed to live another four years

under Mother. Without her, you are likely to reach seventy.”

Everyone falls silent.

“Not that there will not be problems. As you get older from here on out, life is not so easy. You will lose strength, vision, digestive problems. There is likely to be a certain amount of pain. We really don't know. You have been engineered to be almost free of disease. It is possible that you will not have heart disease, diabetes, arthritis or other problems. Who knows how long you will live and what comfort level that will be in. You could all live past a hundred even.”

“I would like to go home please.” General nods of agreement.

“Let's go. The trail should be easy enough with a little help. Marty I need a staff, if you will.” He smiles and nods. Two staffs are formed and he hands one to me. I make a glow globe on top. He follows suit. “These will help light the way. Let's go home.”



# Pluteus in orbit around New Earth

The last of the colonists is down below. Everyone, except for the TK5s and above, had to go through a complete immunity restructuring. Not fun, very painful, but otherwise the different plants and animals would eventually set off huge allergic reactions and kill them. We couldn't survive all stuffed in Pluteus forever, so we really had no choice. We were still cleaning up the stench from the livestock brought aboard. The Mars adapted plants and animals we left behind of course as they would not survive here. Not all that we brought of the earth stocks will survive here either. Sort of a last minute grab at what was left of humanity and our birth world.

“Gum Mao, where is Mei Ying?” She looks at me like she has no idea what I am talking about.

“Oh well. If I have to spend a lot of time looking for Mei Ying, I won't have time to give you a back rub. I am sure you will understand. I had better get going. See you around.”

I turn to walk away I suddenly find her at my leg rubbing it. Ah huh.

“First the information and then the back rub. You are not getting me twice. I remember last time.”

*What are you talking about? Trust Gum Mao.*

“Nope, info first.”

She tries rubbing against my leg again, this time purring. Not going to work.

*Fine. Observation. Back rub now.*

“Which observation area. You have told me nothing.” There are four of them. I hold out.

Front white paw. Her way of saying the forward right hand observation. They were not very good with left-right unless they could compare it to some part of themselves. I did not need to ask her, I knew already, but Mei Ying wanted us to ask Gum Mao whenever possible to get her used to helping out. I wish her luck. Breaking the stupid monkey habit was not easy.

“One problem with your answer. Is this in relation to your current position or to the ship's orientation?”

She gives me a very pissed look. I may have pushed it too far.

*Good back rub?*

“Yes. A good back rub.”

That way. She points her nose in the correct direction. Ship orientation this time. She likes to mix it up so people cannot be sure. They really enjoy this game. I squat down to give her the promised back

rub. I am not in a hurry. Things have slowed down since we came here. The entire Mars population of nearly two thousand norms and one hundred and eighty five TKs of varying levels are on the surface or here on Pluteus. New Earth was much nicer than Mars, so very few were upset about that aspect. Exception the higher gravity of course. Nearly twice Mars, but still less than Earth. Lots of trees, rivers, fish like creatures we could eat with our changed forms. Our own modified Earth crops grew here just fine. The 'thn said that something went wrong with the One Mind for this planet and a mistake killed the sentient life form. The One Mind here was over joyed to be able to work with us. No doubt. It would be a very long time before these "plant-fish" reached sentience. Maybe too long. No sun lasted forever. Which reminds me this One Mind is both plant/animal as it did not suffer the split ours did at the beginning. Plants moved here. Took some time to sort it all out.

Meanwhile my charge is purring and kneading the air in ecstasy. You had to time it right. One second too long and you were likely to get scratched or bit. Too little and all you heard was complaining. That should do it.

*More!*

"Next time don't play games with me and you get more."

*Stupid monkey!* I give her a gentle swat and she DSs out of the area. Not going to be easy. I DS myself to outside the observation area. Mei Ying is meditating inside. I can wait. A few minutes later I hear a, "Susan come on in. I can feel your mind breathing down my neck anyway."

"What has happened?"

"We may find out in 12.65 years. The huge array is working. Kind of weird. From here we can get a very good view of earth as she was nearly thirteen years ago. You should take a look when you get a chance."

"Doesn't it bother you we may be the only humans left alive?"

"We all knew when this whole thing started that it was not going to be life as it was. We are playing with the gods of the universe. We either keep one step ahead or suffer the consequences. Who knows how long New Earth will work out. Too many variables. We have been here over seven hundred years and on Mars for three hundred. As soon as we finish setting up here I am going back to Luna. If anything is left, we will take them to Mars. That was the original promise." We totally evacuated Mars to New Earth as a precaution. We just couldn't leave everyone behind. There are enough supplies left behind on Mars to get stuff going again, if the Luna City folk are alive and decide to expand.

"Why take the Mars people first?"

"Gravity. Mars is roughly half of New Earth, but Luna is one fourth. The Mars people will adapt faster. Luna can go to Mars for a year to

adapt before coming here if they want.”

“Will it even be safe to get that close? Will the moon even be there? Without the earth, how would the orbit behave? Would the 'thn be nice enough to take earth out when the moon was heading in the right direction.”

“It will be volunteers only. If Rhea gets back, it would sure help. This ship is too big to move easily without her, even without all the colonists and equipment, and three baby 'thn is really too much.” She smiles. Good to see someone smile.

“Hey, I am taking care of Pr'thn and Bart has Ly'thn. It is not like you have all three. Speaking of 'thn. I don't sense Br'thn and Daniel.” I pat Pr'thn in my pocket to reassure myself, though I would know instantly if she was not. Physical contact is still part of how I see the world I guess. Not sure I even want to give her back to Yingui. God, I hope everyone is alright.

“They went to the center. Daniel and Br'thn have a lot of friends there. Maybe they know how to help.” I nod. Can't hurt at this point. We have a tendency to not interfere directly in each other's affairs. At first a few did come out, but it was more a show than any actual action. I don't think that a bunch of aliens showing up on Mother's doorstep will impress her.

“Sign me up for the return trip.” She nods. I don't think there will be a single TK holdout.

# Miami Dungeon

I can't believe it. One moment Maria and I are on top of the world. We are in love and finally starting to make a difference in our lives. We were getting respect in our respective jobs. We were talking of getting married and trying to set up a place of our own. No more dorm or sleeping in my lab. Why didn't She help? It is those stupid wizards. Oh, how I wish they had never showed up. We were doing fine before they started interfering. Granted, the entire university would have been underwater, but we would not be rotting away in separate cells. Saints phooey! Me and my big mouth. I wish I could just die. Please Lord, just ick me and get it over with.

"Hey guy, why so low? We get food in a bit." Grizzel again. Only two teeth, long beard, skinny and old. We were both naked. That bothered me. Who was looking on my Maria right now? I have only been here three days, but my cell mate does not make the best of company. Boy does he stink. I can't ever remember being out of the university. This was not my vision of a change of venue. She showed me all the areas She had under her control. The wizards called her Mother. In a lot of ways that was what she was to me. An orphan myself, She was the first real family I had ever had. No contact here of course. I will never see my lab again. All that work, and now it is gone. She can take care of herself of course. I smile at the thought of the first person who tries to enter the chamber without approval. That will be good.

"Just stay on your side." I don't want to be any closer to him.

"Ah, you'll get used to it. A few more days and you won't notice any longer. You'll smell the same as me." He grins to rub it in. Please Lord, just do me in. I bury my head in my hands, but he is right. I am starting to stink as well.

"Tell me your story."

"What?"

"It helps. Don't understand it, but if you tell someone your story, you feel better. Worked for me anyway."

"In here? In Hell?" He just shrugs.

"So, what's your story?"

"Creating a public disturbance. I am trying to remember what year that was."

"They threw you in here for disturbing the peace?"

"For you they have a special torture chamber. When they think you are getting used to the smell that is." He can't keep a straight face though when he sees the horror on mine. "Naw they don't torture, just let you rot.

Almost the same thing really. In fact torture might be an improvement, would break up the monotony.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you want to tell. Start at the beginning. Where were you born, that sort of thing.”

“I’m an orphan, so no idea. My earliest memory is living in a dorm with other kids. Not having family meant the best we could ever hope for was some menial job somewhere. We were trained to clean, clean and clean. As soon as I was legal they started posting me. I was quiet and kept to myself. They soon learned that I could be trusted and did not need supervision. So many of my dorm mates thought that success was getting away with as much as you could. But, I hated confrontation and never wanted to take the risk. The worst part was taking abuse from everyone. I have been beaten up, spit on, urinated on and worse. A regular smiggle.”

“You’ll feel right at home here then.” We had no chamber pot, much less a toilet. At the university, we had full plumbing at least. Too far underground for anything else. Couldn’t have that much waste going up and down the stairs. I wonder how far underground we were here? They kept me in a dark box coming in. Like an animal in a cage.

“The food cart is coming. Assume the position.” He had this crazy idea that we were supposed to be on some imaginary spot on the ground or we would not get any food. He went hysterical if I didn’t, so I played along. The ground was filthy. There were no spots on the ground. I get to where I think it is. “Another two centimeters to the left.” I adjust my position. The empty bowls disappear and return with an amorphous goo inside. My favorite. Grizzel pushes past me and grabs his bowl and begins wolfing it down using his hands as spoons. Not really a choice. The problem is that it takes hours to remove the material from your hands. Disgusting really, but the only thing there is. I did not eat for an entire day before I tried it. Now I just eat and think of something else.

“All the nutrition you need, just not the taste. They want us alive, but they don’t care if we enjoy it.”

“Now were was I?”

“Smiggle was the term you used I believe.”

“I was posted at first to private homes. Not everyone was on the bottom. The amount of wealth I saw would surprise you. These homes had upwards of thirty people doing all the work. Women did the cleaning that I had been taught to do. I was expected to work in the garden or on minor repairs. We were not allowed to do anything important, we were considered too stupid. After I fixed some things that I was not supposed to touch, I was always dismissed. Gotten above my station. I thought I was helping out, but I was only upsetting the way things were done.

About three years ago, I was posted at the University. They gave me the rank of peon, as all the staff were made part of the security, on the account of the kinds of research done there. I was made to go around and check the moisture gauges. Nothing more. Just walk around continuously checking the gauges. The teasing began almost immediately. I was back to the lowest of the low. I had resigned myself to my fate when I stumbled on the chamber.”

“I don't understand. You imply that this was something that others did not know about. How could that be? Certainly the builders knew everything about the University.”

“The University was not built by us. It is old. hundreds if not a thousand years old. Just like most of the technology that we use. I did not know all this at the time of course. It was built by the people from before the plagues. They were far in advance of our own abilities. That was the reason this place, when it was discovered was chosen as a University.”

“With military applications.”

“Precisely. Anyway, it took me some time to figure out how to get into the chamber. When I did, there were all kinds of tech inside. None of it was working of course. So, I just played around. I am good at figuring things out. I managed to get some kind of system back up. It talked to me and told me how to fix other things. Soon I was using the skills She taught me to fix other things. I picked up pieces of equipment that were being discarded and was able to repair some of them. Especially if I mixed parts from several devices.

It was about that time that I started seeing Maria more and more. She was the google for the University and I needed to use the library to research the technologies that I was working on. I did not want to be totally dependent on the console for help. Then the console, with whom I had developed a relationship with, sort of a brother sister kind of thing, started to ask me for help. Actually, more a mother son or teacher student relationship. Anyway, She asked me to find out more information on the wizards. You know the legends and myths. Saint Suz and Raq sort of stuff. I did not believe in them myself of course. No one over the age of seven did, not even at the orphanage. Little did I know.

Anyway, after doing research with Maria's help, Maria followed me back one day. Curiosity got the better of her. She saw Her, or at least my interacting with Her. She then found out about Maria and invited Maria into our relationship. She gave us information on nutrition and other things that allowed me to get stronger and Maria to lose weight. She was so overweight as to never be marriageable. We both started to do better at our respective tasks as well. I started to attract the attention of people who needed equipment fixed. Eventually they let me set up a work area

near the chamber. They did not know about the chamber of course. Though it is likely they do now.

Then the first two showed up. The wizards. She told me they were dangerous, but the first encounter did not cause any trouble and after my refusing their offer to join them, they left. I thought that was the end of it. I was wrong.”

“You really believe these people were wizards?”

“Yeh, they moved objects and changed things right in front of us. Maria was there also. I am so sorry I got her into this mess.”

“You sure it was not a trick?”

“I thought so at first, but then one repaired an entire box of old dead capacitors with a thought. I tested them after they left and they were now the best capacitors in existence. Far better than spec. Oh they were real alright.

We knew about the storm for a few days. Com from the islands told us it was headed our way. We had too many people and none of our structures was strong enough to withstand the forces. Several island populations were completely wiped out. We thought we were done for. Some would likely survive, but not all. I was immediately put back on leak patrol, but this time I considered it an honor, not a punishment. We would all die if the water broke through.”

“Then the Saints returned just in time.”

“Yes, they had several times in our long history, but no one really believed the stories. I never saw the actual saints of course. I believe they were just another couple of wizards in costume this time. News filtered down, but I was more worried about my gauges. Some of them were beginning to show movement. We could be in trouble. One of the wizards, one by the name of Ron, appeared out of nowhere and offered to help. I was not going to stop the water myself. The best I could do was warn others. But with the storm nearly upon us, there really was no other place to go. I was sure that was going to be my last day alive.

The wizard Ron could scan through walls and warn of leaks that were starting to appear that I could not see. I did not believe him at first, but every time we opened a room to investigate he was correct. He fixed what he could, but it soon got to be more than he could handle alone. He did not abandon me though. Even when the water was ankle high and rising, he stayed with me. I was worried about the chamber and was clearly distracted when the rest of them arrived. They talked for a bit and then concentrated facing in different directions. They were working together to fix the leaks and remove the water. They saved us all. It was later that I learned of the dome covering the entire population gathered near the University for safety.”

“Well, that does not explain why you are here though. Sounds like you should be hailed as a hero, not a criminal.”

“There is more to the story. They took me to Maria while they finished fixing the walls and such. There were others in the library. They kept going on and on about the saints. The wizards had admitted to me that they were just humans with special gifts, could be killed even. Some of them had died, so they knew it was possible. The discussion about the saints kept going on and on. Finally I could not take it any longer and told them what I knew about them. I was laughed at of course. A few of them said I was totally wrong. The Saints were at least a thousand years old, they could not die. They were not human at all, but rather angels in human form. I thought that was the end of it. I wasn't a hero, just the laughing stock that I had always been. Never mind that I had probably helped nearly everyone in that room at one time or another. They would only remember me as the one who did not believe in the saints that the rest of them did.”

“Still, being placed here is harsh. You certainly did a lot less than I did.”

Sigh, “There is more to the story. Two of those that left the room apparently went to the saints and shot them. To prove they were immortal and could not die. The two were kneeling at the altar and were shot in the back. They never even saw it coming. When the two murderers were confronted, they told what I had said. I was found and arrested as a co-conspirator. Maria refused to do as she was told, which was to quit the library and be married to some higher up's nephew, and so shares my fate. I love her for standing up for me, but I wish she hadn't. I don't know your story, but I doubt that you did anything bad enough to warrant being here either. We are just pawns of the powerful. I don't know what happened to the two who actually did the deed, but I doubt they are here. The weak are blamed, not the powerful.

But mostly I blame those interfering wizards. If they hadn't shown up everything would be different. I wish they had never had existed.”

“Interesting, and just how would you do things if the roles were reversed? I would imagine it is not easy being in charge of everything.”

“You taking their side?” I am aghast.

“Do I look one of the rich and powerful?”

“No, sorry.”

“Just that they were faced with trying to save all those people in a way that your people would accept. Did they ever threaten you or hurt you or Maria in any way.”

“No, never.”

“Did they ever claim to be saints to anyone? Did they tell you to tell



everyone that they were not saints?”

“No, in fact they told us not to say anything. That the others would not understand.”

“They were in fact right then? So, I don't understand why you are blaming them for your own choices. If you had kept your mouth shut, you would not be here.”

“True.” I could not blame this on anyone but myself. Oh God, please just do it. Now!

“How would you and Maria like to get out of here?”

“Wait a minute, first you convince me I am slime and now you tease me with stupid talk of a way out. Now you are going to tell me you are some kind of wizard come to rescue me. I am sorry, but you don't look the part. Where is your robe and staff? Not to mention your teeth. You did not see them, but they all had perfect teeth. Never seen that before.”

“I know a way out, but there is a price. How much do you love Maria?” I must have given him the right look. He smiled, boy was that an ugly sight. “Enough to forever give up the idea of being with her in an intimate way?” He was serious. What could this ugly mess do? I nodded slowly. If it meant getting Maria out.

“I could accept never seeing her again, just to know she was okay would be enough.”

“Oh, you could be with her, just never have sexual intimacy again.” We had gotten pretty hot in that area. We were careful, never doing THE thing. Last thing we needed was for her to get pregnant before we were married. Good thing Maria looked it all up, as I certainly did not know what was going on. I nodded again. That would not be easy though. We did enjoy each other's company, even in that way.

“Say it.”

“In exchange for her freedom, I hereby give up the idea of ever being with her ah, romantically.” Now what was he going to do.

“Nice story. Tomorrow I will tell you something about myself. Think I will go to sleep now.”

That was sudden, but then I was in a cell with a crazy person. Oh well, it was a nice thought. I dreamed of many things that night, of flying and carrying on like a wizard. They had gotten to me more than I thought. I was the one to blame not them. There were just trying to help. Maybe.

# Mill Town

“We are gathered here today to mourn the passing of two who gave their lives so that others could eat. Two of our own. Jo was an old timer, close to retirement. That did not slow him down or cause him to slack off his duty. Billy was a youngin, a newbie, waiting for his first kill. He got that before they got him and so honor him as a journeyman. We found his bullet in one of the hijackers. All the hijackers were killed and the shipment was saved. No higher honor can a trainman give to their craft. Let us observe a moment of silence.”

A brief pause.

“We got work to do. That last shipment has been milled and we need to get it loaded on the barge. No slacking. The load has to make Gold Mountain before morning to get prime rate. The boss will not be pleased if we fail.”

Me, I captain the barge, but that does not get me out of helping. We are a team, as they remind us constantly. Besides I want the bonus. Not going to be easy, the swell is up. Not the worst I have seen, but still, it does slow you down. They get real upset if you lose the shipment. Worse than getting there late. I take my position on board, directing where to place each sack as it comes up the ramp. I get down and reposition a few. Going to be fog this morning too. Great.

