

TWENTY

ONE

SEVENTY

VINCENT WARE

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Dedicated to Both the Future that Awaits
and the Space Ship Called Earth
that is Traveling There

BOOK I

SAN JUAN ISLAND

The sun does not set in the West in this year of two thousand one hundred and seventy. Not really does it collapse or fall away as the earth slowly turns. It merely, disappears. And no matter how closely one observes, eventually, suddenly it's gone.

The sun, aligned with human hope and belief, materializes again in the morrow. If it does not all and thus everyone would cease to exist.

Dusk settled. San Juan Island grew darker and the individuals, alone and in couples, began to drift along the walking trails. They turned toward the casino and hotel. Some started down the hill toward the beach. The warmth from the day dissipated and this evening, in the first week of June, quickly became cooler.

Dirch, a tall muscular *Sarará DM*, surreptitiously watched his target from a distance. He saw the *Melada DF* start along one of the sloping, winding narrow trails. He followed, keeping well back, attempting to remain out of sight. The wind picked up. Her hooded head bent a little and he could recognize her pace quickened as her cape, reaching nearly to the ground, rose and seemed to billow out behind as if she would take flight.

She wore no elegant silk gown or luxurious sensual dress, with heels that were high and pointed, as she had over the past four nights. Now she was covered in black, fastened into a one-piece suit that was tight, metallic looking and seemed to have been poured onto her body. Her soft boots barely made a sound and her hands and arms, once adorned with rhodium, platinum and gold, were covered by leather gloves that stretched nearly to her elbows.

Dirch increased his pace. The trail bore left and she seemed to evaporate into the dimness and then an apparition emerged as she passed by the tall, dull white lights flaring on and that stood

to illuminate the benches and chairs. There was no one sitting and looking toward the water in the distance or up at the third quarter moon becoming large and bright in the sky.

The trail darkened, turned right. He paused to listen. Then he stepped forward. She was gone! Again he stopped. He peered left into the hemlocks, casting shadows, madrones shifting and dancing. His nostrils flared, senses high. The obvious scent of evergreen was strong to his right and when he looked that way he could see her cape spread out upon a bush. Turned inside out it glowed shiny and red and black. It seemed to be lit up.

Dirch felt it, a warning, something ominous at his back and turning quickly to face this impending threat he saw her. She was watching him from the line of darkness, standing at the edge of illumination.

Her auburn-colored hair was tied behind her at the shoulders. Her large hazel-colored eyes flashed. She was expressionless. Dirch started to speak, to offer some explanation as to his presence. He stopped as she shifted into a defensive stance. He knew there was nothing to be said.

He tossed his suit coat onto the nearby bench and reached into his left pants pocket and extracted a small thin rectangular silver object. She shifted again. Her left leg slightly bent, right leg straight, a step behind her. She prepared to attack. She moved forward, cautiously. Dirch assumed his attack stance and slowly moved forward. He moved right. She moved to stay in front of him.

She fanned her left hand first one way and then the other, as her hand became a claw. Her right hand open, palm forward was at her shoulder. Then, simultaneously they leaped at one another.

Dirch struck first with his right hand toward her chest and then followed with his left. He aimed the object toward her face, the only uncovered and exposed part of her body. With her right

hand she blocked his initial strike and her fanning motion obscured her head-shift as Dirch, reaching toward her face missed his target as she turned to the side, shifted, leaned back and in a blur, her left hand, at the bottom of its arc, came down upon his forearm at the pressure point and when she clamped on him she squeezed and his hand flew open and the object fell and as it touched the ground she proceeded to break him down.

She released her left hand clamp and her right forearm, beneath his left hand rose, straightened him, exposed him even as he struck at her with his right fist. She stepped outside his right, to her left and with her left hand she chopped him on the right side of his neck and as he stumbled to his left she stepped right and her right palm caught him beneath the left side of his jaw and his hands flew into the air as he staggered backwards.

He regained his footing and moved again to attack this foe. He kicked at her. He struck at her. He was throwing with all his power and speed and she slipped and ducked his every aggressive move and countered everything he tried and then she unleashed upon him. She began to turn him, move him with repetitious, double blows and directing him with both hands to her next attack point.

She made no sounds. The only noise came from her gloves that she placed heavily upon this unknown adversary and his grunts each time she touched him.

Suddenly she moved away and using a spinning back kick with her left foot to his stomach she brought his head down. She stepped into a fisted right hook to his temple and as he tilted to the side she jumped behind him and pressed her body against him and instantly wrapped her right arm completely around his neck and grabbed her left arm as she put her left hand against the back of his head and pushed hard as she drew her right arm in, constricting his breathing and she squeezed tighter and pushed

harder and within one minute of his first hostile move against this woman Dirch was forced into deep, dark, unconsciousness.

She dragged him to the nearby bench and laid him down. She quickly went through his coat pockets. She searched him thoroughly and found nothing. She sat him up. With both hands she locked on his left wrist and broke it. She then broke his left thumb and crushed his first two fingers. She crossed his right leg over his left. She placed his hands in his lap and covered them with his coat. She tilted his head so that his chin rested on his chest. Locating the small silver object, she put it into the pouch on her right hip. Moving along the trail, she retrieved her cape. Further along, she carefully began her descent on the wooden steps that led to the beach, the dock, and her awaiting yacht.

This woman was Georcelena Nelson and in this world in the year 2170, she was known as, Lena.

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

Dirch sat on the side of his bed with his head down, looking at the floor, at his bare feet. He lay back and stared at the ceiling. His hand started throbbing again. He sat up and pressed a round lump of hydrogel that was embedded under his skin near the vein in the crook of his left arm. A small amount of the clear medicine flowed immediately and the pain quickly subsided. He got up, and crossing the room, he went to the window and stood and stared out. Ocean Boulevard was nearly empty. He cursed aloud the woman who had damaged him. He knew she knew his left was his dominant hand. He sincerely hoped he would meet her again. He wanted to enact his expertise upon her. It was his job to remove individuals from the face of the earth to never be seen again. His kind were known as Abolishers. He was best at that, not physically fighting with some strange woman. He had not

experienced such a confrontation in several years.

The gaming island afforded his target quite a high degree of protection. No weapons of any kind were permitted. Use, or even possession of a projectile weapon was an offense punishable by death. Each individual and all they carried were thoroughly scanned. Everyone registered upon arrival and was verified and again checked upon departure. Even taking into account the occasional physical altercation or assault with a sharp or blunt object, the islands were known for their safety.

Dirch and his team were furnished all that they needed but he felt they had not been provided all the information they required. For him there were other aspects that disturbed him, unknown qualities.

Abolishment on an island was too radical of an act to not be followed with the utmost attempts at a judicial resolution, this he understood. In addition he had been given prior notice that he and his people were on their own. They would not be recognized or acknowledged by any officials of their organization. With no legal standing, the local authorities in addition, became his team's adversaries.

He had been sternly warned, explicitly told several times that no serious harm could be administered in any way to the target. Their mission, if executed to a successful completion would entail a physical encroachment that would not cause debilitating injury in any manner to the female.

As Dirch bitterly thought of these boundaries and restrictions he shook his head at the irony and looked down at his own incapacitated hand that was explained away to curious individuals as an awkward and clumsy self-induced accident.

What unsettled him most was in fact the woman on the hill. She was contrary to his understanding of both the ability and limitations of humans. There had been nothing ordinary in the

way she passed from one particular portion of space to the next. The fluidity of her attack had been both graceful and violent at the same time. It had been as if they were both fast dancing the Malagueña and she was leading.

Most unnatural was her strength. When she touched him he felt a tremendous weight, a deep dull heaviness that seemed to have no bottom. Yet he pondered of the potential of her power because he suspected, by the way she struck him, she had indeed, withheld force.

He went to stand beside his bed and picked up a short gray plastic cylinder and pressed a button and it came on. It hummed then glowed, emitting bright rays that he directed at the stiff bandage that covered his hand. The rays would strengthen and heal. He rotated a dial, increasing the *NM Wavelength*. It had been four days and there still remained seven days of treatment on the bones and his two fingers quite possible might never be as before.

Resuming his position at the window he continued to direct the rays. Their intensity changed and the color was altered as he rotated the dial.

He thought of his situation. The three individuals of the Advance Team had once again, rather easily, found the target. Clearly she was not overly concerned by the incident. She had carried on with her usual routine. She was visiting her properties, meeting with business associates and socializing with friends, which is what she did on a schedule every two months.

He had gathered with his two other team members so he could brief them. He had summarized and attempted to explain in a concise and intelligible manner his beliefs as to exactly what he had come up against. As he was speaking the two looked at him with obvious skepticism. Fronie had reacted with disdain and had openly scoffed at him, and Madge had mildly derided his

account as being something he had imagined, twisted her fingers through her purple hair and then paid him scant attention.

The two had then proceeded to go over how they would go forward and then just hours ago departed for the ferry that would deliver them to their quarry. They were in a state of excitement. He knew the hostility they held for him. They looked forward to succeeding where he had failed.

As he stared out of the window he contemplated that evening and that unique woman he had encountered on that hill.

CATALINA ISLAND

Lena sat in a booth in the lounge area of the casino with several of her friends and associates. As was usual, her group consisted of a diverse mixture of individuals of all colors, styles, and sizes. Occasionally she sipped from her glass of champagne.

She drank and gambled moderately and yet was fascinated by those activities that were tinged with a potent element of control loss. She enjoyed those activities of chance and also the people who played those games and attempted to exert their will and maintain command of their selves.

She looked at and smiled at the dancers on stage and on the floor. Their spiraling, jerking, disconnected movements were filled with spastic energy. They were euphorically afflicted by the loud music and flashing lights that brightened and dimmed and altered into a myriad array of colors.

She swayed to the sounds and laughed often but those closest to her, who knew her well, would notice extended moments of distraction. She was continuously vigilant, positioned to protect her back, observing with caution anyone unfamiliar to her that approached. On guard she was and had been in that condition since San Juan Island.

Her yacht had taken a relaxed three days from Washington, past Oregon and Northern and Central California, finally arriving near Long Beach. Now, even after nearly a week on Catalina Island she remained on edge internally.

She had inspected in her thoughts over and over again the physical encounter with the tall, brown man with the yellow hair. She considered impending business deals and recent transactions. She brought to mind and assessed the possible duplicity of her competitors and weighed their inclination for violence.

She attempted to come to some conclusions as to what the incident indicated. What did it mean? What was its purpose? She had noticed the *Sarará DM* and his feigned nonchalance when he looked at her. Being watched, even approached by strange individuals was not an uncommon occurrence.

Certain types of forceful attitudes, for her tended to be annoying more than anything else. She had accepted that a woman in her position would experience inconveniences and intrusions into her personal space because her presentation warranted that. Nevertheless, specific physical aggression was extremely infrequent and sporadic in *West World*.

This initiative emanated from an obvious professional who was exceptionally skilled in the various disciplines he displayed. He had placed himself in unfavorable positions in attempting to repeatedly strike her face with the strange object. That goal had made his attack predictable and awkward and kept him off balance and out of rhythm.

She had with care examined thoroughly several times the object he wielded, unable to uncover anything to inform her of its purpose or capabilities. Eventually resigning herself to pursuing an answer upon reaching shore.

She stared at her tall glass and smiled slightly at the bubbles and their effervescent essence. They fizzled and rose, ascending

as if charged, alive. That's the way she felt that evening on that hill. She had experienced a prickly, stinging sensation. It had been so long since she had gotten physical in such a manner that she realized she had neglected that form of stimulation. That aspect of danger and anger excited her and there in the dim glow of that ambient light she had come precariously close to the edge. Momentarily she had desired to destroy that strange man.

She jumped up and grabbing the hands of two of her friends she positioned herself between them, away from the crowd and danced. She too twirled and twisted and bounced to the sound that filled her head and she could feel the bass beat and guitars move throughout her body.

As they returned to the booth, the wide emerald-hued bracelet on her left wrist buzzed. There was a thin coil wrapped around her left ear that projected forward from her earlobe a micro two-way camera and a nano-microphone was attached to the coil in a position behind her ear with nearly invisible sensors that stretched close to her jawline. The microphone simultaneously vibrated. Lena turned her palm up and looked at her Comm device. She recognized the identity of the caller so she tapped her wrist. A hologram of her full device extended up her palm to the tip of her fingers. She tapped an area on her palm and communication opened. She spoke.

Lena: Hello Tiah. How are you? Are you well?

Tiah: I am well Lena. I trust you are?

Lena: I am. I am well, thank you.

Tiah: You have issued a locate?

Lena: Hold a moment.

Lena rose and after a few steps entered one of the numerous privacy enclosures that were conveniently situated throughout the establishment. They were designed for a single person to either sit or stand and after entering she secured the door and remained

standing, looking out through the tinted one-way glass.

Lena: Okay Tiah, let's open visual.

She tapped her palm. Their devices synced. Each held their device to project their respective images. At her earlobe the camera lit up and a three-dimensional image appeared on the enclosure's dark wall of a *Bronzeada DM* with short orange hair and light-brown eyes. He looked intense, serious and then he smiled slightly.

Tiah: You look beautiful this evening Lena.

Lena: Thank you so much Tiah. I like compliments. And as always you look strong and handsome.

For a long moment they stared at one another and then a smooth, precise voice came from the solemn, earnest-looking man.

Tiah: You have issued a locate on a tall, thick, *Sarará DM* with dark-brown eyes and an injured left hand?

Lena: I have.

Tiah: He was seen in Long Beach. He is residing at the Wayer on Ocean Boulevard. There were two individual with him at that time.

Lena: Describe.

Tiah: One is an *Alva DF* with purple hair about your height, five nine, medium size with blue eyes. The other is a *Parda-clara DQ* with red hair about five four and rather thick also with blue eyes.

Lena: Anything else?

Tiah: The man is currently in his room. I have no location on the other two.

Lena: I just knew I could count on you and your people. Keep a track on the man.

Tiah: We'll do that.

Lena: Now open an account. I have values for you.

Tiah: That is unnecessary.

Lena: I insist. Look at it as value in advance, as a retainer. I'll be requesting your assistance until this issue is resolved.

Tiah: Only because you insist.

Lena made several taps and raised her hand and placed it in close proximity to the image. Tiah placed his device near her hand and the Cryptocurrency transaction was completed. Then he looked at his account and appeared slightly troubled and again he was serious.

Tiah: Really Lena, as always this is much too generous. What I need is for you to share with me if you are in any danger.

Lena: A new challenge Tiah. One I look forward to. We'll get together when I reach shore and we'll talk then. I'll let you know when I arrive. Until then, be well and thanks.

Tiah: Of course you're welcome. See you soon. Be well.

They ended communication.

Lena sat down and stared through the dark glass at the two individuals sitting at the bar. They were the ones that Tiah had described. The shorter one with the red hair took a furtive glance at the booth Lena had entered. She spoke to her partner who nodded slightly. Lena had seen them. She had identified these two, noticed them on several occasions the past days. She smiled, left the enclosure and returned to her seat.

Over the next several hours she entered the privacy area two more times for brief periods to again note the affected actions of her adversaries. Abruptly she rose, strolled to the private elevator and went up to her floor and her penthouse accommodations.

The next day at around one in the afternoon Madge contacted the front desk and complained that they were having problems with water pressure in the bathroom. The manager called back and explained that others were also experiencing similar issues, indicated the problems would persist for some time, apologized

profusely and offered, then insisted that he be allowed to upgrade them, at no additional charge, to one of the quaint yet luxurious private cottages that stood not far from the casino and hotel. They accepted. Their belongings were relocated and they took a nap in anticipation of a long night.

A little before midnight the two agents were drinking at the bar when Lena came down. She was dressed exquisitely in a long diaphanous red silk dress and bedecked in jewelry on her fingers and wrists and around her neck. Fronie and Madge only saw her uncovered shoulders and arms.

The party group consisted of at least a dozen people and they obviously required more space so they went to a different area near the back wall where there was a long table and began their revelry for the night.

Lena never left the table except on several occasions to enter the privacy enclosure near the wall not far from them. Several members of the group drifted away to gamble and then around two in the morning Lena again stepped into the booth with a Comm device in her hand. Fronie and Madge observed this as with passing interest. They then realized, after thirty minutes, that Lena had not emerged. Ten minutes later the remaining people in the group ambled away to the bar and ten minutes after that a large drunken *Amarela DM* with a baldhead entered the booth in which Lena had gone.

Fronie immediately went to the booth and pulled at the door and it came open. The man, listening to his device, glared at the red-haired *DQ* and snatched the door shut and locked it.

Now the two agents, attempting to remain composed, searched the casino and restaurants. Next they both went outside to look around. Finally, after a little more than two hours, as five in the morning approached, they proceeded to their cottage.

They spoke in low anxious tones as they passed through the

ironwoods that cast elongated shadows and the manzinatas that seemed to bend, sway and expand and cover the fuchsia. The two did not, could not observe any of the other altering images. They only saw each other's uneasy eyes, the narrow path in front and then in the dimness, their cottage, awaiting their arrival.

Each held onto a small strip of expectation that their assigned, elusive target would that night exit that elevator, pass through the casino, enter the lounge and provide them another opportunity to touch her.

Now they stood before the wooden door. Madge, on the left, having taken an electronic card from the small purse that hung from her left shoulder waved it at the lock, it clicked and as she began to push the door open, dull-brown leather descended out of the sky, through the darkness, from the low roof and Lena, clad for battle landed heavily behind them.

Madge, reacting immediately, began to rotate to her right and was struck in the temple and collapsed onto her side against the door and fell into the main area of the room. As Fronie spun around Lena grabbed the throat with both hands and front choked the agent to the knees and dragged her foe through the doorway and threw Fronie under the lamp beside the couch. She pulled Madge by the hair further into the room and taking a step outside she picked up the small clutch that was dropped. She moved back into the room and closed the door.

She tossed the clutch into the corner and shoved the purse into the same far corner with her foot as Fronie, dazed and coughing, attempted to get to a standing position but remained on hands and knees. Madge had rolled onto her back and shaking her head to clear it she gained her feet. Turning to Lena she kicked off her shoes and ripped off her skirt. Both the agents planned to avoid standing and striking with their target and were prepared to grapple and fight on the floor.

Madge attacked as Lena moved forward. They feinted with both hands and grabbed at one another in the lapel area, seeking control. Lena, with both hands, latched onto Madge's blouse in front of her shoulders but Madge couldn't get a firm grip of the tight slippery material. Lena, holding on, pushed and then pulled and spinning she stuck her right leg out and lifted Madge and body dropped the agent over her hip, hard to the floor and then stepped close and with her left foot kicked Madge in the head and with her right she stomped her in the throat.

Fronie had gained a standing position and as Lena turned, the enraged agent, cursing and yelling what was about to be done lunged with both hands at the target and ripped at Lena's top. They knocked each other's hands away and slapped and blocked and moved to acquire a grip. Lena gained control and tossed Fronie from one side to the other and then shifted and stepping forward with her left she sat down quickly while placing her right foot into Fronie's stomach and flipped Fronie into the air over her head and the agent landed on the large dinning table and it shattered into pieces.

Fronie clambered up and rushing at Lena, fisted left hand raised and extended, a right strike was thrown that Lena, stepping right slipped and grabbing with her left hand that right arm she pulled it and swung her right arm up and locking underneath Fronie's armpit she spun to the side and tossed Fronie over her shoulder across the room along the floor and tumbling into the wall face first and stunned.

Lena turned on Madge who kicked out and rolled to her feet. Lena chopped her on the side of the throat and as a bent Madge staggered right Lena, with her left foot, kicked Madge in the head, who wobbled left. She moved in front of the turning agent and grabbed a handful of the purple hair and held the head in place and with a quick fisted blow broke Madge's nose. Then she

leaped around, jumped onto the agent's back and wrapped her right arm around Madge's throat and moved into the chokehold position and put Madge down into a deep sleep.

As Fronie, moaning and cursing was lying there trying to get up Lena went over and rolled the agent onto their back and taking a straddle position used both gloved hands to double ear clap her foe and Fronie was concussed and as the blue eyes rolled in their sockets Lena, with another short quick strike with her right hand, hammer fisted Fronie's nose and broke it. Then with both hands she again grabbed the front of Fronie's throat and squeezed and her adversary squirmed and kicked and then was stilled. Fronie was also choked into a deep sleep.

Lena went to the corner, retrieved the purse and clutch and removed a small silver object from each one. She then left the room, after turning off the light.

Twenty minutes later her yacht was slowly pulling out from the private dock.

THE PROFESSOR

The Professor sat in his special chair at his large desk in front of five computer screens. The room was dark and the glow from the monitors cast light and caused shadows to waver behind him on the far wall. He pushed buttons on his desk and several of the screens went off and the lights around the ceiling brightened in intensity to a level a little above dimness. He slid his chair back and rolled up both his pants legs and unfastened, just below the knee, first one prosthetic leg and then the other one and placed them beside him near the desk. He pushed a button, put his head back and contemplated recent events as he stared at the glowing stars and planet patterns etched into the twelve foot high ceiling above him. Raising his head he looked to his right at the open

doorway and standing in the light cast from the hall stood a tall *Escurinba PM Entity* with dark-brown eyes and short black hair.

Professor: Come in Zesiro. Come in and have a seat.

The casually dressed *Entity* strode across the room, sat down on a sofa facing the Professor and crossed hands in lap.

The Professor turned a small knob on his desk and all the lights that were on grew brighter and illuminated the spacious room. He then slid open the coverings on compartments on each arm of his chair at his hands and pushing and turning controls, the chair rose slightly from the carpet, moved backwards and then up and around the desk.

Floating across the room to the bar he periodically glanced at the large ornate mirror on the wall behind the bar and spoke as he made himself a drink. His utterances came forth quickly, in his slightly high-pitched voice, rising and lowering in level.

Professor: Look at me Zesiro.

Zesiro stared at him.

Professor: I'm facing all the doubts, all the insecurities and uncertainties that accompany the reality of mortality.

He extended his glass to the hovering image in the mirror and then gulped some of his drink. The image of a somewhat thin *Parda-clara DM* with thick, gray hair that came down to his shoulders, of course acknowledged the raised salutation and then the cunning light-gray eyes of his optical counterpart narrowed and then widened as he ran his long fingers through his hair. He stared. His reflection stared back.

The Professor pulled at a thin plastic tube near his right hand until it extended and placing it into his mouth he drew on it and a dark-red liquid flowed from a tank at the back of his chair and when he tasted it he frowned a little and shook his head. He released the tube. It popped back into place, and turning, he continued to speak as he moved to a wall from which weapons of

all kinds from the far distant seventeenth and eighteenth century were hung and prominently displayed.

Professor: Yes, mortality!

He pointed at the dark-skinned *Entity* and there came a deep, clear precise voice.

Zesiro: The state or condition of being subject to death, the relative frequency of death in a population.

The gray-haired man held up his hand. Zesiro stopped. The Professor thought a moment.

Professor: Death!

He pointed.

Zesiro: The act of dying or state of being dead, the end of the life of a person or organism, the permanent ending of vital processes in a cell or tissue, extinction, destruction.

Raised hand. Silenced voice.

The Professor chose a pistol from the wall and floated to the nearby window and aimed the antique weapon toward the barely visible barn in the near distance and made two bang sounds, looked at his prized weapon and smiled. He turned and put the pistol back in its place and moved toward Zesiro.

Professor: There you sit in your dark, glowing skin, strong and relatively new and oblivious to my state. Observe my aging hair and skin. My eyes dull and even my voice, against my will now grows raspy. Seventy-three years I've been on this earth, yet but a brief moment within, eternity.

He pointed.

Zesiro: Infinite time, seemingly endless period of time ...

A raised hand. The voice continued. Rushing.

Zesiro: ... existence, eternal, perpetual, ceaseless, existence.

Now the Professor waved his hand and silence came as his voice rose.

Professor: I didn't ask for that!

He stared at Zesiro angrily only to receive a blank and direct expressionless stare.

Professor: Zesiro this conversation henceforth is, private.

He pointed.

Zesiro: Of or belonging to some particular person or persons, personal, secret.

The Professor held up his hand.

Professor: Yes! Yes, a secret!

He pointed.

Zesiro: Done, made, or carried out without the knowledge of others, hidden from sight, concealed ...

Zesiro paused, then concluded softly, unheard.

Zesiro: ... a mystery.

Professor: Do you understand secret?

Zesiro: Yes. I understand.

The Professor floated slowly past his weapons toward the window as Zesiro again whispered.

Zesiro: A mystery.

He looked out of the wide window of his large home in upstate New York. He sipped his drink and sucked on the plastic tube as he stared across the darkened, unlit grounds.

Past the fenced-in pasture area and the barn he could see, high in the sky, the first of the waning crescent moon. He began to speak, his voice low and modulated.

Professor: In what could be called most improbable, in 1951, two hundred and nineteen years ago in Baltimore, Maryland, an event, the first known in the history of the humankind occurred. A human cell line that was immortal was created, grown in culture. These cells could be forever produced, frozen for hundreds of years and awakened, perpetually divided and shared. These cells were essential in developing vaccines.

He looked up at the lighted natural satellite of the earth and continued.

Professor: These cells flew in the first flight in space and pointed the direct way to dramatic revelations in gene mapping, in vitro fertilization ...

He rotated from the window and looked at Zesiro.

Professor: ... and cloning.

Pulling on the plastic, he floated to the bar and poured another drink. He sipped and then spoke, almost shouting.

Professor: Can you even imagine?

He sipped, then coughed and gagged as the dark *Entity* yelled quickly.

Zesiro: To form a mental image, to suppose, or guess ...

The Professor held up his hand.

Zesiro: ... to believe.

Zesiro fell silent and stared at, through, and past the hovering gray head.

The Professor looked at Zesiro, into the dark-brown eyes. He pondered a moment and then shook his head in puzzlement at these unsolicited recitations. He drank and pulled on the tube as he rose close to the ceiling and spun the chair several times in a circle. Now whenever the chair moved, the Professor leaned in that direction. Right or left he was tilted and if the flying chair accelerated he was pushed back and when he stopped, as if slamming on brakes, he would almost tip from his transportation. He careened around the room, moving faster and faster, his voice rising in excitement.

Professor: Yes! Yes! Amazing! Cells from a woman of color. Perhaps similar to my light-brown shade or some essence of your dark-brown covering, hers a natural color, not as these humans now with these modern-day artificial hues of pink and gold and every shade and derivative of the rainbow spectrum. A natural

color, produced through the wondrous phenomena of nature, which intrinsically is an essence of all that is beautiful. But what does color matter to scientists and doctors who seek truth and knowledge? This woman, from the inside, altered the world and the destiny of the humankind. All life is of course, lived from the inside out!

He paused to take a breath and sip his drink and pull on the plastic tube. The chair hovered. He eased it close to Zesiro and smiled with a conspiratorial gleam in his eyes. His voice lowered.

Professor: Here's the secret only we shall ever know. Only you ...

He started to point but changed his mind.

Professor ... and I.

Now he started around the room again. His voice rose slightly. Professor: There were other immortal cells! A male child born in Detroit, Michigan in approximately 1939 was stricken with a mysterious, debilitating fever and hospitalized five times between the years of 1947 and 1983. The last time this man was brought into the hospital, near death, he was accompanied by his thirteen-year-old daughter, the wife and mother unaccounted for, was missing. At each admittance, copious notes were taken and pertinent information acquired and retained due to the strange attributes of this never before documented type of fever. Blood was drawn and during each iteration of the fever, that human's genes were drastically altered until there arose not just immortal, genetically modified cells but immortality in the true and real sense of the word.

The Professor passed by the couch and pointed. He yelled.

Professor: Real!

Zesiro: Actually existing as a thing, actual rather than imaginary or ideal or fictitious or supposed, not artificial, genuine.

The Professor passed back by. Raised hand. Silence. He laughed euphorically as Zesiro stared at him. Then he gained his

composure, stopped his flight and sat back. He floated five feet into the air to the center of the room and hovered there. He looked at the dark *Entity* wistfully and then he spoke in soft incredulous tones.

Professor: There is a woman, born in 1970, who lives and thrives today, at this moment. She calls herself Lena. Apparently she came to be who she is in the times of her early twenties and now having existed for two hundred years, remains alive. But what is even more significant, of greater importance to me is that so too does her Father live.

He took a drink, pulled on the plastic tube and floated to the window. He spoke, softly.

Professor: No one knows but me.

He paused, reflecting on that thought. He continued, quietly.

Professor: All my adult life I've searched for truth. For fifty years I've searched for a specific reality. It exists, through them. Humans who do not age and unaffected by decaying cells, do not die, impervious to any disorder or any abnormality to their now forever altered cells. How does she survive this madness of life, the vicissitudes of two hundred years? The strength and agility she must have. Not just the unnatural physical strength that's been reported but the mental and emotional strength to defeat the daunting challenges that were presented throughout the years. Envision the experiences, all she's seen and done as she passed around the world as both life and death swirled around her. What level of intelligence and resourcefulness has this unique looking, so I'm told, and wealthy woman attained to survive detection until now?

He had spoken in wonderment and as he turned from the window and began to again circle the room, dipping and rising, Zesiro looked at him impassively and followed his erratic path. The gray-haired man was animated and his voice grew louder.

Professor: I've found her! I've found her but what of him, her partner, her mentor? He's guided her, protected her for he is the originator, the reclusive and elusive Father. His degree of wealth and strength and intelligence is unknown but whatever power she possesses, his is greater! He's older. He came first! I've studied the collected blood samples and then simulated that indefatigable immune system. I've mapped the genes and identified the markers, shattered the genome into small fragments, sequenced each and every fragment and then put them back together and I uncovered in the genetic linkage absolute confirmation that proves in some incestuous manner he created her for all immortal life must spring from him. I'll capture the daughter and force the daughter to bring forth the Father. I'll drain the blood from the Father's body and freeze it. I'll harvest his spermatozoa and with one draft of that which creates all life I too shall be immortal. And with that everlasting life I'll also gain incalculable wealth and power for I am a genius and exceptional minds should live forever to make great discoveries and erect permanent everlasting monuments to their greatness.

He seemed to grow weary. He yanked the plastic tube toward his mouth, looked at it and released it to snap back into place. He muttered bitterly.

Professor: And I'll perfect the process to grow new legs.

He floated to the bar and placed the half-empty glass on the countertop. He moved back behind his desk. After looking at a computer screen he spoke quickly, sharply to Zesiro.

Professor: Dirch, Fronie and Madge failed their mission, which was rather expected since I assumed they would be at an obvious disadvantage. From all reports our esteemed adversary is quite a special individual and her Father concerns me even more. Everything continues as planned. I'm waiting on a report from the Advance Team and our Team Two has now been activated

and dispatched. Your opportunity approaches. Perhaps I'll make a gift of the woman to you but then there's really nothing you could do with her is there? You can go now.

Zesiro rose and exited. The Professor watched on a monitor as the dark *Entity* strode down the hallway and turned right through a doorway. He then pressed another button on his desk and the image on the monitor switched to Zesiro entering a dimly lit room, moving to a couch, sitting and crossing hands in lap.

Now the Professor looked with an elevated level of curiosity at another monitor that contained different percentages and gauges that changed colors and moved up and down and sideways. He stared at these indicators of Zesiro's vital signs. He launched diagnostics.

He sat there and watched the *Entity* for a long while and waited for the diagnostics to complete. He knew he could not have Zesiro functioning at any level less than one hundred percent and the verbal outbursts concerned him. They had never occurred before. He had to determine if there were any programs possibly executing that he himself had not loaded and launched. He had heard of *Entities* being infected in some unknown manner as if they were ill and becoming unstable and even in some cases dangerous.

He found nothing unusual and so he picked up his prosthetics and placed them on his lap and his chair rose and he floated to the doorway. He ordered the lights off and went to his bedroom. He could only hope he would be able to sleep.

WEST WORLD

Lena reclined on the rear balcony with her legs drawn up beneath her and looked out over the seemingly purple water as the light from the day slowly extinguished itself. Her bathing suit

reflected the sun and its altering color and the golden light shimmered against her golden-colored skin.

She had not gone down across the beach and into the water or down and into her pool for a swim but she had encouraged anyone who wanted to enjoy the water to do so and several of her guests had gone to the beach and done that and were now returning. She appreciated her home in Malibu, California. It was private and serene and the view and the sound of the ocean soothed her.

She considered all that which needed still to be done and the appointments she had already made. She stretched her legs out and took several deep breaths. She just wanted to remain there and relax and sip her cold drink and for three days that's really all she had done.

The evening quickly cooled the unusually warm day as soon as the sun disappeared so she went inside, covered herself and joined her guests who were now involved with the food that had been prepared and set out for them.

Music played softly and as the voices swelled and laughter moved throughout the room she acknowledged the admixture of emotions that coursed in circles within her. Peace and a level of contentment swirled along with anger and she could touch the edges and the sharpness that bordered on rage. She liked those feelings as all of them flowed.

Tiah was there with three others from his organization, two *DFs* and one *DM*. These four would not be far from her as long as she wanted them near.

Slowly individuals departed and the middle-aged *DF* and *DM* who lived in, and ran the business of the house for Lena began to clean up and Tiah and his people retired to their rooms and Lena went to her office, activated a communication device, completed several tasks and went to bed.

The next morning five of them departed after an early breakfast. The lead Auto-Drive automobile contained a *DM* and a *DF* and in Lena's auto a *DF* controlled as Tiah rode in front. Everyone carried small pistols. In *West World* possession of a weapon was not only allowed but also encouraged, with the minimum age of sixteen being one of the few restrictions.

Traffic was light and they made good time covering the nearly thirty miles from Malibu to Los Angeles. As they reached La Cienega Boulevard all moving transportation began slowing to a halt. The Auto-Drive automobiles, their emergency lights having auto activated, slowed and then stopped.

Manual bike riders, anyone in a flying or rolling scooter seat stopped and pedestrians paused. Everyone knew the procedure. Those walking and talking or listening anywhere on Comm devices prepared for their visual and audio signal to switch. The display in Lena's auto changed as visual hologram displays on the sides of building were activated and large screens on poles began to flash and emit the words, Universal Broadcast.

Someone in *West World*, an individual suspected of causing a death, of taking a human life, was being detained. Body cameras of the participating authorities were broadcasting the arrest and the transmission of this action would be seen throughout every area of the West and heard on all activated Comm devices, live, in real time. If the alleged perpetrator survived the arrest then the suspect would be taken into custody and then within two days undergo the process of Narcosynthesis. The individual under suspicion would be injected, veins filled with a combination of drugs that would have no taste, no smell, no color and no side effects. Anyone who wanted to could watch this process and observe the interrogation and hear both the suspect's answers and explanations. The suspect would then fall asleep with no recollection of what had been said. A vote would immediately be

taken by a panel of seven judges with a majority ruling. Under the Ultimate Law the only defense was defense of individual life or of physical harm. There could be no attack only a response to an attack. An individual found guilty would be executed within twenty-four hours by firing squad and the execution would of course be transmitted through a Universal Broadcast.

Due to the proliferation of weapons and the swiftness of justice, physical assault and homicide was a very rare occurrence. Lena observed the capture. Movement began, life went on.

Lena's first stop was at the Theatre of Alterations on Santa Monica Boulevard. She told Tiah he and his *DM* partner could come back in four hours and she would look after the two *DF*s and provide them with whatever they wanted while she was being taken care of. She grabbed a large canvas bag and the three entered the salon.

A six foot four inch *Avermelhada DT* with light-brown eyes and long white hair that hung past the waist and that was tightly braided in elaborate patterns jumped up and hollered and began to talk fast in a strong, loud voice.

Thirza: Lena! Lena, I'm so glad to see you. Are you well?

Lena: I'm well, are you?

Thirza: I am. I'm very well, thank you.

They laughed and hugged and kissed and Lena introduced her two companions to the owner of the salon. Thirza took her and turned her around.

Thirza: Let me look at you. You made your appointment so long ago I was hoping you wouldn't cancel or forget. You look great!

Lena: Thank you. I love your hair color. Have you stopped growing or can they alter that too?

Thirza: Sure heights can be manipulated. But I'm not growing any more. Changing and creating body parts, the next mass craze. I don't care what's going on with this new technology and surgical stuff, you have got to have the best doctors in the world. I've known you ten years and the basic you has not changed a bit. Sit down and tell me what you want done. Do you need a chart?

Thirza pointed to a skin color chart.

Lena: No, I know what I want. I'm gong back to my original color.

Thirza: Oh, Lena that's so exciting! It's been a long time since you've been back. What about your hair?

Lena: I'm going short and natural.

Thirza: How short?

Lena: Five, maybe six inches.

Thirza: Let me see what shape your real hair is in. We'll need to shampoo and condition it. You can decide the length after we finish all the changes. While you get a manicure and pedicure we'll remove that auburn hair. Then we'll remove the skin color. Oh, Lena I loved that honey color, you wore it well.

Lena: And I want a gold covering on this second tooth from the top front.

She pointed to the top left side of her mouth.

Lena: And I want my companions to be taken care of.

Thirza called for the assistants and with three others, prepared to work on Lena. Tiah's people decided to have both facials and massages and left for another room where other assistants waited.

First Lena removed the hazel-colored coverings from her pupils. The gold covering was put in place and when her hair was ready to be styled and cut she removed all her clothing. She lay on a movable table and intravenous tubes attached to small machines were inserted first to one arm and then the other. The table slowly slid into a large white darkened chamber that was

then sealed and Lena began the process of having all the artificial color diluted and removed from her body.

An hour later the table slid out, the tubes removed and Lena stood and began looking at her arms and hands. Then she stared at herself, naked in the full-length mirror. Thirza walked in and started clapping.

Thirza: Let me look at you. Turn around so I can make sure you're done.

Lena's body was carefully inspected.

Thirza: Oh, you look beautiful as an *Escura-Marrom* woman. Your dark-brown skin is lovely, simply lovely. That color is timeless, ancient. It's always been one of my favorites. I love all colors but everyone can't wear dark shades confidently.

Lena nodded her head as she looked at herself. She turned in a circle several times and did a few dance steps and when she stopped and smiled the gold in the top of her mouth glittered.

Lena: Thank you Thirza. You did a wonderful job! I had almost forgotten how I looked and felt like this. Let me put on those other clothes I brought and then let's get my hair done.

Lena sat in the chair in front of the large mirror and she and Thirza discussed the style and length. Then Thirza spoke and began to work.

Thirza: Fewer humans present their natural color now. I'm not complaining. I consider myself an artist and I love what I do and I'm just glad it's not like it used to be two hundred years ago when people were called black or white or red or yellow. Now humans can be not just whoever they want to be but whatever color they choose to be. There's really no such thing as white or black or red or yellow skin. Skin color is really fascinating and has evolved throughout the years. A hundred and fifty years ago people really began traveling all over the world and the human population started becoming more physically similar and traits

became more and more averaged out. People of all races, breeding freely, mated with people of other races, not just their own. Think about that. Two hundred and fifty years ago half the so called white people in this country had blue eyes, yet today those natural blue eyes are extremely rare and usually the ones you see are bought, along with red and blond hair and freckles. There was such a blending that more humans started becoming what was called light skinned, that *Parda-clara* example you see there on the chart. With mass immigration the unique and dissimilar people of the world brought their culture and various hues and humans, especially in our country, started becoming closer and closer in features and shades. Then color alteration was developed, refined and became popular seventy years ago and now the majority of our country does it along with facial cosmetics, surgeries and implants and reductions and tattoos and piercing and whatever else is coming along. A long time ago this scientist predicted we would all eventually look like South Americans in features and colors and that's why South American words are used to describe skin colors now. That scientist must not have known they have almost one hundred and forty variations they use to describe humans and their skin colors.

Lena: What color are you naturally?

Thirza: *Alva-rosada*. What I'm presenting now is a little darker than my real color. In medical school I studied and learned all about pigments and their related genes. There's a pigment called melanin that every human has and then the two other forms, pheomelanin, red to yellow in color and eumelanin, which is dark brown to black. Humans produce more of one than the other. The color-alteration process manipulates the number and size of melanin particles, turns some genes on or off and along with specific chemical coloring that's added, the change occurs. An individual goes in one color and comes out a different one. In

your case the processes were reversed and the additives removed. Let me tell you something Lena. The humans, who go in, within their souls, are the same humans who come out.

Lena: I don't care what color you are Thirza. You'll always be special inside.

Thirza: You're so sweet. Now look in the mirror and tell me what you think. Six inches on top may look a little longer than you want but with the shorter sides and back at the neck I think it's just right for now and as it grows you can cut it down some.

Lena looks as she is shown the sides and back. She stares at a youthful appearing, dark-skinned woman with somewhat short, curly natural black hair, full lips and a slightly upturned nose with high-cheek bones and large expressive eyes that emanated a dark-brown, penetrating gaze and then when she smiled, her barely noticeable dimples emerged and her tooth sparkled.

Lena: I look like my mother again! I like everything about that and I feel so right! I feel dark like chocolate!

They laughed and Thirza spoke as Lena rose.

Thirza: It'll be real easy to take care of. All you need is a little lip coloring or gloss and with your unblemished skin you don't really need much or any makeup and you'll be ready to go. I've got a bag for you with everything you'll need. I want you to try my new brand of shampoo and conditioner and body moisturizer and I put some of my new nail polish in there for you. You'll love the shade. It's called Uniqueness. It'll be a unique color for a unique woman. And I've got some things for your companions.

Lena: Thanks for your words. You think of everything. I'll transfer your values. You're wonderful at what you do.

Thirza: Oh, Lena, thank you so much. You're always so kind and so very generous. Please don't stay away so long. Promise me.

Lena: I can't promise but I'll try real hard to do better. I plan to see you again right before the new year.

They hugged and kissed and then imparted their heartfelt goodbyes.

Thirza: Be well Lena.

Lena: Be well Thirza.

When Lena stepped outside Tiah looked for a long moment.

Tiah: Well, it's been a long time. The old beautiful you or is this the new beautiful you?

Lena: Thank you Tiah. I'm glad you approve and you know I like those compliments.

She smiled and showed him her tooth.

They then rode a few miles to Hollywood Boulevard where they stopped to eat outdoors at a restaurant. Lena watched all the different individuals as they passed by. The various sizes, shapes and colors intrigued her as she thought about where they could be going and where they had been.

It was a pleasant afternoon and when she looked at the sky she admired the blueness of it, the clearness of it and the whiteness of the fluffy drifting clouds. She enjoyed the expansive sky and all it contained, especially at night. She could gaze at the stars for hours and think of days long ago, gone forever.

Then, as if a thick, opaque cloud engulfed the sun, she was cast into her own personal shade that darkened to shadows and she became pensive and set. She thought of the strange people and their attempts to do something to her. She didn't yet know the ultimate intent but she was determined to find out and resolve this distraction that interfered with her life. And then, at the sound of Tiah's soft voice, her mood changed.

Tiah: Are you alright?

Lena: Yes, I'm alright.

They next drove to a large factory in El Segundo. Tiah and the others waited outside as Lena entered and walked past several automobiles in various stages of production. She continued into the back office where a short thick middle-aged *Louira DF* with light-green hair sat before a computer screen tapping and talking and cursing to herself. Lena watched for a few moments and then started laughing.

The *DF* swiveled in the chair and looked solemnly at Lena and then her light-green eyes seemed to twinkle and she spoke in a slightly harsh tone.

Dimmis: Can't say I'm surprised. I saw your appointment on the calendar but I am pleased, I guess, depending on what you want.

She rose and crossed the room and they embraced warmly.

Dimmis: Are you well?

Lena: I am well, and you?

Dimmis: I too am well, thank you. How different you appear.

She stepped back and looked at Lena up and down and then walked around her as if inspecting a completed automobile.

Dimmis: You present the original you. I like it.

Lena: Thanks. I'm glad you approve.

Dimmis: Now, what can I do for you?

Lena: I want something special.

Dimmis: Did you give away the last one I made for you?

Lena: Not yet.

Dimmis: Something special?

She walked to the glass and pointed to the work area where technicians were finishing automobiles by hand.

Dimmis: Look at that blue one. Look at the low front end and grill that looks like it's growling, the slope of the glass roof and that large rear end. That's a solar-powered and electric hybrid that can reach two hundred miles per hour, just your style.

Lena: I'm not that excited about the new designs. They're all so

low and sleek looking, like space ships on wheels. I know they're fast but solar, electric, gas hybrids are all beginning to look alike. Even the ones that'll soon be flying are supposed to look like that. I want a Corvette.

Dimmis: A Corvette? Do you know how long it's been since one has been made?

Lena: I know, a long time but I want one from '57.

Dimmis: That's over a hundred years ago.

Lena: No, from 1957.

Dimmis' mouth dropped open. She shook her head.

Dimmis: Why do you always have to be so difficult?

She walked to her computer, sat down and started tapping. She turned to Lena, looked at her and then turned back to the screen.

Dimmis: I can make one from the '58 specs, which are almost the same as the '57.

Lena: Pull it up. Let's look at it.

Dimmis pulled up a picture of a 1958 red and white Corvette.

