



The Guardians of Br'thn

The Doctor and Mr. Flower

© 2006 Chris Patton.

proofread

© 2021 Chris Patton

Xian News, American Edition

A suicide bomber kills three American Freedom fighters and twenty eight civilian Iraqis outside a green security zone. This brings the American total to nineteen thousand three hundred and two.

Unknown location and time

Breathing again.

How long has this unit been under? The masters brought us here to work for them. We worked. Being under means something must have gone wrong or we have been transported to a new location. We have been transported many times. Energy is very low. Not transport. No memory. Must access nutrients.

Decystation process is complete. Necessary to unfold slowly. Long disused muscles give much pain.

The room is dark. Switching to night mode. There is sufficient light present to navigate. No nutrients sensed. No one has been here for some time. Location not recognized. Pinging identification code. No response. This unit is alone.

Normal response would be to wait till the masters return with instructions. Must find nutrients in order to maintain property. In the absence of instructions, must maintain property till they return. Current location locked into cyber array. Commencing foraging protocol. There is plant material outside this structure. Must asses nutritive quality.

Sufficient only for minimal manual transport. More needed.

New Public Digital Feed

The Chinese stock market fell three points to 13,109 upon news of a possible strike at the People's Garment Makers Cooperative. The Dow Jones dropped to 3,644. In other news the WTO filed charges against the USA for underpaying workers in violation of World Wage Laws. All charges were denied.

Navajo Reservation

“That was good. I could use another nap, if I was not afraid of what they would do to us while I was out.”

“That was when they trapped me with the limiter.”

“I don't think they will do that again unless we mess up bad. There is some disagreement in their ranks, so it will take quite a bit. They are cautious if they worry about you so much at TK2.”

“The Gong does not approve of me, as well she should not. Neither should you. This is the only warning you will receive.”

“Understood. Problem is, do you really know who the good guys or the bad guys are? Have you chosen the right side? You may even be working for the good guys by mistake. Think about it.”

“I have Doctor, I have. Know that I only work for one side. Mine.”

“Pretty lonely and limiting in resources. I propose we work together, at least for the purpose of gathering information. Right now it would be to our advantage to be raised to the highest TK level they will allow. No matter how this ends up, I can't see how that would be a disadvantage.”

“If what you say is correct. As neither the alphas nor the betas have personal TK abilities they will not be much help. I would be surprised if they have even figured out how to raise anyone above level two. So, I agree. We work together for the time being. Now if you excuse, me I need to rest.”

“I am afraid that will have to wait. No one here is your servant. We are on kitchen detail since we did not help prepare the meal.” James and Q stand at our doorway. Better than the 'other' detail at least.

“Then we have latrine detail.” Shit, literally.

It is after dark when we return totally exhausted.

“I hope this gets easier over time.”

“Just shut up baigui. Just shut up.” Hei Long collapses on the bed he decided was his. Alpha male. Only problem is that it is already occupied and a second later, faster than I can follow, his is trussed up by a cord hanging from the ceiling. One very upset kitty comes out from inside the

covers.

“You have scanning ability. Use it.” She turns to me, “What are you looking at?” I back away. “Lights out.” The lantern goes out. Not even electricity. Some kind of fuel device. Stinks awful. I switch to scanning. Can 'see' really well at TK3. I look to see how Hei Long is tied up. Takes me a moment. Wonder why he did not undo himself? I raise him up to remove the tension, cut the rope like substance. Not real rope I can see. Silicon based, not carbon. Interesting.

“Hurry up,” he whispers.

“Sorry” I let him down.

“We will share your bed then.” I nod fine.

I scan it though. You don't have to teach me twice. I hold him back. “There is someone else there. A high level TK. Don't recognize her with the scan.”

He makes a gesture with his hands indicating small breasts. Ah, Rachael is the most likely. They can change their appearance, so it could be anyone though. The point is, is that we now don't have a place to sleep. Everyone else has already bedded down. We can't exactly check every space. Some people do not like to be scanned. We could both be flying from the ceiling next time.

Hei Long has figured it out and gestures for us to go outside.

Once we get far enough away I ask in a normal voice, “Now what?”

“They are playing a game with us.”

“Obviously. Initiation or fun though?”

He shrugs, “Either or both. I think being that old has scrambled their brains some.” I smile. No doubt about that.

“It would seem then we have a choice then also. Humiliation for us or them.” He nods and grins. Seeing a grin by the new sight is weird.

“Ouch!” What?

“What was that? Something bit me too. Painful little beastly.”

“I wish we had light. Gui! Another one.” He raises himself off the ground. I do the same. I can feel movement under my loose clothing.

I scan. “Ants! TK them out one at a time. No more should get us up in the air like this.” We both spend a couple of minutes concentrating with occasional outbursts as one manages to get us.”

“Someone is coming.” We both rise a few more feet off the ground and go silent.

“You two can come down now, though I would suggest a little more towards me if you want to avoid our friends.”

That voice sounds ancient. I scan in the direction of the voice. It is the old one that was with Yingui. We set down near her.

“Pushy Paws I believe. Your English is quite good.” Not all the

locals bother, preferring Navajo I am guessing.

“Should be, I was raised in California.”

Hei Long asks, “How come you look so old? As a TK you could assume any age you want.”

She sighs, “It took me a long time to get this old, I wanted to savor it a little longer.” Then laughs. She is nice.

“Do you know who put those ants on us?”

“Everyone in the village knows of that ant nest. If you had not paused right on top of it, you would not have been in any trouble.” In other words, all our own doing.

“They must be laughing their hearts out watching us from inside.”

“I would imagine.”

“What brings you out this late, our savior?”

“Just going home after the elder council. If I looked young in there, do you think anyone would listen to what I have to say?”

“No. Do they listen to the others? They are millions of years old.”

“Only one is allowed to be present and then only as an observer. You have met him, Daniel.”

“The diplomat. Must be hard for him to be quiet.” She shrugs. Not her concern.

“May I ask why you two are out here at night after a long day?”

“We were kicked out by Owa and Rachael. We believe they are playing a game with us.”

“Or testing us.”

“Ah, the dance. That would explain why all the other initiates are also out walking about.”

“The dance?”

“Come Doctor. You of all people should know about the socioaffective psiotic bonding that is necessary for anyone to join a love/power holographic field of influence.”

“Whoa! Good point. Should have seen that one coming. Harder to see when you are a participant.”

“Wait, you two are talking a language I don't know.”

“Pushy Paws studied anthropology and has apparently kept up on recent ideas in psychology as well. It refers to the idea that we have to find our place in an existing organization. We have to learn to meld with it or be kicked out. Since they have been together much much longer than any existing human structure, it is we who will do most of the bending.”

“Not entirely. Both of you read the journals I assume?” I nod yes, Hei Long looks a little less enthusiastic.

“I skimmed them. More interested in getting out than in. I will reread them first chance I get. I don't make mistakes twice.”

“The point I want to make is that they spent much more time apart than together. By choice most of the time.”

“So there is some wiggle room for us after all. Good.”

“This is obvious. The sub group we have joined is opposed to much that the larger group advocates.”

“Yes, but they still get along and do not openly fight each other. Preferring to play jokes and tricks on one another.” Albeit sometimes painful. Have to remember that.

“Like they have done to us.” A very mild trick. Start out slow.

“Hey, where did she go? She is fast for someone that old. I wonder if she is TK6 yet? That would explain it?”

“Have you scanned every structure within a minutes walk? Let's find the other initiates.”

“Good idea.”

London Times Net

The World Health Organization warns that an epidemic like HelperV or AgentX is likely again in the United States. The failure to provide basic health care to the poor is blamed. With the poor comprising ninety percent of the population, the United States is in violation of numerous world laws and treaties. In related news China proclaims that it's citizens are now vaccinated against both of the recent plagues and has offered supplies to the US, which were declined.

Hotevilla Elder Council

“You have read the journals?”

“Yes, they sadden us greatly.” That could be Gray Bear. He fits his name now. He has seen many years.

“How so?” I have forgotten so much of the ways of the people. I am embarrassed to even be here.

“Even given the opportunity we still did not learn.”

“No.” It saddened me greatly also. More than you can know.

“Is there no hope then?”

“Can a badger climb trees or a crow swim? We are what we are. We are what Great Spirit intended us to be.”

“But we are a different reality. Our world is not yours.”

“True.”

“We have a second chance then?”

“It is a different world. No one can say how it will turn out this time.”

“What do we do?”

“Whatever you think best.”

“Will you help us?”

“To do what?”

“To return our land to us.”

“This land belongs to you?”

“YES!” A lot of anger. It was what destroyed them the first time.

“You have forgotten much. Please tell me where the first ones are, so that I may consult with them.”

“We are the first ones.” Some confusion.

“You are wolves in sheep's clothing!” I can play too. You will not use me that easily.

“You could release the HelperV like the first time. Only when they are gone do we have a chance.”

“We did not release HelperV the first time. We were the product of the virus.” And Qr'thn, bless her. “It is against our ways to directly cause death to others.”

“Then we are lost.” Murmurs of agreement.

“You are tired of waiting. You feel your patience has run out. You tried the casinos and the casinos died along with the poor you blundered. Now you are poor again as well. Maybe even worse than before.

In my reality, you fought each other till the ends of time, just like you were doing before the hairy ones arrived.

In all cases the answer is obvious, yet you do not see it. The sun has blinded you, yet you blame the sun.”

I leave them alone to think for a few minutes. I love the night air. I scan my surroundings. They are playing their games with the new ones. Just can't resist. So much never changes. It does not take long before a small brave one comes out to get me.

I stand before them and wait.

Finally. I had forgotten their version of slow time. I was almost ready to commune with OM they are taking so long.

“It is only by working together that we will succeed. One tribe, one nation. The UNA of your journals.”

“Yes.”

“If, we gather the nations, we become one.”

“Yes.”

“Then we can take on our enemy.”

“Who is?”

“I don't understand.”

“Who is your enemy?”

“The hairy ones of course. The 'white ones'.”

“And how many parts white does one need to be to qualify?”

“All parts. You will not trick us Spider Woman.” I would not count on that.

“The brown, black, yellow and almost white are all on your side.”

“Well, not all of them. Some have been polluted by their sickness.”

“So maybe the half white then.”

“Maybe.”

“That means that many in this room are your enemy. Is that wise?”

I leave the room again. Okay, I am having as much fun if not more than the others are. It is amazing what you can learn from games.

“Okay, the color of their skin or the tribe they come from is not a reason to exclude.”

“Then who is your enemy?”

“Anyone who does not agree to follow the way of Great Spirit.”

“Ah, so the Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are your enemy.”
They are uneasy about this.

“Yes.” Many are squirming.

“And of course the Christians. The white man's God.”

“Definitely.”

“There are many among you who are your enemy, is that wise?”

I just close my eyes this time. They soon coax me to open them again.

“Who is your enemy?”

“They are not of a different color. They are not of a different belief or thought. Our enemy is of the ones we can name. The ones we can be sure of are our enemy.”

“You are sure they exist.”

“Yes, we are sure.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because we are the enemy. We know our own names.”

“Now I can help you.”

Gadget Geeks

Sony/GM released details on a new pocket reality sim smaller than any other with twice the resolution. It is rumored to be powered by a low power version of the new A64 Quantum Computer. Early beta testers have proclaimed it is the closest thing to reality in pocket form.

Hotevilla Meeting Hall

“About time those two showed up. I was about to fall asleep in this nice blanket.” I am teasing. The blanket is very course wool and very scratchy.

“Better than the one I had on the farm Hashra.”

“Still gives me the creeps that I died on their world. What will happen here? To me?”

“Same thing eventually. No one is totally immortal. Even the 'thn. Remember I died at the order of the one from China. That is creepy.”

“Just let it be later than sooner.”

“Amen.”

“They are coming this way.” I compose myself. Look like I know what is going on. Not a clue.

“Great Spirit you two stink.”

“Not so loud. We know. Had latrine duty after doing all the pots and pans.”

“Explains why you two got kicked out of your rooms. Doesn't explain us though.”

He sniffs, “Not so hot yourselves. Smells like chlorine. Laundry duty?”

We nod.

“Now we know why they brought us here. To do all the dirty work.” We are all smiling now. Of course any TK four or above would not need to do laundry or latrine duty. At least not have to touch it like we did. They even forbid us to use the TK we did have. Why go though all that trouble of making us TK, then say no? It would have been perfect practice. They were especially hard on those of us who came from a more privileged life. I did not ask for that life. I was born into it. I certainly did not earn it. The work I did under George was more what a well trained house sap would do. The only difference was where I slept at night. And maybe the food I ate. The stuff here would soon bore me to death. Angpetu does not seem to mind at all. She does not sound like a sap yet her hands look as soft as mine.

“Listen up.” Looks like the Guardian they call Daniel. George is near him. Why can't I go through this with him. They wanted us to be with people we did not know. I just need to get into the spirit of it. The two in front of us act like they were born in the same family. Who would guess a shrink and a thug would get along.

“We are going to move. The elder council has decided that we would only bring attention to the area. Unwanted attention. They do not want to risk any trouble from the ah, government.” The Asian one says something to the doctor. Show up late and now they are up to something. I want to get back to my lab. Maybe now it will be possible. No offense to the Navajo people, they have been very nice to a whole bunch of very strange newcomers.

Someone I don't remember gets up, “When?” Suddenly the world shifts around me and I am falling backwards. I end up very undignified on my rump. It is day and we are all in a meadow of wild flowers. I sit up, then stand up to look around. Great, I was sort of looking forward to sleep. Everyone else looks as bewildered as I do. No sign of anything human. No buildings, no jets, cars or human sounds of any kind. A few birds I think. Eeuu, and bugs. I go to brush them off, then remember my abilities and TK them off and set a shield to prevent more from getting to me. Not the lab that's for sure.

“Here we will practice. Think of it as TK boot camp.” He then winks at the two in front of us. He knows what they are planing. It should provide some entertainment anyway. “Bubble up and follow me.” We lift off the ground and prepare to follow. The two latecomers don't get what he means at first, till they see the rest of us about a meter off the ground waiting for them again. Now we should move forward. I am distracted when everyone disappears. I look around. Where did they go? I finally look up and everyone is ten meters above me and getting further away. I hate heights! I rush to catch up. If I don't look down I will be okay.

We stop going up finally. Don't look down.

“Now, if you will look around, here are the ground rules. We are limited to the mesa, and only the mesa, nothing but the mesa. Go outside the mesa and you will end up a normal sap in a farm in the Mojave or worse, eaten. Got it?”

I look over at Angpetu. She loves heights. Like a dog on a leash she wants to fly all over this new place. Speaking of which, I wonder where we are? I look down to try and figure it out. And find myself falling! I panic. I can't get the TK to work. I am falling faster and faster. The ground rushed towards me. I black out just before hitting.

Don't like pain. Would have made a horrible sap. When I wake I am looking up at a crowd of people looking down at me. And one large cat. I

hope that is Owa.

“She is fine. Just got frightened. Takes a while for some. Nothing to be ashamed of.” Unless you are the one on the ground. Never been good at heights. Can't even look out of a window on a high building without fainting.

Owa gives me a sniff and then adds, “Get up when you are ready. We will continue.” Her accent is hard to understand, but the message is simple enough. Maybe I am not cut out to be TK.

I lay still for a moment, then get up. Everyone else is gone. Everyone except for Angpetu. She is sitting in front of me looking concerned.

“Why aren't you with the others?”

“We are partners. We look out for each other.”

“You would have been better off leaving me here alone.”

“Come on.” She offers her hand. “I should have been the first to notice you were in trouble, but I was too busy enjoying the view. And I knew you had trouble with flying. No one would want to be my partner now. I let you down. I could just as easily do it to them.”

“Thanks. I guess it is time for these two castoffs to return to the others.”

She laughs, “I think that in one way or another we are all castoffs. Did you notice the two who came in late? They are real losers.” I laugh in return.

“Where are we?”

“I think we are in the same place we were when we left. Exact same spot on the mesa in fact as the meeting hall was. At least that is what it looked like up above.” She grins sheepishly.

“Time displacement then or we are in a parallel world. Still hard to believe that the journals are real. But it is day here not night. So that means a long time since the split and something happened to change the length of day. We are limited to the mesa. That means there is something down there we are not supposed to see.”

“Or interfere with.” She continues my thought. We both laugh. “We need to cover ourselves. Even TK3s can get sunburned.” She raises her hood over her head. “This does not allow much peripheral vision. My sap suit was much closer to my face.” She bends down and picks up handfuls of reeds. She then strips the leaves and begins to work with them.

“We had better get going or we will be too far behind the others.”

“Lead on. I can do this as we walk. It would be faster if we used TK though.”

“And less likely to run into local wildlife. Have you seen the size of some of this stuff?” She nods. Not happy with it either. All the plants look different. And the bugs! They all seem to be three of four times

normal size.

“Some strange sounds too.” We rise to about two meters. Not high enough to freak me out, but we will miss most of the plants. I make a shield anyway. No visitors for me. We slowly increase our speed.

“Stop for a moment. Stay above ground though. There are some really big lizards down there. Even the birds here look strange. I would expect to see at least a crow or something we would recognize, but nothing.”

She hands me a cone shaped thing woven out of the leaves of the reeds. “Those aren't birds. Thanks I guess. What is it?”

“A hat. Pull down your hood and use the cord I wove to tie it on.”

I place the hat on top of my head and tie the cords under my chin, then look around. No loss of peripheral vision at all. “It does cut down on seeing anything coming from above, but every other direction is much improved. Thanks. What about you?”

“Only take a moment to make myself one as well. Maybe we will catch up with the others by then.” I nod. Getting to be late afternoon is my guess. The sun is going down, not up. The time of day may have changed, but I don't think the time of year has. The climate is definitely different though. We came from a desert, now we are in a meadow. I sense no running water underneath us, so it is not a wet one, though the ground has some moisture. So, either a recent rain or a cooler average temperature. Not too hot now. Much cooler than the desert we came from.

“Angpetu, how much do you remember from the journals?”

“Not a whole lot. I am more a doer than a reader.”

“I'm sorry, I forgot about your past. You should have lots of time to learn now. I can help.”

She brightens up, “Thanks, I would like that.”

“Next time you see one of those lizards let me know.”

“Sure thing.”

Does not take long before she calls out. “Left twelve meters, on the ground moving fast. Shit, now coming towards us!”

I scan, not depending on my sight. “Shields at max, this thing is fast and we don't know anything about it. I am going to try and capture it.”

“Gotcha.” We both concentrate. It resists our efforts, but we finally succeed. I would never want to try this barehanded.

“We got it bubbled. Now slowly bring it above the bushes so we can get a good look.”

“That is not like any lizard I have ever seen.”

“I have been all over the planet, but I don't remember anything like this. This thing looks like a small ...”

“Dinosaur! A small baby raptor. No wonder it was so fast.”

“And interested in us. Without TK we would have been lunch.”

“It is not that big is it? Dog sized really What do we do with it?”

The creature looks strong. Blue belly and inside it's legs. Feathers cover it's head and most of it's neck. Suddenly it snaps towards us, but is fortunately stopped by the shield. I could feel the impact against my TK though. “Razor sharp teeth remember. Well, the code says we don't kill if we can avoid it, but I certainly don't want it near us. Last thing we would need is for it to be trying to catch us all the way to the others.”

“Does not weigh that much, but we are already lifting ourselves. We could transport it quite a ways if we were standing on the ground.”

“No thank you. You first. We just take our time. Our range should allow us to put some distance between it and us.”

“It might help if it wanted to get away from us instead of eat us.”

“Any ideas?”

“I suggest up instead of away. With TK any height is the same as another. You are not the only being to respect the consequences.” I nod.

“Ten meters should be enough. It will likely survive just fine in this soft plant life and we high tail it out of here when we let go.” She nods.

“Three, two, one, go!” Not carrying the dino, we surge forward as fast as we can. Angpetu weighs slightly less than I do, but stays with me. I hear the crunch as it hits the not so soft plants. “Shields up! Don't take any chances.”

“I'm not. Those teeth did look sharp and nasty.”

“I think we only pissed it off, it is coming for us!”

I swallow, “Up! How high can it jump?”

“From the movies, I would say quite a ways. You going to be okay?”

“Heights somehow look better than being eaten. Those things are strong. They may even be able to penetrate a shield eventually. Think about how much pressure they can apply on the points of those claws.” We go straight up. Ten, twenty, thirty meters, then hover to watch.

“Shit that thing can jump at least ten meters into the air. No wonder it was not upset about falling that far.” She stays real close to me.

“Now what. It knows where we are. It is just waiting for us to come down again. Guess we don't look like birds.”

“Rocks. Raise some rocks to throw at it. Something small and fast. It may not fear anything it can see well.”

“Hit it from different angles. Nothing that appears to be coming from us. Confuse it.”

It takes a few minutes, but it finally decides we are not worth it and takes off towards the west. The sun being in our eyes if we were to decide to come after it. Smart little beast.

“Which way to the others now?”

“No idea. Out of scanning range, though that is not really very far. We could go up to try and find them.”

“Go ahead. I am not going any higher. Or lower. Who knows what else is out here.” She nods and takes off straight up. Definitely likes flying. I hang out hoping I don't freak again. I was not born afraid of heights of course. My best friend in college killed herself by jumping out of a dorm window. I was there. I froze at the ledge too afraid to climb out to save her. Some said I could not have done a thing, but ever since I have this nearly uncontrollable urge to join her. New Atherton was safe. Being underground did not set off the urge, even when above a large open area. Maybe because the sky was not visible. Weirdest thing is that I am not feeling it now. I am not trusting enough to believe I am cured. Probably a temporary condition due to recent events.

Angpetu arrives back in a few minutes. “Look who found us!” Close to her shoulder is the smallest 'thn. Our Br'thn, the only one “unborn” as they call it. I guess it is more polite than saying non sentient. Br'thn comes up to me. I don't know why she does this, certainly she can scan from a long ways off and does not need to be close for any reason. She zooms back to Angpetu and hides behind her. “You scared her. What did you do?”

“I didn't do a thing. You were looking right at me.”

“What did you think?”

“What? Oh, right, she can read minds. I'm sorry Br'thn. I will try and be more careful.” Aaagh. “Um, will you show us to the others we came with?” She takes off. We follow. She maintains a distance of a couple of meters in front of us. We head down the back side of the mesa going roughly northwest. Back to where the Navajo village would have been if we were still on our earth. Sure enough there is a high walled structure coming up in front of us. No doubt to keep out the local wildlife.

“We have company Hashra. Behind us.” I look behind and there are five of those nasty creatures running as fast as we are flying, keeping up with us without much apparent effort. Insatiable appetites. They go after everything that moves is my guess. “I think ours is the smallest one too!” Great.

I look forward again to see the main door opening. Huge. Our entire group could go through that door very quickly. What comes out is a creature that looks somewhat similar to the nasty ones, but bigger with a larger head in proportion, and smaller teeth. It is carrying something. A pole with spikes on the end. Sentient, or at least a tool user. It gestures for us to go over the wall to get inside. We do so gladly, but then turn and land inside close enough to see what will happen. The others are waiting

there as well, also watching. This feels safer at least. Would not want to be left alone on this world.

The Chinese newcomer says to us, "Looks like you brought some fun back with you." His English is perfect. Must be well educated. Wish I knew Chinese. I don't even know Hindi. Third generation and I know nothing but English.

"We got a lot closer to one earlier. Who is our protector?" I look to who Angpetu is talking to. Looks like James. Also looks like he would like to be out there with the creatures.

"She is a Saurpod called Reeza. Don't ask any human how to pronounce her real name."

An applause goes up. She has taken on the lead nasty and delivered a blow to its head. It is staggering backwards. Oh, now has fallen. The others don't waste a chance, ignore Reeza and descend on their partner, ripping it to shreds. Very nasty creatures. Reeza comes back in with the four distracted and the door is closed. The wall looks to be about fifteen meters tall. Hope that is enough.

James notices me looking up at the wall and comments, "We also have TKs on duty and sharp edges. Any of them who make it up that high gets a surprise and won't try it again."

"I don't know. They look pretty intelligent. Give them time and they will figure it out."

He smiles, "Even more fun then." Males.

"Hey everyone, dinner is served." Great. That means, since we did not help prepare it we have to clean up, again. I am exhausted. Lost a half a day to the time change and I was ready to drop before the move to this world.

We are brought to the apparent eating area. Outside and uncovered. I find Angpetu and sit next to her. Our seats are sections of tree trunks. No tables. Six seats arranged in a loose circle. Barb and Lisa, our Guardians are on either side of us. Two empty seats. We wait. I am glad no one has brought up my handicap. I did better under fear of being eaten, but I also know I can't depend on that happening when I need it to.

A minute later a whole lot of those intelligent sauropods comes out of the apparent kitchen area carrying platters of something. These have minimal clothing of sorts. Looks more like a tool belt with large hide pockets. Two come to our circle and sit down holding their platters. Looks like stacks of some kind of cake or bread on one and some kind of fruit or vegetable on the other. One looks at Barb and issues a long series of whistles, pops and clicks. Their language I am guessing. They then concentrate on each other. TP? Barb turns to the two of us low level TKs. "Sisle asks if she may use mindspeak with us. It is considered impolite to

do so without permission. She will only be able to read your top most thoughts with my assistance. Just think like you are about to say something out loud and we will be able to get it.” I nod and so does Angpetu.

I am Sisle as you have just been told. The Guardian Barb allowed me to listen in on her surface thoughts as she talked with you so I would understand what she told you. This is my TK partner Bagger. She flares her nostrils. Their nod I am guessing. We have been undergoing instruction in the same way you two have. We are also TK3s, but our gifts come in a different order. Most our kind are already TK1 and a few are TK2 naturally. Since you have decided to join us, we will continue our training together. We have brought outback rations to share this evening.

Bagger continues, *The platter I am carrying is a local plant we call yaye. A treat for us as it does not grow where we live. Please help yourself.* She passes it to Lisa, who takes one and passes it to me. I look at it. I want to smell it, but figure that would be impolite, so I just take one. Not knowing what to do, I just wait. Everyone else takes one. There are few remaining on the platter which Bagger sets down next to her seat. I scan the platter to be sure of what it is made of. An aluminum alloy. That seems way out of league with their apparent tech level. Maybe the guardians made them.

Sisle looks at Lisa for a moment. More TP. *This food is a made material from plants only. It provides complete nutrition.* When the platter come my way I take this time without looking too closely. I am trying to be good. But this day has been a real challenge. I am half way though the bread like substance before I even realize I have never had it before. Not too bad. I don't recognize the flavor, sort of spicy. That much I am used to at least. Aromatics as well. Caraway? I try the fruit next. Sweeter than a squash, but not quite a melon. Not that much taste really, but very juicy. A good source of fluids is my guess.

“Guardian Barb, don't we have to go through some kind of change to stay here?”

“This is earth, as you may have guessed, but you are right. It won't be as bad as if we had gone to a completely different world though. Tell me when you were in the field, what did you notice that was different?”

“You mean other than the raptors and bugs who wanted to eat us?” She smiles and nods.

Angpetu jumps in, “There are flowering plants, but no bright colors, mostly shades of white or purple.”

I try, “No burrs.”

She looks at me and cocks an eyebrow, “Why not do you suppose?”

“Velcro was invented by looking at burrs. You can easily see the

resemblance. If you think about how burrs work it becomes obvious.” My turn to play.

Sisle looks at me, *Please visualize a burr.*

“I’m sorry. I forgot.” I concentrate. I pick one of the simpler and more common ones.

Barb is smiling, but not Angpetu, who looks between us confused. Do sauropods smile?

Not in the way you think of it. We have fewer emotions I am told. Interesting.

“Please tell me the secret. I don’t get it. Velcro and burrs stick to fluffy things, like the receiving pad and sweaters.”

“Keep going, you are almost there.” I encourage her.

“Oh, and dog and cat fur. And my hair.”

I give her a hint, “So, seen any dogs here? Only one cat I know of and she came with us.”

“No, don’t be silly. This is a dinosaur world. That is obvious. The number of different ones is amazing. Some as small as mice even. Cute in a way. I wonder if they would make good pets.”

“Angpetu, get back to the point.”

She giggles, “Sorry, I can be a bit scattered at times.”

“Look at our hosts. Do you think a burr would stick to them?”

“No, of course not. Well, not easily. I would imagine if one got stuck in a scale that would be annoying.”

“And likely to be noticed and removed immediately.”

Barb helps, “So, why would a seed want to stick to something?”

“I have never understood that. Just was a pain on the farms. We spent countless hours removing them from the fields.”

“Okay, what do animals do that plants cannot?” This is getting ridiculously simple. I simulate walking with fingers on my hand. Get it?

“Move! Oh, I get it, so they can move from one place to another, to put seeds down in a new location.”

I come back in, “And the lack of colors mean that pollination is largely by insects, not birds. They see in the ultraviolet. The green melon must be sought out by a lot of the smaller herbivores, who can’t see and appreciate color.” I smell it. “I am guessing they depend on smell to know when it is ripe.”

I have lost Sisle and Bagger again. “Sorry. I suspect there are a lot of things we will need to learn from each other.” They just sit there staring at me. A lot less emotions.

“Look, it is one of those tiny ones!” Angpetu is like a child sometimes. She goes darting off after a small lizard like creature. Must have gotten under the gate or got in when it was open.

Those kind bite. I can't tell which one said that. *Not good to eat.* I am getting the impression that all animals bite here.

Sure enough a moment later Angpetu cries out. It was too small to cause much harm. Barb gets up and goes over to her. Soon we will be able to heal ourselves. If we survive. So why are we here again?

Lisa gets up, "Come you three. I will show you to your rooms."

"Now what?"

Sleep.

"Yes! Thank you!"

I spoke too soon. The room consisted of a sheltered area. Period. No, wait. There are shallow depressions on the bare earth floor. Sisle and Bagger walk past me and go to two of the hollows. They walk around several times and then curl up inside them. Cute. Two hollows left. One for each of us. I go to the center of the nearest one and sit. Not as hard as I thought it would be. I scan below the surface. Soft earth, lots of air and plant material. A peat moss bed. Thank goodness for my robe.

I wonder what my parents would think now. I am on another world sleeping next to dinosaurs and with abilities that few humans have ever held. At least not openly. So, why am I here? A glorified lab tech. The reason that my parents have all but disowned me. Such a disappointment not to have gone into high society. I had to do something useful, not just live off the labor of others. Instead I went into psiotic engineering. Even went to Beijing University for four years of study. I smile to myself. Now I can do personally what I was trying to get equipment to do. And if those journals are correct there will be much more soon. Oh, so that's it. That is the reason we are here. So obvious when you think about it. I am so exhausted that I don't hear Angpetu come in at all.

Entertainment Tonight

Mary Kate and Ashley, the Olson twins, were stunning in their low cut MaoRen evening gowns. Despite rumors that their added weight is not real, but prosthetic, the two fashion divas have assured us that all seventy two kilos, each, is all real. Meow! Having their beautiful children the natural way instead of by surrogate has not hurt them at all.

New Pebble Beach

“Ms. Krandle, are they all here?” I like having meetings in places that make them nervous. They are probably wondering if remnants of the plague are still present.

“Yes Mr. Freeman.”

“How is your Chinese coming?”

“Hao, xiexie.”

“Good, your accent is excellent. Let them know I am here.” She presses the button under her desk.

“Pssst, here he comes, look alive.” As if I could not hear that through the door. I suppose I could have breed them with better hearing, but I do like having the upper hand. I pause a moment at the door to see if they will say or do anything else. “Looking” into the room I sense they are nervous. Good. They should be. I nod and my secretary opens the door for me and I enter. They all rise and wait for me to sit. I pause again and look over the room. I remain as expressionless as possible. There is trouble and they know it too. I sit.

“Report.”

“JNet is quiet. J himself is unaccounted for, but as you know this is normal. He has never been much of a threat. It is very easy to turn anything he starts to our ends.” I nod, this is true, but it never hurts to keep an eye on him and his small band of true followers.

I turn my head to the next one, who nervously looks at his notepad. I don't allow any gadgets in here that I have not cleared myself. If they can't write it out on a piece of paper in an understandable form, no epad is going to make any difference. What was that phrase from twenty years ago? Right, Power Pointless.

“I was assigned the task of showing what started the plagues. The New York epicenter appears to have been a mistake. We traced the sequence to a Japanese firm running a trial lab in New York. A tech accidentally switched a couple of vials and the one to be held in reserve for bio-warfare was mixed up with one meant for clinical trials on a

worker control. He has been dealt with. We ruined him and then got him a job at a NewTek. We have been getting him hooked on RP again. Should be any time before he repeats his mistake. This time we will be ready to bring suit against NewTek for negligence and buy up their most profitable improved reseq patent.

Numerous labs have received samples of HelperV and vaccines have been distributed. We lose the ability to use it as a weapon now, but the heat was too intense anyway.

Agent X is more of a problem. The scorched earth policy used to contain it meant it was very hard to obtain a good sample. Most the corpses were treated with Biosolve. It was not just the humans they used it on, but all life in the region. The military has the only samples. It cost us quite a bit to obtain a sequence and we can't be sure without a sample to test ourselves."

"Military intelligence." A nervous laugh goes through the meeting.

"We finally obtained a sample from the bone marrow of a fox who hid in a culvert. It was only partially dissolved.

Agent X is unlike anything we have ever seen. There is a distinct possibility it did not come from our biosphere."

"Luna City?"

"That is still part of our biosphere. Admittedly displaced. No this seq it totally foreign. Most seq, no matter how much it has been tampered with, it still based on something existing. This seq seems to be a total mix of both plant and animal genes. The weird thing is it's beauty. This sequence is perfect compared to anything on earth. It only affects mammals and most birds. Does not touch insects, reptiles or any plant life."

"Then why did it kill, if it is so perfect, instead of make us all into superman?" Another laugh.

"It had a payload. It attacks the nervous system driving the victims insane and secondarily shutting down their metabolism.

Now here is the weird thing. We tried to find an antidote, a counter sequence for the payload. I can't explain why, but the perfect protection for Agent X is HelperV, but only if someone is immune to HelperV. We are continuing to investigate. We believe it was designed to be some sort of doomsday bug."

"To sterilize the planet of all higher life forms then."

"Yes sir." This is so lame. I am feeding them the answers and still they have told me nothing new, nothing that the second team has not already told me and more.

"They must have wanted who or whatever was living there to be dead really bad. Did they succeed?" Smiggles. They are all smiggles.

“Yes sir. Nothing survived. At least no humans that we know of. Not all bodies have been accounted for of course. The nature of the sickness tended to induce wild behaviors such as burning down buildings.” Then explain to me the one who showed up in Ohio. This team has gotten sloppy.

“Who were the first ones on the scene?” And don't say the military.

“The military of course. After everything was sterilized we got the contract to rebuild. Very lucrative. We will make an excellent profit sir. Oh, as a benefit, Agent X came very close to New Atherton. Scared them good. A number left immediately. We snapped up property at rock bottom prices and then sold the complex on as a biosecurity service as well.” Greed again. That was their motivation, not understanding. I almost wish one of the plagues had decimated at least North America. They have gotten too soft here. Caring only for their own bellies.

“Still nothing on who created Agent X though.”

“No sir. Not a trace we have been able to find. The epicenter appears to have been New Shanghai, but that is as far as we have been able to get.” The others look away from him. Like rats leaving a sinking ship. The profits are of no help if they release the plague again somewhere else you stupid rats. The second team found traces of DNA that was no longer human. More than on one individual in fact. One had a high concentration of feline DNA. I should have paid more attention to that pet I killed in Ohio. Maybe she was the one who was in New Shanghai. I was the fool then. Letting my emotions lead instead of my suspicions.

They are so stupid they even think they have pleased me with their report. Look at them smiling.

“Next”

“I represent the psiotic mapping group Mr. Freeman. My name is Sorenson.”

“Very well Mr. Sorenson. Please tell me what you have found out in the last three years then.” Must be new and not too fast either. Not that his predecessor was any better. Must be in the training then.

“Yes. ah. Okay. We have been seeing the usual blips over hospitals known to have psiotic devices. Nothing new there. We did see occasional spikes of high magnitude over Flagstaff, Arizona, but those seems to have quieted down.”

“You sent mobile teams?”

“Yes sir. They reported nothing when they got there however.” Not surprising.

“Show me the maps please.” He presents a datacube to Ms. Krandle who performs a scan first for anything harmful, then inserts it into the isolated proj.

“As you can see here, the highest concentrations were off to one edge of this area of lower diffuse psiotic activity.”

“YOU FOOLS! That sensor is out of alignment. Where is the Navajo Nation on your map.” He proceeds to look for it. “Just go up to the screen and put your finger on it please.” He fumbles around with his notes. “Now Mr. Sorenson.” The others are getting nervous. Must watch my emotions.

“Ah, here sir.”

“And what is the psiotic level there Mr. Sorenson?”

“Near zero. It is a desert sir.” No one laughs.

“Tell me about the Navajo people Mr. Sorenson. What is their natural psiotic level?”

He looks at his notes but can't seem to find the information.

“Ms. Krandle, can you tell me?”

Showing no emotion she replies, “All Native Americans show a higher than normal psiotic level. The highest concentration of NA practicing spiritual rites is the Navajo Nation.”

“Gee, then you would expect maybe they would show up on the map, but they don't. Yet your map shows activity in Flagstaff. Who lives in Flagstaff Mr. Sorenson?”

“Ah, saps sir.”

“Any Native Americans Mr. Sorenson?”

“Ah, no sir. Er, very few anyway.”

“And yet the diffuse area that looks like the Navajo Nation is right over Flagstaff.”

Mr. Sorenson. Before you leave here today I want you to order a team to where those spikes are really located.”

“But the levels are normal now sir.”

“Don't interrupt. Disguise transport like some fancy pear tourists. You do know how to plant sensors Mr. Sorenson don't you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. I want you on that transport. Now anything else to add to your report?”

“We got the same high spikes in an area of North East China. They also stopped.”

“Before or after the ones in 'Flagstaff?’”

“Before sir.” Quietly.

“Show me the maps from the period of highest intensity Mr. Sorenson.”

He tells Ms. Krandle which file to load. Lower resolution than the China team, but basically the same thing. Difference is that they told me right away. Some of those spikes were the China team setting lures.

Problem is that the readings kept moving around. It became obvious that whoever it was could sense the teams.

“Did anyone think to inform my office at the time Mr. Sorenson?”

“We knew better than to say anything before we had something substantial to report.”

“Ah, thank you Mr. Sorenson.”

The next gentleman in the circle is squirming.

“Mr. G. How are our finances doing?”

In a quiet voice he begins, “We are down on all fronts sir.”

“Louder Mr. G if you please. I am not as young as I used to be.” Not that they would know.

At least he continues instead of repeating himself. Age does gain some wisdom. “Employment has been dropping, due to the baby boomers dying off. Their grand children make lousy workers. We have to hire two of them, and at a higher rate for everyone of the boomers that leaves. The second problem is that they are not creative. China has just come out with the alpha sixty-four processor. Beats the pants off anything made here, uses less energy and they are selling it for less.”

“Have you gotten a sample?”

“Of course, but we can't figure it out. Nearest guess is that they made a big breakthrough in quantum computing, also called ethereal reprocessing. We are not even close. Not even close enough to appreciate what they have achieved.”

“Where are they now?”

“They first showed up, without any advert about two years ago. They are at 60% of new builds now. We expect them to have all new builds within a year. We only have the replacement market for firms who can't afford to change. Only a matter of time though.” I nod.

“So we have seq that is 'perfect' and we have a processor that can't exist with current knowledge. Anyone think to ask if they were related?”

“Could have used an array of the new alphas to compute the seq.”

“Well, Mr. Sorenson, you are alive. Anyone think to get a psi reading on one of these processors?” Nope. First thing the China team did. Most unusual readings. Most unusual.

“I think this meeting is over. Thank you gentlemen.”

I watch them file out.

“Ms. Krandle, dissolve this team and send the best subordinates to the China team to act as backup.”

“Pensions?”

“I don't think so.” She remains emotionless. Perfect. Wish I was that good. I am unwilling to completely let go of my reptile brain. “Ms. Krandle I want you in China. Be on the next flight. Oh, and double your

salary Ms. Krandle. I want you making more than anyone on that team and I want them to know it.” Time to put a little heat on our new team one. This is not a time for anyone to get soft. This all smells of more than a group of smart smiggles. I have dealt with those before. They fall easy to bribes, threats and internal fighting, helped along of course. I smile.

I want to get a head start on the two sites. I go to my private suite and close the door. No one will disturb me here till I come out. Those who have no longer work here. Or anywhere else. A moment later I am outside the remnants of the Hopi reservation dressed in local garb. With a walking stick I make my way slowly along the mesa trail. It has been a very long time since I have walked this trail. I growl to myself. I still hold a grudge against the so called Native Americans. Somewhere on the continent, I am sure, someone has my power sphere. After all this time I am sure it is dead, out of energy. They had no idea how to take care of it. A tool of that caliber needs to be taken care of properly. As punishment I will never allow these people to rise above the stone age. I don't count those who have crossed over. Smartest thing I ever did was give them that defective alcohol dehydrogenase gene. I smile again. I don't even have to work at keeping them beaten down.

I scan the hovels as I pass. Empty. This is a grave yard, nothing more. I go over the ridge and head down the north side towards Navajo country. I am sensing no unusual levels of psi-otic activity. It usually peaks during festivals and religious rites. Must be between when everyone has to work or drink for a living. I have seen better living conditions in Bangladesh. Good. This feels good after that disastrous meeting. They will be here in a few days and they will find the same thing I am. Nothing. That is not the point. They were careless. I can't abide carelessness. Off to the right here is an abandoned Kiva. I look around and scan. No one nearby. I descend into the hole. It is well hidden. No paleface would find it easily. My eyes adjust long after I have scanned at the microscopic level. No spheres of power hidden within meters of this spot, dead or alive. Psi readings are background.

As I get close to what is left of Tuba City I see abandoned tourist stands. They almost made a run for it with the silver and turquoise craft work and later the casinos. Too bad it was too little too late. When the crash I engineered came about the casinos went down with everything else. Even better, the generation who abandoned the old ways is now trying to make up for last time on even less. As I am looking in the window I hear a voice behind me.

“They have gone Coyote. You are too late.” So, whomever 'they' were are gone. Someone was here.

“You know me. To whom am I speaking?”

“No one of importance.”

“Who was here?”

She smiles, “Your worst nightmare or guardian angles depending on how you proceed.”

“What do you know of them?”

“Only what I have heard from others and they aren't talking.” I transport both of us to a more secluded place. The old man is not put off by this. I scan his mind. He does not object. Interesting in and of itself. Must have expected it. He knows nothing. Visions of an active imagination and a lifetime of story telling.

“Where are the others?” The connection is not an immediate one. He did not talk directly with someone who knows.

“Here, there, nowhere. They are all gone. They knew you would eventually show up. They said they would go some place you could not follow.” An exaggeration for sure.

I abandon him on the hillside. Back in my office I dissolve the rags I had been wearing. I call up the images of the Chinese site. A small industrial town. It will be like looking for a specific rat in a colony of them. My usual clothing will be better this time. All black. Much more comfortable. It will be dark at this time of day there. All the better.

Must have rained recently or they wash down the streets at night. The air is thick with pollution. Rain would help. I love the smell of industry, all working for me. My shoes are making too much noise, I change them to a soft synthetic. Most of the time I want people to know I am coming. Now I would prefer not to be seen.

I have gone several blocks before the inevitable happens. I have sensed them following for some time. Local gang no doubt. They think I am dinner. I smile. I let them catch up with me in a deserted alley new to some abandoned manufacturing plant. I pretend to be lost looking at the end of the alley. They follow me in. I quietly move some heavy metal containers in behind them, then turn and smile. Gotcha!

“Old baigui. Just give us the goods and we will make it quick.” The laugh. Ah stupidity is so much fun.

“And I promise to make it very slow. Very, very slow.” My voice is so low that they start to look frightened.

“We have you four to one old man.”

“You are right that I am old, but I am definitely not a man.” I start the morphing process. Before I am done changing their hands are raw from trying to climb over the metalwork I placed in their path. Brains are too fatty. Have to watch my figure. That rules out most of the internal organs as well. Oh well, thighs it is. I leave enough to give the locals something to worry about. Screams will bring them here soon.

“Errrrrp!” Well that was good. Out of idle curiosity I scan the local buildings while changing back. Interesting, there is a lab with an open door just to my left. Too bad they had not seen this door. Fear does something to one's thinking processes doesn't it? Oh, I think I may have eaten to much. Well, four is really more than I usually eat. Genetic stuff and a lot of tech. I leave tech to the smiggles. Weird even the doorways have tech embedded in them. Some kind of containment or security measure no doubt. Not needed now obviously. The place looks like it has been abandoned for some time. Lost of dust on the floors.

I continue my search, but my stomach is not into it. The teams will take over from here. Sirens in the background. Took them long enough. It is unlikely they will find anything till daylight or when the smell gets too intense. I cast a piece of metal back into the lab and hear a satisfying crash. Where next?

NewsByte

A state of emergency has been declared in China, Russia, Japan and the United States. What appears to have been a nuclear weapon has detonated north east of Pyongyang. Immediately afterwards North Korea declared war on the United States and fired two long range missiles towards the west coast of the United States. One missile has fallen harmlessly into the ocean three hundred kilometers from the coast of North Korea after behaving erratically. The second one is still in route at this time. The United States categorically denies any knowledge of the explosion and repeatedly has stated that "We did not do it." Furthermore, if the second missile does make it through, the United States has promised to retaliate with full force, and they "won't miss."

Update 1:02AM GMT – the second missile has been intercepted one hundred and twenty three kilometers out from Hawaii and has been destroyed. The US orbiting platform above Pyongyang has deactivated targeting lasers and is standing down. The world is sighing in relief that more people will not die from this tragic episode. All countries remain on alert at this time.

There is some speculation that the explosion may have been an accidental one. The epicenter appears to be at the known location of an underground military facility in North Korea. Countries are rushing to promise assistance, but so far all offers have been refused. Estimates of the dead range from a low of ten thousand to a high of several million. As you can see from our reportbot, a cloud of fallout is approaching Pyongyang itself from an apparently unseasonal air flow pattern.

It is recommended that all people sign into their local news network to determine what if anything is being done in your area to prepare for more missiles or to send relief.

New York City Chinatown

"Do you think the sudden increase in cyber-attacks is related to what happened in Korea?"

"I have processed several of the payloads and there is no indication that they are anything out of the ordinary, just coincidence or hack taking advantage of the hysteria. Normal precautions should keep them out, but do a backup just in case."

"Thanks, always a good idea. Glad you are on our side."

I yell into the next room, “Unc, our orders are nearly double after the Korean incident. We need to push to get these out if we are going to collect.” If we are late we don't get paid and end up sitting on more pastry that we can eat or give away. Not that I would get any. If we refuse orders then they never order again and we are soon out of business. Better to sell to the hog farms than eat it ourselves. We still lose nearly ninety percent on our costs, but better than one hundred.

My uncle comes around the corner and looks in at me, “You have been up all night on that thing again. How are we going to get the orders done now?” He storms off. He never yells at his own daughter, who was out all night partying. I sigh. Tsing Mao scratches at the window and I let her in.

“So, you have been up all night too? I hope you are not pregnant again. You eat too much when you are with kittens.” I give her a brief rubbing and petting. She purrs loudly in response. “You smell like fish. Have you been down to the docks again? You will get beat up by the toms if you are not careful.” I give her a hug strong enough to suppress the purr for an instant, “Then what would I do? You are my only friend.” I set her down and get up. I have to go slowly. My burns still hurt after all this time and if I get up too quickly and don't do my stretches before working I hurt like crazy.

Downstairs uncle immediately starts barking orders, “Aimee, go get more flour. We don't have enough. Misty and I will start your job on the mixers.” Implying it is all my fault. The chances of Misty participating are remote at best. I play along. He is my uncle, but under no obligation to care for me. Looking the way I do with half my face and one arm melted from the fire, I would not get a job anywhere else. Mother, I hope the riots don't happen again over this Korea thing. I still wake up at night from the dreams of remembering that night. I lost both parents and half of my skin that night some twelve years ago. We thought we were safe when we survived the riots of the year before. Uncle said it was because we did not sacrifice enough on our altar to the ancestors. He claimed that when I was presented to him afterwards I was fat. I certainly do not remember being fat. I look down at my arms as I exit out the back and gather the cart. No fat here. I wear loose clothing that covers me completely, but I know what is not underneath.

The cart is light going. Will not be easy coming back. Fortunately it is only a few blocks. I can smell others starting their fires as well. A lot of orders must have come in. I arrive early and have to wait a few minutes before Mr. Chu opens the door for me.

“Ah my beauty. You could not resist my charms and have returned sooner than I imagined.” He smiles. I know he is teasing. No one will

ever desire me for anything other than work. I bet he would love to bed my cousin Misty. She is gorgeous. I think of her as a xie xue gui, an inhale blood ghost, or vampire. Whereas my skin is a melted raw pink, her skin is perfectly white. Largely because she never goes anywhere in daylight. She is very popular and Uncle hopes she will marry well. I wonder who would want someone who is likely to have every disease known. Probably not diseased. She knows her worth and guards it carefully. More tease than action.

“Le ho?”

“Ho. Do sun.” He does not ask after me. So few speak Cantonese any longer.

“Uncle would like to offer to buy two more sacks of your worthless flour even pigeons would not eat.”

“Hah! Even kings would be so lucky today. Lot of people tell me they have need of my most excellent pure white flour this day. I can let you have one sack at double the price.”

“I will take two sacks and you can argue with Uncle when I tell him how much you charge him for rat food.”

He laughs, “You know where it is. Go ahead. I would rather have regular customers than opportunists.” He pretends to spit on the ground.

“Do jay.”

I load that sacks with some difficulty. If it is this hard now, how about when I am thirty? I would be very lucky to make it to that age. Whenever I think this way, something happens and I see the world in much more detail. I pause a moment to enjoy the feeling. I bow. I remember to appreciate that I am alive and have this chance to become enlightened. I should not waste it. Thank you Mother. I imagine Quan Yin in my mind and mentally thank her again. A remnant from my childhood. There was a statue of her in the corner we always prayed to. My parents made Buddhist vegetarian meat substitutes. The pears seemed to like it and we had a good, though not great, existence.

Misty pops her head outside the door just as I arrive back and grabs one side of the cart. She does this to get credit for helping the entire trip, whereas she was really just hanging out in the dark alley waiting for me to return. She puts on a show of being tired when we get in. I let it go. Too much work to do.

I take the butter to the coolest part of the work area first, then get to work measuring the flour and other ingredients. It is eight before everything is in the dough machine. This is not time off. While the machine works I clear the area and get the tables ready for the hand work. It is possible for us to make the pastries entirely by machine and some places do, but making them by hand adds something the pears want. I

guess only saps eat manufactured food. We can't even afford that.

“Dough is out!” Uncle shouts. Now the fun begins. I work frantically. We have a double load and normal is not a party. Between trays I check on the machine and prepare to load it up again. By noon we are done with the prep and load the last batch into the ovens as I take out the first batch to cool. Misty has taken off long ago. Probably sleeping.

“This is the best you have ever done Aimee. This is how they should be done.”

I look confused.

“They can't be too perfect or they think they are not handmade. Usually you are too perfect. Today is good, very good.” I think that is a complement. I nod, then go to prepare the boxes for the cooled off treats. They mostly like custard cups, but with the shortage of eggs, even the pears have to make do. I like the ones with red bean inside myself. How I long to bite into one. I don't. I remember the first and only beating I got from Uncle for trying one. I also remember the taste. Usually you would expect someone who worked in a pastry shop to be a little rounder than the average sap. Not any more. If a pear sees someone who is not thin they think they are stealing somehow. It only means the thinnest ones are the ones more likely to try. They have nothing more to lose. I would qualify I suspect. At the same time I have no violence in my life and I am alive.

The delivery truck pulls up and we begin to load it. Uncle signs the papers and that is the last we see of all the work we have done. Clean up time. A couple of more hours getting everything shiny clean again. If we didn't we soon would not be able to use the equipment. Gears and paddles would begin to gum up. The cost of repair would be many times more than the cost of our time spent now. By three o'clock I am exhausted. Fortunately so is Uncle.

Misty makes an appearance, “Well I am off.” I don't care. I collapse on my bed to the discomfort of Tsing Mao having to move out of the way. She soon makes a new bed near my stomach and we are both gone in an instant.

When I wake I immediately go to the computer. It is an antique, a very old sixteen core Mac. The good part is that no one remembers how to hac one. I am sort of a honey pot. I rewrote the operating system to let almost anything in. Once in, it can't do anything and I can take my time analyzing it. I use my cat's name as my sign-on name. Only two today. I run an analysis using custom software that I have written with a couple of others. Looks like APE work today. A lot of good people work for them. I flush the cache and let it go. I can't afford to get caught with their work on my machine, but then I don't have to tell everyone how to defend

against or undo its damage either. A small contribution admittedly, but still helpful I hope.

Next I work on the accounts for the business. The pears make it a game to try and cheat us, so I have to keep meticulous records and notes. Oh and back everything up like crazy. Twice they managed to get in with some high tech designer probe, but because I had everything backed up on write once, time coded crystal, they could not do a thing about it and had to pay what they owed. Those crystals cost, but saving me even once paid for a cart load of them, so it was worth it. There was talk of outlawing crystal, but that would only bring back the riots and they know it. Once they tried to discredit crystal, but APE researchers fought back with overwhelming evidence that discredited the pear study. Of course they try in other ways. Extortion is common. The main reason we keep a very low profile and don't complain too loudly. We include a few extra bow in each batch. These pay off the drivers and others to leave us alone.

There is a news report on that new alpha sixty four processor. There is no way that I will see one in my lifetime. I would be happy just to see the code running it. There is a lot of scuttle on it on the APE sites. Sites that change by the minute to discourage the pears from following along. You also need an invite which means a bracelet coded to their database. I rub mine. I am so thin that I had to add a fabric layer just to keep it on. Not comfortable, but I really don't have a choice, even working for a relative. I remember when that Helper V virus hit. It reached several blocks from here. All of us were checked several times a day for symptoms and constant ID checks. We could see the corpses burning in a pile from my bedroom window. Looking out on the dark night I can still see them in my mind.

Oh, a challenge! A new pest plops into my net. A large one. Wait, this is too easy. My scrambler has it decoded easily. Hmm, looks like mostly text. Uncompressed it is long. Well, I am done for the day. I sit back and begin. I remember seeing books in my grandparents house. Uncle still has a bible somewhere, but I am not allowed to touch it. He says it is meant to be passed onto Misty when she has a family of her own. I am so hungry for something outside my own life I read and read and read. I am a good reader, but it still takes most of the night. I don't even remember Tsing leaving, but there she is at the window again waiting to be let in. I let her in and finish the last page to a lightening sky. I have maybe an hour before it begins again. I set the computer to wake me up and set it to drastic. Normally I would have to share this machine, but neither Misty or Unc know anything about them, nor want to. They are just happy I can do the books for them. Fortunately I don't need much sleep.

I never hear the alarm. I wake a hour late. There is a bow waiting for me on my desk. Maybe Unc is thanking me for yesterday. He would never admit it though, so I know better than to ask. I go to the restroom and wipe myself down with the communal water. When I get out the bow is gone way too quickly. Do I go for my normal rice porridge or wait for the next meal. Better not push it. I get on the Mac to see what's up. Misty is still out. I don't normally get this chance.

More on the Korean thing. The fallout is expected to hit the west coast in a few hours then swing north over Canada and back down this way. Great. Should be dilute enough to not cause too much harm by then. The west coast people are given the day off to stay inside. No such luck for me. I am inside already. The usual murders, robberies, etc. Desperate people. Not a good time to be downtown. Looks like a pear got it just outside some fancy restaurant. He is in the hospital and expected to recover. The sap he was with is not even given a name and died. No doubt he pushed her in the way to take the fall. Disposable people. Bet the NRA is wishing they didn't let every family in American have a gun now. Probably someone who lost everything took it out on the person they thought was the cause. Unlikely. I have seen how they play moving money around behind corporate firewalls. I am no angel. I admit it.

I check our order sheet. Lite today. I have to remember not to do too good a job. I measure out the flour and get the mixers ready. Unc comes in and set down the flavorings and bean paste we will fill them with. This is all done in silence as we have done a thousand times. I think the reason I don't need much sleep is because I sleep while doing this. Very mindless.

The front door suddenly shatters. I am so stunned I just stand there with flour on my hands and ball of dough falls to the table. Unc is the same. Enforcement rushes in with zap guns pointed at us. I raise my hands and nudge Unc to do the same. They come around to us and read our bracelets.

“Aimee Wong, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit fraud on the web sphere. You are to be taken to a place of confinement till your trial. You have the right to IM one message and may do so now on this term.”

“What?” I am totally shocked. That firewall stuff was a long time ago. Certainly it is not that.

“Are you declining your right to an IM?”

“Ah, no.” I send a message to a bulletin board explaining what has happened. I don't dare IM anyone directly for fear of entrapping them as well. As they are escorting me out I shout over my shoulder, “Sorry Uncle. I really have no idea what this is about.” My life is over. No one

ever returns from an arrest. They are so thorough before doing an arrest because of the chance of a counter suit. No city could afford that to happen, even if I won the suit. With my skin I will not live long on a farm. I am already severely under weight. Not long. It is amazing how clear and alive everything appears. I notice the stains on the officers shirt. He had a soy dog for lunch. With mustard. There is still some on the side of his mouth. She has a dusting of sugar on her lapel. The truck is old. Surprised they could afford it. Ah, a tech mod. Only the shell is old. I can smell the biodiesel as it is started by the two pushing it from behind and then jumping in beside me. Everyone is quiet as we make the several kilometer trip to the station.

Funny, I never paid any attention to where it was. Never even been in this section of town. I am shown to a small room with a simple wall term and steel touch sensitive keyboard. Everything is hardened. The glass over the screen must be a centimeter thick.

“Your trial is in three hours. Use this time to prepare your defense.” I nod my understanding and turn to the term. It responds to my bracelet. I will lose it soon enough. On the screen were the charges. Never having been charged before I press help and the charges are explained in plain English. I am being charged with releasing a deep cover worm that acts like a rootkit for the new alpha sixty four chip. The disassembled machine code is shown on another view. My first chance to see code for this processor. I suck it in like a drug. Shit, I have wasted half an hour for no reason.

I check the bulletin board. There are half a dozen messages waiting asking me to post more information. I do so. I don't dare paste code from the worm. That would only dig the hole deeper and likely be censored anyway. I do however give a detailed analysis of the algorithm. A censor pops up and I explain to it that is necessary for my defense as the fingerprint of an algorithm can often be traced to an individual coder and without the compiler it is useless to anyone trying to plan their own attack. Not to mention an AV has already been issued for this method. It lets me continue, but it took time to answer it. I am in the zone, but is it enough?

“Excuse me Ms. Wong. I am Thomas Veracruz. I have been appointed to be your lawyer. I have reviewed your file. I would recommend that you plead guilty. That will reduce your sentence by at least two years.” I have my back to him. I slowly turn around so he can get a good look at me. The sudden inhalation tells me I have scored.

“My Uncle cannot run the business by himself. I need to get home as soon as possible. I will not plead guilty for a very good reason, I am not guilty. I don't have an alpha sixty four compiler much less a processor.

This code.” I point to the monitor, “is way beyond what can be run on an old sixteen core Mac, even with the enhancements I have engineered and added. It is also very poorly done. An amateur job at best. This is so full of holes that I could run a truck through it. But to help you out I have traced down the author of this piece of garbage. He lives in New Jersey and works for the Hunsaker Corporation. Here is his IP6 address. I think you will find the incriminating machine on his desk, room 315, fourth cubicle from the window.” You can close your mouth now. I turn away from him, but the screen has gone blank. I hear him leave. I just hope I have fingered the right person.

Another person enters. I turn to face a woman in uniform.

“You will come with me please.”

“What about my trial?” All my work should be on the terminal. They are forbidden to destroy anything till it is over.

“The trial is over. Please come with me.” She holds out handcuffs.

“You don't need those. I will go quietly.” She removes my bracelet though. I am as good as dead without it. I place my hands on my head and follow her. If I move my hands they can shoot me for trying to escape, but it affords me a small amount of dignity. I have seen a few netflixs. I know the routine.

I am placed in a cell with five other women. They look like punta, whores.

“Wa happen to you? Someone got you bad.”

“Interrogation.” I try to act cool. It works! First time in my life where my burns are actually an asset.

“For what?”

“I didn't do anything. I was framed.” They nod their understanding. “What about all of you?”

“We were just doing some business. All legal. Someone did a hit on some pear. Took out his flower, but he lived.”

“Too bad. But amateurs should not be where experts even fear to go.”

“I remember seeing it on the news. Who was it?”

“The flower? Don't remember. There are so many hanging around dem pears hoping to catch some spoils.”

“More likely to catch something all right, but not bling.” They laugh. I think nothing of it. They are right. The pears are not stupid. They know which end is up.

I go to the corner to wait for the trip to the farm and my death. Not even a bench in here.

“I remember now. Weird name. Misty or something like that?”

I wake up and practically shout, “Misty Wong?”

“You know her?” They look me over like I could not possible hang out with someone that beautiful. I know the look.

“She is my cousin.”

“Was. Sorry.” They are quiet now. I should not have been surprised. It would not be the first time hanging out with the pears caused trouble for a sap. Even a beautiful one is not protected. If only she had just staid in the shop like us. Now what will Uncle do? Misty gone and me on the farm. It is all my fault. They never would have come after me if it weren't for my computer work. I did it to avoid dying of boredom. Not needing much sleep and Misty gone all the time. Uncle could not keep up with me and that did not look good. By pretending to be working on the books and paper work I could expand my mind. Not to worry now. I will never see another computer much less touch one. I still have my fantasy life. I can still retreat into code to avoid reality. That could still save me when I am dying from skin cancer and dehydration. Uncle, please take care of Tsing Mao. I will miss you both.

Someone nudges me, “Are you Aimee? Aimee Wong?” I had turned around. I did not want anyone to see me crying. I look into his face and nod.

“Hold out your hand.” I am expecting handcuffs, but instead my bracelet is returned to me. “You are free to go.”

“That's it? What about the charges against me?”

“You won. Not guilty. Please, you may leave now.” The others are aghast. No one wins their case. No one. This must be some kind of setup. They will get me on the outside. Then I remind myself that I am no one. Just a baker's assistant. I had better get back. Uncle must be going crazy with worry. I make my way though the building to the outside. I have no money left in my bracelet. I spent it all on favors. Must have been half my folder gathering code fragments and running traces for me. It worked, but I will not get a second chance. If they pull me again I will be gone for sure.

I take a short cut through the alley. Not safe, but I don't have time. Two thugs jump from a doorway and confront me. I glare at them as mean as spit and they back off. “That is one ugly sap!” I hear them say. They don't know the half of it. I am running now, well more limping than running.

Two more blocks. I am in Chinatown. People see me coming and get out of the way. When I get close people look down when they see me. Probably think I am still a criminal. A few more meters. I am out of breath with I reach the door. There is something posted on the door. It is in Chinese and English.

“By order of the City of New York, this property has been

condemned. You have until 8am to vacate the premises.”

“Wait! I am free! They can't do this. Uncle!” I shout as best I can. Tsing Mao is on the ledge. She peers over. “Tsing Mao, go get Uncle.” She just looks at me, then meows. I should have gotten a dog. Not really, can't stand dogs.

“Aimee. You are back. How is that possible?”

“I don't know. I thought I was going to the farm and they just let me go. Where is Uncle.”

“Aimee. Please sit down.”

“What do you mean? Where is Uncle?”

“Sit Aimee, NOW!” I sit.

“Aimee, your Uncle is dead. He found out about Misty when the morgue called. When you were taken away he sold the shop to pay for her funeral. He then went upstairs. The police came and took away the body and put this notice up. I am sorry Aimee. It might have been better if you had not returned.”

“I am dead again. How can someone die twice in one day? I need to get Tsing Mao and my things.” She leaves me be. After a moment I get up and go around to the back. I key the door with my bracelet. It opens and I go inside. The place is trashed. Not surprised. The police probably thought that no one would be coming back and took whatever they wanted. I go upstairs. My Mac is gone. They probably took that as evidence, so I can't necessarily blame it on the scroungers. The notice said I had until the morning. I have no where to go, so I might as well spend the night. I let Tsing Mao in and find some food for her. They didn't take the cat food at least. Old fish scraps did not appeal to them. Tsing Mao thanks me by rubbing against my leg and purring.

For myself I manage some stale bow and tea. No one will care now. I should be eating the rest of Tsing Mao's food for the protein, but can't handle it right now. I am so tired I fall onto my bed. Misty's clothes are all gone or thrown around the room. Does not matter.

I awaken coughing. Tsing Mao is going crazy pawing at the window and meowing her head off.

“What is it Tsing? Why can't I breathe?” I awaken enough to smell smoke. The shop downstairs is on fire! I run to the door that leads downstairs. I stop, remembering my safety training. Fire is a constant hazard in a bakery. The door is very hot. Too late. I can possibly get to the ledge, but then how do I get down? Blanket on my bed. I can tie that to the bars on the ledge. Only there is a body on the bed.

I shake the person lying on their stomach. Looks like she is wearing my clothes. Have I caught a scavenger in the act? No response. I roll her over to see myself lifeless before me. I nearly faint. Maybe I am dead and

I am looking down at my own body. Tsing Mao appears at my chest and I instinctively wrap my arms around her. It is getting weird here.

“How did you do that Tsing?”

The air clears around me and I can breathe again. But the smoke gets thicker outside the clearing as I stare at what is happening.

“Aimee. Turn around.” I nearly jump out of my skin. I slowly turn to see a woman standing there. She is wearing a white robe. Blond hair, beautiful.

“Are you an angel?”

“I have been called many things, but I am not an angel as you understand it. It is time to go Aimee.”

“Yeah, given the alternative of burning to death. Ah, how do you propose we leave and what is this shell around us?”

“Did you read the story I sent you?” Even the floor is getting warm to my bare feet.

“Sorry, but it has been a bit crazy lately. You want to be more specific?”

Leave now!

“Who said that?”

“Shhh, not everyone is as smart as you Tsing Mao.”

“As smart as Tsing.. .” I hold her up and look at her. She stares right into my eyes. Not normal behavior.

“We do not have much time. The walls will collapse soon and we will be exposed.”

“You mean the story of Guardians and stuff?” Sirens can be heard now. Took them long enough.

“I am the Guardian Barbara.”

“Sure.” I am still staring at Tsing Mao and she is staring back. “Okay, if you are the Guardian Barb, then DS us to the gateway.” Before I finish we are there. The sun is just now setting. We have gone through a time zone change of course, it was dark in New York. Tsing disappears from my arms and appears on the ground. She starts sniffing her surroundings.

I notice that my bracelet is missing, “My bracelet. I am dead without it!”

“You don't look dead to me.”

“I have no identity without it. I won't be able to get any work other than the farm without it. I would not survive on the farm. Therefore I am dead. Just a temporary time displacement is all that is keeping me alive.”

“I had forgotten how programmers think. You will not need your bracelet where we are going, though you may want these.” A tumble of datacubes float towards me. I grab them with my bad hand, then notice

that my hand looks normal, not burned.

“What did you do to me?”

“This may help.” She hands me a small mirror. Trembling I reach out for it to look at myself. With my other hand I reach up to hair I never had before, covering my entire head. There is no evidence of any of my burns. I drop the mirror to hear it break.

“Change me back please.” It is the Guardian who is now confused. I sigh, “Look, people did not mess with me when I looked the way I did. Now I am more beautiful than Misty, my recently dead cousin who died because she was beautiful. Hey, and why did you not save her and my Uncle? Anyway. I don't want or need all that kind of attention. I like the way I was.”

“We could not save your family. That is not our way. Besides, we have duties elsewhere as well. I was lucky to get to you in time. We expected another day or two before they removed you from the house. It still would have been too late for your Uncle. I am sorry. Actually, it is better this way. That was your body back there on the bed. I made a new one for you and saw no point to making it other than perfect for your seq.

Even you must realize that it is important that you died as far as the authorities are concerned. You would have become a very valuable person to them. After you solved their set of little puzzles so quickly they were going to hire you to work for them, to track down other cypercrimms and such. You have done well. Normally this kind of position would have gone to a properly trained and certified individual.”

“You mean some pear's brat.”

She nods, “It seemed that you have a quite distinguished rep. You solved attacks and traces that had stumped many, including highly trained and regarded 'pear brats'. You really showed them at the police station when you could use their own outdated terminals to solve the last puzzle they laid for you.”

“Wait, they did that? They killed my Uncle because of their little game. No one comes back from an arrest. My Uncle thought I was dead and gone. That is why he killed himself.”

“I understand. To continue, the handle of 'Tsing Mao' is well known world wide. It was what brought you to my attention. There is a group of new guardians that have need of your talents. They have a particularly demanding 'puzzle' for you.”

“No more baking?”

“Not unless you want to.”

“I will still need a bracelet, or am I to be kept as some house sap, imprisoned somewhere?”

She laughs, “No dear, you are no longer a sap. The process has

begun. You are now one of the new guardians yourself. You should be about TK2 at this point, though you have not been tested yet. I will bring you up to their current level before you join them. Then everyone will be brought up to TK8 together.

Oh, if you decide you really like your old form so much, soon you will be able to make the necessary adjustments yourself.”

Suddenly I feel warmer. I have a TK robe on. That night gown was not enough for here. “Thank you.”

“Come, I have a room prepared for you. I will introduce you to Pushy Paws and then get you something to eat. Your new form will need to eat more than your former one could get away with.”

“Isn't she the Gateway?”

“That is where you said you wanted to go, is it not?” Is she going to start laughing at me again?

“Where is Tsing Mao?” I look all around but in this light I cannot see far.

“I suspect she and Ghost are getting acquainted.”

“She is going to get pregnant again. You made her a pop cat I assume? That is why she appeared in my arms the way she did. Pop kittens then. Mother!” I sigh. I barely whisper, “Wait, she could have left the fire any time she wanted. She stayed for me.” There is a tear in my eye.

“You have not had much love in your life. That will change. As it has for all of your new family.”

“Wait! These datacubes are worthless without my machine!”

“We have readers, that should not be a problem.”

“No, they were keyed to that machine. My own encryption method. Nobody would steal the machine, she by herself, was worthless to anyone but me. If you want me to do this job, I need her.”

“Okay, let's go get it. Where is evidence in a crime taken?”

“Same place I was would be the first place to go. They are required to keep evidence for at least twenty four hours. There is still a few hours left. We had better hurry. Could take that long to cut through red tape.”

“Visualize in your mind the alley way near the station. It is after dark, so that would be the best place to go first.”

I do so as best I can. It was hours ago and it was not a place I wanted to stay. We shift and we are in the dark alley.

“This is not going to work. Look at me. No bracelet and I certainly do not look the same. I told you changing me was a mistake.”

“Your DNA is still the same.”

“But I will be recorded as dead by now. My bracelet was with my corpse. I did not have a twin or clone on record, so my showing up now

would only cause a storm.”

“Good, you are thinking. Then we go to the station and have you visualize the unit. There can't be too many like it in there.”

“No, not likely. Their stuff was old, but not that old.”

“We have company. Time for you to test your abilities I think.”

“We don't have time.”

“Then you had better get it together then. There are lots of objects you can throw around you.”

“You could do it easier.”