Just as they reach the end of the load I give them the bad news, “Tarps, fog is coming.” A moan goes through the guys. The tarps are heavy and awkward. I don't call for them lightly, but ruined rice will not help us either. With the fog and the swell, we are likely to see water. When they finally push us off the dock a cheer rises. I bet they are glad to see this one leave. A lot of back breaking work.

They won't get much rest though. The return trip will be 'fertilizer'. Because it is dried it does not weigh much and smell is minimal. No danger of it being hijacked at least. A death took us all hard. Two was not normal. Everyone would be edgy for some time. We did the best we could to discourage the hijackers. Those five that tried this time will be hanging from trees near the tracks where they made their attempt. Didn't matter they were already dead. Their rotting corpses reminded those who thought about it and told them it was not worth it.

Not that I was immune. Hungry people do desperate things. This barge had rusty spikes all along it's edge and two boatmen fore and aft. Not that many who could take us on, but barges were more expensive than rice, we could not afford to lose either. This old boat has seen better days. Would not be too much longer before she was stripped and sunk to

help somewhere against the rising tides. I had my own son along as second. Eighteen, knew everything and still wet behind the ears, had plans to be a real sea captain, but he will likely take my job when I go. My wife and his mother died in child birth. I never remarried. Not too many could handle being the wife of a bargeman. We worked seven days a week. Only rarely got a day off. Usually when there was nothing to haul. And of course, always seemed you were on the wrong side of the bay when it happened.

We pass Chimera Island to see the wall of fog ahead of us. Chimera Island was a permanent monument to the people who gave their lives for our freedom. Almost everyone had both Chin and Mex blood in them. It got to the point where the pure bloods were less than one percent of the population. The revolution was not pretty. They never are. A lot of pent up hate to repay for the centuries of injustice. The old Chinese characters were banned for a long time. Only now used again, mostly as brand names or family marks. Like Mr. Lee's rice. Not all the rice that bore his mark was grown on the Lee farm, just the best that we could offer. Everything else bore the Mill brand. Don't ask me what any of the marks used to stand for. Doubt anyone here knew that. I could read and write, as could my son, but we all just knew Standard. None of the old stuff. Leave it for the scholars.

“Fog looks bad.”

“Give her three blasts then one.” Jue complies. We are assigned a different code each trip to try and confuse those who did not need to know. Deep in the fog, no one can come to your aid. We have a locator on board, so we would not get lost or end up on a submerged wreck, but not everything floating out there had one. Lots of small fishing boats still. There was talk of limiting the number, but lack of fish was doing a good job of that on its own.

The population of Gold Mountain must be near ten thousand by now. Nearly doubled in my life time. Some recent excavations have uncovered a city underneath. They say that a lot more people once lived here. Hard to believe. With all the fog, you couldn't really grow much. That was why we existed, to bring in food for those who couldn't grow their own. Oh they talked about doing a huge bridge, but they would never raise the money for a project that large. The tides were expected to raise the water level another few meters this century too. Global warming causing the glaciers to melt. Bad Chi.

I look to our altar with pictures of my parents, my wife and her parents, and say a little prayer. It is getting even colder because of the fog. “Jue, take the wheel, I am going to take blankets to the guns.” He nods with excitement. He loves to steer and be in control. No doubt

fantasizing about the big schooner again. Hard to make a rice and fertilizer barge caught in the fog into anything romantic, but the young always managed. It was not like I didn't have the same dreams when I was his age.

I grab some extra blankets and make my way to the bow. An appreciative gun thanks me for the warmth with a mouthed thank you. We kept silent outside the cabin. Sound traveled far in the fog and we did not want to give away what we were. The engine already told anyone close enough something was here. I make my way to the stern with the last blanket. I can hear another boat out there then silence. Not a good sign. Gun is not facing me, so I can signal nothing. I drop to the deck as a precaution when a shot rings out, splintering the deck where I was going to be if I had kept my pace. Lucky shot, they can't see any better than we can. Jue hears it, guns the engines, turns the barge hard of port, and then cuts them to silent mode. Very slow, but we are still moving. Not going to make time, but survival of us, the barge and the shipment takes precedence now. I can only feel the barest rumble from my hands on the deck. Hope it is quiet enough to hide us. The stern gun is flat on the deck too, looking out over the water. We continue this way for half an hour to be sure. Electrics won't hold out much longer without a recharge. I make my way back to the cabin to relieve Jue as we near the docks and start the diesel again. Runs on soy oil, with the exhaust smelling like a restaurant. Reminds me we haven't eaten anything the entire trip. All that rice and we are hungry.

# Techs

Raul comes running up, "Marty, people coming up the south road."

"Alphas or betas?" Please no more alphas.

"No blue cocks. But they don't look like us either."

"Call out the others. Let's meet them in numbers, but nothing hostile looking. I want them to know we are not a push over, but that they are welcome as well."

"How about food?"

"Great idea! Go to Crys first and let her know. How many are there?"

"Only about fifteen or so." I motion for him to go. I had sensed them of course, but both Cilan and I thought it best if they get used to doing their own scouting. If these were alphas and no one had raised an alarm we would have, but these are clearly betas even if they are ones we have not encountered before.

I go to find Cilan. She has been hanging out with Ellen a lot in the pottery area. By comparing the good pots with the failures she is hoping to help make things more predictable. There is the temptation to just do it for them, but what happens after we are gone or when there are too many of them. No idea what Mother is up to. We still have our abilities, so we are alive. Have not heard a word from the other TKs. Are they okay? Are we the only ones left? Even as a TK5, this could end up eating up my stomach.

Yep, there she is bending down over some shards talking with Ellen. Glad women like Ellen did not exist in my life before the change. Too distracting, though not very practical. Still, she does a lot around here in spite of her, ah, shape.

"Hey, people coming. Raul is gathering us to meet them. Crys will be preparing some food. If you can spare a few moments it would be nice for us to be there as well." Meaning Cilan, though Ellen was welcome too of course.

"Which way and how many?"

"South road, maybe fifteen."

"We can all stop by the kitchen on the way. Looks better if we have food in hand."

By the time we get there, there is a line of people lining up to be handed bowls and a baskets. "There are enough people helping. Let's get to the road. Fifteen can travel much faster then seventy."

"Did Raul say who they were?"

"Not alphas, but otherwise he didn't know. Maybe something new. There are beta forms we have not met yet." Cilan nods, she has picked

them up too.

We make our way to the south road coming into the center. There are only the south and northeast roads, so it was not that big a deal. Not too many would come through the forest trail, but we have the garden workers covering that way, just in case. The fear is alphas of course. We pulled it off the last time. No guarantees we could again. We have seen no trace of them since our last encounter, so maybe, just maybe they are following Mother's orders now and all have headed south. Of course, if there were alphas far north of us, they might still be on their way. okay, okay, I have to get off this subject.

"I don't see anyone."

"I hope we did not scare them off. If they have had experiences with alphas, they might not try a direct approach on a new center. Ah, here come the food carriers. Good."

"Let's all sit down here in a half circle. Lay down the blankets here and place the food on the blankets." Good idea. Being TK did not mean you were smart, just lucky.

We wait. I know they are hiding in the trees, so it is easier for me. Good that the rest learn though.

The weather is definitely getting cooler. Did not seem to bother the locals, but Cilan and I had to switch to heavier robes. Before too long we would be performing the TK heat trick. I was told it still snowed a lot this far north.

A face peeks out from behind a tree. Cilan motions to the person to come and shouts, "It is okay, come on out. We have food. Fresh greens, roast cow. Enough for all of you."

The face disappears for a moment and then the entire person comes out. A small woman, not much bigger than a child, wearing olive drab colors in a sort of camouflage way. I won't use the old term, we are trying to distance ourselves from the labels. She walks slowly up the center of the road, watching both sides as she proceeds. Must have lost the toss this morning. No one wants to be the first. Just as she gets closer, Samuel and Alena come walking up rather quickly. The woman quickly darts into the brush again.

Samuel whispers to us, "Sorry." and sits down with Alena. Alena being the most recent recruit decides that she will be the new ambassador and gets up and goes part way down the road. She issues a series of strange calls. Not something I have heard before. She sits down in the road with her hands held high and palm up, and head down. All fifteen appear at once and come out to greet her. They seem to know her. They are all dressed like the first one we saw, more or less. Alena gets up and grabs the hand of the small one we saw first to bring her to us.

Ellen and Patrice get up on our side and walk slowly towards the two. They exchange some words I can't make out. The small one waves the others forward.

Alena starts, "Betas of central, I would like you to meet what is left of the others I used to work with. Please feel no threat and be open to embrace." Alena has a strange way of phrasing things at times, but we get the idea. We stand slowly with smiles on our faces and hold out food to the ones who have arrived.

They are all women. Not totally unexpected. Things are going great till we hear a signal, a sharp high whistle. The fifteen immediately drop everything and are suddenly outside our group looking back at us afraid.

"What happened?"

"It is my fault," Alena says, "I told them there were males among us." That's what I get for not having a beard. She goes out to them with my hand in tow this time. I don't know why she did not pick Samuel. Samuel does not seem offended though. I go with her. When we reach the others they are all ready to run if necessary.

"None of the males are a threat. Really." She lifts my robe to the usual looks of awe and wonder and then snickers. One even touches me to see if it is real. I suffer the indignity in the interests of peace. To think that being small would ever be a virtue.

"Are all your males this way?" Alena nods. "Are both the diggers male?" They being the largest, would present the biggest threat.

"No, the larger one, Dyan is a male and Gryk is a female." We hear a series of pops and whistles and then the small one in front of us answers in the same way with amazing ability. Did not know a normal human mouth could make those sounds.

She notices me watching her. "My name is Rox. I am a trans." I guess that means translator. I nod, and close my mouth. Cilan has walked up to us along with Samuel. Samuel assumes a position near Alena. Cilan touches my arm and motions me to look at Rox's arm. There is a nasty scar there. Not too old, maybe a month at best.

"You removed your trackers." Rox nods.

"I am surprised you know of them and yet you have not removed yours."

"We have, we just have other means. If you will allow me a moments touch." She nods suspiciously. I touch the scar and use TK to make it match the rest of her arm. This does not seem to bother her at all.

She turns to the rest of her group, "We have arrived. He is a TK5 at least." The rest suddenly relax and smile. "How many are here?" How does she know about 5s when Mother only knows of 4s?

"Cilan and I are the only TKs. We have thirty five beta females and

thirty four beta males and one adapted alpha male.” This last concerns her.

“Who is the alpha?” Samuel steps forward and drops his cloth. She nods in approval and he replaces it. She addresses him, “You were the lowest one in your pod?” He nods. “You made the right choice. Welcome.” He smiles. Not even a mention of my fine handy work. Thanks a lot.

“How much food do you have?”

“Before you arrived we figured we had enough to last though winter, barely. Now it will be tight.”

“How are you storing it?”

Ellen answers, “We have made sealed clay pots for the dry materials and seeds and have cows growing in the male dorms.” She laughs at the latter.

“You did good. Who figured out food would be needed?”

“I did Rox. I had help from Mother to come up with the means though.”

“Before or after the change?” So many questions.

“After the first and before the second.” Rox smiles. We are being tested!

“You are with me. We have much to relate to you.” And the rest of us? Ellen does not move.

Patrice comes up, “We do not have a leader, nor do we want one. You are free to a meal and lodging for the night, but any attempt to take over will be met with resistance.” She is not as dumb as she looks either. Pheromones?

“A drill. Class one or two?”

Patrice smiles, “Three.” She could rip Rox to shreds easily, but I bet Rox could outsmart her in a millisecond.

Rox looks over the rest of us and then turns to her group. More chips and whistles. I see Ellen concentrating intently. Rox turns back to us, “We will camp out here tonight. In the morning we will either be gone, or we will tell you our story.” She then turns and the rest go with her. I would imagine they have been hardened by circumstances. Removing those trackers without anesthetic took guts. Or extreme fear.

After they are out of sight, Ellen comes up to Cilan and I. “They are part of some special project. I could make out some of what they were talking about. It is still normal, just said through a whistle instead of talking. Easy once you understand.” We turn to Alena, but she and Samuel are already heading back to the main building. “She knows.” That is obvious. Alena has not said anything about her past. We all had things we would rather not share, but it was more than that. Something



about it not being safe for us to know. How has that changed or has it changed? We gather up the food they did not touch and bring it back in.

“It will be getting dark soon. Weather looks like it might turn also. Let's get stuff under cover at least.”

It did storm that night. Thunder and lightning even. We were safe enough inside, I hope they are okay out there. They are together and they have a fire going. Some kind of lean to set up also. They know what they are doing at least. If the rain keeps up they will want better shelter to avoid the runoff. Ah what the heck. They have been coming across as so superior. I make a barrier around their encampment high enough to divert any water around them. I also fill in the lean to so that it is more water tight. Nothing really obvious and I keep it quiet.

## **Morning**

The rain has stopped, but everything is still very wet. Cilan is complaining that the fire went out in the kiln. They will have to clean out the entire thing and rebuild it. Nearly all the pots in it are broken. The rest show stress and are likely no good either. Oh well. Everyone is going to get muddy today.

Well nearly everyone. The fifteen come marching in, in a sort of formation. Even the alphas did not do that. Wonder where they learned this idea? They are wearing boots, high top ones. Muddy, but they do keep the feet dry. Someone motions them to sit.

I am on serving duty today, so the other five and I come out with platters loaded with a sort of flat bread. We really did not have flour, so had to make do with a sort of pancake made from ground corn and bean paste. No one here was used to sweets, so a roast cow sauce gravy was poured on top. I fill the bowls of three of the new comers and several of the regulars before heading back in to get more. Always under the watchful eye of Rox. She is clearly the leader, not just the one picked for point.

I go back and forth a few more times, lastly to pick up empty bowls. It will take a few minutes before the kitchen crew for today is finished rinsing the bowls. They have already taken care of the pots and such. I am still making soap. There were limits to what I was willing to put up with long term.

Rox comes up to me, “How good are you at tech?”

“Depends on what you mean. I would not try and debug someone else's code.”

“How about duplicating stuff?” Ah, TK only sorts of things. I nod to respond. She leaves me. They are up to something. Something they want

us for. Wonder if they have asked Cilan the same thing.

I go over to Cilan, "Are you ready to do your thing?"

"Let's give them a chance to come clean on their own. It really is prying without permission otherwise." Do not steal. Same as with the TP capable really.

Everyone from the kitchen comes out. Patrice signals that everyone is here. We all sit.

Alena comes over quietly and sits near Cilan and I. One of the new group people that I don't know yet stands and comes into the center of the circle of benches.

"My name is Nyomi. I will relate to your our tale. First I will ask the TKs. Are there any working electronic devices in this area?"

She is looking at me, but Cilan stands and answers, "Not within 1 kilometer. That should be enough to insure privacy."

"You are wrong on both counts." What? We are about fifteen kilometers from an Armstrong unit, maybe even the one Mother is in, but all the rest of the nodes and electrical materials have been silent for some time.

She pulls a device out of her pocket. I try to scan it, but it does not register. Strange. She looks directly at me again. "It is possible to make devices that are hidden from TK."

Cilan, already standing, walks up to Nyomi, "May I see this device?" As Nyomi hands the device to Cilan. Cilan smiles and turns to me. Her talent works on things as well as people. "Different frequency. Try thinking in different colors till you find one that works." Different colors? I try visualizing in red. It helps, but only a little. Green it disappears again. Blue, it suddenly comes into sharp focus. I find the off switch and turn off whatever is cloaking it. Now it scans very easily. I can see deep into its, shit, psiotics!

I stand facing away from the group and close my eyes. I scan in the blue for other devices. They are all over. Laid out in a grid all around us. Every ten meters about a meter below us. Far enough down that they were unlikely to be disturbed by even the normal activity in the garden. There are ones there two meters down even. Someone thought ahead. I turn to face Nyomi, "Do you wish me to disable them?"

"No. Mother would know instantly and likely investigate so many in one location failing all at the same time. They are only sensors to determine where people are. Only they are dependent on the people having trackers. We are all safe. To Mother there is no one here. Only animals. She can sense vibrations as well."

"What about infrared? She would sense all our fires and possibly our bodies. No warm blooded insects. Or TKs?"

“These sensors were set up before she had those concerns. They were only intended to keep track of us.”

“Not completely,” I answer. Cilan smiles. “They are part of the array as well. Otherwise she would not need to hide them from TKs. How come they don't sense TKs?”

“She would have to activate them to do so and so far she is afraid to do so.”

Cilan hands the device back and we both sit.

“I only did this to show you that TKs can be fooled also. We play a very dangerous game. To have the knowledge we have is likely a death sentence.” She looks at Alena when she says that. “The fact that you have already removed your trackers means that you are already dead if Mother finds out. Tell me, have you had any encounters with alphas since the second change?”

Ellen rises, “One. A group formerly headed by an alpha by the name of Adonis about a month and half ago.” She sits.

“Did Adonis have any tech?”

Patrice answers without rising, “A compad for a few seconds.” She smiles wryly and the rest of the group giggles. Nyomi looks at us, but does not question us.

“Since you are already dead and can never return, you might as well know the rest of the story. That way, when we are all killed, you will know why.” Such an optimist.

“Alena, please join us.”

She gets up, “Don't worry. I will be okay.”

“Alena was one of the last to get out and survive. The rest of us escaped a few minutes before Alena's group did. No one else with Alena survived. She tripped at a critical moment and ended up behind a metal drum just as a missile hit near her. Mother probably thought she was dead. Our guess is that her tracker was damaged somehow at the same time.

We were all a part of an elite group of betas. It was thought that alphas and Mother ran things. That was not the case. At least not until recently when Mother reasserted control. Not even our own group realized how much this was true until we all got together and talked. We worked in cells isolated from each other so no one group would know everything. The grinder, done slowly, breaks most.” She lets that sink in.

“We worked on the DS drive project. It has been completed. Only we left out an essential component.” She holds up the device again.

“When we realized that she had reasserted nasty control we engineered the escape to remove the device from the DS unit. We know she was playing the TKs for time in hopes of trapping a few to learn more

from.”

I stand, “She did hold two temporarily, but she thought they were only TK4. I have two questions, how do you know about those above TK4 and what caused the two changes?”