Lena: That's it, red and white convertible! I want those wide whitewalls and wheel covers that look just like that but I only want one headlight.

Dimmis: What?

Lena: The '57 only had one headlight. The '58 had two. And I want a red top, same color as the car.

Dimmis: Anything else?

Lena: I want a clutch and a brake and accelerator, not all those buttons. And an extra large gas tank. And I'm going to name it Redd.

Dimmis: Naturally.

Lena: That's with two d's

Dimmis: Of course.

The carmaker kept tapping and shaking her head.

Dimmis: I guess you want an old fashioned key to start it with?

Lena: Not necessarily, skip the key. And I want it to go fast.

Dimmis: How fast?

Lena: Fast, fast.

Dimmis: It will. Look Lena, I know how you are so I want you to understand something. We'll basically be placing a fiberglass body that looks like a 1958 Corvette on a modern chassis with modern parts and engine. It's going to be somewhat heavier with that tank. The parts will mostly be made of aluminum and carbon fiber with carbon-fiber tubing. We'll use reinforced ABS plastic and make the interior similar to the original. It'll be either a five or six-speed manual and stability and handling will be just like that solar monster I showed you out there. You'll be new but you'll look like 1957.

Lena: I understand. That's fine but no hybrid. I want it to burn gasoline and make that sound when it goes.

Dimmis: What sound?

Lena: Find a video with sound.

Dimmis finds a video with sound and turns it on and they watch it and listen.

Lena: That low rumbling sound, like a racecar. And put a real nice audio system in it and a loud horn. How long will it take?

Dimmis ponders and then runs a program on the computer.

Dimmis: I assume you'll want us to drop whatever else we may be doing? The convertible top will have to be contracted out. I'll reprogram the printers and start producing your parts tomorrow evening. It should take six days.

Lena: Make it five Dimmis, please, for me.

Dimmis: Why are you always so difficult.

Lena: I'm not difficult. Just give me your best.

They hugged. Lena opened the door and turned back.

Lena: Oh, one more little thing. I want two of them. The second one should be a black and white hardtop. I'll pick up the red one. The other one can be delivered, there's no rush. Bye, bye, be well Dimmis.

Lena quickly closed the door.

The carmaker grabbed her hair with both hands and pulled at it as she rushed to the door and snatched it open. The carmaker yelled.

Dimmis: Be well Lena!

Next, the group went to a small nondescript warehouse fifteen minutes from the auto factory. Here they all entered and once in, Lena pressed a button and the heavy door behind them locked and a voice, over the intercom, spoke.

Voice: Well, well, right on time, Lena and her friends. That is you isn't it Lena, the new you, and they are your friends?

Tiah: Open the door Cuddy.

Cuddy: Oh, I couldn't see you back there Tiah. Welcome, welcome everyone.

The steel door in front of them buzzed open and after they entered, it also locked behind them. They walked down a long hallway and when they reached the next door it too buzzed open.

They entered a large room and the final door locked behind them. This was a work area with parts and tools everywhere and dozens of all types of weapons on all the walls.

A tall and wide *Trigo DM* with blond hair and brown eyes, working alone, was standing to greet them. His voice boomed.

Cuddy: How is everyone? I sincerely hope everyone is well.

Lena: I'm well Cuddy. I hope you are.

Cuddy: I am well, thank you.

Tiah shook his hand and wishes and acknowledgements of wellness were expressed all around.

Cuddy: Lena, this is your appointment what can I do for you?

Lena: I want to upgrade. I want new and special and I want to purchase hand weapons for Tiah and his associates.

Tiah: Lena ...

Lena: I insist.

Tiah: Only because you insist.

Cuddy: Lena, it's difficult to refuse you anything.

Lena: I know, I've been told that before. My Father spoiled me.

The mood was light and there was a sense of excitement experienced by them all that was caused by both the power and danger all the weapons represented. Each placed their pistol on a long table and Cuddy looked them over.

Cuddy: I provided all of these except for this one, which is actually a very nice handgun. What did you have in mind?

Lena: Do you have anything attractive?

Cuddy: What does that mean?

Lena: Something different, with style.

Cuddy walked to the near wall and took down a medium-sized pistol that was almost completely clear.

Cuddy: This is made of transparent polymers. You can see most of the inner workings. Single stack in the handle, it's powerful and accurate and I guess it could be called attractive.

Lena: It's different. I like that. Set it on the table while we look around.

Cuddy watched as the five customers walked slowly around the room. They hefted various guns, looking at them intently and sighting them. Finally, after acquiring specific details, Tiah and his people decided and placed their preferences on the table. Lena chose a larger polymer pistol than the one she had been shown. Then she turned to Cuddy.

Lena: Now, I want two other handguns and a rifle and you shall create all of them for me. That'll make them new and special.

Cuddy: Of course.

He reached for a pad and pen to take notes.

Cuddy: And how do you want them made?

Lena: The handguns should be this size.

She pointed to the one she had chosen.

Lena: They'll have electro-optical sights, position sensors and they'll also have detachable, combination silencers and flash suppressors. I want a pistol grip on the rifle and all three grips will have sensors that can be programmed to only allow me to fire that weapon. The rifle should also be equipped with detachable silencer and suppressor and have integrated electronic sights for both night light and dim light sighting. All three should have automatic and semi-automatic capability. All three should be black and I'll need two separate pistol holsters that can be worn here ...

She placed her right hand at her left waist area.

Lena: ... and here.

She placed her left hand at her right waist area.

Lena: I need to be able to hook a strap to the rifle so I can carry it hands free.

Cuddy: Anything else?

Lena: What do you suggest?

Cuddy: Two additional modifications for all three weapons. One, a laser spot tracker that is a seeker that will detect laser energy from a laser designator and guide to that energy spot on a target. Two, a design that allows for caseless ammunition, which provides a great deal more capacity in the magazines and no shell ejection is necessary. All the mags will be a double stack design with the short compact mags constructed for you to be able to increase the load by fifty percent. The rifle mags will hold either fifty or seventy-five shots and the pistol mags either twenty or thirty shots each, depending on how you load them.

Lena: I like that. The rifle should provide high muzzle velocity and I'll need to be able to break it down into either two or three sections so I'll need a hard-shell carrying case.

Cuddy: It'll have the high range of fifteen hundred yards and it'll be easy assemble and disassemble.

Lena: Tell me about ammunition. I'll need something lethal for the handguns that'll deliver optimal damage without too much pull or kick. I want to be able to fire without covering, with both hands at the same time.

Cuddy: How much will you need?

Lena: Double my normal amount and double the extra mags.

Cuddy was writing at times during the conversation and now he added notes to his pad.

Cuddy: I can't guarantee it but I may be able to provide you with some directional ammo. You'll be able to lock onto a target and the bullet can change direction with up to a two-foot arc. You'll be able to shoot around a corner if necessary.

Lena: I've heard of that. Do your best to get some.

Cuddy: I will. But what I already have and will provide will be a normal penetrating projectile along with a special explosive type and a unique incendiary type.

Lena: You mean one explodes and the other ignites?

Cuddy: Exactly.

Lena: I like that fire part.

Cuddy: I thought you would. Anything or anyone you hit will literally, light up.

They all chuckled. The gunmaker looked over his notes.

Cuddy: Anything else?

Lena: I can't think of anything.

Cuddy: That should be it.

Lena: Cuddy you're the best so I'll expect above and beyond your usual masterful work. Can you finish in four days?

Cuddy: For you I can.

Lena: I'll test on day four in case you need another day for adjustments, five is the deadline.

Cuddy: I have all the parts so you can shoot in four. You'll have three weapons that no one else in this world will have and I'll etch the name Lena into each one. It makes me proud to know you'll carry and fire my weapons because quite frankly, I've never known anyone who could shoot like you.

Lena: Is that a compliment? You know I like compliments. Alright everyone let's step into the range and fire these weapons. The attractive one is mine.

The next afternoon Tiah drove Lena to an open area ten miles south of Malibu where a helicopter landed, picked her up and took her to the top of a twenty-five story building in downtown Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard.

She went to the basement of the building and taking a private tunnel she walked into the basement of the three-story building next door. She then walked up to the second floor. She carefully opened the door and quietly entered a small office. An elderly *Parda-clara DM* with medium-length black hair and brown eyes was standing with his hands clasped behind his back as he leaned over papers on his desk. She watched him for several moments, as he remained motionless and engrossed.

Lena: Something interesting Doc?

He looked up and frowned, puzzled. He peered over his thick glasses and then took them off.

Doc: Lena? Oh my, you look so different. I haven't seen you in months and I haven't seen you like that in years. Are you well?

Lena: I'm well Doc, and you?

Doc: I'm well thank you, and old.

Lena: You certainly appear well, and the same.

Doc: I have competent doctors, as do you but it's better to feel good than look good.

They hugged and Lena sat down in a chair in front of the desk and Doc sat down and leaned back in his chair.

Lena: You have information for me?

Doc: Yes I do. But first tell me how you came to acquire these instruments?

Lena: I took them from three people who sought to attack me.

Doc: And they attempted to touch you with the instruments?

Lena: One did, the other two weren't afforded the opportunity.

Doc: I see. Let's go to the display room.

They walked down the hallway and entered a room with a large screen on the wall. Lena saw one of the silver objects on the table near the screen. They sat down and Doc began to press and turn knobs on the arms of his chair, near his hands. The lights dimmed and an enlarged three-dimensional image of the object appeared before them. Doc moved his fingers and the image rotated, showing all sides and angles.

Doc: This is a delivery system that was called Surrender. It's designed to deliver into a host, in this instance an organism, a sequence of instructions and directions that were created to compel specified tasks. I would describe the host as being infected with a program, but more precisely, a virus. I use the word infected because of potential for those end tasks to be harmful to the host and or others and the word virus due to the manner in which it is introduced, usually surreptitiously, and its method of organization within the organism which is similar to the process of replication.

Here he stopped and looked at Lena.

Lena: Continue.

Doc: Once the program enters the host it proceeds to form itself, compile itself into an executable status by transforming from

program language into another language, in your case English. Once it has successfully loaded it seeks areas of function, central regions of the host that entail thought, reasoning and will, essentially the areas needed for complete program control, which would be the brain and central nervous system.

Lena: How does that thing work?

Doc: It's initially activated by being pressed at specific points in a precise somewhat complicated sequence using four fingers as if entering a combination. It is then that two nearly invisible one and a half inch long silicone extensions are released.

He magnified the device and two clear, hairlike fibers, moving and wiggling as if alive, could be seen on one end of the silver object.

Doc: Once these extensions touch the organism's skin surface they break away and adhere until the program is loaded which occurs in a matter of three to five seconds, depending on the complexity of the instructions and directions, and then they dissolve. An obvious limitation is the need for close proximity to the target however, if done properly you would not have known.

Lena: How long does it take for the program to compile inside the host?

Doc: That also is determined by the program complexity and the physiology of the organism.

Lena: When will you know the instructions and directions?

Doc: At this time I'm only able to provide an estimate as to program completion. Right this moment it's compiling, running and organizing itself in a simulation environment. It can be a somewhat slow process. Lena, only the *WLA* or someone affiliated with that agency would have access to these devices. They were banned from use years ago and were supposed to have been destroyed because of their potential harm to humans. The program itself could destroy brain tissue and the infected host

could be forced to perform illegal and or immoral acts against their will. In other words they would be forced to Surrender their selves to the internal commands and directions. Why are you involved with the intelligence agency aligned with every other functioning government in the world?

Lena: I have no idea who these people are or may want.

Doc: Lena please ...

Lena: I've never lied to you or attempted to deceive you in any way. I give you my word, on my life. I do not know what's going on. Perhaps we'll know more when the program completes. Which is when? I need some kind of time frame.

Doc: At the rate it's progressing, within six or seven days we'll have more information.

Lena: Good. I'm going to provide the plane for you. You'll celebrate your birthday with me next week. I'm going to Las Vegas. Bring your two assistants you're so fond of.

Doc: You always remember.

Lena: Birthdays are important. Not many individuals are able to reach ninety-six years of age. You're special.

Doc: I haven't gotten there yet. I'm still days away. I might not make it. Lena, be careful, please.

Lena: Just concentrate on today. One day at a time. Doc, I'm always careful. Now, let's order something to eat.

Three days after leaving Doc's office Lena, with Tiah and his people, returned to Cuddy's shop to test the weapons. Minor sight adjustments were made on the rifle and the weapons were then put into their cases and loaded for transportation. Ammunition was placed into both cars with the bulk of it to be flown to Las Vegas. They then all returned to Malibu.

For the past several days Lena and those who surrounded her had stayed on the beach, at the pool, played card games, and

listened to music and basically relaxed. Now, as the sunlight faded, she and Tiah reclined on the rear balcony.

Earlier they had gone over the daily reports received from the technology used to protect the house. The Spectrum Analyzer, Wireless Signal Detector, Non-Linear Junction Detector and the Cellular Jammer all reported no abnormal activity.

Tiah: Si and his wife and children are still missing.

Lena: Yes, and two days after they disappeared, Iin and Uin, with two others from their organization moved onto Si's property and made claim to it. They blocked Si's mother from her rightful possession. I suspect treachery. They were all supposed to be friends and business partners. I so detest treachery and I detest treacherous individuals.

Tiah: Now they are your neighbors.

Lena: Ain has for several years attempted to trade some of his property for mine. This year he became more insistent and more resistant to my refusal.

Tiah: Let me go with you. Let me stand between you and any harm that approaches.

Lena: My drive from here to there is straight, perhaps one stop. There won't be any danger between and I'll be self-protected and once there I remain protected. I need you here for now. Come to the house with Doc. I'll let you know when.

Tiah: I don't like this unusual issue that confronts you. It feels to be more of a threat than any we've seen.

Lena: I understand your feeling and I know you have concerns for me. I respect that and certainly I appreciate it, but listen. Ain is the brother in control and he resides near here, in Los Angeles, within your reach. The other two don't have the mental capacity to devise anything of imagination. Find out in what way he is involved in the disappearances. Also, see to it that the *Sarará* and his two cohorts continue to be tracked. They all remain in Long

Beach, again close to you. It may be necessary for them to be tagged. With me on my normally scheduled trip they too will most likely move. Now do you see why I need you here?

Tiah: Yes, I see. I have others who could handle those tasks but I'll remain here if you insist.

Lena: It's you who I trust, in whom I believe. Don't make me insist.

Tiah: I'll willingly do as you wish.

Lena: Thank you Tiah. You and I will depart at three thirty in the morning. Try to sleep. I'm going now to complete a few things and then I too will rest.

She touched and then gently squeezed his hand.

Lena: Be well and sleep well.

Tiah: I'll try. Be well and stay on guard.

Lena: I will, always.

Lena went to her office, completed her tasks and then went to her bedroom. She showered, brushed and combed her hair and oiled her body. And then, while still naked, she lit a small candle, turned off all the lights, sat down and crossed her legs beneath her and placed her hands at her knees. She stared at the candle until she descended into a deep trance. After an hour she closed her eyes, stretched out on the rug and there she remained asleep until her eyes suddenly opened at two thirty in the morning. She was refreshed and excited.

Dimmis was waiting for them at the factory with the car when she and Tiah arrived. Lena wore one holstered pistol at her left side. The other weapons, several boxes of ammunition and her small travel bag were transferred into the trunk.

She said her goodbyes to Dimmis and turned to Tiah. They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment and then hugged, an extended embrace.

Tiah stepped back, turned and turned back with a slight smile.
Tiah: Shall I kiss you?

Lena smiled just a little.

Lena: Of course.

Tiah gently took Lena's face into his hands and they kissed goodbye. And they both spoke softly.

Tiah: Be well Lena.

Lena: Be well Tiah, I'll see you soon.

Lena got into the red Corvette, fired it up and shifted into first. And as it rumbled slowly to the street Tiah, watching as she pulled away, saw her left arm extend from the open window and rise into the air and when she reached the street the waving arm disappeared and the horn honked, four loud times and the car turned and accelerated as it was shifted to second and when she reached third she was gone into the darkness.

Tiah could hear the rumble change to a growl as the gears shifted until that sound faded and then it too was gone and all was quiet.

It was that time of the morning that Lena found most precious. The moon was bright and dark. The stars were sparkling and when she passed through the desert she knew they would appear brilliant and so close a reach of the hand could touch them, grasp one. It was the amount that fascinated her most, so many, so beautiful.

She wore red shorts and soft red shoes with a loose long-sleeved blouse the color of the car. She had tied a white scarf around her neck in case she wanted to cover her head. The holster she wore was empty as one of Cuddy's pistols rode beside her near her right hand.

Traffic was almost non-existent except for occasional lighted movement far on the other side of the freeway in the opposite

direction. She had made this trip many times in the past. This one would be a little over two hundred and forty miles to Ivanpah. Once known as State Line and then Primm, it was now named for the dry lake upon which it sat. Ivanpah was the entrance point to *Center World*. It was where one world changed to another, one that was vastly different in specific ways, most important being the absence of formal authority.

She cruised at eighty for an hour with no music, just the sound of the automobile and then pulled in where she had stopped before at what once had been a rest stop for travelers. She got out and strolled a few yards from her car. She stood there, waiting patiently, and marveled at the above and as the sun began to express its essence she watched as the stars faded. Then it happened. That moment when the moon grew dim but was still there, the dulled stars remained and the sun, reddish-orange, began to dominate. This was what she desired, to be able to raise her hands as if she held the nascent sun in one hand and the incomplete whitening moon in the other. There she stood, alone in her acknowledgement of her life.

When she pulled back onto the road the loud music merged with the sound of the wind and the engine as she ran through the gears and stayed on the accelerator to reach one hundred and fifty miles per hour and less than an hour later she crossed the line.

Here she again pulled over and let the top down and put the boot in place. Now she crawled at fifty miles per hour enjoying these last miles. The desert was stretched out on all sides and the heat was rising in this city that called seductively to all those who desired to take a chance. She passed the signs she did not have cause to heed. Enormous signs, one after the other, interspersed for miles, they would blink and flash in their attempts to shout out, to inform, to caution, to threaten, to warn.

YOU HAVE ENTERED CENTER WORLD!!!

ALL INDIVIDUALS AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN
YEARS MUST POSSESS, WHEN IN PUBLIC,
A WEAPON!!!

NO AREA OF CENTER WORLD IS SUPPORTED
BY THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT!!!

PROTECT YOURSELF AT ALL TIMES!!!

WITHIN CENTER WORLD THERE IS ONLY LIFE
AND DEATH!!!

Less than an hour after passing the line, the gates at her Las Vegas home swung open and Lena pulled down the road and then around the circular driveway to the front door and announcing her arrival, honked the horn four long blasts.

The morning after Lena arrived at the Las Vegas home the Professor was working in his high-rise office in Manhattan when he was notified that his target had entered *Center World*.

He communicated to the leader of the Advance Team that Team Two would assume control and to provide them with all known information, including updated images and to remain in Los Angeles to await their further instructions. He then contacted Team Two and ordered the three members to seek the target at the locations they would be provided.

Next he contacted Team One and through a simultaneous communication, informed them that they had fulfilled their obligations and had been released from the mission. He thanked them and also added they had done the best they could under the

daunting circumstances and restrictions they faced and would be provided value bonuses, ten days of paid leave and were to report to their superiors in Washington, D.C. after their vacations for their new assignments. He ended by wishing them good fortune and good health.

Dirch told his fellow agents he was flying back immediately and Fronie and Madge said that they were going to San Diego for a week before returning east.

Dirch proceeded to request from the Advance Team a complete update on the target and when he received all the new information, including the photos of her he would require, he promptly booked a flight to Las Vegas. He was aware that those he directly reported to had been deceived by the Professor in regards to this mission. He was on loan for a special task and he had come to realize this was really some nefarious personal issue involving the woman and included outlawed technology. This wasn't a national security threat, nor was it government related.

The time off and extra value and bonus he received above his normal pay was welcomed but the beating he had gotten and the pain that came with it was not. He also knew there was absolutely nothing the Professor could do in reprisal to him without being exposed. And what he knew most clearly was that he would be satisfied. He looked at the two handguns he had and decided he would purchase whatever else he needed when he arrived. He rubbed his hand and cursed. He was going to *Center World* to do what he did best. He would abolish that woman.

The other two agents had the Advance Team provide them with an updated report on the target and remained in their room waiting for Dirch to depart. Fronie stood in the middle of the room with a handheld mirror and projected *NM* rays onto the slow healing and bruised area and cursed the woman who had caused the damage. Madge lay on the bed with a pain medicine

patch on her nose and stared at the ceiling. When Dirch left for the airport they loaded their possessions into the automobile they had procured and started for Nevada. They were going to find the woman who had beat them down and broken their noses.

In regards to the controller of this mission they knew exactly what Dirch knew. The Professor was a former director reduced to an advisory role. He had taken advantage of his connections to appropriate their services for an unauthorized covert operation that was tactically unlawful.

They believed that for what they considered a pittance of extra value and a token bonus, they had jeopardized their careers and their health. As far as repercussions for their planned disobedient transgressions they also understood what Dirch perceived. The Professor had no valid authority over them. In addition, *Center World* was basically lawless and offered them impunity for their impending actions.

They dismissed any potential reverberations. They were going to do what they did best. They would take a nice leisurely ride, a cross-country drive, after first passing through Las Vegas and abolishing that woman.

As Dirch boarded his flight, Tiah was contacting Lena with the flight number, gate number and estimated time of arrival. He informed Lena that the automobile in which the other two agents traveled had been tagged and it appeared they were headed in her direction. He gave her a detailed description of the car and the plate identification numbers. She would be able to pick up their signal within a radius of one hundred miles of her location and he added they all appeared the same in their presentation.

Lena then initiated visual communication with her good friend and most trusted business associate in Las Vegas. She was sitting at her computer in her office as the link was completed. A bust-sized image of a middle-aged *Castanba DM* with deep-set hazel-

colored eyes and light-brown hair came into focus and filled the screen

Lena: Hello Bige. How are you? Are you well?

His deep voice boomed and he spoke in a mirthful manner.

Bige: Lena my darling! It's so good to see you! I trust you are well? You look beautifully different. Where are you? And yes I'm well.

Lena: Yes, I am also well. Thank you for your flattering words I like such words and I'm near you, at the house.

Bige: That's great! We must get together! Bella asks about you all the time.

Lena: How is Bella, well I hope?

Bige: Yes, quite well.

Lena: I need your assistance.

Bige: Of course.

Lena: Make note of this.

He took a pen and placed it to paper.

Bige: Ready.

Lena: There's a tall *Sarará DM* on CW Airlines, flight thirty-seven that arrives in approximately forty minutes at gate twenty-two. He is to be continually tracked until I release him. Have any transportation that he uses tagged. Later I'll need two other individuals tracked who are arriving by automobile. I'll send you the information on their current mode of transport. I have them tagged as of now but if they change transportation or separate I'll need a new and or another tag placed.

Bige: What other assistance do you require?

Lena: That's all on this, for now. We'll be in contact as needed.

Bige: Are you in danger? Are you alright?

Lena thought a moment and then smiled slightly at her friend.

Lena: Consider these individuals my enemies. Yes, I'm alright and intend to remain that way.

Bige: Everyone will now be placed on alert. A threat to you is a threat to me. You're aware of the situation with Si? He deserves justice.

Lena: I am aware. Much more than justice will be had. Bige, I know I can count on you and your people in this matter that belongs to me but I have one other request I want to ask of you.

Bige: Anything!

Lena: I want you and Bella to be here at the house day after tomorrow around seven in the evening. Doc will be coming and a small gathering of us is going to properly celebrate his ninety-sixth birthday.

Bige: My goodness! That number makes my eyes open wide and my head dizzy. Of course we'll be there.

Lena: I'm sure we'll be communicating often over the next couple of days but no talk of business when you get here, understand?

Bige: I agree, I understand.

Lena: Also, I'll provide a car, you won't have to drive so that way you and Bella can get drunk.

Bige: An excellent idea!

Lena: Contact me as needed. Be well my friend.

Bige: Be well.

They ended communication.

Lena went into the large main room and called out to the two middle-aged individuals who lived there for her, protected her and ran the business of this property.

Abe, a thick *Parda-clara DM* of average height, with a baldhead and dark-brown eyes and his mate Abbie, a short bald-headed *Parda-clara DF* with dark-green eyes, came in and they all sat and discussed details of the coming days.

First Lena advised them that there was a threat of a high level to her safety and that the security system was being activated and

expanded to monitor the perimeter. She wanted all the weapons that were strategically placed around the house to be inspected and confirmed that they were fully loaded and ready to be fired if necessary.

They then discussed the impending celebration and all they wanted to do and have available so everyone would have a memorable experience. Preparations were then begun.

Throughout the day she and Bige exchanged notifications. She knew where the three agents were, how they were traveling and anything else thought to be of importance. Dirch was in a white car and Madge and Fronie in a yellow one and they were staying on opposite sides of the city.

That evening when the sun disappeared she sat by the pool with several Comm devices and monitored connections and responded to inquiries. Before retiring for the night she went to the soundproof range behind the house and fired several of her weapons, including the ones Cuddy had provided. She broke them all down and cleaned and prepped them and went to bed.

The following morning, on separate occasions from different directions, the automobiles of the agents slowly passed by the front and rear of the house. There wouldn't be anything of significance gleaned from this reconnaissance. It was difficult to observe the house from the front road through the gates and past the bushes, cactuses and tall palm trees. In addition, the three main structures, made up of the house, five-car garage and guesthouse that sat in the middle of three acres were completely surrounded by a six-foot high cinder block wall.

As noon approached, Tiah requested a visual connection. They opened communication.

Tiah: Hello Lena, how are you? Are you well?

Lena: Hello Tiah. I'm well and you?

Tiah: I'm well, thank you. Does everything move forward with the intruders?

Lena: Yes, they present no problem. Bige and his associates are assisting me in the matter.

Tiah: Good, Bige is an expert in stealth, observation and food and drink. Here's an update. I've been informed that Ain is attempting to barter his property near you and the property Si once controlled in order to gain possession of land on Las Vegas Boulevard. That boulevard land is controlled by a group here in Century City and the deal cannot be consummated without including the property upon which you reside. Ain assures the Century City individuals that he will soon have claim to your property and that all their desires will be satisfied.

Lena: Well, well, Ain expands his empire.

Tiah: How will you proceed?

Lena: Have your people start tracking Ain in order for him to be within reach. We'll touch him when necessary. Bige and I will take care of all else here.

Tiah: We'll tag him first so we can remain in the distance. He is usually fairly well guarded.

Lena: Yes, that will be best. Handle it as you choose, but you must be able to react quickly.

Tiah: I understand.

Lena: The plane will be waiting and ready to depart tomorrow at six in the evening. The ammunition has been loaded. Pick up Doc and his friends and I'll see you when you arrive and Tiah, one more thing. We'll talk no more business until day after tomorrow, agreed?

Tiah: Yes, agreed. I look forward to the next new sun. Until then, be well.

Lena: Be well.

They ended communication.

The next day, Abbie, Abe and Lena completed the last of the preparations and by evening had changed clothes and waited to meet their guests. The gathering would be an intimate, close group of friends that coalesced from several areas and evolved, beginning when Lena had arrived fourteen years in the past. From exactly where she had arrived no one knew or cared. Since her arrival they had all profited in diverse ways, enormously. Several could claim that she had quite literally, saved their life.

Abe observed the visual monitor of the front gates with his handheld device and a little before seven he admitted a small orange automobile. It contained Dosia a tall *Bem-branca DL* with light-blue eyes and a head full of long wild black hair that stood out in all directions and Fally, a tall *Bem-morena DL* with cobalt-blue eyes and a head full of long and equally wild, white hair.

Lena kept laughing as they greeted and hugged and kissed because once again the two had altered themselves into opposites. The last time she had seen them Dosia's skin was very dark with white hair and Fally was very white with black hair.

They remained standing in the yard turning and showing their clothes and skin and hair and talking excitedly about the alterations all three of them had done when Abe, pointing, said a long automobile was coming through the still open gates.

They all watched it pull past the trees, roll around the driveway and stop in front of them. The driver quickly exited and opened the back door and Bella and Bige extracted themselves, with some effort, from the rear.

Bige was six feet seven inches tall and weighed nearly two hundred and eighty pounds and Bella, his mate, a *Castanha-clara DF*, also with hazel-colored eyes and long auburn-colored hair piled high on her head, was easily six feet five inches in her high heels and in addition was rather thick.

The two stood near the car as Bige laughed and talked with the driver and the way the evening sun reflected on their skin, Bige's chestnut-colored skin and Bella's light-chestnut-hued skin seemed to glow and their eyes sparkled as the two moved toward the others waiting for them.

Lena and Bella hugged and kissed and Lena was nearly lifted from the ground. Then Lena went to embrace Bige and this time she was lifted into the air and spun around and when he set her down he did as always and grabbed her nose and gently squeezed and pulled it.

Lena: Stop that! Now my nose will itch. Look Bige.

She smiled and showed her gold tooth.

Bige: I thought that's what I saw when we first spoke. Ah yes, a golden smile.

Lena: It's only one. More like a golden tooth.

Bige: It's what's the word? Dazzling!

Greetings and hugs and kisses and inquiries of wellness were given all around and just as they all moved toward the house Abe opened the gates and said another long automobile was coming. The transport came into view and stopped before them and as the driver opened a rear door other doors opened and Tiah and the two assistants stepped out.

Hiley a brown-eyed *Palida DM* with light-silver hair and Crecy a brown-eyed *Palida DF* with braided black hair, both took an arm and Doc stepped on out, smiling broadly. Lena hollered.

Lena: Doc, don't let Bige hug you!

They all entered the house as Abe began to bring in their bags. Once again greetings, hugs and kisses and words of wellness were issued and they all moved to the large area near the glass door leading to the pool. It wasn't long before they began by toasting to Doc and his longevity and then to the good fortune enjoyed by them all in being able to gather again together.

Lena and Abbie and Abe brought out the first course of food to start off and the festivities began in earnest. The once soft music was turned up and voices and laughter filled the room.

As soon as the sun was gone and the desert heat had subsided they all moved outside. Dosia and Fally took off all their clothes, jumped into the pool and proceeded to repeatedly dunk each other. They dared anyone else to jump in and no one did. The group ate and drank by the pool for a while and then went in to get on their hands and knees on the rug and throw dice up against a wall and wager outrageous sums of colorful replica play values that Abbie had provided.

Then everyone danced, even Doc, until they all had to sit down or stretch out on the rug to rest except for Bige who stood in the middle of the room and sipped his drink and ate food from the tables laden with varied dishes. As eleven-thirty approached, Doc waved both his hands in the air and the room grew silent and all eyes turned to him.

Doc: My good friends, ninety-six years ago I was born at eleven thirty-four, so it was recorded. We are now four minutes from that occurrence. Each of you should acknowledge the time, the moment of your birth and celebrate it for that was a momentous event. It was your very own beginning in life and your life, life itself is indeed so very precious. Think of it in this way. Billions of humans have dwelled upon this earth just as billions of stars have inhabited the sky. You made it! You made it into existence to join the billions. Each of you has taken your place, a place that belonged to you only. A singular unique portion of space that allowed you to occupy surface, not in imagination, not in some symbolic form, but in reality, which is the only location of true importance. To live, to survive is not only remarkable it's extraordinary which makes each of you here remarkable and extraordinary. Now, give me another drink and prepare to sing,

keeping in mind that when you finish the song I will have already moved toward ninety-seven.

As Doc was speaking, Abbie had brought out a large cake on a cart with the numbers nine and six sitting on top with a lighted candle on each one.

Doc was handed a tall light-pewter colored mug with the large word Doc, in bright shiny red on it. Everyone held their drinks of champagne and watched the time, now projected in large numbers on the wall and when eleven thirty-four flashed they all burst into a loud raucous birthday song. They sang it over and over. They took turns until the time changed to eleven thirty-five. Doc was then helped to his feet and he walked over and blew out the candles and cheers erupted. Lena started slicing the cake and everyone had a least one piece. Bige had three.

It was almost one in the morning when the long automobile for Bige and Bella arrived. The group walked all the way to the car with them as Bige kept bellowing.

Bige: I'm inebriated! I got there! I'm drunk everybody!

They all waved as the car began to pull away and the window came down and the deep voice called out.

Bige: You did it again Lena! I'm full of food and alcohol!

Bella: Good job Lena! Bye Doc! Be well everybody!

Everyone in the group hollered out for them to be well.

Fally: He walked out looking the same way he walked in.

Lena: That's the way it is with Bige. He walks the same, talks the same. The only way you know he's drunk is when he's driving, you're riding with him and he runs into something.

They all went back in. Abe and Abbie had just about all of the food put away except for the snacks left out for anyone who needed something more and they said their goodnights with well wishes and went to bed.

The remaining group all sat on the big couch except for Dosia who lay on the floor and Fally who sat on the floor, back against the couch. They could see the pool lit up and the blue water shimmered and the stars above were blinking and shining in a cloudless sky and the hanging moon was moving to its next phase. It was a beautiful night. The music was low and they were content to sip their drinks in quiet contemplation and then Dosia, staring at the ceiling spoke from the floor in almost a whisper.

Dosia: What's it like to be ninety-six years lived?

Fally: How did you get there? Is there a secret?

Doc: I can't explain it. Fate was all it was and if there's a secret it remains so because I don't know it. Just try everyday to have a healthy attitude and do one positive thing so you can sleep in peace.

Crecy: Doc would you tell us what it was like? We've all read about it and seen the images but what was it like to live through it in your own words.

Hiley: You spoke of living and surviving but we've gone through what could be called normal times. I've never personally known anyone who lived through the *G.E.* It was so long ago.

Doc stared out of the door over the water, past the stars, thinking. Lena rose and took his mug from his hand and poured some cold water into it and placed it into his outstretched hand.

Lena: Are you tired?

Doc: No, I'm fine. I had a wonderful birthday. I feel both energized and old, at the same time.

The music floated lightly throughout the room. An element of expectancy fell upon them and they all shifted, turning to look, waiting to listen to Doc, a ninety-six year old *DM* known in both *West World* and *East World* as a brilliant scientist, an esteemed medical doctor and wise philosopher. Doc sipped his drink.

Doc: A long time ago? Time is relative in that it is measured in relation to something or someone else, a point of reference. Hand me my device.

Tiah reached behind the couch to a table and handed Doc his large Comm device. He opened it up, leaned forward and stood it on the low table in front of him.

Doc: So let us look at time in connection to my grandfather for it is there I'll begin in order to attempt to respond to your question and fulfill your request to know, such a wonderful quest, the seeking of knowledge. So let us uncover and discover at the same time. I'll start there so it can be seen that long ago is not really so distant and the time of grandchildren of the future is not so far away. I'm joined to my grandfather of course through my father but also because I knew him, was in his presence and thus I'm connected to his time.

He pressed the Comm device on his left wrist and the device on the table lit up and began blinking colored lights. He pressed several more times and set the table device to only his voice activation and also to speaker response.

Doc: Vee, respond to my numerical questions in estimates and approximations. Understood?

The Comm device blinked and answered in a clear, human-like voice.

Vee: Understood.

Doc: What was the world population in the year two thousand and ten?

Vee: Six point nine billion.

Doc: What was the population of the United States that same year?

Vee: Three hundred and nine million.

Doc: Report three Global Health Alerts and three Human Health Alerts issued that same year.

Vee: Global Alert: Sediment erosion increasing. Biology changes affecting flowering times of plants and migration patterns of birds and mammals. Tiny organisms that support entire marine food chain dying.

Global Alert: Ocean life facing extinction due to over fishing, pollution and habitat loss.

Global Alert: Ozone layer thinned forty percent during winter seasonal loss.

Health Alert: Infectious diseases that are passing between humans associated with cervical cancer and infertility in women at epidemic levels. Seven percent of Americans affected

Health Alert: Infectious disease passing between humans through bodily contact and exchanges of bodily fluids has developed a super bug strain that is resistant to all recommended antibiotics and has merged with world's most common sexually transmitted disease to jointly damage optic areas, lymphatic system and compromise immune systems.

Health Alert: Tropical disease spread by insects has affected eight million in Latin and Central America and sickened three hundred thousand in United States. Number of deaths unknown.

Doc: So here we have just a very small example of the issues confronting the humankind in the immediate years before my grandfather was born. Two critical areas, the health of the earth and the health of the organisms that inhabited that domain. Humans failed to understand that without health there may be life but ultimately there will be no quality to that life. Crecy if I took a knife and repeatedly stabbed you through your hand ...

Fally screamed and Dosia threw a shoe in that direction. Doc continued.

Doc: ... in this case your right hand since that's the hand you use most, your injured hand would dominate the foreground of your

life. All your attention would be directed by the pain and your focus would be on healing and in addition any activity you performed in which you required that hand would be impaired. You could not ignore your hand and all else would move into the background and become secondary in importance to you. The destruction of the planet and all the life it supported and the deteriorating health of human beings, at that time, existed in the background. The foreground and the majority of human existence consisted predominantly in the pursuit of wealth, superficial material goods and instant gratification of the sexual instinct, a most powerful instinct that to this day refuses to be tamed or controlled.

Doc paused and sipped his water.

Doc: Lena let me have a little snack please.

Lena: What would you like?

Doc: Let me have some of that green stuff with some chips.

As Lena rose to get the snack, Doc continued.

Doc: My grandfather was born in the year two thousand and sixteen. Vee what was the world population and the population of the United States in the year two thousand and sixteen?

Vee: World population, seven point four billion. United States population, three hundred and twenty-four million.

Lena set the snack on the table in front of Doc and he took a chip and dipped it in the green sauce and munched a moment.

Doc: Let's look at what my grandfather was confronted with the year he was born. Vee report three Global Health Alerts and three Human Health Alerts for the year just accessed.

Vee: Global Alert. Greenhouse gas must be reduced by significant amount or fifty percent of plants and thirty percent of animals are likely to vanish from fifty percent of their habitat by the year twenty eighty due to warming of the earth.

Global Alert: Extinct rate one thousand times faster because of human influences. Between one hundred to one thousand species per million now go extinct every year. Prior to human existence one per every million went extinct each year.

Global Alert: Entering period of sixth mass extinction with complete loss of ecosystem imminent.

Health Alert: Deadly untreatable germs now widespread in hospitals, clinical offices and nursing homes. These germs have mutated, developed new resistance capabilities and have fought and defeated drugs of last resort.

Health Alert: Disease causing resistant bacteria are now rampant in every part of the world at alarming levels and threatens achievements of modern medicine. Two million people in the United States each year develop antibiotic resistant infections and twenty three thousand die in this post-antibiotic era in which once common infections and injuries of a minor nature will kill.

Health Alert: Outdoor air pollution is one of the leading causes of cancers in humans and environmental chemicals consumed by humans in food one of the leading causes of cancer deaths.

Doc: In the six years between two thousand and ten and two thousand and sixteen very little could or did change in that short span of time yet there were some who were alive at that specific period who would call those days good. And compared to what was coming, obviously they were. Each generation can only exist and live through that time which is allocated to them and twenty-four years after the birth of my grandfather, my father took his own place. Vee, what was the population of the world and the United States in the year twenty forty

Vee: World population, nine point two billion. United States population, four hundred and twenty million.

Doc: My father began his life in worsening times for those who were peering in two crucial directions and could see what was coming. Only those who were involved in the preservation of natural resources and the health of the planet and those involved in the health of humans, including the professionals and other specific areas of science, concerned themselves with the destruction of the earth and obvious proliferation of diseases. Others became invested when somehow directly affected, personally touched and thereby influenced by the deteriorating earth and collapsing health of humans. Death was in a real sense sporadic and on what could be called a normal pace when war, natural causes, and even the rising weather catastrophes were factored with the exploding population growth. Life went on. Then thirty-four years after my father, I came kicking and screaming into the world. Vee what was the world population and the population of the United States in the year twenty seventy-four?

Vee: World population twelve point nine billion. United States population five hundred and nine million.

Doc: As you just heard there was an increase of one hundred and eighty-five million individuals in just the United States from the time my grandfather was born to the year I was born. There were other drastic changes. By my early twenties circumstances of disease had become, should I say, unique. Diseases once specific to particular regions of the world jumped to other countries and once eradicated diseases in the United States came back to rise in different areas. An immune deficiency disease from the nineteen seventies increased in infections. In Colorado a house cat transmitted tuberculosis to two humans and well over three-dozen people died. A unique new species of blood sucking, kissing-bug insects bit humans on the face causing deaths. Ants in the Southern states that were altering the ecosystem began

causing deaths by attacking animals and humans. Missouri ticks transmitted a strange killer virus. Mosquitoes deformed unborn babies. Nodding disease killed small children in Africa. Aquatic invasive species latched onto the hulls of boats and traveled the world to kill native marine life and starfish died. Honeybees continued to be killed by wireless signals and then the lowly fly began attacking bees and causing deaths and finally all the commercial bees began infecting wild bumblebees and spread the destruction.

Doc paused. He sipped his water and ate some of his snack and Hiley and Crecy got up to get something to eat and drink. Dosia and Fally opened another bottle of champagne and set it between them and drank from the bottle as they munched on buttered bread. Doc waited for everyone to settle.

Doc: Much of this was going on in two thousand and sixteen, the time of my grandfather and yet was not addressed as required, not attacked as a deadly enemy to human existence as it should have been. All was basically ignored and thus all was exacerbated and so by the time I was thirty the failures of the world caused this collapse to increase exponentially. Bats died by the millions from a fungus. Penguins disappeared. Birds, by the thousands, fell from the sky. Dolphins in the ocean and awash on the beaches on Northern Peru died. From the largest, the elephants and big cats to the smallest turtles and rodents they all moved slowly, inexorably toward non-existence as the whole world became warmer, more polluted and more crowded.

Doc rose and walked to the door and stared out and then began to pace before the glass as he spoke. His voice was strong. Doc: And then the identical strain of the Black Plague that had spread through areas of New Mexico in two thousand and eleven began again in the same area in two thousand one hundred and nine. It was a pneumonic plague, transmitted through the air.

How it was done to this day is unknown but the four most prevalent diseases transmitted between humans through sexual contact somehow exchanged DNA and created one new super strain that then merged with DNA from that plague and adopted one specific element of that disease which was its pneumonic attribute. This Omni-Strain left the restrictive confines of the human body and rose into the air. That was the how, as much as we knew it to be. The when is known because deaths could be traced to a period of time on each continent to within a span of two days. Inexplicably this disease began as if spontaneously and spread out immediately and at an amazing rate of infection. In less than a month the world was aware a virulent pandemic was underway with no means of containing it. The year was two thousand one hundred and ten. I was thirty-six years of age.

As Doc paced slowly back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back, he would stare straight ahead and then he began to look, for long moments at each person who watched him as if he were teaching a class and each person saw that the glow from the outside lights added an eerie tint to his silhouette.

Doc: Death became the injured hand. It shoved its way to the forefront. From hundreds each day at its inception, thousands every twenty-four hours around the world were dying within two years. In five years it was tens of thousand. The bodies couldn't be buried or cremated or disposed of quickly enough. Scientists developed the process of sublimation. A solid form, in this case a human body, was transitioned directly to a gas phase without going through the intermediate liquid phase. The dead were quite literally, vaporized. Enormous sublimation plants were quickly constructed around the world in all industrial areas. Here in the States there were at least three in each state with six in California, Texas and New York. Huge polypropylene pipes were embedded into the ground and with extensions, pushed deep into the core

of the earth. The gas vapor from the bodies was then injected through those pipes. Every day, every hour, every minute, the process went on. Refrigerated trucks were used, more were built. Refrigerated trains with a seemingly endless amount of containers rumbled continuously along the rails. Mass transit units had coils of chilled water placed inside them and used as body transport and they all went to the plants. Millions in the isolated, outlining areas simply rotted away and if the sun found their bodies they would leave their bleached bones as a monument, a testament to the devastation and horror that was being wrought upon the world and such was existence for twenty-five years. That's all that was known. It was death that stood in front and blocked out everything else and there was nothing in the background either. And then, for a period of five years it slowed and mysteriously, it finally ceased.

Doc paused and took a deep breath. He went to the table and picked up his mug and took a deep drink. Lena rose and took the mug and poured more water. Dosia and Fally passed the bottle between them and gulped as if parched. Others shifted. No one spoke. Doc sipped more water, set the mug on the table and resumed his place in front of the glass door but he did not pace. He did not move. He only placed his hands behind his back and now his voice lowered as if to soften the coming words.

Doc: A year after it began, my father was gone, my mother a year later. Next my wife, my brother and his family, my four sisters and their families, finally my son and two daughters were all gone.

Again Fally screamed, softly, and Dosia cried, audibly.

Doc: Yes Fally, that's something to scream about. Scream silently for humanity. Dosia don't cry, not for me. When my loss merges with the losses that consumed the individuals of the world, the personal pain lessens. And if you were to shed a tear for each and every life lost you would cry forever. So don't cry. Those of us

who lived through it were shocked then stunned and ultimately numbed by it all. Death is horrible and if it is not it is because life has become so.

