

The Farside Chronicles

Book III

Farside Colony

by Frank Clarke

© 2017

Table of Contents

1 - Farside Barkley Six.....	3
2 - Burglary One.....	15
3 - Arrested Development.....	27
4 - Investigation.....	37
5 - Snoops.....	48
6 - Retribution.....	60
7 - Newcomers.....	71
8 - Publicity.....	80
9 - Fatah and Anwar.....	89
10 - Crime and Punishment.....	98
11 - Legal Niceties.....	107
12 - Geneviève.....	119
13 - Dante and Geneviève.....	131
14 - Affairs of State.....	140
15 - The Diplomats' Dance	151
16 - The Gatekeepers' Guild.....	163
17 - Fences.....	182
18 - All that glisters.....	193
19 - Passages.....	206
20 - Eventide.....	218

1 - Farside Barkley Six

Paul Ramsey slid into the booth across from Hardy Burke in the Crumley Cogwheels at Dallas and Milam. Hardy reached over to grip his old friend's hand.

"You called the meeting," Hardy informed him, "so you're picking up the check, right?"

Ramsey smiled back. "Sure. It's all expensed anyway."

They ordered lunch and drinks and spent the first ten minutes swapping notes on old friends they both knew, a few of whom had gone on to their eternal rewards, whatever form that might take in each case. When lunch arrived, they finally got down to business.

"What's up?" Burke started the conversation.

"I need an assault group," Ramsey admitted, "and they all have to have clean records because they're all going to be investigated and they all have to pass inspection. Before you ask, don't ask. They and you will find out what they're assaulting the morning of the operation, and I don't yet know when that will be, myself."

"Artillery?" Burke asked.

"Probably not," Ramsey answered. "Rifles, pistols, subguns, dynamite. That will about cover it."

"So, it's not a hard target," Burke confirmed to himself. "That's good. It widens the field and gives me a better chance at filling the roster. How many heads?"

"I don't think we'll need fifteen, but it would be good to have spares in case any of them don't survive the investigation. Set up for fifteen."

"Who's supplying the equipment?" Burke asked.

Ramsey tapped his own chest with a fingertip. "I'll take care of that."

"Payment?" Burke prodded.

"All the key players have to be signed up in three weeks. Payroll starts then for everyone who's then on board, and whenever they sign on for the rest of them. Twelve hundred a day in arrears for command, eight-twenty for grunts. Eight days for training, three for the op, two weeks max."

Burke grimaced. Nobody likes short contracts and this one was very short. "I'll see what I can do."

—==++++==—

Back at his office at One Allen Center, Ramsey busied himself

with security-related matters for Barkley Oil until about six in the evening. After the office complex had largely cleared out and city traffic had started to taper off, he called for his car to pick him up at the Dallas Street entrance, and from there he was driven to the West Houston Airport where Barkley Oil kept its two corporate jets.

The pilot had the engines warmed and ready as Ramsey's limo pulled into its parking spot. The limo driver grabbed his passenger's bags from the trunk and handed them to the ground crew for stowing. Ramsey buckled himself into the first-row aisle seat and waved at the pilot who advanced the Cessna's throttles, taxied it to the north end of the runway, turned, and roared down runway 15.

Three minutes after Ramsey seated himself, the plane turned into the west-northwest bound for Pecos Municipal Airport, an hour away by air. At the Pecos airport, Ramsey presented his passport with its permanent Farside visa at the Farside immigration control building and was promptly ushered through. He was met there by a security guard in the uniform of Barkley Oil who took his luggage and led the way toward a plain sedan without markings. Shortly, the sedan took him to the Barkley Oil Farside-Pecos complex, a cluster of five buildings fitted out to support the administrative crew assigned to the local operation.

His security chief met him at the door. "Dinner's waiting," he told Ramsey, "and the recon team is ready to meet with you."

"Good," was all Ramsey said.

—==++++==—

Barkley Oil had seen the potential of the oil fields in Farside early-on and its management made sure they held a substantial interest in the refinery end of the deal, the better to keep track of what was happening *vis-à-vis* its competition. The competition, Barkley's board noted, was spending a lot of money adhering to the Crown edict that there must never be a spill in Farside. Barkley's approach was to do frequent inspections of its pipelines in order to detect problems early-on when fixing them would not be too costly.

The fly in this ointment, which no one at Barkley noticed until it was too late, was that human inspectors will sometimes make mistakes, and others will simply do a piss-poor job. Either is a recipe for a leaky pipe, and that is exactly what happened to Farside Barkley Six-B. Whether the break occurred because of an error on an inspector's part, or whether it was out-and-out negligence on an inspector's part, or even whether it would have been possible at all for anyone to say in advance that a join was about to let go no one could say, not that it would have mattered one way or the other.

The pressure sensors spaced evenly along the seven-mile length of Farside Barkley Six-B detected the drop-off in pressure almost instantly, and equally quickly relayed back the command to stop pumping, which command the pumps obeyed as soon as the order arrived. Nevertheless, two hundred twenty-eight barrels of Farside West Texas crude wound up in the sand beneath Six-B, and Nell Gruder, Farside's Petroleum Minister, was on-site before the sun set, delivered there in what the people of Farside now half-jokingly called 'Farside One', Barbara's personal Honda bizjet.

Nell and her team did an eyeball inspection of the spill site and immediately called a meeting with all the resident managers for Barkley Oil, and included the senior reps from all the other oil companies drilling in Farside.

"Is there anyone here who would like to stand up and claim ignorance of the Crown Edict on Spillage?" she demanded of them, the fire clearly visible in her eyes. No one responded to her challenge. "Is there anyone here who has not signed one of these?" and she hoisted aloft the standard 'Agreement Regarding Operation of Farside Wellheads' that all oilfield operations personnel, from senior managers down to roughnecks and chauffeurs, signed as part of the work-visa process. Again, no one rose to the challenge.

"So, there is no one here who can claim not to know the penalty for spilling in Farside," she continued. She watched the blood drain from a few of the faces in the room as they suddenly realized what was coming.

"But we're only dealing with two hundred twenty-eight barrels!" the senior resident manager blurted.

"It wouldn't matter if it were only two hundred twenty-eight milliliters," Nell informed him. "Farside Barkley Six is permanently shut down by order of the Crown. The decision is final and not subject to appeal. Pack it up."

"What of our eight other wellheads?" the senior resident for Barkley asked.

"They are not affected by the shut-down order," Nell answered. "If you'd like them to stay that way, don't spill any more oil on our sand."

—==+++==—

"We know there are more than just the airport gate in the Pecos area, but where they are is pure speculation... almost," the recon team leader told Ramsey. "There's an equipment barn that we think is a likely candidate. It's located about three miles west of the airport gate in a farming community."

"Why there?" Ramsey asked.

"It's a guess," the recon leader admitted. "The gates we go through when it's just people and luggage are about door-size, maybe a little larger. Certainly, you can't get a Jeep or construction equipment through them. They're just too small for that. Somewhere there's a gate that's a dozen feet wide and a dozen feet high, and maybe bigger than that. When we need to send pipe, drilling equipment, trucks, pre-fab buildings through, how do we do it? We hand the keys to the trucks to some Farsidenik who drives them off into the sunset, and tomorrow the truck shows up in Farside where we asked for it to be delivered.

"After we off-load it, the Farsidenik drives off with the empty truck and it shows up back in Nearside sometime later.

"Last week we arranged for a fresh shipment of down-pipe, but we used a truck that has a GPS tracking device built in. The GPS went dead just south of I-20 two to three miles west of the airport. We're guessing that's when it crossed into Farside. In Farside at that point is a barn or stable — that size building — and it corresponds to a similar-sized building in Nearside.

"We followed this up with some aerial surveillance when we knew there were shipments scheduled for transit into Farside." Ramsey lifted an eyebrow. The speaker continued. "We saw several large trucks roll into a building that was in no way capable of holding all of them at the same time. I can't tell you with absolute certainty there's a gate in that building, but I can tell you that I can't think of any other explanation.

"Our guess is that there's a huge gate in that building, one big enough to accommodate a truck, and that's where the crossover takes place."

"So, what's the plan look like?" Ramsey asked. He already knew the answer.

"The way I see it," the recon team leader answered, "we snatch the airport gate, hotfoot it over to the equipment gate where we can bring the captured gate back into Texas. We need to have a pick-up team waiting there with wheels so we can scam out of the area without delay. Nobody involved in the operation can ever come back to Farside, of course."

"Why not?" Ramsey demanded.

"Because the Farside authorities will not have any record of us leaving Farside. If we try to re-enter under those circumstances, we mark ourselves as the ones who stole the gate."

Ramsey smirked. "At your expected exit point, you hand the gate through to the retrieval team on the other side. You stay in Farside. You don't leave. Unless they have surveillance video, and I

can't recall ever seeing any, you'll never be associated with the operation. As far as anyone can know, you will have had nothing to do with it."

"Slick," the recon leader responded. "I've got one more test we can make."

—==++++==—

The security staff gathered around the wide-screen TV in the presentation room watching the landscape roll by.

"The driver turns left onto I-20 westbound," the presenter explained, then ran the video in fast-forward mode for a few moments. "Here, he takes the exit 33 off-ramp and turns south on Ranch 869... and another left onto county road 206... there's the barn where the gate appears to be located. As the barn doors open, we can see that there's a monster of a gate inside the building, plenty big enough to handle any truck we care to send through. This is the spot where we lose the GPS tracking signal.

"So, Dan... great idea you had, putting a periscope on one of our containers and getting video of the trip from Pecos Municipal to our wellheads. We've also done some recon in Farside and know there's a barn-like building approximately the same size as this one right where it needs to be.

"This makes planning a whole lot easier, and Dan is going to see a much nicer paycheck in the next cycle. The high-level overview of the op is now as follows:

"We will start by seizing the door-sized gate at the airport immigration office in Farside and powering it down. At the same time, the retrieval team will neutralize any personnel at the truck barn. The raid team will take the gate to the truck barn and deliver it to the retrieval team, then retreat back into Farside. The retrieval team will bring the gate to the airport and put it aboard the jet plane that will be waiting for them there."

"Neutralize?" one of the security team asked.

"Neutralize," Ramsey confirmed. "If that means you must kill them, you kill them. If you can do it with flash-bangs and tear gas, that's fine. I don't care how it happens. I only care that it happens."

—==++++==—

The ad in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine was as uninformative as the others except for some of the odd details:

Short-term contract (2 weeks including prep) for experienced operatives only. \$820/day to

\$1200/day, start to finish. All equipment and transportation supplied. Respond in confidence to P.O. Box 1187, Houston TX 77084-1187. Reference SOF-88e.

Lou Mosca slipped his CV into an envelope, addressed it, and added a stamp. It would go out in tomorrow's mail and be in Houston within three days.

Four days later his cell phone purred in his shirt pocket. He flipped it open, looked at the display showing only "Texas", and pushed the 'TALK' button. "Yeah," he acknowledged the incoming call.

"I'm calling about the ad in *Soldier of Fortune* this month. Am I speaking to the right person?" the caller asked.

"Yes, I responded to that ad," Lou admitted. "Who am I talking to?"

"My name is Jeff Mears, and I have been asked to screen applicants to weed out those who wouldn't fit the necessary profile. And to whom am I speaking?" he finished.

"You called me, remember?" Lou challenged him. "Don't you know who you called?"

"I do," Jeff Mears confirmed. "I just want to hear you say it... just to make sure I have the right person. Your name, please?"

"I'm Lou Mosca," Lou told him.

"Excellent!" Mears chortled. "It says here you were 'Recon' for several years until four years ago when you mustered out. May I ask your age, Mr. Mosca?"

"I'm 56," Lou admitted.

"And I presume you're in reasonably good physical shape, Mr. Mosca?" Mears probed.

"Well, I'm not nineteen anymore," Lou grimaced, "but I stay active and work out on a regular basis. Yeah, I'm in pretty good shape for somebody my age."

"And would you be available to come to Texas for a week or so of orientation and training for a very short term assignment?"

"Sure," Lou assured him. "I'd like to know a little more about the assignment, though. And the pay scale: am I on the eight-twenty end or the twelve-hundred end?"

"Until we sort out roles and responsibilities, Mr. Mosca, everyone is on the eight-twenty end. If we decide to put you in a leadership position, you'll move toward the twelve-hundred end retroactively. Can we fly you in this coming Thursday with a return trip two weeks after that?"

"That would be okay," Lou agreed.

"Which airport?" Mears asked.

"Stewart outside of Newburgh is best for me, but if you want me to use one of the metro airports, any of them would do. Newark, of course, is easier for me than the others."

"We'll get your tickets purchased and let you know what airline and flight. I'm sending you a form for you to fill out and return to me. Print it out, complete it by hand, sign it, and express it back to me as soon as possible. The note will have the account you can use so the shipping charge is billed directly to me. Pleasure talking with you, Mr. Mosca." Mears hung up the phone without waiting to hear if Lou returned the compliment.

—==+++==—

The Boeing 757 nosed into its slot at Houston's gate A29 and the doors popped open. Lou Mosca grabbed his carry-on from the overhead compartment and began the tedious shuffle toward the jetway. *Of course, I'm as far from the terminal as I could possibly be*, he grumbled to himself as he realized his plane had arrived at the uttermost gate. The only way to get farther away from the terminal would be if the airport had used an old-style boarding stairway and rolled it out to the aircraft on the apron.

In the terminal, he looked around for anything familiar and soon spotted a sign held high with the names Mosca, Calhoun, and Piasecki neatly printed. He maneuvered his way through the crowd toward the sign.

"I'm Lou Mosca," he told the sign-bearer.

"Thank you, Mr. Mosca. Please wait here with me for the others."

One of the others had already arrived. He stuck out his hand in greeting. "Jerry Piasecki," he announced himself.

"Lou Mosca," Lou responded. "Where are you from?"

"New Paltz," Piasecki answered. "You?"

"Beacon," Lou informed him.

A few moments later, the third man arrived. "Bud Calhoun," he identified himself to the escort driver.

"That's everybody I'm supposed to wait for," the driver announced. "Follow me." The four set off toward the parking lot to find their ride.

Ten minutes later, their luggage stowed in its trunk, their limousine exited the parking lot headed for a training camp in an office park not far from the West Houston Airport. There they met others who had arrived earlier and were introduced to the team leaders.

One by one, they were ushered into a quiet conference room where their final exams would take place.

"Lou, do you have any reservations about where we might ask you to operate?" his team leader asked.

"I won't do ops in the States," Lou informed him.

"You're Italian, right?" the team leader asked.

"Italian-American," Lou corrected him.

"What if I were to tell you this op was scheduled for Italy?"

Lou hesitated. "Italy's an ally," he pointed out. "Won't the State Department have something to say about you putting mercenaries into the territory of an ally?"

"In case you're unaware of the legalities, Lou," the team leader smirked, "virtually everything connected with this business is illegal to one extent or another. If you have a problem with that, we can get your return ticket validated for tonight or tomorrow morning. Please tell me you're not that naïve."

"No, I understand that," Lou assured him. "I just don't want to do anything that will lose me my citizenship."

"So, an assignment in Canada would be okay?" Lou nodded. "France? Farside? Mexico? Costa Rica?" Lou nodded in the affirmative for each of those. "Okay, you've passed the first test. You're on payroll at eight-twenty unless and until we upgrade your status." They shook hands and Lou left the room. Another candidate entered.

Outside, Lou discussed the assignment with some of the others.

"So... where do you think the op goes down?" he asked rhetorically.

One suggested Mexico: a revenge 'hit' for some slight or damage received by a well-connected and well-funded someone. Another asked: "Did they ask whether you'd work in Farside?" Everyone else admitted that Farside had been in the list of possible sites. An idea slowly began forming in Lou's head.

That evening after dinner and a short briefing outlining the following day's training exercises, Lou went for a jog around the compound. He brought his cell phone with him. He recalled that someone he knew from the past, Davy Harmon, was somehow connected to Farside. He owed more loyalty to Davy Harmon than to any of these mokes, none of whom he had ever seen before today.

Lou scrolled through his phone's directory until he found Karl Brunner's name. He pushed 'TALK' and Karl's phone started ringing.

"Yeah," Karl answered the phone. To Lou's ears, it always sounded like Karl was saying 'ja' because he had the faintest German accent, a holdover from his parents, both of them born in the Old Country.

"Karl, it's Lou Mosca. I don't have much time, so listen. I

need to find Davy Harmon and I don't have his phone number. Could you ask around, see if anybody has contact information for him, then call me back and leave a voicemail with Davy's number. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, sure, Lou. What's this all about?"

"No time, Karl. Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it. By the way, this is urgent." Lou disconnected.

Karl shrugged his shoulders. *Where in Hell would he find Davy Harmon? Maybe that BAM who liked to keep track of all the folks she served with...* He dialed Sarka's number and let it ring until it went to voicemail.

"It's Karl Brunner," he started talking to the recorder. "A friend of mine is trying to locate Davy Harmon. Maybe you know him. If you do, call me... no, call him, Lou Mosca, at 914-555-1101 and give him Davy's contact information. Thanks."

Sarka Moskowitz picked up her messages very late that night and nearly forgot Karl Brunner's cryptic message overnight. In the morning, the only thing she could recall about Davy Harmon was that he had been friends with Tony Cusumano because they both came from the same part of the world. 'Queens', she seemed to remember. She looked up Tony Cusumano and found his number.

Tony picked up the call on the second ring. "Tony," he said.

"Hey, Tony, it's 'Sharkey'," she answered.

"Moskowitz?" Tony queried. "How the hell are you? I haven't heard from you in —"

"Yeah, a real long time," Sarka completed his thought. "Listen up. I got a call from an old Army buddy, Karl Brunner. He's trying to locate Davy Harmon for a friend of his and he asked me for an assist. I thought of you, because you and Davy used to live in the same neighborhood. Are you still in contact with Davy or do you know anybody who is?"

"I'm still in contact with Davy," Tony told her. "We see each other every now and then. What does this guy need with Davy?"

"Don't know," Sarka admitted, "but he passed along the guy's phone number to be given to Davy Harmon so Davy can contact him right away. Can I give it to you to pass to Davy?"

"Sure," Tony agreed.

"The guy's name is Lou Mosca, and he can be reached at 914-555-1101."

"Westchester County?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, Westchester. Karl is from somewhere up there himself — the other side of the river, I think. Anyway, Karl says this is urgent, so get that number to Davy as quick as you can."

They disconnected and Tony immediately dialed Davy's

number. Adele Harmon picked up.

"No, sorry, Tony. Davy's in Pennsylvania for the next week — something to do with his Farside job," Adele told him in response to Tony's question as to Davy's whereabouts.

"Does he have a cell phone, Adele? I really have to talk with him pretty quickly."

"Oh, sure, Tony. Call him on 303-555-8888. That's his 'work' cell phone so it's always with him. Good luck."

Tony immediately redialed Davy's phone. Davy answered on the first ring.

"Ministry for Security," he answered the phone.

"My name is Tony Cusumano," Tony began. "I'm trying to locate Davy Harmon and I was told this was his number —"

"Hey, Tony," Davy Harmon cut him off, "this is Davy. That's my work phone so I almost always answer it in the 'official mode'. I'm Farside's Minister for Security these days, didn't you know? What can I do for you?"

"Davy, I got a call from 'Sharkey' Moskowitz earlier today. She was passing along a message from Karl Brunner who was passing a message from somebody named Lou Mosca. Do you know that guy?"

"Nope," Davy told him, "never heard of him. Who is he?"

"I have no idea," Tony admitted, "but he's very anxious to get in touch with you, it appears. Would you like his number?"

"Sure. Let me have it."

"914-555-1101. Like I said, the guy's name is Lou Mosca and he says he needs to talk to you. That's all I know. I think that's all anybody knows."

"I'll give him a call as soon as things quiet down here."

Late that afternoon, things finally quieted down for Davy as he and his staff finished their security audit of the Pottstown complex. He dialed the 914 number. It went direct to voicemail.

"Hi. You reached Lou's cell phone. If you're getting this message I'm either on a very high priority call and can't interrupt it or I have the ringer on 'silent' for the same sort of reason. Leave a message and I'll get back to you when circumstances allow. BEEP!"

"This is Davy Harmon," Davy began his message. "I hear you're looking to talk to me. You can call me back at 303-555-8888. That's a cell phone, too, so don't be shy about leaving your own message."

—==+++==—

The team returned to their barracks to wash up and get ready for dinner after a strenuous day of exercises that reminded Lou far too much of the 'kill house' drills he had been through during recon training. No electronic devices were permitted to be carried during training save for those devices issued as part of the operation, so his first task on returning to quarters was to check his phone for missed alerts. There were four.

The first urged him to refinance his home now that interest rates were becoming more affordable. The second was entirely unintelligible and garbled. The third was from the 303 area code, and the message said:

This is Davy Harmon. I hear you're looking to talk to me. You can call me back at 303-555-8888. That's a cell phone, too, so don't be shy about leaving your own message.

What Lou intended to say to Davy Harmon was best not overheard by anyone here, so he saved the message and picked up the last. It was from Karl Brunner confirming that he had sent Lou's message downstream and the response he got back from Davy via Tony Cusumano via Sarka Moskowitz was a 303 area code telephone that was supposed to be Davy Harmon's direct line. Lou also saved that message.

Dinner at the compound was baked potatoes and steak cooked-to-order on a massive barbeque grill behind the barracks. After chow, most of the team left to exercise on the equipment in a makeshift gym. Lou went for a jog around the perimeter. As he loped along the path, he returned Davy Harmon's earlier call.

Davy looked at the display when his phone started ringing. The 914 area code number was now associated with Lou Mosca's name so he knew this wasn't 'business'. "Mr. Mosca," Davy answered the phone, "what can I do for you?"

"I think it's more correct to ask what I can do for you," Mosca replied.

"Alright," Davy agreed, "I'll bite. What can you do for me?"

"I understand you have Farside connections," Lou offered.

"Better than just 'connections'," Davy countered. "I am Farside's Minister for Security. I report directly to the Queen's Privy Council on security matters. Are we discussing something security-related?"

"I think it is," Lou continued. "I'm training for a grab-and-go

at an undetermined location at an undetermined time, and I suspect the location is somewhere in Farside."

"Why do you suspect that?" Davy asked.

"Some of the interview questions they asked," Lou offered. "They asked if we would have reservations about doing an op in Canada or Mexico or Farside, for instance."

"I presume from this, Mr. Mosca, that you are a mercenary, what is sometimes called a 'private security contractor'?"

"I am when I can get work in the field. At other times, I have other occupations."

"May I ask where you are now, if you know?" Davy probed.

"I'm presently somewhere near Houston, Texas. West of the city, I think."

"And when do you think this operation might happen? Do you know or can you speculate?"

"We were told to expect eight days of training and a few days for set-up," Lou told Davy. "A week and a half? That's a guess."

"I very much appreciate the information, Mr. Mosca. I'll be in touch with you later." Davy Harmon dropped the line about the same time Lou Mosca disconnected.

2 - Burglary One

The warning went out to all the gatekeepers for all the outposts:

Be prepared for an attack of an undetermined nature, possibly in force, on or after next Wednesday, the 12th. Re-certify all video surveillance equipment before that time. All gates should be rendered inoperable when not in use.

This directive applies especially to gates in the American Southwest and Mexico: Pecos and Ensenada.

Starting the Wednesday after next, all the gates would have armed guards in plainclothes watching for trouble.

Gatekeepers at the two named outposts ramped up their security protocols and started having readiness exercises on a regular basis, usually surprises to the gate operators.

"Is that gate functional?" Davy Harmon demanded of the duty operator at Ensenada after a surprise drill for which he had flown in especially.

"Yes, Minister," the operator admitted.

"Don't you know how to disable a gate without using the Big Red Switch?" Davy challenged her.

"No, Minister," she told him softly.

"Here, let me show you." Davy reached over to the cluster of chips at the edge of the gate frame. He took a wire in the crook of his middle finger and, using his thumb and index finger to push, deftly disconnected the wire from the chip. "You only need to do one. That's enough, but if you have time to do more, that's better.

"Now, you do it," he ordered.

She selected another chip and, using three fingers as the Minister for Security had just shown her, pulled the wire free.

"Just like that," Davy congratulated her, as he gave her a soft slap on her shoulder.

—==+++==—

The forms each team member filled out during the vetting process were repackaged as Farside visa applications and forwarded

on to the Farside liaison office in Odessa, the closest one to Houston, the same day they were received at Barkley Petroleum.