“The first change was us. A slight of hand and some gradual programming changes. It was fortunate that the Caretaker came along at just the right time to sway her in the right direction too. We might not have succeeded otherwise. There was always hope that Mother could be made to realize the mistakes that she had made and have her return to her original role, that of helper, not controller. We don't know what caused the second change. We lost most of our group when that happened. She was ruthless with whomever she felt was part of the plot.”

Alena whispers to us, “She is telling the truth.”

“As to the TKs. We had tech that Mother did not know about. Psiotics adapted from what we learned from her and from what was hidden from her before the plague. That knowledge was never entered into any database for just that reason. All the notes were hand written. A small group of betas happened on it by accident while cleaning up. It did not take them long to realize the truth and plot our eventual path to this point.

What you see before you may look ordinary physically, but we were all mentally enhanced without Mother's knowledge, over many, many generations. We worked with the more normal looking forms to better able to fit in without notice. We did not have the resources to work this way with all lines, though there is no reason the same methods could not be used on the other forms as well.

When the two you spoke of were captured, we were there. We are usually not seen by alphas and can hide in plain sight. We took readings on the two. They are both TK8 if we are not mistaken.” Cilan and I nod they are correct. I have to remember to keep my mouth closed when this happens. Being surprised that is.

“How did you keep all this from Mother?”

“Mother only sees what her sensors tell her and betas did all the dirty work. She was totally dependent on us for repairs and fabrication. On the surface the alphas were in control, but they were even easier to fool than Mother. Very full of themselves.”

“Though, not without cost. Any one found out, faced the grinder. We usually managed to administer a narcotic before it was done, but not always. You will understand if we don't tell you everything, nor trust you.”

“Understandable. So, what do you want us for? You would not be telling us anything if you didn't want our help.”

“We will tell you what we want when we want.” Right.

“Not going to happen that way either. We have all been deceived or worse as well.”

A black cat with a white star marking on its forehead saunters into the discussion.

“What is that hideous thing?” Rox asks, taking a step backwards.

*Bad monkey, scratch eyes out?* Sootala looks up obviously ready and willing.

Ellen comes forward and picks up Sootala for which she is rewarded by much purring and one of them gets a nice back rub.

“To answer your question, that is a cat. A mammal with a bad attitude towards people they don't like. Can be dangerous if annoyed or not fed on time.” I did not tell her that she never traveled alone.

“No mammals can survive here. The virus will kill it soon enough.” She relaxes.

“She spent over a month here. How long does it normally take? And we have been here several months too. Even eaten cow and puppy many times.” I smile. Twenty four hours is the LD50 point.

“TKs are different.” She seems less sure now.

“Sootala is TK. That must explain it.” Let her digest that one. I turn to follow Ellen and the others back to our tasks. I am not amused by people who think they are superior, either mentally, physically or psiotically. Never met a TK that would act this rude.

Once back inside, Rhea is waiting. Cilan is already hugging her. I go up and give her a hug next, followed by Ellen with Sootala. Patrice and several others follow her.

“Well, you two have been busy I see. Who are the pests outside?”

“Some 'advanced' forms that worked on the DS project. They are being rude, so we decided to give them some thinking time.” She smiles. I was not always as enlightened as I am now. She could tell tales of me I would not want others to hear. Of course no secrets from Cilan, but she was the most forgiving person I had ever known. Guess when you see that much of everyone it sort of follows.

Speaking of which, she turns to Cilan. “No, I have not touched her yet. Nor Alena who has been with us longer. Do not steal applies to my talent as well as to TP.” Some obvious TP exchange goes on between them, Cilan blushes and then bows. “The device is the control circuit. Without very precise control, the whole things goes up like a million megaton bomb. Would take out most of the east coast and likely to cause some climatic changes in the rest of the world as a result.”

“It would appear that they need our help for their plan. They helped Mother through the first change, but don't know what triggered the

second. They have been hiding and trying to figure out what to do next. I get the impression that a significant number of their group are dead. They may be getting desperate.”

“And likely to do something rash rather than thoughtful. The DS ship would certainly destroy Mother effectively. They may think it worth it for their freedom. Well, I know more now as well. Mother has no plague bombs.”

“We could have told you that. Every insect in this place makes or stores the virus. And the alpha/betas get it by consumption.” She nods.

“All she had to do was DS anything from this place to another place and it is done. DS the more 'normal' looking things and people would never even suspect.”

“What? You mean they don't have cows and puppies where we come from?” I make a silly grin. She ignores me. What is the fun of being silly if she does not react? No fun at all.

“According to Rox, the DS ship will not launch without the device she is carrying and Mother cannot easily make another. Her network of 'humans' is a real mess right now. Starvation is likely soon. Oh, and you can't scan the device with normal TK scans. You have to think blue to see it.”

“That is interesting. You had to think blue to see Jason's stuff also. And Jason is down in Florida right now helping us on a special project. I am beginning to think he and his group have been up to more than we give them credit for. All this time I thought it was Mother that was the source of the 'thn nervousness. It might be a combination. Mother could not have done all this on her own.”

“No, and I have seen no sign of the Chinese influence past the initial plague. There are some similarities in the sequence and psiotic patterning to the work of Wei Feng in Sechwan province, circa 2100 A.D.”

“Very good Marty. You have an excellent memory for genetics.”

“No, I just read that part in the volumes I skimmed before coming here.”

“Don't forget the Dama centers. She has cut off reproducing us for the time being at least.”

“Here they come. Did not take them long to lose patience. Please, everyone be seated.” We all sit around her while Sootala weaves among us, getting lots of attention.

*Food?*

“Shhh!” Rhea is not amused by even her own cat.

As soon as Rox sees Rhea, she consults something on her arm. I scan. Another blue device, only much smaller. Just how much was hidden from us? I can guess what it is though. She taps the device several times

and looks at it again, then at Rhea and back to the device. Never met a nine before huh honey. Don't forget her staff either. Together that makes her a nine point three. She can't decide whether to leave, proceed or change her game.

Finally she bows and then calls her group together in the corner. Again the whistle talk, I am starting to get some of it though.

*Rhea, ask Ellen, she can understand more than we can.*

*Same as TP Marty. Not intended for our ears.*

Right. Sorry. I can see why I am still a five, sigh.

Sootala decides that being with us who love and worship her is not enough and in her quest for ever more subjects to rule she DSs right into the middle of the other group and lets out a friendly yeow! They must have jumped half a meter into the air.

“Get that beast away from us! I am warning you, we are armed and will not hesitate if it attacks.”

“I would not recommend that personally. She would win and it would be very messy. A lot of work for the rest of us to clean up.”

Regaining some of her composure, “We should help each other. We both want Mother brought down.”

“Not true. We want Mother to survive. Always have. We just want the rest of the planet to survive also.”

“You play a dangerous game then.” Rhea nods.

“You really expect to succeed?” Rhea shrugs. A nice vote of confidence.

“Do you see us as help or hindrance then?”

“You can be either or neither. Certainly you could upset Mother enough for her to do something unexpected or dangerous. So could we. Or you could share your information and work with us.” Not likely. Are they more afraid of Mother or us? I would guess all that anti-TK stuff affected them as well. Hard to share power with people you fear.

# Utah

“This is the last one Running Snake.”

“The Mormons finally melded with the Ute tribes through inter marriage and settlement. They have all gone back to the ways of the earth. This is nothing more than a mystery to them now. They will not notice that the core is gone. I am afraid that the supplies are gone already. They used them to keep things going for a long as possible and then later for decorations. Once they allowed the nuclear core to be dissolved, it was all over. Safer this way anyway.”

“Let's light globes and go into the supply area anyway. We can scan, but Mother can't.” I nod. Edwin would have loved traveling to all these units. He would have stayed on the surface of course and we would have had to beg him to put some lichen down so we could move on. Who would have guessed that lichens would be the one thing that would grow so well on New Earth and Mars. Mars sort of made sense. On New Earth it was more of a competition with the locals. We all started from the same basic DNA plan, but over billions of years there were a lot of changes. Not too surprising then that most stuff was mutually toxic or inedible at least.

We DS into the supply area. Even the doors are gone. Doors make great tables. Yingui slowly turns so Mother can see the entire space. It is a prayer in the way he does it. Yingui has grown. There are no enemies, only friends you don't know everything about yet. Daniel is still the diplomat, spending more time off earth than on. Ron and Susan are the teachers of the next generations of TKs, in tech and spirit respectively. Barb and James took to saving whales and wolves respectively, and poor Rachael still doesn't know what she wants and is still fun to be with. Yingui just takes each day as it comes, always delighted, always curious. Such are the Guardians.

“On to the core.” Mother is not going to be happy about this, but she has to see it. Actually it should not be that bad. Overall there are enough parts to keep her going for some time. If she ever learns to trust us, she can be in parts for eternity. We arrive outside. Yingui carefully opens the core door and steps inside. They have stripped this bare also. It is like they killed the mother unit that was here, carved her up and ate her for the projects they thought were more important than a potentially living being. Hmm..

“Mother were you aware when you were just an Armstrong Unit under the White House?”

“No, that came later. Consciousness is not just a collection of units



any more than you are because of your meat.” Point made.  
“We are through here. On to the Shrine of the Fifth Age.”

# Hotevilla

We walk the last several kilometers to the shrine. It just does not seem right to approach it quickly. The path is dusty, the sun is warm, but the wind is cold. First snow will not be too far away.

The shrine itself has been embellished over the years. Each TK who has been here has added something of themselves when they left. It does that to you. I come here every hundred years to renew my vows and understanding. It was not just the Europeans that Sauron betrayed. The outside has everything from rare jade carvings from China to intricately embossed 'thn shield patterns from the higher level TKs to simple wooden shapes with faded feathers and dusty beads left by tribal members. It is considered a great honor to be allowed to read the writings, even when there is no chance of being raised to TK7. No one would be bared who sought this knowledge. There is no one on guard. In all this time no one has done anything disrespectful. Probably the most sacred place on earth and yet it is the only artifact of the most horrible thing done to one species by another. Even the Galactic center representatives come here from time to time to learn. They leave thankful that it did not happen to them.

Some, upon hearing of One Mind wanted to create a second shrine, but I see her as totally different. She worked by influencing, never by outright interference. And even the most jaded upon hearing her tale have to admit, she is only doing what she was created to do. No different than any species really, even if she is the embodiment of us all.

Yingui starts his way around to the other side where the entrance is. I pause for a moment. A very old woman is sitting on top of the shrine laughing at me.

“You have certainly done a good job on this one Spider Woman.”

“Life is complex, you know that already.”

“What pattern do you weave this time?”

“The pattern will become obvious, be patient, for it has not yet finished.”

When I look up again she is gone. I proceed to the other side. Yingui is facing the entrance and waiting. I scan quickly so as not to disturb anything or anyone. There is a young lady inside. I think it may be Koo's mother. She has been coming this way for years now to study the old ways. She will be a great leader when she reaches her understanding. I give her another thirty years or so. There is a strange cat at the side of the entrance facing out, looking at Yingui. Young female, maybe two years old and TK. I don't remember seeing her at the village. This is good place

to pick up a human TK though. We all come here from time to time. She is patient, I give her that. She has not moved a muscle.

“Why are you not proceeding?” squawks the compad.

“Shh. We wait.” Yingui whispers back. We have no more right in the great shrine than anyone else. People are allowed to study in silence. And we being the longer lived always give precedence to the normals who wish to learn. I use this time to do silent prayer and meditation. Watching a beetle move something of interest to it across the path and down a hole, a few ants are following each other in a line up the wall of the shrine, and the winds catches some of the lighter additions and a soft tinkle of ceramics chiming is heard. After about twenty minutes she comes out, bows to us and makes her way down the hill. She may or may not recognize us, but no one ever says to anyone whom they have seen here. That would bring dishonor to those who choose not to come and elevate those who have without reason.

As we enter the shrine, the cat remains motionless outside. Maybe she is waiting for someone else. Inside our eyes adjust to the lower light levels. There is a clear roof, so plenty of diffuse light enters, enough to read by, except at night. At that time, solar power saved during the day lights globes placed throughout and along the path up to here.

We head to the wall of languages. Every language that can be recorded in written form is here. Most are long dead now, but are still present so as to pay respect to those who have come before us. We bow to the wall three times before advancing. Yingui goes to a dusty volume. No one has touched it in a very long time. He carefully pulls it from the wall and places it on a table before opening it. The Hopi – Merican dictionary, the language of Mother’s people. Some people complained that we used dictionaries instead of just doing translations in each language. The Hopi are gone, but using this method, everyone learns of them and their ways of thinking. A kind of immortality. We honor them in this way.

Not one of Mother's people has ever been here, but the book is here in case it happened. Though they bring the plague with them, accommodations would be made for them to be able to read the sacred texts. There are huts surrounding the shrine where individual learners can study the dictionaries and learn the Hopi language before reading the texts themselves.

I walk to the other side of the table. Yingui and I take turns flipping pages for Mother to scan. It only takes her a moment to make an image of each page so we proceed quickly. An hour later we are done. Yingui motions to me that another has arrived. We leave the hall and go outside. The cat is still at the door, facing out, and appears to ignore us. We

proceed a few tens of meters to give the old man some privacy. This will give Mother time to digest the images she has seen into words and meaning. In that way she will be able to read the texts in real time and not just have to store them away for later. Sometimes the pattern appears obvious. I thank Spider Woman for showing me this little piece.

We sit and watch the sun set over the southwest. There are clouds coming our way. Maybe rain this time. There is an eerie quiet in the transition from light to dark. The birds go to rest and the bats and other night creatures come out to feed. It is easy to tell the difference between a bat and a bird. No bird can fly at such sharp angles. The old man has fallen asleep inside. No matter we wait.

*He will be hungry and cold when he comes out. I will make a fire.  
I will make something to eat.*

When he awakes and stumbles out, he sees the fire and food warming. At first he is shaken. After all, this place is in the middle of nowhere. He gives thanks to Great Spirit and sits down to eat.

We quietly go in to finish our task. The important thing here is to remain silent. Normally a person would read the volumes alone. As that is not possible this time, we will try and remain as neutral as possible. This is explained to Mother as an admonition not to speak inside. It is amazing that, as one used to running things, she can live with this restriction. Will she be as nice when she no longer needs our help?

Learning a language is one thing, but applying it is another. When you learn a language, you also learn a people. Of all the tribes, the Hopi were the least enthralled by war. They did participate from time to time, but legends were not spawned of great battles won or lost. In their history, war was seen more as a mistake, something that should not have happened. There was always a story of pride, greed or jealousy behind every story told.

The perfect language to relate the tale of Sauron. The one, who sixty five million years ago, lost his people to his own ignorance and then sought revenge instead of understanding for the next sixty five million years. He eventually enslaved a race of primates, monkeys, “Stupid Monkeys” as the pop cats remind us daily, to attempt to reach his goal. Nearly succeeded. Would have except for those few and rare individuals, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Ghandi and many others seen and unseen, who influenced our cultures. So, when the time came to make a choice, the Guardians chose love over hate.

This choice has had consequences of course. History, post Guardian has been very different than pre. With the possible exception of Mother, who only has a few thousand individuals total, there are no empires. Well, at least for the moment. Whenever a bully arises, ways are found to

bring them down with subtlety. Direct confrontation would just make us the bullies, so ways are found to educate people. A bully has no more power than those around him, or rarely her, give them. The usual outcome is that the bully is overthrown. Sometimes it works perfectly and the bully is simply ignored. Very beautiful and poetic when that happens. A sign of a truly enlightened people.

It also means, with the exception of Jason's group and the off earth settlements, that technology is at about the early 19<sup>th</sup> century level. Reflecting a time when small groups of people could make all that they needed. We wanted to encourage cooperation without the side effect of domination. It was too easy for people to give up to a bully who destroyed both people and the environment. It will be interesting to see what will be made of the off earth settlements that are way too dependent on TKs to survive on their own. I am hoping that New Earth will follow the tribal ways and not the tech driven madness. At least the Guardians see that they eventually must leave even these areas to their own abilities. Weaning is as hard on the parents as the children.

When we emerge, the sun is rising from the south east and amazingly the cat is still there at the entrance facing out. As Yingui, who is ahead of me, passes her, I see him make a hand gesture and she follows him. Yingui has not had a pop cat for some time. This will be good for him. I am pleased. I hope that this is true though and not just a moment of weakness on his part because Pr'thn is not here. I really need to learn to stop worrying about my Guardian children.

# Miami

“When do I leave?” How is this old toothless man going to do anything?

“When ever you want, all you have to do is unlock the door and walk out.”

“Sure, right.” I go over and give the door a rattle to convince myself it is in fact still locked. It is.

“You did better than I did. Good for you. okay, our lessons begin.”

“What lessons? What are you talking about?”

“Wizard lessons of course. Only we call ourselves TKs.”

“Oh shit. Not you guys again! Haven’t you already made a mess of my life? Just leave me to rot in peace.” I sit down and cover my face with my filthy hands, but I don’t care any more. How could life get any worse? Please Lord, let the nightmare end!

“Hey, we said we would not abandon you.

And just for the record. Maria accepted too.

Really kind of sweet. Ah love. It also shows you have the kind of love that really matters.

Oh, well, time to get to work. No turning back now, a promise is a promise. I need you to concentrate on this pebble in front of you.”

“That is not a pebble and you know it.”

“Dried turd then. It will still work for our purposes.”

Mother warned me this might happen.

# Dock side, Gold Mountain

Finally! That barge took forever to get here. Boss is going to be furious. Not my fault he did not think ahead. Big group coming, need more rice, he says. Great, more work for me and the others. It will be a long day today. I am so tired. I just want to curl up somewhere and sleep.

There are many others ahead of me of course. The Blue Jade is not the best place on the row. Yeah, we are near the bottom. The place has seen better days. There is much that needs repairing. People don't come to us the way they used to. No one likes the old style of cooking any longer. But boss keeps insisting that things will turn around. Just wait. Not in my life time it won't. I had better get off my butt.

Being small has some advantages, as I squeeze myself between the others to get near the front. They are unloading the house brand now. This is what we usually get, but I remain silent. These are special guests.

"Hey weasel, aren't you going to get your rice?" The others laugh. The big places can afford the best. It is no wonder their food tastes better. Not that what we serve is inedible, but it could be better. I remain silent and wait. I am nervous. This is not routine and I hate changes in routine.

Finally they begin to unload the Lee brand rice. I step forward only to be knocked back by the others. "You had your chance weasel. Maybe more black rice will be here tomorrow."