Doc sat down and picked up his mug but he did not drink. He held it and stared into it as if there was something to see. Then he took a deep breath and raised his head and once again his voice was strong and authoritative.

Doc: This place that awaited your births had been drastically changed. Death did not discriminate. You're aware that four presidents died, two vice presidents, kings and queens, doctors, scientists, teachers and farmers along with the workers who made this country and the world livable, all died. Many leaders in all fields perished. Momentous advances being made in technology, medicine and the natural sciences halted. It did not matter the color of the human or the gender or age, old and young died. There was no protection in a specific belief or strength in a community or hope in isolation. When that disease struck there were headaches and chills, open sores and then the fever came and finally, in a matter of a week the heart stopped and there was no more breath to be taken. In death, humans came together as one. It was taught, in reality, that we are indeed all the same.

Now Doc rose, nearly jumping to his feet. He was animated and his hands moved and pointed and his eyes seemed to sparkle. Doc: Humans wanted to present that particular extinction as above the previous ones. It wasn't a mass extinction. This event deserved a status that was unassigned before. Thus it became the *Great Extinction*, the *G.E.* epoch! Of course a period involving humans was worthy of such elevated status. This occurrence was something horribly great. But let us view it another way. The darkest period of modern civilization also consisted of the truly greatest accomplishments and that was the great eliminations. Here are the significant changes that awaited all of you young

and healthy individuals. Pollution, eliminated! Poverty and joblessness were eliminated! Through the doctrine of *CMU*, homelessness was eliminated! The conflict between the class structures was virtually eliminated! Of course hatred could never be eliminated but it was suppressed. There have been no wars of significance through twenty-five years of mass dying and thirty years living in both remembrance and apprehension of that dying. There has been no strong motivation for ethnic conflict as the thoughts of disease were passed down to the children, above the thoughts of race and religious superiority. Exorbitant amounts for health care, eliminated! Everyone wants everyone else to be healthy. During the dying times greetings of wellness were issued with seriousness and were not perfunctory benign salutations that are now given through habit and have become commonplace. An individual had a moral obligation to inform truthfully if they were well or not.

Hiley: Are you well?

Crecy: I'm well and I hope you are too.

Hiley: Be well, please be well.

Crecy: You too, please be well.

The mood lightened. Doc chuckled.

Doc: Yes, exactly. The word wellness took on an unprecedented connotation. And the wellness of others was of paramount importance to each and every individual alive. Now let us look at the land itself. *West World* and *East World*, the most populated areas, are supported by the National Government. *Center World* as we all well know, is unsupported and is virtually empty and abandoned yet is right now and has continually, for the past thirty years, been going through deconstruction in those empty remote areas none of you have ever seen. Workers and robots with giant deconstruction units are imploding and tearing down all the old unoccupied structures and melting metal and pulverizing all else

and then digging huge, deep holes and placing into those holes what then remains from the buildings and unused roads and covering those holes with dirt and replanting native trees, flowers, plants and grass. Hardy strong-spirited individuals who are willing to protect themselves and their families can choose to place a claim on property or an existing home or claim property and build a home and live in near isolation and produce their own food and sustain themselves without government interference and even as I speak many people are now doing just that. They are slowly moving back into the middle of the country and reclaiming the land just as nature reclaims *Center World*. Near extinct animals and organisms thrive again through restored habitat. The ocean reefs are reforming. Marine life expands. The eco-system is healing and the ozone protects again. The air is clean and harmful chemicals reduced to the point that they also have been virtually eliminated. Each and every single thing that was being destroyed by overpopulation has been given another chance to live. The planet was afforded another opportunity and the humankind essentially, in many crucial ways, started over and has now proceeded through thirty years without another outbreak of the Omni-Strain. Enjoy your time my friends. The sexual restraints and modifications adhered to in *West World* and *East World* are breaking down and will not last much longer and *Center World* knows no boundaries. Sexual freedom is the norm here and so who knows what the future holds in that area, remember, no cure for that which almost emptied this earth was ever found.

Doc went to the couch, sat down and repositioned his device.
Doc: My grandfather was born in two thousand and sixteen. The *G.E. Period* began in two thousand one hundred and ten. I forget, Fally what year is this?

Fally was taking a long gulp from the upturned champagne bottle, emptying it of its contents.

Fally: I forget too Doc:

Dosia, and Crecy yelled in unison, 'Twenty One Seventy!

Doc: Vee, I want you to create a chart. List the populations of the world, the United States, and California and Nevada for the years two thousand and sixteen, two thousand one hundred and ten and two thousand one hundred and seventy. At the bottom of that chart list those same numbers for the year of nineteen seventy. Place into projection format and inform when done.

The device blinked several time. Yellow and red lights flashed and then they all blinked green slowly and then faster and finally remained green.

Vee: Done.

Doc leaned forward and turned the device toward the wall.

Doc: Project chart.

A light beamed from the device and the chart appeared on the wall

Doc: Enlarge two sizes. Brighten one level.

The chart enlarged and brightened. Everyone stared at it. There was no sound.

	POPULATION		
	<u>2016</u>	<u>2110</u>	<u>2170</u>
World:	7.4 BN	14.2 BN	3.45 BN
United States:	324.5 MM	688.3 MM	201.9 MM
California:	39.8 MM	77.4 MM	18.77 MM
Nevada:	3.1 MM	10 MM	442 K

POPULATION 1970	
World:	3.69 BN
United States:	205.1 MM
California:	19.97 MM
Nevada:	488 K

Finally there came a quiet comment.

Tiah: Now, is two hundred years ago.

Doc: And that my friends is my birthday story, in celebration of having lived ninety-six years, and counting.

Dosia: Doc, next year tell us a fairy tale, please.

Doc: I thank you all for sharing my day with me and Lena thank you so very much for your thoughtfulness. Now I'm going to take these glasses out of my eyes and go to bed. Sleep well all.

Fally: Ah, but what dreams may come after a story like that.

Hiley and Crecy pulled Doc to his feet as Lena spoke.

Lena: Listen, you're all going to a show tomorrow evening so get some rest during the day. Doc, you know where your room is. Hiley and Crecy are in the rooms next to Doc. Tiah you know your room and Fally and Dosia you have the guesthouse. That way you two can make all the noise you want. If anyone needs anything, buzz me. I wish for everyone to sleep well.

Hugs all around and goodnights and wishes of wellness and Lena watched as everyone moved down the hallways. She turned off the music and began to darken the lights. Then she stopped and slid open the door and stepped outside. She walked once around the pool and then stood and looked up at the stars and the moon. She spoke, a whisper to the sky.

Lena: Two hundred years. That's a long time.

She went back inside and finished turning everything off, activated the security system and went to bed.

It was a slow and relaxed start to the next day as all those who celebrated properly were required to sleep late. Lena and Tiah had risen early and were sitting in her office looking at monitors and their handheld Comm devices when Doc came to the open door a little after noon and tapped and walked in and sat down between them. He now wore his thick glasses and a broad smile.

Doc: Are you two well this afternoon?

Lena: I'm well Doc. How do you feel? Did you sleep well?

Tiah: I'm well Doc, I hope you are.

Doc: I slept like a restless child but I feel good. Are we ready to get down to some business?

Lena: We're ready. I assume you know all the instructions of the program?

Doc: I do.

He opened the carrying case he had brought and removed his larger device and set it on the desk. He took out an entry device and set it down also. He stood the larger device up and turned it toward the wall and tapped the keys on the entry device and the larger device lit up. He began tapping.

Doc: Here's an image of the program code.

The code appeared on the wall and began to rapidly scroll down. Abruptly it stopped.

Doc: In English here are the final instructions.

He tapped and words and numbers appeared on the wall.

Arrival location: 7679 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York.

Suite 2323

Arrival Date: 09292170

Arrival Time: 9-Ante Meridiem

Doc stopped and looked at Lena.

Lena: That's it?

Doc: That's it, basically. An address at which you are to arrive and the time you are to arrive. September twenty-nine at nine in the morning in New York City. I'll send you a detailed report of the complete English translation.

Lena leaned back and thought for several moments, staring at the information.

Lena: Why did it take so long for the simulated program to compile and reach executable status? There's nothing hidden?

Doc: Nothing hidden. Hiley went through it over and over and Crecy went through each line in reverse to double check. The program also contains a series of numerical combinations that would be used to gain access to the building. In mapping the precise location and following specific program directions it was determined that you would be using a rear entrance. A code would be used to unlock the door and another to activate the elevator and still another to actually enter the room on the twenty-third floor. The combinations are not that complex but were designed to take the longest to compile. Had the attackers been successful on their initial encounters you would have had ample time to reach that destination by the arrival date.

Lena: So someone desires me to be in New York.

Tiah: What are you to do now?

Doc: She's going to New York.

Lena: Tiah don't look at me like that. Listen, whoever is behind this knows their plan has not been implemented. I still remain uninfected. What they don't know is that Doc has decoded the program. I'll go to New York long before that arrival date and with the assistance of my *East World* associates I'll uncover who is behind this and what it is exactly that they want. In order to remove any future threat I must end this.

Doc: I can't disagree but ...

Lena: I'm always careful. Now relax, get some rest. Remember Tiah is taking all of you to a show tonight.

Doc gathered his devices. He turned to Lena and she grabbed him and gave him a hug.

Lena: I knew I could count on you. I thank you. Your account will increase in value.

Doc: You don't have to do that.

Lena: I know I don't. That's what makes it so enjoyable. Reward your assistants for their time and expertise. Your research is your

life. It has to be funded and it brings me pleasure to assist you in your endeavors. Don't deny me, don't protest and don't worry, everything will be fine and I'll be back by New Year's Eve and we'll meet here again.

Doc: Thank you for everything.

Lena: You're very welcome.

Doc adjusted his glasses, hesitated and then departed the room. Lena sat back down next to Tiah. She tapped on her entry device and one of the screens in front of her lit up. She requested a visual with Bige. It took about three minutes before the image of the large *DM* appeared.

Bige: Ah, Lena and Tiah. My what a wonderful celebration that was. Are you both well? Lena, display that golden tooth for me.

Lena: I'm well.

She smiled, turning her head slightly.

Tiah: I'm well. I hope you are.

Bige: I feel great. It blinds me Lena. I want one like that or perhaps two or maybe a diamond in one. I went home and stared at my bare chest in the mirror and gazed upon my jagged scar. I can barely see it now, how faint it is, but I remember, and what a reminder it is of Doc's importance to me. A scar he created for me. A beautiful lifesaving decoration. I almost shed tears. Now, what's on the agenda for the day?

Lena: Give us an update on the interlopers.

Bige: Yes, our sneaky friends. As we all know they ride past the house on occasion and the *Sarará* parks in his white car and stares wistfully through his large optical instrument. He does not realize the house he sits in front of is occupied by an associate of ours. I can touch him anytime you say.

Lena: No, that's too easy, keep away. Those three belong to me. I shall reward them for their persistence.

Bige: They remain separated in their furtive activities but hearken

carefully. They have all purchased fine rifles along with deadly ammunition.

Lena: Apparently they desire to accomplish more than just a touch with their little silver objects. Their tactics have evolved. Perhaps they now seek to capture me, succeed by coercion.

Bige: There's more. A strange *Branca DM* inquired about you at one of our gathering spots last night. I have scant information at this time but there are possibly two with him. We have a locate on them. As soon as we track them down we'll tag them and keep eyes on them from that point forward. The one asking questions was also described as sneaky looking.

Lena: Perhaps their forces have expanded. Keep me informed as necessary. I need for you to determine, if possible, exactly who is next door with the brothers. I must visit them at an opportune time and touch them when they are alone with their guards.

Bige: That presents a challenge. Individuals come and go. *DFs* sometimes stay the night. They do however attempt to maintain a subdued presence. There has been hostility and resistance as to how they gained position on the property. The claim is being contested and as of this time has not been approved. The house and land should have first reverted to the next of kin family, in this case Si's mother. Those trying to remain in possession say the property was abandoned. There's been no determination as to the fate of the missing family.

Lena: We have some time. I must go east and I'd like to leave within a week.

Bige: How far east?

Lena: New York.

Bige: *East World*, a long flight.

Lena: I'm driving.

Bige shook his head and then smiled.

Bige: An even longer drive. How exciting. I'm envious.

Lena: I have a vehicle that desires to go on a trip. I'll take my time and visit friends and associates as I stop along the way on business. Can you and Bella meet Tiah and the others at the Towers and go to a show with them?

Bige: Of course. We're partial to shows, a risqué musical I hope. What time?

Tiah: Meet us at eight. We'll have drinks before the start.

Bige: We'll be there. Lena, I shall notify you if anything of importance arises.

Lena: Enjoy yourself tonight.

Bige: Both, be well. Lena, keep smiling. Tiah, until tonight my friend.

Lena: Be well.

Tiah: Be well.

They closed communication. Lena got up and walked to the window and looked out.

Lena: What problems does Ain present?

Tiah: He has to disappear completely. Unless we can somehow touch him when he is alone then anyone with him must also go along. Do not concern yourself. Ain is a threat to you, which alone motivates me. Si was our associate and trusted friend. It will be a pleasure, in honor of Si and his family to enact justice upon him.

Lena: Justice?

Tiah rose and walked across the room to stand beside Lena at the window. He spoke, his voice quiet and sincere.

Tiah: After we return and everyone has retired I would like to have some time with you, just you and I.

Lena: Of course, just you and I.

Tiah: Be well.

Lena: Be well Tiah.

Lena turned and watched him as he walked away.

That evening Lena stood outside and watched as the revelers pulled from the front of the house and eased around the driveway toward the gates. She looked at the device in her hand. She saw the agents but they were not in the immediate area. She tapped the device and closed the gates. As she entered the house she activated the security system and went to her office. She launched a scan of all the house devices and then the personal devices and determining no unauthorized activity. She initiated a secure encrypted connection. For the next hour she responded to business obligations, attempted to notify associates and friends along her planned route and then in code, alerted her main New York associate she was on her way there with an approximate date of arrival.

When she was done she shut down all the devices in the room and with just one for handheld access she went to her bedroom and laid out everything she wanted to wear. She then removed all her clothes and taking a towel and her device, with which to remain on alert, she went to the kitchen, got a cold drink and then turning on some music to be piped outside she went to the pool and dived in.

She swam laps without counting and then floated on her back and stared at the sky changing colors. Then she got out and while reclining on a chair, on her towel, she read her latest notifications and relaxed until it was time to dress for the night.

It was near midnight when Lena pressed her device to open the gates and the long automobile began to move toward the house. She waited outside to meet them. She wore a pale-yellow, short summer dress that came off her shoulders and soft flat pale-yellow shoes. The outside lights seemed to cast her in a glow and as she stood in that substance that appeared as heat she was radiant and seemed happy and excited.

She smiled as the driver opened the doors and her friends piled out singing and laughing. And as the auto pulled away Doc broke out into a soft-shoe dance, mimicking the movements from the musical they had enjoyed. Others twirled, Lena joined in and they all danced into the house.

There was food waiting for anyone hungry and after a bite to eat, Abe and Abbie retired, Doc soon followed them and then Hiley and Crecy went to bed. Lena had barred Fally and Dosia from the pool because they were drunk, so taking some food along, the two headed to the guesthouse.

Lena lowered and slowed the music and then dimmed the lights, motioned to Tiah and they stepped outside and followed a few steps and watched as Fally and Dosia, arms around each other for support walked into the darkness. The lights of the small structure came on and then music, loud voices, muffled screams and laughter could be heard. Lena turned to Tiah.

Lena: Walk with me.

She put her right arm around his left and held it and they strolled in silence past the tall palm trees, turpentine bushes and sage, nearly to the rear wall and on the return, Tiah spoke.

Tiah: You look beautiful tonight.

Lena: Thank you. Those are such nice words. You appear so special in that suit. Your tanned color and orange hair befit your presentation so well. I've always admired you Tiah.

Tiah: Such compliments. With modesty I accept. Thank you.

Here they paused and Tiah turned to her and spoke softly.

Tiah: Do you remember the first time we met?

Lena: Of course. It was on a Saturday night outside that club in Beverly Hills.

Tiah: You took that knife from the *DM* who was attempting to stab me in the back.

Lena: You were already hand fighting with that *DM* and *DF* and that was a treacherous act. I detest treachery. Besides, you looked good fighting that battle for honor and position. I had observed how it began. I wanted to assist you.

They started to walk again.

Tiah: That was the first time you saved me.

Lena: There were others to intervene.

Tiah: But they didn't. And you, presenting just as you are now, aided me and your dark-brown skin hypnotized me. I was young and rash but even then I knew you were different somehow because I felt an embodiment of a spirit and the depth of a soul I could have never conceived of before meeting you.

They entered the house and turned to one another. Lena looked up into the light-brown eyes, large and serious.

Lena: Are you concerned about my trip?

Tiah: No, there is another matter that has moved to the front of my life. Or, to use Doc's word, the foreground of my existence.

He extended his hands.

Tiah: Dance with me.

Lena went into his arms and they moved around the room. They were close and their bodies seemed to merge. Tiah would spin her away and bring her back and they became lost in the music and essence of one another. When the music faded away and before it began again, still holding her, Tiah looked down into her eyes and Lena's eyes widened as he spoke and his smooth voice seemed to thicken and resonate with the emotion that flowed through the near whisper.

Tiah: I'm dying for your love.

Lena put her left hand up to his lips.

Lena: Please don't. Don't use that word.

She turned away and walked to the door, as if to look out.

Tiah: Love?

He followed to move behind her, close.

Lena: Dying.

Tiah: It's the perfect word. The pain I experience must be as a slow tortured death. How else would I describe it? I've loved you from the first instance I saw you. Before that fateful particular night I had seen you previously in that club. I recognized uniqueness in you. The way you walked and carried yourself as if you were beyond the moment and not simply from another world but another era, a time I could not begin to understand. You thrilled me, inspired me and each day the pain worsens because I know you know, and have known for years my feelings for you.

Lena: I sense you truly believe the words you speak to me and I'm honored a man such as you would say that word, love.

Tiah: What am I to do? I cannot contact your heart or touch your soul. I long for you, ache for you and I suffer deep inside when I'm in your presence.

His voice almost broke but he gathered himself and anguish spilled forth.

Tiah: You have no idea how that feels, how I feel!

He turned from her and started to slide open the door.

Lena: No! Don't go! Stay and hear this. Come sit next to me.

She took his hands and they moved to the couch. She sat on the edge with his hands in hers. She lifted his right hand and placed it to her cheek. Then she kissed it softly and still holding on she lowered it into his lap. She did not let his hand go.

Lena: I know exactly how you feel. My knowing does not ease your pain but listen to me and try to understand. Perhaps this that we experience together will bind us and somehow make our relationship, ours. Just as you, I have loved someone from afar for many years, as if all my life. This individual, this man is unreachable to me. He is so close yet so far that my love for him

will forever remain unfulfilled. He consumes me yet he is outside of my existence. I will never be his and he will never be mine in specific ways. Without shame I implored him to take me, experience me, to do with me as he pleased but he had promised sexual fidelity to the spirit that haunted him and the ghostly memory of his departed wife whose death he had caused. He chose to live his life in mourning and he swore he would always remain on a lifelong journey of self-denial and celibacy. A man of his word he is bound by his own oath. I want you to be clear on this. I am far from sinless but in the pure meaning of the word virgin, I am that. Yes, I am pure because I made a vow also. I vowed that if I could not have him I would uplift my love for him, elevate it and claim it wonderful and exalted by not ever having anyone sexually, as long as he lived.

Tiah dropped his eyes and turned away. Lena gently turned his head back to her. She held him in her gaze and he wanted to avoid her dark-brown eyes and so again he tried to turn but something he could not describe, a force, an energy ran through him when she spoke, commanded, and he was immobilized.

Lena: Look at me! Look at me! So in longing and pain we are joined as one and I want to assist you, if you allow me. I learned that acceptance was the answer to this impossibility. Once I made my solemn declaration I accepted the consequences of that which I forbade myself. I learned to accept that which I received from him and thus from the world I created. So my pain subsided. My life improved. I no longer suffered as you do now. I realized he loved me too and returned my love as best he could. Accept from me what I can provide. You must know how deeply my feelings are for you. Of course that which I feel for you and have expressed to you, is love. It's my love for you, not for him or anyone else. What I feel for you is yours and belongs only to you. I would not hesitate to kill anyone who attempted to harm you

in any way. Your goal is clear yet noble and that is to maintain that which you have created. You are filled with integrity and loyalty and I trust you above all others. Through the years we have grown, accomplished much and shared both protection and companionship. Live your life. Remain true to the person you are now, this moment in time. Bring into your life whomever you believe has your best interests in their heart and seeks to experience joy with you. I place no restrictions and I'll always give to you everything I am able to give and that belongs to you. Desire from me what is yours.

Tiah was staring into her eyes and as her last words faded they seemed to echo and then all was quiet in his soul and he was let go and could move again and he saw her eyes fill and for the first time in the years he had known her he realized that tears were falling and Lena was crying and he spoke softly.

Tiah: Why do you weep?

Lena: For you, selfishly for my own plight and with the thought of all those in the world who experience unfulfilled love, it is impossible not to shed tears. Tiah please, do not forsake me.

He reached for her and they embraced, clung to one another.

Tiah: Never! Never! Let us together in harmony discover what the future holds.

By two in the afternoon the next day everyone stood outside in front of the house as the driver of the long car and Abe loaded luggage. The time had arrived so amid laughter and some sadness, hugs and kisses and wishes of good fortune and wellness were shared by all. Fally and Dosia jumped into their little orange car to return to Reno and as they pulled toward the gates Fally honked the horn, extended an arm and waved and could be heard screaming as they passed through the palm trees.

As the others began to climb in, Lena and Tiah stood beside each other in silence. Then he turned to her. They both smiled and behind the pleasant expressions on their faces was a new understanding and a greater appreciation for that which they had created and would hold on to, together.

Lena: A kiss goodbye?

Tiah: Of course.

They kissed goodbye and as Tiah pulled away and backed up to the car he spoke.

Tiah: I'll contact you later tonight. Protect yourself. Remain on guard at all times and be well.

Lena: Alright, I will, and also be well.

When he reached the car and was about to climb in Lena yelled to him.

Lena: There's a gift for you in the Malibu garage! Enjoy!

He looked puzzled, waved and then they all were gone. Lena looked down at the device in her hand and closed the gates. She could also see the indicators of the cars of the agents, both stationary, as one sat down the street to the left and one remained one street over to the right. She stared at her device. Neither moved to follow the long car. As she looked at her device another indicator, several miles away, appeared and a notification came through from Bige.

Bige: Just activated tag on a third automobile. Moving in your direction. Three individuals. Will provide description of car and occupants next.

She entered the house. Abe set the security system and she went to her office. As she turned Comm devices and monitors on, the next notification came through.

Bige: Purple car. One *Branca DM* with white hair. One *Vermelha DF* with red hair. One *Azul DM* with blue hair.

Lena sent a notification reply.

Lena: Thanks, will contact each other as necessary.

She worked for two hours on business and then finished by creating a weather forecast for the next thirty days and loaded it onto her portable device.

Notifications of arrivals and thanks came in from Doc, Hiley and Crecy as she worked. She had finished and was looking out of the window when Dosia sent thanks and informed her that they had stopped to visit friends and would notify upon their arrival home the next day.

She then went to her bedroom and began pulling together everything that would be required for her next door visit and cross country journey and moved the first of those items into a separate closet.

Taking all three of her new weapons, the only ones she would carry from this point forward, she went to the range to shoot. After she cleaned, oiled and prepped the weapons she changed into a bathing suit and sat underneath an umbrella by the pool and sipped a cold drink. When the sun was gone she went to the diving board and plunged into the water.

After her swim she reclined by the pool and attempted to relax, to no avail. The many laps she swam only seemed to energize her. She realized she was anxious and on edge. She wanted, needed to start east but first, with her company having departed she was ready to proceed immediately with the unfinished business that was very near and dear to her.

A call came in from Bige. She picked up the Comm device beside her and opened communication. His deep voice seemed to cause her hand to throb.

Bige: Hello my dear. Quiet isn't it? Are you well?

Lena: I am well. I hope you are too. It is quiet but I'm used to that here. You have information?

Bige: Are you clear on your new visitors?

Lena: Yes, I may not have the time for them. If I can't get to them I'll give them to you.

Bige: Good, a gift I can appreciate. Now, I made contact with a *DF* who is regularly engaged by Iin for pleasurable favors. She has just shared with me that he has arranged for her and three of her working associates to meet him, his brother and the two enforcers at their casino tomorrow evening at seven for dinner, drinks and a little gaming activity. They are then, all of them, to return to the house. The *DFs* are to drive together and depart together. She will inform me when they leave the house and who remains. Nothing has changed in the house. They haven't taken the time to refurnish and even the children's items still remain. How morbid they are. Also, Si never had an alarm system and there is still none. My contact will update if any change of plans occur. Tomorrow night may be your time to perform.

Lena: Yes, perhaps. Let's anticipate you being correct. Put our cleaners on standby. When this is done the house should be cleaned out completely and we need to immediately have a claim formally initiated for Si's mother on that property. When the approval comes through put the house on our maintenance and upgrade contract. As long as his mother has the house we'll be responsible.

Bige: I'll take care of everything.

Lena: We'll be in contact. I just need to know when the *DFs* leave and who remains. I'll be prepared.

Bige: My dear Lena, you are always prepared. Until tomorrow, be well.

Lena: Be well my friend.

The connection ended. She leaned back, contemplating. She sipped her drink and closed her eyes. Minutes passed like that and then her device buzzed. She picked it up, looked and saw it was Tiah.

Lena: Hello Tiah.

Tiah: Hello Lena, are you well?

Lena: I am, I hope you are.

Tiah: I am indeed! Right at this moment I'm sitting in your gift. Words are difficult to find. This is so unique. This generous act means so much. To have something like yours humbles me and gives me much pleasure. Thank you! Thank you!

Lena: You're very welcome. It makes me feel good to share something like that with you. I know it's only a thing, material and transitory but you deserve it and we're going to live life to the fullest.

Tiah: Yes, and together, with me driving of course, we shall ride up the coastal highway to beautiful San Francisco the very first opportunity we have. We'll partake of seafood and fine wine and gaze at the bay water and then ride across the golden bridge to Sausalito and find somewhere to dance the night away.

Lena: Such imagination! We must make that happen. Is that your promise to me?

Tiah: I promise.

Lena: You sound excited and pleased.

Tiah: I am both, and it's your doing.

Lena: Hearing your voice like that takes me there also. Now, I want you to do something for me.

Tiah: Of course, say it!

Lena: Honk the horn, four times, announce your presence.

He did and they both laughed.

Tiah: Anything new there?

Lena: Yes, Bige has given me information that indicates I may be able to visit my new neighbors as soon as tomorrow night. This means you must touch Ain soon thereafter. If I do go I'll be contacting you before and immediately upon my return. Put your people on alert. Are you ready?

Tiah. An alert will be issued. The plan has been formulated. We're ready. Send a notification to release me.

Lena: I'll do that. Now take a ride in your 'Vette and be well.

Tiah: I will cruise in your honor. Be well.

Lena smiled, almost laughed aloud. It was exciting to hear Tiah's voice full of energy and positive emotion. He tended to be consistently subdued and pensive and yet just moments ago he sounded full of enthusiasm and alive.

She thought of the pain he had expressed and how heartrending it had been for her and she knew she never wanted to experience that again with him. To be the cause of such despair in someone she cared so deeply for had forced her own feelings to whirl to the surface and she had felt unpleasantly raw, open and exposed and now she could clearly observe the spreading, the expansion of her existence.

It was crucial to keep within her life those she could trust and believe in but she also wanted to invest her emotions and care for and promote those she chose to keep close. It was important that they all, each and every one of them flourished and thrived in all manners. She knew that ultimately it was those she shielded and defended who gave to her purpose and direction so that the tremendous weight and the unyielding burden of unending life would not crush her.

She thought about the distance that lay in front and all, which she could not know, that lay between here and there. It was an adventure that called her forth and wailed for her to come out once again and travel through risk and uncertainty and engage the challenges that would arrogantly confront her along the way.

It was a shrill sound that always seemed to travel on the air and find her. This time the prolonged cry emanated from *East World* and it gave her life an even greater purpose and more precise direction. It was a banshee voice that for her, would not

ever stay away for any extended time and she adored it and was always thrilled by its piercing sound and she looked forward to this journey and all it entailed. She was determined to resolve this issue that restricted her freedom.

The next night, a little before midnight, Lena was dressed and stood looking out of her bedroom window. She wore a tight, dark-blue, full-body linen suit tucked and tied into calf-length cloth boots with thick soles. At her left waist was one of Cuddy's pistols equipped with a silencer. Strapped to the outside of each thigh was a sheath that held a twelve-inch dagger. Her skin-like brown gloves lay on the bed. Hard, thumping, loud music played throughout her room and the sound engulfed her as the bass vibrated the walls and she focused on the pretty floodlighted marigolds and globe mallow flowers and the pink fairy dusters seemed to wave at her. She looked up into the sky and saw the moon that hung low in the partially cloudy sky and she was calm, her spirit quiesced by the impending task.

She remained there like that until one in the morning and then her Comm device buzzed. She looked at it lying on the table beside her. A notification came through.

Big: They have departed. Four remain. Do it!

She pulled on her gloves and left through the pool door. She walked to the rear wall, near the far left corner and taking several running steps she leaped to the top, pulled herself up, over and dropped into the semi-darkness, to the ground. She turned and looked at the house sitting in the distance. This structure was larger than hers and sat near the front edge of four acres and contained two floors. Lights were on downstairs and up.

She moved along the wall and then started toward the rear of the house, pausing in the center of a cluster of palm trees and cactuses. She waited, listening and then she eased up behind the

house, close. She looked around the corner and could see the pool and the nearby room that was still lit. She moved back into the darkness and closed her eyes, absorbing the sounds of the night.

She remained there for a little over two hours and when she looked around the corner the room was empty of light. She stepped back and looked at the rear windows upstairs, they were dark. She went to the front. It was dark. Both sides were black. She listened and all was quiet, deathly quiet.

Back she went to the rear. Again she stared around the corner at the pool. She recalled the many times she had swam and played in that pool with her friends' three children. The children she had taught to swim. She had been at the hospital at each of their births and she thought of their loving and doting mother and father. Those children were precious to her and now they and their futures that awaited them were gone forever. She had to force open her fisted hands.

She removed a stick suction and laser pen from her back pocket and moved in silence to the pool door. She tried the door and it was locked. She pressed the suction cup to the glass near the handle and with the laser she cut out a circle near the handle and placed the glass and laser into the nearby flowerbed. She reached in, turned the lock and carefully slid the door open and stepped inside.

The curtains were open so the lights from the pool area cast a bluish glow into the room and spread a dull illumination onto empty bottles and glasses and food containers and coats and shoes cast onto the floor.

She knew this house and its every room. There were the three bedrooms downstairs and four bedrooms, in a half circle pattern upstairs. She surmised the enforcers would most likely be down and the two brothers in the master and second largest room up.

It was never her intention to creep throughout the house and place quiet bullets into them. It was her desire to touch them with her hands.

As she was standing there the nearest bedroom door suddenly opened and she dropped down beside the couch. A large form walked past and went to the kitchen. When the chilling unit light flared she rose slightly to see a thick, bald-headed *Parda DM* bend, remove a bottle of water, take several gulps, put the bottle back and close the door. Now, in the gloom, he stumbled back to the room.

Lena, still low, moved around the couch and when he passed she leaped onto his back, wrapped her arms around his throat and with a cracking sound she broke his neck. He was dead. She laid him down and moved along the hallway to the next bedroom. The door was open and a form lay on its left side, his back to her, coughing and snoring. She walked up to the bed and pulled his shoulder. The form rolled onto its back revealing another *Parda DM* with long black hair. She shook him awake and when he groggily opened his eyes, with her left hand, she pinned his right arm to the bed and her right hand clamped down upon his throat. He kicked forward twice with both legs and she squeezed and he grabbed at her with his left hand. His eyes bulged and he flailed at her and she squeezed harder, crushing his throat and when he was dead she continued to squeeze and she started to rip his head from his body. She released him.

She went to the winding stairs and looked up at the doors of each room. They were all closed. The larger rooms were situated on each end. She eased up the stairs and when she reached the top she pushed on the overhead lights and then turned right. She stood in front of the door and listened. She looked down and could observe no sudden light emanating from beneath the door. She pulled the dagger on her left thigh, gently turned the knob

and slowly opened the door. The room brightened slightly from the hallway light and when she reached the bed she could see it was the third brother, Uin lying on his back, a *Canelada DM* with long cinnamon-colored hair. His mouth was closed and his eyes partially open. She stared a moment and when a choking snore was heard she realized he slept like that, trying to see, even in his sleep. As she looked down at this individual, emotions spilled up inside her. She slapped him awake. His eyes opened, widened, puzzled and confused.

Uin: What are you doing here? What d'ya want?

Lena: You know why I'm here. I want you.

She plunged the dagger into him. It sounded as it penetrated his breastbone and quieted as it went through his heart. He was dead with his eyes open and the dagger remained upright, protruding from his body.

She moved quickly back along the hallway to the brother in the master bedroom. She pulled the other dagger, opened the door and walked up to the sleeping, reddish-haired figure sprawled naked, nearly hanging off the bed, on his back. It was Iin, the second born *Canelada DM*. As if he overslept, with irritation in her voice she loudly commanded him awake.

Lena: Wake up Iin! Wake up!

He rose up startled and automatically reached for the pistol on the nightstand beside him. She stabbed his hand, pinning it to the table. He hollered and she knocked the gun away, snatched the dagger from his hand, pushed him onto his back and plunged the blade into his chest and through his heart and he also was dead and the daggers would remain as they were, standing up straight in their bodies as markers, representations of her pointed hatred for their treacherous, despicable acts. She stared at him for a long moment and then turned and left the room.

Going now to the next room, she slowly opened the door and

turned on the light. This was the girls' room. A room painted and decorated for an eleven and nine year old. She went to the closet and looked at the little clothes and shoes, ran her hands over the pants and jeans and smiled at the little boots. She walked to the dresser and looked at the small bottles of fragrances. Then she went to a bed and removed the case from a pillow. She went through the small human-like figures that sat all around the room with innocent faces smiling and wide eyes opened and found the two little figures she sought, two of the ones she had given, one to each child. She placed them into the pillowcase and left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

She walked a few steps and entered the seven-year-old boy's room. There were articles of clothing strewn around on the floor and on the bed. She removed clothes from the top of a large toy chest and got down on her knees and taking a deep breath she lifted the lid. She dug through the toys and found the two for which she searched. They were little precise replica automobiles. She looked at the first one and turned it over in her hands. It was a nineteen fifty-seven black hardtop Corvette. She placed it into the case. Then she looked at the other one and smiled slightly as she held it in the palm of her hand. It was a nineteen fifty-seven red and white Corvette convertible and the top was red. She placed it into the case with the other precious mementos, rose and left the room and without looking back she departed the house.

Upon reaching the wall she pushed the case into her belt, went back over and walked slowly through the trees. When she got to her room she set the figures and cars on the table near her bed. Then she sent simultaneous notifications to Tiah and Bige.

Lena: It's done.

Within a minute Bige sent one back.

Bige: Justice?

She immediately replied.

Lena: Retribution.

A minute later Tiah responded.

Tiah: Justice?

She replied with one word.

Lena: Revenge.

She removed her clothes and stood for an extended time under a shower of cold water and then lay naked on her bed, listened to soft, slow music and stared at the rotating ceiling fan and as dawn approached she fell into a restless sleep.

She was awakened at one in the afternoon by the buzz of the Comm device on the nightstand beside her. It was Bige.

Bige: Claim has been initiated. Cleaners at work.

She acknowledged and lay there a little while longer. She felt weighted and listless and she knew the cause. Tiah had not yet contacted her. She pulled herself up and got ready for the day.

She had Abe pull the gas truck from behind the garage and fill the extra large tank of the vehicle she would be driving and also plug it in to charge the batteries. She had him remove the covering on the Corvette so she could see it and it was to remain that way until she had gone.

She got into the vehicle and entered a code that gave her full access and then locked it in. A partial, basic automated check on the electrical system and all engine and power components was then run. Making numerous trips back and forth from the house, she began carefully placing all she would need into the specific areas and designed designated compartments.

What she now arranged was not just important but essential. Each item that was being put into the vehicle was filed into her memory as to its exact location and then she would ensure that she could reach what she wanted with minimal effort.

She and this transportation would be, as much as possible, completely self-contained. She already had clothes and other necessities at all of the stops along the way and she would purchase other items as required.

She placed her rifle into its front holder near the dashboard in front of the passenger seat and slid the two pistols, grip up, into their holders in the console area and hung the holsters near the rifle. She activated the step extension and when she opened the door it deployed and she stepped down and out. She then went into the house and took from her closet five wide brim palm straw hats and four were put in the rear storage area and the black one was placed on the passenger seat with a pair of black gloves.

She got back in behind the steering wheel and looked around. She adjusted her seat several times so that she could reach all of the controls and main items she would need. She wanted all her weapons to be within arms length and yet she would still have to be able to drive comfortable and efficiently. Now the initial tasks were done and she smiled as she looked around. The dashboard area was black and the interior was a dark gold with black leather trim and her black guns looked good against that golden-colored cloth.

A little over a year ago this vehicle had been delivered directly from the factory and except for several test drives around the area this would be the first real trip in this creation that she and Dimmis had designed and she looked forward to seeing how it performed. The automaker had often boasted of how proud she was of this thing she had made that wasn't a car.

After eating something, she sat in the front room and stared out past the driveway and into the trees. She watched, as it grew dark outside. She felt anxious and then at eight Tiah requested a visual connection.

She could feel her heart as she rose and ran to her office. She pressed a button in front of the largest monitor and the clear image of Tiah appeared. She sat down and quickly slowed her breathing.

Tiah: Hello Lena. Are you well?

Lena: I am. Are you well? Are you alright?

Tiah: Yes, I'm well. Everything is done here.

Lena: I'm so relieved but I should have known you would be careful in your business.

Tiah: It's over. Now, when do you depart?

Lena: As soon as both cars arrive to stalk me again I will lead them to their destiny. Bige may get the last three.

Tiah: A shame those last ones aren't here. They could belong to me. Lena, let us not speak of separation and let us not worry each about the other. Do you promise to return so that we may be together, toast to good health and prosperity and drink champagne as the next New Year Day prepares to arrive?

Lena: Yes, I promise.

Tiah: Then any dour words, negative thoughts or annoying worries would be for naught. Do you agree?

Lena: I agree.

Tiah: Your task is to focus on that which lies before you and I make this promise to you. I will be there where you are now on New Year's Eve.

Lena: Yes. Yes, we will both of us, fulfill our promises.

Tiah: You look lovely. Smile for me.

She smiled and raised her hand to the screen.

Lena: And as always, you look strong and handsome

He raised his hand and they touched, virtually.

Tiah: Be well Lena.

Lena: Be well Tiah.

They ended communication.

Lena pushed a button on her desk and when the hard rocking music started it resounded throughout the house. She turned it up loud and spun around the desk into the middle of the room. There she twisted and turned and played an imaginary guitar and beat on imaginary drums. She was now weightless and she danced out into the hallway and all the way to her bedroom.

After a hot shower she oiled her body and stared at her naked dark-brown image as she brushed and combed her hair. Finally, she lit a candle, crossed her legs beneath her on the bed and put herself into an hour-long trance and then, as the scented candle extinguished itself and the wispy smoke floated into the air she stretched her legs out and entered a deep and peaceful sleep

The next morning, before the sky began to brighten, she sat on the couch in the front room. As she occasionally glanced down at the Comm device in her hand the silhouetted palm trees and flowers began to slowly retreat from the previous night's darkness and the dawn crept onward.

She was dressed in all black for travel and for battle. She was prepared to wait each morning like this and all she wanted was for both of the tracking indicators to move toward her. She couldn't leave until both of the automobiles had taken their respective positions. Several hours had passed and it was when she was returning from the kitchen to the couch that the first little dot began to move and thirty minutes later it stopped down the street to her left. That would be Fronie and Madge in their yellow car. Twenty minutes later the other indicator moved and within fifteen minutes it had stopped one street over. That would be Dirch in his white car. She noted the time. It was nearing eight in the morning.

Lena rose, called out to Abbie and Abe and she embraced them and they all expressed heartfelt goodbyes and well wishes.

She walked through the kitchen into the garage, pressed a button and the door in front of her vehicle slowly raised. It was the one she had named Baby. As she approached, the extension lowered and she pulled open the door, stepped up and slid in. With a press of a button she fired it up and pulled into the new daylight.

She pushed a button on a central panel that came up from the floor near her right hand and the rifle moved forward to within close reach. There were fully loaded magazines for the rifle and fully loaded magazines for the pistols that were placed in holders throughout the interior.

Next she pressed a button in the center of her steering wheel and every light and gauge not already active, lit up. A large monitor, top center on the dashboard area came on and divided into four screens. Below there, above the gearshift, another monitor was blinking in wait status.

She pressed another button on the steering wheel and Baby came to life. The voice resonated, seemingly throughout the interior. It was clear, authoritative and in an obvious *PF* tone.

Baby: I await your command.

Lena: Hello Baby, ready to go for a ride?

Baby: Say a command. Say a command.

Lena: Disregard.

Baby was silent.

Lena: Activate voice recognition mode.

Baby: Voice recognition mode activated.

Lena: Activate mapping.

Baby: Mapping activated.

The bottom left area of the four-section screen lit up and showed a map and Lena's position with Baby being a red arrow indicator. Lena placed her hand device near the screen and loaded her portable tracking system onto the map. Now as she looked at the dashboard monitor she could see the black dots of the two

cars and as she noted them she smiled slightly, a third black indicator was moving in her direction. That would be the purple car with the other three agents. Now she would wait until they got near so she could also bring them along for the ride.

She adjusted the music level and cleaned her sunglasses and put them on. She pressed a button on the dashboard and the dark metal covering on the glass portion of her roof slid back and she looked up into the sky. Then she notified Bige.

Lena: Third car approaches. They're all mine.

Within a minute Bige replied.

Bige: You giveth and taketh. Enjoy your journey and be well!

Lena: I'm gone. Be well.

She turned that hand device off and placed it on a charging station on the side of the center console. She activated her wrist Comm device, put it in sync mode with the vehicle and adjusted her earpiece.

Now, in order to double check her previous verifications, she ran a comprehensive examine through the central processing unit.

Lena: Run diagnostics on all systems.

Baby: Initiating complete diagnostics.

Colored lights began blinking and any unit off, turned on briefly to ensure its successful functioning. The three remaining blank screens came on in test patterns and then went dark. The Radar Scope above the shifter came on, scanned and went off. All lights went on and off and this continued for nearly ten minutes. The engine and all computerized components, brakes, coolant system, oil pressure, tires, headlights, rear lights, air conditioning, solar panels and hybrid system, everything was checked and verified.

Baby: All systems normal.

Lena looked at the screen in front of her. The third indicator drew closer. She was waiting for the right moment.

Lena: Activate turbo-charger one.

Baby: Turbo-charger one activated.

Lena: Activate turbo-charger two.

Baby: Turbo-charger two activated.

Lena buckled in, put on her gloves, opened the gates, shifted into first and eased forward.

Down the street the two agents were sitting slouched down with caps pulled low on their heads. Madge was applying gel to her nose and Fronie was holding a small mirror and looking intently at hers when Madge noticed the gates moving.

Madge: Look, the gates are opening!

Fronie sat up and lifted her cap.

Fronie: Is it her?

Baby pulled forward and stopped. The gates closed.

Madge: What is that black thing?

Fronie: Is it her?

Madge: Can't tell, the windows are tinted.

Fronie: It looks like a small tank.

Madge: Or a large Ranger. The windows are coming down!

Fronie: It's her! It's her, finally!

She reached to the back seat for the rifle.

Madge: Use your pistol. We'll drive by. That thing won't have any speed.

They buckled in.

Madge: Look at the tires on that thing.

Fronie: Off road, probably airless.

Madge: Look how long it is!

Fronie: Get ready, she's moving! Blinker's on left. She's coming this way.

Madge: No, right! Blinking right!

Fronie: Blinker's off. No blinker.

Madge: Left again!

Fronie cursed several times.

Madge: Right again! It's moving this time! Here we go!

The big black thing pulled to the street, turned right and eased away. Madge waited for a car to pass them and then pulled in behind that car. Up the street the two agents moved, slowly.

Lena, looking in her large side mirrors, saw the yellow car following. She came to a four-way stop. The white car pulled to the corner on the left. The purple car came closer to the corner on the right and when she saw the backseat agent in that car move forward and look at her and point, she let all her windows up.

The car in front of the yellow car stopped as Lena crossed the intersection. The white car turned in behind Lena, going slowly to keep its distance from her. As he turned, Dirch put a hat on to conceal his yellow hair.

Fronie: Look, it's Dirch!

Now she cursed at him. Poisonous epithets rained upon his unhearing ears.