Although Farside Immigration Control used databases provided by the Security Ministry, the Security Ministry was not otherwise actively involved in the Immigration process. Because of this disconnect, Lou Mosca's name did not raise any flags when his application was submitted for a visa. Several of the others did, and their applications were rejected for one reason or another. The approved visas were transmitted back to Barkley's Human Resources department late Sunday and were delivered by courier to the training complex bright and early on Monday morning.

An emergency briefing was called for Monday lunch, an event at which everyone would be present beyond a shadow of a doubt. These exercises burned many calories, calories that had to be replenished on a regular basis. Nobody missed a meal.

One of the team leaders moved to the front of the room. He carried a paper in his hand from which he read a list of names: "Jennings, Piasecki, Paulsen, D'Amato, Collins J. See me after lunch." He sat down.

Lunch over, the bulk of the team headed out for their afternoon briefing and another series of drills involving a different layout of the presumed target. The five whose names were read at the start of lunch assembled in the team leader's office.

"You've been dropped from the program," he told them. They all wore startled expressions on their faces. "You'll be paid at the agreed rate through end-of-day today. Pack your gear and assemble at the front gate by fourteen hundred hours. The driver will have your pay envelopes for you when you board the van. Your air tickets have open returns, so you can stay in the Houston area for as long as you like. Good luck. Thanks for trying."

Jerry Piasecki spoke for all of them when he asked: "Why are we being dropped?"

"Background check," the team leader informed them. "That's all I know. They didn't say what happened beyond 'these five guys are out'. If it were up to me, I'd keep you on, but it isn't. That's just the way it is."

"I was thinking it would be good to know why we scrubbed out so we won't bid for another job with similar requirements," Jerry concluded. "'You're out' doesn't give us much information we can use in the future."

Their leader shrugged his shoulders. "I'd tell you if I knew. Like you, I go where I'm told and I do what I'm told and I don't get to ask many questions. That sucks, but that's the way it is."

The five left to gather their belongings. By two that

afternoon, all their gear was stowed in the back of the van and they were each counting their payroll as the van rolled toward Houston Intercontinental Airport.

At six that evening, the remaining team members dragged back to their barracks to clean up for supper. Twenty minutes later they were starting to fill their plates. Lou Mosca looked around him. "Where's Piasecki?" he asked the man next to him in line.

"Beats me," the other answered. "I haven't seen him since lunch. He went to see Sloan, the team leader, but he didn't join the exercise. Maybe he got fired."

Mosca tracked down the team leader. It wasn't hard. The entire crew numbered fewer than a dozen when they started and now it was noticeably smaller than that.

"What happened to Piasecki?" Mosca asked Tim Sloan.

Sloan looked up from his plate at Lou. "Gone," was all he said.

"Why?" Mosca asked. "I thought he was pretty good."

"So did I," Sloan replied, "but I don't get to say who stays and who goes. I received word this morning: *these five guys are out*, so they're gone. They all shipped out around fourteen hundred."

"I don't know about this. Jerry Piasecki is an old friend of mine," Lou lied. "If he's not going to be part of this team, I don't know whether I want to be, either."

Sloan looked at Lou Mosca with a squint in his eyes. "You know you get paid in full at the end of the project, right?" he asked Lou. "If you bail on us early, you don't get paid, and we're going to want you to reimburse us for the cost of your flight. Instead of you getting twelve thousand bucks, you'll be writing us a check for eight hundred, and all the time you've already spent here," he waved his hand to encompass the compound, "is a waste of your time. You understand that, right?"

"I'll think about it," Lou muttered as he turned away.

—==++++==—

While the assault team — now up almost to the full complement with the addition of three men shipped in overnight — were busy running drills on various configurations of the Pecos immigration gate, the senior team leaders held their regular morning briefing and status check.

Guy Murphy called on each of the team leaders in turn to hear their reports on the various tasks they had been assigned, and to hear their suggestions about changes to be considered for the overall plan.

"I was thinking last night that we have a security exposure,"

Ko Nakamura told them. "We issue smart phones to the men so we can all communicate during the op, and we can control what goes out on those phones and to whom, but the men still have their own phones, and they can call wives, girlfriends, old Army buddies, what-have-you and spill information we'd rather not be out on the streets."

"Good point, Ko," Murphy congratulated him. "Let's collect all the phones and personal computers until the operation is complete."

The meeting broke up shortly ahead of Tuesday's lunch. Not even the team leaders wanted to miss chow. Changes to the morning briefings, if any, were usually read aloud at lunch.

"Listen up, everyone," Tim Sloan shouted for all to hear. "Afternoon practice is delayed thirty minutes. Use that thirty minutes to collect all your electronic devices, cell phones and computers especially, and bring them back here. We'll pack them and store them for you until the assignment is over. Nobody is to have any devices they weren't issued by their team leaders. Everybody got that?" They all indicated that they did, indeed, 'get that'.

By 1315 hours, everybody on the team had poured their personal electronics into boxes that they then sealed and signed on the sealing tape to ensure no one could open the boxes without leaving evidence behind. The boxes were then moved into the store room to which only Guy Murphy had the key. They were as secure as they could be in the absence of a real safe.

The following evening's briefing brought good news to the senior lead. "My team's ready," Tim Sloan assured the others. "The addition of the new guys who know something of the second team's requirements has smoothed down the training and it's now going very fast, so fast that I have to say my men are now as ready as they're ever going to be. We can go whenever you all agree."

The other team leads agreed that the schedule could be moved up to the following Sunday, almost a week ahead of the original schedule. The retrieval team didn't need Farside visas, but everyone had had an application made on their behalf by Barkley's HR department, even those on team-2 who wouldn't necessarily have to transit into Farside.

All their ducks were already in a row.

The following morning's training was done classroom-style, with drawings and diagrams projected onto a wall behind the speakers.

"This morning you're going to learn the true nature of our objective," Murphy explained. "On Saturday morning, you will all be flown from the West Houston airport to Pecos, Texas. There you will cross into Farside.

"I want all of you to pay very close attention to the layout and the security arrangements on both sides of the crossover point, because on Monday or Tuesday evening after the traffic has tapered off, you are all going back to that gate, you are going to overpower the personnel manning the gate, you are going to shut the gate down and transport the device to a spot about three miles from there where you will hand the device over to team-2 who will be waiting there for your arrival, having similarly overpowered the personnel, if any, operating a secondary gate at that spot.

"After that, you will dispose of your weapons and other gear and return to your cover occupations, wellhead roughnecks. If all goes as planned, you will be able to return to Nearside the following Friday. You will then be flown back to Houston, paid in cash for your services, and put on your return flights. Any questions?"

"We kill all the gate personnel as part of the job?" one of the men asked.

"The word I have in my instructions is 'overpower'. If you must kill them to overpower them, then, yes, you kill all the gate personnel. You may have noticed your equipment contains Tasers. If they go down after being tased and you don't think they need killing, leave them. The people manning the gate are not important. The gate is important. There is one more training exercise we're going to do right after this tutorial on 'gates'. That will be on the topics of 'how to shut a gate down', and 'how to break a gate down for transport'. Listen up to our resident expert."

Murphy stepped aside and Ko Nakamura took his place at the front of the assembly. A hand-drawn diagram lit up the screen behind and above him.

"This is roughly what a gate looks like," he began. "There are a very few controls and they are all located on either the right or left side — we don't think the location has any significance — one of which is a big red button. It almost looks like the button that office supply company uses in their ads, doesn't it? Whatever you do, don't touch that button. It permanently destroys the gate if what we have been told is accurate. One tap on that button and there is no gate anymore, just something that once was a gate and may still look like a gate.

"Your job is to bring back a working gate. If you see any of the gate personnel reach for it or move toward it, kill that person instantly. Don't worry about overpowering them.

"Just below the big red button is an on-off switch. Before screwing around with the gate, if it's operating, make sure it's turned off. We are told the gate's edges are very dangerous. Switch it off before you try to break it down for transport. Otherwise, we'll all be calling you by your new nickname: 'Lefty'. That's if you survive at all.

We have it on good authority that these gates can kill you if you don't treat them with the respect they deserve. Any questions?"

"Just to recap," Bud Calhoun asked, "we overpower or neutralize the gate crew, power the gate down, fold it up for transport... Then what?"

"Phase two," Nakamura intoned as the display changed to a road map of Farside showing the immigration gate and the roads leading to the truck gate. "You scam out of there heading west following established tracks as shown on the screen. You'll get to see those roads in daylight sometime Saturday afternoon so you'll have a decent mental picture of where you are and where you're going.

"At the end of the track, about three miles, just a couple of minutes' travel, you will arrive at the truck barn. Team-2 should — they damned well better — already have secured that area. You hand your gate over to them, dump your gear, and return to the Barkley Farside complex. Team-2 takes the gate back into Texas. The operation is complete. At the end of the week, you all grab your passports and visas, go through the immigration gate into Nearside, we fly you back to Houston, pay you and put you on a plane for home."

He looked around the room expectantly. When no one asked a follow-on question, he pointed to the back of the room. "Let's go take a look at our model of a gate," he ordered.

The group rose and moved to the back of the room where a framework of 3-inch PVC pipe stood. LEGO blocks spray-painted to look like the various components were strung together by wires glued here and there to simulate the appearance of an actual gate.

"This is approximately what you'll see when you get up close to a gate," Nakamura informed them. "As you can see, there are external wires supplying power and what-not to the various components. At this time, we're not sure what's what except that we know this model is only an approximation. Any real gate you come across will look slightly different. How much different we can only guess.

"This is the emergency power off — EPO — switch that permanently destroys the gate," he indicated the mock-up big red switch. "Here is the regular on-off switch. Use this to power the gate off if you find it in an 'open' state. In a pinch, you can disconnect it from its power supply. That should take the gate down, too.

"After the gate is powered down, you can pull these pipes apart like this," and he popped the end cap off one of the pipes. "It'll fold down very flat and compact.

"Don't waste a lot of time on this part of the task. Break the gate down, toss it in your vehicle, and get the hell out of there as

quickly as you can. At the same time you're grabbing this gate, team-2 will be securing the other gate. You have to grab the gate and get gone off to the truck barn where you hand the gate over to the second team. They take the gate back into Texas. You all stay here."

"I don't get it," Lou Mosca interrupted. "Why don't we all head back through the gate?" There was a muttering of agreement among the small group.

"That's a good question. You all stay here in Farside because after that gate is pinched, the Farside authorities are going to want to find out who did it. They'll start questioning people and counting noses. If your nose is not one of the ones they count, they're going to want to know how come you're not here in Farside when all their records say you came in but you didn't go out, and they're going to want to know how you got out of Farside and why. There will be only one plausible explanation: you left Farside via the truck gate in possession of a stolen immigration gate, and Barkley Oil, your employer-of-record, will be implicated in a crime for which I am sure the Farside authorities have a severely underdeveloped sense of humor.

"Now, that might not matter to you, but I assure you it matters very much to Barkley Oil, and if the Farside Ministry of Security decides to track you down and make an example of you, it will suddenly matter to you, too. So, no, anyone who came in through that gate must stay in Farside so that their nose can be counted, and when questioned about where you were and when, you shrug your shoulders and play dumb." Lou and all the others nodded their understanding of the plan.

"The exercises for the remainder of the day will be on a mock-up of the Pecos immigration gate. After today, the next time you see a setup like that will be when you walk through the real one into Farside. The next time after that, you'll be stealing it. Get sharp. That's all for the classroom part."

The men scrambled for the door and headed out to the training area for their last practice sessions.

On Saturday after breakfast at the training facility, team-1 was shuttled in a chartered bus over to the West Houston airport and onto the two Barkley corporate jets. Lunch was at the Barkley Pecos complex's mess hall. Between those, the men each got a very close look at what a door-sized gate looks like as they had their visas validated for entry to Farside. Their uniform opinion was that the mock-up they had seen a day earlier was a very close analog to the real thing. Each of them casually stole glances at the supposed controls at the upper left corner of the gate. The red panic button was

clearly visible.

Saturday afternoon was spent ferrying the men in small groups around the area, each tour making sure to twice pass within easy viewing distance of the barn that housed the truck gate. Saturday evening, they were issued their gear: ski masks to hide their identities, rifles, pistols, and Tasers along with wire snips and other assorted tools. Each man disassembled his issued weapons and cleaned them to their individual specifications, reassembled them and loaded the magazines for use the following day.

On Sunday and Monday, the men were taken by truck to a distant site, many miles from any wellheads, where they could test fire their weapons and assure themselves of proper operation. The evening of the operation was not the time to discover a broken firing pin, or to discover that batteries were weak.

In Nearside, similar preparations were happening with team-2 whose training regimen had concentrated on assaulting a large building mocked-up to approximate what the hidden camera in the shipping container had shown them was inside. Team-2 would be hiding under tarps on a flatbed truck. The truck was scheduled to arrive at the truck gate at exactly 11:11pm, 2311 hours, exactly the time of the assault on the immigration gate by team-1. If all went as expected, team-2 would catch the gatekeepers by surprise, tase them, bind them and blindfold them, so that when team-1 arrived they could hand over the smaller gate along with their ski masks and weapons, all of which would be removed from Farside and, with luck, leave no clues behind.

At 11:08pm on Tuesday night the truck began rolling slowly northward along Ranch Road 869 west of Pecos toward their turn-off for the truck gate.

In Farside, two step vans, their sides carrying magnetic signs in the image of the Farside flag, rolled toward the immigration building. At 11:10 and forty seconds, they stopped at the building's front door, the van's passenger door slid open and a hand bearing a Taser emerged. The gate worker who had stepped outside to smoke a cigarette collapsed in a heap.

The first member of the assault team who tried the door found it locked. The badge hung on a lanyard around the gate worker's neck opened the door for them and they slipped inside to be confronted by a second worker walking toward the door to join her co-worker outside. She they tased immediately, but this alerted the last gate attendant who launched himself toward the kill switch. A volley of shots from the rifleman who was second into the building brought that gate attendant to the ground, apparently dead.

With no others in sight, the assault team switched off the gate

and broke it down for transport as they had been trained. By 11:14 they were all on their way to the truck barn.

In Nearside, the truck bearing team-2 turned onto County 206 then switched onto the unpaved road leading to the truck gate. At 11:10 the doorman slid the barn door open to admit the new arrival. On the off side of the truck, one man slipped from underneath the tarp and dropped to the ground where he hid behind a barrel.

Inside the barn, the gate was not open, but a sensor at the barn door alerted the gate operator in Farside who powered her gate on. The portal opened and the truck rolled through into Farside. Just as the tail end of the truck cleared the portal, the man hiding at the barn entrance tased the doorman as he moved to slide the door closed again.

Immediately, assault team two threw off the tarp hiding them and tased everyone in sight, three operators who were caught completely by surprise. The three Farside operators and the one Nearside doorman were bound with plastic wire ties and hoods were pulled over their heads in case they came to from the effects of the Taser.

One man waited at the Farside door for the arrival of team-1. At 11:16 headlights could be seen approaching and in two minutes the step van carrying the immigration gate pulled to a stop at the Farside truck barn. The collapsed gate was handed to team-2 and the van sped away.

The flatbed truck had by now already been backed into Nearside and out of the truck barn. The remaining members of team-2 in Farside passed through the truck gate and rejoined their fellows, mounted the truck, and were soon on their way toward I-20 and the Pecos Municipal airport.

On the frontage road near the airport, two members of team-2 switched to a smaller vehicle and drove to the airport where they handed the gate over to Paul Ramsey.

Three days later, on Friday evening, the entire team transited through the new replacement immigration gate into Nearside, boarded the Barkley Oil corporate jets, and flew back to Houston each with pay envelopes holding fifteen days' pay in cash.

—==+++==—

Davy Harmon's phone rang as the Hondajet carrying him to the Boulder Municipal airport started its downwind leg. He glanced at the display. "Yes, your majesty," he answered it.

"Davy, don't get off the plane," Barbara instructed him.

"There's been an attack on the Pecos Farside immigration point and the gate was taken. One of the gatekeepers was killed. Ted Chubb and Paul Gillman are on their way to the airport to join you. I want you all to go to Pecos and start the investigation. I want to know everything about everybody."

"Yes, ma'am," Davy responded. "I believe I may have more information about that already. You may have seen the alert that went out to all the gatekeepers over the weekend? I received a call from one Lou Mosca —"

"I don't need to know about it, Davy," she cut him off. "I trust you to run the investigation adequately."

"I will see to it that we find out who did this," Davy assured her. "Are we authorized to go to war, your majesty?"

"Not unless this turns out to have been a government-run operation. In that case, it constitutes an act of war. I suspect we're going to find our gatekeeper was murdered by someone known to us. At the very least, someone with a Farside visa. I want them brought in for trial. We can't demand justice of others if we aren't willing to grant it even to cold-blooded killers."

"Understood, your majesty."

As the jet taxied toward the apron, a fuel truck paced it waiting for the plane to roll to a stop. The instant the wheels stopped turning and the engine began to wind down, a crewman started unrolling hose while another opened the craft's fueling ports. A car containing Ted Chubb and Paul Gillman soon arrived and they boarded immediately.

"How much do you know about what happened," Davy asked them after they were comfortably seated.

"Nothing," Ted Chubb admitted. "We think you may know more than anyone else because of the alert you sent out earlier."

"Yes," Davy hung his head, "my information was that the attack was scheduled for later in the week. I didn't think we'd need to go on alert earlier than tomorrow. Now someone has died because of my carelessness."

"Her majesty does not hold you responsible for what happened, Davy," Paul assured him. "She knows you did the best you could."

"Nevertheless, I vow I'm going to bring these killers in. I already have one name: Lou Mosca. He contacted me late last week to warn me of the danger. That's why the alert went out. Our first task is to track down Lou Mosca. If he's still in Farside, I want him to stay there. I've already put a hold on his exit visa."

"Let's approach this carefully," Ted cautioned. "If Mosca called in a warning, he's probably on our side. If we arrest him or even if we

pull him aside for special questioning we may blow his cover. Do we want to do that to a friend?"

Davy pursed his lips. "That's worth considering. Thanks, Ted, for the idea. We should probably round up everyone who looks like the assault team and question them one-by-one. That way we'll be able to speak with Mosca in private without arousing anyone's suspicions."

The three used the hours in the air to plan their investigation. Meanwhile, a spare gate was being rigged as an entry/exit point at the Pecos immigration checkpoint, but at Davy's order remained powered off. It stayed that way until their plane landed at Pecos Municipal and Davy issued the 'power on' command via his phone.

They were greeted on the other side by the site manager, Rafael Vallejo, who reported to them that the security cameras had recorded the two attacks, one on each gate, but that the attackers in both cases were wearing masks and so could not be positively identified. The doorman at the truck gate had given them a reasonable description of the driver of the truck, but his description was sketchy and couldn't be positively linked with any of their records.

Over the next few days, the team interviewed all the oilfield personnel about their alibis for the time of the attack. Everyone, it seemed, could provide witnesses to their innocence.

"Mr. Mosca, please come in and sit down," Davy invited Lou Mosca into the interrogation room. The door closed silently behind him and he sat facing the three investigators.

"Have we spoken before, Mr. Mosca?" Davy asked when they were settled.

"We have," Lou told him, "about five days ago — last Saturday."

"And at that time," Davy recapped for the benefit of Paul and Ted, "you suggested an attack might occur in about a week, if I recall correctly." He paused as if in invitation for Lou to speak.

"Yes. At the time, I had been told we would spend eight days in training and several more in preparation. A few days ago, we were all informed that our training had gone much faster than anyone anticipated and that the schedule had been moved up. I would have given you a heads-up except that they secured all our cell phones and computers just after I spoke to you the first time."

"I see from your visa application that you were submitted by Barkley Oil. Was this a Barkley Oil-run operation?" Ted asked him.

"I presume it was," Lou responded, "although the first time I encountered that name was when we were hustled onto two jets for the flight here. We're all staying at the Barkley Coyanosa barracks

until Friday when we're scheduled to go back."

"Where's the gate?" Davy asked.

"Gone," Lou told them. "It went through the truck gate to the second team, from there to the Pecos airport and then back to Houston, I guess.

"One of the gate operators was shot. How's he doing?"

"Dead," Paul told Lou. "Do you know who fired the shot?"

"I can't say for sure," Lou told him. "Only a few of us went inside the gate house and I wasn't one of them. Dagostino, Spencer, Davis, and Platt went through the door. It had to be one of them, but nobody's saying anything."

"I just want to be clear that you have no connection to the death of our gatekeeper. That is what you're telling us, is it not?"

"I swear that I had nothing to do with that other than being close-by when it happened," Lou assured them all.

"Okay, thanks, Lou. Send in the next person when you go out."

"Are you going to arrest anyone?"

"Not until we've interrogated everybody. Possibly not even then," Ted Chubb informed him. "We don't want to blow your cover, expose you as the mole, especially considering all the information you've given us." Lou smiled. "In any case, the ultimate responsibility for what happened lies with the management of Barkley Oil. We will be calling them to account in due course, I'm sure."

—==++++==—

"I'm pleased to report that the operation was a success," Ramsey told Barkley's board of directors at a special Saturday meeting. "One Farsidenik was killed, unfortunately, but other than that the entire operation seems to have gone off more smoothly than we had any right to expect. The total cost was just under a quarter million, right where we estimated. Exact numbers will have to wait on the bean counters, but it certainly didn't go over the three hundred thousand budget I was given for it.

"The team has been dispersed and they all, of course, understand the necessity for keeping mum about the operation, not merely for the sake of Barkley Oil's skin, but for their own.

"Security has been beefed up at all the immigration gates, so it's a good thing this grab-and-go went off as smoothly as it did. There certainly won't be another chance to acquire our own gate that easily ever again."

3 - Arrested Development

"I'm awe-stricken at the colossal crudeness of the whole thing," the Barkley Chief Scientist told his boss, Barkley's Vice President for Research. "Wires hanging loose, components bracketed onto PVC pipe with what look like twelve-for-a-dollar plumbing straps, exposed terminals, and the chips themselves completely unprotected from stray missiles. You're lucky one of your commandos didn't put a bullet through the rig. It would have been a pile of junk before they put it on the plane.

"All of the chips are connected by two-strand wire attached with what looks like some sort of glue to another device we haven't yet figured out. There's no way to reverse-engineer the programming on the chips, of course, so we're stuck with just this one gate, but if I'm understanding it correctly, it will be adequate for your 'Project Ali Baba'.

"To protect it from sparking and igniting stray gases, I've had the entire rig enclosed in an air-tight plastic sheath, kind of like the blister packs you find for retail small electronic components. The 'emergency power off' switch, we have disabled since we're never going to want to EPO the thing.

"Excellent," the VP chortled. "That's really the only thing that matters at this point. When can we implement?"

"You have the silo set up?" the scientist asked.

"It should be ready tomorrow or the next day. The pipeline to the tank farm is already in place. Basically, all we need is to install that gate and close off the top of the tower. Why don't you tell the group to make it ready to transport?"

—==++++==—

On a dusty farm-to-market road east of Cayanosa, Texas, a vertical tower like a farm's silo rose from the desert-like landscape. It coincided with a much larger oil storage tank in Farside where a series of Barkley pumps bobbed up and down like huge metal birds fishing for minnows in the sand. These pumps drove their oil up a vertical pipe on the outside of the tank, bending horizontally to the inside of the tank, and through another short bend downward, depositing their black gold into the tank like an open faucet. The downward bend marked the center of the Cayanosa silo.

A crane lifted a door-sized framework to the top of the silo where a team waited to fit it into a specially-made rack a few feet from

the eventual top of the silo tube. Carefully they guided the framework onto its lattice-work shelf and locked it into place. None of them knew what it was they were installing, and none knew what it was supposed to do. The small rocker-type switch along one side of the framework gave some indication that it was an electrical device of some sort, but none of them would hazard a guess as to what sort.

Inside its clear plastic sarcophagus, the Barkley scientists had rigged a servomechanism to switch the gate on and off, and had replaced the batteries with a small transformer run by external electrical service. After installation and the closing of the top of the silo, a radio signal would switch the gate on and oil flowing into the storage tank in Farside would suddenly find a path into a silo in Nearside. Should the silo ever get filled to capacity, the oil pouring in would simply overflow back into Farside where capacity was effectively unlimited.

In the meantime, independent refiners would find a ready source of crude oil at enough of a discount that they would be disinclined to ask too many piercing questions. The price they paid was still higher by a substantial amount than Barkley's cost-to-produce, especially since this oil was no longer subject to a seven percent royalty.