Frustrated I shout, "I have two gold marms for a bag of the Lee brand." That is at least twice the going rate. Everything stops. The others stand silent looking at me. The foreman comes up.

"Let me see them then." The others are smiling now. The joke is on them though. I don't know where boss got this money, but I slowly remove the two precious coins from my hidden pouch. Not so hidden now, but these are not the ones I have to worry about. First and last time I will ever see something like these coins. They look brand new, never been touched. I hand the coins over. I sigh relief. If something had happened to those coins... The foreman is suspicious. I would be. He holds an instrument up to the coins. There is a pause. Silence. "Good!" The others have their mouths open now. A worker comes up to me with the bag of rice. "Bandon, go with wea.. ah, Tom here, to the Blue Jade and then come right back." That has never happened before. Nobody else wants the house brand. Most of it ends up being sold later to the slop houses, so I never have anything to worry about usually. I bow to Mr. Kung to show my appreciation for the help. One bag of rice is not going to affect much in the scheme of things, but it means a lot to us. The others ignore me now and go about getting their own bags loaded and out of

here.

Bandon is huge and offers to take the rice without help. It would have been hard for us handle it together anyway. I can't believe I don't have to carry the twenty kilo bag myself, but I am not complaining.

"Don't worry Tom, it was worth it just to see the looks on the other's faces. You did good. I will remember this for a long time." He is still smiling. It was good. Would have been better if I was not so nervous as to have missed most of it. But it was good. I walk a little taller going back. When we get to the entrance we are met with the anxious cook. When he sees the size of Bandon he says nothing. Bandon carries the rice into the kitchen. We all bow to him in thanks and he bows back.

As soon as Bandon is out of sight however, I receive a slap on the face. "What took you so long?" The spell broken, I mutter about the barge, but his attention is already on the rice being pored into the huge rice pot to be washed. I get the mop and begin washing down the floors of the eating area. It has to look good boss says. Whatever.



# Luna City

“Captain, I want that report on my desk at 1400 hours.”

“Yes sir, Commander Washboard!” I looked up his name in an old database. They thought they were so high tone using fancy old English names instead of Standard. They could have at least found out what they meant first. I did not say anything though. I had a dentist whose name translated to goat's leg. If that is what it means to be one of the council, I want no part of it. Everyone is getting so as to be putting on airs. I heard that when Luna City was first settled it was far different. They didn't have TK help. Only a thousandth the current size too.

I fumble my lottery chit in my pocket. My only chance at going to Mars or beyond. Worthless now. I can't imagine what it would be like to be on a planet with a sky. I have only seen Earth a few times from suborbital scout training missions. We had sats and relays of course. Earth was never out of sight and neither were the stars. Even during the day you could see the stars simply by shading your eyes. What would it be like to only see them at night and on a good night at that? To be in a place where everything was not rationed, measured, recycled or sold to the richest. Don't think we don't know about the black market either.

In spite of all the precautions and careful planning though, we now had many more people than could be rescued by TKs on short notice. They had always wanted us to be self sufficient, but it is scary to know that some would die if anything big went wrong. It could have been the Elixor meteor three years ago that took us all out without TK help. I had only a little over two hours to finish the report. I had better get to it.

“Jeffa! Jeffa, did you hear? The Pluteus is here!” I rub my chit again for good luck. How can this be? I did not think she would return when we heard the TKs were evacuating everyone they could to New Earth. A few weeks ago, we heard they were going to make another run to try and pick up more people. A rescue mission for the few TKs still left on Earth, but they really did not count. Not needing sleeping space and able to help push the ship and replenish the air and water supplies meant they did not count towards the limit. There would be room for over three hundred of us normals, if we wanted to go. I did. I was only third in line to purchase a ticket. It was not that Luna was so bad, it was not the threat of total annihilation, it was I wanted to see what was out there. I go to an observation dome. The room was already packed and people got upset when I opened the door to enter, letting light in. I closed it as quickly as I could. Pluteus was maintaining itself ten kilometers above the lunar surface. Ideally she would be orbit, to give the TKs on board a rest, but

she wanted to remain hidden from Earth in case. In case everything there had gone bad. We could see her without optics and she was beautiful half lit by the sun, slowly turning to prevent being cooked or frozen.

We knew Earth was still there of course, but it was too far away to sense the TKs even with our most sensitive instruments. Being a captain has its advantages though. We all had wrist pads we could consult. I see that the reason Pluteus could only take three hundred back was because of all the 'thn being still on Mars. Only human TKs came this far sunward. I had only seen a 'thn once from across the room. Oh, to be out there!

“Jeffa, if you stop moving for much longer they will make a statue out of you.”

“Ha-ha. She is beautiful though, you have to admit that.” They all nodded. They were not doing much better than I was. “I better scat. I have a report to finish for Washboard.” They seemed to sympathize and let me go without a struggle.

Observation areas were on the surface, everything else was down. Better insulation from heat loss or gain and of course radiation and falling objects. The higher up the ladder you were the closer to the surface you lived. Being only a captain meant I was about half way down. It had been a long time since I visited the lowest quarters that I struggled and crawled my way up from. okay, I didn't. My parents were both captains and I had an easy in. Never even been below about three levels were I lived my entire life.

The report! okay. Commander wanted to know what the impact of three hundred people leaving would be on the operational structure. And I had to do this without knowing who was going. MB3 knew already of course. There was enough redundancy in our jobs so that theoretically, Luna would not be hurt if any sector was taken out for any reason. We had to learn the hard way of course. Plagues, the meteor I already mentioned, which did not happen, but easily could have, but also politics, as in civil wars and shunning. The last was the worst. The others you could sort of understand, but to deny help just because of some silly ego thing. Anyway, multiple redundancies now. There were probably several others just like me asking the same questions of their core.

Hmm, this is interesting. If I follow one line of worker, say a captain of statistics, like myself. okay, that means there are only nine others that fulfill this position. Calling up their profiles. Shit, I am the weakest one here if I can believe this. These others are good. Three hundred people are roughly one percent of our population. Afterwards they could increase the child limit for a few to compensate and in one generation they would be back to where we started. But with the lower TK count, it

might be wise to keep things the way they are and use the space as an extra insurance buffer. We only had eight TK6s and one 7. The seven was our truth teller. I shudder to imagine someone being able to read your deepest thoughts. I hope I never have to face that one. I add all my thoughts to the report maker and out comes my report. Only took fifteen minutes. Great! I'm hungry. okay, I was always hungry, especially since they decided to store more away and feed us less.

I send in my report to Commander Washboard and decide to see what is happening topside. The little observation area was too crowded; I head for the Hall of the People instead. When I get there though, there is a large crowd and some sort of commotion going on. I tap a nearby person, "What's going on?"

"Don't know, just got here myself. Must be something though to get this many people so excited. Let's hit the rafters." Strictly speaking we weren't supposed to do this except in an emergency, but what the hey. I nod and we both push off to grab onto supports above us and haul ourselves up. Best to keep a low profile. We soon see others doing the same thing though. Either independent thought, or we were seen.

"My name is Ira." A fellow captain.

"Jeffa." I concentrate on the clearing in the center. Can't see clearly what is going on. I pull some a farseer out of a pocket. Ah, much better. "What the?" I hand them to Ira. She also is confused.

"What are those? Life forms of some kind, but definitely not human."

"Look, a 'thn!" There is nothing quite like a 'thn in appearance, even though I no longer am holding the farseer, it is obvious.

Ira, who has the better view, "Must be Br'thn, no way they would let the younger ones this close. That would explain all the aliens too. She is part of the gateway. That would make the cloaked ones over there the Guardians Daniel and Lisa."

"The beard would mean Daniel. Do you think they have come to rescue us? Assuming that many TKs, they could take upwards of a thousand on the Pluteus now."

"Doubt they would let three percent of our population go."

"I don't know, maybe have my own room." I grin. Ira socks me in the arm and hands back the farseer.

"We had better get down."

"One more second, you had them longer. I want to see the aliens." Too long. "Get down quick. They are looking this way!"

"There are people below us now. We're stuck!"

My wrist pad chirps. "The message says to report to the Hall of the People immediately."

“But, we are already here. The rafters must be messing with the locators. Have to remember that. No wonder they don’t want us up here.”

Suddenly we are lying down on the floor in the center of the hall instead of on the rafters. After a moment’s hesitation and the sight of a Guardian’s feet I get up hastily and salute the bearded one. Ira is already on her feet, she must have been transported first. “Captain Jeffa reporting for duty sirs!” Guardian Lisa is standing beside him with an amused look on her face.

“Good thing we did not send Cat after them.” One of the creatures, I did not even know had a mouth, said that.

*I could have done it.* This is apparently coming from the orange colored furry thing sitting next to the Guardian Daniel.

“No doubt, but you were also likely to have caused them to fall as well.”

*Stupid Monkeys.*

“I am inclined to agree. Best send to them on their way.”

Another disorientation and we are standing on what appears to be glass with the moon below us. I instinctively squat.

“Congratulations captains for having won the lottery. Welcome to Pluteus.” He is grinning wryly at the two of us in very undignified poses. Another robed one.

“We won?! How can that be?” Ira is excited, but I am not. She looks at me with a quizzical look.

“We did not win the lottery Ira. We lost the lottery.” Our male TK smiles again even wider.

“What do you mean?”

“I am stat. I did the figures. We are here because we are the ones they could most afford to lose.” That does put a different spin on things.

“Don’t worry. You will fit right in. We are all losers here. Oh, you can stow the captain’s bars. No rank here, except what you earn. Also known as respect.” The hard way no doubt. He is smiling again. Shit! The moon is looking pretty attractive right now as I watch her below my feet. I can just make out the Hall of the People we just left.

# Costa Rica

“Susan, so good to see you!” Jesus gives me a kiss, which I return.

“Can we talk? I only have a few minutes before I have to go back. Pr'thn is not allowed to be here because of the danger and I am her caretaker till Yingui can be with her again.” If he can. I have to be prepared for the worst.

“You are both always welcome.” He gives Pr'thn a stroke as she hovers near me. Yingui has taught her to emit a sort of TP purr to show appreciation. Very funny at first, but can get annoying if you are not a cat person. Pop cats give her the weirdest looks, like she has invaded their territory. I would not be surprised if others of them pick up the purring idea. I smile though. Still funny to me.

“Walk with me.” We head down the path to the heath center.

“I don't know what to think. I guess I am just scared, scared to death. Is this the end of the human race?” He is always such an optimist I half expected him to laugh, but he doesn't.

“There have been many times in human history when it appeared that all was lost, but we are still here. We must always trust in God.” We reach the center. People come from all over the country around to be healed.

“Don't you feel left out? I mean, you are the Son of God. Who is this Yingui upstart?” He gives me a dirty look. I know he does not like the designation. He never retracts it though. He claims that we are all the sons and daughters of God, by virtue of the works that we do.

“My work is here. This is what I do. I don't understand tech, nor want to. I said over three thousand years ago, that there would come a time when others would do greater things that I have.” He stops to lay hands on a little girl who is suffering from malaria. “I love you Susan for wanting to learn the spiritual path, but there is also other work to be done. I don't approve of direct confrontation with force. Might does not make right. Yingui is of our path. Have faith that our Father would not raise such a gentle soul to such heights to turn into a bully.”

“What is level thirteen?”

“You are still thinking of doing it then.” A statement not a question. I love Pr'thn so much. It would hurt to part from her. I think all the time what it would be like to have a child of my own. Someone who was part me, but not me.

“Why was the time with Yingui so different and why have you not accepted? I would feel funny going before you did.”

“No one has ever asked, 'thn that is. My guess is that they want

someone stronger, more willing to do what is done, rather than 'give up' and accept sacrifice instead, at least so easily.”

“That is not you and you know it!” He cracks a smile when he sees how upset I am.

“No, but I suspect they already know that I would decline. My place is here, among humans. Others are more open to sharing among all sentient beings than I am. Remember I grew up and lived in a time without other intelligent beings. No computers even.”

“I am not so different in that way. Oh, I used computers, still do occasionally, but I am not at all convinced Mother is sentient.”

*Mother live.* So she is awake, not that 'thn ever sleep. I smile.

“No offense Pr'thn, just my own gut feeling.” Maybe that is it, they have no guts. I can accept K! and the others, even the 'thn. They are so gentle, most of the time. “A 'thn would never destroy a whole people, just because it was convenient or they were in the way of their plans.”

“That's true.” Br'thn appears. Time to go.

“One moment. Help me with this child.” I am a sucker for the little ones. A toddler mauled by a large cat or something. The eye is infected and scans useless. The leg is gangrenous. This little one will not live another day.

“He came in just this hour. The mother,” he indicates her standing a short distance away crying, “walked for three days to bring him here. It is also good for them to see that others have the ability also. I will go and help the old women about to die in the next bed.” He will not heal her, but comfort her. No one lives forever and he does not do the Lazarus thing very often. He says it brings dishonor. I still don't quite understand this aspect of his teaching.

“Come on you two, let's get to work. We need to leave before Ar'thn comes for us for disobeying her orders.” I suspect she already knows.

Pr'thn and the larger Br'thn take up positions near the boy's head. I will handle the leg.

I whisper, “Use his good eye to pattern off of and you will do fine.” This is easy for Br'thn, she even spent time as a human, but it is important for Pr'thn to learn as well. It only takes a moment before we have a fully healthy baby boy again. We get up quietly to leave Jesus in quiet as the woman next to us takes her last breaths.

We DS up to New Hope where Lisa is waiting. Br'thn gets a scolding for making her worry. Hey, she is a big girl now. Back to Luna City and then catch up with Pluteus. With three 'thn on board, it will be a fast trip to Mars and New Earth. Now what is Daniel up to? I don't scan him on board.



# Former North Carolina

“Their encampment is just over the rise. Remember the TK code. We can't hurt them. Our job is just to convince them not to come any further south.” Surprised James remembers it, meow!

“Scare good them.”

“Right K!. Just scare them. These are the alphas that I have told you all about. They are the human fighters and rulers. At least they were till they split up. Everything is a bit confused right now. Mother, as she is called, has just finished reading the Hopi Chronicles that some of you have also read. We are waiting to see what her reaction will be to them. In the mean time we are to try and prevent things from getting worse.”

*Set up camp?*

“Yes. Might as well. Nothing is going to happen till one of their scouts sees our camp and no one is anywhere near enough to do that yet.”

I miss Br'thn already. She went back to Mars with the Pluteus. Ar'thn's orders. I was lucky to get permission to let her help bring back a few friends. Nineteen off worlders, all TK8 or 9 should be enough. The gateway only works from near earth proximity though, so there really was not a choice. Lisa will take good care of Br'thn, not that she needs any help any more. Good were the days when she was dependent on us. They grow up so fast. Wonder if Rachael ever will. I sense she is in Miami. A jail cell? No matter, she does not look like she is in any harm. Something to do with the TK2 next to her no doubt.

“Oh come on guys, don't you think that is over doing it?” But they may be on to something. I was thinking more along the lines of TK acrobatics.

“What, they not real, duplicated forms only.” James says it, but it is K!'s smile that still cracks me up and it knows it. What they have done does look good though. Right down to the nail fungus on the toenails. The odd number of legs per cooking pots looks right too.

“Could use more variety though. Some harry and some thin.”

James goes on, “Well, if you are doing to do this right, then stack some knives and weapons over there. You need some bones from ones already finished. Everyone needs a large stomach from eating too much. Leave a skull or two laying about.”

Shuvuan makes a skull and then starts to play catch with Friggert. “That's the idea. Good!”

Now what is missing? Of course blood. They are obsessed with their grinder, we need lots of blood. Hmm, pots of it should do. We drink their blood. Always worked in the past to scare an enemy.



“We need a few semi animated ones to tear apart on cue. Screaming would be nice too.” The smoke rising from the fires should get their attention. Won't be long now.

Two have taken to using the blue cocks as small swords to do mock battles. Seems appropriate. James seems to like it. The great warrior is right in his element.

### **Alpha Camp**

“They have gone completely nuts Adonis. I saw them eating our brothers, sometimes raw. I saw them rip apart one guy screaming the entire time and ate parts of him right in front of him. The creatures themselves looked like monsters out of a nightmare. One even split into two and went in separate directions. One has knives all over its body. It sliced a brother to death in a second. Parts were flying everywhere.”

All three scouts were relating similar tales. Is the plague meant to protect us finally having an effect on them as well? All the previous reports and my own experiences showed the TKs to be passive. Well not counting the nasty bitch anyway. Even she did not hurt anyone though, just caused me to suffer humiliation. Boy what I wouldn't do to get even with her. I would love to stick her in a pot and boil her slowly. Took me weeks to gain the top position again. A number of good fighters, we could have used right now, had to be sacrificed. Such a waste. Sigh, it is time I put a stop to this foolishness. “Those TKs can fake things. I bet this is all just meant to scare us.”

### **TK Camp**

“Adonis, they are just over this small hill. Listen, you can hear them.” Sounds like a lot of noise for no apparent reason. Screams can be faked easily. There should not be that many of us in this area.

“Where are all these victims coming from? Fake I tell you. I know their code. This is all a lie.”

“Come with me.” I look behind me. It was no wonder I am lead again. What a bunch of treemen. “Look you lazy smiggles, just watch from the top of the hill if you are too afraid. You'll see, they won't touch me. I can walk right into their camp and they won't do a thing.” As I walk down the hill towards the camp, I see thirteen sets of eyes just peering over the top. I shake my head. If this is all Mother has, maybe we should just give up and go home. Then I could have another chance at the female roach.

As I walk into the middle of the camp they are nearly passed out

from eating so much. Disgusting. I kick one that is snoring and it startles and slowly opens an eye. I think it is an eye. Ugly. Not much different than some of the betas. One really ugly one is sucking the fluid out of an alpha body like a spider would. Soon all the sound stops at once and there are many sets of eyes watching me. I walk more slowly. The reports looked accurate, at least from the descriptive part of things. Parts everywhere, shields stacked up seven deep. I am still not convinced. I look into one of the pots and see it full of bubbling blood with bits of fingers and such rolling about. I snag one and blow on it to cool it off. Then pop it into my mouth. "Alphas taste better than betas, you have to give us credit for that much."

"FRESH MEAT!" A huge furry thing with no apparent mouth is standing in front of me. I find myself being raised by TK to three or four meters above the ground. I remain calm. They start tossing me back and forth between themselves.

