

The Farside Chronicles

Book II

The Town

by Frank Clarke

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We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand...

-- Thomas Paine

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1 - Cibola

Buck, Ernie, and Barbara sat together over dinner with the TV playing softly in the background.

"Ideas?" Barbara prompted.

There was a long pause while Buck and Ernie mulled whether they had anything in their heads they could call "an idea".

"A whole planet is a pretty tall order," Ernie finally offered. "It's more than a lifetime's work just to figure out what we're looking at."

"No doubt," Barbara agreed. "Where do we start?"

"Doesn't that depend on where we want to go?" Buck asked casually.

"Why does this sound like dialog from '*Alice In Wonderland*'?" Barbara asked no one in particular, then turning back to the others continued, "Wherever we intend to go with this, it's certain we'll need money, and even if I'm queen of the world, I can't just print it. Beyond the gate there are no hardware stores or lumber yards, and those are just two things we'll need if we're going to do anything with our whole new planet. We need a source of funding, and I don't want to ask Dennis Cameron again. How do we raise money from this thing? What's our business model?"

"Natural resources," Ernie suggested. Barbara just nodded, so Ernie continued.

"If this is a genuine analog to Earth, there should be gold in California, silver in Nevada, oil in Texas, and coal in Pennsylvania, not to mention lumber everywhere you look in stands that stretch for hundreds of miles," he mused. "We could just mine for precious metals, bring it back and sell it. How's that for a business model?"

Barbara looked at Buck. "Dad?"

"It has possibilities," Buck agreed, "but it requires we start slow. That's not necessarily bad, but time is not on our side.

"To mine for precious metals means having a secure base of operations on the other side of the gate, and it's presently winter there, in case you've forgotten. We're talking tents and camping out. How did you like our camping experience back at Arlo's?" They both grimaced.

"Plus, we need supplies, because it's unlikely we'll be able to zip back through a gate to order a pizza when the day's work is done, and, oh-by-the-way, both of you will get a new appreciation for the phrase 'a day's work'. Plus, all that equipment we used back at Arlo's was somebody else's. We'll have to buy our own, and good equipment

is not exactly cheap. Plus, we're speculating that Earth-II has the same sort of natural resources in the same general areas as does this Earth. It might be a good idea to double-check that hypothesis first, don't you agree?" They both nodded in agreement.

"Any ideas on how we might gather that information?" Buck asked. There followed a long silence from Ernie and Barbara.

"Maybe we should plan for a vacation in California," Barbara suggested. "Someplace historically significant... like Sutter's Mill."

"Maybe we should also try to develop some information about exactly how one goes about panning for gold," Ernie mused. "I've never done that. Have either of you?"

"No," Barbara admitted, "But I know who knows, and knowing who knows is the same as knowing."

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Professor Oscar Gruder, Colorado School of Mines, was delighted to hear Barbara's voice. "Barbara! How nice to hear from you again! I heard something about a house belonging to some fitzGibbons exploding or something. I hope that wasn't you."

"As a matter of fact, Oscar, it was my house. It's a long story that probably ought to wait until the police finish their investigation before it's finally told. But please don't worry. Dad and I are fine. We were away on vacation when it happened. How are you doing? I presume you're still teaching?"

"Oh, you know me, Barbara. They're going to wheel me out of here on a gurney. I'm having too much fun to give this up voluntarily."

"That's great to hear, Oscar. That means you'll probably be thrilled to answer a question or two from me."

"What? Are you getting into geology, now? What next?"

Barbara laughed. "Well, maybe, but only on an amateur level."

"A few days ago, a random conversation turned to gold mining and panning for gold and 'how do you find it?', and I realized I knew nearly *nothing* about the topic, but I was interested. Your name was the first one that popped into my mind."

"So, you're changing your name to 'Clementine', then," Oscar teased, "and heading off to find a cavern in a canyon? I'm afraid most of the deposits in Colorado have been pretty thoroughly worked over."

"There was gold in Colorado?" Barbara asked incredulously.

"Well, of course!" Oscar replied. "Why else would The Colorado School of Mines be in 'Golden' Colorado? The Colorado gold rush happened about 10 years after the California strikes. In fact, the first finds were made up near you in Boulder. Goodness, Barbara,

haven't you ever been to Gold Hill? It isn't 10 miles from your house."

Barbara caught her breath. "Of course I've been there. I just never made the mental connection. So, where were the big strikes in this region?"

Oscar Gruder was enjoying this immensely. He was getting to tutor someone who probably one day would go to Stockholm to get her Nobel Prize.

"If you take a map of Colorado and draw a line running southwest from Boulder down to, oh, about Durango, you'll find almost all the really large strikes within 20 miles of that line, places like Idaho Springs. It's called the Colorado Mineral Belt, and it's loaded even today. They're still sucking things like molybdenum out of Colorado, and in very economically noticeable quantities."

"Wow!" Barbara exclaimed softly, "I'd heard all of that before and it just never rose to the level of a conscious thought. That's spectacular.

"But back to the original questions: how do you find gold, and how do you collect it?"

"Well, the simplest method is what the Forty-niners did: panning. You find a stream with a silt-gravel bed and you start washing the pebbles and dirt away looking for something shiny. That's actually the degenerate case of what's called placer mining. Placer mining involves a sluice — there are several good designs I can show you — into which you shovel dirt. You then wash the dirt with water in such a way that the heavy stuff — the gold — settles to the bottom and the lighter stuff — dirt and gravel — gets washed away. At some point, you have a high-enough concentration of gold to make it easy to 'collect', as you put it. Sometimes you get real lucky and you find nuggets that are just too big to ignore, but most of what you find is best described as 'gold dust'. For almost everyone who tries it, it's a tough way to make a living. If you're very lucky, you get very rich very fast, but as they say on the stand-up-comedy circuit: don't give up your day-job."

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Still in possession of the RV Dennis Cameron had bought for them, the next day the trio, armed with pie tins and shovels, set off westward into the foothills looking for streams that might once-upon-a-time have produced gold. When they found a stream that seemed to be a likely candidate, Buck would park the RV nearby and Barbara would open a gate to allow them to explore the terrain of Earth-II.

Disappointingly, it seemed that, while the terrain was very well matched between the two universes, the presence of water was

not. Streams that bubbled actively in one were often dry in the other. They began to explore more broadly within the alternate landscape, eventually discovering that where there was water in one, there would be water *nearby* in the other.

But winter is still winter, and the water gurgling along stream beds in Earth-II was as bitterly cold as it would be anywhere under such conditions. After several painful flirtations with frostbite, they mutually agreed to build a sluice using Oscar Gruder's plans. That, they hoped, might minimize their exposure to ice-cold water and make the whole effort much more pleasant.

Working from plans Oscar Gruder had e-mailed to Barbara, the three set up a hasty shop in Ernie's carport and began construction of GS-1, Gruder's Sluice #1. As the device came together it also became clear that it was going to be too big to fit into the RV. It would also be too big to fit through any of the gateframes Barbara had available.

"What now?" Barbara asked.

The two, Ernie and Buck, mulled the issue for some moments before Buck announced: "There's only one solution: we have to do the final assembly on-site. That means GS-1 has to be seriously redesigned so that it can be built as components. GS-1 is dead. Long live GS-2!" They set to work determining which pieces could be built as units.

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Two days later the components of GS-2 were loaded into the RV and the three set off for their 'claim'. On site, they opened the gate and passed the pieces into Earth-II, and had their sluice operating in a half-hour.

Situated at a bend in a stream, the place where water is flowing relatively slowly and heavier particles are more likely to drop out of suspension, Buck shoveled several loads of gravel into the sluice while Barbara and Ernie supplied water via buckets. Then they took turns rocking the device from side to side to get the dirt and gravel moving downsluice.

It wasn't long before it became obvious that gold was beginning to accumulate in the sluice's catchpoints. There were even two nuggets that were large enough to be picked out by hand although most of the gold collected that day was truly worthy of being called 'dust'. By the end of the day, after nearly seven hours work by the three, Barbara estimated they had collected, not counting the two nuggets, about 20 grams of gold dust.

"What's that? About seven hundred dollars?" Buck asked.

"Twenty-five, thirty dollars an hour apiece?"

"It's a heckuva lot more than I got from The Better World Society," Ernie mused. "Based on a 2,000-hour work year: fifty weeks, 40 hours a week, that comes to between fifty thousand and sixty thousand dollars per year for each of us. It may not look all that attractive to you, but I've found a new career."

Buck slapped him on the back. "We're in this together, Ernie. All for one and one for all."

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As time passed, the trio became better at extracting gold from the stream, one of hundreds like it in the area. In a little over a week they had between six and ten ounces of gold that they stored in little paper envelopes. Barbara called her 'expert' again to find out about the business-end of gold mining.

Oscar Gruder was fascinated. "You found gold in a local stream?" he asked incredulously. "I would have guessed that all of them had been panned-out a century ago. How much gold have you recovered?"

"I'm guessing because I don't have a good scale and I don't know that it's all gold. In fact, none of it may be gold, but it seems to be on the order of, oh, six to ten ounces," Barbara offered.

"I have to say, Barbara," Oscar told her with a note of sorrow that she had spent a lot of time and effort for nothing, "that you just can't have that much true gold. If there were that much gold extractable from a single stream by simple placer methods in a single week, we would have a second gold rush on our hands. That's the kind of production you see from virgin gold fields, streams that haven't ever seen a pan. I hate to tell you this, but what you've got there has to be almost entirely iron pyrite, fool's gold.

"Just in case," he finished, "why don't you come on down on Saturday. We'll open the lab and I'll do a quick assay to tell you what you're holding. Say, ten or eleven Saturday morning?"

"Thanks, Oscar," Barbara closed, "we'll see you at 10 o'clock on Saturday at the school."

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A few minutes before 10am, Buck, Barbara, and Ernie finished their breakfast at a restaurant not far from the CSM campus, Buck picked up the tab, and they all piled into Barbara's Jeep for the last leg of their journey to see Oscar Gruder.

As promised, Oscar Gruder was waiting for them at the front door of the General Research Laboratory and he held the door open for

them as they entered. Inside, Oscar led them upstairs to find an open lab.

"OK," he began, as they gathered around a lab table, "let's see what you've got."

Ernie opened the top of a cardboard box and withdrew a series of small manila envelopes and one somewhat larger envelope. Oscar took the larger one, opened the flap and peered in. Seeing the contents, he selected a sample tray and poured seven nuggets of varying size into it. He selected one of the nuggets at random and hefted it.

"It sure feels like gold," he muttered. He weighed it on a very precise electronic scale and then carefully measured its volume. Grabbing a calculator, he tapped the keys quickly and looked at the result.

He then took one of the small envelopes and poured the contents onto the scale, weighing it equally as carefully, and visually inspecting it for the presence of obvious impurities. He took tweezers and removed several pieces of what he presumed was unseparated sand. Satisfied that the tray of dust was homogeneous, he transferred the tray's contents to a graduated test tube partially filled with water and observed the change in the fluid level, then tapped the calculator's keys again.

"Well," he concluded, "this nugget is gold. You really surprised me with this one. Yesterday, I would have bet my house that a pure gold nugget this size could not have existed in a Colorado stream bed. I would have been equally sure that there wasn't this much gold dust left anywhere near here. I'm going to guess that what you are calling 'gold dust' is really gold. The density numbers seem to bear it out, at least.

"Okay, where did this stuff come from? I presume you didn't travel very far from home to go do your 'prospecting', right? So, this gold was found in the Boulder-area on public land. If you found it on private land, you were trespassing and this gold belongs to the owner of that land. If you found it on public land, it's probably not a good idea to tell anyone about it until you file your claim documents. I presume you are planning to file a claim."

Barbara and Ernie looked at each other momentarily.

"What's involved in filing a claim?" Barbara asked.

"We don't have a Land Office anymore — last one closed 60 years ago — so you go to the county clerk's office and ask for a mining claim application. You fill out the paperwork and the clerk records it. Then you head over to the nearest IRS office and apply for a tax ID number, because you'll need it to be able to sell your gold to a refiner. They must issue a 1099 form for what they pay out to miners and

prospectors. Then you should hire an accountant with some experience in the field. CSM can help you locate..."

"Oscar," Barbara interrupted him, "I was hoping to keep all this rather low-key. Do we really need to go through all this hassle?"

"Well," Oscar began thoughtfully, "most refiners won't deal with you on any but the smallest quantities of ore. I don't know exactly what the law requires, but if you're going to be pulling several ounces every week or so from your claim, you will attract the attention of the Federal government in very short order. Yes, I think you need to go through all this hassle."

Buck spoke up. "We can't do that. We have already attracted the attention of the Federal government in other ways, and we cannot — I can't stress that word strongly enough — cannot do it on this issue. Can you think of any alternatives?"

"Alternatives to following the law and paying your taxes?" Oscar asked. "I don't think I want to go there," he told Buck.

"Do you think someone already in the business might 'broker' the gold?" Ernie asked.

"You mean: buy your gold at a discount and handle it as if it came out of their own mine?" Oscar suggested. "That's either marginally illegal or highly illegal depending on the actual law, with which I admit I'm not very conversant. But if you wish I will make some discrete inquiries."

"That would be very nice, Oscar," Barbara agreed, "and 'the discreter the betterer'." She winked at him. "In the meantime, we're going to continue working our claim, and we would be very, very grateful if you were to say nothing of this to anyone."

Oscar made a 'zip the lip' gesture with his hand. "If anyone finds out, it won't have been from me."

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Oscar Gruder slipped into his seat in a quiet corner of The Sherpa House restaurant and shook the hand outstretched toward him.

"Thanks for meeting me here, Pete. How are things at AMAX?"

Peter Cosgrove, Assistant VP-Engineering for American Metals Climax smirked. "I'll be honest, Oscar: the whole industry is a little shaky these days, but AMAX is doing way better than average. Our bonuses won't be great this year, but I'd rather have an AMAX bonus than some of the others. Things could definitely be worse. How about you?"

Oscar smiled. "I'm teaching, exactly what I've wanted to do

since I discovered how much I know about geology. I probably wouldn't be happier if I were working for AMAX and making your salary. Well, yes, I would be happier if I were making your salary, but I don't really need it. I've always lived a Spartan lifestyle, and Nell's outlook on life exactly matches that, so we're... 'comfortably pleased' I guess is a good way of saying it."

"You know, Oscar," Pete leaned in and whispered to him, "you could be making a shitload more working for AMAX than CSM will ever pay you. I keep offering you a way up and you keep pushing me off. I want you to know the offer is still good."

"I appreciate that, Pete, and if I ever leave teaching, AMAX will be the first company to see my résumé. I'm not ready yet, OK?"

"We'll be ready when you are, Oscar," Pete assured him. "Take your time."

They ordered drinks and appetizers and set to selecting their dinner from the menu. Small talk continued between them until their meals arrived.

"Well, Oscar, what's on your mind these days?" Peter asked his dinner partner. "If you're not ready to give up teaching, what's the reason for this one-on-one meeting?"

Oscar hesitated. He had always had a good relationship with Pete Cosgrove and didn't want to put it at risk. He had been mulling this topic for days since his meeting with Barbara fitzGibbon and had not quite decided how he would broach the subject. *Well, 'bull by the horns' time, he thought. Might as well do it and get it over with.*

"Pete, this is an extremely delicate matter I'm about to entrust you with. Can we agree that, win, lose, or draw, what's discussed here doesn't pass beyond us?"

Pete put his fork down. "Wow," he began, "this sounds pretty sinister. OK, what's discussed here tonight stays between us. I presume we're not about to do something illegal."

"I don't know," Oscar admitted. "I'll rely on you to tell me if I'm headed for jail or not. If what I'm about to suggest is, in fact, illegal, all I'll ask is that you not rat me out. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Oscar, you've really got my adrenaline pumping. I've got to hear what this is all about."

Oscar smiled. He knew he could trust Pete. "I know someone who has a source of placer gold. Lots of placer gold.

"For reasons they don't wish to elaborate upon, they can't deal this gold in the open market. They're looking for a go-between."

"A broker?" Peter interrupted.

"Yes. They're looking for someone to take their output at a discount, of course, and handle the paperwork as if it came from their own sources."

"Sounds fishy to me," Peter said. "Why would they not want to deal direct and at market price? Where's the gold really coming from? Are they laundering money? That's what this sounds like."

"I can't swear to it, Pete," Oscar replied, "but I would bet big money that this is not money laundering. I saw some of the gold that came out of the placer, and it wasn't packaged as you might expect had there been a formal operation going on. This is just a small-time placer run by people who would rather not be involved with the inevitable bureaucracy inherent in an actual company."

"How much product are we talking about, Oscar?"

"They did 8.8 Troy ounces their first week, very high quality ore, virtually no scoria. I'd call it ninety-seven to ninety-eight percent. Maybe ninety-nine."

"8.8 ounces per week by placer? That's got to be bullshit, Oscar. Where are they getting it?" Pete asked. "There's nothing like that kind of metal left where it could be recovered by placer, at least not in this part of the world. If they say they're taking it out of a stream, I don't want anything to do with this, because they're lying, and you know they're lying, Oscar."

"If I didn't know the people involved as well as I do, I would have to admit you have a point, Pete," Oscar allowed. "As it is, I've known two of them for long enough that I just can't see either of them being involved with anything shady."

"OK, so AMAX isn't interested. Can you suggest anyone who might be?"

"Let's not be so hasty here, Oscar," Pete back-pedaled. "If you're so confident in these people, maybe I'm guilty of jumping to an unwarranted conclusion. Is it possible for me to meet your principals? Maybe they can be talked into showing me their claim? If it turns out they've discovered a never-before-exploited source, we might be able to work something out."

Oscar paused to think this over. "To be honest, I'd like to see it myself. Let me ask if they'd consider it. If they agree, when do you want to see it?"

Peter Cosgrove leaned in to speak to Oscar. "Tomorrow. If they can't or won't do it tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow."

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Ernie's phone rang and Buck picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hello, Buck?" Oscar began. "It's Oscar Gruder. I have a proposal I'd like to present to you in connection with our conversation Saturday. Is Barbara there?"

"Hold on." Buck turned to his daughter and held the phone

out to her. "Oscar Gruder," he announced. Barbara took the phone.

"Hi, Oscar," Barbara began. "Do you have good news for us?"

"I have news, Barbara, but whether it's good or not remains to be seen. I did contact someone in the business, and his reaction was very like mine. When I informed him you took almost nine Troy ounces out of a Colorado placer in one week, his one-word assessment was 'bullshit'. He wants to see the site. In fact, he's demanding to see the site. He wants to verify that this isn't a scam."

A frown crossed Barbara's face. "A scam! What kind of 'scam' does he imagine involves selling precious metals at discount prices?" Barbara retorted.

"The phrase he used," Oscar explained, "was 'money laundering'. Now, I think I know you well enough that the question shouldn't need to be asked, but just for the record: Barbara, this is all legit, right?"

The light went on in Barbara's head: *money laundering! Of course! And precious metals would be an ideal vehicle for that kind of operation.* She forgave Oscar his doubts immediately. "I see the point, Oscar, but I assure you this is exactly what we discussed over the past few weeks, nothing more, nothing less. When does your contact want his tour?"

"Right away," Oscar told her. "The sooner the better."

Barbara turned to look at Buck and Ernie who had been listening as well as they could to the conversation. They both nodded. "At his convenience," she told Oscar. "Just give us overnight warning and come on up. Mornings are best, but if he can't make it until the afternoon, we'll accommodate that."

"I'll call you back in twenty minutes." Oscar disconnected and immediately re-dialed Peter Cosgrove.

"They said 'anytime'," Oscar told Peter Cosgrove. "All they want is overnight warning and they suggested the morning would be best. Up to you."

"Let's do it tomorrow morning, then," Peter agreed. "I'll pick you up at 8:30. We'll be in Boulder by 9:30, shake hands with everyone, drive out to the site and be home by noon."

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At 9:15am Peter Cosgrove's Volvo pulled to the curb outside Ernie Walsh's modest house. Cosgrove's one-glance assessment was that if these people were in the money-laundering business, they sure gave no indication of it.

Before they could get out of the car, Barbara, Buck, and Ernie exited the house and went to greet the visitors. After shaking hands

all around, Buck motioned toward their RV. "Shall we?" he offered.

Cosgrove was taken aback. "I had planned to drive my own car so I can leave for Golden directly from the site."

Buck shook his head. "You won't be able to drive, Mr. Cosgrove. You'll be blindfolded the whole way there and the whole way back. Because we can't actually go on record by filing a claim, the location of the site has to be kept confidential. If we gave you directions, that would reveal far more than we're willing to allow. I'm afraid this is the only way. Is that a problem?"

Cosgrove gave it only a moment's thought. What Buck said made a lot of sense. Cosgrove gestured toward the RV and the five of them boarded. Inside the RV, Oscar Gruder and Peter Cosgrove buckled into their seats, and Ernie blindfolded both.

Twenty-five minutes later, the RV lurched to a stop and the two passengers began to reach for their blindfolds.

"Don't take them off quite yet," Ernie instructed. "We're not there yet."

With the passengers still blindfolded, Buck switched on the gate that provided access to the alternate Earth. "We'll lead you," Buck and Ernie told the passengers, then unbuckled their seat belts. Still blindfolded, the two were led down a ramp from the gate onto the ground of Earth-II and from there down a path to where the RV could not have been seen had it existed in this universe. At that point, the blindfolds were removed. "It gets a little rough from here, so you'll need your eyes. Follow us."

At the bottom of the path, a stream gurgled around a horseshoe bend where a sluice was positioned ready to separate whatever gold was here from the sand and gravel accompanying it. Oscar recognized the design immediately and smiled.

"Did you build that from my plans?" he asked to confirm what he already suspected.

"Yup," Ernie confirmed. "We made a small design change to allow us to disassemble it for transport, but it's basically your design." And with that, Buck shoveled a load of riverbed into the sluice and Ernie and Barbara began pouring water.

Pete and Oscar largely ignored the sluicing operation. Instead, they walked a few feet away from the sluice and bent down to examine the soil. With a few moments of poking and prodding, Pete picked up a pinch of dirt and placed it in the palm of his other hand. With the addition of a few handfuls of water from the stream, Pete could see several grains of gold dust glistening in his hand. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed silently, "this place is filthy with it."

2 - Problems and Opportunities

"OK," Peter Cosgrove spoke, "you're really pulling gold out of the earth and it's not out of the question that you could be producing eight to ten Troy per week. I apologize for suggesting this was not what you claimed. I'm ready to do business. Let's go find a place to sit and talk."

The five climbed out of the valley up toward the gate. Along the way, they stopped and re-affixed the blinders on the visitors and Ernie and Buck guided them the rest of the way, finally up the ramp and into the RV where they took their seats for the trip back to Ernie's.

At Ernie's, Pete and Oscar changed vehicles and Barbara, Buck, and Ernie led them to a nearby park where they could sit and talk with negligible risk of being overheard.

"AMAX will buy your gold at 40% of market," Peter Cosgrove began the conversation.

"At that rate," Ernie offered, "we might as well incorporate and pay the damn taxes. Your offer is highway robbery."

Cosgrove shrugged his shoulders. "I was told you wanted to avoid 'entanglements'. Avoiding entanglements doesn't come cheap."

"We understand that," Ernie answered him, "but you're going to resell the product at market with no offsetting overhead, no salaries, no benefits, no infrastructure, no maintenance. You'll be making 60% clear profit while we do all the work. No, your offer has to be lots closer to 80% than that. We're not in this for the exercise, you know."

"But AMAX is taking all the risk on this," Cosgrove retorted. "We're the ones risking entanglements that can send corporate officers to federal prison. That's the costly part. If our part in this gets out, we're looking at jail time and we get to pay back any tax assessments with interest. That's why you won't get 80% of market. Forty percent. Take it or leave it."

Ernie looked at Barbara who shook her head. 'No'. Ernie turned back to face Cosgrove. "Call us if you change your mind."

The meeting was over.

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"I really think you could have been more generous with the offer, Pete," Oscar opined on their way back to Golden. "Forty percent was almost a slap in the face."

"Oh, it will probably come up some," Pete Cosgrove admitted,

"but it will never get to eighty percent — it won't even get near eighty percent. Eventually they'll cave."

"I don't know," Oscar muttered. "Barbara's a pretty stubborn gal."

"They'll have to give in eventually," Cosgrove chuckled, "or AMAX will simply file a claim on their site."

"How can you file a claim on their site?" Oscar asked. "You don't know where it is."

"But, yes, I do," Cosgrove continued as he pulled a device from a belt holster. "My GPS has been running all day. When I get back to the office, I'll just play back the route, plot it onto a topo map, and I'll know exactly where all that gold came from. No, Oscar, I won't jump their claim unless they really want to play hard-ball."

But back at his office, Pete Cosgrove had a disturbing revelation. At some point in the journey, his GPS dropped signal for all satellites. It got lost for thirty-seven minutes. From the time the RV arrived at its destination until the start of the trip home, the GPS track was blank. Somehow those three had set up some interference that caused the GPS to go blind.

No matter. It was only a five- or six-minute hike from where the RV parked to the riverbend sluice site. But when he plotted the existing GPS track onto the map, it appeared the RV had been parked in a residential neighborhood. The matching topographical map showed nothing like a river or stream within... cripes! the nearest water was over a mile away as the crow flies. They couldn't have hiked there in a mere six minutes. Where the hell was that damned stream?

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Oscar called Barbara immediately after Pete dropped him off at his house.

"Barbara, I'm sorry," Oscar began, but Barbara cut him off.

"Don't worry about it, Oscar. I'm sure there are others who will be willing to make us a better deal."

Now it was Oscar's turn to cut Barbara off: "No, it's worse than that. Pete had a GPS device running while we were being shown the site. He knows where your dig is and he said he'll jump your claim if you don't deal with him."

Barbara smirked inwardly. How could she tell her dear friend that there was not 'a snowball's chance in Hell' That Pete Cosgrove would jump their claim?

"Oscar, don't worry. Pete can have that one. We've already found a better one. He'll make a few bucks and miss out on millions."

Oscar was amazed. "You have a richer find than that one? Barbara, you now officially know more about the Colorado Mineral Belt than I do. I think we need to talk some more."

"I'll have to run that by my partners, Oscar," she back-pedaled. "In the absence of Pete, do we have any alternative routes? Anybody else who might be a front-man for us?"

"There are a few refiners I had planned to talk to if AMAX fell through — which is how it's looking now — but nobody the size of Freeport-McMoRan, of course. That's the AMAX sub that handles their gold. I'll start ringing phones on Monday."

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The only explanation Pete Cosgrove could imagine that fit all the facts was that inside that RV, GPS devices lied. That would make it a very poor vehicle for vacation trips to unknown places, but... Maybe it was something they could turn on and off at will. Was that even possible? If it were possible, what else might be possible?

He dashed off an email to AMAX's Research Library: *is there a way to make a GPS lie?* If anyone knew, they would.

The Research Library answered him bright and early Monday morning: "As far as we can tell, there is not any way to make a GPS 'lie', but we are continuing to check other sources and will give you a complete assessment by Friday."

The 'complete assessment' they would present to him on Friday would not say much else beyond their initial guess.

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"You know," Buck began, "if we're going to make this a commercial application, we can't drive the RV to a set spot every day, park it for hours at a time, and (apparently) not come out of the vehicle. Eventually, someone is going to report that there's a strange vehicle parked on their street and the police will investigate, knock on the door, then tow the abandoned vehicle away along with our working gate and our way home.

"In fact, I don't think we should do it anymore."

"I never thought of that," Ernie admitted. "That would be a catastrophe. Is there an alternative?"

"I don't know," Buck admitted. "The only thing I can think of is to rent some very heavy equipment suitable for clearing wilderness and cut some paths through the woods, one path from here to there at the very least. The obvious problem is: Can we get things like road graders and CATs at a rental agency? Then, who's going to do the work? I know enough about equipment like that to get us all into a lot

of trouble.

"We need to get some experts involved."

Ernie spoke up. "I'll bet we already know some Marines with the right skills. Why don't we get Arlo's opinion on this?"

Buck fetched his cell phone from his pocket and began dialing.

"Yeah," the voice on the other end answered, giving up no information to whomever was calling.

"It's Buck," Buck informed him. "I need some on-site expertise. Do any of your guys, especially those few who know about 'the technology', also happen to have logging, wilderness-clearing, or road grading experience? And if their experience encompasses 'project management', all the better."

"Buck, these are all mostly city kids," Arlo replied. "I'd be surprised if any of them have cut down a tree since Boy Scout Camp, but let me ask around and get back to you."

"Good," Buck agreed. "I'll wait to hear from you."

He didn't wait long. It was mid-afternoon when his phone rang. "Yeah," he began, the same greeting Arlo typically used.

"You'll have to go outside the group to get what you need," Arlo informed him. They both knew what that meant.

"Who?" Buck asked.

"Gillman," Arlo answered. "Born and raised in eastern Washington, grew up as part of a logger-family, did a lot of stints with lumber companies as a youngster. I talked to him within the hour and asked him about things like road grading. He sounds like he'd be a good fit except for that one thing: he'll be another mouth to feed."

Arlo meant that Major Paul Gillman would be one more person who would have to be told about 'gates'. There were already eight, not including Arlo himself, who were privy to the existence — if not the details — of the technology.

"Can't be helped," Buck allowed. "We need his know-how and I'd rather have him than someone with no *semper-fi*. Let me have his number. I'll give him a call and feel him out."

"718-555-1181," Arlo gave Buck the phone number. Buck read it back to him to confirm. "You got it," Arlo told him.

Buck disconnected the call with Arlo and immediately redialed Paul Gillman's number.

"Hello," Gillman answered his phone.

"Major Gillman, this is Buck FitzGibbon," Buck announced himself. "How are you?"

"Buck," Gillman acknowledged, "it's good to hear your voice. Are you back home at last?"

"Yes, we've been home now for about two weeks, trying to adjust to the new realities of life without our old house, and we've

come up against something of a snag." On his end of the phone, Paul Gillman's ears perked up.

"We have some virgin timberland here seriously in need of some development. We need to have some trees felled, logging roads cut, camp areas graded, and shelters built."

"Arlo said you might call me about a project," Gillman admitted, "but why me? You must have hundreds of contractors in your immediate neighborhood who can handle the tasks and would be willing to give you a nice discount on the price in exchange for the timber. Why not use one of them?"

"The issue is one of 'security'," Buck confided. "A local contractor might give me a competitive price, but I'd always worry about what that contractor was saying at the next Caterpillar convention. For that and more reasons, I'd like to 'keep it in the family', as we say. I'm broaching the subject to you because Arlo trusts you and says you have the Marine ethic well set. If you're interested in a project that you won't be able to brag about to anyone including your family, I'd like to invite you to come visit us and look at what we're dealing with."

Gillman was fascinated. "What could possibly be 'secure' about clearing timber?" he asked. "What is it about the project that can't be talked about? This isn't illegal, Buck, is it?"

Buck chuckled. "The term actually has no meaning as far as this project is concerned," Buck told him. That was true. Where they would be clearing timber, there was no law as the term is understood. "I hope that sets the hook, Major, and I hope you'll decide to provide us with someone we can trust to help us with this project and not blab about it far and wide. If I've got you adequately intrigued, perhaps you'll fly out and we can show you what's involved."

"When?" Gillman asked.

"The sooner the better," Buck told him.

"I'll get tickets and let you know."

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Barbara waited at 'Arriving Passengers' at Denver International Airport holding a sign on which was printed 'Gillman'. Paul Gillman saw his name and headed straight for her.

"I'm Paul Gillman," he informed her.

"Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh," Barbara introduced herself. "Let's find your luggage and get going. Dad is anxious to meet you."

"I'm strictly carry-on," he told her, holding up a single bag. "I'm ready to go."

She led him to the parking garage and found her Jeep. A few

minutes later they exited the airport, picked up I-70 West and connected with US 36 for the trip into Boulder. Less than an hour after his plane's wheels had touched ground, Paul Gillman was shaking hands with Buck fitzGibbon.

"What, if anything, has Arlo briefed you on?" Buck asked as an opening gambit.

"Arlo has told me nothing," Gillman asserted. "I tried to get him to tell me something, anything, about why you're all so secretive, but he wasn't giving up anything. In fact, he claims to know nothing about what's going on. I'm sure he's holding something back because every time the conversation turns to that last op, the one involving all the middle-easterners, everybody clams up tight. So, tell me, am I the last one to know what's going on?"

Barbara laughed. "Certainly not the last one, but there aren't very many people at all who know anything about what we're going to tell you.

"But first we have to have your solemn oath that nothing you hear from us gets passed to anyone. That includes Arlo, even though he now knows more than you. Do we have your word?"

Gillman looked to Buck. Buck's return glance told him absolutely nothing. Gillman gritted his teeth. "Nothing that will get me thrown into the brig?"

"Alas," Ernie told him, "we can't absolutely guarantee that. What we can guarantee is that if you keep your mouth firmly shut and everyone around you does likewise your chances of winding up in a brig will be greatly reduced, possibly to zero."

"OK," Gillman agreed, "'top secret' and nobody hears about it from me. I agree. You have my word."

Barbara rose from her seat and walked toward the kitchen door. As she passed the bookcase, she pressed what appeared to be a doorbell button glued to the side of the bookcase. Instantly, the view of the kitchen disappeared, replaced by a wintry landscape as the portal came active.

"You'll need your heavy jacket," she told Gillman. Gillman's jaw was slack. He could not believe what he was seeing. He managed to compose himself enough to shrug on his parka and follow Barbara through the portal. Buck and Ernie trailed him.

Once all four had passed through, Ernie turned and activated a second portal placed contiguous to the one in his living room. When he activated it, the image of his living room they could see through the single portal changed to a view of Earth-II's snowy outdoors. The two active portals cancelled each other out. Anyone inside Ernie's house would similarly see nothing out of the ordinary.

"This," Buck began his explanation, "is what we call 'Earth-II'.

We, ourselves, are not 100% sure what it is we are dealing with, but we think it is a parallel universe.

"It has some interesting characteristics. The terrain is very analogous. It isn't identical, but it's close. Where you find a mountain range in our world, you will also find one in more-or-less the same general vicinity in this one. Where you find a low spot in one, there will be a low spot in the other, maybe not exactly where you expect it, but *nearby*. A low spot in one may be filled with water, while the corresponding low spot in the other is not.

"What's different is also pretty interesting. So far, we haven't seen any large animals: deer, moose, bear, or hominids. We have seen what look like horses, but from a distance it appears they're closer to Shetland ponies than to anything we normally think of as 'horses'. You'll run into the occasional raccoon or opossum, but that's about 'it'.

"What we do have is this vast wilderness with lots of virgin forest." Buck swung around with his arms outstretched to illustrate the surroundings.

Gillman looked about him, taking it all in, still thoroughly awe-stricken. "Mineral deposits?" he finally asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Ernie picked up the thread. "In fact, we have a placer set up in a stream about six miles from here, which brings us to the reason Major Paul Gillman, USMC (ret) is with us today, looking over this terrain.

"We need to cut a path from here to there, and that means 'logging' and 'road grading'. We need to build a shelter, maybe a log cabin or something so we can stay on site and work our placer. We need... well, to be honest, we're not sure what we need, but we need lots of stuff we have never thought about before in our lives, and that means we need 'expertise' more than anything. We need someone who can plan and direct, who can say what assets and tools need to be brought into play to get done what needs to get done.

"We're hoping you're the person who can do that for us."

Gillman was silent for a few minutes. If it were possible to hear a brain work, his would have been making a great deal of noise. "This is a whole planet we're talking about here, isn't it?" he finally said. "Roads, cities, power plants, factories?"

Ernie interrupted. "You don't have to take on the whole thing, Paul. You can tackle what you want, and leave the rest. We all understand that this is the work of multiple lifetimes."

Gillman relaxed somewhat. "So, this is what you had in mind when I asked whether it was illegal and you said, '*the term actually has no meaning as far as this project is concerned*'," he smirked toward Buck.

"Exactly right," Buck agreed. "Here, there is no sheriff and there is no law."

"And there is no money and no bank to put it in," Gillman finished. "So, do I get *paid* for what I'll do here? How? And in the absence of any law, what recourse do I have if I don't get paid?"

"I had hoped we would base our relationship on our shared heritage. That's why I asked Arlo to recommend someone. That's why I didn't just open the Yellow Pages to 'Land Clearing' and start dialing.

"But you raise an interesting point: we do have to compensate you for your efforts, but it will have to be something other than 'money'. How would you like to be compensated, given that the answer can't be 'money'?"

"How about 'California'?" Gillman answered.

"Be careful what you wish for," Ernie warned him. "At this point, the existence of 'California' in this universe is 'speculation'. You might get to Nevada and discover that that's where the Pacific Ocean starts. How about," Ernie added, "we let you take all the gold you can pan or placer consistent with 'keeping this a low-key operation'?"

"That could be quite a lot of gold," Gillman said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I would call that 'fair compensation'."

"Well, then, Planning Director Gillman, where do we start?" Barbara asked.

"I think a good place to start is at your dining room table with several pads of note paper and many, many pencils. A project like this should start with lots of planning. This is a poor place to do it. Let's go back."

Ernie clicked the gate 'off' and his living room appeared in the portal. The four trooped through the portal into Earth-I, and Barbara, the last one through, shut off the portal from that side.

3 - Planning

"We need to do a survey, even if it's just rough," Gillman opined. "We need to know what's between here and there before we can plan for changing it. After we know what work is involved, we need to rent some heavy equipment and get it to the work site. That's going to be a problem, but we have a few days to solve it."

"A 'problem' in what way?" Barbara asked.

"It's logistics," Gillman explained. "One, this equipment is very large. It won't fit through a doorway, so I hope you have a way of making a very big gate. I'm talking thirteen feet high and twenty-two feet wide." Buck whistled. Barbara nodded.

"Two, you'll need a quiet place away from prying eyes where you can set up your monster gate and roll equipment through it. If you try to do it here, smack in the middle of town, *someone* is going to notice, and I don't think that would be a good thing.

"Three, CATs and backhoes and such things run on diesel, and we could very easily use enough fuel to require refueling mid-operation. You don't want to stop everything so you can run down to the nearest 7-11 to tank up. You'll want your own supply of diesel fuel standing by on site. You'll want a small tanker truck at the very least.

"Four, God forbid something breaks down and has to be towed out. You may have to jack it up and put it on a sledge. You'll want your own electric supply — via a generator — and that generator should use the same fuel everything else uses: diesel. After the initial operation is over, you'll want that diesel generator for other things: running a sawmill, maybe, or providing power for tools to construct a cabin. You said you had a 'placer'. You might want to motorize that placer and increase the output. God knows, you're going to need lots of money before you even get started. If you can't come up with a hundred thousand bucks as a 'deposit', you'll need to figure out a way to borrow it."

Ernie snorted. "A hundred thousand dollars? We might have a tough time coming up with a hundred thousand cents."

Buck had a look of deep thought on his face. "We could cash-in the house," he said to Barbara. "It's insured, and it's probably a total loss. We might get a quarter mil out of it. It would provide us with a very desperately-needed grubstake."

"Oh, Daddy," Barbara sighed, "not the house!"

"Barbara, we'd have to rebuild it from scratch as it is now," Buck explained. "There would be nothing, or close to it, in the new house that would link us back to the old one. The memories of that

old house would be all we have, and we'll have those anywhere.

"I'll call the insurance company in the morning."

"Fifth," Gillman resumed his list of logistical problems, "you'll need a crew. We're not going to be able to do this with just the four of us. There are trees to be felled and dragged clear. Those trees should be trimmed of branches, and the branches reduced to chips. The logs must be milled to provide lumber for any building you intend doing.

"After felling, you're left with stumps all of which have to be ground down because the empty spots where the trees used to stand will become your new roads. You want that area relatively flat. Damn, Buck, the more I think about it, the more I become convinced we're all crazy. We can't do this. It will take us forever."

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"Good morning, Ed," Buck spoke into the phone to Ed Smith, "this is Buck fitzGibbon. How are things?"

"Things are generally okay on my side, Buck. How about yours?"

"Better than okay, Ed, but I do have a golden opportunity, and I mean that in a very literal sense, for a group of talented, hard-working outdoorsmen, just in case you know of any."

"Well, shoot, Buck, you must know I have the names, addresses, and phone numbers of hundreds of those. What's on your mind, brother?"

"Well, Ed, I'm engaged in a little project with Major Paul Gillman, a good friend of Arlo Rubinstein's, and we need to do a little land-clearing. No, let me re-phrase that: we need to do lots of land-clearing, and I can make it pretty attractive, in a financial sense, for the right kind of person.

"The right kind of person is one who can keep a secret and doesn't have to ask lots of questions. That's the primary talent I'm looking for. Beyond that, I need lumbermen and heavy construction equipment expertise."

"About how much land clearing are you looking to do?" Ed asked.

"Don't know, exactly," Buck allowed, "but I'm guessing it will be thirty to fifty miles of road over rough ground and timberland."

There was a long pause on the other end as Ed Smith digested Buck's estimate.

"Buck, whose land is this we're talking about?" Ed asked.

"I guess you could say it's Barbara's, Ed, but there's several of us with an interest in it."

"I'm just thinking, Buck, if you were cutting roads as dense as

city streets, you'd need three or four square miles of land to get you fifty miles of road. I don't guess you're cutting city streets, so we're talking lots more than four square miles, maybe forty square. That's twenty-five thousand acres, give or take. Where does a college professor get twenty-five thousand acres?"

"The situation is what the situation is," Buck replied cryptically. "So, how many hands do you think we'll need?"

"You have the equipment? Road graders, log haulers, stuff like that?" Ed asked.

"Nope," Buck told him, "none of that. We figure we'll have to rent. No idea what it will cost, though. Hope we can afford it."

"You might get a good price from Steve Okambo," Ed suggested. "Him and his boys went into that business after mustering out. He's mostly retired now, lets the kids run the business, but he's 'family', y'know, so maybe he could see his way to easing your pain. Lots of the old bunch make it a point to rent from him when they need 'heavy'. He's honest, keeps his equipment in good shape, and he can be trusted."

"Good suggestion," Buck agreed. "Thanks. It's Wednesday. Do you think you could round up a crew for me by Friday so I could meet them and brief them on the op?"

"Friday sounds about right," Ed agreed. "Six-thirty? Where would you like to get together?"

"Any suggestions?" Buck asked.

"The back room at the VFW might do the trick," Ed suggested.

"I like it," Buck agreed. "We'll plan to be at the VFW at six-thirty Friday."

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At six o'clock, Buck, Ernie, Barbara, and Paul Gillman entered the VFW hall and worked their way over to the bar. Barbara ordered Scotch neat as did Major Gillman. Ernie and Buck settled for beer.

"While Barbara and I are inside briefing the volunteers, I'd like to have you, Ernie, and you, Paul, standing guard outside the room so that no one outside can get close enough to eaves-drop. Within about five minutes of starting, some of those inside may opt to leave, and you should let them go, but don't let them hang around the door. If you encounter any trouble, just knock on the door and we'll stop." Ernie and Paul nodded their understanding.

As the hands of the clock crept toward six-thirty, more and more people began to show up. Many of them went directly to the back room to find seats for what Ed Smith had promised was going to be an attractive proposal by Buck fitzGibbon. A few approached Buck

to make small talk, but Buck gave no clue as to what he was going to present.

A few minutes before six-thirty, the four left the bar and headed for the meeting room at the back of the hall. Buck and Barbara entered and went to the front of the room. Ernie and Paul stayed at the door. At a signal from Buck, they closed the doors on the meeting. Barbara stepped to the lectern.

"To begin, I'd like to ask Ed Smith to give us the abbreviated version of what he has told everyone to get them to come here tonight. Ed?"

Ed Smith rose from his seat in the front row and began: "I just repeated to them what Buck told me over the phone, Barbara: you have some wilderness area that needs roads cut through it. I presume we're talking 'logging roads'? I repeated what Buck said about there being maybe thirty to fifty miles of road to be worked. Buck also said the deal would be financially attractive. That's about all."

Barbara turned to the audience. "Would anyone like to add anything they heard from Ed that he might not have mentioned here?"

One of the men in the audience raised his hand and Barbara glanced at him. "Ed also mentioned that this project is secret and that too many questions wouldn't be real welcome. I have to admit I only came because that got my curiosity going." A murmur of agreement rippled through the audience.

"That's correct," Barbara confirmed. "This project is somewhat secret, or at least we would prefer it not be blabbed all over town. Do I have your word, all of you, that what is said here tonight does not leave this room? If there is anyone here who can't promise that, this is your chance to back out. If you stay, you're promising, to Buck and to me and to all the others gathered here, that even if you decide you don't want to be part of it, at least you won't ruin it for everyone else."

One man rose from his seat as if to leave, then sat back down again.

"If you have any doubts," Barbara spoke to him, "we would all much rather you left than potentially compromise the operation." The man hesitated a moment, then rose and left.

When he had departed and the meeting room doors were again closed, Barbara faced the audience again. She held up a small leather pouch dangling by its drawstring. "This is the reason for the secrecy." She opened the pouch, reached in with two fingers and withdrew a small shiny object. She tossed it underhand to the man who had spoken, who reached up and snatched it from the air as it soared toward him. He rolled the object over in his hands for a few seconds then hefted it.

"Is this gold?" he asked.

"It is," Barbara confirmed. "It was collected in a placer within the last two weeks. In the space of one week working that placer, three people collected almost nine Troy ounces of gold." The man handed the gold nugget back to Barbara. "At about a thousand dollars per Troy ounce, that's nine thousand dollars, three thousand per person per week — roughly one hundred fifty thousand a year per head — conservatively, a hundred grand a year part-time." Someone issued a low whistle.

She looked at one of the men chosen at random and fixed him with her stare. "There's more where this came from," she said, holding the nugget aloft, "but getting it out is a bitch-and-a-half," she said using one of her father's favorite expressions.

"The reason is that the source is in deep wilderness and there are no roads. Getting in is difficult, living and working on site is difficult, getting out is difficult. We need help to correct that."

Someone raised their hand and Barbara glanced toward him.

"The only places you find that kind of 'deep wilderness' are the National Parks. Are you taking gold out of a park?"

Buck stepped to the lectern to answer the question.

"That would be illegal," Buck replied. "Nothing we're planning to do, nothing we'll ask you to do, nothing you do at our direction relative to this project is illegal. No agency of the government at any level will have a problem with you building roads for us.

"We said we would also make it financially attractive for those who throw in with us. You won't, however, be paid in cash. Your 'compensation' is that when this project is complete, you can stake a claim and take from that claim all the gold you can pan or placer. We will issue shares very much the way pirate crews got shares: every member of the crew gets one just for being in the crew. Others get more than one for additional services they perform or provide.

"The beautiful part of this is that the number of shares is almost unlimited. Ed suggested to me that we had twenty-five thousand acres to develop. Let me assure you: there's lots more than twenty-five thousand acres. Lots more."

"How much, would you say?" one of the men asked.

"No," Buck replied, "I will not say, because, to be perfectly honest, I have no way of estimating. Take my word for it: twenty-five thousand acres is a low-ball figure."

"We're talking a construction project that will last a year or more, then, aren't we?" one of the men asked. Buck nodded. "And we get paid... when?"

"A fair question," Buck agreed. "I'd like to postpone answering that until everyone who decides they want in on this project

has a better idea of what we're looking at and everyone not really interested has been sidelined. Sometime early next week, we'll call you all together, those who sign on the dotted line in blood tonight, and we'll do a project briefing to give you the detail you'll need to give us the feedback we need to give you an answer we all can live with. Fair enough?"

The original questioner nodded his agreement.

"Thank you all for coming," Buck closed his presentation. "If you're still interested, please see me or my daughter, Barbara, afterwards and let one of us know. The rest, please bear in mind that what you heard here tonight is confidential and you have given your word not to spread it. Doing so, in any case, will only hurt your brothers-in-arms, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to do that."

A very few people left the room without talking further to Buck or Barbara, but most put their names on a sign-up sheet so they could be contacted later.

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Steve Okambo approached Buck and Barbara after the presentation.

"That's impressive," Steve began, indicating Buck's and Barbara's presentations. "Ed told me you would be needing some of my heavy equipment. Do you have any idea what, specifically, you're going to need?"

"Not a clue, Steve," Paul Gillman replied, thrusting his hand forward to shake Steve's. "The more motors, the more operators, the faster it will go — up to a point. To start, we'll need just one or two to rip out stumps or grind them down. As the project progresses, we'll have more than one road to cut, and at that point we'll be able to put more equipment on task."

"Do you have a survey?" Steve asked.

"We don't," Barbara admitted sheepishly. "I guess it would be a good idea to know what we're up against, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yeah," Steve smirked. "When Ed said you guessed you had between thirty and fifty miles of road to cut, my first thought was: 'that's a lot of guesswork'. Would you like me to recommend a surveyor?"

"Sure," Ernie agreed, "suggest away."

Steve handed Ernie a business card.

"Is he trustworthy?" Ernie asked. "I mean, is he someone we want to bring aboard on this project? Is he someone who can keep what we're doing quiet?"

"You mean 'is he Corps'?" Steve asked. "No, he's not, but he

is someone I have grown to trust. If you wish, I'll approach him to see if he's willing to maintain confidentiality."

"Yes," Barbara agreed, "please do."

"Something else just occurred to me," Paul Gillman mentioned. "We might want to use Steve's place as a base." Turning to Steve he asked: "You keep your CATs and graders garaged, I presume." Steve nodded. "That means Steve here has a large indoor area suitable for large vehicles. Barbara, does that suggest anything to you?"

Barbara smiled. "It does. We may want to start our survey at Steve's and branch out from there."

Steve Okambo had a bewildered look on his face. "My place is in Valmont," he explained. "Why would you want to survey that?"

Ernie put his hand on Steve's shoulder. "I think we're going to have to give you more detail... lots more detail." The others just smiled.

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Barbara guided the Jeep into the 'Okambo and Sons' rental yard and Steve exited the office to greet them.

"Can we park this inside?" Barbara asked.

"Oh, sure," Steve replied and pushed the button to raise the door electrically. Barbara eased the Jeep inside and Steve closed the door behind them.

"Now," Barbara began after they had all gathered outside the Jeep, "for this little demonstration I would like to find a place that we would be very unlikely, say about 'zero', to be disturbed or observed because, quite frankly, anyone who disturbs or observes us during this demonstration is going to be very disturbed themselves, and I'd like to avoid that."

"How long do you think this demonstration will take?" Steve asked.

"I suspect we will be finished in less than half-an-hour," Barbara suggested.

"Let's take over the customer presentation room, then," Steve offered. "We'll hang the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the handle and be assured we'll be undisturbed."

As they moved toward the conference room, Steve took his walkie-talkie from its holster and keyed the handset. "Danny?"

"Yeah, Pop," Danny replied.

"I'll be in the CP room with some visitors for half-an-hour or so," he told Danny. "No interruptions, OK?"

"OK," Danny confirmed.

Inside the conference room, Ernie opened the long canvas carry-all he brought in and extracted an odd contraption consisting of plastic pipe and devices and wires and batteries. In two minutes, he had constructed two doorway-sized frames.

"Ready," he told Barbara. She nodded and Ernie powered on one of the gates. Instantly, an icy wind blew into the conference room through the portal to a winter wilderness beyond.

"Everybody through, please," Barbara instructed, and they all went through the gate: Paul, Buck, then Steve, Ernie, and Barbara taking up the rear. As soon as they were all on the other side, Ernie positioned the second gate flush with the first and switched it on.

Steve Okambo looked around in wonder. "What the hell?" he gasped, not quite able to grasp what he was seeing. "Where are we?"

Barbara took over. "To be perfectly honest, we're not completely sure. It is probably a parallel universe, a very close analogue to Earth-as-we-know-it. It is, however, an 'Earth' that lacks everything we might call 'civilization'. There are no people that we are aware of here. There are small animals of various types: raccoons, opossum, miniature horses, some birds perhaps, maybe snakes, but we haven't noticed any. There are trees and plants that seem to be similar verging on identical with trees and plants we know of. The terrain is roughly equivalent, but not close enough that you can be sure to find a mountain right here or a lake right there.

"There are forests, but there are no roads through the forests. There are mineral deposits, and you saw some of the gold we took out of here the other night. Because there are no roads, travel from place to place is a real chore. Oh, p.s.: there are no GPS satellites in orbit and your GPS doesn't work on this side of the gate."

"Holy crap," was all Steve could muster.

"So," Barbara continued, "your part in this is to provide the muscle for taking down the trees that need to be taken down, cutting roads through the forest where the trees used to be, and milling the logs to supply building material. Think you can handle that?"

Steve was still lost in a torrent of thoughts all fighting for the number-one spot in his consciousness and he barely heard Barbara's question. "Holy crap," he repeated, then Barbara's question popped into his mind. "Yeah, that's not a difficult assignment given that we have the talent to operate the equipment. I can, of course, and both of my boys are trained as well. Holy crap, we're looking at years of work, Barbara. You could be our only customer through the foreseeable future."

"The problem there," Ernie jumped in, "is that until we get some roads cut and some gold-extracting operations going, we have no capital with which to pay you. You'll get a share, of course, and if

your boys throw in with us, they'll each get one, too, but you can't work a placer until you can get to it and back with relative ease. We don't know how long that will take. As you pointed out the other day, we don't even have a survey to tell us what we're looking at. We need to solve that problem first, and we need to do it pretty quickly."

"How are you planning to get CATs and road graders in here?" Steve asked. "They won't fit through your doorway, you know."

"That's not a problem," Barbara assured him, "Paul says we need a portal thirteen feet high and twenty-two feet wide. We can do that. The problem is 'where do I put it?'"

"You put it right inside my main building where all the wheels are stored," Steve informed her. "Turn it on, roll the equipment through, turn it off."

"Problem solved," Paul smiled.

"I'll call my surveyor-friend and get him up here," Steve said. "We'll probably want to give him the same demo."

Leroy Starkweather, Professional Land Surveyor, absent-mindedly picked the phone from its cradle. "Starkweather Surveys," he answered the call.

"Leroy, when are you going to get yourself a secretary?" the caller demanded.

"When I have enough business to warrant it, Steve," he snapped back. "Right now, I'm wondering how I'm going to pay for my next meal. A secretary is the last thing on my mind."

"Oh, please," Steve Okambo chortled, "we both know your family's money would keep you well-fed even if you didn't have a single client. I am, however, about to make you an offer you can't refuse: a multi-year contract with payment as good as gold."

"Who's the client?" Leroy asked.

"Why don't you plan on coming up to my yard when you have a moment and I'll introduce you," Steve countered. "I think you'll find the project intriguing to say the least."

"When's good for you?" Leroy asked.

"I'm thinking you should probably drop everything, jump in your car, and get over here about five minutes ago," Steve told him.

"That good?" Leroy asked.

"That good," Steve confirmed.

Less than ten minutes later, Leroy Starkweather's car turned into 'Okambo and Sons'. Steve met him outside and escorted him in.

"Leroy, let me introduce my old friend and Marine buddy, Buck fitzGibbon, his daughter, Barbara, her beloved, Ernie, and their friend Paul. Barbara, why don't you take it from there."

"Thanks, Steve," Barbara stepped into the conversation. "Mr.

Starkweather, we are engaged on a project of undetermined magnitude other than that we know it is 'big'. We ourselves don't actually know what that means. We've asked Steve here to vouch for your abilities as a surveyor and, more importantly, your ability to retain confidential information. That's the part I'd like to verify independently. Mr. Starkweather, how good are you at keeping secrets?"

Leroy Starkweather was somewhat taken aback by this. "I have a government security clearance, if that's what you mean," he offered.

Barbara shook her head. "No. We're more interested in keeping secrets from the government. Do you think that might present a problem?"

"This isn't something illegal, is it?" Leroy asked.

Paul Gillman chortled. "Technically, no, although I'm sure I could locate someone in the government service who would dispute that. As far as we can determine we are breaking no laws that Congress or the Colorado legislature have made, or ever had or now have the authority to make. The future is another matter entirely. That said, we would still prefer not to have to argue the issue before a federal magistrate, so we're highly motivated to keep our mouths shut. We're looking for a surveyor who can be similarly motivated. So, I ask you Barbara's question again: how good are you at keeping secrets?"

Leroy looked at Steve Okambo for guidance. Steve just shrugged his shoulders. "My lips are sealed," Steve told him.

"Good enough for Steve," Leroy offered, "good enough for me. My lips are sealed as well."

Ernie flipped the power switch on and the frame turned into a Colorado winter afternoon. Leroy flinched and stepped back away from the frame as if he had been blown by the gust of wind that came through it. Buck and Barbara stepped through, followed by Steve, Paul, Leroy, and, finally, Ernie. Ernie turned to power the second gate 'on' and the image of Steve's Customer Presentation Center visible through the open portal immediately disappeared.

Leroy looked around, bewildered. As if to answer his unasked question, Paul started talking.

"We have here what appears to be... what *may* be an alternate Earth existing in an alternate universe. This other-Earth may be Earth of the far-distant past or Earth of the far-future or something else entirely. We don't know.

"What we do know, or suspect at least, is that there are no humans or human-like creatures here. It's effectively unpopulated save for a few small mammalian-appearing animals, plus assorted

insects and birds. The vegetation appears to be analogous to what you'd find in this part of Colorado and we suspect that in that part of this other-Earth corresponding to California you'll find redwood and sequoia."

Leroy held up his hand to put a stop to Paul's explanation.

"Stop me if I get this wrong," he began. "You want me to survey the entire Earth?"

"Not exactly," Barbara explained. "We need to get a rough picture — mountains, rivers, forests — for the land 25 miles out from Valmont — from right here."

"Do you know what you just asked me to do?" Leroy smiled. "You want me to survey an area that's roughly two thousand square miles. That's..." Leroy paused in thought as he did math in his head. "...something over a million acres, maybe one-and-a-half million acres. How many people do you think are going to be doing this surveying?"

Buck looked dismayed. "Well, Leroy, we were hoping that you'd be giving us answers instead of questions."

"It'll be just you, Roy," Steve suggested. "Is it possible?"

"Let me think on it and get back to you."

"Time is of the essence," Barbara told him.

4 - Cartography

Buck's phone rang. He pulled it from his shirt pocket and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

"You don't need a survey so much as you need a map," Leroy began. "From the map, we'll determine what in particular needs to be surveyed. It's madness to even think about surveying one-and-a-quarter million acres. Oh, by the way, that's what Barbara's talking about: 1,963.5 square miles, more or less which, at 640 acres to the square mile, comes out to 1,256,637 acres in *'a circle of radius 25 miles'*."

"That's the same problem," Buck mused. "Map or survey, we still have to have an image on paper that tells us *'make a road here'*. Am I missing something?"

"Yes," Leroy explained. "You don't need the fine detail a survey will give you for what you're going to be doing. You're not planning to build a high-speed six-lane superhighway with bridges over ravines and tunnels under mountains. You want to know which direction to point your equipment, and whether you'll find insurmountable obstacles along the way. For that, a map does just fine. A survey is, at this point, overkill."

"So, what are you telling us?" Buck asked, exasperated. "That we now need a mapmaker, a cartographer?"

"Heck, no," Leroy assured him. "I can do a map, and I've figured out how to do it pretty quickly and easily. All I need is a relatively flat and dry, grassy meadow as a starting point."

"How big?" Buck asked.

"Half-mile square should do it," Leroy told him.

"And I guess we find that by exploring?" Buck asked.

"I guess," Leroy confirmed.

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Barbara smiled when Buck explained to the others what they needed to do.

"That's not a big problem, Daddy," she told him. "In fact, it's pretty easy."

Buck looked bereft of ideas. He shook his head. Barbara continued.

"We'll put up a drone and have it done in a few hours."

A local hobbyist store had a suitable drone with an on-board camera. The camera could be rigged to display as part of the picture

the compass heading and altitude. It was perfect and it was — from their viewpoint — ridiculously inexpensive.

Examining the result on Steve's laptop, they all admired the images.

"That huge break in the trees is either a lake or a meadow. If the drone were higher we might have been able to see which. It looks to be about a mile or so southwest."

"Daddy, let's go check it out!" Barbara urged.

"We could send the drone," Ernie suggested.

"I'd rather see it with my own eyes," Barbara objected.

Buck thought about that for a moment. He now always carried a compass and it seemed to work reasonably well beyond the gate. He could blaze a trail with the KABAR on his belt so they would be able to find their way back to Steve's even if the compass turned out to be unreliable. There were still four hours of daylight left.

"Let's go," he agreed.

The four plunged through the gate and switched the far-side gate to isolate Steve's conference room, then took up a course to the south-southwest. Periodically, Buck would hack a piece of bark to indicate their path through the forest. After about a half-hour of plodding through deep layers of pine needles the forest suddenly ended at an ice-covered lake about three-quarters of a mile across to the far shore and perhaps a mile end-to-end.

"Not much of a meadow," Ernie suggested.

"OK," Paul agreed, "we'll keep looking. Let's head back."

Following the trail back was reasonably easy except for the fact that it was mostly uphill. Within the hour, they switched the far-side gate off and stepped into the conference room where they shut the near-side gate down as well.

"Heck, that's not a problem," Leroy told them. "Yeah, a lake is just fine, maybe better. It's hard to make a bad landing on a lake.

"What we will need is a road or a path wide enough to let us drag the airplane down to the lake."

"Airplane?" Ernie asked incredulously. "How are you going to get an airplane where we can roll it through a gate?"

Leroy chortled on the phone. "It's an ultralight. When your airplane only weighs three hundred pounds it's a simple matter to pop the wings off, throw the parts onto a trailer, and just haul it to wherever you want it and that includes Steve Okambo's place. The hard part will be dragging the parts a mile through forest to the place where it can be reassembled. We need a clear path twelve, maybe fifteen feet wide all the way to the lake. If there's no flat area on the shore that can be used as an assembly area you'll need to clear one,

maybe thirty by thirty."

The five: Barbara, Buck, Ernie, Paul, and Steve, huddled around the speakerphone in Steve's conference room discussing plans for the next day with Leroy Starkweather. Steve nodded at this last request from Leroy. It could take the better part of a day to locate or plat an assembly area on the lake shore as Leroy had requested. If it turned out there was a suitable area already in existence, they would merely adjust the route through the forest to go directly there. Otherwise, they would have to 'prep' a suitable area out of forest land by cutting down and removing trees, a much bigger job.

"OK, Leroy," Barbara agreed, "we'll get started on that right away. Start tearing your plane down. We'll plan on putting you in the air early the day after tomorrow." Steve nodded assent.

"See you then," Leroy agreed and dropped the connection.

"Ernie and I have the next task on the list: building the big gate," Barbara offered. "I think we better get started. Anyone who wants to help, you're welcome."

"I'll give you a hand," Steve told her. "I probably ought to know some of the background in case there's ever a failure."

"Oh, Steve," Ernie answered, "we better hope there's never a failure. These gates are dangerous when they're not carefully handled. The big one we're going to build against the far wall will be able to slice your machines like sandwich meat at the deli. The fewer people putting their hands to the equipment, the better. Barbara will give you another demonstration when we have it ready to power-up." Ernie turned to her and Barbara winked at him.

Then Barbara turned to Buck and Paul. "How soon can we get another exploratory trip down to the lake shore? We'll need to establish a route for Steve to start clearing trees as soon as possible."

Paul shook his head. "It'll be dark soon. I don't think it's a good idea to try to blaze a new path this late in the day. Let's do it first thing in the morning."

Barbara and Ernie contented themselves with placing the 'gadgets' on the back wall of Steve's garage. They performed a quick test to see if the gate would open and, satisfied, they pulled the batteries and called it a day.

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Bright and early Monday morning, the four drove to Steve Okambo's rental yard to begin their exploration. With the sun barely above the horizon, the five slipped through the gate to reconnoiter the area and set out a preliminary path to be cut through the forest by Steve's equipment. Following Buck's blazes of the previous day, they

quickly passed through the forest and arrived at the lake shore.

Scanning the area for a flat section of shoreline suitable for putting Leroy's airplane together, they found what appeared to be a large enough area, but it was across the lake on the other side.

"Well," Steve muttered, "we can cut enough trees right here to give Leroy a place to put his stuff together."

Barbara interrupted: "Or we can have him use the ice," she suggested as she stepped onto the frozen surface of the lake. The ice made no sound as she moved across it indicating that it was thick enough to support substantial weight.

"If he can," Paul added, "all we need is the road from here to the gate. Steve, what does it look like to you?"

"This is easy," Steve confirmed. "We'll get a team with chain saws in here, drop the trees off to the side, and grind the stumps as we go. We won't even have to drag the logs clear if we do it right, although we might want the wood for sale to the highest bidder. The stuff by the lake is pine, but closer to the gate it's black walnut. Black walnut is almost as expensive as gold when you can find it, which is 'almost never', and all of it looks pretty healthy to me. I'm amazed, too, because you never see black walnut in Colorado. It usually doesn't range this far west.

"I know a couple of woodworkers who'll pay top dollar for any of it we have to take down."

"Great!" Barbara said. "We've just started a barter economy on this side of the gate. Steve cuts wood for a road, sells the wood to aficionados to pay the cost of cutting down trees for the road."

Steve smiled. "Oh, that'll more than pay the cost of making a road," he told her. "Each of those trunks is probably worth \$20,000 apiece undressed. If we only drop twenty of them, I'll be surprised."

Ernie had an odd expression on his face. *Natural resources could be a very profitable business*, he thought.

From the lake back to the gate, they ran a strand of twine periodically dressed with yellow or white ribbons. Eight feet out from the central strand on either side outer strands marked the boundaries of the cut area. All trees inside the cut area would be felled and some of them, the black walnut, would be dragged back to the staging area near the gate to be later resold in private sales to woodworkers who could be personally vouched for by an already-trusted source. Black walnut 'poachers' were still dealt with harshly by law enforcement, and it would not be possible to adequately explain exactly where this black walnut came from without very unpleasant consequences.

A call to Leroy in the mid-morning had confirmed that Leroy was very pleased with an icy landing strip. Steve Jr. had cobbled together a sled that could be dragged behind any of the rough-terrain

vehicles.

By sundown Buck, Ernie, Barbara, Steve, Paul Gillman, and Steve's two sons had dropped every tree in the sixteen-foot-wide alley stretching from the gate to the lake shore. The stumps remaining had been reduced to nearly ground level and chemically treated to cause them to decompose. The path to the lake, just over three-quarters of a mile, was clearly visible through the forest and very close to plausibly being called 'a road' although still quite rough. They would be ready to start aerial mapping in the morning.