Before the sun painted the west side of the silo red, tanker trucks bearing all manner of names and logos were lining up to drink their fill from the silo's teats and Barkley's invoicing system had sprung into action to create thousands of dollars of accounts receivable.

The \$235,000 Barkley's board had spent to steal their own gate would be amortized in less than a week. After that, it was all profit.

—==++++==—

Thorsen's Flight School was more than amenable to Ted Chubb's offer: just carry this recording device with you when you take a student aloft. The school operating out of the West Houston airport was one of the busiest in the area, so there was almost always somebody taking lessons. The device suspended from a hook at the back of the cabin listened intently for anything broadcasting on 288.02 MHz FM.

In Farside, all gates were shut down between 1530 GMT and 1615 GMT and from 2130 GMT to 2215 GMT every day. These two 'quiet times' allowed listening stations around the country to detect any gates broadcasting their characteristic signature. The number of listening stations increased periodically, but for the moment there

were fewer than fifteen widely scattered and none had so far seen the little dimple that said "type-II gate".

Davy Harmon and Tony Dinardo, who shared the duties of watching out for security concerns in Farside, had come to a dead-end in their investigation of the missing gate and the dead gatekeeper. Both Harry Tumulty and Barbara had assuaged their concerns that whoever took the gate might reverse engineer its function. "NSA might be able to do that," Barbara had soothed their minds, "but short of that, we have little or nothing to worry about. Really, all you have to do is locate that gate."

Every now and then, someone from the Security Directorate would access a listening post and download the records for the two 45-minute dead spots. Day after disappointing day, there would be nothing to report. If there were a gate operating, its signal was so weak none of the listening stations could hear it.

Because Farside One was used for cross-country trips on a regular basis, Harry installed a listener while the Honda was parked at the Reading Regional airport during one of Davy's increasingly frequent trips between Pottstown and Boulder.

In Boulder-in-Farside, the Privy Council, joined today by Danny Okambo, gathered in the Okambo Moot Hall to discuss progress. Barbara, in jeans and a t-shirt, bounced two-year-old Penelope Alice on her knee while she listened to the opinions of her trusted friends.

"We know Barkley is in this up to their necks," Nell Gruder fumed. "We should shut down their entire operation and kick them out."

Danny Okambo shook his head. "Can't do that, Nell," he tried to soothe her. "The law —"

"They killed Lars Andersen — shot him dead for trying to save his gate. If the law doesn't allow us to punish that, what good is it?"

"Nell," Barbara interrupted, "let Danny finish."

"Sorry, your majesty — Barbara," she corrected herself as she remembered that Barbara's crown was still in its box on the table at her side.

Danny nodded a silent '*thank you*' toward Barbara and continued. "The law requires that we not do things to them that we wouldn't want done to ourselves. You may think you know Barkley is at fault. The question is 'what can you prove?' and at the moment we cannot prove Barkley's leadership knows (or knew) anything about this beyond what was reported officially. When we can prove that, the situation will be different. Be patient."

Paul Gillman took up the conversational thread: "Davy now has fifteen listening stations at various places including five airborne

devices, one of them on Farside One and two of them in Europe. So far, everything has been very quiet. Davy is beginning to suspect that the gate may have been blown out either by Lars Andersen before he died or by a bullet fired inside the immigration building. Those chips are mighty fragile. They might not even need a direct hit — just a nick might crack the base enough to ruin it, and you know, your majesty — Barbara, that one damaged chip means one non-functional gate. We may have lucked out once again.

“Davy has also asked for permission to build a platform in Houston for the purpose of bugging Barkley’s executive suites. Barkley Oil is on the fifth floor of One Allen Center, so the platform won’t have to even be very high. A preliminary survey of the area indicates that the Farside terrain is swampy but buildable. We can drive a few piles to provide a solid base and build up from there. It’s the work of a few weeks at the most.

“The last piece of the investigation involves Laurel Hamm.” Barbara, who had been paying more attention to Penelope Alice than Paul’s report, suddenly looked up at the mention of Laurel’s name. “Laurel, some of you may know, has an accounting degree and she has, at the urging of Davy Harmon, applied for a position in Barkley’s accounting department. She’s flying in for a face-to-face interview tomorrow. If she gets the job, she will become our *‘Miss Inside’* at Barkley, able to discover financial irregularities should any exist.” Nell smirked. *Of course, they exist!* she thought.

Barbara looked around the group for anyone who might want to continue and seeing no one expectantly waiting, began her wrap up: “Paul, thank you for an excellent report and some welcome progress in the investigation. Everyone please continue your efforts and coordinate through Paul to the extent possible. We should continue deploying listeners whenever we get the opportunity. In case that gate survived, I very much want to recover it or destroy it. Thank you all for making yourselves available.”

“We’re your Privy Council,” her father chuckled, “what good would we be if we weren’t available when you need us?”

Nell stepped in closer to Barbara and patted her again-swelling abdomen. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Barbara assured her. “Easier than Penny at the same stage.”

—==++++==—

“Look at these numbers,” Robert said to his boss, 17-year-old Linda Rossi, Special Assistant to the Chancellor. “What’s wrong with Barkley’s equipment?”

Linda glanced over the printed sheets comparing the oil field operations of several producers. Over the past several weeks, Barkley's production numbers had begun to diverge from their other nearby competitors. Barkley's wells were pumping, overall, it seemed, something like 900 barrels per day less than they pumped when new. "Could they have drained their field?" she asked.

"No. More likely they're starting to exhaust a pocket that can't be regenerated by seepage," the accountant suggested.

"But nobody else is having that problem, are they?" Linda asked.

Robert shook his head. *No.*

"Where did these numbers come from?" Linda asked.

"These come straight from the producers. Each week we get a report of how much oil each leasehold produces. It's a summary of all the wells in the leasehold, so we can't tell which well is producing what, although the individual oil companies almost certainly can. We match these back to the numbers we get from the refineries. What the producers send down the pipe has to be pretty close to what the refineries report arriving through the pipe." Linda nodded. "The outputs from the refineries won't match exactly although they can be reconciled to some extent. They're producing gasoline, kerosene, diesel, LPG, naphtha, and a few others. You can see x gallons of kerosene coming out the end of the kerosene pipe and be pretty confident that it is the result of y gallons of crude at the input end. It's not exact, but it's close.

"As a final check, we have meters on the output ends so we can do our own royalty calculations. Our meters say the refiners are playing straight with us.

"However, because of this fall-off, we're seeing a loss of about 63 barrels a day in royalty. It's not much, but it adds up."

"Do you have a recommendation?" Linda prodded the accountant.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We may want to consider letting them put Farside Barkley Six back on line."

"Not going to happen," Linda told him dismissively. "It would set a bad precedent."

—==++++==—

Houston's Buffalo Bayou didn't have an exact analog in Farside — it wandered somewhat differently — but the effect of that much water that close made it nearly indistinguishable. The area corresponding to the intersection of Smith and Dallas streets was ankle-deep mud where it wasn't knee-deep and all of it under two feet

of water. A supply barge provided painted steel 55-gallon drums, beams to connect them into a matrix, wood planking for use as a platform, and straps to keep the beams and barrels and planks together. As each section was completed, it was hoisted overboard and dropped into the muck to provide a high-and-dry work area. Four platforms in a ring enabled the crew to position a hollow metal piling between them to be lowered into the ooze. Once embedded, water was pumped out of the bottom of the tube along with the mud, and as the natural seepage eroded the mud below, the piling slipped deeper and deeper down. A few hours work put a piling deep enough that it could serve as a base for building up. In a week, there were enough pilings and enough superstructure to enable the surveillance team to start looking for the evidence, if it existed, that Barkley Oil was behind the death of Lars Andersen.

As the structure rose out of the swamp, the location of the various floors in the building were marked on the vertical posts but little in the way of flooring was added to the structure until it had been raised to about eighty-two feet, the height of the fifth floor.

Now began the task of building out.

The all-volunteer crew was made up primarily of friends, relatives, and acquaintances of Lars Andersen, but there were a fair few who offered their time and energy and expertise not simply because they felt a need to be part of this community-wide effort, but because the experience gained working in such primitive conditions would, they were sure, fit them better for survival in Farside and make them essential persons in their communities, not a bad situation to be in.

—==++++==—

Lisa reined her horse in at the front steps of Barry Winslow's ranch house, dismounted, and tied the reins to a nearby post. Barry waited at the front door, having seen her approach from some distance.

"Need to borrow a cup of sugar?" he asked her.

"That's exactly what I had in mind," she replied with a wink. Striding up the front steps two at a time, she reached him and pulled his head into a long, sensuous kiss.

"I have a special stash I've saved just for you," he told her as he turned toward the door. She followed him inside, then turned and flipped the deadbolt.

She did not need a guide to find his bedroom. She was already familiar — intimately familiar — with the house's layout. By the time she reached the bedroom door, Barry was beginning to undo

his belt, and Lisa had already unbuttoned her blouse almost to the waist. Barry grabbed the belt that held her jeans up and pulled her toward him for another kiss, then unbuckled it and undid the waistband.

He moved his hands over her chest and swept his palms across her now partly-covered breasts. "You've got nice bumps," he told her, smiling.

She reached down to run her palm across the bulge in his crotch. "You too," she smiled back.

Barry picked her up bodily and swung her over onto the bed, grabbed the bottoms of her jeans legs and tugged. The jeans came off with a 'snap'. She giggled at the speed with which her lover had undressed her and lunged for him. He caught her and buried his face in the crook of her neck, kissing her frantically. They fell on the bed together and began to kiss and fondle each other as their ardor swelled to the point of no return.

Discarding what was left of their clothing, they entwined their bodies, running their hands each over the other, teasing and enticing each other to take the next step and the next and the next.

For a half hour they played with each other, culminating in the exhausting and satisfying flash of sensation they sought, as today, on regular occasions in the past.

Regaining her composure, Lisa slipped naked from the bed and sauntered into the bath, stepped into the shower, and turned the water on full force and hot. When she finished, Barry followed her in, repeating the exercise. By the time he had finished his shower, Lisa was dressed and ready to leave.

"I'm going into Nearside," she told him. "I have some shopping to do. Want to come along?"

Barry kissed her again on the lips. "I better not," he grimaced. "People might talk."

"Alright, lover, but keep this in good shape," and she squeezed his penis with her hand before striding to the front door, unlocking it, and opening it.

She mounted her pony and turned toward the equipment gate on County Road 28 where most of the farmers and ranchers stored their automobiles for the times they needed to cross into Nearside for trips that were not practical in Farside. Shortly, she galloped up to the animal barn, dismounted, and led her horse into the relatively cooler interior. A groom took the animal and found a stall for it. Lisa found her car in the nearby parking lot and drove it from under the canopy that shaded it. She rolled to the equipment gate inside a large barn-like building and got on line behind two other cars. When the RV waiting to pass through the gate finally moved through, the other

waiting vehicles followed it into Nearside and Lisa turned west toward Longmont.

Barry, meanwhile, had saddled his own horse and ridden off into the northwest to keep watch on his herd of beef cattle. After a short ride, he caught up with his foreman, who seemed to be looking past Barry rather than at him.

"What's burning back there?" the foreman asked.

Barry turned in his saddle to look over his shoulder and gasped. "It's my house!" he shrieked as he turned his horse and galloped away.

The foreman put his fingers to his lips and whistled three short bursts, the signal for 'come here right away' and took off after his boss. Within minutes, the rest of the ranch hands joined them, leaving the herd to fend for themselves.

Barry galloped into the barnyard of his burning house and grabbed a hose, flicking the water pump switch on with his free hand. He dragged the hose toward the house and tried to put as much water as he could onto the roof. After a few minutes, it became obvious that his was a lost cause. The house was completely engulfed in flames and even the efforts of the five other men could not save it. By the time neighbors started arriving, there was nothing left to do but stand and enjoy the warmth.

—==++++==—

Brian Murphy's phone rang and he picked it up immediately. "Murphy."

"Good morning. My name is Ernie Walsh and I need to hire a fire marshal," Ernie began.

"Mr. Walsh, private citizens can't just hire a fire marshal, sir," Brian began what was to be a patient explanation of 'how the system works'. "We work for the city government and thus I already work for you."

"I understand that, Mr. Murphy," Ernie cut him short, "but this situation is slightly different. This fire marshal is needed to investigate a fire, a possible arson, in Farside. Farside has no fire department beyond a very small volunteer unit. We're looking for someone who has some vacation time they're willing to invest making some extra money on the side."

"How much extra money?" Murphy asked.

"I'm thinking about twenty crowns," Ernie offered.

"What's that in real money?" Murphy asked.

"Twenty crowns is two Troy ounces of gold," Ernie answered, "about sixty-two grams. In U.S. dollars, something in excess of two

thousand."

"Do you have a lab?" Murphy asked.

"No. We have a veterinary lab and an agricultural lab, but nothing like I suppose you're looking for," Ernie admitted. "Would it be possible for you to pull together a small lab adequate for the purpose? We'll cover the expense and keep it here against the next, hopefully rare, such incident."

"I can't do it," Murphy finally told Ernie. "I used up all my vacation this year, but I will ask around to see if any of the other inspectors are interested. Can they call you back on this number?"

"Sure," Ernie agreed. "It's my cell phone. Call anytime."

A few hours later, Ernie's phone rang and he flipped it open. "It's Ernie," he announced himself.

"My name is Mike Mullalley. I work with Brian Murphy in the Fire Marshal's office. I hear you're looking for an inspector to do forensics on an arson site?"

"That's true," Ernie confirmed. "Payment is two Troy ounces of fine gold, something North of two Grand, and if you need to outfit a lab, just get the parts and we'll reimburse you. If you'd rather, you can order it shipped and we'll pay the bill when it arrives. Up to you.

"We need this done pronto," Ernie finished.

"I can take three personal days starting tomorrow and give you the weekend as well if necessary. Is that pronto enough?"

"You're hired," Ernie told him and started giving him directions to the truck gate on County Road 28.

—==++++==—

Laurel Hamm badged through the security door, entered the Barkley Oil Company Accounting Department, and headed straight for her desk. In three minutes, she had signed onto the system and had begun her daily tasks. Later, after a quick lunch at Crumley Cogwheels with four of the other accounting staff, she continued working non-stop until after everyone had gone home.

In the quiet of the early evening when the hubbub of the office had finally ceased, she called up the detail for the account labeled 'other oil sales' and shortly noticed an unusual entry for 'Coyanosa reserve'. Cross-checking with the salary accounts, she could find only three people clocking time at Coyanosa, and none of them were engineering headcount.

That's odd, she thought, the only personnel at Coyanosa are 'retail sales', and nobody is assigned to the pumps, but we're obviously pumping something to the tune of about nine hundred barrels per day. Where's the oil coming from? She made a note in

her notebook and resolved to mention it in her next status report to the Privy Council.

As a last 'reasonableness check', Laurel cross checked the assets at the Coyanosa location. There were no pumps or pumping equipment located at Coyanosa, and no spare parts. There were also no records of any activity at the Coyanosa site earlier than a month or so ago. *Could it be that she was just seeing a lag in the assignment of equipment, and there really was a pumping operation? But before there could be a pumping operation, there would have been a drilling operation. What was going on at Coyanosa?* she wondered.

4 - Investigation

Ellen Messier, eldest daughter of Pat and Deena Messier, waited for Mike Mullalley at the County Road 28 truck gate, and introduced herself to him as soon as she spotted an unknown face descending from the shuttle van.

"Inspector Mullalley?" she inquired. Mike smiled back at her.

"Are you my escort?" he asked the pretty 19-year-old.

"For as long as you need me," she told him. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?" Mullalley shook his head. "Good. The fastest way to get where we're going is to fly, so if you don't mind, let's head over toward my airplane and get going."

She led him out of the barn-like building and toward a small airplane with sponsons dangling from the ends of its wings.

"In that?" he asked timidly.

"Perfectly safe," Ellen told him over her shoulder. "My dad inspects it twice a week whether it needs it or not, and I give it a once-over every time I spin the prop."

"What is it?" Mike asked.

"Aventura II. It's amphib, so I can put it down on a lake if necessary. It's been modified somewhat to give it a better range: there are fuel bladders in the wings and the wings have been strengthened to accommodate the extra weight. Believe me, Inspector Mullalley, they wouldn't let me take you up in this if they thought it might damage you. You're here because you're a valuable commodity." She lifted the canopy to allow him to step gingerly into the cockpit, then climbed in on the other side.

"Clear!" she shouted for all to hear, then pushed the START button. The engine roared to life, she advanced the throttle, and the little plane taxied away from the truck barn. Clear of all other people and ready to go, she turned it into the wind, pushed the throttle all the way forward and rolled across the meadow gathering speed until the craft lifted into the air. She turned north.

In what seemed like just a few moments, Mike could see a huge dome-shaped building growing larger. He pointed at it and gestured.

"Yep," she told him through his headphones, "that's where we're going." True to her word, she landed the plane on the grass strip next to the dome and came to a stop within a dozen yards of its front door.

The Ag building had once been centrally located in this farming community, but as more farm people migrated into Farside

they seemed to be drawn further north. The water supply was better to the north, with several substantial streams descending out of the mountains to the west emptying into Platte Lake, and that may have influenced them in their choice of location. As a result, the Ag building was now very far south of where most of the farming actually took place. Many of the farmers' children amused themselves in their leisure time by panning those streams for gold, and several of the teenagers has amassed small fortunes from their hobby placers.

She led Mike Mullalley inside.

"Dr. Dante Robinetti," Ellen started the introduction, "I'd like you to meet Inspector Mike Mullalley. Mike is with the Denver Fire Marshal's office and he'll be working here to determine the cause of the blaze at Barry Winslow's place. If you can spare the time, we'd appreciate it if you could lend him a hand whenever he needs one."

"Sure, Ellen," Dante smiled back. "Nice to meet you, Mike," he said, offering his hand at the same time. "I cleared some space for you over there away from the dirtier stuff. You can load your equipment anywhere over there. If you need more space, just let me know and I'll see what I can arrange."

Dante ushered him toward the western edge of the dome where two large lab tables protected a desk and chair as if they were ramparts. "120 volt AC from those six outlets," Dante gestured toward an electrical stanchion centered in the cluster, "and LP gas in four places on the table tops." Mike Mullalley nodded in acknowledgment.

"So, what's first, Mike?" Ellen asked.

"I'd like to get a preliminary look at the scene, if that's okay," Mike told her. "I'll want to take some samples, then I'd like to talk to everyone who was at or near the scene around the time the fire was reported."

"Let's go," Ellen gestured toward the door. "See you later, Dr. R," as she waved good-bye to their agronomist.

As the aircraft lifted from the ground, Ellen keyed the microphone: "Niwot ground, Messier 2. I am in transit to the Winslow ranch with Mike Mullalley. Please contact the first four names on the witness list and ask them to meet us at the Moot Hall in two hours."

On the ground at the Winslow ranch house, now a charred shell of what must once have been a very pretty and prototypically Western frame structure, Mike Mullalley began poking in the rubble and occasionally selecting an object from the remains. Each of these he placed in its own sealable plastic bag, writing the location, date, and other information on the bag itself. Each individual bag joined its companions in a larger plastic bag. Ellen Messier stood to one side and let him concentrate on the job at hand. Mullalley kept up a near-

steady stream of mumbling as he quietly vocalized his thoughts about each piece: "Bag eighteen: a dual electrical receptacle. Note the twisting of the metal ears where they were deformed by heat. Wood fires don't create that kind of heat. Must find the accelerant..."

After a little more than an hour of poking and prodding and collecting, Mike stood upright and stretched.

"How's it going?" Ellen asked.

Mullalley nodded absentmindedly. "I don't think I'm going to need that lab after all," he told her. "There's no doubt in my mind that this was arson. There are just too many clues that all point the same way. Somebody deliberately burned this house to the ground."

Ellen had a dark look on her face. "Her Majesty was afraid that might be the verdict," Ellen offered softly. "Do you have any idea who might have done it?"

"Not yet, but that, too, will come in time." He picked up the large plastic bag containing all his samples and moved toward the airplane.

Forty minutes later, having cranked the wheels up for a water landing, Ellen splashed into the lake southwest of the Okambo town square and taxied to the dock that now jutted out into the water. She tied the airplane to a wooden bollard, and she and Mike Mullalley climbed up onto the dock. An ATV with a flatbed trailer waited there to transport them up the road to the Moot Hall.

As the two strode into the Moot Hall's cool interior, a visibly-pregnant woman approached them with her hand outstretched. Ellen introduced her: "Inspector Mullalley, allow me to introduce our ruler, Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh."

Barbara's hand connected with his and he gave a little bow. "Your Majesty..." he began, but Barbara cut him off.

"No crown," she pointed out, her finger circling the top of her head, "so protocol says I'm just 'Barbara'. It's my pleasure to meet you, Inspector. Won't you join me and my Privy Council over here?"

As the two moved off, Barbara turned to Ellen. "Ellen, make sure you top off your tanks and charge it to my account. You may be spending a lot of time in the air over the next few days."

Ellen winked, turned, and left.

"How far along are you," Mike Mullalley asked her.

"Nine weeks to go," Barbara informed him. "It can't go fast enough."

"Boy or girl?" Mike asked.

"Inspector Mullalley, only three people in all the world know the answer to that question: myself, my husband, and my obstetrician, and we intend to keep it that way." She smiled.

"Well, then, at least explain to me why it is that you're 'just

Barbara' when you're not wearing the crown," he pleaded.

"It's simple, really," Barbara explained as they headed for the door to the back room, "I didn't really want the job in the first place, and only took it because it was more-or-less forced upon me." Mullalley had a surprised look on his face. "Part of the unspoken deal I have with the people of Farside is that I can regain my non-royal status by taking off the crown and putting it away. They just won't let me do it permanently. As ruler of Farside, I primarily serve as the chief magistrate, making policy decisions on Farside-wide issues."

Mullalley looked around. "It's not very 'regal'," he said, indicating the Moot Hall.

Barbara shrugged. "It was what we could afford at the time. Things are looking up these days. I'm planning to have a new Moot Hall built. This one is starting to show signs of wear."

"So, you have your own income, then?" Mullalley asked.

Barbara nodded. "A year ago or thereabouts, at the suggestion of a committee of representatives of all five — oh, I hate using this word — colonies, it was decided that since I had basically given all the gold and silver in Farside away to the people, the Crown was to retain title to oil reserves — all the black gold — in Farside. Yes, I have my own income, and it's substantial.

"But enough about me," she finished as she pushed the door to the council chambers open, "I want you to talk to my trusted advisers." The council members stood as she entered. Barbara wagged her finger at them in remonstrance. "Allow me to introduce my Privy Council: my father, Buck fitzGibbon; my husband, Ernie Walsh; Steve Okambo Sr.; our Petroleum Minister, Nell Gruder; her husband, Oscar Gruder, jack-of-all-trades and Director of the Royal Mint; Mr. Dennis Cameron; and Mr. Paul Gillman, my Foreign Minister.

"If you can brief us on how you intend to proceed with your investigation, we would all appreciate it."

"Certainly," Mullalley started. "I have already been to the site of the fire, the Winslow property, and have made a preliminary survey. Based on what I saw there, I can almost guarantee that you have a case of arson on your hands —"

"Our first," Steve Okambo muttered morosely.

"— and you have a unique situation here that makes my job immensely easier: a small population of potential arsonists. If necessary, I could interview them all in a few days. I probably won't have to. This environment is very 'small town'. The primary characteristic of that is that everybody knows everybody else's business. I expect to interview no more than a dozen people and I'll have this case cracked."

"We've lined up everyone who lives in the area surrounding

the Winslow ranch and anyone else who may have been nearby when the fire started. A few of them are waiting outside to speak with you," Paul Gillman informed him. "If the interviews run long, are you prepared to stay overnight in Farside?"

"I brought along a change of clothing just in case," Mullalley answered, "but I haven't made any reservations anywhere."

The rest laughed at that. "We don't actually have facilities for overnight guests," Barbara told him with a chuckle, "but Randy and Sam Burke offered to put you up for the night and for as long as you find it necessary to stay in Farside. It's not the Ritz, but it's warm and dry and avoids a long commute, not to mention that the price is right."

—==+++==—

Gus and Anna Schwartz took their seats at the work table behind partitions, a small nod to the notion of privacy that protected only against those who could read lips.

