

Decision Point



A Novella by

Russell E. Vance, III

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Russell E. (Rusty) Vance, III, PhD. is a retired psychotherapist who, after retiring, has followed his passions and dreams. He and his wife, Pamela, spent the first ten years of retirement as nomadic RVer's spending over 90% of their life off-the-grid far out into the Sonoran Desert or in the dense cedar and hemlock forest of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana where Rusty and Pamela served as volunteer campground hosts.



An unabashed tree-hugger and environmentalist, Rusty's post-retirement advocacy became wildlife management, living among and helping keep deer, mountain goats, big horn sheep, bears and other creatures safe. Many of his stories carry a strong environmental message.

Living in a twenty-foot camper trailer they named Nitsitapiisinni (Blackfeet for 'our way of life'), Rusty enjoys spending his evenings writing stories. His novels include – *AGEH*, *New Prince of Coillearnach*, *Tree of Life*,

The Tillman Place, and *Mountain of Gold* along with several novella and short stories.





Kaibab National Forest

Liam Muir sat on a large stone at Decision Point just west of town looking toward Departure Point at the end of the deep, steep-walled canyon that was a precursor to the Grand Canyon just south. The canyon itself contained only a few shrubs and small fir trees with a plethora of wildflowers living in the scree of the steep sides. Liam could see silverweed cinquefoil, purple-white owl's-clover and Colorado blue columbine in abundance in the subalpine meadows. The forest of Ponderosa Pine and a variety of firs grew thick and up to the edge of the canyon. There was no mistaking the “pumpkins” – mature Ponderosa with large pumpkin-orange platelets outlined in black. They were magnificent. The elevation was at that point where the firs – Douglas, White and Corkbark – were beginning to dominate. One can almost determine their elevation by the trees. The giant Ponderosa can thrive

from almost sea level to six or eight thousand feet, but the fir are strictly a high elevation plant.

Out there, somewhere, would be his new home, assuming that he didn't decide to back out before the next morning. He had been well trained over the past weeks but he had also been warned that once he went through Departure Pass his life would be changed forever. He would be a part of a small band of people living on their own totally off-the-grid. The so-called comforts of the twenty-first century would be gone. He would disappear into the wilderness never to be seen again by modern society. It was his choice, and it was a big decision.

As he tried to visualize what it was going to be like to simply walk out of the modern world, he thought about the path that had led him to this point.

Liam was a solitary type of person. His life revolved around nature, wildlife and being out in the wilderness. He had a degree in wildlife management, which Liam always said was a euphemism for 'protect the animals from humans'. He had worked for the National Park Service, National Forest Service and half a dozen state organizations. He was an unabashed tree-hugger and preservationist, and found the politics required to work in any type of government organization, no matter how good, almost unbearable. He worked for so many different organizations because sooner or later the political factions required him to do something which he considered a crime against nature.

At thirty-four years old, Liam was living in an old eighteen-foot Class-C RV which he had bought with his last full-time job pay-check. It wasn't very fancy, but he was comfortable and he could live in the vast public lands of the American west. Well, he could live there until the government gave the land away to mining and oil companies.

Before the new administration in Washington started attacking public lands and trying to lease it to their super-rich buddies, there were almost countless places in national forests and BLM (Bureau of Land Management) lands where one could camp without cost because they are public lands. Of course, you're in the wilderness where there is no water,

toilets or dump stations, but people who like to camp, vacation or live in such areas don't mind. More and more retired couples, whose retirement income is not sufficient in the new economy, are selling everything, purchasing RVs and living in the desert. They are rather like a tough version of a snowbird. They often follow the weather, sometimes never leaving a state like Arizona, and other times covering thousands of miles.

The number of people disenfranchised by a runaway money-hungry capitalistic economy continued to grow in the United States. Liam, in just one dispersed camping area in central Arizona, encountered five people living in cars, old vans and trailers because they could not afford an apartment in the town where they worked. They had jobs. The jobs just didn't pay enough for food and housing. One woman had lived in an apartment complex that was sold. The new owners put everyone out, did some remodeling and doubled the rent. She could not afford to go back. Retirees were finding that they could not live in an economy where the difference between the haves and have-nots was so great. Some were being forced to live in campers and get minimal paying jobs in places like Walmart. Other worked in the fields doing things like harvesting sugar beets in North Dakota or Minnesota. A man Liam knew had owned a successful business for twenty-two years. The little companies were being strangled by the giant corporations. He sold his business, bought a motorhome and became a work camper. Yes, some do it for adventure and to avoid getting back into the regular workforce, but all of them do it because they need money to live.

Some BLM and Forest Service land has minimal camping fees, but those are almost always places that provide water, pit toilets and even dump stations. People can also hunt, fish, hike, and ride their ATVs in many places. If you camp in these areas there is often a fourteen-day stay limit. After the stay limit you have to move to a different national forest. In much of the southwest that may mean just moving across the road. The little town of Quartzsite, Arizona, population three-thousand, has almost a million people in the winter. The vast majority live in their RVs in the desert.

Liam gave up full-time work by choice. He would pick up jobs when he needed money, but most of the time he did wildlife and other wilderness work for universities and non-profit organizations. His biggest expense was gas. He would spend his summers in the high mountains of the northern Rockies where he worked on trail crews and guided groups. In the winter he would head to southern Arizona where he helped snowbirds learn how to boondock and worked for a friend installing solar panels on RVs. He found that life got better and better the farther away he got from society.

Liam was somewhere in the Sonoran Desert when he got an email from a good friend who likewise lived off-the-grid.

Hey Liam. Just wanted to say good-bye. I finally found a way to really escape. Just like we always talked about. Tomorrow I'm leaving with a group. We will literally disappear. Can't tell you any more, but if you decide that you really want to escape, put up a public Facebook post that says "Stop the world. I want to get off. #bravenewworld". Someone will contact you. Have a great life, buddy! Ted.

Ted and Liam had been friends for many years and shared the same hopes, dreams and frustrations. They had often talked about just walking off into the wilderness and disappearing; escaping from the madness of so-called civilization. They both had the skills to live in the wilderness but they had to agree that, despite the immense area of wilderness in the United States west, it was still next to impossible to truly disappear and avoid society. The current government was making it even more difficult by closing some areas and giving other areas to their rich friends who, in turn, close the land to public use. Somehow, according to Ted's email, he had found a way to truly escape and was sharing it with Liam. The idea was too enticing to ignore. Liam opened his Facebook account and where it said "What's on your mind?" he wrote, "Stop the world. I want to get off. #bravenewworld".

It was the next day that Liam found a Facebook text regarding his "Stop the world..." post.

There truly is a brave new world for those who really want. Go to 33.360725 -114.099391 at noon four days from now and wait there for further instructions.

Why all the cloak and dagger, Liam wondered. It seemed silly to Liam, but he was aware, and sadly understanding, of the paranoia experienced by so many seeking escape from the culture of violence in which they lived. He looked up the coordinates. They were at the end of the Palm Canyon trail in southeast Arizona. That wasn't far from him. He packed up and headed to KOFA.



Palm Canyon in the side of Signal Mountain

KOFA is a National Wildlife Refuge that gets its name from an old mine called the King of Arizona. It is about 60 miles or so north of Yuma and covers about 1,040 square miles in the

Sonoran Desert. Palm Canyon Road, one of the few roads into the refuge, is extremely popular with those who enjoy the solitude of living in the desert.

The Palm Canyon road is gravel and washboard in places. Liam had been there many times. It was one of his favorites and a great place to get away. The nearest town was Quartzsite, Arizona, about twenty-five miles north. The mountains were fantastic, the desert beautiful, and the night sky phenomenal. You can actually see the Milky Way on a clear night. And most nights are clear in the desert. Despite its popularity, the desert is pristine. Maybe the people who want to boondock here are more willing to preserve and less likely to trash the desert than you find when you go to some BLM land near towns.

A few years back someone had built a meditation circle along the Palm Canyon road. It is still there and undisturbed. Camping near it is one of his favorite places.

This visit Liam found a spot he liked inside the refuge. If you stay just outside the refuge no one pays attention to how long you stay or how far from the road you camp. If you stay inside the refuge there is a camp host and rangers who enforce the fourteen day stay limit and camping sites. Liam wanted to be close to the trailhead so he could walk to the rendezvous from his camp.

The night of day three Liam sat outside his RV looking up at the dark gash in the side of Signal Peak which was Palm Canyon. Signal Peak, the highest point in the Kofa Mountains, is a volcanic mountain dating back to the Tertiary period. Its red and brown rock rising suddenly from the desert floor, this was the hottest spot in the Sonoran Desert. Only the occasional cactus could be seen clinging to the steep walls. In 1936 a frontiersman turned conservationist named Frederick Russell Burnham started a campaign to save the Desert Bighorn Sheep. Burnham was a co-founder of the Boy Scouts and used that organization, in concert with the Audubon Society, Izaak Walton League and National Wildlife Federation, to lead the charge that, in 1939, became Kofa National Wildlife Refuge.

Liam wondered about what would happen the next day. With all of the secrecy he was a bit concerned that he was going to be recruited into something illegal. That, however, didn't sound like Ted. Ted was probably more concerned about being legal than anyone he knew. What was this 'brave new world'? How could there be any place left that was not controlled, manipulated or somehow influenced by the capitalistic world order?



Liam was awakened by the sun rising over Signal Peak. The canyon was still a dark gash in the mountain's side and would not get sunlight until at least mid-day. The sky was cloudless. The coolness of the desert night was quickly dissipating and giving way to the heat of the desert day.

He made himself a good breakfast and then sat down under the RV's awning with a cup of coffee looking at the mountain and thinking about his hopes and fears. It would be several hours before he had to get ready to go.

Most of Liam's hopes and fears revolved around ecology, environment, conservation and preservation issues. But even those went back to a fundamental fear and belief that the modern society and government was rapidly becoming like Robert Orwell's book *1984*.

In the book the country was run by a dictatorship of the mega-wealthy. They ruled by fear, rewriting history, doublethink and keeping the masses ignorant. This is what Liam saw happening around him. The administration snubbed morality while claiming to be definers of morality. Like the government in the book, the current administration taught that *war is peace; slavery is freedom and ignorance is strength*. Like many other, Liam hoped that what they were experiencing was a bad dream. Sadly, it wasn't. He hoped that somehow the masses would

realize that they were being used and turn things around. His dream was that society would realize the damage it was doing and at last stop its destructive ways. He knew, however, that they were hopes and dreams that would probably never come about.

Packing a backpack was second nature to Liam. Methodically he checked the items like first aide kit, water purifier, survival gear, maps and compasses that are never removed from the pack. Once assured that everything was there he added the consumables – protein bars, trail mix, and a three-liter water bladder. The trail was only about a half-mile long and he was camped less than a half-mile from the trailhead, but Liam never went into the wilderness without his backpack. You never know what you will encounter or what you will need when you are in the wilderness. You don't need to be miles and miles into the back country to need a well-equipped backpack. In fact, the only time that Liam had been seriously injured had been less than a mile from the trailhead.

Sliding his sheath knife onto his belt next to the Leatherman that was always there and clipping his compass to on his left side, Liam donned his trail hat, slipped into the backpack's harness, gave his hiking staff, which he had named 'Roosevelt', a spin and headed off toward Palm Canyon.

His gait was steady and not too fast. Liam was a great admirer of John Muir, a distant uncle, who said that we should saunter through the wilderness because it is our holy lands. The wilderness was definitely Liam's holy lands. Besides, you miss things if you go too fast. Liam wore an off-white loose-fitting linen long-sleeve drawstring shirt. He liked it because it was cool while providing adequate protection against the sun and elements. His trousers were kaki backcountry pants designed for comfort and protection. He wore Keen high boots and gaiters.

The hike to the head of the trail took Liam less than thirty minutes. He had been up the trail numerous times but still enjoyed the scenery. He stopped by the simple sign that said "Palms" and had an arrow. It pointed to a narrow crevice on the west side of the canyon, which was just getting direct sun light. Far up the canyon were the California Palms which had been there since the last ice age. They are the only California Palms that

are actually indigenous to Arizona. You can climb up the crevice to the trees, but Liam's instructions were to wait at the sign. He sat down on a rock, peeled open a protein bar, and sipped water while he waited.

By twelve-thirty Liam was beginning to worry that he had fallen victim to a cruel joke. He was actually putting on his backpack when a young man approached him.

"Are you Liam?" the young man asked.

"Yes," replied Liam, "and who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Ron," the young man held out an envelope. "A guy down at the parking lot asked me to give this to you."

While carrying on a polite conversation with Ron about the magnificent palms, Liam quickly opened his backpack, pulled out his binoculars and scanned the parking lot. There was no one to be seen. Well down the road Liam could see the dust rising from a moving vehicle, but it was much too far away to see.

The envelope contained a note.

To be truly free is everyone's dream and we both know that few people actually realize it. If you wish and are willing to walk the path, we will help you realize that dream.

Stay here two more nights. You will be contacted again with further instructions. Please do not talk about this with anyone. There are those who would stop us.

Liam thought about the note as he walked back to his RV.

First of all, was he willing to stay here two more nights just to see if anyone contacts him? Actually, he thought, he didn't have anything better to do, he was quite curious, and it was a great place. But who, he wondered, would want to stop a person from helping people realize their dream of true freedom? He decided that they were just being over-dramatic, but he had to stick around to find out what they meant by being truly free. Did their definition match his?



Ambling, seemingly meaninglessly and without direction, through the wilderness was Liam's way of dealing with issues. It was like meditation in motion. Even the confines of his Class-C motorhome was too much when he really wanted to think. He needed to think, and so he headed north and west along the base of Signal Peak.

There is a bumper-sticker that reads "All those who wander are not lost." This was Liam. He was merely lost in thought. As he sauntered through the creosote bushes, ocotillo and palo verde trees, carefully crossing washes, and admiring giant Saguaro cacti, his mind was freed to concentrate his thoughts on what was happening and what he would do in various scenarios.

The cloak-and-dagger bothered Liam. He could think of no reason for it if these people were legitimate. Why would anyone want to stop others from realizing a dream?

Looking at the sand burrs ready to either hitch a ride or cause extreme pain, Liam quickly came up with a short list of people who would want to stop his dreams. It was headed by government, big business and religion.

His dreams of an environmentally conscious society; of a society that did not rape the land in the name of comfort and consumerism; was definitely opposed by big corporations. Capitalism can only survive by ever increasing consumption which means greater and greater destruction of the environment. Since those who run the government get elected because of the money of big corporations, government is not going to support his dreams. If he had the means to bring about his dream, these two would definitely do everything in their power to stop him.

Maybe, he concluded, #bravenewworld might not be overreacting.

Liam was a good two miles into the desert but still in the shadow of Signal Peak and in sight of Palm Canyon. The desert represented freedom to Liam. Here plants and animals, great and small, struggled against unbelievable odds to survive, and are successful. For Liam the wilderness represented real life whether deserts, forests, mountains or plains. In the wilderness one lives life. The challenges and difficulties are not seen as a personal assault but a part of being truly alive. In so-called civilization, the ways of nature, the ways of true life, are seen as the enemy and as something to be overcome and exterminated. As a result, true life was not only denied but avoided.

When he returned home there was a van parked nearby. They weren't too close but the owner, a young woman, immediately approached Liam and asked if he minded if she camped that close.

The young woman's name was Stephanie. She was short and athletic, which was extremely obvious from the dark well-muscled legs protruding from the hiking shorts she had folded up a couple of turns. Liam figured that she was Native American but had no idea which tribe. Her beauty wasn't lost on him either. Stephanie was a full-timer living in a Transit van. Transits are very popular among full-timers who must, at least at some point, do what is called 'stealth camping'. That is camping on city streets or in parking lots where you might get run off by the police. Some people stealth camp just for the excitement. Others stealth camp because they can't afford an apartment in the city where they work. Stephanie was in the latter group. She worked at the Los Angeles Botanical garden as a botanist and couldn't afford a decent apartment so she bought the Transit and fixed it up as her home. She told Liam that she was visiting Palm Canyon as a part of her trip home to visit her parents who still lived on the San Carlos Apache reservation. He had been right. Her family were Yavapai Apache who had been forced to move to "Hell's Forty Acres."

Stephanie's family had survived the 180-mile forced march in the winter of 1875 from Camp Verde to San Carlos, which soon earned the name Hell's Forty Acres. The San Carlos reservation was established in December of 1872. The government gave various religious groups

responsibility. The Apache were supposed to have been fed and housed by these “caretakers” but they rarely saw the federal money. The Army showed open hatred toward the Apache and were known to torture and kill them for sport. And Stephanie and other Native Americans are supposed to appreciate what the white man has done for them?

Stephanie was the type of person with whom Liam felt comfortable. He could talk to her about anything and within a short while he felt as if they’d known each other forever. They had dinner together, each sharing what they had, sitting under the stars and talking well into the night. They talked about being nomads, about how they felt alienated by modern society and fearful of what lay ahead for humanity as it continued to devour and destroy the Earth’s precious resources.

Stephanie was as dedicated a tree-hugger and preservationist as Liam. She had learned many of the old Apache ways of living but she was frustrated by always being tied to the white-man’s agenda. There was no place she could go and live as her ancestors had done. Van living was a steep learning curve for her. She was fascinated by Liam’s wilderness skills and asked him all sorts of questions about living full-time off the grid. They both agreed that no matter how far you go into the wilderness you are still trapped by the greed, corruption and human degradation of capitalism.

The next morning Stephanie’s van was gone and a note was taped to Liam’s door.

Dear Liam, it was so nice to meet you and spend time getting to know you. It does seem that we are both truly looking for that brave new world. If you would like to talk more, meet me at 34.818958 -111.905268 at 11:30am in two days. Stephanie.

Stephanie had been his contact. He thought about their conversation. They had talked about the concept of totally leaving society and living life free from the corrupt politics, destructive society and capitalism that together consume so much, so quickly that it was killing the Earth. He had felt comfortable with Stephanie and had poured out his heart to her; his fears, his dreams, his hopes for the future. He wanted to see her again.