When Steve and his boys arrived to open for business the next morning, they found Leroy Starkweather waiting for them, the disassembled parts of a small plane on a trailer behind his SUV. They unlocked the gates and directed him to 'the big room'. By the time Barbara, Ernie, Buck, and Paul arrived, the parts of Leroy's airplane had been strapped to the sled for transport down to the lake. Ernie pulled a set of batteries from his duffel bag and connected them to the big gate.

With the big gate open, Danny cranked a bulldozer and rolled it through, dragging the sled behind. Once through, Ernie closed the gate and disconnected the batteries.

"Too much of a drain, running a gate this size," he explained.

"How much of a drain?" Steve Jr. asked.

"I don't know," Barbara admitted, "We've never measured it."

"Well, Barbara, after the demonstration you gave us yesterday, slicing a piece of steel re-bar clean in two, that strikes me as a little risky," Steve Jr. retorted. "I'd hate to have that gate snap closed as I'm driving a quarter-million dollars worth of equipment through, even if it didn't snap closed on me, personally."

"Agreed," Barbara said sheepishly. "Safety first. We'll pop a meter on it and check it periodically."

"The rest of them passed through using the much smaller gate in the Customer Presentation room where they joined Danny and the airplane. They all rode the sled down to the lake whereupon Leroy assigned them tasks to help him get the machine reassembled.

One task was to start a fire using wet wood and gasoline so that the column of smoke would tell Leroy where 'home' was.

Forty minutes from rolling through the gate, Leroy set the throttle and the choke. "Clear!" he ordered and all the others scampered to safety away from the now-dangerous propeller. Leroy spun the prop by hand and it caught on the first attempt.

"If I'm not back in fifty minutes send out a search party," he told them. Then he advanced the throttle until the air-bag pontoons under the plane began to slide across the surface of the frozen lake. A

minute later the plane lifted from the ice and Leroy began to spiral outward from the lake snapping pictures of the terrain from 800 feet every ten seconds.

At fifty-five minutes, just as everyone was starting to get worried, the muttering of Leroy's engine could be heard, and a few minutes later the spidery craft soared over the trees behind them and settled onto the ice. Safely down, Leroy turned the plane toward the smoky fire on the lake shore and skated back to his new home base.

"Interesting terrain," Leroy opined, "and I have lots of photos to illustrate it. If I estimated this correctly we should be able to print all these pictures and mosaic them into a pretty fair picture of what's out there. We'll know how to orient the pictures by the way the shadows fall.

"I only got about two miles out, about where Diagonal Highway would be, and there are a few big lakes in the area where I could put down in case of an emergency. I'm thinking this," he indicated the lake behind him, "is Valmont Reservoir or very near it, except that Valmont Reservoir is substantially larger than this lake. There's also a body of water north of here that looks to be in the right area for Boulder Reservoir but it has a different shape. There's a few more lakes, mostly small ones, that don't match anything I can think of in the area. Lots of forest, largely pine, although there's also a lot of deciduous trees judging from the bare branches I could see.

"I was also able to pick out pretty clearly the end-point for this road, which means I have a place I know matches with what's on the other side of the gate.

"I think it will take me a few days to pull this all together. Say, Thursday?"

"Thursday's good, but there's some specific information I'd like you to add to this as quickly as possible, Leroy," Barbara said. "I'd like Ernie to head back to his house and my Dad to head over to our claim and set smokers at both spots. Then, Leroy, I'd like you to photo-map the area between here and those two spots. Can you do that?"

"How long before the smokers are working?" Leroy asked.

Buck and Ernie looked at each other. "An hour?" Buck suggested.

"OK," Leroy agreed, "I'll make another run in an hour. Steve, send one of the boys back to wait for a call to tell us Buck and Ernie have finished. He can step through the gate and hit you on your walkie-talkie. No sense just loitering and using up gas until there's something for me to photograph."

Steve sent Danny back with Buck and Ernie to the gate where Ernie gave him just enough information to turn it on and off, then the

two set out for Ernie's house.

At Ernie's they grabbed two small camp stoves from the RV, went through Ernie's gate and set one afire in an open area where it would be unlikely to set other things ablaze. They left that stove quietly smoking and returned through the gate to the RV. Buck called Danny Okambo on his cell phone:

"There's a smoke signal at Ernie's place working right now. We're on our way to site 2 and will be there in fifteen minutes. Tell Leroy he can get started as soon as he wants."

Danny switched the gate on and popped through to deliver Buck's message to his father, then returned and waited for Buck's second call. At the lake shore, Leroy refueled the plane and spun the prop. The craft taxied out across the lake and lifted.

As soon as Leroy had altitude he located a faint column of smoke in the west-southwest, turned the nose toward it, and began taking pictures. As he circled the area, photographing it thoroughly, another column of smoke began appearing off to the north-northwest and Leroy took up a new heading for that, photographing as he went. Over the second site, he waved at Ernie below him and Ernie waved back. After circling the area twice and taking lots of pictures, Leroy headed back toward the Valmont site, continuously photographing the terrain along the way.

With the plane secured to a tree near the shore and a tarp covering it to protect it from other hazards, Leroy packed up his camera and the group headed back to the gate taking the bulldozer with them.

"As soon as Leroy has a decent map we can use," Barbara told Steve and his boys, "I would like to get roads cut from here to each of those other sites. From there we can branch out in whichever directions seem worthwhile or profitable. What are we going to need in terms of manpower to get that handled?"

"It all depends on what Leroy's map shows is between here and there," Steve Jr. told her. "If there's water or rough terrain, it's a different matter than if it's just forest. If there is significant open space like a pasture it will be easier. We'll just have to wait and see."

"OK," she responded, "but it's important that we start extracting value from this project. None of us can live on dreams. We need to begin producing gold and selling it to fund the rest of the operation, agreed?"

They all nodded their understanding.

5 - Pioneers

On Wednesday, Oscar Gruder delivered some good news to Barbara.

"Pete Cosgrove called me last night and bumped his offer to sixty percent," he told her. "In addition, I have also talked to two other refiners, smaller, of course, than Freeport-McMoRan, and both are willing to buy at seventy-five percent of market, no questions asked. So, we have several alternatives available at this point. It's now up to you."

"That's great, Oscar," Barbara gushed. "How will we ever repay you?"

"Well, maybe you can let me have the next bend downstream."

"That might be a possibility, Oscar," Barbara answered, "if you're serious."

"I was thinking it might be a fun way to spend my summer vacation, pulling a couple of thousand dollars in gold out of a stream," Oscar replied. "Wouldn't want to do it in winter the way you did, but it could be pretty pleasant as a warm-weather hobby."

"I'll mention it to the partners," she assured him.

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Wednesday afternoon all of those who had signed on at the VFW hall the previous Friday assembled at Okambo and Sons for the promised project briefing. Twenty-two people showed up, two others having changed their minds over the weekend.

"Thank you all for coming," Barbara began. "We're short two people who had second thoughts and decided against joining us, but we're going to make do with what we've got. *'What we've got'* is the seven of us up here: me, my father: Buck fitzGibbon, my husband: Ernie Walsh, Paul Gillman, Steve Okambo that many of you know, and Steve's two boys, Steve Jr. and Danny." Each of them waved as their names were mentioned. "There's one other who is not with us today because he's hard at work on another aspect of the project, Leroy Starkweather. That's eight plus twenty-two of you newcomers — thirty in all.

"There may be more in the future. That decision rests with three people: myself, my father, and Ernie Walsh. For the moment, there are the thirty of us present.

"That's probably not enough to do what we think needs doing,

but it's a start. The thirty of us will be making policy that anyone new will have to agree to as they join the project. That's why it's very important that we all keep our eyes on the prize and not make short-sighted decisions. Now, before we get started, does anyone have any questions that may have developed since Friday?"

One man raised his hand and Barbara recognized him.

"Friday someone asked Buck how big the project was and Buck wouldn't answer because he said he couldn't estimate it. I'm thinking if it can't be estimated easily, this must be a pretty big project, and you just said a crew of thirty probably isn't going to be able to handle it. I'd like to give Buck another opportunity to make a ballpark estimate of the project."

Buck cleared his throat and answered the questioner: "In about two minutes you're going to see why I was so reluctant about exposing my estimate. I hope you can wait that long."

The questioner smiled his agreement to wait a little longer.

"One last thing," Barbara said as Ernie hooked up the battery pack to the big gate. "I just want to hear everyone say out loud that they still promise that all of this is strictly confidential, that no one outside the project will be told anything, not your wives, not your girlfriends, and especially not acquaintances. Are we all still on the same page?" There was a muttering of agreement. "Raise your hand if you're not in 100% agreement," she directed. No hands were raised.

"OK, Ernie, light it up," Barbara told him. Ernie flipped the power switch and a portal thirteen feet high and twenty-two feet wide popped open before the assembled crew. There were gasps of astonishment from every mouth. "Everybody, follow me," Barbara commanded and she marched through the portal. Twenty-two new recruits followed with Buck, Steve and his sons, and Paul Gillman bringing up the rear. As Paul Gillman crossed the threshold, Ernie glanced at the newly-installed battery-level gauge and switched power off, then used the small gate in the conference room to join the others.

Barbara turned to face the group of new recruits. "What you're looking at, what you're standing on, is a planet. It's Earth, we think, and that's about all we know or think we know.

"This land is very much like the land you were standing on a minute ago before you walked through the portal, but it's different. Beyond that portal is a city with city streets and people and cars and stores where you can buy bread and milk and lumber and newspapers and gasoline for your vehicles, where you can dial a number on your cell phone and call your cousin in Topeka, where you can watch football on Monday night TV, where the GPS in your car will tell you where you are if you get lost.

"None of that is true here, thirty feet away from where you

started two minutes ago. There are no roads except this one," she pointed at the logging road down to the lake, "that we cut the day before yesterday. There are no grocery stores, no GPS satellites in orbit, no cell phone providers, no nothing, in fact, that you might think of as 'civilization'. As far as we can tell, the entire planet is primitive, just as you see it here.

"Thirty-five billion acres. That's 'billion' with a 'B'." Barbara started walking toward the lake and everyone followed. She continued speaking to the group:

"That's more land than any of us, or even the whole bunch of us, can imagine what to do with. That's why Buck said that the number of shares is virtually limitless. We are the pioneers and this is our frontier. For the next few hundred years, I would guess, we'll be building all the stuff that we're used to having on the other side of the portal: streets and roads, houses, stores, farms, factories, airports, telephone companies. The list is longer than any of us can comprehend.

"The first things we have to build are roads and shelters. As you can see, we've got natural resources we can't even inventory. Forests by the square mile, lumber by the board mile, but it still has to be felled and milled. We could use people with sawmill experience as much or maybe more-than people with heavy equipment experience.

"We have gold, silver, and lots of other deposits just lying there waiting to be picked up, but we don't yet have an economy that can handle it. *That* only exists on the other side of the gate. We can take minerals and sell them out there," Barbara gestured toward to now-deactivated gate, "but we must be careful, at least for the time-being. We can't sell tons of gold without attracting attention we really really don't want.

"We can't get to the gold and silver and what-not without roads, and we can't work a claim through the winter without a place to get warm at night, and 'staying warm' is just one part of the problem. 'Food' is the other part. We'll have to import everything we need and we'll need to be able to pay for it. It's something of a circular problem, as you can see.

"The task in front of us is to build a civilization from the ground up. At the start we'll need doers, people who can cut trees and haul logs and build log cabins and make roads through the forest to get to streams where the gold hides. Soon, we'll need someone to operate a general store for the benefit of people who don't see this as 'just another day job'.

"There's *lots* to be done. There are so many things to be done that it isn't possible to make a comprehensive list. Yes, we know *some* of the things we need done, but we don't know *everything*.

"If you have equipment or experience that can be used here, and you have the will to win, I'm sure you will do well. If you just want to work and earn a very good living, there's a place for you as well.

"Welcome to The New World."

In time, they came to the lake, admired it, then turned around and headed back uphill toward their entrance point.

"Now are there any questions?" Barbara asked as they trudged upslope.

"I've got a question," one of them started. "I turned out for this because I was unemployed and I do have a little experience with construction equipment, but you mentioned back there about needing a sawmill. I have a small portable sawmill that I can haul behind my pick-up. What's the possibility of me bringing in my sawmill and setting up shop to mill all these logs I see here?" he indicated the mostly-pine logs that had been felled for the lake road.

"We'll be talking more about that when we get back up top, but let me just get a quick 'read' from the others. What's your name?"

"I'm Josh," he replied. "Josh Troon."

"Well, everybody, what do you think? If Josh gets his way, he won't be running a tractor or a road grader or a chain saw, but he'll be providing dressed lumber for the houses some of you may build. Is that worth a share?"

"If he gets a share, he'll be able to stake a claim and work it, is that right?" someone asked.

"Yes," Barbara replied, "that's the way we think it will work out."

"So, he doesn't drive a grader or cut trees or grind stumps but he still gets to work a claim," another mused. "What's to prevent him doing nothing except working his claim? What do we do for lumber then?"

"Good question!" Barbara exclaimed, "Does anyone have an answer?"

There was a 'pregnant pause' while everyone considered this before Paul Gillman stepped into the conversation.

"There is an answer for this," he told them. "It comes down to this: what is dressed lumber *worth* to you? Yes, Josh will have a claim. You '*prevent him working his claim*' by giving him a price for his labor and skill that makes him want to run a sawmill instead of panning gold out of a stream. What price is that? I don't know. You and Josh work it out."

"Suppose the lumber he mills is junk?" the first asked. Another long pause.

"Well," Paul answered thoughtfully, "I guess you could always buy your own sawmill and do your own milling if you think Josh is giving you a bad deal. If you're better than he is at it, you might not have to work your own claim. Just live on the price you get for your very good lumber."

"I have a suggestion," Barbara interrupted. "There is a risk that Josh will perform no service for the group yet derive benefit from the share he gets just for signing on. Can we agree as follows: Josh, you can bring your sawmill through and produce lumber from logs for whatever price you can bargain for, but if you're not using the sawmill... if, say, you're down in the stream panning for gold instead, then anyone who needs it must have access to it for doing their own milling. Is that fair to all around?"

There was a muttering of agreement among most if not all of the group. "That's fair," Josh agreed.

The group arrived at the smaller door-sized entrance point and Barbara turned toward them again.

"Unless anybody wants to see more — and I have to tell you, there's not a lot more to see here — let's head back." They all nodded their agreement. "One other thing," she added, "stay away from the edges of the frame. It's very dangerous," and with that she picked up a length of branch from the ground and whisked it against the gate-edge which snapped it neatly in two. "It will do that to an arm or leg or neck just as easily," she warned them.

They all trooped into the conference room and gathered around the table, most of them standing.

"So," Buck began, "this answers the question 'why you won't get paid right away'. You won't get a regular paycheck because the infrastructure doesn't exist to generate a paycheck. In fact, when you 'get paid' it will be because you collected your own pay out of an icy-cold stream or, in Josh's case, because somebody who panned some gold traded it to him for squared-away lumber. That's the idea behind 'a share': it's your ticket to make whatever you want of it."

"Where do you sell gold dust?" one asked.

"We have someone working on that as we speak," Barbara answered. "The last word I have is that a broker has been located who will pay 75% of market, no questions asked."

"Questions?" the same person asked. "What sort of questions would be asked if we went somewhere else?"

"For one thing," Ernie explained, "a regular gold dealer would want your business ID number so that they could issue a proper IRS form 1099 for the transaction. When you sell raw gold, it's income to you that you are expected to report on your 1040. Whether you do or not is your business, not ours, but if you do register as a gold

producer, an IRS auditor may ask to see your claim to verify it's producing what you say it is. That might be a problem for you. It would *absolutely* be a problem for us."

The man nodded. "So, somebody else gets a quarter of everything we produce," he replied.

"No," Ernie explained, "only the gold, and only the gold we sell out there." He gestured toward the street.

"What else is there?" another asked.

"Eventually, we'll have a real functioning economy here," Paul Gillman started. "We'll need a medium of exchange. Gold makes a great deal of sense as the 'currency' here since everyone will have the ability to manufacture their own money, but gold can't be everything. There has to be someone providing food, and someone providing fuel, and someone, maybe Josh here, providing building material and hardware. At least to begin with, we will have to get those commodities from this side of the portal and we'll have to find a way to pay for them.

"Starting tomorrow we'll be cutting a road... two roads, actually, one of which will lead to a known source of gold. When it's complete we'll begin to produce gold that can be converted to cash that can be converted to all those things we need.

"It would be a good thing if, starting tomorrow, Josh begins milling logs."

"Tomorrow?" Josh interjected. "I had planned to start today."

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"You know," Barbara began when the four of them: Barbara, Buck, Ernie, and Paul sat down to dinner, "the more I think about it, the more I believe we need to bring Oscar Gruder into the cabal." Ernie snickered at her use of the word.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"'Cabal' has lots of negative connotations," Ernie explained. "You say 'cabal' and people will think we're doing something naughty."

"Well, we are, aren't we?"

"No," Ernie replied, "I don't think we are. We're just safeguarding an asset that can easily be taken from us if we're not careful about what we do and how we do it. In that respect, a little secrecy is a good thing.

"But I won't *cavil* over your use of 'cabal'," he finished with a smirk.

"Well, as I was saying: I think we need to bring Oscar on board. He knows lots about minerals, not just gold, and by not having an expert 'on staff' as it were, I think we'll be overlooking a great

many golden and other-than-golden opportunities.”

“I agree,” Buck said. “It occurred to me when you brought that up that we may be able to trade refined gold (instead of cash) for the stuff we need to import. If we can find a fuel distributor or a food distributor, for instance, who wants gold, maybe as a hedge against inflation, and will take it in place of cash, we may be able to bypass those gold brokers for a portion, at least, of the transactions. That will save us a little and make that gold go farther than it otherwise would.

“‘Refined gold’ implies the services of a refiner, and I suspect Oscar could fit into that shoe.”

“That’s a great idea,” Paul agreed. Ernie nodded his head. Barbara reached for her phone and began dialing.

“Hi, Oscar,” she began when Nell Gruder had handed the phone off to her husband. “I talked it over with my partners and we’d like to bring you in as a full partner. You’ve already done a great service acting as our lead-man, and we feel that having your expertise available for the future would be invaluable. If it’s alright with you, we’d like to do a deep briefing on our project at your earliest convenience. How does that sound?”

“Wow,” Oscar replied, “I was half-joking when I said I wanted to stake a claim, but if it’s really a possibility, then yes, it sounds great to me. I can’t wait to tell Nell.”

“Well, Oscar,” Barbara cautioned him, “we’d much prefer that the less said outside the immediate group, the better. If it’s possible to let Nell remain essentially uninvolved, let’s keep her uninvolved, shall we?”

There was a long pause on Oscar’s end of the phone. Finally, he spoke: “I have no secrets from Nell, never have. I don’t want to start now.”

Then it was Barbara’s turn to think silently, which she did for a noticeably long time. Barbara glanced from Ernie’s face to Buck’s and to Paul’s as she thought. “Perhaps we ought to issue you two half-shares,” she said finally.

“Shares?” Oscar asked. “Shares in what?”

“It’s bigger than just gold, Oscar, much bigger. Rather than describe it over the phone, perhaps you and Nell could make the trip back up here to Boulder and we can show you.”

“You mean ‘without blindfolds’?” Oscar asked.

“Yes, Oscar, this time it will be without blindfolds.”

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As Oscar and Nell, Barbara, Ernie, Buck, and Paul made their way toward the Okambo and Sons conference room, Barbara began

her pre-briefing briefing for the two newcomers.

"What we have here... what we're about to show you is confidential in the severest meaning of the word. If either of you cannot promise that what you're about to see will remain absolutely secret, we can still call off the briefing and all things will revert to the *status quo ante*. Is that agreeable to both of you?"

Both Oscar and Nell muttered their promise to maintain the project's confidentiality. Nell, of course, already knew that 'the project' involved gold, the only thing that Oscar knew about it, and she already knew from Oscar that an elevated level of secrecy permeated the entire topic so promising to maintain the confidentiality Oscar had promised them was easy for her. If it was secret for Oscar, it was secret for Nell.

"Very well," Barbara concluded as they stood before the gate that was now just a pattern of devices taped against the far wall, "behold the New World," and she powered the gate on.

Neither Oscar nor Nell said a word. Indeed, they were both rendered speechless, literally, by the sight that had magically appeared before them.

"Follow me, please," Barbara instructed and she slipped through the gate. Oscar and Nell followed as directed, then Buck, Paul, and Ernie who turned and activated the paired gate.

"Where... where are we?" Nell asked.

"Exactly the right question, Nell," Barbara replied smugly. "The answer is that we don't know, exactly. We believe it to be a twin of Earth in some sort of parallel universe. It's not a precise analogue, but it's close: mountains generally about where you'd expect them, valleys ditto, lakes and streams more-or-less so, depending on 'what' we have no idea, continents and oceans, we suspect (but have no evidence yet) will follow that same rough pattern. More interestingly, it is *absolutely primitive*. The flora seems much more Earth-like than the fauna which is charitably called 'sparse'. Most interestingly, as Pete Cosgrove remarked, it is 'filthy' with mineral resources.

"That is why, Oscar, there was never a possibility Pete Cosgrove would jump our claim: his world doesn't have the site you and he examined last week."

"That's the reason for the blindfolds," Oscar declared, "to keep us from seeing that we were stepping through that..."

"Portal' or 'gate'," Ernie interjected.

"...to keep us from seeing that we were stepping through a portal between the two worlds," Oscar concluded.

"Exactly correct," Paul told him.

"Now to get down to business," Paul continued. "We have a whole raft of problems that we never anticipated all of which must be

solved either in the near-term or the relatively-near-term. The most pressing problem is funding because we need lots of material unavailable in this world and which will take years (if not centuries) to develop unaided. We can pay for it in gold and silver if we can get the gold and silver out of the ground expeditiously. That's proving to be a bigger problem than we planned for. If we need cash instead of ingots we can convert raw gold to cash thanks entirely to you, but we can short-circuit that process if we can find suppliers who will take refined gold, but that raises the question of 'who will do the refining?'"

Oscar interrupted. "I can refine gold and other metals," he said. "That's one of the things I *teach* at CSM."

"And that, Oscar, is why you are here," Paul concluded. "We want you to be our refiner-of-choice and our mint, taking the gold that comes from the streams, banking it for the 'miners', accounting for it, and issuing standard-weight coin so that people here will have the capital to trade among themselves."

"Of course, you will be paid for this service by skimming a small percentage 'off the top', and you and Nell will have a share entitling you to claim a site from which you may extract all the wealth you care to. Our hope is that you will also *teach* the rest of us the mining trade."

Oscar's eyes lit up, then fell again.

"It's perfect for me," he told them, "but it's a shame to waste a perfectly good petroleum geologist panning gold out of a stream."

"A petroleum geologist?" Paul stopped him. "Who's a petroleum geologist?"

"Nell," Oscar told him, pointing his thumb over his shoulder toward his wife.

"Maybe we should up that to two full shares," Barbara suggested. "Otherwise these two might move to west Texas. We can afford to have Nell turn into a new Rockefeller, but we can't afford to lose Oscar."

Nell shrugged, but with a smile on her face. "Pipelines," she said.

"Oh, God," Ernie muttered, "not another problem."

6 - Exploits

Leroy Starkweather accompanied by the three Okambos strolled into the conference room where the Gruders were seated. Leroy had a roll of paper under his arm.

Paul looked at the roll and pointed. "Is that our map?" he asked.

"It's your map," Leroy confirmed, and with that he unrolled the paper across the conference room table.

It was a two-layered map. The base was paper and was a large-scale standard topographical map of the Boulder-Valmont corridor. Affixed at one edge was a glassine sheet on which Leroy had plotted the topographical features of Earth-II that he had been able to derive from the 485 images he had snapped while flying above it. The whole group, all ten of them, gathered around the table and leaned over to get a closer look.

"Here's where we are right now," Leroy pointed at the map and drew a red arrow on the glassine overlay with a marker. "Here's the lake, and you can see the road that connects the two.

"This is site 1", he continued marking and pointing, "and site 2. My recommendation for the route from here to those two spots is this," and he drew a line on the glassine sheet that angled west-northwest toward site 2 and changed course a quarter-mile from it southwest almost straight to Ernie's house.

"That gives us just a single road to cut for the bulk of the distance, with just another quarter-mile to connect them. Much of it is meadowland so there's no road-building necessary for those sections beyond marking the direction to the next cut-area, and there'll be surface indications of that pretty quick, I guess. The route between site 1 and site 2 is about twice the straight-line distance between them, but nobody's going to be walking it, I suppose. We should think about buying a few ATVs for getting around out there. Since those are all gasoline-powered, we may also want to create a couple of fuel dumps strategically scattered around. Wouldn't do to run out of gas, especially if the sun is low.

"Total cutting, if I have it calculated correctly, is about a mile-and-a-quarter, give or take. The way it's laid out, however, means that you'll only be able to use a second crew for a very short stretch of it. You said you cut the road to the lake in a day and that was through heavy forest. You may be able to do this piece in about the same time."

"That's great!" Paul congratulated Leroy. "Steve when can we

get started on this?"

A blare of horns in the yard drew the attention of Danny Okambo and he left to find out what was causing it.

"I don't see why we can't put a crew on it immediately," Steve answered. "Let's call a few of the volunteers and see if we can't rustle up enough manpower to start cutting." With that he took out his cell phone and a contact list of the participants and started dialing.

Danny Okambo returned and announced that Josh Troon had arrived with his sawmill-on-a-trailer. "Ernie, can we open the big gate to let him tow it through?" Ernie and Danny left to assist Josh while Buck, Barbara, Paul, and Steve Jr. started calling in 'the crew'.

By noon, men with hardhats and chainsaws were showing up armed with lunch bags from all the best-known fast- and not-so-fast-food joints in the area and were wolfing down the last meal they would have until sundown. The sound of wood being sawn reverberated through the air. Steve and his sons had refueled the heavy equipment and moved it into place beyond the portal where they stood ready to make the push westward toward site 2.

Leroy briefed the crew chief (whom the men had selected from among themselves) and provided him with a suitable compass for setting the route.

"We want you to cut a line roughly 280° magnetic from here to the next break in the trees, about a half-mile," Leroy instructed. "We're counting on having that cut finished by sundown. The logs can be loaded on a sled and brought back to Josh for milling. There's no need to sort them by species, but you'll need a gang to lop the branches before they can be loaded on the sled. Here's a radio for you to call back for any equipment or help you need." Leroy handed him a walkie-talkie. "Any questions?"

"280°," the crew chief confirmed. "Do you want us to stop when we hit the break?"

"That depends on what time you get there," Leroy told him. "If you hit the break before sundown, continue at 290° on the other side of the meadow. But safety first. There are no doctors or hospitals here. We can't afford a casualty."

"Gotcha," the crew chief acknowledged.

He snagged a passing worker and handed him the compass and a ball of twine. "Bob, take this twine and compass and start laying a path through there," he gestured toward the west, "at 280° magnetic. Come back when you run out of twine."

A feller-buncher was rolled to the edge of the forest and began dropping trees at the crew chief's direction. As each trunk was laid to the side, the chainsaw operators started trimming so that the logs

could be dragged back to the sled for transport back to the sawmill. Behind the feller-buncher, a stump grinder turned what was left of the trees at ground-level to wood chips.

Barbara and Ernie made themselves useful at the sawmill by feeding scrap wood into a chipper. They had accumulated an impressive pile of mulch by 4 o'clock that afternoon. Very little of the black walnut, of course, went to the chipper. That was laid aside if the piece were anything but a twig. Even the smaller pieces could be turned into decorative and useful (not to mention 'beautiful') artifacts in the hands of skilled craftsmen. Steve Okambo selected two substantial branches of black walnut and quickly trimmed them down for ease of carrying.

"I might as well see what this stuff is worth out there," he told Ernie and turned toward the portal.

Behind them, Josh Troon, now the sole proprietor of Troon's Mill, was pushing pine logs into a band saw that had not stopped humming since he turned it on four hours prior. There were several neatly-stacked piles of 2x6's, 2x8's, and 2x10's along with substantial quantities of 2x4's, 4x4's, and 4x6's.

Leroy's walkie-talkie crackled and a voice commanded: "Leroy, come back."

He pulled the device from its holster and keyed the TALK button: "What's up?"

"We're about to break out of the forest into the first meadow," the voice told him. "We'll start cutting at 290° magnetic in about fifteen minutes.

"OK," Leroy acknowledged. "Safety first and good work."

"How far to the next meadow?" the voice asked.

"You won't get to it today," Leroy warned. "It's a shade longer than the cut you just made. It would take until 8 or 9 o'clock tonight, and I don't want anyone cutting in the dark. Another hour at most, then wrap it up for the day. We'll restart at sun-up."

"Roger that," the voice confirmed, "one hour then wrap."

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Steve Okambo wandered into the conference room. On his face was a 'dazed' expression. Danny took one look at his father and rushed to him.

"Pop, are you alright?" he asked with much concern in his voice.

"We should forget about the gold and just harvest all the black walnut we can find," he told his son. Steve drew a check from his pocket and handed it to Danny as Paul Gillman arrived at his side.

Danny looked at the check, made payable to 'Okambo and Sons' in the amount of \$300 dollars. "Is this for the wood you sold?" he asked his father.

Steve nodded. "Two scraggly branches, probably not two board feet between them, and a woodworker friend gave me that without blinking," Steve said quietly. "He asked if I had more and I told him we probably had between a hundred thousand to a quarter-million board feet in trunks in the twenty-plus inch range. He almost wet himself with excitement."

"Damn!" Paul exclaimed, "what's the good stuff worth?"

"I asked him," Steve continued. "He said mills pay upwards of a Grand per prime board foot. Do you recall me saying the other day each of those trunks might be worth twenty to thirty thousand apiece? That was laughably low. Some of those trunks are near two feet across and fifty feet tall. The big ones might bring a half million each if they're carefully cut.

"We probably shouldn't lay a saw on any of them. Let the professional mills have the stuff the way God designed it." Paul and Danny nodded in agreement.

"Do we have a lead for selling the stuff?" Paul asked.

"I got the address of a woodworkers' specialty mill from my acquaintance. I'll contact them tomorrow and see if I can develop a working relationship. The information came with a price," Steve smirked. "My friend, Karl, only gave me the name on condition I give him right of first refusal. I suspect he'll refuse anything that looks like a whole tree, but he'll appreciate any branches we're inclined to let go at bargain prices." They all smiled.

"Yeah," Paul agreed, "I suppose we can afford to be generous in that case. Did he say what those branches were *worth*?"

"Sort of," Steve told them. "I asked him what would be a good price for those two chunks of wood. He asked, 'good price for the buyer or good price for the seller?' and I let him name his price. When he offered me \$300, I near fell over. He said he felt bad taking advantage of me like that, but he really wanted that walnut and \$300 was all he could spare. He said I could probably have gotten \$800 for them from any good mill, \$700 from *anybody*.

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At break of day the next morning work crews showed up at Steve Okambo's and Ernie, who had spent the night in the RV parked inside the compound, was ready to open the portal and let them through. All of them had been warned to get a good night's sleep and, after a long half-day of back-breaking labor yesterday, all of them had

taken that advice to heart.

Now, with chain saws freshly oiled and sharpened, with spare fuel for the long day ahead, with logging trucks fully fueled and ready, with good breakfasts under their belts and lunch pails safely stowed in the refrigerator in Steve Okambo's office, they all hitched rides on the motors as they headed out to pick up cutting where they left off last evening.

By 8am the sound of trees falling could be heard all the way back to Troon's Mill. That is, it *could have been heard* had not the band saw been doing its work and making a great deal of noise doing it.

It made sense for Josh to spend this time making lumber. There were no roads to take anyone where they might start to work a claim and Josh wouldn't have known what to look for in any case. Thus, the best use of his time right now was to build up an inventory of lumber in the most useful dimensions. Then when gold did start dribbling out of the stream beds and people started thinking seriously about having a place to call 'home' on this side of the gate, there would be material to make those thoughts real. The ready availability of tons of freshly-cut pine was a gift and Josh was not about to pass it up. The band saw kept up its steady hum punctuated now and then by a whine as a log was fed down the cutting trough. The piles of cut lumber grew steadily.

Around noon, Leroy's walkie-talkie barked at him: "Leroy, come back." He acknowledged the call and Randy, the crew chief for the first crew, reported that the road would break into the second meadow in ten to twenty minutes. "Our next cut is southwest, 225°, to site 1," the crew chief told him. "You should prep the second crew and brief them for the cut to site 2."

"OK," Leroy told him. "The second crew is ready to roll. They'll be there and ready to cut about the time you break out into the open. Safety first. Good luck."

"Roger that," the crew chief acknowledged.

Leroy waved at Steve Okambo and Steve headed towards Leroy. "What?" Steve demanded. "You're slowing us down."

"The first crew is..." Leroy began but Steve interrupted him.

"...about to break out into the second meadow. I know. All the walkie-talkies are on the same frequency. Danny's bringing up the second feller and Steve Jr. and I are working 'clean up' with six others. What else?"

"Nothing," Leroy told him. "It sounds like you have it all covered. Just remember..."

"Yep," Steve stopped him. "Safety first." Leroy smiled.

The first crew cut the quarter-mile through sparse pine forest to Ernie's house in a little under two hours. Meanwhile, the second crew was cutting a quarter-mile path through much denser birch forest to site 2, the stream where Gruder Sluice #2 waited for someone to put it to work. By 2:40 Danny Okambo dropped the last tree keeping them from the stream. He dropped the birch trunk off to the side behind the feller and shut the motor off.

"Leroy, come back," he spoke into the walkie-talkie.

"Danny," Leroy started, "how's it going?"

"We're at the stream. Clear path to site 2," Danny reported.

"Good," Leroy acknowledged. "Cut a path upstream on whatever course seems easiest to you. Randy, take your crew over to site 2 and cut a path downstream on any easy route. We'll cut 'til 5 o'clock then call it a day."

"5 o'clock, roger," Randy answered.

"5 o'clock, roger," Danny echoed.

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By 5 o'clock when the two crews knocked off and headed back to the portal, there were cleared paths in the forest leading upstream and downstream each about one quarter-mile. At the end of each path, the crews had also cut turn-around areas that one day might become homesites. At the junction, another open area had been cut and birch logs, trimmed and topped, lay stacked in neat piles. The birch cut in the making of those paths had been, for the most part, left where they fell.

As the crews reassembled at the big gate to take the equipment through for refueling and other ordinary maintenance, several of the crew members approached Buck.

"When we cut through to the stream, we saw a... I don't know what it was... a wooden thing on the shore. Is that your claim where you took that gold?"

"That's our claim," Buck confirmed, "And the thing you saw there was probably our sluice."

"Is that what you use to get the gold?" the fellow asked.

"Yes," Buck told him. "You shovel some riverbed into the hopper and then pour water in slowly as you rock it from side to side. The water washes the silt and gravel away and the gold, being heavier, settles into the grooves in the sluice. When it gets thick enough, you manually separate the gold from the not-gold. That's all there is to it."

"Where did you get your sluice?"

"Built it," Buck crowed, "from plans we got from Oscar Gruder.

You can have a copy of the plans if you want to build your own."

"Thanks," the fellow said. "That looks like a really clever way to do it."

Another said: "There's lots of logs just laying around where we dropped them. Is that stuff available for house building? Can we just take what we need?"

"Josh Troon is running a sawmill over here," Buck motioned toward Josh's bandsaw, "and he'll turn any of that into dressed lumber for a fee. If you want to saw your own, I guess that's OK. A little competition never hurt anybody."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a log cabin: notch the logs, stack 'em in place, use mud plaster to fill in the chinks. I wouldn't need dressed lumber for any of that except maybe the door."

Buck looked around at the group. "Are you planning to do that by yourself?"

"There's three of us who have some experience putting log cabins together. We think we can do it and plan on knocking out one for each of us," the leader informed Buck. "Add a wood burning stove and you've got a pretty nice wilderness cabin."

"How long do you think it will take you to complete a cabin?" Buck asked, an idea forming in his head.

"We figure with the three of us at it full-time, maybe three or four days." The others nodded in agreement.

"So," Buck addressed him, "three of us took almost nine Troy out of that stream in a full week, seven days, of hard work. 'Four days' comes to about four and a half, maybe five ounces of gold. Would you build me one for five ounces?"

The three each looked from one to the other assessing the others' moods and finally one spoke: "For five ounces, yours will be the fourth cabin we build, you supply your own stove," he told Buck.

"Damn right," Buck agreed, "I sure don't want mine to be the first one you build." They all laughed and shook Buck's hand sealing the deal.

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The group always held a daily de-briefing session after work shut down. It was a chance for everyone to say what (if anything) had gone wrong that day and to suggest ways to keep wrong things from continuing to go wrong. It rarely went beyond fifteen minutes because there just wasn't much of anything that wasn't going smoothly on the far side of the gate. Steve Okambo was immensely pleased that everyone who *claimed* to have heavy equipment experience actually *had* it. No one was doing things with his very expensive motors that

warranted a complaint although there had been two instances where he took an operator aside and said: "I wish you wouldn't do that to my machines."

Tonight's de-briefing would break the mold.

"I have a problem," Walt Clancy started. Everyone turned to him for an explanation. "My wife is starting to ask where I'm spending all my time these days. My agreement with all of you is that I can't tell her. That's the problem. When I don't bring home a paycheck to compensate for all the time I've been absent-without-explanation it's going to get even more difficult." There was a murmur of what may have been agreement.

"Some of us may one day decide to cross through for the last time — not go back — ever. She'll definitely have to be told before then. I think this is a problem we have to solve very soon." Many of the men nodded their agreement. Clearly, this was a topic that weighed heavily on many of them.

Barbara looked at Ernie and Buck who both wore expressions not capable of misinterpretation: *You're in charge. It's your decision.*

Barbara stood and the room fell silent. "I agree," she told them. The tension in the room eased immediately.

"We don't know who all these new people will be, but I agree because within the past two days we did add a husband-and-wife team to the crew: Oscar and Nell Gruder. Oscar is a hard-rock geologist at the Colorado School of Mines and will be very useful to us as we ramp up gold extraction operations. The sluice some of you saw at site 2 is actually Oscar's design and we can tell you from first-hand experience it works very well. Nell Gruder is a petroleum geologist not presently employed, but her field expertise will come in very handy in the future because Colorado also has oil reserves.

"So, yes, it's clear that we need to bring your families on board, if not *today*, then *soon* and so we had better address that problem or at least have a plan for addressing it. Any ideas?"

There was a long pause in the subdued conversations in the room before one of the men stood: "Suppose someone's got a family that's not interested? Not interested in 'pioneering'?" *Yeah*, a few of them muttered, *what then?*

"I presume you're speaking of the situation where *he* wants to be a prospector and *she* wants to watch *General Hospital*." Some of them nodded. "There are a few ways I can see this playing out: first, *he* may decide to pan for gold and just go home every evening, or maybe every weekend, or maybe every Christmas, or maybe never. This is an odd situation we're in. There are no rules except the ones we make up as we go along, but I can tell you from the many spankings I received across my father's knee," Buck put his face in his

hand and chuckled, "that you can't go wrong if you always do what's right. We all know the difference between right and wrong. We're putting together a civilization over there," she gestured toward the gate, "based, so far as I can tell, on The Golden Rule: *don't do things to other people you wouldn't want other people doing to you.*

"Second, *he* may decide that it isn't worth the friction it might cause, and sell his share to someone else. But that person would have to be brought aboard if they weren't already. And then what might be the terms of such a sale? Those shares could be worth millions. Hell, they could be worth billions! What would you sell it for? Ten thousand dollars? Maybe five percent of the gross in perpetuity?

"And if it's five percent of gross or eight percent of gross, who's going to be the trusted umpire, the disinterested third-party, who says what that number is? Right now, we don't have any banks or courts or sheriffs. We're pushing the frontier inch by inch. Who's got time for that?

"OK, what did I miss? Are there other scenarios you can think of that I didn't hit?"

"Yeah," Clancy responded. "I don't think this applies to my situation, but what if she says '*yeah, she'll keep quiet about the operation*', and then changes her mind? If she doesn't have a share, she's got nothing to lose. Us? If we blab we lose the prospect of becoming, as you said, millionaires or billionaires. What of someone with no stake in the operation?"

Randy Burke, crew chief for crew #1, popped up. "When you brought us in, we all knew where we were: Steve Okambo's place, and we all saw the gate open for the first time all at once. You were trusting us much more, I think, than you had any reason to." Buck made to protest, but Randy kept talking. "There's no need to do that for everyone, especially not for someone who will be a stake-sharer, a member of the stake holder's family, say.

"We can give them a quick run-down face-to-face, then ask them if they want to see more. If they say 'yes' and promise confidentiality, we bring them blindfolded to here and walk them through the gate. If they say '*geez, very impressive. No, I'm not interested*', we blindfold them and take them home. Problem solved. They know very little more than what they knew yesterday, and they don't know enough to scotch it for the rest of us."

"Except," another protested, "that they know Dad heads out every morning and comes home at night wiped. If they really want to know where he's going, is it that hard to follow him? If they want to blow the whistle on us, don't they have enough information that the IRS would pay them handsomely?"

The room got very quiet.

Ernie rose to speak. "I don't want to go into a lot of detail. I won't go into a lot of detail, but take my word for it (and don't quote me): that person wouldn't live long enough to collect their reward. The IRS agent they blabbed to wouldn't live long enough to collect a pension. The IRS office that honchos that operation would be a parking lot within hours of anything like that happening.

"'Blowback' is a two-way street and it's a six-lane highway from our perspective."

The expressions on the faces looking up at Ernie were universally 'awe-stricken'.

"I like Randy's method," Buck told the group. "With a little refinement, I think we can make it work. How does this sound to you all?"

"Approach your families and say 'I'm involved in a confidential project that could be very profitable for us, and it's strictly legit. I think you could be useful to the project (and to my part in the project) and I'd like to bring you aboard if you can agree to some preconditions. The preconditions are that you may not divulge to anyone the nature of the project — that's why I've been so secretive lately — even if you look at it and decide you're not interested. There may be some travel involved, and perhaps some short-term or long-term separation from the rest of the family. If you can agree to this, I'd like to arrange an in-depth briefing for you which would be your last chance to back away from the project. I need you to know, up front, that I have already committed to the project and can't back out without significant loss of future earnings. Lest you misinterpret that, let me give you some perspective: the strictly-legit future earnings could be millions or billions. Anybody interested?'

"Anybody who wouldn't bite that hook we probably don't want involved," Clancy opined.

7 - Interviews

Peg Clancy stared at her husband, as her sainted grandmother would have said, *'as if he had six heads and a hat on each one'*.

"You're off your rocker, Walt," she told him. "That's the craziest story I've ever heard. Let me smell your breath. Have you been drinking?"

"I don't blame you one bit, Peg, for not believing what I just said," Walt comforted his wife. "A week ago, I would have said the same thing, but it's true. We're talking millions of dollars, a hundred thousand a year easy. I think you should see it. All that's required is that you promise to keep it strictly confidential."

"And you say it's completely legal?" Peg pressed him again. "You're not stealing this from somebody else's mine or taking it out of a National Park or anything?"

"Completely legal," Walt assured Peg for the fourth or fifth time. "The only part that skirts the law is 'taxes', and we're working on that right now."

"OK," Peg agreed finally, "I'll look, but if this turns out to be a scam of some sort, don't expect that I'll keep that promise of confidentiality."

"If I'm lying, there's no reason to expect you to cover up for us, but if it's true, your promise is good, right?"

"Right," Peg agreed.

Walt dialed his phone and waited for the call to be answered. "Come and get us," he spoke into the phone.

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Work had been suspended for Saturday to allow for 'interviews'. The crew of twenty-two had been split into two groups. Eleven of the crew had each been paired with a driver from the other group and each of the eleven selected had given his wife (and in some cases their children) the 'spiel'. The driver for the pair was standing by waiting for the call to 'pick us up', whereupon the driver would provide transport for the blindfolded passengers, while the other would supervise his family to see that no one peeked.

Once in transit, the group would drive aimlessly to confuse the passengers and to spill time waiting for their scheduled arrival time at Okambo and Sons. At a pre-arranged time, each driver would deliver their cargo to 'the big room' where the blindfolds would be removed. With a crowd of twenty-two men, eleven of their wives, and seven of

their children gathered before the end-wall of the big room, Barbara stepped to the front of the group.

"Good morning to you all. I'm Barbara, and I'll be leading you on a short walk this morning. First, do we have anyone here who thinks they won't be able to walk about a mile?" Nobody objected. "Good. Now, before we start, I'd just like to reiterate the conditions for this presentation and give you all a last chance to back away from what all of us consider a most serious obligation of confidentiality. Your husbands and fathers have been sworn to secrecy, and so have you, or you wouldn't be here. This obligation of confidentiality extends to everyone without exception. Moms, your sister can't be told, nor can your parents if they're still with you. Kids, you can't brag about this at school. You can't tell your closest friends no matter how much you trust them. Is there anyone here who isn't clear on that?" No one objected.

"This is the penalty for breaking confidentiality: your husband, your father, your parents, even yourselves, stand to become very wealthy from this operation as long as it remains confidential and not a moment longer. In fact, the moment this project loses its secret nature, all of us — let me emphasize that: all of us — could be in danger of losing our lives, and not simply our valuables.

"If there is anyone here who thinks they may not be able to keep their word, who thinks they may not be able to keep their mouth shut about what they're about to see, this is your chance to raise your hand and say, '*let me out, this is too much*'. If you stay, you have promised to your husband, to your father, and to all of us that your lips are sealed. Anybody?" She looked around the room. They all stared back at her.

"It gets worse," Barbara continued. "This project involves skilled manual labor and could involve short-term or long-term separation of the participants from the rest of their friends and family. Your husbands and fathers have already seen and done lots of that 'manual labor' part. Whether you will do physical work, too, is a decision that individual families will make for themselves. No one will order you to put in 'x' hours per week, but it is also true that what you get out of this project will be tied to what you put into it.

"It may be that for those families that '*jump into this with both feet*' that some members of the family will go missing for weeks or months at a time, as if you were married to a merchant seaman. That about sums up the bad parts, so now comes your real last last chance to back away. Beyond this point, you are '*in*' up to your necks along with all of us. Anybody want to back out?" Stern faces looked back at Barbara. *These are hard people*, she thought.

"OK, Ernie," she said, turning to him, "open it up." Ernie

switched power on to the big gate and the portal, thirteen feet high and twenty-two feet wide, popped open to reveal a wintry wilderness. "Everybody, follow me," Barbara ordered. Looking all around them and up to the sky overhead, they followed her like children on their first visit to an amusement park.

"All of you are asking yourselves 'what is it?'. The answer, if what we believe is true, is that you are in an alternate universe that parallels our own and, except for the improvements already made by your menfolk," Barbara pointed to the road leading southwest toward the lake and the Westroad to site 2, "utterly primitive. No roads except the ones we've made, no cities, no TVs, no phones, no stores, no electricity.

"There is, however, gold, silver, platinum, molybdenum, and other raw materials like you might have found on Earth a million years ago."

"Dinosaurs?" one of the kids asked.

Barbara shook her head. "No. In fact, we haven't seen many deer or any bear or moose or anything, really, on the larger scale. Raccoons, opossum, birds, insects, mid-size ungulates, that's about all.

"Your guys have been cutting trees and grinding stumps and generally making roads for the past few days so that in the very near future you'll be able to get out there and stake a claim on a nice quiet riverbend and start pulling gold from your claim. I should tell you that three of us: my Dad, my husband, and myself; took almost nine ounces of gold out of our claim in the first week. At \$700 or \$800 per ounce, you're looking at \$2,000 to \$3,000 dollars per week per person. That's what I meant when I said, '*what you get out of it will be tied to what you put into it*'. You can say '*Honey, you go pan for gold and I'll stay home and cook*' if you're content to live on the measly hundred Grand he'll bring home each year, or you can grab a pan and get busy. Help him work the claim during the warm weather. Spend the winter in Rio."

"What's in it for you?" Peg Clancy asked Barbara.

Barbara's jaw went slack. Until this moment, she had not given the question any thought, and now a million thoughts swirled in her head trying to form a coherent answer to Peg Clancy's question.

"Well," she began, and hesitated. "I'm 'Queen of the World'" she told Peg confidently, "and I have some obligation because of that to see that it turns out in a good way. 'Step one' has to be 'start with good people', and I think we're well on our way to that goal. Wouldn't you agree?"

Peg smiled. "I would, indeed, Your Majesty," and she performed a little curtsy. "This, then," Peg continued, "is your

domain?"

"It is," Ernie answered for Barbara. "She discovered it. It's fair to say that she created it. If anyone can claim to own it, Barbara can."

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Samantha Burke sat on a felled log and marveled at the scene around her.

"There's so much to do!" she told Randy. "There's no end to it! Digging gold out of streams is just one part of it! These people need a place to sleep, a place to eat, a place to do their laundry, a place to go to have a little fun at the end of a day! If they don't have that, they have to retreat back beyond the gate every evening! That's crazy!"

"Do you realize what you just said?" Randy asked her. "You just said that living and working here 24/7 is not crazy."

Sam turned to face him. "I did, didn't I?" she admitted, somewhat astonished, herself, at the realization of what she had been thinking deep-down. "I wonder what it would take to start a general store?"

"First," Randy said, "you'll need the 'store'. There are three guys who claim to have some expertise building log houses, and another who has been sawing lumber for two days. Still at it, too, judging by the sound of his mill. Maybe we should find out what he's asking for his output."

The two meandered over toward the whine of the band saw and finally managed to get Josh Troon's attention. He gave them a *just a minute* hand sign as he pushed a log into the whizzing blade. When the blade stopped screaming, Josh switched the power off and the blade slowed to a stop.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"We're just wondering if you have a price schedule," Samantha asked.

"To be honest," Josh admitted, "I've been so busy cutting I haven't given much thought to what it's all worth. We're looking at, here, I guess, something like three days' work, but I have no idea even what I've got for all that cutting.

"Make you a deal," he said turning toward the piles of lumber, "inventory this stuff for me and I'll give you, say, five percent of it for your trouble."

Sam looked at Randy who shrugged his shoulders. "We're not ready to stake a claim, yet, are we?" he asked her.

"I don't think so," Sam agreed. "Let's do it." Turning to Josh

she asked him: "Do you have any lumber pencils?"

In response, Josh pulled a handful from a pocket in his tunic and handed them to Samantha who smiled and split the handful with her husband. "Notepads in the pick-up," Josh told them.

They each grabbed a notepad from the truck's front seat and headed off behind the sawmill to the chaotic disarray of piles of lumber. They began by clearing a staging area where lumber could be brought for counting, and then started transporting lumber pieces in twos and threes to the staging area. As a piece was brought over to the staging area, it would be laid against a 30-foot 'ruler' — just a 30-some-odd foot length of 2x4 marked in 1-foot increments — and each piece would be marked on its side to indicate its length, then stacked with others of its type in a way that the mark could be read.

After several hours of this, the two had much of the lumber sorted and marked and they began a rough count. Taking the notepad, Randy began scribbling. Each page of the notepad was labeled with the dimensions of one size of lumber. At each pile, Randy would do a rough count of 'pieces', then go back and count total length, each time reporting the result to Sam who would write notes on the appropriate page.

As dusk began to creep over the landscape, they finally called it quits for the day, and reported back to Josh what they had found so far.

"In those piles that are neatly stacked, you've got 62 pieces of 2x4 totaling 844 linear feet, 38 pieces of 4x4 totaling 419 feet, 41 pieces of 4x6 totaling 580 feet. There are also 27 pieces of 2x6 for 390 feet, 25 pieces of 2x8 for 411 feet, and 22 pieces of 2x10 for 355 feet. That's as far as we got today. We'll come back and finish tomorrow, if that's alright with you."

"That's fine," Josh told them. "In the meantime, I'm going to be making your job harder," and he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at the saw.

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When the Okambos arrived late Sunday morning to open for business, they found Leroy Starkweather asleep in his car at the front gate with the windows completely frosted over from the inside. On a trailer behind his car was an ATV and four 5-gallon gasoline cans. Danny rapped on the driver's window a few times and was greeted by the roar of the car engine starting. A moment later the driver's window creaked and crunched as it opened to reveal a bundled-up Leroy just coming around from a nap of who-knows-how-long.

"How long have you been waiting, Leroy?" Danny asked, and

Leroy admitted that he had only been there an hour-or-so. "Well, bring this thing in and we'll get some coffee started."

Leroy rolled the car and trailer inside the gate, shut the engine off, and followed the boys into the front office. Minutes later the sound of coffee dripping into the pot had all of them enthralled.

"Going to do some exploring?" Steve asked Leroy.

"Uh-huh," Leroy confirmed, strolling toward the map now pinned to the office wall. "I'm going over here," he indicated the area northwest of Valmont, "up where Boulder Reservoir would be, then west into the hills. I want to do some more photo-mapping and I may put down just to get a closer look at the land. I was talking to Oscar Gruder and he said historically the takings from just northwest of Boulder were eye-popping, so I'm going to see if it would be worth staking my claim there. If I find the right spot, I won't need roads."

Steve handed him one of the company walkie-talkies. "Better take one of these," he told Leroy. "The range is only about 20 miles or thereabouts, but in an environment with zero interference, there's no telling how far out we might reach." Leroy nodded and pocketed the radio.

Leroy got the ATV off the trailer, started it up, then rolled toward the big gate. As he approached the wall, Danny switched the power on, Leroy rolled through, and Danny switched power off.

Within half an hour, the 'settlers', as they were now calling themselves, began arriving to continue the day's activities. Randy and Sam Burke went straight to the sawmill and continued where they left off the prior day inventorying Josh's lumber. Peg and Walt Clancy showed up with two ATVs in tow so that they could explore this almost-entirely unexplored world.

"Where are you thinking of looking?" Steve asked.

"North," Peg said, "up toward Gunbarrel."

"There are no roads in that direction," Steve told them. "Make sure you blaze an easy-to-follow trail. Here, take one of these radios in case you get lost," and he handed them a radio just like Leroy's.

Peg took the radio, then fished a spray can of Day-Glo Orange paint from the saddlebag on her ATV. "We mark our trail with this," she told Steve. "If there's any light at all, this stuff is visible."

They packed their lunch and other goods into the ATVs and headed out toward the north through the forest. It was very slow-going for the first half-mile, because every few hundred feet one of them would stop to spray a ring around a tree at eye-level and then another splash to mark the way back home.

Steve's radio crackled: "Steve, come back."

"Hey, Leroy," he answered, "what are you seeing?"

"I'm up here about where Boulder Reservoir would be," he told Steve, but of course everyone whose radio was 'on' could also hear him. "There's a substantial lake, and to the west it's all meadowland and foothills. I'm going to go west from here before heading south. It doesn't look like I'll be able to land with these bags in the meadow — I'll have to get my wheels back on for that. Is there a crew near site 2?"

Tom Rossi keyed the TALK button on his radio. "Hey, Leroy, Tom Rossi. I have my crew not far from '2'. What do you need?"

"Hey, Tom," Leroy answered, "I could use a smoke signal to guide me back in about fifteen. Can you start a campfire?"

"Sure, Leroy, no problem," Rossi assured him. "We've got enough wood chips here to make a permanent beacon."

"Clancy, where are you?" Steve spoke to his radio.

"Quarter to half mile north," Walt Clancy reported. "We just broke into meadow, and it looks like it's meadow to the horizon north from here. There's a stream ahead running east-west and we're headed for it to check it out."

"OK," Steve acknowledged. "Stay in touch."

Not long after that, Leroy's flimsy aircraft appeared over Tom Rossi's work crew. They all waved at Leroy and Leroy rocked his wings in salute as he turned southeast toward his base camp. Back at the camp he refueled the airplane's 5-gallon tank and re-checked all the rigging.

Taking his radio, Leroy squeezed the TALK button. "Clancy, where are you?"

"Eight, maybe ten miles north. We've crossed a dozen streams so far, most of them running pretty slow, big S-curves in nearly every one. Oscar is going to go crazy up here. Hey, Leroy, why don't you come up and take some pictures?"

"That's what I'm about to do, Clancy, as soon as I get the plane ready. I'll be there in ten or fifteen. Can you set up a smoker for me to home on?"

"Sure," Clancy told him. "No problem."

Ten miles or more north of the gate, Walt Clancy tended a little rock-ringed campfire, occasionally tossing in some wet grass while Peg amused herself by trying to draw a gigantic Day-Glo Orange arrow pointing to the east where they had found a shallow pond formed by the nearby stream. They had already looked it over and it appeared to be about a foot-or-so deep for most of its extent although it was currently almost solid ice. Leroy should have no trouble landing there.

Shortly the sputtering of Leroy's two-cycle engine could be heard in the distance and the two looked off to the south.

"I see him," Peg said, pointing, and then Walt saw him, too. He squeezed the radio.

"We see you, Leroy. There's an iced-over pond to the east you should be able to land in."

Leroy rocked his wings and banked right to head east in the direction of Peg's giant orange arrow, pointed the plane's nose into the wind heading back toward Walt and Peg, and set it down smoothly on the mostly-frozen pond. He taxied over to where the Clancys waited for him, waving, and shut off the engine.

"I can hardly hear *anything* over the noise of the engine," he admitted. "It's a good thing I saw you both waving, and thanks for that pointer to the pond."

"What did you two find down here that's not visible from the air?"

"I don't suppose there's much you can't see from your perch, Leroy," Walt suggested. "In fact, you may have a better view than any of us. Tell us: are these streams as wiggly as we think they are?"

"Yeah," Leroy confirmed. "Out here away from the hills where it becomes reasonably flat, they meander pretty good. In closer to the hills, they run pretty fast and straight. You'll see what I mean when I get the pictures printed and laid out. From the tracks I could see on my way up here, you two ran bang through the middle of a damn maze. These streams are all over the place. There's going to be some great claim sites up in these parts, I tell you. Maybe you ought to pick one before they all get taken."

"Oh, yes," Peg said, "we've been taking notes and Walt and I have already agreed on a site. We're planning to stake it out on our way back. By the time you get your map put together, we'll be able to mark our claim on it."

"OK, then," Leroy told them. "I'm going to head a little further north, then swing over to the east and come back that way. That will give me some more data for the map."

"When you get back, make sure they've kept the smoke signals going so I can find my way."

Leroy pushed the plane around to point it for take-off, set the controls, gave the propeller a tug to get it started, then taxied out across the ice to the far side of the pond. He turned the plane into the wind and pushed the throttle forward. The air bags slid smoothly across the ice as the plane accelerated, then lifted off. By the time he got back to where Walt and Peg were standing and waving, he was 200 feet high and turning to the north.

On their way back, Walt and Peg stopped at the last stream north of the forest between them and the portal. At a pair of broad S-curves in the stream, they began spraying boulders and other

outcroppings of rock with their mark to indicate this as their claim.

As they pushed through the forest into the clearing on its south side where the portal was, they could hear the sputtering of Leroy's engine overhead. Nodding to each other, they turned their ATVs toward the lake road and sped away to help Leroy secure his plane. With the plane tied firmly to a tree by the lake shore and covered with a tarp, the three rode back toward the portal.

A fine day of exploring.

8 - The Dawn of Civilization

Josh Troon buttonholed Sam Burke as she came through the portal Monday morning and he waggled his finger at her.

"I calculated what I've cut based on your inventory, and if I haven't thanked you yet, let me make that correction now: thanks a whole bunch for helping out.

"I calculated the cut lumber as 'dimension in inches' times 'length in feet' divided by 12 to get 'board feet. Your final inventory was 1,107 feet of 2x4, or 738 board feet, 772 feet of 4x4, 1,029 board feet, 950 feet of 4x6, 810 feet of 2x6, 885 feet of 2x8, and 750 feet of 2x10 for a grand total of 6,907 board feet. I promised you five percent as a commission, so you're entitled to 345 board feet, call it '350', in whatever dimensions you want. Come by anytime and collect what you need."

Sam shook his hand. "Glad to help out," she told him, then headed off to find Paul Gillman.

Sam finally found Paul Gillman in a 12x12 tent set up as a sort of field headquarters. A large table and several chairs around it formed a rough work area where Leroy could pencil in any details that could be gleaned from the paper copies of the pictures he had taken during the preceding days. At this point, he was just roughing-in the dozen-or-more streams the Clancys had prospected yesterday.

Sam wasted no time. She buttonholed Gillman and forced him to pay her some attention.

"Porta-potties," she informed him as if there were nothing more needed to be said.

"We don't have any," Gillman told her, completely misunderstanding the direction of this conversation.

"That's right," Sam told him. "You need to fix that. You're about to have whole families here in the wide-open spaces working whenever there's daylight. Men and boys, women and girls. I'm not too worried about the men and boys. They have options, but the women and girls aren't going to take kindly to squatting in the bushes and wiping with dried leaves. Unless you want them trooping through that gate," she waved her hand indicating the single doorframe gate into the Okambos' conference room, "all day long, you had better get some porta-potties strategically placed throughout the encampment."

"Well, Mrs..."

"Burke," Sam introduced herself thrusting out her hand. "Samantha Burke. Pleased to meet you."

"Same here, Samantha," Gillman grabbed the conversational

reins. "This *is* wilderness, you know."

"Of course," Sam came right back at him, "but we're trying to turn it into 'civilization', right?" Paul nodded. "OK," she finished, "let's get to it," and she turned and left Paul Gillman with his jaw still a little agape.

Gillman grabbed his radio and keyed the mike: "Steve, come back," he said.

"Yeah, Paul, what's up?" Steve asked.

"Do we have a source for porta-potties?" Gillman asked.

"Better than 'a source'," Steve told him. "We have them for rent under subcontract with the local supplier. We always have a half-dozen or so standing by. Should we bring a few in?"

"Yes," Gillman told him. "We need to short-circuit complaints from the fair sex, one of which has already been delivered."

"Hey, way to be pro-active," Steve cackled. "I'll have the boys bring a couple through right away."

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Walt and Peg Clancy came through the gate and spent a few minutes making small talk with some of the others who had already arrived. When they learned that Leroy Starkweather was hard at work in the big tent, they decided to pay him a visit.

"How's it coming along, Leroy," Walt asked him as an opening gambit. Leroy looked up from his work.

"Ah, our intrepid explorers," he greeted them. "And what have you planned for today?"

"The first thing we'd like to do today is to mark our claim on that," Peg told him, indicating the map he was working on.

"Sure," Leroy agreed. "Can you identify it from the photos?"

Peg and Walt shrugged and moved so they could look over Leroy's shoulders. Leroy was sorting through 4"x6" paper copies of the aerial photos, each marked with its sequence number, and trying to arrange them so that they formed a photo-mosaic. He had most of them now connected in several long 'strings' and was transferring landmarks to the glassine overlay on the Earth-I topographic map. Peg pointed at one of them.

"Are these the tracks of our ATVs?" she asked.

Leroy looked closer and aided by a magnifying glass confirmed that the stripes on the photos were probably the Clancys' ATV ruts.

"OK," Peg said, pointing, "here's the edge of the forest to the north of us, and here's that first stream, about a half mile north. This double loop right where our tracks cross the river is where we've staked our claim. We marked this rock," she pointed at a gray spot on

the photo, "and here, and here, and here as the claim area.

"Now all we have to do is figure out how to get the gold out."

"See Barbara, Buck, or Ernie for that," Leroy advised her. "They have already built a sluice over at their claim and they said anyone can build their own from their plans."

"OK, thanks," and Peg and Walt left to find one of the principals.

Shortly, they came across Buck and engaged him in conversation about how to build a sluice.

"Pretty simple, really," Buck told them handing them a two-page exploded view of GS-2. "You may want to talk to Josh Troon about some lumber and just cobble one together. Ernie and I put our first one together in under a day once we had all the pieces."

The two thanked Buck and left heading for Troon's Mill where they found Josh still diligently sawing logs into regular shapes. Josh shut down the saw when he saw the Clancys arrive. Peg and Walt showed him the plans for GS-2, and Josh started penciling in notes in the margins as he totaled the lumber needed to complete the sluice.

"Pretty neat design," Josh admitted. "It all comes apart into two pieces that you can pin together on site. You're planning to build one of these?" Peg and Walt nodded. "I'll make you a deal," Josh started, "I'll build you your sluice for \$300. If you'd rather pay in gold, I'll take the first half-ounce that comes out of your claim."

"You've got a deal," Walt agreed, extending his hand. The two shook hands, sealing the deal.

"When do you want it?" Josh asked.

"As soon as possible," Walt told him. "When can we have it?"

Josh looked the plans over once again, then paused while he thought about what he would need. "I'll have it ready for you Wednesday morning," he promised.

"If we pay in gold, will you put this on our account until the claim is operating?" Peg asked.

Josh nodded agreement. "I don't want to wait forever, though. You're planning to start working the claim soon, I hope."

"As soon as we have the sluice," Peg told him.

Josh could see another opportunity unfolding before his eyes: builder of sluices. Just about everyone was going to need one, and if he could develop the knack of knocking them out quickly with the lumber standing by in piles behind him, he might never need to work his claim. At one-half-ounce of gold per sluice, assuming he could assemble them in a reasonably short time, he would make more building mining equipment than he could reasonably expect to make mining his own claim. The sluices, he suspected, would cost him next-

to-nothing in materials.

Under the permanent sign announcing that this was "Troon's Mill", Josh hung a second sign. The new sign said: "Gone for supplies. Back at 2pm."

Finding a hardware store, he purchased enough nails, screws, nuts, bolts, washers, and other materials to complete eight or ten GS-2 sluices. He also bought a stencil-making kit at a local art supply store along with several cans of spray paint in an assortment of colors before heading back to the Okambos' yard.

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Oscar and Nell Gruder showed up late Monday with a large tent, a diesel generator, two ATVs, a folding table, a small smelting kit, scales and what-not that Oscar would need for his 'refinery'. He also had a sign identifying the tent as "Gruder's Smelting & Assay". A second sign informed everyone that:

Gruder's Refinery is open for business. We will be happy to assay your ore, refine it, smelt it to bars or ingots, and hold it on account for you until you decide to sell. The fee for this service is 3% of net. We will also be happy to act as go-betweens for 'sell' orders via our client who has offered to buy any quantity, large or small, at 75% of current market – no questions asked.

