

The Bird Shaman's Girl

by Judith Moffett

Judith Moffett's first stories of the Hefn invasion were assembled into the novel The Ragged World, which was followed by another novel, Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream. Her most recent story in the series was "The Bear's Baby" in our Oct/Nov 2003 issue. These days, Ms. Moffett divides her time between Swarthmore, PA, and a hill farm in Kentucky. She says she has finished up work on a third Hefn novel (of which this story forms a part) and she is now writing and publishing more poetry again. For this story, Ms. Moffett is grateful to Polly Schaafsma, and to Solveig A. Turpin and Jim Zintgraff, whose written and photographic work on Pecos River rock art were of great help.

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1

Even at the end of May you could find snow in the Wasatch Range of Utah if you went high enough—snow on the ground, snow occasionally falling from the sky. Pam Pruitt stood behind one of the cameramen and watched a group of actors haul their burdened handcarts up a steep slope. Wooden wheels screeched on wooden axles. Neil Reeder, a handsome teen in a tattered coat and britches, with a rag tied over his head and ears, was pushing a cart from behind while a man and woman strained backwards as they pulled on the handle. Snow swirled around them. As he passed the camera Neil looked directly into the lens, face contorted with effort and determination, heavy shoes slipping on the icy stones. The next instant a wheel came off the cart and Neil, with a startled yelp, went sprawling.

"Cut!" the director yelled. "We'll do one more take, folks. Dave, move that mark two feet downhill, I want Neil to release the wheel a little sooner." The actors trooped back down the slope while props people reattached the wheel and rolled the carts down. Neil saw Pam standing with Lexi Allred, his costar in the series they were filming, and waved. Pam and Lexi waved back. "Places, everybody. Neil, see the mark? About two feet sooner." Neil nodded. The director called "Ready? Roll 'em. And—action!" And the Ephremite pioneers began again to toil up the mountainside, pulling and pushing their handcarts toward the New Jerusalem and the cameras.

Pam glanced sideways at Lexi, eleven years old and in a peck of trouble. Lexi, radiantly beautiful even in that getup, stood clutching a silvery emergency blanket over her long dress and shawls. Feeling Pam's regard

upon her, she looked up and smiled, and Pam smiled back.

This time the director was satisfied with the broken wheel and the actors regrouped to begin a different scene. “I’m in this one,” Lexi said. She gave the emergency blanket to Pam. Walking to join the others, she lifted her shawls and redraped them so they covered her head as well as her shoulders. Pam shook out and folded up the blanket, and handed it to RoLayne Allred, who had come to stand beside her. “Can you take charge of this? I might get called away before they finish the scene.”

“Fine,” said Lexi’s mother. She half-looked at Pam as she tucked the blanket under her arm, a look of mingled resentment and shame.

Years of being Liaison Officer for Child Oversight in Utah had conditioned Pam to ignore such looks. Lowering her voice, keeping it friendly, she said “How do you feel she’s doing?”

“She seems to be doing all right.”

“Have you talked about it with her much?”

“That counselor you’re making her see is the one she talks to,” Lexi’s mother said, and this time the resentment was unmistakable.

Pam counted to ten before replying, with a kindness that was at least partly genuine, “She feels bad about getting her granddad in trouble, you know—she feels like the abuse was *her* fault somehow, that’s very common. You could help with that, RoLayne. I know it would be a huge relief to her if *you* could talk about it with her—reassure her that she did the right thing to turn him in.”

The director called for action and they watched Lexi struggle up a different slope (with less trampled snow) at the front of a group of shawled women, heads bowed against the wind and swirling flakes. The able-bodied women were helping haul the carts; these, as Pam and RoLayne could see, in front of them and on the monitor screen, were all too old, young, pregnant, or enfeebled to do more than totter along behind. Where the ascent was less steep, some would ride.

It wasn’t a scene where the onlookers had to keep completely quiet, and Lexi’s mother murmured, “Well, I can’t very well say what I don’t believe.”

Pam murmured back, “That she was right to tell? But surely—”

“Tell you Gaians. I don’t think that was right myself, so you needn’t expect me to say it was.”

Pam gritted her teeth. “But surely it’s less important whether she told us she was being molested, or told her Canon, or her parents, than that she told *somebody*.” When Mrs. Allred didn’t reply, Pam gestured up the slope and led her companion farther from the microphones. In a normal voice she said, “Kids often feel guilty at the commotion it causes when they report abuse. That’s why it’s so vital that they be reassured by the people they love and trust the most. Lexi really needs to hear that it’s not her fault people are so upset, and she needs to hear it from you.”

“Tell her yourself,” RoLayne said shortly. “I’ve already given her my opinion, which is that she should’ve come to the Canon and let *him* talk to her grandfather. In the Ephremite Church even children have a responsibility to put the good of the Church ahead of their own good.” She flashed Pam a look of pure hostility. “I don’t expect you to understand that, but it’s true.”

“Well, but—her grandfather and the Canon are old friends,” Pam said, still hanging on to her reasonable tone, which was getting harder to do, “so you couldn’t really expect her to go to him about this.”

“What I expect her to do,” said RoLayne, “is her moral duty. I’ll tell you one thing I do know. I know whose fault it is that she’ll have nothing to do with the Church anymore, since you Gaians got ahold of her.”

“That’s a wrap!” the director called. “Good job, everybody. Take ten. Neil, I need you for a sec.”

The group of toiling women broke formation and headed for the hot-drinks trailer, and Lexi, seeing her mother and Pam standing together, ran over to them. RoLayne shook out the silver blanket. As she wrapped it around her daughter, Lexi said, “Mom, could you fix this? I stepped on it and it ripped out.” She held up the hem of her tattered dress with both hands.

RoLayne examined the hem. “Oh, I think so. Let’s go see if we can’t find a needle and thread.” She slipped an arm around Lexi’s shoulders and propelled her toward the props trailer. Pam she ignored.

Lexi, however, turned inside her mother’s half-hug to look back at Pam. “We’ll be done pretty soon. I’m still coming home with you, right?”

“Right. I can wait, there’s no hurry.”

“Is Humphrey still hibernating?”

“Yep. It’ll just be us tonight for dinner, but I got out another cobbler anyway.”

Lexi beamed—she knew blackberry cobbler was the Hefn Humphrey’s favorite food on earth—and turned away. RoLayne’s stiff back spoke volumes, but there was nothing she could do. Pam felt a twinge of sympathy. Only a twinge, though. If there was one thing she could not abide, it was a parent who protected her belief system and herself at the expense of her child’s well-being.

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Apart from RoLayne, Pam enjoyed these visits to Lexi on location. Ephremite history fascinated her. Founded by a visionary and led for decades by a genius-level businessman, the Church of Ephrem the Prophet was a purely American product. Early persecution, climaxing in martyrdom, had united and empowered the Ephremites as a people set apart. They established a kingdom in a desert, and the kingdom thrived. Deprivations? Plagues of locusts? Military occupation? Mass arrests and jailings? They rose above it all; their indomitability kept pace with their suffering. A mulish determination to triumph over adversity seemed hardwired into the collective Ephremite psyche. As a people they were tough as nails, and the toughness had survived into modern times. The more Pam learned about them, the more she admired them for it.

But child sexual abuse had long been a special problem among the Ephremites; and—as with the Catholic Church—a powerful, patriarchal, self-protective governing authority had allowed the problem to persist and spread. The Ephremite community was deeply family-centered, with many children and lots of activities organized for them. All those Scout troops needed leaders. If you were a good God-fearing Ephremite pedophile, you had no trouble finding victims, in or out of your own family, and nothing much to prevent you, or help you if you wanted to stop. Every Ephremite male was inducted into the Meshak Priesthood when he turned eighteen. For children raised to believe that members of a Priesthood held a God-given authority over them, disobedience was not an easy option. What Lexi had done by exposing her grandfather had taken more nerve than anyone unaware of all this could possibly appreciate.

The Ephremite Church's way of dealing with the problem was to encourage repentance and forgiveness, to counsel wives that the main thing was to keep the family together and that kids needed their father at home. A perpetrator's local Church authority, his Canon, would explain—and honestly believe—that pedophilia was basically a moral problem, that could be cured with prayer and counsel.

The Hefn solution of assigning all child-abuse cases to the Gaians worked a lot better than prayer and repentance did. But the Ephremite leadership hierarchy, stripped of authority where certain of their members were concerned, could perhaps not be expected to feel very grateful.

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2

When the mysterious and powerful Hefn had arrived on Earth, they'd been horrified to discover a sentient species there, busily destroying its own biosphere. Taking charge, they'd set out at once to reverse the damage. They imposed sweeping reforms on agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing; they established the Baby Ban, mass infertility brought about by mass hypnotic suggestion. Also, one Hefn—Humphrey—set up the Bureau of Temporal Physics, where young math intuitives, known as Apprentices, were trained to operate alien devices that could be used to locate the placetimes in human prehistory where people had once lived in harmony with their world.

The Bureau's findings had launched the Gaian Movement, with its mission of converting humanity to values that could help heal the Earth and get the Baby Ban revoked. For converts this had involved choosing a piece of land as a personal Ground, and developing an intimate relationship with that Ground over time, a process called "living into" the land. That part of Gaian teachings had appealed to Lexi enormously; it was largely because of it that she'd fled to the Salt Lake Gaian Mission a little more than three months before.

But now Lexi and Pam were sitting on Pam's back porch steps before dinner, feeding lumps of dry dog food soaked in water to the juvenile robins Pam had been rehabbing for the Salt Lake Aviary. And Pam was explaining that the Gaians had decided to change their focus.

"You're supposed to think about your *family*?" Lexi asked dubiously.

"Mm-hm. Where they came from, where they live now. Like, all the

Ephremite families that settled the Great Basin and made the desert blossom as the rose.” She pulled a wad of dog food in half and fed the halves to a badly banged-up robin she called Gimpy. Wingy sailed in to demand his share.

“Oh.”

“*Your* family was part of that, right? Here, Greedy Guts.” Pam poked a piece of food into Wingy, who gulped it down. Behind the garden, seven mallard ducklings splashed and squeaked in their plastic wading pool.

“On my dad’s side. Mom’s relatives came from Denmark later on. My dad’s great-great-I-don’t-know-how-many-greats-grandparents came with a wagon train. They’ve got it all written down in a book at home.”

They would; Ephremite genealogical resources were the best in the world. “But they’ve lived in Utah a long time.”

“Yeah. Mostly. When did you say you were getting back from your trip?”