"My turn! Everyone promised I would get the next one. Ooo, looks like a good one. Lots of gristle to gnaw on." A human in a robe appears out of clouds of mist. I am lowered to a few decimeters off the ground. He pulls out a huge sword from behind his back. He looks like the one we gave to mother. Darker than the usual TK. Can't be too many of them. The back edge is made of something I should recognize. A cock bone, that's it.

"Nice sword. Going to cut me to ribbons I suppose?" I yawn for good measure.

"Sounds good to me." He heaves back his arm to make a swing at me. Suddenly I am in a dark room with a small window. I run to the only window to look out just in time to see my own body being hacked one limb off at a time, screaming each time a new part is cut off. The second to last being my blue member. The last being my head and finally silence. I look up at the hill and one by one the eyes all disappear. I try to scream it is all a lie, but nothing comes out of my mouth. Nothing more to see, I sit against the far wall.

A few minutes later I have company. The two robed human TKs.

"Adonis is it?" I nod.

"Cilan gives her regards." I have no idea who or what he is talking about.

"The women you raped stupid. You could have at least learned her name." I smile now. He slaps me hard. I taste blood. This is more like it. I can relate to this. I am much stronger than he is if he does not use his tricks I could at least inflict some pain. He calms down instead. No fun today.

"What do you want with me?"

“I don't want you at all Adonis. You are garbage to us. A mere annoyance. You are right. We can't kill you. At least not intentionally. No one said that I couldn't make life ah, different. That's it. Different. A change will do you good.” The dark one is smiling like a lizard with a bug.

I feel myself changing. There is a lot of pain below my waist. I look down to see my beautiful blue one shrinking. I try and fight it, but he has me pinned down hard. I can't move. It keeps getting smaller and smaller. The blue color is fading. I look like a beta male now! I am so mad that I can't even think. How dare he!

Suddenly everything is bright and I am wet. It takes me a moment for my eyes to clear and adjust.

“Well, looky here. We haven't had one of your kind here in a long time now. Those alpha males think they are so hot, but know nothing about how to make a girl happy. Come and give me some honey dear.” I look at a very fat woman, naked and smiling at me. I look around and see myself as the only male in a shallow warm pool full of smiling alpha females. I had heard of them, but even my imagination was not this good. I nearly lose my lunch. I would rather have a digger than one of these.

“Get out of my way fat cow.” Though that would insult a perfectly good meal. I move to make my way to the other side of the pool. I never made it. They were alphas all right, strong as hell, outward appearances not withstanding.

# Miami Dungeon

“Why can't I see my Gregory?” This wizard stuff has gone on long enough. I can sense him. He is only a hundred meters or so away. So close and yet...

“Unlock the door, get past the guards without their knowing, find him and he is all yours. Or wait and learn how to do it right.” I sigh. She is right, but this stinks. I know that I am strong enough to push my way though now, but she would block me if I tried. An alarm would be raised and then too many of them would descend on us for me to handle.

“What do you want me to do now? More glass balls?” She smiles. I can do those so fast now, they are a blur.

“There are five spheres hidden about this cell, one is made of frozen air and disappearing fast. Find them all and bring them to this food bowl.”

“What no hoops?”

“You want some, no problem. Pass them through this hoop then, without touching it's side.” The hoop that appears is only a fraction of a millimeter wider than the first sphere I have already noticed next to her right hand. I need to learn how to keep quiet.

I find four of the balls easy enough, even the frozen air one. I was stupid and touched it with my hand and got a nasty burn on two fingers. Who would have thought that cold would burn. Getting mad I burst the ball and rain frozen air on myself. She has shielded and suffers no harm.

“Too much, I can't think of everything at once like you do.”

“You need to learn though. Your survival depends on it.” Why, what happens next?

This is my third day of training. Every night I have nightmares and everyday I am stronger than the previous.

“Where is the last sphere? I give up oh wise one.” She looks familiar, but I can't place her face. Not the one I saw before though. Smaller, dark hair instead of blond. Why do men go crazy over blond hair?

“Well, it won't melt if that is what you are worried about. Keep looking.” I comb every centimeter with my new sight. Nothing.

“Keep looking.” She makes some yarn and starts to knit something. Oh, that is really rubbing it in. I stand to take a swat at her and then suddenly notice that I was sitting on a round ball of dirt.

“How did you do that without my noticing?” She just taps her head and smiles. We speak Standard, as her attempts at speaking normal are horrible and I don't like her speaking in my head.

“At least you found it. okay, next task. Last one before bed time.”

Great more nightmares.

A guard makes his way down to our cell block. I am always scanning for them now and can tell ahead of time when we are going to be fed. Not that I like what is on the menu. I quickly TK our bowls to the entrance. Then remember one is full of spheres. I TK them out before the guard notices. The pile on the two bowls comes in through the slot at the bottom of the door. I reach over and grab both bowls, handing her one. They are both the same, or so I thought. When I taste mine it is horribly salty. I spit out the first bite.

“So, your task is to remove the extra salt from your food.” She holds her hand over hers and a cloud appears between the food and her hand condensing down to a cube of pure salt, which she lifts up between two fingers. She then TKs bite size portions of the stew to her mouth. At least we did not have to use fingers any more. The first few days were horrible. I concentrate. It takes me much longer and I do not get all the salt out, but enough so that I can eat the meal.

### **Next Morning**

“What's next?” If he gets any more excited I am going to lose it. He has done a complete reversal, from hating everything TK to wanting more and more and more.

“TK4. Transmutation.” He is watching me intently. “You can scan at finer detail also. So pay attention.” Well that was totally not needed and obvious. I wish my own regular students were this intent. Maybe this accelerated method is better, though certainly hard on the instructors. I am tired and have been sleeping at night as well. Fortunately the process knocks him out longer than me.

“Let's start out simple. Remember Ron made some gold for you. I can raise any mass to a height easy to work on.” I use some fecal material. He is not too excited about this. The smell is very real. “Concentrate.” He focuses again. I do this slowly so he can 'see' what happens.

“Isn't that dangerous? What about the extra electrons?”

“You can let them go as a static charge, or convert them to more gold. Granted electrons don't do much to the mass. This is the preferred method though. Imagine what a spark would do if you were making something flammable.” He gets ahead of me and makes some hydrogen. The problem here is the extra neutrons. He looks confused and collects the neutrons together, which promptly disappear from his ability to scan them. Being much more powerful than he is, I have it under control. I have DSed them out of harms way.

“That is a good way to make a disaster. Even the smallest black hole will spread if not dealt with properly. So, instead of condensing the neutrons, remember that a neutron can be converted to an electron and a proton.”

“More hydrogen!”

“Exactly. Now try again.” This time he makes a few grams and ignites it with a muffled poof and flash of light. “Now the gold.” He scans the gold I have made. Good boy. Takes a while to memorize the periodic table. Easier to scan something and copy it. He raises a simple shaft of straw with TK and converts it very carefully. He has gotten nearly every pore perfect. Gold being denser he had to make some compromises and decided to add air spaces inside. It weighs exactly the same as the straw did, but now is purer than any gold ever mined. I smile. He is really good. Way ahead of where my own students were at this point.

Without losing a thought he continues to concentrate and the lock dissolves into water. I reform the lock, only this time make it from TK shield material. That is hard for me. Took me many hours to learn how to do what normally a TK8 does. Of course I am not as fast nor can make as much before getting tired, but it is certainly beyond him. He looks at me and then concentrates on the lock. His mouth falls open and his eyes go wide.

“We are not ready to leave just yet.” His mouth shuts and he concentrates on me again.

“Now we are both tech, that is our strength. You won't believe this but I was not interested in anything tech till I was at your level, TK4. I grew up on a farm. The highest tech we had was watching the blacksmith on rare visits into town. Now....” Out of air I create an animated dancer and activate it. I set it down before him. He is totally enthralled.

I leave him alone with the device for a bit while I concentrate on peeking in on Rachael and Maria. Maria is not tech, but holds a lot more history and other information in her head. Ah, she is tending towards the arts. Oh, she is going to be good. We will have to invite her to the annual TK art convention. I have only gone a few times, mostly as a watcher, once as one of the judges. The location is not announced in advance, so no one has an advantage. Different rules are set up each time too. Limitation actually makes for more creative works. There are categories for each TK level. And then an open competition for all levels. The highest TK is not always the best, as imagination counts more than brute strength.

Great, he has taken it all apart. Everything is carefully laid out.

“This stuff is good. Much better than the tech we have.” He thinks

for a moment, “Though I can't be totally sure, never being able to see it at this level before.”

“The tech you have been using is over a thousand years old, pre plague. What is before you is new tech. We have made some advancements since the advent of TK abilities.”

“The basics are still there. Most of it anyway. But, what is this?” Most don't see that on their first day. How far do I go? This was not part of the deal, though I doubt that I could have kept anything from him. At least not for long.

“That is a micro psiotic powered linear motor combination.”

“A psiotic muscle then. That makes sense. Perfect for this application. It is hard for me to see how it goes together though. Different from what you did to the lock.” He is scary.

“We have a lot of exercises before you are ready for something like an anime. They are just toys anyway.” He nods. I have his attention again. Like a laser boring through my head. This is one intense guy.

# Gibraltar

“Fiona cannot be upgraded till she delivers the baby, but you can. We have been all over this.”

“But, but...”

“No buts, back to practice. Now where were we, TK5. Time for you to see for yourself. Fiona if you will sit still, I want Onna to look at your baby.”

He is sort of shy about anything involving sex or its affects. The hormones have not totally worn off yet. I scan him. No, that's not it. Ah, just concern for Fiona and the child.

“I just want you to look, not touch, okay?” He nods, turns to face Fiona and concentrates. Still has the weakness of thinking he has to face something to scan it. Takes time to break old habits. “Compare your own psiotic pattern with Fiona's and the child's. What the hey, do me as well.” After a moment I feel his scan. Easy when they are so far down the scale from oneself.

“They are all different. I can understand why mine is different from Fiona's now, but why is hers different from the baby boy's?” Fiona gasps.

“The boy is not fully formed yet. Only a couple of weeks old. A long way to go before birth. About the same psiotic level as a salamander really.”

“From my perspective you and I are more similar than I am to the others.”

“Only from your current perspective. From mine, you look like the salamander. Not really, but you get the idea. You can see lower psiotic patterns, but not really much above. Oh, I can tell a nine from a ten now, but I am not sure if it is not just the size difference. Only 'thn above nine and as they progress they get larger.”

“What else is it good for?”

“There are conscious and unconscious effects. On the unconscious side, you will never be sick again. Nor will you age.” His mouth falls open, then he frowns.

“What about ...”

“For the time being you will be responsible for their health. Once your baby boy is born, Fiona can be raised as well. Which brings us to the conscious aspects. You can see the psiotic nature of anything. Not just living things that have that aspect, as you will see in a moment. Next you can affect healings. Not too much yet, you can't raise the dead. Don't waste your time, you really can't. All you can do is make the corpse look better.”



“Perfect talent for a death washer.” Wry smile. Ha-ha.

“With time and a lot of effort, you could replace a limb. Problem is, that TKs rarely have time. We always seem to be on the run. Of course you can bring the person with you. You are also now strong enough to exist in a vacuum. You can convert the CO<sub>2</sub> in your blood back to O<sub>2</sub> and create enough 'food' to keep going. Buried, you could exist for as long as your mind held out. Which is not that long. Being alone in that way is not easy. You are lucky you did not have to go through normal TK training.”

“Where is Rog Jason? I think it is about time you told us what is going on.”

I DS the attache that he used earlier. We have kept track of it. “Remember this?” He looks shocked and nods. “Try to scan it.” He concentrates, looks confused and tries again.

“It scans like an empty box. But I know what is in there or should be.”

I open the box to show him it is intact. “So you did not know about that aspect?”

“I was not TK then, how would I know?”

“He could have let you in on it. Or you have other means. Yes, we know about your underground. Who do you think runs it?”

“Why?” I have turned his world up side down. Fiona looks less concerned for some reason.

“Onna, dear. You really can trust them. It was important for the Guardians to know. In fact it was their job to know.” Ah, she is higher up in the underground. A major at least to have that knowledge. Funny how it is usually the quieter ones. Onna is now sitting down with head in hands. He must have thought he was the great protector. I can't help but smile. “You are Barbara right? The one who rides with whales?” Now it is my turn to be surprised. I nod. “We were briefed on all of you, so that we could assist if necessary without tipping our hand.” I nod again.

“What am I then chopped carrots?” Carrots, vegetarian culture. At least the servants are. Left over. I wonder how much meat Jason really eats.

“Fiona is TK0.43 and you are a 5, so relax, you are still needed. And yes, every human has some TK ability, just usually pretend it is not there. The assignment itself. Jason, ah, Rog Jason that is. You realize that your own title is now Rog as well? Anyway, Jason knows I am here as I know where he is. We are working together on this. Jason would have raised you two himself, but decided after we made use of his help on the Mother virus, it might be better to have a few Rog who were trained by someone other than himself, just for the variety.”

“I thought that TKs were born, not made. At least that is what our history says. The HelperV plague created them, at least to TK2. Then the Guardians identified the TK2s likely to be of greater value and raised them from that point. Something about having the right psiotic pattern. Would make a normal person go crazy, or ah, rogue.”

“HelperV burned it self out a long time ago. I don't think we have had a single case in over seven hundred years in this part of the globe. No HelperV, no natural TKs. There are still some coming out in what was formerly South America. There was a special one recently, Cilan. She is not following the normal TK progression curve. So, anyway, we don't depend solely on that crude selection process any more. We can do almost anyone we want now. We are still very selective. It would be a disaster to raise the wrong type of person. And no, we never get rogues any more either. If we did, we have painless ways of dealing with that as well.”

“Why even have TKs? Why not just leave the human race alone.”

“We, humans that is, don't do so well without someone watching. I am old enough, pre-HelperV, to remember what it was like before all this happened. Not nice.”

“And this is? TKs acting like gods and treating us like slaves?”

“A very limited case. We gave Jason enough leeway to see what he could make of it. Believe me, you are better off than most of the populations. And it did not start out this way. But, you are not free. That is also true. The 'thn believe in something called the Diversity Imperative. That means we often have to wait and see. Sometimes we are wrong and it eventually does go good. Sometimes, like this experiment, it does not work out.”

“What could be worse than this that you would allow it to continue for so long?”

“Under the Darwinists, it was very bad. Darwin was a man who grew up in an era of horrible oppression of the poor. It was no wonder that his ‘theory’ spoke of winners and losers. Several different versions developed from the basic writings, but they all involved destroying the environment for the personal gain of a special few. Even those who were against this religion often incorporated elements of it, saved and dammed sound almost the same, as well as domination over nature being synonymous with destruction of same. Here, with the possible exception of the chocolate, which you did not know about, you eat the same food and live in the same house as your Rog master. You have similar living spaces and possessions even. What you lack is freedom of movement and association. Under the Idealists there was a huge difference between the rulers and the others, who were all but slaves. Actually worse. They

could be told not to come back to work at any time, with little possibility of finding more work that allowed them to maintain themselves at the same level of living space, freedom and food. People were forced to compete with each other for the right to work for less than they needed. Some people lived on less than two hundred units of exchange per year while others were granted hundreds of millions for working no harder.”

“But they were free.”

“Only in name. You took a job you could get, any job, and thought the way you had to think to keep the job. You married the person you had to, to maintain appearances, to buy the right transport vehicle and housing situation that befitted your station. You came to work at the specified time, and worked as long as needed, often without advanced notice of needing to work late. A certain level of 'accidents' were allowed before anyone had to do anything about it, if then. If that was not slavery, I don't know what you could call it.”

“Transport was not free? Was that not inefficient? Everyone purchasing their own?”

“Terribly. Remember I told you they sacrificed the environment. This was one of the many ways it happened. The rulers did not live in the bad zones though. No, they lived in carefully maintained paradises. Fantasies really. Nature was never that orderly.

What you have to understand was that is was not all our doing.”

“The underground speaks of the one called Sauron, but it is not part of our normal upbringing. So are you giving us our freedom then?”

“Not exactly.”

“Right. I thought so. We are to be little more than enhanced slaves, but still slaves. And now I can't even have another child. You have simply sterilized an uppity slave.”

“Well, I accepted the same sentence then Rog Onna, as did Jason. What you are trading for your slavery is something far worse in many ways. We call it responsibility.”

“Huh?”

“It was the thing that Sauron feared the most. That people would figure out the true meaning of existence. Technically you will be free, to decide your own direction, but you will have far less time for your own desires than you have now.” Interesting that Jason never told them about Sauron. His having failed to complete the chronicles must still be a sore point. I would like to hear his version of history at some point.

I need to return to the sea, but I know I can't, not yet. Just the point I was trying to make. Stupid Monkeys. In whale, we are the death bringers, the pain makers. It is the only time they use the verb to make and it is always associated with evil. Their only other verb is to be. As in

everything is as it is. A totally different sense of time results. Language does affect ones world view.

# Betas

Rhea and Sootala pop in to the meeting hall looking very haggard.

“Cilan, Marty! Bring everyone here as fast as possible. Something has gone terribly wrong and we need to get out of the way fast.”

“Rox?”

“No. Two rogue fives are coming this way. Tell Rox and her group as well.”

Marty heads out towards Rox’s camp.

“Shit!” I can’t believe I said that. “How the freep could THAT have happened?”

“An experiment gone bad. These two were raised to five in less than a week. No more questions, get!” People start appearing via DS to this open area. This gives new meaning to haste makes waste. I take off at a run and then remember I can TK much faster than that. I have gotten out of the habit. I swoop down over the fields and yell out for everyone to get back to the compound immediately. In less than five minutes we are all assembled. Half are frightened by their strange method of arrival.

Rhea looks about, Sootala is in her arms looking frightened, “Is everyone here?”

“Where are Samuel and Alena?” No time. There is a horrible crunching sound as trees behind us about a kilometer away are falling.

“First we get everyone who is already here to safety and then the TKs will come back to find them. This will be scary, as you have never traveled this way before, but hang in there. You will be alright.” She DSs the entire group and herself to a large open field.

“There is a ravine just off to your right. Go there and stay out of sight.” They take off.

“Now you two are coming with me. We need to find them before the rogues do. They are killing everything in their path, fortunately there are hardly any people around. We went crazy popping people out of the way where ever we could. Jason is dead and Rachael was hurt badly, but will be alright.”