Madge sped around the stopped car in front of them, ran the stop sign and moved in close behind Dirch, honking the horn. Dirch looked in his rearview mirror and recognized the occupants behind him, making obscene gestures. He showed them his weapon and sped up when he saw the black thing was moving away into the distance toward the highway entrance.

The purple car had pulled up to the right corner as Lena began to cross. The driver had seen Dirch make his turn and as he shook his head and pointed, his white hair bounced on his neck.

One: It's Dirch! Look, it's Dirch! What's he doing here?

The number three agent in the back seat had grabbed his head and ran both his hands through his short blue hair.

Three: He's not supposed to be here! Something's wrong!

But their confusion peaked when they saw the yellow car speed through the intersection. The number two agent pulled her sunglasses down from her red hair, pointed and hollered.

Two: It's Fronie and Madge! Are they chasing Dirch? What's going on?

One: No, it's that black thing! They're after her! That must still be their target!

Three was growing frantic.

Three: That's not their orders! That's not the plan!

Two yelled at Three then spoke to One and pointed.

Two: Be quiet! Follow them! Stay back!

Three: No, let's get out of here! Abort! Abort the mission!

Then One had settled the issue and decided their direction.

One: I'm in charge and I have to find out what's going on.

Thus they had gotten in line way back, behind Baby. The black thing slowly eased through the traffic, turned onto the highway and immediately picked up speed. The white car and yellow car jockeyed for nearest position. First one and then the other moved closest, as if racing, but the faster they went the faster the black thing in front of them moved. With the traffic interference they could only get but so close. Suddenly the black thing accelerated, leaving them behind, and took the exit to the dam. The cars took the exit with Dirch leading and the purple car, with the Two agent watching through long glasses, followed.

Now traffic thinned and Dirch and Madge were reaching nearly ninety miles an hour and as they raced side by side along the winding road the vehicle they pursued would come into view, round a curve and disappear. Fronie grabbed the rifle, put the window down and when the black thing came into view again, opened fire and sparks flew when the bullets hit. Curses came, the words exploding from the agent's mouth and statements followed.

Fronie: It's bulletproof! It is a tank! I'll shoot the tires!

Madge: You'll waste your ammunition. Notify Dirch. We've got to work together, catch her and box her in and then run her off the road and roll that thing over.

Fronie sent the notification.

Fronie: I'll take care of Dirch on the way back. I don't like him.

Dirch looked at the alert on the Comm device sitting up in the holder on his dashboard. He pulled up beside the other two and vigorously nodded his head.

Around the next bend they raced and as the road straightened they saw in the distance the black thing turn onto a narrow paved road and start up between rocky mountains. They maneuvered to reach the turn and Madge got there first. She then had to avoid a road-closed barricade and a sign that said it was a dead end and no unauthorized vehicles. She avoided the barricade and ran through the wooden sign and accelerated up the road.

Fronie: We got her now!

Madge: No way out!

Dirch, sliding sideways had nearly lost control as he ran through the barricade sign and he fell behind so now he went faster to catch up. He thought about running the car ahead of him off the road and over the side but decided he'd do that on the way down. Right now he figured he needed the other two. He increased his speed.

The ascending road led to a communication tower on top and as it wound through the mountains it narrowed even more and there were signs identifying the coming turnaround points ahead.

Fronie could look out of her window over the side of the road and see the rocks that lay below and could feel the tires trying to grip, struggling to maintain traction and could observe Madge wrestling furiously with the steering wheel.

Suddenly, as they came around the mountain Madge slammed

on the brakes and the tires squealed but they did not stop, they were sliding and Dirch, having almost caught up, also slammed on his brakes as he saw what Madge had seen. He was also turning sideways and smoke was rising from his protesting tires and he could see that black thing stopped ahead facing them.

Its massive silver grill seemed to grin at them and their target was standing up through the retractable roof with her black rifle pointed upwards and when the yellow car finally came to a stop she dropped the rifle into firing position and with a short burst of gunfire through the front windshield on the passenger side, Fronie's chest exploded. Madge shifted into reverse and pressed the accelerator while turning the steering wheel. With another burst, Madge's head disappeared. The car continued speeding backwards and went off the side of the road, rolled down over and over again to the rocks below and erupted into flames and as the billowing smoke rose, Dirch was trying to turn around, to no avail, and as he got sideways both tires on the right side were shot out. He grabbed the rifle beside him and jumped from the car and from behind the hood area he peered over to see the target quickly drop down from his sight. He aimed but the driver's side door did not open. Then he knew she had exited the vehicle from the passenger side as he saw her, in a crouch pass the front end and move into the nearby rocks.

The purple car had come around the bend and stopped and then it had backed up almost out of sight from the top and the Team Two agents had watched from this vantage point and seen the events unfolding and when Madge and Fronie had gone over the side One, without benefit of a designated area, had begun trying to turn around.

Dirch moved into the rocks near his car and furtively looked over and then around the large boulder in front of him. He knew she was attempting to gain rear access to him and he crawled to

change his position and he heard the sound of the now familiar rifle burst and the rocks shattered near his head. He moved the other way and again bullets barely missed him as if they were somehow changing direction and coming around the boulder to which he clung. He dropped the rifle and pulled his pistol and stuck only his hand up and fired wildly in the direction of the target and when he was empty he dropped the magazine, reached in the holder on his belt and put another one in. He fired until he was again empty and when he dropped the magazine to reload, his body was riddled with bullets.

The purple car was now almost completely turned around and Three was looking out of the side rear window when he saw the dark woman dressed in black drag Dirch's body from behind the rocks by one leg and hurl it over the side of the road and onto the burning car below.

He was on his knees looking out of the back window as their car, now fully around, began to slowly start back down. And as they neared the bend he saw their target shoot out the driver's side window of the white car and reach in and as the purple car got to the bend he saw Lena move to the front of the car and with one hand push the white car backwards and over the side of the road and then start back quickly toward the black thing that awaited her.

Three: You better hurry!

Back down and around the mountains the purple car now sped. Sliding, and with the tires making shrill noises, they attained the bottom and stopped. Two looked back at Three. His once medium-blue face was now ashen, light blue and he licked his lip and stared at her, unspeaking. Then he hollered.

Three: Don't go back! Don't go back the way we came!

One turned right and started toward the dam. Traffic was moderate and One had scant opportunity to pass. It was a two-

lane area, one going, one coming and tourists and sightseers on buses were on the road and pulled off to the side looking and taking images of the surroundings but the purple car would speed every chance offered. Around the dam they went and as traffic cleared they crossed into Arizona.

Three kept looking back. He couldn't, wouldn't explain what he had seen. He kept rationalizing it in his head. He told himself she had put the car in neutral, that it had been on an incline and would roll easily under those circumstances. He dismissed the deflated tires but what he couldn't put aside was the fact that Dirch's car had been thrust into the air and left the earth like a backwards-flying car that had failed to fly.

They came out of the mountains and reached flatness. The land in all directions was empty and the road before them was smooth and straight. They got to one hundred and twenty miles per hour and switched to solar power to conserve gas. Three asked for the long glasses and began peering behind them.

Lena had come to the bottom of the mountain and stopped. She had dropped the nearly empty magazine and put another one in. She had watched the indicator of the purple car on the monitor as it had started around the dam and she had turned the black thing in that direction.

She moved through the traffic and when Baby reached the flat area she placed her rifle into the holder behind the passenger seat. She went through the gears to fifth and then spoke.

Lena: Engage Auto Drive. Display speed.

Sensors lit up completely around the exterior including along the roof.

Baby: Auto Drive engaging. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Auto Drive engaged.

The top left screen on the large monitor displayed the speed in bright red numbers.

Lena removed her hands from the steering wheel and opened the control panel on her right armrest and using a rolling button she moved her seat fully back to the point she could rotate around and she turned the seat to the rear, unbuckled and moved to the back row, middle seat. She buckled in.

Lena: Activate maximum performance.

All the lights on the dashboard lit up and began blinking rapidly, sequencing.

Baby: Supercharger one activated.

Supercharger two activated.

Now in double twin-charger mode.

Solar power activated.

Electric power activated.

Rev matching activated.

No lift shifting activated.

Peak traction control activated.

Peak stability control activated.

Launch control activated.

Estimated maximum velocity two hundred and sixty MPH.

They were running at eighty miles per hour.

Lena: Engage.

The sound of the engine altered. The power that Lena felt flow through this black thing in which she rode excited her and the power that Lena felt course throughout her body was as extreme heat. And Baby seemed to squat down as if to leap off the road and fly.

Lena: Increase speed to one hundred and forty MPH.

After each command it only took Baby two seconds to respond and then within seconds the command was completed. First Lena had been pushed back as they sped forward and then Baby had responded.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and forty MPH.

Lena looked at the monitor and gauged the shrinking distance between Baby and the little moving black dot ahead of them. She watched awhile and then spoke.

Lena: Increase speed to one hundred and eighty MPH.

Again they sped forward.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and eighty MPH.

The distance closed, but not fast enough. And Lena needed to see the amount of traffic ahead.

Lena: Activate RS.

The Radar Scope came on and scanned.

Baby: RS activated.

Objects were being highlighted and chimes sounded as they were identified.

Lena: Scan one hundred mile radius.

Baby moved to the left lane and passed two cars.

Baby: RS scanning one hundred mile radius.

With her armrest control Lena moved forward and took her chilled bottle of water from its holder at the center console. She moved back and stopped at a point where she could turn her seat either right or left or completely around if necessary. She stared through the front windshield. She sipped and then watched through the side window as the blurred landscape flew by and on the mapping screen the indicator of the purple car grew closer, as if it backed up to her. She could feel the speed in her stomach.

Lena: Increase speed to one hundred and ninety-nine MPH.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and ninety-nine MPH.

Lena smiled. She liked the way that sounded and those numbers looked good on the screen. Up ahead Three was looking back through the long glasses.

Lena: Increase speed to two hundred and ten MPH:

Baby eased forward slightly and now the increase was barely perceptible.

Baby: Current speed two hundred and ten MPH.

The red-haired agent was growing irritated with the agent in the back seat. Every time she looked at him he was shifting nervously and still staring behind them.

Two: We've been running between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and forty for almost an hour. What are you looking for?

They were all yelling, as if the engine and the speed and the noise from the wind that passed them was suppressing the sound of their voices.

Three: There it is! There it is, I see it!

One: What?

Three: That black thing! I can see it! It just came into view!

Two looked back and attempted to see what Three saw.

Two: That's your imagination!

Three: It's gaining on us! Go faster! Faster!

The purple car's engine changed sound, its pitch rose as gas power kicked in and they ran on gas and solar power and their speed increased to one hundred and sixty miles per hour.

One: That's it, can't go any faster!

Now the big black thing was obviously running the purple car down.

Three: Turn off! Turn off!

One: There's nowhere to turn off! There's nowhere to go! I see it now! It's like we're standing still!

Two reached in the area in front of her, past the little silver object she had planned on using on the target and grabbed her pistol.

Two: Let it pull up on my side!

She yelled to Three, turned back and then hollered at One.

Two: Get ready to fire! Don't let her run you off the road!

Three: Fire for what? It's like a tank, idiot!

Two: The window will come down when she shoots!

She unbuckled and shifted in her seat as she was lowering her window.

Three lowered the right side window and prepared to fire his pistol. He moved to the left back door. He wanted to shoot left to right and he aimed and waited. Now, with the windows down the sound of the wind was deafening and One could not only hear the rushing sound he could feel it in his hands as he moved the car to the left lane and glanced in the rearview mirror.

When the purple car moved left, Baby moved right and drew closer. Lena's rear side windows had three sections and with the controls at her left hand she lowered the first and second narrow sections of the left window and when they were down a wind diverter was deployed from the door near the glass.

Two stuck her left hand out of the window and leaned out and started firing. She saw sparks on the body and no effect on the glass and she saw no one driving the black thing that bore down on them, only the dark tinted windows, not the opening.

Baby was still just a short distance from passing when Lena began to fire through her opened window with her rifle. She raked the back of the car and bullets went not just through the window but through the trunk and the seat and the Three agent was shot to pieces.

Baby moved to pass and Two kept firing until empty and then dropped the magazine and reloaded. The purple car swerved right and Baby slowed, moved behind and then moved left. The purple car moved left to block. Baby reduced speed to avoid. Baby was trying to pass but had to keep backing off.

Lena: Reduce speed to one hundred and forty MPH.

Baby slowed and the purple car sped forward and immediately gained separation.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and forty MPH.

Shards of glass from the shattered rear window bounced from the car and Two kept looking out and then she fired through the glassless back window. The distance between the two vehicles grew. Lena spoke.

Lena: Increase speed to two hundred and sixty MPH.

In order to reach maximum velocity speed Lena knew Baby would have to find a way to pass. Now the black thing launched forward and moved behind the purple car in the left lane and latched onto the draft and then seemingly jumped to the right and began to pass and then as they got side by side the purple car moved further right and Baby moved right, partially off the road and they were speeding together at one hundred and fifty miles per hour. Lena was holding on as Baby's right two tires were off the road, running through sandy dirt and two hundred and sixty miles per hour lay ahead.

The dashboard lights began brightly flashing. Loud beeping began sounding.

Baby: Warning. Traction control compromised.

Warning. Stability control compromised.

The lights flashed faster. The beeping sounded faster and grew louder. Lena was in the back holding on tightly and swaying and riding with wide eyes and she was looking at the steering wheel vibrating and the brake pedal pumping and the shifter was down shifting as with invisible hands and as the rear end began to slide and drift the shifter moved up and the beeping and Baby's voice filled the air.

Baby: Warning. Traction control compromised.

Warning. Stability control compromised.

Back down the shifter went from sixth to fifth, increasing torque and suddenly up through seventh and Baby shot forward, passed the purple car, moved back onto the road and accelerated into eighth gear on the way to the commanded speed.

The lights stopped flashing. The beeping ceased.

Lena turned her seat and moved toward the rear.

Lena: Broadcast current speed.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and ninety MPH.

Lena: Reduce speed to one hundred and seventy MPH.

Baby: Current speed one hundred and seventy MPH.

Lena lowered the middle panel of the rear window.

Lena: Reduce speed to one hundred and forty MPH.

One realized what was happening, recognized the black thing was slowing and beginning to come back and they were drawing closer together and as Two prepared to lean out and fire, One pressed on the brakes.

From her rear firing position Lena unleashed a burst through the purple car's front windshield. She sprayed the car and it swerved off the road and rolled over and over and as it flipped into the air Lena emptied her magazine into it and the car exploded and flames and black smoke rose and she and Baby sped on.

She backed her seat up, turned it and moved it to its original position. She looked out through the front windshield and she could hear the outside windy sounds blowing and she felt an exhilarating admixture of emotions and she screamed out loud.

Lena: Wow! I liked that!

Baby: Say a command.

Lena: Oh hush.

Baby: Say a command.

Lena: Disregard.

She took a deep breath and then after several long drinks of water she raised the windows.

Lena: Reduce speed to seventy MPH.

It took a while and then Baby acknowledged.

Baby: Current speed seventy MPH.

When Baby reached that cruising speed it felt as if they were crawling and Lena moved back into the driver's seat and buckled in. She turned it and went forward to the driving position.

Lena: Deactivate Auto Drive.

Baby: Auto Drive deactivating. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Auto Drive deactivated.

Lena took over and after several miles she pulled off the road. She got out and stood in the sunshine and stretched. She let all the windows down and while she finished her water she walked around Baby and inspected and touched the dings and chips.

She got back in and put Baby into normal driving mode and ran a complete automated systems check. When she was ready to go she switched to solar power and as she pulled back onto the road she honked the horn, four times.

Lena: Baby let's roll on to Phoenix. I feel like dancing.

Baby: Say a command.

Lena: Disregard.

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Lena took her time, stopping on several occasions along the way as if she were a sightseeing tourist and it was six in the early evening when she pulled off the highway, rode through downtown Phoenix and made her way to her good friend and business associate, Gerty's house.

As she turned into the cul-de-sac a *DM* on each side of the street with a rifle, waved and with her windows down she waved back. Gerty was waiting for her at the end of the block motioning her forward.

Lena pulled to the backyard and into one of the open garage bays. She jumped out and hugged her friend and wouldn't let go, spinning her around and around.

Gerty: Let me go! Let me go, I'm getting dizzy.

Lena released her and stepped back to look. Gerty was a tall middle-aged *Branca-queimada* DF with large blue eyes and long blonde hair piled high on her head.

Lena: Are you well? You look bright.

Gerty: Thank you. I am well and I hope you are and I feel bright and you look dark and I like that look. You stay away too long.

Lena: Thank you and I feel dark. I know I do, and I apologize.

They laughed and Gerty grabbed Lena and pulled her close and planted fiery-red lipstick on Lena's lips and Lena licked her lips and frowned.

Lena: Now you've stained me.

As Gerty turned toward the house she looked at Baby sticking out.

Gerty: What is that thing? It won't even fit in the garage with that big fat rear end.

Lena: Softly. That's my Baby and she's sensitive.

Gerty: She could do for a wash. I'll see to it.

They went in and laughed and talked as Lena showered and changed into a short loose black skirt and a loose white blouse with soft black flat shoes.

They walked all through Gerty's new house and continued to converse animatedly as they strolled through the large backyard, pausing to admire the flowers, trees and plants.

They were then driven to a restaurant where they ate and then they rode around to look at and jointly inspect property and buildings they had recently claimed and discuss and reach decisions on the maintenance and upgrades that were needed

At ten that night they were transported to the club that they co-owned where they sipped champagne and Lena with her black straw hat on and Gerty, covered in a tight white dress and with a white cape swirling around her, danced until four in the morning

and as the sun was appearing in the sky Lena was going to bed and Gerty was asleep, face down, on the couch.

At noon Lena was up and dressed in beige for travel. She sat at a table in Gerty's office and prepped and loaded her rifle. She then went through her notifications received and responded as needed. She could only hope they got through and she knew she would have to continue to verify and resend as the ability to communicate became more difficult as she moved further into *Center World*.

At three that afternoon she hugged Gerty goodbye, reminded her of their date for New Year's Eve, wished her well, waved to everyone as she eased down the street and when she reached the end of the block she honked the horn, four times, and turned toward her next stop,

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Again it was a leisurely ride and with the metal and glass roof retracted and the arid semi-empty expanse spread out all around her and the endless sky above, it was as if the top of her head was lifted and opened and her spirit was warmed by the blazing sun.

At ten that night, before reaching Albuquerque city limits she exited the highway and turned into a community with large gated homes. She turned down a palm-tree-lined street and slowly rolled to the front of the house at the end of the block. As she drew near, the gates swung open and four armed individuals stood in line as one waved her forward and as she rode past, Lena extended her hand and she touched their fingers.

She pulled to the garage and an *Escura DP* individual stepped from the shadows into the light. Lena got out and there were no euphoric hollers or screams of joy, only a long tight embrace.

Finally Lena stepped back and they looked at each other. Each gently took the other's face into their hands and they kissed softly, their lips lingering a moment. Then they held hands at arms length and both looked at the other, up and down and smiled. They were the same height and the same dark-brown color with nearly the same body dimensions. They looked as sisters and Lena saw the intense hazel-colored eyes that stared at her sparkle and she was filled with joy.

Lena: Oh Lott, look at you! Are you well? You're beautiful! Your Locks are down to your waist and that black color with the red tipping is exquisite.

Lott: Thank you, thank you. And look at you. You're natural again and your face remains unchanged. Smile, let me see your dimples, oh and a golden tooth, so nice, and your body remains unique. I am well, are you?

Lena: Thank you for your nice words. I like compliments and yes I'm well, even more so to be here with you.

Lott: You are health for me also. How wonderful your presence. Turn around.

Lena turned around so Lott could see her.

Lott: May I touch your hair?

Lena bent her head and her special friend laid hands on the curly natural hair.

Lott: So soft.

Lena grasped Lott's long thick Locks with both hands and pulled gently.

Lena: As you are, so powerful and strong.

Now Lena took her friend's hand and Lott was turned around and Lena looked at the form in the short tight dress and as they again faced each other Lena felt the exposed arms and moved close and ran her hands over the body.

Lena: You still touch weights, I feel.

Lott: Yes, only weights, as you, no *AAS* shall enter my body.

Lena placed her left hand near Lott's breast and felt the beating within the chest.

Lena: Do you exercise this heart?

Lott: Yes almost daily and my thirty-five year old heart remains inexhaustible.

Lena: And your soul is precious and wide and deep.

Lott: As is your unique essence that contains physical strength unknowable to me with mysterious powers and you are all I aspire to be.

They touched foreheads and grasped hands and remained in silence and stillness for several long moments. Then they turned and walked arm in arm into the house and as they moved toward the kitchen Lott spoke.

Lott: And what is that you drive? I've never seen anything quite like it.

Lena: It was made for me from my imagination. I call her Baby and Baby can really go.

Lott: How appropriate, you the mother. I'll see to your Baby having a bath.

Now they laughed. Lott opened a bottle of champagne and they lifted their glasses to one another, to wellness and to the future. Lott touched a button on the Comm device on the wrist and low music filled the house. They ate and talked as the night grew late and then as the champagne flowed the music rose and they sang and danced together until the sky brightened and then they fell asleep naked in each other's arms.

They arose, showered together and washed each other's back. They dressed and at one in the afternoon, with Lott driving, they were on their way to meet their partner who managed the casino, hotel and lounge in which the three of them each held a one third share.

Upon arrival Lena began a walk-through of the three main areas as Lott went to security headquarters. Then Lena joined her two partners in the manager's office. When she walked in a short thin, middle-aged *Parda-clara DM* with long wispy brown hair and dark-brown eyes rose and smiled and then frowned.

Ike: It's been too long Lena, entirely too long.

Lena: That's your greeting, Ike?

Ike: Forgive me. Are you well? You know, it's so good to see you but you upset me and you look wonderful with your different presentation. In fact the two of you both look pleased and fresh and valuable in your golden dresses and Lena your gold hat is of another time and place.

Lena: That's much better. I'm well, I trust you are and how is the family, well I hope? And thank you for the nice words I like such words and so does Lott as Lott likes what I like and look at your office, you've finally gotten some new furniture. Now, this represents a man of your stature.

Ike: Don't attempt to turn me. It's just not right for you to stay away. You should come as you used to, at least once every two months, at least. The family is well, thank you.

He sat down.

Lena: I know, I've been remiss. I apologize but you and Lott handle things so thoroughly here that I've left everything in your very capable hands.

Ike: It's not simply the business. The atmosphere is altered with your presence. We're all friends and we miss you greatly. Isn't that correct Lott?

Lott: She knows my feeling about that.

Lena removed her gold straw hat and went around the desk.

Lena: Stand up.

Ike rose and she hugged him tightly.

Lena: I hear you.

She let him go and he sat back down as she moved back around the desk to sit facing him in a chair next to Lott.

Lena: I'll do better.

Ike: Do you promise?

Lena: I promise to try harder. Now, let's get our business out of the way so we can talk about other much more pleasant topics. I only want to discuss two matters, your ideas on expansion and your issues with Kit.

For the next two hours they sat around a table in the corner and discussed their business and when Ike shut the computer down he paused, hesitated as they moved back near his large desk. Lena waited and when he didn't speak she poured water for everyone and then spoke, looking at her manager.

Lena: What are your problems with Kit?

Ike: He wants to buy in. He wants ten percent of our business. I told him no and conveyed to him Lott's refusal and that you notified us that you were aligned with our decision.

Lena: That was six months ago.

Ike: Yes and since then almost regularly we've had problems with our best customers being harassed after they leave our area under control. One was beaten and robbed and we, out of good faith saw to his medical treatment and reimbursed his financial loss. We've expanded our patrols and increased our security and so far there's been no further incidents but I don't like the disrespect that's been shown us. It sets an ominous precedent.

Lena: Why wasn't I notified of the robbery?

Ike: That incident was a little over a week ago and I held off once I became aware of your impending visit. We can't prove Kit and his people are behind the other incidents but we strongly suspect. After each occurrence he contacts me in reference to his offer. The connection is all too obvious.

Lena: What is his offer?

Ike took several sheets from his desk drawer and handed them to Lena. She scanned the papers.

Lena: His offer is more than fair, almost double what we would ask. How did he arrive at these numbers?

Ike: I believe he extrapolated from the revenue of his own business. He knows we're at least twice as large as they are.

Lena: What do you want done about it?

Ike: I'm not sure. He's so suspicious and well guarded. It's difficult to isolate him but I do know the harassment must end and I'll not tolerate any threat to our patrons. An armed conflict would be reverting to our former ways and none of the other casinos want that kind of attention it's detrimental to everyone's business. Besides, I'm too old for that.

Lena: What does your security chief want to do?

Ike looked at Lott.

Lott: Destroy him. I told Ike that months ago.

Lena: Would you two be willing to sell him three if I sell him four?

Lott: He can't get three from me.

Ike: Nor three from me.

Lena: Why not?

Ike: Because Kit is dishonest. I would add immoral but who am I to judge. He lacks integrity and he has no conscience. I will not align myself with him. In addition I don't like him.

Lena turned to Lott.

Lena: And you?

Lott: Kit is a treacherous, detestable individual. Don't forget that period of time when he was viciously violating *DFs* and several disappeared. I say destroy him. He'll just want more.

Lena got up and strolled around the room. She stopped and picked up a large seashell from a table and looked at it, examined it and then put it to her ear. She listened a moment, closed her

eyes and then abruptly set it down.

Lena: Alright we're in agreement. I concur with two you on this.

Lott: I can kill him?

Lena: Let's see if we can find another way to make peace. His organization is the second largest in this area. Let's minimize conflict by attempting some synergistic form of business.

Lott: Is that a no?

Lena: Ike, here's what I want you to do. Contact Kit and explain that I'm in town and that I've agreed to sell him ten percent of my share. Have him draw up the papers for me to sign. Stipulate the signing is to be at his office and his second in command must be there. What's the calling?

Ike: Dyer.

Lena: Describe

Ike: Medium height, a *Palida DM* with white hair.

Lena: And what of him?

Ike: Quite competent. Shady but not excessively so. Typical.

Lena: In addition his head of security is to attend with no more than two other of his associates. Tell him I will come alone and no weapons are allowed in the room. Finally, he must agree to you that all harassment will end or I will not sell. When he agrees to that you'll have your proof that he's behind it.

Ike looked worried, he put his right hand on top of his head and smoothed his hair several times.

Lena: Kit is emotional and erratic but he does not lack for intelligence. He'll assume his extravagant offer has brought me to his side. There won't be any danger because he'll believe he's about to get what he desperately wants. Kit has always had designs on my business and on me. I'm going to satisfy his desires, in my own way. Call him and when it's done call Lott.

Lena put on her straw hat, adjusted it, and the two dressed completely in gold departed as Ike opened communication.

Lott drove around so Lena could see how the city had grown as more and more individuals relocated into the area and babies were born in this once nearly empty part of *Center World*. They then ate in the sunshine and returned to Lott's home.

As the late afternoon cooled and evening approached, they reclined naked under a large umbrella by the pool and sipped cold liquid and listened to music. It was seven thirty when Ike requested communication with Lott. He was put on speaker and conversed for several minutes as the two lay side by side with Lena listening with her eyes closed. When Ike asked if three the next afternoon was agreeable Lena nodded, Lott confirmed and communication ended. They remained there as the sky slowly darkened and then beneath the nascent starry night and light of the incipient waxing crescent moon they wrestled playfully in the cool water and swam until it was time for dinner.

They ate and after showering together they massaged and oiled each other's body. Then as they talked, Lott combed and brushed Lena's hair. Lena's eyes were closed and her scalp tingled from Lott's touch and the light prickly sensation was moving throughout her and her body felt warm and she shook slightly, inside.

They sat on a large, long chair and Lena was between Lott's legs and she could feel at her back the presence that would always evoke powerful feelings within her. They grew silent and then Lott began to hum softly as the brush moved and to Lena it seemed as her head was weightless and her body, no longer belonging to her was floating away. After a while Lena spoke.

Lena: Who is your otherness? The calling?

Lott: Bebe.

Lena: I like that name. Does Bebe please you, the presence, the touch?

Lott's movements paused and then began again.

Lott: Yes.

Lena: How many years lived?

Lott: The amount I was when we first met, twenty-two.

Lena: Do you please Bebe?

Lott: I hope so. Those are the words that have been expressed to me. Why such wonderings?

Lena: Because being around you I always feel open and sensitive. I think and experience that which I keep away and suppress.

They fell silent again and then Lena spoke softly.

Lena: Then you both feel love for each other?

Lott: We believe in love.

Lena: Good for you. Good for Bebe. Now, explain to me. Does the pleasure bring you satisfaction?

Lott: Yes, but it's as if that satisfaction is only momentary and always transitory. It's like a fleeting dreamy illusion and feels as a temporary cessation of desire only to eventually rise again. That seeking of satisfaction is a powerful drive. It's instinctual.

Lena: Is not that quiescence, that satisfaction, a sense of peace, even if short lived?

Lott's hands fell to the side and then the comb was picked up and Lena's hair was lifted with the hands and the comb was pulled gently through it.

Lott: Yes, I believe that is what individuals seek through the physical aspects, that sense of serenity through the absence of desire, if even for a matter of moments. Lena, that rise again is exciting.

Lena: I believe peace cannot come through the act but only through the shared emotion of love. What's it like, your release?

Lott: For me it's as if I'm burning hot, on fire, and the molten liquid that courses through my body inflames me and then it pours from me and for just a little while I'm cooled and all is right in my world.

Lena: Good for you.

Lott stopped all movement, laid the comb down and placed both hands on Lena's shoulders.

Lott: How do you live as you do?

Lena: I'm human. I've lusted, craved, use whatever words or description but I push it away, keep it down and although I've experienced the power of desire and had some semblance of peace in my life, I've never known that specific means to bring about the removal of that desire. In that sense my essence is in continuous turmoil without cessation. That's all it's ever been for me. I was born into it. It's all I've ever known and it's that which I seek in order to remain true to my self. For me turmoil and chaos and violence are natural and exciting and there is no need for release from that.

Now Lott's arms wrapped around Lena's shoulders and they were close together.

Lott: So you save yourself for him and remain in a state of submerged wanting?

Lena: Yes, only for him. My desire exists in front of me, in the future. Hope of that satisfaction lies before me and until then I live my life as I please. Bebe attracted you and you were drawn to that otherness, a natural occurrence for you for many reasons and so you are together. I exist among, yet alone, again a natural occurrence, for me.

Lott: You're alone by choice. A vow I accept and respect but I still do not understand this self-denial, this waste of your youthful vigor and beauty. Something essential about you called me the first time we met thirteen years ago. Your eyes, your lips, your body inspired me. Sometimes when I'm with Bebe I'm with you. I kiss, touch and taste you. It's as if I'm being unfaithful to my mate. Don't I speak to you at all?

These last words were imbued with feeling.

Lena turned sideways now to look directly at Lott as she heard the voice quiver and she could see the emotional eyes fill and she raised her right hand and touched her fingertips to the grimacing lips and softly kissed them as Lott struggled to hold back tears.

Lena: Oh Lott, my special one. Of course you do. You make me feel as only you can. Your physical presence speaks to me but what I feel for you and see of you is permanent and will last, without fail of my memory, until I die. There exists no fantasy within it and it is most certainly not a dream. That which is physical will in reality age and eventually perish. But humans are beyond physical. To be human is to be soul, spirit and therefore you will for me, through my soul and my spirit never grow old or depart. For me you are above material and that which I adore, what drew me to you and what loudly spoke is inside you and cannot be reached with any part of my body. You've never disappointed me and never will and most important, even when we are apart I feel you behind me, protecting my back.

Lena turned her back to Lott and their bodies were close again. They remained like that with Lott's arms tightly around Lena's shoulders and head pressed against her neck and Lena could feel the soft Locks brushing her lightly as extended delicate tendrils and she shivered just a little, all over.

They remained like that and then Lott began to hum again and they felt no need to move or speak, as each was lost in their own thoughts.

And so they crawled into bed naked to cling to one another and hold on and not knowing what awaited them in the future they understood each time they were together like this could very well be the last and as they eased into a deep powerful sleep they whispered to each other.

Lott: I love you.

Lena: And I love you.

The next afternoon at three, Lena's heels clicked on the wooden stairs as she ascended the steps two floors to Kit's office. The door opened as she approached and a tall thick, bald-headed *Parda-clara ND* stood there watching her. She stopped in the doorway and from there she could look to the far side of the large room and see Kit, a tall slim *Bronze DM* in his early thirties with wavy medium-length gold-colored hair and dark-green eyes.

He was standing beside the bar and as she eyed him she could smell drug smoke in the air and see him lift two bowls, one full of white powder and one brimming with yellow powder and place them behind the bar. He took a glass and sipped. He moved toward her and stopped. He wiped his face with his silk handkerchief and patted his forehead and his jewelry flashed.

She took several steps in and the *ND* closed the door and began to pass a handheld detector around her.

Kit: Lena, my darling you look wonderfully dark and beautiful. It's been a long time. How are you? Well I hope?

Lena raised her arms a little and opened them slightly. She ignored his greeting.

Lena: Now Kit, do I look like I have a weapon on me?

She placed her hands on her hips as she looked around.

He saw her strapped into a very short and extremely tight dark-red dress. He smiled at her long dangling bejeweled earrings and nodded approvingly at the gold and platinum and rhodium and diamonds on her fingers and wrists and that hung from her neck. He waved a dismissive hand at the *ND* with the scanner, halting the activity.

Kit: My dear, you could not conceal so much as a thin blade on your body with that dress on.

She was looking directly into his eyes as he drew a little closer and he realized she was almost his six foot one inch height. He looked down at her four-inch burgundy high heels.

Kit: I adore those shoes. You know, I like shoes and pretty feet such as yours.

He chuckled and wiped his moist brow.

He was well dressed as always. He wore an off-white two-piece suit, silver linen shirt and white straw shoes.

She walked on in, staring intently at the other three individuals in the room who stood in a line. She moved slowly past the first two and then stopped at the last one, a young thin *Parda-clara DM* with short brown hair and of medium height who could not look at her and stood with his hands clasped behind his back. She was unsmiling as she spoke, her voice low, even and precise.

Lena: What's your name?

He was taken aback at being singled out and the question surprised and unnerved him. His arms fell to his sides and he looked up at her and then lowered his dark-brown gaze.

Young Man: Mal.

Lena: How old are you Mal?

He swallowed, stammered.

Mal: Nineteen.

Kit laughed.

Kit: You're intimidating the young individual Lena. He's fresh. He's never been in the presence of someone such as you.

Lena walked back near the *ND* and then turned and moved past the second individual, the middle-aged, white-haired *Palida DM* and stopped in front of the third, a short thick *Parda-clara DM* with long red hair. She stepped close to him and he took a step backwards, eyeing her suspiciously. She reached and pulled open his suit coat to reveal a holstered pistol beneath his arm.

Lena: What have we here?

She released his coat and walked toward the desk Kit now stood behind and spoke to him as she turned and moved to the round table in the middle of the room.

Lena: I thought we agreed there would be no weapons.

Kit: An inadvertent oversight, I assure you.

His voice was light, smooth.

She stood at the table that had nothing on it but three sheets of paper and a pen. The four individuals' heads had moved in unison as they followed her around the room with their eyes. They felt her indescribable presence and Mal had touched his forehead as he grew warm and he needed a handkerchief.

Lena: His or yours?

Kit: His, again I assure you. I gave specific instructions. Didn't I tell ... ?

Lena cut him off. She was all business but at the same time seemingly bored with the proceedings.

Lena: Are these for me to certify and sign?

Kit: Yes, everything is in order. Read them over.

She picked up the first piece of paper.

Kit: I want to thank you for this opportunity. To be a part of your business is very important to me and of course an honor of the highest magnitude.

She laid the first piece down and picked up the second.

Kit: My goodness Lena, you look wonderful. You have always been my dream. My dream never fulfilled.

He patted his forehead and smiled when she looked his way and then she turned back to the paper in her hand.

Lena: Kit, forever the romantic.

Kit: There haven't been many but you remain the one who slipped through my fingers like grains of sand, and got away.

Lena: You've agreed to cease hostilities against us?

Kit: We had nothing to do with those unfortunate incidents.

Lena put the second piece of paper down and picked up the third. Again she looked at Kit and this time stared at the smooth face and gold-colored hair. Not a strand was out of place.

Lena: Is that what you told Ike?

Kit: Ike was insistent. I agreed but I swear to you on my word, we had absolutely nothing to do with that.

Lena began to sign the papers.

Kit: Thank you Lena. We all thank you. Perhaps Ike and Lott will come around to your way of thinking and I can acquire a few more percentage points. My offer is quite generous and I'll have no say, just a small silent piece of the action.

As he was speaking, Lena completed the signings.

Lena: Well Kit, I guess that concludes our business.

As he came to the table to examine the papers and verify the signatures she turned toward the door. He smiled as he laid the papers down and spoke as she moved away.

Kit: Why not a toast to our new venture? I have your favorite champagne.

Lena turned to Kit and smiled slightly and her now sultry voice came across the room to him and he was surprised and grew excited and then he frowned, in doubt.

Lena: No thanks, but I'll tell you what. How about a kiss, to seal the deal?

The golden-haired *DM* could not believe what he had heard. He hesitated and then when he could see her take a step to him and stop and was standing there and he looked at her painted red lips and her slight smile broadened and he could see a flash of gold and he realized she was waiting for him to come to her.

He stuffed his handkerchief into his coat front breast pocket and moved around the table. He strolled toward her to enter into those inviting arms she extended slightly and opened to him. He raised his arms and as he got close she gently pushed his outstretched arms down and quickly took his face into her hands and she rose slightly on her toes and pulled him close to her but just before their lips could touch she exhaled imperceptibly into

his partially opened mouth and then eased him away.

His eyes grew wide, in shock, immediately. He took several deep breaths. His chest heaved.

Kit: Oh! Oh, what is this ecstasy?

His tongue began darting from his mouth, like a snake. He grabbed himself at his crotch and began to rub, vigorously.

Lena: You like that Kit?

Kit: Oh yes! Rapture! Rapture! What drug is this?

A spasm shook his body, an orgasmic spasm ran throughout him. He shuddered and then shuddered again, harder. Faster he stroked himself. His four associates stared at him.

Kit staggered to the side and then fell to the floor on his back. He was moaning and jerking in pleasure and then the pleasure turned on him and he began to yell in pain.

Kit: Make it stop! Make it stop! Please, that's enough! I've had enough!

Lena strolled to the head of security as he stared at his leader in disbelief and easily opened his coat and removed his pistol.

Kit was now twisting and kicking and hollering on the floor and then his legs began to draw up and bend and his feet began to turn completely around and his bones cracked like dulled gunshots and he no longer hollered but he was not dead because his eyes rolled in his head and his mouth was moving soundlessly.

When his hands and arms began to distort and break Mal turned from the scene and bending over the chair he now grasped he began to empty his guts onto it.

Kit's hands continued to turn at the wrist and his fingers bent backwards and broke one by one and he drew up nearly into a ball and moved slowly into his final grotesque position and died and his once dark-green eyes were now black and the golden hair was white and standing up straight and his handsome face was a horrible dried and sunken-in mask.

Lena went to Kit, leaned over and removed his handkerchief and walked over to Mal who now stared at her in fear and horror and as she handed him the piece of silk she spoke to everyone.

Lena: It must have been that yellow powder. That stuff should never be mixed.

She turned to the head of security and pointed his pistol at him and then at the second in command and waved them to the window.

Lena: You two need to look outside.

While watching the dark woman they stumbled to the window and glanced out. Lott was outside with the complete security force spread around the building. They were dressed in their burgundy uniforms and carried large pistols and long rifles. They all stared up at the window. The two looking out turned back to Lena. She addressed the white-haired *DM*.

Lena: Dyer, now you're in charge. You can stay with him ...

She pointed the pistol at the unrecognizable form on the floor.

Lena: ... or you can align your organization along with ours and continue to create value. Which will it be, him or me?

They both yelled the word, you!

She looked at the other two and the bald-headed *ND* said the same thing loudly and then the youngest individual, through the handkerchief at his mouth said it emphatically, twice.

Mal: You! You!

Lena looked at each individual staring at her and then smiled slightly.

Lena: Good! I welcome you all. You'll discover we handle our business a little differently than you did.

She pointed the pistol at Mal and directed him to the table.

Lena: Tear up those papers into little pieces and sprinkle them on Kit.

Mal hurried to the table and did as ordered and as the pieces fluttered in the air she turned toward the door and the two *DMs* nearest to her bumped as they rushed to open it.

Lena: Follow me out so you can survive this episode.

The dark woman started down the steps and spoke, almost to herself.

Lena: I so detest treachery.

That evening Lena assisted Lott as food was being prepared and they talked of many pleasant things. The Comm device on the counter buzzed and Lott looked down at it then pressed a button to acknowledge the notification.

Lott: That's Bebe.

They could hear the sound of the car as it pulled to the back and into the garage. The side door opened and Bebe walked in smiling. Lena saw an *Escura DP* who was the same height as Lott, which meant the same in that regard as Lena. Lott was given a hug and they kissed lightly.

Bebe: Are you well?

Lott: Yes, are you?

Bebe: Yes, oh yes.

Bebe turned and with wide light-brown eyes looked directly at Lena. Locks were tied behind the back that were as long as Lott's and that were tinged purple throughout and a soft, throaty and sensual voice could be heard.

Bebe: I'm Bebe and you're Lott's special friend Lena.

Lena: Yes, I'm Lena. You're Bebe and you're also stunning.

Bebe's smile broadened and the voice now spoke in quiet awe as the innocent eyes stared at Lena.

Bebe: Thank you so much and you're much more than Lott has described. Much more than beautifully unique.

Lena opened her arms and they embraced, a long hug as Lott

watched them, pleased. They shared a brief kiss and then Bebe began digging in the bag that hung from the shoulder.

Bebe: I have something for you.

Lena was handed a small gift-wrapped box and as she sat down at the kitchen table to open it Lott stepped close and Lena quickly removed the paper and opened the box and lifted a gold heart-shaped locket.

Lott: Open the locket.

It contained a picture of Lott and Bebe smiling at her.

Lena: Oh, so thoughtful, so unique. It thrills me!

She jumped up and they all embraced

It wasn't long before they had taken their clothes off and gone for a swim. Then Lena helped as their long Locks were squeezed and blown dry and then they covered themselves lightly and sipped wine and ate by candlelight. They then moved to the living room to sit and talk and Lott opened the first of three bottles of champagne.

Bebe sat enthralled as Lena and Lott spoke of how they met and shared memories from their past together and they laughed often and when they would look deeply into each other's eyes electricity passed between them all.

They went into the night to look at the lighted plants in Lott's garden and Lena saw colorful butterfly weed, wild hyssop and chocolate flowers and when she pointed and inquired about a tall pink, thin-shafted flower with black on its bottom Lott told her about the flower called, shooting star.

They strolled further into the night to look up at the moon and stars and by a wondrous happenstance a meteor, small yet brilliantly lit up, streaked across the sky and they all saw it and together made their silent, private wishes. They were, the three of them in union yet as individuals, alone.

It was still early yet it was time. Lena issued her goodnight

wishes, hugged them both and went to her room. She took a long cold shower and as she lay naked on her bed she placed her hand on her breast and she could feel her heart throbbing. She closed her eyes and visions, as shadows pirouetted before her.

In the middle of the night Lott and Bebe stole into her room and naked on the soft rug beside the bed, beneath her, the two dark, heated bodies moved and they made quiet, slow, sensual love and Lena having descended into a deep peaceful sleep dreamed that Lott and Bebe were in bed with her and she could see them, hear their moans and enticing exhorting utterances, breathe their pungent perfumed essences and feel moist passionate heat exactly as they felt.

The next day was a somber one for the two close friends. First the three partners, by visual communication, completed their remaining business during the early morning and then Lena ate lunch, loaded her vehicle, ran diagnostics and by two in the afternoon she was ready to leave.

She was dressed in dark blue with a loose long-sleeved blouse and her pants were tucked into tall dark-blue boots. She had opened the back, taken her dark-blue palm straw hat and placed it on the passenger seat and now, facing the gates in the distance she stood beside Lott in the backyard, in silence. Finally Lena turned and pulled her special friend close.

Lena: Tell Bebe goodbye and give my well wishes and a kiss.

Lott: I will. Gone before the sun rose but sends through me well wishes on your journey and this kiss.

Lott kissed Lena's lips softly. They looked at one another. Their eyes moistened and they held hands at arms length.

Lena: I always get so emotional around you.

Lott: As I do with you. Is that why you stay away from me?

Lena: No, I don't fear my emotions.

They stared at one another. Finally Lena spoke.

Lena: With you I am alive in a manner that is ours, yours and mine.

She moved close, touched Lott's chest and then her own. She touched the tears there beneath the eyes of the other. Lott touched the locket that hung from Lena's neck.

Lott: I'll see you New Year's Eve.

They brightened now with anticipation of an event yet to materialize.

Lena: Yes! New Year's Eve.

They hugged and kissed for this last time, this time.