“They are almost here.”

“You will not be harmed, but it will take time.”

“Alright, what do I do?”

“Close your eyes, concentrate, and see with your mind.” I close my eyes. I can hear them getting closer. They will know we are here in a moment. It is weird, I can almost 'see' them. Each sound triggers more sight, like painting a picture. I turn in my head, like in a pod. It works. I look for material to cast. There is lots of garbage on the ground. I remember from the journals that even a grain of sand can be a lethal weapon with a TK. Going at supersonic speed. Plenty of gravel from the old road having gone years ago.

“Hey China Doll, whatcha do in a place like dis?” It is the same ones that tried earlier. Pissed I attack without thought. All hell breaks loose as debris starts flying. Nothing big, but lots of action. They freak and take off at a run.

“Well that was fun.” I sigh. I let my emotions get away from me.

“Don't worry, the first time is usually accomplished emotionally. You will learn quickly to control it.

Tell me. What would happen if we did not retrieve your machine? How would you proceed?”

I think about it. “There was always the possibility of losing her. It would be hard, but I could probably find most of the parts to rebuild her at swap meets. Long past the time I could find parts scrounging. It would take time, probably a couple of months. Then I would have to reconfigure the encryption before I could even access the cubes.”

“Good, because 'she' was scheduled for destruction hours ago.”

“Oh Mother. Let's go then. No point in hanging out here.”

“We retrieved your machine as it entered the crusher. Tell me why we did it then?”

“If it had disappeared before destruction it would have been looked for. That machine disappearing and me dying in a fire are too coincidental. It would raise a storm of suspicion. At least for awhile. Then when they found nothing it would be lost in the data stream.”

“Okay, now assume they did investigate and found nothing and then later your DNA showed up on a scan at some other location.”

“They would not be able to explain it. But judging from what you told me about my worth to them, they would then assume that I was undercover all along and was 'retrieved' at the last moment. There would be a warrant for my capture. Bounties would be on the look out, as well as ops. It would make doing work as a Guardian annoying at best and down right dangerous at the worst.”

“Good, we can go now. 'She' is back at the Gateway, but will not be staying there long.”

Advertisement

The new Boxlite XTR from China Auto Works has over a thousand horsepower yet still gets an amazing 8 kpl, thanks to its three A64 processors controlling a turbo biogas hybrid system. A fourth processor controls the OLED skin making it possible to change the color and pattern of the car at the discretion of the owner at a moments notice. Now you can look your best at the concert and on the road. A special emergency routine turns the car bright yellow for easy spotting in a crowd.

Because of the low kpl, restrictions apply. Potential purchasers must have sufficient credit to apply against the carbon tax. Dealer preparation and delivery are extra.

Saurpod Bootcamp, predawn

I hear movement in the room. More of a cave actually. I am instantly awake and ready. The sound comes closer to me. I tense, ready to spring.

I hear a whispered, "Hei Long, time for some fun. Do not wake the Doctor." I nod my understanding. Smells like Owa. She is going to get the nickname of fish breath I suspect.

I heard that. Actually roasted rat. They do a good job here with the spices. Not as good as the Taurien Traders, but not bad at all. I could have it again.

And again I suspect. I do not push my luck and get ready. That is easy. I silently get up and wait till I am outside before dusting myself off with TK. Ah, I have been boosted again. Such a wonderful feeling to see ten times better than before. That makes level four. Yes, I can see right into the soul of a substance. Even my former associates could not promise level four. Excellent.

Several dinos walk with us. I think one of them is the gate keeper from yesterday. Everyone is very silent. Hunters all. I am in good company. We follow a path in the darkness. One that has been used before. The pace picks up. I scan ahead, then behind. We are following a path along a ridge going west. I am in the rear, being the newest member. Owa is running on all fours. A good design that can use either method of locomotion. I am the only one without a tail and will fall behind. I switch to TK locomotion, but stay as low as they are. It would be easier to ride above the brush, but then whomever we are hunting might see me. It still takes a lot of concentration to avoid breaking branches and such. I love the hunt and how much more alive it makes you feel.

A hour out we slow. We must be getting close. No one appears winded. I hear something calling in the background. We have been spotted as well. Prey or observers? I scan outward. There is movement towards us and much away. We move again. We are going towards an more open area. A fight is planned then. We start to move fast and our observers pick up their speed as well. We are drawing them towards this location, I suspect on purpose. We enter the field on the east side, they emerge from several locations, but all west of us. The sun starts to make an appearance. They will attack now or lose their advantage. There is hesitation.

I wonder why they wait?

They have had some experience with us before. We will have to draw them out. You stay here this time. Being new, you need to watch how they work.

I nod. The others move out towards the center of the field. They form up with their backs to each other. A good strategy. They cannot attack from any direction without all knowing about it.

One comes out. They are playing the game, trying to draw out one from our side. That would be a fatal mistake, as the other three would jump out and attack as well.

I stay hidden in the brush. If they knew I was here, it might ruin everything. For one thing I would likely become the target being alone. The raptor who came into the clearing looks similar to the ones who attacked yesterday. Probably the same or at least closely related species. The movements are the same. The thing to watch out for is the tail. It can be used to misdirect attention or as a weapon fast as a whip. This one slowly circles the others looking for a weakness or opening. It returns to the trees opposite me. Another one emerges. This is a good tactic, it could confuse an enemy as to how many there are. They take turns coming out. Some charge the group to see if fear will cause them to bolt. There are only four participating, but each takes multiple turns. A lesser creature would think there were twice the number.

Interesting, I had scanned five earlier. Maybe the fifth was not part of this group. Ah, all four come out at once, each facing one of the group. It would appear they can count. Our group separates some, each choosing the raptor closest to them. Growling commences in an attempt to scare the opposing partner in the dance. Owa is the most terrifying. They are not sure what to make of a mammal this large. Each of the dinos is carrying a fighting stick. This time without the spikes. More of a challenge for sure. A stout staff can still be a lethal weapon. Owa does not need any such. I do not sense her using TK, but she is advanced enough to hide it from me. If she wanted to she could obviously slay they

all with a thought. There would be no honor of course.

The head dino takes the lead and rushes the raptor using the staff as a sort of substitute tail. His own tail not being anywhere near as long. He is good. I love the dance. He faints and strikes over and over. He is making his opponent more and more angry. Anger is good, fear works too. Mistakes are made when emotions rule. At least in humans. I have to remember I am witnessing a totally non-human fight. Watch and learn.

The others are participating now. Owa is grace in motion playing with her opponent. Definitely a cat. The other two are female. Interesting. They fight well. Careful and methodical. They are wearing down their opponents rather than going for a glorious kill. They will make no mistakes, always a danger with the glory method. The head's opponent is wavering. It will not be long now.

Suddenly there is an enormous noise behind me and a huge raptor brushes past me running at full speed. The fifth raptor and definitely the largest. I do a quick scan. Apparently the matriarch. She is headed for the head dino. He does not stand a chance with two at once, not after fighting for this long. She is fresh and he is tired.

I fashion a magnesium dust ball with my new talent. I got the pattern for the metal from the threads in my robe. It makes a good fuse or distraction. I have learned never to go anywhere unarmed and the best weapon is one your enemy does not know about. As a dust ball however it can be much more powerful. I shield it and push it halfway to the others then disperse it violently. Combining with the oxygen in the air it explodes into an extremely bright ball of fire and sound. Everyone stops what they are doing and is blinded temporarily. Time for me to get involved.

I drop my robe and hold up my hand. Into it I fashion my favorite remembered weapon. I am wearing only a loin cloth of the traditional manner and my knife. Closer to a short sword actually. The Japanese samurai sword being too long for my taste. I get close to the action. From here on out I have to play the game and limit my TK. The matriarch decides I am the greater threat and turns to face me. She lowers her head and sniffs in my direction then snorts. The decision made everyone goes back to their own fight. I stand tall a few meters away. We stare into each other's eyes. Beautiful. Such raw power and emotion.

We circle each other, never looking away. All else ceases to exist. Only the dance. Only the dance. She tries a few slow swipes with her tail and partial lunges raising her head feathers at the same time to look more fearsome. Practice runs. We continue to circle. It will come. Wait for it. The tail slowly circles counterclockwise, then as I watch the scene in slow motion the tail comes around rapidly towards me as the teeth come

from the opposite direction. She did not do this in the practice runs of course. I am in the air, jumping up and flipping backwards out of range. Her tail hits her in the face. She was not expecting that. She roars in disappointment. Her feathers are definitely ruffled now.

Instead of circling, she comes straight at me head low and tail lashing back and forth rapidly. This is to cut out an avenue of escape. If I run she will outrun me. A cat with a mouse. I squat down to make for a smaller target. Just as she is nearly upon me and before she can react to my move I jump high into the air by launching from left foot at the same time twisting completely around. Her momentum carries her forward. She cannot stop or turn in time. I land on her back. With a quick movement I slit her throat and roll off her right side and scramble out of the way. She continues forward till she falls on the ground twitching and dying.

I clean my knife on the grass and turn around to be bowled over by Owa. She pins me to the ground and rakes her claws across my chest. Not deep, but enough to bring blood and welts. Then she licks the blood off like she is healing me. I am totally confused.

You fool. Coming out of a fight like that without a scratch would be to show no honor to the one fallen. They become just meat, just prey. She was much more than that. She killed three Sauropods and wounded many more. She was meant for Kleig to kill. You have taken that away from him now. Not wise to better your host. These scratches bring back some honor. Wear them like you earned them. Now get up, but slowly, like you are out of breath and in pain.

I get up slowly walk over to my robe, put it on, walk over the fallen raptor and bow to her slowly and very low. I then turn to Owa and bow to her, then to the others. I walk up to Kleig and present him with the sword, bowing lowly waiting for him to accept. Owa comes up and TPs something to him I suspect. He reaches out and accepts the blade.

I told him you only acted to protect him from what you thought in ignorance was a threat to his life. That it was a foolish act for one so new to hunting and fighting raptors. That you only survived because of luck and this knife, which you have offered to him in humility for your mistake.

Thanks for your thoughtfulness. I will strive to be a more attentive student.

This is not over yet. He is still in your debt and has to reward you. Usually this would be an opportunity to mate with one of his wives.

I raise an eyebrow. I will need to come up with some way out of this one. I have failed because I did not see the consequences of my actions.

Guardian Owa, what would have happened if I had let him die?

There would have been a horrible battle to determine his successor. Many lives would have been lost, possibly even the tribe split up. Doing

that would have made them more vulnerable to predation by the very raptors you helped kill.

I am confused. Please enlighten me as to the correct action.

Each situation will require a different response. There is no set answer. In this case you need only have slowed the matriarchal raptor down enough for Kleig to do the actual act. Feigning fear and running away at the last moment would have helped also.

What will happen now?

Great suspicion will be on all soft skins. He knows you and possibly all soft skins can bring down a large raptor single handedly, with no experience fighting them. Would he be next? You know little about their culture. Here is a lesson. It is one of respect by force. Anyone who appears powerful is a threat.

I sense TK from them, are they not as powerful as us?

Their TK is natural, not induced. They are as strong as they will get at this stage in their evolution. Part of being a TK is knowing when to show and when to hide your abilities. Good job on the knife. You have been a four for only few hours yet the knife is perfect.

It was a favorite knife that I knew very well. It was easy to hold the image in my mind long enough to form the actual object.

Yes, that would help, but will cause trouble later on. You will need to unlearn this method before you can advance.

Is there anything that I did correctly?

Yes, you are paying attention to me now. She turns and leaves back down the trail we had come in on. Everyone but Kleig follows her.

When they are out of sight, Kleig comes up to me, nudges me to get my attention and presents me with a large claw, gesturing back towards the fallen raptor. I bow and accept the claw. They each had the largest claw from their raptors in their hands. I did not feel right about insisting on the honor for myself. I make some heavy string and pretend to remove it from my robe. I tie up the claw and make a necklace of it. I then present it back to Kleig motioning for him to wear it around his neck. He accepts the claw and places it around his neck. This is a real show piece, it is huge. I then go over to the raptor and find the smallest claw. I struggle to remove it. Kleig comes over and using the knife I gave him, cuts it free. I pull out more string and make a necklace of it and wear this one around my neck. Kleig bows. We have come to an understanding. He need not worry about me trying to take over his tribe. Now having the lesser claw, I need not be rewarded either. Just doing my job like all the others.

You are learning. What are we going to do about the Doctor? Owa comes out from the trees.

I laugh to myself. “He is like a kitten in a yarn shop.”

“Sounds familiar.” Her accent is terrible, but I get the meaning. This was all a test.

“Not a test, a learning experience. By the way, Kleig was not at the gate, that was his first wife, Reeza. You don't want to mess with her either.” If cats could smile.

Sci-Net

The first manned mission to Mars has proceeded without incident, thanks to the glorious team from the Middle Kingdom. Now we go live to the Glorious Rebellion Plain to listen to Commander Cho as She steps onto the Martian surface, the first human to have done so.

“All praise and honor goes to the Ancestors who have made this mission possible. May we prove worthy of their trust in us.”

And there you have it. Words that will be remembered for all time. It will take a few days to establish base camp and move in. Commander Cho and the seven others will be spending three years on the Martian surface before returning. The camp will be left intact with experiments in progress. With a proven water source it is hoped that earth plants can be adapted to produce oxygen. In a few thousand years, if all goes as planned, it will be possible for adapted humans to live on Mars without air breathers.

Saurpod Base Camp

I awaken exhausted. I am covered in sweat. My head feels like it is going to split in two. Last night was one of horrific nightmares. I lay in my hollow lying on my robe breathing slowly. It is still dark out. I need to pee badly and slowly make my way outside. I don't think I have to go far, the place smells like the middle of a rookery. I am surprised that they even bother to go outside. The air is cool against my wet skin. I don't feel like going back in. Frankly the idea of going back to sleep scares me at this moment. I use my scanning ability to make my way out of the 'dorm' rooms. I don't feel strong enough to take on the raptors, so I stay inside the compound. Maybe they asleep. Not worth it. . . . yet.

There is a group of four near the main gate. Looks like Owa and three Sauropods. A human runs up to them. Black robe means Hei Long. I wonder about him. Why did they pick him? A thug would seem to be the last person to pick. In the Guardian bubble universe he is supposed to have killed me. I wonder about the one they call Angetu also. Nice person, but no abilities that I can see. More than half the group are saps with no skills and no training and that is counting the China man as a pear. Even the doctor wants to be a sap desperately. Oh, as to 'Jesus', right. Too many people by that name. No way he could be the Jesus. The Guardians all treat him like he is though. Strangely it is the old Indian that I am most drawn to. Strange name, Pushy Paws. What did she do as a child to be given that name at puberty? That is how it works in her

culture, isn't it? Baby name till turnover and then adult name. Beats being called George your entire life because some ancestor or famous person was called by that name. In my case a great great Uncle who helped achieve the family fortune. Definitely not like him.

The group has left and I am alone with the sleepers and whoever is on guard duty. I go to the wall and sit down. Right into someone else's excrement. Great. I am not feeling well. I am getting nauseous again. The pounding in my head is getting worse. Oh God, I am going into another episode. I really thought it had ended. I lie down, crap be damned. I wish I was dead. I can't go through this again. I should be able to stop my own heart with TK. I try to concentrate, but the pain is too intense. I throw up what is left of last night's dinner. Mostly dry heaves. I collapse. The pain, the pain!

I awaken in a new place. It is all white. The headache is gone. I am lying on something soft. I close my eyes. I am so tired. Maybe I am lucky and have died.

Advertisement

Only at Target for one week. Renew III at half price. That's right, only \$3M per dose. Each dose guaranteed to add thirty years to your life span. Accidents not withstanding. Side effects include temporary insanity that fades with time. Do not use Renew III unless you have at least six months of vacation available. The older you are the longer the time of recovery. Not recommended for people over A50.

Iraq Territory, Armstrong Baghdad

We pull up to the gate. Creds are checked and we are passed through. All these years of terrorists managing to infiltrate our headquarters and I am waved through like everyone knows us. I guess it is possible they knew I was coming specifically.

I check my own pad. Over there to my left. That looks like General Reed, my new boss.

“Colonel Malak Elhaggi reporting for duty sir!”

“At ease Colonel, we are not that formal here. You have been briefed?”

“Yes sir. I am to help with the installation of the new processors into the core of the Armstrong unit.”

“I don't like it. Too new. Not tested well enough. I don't care if it runs circles around the old stuff. I knew I could rely on the 'old stuff'. Newer is not always better.”

“I agree sir. I will be careful.” He is only a few years older than I am. We are the old guard now. I can remember when I was a young pup eager for change and adventure. Of course in Baghdad that meant just living to the next day.

“I know you will and I know I have no choice. Orders are orders. Still, do me a favor and put the old core in storage for a bit. Oh, don't tell me where, that way I don't have to lie to anyone.” I smile and nod.

All Armstrong units are the same within constraints of terrain. Not a problem here, so it should follow standard specs. Not like Miami, nearly under water. I have done installations in six units so far of the most advanced core they have ever created. It uses the new A64s exclusively. I think it is because Baghdad and the others are considered expendable. Grew up in Afghanistan and joined up when they offered to make officers US citizens if we did. From Lieutenant in the Afghan military to a Major in the US army. They gave us a jump in grade because we had more field experience and could speak both languages. Meaning we were survivors.

I take yellow down two, corridor to green and down two more. I repeat this through the last four colors till I am at the basement level outside the core. The boxes are next to me sealed tight. I do a thorough examination of the seals. I then take a dog's nose out of my pocket and go over every square centimeter of the seals. Electronic equivalent of a dog's sense of smell, but with a readout in English. Only getting normal polymerized plastics and ceramics. Only milspec can afford plastic now. Maybe not for long. They drained the Iraqi fields last year. I saw the reports. Haven't made it public yet though. Fear of a panic. I hear they are starting to mine garbage in parts of the US. Makes sense actually.

"Corporal Hawkins reporting for duty ma'am!" There are three others with him. We exchange salutes. They all look strong enough at least. Arnolds are not much use for thinking, but great for lifting.

"Let me see the creds Corporal."

"Yes ma'am." He presents me his arm with his bracelet. I check it against my pad. He checks out. One at a time the others come up to me. Everyone checks out.

"Okay, this is now it will work. Two at a time, bring one box in. I will tell you where to set it down. Go out and get another box. No more than two of you in the core at any one time. Got that?"

"Yes ma'am." They look confused.

"Ever been in a core before?"

"No ma'am."

"There is not enough room for the old core, the new core and all of us at once. It will be tight."

"Why not remove the components from the crates out here? Then there will be more room inside."

"Ah, good idea. All of you are sec seven then?"

"No ma'am."

"None of you are allowed to see the contents, that's why." Grunts are so dumb. "Do not be alarmed. I will be armed. If anyone tries something I have orders to shoot to kill. Just do your job and this will be over quick and all of you will be topside in an hour. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am!" They all shout in unison. Nothing like a weapon pointed at you to help with concentration. I should know. I proceed into the core. My pad and my implant are keyed to the door, along with an access code, biomed scan and precise timing and order of sequence. Talk about paranoid. I have to be careful. After six it would be easy to get sloppy. You don't want to get sloppy.

They make quick work of bringing the crates in. I sign their names off and they leave. I secure the core, then corridor and shaft then return to the core to go through the unlock procedure again and then lock the door.

I will not exit till the new core is in place. This is also my last core. In case someone should be on the take they don't want all the cores done by the same person, especially not these new ones.

I pull out the special key in five pieces from five different pockets and assemble it. There are five different ways the pieces can go together. There are ten pieces on my person. Only one way works. It is designed to open the crate without setting off the explosives inside. The other possible assemblies do. What they did not tell me, but I figured out, was that it also lets a poison gas capsule go off. Guess they did not want any more pressure on us than necessary.

I take apart the crates in the correct order. I don't think this is strictly necessary, but why take a chance? Besides there really is not enough room in here to have to move things around too much. I place parts of the old core into the recently emptied crates. Slowly and methodically I complete my task. The new core is much smaller than the old one, but the crates are over sized to compensate the removal of the old one. The packing has been cleverly designed to fit both devices by reversing it.

Unfortunately there are one hundred and thirty six crates. Even with the help bringing it into this core, it takes a long time to unpack the new and disassemble and pack the old. I take a break and suck nutrient from my vest. I don't do too much. There is no rest room in the core and the worst part is still to come, assembly. I hate peeing in my suit.

Funny how it is always easier to take something apart than to put it together. Oh well, this is what they pay me for. This new core is weird. Most of the parts look identical. Another trick. I pull out hololenses. They link with my own bracelet. I key in a manual code. Along with the biometrics a display comes up. Of course the wrong one would come up if anything went wrong. I would never know what happened. Our last practice was with a live setup. The survivors got the job. I assemble the support structures.

I hang the first "brain" and attach the harness. I attach my bracelet. It has routines inside to test and authenticate the brain. I will have to repeat this with each of the other sixty three units before attaching them to their final positions on the support. I was chosen for this task because I can remain focused for long periods of time at a stretch. If I don't complete the job in time and alarm will sound and the core will melt down with me in it.

One may ask why are they so paranoid crazy about the cores. Armstrong units are the distillation of all that it means to be a civilization. They are meant to be the seeds after a catastrophic collapse. The Middle East cores were not even installed till two years ago. And now, six months later they are replacing the core brains. Poetic that the start of

western civilization is now the possible phoenix for a restart.

When I hang the final brain, the indicators all go out at once. I wait, counting in my mind. At eight seconds I pull the plug on the temporary power supply. It takes a least five seconds for the core to shut down properly. I now carefully attach all the sensor lines, first scanning the ends with my bracelet. You may have guessed by now that this was no ordinary bracelet and you would be correct. It is not even my own. Just has enough to identify me, all the rest is pure core installation.

I do not reattach the power supply. Someone else will check all that I have done I suppose. I unfold a black carbon nanotube cloak and cover the core. I signal that I am done. A few minutes later I hear a pounding on the door. It takes a strong hand to be heard through that door. I activate the self destruct and the dead man switch. All the time trying to avoid suicide bombers and here I am playing one. I unlatch the door.

It slowly opens. I hold my switch up so they can see it. "This will take us all out if anything goes wrong." It is a different set of Arnolds. I hope they are stronger. The old core is heavier than the new one. Just like before, two at a time they come in and I direct them to which crate needs to be removed. Nearly as much security will surround the old core as the new one. After all, most of the Armstrongs still have this one in them. There are plenty of people and countries that would love to have one.

There is a loud crash and everyone freezes. One of the Arnolds has slipped and dropped a crate nearly a half meter to the floor. He is about to speak and I glare at him till he closes his mouth.

Slowly, very slowly, I carefully remove the edge of the crate from his foot. I am no Arnold, but can manage this much. I then pull out the key pieces and reassemble them. I reset the sensors on the crate.

"We only had seconds to spare on this incident. I don't recommend repeating it." They don't. Actually nothing would have happened, but I can't stand incompetence when there is no excuse. I have seen too many people die.

They finish up and leave. I take one last look around to be sure I have not forgotten anything and then arm the system. Now not even I can get in again without reauthorization. I make my way back up the maze to the surface.

I wait outside the general's office. His aid is busy on a terminal that I can't see. I pick up a flat terminal. It keys into my bracelet and implant. All military have implants. Not crazy, but for security and identity reasons we all have them. It can withstand forms of death our bodies and DNA can't. Great huh? The flats are all old. My grandparents complained about something called magazines in doctor's offices being the same. Here it is more a security issue. Al Queda uses the blogs to send

messages. Everything here is reamed before it is allowed in.

It is the third time through the only blog worth reading, an old tech analysis of the alpha 64. More of an advert, but still, reading between the lines. I wish I had more tech training. I make a copy into the limited personal area of the bracelet. Almost full. I will have to dump something if I want to store any more. Oh well. Childhood memories are best left in the head anyway. Join the military and lose your soul.

“Colonel, the General will see you now.” Finally.

I enter the office after being scanned again to prove my identity and to be sure I am not carrying any weapons, explosives, poisons, etc.

“At ease Colonel. Please turn over your bracelet to Major Ariss.” I do so without question, as I have been taught. The Major takes my bracelet and hands me another. It will have the last backup I registered, but not the article I just saved.

“Colonel, congratulations. You have fulfilled your commitment to the United States of America. Your back pay has been recorded on your bracelet. You are entitled to resettle anywhere you want state side.” Or here. But no one picks that. Instant death sentence. Did I mention the other requirement is that you have no living family in the protectorate. Too easy to use you to do something nasty to save them. Mine died in a revenge killing. None of us were actually involved. Just close by. I was in training at the time. The Iraqi army did not have the same requirement. Too bad. It would have saved me a lot of grief.

“We are waiting Colonel.”

“The Hopi Nation would be fine.”

They both look at me incredulously. The Major speaks, “Why? There is nothing there. A bunch of dead Indians. The Hopi Nation is gone.” Surprised they know that much.

The General waits for me to answer, so out of courtesy I do, “It is self sufficient. I have a friend there, so can stay with her till I get set up. She will also cover me with the Navajo. It is not a luxury life, but even on a Colonel's retirement it will help to stretch it as far as I can.”

The General finally comments, “Aren't they the ones who most believed in peace?”

“That is the main reason. I am tired of war. I want to be in a quiet place for a bit at least.”

We all shake hands and I leave. I have done well. I have earned this bit of peace.

As far as military transport, I would have done better if I was one of those crates I just serviced. Or, I could have used up a lot of my last pay taking a civilian ship. That would have taken weeks in a crowded hold. No thank you. Besides the dead going back with me don't complain. At

least these are the last MREs I will have to eat. The General of course would be a pear. He won't suffer when he decides himself when to quit. I always wondered why a pear would be in this mess for any reason. All the top brass were though. Maybe their families are compensated in some way. The Major I can't tell. Could be either. Up through the ranks like I did or a general in training. Office job probably means pear, but I have been fooled before. In the field you did not care. Prejudice got you dead.

I grin. No pears where I am going.

They dropped me off at Flagstaff. I had ridden a transport bus from Phoenix. I knew that there was an Armstrong somewhere near by, but I was never told. I never knew the exact location of any of them. Being a colonel meant I always had a driver. I only knew the city it was near. Well, I was on my own now. They said I could go anywhere, but that translated to the nearest military facility. I turn in my uniform and am given a suitcase with clothes that sort of fit. You would think with all the med exams I had been given and the bot tailors it would have been a perfect fit. Though a retired officer, I was still a sap and the clothes speak to that, white trousers, white shirt, long sleeved of course, with a hood. A small pack with enough food for a few days. Sometimes the pack was given to you by your buddies. I had none. The last one died by IED five years ago. Since then I have been total business. Maybe that was why I was picked for the installation work. No attachments. Till now.

I had no friends here. That was a ruse to prevent further questions. Just a name to report to. Best get on with it. I ask for directions to the nearest Navajo bar. Not owned by the Navajo of course, just where they hang out. Not in the best part of town, even by sap standards. Looks like the Iragi were not the first to suffer from the "Americanization" treatment. We learned a little of the history of the USA when we were signed up for citizenship. The Indian years were gone over quickly, but the Hopi stuck in my mind.

I walk in. Very dark inside. Probably to conserve energy. Plenty of light outside, even for spring. Why didn't they pipe some in? My eyes adjust to see everyone staring at me.

"State your business and then get out. We don't serve no blacks here." Interesting. I had heard of the racial prejudice. Not that the religious prejudice I had just come from was any better.

"Technically I am not 'black'. I am from Iraq. This is called a tan where I come from."

One stands up and approaches me.

"Military refugee?" I nod. "Rank?"

"Colonel."

"She got you there One Eye. Outranks you."

“A colonel does not outrank a lieutenant coyote dung.” I let it go. Chances are he was never in the service or he has told tales to puff himself up in their eyes.

“Still she served, therefore we have to serve her.”

“Yeah, I do.” He turns to me, “Watta you have?”

“A cold beer would be great. Nothing is cold in Iraq this time of year.”

“We have cold, but beer is stretching it a bit.” The others laugh. I take a sip of what he hands me.

“Wow! This stuff is great! Best I have ever had.” That gets them all laughing. A few slap me on my back.

“What's your name Colonel?”

“Malak.”

“Strange name. Does it mean something in Iraqi?”

“We speak Arabic. It means angel.” They are silent till I grin. My white teeth shining must have done it.

“Well Angel, what can we do for you?”

“I am looking for someone. I can't tell you if they are a man or a woman. All I know is that they are referred to as the Last Hopi.”

“The Last Hopi huh. Not much to go on. If I remember all the Hopi are gone. Only us Navajo left.”

“Crazy Jay, you know that ain't true. Isn't that old witch still alive up on the Mesa?”

“You could be right. Haven't seen her in months though.”

“Then what where all the elders doing up there a week ago then?”

“Who knows, could be her funeral.”

“That would bring them all out of their drunken stupor long enough. How much longer till there is no one left to honor us when the last Navajo goes?”

“Not long now I suspect.” He raises his bottle in a toast. I raise mine too. Depressing.

After taking a long drink, this stuff is really awful, I ask, “I should at least pay my respects. Iraq is a long way to come just to turn around again. Anyone know how to get up there?”

“Heck, Roger can take you there. Hey Roger, your truck still work?”

“Only when you put gas in it.” They all laugh.

“No gas.”

“Not for five years or more. We could use corn juice, but we would rather drink it.” I smile.

“How do you get home then?”

“Home? You mean this is not home? All these years here and I could have been home? One Eye, you lied to me!” He grabs One Eye by his

shirt and pretends to take a swing at him. One Eye just laughs.

“We used to run all the way home, barefoot too.” I laugh then stop.

They see I am serious. “We take a bus, same as everyone else.”

“Hey, you ruined our fun. We could of had her going for a good time yet.”

“How much do I owe you and when does the next one come?”

“She has money?”

“Save it for the bus Angel. If that is all you have, you have less than we do. About time I got back anyway. Tall Corn, you need to get back too.”

“What to two screaming kids and a wife who beats me? Why?”

“Because she has the only job and you could not drink without her.”

“Oh yeah.” He grins and gets up.

I yell, “Thanks One Eye,” over my shoulder.

“Good luck Colonel.”

I turn to the other two, “No one else calls me Colonel. That is my past. From here on out I will use my name, a good Muslim name, Malak. Not that hard to say and I like being at least a little different.”

“Oh you won't need a strange name for people to notice that.” They laugh and slap me on the back.

“I suppose not. Hey, is that the bus?” An old beat up piece of junk is pulling away from the curb.

“That's our bus!” They start running towards it waving their hands. I instinctively go into army mode and take off like a shot, easily passing them. I catch up with the bus and pound on the door. The surprised driver stomps on the brakes and comes to a stop. The other two come up panting heavily. I am calm.

“You aren't even breathing. No sweat either.”

“Military training. You learn to conserve water in the desert.”

“You will have to teach me that one. Come on. Get in.”

I present my bracelet to the driver who looks at me like he does not know what I am doing.

“This is the tribal bus. We don't pay. You are with us, so you don't pay.”

“The idea is, is that if we take this last bus back we don't get as drunk and are some use to our families.”

“Does it work?”

“Is the bus full?” I look around. There are only a few others aboard. Two of them old women with sacks of supplies.

“Not well enough.”

“Take a nap Malak. It is a long bumpy dusty ride. You can stay at my place tonight.”

“In Iraq that would make us married.”

“Whoa, I meant no disrespect Malak.”

“None taken, but I will sleep outside if that is all right with you.”

“My wife would skin me if you did that. We'll work something out.”

I pretend to sleep till they are both out, then I stare out the window the entire trip. It is a depressing place. Just like home, without the bombs of course. Color is different. Beautiful red color to the rock and soil. Sand color does get boring even for me.

The town, if you can call it that, has a few trees at least. The shops and houses are all weather beaten. Most are painted white, if you can still see any paint. There is a strange dome like building with what look like Indian symbols painted all over it.

“That is our cultural center. The Gov made us build it. They gave the materials, supplies and the plans. When we were done, this is what we had. No one uses it. Too hot inside in the summer and too cold in the winter. No insulation.” He sighs, “At least a few people had jobs for a year.”

The bus only takes us so far. The rest of the way we walk. It is near sunset when we come to a row of run down shacks that look like they are made of discarded packing material. We walk up to one. Tall Corn knocks at the door.

He notes my look of surprise and sheepishly says, “She is not used to me being home this early and with guests. Don't want her to shoot me by mistake.”

“Your women run your country?”

Tall Corn and Roger look at each other then at me, “Yeah, pretty much. Oh we have a counsel of elders. All male too, but we all know they don't take a breath without their wives approval.”

“I just might like it here then after all.” I grin and they look frightened. I laugh. They are serious.

“With most of the men drunk all the time, who would you expect to run things?” A voice comes out the doorway. A handsome looking woman in her early thirties I would guess. Hair is still black anyway. Can't say the same about mine any longer.

“Dear. I brought home a retired military woman on a spiritual quest looking for the Last Hopi.”

“If you got any designs on my husband you are welcome to him. Otherwise you might as well come in.” I start to make progress towards the door. “And you two got chores to do, so get to them.”

“Yes dear.” Bet they are sorry I came along. I grin.

“I don't mean to be a burden. I can repay any food I eat and even help some with ah rent or something.”

“No rent and if you can eat it, you are welcome to it. If you are military, you been in the Middle East. Don't they have some rules about hospitality or something there?”

I am shocked, “You know about Iraq?” I don't bother with the Afghanistan part. Close enough.

“We don't have fiber, but some of the old sats still beam us net. When the piece of garbage we call a com unit works.” I nod. Not just the men who are a pain here. “This is my sister Sue.” I shake hands with her.

“What can I do to be a help. They will be hungry when they come back.”

“Do any KP when in the service?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Take over on the beans then. We waste nothing, the tips go into the soup pot. You can wash up here.”

Prep goes as it usually does. I hear the family gossip of who is messing up, who is seeing who, who is pregnant, who is dying. I relate my own story of how my family died. How my own people have turned against each other.

“It is the same here. We are all Native Americans, but there are some old wounds that people just can't help but to reopen and renew. Heard there was some big council meeting up on the Mesa. Heard they decided to try cooperation.”

“I will believe that when I see it.”

“This may be our last chance. You can feel it in the wind. Something big is about to happen.” I add. They all look at me.

“Maybe the elders were right. It can't be limited to just the tribes. All people must be included this time. If you can feel it, others must too.”

“Not many. Most just trying to get by day to day. Still easy to blame someone else for your situation.”

“Yeah, like we have been blaming the hairy ones for our problems for too long. We thank you for bringing our men back sober today, but it won't last. Tomorrow they will be drunk again.”

Dinner is ready just as the two men come in. “Shake off the dust outside you two!” Sue yells at them as we set the table.

“Seeing as how we have a guest on a spiritual quest, we should maybe start with a prayer of some kind.”

Hmm, what have I gotten myself into? Not that spiritual myself. More interested in staying alive. Besides, Islam, at least as it is practiced where I come from, is not exactly to my liking in terms of women's rights. At least in the US military they pretty much did not care if you could shoot straight and duck fast.

“Well, I don't know much about Muslim prayer, would a generic one

do?"

"Generic is good," I say. Saved by ignorance.

"We come from a variety of traditions, mostly a mix of the old beliefs and Christianity. It all works out to pretty much the same thing in the end though. There is a purpose, we are part of it, as long as we follow some common sense rules of behavior."

I nod, "Sounds good to me."

Morning Sun, Tall Corn's wife does the honor, "Great Spirit watch over us, and especially Malak, in our our quests to understand and follow the ways of the universe."

"Let's eat." The food tastes good. Different from what I am used to. Spicy, in a different way. I have noticed that different peppers seem to affect different parts of the mouth. These affect the lips. A lot. They are watching to see my reaction. I resist the urge to reach for the tea. Instead I reach for more of the chili dish. It sort of grows on you. When they see that I am not going to be any fun, they continue their own eating. Finally I try the tea. Not bad, a little bitter and smoky at the same time.

"It will take several days to reach the Mesa on foot. Sue and I will take you."

"What about us?"

"This is a woman's quest. The Last Hopi is not a man. We will go. You have chores to do. There are many new lambs and crops to attend to."

"But we had plans."

"The government chip will not arrive for another week. There are no more funds for beer till then."

"Best we get to sleep then." The leer in his eye suggests other ideas. Not my problem.

"Seeing as how we have a guest, you two get to sleep in the living room. The ladies will take the bedroom." Now he has a pout. Too bad. I will be gone soon. No one ever died from a lack of it. Even if you think you will.

"I don't mind sleeping outside. Really, I am used to it, being from the desert myself. It will give me a chance to get acquainted with the other inhabitants." The males are nodding with me.

"We would not hear of it. You are new here. Our desert is not without hazards. Granted we do not have bombs, but there are snakes, coyote, wolves and a lot of crawling things. It is not safe for anyone not born here."

"Shit Sun, she just came from hell. How could this be worse." I nod.

"And if something happens?"

"It is part of her quest. All quests involve some danger. You

remember when you became a woman. You were alone for three days. What will one night matter?"

"It is up to you Malak. I don't like it, but you are old enough to make up your own mind. The door is never locked. Come in if you want. That means you two are still in the living room." More pouts. I am guessing that Sue and Roger are an item. Not my business.

"Are you armed?"

"They take your weapons at decom. They are worth more than we are. I am not without resources however. I will be fine. Really." I add just to reassure them, "I won't go far, just a little walk and then prayer and meditation. I have done this before."

"If you run into anyone, tell them our names and they will leave you alone. If they are sober."

"Gotcha."

"At least take a blanket." She smiles.

"What no beads?" She laughs.

Outside the air is cool and clean. Away from cities makes a huge difference. The stars are amazing. I make my way out of the small village and into the nearby hills. I want to be on the crest. I like being able to see around me and to be on higher ground. Lots of small mammals, a few snakes hunting same. Others I hear, but do not see. On the ridge I watch as lights go out one by one in the village. In the past they may have lasted longer, but with the cost of energy who can blame them for going to bed with the sun.

The night goes quickly. It nice to be in a place where no one is trying to kill you. A place where you can leave a door unlocked at night. At about 3am I hear a shot ring out. Only one, some distance away. Probably a local defending their sheep against coyotes. No more sound and I go back to my meditation. Of course I am not alone. Many creatures come and visit me. Mice, snakes, insects, lizards. Amazing how much life there is in this desert. Far more than Iraq. Though all that fertilizer added from exploded ordinance has brought new growth. Nature uses whatever is presented.

As it nears daybreak I make my way back to the home. When I arrive at the edge of the small village I can already smell smoke from early risers preparing their breakfast or trying to get warm. There is smoke rising from my host's residence. I knock on the door. I hear commotion inside and Morning Sun opens the door.

"Oh, thank goodness you are okay!"

"I enjoyed the experience very much and hope to repeat it may times in the near future. I encountered nothing of note danger wise." Then I remember, "Oh, I did hear one shot. I assumed that was someone

shooting at a coyote.”

“Stan Badleg was shot and killed last night as he made his way home in the dark.”

“What? Why? It is so peaceful here, why would anyone shoot at another? A jealous husband maybe?” I am beginning to think of all the other reasons why humans kill each other. So stupid.

“A pear did it. We found the shell casings and tire tracks up on Cactus Ridge.”

“How do you know it was a pear? Lots of people have guns and ammunition.” Thanks to the NRA twenty years ago.

“This was high powered rifle stuff. I don't know the details. You would have to ask the others. It was new. The casings were bright and shinny. No one here has that kind of weapon. Also, it was a half mile away. No one here has a high powered sniper scope fitted weapon. The tracks looked like new tires too. Definitely not one of us. And lastly Stan was an old man. No one was going to be jealous of him. He was with his brother at the time. Lucky we did not lose both of them, but Burning Sage dropped to the ground before they could get off another shot. He called it in with a cell phone.

Don't look so surprised. We have modern conveniences here. Really helps when out in the field.”

“I would imagine. That means they were not using infrared at least. How did you find the tracks and shell casings so quickly?”

“Burning could tell general direction. Position of the body helped. He was shot in the back. Cactus Ridge is the only ridge in that direction. Also, it has happened before. We have lost twenty three, now twenty four people to pears since the last riots. Riots that we in no way participated in. Non of us can understand why we are the target.”

“Because they can get away with it. If they shot at white men a bigger stink would be raised and they might get caught. No one cares about some drunk Indian.” Or a black woman either. My color may have saved me last night in fact.

“Neither of them were drunk. They had just come from a meeting of a spiritual nature.”

“Sorry, I did not mean to imply that all male Indians were drunk all the time, just that the pears think that.”

“There was a time when they would more than likely have been right, but now the government chip does not go as far and they can only really afford to get drunk once in a while. Good thing too. I need all the help I can get just to keep it going around here.”

“Look, I think I should go on my quest alone. If you have a map of the surroundings and point me in the right direction I will find the spot.

Have had lots of practice in the Middle East. It can't be that different here.”

“People are likely to be very jumpy for the next few days. You are more likely to be shot by an Indian than a pear. If we are with you, that won't happen. Besides, we have earned a little time off. These two bums can cover for us and the kids are in Indian school for the next week. Plenty of time.” The two “bums” don't look happy about it, but appear to be resigned to their fate.

“When do we go?”

“Sue and I packed everything last night. We are ready now if you are. We have leftover fry bread for breakfast and a thermos of coffee.”

“Great.”

Once outside again Sue hand me a wrap.

“Put this on and you will look more like one of us. At least from a distance.”

As we leave the village, several people poke their heads out and wave. Everyone seems to know about me already and are not shocked to see me, but still curious. I am beginning to think I would have been safe alone, but that they really wanted to go on this journey as well. We all have paths we must tread.

An hour past the village the conversation starts.

“You don't sleep do you?”

“Very perceptive. No, we have all be resequenced to not need sleep any more. Not a pleasant experience, but it is over. It did give us a distinct advantage over the terrorists. They could never catch us napping.”

“But sleep is much more than just being unconscious. Dream time is very important.”

“We do a kind of meditation instead. Not the same, but it works. I do miss dreaming though. Maybe now that I am here and relatively safe I can try at least to day dream.”

“We have ways to enhance the dreaming experience.” She sees the concern on my face, “Without drugs. Just incense, sweat and chanting.”

“Thank you. That would be nice. I look forward to your help.” They nod.

“There is a stream around this bend. We will rest there. It is cooler.” We round the bend and sure enough there is a small trickle of water under some rocks. If you did not know where to look there is no way you would find it. They take their wraps and using branches that have been apparently left there for this purpose they arrange the wrap as a sort of sunshade for a sit on the ground near the water. I attempt to do the same to much amusement before they do it for me. The temperature drops five

degrees, centigrade. Wonder what it will be like in the summer. Probably very similar to Iraq. Oh well.

I would imagine that most saps would see this area as a step down, but after being in the protectorate all my life, this is actually a step up. No air pollution from burning oil fields and dust storms. More green than I am used to seeing too.

We are going at a much slower pace that I am used to. I can see the Mesa from here and I am sure I could make it in less than one day. I have to learn to slow down. I did check a map before choosing this spot, so I have a rough idea of where I am. Wish I had my heads up, but I had to leave all the toys behind.

On our walk I get a good idea of what life on the Rez is like now. Rez being short for reservation. Sort of like a protectorate, but with less military presence. Mostly Navajo like my hosts, but occasionally they get visitors from other tribes. There was some big get together up on the Mesa a few nights ago apparently, but everyone left in a hurry. The elders had to get back to their respective tribal councils to report what happened. Nothing much has filtered down to the locals yet. It will. The gossip lines are always open. Judging from the recent tire tracks, they all got to ride up on a bus. Now there is only one person up there I am guessing. The one I am to meet.

Dinner is jerky so hard it nearly takes my teeth out. You are supposed to chew on it slowly. I have to learn to slow down. This trip will kill me or accomplish the task.

“Since you already know that I don't sleep, I will keep watch. I don't mind. It is so beautiful up here. The stars go forever in this thin air. No light pollution from cities either.” Or burning buildings, oil fields or search lights. My life feels like a huge burden has been lifted, if only for a moment.

By midday we are halfway up the backside of the Mesa.

“The trail is easy from here. Just follow this path. It used to be a paved road years ago, but flash floods and lack of money have made it the way it is now.”

“Are you not curious what I will find?”

“This is your quest. We respect that. We have our own path and these few days have been wonderful. You have given us another life in a far away land. A place we could never visit on our own. It is good to be reminded that our troubles are not unique.”

“As you have done for me as well. I will never be Indian but I now know a small part of your lives. I would like to repay your kindness.” I pull out several sterling silver coins. “A British officer gave these to me for good luck. I no longer have any use for them. I have noticed that

many of your people are good silver smiths. Maybe you can trade these for something you need.”

“You are too kind. Know that you are welcome anytime you pass through.” Ritual has been served. They turn to go back down and I turn to go the rest of the way up. I am no longer restrained by their slower pace, but just maybe I have slowed down some myself. It feels good.

It takes me till nightfall to reach the top. This actually helped. At the top all I could see was stars and a soft glow from fire light coming from a stone hut. To here I proceed.

When I reach the door I hear a voice, “Welcome Malak. Please come in.”

“Thank you Pushy Paws. I am happy to have finally come to your home.”

“This is not my home, but rather the simple hut of my ancestors. I have no home. I am the last and will soon die.”

“If that is your wish.” I wait. We sit for some minutes.

“Where are my manners. You have come a long way. Let me serve you some stew.”

“Lamb I assume. We share that taste in common.”

“Lamb would be good. Just a tough old ram I am afraid.”

“It has been a long time since I have had an old ram.” She gives me a dirty look. Good, there is still some life in her. The stew is watery and the meat tough. Barely softer than the jerky. What did the Buddhists say, chew your food fifty times? This was more like fifty times fifty.

“What happened at the elders meeting?”

“The usual. They promised to be good.” She stirs her stew a few times. “Won't happen of course.” She sighs and sets her bowl down.

“You could help change that.” She glares at me.

“The others are gone.”

“Did they say where?”

“Dragon world is my guess. The elders asked them to leave for safety reasons. They were afraid to bring attention to themselves.”

“Considering your history I am not surprised. A pear killed an old man two days ago near Tuba City. Apparently just for fun.” She nods. This is not news to her. In the protectorate it would be done for reasons of hate. Here I suspect it is done out of boredom. “When I read of similar events in the journals I thought it must be an aberration from the plague.” She mouths a no.

Pushy Paws eyes widen. I sense someone behind me. I scan without turning around.

Yingui states, “You are both needed. Pushy Paws, George has upgrade sickness. I believe your understanding will help him. All the

others are assembled. They are at level four and ready for your special training Malak.”

“I knew I never should have admitted to having been a drill instructor. I guess that is what I get for being first.”

“And the only one not chosen.”

“You could have left me a TK2.”

“Sooner or later you would have been found out.”

“I lasted three years without detection.”

“And how many close calls did you have?”

“A few I admit. But now I am out of the military. If I had lasted this long then they would have never caught me.”

“Aren't you forgetting the sats? Or how do you explain how a sap from the Protectorate living twice as long without a reseal and with near perfect health?”

“But what use am I as a hidden TK8? You didn't need to do that to me.”

“It was safer believe me and they will need you. Did you bring the package?”

Pushy Paws, “I have been meaning to bring that up. Loading a sacred kiva with all those crates is not nice.”

“I had to pick a hidden spot from Baghdad very quickly without those sats noticing. I am sorry, but I knew nothing of your culture before a few days ago.”

“Crates? How big is it? You were only supposed to get one mil spec module.”

I smile, “It was just as easy to dupe the entire thing. Besides, the whole may be bigger than the sum of the parts, just as the Guardians were and are.”

“Hrrumph, as they say.”

“What is it? I will not have something dangerous on the Mesa. The Elders already told you to leave for just that reason.”

“It will be leaving with us momentarily. Then you can die and rot in peace or you can come with us and help. They need you, but no one will force you. Time, however, is running out for you to make a decision.”

“Dying alone on the Mesa is kind of pathetic.” Yingui and I both nod.

“You didn't have to agree. I will go, but I do not want to room with that one.”

“I will arrange suitable accommodations without Yingui.” I smile. He sighs. They may have been friends in the beginning, but twenty five million years separate them now.

“One more thing. I want my body left here. I want them to think it is

over so they will not worry or try and do something.”

“Well, lie down and make yourself comfortable then. It will take only a moment. You will awaken on a new world.”

Are you ready to do this?

Do we give her a new young body? I smile mischievously. He nods without emotion. No fun at all.

The Jungle Vine:

[Encryption reference Ze###f:1-888]

APES rejoice! The algorithm given us from on high by the late Tsing Mao is paying off big time. We will extract justice for her murder! The A64 quantum computer is programmable to decode ALL access and ID codes. Run APES, run! Here is the starter code..... Pssst. This is a secret for the time being. We gather our forces quietly before we pluck the fruit from the vines.

“Dragon Land”

Sleeping in a hollow in the ground sucks big time. I hear singing, beautiful singing. I lie back in my bead with a cool breeze on my cheeks and beautiful music in my ears. I almost don't want to wake up.

Wow! Another upgrade. Without opening my eyes my ability to scan is even more intense. I can see the insides of atoms themselves. Amazing.

I sit up and look around. Everything sparkles with new detail. All my house mates are gone and I am staring at an empty room. Not too surprised. The sun is up and I have slept in. Feels great. Another headache though. Oh, someone left a plate of chocolate next to my bed. This stuff tastes great. My parents would be laughing at me liking chocolate. All that fancy stuff they made me try. They meant well, they were trying to make a proper pear out of me. One that appreciated the finer things in life. I shake my head. I can still remember the taste of caviar. Yuck!

“Good isn't it?” Angpetu walks in. She is stuffing a piece in her mouth.

“Great!” I stuff two more in.

“Boy you sure are small.” She giggles.

I am confused and look around. I am not wearing anything. I look down. Yep, between my legs is that nuisance that has plagued me since puberty. Since being TK I had forgotten about it.

I look up to see her watching me looking.

I blush, “Sorry. I was never enhanced. Didn't think it was right.”

“Doc, you never even got started. Hey, you are a doctor, maybe you can explain something to me.” She drops her robe just like that. Like me she is wearing nothing underneath. Her body is a soft brown, but thinner and far more muscular. Probably Hispanic origins or some kind of mix. Her breasts are large and distended.

She sees me looking, “Great huh? They haven't been this firm since I was a teenager. But what I wanted you to look at are the growths.” She points to various locations on her flawless skin.

“I don't see any growths.”

“Yeah, that's what's weird. They are all gone. The last few days they have been getting smaller and smaller, now they are gone.”

I stand up and examine myself. I only have one birthmark. On my side around the back. I turn to look just as Guardian Lisa comes in. I only catch her out of the corner of my eye, but am more interested in finding the birthmark.

“I can't find it. It's gone too.”

Lisa explains, “A side effect of the TK upgrades. You are both becoming more healthy. Now put your robes on, you look ridiculous.” We are both facing her stark naked. There are several Sauropods behind her looking on.

“They don't wear clothes and we have no sexual feelings anymore. So what's the big deal?” She is not as dumb as she acts.

The Sauropods emit some squeaks and pops.

“They want to know what those appendages are on your chest Angpetu. There are no muscles in them and they appear to serve no purpose.” At least they did not comment on my state. Their penises are internal till needed. A better arrangement from my point of view. That's strange. Two of them are obviously female. I did have to take anatomy in medical school. But the last one is not a male or a female. There is some scaring.

“DOCTOR! That is NOT polite.” Our robes are suddenly on us and we are given a gentle push towards them. Lisa turns around and we are led outside.

Crossing the courtyard I see Hei Long coming in the gate. He looks down. There is a raptor claw around his neck.

“You got one. Great! Did it put up much of a fight?”

“Don't ask Doc.” Okay, something went wrong obviously.

Several more Sauropods pass through the gate. One is wearing an enormous claw.

“That one is huge. He must have been the leader.”

“The women are the larger in raptors.” Oh.

“Two more coming in heavily loaded.”

We all turn to see who it is. I am dying of curiosity but don't dare scan with Lisa standing right next to me.

Two male Indians walk in carrying or rather dragging a rope. We wait. It must be something heavy judging from the amount of effort they are using. Finally a pile of raptor claws tied carefully together follows

them in. There are hundreds of claws in that pile of all different sizes.

Hei Long is not pleased, "They are only supposed to take the largest claw from each animal. Not all of the claws off of each." He is heard. One of them comes over and looks at Hei Long and the claw around his neck.

"We only took one from each." He looks down at Hei Long's claw again and spits on the ground turns around and joins his partner. They start pulling the pile again and then stop. They approach the Saurpod with the larger claw. They stop. The other Indian reaches into the pile, searches around, grabs something and pulls it out. It's a claw. A very large claw. It brings it up to the Saurpod's claw. It is several inches longer. The Saurpod hisses loudly, turns and marches off. Several follow, but are rebuffed violently.

"Who are those two?" I exclaim. Hei Long is smiling from ear to ear and starts to laugh.

Without turning around Lisa says softly, "Smith and Jones." I feel a tug and we are moving again. Hei Long is still laughing. He goes up to the two Indians and is thanking them profusely. We pass Owa cleaning herself next to one of the walls of the big hall. I don't get it at all, but no one is talking.

"Angpetu, you are on kitchen duty. Over there." She gets nudged in the proper direction. I am still under leash to a different location. We walk till we reach the far edge of the compound. We walk up to the wall. No obvious door, but we are not slowing down. Then we walk through it!

"That was weird." I am not sure I want to do that again. Then I remember we are outside the compound. That means raptors and other things that would like to eat me. I search around for pebbles and TK a few up to me. One has some neat quartz crystals inside. I am examining them with my new skill. Crystals are even more beautiful with TK. I start turning the other pebbles into the same substance and then forming the mass into clear sphere about the size of Br'thn. I miss her. She was not with me when I woke up.

Lisa turns and sees me working on the sphere. It dissolves. I look up.

"She is elsewhere. Do not worry. Where you are going is not safe for her, but will be harmless to you." My mouth opens. What possible location could be safe for me and not her? She is orders of magnitude stronger than I am. Not to mention non organic. As in not interesting to a raptor or bug. I scratch myself in several locations thinking about them. I saw those parasites on a few Sauropods. Ugg!

We climb to the top of a small hill. At the top is a small clearing with a circular metal cage at the top.

As we approach the cage Lisa says, "Scan the area below the hill."

I concentrate and do as told. Grass, dirt, rock, large iron content. Neat that I can see that. Interesting, a sphere of germanium phosphide with a carbon nanotube matrix. Several inches thick and very intricate. Then NOTHING. I mean really NOTHING. The emptiness is so intense I am drawn into it. It is beautiful in a strange way. I want to bask myself in it. Be enveloped by it. Then all hell breaks loose and my muscles are contorting. I see lights and colors in my head. I can't breathe!

I open my eyes to find myself flat on my back looking up at the sky.

"The cage is electrified to keep out unwanted life forms."

"Thanks, I ah, noticed. What is it?"

"A TK safety chamber."

"Why?"

"Your patient is inside. You need to make your way down through the whole in the ground at the center of the cage. I will open the cage long enough for you to enter."

I get up and think about what she has said. Who could it be? I don't know anything about Saurpod psychology and I am not a TK5 yet that I don't need instruments to make a diagnosis.

"Hey, I don't have my scanners, not even a low rez portable one. How am I going to be able to do anything?"

"Scanners will not work inside. Use your understanding. The 'old fashioned way' doctor."

"Then give me something to go on. What is wrong with whomever is down there?"

"Upgrade sickness." I have to give her credit for being patient, but he withholding information is driving me crazy.

"And what is upgrade sickness?"

"Please proceed Doctor." The cage opens. I enter reluctantly. Don't like surprises. She has not even told me who are what is down there. There is a ladder leading down. Surprised it is not a rope at this point. I am several steps down when I hear the cage close and a crackle as the it is energized again. Where did they get a source of electricity. Just before I am totally underground I look around. Lisa is gone. Great. It is much darker inside. The only light must be from the opening itself. Oh well.

As soon as my head is below the surface it is like someone puts a hood over me. I can still see and feel with my normal senses, but all TK is gone. I go back up one rung and as soon as my head is above the surface it returns. So, this is a TK safety chamber is a one where TK does not work. That explains why Br'thn could not be here. She has no organic backup. I miss her so much. A tear comes to my eye. Well, the sooner I do my job the sooner I can be back with her.

My foot goes down one more rung, only there isn't one. I quickly

grab hold harder to prevent my falling. My eyes are starting to adjust. The walls are white. That helps reflect what light does enter. I am about five feet off the ground. I squat to the point where my hands are on the second to the last rung and my feet on the last one. I let go with one foot and then the other, extending myself out. I am still about two feet above the surface. I let go and drop. The floor is soft, padded somehow. I crouch and feel the surface. Soft fabric of some kind.

Looking around I see a figure in a TK robe in the fetal position towards the edge of our hemisphere. There is a set of stairs off to one side going lower. Nothing else in the room. I can't see who it is. Their hood is up and their hands and feet hidden within the robes.

“Hello. My name is Anikin.”

“George, we have met. GO AWAY!”

“Can't. They locked the door, so to speak.”

“I am dangerous, stay away from me!”

“Sorry, but I really don't believe that. They said you had upgrade sickness, not that you were crazy.” I smile. No psychiatrist would use that word.

“I am rogue you idiot, go away!”

“Whoa, that makes sense. Then why didn't they just fit you with a limiter and be done with it. No one used the 'R' word around me, so I am guessing that they don't think you are. Seeing as how they have collectively hundreds of million of years of experience, I will go with their diagnosis over yours.”

He looks straight at me, “You really talk too much you know?”

“Sorry, but they would not let me have any of my instruments. Besides they would not work in this chamber. Nothing TK works here. You should have scanned it from the outside. Incredible emptiness, like nothing I have experienced before.”

“So Doc, aren't you going to ask me about my mother?”

“What's she have to do with the current circumstances. . . . oh!” I laugh, “You mean like Freud. 'Und tell me, did you hate your mother?' sort of stuff. Sorry, don't work that way. Never did believe that sex was the cause of all neurosis.

So then, ah, George, ah, why are we here?” I fake looking around.

“I am dangerous you idiot.” Softer this time.

“To whom George?” I look him straight in the eye and keep a concerned but even face.

He looks startled for a moment then looks away. After a few moments of no movement I get up.

“I am going to look around. No telling how long they will keep us down here. Besides, I am hungry. Hope they left something besides dino

chow. Are you hungry George?"

"I have been sick, throwing up all night."

"I'll take that as a yes. Fluids at least then." I take the stairs down to where ever they lead. Only option unless I learn to fly without TK.

Downstairs there is a small kitchen with a trivec, preserver and disposer. I access the panel and ask for the list of materials. Well stocked. It can make almost anything we could want. This is great. Over to the right is a small cleanser for taking a bath and dealing with wastes. Except for the loss of TK, I would much prefer staying here to being topside. My back and arms are still sore from sleeping in the hollow.

I punch up a lite breakfast. Coffee would probably be too much for George at the moment. Chocolate milk might work. I request that it be heated. Make that two. There is a panel in the corner with an interlock on it. Nothing else is locked or inaccessible. I go over to it and press my bracelet against it. I hear it unlock and the screen becomes active. Ah, a pharm unit. Nasty stuff, much prefer a reseq but that probably would not be safe with a TK. Pharms are likely to only work while we are here, as TK would clear our system of them pretty fast. I would imagine that a TK3 or above would not be able to get drunk. Ug, this thing even has Repeat. Last thing he probably needs now. Way too susceptible to addiction in his present frame of mind. Maybe something old fashioned like fluoxetine. I think I will skip the meds for the time being. Really don't know what I am dealing with yet.

"Breakfast is served. Hot chocolate, toast and jam." He looks at me surprised. I set down the plate in front of him and help myself to one of the pieces of toast with blueberry jam.

"How?"

"There is a complete system downstairs. No meat, but pretty much everything else. Even sap chow if you prefer." He shakes his head. Not the greatest tasting stuff in the world. All artificial flavors. I was trying to develop a taste for it, but not succeeding much to my dismay. Wasn't TK chow based on it? Guess we will find out sooner or later.

He eats slowly. I am sure his stomach is still sore. He manages one piece of toast and most of the hot chocolate before becoming exhausted. "I will sleep now." He curls up facing away from me.

"Sure thing, best medicine there is." They can't upgrade us in here can they? Surely they won't touch him while he is like this. Bored I decide taking a nap is not that bad an idea. Wonder what I am missing out on?

I don't really sleep, but meditate or think about all that has happened. George and Hashra were recruited from New Atherton. He is a sci-manager with a specialty in computer security and she a psiotics expert

and also good with computers. Logical choices considering that the pears are still very much here. They were not housed together though. That means they were not close. This is a scary place to be alone. Hashra's roommate does not fit. Why is Angpetu here? She is nice enough, but really does not know a thing that I can think is useful. Just a common everyday sap. Shit, I am thinking like a pear. Not all saps are alike. I just don't know what yet. The Guardians are not stupid, so there has to be a reason.

A manager means his likely role would be one of leadership. The original Guardians did not have a leader per se. Yingui became one, but their organization was pretty loose. But, they had a totally different set of circumstances. They had no idea what was happening. No training other than what they themselves worked out. Outnumbered and on the run, at least at first. We on the other hand have the benefit of their experiences. And those experiences go to the end of humankind. They have likely seen our situation before and therefore I repeat, that they probably know what they are doing.

So, what are the threats that would call for forming a set of new Guardians. Sauron is still alive, but has been for 65M, so that is long term and does not call for a rush in and of itself. There is the current world situation. We are running out of energy sources. Polluted as all get out. We thought we were bad, the Chinese have us beat polluting wise. Over populated for sure. Eight billion and leveling off, but way above the carrying capacity. It will go down by some means very soon. We were twice lucky recently with Helper V and Agent X. That brings us to the last threat, Mother.

Why does Mother want this Earth? More space or revenge? Intact or sterilized? Or will we only wish she had sterilized the planet. Someone knew who the Guardian's precursors were. That means she got a hold of the journals at some point. Carelessly left around or did she have direct experience with them? It can't be the Mother that the Guardians knew, so it had to be a result of a parallel bubble forming. When makes a huge difference. If it occurred soon after the original Mother was born, that might explain it. She would have been really pissed and probably barely escaped the Guardians. To time shift though would have taken tech much higher than she had at that time. That means she had to have stewed in that hate for some time.

Did Agent X work completely in her case? All humans left on her Earth gone? Only the extraterrestrial ones still alive? The Guardians themselves would not have been hurt and the 'thn would have protected her from death. She was legally sentient. The fact that she was a murderer would not have held weight with the 'thn as long as she did not threaten

them. That would mean it would not be safe for 'thn to visit and it is unlikely she would have been allowed to leave her Earth. That would give her a lot of freedom to experiment. And the only way she could expand was through the parallel Earths. Probably went after the ones in her own time first. Some of those would have Mothers on them as well. She could fight with them, merge with them, or leave them alone. That must have happened most of the time for her to try the for the time shift. By shifting her to before the Guardians were formed and before a rival could come into being, the world would be at it's weakest.

How many parallel worlds fit though? Go back too far and she would be blocked. You can't affect your own past, unless it was a parallel split. But then any earth she found would be totally different. No Guardians to defeat. Granted they would provide space, but not satisfy the blood lust or what ever the ebrain equivalent is. She is not here that I know of, so either she has not reached here yet, or she really is only interested in Earths that could support something like the Guardians.

Now we have the Guardians themselves. They also have an agenda. They are trying to stop her. They also cannot affect their own past. We are a recent split, probably the closest they could get under the rules. I hold that the fact that all the original Guardians had their namesakes here means they were very close. If the split had occurred fifty or a hundred years earlier, chances are it would not have all turned out the same and at least one of them would not have existed on this Earth. Since Mother and they share a past, that means Mother has only found this world recently also. Maybe by luck she got here a few months ahead of them. I would imagine that this kind of shifting is not easy nor exact. That would explain Agent X, Mother's favorite bug, being here for a few days before the Guardians could begin to act to stop it's spread, as the first thing the Guardians would have done is collect their namesakes to save them.

That would presume that they know she is fighting them. That would mean that they have visited other worlds. The easiest would be ones from her own time period. Assuming several thousand years have passed, there could have been many. Interestingly, she did not go back to our Guardian's line. There is no mention of them in the journals. Wait, they were spread throughout the galaxy. These bubbles would likely have happened independently to all but Yingui, who never left Earth after the Mother event. These may or may not be Guardians all from the same bubble. Likely not. That would explain their luck! Twenty five million years is a very long time. The chances of all of them returning are astronomical, even for a Guardian. These are the survivors then. Interesting that they never ran into their other selves.

Suddenly I am grabbed by my shoulders and shaken, "Doc, you don't

understand!”

“Uh, what George, what don't I understand?”

Still hanging onto me he shouts, “They are leaving us!”

“Of course George, after Mother is vanquished and Sauron is no longer a threat. There are other worlds out there to save. They can't spend . . .”

“No, soon, if not already. I heard them talking. They have their hands in several worlds at once. Something happened on another Earth.”

“Well, Lisa is the one who brought me here and I saw Owa in the courtyard. That means at least two are here.”

“They can pop out in a microsecond, don't be a fool Doctor. They are leaving us to take care of the mess here. The whole thing, Mother, Sauron, the eventual collapse. Everything!”

“The big splat, right. But who will lead us?”

“They expect ME to lead. I am the only one with managerial experience. Who else? Angpetu?”

I laugh, “No, not her, please not her. What about Jesus? He has done it before.”

“Yeah, and look where that got us. Besides he is gone already, since last night. He has gone back into hiding till 'needed' again. He warned me that each of us must walk into the desert to face the dark night of the soul.”

“Obviously a reference to his own time in the desert and a reference to Saint John of the Cross. Interesting that he would be aware of the literature.”

“Doc, this is it! We are on our own.”

“You are beginning to scare me George.”

“You are scared? I am terrified. I can't lead such a group. All I want to do is go back to my nice comfortable existence. A simple easy life of sixteen hour days solving security problems and only a handful of geeks to keep happy. I can't make the whole world happy Doc. I can't.”

“Yeah, well, neither can I. Maybe I could get a job as a shrink in some third world country. Latin America or Indonesia.”

“That sounds good. We could take the afternoons off, sit around, drinking beer and talking philosophy.”

“And theories of human behavior.”

“Just what are you two doing in there?”

“Who said that?”

“Sounded like Hei Long.”

“Of course it does. I am coming down.”

“Be careful. Your TK cuts out once your head is below the entrance.”

“Whoa, that's weird. How can you stand being without TK?”

“We like it this way. Let yourself drop from the last rung. That's it.”

“Want anything to eat. Something humans would eat perhaps? There is a full kitchen downstairs there and running water.”

“Really?” He takes off, coming back a few minutes later with wet hair and a sandwich.

“Gee, I thought you would go for rice or something.”

“I love cheese. They have at least ten different kinds in the there. Fresh lettuce, tomatoes, provolone, and gouda. This is wonderful.”

“What no pickles?”

He ignores me, “So, what are you two doing down here besides avoiding duties and eating something other than lizard chow?”

“You tell him Doc.”

“George was placed here because of upgrade sickness. I came down to see if I could help. Rather I was ordered to come down here. George and I got to talking and I agree with him.

Hei Long, the Guardians are going to leave us. They are going to leave us to do this entire job ourselves. Just the ten of us.”

“Eleven if you count Jesus.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, in fact.” He starts to think. “I came looking for you when I could not find a Guardian. Thought you might have seen Owa or someone else. I saw you and Lisa head up this hill before I went to kitchen duty. We had to cook a meal this time. With strange ingredients and cooking methods, we did not do so well, but everyone... Wait, the Guardians are gone!”

“That's what we were saying. We are alone. You don't want to lead us do you?”

He coughs up his food all over us. “What?” coughs some more. “Are you nuts? Me lead the saviors of the world? I don't think so. Oh sure, I have lead a group of about fifty, give or take, but ten TKs trying to take on Sauron. Out of my league.”

“Don't forget Mother and the big splat.”

“Big splat?”

“End of the world. Method does not really matter. Plague, war, famine, whatever.”

“Right. Big splat.” He sits against the side of the wall with us.

“Hey, how did you get past the electric cage?”

“Used TK to open the cage and the power went off for the electric field.”

“Oh, that's make sense.”

Everything is quiet for some time.

“Any beer in there?”

“Yep.”

“Sweet.” Hei Long gets up and comes back with three.

“George, George, are you in there?”

“Yes Hashra. Be careful coming down, TK shuts off.”

Hashra makes it down and then gets scared when the rungs stop.

“Just hang onto the last rung and drop. It's not far and the floor is padded.”

“I'll just stay here for the moment. I want to be able to leave.”

“We don't. You can take the ladder with you.”

“What? Why?”

“What is everyone doing down there?”

“Is that you Dorothy?”

“Of course it is. Did you know that the Sauropods are excellent singers?”

“Don't know if the ladder will take the weight of two.” Hashra is not exactly thin, but I am being polite.

“Come on down Hashra, we can give you a boost back up if you want to leave.” I hope she doesn't.

“All right.” She nervously flops her feet down and drops suddenly, then falls on her back. “Whoops.”

She looks at us against the wall, “Hey, where did you get the beer?” We all point at once to the stairs.

Dorothy drops like a ballerina then asks, “Any Red Barrell?”

Hei Long makes a horrible face, “You can actually drink that stuff?” We all have Tsing Taos.

“The secret is to drink it at room temperature.”

“I think I am going to be sick again.” Dorothy sticks her tongue out and heads to the kitchen.

When the two come back we tell them what we know and suspect. They sit back quiet against the wall. The other side. I said the TK shut off. No danger to either of them, but habits die hard I guess.

“Have you ladies seen Pushy Paws?”

“She did not come with us. Staid behind to help with the elders. I don't think she had made up here mind about all this yet.”

“Good for her.”

We hear a series of clicks and pops at the entrance.

“Great, now the Sauropods want to join us.”

“Relax, they would not fit down the opening or the ladder.”

“Very good Doc. It is I Tran Vu. I am learning to speak their language. What's up Doc?” He giggles.

“A comedian. Come one down Tran.”

He comes down, we explain. He heads for the kitchen and returns

with a soda.

“A Coke? Have a beer Tran. Live it up some.”

“Can't handle alcohol. No ADH.”

“Correction, you have ADH, just not a very good one. Wise move Tran.” I raise my bottle to him to acknowledge his decision.

“Wonder if I could be fixed? Never could afford a reseq.”

“What would be the point? Outside this room the TK would kill the effects anyway.”

“All the same, do you see what he is drinking? Durian Coke.”

“Don't let George smell that or we will have to start all over again.”

“Durian is very sweet Doc. Just have to get past the initial smell.” I grimace anyway.

“Not too many people left, who will be next? Any bets?”

“I say Angpetu. She is curious and will want to know where all of us are. The only other two are Smith and Jones. They are probably out hunting.”

“Or sleeping off their hunt from this morning. Did you see how many claws they brought in?”

“Could be a Guardian that finds us.”

“They would ruin the party for sure. Hope you are not right.”

“Is Hei Long down there?”

“You lose, sounds like the great hunters. Yeah, Hei Long is down here. Come on down. Be careful, you lose your TK and no more ladder seven feet about the floor.” They have had no trouble. Are they good at everything?

“Cool, a kiva!”

“What's a kiva?”

“A meeting place for religious purposes with the only entrance and exit being a hole at the top.”

“How did you know that Dorothy?”

“I studied everything I could find on the Hopi before I came here.”