“I thought the higher TKs could handle someone like this?”

“They have enhanced themselves with tech psiotics of a very different nature than what we are used to. It was decided to give them room till we understood what we were up against. Not a lot between Miami and here really. Mostly forests that have come back and no wildlife within a hundred kilometers of the infected zones. Missed the alphas by only a few kilometers. Was half tempted to steer these two right towards them. In spite of the fact that we have had to watch them

the entire time, we have learned little.” I nod.

“I have Samuel and Alena. Moving them to the ravine. Cilan, ideally we want you to be able to use your gift before they kill anyone else, but we don’t want to lose either of you two either. We are to stay out of sight and watch. Learn as much as you can. Others should be here shortly. Stay safe!”

“Or are already here.” The strong dark Guardian, I don’t remember his name, has appeared. One of the Guardians, hmm. James? That’s it. He must be James. The scars give him away.

“Let’s get inside. We can shield you two so you can’t be seen by TK, but that would not help with visual sightings.” We all go into the museum and then down to the basement of the male quarters, to where the cows are being housed. No one will come down here unless they have a very good reason. Hopefully it will be enough. James makes some devices and hands one to each of us.

“You can use these to watch without being seen. Not tech or TK, so should not attract attention.” That is not obvious, but he is gone before I can ask.

“Keep Sootala safe.” She pops out too. Like I would be able to confine a pop cat if she did not want to be? *NO TK EITHER*. Great, but I remember our lessons on rogues. They can sense TK same as us. Then they are drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Only with them, the moth consumes the flame.

Marty looks in one end of the device and sees something. “Periscopes. We put one end up here on the high window ledge and then look through here.” He demonstrates and then I do the same out another window. Not perfect, but better than sitting down here wondering what’s going on. Wondering if we are going to die that is. Not even being able to scan without being detected is hard. This is becoming a common theme with me. I need to learn a new trade. The periscope is kind of nice to hang onto for another reason. It has no history, so I don’t get any ‘other’ images from it.

I grab a blanket from the corner where the supplies are kept. The area around the windows is free of cows at least and nearly dry. Can’t do anything about the smell. I put the blanket on the ground and Sootala gets the message. She curls up and goes to sleep, or tries to. I see her open at least one eye everytime something makes a noise. And the noise is getting closer.

“You are not a very fearless cat Sootala.”

*See monsters then judge.* She hunkers down even lower, if that is possible.

The crashes are getting closer.

“This window.” Marty whispers. I move my periscope over. Wish I hadn’t. It is like two humans four times bigger than normal, built out of some kind of huge mechanical exoskeleton. There is a tiny human at the center of each one. These are apparently the rogues. They come trudging towards us. One step and the kiln is dust. The tables go next. We are not quite in line, but they will get close.

The museum is pretty big. A huge deafening crash and dust coming down from the ceiling tells us they have broken through the overly tall front doors above us. We wrap out robes around our mouths to keep the dust out, but as the room fills with dust, our visibility goes down. Another crash and part of the ceiling gives way at the other end, with more dust. There is a chattering sound from the cows. I didn’t know they could make any sounds. For a brief moment we see part of a mechanical foot caught in the hole and after several attempts to dislodge it, it is finally gone. Another crash as they break through the far wall that had no door. The noise then slowly fades into the distance. They just walked right through the center of the museum taking out as much of it as they could apparently. All that effort gathering and storing food is destroyed in ten seconds for no reason other than hate.

“Cilan over here please.” I hear Rhea above us looking through the hole they made in their floor and our ceiling. Marty and I use TK to lift ourselves and Sootala, who is wide awake now, through the opening. Tight fit, Sootala gets claustrophobic and DSs the rest of the way. Rhea adjusts some of the structure. When we get up top we can see that my previous assessment was correct. All the jars are broken, as are the museum exhibits themselves. No more fake treemen and Saint Taghert. I look to where she is pointing.

Marty gets there first. “Don’t touch! I want Cilan to be the first so that it is not contaminated.” It is a piece of metal, some sort of titanium steel with ‘thn fibers running through it. I can recognize the stuff, but no way I can make that.

“How did a TK5 make this?” I have hesitated touching it.

“Cilan please, we need your help.”

“I really don’t want to touch this. I have a bad feeling. I am TKing it to take it outside. I want to be in the open and away from walls or any other unstable structures. Also, understand that is a second degree contact. I would get much more if I touched one of them directly.” The museum is too unstable now. No one is going to live in there again.

“Just do it.” I nod and reach out. All it takes is the briefest glancing finger when it hits me. The pain, the hate, the PAIN!

When I come to, Rhea and Marty are standing over me. Sootala is licking my face. I pat her on the head weakly.

“What did you see?” Not how are you, but what did you see. Thanks a lot.

“They made the monsters alright. They used what they learned from carefully asked questions. Proud that they outwitted the nasty TKs. The power comes from a kind of psiotic muscle that Jason used in a toy he made to illustrate a point.”

“They caught on very quick.” I nod.

“The exoskeletons were made by the male, so what I see is his perspective. I can only infer based on his relationship to her.”

“How did they make the 'thn shield material.”

I smile. “They didn't. They tricked both Rachael and Jason into shielding most of the dungeon with it by repeated attempts to escape, ostensibly to reach each other. In fact they were biding their time and had worked out a way of communicating using TK to write things in the dust near each other in a kind of short hand code. Then when both Rachael and Jason were so exhausted from doing the upgrades and watching them 24 hours a day, they sliced the shield material up using a combination of TK and some psiotic muscles they had made. This took time, which is why they weren't here earlier. Most of what became the monsters was made after they took Rachael and Jason out.”

“How was that possible?”

“He knew a lot before meeting Jason. Mother taught him about DS and psiotic inhibitors. Along with what Jason taught him about miniaturization he was able to hide the inhibitors in both jail cells from TK4 on. By TK5 he had the last piece, the psiotic muscles, to spring the trap. Once he had turned off everyone's ability to use TK, he stabbed Jason to death with a 'thn knife he had made in advance. Rachael was not that easy to take out however. All that martial arts training that she and James had done.” James nods to me. He looks like he could take on anything.

“He believes Rachael is dead by now if that matters. Rachael could not do much against the mass of them combined and had no weapons herself. It was fairly easy for them to lock her in the cell to die a slow death and to avoid injury themselves. Once they were outside the inhibitor fields they could drag pieces of shield material outside to be combined with the other materials they could make with TK. They knew that once they were outside the field they also had to work fast. They did not know how many other TKs were around and did not want to take any chances till they had their 'vehicles' built. It was also not long before Rachael literally beat her way out of the cell, using left over shield material as a lever and then ramming the door till it gave with the last of her strength.



The constructs they made are well armed. With conventional weapons that can be fired without TK as well as TK weapons. There is a sort of net that can be DSed over a TK that takes out the TK ability. There are also small darts that do something similar, but are not as powerful. Probably only good on lower TKs. As long as they have TK ability their conventional weapons can be replenished pretty much forever.”

“I want to know how a nerd and a bookworm learned so much.”

“Mother has been teaching them for some time. I don't know if this is important, but it was Gregory that caused Mother to reset. He had apparently learned of the original edicts when he first entered the core and agreed with them. When he made contact with Mother and noticed that she had strayed from the path, so to speak, he 'helped' her regain her original purpose.”

A rogue fundamentalist is loose. “Where are they going now?”

“Mother of course. The true core. The original. He feels that they need to get to her to save her from the evil TKs.”

James comments, “When they see her changed after reading the chronicles, they will really go nuts.”

“We need to warn Yingui and Mother then.” Rhea concentrates. She soon looks confused and then pissed. “That stupid jerk! You know what he is doing? He was some distance away, with Ron at the DS ship in fact. Now he is headed straight for the White House core. I tried to tell him what is going on, but he insists that this is the only way.”

“There are more ways that the Yingui way. When is he going to see that?”

“The others are returning. You did not DS them far enough.” Rox, Ellen and Patrice appear over the hill walking down the road to us.

Ron appears next to Rhea, then Barbara, with two others, a young female with her male companion, appear next to James.

“These are your two?” Barb nods to Rhea.

“More coming in.” Daniel appears with a host of off worlders. They look like they have been in some horrific battle, covered in blood and splattered body remnants. Barb's two are hiding behind her now. One of the off worlders nibbles on a hand or something. Daniel notices me staring at it.

“Fake. K! is vegetarian normally, sort of. We scared the shit out of the alphas. Sorry we are late. James, you could have stayed to help clean up.” He looks a bit uneasy, “I am afraid I have a confession to make to you Cilan. We sent Adonis into a wading pool of alpha females. Ah, as a beta male.” He, James and K! are grinning. I can't tell about the others. I just shake my head. The age of chivalry is not dead. Or should I say male

stupidity? Sending Adonis to the alphas solved nothing. He was just acting out his life as he had been made and taught.

“Sorry, but I promised not to say anything till they got here, as it was Daniel's idea.” James of course.

Running Snake and Edwin, I think, appear with Lisa? I wished I had paid more attention in class now. Never expected to meet all of them, especially not all at one time, and here of all places.

Rhea suddenly drops to her knees to a gasp from the rest of us. Sootala is meowing loudly for some reason. I don't understand why, but soon do. A 'thn, I assume is Ly'thn is slowly going around Rhea. Another one appears near Daniel, larger, must be Br'thn. Rhea is standing now, but in tears, touching Ly'thn and speaking quietly to her. Susan appears with Pr'thn looking a little confused at all of us standing around.

“Look above us!” A barely visible Pluteus is in low orbit. Mei Ying and Sy'thn appear, very dignified and proper, and bow to the rest of us. Marty starts a bow in return and the rest of us follow, including the betas, who are really lost as to what is going on, hardly knowing anyone.

Mei Ying takes command, “I want Cilan and Marty to remain with the betas, and Barb's two. The rogues will reach the Whitehouse within the next few hours. It will take them awhile to figure out how to reach the core. The layout is not the same as the other Armstrong units. With their enhanced TK abilities they will succeed soon. Yingui is already waiting at the core with his new partner, Owa Moosa.” She smiles. I suspect that Yingui is up to something again. Who is Owa? “Everyone else is with me. Let's go.” They blink out, leaving a large gap where they were.

The two who came with Barb finally get a good look at the betas and freak out again. I try to help, “It is okay, they are friendly.” I don't think they believed me.

Just as the Guardians leave a new person pops in and promptly collapses. I rush over to her. “You must be Rachael.” She opens her eyes and nods before taking a few deep breaths. “I am Cilan. I am sorry about Jason. I told them about the escape, but not the details about what happened to you.”

“You are the one with the connection gift I gather.” I nod. “Thanks.”

“Guardian, may I assist you in anyway?” Sir Marty the Gallant. He lifts her up to a sitting position. I had been afraid to touch her, because of my gift. Who knows what images this Guardian would bring. Touching Rhea carefully was enough to let me know I really don't want to repeat it. Especially since I had already seen the last few hours from the rogue point of view.

“Thanks, but I should be alright. You should have seen me ten minutes ago. I nearly died for real this time.” Her smile did not look that

strong.

“You should be resting somewhere else. You do not need to be here.”

“Is the schooling for TKs falling apart? I am what I am. Too late to change me.”

“At least stay here with us then.”

“That I can do.” She forms a glass of water out of the air and drinks it down. She retains some of her abilities at least.

“In this weakened state, is it safe here? What about the Mother virus?”

“Well the young lady is in the same state then. We will have to constantly scan both of them.”

“Excuse me, but I am able to scan and care for my wife Fiona and my unborn child.”

“Great. Then I will keep an eye on Rachael. Cilan, see if you can do something about our pack to keep them busy.” He rolls his eyes like it is somehow hopeless, but smiles afterwards.

“That won’t be a problem. Did you notice the mess the two rogues made of everything we have done?” I stand and address the group.

“Everyone else is with me. BE CAREFUL, the museum is not safe, but we need to get as much as we can salvage out of there. No more than two at any one time. If something is trapped under supports, leave it. Moving anything big could bring down the rest of the building. We also need people to move what we can to the remaining buildings and get it organized as living space. Crys, you take over the kitchen as usual. Get your people to direct the storage of the food stuffs that we recover. We will have to make do without your large pots for the time being, they are in the most collapsed section. Dyan and Gryk, you two are on the heavy work. Move fallen structures and trees out of the way if you can. Don’t trust a partially collapsed building. Maybe when Rachael recovers she can make us some new ones. I want Marty watching her, and not doing anything else.” She nods and takes off. They are good at taking orders.

“Patrice and Ellen, you are with me. Each of you choose someone to go in with you. We will do this in tag teams. It will be dark before too long, we need to do this while we can still see.” At least the sky is clear. This would be a really bad time for a storm to hit.

Rox comes up to me, “What about us?”

“Do you want to help? I was not sure you had made up your minds about us yet.”

“It is obvious from the abilities of the people that you work with that you could stop anything we did that you did not agree with, nor are we likely to be of much help to such as them if we did agree.” She looks a little upset still. Not happy at all.

“I get the point. You are welcome. Why don’t you be my partner then? We go in first. Nothing heroic, just find the first salvageable material and get it out. Always work from the outside in. It helps to make an easier path for those who follow.”

She directs the rest of her group to help the others and then comes with me.

Patrice and Ellen both come back with their male partners and meet us at the museum entrance.

Rox asks a strange question, “Can you make some chalk, red would be nice?”

“Sorry, my talents don't lie in that direction. Unless you can find some limestone and something colored to add to it.”

She nods, runs off into the court yard for a second, coming back with some decomposed marble from the old museum, circa zero HelperV time and some berries from a bush. “Will this do?”

After I close my mouth, I nod yes and get to work. Takes me longer than the other TKs, but I come up with some reasonably colored chalk. “Can't promise it will stay this color for long.”

“Doesn't need to. I am skilled in structural engineering. I will mark the areas that are not safe to go near with the chalk. You can help by scanning what I point out. You should be able to see more than I can, by looking into the material for stress fractures.”

“Great idea!” I think they may fit in fine. All that remains is the attitude. That takes time.

# Blue Jade

“Jasmine, get off your butt and get to work.” The cook's assistant yells at me. She can be such a pain. Married to the cook whom we can't afford to lose and she knows it. Why did they have to pick this day to come. I wanted to be out with my friends. We were all going to go to the higame meet. I am going to be so embarrassed. I bet the other owner's children did not have to work in their parent's restaurants. Only at the Blue Jade. The oldest and to me, the lowest one on the row. If these people are so special, why didn't they go to one of the better places.

I get out the wash cloth, dip it into the soapy water and wring it out. Then I go to each table and wash it carefully. If I miss a spot, I will be scolded. Not worth it. They always call me the bad daughter, but I do everything they ask. My older sister got married over a year ago now. I used to have more freedom when we both worked here. Now she works at her husband's curio shop. Light duty if you ask me. My brother died in a gang fight. Innocent by stander. Wrong place, wrong time. He was waiting for me, but got the directions wrong. Ended up two blocks over from where I was. They blame the whole thing on me of course.

It used to be the Blue Jade was in a good part of town, but not so now. I can remember a time when you did not have to lock doors or stay in at night. Why couldn't I have been born ten years earlier? I want so much to go out at night. But, I have to be here every night waiting on tables. It was easier when I was just a greeter and only had to direct people to an empty table. A nothing job really. Now I am older and do more. The problem with getting older is the unwanted attention any woman gets. Being in close quarters does not help. Men! They think they can get away with any indignity. But, what can I do? I can't very well make a scene every time. It only encourages them more anyway. Two more tables to wash and then I set them all. Then we wait for our honored guests. May they leave early and tip well.

What the? “What are you doing here? Scat you! No hand outs. Special guests coming. You know the rules. You get yours after wards.” The black and white pop cat just stares at me. I give him the evil eye. He finally decides to saunter over to the door and then pop, he is gone. Pests, all of them. If we don't feed them they just steal. You can't sell food with cat foot prints in it. Extortion of the feline kind.

“Jasmine, I have to go out and get more tofu. You watch the place and keep cook out of the wine.” I nod, not that it would do any good. Maybe with all the fuss over these guests he won't be drunk before they get here this time. I see my chance and duck into the kitchen. Oh, they are

important guests. Look at everything, but no meat. Strange guests.

# White House Ruins

“We are almost there Maria. Soon we will be with Mother and this nightmare will end.”

“We will not be alone my dear.”

“They will not touch us. We have proven ourselves. Two paid the price.”

“We should not have done that. They will be mad now.”

“Then where are they? No, we scared them off. With the new abilities we will serve her well. We will make the world what it was supposed to be. No more poverty. Everyone will be equal and everyone will be happy. Order is perfection, perfection is order. You'll see. She does not need TKs, alphas and betas. We can do it.”

I am not as sure as Gregory about all this, but as long as I am with him, we will be alright. I can see the ruins that Mother told us about. There are columns fallen down among the trees and brush. No one has been here in a very long time. We marched through countless kilometers of forests. Without the strong arms that Gregory made and our own TK abilities it would have taken days and days to reach here. The strong arms were fun actually. Squashing old ruins and abandoned buildings. Mother used to have her betas near by, but we have not seen any of them. I thought I scanned some, but I can't be sure. The strange gifts are harder to use and will require much practice. Being locked in the cells did not afford the right kind of practice. Probably why they kept us there so long.

“We need to find a way to the lower portions. It should be similar to our university building, though she warned us, it was not identical. We should be able to scan and if we are careful, we can just bash our way through to empty rooms.” Good, more bashing. After so many years of treating everything as carefully as possible, it does feel good.

The obvious problem surfaces immediately. We are too big. The lower portions were designed for normal people, not ones wearing strong arms. We go back outside the one structure still standing and big enough to let us in. No passage here, though there are signs that some one has been here at times. Maybe a place of reflection. The view overlooks a small pond. Gregory starts around the perimeter. “okay, she said there was a way in around here someplace. After all, her alphas had to get in to service her occasionally.”

“Shouldn't there be a path around here then?”

“That's what I am looking for. If we keep going around, we will run into it.”

“What's that up ahead? Looks like a wall built from recovered blocks

of stone.”

“That must be it. Hurry!” We scramble over. We could have scanned and seen it much sooner, but it is still easier to see than scan. Lazy I guess. Too much time and no one after us that I can tell. The path inside the underground structure is definitely too small for the strong arms. We will have to abandon them. Gregory gets out of his, but motions for me to remain in mine for the moment. “I don't want to be defenseless. There may be wizards about.” He removes some things from his strong arm. Devices he had added as we went along in anticipation of potential problems.