"I'd like you to tell me in your own words what you recall of Monday's events," Mike instructed them. "Don't leave out anything no matter how insignificant you think it might be. You never know what small fact you have matches with another small fact someone else has."

"I was out front tending the garden," Anna told him, "when I noticed smoke in the west. At first, I wondered if it was a brush fire that had gotten out of hand, but it was very local — the column of smoke was not getting wider.

"A few minutes later, I saw someone riding a horse coming from that direction, but I couldn't make out who it was."

"Anna called me out to see it," Gus began his account, "and I decided to ride over to take a closer look. I had only gone a mile or so before I realized it was Barry's place. I called Pete Gorsky to let him know, but I didn't get an answer, so I called Dante Robinetti, and he didn't pick up, either."

"Anything else?" Mike asked. They both shook their heads. "Okay, thanks for your help. Would you send in the next person?"

Pete and Grace Gorsky sat down at the table with Mike. "Just say whatever you remember about Monday," Mike instructed. "Don't leave anything out."

Grace sighed and paused expectantly, but when Pete didn't jump in to offer his views, she started: "Pete was in the east section when I saw smoke on the horizon west of us. I called him on his cell phone, but it went to voicemail. Some parts of the farm are dead spots. That's why Pete also carries a walkie-talkie. I paged his

handset and told him about the smoke. He told me he would go check it out."

Pete finished for them: "I called Dr. Robinetti while I was in transit to the Winslow's and told him about the smoke. He was up to his neck in a process that he couldn't interrupt and asked me to give him another call if my opinion was that he was needed personally. By the time I got over to the Winslow place, it was completely engulfed. I never bothered to call Dante back. There was nothing he could have done. I briefly helped Barry Winslow hose the house down until we both realized it was a waste of time and water. We watched the end of the burn with the Schwartzes and Mrs. Preston and her son, Edward."

Mike Mullalley furiously scribbled notes as they spoke. "You didn't go with your husband to the Winslow ranch, is that right?" he asked Grace.

"Correct," she confirmed. "I didn't get the rest of the story until Pete got back about two hours later."

"Did you see anyone else while you were on your way to the Winslow place?" he asked Pete. Pete shook his head. *No*.

"Anything else?" Mike asked in wrap-up.

Pete and Grace shrugged in unison.

Barry Winslow took their place.

"You're my most important witness, Mr. Winslow, since you were the last person — that we now know of — who was at your house before it burned. I need you to tell me everything, leaving out nothing, no matter how insignificant you may think it is."

"Everything?" Barry asked with some trepidation.

"Absolutely everything," Mullalley confirmed. "Now, about what time did you leave your house for the last time?"

"It was about 11:15," Barry replied.

"And how do you know this? Did you happen to notice a clock or did you look at your cell phone display? What told you it was 11:15?"

Barry hesitated and Mullalley noticed. "I... I'm estimating the time because I had just taken a shower and noticed the bedroom clock when I got out and was toweling off. It said '11:01'. I figured another fifteen minutes to get dressed and out of the house. It could have been 11:14. It could have been 11:17. I said 'about 11:15'."

"Did you see anyone nearby when you left the house?"

Barry hesitated again and Mullalley pounced: "Mr. Winslow, is there something you're not telling me? I don't know the law here in Farside, and I am not a Farside law enforcement officer, but I'm sure there's a way to get you under oath and compel testimony. We're

dealing here with a felony crime and I have been asked by the Privy Council to get to the bottom of the matter. I absolutely must have your cooperation in this. Am I making myself clear?"

"Is this conversation confidential?" Barry asked, fear beginning to set in. "I'm not sure I would want everything I could tell you made public."

Mullalley sighed. "I have no interest in embarrassing you, Mr. Winslow. I just need to find out who burned your house down. If you tell me things that are not relevant to that goal, I won't be including them in my report. If you impede this investigation in any way, however, that will be in my report, and it will be made public. I don't know how I can be any clearer.

"Now, please tell me everything."

Now it was Barry Winslow's turn to sigh. "Lisa Robinetti had been at my place earlier," Barry admitted finally.

"Any relation to Dr. Dante Robinetti?"

"By marriage. She's Mrs. Robinetti."

Mullalley looked at Barry but didn't say anything at first. "Is it pertinent to ask what Mrs. Robinetti was doing at your place?"

"I don't believe it is," Barry replied. "Lisa left on horseback some minutes before I did."

"Left for where?" Mullalley asked.

"Probably the equipment gate," Barry mused.

"That's the entry port on County Road 28, I presume?" Mullalley prompted. Barry nodded agreement. "Go on."

"That's it," Barry shrugged. "Lisa left to go shopping in Longmont or Boulder or Denver. I went to look in on the herd and lend a hand to my range crew. It was a few miles on horseback — ten minutes, maybe. When I got there, my foreman, Fred Hill pointed back the way I came and asked me what I had left burning."

"So, there was, at most, ten minutes between you leaving the house and your house going up in smoke, is that right?" Mullalley asked. Barry again nodded agreement. "And by the time you got back — this time at a gallop, I presume — the house was fully involved?"

"The front of the house was not in flames, but everything else was," Barry told him. "I started hosing it down as well as I could. My range crew was there, and they started hosing. Pete Gorsky arrived a few minutes later and worked a hose. About then the flames blew out the front door and we all just gave up."

"And, other than Mrs. Robinetti, there was no one that you observed at or near your ranch before the fire started whose presence would make you suspicious, is that correct?" Barry nodded. "And, lastly, again not to embarrass you, I have to ask if you and Mrs.

Robinetti are sexually involved."

"Yes, we are," Barry admitted. "I trust you will not spread it around."

"By that admission, you have made Dr. Robinetti my prime suspect. If it turns out he is, in fact, connected to this arson, a little tryst with another man's wife will be 'small potatoes'."

"I understand," Barry said softly.

—==++++==—

Although many of the newer residents had opted for factory-built housing, many of the old timers still relied on their 'LOGAnHOpkinsMESsier' log homes that had served them well as wilderness dwellings. Among the many advantages: "They smell nicer," almost everyone who owned one would tell anyone who asked.

Seated around the table on the cabin's back porch, Mike Mullalley and Sam and Randy Burke sipped beer cooled in the burbling stream that ran alongside the property while steaks grilled nearby, and watched the Sun set through the trees.

"Pretty nice," Mike told his hosts, "I could grow to like this place."

"Thinking of bidding for a homestead?" Sam teased.

"Twist my arm," Mike challenged her.

"What sort of skills do you bring to Farside?" Randy probed.

Mike laughed. "I was in the Boy Scouts," he offered. "Other than that, I have a Liberal Arts degree from Vanderbilt and a B.S. in Chemistry from Kansas State."

"The chemistry can be put to use here, I think," Randy mused, "but there's not a lot of call for philosophers. Shall we think about sponsoring you?"

"What's involved?" Mike asked, now clearly intrigued by the suggestion.

"For one thing," Sam re-injected herself back into the conversation, "it means you move here lock, stock, and barrel. It's not a commuter-job. You don't show up in the morning, work your nine-to-five, and then head home to the wife and kids. A commitment to Farside is expected to be with both feet. If you're married, your spouse and kids have to buy in as well."

"Buy in?"

"A figure of speech," Randy comforted Mike. "The financial commitment is all one-sided: from us to you. Your commitment is more emotional than anything else: you give up a Governor and get a Queen."

Mike held up the aluminum beer can and regarded it briefly.

"I wonder if Farside needs a brewery?"

The smell of bacon and eggs permeating the cabin finally got Mike Mullalley out of bed. He dressed quickly in the private little alcove that had been provided for him, and presented himself in the Great Room where Randy worked several pans on the top of the cabin's camp stove.

"Sam always tries to spend a little time in the morning down at the stream panning for gold," Randy explained.

Mike cocked his head to one side as if about to ask a question. Randy anticipated it. "Maybe 12 hours a week plus whatever time I put in... another six or seven, maybe. Over the past four years we've taken about 170 ounces out of it."

"So, you're taking — what? — forty thousand a year part-time?" Randy smiled. "And if you worked it full time you could probably triple or quadruple that..."

"Something like that," Randy agreed, "but you get real wet and real dirty and real cold when the weather turns. It's not all fun-and-games."

As the two finished their breakfast, they could hear the hum of Ellen Messier's airplane approaching. A few moments later, Ellen knocked and entered. "Where to today?" she asked Mullalley.

"I think I'll head over to the Ag building, maybe run some tests on the samples I poached, try to find out what was the vehicle used for getting that fire going so quickly.

"I hoped you were going to say something like that," Ellen smiled. "I brought along my fishing gear just in case."

"Where do you go fishing?"

"Platte Lake," Ellen informed him. "Three thousand square miles of drinkable fresh water. I plunk the plane down in the middle, pop the canopy, and drop a line."

"Cool," Mullalley smiled, "what kind of fish?"

"Don't know," she shrugged. "The species we take from the lake aren't the same species we're used to from Nearside. There's one that reminds me a lot of tilapia and another that's almost trout."

"Bring some back for us, Ellen, and we'll have fish for dinner," Randy asked. Ellen gave him a 'thumbs up', then she and Mike Mullalley climbed aboard the airplane and departed for the Ag building.

Twenty minutes later, Ellen deposited her passenger near the Ag dome and immediately took off again heading east toward Platte Lake.

Inside the Ag building, Dante Robinetti greeted Mike Mullalley. "So, what do you think was the cause of the fire?" he asked Mike.

"It's too early for that, I'm afraid," Mike replied. "I have some samples to analyze, but there's always the possibility they'll show nothing out of the ordinary."

"Was it arson?" Robinetti asked.

"It could be," Mike told him, "or it could be entirely accidental. Accidents are the number one cause of house fires, you know. Somebody forgets they've got something cooking on the stove and *poof!* — instant ashes. Given the circumstances: the small community, the overall friendliness of the people, I'd be surprised if it were arson. Given the age of the construction, though, it's unlikely to be electrical. There hasn't been time for the technology to become back-level. Mr. Winslow says he didn't have anything on the stove, so a cooking accident also seems unlikely. I'll just have to look at the evidence and see which way it points."

"Hmmm," Dante muttered and turned back to his own work.

Mullalley began fetching samples, one by one, from his collector bag, opening them, and either examining them under high magnification or swabbing them with this chemical or that. The result of each test he carefully annotated in his case notebook, sometimes going back to prior samples and re-testing them in other ways.

The bag marked: `#24 - wine bottle shard; rear bedroom left' still contained a film on its inside that was clearly not wine-related. Mike sniffed it. It had a noticeable trace odor of some sort of exotic chemical product, but Mike couldn't immediately identify which. As he moved to put it away, the light in his head turned on.

"Do you have any kerosene around here that I might be able to use?" Mike asked Dante.

Dante turned and paused. "There should be ten or twenty gallons in cans in the storage shed out back," Dante suggested. "It's what runs my space heaters in the winter." Dante rose to lead Mike to the shed located near the dome's back door. "What do you need kerosene for?"

"I've got some reagents that need to be dissolved in oil," Mike lied. "Kerosene is usually a nice, clean substance for that." Dante nodded, then pointed at the four 5-gallon cans lined up along the shed wall.

Mike unscrewed the cap of the nearest can and began pouring into a half-liter container, carefully noting how much the can needed to be tilted before fluid started splashing into the receptacle. It appeared to be almost completely full. "I'll replace this," Mike assured Dante. Dante waved his hand in a 'think nothing of it' gesture.

"So," Mike started a new conversation with Dante, "what is it you do here?"

"Do you mean me, personally, or are you talking about

Farside?"

"Whichever answer you feel most expert at answering," Mike prompted, hoping Dante would feel most expert about his own work.

"I'm the local agronomist and veterinarian," Dante answered obligingly. "I find out which things affect the plants — adversely or otherwise — and recommend strategies for maximizing crop yields. I do the same general task for the livestock."

"Sounds kind of dull," Mike offered.

"It's not," Dante replied. "Of all the bugs I learned about in school, about none of them exist here in Farside. All my work is learning to identify bugs never before seen and finding the best route to control them. Of course, I have to use what formulations I can find in Nearside because we don't have the means to produce new ones. 'Dull' is the one thing it isn't."

"So, what sort of pesticides do you find useful here?" Mike probed.

"Triazine seems to work... okay, even though it's not ideal. Some of the thiocarbamates will work where triazine doesn't. The downside is that they're all pretty toxic."

"You import all of that from Nearside? Sounds expensive."

Dante pursed his lips and nodded. "Very," he confirmed.

5 - Snoops

Barbara and her Privy Council sat around a laptop computer from which Davy Harmon's face and Laurel Hamm's face stared back at them on a split screen. "Something odd is happening in a place called 'Coyanosa,'" Laurel told them. "Barkley has a retail sales operation there operating under a different name: 'Kelleher Oilfield Services'. Despite the name, it's Barkley-owned-and-operated. We carry the salary accounts on Barkley books although the actual payroll is handled by a commercial payroll services firm that simply bills Barkley for the checks they write.

"The crew there sells crude oil to all comers, and they sell about 900 barrels a day, Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays included. Although they sell it at a small discount, they still gross more than \$75,000 per day. *Per day*. Here's the odd thing about Coyanosa: there is no pumping equipment there, and there has never, as far as I can tell, been a drilling operation there. No well, no pumps, and they move 900 barrels a day anyway.

"I asked Davy Harmon to eyeball the place on his next trip down to Pecos and he did. He took several dozen photos of the operation from different angles and this is what he saw." The picture on the laptop's screen switched to show a tall, narrow silo. "According to Davy, Barkley has a pumping-and-storage operation in Farside very near to this spot. I think you have a leak."

Nell Gruder snarled. "If they have the missing gate and are using it to export crude, I want to pound them into dust. Having the gate is absolute proof they were intimately involved with the raid that killed Lars Andersen. Exporting unrefined crude is a direct violation of their license. What are we waiting for?"

Ernie looked grimly back at the rest of the council. "Oddly enough, Linda Rossi is reporting something quite similar. Her team's analysis says Barkley appears to be losing about 900 barrels a day compared to the other producers. That equates to 60-some-odd barrels that are not paid as royalty, but I think the flip-side of that is more disturbing: if they're stealing crude by pouring it through a gate — a stolen gate — and we can prove it, we absolutely, positively must shut them down, recover the gate, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

"Now, I know many of you think Nell gets too hot under the collar too quickly and too easily, but in this case, she is 100% justified. If any part of what we are discussing here turns out to be true, we must make a solid case against Barkley management and bring them

all before a jury. We owe it to Lars."

"And I'll give you something else," Davy interrupted. "Some weeks back a gate listener was installed on Farside One. It's been all over the country since then without a squeak from the listener. This morning I noticed that the listener had a red light 'on'. I called Harry Tumulty. Harry accessed the listener remotely and tells me that the listener has heard a gate signal — a very, very faint gate signal, and it heard it while Farside One was parked at the Pecos municipal airport. Somewhere close by is a type-II gate that didn't shut down during the quiet time."

"Suggestions?" Barbara prodded.

"We've been operating under the assumption that the stolen gate was moved to Houston," Buck said. "We couldn't find it because we've been looking in the wrong place. Now that we know approximately where it is, let's find the gate and either recapture it or destroy it. That should be priority number one. After that, we can continue with our other pursuits."

"If I may..." Dennis raised his hand for recognition and the others turned to face him. "I want to suggest a small modification to that plan.

"I'm told that we have the ability to switch a gate on or off remotely." Barbara nodded. "Let's switch it off and wait to see how long it takes them to realize they aren't moving product from Farside to Nearside. We apparently can tell when a gate is operating. We can just listen for the signal that tells us they've turned it back on. This may give us other information we will find useful, and sometimes information is more satisfying than revenge."

Buck smiled broadly back at him. "I love that plan," he told Dennis.

Barbara spoke to the image of Davy Harmon in Pecos-in-Farside. "Davy, can you shut the gate off?"

"We'll have to locate it first," Davy mused, "and if it's adequately shielded we may not be able to get enough of a signal to it, but I think it's worth a try. I'll get a crew on it immediately."

"Keep us in the loop," she ordered.

"Mike Mullalley would like to say a few words to us," Barbara continued. "Mike?"

"I think I have some bad news for you," Mike began. "The accelerant used on the Winslow ranch house was a thiocarbamate-based pesticide. That and other evidence strongly suggests — indeed, it almost convicts — Dr. Dante Robinetti as your arsonist."

"But everyone here has pesticides stored on their farm," Paul Gillman countered, "and they all get them from the same place: the Ag shack."

"Not thiocarbamates," Mike corrected him. "That thought also occurred to me so I checked it independently. I asked Gus Schwartz and Pete Gorsky about how they store pesticides. They talked about all sorts of formulations, a little of this, a little of that. I asked specifically about things like triazine and thiocarbamate-based pesticides. They both volunteered — independently — that they never keep those chemicals in storage. They always get what they need from the Ag shack and return any unused portions when they're done.

"The thiocarbamates are highly toxic along with being highly flammable. Not keeping them locally is a safety practice. Dr. Robinetti demands it. That's a good thing. The bad news is that this means the only person who has unsupervised access to thiocarbamates is Dr. Robinetti himself.

"The method seems to have involved a sort of Molotov-cocktail pitched through the back window of the ranch house, followed by some sort of trigger — a piece of smoldering rope, perhaps."

"Still, that seems to be awfully 'thin' as evidence goes," Nell Gruder shrugged.

"There's other evidence," Mike said softly.

"What other evidence," Barbara prodded.

"Ma'am, if it's possible to avoid bringing that out, I would much prefer it," Mike begged her.

Barbara thought for a moment and all in the room waited for her to bring her eyes off that spot on the floor she seemed to be concentrating on. "Would you all please give me a moment alone with Inspector Mullalley? Ernie, you stay, too." The others rose and left the room.

"Mike," she addressed him informally to ease any trepidation he might feel, "as part of my regal duties, I act as Farside's chief magistrate. I expect I will sit in judgment on Dante Robinetti if it comes to that. I must know what other evidence you have or think you have that relates to this."

Mike sighed. "I feel like I'm violating a confidence by telling you this... Barry Winslow and Lisa Robinetti are sexually involved. Lisa Robinetti, in fact, spent some portion of that morning at the Winslow house. This provides the motive that might have driven Dante Robinetti to fire-bomb Winslow's house."

Barbara looked at Ernie. "Oh, shit," Ernie muttered.

—==++++==—

Later that day, three triangulation stations ringed around Coyanosa, Texas pinpointed the very weak signal as emanating from the same silo-like object Davy had photographed at Laurel's urging. It

appeared to be functioning as part of an oil-dispensing facility. Davy keyed the 'power off' code into his hand-held transmitter and pushed the 'send' button.

"The dimple's gone," the tech next to him informed him. "The gate is powered down."

A phone rang in the One Allen Center offices of Barkley Oil and Peggy Morrissey picked it out of its cradle. "Field Ops," she announced herself.

"Hi, this is Larry at Coyanosa. We just noticed pressure dropping and checked the tank level. It looks like it's not automatically refilling. Do you have a pump that's gone offline or something? Maybe you need to get a technician out here to check it out."

"I'll look into it, Larry," she told him. Hanging up, she flipped the directory open to find out who was responsible for Coyanosa, then dialed another number. *Developmental Research Department*, she thought. *That's odd...*

"Hi," she greeted the receptionist who answered her call, "this is Peggy from 'Field Ops'. I just got a call from Coyanosa that they're experiencing a pressure fall-off at their site. Am I talking to the right department?" The receptionist assured her that she was, indeed, talking to the right department and promised to see the message got to the proper person.

Twenty minutes later, the phone at Coyanosa rang and Larry answered it.

"Start the 'gate control' application by double-clicking the desktop icon," Larry was told. He did as instructed. "Now, click the 'power off' button, then the 'power on' button. You should start seeing pressure come up soon. If you don't see improvement in twenty minutes, call back on 713-555-4543."

In the RV parked a quarter mile northwest of the Coyanosa silo, a technician dialed a number on her cell phone. "Coyanosa just came back on," she told Davy. "One hour twenty-three minutes."

"Keep an eye on the traffic," Davy told her. "If traffic starts to slack off overnight, take it down again." Near midnight, the technician on duty sent the 'power off' sequence again.

With the sun just threatening to peek over the eastern horizon, the first of the morning's tankers pulled alongside the tangle of hoses at Coyanosa and began taking on crude oil. Before the truck finished loading, the Kelleher Oilfield Services crew noticed the fluid level in the silo dropping precipitously. They called Houston again and left a message for Field Ops. Before the message was received and responded to, the fourth tanker truck drained the last drops from the

silo.

Their contact in the Research department had them recycle the gate and oil started pouring into the silo again, but Barkley also dispatched one of their techs from Midland to eyeball the gate via the access port high on the silo tube.

"I can't see anything wrong with it," the technician reported back to his boss in Houston. "It could just be a sporadic short, or it could be that one of the chips is about to fail. If you want to keep this from recurring, you better develop a back-up plan pretty soon."

—==++++==—

High on a platform floating in the muck of a swamp corresponding to Houston's One Allen Center, two volunteers watched people file into what their survey thus far told them was the board room for Barkley Petroleum. They switched on the recorders.

The directors milled about getting coffee and snacks as they waited for the late-comers to arrive. Hands were shaken among both the men and the women, and idle conversations clashed on the recording.

"Okay, it looks like we have a quorum," the apparent chairman announced. "Let's get started."

They handled various matters relating to finances and inter-company policies before they reached the agenda item labeled "Coyanosa".

"The Coyanosa operation continues to produce revenue although reliability has recently become a concern," one of the directors reported. "It will be responsible for a gross uplift of approximately \$11.4 million dollars this year, on track for \$27.5 million per annum. The reliability concern is being addressed, but may require we take the facility offline for several weeks, possibly as long as two months, while we adjust and shield the equipment. Shutting Coyanosa down for that long could result in a loss (based on projections) of \$2.3 million."

"Coyanosa is the unit that was started as a result of Paul Ramsey's project, is that correct?" another director asked. "Why are we just now hearing of problems?"

"That is correct," the first answered. "As you know, security on this operation is very tight, and we have all agreed not to discuss any part of it or any operations relating to it outside this board room. That is why you have not been receiving notice in your weekly briefing packets. The project can only be discussed here, and only verbally — nothing in writing. Of course, if this board wishes to lift that security protocol..."

"No, of course not," the other director demurred, waving his hands as if to deflect something. "I just wondered. What sort of reliability problems are you having?"

"As you know, Coyanosa represents a port between our Farside operation and Coyanosa... what the Farsiders call 'Near-side'. Crude oil is delivered to that port and flows into the storage tank at Coyanosa where it is sold by a dummy corporation, Kelleher Oilfield Services, which we own. The employees of Kelleher do not know that they work for Barkley. Their checks are processed via a third-party and do not link back to Barkley in any way that can easily be discerned.

"Recently, we have had reports — seven in the last nine days — of the port closing spontaneously. Naturally, when this happens, oil stops flowing from Farside. Our technicians have now installed a flow monitor that watches for interruptions in the delivery of oil and recycles the port to bring it back online. This is a short-term solution. The long-term solution involves taking that port offline (and shutting down Coyanosa while it's down) so that we can do a deep-dive on the technology that operates the port. We're thinking *five weeks minimum* and it could go longer than that.

"During that time, we will try to develop an understanding of how those ports work and why so that we can build a replacement. Ideally, we would then wind up building a more reliable port, but we'll settle for a workable back-up.

"If the board approves, we want to start work on this as soon as possible."

"What's the payback on Coyanosa?" another asked. "When will we have Ramsey's operation paid for?"

"Ramsey's operation was fully-amortized after three days," the first declared smugly. "It's been all gravy since then."

"Can I have a motion on this?" the chairman asked.

The motion to shut down Coyanosa and spend research funds on an analysis of the gate technology was made, seconded, and passed with nary a dissenting vote.

Later that day, a team searching through the hallways of Barkley Petroleum's Houston offices found Paul Ramsey's office, and a recording device was hidden in an out-of-the-way crevice. About the same time, the Coyanosa silo gate heard its own 'destroy' order and blew all its chips to splinters. Because the gate and its chips were hermetically sealed inside a plastic bubble, the explosion did not reach the flammable vapors in the silo. The oil simply stopped flowing into Coyanosa and no amount of cajoling would cause it to restart.

Dante Robinetti tied his horse to the hitching post outside the Okambo Moot Hall and pushed its door open into the cooler interior. Barbara, Ernie, Buck, and Dennis Cameron waited for him there. The smile leaked away from Dante's face when he realized Barbara was wearing her crown.