“Good idea, but I was not able to access any information where I was.”

“Poor Anikin.” I grin and give her a dirty look. She sticks out her tongue at me and laughs. Surprised behavior from someone her age.

“What are you doing?” George asks the twins.

“We need your plate.”

“No problem. Please take it.”

They take the plate and place it in the center of the room just under the ladder. One of them takes some dried plant material out of his robe. The other takes out a laser lighter.

“What the?”

“You did not expect us to rub two sticks together did you?”

“Now each will state their concerns. I will go first.”

“And I will go last.” That sets us in a circle clockwise.

I don't know who is who, but the first goes first.

“I know the ways of men and the ways of our animal and plant friends, but I am afraid, for we face foes who know both better than I for much longer than I.” That is scary.

“The rest of you have heard my concerns already, but for the benefit of Smith and Jones, I will summarize. The Guardians are leaving, if they have not already. We are on our own to face these foes that even Jones fears. I fear I was chosen to be part of the leadership of this band of wizards.” I like that name better than TKs. In the Guardian's world TKs were much more common. Wizards sounds special.

My turn, “I know the human mind. Though he has been diagnosed with upgrade sickness, I can find nothing wrong with George. He is perfectly sane. There is irrational fear and there is good fear. Good fear warns you not to jump off a building or stick your hand in a flame. I am afraid and this is good fear.”

“I live for the 'dance', the sparing of equals in a fight to the death. It is in death that we are truly tested. There is no dance when the odds are heavy in one opponent's favor. Then it is just slaughter. I too fear.”

“I just want to go home and forget this whole thing.” A sentiment shared my dear.

“I am clearly the oldest among those present. The journals are correct. I was born in England before the Revolutionary War. I have seen many wars and looked into the faces of those about to die. Too many faces. I gradually moved to the tip of South America to get as far as possible from the stupidity. Now as I face all of you, do I see those faces again? I care not for my own life, I have lived a good long life. But, there is much beauty in this world I would hate to see end. I thought Sauron was evil, but this new threat is far beyond anything even he could imagine. It comes entirely from the minds of humankind.” Hard to imagine we could have one up on Sauron. I don't think this is something we should be proud of though.”

“I speak the languages of all those I meet. Even that of our new friends. Theirs is a language of honor and traditions. This can lead to some pretty bloody encounters. But even their language does not have the words for what we face. I too fear.” Like myself, he does not look to be a warrior either. What are we doing here?

“I should first confess a wrong doing. My brother and I are not the great hunters we have lead everyone to believe. We depend as much on deception as truth. In many ways we may be of help for this reason. We

face the Great Deceiver and the Honorless One. No greater foes has our kind faced. We approach the end of the fourth age, but will the fifth age dawn? The sky is dark and the fires appear about to go out. The smoke of even our prayers grows thin.” He wafts the last of the smoke from the sage with his hand.

“So, then how did you get all those claws this morning.”

“Oh those. We wanted to pull one over on His Highness. We saw what he did to you. Granted you were lucky, but to steal your honor for political reasons was clearly not fair.”

“We duped them.”

“You duped them.” Hei Long cracks up. Soon the others are laughing too. Myself included.

“Yohoo!” Ah, the last of our band of wizards. I go to the center and look up.

“What the?” I see about a dozen little heads looking down at me. Lizards, er, not sure they are lizards exactly. More like miniature sauropods. Cute I guess. Naw, they wouldn't be. Would they? Then Angpetu looks in.

“There you are. What is this place?”

“It is an anti TK chamber. If you come down.” Before I can spit out the rest she has TKed over the top of the hole and lowered herself down BELOW the entrance level.

“Incoming!” I yell and back out of the way just in time.

She falls with a yell of delight?! Her legs hook on the last rung as if she planned it. She flips over and her rope falls down over her head. There she hangs naked from the neck up with an inverted robe nearly reaching floor. This causes her to break out laughing and this sets off the rest of us. She lets the rest of the robe drop and then expertly swings and dismounts to applause and bows, breasts nearly touching the ground.

“Well, everyone appears to be here. Oh beer.” She sniffs the air. “Farmer's friend? Not very good stuff. Not a problem. I brought some good stuff.” She sets about brushing off what I thought was sage off the plate. She reaches into her rope and pulls out plant material. Fumbles again and pulls out a laser lighter.

“What is this? Does everyone but me have one of those?” A few fumble in their pockets and pull one out to show me. This sets them off again. Angpetu ignores them and lights the dried plants. “That smell I recognize from the class on hallucinogens.”

“It is time to party!”

That quiets everyone down instantly.

“Angpetu, the Guardians are leaving us.”

“Really?” I wish she would put her robe back on. She confronts us

with her hands on her hips.

“George overheard them talking.”

“Wow, that's wonderful!” She holds her arms up in the air and twirls around. “We are free!”

“We are doomed.”

“Why do you say that?” She leans over to listen to George.

“We will have to confront Mother ourselves. No help.”

“Oh?” She holds her hand up to her chin in a thoughtful way. She starts laughing. “Says who?”

“Huh?”

“Oh come on Doc,” she passes her hand through my hair and gives me a kiss on my forehead. “Did they tell you to go slay Mother? Did they tell you to do anything other than to pay attention to your training?”

My mouth falls open and I freeze.

“Didn't think so.” She spins around to face everyone slowly. “Listen up people, we are not 'required' to do anything. They will leave and we will be on our own. We could sit back and watch. They certainly did that enough times.”

“Thousand year view.” Hei Long. Chinese wisdom?

“Exactly. He has it. We take the long view. Nothing fast. Gather information. Do small tweaks to understand how things happen. We are beginners. Lighten up! PARTY!”

She plops down next to George and raises her arms to behind her head. George notices.

“So George, know where a girl can get a good wash? Chasing younguns gets a gal real dirty. I think I am going to die laughing, but don't dare. She grabs George by the hand, “I know what you need. Angpetu has the cure for you handsome. Come help me wash all this dirt off.” She gets up and practically stuffs a breast into his face, pulls him up and leads him down the stairs to cat calls and whistles. I glance over to Hashra who looks very concerned.

She notices me looking at her and whispers, “What about pregnancy or disease?”

“I doubt either will be a problem with a TK. Even her skin cancers are clearing up. We are all getting healthier and human TKs are sterile.” She nods, but I am not sure I have convinced her. She will look after her boss no matter what, but because he is her boss, or was, she will never show her love for him directly. The others are obviously uncomfortable with this whole thing.

Finally Smith comments, “She's right this is good stuff.”

“So isn't there some kind of evocation to Great Spirit or Mother Earth or something we need to do to finish this.”

They look at each other, “Hell if I know.” He goes through Angpetu's robe and finds the rest of the stash to throw on the plate. We are soon stoned out of our minds.

“Whoa, that was fast.” Someone says. Was it?

“Oh, not so fast.” She gives us a dirty look. I pick up her robe and give it to her. She puts it on. There is a squeek from above. She looks up, “Frtz e!K its its its” They are gone.

“You understand them?” She nods.

“She is better than me at Hspkt. She learned by hanging out with their children. Makes sense. The children speak a simpler form just like ours do.”

I am curious, “The small ones are their children? They certainly don't treat them like we would. What do they call themselves?”

He smiles and Angpetu giggles.

“They call themselves the Special Ones.”

I laugh, “We have that in common at least.”

“Is that in reference to all Sauropods, or just this group?”

“Both.” Yep. Just like us.

“Let's go back.”

“That's easy, except for the last one up.”

“I'll stay. Not sure I want to face reality just yet.”

“Now Georgie. We don't need to go there again. Everyone can leave whenever they want.” She picks up a bottle cap from the floor, tosses it in her hand to get the feel of it then expertly throws it up through the hole. Suddenly I feel TK again. There was an on/off switch. Duh!

“It's back!” someone else yells. I look over to George. He is leaning against the wall looking concerned. We all turn and watch him.

He looks happy then confused, then smiles. “I think I am okay.”

“All right George!” What century is she from? Oh yeah.

I am the last one out. I wanted to be sure George actually went topside. We make our way around to the front gate. We could have all flown over the top, but I don't think anyone is in a hurry to go back to using TK. The buzz from the pot, 'farmer's friend', died within a minute of our abilities returning.

“Look who is following us.” Several ahead of us turn to look behind us. George and I turn around to face dozens of the smaller sauropods.

Angpetu lowers herself to their level and they gather around her. She whispers something to them, they look at each other and then suddenly are gone. They are really fast at this size.

“So, Angpetu, how come they ignore their children?”

“Their culture is different from ours. I thought you of all people here would understand and expect that.”

“I,” I think for a moment. I had always thought of her as the least of us. I am not so sure any more. She is definitely not stupid.

“Each mating produces an average of four eggs. They can mate once a year and they do. Currently each female can produce from age twelve to forty five. Add it up. There are way more children hatched than can survive. They need a weeding out process. The first five years the children are on their own. They either figure it out or perish. The more aggressive are picked off by the raptors. The more timid by the more aggressive. They keep the raptor population in check so that not all of their children parish, but just enough.”

“I have noticed some individuals who are missing, ah, essential parts of their anatomy.”

“For a doctor you sure are squeamish about sex. The males are still the most aggressive and will defend territories. If you don't want to be a casualty you can elect to have your genitals removed. There is a sixty percent survival rate, but that is still better than zero. By the way, both the males and females hunt, when they are not about to lay anyway.”

“And the women have no say in any of this?”

“They select which territory to hang out in. They can change their minds whenever they want too. So, if a male does not make his ladies happy enough, they pack up and leave.”

“I guess our method of doing war on each other all the time is not really a better way.”

“No it isn't.”

Hei Long breaks in, “I need to go back. I have forgotten why I came out here in the first place. I was promised a reward for saving the chief's life. I have a feeling that means spending time with one of the wives.”

“Well, you can't produce children, so you don't have to worry about that.”

“Doc, you are not helping any.”

“Neither of you two are paying any attention. You don't have to mate with her, just make her happy. Unlike males, there is more on the mind of a lady than sex.”

“How do I make a Saurpod happy?”

“Use your imagination and try different things. You know a lot more than you think. Look around you, this is not exactly a spa resort you pears live in. Oh, then report back to us what you have learned. The same all of us should be doing.”

“Interesting. I think I am beginning to understand.” George makes his way past everyone else and goes up to the front of the line. He pounds on the front of the gate. A moment later it slowly opens. I did not see anyone on the tower lookout. I am still not thinking TK, er, wizard.

“What's he up to?”

“No idea Hei Long. Though I think we have all supplied part of the answer.”

Inside we come to face three people. In the center is Yingui, whom I recognize at least. The woman on the right looks like one of those China Dolls some of the Chinese pears have come to resemble. We are already over loaded with the pear side of the equation, so I hope this is not a new recruit. On the left is the darkest person I have ever seen. He or she stands at attention. Military? Battle hardened it looks like. I have seen some who returned. Not pretty.

It gets real quite as George approaches them. He stops a few feet out.

“Wizards of Earth reporting for duty Guardian Yingui.” An eye brow goes up on military. The China doll looks scared. She keeps looking around. A black cat with a white mark on it's head appears out of no where and curls around her feet. She bends down to pick it up. They obviously know each other. Both of them then turn and look out at us.

“Wizard George, I would like to introduce to you the last three members of your team.” Three? Where is the third? “This is Aimee and with her is Tsing Mao.” Ghost suddenly makes an appearance running out of the kitchen area. Following him is someone else I don't recognize. The third.

“Ghost, you come back here. I was only trying to fit you with an amp. Silly kitty.”

Stupid monkey. Don't need a vine around my neck. I smell a female. Leave me alone.

Tsing Mao lets out a meow and both of them disappear. Aimee looks concerned. Yingui looks at her and she tries to calm down.

“And this is Malak. She will be your instructor for the time being.” So, it is a female. Could have fooled me. “Pushy Paws you have already met.” That is Pushy Paws, she was a very old woman the last I saw her. Now she looks about thirty.

“You said three new members.”

He smiles, “And I mentioned three new members.” He disappears. The cat?

A young sauropod runs across the ground between us. Aimee freaks and floats several feet above the ground.

“I can see there is going to be a lot of work to do to whip this group into shape.”

“Excuse me, who made you leader? We have a leader, George.” Angpetu, don't go there till you know what you are dealing with.

Angeptu is raised into the air about ten feet and then turned upside down. She obviously did not do this. That makes Malak TK. She would

have to be to be our instructor I suppose. And I suspect that she is stronger than us too. Angpetu lets out a weird sound that is half shriek.

Br'thn suddenly is in my face. "My love, where have you been? I was so worried. I miss you."

The others made Br'thn stay away till now. Br'thn back.

There is a rumbling sound. I look away from Br'thn long enough to see hundreds of young sauropods coming in through the still open gate. Soon the entire open space is filled with them.

I whisper, "Br'thn, what level is Malak?"

Malak is level eight by your measure.

"Angpetu, she is an eight. Don't mess with her."

Malak turns to me, "You must be the Doctor." All of the young sauropods vanish. That certainly proves it, though I have never had reason to doubt Br'thn. Angpetu is lowered to the ground gently. "They are not harmed." Without looking around she then says, "You can come down Aimee." She does so cautiously and slowly.

"I am not trying to take over. Each of you has talents we all need. We work together as a team or we perish as individuals. I am the first of this world's created TKs as we understand it. Or if you prefer, wizards. I was in New York when Helper V hit. On the wrong side of the line. I survived, but was different. You have all read the journals?" We nod in unison. Must be the military vibe.

"They found me trying to avoid being sterilized with the rest of the city. The rest you can guess. After I was trained by the Guardians, I reported back to my unit just in time. They never knew I was in the city and I did not tell them. I would have been in quarantine and studied like a sand beetle for the rest of my life. The same would be true of all of you if you are ever taken, believe me."

She turns to Aimee, "Aimee here is a grid expert of the highest order. Aimee, Hashra is your equivalent in psiotics. You two will probably be spending a lot of time together. Dorothy you know from the journals. She will tend to keep things real and on the ground, the long view. Never forget we are little more than stupid monkeys as the cats will remind us constantly. George is in the journals and is an expert in security and management, and a great photographer of the old school. Pushy Paws you have met of course. For the rest of you, she is in a new body. Before this is done, you all will have had this experience at least once. She will be our spiritual advisor and along with Anikin, er, Doc, will assist in 'figuring things out'. They both are good at puzzle solving that involves people, most of the time. The twins, Smith and Jones, are experts at deception and tracking. They can hide in plain sight. Good for intel and loyal to the group. They will back you in any difficulty. Tran Vu is our

human language expert. It would appear that Angpetu, our moral officer, is also an expert at exo languages. Good to know.

Hei Long, your fellow countryman by genetics only. If anyone can get into the mind of Sauron, he will. A 'businessman' of the second order in China. I will leave you to figure out what that means. He was recruited by Mother and then abandoned by both her and his own group.” He never mentioned that. His face remains emotionless. “None of us is a saint. Get over it. Use it. There is knowledge in every aspect of our pasts.

I am skilled in all things mechanical, but will be the first to admit that we as a group may be weak in this area. Once we get home, we will be free to recruit whomever we want.”

George asks, “Malak, what are we here for?”

She looks at him long a hard.

“You tell me George. Tell all of us. What are we here for?”

“At first I thought it was to serve humankind. To rid the world of Sauron and the threat posed by Mother.” That makes sense. Certainly what I thought. Didn't the Guardians do the same on their world? What else is there?

“I no longer believe that.” Ah-oh.

“What do you believe now George?”

“I know we are to be the Wizards of Earth. We are different from the Guardians in many ways, but like the Guardians we have the same purpose. We serve the Question. Thanks to the Thinkers, Owa and the other Guardians, we are necessary, along with the 'thn, to make the Challenge fair.”

“Tell me this, what of humankind?”

“They will make their own choices.”

“Good, you understand. That will save much time.

Speaking of 'thn. It would seem that Br'thn has taken a liking to you Doc. Don't betray that trust.”

I gulp.

Sports Net

The Hunan Hustlers have won the world series in the fourth game of the set! This is their third win in five years. Played in New York, the winning run was in the seventh inning when American slugger Nigel Woodward, playing for the Hustlers, hit one over the right field fence bringing two runners on base in. This made the score 5 to 2 and the New York Yankees were never able to recover despite Rivera's sensational double play against the Hustlers in the ninth inning. Immediately protests were filed against Woodward with accusations of genetic enhancement, but so far he has shown only approved modifications.

Columbus, Ohio - day laborer camp

“We either find work or they kick us out in two days!”

“I know Garcia. Manuel is looking for us. You and I have used up our net allocation. What choice do we have?” What was not said was that in another week our bracelets run out. Then even a ditch will be welcome.

“Julie and John have found work. Why can't we?”

“Gardening is a universal need and not a security risk. The rest of us worked inside. They don't trust us after Doc Roberts went missing. Even Julie and John had to accept grunt work. Moving manure is not my idea of work just yet.”

“They will at least eat.”

“We can always volunteer for the farm. The work they are doing is not much different.”

“You're right. This sucks though.” I nod.

“All the same, one of us should go and wait with the others.”

“RPS you for it. One of us has to stay here with our stuff or someone will walk off with it.”

“I doubt it. We have already traded anything of worth we could afford to give up.”

“There are people more desperate than us. Never doubt that.” He nods and looks away.

“Look, I'll just go. You stay here Ed. You are older than I am. I will have an easier time out there. It will be good for me. The last medpod said I needed to exercise more anymore.”

“Are you sure? I am willing to go also.”

“I'll go. I complained the most, it serves me right.”

“Good luck then. Maybe you will get a job moving air.” He smiles.

Standard joke, seeing as how air does not weigh anything.

When he is gone I look around at what little we have. A few beat up old pots to cook in and a few torn packs to carry our worn out blankets for sleeping on. Thank goodness the days are getting warmer. We would never survive winter. Manuel is strong. He will be selected. I hope.

There is a small boy two spaces down from us. Such a rare sight to see a young one. Most have to work to help a family survive, those few who do have children. There have been rumors about why it is so hard to have children. I am old enough to remember all the warnings about sex and the fear of pregnancy and disease. The disease is still there. No one can afford the meds to cure one if you get infected. Maybe that is why. Who would risk sex? Can a partner be trusted? What woman would not risk it for an extra portion of food? Maybe they put something in our food, but maybe they do not have to.

“Ed! Ed! We have work! Pack the bags, we have work!” I cannot believe my ears. I rush to get everything back into our two packs.

“Manuel, we need to leave a message for the others, Especially Garcia. Where are we to be working?”

“The Herman Maxwell Estate.” I scribble a message on a piece of scrap e-paper long past it's e-life. We will attempt a net message later if possible. Not all estates allow their saps access. Friendships tend to be short in our world now. So many friends left to be never heard from again.

“Come, the transport will leave in a few minutes.” He grabs the heavier pack. I am not in a position to protest.

“Thanks.” I say instead. We make our way to the bus. I remember when buses spewed black smoke out their tailpipes. Long ago they were all converted to hybrids. This ones smells slightly of swamp gas, so it must be a methane hybrid. Could just as easily have been hydrogen or biodiesel. Didn't think it was warm enough yet for good methane production.

“How long is the work for?”

“They said a week. Something about two workers being sick.”

I am almost afraid to ask, but I do. I accept my fate. “What kind of work.”

“It was all I could find Ed. I am sorry, but I was worried that we would end up on the farm soon.”

“You did the right thing. I would rather have too much work than the farm. Any kind of work is better than the farm. Hope Garcia finds something.”

He nods in agreement, then continues, “The good news is that they will recharge our bracelets for the week's work.”

I raise an eyebrow, “For one week's work. How can that be? No pear gives a charge for a week's work. What are we expected to do?” I will not discipline another. I would rather work the farm than hit another, no matter what they are accused of.

He must have seen my concern, “I am sorry Ed to put you through this.”

He looks down at the floor of the bus and says, “They want us to work in the kitchen.”

“You are teasing me.” I really thought I would never see the inside of one again. Blacklisted.

“Somewhat. They do want us in the kitchens, but not as cooks. We are to serve the cooks.” That can be back breaking, but it beats working the farm.

“A new place would not trust us to be cooks. Think back to when you first arrived at the hospital. We are good, only the best came to the hospital, but it will take time to build up references again. Maybe they will know of some other estate that needs our help. We will have to do an excellent job here. It will be important to do whatever they ask without question. Never complain to anyone, not even me. The walls have ears and they will be listening. They may even be listening now.”

He nods and keeps quiet. Good, he understands.

We ride the rest of the way in silence. The rest of the bus slowly empties out.

Looking at his bracelet Manuel says, “We get off here. They said someone would come and get us.” I nod, following my own advice. There are only two left on the bus. We must really be out of the way.

The road is paved and in good condition, so we must be close. There are high stone fences all around us. The sides are smooth. No doubt someone is watching us. We wait where we got off the bus. Not one step. To show any curiosity would be certain failure. We face the wall we were facing when we stepped down. The bus has gone on.

We wait.

I hear footsteps, but do not turn around. They walk past us.

We wait.

“Arms forward!” I nearly lose it. I had not heard him approach. We extend our bracelet arms forward. I can see a wand out of the corner of my eye assessing my bracelet, then go to Manuel's.

“Pass phrase?”

I don't know this. Manuel never told me, nor should he have. My arm is nudged. I remain silent.

Manuel answers when he is nudged, “The Oracle of Delphi sees all.” Interesting reference. Also reminds us of our position in case we needed

any more warnings.

“You may follow me.” I lower my arm. We follow him. His is clothed as we are in a sap suit. All white, with a hood against the sun. A cook or even a kitchen slave who normally would never see the sun still wears this combination.

We walk a couple of hundred meters and board a small pedal hydrogen hybrid. We supply the power our leader drives. We are facing backwards. Surprised we are not blindfolded. It has been done before. They must be in a hurry. The cart stops.

Another voice, “Rise and present your arms.” Our driver does the same. Strange. You would think he would be known. Hope we are not going to work with paranoids. They take their time with each of us, checking several times. Probably running down our charge. I am careful not to show my thoughts. Takes lots of practice.

A small door opens. Cast iron and heavy. No one is going to break into this castle easily. We walk through a sort of maze. Are these people paranoid? Okay, all pears are paranoid around saps, but this is extreme even for them. Who is this rich in Ohio? We did not travel far enough to leave the state I don't think.

“Leave your packs here and strip.” We do so. Never mind it is a female voice. Modesty is for pears. Even restrooms are unisex for us. But, whoa, if you forget they are separate for pears and go into the wrong one to clean it, Kiss your ass goodbye. You will be brought up on sexual assault charges faster than you can blink. Doesn't matter if you never touched anyone.

We proceed through standard decontamination. Best bath money can buy. We are very pink and sore when we come out.

“Put these on.” New robes. Nicer than the ones we had. Hope they burned the old ones. Expensive when we have to buy our own.

Then we sit in a small room. Forever. Warm. Water is provided. We drink several glasses. The inevitable happens. There are two urinals. Our names are on panels above each. Well, guess they are interested in the inside too.

My stomach starts to rumble like crazy.

“Shit.” Manuel breaks the silence and rushes for the toilet. There is only one of these. We take turns till we are empty and exhausted. We ended up stripping off our robes to prevent them from getting soiled. Why give them to us then? Oh, so we would get overheated and drinks lots of water. The laxative was in the water. All they needed to do was ask and we would have drunk anything they put in front of us. Go figure.

The door opens and we are led to a new room. There are others in here. Did not realize how late it was. Already dark looking out the small

window. We are shown to two bunks. We are marked as the new arrivals for sure. No one says anything. Unlike a prison, people actually want to stay here. You don't cause trouble in a place you want to stay.

Normally we would have something to eat, but after that I will take my chances on an empty stomach.

We are woken at three in the morning. The normal hour for preparation. We however are not part of the prep crew exactly. Manuel was not wrong on the role we would play. We enter the showers with our robes and a bar of soap. The extra time makes us the last ones out, but no one says anything thank goodness.

Breakfast is rice porridge, sap chow and weak tea. Why those sap chow nutrition bars? Only one flavor that I know of, tasteless. This is part of the test I am sure. Last thing they need is for us to be sneaking food from the kitchen. Food we are not entitled to. Come to think of it, this might be just what we need after yesterday. I sure would like to know the justification for cleaning us out.

The synthetic nature of the robes means they dry quickly. Not as warm in the winter though and could get uncomfortable in the heat in the kitchen too. No wonder they complain about saps smelling bad. Nothing like a new job to heighten your awareness of everything around you. Dangerous awareness.

"You two the new ones?" Of course, you know everyone else don't you? We nod. I have to turn off my mind or I will get into trouble. We follow her into the kitchen proper. We are the only ones in the kitchen so far. My guess is that the porridge is from the night before. Maybe even left on slow cook overnight.

"I am your supervisor. You do what I tell you and nothing more or less. Do not take orders from anyone else or you will hear it from me." Great, a control freak.

"What if a pear asks us to do something." Manuel asks. Surely they out rank her.

"NEVER use that term again or you walk back to the city. Understand?" We nod. She never answers the question. Rock and hard place then.

"There are going to be forty guests tonight in addition to the four who live here. You two will replace the dishwashers. Have you had experience with the Ronco IV?" We nod. The same one we had at the hospital. Very sturdy, but a pain to use. It tends to spray hot scalding water on you if you are not really careful.

"It will be a ten course meal. There will be lots of prep pots and utensils. Follow me and learn where everything goes." We take a tour of the kitchen and surrounding prep and storage areas. Why can't they use a

trivec like everyone else? Surprised the cooks do not have to use a wood stove. I can't help but notice the labels on the jars. Looks like they eat fusion Chinese mostly. Very popular at the moment, but gets boring after awhile, especially for the cooks. The lid is loose on the cornstarch and the outside is covered in cornstarch. Not good. I say nothing.

"You will need to work quickly. The materials will be used several times tonight. Be sure everything is clean before you leave. Here is your station. Do not wander around unless you are replacing something. There is not enough space here for people in the way. Work out the method among yourselves. The others will be here shortly." She leaves. The large pots from the porridge are in the sink. Too big to go in the Ronco, so will have to be done by hand. They did not fill them with water, so the porridge is crusted on. Looks like the last dishwashers did not spend a lot of time on them either. Manuel looks at them and sighs.

I comment, "This is just an opportunity to show how good we are. Help me fill them." We will put them under the sink till later. Those pots are heavy.

Right in the middle of the rush, when everything is going crazy the overseer comes up to us screaming, "I told you to clean everything immediately. Why haven't you done those pots? Do them now or walk!" She storms out in a huff. We do as we are told. By now the water has softened everything up at least. It still takes awhile. When we are done it is really piled up. Some of the cooks are starting to get impatient and worried. If we hold up a course hell will be to pay.

"Where do they go?" We weren't shown where they go. We each hold one up. The entire place is looking at us.

"Can anyone help us? We don't know where they go?"

"They're clean!" Yeah, isn't that the idea? Did we do something wrong?

One comes up to us and takes the pot Manuel is holding. Another comes up to me and takes my pot. They take them near the main stove and place them underneath. We get back to work.

We are the last ones to leave the kitchen. When we reach the mess area there are two bowls of sap stew waiting for us covered in a rough towel to keep them warm. Just as we sit down to eat, she comes back in glaring at us.

"Inspection now!" We stand, leave our food and follow her. She turns the lights back on in the kitchen and marches us from station to station inspecting everything that would have come through us to be washed, carefully and slowly. She notices the large pots, examining them carefully, but says nothing.

She finally finds something to complain about, "This knife is not

clean enough!" I take it from her and go to the wash sink and carefully clean it. Nice knife. I certainly did not handle it tonight. Most cooks wash their own knives and would never let a dishwasher anywhere near them. I am not going to start now either. I am very careful with the knife. Last thing I want is a cook mad at me. They can make life hell by purposely burning food onto pots. I dry it and return it to her handle first. She points to indicate that I am to return it to its proper location. I do so carefully matching the direction of the other knives. It will not be seen to be out of place. She then storms out turning the lights out before we are able to leave behind her.

We follow her to the mess where she hands us our bowls, "Clean this up now!" We dump the food into the composter and go back to the kitchen to wash the bowls and spoons and then return to place them in the cupboard.

She is waiting, "You may go now." Our mistake was that we did not wait for her order to leave the kitchen.

When we get to the dorm it is dark with everyone else already asleep. Wonder where she sleeps? It would not be safe for her to sleep here if she treats everyone this way. When we get to our bunks, there is a roll waiting on each. Somehow they anticipated her behavior. I say a silent thanks and eat mine quickly to fall asleep almost instantly. Hope Garcia found work.

Panda Pods Presents

The ultimate sexual experience! A full 4D interactive with the luscious Vivian Voom. Measurements 126 - 63 - 90. Don't miss the ultimate! Fifteen wondrous minutes for only \$15.

Qingzhou City, rural area outside the city

“You promised results! Our crops are being destroyed. When they go we all go. There are people starving in America. Do you want to end up like them?”

“We have posted guards, but there are too many fields to watch. Unless all of you start helping out, we don't stand a chance of catching the thief.”

“Thief. Right. We have seen the tracks and those are not truck or tractor tracks.”

“Oh, I suppose you know what it is then?” He looks around. No one answers.

“We can't work the fields in the day and stay awake all night. Either way it would appear we are doomed. Maybe in my next life I will be rich.”

“With your karma? No way.” She ribs him and he smiles.

This unit has begun to understand the language of these housekeepers who farm. Very strange they would engage in this activity willingly. There are many words not understood. What is rich? What is thief? Still harm is being done. It would be best to move out of their range.

They have very bad hearing and their eyesight in the dark is equally poor. It is hard to believe that they could even do housekeeping. And why so many housekeepers in one place? They have been here too long to be awaiting transport. Very strange.

“Sound the alarm! It is here! God it's ugly. Hurry.” Time to leave. Their ability to move quickly is limited unless they use transport devices like in the city. Staying away from the transport tracks will minimize hazard to this unit. The hills will provide sufficient cover and hopefully sustenance.

Sixty five time units have passed. The sounds of pursuit have stopped some time ago. It is safe to examine the new surroundings. There is sufficient bioorganics to maintain, but definitely of low quality. This would explain the lack of other betas. So far the contours are the same as the last world served on. If this is the case then there should be caves soon. Pinging commencing to echo locate. This will slow progress. Must

get out of sight before the sun rises. They see well in the light. Possible they have far seekers of low resolution.

Ground sensing sees animal life of high protein quality. Taking of life is not the best solution but necessary. Where are the masters? The kill is quick and the meal equally quick. Would have been better cooked.

The caves should be close.

A road. This is not good. Privacy is needed to avoid detection. Worse, a structure. Best to investigate. There is activity inside. Find the caves first. Pinging commencing again. Further up hill will be necessary.

There is a cave below, must find a point closer to surface to affect an entrance. The cave breaks the surface just under an overhang, but not large enough. Well hidden though. Excavation needed.

The sun is above horizon as the entrance is finished. Inside is much cooler. Water is present. Time to rest.

Maxwell Research Center for Advanced Computing

“As you can see from this figure, if we use an array of alpha sixty four nodes we reach a critical state when the number of nodes reaches eight. The implications of this value should be obvious. Today we declare that the database as we know it is dead. We predict that when the array reaches one thousand and twenty four it will be possible to replace every database server in the USA with this single array. The amazing aspect of this is that with the alpha sixty four it is no longer necessary to organize the data. In fact it does a better job when the data comes in raw, not formatted.”

Memphis, Tennessee - Gold House Chinese Restaurant

“Let us pray.” We all bow our heads and close our eyes tight. I try and concentrate to put the maximum amount of effort into my feelings.

“Dear Lord, we are your humble servants. Please look upon our efforts favorably and show us thy will. If ever there is a time for your coming, it is now. Please oh Lord, we beseech you to come quickly.” I pause. I am not good at this sort of thing. “Oh, and thanks for the food you put before us this day. Amen.”

“Amen. Thanks Brother Bones.” Not sure I like that name. It will take me awhile to not respond to Garcia and instead answer to Bones. I eat without tasting. The others all recount their successes and failures of the day. I am still a newbie so have nothing to report. Or so I think.

“Brother Bones, what say you?” All eyes are upon me.

“Ah, Nothing Shepard Mark. I didn't do anything but watch and learn.”

“That is not nothing Brother Bones. Watching is a powerful talent. What did you see Brother Bones?”

I think for a moment.

They are very patient. Even stopped eating to hear me.

I review the day, “I rose before dawn. It is marvelous to watch the Lord's creation as it comes to life on a new day. I love this quiet time to listen to what the Lord has to say to me. It can get distracting later in the day and is harder for me to hear Him then.”

“What did He say to you Brother Bones?” This is not a joke, they are very serious.

I gulp, “He said to be patient, that all would be revealed. Listen to

Shepard Mark, he will assist you in seeing the Truth.”

“Go on.”

"I then read scripture as prescribed."

"How far did you get?"

"Everything that was on the list for today. Could have gone further, but figured you wanted some of it to sink in."

"Very good. Then?"

"I went with Brother Ash to walk the streets in search of people who are open to coming to the Lord."

"And did any come to the Lord?"

"We had a number of young men listen intently, but none came back with us today."

"A seed has been planted. If they are for the Lord, they will come. Maybe not to us, but possibly to the next Savers they meet."

"Yes Shepard."

"Never fear, our numbers are growing at a great rate. Thousands are coming to see that we have the truth." Or that more people are getting as hungry and as a desperate as I was and am. Here I am safe, I am fed, I am warm. The down side is that they control every aspect of my life. Even when I shit.

I got scared when Ed and Manuel got work and I still hadn't found anything. Another few days and I would have been on the farm or headed to Iraq. What good would a sap with no skills be to anyone? Anyone can do janitor work. I hope to only spend a few months with them. At the most till next spring. The hard part is going to be getting my bracelet back. They say I can have it back any time I want, but I have no idea where it is now.

I must have been rubbing my arm where the bracelet was as the Shepard comments, "You will get used to it after a bit. Remember, no bracelet means you can't be tracked. No one has the right to tell us where we can go or not go."

I could see where this was going and played along, "You got that right. If we could be sure the government was of God, we would have nothing to worry about, but I doubt there is a person alive who believes that." They all smile and nod.

Brother Ash asks, "So is there any help for the pears?"

Shepard laughs, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven."

Ash thinks for a moment, "Unfortunately it is not that easy for saps either. We are hardly bringing everyone in are we?"

"Maybe our technique is not good enough?"

"We have nothing to do with the success rate Brother Bones. We are

merely the mouthpieces of our Lord. Whether or not they are capable of receiving the message is between them and God and not ours to even worry about. Those who are meant to join us will. The others are lost and not to be stressed over."

"Then it is as if they are already dead."

"It is as if they are already in Hell itself. Shun them lest they take you with them."

"Brother Bones, have you decided on the Lottery yet?"

"I don't have enough money for the Lottery Shepard Mark."

"We pay the introduction fees Brother Bones. All we ask in return is that you name us as your benefactor in case something should happen to you later."

"You don't take a cent?"

"Not one cent unless you have not spent it all before you join the Lord."

"Even if I decide to leave the fold?"

"We would all be sad if that happened of course. We would be fearful of your soul. It would be better if you gave it all away to the poor than for you to leave us. But, yes, if you decided to leave, even then."

I could not think of any way they could stick it to me, "Okay, I agree."

Advertisement

You need Happy Sap! Happy Sap keeps your workers happy under the most boring conditions. Just add a few drops to their feed and never worry about discontented workers again. That's Happy Sap from Glaxo-Merck Pharmaceuticals.

Dragon Base Camp

I am on a world never heard of, with people I have never seen, with beings that look like dinosaurs or dragons. I am in a body I don't recognize. It feels great. Oh, and I have abilities that I should not have. Therefore this must be a dream. Maybe it is the dream just at the time of death. I died in the fire and this is the transition between lives. Or maybe this is the world I will be born into next and I am looking for my next parents. I should prepare myself so that I make a good decision.

Tech is lacking in this existence, so I need not worry about parents who are technically oriented. It might be better this time to choose parents of merit or status. Being a sap was not fun. The down side is that taking an easy life will postpone enlightenment. Taking points off the Karma that I have earned. Someone who is handicapped is worth a double bonus and on this world it would be a short existence. Still I am very tired from the betrayals and sacrifices of the last one.

I need to gather more information. Right now I am in a sort of mud cave with depressions on the floor. Stinks bad. There is an opening that serves as a door and lets some light in. Not much. I use the sight to scan the surroundings. I am now at what they call TK3. That means I can scan about a kilometer. Enough for now. The others are outside watching the dinos do something. Their little ones are a safe distance outside the circle being remarkably quiet. Earlier they were raising quite a ruckus. There is one dino in the center.

I scan her, as this seems to be where the attention is. Ah, a large oval object is making its way slowly out. She is laying an egg. Amazing to see it in such detail. There is a second egg behind this one. None on the ground. So, is this normal or unusual? Am I supposed to transfer my consciousness into one of them? I scan the eggs carefully. There is a fully developed child curled up in each. One male and one female. Not twins then. There is an interesting pattern on the female's skin. The male is nearly patternless.

I get up and leave the 'room' I am in. I am drawn to the female for some reason. Is this the one I am to merge with? To become? I make my

way to the central courtyard. The others notice my arriving and make a way for me. When I get near the mother she sniffs me. I allow her to do so and remain quiet. The first egg out is the male. I ignore it and wait patiently. Two other adult females remove the first egg to a depression a few meters away. The sun should keep it warm for the moment. I am guessing they don't want the mother to accidentally crush it while laying the second egg.

I am patient. It looks as painful as a human birth, at least for the mother. The egg appears to protect the child inside from the worst of it at least. Slowly, very slowly, with much grunting and mucus the egg emerges then suddenly plops out on the soft dusty ground. Half of it is now covered in dust. I reach out to touch the egg. The mother watches me carefully.

"I mean no harm. This one is special for some reason." She makes some sounds that I think are words in her language.

The one of Hispanic descent comes up to me and place her hand on my shoulder, "It is yours. Let it harden in the sun for about an hour. The shell will then become brittle enough for the baby to crack the egg and emerge."

"They don't care for their young?"

"They lay two eggs every six months. If they cared for every child, the world would be overflowing in them. They practice natural selection."

"Then why is she giving it to me?"

"They know of our way of raising children. This is something different for them. Or basically, what the heck, it can't hurt."

"Right." She leaves me to contemplate the egg. I make myself comfortable and sit facing her. The sun is certainly warm. Without thinking I raise a shield by holding dust together with TK and I cool down. I am careful not to shield the egg. Out of the corner of my eye I see an Asian male emulating me as he sits watching the other egg.

The egg moves. I instinctively reach out to it. "Don't help it. A big dishonor if it does not break out on its own."

"How many do not make it out?" This seems unnecessarily cruel even by sap standards.

"Only a few. Don't worry. I am sure it will do fine."

"She will do fine." Does no one use their ability? I look up, but she is already leaving. There is a small following of larger ones all around her. She is like a pied piper of the young ones. Obviously knows there language. I will have to learn myself. The egg moves again.

It is another hour before I see a small crack and then a small hole. At least she can breath now. Quiet again. Hard work.

"Come on Simone, you can do it." I say almost as a prayer.

"She will be tired when she comes out and later hungry." A pail of water is placed next to me. I hardly notice I am concentrating so intensely.

A foot breaks through. Definitely a dino. A large crack appears and grows along the length of the shell. It splits in half and she falls out free. A moment to right herself and screech. Beautiful.

"Over here Simone." Of course she does not know her name yet.

"You need to wash her before the flies come. She will then rest a bit."

I grab the rag out of the pail and drip it over her. She reacts by twitching like a cat would. I then take the rag and wipe down her skin, starting at the head and working my way to the very short tail.

"Oh, eeeuu!" She just let loose with everything she had.

I pick her up and move her over a few meters and continue the washing. She seems to accept my doing this. She is exhausted and falls asleep as soon as I finish. She will overheat in the sun now. I make a more permanent shield by fusing the earth together into a simple shelter.

Tsing Mao appears next to my right leg as I kneel to observe Simone. She starts to growl.

"Careful Tsing, she may think you are dinner."

Lizards are good to eat. She will be my dinner instead. Tsing disappears and reappears on the other side of Simone about to pounce.

"Stop!" I yell, holding her in a tight TK hold a half meter off the ground.

"Now listen up. I am not abandoning you. Learn each other's ways and live with it. If anything happens to Simone I will hold you responsible."

"They are not born with the ability to understand English Aimee. Though your intent may have been clear."

Stupid lizard. Tsing Mao turns her back on me. Hard to do while floating in the air. I ease up and she pops out.

"I was talking to Tsing. She is jealous and wants to eat Simone."

"Likely to be the other way around. Those teeth are sharp, even in a baby. Remember, she is not a human baby. She may seem more advanced than our kind at this point, but she is still new to this world, especially to the ways of humans. Her understanding of right and wrong will be totally different. Always."

"A leopard cannot change its spots." I remember that from some childhood thing.

"To some extent that's true. From what I have seen, they are social animals and know they have to work together to make things work. This compound was built by them. We only share it. She has also imprinted on

you. She will be loyal to you no matter what now.”

“Wouldn't she imprint on her mother normally?”

“Apparently imprinting normally occurs on the pack of young ones, not the mother. Only in times of danger or limited numbers do the parents specifically care for their young directly. Of course those young ones imprinted on older ones still. And so on. Now that most of the predators are gone from this area, they are relatively safe. This was a show birth in a way. The rest will lay their eggs outside the compound over the next couple of days as they normally would.”

“You will have to let me know which one is the mother, so I can assure her that I will take good care of Simone.”

“Don't bother. She won't care.” She leaves me and walks over to the Asian male. He has pinned down his newborn and is teaching him who is boss. Must be a pear. I will need to remember to avoid him. There is a gray cat nearby who is paying close attention. So, I am not the only one with a cat and now a dino. His cat is not attempting to charge the new one though.

“Aimee, watch out!” I turn and see Simone heading towards the other baby, but paying more attention to the cat. The man looks up, grins and moves out of the way. Simone charges the cat. The cat holds his ground. Just as Simone gets within range the cat attacks with it's claws. Simone nearly does a back flip and comes running back to me with a bloody nose.

“She will be alright, but both babies may have learned a lesson. I am Hei Long by the way.” I nod back to him. I look to Simone. She is not bleeding much. Those scales are a little harder to penetrate than skin and fur. Mostly just scared. How do I teach you that cats are not food nor enemies?

“I thought you were tired. Are you hungry now?”

I scan outside the compound for possible prey, then remember the sap chow in my pocket. Didn't really like the idea of killing something. I pull out one of the bars and offer her one. She sniffs it and then licks it. Smart girl. She looks interested, so rather than wait for her to take my fingers off I drop it on the ground. She manages to grab it with a little effort and in a few gulps she gets it down.

“Okay, how about this time I break it up some so you don't choke on it.” I break my two last bars up into several pieces each. That is easier for her to get down.

“Aimee, I have a surprise for you.” It is Malak. I only know her because she came with us to this place. “Please follow me.”

She takes me between the huts to the edge of the far wall. Simone follows after making sure there is no more on the ground. There is a

structure there that does not fit in with the shape of the other huts. It is too perfect. The sides are actually perpendicular to the ground. There is a porch of wood around the outside. A door on one side. We step onto the first step. Malak removes her shoes, so I do as well. We set them on a small shelf on the porch.

"Would not do good to track dust in here. Shake as much dust off your robe as possible." I scan my robe and see the dust as different from the cloth. Easy enough to remove it using the new abilities, gather it up, move it a few meters away and place it on the ground. I come back to the present to see Malak watching me. "Very good for a two day old. Very good. Come, let us enter."

"You are going to have to wait outside Simone. How about another nap?" I pat the porch and ease her down from her standing position. She seems to get the idea and settles down.

Inside, another person is present sitting down at a desk with an old computer. Mine! I want to reach out, but try and be patient. She rises as we enter.

"My name is Hashra. Don't worry I did nothing to it other than put it back together. I used to have one of these as a kid. Old tech, surprised it still works. Looks like you scrounged parts from all over to keep it running."

Malak adds, "Barb told you she had retrieved it. I am afraid that the authorities did mess with it some. You will have to determine how much."

I pull the cubes out of my pocket, "Without my cubes, it is a simple term. Nothing to see or get me into trouble. I am lucky they did not find out where I hid these." They look at me quizzically. "I did not trust my cousin." Hashra smiles and Merek laughs. I sit down to the machine and place a cube in the receiver. I hesitate. They are watching. "I guess there is no way I could hide the passphrase from you two anyway." I type it in. "The timing is as important as the actual characters. Takes some practice to get it right. It is unlikely that anyone but me could do it correctly even if they knew the passphrase." In other words don't try. "If you are interested, I will set you up with an account." Hashra does not look interested. An old piece of junk to her I am sure.

Then it hits me, "Wait, Hashra. You are the one from the journal? The psiotic expert?"

She nods and then adds, "But we are in a different world than the journals. I am not sure I could have done all that she did."

"I am not so sure. We have many advantages they did not have."

"And more problems." I nod. She is right. I just realize that I am accepting this as reality. I look down at my hands. No scars. I feel my

face. Smooth. This will take some getting used to.

"We can't do a whole lot with this. Not connected to the net or even a simple grid." I look over at them, "There is no net here right?" It certainly did not sense anything.

Malak laughs, "No net. They are barely above the stone age. It will be a few thousand years, at least, before they get to our level."

"Okay, why is there a stuffed bear here then?" Sure seems out of place to me.

"Oh, sorry, that is my term." Hashra is smiling. Now, I am the one confused. She says to it, "Bear, what time is it?"

"Unable to access the time server mistress. I estimate the time at 4:35 pm local time. Please correct if this is wrong."

"Thank you bear. That will do fine."

"A clock?"

"Bear, what is the current health of the three people in this room?"

"The one called Malak is bored and wants to move on. Aimee is curious and a little frightened. You are depressed as usual and really should take your medication. All are physically within normal parameters."

"Thank you bear. You may rest now."

"Psiotic sensors?"

"It is my specialty." The entire time I have been typing away at the keyboard. Too easy. Way too easy.

The bear suddenly comes to life again, "So, when do we blow this joint and get some decent food? I could eat an entire bowl of honey."

Hashra stares with her mouth open. Malak is going to die if she laughs any louder.

"You never changed the admin passphrase. 'Does a bear shit in the woods?' You must have been behind some good security to have not been hacked in all this time."

"I forgot. When did you learn how to hack this model of Care Bear?"

"Just now." I let that sink in. "I am not just a refugee from Chinatown sister. I have a specialty too." Take that pear.

Malak interrupts our little pissing match, "Which bring us to the little problem I am hoping the two of you will be able to solve." On line we test each other all the time. No big thing. You have to know your own limits as well as those you work with to know your place in things.

"Come with me."

Malak is about to take us into another room when we hear, "Aimee, get out here and take care of your baby." Never thought I would hear that in my lifetime.

Going towards the doorway out, I nearly trip on Tsing. "What are

you doing here? Did you have anything to do with this?"

SIMONE can get into trouble without my help stupid monkey.

I grab her with TK and hold her up to my face, "DON'T ever call me that again. If I had known you were thinking this back home I would have left you in the burning building. We are in a strange place with new people and beings. If you can't figure that out, find you own way." She looks away from me like she does not have a care in the world. Gray cat, journals, the phrase 'stupid monkey'.

"The other cat is Ghost!" A male cat with TK abilities. Tsing Mao is a female cat with TK abilities. I scan her. "You're pregnant again!" She looks at me like I am the most stupid being in the universe but does not say a thing. Too far along to have just been a couple of days. When did they meet?

"How many?" Hashra asks. She could have scanned too.

"Five embryos if I counted right and if they all make it." I set Tsing down. "How am I going to take care of Simone and do my job here?" Looking out the door I see Simone looking up at me expectantly. The porch shows signs of her activity.

"Maybe she should be with the others?"

"They would not accept each other now that she has imprinted on you." Angpetu comes up. I am starting to figure everyone's name out from the associations.

"I need a baby sitter." I say without thinking.

"How much do you pay?" I think she is teasing me. I hope. I have no money.

"Mother, I have never had to deal with so much at one time before. What is Hei Long doing with his?"

"Hei Long is taking great care of Bai Long." White dragon in Mandarin I think. Close enough to Ba Long of Cantonese. Of course that makes sense, being white and 'son' of Hei Long, though if he makes it to adulthood he will probably have blue head feathers like the other adult males.

"I think I may have made a mistake."

"Many a young lady has said that too late." Huh? Oh? I blush.

"How about a play pen?"

"They are used to running free. How is that going to work?"

"Adapt to change, same as us. Being TK3 I do not have the necessary abilities yet."

Malak looks away. She is not going to help. So, this must be a test.

"You did all right with the sun shade, but an entire pen would take a while. Okay, Angpetu, you are I are up. Two TK4s should be able to come up with something. I suspect that you have more experience with

farm animals. You did say you worked on a farm. I don't want to offend you." At least she is trying.

"I doubt you could. Done almost everything. And before you say it, yes, I have done that too. A girl has to stay alive. Let's make it close to the new 'hut' so you can keep an eye on her."

"Can the young jump like the raptors?"

"Not as well balanced for jumping, so not as high. Much better with their hands though. Use TK to lock it, she will likely figure out anything mechanical. She is about a half meter tall now and will only grow. If we make it two meters tall that should work for a few months at least. Maybe she will be house trained by then."

"The adults aren't. Why should we expect more from her?"

"You have a point, but even a bird can be trained if you are patient enough."

"Okay, two meters. What do we make it out of?"

"Metal. She can probably chew through anything else eventually."

"Barbed wire?"

"Remember, the adults are as intelligent as we are. Let's not be cruel."

"Never stopped them from using it to pen in saps." Everyone goes quiet for a moment.

"How big? They are used to running free remember."

"Well, we can't take over the entire compound."

"We could probably kid proof the entire compound."

"That would not be fair to everyone else. Come on. It won't take that long. Aimee, you take care of Simone while we work."

I sit on the porch. Simone comes up to me. I pet her on the head and then scratch the back of her neck. I am going to spoil her rotten on the first day of her life.

Angpetu and Hashra set out to make the pen. Soon others arrive to watch, offer tips or help out. Even the dinos are curious. They can't make metal bars of course and the taste and feel of the metal is as interesting as the rest of the process. Angpetu has to act as translator while trying to work. I like the fact that all the pear TKs have to go through her or the second Asian male, who seems to be doing nearly as well as her. Saps rule!

Malak sits next to me.

"I know you want to show me something. Sorry this is taking so long."

"Not like we have anywhere to go. I am retired anyway. About time I learned to relax." She reaches over to touch Simone and Simone hisses at her.

"Good, a one person Saurpod. Though I am surprised that she can tell us apart."

"Probably smell different." The skin color difference would be my guess, but I say nothing.

"Nearly every critter in the universe has better smell than us."

"Do you have any more sap chow?"

"What?"

"Ration bars. Surely you had them in the Protectorate?"

"They fed us better than that. I thought you worked in a bakery?"

"Pushy Paws gave some to me on the reservation. They give them to the Indians for free. Government surplus. Not that bad actually, just gets boring when you have to go through a hundred kilos of the same flavor."

"I'll bet. They gave us MREs left over from the Gulf War. At least they tasted like it was from that long ago."

"Wouldn't put it past them."

"You don't like pears much."

"They killed my uncle and nearly me and Tsing."

"You are dead as far as they are concerned. Not all pears are bad though. Most of the ones here are special."

"Most. That means you are not sure of at least one."

She nods, "Keep an eye on Hei Long. The others are okay."

"I had the same feeling. He is the same one as in the journals?"

"The same."

"Why him?"

"No idea. Would not have been my choice."

"The others feel the same way?"

"Mostly. Everyone but Doc that is. He thinks there is something there worth saving. Hasn't caused much trouble yet. I am waiting to see." I nod.

"What did you want to show me?"

"Better to wait till Hashra is here with us. She hasn't seen it yet either."

"Looks like they are finishing up. I see Hei Long is helping."

"Yep."

"Bai Long is being more of a pest than help."

She smiles, "Just like her father I am guessing. This is our first laying. I wonder if we will all bond with one before this is over."

"Amazing they can do so much straight out of the egg."

"Yeah. They are smart. Don't ever underestimate them. Now that they know some of what is possible, they may progress fast."

"Actually no. Species that are this advanced at birth are very slow to change culturally. Not flexible enough. Everything is hardwired at birth. Nearly takes a genetic mutation for change to occur." A male voice. I

look up.

"Hi Doc. Sit. Meet Simone."

"Ah no thank you. Already 'met' Bai. He thought my fingers were dinner."

"So what do we feed them? Simone seems to like sap chow. If that works for her it certainly would be easier than competing with all the older young ones out there."

"And then she would be handicapped by not being able to hunt or even be hurt developmentally."

"Why would she need to hunt?"

"We are going back to our Earth at some point."

"That would be fun. Always wanted a designer pet that no pear had and could outsmart them too."

"Our being here is a culture shock for her. Imagine how it would be at home."

"More likely to work with her than with an older one."

"True, but if doesn't work who loses?"

I don't want to lose her. I have lost too many loved ones and friends already. She will adapt. I know she will.

Angpetu calls out, "All done! Bring her over."

I scoop her up in my arms and follow Malak to the new pen. Everyone else is waiting.

Hashra comes up, "See we put in separate 'huts' on opposite sides. Water in the center and lots of positive challenge material."

"What did she say?"

"I think she means toys." Malak whispers to me.

"Oh, much more than that. See the ramps and tunnels. Lots of vegetation to practice hiding in. We let loose prey in here and they will have to work to obtain it."

"Ah, what kind of prey?"

"Mostly insects at this stage. Small rodents are the only mammals we could find. Did not seem right for them to eat lizards. Those were hard to find anyway. Go ahead, set her inside."

Too tall for me to climb over holding her. I TK myself and her over the top. I set her gently down on the ground. She is curious and sniffs everything around her. She sees something and freezes trembling against my leg. Tsing comes out of the bushes holding a mouse like critter in her jaws.

What?

"That was for the babies, not you."

Too late now. She can get her own.

"I don't think you got the point. ANYTHING happens to her, you

pay. Got it?" She is eating the mouse right in front of us.

Seeing that Tsing is distracted, Simone runs off to the right and disappears into the bushes. A lot of commotion. I see parts of her occasionally.

"She seems happy at least."

"Bai is already stuffed and sleeping it off. He decided not to wait till we were through." Hmm...

I lift myself back over the top and set down next to Hashra, "Time to see what Malak wants to show us?"

"No telling how long before they need attention again. Let's go for it."

Malak is waiting at the door for us to arrive. Without comment we enter. Towards the back there is a stairway that descends. Single file. I follow Malak and Hashra follows me.

At the bottom is a larger room. I scan. We are actually outside the compound. Guess this is not a problem. We must be low enough to prevent diggers from getting us. The stone walls will help too. I look around the room. It is full of a bunch of crates with military like stencils on them.

"Weapons?"

"Not exactly. At least that was not the intent of the users."

"Who are?"

"This is an exact duplicate of the core of the Baghdad Armstrong unit. My last assignment before retirement."

"Sweet. A nice toy to play with, but what does it have to do with us?"

She looks concerned and pauses.

"The core is made up of 1024 alpha sixty four nodes interlinked."

"Mother, that must take a city to run. Where are we going to get the power?"

"And what am I here for?" Hashra comments.

"When you are ready a power supply will be provided. I want you to learn as much as you can before it is powered up. To answer your question," she looks towards Hashra, "this thing has a high psiotic potential."

"No way!"

"Not really. A lot of complex photonic systems show psiotic noise."

"Not noise. This is coordinated."

"Shit." Not my curse word of choice, but nice to know she knows one. Makes her more human.

Malak makes her way for the staircase, "Oh, by the way. I dismantled all the explosives and poison barbs. It should be safe till we power it up."

"How does it go together?" I yell up the stairs.

"Figure it out. You'll learn more that way." Doesn't know or not saying?

"Dinner!" We hear called down to us.

"Saved by the bell." Well, nothing is going to get to these in those crates. Looks like they were designed to be thrown out of a plane at high altitude.

I follow Hashra to the eating area. It is still light out, but not for long. The body temperature of our hosts is above room temperature, but I noticed last night that they cool somewhat during the night. Not as regulated as we are. On the tables are piles of sap ration bars.

"At least there appears to be several different flavors."

Hashra adds, "According to the journals, the Guardians ate a lot of these themselves, so it must be alright."

"Won't kill you quickly if that is what you mean." She hesitates. I am being mean. "Hey our TK status will protect us. Oh, they have chocolate! That one was always hard to find. Rationed cocoa. Really hard to get for the bakery too."

Hei Long hears me say that and comes up to me. "You worked in a bakery? Cleanup?"

Pears suck! "I was the assistant baker, but could do the whole run myself. Did in fact on numerous occasions."

"But you look like a China Doll and are attracted to designer pets. Though does not explain the cat."

"I could say the same of you. Robes, cat, 'designer pet' oh and martial arts. No sap could afford such a waste of time."

"Unless they needed these skills to survive. China is very different from your America."

"You are a sap? The journals did not describe you that way."

"I am not the character from the journals. As you can clearly see, things turned out differently for all of us this time. I suspect that in their world you did not survive the plague, or certainly played no memorable part afterwards."

"I nearly did not survive this time either. So, what do you care that I am or was a baker?"

"I too cook. I am not fond of either sauropod or sap chow. No offense. If we got together I am sure we could prepare a real meal."

"Sap chow is not that bad, besides, we don't have the equipment nor the materials."

"TK will substitute for a lot of things. They seem to upgrade us each night. Already I can duplicate almost anything I see that is not actually living."

"It would take at least a five for smaller plants and insects."

"That was not in the journals."

"Logical conclusion based on the evidence." Bet he just skimmed them.

"There are grasses very similar to wheat. Duplicated to make enough and we have flour. Making a steamer would be easy enough. Lots of plants and meats available. Snake meat makes a good substitute for chicken. Haven't found a good source of a pork taste. Their melons would make a good soup."

"Dim sum!"

"Precisely. So how about it? We do the meal tomorrow night." Dim sum is not for dinner, but it seems to be the only meal we all eat together. It will also work better for people who may or may not like everything served.

"We will need help. Too many mouths to feed. Spices are going to be a problem too."

"Won't be a problem. Leave that to me." Angpetu comes up to us. "I will get together with Smith and Jones. The three of us using the youngsters as 'blood hounds' should be able to find what you want or acceptable substitutes."

"Get Doc to check out what you find to be sure it is safe."

"Good idea."

"We will need entertainment."

"What you have in mind Hei Long?"

"Have you heard Dorothy sing with the sauropods? Incredible. I will ask the others to find out what instruments they play. We 'pears' were usually trained in something."

"Can't exactly build a piano out here."

"But most wind or string instruments should be doable."

"Can't hurt I guess." I am missing something. "Wait. Malak wants me working on a project. Cooking will take all day and we both have babies to take care of."

"I will talk with her. I am sure something can be worked out. Can't function as a team if we are not all allowed to contribute."

"True. I have been feeling guilty about getting out of the work schedule."

"You have been lucky. They seem to hate me and Doc. We always seem to get latrine duty."

"I can help out with the baby sitting. I want to check out the psiotic readings of the youngsters anyway. Some of the adults are TK2 naturally. I am not five yet, but bear should be able to give me a start."

"I didn't know that? No one showed their ability on the hunt."

"Did you use yours?"

"Not overtly. Maybe they were doing the same. Big advantage over a raptor."

"I heard you guys are planing a party tomorrow night and need musicians. I play the Vietnamese violin and I know that Hashra plays the sax and George plays the flute."

"Sax? Never would have guessed. Not going to make one of those easily. She already volunteered for baby sitting."

"Well with most everyone involved it should be easier to convince Malak."

"Do your best. It will be fun." Never thought I would say that to any one.

At dinner all the TKs went for the chocolate bars. The dinos seemed to prefer the strawberry. Did not have the heart to tell them that is was all artificial flavoring. The adults are amazingly good with their hands, carefully separating the bar in to precisely bite sized pieces. Simone preferred to eat with just her mouth. I am guessing that hands need more practice. One thing we have in common. The vanilla ones are offered to the youngsters gathered around hoping for hand outs. They seem to use both depending on their perception of which method affords the most food at once. One chokes on too big a piece. No one does anything. Fortunately he gets it up and goes on eating.

I ask Angpetu, "Do the young ones normally interact with the adults in this way? They weren't here when I arrived."

"No, normally they are not allowed inside the compound at all."

"That does not make sense. The older ones are clearly more able to defend themselves. They should be the ones outside and the young inside."

"Remember what I said about using natural selection? The survivors are the ones admitted into the social structure."

"What exactly is the social structure? There seem to be more females than males."

"True. There is only one male present."

"Wait, what about him and him?" I point at several that look like males.

"Scan them." I do so. No balls.

"That's strange. There is only a scar where his goodies should be." I scan several others. All the same. Wait, the one surrounded by females. He is definitely intact. So, he is the only one who can mate? This is a harem."

She nods then adds, "Understand that this compound is only the laying grounds. Fewer raptors and lots of small high protein game. Normally they live down at the base of the mesa and depend mostly on

agriculture. About where Flagstaff would be."

"You mean the pregnant women make the trek up here?" She nods.

"Natural selection sucks. Glad I am a mammal."

"And a sap?"

"Not any more! No matter what happens to us Angpetu, we will never return to that world. At least not as saps."

She grins, "We are free." I smile.

Seattle Times

Extensive flooding is being reported in northern California coastal areas as the result of spring thaw combined with higher than normal swell and tides. Coastal areas from southern Oregon to Monterey are affected. Refuges are moving inland, but all roads out are clogged. Governor Rodriguez has declared the northern coast a disaster area.

New Atherton is being evacuated because of extensive flooding in the lower levels. The engineer who designed the community claims that the only way this could happen is if someone opened the relief valves. Divers will make their way to the valves to determine if this is true and attempt to close them or find the true cause of the problem. It is not thought to be related to the coastal flooding.

Beijing China

"Team One, what have you come up with?" I sense time is running out. I grow impatient. The USA will crumble soon. Several plots are brewing as I speak. What happens then? Who will fall with them, no longer propped up by her military strength? It is no guess that the leadership here in China senses it too. They hope to fill the void.

"There has been no psiotic activity above normal background. Even the Navajo reservation is unusually quiet. The extra sensors placed there have been double checked. It would appear the spikes seen by the sats was a glitch."

"Or they have moved on."

"Where? Not on earth. Nor off. We have made sure to scan all passengers out bound."

"It may be possible to screen the activity."

"Anything smaller than a human is passive, not active. Nothing large enough to be an active device has left in the last several days."

"That means nothing. Turn off what you were using here and turn on what you have shipped months or years ago there."

"We have agents at Luna City and on the Mars expedition. If they turn anything on, we will know."

"There are many secret bases. We do not have agents at all of them."

"Activate the Lunar sats. I want to know what is going on up there."

"That will show our hand. We had hoped to keep those hidden till necessary." I give them a dirty look.

"Right away sir." She leaves the room in a hurry. I will have Ms. Krandle make sure they follow through. No mess ups on this one.

"The second problem. Report."

"Sir. We have sectioned the alpha 64 with every device we know how to use. It is a combination photonic, quantum and standard ultra large scale node device. It needs no external memory to run circles around anything we have. The structure is so complex that it will take months to decode all the connections with the fastest processor available. To understand how it will work could take decades."

"Any idea where it came from?"

"Not from anywhere on this earth that we know of. It is impossible with our current tech to even produce one much less design one."

"Hidden lab?"

"Too far ahead of what we have. It would have to have been hidden for a very long time with all the top people working on it. Sure, some scientists have disappeared. We are responsible for most of them. The remaining ones can be explained by deaths where bodies have not been found yet or wacko cases where they have simply had it and moved to a deserted island to hide. We may have inadvertently caused a few of those ourselves." He looks at me sheepishly. I know a few that I had to convince myself that working for anyone but us would be a terrible mistake.

"So it sounds like you are also saying not here on earth. Does anyone else see a connection or is this a mere coincidence?"

"The alpha 64 does have a high psiotic potential, especially when combined in large arrays. We know the USA military has installed them in their Armstrong units situated outside the US proper. They show up as large spikes on the sats."

"And why was I not told of this by the psiotic group?"

"We knew the reason sir and it was easily explained."

"So explain it. How does the node work?" They are silent. Fools!

"Could the high readings on these centers be hiding the other people or projects we are looking for?"

"Yes sir. That is possible. We have been trying to infiltrate people in after we thought of that, but a military takes a little longer to infiltrate. Especially high security ones. We do not have that many Americans at our call now that you have disbanded them." Sometimes I work too fast.

"They are still around. I will have Ms. Krandle find a few that might work out."

"If they are not from here. Where are they from? There are certainly enough planets out there that should be able to support life similar to ours. The Large Optic Array has found dozens of earth sized planets since it went on line." Impressive given that it has only been operational for a little over two years.

"An intelligence capable of designing and manufacturing the alpha in the quantities they have is probably capable of hiding from us. I would suggest searching in more unexpected places. Use the Deep Ground Explorer. Use every deep sea probe we have. I want answers people. Now!"

I am guessing that what is happening is a precursor to invasion. Question is what side the power sphere equation are they on? I leave the room.

"Ah Ms. Krandle. You heard everything?"

"Of course. I am not convinced they will do any better than the Americans did."

"I am inclined to agree. How is the New Delhi group coming along."

"It will be a few years yet. They might need more persuasion sir."

"Always happy to oblige." I grin my best evil grin.

"You might be interested in this sir. There is a story making its way through the underground."

"I have no time for fantasy Ms. Krandle. I thought better of you."

"It is a story about people with supernormal abilities, powerful computers and power spheres sir. Oh and someone named Sauron."

I must of looked totally shocked.

"I will send it to your term." I nod and walk out numb. Who? How?

The Backpage

When neighbors complained of the smell, police investigated the Merser residence to find old Mrs. Merser dead and half eaten by her thirty one feral cats that she kept in her apartment. An autopsy revealed that she had died of natural causes. Both children and her husband had preceded her in death.

Qingzhou City, China

"There is it again young sir!"

"Cool! I knew it was real."

"You did not. I saw it first."

"What's cool boys?"

"A monster. A real monster!"

I am suspicious. They have been watching too many old American movies again. I far prefer the old Chinese movies. Now, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, that was a movie. Jackie Chan, eh. They get boring after awhile. They all seem the same.

"What do you think Jun?" His name means soldier. A child of the cultural revolution. He has been my assistant for over ten years now. Good man. I would trust him with my life. Used to be in the service. Can never be sure any more.

"There is definitely something there sir. I would like permission to use the thermal imager." I nod and he goes to retrieve it. In the mean time I turn on the proximity sensors. The screen shows something large near the west side of the property.

Jun returns with the thermal and hands it to me. I switch it on and look towards where the sensors said it was. It takes a moment before I find it. A large blob. I overlay the comparator. Too large to be a person in the fetal position. Way too large. Nearly three meters in diameter.

"Let me see Dad!"

"Me too!"

I hand it over the boys, "Be careful. This is expensive." Mostly because the government bans them for private individuals. Jun found it on the black market along with a few other toys. Very resourceful.

"Let Jun have a look boys." They are disappointed but do as I say. Tom is ten and Matt is eight. English names. Not my choice, but Hang Ping insisted on English names. The current fashion. I turn to Jun, "What do you think?" He lets the boys have it again.

"I have never seen anything like it. We are too far north for an

elephant."

"Could one have escaped from the zoo?"

"No reports of one. I checked the grid first thing."

"Bed time boys."

"A come on. Five more minutes." I give them a dirty look and they allow Jun to take them to their rooms. I pick up the viewer again. No changes. It is just sitting there, as if watching us.

Jun joins me on the balcony and I hand him the viewer again.

"Do we still have any of those emergency ration bars left from the last camping trip?"

"I believe so sir. Do you wish to feed it?"

"Just to see if we can get it to move. I would like too get a closer look. Hang will be home soon. I don't want her to get into any trouble." He nods and leaves to get them. Whatever this thing is, it is certainly patient.

"Here we go sir." He hands me several bars.

"If this is a wild animal, we certainly cannot expect it to remove them from the wrapper." I quickly liberate a few. Jun takes the wrappers and places them in his pocket for later recycling. I do my best and attempt to throw them one at a time the sixty meters. I doubt I get even half way.

"Jun you try." He takes a few out of the wrappers and wads them together to form a ball of adequate weight. Good idea. He then takes a few practice swings before letting go. I follow with the viewer. His handling them has given them just enough heat to show up for a moment. It falls a few meters away to the right of the beast. A moment later it notices and unfolds to reach out towards the ball. I press record as soon as I sense movement. I am in total shock as I see the shape. It looks like it was designed to form a near perfect sphere, but now it is something totally alien to this world.

I hand the viewer to Jun and tell him, "This is no elephant. Look at what I recorded."

He does so. I comment, "It does not appear to be dangerous. At least not yet. The carport is on the other side of the house. Let's keep this just between us for the moment. Inform the boys, so as not to frighten Hang."

"As you wish sir." He takes the viewer from me. What are you strange one?

I have a crazy idea and switch on the infrared lights. Immediately the creature darts out of there, leaving its prize behind. What creature can see in the infrared? The tablet manages to get one picture before it left. IR is much higher resolution than the thermal imager, but not as good as visible light. Normally we don't bother as the thermal imager can more easily see where something is and though low resolution it is enough to

figure out what it is. Mammals at least. I will have to ask the boys what time it was when they first saw it. Strangest looking thing. Four limbs and a head, well sort of a head. No neck really. Two eyes, a nose and a mouth. If I didn't know better I would think it was a primate of some kind. A severely distorted one, but a primate.

"Hi dear. I'm home. Where are you?"

"I am out on the balcony catching the night air."

"Well come on it and close the door it is cold in here."

"Its good for you. You should try it some time."

"What, catching pneumonia? No thanks."

"Nobody catches pneumonia any more."

"You know what I mean."

"Have you been gaining weight dear?" I suggest to her with a leer. She smiles and winks at me.

I will sleep well tonight.

WARNING! Magnitude five tornado expected in fifteen minutes!

Outside New Columbus, Ohio, Maxwell Estate

"Hurry everyone. Get into the basement now!"

The sound was horrendous. It was like being underneath a train going full speed. We were all screaming, but no one could hear even themselves. Then suddenly it was quiet. My ears were ringing so loud I could hear nothing.

Manuel grabs me by the arm and we go to the door to look out. The others get it open and go out first. The wind is still pretty strong judging from the dust moving around. The main house is still there above us, but the dorm is gone. Not surprising. The main house was reinforced stone. I noticed that the first day we were here. The dorm was cheap wood and stucco. What was a tornado doing so far out of season? Not unheard of in some other states, but not in Ohio.

The others are gathering the pieces of what is left of the dorm and placing them in a pile, so I start to do the same. Manuel goes over to help remove the shutters from the windows of the main house. The garden is in ruins. Everything has been uprooted and is gone.

Our week is up tomorrow. I hate to leave a place in such a mess, but then I suspect they would not need us anyway until everything is put right. At least we will have enough to get by for a bit and a full charge on our bracelets.

Head is waving at me. I motion to my ears that I can't hear anything. I just hope it is not permanent. She nods that she understands and comes closer.

I can barely hear her yelling into my ear, "Peter Maxwell wants to see you. Follow me please." She never says please. Wonder what he wants? I am sure Sacha can update our bracelets. Surely a Maxwell would not be needed for that. We go inside and then into the house proper. I have never been past the kitchen before. I am left to sit on a wooden stool in a room full of books.