Pam suppressed a sigh. “It’s only just over this weekend, sweetie. I’ll be back on Monday.” Lexi had been told this several times, but anxiety made her keep asking; she didn’t want Pam to leave Salt Lake. “I really do have to go, Humphrey’s orders. There’s still a lot to decide about Homeland, that’s the new term we’re using, but I’ll be back before you know it.”

Lexi kept her eyes on the wet lump of kibble she was squeezing. Pam said brightly, “I was thinking today, up on location, that acting in *A Thousand Miles* is a terrific way to focus on the country that means the most to you and your family—I mean your whole family, Lexi, I’m not counting your granddad. You and Neil *really* know what a high price the first settlers paid to get here, and how important that makes this land to their descendants—it’s *their* Homeland, see?”

The soggy lumps were disappearing fast. Pesky hopped onto Lexi’s knee, and Lexi, delighted, fed him a lump herself. She didn’t push it far enough down his throat, but he threw his head back and managed to swallow it anyway. “Good!” said Pam. “Try to stick it a little farther in, like this.”

“I wish they didn’t change it. I know Humphrey said the old way didn’t

get enough converts. But I liked it better.”

Stuffed, the robins withdrew. Pam snapped the lid back on the kibble soaker, a margarine tub from Landfill Plastics, and smiled at Lexi. “Tell you the truth, I did too, but Humphrey and the missionaries think more people can relate to what the Gaians are saying if we do it like this, through family ties to land that’s been lived into for a long time, so the land and the people really belong to each other. Like, you know ... getting together at Christmas with all your relatives at the old home place, the special feeling you get from that.” Seeing the child frown, Pam wondered what feelings she had just conjured up, and added hastily, “But anybody who wants to can still go the old way and choose a personal Ground. We’re trying to bring more people in, not push anybody out.”

Lexi looked relieved. “What are *you* gonna do, keep on with your Ground in Kentucky?”

“Actually, in my case Homeland won’t make that much difference,” Pam said. “I was a grounded Gaian steward long before we decided to change our approach. But it can be good to go at things from more than one direction.” She grabbed the tub of kibble, stood, and smiled down at Lexi, sitting on the step still looking worried. “So what about *your* dinner, are you hungry yet?”

Lexi got up slowly. “It won’t make any difference in my case either, the Homeland thing won’t. I’m sticking with *The Secret Garden*. Like when Mary Lennox says ‘Might I have a bit of earth?’—like that.”

She spoke the line, in Mary’s British accent, with a wistful hopefulness so utterly convincing that Pam shivered. She put her hand on Lexi’s shoulder and squeezed. “You be Gaia’s actor, kiddo. Anything else would be a shameful waste of talent.”

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When they broke for lunch on the first day of the conference, Pam went back to her room and checked her messages: a brief one from her deputy, Jaime Rivera, that boiled down to “Everything’s under control”; an even briefer one from Lexi in a tattered sun bonnet, evidently sent on a break between scenes: “Hi, sorry to bother you on your trip but could you please call me right away?”

Oh, Lexi. Yawning hugely—none of the conferees had gotten much sleep—Pam pushed the recall button. The face that flickered onto the

screen was that of Marcee Morgenstern, producer of *A Thousand Miles*.
“Hi,” said Pam. “I’m returning a call from Lexi.”

“From Lexi? Lexi’s gone AWOL!” Marcee looked angry and flustered.
“You say you’re *returning* a call? When was this? What did she say?”

Wide awake now, Pam checked the readout. “Looks like ... about two hours ago. Eleven forty-six Utah time. I’m in California at a conference, I left my phone in my room this morning, only found out she’d tried to reach me a few minutes ago. She just said to call her. What do you mean by AWOL?”

“She finished her last scene and I sent her to get out of makeup. About twenty minutes later here’s RoLayne having hysterics, where’s Lexi, has anybody seen Lexi. Which nobody had—including makeup, she never showed up over there. We all dropped everything to look for her, but so far no luck. I’m going to tan her bottom when we get ahold of her, this has played holy heck with the schedule and we were already a day behind—”

She was going to do no such thing, but Pam understood how she felt.
“How long have you been looking?”

“I don’t know, an hour maybe, or a little less.”

“An hour?” Pam relaxed. “That’s not very long. Maybe she went for a walk.”

Marcee glared. “She’s under strict orders not to wander off, *remember?*”

Pam herself had given those strict orders when the abuse had been reported. “Yes, of course she is, I’m sorry.”

“Nobody’s got a clue where she could have gone.” Marcee’s voice slid up dangerously. “And *I* haven’t got a clue how she managed to slip off, there are people everywhere up here keeping an eye on her!”

A pang of real alarm shot through Pam. “Okay, I’ll notify my office. If she doesn’t turn up soon we’ll bring in the police.”

“If she calls you again—”

“I’ll handle it. Let me know the minute you find her, okay?”

The instant she hung up, something very peculiar happened; Pam could feel her consciousness expand and zoom in, like a powerful microscope, on the details of Lexi's situation. In this state of preternatural keenness Pam's mind informed her that one of two things had certainly happened: either Church authorities had snatched Lexi, or she'd run away to escape being snatched by Church authorities. Her mind was astounded at its own failure to see this coming. The Ephremite leadership had agents everywhere, they knew the Hefn had summoned the Apprentices and the Gaian leadership to a conference; obviously they would not have been slow to seize their moment.

When things abruptly shifted back to normal, Pam managed to stay focused, disoriented and freaked out though she was. Were people holding Lexi, or was she all by herself somewhere up Emigration Canyon, scared to death? A kidnapping, if that's what it was, had the earmarks of an inside job.

She thought a minute, then punched her phone. When Humphrey answered she said simply, "I have to go home. Lexi's disappeared and I'm as sure as I can be that the Ephremites are behind it. They've been raising Cain about Gaians having jurisdiction in a case involving an Ephremite kid. If I leave now I should make the 13:58 express."

"They do this always, raise the Cain?" He meant, whenever Child Welfare Oversight took custody of an Ephremite child, which happened several times a year.

"They do, but this kid's famous, it's giving them a big public black eye. And there's something else—something happened, I had this very weird mental experience ... I'll tell you later, but now I really need to go."

The Hefn's tiny likeness stared at her from the phone: great opaque eyes, face covered with short gray hair, full gray beard. Pam said, "Humphrey, this is extremely important. I can't explain how I know that, but it is."

Surprisingly, he didn't argue, only said soberly, "When we have finished here, I will come to Salt Lake if you have not found Lexi. I would like very much to hear more about the weird experience."

"If we haven't found her, I'd love it if you could interview her mother." *Probe her twisted little mind*, she meant. "But do please come either way."

He made his neckless imitation of a nod. "I have said so."

“Good luck then. I wouldn’t leave for any other reason,” Pam said, and cut the connection. Then she called Jaime.

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3

The sledcar had been fitted with hard rubber tires for summer, which made for a bumpy ride. Barefoot, in her raggedy dress, Lexi sat shoved up against the car’s passenger door, as far away from her grandfather as the seat belt would let her get. She was trying not to make a sound as they jounced along, but her makeup was streaked with tears.

Her grandfather, Edgar Carstairs, was making the sledcar labor up the mountain at its top speed—not that fast but still way too fast for the condition of the road. Both of them kept being thrown around, but Lexi had no way to hold on; her hands had been tied behind her with a leather boot lace. Granpa’s face wore a funny look of grim satisfaction. Once he and RoLayne had got Lexi bundled into the car, he’d paid no attention to her, except that when she had asked—careful not to sound panicky—“What’s happening? Where are we going?” he stopped the car just long enough to pull her arms behind her and whip the thong around her wrists.

“That’s in case you should take a notion to jump out,” he said. “We’re going someplace no Hefn and no Hefn-lovers would ever think to look. And by the way,” he added in a mean voice, “don’t you worry about me lovin’ on you anymore. The very idea of lovin’ on a little brat that would go and tattle to the Gaians makes me sick.” He whirled on her suddenly. “You ought to be ashamed! Embarrassing me, that’s bad enough—do you know you got me thrown in *jail*? Your own grandfather? But slinging mud at the Church, now, that’s beyond anything.”

Granpa looked a little crazy while making this speech, glaring at Lexi, spit spraying, face working. The car lurched wildly. She shrank away from him in fear. Also in guilt. Despite what the counselor kept telling her, and what Pam and her dad had told her, Ephremite conditioning went bone-deep with Lexi.

They ground along in silence for a while. Finally she asked timidly, “Do Mom and Dad know where you’re taking me?”

Granpa smirked. “Your mom knows where I told her I was taking you, but that’s not where we’re going. And your dad, he’s a know-nothin’ from the

word go. Now I want you to sit still and shut your mouth.”

This was a side of Granpa Lexi had never seen, or even consciously suspected. All her life he had treated her like a princess, in a kind of artificial, saccharine way, even when he was doing things to her in the dark. She had dreaded spending time with him alone, but she hadn't exactly been *terrified*, like afraid for her life. But this crazy-seeming stranger frightened her so much it was hard to think.

The one hopeful thing was that she'd left the message for Pam after catching a glimpse of her Granpa, who wasn't allowed to be anywhere around her right now, through the window in the wardrobe trailer bathroom. She'd come out, gone straight to the phone, and made the call, reluctant somehow to say in her message what she was calling about. Then it was time to do a scene, and then another scene that had required multiple takes, and after that Marcee said she was done for the day. Lexi'd been on her way to get out of makeup when her mother, sounding happy and excited, had called to her to come and look at something out behind the trailer. By that time she'd forgotten about Granpa, and that was when they'd tossed the blanket over her head and shoved her into the car.

“Mom!” she pleaded when she'd been strapped in and the blanket came off. RoLayne looked over her shoulder furtively. “Honey, everything's fine, don't worry. Just mind Granpa, do what he tells you. I'll see you real soon.” She squeezed Lexi's arm through the car window, and they started moving.

Remembering all this gave Lexi an idea, something to grab onto mentally in the dizzying terror. “I have to go to the bathroom,” she said in a whiny voice. He'd called her a brat, okay, she'd play a brat.

“Then I guess you'll just have to hold it.” He sounded calmer now. He didn't take his eyes off the road.

“No, I really have to go *bad*,” she said in a shrill, complaining voice. A little more nasal quality? Maybe just a little. “I already had to go when I was going to the trailer. Granpa, I'm gonna wet my *pants*!”

“I told you to shut up,” he snapped, but he looked uneasy all the same. He must have borrowed the sledcar, and what sledcar owner was going to be thrilled to find the seat had been peed on?