Perhaps it was their connectedness. Perhaps it was having so enjoyed feminine company, especially when the woman was smart and like-minded. The fact that she wanted to talk more about the illusive escape, about which his friend, Ted, had told him, didn't hurt. He entered the coordinates into his topographic map app. This time he was headed toward Cottonwood, Arizona.



Looking out from Angel Valley Road.

The Cottonwood-Sedona area is a very popular area for snowbirds and nomads. It is in north-central Arizona about forty miles south of Flagstaff and just north of Prescott. Sedona is a very touristy area. One person described it as Gatlinburg on steroids. Cottonwood is less tourist oriented but has lots of good restaurants and interesting shops in its old-town area. Cottonwood, Sedona and Camp Verde make a triangle of tourist attractions, Native American cliff dwellings and pueblo, historic sites, fabulous mountains and trails and a boon docker's paradise.

The coordinates led Liam to a dirt road about half way between Cottonwood and Sedona called 525. Obviously a National Forest Service road. The topo map showed the coordinates at a place called Dad Jones Tank. He had passed some campers in a dispersed camping area but none of them was Stephanie's Transit. The coordinates led to a dispersed camping area that had been closed off by the Forest Service. It was sad, but if the administration wasn't giving the public land away the Forest Service or BLM were being forced to close areas because people were not taking care of the camping areas and trashing them. Life was getting harder and harder for the nomad.

When noon came and went Liam was getting a bit annoyed but, after his experience at Palm Canyon, knew that this was just a part of the game. He decided that he'd give her until one o'clock.

Just past twelve thirty an old GMC pickup pulled up.

"Hi," said the driver as he got out of the pickup.

"Hi," Liam replied.

"Are you waiting for someone?" the man asked.

"Yes," Liam realized that he was again being checked out.

"You wouldn't be looking for Stephanie, would you?"

"Yes, do you know her?"

"Give me ten minutes," said the driver. "then return to the highway, go straight across. That's Deer Pass Road. There's a trailhead a short distance in. Stop there for fifteen minutes. Just over the mountain is Angel Valley. It is a commune. Go there and we'll come get you." He paused briefly. "May I have your cell phone? I'll be sure you get it back."

There was no time for questions. Liam handed the stranger his cell phone. The man got back into his truck and drove off into the desert from which he had emerged.

Liam followed his instructions. After ten minutes he drove back across the highway, found the trailhead and counted off fifteen minutes. There was an old truck-camper there. He kept waiting for someone to get out of the camper and give him instructions, but it didn't happen. After the allotted time Liam headed up the mountain. In less than a mile he encountered a woman who was pushing her bicycle up the narrow dirt road. There really wasn't a safe way to get around her. She indicated for Liam to stop. He rolled down his window.

"Turn in at the next dispersed camping area," she called through the window and stepped aside.

Liam pulled into the dispersed camping area and found a spot. He spotted Stephanie's van under a tree. In the camping area were five other RV – a small Class-A, Class-C, a Casita trailer, and another van. A group of people sat outside the Class-A. Stephanie stood up. Liam waved.

Stephanie met Liam as he climbed out of his rig and started toward the group. As she approached he was reminded of how beautiful she was. She was wearing what he assumed was a traditional Apache dress. It didn't matter. The gentle desert wind blowing against her just accentuated her grace and beauty, and he saw nothing else. In fact, he could have missed the old GMC and truck-camper that pulled in right behind him.

"I'm so glad you came," Stephanie said as she drew near. She paused as though she didn't know what to do, then held out her hands. "Come, meet the others."

Liam looked over her shoulder at the group that was now standing up and moving toward the two of them. Each, in turn, approached, greeted Liam and introduced themselves. The fellow from the old GMC came up from behind, smiled, introduced himself, patted Liam on the shoulder and handed him his cell phone.

"It was just to make sure you didn't call anyone between then and now," the man, named Bob, explained.

Raymond Stadler, who insisted that he was not in charge, was the default leader. Sitting down under the Class-A's awning, Raymond wasted no time coming to the point.

"I'm sorry that we put you through so much trouble," Raymond explained, "but we were warned that there would be those who would try to stop us. We're just trying to get away from this society but evidently there are government officials who believe that our doing so is or would be a national security problem."

"That's okay," Liam smiled. The jury was still out for him on whether or not this exercise was worth the effort. "I'm just glad we finally get to talk."

"My wife, Lisa, and I were the ones who started putting this group together, so I guess telling you how that came to be would be a good place to start," said Raymond. There was a murmur of agreement.

"We were young, idealistic professionals. Lisa is a physician. She specialized in trauma and sports medicine. I was a college anthropology professor. Financially everything was perfect. Socially everything was perfect, but we were also outdoor enthusiasts and Sierra Club supporters and that wasn't perfect. We saw constant deterioration in the way people treat the environment, giving no consideration for anything other than themselves and their own comforts. In our professional lives we saw the decay of society. It got to the point that Lisa wasn't diagnosing and treating patients. Some person without any medical education, nevertheless experience, was sitting in an insurance company office making life determining decisions. And Medicare and Medicaid said it was illegal to provide health care for free. She could lose her license if she helped a homeless person without getting paid. The more the scientific and intellectual community tried to warn society, the more the mega-corporations, who were becoming richer and more powerful as the world and society died, incited the poor and uneducated against us and made us out to be the evil ones. Anti-intellectualism has always been alive and thriving in the United States. Have you read Hofstadter's book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*?"

As Raymond took a breath, Lisa Stadler put her hand on her husband's shoulder. Liam could see the tears in her eyes. "Raymond," she said, "he knows."

Raymond just looked at her and nodded. Tears also filled his eyes. This was obviously a horribly hard story for him to tell.

"We finally could not take any more of the abuse," Lisa continued her husband's story. "nor could we stand by idly watching a few super-rich people lead the poor, ignorant masses into the destruction of the world. When we were threatened, demonized, and physically abused we decided that we had done and suffered all we could. It was time to try to escape. To live in the wilderness away from any form of society and try to live out our lives in the peace of nature."

"We thought of moving to another country," Raymond added, now more in control of his emotions. "There are a lot of countries that are way ahead of the US environmentally, socially, and just about every possible way. Problem was, we actually couldn't afford to live somewhere else. I taught in a State university. The State legislature took our pension money for their pet projects. My pension is worthless."

"We had . . . we had . . .," Lisa buried her head in Raymond's shoulder. Raymond looked around in distress as though searching for help.

"They had a child," Tony Costa said quietly as though trying to soften the blow of reality. "They had a little girl who died of some sort of liver disease because the insurance company wouldn't pay for the treatment that would save her life. They said there wasn't enough proof that she wouldn't die anyway." He paused to deal with his own emotions. "They used all of their savings, Lisa's retirement and even sold everything they had, but it was not enough."

Liam just sat and looked. He had heard of things like this happening but he'd never actually known anyone who had suffered such lack of compassion. Everyone sat quietly, giving Lisa and Raymond all the time they needed.

“When my cycle of grief hit anger, I let loose with a series of articles and blogs condemning our society for what it had become, and especially the fact that so many think it’s so great.” Raymond finally said. “I got in trouble with the university but I refused to recant and resigned before they could fire me.”

“It was shortly after that that the Sisters contacted us,” Lisa picked up the account. “We met them in a little roadside café near Flagstaff. They said that they understood our plight and had a plan that could save a lot of people, or at least give us a peaceful existence until the end. It would, however, mean learning to live in the wilderness, without modern comforts or conveniences.”

“Even if we weren’t outdoor enthusiasts we would have accepted,” Raymond added.

“They didn’t give us any detail. They said that they didn’t actually know where our destination would be, but they promised that we would be safe from the society that we found so intolerable and we would have an opportunity to start fresh,” Lisa continued. “The only catch was that it takes about twenty people on a team and finding these people would be our responsibility. The Sisters would give us names of others who had reached the point of total disenfranchisement; people like you who responded to #bravenewworld. We would then contact the person to see if they wanted to join us. That seemed fair to us if they held up their end of the bargain.”

“That’s when the Sisters warned us that there are government people who will try to stop us,” Raymond took over. “You’d think the government would be glad to get rid of the educated and intellectual. It’s undoubtedly about money. If all of the educated and intellectual leave we will take a lot of money with us. Also, the educated and intellectual are the ones that come up with products and ways for the wealthy to make more money. It puts them in a tough position. They’d like to get rid of us because we will oppose them, but if they do, they know they will lose tremendous money.”

“We started contacting the people whose names the Sisters gave us,” Lisa went on. “Only about one out of ten really wants to escape, and many of those don’t want to escape for the right reasons. We also weren’t as careful at first as we should have been.”

“That’s an understatement,” Raymond laughed. “We were almost done before we got started. We were interviewing a man when he pulled out what he claimed was a federal identification and threatened to arrest us for treason.”

“After that,” said Lisa, “we sold what little we had left, bought this old Class-A, and did our best to drop off the grid. That’s when we started doing things like we did to you. Bob checked you out on the trail. He passed to Stephanie, who was to camp near you and get you talking. If Stephanie hadn’t felt good about you she would have just left without a word.”

“I’m sure glad that I passed muster,” Liam couldn’t help glancing at Stephanie as he spoke. “But where can the Sisters hide us, or whatever?”

“We have no idea,” admitted Raymond. “They said that when we have a group together they will give us directions for the next step,”

“They keep promising us that it will be beyond our imagination. There’s something about them. We believe them.”

“None of us has anything to lose,” Tiffany Larson chimed in. Tiffany was in her late twenties or early thirties. She was a stocky, big boned woman with broad shoulders, short blonde hair and the most charming smile Liam had ever seen. “If you join us, we still need another eight to ten people. We all agreed that we should stay together until the team is complete. We share everything. We’re like a commune on wheels.”

“We stay in Arizona because it has so many places for us to camp,” Stephanie contributed. “Lots of them are never checked for stay limits, and we make sure that our camp is always spotless. In fact, we will police the area around us so that the entire dispersed camping area is cleaner when we leave than when we arrived. Tiffany was a National Park

Service Ranger, so we always let her talk shop with the Rangers who do check us out.” Everyone laughed and Tiffany blushed. “We can come back to places like this frequently without worrying because the Rangers know us.”

The conversation about hopes, dreams and their great escape went on through dinner and well into the evening. Liam was impressed by how casually and naturally everyone pitched in and got things done. One by one they shared their story.

Thomas Anderson was a quiet man. He had been trained as a jet engine mechanic by the Air Force and was a high ranking non-commissioned officer when he was sent to the Iraq War. The death, destruction and inhumanity he witnessed still haunted him. He had witnessed soldiers shooting prisoners in the head and Iraqi allies decapitating prisoners. By the time he had been there a year he was going back to his quarters at the end of his shift and drinking until he passed out.

He was barely functional when his tour was up. He had signs and symptoms of PTSD but the military said he was fine. He got to the point that he couldn't handle the excessive drama of “civilization” and attempted to drop-out by becoming a nomad and fixing RVs to supplement his military pension. That's how he met Tiffany. She knew how to help him through his “episodes”. He and Tiffany bought an old Class-C and fixed it up. Besides being able to make or fix anything mechanical, Thomas was a bow maker and hunter.

Tiffany had been a National Park Service Ranger working in the back country for several years. She liked it in the back country. Most of the visitors whom she met were relatively like-minded. She became fascinated with the Mexican Grey Wolf while working in Arizona and, moved by their plight, turned to wolf research. At first she worked for the government and then non-profit organizations trying to save the animals. She finally became totally fed up with the human assumption that humans are the only important animal on the planet and totally disgusted with what humans are doing to wolves and other animals. She decided to drop out. That's when she and Thomas met.

The crises in Thomas' and Tiffany's lives that brought them together not only coincided but intersected. Both of them were working in the Buenos Aires area of Arizona right on the Mexican border. Tiffany was with a team of scientists and wolf advocates who were trying to address the problem of the President's wall. Even though illegal immigration, by statistical data as well as local observation and reporting, was at an historic all-time low, the Administration was determined to make it an issue and build a wall along the border. This wall was devastating to wildlife and destroyed the ecosystem. And if you don't care about wildlife and ecosystems, the way divides families and creates human hardship as well. People who before could cross the river to visit family now had to travel hundreds of miles and worry about visas, etc.

At the same time Thomas was working for the local wildlife refuge. As with so many such conservation and environmentally oriented branches of the government, it was walking the political tightrope, simultaneously trying to continue their advocacy for the environment and wildlife while trying not to anger a paranoid administration resulting in funding, if not program, cuts.

Somehow they both ended up in a convoy of vehicles touring the border. The group was made up of individuals from the US Border Patrol, wildlife refuge and the advocacy group. It was supposed to be a tour during which everyone could openly share and discuss their concerns.

Thomas was driving one of the open vehicles. Next to him was the senior Border Patrol officer. Tiffany was in the back seat with the superintendent of the refuge. The three of them were supposed to be talking about ways of cooperating so that each could do their jobs efficiently without compromising the other. It had turned out to be the Border Patrol officer lecturing Tiffany and the Superintendent about how keeping "illegals" out was more important than anything else.

Suddenly the officer ordered Thomas to stop. Thomas complied. The officer stood up in the vehicle, pulled out his nine-millimeter Glock and was taking aim at something ahead. Thomas saw a coyote. As the officer was pulling the trigger, Thomas let off the clutch. The vehicle lurched

forward causing the officer to fall off balance, missing the coyote and causing the animal to run. Without thinking the officer hit Thomas in the side of the head. Thomas jumped up facing the officer. Tiffany got in between them and talked Thomas into stepping out of the vehicle with her. The officer followed, trying to continue the confrontation, so Tiffany had to tell Thomas to stand still as she physically took the officer aside.

Thomas never did know how Tiffany got the Border Patrol officer to get in the back seat and be quiet. She had pointed out to him that if he caused trouble for Thomas, she would personally report the numerous regulations he had violated by shooting at wildlife in a restricted area and from a vehicle as well as striking a civilian without cause. Evidently the Border Patrol officer believed her.

Tiffany and Thomas spent most of that evening together talking over submarino - tequila shots and beer. They were both burned out, and the government and societal change against the hard-earned environmental laws was the leading cause. They began seeing each other frequently and were soon plotting their escape from the violent and chaotic society.

Janet Miller, the cyclist on the road, had been so quite most of the evening that Liam could have missed her. When she did speak he recognized a strong and intelligent woman. It was the system that brought her to this group. Janet had a B.S. in Agriculture from Kansas State University. Her thesis had been on the quality, safety and cost advantage of the local family farm as opposed to the giant agri-business. The university wanted to publish it. Janet had her first glimpse of the reality of agri-business. The giant companies threatened the university with the loss of funds if it published her thesis. It was never published.

For almost twenty years she had been a faithful farmer's wife working the land along side of her husband. She caught him cheating. She got a fair settlement in the divorce but she will not get any of his Social Security and had none of her own. She had never paid in on her own because she was "just a wife". She had always admired the old-time subsistence farmers, so she took her settlement and bought a small farm. Big farming companies and government give-away to oil and mining

around her began to poison her land. Since the EPA was now a partner of big industry and the Department of Agriculture belonged to the corporate farmers, she got no help from the government. All she could do was watch her land die. Finally, she sold at a significant loss and kept all of the money in cash. She bought an old van and was starting to full-time when she heard about #bravenewworld. Until then she had been making money by working in the fields. Picking sugar beets was one of the best paying jobs. She could live for a couple of months after that gig.

Bob Wasem was a tall, well-built man with premature grey hair in his early forties. He had been with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for fifteen years. He had a degree in geology but ended up a law enforcement officer. He finally left the service when he could no longer tolerate government policies and how they didn't listen to people in the field especially when that person had dark skin and a middle eastern name. Time and time again he was passed over for promotion when he knew he was the best candidate. He now lived in a Casita and moved between hunting areas to work as a guide. He had become a part of the team when he realized that every time he returned from a job he was angrier. He was angry not just about the way he was treated but the fact that so many people went hunting just for the pleasure of killing something.

The last one to share his story was Anthony Costa. Tony was the son of Italian immigrants who came to the United States looking for the non-existent 'American Dream'. His father was a steam fitter who somehow got the idea that jobs were more abundant, more secure and higher paying in the US. He was willing to work hard for his family. Alas, he found that none of those was true. Tony's Mother returned to Italy after his Father died in an industrial accident.

Tony had worked two or three jobs at a time to get a degree in pharmacy from Butler University. He spent less than five years working for Eli Lilly, in Indianapolis, Indiana, and decided that he couldn't handle the greed and hypocrisy. Yes, Research & Development costs a lot of money and they had to have some way to pay for their failures, of which there were many, but he saw his company marketing drugs with sketchy research for two to three-hundred percent above the actual cost including R&D.

Tony moved from Indiana to California and worked at a drug store while he attended the Natural Healing Institute of Naturopathy in Encinitas, CA after which he became a certified herbalist. Again, he was confronted with pharmaceutical greed when, as a result of their rich lobby, elderly nursing home patients could not get less expensive and more effective natural compounds. They were forced to use expensive, often dangerous, drugs or go without. He finally decided to go off the grid. He now lived in the truck-camper Liam had seen at the trailhead. He made ends met by consulting with health food stores and selling herbal compounds he was able to make.



Forrest near Flagstaff

The group enjoyed almost two weeks at Deer Trail. Stephanie and Liam went on several hikes into the desert, often hiking up to the top of the mountain behind them where they would sit and talk as they looked down into Angel Valley to the east and Hidden Valley to the south. The steep side of the mountain dropped about eight-hundred feet to Angel Valley. The Angel Valley commune was built in a sharp bend of Oak Creek as it meandered through the mountains. A road led southward to Hidden Valley emerging a short distance from highway 89. At elevation there were lots of enormous junipers along with a variety of cacti. Lisa and Anthony asked the two of them to collect juniper “berries” when they were on their hikes. The “berry” is actually the juniper cone. Occasionally Liam would take heavy gloves and use his big Bowe knife to cut some prickly pear cactus paddles. Liam loved Nopalitos con Huevos – prickly pear and eggs.

They had a few good leads from the Sisters while they were at Deer Trail. There was one man, named Mark, who actually came to visit the group at Deer Trail. It was Bob Wasem who said that something didn’t feel

right to him. It didn't matter. Mark said that he didn't really think he was prepared to give up everything and left. Bob suggested that the group might, as a precaution, want to think about changing locations.