Inquire within.

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Leroy mounted his finished artwork on an easel outside his tent. A sign pinned to the edge of the map informed one and all:

You may stake a claim of two adjoining loops of any stream shown on this map by filing your Notice of Claim with Leroy Starkweather, Recorder of Claims, and by following this action up by marking the physical boundaries of the claim in an appropriate manner, viz.: spray-painting rocks or other permanent features (or otherwise marking those features) with your claim number.

To stake a claim off-the-map, you will need to describe (preferably with photographs showing or indicating the boundary markings) the exact location

of your off-map claim with high precision.

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Tom Rossi's crew had started Monday morning by marking a sixteen-foot-wide road from the gate area northward toward where Gunbarrel would be in Earth-I following the blazes the Clancys had left the day before. By mid-afternoon, the crew had completed cutting a road to what they were now calling the Great North Meadow, and the stump-grinders that followed the feller-bunchers had completed the process of smoothing out a road suitable for ATV-use. From here northward as far as they could see was nothing but prairie with streams wriggling across the surface. If there were forests north of here, they were over the horizon. There was nothing left for the road-builders to do. They turned the machines and headed back toward the portal.

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Barbara and Ernie huddled over the gate and watched and listened for the 'pop' or 'whoosh' that told them the gate had changed state either from opened-to-closed or vice versa. Barbara inched the power down in small steps until a soft sound caused them to look up at the gate. It seemed still to be open. At least they could still see through it.

After a few more steps down, the gate popped closed and the image of Earth-II disappeared. Barbara made a notation of how much power the gate took to open and then inched the power setting back up until the gate popped open again.

"I wonder what that other sound was?" Ernie muttered.

Barbara shook her head as if to say, *'I don't know either.'*

Ernie tossed a penny through the gate expecting it to pass through, but instead they heard the metallic sound of the coin hitting the wall behind the gate. Barbara powered the gate off and there, sitting on the carpet where it had fallen after hitting the wall, was the penny. They each looked at the other wondering what they were seeing.

Barbara took a length of dowel and positioned it in the gate where it would be guillotined by the gate opening, then stepped the power up slowly. When the gate popped open — that is, when an image appeared in the gate — they both expected the dowel to be chopped in two, but they did not hear the sound of the chopped piece falling. Indeed, Ernie could slide the dowel out and it appeared to be intact. The gate popping open had not severed the wooden rod. Ernie reinserted the dowel into the gate and the part of the dowel they

expected to be in Earth-II merely disappeared.

Barbara stepped the power up in small increments until two things happened simultaneously: with a soft 'whoosh' the gate opened and the portion of the dowel 'beyond the gate' dropped softly to the carpet.

Ernie took a clean dowel and probed through the gate.

"Inch it down," he instructed Barbara. Barbara twisted the control back and the gate whooshed at them again but the image of Earth-II remained as they watched half of the dowel drop to the ground beyond the gate. Ernie withdrew the stub of the severed dowel. Barbara inched power back up and the gate whooshed open again. She made another notation about the power level.

"We've always just either powered the gate on or powered it off, and always at full power," she remarked. "Lucky for us we haven't had a serious accident. If power drops off beyond a certain point, you can still see through the portal even though the gate is actually closed.

"This gives us a 'viewer' without actually allowing anything to cross the barrier," she continued. "Do you know what that means?"

Ernie nodded. "It means we can do aerial surveying without having a gate truly 'open'."

"Bingo."

9 - Exploration

By late Monday the pioneers had begun to take advantage of the roads to site 2 and to the Great North Meadow. In pairs and groups, they set off on their ATVs to find and mark their claims. In some cases, he would stake the claim and radio back to her that the claim was marked, and she would register it with Leroy Starkweather, Registrar of Claims.

Oscar Gruder stood before Leroy's masterpiece contemplating it. Leroy saw him studying the map and stepped outside the tent to talk to him.

"Looking for a good site?" Leroy asked.

"Yes. Do you have the photographs of this area?" Oscar asked, pointing to one spot on the map.

Leroy nodded and Oscar followed him back inside the tent. Leroy grabbed one stack of photos and started flipping through them. "That's the stream that runs down into 'mini-Boulder Reservoir', isn't it?" Leroy asked.

"Yes, that one," Oscar confirmed.

Leroy started laying photographs on the table taking a moment to align each new one so that it overlaid the others and formed a larger picture of the area. Oscar peered intently at the photomontage on the table and finally put his finger on one particular S-curve in the stream.

"I claim that," he told Leroy.

"I can pencil it in for you, but you'll have to go there and physically mark the boundaries before it becomes official," Leroy told him.

"How far is it?" Oscar asked.

Leroy consulted the overlay map. "About six to eight miles, I would guess," Leroy said. "Very rough terrain up there," he added. "No trails cut yet, either, although it looks mostly open."

"Can I hitch a ride on your airplane?" Oscar asked.

"There's only one seat," Leroy grimaced.

Oscar grimaced, too, then began mapping a path based on Leroy's map: *"out to site 2, cross the stream, north through the forest to the next clearing, 330° passing the big rock outcrop to the east, 310° to the site."*

"If you're going by ATV, make sure you get a radio from Steve or the boys so you can call for help if you need it," Leroy told him. Oscar nodded.

Oscar and Nell set out along Westroad, the road to site 2, on their ATVs, found a decently shallow ford across the stream west of the sluice, and began working their way north through moderately dense forest on the other side, marking their route with occasional splashes of fluorescent paint sprayed on the tree trunks at eye-level or directly onto exposed rock face where there were any. In a half-mile, they broke into a clearing that extended as far as they could see to the north, and broken only by the odd, lonely copse of trees here and there. Oscar checked his compass and headed out on 330° with Nell lagging slightly behind.

Shortly, they approached a massive boulder 40 feet high or more, and skirted it to the east. On the far side of the boulder, the pair changed course slightly to the left and sped off toward their claim. Arriving at the stream, they dismounted and walked to the water to examine it.

"This looked really good from directly above," Oscar told Nell, "but I'm less than impressed seeing it in person at ground level. I think we should look downstream." Nell nodded.

Downstream they found two very snaky S-curves that were one flood away from becoming oxbows. Oscar squatted by the stream, took a handful of silt from the bed and washed it with water from his other hand. Nell watched as the little flakes of gold appeared in the palm of Oscar's hand and grinned.

As Nell marked the corners of the claim, Oscar photographed the process, documenting the exact location of the claim. Before they left, Oscar took two samples, one from each bow, and marked the containers. Then they mounted their ATVs and retraced their path back to site 2 and the portal.

When they showed the pictures to Leroy, he was surprised. "Not the original penciled-in site?" he asked.

"No," Oscar confirmed. "We found a better site four bows downstream," and he pointed to the area on Leroy's map. Leroy made fresh marks on the map to match Oscar's photos.

"What was wrong with the original claim?" Leroy asked.

"Nothing, really," Oscar admitted. "The water was running a little faster than it was further downstream. The second site will probably be a little richer, that's all. Now I have to go get a sluice."

"You should check with Josh Troon," Leroy advised. "He's put the word out that he's building sluices for cash or gold."

"Really!" Oscar exclaimed. "I'll have to check that out!"

With darkness approaching, Oscar and Nell strolled over to Troon's Mill just in time to hear Josh power the saw down for the night.

"Hey, Josh," Oscar called to him and Josh turned to greet them. "I hear you're building sluices," Oscar offered.

"I am," Josh confirmed, taking out the plans he received from the Clancys. "Three hundred dollars or the first half-ounce from the claim," he told them, then showed them the plans. "This design allows the whole thing to be transported as two large pieces and bolted together at the work site. I got this from Walt and Peg Clancy. I don't know where they got it."

"They got it from Buck or Barbara or Ernie," Oscar crowed, "and they got it from me except for the 'two large pieces' part. That's their own innovation."

"Oh, so this is *your* design, basically," Josh acknowledged. "Tell me, what's this piece for?" and he pointed at the diagram.

"This little strip of half-round just provides another obstacle for heavier material, that's all," Oscar told him. "It's one more place that gold dust or flakes will hang up on the trip down the sluice. At the bottom, this pan collects the stuff that's escaped. The idea is that you take that and dump it back in the water upstream just in case there's gold that got away. The act of 'dumping' takes more of the silt away as well.

"Hey, if you're going to be using my design, I should charge you a royalty," and Oscar winked at Josh to let him know he wasn't serious. Josh smiled. "Still, if you're going to be building sluices, you have to drop your price. Anyone can buy a sluice mail-order for a third of what you're charging. \$300 is 'way too high even for such a brilliant design."

"Really?" Josh asked.

"Really," Oscar confirmed. "The CSM bookstore will give you an even better deal than that. Probably seventy-five dollars for an aluminum track with carpet and baffles. If you'll go for 'used', it's even less. My design is mainly for people too poor to do anything but build their own from scrap lumber. If you're going to be competitive, you'll need to beat the price-point of the commercially-available sluices."

Josh looked at the design again. "One hundred dollars, you say," he muttered.

Oscar nodded. "Or less."

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Buck fitzGibbon sat across from his insurance agent. It was clear that neither of them was entirely pleased with the way things had worked out.

"There's plenty of coverage, Buck, to enable you to rebuild

Pershing Street," his agent told him. "I don't understand why you would want to 'take the money and run'. You won't find a better place to live than Boulder — is my bias showing?"

"Too many of the wrong kind of memories, Phil," Buck explained, "and we don't know with certainty that those who bombed it won't try it again if we rebuild," he lied. "Given that uncertainty, do you know of a company that would insure its replacement?"

"Buck, we're required *by law* to insure the replacement if you rebuild," the agent assured him, the thought suddenly breaking through to his conscious mind that this could turn out to be a very bad bargain for the insurance company. *Perhaps he oughtn't try so hard to convince Buck to rebuild after all.*

"Well, if you're certain."

"We're certain," Buck assured him, and Barbara nodded her acceptance. The agent withdrew a check from a folder on his desk and placed it into Buck's outstretched hand.

"Very well, this check for \$247,350 represents the insured value of the property at 2550 Pershing, Boulder. You, of course, still own the lot the house once occupied. Since you're not going to rebuild, I have taken the liberty of notifying several realtors of its availability, and I have received firm offers from several of them. Would you be interested in seeing those offers?"

Barbara nodded.

"The best offer I received was this one from O'Kelly Investments." He handed Buck a sheet of paper. Net, O'Kelly offered Buck \$220,000 for the land his house once stood on, as-is, debris and all. Barbara's eyes were wide. She hadn't realized the land was nearly as valuable as the house. It was such a little piece of land.

Buck nodded. "You can tell O'Kelly they've got a deal," he told his old friend and insurance agent.

"Where are you and Barbara headed, then?" the agent asked. Turning to Barbara he asked her: "Are you leaving UCB?"

"Probably," Barbara admitted. "I've been on an indefinite leave since the house blew up. I lost a lot of research material to the fire, and I really should try to recreate it." Then, to confirm what Buck had said earlier, she added: "For the time being, however, we're just laying low and trying not to be targets. We're going to be spending lots of time in wilderness where we can see threats coming a long way off."

The agent nodded his understanding. *I'm glad it's them and not me,* he thought, reflecting on the amount of firepower necessary to destroy 2550 Pershing as thoroughly as it had been.

"We need to re-pay Dennis," she told her father as they exited

the bank after depositing the check Phil had presented to them.

"Yes," Buck agreed, "we do. Maybe we should pay him a visit."

"I'll drive," Barbara announced and took her seat behind the wheel. Twenty minutes later she turned into Dennis Cameron's driveway.

Buck issued a low whistle at the house. "Impressive," he told his daughter. Barbara smiled.

"Good morning, Miss Barbara," the butler greeted her when he had opened the door. "Mr. Cameron is in his study. Please come in and I will let him know you're here."

The two entered and took seats in the foyer to wait for Dennis. A few moments later Dennis entered the foyer area, went straight to Barbara and pulled her into a hug.

"It's so good to see you again," he gushed. "Is everything going alright?"

"Everything is going great, Dennis," she told him. "I'd like to introduce my father, Marion 'Buck' fitzGibbon."

Dennis turned and took Buck's outstretched hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. fitzGibbon, and very disappointed not to be calling you 'Dad'. Please, both of you, come in and sit down. I want to hear about everything that's been going on. Tea? Coffee? Something stronger?"

"Actually, Dennis," Barbara began as they were ushered into a lounge area off the entrance foyer, "we came to make amends, as it were — to pay you back for all your past kindnesses." She held out a check made payable to Dennis Cameron in the amount of \$132,000. "When we needed liquidity after our house blew up, you handed over twenty thousand dollars to Ernie without batting an eyelash. When we needed quiet, private transportation back from the East Coast, you equally unflinchingly bought us an RV for one hundred twelve thousand dollars. At the time, I suspected I would never be able to repay that debt, but things have changed, and Buck and I and Ernie want to repay you, not just with money, but with our everlasting gratitude. Dennis, you almost literally saved our lives at a time when we could not say with certainty who was a friend and who was a foe. Dennis, we are so lucky to have you as a friend."

Dennis took the check and looked at it briefly. "I said when I bought that RV for you that I did not expect to be repaid. In fact, I was already thinking of that in terms of 'a wedding gift'. This isn't necessary." He offered the check back to her. "Having you three as friends is more than payment enough."

"It is necessary, Dennis," Barbara insisted. "That sort of loyalty must not come with a penalty. The Queen of Hearts desires it.

May that be the end of the discussion." She smiled at him.

Dennis performed a little bow from the waist. "Her Majesty is most kind," he smiled back at her. "The matter is settled."

He turned to the butler. "Paul, champagne."

"Yes, Mr. Cameron," the butler replied.

Buck turned and with a finger held up said: "Bourbon."

"Me, too," Barbara echoed.

"Cancel the champagne, Paul," Dennis told his servant, "make it bourbon all around."

The butler nodded his acknowledgement, turned toward the bar against the far wall, and proceeded to pour three glasses of amber liquid.

"So, I presume the case against whoever blew up your house is progressing?" Dennis offered by way of a *segué* into another line of conversation.

"I don't think so," Buck answered. "In fact, we think the police have little or no idea who was responsible. All they have at this point are questions, assumptions, suspicions, and suppositions. One of Barbara's students is a prime suspect along with his paramour, but if the police know precisely what their motive was, they're keeping it quiet. At least, they haven't shared that information with us. NSA and FBI are also involved because of the methods and materials used, but they also aren't very talkative.

"If they have information as to where the suspects are or when they may be brought in for questioning, they're not sharing that, either. I suspect they've let the trail go cold and we will never hear anything more about this."

"So, your house was professionally bombed to rubble, and nobody knows 'who' or 'why' or maybe even 'how'?" Dennis asked incredulously.

"Oh, they know 'how'," Buck assured him. "A crate of rockets was stolen from the Colorado National Guard Armory a few days before that, and four of them are unaccounted-for. 'Four' would have been just about what was needed."

"Rockets?" Dennis asked.

"Right," Buck confirmed. "You've heard of a 'bazooka'?" Dennis nodded. "That kind of rocket," Buck clarified.

"They shot bazookas at your house?"

"No," Buck explained patiently, "it was probably rigged as a booby trap. Possibly something would fall over and trigger either the propellant or the warhead or both."

A dark thought crossed Dennis' mind. "Where did you get the funds to do this," he asked, waving the check.

"The house was insured for replacement value," Barbara

admitted.

"So, you're not going to rebuild?" Dennis continued.

"Probably not," Buck confirmed. "There's a possibility we're still targets," he said, repeating their alibi for going underground. "We're going to take a low profile for the foreseeable future."

"Well, keep in touch," Dennis said looking straight at Barbara, "and remember: if you ever need help, I'll be here."

Barbara gave Dennis one last hug, and she and her father left.

Their next errand took them to a dealer in snowmobiles and ATVs. They purchased three top-of-the-line ATVs and a trailer to handle them, a dozen 5-gallon gasoline cans and assorted accessories, and drove the rig back to Okambo and Sons, filling the cans along the way.

They found Ernie getting a lesson in 'bulldozer' from Steve Jr. and doing passably well for a beginner.

"Well, jump down from there and let's go exploring," Barbara ordered.

"I'm hungry," Ernie complained. "I think we should get something for lunch. Have you seen what Sam Burke has done?"

"No. What?" Buck asked. Ernie pointed toward Troon's Mill and as Buck and Barbara turned, they saw Sam in an apron behind a makeshift table on which she was making sandwiches from the contents of four large camping coolers at her feet.

People were lined up in front of her 'counter' ordering sandwiches and soft drinks and then taking their lunch off to equally makeshift benches to sit and have a mid-day break. The three strolled toward "Sam's Deli" and got in line. Off to one side, a pair of toasters were plugged into a power cord leading to Josh Troon's generator.

"Smoked turkey and Swiss with mayo and pickle on toasted rye, diet A&W, coming up," Sam informed the customer as she wrapped and bagged the order. The younger Rossi girl helped by digging through the coolers to bring out the components for whatever Sam was about to make, and putting those packages back into the coolers when no longer needed. Both were moving fast and smiling as much as their customers who were clearly happy not to have to stop everything they were doing to go back through the gate, get in their cars, drive someplace to get lunch, drive back, and get back to work having lost as much as two hours.

"Great idea, Sam!" Barbara congratulated her. "How's business?" although Barbara could see that Sam's business was booming.

"I'm overwhelmed," Sam admitted. "I'm going to be out of food in another half-hour if this keeps up. I didn't think there would

be this much demand. I figured 'a few dozen sandwiches each day, max', not *this*. I've almost gone through what was to have been a three-day supply of lunch meats and I've only been open a little over an hour."

Danny Okambo approached Sam with a radio in his hand. "Group out at site 2 wants to know if you can deliver an order," Danny asked. "I wrote it down for you. I can run the order out there if you want me to."

Buck turned. "We're headed out to site 2, Danny; we'll take it with us."

Sam looked at the order, mumbling to herself, then took the radio from Danny's hand. "Site 2, come back," she called.

"It's Sam," she told them when they had answered. "I don't have any rolls left, and I'm completely out of roast beef. Ham, turkey, chicken, salami, that's it for today." They agreed on the required adjustments to the order and she and Linda Rossi began assembling sandwiches as fast as they could, having first filled the needs of Barbara, Buck, and Ernie. While those three sat and had lunch, the site 2 order came together, was wrapped, marked, priced, bagged and handed over for delivery. "They can pay for it tonight or tomorrow, but tonight is better because I have to go shopping again before tomorrow's lunch."

Now fed, Barbara, Buck, and Ernie mounted their ATVs and headed west toward site 2 where they delivered two bags of sandwiches, a bag of soft drinks, and Sam's instructions that the bill needed to be paid pronto, then they crossed the stream and headed north following the blazes left by the Gruders. Breaking into the open a half-mile later they followed Buck who led them on a roughly northeast course across the prairie. They traveled nearly twenty miles to get to the place they had stood four weeks prior looking out across that vast inland sea.

Examining the area carefully, Buck thought he saw a way down the escarpment to a beach-y area below and a little more north.

"Let's see if we can't get down to that beach," he suggested. "It looks like there's a way down over there," he pointed.

At the place where the cliff broke away, a gully or ravine led down about two-thirds of the way to the beach. A ledge at that height gave enough room to turn the ATVs (if care were taken), and a rough slope led south from there down to the water. Buck made the first attempt and when he had successfully reached the beach, Ernie followed, then Barbara.

Buck reached down and scooped some water up in his cupped palm, brought it to his lips, sniffed, then took a small sip. "Fresh

water," he told them. Taking a plastic vial from his pocket, he filled it with water from the lake, marked it with a pen and put the tube into the pannier on his ATV.

"There are fish in here," he added. "Can you see them?" Barbara and Ernie looked and nodded their agreement.

Carefully retracing their path, Ernie first, then Barbara, and Buck last, they regained the top of the cliff, turned southwest and headed back toward the base camp.

10 - Exploitation

Josh Troon waved at the Clancys as they came through the gate Wednesday morning. They headed straight for him.

"Is it ready?" Peg asked.

"Right here," Josh assured her, "but Oscar Gruder says I can't sell this to you for \$300," he added. "He said if I charged you any more than \$100 I'd be cheating you, and that's a bad way to start a business relationship." Josh turned and pointed to the freshly-painted GS-2 and the stenciled letters proclaiming this to be a product of the 'Troon Sluice Co'. Two others, nearly identical, stood behind it waiting for their owners to show up and claim them.

Peg handed over one hundred of the three hundred dollars she was prepared to pay for their new sluice as Walt loaded it onto a utility trailer hitched behind his ATV. The trailer also contained a rolled-up tent and enough supplies to keep them fed, safe, and comfortable for about a week. When the load was secure, they headed for the Great North Meadow road and their claim site.

Between Josh Troon's sawmill, Sam Burke's lunch counter, Leroy Starkweather's claim registry, and Oscar Gruder's Assay, the clearing fortunately coinciding with Steve Okambo's conference room was beginning to take on some aspects of a town, and the realization was slowly dawning on many of the 'locals' that a community was starting to form. Leroy had already begun referring to the area as 'Okambo'.

Around noon, Randy Burke wandered into the commercial center of Okambo, kissed his wife, grabbed a sandwich and a Coke, and made for Oscar Gruder's tent. In his hand, he clutched a small leather pouch.

"Tell me what I've got here, Oscar," he instructed, plunking the pouch onto Oscar's workbench.

Oscar took a fresh tray from a stack of trays and poured the contents of the pouch into it. The tray now held one sizeable nugget which Oscar concentrated on, first cleaning it, then weighing it, and finally measuring its volume by submerging it in a water-filled graduated tube. Tapping the keys of his calculator, he entered the results into a log book, then repeated the process with the half dozen flakes littering the tray. At last, he gathered the smaller particles and went through the same process.

"I call it 0.57 Troy ounces, adjusted for likely impurities. That's \$427.50 at \$750 the Troy ounce, minus my three percent:

\$12.80 for me, \$414.70 for you if you agree to bank it."

Randy looked surprised. "What do you mean: 'if?'"

"It's your gold," Oscar told him. "There's no obligation that you deal with me. You can do whatever you want with this. If you want me to handle brokering it, I mark your account for \$414.70 and in about a week you'll be able to have cash for the gold you deposit. Or you can leave it in your account and take it when you need it. Up to you."

"With interest?" Randy asked.

"Not quite yet," Oscar told him. "Paying interest doesn't happen until there's a real banking system that makes loans and issues credit and does all the other things banks normally do. I'm not there yet. I don't know that I'll ever be, but you can take the cash and put it into your regular bank."

"OK," Randy agreed, "mark me down for \$414.70."

Oscar took out a receipt pad and wrote a duplicate receipt for \$414.70 for Randy Burke and placed the gold fragments into a plastic container for smelting later.

Randy took his receipt and turned toward Josh Troon's mill to look over the available sluices.

North of Okambo, the Clancys found a piece of dry land well elevated from the stream and pitched their camp. Within the past few days, the temperatures had begun a noticeable rise, signaling the onset of Spring. 'Camping out' was about to become much more pleasant.

As Peg Clancy puttered about the newly-pitched tent setting up a homestead of sorts, Walt hauled the sluice down to the stream and assembled the two pieces, then shoveled a small load of silt and gravel into it to begin the process of extracting its gold. In the course of three hours or so, he had managed, single-handedly, to separate what he thought was a lot of gold. In reality, it was not even a quarter ounce, but it looked to Walt like the future. He collected it into a small plastic tube, capped it, and put it aside.

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Barbara pushed open the door of Edwin Schultz' lab and walked in. Edwin turned to see who the new arrival might be and smiled.

"Dr. fitzGibbon!" he exclaimed, "Does this mean you're 'back?'"

"Not exactly, Mr. Schultz. I've come to beg a favor."

"For you, anything," he assured her.

Barbara handed him the water sample Buck had taken from the lake. "I want to know if there's anything in there to be concerned about."

Edwin took the tube and looked at the label. All it said was 'Platteville'. Edwin looked at her askance.

"This isn't another of Al's 'samples', is it?"

Barbara feigned her best 'shocked' look and shook her head. "Oh, no, this is from a lake on some property my Dad and I are thinking of developing. Just want to be sure, that's all."

"OK," Edwin agreed. "When do you need to know?"

"Well, *now* would be nice, but since I'm asking for a favor, whenever you can get to it," she told him.

Edwin smirked, then turned toward his bench. Taking an eye-dropper, he put a single drop on a sterile microscope slide and bent to look into the eyepieces.

"Some impurities," he opined, "but nothing biologic. You could probably drink it without a problem."

"That's comforting," she sighed, "since my Dad already performed a taste-test. What about the 'impurities'?"

"Looks like it could be pollen, maybe pine pollen, but I'm guessing. There could also be some silt. Let it settle out and it's probably drinkable. Best to treat it anyway, just to be safe."

Edwin took a second drop and placed it into his mass spectrometer. A moment later the residue of the evaporated droplet blinked as it turned to vapor. Looking at the read-out from the device, Edwin shook his head.

"I take it all back. It's drinkable, but not in large quantities. Your water contains selenium."

"I thought selenium was a beneficial element," Barbara offered quizzically.

"It is," Edwin agreed, "but you need just a little bit of selenium for good health. It is possible to overdose. You can drink this water in a pinch, probably even regularly, but you need to watch your levels. If you notice any physical changes, get medical advice right away or you could wind up poisoned."

"Wow," was all Barbara could muster. "What about the fish in the lake?"

Edwin shook his head. "I would be surprised if there were any fish in the lake this water came from. If there are, the selenium levels in the meat could be very high. If there are fish in the lake, bring one in and I'll run it."

Barbara nodded. "I think there are some other sources I'd like to have you run the same tests on, Edwin. Would that be okay?"

"Sure," Edwin replied, "but let me ask that first question

again: this isn't another of Al's samples, is it? The reason I ask is finding this much selenium in a water sample is odd — make that 'very, very odd' — on planet Earth."

Barbara shook her head. "No, this is definitely not one of Al's samples. Let me ask a question in return, though: is the selenium level high enough to warrant mining it? That is, extracting it from the water?"

Edwin shook his head. "I don't think so. Selenium's not that valuable because it's not that rare as an ore. You can find it all over the planet if you know what to look for."

"Thanks," Barbara told him. "I'll bring back a few more samples just to make sure I have a source of drinking water I can count on not to kill me, if that's okay with you."

"Anytime," he said as she exited the lab.

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Larry Hopkins rode into Okambo on his ATV sporting a hand-routed sign made from three halves of birch log. The sign announced:

"The team of Hopkins, Logan, and Messier, log home builders extraordinaire, have their first model available for inspection one-quarter mile east of site 2. We are taking orders for log-homes-with-slab to be erected on your site. \$3700 cash or the equivalent in gold. Delivery date negotiable. Inquire at the model."

He took a sledge hammer and the sign from the back of his ATV and began pounding it into the ground near Leroy Starkweather's tent, a place he thought might make it noticed by those who would use their services.

Leroy, as was his custom, strolled outside to see what new activity was happening outside his place of business. After reading the sign, he rubbed his chin in thought, then turned to Larry.

"Serendipitous, you three getting into the 'log home building' business," he offered.

"Beg pardon?" Larry replied.

"But I would have re-arranged the order of the names," Leroy added cryptically. Larry just stared at him, not yet sure what Leroy was talking about.

"We arranged the names alphabetically," Larry explained.

"Yes," Leroy acknowledged, "but if you had put Pete's name first, you could have capitalized the L-O-G of 'Logan', the H-O of 'Hopkins', and the M-E-S of 'Messier'. 'LOG HOMES'," he explained to

the still-not-comprehending Larry.

"Anyway, I think I'll ride out and check out your handiwork," Leroy told him as he cranked the engine of his ATV and departed in a cloud of gray exhaust.

As Leroy approached site 2, he could hear the buzz of chainsaws through the trees, then he turned east on the river road toward the noise. A few minutes later he pulled up at the edge of the clearing where stood a very sturdy-looking white birch rectangle about fifteen feet wide and about thirty feet long. It had a door sheltered by an overhang and opening onto a fenced porch, and two windows, one along the short side, and one on the long side. He suspected there were more on the sides he couldn't see. Rough shutters closed off the openings to all but insects. A sheet-metal chimney poking through the roof exuded a slowly drifting cloud of wood smoke. Pete Logan and Pat Messier shut off the chain saws when they saw Leroy dismounting his ride.

"Very nice, boys, from what I can see," Leroy congratulated them. "Are you giving tours?"

Pat waved him inside. Inside was a small wood-burning stove, a table and four chairs, sitting on an otherwise-bare concrete slab. The stove made the interior almost uncomfortably warm, but it was a great relief from the still-wintery conditions outside.

"Thirty-seven hundred," Pat told him as they stepped inside, "that's just the shell. You need to supply your own stove."

"And cut the hole for the chimney?" Leroy asked. Pat nodded. "How much with a stove like yours, installed?"

"Leroy, you ask twenty people 'which stove is best?'," Pete interrupted, "and you'll get twenty-five different answers. But if you get your stove ahead of time and it's ready to install before we finish the cabin, we'll cut the roof and install it free."

"Now you're talking like a businessman, Pete," Leroy congratulated him. "What's the roof made of?"

"One-by-ten planking, lapped and caulked. If you want shingle or anything fancy, you'll have to find somebody to do it. We don't have the tools or the skills."

"Okay," Leroy told them, "sign me up."

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The next morning, several of the settlers wandered into town and stopped by to see Oscar Gruder. Between them, seven claims had produced over four ounces via panning. They all accepted Oscar's offer and 'deposited' their dust, flakes, and nuggets with him.

Near noon on Thursday, Oscar decided to take what he had

collected thus far to his contact for conversion to cash. He hung up the sign that said '*Running errands. Will return at 3pm*', gathered the several tubes holding the various 'deposits' and headed for the gate.

He drove into Lafayette, Colorado, and found the offices of the DC Refinery. The manager recognized Oscar as he entered and greeted him.

"We spoke some weeks back about brokering some placer gold," Oscar began after they were seated in the back office. "I have some of that with me. Are you ready to do business?"

"Yes, of course. We quoted seventy-five percent of market if I recall correctly," Dale Pollard, the manager at DC, replied to Oscar. "Is that what you recall as our agreement?"

"It is," Oscar confirmed. "I have with me 4.96 Troy ounces of gold-bearing ore. It appears to me from my examination to be about ninety-seven percent..." Dale Pollard issued a low whistle. "...so, I'm expecting we'll see 4.8 or thereabouts of actual gold."

Dale Pollard's eyes were wide. "Oscar, I expected you to show up with a half-ounce or maybe a full ounce. I didn't realize we were talking this much gold. I think I better get the boss' OK on this before I proceed."

Oscar looked a little startled, but recovered quickly. "Dale, I expect to be doing this on a weekly basis into the indefinite future, and the next shipment won't be five ounces. It will be twenty ounces. One day soon, it will be sixty ounces... each week. Make sure the boss understands that."

Pollard nodded and disappeared into the back room. A moment later he reappeared and spoke to Oscar.

"The owner would like to speak with you directly. You might call it 'a personal interview'. Would you please come with me?"

Oscar rose and followed him into the back room. As he entered, the owner stood and extended his hand: "Mr. Gruder, please have a seat. Dale tells me you surprised him today. I must admit being a little surprised myself. When Dale originally broached the subject some weeks back, I asked him how much gold we were talking about and he told me he expected it to be, in his words, 'small potatoes', which I took to mean an ounce or so now and then. We're talking much more than that, now, Dale tells me."

Oscar nodded. "Yes. Probably very much more. I'm estimating upwards of fifty ounces per week into the indefinite future.

"By the way, I don't believe I caught your name."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the man responded, again holding out his hand in greeting. "My name is Dennis Cameron."

"Now, Mr. Gruder, please pardon me for being curious, but exactly *where* is this gold coming from? Surely there are no mines in

this area that still have enough gold left to supply 'upwards of fifty ounces per week'. I need to know that I'm not setting myself up for a very long prison sentence in a place no one has heard of via the mainstream press. What, exactly, are we talking about here?"

A scowl crossed Oscar's face. "The 'deal' I made with Dale was 'no questions asked'," Oscar whispered. "That's why you're buying this at seventy-five percent of market and not at one hundred percent of market. Are we clear on that?"

"Mr. Gruder, be reasonable," Dennis Cameron protested. "No questions asked' when talking about an ounce of gold is a different proposition than 'no questions asked' when it's fifty ounces of gold every week for several years. We have to send this gold down through normal commercial channels involving audits and tax filings and all sorts of other documentation. I can 'lose' a few ounces and no one will notice. I can't lose three thousand ounces per year. *Someone* is *sure* to notice if my business suddenly increases by sixty percent. That 'someone' is the IRS, and I assure you they have an inadequately developed sense of humor about such things."

The scowl had not yet left Oscar's face. "The agreement I have with my principals is that there will be no paper trail back to them. Period. End of story. I was under the impression you were going to handle this material outside of normal channels. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

"What do you mean: 'outside of normal channels'?" Dale Pollard asked.

Oscar hesitated. "I thought this would be handled essentially off the books as by, say, offering it in private sales to those who would like to take a position in gold without, themselves, leaving much of a paper trail. I'm fairly certain anyone in this business would have such contacts. In effect, I was offering you a twenty-five percent discount for the use of those contacts. As I said, I'm sorry to have wasted your time." He rose to leave.

"Please don't go quite yet, Mr. Gruder," Cameron urged. "As it happens, I do have such contacts. I'm not certain I can move three thousand ounces per year, but if you're still willing to do business on that basis: that at some point in the future I may have to turn you away for being unable to find a home for your gold, then we can accommodate you until then."

"No questions asked?" Oscar demanded.

"As we agreed," Cameron confirmed.

Oscar extended his hand and Dennis Cameron took it in his.

"Dale, let's play this pretty close to the vest, shall we?" Dennis advised his employee. Dale nodded, and led Oscar out of Dennis Cameron's office and into the laboratory area.

In the laboratory, Dale introduced the refinery's chief technician, Lou Turner, to Oscar. "When Mr. Gruder presents a sample, it's to be handled separate from any other processes," Dale told Lou Turner. "We'll refine it down to a single non-standard ingot and report the refined weight directly to me. We'll also handle it as a priority RUSH-job. Do you have time to handle this sample right away?"

"It's a 'priority RUSH-job', isn't it?" Lou replied, smirking. "I'm on it. I'll have a weight number for you in about fifteen. Do you want to wait for it, Mr. Gruder?"

Dale answered for him: "We'll be in the outer office. Let us know when you've got a number."

As promised, Lou exited the lab a quarter-hour later holding a shiny metal bar in his heavily-gloved hands. He turned the bar so that Oscar and Dale could read the numbers stamped into the top surface of the bar: '4.81'. Dale tapped the keys on his calculator and the paper tape rolled up for each new line. At the end of the calculation, he ripped it off and showed it to Oscar. It said ' $4.81 \times 1,040 \times 0.75 = 3,751.80$ '

"The market is \$1040 per ounce for 'buys' this week. Is that number OK for you?" Dale asked.

"Love it," Oscar agreed.

Dale buzzed Mr. Cameron's phone, waited a moment, then said: "three-seven-five-one-point-eight-zero". Then Dale turned to Oscar and asked: "Cash or check?"

"Cash," Oscar answered.

A moment later, Dennis Cameron stood before Oscar Gruder and counted out three thousand seven hundred fifty-two dollars. "Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Gruder," he said. Oscar took the money and left, smiling.

On the way back to Okambo's, Oscar stopped at a local bank and bought eight assorted rolls of wrapped coins and broke several of the larger bills to smaller denominations so that his principals could be paid individually.

"Dale," Dennis Cameron addressed his office manager, "we can't ask any questions, but we can certainly develop our own intelligence. Let's discover where Oscar Gruder goes and who he talks to. If you know a trustworthy P.I., put him on the case. The less he knows, of course, the better."

"I'll have it taken care of, Mr. Cameron," Dale assured him.

11 - Gumshoe

Lisa Boatwright snapped the phone out of its cradle. Customers were rare enough these days. She didn't want anyone to try another agency just because the phone wasn't answered promptly enough.

"Boatwright Investigations," she announced.

"My name is Dale Pollard," Dale informed her. "You were recommended by a mutual friend as a trustworthy investigator. What can you tell me about yourself, please?"

"Thank you for calling, Mr. Pollard," Lisa began, quickly constructing a résumé for herself inside her head. "I have been in this business over six years with no, that is: *zero* negative reports to the Better Business Bureau. That, alone, may be my best recommendation.

"I developed my skills while I was in the U.S. Air Force stationed in Europe where I worked Base Security, vetting civilian workers, sometimes undercover. I am reasonably fluent in French and German, and I can get along in Russian and Italian.

"My fees vary by the type of work I am asked to do, but you should expect that I will cost you about twelve hundred dollars a day plus expenses.

"Is there something else you would like to know about me, Mr. Pollard?"

"So, you're experienced with surveillance?" Pollard asked.

"It's my specialty, Mr. Pollard," Lisa Boatwright bragged. "You're talking to the expert."

"Good," Pollard replied, "because that's exactly what I need for this assignment."

"And who, precisely, is the object of your interest?" she asked.

"His name is Oscar Gruder. He lives in or near Golden. Teaches at CSM. We'd like to know where he goes when he's not doing things we know about, who he talks to and when."

"We?" Lisa interrupted. "Am I working for more than one person?"

"I'm an agent, myself, Miss Boatwright," Dale explained. "I'm just a go-between."

"For whom?" she asked.

"That's not something you need to know, Miss Boatwright, is it?"

"Temporarily," she agreed. "Go on."

"Shadowing him may be a real test of your skills, because he

may go where there is little in the way of cover or concealment," Dale continued as instructed. "Nevertheless, it is such places that we are most interested in. Your turn."

Lisa Boatwright paused in thought. She might not make a lot of money on this contract, but the thought of at last having something worthy of her skills held a certain thrill. "I'd like a retainer," she told Dale Pollard. "Five days, six thousand dollars in advance."

"Cash tomorrow morning?" Dale offered.

"Eight AM," Lisa confirmed, "my office."

"Have coffee ready," Dale ordered.

"Three bucks extra," she quipped.

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At precisely 8am, Dale Pollard tried the knob on the frosted glass door at Boatwright Investigations. *Straight out of Sam Spade*, he thought. *If I had to guess I would have said places like this didn't even exist today.* When the knob didn't turn, he knocked.

At that very moment, in a clatter of footsteps on stairs, Lisa Boatwright appeared at the head of the staircase.

"Mr. Pollard?" she inquired of the man standing at the door of her office.

"Guilty," Pollard admitted.

"Well, in that case, you're under arrest," she informed him as she turned the key in the door and pushed it open.

"Not so fast," Pollard smirked. "I come bearing a retainer."

"Oh, sorry," Lisa smiled. "Coffee?"

Pollard nodded and Lisa set to work loading the coffee maker.

"So, where would you suggest I pick up Oscar Gruder's trail?" Lisa asked Dale Pollard, "at home?"

"I guess," Pollard replied. "I know very little about him and his personal life. That's why I'm hiring you."

"What's the reason for the surveillance, if you don't mind my asking?" Lisa Boatwright probed.

"I suspect that if I knew," Pollard lied, "I probably wouldn't be allowed to tell you. As far as I know, my principal merely wants to know Gruder's haunts and associates. My guess is it's a 'job suitability' inquiry."

"So, Mr. Gruder is being considered for a sensitive posting, and the poster wants to know if that's a good idea?"

Pollard's facial expression said *that sounds like as good a guess as any.*

Too easy, Lisa thought.

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Lisa Boatwright lounged around the office most of the morning and afternoon doing web searches for background information on Oscar Gruder. She had a promising dossier on him when, at 7pm, she turned in for the night, setting her alarm for 3am.

When the alarm woke her in the pre-dawn of the next day, Saturday, Lisa was ready. She rose, washed quickly, and was out of her house and on her way south toward Golden in forty minutes.

An hour later, she took a position from which she could observe the unassuming Gruder residence on Chelan Street. Two cars occupied the driveway, and from this she assumed that everyone she was interested in was inside the house. Indeed, Oscar and Nell were still asleep at 4:45am and would be for several more hours. Lisa contented herself with strong coffee — but not too much of it — and snack food to keep her awake while she waited for the Gruders to stir.

At 7:45am, Nell rolled over and looked at the clock on the end table. She poked Oscar awake.

"It's almost eight," she told him, leaving the ultimate decision up to him.

Oscar was exhausted from the effort of driving an hour each way to Valmont each day, waiting patiently for hours for clients or else driving their ATVs over kidney-abusing terrain for more than half an hour to get to their claim, all this after teaching his classes at CSM, and sometimes doing this trip in the morning, then rushing back to Golden to meet his classes in the afternoon.

"It's Saturday, isn't it?" he asked Nell.

"Yes," she assured him, "you can sleep in if you want."

"No," he grumbled, "let's try to work the stream. Are you up for it?"

Nell chuckled. "Sure. Let's go play in the dirt."

By 8:30, Nell and Oscar stepped out of the house and into Nell's car. Lisa, who had been on the verge of slipping into a nap, was instantly awake. She started her car, ready to follow the Gruders.

Nell worked her way over to US-6 where she turned north. She picked up CO-93 headed north through undeveloped rural areas that made for a fast trip. In Boulder, she switched over to US-36 briefly before taking Arapahoe Avenue east to 75th Street and that north to the Okambo equipment yards. Along the way, they picked up a fast-food breakfast and ate it in the car as they rolled.

Lisa Boatwright may not have been familiar with some of these roads, but the GPS device in her car would let her retrace her steps with precision. By 9:15, Lisa could observe the Gruders pulling into the parking lot for Okambo & Sons on 75th Street. She made the required entry in her notebook to document that she had been doing

the work she was paid for, then settled back to see what the Gruder's were going to rent from Okambo & Sons.

By 12:30, the Gruders had not yet reappeared with whatever it was in the way of rental equipment they had come here for. Lisa took a chance and doubled back to the last Burger King she had seen on the trip in. She ordered food to go and returned immediately to Okambo & Sons. The Gruders' car was still parked in the same place as when she last saw it, and appeared to Lisa not to have been moved in the interim. She continued watching through lunch and on into the afternoon. At 6:45pm, the Gruders reappeared coming through the front door of Okambo & Sons, got into their car, and returned to Golden. The day appeared to be a complete waste of time except that it gave Lisa something to investigate: what the hell were the Gruders doing in there for an entire day?

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Nell and Oscar entered the building and waved at Steve who waved back. When they stepped into the conference room, Linda Rossi, Tom Rossi's daughter, was seated at the table reading a book. Linda looked up and smiled at them.

"Going through?" Linda asked.

"Yes," Nell replied. "How did you get the duty today?"

Linda held up the book with a sour expression on her face. "Homework," she replied. "Dad found out I missed two assignments while I was helping him out there," she gestured at the gate, "and he sort of lost it. Told me I was on permanent gate duty until I was all caught up, so I'm hurrying to catch up."

Nell smiled. "You'll thank him someday," she told Linda. "He's not punishing you. He's doing you a favor."

Linda hung her head. "I know," she admitted, but her voice was unmistakably sad.

Nell and Oscar stepped to the gate. Linda pressed the button affixed to the bottom of the conference room table, the gate popped into existence, Nell and Oscar stepped through, and Linda deactivated the gate.

The two stepped into the middle of the sleepy little village of Okambo, found their ATVs still parked next to Leroy's tent, and departed for their claim site, the farthest out of all the current claims.

Oscar had chosen his claim well. Whereas Pete Cosgrove had proclaimed the fitzGibbon claim at site 2 'filthy' with gold, at the Gruders' claim gold flakes and flecks could be seen nestled among the silt and gravel with no need to actually rinse it before it became

obvious.

Nell and Oscar, using a commercial sluice Oscar had owned since his post-graduate days, were now extracting about two ounces per day, some days more, some days less, from the stream bed of the upstream bend. They hadn't even made an estimate of when they would move the sluice downstream. There was no sign whatsoever that they were making a dent in the concentration of gold in their claim. By the time Saturday was drawing to a close, they had collected another ounce or more, but they hadn't really been trying today. They had taken their time and were enjoying the onset of Spring, breaking often to just sit and watch the clouds and once to eat the sandwiches they had purchased at Sam Burke's make-shift deli.

A little after six in the evening, Oscar turned to Nell.

"Let's wrap it up," he suggested. Nell nodded.

They packed their equipment and rode their ATVs back to Okambo, parking them next to Leroy's tent, waved good-bye to everyone and transited the gate. By 6:45 they were on their way home.

In the less-than-a-week that Oscar and Nell had been seriously working their claim, and that part-time, they had extracted (by Oscar's measurement) about seven ounces of gold, half again as much gold as he had processed from seven other claims for sale through DC Refining during the past week.

Every few days, Oscar would take some time to assay his own samples and the ore would be squirreled away in small plastic containers. Each batch of ore went through the gate with them each night, made the trip to Golden, and wound up in their wall safe. What Oscar made from his assaying business was peanuts compared to the more-than \$7,000 now sitting in his safe.

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Lisa Boatwright was stunned when, the following Monday, Nell Gruder made the same trip. She followed Oscar Gruder when he went to CSM that morning to teach two classes. Afterward, she followed him to Valmont where she discovered Nell's car parked in the Okambo's rental yard. Oscar disappeared inside the building and Lisa didn't see either of them reappear until the evening.

Against that possibility, that she would be forced to stay on station the entire day, Lisa now carried a cooler filled with sandwiches, snacks, and drinks to keep her from having to abandon her post while waiting for something to happen. Lisa hated stake-outs.

The only odd thing she noticed about Okambo & Sons was that they seemed to have lots of employees, among whom were (probably)

numbered Oscar and Nell Gruder. Cars stayed parked in the side parking area virtually all day.

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Nell spent Monday morning looking at the prototype log home near site 2. The three men, Logan, Hopkins, and Messier, were busily notching birch logs according to a preset pattern, getting ready to put up their second structure in the clearing next to the first.

"Four days?" she asked again.

"About that," Pat Messier bragged. "Between 'site prep' and pouring the slab, we generally need a week up front. We'll pour the slab and let it cure for four or five days, longer if we have the time. While it's curing, we cut the logs, notch them, get everything ready. It's a day to pour the slab and another two-or-three to get the walls and roof up, so four days of work, but it takes ten days."

"OK," Nell nodded her understanding, "how about making mine the next one you pour a slab for?"

"We can put you on the list," Pat shrugged, "but there are five others ahead of you."

"Who?" she demanded.

"Buck fitzGibbon is next after our three prototypes: one each for me, Larry, and Pete, then Leroy Starkweather, Tom Rossi, Dean Purcell, and Tony Dinardo."

"So, you're planning to do one more before starting Buck's? Why don't you let me buy that prototype instead? Have you started site prep, yet?"

"Uh... no," Pat admitted. "We were planning to start site prep this afternoon for slab 3, but that's supposed to be Larry's slab. I'd have to ask him if he's willing to sell his slot."

"OK, let's ask him," Nell urged.

Pete and Larry shut off their chain saws when they saw Pat and Nell approaching.

"Nell has a proposition for you, Larry," Pat announced. "She wants your slab and the cabin that goes on it."

Larry looked confused. "When do I get mine, then?" he asked.

"Later, when demand drops off," Nell suggested, "or you can just take the next slot on the list."

"So, basically, we're trading 'build' slots?" Larry asked. "Why? I mean, what's in it for me?"

Nell nodded. "I see what you're driving at. You're trading a prototype to be ready in a week and a half for a non-prototype ready in something like three, three and a half weeks. I'll make it worth

your while. What's it worth to you to make that trade?"

"Let me think about it," he told her.

"You can't think too long," Nell reminded him. "Site prep starts today. You have to decide where that's going to happen."

Pete Logan interrupted. "For a thousand dollars, I'll give Larry my cabin and take his slot, then switch slots with you."

Nell looked at Larry who smiled and nodded. "Done," Larry announced.

"Good," Nell smiled back at the three. "Get your site prep equipment and follow me." She headed for her ATV.

"Where's your site?" Pat Messier asked.

Nell pointed to the northwest. "About twelve miles," she told him.

"Will we need to drop any trees?" Pat asked.

Nell shook her head. "It's wide open spaces. It's even relatively flat where we want the cabin."

Nell and Larry departed for the Gruders' site, Larry driving the Bobcat he would use to rough-grade the area for the slab. The others hooked up the sled containing the cement mixer, the bags of concrete mix, sand, and aggregate to the Caterpillar backhoe for hauling to where it was needed. Nell had assured them they would be able to follow the tire tracks easily.

By the time the backhoe arrived with its cargo, Larry had already staked the area and was using the scoop on the Bobcat to de-turf the plot where the cabin would eventually sit. The backhoe was used to dig five pits near the corners and the center of the slab. The three then immediately set to building the form for the slab. When the form was nearly complete, Pete began loading the mixer with material and getting the mixing started.

The pits were each filled in turn and re-bar bent 90° was plunged into the unset concrete, the horizontal arms resting on wood blocks. Then they called it 'quits' for the day, promising to return in the morning to finish.

By 8:30 the following morning, they had returned as promised, accompanied by Oscar and Nell, and began mixing more concrete. The remainder of the slab was poured around the sections of re-bar to connect it to the five pillars supporting the whole.

As Pete and Larry smoothed the top of the finished slab, Pat took the backhoe downslope and began digging a trench.

Nell poked Larry and asked: "What's Pat digging there?"

"You want a latrine, don't you?" he asked. She nodded.

The final task was to join several sections of pre-cut 4x6 to form a base for the outhouse, then rough walls of 1x10, a roof, the 'seating area', and a door.

By one in the afternoon, they were able to pack their equipment on the sled and depart, leaving the slab to cure until it was ready to receive the Gruder's cabin.

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Randy and Sam Burke entered the offices of Rocky Mountain Wholesale Food Supply and asked to speak to the owner. The receptionist had them take a seat while she paged her boss somewhere in the huge warehouse attached. A few moments later, Treat Ahearn pushed through the double doors into the reception area, his hand outstretched in greeting.

"I'm Treat Ahearn," he announced himself. "Dena tells me you want to see me?"

Randy and Sam shook his hand in turn while introducing themselves. "Is there someplace private we can talk?" Randy asked. Ahearn pointed at his office door and the three retreated behind it.

"Sam and I are thinking about going into business," Randy began, "and we're scouting potential suppliers. We've looked you up on the web, and we've seen your catalog, and you appear to have most or all of what we're going to be in the market for. What we'd like to talk about is more in the area of 'payment options'. We have an odd situation we're dealing with and establishing a standard business relationship may not fit in well with our situation. Basically, we're looking for a supplier who can adapt to an alternate reality."

A dark look crossed Ahearn's face. "I'm not sure what it is you're driving at, but I have to tell you that 'running a business' means having a more-or-less standard way of doing the back-office administrative tasks. Not having a standard business relationship leads to non-standard back-office procedures, and I'm not going there. I don't suppose you'd care to elaborate on what you're talking about, would you?"

"We came prepared to get very elaborate," Sam interjected, pulling from her pocket two substantial gold nuggets and placing them on the desk in front of Ahearn. "What we're talking about, with all the lace around the edges stripped off, is paying our account in gold."

Ahearn's eyes were wide as he picked up the nuggets and rolled them in his hands. "How much is here, do you think?" he asked.

"That's merely a sample," Randy told him. "The big one is about an ounce; the smaller, maybe three-quarters. When we pay the account, it would not be with nuggets, it would be small ingots in the ounce-range, say: two to six ounces per, and we'd iron out any small differences with IOUs.

"This would, of course, be 'off the books'," Randy continued.

"It's difficult to leave a paper trail behind such transactions, and that's exactly the way we like it. What do you think?"

Ahearn paused, thinking. "What do I do with gold?" he asked finally.

Sam shook her head. "You do with it whatever you want, as long as whatever you do doesn't lead back to us. You can store it, trade it, or sell it (although you will raise some eyebrows when you try to peddle a four-ounce bar of .999 gold)."

"I suppose I could issue a credit memo over my own signature for the gold and let you use that for paying the invoice," Ahearn mused.

"As long as the credit memo doesn't say anything like: '*for gold ingots received*,'" Randy reminded him.

"Of course, eventually, I will have to make the cost up to make the books balance. That may require I sell some or all of the gold. I don't know what's involved there. Am I asking for trouble?" He didn't expect the Burkes to help him with that question, but Randy did, anyway:

"If you sell gold ingots to a dealer, you will almost certainly wind up reflecting that on your tax return. Unless you can find someone who will offer you a similar '*off the books*' arrangement."

"A jeweler, perhaps," Ahearn mused. Then, a light seemed to go on in his head. "Would you accept an IOU for these two nuggets so that I would have something solid to help with that investigation?"

"Wouldn't you rather have an ingot as a sample?" Randy asked. "We don't actually have good weight numbers for these, so we couldn't even tell you how much to write the IOU for. Besides, you don't actually need anything material if you're just talking with friends and acquaintances, would you?"

"Perhaps not," Ahearn agreed, handing the two nuggets back. "Let me ask around to see whether I can develop a list of potential customers. By the way, what is the conversion rate you would want for the gold?"

"Current market is about ten-forty the Troy ounce," Sam told him. "You would, of course, get a substantial discount for the favor of dealing in other-than-cash. Why don't you ask around and tell us what sort of discount you would find acceptable?"

Randy butted in for the last word: "Notice: she said '*acceptable*', not '*attractive*,'" then he winked at Ahearn. The two, Randy and Sam, shook Ahearn's hand again and left to go interview another potential supplier.

Treat Ahearn entered *Willett's Jewelry* to a jangle of bells attached to the front door, a hold-over from a much more sedate age that Len Willett just couldn't let pass.

"Morning, Treat," he greeted his old friend, "What brings you by? Looking for something for Ellen?"

"Not today, Len," Ahearn answered. "I came by to get your professional advice."

Len Willett drew back with a facial expression that said: '*are you kidding me?*'. "My professional advice?" he asked.

Ahearn smiled. "Do you ever work from raw gold?" he asked.

"Rarely," Willett admitted. "For the most part, I'm just a reseller of pieces that come out of commercial factories. If I were to make a chain like this," he held up a strand of gold links, "you couldn't afford it. The time it would take me to craft it would make it prohibitively expensive. A special order, however, I might make from scratch, but it would still be expensive. The difference is that you expect a special order to be more expensive than something you find in a catalog.

Ahearn thought for a moment. "How much more expensive?" he asked.

Now it was Len's turn to think. "Double," he offered. "Maybe triple."

"So," Ahearn continued, "for you to compete with the commercial stuff, you would have to be able to buy raw gold at one-third of market," he suggested.

"Yes, about that," Len agreed.

"Different subject," Ahearn announced. "If I were to buy raw gold, what should I pay for it?"

Len looked at his friend askance. "How much gold?" he asked, "Grams or ounces?"

"Small ingots in the multiple-ounce range," Ahearn admitted. "Two- to six-ounces."

"Where? From whom?" Willett probed.

"I'm not ready to talk in such detail quite yet if you don't mind, Len," Ahearn begged-off. "I'm just looking for professional advice."

"Okay," Len told him, "this is my professional advice: gold coins that come out of recognized mints, whether government-operated or privately-run, and are advertised in the New York Times Sunday supplement are safe to buy because everything is out-in-the-open and above-board. That's not what I'm hearing here. Run, do not walk, away from whoever is offering you two-ounce gold ingots. One, if they're 'legit', there's no way to verify the purity of the gold without a fairly complex metallurgical manipulation. Two, if they're not legit,

you're an accessory to money laundering. Your new home address will be Danbury, Connecticut, which is, all things considered, not a bad place to do ten-to-twenty."

"I don't know," Ahearn demurred. "I've dealt with shady characters before, and this deal doesn't strike me as 'shady'. What if they are straight? Suppose it's all on the up-and-up? What's gold like that worth?"

Len shook his head. "Treat, please don't go to jail. You're my best customer along with being a good friend.

"Gold is presently up over \$1,000 per Troy ounce, \$1,040 is the last quote I recall seeing. That's what a miner sells it to a refiner for. I pay a premium over that for buying refined gold from a reputable source: over \$1,100 for me. You need to recognize that you are not necessarily buying from a reputable source. How much is that risk worth? I don't know. That's up to you.

"If you can get a sample, bring it in and I'll run some tests on it. All that will tell us is whether the gold is pure or whether it's been doctored, but it won't tell us whether it's legal or not. That I don't know how to figure."

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Having talked to two more potential suppliers for Sam's General Store, Randy and Sam now realized they were going to have to go out on a limb to establish any credibility with any such supplier. They tracked down Oscar Gruder.

"We'd like to have some of our gold turned into ingots," Randy started.

"Bring it by the tent Tuesday afternoon and I'll work on it. Three percent, okay?"

"Sure," Randy agreed, "three percent."

12 - Commerce

Sam and Randy had amassed, they felt, about 4 ounces of gold in a week of part-time work. That included the two nuggets they showed to Treat Ahearn yesterday making up the bulk of their holdings. Those hopes were dashed — somewhat — when Oscar looked at their ore.

"There's a lot of non-gold mixed in with the gold," he told them. With that, he started sorting the particles in the tray on his table with the end of tweezers, pushing the gold-looking fragments to one side and the non-gold to the other side. It was soon obvious even to Sam's untrained eye that they could have done a better job of washing the silt. There were even some pebbles in the mix for which there was just no excuse. They should have been removed before showing the ore to Oscar.

After several minutes of separating wheat from chaff, Oscar turned to them and said: "That's close enough for me. Look at the non-gold pile and tell me if you see anything I should have put on the other side."

Sam and Randy pored through the scoria for a few moments, then nodded. "I don't see anything there that looks like gold."

Oscar took a small lab vacuum cleaner and sucked up the discard pile leaving only assayable gold in the tray. He then poured the contents of the tray into a crucible and placed the crucible and its cap on the flame of his burner. "It'll be a few minutes," he told the Burkes.

As promised, a few minutes later, Oscar peeked into the crucible to verify that the metal was liquid. He added a curette of some powdered material to the crucible, stirred it in and replaced the cap. After another few minutes, he uncapped the crucible, reached in with another curette, and scraped away a layer of scum on top of the gold. Satisfied at last, he picked up the crucible in a pair of tongs and poured its contents into a second crucible positioned on his scale. As the liquid gold poured into the receptacle, the digital display showed the newly-added weight, eventually settling on '2.76'. Oscar tapped the keys of his calculator and announced: "2.76 ounces. Three percent is point-ought-eight ounces leaving you with two-point-six-eight. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Sam and Randy acknowledged. "Can we have ours as three three-quarter-ounce ingots and whatever is left over?"

"Not a problem," Oscar agreed.

He took the second crucible in which the gold was already

starting to harden and placed it back on the flame. He took five molds from his toolbox and placed them on his scale, then re-zeroed the scale for their weight. When the gold was again liquid, he poured gold into the first mold, carefully watching the scale until it read '0.75'. He filled the second mold until the scale reached '1.50', and the third until the scale read '2.25'. Then he poured the fourth mold until the scale read '2.68', and poured the remainder into the fifth mold. The scale now read '2.76'.

From his toolbox, he extracted a set of metal bars. When the ingots had cooled sufficiently, Oscar stamped each of the first three with '♀0.75 .999♂', the fourth with '♀0.43 .999♂', and the last with '♀0.08 .999♂' using the numbered dies from his set. As a final test, he took one of the ingots and immersed it into a graduated cylinder to determine its volume. Tapping the keys of the calculator one more time, he nodded to himself with some satisfaction, and handed their four ingots to the Burkes.

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Randy called Treat Ahearn to let him know he had a sample Ahearn could test and Ahearn invited them to bring it in.

"I thought you said these would be in the multiple-ounce range," Ahearn remarked as he looked at the '♀0.75 .999♂' marking on the ingot.

"It's just a sample," Sam informed him. "You're not the only person who has asked us to prove we're not talking through our hats."

Ahearn nodded. "How shall we handle this half-transaction?" he asked.

"Just give us a receipt for three-quarters ounce of gold, and you can take it to whomever you wish to have it analyzed," Randy replied.

"Suppose it turns out to be pot metal?" Ahearn asked. "Then I've just given you a receipt for something like seven hundred dollars in exchange for a slug worth a few cents."

"We're looking to do business with you, Mr. Ahearn," Randy protested. "That would be a pretty poor way to start a business relationship, wouldn't you say? If you think this is just a scam..."

"No," Ahearn protested in turn, "what I'm thinking is that we should all go to my friendly jeweler, and you can hand the ingot to him without me acting as an intermediary. If my jeweler says this stuff is genuine, we're in business. If he says it's junk, you take your ingot back and we walk away."

Sam and Randy looked at each other, then back at Ahearn. "We were hoping to have as few points of contact as possible," Randy

admitted, "but if it's necessary..."

Ahearn wrote the name and phone number of *Willett's Jewelry* on a piece of paper and handed it to Randy. "You can follow my car. In case you get lost, that's where we're going."

The three left Rocky Mountain Wholesale Food Supply and convoyed to Len Willett's store. As they entered, Len called to Treat: "Flip that sign on the door to 'closed'."

"Len, allow me to introduce..."

Randy stopped him in mid-sentence: "We don't need to know each other," Randy insisted. Ahearn nodded.

"These acquaintances of mine have some gold to be verified," Ahearn told Len. Len held out his hand. Randy dropped the ingot into it.

Len Willett looked at the ingot curiously and its marking 'Q0.75 .999σ'. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

Randy turned to Treat Ahearn. "People keep asking questions," he complained.

"The reason I ask," Willett interrupted, "is that just about every refiner in the world has a way of marking ingots to indicate who did the work. It's one measure of an ingot's veracity that a refiner, for all practical purposes, 'signs' his work. By an odd coincidence, I recognize the 'signature' on this ingot. You don't mind if I call the refiner to verify it, do you?"

"Of course not," Randy agreed. "Who are you calling?"

"Colorado School of Mines," Willett answered as he dialed the number.

"Oscar Gruder," Sam interjected.

Willett stopped dialing and hung up the phone. "I just have one test to make," he told Treat Ahearn, and with that he weighed the ingot to verify it really was three-quarters of a Troy ounce, then immersed it in a graduated cylinder half-filled with water. Using his calculator to compute the density of the ingot, he looked at the answer, dried off the metal bar and handed it to Treat Ahearn.

"It's OK," he told him.

"What's this thing worth, Len?" Treat asked.

"Seven hundred eighty dollars to any refiner in the state."

Ahearn thanked him and the three left the shop, flipping the sign back to 'open' as they left. Outside, Ahearn turned to the Burkes.

"I want a fifteen percent discount," he told them, "because of the 'no checks, no questions' restriction."

"Let me get this straight," Randy countered, "you're offering eighty-five percent of market?"

"Yes," Ahearn confirmed, "I'll give you six hundred sixty-three for this."

Sam and Randy looked at each other and smiled. "Write the receipt," Randy agreed.

Inside the store, Len Willett picked up the phone again and continued dialing the number he had before him: Oscar Gruder at CSM. Getting Oscar's voicemail, he left a message: "Oscar, this is Len Willett. Give me a jingle at 720-555-GEMS. So, I see you're getting into the refinery business, eh? I just came across an ingot with your name on it. Nice work, too, but I'd like to verify it really is yours. Talk at'cha later."

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Nell Gruder parked her car in the Okambos' lot and entered the building a few steps ahead of a customer, waved at Danny Okambo, and headed for the back conference room. The customer almost followed her but stopped at the door marked "Private — Authorized Personnel Only". The customer browsed through a stack of brochures on a display table, then left.

Across the street, Lisa Boatwright waited in her car. When her cell phone rang, she answered it immediately.

"Yeah," she started.

"Subject walked in, waved at one of the other employees and went into a restricted back area. I didn't follow her," the voice on the other end told her.

"Okay, thanks. That's all I need." She disconnected, started the car, and drove away. As she drove, she dialed Dale Pollard's phone. Pollard answered it after checking the caller-ID.

"Pollard," he began. "What've you got for me, Lisa?"

"I followed the Gruders as you requested, often both, but sometimes just one, nearly always concentrating on the man. In most cases the Gruders wind up at the same place. They seem to stay in pretty close touch. Most of their time away from Golden is spent at a heavy equipment rental concern in Valmont, Okambo and Sons on 75th Street. In five days, they have gone to Okambo and Sons five times.

"You wanted to know who they associated with outside of their known environment. That's who.

"You paid up front for five days' surveillance. If you want more, I'll be happy to bill you in arrears, but to be perfectly honest, Mr. Pollard, these people are boring."

Pollard smirked at the remark. *I wonder if they're 'boring' a mine in Okambo and Sons' backyard,* the thought flickered across his mind.

"Photos?" Pollard asked.

"Lots," Lisa confirmed. "Okambo and Sons seems to have a whole bunch of employees — thirty or so. The same cars show up every day or nearly every day, and I've been documenting the regulars. I'm not sure where they're putting them. The complex isn't that big. If they've got office space, it has to be underground.

"I've got images of the vehicle license plates and a contact at DMV has been able to supply me with registration data for all of them. I'll spin it down to a CD and drop it by this afternoon, if that's alright."

"That's perfect," Pollard agreed, "except that I'll swing by your office and pick it up. What time?"

"Any time after lunch is good," she told him.

At 2pm Dale Pollard turned the knob on the door to Lisa Boatwright's office and found her sitting at her desk reading. She pointed at a CD in a slipcase on the corner of the desk. Pollard picked it up, waved at Lisa, turned and left.

"According to the P.I.," Dale Pollard told his boss, "the Gruders spend most of their time at a heavy equipment rental concern in Valmont, Okambo and Sons on 75th Street. Several other people also frequent the place and it appears they are all employees of one sort or another."

"Could it be a mining operation?" Dennis Cameron asked incredulously.

"It's possible," Pollard reflected, "but that would be really odd that there's a newly-discovered vein of gold in the middle of Valmont. Still... In any case, the P.I. snapped pictures of the license plates that frequent the yard and managed to get names connected to all of them." Pollard handed his boss a printed list.

Cameron took the list and scanned it quickly, his eye stopping when it read "Ernest S. Walsh".

"Is she still on our payroll?" he asked Pollard.

"No, but we can get her back on," Pollard replied.

"Right," Cameron handed him the list with "Ernest S. Walsh" circled. "Background and frequent contacts for this 'Walsh' entry. Photos, too," he added.