Things seemed to be taking a promising turn, but just then Lexi realized that even if she prevailed, Granpa wasn't going to untie her hands

and let her go off into the bushes on her own. He would keep hold of her, and pull her dress up and her pants down himself. He'd claimed that the thought of "loving on her" made him sick, but what if getting into that kind of situation made him change his mind? Lexi felt a thrill of a sicker sort of fear. "I guess I can wait a little while," she said in a sulky voice.

"You do that," said her grandfather, though he looked over at her in a way that made Lexi glad she had changed tactics. "It's not that much fu'ther anyways."

"But this leather thing's really hurting my hands, they're getting numb."

"Like I said, it's not much fu'ther."

At that moment the sound of a helicopter made Lexi's heart leap with hope. Pam might have returned her call by now; by now, everyone would realize she was missing. Maybe that Jaime at Gaian headquarters had called the Salt Lake Police. The only choppers allowed in the air were official ones. The police were probably hunting for her right this minute. She strained around, trying to see, just as the racket got much louder and the chopper suddenly appeared from behind the slope of a mountain.

It wasn't a police helicopter after all. The lettering on the side said the church of ephrem the prophet. As she was realizing this, Lexi also realized that Granpa was looking up with interest, not concern. In fact the chopper was landing behind some trees above the road, and he was turning the car into the parking area at one of the abandoned picnic sites that used to be popular back when people could take private cars up into the canyons east of Salt Lake.

Lexi's heart plummeted. This wasn't rescue, this was rendezvous. Granpa was handing her over to the Church. He hadn't kidnapped her for some reason of her mother's and his own, he'd done it with the cooperation, maybe even on the orders, of the Church leadership.

Her grandfather quieted the car and came around to pull Lexi out. "Up there," he said tersely, and started pushing her ahead of him, up a trail that wound among derelict picnic tables set on terraces.

The trail went pretty much straight up the side of the steep canyon. Granpa had to stop partway to catch his breath, holding onto Lexi's arm and bending over to pant. She could probably have wrenched herself loose while he was preoccupied with panting, but there wasn't much point, the terrain was way too rough and her bare feet, toughened though they were

by all that traipsing over rough ground while the cameras rolled, would slow her down, even if she could keep her balance with her buzzing hands tied behind her. She would never get away. "If you untied me I could walk by myself," she said anyway.

"Don't make me laugh," he growled. They started up again.

Lexi expected to see Sire Cooper, but the person standing by the chopper was the Canon of her own Parcel, the one who was Granpa's friend, the one who always used to say how wonderful it was that their Parcel had a real family with a real testimony.

Canon Erickson gave Lexi a big smile, then frowned when he saw that her hands were tied. "Was it necessary to truss her up like that, Ed?"

"Trust me," Granpa puffed, very red in the face. "It was necessary. The kid can run like a rabbit."

Canon Erickson leaned over Lexi's bonds. He *tsked* sympathetically, and Lexi made a strategic tear slip down her right cheek, already streaked with actual tears. "Oh dear, it's digging into her skin, look. Jared," he said, turning to a person inside the chopper, "will you take a knife and cut this child's hands free?"

"At least put her in there first and lock the doors," Granpa said. "You don't know her like I do, Carl."

The Canon nodded. "All right, Lexi, up you go." The man called Jared swung to the ground, picked her up like a sack of flour, and boosted her onto the helicopter behind the pilot. He climbed in after her and opened a clasp knife, and Lexi's hands were free.

Numb as they were, if she'd still been on the ground she'd have been off like a streak of lightning, Granpa was right. Vividly she saw herself squirm into a hidey-hole in the rocks and crouch low while they lumbered past, kicking at the scrub oak, failing to find her. Later she would tear strips from the dress to wrap and tie around her feet, make a little shelter, stay cleverly hidden until Jaime or Pam could spring into action. There were serviceberries in the mountains this time of year, and plenty of water. She had perfect faith that eventually Pam would save her. All she would have to do would be not get caught until that happened.

But it was all useless; she was sealed inside the helicopter and the pilot was making the rotors roar.

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Aboard the bullet train from L.A. to Las Vegas and Salt Lake, Pam sat at a table in the concessions car, sipping cider and alternately fretting and scheming. The Nevada desert slipped drearily past her window.

If Lexi was alone in the mountains, she had to be found at once. If the Ephremites were holding her—and this seemed likelier—there was no need to be concerned about her physical safety; but the Church would work on her to renounce the Gaians, and otherwise try to guilt-trip her back into the fold, which they would consider a great PR coup if they could bring it off.

Fiercely Pam determined not to let Lexi be put through deprogramming. She intended to find her fast, with Humphrey's help if necessary. And from now on, however often she would have to encounter the odious RoLayne, Pam intended to play a more active role in Lexi's life. The world as they knew it might be on the verge of changing for everybody, but this one child was not going to be forced to live in constant fear of having her private world turned inside out like a sock if Pam could help it.

As if activated by these thoughts, the TV screen above the forward door of the car crackle-flickered to life—and Pam gasped and half-rose, for there stood Lexi herself, in her Kate dress and sun bonnet and bare feet, arms folded across her chest, looking proud and defiant despite her streaky makeup. As Pam sank back in her seat, a news announcer began reading a report: "CBC-TV has learned that Alexis Allred, eleven-year-old star of the popular television series *A Thousand Miles*, was kidnapped earlier today by agents of the Church of Ephrem the Prophet, commonly known as the Ephremite Church.

"The network received this recording an hour ago from a spokesperson for the Church, which is claiming credit for liberating Alexis from what they term 'the corrupting influence of the Gaian Movement.' Church agents are holding the girl in an undisclosed location and demanding that the Hefn agree to release her officially into Ephremite custody. Here is the actual recording received by this station."

The still image of Lexi on the screen now began to move. Someone said, in a voice Pam didn't recognize, "Lexi, go ahead now, honey, tell the folks you're all right." The girl glared at the camera and lifted her chin, and Pam's insides weakened at this show of courage. Lexi might be intimidated, even scared to death, but—professional to the core—she

wasn't going to let it show. The speaker chuckled. "Alexis doesn't want to tell you herself, but as you can see she's absolutely fine, if a little mad at us right now. We're going to take wonderful care of her. But we're going to keep her tucked away till the Hefn agree to restore her to us for safekeeping, away from the corrupting influence of the Gaian Movement. This child was a wonderful Ephremite girl until just a few months ago, when the Gaians got hold of her and brainwashed her into believing their lies.

"So now, while we're waiting to hear what the Hefn have to say, we'll also be trying our best to undo the evil visited upon this innocent child. Every single child is precious to us, all the more precious now that the aliens have stolen away a whole generation of our children." All the time the unseen speaker was holding forth, Lexi stood very still but her mobile face expertly conveyed her disdain. ("Precious my foot ... *what* a load of crapola ... you people don't *believe* any of this, do you?") Pam was so proud of her that her eyes prickled.

"We ask for your prayers and support as we endeavor to force these evil creatures to renounce the crime they committed against humanity a generation ago. We demand that they restore our ability to obey the commandment God first gave to Adam and Eve: that they be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth."

The newscaster's face replaced Lexi's on the screen. "CBC has learned that six months ago, the Gaian Mission in Salt Lake City filed a complaint against Alexis Allred's grandfather, on a charge of sexual abuse of a minor. The grandfather, Edgar Carstairs, is a member of the Ephremite Church and a direct descendent of the Prophet Ephrem Carstairs. Since allegations were filed against Mr. Carstairs, Alexis has been under Gaian oversight. *A Thousand Miles*, which is financed and produced by the Ephremite Church, was filming on location in the Wasatch Mountains east of Salt Lake when the child was abducted."

* * * *

It was nearly midnight when Pam's train pulled into New Jerusalem Square. The light-rail system, TRAX, had stopped running at 11:00, but a few horse cars were still parked at the curb. Pam shouldered her pack, climbed the stairs to the street. Office or home? Home first, then office? Or vice versa? She dithered, staring up at the Ephremite angel, Fortibus, guyed atop the tallest spire of the Cathedral opposite the station.

The Gaians would need to put a public face on their efforts to find Lexi. It would be best to get a statement out tonight. Office then. Pam hailed a horse cab and climbed in.

The night air was delightful; the driver had folded down the top of his cab. As the horse began to clomp forward on its rubber shoes, Pam sat back and studied the angel, bathed in light high above the darker streets. Despite his winglessness he did appear to be in flight, as the figurehead of a ship appears to fly above the waves. From the high vantage of his perch a person might very well be able to see where Lexi was being hidden. The great slab of the Ephremite Office Building dwarfed the Cathedral, spire and all; if they were holding her there—a good possibility—then Lexi might be able to look down on the angel from above. Supposing they ever let her near a window.

“Where to, lady?” said the driver, who sounded Latino.

“The Gaian Mission on Fourth South.”

He whistled. “Wouldn’t go nowheres near that place if I was you.”

“Just take me there, okay?”

Inside the Mission, lamps were lit. Good, dear, faithful, dependable Jaime. Pam climbed out and paid the driver, who got his first good look at her under the street light. “Oh, hokay, you that lady that works for them Hefn. Workin’ late tonight, tryin’ to fin’ that little girl on the telly, now I get it.”

Pam hurried up the walk. Jaime jerked the door open before she could finish unlocking it. “Thank God you’re back.”

“I’m mighty glad to see you too.” She shrugged off her pack and collapsed on the couch beside it. “I saw the recording on the train. What have you found out?”

“Not a freakin’ thing! I called the cops right after I talked with you, and they started out looking, but the minute they found out who it was that had her, that was the end of that. The Church is zipped up tight on this one, I worked through the whole list of contacts and nothing, not a peep, nobody’s talking.” Jaime blew through his lips in frustration. “Want some tea? Cider?”

“Thanks, but I rode all the way back in the café car.” Pam rubbed her eyes. “There may only be a handful of people who actually know anything. You have to give them credit, the ones involved are putting their lives on the

line. They know the Hefn could mindwipe them for this if it doesn't go their way. Ephremites have never been cowards about their convictions."

"Yeah, well, I think it's pretty cowardly to kidnap a little girl and use her as a hostage," Jaime muttered. "How are the Hefn gonna respond?"

"I doubt they'll respond at all, actually, they're more likely to just act like nothing happened. Or no," she said, "Humphrey's fond of Lexi, he won't leave her in the clutches of the Church. He's coming out in a couple of days. If we haven't found her by then, he'll get out of 'em where she is, and not by negotiating either."

"Well, I'd a hell of a lot rather not wait that long."