Taking Bob's suggestion, the group moved north to BLM land west of Flagstaff on A-1 Mountain Road. It was cooler in the higher elevation and there was more tree cover. The group found a good spot but they were beginning to run low on money. Thomas got a job as a mechanic, Stephanie and Lisa got jobs at a local restaurant, Tony found some work at a drug store, and Bob worked as a security guard. The rest kept checking out leads to fill their team.

Life was good with the small group. Except for the short trips, that each of them took turns making to check out possible team members, life fell into a comfortable routine.

Despite his insistence that he was not the group leader, Raymond was stuck with the job. That didn't mean that he made unilateral decisions. It meant the he got the job of trying to bring order out of chaos at their meetings when everyone was trying to talk at the same time. It wasn't a job that anyone else wanted and Raymond accepted and executed it with humility and grace.

He did obviously feel some responsibility for the group. It didn't take a shrink to figure that out. It was probably due to the fact that he and Lisa had brought the rest of the group into this unknown adventure. Any time there was a problem, someone got hurt or felt ill, Raymond would react as if it were his fault. At such times Lisa would be at his side, putting her hand on his shoulder and saying either "Raymond, they know" or "Raymond, it's okay. It's not your fault." Occasionally others would chime in "Yes, Raymond." Raymond was also the one with whom the Sisters would communicate and he had accepted the job of organizing contacts, background checks and the like. It consumed a lot of his time but he was anxious to get a full team together and get on with their escape.

Bob and Janet turned out to be the breakfast people. They would both be up no later than five o'clock in the morning and would be on their second, sometimes third, cup of coffee by the time others got up. As soon as they

would see others starting to emerge they would make a hearty breakfast. Sometimes it was Janet's farm style bacon and eggs. She also made a phenomenal porridge. On special occasions they had Bob's mountain flapjacks.

Thomas was the maintenance man. I'm sure that was no surprise to anyone. He not only did all of the maintenance type of jobs and basic vehicle repair but he kept track of oil changes, tire rotations and other maintenance activities for everyone. It was like all the vehicles were his squadron. He enjoyed the hands-on work and he loved to show others how it was done when they offered to help. All of the vehicles were relatively old, so he was always busy.

Lisa, Stephanie and Janet did the shopping. In fact, they wouldn't let any of the men go with them. They said it was a female thing and men had a bad habit of rushing. If they wanted to spend fifteen minutes reading labels and comparing ingredients, that was important.

It was Anthony, Janet and Stephanie who did most of the cooking apart from breakfast. Watching them, you knew that they were having a great time together, but you could always count on a marvelous clash of Italian, midwestern farm, and Native American cooking styles. I say "marvelous clash" because the outcome was almost always unique and unbelievably good. Add to this Lisa and Tony scouring the surrounding area for edible plants and food supplements. Foraging not only reduced the food budget but added some great new tastes and good nutrition. Lisa had started studying Native American medicine and edible and medicinal plants when she and Raymond decided to go off the grid. She and Tony were a great pair because Tony had the extensive herbal, pharmaceutical and compounding knowledge while Lisa was great at identifying plants in the wild. They would bring home things like Ephedra (Indian Green Tea), prickly pear, chicory and amaranth. With the two of them, except for meat, the group could probably skip going to the grocery store.

Liam and Tiffany were usually the KP – kitchen patrol, clean-up. Neither of them minded. In fact, they had fun especially when they could tease the cooks about how many pots and pans they used. It was a good time

and no two people could make doing the dishes look like so much fun. They also became the water conservationist. The rest of the group were absolutely amazed at how much these two could get done with such a small amount of water. They had to laugh. They were both back-country people. Water conservation was one of the first big lessons one learns in the backcountry.

Of their seven vehicles, the Class-A and two Class-C had large fresh water tanks. With all of the vehicles carrying water they still had only a bit over 100 gallons of water for nine people. Considering a 14-day stay limit, that's less than a gallon of water per person per day. To supplement this Liam and Tiffany bought nine six-gallon water containers. They would use Bob's pickup to take the containers to a nearby town to fill. Even if they had to pay for water they could usually fill all of the containers for less than twenty dollars. At the camp, the containers were stored in the bottom of the Class-A. This way everyone had almost another half-gallon a day. The containers were designated for cooking and drinking only. The water in the fresh water tanks of the RVs was potable, but, no matter how new or how good a tank, it would sooner or later start tasting like plastic. That water was used for washing and anything where flavor wasn't going to make a difference. Unless it was consumed, all water was generally used twice. Used dish water was kept by the toilets in the RVs for flushing and used for various cleaning needs and to drown campfires.

To conserve water, Thomas had started making composting toilets. These toilets were divided in such a way that urine went into a small tank that could be emptied into a hole or other appropriate place, while feces went into cat litter or similar materials which could be spread as compost. His design was very simple and quite efficient.

They hadn't been in Flagstaff more than five weeks when they received a message from another team. The second team said they were having trouble getting enough people and suggested that the two groups talk about joining forces. It seemed like the perfect solution. Going over possible sites with the team, Raymond suggested that the two groups meet on some BLM land in Ehrenberg Wash south of I-10. There was

plenty of room and not much change of being disturbed. The other team agreed.



The Colorado River at Cibola Wildlife Refuge

The BLM site was only about three or four miles off the main road, but it was a tough three or four miles. Dirt, gravel and lots of washboard, one traveled down Ox Bow Road for close to three miles before turning off onto Cibola Road that led to the wash. It was an extremely large area along a wash with some scrubby vegetation. The camping area was hard packed sand and rock. The wash itself was a gash in the ground that was probably three feet deep. In heavy rains it can fill quickly because the soil cannot absorb the water quickly enough. Even with only three inches of rain or less a year, the washes could be sudden raging rivers. As is normal, there was a mound of sand and gravel running along both sides of the road that formed a barricade. In areas used for dispersed camping a passageway through the low wall would give access

to the desert. Raymond knew that several groups of nomads used this area frequently when they really wanted to get away. Rangers seldom came by and people had been known to stay over a month.

Arriving at the site, it was again Bob Wasem who advocated for caution and suggested that they park so that they could not be blocked from the road. He had the group park in the old wagon-train circle where they could quickly and easily pull out.

They waited.

Late afternoon of the agreed upon day the team saw dust on the road. The second team was arriving. A big Class-A led the group, followed by a slightly smaller Class-A, and two Class-C. They all looked new. Raymond's team looked at each other. That seemed unusual.

The second team stopped on the road and a tall, grey-haired man emerged from the lead Class-A. A woman slipped into the driver's seat after he got out.

"Hi!" he called walking toward Raymond's assembled team. "I'm Jim Butler. I assume that I'm at the right place for the 'brave new world' gathering."

"I'm Raymond," replied Raymond warmly greeting the man. Everyone noticed that he said nothing about 'brave new world' in his response. "Would your group like to share this camp area?"

"Sounds great!" said Jim Butler.

"There's a really nice, level spot over by the wash that actually has some fire pits already there," said Bob, pointing at an area that put his group closest to the exit.

"Great," Jim gave a thumbs up. "We'd better get set up."

The new convoy passed slowly into the desert. The occupants of each of the rigs smiled and waved as they passed Raymond's group. The group waved back.

Raymond and the others watched as the new comers set up camp.

"Do you have the idea that they have no idea what they're doing?" Thomas asked out loud.

"Yeah," replied Bob. "And did you notice that all of the rigs seem brand new?"

The conversation soon turned a bit paranoid and it was Lisa who finally put a stop to it. "Even newbies, richer-than-us people are wanting to escape. Let's give them a chance."

"That doesn't mean that we should let our guard down," Bob insisted.

"No one said that," Raymond answered. "Their message came through the right way with the right keywords and phrases. I'm going to assume that they're nervous too. Nevertheless, we never stop being careful until we escape."

Everyone agreed.

That evening there was a brief meet-and-greet at the new groups camp. Raymond's group took turns casually strolling around the newcomer's camp as the two groups talked. After they returned to their own camp they compared notes.

"Wow, did you see that big Class-A?!" exclaimed Tiffany. "That thing is brand new and must have cost the better part of a million dollars!"

"Yes," agreed Stephanie, "everything was new. Even their clothes were new. I bet they were all the same brand."

“What I noticed,” offered Liam, “was that there were only two women. Almost the entire group is men, and they all look like they just graduated from the Navy Seal academy.”

“No kidding,” agreed Janet. “that Butler guy; the obvious leader; may have grey hair but he’s built like a brick shithouse.”

There was a brief pause as the group looked at Raymond. Normally by this time he was bringing the discussion under control and getting things organized. But now he just sat quietly listening.

“I agree,” Raymond finally spoke. “It was strange. And that Jim fellow. He kept talking about where the Sisters are and where we’re going next. I don’t even know any of the other teams nevertheless where the Sisters are.” He paused. “I’m worried.”

It was decided that Tiffany and Liam would see if they could get close enough to do some after hours reconnoitering. Liam and Tiffany were a good choice. They were both accustomed to moving and being quiet in the back-country. If they could watch wolves and track bears, they would be able to get a whole lot closer to the new group than anyone else.

The two mapped out a quick strategy, hung a knife and bear-spray on their belts, and headed toward the nearby camp. As they approached they realized that the newcomers were running generators. Not that Raymond’s group was superior because they were 100% solar, but how often do you get a group together that not only all run generators but, as they got close and could see, all ran the same big ole noisy 7500? That wasn’t right. A big generator like that is made to run a large house, not an RV. Most full-timers who use generators are going to pick a smaller, quieter, more reliable and less expensive generator. The most popular is the Honda 2000.

Tiffany and Liam made their way toward the big Class-A. That was Jim Butler’s rig, and he was obviously in charge. Besides there were a lot of

lights. They were burning so many lights that you could read the fine print of a newspaper.

Drawing close to the rig they could see the group sitting around drinking beer.

"I'm sorry, Sir," a young man was saying, "I don't understand why we're out here after this travel-trash. What do they have to do with national security?"

"As a group," Jim Butler replied, "they're no threat. But they're part of a bigger organization that could undermine confidence in the administration and cause us some big problems."

"Problems like?" a second man asked.

"The Kmel Rouge learned the hard way in Cambordia that you must control and dominate the educated and skilled population. If you run them out, or kill them, as the Kmel Rouge did, you've lost an irreplaceable resource. The society will collapse without them," Butler explained. "But they're a pain in the ass for any political system, so they must be contained and controlled. That's our job."

"Then why don't we just go over and arrest them, Coronel?" the second man continued. "We know they're a part of this 'brave new world' group."

"Because I'm hoping that they'll lead us to the Sisters," Butler replied. "Our informant said that they spoke of Sisters who are calling the shots. If we arrest these people without the Sisters, and this is the resistance movement we suspect, all we're doing is warning the others. We need to make friends and find out about the Sisters."

"How long are we going to give them, Coronel?" another man asked.

"I don't know."

“Geez, Coronel, it’s really hard talking to them,” offered one of the two women. “I tried to pick up a conversation with a couple of the women in the group and they talked about things I’ve never heard of. It isn’t going to be long and they’re going to know I have no idea what I’m doing out here.”

“Then admit to them that you’re new at this. Get them to teach you and maybe they’ll give up some information,” Coronel Butler was a bit annoyed. “Jesus, Lanikin, I thought you’d done undercover before.”

Tiffany gave Liam the signal to withdrawal. The two quietly moved away from the group and headed quickly back to their camp where the group was waiting patiently.

“Are we in deeeeeeeep shit!” Liam said as his introduction to their report of what they had heard. After their detailed report the group sat silent for a moment.

“Okay,” said Raymond. “Ideas.”

“We’ve obviously got to run,” said Anthony, “but where to.”

“Ox Bow Road actually leads all the way down the east side of the Colorado River to Yuma,” said Liam. “Don’t you think they would expect us to go back to the interstate?”

“That’s what ‘normal’ people would do,” Bob laughed as he held up his hands to indicate quotation marks around the word ‘normal’. “So, you’re suggesting that we drive these lovely dirt roads at night?”

“Not only that,” Liam replied, “I’m suggesting that we send one vehicle back toward the interstate with its lights on so that they have something to follow. That vehicle can hide up by the traffic circle and catch up with us after they pass.”

“Why don’t we just slash their tires before we go?” offered Tiffany with a bit of animosity in her voice. The others gave her a somewhat surprised

and somewhat frightened wow-I-don't-want-to-get-her-angry-with-me look. She shrugged.

“Hopefully they won’t see us go south on Ox Bow Road,” said Raymond. “Then, if we slash their tires, we wouldn’t have to send a decoy north.”

“That works for me,” said Liam. “We could hide out along the river further south.”

“I just checked my map,” said Bob. “There are some roads down there which make loops off the main road. We might be able to find a place with two exits.”

The discussion continued until a consensus was reached. They quietly packed up. All stabilizers were raised manually since the battery-powered drills they normally used to raise and lower stabilizers would undoubtedly raise an alarm with the feds. Liam, Stephanie, Tiffany and Bob sneaked over and either cut or let the air out of tires, and did anything else to disable vehicles that doesn’t make noise.

When the four returned, it was decided that when Raymond started his engine, they would all start their engines and move out smartly. That’s what they did.

The group didn’t take time to look back at the surprised government group. Had they looked they would have seen lights in every rig come on and soon men pouring out into the desert. A couple had brought their rifles but there was nothing at which to shoot. They raced to their vehicles and quickly realized that they couldn’t just drive off. They had to take time to lift stabilizers and make the vehicles capable of moving. By the time the government group had made their vehicles drivable, Raymond’s group was past the corner of Cibola Road and Ox Bow Road and moving south as fast as the road permitted out of sight of the government campsite. By the time the government group realized that their tires were flat, Raymond’s group was well south on Ox Bow Road.

To say that Coronel Butler was furious was the understatement of the decade. He screamed and cursed at everyone, but mostly at the group of civilians who had left him standing with the proverbial egg on his face.

“How in the hell did an elite black-ops group get outsmarted by a bunch of eggheads and misfits?” the Coronel demanded.

“We’ll catch them, Sir!” one of the young officers tried to console his commander.

“No you won’t,” barked Butler, “because those fuckin’ traitors are smarter than you, Asshole!”

“Begging your pardon, Sir,” said an officer who, upon closer inspection actually showed some grey around his short-haired temples.

“What, Major!” yelled Butler.

“Respectfully,” the Major continued, “may I ask why the Coronel is so extremely upset about a small band of people trying to drop off the grid?”

“Because they’re a national security risk!”

“I think it would be helpful if you’d explain to us exactly why they’re a national security risk.”

“Because the administration says they are.”

“And they decided that because why?”

“Major Landon,” the Coronel suddenly became almost quiet; speaking in a low, soft voice. “Do you like your job? Would you like to keep your retirement?” He paused for effect and screamed, “Then stop asking questions that sound like you’re siding with those perverts and help me find them.”

It took hours to get all of the tires either fixed, inflated or changed, but the military group worked well into the night to get back on the road. The female Staff Sergeant who had been playing Butler's wife, slipped behind the wheel of the big Class-A and was maneuvering the dirt road back to Ox Bow Road. Col Butler and Maj Landon sat behind her discussing strategy.

"Which way at the intersection, Sir?" Sgt. Ross called over her shoulder.

"Head back to the Interstate." Butler looked at Landon. "If I were running from someone I'd want to travel as fast as possible. I'd head toward the interstate."

"Which way when we get there?" asked Landon.

"There isn't much place to get lost in California," replied Butler. "At least not near here. There are millions of acres of BLM land just along this US95 corridor from Parker to Yuma." There was a long pause as Col. Butler strategized in his mind. "Get the BLM people looking for this group. Tell them that they're dangerous, not to approach but to call us. We'll go down to Yuma Proving Grounds and set up our base there."

"Yes, Sir," said Major Landon pulling out his cell phone.

"And get us some goddamn real vehicles and armament," shouted the Colonel as an aside.



The group found a good spot about twenty-five to thirty miles north of Yuma. Ironically it was right up against the western boundary of the Yuma Proving Grounds Army Base a short distance from

where Col. Butler would take up residence. The road made a loop which gave them a bit more flexibility. It was the best they were going to do.

Raymond asked Janet and Bob to make an immediate Walmart run. He gave them his credit card. Thankfully none of them had divulged their last names, so Raymond's card was safe to use a bit longer. He asked that they get five sets of GMRS radios and two descent pairs of binoculars.

GMRS radio stands for Global Mobile Radio Service. They are more powerful than walkie-talkies, tend to be better than CB and require a license but not a test. Lots of truckers use them in Alaska because they have a better range and don't bother with the license. The FCC doesn't find it worth the effort to track down violators since they are usually long gone by the time law enforcement can get there. They should also get as much water as Bob's truck could hold.

The landscape was much the same as the desert near I-10; mostly open with a smattering of scrub trees and bushes along the washes. This part of the Sonoran Desert had a lot of Palo Verde and Creosote. The Creosote generally did not grow high enough to hide anything, but in concert with the much taller Palo Verde along the wash the group was able to park behind bushes and each other so they didn't look like a large group. Liam and Anthony took the first shift sitting in the bushes near the two intersections where the loop intersected Ox Bow Road.

That evening Raymond called for a group meeting. He had some ideas and he needed their guidance.

"Okay, guys," Raymond started. "We know that we're in, as Liam so aptly described it, 'deep shit.'" He paused as the group verbalized their agreement. "Here's what I came up with as we drove here. Remember, I'm not the boss. This is just an idea, perhaps a framework, for us to use to survive."

Raymond looked around the group. "First, I'm going to try to get ahold of the Sisters and ask them if they can get us out of this mess. There is no way we can recruit a full team with the feds looking for us. We'll be lucky to stay out of jail."

“We need to change our appearance and lighten up. This is going to mean some sacrifice. The logical thing would be to consolidate to the Class-A and two Cs. They are big enough for all of us. The feds are looking for a group of seven rigs. If we can consolidate to three vehicles we not only change our appearance but it would be much easier for us to move and find places. Any problems.”