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Nell Gruder listened to the recorded message on the answering machine and copied the basic details onto a pad. She tore off the sheet and left it on the dining room table where Oscar would see it after he got out of the shower.

As Oscar towed off he wandered into the main living area

and saw the note on the table. He picked it up and read it. "Len Willett," he remarked.

"Is that a good sign or a bad sign?" Nell asked.

"Don't know," Oscar answered, "but it can only be the ingots I poured for Randy and Sam. I wonder why those particular ingots found their way into Len's hands."

He picked up the kitchen phone and dialed 720-555-GEMS. A moment later the phone was answered: "Willett's Jewelry".

"So," Oscar began without bothering to introduce himself, "how big were these ingots?"

"Not ingots, Oscar," Len corrected him, "ingot, singular. Or are you saying you've produced more than one of these? It was three-quarters ounce Troy."

"Yeah," Oscar admitted, "it's mine. Was it okay?"

"It was perfect," Willett admitted. "True weight, proper density. I just wanted to make sure someone wasn't hijacking your mark for nefarious purposes." He could hear Oscar chuckling on the other end.

"But this has aroused my curiosity, Oscar. Why are you refining gold all of a sudden?"

"It's a very long story, Len," Oscar parried. "The short version is that some friends get their jollies from placering the local streams, and over time they've collected some gold. They asked me to refine it for them to avoid the fees a regular refiner would have charged, fees that would have taken a lot of the joy out of sloshing in all that icy water for all the time they've spent."

"How long did it take them to placer three-quarters of an ounce out of local streams?" Len asked.

"I really couldn't say," Oscar replied truthfully, for he was under an obligation not to reveal that three-quarters of an ounce was about a day's effort.

"Well," Len pressed, "might you know where they placered this gold?"

"Tsk," Oscar chided Len, "I'm not sure Randy and Sam would want me talking about that even if I could pinpoint it on a map, but certainly if they're finding gold on public land they would file a claim and knowing 'where' wouldn't do you any good, would it? I suspect this is coming out of private property, theirs or someone else's, but I can't say for sure. Anyway, it's just a hobby placer.

"Now, *I* get to ask some questions," Oscar took over the conversation. "How did this ingot wind up at *Willett's Jewelry*?"

"A long-term acquaintance of mine seemed intent on buying it from... you called them 'Randy and Sam'? He wanted to know if it was really gold or whether he was about to get scammed. When I

threatened to call the owner of the proof marks, they admitted to knowing you. I figured if they knew you and your marks were on the bar, it was probably okay. I just weighed it and checked its density, and as I said, it was perfect. So, is that all the gold they've taken."

Oscar thought for a moment, composing his words. *Len already suspected there was more than one ingot. Might as well admit it.* "There's another one just like that, three-quarters," Oscar told him.

"Okay, thanks, Oscar. Stay in touch."

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On Thursday afternoon, Lisa Boatwright again found herself in Valmont monitoring the comings and goings at the Okambo and Sons yard, but this time she was paying very close attention to one particular Pontiac with Colorado tag EHG-122. She had photographed everyone exiting the building, capturing most of their faces with the 400mm lens on her Nikon, not knowing which of them would eventually wind up in the red Pontiac. At last three people loaded into the van now holding all her attention. It rolled out of the yard and turned north on 75th.

Consulting her copy of the list she had gotten from her friend at the DMV, she was prepared for Ernie to turn west on Jay Road because it specified his address as 17th Street. Lisa smiled. They were headed home.

As Ernie turned south onto 17th Street from Quince Avenue, Lisa was 10 or 12 car lengths behind, and turned the corner herself just in time to see Ernie's vehicle roll into his driveway.

Carefully timing her approach, Lisa glided forward as the occupants exited, her finger solidly on the shutter button and the automatic advance on the camera *snicking* continuously. As she passed the driveway, she also got a few pictures of Ernie's modest house, then continued down the street, and away.

One of the photographs would later reveal a Jeep parked in the same driveway, its plates showing, and her contact at DMV would easily match it with a name: Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh.

Dale Pollard placed a stack of photos on his boss' desk. "This photo shows Ernest S. Walsh, Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh, and an unidentified other man who appears somewhat older. Lisa Boatwright, our investigator, reports that all them: these three along with two dozen or so others seem to spend virtually all day within the Okambo and Sons compound.

"If they're employees, they're damned dedicated employees. They're working six or seven days a week, most of them, and eight

hours a day is about the minimum any of them are putting in. Some of them work the occasional short day as, for instance, when Oscar Gruder has classes to teach and spends part of his day at CSM. There are probably others who have real jobs that take them away from here every now and then.

"I know it doesn't look like a mine on the outside, but I don't have any other explanation that fits, especially given Oscar Gruder's assertion that he's going to be selling us fifty ounces per week. He's not doing anything unusual in his day-to-day life except for these near-daily trips to Okambo and Sons. There's no place he could get that much gold — and no opportunity, either — except for that site on 75th Street.

"I now believe you were right. It's a mine. I'd bet my life on it."

"Good," Dennis Cameron acknowledged the report. "Thank you, Dale. Let's keep this one under our hats for the time being. I'll take over from here."

Dale nodded, turned and left to get on with his other tasks.

Dennis opened his cell phone, found Barbara's number in its directory, and placed a call. It went to voicemail. He was not surprised. If she were adhering to the pattern Lisa Boatwright had reported, she would be hard at work mining gold at the site on 75th Street.

No matter. She would get the message when she got the message.

BEEP! "Barbara, it's Dennis Cameron. I would like to invite you and Ernie and your father for Sunday brunch at my place. I'd like to finally meet the man who edged me out, and I'm sure there are lots of other things for us to talk about as well. Call me when you get this and let me know what time you can make it over."

As Dennis Cameron disconnected his call, he could hear Dale Pollard's voice from the outer office.

"Oscar! Good to see you again." Then the volume of the conversation decreased to the point that he could no longer hear what was being said. Whatever. Dale knew how his boss wanted this game played.

"So, what do you have for us this week?" Dale asked Oscar.

"It looks to me like nineteen-and-a-fraction ounces. As with the rest, it's pretty high-grade ore, ninety-six percent, maybe ninety-seven."

Dale motioned for Oscar to follow and he led the way into the laboratory-proper. Lou Turner saw them enter and put the task he was currently working on 'on hold'.

"Another priority rush job?" he asked with a wink.

"Just so," Dale confirmed. "Oscar says he has something short of twenty ounces. When can we have a good number?"

"Fifteen," Lou mused, "maybe twenty."

"Okay," Dale agreed, "we'll wait outside."

A short while later, Lou pushed through the lab doors and into the waiting room. "19.12," he announced.

Oscar smiled. "I'll take it," he agreed. Seven of those ounces were his own.

Dale patted the keys of his calculator and finally tore off a strip of paper tape to show Oscar. It read `19.12 × 1,040 × 0.75 = 14,913.60`. Oscar nodded. Dale keyed the intercom and spoke to Dennis Cameron: "One four nine one three point six".

A few moments later, Dennis stood before Oscar and counted out fourteen thousand nine hundred fourteen dollars. Oscar put the stack of bills into his inside jacket pocket, shook Dennis' hand and turned toward the door.

Dennis Cameron dialed the number from memory. The phone burred softly in his ear to assure him another phone somewhere far away was ringing. After four rings a voice answered:

"Hello?"

"Hank, it's Dennis Cameron. I have a little proposition for you. Are you still interested in expanding your gold holdings?"

"Sure," Hank Harns assured him, "What have you got?"

"Intriguingly, Hank, I have come across some unpapered gold ingots. I personally guarantee their value, but this would be a 'strictly cash' transaction: no invoice, no check, no credit card. Each ingot will be marked with its weight. The price is \$1,110 per ounce, cash only. Interested?"

"Yes, of course," Harns agreed. "How many ounces are we talking about?"

"I've got twenty-some-odd ounces at the moment. You can have as much of it as you want."

"*At the moment?*" Harns queried.

"There will be more like it in the future," Dennis told him, "and it will all be for sale on the same terms."

"I'll take twenty ounces now, and probably more when you get it," Harns told him.

13 - Intrigue

Ernie's red van turned into Dennis Cameron's driveway and he stopped at the intercom. "May I help you?" Paul's voice inquired of the driver.

"Barbara fitzGibbon and party at the invitation of Mr. Cameron," Ernie informed him. Noiselessly, the gate swung open and he proceeded through to the house.

Dennis greeted them at the door, first giving Barbara a chaste kiss on the cheek, then offering his hand to Buck, and finally turning to Ernie.

"We shouldn't be friends," Dennis began, offering his hand.

"Not to be cruel, Mr. Cameron..."

"Dennis," he interrupted Ernie.

"Not to be cruel, Dennis," Ernie restarted, "but no one was more surprised than I over Barbara's choice. The girl is clearly irrational. Comfort yourself that I have saved you from a potentially horrible situation."

"Ernest Walsh!" Barbara protested, but she was obviously not angry.

"Come," Dennis herded them all inside. "Brunch is waiting and good conversation as well, I hope."

When they had all taken seats around a table much too large for just four people, the butler placed a freshly-opened bottle of bourbon in the center of the table, then turned to Ernie.

"Something to drink, Mr. Walsh?" he asked.

"Bourbon is fine for me," he told Paul. Paul nodded and produced another glass, setting it before Ernie's place.

"To who may be the three best friends I have in this world," Dennis offered raising his glass, "and certainly the most honest and honorable of those," he finished. The others raised their own glasses in salute and then each took a sip.

"So," Dennis began after Paul had taken their brunch orders and gone off to assist the cook, "what are you three doing with yourselves these days? Barbara, you're not teaching any more, I understand, and Buck is retired, isn't that so?" Barbara and Buck nodded. "What keeps you occupied, Ernie?"

Ernie had not expected to be engaged in conversation so immediately and was caught somewhat off-guard as Dennis had hoped. "I... uh... I'm doing a bit of land development," Ernie adlibbed, hoping there wouldn't be any piercing follow-up questions, but he was due to be disappointed.

"Really?" Dennis pounced. "Where?"

Barbara looked over at Ernie, biting her tongue to keep herself from blowing their cover. "Wherever there are opportunities," Ernie answered.

"Well, that's true for all of us, isn't it?" Dennis offered.

"It is," Ernie agreed. "What line of work are you in, Dennis," he asked their host.

"I have my fingers in lots of pies," Dennis smiled back. "Lately, I've been devoting most of my time to a small business I own in Lafayette, a little precious metals refining company. You know, you meet the oddest collection of people in that line of work."

Barbara and Buck and Ernie exchanged glances and Buck jumped into the conversation: "How do you mean: 'odd'?" he asked.

"Well," Dennis back-pedaled, "I don't mean all of them are odd, just that the loners, the one-offs, the 'olde-tyme prospectors' that wander in every now and then with a 'poke' for sale are often not what you'd expect. One of my customers is a professor at CSM down in Golden. Oscar shows up every now and then with a little bundle he's collected God-knows-where. Does a roaring business finding gold in streams you would have bet were panned-out a century ago."

Barbara had a funny look on her face on hearing this. "Oscar... Gruder?" she offered.

"Yes," Dennis seemed genuinely surprised. "Do you know him?"

"'Academia'," Barbara tossed off. "Anyone in the 'teaching biz' locally, especially at the college-level, is probably an acquaintance unless they're new in town. On the other hand, lots of people know Oscar Gruder. He's well-known for his expertise and his teaching skills."

"Well," Dennis continued, "if he keeps bringing in pokes like he's had in the last few weeks, he'll soon find teaching a very poor choice of occupation. Oscar's 'expertise' has brought him quite a lot of extra income recently."

All three of the visitors, Buck, Barbara, and Ernie, had stopped sipping their bourbon as if by common agreement. The same thought had flitted through all three heads: *...must keep my wits about me and not say anything I shouldn't...*

"Oscar has a source close by from which he's extracting a remarkable amount of gold," Dennis looked straight at Barbara. Ernie and Buck saw Barbara tense in anticipation of what was coming. "I have to admit my curiosity got the better of me," Dennis continued. "Normally, I wouldn't do such things, but I had Oscar followed. Not to jump his claim, understand," Dennis begged off, "but to assure myself that by dealing with him I wasn't setting myself up for criminal

charges.”

“I can’t believe Oscar Gruder would ever engage in shady business,” Barbara protested.

“And it turns out he’s not doing anything very shady,” Dennis assured her. He reached behind him to retrieve a stack of photos laying on top of a credenza. “Something odd, however, is going on, and I’m counting on you three to fill in the blanks for me.” He dropped the stack of photos on the table.

One of the photos showed two cars parked side-by-side in the Okambo’s side lot. Both license plates were circled, and arrows pointing to them marked the plates as belonging to Oscar Gruder and Ernie Walsh. Another showed Barbara, Ernie, and Buck leaving Okambo & Sons in the presence of Oscar and Nell.

“The investigator who took these pictures reports that some two dozen to three dozen people, including children, frequent this business, arriving early and departing late, rarely leaving the premises for lunch or any other purpose.

“This week, Oscar showed up with nearly twenty Troy ounces of gold, apparently one week’s ‘production’. Knocked me for a loop,” Dennis admitted. “There’s nothing like that kind of ore — extractable by amateurs — remaining in this area. If you decide to say nothing, my lips are sealed because we are, in fact, friends, and I will not blow your cover, but I’m hoping very strongly that those same bonds of friendship will move you to help me understand what’s going on here.” Dennis sat down. Paul wheeled a cart laden with food into the dining room.

After Paul had served each with their meals, he turned to Dennis. “Will there be anything else, Mr. Cameron?”

“Thank you, Paul. Please close the door as you leave. We’ll ring if we need you.” Paul gave a little bow from the waist and exited, pulling the dining room door closed behind him.

“So,” Buck began, “you think Oscar is — what? — mining gold at the Okambos’, and that we’re helping him?”

“If that were true,” Dennis answered, “it would fit very neatly all the observed facts save one: mined ore has a different configuration than placer ore, the stuff you take out of stream beds by panning or sluicing. That’s what’s throwing me. Oscar’s ore is placered, taken out of a stream bed whether wet or dry. There’s no stream flowing through the Okambos’ property. The nearest running water is a quarter-mile away and there’s not a whole ounce of gold in its entire length. It was gold-free, stripped completely clean, before Teddy Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill.

“There can’t be a mine there at the Okambos’, at least not a ‘mine’ in the traditional sense of the word, because there would be

some indication above-ground — tailings at the very least — some signs of excavation.

“What am I not seeing?” Dennis asked in conclusion.

There was a long silence before Barbara suggested: “Let’s enjoy our brunch, shall we?”

In the half-hour or more the four of them sat eating, drinking, and making uncomfortable small talk all deliberately avoiding the topic Dennis had raised, Barbara, Ernie, and Buck would occasionally glance at each other trying to gauge what was happening in the others’ minds. Barbara wore a bemused expression for the full length of the interlude. Ernie, looking at her face, correctly judged that Barbara was thinking: *Dennis has guessed too much already and has the capacity to guess more. Having such a person ‘on the outside’ is too dangerous because of the things he might do (or try to do) to satisfy his own curiosity. Dennis also has business contacts that can prove invaluable, and by bringing him inside the circle, we get those contacts essentially for free. We could do lots worse than to bring him aboard.*

Buck, meanwhile, was having the same sort of internal conversation with himself and coming to largely the same conclusion as had his daughter. Putting down his fork on a mostly-empty plate, he turned toward Dennis.

“You own a precious metals refinery locally,” Buck addressed Dennis. “What else?”

Dennis dabbed his lips and put the napkin to one side. “I have a sixty-five percent stake in a Denver brokerage,” he admitted, “which is where most of my current income derives, and a forty percent stake with my brother’s architectural firm where I’m a silent partner. I own an air taxi service with a fleet of six jets, but it’s heavily mortgaged. I have a fifty percent share of a building construction firm, Tester-Cameron, in Centennial but my partner handles all the details. I don’t know beans about construction. There are a couple more that are just monetary investments, and I only pay attention to the P&Ls.”

Buck looked at Barbara and Barbara looked at Ernie. “Could we have a few moments alone to discuss this?” Ernie asked Dennis.

Dennis indicated the garden beyond the French doors. “The garden is quite private,” he assured Ernie. The three rose from the table and exited through the doors into Dennis’ garden.

“I’ll tell you what *I* think,” Barbara began. “Dennis is not stupid. Between what he’s guessed, what he suspects, and what he has the capacity to uncover if he gets curious, he could know as much about this operation as we do. It’s too dangerous having him on the outside. We have to bring him in.” Ernie nodded in agreement and Barbara continued: “He has contacts in skill-areas that we will find

very nice-to-have in another year or two, but the most important factor is that we have to give him a reason to keep quiet for as long as we need secrecy.

"I think it is prudent to bring Dennis aboard. What do you say?"

Buck cleared his throat. "Barbara, if I thought you were making an unwise decision I would be the first to let you know. I would support your decision because you own this operation, but I wouldn't be bashful about letting you know my reservations. This is the right thing to do. You shouldn't worry about it. Bring Dennis aboard." Ernie gave her a 'thumbs-up' and the trio headed back toward Dennis' dining room.

As they entered through the French doors from the garden, Dennis turned and looked expectantly at them.

"Get your coat," Barbara instructed. "We're going for a ride."

Dennis rang for Paul who appeared in the dining room a few moments later. "We're going out, Paul. I don't know when I'll be back. Take the rest of the day off."

"Very good, Mr. Cameron," Paul acknowledged.

Dennis turned to Barbara. "Do I need anything other than my coat?"

Barbara thought for a moment. "Is there anyone else who should come along with us?" she asked. Dennis shook his head. *No*.

Inside the van, Ernie driving and Buck riding 'shotgun', Barbara began briefing Dennis:

"What you're about to see we all consider 'top secret', and we require that you also treat it as top secret. Are we agreed?"

Dennis nodded. "Agreed."

"You are about to join a very select group: the approximately three dozen people who are party to what is only-partly 'a gold mining operation'." Dennis looked somewhat surprised. "It is, in fact, a civilization-building exercise much more than it is anything else," Barbara continued. "You are being inducted into a secret society of people who share a common goal. We do not insist that you share that common goal, although if you reject it, you cannot be a full member of the group and we will part company, because what we're doing is too important to be weighed down with excess baggage. What we do insist upon is that, whether you join us or not, what happens today goes into your memory vault and stays there... forever. If you think you can't do that, please say so now so we can return you to your home."

"No," Dennis replied, "I have to see what this is all about. If I can't have my curiosity satisfied this way, you know I would spare no expense to satisfy it some other way."

"In fact," Ernie explained, "we already came to that conclusion independently, and that is why you are here."

"If you join us in this effort," Barbara went on, "it isn't just today's memories that go into the vault, but all of them. You may not discuss this with anyone else, including siblings, parents, friends, and acquaintances. It goes without saying that we wish to minimize 'official' recognition." Dennis nodded again. *Agreed.*

Ernie stopped the van before the locked gate at Okambo & Sons and honked the horn. Pat Messier, a rifle cradled in his arm, trotted over to the gate and unlocked it, then re-locked it after Ernie had passed through.

"Who's on the gate?" Buck asked.

"Laura Purcell," Pat informed him.

Since the operation had gone into full-swing three weeks ago, someone was always assigned to sit in the conference room to operate the gate for people transiting to their work assignments, and on weekends, someone was on duty at all times to handle the locked gate surrounding the compound. On the other side, the second gate had been rigged with a five-second delay so that the gate could be opened and would remain open just long enough for someone to exit back to 'the real world'. A kill switch had also been added on the conference-room side as a safety measure: if the kill switch were activated, small explosive charges would blast all the gate chips to splinters and start a ten-second timer before the chips on the large equipment gate got the same treatment.

The four entered the main building and went to the back conference room. Laura Purcell smiled at them as they entered and asked: "Four to cross?"

"Not quite yet, Laura"" Barbara held up her hand. "We need to brief our newest member."

She turned to Dennis. "Get ready for the shock of your life. You are about to see science fic..."

With a 'pop' the gate opened to reveal Linda Rossi who stepped into the conference room from the wilderness beyond. Dennis' jaw dropped and his mouth was still agape when, a few seconds later, with another soft 'pop', the gate closed and the wilderness disappeared.

Linda Rossi breezed past the group with a little bow to Barbara: "Your majesty," she intoned with an ear-to-ear grin.

"That's enough of that, young lady," Barbara wagged her finger at the girl, "or I'll be having a heart-to-heart with your Dad."

"Your majesty?" Dennis repeated questioningly.

"A little joke," Barbara explained with a grimace. "Because I created... Oh, let's cross since the surprise is spoiled." Turning to

Laura Purcell, Barbara told her: "Four to cross."

Laura activated the switch under the conference table and the gate re-opened. When they had all crossed through, Laura popped the gate closed again.

"Because I was the one who first opened a gate to this world," Barbara explained to Dennis, "and because I'm the only one who knows how the gates work, everyone here considers me the unofficial queen of the world and some of them have been having fun at my expense because of it. No, I'm not the queen, although I probably *could* be if I insisted upon it."

"You've always been The Queen of Hearts for me," Dennis chuckled, "so it's no great leap. What is it, specifically, that you are queen of? Where are we? What is this?"

"This," Ernie cut in, "is an alternate universe — we think. It appears to be analogous to the Earth you were standing on a few moments ago, but it's *different*. It's completely primitive — no people or cities or bridges or any of the other infrastructure you associate with 'civilization'. You can see there have been some inroads into that," he waved his hand toward Troon's Mill and Westroad, "but we've only been at it for a few weeks."

"And the gold?" Dennis interrupted.

"Streams coming down from the foothills," Buck continued the thread, "streams that have never seen a pan. Some of them are pretty rich."

"Are you saying you've got an entire planet to exploit?" Dennis asked, the truth finally dawning on him.

"No," Barbara countered. "It's an entire universe, but for the moment there's no 'space program' to get us off-planet. We presume the workload we already have will occupy us and our descendants for the next several lifetimes."

"And my part in all this?" Dennis asked.

"An excellent question," Buck congratulated him. "What would you like your part to be? The possibilities are, without the slightest exaggeration, limitless. Josh Troon decided he wanted to run a sawmill part-time and prospect for gold when the workload got light enough. The Okambo family takes care of road-building. Samantha Burke runs a deli. Makes a damn good sandwich, too.

"What you decide to do is up to you. Nobody will begrudge you the opportunity to make all the money you want as long as you're helping the community in the process. 'Helping the community', of necessity, includes telling no one about this or anything connected to it.

"Are we still on the same page?"

Dennis looked startled. "Of course, but you'll never make a

'go' of this without a million people, maybe twenty million people. Thirty, forty people? This will never be more than 'an encampment'.

"Oscar told me he expects to transfer fifty or sixty ounces of gold per week, presumably from all the people working their individual claims and pooling the output. Okay. That means your gross national product, your GNP, is three million dollars per year. That's a tidy income for a group of thirty individuals, but you can't run a decently-financed mid-size company with that kind of gross revenue. You'll spend *forever* developing a civilization here. In twenty years, you'll wonder how the Neanderthals managed so well."

"Well, what would you suggest?" Ernie asked. "We have to develop this within the framework of an existing economy. If we get greedy, if we become visible to that existing economy, it will try to swallow us, to blend us with itself. That's what we're trying to avoid. How do we avoid it?"

"I'll have to think about that," Dennis responded, "but trying to base everything off a gold economy is probably the *wrong* way to go. What else is there in the way of 'natural resources'?"

By this time, people had started to notice a 'new face' and began wandering toward Barbara. Josh Troon heard this question and jumped in with an answer:

"How about five million square miles of virgin forest including several species either extraordinarily rare or actually extinct?"

"Splendid," Dennis remarked with a wry grin, "and what are you going to say when someone to whom you're trying to sell four hundred board-feet of an extinct species asks you where you got it?"

Josh Troon laughed. "I'll tell him: *It's none of your damn business, but I've got six hundred million board feet in reserve that still has leaves on it and needs watering every few weeks. If you'd like to see any more of this, shut your mouth and open your checkbook.* Anyone who's in the business of 'serious woodworking' will salute, say 'yes, sir', and write you a very nice check. When anyone asks them: 'Where did you find this?' their response will be a shrug and a 'just lucky to find an old piece I could salvage'.

"That's how most woodworkers find the material they need: they buy an old piece of furniture made from, say, black walnut, trim it down and turn it into something brand-new."

"Yeah," Dennis retorted, "but you're not selling him an old breakfront. You're selling him next years' production. How long do you think he'll get away with 'just lucky'?"

"I suppose that depends on whether he's willing to share the wealth," Josh replied with a smirk. "When his friends in the business — or the hobby — also have some skin in the game, their mouths will automatically shut, too. The people who buy at retail tend not to ask

very piercing questions. That's the end of the line except that lust for the otherwise-unobtainable will drive business to those woodworkers in our supply-chain, and that means more revenue for us."

Dennis shrugged. The gesture said, better than words could have, *I hope you're right.*

Behind them, a soft 'pop' announced the opening of the gate and Oscar and Nell Gruder walked through. Seeing Dennis Cameron, Oscar gave a startled gasp. Barbara waved the two over to join the group of four.

"Oscar, I believe you know our newest acquisition," Barbara said to him. "It seems Dennis' curiosity got the better of him and he managed to develop a fair picture of what we're doing — absent a few salient details, of course," she smiled.

"Of course," Oscar agreed. "It would be beyond belief had he figured out we had an alternate universe at our disposal. Well, this will make dealing with DC Refinery a little easier, won't it? At least we won't have to beat around the bush making excuses and demanding secrecy."

"True," Dennis agreed, "but we still have the problem that I can't move three thousand ounces of gold in a year without raising eyebrows. I'm going to have to farm some of this out, and that will raise new questions. Given enough time, everybody in the entire world will know about this. There's no way to keep it secret. There's an old saying: *Two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead.* Your problem is that dead people don't produce too much gold.

"You *absolutely must* diversify," he finished. "You need sources of income providing more than three million dollars a year, and those sources *cannot* raise eyebrows. That's the only way you'll ever have the funds to do any serious development absent a government take-over."

Paul Gillman had arrived in time to hear the last few exchanges between Dennis and Oscar. "I told them that a month ago," he told Dennis. "This is the biggest construction project in all of human history, and we should expect it to take ten thousand years. None of us will live to see it finished. As long as we've got just 'a tribe', it will never be completed. Hell, most of us won't be alive to see it started."

"That's right," Dennis agreed. "It will be primitive camping for decades or centuries without a huge infusion of capital. Even the Romans had plumbing and built with stone. You are several lifetimes away from being as far advanced as Rome of two thousand years ago. You need running water, electrical power, waste water treatment plants, farms, dairy herds, beef cattle, and people who know how to build and operate those facilities. Adding people one at a time as you

just did with me — this man,” Dennis indicated Paul Gillman, “is dead right when he estimates ‘never’.”

“Okay,” Buck butted in, “is there a solution to this problem?”

“I would suggest you adopt ‘the Oklahoma Model’,” Dennis replied. “Offer homesteads to settlers if they build a dwelling and improve the land as by plowing and planting. The starting point of every human civilization is agriculture. Hire some farmers, some ranchers, some cheese-makers, blacksmiths, tool-and-die makers, merchants. Step number one is that you have to be able to feed your community without relying on the outside world.”

The gate from the conference room popped open and Laura Purcell made a throat-slitting motion with her hand, the signal that she was about to blow the gates. Although no sound could be heard across the barrier, they could see bullet holes perforating the conference room door in the few seconds before the explosive charges destroyed the chips and the gate snapped shut.

14 - Intruders

Laura Purcell sat at the conference table reading a romance novel, a story of wooden ships and iron men complete with the required amount of bodice-ripping and was deeply absorbed in the plot. Her attention was diverted from the book by a commotion in the outer yard: raised voices followed by a gunshot.

Dropping the book, she pressed the button to open the gate and waved at the people in the 'Okambo town square', including Barbara and Ernie. She drew her flattened hand across her throat in the gesture indicating: '*I'm blowing the gate.*' then Laura pressed the destruct switch.

Immediately, explosive squibs on each of the gate's chips shattered the chips' integrity and the gate snapped shut. Ten seconds later, squibs on the giant gate used for transiting Steve Okambo's construction equipment shattered its chips.

A clatter of machine gun fire had already started to smash through the conference room door when the gate snapped closed. Because the room was sometimes used for confidential presentations, the room had no windows, not even on the door, so the intruders never saw an open gate — it had closed before any of them were able to gain entrance to the conference room.

Laura Purcell had her back to the wall when the door finally crashed inward under the impact of a combat boot. The intruders wore SWAT gear and carried assault rifles that they now trained on Laura.

"Don't move!" they ordered. "FBI with a search warrant!"

Laura couldn't move. She was petrified with fright, but she was able to remember the instructions she had received on several occasions: '*Say nothing. Identify yourself when ordered, but otherwise answer no questions posed by the police or any other interrogator. Don't shake your head, don't look away, don't be scared. Make believe they're speaking in an alien language. If they take your fingerprints, let them. If they take your picture, let them. If they tell you someone else snitched already and they just want you to confirm what was said, don't believe them. They can lie to you with impunity but anything you say can and will be used against you. Don't worry about protecting the gate. Protect the knowledge of the gate.*'

The agent-in-charge approached her as he slipped his pistol back into its holster. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Laura Purcell," she answered truthfully.

"What are you doing here?" the agent snapped at her.

Laura stared at him blankly, and after a few moments she could see the agent start to seethe.

"Honey, you're going to jail for a real long time if you don't start giving me some answers," the agent threatened. Laura continued to stare blankly ahead.

The FBI agent looked at the gateframe with several spots still smoking from the explosion of the squibs, then looked around at the particles scattered on the table and the carpet of the conference room.

"What is this? What happened here?" he continued throwing questions at her. Laura continued to ignore him. Finally, he turned and signaled to one of his men to come closer. "Maybe you'll be more talkative after you're booked," he told her as handcuffs snapped around her wrists.

As she was led from the Okambo & Sons building, she was aware of an ambulance in the yard and Pat Messier on a stretcher being loaded into it.

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In the town square, people were gathering, summoned by radio for an emergency community meeting, but Buck had already started planning.

"We have to assume that whoever broke into Okambo's was looking for a gate," he explained to those who had already arrived. "Any gates in Earth-I are presumed to be 'in danger'. Barbara, what gates are still operating on the other side?"

"Only the one at Ernie's," Barbara spoke. "From the way this portal crashed, I assume Laura activated the destruct switch successfully. That means the equipment gate is destroyed, too. All the others were moved to Earth-II months ago."

"That means we can get back, right?" Josh Troon asked.

"That's true as far as it goes," Barbara assured him. "The other part of the problem is '*where does it take you back to?*'. There seems to be a one-to-one correspondence in locations between the two universes, so a gate here always takes you back to Okambo's, et cetera.

"We can discuss this at great length later. Right now, we have to secure the one remaining gate in Earth-I. Everyone who must transit back immediately, follow us to site 1. Everybody else, stay put and make yourself useful. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Buck, Barbara, and Ernie mounted their ATVs and started the engines. Dennis grabbed Barbara's sleeve.

"I have to make a call to Dale Pollard," he told her. "He needs to get my lawyers on this right away."

"Do you know how to ride one of these?" Barbara asked. Dennis shook his head. *No.* "Get on double with my Dad. Hang on tight."

"The viewer!" Ernie called to Barbara.

"In my handbag," she told him as she gunned the ATV toward Westroad and site 1. A smaller gate rigged with a three-position switch calibrated and marked as "off", "view", and "full" Barbara now kept with her at all times. It was a risky proposition, she knew, but she always left it in a non-working condition with the batteries stored separately, so anyone finding it would have to do several steps before it would reveal any secrets.

The trip to Ernie's was more than three miles over rough logging roads and took nearly ten minutes.

Arriving at Ernie's gate, Barbara immediately started putting her viewer into working condition by connecting the two disconnected chips and slipping the batteries into the battery compartment. The device was only about the size of a picture frame, five inches by seven, and drew so little power in view-mode that the three triple-A batteries would run it for hours.

Ernie's Earth-II gate, they knew, was sited at the doorway between his living room and his kitchen to coincide exactly with the doorframe gate inconspicuously surrounding that doorway. Standing where Ernie's kitchen sink would be, Barbara switched the viewer on and did a quick scan around the kitchen. Finding no one there, she moved cautiously to the entrance to the living room and peered through the doorway. The living room was likewise empty.

In a flash of inspiration, she walked quickly to the front door of Ernie's house and passed through it, which gave her an odd sensation. *In this world, there is no door,* she had to remind herself.

The outside was equally quiet: not a soul in sight.

"Whatever is going on," she told Buck and Ernie, "they're not looking for us and they may not be looking for gates. This gate is probably safe. Shall we leave it?"

Buck looked at Ernie who returned the glance. They read each others' minds.

"Leave it," Ernie said.

"But disable it," Buck added.

Barbara switched the gate on and Ernie's living room appeared in the frame.

"Come through and make your call," Barbara instructed Dennis.

They both stepped through into Ernie's house and Dennis started dialing a number on his cell phone as Barbara turned back to

the gateframe and began rearranging wires to several of the chips.

"Dale," Dennis began speaking, "I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but I need you to take care of an urgent matter for me. I need some legal assistance. No, no, it's not for me. It involves that equipment rental place in Valmont, 'Okambo & Sons'. Something happened there today — looked like a police action of some sort — and two persons were either arrested or killed. Their names are..." He turned to Barbara for information.

"Laura Purcell and Patrick Messier," she offered.

"...Laura Purcell and Patrick Messier. I need Ed or Boris, preferably both, to find out what happened and why and where the two people are to be found. Yes, they have my permission to bail them both out if that's possible, and they can bring in any outside experts they think they may need. Get this moving as fast as you can. Thanks." He disconnected.

Dennis turned to Barbara. "I'm thinking I don't need to go back through there," he explained. "I can call a cab and have it take me home, and I think that makes a lot of sense. You're going to need someone on this side who has some muscle, and I can't do any good on the other side."

"Agreed," she said. "Thank you, again, Dennis." She gave him a peck on the cheek and turned toward the gate, then stopped and turned around. "If you call a cab, do you know where to have them pick you up?"

Dennis thought for a moment, then said "I presume we're at Ernie Walsh's house, 17th south of Quince?"

"You do know lots more than we suspected," she winked at him. "I'll call you when we transit back and have cell phone service again." She turned and slipped through the gate whereupon it winked closed.

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Boris Wilsky took the call from Dale Pollard unwillingly. *Why must these people call on the weekend?* he wondered exasperatedly, but his demeanor softened when Dale gave him the details of Dennis Cameron's request.

He apologized to his wife for ruining her Sunday and explained that the Cameron account was far too valuable to risk. In fifteen minutes, he was in transit to Boulder PD headquarters and chatting on the phone with Edward Flynn, senior partner in the firm of Wilsky & Flynn, to bring him up-to-speed on the issue. The two agreed that Boris would do the initial digging and call the partner if needed.

At Boulder PD, no one knew anything about any operation at Okambo & Sons on 75th in Valmont, but as a favor to Boris, one of the sergeants made some calls and determined that it had been the FBI operating on a federal warrant for money laundering, and they were actually looking for Randy and Samantha Burke at that location. The sergeant was able to further determine that one Patrick Messier of Boulder had been shot once in the abdomen and had been taken to St. Luke's Emergency Room for treatment. Laura Purcell had been booked into the Federal Holding Facility on a charge of conspiracy.

Boris thanked the sergeant and headed for the federal lock-up, calling Ed Flynn on the way to alert him that this was bigger than they had originally suspected. Boris asked Ed to go to St. Luke's and stay with Messier.

At the Federal Holding Facility, Boris demanded and got a copy of the search warrant authorizing the raid on Okambo & Sons, after which he was ushered in to see his newest client.

"Good afternoon," he introduced himself to Laura Purcell. "My name is Boris Wilsky. I am an attorney and I have been hired by Mr. Dennis Cameron to represent you. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Is Mr. Cameron paying for this?" Laura asked. Boris nodded in the affirmative. "Why is Mr. Cameron interested in this?" she continued.

"Ma'am, I work on retainer for Mr. Cameron. He tells me what he's interested in but not necessarily 'why'. In this case, I don't know why Mr. Cameron is interested in your case, but he is, and since he is, I am. If you don't want me to represent you, I can't force you. I'll just tell Mr. Cameron that you preferred a different attorney."

"No," Laura answered, "you'll do fine. Tell me, do you know why I'm in here?"

"Not exactly," Boris admitted. "You have been charged with conspiracy to commit financial fraud. Have you spoken with anyone since your first encounter with the police?" Laura shook her head. *No.* "Were you questioned by the police or the FBI?"

"They asked questions, but the only things I told them were my name and address," Laura smiled.

"I'd like to keep it exactly that way on into the indefinite future, Mrs. Purcell. You've done very well so far in a very stressful situation. Keep up the good work. Now, I must ask you to level with me, and you can rest assured that whatever your answers to my questions, you will get the absolute best representation I and my partner can provide. Do you understand what I just said?" Laura nodded affirmatively.

"Is there any basis for the charges leveled against you in this instance?" Boris asked.

"As far as I know," Laura answered, "I have not committed a financial fraud, nor have the people I normally associate with."

"The search warrant justifying the raid on Okambo & Sons today names 'Randy and Samantha Burke'. Do you know these people?" Laura nodded. Yes. "In what context, may I ask?"

Laura hesitated. She didn't know how much she could say to this person. Certainly, she could not say anything like *we mine gold together in an alternate universe*. "We all work at Okambo & Sons," she told Boris.

"Doing what?" Boris probed.

Laura hesitated again and Boris noticed it. "Mrs. Purcell," he warned her, "you have to be completely candid with me or I will not have what I need to provide you with an adequate defense. What is it that you do at Okambo & Sons?"

"Lawful things," she said, "digging, sweeping, hosing down, that sort of stuff."

"And the Burkes do the 'same kind of stuff'?" Boris dug.

"Yes," Laura replied, "the same kind of stuff. Sometimes Sam makes sandwiches for lunch and we buy them from her."

Boris was now completely puzzled. Unless his client was lying to him, there was no basis for any sort of charge, not even 'littering'. He picked up the copy of the search warrant and browsed through it.

"Do you recognize the names 'Michael or Edith Bowers'?" Boris asked. Laura shook her head. "Would you know how I might contact Randy or Samantha Burke?"

Laura shrugged. "Phone, I guess," she offered. "I had Sam's number in my cell phone, but they took it away from me."

"Look. I appreciate all that you're trying to do for me, but I really need some extra assurance that I'm doing the right thing talking to you. Who is this Mr. Cameron who's paying for my lawyer, and why is he doing it? I'd like some time to think things through before we go any further."

"I know it's kind of mysterious, but I'm limited in what I know at this point. Shall I try to get you out on bail? Mr. Cameron is covering that, too."

"Yeah," Laura agreed. "Get me out of here."

They shook hands and Boris left to demand an arraignment.

At St. Luke's Hospital, Ed Flynn introduced himself as 'Patrick Messier's attorney' and demanded to see his client.

"As soon as Mr. Messier is out of surgery and awake, you can see him," the charge nurse informed him. "I'll let you know when that is."

It took nearly two hours before Pat Messier was moved to a

private room with plainclothes guards outside the door. Ed Flynn found his entry blocked by two burly blue-suited FBI agents.

"I'm Mr. Messier's attorney," he told them.

"Mr. Messier hasn't been arrested," he was told. "He doesn't need an attorney."

"Good," Ed Flynn congratulated them. "Since he hasn't done anything, the civil damages lawsuit against the criminal who shot him should be interesting. Now, since I'm still his attorney I demand to see my client." The agents exchanged glances then stood aside to allow Ed to enter.

Pat looked up from the bed at the stranger entering his room. Ed stuck out his hand toward his new client.

"Mr. Patrick Messier? My name is Edward Flynn with the firm 'Wilsky and Flynn' and I have been hired by Mr. Dennis Cameron to represent you in any proceedings resulting from today's actions. Mr. Messier, will you accept me as your attorney under those conditions?"

"Let me understand you," Pat responded. "Someone I don't know is paying your fee to represent me?" Flynn nodded his agreement. "Why?"

"I don't know, Mr. Messier," Flynn admitted. "I do legal work for Mr. Cameron for reasons Mr. Cameron sometimes keeps to himself." As if to put a period at the end of his explanation, Flynn shrugged.

"Okay," Pat agreed. "Who are these guys and why did I get shot?"

"*These guys*' are the FBI. Did they not identify themselves before shooting?"

"I saw five or six heavily-armed guys tumble out of a black Ford SUV and all I had was my AR-15. I turned and hauled ass for the building. I didn't hear anything but the gunshot and then I went down. I must have blacked-out then, because if they said anything after that, I didn't hear it."

"Mr. Messier, may I call you 'Pat'?" Pat nodded his okay. "Pat, what passes between a client and his attorney is privileged communication. If you were to tell me you were a saboteur or a traitor, I would not be able to pass that along to anyone and I would still give you the best defense I could manage. With that in mind, I am going to ask you to be brutally honest with me: why would the FBI send a heavily-armed raiding party to Okambo & Sons?"

Pat shook his head. "If you're asking, '*what kind of illegal activity was happening there?*', the answer is 'none that I know of'.

"Then why would you be carrying an AR-15 on... I presume you were on 'guard duty'?"

"I was on guard duty," Pat admitted. "Mr. Okambo has lots of

very expensive equipment inside those fences. I don't think he ever expected me to use my rifle, but just it being there tends to discourage the wrong kind of visitor."

"Yes, well, in this case it seems to have attracted the wrong kind of visitor," Ed mumbled. "Have you spoken to anyone? Has anyone questioned you?"

"Not unless they did it while I was out cold," Pat told him.

Ed Flynn handed him a stack of business cards. "That's good to hear. If anyone does try to question you, just give them one of these cards and have them contact me. I don't want you even expressing an opinion about the weather in earshot of anyone carrying a badge. Can you do that?" Pat winked at him. "Okay, that about wraps it for me for this visit. If you have any questions, just call the number on the card. Call me if they arrest you. Call me if they release you." He stood and shook Pat's hand again, then left the room.

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Buck, Barbara, and Ernie roared into the Okambo town square on their ATVs to find almost all of the group had now gathered near the gate. Josh Troon had briefed them as well as he could, informing them that Laura had blown the gates from the other side. Everyone was anxious about how they would get back to their homes. When the three arrived from Ernie's they were immediately mobbed by people shouting questions.

"Relax," Barbara urged them, "everything's going to be fine. We brought three spare gates and extra gate parts from our warehouse. We'll be able to rebuild the gates. You'll all get home. Don't worry.

"This is what I have in mind: as soon as things quiet down on the other side, we'll pop the gate and you can exit, get your cars, and go home."

"What if things don't quiet down on the other side?" Peg Clancy demanded.

"Then we'll create a plan-B," Barbara tried to calm her.

Barbara turned on her viewer and began walking toward the gate. Momentarily she passed through the conference room wall and could see inside the room. There was no one there, but the place was a mess. The door had been nearly destroyed by the hail of bullets that had been fired at the door lock, and some of the bullets had gone astray and nicked and chipped the conference table. There were bullet holes in some of the walls. Barbara looked carefully but couldn't see any blood on the walls or floor and concluded that Laura had not been

injured.

Outside the conference room in the main area, three 'suits' poked in closets and cabinets looking for something. Outside in the parking lot, two more 'suits' backed by Boulder County Sheriff's Deputies stood guard at the gates.

"I don't think we're going to be able to get the cars out of the parking lot," she remarked to whomever was listening. "There are people guarding the gates."

"How would we get the cars out even if there weren't people guarding the gates if the gates are locked?" Peg Clancy asked.

Ernie answered her. "We set up one gate here at a place that corresponds to 'in the parking lot' and another at a place that corresponds to 'outside the parking lot'. You drive your car through the first gate into Earth-II and through the second gate back into Earth-I and you're out on the street."

"So, if we knew where our houses were in this world, we could just drive them home overland?" Peg suggested.

"I'm not sure your car would be any good by the time you drove it over this terrain," Ernie said waving at the wilderness around them, "but, *yes, theoretically* you could."

"Alright," Barbara barked, "is there anyone who needs to get home right away?"

Tony and Melissa Dinardo raised their hands and waved. "We have to get back to relieve the babysitter," Tony shouted.

"Where do you live?" Barbara asked.

"Essex Place in Gunbarrel," Melissa answered.

"If you had to go overland from here, which way?" Barbara probed.

"Northeast, I think," Tony suggested. "Heatherwood loops off 75th Street to the East and Essex is off the northern end of Heatherwood."

Tony was given the viewer and rode behind Barbara while Melissa doubled with Ernie. They roared off along Northroad with Tony scanning from side to side until they broke into a clearing a half mile north of the Okambo town square. From there they had to pick their way east through woods with Tony directing Barbara to 'bear left' or 'bear right' until they arrived at the Dinardos' house on Essex Place.

Barbara scanned all around with the viewer while Ernie set up a gate. When Barbara confirmed that the area was quiet, Ernie switched the gate on and Tony and Melissa slipped through. How they would explain to their babysitter's parents that they were unable to take her home was their problem. Ernie broke the gate down and carefully they retraced their tracks back toward the Okambo town center.

While they were gone, Buck, Paul Gillman, and the Okambo family put their heads together to form a plan.

"Whoever it was, they weren't looking for a gate," Buck started, "otherwise Ernie would have been implicated and there would have been either a stake-out at his place, or it would have been searched. Neither of those happened.

"Whoever these people are, they're here investigating a criminal act. The open questions are: what criminal act, and which criminal?"

"Could we have raised some suspicion because of the amount of gold we've put on the market?" Steve Jr. asked.

"It's a possibility," Paul Gillman began his answer, "but we haven't put all that much gold out there yet, and Oscar told me a while ago that all of it that's gone through his hands so far has been to trustworthy buyers, trusted friends of Dennis Cameron. All of those buyers, by the way, have gotten discounted rates and have an incentive to keep the transaction quiet."

"Has any gold gone out through other channels?" Steve Sr. probed.

Paul shrugged, then turned around to face the crowd. "Listen up, everybody," he shouted, "has anybody sold any gold other than to Oscar Gruder?"

Randy Burke raised his hand and Paul pointed at him as an invitation to speak. "I wouldn't call it 'sold' exactly," Randy explained. "We're planning to buy foodstuffs at wholesale using gold instead of cash, and we put three three-quarter ounce ingots 'on deposit' at three different food wholesalers so they could have them evaluated to verify we were on the up-and-up."

"So, there is gold out there that didn't get there via Oscar Gruder," Paul confirmed. Randy nodded.

"Okay," Steve Sr. continued, "that could be the security breach, but what's the connection to 'Okambo & Sons'? Why a raid here and not at their home? What would point them here?"

"No idea," Gillman replied, "but until we have better information, I think we should go with the assumption that the Burkes are connected to the raid and that they're probably being sought by the police." The others nodded their agreement. Samantha Burke inserted herself into the conversation.

"Why would the police be looking for us?" she demanded.

"We don't know that they are," Buck assured her. "It's just a working assumption for the time being because your gold is the only gold that's gone to people no one can vouch for. You may be completely divorced from any of this, but for the moment you two are

the only ones we know of who have dealt gold outside of secure channels.

"Perhaps we ought to move you two home, which will give us a chance to see whether your house is being watched. If it is, we know our assumption is good. If it isn't, we know we need to keep looking for an explanation."

"You've got my vote," Randy agreed. "Where's Oscar? I want to deposit some material with him before we transit back."

"Oscar and Nell are on their way in from their claim. They're very far out, maybe ten miles, and they have to shut down operations and button the place up before they head back. They should be along shortly."

And, indeed, a few minutes later the sound of two two-cycle engines could be heard approaching through the trees. Shortly, Oscar and Nell rode into Okambo and parked their ATVs next to Oscar's assay tent. Randy and Sam walked over to meet them.

"Oscar, I have to make a deposit before we go back through the gate," Randy explained.

"What's the rush?" Oscar asked.

Randy pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at Buck and the others. "They think I may be headed for jail. Those three ingots you cast for me may have wound up in the wrong hands, one of them anyway," Randy told Oscar. "If so, I'm responsible for the police raid today, and I'll be going back to be arrested. I figure it wouldn't do me any good to be arrested in possession of a little leather bag of gold, would it?"

Oscar smiled and shook his head. "Why don't you just leave it with someone you trust? I think we all need to get back on the other side without delay."

"We trust you, Oscar," Sam told him. "Just keep it safe for us, then."

Oscar unlocked his personal safe and put the Burkes' gold inside.

Barbara and Ernie arrived back from depositing the Dinardos and Buck filled them in on what had been learned and decided.

"Then let's get the Burkes back home and see what we can learn there," Barbara suggested. Everyone agreed.

While Ernie refueled the ATVs, Barbara took one last look with her viewer. During the interim, the guards at the Okambos' gate had been moved to a spot about a tenth of a mile south on 75th Street, and there appeared to be no one left inside the compound, either.

"Dad, look at this," she called to Buck. She pointed to a spot in the parking lot where the ground levels of the two universes were

nearly equal, and another on the north side of the Okambo yard where a dirt road ran toward 75th Street. "If nobody's watching the parking lot, let's get the cars out while we can. Ernie and I will cobble two car-sized gates and place them. You get everyone organized to move their cars one-by-one. Tell them 'no headlights' and no revving their engines. We don't want to attract any notice."

Barbara got three gate-kits and she and Ernie quickly scavenged parts from one of them to enable the construction of two larger gates. Buck meanwhile had lined up people in the order their cars were parked, ready to jump in, start the engine, and drive their car through the gate.

Each person was given a section of canvas to throw over the front of the car in case a car had daytime running lights that would come on automatically when the engine was started. The blanket would be draped over the front of the car, the engine would be started and the car driven through the gate. On the other side, the blanket would be surrendered for use by someone else, and a pathway marked with posts of odd pieces of lumber from Troon's Mill led northward to the second gate on a dirt road outside the compound's fence. From there, cars would turn northward on 75th Street and make their way toward their homes.

The Dinardos' car was, luckily, unlocked with keys left in the ignition, and a volunteer drove it to Essex Place in Gunbarrel. Not knowing the Dinardos' exact address, the volunteer just parked it on the street and left it. Someone would call Tony Dinardo later and let him know. Ernie's van went through the gate in the proper order, but it was the last to turn onto the dirt road after the first gate was closed and just before the second gate closed as well.

15 - Recovery

By the dawn's early light, a team of FBI agents descended upon Okambo & Sons to continue their investigation by talking to the owner. One briefly noted that all the cars were gone and pointed it out to his partner. "Impounded by BCSO, probably," the partner shrugged it off.

Inside, the FBI agents found all three Okambos: Steve, Steve Jr., and Danny, complaining loudly to a Boulder County deputy about the treatment his 'employees' got the preceding day.

"What is it with you guys?" Steve demanded. "You can't knock on the door and announce, 'search warrant!?' You have to come roaring in with guns blazing, shooting innocent people and destroying everything in your path?"

The deputy raised his hands as if to fend off an attack. "Don't blame us, Mr. Okambo. This was an FBI operation start-to-finish. We just came along to make sure the people of Boulder County weren't mistreated."

The two FBI agents wandered into the middle of this conversation.

"You don't call shooting someone in the back 'mistreated'?" Danny chimed in, then pointed to the shredded conference room door. "You don't call this 'mistreated'?" What would rise to your definition of 'mistreatment' if not shooting-the-shit out of everyone and everything in sight?" Danny indicated the door. "It doesn't even lock. We hang a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the doorknob when we're having private conversations. Why would you shoot holes in a door that can't be locked?"

The senior FBI agent butted into the conversation. "When we see a closed door and we have to get inside quickly, we don't stop to check whether it's locked or not. We just take it out."

"Well, let me give you guys a lesson in doors," Big Steve added. "See this?" he pointed at the doorknob. "No keyhole. A sixth-grader can look at this door and know it can't be locked. If you can't figure that out with all your training and education, I'd say you were overpaid."

"Speaking of training and education," the senior agent retorted, "with all my training and education, I've never seen a rig-out like we found in that conference room. What is that device?"

"Do you have that search warrant with you," Danny asked. The FBI agent presented the warrant for Danny's inspection.

Danny skimmed through the paper and looked up at the

agent. "This authorizes you to look for evidence of financial impropriety, documents and the suchlike relating to a suspected money-laundering operation. Are you suggesting that 'rig-out' is somehow connected to money and finance?"

"Well... no..." the agent stumbled.

"Then it's not covered by the warrant," Danny told him, "and we'd rather not discuss potentially patentable devices that may or may not be found here. Any problems with that?"

"I have a problem," the junior agent butted in. "That device was rigged with explosive charges that were tripped just seconds before we arrived. What were you blowing up and why? And do you have a blaster's license?"

"As a matter of fact, I do have a blaster's license and all the ATF clearances to go along with it. As to 'why' it blew, I suspect somebody was operating a radio transmitter in the area. Would that have been you folks?"

"Why would you have explosives indoors?" the junior agent avoided the question of 'who did it?'

"You know," Danny rounded on the agent, "we shouldn't even be talking to you guys without an attorney present, but I'm going to make an exception here, because you two seem just too stupid to be able to figure out some things for yourselves.

"The issue is 'precision'. There are some things that require such precision blasting that if you can't do it indoors, you probably shouldn't do it at all. Does that make sense to either of you?" The two agents nodded sheepishly as if they had been caught writing dirty words on the blackboard at school.

Big Steve took over the conversation again. "Okay, what is it you are looking for here? We want to cooperate with this investigation so that you can all leave here with whatever evidence you think you need and we can all get back to our business. Let's wrap this up."

"We're glad to hear that, Mr. Okambo," the senior agent replied. "We'd like to see your books of account to start off with."

"You mean you want to seize our books of account," Steve countered. "You've come to the wrong place. All of that is in the custody of our accountant who keeps it off-site."

"We're also going to seize all your computers," the agent told him. "Never know what you'll find."

"That's true," Danny agreed. "All you need are the passwords." He smiled.

At this point another person, this time the Okambos' attorney strolled in, greeted everyone, introduced himself to the FBI agents, and lifted the search warrant from Danny's hands. He glanced at it quickly, then turned to the agents:

"What are you taking?" he asked them.

"The computers, for now."

The lawyer nodded. "Can you boys continue doing business without them?" he asked the Okambos.

Danny nodded. "We'll have a replacement system this morning, download the files we need from the remote server and we're good to go."

The lawyer turned to the FBI agents. "Have at it," he offered.

A BCSO deputy standing off to one side asked the senior FBI agent: "Where did you take the cars?"

The senior FBI agent turned and gave him a funny look. "We thought BCSO impounded them. Did you at least record the plate numbers?"

The deputy shook his head. "Not us. They were missing this morning and the FBI seals on the fence were still intact. We thought you took them and resealed the place."

"Do you know anything about this?" the agent asked Steve Okambo.

"Don't answer that question," Steve's attorney interrupted. Turning to the FBI agent, the attorney informed him: "My client declines to answer on fifth amendment grounds. No more questions. Take the stuff you're taking, give me the receipt, and clear out. You're interfering with my clients' business and exceeding your authority under that warrant."

The agents grimaced, then began to make a list of the items they intended to seize.

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That same morning, Laura Purcell was arraigned at the Federal Court House in Denver, with Boris Wilsky at her side. The government attorney asked for an outrageous sum as bail and Boris objected.

"Your Honor, the prosecution has no evidence of any wrongdoing on my client's part other than being at a site subject of a search warrant. The warrant itself is highly suspect and will be challenged in due course. Its entire basis is the testimony of two people, Michael and Edith Bowers, who offered nothing in the way of 'evidence' beyond a single gold ingot that they claim they received not from my client but from other people entirely."

The prosecutor jumped to his feet. "Both the subject and the two people sought in connection with this warrant, Randy and Samantha Burke, frequent the same location, an equipment rental concern that is also the subject of this search warrant."

"Coincidence is not a crime," Boris reminded the prosecutor. "I would also remind the court that Mrs. Purcell is a homeowner and an upstanding member of her community. She is by no means 'a flight risk', and therefore a high bail is uncalled-for."

The judge caught the eye of the clerk. "R-O-R," the judge told the clerk, shorthand for 'released on [her] own recognizance'. The prosecutor looked disgusted.

"There is also the matter of my other client, Mr. Patrick Messier who cannot be here, unfortunately, as he was shot *in the back* by FBI agents and is still confined in a hospital. I would request that Mr. Messier also be ROR'd on his discharge from the hospital."

"The brief I have here, Mr. Wilsky, indicates that Mr. Messier was armed at the time. Is that so?" the judge asked.

"It is, Your Honor," Wilsky replied. "Mr. Messier was inside the gated area when five or six heavily-armed men appeared. Mr. Messier felt he was outmatched and ran for cover. That's when he was shot from behind."

The judge peered over the tops of his glasses. "But I'm told he had an assault weapon."

Wilsky smirked. Judges didn't like it when they were lied-to, especially by the FBI who should know better. "Mr. Messier had an AR-15. The agents on the raid probably carried M-16s or M-4s. These all look very similar, but the FBI weapons were *machine guns* and Mr. Messier's was merely a rifle despite outward appearances. Under similar circumstances, Your Honor, you, too, would run for cover."

"Did not the FBI agents identify themselves on their arrival?" the judge asked. The prosecutor nodded vigorously.

"Mr. Messier claims not to have heard any such," Wilsky answered. "In any case, in high-stress situations a syndrome known as 'auditory exclusion' often occurs as part of the fight-or-flight reaction. In addition, when several people are shouting things at the same time, interference between voices may render any message unintelligible. Whether or not they properly identified themselves, my client didn't hear it, and the first law of communication is that *communication is the responsibility of the sender*."

The judge paused briefly rolling several thoughts around in his head. "Mr. Messier is ROR'd," he said finally and rapped his gavel once.

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Randy and Sam Burke decided it would be a good idea to get some rest before they let the police arrest them, so they drove a little North, found a motel with a vacancy, and checked in for the night.

In the morning, they enjoyed the 'continental breakfast' served just off the lobby, checked out and drove home. As they pulled into their driveway, a black Ford SUV pulled in behind them, blocking their escape and three besuited FBI agents approached their car, guns drawn.

"Keep your hands where we can see them and get out of the car," they were ordered. Randy and Sam carefully exited the car and were in handcuffs before they knew it.

"Randy Burke?" one of the agents asked.

"If I'm not, you're looking at one hell of a lawsuit," Randy told him. The agent fished Randy's wallet out of his pants pocket and flipped it open to find the driver's license then did the same with Samantha.

"You both are under arrest for suspicion of money laundering," the agent told them, then waited for a response.

"We don't consent to any search and we want to speak with our attorney," Randy informed him. The agent grimaced and nodded.

"And who is your attorney?" the agent asked.

"We don't know yet, but we will shortly," Sam informed him.

"Well, after we book you, you'll get to make a phone call." He and the other agents escorted them to separate vehicles and they were taken to the Federal Holding Facility in Denver.

There, Randy and Sam each made a telephone call, Randy to Okambo & Sons, as he and Sam had agreed beforehand, to leave a message as to their status, while Sam called Ernie Walsh to alert him, Barbara, and Buck. Two hours later, Boris and Ed arrived to talk to their new clients.

Boris and Ed advised these clients, too, to say as little as possible, but they were now both beginning to go a little crazy over the idea of defending God-knows-how-many people and they were frustrated at not knowing why all these people had been arrested and why they were tasked with defending them. The up-side to this, of course, was that they were going to bill endless hours and Dennis Cameron had told them in no uncertain terms that cost was not an object. They had stumbled upon a lawyer's gold mine.

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On Monday afternoon, Boris Wilsky and Ed Flynn arrived at Dennis Cameron's estate for a private briefing. Also attending at Dennis' invitation were all three Okambos, Barbara, Buck, Ernie, and Paul Gillman.

"At this point," Ed began his presentation, "four people have been arrested on charges-of or charges-related-to suspected money

laundering: Laura Purcell, Patrick Messier, Randy Burke and Samantha Burke. Mrs. Purcell was released on her own recognizance this morning because there was no evidence she was engaged in or knew of illegal activity at *Okambo & Sons*. Mr. Messier who was shot in the back during the raid will also be ROR'd when released from the hospital where he underwent surgery for his wound. Randy and Samantha Burke were arrested this morning when they returned to their dwelling after being missing all of Sunday. They have been advised that Wilsky and Flynn are available for their defense at no charge to them." He bowed toward Dennis and continued, "and they were advised to decline questioning without one of us being present.

"The search warrant issued on Thursday cites the testimony of Michael and Edith Bowers, owners of Evergreen Food Supply, that they were approached by Randy and Samantha Burke who offered payment in gold ingots in exchange for food and other items they intended to buy.

"The Bowers' testified that they thought this unusual proposal was a scam of some sort and followed the Burkes to *Okambo & Sons*. They later reported the offer to the local office of the FBI who interviewed the Bowers' and based on that interview applied for a search warrant for the property on 75th Street and another for the Burkes' residence. The search warrants seek documents and similar evidence of financial improprieties as well as equipment for the mining and refining of precious metals indicative of an unlicensed gold exchange business.

"Why and how *Okambo & Sons* is connected to this seems to us extraordinarily tenuous: simply that Randy and Sam Burke made that their next stop after speaking to the owners of Evergreen Food Supply. We intend to challenge the validity of the search warrant for *Okambo & Sons* on that basis, as well as the arrests of Purcell and Messier.

"Neither Randy Burke nor his wife would discuss with us the events leading to their being charged without being able to consult with others unknown. We," he indicated himself and Boris, "presume that at least some of those 'unknown others' are present in this room."

Dennis smiled. "Some of them, yes. What does the case look like thus far?"

"Thus far," Boris rose to speak, "the feds have nothing beyond the allegations made by the Bowers'. Somebody at FBI is going to get a letter in his file for what happened. Clearly, they jumped before they had a real case. This looks very amateurish, and I suspect the judge who issued the warrant was told lots of things that aren't true.

"Speaking of which, Ed and I need to know who's who and what's what if we're to mount any sort of defense, not that we're going

to need much if what we're seeing is actually true. Notice that *'if'*. What we need is for someone to come clean with us about what's going on. Any volunteers?"

Barbara grimaced and turned toward the lawyers. "Randy and Sam have a small gold-extracting operation on land where they have mineral rights. They collected some gold, mostly dust, and had it refined to the ingot the Bowers' saw. I think... I'm very certain that they expected to use that as a stake from which to build a retail grocery operation. There is no 'money-laundering' happening here, at least in the sense I understand the term: manipulating illegally-obtained funds to hide the illegal source. We're looking at two people who relax by swirling dirt in pans and saving any shiny bits and who decided to turn it into something else of value."

"May I ask how you know this?" Boris asked.

"I own the land," Barbara informed him.

"Where is this land?" Boris probed further.

"That's a more difficult question to answer," Barbara admitted.

"I'm not sure giving you all the fine details would be good for any of us, you included."

Boris sighed and looked askance at Ed. "Money-laundering is 'illegal' only in the sense that there are tax implications that are illegally evaded. The Burkes have been charged with tax evasion. That's the charge-behind-the-charge. When the case comes to trial, they will be asked questions such as 'did you offer a gold ingot in payment?', 'where did you get the ingot?', 'where is the stream you took the gold from?', 'did you declare the fair market value of the gold as income?', 'do you have a business license?', and other similar questions. Somebody is going to answer those questions or somebody is going to prison.

"For the record, attorneys rarely wind up in prison, but their clients do so with alarming regularity despite our best efforts. We need a better plan than 'Randy and Samantha Burke do five-to-seven in Leavenworth', because I can virtually assure you that given the choice of a long vacation in Kansas or 'ratting you out', you'll be the ones going to Kansas."

"I presume you have a suggestion?" Dennis prompted.

"Actually, no, I don't," Boris shrugged, "beyond having them invoke the fifth amendment, refusing to answer any questions if asked. That means all the evidence will come from the prosecution, and all they have to prove is that taxes were not paid."

"*'Were not paid'* on what?" Ernie asked. "I'm not seeing any taxable events occurring here. Which taxes weren't paid?"

"The Burkes tried to buy foodstuffs from Evergreen, if I'm not mistaken," Boris answered.

"I don't think that's what happened," Ernie came back. "What I heard was that they offered that ingot 'on account' so that the Bowers' could have it tested for purity, *et cetera*. There wasn't a 'transaction' *per se*, was there?"

"Possibly not," Boris agreed, "but the warrant claims the ingot was three-quarters of an ounce and estimated its value at nearly nine hundred dollars. Over six hundred and there are 'tax implications'. The feds will get them on that, easy."

The room grew very quiet while everyone thought about their options.

"If there were to be a trial," Gillman asked, "where would it take place?"

"Federal courthouse, 19th and Curtis downtown," Ed Flynn told him.

"I think we all need to consider our plans for the future," Gillman suggested. "Why don't we let these guys get on with their other work so the rest of us can discuss this behind closed doors?"

Boris and Ed rose, gathered their things, and left. The rest pulled their chairs around into a circle for a planning session.

"From what Boris and Ed told us, the entire case pivots on two things," Gillman began when they had all joined the circle, "the testimony of the Bowers' and a single gold ingot. Remove either one, and there isn't a case."

"Remove?" Barbara asked incredulously.

"Yes, 'remove'," Gillman confirmed. "I didn't say 'kill'. I said 'remove'. If we prevent the Bowers' testifying, there's no case. How can we prevent them testifying? If we can reacquire that ingot, there's no case. How can we reacquire that ingot?"

Steve Jr. smiled. "If there's a trial, they'll have to present that gold ingot as evidence, won't they? Why can't we set up a gate coincident with the courtroom and when the prosecution shows up with the evidence, we snatch it."

Barbara, Buck, and Ernie all thought of the operations they and Arlo Rubinstein's friends had executed back East.

"I can just see that," Buck snickered. "A gate opens in the courtroom, a figure appears out of nowhere, grabs the ingot, and scrams back through the gate just before it snaps shut. Forget about 'keeping a low profile'. It'll be on the front page of every newspaper around the world."

Steve Jr. snorted. "You don't do this with a full-size gate," he explained. "You do this with a really, really small gate, maybe just big enough to slide the ingot through. Barbara's got this neat viewer thing that lets you see what's on the other side without actually having a

gate open. You use that to find the ingot, grab it and go.”

Ernie turned to Barbara. “We’re always trying to make our gates bigger. What about Steve’s idea? Can we make one that small?”