Pam nodded. "They'll take care of her, and she won't crack, at least not right away, but she'll be counting on me to get her out of this and I absolutely have to not let her down—I'm with you, I don't want to wait for Humphrey, let's find her *now*." Despite these words Pam yawned and stretched, pulling herself almost horizontal on the couch.

"So, do we issue a statement?"

"We do. That's why I came here straight from the station." Pam heaved herself up and trudged into her office. "Computer on." She plunked into her desk chair. "I like what you said before. How's this: 'Abducting a child to use as a bargaining chip is a cowardly deed. The Ephremite Church, whose history is filled with acts of sacrifice and courage, has betrayed herself today.'"

* * * *

Jaime dispatched this to the *Salt Lake Tribune* and CBC, then left to bicycle the half mile home. Pam had intended to go home as well, but the couch in her office suddenly seemed to sing a siren song. She scrounged her toothbrush out of her luggage, washed the sunblock off her face, flicked off the lights, and crashed.

She slept heavily, done in by the past couple of days. Dream fragments came, went, came again. At dawn, weightless in the pure light, she stood transfixed upon the tallest spire of the New Jerusalem Cathedral and beheld the burning sliver of the sun poised to lift above the Wasatch Range. Birds came to her: finches, sparrows, robins and mallards she had raised or nursed and released, all shining, whirling about her head. Gimpy swooped in and hovered at arm's length before her face, wings beating,

strong and whole; and as she stretched forth a finger to touch the russet feathers of her breast the realization struck home: *I'm dreaming! I'm having a lucid dream!*

She had read about this but never experienced it. In a lucid dream you're aware that you're dreaming, you can take the dream wherever you like. *I'll find out where they're keeping Lexi!* she thought at once, and, spreading her wings wide, launched herself into the air. Flanked and buoyed up by the spiraling flock of ducks and songbirds, Pam circled high over the city. *Show me where Lexi is!* she commanded, and was immediately soaring south, the Great Salt Lake to her right and rear, the Wasatch Range and the sunrise to her left. The birds flew with her—silent, even the mallards, except for the stroking of their wings. All together they swept past Point of the Mountain and flew over Orem and then Provo, the silver tracks of TRAX flashing far below.

They went like the wind. The birds stopped weaving in the air and settled into a mixed flock with Pam at the center, holding a flat smooth trajectory, higher and far faster than natural birds can fly. *I hope I don't wake up before we get there,* she thought; but the landscape streamed beneath her and the dream went on.

Pinned to the wall of the office where Pam's body lay asleep was a huge relief map of Utah. Now this map lay spread below her, showing her the green peaks through which she was being guided. Above Spanish Fork, with the tip of Utah Lake in view, the flock turned east of south, leaving the shiny rail tracks and the Salt Lake Valley behind. The terrain abruptly changed; they broke out of the peaks, and now beneath them deep meandering canyons cut through scrubby mountains, where dark green vegetation grew thickly scattered against a ground of red and yellow-tan. A road wound through and they followed that, flying high and fast. Clustered buildings—Price?—flashed by. They were moving even faster now, veering south again, and now the land-map lost definition in a long broad valley vaguely and distantly flanked by ranges, and Pam was aware of little but dizzying speed and the energy of the birds, bearing her up, sweeping her along. Till suddenly there was the tiny twist of a river dead ahead, dirty green within the wrinkled flatness of the valley, and they were speeding down, down, down, circling, swooping low above a line of tall flat-topped pink cliffs and the flash of water to a wider road, a long low building, a child looking up, holding her left hand high in the Gaian salute.

Pam gasped awake. Her legs swung off the couch by themselves, rushed her to the wall and the relief map. "Lights!" Her head was clear as a

bell, but she had to prop herself with both hands on the wall while she made sure.

Then she pushed off and spoke to the phone. "How fast can you get over here?" Pam said, when Jaime's puffy, stubbly face appeared onscreen. "I know where she is!"

* * * *

"Green River?" He peered at the map doubtfully. "How would they get her there from Emigration Canyon? We'd know if they'd taken out their chopper after the news release. They haven't. They probably can't."

"No, they'll lose their chopper now. TRAX to Salina, then overland?"

"Overland how? By public bus? It's less than twenty-four hours since they snatched her." Jaime rubbed his face, making a raspy sound. "They could put a Church car on the train without attracting attention, I guess, they do that all the time, but—look, Boss, tell me again about this dream?"

Pam said, "No matter how many times I tell it, it's not going to sound any more reasonable. I can't even be sure it was a dream. I was sound asleep, but ... listen, we can talk about it later but right now we have to get down to Green River. Humor me, Jaime. I know that's where she is, even if I can't explain how I know."

Unhappy but resigned, he grumbled, "I'll go along, but I gotta say, it's not like you to do things that don't make sense."

"I know it's not. I agree with every word you've said so far."

"Well." He paused. "Okay. Here's what we do. We call down to Moab and have Harley send some people up there."

After Salt Lake, the principal Gaian Mission in Utah was in Moab, not far beyond Green River but farther than Pam had flown in her dream. "That's brilliant! Thank God one of us still has their wits about them. Better not mention the dream thing, say we've had a tip, and to check out all the motels that have rows of rooms on one level. Probably an older motel, maybe abandoned."

"Phone on," yelled Jaime, striding toward his own office.

"And tell him to be careful! The Church has staked an awful lot on

this.”

Jaime sat at his desk and punched a key. “People go back and forth all the time between Green River and Moab on the old rail line through Crescent Junction,” he called to Pam. “We can have a posse up there by lunchtime—what the devil’s the matter with this phone?”

The problem was an incoming call from Santa Barbara. “If that’s Humphrey, put it through to my office.” She went in and shut the door, and there on the screen was her favorite Hefn’s familiar face, all beard and fuzz. Seeing it, Pam realized she had totally forgotten about the conference and its urgent business; but this had priority now. “Okay if I call you back in five minutes? We’re sending out some people to pick up Lexi and we need to get hold of them.”

“Lexi has been found?”

“Not yet, but we think we know where she is. I’ll explain when I call you back.”

“Explain when you see me,” said Humphrey, “this evening. I am coming to Salt Lake, as we agreed.”

Pam said, “Look, that’s great, but I may be tied up with this rescue. You might want to wait a day or two.”

Humphrey said calmly, “I do not want to wait a day or two. If you are not at home I will let myself in and wait for you, or I will come and find you.”

He was telling, not asking; Pam had to acquiesce. While Jaime called Moab, she stared soberly at the blank screen. But then she heard Harley Kroupa’s voice describing how he would organize and move his troops, and rushed into Jaime’s office to urge, “Be careful! Don’t you guys get captured or we’ll have to bust you out of there too.”

“You *sure* they’ve got her in Green River? Seems like a funny place to pick.”

Jaime started to answer but Pam said firmly, “That’s what we hear. No guarantees, but it’s our best lead, and if there’s any chance at all—”

“Gotcha. We’ll do our damndest. An old motel, they said, just a strip of rooms like a train of cars?”

Pam hesitated. "Something like that. Kind of big."

"Might be any of a bunch of 'em. Well, those ones are all on East Main, we'll stake 'em all out."

"Great. If you can bring her back as far as Salina, we'll meet you there. There's a train in an hour and a half."

Jaime cut the connection and swiveled in his chair to look up at Pam. "We'll meet you?"

"I will, then. You don't need to come, O thou of little faith; I know you think it's a wild goose chase. You stay and mind the store."

Her own words made her shiver. A wild goose chase indeed.

* * * *

5

Lexi came out of the little bathroom of the swaying bus and made her way back to her place behind the driver, holding onto the other seats to keep her balance.

She was no longer in her *Thousand Miles* getup. Back in the huge bathroom of the house in Little Cottonwood Canyon, where they'd shot that vidy, she had scrubbed off her makeup and changed into her own jeans, T-shirt, socks, and sneakers. Her mother had put these items in a bag for Granpa, and Granpa had given the bag to the Canon after they'd hauled her into the helicopter. There was a sweatshirt too, but she'd taken that off. Even with all the windows open it was warm on the bus.

She'd been sleeping with the seat tilted back as far as it would go, and felt dopey and strange, and now she was hungry. She glanced across the aisle at the young man—Jared—who'd been in the chopper with Canon Erickson, and who'd bundled her onto the train at Midvale while everybody looked the other way. He was reading, a book that looked like *The Sayings of Ephrem*. It went against the grain to ask a kidnapper for any favors, but the more she thought about food the harder it got not to. She was mentally practicing "I don't suppose you thought to bring any *food* on this getaway bus," in haughty, disdainful tones, when Jared closed his book, stretched, looked over at Lexi, and said, "How about something to eat?"

“You don’t mean to say you actually brought any *food* on this getaway bus,” Lexi said in her best withering voice, hoping her relief didn’t show.

He grinned. “Sure did. Let’s see here.” He got up and opened the lid of a cooler on the seat behind him. “Ham and Swiss with lettuce and mayo? Coke?” When she nodded he handed her a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, and a green bottle, then took another sandwich and bottle for himself and slid back into his seat.

Except for the driver, they had the whole big bus to themselves, a shockingly unGaian waste of resources. Lexi couldn’t remember getting off TRAX and boarding the bus; she’d slept right through the whole thing and had been sleeping off and on for hours while the three of them roared along through the dark. *I bet they drugged me*, she thought darkly. She’d had tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner on the train. *I bet they put ground-up sleeping pills in that soup. So I wouldn’t yell and give them away when we switched to the bus. I would have, too, I would’ve yelled my head off!*

Now it was morning. They were deep in mountains Lexi didn’t recognize, heading toward the sun. She unwrapped the sandwich avidly, wondering who had made it, and twisted the cap off the Coke bottle with caffeine free stamped in raised letters right in the glass.

The sandwich was heavenly; Lexi tried not to wolf it but she pretty much did. The Coke was cold and delicious. “Want a cookie?” Jared held a round tin box across the aisle. “Oatmeal raisin?” The cookie was *extremely* good. Lexi ate several more cookies and started to feel a lot better. Cookie by cookie, the dopiness was dissolving out of her head. She stared out the window, wondering where the heck they were taking her.

It couldn’t hurt to ask. “Where are we going?” she asked above the roaring of the motor.

“Sorry. Can’t tell you that.” Jared smiled when he said this, but Lexi could tell he wasn’t going to budge.

Would he maybe relent and tell if she sobbed and begged him and acted distraught? After watching her gobble a sandwich and seven cookies? Not likely.