“You’re asking the rest of us to give up our rigs?” asked Stephanie.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“What are we going to do with them?” Bob asked.

“It would be nice if we could sell them. We might have to hide them. The last thing I want to do is abandon them.”

“I’m okay with that, if it gets the feds off our backs and the Sisters really help us to escape,” said Janet.

“I’m thinking that we could get a utility trailer to pull behind one of the Class-C. That would carry all our supplies. If Bob wouldn’t mind, we’d just sell his trailer and use his truck as a toad. This change would not only give us flexibility and a vehicle for running errands, but it would change our appearance and configuration.”

“But don’t you think they’ll have a description out on us,” said Tiffany, “and probably even our license plates?”

“I’m sure they already do,” Raymond looked uncomfortable. “This is where I think we’re going to have to break some laws.”

“What do you mean, ‘break some laws?’” ask Bob.

“We’re going to have to steal license plates.”

“What!” was a group exclamation.

“I knew you wouldn’t like the idea, but I can’t think of any other way around it.”

“Sure,” said Liam, “but as soon as the owner realizes that their license plates have been stolen, the police will just be looking for those plates.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Raymond looked even more uncomfortable. “but if we steal the first plates, trade them for the plates on a second vehicle, the second owner will probably not notice for a long time, and may not notice at all until the police stop them for having stolen plates. We will have the unreported plates. If we make the swap with a rig similar to ours, we might even possibly get by if a cop would check our plates.”

“Have you done this before?” questioned Thomas. The group laughed. It was a good tension breaker. “I say we do what we must. The worst thing is that the second owner will get stopped for having stolen plates and the police will figure out what we did. No one should get hurt.”

“We hope not,” said Raymond. “We just have to survive. Are we still together so far?”

Everyone verbalized acceptance of what had been suggested.

“Now,” Raymond continued, “I have some suggestions about consolidation and rigs. Our Class-A is easily big enough for four people. We’ll take Bob and Tony. You guys will have to stay out of sight as we travel so it looks like just Lisa and me. Lying low will be easier in the A.”

“Thomas and Tiffany, your Class-C is much bigger than Liam’s. Both of you could handle an extra person, but I’m going to suggest that Janet go with you. Again, only one man and woman should be seen as traveling in the unit. Stephanie you’re going to have to play like Liam’s wife. Anyone have any problems with this?”

Again, group agreement with a wee bit of teasing Stephanie to release some of the tension.

“My Class-A can pull Bob’s truck. We can put a utility trailer on Thomas and Tiffany’s C.”

Agreement.

“What would everyone think of painting the three units?” suggested Janet.

“How would we do that?” asked Stephanie.

“It wouldn’t really be that hard,” said Janet. “We could simply use spray paint. It doesn’t have to last for years, and we could actually paint them to match the color of the units we steal the plates from.”

“Not a bad idea,” offered Thomas. “You can get spray paint at Walmart that would probably get us through several months.”

“Everyone?” asked Raymond.

“Sounds good.”

And so the survival plan was devised.

Each person carried one of the GMRS radio set on channel 17 – a GMRS high power, long range frequency. They were all taught to use the call sign WQZE319 and say “whiskey, queen, zulu, echo, three, one, niner”. This was actual ham operator jargon. Each of them took a unit number. After the original formal contact was made using the call sign the units could address each other by their unit number. They were never to use actual names. The radios were mostly used by those on road guard duty. They would call each other and back to the camp to whomever was on ‘security duty’.

The group felt good about their plan but tension was still high. Everyone held their breath every time a vehicle went by. Their second day there a white truck was seen approaching. It was a BLM ranger. Thomas and Tiffany hopped into Bob’s pickup and hurried toward the intersection to intercept the ranger before he turned into their road.

“Am I glad I found you,” Tiffany said excitedly approaching the government truck. “I saw some people over by Quartzsite, by that place, what’s its name, Dome Rock, just digging the hell out of the side of a wash.”

“Sounds like prospectors,” said the ranger amiably. “That’s okay. They’re allowed.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Tiffany feigned disbelief. “I was with the National Park Service and the National Forest Service for years and we

would have had them in cuffs. I've never seen such a mess. I mean, they were destroying that wash."

"I can understand your concern," the ranger replied, "but gold prospecting is legal. They may even have a claim."

"On public land!!"

"On public land," the ranger said calmly.

Tiffany proceeded to tell story after story about people she had arrested for destroying resources. Each time the ranger would reply she would have a question or another story. She could see he wanted to get away.

"We're camping just down the road," Tiffany failed to indicate any particular direction. "Would you like to stop by for some coffee. We could swap stories."

It seemed super risky, but she had been on his side of the conversation often enough to know there was no way he would accept her invitation. To the contrary, the ranger gave some excuse about something he had to do, thanked them for sharing, and quickly drove off north.

Fortunately, that was their only ranger encounter. There was no real access to the Colorado River along this stretch and no other reason to be on the road except to go boondocking.

Raymond and Tiffany headed out to scout for license plates to steal. Tony and Liam started the search for an RV dealer who would sell their rigs. Since none of them had been petty thieves in their youth, looking for plates to steal, nevertheless figuring out how they were going to accomplish the dastardly deed, was not easy. As a result, Liam and Tony were the first with any success.

They had stopped at a small RV sales lot on the outskirts of Yuma. The owner, manager and chief salesperson was a large, overweight, balding middle-aged man who looked more like a red-neck ex-high school jock that had an AK-47 in his office than a highly educated and liberal individual.

“That’s a lot of rigs to be selling all at once,” said the owner, Jason Miller, after listening to Tony’s pitch.

“Yes, sir, but . . .”

“Don’t explain,” Jason interrupted with a laugh, “I know who you are.” Tony and Liam stood frozen, not knowing what to say. “Those military types up at Yuma Proving Grounds don’t know how to keep a secret.”

“What do you mean?” asked Liam.

“I mean that there is a black-ops group that’s moved onto the base who are looking for a group of ‘terrorist’ who live in seven RVs,” Jason laughed. “I have a couple of good fishing buddies who work for the Army. They told me about you when we went fishing at Mittry Lake the other day.”

“How do you . . . ?”

“Don’t worry,” Jason again interrupted. “I won’t turn you in. After what my friend said you did to those black-ops guys and their foul mouth commander, I figure you are heroes and I’m proud to meet you.”

“Does that mean you’ll sell our rigs for us?” asked Tony.

“On one condition,” Jason grinned.

“And that is . . . ?” asked Liam.

“That you take me with you.”

“Take you with us?”

“I don’t give a damn where you’re going,” said Jason, “I just want to go. I don’t figure you for traitors or terrorists.”

“That’s good.”

“But if you’re giving that blankety-blank administration the red-ass, I want to go with you.”

Tony and Liam didn’t know what to do. Liam talked with Jason and learned more about why he wanted to join a group that was being hunted

by the military while Tony contacted Raymond and Tiffany, who arrived shortly.

When Raymond and Tiffany arrived, Jason explained that he had started his work life as a teacher but couldn't make a living. His wife, Sarah, was disabled with Parkinson's, and required expensive medications. He was angry about our poor health system. He was angry about how she was treated like a 'freeloader'. He was angry about how government was no long of, for and by the people, but all about the super-rich. As he spoke he became more and more physically animated in his anger to the point that the rest had to comfort him to calm him.

Raymond explained what they knew of the concept of 'escape' and how they were all taking a significant risk because no promises were made.

"I don't care," Jason insisted. "Sarah deserves some peace in her life and I can't take much more." He paused. "Tell you what, I'll sell your units, give you a utility trailer, and even give you some living money. In fact, I'll give you perfectly legal license plates. All you have to do is to promise to take me along when you escape."

"What if we don't escape?" asked Liam.

"Doesn't matter," Jason said matter-of-factly. "I'm no worse off for the effort. You are worth the gamble."

The deal was made. Jason would stay with his wife, sell their units and wait for them to contact him if and when the Sisters gave them instructions. The four fugitives returned with a new 8x10 utility trailer and five new legal license plates.



The next few days were spent in preparation for moving on. They needed to find a place where they could hunt, forage and lie low until the Sisters

responded to their distress message. Even though they now had legal license plates with different numbers, the group decided that they should still change the appearance of the vehicles as much as possible. They didn't want to paint them to stand out but to blend in. The truck was changed, via ten cans of Rust-oleum spray paint, to a copper color to better match the Class-A that would be pulling it. That was common among snowbirds. The Class-A was getting some red highlights, while the Class-Cs went from yellow and gold stripes on white to blue and green stripes on white.

To avoid long stretches of dirt roads or ending up way south, they decided to take the chance and drive right past the front gate of the military base. It was a moxy move, but it would be the last thing Coronel Butler would expect, and they doubted that the guards at the gate had been told to be watching for them. They kept in contact by radio and left a fair distance between each of the rigs so that they didn't look like a convoy.



Unless they wanted to head toward the Tucson area or even further south, toward the heat, they needed to find a place up north. The nearest place where there was lots of BLM land and places to hid, where they had not been before, was Kaibab National Forest, a large and rather heavily wooded forest north of the Grand Canyon.

It was a long drive but the group was able to find a good spot in the heart of the forest. They found a dirt trail leading to a clearing off of a remote unnumbered Forest Service road. The next morning they scouted out the area and found that it was nearly perfect. There was a spring a short distance north of the camp which fed a nice stream that appeared to have fish. A second stream went underground less than a hundred yards northwest. There would be plenty of water. The forest was a thick growth

of Ponderosa pines which meant that there was probably good hunting. They didn't know how long they would have to be here, so they wanted to make sure that they could survive without any outside input.

Their clearing wasn't very big, but they didn't want it to be any larger than necessary for parking their rigs and providing a small open area. There was already a fire pit in the middle of the clearing and plenty of room for activities like food preparation, smoking and bow making. They knew they had to get really serious about being totally independent of the outside world.

There was a very narrow barrier of trees and shrubs between the clearing and the road. Raymond parked his Class-A with the front end into the woods on the north side of the clearing, leaving the solar panels exposed to the southern sky. Liam and Thomas positioned their rigs so that their panels got sun while there were thick bushes between them and the road. Minimal exposure should mean minimal observation.

Liam and Bob had taken the truck and made a small detour in Flagstaff to an Army-Navy surplus store. They were there to get knives, bear spray, compasses and canteens. These were four things each of the group members needed to have at all times. Most of them carried Swiss Army knives or Leatherman, but Liam and Bob were convinced that each of them should have a bowie knife on their belt.

Bear spray was for more than bears. It was a tremendous non-lethal weapon that stops anything and anyone. Everyone needed to always have water nearby and the back-country people all agreed that everyone should have at least one compass on their person at all times and know how to use it.

The road guard had a place at the intersection of FS429 and the unnumbered road. They picked a spot on the northeast side of the intersection, which was a Y, so that they could return to the camp without being seen crossing a road. There they built a small shelter similar to a duck blind.

The group wasted no time getting organized and starting essential tasks. They knew where there was water and everyone took turns walking to

the spring and carrying back as much water as they could carry. Usually they would go in twos. Food was the next essential. It didn't take them long to identify three groups: hunters, gatherers and fishers.

By this time Thomas had had time to finish two more new bows, giving him a total of three. Thomas, Liam, Tiffany and Bob were the hunters. Thomas had made one of the new bows specifically for Tiffany, and the second was best matched to Bob. When there wasn't something that specifically called for Thomas' attention, he worked on finishing a bow for Liam. He taught the other three how to make arrows, a task which they could carry out while sitting around in the evening. That's when they realized that, unless there was a sporting goods store where they were going, they would need to learn how to make bow string and arrow feathers. This was one of the moments when they realized the seriousness of their goal. It would not be a matter of admitting defeat and going to the sporting goods store. It would be a matter of survival.

Learning to use the new bows was not an easy task for Bob and Liam. Thomas had taught Tiffany, so she worked with the two men under the watchful eyes of Thomas who worked to finish Liam's bow. Thomas would call out pointers from time to time. They were stiff bows with forty to fifty pound draws. The rule of thumb is that the draw weight should be twenty-five percent of one's body weight. For Liam that would be 42 pounds. They proved to be excellent and powerful bows. They would need that if they were to hunt deer and elk. At seventy inches, each leg being 32 inches long with a six-inch grip, the bows were a cross between the Native American hunting bow and the famous English Longbow, being much longer than most Native American bows and a bit shorter than the longbow, which range from seventy-four to eighty inches long.

Lisa, Stephanie, Anthony and Janet were the gatherers. Lisa and Anthony wasted no time teaching Stephanie and Janet what was and was not edible and how to identify certain plants. There were a lot of nuts and berries in the forest along with some root plants that could be used either like a potato or dried and ground to make a flour. By the end of the first day the gatherers were complaining about running out of storage containers. They would need to learn to make baskets before they escaped to their

new home, but in the meantime they settled for bags, boxes and anything they could scrounge up.

The fishing was left to Lisa, Raymond and Janet, unless someone just wanted to go fishing. The three of them not only had tackle with them, but they had a great deal more experience. All three were avid fly fishers and Raymond and Janet both loved to tie their own flies. To tie successful flies required understanding the behavior of the species of fish one wished to catch. A Rainbow trout in the west probably wasn't going to be too interested in the little brown, deer-hair May Fly that could get the midwestern Striper to strike almost every cast in the late spring and early summer. As they prepared for their first fishing trip, they became aware that once their current supply of line, leader, flies and other essentials were gone they were going to have to make their own. It was a daunting thought.

Since Thomas wasn't ready to go hunting, the main protein was going to be fish. The streams turned out to be very good and have nice trout, so there was fish for dinner the first night.

Everyone worked steadily to prepare their camp for whatever lay ahead. And everyone was amazed that they didn't feel pressured. This was just what needed to be done. The work was enjoyable and they soon realized that they didn't even think of it as work. Tiffany had turned learning to use the "T-bow", as Thomas' bows became known, into a game, and the three of them were becoming quite competitive.

The most challenging game they had was continually moving the target farther away until only one person hit the target, then accumulating points from closeness to the bullseye. The power of the T-bow soon became evident. As the hunters became more proficient the thicker their targets had to be and the deeper they sent the arrow into the target. It was not uncommon for the tip of an arrow to protrude through a target as thick and the length of a person's forearm.

For Janet, Lisa and Raymond to have the "job" of catching dinner was like ole Brer Rabbit, from the Disney movie 'Song of the South', "*please don't throw me in the briar patch.*" It had been so long since any of them

had put a line in the water that the therapeutic value of the fly was amazing. It was hard to fathom that they were doing their part for the survival of the group. Due to the heavy forest and small pools containing the trout, the three were quickly becoming expert at roll-casting and controlling distance. They spent a lot of time talking about what they were going to do when their tackle ran out. They realized that they were being forced to think outside the box. They may very well have to develop an entirely new way of fishing, assuming that there were fish where they were going.

The list of things they needed to learn was growing rapidly, and their stay at Kaibab was opening their eyes. Many of them had excellent backcountry and survival skills, but they realized that those skills were still, in total or in great part, tied to the capitalistic world they would be leaving behind. What do you do when you don't have a sporting goods store to buy bow string, arrow feathers, and fish hooks or a craft shop to get thread?

"You know," said Thomas as they sat around the fire, comfortably full of fish and forest vegetables, sipping the last of Liam's Irish whiskey, "we really need to learn to make this stuff."

The group laughed. "There are a lot of things we're going to have to learn to make," replied Bob Wasem. "I'm afraid that whiskey isn't close to the top."

"I know," Thomas pretended to pout, "but one can dream." Again the group laughed. This was the most relaxed they had been for many weeks.

"What we do need to be considering next is smoking meat," Bob suddenly announced. The group just sat and gave him a quizzical look. "Has anyone thought of how we're going to keep left-over fish and meat." Someone glanced at the Stadler's Class-A. "Sure, we can use their fridge for now, but firstly it isn't big enough to handle a deer or an elk. What then? Secondly, are we going to have electricity and refrigerators in our new home? And what happens if we're stuck here for an extended length of time and something happens to the fridge? I say we make a smoker. When Thomas and company come home with a deer or an elk,

we can smoke most of it and make jerky with the rest. It will last us weeks, solve the storage problem, and take pressure off the hunters.”

There was no argument. Bob made good sense. The next thing was how were they going to make a smoker. If they had had internet, they could have just looked it up on-line.

“Anyone built a smoker?” Raymond asked. There was silence.

“My people traditionally dry meat and fish in the sun on racks,” said Stephanie. “A few have smokers. I’ve just seen inside.”

“I had a friend who smoked meats for a big restaurant,” said Anthony. “You could walk into his smoker.”

“I saw one in a fellow’s back yard,” Tiffany shared. “It was basically a box over a fire. The smoke, not the heat, cures the meat. It takes a couple of days.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” said Thomas. “Dig a pit for the fire and make a box over it.”

And so the conversation went until a design had been agreed upon and a plan made. Emptying their glasses, they started sharing their feelings of peace. “If I understand the Sisters correctly,” said Raymond, “this is what our lives are going to be like, just without anyone looking for us.”

“Sadly, our super-rich capitalist leaders have convinced the poor naïve people that our life is the ‘hard life’ which is overcome by conspicuous consumption. It is too bad they can’t see the truth that, in reality, our life is truly the good life.”

“That’s exactly why Marshal Sahlins called hunters and gatherers the original affluent society.”

With that all glasses were raised in a toast, “The Sisters and the original affluent society.”



Three weeks had passed, during which time the smoker was built and used to successfully smoke some fish. Liam's bow was finished. It was a beautiful bow with a good forty to fifty pound draw. Life had fallen into a very comfortable pattern. They soon learned that, other than daily tasks like fetching water and cooking meals, they had plenty of time for exploring, learning new skills, or simply sitting and enjoying being alive.

Thomas and Company, as the hunters became known, came home empty handed after their first two hunting trips. They got a turkey the third time out and Thomas got a deer with one arrow on the fourth outing.

With this significant success they realized that no one had any idea how to do anything more than field dress the deer. This was too important to learn by trial and error. It was over forty miles to Fredonia, but that was the nearest place where there was a cell signal or internet. Liam and Stephanie drew the short straws and headed off to get instructions for preparing the deer and some other skills they might need.