"Dante, have a seat," Barbara ordered. Dante sat. "We've called you here today ahead of the scheduled moot to clear up a few matters of concern to the community," she started. "Dante, is there anything you care to tell us about the fire at Barry Winslow's ranch last week?"

Dante's face was now white, all the blood having drained from it. "Am I accused?" he asked.

"You are," Buck informed him. "Evidence both physical and circumstantial links you strongly to the arson, and there is no one else who is linked in any comparable way. So, this Privy Council now asks you again: is there anything you care to tell us about the fire at Barry Winslow's ranch last week?"

Dante paused for what everyone thought was a very long time, staring at them with a 'deer in the headlights' look in his eyes, not breathing. Finally, his head fell into his hands and he began sobbing. "I'm so sorry," he squalled through the sobs as he gasped for air. "I went crazy when I found out Lisa was having an affair with Barry..."

Dennis moved to a quiet corner of the room, opened his notebook, and looked up two numbers. He first dialed Lisa Robinetti's cell phone and spoke briefly to her, asking if she intended to be at the afternoon's moot, and advising her that she should come early — immediately, in fact. He next dialed Barry Winslow and gave him the same message.

The others meanwhile sat with Dante and questioned him about the method and the timing. Dante independently confirmed virtually the entirety of Mike Mullalley's formal report: he had filled a wine bottle with a mixture of kerosene and thiocarbamate pesticide and lobbed it through the window of the ranch's back bedroom just a few minutes after Barry Winslow rode away, counting on a spark from the air conditioner to set off the vapors. He also admitted that this was not a 'spur of the moment' action, but one that he had thought out and planned; it was premeditated.

Barbara let Ernie and Buck fire questions at Dante and listened with her eyes closed. This was going to be her first test as a monarch: deciding Dante Robinetti's fate. She was not looking forward to it. She would also have to deal with Barry and Lisa, although she did not know how or on what basis she might do so. Adultery was not a crime in Farside; almost nothing was, yet their actions had broken unwritten

law, at the very least.

"Dante," Barbara spoke, "there is a storage room on the west side of the moot hall. You are confined there until a decision can be reached on how this matter is to be handled. You are forbidden to participate in today's moot. You may be able to hear some of it from that room, but you may not speak before the community unless in answer to a direct question.

"Dante, you have given us all a problem of massive proportions. I don't know what's going to happen, but I can virtually assure you that you are not going to like it."

"Will I be expelled into the wilderness?" he asked.

"I don't know," Barbara muttered. "I don't know. Go. Someone will be sent to fetch you when we do."

Dante left to follow Barbara's order, and the four discussed the possible routes to a resolution. While they were talking, Lisa Robinetti arrived at the Moot Hall on her pony and tied it next to Dante's. "Is Dante here?" she asked as she approached Barbara and the Privy Council, then seeing the crown atop Barbara's head, added "...your majesty."

"Dante is close-by," Dennis answered her. "Please have a seat and we'll be with you shortly."

Lisa took one of the two widely-spaced seats positioned twenty feet or so from their hushed discussion. She wondered why she had been sent for, and she wondered why Barbara wore the crown that she almost always kept in its box until the start of the Moot.

She waited patiently for what she thought might have been ten or twelve minutes before the Moot Hall door opened to admit Barry Winslow. Barry moved cautiously into the room, noticing Lisa sitting apart from the other four and then noticing the bright gold ring in Barbara's hair. He gave a small bow in Barbara's direction. "Her Majesty sent for me?"

"Yes," Dennis confirmed. "Please take a seat," and he indicated an empty chair about a dozen feet from Lisa's.

With both Barry and Lisa now present, the conversation among the four tapered off, and Ernie turned toward them.

"We have the arsonist in custody," Ernie told Barry, "and we have both an admission of guilt and the motive as well. Can either of you guess what that motive might be?"

Tears welled in Lisa's eyes. "Dante?" she asked fearfully. Ernie grimaced.

"Yes, Dante," Barbara interjected, "and you two are involved as well. You two have, by your actions, set this community back damn near to its starting point." Barry and Lisa looked startled. They couldn't imagine why Barbara would lay the blame for this on them.

"Dante committed a serious crime, and his punishment is going to be appropriate to a serious crime. That means we will lose our one-and-only agronomist and our one-and-only veterinarian, and for what? What do we get in return?"

Barbara looked straight at Lisa Robinetti. There was fire in her eyes. "How will you repay your neighbors for the loss they are about to suffer?" She switched her angry gaze to Barry Winslow. "Are you going to step in and do Dante's job?"

"Oh, I'm not blaming you for the arson. That's completely on Dante's shoulders. I'm blaming you for setting up the conditions that made it seem like revenge was a suitable option for him. You both are aware of the ultimate law here in Farside, are you not?" The two nodded, fully chastened. No one could say they didn't know.

"The Moot starts in less than two hours. When the Moot starts, this will be on the agenda. I am charged with punishing Dante, damn you both, and I want a solution to this from you two before I have to step in front of the people. I want to know how you're going to replace our plants-and-animals guy.

"Get out."

The two rose and hastily retreated to the outside.

—==+++==—

Five minutes ahead of the start of the Moot, Barry and Lisa pushed through the front door of the Moot Hall and made a bee line for Barbara. Barbara still sported her crown, not having taken it off all morning. They each gave a small bow when Barbara turned to give them her attention.

"Lisa and I have a proposal," Barry said. "We forgive Dante for his actions — completely. We do not wish to prosecute the arson charge." Barbara raised one eyebrow. "Lisa will divorce Dante. We will marry as soon as the community allows it —"

"If the community allows it," Barbara interjected.

"Since I was the one harmed," Barry concluded, "I think I should have some say in the disposition of Dante's case. We have both agreed to this." Lisa bobbed her head to show her agreement.

Barbara paused, thinking about their proposal. "Not acceptable," she said softly. "Dante has to be penalized for what he did. I cannot, in good conscience, let him 'walk' on this, but I thank you for the input you've given me. I will decide Dante's fate... and yours. You two are not completely guilt-free in this. You both may have a penalty to pay. Do you understand?"

Barry and Lisa hung their heads. "We understand," Lisa assured her, "and we trust in the fairness of Your Majesty's judgment."

"I have forbidden Dante to speak at today's Moot. I now forbid you two to speak unless in answer to a direct question." The two obediently nodded their heads.

Paul Gillman stepped to Barbara's side. "One minute," he warned her, then escorted her to the raised stage.

As Barbara walked toward the microphone, the entire hall came to its feet and they began to sing:

*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 restored 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.*

Finished, Barbara gestured for them to be seated and they did so. "Are there matters of concern to be brought before the Crown?" she asked. No one made a response. Paul had already told her the agenda was clear, having urged the two who had approached him earlier to delay raising their concerns in view of the serious matters to be handled today.

"Today, we have serious business, sad business to handle," Barbara told them by way of introduction. "As you all know, Barry Winslow's ranch house burned to the ground this past week, and it was arson, not accident." Several in the audience nodded knowingly. The rumor mill had been working overtime since the event, and much of what was suspected was, in fact, true. "We have also located the arsonist, and we know his motive, and he has confessed.

"Dr. Dante Robinetti admits having burned the Winslow ranch in revenge for Barry Winslow conducting an affair with Lisa Robinetti." A gasp ripped through the audience.

"As the chief magistrate for Farside, I am responsible for seeing justice done. I have to tell you that I am in over my head on this one."

She turned away from the microphone and asked Buck "Please bring in Dante Robinetti. Remind him that he is forbidden to speak until ordered to speak." Buck left to escort Dante to the stage, and Barbara turned back to the microphone.

"Barry and Lisa have proposed that Dr. Dante Robinetti be absolved of all fault connected with the arson of the Winslow ranch, and that Lisa and Dante divorce and Barry and Lisa marry." A

negative-sounding rumble returned from the hall. "That was my opinion, too. I'm happy to see that I am not alone.

"Crimes of this sort taint the entire community. We cannot allow such actions to pass without penalty. The precedent it sets would place us on a downward path from which we might never return. It is the judgment of the Crown that Dr. Dante Robinetti will replace from his own funds a house for Barry Winslow comparable to that which was burned down.

"Further, Dr. Robinetti will be confined to the Ag building and the land within one-quarter mile of it, and may not travel or remain outside those boundaries without escort by a citizen of Farside until such time as the Moot lifts that restriction."

Barbara turned toward Dante, now seated at the far end of the stage. "Dante, Lisa offers you a divorce. Is that acceptable to you?"

"It is," Dante replied.

"Very well," Barbara spoke. "Let the record show that on this date, Dr. Dante Robinetti and Lisa Spencer Robinetti were separated by divorce granted by the Crown of Farside. No alimony or support is authorized.

"Now, we are left with the problem of what to do with Barry and Lisa. Clearly, having Dante and Lisa and Barry in the same community is going to be a source of endless friction, and any solution to this problem cannot penalize the uninvolved citizens of Farside. Removing Dr. Robinetti from his researches would penalize the people of Farside, so that is out of the question. We're seemingly left with a very unpleasant option: effectively banishing Barry and Lisa.

"I can't do this," Barbara pleaded. "Please don't make me do this. I need a Solomon to help me make a good decision."

"Yer doin' fine!" someone shouted from the audience and a wave of laughter followed.

"No," Barbara begged off, "I'm serious. We're talking about the peace and stability of this community. I need help. What am I going to do, banish them?"

Peg Clancy stood in the audience and raised her voice so that everyone could hear. "Barry... Lisa... can you two see that you have put this community at risk? What do you think Barbara should do to solve the problem you created?"

Lisa and Barry looked at each other and spoke in whispers for just a few sentences before turning to the stage. "With Her Majesty's permission..." Barbara held out her hand in a gesture of approval. Lisa turned back to the Moot and said in a loud voice, clear enough that all could hear: "We accept Queen Barbara's judgment. With your approval, we will seek another Farside colony and move our belongings away from Okambo — forever. May we have three months

to make arrangements?"

Barbara stepped to the front of the stage and held out her hands. "What is your pleasure?" she asked the Moot and was greeted by loud applause.

"Barry... Lisa... within three months you will contact the other Farside colonies and obtain approval to join one of them, then depart with whatever possessions you intend to take along. Dante will arrange to have a comparable house built at your destination at no cost to you. Good luck."

6 - Retribution

"The chips are all blasted to smithereens," the technician told Paul Ramsey. "I don't know how or why. It may be these things have a timer built in and commit suicide on a pre-arranged schedule. That would make a lot of sense. It would keep any gates from being used for the long-term, and the Farsiders aren't affected because they can just manufacture new gates whenever they need one. Pretty smart, all things considered.

"Anyway, if you need another gate, you'll have to go steal it. There's no hope for resurrecting this one."

Ramsey had a seriously disappointed look on his face. "At least it paid for itself," he opined, "or so they say. Alright, thanks. I'll let the directors know we're out of business at Coyanosa."

Ralph Marks, senior HR manager for Barkley Petroleum, twisted the key in his office door, then tried the doorknob to make sure it was locked. Satisfied, he left the HR department heading for the parking garage. The elevator door opened and Ralph stepped inside. He was the only person in the car. As the elevator doors began to slide closed, the sides of the car to his left and right disappeared in a wink and a burly man lunged at him, picking him up bodily and carrying him through to the other side, at which point the image of the elevator car winked off and he was left standing on a wooden platform above a fetid swamp being held firmly by five men. It had all happened so quickly Ralph had not even thought to cry out in alarm.

Still stunned from the suddenness of the attack, Ralph mumbled his first cogent thought: "Where am I?"

"I don't like that game," their leader spoke. "We're going to ask the questions. You'll handle the answers. Where are Barkley's personnel files stored?"

"Stored? What do you mean?" Ralph demanded.

"I mean: when you want to review Sally Jones' records, where do you go to get them?"

"I pull them up at my computer," Ralph blurted. "Everything's on the computer."

"Then we'll need you user ID and password," he was told, "along with instructions for signing on to the system."

"I can't give you that," Marks nearly shrieked. "I'd lose my job for that!"

"Mr. Marks," their leader cooed, "at this point, losing your job

should be the least of your worries. You now have so many more important things to think about, 'losing your job' shouldn't even crack the top-100."

The expression on Ralph Marks' face became much more sober and he repeated his original question: "Where am I?"

A dragonfly with a twelve-inch wingspan buzzed Ralph's head and he ducked. The others surrounding him just looked amused. The dragonflies' huge appetites were protecting them all from mosquitoes and disease, for which they were thankful.

"marksr_hr'," Ralph finally responded after realizing this conversation was going nowhere. "My password is 'barkrm22'. You get on the system by clicking the 'HR' icon on the desktop. What are you going to do?"

"We just need to get a few home addresses, that's all," he was told.

They helped him climb down to the surface of the swamp and into a pirogue that another poled away to the northwest.

A gate opened inside Ralph Marks' locked office. Since it was an HR office, there were no windows, guaranteeing maximum privacy. A Farsidenik powered the computer on and waited for it to prompt him for the password, then entered the one he had been given. The computer's desktop appeared and he clicked the 'HR' icon to start the application.

Over the next four hours, the volunteer prowled through Barkley Petroleum's online personnel database collecting enough information to enable his colleagues to locate almost every person of interest who might be mentioned there.

Parker Wiltbanks, Chairman of the Board for Barkley Petroleum, arrived home from his latest business trip via Houston Intercontinental Airport and his personal chauffeured limousine. *Rank certainly does have its privileges*, he mused. He thanked the driver and entered the lush River Oaks home he shared with his wife and the one child who had not yet headed off to college. Curiously, Mrs. Wiltbanks was not there to welcome him, and Parker assumed she had gotten tied up with a longer-than-expected meeting of the Garden Club. He climbed the staircase to his room and a change of clothing.

He had already stripped off his jacket and tie and was unbuttoning his shirt when he noticed a young woman lounging on the window sill. Startled, his mind raced to analyze the situation. He wondered whether he had enough time and space to reach the small automatic pistol he kept in the dresser drawer, or even whether he would need to. The girl seemed not to be very threatening, clad as

she was in a lightweight, summery dress with no apparent weapons nearby.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you doing in my house... in my bedroom?" He looked around for her accomplices as the girl gave a little giggle and he edged closer to the dresser.

"No need to be alarmed, Mr. Wiltbanks," she told him with a smile. "I'm merely here to interview you on a matter with which you are intimately familiar."

With one quick motion, Parker Wiltbanks slid the dresser drawer open, grabbed his pistol, clicked the safety off, pointed the gun at the intruder, and pulled the trigger. The firing pin clicked on an empty chamber. Recovering quickly, he racked the slide only to have it lock in the rearward position, the sign of an empty magazine.

"And there's no need for violence of any sort," the girl continued as she held up a plastic bag containing the ammunition removed earlier from the gun Parker now glared at as he would a friend who had failed him in his moment of need. "We merely wish to ask you a few questions," she finished.

"We?" Parker queried, and with that the bedroom and the house behind it disappeared with a soft 'pop' to be replaced by a vista of moss-draped oaks. Three men with rifles leaned against the railing of a deck that seemed to extend from the carpeting of his now half-gone bedroom.

"We," she confirmed and then gestured for him to move onto the deckwork. He complied. She followed. With another soft 'pop', his bedroom disappeared. "I presume you know or can surmise where you are?" the girl prodded.

"Farside," Parker grumbled. The girl smiled. "What's this all about?" he demanded.

"This is all about a Barkley Petroleum-funded mission to steal a gate from Farside. Tell me everything you know," she demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Parker bleated. "Barkley Petroleum would never do such a thing!"

She made a *moue* with her lips and looked him straight in the eye. "Would you like to see the video we have of the last board meeting?" she asked, "the one where the board discussed reliability problems at the Coyanosa site? The meeting where the board voted to shut down Coyanosa so your Research department could do a deep dive on the technology of the gate your operatives stole some weeks prior and find and fix the cause of that gate's unreliability?"

A look of horror crept across Parker Wiltbanks' face. "Yes," the girl informed him grimly, "we know a great deal more than you would want us to know, and after you finish telling us what's in your head, we'll know more than anybody at Barkley wants us to know."

"I'm not going to tell you anything!" Wiltbanks snapped angrily. "I have a fiduciary responsibility to the corporations on whose boards I sit. Including Barkley," he added.

"You also have an ethical responsibility not to kill people," one of the men leaning against the deck railing noted, "but you managed to violate that pretty casually."

"I haven't killed anyone," Wiltbanks rounded on the accuser. "Whom do you think I killed?"

"His name was Lars Andersen," a third interjected, "and although you didn't pull the trigger, you hired the person who did pull the trigger, and you bought that person a gun with Barkley funds and sent him into Farside to steal a gate. You bought that person the gun he used to kill Lars Andersen the night he stole a gate. Perhaps you are familiar with the legal term '*accessory before the fact*'? Under your very own law, an accessory before the fact is as guilty as the person who committed the crime. You are, Mr. Wiltbanks, a thief and a murderer. Only the mercy of our sovereign will keep you from the gallows. The right attitude on your part will go a long way toward 'staying alive', if you catch my meaning."

Wiltbanks slumped noticeably. "What do you want?" he asked dejectedly.

"We haven't been able to figure out where the operation was funded, and we need to know that so we can track down all the people who were involved and bring them to justice. As chairman of the board, you must know all sorts of things. Perhaps you'd like to fill in the blanks," the girl suggested.

"The funding came out of Anne Clyde's budget. She's Director of Research and has a separate budget for off-the-books projects. It was probably funded from there."

"And where do we find the details on that?" she prodded.

"Ask Anne Clyde," Wiltbanks replied smugly.

"That's being handled right now," she told him with a smile.

"Great game!" Anne Clyde hugged the three other women who made up her regular Thursday foursome at the Woodlands Country Club and stepped into her car. A few minutes later she rolled into her driveway as the garage door obediently rose to admit her. She turned the engine off as the automatic door dropped down behind her.

The door had no sooner touched the concrete floor when the garage was bathed in bright sunlight as a huge portal opened behind the car. Three men with menacing looking rifles aimed them at her.

"This way, Mrs. Clyde," their leader ordered. She raised her hands and walked toward them onto the sunlit grass where they

waited. "Anne Clyde, member of the board of directors for Barkley Petroleum, you are under arrest for acts of war against the people and Crown of Farside, including grand theft and murder in the first degree."

Anne Clyde fainted. The burliest of the three men hefted her limp body over his shoulder and the three moved off toward the swamp buggy that served as their transportation and base of operations.

"Unit four has collected our specimen," the leader spoke into a handheld device. "We're on our way back."

With all nine of Barkley's directors now collected in one place, the collection teams took each in turn to a tent separated from the rest and interrogated each director according to a prepared script. The answers to many of the questions they already knew, but sprinkled in among those were others for which the answers constituted valuable information.

They already knew of Paul Ramsey's involvement, but he was on vacation and away from the Houston area. Collecting him would have to wait until he returned.

Anne Clyde had easily surrendered the information that her Barkley-supplied personal secretary had access to and knew all that could be known about Ramsey's mission and the personnel he had hired and trained. Armed with newly-discovered facts gleaned from unusually cooperative prisoners, a slate of additional 'specimens' was scheduled for collection, first among whom was Anne Clyde's secretary.

By the following day, the collection of the second group was complete and managers and staff at Barkley Petroleum began to worry that they could not contact certain missing employees.

Paul Ramsey's boss called him on his cell phone and ordered him back from vacation immediately. "Something's going on. I don't know what, but I'm worried. Ralph Marks has been missing since leaving work Wednesday evening — he never made it home. Gloria Macombe went missing last night. We tried to call Anne Clyde to see if she knew where her secretary might have gone off to, and we can't find her, either. Parker Wiltbanks is missing as are all the rest of the board. The police have been alerted, and their initial investigation has turned up nothing — no bodies, and no indication of foul play. We need you back here right away to help with the investigation."

Paul Ramsey sorted all this information as it arrived, and he knew what was going on. There could only be a single explanation for sudden, mysterious disappearances as if the missing were snatched cleanly off the face of the Earth.

"I quit," Ramsey told his boss, "effective immediately. Forget you ever knew me. You can throw out everything you find in my office. I'm not coming back."

He disconnected the call and went straight to the nearest cell phone store. "I need a new phone," he told the clerk, "and I need it right now." Forty minutes later, he pitched his old phone as far into a nearby lake as he could throw it, put his luggage in the car's trunk, and left in a direction taking him further away from Houston.

"We've been here a week," the leader of the collection team told Davy Harmon, "and we haven't seen hide nor hair of Paul Ramsey. All our best information says he was due back on Tuesday, and he's not back. Shall we wait? What do you want us to do with the prisoners?"

"I think we'll give up on Ramsey for the time being. The Privy Council wants the Barkley board tried in Pecos since that was the scene of the crime, and I think we have enough documentary evidence to make a good case. Button up the Allen Center operation and bring the prisoners back overland. How long do you think it will take?"

"It took more than a week to get here, but a lot of that was spent blazing a trail and doing side-to-side checks to determine exactly where we were. We have a well-laid-out route to get back and we don't have to waste much time doing anything but traveling," the team leader thought aloud for Davy's edification. "The only problems we have on the way back involve fording rivers and some rough terrain near Austin. We should be able to do about 150 miles a day. Look for us in about three or four days."

"Okay," Davy agreed. "Stay in touch. Give me or Tony a call whenever you refuel."

"Wilco." They ended the call. One of the swamp buggies was sent back to the base camp they had built in the swamp to shut down electrical equipment and to bring back anything they would need on the return trip to Pecos. The rest of the team secured the dry-land camp and made the prisoners ready to travel. As the sun set, they bedded down for their last night at Houston-in-Farside.

At sunrise, they broke camp and boarded the vehicles. One vehicle went on ahead as a scout following the inbound track in reverse to make sure of the route. The rest followed at a respectful distance. By sunset, they had passed Austin but only barely since their route had wandered somewhat to avoid multiple re-crossings of the Colorado River that was even more sinuous in Farside than it was in Nearside. They refueled near Bee Cave, Texas early the next morning, picked up their route immediately, and kept moving west, but the hilly country made for slow going. They almost made it to

Eldorado by the second night and refueled there. Running out of fuel in this landscape was not an option conducive to long life.

From here, the land was almost completely flat, and except for the occasional stream that crossed their path, the third day was — comparatively — very fast traveling. At about four in the afternoon of the third day, the convoy rolled into Pecos-in-Farside and was met by Davy Harmon, Buck, and Ernie.

"We set up a security compound near the equipment gate," Davy informed them. "We'll house the prisoners there until we can make arrangements for a trial. Based on what I've seen coming back from the Allen Center surveillance, I imagine any trial is going to be short and not very sweet and will be followed, as they say in these parts, by a first-class hanging.

"Buck and Ernie have been sent here as judges in Barbara's place because her doctor won't let her travel before she delivers. I'll serve as the third judge."

As the vehicles rumbled away toward the security compound, Ernie put his hand on Davy Harmon's shoulder. "I wouldn't plan on a hanging," he told Davy. "Barbara expressed her distaste for any punishment not subject to reversal when our tempers have cooled."

"But surely this is different," Davy objected. "These people were intimately involved in the cold-blooded murder of a Farside citizen."

"I can only tell you what I heard from Barbara," Ernie parried. "I can promise you that she will commute any sentence that involves execution. You don't want to go there. Barbara has an unbroken record of supporting the decisions of individual moots. Why would you want to be the first to be reversed?"

"Besides, with me and Buck as the second and third judges, you can't get a majority for a death sentence, anyway. *I* won't vote that way knowing Barbara won't allow it, and I can't imagine Buck doing so, either."

"I have to do what I think is right," Davy said with resignation. "You do what you think is right, and we'll trust that it all works out for the best."

"Our biggest problem will be designing a punishment that both fits the crime and meets with Barbara's approval," Ernie mused. "We need to start thinking creatively."

"Parker Wiltbanks, Anne Clyde, Margaret Fletcher, Edward Lawton, Edward Pressman, Louis Bachrach, Bertram Loehman, Paul Grossinger, and Ellis Meador," Buck intoned, "you are charged with being accessories before the fact to murder in the first degree as regards the slaying of Lars Andersen. Do you understand the nature

of the charge? Do any of you not understand the nature of the charge?"

Each of them glared back at Buck and the other two judges. "I understand the nature of the charge," Pressman replied. "I don't understand how you can summarily deny us the benefit of counsel or the right to cross-examine witnesses against us. I don't understand how you can use wiretapped evidence without first having had a warrant to collect it. I don't understand how it's lawful to kidnap us and bring us before your courts without an order of extradition."