Lott: Be well my special one.

Lena was moving backwards.

Lena: Be well my spirit.

She jumped into Baby and backed out, turned and with the windows down she put her left arm out and waved goodbye.

Lott: Protect yourself!

Lena: Protect yourself!

She eased away and then honked the horn, four times. She touched the hands of the guards at the gates and started towards her next destination Dallas, Texas.

THE PROFESSOR

The Professor was being driven from his office in Manhattan to his house in upstate New York, as Lena was starting further east. He was looking at and accessing his handheld device throughout the ride and when he arrived at home he hurried up the stairs with an awkward gait.

He always wore his prosthetic legs while in the city and mounting stairs could be somewhat difficult. In addition he carried a rectangular shoebox sized package under one arm. He

put the box on his desk in his office and then went to his bedroom and removed his loose-fitting wide-legged pants. Now in his white shirt, tie, suit jacket and underwear he made his way back to his office. He sat behind his desk and following his usual routine he removed the man-made devices and rubbed his knees and the end of his legs with pain-reducing cream. Then he pushed a button on his desk.

Professor: Zesiro, come into my office.

Then he pushed another button.

Professor: Akia, come into my office please.

The Professor was turning on monitors at his desk when he looked up to see the tall *Escurinba Entity* filling the doorway.

Zesiro: You wanted to see me Professor?

Professor: Come in. Come in, have a seat.

As Zesiro moved to the sofa another form came and stood in the doorway in silence.

Professor: Come in Akia. Have a seat beside your brother.

The *Entity* that walked slowly across the room was a tall *Escura PF* form and was the exact twin of Zesiro. This presentation had thick black hair that came down to the shoulders and although the same height, was thinner than Zesiro, with softer features, fuller lips and large haunting deep-set dark-brown eyes. Wearing a long, form-fitting dress that draped to the ankles, Akia obviously had the attributes of a female and also moved with a lithe gracefulness.

The sister sat down next to the brother and they both stared at the Professor who now rose into the air after picking up the box from his desk. As he floated to the wall of antique weapons he noticed Akia's feet and he spoke, almost gently.

Professor: Akia, you've neglected to put on your shoes again.

Akia looked down then rose to leave.

Professor: Sit down. You can put them on later.

Akia sat down and put both hands to the long earrings being worn and touched them to cause them to make a tinging sound.

Professor: Akia, I know you like that but don't play with your earrings or I'll have your brother remove your pretty jewelry.

Akia stopped and with hands crossed in lap watched the white-haired man as he opened the package, removed the content and placed it on his lap and tossed the empty box on a nearby table.

He pulled the plastic tube with his right hand and put it into his mouth and sucked at it and the dark-red liquid flowed and he released it, smacked his lips and coughed and frowned.

He stared at the pistol in his lap and smiled and admired it. He then floated to the bar and made himself a drink and gulped it down and made another one and placed it in the holder near his left hand. He moved to the center of the room and turned from the two observing him and picking up the old weapon he spun around and pointed it at the couple.

Professor: Bang! Bang!

The brother and sister stared at him.

Professor: You're supposed to duck, flinch or something. We'll have to work on that.

He pointed the weapon toward the large front window and sighted and then held it in his hand and caressed it.

Professor: This is a Harpers Ferry Flintlock pistol from the year one thousand eight hundred and five. Now I've added it to my Kentucky Flintlock rifle, Percussion Rifle from the eighteen hundreds and a Charleville Flintlock musket from seventeen sixty-three. Imagine that, original weapons from hundreds of years ago grace my home and are displayed on my wall. History belongs to me. Ah, the violent past.

He placed the pistol in his lap. He chuckled as he went back to the wall. He sucked on the tube and took a sip from his glass.

There were two crossed sabers hanging on the wall and with both hands he lifted one and began waving it over his head and then wielding it in a chopping motion. He stopped, breathless.

Professor: This Zesiro, is a Dragoon Saber from eighteen forty. It weighs six pounds and was called the wrist breaker.

He attempted to jab with one hand and after several thrusts he dropped it and the heavy metal thudded on the rug.

Professor: A very apt moniker I must say. Zesiro pick that up for me.

Zesiro rose and picking up the saber with both hands he presented it to the hovering man and suddenly excited eyes watched the dark entity return to the couch and sit down. The Professor stared at the two that were staring at him. He yelled at the siblings.

Professor: It's all gone bad! Or has it all gone well?

He took several deep breaths and reaching for his drink he took a gulp. He calmed himself. He moved before the two and hovered and then spoke quietly in a matter of fact tone.

Professor: The Advance Team lost contact with Team Two. Dirch, Madge and Fronie, having cut off communication had disappeared on their vacations and since they were technically invisible that really wasn't that difficult to do.

Now he yelled again, leaning forward.

Professor: They failed, the mediocre incompetents! They're all dead!

He took a sip of his drink and pulled on the tube. Again he took a deep breath and seemingly relaxed as he sat back.

Professor: Near Las Vegas a partially burned body, riddled with bullets, of an as yet unidentified brown-skinned male with yellow hair has been found near the wreckage of a nearly incinerated automobile containing the bodies of two, as yet unidentified individuals who appear to be some form of roasted meat. Three

other burnt-toasted and extremely over-roasted individuals, once again unidentifiable, were extracted from the wreckage of an automobile in Arizona. My intuition tells me our esteemed target has spread mayhem, destruction and death across two states. Normal *Center World* activities that no one really cares about. Oh well, it was expected. That was after all Plan B but now the higher ups are looking at me with angry accusing crossed eyes. They want to know what I am doing and what am I up to? Where are their agents, they ask? No more agents for me they say, wagging their crooked fingers at me.

The Professor moved back behind his desk and looked at screens for several minutes and then began to turn monitors off. Professor: At least Plan A is still in effect. They underestimated her but I haven't. This is a most unique human being.

He waved and directed the two that stared at him blankly. Professor: You two go to the laboratory and study those new programs I've set up for you. Study for exactly three hours and then go to your rooms. And Akia, put your shoes on. Go now.

Zesiro started out. Akia took several steps, stopped and then pulled the long dress up a little and looked down and then followed Zesiro out.

The Professor watched them on the monitor as they went down the hallway. Akia paused in front of a room and looked down, looked into the room and then followed the brother into the laboratory, with bare feet.

The Professor shook his head and then watched as Zesiro turned on a computer and the two dark *Entities* sat side-by-side and stared intently at the screen.

The Professor drank, sucked on his dark-red liquid and played war with his weapons and then later, passed out in his chair as he hovered four feet in the air in the middle of the room.

AVENGING ANGELS

A little less than six hours from Albuquerque, as it had just begun to grow dark, Lena was nearing downtown Lubbock. She pulled into a gas station to fill the nearly empty tank. As she began to unbuckle she could observe a biker group that was headed in the opposite direction from her begin to turn into areas of the station and pull to the pumps. She watched them in her rear and side-view mirror and started to leave until she saw a thin *Mulatinha* with long light-brown hair standing near the pumps waiting patiently for her. She let the window down.

Mulatinha: Can I put your gas in for you, please?

Lena: What's your name?

Mulatinha: Mitty.

Lena: How old are you Mitty?

Mitty: Nine years lived, ten next week.

Lena: Think you can reach high enough?

Mitty: I've got a step stool.

Lena: Ah, a businessperson. I like that. Okay Mitty, hold on.

Lena reached for a holster, adjusted her position and put it on her left side. She pulled a pistol from its holder and armed herself. She repositioned her sunglasses and looked at the bikers and thought a moment. She reached into a pouch behind the passenger seat and removed a twelve inch black metal cylinder and grabbed her dark-blue palm straw hat. The extension step deployed and when she got out she shoved the cylinder into the long pocket on the right side of her thigh and put on her hat as she began walking to the rear. After two steps the doors locked.

Mitty picked up her stool and followed. Before stepping out she had opened the covering on the tank and now she assisted the little person with the nozzle and spoke to her as Mitty was looking at the huge vehicle with awe.

Lena: It's almost empty so it's going to take a while. I'm going to pay so hold on tight because the gas will flow soon. Come inside when you're done.

Mitty: I'll be careful. What is this? It's so big and pretty. The tires are taller than me. I can see myself in these shiny wheels.

Lena: That's my Baby.

Mitty: Baby sure is wailing!

Lena: Thanks, I think.

She stepped inside and handed a value card to the proprietor and moved to stand at the window. She put her sunglasses into her breast pocket and watched as several of the bikers walked up to the black thing to examine and admire. Some tried to peek inside through the darkened windows. Lena read the name on their backs and looked at their bikes.

There were all colors and types. There were solar-electric hybrids, bikes with sidecars, modified quad bikes, smaller speed bikes for the streets and larger cruisers and touring bikes for distance and dirt bikes for riding off road. She saw bikes that could transport a rider in front with two on a seat behind and others that had been stripped down or chopped up.

All of them had skulls, crossbones and other indicators of poison, danger and doom. Several had rear taillights in the form of a fisted hand with an extended middle finger. They were all adorned with some symbolic form of rebellion, resistance and anarchy.

The machines and those who traveled on them, the Avenging Angels, represented *Center World* perfectly. Lena could count thirty-five bikes and stopped counting at forty-five different individual presentations, including *PFs*. She paid particular attention to the various handguns and rifles in their possession.

When Mitty finished she closed the covering, set her step stool to the side and ran inside.

Mitty: It took so much I thought it was running out of the bottom.

Lena signaled the owner and pointed to Mitty.

Lena: Go get the over-payment card.

Mitty ran to the counter and returned with a card and extended it to Lena.

Lena: Good job Mitty. You keep that.

Mitty looked at the amount on the card and smiled and bounced in excitement.

Mitty: Thank you! Thank you very much!

Lena handed the little one another card.

Lena: And that's for filling my Baby. She was thirsty.

Mitty looked at the card and her eyes grew wide and then she looked perplexed and held the card out to Lena.

Mitty: That's too much.

Lena: You earned it for honest effort and it's still hot out there. Think of it as a birthday gift. Happy birthday.

Mitty stared at the card and then spoke with excitement.

Mitty: Oh, thank you so much! This is my best birthday ever!

Lena: Will you do me a favor?

Mitty: Of course.

Lena: See that individual over there sitting on that red bike?

Mitty forced her eyes from the card and looked out.

Mitty: I see.

Lena: Walk out and take a look at the bike. Make mention of how nice it is and ask where they're going. And Mitty, don't say I sent you.

Mitty: I won't. I understand. I'll be like your spy.

Lena: Let's not put it like that. How about being my Minister of Information? Now put those cards away.

Mitty shoved them into the back pocket of her pants.

Lena: Why don't you put them in your boot?

Mitty sat down on the floor and removed her left boot and eased the cards in, pulled her boot back on and walked out. Lena could see Mitty do exactly as instructed and then stroll back in.

Mitty: They're going to Utah.

Lena: Thank you Mitty. Again a job well done.

Mitty: Will you do me a favor?

Lena lowered to her haunches and she and the *Mulatinho* were face-to-face, eye-to-eye.

Lena: Yes, if I can.

She gently pushed the hair from Mitty's forehead.

Mitty: Will you tell me your name?

Lena stared into serious and all-knowing hazel-colored eyes. These wide innocent eyes were the portents to this little human's soul and Lena was moved by all they seemed to show.

Lena: My name is Lena.

Mitty whispered the name as the dark woman rose and then Mitty grabbed Lena around the waist and gave her a tight hug.

Mitty: Thank you Lena. I'll never forget you.

Lena: And I won't forget you either. Now, it's getting late. Take that boot home right now. Your workday is done.

The little one yelled out as she bolted through the doorway.

Mitty: Bye bye Lena! Be well!

Lena: Bye bye Mitty. Be well.

She watched Mitty head around the side of the building and turn toward the houses in the distance. She adjusted her hat, put on her sunglasses and stepped outside.

As she walked, a tall somewhat thick *Cobre DM* who was leaning on the front of the building straightened and moved toward Baby's passenger side and pointed.

Cobre DM: Hey, what is this thing?

He moved around and stopped at the front on the driver's side. Lena was at the rear on the driver's side.

Lena: That's my Baby.

Cobre DM: Yeah? Take me for a ride in Baby.

Lena: I can't. I'm going my way you're going yours.

The copper-colored man scratched at the side of his short blonde hair, pulled on his long beard and stared. His left eye was light blue and his right eye was light gray. He couldn't see the other individual's eyes behind the dark glasses. The head was slightly lowered, the front of the large-brimmed straw hat dipped. He heard a quiet voice, direct and precise.

Cobre DM: Looking the way you do you need someone to ride with you. It's dangerous out here.

They faced each other. Lena stepped twice, toward him.

Lena: I like riding alone.

Cobre DM: Oh you do huh?

He eased forward, closer to the driver's door and stopped.

Lena: Step away. I have no time for this.

He looked at her pistol and with his right hand he opened his vest, showing his weapon and then closed it. He put his left hand on his long knife at his hip and patted it and then lifted that hand and spoke as he began to move to the side and reach out.

Cobre DM: Maybe I'll just take it for a little drive myself.

As his left hand neared the door Lena pulled the cylinder from her pocket, pressed a button and it quickly extended to thirty-eight inches with the last twelve being a solid steel bar.

She stepped forward and whacked the airborne hand and broke it and he howled and grabbed it and then she hit him on the left side of his head and he stumbled right and when he didn't go down she hit him again, harder and knocked him out.

She moved past the prone figure and before she touched the door it unlocked, Baby started, the extension descended and she stepped up and in. She rode from the pump area to the street in first gear, tossed her hat into the backseat and as she buckled in

she was looking in her side mirror watching the *Cobre DM's* associates sit him up, gather around and attempt to bring him to consciousness. She accelerated, shifted up into third and when she was back on the highway she went to sixth.

Lena: Activate RS.

Baby: RS activated.

Lena: Scan five-mile radius.

Baby: Scanning five-mile radius.

Lena: Activate rear camera.

Baby: Rear camera activated.

On the top monitor the bottom right screen lit up and displayed the rear view.

She didn't try to outrun them but she wanted those she assumed would pursue her to have to make an effort to catch her. It took thirty minutes before she heard the chimes. Four oncoming objects identified.

Lena: Zoom rear camera 10X.

Baby: Rear camera zoomed 10X.

Lena slowed until she could determine there were four street bikes modified for speed. When they drew close enough she went right, from the paved highway onto the dirt. She moved through bushes, around trees and toward the nearby low hills. Over a rise Baby went and when she could determine she was out of vision of the bikers she stopped and watched until the scope chimed as the four objects were identified, returning in the direction from whence they came.

She sat there until they were out of range and then put Baby back on the road, switched to electric power and continued on her way.

At a crawling speed it was a little over ten hours from Albuquerque to Dallas and she had planned to take it easy and stop on occasions so she could watch the sky darken and the

stars and moon as they first appeared and then arrive in Dallas soon thereafter. She wanted to enjoy the ride and now the Avenging Angels had interfered with that plan.

She rode another hour and then began looking for a particular area and terrain and when she found it she pulled off road and drove approximately one hundred yards and stopped. The area had been deconstructed, replanted and reclaimed by nature and had nearly returned to its original state. Once a neighborhood of homes, there remained trees that were hundreds of years old.

To get to this point she had passed through bunchgrass, rosin weed, river primrose plants and stopped in front of tall, majestic Afghan Pine and Cedar Elm trees. She got out and walked around, familiarizing herself with the immediate surroundings. She strolled through sunflowers and four-nerve daisies and stood beneath an Austrian Pine tree and looked at giant cherrybark oaks in the distance while she sipped chilled water and munched on fruit.

Returning to Baby she retracted the metal roof, then the glass roof, set the RS to scan a two-mile radius and entered backup power mode. She next prepared her weapons and ammunition. When she was done she put on some hard grinding music and turned it and all interior sound down to low and set the interior lights to off. She moved to the rear middle seat, reclined the back a little, raised the foot rest and in this position she could do as she had wanted and look up into the above and wait patiently for the visitors she knew would arrive.

She calculated the time it would take the first four Angels to return to their group and send as quickly as possible bikes that could go off-road. The enforcers would be sent to overtake her and extract revenge for the assault of their associate.

She would look each time the RS chimed and watch until the object moved past and continue on and she no longer could hear

it or see its guiding headlights in the darkness.

It was almost ten o'clock when the RS chimed and she could see four objects riding in single file. Two sped on pass, riding in electric mode, in near silence and then the rear two stopped. Lena could look out and see the last two bikes on the road as their headlights went off and watched as the other two came back. Those headlights went off and the four bikes moved slowly back down the road. They could see the big black thing sitting back near the trees, its silver grill reflecting in the moonlight.

As they moved to gain the rear position, she placed, cross body over her head, a bag that contained fully loaded magazines and took one fully loaded silencer equipped pistol and her silencer equipped rifle and carefully exited the rear and while crouching, went into the high grass.

She kept moving and stopping to look through the integrated electronic sight she had set for nightlight until she saw the four bikes and four enforcers huddled with their heads together. Now she disappeared into the nearby trees. She remained still and watched as first one and then another would point into the darkness.

For thirty minutes they watched Baby, looking for any indication of the dark woman they sought and then they split up and as two crept forward the other two proceeded to move into flanking positions. They all wielded large pistols.

She sighted on each one and gauged their movements and specific points of arrival. The two together in the middle were moving more slowly in order to allow the other two on the ends to arch closer toward her.

The attackers directly in the middle were uncovered, the one to the left was uncovered and the one on the right had moved into the trees. She had parked in order to enable herself to secure the position in which she now stood, unseen.

When the taller Angel on the right eased from behind a tree to move to the next cover she squeezed the trigger three quick times and he burst into flames. She swung to the left and as the flames rose from the collapsed body, the remaining three froze and she shot the Angel on the left three times and he lit up. There was no warning no gunshot sound or muzzle flash and no screams. She locked in on one middle Angel and when he ignited, the last one, before he could even turn, experienced fire and death just as the first three.

Their bodies were burning as the black thing pulled back onto the highway and continued the impeded journey.

DALLAS, TEXAS

That next night after her arrival in Dallas, Lena was sitting in a casino she and her two friends and business partners had been offered in a barter transaction. The three of them were playing poker and sipping on champagne.

To her right sat Dob, a *Parda-clara DTM* of average height with medium length dark-brown hair and light-brown eyes that were covered by gold-rimmed sunglasses. On her left sat Dob's mate Prue, a shorter than average, somewhat thick, *Parda-clara DTW* with long auburn hair piled high and intense dark-brown eyes.

They were all elegantly dressed for the night with Dob in a white-coat Tuxedo. Lena was in burnt-orange and Prue in black and they both wore tight long flowing gowns with arms, hands, and necks adorned in fine jewelry and beautiful shoes with heels that appeared too high and thin to support their bodies.

Two house guards stood close and it was nearing midnight when one of the floor managers who was standing behind the three watching the action received a long whispered message and

immediately after receiving it, strolled over to Dob and with another detailed whisper, conveyed that message. Dob turned to Lena.

Dob: The Angels are less than two hundred miles from here near Abilene inquiring about a dark-skinned individual and that black thing you pilot. They have settled for the night.

Lena passed the message to Prue and then said the same thing to both on her sides.

Lena: We'll visit them before the sun arrives.

As the sky began to lighten in the east, Lena and Prue, with Dob driving, pulled into the trees some distance from the camp of the Avenging Angels. They rode quietly in an electric powered, camouflaged off-road vehicle and each wore tan-and-green pants and shirts and billed caps. In their possession were three rifles and six handguns and additional ammunition for each weapon.

They armed themselves and got out and walked several yards so they could observe the group through their dim-light-vision long glasses. They spoke in hushed tones.

Dob: The report indicates the reality of this gang.

Prue: They are known to attack and pillage the outlining areas of the weaker states, those without strong militias or significant population strength. The more powerful larger populated cities ignore them as long as they only pass through and otherwise stay away.

Dob: They should call themselves the Plundering Angels.

Prue: Rapists and murderers.

Dob: They create no real value. They survive mainly through robbery and intimidation to acquire goods in order to survive.

Prue spoke with disdain and bitter hatred.

Prue: Rapists!

Dob: I'm surprised they would venture this close to Dallas. They know they can't come in and cause trouble. They would be attacked.

Prue: They need to catch you on the road and good passable roads are most often limited to the main ones.

Lena: They pause here to consider their next move. They need confirmation that I am near or have passed through.

Prue: They're worthless. Their actions, their very existence and all similar groups sabotage the progress of *Center World*.

Dob: *Center World* strives for world support and they live in the violent past.

Lena: They are on a mission.

Prue: What mission is that?

Lena: They are seeking to embrace death.

As the sky grew brighter the three stood in silence. Then the campfires could be seen and Lena saw individuals cross the road to the small store that sat opposite them.

Lena: Remain here and watch. I'm going down.

Dob: We all go together, as always.

Prue shifted the rifle being held.

Prue: As always.

Lena: I have a plan. I will attempt to dissuade them one final time. If I can prevent it, no one is to be placed in danger because of this clash other than them and me and that includes you two my dear friends. I don't go to attack so only come if you hear gunshots. I won't be gone long. Trust me on this.

Lena moved off slowly towards the camp as the other two watched and when their friend reached the trees behind the store Prue kept the glasses trained in Lena's direction as Dob watched the Angels.

There were four houses not far away and one that was close but the store stood alone near the highway alongside two supply

sheds. Lena had seen three individuals with the one in charge pointing and giving directions to two assistants who were going in and out of the back door and removing supplies from the sheds to replenish stock in preparation for this unanticipated business at this unusual time of the morning.

Lena left the trees and keeping her rifle on her back and her pistols holstered she approached the back door of the store. As she drew near, two young *Rosada ND* individuals walked out and seeing the armed person they assumed another member of the gang and one nodded and the other spoke a greeting and they went to the nearby shed. As they came back past, Lena showed a value card to each and placed a finger to her lips and stuck the cards into their shirt pockets.

Lena: No trouble. Send the one in charge to me.

She opened the door for them. It wasn't long before an older gray-haired *Rosada DM* stepped out.

Lena: No trouble, I need to speak with one of the Angels. I'll go in with you.

She showed a high value card and with surprised eyes the gray head nodded, took the offered card and opened the door. Lena indicated she would follow and they stepped inside.

They moved toward the front and Lena stopped between the shelves as the *DM* went behind the front counter. The three who worked the store kept glancing in the direction of the dark woman and saw her standing with a slight, tight smile waiting patiently.

Two Angels came in to make purchases and as one assistant waited on them the one in charge looked back and Lena shook her head.

Next a young, short *Palida DF* with long black braided hair hanging down her back and a holstered pistol under her left arm entered, alone. Purchases were made and with bags hanging from

both hands the pale-skinned young woman turned to leave. Lena stepped forward and eased up behind, took an arm and remaining at the rear, turned the Angel toward the rear door, holding the arm tightly.

Lena: The Angels are searching for the driver of a large black vehicle and I have information for you.

They moved quickly between the shelves and through the back doorway to the rear of a shed out of sight from the road. Lena turned the Angel around and looked down into the soft light-brown eyes and moved closer.

Lena: You can set those bags down.

The young Angel could look up and see beneath the bill of the cap, piercing, hypnotizing dark-brown eyes that would not allow any thought and she could hear a quiet authoritative voice that elicited rising fear and the presence of the tall dark figure forced brief involuntary movement and with weakened arms, the bags dropped.

Lena: What's your name?

Angel: Briney.

Lena: How old are you Briney?

Briney: Eighteen years lived.

Lena: Who leads the Avenging Angels?

Briney: Cager.

Lena: Who is the second in command?

Briney: Quill.

Lena: The black vehicle belongs to me I am the one Cager seeks.

Briney looked at the muzzle of the black rifle rising from behind the back of this dark woman and then down at the holstered black pistols. Now with lowered eyes the youthful Angel felt a chill.

Lena: Look at me Briney.

Briney looked up and was held by the gaze.

Lena: Take this message to your leader. I desire to see him. Tell Cager I will meet with the number one Angel at the Blue Rock tomorrow at seven in the evening. Quill must come. There will be no more than three others. You Briney must be one of the three. I will come to the rock alone. I'll be watching and any deviations and I will not show. Have you heard me?

Briney: Yes, I heard.

Lena: Repeat my words.

Briney repeated the instructions.

Lena: Now pick up your bags and walk around the far side of the store and back across the road. Do not look in this direction.

Before the young Angel had reached the front of the building Lena had faded into the trees.

The next day at four in the afternoon, Lena, Dob and Prue were approaching the meeting area from off road. The Blue Rock was forty miles south of Abilene and once sat in front of the courthouse in the center of a small town. Now, it sat in the middle of nothingness. The rock was the size of a large automobile and was covered with deposits that had formed bluish veins throughout and when the sunlight fell upon it just right the whole rock appeared a bright blue, as a jewel.

The three, again dressed as soldiers, had brought two vehicles and they parked in a partially concealed shallow ravine and climbed near the top where they could observe with their long glasses anything or anyone approaching from a far away distance. They talked quietly with at least one of them watching constantly and alternated walking back down the short distance to the vehicles to sit in the shade and sip chilled water.

As seven drew near, they were all scanning in different directions when Dob spoke.

Dob: Dust on the horizon to the right.

The other two shifted and observed that which Dob had seen. Dust and dirt rose and then vehicles and individuals came into focus. There were three off-road bikes, two with sidecars, five individuals total. They were spread out and to protect against the elements they all wore visor-covered helmets.

Lena: Keep your glasses on me. Don't overreact.

She adjusted her sunglasses and got in her vehicle and started along the ravine, went up and then toward the rock. Her rifle was next to her and she wore both her pistols.

She arrived first and was standing outside when the Angels pulled up. Their dust settled and when the engines of the bikes were cut off they were all then within the diminishing heat of the day and the silence of the expanse in which they stood.

No one spoke as the bikers dismounted and the two in the sidecars extracted themselves. They were all armed with pistols and knives and wore black and red with black gloves except for the one whose left hand was covered with bandages.

As they removed their helmets Lena looked at each face and paused to look deep into Briney's anxious eyes. Then the final black helmet was removed to clearly show the *Cobre DM* with the long beard and short blonde hair who had first confronted her.

The five slowly approached and then when they reached a particular point Lena held up her left hand to halt their movement. Behind the sunglasses they couldn't see the eyes but they could clearly hear the sharp voice call out.

Lena: Which one of you is Cager, the leader of the Avenging Angels?

The copper-skinned man wore a vest with no shirt and he thumped his bare chest with his broken hand and loudly sneered.

Cager: I am the leader! The Avenging Angels follow me!

Lena pointed to the tall extremely thick pink-haired *Parda-clara DM* who stood next to Cager.

Lena: Then you must be Quill.

The second in command crossed his burly arms in front of his chest and proclaimed loudly.

Quill: I am!

With her left hand Lena pulled her right pistol and shot Cager through the head and pulled her other pistol and covered the remaining four and as the leader was knocked back and to the ground. Quill dropped his arms and hollered.

Quill: You said you wanted to see him!

The dark woman hollered back.

Lena: I see him, look, he's dead! How appropriate, he began this conflict!

She walked several steps toward the group with her weapons spread and extended. The four froze as they were and it was obvious from the intensity within the sound of her lowered voice that she was very upset.

Lena: Now listen carefully. I know the Angels are angry. You find the burnt dead bodies of four of your associates lying in the dirt but your treacherous leader sent those treacherous henchmen to sneak up on me in the night and attempt to do me harm. Quill you can end this right here. Now you are the leader so take this to your people. Ride on to Utah. Turn around. Go no further. You go west and I'll go east to New Orleans. To follow is to continue your war against me and you risk the lives of all those you now lead. But if it's war you desire then meet me in Longview in three days at high noon. You have my word, just as I stand here before you alone, I'll be there also alone. If the Avenging Angels do not show by sundown I'll know that you lead wisely and are not as dense in the head as you appear.

Quill's eyes were bulging and his head was turning red. The two drivers stared in amazement and Briney was expressionless.

The dark woman's voice rose.

Lena: Now take that worthless human away so his poisonous blood and filthy rotting corpse can't pollute the grounds of Blue Rock.

As the two drivers gathered the body, the young Angel, as if forced to, took several steps forward and spoke.

Briney: What's your name?

Lena lowered her weapons.

Lena: My name is Lena.

Briney turned and walked away, paused without looking back, as if pondering something and then mounted the quad bike and watched the dark woman standing in the light.

Cager's body was dumped into a sidecar. Quill was livid and he sputtered and yelled and cursed, filling the air with promises and threats. The three pulled off and the young Angel hesitated, lingered and then eased away and followed the others.

Lena watched as the dirt rose, settled, and the bikers moved into the distance and then she drove back to her waiting friends. When she got out Dob was the first to speak.

Dob: Who died?

Lena reached for a bottle of chilled water.

Lena: Cager, now the former leader. In a twist of irony the one who led them was also the one who first needlessly confronted me and began all this. Now he's done with his foolishness.

Prue: What's next?

Lena: I go further to New Orleans. Where they go next I'm not sure. Quill is their new leader and must decide their direction and if the others agree to follow wherever he leads, that will be their choice.

Dob: You've eliminated four of their associates, removed their leader and they've chased you almost two hundred miles through *Center World* and now they just go away? What is that the perfect conclusion?

Lena: I strongly recommended they turn around and continue their journey to Utah and put me and these incidents out of their memory.

Prue: Are you telling us everything we should know?

Prue eyed Lena suspiciously and walked over and removed her sunglasses. They stared at one another and then Lena took her glasses back and spoke as she covered her eyes.

Lena: My dear Prue, you and your beloved have been told everything you need to know and remember, it's impossible to know everything. Now, let's get ready for the night. I feel like dancing.

Dob and Prue existed in the penthouse of the large hotel the three of them controlled and there they returned to eat and rest until time to go out.

It was near midnight when the three friends, Dob in a black Tuxedo and Prue and Lena in their fine dancing clothes were being driven in a long car to a casino in Plano.

Lena felt alive. She had constantly remained vigilant but not at the level she had been in *West World* and to a degree in Las Vegas. It was not just a matter of being in the smaller and more isolated Phoenix and Albuquerque, it was also whom she had been with and where she had gone. In addition, transient strangers were uncommon and more obvious in those areas. Generally, individuals were coming that far into *Center World* to live, remain and die. In Dallas, Dob's and Prue's protection also shielded her and Lena's two friends were near the top of the power and influence hierarchy in this part of Texas. So the three of them set out to have an enjoyable time together knowing Lena would soon be departing.

They sipped champagne and played poker for several hours and then Lena and Prue danced together to loud pulsating music

as Dob, too smooth to move, watched them with an occasional wave of the hand and as the sky lightened they returned to the top of the hotel.

They slept late and in the early evening they put on bathing suits and just the three of them sat by the private rooftop swimming pool and talked, laughed and listened to music. Lena swam and then on her back in the cool water she looked at the emerging stars and the first quarter moon and thought of her living friends, all of them, and then acknowledged to herself appreciation and that she greatly missed those who were not near.

The next day was a business day. They completed the barter transaction and inspected their newly acquired property and finalized the list and established a new budget for the needed upgrades and continued maintenance for all of their properties and concluded by discussing their plans for the future. It was then time for Lena to prepare for her next morning departure.

Prue wanted to remain close to Lena and went with the dear friend to the secure garage area in the parking area beneath the hotel where Baby was parked. Lena brought her weapons up to the office and Prue sat and watched as Lena broke them down, inspected and then loaded them. Back down they went with Prue carrying the rifle and rifle case. Lena glanced at her friend and knew emotions were swirling, rising inside of them both.

Prue watched as the rifle and pistols were clamped in and magazines arranged and the rear storage area rearranged. With Prue in the passenger seat Lena ran a manual and then another complete diagnostics check through the Central Processing Unit.

Prue would occasionally pose a question but was otherwise subdued, and looking around. Prue moved to the rear middle seat and Lena explained how to move it, recline the back and raise

the footrest and as the seat shifted, Prue spoke softly.

Prue: Are your friends and associates still in control of New Orleans?

Lena: Yes. Texas and Louisiana are the safest states in *Center World*.

Prue: And then you go to New York?

Lena: Yes. After my business there this journey will be over.

Prue: Do you really believe the Angels have given up their desire to kill you?

Lena: I don't know. I hope so, for their sake.

Prue: It's unlike you to allow enemies such as those to remain alive.

Lena was silent and opened her door to step out. Prue jumped from the rear and standing there outside shouted as tears filled the eyes.

Prue: You're withholding from me Lena! I know you are! I can feel it!

Prue slammed the door and ran toward the elevator as Lena called out but her friend did not stop or return. She continued her preparations and had lifted the rear hatch and was just opening the storage compartments on the interior side panels when she heard the elevator and then slow quiet footsteps. Dob approached and moved to stand beside Lena and observed in silence for a few moments.

Dob: This thing looks a lot better all washed and cleaned. What are those dents?

Lena: Those are dings and chips and they come from bullets.

Dob: I thought so.

Dob walked around Baby and then returned to stand and look as Lena took a bottle of water from the chilling area and after taking a long drink she handed the bottle to Dob who took a drink and handed it back.

Dob: Prue is upset. There's the disorder your presence brings which we always enjoy so much and then we're disturbed by your departure.

Lena: I know. The thought of our separation already begins to bring longing to me for you both.

Dob: Perhaps you've let slip away that which we three mean to each other. You stay away too long. You used to fly in often and remain for a week at a time now it's been almost two years.

Lena: I must do better.

Dob watched as Lena examined a two-piece black suit. It had a dull sheen and at first glance looked like it was constructed of a metal-like material. Next a helmet with a tinted glasslike front was pulled out and Dob looked at it with fascination and then when Dob attempted to lift the top section of the suit the weight was surprising and it slipped from the hands and landed with a thud on the interior carpet. Dob stared at Lena and she stared back.

Dob: And what is this?

Lena: A suit I wear on special occasions.

She now pulled out black boots that looked as if they were made completely of a thickened polymer composite.

Dob: Has such an occasion arrived?

Lena: Perhaps.

Dob: Did Prue see this?

Lena: No, there was no need for Prue to see.

Dob: Sit with me.

They sat on the rear of Baby and looked ahead. There was nothing before them except for the walls of the enclosed structure. They passed the bottle of water between them and spoke as intimate friends.

Dob: How long have you and I known each other?

Lena: Almost fourteen years.

Dob: A lifetime in *Center World*. And you knew Prue before me.

Lena: Yes, fifteen years now.

Dob: When you suddenly arrived from *East World* I was twenty-three and was five years into my change. Prue was seventeen and still suffered. Lena, you provided the last of that which my beloved needed to gain spiritual peace. Not just the values that procured the doctors but also the emotional support that showed the way to live as you insisted we both live, authentically.

Lena: You and Prue are not just unique humans, in any physical form but also courageous. I may have pointed to a path but you two had to decide it was correct for you and go.

Dob: And go we did. Discovering not just ourselves but also each other on that path and I've never been with anyone but my special one. I've been loyal, always. And believe with all my heart that Prue has been the same with me.

Lena: And have been truly together ever since.

Dob: We both are eternally grateful.

Lena: It was fate, and so the outcome, the conclusion will be determined by you and the one you love. Fate is only that which it is. It is not good or bad it simply is, the real. You two have made the most of your opportunities, taken advantage of the events that were placed upon you and the world into which you were born. You separately and together struggled to rise above and deserve all you have acquired, both the material and that which is most important the quietness in your souls through emotional health. Your assisting others such as yourselves is not just kind but a noble effort and for that I greatly admire you both.

Dob: It makes me feel good to hear those words from you. Thank you.

Now they were silent. All around them was silence and they sipped their water.

Dob: I have never had concern for you. I've never known anyone such as you and never will. I've seen you do things I would not have imagined a human being capable of doing but Prue not only misses you greatly but also worries no matter where you are. The two of us have never been anywhere outside of Texas and so everything else is foreign to us. How you survive as you do is for us incomprehensible and Prue sees danger for you everywhere and through everyone and so I ask of you two things, make two requests.

Lena: If it's in my power they'll be fulfilled.

Dob: Come more often. Visit us as you used to.

Lena: That I can't promise but we'll see each other more. I hear you. And the other?

Dob: Don't depart without the fears of my mate being eased. Talk things over. You two have always known what to express to each other.

Lena: Before I leave all will be right between us. That I promise.

Dob: I love you Lena.

Lena: And I love you Dob.

They smiled and kissed and hugged and Dob left Lena to complete her tasks.

When Lena went upstairs Dob, from the kitchen, pointed down the hallway to the den. The door was closed and Lena knocked softly. A voice, barely audible, responded after three additions taps.

Prue: Yes?

Lena: Can I come in?

Prue: Yes.

Lena opened the door. The room was nearly dark and Prue's outline could barely be seen face down on the couch across the room. Lena closed the door.

Lena: Can I turn the lights up a little?

Prue: Yes.

Lena turned up the illumination so that soft light spilled around the room and then she moved to sit beside her friend. She placed her hand gently on Prue's back and then moved it to several different spots squeezing each time just a little.

Lena: It pains me to see you like this. What can I do for you?

Prue: Just whisper to me my name and tell me you'll be alright.

Lena did as asked. Prue remained turned away and then the sniffles ceased.

Prue: I'm fine now. No pain for either of us. My spell is over.

Lena: Really?

Prue: Yes.

Lena: Then let me see that truth.

Prue turned over and sat up and slid back to the armrest and with head down twisted the handkerchief being held.

Lena: Look at me.

Prue's head raised and they looked directly at one another. Lena took the cloth and dabbed beneath Prue's eyes and wiped the cheeks. They held each other's gaze and looked deeply into the eyes of the other. Prue spoke quietly.

Prue: Dob and I recently reminisced of the past, spoke of how we three came together. Do you recall when you and I grew close?

Lena: Yes.

Prue: Our friendship was still fresh yet you fought those three who attempted to assault me.

Lena: We fought them together.

Prue: You destroyed them, for me you did that.

Lena: They were treacherous individuals.

Prue: They were rapists!

Lena touched Prue's face and felt the heat.

Lena: That they were nevermore.

Prue calmed and touched Lena's face and the hand lingered a moment and then fell to the lap.

Prue: I was seventeen years lived but it was not until then that I, as Prue began.

Lena: You were special then and you're special still.

Prue: You saved my life and then helped me in achieving life.

Lena: Prue, you created the life you have. Just as you fought those attackers, you fought within life, with strength and courage.

Prue: Dob and I talked of how it was you who first spoke of living authentically in a way that touched us. We had heard it before but it was you who showed us through your existence exactly what that meant. I wanted so badly to become myself and you suggested I had to eventually come out in order to have peace within. You said life was lived from the inside out and that acceptance of my inside self was that first step out.

Lena put the back of her right hand to her friend's right cheek and then gently took both of Prue's hands and laid them in the lap and held on tightly and they looked down at the light-brown and dark-brown skin.

Prue: How different and beautiful, the contrast.

Now they both smiled a moment and then Prue began again and the once soft voice grew stronger.

Prue: With your assistance the doctors made this body but this body does not make me. My true essence, my soul is given to you and the one who has been for me and will always be for me the only one, Dob, my mate. And so as I lay here in the dark weeping I remembered clearly who Dob is, who I am and most important, was reminded of who you are, not just to me but to this world in which we all exist and through which you freely move and so I reject the corporeal restrictions entailed in this man-made body and I'll travel with you in spirit wherever you venture and strive in thought, as long as I live, to protect you. To live authentically

for you is to actualize your desires, to make them real through actions. Go forth Lena, live your life and do what you do but don't stay away so long from those who dearly love you.

Lena: I won't.

Prue: I know you can't promise to come as you used to but can you give your word you'll try harder to come more often than you have?

Lena: I give you my word I'll try harder.

Prue: I'll accept that.

Lena: You know how communication is so poor here in *Center World* but I promise to let you know I've arrived safely in New Orleans.

Prue: I hold you to that promise. Now smile for me.

Lena smiled and flashed her tooth. They kissed and hugged.

Prue: I love you Lena.

Lena took Prue's face into her hands.

Lena: You and Dob are the future, what this whole world must become in that you are the examples of the power of love and I love you Prue. Now, I know Dob has been cooking because I am being teased by the aroma of something I believe is delicious. Let's go eat.

The next morning at eight the three friends were in the garage. It was time for Lena to depart. They stood with their heads together, arms around each other in silence. Finally Lena spoke. Her voice was firm and each could feel the presence of three.

Lena: Protect yourselves, protect each other and though I leave I take you both with me and I shall return and we'll be together again. Be well my dear friends.

Prue: Be well Lena.

Dob: Be well my friend.

They watched their friend, dressed in dark green, climb into the big black thing she called Baby and ease toward the exit. The horn sounded four times and Lena was gone.

Prue: I hope she destroys them all, the murdering rapists.

BATTLE AT LONGVIEW

It was less than two hours to Longview in East Texas and by ten Lena was sitting on a hill looking down and into the distance at the Avenging Angels. She was staring with her long glasses through the front windshield and deciding how best to move forward.

Years ago, before deconstruction, interstate twenty and highways eighty and two five nine converged here. Now only the main highway twenty remained. States in *Center World*, the ones that sought to expand, each made the effort to keep their main thoroughfares in excellent condition. Those in charge knew that population growth rose from strong infrastructure and though the city was gone and the majority of the people were located near the larger cities, highway twenty remained, that and the Sabine River that ran north of where Longview once thrived.

Lena counted forty Angels and observed how the quad and off-road bikes sat well away in the dirt areas and near the trees and the speed street bikes had been carefully ridden or probably pushed into the grass and bushes near the highway. The Angels weren't hiding to ambush they were just waiting and from the location and appearance of their camp, had more than likely been there at least two days.

An hour into her ride she had stopped, put on her special suit and set her helmet on the passenger seat. A thick bag and strap made from the same material as her suit was filled with magazines and now she was calm yet feeling the excitement rising within.

The Angels had made their choice and she was determined to ensure that each individual not only traveled their predetermined course in life but also arrive at their desired destination.

As noon approached she knew what was to be done. Down the hill she started and picking up speed she headed for the wide flowing river.

The Angels had been on heightened alert as high noon came and a lookout saw the dust and dirt blowing furiously, like a low windstorm, spread out behind the black thing as it headed toward them and then veer north.

Sounding the alarm, the Angels sprung quickly into action and gathered their weapons, jumped on their bikes and started after the speeding vehicle. The off-road bikes went in a direct line and the other bikes stayed on the road, parallel to the river. Quill led the off-road attack.

The black thing reached the river, raced alongside it for a while and with dust and dirt spraying, slid to a halt and backed up and stopped at an angle with the rear close to the steep riverbank. In this position only the front and both sides were exposed and vulnerable.

As soon as the dust cleared, Quill and his group stopped and watched as black metal skirts descended from the fenders to completely cover the wheels and tires. The headlights were then shielded in black metal and with the silver grill seemingly grinning at them, the black thing looked like a sleeping monster with its mouth open. Then black metal came down to cover the grill and all they saw was a large black metal box.

The Angels got close enough to open fire from the dirt, from the road and metal sparked and lead bounced off harmlessly and they were slow to realize the thing at which they shot was impervious to their bullets. They kept firing until their leader dismounted and waved his arms for everyone to stop. Now they

were in a quandary.

Quill gave orders and directions to move into a semi-circle around their target but then he had to figure out a way to breach this thing they faced and that faced them. He wondered how they could get inside.

Lena watched her adversaries and as they looked at her, pondering their situation, she was putting on her helmet and snapping it into a secure position by attaching it to the material that rose up around her neck. She had then opened a flap on the suit near her left shoulder and touched a control and coolant had begun to flow through the material. She had then done the same thing at her right shoulder and pure oxygen from storage areas throughout the lining of the suit, at intervals, was injected into her helmet. Then she had disconnected the power cord from the suit that had been linked to Baby's electrical system and the solar power source imbedded in the back of the suit took over. She had next pulled on black gloves that had stiff metal plates extending on the back but were also designed to allow dexterous movement of the fingers. Finally she had lifted her rifle from its holder and with her pistols protected in solid pouches at the sides of her thighs, she had waited patiently for the right moment.

Quill gave orders for three of the quad bikes to return to camp and using the reserve portable gas tanks, construct gas bottled cocktails so they could burn the black thing and force the dark woman out into the light. Three bikes turned back toward camp and as they moved off, the driver's side door opened.

The Angel who had been the one to transport Quill to the Blue Rock meeting was near on his right and he pointed.

Driver: Look! Look, the door's opening! Is she getting out?

The way the black thing had come to a halt, only the front and passenger side could be seen by Quill and his group, but the other side was blocked from their view so although they could

see the door open they could not clearly see the occupant emerge. However, those on the left side of the vehicle, six Angels on three quad bikes and three off-road bikes, could see distinctly. They saw a figure in a black helmet with a tinted glasslike face-covering, wearing a black shiny suit, carrying a rifle with a bag hanging from her neck and pouches on her legs exit, close the door and walk slowly, laboriously toward the rear left side. The six opened fire.