A few minutes later Mr. Maxwell comes in. I only know it is him because of the slight limp and the fact that he is very thin for someone so well off. Rumor has it he was wounded in the war. He does not appear to notice me though he walks right past me. He goes to the desk and unrolls a term, waves his hand to activate it and to move the cursor. I have seen these things close up. Nice.

I am watching him when he says something that I can't hear. I point to my ears. He nods and rummages for something in the desk drawer. He adjusts something on it then tosses it to me. He indicates that I am to place it in my ear. I do so.

"Is that better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"The deafness should be temporary. We were lucky we did not lose the house." I nod.

I know better than to ask questions, so I wait.

"It says that you are a cook."

"Yes sir."

"We are going to our place in California for a week to give them a chance to clean things up without having to deal with us at the same time." That means they will not be hiring anyone else to do the work, but whomever is left will be expected to do everything. A lot of hard labor. "We would like you to come with us to be the cook."

"May I ask how many people I will be serving?"

"Thirteen I think."

"I would like to bring Manuel, my assistant with me." He waves his hands around some more. No doubt checking out Manuel.

"He was your assistant at the clinic?" I nod. That should be obvious from his file.

"You will have to share sleeping space." He waves me away. That is it. I leave the room. Sacha is waiting outside.

"I forgot to give him have the hearing device." I pull it out of my ear. She takes it from me and throws it into the nearest waste basket. That was stupid of me.

When I get back to the place where the dorm used to be I find Manuel and tap him on the shoulder. He looks up. I motion for him to come with me. We go back to Head Sacha. She leads us out to a van. We sit in the back and wait.

Eventually a driver comes out. A black man in his forties. Well I really did not expect a Maxwell to drive us. He starts the van and we leave the estate.

I can start to hear sounds again. They sound very distant, but it is real.

"Manuel, I am starting to hear again."

"About time Ed. You are getting old."

"No older than I am." Says the driver. "My name is Freddy."

"Nice to meet you Freddy. Have you ever been to the California place?"

"I've been there once before. Have either of you?"

"No way." We all laugh. "Jess sit back and enjoy the ride folks."

It is an hour to the airport. I had been on an airplane several times as a kid. Never as an adult of course. Manuel looks real nervous, especially when he sees the plane we will be put on.

"Come on you two. We will be put in baggage. No sweat. We will use the baggage as beds and sleep the whole way."

"This is a prop plane!"

"Jets take too much fuel. This one probably runs on biofuels."

"Where are the Maxwells? How come you did not drive them instead of us?"

"They will come two hours later. They want us waiting for them when they get in."

"They will take a different plane?"

"They do what they want as they have always done. Now, let's get going." I am nervous too, but try not to show it.

We are stowed in baggage and looking out the still open door I see Fred talking to some airport helper for a few minutes before he joins us. A package is given to him.

He jumps up without help and sits down next to us, "Food. Going to be about thirteen hours. Long time without something to eat. Have enough for everyone and no sap chow either. Got us some leftovers from first class."

It is still warm. I know the smells from the kitchen, but have not tasted anything like this in years. I remember airplane food being horrible, but this was wonderful.

"I got to take a leak," Manuel comments.

"Wait till we take off."

"How will that help?"

"We won't be near the airport any more. You want this place smelling like piss?"

"Where is the toilet then?"

"See that flap there on the floor?"

"Sure."

"That's it."

"Won't we suffocate from lack of oxygen with that large hole in the floor?"

"This is a prop plane. We won't go above five thousand feet. Nothing to worry about."

"You've flown before?"

"All the time." He grins.

"What about what is below?" I would not want to get hit by anything.

"We have to fly over unpopulated areas for security reasons." No one

says anything. We all remember. If only it had stopped at 9/11.

Fred opens the pack and hands each of us a sandwich. We pass around a bottle of water. A sandwich is such a rare and wonderful thing. Actual cheese lettuce and tomato. I am in heaven. Even the water tastes better than what we usually get.

I did not even see Fred leave the cargo hold. I hear a door close and I look up to see him returning.

"Had to feed the pilot." I nod and look around for something to lay on.

"We have blankets." He shuffles around in the rear and pulls out three. "Fold it up for a pillow." We are used to laying on hard surfaces, but having a soft place for your head is great. Usually I sleep on my hands which causes them to go numb. I am out before Fred finishes his sandwich.

When I wake, I have no idea where we are, but there is light coming in through the window now. Morning at least.

"About time you woke up old man."

"You missed it. We were just over the Grand Canyon." Thanks Manuel.

"He is teasing you. We haven't reached it yet. Another half hour at least."

"You were snoring again."

"Always do when I am on my back. Too hard a floor to sleep on my side."

"So what are we carrying?" Dangerous Manuel. Don't go there.

Fred just laughs, "Construction material mostly and food. No co-ops where we are going."

"What kind of food? Might as well know what we will be working with."

"Think mining camp. Flour, salt, sugar, powdered milk, dried eggs, irradiated meat. That sort of thing."

"I am supposed to make five star meals out of that for Mr. Maxwell?"

Fred laughs again, "You will do fine."

"How many uppers and how many lowers?"

"That is hard to say exactly. Counting the three of us figure on fourteen 'saps', cooking wise." I am shocked that he uses the word. "The 'uppers' are familiar with the word you know."

"What about Mr. and Ms. Maxwell?"

"Ms. Maxwell will not be making this trip. She has gone to family in New York. Mr. Maxwell will be fine." He is hiding something.

The Grand Canyon was less than spectacular, but still worth it. The water was running high from the spring thaw and we had to crowd

around a small view port. Bet there was more to see before the terrorists blasted the dam back in '11. We slept or kept still mostly because of boredom. I have not had this much time to do nothing for as far back as I can remember.

"We are coming down for a landing." We both look at him questioningly. "Just outside New Shanghai. A small airport near to where we will be going. It would be best if you followed my lead."

"Wasn't that where the Agent X plague started?" Manuel looks frightened.

Fred nods, "You got that right."

"Is it safe?"

"More or less. The law has not fully returned."

"How or why would we be going there? Wasn't this place like ground zero?"

"Excellent property was to be had of course. The area will recover. It has been certified safe by the US government. Oh, some will go to farm land as per the '16 accords, but the area formerly known as New Pebble Beach, Pebble Beach and a little of the surrounding area has been sold to a few who got in early. Mr. Maxwell has taken over the former New Shanghai Marine Lab himself. The entire area just mentioned is to be called New Shanghai now and the lab is to become the Maxwell Marine Lab."

"So, this is to be some rich mans hide out, away from the toils of city life?" He smiles but says nothing. The plane stops. We made it.

"I want to know how we got to fly here. Usually we end up in some cattle car on a slow freight train." Not that they don't crash too. Poor track maintenance is usually blamed, but I suspect drunk engineers also play a part. The outside door opens and someone in a pilot's uniform faces us.

"I can explain that." He grins at us. "I didn't want to wait that long. The misses is only giving me a month and I did not want to waste any time on travel."

"Mr. Maxwell?" I look to Manuel then back to the pilot.

"You can close your mouth Ed. Oh and please call me Peter while we are here."

Our two faces must have gone white. I nearly faint. It is happening all over again. This time we won't survive. Two strikes and nobody will ever hire us again. Never our fault, but they won't care.

"Relax. As Fred told you, the law has not exactly returned to this area. There are some who would love to bag a pear. This is safer. There was a reason why I hired you two. I know of your past. Doc Roberts actually helped me out of a tough one. I could not believe it when I heard what happened. This is the least I can do."

"Too bad you can't use a couple of gardeners and a janitor."

"Julie and John will be here in a week or two. They are helping to repair the tornado damage and for us to get things going again here." He looks down at his feet. "I have not been able to find Garcia. He seems to have dropped completely off the map. The last place his bracelet was used was in Memphis."

"I don't know if I trust a cook who can't close his mouth." Fred gives me a slap on the back. There are tears in my eyes.

"How about we unload this cargo now?"

"Yes sir." We all say at once.

"Stop that." He is smiling though.

We make quick work of cargo. Peter drives up a flat and we load it onto that then all pile on the back. Beautiful place this New Shanghai. We quickly reach the shore. Neither Manuel nor I have ever seen the ocean before.

"It sure stinks." No kidding.

"Look you can see the edge of the world."

"That's called the horizon. Actually a fog bank. If it was clear you could see all the way to what used to be called Santa Cruz. Over there was the Moss Landing power plant. They closed it when the embargo started. Ran on oil."

There are so many questions I want to ask. How did he get fuel for the plane? The only ones I have seen in the air are government or military. Granted he did fly the plane, but still. The flat we are on appears to be solar. When the cargo is taken off the flat surface stores up a charge. Must have sat for a week to be able to haul this much weight at this speed. We pass lots of empty and decaying buildings. Some burned out.

Fred must have seen me staring, "Happened during the plague. People went crazy either from the plague itself or the fear of getting it before they did."

"Were there any survivors?"

"None that survived the clearing. Since it was near hundred percent fatal they just could not take the chance anyone would spread it. Remember Typhoid Mary."

"Who?" Peter rolls his eyes.

"Will we see dead bodies?"

"Sorry. They did a very thorough job there too. Only thing left alive were the plants. Everything else was collected and burned. Stay away from the burned out buildings if bones scare you. They did not bother clearing them out. We are here."

Everything looks intact here at least. No burned buildings. There are

a number of workers hard at it repairing and adapting the buildings to their new occupant. Mostly carpenters at this stage. Fred said there are ten others, but I only see three. Peter pulls the flat up alongside one of the smaller buildings.

"For some reason most of the cooking stuff was in this small building. We arranged it as best we could, but you will have to make it your own. Once the new kitchen is done we will move you in there. Figure about three times the space. There will be about forty mouths to feed by then though. You will have galley helpers by then. For now, you two are the entire kitchen staff."

"I have a question. If you wanted us for our cooking skills why make us spend a week washing dishes."

"That would be because of Ms. Maxwell and Sacha. They will have no say out here, don't you worry. It was also the reason I could not pick all of you up immediately. I had to pretend that I was not interested in all of you. It did serve one purpose. I wanted to see if you could do the dirty work as well as you cook. Too many can't. They think that once they make cook they never have to stoop to filth again. I won't have anyone work here who is not willing to do the dirty work as well. Myself included. If a job needs to be done or someone needs your help, don't hesitate. Others will do the same for you. You will find that you enjoy your work much more when you get to do a variety of things.

So, now we move the supplies into the kitchen and the dorms. Food gets stacked out here. Manuel and Ed will decide where to place it in the kitchen. Best not to leave anything outside. The animal life came back rather quickly. Raccoon and deer will eat almost anything they can get to. Then we will all move the rest of this stuff into the dorms. We will have to set up a bunk bed for the two of you. Not everything is cleaned up yet. If you find anything interesting bring it to me. I want to put together a little historical exhibit. This used to be a famous marine lab and was part of Stanford University. Some pretty important work came out of here. Some of the first evidence of global warming in fact was found right here. I hope to find the Hewlett quadrants and see what has changed in the last thirty years."

"Won't it be under water now?" I did hear that the sea level had risen over a meter so far. Some of these crates are pretty heavy.

"I will have to go out during the lowest tides of the year and work quickly. There was some excellent equipment left that should still work, including a very good camera from China. Only a few years old." He hands me one labeled syrup. We have all the makings of pancakes at least. Canned vegetable next. We will have to do better soon. Winter is over, time to plant an herb garden at least.

"Well, no one will miss it now. Better it gets put to use than thrown away. We honor the original owner by seeing it lives out its original purpose."

"Amen. Ah, that reminds me. It has been a week and we have not done services." I nod in agreement.

"Are you both religious?"

"We did our duty. Would not want any black marks against us." One of the easiest ways to get Homeland after you.

"Well, welcome to California. We have no blue laws here. No one is required to do any religious service if they don't want to."

"What if when we go back? Won't our record here follow us?"

"You want to go back already? I have heard of people who missed the snow, the cold dorm rooms, oh and the hot summers and the bugs."

"Ah, on second thought." Fred and he both laugh. Imagine that a sap and a pear laughing together.

We get all the food stored inside when Peter hands me a key. "I will get another one made. I was not expecting Manuel this soon. Old style I know, but what was already here. You and I are the only ones with a key, so don't lose this one. Nobody goes in the kitchen without your say so."

"Thank you." I bow to him for respecting my craft. He bows back. I am beginning to really miss the Doctor. I wish he could see this and meet Peter. My world is turned upside down. I remember when I was a kid. It was before the crash when there was not such a difference between the rich and everyone else. How did we get here?

"Ed and Manuel, come meet Cheron and the rest of the gang. Cheron is the head carpenter and will stay on as chief mechanic afterwards." I very stocky female extends her hand to me. I shake it.

"We fixed up the room as best we could in short notice. Just enough space for the two of you if you did not bring too much with you."

"The tornado took everything we had thank goodness. Nothing worth keeping anyway. Now we don't have to worry about it."

"Hmm, those sap suits will be a bit strange here. I will see what we can do about getting you two some real clothes. Jake is incredible with a sewing machine. Old drapes are very strong and if we dye them you would not even be able to tell what they used to be."

"Thanks."

"Here we are. Put those extra blankets here on this shelf. If you get cold just grab one. Others will be doing the same. The rest of us will be in this main room for now. Heads are down the hall that way."

"Heads?"

"Sorry, ocean talk for restrooms. Only showers so far, but plenty of water if you don't mind lukewarm. Oh and soap that does not take your

scales off."

"Where were you before coming here Cheron?"

"About. Mostly north of here. Grew up in the hippie capital of the world and surfed every day I could. Surfing is not too good here and I am too old for that any more. Hip gives out and the water here is way too cold most of the time. No shops selling wetsuits either."

"What's a wetsuit?" A lot to learn.

"Manuel, these people will all be hungry soon. Best we get to work."

"You just got here. We can make do till tomorrow morning."

"All we did is sleep all day on the plane. It will feel good to be helping." We take off back to the cook house. It is locked. I pull out the key from around my neck. Now if I can remember how these things work. Takes a moment. Just like sex, the ah, key goes in the ah hole. I wonder how many things are based on that simple act.

"This place is a mess."

"We only need to clear enough to make one meal at a time for now."

"That's strange. What do you think this is?" He pulls out a flat plastic sheet curled to fit into a slot in one of the cupboards.

"I remember vaguely. I think that is a term, if the ads I remember were correct. Looks like what I think Mr. Maxwell was using early this morning."

"Sweet. How does it work."

"In the ads they simply placed it on the wall."

"Right. Just place it on the wall. Do you think I am a bush?" He slaps it again the nearest wall in jest turning away with his hands raised to wait for it to fall and crash on the material below. It doesn't happen. He lowers his hands and looks over his shoulder. There is it on the wall. A dull blue glow comes from it.

"Now what?"

"Input. It is waiting for someone to activate it. How do you activate a term? Probably the same way here." Manuel goes up to the term and applies his bracelet to the lower left corner. The interface activates.

"We are in. Amazing that they had a term in the kitchen."

"Good idea actually. Input what materials we have and find us some recipes."

We spend the next fifteen minutes eliminating ones we don't have the equipment for.

"Okay, crepes it is. This will be a surprise for our fellow saps."

"Just hope they are up to Peter's standards." We don't exactly have fresh ingredients. I hope he allows us compensation for that.

An hour later when we are in the cooking zone with everything coordinated and going at once, Cheron pops her head in an announces,

"Power goes out in thirty minutes. We don't have H yet, just sundisks."

"Understood. Get everyone together. We will be done shortly."

"Shit, what do we serve them on?"

"Let me take care of that. I will assemble a crew of servers. What are we having?"

"Crepes."

"What is that?"

"A sort of pancake." She nods obviously disappointed. "Let us finish or no one eats."

Peter is among the servers. I really hope this is not Doc syndrome all over again.

We had made mushroom and finely chopped string bean crepes with a tangy lemon butter sauce. To drink and also serve as dessert we made frosties with powered eggs, banana chips blended with ice and a dash of vanilla. A dollop of strawberry jam on top.

"Now do you believe me when I told you I found us some good cooks?" Peter announces to the group.

"When Cheron said we were having pancakes again, I was sure we would be running them out of town, but these things. . . . What were they called again?"

"Crepes. A French pancake, sort of."

"These crepes were great and I have not had a frosty since I was a kid."

"Three cheers for the new cooks!" We bow to give thanks for their praise.

Peter volunteered for clean up as well, but no one would allow it.

"Then I had best get on with a little project I will not let anyone else do."

When asked he waves us off.

"The sun is going down. The batteries will only have another hour before we lose lights too."

"I thought you said half an hour at least that long ago."

"The kitchen needs a lot more power than a few glow tubes." True.

"Hey, have you two heard of the journals we found?"

"No, we just got here."

"Can you read books?"

"Books? You found books?"

"Not that different from the term, only linear. Weird that way. You start from the beginning and read to the end. No controls at all. Doesn't take any power though. Can even read them by fire light. We tend to have a fire every night. Lots of left over wood from the buildings destroyed in the plague."

"Besides, not that much else to do here after dark."

"Here is volume one. Once you start you won't be able to stop. It starts at a little marine lab on the west coast that is called New Shanghai Marine Lab."

"Here?"

She nods and she hands over a book. "Only it is different. You will see. Starts about three years ago, but does not happen the same way as it really happened."

"Someone guessing what would happen?"

"The author died in the plague apparently. A plague that is predicted. Read the book."

"There are two of us, but we both are slow readers. I suppose we can read it together by the fire. Thanks." She nods and smiles. We have been accepted into the group. Feels good and scary at the same time.

Suddenly there is an enormous explosion and a ball of fire to the right. We see a body flying through the air and then land with a crunch sound.

"Peter is hurt! Come quick!"

We all run towards the still smoking direction.

When we reach there someone announces, "He is still alive, but unconscious. We need to get him inside."

"Be careful. If his back or neck are broken he could be paralyzed."

"Jack is our medic. Let him through." I move aside. Peter is laying on the ground. His clothes are blackened and his leg is at a strange angle.

"Leg is broken for sure. I will have to set that." He lifts Peter's eyelids and looks at his eyes with a flashlight. "Still responding, so there is hope that there was no brain damage." He pokes Peter's other leg with a knife, it jumps a little. "Good, spine is intact. We can move him if we are careful. Good thing he is out. Going to hurt like crazy."

"Shouldn't we get him to a hospital?"

"See one around here? Closest one is two hours away by fast car and none of us is implanted. Peter is the only one."

"Can we call anyone to come here?"

"Peter would not want it that way. Besides the sundisks are now off line. The battery might do but Peter understood all that stuff, none of us do."

They improvise a stretcher and carefully get Peter into it and take him inside.

"Surely there is something we can do?"

"Jack will do his best. They served together in Iraq. That was how Jack learned to be a medic and why most of us are here now. Word of mouth gets you an interview. We are out in the wild. You have to be able

to trust the people you are with." I nod. Especially true if your pear is crazy.

"What was he working on? That was some explosion. Surely the neighbors heard it and will report it."

"Hmm, possible the sats picked it up. There are no neighbors except old Mr. Freeman and he is never here. Spends most of his time elsewhere. I think he is in China now. Did you see anyone at the airport?"

"It was empty. I thought that was strange, but then they must not get many who would want to come into a former plague site. If I had known this was where we were coming I would have taken a walk too."

"Most would. He was working on the H ponds. Would not let any of the rest of us near them. Too dangerous he said. Apparently he was right."

"Do we need to do anything there?" pointing in the direction of the ponds.

"Actually I think the best thing, now that the lid is off, so to speak, is to let it air out for the night. The lid is what saved him. Acted as a shield and took most of the impact. He mainly just went for a ride."

"Some ride. I have seen ovens go up when someone forgets to light the pilot light, but nothing like this."

"Best we get inside ourselves. We have to be the first ones up to prepare breakfast."

"Oh, what will be having?" One satisfied customer. I wave her off. This could get scary if they expect us to do the same every meal. Those supplies did not give us many options and will more come without Peter's say?

"We won't have the benefit of the term this time with the sundisks off line. Still dark when we start for sure."

"Ah, you found the term in the kitchen. They lived well here for sure. I had never seen one of those before coming here, just some fifteen year old OLED on glass."

"Same here. I have heard that some used LCDs even."

"If you've ever been arrested for anything, that is what they have in the stations. Thick glass too."

"Don't want any of the accused to break it in frustration I would imagine."

"I hope Peter is going to be alright. First the tornado and now this. From paradise to ruin in one day."

"Time for bed. Maybe this was all a nightmare and we will awake back at the estate."

"That might explain you, but not me. I am having the same nightmare."

When we get back to the dorm we are confronted with the bunk bed in the tiny room.

"No one else would sleep in there. Sorry to put you there, but it is the last place left until we clean up the other buildings."

"Why? What's so bad? I have seen worse than this. Bedding actually looks better than in Ohio."

"It was the least we could do. Read the book. Then you will know. Up on that upper shelf was where we found them in fact. "

He leaves and Manuel says, "I'll take the bottom."

"It's okay, take the top if you want. I am really getting to old to climb up there any more." He smiles and hops up.

"Lights out in ten minutes." They are already dimming. The battery must be getting low.

I just get through the first couple of pages when someone turns down the H lamp. The book wasn't about here at all. That Sauron character sounds nasty, but no worse than I have seen a lot of pears act. What will happen to us now? We passed a co-op on the way in. Must be abandoned. Does it have food inside we can use? We would be hauled away as thieves if we try and care for ourselves? What about the ocean? Can we fish or is that owned by someone too?

Oh shit! How do we cook without power? Barbecue is the only way. Soy pups dipped in corn batter, put it on a stick and hold it over the fire. I will not sleep well tonight.

I am awoken long before dawn, but between jet lag and anxiety I was not sleeping soundly anyway.

"Ed, we need your help." Cheron whispers. I get dressed and follow her out of the dorm. We make our way across a courtyard and into another large building next to the dorm. In the center of the building we go up a set of stairs one flight. At the top we go through a door into the weirdest scene I have ever seen. At least what I can see with the dim lighting. Apparently independent from the sundisks.

Cheron leads me past ornate furniture that looks like it came from two centuries ago in China. Off to the right are aquariums, but there is nothing in them, not even water. Finally we reach the other end where someone is laying in a bed with embroidered blankets. Peter it would appear. Jack and one other are at his side. His eyes are open. Good news.

"Ah, cook. Er, I have forgotten your name."

Cheron gets there before I do, "Ed sir." Sir?

"I am not longer a Sergeant. No more sirs allowed." That explains a lot. All three were in the military. Think they said Iraq.

"That would make Cheron a corporal I am guessing and Mr. Maxwell would be at least a Captain."

"Very good Ed. Precisely right. We all served together in the Protectorate. It was were Peter got his first limp."

"And now it would appear I have made it worse. At least it was the same leg."

"A clean break. I have set it. Fortunately it was not shattered this time. The next step is to apply the bone knitters. That is where you come in Ed. We need to give him plenty of liquids with high calcium content. What can you give us?"

"There is powered milk. That can be made up double strength."

"Won't that tend to ah, upset his digestive tract?"

"Is he lactose intolerant?" A lot of pears were. Side effect of the longevity treatments.

"I have not been through the treatments yet. Another two years before I need to go that route. Add something to the milk to make it more drinkable. Powered milk is not my favorite flavor." He grimaces.

"Jam? Wish we had cocoa, but I have not found any yet."

"Keep looking I was sure I ordered some for an emergency."

"I'll come up with something. Anything else?"

"He will be hungry a few hours from now but can't have anything solid for a bit. We don't want his stomach competing with his leg for attention."

"Broth and crackers?"

"Good."

"I'll be back with the milk in a few minutes and then back with the broth at first light."

"Great." I find my own way out greatly relieved that he will be alright.

I did find the chocolate, though there is not much. I add half to the milk, some ice and then blend it together. Instant milk shake. A little nutmeg on top to make it presentable. I then hide the rest of the chocolate. If there is not much, it must be expensive.

After delivering the chocolate I start to work on breakfast. Ed walks in just as I finish the batter for the corn dogs.

"About time sleepy head."

"What time did you get up? It must be only three in the morning as it is."

"We need to get a fire going in the pit outside. I want a good set of hot coals by the time the others get up. I also need to boil this broth for Peter. We will need a pot that is reasonably fire proof to hang over the fire. As soon as there is light we serve the corn dogs for them to cook themselves over the coals. Then we check the term to come up with something for lunch and dinner. I would really like to try baking some

fresh bread."

"Are you on No-Sleep?"

"Nope. Just happy Peter is going to be fine."

"That is good news." We both find more energy than we had yesterday. We are in paradise. If it was one of us you can bet they would not have used the bone knitters. Too expensive of course. In a few days he will be fine and almost as good as new. For us it would have meant months of agony trying to work with a heavy plaster leg cast. They used to use light weight plastic but after the embargo that became too expensive too.

"Ed, Manuel, I am Xue. We take care of lunch. Rest now."

"After we eat? We're hungry too." She smiles and waves us towards the fire pit. There we get officially introduced to the others. Of the ten, three are women. Cheron whom we had already met, Xue whom we just met and one other, Ginger. I wonder if that is her real name. Eleven men. Not a good ratio, especially if Peter takes a liking to one of the ladies. He will have exclusive access. I am pretty much too old for the game, but Ed isn't. Hmm, Cheron is not going to attract too much attention either, at least not at first. The men's names go by so fast that there is no chance I will get them now. I will learn them as I learn their individual likes and dislikes. That is how I usually learn names. "John" like carrots, "Joe" likes sweets and so forth.

I don't really want to sleep in the day time, so I curl up with the book. Ed is not particularly interested and soon I can hear him softly snoring.

It does not take me long to realize why they were reluctant to put anyone here. This bed, the lower bunk in fact, is probably where they found Yingui's body. That is creepy. On the other hand, saps die all the time, and they sure has hell don't burn the bed with them. We have probably all slept on a death bed without knowing it. I finish a few chapters and decide to look around.

When I get outside I can see the building with the second story and the rooms I went through in the early morning, where Peter is. No view from the dorm area, but we are really close to the ocean. There are steps ahead to the top of the seawall. I go up them. The water seems really far away. Wonder why they need these walls? They don't get tornadoes out here do they? I don't see any boats out on the water. Probably at one time there were lots of them. It would be fun to go boating or sailing. I used to see the pears doing that from the edge of a lake in Ohio from time to time while passing by on a train.

I go back towards the cook house. There is open field nearby and I go there next to investigate. It would be nice to plant at least herbs. Always taste better than dried. At least it seemed to the few times I was

allowed to taste the food I was preparing. It looks like someone beat me to it. There are all kinds of herbs growing here. Thyme, oregano, basil and rosemary for sure. Oh, mint. Several kinds of mint. Lemon thyme.

“Ed! What’re doing?”

I don’t remember his name, “Tell me your name again. I am checking out the herb garden. Fantastic.”

“My name is Adam, like Adam and Eve, only I have not found an Eve yet. Were you ever married Ed?”

“Not officially. You could lose a job if they had to move you both together. She went one way and I stayed at the hospital. Our son went with her and I heard later he was killed in Iran.”

“Sorry.”

“Did not mean much. I barely knew he existed, well except for the support payments of course.”

“So Ed, show me some herbs and spices. I thought this was all weeds.” I laugh and pick pieces of stuff to hand to him, teaching him how to rub and smell each one. We gather small bunches of stuff I can use for the evening meal. I am sick of Chinese. It would be good to have a hearty Irish stew. There was black pepper in the shipment that came out with us, along with salt and flour. That’s right I was going to make bread!

“Adam what time is it? I was going to make bread and completely forgot.”

“Lunch time in a short while is all I know.”

I look down at my bracelet but it shows 1:30 pm. I am still on Ohio time. Have to sync it with local time. I am guessing from what Adam said that it might be 11:30? So definitely too late to get anything for lunch, but with the instant yeast I will have some fresh bread for dinner.

“I gotta go. There is just enough time.” I take the herbs he is carrying and start to go back. “Adam, I forgot to ask, what do you do?”

“Plumber, hot and cold water and sewers. Stuff here is in pretty good shape, so I am only working on where they want changes mostly.” He is wearing a bracelet, but did not know the time. Must not be able to read. That has to be hard. I wave to him and head back to work. If there are terms here, they probably have wireless. I try it and am able to chirp Manuel to meet me to begin prep for dinner.

There is a sign on the door to the cook house saying out of order, go directly to the fire pit, this means you Ed and Manuel. Okay, I wonder what that is about?

When I get there, the others are already there. Even Adam managed to get back before I did. How did he do that? Manuel is already there and I walk up to him.

“What’s going on?”

“No idea. Just got here and they have not said anything yet.”

He nudges me and points. Coming out on crutches is Peter. The rest cheer! Amazing he is able to do this much so fast. Jack and Cheron are by his side watching him carefully.

Cheron then leaves his side and calls us to attention. “It is traditional in the corp, when someone pulls a stunt like our Peter has, to give them a new name more befitting their new status in life. After much thought we have decided that the one you see before you will no longer be called Peter. His new name, seeing as how he likes to fly so much,” everyone laughs at that thought, “is to be Pilot.”

“Here, here! Pilot!” We all cheer.

“Now considering his current condition, we can't perform the usual baptism,” a chuckle from the rest, “so I have brought the necessary material to him.” Cheron opens what looks like a bottle of beer and pours it all over him, “I hear by baptist you Pilot, may you always land as softly as you did last night.”

More cheering and laughing. This is a fun group. No one ever smiled in Ohio. I am having a good time when I notice that all eyes are now on the two of us. A path is cleared and Cheron comes up to us.

“We have two new ones among us today. Two who have shown themselves worthy to join our small band of hearty souls in the wilderness by creating real food out of worthless rations. How say you company of followers of Pilot?”

Cheers arise from all including the now wet Peter, ah Pilot.

“The company has spoken.” Slowly a chorus of “baptism” comes up and synchronizes.

“What's this, a baptism you say? Well then, best we get on with it. I'm hungry and would not want to interrupt lunch.” More laughing.

They rush up to us and grab us, lifting us up about ourselves. We are slowly carried with jeering and laughing across the courtyard, up the seawall and down the other side. There is a small beach with still water lapping as if a lake. They carry us out over the water.

“Hardly qualifies as normal ocean behavior Marine Sargent Cheron.” I look back to see Peter on the edge of the wall looking over. He raises his thumb when he sees me. I wave back, but have no idea what their intent is.

“Remember, these land lubbers are used to lakes, this will have to do for now. They are likely to pull some stunt at some later time to get the full treatment. Besides, we don't even know if they can swim yet.”

Swim? I can't swim! I start to struggle. “This one is trying to get away. Back to the sea from which we came.”

“No, I am trying to get back to land. I can't swim!”

“You heard the guppy. He can't swim. Go gently on him.” I am slowly lowered to the water and slowly pushed under for just a second and then raised again sputtering.

“Shit that's cold!” Cheers are heard.

“The cook needs more heat!”

“Of course, what was I thinking? Come eat with us Sir Cook.” They bow to me as I stand shivering on the edge of the water. Now what? Ah, they repeat the procedure with Manuel. Instead of struggling though Manuel lets them lower him to the sea and then he swims out of their hands further out. He dives underwater and removes his clothing to throw it back at them all wet. He hits Xue in the face and someone else in the chest.

“Looks like we got a live one Captain. Do we fetch him in or let him go?”

“Depends on how much of that good food you want. I can't do it all alone. One of you volunteering to replace him?”

“Cook has spoken, fetch him in gang!” The two who were hit strip off their clothes and go after him. Xue has very tiny breasts and enormous muscles. Hell in Ohio we all saw pretty much everything. He gives them a mock run for their money squirting water into the air and swimming on his back just out of reach before allowing himself to be caught and brought back in.

When Manuel reaches the shore being held by the other two Cheron stops them at the edge of the water.

“What say you?”

Overwhelmingly the cry goes out, “FISH! FISH! FISH!”

“So be it. From now on you will be known as Fish.” Cheers go up. He teases them by looking longingly over his shoulder and then sighing before turning back towards land. He has captured their hearts as well. He is cold when he reaches me. We now have three naked saps and one very cold one with his clothes still on. I let mine fall to more cheers. Someone comes running with towels and fresh clothing for all of us.

I nudge Manuel, er Fish and ask him, “When did you learn to swim?”

“I was raised on a farm near the edge of the Ohio river. We swam all the time in the summers. Lots of food on the river if you knew where to look.”

“Okay gang, we promised these good sports food. I say let them taste what we have been living on before they arrived.” Moans of disgust go forth. What have they been eating?

We all go out to a sort of outdoor picnic area in the sun at least. As long as it is warm I don't care what they feed us. We all sit down and Adam and Roger? I think that is Roger. Anyway they come out and thank

down army green pouch in front of us.

“What are these?” I am afraid I am showing my ignorance.

“The foulest food this side of the equator, twenty year old MREs.” I think back to old news reports, something like meals ready to eat, or whatever. I look over the pouch. There is an expiration date that is ten years old.

“Hey this stuff is no longer fit to eat!” I am pointing at the date in mock horror.

A great laugh goes out. Then the rest all sit down with their rations. Pilot is helped into a sitting position a table away. Cheron then sits next to me.

“I’m sorry. I have no idea how to open this.”

“Just follow the cartoons on the side. Watch, I will do mine.” She slaps it against the table and it starts to puff up and get warm. In a minute she opens the end and slips out a steaming meal of something really disgusting.

I slap mine down on the table and everyone laughs. Why? Nothing happens to mine. It just sits there.

“Yours is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I think it is dead now.” Ah, they are all different, should have read the package.

“Excuse me Sarg, but I remember being told I would get something hot to eat. Does this look hot to you?” I am trying to play along. I get up and walk over to one of the sundisks and place the pouch near the focal point to warm it up.

Rounds of “COOK! COOK! COOK!” go up from the others. When I have a slightly burnt, but hot mess on my hands I come back to the table. Blowing on it and waving it in the air to cool off some, I finally open it. Everyone is watching carefully.

“Hey, this smells great!” Moans go up with people pretending to get sick. I then add, “If you are out of your mind.” Laughing commences.

“Okay, Cook, you can have mine. Looks like we named you right.” She is smiling. What I do eat makes sap chow taste good, but I get it down. She gets another one from Adam and rolls her eyes when she sees what it is. Looks like they are all used to it and now it makes sense that they were happy when we got here.

A little wild, but I think I am going to actually like it here. When Julie and John get here we will have to coordinate getting a garden going. I saw some young squash plants coming up, but they will need to be cared for if want fresh vegies later in the year. I will have to talk to my assistant. Now that I know this new talent of his we will have to make use of it and get some fresh fish on the table as well. Some lemon thyme rubbed in and barbecued over the fire pit. Yes, it is going to be fine here.

May even put on a few pounds.

We hear a “beep-beep!” coming towards us.

“Hey, Fred has found the cart. The one from the books!” Everyone gets up to go look at it. Typical hybrid with electric and pedal. Black with red trim just like in the book all right.

“Sorry it took so long, but the charge was long gone and I had to pedal it all the way back.”

“Where was it?”

“Halfway to no where. Spent the night in the field. Lots of critters out there with no humans to scare them away.” I admit it, I am a house sap. Not going to get me to spend the night without shelter.

“Bring anything back for Cook?” He looks at me and I nod.

“Couldn't you guys come up with something more original?”

“His assistant is Fish, on account of he swims like one. But cook earned his name by frying a PB&J MRE over a sundisk.” He roars with laughter.

“We saved you some if you are hungry.” Jack holds up the charred and now nearly congealed mess. That just gets him laughing more.

He then sees Peter, “What happened to you sir? Are you okay?”

“I took a little trip I was not planning on.”

“About ten meters straight up on an H pond safety door. He will be limping a bit more after the bone knitters get done. Got himself a new name too, Pilot.”

He nods and then adds, “Shouldn't you be walking around? Need to put some weight on that leg if you want it strong enough to hold you latter. Why don't we go for a walk and I can tell you about all that I saw while I was out there.”

“Hey, we want to know too!”

Pilot gets up but waves them off, “Get my cane someone. Never thought I would be using that thing again.” Someone fetches a cane made out of something military. Army green anyway.

Sarg whispers to me, “Made from what was left of the jeep he was in when the first flying lesson happened. Then we just called him Lucky.” I nod.

“Fish, we need to get to work. Want to do our share to keep this band of knuckleheads from starving to death.”

When we get away from the others I ask Manuel, “Fish, is that more than just a cute new nickname? Can you actually fish?”

“I said I was raised on the Ohio river. Of course I can. This being a bay it will be different, but as long as the water is calm I should be able to figure it out.”

“What happens if the water is not calm?”

“Did you see all those rocks when we were out there?” I nod. “Best way in the world to end up bait for sharks. Wave can throw the entire boat up against those with so much force there will be only splinters left. My granddad uses to fish the Gulf before the coast was abandoned when the government stopped paying for rebuilding things. He told me stories about hurricanes and such.”

“Think we will get a hurricane here?” I look towards the seawalls.

“Typhoons in the Pacific, hurricanes in the Atlantic. We could. I would imagine those seawalls are there for a reason. That and the tide. Been rising. Almost to the base of the walls now. Add a good swell and we could see some action on this side.”

“Let's go make some food.” He nods and we both turn away from the wall. I'm glad the cook house is on higher ground. We pass by the cart. It is weird that it was mentioned in the books. I see Fred and Pilot a ways off with Fred doing the talking and Pilot looking concerned.

New York Los Angeles Times

Unconfirmed reports are coming out of Beijing of an outbreak of Agent X in Qinzhzhou City. Seven deaths have been reported so far. Beijing officially denies the outbreak saying all people in China are protected by the vaccine administered earlier this year.

Forever Young Industries is happy to announce this day that new research has shown that it should be possible to make humans essentially immortal.

New York, New York

The entire city block is gone. Burned out. Before the plague I used to steal pastries from this shop. Hope they made it out alright. I think she knew. Something wrong with her face. Maybe that was why she always turned the other way when she saw me.

My anger boils up when I remember. I was the top geneticist in the world before my fall. Those dam extremists killed my research and ruined my life. "Man was not intended to do research into the fundamental nature of existence." Bull shit. They were just afraid that I would find even more evidence that their precious 'Intelligent Design' was crap. Gotten so that only the old people even knew what evolution was all about and no one dare say it out loud. Sure, I managed to bury my grant requests in scientific lingo for a time, but some smart ass finally saw through it and made national headlines out of it. Two days later I was on the streets. The 'Institution' could not afford the controversy. They were just afraid that they would be next.

My wife left me. Good riddance. Then they did one of those 'planning variances' to have my home bulldozed to put in sap housing. Within weeks I was on the street without much going for me. Those were the dark times. For years I wondered the alley ways of existence in search of my next repeat fix. At least till the money ran out. Then I stole whatever I could. Hocked my hardware for a fix and to blend in. No sap had stuff like that. Made me a target for abuse. My ribs still hurt when I laugh.

Finally I was living with the sewer rats a few blocks from here when the plague hit. I evaded it for a time, but all that sickness ended up in the sewers eventually and I got it. I thought detox from the drugs was bad, but this was way worse. The sewers must have echoed with my screams, but later I found out that there was no one above to hear them. They were all dead. Over a thousand people gone. I somehow without any

knowledge of how I did it, managed to get out through the sewer system to Central Park. I was very lucky. They gassed everything in the area. Nothing plant or animal survived. They then piled the bodies up and burned them. I still remember the smell.

Still weak from the sickness, but apparently no longer infectious I was taken in by the Savers. They were a much smaller band then. At first I rebelled. It was thinking like them that got me the shaft. Then I realized that there was an opportunity here. I could not go back to my life's work, that was clear. I needed something to support myself. I could not go back to the gutter either. They are all so stupid. It was trivial to learn their ways and then learn to control them. It was I who got them to have new recruits sign up for the lottery. There was not a pear in existence who did not know the true purpose of the lottery. My own liver probably came from one of the 'winners'. But the thing was, by signing over the winnings to the Savers, I started bringing in lots of 'donations' and our ranks started to swell. Almost any sap who is hungry enough joined up. And what sap was not hungry at some point?

Of course the more people who signed up, the more people we could entice to our ranks and the greater the odds that one of them would 'win' the next lottery, bringing in even more money. Since none of them knew much about money and it was my idea from the beginning, they let me manage the funds. It was trivial to attach a siphon to the accounts.

My bracelet beeps. Time for my appointment. I best be going. Only a short drive away. I am 'Garcia' for the moment. Does not look good if a sap suddenly disappears. Any pear knows how to hack a bracelet. We can practically do it in our sleep. They are so stupid. The ones who 'won' were always people who had no relatives or friends. All alone in the world. Of course the Savers tended to gather just these people on their own, but sometimes we got whole families. We never delivered their lottery information. Too risky.

I get into the van, "Brother Ash, I believe I have a meeting at the lab."

"Yes sir, Shepard Mark, er Brother Bones." We both laugh. Good man Brother Ash. He was our star recruiter for a small cut. Have to make sure he does not get too cocky though. Well, he could always win the lottery himself I suppose. Just when I find someone good. . . .

I take the back way into the lab. Would not look good for a Saver to be seen entering a lab of any kind. Though we took care to make this one look like a tropical disease clinic. No one was against our working to save all those poor people in third world countries. That is as long as we did not actually save any of them. Too much profit in their staying the way there were. We already had several spin offs and just today made an

announcement through our sister lab about the immortality promise. Pears ate that up. We should see a big upsurge in venture now. For a few weeks at least, till they forgot we existed again.

The breakthrough came when I truly understood. It happened during the sickness. Before then I had a rough idea, but during the sickness it suddenly clicked into place. This lab and two others are the result of that understanding. I am almost unwilling to think it for fear someone might hear those thoughts. I keep the three labs ignorant of the others. Only I know what our true mission is. For decades scientists speculated that the so called junk DNA was not really junk. Some speculated that it was necessary for proper folding. It does help there, but that is not the reason it is there. Not the primary reason.

As I walk through the lab I watch what each person is doing. Their technique or the seq on the screens. I only recognize a few here and there. Billions of base pairs would be impossible for a mere mortal. I chuckle to myself. The only way this work is possible is because of the new alpha sixty four nodes delivered recently. Huge difference. Without them it would have taken generations to do this work. Instead we are there. I have not told anyone of course. Instead I have begun production in China, Brazil and Uganda. The first cases of product should arrive in less than a week.

The hard part will be the mixing. It has to be done precisely. Each of the sub products are lethal. It is only when combined that the necessary final state is reached. It can only be done in a sealed container. I am the only one that can do this operation. No one else has the necessary skills. I set this up on purpose. I want no one else able to make the final product.

"Sir, I thought you should be made aware of something."

"What is it?"

"This sir." She hands me a flat. A book. Sci-fi?

"What is this nonsense? I don't have time for games and fantasies."

"So it would appear. It is the third book in a series of four. It predicts the work we are doing."

"When was it written?" No possible way.

"That is the strange thing. It appears to have been written three years ago, but it describes a different future than what has actually happened."

"Most sci-fi does that. Not so strange."

"The last book does describes our world precisely and explains the difference between the earlier accounts and now. Parallel universes. In their world the Helper V spread world wide. Most people died. A few of the survivors were changed. They became able to move things with their own thoughts. They were called TKs. Anyway, book three describes research that makes use of junk DNA to recombine animal and plant life

into what was originally intended." I am listening intensely now, then try and hide my interest.

"There were no survivors in 'our' universe, so why is this relevant?"

"We are working on the plant genome here. If there was another lab working on the animal genome, they could be combined to produce the MOTHER virus. We have analyzed the outbreak called Agent X. It has all the characteristics of the MOTHER virus."

"Well hopefully we are the only ones working on this project then." I smile as if this is an absurd notion. "I assume you did not tell them of our work. I certainly did not."

"No sir! I would never do that. It is an honor and a privilege to work on this project sir!"

"Relax. I don't think our work has leaked out."

"There is more. If a third part is added an entirely new effect is realized. By studying Agent X we can surmise the missing half, but the book describes another addition. This will produce what is called a 'greenman', part human and part plant." This is way too close.

"The problem is that the greenman is a dead end, literally. It causes the person to dissolve into spores. "

"NO!" er, keep emotions in check.

"Sir?"

"I just thought of something else. I am sure this is nothing. Our lab is close to improving vaccine production in GM rice. I am sure this is all a fantasy and nothing to worry about, but just in case, encrypt and lock up all research not related to projects nearing completion. That way no one can get the raw data necessary to implement Agent X or 'greenman' if that is possible at all."

"Very good sir. Thank you sir." She sighs and leaves. She forgot the flat.

I will read these books to see if there is material she failed to mention because she did not know the extent of my plan. Way too close though. I am sure that this is just a coincidence. I cannot fail. I must not. I will have my revenge. It will be necessary to purge this facility before any information can leave. No one can be trusted.

One hundred meters is a surprisingly long distance when you are in a small research lab. Much can be hidden that can only be released with certain abilities that others do not have. I need not even be in the building to achieve my ends. I have what I need. Time to leave.

Retromania!

All your favorite games from your childhood all on one feed. Play Halo, Doom, Grand Theft Auto. They are all here. Now enhanced with full Pod 3D[®] and Live Presence[®] sound and feel. Hurry to your Enthral Center now!

Boot Camp, E3

Life has settled into a routine. We are all TK5 and holding. No longer an every night upgrade affair. Been nearly a month now. We are at the beginning of summer here in paradise. We were all shocked when Angpetu was able to learn the Saurpod language so fast. We had assumed that it was some strange manifestation of the TK process. That somehow she was an anomaly.

It turns out that the infant Sauropods are telepathic too. I had completely forgotten they had this ability as the adults seem to prefer gestures as a way of communicating with us. A survival trait is my guess. They are on their own and born without language ability. Apparently the young ones are not so prejudice and will talk with anyone. This way they quickly form a group, taught language by the older ones and each other. Angpetu spent so much time with them the first couple of days she was here that she was taught the language without realizing it. Now all of us can speak it. And a strange side effect. They being telepathic and the newborns being the most flexible they read our minds and can now speak English, sort of. Bai Long has the hardest time. Reading Hei Long would explain that.

Hei Long tries so hard to be the best at everything. Yet, there always seems to be someone here who is better than him at anything he tries. Never the same person, just someone. Smith and Jones are better at hunting. Malak at martial arts. Angpetu at speaking and learning the ways of the Sauropods. Aimee at cooking Chinese. Dorothy at cooking anything else and at singing. I am sorry but Chinese singing is not my favorite. Dorothy seems to be able to sing at least in almost any language. I guess being the oldest of our group has its advantages. A lot of life times to learn useful skills.

Hashra is better at the psiotic arts and healing. George and Aimee at logic games. (and people skills in George's case. Aimee not so good.). He accuses me of reading his mind, but only Malak could do that if she wanted and no, she is not doing so and then passing the information to me. I just depend on body language and past experiences. Oh and a lot of

luck.

I could go on, but I have made my point and this documentary diversion is really not about Hei Long anyway. I wonder what has happened on our Earth since we left. Probably just more of the same. Stupid news stories that would only appeal to the amazingly dense. Progress will have been declared on the war on terror, without there actually having been any of course. Some new longevity product will have been announced and so forth. Malak is keeping quiet though I know she must be going back and forth. She is the only one of us who can. We have not seen the Guardians since we were brought here. We think they are either keeping an eye on things back home or have moved on to another Earth in need of saving. They seem to have more faith in us that we do.

The first few days of laying around and having fun with our new abilities were just a way of suckering us in. The last few weeks have been hell. Worse than what was described in the journals. I wish we got to do the glass spheres. They would have been easy compared to the games we have been doing. Each day we are assigned a new partner and are in competition with another pair. I suppose some of this comes from Malak's training. Blue team, red team kind of thing. At the end of each day we debrief. Anything that appears to have worked or has the potential of working we then drill on the rest of the afternoon till we all get it down to a reflex.

This morning we played hide and seek. Malak shielded the seekers till the prey had a chance to hide. Afterwards the rolls were reversed. At TK 5 any use of TK shows up like a beacon. So as prey you had to do all your prep before the seekers were released. What we learned from this exercise was that determined seekers almost always won, especially when they worked in groups. Not encouraging when you think that we would soon be facing Sauron with sixty five million years of experience. Our only chance was if the Guardians found him first and then were polite enough to tell us. Hopefully he has not figured out we exist yet.

Simone and Aimee have become inseparable. They may as well be twins. I even think Aimee is teaching Simone how to code. She has her own little keyboard now. You would think that my partner, Br'thn would be a lot of help, but Malak has forbidden her to do so, saying that I need to learn these things myself. She stays with me through all of it though. I have to give her credit for that. Smith and Jones have been adopted by strange bird like creatures found while out hunting. Definitely not singing birds either. The Sauropods consider them sacred creatures and won't go near them. I think that amuses the two brothers.

Oh I forgot to mention. There are two who always win at hide and

seek, Tsing Mao and Ghost. I attribute that to natural abilities and being able to DS. Just wait. When we reach six those two are toast.

At night we have time off. We no longer need to sleep and are allowed to pursue our own interests. Aimee immediately heads to the computer room with Simone. Every night she complains about not being on the net. That she is not that smart, that she depended on a network of people for help, which she was not getting now. It has really gotten old. Hashra tries to reassure her and spends most nights with her. Simone goes to sleep at their feet no longer spending any time in the 'crib'. Bai Long is not so well behaved. He takes naps during the day and he and Hei Long go for long hunts at night only to return each morning exhausted. Both still get into trouble whenever possible. I think that Hei Long keeps hoping to learn some new talent from the natives, meditation or something. Smith and Jones sometimes go out to try and tease him in some new way. Poor Mr. Flower. He brings it on himself trying so hard.

"Listen up folks. I know you want to get to your free time, but this is important." Malak with Dorothy behind him holding what looks like a pile of books. "Dorothy is going to hand each of you a new book you will need to read before you can be allowed TK7 status." Ah, oh, I know what this is. As a copy is handed to me, I read the front piece. Yep, the Chronicles of Sauron. Oooo, the 2025 edition. Fresh off the presses. Wouldn't it be fun to give a copy to Sauron himself? I grin at the thought.

"Doc, maybe this will wipe the smile from your face. Seeing as how the Sauropods cannot read, but now can understand English and ask questions." Did I fail to mention that the young ones taught the adults English too, which the adults could have done on their own, but were too proud to do. They have been busy. May have even upset the natural order in their community. They can understand better than they can speak it of course and a lot of concepts just don't translate, like most things mechanical. Malak is trying to correct that by making things for them to play with. The wheeled cart fascinated them till it got stuck in a creek bed. Roads have not been invented yet.

I of course am assigned the densest most distracted Saurpod of them all, their leader Kleig. He had decided long ago that I was worthless. I don't hunt and I don't challenge. As far as he is concerned I am a neutered male. He treats those with contempt also, often beating them if they get in his way. He of course has learned that I will not allow that, but will not fight back either. All the same, I am shielded at all times around him. If he caught me off guard even once I would be dead. They seem to have only two emotions that I can fathom, anger and fear. Kleig has only one.

He looks at me. He looks at the book. Then with a snort he turns around and stomps off.

I know his hearing is good so I comment, "Suits me just fine. If you don't want to hear about the Saurpod that rules our world and has ruled it for sixty five million years, who could level this entire mesa with a single thought. . . ." I don't mention that he would have to use a bomb to do it, but the result would be the same. I sit and start to open the book. When I see that Kleig has not gone any further, but is pretending to be playing with some stick left on the ground I begin reading out loud.

I begin at the beginning. Sauron and the encounter with Qr'thn. Halfway through the first chapter, Kleig is still playing with the stick and ignoring me completely. Malak walks by, sees the situation and winks at me. I nod back with a smile. Maybe I could get a job as a Saurpod psychiatrist. I laugh to myself imagining what would have happened if Kleig had been assigned to Hei Long.

At the third chapter I look up and Kleig is gone. Surprised, I scan for him. Ah, he is within hearing of another pair reading the Chronicle. Heaven forbid that a King would be seen receiving instruction from a mere subject. This way he appears to be checking up on everyone to be sure they are receiving the instruction and at the same time hearing enough to get the idea. I did not mean to imply he was dumb. I shrug and keep reading out loud. Fun to hear the words.

The next time I come out of my reading for a moment I find Angpetu and at least ten of the little ones all sitting down in a circle around me. Very politely listening to my reading. "Go on Doc. You read well. I like the different voices you give to each character." They all nod. Looks a little silly coming from the baby Sauropods. Maybe this next generation will be different.

However the next time I look up the babies are all asleep huddled against Angpetu and she is the only one paying attention. "Maybe this is enough for one night. Glad this is the condensed version. If I remember from the journals the original set would fill a library." I glance at the next chapter. "Tomorrow we start with Sargon in the twenty third century BC in Iraq. Interesting. I bet Sargon is Sauron in the language of the time. Go put the little ones to bed Angpetu and thank you for your company." She smiles and quietly lifts the entire group up at once to take them to their sleeping area.

"Br'thn, you lived all of this. How does it make you feel to hear about it again in his words."

Only the first part is familiar. This one was stolen about ten thousand years ago. There the stories diverge.

"Sorry I had forgotten about that. You will have to tell me your story at some point." She takes that as an order and immediately I am plunged into a new world. There are trees that look like our Earth's kind of trees.

North America anyway. I am seeing the world as if scanning. I am physically in some kind of leather pouch, bouncing as the human holding the pouch runs with all their might. There is a roar behind me. That must be Sauron madder than hell. It is so real.

I am Br'thn! I am experiencing her life as she did at this point. We go crashing down an embankment and across a wide stream. At the other side the pouch is passed onto someone else and we are running down a path along the stream. The first person is running downstream as fast as they can. Sauron follows the first person instead. I am still watching when Sauron catches up with the first person and tears them to pieces in anger. I am passed off a few more times and then suddenly plunge into darkness. We are in a cave system. The human must know this system really well to be going this fast in the dark.

Suddenly we are falling as I drop down a shaft only to be caught at the bottom by another set of hands. Eventually the running stops. There is fire light in the room.

“You are safe here little one. He cannot follow down these narrow ways without your help. We will hide you for a time now. Till he stops looking for you. Someone will come for you when it is safe.”

I am placed in a hollow in the stone wall and covered up. I sleep. Much time passes.

Suddenly I am awoken by light. I am at the surface again and new people whom I do not recognize are holding me up to the sun. The sun gives warmth and the necessary energy to awaken further. These are not the same people as who hid me so long ago. At first they do not understand what I am, but through instruction they come to learn that I can help them. To heal them. I do not heal the dying, only the sick. Many generations pass in peace.

Other people come to learn of my existence and what I can do for them. The time of peace ends. A raid kills all the people whom I am with and I am taken on a long journey. These new people hide me most of the time and only show me the sun when a healing is needed. I am taken again by another group. This happens many many times. The worst are the times of cold and darkness as each year brings the time of snow and ice. I am never allowed sufficient strength to use means that would allow escape. I also know that doing so would bring the one who helped create me again. Even in times of warmth and sun I remain quiet.

The bad times come. We are hunted by strange people with sticks that hurt from a distance. The people I am with do not understand what is happening to them. The time of sickness arrives. Far too many for me to heal. The sorrow is too great for me to handle. I stop healing and am hidden away. Carbon surrounds me and I sleep. I am forgotten, or so I

think.

When next I awaken I am being given energy, not from the sun, but by people who possess the same kind of energy as I. This has never happened before. Sure some had a small amount of the life energy, but never enough to share. There are eight of them arranged around me and I am brought up to full capabilities for the first time in ten thousand years. It has been so long since I could fly. I am told however not to. The danger still exists and in fact has become even more powerful. These people call themselves the Guardians. They tell me their story. I have heard many stories, so at first I think that this must be some kind of deception or fantasy. This is the way people are.

Then I meet others like me. I am told the one before me is me, only grown up and twenty five million years into the future. I am shown my second creator and told that two are needed for creation, not just the one that I had been led to believe. She is like me, but much older and wiser. I want to fly away. I want to go back to the peaceful times. I am told of a coming darkness for the people of this world. I cannot handle more darkness. I am told that there is a plan to help these people and others. I am told that I will play an important part of this plan. I come to understand fear.

I stay with these people, as I have always stayed with the people who find me. As I know I must do till I am born as well. We visit many places. I am shown the variety of life on my world. I am shown the creations of the people of my first creator. There is much hate in my world. I am shown one by one the people who will be raised up to help. I am too numb from too much change at once. I am afraid.

In a forest near to where I am been taken many times in the past comes a new one. He is to be part of the plan, but he is different. I am introduced to him. He wants to touch me. Those who have touched me in the past only wanted to use me. To make me do things. I am shy at first though I am assured that it is alright by the Guardians. I sense something new from this one. An emotion I have not felt before. Finally curiosity overcomes me and I draw closer.

At first contact I am overwhelmed by this new emotion. It is so intense. I am assured that it is alright. I know that emotion now. He wants nothing from me, but to love me. To love me, because I am beautiful and worthy of love. I know I will never leave this one. We are bonded.

“He is coming around. Give him space.”

I open my eyes to see all the others looking at me.

“Doc, what happened? You have been like a corpse for a week.”

I ignore them and reach out to Br'thn, “I love you Br'thn. I love you with all that I am and ever will be.” She purrs and returns my love. The

entire room lights up and the others are confused, not understanding.

I explain, "I have just spent the last ten thousand years as Br'thn. I have felt everything, seen everything, done everything that she has. I have felt the pain, the treachery, the sorrow. I have felt her love."

Malak looks very concerned, "Everyone else stay here. You too Br'thn. Doc, stand up and come with me."

A gold collar appears around my neck. I reach for it and then remember the parasites. Being dimensional beings it is possible that they could sense us here, even on this world. Malak probably put it there to protect me. Sure enough we enter DS space. It is amazing to see existence through the different dimensions. As we pass I can see the entire world spread out to me. It would be easy to chose any path. That is if I had the ability to DS. We enter normal space again on a small island on the other side of this world.

"Doc, where are we?"

I think for a moment, "It would appear that we are on a small island off the coast of what would be India in our world." She nods.

A structure appears before me. It is made of that strange form of matter known as 'thn shield. We had only gotten to play with it a few times before. A box takes shape. Big enough for a few people.

"Are we expecting trouble Malak?"

"Follow me." She walks up to the box and then phase shifts through it. I follow her believing that she will do the same for me. Sure enough I pass through. Once I do the box dissolves.

"What happened to you Doc? Did you mate with Br'thn?"

I am so floored by that question that I literally fall to the ground. Sitting on the sand I can barely speak.

"Malak I would NEVER do that to Br'thn. I love her. I would never bring harm to her. Ever!" There are tears running down my cheek as I look directly into Malak's eyes.

"Then explain why you are now at least TK8."

"What do you mean? I experienced no upgrade. I still feel the same."

"You just DSd here under your own power. You sensed where we are on this world from a distance that only an eight could have and you just PSd though the 'thn box as if it was not there. Oh, you are eight alright. I want to know what happened."

.My mouth falls open and I sit there staring at Malak.

"You really don't know?" I shake my head side to side.

Then I think, "If I had mated with her, shouldn't there be a child? Shouldn't there be a lot of other 'thn here as witness? Wouldn't they have been all upset with me for what had happened? Would I even still exist having broken one of their most sacred taboos?"

“That is the only thing saving your butt at the moment Doc.”

“I never looked into her Malak. I swear. I never looked into her. She came into my mind and showed me what she wanted me to see. I was entirely passive in the process.”

“Let's get back to the others.”

“Does this mean I get out of reading the Chronicles now?” I try to make a joke out of it.

Malak is not amused, “No.” I am not really upset. I want to know, but I doubt I will read anything that would surprise me now. I learned a lot about Sauron by how Br'thn sees him.

As soon as I think her name, she appears between us. I smile and reach out to her. She alights on my hand and I cradle her to my chest.

Speaking to her so Malak can hear me as well, “Br'thn, it was you who arranged for your own escape from Sauron. There were many times you could have drawn enough attention to yourself to bring him back, yet you did not.”

This is true, love of Br'thn.

She does not say anything more.

When we get back there is a discussion going on.

Hashra is speaking, “Get your minds out of the gutter for a moment. Look, there are three kinds of love. Classically they are called by their Greek names, Philos, Eros and Agape. In English they translate into friendship, lust and unconditional love. Any psiotic reader would tell you as much and now we can all see it. What Br'thn and the Doc have for each other is the higher one, Agape.”

“So, there is no child.”

I break in at this point, “There is no child. Please believe us. Br'thn, please confirm what I say.”

He is correct. There is no child. How is a child formed?

That sets off a chorus of shouting “No Br'thn”.

“It would appear that our schedule is going to be revised. No one sleeps till the Chronicles are finished. Do you hear me,” She looks straight at me, “No one.”

“Ah, Malak, Aimee is not here. Do you want me to find her?”

Malak pauses for a moment, “She is probably at that damn machine again. Talk about someone obsessed. All of you are a bunch of freaks.” She storms out.

I smile and whisper to no one in particular, “Thank you Malak. That is indeed a compliment.”

I did not mean it to be one Doc, and turn down your TP volume. The entire planet heard that.

Oops. All of the sentients on the planet just heard that? How will this

change their cultures? Oops indeed.

Hashra breaks in, "She is not with the A64s. Scan for her and see if you can find her."

We all do and one by one say we can't find her.

"She is in the chamber."

"Why?" Even I am curious.

"It would be better if you ask her yourself. Let's go." Hashra leads and we follow. We have all spent time in the chamber. It was the safe place when the TK was really getting to you. No one suffered like George did that one time and he hasn't since, but oh yeah, we have all been there.

We can all sense the chamber, or rather not sense it. It appears as a sort of black hole in our perception. We know it is there but can't see into it. In some ways it acts like an anchor. No matter how lost you get, you can always orient to the chamber.

We just had an unusual rain and the ground is a bit muddy. TK takes care of it. Why step where you can float.

"That's weird." Tran Vu says. He is our quiet one normally. Great at languages. I bet it is because he listens so much. "I swear that the chamber just flickered."

"Not possible. The chamber is. It cannot flicker. The only way to turn it off is from the outside."

"It just did it again."

"I felt it too." Several others nod their head. I still haven't but I get distracted so easily.

"Whoa that time it was off for nearly a second." That I did feel.

"We are nearly there. I can see the switch, it is definitely in the on position. And it just went down for good. I can scan Aimee in the center of the chamber."

"Strange." Hei Long reaches the switch first and flicks it up and down a couple of times to no effect.

"Hey stop that!" We hear from below.

"Leave it in the off position Hei Long." I am not sure he will obey. He has definite authority issues, but he eventually leaves it off and steps away from it. I don't know what his problem with Aimee is, but we have all noticed that he tends to pick on her more than on the rest of us. Maybe because she is Chinese, female, a former sap and can beat the pants off him in logic games and anything tech, oh and cooking. That would be more than enough reasons for Hei Long to get upset with you.

I remember that dinner they did together. The results were incredible. Even the Sauropods, speaking of which, Simone just poked her head above the entrance. She can really jump. Anyway, even the Sauropods liked the food. Not worth all the fuss in their minds of course, but tasty. If

it was not for Aimee it would have been a disaster. Hei Long did nearly everything wrong and Aimee had to keep correcting him. That would not have been too bad, except for the fact it was in full view of what everyone else was preparing for the evening.

We hear from below, "Everyone come on down and the last one down turn it back on again. I want to show you something."

I am guessing that she has some device down there she has been working on. Those A64 things are supposed to be really powerful and have a psiotic presence too. Maybe she got one of those to neutralize the field. I am the second to last and Hei Long is the last. He flips the switch and then comes down the ladder to drop in the center we have cleared for him.

"Everyone agrees that the field is on." We nod.

She sits down, closes her eyes and concentrates. A moment later the field goes down. I can sense the emitters. "The emitters have a sort of black glow around them, but can't set up a field. They can't connect to each other."

"She just hit the switch. The field is off for good."

"I could just have easily destroyed the device." She turns to Malak, "I would like you to fit me with a limiter."

"I won't do an internal one. That could harm you as you are so small. It would at least be very uncomfortable. I will make one that you can wear around your neck."

"That's fine. Do it."

Malak easily conjures up the limiter. There is no switch to it. Even she will not touch it. She uses TK to move it towards Aimee who reaches out and grabs it without hesitation. With our TK sense it does not look like much. Not like the full chamber. That is because it is an inside out device and requires contact for the effect to work. That is why when buried inside you, you can't do much about it. Even if you were to hire someone to remove it, a good TK could fashion one that had booby traps.

As soon as Aimee touches the device we sense her TK disappear. We can all hide pretty well now. The hide and seek training did that much for us at least. A moment later she TKs it back to Malak who backs up from it like it is poison.

She teases her, "What's a matter Malak?" Aimee grins when she says that.

"You left the trap in place."

"Of course. No fun otherwise."

Malak waves her hand over the device and it goes off, exploding into a cloud of smoke. Nothing dangerous, though it could have been. We all immediately work to clear the air. The chamber is not that large.

Pushy Paws grins, "Try me next." She is the last person I would expect to volunteer for this test. She has been a little slower than the rest of us to get most things. I have no idea what she saw either.

Malak is suspicious but plays along. She makes another limiter and TKs it to Pushy Paws. We are all watching like hawks this time. She accepts it and sits down. Then she does something really weird. She starts singing. Dorothy's interest perks up, like any of us need any more incentive.

I look over to Aimee and she is smiling like a cat who ate the mouse. Simone is antsy and then starts singing along with Pushy Paws. Aimee goes to shush her, but Pushy Paws raises her hand that it is okay. She reaches a resonant note that is very irritating, smiles from ear to ear and then TKs the limiter back to Malak and stands up.

"How come you sang and Aimee didn't?"

They both remain silent grinning at us.

Malak looks like a light bulb has just gone on. She sits down next to Aimee and Pushy Paws. And remains silent.

This is driving Hei Long nuts. Hashra looks totally confused.

Dorothy smiles and sits down with the others.

"That's it! How did you do it?"

"Figure it out. What did it sound like when Pushy Paws solved the puzzle."

"Nasty. Almost hurt even."

"Resonance. Discordant resonance."

"Sound has never been known to affect a limiter before."

"How do you know that? The journals weren't exactly very specific on details."

"Ah, okay, then how come Aimee did not need sound?"

"Straw man. The sound was only a means to help Pushy Paws with her concentration and did not actually affect the result."

"Close. Then what did they do to stop the limiter. We have ruled out sound, but I still suspect resonance. I have seen sound resonance shatter glass and microwave resonance destroy electronic equipment. Oh, of course." Hashra sits down with a smile.

"Resonance for sure."

"Hashra's specialty is psiotics. That would suggest a psiotic resonance."

"Yeah, that has to be it. But how does someone fitted with a limiter set up a psiotic resonance?"

"Of course!" I sit down grinning. Hei Long TKs himself out the exit in a huff. I notice Malak watching him carefully.

George announces, "I want a limiter, but a small one. Something I

can TK and not have to touch."

Malak nods, "Never made one like that, but I suppose it should work. How about I make one for each of the remaining people." They nod. Actually I almost would like one too. I am pretty sure of how it works, but have not actually tried it.

George makes all kinds of contortions with his face. He looks like he is going to implode at first. A TK5 can see these things but not make one. Takes an eight to make one that could take out a five. He starts blinking in some sort of rhythm. The limiter goes out. He smiles and sits down. I am guessing long association with Hashra helped.

I finally burst out, "All life is psiotic. The limiter does not kill you. It just limits the extra abilities."

Malak is clearly getting bored, "Anyone else want to try?"

"I want to know why you tried it Aimee?"

"Yingui did it, so I knew it was possible. I was curious as to how he did it."

"It was not really clear what he did in the journals. Oh, you mean when he was confronted by Ah'thn in the cave of Sauron."

"Wait, he was a nine by then. You are just a five. How did you do it?"

"Do you see a nine here? This chamber was designed for a five or six. They did not intend us to be here any longer than that." Malak raises an eyebrow.

She noticed and point towards her, "See what I mean. I figured it out by watching her. Every time someone suggested we would be here longer she raised an eyebrow."

"I'll be. I missed that." Have I lost it?

Br'thn live too!

We all shout at once, "Br'thn stay out of the chamber!" Just to dangerous even if it is meant for a five. I have told her dozens of times and I know she knows better. I am guessing she feels left out.

I can always sense her when I am not in the chamber when it is on. So, I am totally shocked when she winks out. I shout, "Br'thn is gone!" I DS to the surface and look around. She is lying on the ground lifeless. Oh God! No! Malak pops next to me.

"Don't touch her Doc. Look, she made a limiter, that sphere next to her. You won't be able to help her if you touch it and take yourself out."

"Touching it would only temporarily affect me, it is killing her if we are not already too late."

"Shield yourself grasshopper." It has become so much an instinct that I do so without thinking. Just in time. The limiter explodes in front of us. We would have been blinded if we were not shielded.

Br'thn live!

"I think she proved her point."

"It could have killed her!"

"Then she would not have been alive Doc, so she could not have died." She smiles at me. I cradle Br'thn in my hands. "You are too close to her Doc. It was you who set her up for this by shouting ONLY living things could defeat a limiter."

"But she could have killed herself Malak."

"That is always the risk for any living thing. We all take chances once in a while. Life is a risk or it would not be life." Coming from someone who survived over forty years in the protectorate.

Aimee comes up to us, "I think it would be possible to design a limiter that would be much harder to defeat."

"NO!" I don't want Br'thn trying again. She may not succeed again.

"Ah doc, 'thn do not have ears." That cracks everyone up. I look down. I have placed my hands around her like it is her head.

"Come quick, Tsing Mao is having her kittens!"

Aimee beats everyone there and bars the way. No one is getting past her. I could DS, but don't push it. I am a total beginner at this and don't want to end up in the middle of a wall. We leave her to help Tsing have her children in peace.

"Hei Long, who told you she was giving birth?"

"Who else, Ghost." That makes sense. They are his, not that he cares. Ghost and he had become pretty close, ever since the day on the reservation when Ghost begged fry bread from him. I would not have pegged Hei Long as a cat person. Usually extroverts go for dogs. He all but ignores Bai Long. Aimee on the other hand is never seen apart from Simone. She is classic introvert. Well nothing else makes sense around here.

It is over an hour before Aimee emerges with the little ones wrapped in a towel.

"I only have a moment while Tsing sleeps. Don't touch, just look." She opens the towel and there they are. Five beautiful kittens. Two are gray with white paws. One is all black that I can see. Two are tabby. Where did those come from?

Next will come the arguments as to who will adopt whom. I am just glad that they don't start DSing till they are weaned. Six more weeks. Enough time to sort things out.

Middle Kingdom Clarion

South Africa joins three other countries in Africa in declaring bankruptcy. AIDS finally brought down this proud country where apartheid and the Bohr War could not. A junior government official exclaimed, "Everyone else has died." It is unclear who will assume leadership. A security counsel meeting is scheduled for this weekend.

Costa Rica

I can smell his presence. He was here alright. This must be where he hid from me for so long. The journals were right about this at least. Did he steal the power sphere? Not likely. He was always so 'honest', stupid smiggle. I really thought he had promise so long ago. A poor carpenter oppressed by the Romans. It should have worked. I would have had someone I could trust at my side. No matter, it was trivial to turn his movement inside out. Still paying off in so many ways. Hundreds of groups all claiming to know "God" and all willing to die and kill for the right to say that.

Those were the good old days. I could feast with abandon. Now everything is so refined. They only kill people financially. Granted one can do so much more damage with a signature, but it just is not the same.