In the audience, a besuited figure rose at these words. Buck faced him. "Mr. Ambassador, do you have something to say on this matter?"

"I do, Mr. FitzGibbon," the ambassador responded. "The United States government vehemently protests the treatment of its citizens, most notably that they were taken against their will into Farside without the due process their Constitution provides, and are charged under laws to which neither they nor their government has given assent."

Paul Gillman rose to address the ambassador. "That is not precisely true, Mr. Ambassador," Paul objected. "The treaty between Farside and the United States, that your President proposed and that your Senate ratified, posits that gate technology is the sole and exclusive province of the Crown of Farside and that the Crown of Farside is empowered at all times and in all places to defend its claim by any means that we see fit.

"In this case, we have non-state actors, United States citizens, invading Farside under false pretenses to acquire (by force of arms) a gate that, under the provisions of that same treaty, is illegal for them to possess. It is illegal under both our law and yours since that treaty, once ratified, became part of your Constitution. Unless it is your intention to defend their actions, I cannot see that you have a valid objection to the means used to bring these treaty violators to justice, since the places from which we took them certainly fit into the definition of 'all places'. We hold that the provisions of that treaty, *ipso facto*, constitute 'due process'. While they may not have consented to it, their government did so on their behalf." Paul sat down.

Buck waited for the ambassador to counter, and when he did not, continued: "As to denying you the benefit of counsel, please note that there are no attorneys here. The prosecutor-of-record is the Queen's Privy Council. The witnesses against you are yourselves. The 'wiretapped evidence' consists of your own words. You may dispute that the words mean what we contend they mean, and a jury of your peers will decide if your explanation holds water.

"As to the charge, the charge is brought not under our law but, rather, under your own. Your law holds that if, during the commission of a crime, a death ensues, that death is a first-degree murder and all the unlawful participants in the crime are chargeable as accessories before the fact. Had you been charged under our law, you would already have been executed.

"As luck would have it — your luck — Her Majesty has forbidden this court to impose the death penalty and hopes that this will smooth relations with the United States. Your judges have also spent the past two days discussing what options this leaves us and we believe we have found a punishment befitting the crime.

"First, however, we need to find out if there is to be a trial at all. Defendants, how do you plead?"

"Hold on a minute," Margaret Fletcher protested. "Does the penalty change based on the plea?"

Buck turned back to look at the other judges. They each shrugged noncommittally. Buck turned back to Margaret Fletcher. "Apparently not," he informed her.

"Then let's go to trial," she answered. "Hell, we might even get off. I plead 'not guilty'." The others, smiling, repeated her assertion of 'not guilty'.

"This, I suppose, is why there are plea bargains," Ernie muttered.

Jury selection followed, Pecos-in-Farside citizens all, and Buck offered them one by one to the defendants for their acceptance or rejection.

"Have you formed any opinions regarding the nature of this case?" Margaret Fletcher asked the first. "Have you come to any conclusions regarding the guilt or innocence of the defendants?"

"I wouldn't do that," the juror, a dark-haired girl, responded.

"Why is that?" Fletcher prodded.

"Because I wouldn't want you to do that if our positions were reversed," the girl answered softly. "Our law forbids me judging you without seeing, first-hand, the evidence against you. I know that our Ministry for Security thinks they have enough evidence to apprehend you, and they've done that, but they don't get to judge. That task is laid upon me by Her Majesty's command."

Fletcher looked astonished. When the second and third jurors answered approximately the same way, Margaret Fletcher turned to the judges. "Will they all answer that way?" she asked them.

"It's a cultural thing," Ernie responded. "I won't say you wouldn't understand. In fact, I think you are beginning to understand: This is wilderness. Wilderness forces a different mentality than you are accustomed to dealing with. Because of that different mentality,

your jury will be fair to a fault. That should make you very nervous given that you already know what evidence we have of your wrongdoing.”

“Before we go further into this,” Fletcher asked with a very somber tone, “let me ask you a question or two.

“What might be the maximum penalty we pay should we be found guilty? What might the minimum penalty be?”

“The maximum penalty could be ‘permanent confinement to Farside’. That is, you would never return to your world again. You would be forced to develop new wilderness-appropriate skills to survive, or to live, as they say, *on the kindness of strangers*.

“The minimum penalty is that you would enter into an enforceable agreement never again to act as a member of a corporate board. It would be a life-long parole, and we would obtain the agreement of your home country or any country you travel to that they would immediately honor an extradition request for violation of that parole.

Both penalties, of course, involve the termination of Barkley Petroleum’s leaseholds in Farside. Barkley Petroleum can no longer operate in Farside.”

Fletcher’s face had gone white. “That would be a crippling blow to our lifestyles,” she gasped.

“Well, you dealt a crippling blow to Lars Andersen’s lifestyle — ended it, in fact — when you arranged to steal that gate,” Ernie retorted. “That doesn’t count the blow you dealt to his fiancée at the same time. The law here is The Golden Rule: *do unto others...* Under that rule, you would normally be facing death by exile into the wilderness. You wouldn’t see another Spring. You’d be a picked-over skeleton before then. Lucky for you, Barbara wants to maintain a good relationship with your country and has guaranteed them you won’t be put to death for your crime. If you ask me, you’re getting off easy even at the maximum.”

Fletcher consulted quietly with her co-defendants briefly before turning back to Ernie. “If you offer us the minimum penalty, we’ll save you the trouble of a trial,” she informed him.

Ernie turned to the others. Buck and Davy both nodded their assent. “Done,” Ernie told the prisoners.

The heads-of-station for all the oil companies doing business in Farside, along with the chairmen of their boards and their CEOs — their chief executive officers — were all invited to the formal signing of the parole agreements with the nine Barkley directors. Almost all the invitees attended.

When the ceremony ended, the nine directors were escorted

to the Pecos Immigration gate where they were handed over to officials with the United States Department of State. Within the month, Barkley Petroleum held a special election to replace their board, all of whom had resigned when they signed their parole agreements.

Eleven very expensive homes and twelve lavishly appointed vacation villas scattered around the world suddenly went on the block. Without their directors' salaries, the taxes on such properties were no longer sustainable, and some of those dwellings still had mortgages. Margaret Fletcher and Ellis Meador, alone among the nine, managed to retain most of their properties thanks only to the fact that their spouses also served as corporate directors.

Eight formerly-Barkley wellheads were auctioned off to other producers.

It was a wonderful object lesson to all the companies with interests in Farside of the hazards of a life of crime. The lesson was not lost on the U.S. State Department, either.

7 - Newcomers

Patricia Mullalley smiled. "I know how much you've always wanted to get into the brewing racket," she said to Mike, "but I really expected you to wait until we were in a more secure position. If you were to quit the Fire Marshal's Office now, we wouldn't have a pension, just your 401(k), and you know that's not much — yet. Is this something we ought to be doing right now? I mean — so precipitously?"

"It's really a perfect storm of coincidences," Mike pleaded. "Farside has a small population — in the Boulder area there aren't more than seven thousand people and probably much fewer than that — so I can reasonably start small and expand as the need arises. 'Starting small' carries with it its own advantages: my existing equipment will form the base for the operation and I can add to it as time passes. Brewing isn't a very labor-intensive task so we can use our spare time in other productive ways. Specifically, we both get the right to mine minerals — mostly gold — from local streams, and they say there's mountains of it out there.

"You are a teacher," he continued. "You are a valuable commodity in Farside. They want you there even more than they want me, even if I will be producing beer they don't have to import.

"Yes, we sacrifice the pension because I'm not yet vested. We also move into a low-tax, high-opportunity environment that's ideal for raising active boys like ours. They don't have to be farmers or ranchers or lumbermen, but they can be if they want to. Really, honey, the opportunities in Farside are unlimited, and I mean that in an almost literal sense.

"Maybe it would be best if you were to see it for yourself. Would you like to take a tour?"

Patricia smiled and tossed her head. "Sure, why not?"

Mike flipped open his phone, found Randy Burke's number in his directory, and pushed 'TALK'. After a few moments for the connection to be made, Randy answered the call.

"Hey, Randy, it's Mike Mullalley," Mike identified himself. "When I was there for the arson investigation, you mentioned sponsoring me for Farside immigration. Is that offer still open?"

"Sure," Randy quickly agreed, "there's always room for talent here. Give me your address and I'll have a package shipped out to you by the secretary of the moot."

Randy gave him an address on West 30th Avenue which Randy copied onto a scrap of paper.

A few days later, a manila envelope bearing the emblem of Farside arrived in the Mullalley mailbox. Inside were several forms and instructions for completing them. Mike and Patricia filled theirs out and completed others for their children before mailing the package back to a post office box in Boulder.

Within the week, Samantha Burke called Patricia while Mike was at work. "All of the ministers — and that includes me — have some responsibility for immigration issues," Sam explained. "Since Randy and I are your official sponsors, everyone felt it would be most appropriate for me to set up your orientation tour. So... when would you like to come for a visit?"

"Can we do this on a weekend?" Patricia asked and got Sam's immediate agreement. "Then let's plan for this coming weekend," Patricia suggested.

"I'll send transportation for you," Sam promised. "Saturday morning at seven. Breakfast is on me."

A few minutes before seven that Saturday morning, a compact bus pulled to the curb alongside the Mullalleys' modest home and its doors opened. Mike and Patricia Mullalley trailed by their sons, Andrew and Mark, boarded the bus which departed immediately bound for the Okambos' yard on 75th Street in Valmont. There, they passed through a gate into Farside and each rode double on ATVs with experienced riders out along Westroad to the small community surrounding site 2 now commonly called Ernie's Ford where Sam and Randy Burke waited for them with a breakfast of griddle cakes, sausage, and bacon. Patricia's eyes were as wide as saucers for the entire trip, and her boys spent the time exclaiming "Wow!".

After breakfast, Randy and Sam gave Mike and Patricia a quick lesson in 'ATV' before the six set out for the Okambo town center and Northroad, the fastest route to the lush farmland northeast of them, Andrew and Mark riding double behind Randy and Sam. They planned to tour several of the farms in the area starting at Jeff Fuller's farm because Jeff had planted hops, a key ingredient for beer.

While Jeff and Mike roamed the hopyard and spoke using unfamiliar names and terms, the Burkes and the rest of the Mullalleys enjoyed a tour of the remainder of the Fuller property led by Jeff's girlfriend, Martha. Martha seemed to know quite a lot about the economics of farming and kept up a running commentary about the market for grains and the uses to which the varieties could be put.

Jeff had been the first to plant oats in the prairie leading east to Platte Lake and he was the only farmer with a stand of hops. He had managed, with the help of laborers located by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, the CDLE, to exploit nearly half

of his three-thousand-acre allotment. He had Brian McEwen's number on speed-dial, and Brian had his — along with several others. Brian treated Jeff to dinner whenever Jeff found himself in Nearside, and considered Jeff the primary cause for his, Brian's, reputation as someone who, if pressed, could find a job for Hannibal Lecter. That was an exaggeration, of course, but Brian could place the most difficult cases if they had agricultural experience or enough incentive to learn on the job — on the farm, that is. All he had to do was call Jeff Fuller. If Jeff couldn't employ another hand, he always knew who could.

Brian had developed good, solid working relationships with many of the parole officers in the area. For Farside job placements, the Nearside justice system expected that the parolee would disappear more-or-less permanently. Brian knew and the Farside immigration authorities knew that the Nearside parole system had to be notified promptly whenever a parolee re-entered Nearside for anything longer than a shopping trip or a birthday party. The Nearsiders only knew that someone was taking workload off their hands. The parolees nearly always put their second chance to good use.

Few of the people Brian placed with Jeff ever needed a second placement. Those who did were invariably white-collar criminals for whom farm labor was either too strenuous for their physical makeup or too far beneath their dignity. The remainder found life in Farside to be so rich in opportunity that the thought of returning to a Nearside existence never thereafter crossed their minds. To a man, they would work — hard — for three or four seasons, saving every crown for lack of a place to spend it, and bid for their own allotments when they felt they had enough put aside as a stake.

Many of these allotments were picked from the rich land on the west shore of Platte Lake. Platte Lake Road largely paralleled the lake's shoreline as far south as Colorado Springs, having been constructed in segments community-by-community. As communities formed at various points along the road, some of them began constructing pipelines from the lake for irrigation and even for drinking. The water of Platte Lake was that pure.

The same story was true of ranch hands, but their allotments were invariably further west to isolate them from the croplands.

"I was sure somebody would find a use for them," Jeff told Mike. "At this point, they're mostly used in herbal remedies or as animal feed, but they're all yours if you want them."

"They smell wonderful," Mike enthused as he crushed a heaping handful of hops under his nose. "European?"

Jeff smiled. "You have there in your hands a sample of our own Farside hops. I found them growing wild on this very site. I

trimmed them down and got them slightly domesticated and they have behaved themselves better than I had any right to expect. We might have better beer here because of these than any of us have ever tasted before."

Martha and her charges caught up with Jeff and Mike. Everyone was smiling.

"What do you think?" Mike asked his wife.

"Lots of potential," Patricia agreed, "but I still can't shake the feeling that we're giving up a bird in the hand."

"This is the bird in the hand," Martha interjected. "If you stay in Nearside, you have crime, taxes, overcrowding, and a dysfunctional school system for your kids. If you move to Farside, you leave all that behind. The fruits of your labors are yours to do as you please. Your children will get an education Nearside could never provide them."

"Of course," Patricia replied haughtily. "I'd be home-schooling them!"

"You're not our only teacher," Jeff stepped into the conversation, "but we are still barely out of the 'one room schoolhouse' model. Didn't Martha show you our school?"

Patricia chuckled. "We didn't get past barley, wheat, and rye. I was hoping we would get to see some of the rest of the community."

"Let's handle that right now," Randy suggested, "before school lets out."

"School on Saturday?" Patricia gasped.

"Some of them," Samantha offered as a clarification. "It mostly depends on the availability of the teacher. If the teacher is only available on Saturday and you want the course, you go to school on Saturday."

Patricia stared at Randy and Sam. "If you want the course? Isn't there a uniform curriculum?"

Samantha smiled back at her. "Every student is different," she explained. "It doesn't make sense to have a one-size-fits-all curriculum when every student might need something entirely different. There are core subjects like mathematics and history and literature, sure, and every student is expected to master those, but there's no sense teaching chemistry to someone with no interest in the subject, is there? And if someone is really good at something so that they complete the coursework in record time, why slow them down?"

"Let's go see the school," Patricia prodded.

The six got on their ATVs and headed out from the Fuller farm toward a cluster of buildings on the horizon. A ten-minute ride had them parked before the door of the school building. Sam led them inside. The lone instructor in the one occupied classroom looked up at the group entering and rose from his seat.

"Good morning, Madame Chancellor," he greeted Sam. The students turned to look as well.

"Good morning, Professor Plummer. I hope we're not too unduly disturbing your class." Plummer waved her apology away. "We have some prospective émigrés here and I wonder if you might give us a few words about why you are holding court on a Saturday."

Tom Plummer smiled. "Today's lesson is 'bookkeeping for small farm operations'," he explained. "I'm teaching farmers and farmers' wives and interested youngsters how to keep a set of books for their operations." Patricia Mullalley looked at the students and realized that most of them were adults. "This was the schedule that was best all-around for those who were interested."

"Thanks for that, Tom. Tell me (and our guests) what you do during the rest of the week, would you?"

Tom smiled. "I head the Crown Office for Nearside Commerce. Basically, I help the locals make contacts with buyers in Nearside and help them arrange for shipping, advertising, and contracting... stuff like that. Teaching is just a sideline at this point."

"Tom, what do you get paid for running the Crown Office for Nearside Commerce?" Sam asked.

"I get paid by the cooperatives, not the Crown," he explained. "Whatever fee I can negotiate with the cooperatives is what I get paid."

Sam turned to Patricia and Mike. "Questions?" she asked.

Mike was smiling. Patricia wore a stunned expression. "Okay, you've got me convinced," was all she said.

—==++++==—

Pierre Cousteau gazed out across the waters of the Gironde from what would have been, in Nearside, Pauillac, France. Bending down, he took a handful of the dry, clay soil and let it sift through his fingers. *Parfait*, he thought, *perfect. The vines will be sturdy. The grapes will have muscles with skins bursting from the pressure of the juice inside. The wine will make critics gasp in delight.* He turned back to his work, planting another row of Cabernet Franc, and finished off the row with a rose bush. He had been at this for almost a year and now had forty hectares of vines. The first ten hectares were even now producing grapes that promised awe-inspiring taste if not volume. The old vines loved the new soil even if they did have to work hard at extracting nutrients from it.

His son, Alain, had not had to use very much pressure to convince the father of the benefits of migrating to Medoc-in-Farside. When Marie-Therese, his daughter-in-law, told Pierre of their plans —

which included taking the three grandchildren into Farside permanently — Pierre decided to go with them. Following the death of his dear wife four years prior, only the land now held his attention, and in Farside there was new land to be exploited, land that had never been asked to work. His *vignoble*, Clos Cousteau, had provided the starter vines for his new operation, *Chateau Reine Barbara*, and he had placed control of Clos Cousteau into the hands of his cousin, Anneliese Fleury. He was confident Anneliese would do as fine a job with *Cousteau* as she had on her own land.

The first harvest had produced nearly double the weight of grapes he had expected, and the juice was exquisite even in its unfermented state. Pierre chortled with delight at the prospect of blending a Bordeaux such as no one had even seen... tasted... before.

Their Regent, Queen Barbara's right-hand man in France, was Marcel d'Hourtin, a physicist, a colleague and a dear friend of Barbara's. Marcel had approached her soon after news began leaking in the scientific community of the existence of Farside, and the Privy Council nearly forced Barbara to agree to the establishment of a European colony.

"It's the least we could do," Ernie chortled, "after what they did for North America."

Scientifically, Europe-in-Farside was the functional equivalent of Disneyland. If game were scarce in Farside's North America, it was lush in Farside's Europe. Several species of cattle-like animals ran in herds sometimes numbering in the thousands, and were preyed upon by European Dire wolves, smaller than the Western hemisphere version but much more numerous, along with several other predators of both the dog and cat families. Giraffe occasionally loped through the Medoc in clusters of twelve-to-twenty, and differed from their African cousins in having developed a spur of some sort near the ankles. These they used to great effect when set upon by hungry cats.

Fences hung with bells made from steel cans let the wildlife know they were not welcome in the vineyards. Rabbits, woodchucks, and something vaguely muskrat-y needed more encouragement to keep out of the tended spaces. At least three kinds of snake kept the small rodent population in check.

d'Hourtin had pitched the idea of Farside immigration to several farmers near Bordeaux where d'Hourtin made his home. Many had scoffed at the idea because it meant giving up all the benefits of civilization for a very precarious existence. When d'Hourtin finally convinced the French government to allow Farside émigrés to retain their French citizenship, many of them changed their minds. For a meager six percent royalty from the produce, the farmers got 1200

hectares, of which they had to exploit 240, roughly the same deal Farside's North American residents got. 1200 hectares was about triple the size of the largest farm any of them could identify. There was some additional cost associated with any of their production they moved into France, but the low cost-to-produce in Farside made that easily bearable. Barbara waived the royalty until the farmers could establish themselves.

—==+++==—

From his parents' farm near the southern end of Platte Lake, Greg Mallory rode his horse further south. He didn't know what he might find, but he knew he was venturing into *terra incognita*, the unknown. Beyond the lake's southern tip, the land rose gently but steadily to form a range of hills perhaps two thousand feet above the water. Every hour or so, he would key the TALK button on his 2-way radio just to make sure he could still reach the ranch. On the northern slope of the foothills he bedded down for the night beside a small fire with a .454 Casull revolver under his bedroll.

By the dawn's early light, he rose and made breakfast, packed up his campsite, and continued his trek upslope to the ridgeline still several miles away. As his horse neared the top, Greg heard a rumble like distant thunder and thought he felt the ground shake, but it didn't feel like an earthquake. At the crest, he looked down upon the Great Southern Plain and at least fifty thousand head of buffalo heading west chased by a line of thunderstorms.

"Mallory ranch, Mallory ranch, come in!" he shouted into the radio.

"We hear you, Greg," his mother replied, "but it's very weak and there's lots of static. Are you okay?"

"Buffalo!" Greg shouted as if this would make it easier for him to be heard. "Thousands of buffalo! About 30 miles south of the tip of the lake."

Greg's father, out in the fields but listening on the frequency used by all the ranch's radios, keyed his mike: "Thirty miles?" he asked for confirmation.

"About that," Greg confirmed, now starting to calm down.

"I'm coming down there to see. I'll be there in about a half hour. Build a fire."

Greg staked the horse and began to prep a ring of stones to contain a campfire. In a short time, he had gathered enough dry wood to make a decent blaze and had some leaves and other wet material sufficient to make smoke his father could home on.

From their barn, Sally Mallory wheeled the family's airplane.

Usually, it was what ferried them north to Okambo when they needed to go into town for supplies or whatever. Today, he would be using that to fly south. With a rumble of diesel engine, Sean Mallory rolled into the front yard on his tractor. He gave his wife a peck on the cheek, did his pre-flight checks, cranked the engine, and rolled away on the grass airstrip.

Climbing to 2,000 feet gave Sean Mallory a view out to 60 miles in any direction, but Greg's column of smoke would not be visible at half that distance. He pointed the nose south and increased speed. In fifteen minutes, he could see a smudge on the horizon and changed course directly toward it.

Ten minutes later he circled above a herd of buffalo that covered, he estimated, twenty square miles. *Thousands?* he thought, *a quarter million head if there's one... maybe more.*

He wagged his wings at his son, still standing at the ridgeline holding his horse and gazing onto the moving carpet of buffalo in the valley below. Greg waved to acknowledge his father's signal, then remounted his horse and rode northward downslope. Greg had taken fifty or sixty frames of still pictures and four minutes of video to show to Her Majesty.

After hearing the experts pronounce for three years or more that there were no substantial populations of cattle in Farside, today's discovery would warrant a fair bit of re-thinking by everyone.

"The only explanation I can think of that makes sense," Buck started, "is that Platte Lake forms an enormous barrier. It's one of those quirky features that doesn't exist in Nearside but does in Farside. If buffalo migrate in a generally circular motion, north and south as the seasons change, east and west as the grass runs out, a barrier like Platte Lake, 200 miles long, may act to keep them all on the east side of the lake. After all, on the west side is a strip of land that's maybe 40 miles wide before you bump into the mountains, and there's not very much grass there. Maybe they've learned over the eons not to bother.

"Maybe Platte Lake acts as a pseudo-mountain range: they get to the water's edge and change course, never quite making it to the west side of the lake."

"They were west of the lake when Greg Mallory saw them," Barbara offered.

"It's seasonal," her father mused. "As the weather cools, they head south to get the grass down by Santa Fe, they make their way back east into Texas when they've eaten it all, then when the weather starts warming they head back north. They never get into the slot between Platte Lake and the mountains."

"It's possible," Barbara offered as a way of disengaging from the discussion.

—==+++==—

With a full load of fuel filling both wing bladders. Leroy Starkweather's ultralight lumbered into the air headed east. He had never crossed the 20-mile-wide Platte Lake before, but did so now at Barbara's specific request.

"Go as far east as you can, but don't take any foolish risks. Leave yourself enough fuel to make it back across the lake." Leroy smirked. *Of course*, he said to himself the words he would not have said to Barbara.

Two hours later, he turned west headed back toward his base in Okambo. The memory chip in his camera held almost four hundred frames showing gazelle, antelope, elk, moose, and deer, all in the thousands, along with several images of wolf packs numbering as many as eleven individuals.

But image number 14897 would always thereafter be his favorite. It showed nine adult and five juvenile woolly mammoth grazing, the bulls' huge curved tusks lifted toward him as they observed this odd, noisy bird above their heads.

8 - Publicity

The August issue of National Geographic began a four-part series titled "Seasons of Farside" and featured Leroy's mammoth picture on its cover as the lead-in to 'Autumn'. November's issue would cover Winter, February's Spring, and May's Summer.

Since September of last year, crews had been crisscrossing Farside in caravans based around a fuel truck or, sometimes, several fuel trucks. The crews would transit into Farside and be gone in wilderness for weeks or months at a time, always accompanied by an observer from the Chancellery that now functioned as a sort of Department of the Interior, although with an 'interior' the size of the visible universe, there was considerable crossover between 'inside' and 'outside'.