Quill could see his cohorts firing but he couldn't understand why they suddenly tried to turn and flee. The firing Angels quickly understood that their target, the stiffly walking individual, was dressed in a bulletproof suit and they had seen the thing in black barely react to their bullets and move around the rear of the big vehicle and with raised rifle, sight on them as they sat in the open.

Lena shot three of the six Angels dead and they lit up and started burning and as the other three sped away she shot one gas tank and the next and then the next and bikes and bodies exploded.

The left side was now clear and no longer vulnerable and Lena moved to the left front and was now standing above and behind the hood. Quill motioned and waved and all the Angels dropped to the ground away from their bikes or crawled behind bushes or tried to disappear into the high grass.

The figure in black fired twice but no one close was hit. Instead, there was an explosion in the distance and two of the Angels making cocktails and standing near the gas tanks were blown up. The other one jumped on his bike and headed toward the trees and just as he reached them he was shot from his bike and he was dead and the runaway bike crashed into the trees.

Lena sighted into the trees and saw two *PFs* crawl in and conceal themselves. She sighted on an Angel sitting on a bike

between the hidden two and recognized it was Briney, watching her through long glasses as if watching a distant play unfold. Lena looked at the young Angel. They looked at each other and then Lena turned her attention back to those in front and on her right.

The driver next to Quill was lying in the grass and began hollering at and cursing his leader and yelling out questions and when Quill was told the dark woman was right, he was dense in the head the leader shot his fellow Angel dead by shooting him in the head.

Fire could be heard crackling and burning and black acrid smoke rose into the sky and now Lena began destroying all the bikes upon which she could sight. No matter how far away they were if the gas tank was exposed they were ignited and loud expressions like bombs filled the air.

If an Angel rose to run they were dead within three strides. Voices called out to Quill but the leader was silent and could only clutch the earth beneath.

Now the bikes close and on the right began bursting into flames and exploding and the Angels knew what came next and so they started firing but the explosions kept going off and finally there were no more bikes to ignite. Only those riders, who had made it to the trees, rode off from the back of the camp or those at the rear on the right had managed to escape and that wasn't many.

Now Lena ejected her empty magazine and put another one in. She put the rifle on her back and pulled both pistols and stepped from behind Baby and began slowly walking forward.

Quill couldn't believe she was revealing herself and he and the others jumped up and started firing. The figure dropped to one knee and they began to run forward shooting and screaming and hollering and then the target stood up and they discovered what

those first attacking Angels had realized. The dark woman wore a black bulletproof suit and helmet.

They did not want to believe this creature could withstand their bullets, not knowing their projectiles to Lena, felt to her body as the sting of a wasp.

Using position sensors she opened fire with both hands, quick double and triple shots and Angels died. She strode awkwardly forward and then angled to her right seeking those who hid behind bushes and crawled in the grass like snakes.

She was driven to one knee as bullets rained upon her but she rose and turned to complete what she had set out to do. From those close to those away she free sighted on them and as they fired she fired back. She would stagger a little, her head would turn slightly as if being struck by a light fisted blow but she never paused for long.

The opposing fire to her right slowed and then stopped and she turned to those who remained in front and dispatched them as she had done the others and then only Quill remained.

He was ducking and firing and when his pistol was empty he threw it at her and taking two steps he picked up a discarded rifle and he sent a burst into the dark woman's body and she bent over slightly and then straightened and the impact of the lead sounded as thumps and then Quill raised his aim to his enemy's head and the force caused her to take a step back and the sound was as lead on plastic and he couldn't see her eyes and she wouldn't stop and refused to fall and when he ran out of bullets Lena, with both pistols answering the onslaught, squeezed the triggers and held them and she shot the leader of the Avenging Angels until her pistols were empty and she rendered Quill into pieces.

Now it was done. This challenge, this conflict was over. She inhaled deeply and allowed the cool oxygen to fill her lungs and

exhaled slowly to calm herself. And as she looked around she reloaded her pistols.

She observed the smoke and fire and bodies and she knew when she removed her helmet she would breathe the scent of gunpowder and death and be taken back to years ago when she and her Father had fought battles such as this to not only protect others or to protect each other but battle to live.

This was the essence of *Center World* and it thrilled Lena to the core of her being.

Part of her wanted to hunt down those in the trees and run down those who had escaped on the road but she knew it was time to move on. Let them go, it wasn't many. They would speak of the dark woman and perhaps advise that it was best to leave her alone or maybe others would come after her. There was only the future and that which it entailed, was meant to be.

She went back to Baby and lifted the rear hatch and as she was removing her helmet she heard the low light rumble of a quad bike. She knew who it was. She was taking a long drink of chilled water when Briney drew close. The young Angel stopped and shut off the engine and sat, still and silent. Briney knew an event had taken place that was unique and that a special presence now stood before her in the sunlight and words were not to be spoken at this time.

Lena removed her gloves and took her time taking off the boots and heavy outer suit. She looked it over and then stored it and her helmet and gloves and put on a pair of soft shoes. She went to the driver's side door and opened it and reached in and activated the electrical system and pressed several buttons and the skirts, grill covering and headlight covers all began to retract.

Next she went to the passenger side and opened the door and placed the rifle into its holder and clamped the pistols in and closed the door. She slowly walked around Baby and made note

of the dings and chips and frowned and shook her head.

Briney, having removed the sunglasses that covered her eyes watched all this with wide eyes.

Lena climbed into Baby and closed the door and started the engine. She let the window down and motioned Briney close. The young Angel was unafraid and walked directly to the window and Lena looked down and peered into the light-brown eyes and then reached out with her left hand and gently touched Briney's right cheek and Briney felt something run within her body that went deep inside to somewhere once inaccessible. Then with her fingers Lena brushed the young Angel's black hair at the side and electricity went through Briney's temple and the Angel heard a voice barely above a whisper come from the dark woman.

Lena: Save yourself Briney. Make your way to New Orleans and seek me out.

The window went up and through the dark glass nothing could be seen except a reflection and then that which was cast back was gone as the black thing pulled slowly away and the sound of the powerful engine could be heard.

Lena looked in her side mirror as she rode away and saw through the smoke and extinguishing fires and images of death a young black-haired figure who represented youth and life and perhaps hope, was all that was left standing.

Briney watched until Lena, traveling east, disappeared past the horizon.

THE PROFESSOR

The Professor lay face down on the floor in front of the bar. He was heavily under the influence and had tumbled from his hovering chair and decided to remain in that position for a few minutes in order to gather himself.

Finally he managed to roll over and he stared at the ceiling and the neon stars and florescent planets appeared to rotate and he watched one fly over and over again in an oval shape and he knew he was hallucinating again and he laughed and admonished himself loudly.

Professor: Now look what you've done! That last dose was too strong!

He pointed at the ceiling and tracked the moving planet with his finger.

Professor: Amazing, Jupiter moves yet does not move.

He looked at the chair floating three feet in the air and sat up to reach for it, changed his mind and lay back down. He cursed quietly at his situation, closed his eyes to stop the room from spinning and softly hummed a tune. Then he pressed the Comm device on his wrist.

Professor: Zesiro come to my office.

In a short time the light from the hallway dimmed as if being interfered with and he knew the dark *Entity* was there and then he heard the deep voice.

Zesiro: You wanted me Professor?

Professor: Yes, come in have a seat.

Zesiro walked past the gray-haired man on the floor, took a seat and placed hands in lap.

Professor: Look at me Zesiro.

Zesiro looked without expression at the supine form.

Professor: Here I lay as an upside down turtle. Yes call me by my new middle name, Turtle. No, no a tortoise.

He pointed at Zesiro.

Professor: Tortoise!

Zesiro: A turtle, reptile, aquatic or of a terrestrial variety with the trunk ...

Professor: Enough!

The Professor pointed again.

Professor: Terrestrial!

Zesiro: Of or representing the earth, of land as distinct from ...

The Professor yelled.

Professor: Silence!

Zesiro stared at him.

Professor: Of the earth, the land or more appropriately, the floor, same thing. This the physical age where preoccupied obsessed individuals change their skin color like they change their minds and alter their hair color, styles and lengths and make the color of their eyes whatever they want and undergo medical procedures and ingest organic compounds that transform their faces and bodies and alter their looks and appearance from this to that and from old to young and cause them to be almost unrecognizable to their family and friends and I lay here obvious and distinctly three-fourths human. Born like this to remain incomplete my whole life. This is a curse Zesiro. How cruel fate can be. And you sit there created by the best scientists in the world, directed by my imagination and the most advanced technology in existence that provides you with speed and agility and the strength of ten men and longevity and with your ability to absorb knowledge perhaps that makes you perfect, whatever that may possibly mean. Perfect Zesiro!

He pointed and laughed.

Zesiro: Conforming absolutely to an ideal type, excellent or complete beyond improvement, without flaws.

Professor: Silence!

The Professor sat up and stared at the dark *Entity*.

Professor: Don't feel sorry for the tortoise.

He lay back down as if weakened from the effort of sitting up.

Professor: But then you can't feel sorry can you? You can't feel anything, no love or hate or happiness or sadness. Perhaps that's

an attribute of perfection, that lack, that inability. I envy you, to be able to look down at me without laughing or crying, devoid of disgust or pity or sanctimonious judgments. My manmade legs sculpted, molded and printed and designed to be the best in the world that value can obtain are an insult, a joke. But I'll have the last laugh! Is this bitterness that wells up inside of me?

He gasped and took a deep breath and then coughed, twice.

Professor: No, it's that Scotch. I can't drink Scotch. I should know better by now. Leave that dark liquor alone, stick to gin or vodka. Pick me up Zesiro. Put me in my chair.

Zesiro lifted the Professor into the chair and stood before him waiting.

Professor: You're my friend aren't you?

Zesiro stared at him, hesitated as if calculating.

Professor: Don't even try to answer that.

The Professor pulled the plastic tube to his mouth and then looked at it, thought a moment and let it go. He looked at Zesiro and spoke quietly.

Professor: I'm going to live forever Zesiro. I'm going to create new cures and develop life-saving vaccines and discover ways to ease the sufferings of the humankind. I'll be famous, venerated and loved throughout all worlds and with immortality I'll make history and exist within it at the same time.

He turned his chair toward the door.

Professor: I'll also find a way to grow some new legs. Wouldn't that fantasy be an accomplishment?

He reached the doorway and stopped and turned to Zesiro.

Professor: But now it's your time that's come and if not now then later. If all plans fail we'll proceed again this winter. I'll not give up. Only death can stop me but we shall succeed and then even death will not be able to touch me. Let us go.

The Professor floated from his office and along the hallway.

He passed Akia's open door and then stopped and backed up. Akia was trying on shoes and pairs of shoes, nearly two-dozen were neatly arranged and color coordinated against the wall. The Professor watched a moment and then continued on. They came to a room at the end of the hallway and as they entered, the Professor commanded the lights on and the room brightened. He eased down in front of a large desk and Zesiro sat beside him.

Professor: Start your programs.

Zesiro started pressing buttons and the console on the desk activated and a large screen covering the wall before them lit up. More buttons were touched and knobs were turned and the image on the screen came into focus and sharpened. Zesiro stopped.

Professor: There before you is your purpose, your mission. When the time comes respond as you have been taught. Repeat your directions.

Zesiro recited his orders and actions to be performed.

Professor: Yes, exactly. Now, never let your eyes leave that image until I release you. Keep your hands at the ready.

The Professor rose and when he reached the doorway he rotated to observe the dark *Entity* staring at the large screen with hands poised to react.

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

On occasions it seems as if one moves across the dark clouds that float above and at other times the dark fluffy mass of particles fill the sky and surrounds and follows and so the rain that showers and pours sometimes appears as though it will fall forever.

A little over an hour from Longview, Lena was passing by the edge of Shreveport, Louisiana and the hard rain began. She was

still in a heightened state from the battle and as always the reality of death and the implementation of destruction had jumbled her emotions and all that had risen within her had provided that which she required to be victorious.

She wanted to relax her mind and so she began an attempt to recall the last time she had experienced rain. It took a while and then she realized it was weeks ago in the northwest on San Juan Island when in fact, although she couldn't have known then, this journey had begun.

It was a welcomed contrast, the dark clouds and wet rain. California had been dry in June and the seasonal fires had already begun to burn grass and trees and homes and scorch the earth.

Las Vegas, with normal temperatures well above one hundred degrees, was as a different planet with its endless bright sunlight and encompassing desert. A planet where only a person or thing, equipped to tolerate that humid-less heat could survive, or thrive.

Arizona and New Mexico as was Nevada, were arid and enveloped in pale colorless hues of sand and yet were also painted and colorful, if one only chose to see, and each of the states epitomized the brazenness and rawness of *Center World* in the southwest.

Then there was Texas, a state so large and much of it flat and empty that it was unknown, in any approximation, how many individuals even lived outside of the largest cities. Texas, a world unto its own, standing as the center of *Center World*.

Now the rain fell upon Shreveport and the terrain changed, the color of the earth was altered and trees and plants and flowers that could not exist in the heat and dryness were abundant and thrived in what could be considered *Center World East*. And conversely, those native plants and trees of the southwest would suffocate and drown in the dampness and wetness of the water-soaked Louisiana ground.

Lena pulled off the highway and rode through downtown and observed how much the city was growing, how the population had expanded and in the neighborhoods, once empty houses that had survived and been maintained were filling with families and she saw children waiting on porches until the sun returned.

Stately houses with lush green lawns and magnolia trees looked as pictures. Azaleas were everywhere and as she moved back toward the highway she saw in the deconstructed areas the dogwood trees standing tall and silverbells looked as if their flowers could ring and native rosebud trees appeared as a forest.

She turned Baby from highway twenty onto four nine south. The clouds above and the rain had been traversed. The sun burst forth again to soon fade again and the humidity and temperature rose and it was only a matter of a short time before the road was dry and it was obvious the rain was no longer coming from up, it was now behind and the sky once dark and ominous was a brilliant blue ahead.

Baby was switched to solar power and the top was opened and Lena could feel the sun and hear wind and was aware of her movement as she turned up the music and began to speed. She was drawing closer. It was less than two hundred and fifty miles to New Orleans.

A little over an hour from her destination she reached out. *Center World* had poor communication infrastructure for cross state transmissions but within state, particularly nearer the larger cities and specifically in the progressive states, was fairly stable. Before departing Las Vegas she had, with difficulty, contacted everyone at each stop and informed them of her impending visit and now, as previously done, as she drew close she attempted to confirm her arrival. She pressed a button on the steering wheel.

Baby: I await your command.

Lena: Contact Pleas.

Beeps could be heard coming over the sound system. The tones stopped.

Baby: Connection failed.

She rode another twenty minutes and tried again. This time the signal connected and her close friend and business associate answered. A loud, smooth, deep voice resonated throughout the cabin.

Pleas: Lena, where are you? Where are you my dear, close to us, I hope?

Lena: Hello Pleas. Yes, thirty or forty minutes I should be pulling into the garage.

Pleas: Calculate for downtown traffic. Wait until you see how much we've grown.

Lena: That's wonderful news. Then make it fifty minutes.

Pleas: I'll be waiting.

Lena grew excited. New Orleans had been her first extended stop after leaving *East World* almost seventeen years earlier. In those days she traveled all longer distances alone with her pilot in her plane.

From New York she had gone home to Detroit and then to Georgia, her mother's home state and then through Alabama and Mississippi and into Louisiana. It was there she had begun her acquisitions and using her already acquired wealth, had started again to create value for herself and those who she carefully brought or allowed into her confidence and she had once again financially supported that which she deemed important.

It was a process she had learned through her Father and one that had begun before she was born when her Father had funded the orphanage in which he lived as a young boy. It was a cycle they had repeated, in one form or another, alone and together for one hundred and seventy-five years.

It was between day and night when she eased Baby down the ramp and around to the private secured area of the parking structure beneath the downtown hotel and casino. She saw two individuals standing and talking at a guard station. One was a short *Palida DM* in a uniform and cap and the other individual was Pleas, a six foot four inch, two hundred and twenty pound, thirty-eight year old *Parda-clara Crioula DG* with light-hazel-colored eyes and short, curly, sandy-colored hair. Pleas was without a suit coat and was showing to the associate the pistol that had been removed from the holster beneath the left arm. They could hear the approaching vehicle and as Pleas holstered the weapon and turned, Lena honked the horn four times and Pleas covered the ears to the loud sonorous trumpet-like sound.

The guard saluted and they watched as Lena pulled in next to her sleek, fast, small automobile she used for Louisiana travel and when she opened the door and stepped down Pleas grabbed her, hugged her and lifted her from her feet. She was spun around and then set down and given a kiss and another hug. The voice boomed and Pleas spoke loudly, as always.

Pleas: Lena, look at you, you lovely dark-brown woman you! You look marvelous, as the first time I saw you! Are you well?

Lena: Thank you Pleas, for your flattering words. I like flattery and I am well. I hope you are. But look at you! You look healthy and rich and happy and noble and ...

Pleas: Stop that! Stop that now! I'm upset with you! It's been too long! What is that in your mouth?

Lena smiled and Pleas laughed.

Pleas: I like that. A touch of gold.

Lena: Thank you and don't be upset. It's only been two years.

Lena lifted the back hatch.

Pleas: In *Center World* that's half a lifetime. You'll stay away and when you return we'll be gone forever.

Lena: Don't talk like that, about being gone.

Pleas: What is this vehicle you drive? What are these dents? It looks like someone took a hammer to it.

Lena: You must speak such words in a whisper. This is my Baby and Baby is sensitive. They're dings, slight indentations. I'll tell you about that later.

Pleas: And look at the dirt. I'll have it washed for you. Where have you been in this thing?

Lena: *Center World* is a dirty world.

Lena had gone to the passenger side and holstered the pistols and removed the rifle and handed all three to Pleas and went to the back.

Lena: Carry those for me. I'll take a few things now and get whatever else I need later.

She removed a bag and hung it on her shoulder and grabbed a small suitcase and as they started toward the elevator she turned, waved to the guard and the guard saluted.

They entered a private elevator and Pleas tapped in a code and as the elevator rose to the forty-fifth floor, Pleas spoke.

Pleas: Faydee is highly upset with you also for your lack of attention. Has vowed to retreat to the bedroom when you enter our premises and there remain sequestered throughout your stay. Swears there will be no words spoken to you.

Lena: I'm going to shower and change. Explain to your beloved that I have something of utmost importance to speak about and that I need assistance. If Faydee doesn't emerge I will stake out and patrol the entrances to the kitchens. Hunger weakens wills and breaks vows.

Lena, Pleas and Faydee controlled this hotel, the third largest in New Orleans and the bottom floor contained the second largest casino in Louisiana along with a restaurant, lounge and nightclub and other retail businesses.

The three had redesigned the whole top floor into separate functioning areas. Pleas and Faydee had a total of fifteen large rooms on one end not including five baths and two kitchens and Lena had nine equally spacious rooms on the other with a kitchen and four baths. Between these two areas was another area of six separate suites for friends and special guests and in addition, office spaces, meeting rooms and a sports and exercise complex.

The two entered Lena's door and she saw her place had been prepared for her arrival. The drapes had been opened and flowers were throughout the front room.

Lena: Thank you Pleas, everything looks so nice, as if I've never been away.

Pleas: I can't accept credit. Although angered, Faydee could not resist touching your home. You'll see your closets are filled with clothes your friend has been buying and making for you since you last left us. There are individuals throughout New Orleans who are finely dressed, for as Faydee acquired and created new, your old was bestowed upon others. It was out with the old, in with the new.

They went down the long hallway to one of the clothes room. There were racks with clothes and Lena looked in the closets.

Lena: Look at the beautiful clothes, and much of what I had wasn't old, most of it I hadn't even worn.

Pleas: Good you're the same size. At least you appear that way. You have wonderful doctors. You look as when we first met, especially now that you've returned to your original color.

Lena: You look great. You must still regularly exercise your body and touch the weights.

Pleas: Faydee and I must set good examples for those who follow us. I was very young during the last outbreak but I'll always remember my mother telling me that a strong body would ward off disease. That motivates me still. Now Faydee and I are both

nearly forty years lived and health becomes more and more important to us. I'll leave your weapons in the den. You'll have to show me the details of these beautiful instruments. We'll be waiting for you.

Pleas left and the first thing Lena did was send a notification to Prue. She knew Dallas would have heard about Longview so she simply said she had arrived safely. The sent message failed so she put it on auto-retry.

She went to the ceiling to floor corner windows that allowed a view of two directions of the city. The lights seemed to sparkle as grounded stars and she could look down and see vehicles, their headlights shining, appear as toys passing below. The natural stars were hidden in the cloudy night sky and the moon was not yet to be seen. Lena felt a sense of satisfaction when she thought of how New York would be her next stop.

She showered and using handheld mirrors, examined her body front and back in the full-length mirrors in her bedroom. She looked carefully for any welts or bruises and except for a few very slight indications of mild trauma, all appeared normal.

She rubbed herself in cream and after combing and brushing her hair she put on a comfortable pair of shorts and a loose top and in her bare feet she walked the carpeting along the hallway to her friends' place and knocked. Pleas called out.

Pleas: It's not locked!

Lena entered and could see a shoeless Pleas, sitting with his legs stretched out on the couch looking at a Comm device, wave and point down the hallway toward the master bedroom.

Lena went down the hallway and tapped softly on the door and waited. There was no response. She tapped again and spoke.

Lena: Faydee I know you're angry with me and you have every right to be. I've stayed away too long and for that I apologize. I'll do better. I give you my word.

Again there was no response. Pleas had moved to the hallway and Lena turned and raised her hands in a helpless gesture. Pleas indicated for her to try again.

Lena: Faydee I have something to ask of you. It's important. I need you.

The door was snatched open and a six foot two inch one hundred and ninety pound *Parda Crionula DG* with light-gray eyes and medium length dark-reddish-brown curly hair stood there, hands on hips in a long red silk robe, looking irritated and spoke angrily.

Faydee: What is it you want? What is it that's so important?

Lena: Tomorrow will you make some gumbo and some corn bread?

Pleas burst out laughing and Faydee stood there glowering and then laughed and with a hug, lifted Lena from the floor and squeezed her and put her down and they kissed and Lena put her head on her friend's shoulder and held on tightly and an admonishment was issued in a stern, smooth Louisiana accented voice.

Faydee: We've barely heard from you. You stay away too long. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Lena: I know, I know. I am, I am. Don't be upset.

Faydee: Are you well?

Lena stepped back a little and looked up into her friend's eyes. The two were clouding up just a little and they both blinked.

Lena: Don't make me feel bad. I'm sorry. It won't happen again and I'm well, even better than well now that I'm here with you and Pleas. And what of you, are you well?

Faydee: Yes I have felt your hug. All is healed between us and you look wonderful in your original color. Turn around.

As Lena turned around Faydee gently slapped her rear.

Faydee: How do you do it? How do you stay looking so young, and the same size, especially the way you eat? You're amazing in more ways than one my dear.

Lena: Thank you Faydee and you look great. You and Pleas were born for each other. Look!

Lena smiled and showed her tooth. They started toward the living room.

Faydee: That gold symbolizes your wealth and that riches are in you and through you. Life stands still for you my special one and you must let me trim and style your hair.

Lena: Whatever you want my friend. I'm going to enjoy trying on some of your beautiful clothes. Then I'll rest and tomorrow night we'll go downstairs and celebrate our reunion.

Lena slept early and deep and long, well into the afternoon. When she awoke she looked at her Comm device and saw it had taken thirteen hours for her notification to go through. After arising and preparing for the day the first thing she did was clean and prep her weapons. From the bag she had brought up she filled magazines. It was then time to relax so she sat with a glass of iced sweet tea and looked out of the window at the sprawl that stretched beneath and beyond the horizon. She looked at all that had been done to keep the ever more intruding water away in order to allow this historic city to grow and expand again.

She was pleased to be a part of that resurrection. Pleas and Faydee and their business associates, along with her assistance, had claimed dozens of empty properties, renovated and upgraded them and then granted homes to all qualified and worthy families and individuals who desired to live permanently in the area of New Orleans.

That they did not strive to control or seek the largest hotel or

casino or possess and hold large swaths of land was by design. This was home to Pleas and Faydee and had been that for their ancestors four hundred years in the past. The position of these Louisiana natives allowed them to live well and thrive but not dominated and thereby keep jealousy, competition and thus conflict to a minimum.

Louisiana was as all of *Center World*, basically lawless. There were fundamental concepts throughout the center part of the country but each state that was able to evolve had developed a consistent method to dispense justice and resolve disputes.

The reality that any adult could be destroyed at any moment for anything meant that all, which were trivial transgressions, were mediated or ignored when possible. Life was too precious for those who believed in life. The specter of disease still hung in the minds of those who had lost everyone and understood how fleeting existence was, truly.

Making babies, protecting the children, creating value and improving the current conditions was paramount to all those who considered rising above the terror, the horror and the decadence and deconstruction that followed the dying years, to be their utmost challenge.

Inhabitants of the lower *Center World* states desired the benefits of a progressive culture, strong population growth and support of the National Government that was experienced by both the *East World* and *West World*.

From Nevada in the southwest to Georgia in the southeast, those who never left their original homes and those who were brave and fearless who moved to establish new homes, didn't want their state to be as the upper *Center World* such as Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. Those areas were nearly totally deconstructed and remained virtually devoid of significant human life.

And they certainly fought against their state becoming a middle *Center World* state such as Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri and down to Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee. In those states rampant abject crime thrived and human life was worthless. Alaska was empty, Hawaii, only for the rich.

Lena closed her eyes and decided to do something she had not done in a long time, sit in a chair and take a nap. She let her body go limp and breathed deeply then exhaled slowly and she floated, drifted as if weightless into a somnolent darkness. In this nether land, below consciousness and above deep sleep she experienced vivid images in her head behind her shuttered eyes and as she did often in these sitting dreams, she saw and heard her Father and just as he, she could remember each aspect of every dream she had ever dreamt.

There was an intercom system that could be activated and would connect all the rooms between the two separate living areas. At seven thirty that evening Lena was dancing throughout her apartment to loud music when Faydee's voice could be heard. Faydee: Lena my dear.

Lena pressed a button in the hallway as she passed by it and danced into the den and hollered out.

Lena: Yes?

She then danced into the office.

Faydee: I hear music. Are you dancing?

Now she was in the library.

Lena: Yes.

Faydee: Gumbo's ready. Come on, the door's open.

She started toward the front door.

Lena: I'm on the way.

By the time Faydee had picked up a knife and turned to the counter Lena was coming through the doorway.

Faydee: What did you do, dance or fly?

Lena: I ran.

Faydee pointed at two bowls.

Faydee: Which bowl do you want?

Lena: The smaller one. Remember we're all going downstairs tonight.

Faydee filled the bowl and set it down before her.

Faydee: It's still hot. Let it cool.

Faydee turned to slice the cornbread and heard Lena making blowing sounds and then holler.

Lena: Ow! It's hot, hot!

Faydee: Hard headed.

Faydee filled another bowl and set the slices of cornbread on the table and soon they were both eating.

Lena: It's the best! The best gumbo I've ever had and the cornbread is real! It's all magic Faydee, or sorcery or voodoo! You're a sorcerer, a witch doctor, a magician!

She took a bite of the cornbread and paused to chew and savor.

Lena: A warlock! I'm under your spell!

Faydee: Thank you. I think you just complimented me. It pleases me the way you always enjoy my cooking.

Lena: Where's you mate?

Faydee: Taking care of some important just arising business.

Lena had one more bowl full, one more slice and then stretched out on the living room rug and there she was when Pleas walked in.

Pleas: I hope you two are well.

Faydee rose from the couch and gave Pleas a kiss.

Faydee: I am are you?

Pleas: Yes, yes.

Lena, with closed eyes replied.

Lena: I'm well. I hope you are too.

Pleas: Why is she on the floor?

Faydee: She's been eating gumbo and cornbread.

Pleas: How many?

Faydee: Two small bowls, two slices.

Pleas: Only two, is she ill?

Faydee: No, saving room for later. Do you want to eat now?

Pleas: Yes, let me freshen up. Lena come to the kitchen and sit with me.

When Pleas sat down Faydee placed a bowl on the table and Pleas slowly began to eat while staring at Lena and finally spoke.

Pleas: What have you been up to in Texas?

Lena: Whatever do you mean?

Pleas: I've just left a meeting with my war council. Apparently there's a biker gang amassing at our northern line that is preparing to invade Louisiana, find a dark-skinned woman driving a big black tank-like vehicle and destroy her.

Faydee: What's going on Pleas?

Pleas: That's what I intend to find out from our dear friend here. Lena, in Longview they're clearing out dead and burnt bodies, thirty so far and counting, those that can be pieced together and identified as bodies and it's not known how many motorbikes since they're only scorched shells and pieces remaining. So, as Faydee aptly put it. What's going on?

Lena: I had a confrontation with the Avenging ones. Angels have sinned and fallen. They lost.

Faydee: You must tell us about it! That sounds exciting!

Pleas: It's obvious they lost. You can tell us later, right now we don't have time for the details. And that explains the dents in your, Baby.

Lena: Dings and chips.

Pleas: The problem is that you truthfully told them where you were going and then allowed some to live.

Lena: I did.

Pleas: Why did you do that?

Lena: The ones who lived simply got away. I didn't have time to chase them all down. I was in a hurry because Faydee's gumbo was calling me.

Faydee chuckled and got up to make more tea.

Lena: When I told them where I was going I couldn't know how things were going to turn out. If they continued their aggression I wanted to keep them behind me so I could eventually finish them all. I wasn't going to allow them to chase me all over *Center World* everywhere I chose to go. They wouldn't be able to come into Louisiana without us knowing. How many could possibly be left? Who's amassing at the line?

Pleas: There's not but a few remaining because there wasn't that many to begin with. Unless they get new leaders and new recruits you've effectively eliminated the Avenging Angels. They were a splinter gang, having recently broken off. Their story is that you deceived their leader and then shot him through the head.

Faydee: Lena, how could you do such a devious thing? Is he dead?

Pleas: And that leader, Cager was the name, correct?

Lena: Correct.

Pleas: That leader was the younger brother of Lazar the leader of the original gang, the Avenging Devils, which happens to be the strongest and possesses the most values in this part of *Center World*. They've been around a long time and are based in Little Rock and now are at the state line.

Lena: Are the Devils similar to the Angels in their activities?

Faydee: I don't know about the Angels but we do know the Devils are quite possibly the worst of the worst. They've gained

their wealth through murdering and plundering all those who are weaker than them. They raise havoc in Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma and other states within their northern reach.

Lena: Then it appears Angels and Devils are one and the same. How many are there?

Pleas: According to our intelligence, above us approximately two hundred and fifty and maybe another hundred in Mississippi. We've had problems with them in the past. They've caused some deaths of my people but that was years ago before you arrived here. I was fairly young myself. Now they are more a nuisance to Louisiana than anything else.

Faydee: We probably didn't make you aware of them because they only annoy those near the northern and eastern line and of course have never dared to try to reach New Orleans and in fact have never entered Shreveport.

Lena: Then how serious is this threat?

Pleas: We have a defector who brought us this information. Supposedly Lazar is being provoked by several of those immediately beneath him who want to overthrow him as leader. He's being called a coward and ineffective. The relatives of those you destroyed cannot be appeased except by your destruction and with his brother being one of the dead he himself is highly motivated. The threat is real.

Faydee: The threat should be eliminated.

Lena rose and walked into the living room and sat on the couch. She was thinking. Pleas finished eating and along with Faydee they all sat on the couch and looked out of the window.

Lena: What I abhor most about these biker gangs is not just their danger to human life and property but their pervasive detrimental influence on the youthful ones. How exciting that life must appear to be.

Faydee: They're dangerous and should be made to disappear.

Pleas: Perhaps this is our opportunity. Let's go into the office.

Pleas and Lena started down the hallway and Faydee got a tray and took three glasses and filled them with iced sweet tea and as Lena sat and Pleas activated his Comm device and screen for a presentation, Faydee sat beside Lena and prepared to dim the lights when Pleas was ready.

Pleas: Here's what the council and I have talked about.

He loaded information from his personal device into a larger device on the desk before them, pressed a button on the projector and a large map of Louisiana appeared along with southern Arkansas and western Mississippi. Faydee lowered the lights with a wrist Comm device.

Pleas: The Louisiana Protectors are now four hundred strong. In addition many of our citizens will use their private arsenals as needed. With two hundred Protectors spread out we'll monitor across northern Louisiana from Caddo to East Carroll, down to Concordia along west Mississippi and then from Feliciana to Washington and Washington to New Orleans. There are only so many roads they can use and even coming off-road they still have to funnel into areas where we can meet them and engage. We'll skirmish with the Devils and put up some token resistance, minimizing our casualties and continue to pull back. We can protect property and citizens through this ploy and eventually draw the enemy into our trap, which will be set by all our remaining forces that surround New Orleans. They can't match our firepower and we'll destroy them at the edges of the city.

Pleas paused and smiled with satisfaction. Faydee clapped and with fingers in mouth, whistled loudly. Pleas frowned at Faydee and then looked at Lena.

Pleas: What do you think?

Lena: I like it. But all this for me?

Pleas: You think I would allow harm to befall you in my state?

An attack upon you is an attack against me, against all Louisiana. Besides, we haven't had a good fight in years. The Protectors are bored with putting down these recalcitrants who attempt to form groups to test our resolve. We welcome this war. It's been too peaceful. I'm the commander and I want to command and lead my people. They want to see me lead.

Lena: Pleas, you've been the mayor of New Orleans, the governor of Louisiana and now you're the commander of four hundred individuals, the strongest permanent standing militia in *Center World*. Everyone knows you can lead. You might as well be king.

Faydee: Emperor.

Lena: What?

Faydee: Pleas wants to be emperor of Louisiana.

Pleas: I didn't say that. I simply said emperor has a nice sound to it. The point being is that I need to be able to exert my authority somehow. Be of use in a military sense. You know the saying, that power is not power unless it's utilized.

Faydee: Kind of like a gun is not a gun unless it's fired.

Lena: Have you ever seen this Lazar?

Pleas: Yes, Faydee and I encountered this individual some years ago. We caught him near Caddo and Faydee accosted the Devil and told him to leave.

Faydee: When was that?

Pleas: Lazar wasn't the leader at that time.

Lena: Describe.

Pleas: My height, maybe a little taller than me, thicker than me. A *Cobre DM* with long purple hair, at least that's what the presentation was then.

Faydee: I remember now. He had a light-gray colored left eye and his right eye was a light-blue color. I should have shot him. By not using my gun I misused the power of my gun.

Lena: How old?

Pleas: About my age.

Lena: What say you?

Faydee: About that, maybe a few years less. Tried to appear tough and mean, typical bully.

Lena: That's interesting.

Lena got up and walked around the room and then peeked through the blinds.

Lena: Pleas what would you think about having a back room brawl? A private back room brawl to the death between Lazar and me? No weapons, no rules.

Faydee jumped up and hollered.

Faydee: I love it! I love it! Like the old days!

Pleas: You mean no war?

Lena: Not if we can avoid it. Listen, I consider this a private matter and for Lazar and me it's more personal than anything. I'll not allow anyone else's life to be put into danger over this unless absolutely necessary. Let's try to eliminate Lazar and we may remove the threat. But we've got to also neutralize those under him who are pressing for war.

Pleas: I can't lead my subjects?

Faydee: You mean lead those you command, your followers?

Pleas: Whatever.

Lena: If this doesn't work and the Avenging Devils attempt to violate the sanctity of Louisiana we'll go to war and I'll stand beside you in battle.

Pleas sat in a chair and was quiet, frowning.

Pleas: It is a brilliant idea.

Lena: You have to take control of everything. It is you who must present it to the council, contact Lazar, issue the challenge and negotiate the terms. Then you'll have to secure the site and provide security. Remember, there may be two or three hundred

Avenging Devils that will desire to be present at my destruction at the hands of their leader. All that needs to be done, you are charged to make it happen.

Pleas: That is right. I'll have a lot to do! I will have to lead! What do you suggest the terms should be?

Lena: Some sort of treaty that bars any Devils from entering Louisiana under threat of death and retaliatory invasion by the Protectors.

Pleas: I like that. If they break the treaty we can go to war.

Faydee: What are you a warmonger?

Pleas: No, a warrior, that's what a warrior does, fight.

Lena: You say the Devils possess great values so calculate how much it would cost to hire more Protectors, say fifty more, buy new uniforms for your whole militia and purchase some updated transportation. Take that number to Lazar as the values amount to be put up for the winner to receive all and then indicate that if the Devils' leader is triumphant then that amount will be doubled by you. Faydee, you have to do what you do. Arrange for a broadcast throughout Louisiana. Add your spice and create a grand and memorable event as only you can so that all of Pleas' subjects ...

Pleas: Followers, fellow citizens.

Lena: ... can feel a part of it. You two have to work together on the logistics. Here's out chance to do something significant and partake of some enjoyment at the same time.

Faydee: I'm getting so excited. It'll be a magnificent spectacle talked about and remembered for years to come. I'll have you ride up in a golden carriage pulled by four huge white horses and I can see your outfit now. I can't wait!

Lena: Don't give it all away, surprise me. You both know to spare no expense. Consult me only when absolutely necessary. I place this all in your capable hands.

Pleas: You must come to the council meeting tomorrow. We'll have it down the hall. I'll inform you of the time.

Lena: Do I have to?

Pleas: Of course. You were the one who helped me and Faydee start the Protectors. In the beginning you funded it all. Think of what it means to the council to have you there as I make the proposal, the cachet you possess, the status your presence bestows upon me. You must attend! You're our only honorary general.

Faydee: And wear your uniform with the medals and ribbons. It's obvious you can still wear it although it may be a little tight.

Pleas: And bring those beautiful weapons, that would be good.

Faydee: But don't shoot them that wouldn't be good.

They all laughed and then Lena stared at them both and lingered on Pleas.

Lena: I'll do tomorrow what you ask on one condition.

Faydee: Here it comes.

Pleas: And what is that?

Lena: Before I leave we'll go to the roof and by the pool you'll barbeque.

Pleas: It's a deal.

She then turned to Faydee.

Lena: And you'll make some red beans and rice. See, I'm not difficult. I just want the best and the barbeque that Pleas makes is the best in the world and Faydee's cooking has got to be the best Louisiana style food in the world. Now, at ten let's go downstairs and play some poker and drink some champagne. Come on Faydee, let's pick my clothes to wear.

The next day was Monday and at three in the afternoon Pleas, with Lena in attendance, presented his plan to the council. There was a great deal of haggling with the main areas of contention

being, allowing the Devils into Louisiana to attend the fight and of course, the danger to Lena, a revered original Protector.

Pleas called on Lena to speak and after she presented her views, including the fact that she, Pleas and Faydee would finance the total cost and make all the arrangements, she emphasized the potential benefit to all who sat in the room and to the people of Louisiana. Finally she stated that this was an issue that she herself should be allowed to resolve. A vote was then taken. It was unanimous that the fight would proceed.

By seven that evening Pleas had begun his nearly six-hour ride to the state line to set up a meeting with Lazar and his cohorts.

Faydee left early the next morning and Lena, accompanied by the head of security, spent the afternoon and part of the evening with various business associates.

She took the required time with the managers of the hotel, casino, restaurant, housekeeping, transportation and the lounge. She wanted to know of any pressing or continuous issues they were dealing with, any suggestions they had to improve their areas and any future upgrades they felt would be needed.

That night Faydee trimmed and styled her hair and then as the two were rearranging clothes in a rear room the intercom buzzed. Lena: It can only be you. Faydee is here with me. We're in the back, to the right. The door's unlocked.

Within a short time Pleas was coming down the hallway loudly calling out.

Pleas: It is I! The triumphant hero has returned!

Pleas entered the room, grabbed Faydee and with a spin and dip, planted a noisy kiss to the lips and then grabbed Lena and kissed her forehead.

Faydee: My, my, you seem pleased.

Pleas: Lazar has accepted the challenge.

Faydee: You mean he took the bait.

Pleas: I guess you could put it that way couldn't you?

Lena: And the terms?

Pleas: I guaranteed their safety and the Avenging Devils agreed to everything. They know this option is better than trying to come into Louisiana and attempt to hunt you down. And then when they understood that it would be just him against you they immediately increased the value amount at stake. On top of all else, they're also greedy.

Pleas turned to Faydee.

Pleas: Right now the fight is scheduled for Saturday night. We'll start the event at nine. I want to bring the Devils in Friday evening, three days, can you be ready by then?

Faydee: I was waiting on you. All my people are in place to proceed. I'll be ready. Will you be ready?

Pleas: I'll be ready.

They both turned to look at Lena. She was staring through them, past them to somewhere beyond them, her eyes wide, her gaze piercing, and the dark woman spoke, in a barely audible voice.

Lena: I'll be ready.

Wednesday morning Lena went down the hallway early and as the sky began to brighten she and Pleas were sitting in the office looking at a large map on the wall and discussing the logistics involved in moving the Devils from the state line to New Orleans and back.

Faydee called them to breakfast and the three went over details for the weekend as they ate cheese grits and beef Grillades topped with gravy and scallions along with one of Lena's favorites, French toast. They then parted until the next morning.

As her friends worked throughout the day Lena, in her small

sports car, rode the city streets, parked and then sat on a bench in a mid-city park and observed people and wondered who they were, what they were like and where they were going? As she sometimes did when she faced the potential of harm she had fleeting ideas of pain and death and growing old, thoughts of human vulnerability.

Thursday morning Faydee proudly served Eggs Sardou with gulf shrimp and grits and of course, French toast. They stood on the balcony and sipped on Café au lait with roasted Chicory root, munched on Calas and watched the city come to life.

That afternoon Lena swam before the rain arrived and then dressed and went downstairs to the restaurant and ate salad and later that evening when the rain came, she prepared to dance.

First she went to her bedroom, removed her shoes, she shed her clothes down to her gold-colored underwear and taking a pair of satin pointe shoes from the closet she sat on the rug and put them on. She remained there and looked at her feet and smiled at the golden color that now covered them and pointed and wiggled her toes.

Then down the hallway she went to a room that was empty. Mirrors covered three walls and she stared at the image of the dark-skinned woman in gold-toned panties, bra and ballet shoes.

Music began, only she could hear, in her mind. It was music her mother had played when Lena was a child and the mother had danced with the little one in her arms. The mother who had died horribly, died young, lived on in Lena and became alive, animated through the music and memorized movements that followed. Movements now known, practiced and executed with uncanny precision for one hundred and ninety-five years.

First Lena began with her own Adagios as if the slow fluid shifting of positions could be extended and held forever.

Allongés of her lifted arms and rising and lowering legs were what took her around the room and cast her back from the mirrors into her half-closed eyes.

She paused and slowly an Arabesque formed from first one leg and then the other, again and again until an Arabesque Penché emerged.

She stepped into rhythmic Balancés and from there Cambrés were done with her back arching and waist bending and arms floating. The music in her head speeded up, increased tempo and the movement and turns of Chaînés and Fouettés caused the excitement within her to rise.

Now she heard jazz and a Pas de bourrée couru forced her to run and she flowed like a river into Pirouettes and Triple Runs and then she stopped and with Aplomb assumed an Attitude on first one leg and then the other.

She was free now to glide and from a Glissade and with Allégro she performed Cabrioles and Assemblés and Jetés and jumped and was lifted and she was light and smooth and the music within exploded and with Bravura she left the room.

She was carried with Brisés and Changements and Entrechats down the hallway and throughout the largest rooms. From one room to the next she leaped as a Grand pas de chat took her into Fouetté jetés and on to one Grand jeté after the other.

The splits in the air elevated her higher and higher and she exhibited Ballon that sprung her into the air seemingly without effort as she floated as if weightless and yet beneath it all was power.

Her body rose into the air and she began to thrust her legs with forcefulness and her kicks became harder and her hands shifted from graceful rounded Arrondi positions to fists and claws and she punched and doubled her movements and for over an hour this continued, faster and harder and as she returned to

the mirrors, her personal Coda began with a final *À terre* split and she remained with her legs and arms outstretched and she reached to the sky, above the stars toward all that existed beyond the moon and then very slowly she stood and stared at her now glistening body. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and was motionless as she found her way back from the past, through the imaginary music and into the present, the here and now. Then she turned to Saturday night, envisioned the future and knew she was prepared to meet the next adversary, answer the summons to engage, which was an order she herself had boldly issued.

Early Friday morning Lena's intercom buzzed. She was standing on the balcony watching the city below and had to step inside to respond.

Lena: Yes?

Faydee: Good morning. Are you well?

Lena: Good morning to you. Yes I'm well, I hope you are.

Faydee: I'm well. Breakfast is ready.

Lena: You two go ahead. I'm not eating.

Faydee: What are you saying? I thought you were well.

Lena: I'm fine. I'm not eating again until this is over, just water.

Faydee: That's almost two days!

Lena: I know.

Faydee: I don't understand. Is that wise?

Lena: I get irritable when I don't eat. I'll be fine. What time do we leave tomorrow?

Faydee: Seven. I'll bring your suit at six fifteen. Are you sure you won't eat something?