“The sun has set, we won't have light and will have to depend on our new senses.”

“Dark inside anyway. They must have had portables. Hang on a minute.” He makes two small portables out of a rock for mass, changing the structure and makeup. Technically I can do the same, but lack the knowledge he has to know what to do. I can duplicate, just not create. He switches his on and hands me the other.

“Wait a second. Look at the sky. Isn't it beautiful? There are so many stars!”

He looks up, “Funny, I don't remember there being that many before. This can't be. Never mind, let's get inside. I am sure I am wrong. How many times have we been allowed to see the stars anyway? I will feel better when we are protected by Mother.” In we go.



# Betas

“Cilan, come outside. Rhea is asking for you.” She shouldn't be here, and why doesn't she just use TP to talk to me? We have nearly finished anyway. Maybe sixty percent was salvageable. The rest is either under the rubble or too contaminated to use. Now we have even less for the winter and less shelter too. It may be that Marty and I will have to use our gifts to help them out. We really didn't want to. They have to learn how to do things themselves and the consequences of not doing enough.

“Rhea, how come you are here? I thought you were dealing with the rogues.”

Marty is already there with Rachael of course, Fiona and Onna too. Everyone is looking at me. “What?”

The next instance we are all outside ruins of some kind. I am used to DS travel, so no big thing. The question is why here? I can sense lots of TKs about. Really too dark now to see by normal sight. We must be further north, though not by much.

“Look at all the stars. Strange we did not see that many at the museum.”

Rachael answers, or rather whispers, “Those aren't all stars.” Rhea gives her a dirty look. Ly'thn is glowing and that must be Pr'thn with Susan, Sy'thn with Mei and the brightest one must be Br'thn. Oh, those are 'thn up there. So many? Why? No one is saying anything though. I am trying to remember. The only reason for so many 'thn is if they are intensely worried about something going terribly wrong, like when Yingui elevated to 'thn parent. That would explain all of them glowing too. They only do that when they are literally charged up. I thought we were past the crisis point. It has been a long time since the initial worries. So much has happened. Something new? Mother again?

*Shhh!*

Hey, I can't help it. I am not TP. I try to quiet my mind all the same. I brush a rock to sit on and a whole flood comes in of forty-five presidents and tons of decisions and consequences. Gets me every time. You would think I would learn. I create some gloves to prevent a repeat. But they disappear suddenly.

*No TK!*

You try getting around with this 'gift' then.

*Shhh!*

Come on. I can't help it. Why am I here if you didn't want me here?

**Below**

*They are almost here Old One.* Silver Ghost huh! He has to earn that title. Ghost was the greatest cat who ever lived. Being TK does not give any monkey the right to that name.

Being gray, I am closer to the greatest than most cats, but do not let that go to my head. Still, I sit proud. I will not dishonor my ancestors. Many do, I am ashamed to admit.

Old One lights a globe. No, excuse me that is his 'thn. Nope, back to being a normal TK light. Not a safe place for a 'thn. I can smell the psiotic dampening field, even when it is not turned on. Sort of like a flea you can't reach. We can live without psiotics, but a 'thn can't. Means he expects trouble. I compose myself. Too bad he even needs the light. I can easily smell them now. They will come through that space slicer [door] soon.

Voices, "It should be here. We are deeper than the university already. Look I see a light up ahead."

Stupid monkeys. Old One remains motionless. Maybe I underestimated him. He might make a good cat. We will see.

They enter the room where we are and stop on their paws.

"I would not recommend that Gregory. If you do, you will die. There is still time to turn this around." Do what?

"As will you old one." So, he knows his name. Maybe they have sniffed each other before. But I can smell that he is not a friend and there is no honor in his voice.

"I have died many times. Have you?" I want to look up at the Old One, but hold my curiosity. Monkeys do not have lives, plural, as we do. What does he mean?

"We are here to rescue Mother. Do not try and stop us."

"Be my guest."

He hisses. Some of my fur rises on my back. Steady.

He undoes the cat-can'ts on the room slicer made of metal to the left of us. Not that we superior cats paid any attention to them. Keeps out the old cats though. He and the female enter the room. Lights come on with clicks, small ones, but enough for me to easily see. He monkeys with the stuff inside, as monkeys are want to do. Such a waste of time. He finally comes to the same conclusion as any cat would, with much growling and threats as one would do before calling someone out on a point of honor. Does he not like this female?

His whiskers come to the opening. Much hissing and spitting ensued, this time directed at the Old One. Ah, it is not the female he is angry with.

"You have done something. Make it right or I will kill you all!"

“I have not entered that room. Are not the telltales telling as much?”

“You can do things without entering. We both know that now. Don't try and fool me old one. What have you done with Mother? Where is she?”

“I have no control over Mother, nor do you. She does what she wants. The last time I saw her she was fine and have no reason to suspect that she has changed.” He does not see the meow-without-breath? Mother is watching the whole thing stupid monkey. The two of them continue their chatter for some time, as monkeys are want to do. I nearly lose it and fall asleep. I am impressed how the old one always remain calm.

Finally it appears the angry one is finished talking, “I am sorry Maria. I love you.” I think he licked her face at this point. Everything happened so fast, I am not certain. The globe of the Old One went out and I could feel my ability to move without being seen fade. The rest of the lights go out as well, one by one with clicks. Not that it mattered. I knew exactly where they were and moved to the room slicer, which was still open. Stupid monkeys, they can't see a thing without their small suns or their abilities. Definitely an inferior life form. The mad one is reaching for a fake claw, monkeys not having ones of their own. The ground starts to rumble like I have never felt before and temporarily distracts me as I stabilize my stance. Strange smells coming from the floor. Bad smells. I need to move quickly or all is lost. I spring off the floor with all my strength, hissing and clawing at the face of the nasty monkey just as he raises his claw. An intense heat comes through the floor of the room along with a low light. The monkey drops his ability stealer onto the red hot floor of the room. I used his face as a jump off as his back paws start to burn from the heat. The flames of pain lick at my fur.

I feel my abilities return and the Old One removes us both to the surface. The memory of the heat and their screaming remains. My precious whiskers are singed, as are the guard hairs on my back side. Otherwise I appear to be intact. I was triumphant!

“Mother, you saw all that?”

“You have spoken the truth. The chronicles are confirmed by their actions. It is a shame.”

The Old One calls to the other monkeys, “Contain the lava to the sub surface structures. The rogues are dead, by their own choice. The magmotics did what they promised. All the cores are gone now. This will never happen again at least.” There is more chattering as monkeys do, but I pay no attention.

Then he does the strangest thing. He reaches down to me and pats me on the head, scratching behind my ears and gives me a good back massage. “Thank you Owa Moosa for saving us both.” Well, of course,

you weren't doing anything were you? I was about to call him a stupid monkey, as befitting the circumstances if there ever was one, when he reaches around my neck and fits a collar to it! I am so ashamed! I give a low moan of the utmost loss. How could he? What did I do to deserve this? Collars are for the beasts, the slave animals. Am I now a slave to fetch his food?

“Relax my friend. You are not shamed, but honored. This is the collar of the most honored one. Even Ghost wore one. Please allow me to apply the scent markings that go along with this most high honor.” I smell the most wonderful scent. Never had I thought that I would be in it's presence, much less be the recipient. Countless generations have told of this scent. I am in heaven. I can't help myself and roll on the ground purring and kneading the life giving air of life.

When I come to my thoughts again, from the most glorious experience any cat can experience, I come to question him.

*Who are you that you know of and are allowed to bestow this honor above all others?*

“I am the one who was the Companion.”

My fur rises in disbelief. And then I rise with pride. To meet and be honored by the Companion himself. Had I know he was The One, I would never have taken upon myself to lead him on this quest. I am not worthy and yet, I have saved him from certain death.

“All hail the Queen of Cats!”

The rest of the monkeys chime in as well, “All hail the Queen of Cats!”

There is one who is not amused, no doubt thinking she deserved this honor instead of I. After all, I am new to the group and she has already done much. I know now that I was lucky in my choices and circumstances. I walk over to her cautiously and lower myself, *Starlight, I know I am not worthy of this honor, please share it with me.* She hesitates, sniffing in the wonderful aroma, then acquiesces and starts to purr. I am over joyed and rub against her, transferring the scent to her as well. *You are a good cat Stone Cat.*

“What happened to Mother? Was she killed as well?”

Starlight growls at her name. My own experiences are different, but I hold my voice.

“Oh, she is fine, watched the entire thing. I told them as much, but they would only believe that I killed her. I still wear the compad, as you can see. There is more. Something wonderful is about to happen.”

“I noticed that the ‘thn are still with us, above us as well.”

“They are not here for Mother, but for another.”

“You mean there is someone we have to worry about worse than

Mother? You have taken us out of the pot into the fire? Again?" His only response is to laugh.

"Come, it is time." Not just stupid by crazy monkeys!

# M.O.T.H.E.R.

We arrive at some kind of low tech industrial complex. Even I can see the crudeness of our surroundings. It is amazing that they were able to do as much as they did. Before us is a huge metallic sphere, roughly a hundred meters in diameter. Not so easy. I hold my belly. Hard to believe that there is finally life within. We tried for so long. I hold my husbands hand. Are we free or are we slaves? I don't feel that question has been answered. Jason, our master is dead, yet we still follow these Rog. We are the only ones not in robes. Not the normal dress of the Rogs we were used to, but still, it sets them apart.

A portion of the sphere is open. There is light within. Everyone but Onna and I ascend using their TK abilities. Onna looks at me, "We should go too." He looks into my eyes questioningly. My other hand is still on my belly, he notices. "I am sure it is safe or they would not have brought us here. We can at least see what all the fuss is about."

I sigh, "Then take us up." He is gentle and slow. Once in, I look back and it is as if there never was an opening. As far as I can see there are no seams or anything. I shudder. Inside is bare metal, sterile and cold in emotion. Everything is silver in color. The old one they call Yingui leads us up some stairs. Barb falls back and stays with us. At least she is someone we know.

The one they call Yingui comments, "Note the hand rails. Even in a weightless condition you can get around." He is excited and happy. Glad someone is. We proceed up to a large open area in the apparent center. "This is central command and the main living space. Kitchen over here. Sleeping, even a crib for small children. Study areas." There are some of those strange creatures called 'thn playing around one of the cabinets. Not from earth, that's for sure.

"I assume that this has something to do with Mother, but where is she?" That must be the one they call Ron. He is smiling, like he knows something.

Yingui smiles, "Onna, if you will assist me." Onna looks at me and I squeeze his hand to let him know it is okay. Barb is still next to me thank goodness. I move closer to her and she rests a hand on my shoulder. Onna goes over to Yingui. The gray cat jumps up on the small cabinet the 'thn were near, but are now a few meters above us all. Yingui picks her up and places her on the ground speaking to her quietly, "Not for you honored one." With Yingui on one side and Onna on the other, they undo some latches and lift the top off of the cabinet. Inside is a high tech device. Something similar to what we would use back home, only larger

and more complex. Seems really out of place, given what we have seen so far.

“This is Mother. Before Jason died he let us know of some of the tech that his group had developed. It was possible, with Ron's help, to build a home for Mother that was much smaller than the body she had been housed in. Now, along with the improved DS and TK control units at the rim, there is plenty of space for human habitation. This ship has been adapted to hold several families to accompany Mother in her travels. Before the new tech, only Mother and a host of frozen embryos would fit.”

“Whew! That's some change. So, are the alphas going with her.”

“Not possible. With all the work we have done, there is still not enough room for a stable ecology. We still have time to do some more work before departure to brighten things up and make it more liveable however. Even I am not that fond of bare metal walls.”

“So, this means TK? Who would volunteer for this duty? Our ships are much nicer to travel in.”

I can't believe I am doing this, but I had to know, “What is going to happen to the Rog society where we live?” People turn to look at me. I am embarrassed, but stand my ground. I want to know.

“Jason was the only one hurt, ah permanently. The culture and society still exists. Without his leadership things will change of course. For one thing, the highest they can raise someone now is TK4, instead of TK5. Eventually I suspect the TK tradition may fade all together. As we have all been reminded, a TK can be killed. It is only a matter of time before it comes to each of us.”

“How long will that take? To change our society I mean.”

Susan answers, “The TK5s that are there are nearly immortal, but the life span of a TK4 is only about two hundred years maximum. I suspect that it will be at least another thousand years before the change is noticeable. Societies change much more slowly after the fall. It will be helped by the underground of course, but if the change were too rapid, too many people would be hurt. There is still much dependence on the TKs for basic needs.”

“What do you mean? We served them, why would we need them?”

“Solar for one. All the solar panels and most of the tech are made by TKs. You have only limited manufacturing ability without TK. Part of this was on purpose to maintain the TK power base.”

“Can't you speed things up?”

“If we did there would be massive upheaval. Many people would become unemployed. Manipulators would rise to take advantage of the chaos. There would be famine, disease, much pain and death. We have

seen this happen time and again.”

“Don't forget they have the Mother virus code now as well. With One Mind working in the background, they are in for a massive change at some point no matter what we do.”

“What do you mean?”

“One Mind is the planet wide intelligence working through the plant life. She will get someone to release the mother virus again, to make more treemen. The fruiting bodies of her existence.”

“But millions will die!”

“It is the way our life was intended to be. We can take steps, like we did here, to minimize the effects, but though we know more much more now, even we do not know where and when it will happen next. You are one of us now, what do you suggest?”

Huh? “We are not one of you, at least not me. I am normal.” With Onna across the room, I really feel very alone now.

“Fiona, you have never been mere normal, but once you are part of our group, no one counts the lack of TK as a point of separation. Besides, you will be TK soon enough.”

“There is room here for several families. Do all the people need to be TK?”

“Only one, but it would be better if there were at least two. What do you have in mind?” Onna is looking at me with concern. He knows me too well.

“With Rog Jason gone, our household will be dispersed. If they are willing, and of course you as well my beloved, we could live with Mother. We have the expertise in the tech and we are already used to living nearly alone, so this would not be that different. When the society that we have envisioned has come about or the current one at least is gone, we can return. By that time we will have collected knowledge from all over the galaxy, or at least the nearby systems.”

Onna comes in, “The other two in our group and their daughter, eventually, would be perfect for TK status. That would give us three. Then when the children grow up they can be raised TK as well.” I move to his side.

The cabinet speaks, “I hoped that you would want to join me. I assure you, I have changed much since the reading of the chronicles and steps have been taken with the Guardians help to insure that a reversal, like Gregory started, can never happen again. We are all free now. I wanted to assure you though, that I will not assume the roll of a 'Rog'. I am not your master or your slave. We will work together in this exploration. It would appear, we all need time to think and decide what our lives will become.”



“Agreed!” We both answer at once and then laugh.

“Why don't the two of you stay here for a bit to get used to things and of course get to know Mother. There is food already in the kitchen. We will pick up the others and bring them to you in a week.” He sets the compad down.

“Long enough to raise them to TK5 status.”

“Oh, I think we could push them and you, Onna, to six. Might be nice if you could DS if needed. Might save everyone in a pinch. We did not raise you earlier because we wanted to be sure you would not go rogue also. You were a half day behind the others in your training.”

“You could not take out a six then?”

“We could take out a nine if need be, but much damage would likely result in the process.” A few of them nod.

“You mean you did not need to let them reach the ruins?”

“No, we let them, so they could decide for themselves what their fate should be. We did not kill them, they did that themselves. They were Mother's first choice, at least before she read the Chronicles, and before she learned of Gregory's handiwork. You were backup, but also Rhea's first choice. Remember, you were also upset at your circumstances surrounding your change. Not everyone thought this idea would succeed. Though Jason had raised a TK to level five in a week once before, we had not. Preferring the longer path.”

“So it could have been us facing all of you. Yet you did not force us to our decisions.”

“No, that is not our way, nor should it be yours. You are free. None of us knew what the others were doing all the time, yet it all worked out. You have to learn to trust each other and work with what ever happens. There is a com unit aboard this ship capable of getting a message to us over great distances. Our stellar psiotic neighbors have shared some technology we were able to adapt. If you decide you have had enough or need help, we will come and get you. There are others who would gladly take your place given a chance. Maybe even a rotation would be good.” It is almost as if he envies us, this voyage into the unknown. For us it represents freedom, maybe for him as well. There are so many questions.

“What are these chronicles you keep mentioning?”

“Normally they are reserved for TK6s who are interested in becoming sevens. Jason did not finish and so remained a six. He ah, disagreed with the truth found there. Not the first nor likely the last. Once you yourselves are raised to six, Mother can teach you Hopi and then let you can read the Chronicles of Sauron. It will take some time, but you will have plenty of that.”

“Thank you.” Why do we have to learn Hopi? What language is that.

I have never heard of it. I am sure it will be explained, when the time comes.

“You're welcome. Now, everyone else, time for us to have dinner as well! I have a special treat planned.”

“How does he know all this stuff? How did he know what would happen?”

“None of us has been able to figure that out. Maybe when you return you can tell us.” They smile and vanish. Not out the door this time. Will take some getting used to.

# Blue Jade

“Where are we? And what happened to the off worlders?” I look around me. Low tech. I scan. No, some higher tech, but not Jason's level. None of my betas either, but since they were not at the ship either, I really did not expect them. Lots of pop cats for some reason.

“The City of Gold Mountain, west coast, about a block away from our destination. I don't think K! and the others would feel welcome here. Besides I think they have had enough to eat.” A giggle is heard at that statement. “They will wait for us at the transfer point. Koo really likes to play with K! She runs to him and he splits in two, going in opposite directions, taking on different forms. Never ceases to delight her. She is still fixated on spiders for some reason though and K! does a great spider. Oh and Friggert and a few others love rock climbing.”

“They still serve yum cha?” someone asks, changing the subject.

“Sort of. Remember, this is dinner time, not lunch. Besides, you can't expect things to not have changed at all in a thousand years. They have just recently discovered capsicum seasoning again. Earlier it really was bland.” James', Ron's and Rachael's eyes light up. I guess they like capsicum, what ever that is.

“There is another group coming our way, let's make room.” We step aside as a group of obviously well off people goes by us completely ignoring us. Our dirty white robes and disheveled looks don't help. They get the sidewalk, we get the gutter. Here are gathered the most powerful humans ever in existence and we take the lower path. The TK way. But you have to wonder what would happen if they ever knew.