Barbara shrugged. “I don’t know. Let’s go find out. While we’re at it, we should make sure that viewer window isn’t two-way.” Ernie nodded.

“What about the Bowers’?” Gillman asked.

“The night before the trial, we drug them, take them through the gate, and leave them with a picnic basket to get them through the day,” Buck suggested. “When the trial starts, the lawyers call the Bowers’ as witnesses and when they don’t show, we move for a dismissal on the grounds that the government is dragging its feet on the case.”

Everyone laughed except Paul Gillman. “You know, with a little refinement, that could actually do the trick.”

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Barbara reconnected the misplaced wires on Ernie’s kitchen doorway gate and powered it on. She then went through the gate and turned on her viewer, proceeding to wander around examining Ernie’s house from the other side. As she did so, Ernie approached her and with his two index fingers drew an outline around the borders of Barbara’s viewer. Barbara watched his fingertips trace the borders of her viewer’s frame and knew the meaning of the gesture.

“Oh, crap,” she muttered to herself, then plunged forward until the viewer was actually inside Ernie’s chest cavity. “Wow!” she added before shutting the viewer off and returning through the gate.

“So, it’s visible,” she grumbled to Ernie.

“Well, I’m not sure ‘visible’ is the right term,” Ernie consoled her. “I could detect *something* although I couldn’t see through the viewer from this side. It looked like a piece of cellophane or plastic food wrap floating through the air. To be fair, if I hadn’t been looking for it and knowing roughly where I ought to look, I could have missed it.”

“*Hmm*. Like a piece of cellophane.” Barbara rolled the thought around. “By the way, I got to see your heart pumping and the blood rushing through your blood vessels. It was awesome! If we ever make this non-secret, this will revolutionize surgery,” she told Ernie.

“But I think we can do this,” she continued. “I’ll have to figure out how to make a really small gate, but I think that’s just a technical matter. Assuming it’s feasible, we have this viewer for surveying, and the smaller gate can be brought in as a viewer then switched to gate-

mode for stealing the ingot. Yeah, this is do-able.”

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In this computer age, it was easy to find a person’s address and telephone number. All sorts of websites would deliver that information for a fee, and many would do it for free. Buck and Ernie were assigned to reconnoiter the layout of the Bowers’ house.

The terrain in Earth-II coinciding with the Bowers’ house was, in large measure, a shallow lake fed by a stream that wandered out of the hills to the West. The lake was thoroughly surrounded by forest that marched down on all sides to within fourteen or fifteen meters of the gravelly shoreline.

Ernie sketched a map containing elements from both worlds as a handy guide for planning any operation. It had to be only detailed enough, he knew, to provide guidance, and the hand-drawn sketch provided merely the roughest of outlines. It showed the approximate shape and size of the lake and the presumed location of local streets. Even so, it was a chore trying to envision simultaneously the character of two very different landscapes.

As Ernie painstakingly drew line after line, frequently checking the image in the viewer against ‘the real world’, an idea formed in his head.

“Suppose,” he suggested to Buck, “we rent a plane to do some aerial mapping...” Buck turned to pay full attention to what Ernie was saying. “...and we have two cameras: one takes pictures of this world, and each time the shutter clicks, a second camera takes a picture through this?” and he held up the viewer.

Buck smiled. “We wind up with matched pairs of pictures showing the same piece of real estate!”

“Yes,” Ernie confirmed, “overlay one on the other and we don’t need hand-drawn maps of dubious accuracy. Didn’t Dennis say he owned a fleet of airplanes?”

“I think he said ‘six’,” Buck replied, “but I have another idea: we can do the same thing from street-level. Just cruise the area clicking away with cameras pointed in the same direction. That gives you an equally valuable image of how the height of the terrain varies between them.”

Ernie snapped his fingers and pulled a digital camera from a bag on the back seat. He took two pictures, one after the other, the first of Earth-I and the second with the viewer held in front of the lens to deliver an image of Earth-II. It was even better than having a map. They packed up their surveillance operation and drove away.

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In the predawn hours of April 18, Edith Bowers roused herself from her slumber and padded out to the kitchen. She flipped the switch to turn on the coffee maker, turned toward the pantry and fell seven feet to a mattress-laden platform on a dock stretching into an otherwise empty lake. She had but a moment to appreciate all this before a black hood covered her head and everything went dark.

Another quarter-hour later, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee tickled Michael Bowers' senses enough to bring him awake. Glancing to his side, he realized that Edith had already started coffee so he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth, the traditional start of his day. Finished with his morning ablutions, he moved down the main hallway toward the kitchen, his wife, and breakfast. As he walked, trying to arrange in his mind the things he and Edith would have to do today, the hallway in front of his advancing foot disappeared, replaced by an outdoor landscape just now being tinged by the coral light of dawn. It was too late to keep his foot from moving forward, and with nothing to grab onto, the inertia of his body carried him into a seven-foot fall onto a pile of mattresses. His sight, too, suddenly went dark as a black hood snapped over his head.

Barbara gave a wordless 'thumbs up' to her assistants who carried the now hands-bound-behind-his-back Michael to a near-by tent inside which a small heater took the chill off the nippy Colorado morning.

Inside the Bowers' house, now empty of residents, a team found clothing for each of the Bowers' appropriate to spending the day (or possibly several days) in wilderness: shoes, socks, underwear, jeans, flannel shirts, jackets, and headgear. This they passed through where it was stacked neatly on a table in the tent.

The Bowers' could hear activity near them and kept up a steady stream of demands to know what was happening and who were the people who had kidnapped them. No answers came to them. Everyone on the team had strict instructions to make as little sound as possible, and to speak no words. The Bowers', therefore, remained mystified as to what was happening around them as they sat bound, blind, thirsty, and hungry.

A small campfire burned on the lake shore beside the tent, and a cooler chest held bacon and eggs, bread and butter, deli meats and cheeses, frying pans, mugs, and utensils. With the campsite 'prepped', the team exited and departed upslope trailing a rope behind them. The rope was attached to the free end of a slipknot binding Edith Bowers' hands.

At the top of the slope, Barbara's RV waited, an open gate providing access back to 'the real world'. The team clambered through, and Barbara, the last, tugged on the rope, as hard or harder

than the previous day's test had said would be enough to pull the knot free.

Inside the tent, the knot binding Edith Bowers' hands suddenly came loose. She reached up and pulled the hood from her head, then Michael's hood, then she undid the ropes around his wrists.

Free of their bonds, the two stepped outside the tent to find a blazing campfire, the makings of breakfast handy, and a note:

We hope you enjoy your vacation. You will be contacted in another day or two to arrange for transportation home. Please do not wander very far from the campsite, although there are some wonderful views from the rise to the South reachable by an easy but barely-marked trail through birches.

A stack of blaze-orange ribbons is in the cooler for marking your trail. You'll find them much more convenient than bread crumbs. Please try not to get lost.

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At the spot where the FBI office in downtown Denver would be, Ernie wandered through brush holding the viewer in front of him while two others walked beside him with flashlights making sure he didn't take a misstep. Every now and then, he would increase the viewer to full power, stick a few fingers through and wiggle them to tease the motion-sensors into thinking someone was in the room. The lights would blink on and stay that way for seven or eight minutes.

After three hours of walking through walls that seemed to be made of mist, he announced: "I think I have something." He handed the viewer to one of his companions to have his assumption double-checked.

Indeed, the door was labeled "Evidence Room" and had a cipher-lock. Ernie took the viewer back and proceeded to walk through the room's wall. Inside were columns and stacks of lockers. Some of them had keys in the locks inviting speculation that they were currently unused. Ernie began plunging through the doors of those without keys.

Although neither light nor sound would pass from the active side of the viewer to the inactive side, there was a thin strip on the order of a few microns, perhaps, where the surfaces in the viewer could be observed by the light on the active side even if there were no light on the inactive side. It was something of a challenge to see a

sliver of who-knows-what and have to interpret what that two-dimensional image might mean in terms of a three-dimensional world. *It was, Ernie thought, like interpreting the images from a CAT scan without knowing exactly what the scanned object was.* It wasn't an impossible task, but it was mentally tiring and Ernie was showing signs of frustration just a half-hour into his survey of the lockers.

"Danny, what does this look like to you?" Ernie asked Danny Okambo, one of his 'handlers'.

Danny looked at the viewer and shook his head. "The thing in the middle looks like gold," he agreed, "but what's this?" and his fingers sketched a pointy-ended cigar-shaped oval around it.

"Set up the tripod here," Ernie instructed and Danny and Linda Rossi assembled the tripod. Once it was stable, Ernie carefully adjusted the height and position, attached the viewer to its special bracket, and applied full power to open the gate. The flashlights shining through to the other side now showed a manila envelope with a bulge. Ernie reached through with forceps and pulled the envelope through the gate. Written on the face of the envelope, along with many other cryptic markings, was the inscription: 'R & S Burke'.

Ernie squeezed the envelope to estimate the size and shape of the contents, then ripped it open and poured out a single gold ingot marked '90.75 .9990'. Ernie dropped power to the gate and handed the bar to Linda Rossi. "Good work," he told them both.

16 - Court Dates

The Assistant Attorney General approached the judge accompanied by the attorney for the defense, Edward Flynn.

"Why the sudden need for a postponement?" the judge demanded.

"We... uh... are unable to immediately locate a key piece of evidence, your honor," he explained. Ed Flynn turned and stared at him blankly.

"And we are also unable to locate some of our witnesses," the AAG continued. Ed Flynn's mouth was agape. Flynn turned to the judge.

"Your honor," he began, "according to the state's presentment, the state's entire case hangs on a single piece of evidence, a three-quarter ounce gold ingot, and two witnesses, Michael and Edith Bowers. May I ask the state which of the witnesses he is unable to locate?"

"Both," the AAG admitted.

"What have you done to locate them, Mr. Dart?" the judge asked the AAG.

"We always call witnesses several hours in advance of their appearance, your honor," Dart explained. "We called the Bowers' about six this morning and got no answer. We asked the Longmont PD to check on them and were notified that both cars registered at the address were still in the garage. One of the Bowers' neighbors had a key to their house for emergencies and opened the house for Longmont PD who did a warrantless search. Longmont PD reported that coffee was brewing in the kitchen — they shut it off for safety — and that both cell phones were attached to their chargers. There was no sign of the Bowers', and no sign of a struggle to indicate they were abducted. Your honor, they're just 'gone'."

"What of the physical evidence, the ingot?" the judge asked.

Dart had a morose look on his face. "This morning about seven o'clock I, personally, unlocked the evidence locker where was stored the ingot surrendered to us by Edith and Michael Bowers. The envelope containing the ingot that I, personally, placed there three weeks ago, and that I, personally, have checked on two separate occasions since, was missing. The evidence locker showed no signs of tampering. We dusted for fingerprints and did a rapid scan. The only prints on the door were mine."

"This is too much," Flynn sputtered. "We just spent two days seating a jury and now the AG says he's not ready to proceed? How

can he misplace his entire case?" The AAG looked somewhat sheepish.

"How would you like to proceed, Mr. Flynn?" the judge inquired.

Boris Wilsky and Ed Flynn had already been warned by Dennis Cameron to expect the prosecution to waffle on the charges, but Flynn wasn't expecting this.

Flynn paused as if thinking about his options. "Defense thinks a directed verdict for the accused is in order..." The AAG turned toward the judge to protest, but the judge held up a hand to silence him. "...along with an order reimbursing my client for the fair market value of the lost ingot. Plus attorney's costs, of course."

"Mr. Flynn, I was under the impression you were going to dispute your clients' ownership of the ingot in question," the judge offered. "Why ought they be reimbursed for something that is not theirs?"

"Prosecution was prepared, I have no doubt, to present evidence the ingot was, in fact, owned by the Burkes," Flynn answered. "If state is now asserting the ingot, the lost ingot, belongs to someone else, I will be happy to take the matter up with the Bar Association, as well as suggesting a felony charge be preferred for malicious prosecution." He smiled at the AAG and gave a little bow. The AAG started to turn red, partly in embarrassment, but mostly in anger.

"In addition," Flynn continued, "the search warrant for the premises of *Okambo & Sons* should be vacated, and all seized material: computers and records, Mr. Messier's firearm; should be returned to their rightful owners. Naturally, the charges against Laura Purcell and Patrick Messier should also be dismissed. Mr. Messier will have medical bills associated with being shot *in the back* by the FBI, pain and suffering, loss of income, loss of consortium..."

"How much, Mr. Flynn?" the judge asked.

"Two hundred thousand," Flynn replied.

"Mr. Dart?" the judge queried the AAG.

"Agreed."

The judge shook his head, glowering at the AAG, then picked up his gavel and rapped it once. "Directed verdict for the accused. Prosecution will cover reasonable costs for the defense. The Attorney General is ordered to reimburse the defendants the fair market value of the seized evidence and the medical costs for Patrick Messier plus two hundred thousand dollars. The AG is also directed to return all items seized at the premises of *Okambo & Sons* related to this case. So ordered." The gavel rapped once more and lawyers and clients began to gather their papers and effects to clear the courtroom for the

next case. Randy and Sam shared the same thunderstruck look on their faces.

“What just happened?” they asked Ed Flynn.

“The prosecutors lost your ingot,” Flynn told them, “and the Bowers’ have disappeared. There are no witnesses against you, and no physical evidence to back up the case. We already seated a jury. Because the prosecution screwed up, I got to ask for a directed verdict of ‘not guilty’ plus costs. The AAG had nothing to counter with, so the case is closed, you walk, and the taxpayers of the United States will be covering my bill. You will also be getting a check for the fair market value of three-quarters of an ounce of fine gold from those same taxpayers.” He snapped his brief case closed and shrugged his shoulders. Randy and Sam echoed the gesture.

“Now,” Ed continued, “would somebody please tell me what just happened?”

Randy laughed. “That’s what I like to see,” he chuckled, “a confused lawyer.”

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When Michael and Edith got back from a hike to the top of a near-by hill from which they could see the foothills of the Rockies, they found a new note pinned to the canvas back of one of the camp chairs:

Vacation is over. You’ll be going home tonight. We do hope you’ve enjoyed your time here.

On top of the cooler you will find four sets of handcuffs and two hoods. Enjoy your dinner tonight, and after sundown sit in your camp chairs and apply the hoods and handcuffs in the following exact order:

First, attach one set of handcuffs to each wrist, leaving one cuff each free.

Second, place the hoods loosely upon your heads.

Third, attach the free cuff to the nearest arm of your camp chairs so that each wrist is secured to your chair.

When you’re ready, we will come to escort you home.

They realized they had little choice in the matter. From the top of the hill they had climbed, there was wilderness in all directions for as far as the eye could see. Wherever they were and however they had gotten so far from home, there was nothing around them anywhere that they recognized, save only the constellations in the night sky. If they were to get home, it would only be by the good graces of those who had brought them here in the first place.

With darkness closing in on them and the campsite lit only by the flames of the campfire, they looked at each other for what they hoped would not be the last time.

"Ready?" Michael asked.

Edith nodded. "Ready."

They sat side by side in their camp chairs, each with two pairs of handcuffs, and snapped one set onto each wrist. They slipped the hoods over their heads and then clipped the remaining cuff rings onto the arms of their chairs. Then they waited, but they didn't wait very long.

Five figures clambered down the slope behind the seated Bowers'.

"Shh!" one of the newcomers warned, as the handcuffs were undone from the camp chair arms. The Bowers' had their wrists recuffed behind their backs, then they were led away upslope, the way the newcomers had arrived. The path was difficult and the going slow, but eventually they all arrived at a level spot.

"We have to wait here a moment until the time is right," someone told the Bowers'. Their handcuffs were removed. "Keep your hands down, leave the hoods on," they were instructed. Both nodded their acknowledgement. "And it would be a very good thing if you never talked to anybody about this, if you catch my meaning," the voice added ominously. "All of this happened for no other reason than that you couldn't keep a promise of confidence. If you were to continue to flap your lips over this issue, you could wind up taking a very, very long vacation in a place you don't really want to be. Don't make us repeat the lesson because the next time we'll make you find your own food." Both nodded vigorously.

"Get ready," Barbara warned her crew as she watched through the viewer for activity on the other side to quiet down.

"Now!" Barbara called out.

The gate popped open and Michael Bowers was turned to face the open gate. "Walk, don't run, eight paces forward, then remove your hood." Edith was similarly pointed at the open gate and told: "Walk six paces forward, then remove your hood. Good night."

As soon as Edith was through the gate, Danny Okambo powered it down and it popped shut.

On the other side of the gate, Michael and Edith Bowers whipped their hoods off and tossed them away. They looked around trying to get their bearings. There was no one on the street except themselves.

After a few moments, they realized they were on a cul-de-sac and turned to walk toward the nearest intersection. With a sigh of relief, they recognized the street names. They were two blocks, possibly a little more, from their home. They started walking.

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"You two have caused us quite a lot of trouble," the AAG snarled at the Bowers' as they sat in his office the following afternoon. "Because of your disappearance, the case against the Burkes collapsed," he lied to them. The disappearance of the ingot would have been by itself enough to torpedo any case they might have had.

"Would you mind telling me where you went?"

Michael and Edith looked at each other, then Edith answered for both: "Yes, we would mind."

"Really?" the AAG smirked, leaning back into his chair. "How about if I slap you with a charge of 'obstructing justice'? Might that loosen your tongues?"

The two of them thought briefly about that and recalled the threat of having to find their own food in that wilderness. "Are we still protected by the fifth amendment?" Michael asked. The AAG nodded. "What have you got on us without our own incriminating testimony?"

The AAG waved them out of his office with a dismissive *swish* of his hand. He had nothing. He knew he had nothing. The Bowers' knew he had nothing. *You win some and you lose some*, he consoled himself.

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Randy and Sam Burke sat at the Okambo's conference room table with Barbara, Buck, Ernie, Paul, the three Okambos, Oscar and Nell Gruder, and Leroy Starkweather.

"We came very close to having the lid blown off this whole operation," Paul told them. "No one is blaming you, exactly, but everyone is going to have to be lots more careful about 'security' as the size of the operation expands as it must. Effective immediately, new business contacts will have to be approved by this council," he indicated the whole group, "before any detailed negotiations commence." Randy and Sam nodded. At least they weren't getting a public spanking.

"The security hole caused by the Bowers has been closed, we

believe, permanently," Paul continued. "Is there anything else we need to do to prevent a repeat?"

"I've separately spoken to Len Willett and impressed him with the fact that his dealings with ingots I originate are to be kept strictly confidential," Oscar announced. "Len indicated he didn't have any problems with that. He stands to make a small commission on transactions he handles and knows the quality of my work guarantees a minimum of fuss and bother. I also took the liberty of contacting Treat Ahern on a three-way conference call with Len Willett, and Treat also assured both of us that he is 'on board' with our security needs."

Oscar handed Sam Burke a small gold bar marked '90.75 .9999'.

"I believe this is yours. You should probably avoid doing business with *Evergreen Food Supply* in the future. They are unlikely to be as sloppy the second time." Sam and Randy grimaced.

"Thanks," Sam said to Oscar, "and thanks to all of you for rescuing us from our own missteps. Randy and I both understand how close we came to becoming federal felons with all that implies, and we assure you it won't happen again."

"There is something else," Oscar continued, this time addressing the whole group. "Now that unwanted attention has been drawn to *Okambo & Sons*, I think I may need an armed escort when transporting gold off site. The FBI may be skittish about taking a second crack at us, but there's no telling who at the Federal level might want to see if there's any truth to the rumors that now must be swirling downtown. I'm not interested in getting mugged. We don't have to solve that problem today, but we have to solve it soon."

They each looked around the room at the others to see if anyone had anything to add.

"Okay," Paul closed the meeting, "let's get back to work."

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Barbara pushed the door to Edwin Schultz' lab open and entered unbidden. Edwin turned and smiled at her.

"More samples?" he asked. Barbara nodded.

"I tried to call you on your home phone and got no answer," Edwin began, "then I remembered that you don't actually have that home anymore. I didn't have a different number for you, so I had no way to get in touch."

"What for?" Barbara asked.

"I wanted to tell you that the water sample you gave me a few weeks back is really okay. Apparently, somebody was in here using my equipment over that weekend and didn't clean it after use. Left it

slightly contaminated.

"Remember I mentioned that fish couldn't survive in that water, but you said there were fish in the lake?" Barbara nodded. "Later that day, I recalled that conversation and wondered whether I had gotten the right reading from the mass spectrometer, so I cleaned it up and retried your water sample. There are trace elements in it as you'd expect from any surface water source, but it's perfectly okay to drink."

"That's good news," Barbara told Edwin. "I've got a few more if you wouldn't mind testing them for me as well. These are from local streams."

"Why the sudden interest in the water quality of local streams?" Edwin asked.

Barbara had been anticipating such a question and had an answer prepared. "Just getting environmentally conscious in my old age," she told him with a wink. Then she handed him a scrap of paper. "That's my cell phone number in case you need to reach me. Leave a message in case I'm out of range." She waved at Edwin and breezed out the door.

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Paul found Barbara at Gruder's Refinery in the town square and approached her. She turned to greet him when she saw Oscar taking notice of his arrival.

"What's up, Paul?" she asked.

"I think I may have just had a brainstorm," Paul told her with a broad smile. "I was recalling the meeting we had to wrap up the 'Randy and Sam' issue. Do you recall Sam mentioning that they narrowly avoided becoming felons?"

"I do," Barbara nodded.

"Why would someone want to avoid becoming a federal felon?" Paul asked rhetorically and continued without waiting for a reply. "Answer: because it ruins any chance at *resuming* a normal life presuming you had one to start with.

"You have a hard time finding a decent job. You get shunted into scut work at minimum wage and count yourself lucky if you do. If you had a family before, they abandon you for their own protection because you can no longer provide a secure environment. Friends likewise drop you for similar reasons. Does this suggest anything to you?"

Barbara looked at him blankly. "No."

"We need people," Paul continued. "We need to hire farmers, fruit pickers, grocers, truck drivers, backhoe operators, you-name-it,

to operate the infrastructure and there's this gigantic pool of people who would jump at a chance to start over, especially at the wages we'd be paying."

Barbara had a horror-stricken look on her face. "You can't be serious!" she gasped. "You want to populate this place with criminals?"

Paul smiled, 'smirked', actually. "You're talking about people who in many cases approximate Randy and Sam Burke. Would you hire them?"

The look of horror left Barbara's face. "Well... yes, I suppose I would."

"I'm not suggesting we bring serial killers aboard, no, not at all," Paul assured her. "The vast majority of federal felons are so because they smoked pot in their bedrooms or trampled an endangered plant on a hike through the woods or filled in a swamp that was home to some snail or lizard or worm. These people aren't a menace to society, but they have been given the shaft and they might just be willing to take on a new career. I'd also be willing to bet we find some reasonably well-educated federal felons if we go looking.

"Their 'deal' from us would have to be that this is a one-way trip. They have to know up front that they are never going back. Essentially, we'll be '*shipping those Micks to Australia*', the same way the British Empire got rid of their Irish troublemakers.

Barbara smiled. "I like it," she said.

Paul gave a little bow. "Then may I assume I have Her Majesty's permission to recruit?"

"You knock that crap off!" Barbara screamed at the hastily-retreating figure of Paul Gillman. Oscar chuckled.

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"Mr. Gillman, come in, please, have a seat," the counselor at the CDLE office greeted him. Gillman sat down.

"Now, how can we help you?"

"I'm helping out some friends by trying to locate some new employees for them," Gillman started. "My old friend, Steve Okambo, is trying to branch out into a new line of offerings and has to expand his workforce." The counselor grinned. These were words sweet to his ears.

"I've convinced Mr. Okambo that this is also an excellent opportunity to reach out to a part of the community that needs a break most. Mr. Okambo, a very community-conscious man, has agreed that we will focus our recruiting efforts for this among the ranks of parolees, people who would otherwise have very limited job

prospects. Obviously, we don't want rapists and serial killers, but there must be very many people who just stepped over the line and paid heavily for it, and who now are ready to do real work for a real company and make decent wages doing it. Those are the people we want to interview. Do you think you can help us line up some prospects?"

To Brian McEwan, the CDLE counselor, this was a gift from on high. The people Gillman was talking about were the most difficult to place, and here was someone, Gillman, saying those were the only people he wanted to interview. He crossed his fingers.

"I don't know that we specifically gather that datum," McEwan admitted, "but it's a good bet that if we round up all the hard-to-place clients, we'll have a good selection for you. If you don't mind my asking, what kind of jobs are you looking to fill?"

Gillman had a prepared 'line' ready and trotted it out on command: "The Okambo's are in the heavy equipment rental business: road graders, logging equipment, that sort of thing, and they think they can make a market with farming equipment: combines, hay balers, what-have-you. So, we're going to be especially interested in anyone who has a rural, especially a 'farming', background, but it's not absolutely necessary. We plan to do some training before turning them loose, too. We'll want them to be able to speak authoritatively when they're face-to-face with paying customers, you know." McEwan nodded. *Better and better.*

"Why don't you give us a day or two to go through our lists and line up some candidates? Say, Thursday or Friday?" McEwan offered.

"Thursday or Friday sounds great," Gillman agreed, "and feel free to get candidates from the eastern part of the state as well," he reminded McEwan. "There are probably more 'agricultural types' there than here in any case." McEwan nodded again.

After Gillman left the office, McEwan went straight to the Director's office to brief him on the proposal Gillman had just made.

"And he wants parolees?" the Director asked incredulously. McEwan smiled.

"And if we can't find enough of what he wants, we can drain clients from other offices," McEwan began.

"IOUs like they're going out of style," the Director grinned. They high-fived each other.

By Wednesday noon, a hastily pulled together task force had pulled the files of the hardest-to-place clients and scanned them for indications of criminal records. Those with non-violent records were individually called to inquire whether they had any agricultural background or knowledge of farm machinery. Even those who

answered in the negative were told of the possibly valuable opportunity for gainful employment and advised to show up for interviews Friday morning.

Outlying offices in Yuma, Sterling, and Burlington were also tapped for potential candidates. You never want a potential employer to walk away unsatisfied. As expected, the northeastern counties produced many more farm boys than did Boulder, although not all of them had criminal records. Those offices were put on alert in case their clients were needed to fulfill the most unusual request of *Okambo & Sons*.

The team Paul Gillman brought along with him on Friday had all been briefed on the mission: without saying it in so many words, find those people who were (a) non-violent, (b) not habitual felons, (c) reasonably intelligent, and (d) with an agricultural bent or background, in decreasing order of importance. The most important data: who's the parole officer and how can the P.O. be contacted?

Armed with interview notes, each of the parole officers were approached by one of Gillman's team.

"It's very simple," they were each told. "Mr. Okambo wants to perform an act of charity by reaching out to the less-fortunate, in this case: people with criminal records and the consequent reduced ability to find a decent job. The main problem is that Jeff says he can't travel very far without your explicit permission. We need to be able to call Jeff at eight in the morning, put him in an air taxi and have him at the Eads Municipal Airport by noon. Can he do that?"

The parole officer looked at the speaker as if he were talking to her in an alien language. "That's crazy!" the PO muttered. "I could never tell where he was from one day to the next! Why would you even suggest such a thing for an ex-con?"

"It boils down to this," the PO was told. "Jeff may be an ex-con, but the charge was 'marijuana possession'. To be blunt, we don't consider that much of a problem if he can convince Farmer Jones that its economically advantageous to rent his farm equipment as and when necessary rather than mortgage his homestead and buy it outright. Jeff was raised on a farm, he knows the lingo, and more importantly he knows the economics. Jeff was a CPA before the DEA found him smokin' dope in his basement. Let's get real, here. Jeff is no more a menace to society than your Congressman, maybe less-so. Tell me what we need to do to make him a productive member of society again."

The PO rubbed her chin. "If he's on probation, there's a requirement that I maintain control over him. It's not so much Jeff's problem as it is mine. For Jeff to be able to move about freely, he

must first be released from probation, which action also releases me from having to monitor his movements. We need to see the judge.”

“Okay, let’s make it happen.”

The judge was largely unsympathetic. “The whole notion of ‘parole’, Mr. Gillman, is that the parolee’s behavior is supervised, typically by someone upon whose judgment the court can rely. Were I to release this person from court-supervised parole, what would take its place? Are you going to be Mr. Fuller’s parole officer?”

“Your honor has me at something of a disadvantage. I don’t know how the system works, or even whether it works,” Gillman began his reply. The judge glared at him. “What I do know is that Mr. Fuller is chronically under-employed due almost certainly to his felony arrest for possession of a regulated substance. This means he is a burden on society that still has an obligation to feed him, clothe him, and shelter him. My client is willing to overlook Mr. Fuller’s past indiscretions, and Mr. Fuller has expressed to me his earnest desire to put all that behind him. For that to happen, Mr. Fuller must be able to go where he’s needed when he’s needed there, and without the delay imposed by having to clear it beforehand with someone who may or may not be available for consultation. It’s a very simple proposition: make it possible for him to be a productive member of society, or make it impossible for him to be a productive member of society. At this point, I don’t care which choice you make. If we can’t have Jeff Fuller, we’ll find somebody else.

“I have to add, however, that I can’t understand why you’re not jumping at this offer.”

The judge turned toward the parole officer. “Ms. Macy? Do you have anything to offer?”

“Well, it represents a loss of revenue for me, your honor,” she told him.

“It also represents a decreased workload,” Gillman added, “and there are certainly more where he came from.” The parole officer shrugged.

“Mr. Fuller?” the judge prompted the parolee. “Anything to say?”

Fuller also shrugged. “I’m still unsure why smoking pot in the privacy of one’s own home while harming no one rises to the level of a federal felony, your honor, but I am highly motivated to avoid the discomfort of dealing with the police and the judiciary.”

“We all have to deal with laws we don’t particularly like, Mr. Fuller. That’s neither here nor there. The question of the moment is ‘what can we expect from Jeff Fuller if he’s unsupervised?’. That’s where I’d like you to confine your remarks, if that’s okay with you.”

Fuller, chastened, nodded. "I think this court should expect to never hear my name again," Fuller offered.

"I would call that 'a positive outcome'," the judge replied. "Let me promise that if this court ever does hear your name again, you will be tightly supervised for a very, very, very long time. Are we on the same page?"

"Same page, same paragraph," Fuller promised.

"Are you ready to hire Mr. Fuller on the spot, Mr. Gillman?" the judge asked.

"Mr. Fuller already has a conditional job offer effective with the end of his parole," Gillman answered.

"Okay," the judge finished, "Jeff Fuller is released from parole effective immediately. Good luck, Mr. Fuller, and good luck to you, too, Mr. Gillman." The gavel rapped hard on the striker and the judge rose to leave the courtroom.

17 - Farm Boys and City Boys

Ernie Walsh and Paul Gillman sat across from their newest 'target', Dante Robinetti, parolee, and prepared to give him 'the spiel' as Gillman called it.

"We're preparing to make you a job offer, Mr. Robinetti, but first we need to clear up a few things regarding your sexual proclivities." Robinetti frowned. "If we extend that job offer and you accept, you'll join an organization that is actually a very large family, and we want to make sure neither of us is making a mistake. You understand what I'm saying?" Ernie asked.

Robinetti nodded. "I never knew how old she was," he explained. "She looked to be a 20-something and I didn't check her driver's license. Let that be a lesson to you. But to say that I gravitate toward underage girls is a complete fabrication. If I had known her true age I would have sent her packing. I didn't. That was an error, not a crime."

"So," Ernie continued. "The thing that draws us most strongly to you is the extent of your education. You've got lots of knowledge that we find valuable, and we can overlook your indiscretions if you can assure us that they're all in the past. If you can do that, we have an unusual offer of employment that we think you will find 'intriguing' if not exactly 'attractive'. In addition, everything said here today is highly confidential. We would be very unhappy if any part of this conversation became public knowledge. Shall we proceed or shall we halt?"

"I'm all ears," Robinetti prompted, "and I have already assured you that my 'criminal past' is past. What sort of job are you talking about?"

"We want you to be our agricultural extension service," Gillman told him. "We have several people preparing to begin small-to medium-scale farming operations and none of them are as scientifically-inclined as are you. You are going to be their go-to guy when they have blight. You are also — that is, were, past tense — a veterinarian, and so you will also be the go-to guy when the horses and chickens and pigs act up.

"We'll build you whatever you need in terms of laboratory facilities and operating theaters. You tell us what you need. We'll see it arrives, but you will have to install it with whatever help you can locate locally."

"Wait, wait," Robinetti protested, "what's wrong with using the university's agricultural extension service? And why not have the

people who sold you the equipment also install it?"

"All in good time," Ernie comforted him. "Now, it's very unlikely we can get you released from an obligation to report your whereabouts on a regular basis. Once you're labeled a 'sexual predator', you're on their list forever. We can't have you heading downtown once a month, so if you accept our offer of employment, we are going to whisk you away to a place where you will never see a Colorado policeman. It is also a place from which you will never return. You will never visit the Grand Canyon again."

Gillman looked at Ernie who turned and read the expression in Gillman's face.

"I mean you should expect never to visit the Grand Canyon again. If you do, it should come as a pleasant surprise. But you will never belly up to the bar at The Boulderado, never ride a city bus, never vacation in Hawaii. Your life will be largely a frontier existence, spent in wilderness, with a very small community of people all of whom you will know and all of whom will know you.

"Basically, as Paul put it to us last week, you should think of yourself as an Irish revolutionary in England circa 1840 or so. The Brits shipped those Micks to Australia, a place that must have seemed to be on the far side of the moon, and they never came back to Ireland.

"Because you will stop reporting your whereabouts to the state, you will suddenly become a real criminal, such that if you ever do go back, you will be instantly arrested, and you will likely blab details about our operation that we wish not to have blabbed. That's why you're never going back to civilization."

"Exactly where is this place you're going to whisk me off to?" Robinetti asked.

"Think of it as '*Shangri-La*,'" Ernie suggested. "It's so well-hidden that no one will ever accidentally find their way in, and no one will ever accidentally stumble out, either. It's because of that we can't have the installers from the Acme Laboratory Equipment Company come in to tighten all the bolts. We don't want to show them the way in because they'll also want to be shown the way out. Therefore, only people who have committed one hundred percent to the project will see that equipment after it arrives. That's why you have to install it."

"If I agree to be hired," Robinetti added. Ernie and Paul nodded their agreement.

"Salary?" Robinetti queried. "Benefits?"

"Ahh, that's a problem," Ernie admitted. "What can we give you that you would find 'useful' given the conditions of the frontier? Money? What would you do with it? Spend it where? The currency we offer is a clean start in a community that doesn't know your past

and doesn't care to know. What's that worth to you?"

"I'm going to have to think about this," Robinetti told them.

Ernie handed him a business card. "That's my cell phone. Call me anytime." The interview was over.

Pyotr Gorsky stared back at Ernie and Paul. "What do you mean: '*never come back*'?" he asked.

"That's pretty self-explanatory, I would think," Paul replied.

"You mean when my father turns seventy I won't be at his birthday party?"

"That's exactly what it means," Ernie told him ruefully. "When you say good-bye to your family and friends on that last day, it will be like you stepped into a rocket bound for Alpha Centauri. You may be able to send messages, but the hugs you get that day will be the last you get from them. There may be others who hug you, kiss you, marry you, have your children, stay with you when you breathe your last breaths, but they will be people like you who gave up that world for another and who, like you, gave away their families. Yes, we know we're asking a lot, and we can't tell you, because we ourselves don't know, what you'll get in return. I'm not going to sugar-coat this: you may look back on this in thirty years and wish for all the world that you had chosen differently, and that's true whether your answer is 'yes' or 'no'. We are all rolling the dice not knowing what the number will be.

"What we do know is that a felony conviction ruins your life here. The statistics are horrible. The percentage of people who exit prison and go on to lead normal, productive lives is so small as to be statistically meaningless. What we're offering you is a big red 'RESET' button, but it resets everything. Everything you had before is wiped away and replaced by other things any of which may be to your liking or *not* to your liking. We'd tell you what those replacements look like if we knew, but we don't. We could be sentencing you to Hell or sending you to Heaven. We want to think it's Heaven, but only you can make the choice. Only you can decide to roll the dice for double-or-nothing, and nobody can guarantee the dice won't come up '*snake eyes*'."

"Why me?" Pyotr asked.

"You come from a farming family," Paul told him. "You know about crops and planting and harvesting and managing a farm. That kind of knowledge is very valuable in the world we're offering you. When we asked you how big a farm you could manage, you told us '*six hundred acres*'. We will provide you with three thousand acres of arable land. What you do with the other twenty-four hundred acres is your business. Raise a family. Give it to your children. It's nobody's

business but your own, and no one will second-guess your decision.”

Gorsky looked aside, staring at nothing in particular and was silent for a long time. “Where is it?” he asked, finally.

This was the question all of them had asked, and neither Ernie nor Paul had as yet developed a satisfactory answer. “That’s not something we can discuss,” Paul told him.

“I’m trying to understand how you can have three thousand acres in a place from which I can’t return,” Gorsky muttered. “The only thing I can think of is that I’m going to be enslaved, farming inside a huge electrified fence, and if I try to escape I’ll be killed. How else can you prevent me from returning?”

“If we were going to do that,” Ernie scoffed, “we would have had six burly goons ready to conk you on the head, blindfold you, and drag you off to your farm. We’re not interested in enslaving you. We want you to do this freely because you think it might work out for the best. But if you’re not interested, then you’re not interested.” He handed Gorsky his business card. “That’s my cell phone. Call me anytime.”

Gorsky left and they called in the next candidate.

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“This isn’t working out,” Ernie suggested to Paul.

Paul looked at Ernie ruefully. “Agreed. We need a better pitch. The killer problem is ‘never returning’. That’s everyone’s stumbling block. We’re going to have to get a dispensation on that or we might as well just pack up and go home.”

“Let’s go talk to Barbara,” Ernie finished.

When the council met later that day, Ernie and Paul were first to address the group.

“We’ve interviewed seventeen potential farmers and two others who would have been ‘support staff’ including one who was both an agronomist and a veterinarian. Every one of them turned us down: one hundred percent. It appears to us that the common factor was that they would be taking a one-way trip, and none of them were willing to roll what they considered ‘loaded dice’. Paul and I are becoming convinced or are already convinced that unless that requirement is eased, we’re on a fool’s errand, and our efforts are a waste of time and money. Unless we can give these people something concrete to make them feel more confident they’re not volunteering for permanent exile on Devil’s Island, we should all give up the idea of starting an agricultural economy in Farside.”

“Farside?” Danny Okambo asked.

"Oh, sorry," Ernie apologized. "I guess within the past week or so, Paul and I have been using the terms 'Farside' and 'Nearside' to refer to Earth-II and Earth-I respectively. It avoids a whole lot of questions we'd rather not address."

Danny crinkled his mouth and smiled. "I like it," he told them. There was a muttering of agreement around the table.

"Perhaps we could give them a preview of some sort," Buck suggested, "maybe have a video showing the scenery of Farside?"

"Two-thirds of the ones we interviewed asked essentially the same question: 'where is this place from which I can't return?'," Ernie continued. "Even if we have a video to show them, they're still going to have that question. We need to develop some sort of answer or give up the idea of developing a farming community."

"Even so," Barbara interjected, "we're going to have to be much more open about the nature of Farside. I think I have an idea. Let me consult with Dennis and get back to you."

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Dennis Cameron listened intently to Barbara's idea. "I'd like to suggest a modification, if I may," Dennis offered. Barbara wiggled her fingers in a *let's have it* gesture.

"You need a 'viewing helmet'," he told her, "something that fits over the person's head and has a viewer panel stuck to the inside. When they put the helmet on they'll be able to see — Farside? — and when they take it off, normalcy returns. A person enters the aircraft and they put on their helmet, visor up. When the plane takes off, they drop the visor and can see everything you want them to see. You can sit next to them with your own visor and chat with them about things you want them to pay attention to.

"At the end of the flight, they give you back the helmet. Even if they tell someone, it's impossible to prove that what they saw was not simply a 3-D virtual reality demonstration. Of course, they themselves might believe it is nothing more than virtual reality dressed up in some elaborate theatrics. Can't help that."

Barbara smiled. "Perfect!" she pronounced.

"I'm glad you like it," Dennis smiled back at her. "I'll have one of the Hondas moved up to Boulder Municipal for your use as soon as you tell me you're ready."

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The Honda bizjet touched down on runway 26 at Boulder Municipal Airport, slowed and taxied toward the service area. Ernie and Paul waited for it with Dante Robinetti, Pyotr Gorsky, and Jeff

Fuller. As the engines wound down, the door behind the cockpit popped open and swung down to form a boarding stair allowing the five passengers, each carrying a flight helmet, to climb into the cabin.

"You each said you wanted to see what you were getting into before you made your decision," Ernie began as they all buckled themselves into their seats. "We're hoping what you'll see this morning will do the trick. We'll be flying north to Longmont and Greeley before swinging back. Is there any other place anyone is particularly interested in seeing?"

"Why are we doing that route?" Gorsky asked. "We all know what those areas look like, and that can't be the acreage you're talking about. It's already heavily developed."

"We think you'll have a different opinion after we show you what's out there," Paul told them. "Keep your visors in the 'up' position until we tell you to drop them down." The three visitors placed their helmets on their heads. The boarding stair raised and became a door, the engines roared to life, and the Honda scooted to the east end of the runway where it turned and began its takeoff roll. A minute later the nose lifted, the Honda rose to two thousand feet and turned north.

"Drop your visors," Ernie told them, and three visitors gasped at the view unobstructed by the now-invisible airplane.

"Where are the roads?" Dante Robinetti asked.

"What you're seeing," Ernie began, "is an alternate reality. We call it 'Farside'. The land we're offering you is here in this alternate reality whose population is presently about seventy-five. None of those seventy-five have any farming experience and therefore must import all their food. That's where you come in. You're going to be food producers, the first food producers in this world. Your job is to make it unnecessary to import food. As such, you will be key members of the community providing grains for baking and other uses, meat, eggs, milk, butter, fruits, vegetables, honey. The list is endless.

"In exchange for producing food, we grant you your farms and your freedom. The people who buy your food will pay you, probably in gold, so you stand to become quite rich even beyond your status as landowners, although as I pointed out earlier, it's an odd definition of 'rich' since you won't have much on which to spend your gold.

"It's also very much a 'frontier existence'. The only electricity is that which you generate for yourself. Life will probably be pretty bucolic: *early to bed and early to rise* and all that."

"We'll need horses," Dante announced.

"Horses?" Paul asked.

"Yes, horses," Dante confirmed. "They produce fertilizer and

other horses. We'll also need cattle and chickens. We'll need people, more than just we few, to do all the work. How do we get all that stuff?"

"Well, hell, you're the expert, Dante. Make a list and we'll get to work on it," Paul told him. "As for 'hired hands', we're open to suggestions. If you know any candidates, bring them in."

"P.s.: I think you're now seeing why 'going back' is a problem. There are a limited number of portals between these two realities. Plus, you're going to be so busy building a civilization from scratch that you won't get a vacation for a real long time. The up-side is that you are as free as the pioneers were. There are no laws or regulations that you must follow. Get busy plowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting and you will found an entire civilization and grow wealthy as you do it. Sit back, relax and smoke some MJ, and you'll starve come winter.

"That's the deal."

"But some people go back and forth between these realities," Fuller said questioningly.

"Yes," Ernie admitted, "some do. I said 'never return', but that really means you should plan on never returning. It doesn't mean that it's 'outside the envelope of possibility'. The security of this world is inversely proportional to the number of people traveling back and forth, and we've already had a security exposure. Luckily, we were able to minimize it, but how often will we luck out?"

Soon they looped around Greeley and headed back south.

"As you can see, there are no farms here, yet if you raise the visor and look out the window, there are farms and houses from horizon to horizon," Ernie pointed out. "You'll also notice the occasional stream where you don't expect one or dry land where you do. If you come aboard with us, we'll map the area for you and give you the plat with all the details so you'll know where to draw water."

"What about people we leave behind?" Pyotr Gorsky asked.

"*Hmm*. That never crossed our minds," Gillman responded. "I guess we could arrange for mail delivery, get a drop box, set up a Pony Express for you guys out in the sticks."

"I was thinking more along the lines of 'after we get established, bring them in'," Gorsky corrected him.

"Always a possibility," Ernie agreed.

"Okay, I'm in," Gorsky told him.

Robinetti looked up. "Me, too."

"And me," Fuller announced.

"Glad to hear it," Paul breathed a sigh of relief. "Before we ship you across, you should all go shopping and make your Christmas lists so we'll know what to supply you as 'seed', figuratively and

literally. Ernie and I will check in every week or so until you're capital-R ready."

The bizjet landed at Boulder and the five passengers got out, shook hands all around, and departed in four different directions.

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Ernie's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and answered the call. "Hi, it's Ernie," he announced himself.

"We get paid in gold," the voice started. "Can we send it back?"

"Who is this?" Ernie demanded.

"It's Dante," Robinetti confessed.

"Yes, you can send it back. We'll even convert it to greenbacks at seventy-five percent of market. That's the deal we get so we're not skimming you. We also have a refiner who says he will knock out semi-official Farside Royal Mint coins for a three percent cut.

"Whichever way you decide to go, we'll deliver the payment and get you a receipt."

"*Royal mint*?" Dante squeaked. "Do we have a king?"

"It's kind of an inside joke," Ernie explained. "Barbara doesn't want to be Queen, and it gets her riled to be thought of that way, so everyone refers to her as '*her majesty*'. The coins don't have any extra value beyond their gold content unless it's as a collector's item. Coins or ingots or greenbacks, it's up to you."

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Arlo Rubinstein's phone rang and he yanked it from its cradle. "Yeah."

"I have an offer you can refuse," Buck told him, "although I suspect you'll want to think about it before making a decision."

"Buck?" Arlo asked.

"Yes," Buck acknowledged. "Barbara and I have some land available for homesteading and we're looking for some pioneer-types to homestead the land. If you know anyone who might be interested and who can keep their yap shut about the deal, you have our okay to give them our telephone number and email address."

"How much land do you have available for this homesteading?" Arlo asked.

"Thirty-five billion acres more-or-less," Buck informed him. There was silence from the other end of the line.

"That's a lot of land," Arlo said finally. "I presume these acres are in lots of places."

"Actually, they're in every place," Buck explained. "For

instance, all of Long Island is available for anyone who wants it."

"I've always wanted a little beach-front weekend getaway place," Arlo offered dreamily. "Got anything like that?"

"If you can find it," Buck told him, "you can claim it."

"Cost?" Arlo prompted.

"Anyone who claims land must homestead it. They must build a structure in which to live, dig a well, plant a garden or the equivalent. They must produce more food than they use and more energy than they use.

"They have to agree that the gates we supply for transiting back and forth remain ours and that if we discover they're being abused, we can take them back. They must adopt The Golden Rule as their community rule of law. That's about it."

"Do they actually have to live there?" Arlo asked.

Buck hadn't thought about that, and in his discussions with Barbara and Ernie the question hadn't come up. "I'm thinking it would be tough to work a garden or a ranch or a farm if you didn't live there, Arlo, wouldn't it?"

"So, this land grant is intended to be a working grant, is that right?" Arlo asked for clarification.

"That's the intent," Buck confirmed. "They have to invest their own selves to establish ownership of the land."

"I'll ask around and get back to you," Arlo finished the call.

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Danny Okambo sat across the conference room table from Barbara, Ernie, and Buck.

"You're the guy with the knowledge of blasting, Danny, so you're 'lead' on this project," Ernie explained. "What we need is the ability to remotely destroy a gate. It has been suggested that each gate will be rigged with a radio receiver of some type with that radio hooked to charges on each chip. Each of those radios should respond to a special signal that is unique to each gate. When the radio hears its own unique 'destruct' order, it blasts all the attached chips.

"That way we can target a particular gate, sending a signal that orders one specific gate to destroy itself without affecting any of the other gates. Is that do-able?"

"I know about blasting," Danny begged off, "but I know *zilch* about radios. At least, I don't know enough to pull this off. I think we need to go outside for expertise."

"Okay," Ernie agreed, "we'll try to find a radio expert."

Ernie contacted several of the technical trade schools in the

area and talked to their guidance counselors. Most of them welcomed the chance to offer their students even this very-short-term employment.

“Well, it’s really much more than short term,” Ernie emphasized. “Over the course of the next several months, we will be seeking hundreds of these devices with orders for up to a dozen more each month stretching out as far as the eye can see. The student who can build the right configuration will have a small but steady business for a very long time.”

Within the week, Ernie’s offer of \$200 for a working prototype had garnered three calls from interested students and all three had presented prototypes to claim the reward. Ernie considered it six hundred dollars well-spent to have a choice to offer Danny Okambo.

Danny, not surprisingly, chose the smallest, the receiver for which was no larger than a Zippo lighter yet still capable of being programmed for over four thousand different activation codes. The transmitter supplied as part of the ‘set’ would activate the receiver from a half-mile away if the right keys were pressed on its telephone-like keypad.

Ernie immediately placed an order for two more transmitters and three hundred receivers to be delivered over the following four months. The lucky — and talented — student no longer had to worry about where next semester’s tuition was coming from.

As the receivers were delivered, Danny set to work rigging gates each with a uniquely assigned death code and a separate activation code on a second receiver to enable the gate to be remotely switched on if necessary. Each receiver he first tested to make sure it would hear and respond to the proper signal.

As each gate got its own receiver and destructive charge — tiny dabs of explosive material barely adequate to make a noticeable ‘pop!’ but entirely adequate to wreck the integrity of the chip to which it was mated — and another receiver to flip the power switch from ‘on’ to ‘off’ or vice versa, Danny logged the codes and the location of the gate on a master list.

Over a very short time, one by one, all the gates operating here, there, and everywhere in Farside were replaced by upgraded versions. Barbara, Ernie, and Buck knew that in the foreseeable future there would be gates in places too far away for immediate supervision and none of them wanted to risk the unintended consequences of losing control of one of them.

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Barbara, Ernie, and Buck transited through Ernie’s gate after a

long day of wading in an icy mountain stream and shoveling tons — well, that's what it felt like — of stream bed into their sluice. A few moments later, Buck's cell phone having been able to establish communication with a local tower, the phone chimed at him to announce a voicemail message waiting. Buck listened to the message and wrote a number on a piece of paper.

"Somebody from Arlo's neighborhood looking to take us up on our homesteading offer," he told Barbara and Ernie as he dialed the number.

Tony Cusumano answered the call. "Hey, Buck, thanks for calling back so soon," Tony said after Buck had announced himself. "A few of the guys were talking about the offer you made to Arlo, and we're wondering if you're open to a slight modification?"

"Let me put you all on 'speaker'," Buck replied as he switched the phone's speakers on. "The people who have the authority to make that decision happen to be right here. You all know Barbara and Ernie, right?"

There was a muttering of approval from the group at the other end now also using a speakerphone.

"Barbara, Ernie," Tony restarted, "there's a bunch of us that are talking about your offer and we want to take you up on it but in a slightly different way. If each of us must produce our own food and energy, that could be a problem for some of us.

"What we're proposing is that we form a community and jointly produce the food and energy needed to be self-sustaining. That way, people who are good at raising chickens won't have to become experts at farming, too."

"That sounds okay to me," Barbara agreed. "Are we also agreed on the other aspects of the plan?"

"I think so," Tony answered. "We already deal with each other based on The Golden Rule, so that's not a problem. You also require that we not 'abuse the gates'. I'm not sure what that means, and I'm not alone in that. Could you be more specific about what constitutes 'abuse'?"

"Sure," Barbara came back. "The gates are mine, and they will always be mine. I get to say what things you can do with my gates and what things you may not do with my gates. You may use the gates to move people and their property and equipment back and forth between Nearside and Farside, but only people approved for access to Farside."

"Farside?" Tony asked. "Nearside?"

"Oh, sorry," Barbara apologized. "You're in Nearside right now. Go through a gate and you're in Farside. The land grant we are making is in Farside. We don't want you bringing unapproved people

across into Farside. We'll make it easy to get approval, but the council here gets the final say. No approval, no passage.

"For the time being, we want to minimize the number of people who zip back and forth through the gates. It's a matter of operational security. We feel that security is inversely proportional to activity through the gates."

"So, in other words, we'll need passports," Tony suggested.

Barbara laughed. "At the moment, we don't have a State Department to issue passports, but that's not a half-bad idea. Thank you, Tony. We'll take that under advisement.

"If you're all serious about this, we will send a team back with a supply of gates to get you started. We will also have a meeting with each of your families to make sure everyone is on the same page, so to speak.

"Where, by the way, do you intend to stake claims?"

"Burt Hamm and his brother Mark have adjoining properties near Pottstown, Pennsylvania," Tony explained, "about six acres between them. We're going to use their places as the entry point, if that's okay. We're presuming that we can hunt in Farside to provide some of our food."

"I don't know if that's a good assumption, Tony," Barbara warned. "If what we're seeing here is any indication, you may not find much game in Farside worth hunting."

"No deer?" Tony asked.

"There are deer, and that's about it. Other than that, the biggest animals we've seen here are woodchucks," Buck explained. "It might be different in Pennsylvania, but I wouldn't bet on it. If there were deer in Pennsylvania, they almost certainly would have populated the rest of the land surface. That hasn't happened. At least we haven't seen evidence of it here. You may have to do all your hunting in Nearside."

Tony laughed. "Maybe we should try to corral a few bucks and does and run them through a gate into Farside. I wonder how long it might take before there would be a big enough population to make hunting feasible?"

Barbara wasn't smiling. "Before you do that, Tony, I want to clear that with the council. We have brought in farm animals, but they are penned and don't run wild. Feral animals are an entirely different matter. There are ecological horror stories connected to importing animals into new ecological niches: pythons in the Everglades, for instance, and rabbits in Australia. We don't want to create a problem if we don't have to. That, by the way, would constitute 'gate abuse' as far as I'm concerned."

"You may be overly concerned," Tony responded. "You say

you've seen woodchucks. Have you seen any predators?" On the other end of the line, Ernie's expression changed to one of concern. "I ask because there must be a predator, else the woodchuck would have overrun the planet with an ever-expanding population.

"You may not have seen any predators, but I assure you they are there."

"You are obviously correct, Tony," Barbara admitted, "but until we know what we're dealing with, I insist we import no foreign animals into this ecosystem."

There was a pause as Tony glanced around his group to determine their unvoiced thoughts. "We will follow that rule," Tony told her.

"Then I believe we have a workable agreement," Barbara concluded. "We will dispatch a team to help you get started. We'll all meet in Pottstown on Saturday morning. Is that okay?" The noises coming over the speaker seemed to indicate that was acceptable. "You'll want to brief your families prior to the meeting and get their commitment — and I do mean commitment — to absolute secrecy, the same level of secrecy you all have maintained, I hope, since our last visit east. You may bring to the meeting on Saturday all those who intend to be part of the settlement.

"If any of your family members can't or won't agree to total confidentiality, they will not be permitted to participate in the project. They will be 'unapproved persons' and not eligible to enter Farside. Does anyone have a problem with that?" Again, the noises coming through the speaker seemed to indicate agreement.

"Okay. We'll be in touch later to let you know what the travel arrangements will be."

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With Dennis Cameron flying co-pilot, the plane bearing Danny Okambo, Tony Dinardo, Paul Gillman, and the parts for up to seven gates and viewers took off from Boulder Municipal at 8am Friday on a course for Indianapolis where it would refuel before the final leg into Reading. Around four in the afternoon local time, Dennis touched down gently on Reading's runway 13 and taxied over to the Jet Center.

Dennis released the pilot until Sunday evening and he, Danny, and Tony departed in the company of several others.

At the Hamm's property in Pottstown, a barbecue was in full swing and the remainder of the evening was spent half in everyone becoming acquainted with everyone else and half in getting gates assembled and tested.

"Barbara and Buck tell me that you are familiar only with

Type-I gates," Gillman began as he addressed the hastily-called orientation meeting. "The characteristics of Type-I gates — which I have never seen in operation, by the way — is that the portal is always transparent. That is, you cannot see Farside until you pass through the gate. Once through the gate the landscape appears in black-and-white." Many of those present nodded to indicate that this matched their recollections. "There is also a time-slip of approximately three-to-one.

"Type-I gates are obsolete. We no longer use them or provide them. The gates supplied to you are exclusively Type-II gates.

"Type-II gates show a full-color Farside when activated and are transparent only when not powered. If you place two gates flush against each other and power both on, you're looking into Farside via the first and into Nearside via the second, and both appear to be powered off. This Farside has no time-slip. The ratio is one-to-one.

"As with Type-I gates, the edges of a powered-on gate are indescribably hazardous. This applies even to flush gates if they're both powered on. Even though they appear not to have power, they are still dangerous. Always presume a gate-edge is hazardous. Always.

"You will notice that each gate has a red panic button protected by a hinged cover. These gates must be protected at all costs. If necessary, the red panic button will kill the gate — permanently. We require you to kill any gate you think may fall into the hands of unauthorized persons.

"Any questions?"

"Power," one of the men prompted. "Can we run a temporary cable through a gate to supply electricity into Farside while we get things set up?"

"We think so," Danny Okambo replied. "If the portal closes it severs the cable, of course. Current thinking is that it's better to generate your own where you need it, but the solution is up to you. You will, eventually, have to generate all your power in Farside to meet the terms of the homestead agreement."

"Animals?" another prodded.

"Farm animals, yes. Feral animals, no. Domestic animals... there is no policy at the moment. As far as we know there are no dogs, for instance, in Farside. I would say that if you bring your pooch over and it stays domesticated, it would be alright. If it goes feral, you would have to kill or recapture it. We really do not yet know what we're dealing with here. Please don't make it any more difficult than it has to be."

"Cars and trucks," another asked.

"Yeah," Danny continued. "We built a super-large gate

thirteen feet by twenty-two so we could roll heavy equipment through for road building. If you think you'll want to do likewise, we can arrange for a supersize gate, but we didn't come prepared to build one on this trip.

"Tony and Dennis and I have been peeking at Farside as the gates were going together, and we all think you're going to need chain saws. We think you're going to need a lot of chain saws. The good news is: anybody who wants to live in a log cabin will have more building material than they can shake a stick at."

Mark and Burt Hamm were designated the gatekeepers for the group and Danny and Tony briefed them on the responsibilities they were now expected to honor. They were also presented with transmitters and the codes for the Pennsylvania gates should the need ever arise to kill them remotely.

On Monday morning, the Coloradans shook hands all around, said their good-byes, and pitched their luggage into pick-ups for the ride back to the airport. The two groups promised to stay in touch with each other. Dennis, Paul, Tony, and Danny climbed aboard the plane and it roared off toward Indianapolis and Boulder.

18 - Words

"I've got what I think might constitute an interesting offer," Steve Okambo Jr. informed his friend Hal. "I want to put up a cell phone tower for you. In fact, I want to put up several."

"For me?" Hal asked incredulously. Steve smiled.

"Yes, for you," Steve confirmed. "Along with that, something like three hundred people will switch over to your company from any other companies they might presently be hooked to. They'll become your subscribers. In exchange..."

"Yeah," Hal said, "This is the good part coming up, I bet."

Steve smirked. "In exchange, traffic through any of those 'built by Okambo' towers will be billed straight to me on a flat-rate basis per month. The question I have for you is: 'how much?'"

"You're nuts," Hal told Steve. "This is impossible. Billing would be complete chaos. What happens when a subscriber wanders onto another tower not 'built by Okambo'?" Steve shook his head. "How do we bill that call? Partly to you and partly to the subscriber? What about subscribers from other companies? Do they get the same deal?"

"Nope, nope, nope," Steve cut him off. "Billing will be a snap because all calls involving any of those towers will use only my towers. Yes, they might wander onto another tower, but it will be another 'built by Okambo' tower. They will never involve a tower that's not 'built by Okambo'. Never. Does that make it easier?"

"How can you guarantee that?" Hal demanded. "You can't guarantee that! That's impossible!"

"Let's just say for the moment, just for the sake of argument, that I can guarantee it. Hypothetically. How much?"

"How many towers?" Hal asked.

"A small number," Steve mused. "Four, maybe six, maybe as many as ten, but probably not."

"And they get hooked into our network how?"

"You provide a junction box at a convenient location and my communications techs plug our equipment into the end of your cable," Steve suggested.

"Convenient for who?" Hal demanded.

"I'll tell you the general location. You provide an 'Okambo-only' terminator somewhere nearby," Steve told him.

Hal looked at him askance. "Where, for instance?"

"Near the rental yard on 75th," Steve offered.

"We've already got a tower there, just south of Jay and 75th,"

Hal informed him. "You're going to add another tower there? How will you keep calls from hitting the tower that's already there? You know, this is sounding nuttier with every passing minute."

"Hal, if any calls come through on the existing tower, they're not covered by this, but calls that do stay exclusively on my towers and don't wander onto somebody else's towers will be, okay? That's the number I want. How much?"

Hal rubbed his chin. "Three hundred subscribers, you say?"

Steve nodded. "In total. Some of them are already your subscribers, but the ones who aren't will switch. Over time, the number might get bigger and we may add towers further out. We can always renegotiate if you think you're getting a bad deal. Of course, other networks' subscribers also must be able to call in to folks who may be using my towers, and everyone also must be able to call out from those towers to people using any other tower. How much?"

"You're going to get screwed on this, you know that, don't you?" Hal told his friend. "You'll own the infrastructure and you'll pay us for connectivity and your towers will never be used to the extent necessary to make it worth your while. Why would you do such a stupid thing?"

"It's a test of a new technology," Steve replied. "How much?"

Hal hesitated. "Five hundred bucks a month whether the towers get used or not," he said finally. "Five hundred bucks a month even if we don't connect a single call."

Steve stuck out his hand. "Done," he told Hal. "I'll put my communications guys with your guys and you can tell us what the interface has to look like. Oh, and when it comes to 'maintenance', my guys will do it all. This new technology is also proprietary and we don't want any non-disclosed personnel fiddling with it, right?"

Hal winked at Steve. "Right."

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The fuel supplier who regularly fueled the Okambo fleet was more than happy to accommodate Steve Sr.'s request for an on-site fuel supply. For a nominal fee, the dealer arranged for three sturdy fiberglass-and-aluminum tanks to be delivered and installed along the back wall of the main building.

As soon as the tanks were installed, tested, and certified, three trucks, one bearing diesel oil, another kerosene, and the last gasoline, filled the three tanks.

"We'll top off the fleet later today," Steve told the drivers. "We'll probably need a reload before the week is out."

Inside the building, Danny stepped through the gate into

Farside and waved at Paul Gillman. "Start pumping!" Danny yelled.

The farm community north of Gunbarrel had formed a cooperative and used it to buy a tank vehicle capable of transporting hundreds of gallons of gasoline. That got filled first, followed by Josh Troon's gas cans, followed by the tanks and 5-gallon cans proffered by the miners. In two hours, a five-hundred-gallon reserve of diesel was gone along with three hundred gallons of gasoline and almost that much kerosene.

When the trucks were called back two days later, the owner of the fuel distributorship scratched his head in wonderment. *I didn't realize their fleet was that big*, he remarked to himself.

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The Grand Moot took place in the new domed building that now constituted the bulk of the town of Okambo. Miners and farmers and ranchers throughout the area had been on notice for months that they were all invited to come and make their views known.

In ones and twos, they drifted into town, some trailing wagons loaded with produce, some with crates of chickens for sale, or pigs or steers. It was not a coincidence that the Grand Moot had been scheduled on 'market day'.

In a play area off to one side, children clambered over the web-like playground equipment while the elders gathered in the Moot Hall. When Paul Gillman sensed that most of them had arrived and found seats, he signaled to Barbara who rose and approached the microphone. Unbidden, all in the hall rose from their seats in a gesture of respect.

"Please take your seats," she told them and they sat back down again. "We have just a few items to take care of this morning and then we can all get on about our regular activities.

"First, young Steve Okambo has arranged for cell phone service throughout the area if we can find enough subscribers. I'll let Steve explain the details." She stepped aside and Steve took her place at the mike.

"I have a preliminary agreement with MountainCom to provide cell service. We will build the towers and maintain them in Farside. We estimate that if the three hundred adult inhabitants of Farside each pledge one hundred dollars for the initial infrastructure and five dollars per month for ongoing maintenance, we can provide cell phone service for all of Farside. Any overage will be covered by the Crown." Barbara flashed him a vicious look, but several in the audience stifled snickers. "If we fall short of the necessary subscriptions, no service.

"I'd like to get a preliminary show-of-hands to see whether

there might be enough support for this idea. Hands?"

"I have a question," someone in the audience shouted. Steve pointed at him to indicate he should ask the question. "Is this cell phone service for Farside-only?"

"No," Steve answered. "You will be able to call Farside-to-Farside, but also Denver, Chicago, Miami, Paris, Cairo, any call you could make from Nearside, you will also be able to make from Farside. Now, can I see some hands?"

A forest of hands was raised. Steve did a quick count and turned to Barbara. "Looks like about two hundred fifty or so."

"So, fifty people, five thousand dollars short?" she asked. Steve nodded, his lips pursed. "Okay," Barbara agreed, "the crown' will make up the difference."

Steve turned back to the crowd. "Come on up and sign on the dotted line," he told them. "Signing is your agreement to fund the project." Before he had taken his seat and Barbara had again come to the microphone, a line of residents had formed, all eager to subscribe.

In the audience, a hand was raised seeking recognition. Barbara pointed to the woman in invitation to speak.

"Are we going to have a Constitution for our — you know, I'm not sure what it is we have here — for our society?"

Barbara and Ernie and a few of the others had, as a matter of fact, discussed that very topic within the prior two weeks. Until Ernie expressed his opinion, Barbara had been torn between several conflicting views.

"Everyone here is pretty self-sufficient," Ernie had opined then. "I'm not sure it would be a good idea to tamper with that. Besides, we've seen what happens when it's somebody's job to make new laws: things get pretty hairy pretty quickly. It seems to me that The Golden Rule provides as much guidance as we might need for a fully-functioning society. Why don't we just leave it there?" he finished.

Barbara had thought that quite sensible and immediately put out of her mind any thoughts that a large, blundering bureaucracy might be needed anytime soon.

"Do you think we need a constitution?" Barbara asked the woman.

"How will we know what we can and can't do?" the woman asked in return. "What are our rights?"