While the two were in Fredonia, they got a message from Jason.



After they left the Yuma area, Coronel Butler had been making himself ever more popular by pushing his people, and those whom he could Shanghai, to spend more and more hours trying to find the fugitives. The BLM headquarters got so tired of him calling and harassing them about searching dispersed camping areas that they refused to take calls and made an official complaint to the Department of Defense. His entire command was becoming tired and irritable, but Butler didn't let up. It wasn't long before everyone on the post knew Butler's mission and all about the seven RV rigs.

An off-duty soldier at the instillation was in Yuma and happened to see the Casita and Transit van sitting on Jason's RV sales lot. They reported this to Coronel Butler's team and soon a couple of the government team were visiting Jason. He told them that a guy traded the Casita for a panel van and that he was selling the Transit on consignment for a fellow who had to go back to Michigan to take care of a sick parent. The story would buy him a bit of time, but he knew that it wouldn't be long before they returned and applied some pressure. He went home and told his wife the whole story as he packed their car and headed north on US-95. He didn't know where they were going, but it was going to be away from Yuma and Coronel Butler. He was trusting that Raymond would help them.

"Some friends of yours," his message read, "came looking for you. They'll be back. I couldn't wait for them. I have precious cargo with me. Perhaps we can make connections."

Stephanie and Liam knew that they didn't have time to drive all the way back to the camp and then out again to reply, so they replied for the group.

"The Kaibab-Paiute are really nice people. You could stay in Fredonia while you visited. I like going up US-89A because we love to picnic at Le Fevre Overlook just north of Jacob Lake."

Jason responded. *"Sounds pretty. If the weather holds we'll stop by to see that tomorrow."*

Liam and Stephanie returned to camp and told the others about Jason's message and their reply.

"Good thinking," complimented Raymond, who was usually the one stuck with such communications. "The feds obviously got on to him somehow and we need to help him."

"Thomas and I will go get them," Tiffany offered.

The next morning Thomas and Tiffany took the old GMC, filled up with gas at Jacob Lake and headed to the LeFevre Overlook to wait for Jason and Sarah. It was almost 500 miles to Yuma. Tiffany and Thomas expected that Jason wouldn't arrive until after noon.

When they pulled into the overlook there was a late model silver Toyota sitting off to one side. Could they have arrived already? Without getting completely out of the truck, Tiffany put one foot on the running board and stood up above the roof of the cab. The plates were Arizona but she couldn't see the driver. The passenger was a woman who looked straight ahead.

Jason recognized Tiffany and got out of his car. "Hello," he called.

Tiffany introduced Thomas and Jason introduced Sarah and soon the two vehicles were moving toward the village of House Rock on US-89A on the eastern edge of the National Forest. West of House Rock is FS220. It zig-zags up the mountain south of US-89A. Jason would leave his car in one of the dispersed camp sites. It should be a fairly long time before anyone noticed it. Hopefully the group would be long gone before it was discovered.

Jason and Sarah fit well into the group. Jason was another fisherman and Sarah insisted that she be permitted to help around the camp, preparing food and doing whatever was needed. She was determined that her disability would not keep her from being an active party of the group.

She may have been totally disabled but that didn't stop her from doing anything and everything possible. Meeting Anthony she shared that she was an avid home gardener. She was especially fond of and successful with herbs and peppers. Anthony agreed to help her start an herb and pepper garden wherever they were going which she could look after. That would be a significant contribution to the community. Liam and Stephanie insisted that Jason and Sarah stay in Liam's Class-C. Sarah finally conceded. Liam and Stephanie built themselves a lean-to. Liam definitely didn't mind because it put him physically closer to Stephanie. When she was staying with him in the RV, she slept on the bed and he slept on the sofa. He didn't know that Stephanie rather liked the lean-to for the same reason.

In the next couple of weeks, the group became a well-organized team. Life was so good that they were becoming quite content. They weren't

concerned about how soon the Sisters would come for them until a National Forest Service Ranger happened by.

Bob had been on road watch and called in as soon as he saw the Ranger. Raymond and Tiffany walked out to meet him as he pulled into their trail. Fortunately, the Ranger was happy to stand near his vehicle and talk. Even more fortunate was that he showed no interest in going back into their camp where he would have seen that they had been hunting and fishing. Tiffany talked shop with him until he finally came to the point of his visit.

“How long have you folks been here?” he asked.

“A couple of weeks,” Raymond replied. He knew that there was probably a 14-day stay limit, but, if the Ranger had driven by in the past and noticed their campfire smoke, and was here to tell them that it was time to leave, lying would just make things bad.

“There’s a fourteen day stay limit here.”

“Oh,” Raymond acted surprised. “I’m so sorry. I looked and didn’t see any signs on the road.”

“Sorry about that,” the Ranger apologized. “the general bulletin board at the entrance to the forest has it posted. I guess we assume that most everyone knows about stay limits.”

“We’re not planning to be more than a couple of days longer. We came up for our vacation.”

“Sorry. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Can we leave in the morning? It’s awfully late to be pulling out right now.”

“Yeah, that’d be okay.”

“We appreciate that,” the two said in unison.

The Ranger climbed back into his truck and pulled out. He hadn’t asked for any identification and didn’t see their vehicles up close. What were the chances that he would connect them to the fugitives for whom Butler

had most of Arizona searching? The group sat quietly together. Everyone was contemplating the same possibilities.

“I think it should be safe until morning,” Raymond finally offered. “It is almost 500 miles to Yuma. Butler has too big of an ego not to be in on our capture, so that gives us a few hours even if they fly.”

Everyone agreed. “Let’s just get packed up this evening so we can roll early in the morning.”

Sadly the group began the process of dismantling and packing. This had been a great spot and they had felt safe and comfortable here. It was as though it was virgin land that had suddenly been violated. They saw themselves as the gentle lovers who loved and protected the land, while this ranger, no matter how much of a tree-hugging, environmentalist he might be, represented the rapist beyond.

They knew that the Ranger would return to be sure that they had left. Their hope was that when he returned he didn’t have Coronel Butler with him. They had no idea how Butler had been harassing other agencies for information. Neither were they aware that the local Forest Service was aware of their presence. Because of Butler’s “do not approach” warning they had flown a drone over the camp and then sent the Ranger to visit to get some pictures with his body-cam. Those pictures were sent to Butler.

The last thing that Liam saw as he looked out of their lean-to that night was Raymond sitting with his head down, a shot-glass in his hands and a map-book on the ground. “That man is carrying a great burden on his shoulders,” he said quietly to Stephanie.



The group was up at first light. There was no time for coffee. People scurried around taking care of last minute item, lifting stabilizers and making ready to move out. Bob was on the last road guard

shift. They would let him know when they were pulling out and be at the corner to be picked up.

Suddenly an out of breath voice could be heard on Channel 17. “We have company and they aren’t friendly.” Within a few minutes Bob came running into camp. “There’s a convoy coming up the road. It’s gotta be Butler!”

“Everyone fill a bag with food, water, and a blanket,” Raymond became a commander and barked orders. “Don’t take long. We’re heading toward the spring. Be on the trail in two minutes or less.”

By this time the approaching convoy could be heard coming up the road. Raymond looked toward the road in horror. Scanning the camp, everyone was gone. He ran to catch up.

It was hard to move quickly and quietly, and not leave a trail. The group was trying its hardest to remain calm. They were all convinced that they were going to be captured this time, but they weren’t going to give up without a fight.

Tiffany and Stephanie, the two youngest women, practically carried Sarah. The hunter group hung back at the rear of the procession. Their arrows would do nothing but annoy the soldiers with their body armor and high-powered automatic weapons. Besides, they didn’t want to kill anyone. The T-bow would be deadly if it hit any unarmored body part. Bear spray was going to be the most effective weapon and the four hunters had two cans each. They were counting on the stealth that they used in hunting to catch the soldiers in a trap that would be filled with the blinding, nauseous spray.

Bear spray is an oil-based chemical which burns like fire and was described by one person as ‘the mist from hell.’ When hits you in the face it causes tremendous pain and temporary blindness. It also causes serious breathing difficulty for up to an hour or two after contact. It is a really nasty chemical which was designed to stop a three-hundred-pound charging bear. Even a highly trained soldier in full body armor was no match for bear spray.

As the group approached the spring they saw a figure standing on the rocks. It was one of the Sisters – Agatha. The group, without the hunters, gathered around.

“I know it looks bad,” said Agatha, “but I won’t let anything happen to you.” She paused to look toward the camp which was already being invaded by the soldiers. “Follow your compass on a course of 18 degrees and you will find a cave. Go into the cave and stay there until I come for you. Do not come out of the cave no matter what you see or hear. Do you understand?”

The group verbalized understanding, Lisa took a compass heading, and the band was soon moving off toward Agatha’s cave. Raymond dropped back to tell the hunters. As he moved he saw five soldiers following the trail which the group had made. He could not see the hunters, so stopped and crouched down. Suddenly he heard Thomas call “now”. The air around the soldiers was filled with the mist of bear spray. The soldiers began to scream. No amount of training was going to help them. They dropped their weapons, which a soldier is never supposed to do, and put their hands to their eyes. That was the worst thing they could possibly do.

Within seconds Raymond was being passed by his hunters. He fell in line behind them and, as they made their way swiftly and quietly through the woods, he told them about the cave.

Their attack on the soldiers was calculated. They knew that it would confirm that the group had gone in that direction and that it wasn’t far ahead. At the same time, the first aide required for the soldiers was going to slow down pursuit or at least reduce the numbers. Since they had only used four cans of bear spray, they had plenty left.

The group stood inside the cave entrance while Liam, Bob and Tiffany worked to cover the trail they had made going to the cave. They didn’t have long before they heard soldiers coming toward them. The group moved deep into the cave. The hunters stayed just out of the light with bear spray at the ready.

“I thought I had a trail, but it stopped,” they could hear one soldier report on his radio.

“Same here,” came the voice on the radio.

“They can’t have gone that far, assholes!” The voice and abusiveness of Coronel Butler was easily recognized. “Keep moving up the hill.”

“Begging your pardon, Sir,” came another voice, “but this is a mountain and if they went over it they’re very good and a lot better equipped than we are.”

“Are you refusing an order!” Butler screamed over the radio.

“No, Sir,” the voice replied, “just respectfully letting you know that it is physically impossible. Sir!”

The conversation and abuse continued for a while. Finally Coronel Butler could be heard telling an officer nearby that he could bring his men off the mountain. The soldiers could be heard moving noisily toward the campsite. A short while later there was silence.

The group sat inside the cave as instructed. After what seemed an eternity they could see Agatha moving toward them.

“Bravo, well done,” Agatha smiled. “that nasty man, Coronel Butler, has some soldiers hiding in the bushes in case you try to go back for your vehicles. I’d give them a good case of chiggers but nasty Butler is the one who made them stay. It doesn’t matter, you will make your way northwest through the mountain pass. I’ve left markers for you. There you will find a village we call ‘Gone’. This is your last task. Once you arrive at the village you will be trained for your escape. You have done extremely well. I know you will finish. I’ll see you all there.”

With a smile and a wave, Agatha turned around, walked into the forest and disappeared.

The group stood looking at each other and then up at the mountain.

“Just go up over the mountain,” Stephanie tried to imitate Agatha’s cheery, no-worries way of speaking. “Right!” she then said in a hoarse almost froggy voice. The group laughed, picked up their packs and started northwest. If it meant a place of safety and the end of their long journey, a mountain pass it would be.

The trail was difficult with lots of switch-backs and stony outcropping to climb. True to her word, Agatha had neat little cairns marking the way. The group was never in doubt as to which direction. Not wanting to give any pursuing soldiers directions, the group scattered the cairns as they passed.

Standing at the top of the pass they could make out a small cluster of buildings a half mile or so down the other side of the mountain. No one seemed to notice the difficulty with safety and escape so close at hand.

As they walked into the village they realized that it was a cluster of buildings but there didn't seem to be any roads in or out of the village. The buildings were very plain and appeared to be made out of a material like stucco but it looked more like stone. All of the buildings were an earthen color.

One of the doors opened. There was the second sister, Matilda. She got a surprised look on her face which soon turned to pure bliss.

"Agatha!" she called over her shoulder, "Agatha, the new group is here."

Matilda bustled over to the group. If you had seen her move, the only word is bustle, with short choppy steps; almost a prance; with lots of extraneous body movement and waving of hands. She greeted each member of the group individually as though they were the only person standing there.

By this time Agatha had arrived. In her sweet, cheery, sing-song voice she said "Now, Matilda. Stop being such a fuss buggee. They've had a long journey and we must give them a chance to rest."

With the two Sisters leading the way and talking constantly, the group was lead to the only two-story building in the village. It turned out to be a cross between a dormitory and a hotel. The accommodations weren't much more than a college dorm but they were comfortable and the group felt safe. The three couples were given rooms together while the rest had private rooms. Liam and Stephany glanced at each other as they entered their rooms across the hall from each other. Seeing the other catch them looking, they both quickly looked forward and disappeared into their

rooms. It seemed strange for both of them. They had slept next to each other for so long, it didn't seem right.

Later the group was called downstairs by a young man named Truman. His mother was a Truman Capote fan was how he explained his unusual first name. There was another group already gathered and eating in the dining room at the foot of the stairs. The newcomers stood in the doorway, and only had time to wave and say "hi" to the other group, when a middle-aged woman came out of the kitchen and indicated for them to sit at a large table. Soon the table was filled with food. It was piled with things they had not seen for months; asparagus, potatoes, pastas, ham, beef and chicken, just to start the list.

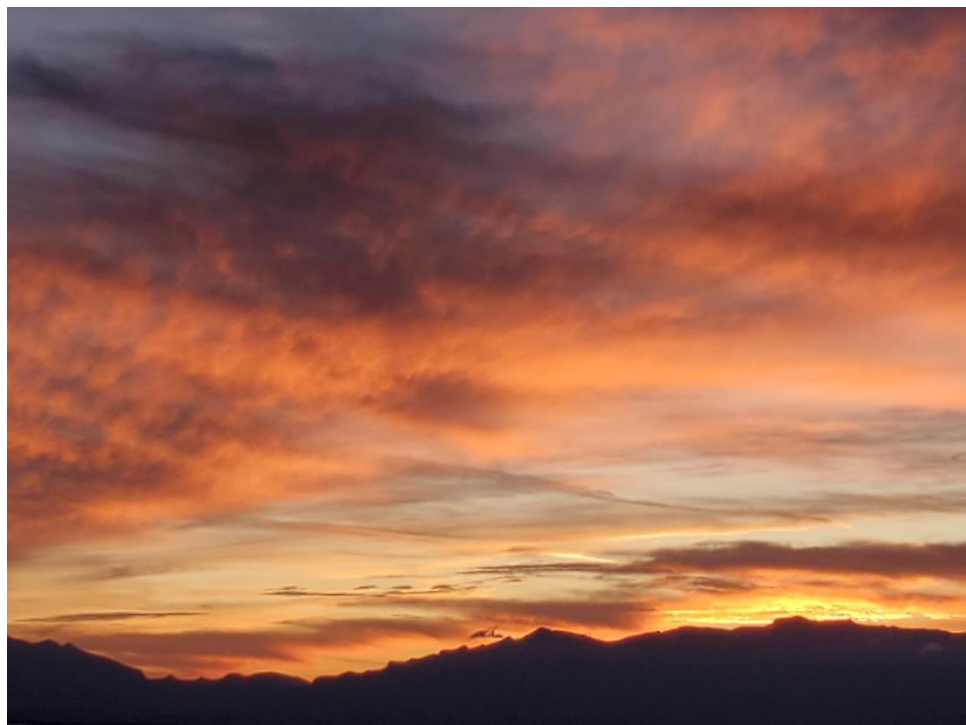
"You can have all that every day," Matilda laughed as she entered the room. "All you have to do is go back."

"It's great," exclaimed Janet, "but not that great!"

The rest of the group mumbled agreement with full mouths.

Matilda laughed at the group, made a few other silly remarks, and then told them that they were to meet in Training Room A in the building across the street after they were finished. She stopped by and made small talk with the other group then turned to Raymond's group and said, "these folks have just finished their training. They're leaving tomorrow."

The first group looked genuinely happy and very much at ease, but there were some concerned looks when Matilda mentioned them leaving the next day. Raymond's group didn't know that this group would soon be heading toward Decision Point. It was probably the most difficult part of the training.



An Arizona sunset.

After a hearty meal and coffee, which they hadn't tasted for months, the group crossed the street to a single-story building that looked much like every other building in the village. Right inside the door was Training Room A.

"Come in. Come in," called Agatha from the front of the room. "take a seat and we'll get started."

Matilda pranced and jiggled in calling each one of the group by name.

“Welcome to Gone,” Agatha started. “This village will be your home for the next three months while you go through final training.”

“Let me start by saying not to worry about your group size. These past months have served three purposes: First, they were to develop rapport and teamwork. Second, they were to make sure that you really want to do this. You all had plenty of opportunities to give up, but each of you was determined. Third, that determination and the difficulties you faced brought out the natural leadership and survival skills in each of you. We generally have a few people who don’t have a group whom we might introduce to you. If you like them and they fit, they will go with you. But that will be your decision.” Agatha paused.

“You will be taught more survival skills and learn to live 100 percent off the grid 100 percent of the time.”

“You already have shown some good skills,” Matilda chimed in. “We were most impressed with your camp at Kaibab.”

“Where you are going,” Agatha continued, “if you decide to go, you will only have what you take, your wits, skills and companions. That’s why the next three months are so important.”

“Now comes the really hard part for all of us.” It was the first time that Matilda spoke in a calm and serious voice. “We can only ask you to keep an open mind and hear us out.”

The group immediately began to worry. All sorts of horrible scenarios filled their minds.

“We don’t expect you to believe us at first,” Agatha added, “because no group before you has ever believed us at first.”

“You have come a long way and endured a lot. Please don’t throw all of that out by over-reacting or making hasty decisions.”

“This must be really bad,” Raymond said bluntly.