Lena: I'm sure. Let me know if anything arises otherwise I'll be waiting for you tomorrow.

Faydee: We'll be off to oversee the arrival of the Devils. They'll be here before darkness sets in. If you need me, call.

Lena: I will.

Faydee: Be well.

Lena: Be well.

Lena spent the day relaxing on the balcony and reading a book. As the Devils were arriving she was in her bathing suit swimming and then she reclined by the pool and listened to music. She watched the stars come out in the clear nighttime sky and observed that the next night a full Thunder Moon would inhabit the above.

After her shower she oiled her body and combed and brushed her hair. She then lit a tall candle, turned off all the lights and carried the flickering flame to a small room that was painted completely in shiny black and contained soft rugs and large fluffy pillows. She crossed her legs and sat naked and put herself into a trance that lasted several hours.

In that trance, with eyes open, she revisited France, Spain and Africa. She piloted fast planes through the air and steered slow boats over the water. She climbed tall mountains and rode across expansive empty foreign land and heard animals call and observed lions on the hunt in the dense jungle.

She then returned to her home, Detroit, Michigan and walked on Belle Isle with her Father and when she waved goodbye and crossed the bridge she was in New Orleans, Louisiana and suddenly the candle in the darkness grew bright and she returned to the room in which she sat.

She slowed her breathing to a barely discernible level and soon the beating of her heart could not be felt and made no sound. There were no thoughts, no feelings, only the peace of nothingness and in this meditative state she remained until she lay back and with her arms across her chest she fell into a deep, dark dreamless sleep.

Saturday evening at six fifteen the intercom buzzed.

Lena: Yes?

Faydee: I'm on the way.

Lena: Come on in. I'm in the back clothes room.

It wasn't long before Lena could hear Faydee coming down the hallway speaking loudly.

Faydee: Wait until you see what I had made for you!

Faydee entered the room dressed in a tan Protector's uniform with a red beret sloped rakishly to the side, carrying a large box that was placed on the couch. The box was opened and when Faydee turned, a shiny silver colored swatch-looking piece of cloth was being held up.

Lena was standing in black sheer underwear and she stared at the material, at Faydee and then asked incredulously.

Lena: And what's that?

Faydee: Your fighting suit.

Lena: I can't fit in that!

Faydee: Yes you can. It stretches. Take off you bra. You won't need it. I'll help you put it on.

Lena removed her bra and was surprised to discover Faydee was right. The material was not only soft, it was pliable and as she stepped into the cloth it seemed to give and then mold to her body. They drew it up slowly, little by little, situated her breasts that were then held in place, as the material was tight around her shoulders.

From her waist up to her neck the suit was pulled together and closed and Lobster Clasps were used to seal the front. Faydee pressed on the flap that ran along the clasps and it adhered to the suit and the thin metal clasps nearly disappeared.

Faydee: Here's your boots. The soles are strong but not too thick and not too heavy.

Lena took the shiny black boots and Faydee assisted as she

put them on. They came to just below the knees and were tight around the calves.

Faydee: How do they fit?

Lena walked around, jogged in place a little and then rose to the balls of her feet.

Lena: 'They're fine.

She went to the mirrors that covered one wall and stared at herself. She began turning slowly.

Lena: What is this material?

Faydee: It's a special reinforced cotton blend. It's super strong, extremely flexible and light.

Lena: It feels like I don't have anything on. Look how tight it is.

Faydee: You look great!

Lena stretched. She then rotated both her arms in different directions and threw several punches. She squatted and then jumped and kicked with one leg and then the other.

Faydee: Don't worry about it giving out in any way. Look how solid and powerful you look. I can see your strength. Your body is amazing.

Lena: Thanks. Thanks for your words. Faydee you've outdone yourself.

Faydee: Silver befits you. You appear as a regal warrior from another time, another place.

Lena: Your words are strong.

Faydee: Look at the cape.

The cape was pulled from the box and turned, spread out on the rug and held up.

Faydee: This will descend a little past your knees. It's reversible. I'll put it on you later and I've got extra strong black gloves for you.

The intercom buzzed. Faydee pressed the button on the wall.

Pleas: Are we ready?

Faydee: Yes, come to the back room.

They both faced the doorway and watched Pleas enter wearing a black beret and the tan dress uniform of the supreme commander of the Protectors. They saw the eyes grow wide as Pleas stopped with arms extending.

Pleas: My goodness Lena! Faydee what have you done?

Lena: I feel naked.

Pleas: If that suit were dark-brown you would look naked. Will it hold up?

Lena: Faydee said it would.

Faydee: It will. I guarantee it and it's impossible to grab.

Pleas: You appear otherworldly, invincible, beautiful and sexy.

Lena: Thank you Pleas. I like those words. I feel good and I'm excited.

Pleas: Let's go.

They were silent in the elevator down and then before they reached the garage Pleas spoke sternly.

Pleas: I've seen your exceptional prowess in these physical matters and still the degree of your ability remains unknown to me. I believe in you and I know you believe in yourself but regardless of your confidence do not take this individual lightly.

Lena: I won't.

Faydee: No grappling. Do not let him get his hands on you.

Lena: I won't.

Pleas: Finish him quickly! Do what you do and be as you truly are. Be fierce!

Lena: I will.

Faydee: Lena be careful. My stomach is beginning to feel as the movement of this metal box we're in.

Lena: Don't worry. I'm always careful.

A long automobile with a two car emergency lighted escort transported them a little over an hour and a half north from New

Orleans to Old Town. There was nothing left of the small borough that sat two miles off the main north-south highway on the edge of a wide bayou and that once thrived three hundred years in the past, nothing but five buildings that were replicated and had been maintained for almost one hundred years.

There was a four-lane road that ran east and west from the highway through the town and that came to a dead end at the marsh. A large red barn sat on each side of this road and there was also a combination blacksmith and hardware store on the south side and a three-story room and board hotel next to that structure. Directly across from the hotel, sitting alone, was the large Alligator Snapping Turtle Saloon, inside which the fight was to be held.

The escorts and long car turned west off of the highway and a mile before town they could see automobiles, trucks and buses pulled over, off the road, parked, and individuals walking toward town.

A half-mile further ahead, the Protectors had the road blocked and only those walking could enter the area. From this barricade Protectors lined both sides of the road all the way past the saloon.

The long car was passed through and still a quarter mile from town, pulled into a barn on the same side as the hotel. Across the road, before the barn doors closed, Lena could see the other large barn and in front and on the sides of that barn was the main camp of the Avenging Devils.

This was their designated area and Faydee had provided necessary amenities for a large group camping out and in addition vendors in parked trucks and pushing carts had been selling everything since Friday from firewood to food and liquor. Some were even trying to hawk Louisiana souvenirs to their Devil guests.

Metal towers twenty feet high had been quickly erected on both sides of the road and Protectors with rifles were positioned on them as a show of force to back up the Protectors on the ground whose sole purpose was to keep the Devils in their area and those from Louisiana, who opposed them, in theirs. The Devils were only allowed on the north side and all others on the south side.

Vendors worked the Louisiana side also and on the edge of the groups were guarded booths where anyone that so desired could wager on the fight, including who would survive and how long it would last. It was Devils' values against all others.

It was a potentially volatile situation but the Devils, although nearly three hundred strong, were essentially surrounded and many miles inside Louisiana. Shooting of guns was strictly prohibited and everyone understood that one shot could cause a war to break out. The Devils would be trapped and blood would spill and Devils would be killed and Louisiana citizens and Protectors would die and neither side wanted that to happen. Everyone maintained their respective places.

Lazar was ensconced in that other barn near his people. As darkness approached the liquor flowed and the Devils howled and those on the other side of the road, hostile to the bikers, nearly three thousand strong, howled back.

Large screens, speakers and tall banks of lights were set up and interspersed throughout both sides of the road and would broadcast the proceedings to all present and a transmission would simultaneously go across the state in all directions to anyone who desired to watch.

Those in both barns could hear chanting and singing and a din that would rise and lower and settle into a cacophony that would emanate from one side of the road and move to the other and back again.

The screens came on and the lights illuminated at eight thirty and an image of the flyers and posters that had been distributed all around New Orleans and far beyond was seen. What were shown were announcements of the fight and the particulars of the combatants.

A fight to the death was proclaimed in big bold letters. A Private Backroom Brawl between Protector General Lena and Avenging Devils' leader, Lazar. To be held this coming Saturday night at nine, inside the Alligator Snapping Turtle Saloon in Old Town and broadcast to all. The challenge was issued by Lena, standing five feet nine inches tall and weighing one hundred and fifty pounds, to Lazar standing six feet three inches and weighing two hundred and forty pounds. Only one will survive.

As the screens were coming on Lena was waving one of the flyers and fussing loudly at Faydee and Pleas.

Lena: Whose idea was that?

Pleas immediately pointed at Faydee.

Pleas: It was Faydee's. I had nothing to do with it.

Faydee: I've wrestled with you before. I make your clothes.

Lena yelled and threw flyers in all directions.

Lena: One hundred and fifty pounds? Closer to one forty!

Faydee: You're the same size as the day I met you.

Lena: One forty-five at the most!

Faydee: You've eaten five pounds of gumbo!

Lena stopped and glared at her two friends and then tore a flyer into pieces and flipped it into the air. She sat angrily in a chair in the corner with her back turned away from everyone and crossed her arms. Faydee and Pleas whispered.

Faydee: She does get irritable without food.

Pleas: I thought one fifty was a little low.

Lena yelled from the corner.

Lena: I can hear you!

At eight forty-five music began and an image of the interior of the saloon filled the screens. A band on stage was seen and up-tempo jazz could be heard and people started dancing.

Inside the large saloon were the top officers of the Protectors and those at the top of the Devils' hierarchy. In addition, the lower level of the building contained another twenty-five of each group and almost fifty Louisiana citizens who had won a free raffle that gave them early and close access.

The saloon easily held two hundred people and had a long bar near the walls on each side of the stage and a balcony that ran half way around the top. The balcony was nearly full, with room set aside for cameras, lights and the director and her assistants who would control the visual transmissions.

There were three handheld cameras on the floor and two boom mics along with two cameras outside, one handheld and one on the top porch of the hotel across from the saloon. There was a spotlight on the porch that would light up the crowd and the standing camera would show them on the large screen that hung from the roof of the saloon.

There were another approximately one hundred Louisiana citizens gathered around the hotel and store and close to one hundred Devils in the parking lot of the saloon that could watch a screen that was placed high on their side of the building.

From Old Town to the first barricade there was liquor being consumed and drug smoke saturated the air.

Promptly at nine the tall lights did not go out but dimmed and the people roared. A camera image from the street showed, on all the screens, headlights approaching and a large green armored vehicle that had passed through the barricade drew close. The people yelled as the vehicle stopped. The back doors opened and two guards stepped out with two Protectors with emerald colored chests and entered the saloon. As the large vehicle pulled off

around the corner of the building, four Devils rode up and two exited sidecars with red metal chests and entered the saloon.

Now the screens showed the chests being opened and a handheld camera showed the contents. Value cards filled the chests and one Devil reached in and grabbed some cards and showed them to the camera and then tossed them onto the round table that sat near the middle of the room.

The people had roared at the vision of the riches. The Devils all across the saloon parking lot and into the campground let out a high-pitched howl. Both groups began to chant and holler.

The music changed and was suddenly harder and began to blast from the band and over the outdoor speakers. A camera showed the barn near the Devils' camp and the doors opened slowly and a big bike the color of blood with large white eyeless skulls and bleached crossbones on the back of the seat and yellow flames on the gas tank started forth.

Lazar, riding in a bench seat behind his driver sat next to his second in command. He stared forward, scowling, and when a close-up of his copper-colored face filled the screens the Devils erupted and their voices filled the air and followed the bike as it rumbled along and when the leader reached the saloon the spotlight was put on him and as he stepped from the seat his followers next to the building pressed forward and the Protectors restrained them as they chanted.

Devils: Lazar! Lazar! Lazar!

Then their voices were covered, nearly drowned out because the other barn doors opened. The images on the screens changed. The music changed, decibels increased as Lena's song began and the guitar player wailed the solo and the bass guitar thumped and the drums pounded and the full moon lit up a large black open carriage with shiny-silver painted wooden spoke wheels being pulled by two huge black horses.

The sound began to slowly build. Pleas sat in the top front seat with the driver and Faydee sat in the rear seat next to a dark-skinned woman with short natural hair standing full, who was wrapped in a black cape and when the close-up image of Lena filled the screen, voices and screams swept up the street and came back into the citizens' field and flew over the swamp and seemingly across all of Louisiana and the sound followed the carriage to the saloon doorway and one horse rose on its hind legs and the other trotted while turned sideways and the driver brought them under control and when they were halted they both pawed at the asphalt road and snorted to announce that their charge had arrived.

Faydee assisted Lena down into the center of the street and as she strode to the saloon's swinging doors the spotlight lit her up and she opened her cape and flung it behind her and the cape rose as if she would take flight.

She entered and took her designated seat that Pleas pulled out for her. Looking from the doors, she sat left center between Faydee and Pleas facing the front. Lazar was further to the right, closer to the wall, also facing forward.

Protectors and citizens stood behind Lena to the wall. Devils stood behind Lazar and covered his left side to the wall. Each group began to chant, attempting to drown out the other.

Devils: Lazar! Lazar! Lazar!

Citizens: Lena! Lena! Lena!

As this was going on a struggle began outside near the front and a voice could barely be heard desperately calling out for Lena and Briney burst through the doors and was snatched back but before she was removed Lena rose, pointed and spoke loudly.

Lena: Let that one through!

Briney was released and walked toward Lena who again pointed and again spoke loudly.

Lena: Stand there at my back!

Briney moved behind the table and Lena sat and leaning over, spoke into Faydee's ear. Faydee then rose and spoke to a nearby individual and as that Protector moved to stand beside Briney and whisper to the young one, Pleas stood and followed by an individual with a boom mic held high stepped forward and with raised arms, silence descended. Inside and out all were quieted.

An image of the signed agreement appeared on the screens and with precision and solemnity the terms were read as the words scrolled and when the amount at stake was reached, murmurs and gasps moved throughout the crowd.

Then the full image of the Supreme Commander was shown and in a deep, sonorous and oratorical voice that rose and fell, the seriousness of that which was about to transpire was imparted to all.

Pleas: What we are having here tonight in historic Old Town, within Louisiana's very own infamous, Alligator Snapping Turtle Saloon, is an old fashioned Private Backroom Brawl.

Inside and out, the sounds began to grow.

Pleas: A no weapons, no rules fight to the death!

The crowd roared until they were quieted. The door at the back wall that led to the back room was shown.

Pleas: Two will enter through that door and only one will come out alive. In *Center World* there is only life and death.

Now the crowd roared and then began to chant.

Protectors: Lena! Lena! Lena!

Devils: Lazar! Lazar! Lazar!

Citizens: Lena! Lena! Lena!

The door was pulled open by an individual in a long white robe to reveal the thick ominous blackness that seemed to float heavily beyond the entrance. The crowd altered the call and joined for the fighters to speak.

Devils: Statement! Statement! Statement!

Protectors: Statement! Statement! Statement!

Citizens: Statement! Statement! Statement!

Pleas quieted the voices.

Pleas: Now, the two involved, in what for one, will be their final battle, will speak.

Pleas turned and extended his left arm to the Devils' side of the room and stepped back and away. From the dimness near that side wall a figure rose. The *Cobre DM* was at least six feet four inches tall with his thick black leather boots on and as the description stated, every bit two hundred and forty pounds.

He wore purple pants and a loose fitting long-sleeved light-pink shirt with a purple vest. His purple hair had been cut and was tied into a short ponytail and his different colored eyes were hooded, nearly hidden, as he walked around the tables and into the near center of the room.

A cameraperson moved in front of him and trained the lens and backed up as the Devil moved forward and then the balcony camera took over.

Faydee's heart had jumped when the figure rose. Having forgotten the size and thickness of this Devil, Faydee focused on the enormous hands and concern pricked and when Faydee glanced at Lena and saw the snarl on her lips and the hatred in her eyes the dread eased but did not dissipate.

Faydee recalled seeing Lena perform unbelievable feats in those early years with her, when Louisiana violence was being subdued and tried to use that to be reassured but deep concern remained and then grew to fear as the Devil stopped and stood with his feet slightly apart and looked around the room with wild widening eyes and as this image filled the screens his followers began to chant.

Devils: Lazar! Lazar! Lazar!

The leader thumped his chest and growled loudly and elongated the pronouncing of his own name.

Lazar: I am Lazar!

His followers fell silent. Those who opposed him booed and hissed and then also quieted as the leader again spoke loudly in his deep, raspy, guttural voice.

Lazar: I am Lazar, leader of the mighty Avenging Devils and I come here to destroy!

His followers inside and out roared and Lazar allowed this expression, listened for several moments as he strutted in a circle and then he brought silence. He pointed at Lena and glared directly into the camera. He spoke evenly, forcefully.

Lazar: I have come to destroy this Protector who ambushed and murdered my Angel friends and through lies and deception assassinated my baby brother. I stand before you as the reality and truth of *Center World*. That reality is that there may be life but I shall be the death and the truth is that only the strongest are allowed to survive.

The Devils roared. Their leader quieted them. His voice rose.

Lazar: The Avenging Devils are the richest most powerful biker gang in the world and nothing can restrain us! No one can stop us! Tonight is Devils' night and belongs to me! Tonight I seek retribution! Tonight, vengeance will be mine!

The Devils roared as Lazar turned and walked to a nearby table beside the bar and sat down. Pleas stepped forward and with raised arms brought quiet and then extended his right arm toward Lena. The dark woman rose and moved forward. She placed an open hand above her left breast and patted and spoke.

Lena: I am Lena, honorary general of the Protectors and friend to all Louisiana's faithful.

The Protectors and citizens roared. The Devils booed and hissed. Her raised arms brought quiet. She began to pace back

and forth and her voice gradually rose and her cape billowed and floated as she pushed it to remain behind her.

Lena: I stand before you and declare on my sacred word, on my honor that Lazar is a dirty treacherous liar!

Lazar moved to the front of his seat. Lena quieted the crowd.

Lena: The Avenging Angels confronted me, attacked me and attempted to do me harm and so I alone stood and destroyed them! My wrong was in allowing some of them to live!

Again Lena quieted the noise.

Lena: I admit to shooting his brother but not through deceit! His no good brother was shot through the head! He too attempted to do me harm! He sent those killers after me and so I removed that threat! I would also admit to blowing his brains out but his brother was a brainless fool!

Lazar rose and had to be restrained. Now the Protectors and citizens were in an uproar and epithets from both sides filled the air and Lena brought them to quiet.

Lena: The leader of the Avenging Devils threatens Louisiana, threatens me and this means that not only is Lazar a murderer, a rapist and a thief, Lazar is also a fool!

Lazar's vest was snatched from him as he tried to gain the middle of the room. The long boom mic moved above him as he hollered.

Lazar: I'll tear you apart!

Inside everyone was yelling and outside the clamor was building.

Lena: Only a fool would threaten me and then come within my reach! Tonight I stand for Louisiana! I stand for the Protectors! I stand for the future! There will be no vengeance! There will be no retribution!

Lazar: I'll put my boot through your face!

As the Devils were putting Lazar back in his seat his shirt was torn apart and he snatched the tattered pieces and threw them to the floor.

Lena: Tonight there will be justice! Justice will prevail!

Now she thumped her chest.

Lena: I protect myself! For I am Lena!

Lazar was incensed.

Lazar: I'll crush you! I'll kill you!

Lena formed her right hand into a claw, extended it toward Lazar and hollered. Her voice rose with each word.

Lena: I'll rip your heart out!

The vocal utterance and its unnatural sound brought a short momentary hush, a brief eerie silence to all, and as the words reverberated, an essence of electricity passed through everyone who saw the look on the face and heard the pure hatred and felt an unknown power emanate from somewhere deep within the dark woman.

Then the crowd erupted, roared and both sides began to chant as Lena took her seat. Lazar was unnerved by the display and he demanded whiskey. A glass and bottle was set before him and he gulped from the bottle.

As Lena spoke, Faydee had stood and moved beside Pleas to express shock at the intensity.

Faydee: I've never seen her this angry.

Pleas: Enraged is a much better word.

Pleas stepped forward and quieted the crowd.

Pleas: Now the room will be examined for weapons.

The individual in the white robe walked into the room and pressed a switch. Lights completely around the ceiling came on in sequence and a yellowish brightness flooded the large room. The image was shown of two Protectors and two Devils going in and the handheld camera followed them as they all inspected the

premises. The back room was not only large, it was windowless, with wood paneled walls and a wooden floor coated with a substance to prevent slipping. The camera showed nothing was found and then the image was shown of a large white X and a large red X ten feet apart on the floor. Everyone returned to the main room.

Pleas: Now the fighters will be examined.

Lena rose and Faydee walked forward with her. Lazar stood and individuals from both opposing sides moved between the two fighters to keep them apart.

A shirtless Lazar was patted down and a detector was passed around him. He flexed his muscles as he pulled on his black gloves and glared at his foe.

Faydee untied Lena's cape and taking it, stepped back. There were gasps and cheers at the statuesque silver form that stood as if prepared for all that could possibly come.

The inspectors saw there was no reason to pat Lena's body so they checked her gloves and boots and ran the wand around her and proclaimed her ready. They stepped away.

Pleas: Lazar will walk into the room and stand on the red X. Lena will walk into the room and stand on the white X. When the door slams shut the fight will begin.

As Lazar stomped into the room and took his place the noise of the crowd began to rise. As Lena entered the room the sound grew louder. The boom mic was placed above the door. The last image to be seen by all was of the two adversaries facing each other.

The cameraperson eased back and as the individual in the white robe stepped to the door Faydee removed a stopwatch from the right front pocket and when the door was slammed shut the watch was started and a Protector and a Devil stepped in front of the door and folded their arms.

The noise level quieted as everyone was listening, straining to hear sounds, anything that would indicate action, wanting to hear something that would provide a hint as to the outcome of an event unseen.

As the seconds passed, the tension built as imaginations were let loose and an occasional scream from the crowd could be heard breaking through the silence. Several people fainted and others turned from the screens, unable to look, refusing to watch and see who came from the room alive.

A loud thud was heard and a collective gasp swept from the saloon, across the street, down the road, into the campground and over the fields.

Suddenly, after what seemed like an interminable amount of time, Lazar came through the door.

The heavy wooden door had exploded open, shattered, and was pulled from its hinges by Lazar's body that had come hurtling out face down and landed on the door that panned to the floor the two who had stood guard in front of it.

The crowd, not fully understanding what had happened, remained relatively quiet as ripples of confused voices began to be heard.

Faydee had stopped the watch.

Pleas: How long?

Faydee: Three minutes nineteen seconds.

Pleas: Probably had to catch him.

The two guards struggled to extract themselves from beneath the door and as they did this the body was rolled onto its back and now the image became apparent as first the balcony camera zoomed in and then a cameraperson held a camera above the sprawled out figure.

There was hollering and then screams as everyone could see Lazar's disfigured face, battered and crushed on the left side and

the camera then moved downward and when the gaping, mangled hole in the leader's chest was seen, the Protectors and citizens erupted as the Devils shouted, cursed and wailed in protest.

Lena stepped from the room past the body and raised her bloodied right hand and that hand contained Lazar's heart and now the noise inside and out rose as she held the motionless heart out in front of her and slowly turned, displaying her prize to all. The chanting began in unison.

Protectors: Lena! Lena! Lena!

Citizens: Lena! Lena! Lena!

She faced the Devils' side of the room and shouted out.

Lena: Lazar is no more!

Then she flung the heart at them and they ducked as it splattered into pieces behind them above their heads, against the wall and as the destroyed heart dripped down the wall in pieces the dark woman turned to leave.

Faydee and Pleas followed her to the swinging doors and two camerapersons rushed forward. Protectors lifted the two emerald chests and the chests that had belonged to the Devils and held them aloft as they fell in behind their commander and second in command and then the bearers of riches moved into the street and around the building toward the waiting armored vehicle.

Lena walked out into the night. The spotlight from the hotel porch shone upon her and the camera zoomed in and her image lit up all the screens and the sound of her name flew up and spilled out and then flowed as a wave through the people and down the road and this time past the fields and into New Orleans proper.

The dark woman stepped further into the street as her carriage arrived. Faydee moved before her and reversing the cape tied it around her neck and the lustrous metallic-looking form was now draped in silver.

She pulled off her black gloves and with a complete turn, threw the left one high and far into the crowd and the people scrambled and wrestled and fought for the souvenir. Her cape swirled and her silvery body sparkled from the essence of the stars, full moon and artificial illumination that encompassed her. Then she held the bloodied glove high and flung it into the crowd and as the people struggled for the crimson-colored memento she turned and Faydee assisted as she stepped up and the undulating sound came back. The Protectors and citizens were in a frenzy and the wave of noise followed and passed and made another return to the distance.

Pleas sat stoically beside the driver and as the carriage moved slowly up the road the band began playing Lena's music and the people began to dance and sing and continued their chants.

Protectors: Lena! Lena! Lena!

Citizens: Lena! Lena! Lena!

The Avenging Devils were angry, suspicious and shocked, dejected, apprehensive and silenced.

As the carriage rolled along, Faydee grabbed Lena, pulled her close and hugged the friend tightly and hollered above the noise.

Faydee: You were wonderful! You were magnificent! You amaze me! Are you alright? You look alright!

Faydee smothered Lena's face with kisses and her friend's head was buried on her neck and Faydee struggled to hold back tears of relief. Finally Lena spoke.

Lena: Faydee.

Faydee: Yes, yes?

Lena: What happened to the golden carriage and four huge white horses?

Faydee looked at Lena with disbelief and then burst into a tearful laugh.

Faydee: I could only find one white horse.

As the noise was diminishing from the closing of the barn doors, Lena took Faydee's face into her hands, kissed the quivering lips and smiled reassuringly.

Lena: It's over now. I'm alright. And I'm hungry.

By Monday night New Orleans had almost regained a sense of normalcy, whatever that may have been. Pleas had led the Protectors Saturday night, immediately after the fight, as the Avenging Devils were escorted back to the state line.

Faydee and associates had spent all of Sunday and Monday during the day restoring Old Town to as it had been.

Lena had spent Sunday and Monday relaxing and preparing for the next phase of the journey. This process consisted of clearing her mind and shifting her focus to the road ahead, to New York.

In order to achieve this she did, as she knew. She did not sit on her balcony and look back. Her Father had taught her at a very young age of the fallacy of that directional approach. True clarity of a present dilemma came from going back and placing the events that unfolded into the proper context. That meant entering one's emotional and mental state that existed at that time, recalling the facts that were then known and moving from that point forward. Only then could the decisions that had been made be correctly assessed.

She closed her eyes and walked the darkened trail of San Juan Island and she could feel the chill of that early June evening as the sun disappeared and dusk settled. She could smell the salted water and once again recognize that sense of peril at her back.

She slowly moved forward, trying to understand and remember why she had gone where she had gone. Next, she experienced again the people she cared for, was now separated from, and missed, and the places she had paused and where her

essence still lingered and of course she relived those things she had done.

When she opened her eyes she nodded her head in affirmation to her existence. There were no misconceptions that lingered. It was the forms danger and violence to which she felt the closest affinity, enjoyed the most.

She had been witness to intense physical force and seen extreme damage done that night in the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety-two when she was twenty-two years old. Her Father had made her, given to her this immortality and then demonstrated through actions how to guard against death. His words that rang in her head reminded her that she was immortal but not invincible. And so long before the powers and strengths she now possessed had manifested, the two of them had fought together and she had killed and it was that night one hundred and seventy-eight years ago, that this endless life she lived, had truly begun.

Briney was lying on her bed, on her back, in the darkness, naked. It was the heated night that had caused her to remove her nightgown. Heat that seeped in beneath the doors and through the wooden walls and past the drawn curtains. She had shut off the cold blowing air. That air gave her chills and she wanted to be hot. She could feel the temperature and humidity and her body was damp and that was, as she desired to be.

It was two in the morning and she had slept fitfully for three hours and now attempted to return to sleep but her jumbled, troubled thoughts kept her awake. And then, drowsiness slowly engulfed her and sleep descended.

Briney did not see but sensed the small lamp near the door come on and cast its dull illumination and then felt a powerful presence and when she rolled her head to the right she observed,

in her semi-conscious state, coming toward her, through the dimness as if floating, a vision dressed in a long-sleeved white dress that flowed and clung and there was no sound.

She attempted to rise, to speak and Lena raised her right hand as if to stop, to hold, and the young one felt a tremendous heaviness press down that covered her body, not to crush but to immobilize. The dark woman sat on the edge of the bed and spoke softly.

Lena: Hello Briney.

Briney looked at this woman with skin the color of dark chocolate as if for the first time and she now saw the sensual, full lips and the dimples emerge with the slight smile and when she stared into the penetrating, dark-brown, expressive eyes she was lost, as if hypnotized, but unafraid.

Lena gently put her right hand on Briney's left cheek and then touched the coal-black hair that was spread out and when Lena's fingers brushed her temple Briney felt something unknown course throughout her body.

Lena then lightly placed her opened right hand, palm down, on Briney's chest, touching her breast near the rapidly beating heart and spoke quietly, directly, seriously.

Lena: Do you Briney renounce Angels and Devils?

Briney: Yes.

Lena: Speak it.

Briney: I renounce Angels and Devils.

Lena: Do you repudiated their ways?

Briney: Yes, I repudiate their ways.

Lena: The Protectors will train you, instruct you and provide for you.

Briney took several breaths. Her heart slowed.

Briney: What has happened?

Lena: Fate has brought us together.

Briney: Why me? Why do you treat me as you do?

Lena: Why? Because you're special. Do you recall the first time we met?

Briney: Yes.

Lena: Can you recall what you wore?

Briney struggled to remember, couldn't.

Lena: You wore a gray top with gray boots and gray shorts. You have a mark from birth on the outside of your right thigh.

Briney: Yes.

Lena: Your mother had such a mark.

Briney: Yes.

Lena: Your grandmother was so marked.

Briney: I never knew my grandmother.

Lena: I knew your family, those who came before you. Your grandmother carried that mark also.

Briney's light-brown eyes now filled and glistened and in the confusion that surrounded this, movement was impossible.

Lena: They are all gone now.

Tears dripped sideways from the young one's eyes.

Briney: Yes, gone.

Lena: The Protectors will be your family now.

Briney: I don't understand.

Lena: Remain on the straight path you now travel and all will be revealed.

Again Briney took several deep breaths. Lena's hand felt soft and strong and hot and seemed to reach inside and touch her quieted heart. She blinked.

Lena: I must leave soon.

Briney: Will I see you again?

Lena: Yes.

Briney: When?

Lena: I don't know when, only where.

Briney: Do you promise I'll see you again?

Lena: Yes, I promise.

Briney: How can I thank you?

Lena: You cannot be who you are. You must become who you are not, as of yet. Show your gratitude by walking where you're supposed to walk and by arriving there where you're supposed to be and at the crossroads we shall meet again.

Briney whispered plaintively.

Briney: Lena, am I dreaming?

Briney felt the caress of Lena's hand on her throat and she stiffened and shivered as emotional fire ran through her. She suddenly felt feverish and a sound barely escaped her moist lips.

Briney: Oh!

Now Lena smiled just a little and then lifted her hand and placed the fingertips to her own lips and extended that hand and lightly touched Briney's lips. Then the dark woman placed her opened hand just above Briney's face and the teary eyes fluttered, closed and the special young one was put into a deep and peaceful sleep.

By early Tuesday afternoon the three friends were on the roof and Faydee and Lena swam and then relaxed by the pool as Pleas tended to the grill. As they ate barbeque with red beans and rice and corn bread, Lena enthralled her two rapt listeners with the details of the battle at Longview and exactly what had occurred behind the back room door at the Alligator Snapping Turtle Saloon.

They had caramel Doberge cake for dessert and touched glasses and held their iced sweet tea high and saluted the past and called out fearlessly to the future that awaited them.

They grew silent as the sky altered and components of red and blue spread and moved over them and onward, westward. It was

a clear beautiful warm summer night and the stars were bright, the moon was again bright and dark, the lights of New Orleans below them were bright and they spoke quietly of observing this all again, together.

At eight the next morning Lena was ready to depart. The three friends stood and embraced. They shared sincere wishes of wellness and Lena expressed love for them and they professed their love for her. She held her opened arms up to Pleas and was lifted and given a kiss goodbye. Faydee hugged her tightly and they kissed and Lena was squeezed and was not released until Pleas pulled them apart and her two special friends held on to each other as the big black thing eased toward the exit ramp. Lena put her arm out of the window and waved. The arm remained extended and raised as the horn was honked, four times and then she was gone.

This was the prolonged part of the journey she looked forward to the most. Driving and riding thrilled her, calmed her and created a spectrum of enjoyable moods between those two contrasting emotions.

She would take this nearly twenty-two hours of movement and sound and images and make this time, these memories, her own and as the next sun was appearing she would be in New York City.

It wasn't long before Louisiana was gone. She and Baby touched, for just a short while, the bottom of Mississippi as they rolled through Gulfport and Jackson. Then came Mobile and Montgomery and when Lanett, Alabama was behind, they had left the turmoil of *Center World* and entered the western fringes and headed further into *East World* and that unique turbulence.

It was early afternoon when they took the bypass around

downtown Atlanta. She marveled at the expansion of the city and the obvious population growth that had been achieved in nearly seventeen years. And then an admixture of emotions nearly overwhelmed her as she spoke aloud the name, Georgia. That had been her mother's name and she flashed on the memory of the beautiful dark-skinned woman with the gold tooth and her heart throbbed and she blinked several time and yelled out, to banish the rising feelings.

Lena: Not now! Another time!

South Carolina lay ahead and Baby was fully activated and took over. Lena continued to munch on Faydee's little sandwiches and the fruit and nuts she had brought and sip her chilled water as she looked through the window to the side at the passing landscape and looked ahead at the distant horizon.

Baby had been running on solar power and electricity since departure and the only things heard were the soft whine of the engine, the tires on the road, the wind passing over the opened roof and the music that blasted from the speakers.

The music signified progress. As the miles accumulated, the ordering of the sounds shifted. There were classical melodies and the expressions of strings from hundreds of years ago that diminished, descended and soared.

There were harmonious voices from her youth that she sang along with while popping her fingers and rhythms that made her nod her head and pat her foot. She meandered through music from all parts of the world, from places she had visited, and lived. She directed the bands and bounced and danced in place and through the miles that remained in front she would continue this orchestration until it was time for music of the current time to emerge and express the dynamics that existed now and remind her who she was and where she was at this time, now.

But it was always the plan to play her Father's favorite song,

that became her favorite song, from the year one thousand nine hundred and sixty-eight, with wailing guitar, heavy bass beat pounding drums, and take her on, into the city of New York

There were stops along the way, but not for long. There were detours, but not for very far. This was purposeful movement and constituted elements of the most important and crucial aspects of life, to have somewhere to go, a destination, and to undertake a mission, to have something to accomplish, a destiny to fulfill.

Just inside North Carolina Lena drove so they could exit the highway and Baby's gas tank could be topped off. Solar and electric power was deactivated and before pulling back on the road Lena looked eastward at the sky and saw that dusk was near and she smiled at the thought that soon the stars would sparkle between the sporadic clouds and the moon, phasing on from fullness, would glow and they would travel through the night.

After reaching the highway Baby took over again and would remain in control until they drew close to Washington, D.C. and it would be at that point that Lena would drive them on in.

They traveled throughout the night and Lena rode through North Carolina and Virginia in the rear middle seat and the further they had gone and the longer she had remained awake, the more energized she had become.

She sent notification of her estimated time of arrival and acknowledgement was received. She reclined and watched as Baby maneuvered around the sparse traffic. She looked at the sky and contemplated on the vastness that existed above and experienced that pleasant sensation of moving yet remaining in place as a specific star barely changed position and yet a hundred miles further and it had seemingly disappeared.

Again she took over and around the capital of the whole North American world they went. Baltimore took its position to the rear and as the edge of New Jersey was traversed, Lena's

excitement was gradually expanding inside of her.

Then, the *East World* city that never slept loomed ahead. There it stood, straight and tall! Huge edifices made of past materials such as solid brick and mortar and cement and steel and brittle polished transparent substances and that were large and imposing and that rose in grandeur having survived the dying years and the deconstruction that followed.

Yes, there the old city stood next to new constructions created from new materials designed to withstand the future and exist five hundred years beyond the life of anyone who, on this morning, walked the hard streets.

New York city, wondrous in its own abstract essence that enveloped everyone who existed within this maze of modern humanity. This all-encompassing substance, this basic real and invariable nature was simply this truth. Somewhere here could be discovered, unearthed, found, all that existed in all the worlds in the year 2170.

It was as the sky brightened from the appearance of the yellowish-red sun on Thursday morning that Lena pulled Baby into a garage beneath an apartment building on West Seventy Second Street in Manhattan. She was directed into a private secure area that was guarded by two uniformed individuals with holstered pistols. As she was backing into her parking space a very short, thin *Parda-clara DM* in his mid seventies with a polished baldhead came around the corner from the elevator. Lena shook hands with the guards, offered greetings and turned to the approaching *DM*.

Lena: Hello Finney. Are you well?

Finney: Lena, my goodness. Too long, too long it's been. I'm well, I hope you are. You look the same. You look wonderful.

Lena: Thank you my friend.

Lena took the little man into her arms and pressed him to her chest and rocked him several times like a child. Her friend's voice was muffled as he spoke.

Finney: Stop it Lena. You always do this and my wife would not approve of how your breasts make my head feel.

She released him and looked at him, at his twinkling dark-brown eyes and laughed.

Lena: I am not responsible for how your head feels.

Finney: In this case you most certainly are. Do you need assistance with your possessions?

Lena grabbed a small bag and put it on her shoulder.

Lena: Leave everything else until tomorrow.

Finney: Guards will look after that which you drive, whatever it may be, it doesn't appear to be an automobile. I'll have it washed for you.

They started toward the elevator. Lena reached out and gently rubbed Finney's head.

Lena: Is it only your head that I affect?

Finney: Genuine breasts such as yours are rare these days and those things make my big toes wiggle.

Lena: They are not things. Is that supposed to be a compliment? I like compliments.

Finney: Magnificent things, how's that?

Lena: Better, I guess. Finney you look great, as regal as ever.

Finney: I have the best doctors in the world, as do you, obviously. But whatever you may do keep them away from your things.

They got on the elevator.

Finney: Look, this is the code.

He punched a sequence of numbers and letters as Lena watched and committed them to memory.

Finney: How is your Father?

Lena: He's well.

Finney: It's been so long. I never know when but if you see him before I do give him my best.

Lena: I will.

Finney: Can I count on you delivering that message?

Lena: Yes, count on it.

Finney: How long has it been for us?

Lena: Almost seventeen years. How's your wife and children?

Finney: The wife is fine, getting a little cranky as she ages. The children are no longer children, all four are on their own, two are married. Remember the years Lena, it's been a long time.

Lena: Time is relative.

They reached the top floor of this building her Father and Finney controlled. They moved toward the double doors in front of them.

Finney: Speaking of time, how long will we have the pleasure of your presence?

Lena: I don't know exactly but I estimate a week to a month.

They reached the doors and Finney used a card to open them and handed it to Lena.

Finney: Devise a code to use from now forward.

He pushed open the doors and they entered the first area of the spacious eight-room penthouse and walked through the hallway to the main room with full windows that overlooked Manhattan.

Lena: Look at the flowers, all my favorites, so early in the morning! You always remember.

Finney: You've been missed. The kitchen has been stocked, the bathrooms replenished. Make a list of anything else you need or may need. Now, what is this task you have for me?

He reached in his pocket and removed a small pad and pen.

Lena walked to the window and looked out.

Lena: There's a building at 7679 Fifth Avenue. I need for you to find out everything you can about it and about suite 2323 inside that building.

Finney: Alright.

Lena: Also I need three motorcycles, two street bikes, different styles and colors and one with off-road capabilities. I'll need separate, appropriate riding clothes for each one including helmets with tinted visors. Nothing elaborate about the bikes, more toward average, nondescript, two solar-electric powered, the off-road should be gas. And I'll need a clean Comm device.

Finney: The bike and accessories are no issue. When do you want the report?

Lena: I'd like to go over the information you have on Sunday.

Finney: Three days should be sufficient. Anything else?

Lena: I'll let you know as needed.

Finney put his pad and pen away. They faced each other.

Finney: Are you in any danger? Do you want guards to travel with you?

Lena: I've never deceived you. I won't start now. Danger is possible, not necessarily imminent. I won't require protection at this time.

Finney: Does your Father know of this possible danger?

Lena: Not yet. He'll know when it's time for him to know. Don't look like that. Remove that image of concern from your face. Would you like a reassuring hug?

Finney started toward the doors.

Finney: No, I can't walk while my toes wiggle. Lena, please be careful.

Lena: I'm always careful.

Finney: If you require anything contact me. I'm one floor below you. Be well.

Lena: Thanks Finney. Be well.

As the daylight of Sunday departed and nightfall settled, Lena rose from the couch to turn on several lamps throughout the front room. There was a different, unique view that stood before her as she stared through the window.

There was no sprawling of land that could be seen. There were no lawns of green grass or tall majestic trees or large beds of flowers or waves of water. Just the pure New York was out there. Buildings that rose into the sky and paved streets leading in all directions and myriad forms of transportation and of course individuals, all kinds of people everywhere.

She reminded herself how nice a view of Central Park would be but there were rarely any new acquisitions of property to be made in this city. The building in which she stood had belonged to her Father and Finney for many years. New York barely faltered during the dying years. Much was passed on from family member to family member, handed on to the living generation.

She walked back to the couch and looked down at the report that lay open. She and Finney had gone over it and she had just gone over it again. There was not much to be gleaned from it. The controllers of the building she was supposed to report to were unknown and could not be with certainty determined, which meant the National Government and *WLA* was more than likely involved in its acquisition and the individuals who were identified coming and going seemed to confirm that.

She could only hope that which she did know would assist her in the next step. She now knew the identity of the person in suite 2323. He was called Professor. She knew of where he lived in the upstate area. Knew of his physical characteristics and possessed a recent photograph of him. And she knew of his fairly strict routine of coming in the morning to the building for several hours each day during the week and usually dining at the restaurant next door for a late lunch.

She thought about that which she didn't know. Why did he pursue her? What did he want? Who else was involved? She picked up the report and turned to the pages of his professional life. His involvement with the *WLA* was well documented, along with his demotion and then his subsequent ouster from the organization. Obviously he still maintained strong ties and access to resources of the most powerful intelligence agency in existence. How deep those connections extended was unknown.

Then Lena focused again on key specific information. The Professor, throughout his life had periodically been involved in a variety of criminal and nefarious activities. He was understood to possess a brilliant mind and was deemed to be a world-renowned geneticist and unparalleled genius in the study of human genetics.

What was most fascinating was that in his twenties, over fifty years ago, during the early years of the *G.E. Period*, he was conducting gene research in Detroit, Michigan.

Lena believed that the answers to this challenge she faced resided in this intriguing detail that connected her and her Father to this adversary.

She went to the weapons room to decide which pistol she would carry. She looked forward to Monday morning.

The initial day of the week did not indicate a new beginning to some pursuit that had paused for some designated time frame. The material world did not operate by specific hours or days. Value was sought at all hours and throughout all days. *East World* and most assuredly, New York City, had the ability to connect with not only *West World* but also to all points beyond in all directions. *Center World* was essentially skipped over.

So although it was Monday it was not necessarily a new week, it was more a continuation. Still, there seemed to be a heightened atmosphere that morning, above the previous Sunday sunrise and

Lena could sense that, observe that, as she sat at the window of a café down the street from the Professor's building. She wore tan summer pants and blouse with soft shoes and a cap, with dark sunglasses. She sipped on creamy coffee, munched on French toast with extra butter and watched individuals going to business, coming from business and conducting business with their heads down as their Comm devices led them around.

She had already confirmed what the photo images and detailed digital maps had shown her. There were two rather narrow walkways on each side of the building that ran to side entrances and to the rear entrance which could not be seen from the street, the rear entrance she would have used upon her designated arrival date.

At ten that morning a black automobile pulled up. It was not a long car, it was a normal large car. The driver got out and went around and opened the rear door on the passenger side. A somewhat thin, gray-haired *DM* of medium height slowly got out and awkwardly made his way to the entrance and disappeared through the doorway.

Lena recognized the Professor and noted he was unguarded. She had another cup of coffee and waited twenty minutes. She then walked a block from the building and got in the front passenger seat of a waiting car and went back to the apartment.

The next morning, when the Professor arrived, Lena, in her riding clothes and carrying her helmet, left the café and walked two blocks, around a corner, and got on a blue street motorcycle and rode an hour and a half to upstate New York. There she took the winding road that went past the Professor's home.

The house sat isolated, far from that road and could barely be seen. She made note of how she would have to approach for possible access. Then she returned to the apartment.