"The law of this land is what you call 'The Golden Rule'," Barbara instructed the woman. "Don't do things to other people that you wouldn't enjoy other people doing to you. Within that boundary, you have the right to do *anything*. I don't see why it should be more complicated than that, at least for now. In the future, we may see

things differently. Are you envisioning a problem that needs to be solved now?"

The woman shook her head and took her seat, then suddenly stood again. "My neighbor is growing marijuana, Your Majesty," the woman blurted.

Barbara frowned at the woman's reference to her as 'your majesty', but held her tongue. "Is that a problem?" Barbara asked.

"What if the kids get hold of it?"

"Which neighbor?" Barbara asked.

"Mr. Tolland," she answered.

"Is Gregory Tolland here at the Moot Hall?" Barbara asked. A figure rose from his seat at one side of the auditorium and Barbara recognized him as Gregory Tolland, a non-parolee who had been recruited by an acquaintance of Dante Robinetti.

"Gregory, are you indeed growing marijuana?" Barbara asked him. Tolland nodded. "For sale *where*, may I ask?" Barbara probed.

"Not for sale, ma'am," Tolland spoke loud enough to be heard by all. "For personal use only."

Barbara turned toward the woman who had raised the objection and shrugged as if to ask: *Who is he harming other than himself?*

"But what if the kids get into it? Steal it? Become dopers?"

Tolland raised his hand to object. "Queen Barbara has already spoken on the law of this land. The Golden Rule forbids anyone stealing what is not theirs," and raising his voice he asked the entire gathering: "Are there any parents here who would permit their children to steal from my farm?"

A thunderous 'NO!' answered him and he turned toward Barbara smiling.

"Even so," Barbara finished, now obviously fuming at Tolland's reference to her as 'Queen Barbara', "we require you to secure those plants more rigidly than the rest of your crop." Tolland gave her a little bow in acquiescence.

"Now, there is one more matter to attend to before we adjourn the moot," Barbara announced. "I am growing increasingly impatient at the recurring references to me as 'her majesty', 'your majesty', and 'Queen Barbara', and it must stop."

In response, a group of four men and two women rose and walked down the center aisle, one of the men carrying a wooden box. On the stage the six approached the microphone and Barbara stepped away from it.

The spokesman for the group addressed the crowd and Barbara: "It is a fact that Farside has a ruler, and a wise one at that," their leader said to applause. "As the discoverer of this bountiful land

and the source of our wealth and well-being, no one has a better claim to that position than Barbara fitzGibbon." Behind Barbara the two women had removed from the box a simple ring of gold about six inches in diameter. "We recognize her growing impatience with our regal references and we agree that it must stop. The impatience, not the references." Laughter rippled through the audience.

"We, the people of Farside, therefore humbly request Barbara fitzGibbon, the rightful monarch of Farside, to accept this token of our eternal esteem and to stop objecting to being called 'majesty'." At that moment, the two women slipped the simple crown upon Barbara's head, nestling the bright gold ring in her dark brown locks. The hall rose to its feet and, with applause both long and loud, confirmed the act of the committee.

Tears began to roll down Barbara's cheeks.

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"It's so... undemocratic!" Barbara objected to her father and Ernie as Dennis, Paul, Steve Sr., and Oscar and Nell Gruder looked on. "I don't know anything at all about 'ruling'. I'll be a catastrophe," she wailed.

Ernie slipped into the unused space next to her on the couch. "My love," he comforted her, "*your* people have a different view of the matter, and it is a fact that, so far, you've done brilliantly. Relax. It will work out."

Oscar held the crown in his hands examining it in fine detail. "Nice work," he remarked. Barbara looked up at him for an explanation. "The inscription on the inside surface says, '*Barbara Regina I fitzGibbon of Farside*' and it has Len Willett's mark. Len made this by hand, no doubt because there aren't many crowns available ready-to-wear from the factory." Everyone in the room snickered.

"So, clearly," Oscar finished, smiling, "they cared enough to send the very best. You should feel quite honored."

"Oh, I do," Barbara admitted. "What opinion do all of you have about this?"

"I think Ernie was right," Dennis interjected. "You're very bright, and that covers the case of getting good advice when you sense you don't know all you need to know. Surround yourself with good people you trust and stop worrying."

"Good people I can trust... Very well," Barbara pronounced, "I hereby appoint you all as my Privy Council, unpaid, of course. I haven't imposed any taxes and so I don't have anything to pay you with."

"Well," Buck mused, "I don't think the workload is going to be

too overwhelming. You handled that issue today very well, in my opinion. Your whole 'duty' will probably be to act as Chief Magistrate when the inevitable conflict arises between people with different world views. Steer a middle course and you'll avoid the rocks."

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To celebrate the event, which Oscar had been warned of although he was not aware of all the minute details, he produced his first 'one crown' coin, a tiny sliver of gold weighing a puny 3.11 grams, one-tenth of a Troy ounce, about the weight of two paper clips.

The tiny disk had a reeded edge and its obverse bore a profile of Barbara wearing the simple band crown above the inscription 'B R I', with the weight, '3.11g', on the reverse within an olive wreath.

Peg Clancy honored the event in her own way by stitching a flag, sky blue with a centered golden ellipse. This she presented to Josh Troon, the unofficial mayor of Okambo, who the very same day smoothed down a forty-foot section of four-by-four into a serviceable flagpole and erected it in the town square.

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Barbara's crown stayed, for the most part, inside the polished black walnut presentation case in the velvet-lined depression made to fit it. Every now and then Barbara would open the case and look at it. *What in the world have I let myself in for?* she would always wonder on such occasions.

In fact, the crown stayed in its box for so much of the time, people, especially those who had contributed the gold for it, began to wonder what was going on. The only time anyone but Barbara ever saw it was at the monthly moots and one community-wide party that several of the farmers and ranchers had managed to organize and that turned into an engagement party when several of the couples announced their intent to wed.

Having gotten what they wanted, Barbara as their official leader, the community at large agreed to refrain from harassing Barbara with 'your majesty *this*' and 'your majesty *that*' and only addressed her formally when she wore the crown. The remainder of the time she was 'just Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh', Buck's daughter, Ernie's wife, who works the placer with her family and consigns her gold to Oscar Gruder the same as everyone else who works the streams.

She hefted a bucket of water to pour it into the sluice, and as she poured, the phone in her pocket began to vibrate and ring.

Without thinking, she put the bucket down, fetched the phone from her pocket and pushed 'TALK'.

"It's Barbara," she spoke into the phone, and suddenly realized where she was and how unusual it was for her phone to ring here. Buck and Ernie smiled but said nothing.

"Your majesty," Steve Okambo Jr. told her, "it is my very great pleasure to announce the availability of telephone service in Farside."

19 - Visitors

Emilio Robinetti's phone rang and he picked it up. "Hello," he answered it.

"Mr. Robinetti?" Melissa Dinardo asked, and hearing his acknowledgement continued. "I have a package from Dante. Are you at home? I'd like to deliver it."

"Oh, yes, certainly," the elder Robinetti agreed. "Come right over. Do you know where I live?"

"I do," Melissa told him. "I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

True to her word, a quarter-hour later her car pulled to the sidewalk in front of the Robinetti house and Melissa took a shopping bag from the back seat. Inside, she sat and shared its contents with Dante's father.

"Here's a letter Dante wrote, and there are pictures of him with his neighbors." Melissa handed over the material holding back one picture she wanted to show Mr. Robinetti separately. "This girl in the tan shorts," she pointed at the picture, "rumor has it that she and Dante are 'an item'," Melissa informed him with a conspiratorial smile.

"He also sent along some gold that he has acquired," at which Melissa handed him a pouch containing a dozen gold coins from Oscar Gruder's 'royal mint'.

The pouch was sealed with a blob of wax bearing an impression of Dante's high school ring in relief. Mr. Robinetti looked at the seal and recognized it, broke the seal and poured out the coins onto his coffee table. The old man picked up a few of them and examined them closely.

"What kind of coins are these?" Robinetti asked. "I don't recognize them. What's this one?"

"That is what we call a ten-crown piece," Melissa explained. "It's 31.1 grams of fine gold, a full Troy ounce, worth about, oh, somewhere near eleven hundred dollars each, I think. These others are one-crown pieces and there are two five-crown pieces, too, it looks like." All the coins bore Barbara's profile and the weight of the coin in grams on the back.

"My goodness," Emilio said, "there's almost five thousand dollars in gold here! What will I do with it?"

"If you wish," Melissa informed him, "we can total up the weight and I can have someone come by this afternoon with cash in its place. Would that be better?"

Robinetti nodded. "But I think I may keep one or two of the

little ones as souvenirs," he told Melissa.

Eventually he let Melissa take the three ten-crown pieces and the two five-crown pieces plus seven of the one-crown coins.

"That's four-point-seven Troy ounces. The going rate is \$1,110 dollars per ounce, so that's..." she tapped keys on her calculator, "five thousand two hundred seventeen dollars."

Robinetti whistled. "Then what are these worth?" he asked holding out the four one-crown coins he kept aside.

"Well, the rate fluctuates," Melissa explained, "but those are one-tenth Troy ounce each, so one hundred eleven dollars, roughly, each."

Their business done, Emilio Robinetti gave Melissa Dinardo a receipt for four-tenths ounce as four one-crown coins and she promised someone would stop by later that day with cash for the remainder. Emilio sat down to write a note to his son to be carried back by whoever delivered the cash.

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Grace Turner looked at the picture of Pyotr sitting on his new tractor back-dropped by what seemed several hundred acres of cropland.

"Want to be a farmer's wife?" the note attached asked. "Call me at 720-555-1010 when you're ready." She smiled. *A girl could do a lot worse than be Pete Gorsky's wife*, she thought.

Pyotr Gorsky couldn't hear his phone ring over the noise of the tractor, but he felt it vibrate in his shirt pocket. He shut the engine off and pushed the 'TALK' button on the phone. "Hello?"

"Nice crop you've got there, Farmer Pete," Grace teased. "Where did you get the new tractor?"

"It belongs to the co-op," Pete admitted, "but I'm getting lots of use out of it. So, you like the crop, huh? Are you ready to come join me and be a farmer's wife?"

"Maybe," she purred into the phone. "Where is this place? You're always very mysterious when you describe it in your letters."

"That's 'cause it's a little difficult to describe its exact location. But, hey, you can come for a visit if you'd like," Pete suggested.

"Yeah," Grace mused, "maybe I will. When would you like me to visit?"

"Anytime is good," Pete told her proudly. "I don't have to punch a time clock on my own farm, you know."

"How is it your farm?" Grace challenged him. "How did you raise enough money to buy a farm?"

"I'll tell you all about it when you come up," Pete pushed back.

"So, when would you like to come up?"

"How about Saturday?" she suggested.

"Saturday's great," Pete agreed. Write down this number: 718-555-1181. Call that number and tell the person who answers that you want to visit me."

"It sounds like you're back in prison," Grace said with alarm in her voice. "Is there something you haven't told me?"

Pete chuckled. "There are quite a few things I haven't told you, but none of them involve prison. No, it's just easier if you let them provide transportation for you. They'll also bring you up-to-speed on some of the things I haven't told you. Don't worry. There's nothing... well, *almost* nothing that will make you change your mind.

"Anyway, I'm looking forward to seeing you on Saturday and showing you around my farm."

Gillman's phone rang and he flipped it open. "Hi, it's Paul," he greeted the caller.

"Hi," Grace greeted him in return. "My name is Grace Turner and I have an invitation from Pete Gorsky to go see his farm. He said you would provide transportation?" It was a question more than a statement.

"Happy to be of service, Miss Turner," Gillman assured her. "Pete told us you might call and asked us to reserve a spot for you on Saturday. When do you plan on coming back?"

"Saturday, I guess," Grace answered with a slight note of confusion. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course," Gillman told her. "When you come back is entirely up to you. You could stay over and come back Sunday if that would be better. Whatever is good for you."

"Can I make that decision later?" she asked.

"You can," Gillman agreed, "but there's limited space, so if several people were to change their minds about their return date all at once, you could be told '*Sorry, no room tomorrow. You have to go back today.*' and you would be forced to keep the original schedule. Barring that, sure."

"So, where is this place you're taking me to?" she asked. "Pete is very mysterious about its actual location."

Gillman took a sharp breath inward. "Miss Turner, we're dealing here with experimental technology. Pete has volunteered for a long-term research effort that requires him and several others to be isolated to a significant extent and for a very long time. Having people just show up out of the blue for a visit would seriously compromise that isolation. I hope you can appreciate that.

"We rigidly control the number of visitors, the frequency of

visitors, and the conditions under which visitors are brought to the project area, and Pete, understanding the nature of the project, has agreed to those conditions in exchange for very generous compensation. We will transport you there and back, but at no time will you know where you are with any precision. That's why we're talking now: so that I can arrange for you to be picked up and driven to Pete's farm somewhere out beyond Niwot.

"So, Saturday, then? When would you like to start?"

"Early," Grace told him.

"And where do we pick you up?" Paul asked.

"I'm in Yuma," Grace informed him.

"An aircraft will be waiting for you at Yuma Municipal Airport at six-thirty Saturday morning. It will have a light blue tail with a halo on it. If you think you might stay over through Sunday, please pack accordingly. I look forward to seeing you Saturday."

At six-fifteen Saturday morning, Grace turned in to the parking area at Yuma Municipal, grabbed a small bag out of the back seat, locked the car, and walked toward the apron where stood a white Honda bizjet with a golden halo on its light blue tail.

"I'm Grace Turner," she introduced herself to the young man standing at the aircraft's boarding stair.

"Welcome aboard, Miss Turner," the pilot greeted her and offered his hand to steady her as she climbed into the plane. "You're our only passenger this morning, so we can depart as soon as you're settled."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Boulder Municipal, ma'am," the pilot informed her. "It's about one hundred thirty-five miles — twenty minutes. Mr. Gillman tells me you have another half-hour trip overland after that."

As soon as Grace buckled in, the pilot restarted the engines and taxied the craft out to the end of runway 34, turned, throttled up and lifted off. As promised, twenty minutes later he turned onto final for Boulder's runway 26 and settled the plane onto the tarmac.

At the Boulder terminal, Paul Gillman and Ernie Walsh waited with a huge bus-like RV. Grace's eyes were wide when she saw it.

"I must say this has all been very first-class so far," she gushed to Ernie. "I'm impressed!"

They all boarded the bus whose window drapes had been pulled shut and secured. In the passenger compartment behind the driver, Paul also pulled another curtain to block her view out the windshield.

"Please make yourself comfortable," Paul urged her. "We have about a half-hour trip during which I'll brief you on some of the

things you'll see today.

"We're heading for a cluster of experimental farms run by a select group of people of whom Pete Gorsky is one. The nature of the project precludes me saying what, in particular, makes these farms 'experimental' and Pete is unable because of contractual obligations to say either, and I hope you won't make it too difficult for him to keep that confidence." Grace nodded her understanding.

"*If* you decide some day in the future to join him, to become Mrs. Gorsky or whatever other arrangement suits the two of you, you may become isolated to something like the degree that Pete is now isolated, but probably not as strict. Until that happens, you are free to come and go on a mutually convenient schedule such as this: call ahead, make sure there's capacity, and *come on down*."

"It goes without saying that we expect you to keep this arrangement as confidential as does Pete. Will you have any problem with that?"

"No, not at all," she assured him. "But Pete keeps telling me the farm is his. Neither of our families have ever been wealthy enough to be land owners, so I wonder: is that farm really his, and, if so, how did he manage to buy it?"

Gillman smiled. "Yes, the farm is his. I said the compensation for this project was generous and I meant it. Pete's payout for his hard work and cooperation is three thousand acres..." Grace gasped. "...of prime real estate he works to provide farm produce: grains, vegetables, milk, eggs, beef, chicken, pork; used in other aspects of the project. He's expected to follow farming and ranching protocols developed by the project staff, and he is paid typical market rates for that which he produces and sells.

"So, in addition to the basic acreage, he also has revenue from the products of the operation. I don't know what that means in terms of 'annual income' — that's not my area of expertise — but I suspect it's substantial. Pete is one of several farmers or ranchers similarly situated."

"And they've all been given substantial layouts?" Grace asked.

Paul nodded. "That's my understanding, yes," he confirmed.

Grace's expression was dazed as she contemplated the wealth doled out by 'the project', whatever it was.

The co-op had acquired an unused corner of a commercial lot in the 5500-block of County Road 28 and erected on the site a large prefab barn long enough to hold two RVs end-to-end. At the exact spot in Farside stood an identical building, and each building had, dead center, a portal large enough to admit the RV.

Ernie turned into the driveway off CR-28 and stopped the bus.

"Are we here?" Grace asked Paul.

"Not quite yet. It'll be a few more minutes," he comforted her.

Ernie dismounted from the RV, opened the barn doors, then drove the RV into the barn, after which he closed the barn doors and powered the portal 'on'. Then he drove the RV through the portal into Farside and a waiting attendant there switched on the matching portal negating the effect of the first.

Ernie pulled the curtain back and announced to his passengers: "We're here!"

At the end of the barn, Pete Gorsky waited to welcome Grace Turner and take her around the property. He was seated on a large ATV hooked to a trailer with latticed side panels. As Grace stepped down from the RV, he rushed to her and gave her a welcoming hug, then a kiss she returned avidly.

He took her overnight bag and tossed it into the trailer, then the two mounted the ATV and roared off down a well-worn track bending northwest, the trailer clattering behind them. By seven-thirty Pete Gorsky ushered Grace through the front door of his home, a small prefab dwelling surrounded by farm structures. Coffee was already brewing and Pete quickly pulled together a breakfast of bacon and eggs, toast and honey to tide them over until lunch.

Breakfast over, Pete and Grace rode double on an ATV through his fields of wheat, barley, oats, and corn, all growing lustily thanks to soil that had never, until recently, felt a plow.

"All this in a year and a half?" Grace marveled.

"I've had lots of help," Pete admitted. "The co-op is really working well. There are some really smart folks serving as our agricultural extension service and we've got a very friendly bunch of people all working for the success of the community. It's turning into a great place to live and work. I hope you'll feel the same way by tonight."

"I'm getting there," Grace admitted.

"Good," Pete told her. "I want you to meet some of the neighbors."

Breaking into the clear at the end of his field, they could see a dome-shaped building a half-mile off. "That's the 'ag' building," Pete shouted over his shoulder. "It's where all the research happens. It's Dr. Robinetti's bailiwick. Just beyond is Lee Smith's place. Lee and his wife invited us for lunch and a tour of their dairy." Grace held on tighter.

Lunch at the Smith's place was followed by ice cream for dessert, the best ice cream Grace had had since she was a child. "Home made," Edie Smith explained with a smile. "Fresh whole milk

makes all the difference in the world. Having a dairy in your backyard means everything tastes like 1890."

Pete and Grace made the rounds of several of the neighboring farms so Grace could see that a real community existed, but she was still confused. "This can't exist within a half-hour's drive of Boulder," she insisted to Pete. "Where the heck is this?"

"That's not an easy question," Pete told her. "The answer is even more difficult. That's why the topic is off-limits for everyone who's not committed to the project. Marry me, sign on, and it will all become clear."

"I have to admit," Grace told him, "that I had my doubts about your sanity when you first disappeared, but this is looking better and better with every passing moment. What I want to know is: how do you check in with your parole officer if you don't go back to Denver?"

"Ahh, that's a problem," Pete started. "Fact is, I have been a parole violator and a wanted felon since I signed on to the project and agreed not to leave the project area. I can't ever go back. I'll be arrested immediately. As it is, I don't care. I'm a valued member of the community here, and I'm making money hand-over-fist. My Mom and Dad get a fat check every month to help them out with expenses. My future isn't just 'bright', it's blinding, and I don't care if I ever see Denver or Colorado again.

"Marry me, sign on to the project, help me run the farm and raise a family. In a year, you'll feel the same way."

"What do you mean when you say, '*you don't care if you ever see Colorado again*'?" Grace demanded. "Isn't this Colorado?"

Pete's face went blank. "Uh-oh," he said. "Let's not talk about that anymore, okay? You'll have me saying things I shouldn't."

Grace looked at him strangely. "What's going on here?"

"Farming," Pete said.

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When Pete called Paul Gillman later that day to arrange for Grace to stay overnight and return Sunday, he casually mentioned his 'slip'.

"*Hmm*. Tell her that tomorrow is all booked and she has to return tonight. That will give me a chance to sit and talk with her and to impress upon her the seriousness of her obligation of secrecy. And, Pete, you have to be lots more careful. The wrong kind of slip to the right person and we're exposed, all of us."

Pete turned to Grace after hanging up with Gillman. He shook his head. "Sorry, sweetheart. Tomorrow is booked solid already. I

have to send you home tonight.”

Grace looked disappointed but managed a smile anyway. “Well, I can always come back some other time, right?” Pete smiled back.

At five-thirty, Pete tossed Grace’s overnight bag into the trailer and the two set out overland for the barn that housed the local portal.

At the barn, Grace and Pete shared a long, loving kiss goodbye. “It’s a great life here, Grace,” Pete told her as they said their farewells. “We’ve talked about getting married for a long time. Now I can actually provide a good living for us. Think about it.”

“You almost have me convinced, Pete Gorsky. Push me over the edge,” and she winked at him.

In response, Pete produced a five-crown coin from his pocket and handed it to her. “Souvenir,” he told her.

She boarded the RV, the curtains were drawn, and the RV moved through the now-active portal into the matching barn in Nearside. The portal attendant accompanied the RV on foot to shut off the Nearside gate and open the barn doors. After the RV had gone the doors were again closed and the attendant transited back to Farside.

On board the RV, Paul Gillman sat with Grace Turner for a little private conversation.

“Anything you’d like to discuss?” he asked her. She shook her head. “According to Pete,” Gillman continued, “you prodded him for forbidden information.” Grace looked up at him with surprise.

“We talked,” she admitted.

“Pete has agreed to a pretty severe form of isolation in exchange for what he considers fair compensation,” Gillman explained. “That also carries with it an equally severe requirement for confidentiality.” Grace was now frowning.

“You asked if that farm was Pete’s and I told you it was. What I didn’t tell you is that the farm is only his while he is attached to the project. That could be ‘forever’. We won’t kick him off his land except ‘for cause’. Violating that obligation of confidentiality would be cause, and your actions today may have put him in danger.

“That danger is very serious in Pete’s case because he is now a parole violator, so he really cannot afford to quit the project. He’s already told me he’s comfortable with the current arrangement and wants it to continue. To be precise, he wants it to continue with you as his partner.

“The question I have for you is: *‘what do you want and are you willing to maintain the same level of secrecy to keep it?’*.”

“I don’t even have any idea what I’m being asked to keep secret,” Grace answered. “All I know at this point is that Pete has a

farm consisting of several thousand acres in a place where there isn't that kind of land available." Paul nodded for her to continue. "And there appear to be several such farms all located in a thoroughly-built-up part of Colorado, and I didn't see a single sign of any of that development. Would you mind telling me where I was today so that I can keep it secret?"

"Will you keep it secret?" Paul asked pointedly.

"No one will hear it from me," she guaranteed him.

"We call it 'Farside'," Paul told her. "It's Colorado and at the same time it's not Colorado, and that's all I'm permitted to tell you at this stage. If you should one day become Mrs. Pete Gorsky, you'll learn more. Until then..."

Grace took the coin from her pocket. "Pete gave me this," she said.

"Five crowns," Paul informed her.

"Crowns?"

Paul smiled. "We have a monarch, Queen Barbara the First, to whom both Pete and I owe allegiance."

"But this is America!" she blurted.

"Not in 'not Colorado'," Paul told her. "In 'not Colorado' we have an absolute monarch who, should you ever meet her, you would think she's just another one of the gals."

"This is the image of Queen Barbara, then," Grace suggested holding up the coin. Paul nodded. "Pretty simple, unassuming 'crown' for an absolute monarch," she added and Paul smiled. "I presume the halo on the plane's tail is that crown?"

Paul smiled broadly. "That's a very good guess."

"What's this coin worth?" she asked.

"Five crowns? Between five and six hundred dollars, I think," Paul mused. "A measure of how well Pete is doing is that he gave that to you as a souvenir. If my understanding is correct, he won't miss it.

"He will, however, miss you if you decide you can't partner with him, and should you break your promise of confidentiality, you will not be coming back. Ever."

"And if I should *partner* with Pete, do I also give up any hope of shopping in Denver because of that?"

"No, you won't," Paul explained. "Didn't I cover that this morning on the way in? Pete can't go back because he'd be arrested and we can't have that. Pete's okay with that arrangement. You? You can go back any time, even if it's not such a great idea to do it too often. As a matter-of-fact, we'll probably have the occasional odd job for you requiring your presence in Nearside."

"*Nearside* being the opposite of *Farside*?" she asked. Paul smiled and nodded.

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Two months later, surrounded by friends and neighbors from Farside, Pyotr Gorsky and Grace Turner exchanged vows in the Moot Hall. The co-op's gift to Pete's new wife was an ATV. Pete, himself, presented her with two horses, and the community put together a pouch containing four Troy ounces of gold in the form of four ten-crown coins.

20 - Trials and Tribulations

Three dozen windmills turned lazily in the breeze. Beneath them combines worked their way through the fields collecting the crop. A dozen miles to the southwest, the village of Okambo was waking up. Josh Troon walked to the flagpole in the town square and affixed the lanyard to a light blue sheet on which a golden ellipse was centered and hoisted it to the peak.

In Nearside, two Secret Service agents entered Perry Coins and Stamps and introduced themselves. The owner produced the odd coin marked "B R I" on the face and "15.55g" on the reverse.

"I measured the coin myself," he told the G-men. "The weight is perfect and the density says 'fine gold'. I just can't figure out where it's from. That's why I asked the question on *alt.collectors.coins-and-stamps*. It doesn't appear to be something issued by any government I know of, and it doesn't have a minting date, either, which is weird."

"And where did you get this?" the lead agent asked. "Who did you get this from?"

"Mr. Harns is one of my very best customers," the shop owner explained. "Understand that Mr. Harns didn't sell this to me. He simply asked me to confirm its value. That's why I asked on the newsgroup about its provenance. This coin, if that's what it is, still belongs to Mr. Harns. Nobody's trying to use this as money. I don't know why you guys are involved."

"Mr. Harns may not be using it for money, but somebody is. We've found a bunch of these in 1/10th ounce, half-ounce like this one, and full-ounce varieties, and they are being used as money. Our interest is merely to find out where they're coming from.

"We'll need Mr. Harns' address so we can go talk to him."

The shopkeeper wrote Hank Harns' address on a scrap of paper and handed it to the agents who thanked him and left taking the five-crown coin with them.

Hank Harns answered the door and was greeted by two sets of Secret Service ID. "Mr. Harns, we'd like to ask you a few questions about this," the lead agent told him, holding the coin out so Hank could see it.

"Is that my coin?" Hank asked, reaching for the coin. The agent allowed him to take the clear plastic envelope in which the coin rested.

"According to the owner of *Perry Coins and Stamps*, it is," the agent admitted.

Hank pocketed the coin. "Thanks for returning it to me. Do you have a warrant?" he asked.

"Mr. Harns, we don't need a warrant to ask questions," the agent told him, "and I'll need to retain that coin."

"You just said this was my property," Hank retorted. "No crime has been committed involving me or my property, else you would have a warrant or you would be actively arresting me. That's all I'm going to say until my attorney is present."

Hank started to close the door, but the agent stuck his foot in the gap. Hank's other hand appeared bearing a .45 caliber pistol pointed directly at the agent's forehead. "Have a nice day someplace else," Hank snarled. The agent withdrew his foot and the door closed.

Hank's first call was to his attorney to apprise her of the situation. She promised to have one of her paralegals standing on his front doorstep in fifteen minutes to demand a proper search warrant should the Secret Service return with reinforcements.

Hank's second call was to Everitt Perry. "In thirty-five words or less, Everitt, what's going on? I just had a visit from the Secret Service and they came bearing the coin I wanted you to appraise."

"Mr. Harns, I am so sorry for any trouble I've caused. I posted an image of the coin's faces on a newsgroup for collectors asking about its provenance. The next thing I know, the Secret Service is walking in my door demanding the coin and your name and address."

"And you, of course, gave it to them," Hank fumed. Then he disconnected without even saying 'good-bye'.

Hank's third call was to Dennis Cameron. "I'm sorry, Dennis," he began, "I placed one of your coins with a dealer I regularly do business with to have it appraised and this morning I got a visit from the Secret Service asking about it. We didn't talk long — at all, actually — and I expect they'll be back presently with more forceful arguments. I need some guidance as to how I should handle this."

"As far as you or anyone knows, it's a commemorative gold coin. That's not money and it's therefore not in the Secret Service's purview," Dennis advised him. "I won't ask you to lie to a federal agent — you know the price Martha Stewart paid for being cooperative — but remember that you are not required to say anything at all. To indict you is easy. To convict you is hard, and in this case, they have nothing to lay on you that you yourself do not hand them on a silver platter.

"Do not hand them anything on a silver platter.

"I may also be able to pull some strings to get them to back off. You will not go down for this, Hank, I promise."

About that time, the paralegal knocked on Hank's door. "I'll

be out here waiting, Mr. Harns, in case anyone shows up."

The paralegal didn't wait long. Barely over an hour later, two black SUVs pulled to the curb outside Hank Harns' home and seven people poured onto the sidewalk: five U.S. Marshals and two Secret Service agents. Three of the Marshals carried Heckler & Koch MP-5s. They brushed past the paralegal as if he weren't there and knocked on Hank Harns' door. The paralegal reinserted himself into the cluster of six men and one woman.

"I represent Mr. Harns," he insisted. "I would like to examine the warrant." A Marshal handed him the paper and knocked on the door again.

The paralegal then dialed his office and spoke to the attorney: "Five U.S. Marshals are here to serve a warrant for 'an unknown quantity of counterfeit coinage'. It also claims Mr. Harns pointed a firearm at a Secret Service agent."

"Hold them there," she told him, "I'm on my way and I'll be there in three minutes."

In less than that the attorney's car pulled to the curb and she walked briskly toward the line of Marshals. "I'm Mr. Harns' attorney. I want to speak to the lead agent." They pointed at a tall black man heading a team getting ready to break down Harns' front door.

"No need for that," she said. "I'm Mr. Harns' attorney. Let me see the warrant."

The Marshal turned on her. "Ma'am, you will leave the scene immediately or I will arrest you on federal charges of 'obstruction'."

"Are you prepared to deny Mr. Harns the presence of counsel?" she snapped back and held out her hand. "Give me your ID and the warrant."

The Marshal fetched a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. "Your associate has the warrant," he told her.

She then pounded on the door with her fist. "Mr. Harns, it's Glynnis Harvey, sir. Please open the door. You have to surrender to these officers."

The door opened a crack and one of the Marshals moved toward it. Glynnis Harvey held out her hand. "I'll bring him out," she told the Marshal. "Less chance of an 'accident' that way."

She slipped inside the house and came face-to-face with her client. "Are you armed?" she asked. Harns shook his head. *No*. "Where's the gun they say you pointed at a Secret Service agent?"

Harns pointed toward the dining room. "On the dining room table," he told her.

"And the coin?" she asked. Harns held up the small plastic case for her to see. "Put that with the gun," she instructed him. He disappeared into the dining room and returned a moment later.

"Ready?" she asked him. He nodded. "One last thing:" she told him. "Tell them your name, your address and your telephone number, and not one other goddamned thing. Understand?" Harns nodded again.

She rapped on the door behind her. "We're coming out," she announced. "Unarmed," she added as an afterthought.

She opened the door and led Harns out into the sunlight where he was immediately seized by two burly Marshals who snapped handcuffs on him and frog-marched him to their SUV.

"The firearm mentioned in the warrant is on the dining room table," she told the remaining Marshals, "along with the coin also mentioned in the warrant. Where are you taking Mr. Harns?"

"Federal lock-up downtown," she was told.

"Do not interrogate him without me being there," she warned them. The lead Marshal shrugged as if to say '*Whatever.*'

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Glynnis Harvey's phone rang. "Glynnis Harvey," she answered it.

"Miss Harvey?" Boris began, "My name is Boris Wilsky of Wilsky & Flynn, attorneys. Our client is an acquaintance of Mr. Harns and wishes us to offer our services for his defense if you think we can be helpful."

"Mr. Wilsky, let me call you back after I have appraised the situation. For the moment, all I know is that Secret Service agents accosted my client over a gold coin of some sort, he ejected them at gunpoint from his property, and he has been arrested for that and for 'counterfeiting' related to his possession of that coin. It will be messy. I will definitely want all the help I can get."

By two that afternoon, Hank Harns was arraigned before a federal magistrate. The prosecutor, an AAG with the Denver office, requested Harns be held without bail because he had threatened federal officers with a gun.

Glynnis Harvey rose to object. "Your Honor, those federal agents were far exceeding their legitimate authority when Mr. Harns defended the sanctity of his home against their unlawful conduct. That Mr. Harns pointed a gun at a Secret Service agent is not at issue, save that by their actions they were not acting within the confines of their authority."

"It seems to me, counselor," the judge answered, "that this is a case of *he-said-she-said*, and I choose to believe the account offered by the Secret Service."

"Mr. Harns, being an amateur collector of valuable objects, has extensive video surveillance of his property," Glynnis offered, "and

assures me the entire incident was captured on full-motion video with sound. I can produce the video if the court wishes to see it."

"That won't be necessary, counselor," the judge smirked, "I don't care what's on the video. There's never a valid reason to point a gun at a Secret Service agent. Held without bail." The judge pounded his gavel. The prosecutor grinned.

Harns was taken back to the lock-up and Glynnis Harvey packed her papers and left the courtroom. Outside she called Boris Wilsky back.

"It looks like they're going to railroad him into federal slam," she told Wilsky. "The prosecutor is loading charges on and the judge looks like he's going to deny Harns any chance at a reasonable defense. Also, as with most federal trials, they'll *voir dire* out of the pool anyone who even hints they might let him walk. Yeah, Hank's going down on this one."

"Mr. Cameron has told us emphatically that he will not permit that to happen," Boris assured her. "Who are the players on their side?"

"Judge Norbert Frost ran the arraignment, but whether he'll be the trial judge or not, I don't know. Prosecutor today was Keith Bascomb. I suspect he'll see it all the way through to the end. Why?"

"Mr. Cameron always likes to know who he's up against."

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Norbert Frost drove into his driveway and the garage door rose as if in welcome. Inside the house, he kissed his wife and hung his jacket in the hall closet.

"How was your day?" his wife asked him.

"About the same," he told her. "Typical raft of miscreants with one shining exception. Some moron pointed a gun at some Secret Service agents, probably thinking he could get away with threatening them. His case, unfortunately, won't even take an entire day. He'll be in and out before he knows it and on his way to Kansas."

"Leavenworth?" the wife asked. Norbert smiled.

"I'll be in my study," he told her and moved off down the hall toward his *sanctum sanctorum*.

He turned the knob on the study door and pushed it open. Then his jaw fell.

His study had been 'tossed'. Books had been pulled from their shelves and left piled chaotically on the floor where they fell. Papers of every size and description were scattered like the debris from a pillow fight. Taped to the far wall was a large sheet of easel-paper on which was scrawled: '*Don't screw with Hank Harns*'.

He closed the door and returned to the kitchen where Lydia, his wife, was puttering over dinner-in-the-making. "Lydia," he asked her, "has anyone been in my study today?"

She turned and looked at him strangely. "Norbert, no one ever goes into your study without your permission, not even the cleaning people."

"Have you been home all day?" he asked her.

"No. As a matter of fact, I just returned from shopping a half-hour ago. Why? Is something wrong?"

He picked up the phone and dialed the police. "This is Judge Frost," he told the dispatcher. "My house has been ransacked."

Within fifteen minutes, a police forensics van arrived at his house and a crew appeared at his front door.

"I'm certain this is connected to a case I heard this afternoon. My study has been turned upside-down and there's a big sheet of paper on one of the walls that warns me 'not to screw with Hank Harns.' Obviously, his criminal associates broke in while my wife was out and 'left me a message'."

The head of the forensics team pulled on a pair of latex gloves and carefully turned the doorknob. The study had indeed been turned upside-down. "Where's the paper with the warning?" he asked.

"It's right there on the far..." Norbert Frost poked his head into the doorframe and gasped. The note was gone.

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Keith Bascomb took the elevator to the basement parking garage and walked toward his car. The car chirped as he remotely unlocked it. He could see something on its windshield but when he looked more closely he realized the something was taped to the inside of the windshield. He could read the writing, printed in 48-point type on a standard sheet of paper, from the outside: *'Prosecuting Hank Harns is a bad career move. Find a different victim or find a safer job. This one could kill you.'*

He pressed the 'LOCK' button on his key fob to re-lock the car, then returned upstairs to find a policeman to whom he could report this threat. In just a few minutes he was back with two police officers, and more were on their way.

But there was no note stuck to the inside of his car's windshield. There was, however, a puddle of honey on the leather upholstery of the driver's seat.

In Farside, a team of backhoes had trenched out a long sloping pit leading directly to the car parked in the garage below the federal building in a spot labeled 'Bascomb - AAG', and Paul Gillman

observed the obvious consternation there with utmost satisfaction.

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The waiter had just delivered Glynnis Harvey's Rigatoni Special to her table when a man and a woman approached her. They each displayed their FBI credentials before starting the conversation. "Glynnis Harvey?" the woman asked.

"That's me," Glynnis admitted.

"You're under arrest," she told her as her partner snapped handcuffs onto Glynnis' left wrist.

"What charge?" Glynnis demanded.

"Terrorism," she was told. "Making death threats against federal officials." She was yanked brusquely to her feet and escorted from the restaurant to the astonished stares of the patrons, several of whom knew Glynnis personally.

They rode in silence to the FBI office in Denver where they placed her in an interrogation room. She waited patiently for several minutes — fifteen, perhaps — until two other agents entered the room.

"Well?" the first agent began. Glynnis stared at him blankly. After nearly a full minute of staring he continued: "Would you like to tell us who else is involved in this?"

"Difficult," Glynnis muttered, "since I have no idea what 'this' is. What are you talking about?"

"This afternoon," the second agent chimed in, "Assistant Attorney General Bascomb's car was vandalized by having honey poured over its upholstery. AAG Bascomb also says there was a note warning him against prosecuting your client, Hank Harns, and suggesting it could be deadly." Glynnis simply stared back at him, so he went on.

"Also this afternoon, Judge Frost's house was burglarized, his study and all his important papers were tossed as if something were being searched for. Judge Frost also claims to have seen a note with ominous overtones. Obviously, these incidents are tied to your client and, therefore, you."

Glynnis continued to stare at the FBI agents until she sensed they were through talking. "So, you think I did it?" she asked. Now it was the FBI agents' turn to stare at her. "I presume you have something that looks like 'evidence'," she challenged them. "A fingerprint, a hair sample, a footprint, something?" The FBI agents continued to stare. "No, huh? Okay, let's go get me arraigned. I haven't had dinner yet, thanks to you."

"Well," one of the agents protested, "we weren't actually going to have you arraigned." He reached over and unlocked the handcuffs.

"You haven't even been officially booked, so you really haven't been officially arrested. All we want is a little cooperation toward finding who's been making these threats."

"What do you mean: '*I haven't been arrested*'?" she growled at them. "Two FBI agents dragged me away in handcuffs after one of them said the word 'arrest', as in '*you're under arrest*'. That line may work with your ordinary street thug who doesn't know what's going on and just wants to get out of this place. I'm an attorney. I know what 'arrested' looks like, and I've been arrested. Now arraign me or get ready for one ginormous fucking lawsuit under the 1964 Civil Rights Act against which you will not be able to claim sovereign immunity."

The agents shrugged their shoulders. "Okay. If we're going to be sued, we may as well be sued for something worthwhile."

Two hours later, having been strip-searched, hosed down, and dressed in an orange prisoner's jumpsuit, Glynnis Harvey appeared before a hastily convened arraignment. The judge looked down at her from the raised bench.

"Miss Harvey, it says here you are an attorney. Is that correct?"

"It is, Your Honor," she replied.

"These charges are very serious charges to be leveled against an Officer of the Court, Miss Harvey. Do you have anything to say about them?"

"I have not seen the charges, Your Honor, and I have been denied counsel so I am unable to address the substance of any charges you may have before you. I do know that earlier this evening I asked my FBI interrogators what evidence they had that I have committed some crime and they were unable to identify anything that might constitute evidence."

The judge snorted. "This is merely an arraignment, Miss Harvey. We are not yet at the 'evidence stage'. These agents," he indicated several besuited FBI agents, "have stated their probable cause to believe you are part of a ring of terrorists that has made death threats against a sitting judge and an Assistant Attorney General."

"Then may we read that 'probable cause' into the record, Your Honor," she asked the judge.

The judge frowned and the agents seated in the courtroom shook their heads. "Since this is a matter of national security, I don't think that would be a very good idea," the judge told her. "Now, if you were to cooperate with the investigation..."

"I wish I had that within my power, Your Honor," she spoke, "but since I have no idea who might have made threats upon whom, I am unable to give the FBI what it so desperately wants."

"Their actions in arresting me do, however, serve a purpose: they deprive my current client, one Hank Harns, of competent counsel further ensuring that no attorney will want to touch his case. He will then be assigned a public defender fresh out of law school who will botch the case and send my client to federal prison for a very long time.

"When the Executive Branch can make an accusation and be assured the accused will have an inadequate defense, we no longer have a 'justice system'. It is now an 'injustice system'."

The judge's gavel rapped once. "You are in contempt of court, young lady. Thirty days. This arraignment is continued for thirty days."

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Bad news travels fast, and in lawyerly circles, it travels at the speed of light. When Boris Wilsky appeared at his office the following morning, his secretary flagged him.

"Do you know a lawyer named Glynnis Harvey?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Wilsky said. "Why?"

"Arrested last night on charges of terrorism. Apparently, she mouthed off to the judge at the arraignment and he gave her thirty days."

Boris tapped on Ed Flynn's door then pushed through. "How's your workload?" he asked.

"I've got space," Ed informed him.

"Good. Head down to the federal lock-up, find Glynnis Harvey, introduce yourself to her, and try to get her sprung. She's in on a contempt charge, thirty days for mouthing off."

"My kind of woman," Ed chortled as he rose from his desk.

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A less confrontational judge was convinced to vacate the contempt charge. Ed Flynn escorted her from the lock-up after her release.

"There's a meeting I'd like you to attend," he told her. "My client, Dennis Cameron, wants to talk to you about Mr. Harns' defense." Glynnis agreed to go with him to Dennis Cameron's house.

When the two walked in to Dennis' living room, Glynnis recognized Boris Wilsky, but none of the others: Dennis, Barbara, Ernie, Buck, Paul, the three Okambos, Leroy Starkweather, and both Gruders. After a brief round of introductions, Boris started speaking.

"Glynnis, I'm going to brief my clients on the Harns case, what I know of it. Please jump right in and correct me if I say anything

wrong.

"Hank Harns came into possession of a half-ounce gold coin, origin unknown, and shopped it to Everitt Perry, a coin dealer, for an appraisal. Perry, not recognizing the coin, posted images on a Usenet newsgroup frequented by stamp- and coin-collectors asking any of the regulars if they could identify it." Boris passed around printed sheets showing the images Perry had posted.

"Yesterday morning Perry was visited by agents of the U.S. Secret Service one of whose missions is to prevent counterfeiting. Yes, they would arrest you for counterfeiting rubles or Euros. The fact that this is not U.S. currency is immaterial to them. Everitt pointed them back to Hank Harns and the agents went to the Harns house to speak with Hank. Harns apparently seized the coin claiming it was his property and ordered the Secret Service agents off his property at gunpoint. He was, of course, arrested for that.

"He was arraigned yesterday afternoon and Miss Harvey was his attorney at that arraignment which was short, sweet, and totally lacking any pretense of due process." Glynnis smiled. "Immediately after the arraignment I spoke to Miss Harvey and learned the judge's name and the prosecutor's name which names I then reported to my client, Mr. Dennis Cameron. Shortly thereafter both the judge and the prosecutor received alleged death threats. I say 'alleged' because neither can produce the warning notes they each say they received."

Boris turned toward Dennis Cameron. "I now have to ask my client whether any of us, most especially his attorneys, are in danger of going to the gallows over this case?"

A broad smirk appeared on Dennis' face. "From what I know that I haven't shared with you, no, my attorneys will not be going to the gallows. All that we've heard here is entirely circumstantial. A competent jury would never convict any of us in the absence of other evidence, and we have the power to ensure not simply that only competent juries try us, but that there is no other evidence." Boris, Ed, and Glynnis all frowned as if to ask 'how?'. "It's clear that the Harns judge and prosecutor are intent on getting a conviction even if it means 'breaking the system'. They will not be permitted to do that." The frowns deepened.

"Mr. Cameron," Ed Flynn rose to speak, "I'm certain none of us should be hearing this. You're making us 'accessories', and that's a bad place for an attorney to be."

Dennis waved him back into his seat. "Ed, as an Officer of the Court you have a responsibility to see that justice is served, do you not?" Ed nodded. "And if some within the system are thwarting that, do you not have a corollary obligation to oppose them?"

"That is all you and we are doing. We are putting this train

back on its tracks after some unscrupulous others have derailed it. Don't leave us hanging — pun intended — now. We need you guys to be our experts."

"Are you saying you know more about this than you're telling your own counsel?" Ed retorted. Dennis nodded. "Tell me about this coin that's causing so much trouble," Ed demanded.

Barbara rose. "The coin is not counterfeit. It's genuine. It is money, but here its value is only that of the gold of which it is made."

"Where is it money?" Glynnis asked.

"Elsewhere," Barbara said.

"Not good enough," Glynnis demanded.

"It's not a place you've ever heard of," Barbara informed her, "nor is it a place you have ever visited."

"What if I decide I want to visit that place, then?" Glynnis smirked.

"No," Barbara told her.

"What do you mean, 'no'? Why not?"

"Because I won't let you," Barbara informed her.

Glynnis picked up the paper Boris had given her and looked at the image on the coin, then back at Barbara. "This is you," she said finally. Barbara answered with a serene little bow. "'B R I'... Barbara... what?"

"Barbara Regina the First," Dennis answered. "Where that coin comes from, Barbara is 'Queen Barbara'."

"And where's that?" Glynnis came back with her original question.

"Call it 'Farside'," Ernie answered.

"I give up."

21 - Interposition

It took Norbert Frost the entire weekend to sort out the mess that some vandal had made of his library. His collection, he now knew because he had counted them, included more than a thousand volumes. It had been arduous work gathering the books from the floor, sorting them, and replacing them on the shelves that lined the walls of his study. Lydia had been an immense help but this had been only the third or fourth time since they lived here that she had even been in that room: once when they were house-hunting, once when they were moving in, today, and possibly one other time. Norbert insisted on having a place that was totally his and totally private. That someone (or several someones) had invaded that privacy rankled him more than Lydia suspected.

Now Norbert Frost sat at the dining room table, a sectioned grapefruit and the prospect of a quiet breakfast before him.

Thump.

He lifted his head to try to determine where the sound had come from.

Thump.

He rose from the table and walked down the hallway toward his study.

Thump.

He turned the doorknob and opened his study door. On the floor where they had fallen from the shelves lay three books and a plain white envelope. He picked up the envelope and extracted the single sheet of paper. It contained one word: *'remember'*.

Norbert Frost wet his pants.

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When Keith Bascomb arrived at his office on Monday morning he was smiling. It had been a good weekend, marred only by Friday's veiled death threat and the necessity of having his Lexus detailed to get rid of the honey. *Hell, if that's the worst they can do*, he thought, *let them bring it on. His A-game was better than that by a long shot.*

He worked on several cases, calling investigators and reviewing files until mid-morning. Needing a specific piece of information, he rose and pulled one of the reference books from its shelf.

Only the top half of the book came off the shelf. The bottom half stayed.

Not yet sure what had just happened, he took the bottom half of the book and laid it on his desk next to the top half. He began turning pages one by one, keeping the two halves in synchronization with each other. The book appeared to have been guillotined neatly into two sections with no sign of damage other than that the book was chopped cleanly in two.

He selected another book from the same shelf. It, too, had been lopped into top and bottom halves. In fact, every book on his shelves had been severed into top and bottom.

He called building security and the FBI.

The FBI investigator thought this was the coolest thing he had ever seen.

"Look at this," he urged his partner. "When you remove all the top halves, you can sight along the cut line and it's so straight... here." He took a ruler and laid it across the remaining bottoms. The ruler touched every binding. "This had to be cut with a laser, but how much power do you need to cut all the way through eight feet of books before you start to toast the first one? This has to be a weapon in the petajoule range. Nobody has anything like that. Buck Rodgers, get out of the way."

"You don't think this was done by a blade?" his partner asked.

The investigator shook his head. "As a matter of fact, the laser idea is only marginally believable. Look at the back wall of the bookcase. Not a mark on it. How do you burn through a book with enough precision that as soon as the book is cut all the way through power is cut off so nothing else gets damaged? That's precision humans can only dream about. We're in *fantasy land* now, bud. This is verging on 'inexplicable'."

The FBI took a sample of several books Bascomb had identified as 'not likely to be needed very soon' and sent them off to be examined microscopically.

Bascomb broke for lunch. When some of the other AAGs offered their company, Bascomb declined. "I really need to do some thinking," he told them.

At his favorite restaurant, Bascomb asked for a table for one and sat alone to mull what had been happening over the past few days. As he examined the menu a young woman walked by his table and said: "Books can be replaced."

Bascomb's head snapped up and he asked the woman: "What did you say?"

She turned to look at him and replied: "I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did," Bascomb asserted rising from his seat. He

grabbed her roughly by her wrist. "You said: '*Books can be replaced*'."

The woman raised her voice so that her words could be heard clearly by the other diners. "Take your hand off me!"

In an instant, they were surrounded by wait staff and management. "Is there a problem, Mr. Bascomb?" the *maître d'* asked the AAG as he gently pried Bascomb's fingers from the woman's wrist.

"This woman spoke to me," Bascomb explained.

The *maître d'* looked at her then back at Bascomb. "Surely, Mr. Bascomb, there's nothing wrong with that, is there? What could she have said to upset you?"

"She said '*Books can be replaced*'."

By now, several diners were eyeing Bascomb as if he were mentally unstable. The woman rubbed her wrist and rounded on the *maître d'*: "You ought to have this person thrown out of here. I ought to have him arrested."

"Please, miss," the *maître d'* begged, "this has all been just a misunderstanding. Let us make it up to you," and he guided her away from Bascomb as quickly as he could manage. Grace Gorsky got a gift certificate for a party of four out of her dramatic debut. Bascomb was asked to patronize another restaurant.

The FBI analysis of the books taken from AAG Bascomb's shelves showed a curious commonality. Every page examined was missing about five microns of material: pages, dust covers, bindings, even bookmarks left by previous readers; and all with no sign of singeing as might be expected by a high-energy cutting device such as a laser. In any case, as the original investigator had pointed out, there was nothing else damaged as might be expected were a laser to be used. A blade, also, would be expected to do some random damage as it sliced through materials of different strengths and densities. There was none of that, either.

The only possible conclusion was 'cause unknown'. The report author would not even hazard a guess as to what might have been used to so uniformly guillotine entire shelves of books leaving no debris and no collateral damage.

Bascomb was shaken to his foundations. He scheduled an appointment with the AG at which he begged to be let off the Harns case.

"Yes, damn it, I'm scared," he told his boss. "I'm so scared I may not be able to put up a good case against this guy."

"Let me put this to you in terms you cannot misunderstand," the AG snarled at him. "If Harns walks on this, your career at Justice is over, but that's not the worst of it. There's a file on you compiled over the years in which you've said many incriminating things over the

phone, in letters, and in emails. If you disappoint me, you will be going to federal prison in Harns' place, and as a federal felon your wife and family will be ineligible to collect your pension or benefits. Are we on the same page?"

Bascomb's face had gone white. He had no way out of this one. The years of toadying to his superiors' every wish had now left him in a blind alley. The incident with the books, he knew, was just a sample, a mysterious sample, of what Harns' friends could do, and the thought had already crossed Bascomb's mind that a neck in the wrong place at the wrong time might be sliced just as easily, cleanly, and fatally as any book.

Norbert Frost was having a similar problem with scheduling himself out of the case. Word of the odd happenings at the Frost house and the weird damage done to the prosecutor's office had raced through the ranks of the Federal Circuit Court judges and every one of them had found one excuse or another to make themselves busy around the time the Harns case would come to trial. Frost was going to be 'stuck with the duty' and he didn't like it one bit.

He was eligible for retirement and the thought had crossed his mind that quitting the bench might be the solution to this problem if he could convince the Chief Judge to release him from the schedule. A quick chat with the Chief Judge, however, made him realize that retirement would have to wait until the end of the judicial calendar. Frost was the only judge that could be found available when 'Harns' would go before a jury. Only sudden death would get him out of this one.

On the first day of the trial, therefore, Judge Norbert Frost entered the courtroom for the Harns case and took his seat behind the huge ornate desk.

"Counsel, please approach the bench," he commanded. Glynnis Harvey and Keith Bascomb both rose and presented themselves before the judge where lowered voices would not cause entries in the official transcript.

"Miss Harvey, I hear you had a run-in with Judge Kaplan." Glynnis had an unpleasant expression on her face as she nodded in affirmation. "I would like to speak with you in chambers if Mr. Bascomb has no objection."

"No objection, Your Honor," Bascomb agreed.

"Ten-minute recess," Frost announced and banged his gavel once. He and Glynnis Harvey disappeared through the doorway to the judge's chambers.

"Miss Harvey," he began when they were both seated comfortably, "I would like to establish contact with whoever ransacked

my library, and I promise that no prosecution or other adverse consequences will follow such contact. Do I make myself clear?"

"I believe I understand what you're asking, Your Honor," Glynnis answered. "Unfortunately, I have no personal knowledge of who might have been involved, and Mr. Harns, if he knows, has not shared that with me, not even as privileged communication. I suspect that Mr. Harns, in fact, does not know anything about it."

"Suspensions?" Frost asked.

"Well, we all have our suspicions," Glynnis admitted, "and, if you wish, I will poke around to see if anyone is willing to come forward. No promises, of course."

"Of course," Frost agreed. "Yes, I would very much appreciate your 'poking around', and the sooner the better. I suspect the prosecutor is going to make short work of Mr. Harns, so time is of the essence."

"I see," Glynnis finished. They rose and re-entered the courtroom and the trial began.

Jury selection took all of the first day. When the court broke for lunch at 12:30, Bascomb approached Glynnis Harvey.

"Would you care to have lunch with me, Glynnis?" Bascomb asked.

"Thank you for the offer, Keith. I have to decline. I'm meeting with some of the defense team, otherwise..."

Bascomb looked shocked. "Harns has a 'team'? How many are on the team?"

Glynnis smiled back at him sweetly. "Three lawyers and their staffs, plus assorted investigators."

"Why?" Bascomb asked. "It's a simple case."

"Mr. Harns doesn't want to go to Kansas," she told him.

"I see," Bascomb said. "Is there any chance I might have five minutes of your time before you head out for lunch, then?"

"Sure," Glynnis agreed. She pointed to a conference room off the courtroom. They both headed for some privacy.

"I have a Sword of Damocles hanging over my head," Bascomb told her when they were settled behind closed doors. "On the one hand, I have Harns' unknown friends who seem to have the ability to harm me and mine even in places where I ought to be 'safe'. On the other, I have some black spots in my past that 'Justice' will have no qualms about beating me bloody with. I don't dare win this case and I don't dare lose it, either. I need a way out, Glynnis."

Wow, Glynnis thought, two in one day. "What are you asking, Keith?"

"I don't know," Bascomb admitted. "I know I can't ask Harns

to call off his dogs, because that will get him sent to Leavenworth, and I know he won't do that. I need to find a way to not lose this case and not win it, either."

"I don't know how to advise you, Keith," Glynnis told him, rising from her seat. "I'm sorry. If I think of something, I'll let you know."

Keith Bascomb mumbled his thanks and left the room following Glynnis Harvey.

Glynnis settled herself into a seat beside Dennis Cameron facing Ed Flynn and Boris Wilsky. "You will not believe what has happened today," she told them.

Ed Flynn looked confused. "Have you seated a jury already?"

"Hell, no," she exclaimed. "We'll be at this all day. No, this morning before the jury pool was even brought in, Judge Frost pulls me into chambers and asks me if I have any way to put him in touch with the people who tossed his library. I told him I'd put the word out but couldn't guarantee anything. I didn't understand what was driving that until about twenty minutes ago.

"Keith Bascomb took me aside when we broke for lunch and asked me essentially the same thing. He's scared. If he wins this case, he's afraid Harns' friends will punish him for it. If he loses it, he's sure the DOJ will come after him for unspecified sins in his past. He thinks he's facing retribution from Hank Harns' friends or retribution from his own friends. Poor guy.

"I think Frost is also gazing into the abyss and not liking the view. God, I wish I knew what the hell is happening."

Lunch over, the four went their separate ways having agreed to meet at the same place on subsequent trial days. Dennis called Tony Dinardo, Farside's Director of Security, to discuss the latest developments. After briefing Tony, Dennis asked if he had any suggestions.

"Not immediately, although an idea is forming in my head. If we can keep the two Secret Service agents from testifying, there's no case. Given that we were able to put the fear of God into both the judge and the AAG with just a few pranks, we may be able to show the key witnesses the error of their ways."

"Well, chopping all the AAG's books in half was an excellent 'prank'," Dennis congratulated Tony. "I don't know how you managed that, but if you can chop somebody's car in half you'll probably get their undivided attention."

"The books were easy," Tony bragged. "We set up a gate horizontally to coincide with a row of books and flashed the gate on for one one-thousandth of a second. *Blink!* The whole stack of books —

the whole top half — falls about five microns into Farside before the gate snaps shut. Result: an entire shelf of books sliced into two almost-complete parts, and a little cloud of paper dust in Farside.” Tony started chuckling. “I thought of that one myself.

“A car? Yeah, I think we can do a car. We might even be able to do it while it’s rolling. That would be really dramatic, especially if we can time it so the slice goes right through the engine block. *Pow!* Pieces of engine flying in every direction. I’ll get to work on it.”

“Something else,” Dennis added. “The judge in the Harns case has asked to be put in touch with the ones responsible for trashing his house — says there will be no repercussions for them — he just wants to talk. The federal prosecutor is making similar noises. If it’s possible to inject a negotiator, we might develop some very interesting contacts or information at the very least. Run it by the Privy Council.”

“I’ll do it today,” Tony assured him.

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The elevator door opened and Keith Bascomb exited and turned left toward his reserved parking space. As he did so he noticed a man standing off to one side holding a cardboard sign whose hand-lettering read: ‘*Free Advice*’. Bascomb stopped in his tracks, hesitated, then turned toward the sign.

“I could use some advice,” Bascomb told the man as he drew closer.

“The first piece of advice I can give you is to put your firearm in your car,” he was told. “After that, the advice gets better.”

Bascomb turned back to his car, opened it and tossed his briefcase inside along with the holster that held his .357 revolver before returning to the man with the sign. The two climbed into the back seat of a dark-colored sedan.

“What’s troubling you, my son?” Tony Dinardo began. “I have to know what you need advice *about* before I can give any.”

“I’m a federal prosecutor,” he told Tony who gave a knowing nod, “and my current assignment is to make sure a certain defendant is convicted. If I screw up and that defendant walks on the charges, the Department of Justice, my employer, will want my hide nailed to the barn door. I know how they operate. They’ll get what they want.”

“I take it you feel bad about prosecuting that defendant?” Tony prompted.

“Hell, no,” Bascomb admitted. “I don’t care about him. He’s got friends that will take it poorly, though, and it appears they can wreak quite a lot of mayhem when and where they choose. I just

want them not to wreak mayhem on me."

"Between a rock and a hard place, then?" Tony asked.

"Precisely."

"Are there no other choices beside winning and losing?" Tony asked.

"The judge could direct a verdict for the defense," Bascomb admitted, "but he wouldn't do that. Or there could be a mistrial, but that might be seen as a screw-up by the prosecutor and I'd still be in trouble. Of course, the witnesses could give testimony that forces the judge to rule for the defense, but that's not very likely, either."

"So, it appears your only options are to pray and keep your fingers crossed," Tony opined, "and hope the witnesses don't show up when called. That's what I advise you to do. No charge. Have a safe trip home."

"What if I need more advice?" Bascomb asked.

"Free advice is pretty rare these days," Tony told him. "Count yourself lucky when you get it."

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The car carrying the two Secret Service agents and their escort turned into the entrance to the underground parking garage and the driver took the paper ticket stub from the dispenser. The gate lifted to admit the vehicle and it proceeded down the ramp.

"So, this blonde brings her little black dress to the cleaners for... holy shit!"

The car had suddenly emerged into sunlight heading down a dirt ramp in what appeared to be an open-pit mine. The driver slammed on his brakes, but the poor traction on the dirt road surface ensured the car would continue several yards down the incline before it could be brought to a stop. The four men looked around them wonderingly. There was no sign of anything that looked like a garage or a Federal Building. There were no buildings of any sort, nor cars, nor people. Behind them on the ramp stood a rectangular frame seven feet high or thereabouts and ten or twelve feet wide smoking in the morning sunlight.

"What the hell just happened?" one of them asked, not really expecting an answer. The others merely shook their heads in dumbfounded silence.

"We drove through that," the driver muttered. "Maybe I can back up through it." He put the car in reverse and slowly backed through the rectangular frame and all the way to the top of the ramp. At ground level, they could see for miles around that there was nothing that even hinted at 'civilization'.

One flipped his cell phone open. He had a signal but it was so weak and wobbly he doubted he could make or receive any calls. "Toto," he muttered dispiritedly, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

In Judge Frost's courtroom, lawyers and observers took their seats for the opening of Hank Harns' trial. As Keith Bascomb shuffled papers in preparation for the arrival of Judge Frost, his aide whispered in his ear: "They just called from Broadway and 21st. They should be here in ten or fifteen minutes."

The bailiff called: "All rise!" as Judge Frost entered the courtroom and took his place behind his desk. After a minute or two of settling, Frost banged his gavel for order.

"Is the prosecution ready?" he asked and Bascomb replied affirmatively. "Is the defense ready?"

"We are, Your Honor," Glynnis Harvey told the court.

"Counselor, please present your opening statement," Frost ordered Bascomb.

Bascomb rose and approached the jury box. "We have before us a very simple, straight-forward case," he began and then went on to lay out the circumstances that caused Hank Harns to be sitting at the defense table, ending with a description of Hank pointing a .45-caliber pistol at the face of a U.S. Secret Service agent. "There is simply no reason a law-abiding person would threaten a Secret Service agent in this manner, and we believe the evidence will show Mr. Harns to be anything but law-abiding." He sat down.

"Call your first witness, Mr. Bascomb," Judge Frost ordered.

Bascomb rose. "The United States calls William VanPelt," he announced. Outside, a bailiff repeated the call among the people milling in the hallway: "William VanPelt?" but no one volunteered.

Bascomb turned on his aide. "Call them," he hissed. "Find out where the hell they are."

"Your Honor," Bascomb addressed Frost, "Mr. VanPelt seems to be temporarily unavailable. The United States calls Harley Pearson." Outside in the hallway, the bailiff asked: "Harley Pearson?" but, again, no one answered.

As if in answer to a rumble of voices building in the courtroom, Frost asked Bascomb: "Is there a problem, Mr. Bascomb?"

"Your Honor, we had word from our two key witnesses within the past fifteen minutes that they were in transit just a few blocks from the courthouse. They may have been delayed with parking. I expect them here within a few minutes at most. I beg the court's indulgence."

"Perhaps you can call another witness?" Frost suggested.

"The United States calls Marshal Thomas Flaherty," Bascomb called out. Flaherty, hearing his name called, entered the courtroom and moved quickly toward the witness stand where the bailiff proceeded to swear him in.

Bascomb approached the Marshal with a paper in his hands. "I ask you to examine this warrant and to tell me if this is the warrant you served on Hank Harns at his residence, 12047 Tennison Lane, the week before last?" Flaherty acknowledged that it was. "What items did you seize from the Harns residence after Mr. Harns' arrest?"

"We seized a Colt .45-caliber model 1911 pistol, serial 2443017, and a gold coin weighing fifteen-point-five-five grams. A search of the house did not reveal any other items covered by the warrant, nor any items that would have been illegal for Mr. Harns to possess."

Bascomb handed him a .45-caliber pistol. "Is this the firearm you seized from Mr. Harns' residence?" Flaherty took the weapon, turned it so he could see the serial number, and acknowledged that this was, indeed, the same item.

Bascomb handed Flaherty a gold coin in a heavy plastic protective envelope. "Is this the coin you seized?"

Flaherty took the coin and turned it over to examine both sides. "In the absence of some differentiating mark, I can only say that this *appears* to be the same coin I seized from Mr. Harns' house, either that or an exact replica."

"Your witness," Bascomb told the defense.

Glynnis Harvey rose and approached the witness. "How was Mr. Harns' behavior during the arrest?" she asked him.

"Mr. Harns was very cooperative," the Marshal admitted.

"No further questions," she told Frost.

Several other of the Marshals on the arresting team were questioned, more to spend time than for any substantive testimony they might give. Having exhausted the Marshals, Bascomb was forced to admit to Judge Frost that there was no sign of his key witnesses, the two Secret Service agents.

"Let's adjourn for the weekend, shall we, and give Mr. Bascomb some time to figure out what's going on?"

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On a dusty plain in Farside, four Secret Service agents sat on the ground in the shade of their car wondering what had happened and how they were going to cope with it, whatever 'it' was. They were hot and they were thirsty. None of them imagined when they shared breakfast that morning on the way to the Federal Courthouse that they

were eating their last meal. Every now and then, one of them would stand up to stretch legs that were stiff from inactivity.

"Hey, look at that!" an agent exclaimed when he saw a column of smoke rising to the North. The others scrambled to their feet to see for themselves.

"Everybody in the car!" the leader ordered and they all complied immediately. The car turned and moved North, carefully avoiding boulders and rough terrain. After twenty minutes of careful maneuvering, they had covered something like three miles as the crow flies from their original spot at the top of the ramp. They could now see a charcoal grill next to a picnic table on which was a large camping cooler. Taped to the cooler was a note:

A few meters to the west you will find a chest chained to a tree. Inside the chest, you will place all your wallets and official credentials. You will also deposit all your firearms and other weapons, none of which you will need for the foreseeable future and all of which can cause you nothing but grief.