“Wow! Look! There must be hundreds of them.” We hear one of their party comment about the pop cats. So, this is not normal. They enter one of the other restaurants we have passed. They spoke Standard. Tourists? Wonder where we are going? The place they went into looks very fancy.

“They are everywhere. Why are they so still?” Back to discussing the cats I am guessing.

“Honor guard.”

“For whom?”

“Who do you think? Certainly not for us 'stupid monkeys'. Look at them. You would think they saved the world.”

*They think they did. Let's not break the illusion. This may be their world at some point. They are entitled to their myths and legends as well.*

“Wonder if that is how some of ours got started?”

“I thought you read the Chronicles?” Everyone stops to look at

Rachael.

“I, ah, I sort of skimmed parts. It is awfully long. Besides, I lived part of it.”

“Too late now. On the other hand we could fit her with a limiter?”

“If you guys think for one moment...” Her face is red and the rest start laughing.

“It is awfully long.” They all seem to agree. This is not helping my curiosity.

Wooden buildings, lots of color, signs in a language I don't know. Same characters as Standard, but not any spelling I recognize. Oh that symbol looks totally different. Smells good though. We pass several more eating places. The two heroes come up to me. One on each side.

*Peace. All will be well.*

“Well, sure, Mother is cured of her sickness. The betas will go to one side of New Earth of a continent we are calling Mother Land. The alphas to the other side. That has been explained to me. Susan will also go to New Earth. Bet she becomes the next ‘thn parent. What becomes of me though?”

*All will be well.* They proceed on ahead of me. Sniffing some of the other cats along the way and allowing themselves to be sniffed in return. Dignitaries no doubt. I try to keep a straight face. They are entitled to their dignity.

Weird, I was the only TK among the betas for months and yet I feel more alone now.

“Welcome! Did you have a pleasant journey?”

“How does he know?”

“He doesn't. Just being polite. Doesn't it smell wonderful?”

My stomach growls. At least it won't be cow or puppy. I smile. As I enter I see a display above the altar. Inside there is a stone that looks like a large piece of turquoise. Ah, blue jade, of course.

“Will you sit with us Cilan?” I had thought that I would be sitting with Marty and the other lower TKs. Why would Yingui want me at the Guardians table?

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yes. I would be very pleased if you would sit next to me.” He smiles and holds out a chair for me. I have heard so many tales. What is he up to now? If any of the last twenty four hours are any indication, I am in real trouble. When I sit, I see Marty on his other side though and relax. Everyone is randomly scatted, not according to status. More like Costa Rica then. I relax.

He looks at Marty and I, “You two have done an incredible job with the betas. They will go to the harsher of the two main continents, but will

retain their virus protections. The alphas will go to a paradise, but will lose their immunity.”

“That seems to be the opposite of reason. The betas were the victims and you punish them again? Why?”

“Oh no. We do not punish them. We place each according to their abilities and potential. The betas are much more likely to work together. The harsher environment will make them strong. The alphas, on the other hand, would likely kill each other completely in the same location, by fighting over scarce resources. By putting them on a soft spot, it will give them some buffering space to work out their differences without total destruction. Anyone who feels the need can simply move to another location to be away from the inevitable bullies.”

“What about the virus. Why make the betas carry the load? There is a small but very real affect on their physical being.”

“Ah, that one is easy. So the alphas would not be tempted to take them over, as slaves to serve them, or to claim their land.”

“Precisely. Good Marty. The only way that the alphas could do anything to the betas would be to work together. Something they can't do well right now. And the betas know the clock is ticking. Both will be better for it.” Strange thinking, but it sort of makes sense.

“What happens to Mars?”

“Expansion for the Lunas. They can't handle the full gravity of the New Earth and certainly not Mars. Even Mars is twice what they are used to. It will take time to adapt, but they really need to be on a world they can convert eventually to a more normal existence.”

“You intend to complete the weaning off of the TKs then.”

“Yes. It is time. We waited too long waiting for Mother and Jason to make their moves. It is over now. Time to move on to other projects.”

“Excuse me.” He is listening. “Ah, Rox told us that the Mother ship would not be able to take off without the control box that she and the others took. I know where it is.”

“No need. With all the new circuitry, it is no longer necessary. Thanks for your concern though.” He is polite enough. “Ah the first course. I hope you like it. Just don't ask what is in it. The cooks are not likely to tell us anyway. Ancient Chinese recipe.” He laughs.

Barb exclaims, “Krill soup!”

I taste the soup. Immediately comes the old rush of lives touched in the preparation. Fortunately free seafood means it does not have a long human history. The bowls have been here for a long time, but so many people have touched them briefly, that the effect is very dilute. More of a sense of a culture, rather than individual images of people's lives. I had been so long with the betas and their simple very repetitive lives, that

even though they suffered much, it all tended to blend together like the images from the bowls. I look over at the young waitress, second daughter of the owner. Her mother and his wife had died of tuberculosis many years ago, their son and her brother in a gang fight more recently. The cook drank as an excuse to get away from a controlling wife, his 'assistant'. The cup itself passed through generations. I take a long breath and try and enjoy the soup itself. Tastes more like shrimp to me. Similar to what we had in the coastal villages in Costa Rica.

The next course brought similar sensations, but I was ready for them this time. Yingui hands me a bowl of rice with flecks of chili peppers in them. James is exclaiming how good it is at the next table.

"This is capsicum? Looks like chili peppers to me."

"Chili peppers are a source of capsicum."

"Ah," and I accept it without thinking, what could rice do to me? I nearly pass out on the first bite. Soon there are tears in my eyes. People were cheated and people died to bring this rice to us. Yingui asks me, "Cilan, are you all right?" He shows concern.

I speak hoarsely, "My gift. It brings pain at times." I take another long breath. Sootala jumps on my lap.

*I would be happy to test your food for you first.* I'll bet. I stroke her a few times before setting her down.

"Go to your own meal with Owa." They are not left out. What they get looks fit for royalty.

"What did you see?" I relate to him the stories of the rice. He listens carefully, as do the others at the table.

"I would imagine that most things bring similar stories." I nod. I notice for the first time the necklace he is wearing. A simple metal chain with a silver emblem of a turtle I think. All sound ceases. I stare at the necklace as my concentration focuses on it. He notices my stares and removes the necklace from around his neck and places it turtle side up before me. I continue to stare. "This necklace has been with me since before the fall. Even when I changed bodies, I always retrieved this necklace and have never duplicated it in all this time. Strange that I would do that. Go ahead and take a closer look. Done by a unknown Hopi silver smith eleven or twelve hundred years ago."

I reach out to make contact. The rice story comes to me again and I hesitate. If that was bad, what would this simple object tell me? I remember the stones outside the ruins of the white house. How much has this simple turtle been through in all those years. A long time and if today is any indication, a lot has happened. I take another deep breath, and then withdraw my hand. Sounds comes crashing into my awareness again.

"She is a smart one. She will do well." The old one of the first ones

says this of me. I think I like her for some reason.

“Running Snake is very perceptive. You would do well to study under her Cilan.”

Without thinking, I know this is right, “I accept. Thank you.” All the others are looking at me now. Yingui laughs, Running Snake raises an eyebrow at such a fast decision, but nods her approval.

“I have a question though. What would have happened, you know, if I had touched it?”

“Level thirteen.” Running Snake answers without hesitation. I must have looked confused.

Yingui answers this time, “Also perceptive. It was with me when I began Pr'thn. It would have meant the end of the universe as we know it for a level 4 to face that before they were able to resist.” He smiles as that sinks in. “Don't worry, I would not have let you actually touch it or me. This robe is new, with no history that you do not know. A TK9 can shield themselves quite well without detection by a TK4, even one of your talents. You would not have managed. Unless, of course, I was distracted some how.” He grins and I nearly faint again.

“It was a test then?”

James interrupts, “The 'thn. They have all gone. All of them except ours.”

“The crisis has passed.”

“They were concerned that I would actually achieve contact?”

“Yes. They are a chicken race really. Does not take much to upset them. Though it would probably not be wise to do this too often.”

“The end of the universe, trivial stuff. If this is what happens when she is TK4, what happens when she is an eight? She may beat you in the number of 'thn at mating.” I blush. I know it is not sex in the human way, but it still carries those old implications.

He shakes his head, “Even the 'thn would not risk that. She will never mate, nor can she.”

“Huh? You want to explain that?”

“Not at this time.” His head is down and no longer smiling. He knows something more. What? “It is time both you and Marty were raised to TK6. You have earned it. And you both have much more work to do.”

“I have another question.” He looks up with a wry smile. I may have pushed the limit.

“I would like to ask my new instructor, Running Snake, a question.” She nods, as Yingui relaxes. “I was under Jesus for the last few years, before being with the betas that is. I would like to know what you think our purpose is? That is, what is the purpose of the TKs.”

“Answer me one question and I will answer yours. What did you learn while with the betas?”

“It has been so recent, I have not had time to think about it much yet.”

Yingui adds, “It is normal for us, especially the Guardians, to discuss an event as soon as possible after wards, so as to get ideas out while they are still fresh in our minds. There will be more discussions later, don't worry. Just jump in.”

“I will try. So much happened. Most of what I felt dealt with power. Mother was in total control at first. The grinder seemed to be the only the most severe punishment, there were other methods nearly as brutal. Certainly a way for her to 'select' for the perfect version of whatever she was planning for that strain. But like any repressive government, there was much that went on that she was not aware of. Rox and her group were a prime example. What I heard about Fiona, Onna and Jason also talks of this in their culture.

The alphas seemed to be the stereotype of everything wrong with leadership. Mother was absolute, but the alphas were nasty, abusing betas and each other for fun.” I must have blushed at this point. okay, I did feel some anger still. Not easy to follow the path that Jesus laid out.

“Go on. If you were to touch any of us, you would find similar 'events' in our pasts or worse. In fact no one goes beyond five any longer without having experienced such a close encounter.” Marty seems to suddenly understand something as his face goes from confused to knowing. It must have been his encounter with Adonis that qualified him. He did not get angry and lash out, as he had done in the past. No doubt surfing did mellow him.

“Yes, I know. I have touched a few of you.” I did not dare look up for fear that I would betray a confidence. “Not long enough to see everything, but enough. Anyway, Jason tried to make the perfect society too. He was kinder and gentler than Mother or the alphas, but equally dictatorial. I almost believe that he was not aware of this. A 'true believer' as Jesus would say, or maybe zealot is the better word. Speaking of which, Gregory was gone, out of the basket, as we would say. It was his way or everyone dies. No compromise. Black and white. He must have suffered a lot of pain to be that way.” Yingui raises an eyebrow and looks at Running Snake, who remains emotionless.

“The 'thn seem to act, or threaten to act, only when things have reached insanely catastrophic proportions. They have to be the saddest creatures I have ever met. Ah, present company excepted of course. I mean collectively.”



“Maybe because ours are still too young.”

“Or been around us too much.”

“Let her finish.” I smile. I bet Running Snake was a good mother.

“What I mean, is that their codes of no interference and diversity sometimes push them up paths of no way out but the hard way.

One Mind. Not being seen and known of does not remove you from responsibility. She is as single minded as the rest in many ways, if not more so. To allow and use Sauron and later Mother to manipulate us is way beyond nasty. To let thousands or millions die, so a few would become reproductive bodies against their will is nasty. I know, as my psiotic sense tells me, as my connection gift tells me, that every living thing has a story and a right to tell it. We all make mistakes, even TKs, and we all try to work with what we are given. But still, to enslave an entire people just to make a few spores. If she had worked with the TKs directly, we could have done the deed without anyone dying. And she even knows we can. Instead she sees the whole thing as some kind of glorious purpose.

Ultimately I have to look inward, at us, the TKs. We seem to have both 'thn and One Mind characteristics. We are reluctant to act and often resort to manipulation when we do.”

“Ouch!”

“Shhh!”

“We are not perfect by any measure. TKness does not infer wisdom. The difference seems to be that we, with these discussions, trial and error, and fine tuning, are trying to be different. Being like Gregory, Jason, Mother or One Mind, is clearly the wrong path. I don't know enough about our own past to understand it all. What was it like when the Guardians came into existence? That was too long ago to come clearly to me. We seem to have 'thn blood in us, by virtue of our being TK, but is that what is affecting us? Or is it something else?” Yingui is the one who remains calm and Running Snake looks concerned this time. I wish I could read them.

“Part of your education with Running Snake will address those concerns; from our history to more about Sauron, who really ran our history and now of course you will learn more of One Mind as well. Do not judge her too harshly yet, she in many ways is less free than any of us. I would like to try and answer the question though.” I nod to James, who has leaned over from the next table over to address us. What could the UNA warrior mind add to this discussion? Others appear to be listening too.

“You have heard of the Darwinists?” I nod.

“We are all taught about them in school, pre-TK school that is.”

“Basically what happened was that one's self became more important than anything. More important than nation, neighbors, and even as hard as this is to believe, than family. Money was the tool, but power was the game. The earth was ultimately what suffered through every living thing. I could go on about this for hours. What we try to do as Guardians, as TK, is to undo the damage, to set the human race back on the right track.

Even One Mind admitted that she was not normal. New Earth is closer, in that there is no separation between plants and animals, but the sentient form is gone, so we will never be able to witness what went wrong. It is hoped that the One Mind there will tell us at some point. She will certainly have fun with Mother's offspring.

Here we mostly watch. When we act, it is to prevent bullies trying to put power trips on others. After much time and many failures, it comes to the idea that everyone has a right to live the way they want without someone else forcing their cultural garbage or greed on them. Call it the diversity imperative. In practical terms this means that if some process involves waste, chemical, biological, social, etc. it can't be moved outside the area of those who made it. You made it, you have to live with it and you can't benefit from another's suffering.”

“So this is why there is not as much tech as at year zero. Too much waste involved. High tech usually exits because some TK made it and we appear somewhat reluctant to do that.”

“On Earth anyway. Remember most of the energy reserves in coal and oil were depleted before HelperV and a lot of renewable sources are higher tech than they can handle, with the possible exception of the hydrogen algae and the methane composters. Luna City and beyond is another story, but even there we have cut back as the ecologies began to stabilize. There seems to be a minimum size that is much larger than you would normally expect. The larger the system is, the easier it is to reach and maintain stability.”

“So why are we going beyond Earth? Why not solve the problems here first before going outwards.”

“Two reasons Marty. One is to try and start over without as much influence from past forms. There is still too much momentum here, even after our being here a thousand years trying to fix it. I am sure even you have noticed that there are still rich and poor. This eating place makes that point well. Good food, good people, yet they are poor. Most live in a sort of 19th century version, not quite as bad as the 21<sup>st</sup> or the 18<sup>th</sup> by the old reckoning, but still there. We hope to make a new start, new trials on different continents and different worlds. One is bound to achieve a stable society with reduced Sauron effects, at least we hope so. The second is to relieve pressure on Earth itself. The population has been fairly stable, but

is still a bit higher than Earth can really handle well. Some cultures, like the UNA between the gold mountains and big river need more room. The old rivalries have come back. Maybe more space will help soften them some. We are letting the UNA take back what Mother took from the Mericans who took from the UNA before her. It will be a few years yet before we can clear out all the cows and re-establish a stable ecology, but it should be possible.”

“So obsession with profit over people is Sauron's way. Our way is the opposite, people before personal gain. Cooperative rather than competitive.”

“That is not to say that all competition is bad, but leave it for games and learning, not interactions with people in day to day affairs.”

“Unless, after the contest, the lessons learned and/or the materials made are then shared with all. And we have seen where cooperation can lead to mindless control too. So, we always have to be diligent and not let the bullies take over again for profit, power or ideals.”

The owner is standing quietly waiting for a chance to break in to the discussion, “Excuse me, honored guest. I believe you are this instrument's owner?” I wonder what the restaurant people here are making of this discussion.

The owner holds out a strange device. Simple with holes in it. Another ocarina is my guess. Similar to the one I saw him play in Costa Rica only this one appears to be made of fine wood.

“Ah, I had wondered where I had left it.” I am beginning to think he leaves them all over on purpose.

The owner, who must be at least forty five, said, “I was a little boy of seven when you were here last. I am very glad you have returned and I may still serve you.”

Yingui rises and bows to the owner, “Please, bring out everyone. Eat with us.” He gets up and places the waitress at his spot and then serves her. The cooks come in and room is made for them as a Guardian gets up at each table. Finally Tom, the busboy, comes in cautiously and is welcomed as well. Yingui goes to the center of the room with the rest of the Guardians, each now holding an instrument of some kind. Must have created them on the spot as I did not see them before. Yingui raises his ocarina to his lips and starts to blow into it. A beautiful, but haunting melody comes out. The others jump in after they understand what he is playing. Who would have guessed that all the Guardians would also be musicians, though the music is strange. But then who and what isn't among us? Maybe I am not alone after all.

In a few hours later, after many smiles and a pile of Silver Ghosts at each table, we get up to leave. Strange, it seems to be a universal

currency. No wonder they look forward to his return. This will probably propel them out of poverty for at least a time.

“Yingui, I have a special request.” He nods to show his attention. “I would like to do something for Mr. Lee. The one who grew the rice.”

“How are we to find one farmer out of so many.”

“I see images along with everything else. Would that help?”

“Concentrate on the land surrounding his farm.” I do so. It takes about ten minutes with others looking on before the two of us working together using Yingui's ability to communicate using TP and also being able to scan the necessary distance. We leave a pile of Silver Ghosts on a counter in his kitchen. Then make a noise so he turns around to find it. We would not want the son to get it.

The weirdest part is that almost no norms know all this is going on. A TK does not call attention to themselves or their accomplishments. There are no rewards or celebrations for tasks done. In the last year the world has nearly ended several times and yet, no one knows. Everyone goes on with their lives like nothing has happened. They truly are the Guardians.

The three 'thn come in suddenly. Usually they stay out of sight of norms who do not work with us.

***The Mogols have crossed into Africa to try and assault the Jasons from the south.***

“People we have work to do. Running Snake and Cilan, you are free to go. The rest of you lazy bums, we are to follow James' lead.”

This ends the first part of my own chronicle. As TK, we are all required to write down what we have learned and perceived, either on our own, or through others as well, as in my case. Still, I feel I am left with more questions than answers.

Cilan