Wednesday Lena rode a black street bike and followed the Professor, at a distance, from his office to the road that passed his house. The road was not heavily traveled and appeared to be used mostly by local traffic. In order to not draw attention she continued on and then went back to the city.

Thursday and Friday, while the Professor was in his office she rode the off-road bike and found two separate directions she could approach the large house and while concealed in the woods she watched with long glasses for extended periods for any indication of activity. She wondered if it was possible he resided there alone.

Saturday, well into the night, and Sunday during the day she watched while the Professor was at home. She also watched the large red barn that sat some distance from the house, across the circular gravel driveway inside the fenced in meadow. There was nothing to see.

Sunday night she paced the apartment and thought about what she had seen the past week and the conclusions reached. Her unconcerned adversary had kept to his schedule. No one, while she observed, had visited. The house appeared unoccupied other than the Professor. She assumed the house must have some sort of extensive, secure security system that could very well be deactivated when he was at home.

She was frustrated in that she knew nothing of significance. There was no way to know what he was doing to further his plans. That he had abandoned them she believed was out of the question. She knew she had to discover the impetus that drove his actions.

She decided that within the next week she would confront him. She wanted to destroy him but that would leave her open to

further attacks through his cohorts, whoever they may be. She would not allow her life to be constricted. She would seek to remain free.

The next day as early evening approached, Lena was waiting as the Professor arrived from the city. She watched from a distance as the car in which he rode departed and saw the gray-haired man walk hesitantly, stiffly up the three steps and enter a front door. She had hidden and covered the off-road bike she rode so now she moved forward to wait.

As the twilight came and before it had grown dark she had seen lights come on in separate areas. There were two doors that led into the house from the long front porch. One, the Professor had entered and another, toward the right end of the house. Lights were now on in the front area and that area to the right. She had seen the lights on in this area before and also seen the Professor standing at the window when the blinds were open. When she had looked into that room she could see it appeared he sat at a desk and surmised that perhaps this was an office or some sort of work place.

She waited until it grew darker and moved closer and stepped behind a large tree. After waiting there several minutes she stepped away from the tree to move again.

The earth opened beneath her and she fell twelve feet into a padded, dimly lit, narrow tunnel. As she quickly gained her feet she looked to the right and vaguely saw a floating spreading mist-like substance rapidly advancing toward her. Taking two steps to the left she looked in that direction and the same mist approached. Now in both directions the cloudy-like matter altered and became thicker like a heavy fog and she could feel its dampness on her skin as it enveloped her, weakened her, and she fell to her knees and was choking and when she attempted to

catch her breath her lungs filled and she coughed, gasped and was forced into unconsciousness.

Lena climbed, with effort, slowly to consciousness and then opened her eyes. She did not move. She assessed the state of her body and determined that she felt normal except for a slight headache and some queasiness in her stomach. She looked at her left wrist. Her Comm device was gone and she could feel her small pistol was no longer strapped to her left side.

She was lying on a bed in a lighted area and she saw above her what appeared to be a metal ceiling. She sat up, turned and placed her boots on the carpeted floor. Immediately a tall very dark-skinned *Entity* moved to a desk and pushed a button. The voice was deep, precise and amplified.

Zesiro: She awakens.

She heard a click and then, through a speaker, a reply.

Professor: I'm on the way.

Now, still sitting, she looked around and paid careful attention to her surroundings. She was in a somewhat large area that was designed as a one-room house. The bed sat near the rear wall in the middle of the room. She faced a wall that had a couch, a small table and three easy chairs sitting before it. To her left in the corner was a kitchen area. She stood and looked behind her and saw an enclosed area she assumed was a bathroom. She saw toward the front right wall a dresser and a rack of clothing.

She began to walk around and look closely at this enclosed place. The complete front wall was made of a clear, glasslike material that extended from the ceiling to the floor. She tapped it and listened for the sound it returned. She touched it, to feel its composition. Then she stared at the dark-skinned *Entity*. She saw a smooth expressionless face and peered into dark-brown eyes that stared back at her, without emotion.

There were noises, unidentifiable, and then she could see, straight ahead, an opening next to cement stairs and ropes and pulleys were moving and a crude lift descended, legs appeared and the Professor came into view, slid open a wooden gate and stepped out.

The gray-haired man, dressed in a suit and opened-neck white shirt, walked to the glass, stopped and smiled slightly. He carried a drink in his hand and was obviously under the influence of consumed substances. He spoke, microphones picking up his voice, increasing its volume and sending it throughout the area.

Professor: Greetings Lena. I'm the Professor but you know that already or you would not be here. Obviously I've been expecting you, as a person of your intelligence would immediately ascertain. I assume you have questions for me, as I have for you, but first I must apologize. The drugs that rendered you unconscious were stronger than necessary, which was my miscalculation, please excuse me for that.

Lena stared at her adversary. She looked into his eyes, down into his soul. She recognized clearly the arrogance this man possessed but she also saw through his self-assured manner and felt the pretense of self-confidence. She knew this was a deceitful individual who stood before her. She hated him and it was at that moment that she decided how she would deal with this situation. She would not speak to him and revelations would spill forth and the reality of who he truly was would become obvious.

As she glared at him the Professor was examining her closely. Then he looked into her eyes. He missed the contempt but keenly experienced the hatred. He felt and saw that palpable inimical emotion reach out through the glass and touch him.

Professor: My, my, if looks could kill I would now be dead, wouldn't I? Lena you are everything I imagined and more, much

more. The images I have do not do you justice. But first I want you to gain your bearings. I don't want you to be disoriented.

He went to his large desk that faced her and pressed a button and the digital time appeared on the wall behind him. He sipped his drink.

Professor: You were unconscious for three hours. It is now, as you can see, a little before midnight. Technically it will soon be Tuesday, in a very few minutes. Now, I mean you no harm, as you will discover when we converse. Lena, my dear, there is no way out for you. We, you, are almost fifteen feet beneath the surface of the earth. You are surrounded by rock and dirt and the glasslike compound that encloses the front of your room is well over a foot thick and the door has been fused shut and only I can open it. I've provided for you as best as possible, under the circumstances, including circulating air and even pure oxygen if needed. I can have fresh food including fruits and vegetables dropped through the ceiling directly into storage containers. You have everything required for what I anticipate will be a brief stay. When you feel stronger take a look around and familiarize yourself with your temporary home. I don't consider you my prisoner I consider you my guest.

He finished his drink and watched for a response and there was none. The dark woman simply stared at him.

Professor: I suggest you drink some carbonated water to quell any feelings of nausea. You'll be monitored at all times but I assure you, on my honor, your private area is just that, completely private. Now it's been a long day for both of us. Let's get some rest. Tomorrow will also be a long day and we'll get started early. My associate, Zesiro here will remain with you and knows how to reach me. Do you have any questions or comments at this time?

Again there was no response. The Professor started toward the lift.

Professor: Zesiro, on guard. Do not leave your post. Repeat.

Zesiro: On guard. Do not leave post.

The Professor spoke as the lift started to rise.

Professor: Please Lena, don't be difficult. Until morning then.

Lena watched as the Professor moved upward and finally his legs disappeared. She went to the chilling unit and found a bottle of carbonated water. As she sipped, she walked around slowly and examined her confines. She noticed that Zesiro stood, back to her, arms at sides, facing the wall and the lift. She lay down for several hours and when she thought the Professor would be asleep she went to the glass wall and spoke softly.

Lena: Hello Zesiro, my name is Lena.

Zesiro turned and looked at her.

Lena: Zesiro means first of twins. Do you have a brother?

Zesiro stared at her and said nothing.

Lena: Do you have a sister?

Zesiro: Yes, a sister.

Lena again heard the unique voice as it was softly projected into her room.

Lena: How old are you Zesiro?

There was only silence for a response.

Lena: How old is your sister?

Zesiro: My sister is three years in existence.

Lena: How is your sister called?

Zesiro: Akia is the calling.

Lena: Where is Akia?

There was again silence for the response.

Lena: Do I appear as your sister?

Zesiro took a step forward as if to see her better but did not speak.

Lena: Is the Professor your father?

Now Zesiro only stared.

Lena: Let me out Zesiro. Release me.

Zesiro turned toward the far wall. Lena watched the dark *Entity* for a while and then went to the clothes rack, looked through the items, held them up, measured them to herself and found pants and a top to wear and went to the dresser and searched for undergarments.

She showered and dressed inside the bathroom behind the closed door. As she opened the door she quickly stopped with it barely ajar as she could see through the narrow opening that Zesiro was watching, looking for her. But there was something else, more than the blank expression she had seen before. When she came out Zesiro observed her for several moments and then again turned away. Now she walked to the glass wall and tapped softly.

Lena: Zesiro look.

Zesiro turned to her. She raised her opened left hand and placed it upon the glass and spoke, a quiet command.

Lena: Touch me Zesiro. Touch me.

Zesiro looked into her eyes, looked at her hand and then turned away.

Lena: Zesiro look!

Again, as if ordered he turned to her.

Lena: Touch me Zesiro! Touch me!

Zesiro hesitated and then turned away. Lena watched Zesiro carefully. She saw a slight movement of the right hand as it moved into a fist, opened, and the *Entity* was still and when she tapped softly on the glass there was no further movement.

She went and lay down on the bed, fully dressed and put herself into a trance, with her eyes open and she too, was still.

At nine thirty the next morning Lena was standing in the kitchen area munching on fruit and sipping water when the lift

began to descend. The Professor emerged, dressed in a suit and tie as if he were going into the city.

Professor: Good morning Zesiro.

Zesiro: Good morning Professor.

Professor: Good morning Lena. I trust you were able to get some sleep and are now back to your normal state, whatever that may be.

She took a bite of her apple and stared at him. She had moved a small table and a large chair from the couch into the middle of the room. As the Professor moved to sit behind his desk she sat down and placed a bottle of water on the table. She reclined in the chair as if relaxing. They stared at one another. Finally the Professor spoke.

Professor: Those I sent after you underestimated you. I have not done that. Had they succeeded in infecting you, fine, but I knew there was a very good chance they would fail in their mission and you would gain possession of at least one of the Surrender apparatuses, break the code, decipher the instructions and determine the destination point. You would then uncover I was the individual behind their assignment and confront me at my secluded home here. As I said, I've been expecting you.

He raised his right arm and indicated the immediate area.

Professor: This room and an intricate series of tunnels, indeed the barn above us and the house were created at the beginning of the *G.E. Period* by a very paranoid and wealthy individual so that he and his family could isolate themselves from the world. His plan succeeded, they were able to survive the dying years and then unfortunately they were all killed in a plane crash. Years ago I took over the property and with extensive modifications made what you now see and what eventually dropped you into my possession. Zesiro monitored, without interruption, the trap grid and when you stepped onto one of three dozen specified sectors

the earth then opened and there you are. Lena, you are here because I know that since your early twenties you have not aged, are impervious to disease and under specific conditions are in fact, immortal.

He looked for a reaction. There was none. The dark woman never took her eyes off of him. He continued.

Professor: You have, to my knowledge, lived at least two hundred years and are the second oldest living human being on the face of this earth. I also know that your Father is alive and thus immortal and is therefore the oldest human being that has ever lived. You have my word, on my honor that no one knows of your existence but me, as apparently the uniqueness of you two is unknown to the world. I alone, with various assistants who were never aware of my true purpose, have searched for your Father for over fifty years. I finally have utilized the resources at my disposal, including those agents from the *WLA* to locate you and get you here but I never meant you any harm. To injure you in any way would have defeated my purpose and crushed my dream that I've carried for so long. If those individuals attacked you it was against my orders. They went rogue and paid for that betrayal with their lives, which was only proper. They have been dispatched by you and the Advance Team that tracked you has been disbanded and they have returned to their foreign countries. At this time no one else looks for you or is pursuing you. All that is over as you are here with me now. You do believe me don't you?

Lena said nothing and the Professor shook his head with exasperation.

Professor: Please answer me.

Lena finished her apple and wrapped the core in a napkin and laid it on the table. Then she took a sip of her water and held the bottle in her hand and examined it and then looked up at her enemy. Her eyes flashed.

Professor: You are being difficult with this silence.

He thought a moment and then sighing, made up his mind to continue.

Professor: Now you shall know the purpose of all this. I must speak with your Father. I seek to acquire a small tissue sample in order to discover the key to his, and your longevity. With an understanding of his genetic makeup I can develop cures and create advances in medicine that were before unknown to the humankind. I know you are aware of my expertise in the field of genetics. Consider the benefits to all of mankind. Perhaps from this can be the prevention of another global pandemic.

The Professor stopped. He stood and moved to sit on the edge of his desk, closer to Lena.

Professor: Zesiro, bring me water.

Zesiro moved to a chilling unit in the corner, removed a bottle and handed it to the Professor who took several gulps and continued.

Professor: He created you as you are now. From him this hope for the world shall spring. How else could I reach him except through you? I couldn't find him. It's taken me years just to locate you. To somehow speak to him on my own was an impossible task. I need your help in this worthy endeavor.

Lena rose and went to the bed and lay down on her left side, facing the kitchen. The Professor went to the glass wall.

Professor: Lena, please speak to me. Ask me whatever you deem necessary so that we, you and I can move forward. Tell me where your Father is. How can I contact him? How do we get him here? I mean him no harm.

He waited. There were no words spoken from the dark woman. She refused to look at him.

Professor: Now that you know my purpose, consider all that I've said. Let us get this done so that all secrets remain that way and I

can release you to the everlasting life you lead. Converse with me. I have so many questions to ask, only you can answer, about your life, how you have survived, the things you've seen and done, how fascinating immortal life must be for you. It is only knowledge I truly seek.

The Professor remained there. Both hands touched the glass helplessly. Then he sat back down behind his desk. For two hours he periodically stared into the room and Lena never moved. Finally he stood.

Professor: I leave you now. Think about what I've said. I'll return this evening with hopes that you'll speak with me then, at least let me hear your voice.

There was no acknowledgement of his presence.

The Professor remained in his house. He sat at his desk in the office and observed Lena on his monitor throughout the day for long periods of time. He noticed she consumed bits of fruit and sipped water but otherwise did not eat.

She paced the room and he thought of a caged, agitated lioness and then, more appropriately, an angry female *melanistic* panther. She occasionally looked up directly at him, using the cameras embedded in the ceiling and high on the walls to let him know, she knew, he watched. The way she would stare at him unnerved him and he had no doubt that he could never allow her to place hands upon him.

He glanced at her Comm device beside the small pistol that had been confiscated from her. He had bypassed the lock but the device was clean, with no information he could use. He thought about his next steps. He never really believed, he could only hope that the woman he held captive would willingly provide him with the information he desired. He now knew he would have to extract it from her, force her to talk and then contact the Father,

trap him, capture him and place him into the room beside the daughter and take what he wanted.

He watched Lena and marveled at the two hundred year old human being he beheld. It was obvious she had been in her early twenties when she had ceased to physically age. He could see a youthful countenance and through the dark-brown portals what appeared to be an ageless soul.

Her rich, chocolate-hued skin was different from the very dark color of Zesiro and Akia and seemed a more luscious brown and exuded an essence of mystery and something ancient and possessed an unknown substance that he could not describe.

She walked, even in the confines of the restrictive room, with assuredness and a confidence that belied her constraining situation. Even in the ill-fitting clothes she looked beautiful, powerful, and there was a presence that was not just of another time but seemingly another world. One word escaped from him, quietly, with awe.

Professor: Remarkable.

He thought how it would pain him to have to hurt this magnificent creature but he knew he would do whatever he had to do in order to accomplish his goal.

He rubbed his aching knees and then rose to walk to the barn. Before reaching for his coat he heard approaching automobiles and looked out of the wide window to watch two large black automobiles coming down the gravel road that led to the driveway and the house. He recognized the *WLA* vehicles.

He opened his office door, pushed open the screen door and stepped onto the porch. The rear doors on each side of the front car opened and two agents got out. The Professor walked to the banister and waited.

One man started up the walkway and the other came across the grass straight to the porch and stopped. The Professor knew

this agent who stood before him. They had on occasion crossed paths and the Professor knew this man did not care for him and had been friends with the dispatched agents.

Professor: What brings you out here? Why didn't you call?

Agent: No office work in the city today Professor?

Professor: I have things to do here.

Agent: You're wanted in D.C.

Professor: D.C., for what, when?

Agent: You know what for. Now.

Professor: What do you mean now?

Agent: Now is now. We're here to take you to the airport.

Professor: That's ridiculous! I'm busy!

Agent: That's an order from those above. Let's go, you'll be back by tomorrow evening.

The Professor stared angrily at the agent. The agent stared back.

Professor: I'll get my coat.

He went back into his office, grabbed his coat, then pressed a button on his desk. Beneath the barn, both Zesiro and Lena reacted to the sound of the intercom coming on. They both could hear as the Professor spoke.

Professor: Zesiro I have to go away until tomorrow evening. Remain on guard. Do not leave your post. Do you understand? Repeat your instructions.

Zesiro: I understand. Remain on guard. Do not leave post.

Lena then heard another voice, distinctly. The agent had come near the screen door and yelled into the office.

Agent: Let's go Professor! We have a plane to catch!

The Professor yelled back.

Professor: I'm coming! I'm coming!

He left through the office and pulled the door shut. Lena noted the time. It was six in the evening.

It was midnight when Lena rose from the bed and began to walk the room. She turned on two lamps and turned up the overhead lights. Zesiro's back remained turned to her.

Lena: Zesiro look!

Zesiro turned to her. She began to dance slowly around the room. She kicked off the slippers she wore and they flew against the wall. Then she unbuttoned her blouse, one button at a time as she stepped and turned and she removed it and spun it several times over her head and then let it fall to the floor.

She stopped and stared at the dark *Entity*. Zesiro stared back. Then she unbuttoned her pants and when the pants fell, crumpled to the floor she stepped away. Now all she wore was her underwear and her dark-brown skin was in direct contrast to the white material.

Zesiro moved closer to the glass with a gaze that never left her. No longer looking only into her eyes, Zesiro was looking, without expression, as if searching for something or perhaps seeking someone.

Lena danced to each of the lamps and turned them off. Then she dimmed the ceiling lights. As she walked toward the glass she removed her bra and let it slip to the floor and when she stopped near the wall she watched Zesiro as she pulled down her panties and stood before Zesiro, naked.

She pirouetted slowly several times and saw that Zesiro stared at different areas of her body. She moved closer to the wall and raised her opened left hand and gently placed it upon the glass. She spoke, an amplified whispered command.

Lena: Touch me Zesiro.

Zesiro looked into her eyes, at her lips as she spoke.

Lena: Touch me Zesiro. Touch me.

Zesiro's right arm was slowly lifted and the opened right hand was placed against the glass. Now they were a foot apart and

Zesiro, never moving the hand, looked at the glass that separated them as if for a way in, or for the dark woman, a way out.

When Zesiro looked again at Lena she smiled and the dark *Entity* stared at the golden tooth and blinked, once. Suddenly Lena's head fell back and she closed her eyes. She stood like that, uncovered, smiling, unmoving and then she turned and with her foot she tossed each piece of her clothing into the air, caught each one and disappeared into the bathroom.

She dressed behind the closed door and when done she pulled the door slightly ajar and saw Zesiro, with the raised hand still pressed against the glass wall, watching for her. She came out, turned all the lights off, lay on the bed and went to sleep.

It was eight in the evening when the lift noisily began its descent. Lena rose from the chair and moved toward the glass. Zesiro's back was to her and they both watched as two pairs of legs came into view.

The Professor slid open the gate and he and Akia stepped out. He carried a large metal canister in his hand. He stopped and stared angrily at Lena, glanced at Zesiro and then set the canister on the floor beside the desk.

Akia immediately walked to the glass wall and stared at Lena. Then raising the right hand, touched the glass and surveyed the barrier that kept them apart. Lena smiled at the dark-skinned female appearing *Entity* dressed in pants and blouse and soft shoes and watched as Akia moved in front of her and looked down at the black boots she now wore.

As this was happening, the Professor had walked to a corner cabinet, opened it and removed a bottle and a glass. Lena saw him pour a drink and lift the glass and empty it of its contents. He turned to her and spoke loudly, harshly, as he walked stiffly towards her.

Professor: The powers that be once again want to know what happened to their agents. They won't let it go! Six agents on loan to me, acting on my orders have been destroyed. Why, they ask? What was their assignment, they ask? They demand accountability and this is your doing!

He pointed at the dark woman who stood impassively, staring at him.

Professor: Yes, your doing!

He began to pace before the wall.

Professor: But this is simply a minor storm. It shall pass and they will cease this harassment. You know why it will go away? Because I know where all the bodies were buried. Bodies that have become skeletons and I can move those bones into their closets and then I can open those closet doors and expose those bleached skulls, let those meaty skeletons out and they know that.

The Professor glared at Lena.

Professor: I hoped perhaps we could do this the easy way but you choose to be difficult.

He walked to the wall near the steps and snatched open a door. Inside there were switches and tubes and blinking lights and a faint humming sound.

Professor: This, my dear Lena, controls that room in which you reside. I can shut off your water, your lights and most important, your air. But that's not what I'm going to do. Unless you tell me what I want to know I'm going to take that ...

He pointed to the canister.

Professor: ... and inject all its contents into your air supply, fill your room with drugs and through the Narcosynthesis process you will truthfully answer my questions and reveal everything I want to know. And you'll have more than just a headache and upset stomach. You may be immortal but that doesn't mean you cannot die. Now, are you going to tell me what I want to know?

The Professor was shocked when he heard the soft, thick, amplified voice ease through the sound system.

Lena: You said you meant me no harm.

The Professor's eyes widened and his mouth was open and then he caught himself but he could not speak as the look of hatred in the dark woman's eyes froze him. Then he was able to gain his composure.

Professor: Time, for you is meaningless. I'm running out of it which means your time is up.

Lena: Was that a lie? And what about not harming my Father? Is that also a lie? It's all a lie isn't it? Knowledge is not what you seek.

Professor: I will do what I must do.

Lena: The Professor is a treacherous man.

The Professor walked to the canister and picked it up.

Professor: Are you going to tell me what I want to know?

Lena: Yes, I'll tell you.

She stared at him. A slight smile became visible.

Professor: We'll contact him but first, where is your Father?

Lena spoke softly, matter-of-factly.

Lena: He's in your house.

The Professor was confused. He set the canister down and stared at Lena. He yelled.

Professor: Don't underestimate me!

Lena rushed to the wall. Both hands pressed the glass, as if to shove the constraining wall down. She hollered, enraged, her face animated and each word rose in volume.

Lena: He's in your house!

The Professor stepped back as if he had been pushed. He watched Lena as he moved behind his desk and still standing, turned on the monitor that sat there. He made adjustments and the camera mounted high on the barn rotated until he could see

the front of his house. He looked closer, zoomed the image and saw that his front door was shattered and hanging open on one hinge. He moved the view and saw the screen door was closed, his office door was open and all his office lights, darkened when he started across the yard, were now on.

He stared at Lena who was now looking at him without emotion. She looked at him in the same manner Akia and Zesiro were looking when he turned toward them as if they would help remove his confusion and tamp down his fear. He couldn't comprehend, didn't want to move but he was forced to react. He reached beneath his desk and extracted a case, placed it on his desk and opened it. He removed a cylinder metal device in the shape of a large rounded laser pistol. It was a device to be placed against an individual in order to rapidly inject large amounts of drugs, through clothing if necessary, into any part of a body. The Professor looked at Lena suspiciously.

Professor: Zesiro, Akia come with me.

The three got on the lift. The Professor gave orders before the lift began its ascent.

Professor: Zesiro prepare for confrontation. Program two, level three. Akia prepare to protect Zesiro. Program five, level one.

The lift rose. Their legs disappeared. When they reached the barn door the Professor paused to look at his house and then to look at the nearby area. They started quickly across the darkening grassy meadow and when they reached the white fence that went around the barn he again paused.

Now they crossed the gravel driveway and across the lawn they went and as they came closer to the house the Professor held out his arms. They all stopped.

Professor: Zesiro, scan the house. Do you see anyone?

Zesiro's head went back and forth, peering through the windows.

Zesiro: I see no one.

Professor: What do you hear?

Zesiro's head turned upward slightly and to the side.

Zesiro: I hear nothing.

Professor: Can you register a presence?

Zesiro: No.

They walked to the office door and slowly mounted the steps. The Professor readied his device, cautiously pulled open the screen door and stepped inside. Zesiro and then Akia followed. The room was lit up. All the lights were on and sheets of paper from his desk were scattered on the floor. The Professor went behind his desk. He turned on a monitor and sat down.

Professor: On guard Zesiro.

The *Entity* moved to stand beside the gray-haired man. Akia remained just inside the doorway. The Professor, using controls and the monitor, looked into every room in the house. He then illuminated the basement, looked there and saw no one. He quickly looked into every room again. He sat there, thinking and then picking up his device they left the office and started, with urgency, back across the yard to the barn.

Dust shifted as they walked in a hurry across the empty barn and above them in the rafters, birds scattered, fluttered, and made sounds of alarm. The three moved behind the false wall and got on the lift. The Professor pressed the down button and nothing happened. He pressed again and when they did not move he cursed and stepped out. The other two followed. He pointed to the wooden floor.

Professor: Zesiro open the door.

Zesiro pulled at a board on the floor and then lifted the door that exposed the steps. The Professor started, with difficulty, down the steep flight of stairs and when he reached the bottom he stopped so abruptly that Zesiro bumped into him and Akia

bumped into the brother.

The large desk lay in pieces against the far wall and there was a gaping, grotesque melted hole where the fused glass door once was. Lena was gone.

The Professor was in disbelief that such a passageway could be made in a glass wall over a foot thick. He shook his head, stunned. He turned and pushed past the two that stood behind him. He was in a panic and spoke frantically.

Professor: 'To the grid room! They couldn't have gotten far!

He started with great effort, up the stairs. He yelled as he took each step.

Professor: We'll locate their thermal images, drop them both into the tunnel and gas them. I'll extract what I desire from the warm unconscious body of the Father if necessary.

Across the driveway and into the moist grass they moved with determined haste.

Professor: Zesiro, carry me!

Zesiro wrapped his left arm around the Professor's waist and lifted him from the ground.

Professor: Run Zesiro! Run Akia!

Zesiro ran, Akia ran and the three reached the porch at the office door. The Professor was out of breath, as if his legs, bouncing in the air had been touching the earth.

Professor: Put me down!

The Professor snatched open the screen door and stepped into his office. After two strides, from behind, the device he carried was snatched from his hand and he was pushed so hard he fell and slid across the room to a stop in front of his desk, face down. He rolled over and looked at everyone staring at him.

Akia had come into the room behind the brother and moved to the Professor's left and remained standing in front of the window. Zesiro stood just inside the doorway. A dark-skinned

man who was dressed in all black with black gloves stood to the Professor's right. He had his right hand near a holstered pistol at his left side. Lena stepped from behind her Father at his left shoulder and stared without emotion and yet hatred fanned across the room and settled heavily upon the Professor's chest.

The Professor could not take his eyes off of the Father. He saw a human being who was nearly as dark as Zesiro, not quite as tall or thick, with short natural black hair and his dark-brown penetrating gaze held the Professor in place.

The Professor glanced from the Father to the daughter and a short distressful laugh was forced from him, as he saw, not just how much they appeared alike, but how young the two hundred year old human beings both looked. He was affected and pained by their appearance. They were both beautiful, as is always, and forever will be, an essence of youth.

The Father held the Professor's device and glared, with a slight frown, at the gray-haired man sprawled on the floor and he looked at the silver object he held and then with a left handed backward motion he slung it and it shattered against the far wall.

Lena: Professor, I'd like for you to meet Lloyd Nelson, my Father. He's very upset with you.

Her voice began to rise in volume and fill with venom.

Lena: Tell him what you want! Tell him you mean no harm!

The Professor yelled and pointed at the Father.

Professor: Zesiro, program three, level five! Subdue and contain that individual!

He then pointed at Lena.

Professor: Akia, program four, attack, dominate!

At the commands, the brother and sister *Entities* sprung into action. Zesiro attempted to grab the Father, hold him, wrap arms around him. Akia did not attack as ordered but moved into a defensive stance and then circled. The Father back fisted Zesiro

to the floor and Lena raised her hands and also circled, speaking loudly.

Lena: Akia, stand down, ignore!

Akia now shifted, moved forward, Zesiro was up and again moved forward and was kicked to the floor. Now Akia threw a right and Lena blocked the thrust to the side, countered with a push and then turned Akia around.

Lena: Akia, disregard your command.

The Professor yelled again.

Professor: Zesiro, level eight, faster, faster! Akia, I command you to attack!

Zesiro moved faster, feinting, in order to put hands on the Father. Akia threw punches that Lena was able to block but now Akia was moving faster, throwing with both hands and Lena recognized that her foe was processing the counter movements and immediately becoming more adept with each move she made.

The Father and Zesiro, fighting toward the far right wall, were tearing the room up. Lamps and tables broke, pictures fell as Zesiro was kicked to the floor and thrown against the wall. Akia was body slammed to the floor, picked up and knocked against the front window and glass shattered onto the porch.

The Professor saw that Zesiro's attempts to subdue the Father were failing. The degree of Zesiro's strength was unknown, the Father was stronger. Zesiro was quick, the Father was quicker. In trying to pin and submit, the Professor recognized that Zesiro was at an obvious disadvantage.

Lena and Akia fought toward the left wall. The Professor saw Akia, strong, yet stiff and mechanical, processing and attempting to adjust and the dark woman, more powerful was moving on memory, training and instinct with the sublime, feline grace of a cat. Lena rained blows and kicks and tossed Akia like a rag doll.

She was focused and silent and continued to dominate even as Akia gained dexterity and performed more complicated moves.

The Professor struggled to his feet and as he supported himself and moved around the desk he yelled.

Professor: Zesiro, program ten, level ten, activate! Kill! Kill! Destroy! Akia, activate program ten, level ten, now! Kill! Kill! Destroy!

Now the four combatants were moving toward the center of the room. The Father and daughter met the increased aggression with rising ferocity and with force that would have been for ordinary humans, lethal.

The Professor staggered to a table in the corner, opened a drawer and removed a large pistol. The Father called out to his daughter as he slammed Zesiro into the wall of weapons.

Father: Disable that *Entity*, now!

Pieces of the wall fell as Zesiro attempted to stand. The Professor yelled.

Professor: Zesiro, the saber, use the saber!

Zesiro looked at the Professor and then while rising, looked at the wall.

Professor: 'The wrist breaker! The wrist breaker!

Zesiro grabbed the large saber and was kicked down. Lena dropped her arms and smiled at Akia and when Akia's hands lowered she leaped to Akia's right, grabbed the right arm and snatched it from its socket. As yellow fluid poured out of the empty hole the Father was taking the other saber from the wall and then he and Zesiro turned toward one another and moved to the on guard position.

The Professor couldn't shoot the Father, Zesiro was in the line of fire as the two squared off. He turned the pistol on Lena who now moved behind Akia and wrapped her arms around Akia's chest.

Zesiro attacked and the sound of the clanging metal filled the room as they thrust and parried, swinging the sabers as they moved from empty fade to fades and stepped across, pivoted and lunged, the sabers making whistling noises as they cut through the air.

Lena was wrestling with Akia and then grabbed Akia's left arm and turning and slinging Akia, snatched that flailing arm from its socket.

The Professor opened fire and missed. He fired past Zesiro at the Father and missed and when Lena kicked Akia to the floor the Professor turned back to the dark woman who was now exposed and again began to fire, rapidly, and the gunshots crackled loudly. From the Father to the daughter, bullets flew at them and sabers clanged and Lena was shot in the back and she went to the floor face down and rolled over as her red blood spilled out. Akia, in silence, was kicking and rolling, trying to get up as the yellow fluid ran onto the floor and Lena called out.

Lena: Zesiro, look!

The dark *Entity* lowered the saber and immediately turned to look down at Lena. The Father moved his saber above his head and in a circular motion brought it around and with a powerful stroke decapitated Zesiro and dark-red fluid spurted up and out and poured onto the rug.

The Professor fired at the Father but the headless torso still stood and was in the way. The Professor turned the pistol back toward Lena and the Father hurled his saber through the air and it pierced the Professor's right shoulder and the pistol fell as the Professor was lifted into the air, driven back and impaled to the wooden wall behind him.

Zesiro's head had rolled over three times, the expressionless eyes disappearing and then coming into view again and then the head stopped, face up. The torso slowly collapsed onto its back

and as the Professor hollered and cursed, Lena crawled to Zesiro and pried the saber from the clutching hand and rose slowly, with effort, and as she turned to her adversary pinned to the wall, the artificial legs kicked as if running and were disengaged from the body. The Professor's right hand opened and closed, then reached as if he could will the pistol from the floor through the air and into his grasping hand. He screamed at Lena as she slowly came closer.

Professor: There's much more to life than death! Immortality! Immortality! Immor ...

Lena swung the saber with both hands and sliced the Professor's head off.

Akia slowed the rolling and kicking and was looking up with an expressionless face and unmoving eyes and then all movement ceased, forever.

The Professor's head had fallen and rolled over twice and come to a stop, face down and as his red blood flowed, a deep precise voice rose from somewhere between the body and head of Zesiro. A disembodied voice spoke quietly and seemed to echo.

Zesiro: Death is the act of dying or the state of being dead. Death, the end of a life of a person or an organism. Extinction. Destruction.

The right hand on the headless torso lifted slowly into the air, extended as if to be placed upon the glass barrier and remained that way. Now each word grew fainter, the last nearly inaudible.

Zesiro: Touch me, Lena.

The Father moved to his bleeding daughter lying on the floor. He turned her onto her right side and tore open her blouse and pulled it up. Blood oozed slowly from the wound on her back. He leaned over and looked at the exit wound in the left front area. He rolled Lena over and saw her eyes were closed.

He reached and picked up the Professor's pistol. He removed the magazine, looked at it and its contents and then tossed the weapon and magazine onto the floor.

He put his arms under Lena and lifted her and walked quickly down the hallway to the laboratory and laid her on the long metal table. He rolled her onto her right side and removed his gloves. He turned the lights up bright and went to the sink at the wall and soaked two towels with cold water. With one he cleaned the blood away and examined the wound and then covered the damaged area with the towel. He placed his hand on her forehead for several moments and then used the other towel to gently wipe her face and neck.

He looked at his daughter and took a deep breath and then leaned over and softly kissed her forehead, her cheek. Then he pulled up a chair and watched his daughter's face, as she appeared to have entered a troubled sleep. It was forty-five minutes before Lena spoke softly, with closed eyes.

Lena: It's been a while, hasn't it?

The Father rose and stepped close and felt his daughter's face and neck with his hand. He spoke, his somewhat raspy voice, quiet and strong.

Father: Almost seventeen years.

He tenderly rolled her onto her back. She took several deep breaths and opened her eyes. She looked up and smiled slightly. She pursed her lips and made kissing sounds.

Lena: Kiss me.

He leaned over and gently kissed her lips and then looked at her and he also smiled, just a little.

Father: It was a lead bullet. It went completely through your body. The wound was clean. Your fever is gone.

He removed the towel and looked at her side. The wound was completely healed. Nothing remained but a discoloration, and an

obvious bruise. She observed the concern in his eyes and reached up and placed her hand on his chest, at his heart.

Lena: Don't look like that. I'm alright.

He assisted and she sat up and turned, her legs hanging over the table. She looked around and seeing a full-length mirror on the wall she slid forward, with him partially lifting her, and stood and walked to the mirror. She held her blouse open. She examined her side, touched it, and then looked as best she could, at her back. She stretched, raising her left arm.

Father: Are we done here?

Lena: Yes, I found out all we could know at this time.

He moved toward the doorway, she followed and together they walked along the hallway and when they came to Akia's room Lena paused and looked in. Then she stepped inside and went to a closet. She removed her bloodstained blouse and found a light jacket and as she put it on she walked around and looked at the women's shoes that neatly lined the floor and that were hanging in racks against the walls, dozens of shoes.

She saw a door and when she opened it she observed a workroom. It contained everything that was required to make shoes. She went in and scanned the tools and the materials that were stacked everywhere and when she came out saw her Father waiting patiently at the doorway, watching her.

Lena: Akia, the shoemaker.

She walked slowly and studied the shoes and then lifted a pair of above the ankles, flat, burgundy leather boots from the wall. She sat in a chair and tried on the left one. It fit so she put on the other one. She rose and looked down and then walked from the room.

Side by side they continued down the hallway. They turned into the living room and Lena followed her Father through the front doorway. Across the porch, down the steps they went. To

their left the office lights shone through the broken window and the house was silent as if it were empty. Above them the late third quarter moon was bright and dark in the starry cloudless sky and shadows followed the Father and daughter as they went to their right, across the driveway toward the nearby woods. Their footsteps crunched against the hard gravel and then grew quiet as they crossed the soft grass.

Before reaching the tall trees the Father stopped and turned around. Lena kept walking and then she too stopped and turned. She saw the dark man staring at the large house in the near distance. Then he raised both hands and extended them away from his face as if to take a clear, framed picture of the house now encompassed within his power.

He stood like that for several moments and then pushed his hands forward and exhaled, barely. Within a matter of seconds the house began to glow, shimmer and smolder and then it burst into flames. He turned to this right and did the same to the barn.

The two watched as the buildings, totally engulfed, burned furiously. The Father turned from the scene of conflagration and when he reached Lena he leaned against a tree and took a deep breath. He removed a handkerchief from his back pocket and she took it from his hand and pulled him to her and gently patted his moist face, caressed his warm forehead and lovingly placed it to his heated throat. They stared into one another's eyes.

Behind them the structures burned but there was nothing to indicate roaring flames or popping, crackling materials. The fires were unnatural in color, intensity and sound. There was a brilliant whiteness that had surrounded the buildings. The white was never more than a foot from the edges and there was only a loud hissing, sucking noise.

The Father pointed the way and the two, each with an arm around the other, moved past the tall, wide northern trees and

further into the woods. As they reached an incline he took her hand and assisted her down.

Behind them the whiteness was no longer visible and as they stepped to level ground the two buildings collapsed into the earth. There was nothing left of either. There was no charred wood or blackened mortar or melted molten metal. There were no bricks from the fireplace or chimney, no identifiable remnants remained. There was only a fine powdery gray ash two feet deep and wisps of white mist rising to dissipate into the black night air. Everything was gone. This was done. This challenge was over.

On they walked slowly, in silence and then they came to a clearing. Lena saw a black automobile parked near a narrow dirt road. The only light was from the glow of the moon and as they grew closer she could see it was a two-seater with wide tires and a sloping front end. It was low and sleek but it sat up as if it could jump.

Lena: 'That's nice. It's different, and pretty.

The Father raised his left hand and the butterfly doors lifted and shifted out quietly. They went to the passenger side and he watched as Lena climbed in and then he went to the driver's side. He paused to look up at the sky for a moment and then he got in. He reached into the back and from the chilling unit removed a bottle of water and handed it to Lena. Then he removed another bottle and they both drank thirstily.

They sat in the partially lit darkness. It was a beautiful August summer night and they could feel the thick humid dampness and hear the crickets chirping and they both knew how wonderful it was to be alive.

He looked at his daughter as she finished her water and she glanced at him as she handed him the empty bottle. He placed it into the back and then placed his empty bottle there also. The

interior illumination was dim and the two were bathed in a soft dull blue. He turned the lights up and they could see each other clearly. He turned towards her. He spoke slowly, and his voice was firm.

Father: You know you should have brought me into this one sooner.

Lena: I know, I know. Don't be upset.

Father: Look at me.

Lena turned to her Father and looked into his dark-brown eyes. His voice softened.

Father: If something should happen to you, for me there would be no life.

Lena: And for me you are the true purpose of my living.

He reached both his hands out and with both hands she grasped his. They held on tightly and they both knew she had summoned him over the wind. All they had seen together, all they had done together and all they meant to each other passed between them and it was reaffirmed in their touch that they were joined, as one, and even when they were apart they were not separate.

Father: I love you Georcelena.

Lena: And I love you Father.

Now all was right between them, as it was supposed to be.

He turned and moved the steering wheel into driving position. Buttons were pressed and the doors lowered, the engine started and went from a mild whine to a low humming sound. The belts came around to buckle them in. The lights lowered.

Father: What's that gold I see?

Lena showed him her tooth.

Father: You present just as your mother. You appear beautiful.

A shadow passed across his face and Lena touched his shoulder. Her hand lingered, squeezed slightly.

Lena: And you appear as my handsome Father, my hero.

He moved slowly onto the dirt road.

Father: Are you going with me?

Lena: Yes, but I need to be in Las Vegas by New Year's Eve.

They headed through the darkness to the road that would take them to the highway and when they reached that junction he stopped.

Father: Those white knobs can adjust your seat. Press that red button.

She pressed a small red button near her left hand and a compartment door in front near her knees lowered and a light came on and she could see a holstered pistol. She closed the door. She adjusted her seat and leaned back a little. As he turned onto the paved two-lane road he honked the horn, four times.

Lena: That's a Cadillac horn! You put a Cadillac horn on a racecar!

He turned to her and with a slight smile, he winked.

They rode awhile with only the sound of the powerful engine and Lena was content and excited and then up ahead were streetlights and other headlights as they drew closer to the highway entrance.

Lena: Put our record on.

Father: Play number one.

Their record began. Now they were on the highway and their speed increased. When the music faded the Father spoke again.

Father: Repeat.

Lena looked out of the side window as they passed other cars and she looked up through the glass roof at the stars and the moon but she didn't look back. And then she began to sing along with their favorite song from 1968. She sang of destroying mountains and building islands and traveling to different worlds.

The song would play over and over until they didn't need to hear it any longer. Lena called out.

Lena: Turn it up! Let's go!

He adjusted his seat and then pressed buttons on the steering wheel.

Lena: Faster!

He moved into the no-limit lane as the sound of the music rose and their speed increased and when the display passed 140MPH she adjusted her seat so that she sat up straight and leaned forward slightly and she hollered out, above the guitar and bass and drums as she looked through the front windshield at the unknown future that they rushed toward.

Lena: I like this!

Acknowledgments

When asked to describe their skin color Brazilians came up with 136 different shades and variations and identifying descriptions. The English translations of Brazilian colors were published by the website Africa Is a Country and were attributed to Lilia Moritz Schwarcz and edited by Achal Prabhala.

LGBTQI+ Terminology from lgbt.ucla.edu and was created by Eli R. Green and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside 2003-2004 with additional input from wikipedia.org.

Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions from itsprouncedmetrosexual.com.

Definitions of LGBTQ Terms from geneq.berkeley.edu Gender Equity Resource Center updated 2013.

Ballet Terminology from American Ballet Theatre at abt.org

Ballet Terminology from, The Glossary of Ballet, from [wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org), the Free Encyclopedia. References listed.

Special Acknowledgment to: The Internet.

NOTE: In the year 2170 it is common practice to self declare one's identity. This is done primarily by the means of wearing specific designated types of jewelry and/or by displaying specific designated permanent and/or temporary tattoos.

Glossary

A

AAS: Anabolic Androgenic Steroids

Alva: Snowy white

Alva-rosada: Pinkish white

Amarela: Yellow

Avermelhada: Reddish

Azul: Blue

B

Bem branca: Very white

Bem morena: Very dark

Branca: White

Branca-queimada: Burnt white

Bronze: Bronze-colored

Bronzeada: Sun-tanned

C

Canelada: Somewhat like cinnamon

Castanha: Chestnut

Castanha-clara: Light chestnut

Center World: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

CMU: As related to property, an individual could **Claim, Maintain, and Upgrade** and thereby retain possession of formerly empty and/or abandoned land or structures.

Cobre: Copper-colored

Crioula: Creole

D

DF: Has **D**eclared as **F**emale

DG: Has **D**eclared as **G**ay

DL: Has **D**eclared as **L**esbian

DM: Has **D**eclared as **M**ale

DP: Has **D**eclared as **P**ansexual

DQ: Has **D**eclared as **Q**ueer

DT: Has **D**eclared as **T**ransvestite

DTM: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**M**an

DTW: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**W**oman

E

East World: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia.

Entity: Human appearing Andriod with Artificial Intelligence.

Escura: Dark

Escurinha: Very dark

G

G.E. Period: Great Extinction that took place between the years 2110 and 2140. A pandemic caused the deaths of approximately 10 billion people.

L

Loura: Blonde

M

Marrom: Brown

Melada: Honey-colored

Melanistic: Zoology, the condition in which an unusually high concentration of melanin occurs in the skin of an animal. Melanin; a dark brown to black pigment occurring in animals.

Mulatinha: Little mulatto girl

N

ND: Has **N**ot **D**eclared

NM Wavelength: Nanometer Radiation Wavelength

O

Other World: Alaska, Hawaii.

P

Palida: Pale

Parda: Brown

Parda-clara: Light brown

PF: **P**resenting as **F**emale

PM: **P**resenting as **M**ale

R

Rosada: Rosy

S

Sarará: Yellow-haired Negro

T

Trigo: Wheat

V

Vermelha: Red

W

West World: California, Oregon, Washington

WIA: World Intelligence Agency