“Not really,” Agatha smile. A bit of her normal cheeriness showed through. “I’m sure that you’ve all talked about where we’re going to send you, how we’re going to send you, and how we are able to do something

no one else has done.” They all nodded. “Did you come up with any answers?” The group laughed. “I didn’t think so.”

“So here goes,” said Matilda.

“Matilda and I are from a planet of which you’ve never heard and couldn’t pronounce,” Agatha again took the lead.

“We are just what you see, humanoids like yourselves.” Matilda continued. “If you did a medical work-up on us you’d only find a couple very minor differences.”

“Matilda and I are scientists. Our population of humanoids did the same thing that Earth’s humans are doing right now. As you would say ‘been there. Done that.’ Fortunately, we survived until a small group of us learned to use what you call quantum physics to move between planets and even universes.”

“However, we kept our discovery a secret,” Matilda said sadly. “There was a lot of ‘soul searching’ to use one of your Earth idioms. We were afraid that if we used our discovery to carry out a mass migration to a new planet, people would start doing the same thing there.”

“The decision was agonizing but we decided that we couldn’t help our planet. Humanoids over the entire universe are the same rather nasty, invasive creatures.”

“A large group of scientists, and some others whom we felt were committed to doing things right, abandoned our planet.”

“We felt horrible, but we didn’t feel that we could open the move up to everyone.”

“Firstly, how would we decide who got to go. Our planet, like yours, was horribly over-populated.”

“And most of them thought that what they were doing to the planet was just fine.”

“If we took that mentality to a new planet we were just spreading the disease.”

“Agatha and I visited this planet and realize that you too are doomed. You are just like our home was. We decided that we should share our good fortune with people here who really want to live in harmony with what you call nature.”

“We have gathered a group of experts on survival and developing new community from around your world and others. They will help you expand the skills you already possess and teach you new skills.”

“We were impressed by how you divided the hunting and gathering when you were at Kaibab. We have found that most of the really successful communities we’ve sent out end up as hunter-gatherers. It is a simple and peaceful existence, and the people feel one with the world around them.”

“When your training is complete, we will send you to a planet where there are no humanoids. You are not there to colonize. You are there to live and become a part of the planet as you are a part of your nature here.”

“You can’t save Earth, but you can help people find peace on a new world.”

The Sisters sat down silently and waited. It was a long wait. The group was struggling to digest what they had just heard. It was unbelievable but so many things about these women, and thing which they had done, were unbelievable yet they instilled confidence. The group asked some generic questions about the Sisters’ home planet and the planet to which they moved. There were more questions about quantum travel. The Sisters’ answers were so complex, or at least they sounded complex, that they quickly lost the group in scientific jargon.

“I know it’s confusing,” said Matilda. “Even your scientists have discovered and demonstrated much of what we have told you. They just haven’t discovered how to manipulate the event so that you end up where you want to be.”

Raymond was the first to express an opinion, and as usual he started out by denying being the group leader and emphasized that he was strictly speaking for himself.

“This is all pretty fantastic,” he said. “I found myself really wanting to believe what I was hearing even though I have no proof, no evidence.” He paused as though looking for a way to say what he wanted to say. “I guess I worked so hard to get here that, whether or not you are from another planet, or can quantum travel or can send us to a new planet, doesn’t really matter. Well, yes it does, but it is harder for me to accept that this is some sort of hoax. What could you possibly gain from such a hoax? Are you planning to sell us? Good luck with that. Does this make sense?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “No, it doesn’t. Anyway, I’m in it for the training. If you can give me the training you promise it will at least help me survive on this planet that much longer.”

“We can understand your perplexity,” Agatha said in a calm and understanding voice. “We’ve had a number of groups go through here and this was definitely the hardest part for them.”

“That’s why we tell you up front,” said Matilda.

“Why didn’t you tell us when we started the journey?” asked Lisa.

“Would you have come? Would you have given us a chance?”

“Probably not.”

“There’s your answer,” said Matilda. “We wanted the chance. We’ve done everything we promised and more. Most people have worked so hard to get here, and realized that we helped them make it, that they’re not willing to give up their dream. That makes them want to give us a chance. Is that how you’re feeling?”

“How many people have you sent to other planets?” Stephanie changed the subject.

“Team Six is the team you met in the dining room,” Agatha responded. “We have trained nine teams. Three teams broke up because they didn’t all want to go, and that’s fine. That’s part of spending the training time here. Those who wanted to go have been successfully introduced to other teams.”

“So, once you go, you can’t come back?” Bob asked.

“The easy answer is ‘correct’. Unless you have someone with you with the equipment and ability to use it for quantum travel, we would have no idea here that you wanted us to open a channel to return.”

“It takes a lot of skill and practice to hit the same place and time consistently, but Agatha has that skill,” said Matilda beaming with pride in her big sister. “We’ve made numerous trips between here and our home planet.”

“A couple of teams have one of our scientists with them,” added Agatha, “but they don’t have the equipment for travel.”

“You are all welcome to quit at any time prior to departure,” Matilda said gently. “There is no shame in changing your mind. Going isn’t a matter of bravery or commitment.”

“If you decide to quit, just tell us and we’ll take you any place you’d like to go.”

“We’ll leave you now to talk among yourselves. Just let us know if there is anything we can do. Good night.”

With that Agatha and Matilda left the room. The group looked at each other. They were speechless. After a long silence and then a lot of sputtering and false starts they talked over their options. They all agreed that despite the fact that it sounded like a fantasy, they really wanted it to be true.

“After all,” said Anthony, “think of how many of Jules Verne’s ideas became reality; submarines, men on the moon. Anything is possible. The Cubs won the World Series!”

That was the tension breaker the group needed. They decided that they’d all stick close together. Anything strange or kinky, they’d leave as a group.



Kaibab National Forest above Gone

The group, now known as Team-7, found the training excellent and the community of Gone friendly and very open. Team 6 had gone to Decision Point the evening Team-7 arrived and really agonized over the final decision to stay or go. This was the tradition. Team-7 had been permitted to accompany Team-6 as far as Departure Pass the next morning. The entire team was excited and ready to go. There was no hesitation and no signs of being forced. Unless they had been brain-washed or drugged, they were a happy group of people heading off to a wonderful adventure.

A few weeks before Team-7 was to finish training Stephanie and Liam decided to take a hike. They had never been outside of the town of Gone without a staff member and were feeling a bit cooped up. They decided that it was time to take a break and do some exploring.

They triangulated their position with their compasses and headed north. A short distance north of town they came to a lovely creek flowing down from the mountain to the east through the magnificent Ponderosa forest. They decided to follow it up the mountain as far as possible. Leaving a small cairn by the creek they set out.

The creek meandered down the relatively gentle slope of the mountain. The giant Ponderosa took so much of the moisture and shut out so much of the light that few plants grew under the dense canopy. Ferns, varieties of rush and grasses grew around small pools. Occasionally there were rapids and small waterfall as the terrain became steeper. They knew that it was still a beautiful sunny day outside the canopy because the sunlight that did penetrate the canopy made bright patterns on the forest floor. They saw plenty of deer, bear scat and the unmistakable chocolate easter-egg droppings of the moose. The forest was so alive.

“Do you think wherever we end up living will be this magnificent?” asked Stephanie.

“I hope so,” Liam smiled as he surveyed his surroundings. “This is marvelous. It makes me feel so alive that I’m almost giddy. Except for practice exercises we haven’t really been out of town. This is where I want to be.”

“Me too,” Stephanie agreed taking in the beauty around her, “me too!”

They had gone only a mile or so when the mountain became quite steep and the giant ponderosa gave way to aspen along the creek surrounded by a variety of fir. The tree-line was close at hand. The two were planning on turning around when a large outcropping, creating a terrace on the side of the mountain, caught their attention. They couldn’t pass up a phenomenal vista.

Climbing onto the outcrop the view was awesome. The lush green of the heavy Ponderosa forest below stretched out as far as they could see. It looked like a giant green down comforter which invited one to jump into it. As they scanned the vista before them they realized that they couldn't see the village.

"It should be right over there," said Stephanie.

"You're right," Liam replied. "Could the trees be tall enough to hide it?"

"I wouldn't think so, but that's about the only explanation," Stephanie answered.

Strange as it seemed, it didn't really matter. The two headed back down the mountain toward Gone. They followed the stream to their cairn and turned south. The village was just around the

The two stood in shock. There was no village. They knew they were in the right place. Not only was this the exact spot that they triangulated when they left, but there were their footprints in the dirt. Where was the village?

Marking their spot with a cairn and double checking their triangulation to make sure they could return to the point at which they were certain the village had been, they climbed part way up the mountain so they could see the entire valley. They went to the spot near the pass where they had all first seen Gone. This time there was no village.

They agreed that there was no way that they had strayed so far off course that they ended up in another valley. They had never left the long narrow valley. Besides the cairn by the creek was due north of the village and they had returned to the cairn without trouble and turned due south. There were also their own footprints in the dirt where they had stood to take the original triangulation. By this time both were extremely frustrated.

"This has to be another one of those crazy quantum physics things Agatha and Matilda are always doing," complained Stephanie.

They tried their GMRS radios but no one answered. Stephanie found her cell phone and a power pack in her backpack. She hadn't used them for so long that she'd forgotten about them. The power pack still had enough

energy to power the phone to about 27 percent but they had almost no signal. They tried texting Raymond. Nothing.

“I’m seriously pissed,” growled Stephanie as she watched the battery of the phone drop.

“Maybe we’re being tested,” offered Liam.

“To see how short our tempers are?” snapped Stephanie.

“Well,”

“I’m sorry,” Stephanie apologized. “but we came out here for a bit of respite.”

“I understand,” said Liam. “I’m more concerned about getting back before the group’s escape.”

“Well, at least we have a lot of survival training.”

“True. Should we put our camp right here?”

“Sounds good to me.”

It was true. The two had a good two months of intense survival training. By this time in their training they could set up an overnight, short-term and long-term camp just about anywhere. Liam, as always, had his backpack with him containing much of what they might need. Each of them had the mandatory water, compass and knife. Shelter was their first priority. They decided upon a very rudimental lean-to under which they made a sort of nest with ground materials. Liam had a couple of the survival blankets in his backpack.

They built a fire and dined on some roasted root plants, a salad of edible leaves and indian tea. They splurged and had an energy bar from Liam’s pack for desert. After dinner they sat quietly looking at the dying fire, each lost in his/her own thoughts. Neither of them was worried about surviving. Both were worried that this separation might be permanent and they would be stuck here when the others went to their new world, each afraid to share this fear with the other.

Finally, they climbed into their lean-to and fell asleep.



They were awakened the next morning by Bob’s voice. “They sure don’t look like they need rescued,” followed by Matilda’s giggle. They looked up to see Bob, Agatha, Raymond and Matilda standing at the entrance to their lean-to. Just beyond them was the village.

“What the hell!” Liam exclaimed as they both sat up.

“Have a nice night alone?” Bob teased.

“I must apologize,” said Agatha, “we didn’t tell you about the village because we didn’t want you to feel trapped, BUT you will remember that we strongly discouraged you from wandering away from the village ‘for safety reasons’”.

“What?” both Liam and Stephanie said.

“I received your text,” said Raymond, “which was evidently miraculous, and immediately showed it to Agatha.”

“Let’s go to the coffee shop, get you some breakfast and I’ll try to explain it to you over a cup of your expresso,” suggested Agatha. “Expresso coffee is one of your world’s greatest contributions to the universe.”

Before they could get to the coffee shop the rest of Team 7 had gathered around with a barrage of questions. The tiny shop was rather crowded as Agatha tried to explain the disappearing village.

“Again, we didn’t tell you because we didn’t want you to feel like prisoners,” Agatha began. “As you learned, you can simply walk out but you can’t get back in unless you know where the passage is located or someone removes the cloaking. The reason is that the village is and is not here.” The expected murmur.

“There are two advanced physics at work here. The disappearance of the village is due to cloaking techniques that your Earth scientists have been playing with for decades. They’re so close to perfecting it that sometimes I want to smack them on the back of the head and say ‘look here!’ I won’t try to explain the physics, but, as you have witnessed, it does work.”

“The second is the use of another quantum phenomena. Between randomness and unlimited potential, it is possible for something to be in a spot and not be there at the same time. Having learned how this works, we can, for all practical purposes, make anything from a person to a large tract of land be someplace but not be there.”

“You know for a fact that we are all sitting here drinking coffee and talking. You are not hallucinating, and if I smack you,” Agatha reached out and gently smacked the nearest person, “you feel it. Right?”

“Yet, if someone were to walk from outside the village toward the village, the moment they reached the edge of the phenomena, in which the village is located, they would pass through and be on the other side. They would never know they had just stepped through a relatively large area. In fact, theoretically, we could apply this phenomena to as large a tract of land as we wanted and if someone were to approach they would instantly be on the opposite side even if that was a thousand miles away. That they might notice.” The group laughed.

“When you went for your hike you stepped out of the phenomena of the village, but there was no sensation or change that would tell your body what had happened. When you turned around, expecting to return to the village, between the phenomena and the cloaking, it appeared to have disappeared. If the cloaking had been turned off, you would have been able to see the village but had you tried to enter you would have immediately been on the other side as though you had stepped through a one-dimensional field.”

“Does this make any sense?”

“Yes and no,” said Thomas scratching his head.

“Good,” said Agatha laughing. “One of your great quantum physicist once said that if you think you understand quantum physics you haven’t a clue. As adept as my people have become at applying and using quantum physics, we still have to just trust the physics. Trying to really understand what is happening is too mind boggling.”

“So this is why we are safe here and there are no trails or roads nearby.”
“Yes.”

“We can pretty much put the village anywhere we want. We brought it here because you all were in trouble nearby. It was easier. Before that we were somewhere in Idaho, I think.”

The discussion went late into the night. It was a good discussion, not just because Team 7 was learning so much but because they had actually encountered the impossible and realize it to be possible. It made them feel better about the entire idea of planetary travel and being trained to live on an unknown planet in an unknown galaxy possibly in a different universe.

“Tell us about your new home,” Sarah asked.

“It is indeed lovely,” said Agatha. “Your Earth reminds me of it. It has oceans and deserts, rain forests, magnificent jungles, great grasslands and forests with trees that seem to reach to our star. Where we live is on the edge of a great forest. Out of respect for our new home, the only building that has electricity and uses metal is the building that houses the equipment we need for our travel. Other than that, we live with nature as do all animals. Only some of us work with projects like this. Most of us are hunters, gatherers or farmers. We live in small groups, sharing everything. We have learned that that works best. Of all the planets and civilizations we have studied, we noticed that once the people get away from being small groups of hunters and gatherers, sharing everything, living as a part of nature without any concept of property and boundaries, they begin a death spiral of self-destruction. It happened to our original home planet. It’s happening to your Earth, and we’ve seen it across the universe.

Our cottages are made of the simple bricks we taught you how to make. Decisions are made as a group, and if we can't walk somewhere, we don't go. We have the knowledge to have technology far beyond what you have here, but we made a decision and a pact that when we realize that we cannot keep the quantum building, as it is known, functioning any longer we will call everyone home, dismantle the equipment, and enjoy the simple life. We know that we will not live as long as we could with technology, but we feel that we will live more fully and be happier. We know that we can actually be the prey of other animals, but we accept that as a part of nature. If you look at environments on your Earth that have not been altered by humans and technology, it is death which keeps populations from exploding beyond control. We consciously elected quality over quantity."

"What about your original home?" Bob asked softly.

"It is about over," Agatha said sadly. The team could see tears welling in her eyes. Matilda looked away. "We had gone back frequently and tried to convince people to change their ways but to no avail. We tried to get them to work with nature instead of destroy it but their economic and political system was too strongly entrenched. Everything was owned and controlled by a few very powerful people and they just wanted more and more no matter who or what they destroyed."

"It's almost funny. The term they used would be translated into English as 'free enterprise.' Proponents of the system could make it sound so wonderful and so beneficial for everyone when in reality it was an insidious killer. The last time we took a look the planet was almost unrecognizable. There were no trees and very few scrubby bushes. Most of the land was barren except for those areas covered by concrete and artificial grass. The towns were in ruins. People were fighting over water and food. Heavily armed guards stood guard over any water source and high electric fences with armed guards surrounded what passed for gardens. They had learned nothing from their suffering. They didn't work together and with nature. We witnessed some of the most bizarre, inhumane behavior one could possibly imagine. At one time the humanoids on our planet were kind, compassionate, and well-educated.

What we observed were the most pathetic of all the animals, having almost no similarity to their predecessors.”

“It was so upsetting,” Matilda looked back with a tear-stained face, “that we never went back. We could only hope that the end came quickly for them.”

“We didn’t want to leave them there to die like that,” Agatha said through her tears, “but because of that so-called free enterprise, which was no more than a euphemism for freedom for the very rich to enslave the people and rape the land, there was no convincing them to change their ways. It hurt so much, but to take them to a beautiful new planet would just be spreading the disease. We had to let it die.”

“Little did we know,” added Matilda, “that almost everywhere in the universe we would encounter humanoids like ourselves who could use language, abstract, plan, plot and create, we found the disease.”

“In comparison to those on other planets, Earth humanoids are rather naïve and well behind most other planets, but you have one of the most advanced cases of the disease that we’ve seen.”

“That’s why we decided to help Earth humanoids. We believe that small groups, who are exceptionally aware of their history and their faults, can start over and enable humanoids to live as a productive, cooperative part of a planet’s nature.”

“It is really a very significant risk,” concluded Agatha. “There are a very limited number of planets that can support life nevertheless the abundant life that was on your Earth. Every group that we place on a planet that does not have humanoids, we risk infecting that planet.”



Training was soon completed and it was decision time. Team 7 had had very little time to think about their looming decision. They were too busy learning how to live a peaceful, enjoyable life in concert with nature. They had learned a great many skills from making the tools to build a dwelling to building the dwelling; from raising the flax to turning the harvested plant into clothing. They learned a variety of ways to catch fish and identify food sources.

The days had been filled with learning and practicing skills by which they would survive. Many evenings were spent with anthropologists, archeologist and historians studying the history of the homo sapiens on earth. They identified, studied and discussed the evidence for the belief that the beginning of the end was when humans started farming, manipulating nature, claiming ownership, and creating the haves and have-nots. They enjoyed lots of red-hot debates over tankards of cold beer.