Each observer carried a laptop computer on which were stored in a side-by-side format aerial photographs of Nearside and Farside using the two-camera technique in which one camera snapped a Nearside image at the same instant the other snapped a Farside image. This allowed the observer to know the rough position of Nearside features based on their known or presumed position in Farside. The Nearside images had latitude and longitude lines overlaid on them as an additional help.

The St. Louis colony had erected a radio antenna with the help of Harry Tumulty and his staff at the Ministry for Farside Communications. The National Geographic crews carried homing devices they hoped would lead them back if they got lost.

DNA analysis of several species hinted that at some point in the distant past there had been a physical connection between Nearside and Farside adequate to seed Farside from Nearside, although what form that connection might have taken was anybody's guess, if it even happened that way. Farside plant and animal DNA had evolved along similar paths, it appeared, but, while some species might seem familiar on the outside, their DNA was usually mismatched enough to prevent crossbreeding. Humanoids, if any existed, had not dominated Farside as they had Nearside. The absence of humanoid predators had protected species like the Dire wolf and Woolly Mammoth from being hunted to extinction themselves.

That the first type-II gates were opened in the Platte Lake foothills, a largely animal-free zone, was now considered merely a remarkable oddity of chance.

That August issue also contained the first formal portrait of Barbara and her family: her father, Marion Eugene fitzGibbon; her

husband, Ernest Steven Walsh; her children, Penelope Alice, aged 3, and Eugene Steven, aged 1. Barbara sat cradling Eugene Steven in her arms while Penelope Alice sat at her side and Ernie stood on the other, with Buck standing behind the group.

Also included in an issue devoted exclusively to the geography and culture of Farside were interviews with several notable and/or infamous residents, among them Dr. Dante Robinetti and Pyotr Gorsky, both of whom mentioned to the interviewer that, because of their status as felons on probation, they were now considered serious criminals in Nearside subject to immediate arrest and incarceration. Both expressed their disappointment that they were unable to clear their records on the other side of the gate, and thus could never return for important family events such as birthdays, weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies.

A Federal judge in Colorado, Norbert Frost, would later take up their cause and have their probations lifted and their status as parole violators expunged.

—==++++==—

"Cousteau, I thought you had gotten out of the wine business?" Annette Parmentier challenged him as she gave him the traditional peck on each cheek.

"I gave 'Cousteau' over to my cousin, Anneliese, a few years back," he admitted, "but I'm still interested. I even have an entry here, in a manner of speaking."

"*Oui?*" she reacted with surprise, "which one?"

"All in good time," Pierre chuckled, "all in good time. You're judging here today, are you not?"

Annette winked at him. "I am, but you know it's a 'blind' taste test so I won't even know which of the entries is yours. You can tell me."

"Ah, that's easy," Pierre assured her. "The best wine you taste today... that would be mine."

Annette gave him a playful slap on his shoulder and wagged her finger at him as if admonishing him for being too boastful.

When the tasting was complete and the judges put their heads together to score the entries, the *Chateau Reine Barbara* Bordeaux placed second. It was the first vintage Pierre had presented to the world, all the prior ones becoming strictly 'family use only'. Pierre comforted himself with the fact that *CRB* has missed first place by only two-tenths of a point in the most subjective of contests.

Next year would be different, he promised himself.

Indeed, *Chateau Reine Barbara* was producing fruit such as

Pierre had never encountered. If there was fault, it lay with the winemaker, not the juice. Perhaps this wine was so good that the judges simply were not prepared for it.

Or it was the Farside oak that gave the wine a flavor distinct from the traditional French oak. Pierre had hired his own cooper who cut his own wood, cured it, and made his barrels from scratch. This had saved Pierre a great deal of money, good barrels being one of the major cost-components in the retail price of fine wines.

Seven hundred barrels of *CRB* had been transferred to bottles and placed with nine international distributors. The distributor in New York State agreed to hold sixty cases for delivery to the House of FitzGibbon. These were turned over to Laurel Hamm who put them aboard a train headed west into Colorado. In Denver, they were transferred to a truck for the last leg of the journey to Boulder, through the Okambo's equipment gate, and into a specially-prepared wine cellar where the wine rested at last from its long journey.

At retail, the 96-points *CRB* had garnered from *Wine Spectator* allowed retailers to mark the wine in the seventy-five-dollar range, but the distributors' agreements with Pierre Cousteau required retailers to agree to charge no more than fifty-five dollars. Even so, they were making a hefty profit, but the lower price, a result of Pierre adhering strictly to Farside's law, allowed Chateau Reine Barbara to achieve an otherwise-improbable market penetration. The vintage was eagerly snapped up by wine *connoisseurs* and it largely disappeared from wine-sellers' shelves within a few weeks of its introduction. The few bottles that escaped into the hands of the less-well-connected became the stars of their collections.

To celebrate the introduction of Pierre's creation, Barbara asked that the next Grand Moot be a community pot-luck supper, with dishes appropriate for sharing in the presence of red wine. The Privy Council had been invited to taste the gift of Pierre Cousteau and most of them, not being wine-lovers, had thought it very tasty. Their opinions generally ended there. Paul Gillman and Dennis Cameron provided the expert commentary for the others, declaring it some of the best Bordeaux either had ever encountered in long, albeit amateur, careers as wine-tasters.

A few people brought pork, fish, and chicken to the Grand Moot pot-luck, saying "everything goes with red wine if you really like red wine", but for the most part, there were steaks and beef roasts galore, enough to feed everyone in attendance. By common consent, the wine of Chateau Reine Barbara was awarded a gold medal for excellence and Oscar Gruder was charged with producing the medal and seeing it delivered to Farside's first *vignoble*.

The few who turned up their noses at wine could enjoy

Mullalley's Farside Red and Mullalley's Farside Lager, Mike and Patricia Mullalley's contribution to the pot-luck.

—==++++==—

Linda Rossi, Vice Chancellor of Farside, stepped through the Okambo town gate into Nearside, her car keys already in her hand. Within a few minutes, she was on her way into Boulder to meet with another Chancellor, this one for the University of Colorado. She had been sent at Samantha Burke's direction to discuss with UCB's new chancellor, Joseph D'Amico, the university's proposal to open a branch in Farside. Barbara, on hearing this, instructed Linda to offer her congratulations to her friend and former colleague, Dr. D'Amico, on his promotion.

Joe D'Amico rose and extended his hand when Linda Rossi was ushered into his office. "I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Madame Chancellor," he began.

"I'm just the Vice Chancellor, Dr. D'Amico, but we Farsiders rarely stand on formality. 'Miss Rossi' if you insist on some level of formality. 'Linda' otherwise.

"Her Majesty, Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh, directs me to offer you her congratulations on your appointment to the chancellery." Linda handed Joe D'Amico a presentation folder bearing the Farside logo. Joe flipped it open and read:

*Barbara Regina I
Farside*

Dear Joe,

I cannot adequately express my delight at hearing of your recent appointment as Chancellor. This was thoroughly deserved and long overdue. I know you will leave a mark on the University those who follow you will have a difficult time equaling, much less exceeding.

Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh

"Her Majesty is very kind," Joe remarked as he closed the folder. "I'm impressed that she remembers me, what with all she has to contend with these days."

"My impression from working very closely with Barbara is that she forgets very little of consequence, and none of her friends," Linda replied. "Of course, that includes you."

"She has instructed me to do all in my power to assist you with the proposal you have for establishing a campus — is that the right word? — of the University of Colorado in Farside. In consultation with others more conversant with the subject, I've come away with the idea that this will be quite a chore. Nevertheless, I'm ready to give it 'that old college try', if you'll pardon the expression." Joe D'Amico smiled. "I say that because the educational infrastructure within Farside is quite different than you may be used to."

"In what way?" D'Amico asked.

"Farside is almost exclusively a rural community," Linda explained. "Most of the commerce there is centered around farming, ranching, and mining. There's a brewery that makes a spectacular beer and a distillery that turns out a fine product as well, but that's the extent of 'manufacturing' unless you count the several sawmills operating here and there. We generate all our own electricity and the lifestyle is strictly 'early to bed and early to rise'. If we were a little more religiously rigorous, you'd think we were Amish.

"Because of that, education is very much of the practical sort: bookkeeping rather than calculus, refinery operation rather than chemistry... For physical education, we teach our youngsters how to ride horses and rope cows. A third of our people can fly simple airplanes, and a third of them can fly damn near anything.

"While we'd love to have a UCB campus in Farside, I'm stumped as to what sort of education you'd be able to sell to Farsiders. What, exactly, did you have in mind?"

"I thought we might offer the sort of course material you might find at any community college," D'Amico muttered, "but I think we'll have to alter our plans somewhat. It appears your need for higher education isn't all that well developed yet. Let me run this past my colleagues to see if they have any better ideas. Perhaps we'll just have a 'learning lab' with TVs and do the instruction remotely the way it's done for the more isolated towns in Alaska."

"That would probably work fine," Linda agreed, "if you can get the right collection of courses."

"Do you have any suggestions?" D'Amico asked.

"Crop rotation practices," Linda started off, "plant grafting, genetics for ranchers, genetics for farmers, personnel development, management of all sorts..."

"My word," D'Amico gasped, "you're turning us into Colorado A-and-M!"

"Agricultural and Mining," Linda smiled, "yes, indeed. If you want to be useful to the citizens of Farside, enough that they will become your students, you will have to become that-which-they-need; in other words, 'Colorado A-and-M'."

"Let me think about this," Joe D'Amico told Linda Rossi. She nodded, they shook hands in farewell, and she left to return to Colorado-in-Farside.

—==+++==—

HBO's lead documentary for the Fall season was "*Whatever Happened to Alfred Beddowes Jr.?*" and focused very sharply on the events surrounding the destruction of 2550 Pershing, Boulder, Colorado. HBO could not, of course, have all the details, but they could speculate, and speculate they did.

The producers had interviewed dozens of people, faculty, and students, at UCB. When rumors of the show's development leaked, some of the people who knew Al and Fatah had traveled to New York City came forward to offer more clues.

HBO had even tracked down two FBI agents who, speaking on condition of anonymity, gave some additional detail about the events, and one of those agents had given up Tareeta Washington's name.

Tareeta Washington denied all knowledge of anything to do with Beddowes, UCB, Barbara fitzGibbon, or Farside but she told her former partner, Marjorie Evans, of HBO's inquiry, and together they reported the incident to NSA headquarters. NSA did what they could to convince HBO's executives to back off on the story, but they had little success. At least HBO had agreed not to publicize Tareeta Washington's name.

HBO offered the Farside Foreign Ministry a chance to preview the program and make rebuttal to any of the hypotheses offered in the wrap-up. In consultation with the Privy Council, Paul Gillman declined the opportunity.

The program aired on the first day of the Fall lineup and nearly broke the viewership records for the time slot. HBO appeared to know much about the research Al Beddowes had been involved in, his association with Barbara fitzGibbon, his personal attachment to one Fatah Abou-Saad, also of Boulder, also a student at UCB, and also missing since shortly after the destruction of 2550 Pershing.

They speculated that Beddowes had made a startling breakthrough based on Barbara fitzGibbon's earlier work, and that professional jealousies had caused a falling out between the two. Had Barbara fitzGibbon been implicated in the disappearance and possible death of Alfred Beddowes Jr. and his consort, Fatah Abou-Saad, along with several others who seemed to have connections, some of them tenuous, with the story line? At about the same time as these events, an apartment building on the upper west side of Manhattan had been bombed in what looked like a terrorist attack, and several people living

nearby taken into custody in connection with it, but NYPD was saying nothing.

The special effects created for the program accurately depicted the operation of type-II gates, but there was almost no one left who both could and would speak with authority on the appearance and operation of type-I gates. Nearly everyone who would have been aware enough of what was happening were now dead. Everyone else who had made the round trip between Nearside and Earth-II were dazed and confused when it happened and couldn't be relied upon to confidently say what they had experienced. The existence of type-I gates thus remained unknown to the producers and the public at large.

What was clear to anyone with half a brain was that the existence of Farside itself was directly related to the research performed at UCB within the prior decade by Alfred Beddowes Jr. and Barbara FitzGibbon. No speculation was required for that conclusion. It was also clear that were Alfred Beddowes Jr. still alive he would have a claim, possibly a better claim than Barbara FitzGibbon herself, to the title 'creator of Farside'.

If he were still alive, why would he not come forward? What, precisely, had happened to Alfred Beddowes Jr.? What, precisely, had happened to Fatah Abou-Saad? What, precisely, had happened to the several dozen other people who had all gone missing about the same time?

And why was the United States' government not asking these questions?

The producers approached several members of the faculty at UCB who might have been given copies of an alleged research paper presented by Alfred Beddowes Jr. just a few weeks before his disappearance.

According to more than one source, there are no extant copies of that presentation. All known original copies have been seized by agents of the U.S. federal government in an attempt to keep the technology under wraps. Their efforts have been largely successful, but 'largely' does not equate to 'completely'.

At least one copy of that paper has escaped the clutches of the FBI and the NSA. That much is known. That document is what has allowed Professor Barbara FitzGibbon, the self-styled 'Queen of Farside', to access that alternate reality to her own benefit.

It also appears that a secret treaty exists between Farside and the United States government providing less-than-official recognition of Farside as a sovereign nation. Rumors abound that similar treaties

exist between Farside and several other nations. We have even seen documents purporting to be Farside passports bearing entry- and exit-stamps from other countries, notably Mexico and France.

Scandals occasionally erupt across the border, as well. Recently, it was discovered that several oil companies have operations in Farside. This fact came to light when Barkley Petroleum angered the powers that be in Farside and lost their drilling privileges. Attempts to interview the nine Barkley directors who abruptly resigned their Barkley board positions – along with all their other board memberships – were singularly unsuccessful. None of them would speak with us either on or off the record.

Barbara and Ernie watched the end credits roll on the documentary feeling a little miffed over the sensationalism slathered liberally over the program, but also feeling satisfied that they had acted properly in dealing with Fatah.

“Still,” Ernie mused, “I think we should check on her every now and then. It must get pretty lonely on a planet that only has one other occupant a hundred miles away or more. Perhaps she’s learned her lesson.”

“Really?” Barbara asked, her left eyebrow raised in surprise. “She probably hasn’t spent two years there yet. “Remember, time flows much more slowly in Earth-II. Are you asking for parole after such a short time?”

“Perhaps,” Ernie replied. “Recall the odd characteristics of the plants there. It’s possible they provide nothing in the way of nutrition. Fatah may already have starved to death. I’m just suggesting we see how she’s doing and whether she needs rescuing. Look, if necessary, we can isolate her in Farside as easily as in Earth-II. It’s an act of kindness.”

“— that she doesn’t deserve,” Barbara finished the sentence.

“It’s not a question of ‘what she deserves’,” Ernie countered, “but rather ‘what our own law requires of us’.”

“So, you think we should move her from Earth-II into Farside?”

“No, I don’t think we should. I think we must.”

Barbara was silent for a moment before lifting her eyes to gaze into Ernie’s. “Do it,” she said.

—==++++==—

“I hate doing this to you, Arlo,” Ernie apologized in advance, “but we need your boots on the ground for two more pick-ups. They’re the two we sentenced to permanent exile beyond the gate.

Barbara has agreed to let me move them into Farside."

"That's not a very permanent exile," Arlo smirked. "Are you planning to re-integrate them to society?"

"If they'll go along with it," Ernie offered. "I suspect they'd have a very difficult time living among us now given the way our society has developed, but I think we have to at least try.

"We dropped Fatah Abou-Saad near MacArthur Airport, and we dropped Anwar Al-Ajib near the west side of Saugatuck Reservoir. Unless they've migrated, they should still be in the general vicinity. Would you be my point man on this?"

"As much as I dislike the task... yes. I'll put a team together and get started."

9 - Fatah and Anwar

Arlo guided the step van into a parking spot at Long Island MacArthur Airport and set the brake. The type-I gate on the inside wall of the truck was soon open and a team moved through it to set up a beacon on the other side.

After building a rudimentary fireplace with local stones, they set a smoky fire going and left a note affixed to a pole. The note said:

If you need to be resupplied with anything, leave word here and we will return within three days to get your list of supplies.

It was a virtual certainty that Fatah would take that bait. There was too much for her to lose from ignoring it. On the off-chance that she had grown to like her new environment, no one wanted to give her both reason and opportunity to attack those who had been sent to contact her. She had to have a reason to behave herself. 'Resupply' might do the job.

In Connecticut, the parking lot at Morehouse Farm Park provided the same kind of access to Earth-II. In both places, multiple trips were needed before the teams would be able to contact their targets.

—==+++==—

Fatah roused from sleep with the dawn and set about starting her day. Her campsite near where Brookhaven would have been in Earth-I provided her plenty of opportunity to snag fresh fish from the Atlantic Ocean without having to fight the surf along the south-facing shoreline. She had grown to like the varieties available at the site even though she had no idea what varieties they were. For all she knew, they might be completely unique to this world and unmatched by anything in her former existence.

Before breakfast, she dropped a baited hook into the water and soon had a fish in her net. She gutted and filleted it and popped it into a fry pan where it sizzled and cooked.

As she observed her surroundings, she noticed a plume of smoke drifting eastward above her head. *A forest fire?* she wondered, and began to consider whether she should investigate it further. By noon the plume was gone and Fatah decided it was probably nothing to worry about.

She noticed it again the following day around noon. By that time, she had moved her camp northeast to about the vicinity of Manorville. She took a rabbit with her rifle — one shot — she was getting very good at this and still had over fifteen thousand rounds of ammunition. Doled out one-per-day, that would last her over forty years by which time she would probably be dead from old age if not earlier by other causes.

With the rabbit in her game bag, Fatah broke camp and headed west to see what might be on fire. The horizon is about three miles away for a normal adult human and Fatah estimated that the source of the smoke was considerably further away than that. The flat, treeless expanse of Long Island made for easy traveling but this might take her the rest of the day to get back to her original base camp.

As late afternoon eased into night, Fatah came across a stone cairn arranged to form a fireplace of sorts, the source of the smoke. *People!* She saw the note attached to the pole and read it and smiled. Taking a fish hook from her gear box, she impaled the note on it and tied the line to the pole as a signal that the note had been seen.

Her permanent camp was set up just a quarter mile away from the fireplace, so she arranged some rocks at the base of the pole forming an arrow pointing toward her camp. As she moved toward the camp site, she broke limbs on bushes and leaned them in the direction she was going. If they wanted to find her, she meant to make it easy for them.

—==+++==—

There was no Saugatuck Reservoir in Earth-II, but there was a large lake at approximately the right spot. That lake fed a stream that meandered southeast to feed another large lake and another stream flowing down to about where Bridgeport would be. Anwar Al-Ajib often journeyed along that path using a dugout canoe he had laboriously carved during his first winter in Earth-II. He had recently fitted it for a small lateen-rigged sail.

Much of the warmer months Anwar spent near the coast fishing and hunting. His first venture into the surf had been short and very scary. In water up to the middle of his thighs, he watched a fin cut the surface not two meters away and a shadowy shape at least five meters long beneath it. Either the beast was plagued by poor eyesight or it was just doing reconnaissance. Anwar didn't care. The next wave to come crashing ashore carried him close enough to the beach that he didn't have to splash much to get to safety. He never swam there again.

Arlo's recovery team built a smoker near where they dropped Anwar those many years ago, leaving a note as they had for Fatah. Five return trips later they were ready to assume Anwar had not survived his exile, but decided to scout the area for signs of habitation anyway. Working their way east brought them to the lake that coincided with Saugatuck Reservoir. Blazes on several trees assured them that Anwar had been here even if he were no longer alive or no longer in the area. Many trees had been felled and worked and dragged through the forest. When they followed the obvious path, they came upon a small log cabin. The cabin's contents suggested that Anwar had been living here until quite recently.

"These may be winter quarters," Emile Valcour suggested, "or he could be out on a hunting trip. Either way, if he's still alive, he could be gone from here for six months or more. If he left yesterday, there's no telling when he'll be back or even if he'll be back. Since a year here in Earth-II takes three years of our time, we could be looking at repeating this exercise again and again for the next eighteen to twenty-four months before we know for sure whether he's alive or not. We need to find a better solution."

"Right," Arlo agreed. "Let's pull the team together and see if we can brainstorm it out."

They left a note inside Anwar's cabin and departed.

—==++++==—

On the third visit to the Long Island site, the team found the note fishhooked to the pole and an arrow formed of loose stones pointing north. They headed north following a trail of broken branches for a quarter-mile until they came upon a tent next to a fire pit, the whole area ringed by sharpened poles pointing outward except for one section that could be moved aside to allow access.

"Hello, the camp!" one of them called but there was no answer. "We'll wait," the team leader said. "She could be out hunting or gathering fire wood."

An hour later, Fatah returned to camp with some sort of small furry animal slung over her shoulder. "At last!" she told them. "I've been expecting you for three days. I made a list."

"We're not really here to resupply you, although that could happen," the leader told her. She looked genuinely surprised. "We're here to offer you parole."

Fatah gasped and fell to her knees, crying. "I thought I'd never get out of here!" she squalled. "I'll do anything you want! Does this mean Barbara fitzGibbon is dead?"

"No," she was told. "In fact, it was Barbara fitzGibbon who

sent us here to get you. She offers to let you leave this place, but it has several conditions that you must agree to." Fatah nodded her understanding. "Barbara will decide where you will live and with whom you may associate. Your former friends you will never see again, but that's true here as well. You will be housed with people who will provide you with companionship, productive work, and many of the comforts you associate with civilization. If you agree, we can rescue you right now."

"I agree," she told them. "Get me out of here."

"We'll take charge of your firearms." Fatah handed over her rifle and pointed to the tent where the other guns were stored.

The men hefted the boxes of ammunition and they all headed back south toward the pickup point where they waited for a sign. Presently, a head appeared as if suspended in air. A 2"-by-10" plank emerged from thin air and the team, accompanied by Fatah, walked up it into the truck that would take them all to Hammburg.

—==++++==—

On a conference call with Boulder, Arlo laid out the elements of the problem and asked for suggestions. "The signs of habitation are recent in the Saugatuck area, but it's pretty heavily wooded and quite hilly. Because we must use type-I gates, we always have to stop, open a gate, send someone through (if we didn't open it inside a mountain), look around, and decide whether it's worth sending a team through to do real recon.

"We left a note with the first smoker and made five more visits to it. The note wasn't read. On the fifth attempt, we put almost the whole team through the gate and reconnoitered the area east of the drop-off point. We saw that several trees had been cut down and dragged through the forest to a clearing where they had been assembled into a crude log cabin. It's certain that Anwar survived his first winter, and probably his second if it has already happened, but where he is now is anybody's guess. He may be off hunting. If so, he could be gone for several Earth-II months, enough that we might not see him for another year or more. Or he could be back tomorrow. We just don't know and we don't know how to find him. We need suggestions."

"Anybody there know how to fly?" Leroy Starkweather asked.

There was a pause while Arlo surveyed the room. "Nobody here admits to being able to fly an airplane, Leroy. How would we get an airplane through the gate anyway? Then we'd need an airstrip..."

"You're thinking too big," Leroy interrupted. "You need to think small as in 'ultralight' and probably 'amphibious' or maybe just

'pontoons'. You launch and land on water which, from what I hear, you have lots of around there." On Arlo's side, several heads bobbed in approval. "That's how we did most of our early surveying out here. I took my plane up from a nearby lake and photo-mapped the whole area. It took a day and a half to shoot the photos, and another week to lay them all out into a mosaic.

"Call the group in Hammburg. See if anybody there knows how to fly an ultralight. If they do, you'll be able to cover a lot of ground very quickly. If you don't have anybody, I'll do it. Let me know."

Laurel Hamm took Arlo's request and asked around among the group in Pennsylvania. Dee Sweet admitted to having taken some lessons but had never gotten her pilot's license. When Laurel inquired whether she would be able to handle an ultralight, Dee smiled.

"They're no good for long flights because of all the restrictions that are placed on them," she told Laurel, "but if it's just local flying, I suppose I could do it."

Laurel told her to find one that could be easily modified to do photo-reconnaissance flying from a lake, and Dee started calling friends from her student days. In four hours, she had a lead on a Quicksilver MX-II that was already configured with floats. By the end of the following day she had negotiated a price and had an appointment to see the plane. That night she bought it, suspecting she had paid too much but unwilling to risk losing this near-perfect craft.