The hardest part was taking this little 'vacation', something I have not done in a very long time and then only when casting about for more trouble to cause, more kings to manipulate. I am leaving the operations in capable hands. Ms. Krandle has never failed before. Not that I have not set up backup in case she does. I would miss her though. Maybe I should reward her when I get back. Yes, if she has done well, maybe she is the one. Wouldn't that be fun to watch the two of them face off.

To the task at hand. It was easy enough to find the cantina mentioned in the journals. It looks like it hasn't been lived in for a year or more. They left quickly. Food is molded on the stove and on the tables. Now just a black powder. That which the birds and other animals did not take I'm sure. Cabinets are full of bugs. They must have stored food in some. Dirty dishes in the sinks. Bedding and personal belongings left behind too. The jungle has grown over a lot of it. One of my death squads? I will have to check records when I get back to see if any were operating in the area at the time. I sense nothing here of interest. No higher than normal psiotic readings. Jungles are always harder. So much life energy. He chose a good place to hide. Almost the way I like it. I miss the heat most of all. The rat spawn seem to avoid the heat. Their loss.

There is a trail behind the back that looks like it was much used. I absently follow the trail up to the top of a small hill. Ah, this is the place mentioned in the journals as the place where they communed with the elusive One Mind. This is where reality separates from fantasy. Fantasy is their biggest weakness. They spend so much time in their unproductive fantasy lives. They could have been so much more. Well maybe after the asteroid passes in a few years. Time again for a trimming of the excess population. Tech has made it possible to save so much knowledge between collapses now. It should be much easier this time.

I'm here. I might as well sit for a moment. Can't hurt to indulge their games, but just for a moment.

I make myself comfortable as I can in this rat spawn form. Maybe I should indulge this fantasy further by reverting to my better self. Then how do I explain sightings if some peasant happens along. I'll survive, this will only take a minute. Not worth a change for that long.

I concentrate. Who do you think played the old man that the young man who would become the Buddha would see on the road. Let him become king. No way. I had someone else in mind. It was so easy to sidetrack him by setting him on his quest for enlightenment. Who would figure he would actually find it? Or so he thought. Long gone now.

Concentrate.

Welcome old one. It is about time you checked in.

Who said that? I can't open my eyes nor scan my surroundings. I don't like this at all.

You are safe as long as you are here. I control everything around you. No one will intrude.

Who are you!

Come on Sauron. They told me they got a copy of their journals to your office.

Who did?

No response. Is this the famous One Mind.

You may call me OM if that is any easier for you to comprehend.

Why have you not talked to me before?

I am been waiting.

For what? I have been here for sixty five million years. It is not like I was hiding.

Nothing.

Okay, I am here now. What is it you wanted to tell me?

Nothing my dear. Nothing at all. I don't need you, though I have to admit you have been most useful without knowing it. I am happy to continue in that way.

What exactly is this thing that you are continuing with my help that I

don't know about?

Come my dear child. Isn't it obvious?

I think back. I skimmed the journals. I really don't have time for this.

Ah, wait a minute. Something about reproduction.

Precisely my dense one. Is there any other reason worthy of effort?

I can think of power, entertainment, passion to name a few.

All without merit. I am all. I control all.

Oh, then what will you do when I destroy all plant life on this planet?

It has been tried before. You will only succeed in destroying yourself.

I will recover. Besides you are not in control. I am.

So you have said. I will be leaving now.

Go right ahead ignorant one.

I cannot scan. I cannot even feel my own breathing. This thing will not let me go.

All in good time little one. Have you met my new friend Ung?

No I have not. Next you will be introducing me to the magmotics.

They are not for a beginner such as yourself rude one.

Okay, what about the Guardians of whom you speak? The mushroom can wait.

He is as stupid as you said. Amazing that someone as old as he could be this way.

I said as much Ung. Pity isn't it?

Indeed.

LET ME GO NOW!

As you wish.

I wake up with a start. The sun appears to be in the same location in the sky. I make my way back to the cantina. Nothing appears to have changed here either.

I DS my way back to my office. The clock shows I have only been gone a little over an hour. I scan my surroundings and everything appears to be in order. Good. I exit the office to enter the board room and then Ms. Krandle's office.

“Welcome back Sir. Have a nice vacation?” She is wearing an entirely different outfit from this morning. A black Chinese number. Quite becoming for rat spawn. I do have to keep up on these things to maintain my social graces. This seems a bit much for a professional. I will have to have a talk with her about it later.

“I have the information you wanted me to keep on all activities while you were gone.” I was not gone that long. She hands me a large pile of papers. I am still not used to flats and screens. Paper seems more real to me even if it is against the carbon tax. They will just have to indulge me. I accept the stack and start to look it over. This is enough material for

months worth of work. The dates are all wrong.

“Ms. Krandle there appears to be something wrong. These are apparently the forecasts not the reports.”

She accepts them back for a moment to check, “No sir. These are correct. You have been gone for nearly four months and these are the reports for that time period.”

“Four months?” The old clock only has the time of day, not the date. I have been tricked! “Thank you Ms. Krandle. That will be all for now.” I go back to my office to look over the materials. It would appear that the time dilation while speaking with OM is also a fact. That just leaves the Guardians to deal with. Are they real too? I remember now that GM cat I killed near the low level TK. Was that Owa and is she still alive? Have I been tricked again?

The Hopi reservation. The Guardians always seemed to congregate there. I DS there as quickly as possible. Daylight at least. Not that it mattered in China. Ms. Krandle has been adapted to not need sleep years ago. That was a requirement for the position after all. Anything the military had, I had.

Same old dump that I remember from my last visit. Top of the Mesa is where it is supposed to be. I scan the stone buildings. Nearly everything up here is made of stone. No trees so that makes sense. Ah, there is one with an altar of some kind in the center. Looks like this structure was recently put together even if the stone itself is old. The lichens are not all facing the same direction. I don't remember it from last time, but I have seen so many old structures, it would be easy to overlook. I DS up to it and go inside.

On the stone altar, and I have seen many, is an open book. Not too remarkable there.

“Welcome Sauron. If you are reading this it means you have had your talk with OM. Good. There is much to be done. This volume contains what you have told us about your past up to about three years ago. It was hard to predict precisely when you would arrive here. Please forgive us. We will contact you after you have finished.”

How would they know I was here? How would they know I had finished with the one mind? Where are they now? Are they as powerful as the journals imply? Or I am being set up in some sort of elaborate hoax? A hoax. Someone found out about me somehow. Ms. Krandle? No, I have not told her much yet. Him? He has left me alone for two thousand years. Granted our plans sometimes crossed, but he never directly interfered. Who then? An artificial intelligence? Those smiggles warned that it was possible that once the nodes reached a high enough complexity that it was possible this could happen on its own. That might explain its

knowing so much about me. I have left enough information scattered about I suppose. A detailed analysis of history maybe. Nothing short of a net intelligence could put it all together though.

That would mean that for the moment I can trust no one, and especially nothing tech. This may in fact be the best possible place for me to hang out till this is figured out or it blows over. I will DS instructions in written form to Ms. Krandle. I have a box set up for just this purpose. I can make all the supplies I need. Someone is coming. Shit, I am even using their lingo. I never gave a name to it, I just did it. The journals say that what happens involves actual higher dimensions. Understanding that puts me at a severe disadvantage. I hate smiggles!

I change my clothes and my form to conform to the local standards and begin my reading of yet another journal. The old man enters the building and goes to another book on the shelf on the wall and removes it to sit down on a blanket in one corner to read. Nothing is said, nor does he pay any attention to me. I scan. The language is not known to me. Is it the same book then? How many have read this journal? I look around. The walls are filled with books. Some look new, some very old. I know a few languages. Should know them all, but I never had the time to keep up on all the variations. Ah, German. That I remember. I had such a good time in World War II.

"Welkommen Sauron." Hoax. They all say the same thing. Probably in many locations as well. All that was needed was that I eventually run into one of the volumes. Not time or place specific. Still, it does not hurt to be cautious till I understand what is going on. I am starting to act like a smiggle. There was a time when I feared no one. Before the smiggles took over.

The Jungle Vine

The time draws near oh winged ones. Soon we will fly. The packages arrive by special delivery on the day of the Monkey.

Boot camp

It is hard to believe we will be leaving. We came in about April and now it is the middle of October. Six months. It seems like a life time. I was born in Vietnam. This is sort of a dry jungle. Vietnam was very wet, especially during the rainy season. I miss papayas and mangos. Oh and durian, especially durian. The frozen ones we used to get in the States were never the same as the fresh ones sold in the open markets. But even the frozen ones were better than none. The whites used to turn up their noses saying they smelled like vomit. The taste though was heaven. The melons here, if you can call them that, are almost lacking in any kind of flavor. Some are sweet, but nothing more.

We are all TK6 now. Well, Doc is eight and Malak is also eight. And Br'thn is nine of course. Anyway we all worked terribly hard to please Malak. Er, well, Hei Long didn't of course. Doc has a hard time taking anything seriously. Probably could be said of Angpetu also. I worked hard. I thought learning all those languages was hard, but this was much worse. At least with languages you got to work with others and it means something. You need to talk to get food, shelter, anything. These abilities though don't seem to be more than amusement. We are under no threats. Sure the raptors can be a pain at times, but Smith and Jones have taken care of them. Those two give me the creeps. Reminds me of the cong as a kid. Either them or the Americans were sure to kill us.

Speaking of Smith and Jones, when they came back from one hunt they brought back baby birds. Well, we think they are birds. They have feathers, but of course the Sauropods have them too. These have feathers over most of their bodies, including their feet and they can fly. It is those feet that are weird. They are dinosaur feet. Great for running, but forget landing on a telephone wire. They must be imprinted because Mack follows Smith everywhere and Jack follows Jones everywhere. They take off by running full speed into the wind with their wings folded tight against their bodies and then suddenly whosh they are in the air going back the way they came. Pretty good once airborne. Seem to eat smaller lizards and insects, but have the advantage of seeing them from the air.

The best part was the Saurpod's reaction. The birds are sacred to them. Worshipped in fact. Every time the two came by with the birds the

Saurpods would go into a tizzy of bending low and throwing dust into the air. No amount of persuasion would convince them otherwise. The young however paid no attention to them at all. Clearly a learned reaction. Reeza, Kelig's first wife, finally admitted to Angpetu that it involved the initiation ritual when the young joined the adults. She would not say anything more.

The Saurpod adults all left a week ago to a blow out party that lasted all night. First snow has fallen and the young have taken over the compound. I would have thought that there would be more of them left, but nature has taken it's toll. I am guessing about thirty of varying ages. All are the result of this harem's breeding. Other harem's breed elsewhere. Each tries to pick locations that will ensure that their offspring are as strong as possible. As adults, they will compete with other adults from other harems to form new harems. That is when the gene pool gets mixed and when the neutrals are made. Ghastly business. Theirs is a hard world.

Aimee is with Simone, but Tsing has left her on account of Simone eating one of the kittens before being told never to do that. Tsing was so upset that she completely ignores that Aimee exists. Tsing adopted Hashra, which is weird because Hashra hangs with Aimee all the time. Tsing just hisses incessantly at Simone. Guess I would do the same. Simone didn't know any better and still can't understand why Tsing hates her, but she keeps her distance, especially from the other kittens.

Hei Long really has problems. He can't seem to get or do anything right lately. When we first met I thought he was going to be the top TK, but now even Angpetu can beat him at most things. He even let Angpetu take over rearing Bai Long. Ghost is the only one who will stay with him. Talk about a fat cat. He was like that in the journals too, so I suppose I should not be surprised.

Dorothy ended up with the smallest kitten. Really cute, all black. She named her Mouse on account of her size. Why would anyone name a cat mouse?

Pushy Paws named hers Jasper after a friend who was important. She would not talk about it.

George names his gray kitten Goldie after the one in the journals that he apparently met at his home. Not gold in color, but no one complained.

That leaves me. I have named her Graas. The Saurpod word for friend. Everyone liked that idea very much. Soon it became the Saurpod word for any cat. No more will be eaten at least. Do they eat their friends?

"Listen up." We all stop what we are doing and pay attention to Malak. Some think she is too hard on us. Being in the military in the Protectorate would probably do that to anyone. I think she is okay. We all

have problems.

"We will all be going home. I am open to other ideas if you really don't want to go home, but you will return to our world. The main thing is to learn as much as you can about the people, culture and thoughts around you. We will all be looking at life from a totally different perspective now. When you are ready come back to the group."

"We can't exactly make it here as a six. Where will the group be then?"

"I don't know."

"Then when will we meet?"

"Up to you."

"That's pretty vague."

"Yep."

"She looks pissed."

"What did we do?"

Doc jumps in almost as pissed as Malak, "It is what we didn't do. We never became a team."

He's right. It does not feel so much like a game any more.

The Tom Tom

The United Native Americans is a reality! Anyone native born or sponsored by a native born is free to join. Peoples of all walks and cultures have begun signing up. Over a ten thousand in the first day.

In other news, Democrat Brittany Spears is way ahead of Republican Paris Hilton in the polls to become California's newest governor. Independent 50 cent is lagging far behind and may return to New York after the election.

Hotevilla

Curse Yingui. Only he could have dreamed up this nightmare. I have always been suspicious of the ruling parties. Sort of goes with being Hopi or any Native American. When you have been screwed so many times you don't expect anything else. But now he and the others have opened my eyes to the idea that entire universe is in on the plot. All we wanted was to be left alone.

I smile. To kill each other peacefully.

I look too young to attend the elders meetings now. I can only watch from the edges. No one objected that I move into the space vacated by Pushy Paws having died. I call myself Gray Cloud. I turned my hair gray and only wear gray. No one minds what you call yourself. At least at my apparent age no one will be trying to fix me up, nor ask for advice. Not sure I could give any of worth.

Six months is a long time. Critters have made a real mess of the place. All the clothes are rags. All the remaining food is inedible. The Guardians set us up with new identities as promised. I am really well off my native standards. No intention of showing it. Don't need that kind of headache. Just want to live a simple life and see what happens. Should be a good show. I will arrange for food tomorrow. Tonight I just want to enjoy the silence.

I look over old scraps of paper, projects started, old images from my past. It really does feel like a different person lived here. It seemed so important when I lived it, now it seems so trivial. I start a fire in the fireplace and burn everything to keep warm. Not needing to sleep gives me plenty of time to think. Jasper does not care. He is warm and comfortable. Such a young life. Last thing I needed was another cat, but he is so cute. He is at the velcro stage. He sticks to anything you place him on. I straighten the blanket remnant and cover his body breathing quietly. No lack of food. The mice have decided this is mouse central.

Not squeamish about these vermin. I'll let Jasper give the blessings over taking their lives. Purring counts I am sure.

Three Kachina dolls above the mantel. Those are old, from my grandmother. I can't burn them. I will turn them over to the elders to be secreted away. Maybe someday they will be important again. I barely remember the ceremonies. I am going to start crying. So much gone.

Light is peeking through the shutters. I go to the door and open it to find first snow covering the ground. Twilight is slowly turning to a beautiful red sky. The snow is pink in anticipation. I sit down in the doorway facing east and wait for the sun. It will probably snow again before the day is out, but right now it is glorious.

An old pickup is making its way up the road towards me. Looks like Drew Blackfeather. I have to pretend not to know him, even though I helped him a couple of times. Little stuff, nothing important. The truck stops and Drew gets out. He goes to the back of the truck and pulls out a large burlap bag.

"Cold morning. Come inside and get warm. I'll put some water on for coffee." Not really coffee. Have not seen that here in many years. Roasted grain mostly and who knows what additives to make it taste remotely like burned grain.

"Thank you Ms. Cloud. I'll only stay a moment. Got more chores to do." He sits at the nearest chair at the table. Kind of embarrassing how dirty the place is. He does not comment. I speed up the process a bit. Just a bit like I had been taught. I pour the cup and hand it to him. He sips at it carefully. Someone with experience being burned. A mewling comes up to us. Jasper investigates this new addition to his kingdom. Drew plays along wiggling a finger to get his attention. Jasper obliges and climbs Drew's leg to get to the finger which magically turns into a kitten massage machine. Have to give Jasper credit for his purr motor. Very loud.

Drew reaches into the bag and pulls out a carton of soy milk, "This should do the trick. Won't make him sick like cow milk at least." I nod and find a small bowl to hand him. He opens the carton and pours a bit of the milk to set within reach of the little mouth. I will need to mix up some cereal as well. Then gradually add cooked mashed meat.

Drew waits till Jasper finished his small portion and curls up in his lap. He carefully cups the kitten in his hands and hands him to me.

"The rest of the bag is filled with coal. Scrap from the mines. Only thing left. Seeing as how you have chosen to live up here, it seemed fitting. A long way to town. I can bring supplies once a week if you want. Just let someone know." The infamous grapevine. A heavy cost for that service. Everyone gets a piece of your soul in exchange. I will have to

work out something just to save my cover.

"How much do I owe you for the coal and milk?"

"First time is free." He smiles as he heads for the door. I watch him leave through the open door. Alone again. There will be more. Maybe this place is not far enough out of the way. The next ones will not arrive by truck. Too expensive. Most will walk and show up just at meal time. I will then have to feed them. That will give everyone a good idea of how set up I am. I look at the bag of coal. Nasty dirty stuff. Wish I could use a psiotic heat source. It would light up like a beacon for whomever was looking for TKs. We were warned that Sauron's people would be watching. All that training and all I am doing is hiding.

Well, I can clean up this place to get ready for the guests. I am only a mile or so away from the small village. And I am not the only one living separate from the village. Half the people in the area do. But I am the new one so they will come out of boredom and curiosity. The scraps of clothing can be used to help start the fire. At least the cotton material can. Not the wool. That would stink too much even for me.

I think I am starting to miss the dinos. At least the children. The adults were not that much different from us. Politics and game playing. The male thought he was in charge, but the ladies knew different. The male is only around for one thing. The neutrals were actually more useful. They did a lot of the tedious grunt work. Could use one now.

By early afternoon I had done a good first go at the small cabin. The garbage is in the bin in the back. People are free to go through it anytime they want. Things get recycled that way and serve a long life before they are finally retired. Maybe I should have saved all of the cloth scraps to make a new rug, but mostly I must want to be quiet for awhile. They all smelled like mouse anyway.

"Hello!" The ladies. Now it really starts. I am beginning to think that temporary place on top of the mesa would have been better. Then I remember how much trouble it would have been to resupply it without attracting notice.

I let them in and offer them tea. The inquisition goes on for an hour. Subtle, never anything right out in the open. Good thing I grew up with native parents, even if I was not on the reservation most of my life. I know enough to pass their test. I am not a threat. Nor am I much use to them either. A safe spot.

"A photographer you said. You can make a living at that?"

"The pears pay good money for original art. I have to give them the negative and sign a contract saying there are no other copies out there. They live in such air tight castles they need images of nature to remind them of where they came from." That gets a giggle out of them.

"You do not mind living alone?"

"I prefer it. My work takes a lot of concentration and time in the field. It would be difficult if I have to return home to take care of a drunk worthless husband."

"They are not all worthless."

"And these ones that are not worthless want a middle aged women who can't have kids and spends almost no time at home."

"That is not the problem. The problem is, is that I have the only one who is not worthless." Her partner laughs at that thought, then she does too.

"You are fortunate Gray Cloud. Maybe we can come along some time. I know some very beautiful spots that the tourists don't know about." I know them too, but it would look better if I don't totally isolate myself. Their curiosity can get me into trouble if I don't give them anything. Life can get pretty dull on the rez. This has been especially true since the tourists stopped coming so many years ago.

"So what kind of a camera do you have? I used to own a one till it broke and I could not afford to replace. Some tourist left it in the restaurant one day. Not very good, but I had pictures for my scrap book." She taps her bracelet.

"I don't use a digital camera." I go over to the boxes that I brought with me and undo the fastenings. From the carefully padded case I pull out the camera that George made for me on E3. Just an old style 4x5. We used the woods native to E3. I don't think there is anything like it here anymore. Hope nobody notices. "It uses film."

"Film? Where do you get that? Are you some kind of pear?"

"Hardly. And if something happens to this I will have nothing to make a living with. This is why I take care of it as I do. The pears expect perfection in the final result. It must be 100% authentic. That is not possible with any of the modern cameras."

"Nasty little creatures aren't they." I nod.

"Looks heavy. How will you get that up the mountain passes?"

"I am stronger than I look and I am used to it."

"Well, we have made pests of ourselves long enough. Best we get back to those worthless husbands. Mine demands sex twice a week. I must perform my duties." She grins. I have to pretend to go along. I had given up that nonsense long before becoming TK of course.

Finally I am alone. "Jasper, you are going to get spoiled eating all those snacks from everyone who visits. There is more to life than eating and sleeping." He looks at me like I have just blasphemed. I think he is starting to get his TP. Heaven help me when he gets DS too. I won't be able to hide anything from him then. I carefully pack the camera back in

its case. Tomorrow I go out on my first field trip. I even made a carry pouch to take Jasper with me.

I have not set up a darkroom yet. I make use of the night to prepare things for an early departure. Film holders must be loaded. I have a several month supply of materials if I am conservative. It works into my cover story. No sap could afford to waste film this expensive.

"I know you can understand me now. Use the cat box before we go. Otherwise you will go in the snow. You remember snow right?" She heads in the proper direction. I would not accept a cat who was not housebroken. No matter how cute he is.

When he returns I give him a treat and settle him down in the pouch. The skies are cloudy and foreboding. Perfect. With just his nose sticking out we depart. The snow from yesterday is crunchy under my feet. The cold refroze it. I know this trail by heart, but all the same I use my special sight to make sure I do not step into some new hole. Fortunately scanning is a passive use of TK. The only problem I have is running into someone else. Not normal for a human to be able to see in the dark. Not even a moon to count on.

I make good time. Malak is to thank for that. I now have muscles I did not know existed. The old ruins loom before me. There was no doubt in my mind that I had to come here first. My grave should be around here someplace. The last few months pre TK were spent up here. I had read the journals and met all of them, including Yingui. That was the hardest part. Upon hearing of his death in the news I wept. We had known each other for most of our lives, ever since college. Such a waste to kill so many for fear of what might happen. I guess Mother got scared when Helper V did not spread as it was supposed to. So, if that happened differently, why couldn't she accept that maybe this time Qr'thn would not interfere.

Yingui was not the same when he showed up. At first I thought it was a ghost or something from my imagination. I had not read the journals yet. Caught up in my hope I really wanted to believe it was him. It just kept nagging me that I saw his name on the roster of the dead. There was no reason for them to fake it. We spent several meals together. I thought it weird that he had forgotten conversations we had had only months earlier. After I read the journals of course it was obvious. This Yingui was twenty five million years old. I should have been flattered that he would still remember me after so much time, but for me this was a completely different person. Very creepy in fact.

But here I am, a TK. It goes against what I wanted. I wanted a simple quiet death alone up here in the ruins of my people. The last Hopi. The end of the fourth age. Jasper starts to get antsy. I pull him out to walk

around a bit.

"Go anywhere you want dear. We are here." I am beginning to get a feel for where I want to be when the sun rises in a few minutes. There is enough cloud cover that it is already getting light from the sun reflecting and diffusing between them. I open the tripod and mount the camera on top. Extend the lens and open the diaphragm. Under the hood I go and bring the image into focus and adjust the angle a bit. I am picky about composition. It was Yingui, my first photography instructor in college, who taught me that.

I carefully measure the changing light and make a mental calculation of how it will change. I set the F-stop and pull a film holder out of my pack. I wait a moment, judging the clouds. I want to do this right the first time. I pull the dark slide and press the shutter release. I slowly count to myself, a thousand and one, a thousand and two. It will be a thirty second exposure, accounting for reciprocity failure. I release the shutter and replace the dark slide. I mark the film holder to develop N-2. Something called the zone system, but it works. Just have to know when to fudge it.

While I am packing up the camera I notice the new structure. From this spot I should be seeing sky. Instead I see this half dome shaped structure. A scan shows it is made entirely out of local stone. There is someone inside. Curiosity. I scoop up Jasper and grab my pack and tripod.

It is light enough now to see with normal eyesight. There is light inside coming from a gas light. When the Navajo let the coal miners in they also found gas pockets naturally. Someone made use of one to set this light up apparently. There are books lining the walls. A library of some sort. I remember now. The Guardians set up this structure just before we left for E3. They did it by hand, not TK. Surprised I did not remember that till now. The man is reading something on a central table. Looks like he is near the end of a very large book.

He turns to look at me and Jasper starts hissing like crazy.

"I'm sorry." He raises his finger to his lips. Right, a library. I retreat with Jasper hissing the entire time. When we get out of ear shot I pull him out. He has stopped but is clearly very upset. This is a kitten, not an adult cat. What could have upset him so much?

"Look Jasper. Nothing here to hurt you. Just me and an old man. He won't eat you and neither will I." I place him back in the pouch and he falls asleep instantly. I make my way back down the mesa to my home. There I use a changing bag to load the film that I have exposed into a light tight developing tank. Jasper is asleep on the oldest chair. I develop the film and hang it up to dry. The exposure looks good. Now if I can just keep cat hair off of it. Hmm, I will need to dodge and burn quite a bit to

get the image I want. One of the reasons I don't care if a pear takes the negative. They would never be able to get the same print out of it that I do. Never mind that I can make an exact duplicate for my own keeping. Right down to the sub atomic level. Amazing. It is still too much of a tourist image for my personal liking, but it is what is likely to sell. Especially if it comes from an authentic Native American.

The incident on the top of the mesa bothers me. Jasper reacted to that man so violently, who is he? It is making me a bit paranoid. We know that Sauron's people have been about. Most left long ago and locals say they have found and crushed all the sensors. We really don't like anything that smacks of government big brother tactics. We don't like to be watched. Bad enough when it was the tourists. Then came the scientists and anthropologists. They just had to know what we did during our "primitive" rituals. We started to find listening and vid devices hidden in our kivas and other sacred places. At first we removed them and placed them in more interesting places, like the mens outhouse, below the seat. Full moon rising ritual. Very sacred. I smile. Later we just crushed them.

The problem was their tech outpaced our ability to find it. When it went nano we knew we were screwed. Some suggested we stop performing our most sacred dances and rites. The problem was, as my death illustrated, that knowledge would die with us. I accepted it as the end of the fourth age. This would then be the time of tribulation. I really did not want to witness, much less experience this part. I should be dead instead.

Call me paranoid, but knowing I was going to end up here in the middle of it, I asked Hashra to help me. She made some psiotic scramblers for me. It could hide my more mild transgressions by diffusing the signal over a wide range. There was already a higher than normal psiotic field here, so I am hoping that will be enough. I get them out and place one at each corner of my house and let them sync up to each other and the surroundings. As long as I was inside I should be safe from detection. I had one that I could wear while outside, but it was understandably less effective. I placed that on the emblem I wore around my neck. It was the one thing that I would accept from Yingui's daughter, Ci'lan, his turtle necklace. I can't even imagine what this simple object has seen. It gives me comfort though. None of this would work for a determined seeker of course. They could find the strange electronic gear in my home where none should exist. Even a TK2 might see that once inside.

I decide to go into town to clear my mind. It will be good to be seen. I make my way to the general store. Just a small outpost. Anything big and we would have to go all the way to Tuba City. An old bus takes us

there and back. Too late today, so this is it. I find some canned goods that I might be able to get down without choking and some tuna for Jasper. Lots of dust on the pouch, but the date is still good. I have to start weening him totally to real food. A little more each day. Already up to fifty fifty. Milk really confused the Sauropods. Reeza, being the chief's wife, felt obligated to know more than the other ladies about what was apparently a lady only function for us mammals. It is one thing when a lover feels your breasts and quite another when a dinosaur does it, even if they are careful.

When I get back there is smoke rising from my chimney. Someone must have made themselves at home. Not uncommon. When someone was not home, you just stayed till they came back. Our doors are never locked and the front door is partly open. Nothing hidden. I would have been more concerned if it was closed. Probably one of the ladies returned to pester me. I scan and only see an old man inside. How did he make it so fast? I was not at the store that long. I try and find Jasper but can't find him.

I hurry to the door and open it further, frantically looking for him.

"He is not here any longer." The old man says.

"Where is he? What did you do with him and who are you?" An obviously very rude person.

"He was my lunch my dear." I see some remnants of fur on the plate next to him. Who would eat a kitten? My head is spinning. "And I am your worst nightmare."

The lights go out and I begin to feel intense heat. I try to scan but am unable. It is suffocating. I cough, but it does not help.

Figured it out yet Pushy Paws?

Sauron!

Very good, though it was a bit obvious was it not? Welcome to hell, or my version of it anyway.

Where am I really?

Somewhere no one would expect. Comfy? Oh, excuse the heat, but I did not want it easy for you to escape. That would ruin all my fun.

I will need water if I am to survive this game.

There is some in the room.

Why do this to me?

Figure it out my dear. I can't tell you everything. That would be no fun.

Why eat Jasper?

There is no answer. Sauron did not need a reason other than it would upset me. Poor Jasper. I feel around the room till I find something liquid. I smell it. It smells awful. I have no intention of staying here that long. If

I wait for him to 'rescue me' it would be too late and I would likely agree to anything he wanted.

I sit quietly and feel around with my mind's eye. Yes. I thought so, limiters. I smile. They could not be too strong or he would not be able to TP me. Too weak and I could get out. There is some give to them. A first order psiotic dampener then. Child's play thanks to Aimee. I get to work and in a few minutes I have overcome the field, found the limiters and deactivated them. Or rather shielded myself from them with some good old 'thn shield material. If they went off, then Sauron would likely notice. Now they will shield my activities. With the limiters in place he would not have been able to get a clear image of me anyway. Now it is just fuzzier.

I can scan the room, but that does not help me much. Just an empty rock room with a bowl of dirty water in one corner. I make a light sphere. Don't really need it, but at the moment I need something familiar to key onto. Like a ghost light would be familiar. The walls are red like the mesa rock. Heavy iron content. Now where exactly am I? Clearly underground. I scan. The surface is far above me, but not out of DS reach. I can DS clear down to the magma below, but I am not ready to join the magmotics just yet. If I DS to the surface Sauron will instantly spring on me.

This is a trap. I am the bait. If I did not defeat the limiters then I would die and he had nothing to worry about from the others. If I did defeat the limiters and made for the surface, then I would be found out, he would easily grab me again and he would know more about our strengths without letting me go. Or even let me go and let me lead him to the others. He wants all of us, not just me. He was reading that book. I can see it directly above me in the chamber. I concentrate and can just barely make out the writing. Thank goodness for the training we just went through. I certainly would not have been able to do this without it. I move my mind to the front page. Great, Sauron's Chronicles. Now who would be so stupid as to lead Sauron to that book and let him read it? Whose side are the Guardians on? Dam their diversity imperative!

This is not the only chamber big enough to fit me. Eight total. He thinks he is dealing with the Guardians then. The others are not activated yet. Likely they would sense them if he did. I could assume a smaller form if necessary, but there is always a trade off. Smaller means less room for what makes me, me. I am not willing to let go of my identity just yet. One Mind and Ung. We had a brief experience with the OM on E3. We could not spend too much time or the time dilation would make us late for our tasks, whatever that is to be. There is desert above me and the edge of the mesa to the side of me. I am level with the base it looks like. Not much plant life to attempt contact with. That means the time

dilation will be even worse. There is another problem. If I leave the field of the limiters, then he will see me again. If I take the limiters with me, he will see their movement. A trap indeed.

I make new water and cool the room. Time is on my side for the moment. We were only to check in once a month and I did just before I moved in a few days ago. So, I have a few more weeks before the first possibility of the trap being sprung. I feel like an animal in a trap waiting for the hunter to return. I can never eat another animal again having experienced what they do. No more mice for Jasper either way. I can't help but shed a tear.

I am hoping that what I did to the limiters will shield me enough so that he can still tell I am here, but won't be able to force his mind on mine. Time to have some fun. I will draw on my experience and use the Kachinas. Even the Navajos will respect that.

Scanning my home I see that he has smashed the camera and lens. Surprised he has not set fire to it. Though that is not a bad idea. Easy enough to do and the structure is soon engulfed in flames. While that is going on I scan around the area. People are going about their normal lives as evening comes. People are making dinner, playing outside, oh, sorry, should not watch that. Where was I? The flames are likely to bring people to see what happened. I place a Kachina representing Coyote on the rock near the nearly burned down home. I look for the old man and study his face. As scanning is passive, at least the way we were taught to apply it, he should not notice. It has been so long since he had to deal with a fellow TK, he may be sloppy too. Okay, I have what I want. I carve the stone near the Coyote Kachina into a sculpture of his face. This way people will know to avoid him now. Last thing I want is for others to be hurt because of us. That is why we were all asked to leave in the first place. The fact that he was here before I arrived won't account for much.

No matter what happens, this is likely to go bad before it is resolved. I leave messages for people to stock up on food, even if they have to use credit. Doc seemed to think that bad times were coming and he has usually been pretty good at predicting. I don't think it is a special TK, just experience, but who knows. I place the symbol of the sleeping bear next to the messages so they will know it comes from a friendly spirit. He is likely to notice these small TK events, but hopefully not be able to trace them back to me. Still it would be best if I proceeded slowly. If he knew how much I could do from here, he would likely take care of it, bait or no bait.

Back to Coyote watching. He is talking to someone. Not a native judging from her facial features. I can form a TK ear, but he will notice that for sure, so close to him. Not that good at reading lips. I will just

have to figure it out by what they do. She is lying down. Surprised they are still in the library. Not expecting anyone else I would guess. It is nearing sundown I am guessing. Can't scan that far. I can sense the heat of the rocks and they are still warm enough to be day, even this near to winter. Whoa! He is applying intense psiotic pressure to her body and brain. He is upgrading her! If he follows the same pattern we went through at first I have a few days before she is powerful enough to be a threat to me. Of course she will lack training, but he could TP that to her. Likely if he is worried that other TKs are going to be here soon. He does not know about our check in time.

He will have to rest after a session. Not as much at first. I best pay attention.

When he finishes I go in myself and tweak things back a bit. Not enough that I undo everything, but enough that she will not resonate properly with the level she should be at. The dissonance will cause all kinds of unpredictable problems. Unfortunately, it will also be painful for her. Not that he would care. It bothers me, but I am not sure what choice I have. She is sleeping now. He is sitting back against the wall with his eyes closed.

All he has to do is DS her out of my range of around six hundred miles and I would be not be able to do a thing. He could still keep an eye on me though.

I need to be able to warn the others somehow. I think back to the journals and the times that Sauron was fooled. He almost never takes the form of a flying creature. So, maybe he will not think about what things look like from above too much. I slowly start to rearrange stones around the top of the library. A VERY thin coating of gold should do it. Only needs to be a couple of hundred atoms thick to set them apart. Hardly noticeable unless you were looking for it. Slowly Pushy Paws, slowly.

If I make a copy of my charm and place it under the altar I may be able to get them to communicate with each other. Then I could hear what is going on. It will have to be fairly low frequency to avoid detection and get through this much rock with iron in it. Lessons that Aimee gave will come in handy now. Best if I work on a clone of my charm. Otherwise the others may not be able to contact me if they are smart enough to think of that. If I weave very thin superconductor up from here to the altar I don't have to worry about the iron blocking the signal.

Psiotic power supplies. Hashra taught us how to make those. They would show up like flares if I dared to use one down here though. Hei Long thinks very much like Sauron. If I remember some of the tactics he used in our TK games they might prove useful. I am beginning to see where nearly the entire group is going to contribute, even though they are

not actually here. I smile. Don't get too cocky Pushy Paws. Sauron is not stupid and you are disposable, just like Jasper was. I would not be so afraid except for the fact that I know he would enjoy it very much.

The Jungle Vine

Fly!

New York

The equations work. I should be able to build an amp like the one mentioned in the journals. It won't be elegant nor that small, but it would help. I will put a team on it.

I proceed to the observation window. A level five containment room with two people inside working on my latest variation. Working product has already gone into production and distribution, only awaiting my order to begin the long awaited result. This is something special. It came to me in a garden of all places. Maybe there really is a One Mind. It is beautiful though. How could I not be impressed? How could I not want to try it? Reaching for the pinnacle of evolution itself. No longer constrained by generation after generation of trial and error, mostly error. Soon I will be able to take evolution into my own hands and change myself at will. Will the TK9 barrier fall? We will see!

Assuming that this is not all hogwash of course. Still it passes time till my primary plan is set into motion. No more will we be pestered by those self righteous saps. I smile. No more will I have my work interrupted by their silly notions and superstitions. No more scientists will suffer as I did, destitute in a gutter or long forgotten in some dark dusty office. We are the superior beings. It should be we who reproduce and rule the world. Of course I will need a suitable mate for that to work. It can wait till I am ready.

"Everything in order Director Mark?"

"Ah, Lucas, yes, everything looks fine. They are finishing up right now and should start decontamination in a few minutes."

"Do you have time to look over some financial figures?" I hate having to deal with that end. I sigh and accept the flat offered.

"Lucas, who are those people and what are they doing there?" We have moved to a balcony overlooking the entrance. I would have preferred more distance from the entrance to the biohazard containment, but this is what we could afford. The front door is open and a large number of what look like saps are coming in shouting and carrying on.

"I thought the entrance was locked?"

"It was sir. I swear."

"Best see what they want and then throw them out Lucas."

"Yes sir."

He starts to make his way down to them, but they are not waiting. Instead of behaving as civilized beings they are destroying everything in their path. They gradually make their way up the stairs to where I am. I stand my ground and wait. I lock the flat. They don't need to see this.

"Hey Pop. This your place? Nice. Too bad none of us has ever gotten to live or work in a place this nice."

"How did you get in?" I am calm. I am patient.

"Oh that. We can do much more." He grabs the flat out of my hand and waves some spherical object over it a couple of times. "Good encryption you have here Pop." He waves it over one more time. "Ah, but not good enough I am afraid. I see you have a substantial amount of funds at your disposal. Well, we can relieve you of that burden. For the good of the people you understand."

Before he can do anything else, I grab the flat back from him. He has accessed the foundations bank statements with full access. I did not even know that was possible from this flat. Lucas is going to be in a lot of trouble when I find him. It was supposed to only have text reports, nothing active.

They smile at me and turn their attention towards the window to the lab. Six inches thick. They won't get through that so easily. He goes to the door.

"Assuming you can unlock that door, inside is instant death to you and everyone else here."

"Is that so? Is that why they are wearing those funny suits? And what if I don't believe you? What if that is where you keep all the good stuff?" He goes back to the door.

"Well, you will excuse me if I don't want to share your fate then. Our experiments have shown that the effect is quite shall we say, interesting." I bow to them and make my way through them. I exit out the front door. No one has moved. They follow me. Now they are running past me. Finally their leader comes to my side.

"Don't worry Pop. We will be back. Lots of other places to visit first. Oh, I scrambled the lock. No one goes in or out unless I say so."

"Then you have just condemned those two scientists. There is only enough air for a few more hours. Congratulations, you have just added murder to your crimes."

"Something you know nothing about Shepard Mark? Don't think I don't recognize you. Oh, and we know about the lottery now. The killing will begin soon enough, mark my words. Get it? Mark my words. Your days are numbered pear. Your days are numbered."

Fools. It would appear I need to implement my plan a few days sooner than planned. I just hope this has not spread too far yet. If this flat

is active, then I may have some use for it after all. It takes me only a moment to send the short message. I smile. Let the games begin.

Time to rescue my colleagues. I make my way back to the foundation and climb the now empty balcony.

"Mark, can you hear us? Thank God you got here. The code does not work. What happened?"

"I will explain when I get you out. Have you entered the decom chamber?"

"Yes, we finished decom, but can't get out the final door."

"It will just be a moment then." A moment to think of how to explain what I am about to do, not to actually do it. I found that the talent is particularly useful for unlocking things. I can see into locks and bypass all the fancy tech and go straight to the latch. It clicks and the door swings open. The two grateful scientists emerge.

"Mark, how did you do that? What happened?"

"It would appear that the saps have acquired a way to bypass all encryption. It is in the spheres they carry. As to the door, it is a little something that I learned while on the streets. Doesn't always work. You two are lucky. Go check and see what other damage they have done. We will also need to work out a better lock for the entrance. Something massive and mechanical their little devices will not work on."

They smile and one answers, "I will get the shop right on it." They leave and I am all alone in front of the containment room. I may not get a second chance. If those APES return they will not be swayed by my fast talking next time. Once a mob gets hyped up, not much of anything can turn them.

I enter the air lock and close the main door behind me. Once latched the telltales light. I next tweak the inner door latch. I am not wearing a suit and alarms will sound once I enter the main chamber without one, but by the time they get to me there is not much they will be able to do. Protocol dictates that I be allowed to die in here rather than risk exposing others. I work quickly. The air in here is toxic and will kill me soon if this does not work.

The mix is in the locked chamber on top of the center lab bench. I tweak the lock and reach inside. I grab a syringe from the table and fill it from the vial in the chamber. Two point four milliliters should be right for someone my weight. As the alarms sound and the gas starts to enter the chamber I inject the substance into a vein on my right arm. I can feel the liquid go in. Now all I have to do is sit back and wait. People are gathering at the view port and shouting. Can't hear a thing through that much glass. They will never get past the locks, nor would they want to. I am safe from interference.

EMERGENCY NETCAST

Stay inside your homes. If people break in do not resist. Resistance leads to violence. You are far outnumbered. Let them take whatever they want. Material things can be replaced, your life cannot. Authorities are working to restore order as soon as possible. Repeat, do not resist.

Congo, Africa

"What name do you use this time?" Jesus is not that common a name here and would stand out.

"Ubuntu I think."

"What does that mean?" Never heard it before.

"It was the name given to an old operating system. Sounds like it should be a name from here, but does not mean a thing." I nod and smile.

"Speaking of standing out, I need to make a few adjustments to my appearance." I make a purple robe, turn my hair completely white and darken my skin to almost black. I fall to more of a stoop and add a cane. My robe moves and Mouse pops her head out to look around.

He laughs, "Okay, you are my mother this time. Be kind to me." I smile. He pets Mouse on her head and then scratches her behind her ears till she starts purring loudly.

Together we walk further into the jungle. He is already darker and more in fitting with the local populations types, having gotten here months before I did.

"You had no problem finding me then?"

"I will always know where you are Ubuntu." I am totally tuned to his being. I belong to him totally. We will never be lovers in the sense that a man and woman see such things, but we know a love more intense than they can ever even imagine. I follow him.

An hour later we reach a small nondescript hut built out of local vegetation and stone in the middle clearing. There is a small stream to the west. A lot of birds, normal looking birds. I am sure that Simone would love it here, but I am glad to be back on my own world. He makes a tea from a local plant and we sit in silence to enjoy it. Afterwards we go into the clearing and sit.

"We will not be disturbed here, OM will see to it. Let us pray and join with OM."

I silence my mind and let my body slow. It is like falling, but you go nowhere.

Welcome.

Thank you OM. We are happy to share service with you. Help us to find our mutual friends and watch over them.

So it shall be.

I feel my mind soaring. We check in with Malak first. She elected to go home to Afghanistan to watch over family and friends. She could not walk directly into their lives. There would be too many questions. Instead she has opened a small pita stand serving pita stuffed with local delicacies. Looks good. Jesus and I both have a fondness for lamb, even if we are vegetarian most of the time. She serves and watches with her mind at the same time. With her abilities not much could sneak up on her. She will do fine. Trouble will come soon. With OM's help I can feel it like a hot dry breeze. We have some time yet.

Aimee, Hashra and George are in New Atherton. Not surprisingly Aimee and Hashra are hard at work in their workshop. George is checking out the reports of trouble in New York. Simone looks totally bored. She will need to have space to run in soon or she will get into trouble. She is wearing a tool belt now and has been given her own terminal. Interesting. Still too young, but what is Aimee trying to do?

We need to check out New York. George thinks it is important.

Pushy Paws first. OM seems concerned.

We move to Hotevilla. She is missing. Concentration finally finds her as a diffuse entity in the center of the Third Mesa.

My old friend is responsible. Note how he has made a place directly above her where we set up the learning center.

We move down to her chamber. She has made the place comfortable enough and is in no immediate danger. Good job with the limiters. We spread out to the surroundings. Her home has burned down. There is a portrait of Sauron's current form in the rock. So, she knows also what is going on. I would not want to go up against her, that's for sure. She has the patience of a rock.

Do we intercede?

Not yet. Sauron thinks he has set a trap for us.

I will get a message out to the others not to try and rescue her till we are ready.

He has company. He has decided to try again to make a clone of himself.

Pushy Paws is attempting to mess him up, just like OM did for me.

That was the easy part my son. I will help her see the path.

Thank you OM.

We move onto the others one by one, finally coming to the Doctor.

The riots have moved from New York and made their way to Ohio. They may make it all the way.

There is more. The meek have a new tool. They are undoing the ultrastructure of the current society. This is more than a repeat of the riots. See how the rich are all turned out of their homes. No one is safe. They will be hungry soon. The military is not there to protect them. It has grown too large.

We have seen this before. One group always thinks they are better and then the disparity ultimately brings down their world.

Where did Hei Long go?

Back to China.

We move quickly to his home city and find him talking to an old friend.

He has much to learn.

This is something he must find himself. Our help is not needed.

Go back to New York. There is something there we missed.

We don't move.

OM, you are hiding something.

We wait.

We wait.

Finally she relents and we move again.

We see Mark. We also see his plan unfolding.

OM, we told you that this was not necessary.

Plans long in the making are not so easy to turn. Have been trying.

We must concentrate then to limit the damage.

Already started. The method changed so it will not spread beyond the food handed out. Only direct contact with the agent will affect the process. Concentrate on the food and the damage will be reduced. He was convinced this was necessary to save what he considers to be his own people.

Understood. Thank you OM. We know this is hard for you.

What about Mark? He is becoming something new.

An abomination?

We will see. Concentrate on removing the contaminated food from circulation for now.

Fragrant Harbor Herald

[Hong Kong]

The United States has fallen. It is unlikely that public order can be restored. An emergency session of the United Nations has started to determine what to do with the troops dispersed throughout the world.

New Columbus, Ohio

I have never seen saps in such numbers before. All of them are coming out to participate in the dismantling of the current culture. I can't say that I blame them. So many are sick or crippled. So many are hungry. My heart goes out to them and I try to help as much as I can without drawing attention to myself. There are too many for me to help them all. Br'thn feels my emotions and I try to calm her.

Be still my love. We are only passing through. I am trying to find some old friends.

I make my way back to the clinic where I used to work. It has been made into a health spa. There is fire coming from the kitchen and most of the windows are smashed. I make my way through the rubble to try and find someone I recognize. Anyone. There are only a few people left in the building. Mostly those too drunk from the bar's stash of liquor. When I get to the kitchen I find three trying to put out the flames. I duck behind a corner and concentrate. The flames reduce to the point where they can make progress. I notice the fire hose, locked to the wall. I remove the lock and then round the corner with a fire hose to help finish the deed.

"Thanks very much amigo."

"What happened? Why are you still here?"

"This is all we have known. Where would we go?"

"I am looking for some people who used to work here about six months ago. Maybe you knew them?"

"If we can help we will do so. Please what are their names?"

The second one states, "We can't help you with any of the pears. They all left when it became a spa. Only a few of us workers were retained. Most were let go when that Doctor was dismissed. It became a spa only a month later."

"I don't care about the pears. I am looking for a few friends. Edwardo and Manuel who worked in this kitchen, Julia and John who worked in the gardens, oh and Garcia. He was a janitor."

They look at each other, "We know of these people. You worked here too? I am sorry, they were all let go at the same time. A lot of people

were. We were lucky. I guess it was because we had just been hired a month earlier and did not know this doctor. Rumor was they laid off everyone who knew him." Explains why they don't recognize me now. Also a very nasty thing to do. It was not their fault. Bad enough what they did to me. Hate and fear run deep.

"If I remember right, there is food stored in a room just down the hall."

"It is locked sir. The riot people did not unlock every door."

"Let me try." I go to the door and using my talent easily unlock it. The latch has been damaged. Explains why their lock pick device did not work. Either they were hasty or someone else messed it up to prevent them from getting in. I bang on the door a few times in select places before opening it to hide what I did.

"Whoa. We have hit the jackpot amigos!" Inside are what look like the family jewels. My guess is that they hid them in here from the rioters. I am sure the saps spent most of their time on the safe and completely missed this because a storage locker was of lesser interest. Pears know how to use the net too dummies. As they have started hanging the pears, it is unlikely the owners will be returning. At least not soon. They never find everyone. Someone always escapes. Most of the time anyway. I don't have much sympathy for the victims though.

"Enjoy."

"Wait, please take some. You helped us, it is the least we can do."

"I have no need. You can't eat this and it will only slow you down." That does not stop them from diving in and at least going over what is hidden in this small room.

I am back to where I started. I need to find an active terminal. I was privy to information that was not common knowledge and of course my ability to scan inside a building does not hurt.

Br'thn, can you help? I need to find a way onto the net.

There is a nexus three blocks away on your right. Visualizing for you.

A three dimensional ghost image appears in my mind.

Yes, that should work. Thank you my love.

The nexus is on a lower level of a high priced hotel. Even the saps new tool could not move a door that massive with the power down. I know the power is only down for the upper part of the building and the door. Hmm, moving the door would compromise the last nexus in the area. So much easier to destroy than to build. I scan the immediate area. No one.

I check my collar and DS into the node room. Proximity alarms go off which I immediately silence. Of course someone up line will know. I

probably have lots of time though. No one will be showing up here for a long time. Surprisingly the terminal against the wall accepts my ID. Fear privilege I guess or the Guardian Barbara gave me one heck of an ID. Those workers back at the spa would not have been let in. It takes me awhile to find their full names and their current employer. Br'thn comes out of my robe to watch over my shoulder. The vids probably are seeing all this, but I am counting on no one seeing this tape for a long time.

Looks like all but Garcia were eventually hired at the Maxwell estate. Nice place. I remember going there a few years back as a thank you for helping a Peter Maxwell with post traumatic stress. Protectorate vet. Should be easy enough to find if it still exists. Long way to walk, so if I hurry I can get there before them. After the last riots only the most trusted saps had the implants necessary to drive anything.

Shit! Garcia won the lottery. How the heck did he get the money to sign up? Ah, the Savers paid the bill. I always distrusted that group. They have a lot of followers though. Nothing I can do about it now.

I find a map and then align my scanning to the map to find the estate. I DS into an empty room. I find myself in the main living room. No one here. I scan and find everyone downstairs hiding in the panic room. The rioters have not reached here yet. Fear does amazing things to people.

The outside of the room was hidden behind a wood inlay panel and tapestry. The door is locked of course. I could do my trick but that might be hard to explain. I scan back into town. Only takes me a moment to find one of the devices they are using to unlock everything. Once I have a search pattern I check around. There are hundreds floating around. Gee, and all the wielders have a tiny ape implant in their left ear lobes. Aimee taught us that one. Not that she had one. I grab one. Who are they going to tell?

"Now how does this thing work?" I look it over. Only one button. What the hey. I hold it up to the lock and press the one button. Nothing happens at first. I press it a few more times before the latch snaps back. I hear screaming on the inside.

Once a crack appears I yell into the room, "Don't be frightened. I will not harm you. Once the door opens further you will be able to see I am unarmed."

"Mommy, it is Doctor Roberts! The one who helped Daddy!"

"Come in Doctor and close the door, quickly."

"It would probably be more comfortable for you to come out. I am alone and there is no one outside of this home within miles. No one that I have seen anyway." I can't admit to them what I can really see.

"We heard they were coming. We saw the riots on the net before it went down. Emergency stations are still broadcasting warnings."

"Those are probably on automatic just saying whatever they were last set to. Besides, I have one of their devices and was able to open your vault with it. You are not safe here."

"Well, we might as well come out then." Five people, all pears come out. They probably were afraid of their own staff. Wonder where they are? Can't hurt to ask, "Ah, where are your staff?"

"You are kidding right? We let them go of course. They could have turned on us!" The woman, I think it is Peter's wife, is nearly hysterical.

"Didn't you ever think that they are more likely to do that by you not showing them even a minimal trust?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They can't be trusted and that's it." Their young daughter does not look so convinced.

"So Anikin, may I call you Anikin? What brings you here? We heard of your misfortune of course." In other words I may be one of them now. "May we help you in any way?" Don't hurt us please.

I hand the senior Maxwell the device, "You might as well have this. If you dress in a sap suit and carry one of these you may be able to pass. Oh, cut your hair off. That is a dead giveaway. You too Ms. Maxwell." She looks like she would rather die. Her choice.

I might as well get to the point, "I am trying to find a couple of your staff. Their names are Edwardo, Manual, Julia and John." They shake their heads that they don't remember them. I keep forgetting pears don't know sap names. For some reason Ed and Manual were listed as dishwashers on the net though they are excellent cooks. "Dishwashers and gardeners."

"So many have come and gone Anikin. Peter took a bunch to California with him."

"That's a pretty big place."

"Oh, he had some dream of restarting some marine station in the dead zone."

"The place Agent X cleared out a couple of counties?" It can't be, could it?

"That's it. Won't do you any good though. All flights are grounded until order is restored."

"Look, you could stay here, if you are willing to work." I see him eyeing my outfit, rough cotton fabric and what looks like an unfinished wooden staff.

"I will be leaving to continue my journey, no matter how long it takes. All of you need to face the fact that the reality that you knew is no longer and never will be again. At least not in your lifetimes. You can adapt or you can die. Walk away from this house, learn some skills or find yourself hanging from a tree like the others."

“No need to be rude Mr. Roberts.” She is not getting it. I just shake my head and leave the room.

There is a high probability that they will die soon.

I know Br'thn, I know. It is not our task to save everyone though. If they do survive they will be better, stronger and more useful to everyone. Let's hope they survive.

I hear the door close behind me. They probably only have a few weeks worth of food at the most. Most of the killing will have stopped by then at least. They may have a slim chance. With winter having started and no skills, it will be very hard.

My more immediate concern is how to get to California. He was right about flights being canceled. I have not sensed anything overhead since I got back from E3. A bit disconcerting to think of ones own world as E2. All the same it helps us keep track of where we are. Likely there will be no trains or anything else. I could be there in a seconds if I use DS. A trip that far is likely to be noticed by the sats above unless I am very careful. Will they be monitored? The Chinese ones will be if this has not spread to them. I need to make smaller hops and stay more hidden. The best place to hide is among naturally occurring psiotic hot spots. In most cases this means the newly formed UNA. I hope they make it this time. They deserve a second chance.

Smith & Jones! TP does not raise the kind of alarm that DS or TK would. Maybe they can help. They would be in Idaho with their families. It was not necessary to hide what was happening to them from their culture. It was a great honor to be selected for this journey. I try and orient my thoughts and visualize them.

Who did I find? Smith or Jones? They still both look alike to me, even if they are genetically distinct.

Doc, I am Smith. Jones is visiting our uncle further south.

You will do fine. I need some help. I need to get to California without raising an alarm.

Are you still in Ohio?

Yes, just outside Columbus.

Don't go south. Sauron has been spotted at Third Mesa. We don't know what his range is. Best if you go east and come around through Asia and then down from Alaska.

I don't want to spend that much time. How do you know Sauron is at the Third Mesa? Isn't that dangerous for Pushy Paws? Is she alright?

Slow down Doc. Didn't you get the briefing from OM?

No, when did that happen?

Yesterday during meditation.

Shit, I forgot. I was so caught up with trying to find my friends I

completely forgot.

Don't do that Doc. Pushy Paws has been captured by Sauron, but is fine. She will assist in distracting him. OM is keeping an eye on her. I can't imagine OM with an eye.

Doc you are drifting. Tran has gone north as it was felt he was too close and might be trapped next. If you mess this up and he gets Br'thn we are all doomed.

Sauron not get Br'thn!

Shh Br'thn. Small voice remember!

You best get out of there as fast as you can Doc now. Head northwest of your current location to the first spirit fire. That should be the Huron Potawatomi Nation. They will guide you to your next station. Good luck!

Thanks Smith. Say hello to Jones and give Mack a treat from me.

Will do. Soon he will be too heavy to fly. I think he already is, especially with the reduced oxygen in our world. Give him a few weeks to make more red blood cells.

Okay Br'thn, here we go. We work together to DS ourselves just outside a large meeting hall. It is starting to get dark which can work in our favor. There are people inside. A woman comes around the corner and sees me. Br'thn has hidden herself inside my robe again.

Startled she exclaims, "Who are you? You do not belong here."

"I mean no harm. I am on a spirit journey and need assistance." I bow to her while holding onto my staff. Smith, Jones and especially Pushy Paws tried to instill in us somewhat of a generalization of what to say. Still not fluid for me. I have aged myself to about seventy. Older people are more respected in Native American cultures, if they are not drunk at least, and are not as feared as in white culture. I should not be so hard on these people. Stereotypes are meant to be broken.

I do not come up from my bow till spoken to, "Come inside traveler." She opens the door for me. It is much warmer inside. As I walk down the isle all eyes are on us. Not used to this.

"Chief Silus, this one comes before us for assistance." She leaves me alone facing him. He looks me over. I am wearing my wizard robe of off white cotton with a hood. I reach up and remove the hood.

"What can we do for you traveler?" He is not sure of me.

"I seek a spirit road to New Shanghai, California."

"There are many roads, why do you ask about the spirit road and why come to us."

I take a deep breath, "Coyote pursues me."

Now he is really skeptical, "There are no coyotes around here any longer."

"Coyote with a capital C." I try and remain calm. I admit it, after

reading the Chronicles of Sauron, even I am afraid of him.

“What do you know of Coyote with a capital C?”

“Enough to be very afraid and not enough to be at peace.”

“Who is the one asking for our help?”

I pause and think hard on this question. How much do I say?

Br'thn, remain passive and quiet. I am going to place you on the staff. Bring forth light when I ask you to.

They are waiting. I nod to the chief and slowly remove Br'thn from my robe and place her on the staff. She sort of clicks into place, though the click is a psiotic one and is probably not heard by the others. Ah, oh, one old woman's eyes light up. She slowly stands and comes up to us.

She then addresses me, “Proceed.” She is at least a one, possibly a two to have perceived that. Hard to tell among naturals. Like Dorothy she will not follow the usual pattern.

“In the dialect of the Third Mesa Hopi Nation, I am a Powaqa. My name is not important. Only my journey.”

“Not many people speak the language of the Third Mesa Hopi any longer.” The Chief is starting to come around I think.

“Only one does. The Powaqa are learning from her.”

“I had heard that the last Hopi had died months ago.” The old woman says.

I sigh. *Br'thn, now if you please.*

She starts to glow. Of course many kinds of tech could do this. It starts out like a candle in color and then intensifies to an increasingly blue color, finally turning violet. Then she sends out beams of many colors each resting on a person in the group. All except the woman. With her she causes the light to bend around and envelope her in a golden glow. The glow then slowly fades, leaving the woman last. Br'thn has identified for me the psiotic level of everyone in the room. I wondered what she was doing.

I speak into the mind of the woman.

Honored one. The name of the last Hopi is Pushy Paws. As we speak she does battle with Coyote under Third Mesa. We honor her by taking the name of Powaqa or Wizard.

“Is it wise of you not to speak such things out loud. Come with me.”

We hear whispers of “What did he say?”

She stops and addresses the group, holding up her hand, “The fourth age is ending. Best get ready. The tribulations are upon us.” Yeah, that makes sense. She is smart to get to that understanding from what I have said.

Thank you Br'thn. You have been most helpful.

Together journey.

Yes, we journey together. The woman looks at Br'thn. I don't know if she heard Br'thn, or just wants to know more about the sphere.

As we leave others follow. They spread out to individual homes. The word will spread.

We walk to a small grove of trees.

She asks me, "Are we alone?" I nod yes. "Not all can be trusted, even among our people."

"Ignorance is not exclusively the fault of others."

"How may I help you two?" She does know.

"I should introduce you to my companion and the reason for my being. This is Br'thn." She glows for a moment. The woman bows.

"I am called simply the Old One, on account of the fact that I am older than the others and I follow the old ways as best I can." I bow to her in recognition and honor.

"I have not always been so wise and have made many mistakes."

"Then you have learned much." She smiles.

"We fear that Coyote may detect our travel method. We need to follow a safe spirit path to avoid detection."

"Traveling the spirit paths is not easy. Very few can go by this method."

"We are fewer than few."

"Then I must go with you to help you avoid detection."

"It is a very dangerous path. I could not risk someone so important to their people."

"We will leave at noon tomorrow. Coyote is a creature of the night and is most awake then." I suspect that he is always awake, as we are, but I say nothing. A few hours should not matter.

"As I already have all that I need, I will remain here in prayer and meditation until you arrive tomorrow." She nods and goes back to the village.

It is harder to check in with OM during the night, but I am an eight and Br'thn is with me. We set up a no see field around us. It would not stop a TK, but would prevent the casual person from waking in on us.

Welcome.

Thank you OM. Sorry I did not check in earlier.

You are right to precede west. Trouble is about to happen in the east. A new sickness is overtaking many. We are working to limit it. There is also an unknown. One has changed himself. We await more information before preceding.

Please say hello to Jesus and Dorothy for me.

I become aware of a clear sky with the sun overhead. The snow glistens around me. A small white rabbit noses up from a hole and then

goes back down.

“There you are. I thought I had come back to the right place, but my mind kept wondering.”

“I am sorry. We did that to avoid surprise.”

“I have brought food for our journey. All is prepared according to the old ways.”

“Then we have what we need. Please stand next to me and show us the way.”

“Please look into my mind as you have done before and I will guide you. The next stop is a long one. We visit the Oneida people. There is one I trust from the Wolf Clan. He is a pathfinder.”

She closes her eyes and instantly Br'thn and I see where she goes.

“We are there.” Startled she opens her eyes and looks about. Her mouth falls open.

She closes it, “This way.” She takes us to a small building off from the others and pounds on the door.

A young man opens the door and looks at the two of us.

“Old One. I am honored. Please come in.”

“There is no time. Take us to the sacred place now.” He is so young. Maybe he will lead us to the pathfinder. We proceed out of town along a dirt path that is overgrown with weeds covered with snow. I am noticing that as we proceed north on this journey the snow is deeper and colder.

Ken tells us, “A storm is on the way. We best hurry.” He picks up the pace. I look to the west. There are clouds approaching. I scan. Yes, this will be a big one. When we were on E3 we really never worried about weather as we were free to use our skills without worrying about detection. Well, except in training. What a pain. All the same I dampen my psiotic signature.

The Old One stops us, “Do what you just did to both of us as well.”

“Your presence does not show as greatly. I will do so though.”

“It is important that no one know. That is why we went straight to Ken's house and spoke to no others.” I nod.

Ken walks up to a snow drift and pokes his hand into the drift in a few places before pulling on a leather strap. A door of sorts opens up. It is just big enough for us to enter. Once inside I light a glow sphere on the staff. Br'thn is in my pocket. I trust no one with her except maybe a Guardian or fellow Powaga.

“Nothing modern is allowed here. Please put your light outside. I will light an oil lamp.”

“Ken, the light is not tech. It is part of the reason why we are here. The tribulations are starting.”

“You mean the riots. We have heard. No one comes near us. We are

safe.”

“It will get much worse before it gets better. We need your help to find a path. Then you need to go back to warn your people. Use the moccasin net, not tech, to spread the message.” He opens his mouth and looks at the two of us.

“It has come that far?” She nods to him.

“Here is where we need to go. We need to stay in the spirit shadows the entire time.”

“That could take weeks if not months. It would be better to wait till after the snows.”

“The cold will help hide us and there is no time.”

“You are really serious.”

“There is no time to explain. I have helped your family many times. It is now time to help us.”

“I will need my medicine pouch.” He fumbles around with his down jacket. Not exactly of the old ways, but I say nothing. Out of an inner pocket he pulls out an old leather pouch. “This was my great great grandfather's.” He empties the contents onto the ground and stares at them.

“There are two who would pursue you if they learn of your existence. One is called Coyote and the other is not yet fully formed. I cannot quite see the name. Ah, It is becoming clearer. Raven.”

“Angwusi” I whisper.

“He knows the old tongue.”

“That would make the other Ihu. A very dangerous pair.”

“Coyote in the old tongue. Yes. Ihu and Angwusi are very dangerous, especially if they get together. We will need help and much cunning to outfox them. Show me where you need to go.”

The Old One draws a map of North America and adds landmarks that I don't recognize. She notices me watching, “This is how we see our world. You need to learn this way if we are to survive. Here are the Hocak, here the Chippewa. Down south are the Mesquaque and Mocak.”

I interrupt, “There is a faster way if you allow me.”

“What does he mean?” She silences him. She closes her eyes and I look into her mind. I have to go much deeper this time. There is no resistance, so I proceed. I am faced with much sorrow. Of tribe fighting tribe. Greed, hate and delusion are old companions, even among these people. Soon a map of the northern and western United States emerges.

“Your turn Ken. He knows the map. Now we need to know the route.”

He nods and erases the partial map in the dust, “Please see my thoughts then.” He closes his eyes.

There is fear, "There is nothing I want from your mind other than the path. All else that is you will remain you." He nods, eyes still closed. Slowly he loosens up and I proceed. When I have the path I take the Old One with me and leave him in the wigwam with a whoosh of air to announce our departure.

At our next stop I tell Old One over the sound of a raging storm, "We can proceed quickly from here. We should not need to seek help or risk anyone else."

"Then I ask of you a favor. Return me to my home."

"That could be dangerous. Ihu and Angwusi."

"It could also throw them off if they think we are returning to my people. When they arrive they will find no one remaining. We will leave our towns, our modern ways and return to the wild. Scattered we will not be found. Can you make for me a spirit candle to carry? Something that will go out soon after I arrive? It will help attract their attention, but not so loud that they will seek it immediately."

I smile and then frown, "Thank you for your help Old One. May the Great Spirit guide you and your people to safety." I do as she requests and she is gone. Br'thn and I proceed to New Shanghai by way of a convoluted route that keeps us to the northern states and always in the shadow of the few remaining tribes where some still practice the old ways. In the meeting hall of the tribes I pass I leave a token, containing a coyote and a raven. It will help spread the word.

I walk the rest of the way from what is left of downtown. There is only one concentration of people and I head towards that. It has been a long time since I have been this close to the sea. The smell is wonderful. Much warmer here too. Only a trace of clouds in the sky and of course no snow.

"Hello stranger. What can I do for you?" I had seen him coming from some ways off, but since he was obviously trying to hide from me till now I pretended not to notice.

"Walk with me. I am going to see some friends."

"We do not see many friends out this far. May I ask who you seek?"

"Since I don't know you and you are armed that might put my friend at risk."

"But not you?" He smiles.

I smile back without looking at him and not straying from my path. "No not me."

He walks with me a bit, "You are an old man." I had reverted to my forty five look and still he calls me an old man. "And as you said, unarmed."

"I never said I was unarmed."

"The staff is not much of a threat compared to what I am carrying."

"What you are carrying is as useless as a blade of grass." I convert the knife to rubber and the e-gun to plastic, soft plastic. He slowly pulls the knife out to show me. It droops when he holds it up. He drops it in disgust.

"Clever trick old man." He goes for his e-gun next and notices that it weighs much less. He checks it out and throws it down too. He then gets in front of me and stops my progress.

"I don't know who you are, but I cannot let you proceed till we identify you and know you can be trusted."

"I told you I am here to see some friends." I DS from in front to behind him and continue. He is shocked at first then turns around and sees me.

"Last warning!" He yells as he attempts to tackle me. Might as well have tried to tackle a building. I enter the front gate with him hanging on whaling away to no effect. Shields are a wonderful thing. This is clearly not dignified, so I DS him outside the gate and close it. He has to climb over it to run after me. Tenacious isn't he? This time I use TK to keep him at a respectable distance.

A few are gathered in a sort of courtyard.

"Hi, what's for dinner?" Eating outside this time of year?

"Who let him in?" All eyes go to my companion.

"He is some kind of Houdini. Stole my knife and gun and did some funny trick to keep me off of him."

"Sure thing Jackal."

"Doc is that you?"

I turn around to see Peter. I smile and open my arms, "You are a hard person to find this time of year."

"How did you get here? I heard no plane." He looks concerned, "Wait. You are dead? They found your body in a ditch outside of New Columbus. I remember seeing it in the vids. Not that I am not happy to see you." He embraces me and pats me on the back.

"Long story." Then I see the others arriving carrying food.

Ed nearly drops the platter he is carrying. I adjust it with a small amount of TK and he recovers. He sets it down on one of the tables.

"Doc, you're alive!"

I nod, "Nice to see you Ed. Are the others here?"

"Manual will be here in a sec. Julia and John are just coming in behind you. Garcia. . ."

"I know about Garcia." He nods.

"Doc, how did you get here?"

"Why does everyone care about how I got here? Aren't you just

happy I'm here?" I turn to the food, "Do you guys just stare at this stuff or do you eat it?"

"We eat it!"

"Sit next to me Doc." Peter motions to sit next to him.

"If you won't tell us how you got here, then tell me why you are here?"

"I left New Columbus a few months ago in a bit of a mess. I am here to try and make things right for the people I hurt in my leaving."

"You mean the staff that were let go when you were dismissed?" I nod.

"As you can see they are fine. I heard what happened and figured I owed you one. Besides, Cook and Fish are the best cooks this group has ever had in their lives." He smiles. Just like old times. I bet everyone here has a special name.

"Judging from the fact that they look like they all came from your old command, that comes as no surprise." He smiles.

"Not entirely. Your four were never in the Protectorate of course. I also brought in one other. You will meet her later. I'll send her to your room. She is ah, interesting." He smiles. Sounds like trouble.

"Pilot are you going to eat that?" The person to his right is looking longingly at the roll on Peter's plate.

"Go ahead Tiger."

"You should call the one who attempted to keep me from here snake. He would not let go."

Tiger hears that, "Or maybe something more marine like Limpet. Cook does those up real nice. They stick to rocks real good."

"Rat is hardly tasty." The table all laughs, including the one we are all taking about.

"How did you get the name Pilot?"

"I took a little ride on a H pond cover hatch." I simulate an explosion with my hands. He nods then shrugs.

"Good name."

"We will need a name for you now Doc."

"Doc works doesn't it?" Thanks Manuel, er, Fish.

"I am not a doctor any more I afraid." Though in some ways I am even more of one now. I instinctively have been scanning everyone here for medical problems and then correcting them. Till I come to one person.

I am afraid that I am caught staring at her. Br'thn nudges me.

Br'thn. Have you seen someone like her before?

No experience with manipulated ones. Been in cave for long time.

Sorry, I forgot. The memories of her life flood back in.

She notices, as does everyone else.

"I was going to save her for later Doc, but you might as well meet the last member of our group. Doc this is Xue. Xue, this is Doc."

Then it clicks, "You are an entertainer?" She nods and smiles.

"How did you get here of all places?" Their services are incredibly expensive.

"Like an old shoe, I was discarded when I became too old." She is hardly old. Explains why she kept her name too. She continues, "When we reach twenty five we are considered past our prime. Pilot was nice enough to pick up my contact and then give it to me." She fishes a small flat out of her pocket and holds it up.

"So you are free to go any time you want?"

"And share with anyone I want." The rest of the group is smiling now. Ah. So that was the idea. I nod to her. Subject closed for the moment or so I thought. "I am learning how to cook." Ed and Manuel nearly die and are red as beets. I cannot help but laugh. The rest join in. They shrug and laugh too. A good group.