Once the chest is closed, you will not be able to re-open it, so please put everything in it that needs to be there on the first try. Your diet for the next several weeks hinges on how well you can follow instructions.

A stream with water suitable for both drinking and washing can be found about one-quarter mile west. There is no wildlife in the area that you need to worry about.

This is your new base camp. It's safe to sleep outdoors and there is camping equipment nearby. If, on any morning, you should see smoke in the South, retrace your track to your starting point where fresh instructions will await you.

Inside the cooler, they found frankfurters and hamburgers ready for the grill, plus buns and condiments, beer, juices and bottled water, utensils, paper plates, and numerous other things to feed them for several days. Nearby, a small safe stood open, and next to it four sleeping bags lay rolled and stacked. William VanPelt pulled the holster with his Sig P229 from his belt.

"What are you doing?" the lead agent, Wilson, asked.

VanPelt looked sheepish. "Putting my weapon in the box," he admitted.

"We're not giving up our guns until we know what's going on," he was told. "Put it back on." VanPelt clipped the holster back onto his belt.

They cooked an early dinner and turned in as the light of day started to fade. They were up again at dawn, only marginally surprised that the night had gone along without incident. Two more boring days slipped by, their food supply dwindling until they were left only with three beers, two hamburgers, and two frankfurters that they hoped would get them past breakfast. On the morning of the fourth day, which their watches told them was Monday, a column of smoke in the South called them back to their starting point.

"You go with Pearson," Wilson told the other escort. "VanPelt and I will stay here. If the new instructions need us there, fire two shots and we'll drive down there to meet you."

"How are we getting there?" Pearson asked.

"You walk. How else?"

Pearson and his escort set out on foot following the track left by the car three days ago. In just under an hour they came to a smoky fire at the strip mine. An envelope was impaled on a nearby branch. Pearson opened it and read the note:

If and only if you are weapons-free, begin walking east guiding on the forest barely visible at the horizon.

If you are not weapons-free, don't bother. You will come upon a checkpoint along the way and if you fail the check you will be responsible for feeding yourselves into the indefinite future. You have already noticed the almost total absence of game animals here, so that's going to be very difficult.

Do not bring with you anyone who is not in full compliance with the instructions you received at the other camp. One person who fails the check fails the check for all.

"Oh, shit, what do we do now?" Pearson's escort asked. "We didn't lock our guns in the safe the way we were told."

Pearson looked at him glumly. "We walk back, lock our guns in the safe, then we all drive back here and head east the way the note says."

The escort nodded and the two began walking back to the

other camp. Another hour passed before they rejoined the other two.

"The note said to be in full compliance with the instructions or all of us would be cut off from a food supply," Pearson explained. "We'll have to find our own food, and that means woodchucks and prairie dogs, 'cause there's nothing much else that I've seen. Have you?" They all shook their heads. "And you know what a .357Sig would do to a woodchuck if you could hit it? There wouldn't be enough to use as bait." He took his holster and tossed the kit into the safe. VanPelt and his escort followed suit.

"Not me," Wilson snarled. "If there's somebody at the checkpoint, he's a dead man."

"You're not doing that to us," VanPelt informed him as he retrieved his holster from the safe. VanPelt drew his firearm and turned on Wilson. Each fired once and VanPelt fell dead.

The other two exchanged looks and the unspoken thought flitted between their two minds: *We're dead anyway*. They retrieved their holsters from the safe, but neither got the chance to deploy their weapons before Wilson shot both of them as well.

Wilson started the car and worked his way south following his own tire tracks. At the entry point he read the note's instructions: *...begin walking east guiding on the forest barely visible at the horizon*.

"Walk? Bullshit. I'm driving," and he pointed the car eastward.

A mile and a half to the east a line of low hills forced the car through a narrow pass filled with sand. The car bogged down immediately, its wheels spinning uselessly in the soft sand. The last surviving Secret Service agent abandoned the car and continued walking. In another mile a lone metal detector, incongruous for its loneliness on the prairie, loomed in the near distance. A sign on a post next to it said simply: "Security Checkpoint" and beyond it stood another post with an envelope tacked to it.

Wilson chuckled. "Amateurs," he chortled. He took his pistol from his belt, removed the belt as well, and tossed the gun, the belt, and his wallet past the side of the metal detector. Then he walked through the arch which made not a single 'chirp'. He put his belt on, attached his holster to it, stowed his wallet in his pants pocket, and snatched the envelope from the post.

A series of rocks painted red will lead you roughly southward from this point. Follow them.

And don't screw with us ever again.

Good-bye.

Wilson laughed to himself. *VanPelt, Osborn, and Pearson were morons for not following his lead*, the thought rattled in his head. *We could all be going home, but no...* He started walking South.

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The sun had set some time ago and it was now full-dark. By the light of his flashlight, Wilson could make out the line of red-painted rocks positioned at twenty-foot intervals. He came upon the gate so suddenly that he at first didn't realize what it was he was looking at. '*A small outbuilding with an open door*' is how he would later describe the structure. Inside the building, tropical plants of every description occupied row after row of shelves.

At the Denver PD on Josephine Street, an alarm began *pinging* next to the label 'Boettcher Memorial Tropical Conservatory'. Two cars were dispatched to check it out. When the four officers arrived and were admitted by the night security guard into 'the hot house', Agent Wilson saw their flashlights and called out to them:

"Over here. I'm Agent Lou Wilson, United States Secret Service." When the police rounded on him, they could clearly see his badge and ID.

"What are you doing in here?" they asked.

"I've been kidnapped — been walking all day — I just came through that door over there." The police looked over his shoulder where he was pointing but didn't see any doorway. "Where am I?"

"You're in the Denver Botanical Gardens, Agent Wilson. If you've been walking all day, you've been walking through the streets of downtown Denver. Let's go get you cleaned up and take a statement."

22 - Matters of Law

As people milled around Judge Frost's courtroom waiting for the proceedings to restart, Glynnis Harvey perched on the corner of Keith Bascomb's desk.

"Any sign of your witnesses?" she asked coyly.

"None," Bascomb admitted, "and we've been searching for them all weekend. Wherever they are, they're not in Colorado. When I get my hands on them..."

"What are we going to do about the trial?" Glynnis asked. "Judge Frost will never give you another postponement. If I'm wrong and he does, I'm going to move for a directed verdict."

Keith smiled. "You know, just the other day someone suggested that I should pray the witnesses never showed up."

"Really!" Glynnis remarked. "Who?"

"I have no idea," Keith admitted.

"All rise!" the bailiff intoned as Judge Frost entered the courtroom and took his seat.

Glynnis scurried back to the defense side of the room. "You're going to walk," she whispered in Hank Harns' ear.

"Mr. Bascomb, are you ready to proceed?" Frost asked the prosecutor.

Bascomb rose. "Unfortunately, Your Honor, we have still not located our two key witnesses."

"Counsels, approach," Frost ordered angrily. The two attorneys stood before the bench. "Mr. Bascomb, this is, is it not, the second case out of your office in as many years involving gold and missing witnesses? Is there a systemic problem this court needs to address?"

Bascomb looked flustered, but at the same time relieved. "I can't speak to that issue, Your Honor."

"Miss Harvey, I imagine you're going to petition for a directed acquittal?"

"Exactly so, Your Honor," she confirmed.

"Mr. Bascomb? Objections?" Frost offered.

"State has no grounds on which to object, Your Honor," Bascomb told him ruefully. "Congratulations, Miss Harvey."

Glynnis gave a little bow then turned to Judge Frost. "Mr. Harns' pistol and his gold coin should be returned promptly, Your Honor."

"Very well. I'm going to rule," Frost declared. The two attorneys returned to their desks.

Frost banged the gavel once to gain everyone's attention. "The defendant is acquitted by directed verdict," Frost said aloud. "All seized property is to be returned to its rightful owner without delay. The jury is dismissed with our thanks. Court is adjourned." He banged the gavel once more to put a period on the proceedings and people began milling about in preparation for clearing the courtroom.

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Lou Wilson was still asleep in his hotel room, the 'Do Not Disturb' sign keeping the housekeepers from waking him from his death-like slumber.

At the Denver Botanical Gardens' Greenhouse Complex, Denver PD Forensics examined the bodies of three dead United States Secret Service agents, each shot once fatally, and nearby, four ejected brass casings. The pre-opening crew whose duties included making sure all the plants were presentable before the gates were opened to the public had discovered the three bodies in the early morning hours of Tuesday.

The overhead sprinklers that gave the plants their morning drink-plus-bath had largely destroyed the delicate details of the crime scene, but the amount of blood still remaining left no doubt these three had been killed where they fell. Because of the contamination of the scene, no one would think to analyze a sample of the blood on the ground, so they would never discover that it was actually pig blood.

"Get yourself two Marshals and go arrest that Wilson guy," the chief detective ordered two patrolmen. "Keep in mind that he's already killed three people. Let's not make it 'four'."

The team of two Denver police officers and two U.S. Marshals pounded on the door of Wilson's room. Muffled protests issued from inside. They continued pounding until Wilson was sufficiently annoyed that he went to the door.

"Who's there?" Wilson demanded.

"Denver PD," one of the officers responded. "We need to talk to you down at the station."

"Now?" Wilson asked exasperatedly.

"Yes, now!" a Marshal insisted.

"Alright." Wilson flipped the catch off the door and opened it.

The Marshals entered first, displaying their identification. "Where's your firearm?" one of them asked. Wilson indicated the pile of miscellany on the dresser. The Marshall took the weapon from its holster and unloaded it, then sniffed at the barrel. "When did you fire this last?"

A blank look descended on Wilson's face. "Do I need to have my attorney here?" he asked.

"That would probably be a really good idea," the Marshal mused.

When he finally settled himself in the chair at the police station, Wilson had steeled himself to answer no questions. *Whatever was going on here was dangerous*, he told himself. *Caution, caution, caution. Perhaps he should go on the offensive by asking a few questions, himself.*

"What's happening here?" he asked the detective seated across from him.

"Prior to your sudden reappearance last night in the Denver Botanical Gardens, Agent Wilson, where were you?" the detective demanded.

"I need to have my attorney present," Wilson answered.

"Why?" the Marshal asked in return. "Have you done something you think requires an attorney's presence?"

"No, of course not," Wilson snapped. "So why am I being questioned?"

"Just routine," the Marshal assured him. "We have four Secret Service agents go missing just as two of them are about to testify in a counterfeiting case, they're gone for four days, and suddenly one shows up. We'd like to find out what happened to the other three."

"Oh, yeah," Wilson mumbled.

"So, what did happen to the other three?"

"The last I saw of them was out on the prairie," Wilson told the Marshal.

"On the prairie? Where on the prairie?" the Marshal pressed.

"I don't know," Wilson told him dreamily. "We were kidnapped Friday and found ourselves on the prairie. I don't know how we got there."

"But you're back," the Marshal noted. "How did you get back?"

"Yesterday morning there was a note that told us which direction to walk to get back, so I walked."

"The others didn't come with you," the Marshal said. It was a statement more than a question.

"That's right," Wilson agreed. "The others didn't come with me."

"Why?"

"They didn't like that I still had my gun," Wilson told the Marshal. "The note said, 'no guns allowed', but I insisted on keeping mine. Agency policy, you know."

"So, they stayed behind?"

"Right," Wilson said. "They stayed behind."

"So, they're still out there on the prairie?" the Marshal asked.

"I guess so," Wilson shrugged.

At this point another Marshal entered the room and dropped a report on the table in front of the interrogator who glanced at it briefly. He turned it so that Wilson could read it and pushed it across the table toward him.

"Agent Lou Wilson, you are under arrest for the murder of agents VanPelt, Osborn, and Pearson. For your information, the three missing agents were found where you shot them: in the greenhouse complex of the Denver Botanical Gardens. That report says all three were shot at close range by the same gun, the gun you still had with you when you were found not two hundred feet from the place you murdered them. You're a disgrace, Agent Wilson. I hope they toast you like a marshmallow."

The other Marshal had already snapped handcuffs on Wilson and now led the dumbstruck agent away.

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Lou Wilson's attorney entered the interview room and extended his hand to meet Lou's.

"Thanks for getting over here so quickly," Lou opened. The lawyer shrugged.

"I suppose you know this is not looking good," the lawyer told Lou. "Your three associates were found in an adjoining building to the one where you were apprehended by Boulder PD. I've seen the crime scene photos and my first impression is that the prosecution has a damn good case. Now, it's time for me to hear your side." He leaned back in his chair with a pen and notebook, ready to take notes.

"I did shoot them," Lou admitted to his attorney, "but not there. We had a shoot-out, but it was miles away from the greenhouse."

"You need to start from the beginning," the lawyer insisted. "I need to know everything that happened right from the beginning."

Okay," Lou agreed. "We were on our way down to the federal courthouse, me and Frank Osborn escorting VanPelt and Pearson. Osborn was driving. He got the entry ticket from the machine in the parking garage and we were on the down ramp when *WHAM!* we're suddenly someplace else. It was like something out of science fiction. One instant we were here and the next we were somewhere else."

"Where?" his lawyer asked.

"I don't know," Lou answered. "It was out on the prairie. Far

out on the prairie. There wasn't a building or a fence or a telephone pole as far as the eye could see, except for the open-pit mine we drove into. Osborn backed the car upslope to the top and there was nothing anywhere around except that pit to indicate the presence of people. A little later we saw a column of smoke to the North so we drove there to see what it was.

"Somebody had laid out a little campsite for us: coolers with beer, water, soft drinks, hot dogs, hamburgers, bacon and eggs, bread, buns, mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, everything you'd need for a picnic or for camping out for a few days. There was a note ordering us to lock our guns in a small safe chained to a nearby tree and some of the others were going to do it, but I ordered them not to.

"That was Friday, I guess. We spent Friday, Saturday, and Sunday there. On Monday morning, there was smoke where we had started on Friday morning and I sent two of them to investigate. They came back after a few hours and said new instructions there were for us to walk East from that spot but that we couldn't have our guns with us. I refused to surrender my gun and the other three turned on me. I had to shoot them in self-defense.

"Then I drove back to the first site, read the instructions, and began driving East. After maybe a mile or so the car got stuck in sand and I had to go on from there on foot. Maybe another mile later I saw a metal detector just standing there by itself out in the middle of nowhere. I tossed my gun past it, walked through the arch, and picked up my gun on the other side.

"There was another set of instructions there. It said to walk South following a trail of red-painted rocks. I started walking. I walked until it was dark and had to use my flashlight to find the next marker. All at once I came to this little outbuilding with an open door. Inside was like a greenhouse, lots of plants on benches and shelves. When I turned around again, the door wasn't there."

"What do you mean: '*...it wasn't there...*'?" the lawyer asked.

"I mean there was no door. I was surrounded by all these plants but there wasn't any door anywhere near me. I still had my cell phone, but the battery was dead from four days trying to find a tower it could talk to so I just wandered around trying to figure out where I was. Just then, four Denver PD arrived and they took me into custody. That's when I discovered there was no door. They asked me where I had come from and I pointed where the door should have been but it wasn't there.

"They took me to the local precinct house, took a statement, then parked me in a hotel overnight. The next morning two Marshals and two Denver PD arrested me for the murders of VanPelt, Pearson, and Osborn.

"That's everything I know."

Lou Wilson's attorney was already contemplating an insanity defense.

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The prison guard unlocked Lou Wilson's cell door. "You have a visitor," he told Lou.

"Who is it?" Lou asked. The guard shrugged.

Lou expected to be led to the visitors' area, but instead the guard took him to an interrogation room. Marjorie Evans, wearing a new shade of blonde and feeling quite pleased over the way it felt on her new short shaggy cut, sat across the table from Lou's chair waiting to interview him. She rose and extended her hand as he entered.

"Mr. Wilson, thank you for seeing me," Marjorie began. "I'm Marjorie Evans with NSA and I'd like to get a little information from you, if I may."

Lou Wilson looked a little confused. "My lawyer told me not to speak with anyone about the case unless he was present," Lou told her.

"I'm sure your attorney meant 'people in the law enforcement community', Mr. Wilson," Evans assured him. "I'm not 'law enforcement'. I'm 'national security', and anything you say to me in here will never make its way back to the FBI. At least, it won't make its way back to them looking like evidence or testimony. Whatever you say to me is safe, but if you prefer I can have your attorney called so he can be here. Whatever makes you comfortable."

"Okay, we can talk," Wilson agreed, "but I may change my mind later."

"That's fine by me," Evans agreed. "I want to hear you describe this place you say you were taken to — the place you were held for four days. What did it look like? How was the weather? Were there plants or animals? Things like that."

"It looked like prairie," Wilson began. "Mostly grassland, some trees, streams here and there, rolling hills. If I didn't know better, I would have said it was Nebraska."

"Trees and grass," she repeated. "What color?"

"Well, the trees were mostly green except the trunks. They were grayish-brown," Wilson told her while wondering what colors she thought trees might be besides green and brown. "The grass was a sort of greenish-tan. I didn't see any animals, but there were tracks in the dirt. Not big prints. Prairie dogs or woodchucks, maybe."

"So, just the sort of colors you would expect to see on any ordinary tree or on any ordinary prairie?" Wilson nodded to confirm

her words. "And there was nothing that might have caused you to think there was any weirdness going on?"

"No," Wilson shook his head, "it all looked the way I expect such stuff to look."

"Alright," Evans concluded as she stood up from the table. "Thanks for your time. You've been very helpful. I'll mention your cooperation to the A.G."

"That's it?" Wilson asked.

"That's it," Evans confirmed.

"What was that all about?" Wilson demanded.

Evans shrugged. "It's a matter of national security," she told him.

As Marjorie Evans walked toward the door Wilson called after her: "How can the color of trees be a matter of national security?" but she ignored the question and kept walking.

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At the end of another long, hard day's work, Barbara, Ernie, and Buck parked their ATVs near the gate for site 1, Ernie's house, and stumbled through into his living room.

While Buck started dinner, Barbara and Ernie signed on to check their e-mail. Ernie had a note from Mark Hamm in Pottstown, a copy of a note sent to Buck.

Tony said there had to be a predator, and he was right. We put up some automatic cameras a few weeks back to see if there were any nocturnal animals prowling in the area. When we checked the cameras earlier today, we found this.

The two pictures attached showed wolf-like creatures. A third picture, obviously taken with a different camera, showed a ruler lying next to a rock common to all the pictures.

The ruler tells you how big the rock is, and therefore how big those wolves are. They're monsters. Maryjane, Burt's granddaughter, identified the animals as Dire wolves and tells us the species has been extinct in North America for about eleven thousand years, that is: about the same time humans crossed over from Asia. She says current thinking is that humans wiped the species out as an act of self-preservation.

If you haven't seen any of these, it's probably because you don't camp outdoors overnight much. If you do see one, you'll think it's a German Shepherd or an Alsatian on steroids. The smaller one here is probably a female and we think she weighs about 140 pounds. The bigger one is a male and looks to be about 170 pounds.

They appear to be largely or strictly nocturnal. That's why they haven't been seen.

Some of the younger guys are itching to bag one, but the local council has forbidden it pending the approval of the western council. If what Maryjane says is true, these things probably only need one bite. They are very very very very dangerous.

We'll send more info when we have it.

Barbara read the note over Ernie's shoulder. Buck also joined the reading at the urging of Barbara. "I wonder if I should order a curfew?" Barbara asked aloud.

"Either that or edict that no one may be out after dark in parties of fewer than three, all armed," Buck suggested.

Barbara took her cell phone and dialed the special number for Farside's broadcast mailbox. A message left there would result in a voicemail message on every phone registered to Steve Okambo Jr.'s 'Farside Telephone Company'.

"This is Barbara FitzGibbon-Walsh," she began. She still could not bring herself to use her official title. "Effective immediately no one is to be outside unarmed after dark nor in parties of fewer than three. There is credible evidence of large nocturnal carnivores in Pennsylvania and we must assume they are present in Colorado as well. A moot will be scheduled within the week. Please make every effort to attend."

"That would explain the absence of deer and elk in this region," Ernie mumbled.

"No, I don't think so," Buck answered. "Humans are omnivores and if we hunt a species to extinction we can switch to a different food animal. Wolves are carnivores. When they hunt prey to extinction, they starve. In practical terms, when the population of prey animals falls below a certain threshold, the wolf population contracts due to short rations. This gives the prey species time to recover. Over the course of ages, you see a natural balance between the populations develop such that the year-to-year variances are very

small. You never see either predator or prey disappear. If there are no deer and no elk here there's a different reason."

"Do we even have rifles here?" Barbara wondered aloud. "Except for the one rifle Pat Messier has, I don't know of anyone who even has a rifle. Perhaps we ought to find out."

Now it was Ernie's turn to leave a message on the broadcast mailbox. "This is Ernie Walsh," he announced himself when the line had connected. "At the next moot, we will be discussing the formation of a Farside Militia. Please come prepared to say what sort of firearms you have available for your own use."

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When Barbara appeared on stage at the Moot Hall, she wore a long formal gown of light blue, the same shade as the now semi-official Farside flag.

"You have to have something elegant to wear when the crown comes out," Peg Clancy insisted. "It's expected." When Barbara agreed, Peg went shopping, quickly locating a gown whose size and shape particularly pleased her. Two fittings later the gown took its place in Barbara's closet next to the polished black walnut box containing her crown.

As Barbara approached the microphone, the entire hall rose to its feet and began to sing what had become their more-or-less-official national anthem:

*Our home is a land full of beauty,
Free as the birds in the air,
Our futures are bright as the morning,
Our hearts full of joy where'er we fare.
To she who returned us to Eden
We pledge her our faith and our might
We walk at her side
Our hearts bursting with pride
Ever onward to day from night.*

"Be seated," Barbara told them when the anthem had finished and they all retook their seats. "Are there matters of concern to be brought before the Crown?" she asked. Silence greeted her and she smiled. She, of course, already knew the answer before the question was asked. The people of Farside would ordinarily have approached Paul Gillman for a slot on the agenda before the start of the moot and Paul had just informed her that there were no issues to be handled. She turned away from the microphone and left it for Paul's use.

As Paul took his position at the lectern, an image of a rock with a yardstick next to it appeared on the screen above his head. "This rock is approximately twenty-two inches across at its base," he began as the image was replaced by that of a wolf standing near the rock. "This wolf, approximately six feet from nose to tail, has been tentatively identified as a Dire Wolf, and is in the 170-pound range. The picture was taken in Farside corresponding to southeastern Pennsylvania.

"Whether Dire wolves are found elsewhere in Farside is presently unknown. Dire wolves are not found in North America. They have been extinct for ten-to-eleven thousand years, but they are not extinct in Farside, as these photos show." The image changed to show the other wolf. "This female, about five-and-a-half feet from nose to tail is thought to weigh in at 140 pounds.

"This is the reason for the recent curfew. While there have not been any incidents involving these strictly-nocturnal wolves, neither do we want to have any incidents. If there are to be any incidents, we want you to be the ones who come home. Thus, no one may be out at night unless armed and in the company of at least two others, also armed.

"I would now like to ask for a show of hands: how many people here have firearms?" A smattering of hands went into the air. "How many have rifles?" A smaller number of hands. "How many have handguns?" An even smaller number of hands.

One person stood to speak. "I have several firearms at my Nearside home but I never brought them over — didn't think I would ever need them here what with all the wildlife we don't have." A few people chuckled. "Shall I bring them?"

"Better to have them and not need them than to need them and not have them," Paul advised him.

"All able-bodied citizens are — unofficially — the militia. Men, women, and children from the time they can safely bear arms constitute the policing authority in Farside. This doesn't mean you can go busting your neighbor for littering. You are the means by which Farside protects itself, and as such you must be able to protect yourselves from whatever forces operate to destabilize the community. Is there anyone here who thinks they ought not to be in the Farside militia?"

Dante Robinetti rose. "I am, as you well know, a convicted felon. I'm not permitted to bear arms."

Barbara stepped up to the microphone. "Dante, you are a felon only in Nearside. In Farside, the law that forbids you bearing arms does not apply. You know, certainly, the law that does apply here, don't you?"

"The Golden Rule," Dante replied.

Barbara smiled and took her seat.

"Neat," Dante continued, "but I can't buy a gun. Where will I get arms to bear?"

Paul had a startled look on his face, aware now of a serious flaw in their plans. Fully a sixth of Farside's residents were 'prohibited persons' in Nearside. He turned to look at Barbara and saw her chuckling silently to herself. He moved toward his queen for a quiet conference.

"This is not a problem, Paul," she assured him. "'The crown' will be providing arms and ammunition for all those who, by virtue of onerous Nearside laws, are unable to provide them for themselves."

"May I ask how?" Paul pressed.

"We will liberate the necessary material from Nearside armories," Barbara explained.

"Doesn't stealing violate The Golden Rule?" Paul asked with a smile.

"It isn't stealing, Paul," Barbara continued. "Dante and all the others have paid for that material via taxes, all the while their government denied them rights guaranteed in their own constitution. I have no pangs of conscience over this. Their Congress certainly didn't when they stripped these people of the means of self-defense. The Golden Rule tells us that's how they want us to deal with them, and that's how we will deal with them."

Paul smiled and returned to the microphone. "The crown informs me that this problem will be addressed to almost everyone's satisfaction. If you have a particular sort of firearm you would purchase had you the option, please get with me later to discuss it."

With that, the moot broke up and most people went on about their business. Dante, Lee Smith, Pete Gorsky, and several others approached Paul.

"I know nothing about guns," Dante told Paul. Most of the others muttered their agreement that they, too, knew little about firearms.

"Then let us pick out something useful for you. If I read Her Majesty correctly, you'll be able to change your mind and change your gun later if you actually develop a preference." Everyone was satisfied with that plan and they headed back to their work.

23 - Search and Rescue

Marjorie Evans followed her escort into NSA's Hydraulics Lab. There are some places even a Special Agent can't go without permission.

She was here at the invitation of the Chief of Research to discuss the now-abandoned exploration of an alternate universe and the presumed death of four of his best staff.

The Chief stuck out his hand in greeting as she entered the conference room: "Evans."

"Thanks for having me over, Chief," she responded grabbing his hand and shaking it.

"You said you had something new on this?" the Chief prodded.

"I think so," Marjorie answered. "We've been keeping a very low-key surveillance on the three key players whose location we know about: Barbara fitzGibbon, now 'fitzGibbon-Walsh' since her marriage to Ernest S. Walsh, another of the key figures, and Marion E. 'Buck' fitzGibbon, her father. The other key players, Alfred Beddowes Jr. and Fatah Abou-Saad, dropped off the radar at the time of the original investigation and have not been seen since. We presume they are both deceased.

"All of the first three live quietly in Boulder, Colorado, apparently surviving on the proceeds of the insurance on their former residence and the sale of the property on which that house was built. They frequent an equipment-rental concern in Valmont along with about three- or four-dozen others who may or may not be employees.

"A little over a year ago, two of those others were involved in a suspected money-laundering operation involving gold ingots. The case was eventually dropped when the evidence, a 3/4-ounce ingot, went missing along with the only two witnesses. Those witnesses later refused to discuss where they were during the time they were supposed to be testifying at the trial."

"Is this going somewhere?" the Chief asked impatiently, "and, if so, can you please go there?"

"It's coming, Chief. Please bear with me," Marjorie told him.

"Within the month, we've had a repeat of that scenario with some variation. Secret Service was investigating a counterfeiting operation involving gold coins."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait," the Chief interrupted. "Gold coins are sold based on 'how much gold is in the coin'. Why would anyone counterfeit gold coins? Were they only gold-looking coins?"

"That's not my area of expertise, Chief," Marjorie again

begged off. "I'm concerned over the peripheral events: four Secret Service agents in transit to the federal courthouse in Denver to testify suddenly found themselves transported instantaneously to a vast primitive wilderness populated only by mysterious unseen others who dig strip mines and who leave picnic coolers of food and notes with instructions for finding one's way home. Of course, they never made it to the court to testify and that case was also dismissed for lack of witnesses. The accused was a business associate of one Dennis Cameron, a precious metals dealer and a one-time boyfriend of Barbara FitzGibbon-Walsh."

The Chief was now leaning in to absorb every word Marjorie spoke. "I interviewed the sole survivor among the Secret Service agents — Lou Wilson, now awaiting trial for the murder of his three companions — who claimed to have spent four days between Friday morning and Monday night in that vast primitive wilderness. I asked him specifically what color the vegetation was. He said it appeared normal in every way. He also claimed to have covered, driving and walking through that vast primitive wilderness, only a few miles between the Federal courthouse and the Denver Botanical Gardens where he was eventually found.

"That distance is approximately the distance one would travel, given the directions he had, between the courthouse and the botanical gardens. He claims to have walked through the door of a small outbuilding into the botanical gardens, after which the 'door' was no longer there."

"And you think they solved the puzzle?" the Chief asked Marjorie.

"I think if it ever was a puzzle for them, yes, they solved it," she opined.

"Okay. What now?"

"Is there no chance you'll make any progress now that you know it is possible?" Marjorie asked.

The Chief shook his head. "No. We've known it's possible since we first saw a portal open. That's not the issue. When we tried to replicate the blown chip, we got negative results. One of the remaining chips generates the wrong wave: it doesn't match the pattern in the research paper from which it was supposedly taken. We think the effect was a fluke — not replicable — and that the paper itself is a hoax."

Marjorie Evans thought (but didn't say) *You're wrong*. "Well, thanks for your time, Chief," she said as she rose to leave.

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Marjorie Evans knocked on the door of the modest house on 17th Street, but no one answered. She sat in her car to wait for someone to get home. Several hours later she saw movement through the curtains as a figure moved from one room to another. She went to the door again and knocked, and Ernie answered it.

"You look familiar," Ernie offered on first seeing his visitor's face.

"We've met before," Marjorie admitted, "some years back. My name is Marjorie Evans. I work for the National Security Agency. I'd like to have a few words with Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh if she's here — and willing to see me."

By this time, Barbara herself had come to the door. "Ah, Mrs. Walsh," Evans greeted her. "I'm Marjorie Evans with NSA. You may recall me arresting you the last time we met."

"Yes?" Barbara prompted.

"I came to ask if you and I might have a quiet chat, strictly unofficial, strictly off-the-record," Marjorie explained. "Let me assure you: you are in no danger of being re-arrested and you are not under suspicion for any crime."

Barbara stood aside to allow Marjorie to enter. "And the topic of conversation?" Barbara asked.

"Well," Marjorie said cryptically, "I want to tell you a story."

Marjorie sat on one end of the couch in the living room and Barbara took the other end. Ernie and Buck sat on nearby chairs.

"The last time we met, you and I, I seized a device: a plastic framework with magnets and wires and what-not, that you claimed belonged to Alfred Beddowes Jr. Researchers at NSA managed to get that device to work. As you admitted that day, when activated, the framework turns into a portal of some sort allowing access into a kind of alternate universe.

"It's an odd sort of place from what I've heard. Everything is black-and-white or shades of gray except those things brought through the portal. There's also a time-slip, they tell me, of about three-to-one so that one day on the other side takes three days on this side."

Barbara, Ernie, and Buck tried their very best to maintain neutral facial expressions. "You got it to work," Barbara said matter-of-factly. "Good. Why are you telling us this?"

"About eight months ago," Marjorie continued, "one of the chips that control the device burned out. The opening into that other world closed instantly. Four of our researchers were on the other side.

"When we tried to replace the chip with another built according to the specs in the Beddowes treatise, it didn't work. We

have not been able to reopen the passage and our researchers are still trapped on the other side. They've spent, now, three months in wilderness with only the clothes on their back and the instruments they had with them at the time.

"I'm not going to ask you if there's anything you haven't told me about the Beddowes project. For one thing, I'm pretty sure there's a great deal you haven't shared regarding the Beddowes project, and I wouldn't want you either to self-incriminate or to make a knowingly false statement to a federal officer. Note that I haven't asked you how you came to be in this house despite my watching it closely for several hours since I knocked earlier and had no response.

"For another, if I'm wrong, all of this is just babble to you. I merely want to note that I am very concerned for the well-being of those stranded researchers.

"Thank you for listening," she concluded. She handed Barbara her business card. "Should you ever wish to talk to me — for any reason — you can reach me on any of those numbers." Marjorie Evans stood and moved toward the front door.

"May I ask," Ernie inquired, "where these researchers were lost?"

"The NSA Hydraulics Lab is in New York City, midtown Manhattan," Evans answered. "I have to presume they were in that vicinity, at least."

"And what do you expect from us?" Barbara asked.

"Nothing," Evans responded. "Not a thing." She opened the door and left the house.

"I think..." Ernie began. Barbara silenced him immediately with a finger to her lips.

Barbara dialed a number preprogrammed on her cell phone. "I need a team from Pennsylvania," she informed Tony Dinardo when he answered his phone. "They'll need Type-I gates."

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Mark Hamm met the courier, Ted Chubb, at Newark Airport and took him directly to Mark's daughter's apartment in the 200-block of Manhattan's East 62nd Street. The 11th floor apartment provided a view of all of Manhattan island and everything surrounding it out to about fourteen miles except for all the buildings blocking the view.

The afternoon was spent constructing and testing a seven-chip Type-I gate and acquiring a multi-million candlepower spotlight and a marine air horn for use as signaling devices. When the gate opened, the team had to remind themselves what Barbara had told them: the portal of a Type-I gate is always transparent. You can't tell if a Type-I

gate is working except by trying it.

With the new gate operating, one team member leaned through to see what was on the other side. He was back in an instant. "It's pitch black there. Let me have the lantern."

Now armed with a spotlight, the searcher began making sweeps of the tree tops and occasionally blasting the horn. Manhattan island in this alternate universe appeared to be only moderately forested as evidenced by numerous breaks in the greencover. Periodically, the searcher would retract into Nearside, reposition the gate to allow his spotlight to sweep other quadrants, and start the new segment with several blasts from the horn. If anyone were alive in this part of the world, they ought to be attracted either to the noise or to the light.

The sweeps continued, one quadrant at a time, on into the Nearside night. By midnight it appeared to the searchers' eyes that dawn was approaching. A lessening of the darkness to the east was all they had to go on for that assumption, but by four a.m. there was no longer any doubt. There was now a definite glow in the sky. In another few hours, the spotlight might become useless.

"Let's set up a campfire on the other side," one suggested, "and let them home on the smoke."

"Assuming," Mark Hamm pointed out, "that any of them are still alive."

The building's rarely-used emergency stairway allowed them to set up a gate at exactly the proper altitude to match the terrain on the other side. Ted Chubb volunteered to build the smoker. As he stepped through into Earth-II, his first task was to spray-paint the margins of the now-invisible gate so he would be able to find it when his task was done. He knew that twenty minutes in Earth-II was an entire hour in Nearside, so he set to work gathering wood and clearing a space for his campfire. Having started a smoky leaf-fueled fire, he retired back through the gate.

"It will only burn for an hour or two," he told Mark Hamm. "We should do it again in another three to six hours."

By the time they were ready to rebuild the fire, an inspection of the campsite from their 11th floor perch revealed the presence of four bearded and bedraggled figures huddled around the campfire and restoking it with fallen branches. Mark Hamm leaned through the now-100-foot high portal and called to the men: "Stay where you are. I'm sending a rescue party." The four men on the ground below waved and cheered. "Is there anything you need right away?"

"A cheeseburger!" one of them shouted back.

Mark immediately called Arlo Rubinstein. "We've located them," he told Arlo. "Send the truck. I'm going out to get them some

cheeseburgers.”

While Arlo was on his way to Manhattan with the truck, Ted Chubb and Mark found a burger restaurant and ordered eight cheeseburgers to go, with french fries and drinks.

Back at the apartment building, they opened a Type-I gate into Earth-II where Ted found the four NSA researchers still gathered around the campfire.

“I’m Ted,” he introduced himself as he handed them their burgers. The four men tore the wrappings from their burgers and wolfed them down.

“I’ve called for a rescue party and they’ll be here shortly.”

They all looked around in puzzlement. “Why can’t we just step through that gate you just used?” they asked. “Why can’t we go back the same way?”

“You won’t be going back to New York City, gentlemen,” Ted explained. “If you were to go back to your jobs at NSA, that would be proof positive that the technology you were investigating when the gate failed is shared outside of NSA. That’s not going to happen.

“You are going to join a community in what would be — in your world — southeastern Pennsylvania. You will be, at least, in a world with other people with whom you can form a community and — we hope — live out the remainder of your lives in reasonable comfort. Your former lives are gone forever.

“If that arrangement is not to your liking, my orders are to abandon you here. It’s now time for you to choose whether you will go with me or stay here. Both choices are irrevocable.”

“I’m going with you,” one of them said and the others muttered their agreement.

“If there’s anything you need to take with you,” Ted told them, “now is the time to gather it. We have about an hour, maybe less, before our transportation shows up.” They all agreed there was nothing here they needed ever again.

Within the hour, a 1“x12” ramp appeared out of nowhere a few yards away, and Arlo Rubinstein walked down the plank into Earth-II. “Wow! Weird!” he exclaimed as he looked all around at this bizarre black-and-white world. “Whenever you gentlemen are ready,” he informed them, “we’ll be on our way to Hamburg.”

They all went up the ramp, Arlo first, then the four scientists, with Ted bringing up the rear. Mark had already joined the driver in the truck’s cab and at a signal from Arlo that the ramp was stowed and the gate closed, the truck pulled away from the curb and began its trip to Pennsylvania.

The six passengers: Arlo, Ted, and the four rescued scientists,

sat with their backs to the wall on padded packing blankets for the entire two-and-a-half-hour trip occasionally making conversation but mostly keeping to themselves. Both Ted and Arlo, despite their age, looked like they could each handle three of the worn-out men they were escorting. During the trip, Ted casually reconfigured the gate by disabling two of the chips, changing it from a Type-I to a Type-II gate.

At last, with a few final bounces, the truck came to a stop on Mark Hamm's property. Mark bashed the partition behind him and announced: "We're here!"

Arlo switched on the gate and the image of Hammburg appeared in the frame. He pushed the ramp through to provide an easy walkway for the still-fatigued passengers and they walked down the plank into their new home.

The residents greeted the new arrivals by stripping the rags from their bodies and escorting all four to a giant tub of soapy water.

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"I am pleased to report, your majesty, that the rescue of the four stranded researchers was accomplished with no exposure that we can determine," Ted Chubb told Barbara and her council. "They are now housed with the community at Hammburg and are integrating well, as far as we can see. All of them have engineering and scientific backgrounds, as you might expect of such persons, and are proving invaluable at improving the Hammburg infrastructure.

"Hammburg itself, from what I observed, is coming along nicely. Several windmills are providing electric power adequate to run essential equipment, and plans are afoot to provide cellular service, although they seem to be having trouble locating a no-questions-asked service provider. Agricultural operations are blooming, if you will pardon the pun, and they expect that they will be nearly self-sufficient by next Summer."

"Thank you, Ted. You've done a splendid job and we very much appreciate it," Barbara told him.

"Now, there is one more task we would like you to handle, and with the same level of precision, dedication, and confidentiality." She handed him a sealed envelope.

24 - Oops

At the command of his sovereign, Ted Chubb arranged the theft — for lack of a better word — of several rifles in the .30-caliber class. At the selected gun shop, although the owner wasn't entirely pleased with the honor, Ted left a note on the counter listing the items taken and their serial numbers, along with a suggestion that if the owner were to provide an invoice pinned to the store's cork board, the invoice might actually be paid. Thinking he had little to lose, the owner did as instructed, and the following morning discovered a small pile of gold coins, each bearing a woman's profile, stacked atop the invoice on the store's counter.

As far as the owner could tell, the little pile of coins represented a most generous interpretation of the current exchange rate. That was the good news. The bad news was that the Secret Service confiscated the entire pile of coins, leaving the store's owner still out the cost of sixteen very expensive rifles and a substantial amount of ammunition.

All was not lost, however. Sixteen rifles were just the tip of the iceberg. In ensuing weeks Ted and his assistants repeated the feat at a half-dozen more stores. At each, copies of newspaper clippings covering the first operation, highlighted to emphasize the Secret Service's seizure of payment, were left with the inventory. The message was obvious to all but the most dense: *by all means, report the theft, but keep information about the payment to yourself.*

Ted's team also gave the same grab-and-run treatment to the storeroom at the nearest National Guard Armory. Unlike the last time this had happened, when Al Beddowes and Fatah raided a National Guard Armory, no alarms rang. Thanks to their type-II gates, these raiders could see where they were without actually stepping through the gate and triggering a motion sensor. They thus could position a gate so that it was just inside the confines of a storage crate, and slide the entire contents out leaving the box intact and empty.

At inventory-time, whenever that might be, two soldiers would pick up this crate and discover it to be far lighter than they expected. Then they would discover why, and no one would be able to explain how this crate, among many others, happened to not contain what all their records said it did.

Over the course of just a few weeks, everyone in Colorado-in-Farside who wished to do so became armed.

Most of those who took advantage of the newly-available firearms, knowing that those dealers had been reimbursed with

Barbara's gold, also donated a few coins to the royal treasury, such as it was, to help defray the cost, so Barbara, Buck, and Ernie weren't very far in the red for the operation.

When the people of Farside heard that there was a shortage, many chipped in to cover the missing part, so much that Barbara's treasury wound up with a surplus. Barbara called Samantha Burke in for a conference.

"Samantha, I want you to handle the royal treasury from now on," Barbara told her. "If you accept this commission, I appoint you Chancellor."

"Her majesty is very kind," Samantha replied. "I accept the commission," and she gave Barbara a slight bow.

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The four rescued NSA researchers were, to anyone who watched them at their daily activities, integrating nicely into their new community. The community took them in immediately and made them part of the family as if they had always been there. The scientists, in turn, provided suggestions and hands-on expertise to make the community's operations run a little smoother. Over the course of two months as Fall blended into Winter, the confidence of the people in their new neighbors gradually increased to the point that they were no longer accompanied by a supervisor, and they were allowed to wander freely about the community.

"But stay away from the gate," they were cautioned.

Even 'staying away from the gate', they were still able to observe the occasional passage. Those transiting the gate into Nearside (as they had heard some of the residents call the land on the other side) lifted a spring-loaded cover over the activation button, pressed the button, and stepped through the gate during the approximately five seconds it stayed open before closing automatically. Presumably, the process was similar for those arriving from Nearside.

"It doesn't look too difficult," one of the researchers told his fellows. "I think I may try to make a break for it."

The others looked at him askance. "And then, what?" another asked him. "Do you know what's on the other side?"

"It's southeastern Pennsylvania," the first replied. "That's what they told us the day they brought us here. Do you think they were lying?"

"That's not the point," his debate opponent countered. "Southeastern Pennsylvania is a big piece of territory. What do you do once you're on the other side?"

"Flag down a passing motorist," the first shrugged. "Find a cop. Bring back help to rescue any of you who don't come with me."

"You think we'd have a better chance if more than one goes through?" a third asked.

"Yes, of course," the first answered. "At the very least, we could split up and make it harder for them to recapture us. I assume they'll try to recapture us. If they don't, then there will be two or more of us telling the police the same story. Yes, two is better than one."

"I'm with you," the third told him.

"Tomorrow, then," the first said. "As soon as dawn starts to show, we go."

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In the predawn darkness, the men spoke to each other in whispers.

"Do we have any idea what time it is on the other side?" one asked.

"Not me. We've spent so much time on this side of the gate that I don't know how to figure the conversion. It could be broad daylight. It could be midnight. I don't know. We'll just have to take our chances."

As dawn began to color the Eastern sky, the four slipped out of the cabin they all shared and made for the portal in the town square. No one else was yet up and about. The dairies and ranches some miles to the west were, of course, already buzzing with activity, but in this farming community, the fruits, vegetables, and other plants did not require tending quite so early and most people here slept in much later than the ranchers and dairymen.

Maxwell Purdy, the senior researcher, flipped open the protective cover on the activation switch and pressed it. The portal popped open and the lights in the town square flickered to life. Mark Hamm, only moments away from waking up naturally, was roused from sleep by the sudden light streaming through his bedroom window.

Maxwell and two others scampered through the gate. The fourth hesitated, fearing the gate might snap shut, and waited for the timer to run out. When the gate finally closed, he pressed the switch again and joined his fellows on the other side, in Pennsylvania.

The others were already running away from the portal as they had agreed during their planning for this escape. He noted the directions each of the others had taken, picked another and began running.

In Farside, Mark Hamm rolled over just in time to see the last of the scientists step through the open portal. As the co-mayor of Hamburg, with the power to sound the warning siren, he could rouse the entire town. Seconds later, the wail of the siren had everyone in town awake, those who were not already stirring getting ready to start their daily routine.

"The scientists have escaped!" he shouted from his window as other heads popped into view from their windows.

Immediately, people from Farside started scrambling out their front doors headed for the gate. The first ones through the portal alerted the Nearside community via cell phones, and within minutes the hunt for the four escaped scientists was on.

The scientists, having virtually no outdoor experience, had a trying time making their way through the brushy countryside. The locals, most of them experienced outdoorsmen, found the trails of the scientists easily and followed them at high speed, aided by two-way radio communication between the several coordinated search parties.

Within twenty-five minutes of the first alarm, three of the scientists had been located, bound, and gagged, and were on their way back to Farside.

Dick Paulsen, the second scientist through the gate, was the only one to make a clean getaway. Stumbling south over fields planted with he-couldn't-imagine-what, Dick blundered through a narrow strip of forest and onto a blacktop highway. Down the road toward the east he could see lights in a window and he ran toward them. It was the parsonage of a small church and there appeared to be someone awake and getting ready for the day. He tripped up the stairs and rang the doorbell.

"Help me, please," he begged the middle-aged man who answered the door. "I've been kidnapped."

The parson stared at Dick as if he were mad. "Kidnapped?" he repeated the word.

Dick pushed his way past the cleric into the house. "Call the police!" he demanded.

Thinking this intruder might, in fact, be psychotic, the parson acceded to Dick's demand. He lifted the handset and dialed 9-1-1. "There's a man here who claims he's been kidnapped," the parson explained to the 9-1-1 operator, who promised to send a police unit there promptly.

Within the quarter hour, a police cruiser pulled to a stop outside the parsonage and two officers rang the doorbell.

"I'm Dick Paulsen," Dick told them as they began their questioning. "I work for NSA, the National Security Agency, and I was kidnapped some months back along with three of my colleagues. I

have to get in touch with the nearest NSA office.”

“First things first,” the officer insisted. “I need to see some ID.”

“I don’t have any ID,” Paulsen explained patiently. “They took everything except the clothes I’m wearing. Put me in touch with NSA. They will ID me.”

After a few rounds of this, the police relented and managed to contact (via Harrisburg and Washington DC) someone in NSA who listened patiently to their story, looked up the name ‘Dick Paulsen’, and got very excited. “Keep him right there,” the police were ordered. Thirty-five minutes later, the *whomp-whomp-whomp* of helicopter blades announced the arrival of Dick’s ride home. Forty minutes after that, Dick was walking into NSA headquarters just outside Washington DC.

His debriefing was brief and to-the-point. He told them about spending three months, more or less, in wilderness with his colleagues until they were rescued by people they had never met before, how they had been transported to what they believed was southeastern Pennsylvania to a place the residents called ‘Hammburg’, and how four of them had made a break for freedom in the early morning hours, scattering in four directions to make recapture more difficult. The most interesting aspect of this story was that Dick Paulsen confirmed the existence of working portals between his own universe and another similar one.

The administrator in charge of the Hydraulics Lab was one of the first to be roused from his bed by the Incident Team and got his own helicopter ride to DC for a most unpleasant one-on-one chat with the Director of National Security.

Later that morning, Marjorie Evans’ phone rang. On the other end, Barbara’s voice informed her: “We have to talk.”

“Here or there?” Marjorie asked.

“Boulder, preferably,” Barbara suggested. “By now you have probably heard the news that one of your four missing scientists has returned.”

“As a matter of fact, no,” Marjorie answered, “I hadn’t heard that, although I probably will hear it officially pretty soon. What of the other three?”

“That’s a secondary topic,” Barbara insisted. “The primary topic is that if the investigation into trans-dimensional rationalization continues at NSA or anywhere else, we will consider it an act of war.”

Marjorie gasped at the boldness of Barbara’s words. “Who is ‘we’?” Marjorie asked.

“The people and the government of Farside,” Barbara explained.

"I think you're right," Marjorie agreed. "We really do have to talk. It will take me a while to make arrangements, but I think I'll be able to get out there by this evening. Your place?"

"My place," Barbara agreed and hung up.

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The Air Force F-15E carrying Marjorie Evans as a passenger flared at the east end of Denver's runway 26 and slowed until it could safely turn out. It was met by a Cessna Citation standing by at the far end of the runway. Marjorie unhooked the oxygen supply and communications cables and carefully climbed out of the cockpit. She worked her way gingerly to the trailing edge of the left wing, tossed her overnight bag to the crewman waiting below, and slid off the wing to the ground.

The Citation crewman assisted her on board the smaller business jet and it immediately began rolling toward the east end of the runway where it turned, throttled up, and roared off toward Boulder. A few minutes later, it landed at Boulder Municipal, having given Marjorie barely enough time to strip off her boots and flight suit and put on a more conventional pair of shoes. She transited to a waiting car whose GPS had already been programmed with the address of Ernie Walsh's house.

Nine minutes later, she turned into Ernie's driveway and parked the car. She knocked on the front door of Ernie's house and waited.

From their observation post in Farside, Barbara and Ernie could see that Marjorie Evans was alone. Buck answered the door, holding it open for Marjorie to enter.

"Are you armed?" Buck asked.

"Always," Marjorie answered.

Buck nodded. "Keep it stowed," he ordered and he led her to the doorway that normally would lead to Ernie's kitchen. That doorway seemed to open onto a short hallway with an L-bend. As soon as Buck and Marjorie turned the corner of the hallway, the portal at the entrance was powered down, removing Marjorie's access to Nearside. At the end of the hallway, a door opened into a room containing a table and several chairs on one of which Barbara sat, waiting. Barbara motioned Marjorie toward a chair and Marjorie sat while Buck and Ernie stood against the far wall.

"Are you seriously considering going to war with the United States?" Marjorie asked as an opening gambit.

"Only if absolutely necessary," Barbara offered. "We live here under a single law all are required to follow. You know it as 'the

golden rule'. Since we do not want the United States making war upon us, we will do all in our power to secure peace. What we cannot — what we will not allow is the imposition of other law upon our peaceful community, specifically, your law.

"You injected four researchers into our world without our permission. We did not interfere with them. When you asked us to rescue them, we did what we could to save their lives. We provided them with a community and work and food and clothing and shelter, exactly what we would do for anyone we found lost and alone."

"You kept them prisoner," Marjorie interjected. "You're still keeping three of them prisoner."

"Which would you have preferred as their fate?" Barbara countered. "That they died of starvation in wilderness? You insist we return them with their knowledge intact — more knowledge, in fact, than they had the day you came to us, hat in hand, with your tale of stranded travelers. We choose not to make your task easier, since your task is, ultimately, to open a portal, invade us, conquer us, and make us subject to your laws.

"One of those stranded travelers has escaped us and has returned to you. We will not contest your good fortune, but we insist you take your prize and call it 'quits'. We insist you halt your research into methods of opening a gate from your world to ours.

"If you do not, you will force us to take defensive measures. We don't want that, and I assure you that you do not, either."

"What sort of defensive measures?" Marjorie asked. Buck flashed Barbara a look that clearly said, 'no comment'.

Barbara shook her head, but said nothing.

"You understand I will not be able to stop progress on this project, don't you?" Marjorie asked. Barbara nodded silently. "That means you will be waging war on your own government. Give me something I can use to smooth the road to a peaceful solution."

"I can't think of anything that might fit the bill," Barbara answered. "Of course, if the United States is really interested in coexistence rather than conquest, they shouldn't need much, should they?" Marjorie gave her a little smile.

"As long as you're here," Barbara continued, "would you like to see Farside?"

Marjorie smiled more broadly. "I would," she said. "NSA wouldn't let me near the equipment at the lab, so I've never actually seen what all the fuss is about."

Barbara rose and motioned for Marjorie to follow. Buck and Ernie took up the rear as they exited the room and went through a door to site 1. As Marjorie passed through the door, she asked Barbara "where's the gate?"

"You went through it earlier," Barbara explained.

"Without knowing it?" Marjorie asked. Barbara smiled.

"I was told everything in this world is black-and-white," Marjorie remarked. "All of this looks perfectly normal."

"Minor adjustments sometimes make big differences," Ernie explained.

Marjorie looked around her. All she could see was the relatively primitive clearing at site 1 and the pre-fab building housing the gate into Ernie's house. There was no sign of the house itself.

"Interesting," Marjorie remarked. "I think it's time for me to head back."

Barbara pointed at the door to the shed and they all moved toward it. Buck opened a viewer and began to reconnoiter the world beyond the gate. When he was sure Ernie's house had not been compromised, he keyed the code for Ernie's gate into the transmitter he carried and pressed the 'go' button. Marjorie and the others walked to the end of the corridor and into Ernie's living room.

25 - Prelude to War

"Basically, they're telling us to back off and leave them alone," Marjorie told her boss' boss.

"And?" he prompted.

"And I think it's a bluff. They took me through into what they call 'Farside'. There was nothing there except a pre-fab building and a dirt road. They've got *bupkis*. Our own research tells us there's an entire world waiting for us if we can break the code. More titanium, more chromium, more iron, more gold, more silver, more oil than we know what to do with and all without having to deal with third-world bozos. It's ours for the taking, and we should take it."

"You're on the same page, then," he told her. "Everybody else at HQ feels the same way. Paulsen is being promoted to project chief and the funding faucet is full-open. The Director also wants their operation infiltrated and one of their gates brought back so we can figure out what kind of 'minor adjustments' they made. You're in charge of that end."

Marjorie smiled. "Think of it as 'done'," she assured the Director.

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Harry Tumulty sat at his workbench near a small type-II gate mounted on a frame and repeatedly switched it on and off. The instruments scattered around the workbench obediently listened, as such machines are wont to do, for any indication of RF emissions. As the gate switched on and off, the oscilloscope attached to a small parabolic dish antenna reported what, if anything, it was hearing from the gate. Harry could see *something* on the scope, but it was barely a flicker. The clean, continuous 68.714 MHz spike produced by all type-I gates was not, as far as he could tell, replicated by the type-II gates.

"If there's something coming off this gate, it's really weak," Harry muttered to himself as he again adjusted the scale. "Maybe at a higher frequency," he mumbled.

Searching in the 80-100 MHz range, there was still that little 'ping', a mere flicker in the electromagnetic spectrum, when he changed the gate's state. He boosted the range again to 100-120 MHz and the flicker seemed a little stronger. Or was that just wishful thinking? As he reached higher and higher, it seemed to Harry that the flicker became more pronounced. When he switched the scope to cover the 280-300 MHz range, there was no longer any doubt. At

288.02 MHz FM, a dimple in the scan line was clearly evident. When the gate was turned on or turned off there would be a giant spike in the line, settling to a much quieter level after the gate was fully open and disappearing completely when the gate was turned off.

"Gotcha!" Harry whispered.

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Peg Clancy was awakened in the predawn by something scratching at the door of their cabin in the Great North Meadow and, opening the door a crack, came face-to-face with the biggest wolf she had ever seen; the only wolf, in fact, that she had even seen in person. She slammed the door shut and threw her whole body weight against it to hold it closed.

"Walt!" she screamed to wake her husband from his slumber.

Walt was out of his bed and awake in an instant. Seeing Peg holding the door closed by main force, he grabbed his .44 Magnum out of its holster.

"What is it?" Walt asked Peg.

"Wolf," she replied succinctly. "One of those things they showed us at the moot-before-last. It's a monster."

Walt edged closer to the door. "Let it open a little," he told Peg. Peg eased off her pressure on the door and it opened to a 4-inch slit through which a gray muzzle, fangs bared, pushed. Walt fired once at the animal's forehead and it lurched backward collapsing in a heap. The powerful magnum slug destroyed the back of the wolf's head and nearly detached the hind quarters from the rest of the torso. The other wolf, its mate, startled by the thunderous boom of Walt's handgun, fled.

An hour later as dawn began to light their campsite Walt and Peg ventured outside to see what they had done. They found a female Dire Wolf, 130 pounds, at least, when living judging from the remains left behind, and skinny, as if it had not fed in some time.

"I think it's time you had your own gun, Peg," Walt told his wife. "If you had been down by the sluice when these wolves happened by, I'd be burying what they left of you right now. If they left anything." Peg's face was white. The wolf's jaw could almost accommodate her entire head, and the musculature made her suspect it could have ripped limbs from her torso with ease. This was a creature of nightmares. Peg and Walt loaded the carcass onto a utility trailer and they convoyed the corpse into Okambo.

In the town square, residents gathered around the carcass and marveled at it. "What are you going to do with it?" one asked Walt. Walt stared back at him.

"What do you mean: '*do with it*'?" Walt asked in return.

"Are you going to have it mounted or something?"

"I hadn't thought about it that far," Walt admitted. "It would make one heck of an exhibit, though, wouldn't it?"

Everyone standing around admitted that, yes, it would make 'one heck of an exhibit'. Everyone, that is, except Leroy Starkweather.

"Who's going to do the work?" Leroy asked.

"Any taxidermist," someone in the crowd suggested.

"Wonderful," Leroy congratulated them, "and when the taxidermist asks, 'what the hell is this?' what are you going to tell him? — '*Oh, this is just a species of wolf that went extinct 10,000 years ago*' — and expect him not to photograph it and send the pictures to TIME magazine?"

"I think that's a terrible idea," Leroy concluded, "unless you're planning to host hunting parties of sport hunters, and that's a terrible idea, too. This is the first time we've seen these wolves in almost two years of day-to-day living in Farside. They may be damn near extinct here."

They dug a shallow pit at the edge of the clearing, dumped the remains, and covered it with lime. Ernie arrived from site 2 just in time to watch the disposal.

"For almost two years, now, we've had people living and working daily here in Farside," Ernie told Leroy and Josh, "and this is the first we've seen of anything like a predator, save only the occasional snake. Why now? And where have they been for the past two years? I'd really like to know the answers to those questions."

"Where's Barbara?" Josh asked. "She ought to see this thing before we bury it."

"Not feeling well this morning," Ernie informed him. "She'll be back on the sluice when she's feeling better."

"Leroy," Ernie turned to their surveyor, "do you think we could get some aerial reconnaissance of the outlying areas to the north? What's the range of your plane?"

"I put some extra tanks on it a while back to extend the range," Leroy told him. "I can get out a hundred fifty, maybe two hundred miles in a straight line. If I loiter or spend much time zigzagging, less, but this one will get me up near Casper, anyway."

"How long would that take?"

"Two-and-a-half to three hours out, and the same back," Leroy mused.

"Make plans for a run up toward Laramie and Cheyenne returning on an easterly loop to cover the Sterling-Fort Morgan area. When can you do that?"

"Two days," Leroy told him. "I'll go the day after tomorrow."

"Make sure you're heavily armed," Ernie ordered.

Leroy's flight plan was altered *en route* by the presence of a huge lake or inland sea, probably the same one from which Buck had taken samples. From an altitude of five hundred feet, Leroy thought he could see out about thirty miles and reported that he believed he could see the far side of the lake, approximately twenty miles away. He declined to attempt a crossing without either planning or backup. On the west side of that lake, his survey revealed nothing substantial to report.

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Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh flipped her cell phone open and scrolled through its address book to the entry for "GC" — gate control — and followed it with '2081', the 'open' command for their gate. With a soft 'pop!' the gate opened and the three passed through into Farside in the five seconds before the gate automatically snapped closed.

The computer Steve Okambo had rigged as an automated answering machine now matched the caller's telephone number to a local database to verify the caller had authority to make the request, then issued the command via radio signal to the appropriate gate. As long as the wind kept blowing, the windmills would generate electricity and the computer would keep listening for gate-control calls and pass them along by radio. The only three gates remaining in Nearside-in-Colorado were stored in widely-scattered caches as an emergency backup. They weren't used in the regular course of activity and only Barbara, Buck, and Ernie knew where they were hidden.

NSA's entry teams were among the best in the business. They prided themselves on being able to pick a lock, enter a house, and perform a search without ever leaving a clue that they had been there.

Ernie's house, of course, was first on their list because of his association with the most likely person to know about gate technology. Dennis Cameron's house had also been searched, as had the Gruder's humble residence, along with all three Okambo domiciles, the Clancy's, the Burke's, and most of the others. So far, NSA had found nothing they could identify as a gate.

Their communication-analysis unit knew that Barbara or Buck or Ernie made several-times-daily calls to a specific telephone, sending each time the same 4-digit code to whomever or whatever answered the call. The only other people calling that number was somebody at Okambo and Sons, which they did many times each day, and Tony and Melissa Dinardo, although each of the others used different 4-digit

codes.

In Pottstown, Pennsylvania, results were no better. The level of activity at the Hamm's residences there was such that there was never a time when either of the houses would be empty and quiet. If they were going to search, it would be with the full knowledge of everyone there, something they were trying to avoid. If the Hamms and their entourage discovered they were being watched, their security, already tight, would become armor plated.

Since the escape of Dick Paulsen, Mark and Burt Hamm each kept clipped to their belts small radio units that, if activated, would sound a siren over the Hamm properties in both Nearside and Farside five seconds before all their Nearside gates would be destroyed. The sirens were meant to give a few seconds warning to anyone who might be in the middle of transiting to clear the gate area before it snapped closed. At the same time, the power units for the two Farside gates would trip out, requiring someone to manually reset them before the gates could be opened. Three 'fire drills' had introduced everyone to the need to get clear of the gates at the first sound of a warning.

These preparations were unknown to the NSA or to their counterparts in the FBI who would actually execute the search warrants for the Hamms' properties. When four SUVs turned into the driveway for Burt Hamm's acreage and accelerated toward the house, Burt slipped the device from his belt, opened the safety cover, and pressed the TRANSMIT button. Sirens immediately started their *whoop-whoop* on both sides of the portal and everybody, whether in Nearside or Farside, moved away from the gates. A series of sharp *snaps* as the firecracker-like explosive charges detonated signaled that all the Nearside gates and viewers were dead, their chips rendered useless.

By the time the FBI had Burt surrounded, guns covering him, Burt had already raised his hands in surrender. The agents took his hands and cuffed them behind Burt's back along with everyone else they found nearby.

"What was all that noise about?" the lead agent demanded.

Burt just stared back at him. "If I'm under arrest I want an attorney present for any interrogation," he told them.

The agent unfolded the warrant and showed it to Burt. "This authorizes me to search for and to seize any and all electronic devices on the premises. We're especially looking for the things you call 'gates'. You can save yourself a lot of trouble by pointing them out to us."

"I'd like to speak with my attorney, please," Burt reiterated.

"Who's your attorney?" the agent asked. "What's his number?"

"Hal Hopkins," Burt told him. "The number is in my cell phone directory under 'Hopkins'. The cell phone is in my shirt pocket."

The agent fished the phone out of Burt's pocket, opened the directory and quickly found Hal Hopkins' number. He pressed the TALK button and held the phone to Burt's ear.

"This is Burt Hamm, a client of Hal's. I've been arrested," he told the secretary. "I'm at my Pottstown property. I think Hal should be here."

The secretary assured Burt her boss would be there promptly. The FBI had barely gotten started when Hal Hopkins drove into the Hamms' main driveway, parked his car, and introduced himself to the lead investigator. A moment later he was examining the search warrant.

Hopkins turned to Burt and said: "This warrant speaks of 'gates', Burt. Do you know what it's all about?"

"No idea," Burt told Hopkins.

The lead agent butted into the conversation: "Are you saying you don't know what we're here looking for?"

"Would you mind?" Burt snapped angrily. "I'm talking with my attorney here."

The FBI agent grimaced and turned away. Two minutes later he returned with a PVC framework on which the gray scars of small explosive charges still showed. "What's this?" he demanded of Burt.

"You tell me," Burt told him.

"It's a gate, one of the things we're supposed to find and seize," the agent asserted smugly.

"Whatever you say," Burt agreed. The agent stomped off in a huff.

"You're handling yourself well, Burt," Hopkins congratulated him. "Don't say anything. Let them do all the talking. Are the rest of these people all smart enough to keep their yaps shut?"

"They all know enough not to say anything substantive to any investigator. They're good. How soon before we can be bailed?"

"At least four hours, but maybe as late as tomorrow," the lawyer admitted. "Don't worry. If you didn't give them anything, they don't have anything."

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The Privy council assembled in the Okambo Moot Hall to hear the news from Pennsylvania. Paul Gillman stood to brief them.

"The news we have is that both Burt and Mark Hamm along with eleven others have been arrested by the FBI who served a search warrant on the Hamms' property in Pottstown, Pennsylvania where

they seized several gates and gate assemblies, all non-functional, having been destroyed in accordance with policy at the first sign of trouble.

"Their lawyer is presently trying to get them out on bail. The feds are asking for no-bail. We'll have to wait to see how it turns out. The question of the moment is now 'what next?'"

"So, it appears Marjorie Evans was correct when she speculated she would not be able to stop her government from continuing its efforts to open a gate," Ernie added.

"If she even tried," Barbara finished the thought. "I suspect that a state of war now exists between us and the United States, God help us all." The others wore somber looks. "We have, it seems, a very short time in which to react to this, and our reaction should be measured and calculated to elicit a helpful response. Suggestions, please."

"Start at the top," Buck began, "with the President. Let him know how bad things can get if he doesn't put an immediate stop to the whole matter."

"How?" Steve Okambo Sr. asked.

"Same technique we used for that attorney," Buck offered. "Send him a note. Put it where he has never seen a note before: on the carpet of the Oval Office."

"...or his private bathroom," Danny Okambo suggested with a smirk.

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A 26-foot truck rolled through Washington, DC, occasionally pulling into a parking lot and stopping so that the crew inside could open a gate and reconnoiter the landscape. Each report was as gloomy as the one before.

"There is no way we can operate in this mess," Ted Chubb griped. "The whole damn place is a swamp. There's not a single spot we can find that's solid enough to put up a tree house, much less a platform we can work from. Getting to the White House is almost out of the question."

Whether they approached from the 17th Street side or the 14th Street side or the I-Street side, all they found was unrelenting swamp with little in the way of solid ground. They gave up on infiltrating the White House via Farside.