Time dragged by, and they were still on the mountain road, not going very fast. She couldn’t deduce anything from looking out the windows

except that the road was in good shape, so this was a regular bus route, not an unmaintained highway that carried no traffic. Once in a while a vehicle—an ambulance, a recycling lorry, another bus—would pass them going the opposite direction, but all were unrevealing except for the bus, which said salt lake express on the front. *That* wasn't very helpful. All the road signs had long since rusted over or disappeared from their posts. Nobody had replaced them. In a world where private cars were forbidden, what was the point of signs?

Lexi leaned her head against the window and thought about Pam. If Pam had been in Salt Lake, instead of Santa Barbara, her mom would never have dared get involved in the kidnapping, not in a million years. Thinking about how her mom had helped Granpa shove her into the sledcar, Lexi's eyes filled up; but she blinked hard and swallowed, and decided to be mad at Pam instead. Pam had no business going to California! Pam was supposed to stay *here*, making sure stuff like this didn't happen, that was her job! Righteous indignation swelled Lexi's chest. She thought about the scathing things she would say to Pam after Pam had rescued her from the kidnappers—*I'm not speaking to you!*—and how sorry Pam would be, how she would apologize over and over and promise never to go away again. This line of thought was deeply satisfying, for a while; but then Lexi remembered sitting at Pam's kitchen table with Pam and Humphrey, all three with big plates of spaghetti in front of them and big red circles around their mouths, and how Humphrey had talked about what Pam used to be like when she first went to the Bureau of Temporal Physics as a kid not much older than Lexi herself, the only girl in the first class of Apprentices, what a gifted mathematician and quick study she'd proved to be, the first Apprentice to learn how to place the numbers in the time transceiver fields, how she used her mind to do this with such beautiful precision. Lexi had seen Pam watching Humphrey while he was explaining all this, she knew what that look meant. Pam loved that weird-looking, hairy old Hefn. When Humphrey ordered her to go somewhere, she had to go. That was her job too, doing what Humphrey said.

The swaying of the bus was making Lexi drowsy. In spite of herself she dozed off again. Then it was later, and the bus had slowed even more as the driver geared down. Outside were drab-colored flat-topped mountains under puffy, flat-bottomed white clouds. They were coming into a town. Jared had moved over next to her, and one of his big hands had a grip on the back of her neck; that was what had woken her. "Stay right like you are, Alexis. I don't want to hurt you but I will if you try to yell or signal out the window."

Saying this, he pushed her head down nearly to her knees and

ducked down beside her. Grinding its gears, the bus moved slowly through the town. From her bent-over position Lexi couldn't see out at all. Being pressed down made her panicky; her heart thumped while she desperately willed herself not to struggle. If she gave in to the panic and started to fight Jared, whose hard breathing was a rasp in her right ear, he would hurt her. He had said he would, and she believed him.

After a few minutes the bus turned right, into what felt like a driveway. It changed directions several times, then stopped.

Jared sat up cautiously and looked out, then took his hand off Lexi's neck. "Okay, Alexis, we're getting off now. Now, what I'm gonna do is, is I'm gonna hold your hands behind your back. Now, don't you make one sound, okay? Not one single sound. Just do like I tell you and you'll be fine. Okay, come on."

He pulled her up and clamped her again, gripping both her wrists together in the same hand that had held her face to her knees. "Ow!" she said—though it was more uncomfortable than painful to be held that way—but all he did was clamp her tighter and hiss: "*What did I tell you?* Not one sound, not a one! Now get going."

He thrust her ahead of him to the front of the bus and down the steep steps. Through the windows she could see that the bus was parked between two identical long, low buildings. As Lexi stepped the last high step down to the ground, she caught a glimpse of deep blue sky and tall pink cliffs that did look a little bit familiar, and thought, *I bet we're somewhere near the parks*. The driver had maneuvered the bus so that the door was only a stride away from a door in one of the long buildings, which Jared now opened with his free hand. He started to push her inside—

—and let out a startled yelp, and Lexi was jerked backwards. She hit the ground on her left side, hard, hard enough to knock the wind out. While she fought to breathe there was a commotion overhead—scuffling—the thwacking sounds of a fistfight, also the sound of the bus roaring and screeching away.

She got her breath back finally and tried to roll onto her hands and knees, but something was wrong with her left hand. She heard herself yell. Then a woman was helping her up, saying "Are you okay, Alexis?"

"Something's wrong with my arm," said Lexi. A few feet away, a group of people she'd never seen before were holding onto Jared. One of them had Jared's arm bent behind him in a way that looked to Lexi like it must

hurt. Abruptly, humiliatingly, she threw up.

The woman examining her arm was unperturbed. “Looks like you broke your wrist when you fell on it. Ever had a broken bone before?” Lexi shook her head, feeling extremely strange. A moment later she was lying on the ground again. “Keep still, honey. You fainted. We need to get you to a doctor.”

Somebody brought her some water. In a little bit somebody else helped her stand up again, and held her up while the woman arranged her arm in a makeshift sling. “We’d better get you down to Moab, the medical facilities are a lot better down there.”

The sling helped. “Where’s Pam?” said Lexi. Not for an instant did she doubt who had brought about her rescue.

The man who had helped her stand the second time said, “Pam’s on her way to Salina. The plan was for us to meet up at Salina, and she’d take you back up to Salt Lake. I’m Harley Kroupa, by the way—I’m sachem of the Moab Mission.”

“The Gaian Mission?”

“That’s the one.” His grin made his mustache wiggle.

Lexi managed to smile back. “Where are we? What’s this place?”

“This is Green River,” said Harley Kroupa.

“Oh. I was here one time. We went rafting. Oh, so that’s the Book Cliffs then.” She glared at Jared, wilted and sullen in the custody of the victorious Gaians, and back at Harley. “Is Pam coming to Moab too?”

“We’ll have to see. Let’s us get over there and get Jaime on the phone; I expect he’ll know how to reach her. And you might as well let this fellow go,” he told the man who was holding Jared in a half-nelson. “Let him get on back to Salt Lake whatever way he can. I expect he’ll be wanting to speak to the First Minister of the Church.”

The Gaians all laughed, and the man holding Jared turned him loose. Jared worked his shoulders and looked down at Lexi. “Listen, I’m sorry you got hurt, Alexis. If these goons hadn’t of interfered, not a thing would’ve happened, you’d be fine.”

“When you were holding my head down,” Lexi said, “I wasn’t fine. I wasn’t fine *at all*. I bet the Hefn are going to mindwipe you and I hope they do.”

* * * *

6

There was no faster way to get from Salina to Green River than the way Lexi and Jared had come, but at least the twice-weekly public bus continued on to Moab. Harley Kroupa met Pam at the station, a converted film lab. “Great to see you,” he said, shaking hands vigorously. “They pinned her wrist this morning. She’s sleeping off the sedative. She wouldn’t settle down last night till we told her you were on your way.” He shouldered Pam’s backpack. “The Mission’s just a couple blocks along here.”

They started walking, past a cluster of small gift and snack shops with closed till september 15 signs in their windows. Hot as it was in Salt Lake, here it was hotter; dry as it was, Pam could feel the sweat pop out on her back. The wide sunwashed street was all but deserted. In the rush to leave Pam had forgotten her hat, and the ferocious light stabbed her eyes. Shading them with her hand, she asked, “How bad is the wrist?”

“Not very, just a hairline fracture. She’ll be fine, but I reckon they might have to write her out of the series for a while.”

She smiled. “That won’t do the series any harm. Nothing’s better for telly ratings than a little notoriety. So Jaime tells me.”

Harley laughed. “That Jaime is a character.” Pam smiled at him, a lean, weathered man with a drooping mustache, in jeans and boots and a ten-gallon hat. They had conferred often by phone; this didn’t feel like a first meeting. “Well now,” he said, “we’ve been wantin’ to get you down here for a good while. Not quite what we had in mind. You’ve never been to Moab at all before, have you.”

“No,” said Pam, “and I’ve always wanted to, especially after I read that Edward Abbey memoir, *Desert Solitaire*.” Harley grinned, nodding enthusiastically. “I’d love to see Delicate Arch, the bus went right past the entrance to the park, but I don’t suppose there’ll be time for that on this trip.”

Harley shoved his big hat to the back of his head and squinted at the scenery. “Reckon not, but I hope you’ll make it down again soon, now that

you've had a glimpse of the country hereabouts."

"I hope so too," Pam said, meaning it. "So the rescue went off without a hitch, apart from Lexi's wrist?"

Harley ducked his head and looked sober. "We all feel mighty bad about that, Pam. I keep going over and over it, wondering if there wasn't some way we could have grabbed him without her gettin' knocked down."

"Well," said Pam—speaking in her role as Gaian Child Welfare Oversight Officer, as well as her other role as Bureau Emissary to the Church of Ephrem the Prophet—"I won't deny it would have been better to pull it off without anybody getting hurt, and especially without the hurt person being Lexi. Besides the effect on her, it gives the Church a stick to beat us with. But you got her out, and I don't doubt you did the best you could in the circumstances, and neither will Humphrey, I'm sure. So, apart from the wrist, things went smoothly?"

Harley looked relieved. "Slick as a zipper—see, Green River's a pretty dead town most of the year. The town center's basically moved down around the newer motels, there's several of 'em down there on the Green, right where they launch the rafts, right across from the river museum. Plus the bus stop, the bank, the farmer's market, and so forth ... but the train station's in the old downtown. Well, and the Ephremite church, that's the only church in town of course. Well this time of year there's nobody around as a rule if it's not Sunday, but if somebody happens to see a group of people gettin' off the train it looks suspicious. So we're keepin' our heads down and checkin' up and down the street, there's several derelict motels on East Main. Well, so, we're checkin' out the ones like Jaime described and talking about what to do, and while we're doin' that we see this bus pull in at the old Book Cliff Lodge—that one's got two parallel rows of rooms, two buildings you know, one directly behind the other, and of course that means there's space between 'em to park a bus out of sight of the street."

Pam, who had been nodding encouragement throughout Harley's narrative, thought: *That's it. That's what I missed.*

"So soon as they drive behind the streetside building, all eight of us just hightail it across the street, and the minute they get off we jump the guy that's holding Lexi." He shook his head ruefully. "And down he goes, and down she goes too."

"You couldn't have known she'd be on the bus," Pam said reasonably. "Actually, I can't imagine why they'd risk taking her out again—or taking the

bus out again, for that matter, once they'd made it here without getting caught."