As the time grew nearer the team was given two large wagons. Each wagon was five feet wide and eight feet long. They were to be used to carry the items that the team selected to take with them to their new home. It seemed like a lot of room, but the team soon learned that they had to be very careful in their selection.

They decided upon a chemistry set which would be used to test plants to see if they were toxic. This would be very beneficial since they would probably be faced with all new plants and animals. They did decide to take a large quantity of oral and topical antibiotics along with a variety of medications carefully selected by Lisa and Tony. Their medical supplies included several large first aid kits, two significantly large bag of marijuana and some marijuana plants. Antibiotics and pain killers were going to be their most important medications, especially at first. Marijuana was an obviously choice because of its many medicinal benefits. Lisa had seen the tremendous benefits of marijuana both with her patients and her own daughter, and they had witnessed how it helped Sarah. Not only had it help with pain control it had reduced the severity of her tremors. Both Lisa and Tony preferred CBD oils, lotions and topicals with the CBD-THC combinations for pain, but, even though not

as efficient a delivery system, old-fashioned smoking was easiest. It was a great deal easier and simpler to transport and store, and could be used to make oils, lotions and topicals as needed.

It was going to take them some time to figure out what they could eat. They were going to have to test absolutely everything before they put it in their mouths. To feed themselves during this almost perpendicular learning curve they dried a lot of fish and vegetables, smoked some meats and packed some jerky. They also packed a large supply of military field meals.

The expected steep learning curve also applied to every other aspect of their lives. They packed an ample supply of fire-starters like matches along with more primitive methods like flint and steel. Until they found how to apply their newly learned skills at making rope, twine and thread, they needed to make sure they took a sufficient supply of these items. Several tool chests were to make the journey even though they had learned how to make tools.

Liam convinced the team that everyone should have a backpack like his containing survival gear, first aid kit, and clothing, along with the compass, water bottle and Bowie knife they all already carried.

Stephanie pushed for space for books. She believed that they needed to take books about the various skills they had learned. Lisa and Tony wanted some reference books to help them provide health and medical care. Raymond argued for some books of classic literature and philosophy.

It was a difficult and arduous task.



One night, just before they had to decide whether or not to go, Liam was sitting at Decision Point pondering everything that had happened since he received Ted's note. Stephanie came and sat down next to him. Throughout much of the time before arriving at Gone they had lived in the same 110 square feet. They had become personally, emotionally and physically close. Liam had not made any romantic advances because they both thought it would be inappropriate. Stephanie being next to him felt good to Liam.

"Tomorrow is the final decision," he said without taking his focus off the point in the distance called Departure Pass. "What are you thinking?"

"I didn't think it was going to be this hard. I don't mean the experiences or the training. I mean the decision. Nothing about life will be the same."

"That's for sure, but two great things came out of our time in Arizona."

"What are they?"

"I learned that I can survive. I can do this. As Agatha said, that's why they let us go through it."

"And the other thing?" Stephanie persisted.

Liam struggled. "You," he said quietly, afraid to look to see her reaction.

"Me?"

Liam just nodded. "I don't think I could go through Departure Pass without you."

"Would you hold my hand when you do. I'm afraid."

"Yes," said Liam reaching out and taking Stephanie's hand. "but you have to want to go."

"I want to go with you. We can handle anything together."

"We are a good team, aren't we?"

The two faced each other, embraced and kissed.

"Will you be my life mate?" Liam whispered in Stephanie's ear as he kissed her gently on the neck.

“I was afraid you’d never ask,” Stephanie giggled. “Thought I was going to have to ask you.”

That night they returned to only one room. They didn’t need anyone to give them permission or a blessing. It didn’t matter whether anyone else approved or not. It was their decision and it had been made.

Lying, holding each other close after making passionate love; passionate love that had been so long desired and so long put off; they knew that this was a new beginning in itself. They knew that through their own commitment they were now a couple, a pair, mates that were, in reality, one. It wasn’t a oneness created by quantum physics or resulting from some spiritual enlightenment. It was oneness that was a reality which grew out of bonding, understanding, and commitment as well as love and, yes, even desire. From that point on they knew that whatever happened to one happened to the other. Whether stay or go, survive or perish, they were one.



The next morning their companions saw them come out of the same room. Nothing was said. There was nothing that needed to be said. Their friends all smile. They smiled because they were happy to see Stephanie and Liam happy. They smiled because they knew that the reality of their oneness had finally been consummated.

Later that day Raymond called a meeting of Team 7. They met at Decision Point so that they could have some privacy. Besides, that was the traditional place.

“I won’t even say that I’m not the leader,” Raymond started. Everyone laughed. “We’ve been through a lot together. We even survived Coronel Butler.” Again laughter. “However, the decision to stay or go is each individual person’s decision. I didn’t ask you to come here to get a consensus or agreement. This is one time that it’s okay not to act as a team.” Raymond paused. “I asked you to come and share your thoughts and feelings. What you are thinking, or maybe struggling with, might help someone else and they help you. Please share.”

“If we stay we will be fugitives,” Bob pointed out, “but worse than that we will watch helplessly as humans destroy the world.”

“Nature will survive,” insisted Stephanie. “Humans are a major factor in the Sixth Extinction but I believe that history shows that it would have come anyway. We’ve just made it happen a whole lot sooner.”

“If we stay, we would have to face humans taking away and destroying places for us to go. Where could we live out our lives?” Liam asked. “I don’t want to live and die in a society that sees being an invasive species as good, right and something of which to be proud.”

“Living on another planet would give us an opportunity to start things right,” Jason offered. “It would be like another chance.”

“There are no second chances in nature. You must live with your decisions.” Janet said flatly.

“Starting a whole new life on another planet, if it was like our time in Kaibab, would be a wonderful experience, but we would always wonder about Unci Maka, Grandmother Earth,” said Liam. “We would feel like we had deserted her when she needed us most. We all love her.”

“Nature will survive,” Stephanie repeated. “We won’t.”

“I love the Earth,” replied Jason. “but some of us are also leaving for political reasons; human greed, prejudice, lack of compassion, tyranny and everything else which dominate our lives in this society.”

“The political disaster we see in America is a universal experience,” Lisa was planning to stay out of the discussion, but she needed to make this point. “It is also a part of the destruction of Earth. The current political nightmare is just a glimpse at what we are as animals. We developed new parts of our brain. We are able to abstract, sit here and hold conversations like this, and supposedly use logic.” There was a quiet snicker. “but we’re not really smarter than other animals without such abilities. Do animals really need these abilities? These abilities are what seem to have led us to become the nasty, invasive species we are.”

“How can you say that we’re not the smartest animal?” asked Anthony.

“We focus our definition of smart on what we can do with our ability to abstract, so when we try to compare other animals to ourselves we say things like ‘they have the vocabulary of a two-year-old’ or ‘they have the intelligence of a five-year-old’. Wait. Stop and think. Just because the two-year-old has a limited vocabulary doesn’t mean that she’s not intelligent. A person’s IQ may change but the ‘intelligence of a five-year-old’ isn’t an IQ. That five-year-old is as intelligent as he will be, he just hasn’t developed the means to use his intelligence. He, like all animals, is learning life skills and how to use his innate intelligence. Humans are probably the slowest to develop. Some animals almost literally hit the ground running. So, to say that an animal has the intelligence of a two-year-old, or the intelligence of a five-year-old, or the intelligence of a human of any age, is really saying they have the same intelligence, but we don’t really mean that. We think we’re smarter because we can abstract and create. That is pretty neat, but we can’t navigate thousands of miles without a map, compass and lots of training. There are lots of things that other animals can do that we can’t do. Those things take intelligence. I believe that it is our ability to abstract and our erroneous belief that we are the most important animal on the planet and greatest and best at everything that has led us to be what we are; arrogant and destructive.”

“How do we know we could control these negative attributes on a new planet?” Stephanie questioned. “Would we not just infect another beautiful planet? The eleven of us might be able to control ourselves but you know that there will be others. Isn’t this danger why the Sisters aren’t sharing quantum travel? The eleven of us would undoubtedly live out our lives in peace and harmony with the new world, but what about others who might follow us? If we were to have children, there would be no guarantee that they would not revert. Perhaps the most loving, compassionate, heroic thing we could do would be to live here so we don’t infect a new world.”

“You mean die here,” Liam said softly.

“Sadly,” Stephanie replied, “that’s exactly what I mean. I’m not talking about a suicide pact, although we would know we were giving up our lives. I’m talking about a conscious sacrifice.”

“Actually, that makes sense.” Anthony commented. “Not nice to think about, but it makes sense. We can’t change things here. The Earth, as we know it, is going to die and we humans are mostly at fault. We only live in hopes of the Phoenix rising to life again. Hopefully next time without humans.”

“We might make a bit of an impact if we could get humans to reduce some of the damage,” added Tiffany. “Renewal would be faster and more assured if we didn’t see how much damage we could do first.”

“You mean go down fighting,” Thomas clarified.

“Yes,” replied Anthony, “I guess that’s what I mean. We know we’re going to lose yet there would be hope that our sacrifice would mean less damage.”

“And how successful has our fight been to this point?”

“Are we suddenly leaning toward staying?” Raymond asked.

“If we leave we will have happy lives, no idea what’s happening here, and may contribute to the contamination of another planet,” noted Liam.

“If we stay and fight we will suffer and ultimately die. It’s that simple. We might actually make the extinction less severe. Rather like a new Earth versus a planet like Dune.” Thomas voice dropped and tremendous sadness enveloped his face.

“What a wonderful choice,” Bob said sarcastically. “I think we need also to consider that we only have so much time in life. In all honesty, to die for an altruistic cause does nothing for us. We won’t enjoy being dead more because of our altruism. We won’t enjoy the praise and accolades, if there are any. I don’t know what I’d do with forty virgins or a street paved with gold if such places did exist.”

“Let’s not get theological now,” quipped Janet. The group enjoyed a temporary respite with a good laugh.

“I must be honest,” said Lisa after the laughter died. “I don’t want to be altruistic but I don’t want to be the cause or contribute to the problem.”

“Refreshing honestly,” Jason gave her the thumbs up.

“People want to be heroes,” Raymond felt the group needed an anthropological perspective to tackle the problem. “Somewhere, somehow people began to believe that being a hero gives their lives meaning. Philosophers have always loved to talk about the meaning of life. Do ordinary people really ask ‘why am I here?’ Do our lives really need meaning? I don’t think so. I think the whole hero mentality developed as leaders of society wanted to control the people. The hero is just one of a plethora of social concepts that only serve the good of the system. Heroes are generally forgotten, if they’re recognized in the first place. But society; or better said the leaders of society; need heroes, compassionate altruistic people to save our collective butts.”

“What does it mean for life to have meaning?” Stephanie became animated. “I don’t think anyone knows. The philosophers you mentioned have always implied that it is a fundamental question. Really? I can’t remember ever wondering about the meaning of life. Leaders of the society attach their definition of ‘meaningful life’ according to their needs. When we were at Kaibab we were happy and at peace, were we not? At Kaibab we didn’t have a meaning to our lives. We had a purpose!” The group all voiced agreement.

“Theoretically I could drop a seed here that would ultimately give life to a new world. What a marvelous thought. I would have made a difference, but what are the odds? The word ‘astronomical’ come to mind. Do we need or want to sacrifice our lives for such odds?” asked Lisa.

“So let’s take altruism, sacrifice and even meaning out of the discussion,” suggested Raymond. “Why would we stay?”

“Why did you ask about staying first?” questioned Jason.

“Because to me it sounds like you’re all saying ‘damn it, it’s the pits and I hate it, but I think we should stay.’” Raymond responded. “But you’re right. It might have sounded like I was pushing staying. Since the

decision is, in reality, whether or not to leave, let's remove things like altruism, sacrifice and meaning from the discussion and ask for only reasons to leave. Is that better?"

"If we leave, we get to live for the purpose most, if not all, of us have expressed is important to us; namely, living in peace and harmony with the world around us," offered Thomas.

"If we leave, we escape from pain and trauma of watching our own kind do greater and greater irreparable damage to Unci Maka," said Liam.

"If we leave, we don't have to fight a losing battle and die feeling totally defeated," said Bob.

"If we leave, we don't have to worry about being chased and pushed around by assholes like Coronel Butler and our own government," Janet said.

"If we leave, we know we will have a place to live. If we die, we die doing something we wanted to do," said Tiffany.

"I have always said that, for the society we have created, government is a necessary evil," said Jason. "The optimum word is 'evil'. Only something like a mass extinction of homo sapiens can change that. Who wants to live with evil ruling our lives? Who thinks they're going to live past the mass extinction? Therefore, the only way to escape this evil is to leave. Isn't that the word we've used from the beginning, 'escape'?"

"Excellent, excellent!" exclaimed Raymond. "Anything else in favor of leaving? Then let's move on with reasons to stay."

"I'm frightened," said Stephanie squeezing Liam's hand even tighter.

There was silence. Everyone looked around but no one had a reason to stay.

"So it sounds like we feel that leaving is the best choice," concluded Raymond.

"*'Sounds like'* and *'is'* are two different things," Liam said. "As I listened to all of the reasons to leave I began to wonder if this is what refugees feel like. I mean, they have no control over their lives or their destiny.

That's why they're fleeing. There are people whose sole purpose in life is to destroy their lives as well as their way of life. They are often treated by those who are driving them out as well as those with whom they seek asylum as inferior and losers. Do you think refugees are angry? I bet they're damn angry. Isn't anger a part of the cycle of grief?"

"I feel like I have no control over my life. My own government seems absolutely intent upon destroying my way of life as well as my ability to live. It is definitely destroying the land that I love and calling me inferior and a loser because they have the power. I'm watching nature being raped. I'm watching people being abused for the benefit of a handful of super-rich people. I'm watching prejudice and violence being normalized."

"I'm a refugee and grieving the loss of so much I held dear; grieving the demise of a once truly great nation; grieving the slow death of a unique and beautiful world. I'm a refugee prepared to flee into a foreign world for survival. No matter how great that foreign world might be we will still be grieving refugees, so will we be happy? Right now, listening to our discussion my grief cycle is turning to anger. Can I deal with that anger by leaving?"

"I know I'm damn angry," Janet responded to Liam. "And you're right. I've taken all sort of abuse from the very government that is supposed to protect me. But they don't work for me anymore. They treated me like a second-class citizen because I'm a woman and they treated me like I'm totally insignificant and the success of my life endeavor was inconsequential because I was just a little subsistence farmer. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is gone! Now you must be a contributor to the super-wealthy. Only those who contribute to the growing wealth of the super-wealthy are considered good and useful citizens. I want to hit them so hard in their lying mouths that they'll talk out of their ass."

"They already do naturally," offered Jason. "but I know just how you feel."

“Anger,” noted Lisa, “is a dangerous, even deadly, two-edged sword. So often our anger causes us to be hurt much more than that toward which the anger is aimed. Believe me, we’ve been there. I’ve done that! I don’t want to stay or leave because of anger.”

“You are absolutely right,” replied Liam. “I was only noting that I am, and I think everyone else is, in the anger stage of our grief cycle.” He paused. “I realize that the system doesn’t care how I feel. I realize that the government doesn’t care how we feel. I realize that the super-rich people who are sucking our life-blood and destroying our world could care less. So perhaps the question is, should we be making such a life changing, irreversible decision in such a state of mind?”

This caused a lot of chatter within the group.

“I was a refugee,” Bob suddenly spoke up. “We fled from Iraq. No one wanted us. The only reason I’m in the US is that my father and I risked our lives to help the American military. As Liam spoke about refugees I really wanted to block out those memories. Yes, it is grief. Yes, you experience anger. I wasn’t born a US citizen, so when I applied for citizenship it was because I really wanted to be a US citizen. I gave this country fifteen years of good and faithful service after I became a citizen, but I’ve never been treated like a citizen. I have always been suspected because my skin is dark and my name is different. Everyone assumes that I’m Muslim and therefore prone to be a terrorist. Now again, I’m experiencing that grief. Just like in Iraq, I’m a refugee. To say that I’m angry is an understatement. Maybe your right, Liam. Maybe I’m not really able to make such a decision now.”

“I watched my parents do everything possible to be accepted into American society,” said Tony. “They gave up their language, their culture and hid their religious beliefs. They did everything anyone said they should do to be ‘real Americans’. It was never enough. When my Father died because they company was taking short-cuts my Mother didn’t even get an apology. She felt like they were disposable. And she was right. She came here wanting to love America, embrace America and be an American. She left hating this shit-hole.” Tony had to take some time to compose himself. Everyone could see the anger rising, but no one

could blame him and, sadly, no one really knew how to comfort him. “Then I worked with the American sick and elderly. They were used, abused, cheated and killed by a greedy system that didn’t care about any life. I have always been a pacifist. I take spiders, ants, wasps and all sorts of so-called pests outside so I don’t kill them.” Another pause, but this time it was because he didn’t want to say what he was thinking. “But I want these monsters to go away. I want them to die!”

The group sat quietly. Tiffany, who was sitting closest to Tony, put her arms around him. It was all she, or anyone else, could do. They all sat deep in thought. It was true. They were all angry. They had been cheated and abused. They had watched everything their country had gained being sold, spoiled or destroyed by the super-rich, supported by a large uneducated population that was still believing the lies. Yet they were being told they shouldn’t be radical.

“Sadly, we’re expected to make a decision today,” Raymond finally broke the silence.

“I realize that to refuse a decision is, in reality to vote against going now,” Liam explained, “but to refuse a decision is not saying ‘I don’t want to go’ as much as ‘I’m not prepared to go.’”

“Years ago I had the opportunity to do one of the most difficult treks on the South American Continent. I wanted to go so badly I could taste it. Yet, I knew I wasn’t prepared. If I went I would fail. So, I passed on the invitation saying ‘I want to go, but I’m not ready. Maybe next time.’ I didn’t expect there to be a next time but it did come and I had a marvelous experience because I had waited until I was ready. Sometimes we have to say ‘not yet’ no matter what.”

“We may never get this opportunity again,” Jason whispered. Holding his head in his hands he didn’t want to think about ramifications of a lost opportunity.