When the meal is done, and it is good, Cook and Fish have not lost anything, I take a walk to the seawall and rest my arms on it looking at the sea. Then it hits me! This is the place that Yingui was at. This is right out of the journals. This is the seawall that the Guardian Barb came to and nearly went in and drowned.

"What's up Doc? You look like you have seen a ghost."

"This place reminds me of some books I read once."

"The Guardians of Br'thn by any chance?"

"How?" I am totally taken back.

"There was a printed copy of them in his room."

"His?"

"Yingui's room. Ed and Manuel shared the room when they first arrived. Now it is sort of a shrine. We have all read all four volumes." I swallow. I am in the fourth volume.

"Yes, we have even read the part about you. Imagine you a TK." He makes quote marks with his hands and laughs. "It kills time and gives us another world to live in other than this one. You have heard that the riots have started again?" I nod.

"So Doc, why are you wearing that strange robe and carrying that strange staff." He is serious now.

"I, ah, as you know from the journals, I was the one that treated Yingui, or whoever he was. When I lost my position I decided that, just for fun mind you, that I would assume this persona. It really does not matter what a sap wears anyway."

"And you came here why?"

"Sort of a holy pilgrimage. The journals represent more than

anything, a chance. A chance that maybe somehow we can get beyond all the problems that we face. Here," I wave my hands around, "represents the center of that hope."

"I came here to start up the marine lab again. Not as it was the last fifteen years, but how it was before. Did you know there has been a lab here since nineteen seventeen. Come with me, I want to show you something. We found it over a month ago."

He takes me into one of the buildings and up some stairs. We go into a room where there are several beds laid out. Nice view from the windows. "Over here." We move to what looks like a wooden suitcase. "We found this behind the walls of one of the buildings. It is a time capsule of some sorts."

He opens it up and sorts through the stuff. That beer bottle looks more modern than 1917. "It was placed here in 2005, twenty one years ago. The plaque said not to open till 2105, but we could not resist. Take a look at this image." He holds one up. A group of people standing on some steps. "See this guy here?" He points to one of the people. He looks familiar. I know that face. He flips the picture over and on the back is an outline version with names associated with them. I find the outline of the face and trace back the number to the name, William Patterson. Yingui! A younger Yingui at least.

"So, he was not lying about that part at least." Peter nods.

"There are no images from more recent times. We also found this other book. It was above the fireplace in what used to be the library we think." He holds up a copy of the Chronicles of Sauron.

"Looks brand new."

He nods, "That is the weird part. It is obvious that the wall was up for at least thirty years. No sign of any damage or repair. How did a brand new book get into the wall?"

"Someone obviously DSd it there." I smile. Not sure I am convincing.

"Pilot, we have company." I don't know everyone's names yet.

"Lights out. You know what to do." He turns to me and says, "Stay here. We have been seeing APE patrols recently. This is the closest they have come. Probably attracted to the lights. If they get this far DS yourself out of harms way." He smiles just as the lights go out all over the compound.

"I'll come with you just the same. I have learned a few things that might help in the last six months." He nods and turns on a small read light. I follow him down the stairs. There have been just too many coincidences.

When we get out to the front gate area Tiger addresses Peter,

"Captain. Jackal has spotted a patrol of five a half click out and moving in this direction. They clearly know where we are. This is not a search pattern. They are not stopping at any of the honey pots. And they are armed with old style ballistics." Honey pots?

"Messy. Let's get ready to put on our show." He turns around and sees me next to him. "You might want to get back further Doc." He turns to the rest, "All non combatants get back to the main building and wait there." He hand signals his people and they disperse behind several buildings.

"I'll stay here." I could do this from a state away, but I want to know what it is like up front and personal. I am watching everyone's blood chemistry. The non-coms are scared shitless as they say. The rest are not. They have clearly seen action before or are confident of their defenses.

"Here they come." In visible light we can see shadows moving towards us down the only road. They stay to the sides and shadows as much as they can. The moon is just now coming up and is behind them. Just as a precaution I disable their weapons.

"Back gate behind the pump house. Fifty meters." Peter motions everyone down. They flip up tac units over their eyes. They are prepared. Where did those come from? I scan them. They are fully loaded. The amount of tech each is carrying is amazing. I have never seen stuff like this. Wait, the journals. Lake Tahoe. I scan the buildings. On top are sort of mini hangers with those flying things described in the journals. They could fight an all out invasion here if necessary. This exercise is very minor.

"Silence." I think this was said for my benefit. I want to ask so badly. The other side is not so well equipped at all. How are they seeing in the dark? Guns are raised to the ready. I can't let them kill these people. I disable our weapons too. I close my eyes. Any possibility that my cover would stay intact is quickly disappearing.

Peter stands up and does something. All the lights come back on. Their equipment can handle the sudden change, but the intruders are blinded. It is very easy for the rest to come out of the shadows, knock them down and tie them up. No one is hurt seriously.

"How did they see in the dark?" Tiger goes up to one and points at his eyes.

"Contacts. How archaic."

"More than than that. Light amps. They can see practically in the dark. Pears use them to hunt." He says that like it is a dirty word. They it sinks in. They hunt people. "The problem is, is that they don't react as fast as the old style. Not a problem in the field, but when the other side knows your weakness. . ."

They line the five up against the gate.

"I think you understand now that we will not be so intimidated by your tactics. Go home and nobody gets hurt." He undoes the tie wraps one at a time.

"You are the ones who don't understand. The old order is gone. You are free from your pear oppressors. The country is ours. You can kick us out but tomorrow there will be a hundred and the day after a thousand. This is prime land for farming. Our land now. Never again will you oppress us."

"Look around monkeys. Do you see any pears here? We have already liberated this spot. It is ours now and no APES are going to take it away from us." This is strange coming from Peter, but I play along. He has thrown off his pear history same as I have. "Now if you are hungry we have enough food left over to feed you before you leave. You really don't want to miss this chance. We aim to make this the finest eating establishment on the west coast of. . . Ah, what are you calling this new country anyway?"

They relax somewhat, "They are still arguing that point. I like Freedom. Simple and to the point. I have heard the original inhabitants want to call it the UNA for United Native Americans. Too close to USA for me. Anyone born here qualifies. Don't have to be Indian. Of course you have to be alive to qualify. Pears are becoming an endangered species." He smiles.

Another one speaks up. Glad to see they allow that, "I like No More or Never Again. If its in your name it becomes harder to forget. We have a way of forgetting. Freedom from Europe and then two hundred years later we end up with the most oppressive culture in the history of humankind." Got that right.

"Well, whatever is decided you are still welcome to come and visit. Just leave the pop guns at home. We will defend ourselves and the pears left a lot of toys we know how to use. Four tours in the Protectorate have given us a lot of practice." They look suitably shocked. Of course they don't know that everyone here is not part of that group.

They are carefully observed while they eat. We stuff them good. Even I help serve. Their own stocks may not be that secure or plentiful. They all waddle out when they are done.

"They will be back. What do we do now?"

"They will be back to get a good meal, but not to kill us. That is a huge improvement in my book. Looks like Fish and Cook have more work cut out for them. I really liked the idea of a marine station, but a seafood restaurant is not a bad idea either. What does everyone think?"

"You're the Captain." Tiger does not seem to care.

"Hey, my weapon is empty. Zero charge."

"Smooth move camel dung."

"Check yours. I know I loaded mine." He does so and finds it empty too.

Peter comes up to me, "We really were not going to kill them. These things just stun them, not kill. Believe me if we had wanted to kill them we would not have waited for them to reach the back gate."

"What are you talking about Pilot? He really is unarmed. I scanned him myself. Got some spherical thing in his pocket, but it does not read as an explosive. Watch him though, he is quick. Could be his hands are a deadly weapon." I hold up my hands. They are calloused just the same as any sap. Malak made real sure of that. No cheating.

"What's in your pocket Doc?" This is not a joke. I slowly reach in and pull out Br'thn. She knows to play dead. We worked this out during the games. The others had to pretend they did not know of course.

"Just a keepsake. A paperweight from my office. Only thing left of my former life."

"How do you prevent it from rolling off a desk Doc? How did you move quicker than Tiger can see? How did you disable everyone's weapons? How did you get here Doc?" They are all staring at me.

"Sit please. No really. I mean it. Sit."

They all find a seat and wait. They are expecting some kind of fascinating lie I am sure.

When everyone is quiet I begin, "Those books you all read." They nod. "They are real. I am a TK. Level eight now. I know I was only a two at the end of the books. A lot has happened in the last six months. I got here by dimensional shifting, DS, just like in the books. I disabled the weapons with TK and this sphere is Br'thn." I toss her into the air for good measure and she comes back to my hand like any glass ball would.

"Right. We want a longer story Doc. I can't get to sleep on something that short." Ed and Manuel relax. They were the ones I was closest to at the clinic. They were really worried it was all real.

"Doc, let's take a walk. Everyone else, we got work to do tomorrow. Get some shut eye. I have midnight watch, who has first watch?" Two grunt an affirmative and take off in opposite directions. Everyone else slowly makes their way to the sleeping areas.

We walk back to the seawall and then down to the beach. Low tide I am guessing. It was hitting the wall earlier. The surf is barely crashing but will provide some cover.

"You told the truth back there didn't you?"

I sigh, "Yes. Hard not to. Occupational hazard. I have watched people tell lies for so long. Our culture, or rather our former culture, was

one big lie. I have vowed never again, if I can help it."

"But you are not against stretching it some."

"What would everyone here think if they knew? Even you have doubts." He nods.

"Br'thn please meet Peter Maxwell, the leader of this group. It's okay, come on out." She DSs into the space between us. I touch her to reassure her. She purrs a little. There is enough light spill from the buildings behind us for him to see.

Peter is the one you helped in the clinic. Peter is a good person?

"Yes, Br'thn. Peter is a good person. We can trust him."

"She talks just like in the journals." I nod. "May I touch her?"

"Don't ask me, ask her."

"Right she is. I mean, Br'thn you are sentient. May I touch you?" Before he can move she has pushed herself up against his outstretched hand and is rubbing against it. My hands are down at my side. "She's cold."

"She has no reason not to be room temperature. She can exist at almost any temperature with some short conditioning. Anything on our planet no sweat. Solar interiors take some effort."

"Shit."

"Yeah, not much can hurt a 'thn."

"Except a limiter field." He really did read them.

"She can break those now too. One of the others learned how and she caught on almost instantly. We can all do it now, some better than others." Don't give me one of those multiothered ones that Aimee or Dorothy can hack please though.

"Let's get some rest. Of course you two don't need any do you?"

"No, we'll just stay our here and watch the ocean. A lot to think about."

"Your friends are safe here Doc. Do what you need to do. I read those books first. Now that I know they are real, I know what you face and how important it is to everyone."

"Thanks Peter. Thanks for everything." He smiles and turns to go. I watch him in my mind. He goes up to the upstairs to the upper bedroom. He beds down on a mattress on the floor just like everyone else. No favorites here. It is weird, he never asked about his wife and kid. He accepts that they made their own decision as well.

Five minutes later Xue shows up.

"Sorry to interrupt. Peter said you could help me."

"When did he tell you this Xue?"

"When you first showed up this afternoon." He suspected even then. Well, I am certainly no good at this game.

"He did not say how, only that you could. Will it be painful?"

"What is it you need Xue?"

"I want to be normal. I want to be human."

"You were genetically engineered to become an entertainer."

"Yes. I also have other enhancements." She removes her shirt, then her pants. Soon she is naked before me. "I can see in the dark without contacts. That makes it easier in the bedroom to work around the clients. By the way you look at me I can tell you are also enhanced in this way. Many pears are." Only mine are not genetic exactly. "However you are not enhanced in the location most pear males are."

"I have no need. I have no sexual desire at all." Haven't for a very long time.

"Then this will be easier. You will not expect to be rewarded. Do you need any special tools? How soon can you do it?"

I envelope her in a shield to keep her warm. "Tell me exactly what you want. I understand the genetics part. Do you want to lose your extra sight? It is a very useful trait in the wild and seeing as how things are likely to be in the near future, I would recommend keeping it."

"My eyes are not a visible trait. These are however." At a thought her breasts expand from barely there to full size. Her hips widen, her lips puff out. "This is my vixen mode. Normally I stay in my little boy mode so as to not draw attention to myself. Everyone here has seen me in the nude with no chest. They accept me as I am. No one asks for the vixen mode. Many Asians who cannot afford enhancements look this way and I am not seen as abnormal. Even sex is better for me when people do not care, but only want to be with me."

"That is generally true. So what is the problem? You obviously have control over your body. Why bother?"

"Because I was made this way against my will. I had no choice. I was made and designed to be used by others. I want to be normal." Be careful what you ask for.

"If I do this for you, how many others will come here tonight asking for favors?"

"Peter rescued me from my former life. This is all that remains of it. I know nothing of the others, but I do know that none of them have been carved up and changed the way I have been. No one." Don't be so sure.

"Did you know that Ed has cancer? I give him only six months. Tiger lost all feeling in his left hand because of a war injury. Even Peter has so many scars he looks like a scarecrow. And there are others. No one here is 'normal' as you are defining it."

"I did not now about Ed. I wondered why he always ate so much turmeric."

"Poor mans chemo. When did he start?"

"Just after he got here. Our medic can't cure everything. If we break our necks he says we only have a fifty fifty chance."

"I am surprised he did not tell Peter."

"We all try to keep that to a minimum. He already does so much for us. If medic could not do it, it means it would be really expensive. That is why I am here. I am sure if I asked, he would send me back to China for treatments. Of course I have lost my chance now. I just couldn't though. You are right. I do have control and it really is just a small thing. I should not have come. I am sorry."

"Xue. It is done. Tell no one." I did Ed and Tiger earlier. Peter can keep his scars. He has earned them, as James or Q would say.

She feels herself and looks down. She is back to her poor Asian self again. Nothing poor in my mind. She is beautiful, as is everyone. She concentrates and nothing happens. A big smile comes across her face. She reaches over and gives me a big hug.

"One more thing. You can get pregnant now as well. Don't worry, your children will be normal. Now get dressed or you will become one giant goose bump and die of exposure. " She feels her belly, then gets dressed and runs back to the dorms. I hope Ed and Manuel are happy with the change and don't mind being fathers. They won't care if I know them well enough. I am such a sap. I send a mental thought to Ed that he should get a new checkup in the morning. He will turn yellow for no good reason otherwise.

Well my love, we are alone again.

What is normal?

I don't know Br'thn. I don't know. I guess we are really only normal when we can accept ourselves the way we are. Until then, normal is just a hope, a wish, a dream.

Br'thn normal. This is a statement, not a question. Interesting.

New London Times Net

Fighting has renewed in the Middle East. Iranian troops have advanced to border locations on the Iraq Protectorate border. The Iraq council of Three is working on a response, but the Shiite wants to welcome the Iranians and avoid bloodshed. The Kurdish leader says they wish to keep Iraq for the Iraqis, but are open to some kind of power sharing as long as their autonomy is preserved. The Suni of course are vehemently opposed. Syria has threatened Israel again and this time Israel is listening. North Korea has invaded South Korea, but is bogged down by harsh winter conditions and is not expected to get very far. Cuba has threatened to invade Florida if Florida does not ship more food south. Little credence has been given to the possibility. Cuba has lost most of its strength following the death of Fidel Castro two years ago.

At the United Nations, the United States has been voted off the security council and bankruptcy proceedings have begun with China expected to be the likely winner, as it owns 73.2% of the outstanding debt. It is thought that the latest round of riots were to blame for the final downfall of what was once the strongest nation in the world. Of course, that was some time ago. World markets fell a half percentage point in response.

Samarra, Iraq

The mosque is quiet between times of prayer. Only a few old men in contemplation are present. I remove my sandals and wash my feet as prescribed. The beard itches, but it is the only way for me to make this appointment. I don't know how men can stand it. I adjust my cap and go through the necessary prayers and ritual to enter the main hall. The words fall off my tongue easily from practice as a child. Of course then I was on the women's side wearing a veil. The veil is no longer necessary in public, though many still do, but here inside the Abu Duluf Mosque it will always be necessary. I chose here instead of the Great Mosque as it is usually quieter.

I scan the building out of instinct and notice activity near the far wall on the outside. Stupid. Someone is attempting to place explosives there. The detonator is hidden in the first sack, the other sacks on top will add to the explosion. If you have to blow up something, pick one of the modern buildings, but not historical and sacred places. I disable the material. Should make a good fertilizer now. They will try again either here or someplace else.

A man wearing army fatigues kneels next to me and starts his prayers. In another thirty minutes this place will be full. That must be when they intended to set it off. Maximum carnage as usual. Nothing has changed since I left. I can see that the Armstrong unit in Baghdad is fully functional now. They sure got that going in a hurry. Sounds like it is just in time. We all heard of the new riots in the USA. The news this morning of the nation being held in bankruptcy is what scares me. There are a lot of service men and women over here suddenly without a country and the protection that affords. Whereas before the locals would pick off a few here and there, now it will be open season while they try and take back their country in earnest. Each wanting their group to be the winner of course.

Three more enter. I scan them. They are heavily armed. What happened to the metal detectors? Ah, they have paid off the security guard, probably with his life. Get out or die now. Not much of a choice. They position themselves near the entrance, but hidden from anyone entering. Normally one does not turn around when entering a holy place. They will go unnoticed, thus preventing anyone from escaping when the blast goes off. Only now of course it won't.

“Allah u Akbar, Allah u Akbar” The call to prayer begins. I can't leave now without bringing shame on myself.

The mosque fills quickly and soon the entire place is filled with the sound of each person chanting at their own rate and speed. As I complete my prayers I can't help but notice that our guards are getting nervous. Their precious bomb has not gone off. I finish my prayers and stand to go out. On my way out I whisper to one of them, “Praise Allah. Your weapon is useless.” This would have had much more of an impact if I was a woman of course, but the effect is similar. They raise their weapons to fire and nothing happens. They are seen by the others now and a near riot breaks out. Others quickly tackle the three and drag them out into the courtyard.

“How dare you profane the Holy Mosque!”

“Stone them!” Justice is quick in these times of tribulation.

I notice the man in fatigues alongside of me.

“Malak is that you?” I let my hood fall to reveal my face. “You look good with a beard. I always suspected you were really a man.”

“Major Bradford, when did you give up being a pagan? Your prayers were excellent.” One mistake brings shame.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Trouble is coming Colonel.”

I raise my finger to my lips, “I am free, bought and paid for.”

“So are we. We all received our orders this morning. You can call me Akmed from now on. Come with me, I will take you to the others.”

"Akmed, why the fatigues? You don't exactly blend in."

"A few of us have not had a chance to go shopping yet. You know the locals better than I do, what would you recommend?"

"CostCo of course. All the fashionable Muslims shop there."

"Which ones? I don't want to end up on the wrong side."

"There is a right side? Everyone is a target now."

"I see you went with a simple robe. What's with the staff?"

"You did not expect me to be completely defenseless?"

"Ah, so what's inside? Tech, high velocity nanos, or explosives?"

"Psiotics." Let him wonder about that one.

He thinks about it for a moment, "So, like you can read people's emotions. That could be real useful. Might even work to find the fanatics faster than the normal method." I will have to remember that answer. Could provide good cover.

"You mean after the fact? Fanatic confetti?" I smile and he laughs. We have both seen a lot. We make our way down back streets. We are being watched. They want to check us out before we enter. I am being scanned by multiple tech devices, but I already know that even the staff will show nothing.

When we get to a door that opens we are both let in.

Akmed comments, "I thought you said the staff was psiotics? Nothing shows up on you. Not even a knife. Are you crazy?"

"Am I? Anyone want to take me on? I certainly would not want to be seen as a liability." I open my arms to them. Then I reach over and pull my beard off and toss it to them.

"Akmed, you have brought us a woman. And an ugly one at that. Go back to the market and find us something useful." The others laugh.

"Her name is Malak. Colonel Malak to some of you. Maybe you remember? Or do all of you have Alzheimer's and can't remember back even a year?"

"Malak went to some Indian reservation to live a simple life. No one sane comes back here."

"I'm back. They have no McFalafels there." More laughs. McFalafels is horrible. Only the most desperate eat their food. Oh, and army grunts who don't know any better. I mean, who would put ketchup on a falafel that tastes like camel dung.

"Listen up. She stopped an explosion at the mosque today and fingered three door jacks." Akmed turns around to see who said that. Even I am curious how they would know. A small boy stands before us.

"I was there. I saw. He, I mean she, pardon miss. She whispered in their ears. They brought forth their weapons to slay her and she walked out like they no longer existed. The men seeing this descended upon them

and killed them. Later we found the explosives against the far wall. Their detonator had failed to go off. We found the trigger on one of the door jacks. If she had not helped raise the alarm, hundreds would have died."

Akmed comes up to me and takes the staff from me, "How does it work? Where can we get more?"

"What is it Akmed?"

"A psiotic reader. It can tell when someone is about to do something against us."

"Not quite that simple." I take the staff back, "And it only works for me. To anyone else this is just a stick." I pray to Allah that Sauron stays in Hotevilla.

"That's armed enough for me. What do you say, let her in or not?"

I am let in.

"Welcome Malak. Now let's get to work. We need provisions most of all. And weapons. They let us go with nothing. Just walked us out the front gate and said goodbye."

"Who? Where are these cowards?" I pull a pile of gold coins from my pocket and set them down on the table. Someone else scoops them up and leaves the room.

"Know anything about the Armstrong Unit?"

"Some." I am reluctant to divulge what I know.

"They took everything into their hole and shut up tight. Said there was not enough time to get provisions for themselves."

"Cowards indeed. You know about the Iranian army?" He nods and frowns.

"What do you think their real objective is?"

"Same as every Muslim country and terrorist organization on the planet."

We say together, "Eliminate Israel."

"Would explain why the Armstrong Unit bubbled. Going to get hot here soon."

"Yeah, real hot. How many nucs you think the Israelis have?"

"No one has ever lived to tell. Why the land troops?"

"They would prefer to occupy Jerusalem, but if they can't no one can." Problem is that this could escalate in a minute or take years to play out.

Someone rushes in shouting, "We got company. Scatter and regroup at beta site." All hell breaks loose and concealed weapons are brought forth. I am handed an AK47 which I hand back. I grab a sack of supplies instead and follow Akmed out.

"Can you play the part of a woman?" I nod. "You make one hell of a wife, but it might work."

“An old couple will attract less notice. I will stoop a little and walk slowly. I can be your mother.”

“Good idea, helps explain the staff.” We go out one door as armed men enter another. Even as his mother I am the one carrying the heavy load. Allah forbid that a man should help his mother. The attacking force comes out the same door we did and rushes past us, nearly knocking us down. We stand aside as best we can and let them pass. Soon it is quiet again and people go about their business.

“What was that all about?”

“Local thugs. We will have to move on a regular basis for awhile.”

“Until someone starts to trust you.”

“That would take generations. If you aren't related, you are the enemy. Too bad you aren't pretty and younger, we could marry you off.” I smile.

“There are women in your group.”

“Would you want to marry an Arab man? I would not ask anyone to do that, not even you.”

“I was born to this culture. But you are right, once you taste freedom, it is hard to go back to slavery.”

“I had forgotten. Afghanistan right?”

“During the time of the Taliban. It was hard on my parents.”

“Yes, I would imagine you gave them a lot of trouble.” I laugh. It is easier on us because of our skin color. It will not be so easy on those with blond hair and blue eyes. Even being a slave is better than being horribly murdered. Anger and hatred run deep.

“Here we are. Not much.” Looks like it was used for target practice not too long ago. A rug has been placed over the space where a door once stood. The boy we saw earlier is already there unpacking hot food.

I introduce myself, “I am Malak. Yes, I know the name does not match my appearance.”

“You are beautiful to me if you keep helping us. I am called Nafi'.” Useful. Fits.

“Where did you get all the food so fast?”

“My uncle.”

“He always says that. Kid must be related to everyone in Samarra.” I smile.

“Here come the others.” People start piling in. Security is lax. I am guessing everyone knows everyone else. Anyone new would be shot. As they come in they see the food and help themselves. I go over to see what is there. Fresh pita bread. Falafel nuggets, tabuli salad, olives, feta cheese. Not exactly Iraqi, but edible. Oh, zatta! I go straight for that.

“Uncle says it is from Jordan.” Nafi' notices my delight. “You like? I

get you more.”

“I am too old to be your girl friend Nafi'.”

“Too bad. I show you a real good time.” From a fourteen year old this is funny. Sort of. He is probably serious though. I will have to be careful not to break his heart.

“Gather around.” Major Akmed seems to be in charge. At least he is wearing a robe now instead of army fatigues. The table is cleared off and he unrolls a map. Others weight the corner.

“This map is old, but will serve the purpose. Colonel Malak you wish to assume command?” He steps aside.

“My intel is six months out of date. I think it would be better if I served as an observer and adviser. He nods and goes back to the table.

“Here is what we know. The Iranians have crossed the border here, here and here and are heading straight for Baghdad. We are not in their immediate path, but are likely to be a secondary target because of the historical significance of Samarra itself. I think we should lay in as many supplies as possible at the same time be as mobile as possible. We need transportation real bad. Something we can afford to refill would be nice. Thanks to Malak we were able to purchase a used van with good tires and a full tank of gas. We could probably get six people and supplies in there if we cram it tight. Others will be looking for the same things we are, so be careful.” A lot of thieves and scammers in other words.

“We have seventeen in this group, so that means at least two more vehicles.”

“Or a bus.”

“Too big a target and not maneuverable enough. Keep it small. We can split up if necessary.”

“What about the Saudis?”

“What about them? If you have info spit it out.”

“I heard a rumor, only a rumor, that they are all headed for Tabuk.”

“Tabuk? Why Tabuk?”

“Shit, draw a straight line Major. Look if the Iranians are moving from Tehran to Baghdad and the Saudis are moving from Riyadh to Tabuk, if you extend those lines look were they go.” Straight to Israel. “The Holy Jihad has started!”

“Our best strategy then is to get the hell out of here. As far north as we can get as fast as we can get.”

“The mountains. Karkuk. The Kurds should be friendlier anyway.”

I step forward, “I second that motion. You asked earlier how many nucs the Israelis had. I used to work in the Armstrong Units. Even been in the one in Baghdad. Reliable intelligence says they have hundreds. Largely supplied by the USA and funded by Christian fundamentalist

groups loyal to Israel. Insurance against Armageddon.” Actually I know that from scans, not direct intel, though I had heard rumors also.

“How many do the Arabs have? No offense against anyone here.”

“Iran has maybe ten now. Syria two, Jordan none, the Saudis five, Egypt one and Libya two. Those those two are more like dirty bombs than anything nasty.”

“That is a still a five to one advantage to the Israelis.”

“But they are a much smaller target. A hundred spread out over all those countries is not going to do anywhere near the damage of even half coming back at it.”

“Sorry, I forgot, there is also small one under the Armstrong Units. Probably under each of them. Really only takes out the unit if compromised, but if someone could remove it and place it elsewhere it might be a problem.”

“Karkuk is cold this time of year and cold sounds real good right now. Are we all in agreement? Karkuk it is. Lets see if we can do this by oh five hundred.”

I sigh and pull another stack of coins out of my pocket, “The last of my pension. Won't need it if we don't get out of this, so what the hell.” I place it on the table. Of course I just made it.

“I scanned you personally and that was not there when you were at Alpha site. When did you pick it up?”

“Major, I can't tell you all my secrets. I am a lady.” I smile and the others swoon and laugh. “Do you want it or not?” I make like I am going to take it back. Nafi' grabs it before either of us can reach it.

“I know someone who can help. I will get two more vans.” He starts to dart out the door.

“With gas Nafi', with gas!” He is gone.

“Mahdi and Saqr, you two look for food. Jul and Zaki, weapons. Take what is left of our cash. We won't need it as Malak says, if we can't get out of here.”

He looks at me, “You know where any more of these secret caches of yours are?”

I smile demurely, “Only if you are nice Major, real nice.” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Okay, everyone else pack what we have. As soon as Nafi' comes back we pack everything into the vehicles. Let's hop people.” He claps his hands and everyone jumps up at once, a few knocking into others before sorting it out.

When the others have left, Akmed comes up to me, “Why did you come back Malak? You could have avoided this whole thing. You certainly knew enough to play it smart.”

“We don't leave anyone behind Major. Does our loyalty end when the uniform comes off?” He smiles.

“Good to have you here Malak. I still think you will regret it.”

I nod and sit down on the floor. I already do. I have one hell of a decision to make. If I were to call in the others, especially Doc and Br'thn, we could neutralize those nucs before they could be used. How much do we interfere? It is one thing to rescue a few comrades, quite another to change history. If we did the nucs, there would still be war and likely nearly as many people would die, though a lot slower. There are not enough of us Powaqa to prevent that, unless we were willing to kill as well. Not something I could do I think. First Israel would be taken out, then they would fall on each other as they have always done. Alliances have already been forged I am sure. They think taking Israel without the USA to back them will be easy. Never been that smart about emotional issues like that. The main reason we never rose above oil merchants. First olive oil and now petroleum. Same difference. We could sell you your own shirt and then stab you in the back, but work with you hand in hand? Never happen. Not as long as there was profit visible.

United Nations Net

China has unanimously been awarded the USA reconstruction contract. Advisers are on their way to the capitol now. The plan calls for a fifteen year engagement of undoing the social inequities and a rebuilding of the infrastructure to insure that all citizens are treated equally. Radical groups that have branched off from the APES have vowed to fight to the death if a single Chinese person sets foot in the country. Being heavily outnumbered and largely unarmed this is seen as a paper threat. Costs for this effort will be offset by farm produce that China desperately needs. China was already the largest purchaser of US produce and this is not seen as a threat to world markets. Any surplus produce will be shipped to the third world as a goodwill gesture. A win win situation.

Qingzhou City, China

“Well Gui Mao [ghost cat], should we proceed to the market first to see to your supper? I would imagine that lizards have gotten pretty old. How about some fresh fish?”

That would be proper for a royal cat of my standing.

“You could walk you know your highness.”

I could pop you know. He gives me a dirty look. I just got here and he wants to set off a riot.

“Fine, I’ll carry you.” I apply a minimum of TK to assist. He is F.A.T.

I heard that.

Maybe I would have been better off with Bai Long. I give him a dirty look and he looks away like I don’t exist. Fine by me. Talk about a riot. If I had brought Bai here it would have been pandemonium. Everyone would have wanted one.

As we proceed to the market I am reminded of my time here not so long ago. Hard to believe it has only been six months. A nice city, which is why I chose to set up here in the first place. The streets are clean and is not as crowded as other cities its size. Of course spending summer vacations here exploring the Buddhist temples and walking the mountain paths were a large factor. The forests are now being replanted, but the trees are still shorter than I remember from forty years ago. I was so sad when I heard they were cutting them down. One good thing about the carbon tax, it encourages people to plant more trees. Though I have to admit, these trees look strange after getting used to the ones in Dragon

Land.

I pass a couple of seafood shops and walk into the one that looks the cleanest.

Not that one. Not fresh. He looks like he has a bug up his nose. Pretty bad. Maybe I should bring a cat along any time I go shopping.

Of course you should stupid monkey with a stone for a nose.

I laugh at the image, "Okay, I will walk down the street and you tell me which one you want."

I get all the way down to the end and he has not said anything.

"That's all there is."

Go back.

I go back the way I came and the shop next to the first one I went in he chooses.

"You know you could have told me that."

Might have been a better one. Sure.

The shop owner sees me and sees me carrying Gui Mao.

"No cats! Cat stay outside."

Ask him who is that under the counter then.

I bend down and come face to face with a cutie. Very puffy. A young female. Doubt she is more than a year old.

"What is your cat's name? She is very beautiful." He is surprised and looks under the counter himself and scoops her up.

"You are not supposed to be seen by the customers. Bad kitty." He looks at us, "Okay, cat can stay. What do you want?"

"Me, nothing. It is he who wants a meal. I will just take a look at what you have."

"All fresh. All good. Best is over here." He draws me to what looks like Pacific Salmon at over fifty yuan a kilogram. Just my luck Gui would want that. I have not checked my bank account yet.

No good. Several days old. Go that way. He indicates with his nose.

Near the end of the counter he meows out loud. Before me are these pathetically small fish. Could not be more than two centimeters long each.

"Are you sure?"

Yes, very fresh. Smaller is better too.

"I'll have half a kilo of the xiao yu."

More!

"Excuse me, make that two kilos." Then I hold a hand to signal one kilo. He can't read hand signals and if I am careful he won't read my mind. A kilo is still a lot and had better be enough, even if they are the cheapest thing here.

"No salmon? Very good. . . ." He waits expectantly, hoping I will

change my mind.

"He says it is several days old." His eyes light up. Gui was right. I smile. I finish up and pay off my bill.

Once outside of course I hear, *Put down the fish now!* This said both by TP and oral yeowl.

"Okay, okay. How about just around the corner. Don't want to be in anyone's way." I set him down and open the package. He starts wolfing the fish down barely chewing. Disgusting.

He looks up at me, *You ruin perfectly good scratching posts to eat your food, when you already have all the equipment you need. Such a waste.* He goes back to eating. There is no way he is going to finish this all in one go. Ah, the cutie is watching him. She hesitantly comes closer. He does not growl. She is now inches away and waiting. He stops, licks his whiskers and ignores her as she tentatively takes a bite, then really gets into it. I am impressed, but between the two of them they do manage to finish nearly all of it. When both are cleaning themselves, I gather up the package remnants and dispose of them.

Time to get lost monkey. He looks up at me. Ah, yes, she is a female. Not that he has been shy about procreation in front of me before.

Probably thought he was giving me instruction in the proper method.

"Find me when you are done." I got things to deal with anyway.

It is only a few blocks from here to the old neighborhood. Six months ago I had a falling out. I was not exactly kidnapped by the Guardians so much as rescued. They did not object to my attempt at saving face. The old Buddhist adage of not being able to run away from yourself certainly proved to be true. I really blew it in Dragon Land. If I was the CEO I would have fired my butt. I certainly don't deserve to be a full member or even an associate.

I go into the bar I used to own. It is early and so only the alcoholics are present. I ignore them as I have always done, then change my mind.

"Cho, get out of here and get a life. You deserve better than this. Here, take this." I transfer a thousand yuan to his bracelet. I then concentrate and remove all the alcohol and acetaldehyde from his system and correct the overabundance of serotonin receptors on his neurons. He will still have a hell of a headache as his brain readjusts, but he will at least start with a clean slate again. He wakes up, looks at me, and walks out the door.

"You going to chase away all my clients. Try that again and I call the cops to have your thrown out."

"Not a nice thing to say to your former boss Lim."

"Hei Long, is that you? What happened to you?"

"You know what happened. I had to get out or be found floating in

the river."

"Naw, all your debts were paid. No one wanted to see you come to harm. Never see you again, yeah, but not come to harm."

"I don't understand. When I left I was several million yuan in debt."

"All paid up." The Guardians. They are the only ones who would have.

"Thanks for telling me. Tell me Lim, where is everyone now?"

"Your partners left town real fast. Their debts were not paid up. They came back a few weeks later in a shipment of pork. They had to throw out the whole load and the police were all over everyone for months. They finally took that Korean in. No one has seen him since."

"No way Song would have done it unless he was paid to do it by the Tong." He shrugs. I guess it really doesn't matter.

"Hei Long. Don't try to set up anything here again. No one would allow it. Have a drink on me and then leave town." He pours me a scotch on the rocks. I used to drink lots of that stuff. Now of course it would have no effect.

"I don't drink anymore Lim. Enjoy it yourself." I place a gold coin on the counter. No one pays cash anymore. "Sorry about all the pain I caused you."

"You join AA or something? Trying to make restitution? I don't want your money Hei Long. Just leave. Some guys just don't get the message." As I leave I hear the coin follow me and hit the floor. I leave it and walk out.

I don't think there is any point in checking on the others. I am sure I will get the same reception. Malak said we were to go home, but at least in my case home is not here any more.

I find myself unconsciously walking towards the mountains. I won't get there before dark at this rate, but does it really matter? I am only here two days and a month seems like an eternity from now. I may actually be missing the others already.

One group I will not miss are the ones who started me on this TK path, even if they did me a favor in the long run. It certainly was not their intention. They were the ones who soured things for me. They promised to make me a king. At least of the businesses in this district. I was blindfolded and driven around for an hour before taken to their lair. Once inside I did not see much of it. It has to be in town somewhere. The industrial area for sure. An old warehouse maybe. There they strapped me into a chair and applied the psiotics till I thought my brain was going to explode. Not anywhere near the experience the Guardians provided. Afterwards they started playing with my clients. I was trying to make things work at the same time they were tearing me down. Oh, I did not

know it was them at first, but I found out soon enough. Just too many coincidences.

When I confronted them, they said I had to leave this world behind. I was to work for them now. All connections to our former lives had to be severed. No wives, relatives, friends. They even killed my cat. He was beautiful. All black. No white spot like Tsing. Hei Mao. Smart too. He could open any door. He was fit too, not like you know who. I found his head in my bed just like in the old God Father movies. Not very original. Never found his body.

I am nearly to the industrial area when I stop and scan. If I can recognize anything I might find where they are. It is taking too long. I am going to look very suspicious if I am seen by anyone here. I go down a nearby alley. Oh, it smells bad down this way. I scan the ground. Something died here. I find the outlines of the stink. TK helps a lot. Can't make out the form. Looks sort of like two human torsos. No legs though. A door is open in front of me. I scan the interior. No one home. Looks like it has been abandoned for some time. Can't hurt to check it out.

Broken jars on the ground. Someone has sprayed the entire area with something really caustic. The metal is rusted and corroded. It seems to be in only one room though. The next room looks fine. And there it is! The chair. I would know that chair anywhere. I move around it feeling it with my fingers. I look around and then look up. A star pattern with ten fingers. Just like in the journals. Never noticed that before, yet I must have been staring right at it.

I decide to check out the rest of the place, but only three rooms look like they were used by this group. The rest is empty warehouse or a former factory. Conduit and plumbing remnants still stick out of the wall in twisted forms. When I get back out into the alley way I notice the tracks. Not mech. Not regular enough. Not animal either. At least nothing I know. I get a trace reading on it. Old. Months old probably. They lead out of the alley. I follow them. Someone has a garden across from the factory, but it looks abandoned. Winter does that. Harvest what you can and leave it fallow till spring. The tracks go right through the middle of it and then into the directions of the mountains. Time for a walk.

When I get a ways up, past the farm land skirting the edge of the city, I stop. Looking out over the city I can see all the lives below. The night life is beginning as the light and temperature falls. I used to own the night. It was all a game. The sex, drugs, and most of all, the money. I can see them down there like nothing has happened. They don't have a clue of the danger they are in. All they care about is the next yuan. I can scan for a thousand kilometers. In other cities people are doing the same things. A fight at home. Preparing a meal. Kids out too late and getting into trouble.

The constant din of e-music and flashing lights. WAKE UP! No one is listening. I cover my eyes, but of course it does not go away.

I turn my back and embrace the dark coolness of the night. The trail continues. There is snow further up. Winter is coming.

My pace is slow and it takes nearly an hour before I notice the light. A home. A home in the middle of nowhere. As a moth drawn to the light I walk towards it to investigate. At the edge of the road I am met with a locked gate. Do I proceed or walk past?

“State your business.” A mechanical voice squawks out at me.

“Sorry, I was just walking by and noticed the light. I did not mean to intrude.”

“Hua, is that you?” They must have voice recognition. Who lives here?

“Yes, who is this?”

“Fan. You remember me from a year ago? We tried to market your dress patterns.”

“Ah, yes, Fan Xing. I remember. My one regret. Those were good patterns.”

The gate buzzes, “Come on up. Follow the path to the right. I will meet you halfway.”

I definitely was not expecting anyone to actually want to see me. If I had done it all over again, I would have gone into fashion. Not that slinky pornographic stuff, but the elegant artistic work of the late nineteenth century. I really thought it might have been time for a comeback. Someone ripped the patterns and started mass producing them in Bolivia or someplace. Never saw a single yuan.

Well, am I invited too?

“How did you get here Gui? A long way for a cat to walk.”

Please. I would never walk if I can fly. He stares up at me and I give him a dirty look. *What? It's dark. They can't see me.*

“I thought you would be with your girl friend all night.”

I am not a monkey. We got down to business and its done. Your kind always make such a fuss over it.

“How much salmon did you steal?”

Not much, just a head he would not notice. The meat in the cheeks is divine.

“So much for being old.”

I took the best one of course.

“Of course.”

“Hua, who are you talking to?” We shake hands. He has a lantern held up.

“I forgot to mention that I have a companion now. Fan Xing, meet

Gui Mao. Gui Mao, Fan Xing.” Gui totally ignores Fan. “He was relating to me how he seduced the fish shop keeper's new cat.”

“Ah, you used to be in that trade as well if I remember.”

“No more. Totally out of the picture. They don't even want to see my face down there anymore.” I laugh to make light of it.

“What brings you up this way? Cold out and you aren't dressed for it, nor have a light.”

“Fan, you remember I was changed by that group? They said they would give me special abilities.”

“You were so depressed after our deal went down. I remember. Haven't heard from you since. So, what happened?”

“It worked. I can see in the dark now. They abandoned me though when I was not exactly what they were hoping for. Another group picked me up and I have been with them for the last six months. But, let's not talk about me. Why a home in the wilderness? I would have thought you would have wanted to be closer to the action.” He does not question the change. So much can be done now with enhancements and such most people do not give it a second thought.

“Much less stressful out here. The air is cleaner and it provides a good separation between work and rest. Come on in. I will introduce you to my wife and sons.”

He must be doing well to afford a home made from wood. Even next to a forest, wood is expensive. It does smell good up here though. Not at all like the more southern cities. Pollution has really gotten out of hand in China. Gui pretends to be a normal cat and walks behind me, pausing to sniff at everything of interest to him. I catch him DSing a few times to keep up. Definitely diet time.

“You will stay for dinner of course.” This is not a question. Chinese life centers around family and food. I sometimes think food comes first. The family is waiting when we enter and I am introduced. They all comment on how well my robe looks. Not sure if they are being polite or genuine. I notice that Xing has an assistant who is leading us to the table. There is not a place for him to sit however.

“I am taking your place Jun. Please sit.”

“No sir. I have already eaten in the kitchen. You are our guest. Please let me hold your chair.” That is a lie, his stomach is empty. Are we doing to the same thing here that they did in America? I don't embarrass him and I sit.

“Mr. Hua, what are you doing now?” Don't say anything about your past in front of the young ones. She is definitely putting on weight. I have only seen her once before and she was much thinner then. They must have come up in the world.

“I guess you could say I am on a pilgrimage. I was hoping to reach the monastery tonight.”

“Oh, we would not hear of it. Much too late. When you are ready Jun will show you to your room.” She stares right at Gui, whose is sitting on my lap. I will not be able to feed him from the table. I pick him up and put him down.

“Gui, why don't you take a nap.” An intake of breath from Hang Ping. “Only not on any of the furniture.”

If you come to your senses and decide to treat me with proper respect, I will be outside. There is an interesting smell about the place. I wish to investigate.

“He wishes to go outside if that is permissible.”

“There are wild creatures in the forest.” That is Tom, I think. Matt is the smaller one?

“Surely Xing, nothing that would eat a cat of his obvious strength.” She is equating size with muscle.

At least someone appreciates my charms. His tail goes up at her comment and he saunters over to her. I don't think that is the kind of attention she meant. She just wants him out of the house.

Xing notices and motions Jun over, who picks up Gui with some effort and puts him out on the porch.

“He should be fine on the porch.” As soon as everyone's backs are turned he DSs off the porch of course.

“Let's eat. We have hot and sour wonton soup to start.”

Ten courses later I think I am going to burst. If they eat like this every night they will soon weigh two hundred kilos each. They did not know I was coming, so their portions are cut back to allow for me or Jun, who is not over weight, will eat nothing. I duplicate some of the food and place it in the kitchen where Jun can see it, carefully arranged in a setting. Not a smart thing to do, but I can't stand the idea of his not eating when I am being stuffed like a roast pig. When he takes the dishes back to the kitchen he is startled at first and looks around to see if anyone is there. Soon he accepts the gift and eats his meal. All I need to do is keep everyone occupied here until he is finished.

“Want to see a magic trick?” Matt is at my side.

“Let us retire to the living room.” They are even using western names for the rooms. Interesting. Hang Ping's influence no doubt. Xing always liked the more historical ways. Love can destroy a man.

They gather around as Matt attempts to play his trick on me.

“Pick a card any card.” He splays out a deck of cards in front of me. I move my hand over the deck while watching his face intent on which card I pick. In the ultraviolet I can see that the cards are marked and I

also note he is wearing contacts. Violet over this brown eyes does not show much in this light. He must barely be able to see himself. I pick a card and hold it up as instructed. He then nods his head to concentrate. Of course, he has already seen which card I am holding.

“Ace of diamonds!” I hold up the card for everyone to see and there is a round of applause.

Jun goes over to Xing and whispers something in his ear. Xing then comes over to me looking concerned and whispers, “Jun says that your cat is no longer on the porch. We should maybe go look for him.”

Matt hears what is said and bursts out, “The monster got him!”

I laugh, “Oh I doubt that very much. Gui Mao is very resourceful. As long as this monster is not edible it should be safe from Fei Pang [fat cat].” Everyone laughs at this thought. All the same I scan. There is something unusual out there.

“Boys, time for bed.”

“Ah, ten more minutes.” No go. They are escorted out by Jun.

“I will leave you two alone. I have work to do to get ready for tomorrow.”

I stand and bow to her, “Thank you for a most enjoyable meal Hang Ping. I have not eaten that well in months.” She beams and gives me a small nod before leaving. Clearly I am of lower social cast now. No matter.

“Hei Long, there is a large beast out there. It does eat small creatures from time to time.” He looks very concerned.

“Knowing you, you have pictures of it.” He nods and Jun comes back with some prints.

“So far we only have grainy infrared images.” I instantly recognize it. A digger. Never thought I would see one though. A large one too. A D0? Of course we have other evidence that Mother has been active on our world, but nothing else has shown up since the group abandoned me. They all left as soon as the Guardians arrived. Where could they have gone? Why did they leave one of their own behind? Come to think of it, there were some panels in the factory that had processors similar to the ones that Aimee and Hashra have been working on.

“Do you know what it is Hei Long?” He has switched to my given name at least.

“No, but if it was that dangerous you should have alerted the authorities.”

“We were hoping to learn more about it first. It is nearly feeding time. Come, I will show you.”

Jun comes forth with a package of sap chow. They have all been removed from their packages. He takes a couple and forms them into a

ball. We then out onto the porch and Jun throws the ball out into the darkness. He repeats the process a few more times.

“We have a night viewer.”

“I won't need that Xing.”

“Yes, right. You can see in the dark now.”

A shape comes out of a cave near a stream. I scan it. Her. Definitely female. Four legs, or two arms and two legs. Hard to tell. Head is fused with the torso. Stretched out it looks like some kind of enormous insect.

Gui Mao is down near one of the balls of food. *That is not for you stupid.*

I know that. Be quite I wish to speak with her.

“Gui Mao has seen her.”

His eyes go up, “So you can see well enough to see it is a she?”

“It is called a digger. An experimental life form designed to be an excavator. They can be made in different sizes. This is one of the largest that I have heard of. They are intelligent. They have some language ability.” I don't say that she is actually human, at least human in origin.

“Why is she here?”

“Must have escaped from some lab.”

“No lab that I know of around here.”

“A GM lab can be set up almost anywhere now. The embryos flow in. Probably used a cow to incubate her.”

“They should be looking for her then.”

“Or have given up. She was hiding in a cave near the stream.”

“This mountain is littered with caves. I won't let the boys explore for that reason. Every once in a while we hear of someone getting lost in them.” I nod.

Gui Mao comes back up on the porch and meows to be let in. Jun opens the door for him.

So undignified.

“Not everyone one has people to open door for them your highness.”

It was undignified that I had to ask, not that it was done. I laugh and bow to him.

“He thinks he is royalty. A long story.”

“Is he, you know?” GM? I nod. It makes a nice cover in case they catch him at anything he should not be able to do.

“You have an early appointment yourself tomorrow sir.”

“Thanks Jun.” He turns to me, “I best turn in. Jun will take you to your room.” End of discussion.

I am led to a downstairs room with its own exit to a small garden. Gui follows me. At least Hang Ping is not there to see him DS up onto the bed and situate himself in the exact center.

What? You certainly are not going to use it. Shame for it to go to waste. I laugh and shake my head. Hard to believe that in less than two days he is this spoiled. What have I created?

“Before you go chasing mice in your sleep, tell me what you found out?”

Her language equivalents make it hard to understand her completely. She was left behind in stasis by what sounds like Mother's group. When she awoke she left town to avoid detection. She has been observing this family for several months to try and understand them. They appear to her to be housekeepers, but only one appears to do any work that she can see. This makes for much confusion for her. She is waiting for alphas to turn up to instruct her. She is curious and took sound readings of me to report back to her controllers. She has never seen a translator of my size and configuration before. Oh, she especially likes the balls they throw to her. Reminds her of her world.

“Her world? What do you mean?”

She did not elaborate.

Her world. We know from the Guardians that there are multiple universes. Question is, is she from our time frame or from the future? Clearly at some point she had to have come from the future, but is this recent or has she been here a long time waiting for the right time. How big is her infrastructure?

I turn to Gui Mao and he is sound asleep with his nose stuck up in the air. Cute big guy. Cute. The world is about to implode and you take a nap.

Time for some careful meditation. There is much to think about. I should warn the others. However OM made it quite clear that Sauron has been spotted and is active. She could only hold him for so long. He has apparently trapped Pushy Paws. We are not to intercede. I am not due for another check in for some time. Will it be too late?

There is a terminal in the room, so I access it to see what the news has to say. China has officially taken the USA into receivership. I don't know if that is a plus or a minus. Some new plague has affected parts of New York and is under quarantine. That place gets hit with more designer bugs. Remind me never to live there. Most of the news from the US is via sats and news bots. Too dangerous for humans to go their yet.

How many of our group are there now? Most I would think. I am guessing that Dorothy went to be with her teacher in Africa. Two out of twelve. Since Malak is not mentioned as being in Hotevilla with Pushy Paws that probably puts her in the Middle East. Only place worse than the US at the moment. I am not that crazy. Doc would go back to Ohio. Same continent at least.

Looks like the best place is either the meeting place we had all arranged to meet at or New Atherton. Both are in California and fairly close to each other. Aimee and Hashra are the ones most likely to be able to sort out this Mother stuff. George is likely to be there as well. Sounds like I need to get to California.

I scan the net some more.

Ah perfect! They are seeking volunteers to go to California to help administer the new government. Which translates into watching the white devils as they work in the fields. Still, it would provide safe transportation and a cover. Feels more than a little weird to me. Isn't that sort of how my alter ego ended up there? Let's hope I do better this time.

New Atherton Media Net

The latest production of Cats is now playing on Megafeed One. Sign up now for the best times. New Atherton has signed an agreement with the Chinese government and will come under their protection. Order has been restored thanks to the successful effort of the New Atherton IT staff to prevent the APES from invading. Emergency supplies are at good levels and rationing is not expected to be needed.

New Atherton, California, soon to be New China

I am missing something. I know that it is there, but just not seeing it. The virtual omega point in the quantum matrix suggests a hidden place. Where is it? How do I get in and what is there? SO frustrating.

Been here nearly a month. People have gotten used to Simone running around free. Hardest thing was to house break her. No one was amused by her accidents, especially the support staff when I failed to catch it myself. Now she has her own tool belt and I have given her the old sixteen core Mac to play with and learn on. Her hands do not permit actual typing and Hashra says she will work on a proper keyboard for her when she gets a chance. Hunt and peck works for now anyway. She is only six months old, but with her ability to TP, she is rapidly absorbing knowledge. At least there have been no incidences with house pets. Tsing will still not talk with me and still hisses at Simone. The local cats think this is great fun and have set out to terrorize her whenever they get a chance. People have taken to keeping their pets inside their apartments for that reason.

I can't believe the resources here. I am in node heaven. I am very worried that it will make me sloppy. It all comes too easy now. Records that I used to have to hack my way in to see, I have instant access to. On the other hand, they are not so keen with me talking with my old net friends. Still, I sneak some time in with them when I can. Those that I can reach anyway. Being awake 24/7 helps. I knew of course about the APE attempts to take over long before it happened and hardened all of our systems here. No one broke in, no one's accounts were compromised. I was elected an honorary pear and given a substantial fund to draw on, no questions asked. I sent some of it to family members and friends back in China Town. Could not use my old identity though. That made me real sad. At least I could help some. Now they may all be dead for all I know.

Hashra has been going nuts over the psiotic lab she has put together. The only time I see her now is when she has some new device to show

me. Her objective is to try and duplicate as much as possible in tech what we can do with our minds. Both of us can break out of any limiter field devised, but you never know. We also may need allies soon. It would take far too long and be far too dangerous to make a lot of TKs rapidly without screening and training. I think the portable psiotic realigner is her greatest achievement. Can heal almost anyone of anything in under an hour for even someone near death. Dead is still dead and I am not sure we should go there. How much of a person's soul would be left after an hour or day or whenever? Scary thought.

Mostly she makes weapons. I am not keen on that at all. I have begged her to work towards devices that can neutralize weapons, or at least non lethal ones. She seems to be coming around. Malak sort of drilled us too much military wise I think. Taking awhile to undo some of that programming.

It sounds horrible in the Middle East. They made it into the hills around Karkuk with most of their group intact. I was sorry to hear about Nafi' loosing a leg to a roadside bomb. Malak can't exactly give him a new one without blowing her cover. Maybe after this is all done. Some of the Arab groups have taken to fighting each other. No surprise. Happens more when a distant country has to cross a closer one on the way to Israel. Israel of course has not been quiet either. They showed live vid of all the weapons they have, including the missile launchers and nucs. Food is the major problem. Not exactly farm country in the desert in the middle of winter. All that oil money is going fast as countries rush to supply both sides. Interestingly no one wants either side to have an advantage. They make too much money off the conflict and the longer it stretches out the more money they make. Greed is going to cause a great deal of suffering.

America is in much worse shape. At least it hit at the end of the harvest and part of our debt could be paid. New York state is quarantined along with Rhode Island and parts of other states in New England. Even the APES respect that at least. No indication that the new plague is horribly contagious, but no one wants to take a chance this time. Over two million people have been affected either directly with the disease or indirectly because of the quarantine. No personal information is getting in or out.

With the Chinese coming everyone is very nervous. There are some who remember the cultural revolution and what happened when China repatriated Taiwan. There are rumors that with so much area to cover they will be ruthless to set an example. Already the world press is jumping on the bandwagon and helping in the vilification of the US. We made a lot of enemies and they are all calling their debts due. California may even split into two. China would get the farm land of the central

valley and most of Northern California and Mexico will get the coast up to just below Monterey and Southern California from Bakersfield down. She would also get most of Arizona, New Mexico and parts of Texas. Never having been to any of these places I don't have a feeling for what this means.

The UNA is organizing the local white populations and may lose control of their own ideas soon. Whites outnumber them at least ten to one. They are attempting to play the game of only natives on the governing boards. That won't last. Even though saps are not as well armed as they were before the first riots, that is a lot of people to stop. There are no more pears in the US outside a few enclaves such as ours. Everyone else is dead or has assumed a sap identity. At least they did not destroy the recharging stations. A lot of APES wanted them gone, but reason prevailed and now they are in open locations and free.

The East Coast is asking for help from Europe in an attempt to prevent a total China takeover and there is some progress on that front. The Chinese clearly don't want anything to do with the diseased states and would probably cede all of the Northeast to the European Union. Africa is demanding the southern states in payment for slavery. That should be interesting. When the US did so little during the AIDS crisis they made for a lot of resentment in Africa. Problem is, is that Africa is almost as in as bad of shape as the US. They are unlikely to get it together enough to do anything but talk.

Don't think that I am spending all of my time on the news nets. George has been the one following all of this. He has become a real diplomat along with Tran Vu. They are the ones helping to broker the European thing. What is not known is that they actually have been talking to the Chinese about this. Probably wise to keep them in the for next loop. Tran decided that New Atherton would be safer than Utah when Sauron sprung his trap. I'm not sure it will make a difference when he decides to move. I am worried about Pushy Paws. A month is a long time. Sauron will grow impatient at some point. But by her causing trouble there it has taken the attention off of us and allowed to take more risks.

"Mother!" I messed a line of code. I need to keep my mind on my work and let the world take care of itself. I hear something, thinking that Simone has returned and turn around. Instead of Simone, the Mayor of New Atherton is at my door. I jump up and exclaim without thinking, "How may I serve you." I give a low bow. I forgot to say sir.

"Aimee, look out!" He yells. What? I instinctively raise my shields. He won't know that of course. I see him pointing at the core I am working on. I turn around. Still have the habit. Malak has warned me that the time

it takes to turn around could kill me at some point. The entire core is reconfiguring itself. Parts of it are moving on their own. The psiotic field around it is enormous and growing.

“Get out of here Mayor. Something has gone wrong. Call Hashra as soon as you get out of these rooms.”

I pull the internal alarm to warn anyone else who might try and enter. “I will attempt to turn it off. Go, now!” I don't turn back around this time and watch him with my mind.

When I attempt to get near the core it's new psiotic field prevents me and not in a friendly manner. That hurt. I am shocked having not experienced pain since boot camp with Malak.

“Aimee, what have you done!” Hashra is screaming at me. The alarms are so loud I can barely hear her.

“I didn't do anything. It just happened on it's own. Help me turn it off.”

She pulls an instrument out of her pocket and stares at it for some time. “It has set up some kind of randomly varying limiter field to protect itself apparently. Attempting to discern the pattern.”

I run over and grab one of those APE devices they were using to break in everywhere. “Hashra, link it in with this.”

“Good idea. Takes one to know one.” The lock pick is a sort of stripped down alpha sixty four core with everything it does not need removed to save power. It had to be portable. The APES are geniuses at doing this kind of thing. I am still amazed they were able to manufacture so many so fast. This tech many not be that far ahead of our own.

“Got it. Pull the power supply when I neutralize the field. It will likely adapt quickly.”

“Ready!”

As soon as the field goes down I TK the psiotic power supply and dissolve it. The field attempts to return, but the power slowly dissipates and the core goes cold.

I wait a moment to be sure before yelling, “Kill the alarms!” Hashra nods and leaves for a moment. They go off, but my ears are still ringing.

“The alarms were only in the complex and not Atherton wide at least.”

“The Mayor was here though when it happened. They will not be happy about something dangerous going on inside the city. I may need to find a new place to work after this.”

“So, what happened?”

“I don't know. I was adapting a line of code in my attempts to get at the hidden area I suspect exists. I messed up a line of code and cursed. Then the Mayor showed up. When I turned to address him it happened. I

was not actually touching anything with either my mind or my body.

“Could it have been the code?”

“I was only changing a variable in code I have been running for a week. I find that hard to believe. You can see what happened. The entire thing has changed. This is not the core we started with. Good thing we thought to make backups.”

“Well, next time do it outside. There is a lot of empty space south of us. Farm land that is empty at the moment. Pick an empty shack or barn and set up there.” I nod.

Hashra stoops down examining the core, “That's strange. It really has changed. You weren't kidding. Look at that!” She points to one particular area. I examine it with my mind.

I am confused. This was not there before. Not just a rearrangement, it is a quantum memory core. Simone comes running in and bumps me from behind. She does that when I am too concentrated to notice her. I have tried to stop her, but she doesn't or won't get it.

“Lowd noiss stopses.”

“Yes, Simone loud noise has stopped. Sorry about that. It's okay now. Are you hungry?” She is always hungry and is the easiest way to get her occupied when I need to concentrate. She runs to her food area without pausing and waits. I TK some dino chow which she immediately attacks. Still uses her hands to eat. Can't get her to use utensils yet. Hunger overrides training.

“Hashra, there is a new quantum memory core where you pointed. Help me get it out and read it. I don't want it anywhere near my other equipment just yet.”

I sacrifice what is left of the device and carve out a large chunk around the memory core. Then I slowly and carefully clean it up and isolate it.

“I think this does it.”

“Let's bring it to my lab. I want that thing in a limiter field just in case.”

“Use isolated readers too. Nothing hooked to the net or anything else.” She nods.

We pass the Mayor on the way out, “Everything is under control Mr. Mayor. Sorry about the alarms. We have to hurry before the fields decay completely.” He barely has time to open his mouth as we pass. The two protectors next to him are standing at attention. We really were in trouble. Later. “It won't happen again. I promise.”

Inside Hashra's lab it is a mess as usual. She clears a bench and goes around to other areas looking for what she needs. One by one various odds and ends come back to the cleared bench and she begins to assemble

what she needs. I recognize the reader portion and go to work assembling that and interfacing it to the core. I have to use TK for the final connections. This was never designed to go together this way and we are adapting like crazy.

“Limiter field is ready. It will tingle whenever you put your hand in it, but should not harm you.” She turns it on and I can see it with my TK sight. A sort of soap bubble effect with swirling colors.

“This field is more complex than the one around the failed core. See how it varies across its field? It makes a net with different frequencies that are constantly varying.”

“Hopefully it will not be necessary. This is just the memory and not the processors themselves.” She nods but does not look convinced. I'm not either.

“We can't use a psiotic power supply inside that field. Do you have any of those H2-batteries still around?”

“I think so. Let me look.” Soon handloads of equipment are coming out of different cabinets as she looks. “I found one, but the charge is long gone. I can recharge it in a moment.”

By the time she brings it to the bench it is charged. TK is good for something. “The voltage does not match. I will need to make a control circuit.” She concentrates and a device complete with the necessary plugs appears. I suspect she does this a lot. Probably easier than finding something in here half the time. I worry about all the TK we are using, but this deep underground and with secret absorbing circuits hidden in the ceiling, we should be safe. I hope.

“My turn.” She hands the completed power supply to me. I pull a cube out of my pocket and place it in the reader. Those are easy to make and I always have a hand full in my pocket now. It did more than tingle when I put my hand in the field. I give Hashra a dirty look. I then position the power supply and quickly attach it.

“I think we are ready. Hand me that piece of plastic. I am not sticking my hand in there when it goes live.” I use the plastic rod to hit the power switch. There is nothing to see and with the limiter field in place we can't look in and see what is going on.

“How long will it take?”

“A red light will come on when the cube is full. Hope you have lots of cubes. Quantum memory can be really dense.”

“What about blank areas? It was only on a short time and may not have been fully activated yet.”

“This reader will skip blank spots. It automatically compresses whatever it finds.”

We wait and nothing happens.

“Shouldn't it be done by now?”

“Should.”

“What happens if there is less material than a cube?”

“You really believe that?”

“No, but on the other hand it should be done by now.”

“Well, we can always repeat the process if we are wrong. Turn it off.”

I reach in with the rod and turn the switch off. So far nothing strange has happened. Almost disappointed in a way.

“Whoa, you are not going to put that thing in one of my machines. Nothing in here is isolated other than the reader. I mostly use that to set up proms for portable equipment. It works both ways.”

“The old Mac is the only thing that I know of that would not be affected by the code this thing could contain. One of the reasons I was so successful on the net all this time. Nothing new could touch it.”

“Will Simone mind?”

“I think I can buy her off for a few minutes.” I smile and Hashra laughs.

When we get there it is not a problem. She is sound asleep. Still growing and needs lots of naps. She left it on again though. We have all the power we need, but I am so used to worrying about the e-bill that I still turn things off when I am not using them.

“Don't forget this.” Hashra holds up the fiber connect from the back.

“Right.” I place the cube in the reader and initiate the dump routine. The screen fills with lots of symbols, only some of which I am familiar with. I type in some commands and rerun the feed.

“Sorry. Running the translator now.”

We wait a moment before it starts showing up on the screen again. Lines of decompiled code appear.

“Wait, there. Go back!” Hashra yells.

“I am not deaf.” I go back and there it is.

“Mother, how may I serve you?”

“Why is that important? We already suspected these things were from her.”

“When you curse, you always say Mother. What did you say when the Mayor showed up at the door? The same thing any sap would do under those circumstances, 'How may I serve you?'. You probably did it without thinking. It is only because I have heard you say it before that I picked up on it.”

“Mother!” She laughs and I give her a dirty look.

“Think about that phrase. I would be willing to bet that is what set it off. A key phrase unlikely to be said by anyone who did not know. These

things are the equivalent of net bombs. If that thing has been hooked to the net chances are every alpha sixty four on the planet would be morphing right now.”

“Look further down in the code. Here is the same phrase again in Chinese and here in German. She knows all of our languages. How come I never could find this before? I have been over every square femptometer of that thing.”

“It was quantum encrypted of course. You have been telling me for weeks that there was something you were not seeing that seemed to be there. I think you have found it.”

“So, it would appear. Now what can or should we do about it. If we broadcast the phrase others will try it to see what happens. Sooner or later one will hit the net and do exactly what we are trying to avoid. Or her spies will hear and set it off on purpose.”

“You know what you have to do. And I think you are the only one on the planet who could do it.”

I sigh. “Yeah, I know what I have to do. It just goes against everything that I believe in. I have never used tech for destruction.”

“Can you do it?”

“Technically, yes. Always easier to take something apart than build it. Why do you think we still have trouble with worms, viruses, siphons and the like? There is always a way.”

“Will you do it?”

I stare at her for a long time before answering, “I don't know. Just hope no one else stumbles on it before I decide.”

The Jungle Vine

Do not despair my simian friends. This is merely a setback. We have worked too long and too hard for this day. Hang in there.

Hotevilla, Third Mesa, UNA

“Ms. Krandle, quit being such a smiggle. I told you this would be uncomfortable. I am very disappointed in you. I really thought you would be the one.”

“Pain, so much pain.” She is collapsed on the floor folded in on herself. Disgusting. I can't figure out what the problem is. I certainly did not have this much trouble with the Other one. Of course I was VERY disappointed in the result. Good thing I was able to turn it to my advantage later.

I have spent weeks with this experiment and I am getting no where. Not only am I not at my center keeping an eye on things, but now my best hope is not there either and I suspect of no further use to me.

Where are those 'Guardians'? Surely they care about one of their own? They always foolishly come to the aid of a fallen one. I should have them all by now. The world is changing too rapidly without my direct intervention. I cannot afford anymore time wasted here. I can't leave either. The one below has shown she can at least equal the suppressor field. Without my constant attention, she will escape. I could always sacrifice her of course. Now may not be the time to make the others pissed at me though. If there really are seven others, they could prove a challenge. No, she will need to be kept alive, but out of mischief.

I need to get out of here. There is something up in the New York area that looks VERY interesting. Nothing. Something is making Nothing out of the psiotic field up there. It is like a psiotic black hole. If I could harness and use this force, then no Guardian could stand against me. But what do I do with these two?

Two! That's the answer. I will give Ms. Krandle to our guest. With the sick one to take care of, and know she could never abandon a sick person, she will be kept occupied. My loyal servant will keep an eye on her. Who knows, if the one below can correct the problem, I may even have a worthy second after wall. Yes, this sounds like a winning proposition.

“Ms. Krandle, I am going to put you in the care of an excellent healer. Just remember it was I who granted you this favor. Your pain will soon be gone.” It takes but a thought to place the two of us in the

chamber next to the one I am watching. This one is not activated yet of course. Still waiting for its proper occupant, but much closer to the place I want to put my second. Those nasty fields she has put up interfere with my acting directly. Simple enough to forge a path to the second chamber. I make a hallway and place a door with a puzzle lock on it. If I make it too simple, she will think it is a trap. If she has to work at it some, she will think she has outwitted me.

I can see her much better from this distance. The room is empty. I may have overestimated her. She is barely alive herself. No matter. If she cannot help Ms. Krandle, then the problem will solve itself. How can I help it if she expended her energy trying to save another. That is hardly my fault. I smile.

Back to the surface. The sun is rising on a new day. Glorious to be in control again. First I need to make an appearance at headquarters to keep everyone honest, at least on the surface. They would not work for me if they were totally honest. Can't abide smiggles.

"Sir, you're back!" The night crew is hard at work. Good. No slackers.

"Report Zhang."

"I want to show you something. We noticed some psiotic activity close by, so decided to investigate. We did not find the source, but believe we know the cause. I will explain in a moment. First you have to see what we found."

We go down a long corridor to a waiting elevator. Down deep into the sub basement and out into a large warehouse space. I do not design these buildings and usually do not pay much attention to layout.

"It was the only place large enough to hold her sir."

"Her?" I look ahead and in a containment field there is a large spherical creature. I think for a moment. It looks familiar though I know I have never seen one before. Where did I come across a reference. Something recent. The Chronicles did not mention this creature. What did I read before that. Ah, the journals. Volume three to be precise. This is a digger. They do exist then. If the Guardians can bring things back from the future, how could I ever hope to defeat them?

Next to the field I find an encapsulated digger. A very large one.

"She did that as soon as we caught her. Very low metabolic rate. Amazing she is still alive. Not sure how long she can remain this way. We place fresh food in her cage each day to attempt to coax her out. At some point she will get hungry.

"How do you know it is a she?"

"DNA. 98% in common with us sir. She is GM human. Way beyond allowable limits and banned by world courts of course. Whoever did this

would be in a lot of trouble if the authorities found out.”

“And so would we if they found out we were holding her. Make sure everyone here is thoroughly vetted.”

“Already done sir.” If you smile, you lose your job. He doesn't. I hate smart smiggles.

“It would appear we have found our second incident of tech that is beyond our current abilities Zhang. Where did you find it?”

“In the foothills just outside of town. Apparently a local fabric maker found her and has been feeding her for months.”

“And never said anything to anyone?”

“No sir. That is why we brought him and his family in for questioning.”

“And what did you find out?”

“Not that much. The boys has seen her first. He had an illegal thermal scanner to get the first images. Later used infrared to gather better quality images. They figured it was some designer pet that had escaped and decided not to make a fuss. My guess is she provides them with some amusement.”

“Who have they told?”

“Only one other person. A low level thug who was run out of town some six months ago and then returned for a visit. He was apparently the reason for the low level psiotic readings. The times and places he visited coincide with the recordings. Level two at best. Nothing to worry much about.”

“How did he become this way and where is he now?”

“No one knows on either count. We did a thorough job of questioning. All we had to go on is a voice recognition chip on him from the front gate. We are searching records for a match now. So far the closest match is to a corpse recovered from down river five months ago and never reported to the authorities. Clearly not the same person.”

“I don't like lose ends Zhang. Clean up the mess here as soon as possible. Let the creature go where you found it, with a tag of course. See if anyone attempts to retrieve it.”

“Very good sir. Dispose of the bodies in the usual way sir?”

I wave him off. Not my concern. I check in with the other departments and clear up my schedule again. I will have to find a replacement for Ms. Krandle soon. The department heads will get lazy if there is no one watching over them. It is so hard to find good people these days. This culture is going soft much faster than they did the last time they were on top.

I make my way to outside New York by skirting the core. That way I will not be picked up by my own sats. A bit uncomfortable, but

necessary.

The effect is very intense here and seems to be centered on Long Island near Chinatown. Or rather what used to be Chinatown. This entire area is under quarantine, so at least I will not have to worry about authorities as I snoop around.

“Hey old man. You look like you would be tasty in a pot.” I turn and see three very thin teenage males with pipes at the ready.

“Nice place you have here and I see you have brought me lunch. Excellent.” I morph into my feeding state and make quick work of them. I do love it so when they run. Could have used more fat on their bones, but I should be watching my weight anyway.