Harley shot her a surprised look; but they had arrived. "Well, here we are, this is the Mission." Harley held a door open and Pam stepped ahead of him into the dim relief of a swamp cooler's breeze. Two women stood up from desks as they entered. "Pam Pruitt, this is Mercedes Landrum, my assistant—my gal Jaime, so to speak. She was in the very first class of missionaries to be recruited in Utah." He waited for them to shake hands. "And this young lady is Sophie Rodriguez, she's a volunteer at the mission, she was along on the raid. She's the one who took care of Lexi."

Sophie shook hands with Pam too. "I've had some medical training so I volunteered. They were mighty glad they let me come!"

"It's not a bad break," the other woman put in. "Sophie did the X-rays herself."

"We all feel bad about it though. We know the Church will make hay out of it."

Again Pam went through her acknowledgment/reassurance routine: Yes, it's a pity; no, nobody blames you; don't worry, we'll deal with it. "I'd like to see her as soon as possible. Right away, if the doctors don't object."

"I can take you to the clinic now," Harley offered. "You can leave your stuff in the guest room and freshen up if you like, and you can use Mercedes's bike. The clinic's about a mile from here, you passed it on the bus coming in. Several of our guys are standing guard. They wanted to do something to make up for letting her get hurt."

Pam nodded; it was a good idea. Her eyes had adjusted to the low light in the room, and she saw now that the walls were covered with monstrous attenuated figures, obviously primitive, very striking, rather disturbing in fact. The figures had the massive stillness of Easter Island heads. "Would this be the local rock art?"

"Some of it, and fairly local," said Harley. "These come from the Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon. They're thousands of years old. Mercedes is a pictograph expert, among her other virtues; she put these posters up."

"It's awesome art," Mercedes said. "We're not the first ones by a long shot to have lived into this land. The people who made these paintings

were proto-Gaians for sure.”

* * * *

More posters plastered the clinic walls, some of rock art in different styles, some of stunningly gorgeous scenery from inside the National Parks. All the rock seemed to be dark red, or red and white, or red-gold and glowing in hard sunlight. The painted figures were dark red. Pam noticed a big picture of Delicate Arch in winter, red rock against white snow.

Lexi was still asleep but the nurse in charge said she should be waking up any time now, and it was perfectly okay for Pam to wait in the room.

“I’d like to be alone with her when she wakes up,” Pam told Harley. “Thanks for the escort.”

“Sure thing,” said Harley. “See you back at the Mission for dinner, then?”

“I’ll let you know. Probably.” She turned to enter Lexi’s room.

“Oh, and by the way,” he added, “you were saying about how we couldn’t have known Lexi would be on that bus? I didn’t get a chance to explain—they were only just pulling in from Salina when we got there. We only beat them to Green River by a couple of minutes.”

Pam turned back. “I thought they got there the night before, the night of the day they kidnapped her.”

He shook his head. “Nope, not till yesterday afternoon. From what Jaime’d said we thought they’d be there already too, but they were only just hittin’ town, and if you think about it, they really couldn’t have gotten there very much faster. If they holed up somewhere close to Salt Lake to make that vidy, and then had to wait for a train, get a car put on, locate a bus to charter from Salina—you just got off one so you know yourself how long it takes an electric bus to get up and down those mountain roads, they only average about twenty-five or thirty. And there’s not that many trains that come this far south either nowadays. We can check the schedule, but I’m pretty sure they got there about as fast as humanly possible.”

He was obviously correct. “Of course you’re right. I must’ve put in an extra day somehow.”

“Not much wonder, with everything that’s been going on. See you later, then. Hope the little girl’s doin’ okay.”

The room held six white hospital beds, five of which were made up flat. Pam went in quietly and shut the door behind her. Lexi lay in the bed closest to the door. Its head had been elevated, and Lexi’s long blond hair lay loosely mussed over the pillow. Her left arm was swathed in a white sling with an ice pack tucked inside it, and there was an IV line taped to the back of her right hand. The line led from a beeping bottle of fluid hooked to a pole.

Lexi looked little and pale in all that whiteness. The sight of her struck a blow to Pam’s solar plexus that felt physical. Carefully she drew up a chair and sat in it. She watched the child’s sleeping profile while trying to grapple with the implications of what Harley had just said: that if Lexi had arrived in Green River at the same time the posse did—then the lucid dream had showed Pam, not where Lexi was, but where she was *going to be* some eight hours afterwards.

She pondered this. After a bit, she reached over and slid her hand, very carefully, beneath Lexi’s left hand where it was sticking out of the cast. She closed her fingers lightly around it and sat back.

Considered from the perspective of an ordinary person, remote viewing combined with precognition might seem not much more remarkable than setting time transceiver coordinates mentally while in a self-induced state of trance. But several dozen Bureau of Temporal Physics Apprentices from successive classes had been operating transceivers that way since they were children. For those with native talent, it was a teachable and learnable skill. Pam didn’t understand how her mind interlaced with the transceiver field, any more than she understood how her computer did what it did. But both were familiar, part of her frame of reference.

Whatever had happened in the dream was neither. State your request; be instantly swept up and carried like a cork on a mighty swell of energy. No devices, no crystal balls or mirrors, yarrow stalks or Ouija boards, nothing like that. Nothing like the complex technology of the transceivers. Just a dream. She conjured up the moment of descent toward the long, low, double building where Lexi stood holding up her hand—this hand, the broken one—and shivered.

Had Lexi known where they were taking her, had Pam read her mind somehow? Some kind of psychic thing? Psychics who could do remote viewing sometimes helped with police work. Even that, wild though it

seemed, would have been easier for Pam to accept than that she had somehow seen into the future.

Though if Time were truly One, as the Hefn were always insisting, didn't it follow that the future is just as "there" as the past and just as available to be looked at, if you knew how to look? Pam was seized by a craving for information. Studies had been done on precognition, she'd seen them referred to, somewhere, sometime. But having been involved so intensely for so long with the past, Pam's imagination had never before been quickened by the idea of the future. The future was the disaster the Gaians were fighting to head off.

Then the hand lying weightless in hers moved, and Lexi stirred, gasped a little, opened her eyes and saw Pam. As her lids fluttered shut again, she smiled and murmured, "I knew you'd come."

* * * *

"She's fine physically," Pam told Harley Kroupa on the nurse's phone, "but she's pretty upset about everything that's happened to her. She doesn't want me to leave, so I guess I'll stay here with her tonight, and then we'll start back in the morning on the early bus."

Harley barely heard her out. "Understood. Listen, Jaime called; I was just about to call you. He wants you to get back to him asap." Harley paused dramatically. "*The Hefn Humphrey* is on his way to Moab! He wants you to wait for him. He came to Salt Lake—well, maybe I should let Jaime tell you himself."

This was a poser. "He's coming here? Did Jaime say why?"

"No, just that he seemed really determined about it. He'll be here—well—any time now I guess, he's taking a helicopter from Salt Lake. Will he come to the Mission, do you think?" Harley's droopy face was flushed and transformed with excitement; the Gaian rank-and-file almost never got to see the founder of their movement in the flesh.

"He'll probably land in the middle of Main Street and wait for the Mission to come to him," Pam said drily. "Oh God. Okay, I'll call my office. When he shows up, please tell him I have to stay here with Lexi, but that he's very welcome to join us. And maybe you could send us in some dinner? I'm sorry, there seems to be a lot going on at once."

"Sure, we'll rustle you up some dinner, I'll bring it over myself, bring

your backpack too. Is Humphrey—is he partial to anything in particular?”

“Cobbler,” Pam said. “Blackberry cobbler. I don’t expect you can produce one of those just like that. Lexi and I aren’t finicky, but we’re both pretty hungry.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He rang off, and Pam put through the call to Jaime, who flashed onto the screen with both eyebrows raised. “I take it all back, boss,” he said. “You’re a magician and I’ll never second-guess you again.”

“Good God, don’t say that! I’ll have to fire you and find somebody else to keep me in line!”

He grinned. “So, Harley says she’ll be okay?”

“Completely okay medically, it’s just a hairline fracture, but she’s got some PTSD. Anxious, doesn’t want me out of her sight, refuses to see her mother—RoLayne and Ed Carstairs and the Canon of Lexi’s Parcel were all in on the abduction. I’ll brief you on the details, but anyhow something’s got to be decided about custody right away, she can’t go home. What’s all this about Humphrey, though?”

“He turned up here around one-thirty. He’d flown in from Santa Barbara and didn’t bother to call first. I didn’t say anything about your dream, I just explained the situation—said you’d probably bring Lexi back up here tomorrow, and did he want to make himself at home at your place till then, and he said, honest to God, he said ‘I will not wait at Pam Pruitt’s house if Pam Pruitt is in Moab. I will go to directly to Moab. I will not pass Go. I will not collect two hundred dollars.’ Where did Humphrey learn to play Monopoly?”

“Oh, we used to play board games a lot at the BTP. He loved all those corny old ones like Monopoly and Clue.”

“After that I heard a chopper take off about, oh, two hours ago? I assumed it was him, coming straight there.”

“It was,” said Pam, “I hear the chopper now. Did he say what was so urgent it couldn’t wait?”

“Nope. Maybe he’s always wanted to see Delicate Arch.”

Pam groaned. "Okay, let's focus on the custody question. Lexi's got aunts and uncles in Salt Lake and Ogden, but they're all Ephremites and she doesn't want anything to do with Ephremites right now. She hasn't come right out and said so, but I know what she really wants is to stay with me. And that's fine, for a while, but if she's going to keep acting in *A Thousand Miles* when she's better, she's going to need two things: a different responsible adult on location, and a full-time non-Ephremite bodyguard. Can you get rolling on all that?"

Jaime's mouth twisted sideways. "Hmm. Custody and bodyguard I can do. Responsible adult, I don't know. What about her dad, could he take over for RoLayne?"

Pam realized she knew nothing whatever about Lexi's father, not even his first name. "It's a thought, but I'd better ask Lexi how she likes that idea. He's her dad, but he's an Ephremite too; Ed Carstairs is his stepfather. Hold off on that one, I guess. Have you called Marcee?"

"Yesterday afternoon, soon's I knew something to tell her. The writers are already beavering away on a script about Kate's broken arm. Bit ghoulish, don't you think?"

Pam grinned. "I guess that's show biz. See you tomorrow then."

She cut the connection, apologized to the nurse, whose name tag read Mrs Jackson, for keeping the phone tied up so long, and went back into Lexi's room. The patient was sitting up in bed; she'd taken her arm out of the sling and was examining her cast. "Dinner's on the way," Pam said, "and guess what else is on the way? Humphrey! Did you hear the helicopter?"

Lexi nodded, beginning to smile. "Was that him? Cool! Why is he here though?"

"Jaime wasn't sure. Maybe he'll tell us himself. How do you feel? Want to get dressed before he gets here?"