“I realize that,” Liam said quietly and gently. “Odds are we won’t. I really want to go. I’d probably want to go even if it wasn’t to escape our sick society. Setting up a completely new social structure and culture; almost like getting to go back in Earth history and correct human

mistakes which led to the mess we're in; would be an amazing experience. Talk about purpose and meaning! But something inside my head keeps setting off warning alarms, telling me I'm not ready. The consequences of ignoring that warning could be dire."

The group again sat in silence. What Liam had said resonated with them all. They all wanted to go, but something didn't feel right. It wasn't that they wanted to fight a losing battle against terrible odds and a heartless adversary. The question was whether they were emotionally ready to give up hope. Even though they weren't denying anyone else's escape, they suddenly knew exactly how the Sisters felt when they left their home planet. It was an agonizing all-embracing pain because it meant that they had to totally give up hope. Despite their anger it was hard to totally surrender hope.

They had gone through so much to get where they were. They had sacrificed. They had struggled. They were fugitives even though they had done nothing wrong. Sadly no one would believe them. The entire society believed whatever the government told them through media that no longer reported facts but said what they were told. The society was not just sick, it was terminally ill. How could they survive in such a society?



The next day Agatha and Matilda met Team 7 in Training Room A. It was where they first learned of their destination. It seemed appropriate that the decision be announced here.

"Have you made your decision?" asked Agatha.

"Yes," said Raymond. "May I preface with a few remarks."

"Of course," Matilda, "but that doesn't bode well for us."

“I’m sorry,” Raymond apologized. “Going back to the day Lisa and I first met you in that little café near Flagstaff, I have always felt that I could trust the two of you. We did everything you said, and the results were exactly what you promised. You got us out of that mess at Kaibab.”

“When we talked last night, the entire team agreed that we’d do it all over again; the struggle, the sacrifices and the hard work. We can’t praise your trainers enough. And we all want to go to that brave new world so very badly,”

“But?” Agatha said softly.

“Yes, you knew that all along,” Raymond gave a feeble smile. The team sat quietly, mostly eyes looking at nothing on the floor. “We want so much to say ‘yes’, but we don’t feel that we’re ready emotionally or psychologically. This, however, is not rejection.”

Raymond went on to give a very detailed account of the team’s discussion. Occasionally one of the others would add or clarify, but Raymond did his usual excellent job. He concluded with Liam’s idea that they didn’t have to absolutely reject but ask for a third alternative. “If it would be possible, we would like to have a bit more time to get our emotional houses in order. With that opportunity I believe we would all gladly walk through Departure Pass.”

“Are you all in agreement with what Raymond has said?” asked Agatha.

Each person, in turn, verbalized their agreement with Raymond.

“We truly have become a community, a family, a team,” said Stephanie.

“We want to stay together here or on another world. We just need more time.”

“We’re sorry that you don’t feel ready to go.” This is the first time Team-7 had seen Matilda look so sad. “Your team was one we expected to be most successful. But I guess the attributes which would have made you such a great success on a new planet are the same ones which lead you to this decision.”

“You know that you may come back any time,” Agatha added, looking equally as sad. “We respect your decision, which was one over which we

know you all agonized a great deal. Of course, you understand our position. You understand that we really don't know whether or not we will have the ability to transport when you make a decision. As I told you, our resources are limited but they are here for you."

The group expressed their appreciation. There were lots of hugs and lots of tears.

"What will you do now?" Agatha asked.

"We don't know," Raymond looked around at his team. "We didn't get that far. Just making this decision was almost more than we could handle."

"Don't ever underestimate Team-7!" Agatha said firmly. "You will find your way."

"There's no reason they can't stay here a while longer, is there Sister?" Matilda said through her tears.

"None whatsoever," Agatha gave her distraught sister a hug. "If you wouldn't mind, you might help us evaluate other teams and put some of our ideas to the test."

"Agatha," Matilda said in more of her usual jovial way, "may I have a word with you in private?"

"I'm sure struggling with this decision has sent you to hades and back – isn't that your Earth saying?" The group laughed. "Anyway, why don't you all go get a beer or something and relax while I find out what my dear sister has up her dress – that doesn't sound right, does it?" Again laughter.

It had been a very stressful twelve plus hours, and the Sisters allowing them to stay at Gone removed their fear of the immediate future. Together they made their way to the commissary.

The two sisters watched them walk down the street. "Now what are you up to?" Agatha confronted Matilda. Matilda just laughed and shared her epiphany with her sister.



A wilderness road in northern Arizona.

It took the Sisters two days to put their plan together and be sure that it could work. After that they called Team-7, but this time they met in the Sisters' residence.

Their residence looked exactly alike all the others on the outside. Inside it was other-worldly. In light of the fact that the Sisters did come from another planet, that made sense to the Team. To the surprise of Team-7 the residence was not a cold, high-tech, super-functional, stainless steel cubical. It might best be described as Victorian. Despite the fact that Agatha and Matilda were two genius scientists, they presented as anything but the stereotype of the scientist. Agatha reminded the group of Walt Disney's Fairy-godmother in Cinderella while one of the three good witches in Sleeping Beauty came to mind when one thought of

Matilda. If you know these Disney characters, you can imagine what their home would look like.

Team-7 was escorted into a large drawing room replete with Duncan Phyfe couches, wing-backed chairs, and Persian rugs. There was a large side board covered with finger foods, a tea pot and cups, and three crystal decanters surrounded by delicate glasses.

The team was a bit surprised. The surroundings matched the Sisters, but they didn't expect to find it in Gone.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome!" Matilda pranced into the room, followed by her sister. "Please help yourselves and make yourselves at home," Matilda said as she poured a golden liquid from a decanter into a stemmed glass. She evidently sensed that the Team was wondering the nature of the liquid.

"Oh," she giggled, holding up her glass, "Spanish sherry. Did you know that in the European Economic Community only sherry from Spain can be called sherry? Tasting it, I know why."

"There's also some very smooth Irish whiskey," Agatha laughed at her sister as she picked up a crystal highball glass and poured a splash from one of the decanters.

Anthony and Liam were the first team members to get the rest moving. Once the two of them headed toward the sideboard the others followed. The Sisters saw Janet sniffing at the tea pot. "White tea with Jasmin," Matilda called out.

There are three reasons that one puts on a spread like that for visitors. Firstly, some people just feel that's appropriate social etiquette. Secondly, to put visitors at ease and help them relax. Third, you're trying to sell something. For the Sisters it was a combination of the second and third, even if they weren't conscious of their motives.

After an acceptable period of food, drink and socialization, Agatha got down to business.

"As I'm sure you will remember, Matilda asked to have a word with me in private and we shooed you off to give us time to talk." Everyone

agreed. “Well, we had that talk, came up with some pretty exciting ideas, and took a couple of days to make sure they’d work.”

The excitement in the room intensified. There was no doubt that the Sisters had come up with Option 3, and they were anxious to hear it.

“As I told you,” Agatha started, “Matilda has always been the idea person. She realized ... well, why don’t you tell them, Matilda.”

Matilda blushed and giggled. “You know, we have a serious need for real life experience for our teams in training. How much time did you get to really practice what you’d been taught?” She didn’t give the team a chance to actually answer the question. “You know from your own experience that it takes more than day-trips and over-nighters to really practice what you’ve been taught.” The team verbalized agreement.

“When you told us your decision and asked if you’d be allowed to come back, this idea just popped into my mind. You could be our ultimate trainers. That way you’d be able to stay on Earth and deal with your issues, while at the same time help others who aren’t as well prepared as you.”

“What we’re proposing,” Agatha stepped in, “is that we create a quantum dimension for you.” Agatha took a moment as the team reacted. “The difference between Gone and this quantum dimension is that Gone actually takes up space on the plane. Gone is just under 1600 meters square. If you walk into the field you end up 400 meters from where you entered. Obviously, you’d know something was fishy.”

“The quantum dimension we create for you would mean that you are in a parallel dimension intersecting the Earth plane. You are taking up almost no space on the Earth Plane. In this way no cloaking would be needed and, if someone accidentally encountered it, they would merely pass through with no appreciable distance.”

“We would make it big enough for your village, a water source and a bit of land, but the point is that you would actually pass from your plane to the Earth plane for your hunting and other activities that take place

outside the village. It would be your safe place. There is no way anyone would get in without knowing how to pass from one plane to the other.”

“At the same time, you would not be away from your Earth.”

“We’ve done this before,” explained Matilda. “We use this type of intersecting plane; quantum dimension; when we visit planets that might be hostile in some way.”

“We could put it here. There’s plenty of game and the winters aren’t too bad, but it isn’t a designated wilderness so you’d have to worry about roads, ATVs and the fact that the law is looking for you in Arizona. We figured that you’d prefer a mountainous area with heavy forest and lots of game,” Agatha went on. “The best solution is that the intersection be in one of the designated wilderness areas. Of course, that would mean that you’d have to deal with winter. You wouldn’t be able to head south for the winter.” All laughed.

“So, are you interested?” Matilda was almost jumping up and down at this point.

The team, who had been sitting there in excited disbelief, all tried to talk at the same time. It was a marvelous idea. They all had a lot of ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions but the village of Gone was evidence enough that the Sisters could do it. No, their questions all focused on ‘where’, ‘how soon’ and ‘when can we leave?’

“You do understand that there’s a catch?” questioned Agatha.

“What do you mean ‘catch’?” asked Raymond.

“Remember when Matilda started she talked about real-life experience and helping others,” Agatha continued. “We will expect you to allow teams of up to twenty people to spend a month or two in your quantum dimension. It won’t be that often, but they could be a bit disruptive to your routine.”

“Oh,” Raymond laughed. “I was afraid you meant a real catch. I think we all understood that this was a mutually beneficial arrangement.” He looked around at the rest of the team who all indicated their understanding.

“That’s marvelous,” Matilda clapped her hands. “that’s absolutely marvelous!” She was as excited as the team.

“I do have one tiny technical question,” said Thomas. “When we first learned about you and Gone, you said something about not being able to continue forever. You said something about when your equipment fails there won’t be any more. So, what happens to us when you can no longer keep your system on Earth running?”

“That’s an excellent question,” replied Agatha. “We’re not really sure. If our systems fail, Gone would just suddenly be stuck wherever it is, and we’d be stuck here with it. But your dimension is different. If you are actually inside the dimension, you will go wherever the dimension goes. We’re assuming that it will stay where it is. Gone requires energy to maintain its stability. Your dimension is actually the intersection of two planes which does not require any energy to maintain stability therefore theoretically it will just become a permanent feature in which case we’d be coming to live with you.” Everyone laughed except Agatha and Matilda. That would mean that they could never go home.



Liam sat on a log bench under a large tree outside his cottage. He looked out at their village, a cluster of small cottages. They had taken in a few more people and their group was now up to eighteen people.

Smoke curled from the top of the smoke house. Thomas and Company had brought home a large elk. It would be enough for each person to have almost eight pounds of meat. That would last a good dozen meals or more. Signs of fall were in the air so they were preparing as much of their food as possible for winter. They were turning a lot of the meats into jerky which would last through the winter. They could and would hunt during the winter, but it was best to be prepared.

Drying fish would also provide a lot of protein that would last through the winter. Next to the smoke house was a fish drying rack that was filled. Stephanie had designed it after the racks with which she had grown up on the reservation, so she was in charge and kept it filled.

Then there was the team's pride and joy; their new well. Carrying water from the nearby spring was probably the most difficult task for anyone. As the containers they had brought with them began to spring leaks and

break, it became harder and harder to carry sufficient water in a couple of trips. It was taking most of the morning to gather water. All sorts of ideas were considered. They almost tried an aqueduct but that would have meant the water would have run constantly and it would have been subject to all sorts of problems. The well took a lot of hard work to dig and line with rock, but the results had proven worth the effort. Now they had clean water right in the village accessible at any time.

There wasn't a cave nearby, so the group made a root cellar in the side of the hill. They dug out a large room, lined it with stone, made a roof from trees and proceeded to cover the roof with stone and sod. Team-7 kept it constantly filled with supplies, especially in case they couldn't, for some reason, get out through the opening between their quantum dimensional plane and the forest.

Anthony, Bethann, Janet, Thomas and two of the new people were sitting in a circle, talking happily as they worked on baskets. The group found that they needed to have a good supply of new baskets each fall. A couple of people from the training class, that was living nearby, were trying to learn basket making. The class members spent a lot of time in Team-7's village observing.

Bethann was Bob's mate. He had rescued her when she got lost in the wilderness. She knew that he lived in the mountains somewhere, so she kept coming back into the forest hoping to find him. She always camped in the same place so Bob began looking to see if she was there whenever he went hunting. Bob had some fears about bringing her into the village, but it quickly became evident to everyone that Bethann was a good addition to the group. She was a good hunter, able to easily drawl one of Thomas' stiff bows. She was also a very knowledgeable gatherer, but her outstanding skill was basket-making. With her guidance the team's storage baskets became sturdier, more reliable, and more finished to the point she had taught others how to do designs.

A cool breeze picked up causing Liam to look down at his bare feet. He hadn't worn shoes since the last snow, but it was turning fall which meant that it was shoe-making time. He laughed as he wiggled his toes. As a child he had never gone barefooted. Since they came to their new home

no one wore shoes from spring to fall except when they went hunting or some other activity where they needed the protection.

Looking down at his feet his gaze moved over to the two-year-old child sleeping beside him. Their daughter, Kushala, had been born the first spring. Her name means 'safe'. A sweet and healthy little girl, Kushala was growing up in a marvelous extended family, in a beautiful carefree world surrounded by love and nature. She had been potty trained this past summer by running around naked.

As Liam admired his daughter he caught sight of her mother, Stephanie, coming down the path. She had a big basketful of some sort of tubular. She smiled and waved at Liam. He smiled and waved back.

He was so proud of her. She had started a new life without any of the conveniences with which they had grown up. She helped make them a home. She bore a child without spinal blocks or the comforts of a hospital. She was amazing at gathering fruits, nuts, vegetables as well as medicinal and cooking herbs. She was even more amazing at making marvelous meals.

Stephanie was wearing a dress made from the first cloth she had weaved. Sarah was the community weaver and Stephanie was eager to learn from her. The dress was an earthen brown with designs from berry stains. She was extremely proud of it even if it did most closely resemble an extra-long gunny-sack with holes for the head and arms. Normally she wore it belted but with her extremely protruding abdomen, she didn't even try to wear the belt. Stephanie waddled more than walked. The baby was due almost any time.

Stephanie waved at the group of basket-makers. They waved back. Bethann stretched out her legs and leaned back. Like Stephanie, her abdomen was quite large and she was carrying very low. A sign that she too was due soon.

The village looked more like something out of a 1950s National Geographic magazine of a hunter-gatherer society in some remote corner of the world. But it was their home. Here they found shelter, comfort, and safety. They were at peace. Their worst threat was running into

Rangers while they were in the forest outside the dimensional plane, but they soon realized that their natural skills were improving each day. There was very little chance that anyone would surprise them or see them first.

Dealing with their anger was a serious issue for Team-7. The story about the two men who had been prisoners of the Japanese during World War II was visited and re-visited. It was a story of the two ex-POWs meeting many years after the war. The first asked the second “have you forgiven our jailor?” The second went on an angry tirade about how he could never forgive the jailer. The first man quietly said, “then you are still a prisoner.”

They were working hard on giving up their anger and even forgiving those most responsible for hastening the Sixth Extinction. At the same time, giving up anger and forgiving didn’t mean not to continue to oppose. With the help of the Sisters, they would occasionally venture into the world of Earth civilization to teach.

The heartless administration was gone and no one knew what happened to Col. Butler, but the super-wealthy still controlled the world and were strangling it for greater and greater wealth. There was a bit more freedom for people to change their life-style, even though it was looked down upon. Team-7 members would meet with large groups of people so inclined and teach them how they could live closer to nature. Of course, they had to be careful because their message meant reduced consumption and that did not make the super-wealthy, who relied upon ever increasing consumption to keep their system functioning, very happy.

The Extinction was still coming. Earth was still being destroyed faster than conscientious people could repair human damage. The Team could not keep Thomas’ visual imagery of post-Extinction being a new Earth, rather than a planet like in the novel Dune, out of their thoughts. That encouraged them to continue to teach and educate people and appreciate any small successes.

In the three years they had been in their enclave they had never once been in need. Nature provided everything they needed. In fact, life was quite

good. Because they lived as a group, hunted as a group, and did most domestic activities as a group, the tasks were much more enjoyable and completed much more quickly. Whether it was basket-making, bow and/or arrow making, tanning or meat preparation, it became a social activity.

The hunters enjoyed hunting together. Because they hunted together and shared everything they killed, they did not have to hunt as often and the activity became a social event. The same was true of gathering and fishing. Working together with skills ever increasing, they flourished and found themselves with more free time to explore and enjoy life than the vast majority of those in the modern “developed” and “civilized” world who spend ten to twenty hours every week of their lives just traveling to and from the “employment” that enslaved them for forty hours or more a week. Even if hunting or fishing or gathering were to be considered a “job”, Team-7 spent less time each week at their “job” than those on the outside spent just traveling to theirs. Team-7 wasn’t constantly working. It was constantly living.

Stephanie plopped down on the bench next to Liam, setting her basket next to her. She leaned over Liam and blew their sleeping daughter a kiss then chattered happily about the hunt, where they found the tubulars and what animals they had encountered in the forest. The only thing that Stephanie liked more than roaming through the forest in search of edible plants and encountering a host of wildlife was her time with Liam and the others as they prepared food and enjoyed life and each other’s company.

Stephanie suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and grabbed her abdomen. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “its time.” A large puddle appeared on the ground under the bench. She looked at Liam and smiled.

New life in a new world. As the world outside the quantum dimensional plane continued to die, a small band of people inside would end the disastrous reign of homo sapiens by living as they felt they were intended. It wasn’t about a philosophical concept called ‘meaning’. It was about purpose. They were living with a purpose; to live life to the fullest as

children of Unci Maka, grandmother nature, who would ultimately die and one day arise like a Phoenix bringing a new world with new life.