The Capital Beltway swings by the northwest corner of Andrews AFB. A nearby motel provided the perfect spot for dropping off a crew armed with two thirty-foot extension ladders. As soon as

the crew and equipment was clear of the gate and safely on the ground in Farside, the truck moved away to continue cruising until it was called back to pick up its passengers.

In Farside, the insertion team headed dead east and were well inside the base perimeter before they had gone a half mile. The small gate they carried also doubled as a viewer. As soon as they found Air Force One, they headed straight for it.

With the two ladders fully-extended and shackled at the peak, one intrepid volunteer took the viewer/gate and the note and climbed the ladder. At the top, he looked around at the interior of the airplane, shut the viewer down, and descended the ladder.

"I was in somebody's office, but I don't know whose," he said. "Let's move the ladder twenty feet that way and try again."

They repositioned the ladder and he once again climbed to the peak. Examining his surroundings through the viewer and deeming it 'the right place', he took the letter from its protective sleeve, switched the gate to full power, and deposited the paper on a table before switching the gate off and descending back to the ground.

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The Foreign Ministry
Farside

NSA's current research efforts in the area of trans-dimensional rationalization can only bring harm to both of us.

We urge you most strongly to put a stop to it.

For and with the authority of Her Majesty,
Paul Gillman
Foreign Minister

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"On Air Force One?"

"Yes," the Chief of Staff answered.

"Was there video surveillance?" the President asked. The Chief of Staff shook his head. *No.*

"What is NSA doing that someone wants me to halt?"

"I'm trying to find out now," the Chief of Staff assured his boss.

At that moment, the President's National Security Adviser entered the room.

"What's this all about, Bill?" the President asked.

Bill proceeded to brief the President on the appropriate subject matter and finished up with: "So, yes, they can perform a few magic tricks with their technology, but they're no real threat. They have no infrastructure to speak of and no way to exploit this technology. We do, and we'd be crazy to let a bunch of fruitcake academics freeze us out of it. My very strong recommendation is that you ignore this."

"To my knowledge, you haven't steered me wrong yet, Bill," the President smiled. "Thanks for the briefing. Tell your teams to press on regardless."

The National Security Adviser smiled. "Thank you, Mr. President," and he turned and left.

26 - The Gloves Come Off

Laurel Hamm looked down on the seated figures of Maxwell Purdy, Lew Goran, and Wen Chi Yu. "Because of you and your ingratitude, my Dad is in jail, held without bail along with my Uncle Burt and a dozen others, all of whom welcomed you like long lost family, fed you, clothed you, gave you a warm, safe place to sleep, and asked nothing in return except a little help with the chores.

"Let me put this to you in terms you cannot misunderstand no matter how hard you try: you are going to be turned out in this wilderness and with luck you'll get very hungry before a pack of Dire wolves puts you out of your misery — by killing you and eating you.

"The only way for you to avoid that is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth when we start asking questions of you. We'll ask the questions. You'll provide answers. We'll operate based on those answers. The instant we discover you've sand-bagged us with bad information, you get to become wolf food.

"The first question: what is the precise location of the facility doing research on how to build their own gate?"

"It won't do you any good to know where it is," Wen responded. "Without the proper ID cards properly encoded to open the doors, you couldn't even get in to see the guard who would have to be able to recognize you as someone who works there. At this point, even I couldn't get past the guard even if I still had my ID cards, and if they still worked."

"Where?" she asked.

"2nd avenue between 71st and 72nd," Goran blurted, "next to a bistro there's an entrance to the apartments above and the basements below. In the basement, there's a door with a cardkey lock. That gives you access into the lower levels. It's in an old chunk of subway tunnel that never got made into a real subway."

"That can't be," one of the others told Laurel. "Those tunnels are mostly carved out of bedrock. Their gates would open onto solid rock."

"That's true," Purdy interjected. "The gates are tested at ground level. 'Ground level' on the other side of the gate at that spot is about twenty to twenty-five feet below ground level of this world. The gate testing area is in the first sub-basement."

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A Honda bizjet with a golden ellipse on its light blue tail turned

final for Teterboro runway 19 and settled onto the tarmac. Twenty minutes later, its occupants, Tony Dinardo, Ernie Walsh, and Buck FitzGibbon, climbed into Laurel Hamm's Subaru and headed for the George Washington Bridge.

From their 11th floor perch in Laurel Hamm's apartment on East 62nd street, the team stared northeast toward 2nd avenue and 72nd street a half-mile away through the type-II gate they built using the chips brought in from Colorado. If there was a dip in the surface level at that point, they couldn't see it. Apart from a few clearings in the trees, the area was nearly all forest, possibly the heaviest foliage on the island.

The view from their type-I gate was very different, and not simply for the monochromatic color scheme. A valley, possibly glacial in origin, formed a huge gash running roughly southward from Spuyten Duyvil and laying the bedrock bare.

"We'll have to work in a type-I world if we're going to observe their operations," Tony mused. "I don't like that. We don't have viewer-capability with type-I gates and the time delay could be critical."

"But we do have a doorbell," Ernie reminded him, "this direction finder tuned to 68.714 MHz Harry Tumulty rigged for us. We'll know the instant they open a gate, and we can still explore Farside while we're waiting. There might be something we can do from here. We ought to at least try."

Tony shrugged. "Okay, let's go do some exploring."

At 3rd avenue and 62nd street, the type-II ground level was lower by two feet or so than the type-I ground level, but it was still reachable from the emergency stairwell. They all agreed that Tony and Buck would do the actual exploring since Ernie was the official tenderfoot in the group. Ernie and Laurel stayed behind to mind the gate and wait for their return.

Both Buck and Tony carried .44 Magnum revolvers on their hips and each also carried rifles. In case there were predators on the island, they wanted to be able to fend off any attack.

The two headed as near as they could tell northeast from their insertion point, having thoroughly marked it for their return. As they moved toward their target, 2nd avenue and 72nd street, they also blazed a trail they could follow back.

As they moved northeast, the ground level sloped noticeably downward. Before they had gone two blocks, their image of Manhattan slipped below the surface as if they were in a magical submarine diving into the pavement and basements of the upper east side. They could no longer tell where, relative to the streets of the city, they were walking. The huge treeless scrape visible through the

type-I gate was not present in this type-II world. The depression in the surface was here covered with a thick forest broken by patches of clear space.

The only indication they had as to their location along the way was when they occasionally blundered through someone's basement and the image in the viewer would suddenly shift from unremitting dirt and debris to suddenly-open space.

"This is no good," Tony muttered. "We have no idea where we are. If we can't establish where we are on the surface, we'll never find that NSA lab."

"You're right," Buck agreed, "and I have an idea. We need a periscope so we can see what's up above. We'll put the viewer at the top of the scope and have two mirrors deliver the image to us down here."

Tony smiled. "Brilliant!"

Purchasing several long lengths of PVC pipe, mirrors, an electric grinding tool, nuts, bolts, leaf springs, and washers, the four put their heads together to design a reasonable approximation of a periscope and in a few hours had the initial sketches. Another day of hard work machining the PVC pipe resulted in a set of telescoping tubes with two mirrors angled at 45° and a viewer positioned at the top. At maximum extension, the periscope would give the explorers another thirty feet of altitude.

Buck and Tony started out again on their hike to the northeast now armed with their new device in addition to all the other things they carried. Although the trek was only a half mile, the strain of keeping a ten-foot tube, then a twenty-foot tube, then a thirty-foot tube upright while traversing uneven ground as one of them peered through the eyepiece left the older men wishing they were younger men.

Having found their spot on 2nd avenue, they laid the periscope aside to begin exploring basements using the spare viewer, and soon found what they were looking for: a security guard seated at a desk beside a locked door. Beyond the door was a stairway leading further down and an open area they assumed was the staging area for testing the gates.

Using cans of aerosol paint, they thoroughly marked the spot and blazed a fresh path dead southwest to their entry point.

"One hundred percent certainty that we've found the lab," Buck told the others. "Of course, we can't go down into the lab because it's all 'underground' to Farside, but we do know the exact location of their testing area, and as soon as we see the tell-tale sign of a type-I gate opening, we can snatch everybody concerned and

really put a dent into their research.”

“We can go down into the lab proper,” Tony suggested. “We just open a gate at the top of the stairs next to the test area and walk down.”

“What if there’s additional security below?” Ernie asked. “I can’t see risking a raid on the lab area when there’s a much simpler and more effective way to kill their research completely.”

All the others turned to look questioningly at Ernie, so he continued: “Corral that test area with type-II gates. Completely encircle it. Bring a separate viewer up so you can see everything that’s happening on stage. When you have all the players inside the corral, you power all the gates on at once.

“This is what it will look like: to the people inside the corral, their basement will instantly be replaced by Farside, except for the concrete floor they’re standing on. To anyone outside the corral, there will be a corral-shaped section of Farside’s ground surface visible in their basement, but there won’t be anybody there. Their scientists will have ‘disappeared’. To anyone in Farside, there will be a section of concrete basement floor on which are standing all the people inside the corral at the moment the gates powered up.

“You hustle them off the concrete basement floor and into Farside-proper, along with any equipment they have with them, then switch the gates off. In Farside, the concrete floor is replaced by Farside ground. In the basement, the Farside ground is replaced by a concrete floor now empty of people.”

Laurel grinned. “I *love* it! They won’t know what hit them!”

Laurel took charge of arranging the surveillance and assault teams. Ernie promised a shipment of chips adequate to build the corral would be in Harry Tumulty’s hands within the week. Laurel drove them all back to Teterboro, and they departed for Colorado.

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Peg Clancy and Barbara passed through the gate into Ernie’s living room and waited to make sure it switched off. Peg took the wheel of Barbara’s Jeep and eased it out of the driveway. At their destination on N. Broadway, Peg found a parking spot and accompanied Barbara inside to the offices of Dr. Greg Luscombe, obstetrician.

During a brief consultation, Dr. Luscombe confirmed for Barbara that she, indeed, was pregnant, gave her instructions for her diet and personal care, and ordered a re-visit in four weeks.

Both Peg and Barbara were smiling broadly and starting to plan for the arrival of Barbara’s first child, and so were not paying

much attention to their surroundings. It probably wouldn't have made much difference if they were. The federal agents swooped in on them so fast, only someone expecting it would have realized the lawmen were there.

"Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh?" one of the men queried, his gun pointed at the two women.

"I am," Barbara admitted.

Others quickly surrounded them. "You're under arrest."

"What charge?" Peg demanded.

"Treason," they were told, and the two were handcuffed and hustled into the back seat of an SUV.

"I want to talk to my attorney," Barbara insisted.

"All in due time," she was told.

At the federal detention center in Denver, both women were searched, photographed, and booked before being pulled aside for separate questioning.

"According to the warrant authorizing your arrest," the interrogator briefed Barbara, "you threatened to go to war with the government of the United States. Is that true?"

"I'm not speaking to anyone about anything without my attorney being present," Barbara repeated exasperatedly. "I want to speak with my attorney."

"These are very serious charges that have been leveled against you, Mrs. Walsh. Are you sure you want to be this uncooperative? You're looking at many years in a federal penitentiary if convicted on these charges."

"Attorney," was all she said.

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Walt Clancy waited in the Okambo town square for Peg to return, and as the hour grew later he became more anxious. Finally, he called Peg on her cell phone. It went to voicemail. He called Ernie. "Have you heard from Barbara?" he asked.

"No," Ernie told Walt. "She left earlier for a doctor's appointment in Boulder. It may be taking longer than she expected."

"Peg went with her and I haven't heard from Peg, either. I just called her phone. No answer."

"I'll try calling Barbara," Ernie told him. "I'll get back to you."

His next call was to Barbara's cell phone. That, too, went to voicemail. Ernie looked up the doctor's name on his computer. "Dr. Gregory Luscombe, obstetrics and gynecology?" Ernie dialed the number. The receptionist picked it up.

"Yes, Mrs. Walsh was here earlier and saw the doctor, but

she's left. About three hours ago, I think. Yes, I'll call you if I hear anything."

After hanging up with Ernie, one of the other receptionists turned to her and said: "I wonder if that could have anything to do with what I saw in the parking lot earlier?" The other gave her a quizzical look so she continued. "Two women were arrested or something in our parking lot about three hours ago."

"Brunette, mid-tall, with an older woman?" The other nodded. The first dialed Ernie's number.

"Mr. Walsh, I'm so sorry I didn't know about this earlier when we spoke. One of the other girls reports seeing two women arrested in our parking lot about the time Mrs. Walsh would have been leaving. We don't know that it was Mrs. Walsh, but it could have been."

Ernie thanked her and hung up. He immediately called Wilsky & Flynn.

"I believe Barbara has been arrested along with her companion, Peg Clancy. Can you jump on this for us and find out what's happening?"

Ed Flynn took the assignment and started calling contacts. In twenty minutes, he had a lead on the two. He called Ernie. "They're in federal lock-up downtown," he told Ernie. "I'm trying to find a judge who'll *habeas* them out for me. I'll keep you in the loop."

Ernie called Paul Gillman and briefed him on the situation, then suggested an emergency meeting for all residents.

In the Moot Hall, Ernie, Buck, and Paul looked out over the upturned faces. Ernie rose and moved to the microphone. The people all rose and began to sing:

Our home is a land —

Ernie held out his hands to quiet them and the singing tapered off to silence. "This is the situation as we know it," he began. "Barbara FitzGibbon has been arrested by the United States federal government along with Peg Clancy." There was an astonished gasp from the audience. "We don't know what the charges are, but we're working to get them free.

"In Pennsylvania, thirteen members of the Farside community there have been arrested and we are working to set them free. The National Security Agency is continuing their efforts toward building a workable gate. We all recognize, I hope, that the instant they are successful the peaceful life we live here will come to an abrupt end, and we will be colonized by the very system we left behind when we moved here.

"I believe we are at war," he finished.

"Hell, yeah!" someone shouted from the audience and was greeted by wide-spread applause.

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"They've attacked us all, Ernie," Laurel Hamm agreed. "We've discovered in the past few years that we can live together in peace without the need of an all-powerful government to impose order." Through the speaker, Ernie and the others could hear muffled applause from the Hammburg residents gathered around the phone. "We agree that the arrest of Barbara fitzGibbon is an affront we cannot allow to stand. How do you wish us to proceed?"

"Clearly, the note we left aboard Air Force One was insufficient," Ernie answered. "Suggestions?"

"If you please, sir," another voice interjected, "Davy Harmon here. I think we need to demonstrate our seriousness. May I suggest we do that by destroying the two aircraft used for Air Force One?"

"How do you propose to do that, Mr. Harmon?" Ernie asked.

"I heard about the trick you did with the books in somebody's library, slicing them all in half. We could do the same to the wheels on Air Force One... chop them in half."

There was a ripple of laughter on Davy Harmon's side of the conference. "Excellent idea, Mr. Harmon. You're in charge," Ernie told him. "Press on. I think it would also be a good idea to use this as an opportunity to invite the opposition to contemplate the consequences of their actions, too."

"I read you," Davy Harmon assured Ernie.

The following morning the landing gear for Air Force One collapsed, having been sliced cleanly in two. As the Boeing 747 lurched toward the ground, the left wing impacted hard on the tarmac and snapped spilling several thousand gallons of jet fuel. Six minutes later, the backup aircraft suffered the same fate. Investigators found pasted to the underside of both aircraft a note:

Imagine the repercussions had a Senator been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Free Barbara fitzGibbon or get ready to hold special elections. The clock is ticking. Time is running out.

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"It's an exact replica of the attack we saw carried out in Denver against an AAG: his whole library was sliced in half. That's

what happened to Air Force One: the landing gear was sliced in a plane-cut that also blew out four tires on the primary."

"A 'plane-cut'?" the President asked.

"By that we mean that you can sight along the cut line. It wasn't a jagged cut as you might expect from a blade. The cut line was a straight line like you'd get from a laser."

"So, it was cut with a laser?" the President pressed.

"No," the Air Force General back-pedaled. "We don't have any laser with the kind of power necessary to do this. The cut looks like it was done with a laser, but it's a laser that is ten thousand to fifty thousand times — or more — more powerful than the best we have. Using a laser device of that power always leaves some residual evidence behind, but we have no such evidence. That's why I said the cut line is 'like you'd get from a laser', except that it wasn't done with a laser."

"Then what was it done with?" the President demanded angrily.

"I don't have the first clue," the General admitted.

"Okay," the President asked, having managed to calm himself down, "what now?"

"Unless you're willing to put Congress in a target position," the General responded, "I'd say 'give them what they want'."

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Marjorie Evans met Barbara as Barbara was being led from her cell. She smiled at Barbara but didn't get a smile in return.

"Are you well?" Marjorie asked her.

Barbara smiled now. "My attorney advised me not to discuss anything with anybody. I presume that extends to the state of my health. Where's Mrs. Clancy?"

"She was processed out about ten minutes ago. She insisted on waiting for you. She's in the corridor outside."

As Barbara picked up her personal belongings, she asked Marjorie without turning her head: "What caused this sudden change of heart on the part of NSA?"

"Orders from above," Marjorie told her. "I don't know how far above, but considering where the order to arrest you came from, the order countermanding it must have been from pretty high up. You got a lot of juice, lady."

"There were thirteen people arrested in Pennsylvania as part of this effort," Barbara informed her. Marjorie nodded that she understood what Barbara was saying. "What of them? Have they been released?"

"I don't know," Marjorie lied. "It's not in my jurisdiction."

"Well, pass this message up the line to whoever cares to know: I am as concerned for them as I am for me. Turning me loose, whatever you think that's buying you, is insufficient. The Pennsylvanians have to be freed, too, or it's the same as if you kept me locked up."

"I'll see that the message is delivered," Marjorie assured her.

Outside, Boris Wilsky waited with a car for the two women and whisked them away to Ernie's house as he had been instructed.

"What happened, Boris?" Barbara asked their driver as they worked their way toward Boulder.

"I honestly don't know, Mrs. Walsh," Boris admitted. "I received a call from Mr. Cameron late last night requesting me to do everything I could to get you freed. I explained that I had already done everything I thought possible. He urged me to try again. This morning, I appeared before Judge Frost and made a cursory *pro-forma* motion to quash the arrest warrant on grounds that it did not specify the constitutionally-mandated second witness, expecting Judge Frost to deny the motion. He allowed it, and the warrant for your arrest evaporated. There was nothing they could hold you on."

"Are you in contact with the attorney in the related Pennsylvania case?" she asked.

"Hal Hopkins? Yes, I spoke with Counselor Hopkins several times over the past two days, comparing notes and discussing strategy. Mrs. Walsh, I must admit I'm getting very nervous about all this — accusations of treason and God alone knows what else. Should I be worried?"

"As you once told us, I believe, Mr. Wilsky, attorneys rarely go to prison for the actions of their clients. Should the absolute worst case scenario nevertheless occur, be assured we will do all in our power to see that you are protected, just as you are doing for us."

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"I have a *ping*," Laurel told Arlo Rubinstein. "About six minutes ago. The direction finder says 'northeast'."

"I'll put wheels under the team and have them over there in a half hour," he told her.

True to his word, a half hour later Laurel's doorbell rang. "I'll be right down with a gate," she told the newcomers over the intercom.

Bearing a canvas bag containing the folded-down gate, Laurel let the team in and escorted them to the back staircase where they erected the gate. In Farside, they picked up the guns they had stored there so they wouldn't have to transport them back and forth between

Queens and Manhattan and risk whatever penalties they might accrue should they be stopped and searched by the police. Quickly covering the half mile along a well-blazed path to the vicinity of 2nd Avenue and 72nd Street, they powered their viewer on and were rewarded with the sight of a team of technicians reassembling a newly-configured type-I gate. As they watched, more people arrived at the testing area and began milling around the gate.

Suddenly, two red lights began to flash and three men stepped through the open gate into Earth-II and disappeared from the group.

"Okay," the team leader ordered. "Hustle everybody out of the corral. Davy, you cut power to their gate and bring it along. Remember to keep clear of the edges. Ready... power!"

The eight type-II gates arranged in a ring around the basement testing area came alive and nine assorted technicians suddenly found themselves facing a team of well-armed men. "Move!" they were ordered, and all of them complied, more out of astonishment than fear. Davy Harmon stepped to the gate, a pair of wire cutters in his hand, and deftly snipped the power leads for the gate. The flashing lights went dark, and a soft 'pop' told him the gate had closed, but he poked the wire cutters through the central area just to be sure. Then he grabbed the sides of the gate and hefted it off the concrete floor and through into Farside.

"Power off!" the team leader commanded, and the eight gates winked closed. He turned to the nine captured technicians. "Gentlemen, welcome to Farside. Who else is below decks?"

"All the rest of the employees," one of them blurted as fear replaced astonishment.

"How do we get in there?"

"You can't," another informed him. "It has a palm print reader that operates a revolving door. The door's floor is weight-sensitive and it knows how many pounds each individual person weighs. You could cut off our hands to operate the palm print reader, but unless you weigh the same as the person who used to own the palm print, the door won't let you through."

"That's not a problem," Davy Harmon informed his team leader. "I can bring them all up that staircase voluntarily. You know all that PVC pipe I brought with us in the truck?" Tony Cusumano, the team leader, nodded. "Let's get it and bring it back here. Meanwhile, anybody who tries to enter or leave this area, we snag them just the way we grabbed these mokes. Bring these guys along. They can carry pipe for me."

They retraced their path back to Laurel's apartment building, then Tony and Davy went through the gate, and out to their truck

where they opened a second gate inside the cargo area of the truck. Through this gate, they passed about twenty-five hundred feet of 4-inch pipe and assorted fittings, and hauled them on makeshift wagons the half-mile back to the NSA lab site.

Once there, Davy directed the men to lay out sections of pipe on a line running roughly east-southeast toward the river. Davy worked his way from section to section slipping couplings onto the ends and making the connections fast with pipe glue. Periodically, a tree would be felled with a chain saw and the stump notched to provide support for the pipe. One hundred twenty-five joins later, he installed a T-fitting pointing up with a valve to shut off the flow, and a bend to angle the pipe down toward the water where another valve was rigged with a pull cord to open and close it. This matched the valve installed at the far end where the NSA lab was located.

With only the valve at the T-fitting open, his workers began to pass buckets of water up from the river to the T-fitting where they were poured into the opening. After several hours of pouring, the pipe was at last full from end to end and Davy closed the valve on the T-fitting. Then the valve on the pipe end now underwater in the East River was opened. Davy keyed his walkie-talkie. "Open the gate. Open the valve."

A small type-II gate positioned at the other end of the pipe now made a connection between Farside's East River and the first sub-basement. When the valve on the pipe was opened, the siphon that started sucked as much water as necessary out of the river and into the basement. Water cascaded down the stairway in torrents. As the water pressure at the bottom of the stairs built up against the revolving doors, eventually they collapsed sending the rushing waters into the NSA labs below.

Panicked workers began streaming up the stairs, fighting against the still onrushing water. At the top of the stairs, a type-II gate awaited, and everyone who arrived at the first sub-basement was frisked for weapons and sent on their way southwest following the blazes laid by Buck and Tony Dinardo.

As each person came to the top of the stairs and the gate into Farside they were asked: "Any more down there?"

The estimates kept getting smaller and smaller until finally one of the workers told them: "I'm the last. There's nobody left below."

The siphon was left to run until the entire lab was underwater and the only access involved SCUBA gear.

27 - Sovereignty

"Well, you appear to have gotten what you wanted," Marjorie told Barbara over the phone. "Everyone who was in any way associated with that project seems to have been swept away into never-neverland by some catastrophic flood during a test of our latest gate, and they may all be dead. We'd appreciate it if you could find out anything in that regard.

"I am directed to apologize to you for the raid on the Hamms' properties in Pennsylvania and to assure you that it will not happen again. I guess the President wants to keep the rest of his perks intact.

"So, where do we go from here? My government still wants access to — what do you call it? — 'Farside'? How do we get what we want?"

"We don't always get everything we want, Agent Evans," Barbara told her, "but in this case, we may be able to work something out. I think I should be talking with the State Department rather than the National Security Agency, don't you?"

"The State Department? Why? Do you want recognition as a nation?" Marjorie asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Barbara admitted. "In discussions with my advisers, they all seem to think we can only protect ourselves adequately if there is formal recognition such that we can enter into enforceable treaties."

"Stop me if I get this wrong," Marjorie invited, "but you're talking about us recognizing an entire world as a separate entity."

"Actually," Barbara interrupted, "we're talking about you recognizing an entire universe. There's a whole lot more than just this one planet. We suspect there is an entire cosmos on the other side of the gate. The night sky, for instance, is mostly recognizable... Orion, the Big Dipper, the Moon..."

"I think this topic is above my pay-grade," Marjorie grimaced.

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Paul Gillman, accompanied by Nell Gruder and Tim Feeney, was met at the front steps of the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C. by a guide who led them inside and to the office of the Secretary of State. The Secretary extended his hand and Paul shook it, then handed him a sky-blue folder on which was embossed a golden ellipse.

"Her Majesty extends her warmest greetings and asks that

you accept these credentials as her grant of authority to me as her emissary."

The Secretary opened the folder and read the letter enclosed:

Barbara Regina I
Farside

My Dear Mr. Secretary,

I am pleased to introduce by this letter Mr. Paul Gillman, my Foreign Minister.

Please extend to him every courtesy you would me.

With best wishes for a successful meeting,

Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh

They all sat at a conference table, except for the Secretary who remained standing. "Mr. Gillman, it is my very great pleasure to meet with you and your party," the Secretary began. "I have been briefed on the situation as regards the Kingdom of Farside, but I hope you will be able to give me more information than is generally available about your land and your people. Our knowledge of Farside is sparse at best, and I feel we are going to have to know much more about it if we are to be of much use to each other."

"With pleasure, Mr. Secretary. 'Farside' is our name for an alternate universe existing side-by-side with the one in which is found The United States, France, Antarctica, and all the other geographical and political features with which you are well familiar. Farside has none of these. It is a primitive land devoid of human life save for that imported within the past few years since its discovery by our Queen, Barbara.

"During that time, we have built roads, exploited some of its mineral wealth, primarily gold..." Nell Gruder reached over and handed the Secretary a presentation box that the Secretary opened. Inside was a ten-crown coin bearing the profile of Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh and the letters "B R I". "...and established several colonies, all of whom live by our single law: The Golden Rule."

The Secretary had an astonished look on his face. "That is your only law?" he asked. Paul nodded and continued:

"Her Majesty, with the consent of her Privy Council, has decreed that all residents of Farside may claim dual-citizenship: that of Farside along with whatever citizenship they claimed before arriving in

Farside, as long as that arrangement is accepted by their pre-Farside government. As a practical matter, all of us are originally United States citizens. If the United States does not object, we may retain that citizenship. Otherwise, under the terms of her decree, we must relinquish one or the other. That is the first matter that we wish to clarify.

"The second matter, and of equal importance, perhaps of greater importance, concerns passage between the two worlds. The technology that allows people and goods to transit between the two we consider to be the sole and exclusive property of the crown, and you must agree to this for our discussion to proceed. A very few people, all Farsiders, have access to the equipment, but only one to the knowledge behind that equipment. A recent project headed by your National Security Agency attempted to duplicate that technology — with disastrous consequences."

The Secretary nodded. "Yes, I heard about that as part of the briefing I received. Terrible, terrible tragedy... an awful waste of life."

"As regards 'access'," Paul picked up the thread, "we require that you refrain from such pursuits in the future. Any agreement we come to will be predicated on that: your promise not to build a gate — ever."

"As long as the Senate agrees, Mr. Gillman, I don't see where that would be a problem. Getting the Senate's agreement — that's the problem. What do you see as the alternatives should we be unable to come to terms on that?"

"Her Majesty does not see that as a plausible alternative, Mr. Secretary," Paul told him sternly. "Farside will not permit anyone to research and experiment in that regard. When we detect such, we will consider it an act of war if done by a government, and felonious assault if done by non-government actors. In either case, we reserve the right to defend the domain by any means necessary."

"That sounds quite ominous, Mr. Gillman," the Secretary offered.

Gillman looked him straight in the eye. "I wish I could make it sound as ominous as it is, Mr. Secretary, but words fail me. By the way, has Air Force One been repaired yet?"

"Air Force One? The President's plane?" the Secretary asked with a clear note of confusion. "What's wrong with Air Force One?"

"We cut its wheels off," Gillman told him, "as a sign of our seriousness. It is probably the reason we are meeting right now."

The Secretary's eyes were wide. "I hadn't heard that," the Secretary admitted. "When did this happen?"

"About a week ago," Gillman admitted. "That's why the President cancelled his plans to meet with the French President. It

takes a long time to get a new 747 painted and outfitted as a Presidential command center and he can't show up in the wrong airplane. People would ask too many questions. You could, however, confirm that with the head of the Armed Services committee."

"Thank you, I'll do that."

Paul handed him a business card on which was printed a little Farside flag in the corner, his name and title, and his cell phone number. "We are a small nation without the traditional trappings of power. I have no secretary, just a voice mailbox, but you can reach me at that number anytime. Please keep me informed as to the Senate's position. If you think we may be ready to formalize our relationship, I can return in a week or so with a treaty ready to be signed."

"That sounds about right," the Secretary agreed. "Will we have the honor of Her Majesty's presence for the ceremony?"

Paul shook his head. "Her Majesty is with child and this precludes travel for the next several months — unless you would like to hold the ceremony in Farside. That could be arranged."

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Over a hastily-arranged dinner that evening, the Secretary broached the subject directly with his guest, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee:

"Someone told me today that the President's plane — both, actually — had been badly damaged recently and that's why the recent trip to France had been postponed."

"That *someone* would have been Farside's Foreign Minister, I suppose?" the Senator parried. The Secretary smirked. "Yes, it's true," the Senator continued. "Both of them had their landing gear sliced off, and '24000' lost a wing when it crashed to the ground. We even now know how it was done." The Secretary's ears perked up. "Analysis of the damaged parts removed from the aircraft shows that several microns of material are mysteriously missing. It has been suggested that if one of their gates were positioned horizontally and opened for one one-thousandth of a second, anything positioned over the gate would fall five microns into Farside before the gate closed. The effect would be invisible unless you were staring straight at the place where the gate was positioned, and possibly not even then. One one-thousandth of a second is a pretty short timespan."

"Amazing," the Secretary responded, "but all they can do is damage the odd piece of equipment here and there. What sort of threat is that?"

The Senator looked at his friend, the Secretary, and mused

that academic and scientific educations really were two different things. "Suppose you had been standing there for a close-up inspection of the landing gear," he suggested. "You, also, would be missing five microns of your body." The Secretary's eyes went wide as he realized the implications of that image. "Suppose I had been standing there," the Senator continued. "Suppose the attack were not on the President's plane, but on the House of Representatives... or the State Department... or the CIA."

"That is," the Secretary finally connected thought with thought, "we are the 'odd pieces of equipment'." The Senator nodded. "Does that mean the Senate will consent to their demand that we cease trying to build a gate?"

"The Senate will certainly agree to that condition. Whether we'll abide by it is another matter entirely." The Secretary smiled.

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The flight from Washington National Airport to Reading, Pennsylvania, 120 miles as the crow flies, took less than a half hour from lift-off to touchdown. Gillman and his companions were met at the airport and driven to the Hamm property for a short conference with Burt and Mark Hamm and Mark's daughter, Laurel.

"We have a problem," Paul told them over dinner. The others looked toward him in expectation. "We — that is, me on behalf of the crown — are negotiating a deal with the United States. The problem is this: part of the deal will involve dual citizenship for all Farsiders." The group smiled at this. "That is: you will be able to claim United States' citizenship and Farside citizenship."

"So, what's the problem?" Laurel asked.

Paul looked at her. "Farside is a monarchy," he explained, "but no one in Hammburg, as far as we know, recognizes the sovereign, Barbara. That sounds like a problem to me. Doesn't it sound like a problem to you?"

Burt shook his head. "No, I don't see that. Boulder and Hammburg are two different things. They're unconnected. You can choose whatever leadership you want. We should be able to choose any leadership we want. I don't see any necessity for us requiring you give up your monarch, just as there's no need for you to require we accept one."

"If the United States agrees," Paul continued, "we will begin issuing and they will begin honoring Farside passports endorsed by Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh in her capacity as sovereign. How could you accept one of those without at least implicitly recognizing her authority to issue them?"

"I don't need dual citizenship," Burt answered. "I'm OK with one."

"Why is Barbara raising this issue?" Mark Hamm asked Paul. "Is this a serious concern to her? Is she worried about our commitment to security?"

"Barbara is not raising the issue," Paul answered him, "I am. I'm the one who's worried we could have a security breach."

"Then you're worrying needlessly, Paul," Laurel assured him. "We already demonstrated our seriousness regarding security when my Uncle Burt destroyed all of our Nearside gates, apparently without giving them a second thought."

"Besides, even if Dad and Uncle Burt are uncomfortable living under a monarchy, I am not. You may tell Her Majesty that she has at least one loyal subject in Hammburg."

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With the truck parked in a loading zone on 72nd Street, Harry Tumulty powered on the type-I gate he had configured with instructions from Boulder. Arlo leaned thru and the top half of his body disappeared. He was back in an instant.

"About a two-foot drop," he told Harry. "I can jump down, but we'll need a plank for the return." Harry gave him a 'thumbs-up'. "Come back for me in four hours. That will give me an hour-and-twenty on the other side. If I'm not back by then, add four hours. If I'm not back by then, send a search party." Arlo jumped through the gate into Earth-II. Harry shut the gate down and the truck moved away from the curb out into traffic.

Arlo's first task was to build a fire that he then fed with scraps of soft, damp wood to make a smoky column he hoped could be seen for miles. It had been less than a week since three men had been stranded here by the destruction of their only means of escape. Arlo hoped they hadn't wandered very far. He was not disappointed.

While he missed his first rendezvous with Harry, the appearance of three dirty, hungry men at the edge of his campsite made him smile. He would make the next rendezvous. Mission accomplished.

Arlo stood. "Are you three ready to go back?" They all tried to smile, but managed only grimaces.

"We're awfully hungry," one of them said. "Do you have anything to eat?" Arlo tossed them candy bars fetched from his backpack and they wolfed them down greedily.

Arlo looked at his watch. "We have about forty minutes before our ride arrives. Why don't you all try to make yourselves

comfortable in the meantime.”

“Are we going to be taken to Pennsylvania like the others?” one asked.

Arlo shook his head. *No.* “The entry point in Pennsylvania is compromised due to the actions of the first group of your colleagues we rescued. As a result, you will all be confined to lower Manhattan until we can figure out what to do with you. You will not be tempted to escape because there will not be a gate anywhere on the island. You will be supplied with tools and seed and perhaps a flock of chickens, and you will be expected to make serious inroads into the problem of feeding yourselves. For a while, we will be supplying you with the necessities of life, but I warn you: unless you buckle down and get serious about agriculture, the day will come when you all perish for lack of food. Our generosity toward illegal immigrants is quite limited. You will have as company all the people you worked with at the lab. Surely some among them will have the right kind of talent.”

“Everyone in the lab?” one of them asked, surprise evident in his voice.

“We believe so,” Arlo confirmed. “We flooded the lab to force everyone to the surface, and we’ve taken them all prisoner. You’ll be joining them shortly.”

And, about forty minutes later, a head poked through from nowhere and Harry called to Arlo. A 1”x12” plank then extended from nowhere down to the ground and two wooden wands poked out from the lower corners of the invisible gate.

“Up the plank if you please, gentlemen,” Arlo urged them. “Stay inside the indicators. The edge of the gate is very dangerous.” The three prisoners marched up the plank and through the gate into the body of a truck and were immediately escorted through a matching type-II gate into Manhattan-in-Farside.

“Follow the blazes south and they will lead you to the encampment where you will find all your colleagues,” they were instructed. The group of three headed south. After about six miles of picking their way first through dense forest in the Upper East Side, then much sparser woods as they worked their way through midtown into lower Manhattan, they came upon the encampment and thirty-seven white-coated NSA researchers being questioned by several strangers while six others stood to one side holding ugly-looking rifles.

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Emile Valcour addressed the group gathered at the Prestige Social Club. “The research data for this project: documents and such,

are backed up on a remote server whose location is unknown to anyone we debriefed. All the people associated with the gate project were in that lab that afternoon, and we are pretty sure we lucked-out big time by collecting the entire batch without leaving anyone on the outside." He held up both hands to show crossed fingers on each. "We hope.

"If that's true, NSA will have to rebuild their teams from scratch before trying again, and they may not be able to pull it off, anyway. One of the lab rats mentioned that he reran some of the math from the Beddowes document and discovered several errors, which he corrected. It was the set of chips he built with the corrected formulae that caused the gate to open yesterday morning. They called an all-hands meeting to see the first test of his repaired gate, and that's why everybody concerned was on-site.

"He said he hadn't yet gotten around to documenting the changes he made, so those changes are not reflected in NSA's current research, and they aren't backed up on any remote server, no matter where it's located.

"If, and that's a big 'if', he's telling the truth, we have just shut that project down for good. Congratulations to you all, and especially you, Laurel. Good work, everyone."

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"Paul, why did you raise that issue with the Pennsylvanians?" Barbara asked. "I've never required they acknowledge me as their sovereign. In fact, I never actually wanted the job in the first place, you may recall."

"I felt it to be a security issue, Your Majesty," he began. Barbara grimaced at the term. "They seem conscious of and committed to security, but there's the 'loyalty' aspect. Without a loyalty component, what's to stop one of them going over to the other side and taking a gate with him?"

"What advantage might someone see in doing that?" Barbara asked softly. "Do you think any of them would give up the freedom they have here? I just don't see it. Besides, we can always cripple a gate if we think it has slipped out of our control. Don't you think you're worrying needlessly?"

"Laurel Hamm used exactly those words, ma'am. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I am worrying needlessly. I apologize."

"Not to me," Barbara corrected him, "to them."

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At Barbara's direction, Len Willett cast four gold medals, 1.5

Troy ounces each, showing a flowing Farside flag within a ring of text proclaiming: '*Floreat Farside*'. When Paul Gillman returned to Washington to conclude a secret treaty of recognition, he carried with him the four medals, each in its own presentation case. From Washington, DC, he again flew to Reading and was escorted to Hammburg for a formal dinner.

"I come here tonight with two orders from Her Majesty, Barbara fitzGibbon: first, I am directed to apologize for suggesting there is something wrong with failing to acknowledge her sovereignty over Farside. Her Majesty reminded me that she doesn't even want the job and only took it because the people demanded it." The group gathered there laughed and applauded.

"Second, she directs me to present her thanks for a successful operation in support of the security and independence of Farside." He took the cases one-by-one. "To Laurel Hamm, her faithful subject, for her coordination of the operational teams." Paul draped the blue-and-gold ribbon with its forty-six-gram gold medal around Laurel's neck. "To Harry Tumulty, problem solver *extraordinaire*," and he repeated the action for Harry. "To Davy Harmon, tactician and idea-man," and Davy bent his neck to receive his medal. "And to Arlo Rubinstein, who has never told us 'no'," at which the audience roared with laughter as Arlo leaned in to receive his award.

Burt Hamm rose from his seat. "Since Her Majesty does not demand our loyalty," he told Paul, "you may inform the crown that she has earned it, and I, for one, am happy to acknowledge her as the ruler of Farside."

The hall rose as one and Mark Hamm lifted his glass. "The Queen," he announced and the hall repeated: "The Queen."

28 - A Civilizing Influence

“Welcome to the first Farside orientation program,” Ted Chubb addressed the group. “All of you are here because you have been recruited for a more-or-less permanent emigration to Farside by someone who already lives and works here.

“That’s an important set of words: ‘lives and works’. Farside is not a vacation community where you can escape from the rat race of Nearside for a week or two. Farside requires a long-term commitment from émigrés in exchange for its obvious benefits. Farside is an opportunity to develop a primitive wilderness using skills you bring with you. Like your great-great-grandparents who emigrated to the New World, there are unlimited opportunities for honest, hard-working citizens. What you get out of Farside will be very closely aligned with what you put in.

“For those of you with less-than-pristine personal histories, there is another great benefit: criminal records are not shared across the boundary between Farside and wherever you came from. If you had a record in Nearside and can get permission from the courts to move to Farside, you enter with a clean record, a *tabula rasa*, a full member of the community. It is, of course, very hazardous to pursue criminal endeavors in Farside. We have little in the way of a criminal justice system, but what little we have is adequate to reform the hardest of hardened criminals, so if you’re coming to Farside with the idea of continuing a life of crime, I am required to warn you that Farside isn’t a good place to do it. A life of crime here is apt to be nasty, brutish, and short. Prison is a whole lot nicer than starvation, but we don’t have any of those. The penalty for anti-social behavior here is to be removed from society: no one will talk to you, no one will sell you supplies, no one will give you shelter. You will be on your own to a degree few modern-day people can fully imagine, and it is unlikely you will trouble us beyond your first winter alone in wilderness. You will not be able to escape back into Nearside when you discover how great a mistake you made.

“If you come bearing new ideas, you will find an open society where every person and every viewpoint is valued, where the only law is The Golden Rule: treat others the way you wish others to treat you. Stated another way: don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want others doing to you. Simple and straight-forward, we all think.

“For those who enter Farside with a positive attitude, even the sky is not the limit. There is an entire universe to be explored, and it is Eden. Anything is possible. Welcome.

"You may find our government strange. It is unlike anything you have experienced before. We have a monarch, Queen Barbara-the-first fitzGibbon, who rules at the behest of the original settlers. This form of government is not easily subject to change, and the queen is an absolute monarch: what she says goes, no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts*. As émigrés, you will be required to pledge your loyalty to the crown while you reside in Farside. Elsewhere, you may have other loyalties, but here none other. The queen, herself subject to The Golden Rule, has but one loyalty: to you.

"Despite her being an absolute monarch, you may nevertheless find yourselves being asked to vote on this matter or that. Each community holds periodic 'moots' where the people may voice their opinions on community affairs. These opinions and concerns are transmitted to the queen for a final decision. Community councils may occasionally take positions or actions subject only to being overturned by the crown. What this means is that each community largely governs itself within the single restriction that all must adhere to The Golden Rule.

"Your responsibility, as a subject of the crown and a citizen of Farside, is to support yourself and to take care of your family. There is no requirement that you take care of anyone else, but there is also no prohibition against you doing so, either.

"I will now take any questions you may have."

"You said 'more-or-less permanent'," one of the audience spoke. "What's 'more-or-less' about 'permanent'?"

Ted laughed. "You're not being rocketed to Alpha Centauri. Nearside is just on the other side of the closest gate. You might have to make an appointment to go back to Nearside and to return to Farside, but this isn't Devil's Island. When Gramps has his 80th birthday party, there's nothing stopping you from being there to watch him blow out the candles. Nothing, that is, except the fact that you'll probably be up to your armpits in running a farm, operating a mine or a lumber mill, repairing wind turbines, or whatever tasks constitute your job. You are required to support yourself, but that doesn't absolutely preclude you taking a vacation."

"Taxes," another said. It was not exactly a question, but Ted understood the meaning.

"Just as you are required to support yourself, so also is the Queen required to support herself. She is not absolved from any responsibilities of citizens of Farside simply because she wears a crown." Some of the people in the audience wore startled expressions. "The queen works a small gold mining operation with her family near Boulder. She gets cold, wet, and dirty just like the other miners. On the rare occasion she is tasked with a governmental

function and thus cannot work at her mine, the communities are expected to 'cover the outage', and they do so primarily via voluntary contributions to the Farside treasury. Consequently, there are no 'taxes' in the sense we typically understand the word: somebody telling you what your share is, collecting it, and squirreling it away. You, with your communities, decide what you will contribute. If contributions are inadequate, the governmental function doesn't happen. If you want there to be a treaty between Farside and West Wheresoever, get out your checkbook. Simple as that.

"Now, the queen is about to present us with a crown prince or a crown princess — she refuses to tell us which — in another two or three weeks and so cannot really do much work at their mine. My understanding is that the Boulder community has put aside a fund to cover her expenses and to provide a birthday present for the new arrival, but that is all done voluntarily. Nobody had to participate, but everybody did. If they didn't, everyone else would give them the evil eye," he said, grinning.

"Do we have a flag?" someone asked.

"We do," Ted gushed, stepping to one side of the platform. He took the corner of the flag hanging from a pole and held it out so that all could see the golden ellipse in a field of light blue. "The ring represents Queen Barbara's crown. We also have a national anthem, but it's unofficial. No one has asked that it be made official." He shrugged.

"You said we need to make an appointment to go back through the gate?" another asked.

"We no longer leave any of the gates unattended due to security exposures that caused us some considerable difficulty a while back. Each community has a team of gatekeepers. You call the gatekeeper, possibly leaving a message on their voicemail, and make sure there will be someone available to let you through. If you must transit right this very instant, that could be a problem if no one is on duty. Could. If you're planning to transit Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon when there's loads of traffic in both directions, you can probably just show up, have your Farside passport validated, and play through."

"Farside passport? I already have a U.S. passport. Is that enough?"

Ted shook his head. "Everybody who will reside in Farside must have a Farside-issued passport. To get through the gate, you must have a Farside passport or the appropriate visa document inviting you to cross. Those of you here today who do not have U.S. passports have one of these," he held up a letter bearing the Farside flag logo, "and you were told to hang onto it because it's your exit visa

as well as your entry visa.

"This doesn't mean that those of you who wind up living here can just dispose of your old passports. Because of our treaty arrangements with the U.S., with Canada and Mexico, as well as others we are working on, you, as a Farside resident, will have dual citizenship. If you want to go to Italy, use your U.S. passport because your Farside passport doesn't work... yet.

"Now, as to some substantial differences in the cultures between all these various nations," Ted began the final leg of his orientation. "Some things it is strictly illegal to do in other places are perfectly okay here in Farside. Some of our farmers grow hemp and marijuana. Others grow coca. I've heard of one farmer with a lovely growth of poppies — opium poppies. What you do in Farside is governed by Farside's law which is..." — he held out his hands to prompt the audience for their answer as if it were a pop quiz, and they all answered: "...the Golden Rule."

Ted smiled and nodded. "Correct. What you do elsewhere is governed by other law. The perfect application of The Golden Rule requires that we not violate other laws when we find ourselves where those other laws are effective, so" — he paused to let all this sink in before continuing — "while it's legal for you to grow pot here, for instance, it's illegal under our law to export it to a place where it isn't legal. Everybody got that? You can't use our law to violate somebody else's law." Most of the audience just nodded as if this sounded very sensible to them.

"Visitors," another shouted from the audience.

"Hey, Aunt Sue, why don't you and Uncle Bob come and stay with us for a few weeks in the Spring? The weather's really lovely," Ted mimicked an invitation. "Is that what you mean?" Ted grimaced. "Let's think about this for a moment. You're here because someone known to and trusted by the crown and the people of Farside invited you to join our community. Before you got your formal invitation and the visa that followed, we did a serious investigation of you, your family, your background, your education, your habits... not to exclude you, but so that we would know what we were signing up for, and to make sure we weren't offering you more than you could chew.

"You're here today because you deserve the opportunity to do the same thing to us: check out the land, the people, the culture, the pluses and minuses of living in wilderness, and to decide whether you're really cut out for frontier living. I suspect your question is aimed at introducing more people to the Farside way of life. That's admirable, and I must admit we used to do exactly that when introducing new people to the concept, but it is discouraged these days. If you have someone in mind who might be a valuable addition

to your community there is a way to bring them aboard: the same way you were brought aboard. In essence, we're in the same position North America was in the 1600s: it wasn't a vacation spot. If you couldn't pull your own weight in a primitive setting, you didn't get passage across the Atlantic.

"Do you know someone who would fit in here? Your community leaders want to know about them, so they can be issued invitations to scope out their future in Farside."

"So, we're coming here to work *a la* displaced 19th-century Irish potato farmers, is that it?" someone shouted.

"In a primitive culture, agriculture plays a major role: you must be able to feed yourselves before you can branch out to other, more interesting things, but we already have a lot of that covered," Ted explained. "We have several people here who are really good at that sort of thing. If you want to be a farmer or a rancher, that's wonderful, but there are other things that also need doing. Is Tom Plummer here?" Someone in the audience raised his hand. "Tom is an accountant with a background in marketing and distribution. He's been invited because we need someone to educate our farmers in those disciplines. Tom's giving up debits and credits for blackboard and chalk, and falling back on accounting when teaching gets slow. Nobody's going to ask Tom to pilot a tractor, although if he ever decides to branch out that might be something he would want to try.

"When I said anything was possible, I was not exaggerating. All of you have talents and skills that can be put to use here, but nobody is going to tell you how to go about feeding your families. You can wish big and not be disappointed.

"Let's take a tour. I'll show you what I mean."

The group followed Ted outside to a hay wagon pulled by a tractor. They all climbed aboard the wagon and the tractor began towing them eastward. In about eight miles they came to a vast lake, almost an inland sea. They dismounted from the wagon and followed Ted down to the shore. A pier jutted out into the water where a pair of pontoon boats were moored.

"This is Platte Lake," Ted informed them as the boats set out eastward across the water. "Its width, east-to-west varies from about nine miles at its narrowest point to something like twenty-five miles. North-to-south, it's over two hundred miles, about eighty of those south of us and the other hundred twenty to the north. That's all we know about this lake except this:

"A lake that size forms a barrier to expansion eastward. Some of you have boating and fishing experience. This," he said spreading his arms out over the water, "is why you're here. This lake could be a protein mine if there are edible fish in it. Whether there are or aren't,

we need to establish a ferry service for transporting people, goods, and equipment across this lake so that we can start building communities on the other side."

"We'll spend our whole lives boating and fishing?" one of the men chuckled. "I thought you said this wasn't a vacation spot."

Ted laughed, too. "Mark Twain once said, '*Make your vacation your vocation and you'll never work a day in your life*'. If that's how you see Farside, all the better. While you're at it, map the lake, put soundings on it, and sell the maps, if that interests you. There's lots of work to be done here, and some of it will look like fun."

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A similar scene played out in St. Louis, Missouri, hosted by Samantha Burke, but with a much smaller audience.

"To be honest, the conditions we require for establishment of a new Farside community seem not to be present here," she told the audience. "We generally start with a food-production operation: farms, ranches, and dairies. That implies people from an agricultural background, and I don't see that in this group." She sounded quite disappointed. "If I'm missing something, please speak up."

"I don't have a farming background, but if you wouldn't mind some recruiting help, I know of several people who work farms as employees because their family farms failed and were bought out from under them. Would you be interested in those people?"

"Absolutely," Sam agreed enthusiastically. "In fact, if we can establish a viable farming community able to provide foodstuffs, I feel certain the crown will authorize establishment of a new mixed community."

"The crown'?" one asked.

"Farside is a monarchy," Sam explained. "Barbara, the first, is our sovereign, and I, for one, would have no other. We are freer there in Farside than you are here in the land of the free, home of the brave. I'm not the only person who thinks that way. In fact, I don't know anyone in Farside who thinks otherwise.

"I'll go further," she told them with a definite note of 'challenge' in her voice. "Although we have a sovereign, we, her subjects, are far more sovereign than you are. Yes, it's true: we don't get to make the final decision as you do at election-time, but how much influence do you really have at the polls? I never felt like I had much when I lived here. At our moots, we vote as a community on how we will run our world. Yes, Barbara has the power to overrule those decisions, and one of these days she may just do that, but so far none of the three established communities have had to back-track

because of that. Why? Because all of us are committed to treating each other fairly and that comports exactly with Her Majesty's goals.

"If we wear a yoke, it's pretty light. I never feel it pinching.

"So... who do you know who might like to farm in Farside?"

"First, what kind of deal are you offering? Is it share-cropping or do they have to buy the land?"

"No, it's homesteading," Sam answered. "A farmer gets to stake out and farm three thousand acres without asking anyone's permission or paying any fee. Over that would require explicit permission from the crown, but there still would not be a fee."

"Three thousand acres?"

"Yes, three thousand acres. The homesteader is also expected to provide, by hiring or other means, the workforce to operate the farm. Whether that's family or friends or hired hands is up to the homesteader, with the understanding that any of those people may one day bid for their own land and go run their own operation. The sole requirement is that you must have actual cropland equal to twenty percent of whatever you stake out. That means if you stake out the full three thousand acres, you have to plant at least six hundred."

The faces in the audience were a mixture of wonder and disbelief at what they were hearing. Sam smiled. She had seen this before.

"Understand," she explained, "it's an entire world on the other side of the gate, so you all can dream big, bigger than you have ever dreamed before. Barbara is already dreaming big. She wants a commitment from St.-Louis-in-Farside that they will build an airstrip as their first major construction project after the community is up-and-running. That's the price she asks that you pay for the opportunity to be freer than any of you have ever experienced in your whole lives: to live in a world where the only law is *'treat others the way you want to be treated'*.

"Here are my business cards," she finished as she handed each one of her cards. "When you have your farmers rounded up, even if it's only to have them hear our pitch for themselves, give me a call and someone will be back here to get the ball rolling."

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"Chancellery," Linda Rossi answered the phone. It hadn't stopped ringing all day and she was starting to get frazzled. Her boss, Samantha Burke, Chancellor of Farside, wouldn't be back for another day from her trip to St. Louis, Missouri, and Midland, Texas. So far today she had fielded seventeen calls from people who had heard

about Sam's offer of three thousand free acres of virgin cropland and every one of them wanted more information. Linda had done her level-best answering all the questions they fired at her but was being worn down by hearing and having to answer the same questions over and over. In the end, she changed the message on the answering machine to:

This is the Chancellery for Farside. Due to an overwhelming volume of calls, we may be unable to respond immediately. Please leave your name and a call-back number along with a brief message regarding the reason for your call. If you have an email address, please include that information. We will respond to your message as soon as practicable.

She set the phone on auto-answer and set to work on a 'Frequently Asked Questions' document she could send out to any new homesteader inquiries.

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Q: Where is Farside? I can't find it on my map.

A: Farside is a parallel universe existing side-by-side with the one you are familiar with. Farside is very much like the matching terrain on Earth, but it's not an exact match. During 'Orientation for Homesteaders' you will get a chance to visit Farside before making up your mind if you want to accept a homesteading offer.

Q: Three thousand acres? What's the catch? How much is this going to cost me?

A: There's no catch except that you must plant and farm at least twenty percent of the homestead allotment. If you bid for and stake out the full three thousand acres, you must exploit at least six hundred acres from planting through harvest. If you fail to do that, we will re-survey your claim and reduce your allotment down to five times the acreage exploited. If you exploit the full twenty percent for eight straight years, you earn title to the land. It becomes yours.

Q: What about seed money? What about farm equipment? What does the labor market look like?

A: We very highly encourage co-operative farming

where the co-op buys the seed and equipment and the farmer-members share the costs. How you operate is nobody's business but your own, but a co-op can be very helpful, especially for a start-up operation. Experience in Colorado-in-Farside suggests that Farside's land is very spectacularly productive and even moderate efforts result in bounteous harvests. Because entry to Farside is not wide-open, you should try to locate suitable help to be brought in to Farside to assist you in working your homestead allotment. You may have to obtain new employees each year because anyone may bid for their own homestead, and talented individuals will always be considered for new allotments.

Q: Can we raise livestock?

A: Absolutely, and we highly encourage ranching. To keep cattle and sheep from interfering with fruit and vegetable farmers, farming allotments and ranching allotments are geographically separated. Nobody wants the cattle trampling the wheat. Ranchers may bid for their own personal homestead allotment based on the number of head of livestock imported to Farside as follows: one-quarter acre per head of beef cattle plus one-tenth acre per head of sheep, goats, and swine. Fowl may be raised anywhere but are not eligible for a homestead allotment. Land that hasn't been claimed for farming is open range.

Q: I heard somebody say, 'permanent relocation'. Does that mean I can't come back?

A: Not at all. You can cross from Farside to Nearside and back whenever you need to. The term 'permanent relocation' is used to denote the fact that you are making a serious long-term commitment to living and working in Farside and being a good citizen of Farside. This isn't a part-time job, and it's not a temporary job, either. Farside is looking for people to come here, live here, work here, raise their families here, retire here, and probably die here (although we're not wishing that on anybody).

Q: Okay, I own this land because I worked it for the full eight years. Can I sell it?

A: Sure, but who are you going to sell it to? Right

now, Farside has an estimated thirty-five billion undeveloped acres. Billion. With a 'B'. Everybody in Farside already has as much land as they want – for free, and there's more where that came from. Nobody from Nearside will buy it because there's no guarantee they'll be able to enjoy it, because there's no guarantee they'll be able to cross to Farside.

Q: What are the taxes like?

A: Taxes are levied community-by-community. There is no Farside-wide tax. Expenses of the crown are covered by voluntary contributions, generally from whole communities, but occasionally from individuals.

Q: No taxes? Are you nuts?

A: Yes, we probably are.

Q: 'The crown'? What?

A: Farside is a monarchy. Our ruler is Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh who is officially Queen Barbara the First fitzGibbon. She is married to Ernest Walsh who is not King Ernest. Decisions of local community boards (called 'moots') are subject to being overruled at Barbara's sole discretion, but that hasn't happened yet. She is addressed as 'Your Majesty' only when wearing her crown. At all other times, she is addressed as 'Barbara' or 'Mrs. Walsh', unless you are her student, in which case it would be 'Professor Walsh'.

Q: So, if I bump into her on the street, I say 'Hi, Barbara'?

A: If there's not a golden ring on her head, yes.

Q: No taxes? How do you maintain an army? The police?

A: All citizens of Farside capable of bearing arms are the Farside militia. So far, we haven't needed an army. Come to think of it, we haven't needed the militia, either. You are the police.

Q: So, crime is pretty low in Farside?

A: Yes. So few things are 'crimes' under Farside law that it isn't worth keeping statistics. Our

murder rate is zero, and there have been no reports of thefts, so that rate is zero, also. This is probably because the punishment for such things is severe: the offender is ejected from the community to the wilderness.

Q: You call that ‘severe’? Ha!

A: After your first encounter with a Dire wolf, you’ll change your mind... for the last few remaining moments of your life.

Q: Cool! Can we hunt them?

A: Maybe one of these days, but not yet. Dire wolves have been extinct in North America for 10,000 years or more and we don’t yet know their status here. If they become a nuisance, they’ll become endangered.

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“Good morning. This is Dr. Gregory Urbaniek with the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn, New York. You can call me back at area code 718-399-7339 and ask for me by name.

“There is a rumor going around that Dire wolves can be found in Farside. I’d like to be put in contact with someone who can give me more information about them. Specifically, we’d like to acquire a pair of those wolves for our zoo. Any information you can give me will be most appreciated.”

Sam Burke pushed the STOP button at the end of the message. “Up to you,” she told the Privy Council. “It’s true that we have some unusual creatures here, and I’m not surprised they’re attracting interest from the Nearside scientific community. I’ll admit I’m for it. We have no idea what sort of wildlife we have here, and a few scientific types might give us some otherwise unavailable information.”

“I think we should restrict them to video,” Nell Gruder remarked. “We don’t even allow Farsiders to kill or capture wolves.” There was a murmur of assent from the other members. “Of course, it’s up to Barbara.”

But before the matter could be broached to Barbara she was rushed to the local hospital’s maternity ward where she delivered

Penelope Alice Walsh.

Linda Rossi called Dr. Urbaniek to give him the decision of the Privy Council: "Pending review by Her Majesty," Linda told him, "the Privy Council denies permission to kill or capture Dire wolves, but they are amenable to an exploratory mission limited to photography and videography. If this is acceptable, please let me have a roster of your crew so that we can issue visas for them. I suggest you plan to enter Farside via Pottstown, Pennsylvania."

It took two weeks for the team from Brooklyn to assemble, get their visas, and arrange all their equipment. They assembled at the Hamm compound in Pottstown and got their first glimpse of another world.

Harry Tumulty built a small radio station to broadcast a homing signal and provided the team with three receivers they could use to find their way back to Hammburg. "Keep at least one of them in reserve," Harry told them.

Over the next seven weeks the team worked their way north to about where Scranton would be, then turned southwest until they were near Hagerstown, Maryland, before taking a bearing on Hammburg and heading back to their starting point.

At Hammburg the contents of their digital cameras were copied to DVDs and the team leaders gave a briefing to the community.

"In seven weeks of trekking overland, we haven't seen much of anything — except one thing — any of us would call 'startling'," the presenter began as images flashed on the screen behind. "Certainly, we have not come across any Dire wolves, leading us to agree with your assessment of their status as 'likely endangered'. There seem to be ample small animal populations including beaver, rabbit, and woodchuck, especially south and west of this spot.

"Two weeks ago, we spotted a small herd of what appear to be white-tailed deer numbering five in all. Although we didn't see any more than that, we did see tracks leading us to suspect that there are far more than just the five we saw. We also saw this." The image on the screen showed a hawk-like bird. "This has been identified as some species of eagle, but none of us being eagle experts we can't say which. It is, however, the biggest eagle any of us have ever seen or heard of. This animal has an estimated wingspan of twenty-seven feet. It is almost certainly capable of carrying off an adult deer — or an adult human. It is also unlikely we found the record-breaker just by accident, so we presume that there are others of this species with wider wingspans. If you're looking for a predator, this may be it. If it has developed a taste for Dire wolf, you better let us trap a few and

put them in a protected environment before they are all gone.

"The one truly startling thing about Farside is the relative scarcity of animal life. When European explorers first reached North America the thing that startled them was the incredible abundance of animal life. Had they reached Farside's North America instead, they probably would have starved to death."

Laurel Hamm rose to ask a question: "Are you and your team ready to call this a wrap?"

Greg Urbaniek turned toward Laurel. "We're all pretty bushed from seven weeks in wilderness and I think we'll be happy to get back to a familiar environment where we can analyze what we saw and what we found. That's an interesting question, though. What if we weren't ready to wrap?"

"Exactly the point," Laurel answered him. "What if you're not finished? Do you have more work to do here? What if you were to get permission to acquire some specimens?"

Urbaniek paused, not knowing what Laurel was driving at. "I think we'd debrief to our more advanced colleagues, restock, and be back here next week or the week after."

"Then, Dr. Urbaniek, why don't you plan on doing just that. Her Majesty has authorized the establishment of a zoological preserve dedicated to the Farside Dire wolf. You're cleared to acquire one male and one female for study, and if you can safely capture a pair of Farside eagles, I think Her Majesty can be cajoled into permitting that, as well.

"Your visas are now permanent visas. No need to re-apply for permission to transit. Just let us know when we should expect you."

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Nell Gruder stepped to the microphone as a slide presentation began to play on the giant screen behind her.

"The images you are seeing were taken during the prior six months within Farside's San Angelo-Sweetwater-Pecos triangle; that is: approximately the Nearside Permian Basin. The topology, as you can see, is hauntingly familiar save only for the total absence of signs of oil production. This is land that has never hosted a footprint so there's no bureaucracy to deal with: no landowners, no cities, no counties. The legal costs of setting up an exploration-drilling-production-refining operation here are *nil* and, if the landscape is any indication, there's a lot of oil here ready to be extracted.

"The Crown is amenable to issuing production leases for this land on condition that you may not export unprocessed crude. That is: any bid you make for leases here must include the ability to refine it

such that the output could be sold at retail. 'Royalty' consists of a seven percent cut of the processed product in addition to the origination fee for the lease. From this, the Crown will provide you with a port for each class of product at a location you specify through which you may pass product back to Nearside. Any pipeline required to get the product to the location of the port is your responsibility. You are required to guarantee zero spillage outside the wellhead area.

"You will, no doubt, want to field teams into Farside to survey the land and decide where, if at all, you want your leases. The package you each were given contains all the forms you will need to provide for each member of your team. We'll need at least 72 hours for processing before we can issue visas.

"As you can see from the pictures, you will also have to create an entire infrastructure to support any such operation. There are no roads. There are no airports. There are no power companies. There is no running water except for streams. There are no phone companies, but we're working on that. There are no food stores or hardware stores. You must bring everything with you or do without it. That may change in the future.

"The sooner you can assemble your teams and get the paperwork approved, the sooner those teams can be visa'd and surveying in Farside. Any questions?"

A hand was raised and Nell pointed at the person in invitation.

"Jack Dunne, Exxon. Is there an EPA we have to coordinate with?"

"No," Nell answered, "but we don't need one to protect the environment. You're going to guarantee you won't spill. Did you miss that?"

"I don't know how anybody can guarantee a pipe won't spring a leak," Dunne responded.

"But you will," Nell told him with finality. "We don't care how you do it as long as you do it. Don't spill. We will shut you down and kick your asses back to Houston if you do. I have that on good authority. It's a quote from Her Majesty herself.

"If it means you use double-walled pipe for your pipelines, that's what you'll do. If it means you use triple-walled pipe for your pipelines, that's what you'll do. If it means you have an inspector stationed every two hundred feet the length of the pipe, that's what you'll do. Whatever it takes to guarantee you do not spill outside the wellhead area, that's what you'll do. Do I need to be clearer on this point?"

"No," Dunne responded, chastened, "I think I understand what the requirement is." He sat down.

"Marylou Tolliver, Marathon," another announced herself,

rising, "do we each have to have our own refinery?"

"Thank you, Marylou, for that insightful question," Nell began. "No, you do not have to each provide separate refinery facilities. If one or more of you wants to take over refining as a cooperative venture and do the refining for several suppliers, that entirely fits the requirement. Whatever arrangement you can work out among yourselves is perfectly okay with the Crown. In fact, Her Majesty suggested to me before I left for this trip that we might want to go into the refining business and I briefed her on the phenomenal cost of that operation. She has been disabused of the notion that we could effectively act as the refiner, so it's your ball, ladies and gentlemen. However you wish to play it is fine with us."

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Marathon, Exxon, and Pioneer joined together and created a distinct but wholly-owned subsidiary devoted entirely to the refinery business. Within the following week, Shell and Gulf were making buy-in offers, and before the third week closed there was general agreement that there would be a single Permian Basin refinery with each of the producers holding varying stakes.

The staff of the well-capitalized operation set to work on the planning for a new refinery while the various oil company principals began prospecting the land in Farside's Permian Basin for leaseholds. Nell Gruder's Petroleum Ministry called for bids for the construction of storage tanks for the seven percent that would remain in Farside. In another year, when the joint-venture refinery started producing usable products, the tanks would hold Barbara's share and the House of FitzGibbon would at last have an income of its own.

At about the same time, pioneers began farming and ranching on their allotments alongside the Pecos River in a part of Farside where water was more valuable than oil.