"Can I?"

"I don't see why not, if we can get the nurse to take your IV out."

Mrs. Jackson called the doctor, then came in and disconnected Lexi from her drip. The bandage she plastered over the insertion point had yellow ducklings on it, and Lexi slid her eyes sideways at Pam, saying more

plainly than words, *What does she think I am, a baby?*

Pam grinned behind the nurse's departing back. "Where's your stuff?"

She didn't know, but Pam opened the locker door and there were Lexi's jeans and T-shirt on hooks, and her socks and sneakers on the floor. "I had a sweat shirt too but I guess it's still on that bus."

"Hmm." Pam took the T-shirt down and considered it. "Let's see if this'll go on over your cast. Did I ever tell you I broke my arm when I was about your age? I remember what a hassle it was, trying to get stuff on over my head by myself."

"How'd you break yours?"

"Falling out of a tree." She sat down on the bed and untied Lexi's hospital gown. The shirt went over the cast without difficulty, then over the other arm and head. Lexi tugged her hair free and pulled on her own jeans one-handedly, sitting on a chair to do it, but Pam had to button the waistband. Lexi did the socks and shoes herself and Pam tied the laces. "Teamwork is the answer. You'll get better at doing things for yourself, though. Since you're right-handed it's good it was your left wrist you broke."

The doctor, large brown envelope tucked under her arm, knocked and came in as Pam was brushing the tangles out of Lexi's hair. When Lexi introduced her to Pam she added proudly, "Dr. Boniface is a *Gaian!*"

"I am indeed, and it's a great pleasure to meet you, Ms. Pruitt."

"It's a great pleasure for me," said Pam, "to meet the person who fixed up my girl here." She shook the doctor's hand. "Would you care to stick around and meet the Hefn Humphrey? He's rumored to be headed this way."

"It's more than a rumor. Harley called me a couple of minutes ago. They were leaving as soon as Sophie'd finished hitching up the team. Sounds like they're bringing enough food to feed a regiment."

"Dollars to doughnuts Humphrey will be driving by the time they get here," said Pam. "Anything I should know about Lexi's wrist? We're leaving in the morning."

Dr. Boniface laid the envelope on the bed. "These are her X-rays.

The Salt Lake orthopedist will want to see them. Lexi, your cast comes off in five or six weeks, then they'll give you a splint, that'll make things easier. Keep the sling on till then, okay?"

Lexi nodded. A small commotion outside had been growing louder as the doctor spoke. "Here comes dinner," Pam said.

Dr. Boniface peered out the window. "And every Gaian in Moab."

The door of the clinic burst open. Lexi bounced on her bed with excitement, then bounced out of it as Pam hurried into the reception area.

One of the truly endearing things about Humphrey was the way he gave himself up completely to simple pleasures. "*Hello*, my dear! Look, I am a driver of horses! Harley Kroupa gave me a lesson and put the reins into my hands! We *trotted!* It is very, very—it is very—*delightful*—to drive a team of horses!" He was literally wriggling with delight. "And hello to you also, dear little Lexi! Like you, I am now a driver of horses! Do you also find it very wonderful?"

Lexi, who'd been hovering in the doorway of her room, now came out and leaned against Pam. "Hi, Humphrey. I do find it lots of fun, I wish I got to do it more."

"On *A Thousand Miles*," Humphrey explained to the gathered Gaians, who doubtless already knew this as well as he did, "Kate McPherson had once to drive horses and a supply wagon through the North Platte River. I had *no idea* how delightful this could be." He made a visible effort to calm himself down. "How are you feeling this evening, little dear? I am very sorry about your broken bone."

"It's only a hairline fracture," Lexi told him; she'd been hearing people say that since yesterday. "It kind of hurts though."

Pam supported the arm and pulled the sling out of the way. "It's swollen. Better get that ice pack back on it. Can she have something for pain?" she asked Mrs. Jackson, who was standing at her station taking in the show.

Susan Boniface, who had come out to see it as well, said, "I'll take care of it. Come along, Lexi," and they ducked back into the room.

Harley and the other Gaians had by now crowded into the reception

behind Humphrey, carrying covered dishes, picnic baskets, and coolers. The space filled up with good smells. “Here’s what we’ll do,” said Pam. “Lexi and I will entertain Humphrey in Lexi’s room, but there’s enough food here for an Irish wake. Why don’t you folks put those dishes on the nurse’s station and have a potluck out here—if that’s okay with you?” she asked the nurse, who nodded happily; things were obviously not this lively at the clinic as a rule. “Thanks. We’ll all help clean up.”

“Here’s Humphrey’s cobbler,” said Mercedes, the “gal Jaime” from the Mission. “You can just take that in with you. He had the most wonderful time driving over here.”

It really was a blackberry cobbler, still warm. Pam looked up from its purple surface with amazed gratitude. “How—”

“I had one left in the freezer, from last summer. Humphrey is more than welcome to it. They’re almost ripe again anyway.”

* * * *

7

“The great thing about so many Utah Gaians being ex-Ephremites,” Pam told him later, after everyone had gone home and Lexi had dropped off to sleep, “is that they can put on a first-rate potluck at the drop of a hat. Having to eat hunkered on the floor, out of sick-up basins with tongue depressors, just made it that much more of an adventure for them. The morale of the Moab Mission will probably never be higher than it is right now.”

Pam was seated in the bedside straight chair, Humphrey folded up on the bed next to Lexi’s—straight chairs were just about impossible for him—clutching the round glass cobbler dish to his rough, hairy torso and a serving spoon in one of his forked hands. He had shared this treat with Lexi and Pam, but had eaten two-thirds of it himself, and now from time to time he scraped the spoon around the sides and scooped off the scrapings with his lower lip. “The Gaians of Moab have cause to celebrate without ceasing,” he said mildly. “This land they have lived into, this is a place where Gaia shows herself without equivocation. This is the true Jerusalem and well they know it.” Humphrey gave the bowl a final scrape-scoop and set it on the bed beside him. “How were you able to find Lexi Allred?”

Pam took her time describing the lucid dream. “Lexi didn’t know where they were taking her,” she finished. “She asked the guy in charge of her on the bus that very question but he wouldn’t say. *He* knew, the Canon

knew, RoLayne thought she knew. Lexi didn't know. So either I read one of their minds in my sleep, or I somehow saw a little way into the future, or—what?"

She'd been watching Lexi snooze while telling the story of the rescue, but now at a sudden movement she glanced up. Humphrey was standing on the bed. All his body hair bristled straight out. His large flat eyes were trained on Pam. "What is it?" she said again, and stood herself.

Humphrey made a noise she had never heard any Hefn make in all her years among them, a high gargling sound, shockingly alien. His arms whirled in circles. In her own bed Lexi started awake. "What's the matter? What happened?" she asked in a frightened voice.

Pam shot Humphrey a warning look. "Nothing's the matter, honey. Humphrey just got carried away about something and forget to be quiet. Everything's fine, go back to sleep."

"Nothing is wrong, little Lexi," Humphrey said in a high, strangled voice. "Everything is right. Everything is wonderful!" As an afterthought he sat down.

Of course Lexi didn't go back to sleep. Her arm hurt, she needed more ice, she needed more pills and a drink; what she needed more than anything was for Pam to pull her sheets straight, tuck her in, and generally reassure her. When her eyelids finally fluttered shut and her breathing was even, Pam turned back to Humphrey, ready to remind him to keep his voice down; but the Hefn had become calm. His hair was flatter, and he held both hands up in front of him, a gesture of placation. He spoke in a rusty whisper. "I will be quiet, my dear, I will not forget again. Yet what you tell me fills me with joy. For out of crisis has come this transformation." He slid to the floor and beamed at her across sleeping Lexi.

The extremeness of his behavior made Pam uneasy. "Aren't you overreacting? I wouldn't call one precognitive dream a transformation." Though come to that, the certainty back in Santa Barbara about who Lexi's kidnappers were, the way her consciousness had expanded, become a lens of power—if that and the dream were linked somehow—

"*You* would not call it one, because you do not know." Humphrey's pelt had begun to erect again. "Behold, I show you a mystery! That is from First Corinthians. Come." Spinning round, he walked briskly through the doorway and directly up to one of the posters on the wall.

Pam followed and stood beside him. The poster displayed two long, static red figures, different from, but also similar to, those she had seen in the Moab Mission. The figure on the left had a flattened head with huge goggle eyes and skinny arms held akimbo; it looked much more like a spaceman, in point of fact, than Humphrey did. The one on the right also had skinny arms, but its head was small and surmounted with what appeared to be a pair of rabbit ears or two upright, feathery antennae; and around these structures a group of insects or tiny birds formed a kind of vertical halo. "Look, my dear. Do you see the little birds? This is a shaman figure. Do you know what a shaman is?"

"Um—a kind of sorcerer, a medicine man?"

"In traditional human cultures, a shaman is a person who travels on behalf of his people into the spirit world. He enters the spirit world in a variety of ways. Some of the ways, such as fasting, purging, going without sleep, and eating vile-tasting substances, are quite disagreeable, but many shamans have no other means of getting out of their physical bodies. They must do this if they are to seek a cure for an illness or an advantage in warfare. It is difficult and dangerous, but carries high prestige."

Pam looked at Humphrey in amazement. "How the dickens do you come to know all that? I wouldn't have thought it was in your line, so to speak."

"A very common reason for entering the spirit world is to find what has been lost. Valuable objects. *Missing persons!* Shamans also achieve entry in ways that are less unpleasant than purging or ingesting peyote buttons. Drumming, for instance, can effect the separation. Also, some of the most powerful shamans are known to be strong dreamers."

Pam stared at him, then back at the poster. Her heart began to thump in her chest. "These pictures are thousands of years old," she protested.

"This painted shaman does not portray *your* experience specifically, my dear." He trotted to the nurse's station and did some things to the computer, while Pam continued to stare at the unnerving rabbit-eared figure with its bird halo. "But these shamans of a different ancient culture," he said a moment later, "do." He turned the screen so Pam could see.

It was another pictograph, done in a different style. Against a whitish, uneven surface Pam made out a pair of shapes like identical red sausages, each with four stick limbs, placed horizontally at the center of the screen. Each arm and leg terminated in a three-toed bird's foot.

Sausages or not, stick limbs or not, there was nothing Easter Island-like about these figures. That they were in flight was unmistakable, partly owing to the fact that above and below them, and oriented in the same direction, a flock of birds was flying. These were no tiny creatures swarming like gnats around an immobile spaceman's antennae. Relative to the sausage figures these birds were large, and there were a lot of them—ten—and though they had been painted crudely, the arrangement was extremely dynamic. The shamans flew across the rock wall and the birds flew with them, supporting them, guiding them—Pam stepped to the station and leaned on it; her ears had begun to ring.