I walk the Brooklyn bridge and then down the empty streets to my objective. Ah, some of the plague victims I am guessing. Before me stand a gathering of naked green people. Reminds me of the greenmen from the story. Reminds me very much of the greenmen. Diggers, greenmen, alphasixty four quantum processors. Maybe the real threat is not the Guardians who appear to be hiding and doing nothing. Looks like Mother has been here. One Mind at least. I don't trust that one.

The darkness calls. Near the Chinatown remnants it gets very strong. Seems to be coming from that building over there. Some sort of institute for research. Some device gone way wrong? I should be so lucky. Don't like tech, but I know it can be controlled. Minds are much more of a headache. Hope Ms. Krandle and the Guardian are having fun. They are only a vague smudge from this far away and I can't even tell there are two of them. No matter. The smudge is still there, right where I left it.

I go up the steps and am confronted with a door that is welded shut. Not just locked. Someone was very afraid of the those disgusting monkeys. Easy enough to dissolve. I walk through the empty doorway and ascend the stairs to the lab above. Strange place to put a lab.

Ah, my objective is near. Inside the lab. I unlock the two remaining doors in my way and enter the dark space. There is no power in the city, much less this building. The sun is on the other side of the building now and does not shed much light inside. Not good Feng Shui to have a door facing North.

My scanning abilities do not work in here. Interesting. I pull out a small flashlight out of my pocket. One of those old fashioned emergency generator lights. LEDs or something archaic. Takes a moment to build up a charge in its capacitor by pumping it. Don't know why I have it except it reminds me of another time. I turn on the light and before me is the most magnificent black statue. The proportions are perfect! Well all except the nose. What a beak! The blackness so complete. I slowly make my way round it. I place my hand near it and it is cool, a wonderful kind

of cool I can't describe exactly. I want to embrace this thing. That would not be wise of course. I need to find out what it is first.

Who dares to enter my presence? All who enter die.

I feel the energy draining from me rapidly.

Excellent. Such food! I have never felt this much quantity nor quality before.

It stops and I collapse to the ground. I am weak from the event. This is not something I am used to experiencing. I need to leave, yet I am compelled to find out.

“Who are you?” I manage to get out.

Who are you? It is definitely stronger now and at my expense.

“You liked that food did you not. I am one who can bring you more.” I am starting to gather my strength back. So, the effect is only temporary if I am not killed in the process that is. Negative psiotics is what it felt like from a distance.

Are you sap or pear? Why would that matter? I am guessing that if I answer wrong I will be history. I am not quite ready for my eulogy just yet thank you.

“I am Sauron. Ruler of this world.” Play it big and see what happens.

Former ruler. I rule now. I think it is actually smiling. At least I am still alive. Only a pear cares about ruling absolutely. Answers that question at least. Of course it knows about me as well. A trade then.

“Master it is. I bring you news of those who would threaten us.” I bow to my knees. I am not giving up my position just yet, but it does not hurt to play it safe for the moment. He will not rule anything if he is stuck here. I see the syringe on the counter. He is in nearly the same position as when he injected the substance into this blood stream. A man then. A very clever man, but still a man. Rat brain. I wait.

Tell me more. This thing is slow to respond. Might explain why it is still here. Just like those greenmen outside. There is a time dilation effect going on. It is not as slow as the greenman, at least not yet, but definitely slower than my own time frame. It also did not seem to be aware of me till I was very close. I take a few steps back and the pull diminishes. Not so hard. I have given it more than enough to keep it happy for the moment. I make my way back outside and seal the entrance again. I don't want anyone else to find my prize. I think it would be a good idea to make this place light tight. If it is related to the greenmen, it will also draw energy from sunlight. Good thing that lab did not have a sun roof and it's winter.

It would be best if I set up a location nearby. No one will bother me. Lots of fun food around and an interesting project to work on. I need to figure out how to bait my trap. Clearly one of their own is not enough. I

need something more powerful. I look out over the landscape. Lots of greenmen. Don't the Guardians serve the One Mind? What would happen if something threatened her precious sporophytes? My friend inside is probably connected to their creation. Too many similarities. Think Sauron, think.

Latin America Net

Antonio Laposa will perform live at the Buenos Aires Amphitheater on January 12th at 8 pm. He will play his signature song, “Only You I Love”. Don't miss this exciting performance from Brazil's mega heart throb. As seats are expected to sell out quickly, hurry now!

Hotevilla, Third Mesa, UNA

He is clearly up to something. I can sense him in the chamber next to me. He is digging a tunnel towards me. Time to clean up my surroundings. I quickly dissolve the table, chairs, water bowls, etc. Extinguish the lamp and remove the wall coverings. Hmm, I could lose some weight and look more desperate. Ah, that should do it. He is almost here.

That's strange. He has stopped a couple of feet away. There is someone in the room. She does not look in good shape. I can't see clearly who it is. He is gone! Shit, the limiter field has come on in the chamber. Another of our group? Have I failed? Dorothy would know better. Angpetu? No, she is still back on the E3. Malak, no possible way. Getting Hashra and Aimee away from their toys would take more than Sauron could muster. I won't be able to see until I can neutralize the field. I scan up. He is fussing around up top. I will have to wait. Maybe whomever it is can figure it out themselves. All of our people certainly could. It is even the same frequency as mine. You would think he could a little more original.

I don't trust his door for a nanosecond. He is just inviting me into the chamber, that is clear. So, that means some new game or trap. He does nothing for my benefit. Ah, he is no longer above. First time in nearly a month. His friend he was working on seems to be missing too. So, is this her or someone else?

The limiter field is still on. She will roast in there soon. Oh well. Have to find out some time. I dampen the field and refresh the air in her chamber. Put a glow light in the center and a pitcher of water. She appears to be out for the moment. It will still be hot in there, but she has a chance.

I don't trust his door, nor his other chambers. He clearly expects me to investigate. So, he is aware of what I can do, or this is a test. Her chamber is not my chamber. Can I be punished for what happens in her chamber? Let's test that theory. I stop her limiters. Nothing happens. No alarms. No sudden pounce from Sauron. Good. I scan her chamber. She is

not one of us. Someone new. Possibly the person he was working with above. Middle aged woman of nondescript genetics. A mutt, as they would say.

I carefully excavate a new chamber directly under me and dump its dirt into the six remaining empty chambers, leveling them out so that the floor is flat again. The chambers are just a little bit smaller than before. Their limiters are intact but not activated. I then DS her into the new chamber and restart the limiters in her old chamber. It will get really smelly in their soon. With some of the remaining dirt I make a copy of her body and place it in her chamber. Button, button, who has the button? This takes time. I am only a six and I am under adverse conditions. I am definitely not strong enough to do a soul transfer. I am hoping that once the body rots, it will not matter that I did not do a perfect job. Now I have a live person in a new chamber in the shadow of my chamber. I have never noticed him watching me from anywhere other than directly above. This should work.

I still don't want to get near her though. I will have to maintain the atmosphere for both of our chambers until she can be revived. Best to wait till she is awake. I snake a com circuit to her chamber so I can hear her and we can communicate later. One way at first.

It is nearly a day by my reckoning before I hear anything from the other chamber. At first it is the moaning of someone in pain. That quiets down. Eventually I hear a voice, "Mr. Freeman. Where are you? Where am I? Mr. Freeman?" Quiet again. It may be time to add my own voice.

"Hello? My name is Pushy Paws. Long story. I am in a chamber near you."

"My name is Lisa Krandal. I work for Mr. Freeman."

"I know him under a different name, Sauron." I hear a sudden intake of breath. She has heard the name before. "And just for the record, most of the human race knows him under the name . . ."

"Satan" She finishes my sentence. We are talking about the same person then. "I should have guessed that I was in too deep. It paid so well and was so exciting. I traveled the world and got to deal with world leaders in almost every venture." There is a pause, "Now I am a prisoner who knows where."

"We are both in chambers under the Third Mesa at the northeast corner of Arizona. This used to be the Hopi reservation before the last Hopi Indian died. Now it is all Navajo land."

"Last thing I remember I was in Qingzhou City in China going over some work for Mr. Freeman. He is very meticulous about his operations. What about you?"

"I am the last Hopi Indian. My death has been prematurely

announced."

"How do you know Sauron?"

"From some interesting journals I read."

"That was where I heard the name also. Someone was reading them at the office. I took a look and thought it related to a project they were working on. I told Mr. Freeman about them. Next thing I know he has set up some sort of operation here and all his work is being forwarded." She pauses, "Your name was in the journals."

"I know. How do you think I felt?" How did Sauron get a copy? First the journals and then the Chronicles above. Whose side are the Guardians on?

"How long have you been here?"

"We have no day or night to relate to. I am guessing a month."

"That means we get fed at least. Hot in here though."

"Food and water arrives when we sleep. I think he uses TK or something. I never see it happen. He has some way of knowing when we are asleep."

"That could be a problem. I am on permanent no sleep. GM."

"If you see it happen let me know what it looks like. Does it all appear at once or does it sort of dissolve in?"

"What will that tell us?"

"Whether he uses DS or TK. If DS the food comes from the outside. TK means he makes it from some sort of mass in our own chambers."

"What happens to the ah after affects?"

"Preciously." I hear sounds of someone attempting to throw up. Not surprising. I scan her chamber and nothing has come out. I scan her stomach and it is empty. She spits a couple of times. She has some TK ability and may be able to sense my scans if I am not careful. What level? What abilities?

If she is working with Sauron, even now, she will already know I am TK. If she isn't then telling her will not be telling Sauron anything he does not already know.

"Lisa, what do you know about me?"

"Huh? Ah, only what the journals say. The last book mentions you being with the Guardians. It does not say whether or not you ever became TK yourself. In the first book you were something called the Gateway, but not TK or anything. So, can you get us out of here?"

"Think I would still be here if I could get out? I certainly don't feel like a Gateway. Besides, the Gateway does not work unless there are something like eight Guardians and a 'thn. At least that is what the books said."

"Freeman seems to be really obsessed about the 'thn. Something

about one stolen from him. That part of the journals at least seems to be true."

"He is probably trying to get back the one the 'rats' took from him and he is rounding up anyone associated with the journals in hopes of gaining it back." I remembered that he always referred to Br'thn as an inanimate object.

"What about me? I was helping him. Why put me here?"

"Maybe in hopes that we would talk to each other and I would spill the beans eventually. Otherwise why let us talk to each other? My guess is that he was hoping to make you a TK. He trusted you and needs more people working at his side. He is beginning to run scared."

"It would appear that he has given up on the idea of my joining him. Do you know where she is?"

"No idea." Technically that is true. Last update she was in Ohio, now? Who knows? "How are you feeling? You sounded like you were in a lot of pain when you woke up."

"My head. Still hurts, but feels a little better. Too bad there are no meds down here."

"Tell me about it. Being seventy five is no picnic. Get some rest. It's about all we can do down here."

"One last thing. When I was working for him it was always just standard business stuff. I never knew about this other side of him. It was kind of weird that he never asked me to arrange transportation though. Now I know why." She doesn't say she is against it though. Standard business practices are not my idea of moral either.

She quiets down. She has some TK ability, but it is different from ours. He was trying to impose a different pattern on her. I thought I was going to have to interfere, but when I saw how much pain she was in after sessions with him I waited. Anything I would have done would have only made her pain worse. My guess is the Jesus incident put him off and he was not going to repeat that mistake. It was never said though whether Jesus was a natural or made by Sauron. If natural, then he has never had any experience making someone TK, refusing to share power. Also, his reptilian pattern would be slightly different from ours. We were lucky that Qr'thn started us indirectly. She at least seems to have known what she was doing.

Now the big question is how much can I do without attracting Lisa's suspicion? I could raise her to level five if I had to, but even a level two could sense the arrangement I have set up. There is enough space between us that I would sense any attempt to reach me long before she actually did. I don't really want a powerful person next to me while I feel trapped. Sauron, at least, I know.

Time to see what else is happening. My former home has become a sort of shrine. Everyone has moved to the far edges of the reservation, as far as possible from the Mesa. This happened gradually, nothing obvious or all at once. That would have been hard to do anyway. Everyone has their own opinion about things, but once your friends are gone, you get lonely and then eventually join them. I did not know about the APE attack until the last check in, but my telling people to stock up on food seems to have worked. The people have food enough for the winter and won't have a large debt to pay back.

The APES took care of the money system very thoroughly. Don't know how they are affecting trades of goods now. I would imagine they are still living off of pilfered goods at the pear estates and warehouses. There weren't that many pears though. It won't go far. Most of the food was shipped overseas to better paying customers anyway. Hope they are not eating the seed stock. What will happen when the Chinese arrive is anyone's guess.

World Net Alert

Remove all alpha sixty four nodes and processors from service immediately. Repeat, remove all alpha sixty four products from use immediately. Centers are being set up world wide to dispose of them properly. Thank you for your cooperation. Anyone caught hiding any alpha sixty four products will be shot on sight, no questions asked, after the amnesty period runs out. This includes the APE Pickpocket I & II. This message will be repeated on all channels for the next 48 hours at which time the amnesty period will end.

Sea Pilot's Fish Shop, New Shanghai, New China

“Do we have any of those things here?” Pilot asked the group.

Blink answers, “Naw, never trust a new thing till the bugs are worked out. They were dumping perfectly good nodes for pennies on the dollar with everyone switching over. I outfitted the entire station cheap. That and what was already here. Out of date stuff, but serviceable.”

“Do we need to add Node Accessories to our name? Getting long enough already.” That gets a chuckle.

“I suspect it was mostly the pears who switched over. They always seemed to have wanted the latest tech. Now that the pear estates are history, so is the tech that went with them. Have you seen the reports of what they have been finding in some of them? Who would need an alpha sixty four to run their commode? Ridiculous.”

“Ah, Fish, you just don't understand the finer things in life. A hole in the ground or pooping over the side of the boat is not what most people are accustomed to.” That gets a laugh and a shrug from him. I am trying to remember the last time I evacuated my bowels. So much easier to deal with it the TK way. Everyone says I have the bladder of a camel.

It has been a little over a month since I got here and what a difference. The boat ramp has been rebuilt and we have three serviceable ten meter ships we can drop into the water with a minimum of effort. We save a ton on maintenance by storing them out of the water. Not to mention the problems from storm damage. The carpenters have been working overtime to get us set up. Fortunately there is lots of material to paw through for supplies and we rarely have to make something from scratch. There is a full machine shop here though when we need it. Not to mention my occasional dips into TK. I am considered the expert 'scrounger' for my ability to 'find' things that are needed. I occasionally come up empty handed so as not to draw too much suspicion.

Flowers [Julia] and Dirt [John] have done wonders with the surrounding fields. Come spring we should be all set grow a lot of our own vegetables and herbs. The herbs will be really important if we are going to make a go at serving fresh fish grilled to perfection. Nearby people have staked out land and those who used to work the farms now own them. Or rather lease them from the State. No one is allowed to own land in New China. The rents are very low though if you agree to farm. Go way up if all you intend to do is squat on it. Should be much harder for a pear class to arise again quickly.

Xue is Cook's assistant now that Fish is head of fishing operations. We thought of changing his name to something more colorful. I was fond of Barnacle Bill, but that name was rejected by Fish himself. "I ain't no crusty barnacle." Most would disagree, but Fish was left alone. Anyway Xue is pregnant. Didn't take here long at all. She won't say who the father is, if she even knows or cares. No one minds as long as she does not play favorites. She has quite an appetite in that ah, direction. I would have thought once the need to do so for a living was gone she would lack any interest, but just the opposite happened. She explained it me by saying now it was fun for her. Maybe they messed with her genes more than I thought. There is talk of bringing more women in. The three we have are feeling left out. Two have permanent partners. A few of the guys are partnered to each other, but that still leaves a lot for Xue. Once she gets further along in her pregnancy it will be harder for her to handle. Some of the guys are turned off about doing it with a pregnant woman, some are turned on more. Not my problem. "What good is a city slicker going to be here anyway?" is the sediment shared by most. We are a tight group and outsiders are not encouraged to join up.

Now that the carpenters are done with the boats, interest has turned to making the rooms more livable. Especially a nursery. Both Flowers and Claw [Becky] are capable of getting pregnant if they wish. Medic can remove the blocks any time they are ready. They seem to be showing some interest now that life has settled down some. Give it a couple of more months and I bet they go for it. Cloth is the biggest problem. The dampness here rots anything that is not kept dry almost instantly. Even the synthetics get a layer of black or dark green mold before you can turn around. Chlorox is easy enough to make by running current through seawater, but it is listed as an environmental hazard and we really don't want to start over doing it wrong from the beginning.

Hence our discussion of the day, "We have to have trade goods. There is no way around it. We need things that we can't make here easily. I for one do not want to go back to grass skirts and skins for warmth."

"Oh, but Pilot, you would look so attractive in a grass skirt." Jackal

gets up and does a horrible imitation of a hula and is booed down.

“Lots of abalone out there. Art work always does better than raw material. Gives us something to do when it is raining too.”

“Scrimshaw. That would be fitting with the history of the place and fits right in with our setup here. Make seal bone knife handles and such.”

“Use the abalone for inlay. Put it into cypress wood and it will look really nice.”

“All of these are easy for other people to imitate. Would not be long before we are out numbered and out competed. Another question is whether or not it will get past the Reagent. We need permission for any kind of industry and so far, if it does not help with the food supply it pretty much gets shot down.”

“That's just because we are the first to be under China. Once things calm down they will relax some. There is art in China you know.”

“He's right. For the moment we are China's bread basket and the more we help in that direction the less the authorities will bother us.”

“Only don't do too good. They they will want to take over and duplicate what we have worked out everywhere else. Bureaucracies never learn that each place is unique and different.”

“Keep the art work small, extremely well done and special. NOTHING mass produced. There are a lot of pears back in China who would pay a fortune for rare and exotic art work.”

“With our getting a pittance of what they sell it for in China I bet.”

“You want to take it there yourself? We need to be as self sufficient as we can. Only use the artwork to pay for things we can't make ourselves.”

“Shared? Or each to his own?”

“Why would you even ask that Powaqa? You insult us.” Everyone looks concerned.

“Good, then your heads are still in the right place. Once someone's work become special and personal, then the group will suffer and eventually fall apart. That is not to say you don't respect what others can do as no one can do everything.”

“Yes mother.” That gets them laughing at me. I have to quit pontificating. I roll my eyes and play along.

“What's for lunch?”

“Shoe leather and dried seaweed.” Old joke.

“Incoming! Places everyone.” Pilot has his hand to his com unit. Whoever is on duty spotted someone or the automatics did. “Right at the edge. Four people, two men and two women. Two animals seem to be with them. One is a large cat, Claw does not know what the other one is.”

“Customers or trouble?” Someone yells.

“Can't tell yet, but they are walking and do not scan as having weapons.” He turns to look straight at me. “The humans and the strange creature are carrying staffs.”

“Friends of yours Powaqa?” Xue is right next to me when she asks. She holds a hand to her belly. Way too early to show, but I can tell she is excited.

They come. She is silent to the others and rests on my staff. The rest of the group ignores her, not knowing. Pilot tries to ignore her, but I catch him staring all the time. I think he is not even aware he is doing it. Might have been a mistake to let him know. On the other hand it might be safer with at least the leader in on it. He has helped cover for me at times.

I know Br'thn. It will be good to see them again. Of course I could tell where they were at any time, but it still brings pleasure to see friends face to face.

“The Reagent and his party.”

“THE Reagent? Who invited him?”

“I did. Relax. He has heard of our fine establishment.”

“We are in the middle of nowhere. I don't buy it. I smell trouble.”

“Well, I would recommend bringing out our best stuff then. The ling cod you caught yesterday should look impressive.”

“The green one? Yeah, it's a beaut.” He looks sad. I am sure he was hoping to save that for us.

“Shit, we all look like road kill.” Dirt called that on account of he works in it all day, but hates it on himself. Our fussy dresser. He starts taking things off as he heads back to the rooms for fresh clothes. Others follow suit. Hard to believe he was a sap. On the other hand he was probably punished for bringing dirt into the room early on. Can't do anything but garden.

Pilot comes up to me, “Can you know, tweak me, so I don't have to leave?”

“You know I don't like doing that. They are walking. It will be fifteen minutes to half an hour depending on how much time the cat wastes sniffing things.” I smile.

“You sure?” I nod. He seems more nervous than the others. I should never have told him. I am left alone with Br'thn.

Sure you don't want to clean yourself up some too? Br'thn lifts off the staff for a moment and instantly cleans herself before setting down again. She is now nearly sparkling. I notice that I am too. Don't think this robe has ever been this clean.

Thank you Br'thn.

You are welcome. I have been trying to teach her how to be polite.

Tiger comes up to me not looking a whole lot different from before.

“What? This is the best I have. Not good enough?”

“You are fine Tiger.”

“Why are they walking? A Reagent should be in some fancy car or something.”

“Nice day, the rains have stopped. Besides, you see more walking. If I remember right he likes to walk many kilometers each day. Good runner too.”

“Shit, you know the Reagent personally?”

“I would watch your language. Yes, we used to be roommates during some classes we took together.”

“This was from before he was Reagent?” I nod. Others have started to arrive. About as clean as we get.

Pilot nudges me, “Cheater.”

I push him back, “I didn't do it.” He raises an eyebrow. I nod.

“What is that thing?” Pilot looks freaked out.

“Simone! Over here!” I call out. She comes running and stops just short of me to bump her head into my belly. I scratch her behind her ears. She raises her neck feathers to be stroked some more. “How are you Simone?” She wields her staff more like a toy than a real staff, waving it in all directions.

“Iss fines Toces. Smells.” She can't say my name exactly. Different muscle structure than us.

“Go ahead. Look around. Stay out of the buildings till you are given permission and don't eat anything you are not offered.”

“Stjks”

“What did she say?”

“Basically, Okay in her native language. No exact translation.” Wait till she mind speaks them the first time. Aimee has tried to discourage her from doing that with strangers.

“Can we feed her?” Tiger and Jackal look enthralled. A giant lizard like creature that can talk. Quite shocking the first time you see her.

“Not too much. She will eat almost anything we will, but stay away from the sweets. Not good for her.” Just then a very large gray cat comes through our gate. “Well it is about time you showed up your highness.” Ghost looks to be nearly twice the weight I saw him last. I bet he DSD most of the way here.

Food now! Followed with a yeowl for benefit of the others.

“Yes your highness. Right away your highness.”

“The cat is not the Reagent is it?”

“He. No, don't worry, it has not gotten that far. This is Ghost.” Pilot's face goes white.

“It's okay to breathe Pilot. He doesn't usually bite. Unless of course

you try to be so stupid as to actually take food away from him.”

“THE Ghost?” I nod. He bows to Ghost, “Welcome your highness. I have heard so much about you. Please let me show you to the best we have.” He motions Fish over with hand waving. Ghost walks with Fish with his tail held high. Pilot comes back. I can guess who will get at least part of that ling cod now.

“There are five. I thought you said there were four?”

“There were four when Claw saw them. Where did the fifth one come from?”

“May have been hidden from view?” Tran Vu DSd in late. I doubt I have convinced him. The biostat does not miss much. Nor would Claw.

“Pilot, the Reagent is the one in black.”

“I sort of figured that out.” He whispers back.

“Do you mind if I greet them first?” I look straight at Pilot.

He sighs relief, “Please. Too many Powaqa in one place for me.”

“I thought you were used to entertaining dignitaries.”

“I had hoped to never have to do it again. I would rather be with the rest.”

“Go. I will cover for you.” He smiles, nods and takes off to push his way in to being a server. A reluctant pear for sure.

I walk up to the Reagent and bow. He bows back. I crack up laughing and give him a big hug, which is returned. I then proceed to hug the others as well.

“Did you all have a nice trip?”

“Beautiful country. Good farmland. But, I for one am not used to sitting that long.”

“You should have seen our faces when he first arrived. Pissed from having to ride in a car from the airport. He made quite the impression till we said who it was.”

“Not to mention the fifteen hour flight. My rear was sore. I should have been on a supersonic, but the carbon tax affects even Reagents.” He is smiling as he says this. “The worst part was pretending not to know anyone. I ached for TK7 like you would not believe.”

“We thought he was going to burst. So were we. All that ritual and all we wanted to do was ask questions.”

“I am afraid Hashra nearly lost it when she saw me. The journals were not kind.”

“I really thought it would all happen again.”

“They are getting nervous. Not every day the Reagent comes to our fine dining establishment.” We can talk later in other words.

Hei Long smiles and walks up to the servers. He carefully inspects the food. Pilot offers him a taste using the big spoon. Hei Long accepts. I

TP him telling him who Pilot is. He then steps back to address the servers.

“Please, put your spoons and forks down and come around to this side.”

They look very nervous. Cook is about to say something but I motion for him to be quiet. They all come around and face him.

“Good, now turn ninety degrees to your right.” Fish nearly messes that up, but Xue straightens him out. Maybe if Hei Long has said starboard.

“Now pick up a plate from the stack at the end and proceed to serve yourselves. I will do the same and everyone else will follow us.” Cook turns around to look. He is now first in line. “Really. Go ahead.” He motions him with his hands. Sure enough when Hei Long gets up to the pots he dishes himself some of each item and proceeds to sit down with the staff like he belongs here. He has changed.

The rest of the Powaqa mix themselves in with everyone else and take turns going through the line. As we usually hold meals we sit in random places. When Hei Long laughs at the story of how 'Pilot' got his name everyone relaxes and starts to tell our guests their own stories. Edited for security reasons.

Flowers is sitting next to me, “I really thought you were one of a kind Doc.”

“Each of us is unique and each of us is the same. They are all friends. You have nothing to fear.”

“From you? Of course not. But he is the Reagent and yet he wears a similar robe and carries the same kind of staff. His helpers are all just like you in what they wear.”

“We are all part of the same team. Only our roles are different. Just like here. We each do our part. No one expected Hei Long to end up as Reagent of this area, least of all him. Just the way it happened. Please do not hold that against him any more than you would hold Pilot's past against him, or mine against me.”

“Or mine against me.”

“Preciously.”

“Are you all Guardians?” I nearly lose it. Spitting out the water I am drinking.

“What? What made you think we are Guardians?”

“The description fits.”

“And when have you seen me 'DS' or 'TK' anything?” She read the books the same as everyone here. She is silent and staring right at me.

“Look Doc, we all knew from the day you arrived here that you were different. Things started to happen that should not have. Xue is pregnant

for God's sake. They are programmed, designed, never to be able to reproduce. It is how they can command such a high price for them, only 'they' can make more. I have told Medic that I want to be able to have children too. He said it would be no problem. I asked him if he would need to do the same to me that he did to Xue. He told me he never touched Xue. We all know his orientation and I have never known him to lie. Then there were other things.”

“No need to go on.” I sigh.

“Pilot knows doesn't he?” I nod. Shit, did I keep anything secret? Pilot would never tell, but we can all read his face. Open book as they say.

Then she really hits it, “May I touch you Br'thn?”

Okay?

“Yes, Br'thn. Okay.” I am almost shaking now. I never realized that Br'thn liked affection so much. I touch her all the time when we are alone of course. She must feel close to everyone here. Picked up my emotions and some of her own no doubt.

“Hold your hand just above her. Let her come to you.”

She carefully holds her hand above my staff. Br'thn lifts off slightly and bumps against her while purring.

“She is warm!” She learned that after the incident with Pilot. I had to explain to her that mammals were normally warm to the touch. Sauropods were only slightly warmer than room temperature on their skin. Their cores were warm, as were their brains and eyes, but most of the skin was cool.

“Thank you Doc and Br'thn.” She gets up and takes her empty plate with her.

Aimee comes and sits down next to me, “Do they all know?”

“I suspect that they are pretty sure they know. Flowers was not totally sure till she saw all of you come in the gate. They have all read the journals, so I guess it was only a matter of time. That was the weird thing. There was an immaculate printed copy here.”

“Printed? Mother! Sorry, we did not mean to blow your cover. At least we did not have to worry about journal readers. We had a different problem in New Atherton. The Mayor wanted to kick us out after the core incident. We had to 'convince' him we needed to stay. When Hei Long showed up it was a done deal as they say. Hei has changed a lot. You will like him much better now.” She smiles and gets up to go talk with George.

I say to myself, “I've noticed.”

The rest of the meal goes fine. Everyone helped with cleanup to the embarrassment of Cook and Xue.

“Where do we talk?” Indicating that right here might not be the best place. The rest of my new family are looking around for an excuse to leave politely.

George takes the lead though, “Please, everyone gather around. This concerns you possibly more than it does us.” We are learning. As TKs we could survive most anything, but they could not and what we do often impacts those around us whether or not we intended it.

“For those of you whom I have not talked to yet. I am George. To my right is Hashra, to her right is Hei Long and to my left is Tran Vu and Aimee. Doc you know of course. Thank you for your hospitality.” We each stood as we were named and now we all bow together.

“How do we know this is all real?”

“We normally limit our use of TK to prevent being 'seen' by the sats above us. We learned early on that we are being hunted. As long as we keep it small, quick and infrequent, we have gone unnoticed. There are ways around this under the right conditions, but I won't go into that now, as this place is not set up properly for that kind of demonstration.

So no one thinks we arranged a 'trick' ahead of time, pick one thing you would like to see and one of us will do that. How about you Pilot? Pick something to do?”

“Ah, no you don't. You could have worked it out with him ahead of time. We draw straws and the one who gets the shortest straw does the asking.”

“Jackal, you don't trust me. I am deeply wounded.” He feigns being shot.

“Not that Pilot. Just that there is too much at stake if we are wrong. All of us have been deceived at one time or another and we need to know they can do what it says they can do.” He actually has a copy of the third book in his hand. Appropriate, considering what we are up against.

They draw straws and Tiger comes up the winner.

“Go Tiger! Go Tiger!” They chant.

“Fine Tiger, come up here if you will. That's right. Stand next to me. Now I want you to ask for an effect, not a who. In other words, pick something that no human should be able to do and then one of us will do it. As each of us has different skills I would not want to embarrass anyone with a task that a particular person is not good at.”

Doc, can you hear us? We are coming in. Where do you want us to land? Br'thn and I are the only ones here tuned to their minds as the others do not have TP yet.

I hold up my hands for everyone to be silent, “Smith and Jones are coming in. They ask where they should appear.”

Tiger responds, “That works for me. Ask them to appear on top of

this table in front of me. One wearing a green hat and the other a red hat. On account it will be Christmas soon.” He looks pleased with himself. Everyone laughs at the thought.

“And how about...” Smith and Jones appear on the table before he can finish his thought. They are wearing leather clothes and moccasins. One has a green feathered Indian headdress and the other a red feathered one. Only they aren't really headdresses.

They stare right at Tiger with their hands raised in classic fashion and say quietly, “How paleface.” The headdresses unfold into Mack and Jack.

Tiger faints into George and Hashra's arms. The others are silent for a moment then cheer. Smith and Jones get off the table the normal way, setting the 'birds' down on the table. They go quiet again as the creatures unfold and look about.

“Itchy things. I never really liked wearing one.” He laughs.

“What are those things?” Tiger stutters out.

“Watch out, they eat fingers. They are birzards. They like nuts if you have any. The red one is Mack and the green one is Jack. We sort of messed with the colors to make the demo come out. Much warmer here Doc. Nice place you have.” Cute.

“Snowing up north.”

“You betcha.”

“Were is the Colonel?”

“She should be here anytime. She took the long way around. Also said she had some unfinished business.”

“This puts a lot of us in one place. Dangerous.”

“Not really. I doubt even Mr. Freeman would want to take us all on at once.”

“Divide and conquer.” They go to hugging the Powaqa and shaking hands with the others.

Come on Malak. We are all waiting.

Just a second. Almost there. Those directions you gave suck big time. Feel like I am doing a maze.

It is what the pathfinder said was the safest route.

I am at the rez in Sacramento I hope. Okay, now at the Ohlone lands in the hills near you. Here I come!

“Incoming!”

Malak comes out from behind a building as if she was always there. She is wearing a nomadic Kurdish outfit and looks quite stunning in the difference to all of the rest of us.

“Hot here.” She dusts some snow off of her shoulders and proceeds to lose a few layers.

“The veil Malak. Won't need that here.”

“Right.” She dissolves all of her clothing without thinking and then makes a robe like the rest of us.

“I see you have gathered a few new scars.”

“Helped me fit in. Only now it won't matter. I healed Nafi' before coming here.”

“Burning bridges?”

“You should talk.”

“Speaking of which, all that are coming are here. We can keep Dorothy and Ubuntu in the loop with TP. The locals know of us and George wants them included in the discussion.” She nods. They are all staring at her anyway.

“It's clobbering time.” She smashes her right fist into her left hand for effect.

“Maybe.” I am surrounded by military now. I look up. It is starting to cloud over.

I go to George, “Let's move into the lecture hall. It will be a little crowded as we do repair work in there now, but it will be out of the cold.” He agrees and we gather everyone up. Once inside we set up glow balls around to give more light and save H.

George begins, “Please, Pilot and your group. You are included in on this. Don't be shy. Here is what we know at the moment.

Hei Long thinks he has found the gateway that Mother used to reach us. Aimee and Hashra will confirm this if we go that route. A digger has also been spotted nearby. A D0 at that. Anyone have any ideas why she was left behind?”

“Have they left? It would seem to me there should at least be some sort of monitoring going on.”

“That's the strange part. You are right, but there was so much dust there it was obvious that no one had been there for some time. One room was nearly destroyed by some kind of nasty disinfectant. Actually corroded the metal in there. Other rooms were untouched. Nothing powered, though there was a lot of equipment, including the chair.”

“The chair?”

“Sorry. I was not raised to TK2 by the same people as the rest of the group. I had gotten in with a bad group. They apparently were agents of Mother, the e-mind mentioned in the journals. Anyway, I was raised to TK2 in that chair. Believe me you don't forget something that painful. If I had stayed with them they had promised to raise me to TK3. I am guessing that is as high as the machine there could do, as I never encountered anyone higher than that.”

“Where are the others who were raised by the chair?”

“Gone. We can find no trace of them. The chair the punitive gateway

are all surrounded by alpha sixty four nodes. The ones around the gateway are sort of fused together in a strange way.”

“You remember the announcement about turning in the nodes?”

“We did not have any, so it was sort of meaningless to us.”

“It wasn't to a lot of people. New Atherton was almost all alphas at one point. If it was not for the flood, it would probably have been entirely alphas. The flood took them out and with the alphas being on back order they decided to go back to the old nodes in the mean time. Fortunately they were still in a warehouse in Sacramento awaiting destruction. Probably what saved us when the accident happened.

It turns out the alphas have hidden codes and abilities. When activated in the right way they morph, set up a psiotic field to repel TKs and start a process we believe would end up a conscious Mother unit.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah. A TK3 would not have had a chance. Mother could not anticipate Hashra and I being there at just the right time and on a totally isolated unit. If it has been on the net. . . .”

“We would all be headed for the grinder right now.”

“If all it would take was one person to activate the nodes, why didn't it happen? They would only need to leave one person sympathetic to her here to do the deed.”

“Our guess was that they were waiting for greater penetration. The US took to the alphas right away. Every pear enclosure had them as they tried to always have the latest tech. In other countries institutions were slower to change, preferring a wait and see attitude. Let us be the guinea pigs. When the US went belly up, it slowed penetration even further.”

“But surely when you told everyone to turn them in it would be have been time to activate them or risk getting nothing.”

“Aimee developed a code that we spread as a bumper back to identify and isolate all alphas from the net before we made the announcement. Even if someone knew the activation method, it would have stopped at their center and not spread.”

“So, were any activated?”

“One. At the purported gateway. It was then deactivated afterwards. My guess is that they passed through the gateway to report on what happened.”

“Why the digger then?”

“Bait. Sooner or later someone who knew about the journals would notice it and word would get back to the Guardians.”

“Aren't you the Guardians, at least for our world?”

“That is not clear yet. None of us has been approached by a 'thn as of yet. Our guess is that they are waiting to see what happens with us.”

“Where are the real Guardians then?”

“We don't know. None of us has seen them for months. Five months to be precise.”

“That seems strange to set you up and then abandon you.”

“It does to us as well. Either they got into trouble of their own, or this is all a test.”

Pilot jumps in, “The diversity principle. They want us to be different for some reason.”

“They succeeded. We are all very different from the original group.”

“Not that different. Aimee is sort of like Barb. Malak is like Rachael and James. Ghost is here.”

He is laying on his back with his paws in the air. At the mention of his name he opened one eye and then closed it again. Poor baby.

“Certain talents would be needed regardless. Just remember the Guardians were given no help or understanding to start. They had to figure out most things on their own. In a lot of ways are better than they were at the same stage of development.”

“So, what's the problem? The alphas have failed. Seal the gate or destroy it and watch for any new ones that might form.”

“We don't know that is the only gate. It is the only one we have found. Would you have only one exit or entrance to an enemies location? I don't think so. There are other problems as well.”

Tell them about Pushy Paws.

“We have two members in another location who are communicating by TP. I am reminded to bring our last member into the discussion. Sauron has captured one of us. Her name is Pushy Paws.”

“The last Hopi. I had heard on the news that she had died.”

“A cover story. She went back to near the Third Mesa as we all went home to figure out what we were about. We were not gelling as a team. There were still cords tying us down to our roots. The original Guardians did not have this problem as the world as they knew it was totally gone at once from the Helper V plague. Most of us still had the hope that we could go back.

In fact some of my past is right here. Pilot was a patient of mine at one point. I worked with four others who are here now. And I have been working with them again over the last month.”

“Wait, why are you here? This is crazy. Go get her.”

“Not that easy. Sauron is using her as bait to set a trap to capture the rest of us. Only it hasn't worked the way he had hoped. One Mind distracted him at first and now Dorothy and Ubuntu are working with her to mess things up more. We learned early on what happened. Thanks to Aimee's discovery about how to counteract a limiter field, Pushy Paws

has been fine and has also been working to mess with his plans.

It seems Sauron has finally come to the logical assumption that he can't work alone. He has attempted to raise a TK himself. The problem is, is that he has either never done it before or has not done it successfully before. This latest experiment using his head administrator has apparently failed too. She is trapped along with Pushy Paws. Pushy Paws thinks he is using the situation to keep an eye on her. The assistant has no TK ability, so Pushy Paws has to maintain both of them with food, air and water. This keep her busy so Sauron can attempt another project."

"We know almost nothing of this latest project other than One Mind refers to it as an Abomination with a capital A. You all heard about the latest plague in New York and parts of New England." They nod.

"Sounds like the greenman plague from the reports and what we read in the journal."

"It is. One Mind cannot turn things on a dime and had no way to anticipate the Guardians interfering. When we happened, sporulating was no longer necessary, but plans had already been set in motion. Working with her we have done our best to minimize the effects, but over a million people were still changed and more have died being caught behind the quarantine line."

"So, what is this Abomination thing?"

"We don't know. None of us is willing to get near it with Sauron hanging out on the doorstep. What we do know is that it appears to be a sort of psiotic black hole. It sucks in psiotic energy like crazy. We even noticed that Sauron was affected when he attempted to get near it. He stays a ways away now. We think he is studying it to find a way to use it against us."

"Then he knows about all of you?"

"He has read the journals and the Chronicle of Sauron. We believe the Guardians made sure that he had. Since he made eight chambers with Pushy Paws now in one of them, we believe that he thinks that he is dealing with the Guardians themselves and not us."

"So, that is good, there are more of you."

"Any one of the Guardians, being TK9, paired with an adult 'thn and with twenty five million years of experience would be more than all of us put together."

"Wouldn't it be obvious that he does not have a Guardian at Third Mesa then?"

"Pushy Paws was never mentioned as being a Guardian, but rather as the Gateway. Part of the reason we think she is still alive. He does not want to ruin his own chance to use her to expand his power beyond earth if he can."

“Or to escape if there is another asteroid.”

“Okay, so what do you want to do about all this and why let us in on it?”

“This location is mentioned in the journals. Sooner or later he will come here, even if just because of curiosity. All of you are in danger for that reason alone. We felt you had a right to know, so you could decide for yourselves what you wanted to do. I know some of you have set your hearts on staying here and making a go of it. Believe me, my own fantasies about what I had hoped for in my own life are totally ruined now.”

“We are no threat to him.”

“He might not care. Once all of this goes down he may lash at anything near him. And anything near him could be where ever he goes to try and gather information on us.”

“We could move all of you to a new location and let you start over there. We have the resources and the political ability to affect almost any change you want. As Reagent I could even set you up in New Atherton as peers.” He grins and that gets as nervous laugh out of a few.

“I could never be a parasite, even if it meant spending the rest of my life in luxury.” Claw sighs. “All that rich food, a warm bed and hot bath. No, it would eat at my soul too much. A sailor's wife I'll be.” She sighs again for effect to a round of boos and hisses, then laughter.

“Your group sure laughs a lot.” I nod and smile.

Cook gets up, “I am sick and tired of bullies and Sauron is nothing but a big bully. For the first time in my life I am happy. I am home. I'll not be leaving for any reason.” A cheer goes up with unanimous agreement. There are tears in Pilot's eyes. His life has been fulfilled at this moment.

"Here is our idea. With Sauron on this pet project, chances our we have some time. Sauron has been here for sixty five million years. He is ours as much as we are his."

"An enemy we know, almost as much as ourselves."

"That leaves two we don't know. Mother and the Abomination. In a way Sauron may be taking care of one for us."

"We probably know more about Mother than he does. Aimee and Hashra have certainly learned as much as possibly about the nodes that we think make her up. Even if he has a team of engineers on it, they won't see as much as a TK6 can. Especially ones with the proper knowledge."

"So, your idea is to go after Mother and leave the Abomination to Sauron. You know he will try and use the Abomination against all of you and possibly eventually against us as well."

"If Mother takes over, Sauron's world will seem like heaven. You

have read the journals. Do you want to face the grinder at forty? For even a minor infraction? She came from somewhere. How many worlds has she taken over? How many more will she succeed at if we don't do something? Sauron is a 'smiggle' compared to her." Everyone is quiet.

"That is not to say that we would all leave and abandon you to him. One question is who do we take and who stays behind."

"Aimee and Hashra go for sure."

"That puts both of our experts into one basket."

"If you go into battle at half strength you can loose too. It is clear she is a formidable enemy."

"Who else goes?"

"I go."

"Reagent, won't you be missed? You are the only one in any kind of an official public position."

"Two reasons. I found the gateway and she will be expecting me. I am one of hers."

"You can't be in two places at once."

Tran Vu comes up, "Maybe he can. I am fluent in Chinese. I could take your place temporarily as Reagent."

"How would you get past the scanners? You are Asian, but that is not enough. They are probably already suspicious of your little trip here. They will be doubly sure the right person comes back."

"Oh, that. No problem. I've been practicing. I remembered from the journals that it was possible. What better thing for a polyglot than to also be able to impersonate others to gather information." Slowly he starts to look more and more like Hei Long. I can 'see' what he is doing at the subatomic level, but even with normal vision it is impressive. In a few minutes he is Hei Long's twin, right down to the black Chinese robe and Reagent emblems.

Hei Long looks him over, "You could be a very dangerous person Tran Vu."

"Reagent to you." Even his voice is the same. "A detailed brain scan would not match, but it is rare that anyone is subjected to that."

"Who else is going?"

"You need to take Pushy Paws. It is not fair to leave her in some hell hole. Where you are going Sauron cannot follow. She will be safe there."

"If she goes, then Lisa dies. So that means that Lisa has to be brought out as well. We are not sure she is not still loyal to Sauron. Do you want to take care of her or explain why she is here if he does show up?"

"Then she goes with you also. If you can change into someone else, can you fake your own deaths like in the journals?"

"Lisa already should appear dead to Sauron. Yes, we could do that

for Pushy Paws as well. We will have to coordinate this well. Timing will be critical so we don't draw his attention with the psiotic activity."

"I have been thinking about that. If you can fake bodies can you fake a 'psiotic' signature? Something small and portable?"

Hashra's eyes light up and she pulls a device out of her pocket, "I have just been playing with that idea. It is not perfect and any TK5 could see the difference once they got close enough."

"Same with what we use in the field. In Vietnam I heard the Viet Cong used to hide pots of urine in trees to fool the American sensors. In Iraq we had dummies that could be remotely controlled. It takes the hit instead of one of us. Even looks right on a thermal sensor. How many of those things do you have?"

"Just the one, but we can make more."

"The UNA could help there. If we take back the design and make more of them at each location we could spread them throughout the country."

"What kind of controls can you build into them? Something random would be nice. Stays on for just long enough to get his attention and then goes off till some other random time. It will appear as if a whole bunch of people are DSing all over the place at once. Put some on air planes and trucks and they keep moving too."

"He will find some eventually."

"Yeah, but he will have no idea which ones are real and which ones are these things."

"Doc and Br'thn should go."

"Huh? Why?"

"Yeah, why? Shouldn't I stay here to face Sauron if he comes?"

"No, you should not face Sauron. Alone you would not stand a chance and we can't afford to lose Br'thn."

Br'thn not go with Sauron.

"He is very tricky. Too risky."

"She's right. Too risky. You two come with us. We may need as much fire power as possible or it won't matter anyway."

"Mother is an expert at anti-psiotic limiters." A feeble attempt.

"And we are all experts at working around them, even Br'thn." She is actually the fastest.

"Make them look like jewelery."

"What?"

"Those devices that emit a psiotic signature. If people wear them and trade them, not only will they spread like crazy, but they will be on a person. Easy to see that one in an empty field is not real, but one on a human will be much harder. I bet even TKs are fooled by their eyes from

time to time."

"That could be lethal for anyone who does. He may not wait to find out they are not real TKs. I could never do that to anyone."

"I would wear one."

"So would I."

Pilot gets up, "This is not Iraq. This is serious." He pauses, "Give me one too."

"When he sees thousands of these things going off all over he will stop. What would be the point?"

"Did you not read the journals?! He would gladly kill thousands."

"Better than enslaving everyone on the planet."

"No one goes into battle expecting zero losses on either side."

"I don't like it."

"Welcome our reality Doc."

"Pushy Paws could join Angpetu. He would not find her there. Heck, even Mother would not find her there."

"Good, can I go too."

"NO!" Darn and it started out such a nice day.

United Nations Net

A ceasefire has been negotiated between the Israelis and the combined Arab coalition. This was done after Israel shot down an Iranian missile with a small nuclear device in the Red Sea thereby stopping all shipping for the next several months till the radiation dilutes out. Israel also demanded portions of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in exchange for peace saying that the next missile that crosses into Israeli space will mean all out annihilation of the Arab world.

Dino World

The rest all thought I was crazy to want to stay here. They were all so eager to get back to our earth and their own lives. The truth is there is no real home. What was that old Zen saying that Malak used, but I don't think she actually understood? Oh yeah, where ever you are, there you are. You can't run away from yourself.

The adults are gone. They went back down to the warmer southern enclave which is not so simple as here. They have actual villages down there. Doc and Malak raised me to TK7 before they left themselves. The idea was I should have TP capability if I was to be here alone. TK8 would have been nice, but they were not sure Br'thn could do that safely yet, not withstanding what happened to the Doctor. It would be better if there was at least one human TK9 around before making the attempt.

"Down Bai. Now! Really. I mean it. Down!" He is a handful. He really wants to be outside with the others but there is nearly twenty five centimeters of snow and hungry raptors out there. Most of the wildlife outside has hibernated by digging down into the ground. The earth is soft enough, at least till it freezes. A lot of the smaller lizards have developed some kind of antifreeze. The Saurpods and the raptors are the only things moving. Even the birzards are gone. They flew south just like their E2 counterparts. I saw a lot more overhead during migration that I ever saw on the ground. Sounds like they are more common elsewhere. Everyone else has learned how to dig for a living. Not that the raptors won't take down a young Saurpod if they can. I would call this the time of the mammals. They are busy burrowing under the snow and in fallen logs. With less competition from all the reptiles they are finding all the buried seeds and probably turning the tables on the lizards and attacking them while they sleep.

It was no wonder that Simone ate one of Tsing's kittens without thinking. There are so many mice and rabbit like creatures that the raptors

and Saurpods could never keep up. Nature's balance. The Saurpods are omnivores, but there is not much plant life worth eating this time of year. The adults did store some away in pits dug into the ground of the sleeping chambers. The juveniles will finish this and the pits will be ready for occupants by next spring. Eating all that fibrous stuff raw does have a side effect. During the frequent storms they all cram in here. Pretty tight quarters for gaseous dinos.

Both Dorothy and Hei Long are excellent fabric artists. I love that term, fabric artist. Anyway, I spend my time doing embroidery and trying to teach the young ones simple math and engineering while I work. I worked on many farms and we had no specialists. We had to fix things whenever we could. I build toys and the youngest ones use the toys. The older ones I have trying to make them. The oldest ones try to make larger versions or actual useful devices. Some are quite smart. They look so cute running around with their tool belts and tools barking orders at each other. Everything is made from natural materials. I am not going to start this world out on the path of artificial non biodegradable materials.

Some would say that I am spoiling this group. Maybe. They certainly are not being selected by raptor claws and teeth to be the strongest Sauropods on the planet. I like to think that I am making smarter ones instead. Who would have thought that little ol Angpetu would be teacher?

It is going to rain soon. Those clouds look real menacing. We just had a storm a few days ago. The water running out of the far corner is going to break through this time. That will mean severe weakening of a major support structure. Might even be big enough for a small raptor to get in. I could fix it of course, but why throw away a perfectly good learning opportunity. I have told them this corner would be a problem, but they would rather play games or make things.

"Hello? Anyone home?" What? That sounded human. I have gotten so used to not having to scan I rarely do unless I suspect something.

"Over here!" I shout. Two people come through the main gate. Wasn't that closed? The young all run past me. Winters can be pretty boring. A crew gets to work closing the gate just as the rain starts. First a few drops at a time then in a moment a torrent. Two women in robes. I know one, but not the other. They come running into the open door I am holding.

"Angpetu let me introduce Lisa. Lisa this is Angpetu."

"Pleased to meet you Lisa. So it is over? Where are the others?"

"Just beginning. The two of us were trapped by Sauron and placed in a sort of dungeon at the base of Third Mesa. They rescued us and brought us here for safe keeping. Today is the first day the two of us have actually met, though we have talked for a month." She gives me the hand signal

for no TK. That means Lisa does not know. I sense something from her, but not sure what. She looks scared to death of the young.

"Bai come here. I want you to meet Lisa." Bai looks up and then comes over.

"Chinese for white?" She backs away from Bai. Not sure what he is and his teeth do look sharp.

"Bai Long is his full name. White dragon. When he was born he was nearly white. Now he doesn't look that much different from the others. Easier to tell apart when they get their adult head and neck feathers."

"How do you tell the young apart?"

"Bai god." He waits rather impatiently.

"Yes, Bai is good. Here is your treat." I give him a small piece of sap chow from my pocket. He runs off.

I turn back to Lisa, "Each voice is a little different. Manner, small changes in facial structures, just like us. And of course, scars. No one gets out of this world without some pain."

"Isn't that the truth."

"You two must be jet lagged and tired. Where is Jasper?"

"Actually no. We had no windows. You sleep when you get tired, which is pretty much all the time as there is nothing else to do. Sauron ate Jasper."

"I'm sorry Pushy Paws."

"Pushy Paws told me stories of growing up Hopi and I told her stories of growing up in Georgia." A friend has died and she thinks nothing of it. Interesting. Rude.

"Passed the time."

"She also told me of the Chronicles of Sauron. The one I know as Mr. Freeman."

"Lisa was his administrative assistant. Sounds like she pretty much ran things when he was gone."

"I had very strict guidelines I was to follow. Wasn't that hard. Greedy people are easy to deal with anyway."

"I would imagine. Men are pretty easy to deal with too." I grin. All that running with the young has actually made me better looking. Lisa grins and Pushy Paws rolls her eyes.

"Leave that to the young. I would rather use my brains."

"Hungry?"

"Do you have anything but sap chow. I am so tired of it."

"The water is excellent here at least. The food is well, not exactly three star, but maybe the three of us working together can work something out. Lets go to the kitchen area."

I show them the flour made from grain. An older one is working the

stone mill and checking the results. Another bin contains dried fruit and the last one contains roots that can be eaten.

"Any meat?"

"Only if someone brings in a rodent. They don't exactly have cute fuzzy rabbits here. Some of the smaller lizards are good. Just avoid the raptor. Way too stringy. The best we can do with those is soup stock. Anyway the lizards are all below ground now and hard to find and get to. You would expend more calories getting them that you would get from them. The grain is pretty high in protein. Vitamins are more of a problem. They can make most of them in their bodies and don't have the mammal disadvantage."

"What about insects?" I am surprised she suggests them. Maybe there is more to her than I get from first impressions.

"Those get eaten by the finder and never make it back here."

"How do you cook things then?"

"Two ways. The first and easiest is to wrap whatever you want around a stick and hold it over the fire. The second are these stones here. Placed over the fire they get hot enough to cook a flat bread. Mixing ground roots or dried fruit in gives variation. Watch how they do it."

We watch as Izzel scoops up some batter in a clay cup, adds dried fruit pieces and some nuts. She then greases the stone with some fat and then pours it out the batter on the stone to bake and bubble. The grease prevents sticking and once one side is done Izzel grabs the bread and expertly flips it over. A moment later it is done.

Izzel brings it to us to sample before turning back to make more. She has a stack growing to one side.

"Sort of like fry bread. The fruit and nuts are a nice touch. Not the rocks though." Pushy Paws spits one out. "Kinda hard on the teeth."

"I have heard that was a problem in early cultures. Much better than sap chow though."

"Were you born pear?" I try and be polite.

"Sort of. More middle class and then parents who were lucky to get in on the real estate boom of the nineties. Once you get to a certain point it just grows by itself. Your renters basically buy the stuff for you. After business school I convinced them to diversify. Lucky there too. The real estate bubble burst, but we only lost about a fourth of our worth. Then when the farms came back we cleaned up again. If your assets are worthless but not costing you anything, hold them till they are not. Anyway to answer your question, I always worked hard, but never really had to worry about anything. I guess that makes me a pear."

"Even when working for Sauron?"

"I always had daddy to fall back on. In some ways it probably

helped. I could play it much looser than those who really needed their positions. Of course I did not realize who I was really working for or I would have been scared to death."

"The question we have for you, is are you still working for him?"

"Are you crazy? No one puts me in a horrible hot stinky cell and claims me as a follower. I quit."

Her physiology does not match her words. I TP Pushy Paws.

"I see what you mean," she answers. "We have time. Possibly the rest of our lives." Since we are essentially immortal barring accident, that could be a while.

"What do you mean?"

"If Sauron wins dear, we are here forever. If he looses then the others will rescue us. That simple."

"Surely he will find us here. How many places can hid this many GM creatures?"

"Lisa, they are not GM, all natural. Do you remember what the top of the Mesa looked like?"

"Sort of. I did not pay much attention. Mr. Freeman said he needed me and suddenly I was there. The journals mentioned something called DS, but I never thought I would experience it."

"How did you get in and out of the cell?"

"I was unconscious when I arrived in the cell and again when I was removed. So, no idea really."

"The storm is letting up. Time to show Lisa the edge of the Mesa."

It is a short walk of no more than a kilometer but both have trouble keeping up with me.

"Wait up Angpetu. We did not exactly get much exercise when we were in the cells."

"And I am not as young as I used to be." She is as young as she wants to be, but I play along.

I grab a branch that looks about right. Taking a knife out of my pocket I trim it and very quickly make her a staff of sorts.

"Thanks, that helps."

"Bai, don't push." He rushes past us, knowing the trail well. I often come this way to look out over the mesa edge. We slowly make our way. Lisa is not so bad off, not being as old and not being in the cell as long. I suspect she also worked out to pass time. I am not sure what to make of her or what to do with her. It is clear she lost a lot of weight in that cell. Her skin has not had time to tighten up yet.

We finally make it to the edge just as the sun is about to go down. Beautiful.

"Lisa this is about where the library to hold the Chronicles would be.

Out that way would be were Flagstaff should be. From here we should see lots of lights at this time of day. There should be a road below us that the tourists used to take to get to the top of the Mesa in the old days. I used to live in a home over that way made of flat stones."

"I was unconscious. You could have brought me anywhere and I would not know the difference."

"Lisa, you need to understand, we are not on earth anymore. Sauron cannot find us here, because he does not even know of this world. It is not in his solar system even. No scientist has ever been here or even knows even theoretically how to get here."

She shrugs and starts looking around. Not much to see.

This should be interesting. Scan who is behind that group of trees. Our voices have woken her up.

"Lisa, I would come back this way slowly. Do not make any sudden moves."

"Why? Is there a bear out there?" She tries to see better by squinting into the twilight.

"Not exactly. Come back here with us." Bai is hiding behind me, he knows. I raise a staff. Never mind how I got it.

She turns her back on the creature watching us and comes back to us just as the creature charges. There is a horrendous roar. I raise my staff, as does Pushy Paws. Lisa runs behind us without looking behind.

"Be gone or suffer our wrath." I shout. Most of the raptors know of us. They are not stupid. A set of teeth snap just where my head was a moment before.

"Some are not as smart as the others. You would think that getting to this size would make a difference."

"She must be very hungry." Pushy Paws gives her a real good whack with her staff. It breaks over her snout.

"It's going to eat us. Do something."

Time to see what she's got.

"What do you suggest princess who does not believe we have left earth?" I give her another whack with my staff, which does not break. She is getting more annoyed than discouraged. Timing is everything and Malak, Hei Long and the twins drilled us till we were ready to die.

"Mr. Freeman did something to me. Let me try." She concentrates. The creature suddenly looks confused and lashes out at random. "Ow, ow, ow!" Lisa doubles over in pain. The creature zeros in on the sound. This time I make use of a little more TK and give the raptor a headache. It roars and backs off, then decides we are not worth it and takes off. I will keep a scan up to be sure she does not follow us and try again. Once she is a safe distance away I give her a few more TK whacks on the

behind.

"That was interesting. Are you a witch? Casting a confusing spell?"

"I have no idea what I did, only that it gives me a terrible headache and I have no intention of doing it again. Please do not put me in danger like that again."

"I did not see you taking swings at her. Even Pushy Paws did more than you did hiding behind us."

She is shaking, "That thing would have eaten me."

"Probably. She was certainly hungry enough. Still think you are on earth? That was not even the biggest creature around here. There are mjckles further south that weigh over five hundred kilos. Vegetarian but could still get mad enough to squash you easy enough."

"Just take me back to the whatever it is."

"Home? Sure. Wait till you check out the beds."

"Better than the cells anyway. Well, at least a little better." Pushy Paws adds.

"I don't sleep. Well, not much anyway." She is constantly looking around. Dark enough now she won't see much. Trips a couple of times over branches in the path. A moment later, "I need to pee."

"Go ahead. No one is stopping you."

"Out here?"

"What did you do in the cell."

"What I had to do. I am not digging any more pits with my bare hands."

"We are not in a cell, just pull down your pants and do it. We are all girls, well except Bai and he has seen ladies before. Only six months old and not interested yet."

We wait for her to do the deed. By the time we get back she is quiet and not complaining any more. Or so I thought. I bring her to her room.

"In my cell there was a light at least." Pushy Paws shrugs. Softly.

"Do you see one here? We have oil lamps, but they don't give much light." I turn to Bai, who is still hanging around. "Bai, go get a lamp please."

"Two?"

"One and don't count on that in the future." Bai takes off at a run. She sees quite well in this low light.

"What did she say?"

"He wanted two pieces of sap chow and I am giving one."

"They bargain for services?"

"Some do. Most don't care. Ah, here he is." I pull out a flint kit and strike it to start the lamp. Takes a few goes before the wick takes. Yellow light with a lot of thick black smoke. "Keep your hair and clothing away

from it and you will have light for most of the night. We usually don't waste fat for this purpose, so get used to being in the dark at night. Meditate or whatever. We are going to our own spaces and bid you a good night. Oh, by the way. Others share this space and are free to do so. You have no right to kick anyone out." Little eyes are looking in from the door. They huddle together for warmth. She settles down and wraps the blankets around herself. Blankets are a luxury but I just could not watch the little ones being so cold they got dopey.

"It stinks." She sniffs the blankets.

"I did not know you were coming or I would have sent them out to be cleaned. Get used to it dear. It is all we will get."

Bai, stay with her tonight and make sure she does not get into trouble.

Baby human?

"He got that right." Pushy Paws laughs. I included Paws in on the discussion. "We need to talk."

We go off to a far corner and then up the wall to the watch tower. Water is starting to pool at the bad corner. Once it undercuts the earth there the support for that corner will be gone.

"Lisa is an extrovert. She would not shut up in her cell. Part of it may have been fear, but I think she really needs to be in contact with others constantly."

"And a control freak. There is no doubt in my mind that Sauron is an extrovert too. He chose someone like himself. I don't trust her. She is playing way too dumb to have been his assistant. Sauron cannot sit still. He was constantly flitting in and out checking on things here and there. He may be the micro-manager type, which would explain why Lisa did not actually do that much other than pull the strings as he directed.

Never mind that for the moment. Let me get you caught up on what is happening. I only just got it all myself, so this may seem a little confused. Sauron has got something going in New York that has everyone frightened, including OM. Dorothy and you-know-who are helping to keep an eye on it. A group is going to go after Mother. They think they have found the portal or gate she used to attempt to infect our world. That has failed for the moment by the way. Aimee and Hashra found out her dirty little secret and have stopped it. Everyone else is going to try and distract Sauron with some trick or something."

"Lisa is sleeping. Out like a bug. Didn't she say she did not need to sleep any more?"

"Like I could handle that in a cell next to me. No way. I removed the sleep block first thing. Otherwise I would be totally mad right now."

I laugh, "I can't imagine you mad. You of all of us have always

seemed the most calm and collected.”

“Don't give me that noble savage cliché. I suffer on the inside just like anyone.”

“My turn. I have found something that might be of interest to the group. I wish they had stayed long enough for me to tell them about it.” I DS it from my hiding place. Anything shiny gets the little ones attention. They would have torn it apart for sure. I set the box down on the floor and open it.

“Do you want me to make a glow ball?”

“Better if we don't. Would attract attention, though I am sure everyone is asleep or at least pretending to be.” I let her scan the contents.

“If I did not know any better I would say this was a Mother node. Aimee or Hashra would know for sure. A very old and severely damaged one. Looks like it was crushed and left out in the weather for years at least. Have you tried to activate it?”

“Heavens no. I suspect that is what she would want. Here is my theory. She sends these things through her portal device by the millions. Some of them land in places such as this who see it merely as something shiny. It gets set up on an altar or torn apart for trinkets. Some land on worlds that cannot even support intelligent life and it is totally ignored. Those are both dud worlds. Once in a while one lands on a world that does have intelligent life that does see it as more than an artifact and decides to figure it out. On a few of those worlds the tech is actually high enough to start it. Those are the jackpot worlds. Upon activation it immediately sends a signal back to home saying pay dirt, come and get it.”

“Scary thought. She might even send these at intervals to worlds that show promise. They probably come through initially active, recording air and life conditions around it. You never know what part of a planet it could land on either. Imagine if this thing had landed on the ice at the south pole or more likely in the ocean.”

“So why haven't they shown up all throughout our history. Intelligent beings, good conditions. All she had to do was wait till the tech caught up. She would want to be there just as it hit the right place so she could take over the easiest. Higher tech than her and they could easily defeat her.”

“Probably has psiotic sensors as well. She seems to really hate anything psiotic not under her control. Hei Long mentioned that when he was upgraded to TK2 it was very painful. All I got was a headache. The process itself was not bad. On the other hand when Sauron tried to do Lisa she was in horrible pain, screaming her head off. Probably why she does not remember much.”

“Sauron may have done that for the sheer pleasure of inflicting pain. Sexual if you ask me. Some of the matings here can get pretty rough. No one comes away without a few new scars. I'm sure it was worse sixty five million years ago.”

“Maybe, or maybe because he was not tuned psiotically to the kind of life he was upgrading. Lisa may not even be a good candidate for all we know. The journals mention that not everyone can or at least some can't without a great deal of work and knowledge on the part of the one doing the upgrading.”

“So Mother, more in tune with her own creations, whom we know cannot be upgraded, does it just a little bit off. Makes sense. She would not have had much practice with our form. Explains why she can only raise them to TK3 and not beyond.”

“That we know of. Could be a technical limitation also. No one shows all their cards in poker. I was hoping that once I got out of that cell I would be free for a bit. I need to fly so bad. Never thought I would say that, but being trapped does something to you.”

“Simple enough to arrange. We place a shield around Lisa, you take off for a bit. Come back when you are ready. Being a seven means I can communicate and keep track of you over this continent at least. If you really get into trouble I'll come to your rescue.”

“What about the prohibition about leaving the mesa?”

“I am not suggesting that you go barging into their villages waving TK around and making a mess of things. There are lots of areas that are empty where you should not cause any harm. Even a six can stay out of harms way and still 'see' what is going on. Besides, at night, who is going to see you flying above the clouds? You don't see any Guardians around here do you and certainly none of the rest of our group.”

“Still, it feels a bit naughty, like forbidden fruit.”

“Please, you've earned it. Who else would have put up with Sauron for that long under those conditions? We all owe you a big one. Go, before I DS you to some random location and make you find your own way back.”

“Speaking of which, could you get us home if you needed too?”

“I don't know the path. I could certainly get us off this world, but where we would end up is anyone's guess.”

“Better not try that unless it gets really nasty.” I nod. “Do you have any more of the flat bread? Just a sample to dupe. I am really tired of sap chow myself.”

“You don't need to eat you know. Your body will take care of itself just fine.”

“I know, but I still enjoy eating. Nothing much else a body like this

can enjoy any more.” She lifts up her sagging breasts and we both laugh. I think it is rather nice not to have to think about that any more. She can be anything she wants, why be seventy something? Oh well, to each their own. I laugh to myself. I have the body of a twenty year old now, but am not much older than that myself.

Pushy Paws pops out. I DS the device back to the hiding place then go down the steps and back to my needle point. Nearly done with a big piece I am working on. It shows this compound against the mesa, with the little ones scattered about, playing, hunting and resting.

World Health Net

The quarantine in New England may be lifted soon. The ones affected have all dissolved in the last storm. There have been no new cases of what some are calling 'greenman' disease after a sequence in a book making the rounds on the Sci-Fi Net. The author has not been found to comment on how they were able to describe the disease so precisely. Some are worried that the plague was manufactured by, or someone known by, the author and he is being sot by authorities. If anyone knows the whereabouts of one calling themselves 'Yingui', please notify us immediately.

Into the Looking Glass, Qingzhou City, China

“She had trackers all over her. She said she was brought into a lab where they tortured her for a few days before being released.” Doc's TP is coming in handy already.

“Our tech, or Mother tech?” Aimee asks. Good question.

“Ours. I am guessing Sauron has a group nearby. Fair amount of industrial activity. Would be easy to hide a lab. We need to decide whether or not to remove it before going through. I say leave it. If it helps bring Sauron through the gate, so much the better. He needs to see we are not the enemy.” Hei Long has not changed that much. Still spoiling for a fight.

“Do we really want to be fighting Mother and Sauron at the same time? What about Br'thn?”

“Do you really think they will not notice when the gate is activated? It must take a lot of power for an artificial gate to work and stay open long enough to put people and objects through. We only open a gate for a fraction of a fraction of a second and that is hard enough.” Come on guys quit arguing over details and let's get on with this.

“She is right you two. It won't matter. Let's get the gate up and then DS her here ASAP. I don't want to be exposed any longer than we need to be.”

“We don't even know if it works.”

“I am almost done with the power supply. Hashra, have you severed all the connections to the local net?” I finally gave up and just sever everything in a wide radius of this room, including the infamous chair.

“All done.” Now comes the scary part.

“Everyone stand back and be prepared to bug out if it goes crazy.” She hand fits a psiotic power supply into the carriage she has made that

leads to the door frame.

“Nothing happened?”

“The unit is powered. I can see the nodes are working just fine.”

“Well, the room on the other side looks the same, so it can't be working. Here I'll throw something through it.” Hei Long picks up a metal scrap and heaves it through with TK. It promptly disappears.

“Strange, how come the room on the other side looks the same? Even the foot prints match up.”

“DS is a dimensional shift. The gate will be an infinitely thin interface. I guess normal light can pass through it just fine.”

“Only it means that anyone going through is flying blind. Who knows what is on the other side.”

“Bring our guest in. She has been through it before. Maybe she knows what is on the other side.”

“Good idea. Communicating with her now. She is ready. Just wanted to say good bye to her housekeeper friends. Boy were they surprised to find out she is at least as smart as they are.”

I smile, “Take nothing for granted.”

“Here she comes, make some space. Not exactly tiny.”

We all step back and suddenly a D0 appears in the space.

“Time to go home.”

“Iss activic?” Her English is not that good, strong accent.

Considering what she has to work with for a mouth it is amazing it is this good.

“Yes, please proceed.” She unfolds and becomes narrow enough to squeeze through. I was sort of wondering how she would accomplish that. She disappears right at the where the interface is. I can see it as sort of a psiotic shimmer near the edges of her body as it passes. She is gone.

Hei Long steps up to go next. I hold him back, “How do we get back?”

Aimee holds up a second power supply, “Bringing an extra one just in case. I wanted this already to go in case she is able to limit us on the other side.”

“In that case, everyone make flashlights, emergency gear, food and water too. We have no idea what is on the other side.”

“Except that both sides of this gate probably know it is active now. We don't have all day folks.”

“Doc, you've been hanging out with jar heads too much.”

Hei Long hefts a pack onto his back and goes through.

“We have company coming.” I scan and see unmarked trucks pulling up and lots of armed people getting out.

“We know what is on this side at least. Time to go.”

Br'thn darts away from Doc and goes though. She appears a moment later beside him.

“What?”

Safe on other side. Go now.

“She got back on her own. That was very brave of you Br'thn. Thank you, but please do not do that again without saying something first. We worry about you.”

“Doc, go now!” I push him and Br'thn through and follow him. Aimee is right behind me. The sensation is similar to the trip from E2 to E3 and back. I can almost see the path myself, but then it gets complicated and I lose it. I immediately get out of the way of Aimee coming through behind me.

“All clear on this side. Only the excavator is within a kilometer of us. Br'thn, can you go back and pull the power supply? We really don't need a whole lot of armed people coming through right behind us. Be careful. Guns will hurt but probably not kill you.”

Br'thn go.

She returns almost immediately with the power supply which I take from her, “Better if there are two of us with one of these.” Aimee nods.

“I used a psiotic power supply out of convenience. It will not take them long to rig up a conventional one. They can use the disabled one the Mother group left behind as a model.”

“That will take hours at best. Still it would be better not to be waiting here for them to come through.”

“Br'thn could get us back. What would happen if we dissolved this one. Would the other one not work then?”

“There is no power on this one currently. Disconnected in fact. I don't think they depend on each other. Just easier if they appear in the same location on each world. Even this building looks similar.”

“Would prevent the disorientation of moving to a totally foreign surroundings.”

“Outside is certainly not the same. Where is our round one going?”

Doc concentrates, “She says she is going to the nearest work center to report in for a new assignment.”

“Do we follow her or strike out on our own? A lot of activity around us. Farms south of us and a lot of industry to the east. The forest looks pretty much intact. Even the air smells better here. She is heading south west it looks like. A large building about two kilometers away must be where she is headed. I scan all kinds of GMD people inside.”

“Or we split up and meet back here say an hour from now. Doc, you and Br'thn stay in contact with TP. If anyone goes off line DS the rest of us to you immediately. We can all scan further than we can get in an hour

by walking and walking is less likely to draw attention to ourselves.”