There was writing on the screen, a caption: "Escort Birds of Fate Bell." Below the label Pam read: "In this rare scene from Fate Bell Shelter, ten birds flank two flying shaman figures, illustrating their role as psychopomps or guardian spirits during the shamanic voyage of the soul."

What the Sam Hill was a psychopomp? Wordlessly she looked at Humphrey, who said, "The people who made these pictures, called the Pecos River culture, lived in western Texas perhaps three thousand years ago, at approximately the same time the people in these reproductions on the walls were living here in Utah.

"Despite the distances involved, the rock paintings of the two cultures are amazingly alike in many respects. Not in how they are painted, but in what they depict. No one is able to explain this likeness satisfactorily, or explain why it should be shared by one other culture in Baja California, and by no others in between or elsewhere.

"But in one way—one thrilling way!—the Pecos River people were unique." He punched some keys, and a different picture flashed on the screen: a weathered oval figure outlined in red. The interior of its torso had been painted black, with red and yellow markings. Strikingly, the torso and outspread limbs were heavily fringed in red, giving it somewhat the aspect of a paramecium with arms. Even more strikingly, the figure was headless. Two straight red lines jutted up from the neck region and two other lines crossed them at the tips; to Pam it looked rather like a child's drawing of a trolley car. The caption said: "FANTASTIC CREATURES, THE DART-HEADED FIGURES. Invariably, these creatures can be identified by the parallel lines crossed by one or two bars that substitute for its head. The cross bars often bear an oval motif that designates them as a sign for dart or lance. Some part of the body is hairy, whether just the appendages or the entire torso ... this mythical creature is so consistent and common, it must represent a well-known actor in the Pecos River cosmological cast

whose role in some way informed the audience, but the intent of this morality play is no longer evident.”

Now Humphrey was making different versions of the monstrous creature flick on the computer screen. There seemed to be quite a few of them. “Dart-headed figure, Devils River.” “Dart-headed figure, Pecos River.” “Dart-headed figures, Panther Cave.” The figures had plainly been rendered by many different hands, but virtually all were fringed in dark red, as if tricked out in Daniel Boone buckskins.

Pam wanted to get back to the escort birds, but Humphrey kept methodically displaying pictographs of the hairy headless beings. Quelling her impatience, she said, “These look powerful, but creepy. What’s the fringe, is it static electricity?”

“No,” said Humphrey, and waited. After a bit Pam looked up from the screen. All his body hair was erected. As she stared, he raised his stumpy arms to the sides and she knew at once what he was going to say.

He said it. “They dreamed us.”

“They—”

“Dreamed us. Three thousand years ago, the Pecos River people dreamed the Hefn.”

Pam stared at him, then at the screen. “The heads—the heads are *weapons*. Thought control—hypnotic suggestion. Memory excision?”

“Yes.”

“That’s—no, wait, wait a minute.” She backed off, waving her arms as if to drive the thought away. “How can you know that? These could be anything, you can’t be sure they’re Hefn! Unless there was a contact you never happened to mention, three thousand years ago!”

Humphrey bent his body and perched on the nurse’s desk chair. “I came across the pictures by sheerest chance, in California, in a book. When I saw them, I knew. No: when I saw them in the book, I *believed*. Then I saw these ancient images painted on the living rock with my own eyes, and then I did know. As you knew the Ephremites had stolen Lexi, I knew this.”

“That they dreamed the Hefn. Three thousand years ago.” Pam

reached for a chair and sat in it.

“Last February, when I was coming to see you in Salt Lake,” he said, “I made a detour. I went to Texas. Del Rio, Texas. There is no airfield. I was driven to Del Rio from Austin, Texas, in an ambulance, by a rock art expert who does not remember what he did that day.”

As always, Pam winced at this allusion to casual mindwipe—of Humphrey erasing a day out of somebody’s life to satisfy his curiosity. She pushed the reaction away. “Did you take a transceiver?”

He twisted, a Hefn shrug. “What would be the point? We open a window, we observe a shaman painting a ‘dart-headed figure’ on a cave wall. What would this reveal to us? If he told stories about these figures, we would not understand what he was saying. As you observe, the figures could be anything. But they are not,” said Humphrey fiercely, “‘anything!’”

“Before I say one more word,” Pam said, “I want to know if I’m going to remember this conversation.”

The Hefn conveyed shock. “How can you ask me this?”

Pam thought of the hapless rock-art expert from Austin. “How can I not? Look what you’re showing me!”

Humphrey’s flat eyes turned on Pam. “Have you understood nothing then, my dear? That everything is different now?”

Pam stared back. “Why is everything different?”

“Because,” said Humphrey, “the Hefn do not dream the future. The Hefn do not dream at all! Using a piece of finely calibrated equipment, and our mental abilities, we look into the past. But you, Pam Pruitt, one of our own from childhood, with no equipment of any sort, have dreamed an event before it occurred. Like the shamans of old, you have looked into the future.”

“Not very far into the future,” Pam protested lamely. “A few hours, maybe half a day.”

Humphrey hit another key and the image of a dart-headed figure flipped back onscreen. “These humans saw *three millennia* into the future. You are a Temporal Physics Apprentice, a mathematician, you understand the behavior of irrational numbers and nonlinear equations. You understand

how chaos overwhelms every attempt to predict the future mathematically. But Time is One! Like the shamans of old, you have overleapt the predictive models, you have *seen what will be!*” As he spoke Humphrey had been tapping more keys; and now four figures shaped like bullets with arms and legs soared up the face of a cliff, trailed by a horizontal line of five large ducklike birds with outspread wings. The caption read, “Birds and anthropomorphic figures rising from a sawtooth horizon at Rio Grande Cliffs, Texas. Copy. Original inundated after the construction of Armistad Reservoir.”

More escort birds, drowned ones. Pam shivered; way beyond freaky though it was, she was frankly mesmerized. Another tap, and still another image: “Rotund shaman rising in a cloud of birds. Halo Shelter on Devils River.” Tingling excitement surged through Pam, a thrill of focussed energy; she was frankly dying to know more. “These are all in Texas?”

“Yes. But many, many rock paintings and petroglyphs from many, many ancient cultures depict birds and shamans,” Humphrey informed her. “Everywhere, birds are seen as symbolic of the flight of the human soul from the body, into the spirit world. I have delved deep into the subject of shamanism since my visit to Texas.”

“Whoa,” said Pam. “We’re getting pretty far into a belief system I haven’t got anymore, when we start talking about the human soul and the spirit world.”

Humphrey twinkled for the first time since catching a whiff of the approaching cobbler. “It would appear to be unnecessary for the individual to embrace the belief system, if the belief system has decided to embrace the individual.” But then he spoke in dead earnest. “You also, Pam Pruitt, must now delve deep into the subject of shamanism. Also into the subject of precognitive dreaming, which is the same subject *au fond*. At bottom. These matters were studied intensively by anthropologists and neurologists, before the coming of the Hefn. There is a very great deal for you to learn, whole libraries of information!”

“Look,” said Pam, “I’ll do it, I guess I want to anyway, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up, I mean I wouldn’t count on this being any help with the Homestead problem. It might be just something personal to me.”

“Nevertheless I *shall* hope,” he said fervently. “It may be our best hope. It may be all the hope we have!”

Her thoughts went racing ahead. “Then what if I just”—she realized as

she said it how good this sounded—”drop out for a while? Just go away and start learning? Jaime can take over in Salt Lake, he’s ready for that.”

Humphrey never skipped a beat. “Will you go to Kentucky?”

“Texas first. Then Kentucky.” Her personal Ground: perfect. “I’d rather nobody knew for now. We can say I’m making a retreat, brainstorming about Homeland. Not that far from the truth.”

He “nodded.” “A good provisional plan. I think you are right to tell no one. Telling could dilute the force at work in you.”

Pam nodded with him. The mystery of what her mind was developing into now begged to be solved; solve that, and the answer might bear upon the conundrum of what lay in the future for humanity and their alien overseers. That was what Humphrey obviously believed, and really he had a point. Two decades spent mining the past had not resolved the conflict; if it were possible, why *not* seek a solution in the future, where ancient Pecos River shamans had encountered the Hefn three thousand years ago?

Then with a jolt she remembered. “Uh-oh—what about Lexi? I told Jaime to get custody papers ready for me to sign as soon as I got back to Salt Lake! Damn! It could take a while to find her another situation, if we even can.” The need to rescue Lexi, to get information about her not available by ordinary means, had evidently rammed the “transformation” through; but Lexi was safe now. Pam paced the reception, passing back and forth beneath monumental or attenuated red anthropomorphs sublimely indifferent to her dilemma. “It won’t be easy, she needs a lot of sensitive support. I hate to put anything extra on Jaime and Claudia right now. Maybe one of the other Gaians, or like a younger couple—”

“Couldn’t I just come with you?”

Humphrey and Pam spun around, and there, of course, was Lexi standing in the doorway, barefoot in underpants and T-shirt and her white sling. “They can kill me off. Or maybe leave me with the Pawnees till my arm gets better. I wouldn’t be any trouble, honest,” she pleaded, “I could help out!”

Shit! Before Pam could stop herself she had blurted sharply, “How long have you been standing there eavesdropping?”

“I didn’t *mean* to eavesdrop! I just woke up and heard you talking, and my arm was hurting, and then you said,” her voice squeaked up, she was

trying not to cry, “that it was a picture of the Hefn, so I got up, I was going to come out, but then I wasn’t sure if I should, and then you said—”

Two tears spilled down her face. Stricken, Pam rushed to put her arms around Lexi, taking care not to bump the wrist. “Oh, sweetie. I’m sorry. You weren’t eavesdropping at all, I shouldn’t have used that word, it’s our fault for talking where you might wake up and hear us.” The girl sagged against her, crying openly now, not trying to hold it in. Inwardly Pam sagged too. Her bubble of excitement had been popped, but that wasn’t the worst. Given a good enough reason, she had proved as ready to betray Lexi as any of them.

“Little Lexi, do not cry,” Humphrey said, and quietly to Pam, “Shall I take this memory away?”

Pam shook her head; but Lexi, her face muffled in Pam’s teal-green uniform shirt, said, “Could I come to Texas if I did?”

“You can come anyway,” Pam said. “Or else neither of us will go, but from now on we stick together no matter what. I promise.”