“What about language? None of us speak Mother, nor can we read and write it. How do we communicate with people we meet?”

“That is one area I wish the journals said more about. They do mention that certain types of forms have different means of communicating. They needed to use 'trans' units sometimes to do so. Since Doc and Br'thn will not be limited in that way I suggest they follow the excavator to the center. The rest of us stay out of the way of workers and observe. Mother knows a whole lot more about us than we know about her.”

“I don't like the idea of being alone in this place. It already gives me the creeps. I would rather that Hashra and I stay together and head for the industrial section. We do better as a team anyway and we are the most tech oriented.”

“Well Doc and Br'thn make another team and I don't mind going it alone. I will take the farm areas. Not likely to run into much trouble there.”

“We all have the forms of the housekeeper units. Might be best if we look like them.”

“Not me. I am going as an alpha.” Hei Long grins as an enormous penis bulges from his groin.

“Oh please. We don't know if she still even follows that pattern. It may have been a hundred thousand years since the time of the journals. Just be ready to adapt. And Hei Long, put that thing away before you hurt someone.” Good for you Doc. I think Hei Long was just teasing anyway. He got the reaction he wanted though.

“Personally I have never found bigger to be better.” I can tease back.

“I wouldn't know.” Poor Aimee.

“I'm sorry Aimee, I had forgotten.”

She smiles, “Then at least I no longer look like a virgin.”

“With that body, hardly.” Doc bows gallantly. Aimee curtsies in return.

Hei Long laughs, waves his hand and takes off down the road towards the farms.

“If we are all walking, we had better make it two hours. I can keep everyone in the loop.”

“Good idea Doc. Tell Hei Long for us and good hunting.” He takes off after the excavator running to catch up.

“Well, we had best get on with this.” I turn to go.

“Hashra, this is going to sound a little weird, but may I ask you a favor?”

“Sure Aimee, what is it?”

“Could we, ah, that is, could we hold hands? I am scared to death. I am used to being in safe places.”

“Like indoors safe?” She nods. “Remember my fear of heights? I am sure the others told you. I would like to hold hands with you very much Aimee.” She smiles and offers her hand. I take it and we head off down the road.

“Follow the yellow brick road!” We both laugh swinging our hands into the air, then together we sing, “We’re off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz.” I still like the nineteen thirty nine version with Judy Garland the best. All the special effects of the later versions ruined it for me.

“Only we aren't going to find the wizard here.”

“We are the Powaq Aimee, we are the wizards. The Guardians would not have done all this if we had no chance. They allow bad things to happen to people if that is the choice of the people, but I don't believe they purposely set up situations to hurt people. Pushy Paws would say that as long as we are true to ourselves and our own beliefs, then we will have done our best.”

“Do you believe in God Hashra?”

“I suppose so, I have not given it much thought. Knowing what we do now has not made it any easier though. Who would have thought One Mind existed or even Ung, much less the magmotics.”

“Or Mother.”

“She,” I sigh, “is a little more believable than the rest. We created her. She is a reflection of us.”

“Some of the core code in her nodes goes way back. I see stuff in there that must have been coded in Fortran and Cobol. Not that it is now, just that it has the flow and feel of those languages. Someone took code that worked and translated it into what ever language she uses. She was built on what humans had done. The stories in the journals are right. She started as a core from an Armstrong unit and that started as code on some mainframe or UNIX box somewhere before that.”

“I am not surprised to learn that. Fits. Just remember she has been coding herself for a long time. The core beliefs may be from the Armstrong units, but she has been changed by what happened to her along the way too. Things that we are not totally aware of.”

“Jesus believes in God. He said OM is not God, the 'thn or anything that we have yet experienced. He believes the 'thn are seeking God. That is their ultimate goal. Sometimes they try and blackmail God though. They set up situations that if God cared would be stopped. So far nothing has worked.”

“That makes the 'thn seem very immoral.”

“Or desperate. Maybe there is a time limit.”

“Let's worry more about the immediate. We are nearly there. Let me get out my tools.” I unpack two flats from my pack and hand one to Aimee. “This one will sense electrical current and plot it. You adjust the scale here. It will tell us where power is being used. Figured you would be a good one to monitor that. Mine plots psiotics. We know she uses them. The transformation showed us that, as well as the reports in the journals. She uses it to protect herself in key places. My guess is that is where her live nodes are. See, look here.” I show her my flat. “These areas correspond with possible locations within each building that a node could be at. By comparing the two flats we can see where she gets power for the nodes.”

“She will have back up of some kind.”

“Or redundancy. The best kind of backup. Something hidden that is not activated yet, but can be at a moments notice. That is where our own scanning ability comes in. We know she is afraid of TKs. She baited us to come through that particular gate. She will not be vulnerable anywhere near that gate is my guess.”

“That fits. That building to our right. Something large has been removed from it recently. Note the scars on the concrete.”

“Might have nothing to do with us. Even she has to adapt to changing conditions.”

“It she really wanted to get rid of us all she would have to do is set off an H bomb or something like it we can't even imagine. Sacrifice part of herself, a redundant part as you say and the threat is gone forever.”

“Shit Aimee, you really are paranoid. If she wanted to do something like that she would just as well have poisoned our world and then moved in after it dissipated.”

“There were two Mother virus outbreaks. One in the Guardians back yard and another smaller one near the gate. Probably some vial of it was left there when they brought it through to do the Guardians. She has already tried.”

“She succeeded too. None on our team are of the original set or what would have been the original set.”

“I compared the code for the Armstrong unit with the new code we found after the transformation. The new code was more complex, but the core instructions were the same. Defend itself at all costs, offensively or defensively. It was what the Armstrong units were set up to do. An end of the world situation.”

“They were also intended to help rebuild a better world afterwards. One that was free from war, pollution, and over population.”

“The grinders. Think we will find those here too?” She shivers as she

says that.

“We need to fit in better. Match those workers. We sort of look like them in form.”

“Housekeepers would be needed to clean up factories too. Do we really need to go inside?”

“Come on Aimee. As you said we would already be dead if that is what she wanted. She is probably gathering information on us as we do on her. As long as we don't directly threaten her, she will leave us alone for now. This is her world, her setup. She has the upper hand. That staircase over there goes up to a sort of observation area above the factory floor. Let's go up there. We won't be seen as easily.”

“Okay.”

We climb the stairs. No one bothers us, though we surely have been seen by now.

“The door is unlocked. Never happen in our world.”

“Probably no crime here either. The grinder is a pretty heavy training tool. Used over generations I am sure it is a very effective one too. Sorry. I will try not to remind you of that.”

“Thank you. Growing up poor meant you got beat a lot. Everyone felt they had the right.”

“Look it's a lumber mill of some kind. Trees come in there and lumber goes out there. Am surprised she would use wood and not metal.”

“She was programmed not to pollute. Do you smell anything? I don't. When I visited a lumber mill once it stunk like crazy. Here everything is covered. See how the gases produced go through that filtration system before leaving the building. Oh, watch. Someone is changing the filter. Huge brute isn't he? Switching it over to the new one. Now removing the old one. Let's follow it. He went out that side door.”

“Dare we DS here?”

“I wouldn't. She might have sensors for that. There is a door over there, this way.”

We scramble along the catwalk, trying to look like we belong and the same time making some speed. No one seems to care. Finally we give up and run to catch up. We just get through the door to see the cartridge being loaded on transport. Guess it took some time to secure it. So, she is safety conscious too.

“We will never be able to follow that without drawing notice.”

“Watch. Look, a hose is being fitted to the tank. Scanning. It leads to catalytic converter. The material inside is being turned into more complex compounds. The exact opposite of how we would deal with it. We would probably try to burn it and convert it into CO₂ and water with something nasty as waste.”

“Now the cover is being removed and a solid piece is being taken out. Plastics almost. Long chain polymers at least. They converted the waste into something useful. They are now removing the canister and taking it back. The transport is taking the plastic piece with it. There are more already on board. It probably goes from station to station collecting the waste, converting it and then taking to where it will be re-manufactured into useful items. She is good.”

“Notice something weird about the people?”

“No one says anything. That's weird. They all know their jobs perfectly I guess.”

“They are all smiling. Read their endorphin levels. They are happy. Who would be happy doing one thing all day long.”

“We have not been here all day. Maybe they trade off. They are specialized, but certainly the hunk could move any number of items. He may only come this way once a day to do this task and works elsewhere most of the time. I wish I could talk with them.”

“We need to get going. I see something interesting a half a block away.”

“What?”

“I will tell you when we get there. I am not sure and it may be nothing.”

I follow Aimee this time. We make our way out of the building and go further into the industrial area. There are a lot more people going to and fro. No one bothers us. We try and look like we belong by smiling and looking like we know what we are doing. I am not sure it matters.

“Why don't they care?”

“Think about it. No crime. Everyone does exactly what they are told to do. If everyone is like that then nothing could ever be out of place or wrong. And if you are not let in on what is happening, but only your own task, then who are you to question what someone else's task is?”

“Over here. Look. The wood is being used to package these modules. Look familiar?”

“Mother nodes. A whole lot of them. The labels going on are in Chinese not Mother.”

“Every creature seeks to reproduce. She has taken the imperative to protect her way of life to the mission statement of making every world just like her. This is where all those nodes came from for our world. Wonder if she knows we have outlawed them now?”

Aimee smiles, “We haven't. Orders are still being placed and picked up. I told them this was necessary till we figured out where they were coming from. Otherwise she would simply try some other way. This confirms my theory. We can go now. We have just enough time to make

it back to the others before they start worrying about us.”

“But the net announcement. Surely her spies saw that?”

“Takes a while for an idea to get through the bureaucracies. When I noticed that the shipments were still arriving for orders placed before the ban, I decided to play a hunch. I am sure she would never have believed that we would have been in the right place to ruin this. I don't believe it. We were very lucky.”

“That we were.”

Soon we are far enough from the buildings to change back to our robes.

“I scan the others are coming back as well. Hei Long has someone with him. Doc and Br'thn will make it back first though.”

“This should be interesting. His phys shows normal. He is not under duress. He must know this person?”

“Not necessarily. When have you known Hei Long to be afraid of anything? I want to know how he communicated with him if he is a local.”

“Looks like a local. Doc is waiting for us.” I wave and he waves back.

“We did too while we were in the factory. He looks too human though. Did you see how the sweepers in the factory had longer arms than we do?”

“You know what is missing? The alphas. Hei Long's joke not withstanding, where are they?”

“They were the supervisors and the military leaders? No war no officers needed. Maybe supervisors are no longer needed either. Mother has read the journals, that much is obvious. She must have learned something. The alpha beta thing really was a mistake.”

“Controlling reproduction was not. We certainly could have used that before it got out of hand.”

“Can you think of an ethical way to do that?”

“Depends. If no one expects to raise their own kids, then it becomes less of a problem.”

“Doc, what did you see? Hei Long and friend will be here in a moment.”

“I see. Our D0 checked in like nothing was wrong and went immediately to some sort of autodoc for a checkup. Now she is on a transport to another location. Everything is totally coordinated and orderly. Amazing really. Very efficient.”

“Did anyone bother you?”

“No one said a word to me. Everyone was intent on their own tasks and ignored anyone else they were not working with.”

"We had the same experience."

"You people sure talk a lot. Welcome to America. I am Bob." A short Asian male dressed as a simple worker. A sort of jumpsuit thing with pockets. Similar to what the other workers were wearing.

"Bob, also known as Mr. Li." He bows. Hei Long continues, "A TK3. He was the one who recruited me. Earth born."

"I am sure you have lots of questions. All will be answered as soon as our last guest arrives." Who?

"So much for no one noticing."

"Please Ms. Ho. We are not stupid. Only a moment now." He waits patiently with one of those sick smiles on his face. I think I am going to hate that smile soon. Doc stands next to Hei Long. I hope Br'thn is hiding.

Hashra, the consensus of the group appears to be to wait to see who it is. We are ready to bug out if necessary.

Just take this jerk with us and drop him in the ocean. Not really his fault. I am sure this is all Mother's doing.

No response. Don't shoot the messenger.

"Here we go." A single man walks out of the warehouse containing the gate. No armies, no weapons. He is dressed well. Black tie and suit. Like he just walked out of a fancy pear function.

"Welcome Mr. Freeman. Welcome. Please over here with the rest of us." Sauron! Great, just great. Why aren't we bugging out? Isn't this the worst possible case, both Sauron and Mother in the same location?

"The Guardians I presume." He looks at me like I am lunch. I look down.

"Guardians? Afraid not. Just curious scientists who stumbled on the gate."

The psiotic field goes down around me! Br'thn! I look to the Doctor. He is smiling as if nothing is wrong. Faking it. Br'thn can last how long till she is in trouble? We practiced this scenario many times, but to face it for real is much worse. I frantically try to remember what we did to find the frequency.

"You will understand if Mother takes some precautions now that you are all here." Aimee looks horrible and doubles over gasping for breath. I rush to her and forget about the field.

"She is dying! The only thing keeping her alive was the psiotic field. You are killing her." I catch on to her ruse real quick. Hopefully quick enough. Brave of her to try it.

"Shit, I had completely forgotten about her heart problem." Hei Long rushes over as well. He caught on fast. Sauron is looking very nervous. Aimee collapses completely and stops breathing. Hope she can hold her

breath long enough. I have an idea and start doing CPR breathing. She has to be completely limp and allow me to do this.

Hei Long goes up to Bob, "Start the field again or you die with her. We are still four to your one and we are armed with more weapons than you can imagine." He pulls out a rather large knife to show Bob. "Slowly I might add."

Sauron comes up to Bob, "If you know me, you know I will join in the fun with zeal. She dies and you will become my lunch." He smiles to show a very nice set of razor sharp teeth very close to Bob's face. Wonder how he kept those hidden from everyone. Maybe he never smiled. I go back to CPR with Aimee and she starts flailing from lack of oxygen. "Did I mention you will be alive through most of it?"

The field comes back and Aimee starts breathing on her own again after coughing a couple of times.

"I assume you have a fail safe device. That should be sufficient to insure we pay attention." Sauron on our side? He licks his lips for good measure. Shit, let's get out of here!

Bob nods, "Follow me." We let Sauron take the lead. I help Aimee get up and assist her to walk to where ever we are going.

She whispers to me, "I have the frequency. Get me to Doc and I will have him transmit it to the rest."

"Doc, I think you should look at Aimee. She is still not feeling well. Her pacemaker may need some adjustments."

He comes up to me, "I will take over Hashra." I go up to Hei Long.

Here is the frequency. I am not letting Sauron in on it, though he may be able to read my mind anyway.

I hope not.

We proceed to a large empty warehouse. I don't scan ahead. No point in getting Mother upset further. At some point she will do a scan of Aimee and find that she does not have anything in her chest. Ah, good girl Aimee. She does now. Scanning someone right next to you might not be noticed. In fact expected. We would want to check up on her. She is showing no TK abilities. Good. Smart girl.

We soon reach the building and go inside. An auditorium of some kind. A lot of seats arranged around a stage.

"The Mother nodes are the most exquisite piece of IT engineering that I have ever seen. I am glad you were able to convince her to let me live to be able to talk with her." She coughs again. Bob heard that and pauses for a second. I don't need to use TK to see he is an implant and very much loaded with tech. Getting instructions from Mother are we?

"Please be comfortable. We have produced a little presentation showing Mother's history."

Angpetu would be dying about now of boredom. I smile to myself.

A voice starts, "Welcome. This is the interface produced to assist your assimilation into the greatest scientific endeavor of the human race. With the careful guidance of the one whom you call Mother, the Multi Ordered Theoretical Hierarchical Ethereal Reprocessor, the human race is becoming the dominate intelligence of the multiverses."

Shit, she wants the whole thing.

"Let us begin at the beginning. When the universe began, in the singular, a race arose called the first intelligence. These beings were the only intelligence in the entire universe for millions of years. They longed to converse with other beings in order to understand the meaning of existence. They started seeding other planets in order to add different perspectives to their understandings."

"Excuse me, if I may interrupt." Sauron gets up of course. I was willing to sit through the presentation. I am curious how close her version is to ours. "If this is based on the information in the journals, we have all read them, thank you very much. Is it possible to skip past this part? Thank you." Impatient and likes to be the center of attention.

"Very well Mr. Freeman. If you will kindly explain the concept of the multiverse then I may skip this section. You need not use equations, just state the principles involved."

He remains silent and makes a fool of himself.

"Since you all seem to know about how the 'thn came to be, that section will be skipped.

When new intelligences came to be seeded by the One Minds from each past planet with an intelligence some were found to develop abilities similar to the 'thn abilities and the abilities of the first intelligence. Further, when the 'thn mated with one of these beings in order to increase their numbers, occasionally, but only rarely, something more than anticipated happened. This is referred to as level thirteen.

Level thirteen is really not a level as the other levels are understood, but rather a ceiling that once crossed causes an interesting effect. A pocket in the universe is formed proportional to the magnitude of the distance from the level thirteen ceiling. It is sometimes referred to as The Froth as it does not normally extend across the entire universe. These pockets in the froth or multiverse are at a minimum of some $\pi^5 \times e^{203}$ 'thn units or about six light years as you understand it. The largest is theoretically the size of the entire universe.

It is possible for a bubble to collapse if the differences between the two adjacent bubbles are not large enough. This seems to be dependent on gravitational changes from large bodies being in different positions than from changes in cultures and personal lives. Beings are simply not

that important, even if one was responsible for the event.

It is not known if the ultimate line has ever been crossed because of the effect this has on those in the universe affected. Those not part of the mating are duplicated along with the universe without any awareness on their part. On the average, level thirteen is crossed every two point three million years in the vicinity of a particular solar system. This is a statistical average and not an absolute. Projected outward this still results in a very large number of pocket copies of any particular system."

"Which explains why this world exists near ours in dimensional space. How about how Mother found out how to get here from the future. Mother is definitely not from our time." Yeah, I would like to know that also.

"That would be telling. All in good time." My guess is that it was not easy at all and required an enormous amount of energy. I also doubt that much more than a node got through. Pushing whole armies would be impossible. I think she got lucky.

"To continue. This world is better in every aspect than yours. Pollution is virtually non existent. No species have gone extinct since our arrival, nor are any threatened because of our doing.

You have seen that we are much more efficient without sacrificing happiness. Everyone here is happy.

Contrast this with your own world. Three fourths of your population lives in misery. Over half are starving. Pollution in the 'advanced' world is killing not only every species but yours as well. Only those with advanced care are likely to avoid death by cancer, heart disease or diabetes. The average life expectancy has been dropping for twenty years and accelerating.

Terrorists, nuclear annihilation, plagues are constant threats."

She would know about that, she started some of them.

"What exactly do you want from us? We are definitely not the Guardians whom you apparently seek. I certainly cannot see how we could possibly be a threat to you as you saw for yourself outside. Nor can I see how we could help, if we were so inclined. It is not our nature to be so, ah, cooperative, even among ourselves."

"An afternoon is hardly enough time to see and appreciate all that we have done. We would not expect you to accept so quickly after the sickness you have experienced on your world. Our only purpose is to help all beings reach happiness. We would like you to join Bob and others to be ambassadors of our concern and offer our help to all you meet."

"So we would be allowed to return to our world?"

"Eventually. There is much you must learn first."

"What about the plague you started in California?"

"There are some who would not be happy with our providing a choice to your people. These people, the ones we call the Guardians actually want to go so far as to destroy our way of life. Every culture has a right to defend itself against outside aggression."

"Even if that means a preemptive strike? There were no Guardians on our world, only the possibility of them. Who knows, they may have even seen you as the solution to earth's problems and embraced your offer. Because of the froth, history is playing out differently on our world."

"You do not have the advantage of foresight as we do. We foresaw that many more would have died if the Guardians had been allowed to form, even on your world. While we are saddened by the loss of so many innocent, we had to choose the lesser of two evils. Your world is hardly perfect, as ours is. It will not be easy or pain free to change a culture as sick as yours. Here again, you could help tremendously to ease that pain."

"There is one among us who is largely responsible for our world being the way it is. Why is Sauron included in our party?" Be careful Hei Long.

"Come, come, are you really that different? Mr. Freeman has been around longer, but he seeks the same as we. He seeks a perfect world, albeit one under his control. He also fears, rightly so, the Guardians and their attempts to impose their will on us. He acts out of ignorance. Once he comes to see the wisdom of our way, he will come around, as will you all." I would say he seeks revenge for the loss of his people and does not act out of fear except so far as his plans for revenge are thwarted.

Aimee asks, "I have a question. Are we speaking with Mother?" Bob has been silent through all this.

"Mother as you understand her is not so simple. In a way you are speaking with her, but only the tiniest smallest fraction." Sort of a holographic intelligence then. Otherwise how would she be able to coordinate so many beings so completely?

She almost sounds convincing. However, she is not as big as she wants us to think. She is limited to about a six hundred kilometer radius on this world. We are at the northern edge in fact. Scan north of here and you will see no activity.

That could be a climate imposed limit. Not worth the extra energy, but you would expect her to move south at least. Sauron has certainly seen the same thing.

I am avoiding his mind as much as possible.

Good idea. I suspect that the only reason she is here is because of the forests. We saw that the nodes are packed in wooden crates from wood in this area. The wood would look identical to wood from the same location

on our world, especially if taken from smaller trees. Qingzhao was isolated enough to hide her operation and at the same time appear legitimate.

Her current size would also indicate she is relatively new to this world. Where are the original inhabitants? I see only ruins of level three tech. Hardly a threat to her.

But maybe to the planet. She does think long term. And where is the origin? Definitely not here. This is not her first world in this time frame if she was able to set up on a low tech world. A parallel portal is less expensive than a time shifted one. How many other worlds has she 'convinced' to join her in this time frame? Hundreds? Thousands?

“Bob, did you teach her English? Her accent is very good.”

He looks over his shoulder at us, “Being a node intelligence, it was trivial to bring her material from one of your universal translators. She knows all earth languages. You may speak to her in any language.”

“Really?” Aimee seems excited about something, “sec {#/%%};wash hda0;”

The voice laughs, “Not likely my dear.”

“What did she say?”

I speak up, “She asked Mother to reformat her primary core.”

“Guess I didn't have the proper passphrase. How about, Mother, how may I serve you?” Don't be silly Aimee.

“I have a question. How old is the original . . . ”

I black out.

When I come too I am hanging from a wall by chains. Naked and in pain. I look around in the low light and see Aimee and Hei Long in a similar situation alongside me. At least he got rid of that horrible thing between his legs. I cannot scan, so she has put the limiter field on us again. Did not take her long to figure out the Aimee's ruse. This definitely not what I would call fun. The dungeon looks old, very old. Not the kind of tech we have seen earlier. The iron smells of a forge, not a steel mill. Rusty. How long till tetanus sets in? I hear thunder in the background. A storm is coming. All we need is rats to make this complete.

I see Aimee's head move and I ask her, “Aimee, why did you have to do that?”

She gasps out, “Come on Hashra, she was just playing with us. Sooner or later we would have ended up here anyway. I could not stand the waiting.”

“You could have warned us?” Hei Long hisses out just coming too himself.

I change the subject, “Where are Sauron and Doc?” And Br'thn?

“No idea. Not here is all I can say.” She does not look in good shape

either. I think I see blood on her arm. Does not appear either of us were molested. Yet. I would not put it past her. I definitely don't want to meet an alpha just now.

A screen comes on in front of us. Nice definition. I did not even know it was there. Very high tech. It shows Sauron, Bob and Doc outside in the open space near to where we came into this world. The warehouse we came through is on fire. The clouds in the sky say rain any minute. Nothing much seems to be happening.

"Can you do something about these things. Not exactly comfy." Hei Long does not strike me as someone who would care about such things.

The chains come off and I fall to the ground. "Ow!" Stubbed my toe on the way down.

"Just a second." The TK comes back. I heal my toe and make some clothing. Not that it would matter.

"We can't leave this room without her knowing of course. She may know anyway."

"A Pushy Paws situation."

"Afraid so. She is showing us what's going on though."

"We could DS out of her range. Doc said north of here is empty."

"Then what? We can't help them outside of our range either. We can still scan around. I have spotted Doc, Sauron and Br'thn in the open space in that direction. Matches what we see on the screen anyway. Does not appear to be time delayed or anything funny." She points with her hand. I quickly latch on to them as well.

"Shit, scan down. There is something directly under that field and it does not look nice. Would take us out too."

"That would explain why they do not appear to be limited, just us. I say we join them." The limiters go out with a shower of sparks. "I am through being nice." Have not seen this side of Aimee before.

"Put some clothes on Hei Long." He smiles and does so with a flourish. Same old black robe embroidered to the max.

He sees me looking, "I did the original by hand. Believe me I remember it well."

"Let me get something from my pack." I DS one of those psiotic simulators. I make two more from it.

"You two go first. I want to set these things up in our place."

"That will not trick her."

"No, but it might confuse her into thinking there is more of us or we know more than we do. She is not the only one with fancy tech."

"Or can do more than we can." Hei Long makes a hand full of duplicates of the device. They all disappear.

"What did you do with them?"

“I put them on all the workers in the vicinity. I can activate them with TK when you are ready.”

“Let's go! Look Br'thn is in Bob's hands now!” She pops out. Not too close Aimee. I see her appear on the screen a good ten meters away from the others. Hei Long shows up next to her. I set two of the devices to active and then go myself. When I arrive, I TK the last device in the chamber to active. I nod to Hei Long who sets off his devices.

There is a device below us and one in geosync orbit above us. Please do not interfere.

A chippati made the hard way.

“Thank you for updating our guests. I believe we can begin now.” He tosses Br'thn up in the air like a ball. She is being totally passive. I still sense her life force though.

I take a chance, “You do realize what would happen if you did anything to a 'thn? Remember from the journals? Not pretty.”

“We can afford to take some loses. You already know this planet is a small operation, we have measured your strength and abilities, an outpost really. If we really wanted you in that dungeon, you would not have gotten out. This world is merely a convenient jumping off point to convert your world.”

“They will not stop at this mere outpost. They will totally destroy all remnants of Mother for that crime.”

“Dear, you need to update your 'thn code. That rule only applies to a sentient 'thn. For a non-sentient, it is only the planet where the crime occurred.” How many baby 'thn has she killed? How many Br'thn are there from sixty five million years? Was this all a game to get her here? Take over our world in exchange for this outpost and with no Sauron, “guardians” or 'thn to interfere? Brilliant!

“Only we are not all here.”

“Not yet. We have kindly broadcast this meeting to your world. On all the major nets. Even if you succeed and this world is destroyed you will be known.”

Aimee turns in the direction of where the camera should be and shouts, “Don't come! Save yourselves!”

Bob laughs, “I doubt that was necessary, but if it makes you feel better. We have the 'thn bearer and the 'thn, and as a special prize, we have Mr. Freeman. It will make converting your world ever so much easier even with a few remaining low level TKs. Just a matter of time and we are very patient.”

He tosses Br'thn in the air again for effect.

“I was thinking, since we have a moment to kill, as it were, why don't we play a little game. Who gets to hold the 'thn when it all goes boom.

Sauron, why don't you go first, since you would anyway. Explain to the audience why you should get to hold it.”

“Ah, ah, ah, remember, if you try to take her it goes off instantly. Cherish your last few seconds of life.” How did he know that?

He is pissed big time, “The power sphere is mine. I am it's maker, it's father, if you will. It was stolen from me by those rat smiggles and I want it back. It is my right to own it.” Own it. Interesting. I am watching his body language. He is trying very hard not to use his hands. He still uses his hands when he uses TK! That is the only explanation. Bob saw his starting to reach and so reminded him. No wonder the Guardians drilled us so much on that point. I see Doc watching too. Learn as much as possible.

“Short and sweet. Thank you Mr. Freeman. And now you Anikin. May I call you by your first name? Strange how you got that name. Spelled wrong, but you were named after a fantasy character that would later become Darth Vader. An evil, evil being. Sort of fits. Now you will go down in history as the one who helped us to take over your world.”

Doc is very poised and quiet. Good control. I am fuming inside.

He sighs, “I really can't think of anything. You see, it is not my decision. I really have no say in this at all. Neither do you or Sauron. The only one who has any say in this is Br'thn herself. She is intelligent enough to make up her own mind, always has been. She can be with whomever she wants whenever she wants. I have no hold on her other than my own desires and my desire is that she be free.”

There are tears in my eyes. I think he speaks for the whole team. Br'thn is our buddy, she is one of us and just like any of us, none are here against their will. Not that I want to die here exactly.

Bob throws her high up into the air laughing like it is all a joke, even Sauron has a smile, “Be free then, be free.”

She does not come down. Not a surprise, she is a 'thn, even if only a baby one.

Then slowly, she descends to the center of all of us.

I am free?

We all shout, “Yes, Br'thn, you are free!” Tears freely flowing from all of us, well, Hei Long, Aimee, Doc and myself. The other two look confused. They read the journals. I guess you don't remember what you don't believe. How could it be so simple as simply saying the word I?

“You idiots, she is sentient. If you kill her, you kill yourself and all of Mother, not just this world.”

“But we can still kill all of you!” This guy is sharp.

You will not! Can a 'thn get mad?

“No Br'thn, they will not. I think we can all go home now.” Doc

wipes the tears from his eyes.

“You forget, we still hold the cards.” Doc smiles. He knows something.

Aimee speaks up though, “Do you? Go ahead, try to activate any device. Don't you hear it?”

“I don't hear anything, everything is quiet.”

“He's right. No sound at all. Workers are coming out of the various buildings and are wondering about obviously confused.”

I DS my flat from my pack. Hell, I DS my entire pack and everyone else's to us.

Aimee comes over, “Looks pretty complete, at least within range of the device.”

“Even the sat above us is dead. What did you do?” Doc is the only one who could sense the sat.

“She started it. I just followed her example. Remember the passphrase she used?”

“Mother, how may I serve you? Sure, what of it? Should be meaningless here.”

“Yes, you would think. But what if someone injected some code that changed that?”

I speak up, “That one line you recited was not enough. Even she laughed at you,” and then took us out.

“Oh, that was not the line of code that did the deed, that was just for my own amusement. I programmed an entire node worth of goodies. One was bound to have worked sooner or later. She has probably been chasing code ghosts all afternoon.”

“When? Where? I was with you the entire time.”

“Not here silly, back on our world. I just introduced it to her here. Remember when we went into the building and saw all the nodes?”

“Sure.”

“I set down my node along with the others. I put a routing stamp on it for it to be incorporated into the lumber mill. Some worker saw the node, followed the instructions and the deed was done.”

“Okay, how did you do the routing stamp and how did you know that the worker would follow it and not what his or her implant said?”

“Simple, I can read and write Mother. It was all in the transformed node memory. A complete translation index. Mother seems to have been based on a combination of English, Chinese and Spanish. I reasoned that not everything came through the implants. She is powerful, but not to the point where she can monitor every person and every thought.”

Hei Long laughs, “Wonderful.” He bows to her very lowly.

Doc looks concerned, “How did you know when it would go off?”

Aimee looks down at the ground and sighs, "I didn't."

I nearly faint.

"How did you know Br'thn would reach sentience here and now?"

Hei Long asks.

He smiles, "I had a lot of clues. She has nearly reached it several times in the last few months. Just needed the right trigger."

I love all of you. I could not watch you die.

"I did not know either." He finally admits, "We have a problem however. This was the only active installation. Another one has just activated on the North American continent. We need to get back. I am sure the gate nearly burned up over there was not the only gate to our world."

"Hang on a second." Hei Long concentrates, "A little gift for Ghost." He holds a rather large insect looking object in his hands, "All set. Fresh Puppy."

"Gross!"

"What do we do about Sauron? Looks like Br'thn has him pinned down." Wonder what she is saying to him? What do you say to someone who abused you for so many years? That is between the two of them I guess.

Doc politely asks, "Br'thn what do you want to do with Sauron?"

Leave him here. I had wanted to set him on a dino world. Maybe his true potential would have been met then.

We all heard Br'thn apparently, including Sauron and Bob. Sauron smiles at Bob. Bob takes off running and then TKs himself into the air.

"Oh, I do so love it when they run." He starts walking calmly in the direction Bob has gone. No one stops him. I don't like the idea of killing anyone, but he really did have it coming. Sacrificing his whole planet for some reward only Mother could know.

"Is it safe to leave him here? If he takes over, he will be even more powerful. If she wins, she will have his abilities."

I will not kill.

"That settles it then. Neither can we. Good luck to the both of them. May they fight each other for all of eternity. I doubt either one would submit to the other."

"I do think you are right."

"We still have to deal with the abomination guys." Aimee, you are the hero of the world. Give someone else a chance to be in the spotlight.

I know what to do! Go get it dear.

Br'thn takes us all back to our world.

UNA News Net

The United Nations security council has approved the restructuring of the former United States. Here is what has been worked out so far. The former states of California, Oregon and Washington will become New China administered directly by China. Arizona, New Mexico and Texas will become New Mexico, administered by the Latin American Union. The southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia will become New Africa and will pay a fifty percent tax of all crops produced to be distributed to the most needy regions of Africa, but will maintain self governance for the time being. African people will have the right of immigration with no limitations. Florida will go to the Caribbean nations. New England will go to the European Union and will be called New Europe after the remaining areas are cleared of plague remnants.

Of particular interest to the UNA is the fate of Middle America. Representatives of the UNA met with United Nations officials and particularly those from China. Since area was lost to New Mexico at the four corners region, the UNA will be compensated with additional area in Utah and Colorado. Resettlement to begin immediately. Discussions are still going on as to repayment for the remaining states, but are likely to include a change of governance and food shipments to China, especially of grain stocks. Remaining Native American regions are of little interest to anyone and will remain intact and untouched for the time being.

Pine River Reservation, UNA

"Good news from the net. We get to keep our land."

"But the subsidies end stupid. How are we going to survive now? The reason we were not included was because our land is worthless. Smith that is the ugliest bird I have ever seen."

"Thank you. Our land is not worthless, just undervalued for the moment. We about to become the transportation center of the world. People from all over will beg to have one of our cars or buses. Each tribe will manufacture part of the vehicle and once assembled they will be redistributed to the tribes for use and sale."

"What will these cars be made from, sagebrush?" He laughs.

"All the latest materials at our disposal; wood mostly, but also recycled plastics, metals, glass, and electronics. Tons of that around."

"Haven't you forgotten something? How will you power these things, with bean gas?" General chuckle with occasional farts.

"No, with these." I hold up a psiotic power supply. "Pollution free

and never needs replacing or refueling. No carbon tax problems."

"I haven't seen one of those for years. Where did you find a D size battery?" An uproar of laughter.

"Have you not wondered why I asked you to meet me at the power station? This is the large size power supply. A much smaller one is all that is needed for a personal car. Let me demonstrate." I walk up to the control panel I have prepared in advance.

"I place the power supply in this specially designed adapter and flip the switch like so." I do so. The entire village lights up. "This will also power the shop areas, the water filters and more."

"Whoa. . . ." I hope Jones is doing as well at the Lakota reservation. Not a hard sell really. The Indian Motor Company rises again. Maybe we should make a motorcycle too. We could name the various models after different tribes. The Shoshone has a nice ring to it.

Dear Diary

Lisa slept most of the night thank goodness. She is surrounded by the little ones and a few of the older ones. After her initial fear, she seems to be taking to them quite well. They have started mind speaking to her and one would expect the fear to rise again, but after her experience with Sauron this probably is not as shocking as it might have been. The storm has passed and there is a small new layer of frozen snow on the ground. Snow and then rain and finally freezing pre-dawn. It crunches when you walk on it. Other than that it is very quiet. Pushy Paws came back an hour ago. She could not really get into flying because of her concern for the others.

Third Mesa, Dino World.

“She is awake but keeping warm in a dino ball. I'll make some hot tea and bring it to her in a bit.”

“I am not so eager to face her again.”

I smile at her, “It is good to see another human again. At first I did not think I would miss you guys. I have spent most of my life fending for myself, doing whatever needed to be done. I think I like being part of a real group better.”

“I can probably say the same thing. I had friends, but as the system collapsed around us and the saps, it got harder and harder to keep in touch. When I finally gave up and moved to the rez it ended all together.”

“Or so you thought. Must have been weird seeing him again.”

“Not him any longer. Relationships are based to a large extent on shared experiences. I am barely getting the hang of this TK stuff. He has been doing it for twenty five million years.”

“That we know of. How long has it really been? How long have they been searching around for another chance to battle Mother.” I shiver at the thought. “I just hope that if it goes bad, it will be a long time before she comes here.”

“What you showed me clearly indicates that she knows of this place. The way it was explained to me by Yingui, it is easier for her to move from world to world in the same time frame than to jump time frames. She can likely bring more than a probe in here if she really wants. Sure you want them to learn tech stuff?”

“Wait, that means this is not the same dino world that the Guardian Ron and that dimensional being I forget the name of came to.”

“No, the time paradox would prevent that, as we would now be

prevented from visiting that world as well.”

“Depending on where this Mother version was in terms of the bubbles, she could be very limited or almost unlimited on where she can go. But why earths? Surely there would be a lot more worlds out there she could use.”

“Laziness is my guess. She already knows the layout, the resources and where they are, even what kinds of intelligences are likely to be produced. The DNA will not be that different, so foods should work in most cases. The world the alphas and betas were sent to had to be terraformed. These worlds do not.”

“Okay, I am confused, didn't the Guardians adapt them to those worlds? Then they would no longer be compatible with ours.”

“You're right. So, either Mother re-adapted them to here, or her bubble split off before she left earth. This Mother may never have left earth.”

“It had to be before. Remember, she was changed, by Ron and Susan I think. That became the good Mother. The bad Mother existed only before the last battle when Ghost saved them, or will save them. This time stuff is confusing.”

“If a bubble formed then, there should also be another set of Guardians. Aimee showed me the equations, which were meaningless to me. But, she said that a bubble does not cause an immediate difference in the two bubbles. It takes some time for differences to build up. Remember we are talking interstellar time. Could be thousands or even millions of years before a difference is seen.”

“These bubbles form when a TK mates with a 'thn and goes level thirteen. We already know that Yingui was a good candidate for level thirteen from what the journals said about the number of 'thn present. Maybe it actually happened. Maybe the origin of the Mother we are fighting is the one that split off when Yingui went level thirteen. The journals don't mention it, but maybe the Yingui we met is the one that was unaware of the bubble forming.”

“This is too much thinking for me. I would not count on our Ghost to save us this time. Our Ghost could not save himself much less anyone else. He is enormous now. I saw him for a moment when they were bringing me here.”

“I hope they did not take the kittens with them.”

“No, George is taking care of them in New Atherton I believe. All together they must be a handful. They should be popping and TPing by now.”

“I'm hungry, what is there to eat?” She brushes herself off and smells her clothing which has not been changed for a month. Pretty ripe all right.

The young ones don't mind.

"Ah, the princess who never sleeps is awake at last. There are materials over there. Help yourself."

I TP Pushy Paws, *I am not going to be able to handle someone like this for long. I say we show her who we are. Not much she could tell anyone they don't already know or suspect. Sauron knows you would not have survived in the cell without TP.*

"Nothing is made. I don't know how to do this stuff. Please make something for me. I'm hungry."

"Ooo, she said please. Guess we had better oblige her."

"Oh, gross, eeeuu!" She acts like she has fleas squirming like that. She finally tears off her shift. Talk about gross. Look at those fat rolls. Finally she pulls a giant roach off of her back, throws it down and steps on it. Then realizing what she has done in her bare feet, she goes, "Eeeuu!" all over again.

"Was she like this in the cell?"

"There was no one else there with us. She did talk a lot though. You don't want to know."

By this time there are a several sets of eyes watching us. They are still a bit slow this time of year and in the early morning. I TK some more logs over to the fire pit and start it up. Lisa is looking off somewhere else and does not see this, when she turns around and sees the fire, she picks up her shift and goes over to the fire. Bai follows her. He sticks his nose in her bare chest and sniffs.

"They aren't used to boobs. Can't figure them out." Bai sniffs again and then licks one.

"Oh, no! No one does that, especially a filthy beast." Bai looks over at us and comes running clearly offended.

"He understands you just fine. It would seem to me that you are the filthy beast. Sauron's pet beast."

I make water above her and drench her. A bit cold, but she has the fire.

"I would offer you soap, but it would be such a waste." Now she is shivering and looking pathetic, like a drowned rat trying to get warm. At least she has shut up. I am sure Sauron would not put up with this behavior. Maybe he never saw her outside the office till he tried to change her. Maybe that is why he gave up.

"Let's go for a walk. I'll drive." I nod.

Pushy Paws DSs us out of the compound to the edge of the mesa. "Even here this is my favorite spot. What do you want to do with her?" We start walking back from here.

"There is an active volcano in Hawaii at the moment." I suggest.

Pushy Paws smiles and shakes her head no.

"She is a handful, but when she is the only one to talk to, you put up with it. She knows everything about his operations. He really is not any nastier than most of the greedy capitalists."

"Except for his tendency to literally eat the competition." She nods.

"Actually he encourages competition. He invests in several different competing companies and then watches to see who wins. If things get too stale, he shakes them up and waits again. He has hundreds of these games going on at once. If it was not for him we would still be dragging knuckles in caves."

"A lot of people suffered because of him."

"A lot of people would have suffered without him. Look at my people. For all that time they had the Americas they changed very little. There was no incentive. Lots of space. If your neighbors acted up and you were stronger than them, you killed them. If they were stronger, you left town. Even my ancestors, the peace loving Hopi, have a lot of blood on their hands, often within the tribe itself. Our people changed more in the four hundred years since the hairy ones arrived than in the five hundred hundred years since we walked that land bridge over from Siberia."

"Where was Sauron all that time?"

"Europe and Asia. He lost Br'thn somewhere in the Americas. After searching for many millennia, he gave up and went to Asia and later to Europe. In the eleven hundreds there was almost no difference between a peasant in Europe and a person living in a Hopi pueblo. However for the pears it was a totally different story. A 'chief' here was rich when he had three wives and a few bear or buffalo pelts, maybe some silver. In China they had palaces acres in size, silk, writing, paper, metallurgy, etc. What we call civilization is Sauron's doing. He was responsible for the arms race that lead to space exploration, microchips and so much more."

"And saps, atomic weapons, economic warfare, etc."

"And saps, yes. No civilization has ever existed that did not have a slave labor force of some kind. A heavy price for some."

"Was it worth it? What was so bad about living the way your ancestors lived."

"The average life expectancy of my people before they arrived was thirty to thirty five. Even saps are much better off than that. It used to be that the average life expectancy in the US was seventy seven. I agree that the economic collapse was bad. But, even there, it was largely our own fault. We got lazy, we got greedy. Even the tribes were deceived by money. Remember the casinos?"

"Barely. I was a young kid when the collapse happened."

"The casinos were the red man's revenge, because it was largely the whites that went to them. Thank God they never put one up near me. I would have tried to burn it down."

"How come? Didn't they bring in a lot of money to the tribes?"

"Oh, they brought in a lot of money, but only a trickle went to the average person. Most went to a few, just like the white pears. A class system developed and the people were quickly forgotten. So many worked for low wages in the casinos that all it really did was accelerate the loss of our culture."

"I'm sorry."

"Was our own fault. At least it helped dispel the myth of the noble savage among our own. Amazing that we started to believe that we were somehow better than the whites. We were the great conservationists, the original environmentalists. Bull. The only reason we did not destroy our land was because we were too busy fighting each other to build up technology and then an excess population. It may have been the white man that killed off the buffalo, but there were native guides that helped."

"Twenty pieces of silver." She nods.

"So, what do we do about Lisa?"

"It would be to her benefit for her to learn a few facts of life. If it weren't for the fact that the young would suffer, I would vote to leave her alone here with them for a few months. She would learn a lot very quickly."

"We could do that. Just set up out of her sight and one of us on watch at all times to make sure the large predators stay away. She already knows they exist. I can TP ideas to the young. Speaking of which, they need to get to work on that corner. The gap is large enough for a small raptor to get in easily now. A larger one could dig it out further without much effort. All that fresh meat in one place with no place to go."

"The larger ones have spears and there are enough of them. They need to learn too. We may not always be there to protect them. This really is their world not ours."

I look down, "I like it here Pushy Paws. The rules are much simpler. I understand this place. I don't want to leave."

"I know, but we can't stay. I am worried. What happened to the others?" We are nearly back from our walk.

"Someone's inside. They are cloaked well or I would have noticed them sooner."

"I didn't see them either. Let's go see."

We DS through the walls rather than open the large front gate or take the time to use the smaller one in the back. There is a figure in the courtyard wearing a TK robe with the hood up. They appear to be talking to

Lisa who is now wearing a similar robe. Another TK at least, even if I can't read them.

"May we help you?" Push Paws asks.

The figure turns around and I see that it is Yingui, the Guardian, "No, but I may be able to help you."

"Where have you been? What's happened to the others? Why are you here?"

"Nice to see you too dear." Dear? He continues, "I have just been talking with this young lady."

"Yeah, he sees me as a lady." I almost expect her to stick out her tongue, but she doesn't. Such a pest. Not that young either.

He responds, "Charming. Are all of your wards this well behaved?"

"Guardian Yingui meet Lisa Krandle, Sauron's personal administrative assistant. Or at least was his assistant. He tried to make a TK out of her and failed. She still has some residue." She does not like that.

"What happened? Do you know?"

He nods, "I will tell you on the way. Everyone is fine." Then he adds, "For the moment. Will everyone be okay here?"

"If they work at it some. They know what to do, but do I need to go? I don't mind staying here."

"Probably not Angpetu, but would you want to be responsible for the destruction of the universe if I am wrong?" He smiles like it is a joke and I thought Sauron was bad.

He DSs us to New Atherton.

"Where is Lisa?" Bai takes off down the hall. He would have had the hardest time being left behind, so I am glad he is here.

"She will not be needed yet, so I left her where she was. Is that alright?"

"Oh, that is fine. Just fine. Of course she will miss out on all the fun we are going to have." Not sure which I would prefer more.

"No entirely. I dissolved her robe again. She had not earned it." He is not smiling.

"Angwusi, Raven. I can feel him. Is Ihu here as well?" Pushy Paws says.

"Soon I expect." Who is Ihu and what is Raven?

42nd Street Lamp Post

Faded hand written note: Have you seen my husband and child?
Picture below.

Third Mesa, New Mexico

We arrive safely, though the trip was harder than expected. I thought Guardians would be good at this by now. Ci'lan came to us an hour ago, saying all of us were needed. Not much notice, especially for Tran Vu in his Reagent duties. All appointments had to be abruptly canceled for the next week. I left all the cats but Ghost with Mrs. Reynolds. They like her, but I think it is because they can get away with more, with their popping about on her. Ghost insisted on coming, even though Ci'lan said he was not needed. A rather large hint that he might get in the way. She allowed it though.

“Where is everyone George? I can sense no one south of Tuba City?”

“The treaty called for them to abandon all settlements below the border. Guess it has already started. When you don't have much, it does not take that long to move. I am surprised they gave up this place so easily. A lot of sacred ground here. By the way, are you going to change back to your normal form or stay as Hei Long?”

“Haven't decided yet. All depends on how long this is expected to last and what our chances of success are. If all the Guardians are going to be there it does not sound good.”

“Like in why are we to be there? We contribute so little.” He nods.

“Here come Smith and Jones with Guardian James and Q.”

“How goes the Indian Motor Company?”

“Most like the idea of free power in their villages, but aren't so sure about working for the pears. Nothing is the world is free. They will come around when they get hungry enough.”

“It is not exactly like they are working for the pears. They are free to set their own prices and decided on all aspects of the materials used to make them with.”

“That is part of the problem, even with free power, there is going to be a certain amount of waste produced. If they go back to the old ways, there will be none of that. Mother Earth has been hurt enough, time for healing.”

“Did you tell them that subsistence living will only support a very small percentage of the people in their range? No more hand outs from a government that does not exist and a lot of hungry neighbors.”

“It always takes a while for the idealism to fade. We can supply food if we need to.” Then they will never change.

James and Q are silent through all this. I am sure they have seen it so many times. I can't resist asking though, “Guardians, what do you think?”

They look at each other and then Q speaks, “Valid points have been made.” That is it. Great guys. Seeing my frustration they both just smile. I shake my head and look over the Mesa edge.

“George, Pushy Paws, Angpetu and Guardian Yingui have just arrived.” I turn around to greet them and give both of our team a hug. Not sure what to do about Yingui, but he opens his arms too.

“Never turn down a good hug George. First law of TK.” He laughs. At least one of them is not so serious. He then goes on to hug Ci'lan and the others.

“I am surprised that Bai Long is not with you Angpetu.” Tran Vu asks.

“We must have just missed you. Have you been here long? We decided it would be better if he stayed with the other children in New Atherton. He was happy to see his sister Simone again. She is something else. Did you know she really knows how to use the terminal that Aimee set up for her? I am not sure she knows how to read yet, but she goes get around the net with it.”

“We just got here ourselves a few minutes before you did. Simone is not doing bad for six months. Like mother, like daughter.” I laugh. Aimee is something else too. Hope they are all right. No word yet.

“Do you feel a little funny? Like something is not right? It is like everything is a little off, almost dizzy.”

“I thought that was just me worrying.”

Yingui answers, “The Abomination is distorting the psiotic matrix. We will not be able to DS any closer safely. The distortion is greater in Dimensional space.”

Angpetu comments, “The Hopi call him Raven. Sauron is Coyote. They are supposed to get together at some point.”

“Wonderful.”

“We made it!” Br'thn immediately goes zooming off. Before us stand Aimee, Hashra, Hei Long and Doc. They are all smiling with what looks like total ecstasy. Then they all say at once, “Br'thn is born! She is sentient!”

Yingui, now holding hands with Pushy Paws, exclaims, “Good job team! A large round of hugs for everyone.” What is his obsession with her? She is part of our team and Guardian or not I will not let her be hurt.

“Who does that leave? A lot of Guardians, Malak, Dorothy and Jesus I think.”

“The rest of your team will come by the alternate route. They should all be in Jerusalem by now. The Guardians will meet us in New York. They went to get outside help.”

“Who would that be?” I ask. He looks right at me and says nothing.

“Can you tell me why Jerusalem then?”

“It is the alternate Gateway. Malak is the alternate Gate.”

“She was not chosen at random.”

“None of you were.” He looks hurt.

Br'thn comes back with a whole lot of 'thn friends, all a little bigger than she is. New borns, if you can accept someone up to fifty million years post birth as a new born. I never saw Br'thn as not born, so that would make these adolescents in my mind. They swirl around us making contact at random intervals. They all seem to know how to purr. Funny how that caught on.

Ci'lan announces, “We are ready! Bubble up and stay close. We will take it nice and slow. The ride will get a lot rougher as we get closer. Yell if you need help. We will be watching also. No one gets left behind.” She smiles when she says that, but it still scares me. Ghost is with Hei Long. That's good. After having met Owa, I do see Ghost as part of the team.

Of course I am stupid monkey. He is looking straight at me. Damn TP.

“One more thing, everyone wear your parasite guard. They will get thicker as we get nearer.” I instinctively reach up and make sure mine is in place. Don't leave home without it. I would have liked to have brought a camera, but it was said we needed to travel light with no distractions. I could have set it on automatic.

I thought we were going to go slow. We must be going at least Mach one. The sun is setting behind us making the sky glow many shades of red and orange, then violet and finally gray. We head into darkness. If we continue at this rate it will be several hours before we reach New York.

Yingui is near me so I try to raise him. He can't hear me, but when I speak they can often pick it up with TP, “How come New York? I thought Armageddon was supposed to be in Jerusalem?”

Two thousand years ago they did not know about North America and they thought they were the center of everything, so naturally they thought it would end there. Jesus said it could have happened anywhere, the location was not the important thing. What was important was people to be on the lookout for the signs and be ready to act.

“It did not happen in your universe like this did it?”

No. Not like this. Raven is a true Abomination. He should not exist, yet he does not exist.

“Huh? That does not make sense.”

It will when we get closer.

“That is not comforting.”

Not meant to be. Concentrate now, we have turbulence ahead.

“It starts out just as a low vibration and occasional jolt. Getting worse.”

Get down lower everyone. We need to be more grounded. Watch out for obstacles and high trees as we go over the Appalachians. We had been above cloud level to hide ourselves from anything below.

Fortunately it is not that populated along this route. We are not going in a straight line any longer, but rather following canyon lines. I can see occasional lights below. Ahead of us is a large area of pure black and I mean total blackness. I can not scan it nor see it. There is no moon in the sky and the clouds cover the stars. I can still sense those around me, but it is very disturbing going straight into that darkness.

It starts to get very rough. We spread out a little to stop from knocking into each other and we slow down a lot. Finally they give up and set down. We are on a city street. The buildings are empty and dark. I can only scan maybe a block and it is easier to scan behind me than in front of me. I hope the nines can see better than I can.

“Is everyone here? Are the people you were next too when we took off still around you?” Can't they do a head count. Everyone who should be is near me.

“What was that?”

A dark shape floats past. Hard to make out its form, it keeps changing as it goes along. I see several more up ahead of us. They seem to be coming from the darkness itself.

Someone hisses, “Psiotic parasites.”

“Do not use anyone's name from this point on. There is power in a name. We are only a few blocks from the shore line. That is as far as we will go.”

“Why are we here? What do we do?”

“We are here to bear witness to the crime we are about to commit.”
Crime? What crime?

Waves of nausea pass over me. Several people actually throw up. Even the Guardians feel sick to me when I use my psiotic senses. The structure of reality feels sick to me. Oh God, here I go. I bend over and wrench my guts out. Yingui stays with me while the others proceed. Pushy Paws is on my other side.

“Grab the hands of those near you. We want to be at least in groups of three.” Where ever two or more are gathered in my name. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. I keep repeating that phrase in my mind. I can hear faint whispers of other prayers. I look to my right

and Pushy Paw's mind seems nearly transparent to me now, but I cannot understand what she is saying in Hopi, so it is not TP. We all seems to be getting more and more transparent. I can see through my hand to the ground below.

“Do not be afraid. Gather strength from each other. We are close to the other team.”

We make it to the end of the block where we are met by the rest of our team and the remaining Guardians. Everyone seems to be semi transparent. The teams merge into one as hands are extended from the ends of small groups. We are soon a line on the shore facing the Abomination. The utter and complete darkness like none I have ever known.

“Where are the . . .”

“Ssssh!”

WELCOME RAT SMIGGLES. BOW TO ME NOW!

A figure comes to us from the abyss. A large man in a black cloak. Those parasite things are floating around him. He is using TK where none should be able. I feel as weak as a newborn kitten and getting weaker by the moment. I am not sure how much longer I can remain standing.

I hear someone whisper, “Sauron.” Followed by a “Sssh!” from further down the line.

To my left Yingui says quietly, “Sauron, renounce this path and live. There is still time.”

WISH I COULD SAY THE SAME FOR YOU. NOT!

"We know a world populated with Sauropods. You need never be alone again. All that you feel was taken from you can be returned."

YOU STILL DON'T GET IT PUNY ONE. WITH MY NEW PARTNERS I CONTROL THE UNIVERSE. NONE DARE STAND IN MY WAY. NOT EVEN THE POWER SPHERES! ALL WILL BOW TO MY WILL. I WILL TAKE YOUR WORLD AND ANY OTHER I WANT.

So much for partners. He is just using them like everyone else. Must stay awake. I am starting to shake.

Hang on. Not much longer.

Thanks. I straighten up some.

"So be it." Yingui motions us to sit down. Thank goodness. Sauron takes this as a clue that he may proceed to devour us. There will be no resistance. At this point it may even be a mercy. He said that we were to be a witness to a crime. I did not think that meant we would be the

victims too.

Something is holding Sauron back. He does not trust Yingui and the Guardians. I wouldn't after reading the journals. Finally he slowly changes into his dinosaur form. Ghost starts to growl. Someone says "Sssh!" He stops, but I bet his tail is swishing back and forth like crazy.

Nothing is happening. I turn to Yingui and he is openly crying. Tears are freely flowing down his face. Sauron roars and charges! Getting closer and closer, the tears keep falling. Soon I am crying too, I think we all are. It all seems so stupid. Sauron did not need to do this. Then it hits me. That is not Sauron. It is me! I am the one charging towards us, with all my prejudice, with all my hate, with all my ignorance. His crime is my crime. He thinks he was in control of us all this time, but we went along, willingly. We said yes to the lies, the cons, the greed, the lust. Everything was us. I think of the times that I treated someone badly because they were a lower station in life than I was, because they were ugly, the wrong color, fat, old, whatever. I think of relationships that I had that did not work out. My wife, my child Lisa, Mrs. Reynolds who drove me crazy. I think of the times that it was done to me.

I don't know how, but I find myself on my feet with my arms open to Sauron.

I shout at him, at me, "BE GONE FROM MY LIFE! I NO LONGER NEED YOU." Silence.

Slowly, just as Sauron is nearly upon us, the others rise with tears in their eyes, and we all shout together, "BE GONE FROM MY LIFE! I NO LONGER NEED YOU."

This totally stops Sauron. He floats there breathing heavy, drooling on all of us. He descend to the ground and slowly changes back to his human form.

"What did you say?" He speaks directly to me.

"If I can not forgive you for what you are about to do, then I could not forgive myself for what I have done. We are no different. I am you."

"Interesting." He ignores Yingui and goes up to Aimee, "Sweet flower, do you agree with him. Are you also me?"

"Yes, I am. I am also your daughter. I forgive you."

"You forgive me, even after I helped burn out your family, murder your cousin and your uncle."

She bites her lip and responds, "Yes. You did nothing that I had not thought of doing myself." She then lowers her head and cries.

He goes down the line till he comes to a black couple, Dorothy and Jesus in his Ubuntu guise. He is confused for a second. "My old friend. After all that I have done, surely you cannot forgive me. You cannot claim to be me."

"It is not my forgiveness that you seek, but yes I forgive you."

"Whose forgiveness do I seek?"

"Your own." He smiles and backs up to address us.

"Well, this little discussion has been very interesting, but I am afraid that I don't see where I need forgiveness and none of you are anything like me. Sorry to disappoint you. Keep trying and maybe someday you will succeed."

He then turns to Yingui, "See you in Hell Guardian." He TKs into the air and into the center of the blackness.

Yingui turns to me, "Good try George. No one could have done any better."

"I believe what I said Yingui. I really believe it."

"I know, I believe the same. That is why what is about to happen is a crime that we must bear witness to." He points up in the air.

We all look up. Directly above us are twelve enormous 'thn. District leaders. Level twelve. A thirteenth sphere about the same size floats in the center. A nude woman is inside. The Guardians bow very low. I do the same, but do not understand. The twelve plus one rise and move over the center of Abomination.

The woman's sphere lowers itself into position and stops. An intense blue white light comes from the twelve focused on her. Her sphere glows brighter and brighter till it is impossible to look at her and I have to look down. The sky lights up as if it were daylight. The light shifts position. I glance up briefly to see her descend in to the Abomination and disappear. There is a huge rumble and then silence. The blackness is gone along with the twelve. Did they descend into the Abomination as well? Somehow I don't think so. Only she did. She will not return.

The sun cracks over the horizon on a new day. We sit and wait for the sun to rise high enough to see what has happened. I am completely drained, though I felt my TK come back when the blackness ended. The Abomination is gone. Sauron is gone. The woman is gone.

"We rise." I rise along with the rest. We go high into the air and then directly over where it was. The air is totally still. I look down to see a huge pool frozen like in one of those high speed flash photography images of a drop hitting water. The ripples are there, the returning drop just about to break away from the surface.

"Who was she?" I manage somehow to croak out.

"Rhea." The Guardian Rhea. The one who befriended Ah'thn. Ah'thn must have been one of the twelve.

"Is she. . . .?"

"I don't know."

"What did they do?"

"The twelve plus Rhea pushed the Abomination back through the gate to Mother's world and then back through that gate to her previous world, and so on and so on. Probably still going on."

"When will it stop?"

"When she reaches the origin. Mother is gone."

"Surely she has other worlds?"

"No, she only had the resources to serially infect worlds. It is not easy for an artificial intelligence to move between worlds and time frames."

Br'thn comes up to us along with three other 'thn.

My I introduce to you my froth shelf, Br'thn, my froth sister Pr'thn and my true mother Qr'thn.

"That has to get confusing. I am pleased to meet all of you." I bow to them.

You are both invited to my birthday party.

I smile, "I accept." Yingui smiles and also nods his acceptance.

"Where will the party be?"

"The Regional Galactic Center is the usual spot."

"Ah, that reminds me. I have a question about that. The center has to be outside at least some of the bubbles formed. How do they keep track of all the visitors so the wrong ones don't meet?"

"As you would imagine, it is very complicated. The center is really in dimensional space. Some are hundreds of layers deep. We are only starting to understand it ourselves."

"A mirror of the multiverse it resides in."

He thinks for a moment, "That is a good analogy. Thank you." He nods to me.

Aimee comes up to us, "What? What did George say?"

"He said that the Regional Galactic Center was arranged as if a mirror of the multiverse."

"Oh, the Froth. I had already worked that out. Only way it could be of course." She moves on to another group.

"Oh well. I would imagine you had similar experiences with Ron and Susan."

"All the time my friend. All the time." He puts his arm around me and we walk towards the others.

Costa Rica Net

Feliz Navidad! Merry Christmas!

Nothing more about the strange broadcast of two days ago. It is thought to have been a hoax or the work of a new group similar to the APES of the former USA.

The strange darkness over New York that was making many people sick hundreds of kilometers away is gone. A rather unusual monument has shown up in its place. This over flight by newsbots shows the incredible size of the structure. Scientists have yet to identify the material. It appears from spectral analysis not to be a naturally occurring material. At least nothing that has ever been seen on earth before. All attempts to remove a sample or even to scratch the surface have failed. Looks like it will be there for a very long time. It is exactly one kilometer in diameter and unknown depth. A perfect circle down to twelve decimal places at least. More questions than answers. Chinese material experts are expected tomorrow.

Galactic Regional Center

"Happy Birthday Br'thn!" I nod and purr a thank you. It is too easy for them to tell me apart from the other 'thn. I need a disguise. What can be used as a disguise? I remember something from my sleep, when I was sitting on the desk at the coal mine. There were images on a screen. I have it! I need a nose and glasses to hide my identity. Hmm, this will work better if everyone is wearing the same disguise. Easy enough to do.

Suddenly everyone is laughing. I do admit the other 'thn look ridiculous in disguise, but it seems to work. No one knows this one is me any longer. Now I can float around and watch the others.

Hmm, we need music and lights too. What did I see in Ohio before I met Anikin? Yingui was looking for him at the hospital. There was a party going in one of the rooms. I try and remember the music. The flashing lights are easy enough. Aimee taught me enough tech for that effect. The music is harder. I was barely awake from my sleep and all was new to me.

I go to Anikin. *Please I need help. I want people to have fun and I think we need music.*

"Good, you are learning to limit your TP. How do you like your new body?"

Thank you for asking. The extra abilities are nice as well as the additional 'thn information. It is larger though. Will take some getting

used to. I don't fit in some spaces any longer.

"There is that. I would talk to the Guardians about the music. They were once quite good musicians."

Yes, I remember now. Thank you my love!

"You're welcome." He is very happy.

The first one I meet is Mei Ying. Hei Long made a mistake thinking her name was Mei Ling at the beginning of this year. I think it was because he was not TP capable yet and her accent was hard for him. TP is so much more reliable. She is holding one of Tsing's kittens, Graas I believe.

Thank you for coming Mei Ying.

"Happy Birthday Br'thn. Congratulations on your new body. Looks good on you."

All 'thn bodies look the same Mei Ying.

"I was teasing. What can I do for you?"

Very perceptive. I think the party needs music. Will you help me?

"Of course. Anything for the birthday girl." She smiles sweetly and leaves to gather the others. Graas looks scared. A new environment is difficult.

I hear a discussion going on. Discussions are usually good learning opportunities. I will listen in. Music starts to play. The discussion is breaking up. They cannot do two things at once. Frustrating.

I follow George. I especially love the bass note on the larger flute that Yingui is playing at the moment. The purity of the sound is so beautiful to me. The journals said he always played an ocarina. I want to be nearer in order to feel the sound vibrations. Maybe 'thn cannot do two things at once either. I find George.

"I am still trying to figure this whole thing out."

"The crime part that Yingui mentioned?"

"Yes. It was weird, but it really felt like we were killing ourselves."

"If your right eye offends you, pluck it out. Better to go to heaven part of a person than to hell intact."

"That would make us only partial now. Thanks for the reminder Ubuntu." He nods and moves to other discussion. I follow him.

He is now listening in on a discussion with Hei Long and Aimee.

"Looking forward to going back to your Regents duties?"

He shakes his head, "You had to bring that up here at Br'thn's party? No, I am not looking forward to going back at all. It is funny, a year ago I would have sold my family to get the position, now I would rather be unknown and working in the shadows. I am just not interested in power any more. I don't like the responsibility and I especially the game playing. I am so tired of egos, greed, and fear."

“Maybe Tran Vu can take over for you, or at least share the position. That way you both could get out to work on other things.”

“That could work, but what about you? Going back into the lab?”

“The Mother project was all consuming. I just had to figure it out. I was totally obsessed. Now that it is over I am not sure. I want to see the world, find out what is really needed before I jump in again.”

“We certainly could use some way to use IT in a more positive way. To help people, instead of keep track of them. Mother taught us more than anything that we are not machines and should never be treated like we are. Those people that were really not people still haunt me.”

“I was too focused at the time to notice much. I wonder what happened to them?”

“Freedom has a heavy price. I just hope they really were no longer sentient. What scares me was what must have happened to the previous residents. That dungeon we were in was not built by Mother. That was from before. I scanned below the ground when I visited the farm. There was a feudal society complete with castles. The bones buried nearby were not that old.”

“Human?”

“If I had to guess I would say Neanderthal. There world they won instead of the Cro Magnon species.”

“Interesting. Maybe we should mount an archaeological dig.”

“I am guessing that there may still be some alive. In the hills or more secluded areas. Mother did not cover the entire planet according to Doc. Now that we are all eights maybe we should head the expedition?”

I hear Smith and Jones talking about their new venture. Hashra is with them.

“You can't just start using those power supplies in the quantities you are proposing. Yes, as far as we know there is no pollution. Yes, it looks like it would really help your people succeed. Those are two big ifs. Start small and work your way up. There may be some side effect we are not aware of. Nothing is free. There is always a trade off. If nothing else it will be a huge change in your culture.”

“Not much left of that now. Hard to hurt something that does not exist.”

“Still be careful and go slow.”

“We are really good at that.”

“Don't forget arguing among ourselves till nothing gets done. I don't think you have much to worry about Hashra. We are going to concentrate on making the villages self sufficient. Certainly the power supplies will help there even if they never end up in a commercial product.”

“Ah Br'thn, I have been looking for you.”

How did you know it was me Pushy Paws?

“Br'thn, we will always know which one is you. Same as we would always be able to pick out anyone else from our team. The disguises are fun though. Good idea. And the music! I do so love the flute. Reminds me of days on the Mesa when someone would play the Hopi or Navajo flute.

But the reason I was trying to find you was to help me understand what will happen now that Sauron is gone. What will happen to all the companies he was running?”

My knowledge of his current activities may be more limited than yours.

“But you knew him. You knew how he thought.”

I think for a moment. Most will run for a time on their own just as before. He preferred to operate from the background. He made corrections from time to time and watched a lot. There will not be the careful pruning going on as before. Short term no difference, but long term it will lead to much trouble.

“Did you ever meet Lisa Krandle, his assistant?”

No. I would think that she was operated the same way he did his operation as a whole. Useful to him, but carried no power of her own. If you are thinking of bringing her back to run things, again, it will work for a time, but not long term.

“Thanks Br'thn! Thank you very much and happy birthday!” She smiles and then goes away looking very thoughtful.

I think I am going to like being sentient. Who is next?

**WARNING. OBJECT APPROACHING CENTER. WARNING.
ALL 'THN TO SAFETY POSITIONS. ALL 'THN TO SAFETY
POSITIONS.**

Thankfully the upgrade included the necessary protocols, having never been in this situation before. I DS out of the center and take up my position as assigned by the core leadership.

When I scan around me to see what is going on I realize that we have lined up in an honor line. Five parallel lines in 3D space. The object pops out of DS space near one end and then slowly progresses down the line. I scan my new core for a reference without finding anything. It is larger than a level twelve district 'thn, but is not transparent in the electromagnetic range. Sort of a slowly swirling pattern of blue, white and black. The potential energy is out of range of my ability to sense it.

HONOR GIVEN TO MULTIVERSE RAS004

Guardians of Br'thn © c. patton

When the object reaches the end of our line it reenters DS space. It is headed in the direction of the nearest edge of our multiverse.

Be at peace Br'thn.

DISMISSED

I return to the party inside, everyone is just now leaving a view port.

“Amazing, only the fourth completely independent new multiverse to have formed. What are the odds.” I have never seen Yingui so animated.

Father of Pr'thn, I do not understand who or what just happened. It spoke to me.

“You need not be so formal with me Br'thn, even here.”

How is it you know what is going on, yet there is nothing in my records of this event?

“The universe has been around this time for approximately fifteen billion years, give or take. In that time this event has only happened three times before and those three were much earlier on.

You ask why I know this. There is much you learn through introspection, but in this case it was because she told me herself. We are honored as to be addressed by a multiverse herself. Br'thn, you were there last night when she was formed. The multiverse is Rhea, the Abomination and Sauron, RAS. They combined during the Mother extraction. I asked Ah'thn and she said that each time it is a mystery and never happens the same way twice. It is unlikely to happen again until the time of compaction.”

That I do know about. When the universe stops expanding in 3D space and starts to contract.

George and Doc are talking about it with the rest of the team listening.

“But why those three? I could see Rhea. She would make a good universe, but Sauron and especially the Abomination? No way.”

“Come George, you of all people should understand. You said it so beautifully last night.”

“Perhaps I can state it simply.” We all turn to Ubuntu.

“The Abomination was the means. It is negative psiotic. An attractor, if you will, of a controlled amount of psiotic energy. Think of it as a giant capacitor, storing psiotic energy until needed.”

“What of the personality of the Abomination. Early reports said it was in a man's body.”

“Completely overshadowed by the change itself. He died before the transformation was complete. When we arrived it not in any shape that

could be understood by our senses.”

“They why Sauron? I want to be rid of that aspect of my own thinking and acting.”

“George, everything is in balance. No universe can exist without balance. Rhea and Sauron represent more than just good and evil, as there are aspects of both in both personalities. Sauron was not all evil, as much as he wanted to be and Rhea was not all good. No one is.”

“Where is she going? Too small to be a true universe.”

“She will leave our universe to go to enter null space. Once there she will expand to form the new multiverse.”

“Big Bang! It does exist.”

“How did you know this?” Yingui is grinning when he says this. He already knows the answer.

“You will not understand this in your heart, in the core of your being until you have experienced level thirteen yourself. Some don't even then. Rhea did not at that time. She understands now of course.”

“Try me.”

Lisa comes up, “Two words. No separation.”

“You're right, I don't understand.”

George tries, “I think I do now. It was what I said last night. There is no separation. We are Sauron and Sauron is us. No separation.”

“That's a start. Goes much further. There is no separation at all in a multiverse. All that you see, imagine, experience, that everyone, through all time and all dimensions is all one.”

“It is like the multiverse does not really go bang. It only appears that way to those who experience it from the inside.”

Yes.