Within the week, she cajoled a friend into increasing the fuel capacity to allow her more air time while Davy Harmon rigged a giant equipment gate capable of passing the 10-foot high aircraft.

A separate survey team determined, after a great deal of trial-and-error, that just north of the Farm Park the ground level on both sides of the gate was identical and there was easy access to the water in Earth-II. Dee trailered the partially-disassembled airplane to Connecticut. At 11P.M. that Sunday, with lookouts posted a mile north and a mile south to warn of oncoming traffic, Davy Harmon opened the giant gate and a crew rolled Dee's airplane through it into Earth-II's noon. A surplus parachute was staked to the beach to provide a visual target for Dee and eight 5-gallon cans of gasoline for refueling were arranged on plywood to protect them from the dampness of the sand. An inflatable boat with an outboard motor waited in case Dee needed to be rescued.

Davy broke the equipment gate down and promised to return eight hours — one Earth day — later to pick up the volunteers who stayed in Earth-II to help Dee get her machine reassembled. By four that afternoon, Earth-II time, Dee cranked the engine and taxied the

plane out onto the lake for her first test flight. The craft lifted off the water smoothly and she snapped several pictures of the shoreline as she circled the lake before settling onto the water and running up onto the sandy beach that served as her base.

"There's a tent at a campsite on the other side of the lake near the northwest end," she reported, "and we seem to be only about five or ten miles from Long Island Sound. Top off the tanks and I'll head down to the coast. It looks like there's water most of the way in case I have to put down."

Now with a full load of fuel, Dee lifted off the lake and headed southeast following the lakes and streams. That path would be easy to retrace for the return trip as well.

Banking left at the coastline to run northeast, Dee completely missed seeing Anwar fishing in a quiet inlet, but Anwar saw the airplane. He spiked his fishing rod and took off at a run toward the beach, taking only his fire-making equipment. As he ran, he stooped occasionally to pick up driftwood, discarding some pieces immediately as being too wet.

At the beach, he quickly piled the collected driftwood together in a tent-shape, lit some kindling, and got a decent blaze going in the first ten minutes after he sighted the plane. With the fire blazing, he tossed seaweed onto it to make smoke and soon had a signal that would be visible for twenty miles. As he waited for the plane to return and hoping against hope that it would return, he used a stick to carve a giant arrow in the sand pointing northwest and the message "LAKE 2 MILES" in letters five feet tall.

After twenty minutes of scouting northeast along the coast, Dee turned the plane around and immediately saw a plume of dark smoke back the way she had come.

"Saugatuck base, Saugatuck base, I see smoke. I may have found him." Retracing her path, she dropped her altitude down to eighty feet, just high enough to clear the trees. She also prepared a message of her own: "Rescue party at log cabin 10 miles northwest." This note she rolled up and slipped a rubber band around it, slid it into a 2-liter plastic bottle, then tied an eight-foot strip of red cloth to its neck to act as a streamer.

Approaching the beach, she dropped the bottle, circled the beach to read the message in the sand, waggled the wings to acknowledge it, and turned northwest to find a lake two miles away.

The two-mile trip took Dee two minutes, and she was settled and her airplane tied to a tree branch in ten. Anwar had a more difficult trip. Even with the sail, the little canoe could only make three knots upstream against the current. The trip took Anwar three-

quarters of an hour after he gathered all his belongings. It was a full hour before Dee saw the sail appear at the southern end of the lake, and darkness was threatening to fall.

"Are you Anwar Al-Ajib?" she asked as he paddled toward her.

"Who else would I be in this godforsaken land? Who are you?"

"My name is Dee Sweet. I'm with a rescue party that has been sent to bring you back to civilization. You're being offered parole."

"Parole? What kind of parole?"

"I don't have all the details," Dee begged off. "You'll hear all that back at the cabin. How long will it take you to get there?"

"Three more hours unless you can tow me with that," he pointed at the ultralight.

"I can't, but I know who can." She pressed the TALK button on her radio. "Saugatuck base, come in." When the base camp answered, she instructed them: "Bring the boat. We need to tow this guy back."

Twenty-five minutes later, the inflatable buzzed ashore where Anwar and Dee waited. Anwar climbed aboard the inflatable for the trip back to the base camp. Dee taxied out onto the lake and took to the air for her five-minute return flight.

"These are the fine details of the parole you are being offered," the team leader spoke to Anwar back at the camp. "We will bring you out of this world back to civilization, but not back to the world you knew." Anwar looked at the speaker oddly. "In this new world, there are people and towns and farms and schools. There is no 'New York City'. There is no 'Los Angeles', but at least you will not be in solitary confinement.

"To qualify for this offer you must do three things: One, you must agree to abide by our civilization's single rule of law, a principle you may know of as 'The Golden Rule': treat others as you wish others to treat you." Anwar bobbed his head. "Two, you must acknowledge the authority of our sovereign, Barbara, Queen of Farside."

"Farside?" Anwar asked. "Where is Farside?"

"'Farside' is the name of the place to which we will transport you. It is a world like this one, but without any of its oddities. We all think it's a very nice place to live, and we're pretty sure you'll agree once you see it."

"Okay," Anwar prompted, "what else?"

"You forever give up all past, present, and future 'jihads' or whatever you call them. Agreeing to abide by the Golden Rule ought to cover that, but we impose this special condition just to erase any

doubt you may retain. In other words, what is past is past. Any quarrels you may have had with others are erased: we erase ours; you erase yours."

"What of Fatah, the other who was sent into exile here?"

"Fatah Abou-Saad agreed to these conditions three weeks ago and was removed from this world back to civilization in accordance with the decree of Her Majesty, Queen Barbara."

"Who is this 'Queen Barbara'? Why is she doing this?"

"Our monarch is Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh whom you have met before on at least one occasion. Why she is doing this is not our business to question. That is what she commanded. That is what we are doing. If you accept her offer and her terms, we are prepared to transport you within the day. If not, we part company and you should expect never to see us or to have such terms offered to you again."

"I accept her offer and her terms," Anwar told them. "When will I see Fatah?"

"I don't know that you will," the team leader admitted. "I don't know what part of Farside she has been relocated to, and I don't know where you're going. It could be the same place; they could be different places. That wasn't part of my mission briefing."

Fatah Abou-Saad joined the community on the banks of the Farside Mississippi River near St. Louis-in-Farside. Anwar Al-Ajib began learning oilfield operation from his new neighbors at Pecos-in-Farside.

—==+++==—

"Neither one may ever be issued a passport or a transit visa," Barbara instructed Davy Harmon. "They may never leave Farside."

"Understood," Davy agreed.

—==+++==—

Log entry of the Conde-Nast Traveler expedition for June 4th:

Odd happenings overnight. We pitched camp in the late afternoon yesterday intending to begin our survey of this portion of Nebraska Farside in the morning. This morning, we awoke to find ourselves surrounded by a herd of Woolly Mammoth peacefully grazing and apparently carefully negotiating between our tents to avoid stepping on anything strange — such as people. Felicia, suspecting from this that these giant beasts might be less dangerous than their size leads us to believe, took a stroll among them.

Reaching up to pat the flank of one of the females, she stroked the wool and a huge gob of it came away as if it were ready to be shed. The female seemed not to be very upset and, in fact, turned as if to give Felicia a better grip. In ten minutes, Felicia was up to her knees in mammoth wool and sandwiched between the female and a male who seemed to want the same treatment.

The whole camp has been peeling mammoth wool since a little after dawn and we judge there's several hundred pounds of the stuff littering the camp area. Gus has been going crazy filming, first snapping stills of the giants' behavior, then setting up a movie camera to get a view of the whole camp area, nineteen lumbering beasts each jostling for a better position from which to be groomed, and fourteen expedition members doing their very best to pull the wool off.

Of course, there isn't much we can do about the wool on their backs. Even the females can be twelve feet tall, and the wool on their backs is just too high for even the tallest of us. The bulls, of course, are even bigger. If they ever lay down, that would make it easier, but I think these things may sleep on their feet.

Farside is a god-damned tourist gold mine! If the Farsiders ever decide to allow guided tours, they'll suck every spare penny out of half the world's economies. I've got to get myself a piece of this.

The Conde-Nast crew collected among themselves 367 pounds of mammoth wool in plastic bags and cached them for pick up on the return trip. The bags made it safely out of Farside at the St. Louis personnel gate whereupon the bags were seized by U.S. Customs, the crew's protests about them being scientific samples of great value falling on deaf ears.

10 - Crime and Punishment

"I don't have to have a nap if I don't want to," Penelope Walsh informed her kindergarten teacher. "I'm a princess!"

"Oh, really?" Mrs. Mullalley arched her right eyebrow. "A princess! Where's your crown, Your Highness?"

"It's home. My mommy has it." Penelope folded her arms as if to reinforce her decision not to be forced into an unwanted nap.

Patricia Mullalley's finger bobbed up and down in a gesture even 5-year-old Penelope could interpret: *On your nap mat, young lady.* Penelope surrendered.

—==++++==—

Dear Barbara,

I wish to bring to your attention the behavior of your daughter, Penelope, at school today. Penelope resisted the standard 'nap time' today, informing me that she was exempt on account of being a princess.

Please reinforce with Penelope the protocol we agreed to at orientation ;-)

*Yours,
Patricia*

—==++++==—

"How was school?" Ernie asked Penelope as she sauntered in after being dropped off by the hay wagon. Penelope flashed him an evil look.

"I don't like Mrs. Mullalley," she informed her father.

"Trouble?" he asked his daughter.

"She makes me take a nap like the little kids," Penelope explained.

"But you are a little kid, aren't you?"

"No, Daddy, I'm a princess!" *My goodness, how could he not know that?*

"Ah, I see," Ernie nodded his understanding. "I think I'll let your mother handle this one."

In the kitchen, Buck had all he could do to keep himself from

breaking out in a fit of laughter. *Thank heaven I have a roast to concentrate on!* He put his head down and got back to work preparing dinner.

Barbara roared up on her ATV a half hour later and pushed through the front door. "I'm home," she announced, "how is every —" She stopped mid-sentence when she became aware of mile-wide grins on Buck and Ernie both. "Did I miss the joke?" she asked curiously.

"I suspect there's a note in Penny's school bag," Ernie smirked.

Barbara grabbed the satchel and riffled through the papers quickly until she found the envelope addressed to "Barbara I of Farside". She scowled and ripped the envelope open, then smiled at the contents. She handed it to Ernie who also smiled as he read it.

"Officially or unofficially, do you think?" she asked Ernie.

"Oh... officially, beyond a doubt."

Barbara went to the closet, popped the black walnut case open, and lifted her crown from the velvet. She slipped it on her head. Ernie stood. Buck was already standing. Barbara took a seat on the couch.

"Penelope Alice Walsh!" Barbara called her daughter loudly in that tone of voice that could ever only mean one thing.

Penelope dashed into the living room from her bedroom and skidded to a stop before Barbara. Her eyes went wide as they fell upon the golden ring in her hair. She performed a quick little curtsy and stared at her mother. "Yes, ma'am."

"What is the meaning of this?" Barbara waved the letter before Penelope. "I'll read it to you. It says: 'Penelope resisted the standard nap time today, informing me that she was exempt on account of being a princess.' Is that true?"

Tears began to well in Penelope's eyes. "But I am a princess!" she squalled.

"No," Barbara explained, "you are a princess when you are acting on official business of Farside. Were you acting in your official capacity today? Did I forget that I had assigned you an official task? Or was it Chancellor Burke, perhaps?" Penelope shook her head. "So, when you told Mrs. Mullalley today that you were a princess, that wasn't true, was it?" Penny continued shaking her head and occasionally throwing a tear to one side or the other.

"Tomorrow, first thing, before you even put your school bag under your seat, you will apologize to Mrs. Mullalley, and you will do it in a voice loud enough that the entire class can hear it.

"What will you say to Mrs. Mullalley?"

"Mrs. Mullalley, I'm sorry for saying I was a princess."

"...and I won't do it again," Barbara prompted.

"...and I won't do it again," Penny repeated.

"And remember: loud enough that everyone can hear it." Penny nodded vigorously. Barbara pointed toward her bedroom. Penny turned to leave.

"Uh..." Ernie said loudly.

Penny turned back toward her mother, executed another curtsy, then turned and departed at high speed. Barbara lifted the crown from her head.

"Well done," Ernie told her, and Buck finally allowed himself a laugh.

—==+++==—

The notice in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune's* Business section would have escaped almost everybody's eye. Only others in the same business might pay any attention to such things at all. Newspapers typically did such postings merely as a courtesy to their major advertisers.

Gold Star Oilfield Services announces the appointment of P. J. Ramsey as Operating Director for their Offshore Wellfields Division.

Tony Dinardo's phone rang and he fetched it from his pocket. Glancing briefly at the display to see who might be calling him, he flipped the phone open as he turned away from his sluice and began climbing the bank. "Dinardo," he announced himself.

"Good morning. This is Craig Oster in New Orleans. I'm a private investigator on your retainer. I'm hired to scan the local newspapers looking for certain names for which I receive a periodic stipend. I've found one."

"Which one?" Tony asked.

"Paul Ramsey."

"Fax me the details. If it pans out, you get the bonus."

Melissa called to him when she saw him crank his ATV: "Where are you going?"

"Ministry business," Tony explained as he roared off toward his office in Okambo.

Inside the office, the fax machine contained a scanned image of the previous day's *Times Picayune* Business section with "P. J. Ramsey" circled.

Tony powered up his computer and began composing a note to Paul Gillman:

“Paul Ramsey may have been located in New Orleans as a new employee of Gold Star Oilfield Services. I have asked the U.S. State Department to detain him for us.”

Gillman followed this immediately with a note to the State Department in Washington D. C. asking them to do precisely that. “Formal note to follow.”

—==+++==—

*The Foreign Ministry
Farside*

*His Excellency Pierre Longstreet,
The State Department*

Paul J. Ramsey, formerly employed by Barkley Petroleum Corporation of Houston, Texas, has been located in the vicinity of New Orleans, Louisiana. A current, active warrant for the arrest of Paul Ramsey issued under the authority of the Farside Directorate for Security is attached for your use.

Pursuant to the agreement between our two nations, we request that you cause the arrest of Paul Ramsey, holding him until he can be extradited to Farside for trial on charges of being an accessory before the fact to capital murder.

*Paul Gillman,
Foreign Minister*

—==+++==—

Paul Ramsey picked the phone out of its cradle before it had finished the first ring. “Hello?”

“The State Department received today a warrant for your arrest and a request to hold you for extradition to Farside.”

“Who is this?” Ramsey demanded, but all he heard was the line disconnecting.

Okay, I can't run, the thought played through his head, *I have to get a lawyer and fight this.* He reached for the telephone book.

—==+++==—

Alvin Peterman braked his Land Rover at the St. Louis equipment gate, rolled down the driver's window, and handed over his Farside passport to the immigration agent who took it, flipped it open, and glanced at it briefly before making a copy of it on his scanner for use later in compiling the daily transit numbers.

"What brings you all the way out here?" the agent asked after noting Peterman's Nearside address as being in New York.

"Just taking a break from the grind," Peterman answered. "Going to do some photography, maybe a little hunting, camping out on the prairie for a week or two."

"If you're going to be out in wilderness, you'll need to have a receiver for the VORs." Peterman held up his hand-held receiver for the agent to see. "Here's the directory of VOR locations in the area. Weather promises to be pretty calm over the next few weeks. Have a safe trip. Watch your fuel level." He handed back Peterman's passport now stamped to indicate entry via the St. Louis equipment gate.

Peterman rolled away through the gate and into Farside, turned onto Westroad and moved away toward the prairie. He drove for most of the day and stopped in the late afternoon to make camp. In the morning, he turned northwest into a valley between the hills and drove until he came across a herd of antelope. He pitched his permanent camp there.

Some four-and-a-half months later, a survey crew with Rand-McNally doing preliminary work on the new Atlas of Farside happened upon Peterman's camp and camped with him for three days before moving on.

It was a full year before the survey crew circled back to the St. Louis colony to do their required de-briefing to Farside officialdom, a not-very-brief de-briefing that went on for nearly a week. This gave everyone plenty of opportunity to mingle with those from the 'other side of the fence', and it was that mingling that brought Peterman's presence on the prairie finally to light.

"The prairie is absolutely pristine," their leader intoned as part of a slide presentation on the state of the wilderness, "with almost no exception. In fact, we found only one person living in wilderness substantially away from the established population centers. Last September, we stumbled across a hermit named Alvin Peterman surviving on foraged vegetables and the occasional small animal he would take with his rifle." A picture of Peterman taken by one of the survey team flashed on the screen. "Now, Peterman may not be the only *voyageur* or mountain man living out there beyond the reaches of Farside civilization, but he is the only one we encountered. If there

are more of his kind, they are truly 'few and far between'."

Davy Harmon, seated next to Paul Gillman for this week-long presentation, turned to Paul. "I thought everyone lived in community," he opined. "Do we have any 'loners' that you know of?"

"The rule is that you have to produce more wealth than you consume to qualify for a Farside passport," Paul confirmed. "I think that would just about rule out someone being admitted for purposes of becoming a hermit or a mountain man foraging for a living and living off the land. We need to find out some more about this Alvin Peterman."

"I'll put someone on it," Davy agreed.

Davy's agent started by visiting the immigration checkpoint to determine when Peterman transited into Farside. Immigration procedures were very 'catch as catch can' at this point. People entering Farside were expected to have a Farside passport or a visa letter authorizing passage. These documents were typically copied and a sequential entry made in a log book — actually a computer file — later in the day when activity died down. It was fairly easy, then, to locate the log entry for a given name, and Peterman's name was quickly found.

"He crossed through more than a year ago!" the immigration clerk exclaimed. "The log entry says he was on vacation, going to do some hunting and camping for two weeks."

The clerk sent a message to the central passport-issuing facility in Okambo asking for Alvin Peterman's Farside address and contact information, including his emergency contact. The Okambo facility replied in twenty minutes that they had no record of any Alvin Peterman obtaining a Farside passport.

Davy Harmon tracked down the team leader for Rand-McNally. "Where, exactly, did you say you found Alvin Peterman?" The cartographer took out his notes and was able to pinpoint on the working-copy map the approximate location of Alvin Peterman's camp. An hour later, a Cessna 172 lifted off from the asphalt strip at the St. Louis-in-Farside airport headed west. Within another half-hour, it was on its way back having found nothing at the location but the remains of a long-deserted camp.

"I think we need to track this Alvin Peterman down and find out who he is and what he's doing in Farside," Paul suggested.

—==++++==—

Two U.S. Marshals showed their badges to the receptionist at Gold Star Oilfield Services. "Mr. P.J. Ramsey?" one inquired.

"I'll call him." She dialed a three-digit number on the telephone's keypad and waited. "Mr. Ramsey, two U.S. Marshals are here to see you. Yes, sir, I'll tell them."

"Mr. Ramsey will be with you in a moment," she informed the Marshals. "Please have a seat and make yourselves comfortable. Would you care for coffee?" The Marshals declined. They really didn't expect to be here for more than a few moments. It didn't take long to make one of these arrests.

A few minutes passed before Paul Ramsey appeared in the reception area. "I presume you gentlemen are here to arrest me?" he inquired of the Marshals. They indicated that that was their purpose.

"Where will I be taken for processing?"

"Federal Courthouse, Poydras and Camp."

Ramsey handed the receptionist a sheet of paper. "Call my attorney. Tell him where I'm being taken. Ask him to meet me there."

The Marshals cuffed Ramsey and led him away as the receptionist began dialing.

As Ramsey was being fingerprinted, his attorney tracked him down, introduced himself all around, got a copy of the warrant, then asked for a few moments with his client.

"This warrant is from the government of Farside, the Farside Directorate for Security to be exact. Why this warrant was even honored is a mystery. As far as I know we don't have diplomatic relations with them. It's barely more than an acknowledgment that Farside exists. I'm going to move to quash the warrant on those grounds. Hang tight, and I'll get you out of here before you know it."

But when Ramsey was arraigned before a federal judge and his attorney made the motion to suppress the warrant, a representative of the State Department objected.

"Are you saying we have treaty obligations to support?" the judge asked.

"I can't speak to that, your honor," the State Department rep answered, "but I was told we have a 'reciprocal arrangement' regarding such things, and that is why 'State' requests the warrant be upheld."

The judge thought about this briefly, then announced: "I'm required to observe treaties to which the Senate has consented. Absent a treaty, I am forced to point out that 'reciprocal arrangements' may be very nice, but they are not the law of the land to which I may hold our citizens. The rule of law is predicated on the notion that we write down the laws and publish them before we enforce them. Reciprocal arrangements don't fit that pattern. If you had something more concrete, more formal, something like a Senate

resolution, I could accommodate your request.

"Alas, I cannot. Defense motion is granted. The warrant is suppressed. Case dismissed."

—==+++==—

Although the ultralight aircraft were slow and had limited range, they were easy to fly, so an eager student could be made proficient in a few days if necessary, and in Farside such craft could be modified to go faster and reach out farther without fear of a government bureaucrat finding fault. As a result, there were about a third as many ultralight airplanes operating out of St. Louis-in-Farside as there were people in the community. Since they could take off and land on any piece of flat ground, it was common to see airplanes in people's backyards.

And they were ideal vehicles for this sort of search operation.

A fuel truck was sent with a pair of aircraft out to the last known location of Alvin Peterman's camp. From there, trackers determined that Peterman had likely headed northwest. Two aircraft took to the air to follow the tracks left by Peterman's truck. From two hundred feet aloft, the tracks were easy to follow. On the ground, the fuel truck followed where the airplanes led. Periodically, the spindly airplanes would land to wait for their fuel supply to catch up with them, refuel, and continue the search.

On the fourth day of searching, the searchers found Alvin Peterman's Land Rover where it had been abandoned, out of gas. It was refueled from the tanker and restarted after a little coaxing.

From here, Peterman had almost certainly proceeded on foot, there being no other choice. The ultralights continued their search, but from a much lower altitude since they were now tracking footprints.

It took them one more day to find Alvin Peterman, within sight of the Platte River north of where St. Joseph, Missouri would be. His bones showed signs of gnawing, and ants and other insects had stripped the carcass of everything edible, leaving the skeleton to bleach in the sun. The contents of his backpack included his passport with its entry stamp from the St. Louis-in-Farside immigration point dated more than a year prior.

"I guess we're not going to get much information from this one," the team leader surmised. "What the hell was he thinking?"

They bundled his remains in a spare tent along with his worldly possessions, affixed one airplane to the top of the tanker truck and the other atop the Land Rover, and headed back the way they had come.

"Is it possible it's our records that are faulty?" Davy Harmon asked. "That we simply forgot or overlooked the step that includes logging the issuance of the passport?"

The passport clerk shook her head. "No. This is a forgery. Every passport I issue is numbered sequentially and there are no gaps in the sequence. As a matter of fact, this passport — Peterman's — is numbered '000178344'. That's a duplicate of one issued to Dolores Marx of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania two years ago. This passport has an issue date three months prior to the Marx document. Three months prior to '178344', I was issuing passports in the '159000' range. This document is forged. It's a really good forgery, but it's a forgery."

"Okay," Davy agreed, "what next?"

"Two things," the senior passport clerk began. She had already anticipated this question. "First, we need to have a more formal system for verifying passports at immigration points. Each gate agent must be able to determine quickly that the document in front of him is valid. That says 'database'. Every gate must have access to the complete list of valid passports. Maybe we should give them some sort of 'reader' that looks at the passport and retrieves the matching information from the database. The gate agent compares the document in his hand with the document the database says he should have in his hand. No match? Forgery.

"That means one or both of two things: we need to remotely update the local copies of the database on a regular basis, maybe every day, or we need to enable more-or-less instantaneous communication with the central database wherever it is kept."

"Sounds expensive," Davy mused. "What's the second thing?"

"The second thing is that this probably isn't the only bogus passport out there. How many there might be no one can say for sure until we have checked every transit into Farside since we started issuing passports."

Davy looked startled. "That's everybody!" he gasped.

"Right. Building an infrastructure to verify passports for validity will be expensive," the senior passport clerk agreed, "but the cost will pale in comparison to finding all the forged passports now in Farside, if any. We must interview nearly a quarter-million people.

"It gets worse," she continued. "If you just want the forged passports gone from Farside, you're covered, but if you decide you want to apprehend those who own forged passports, you have to start scanning documents for people leaving as well as entering.

"Up to you," she finished.

11 - Legal Niceties

Initially, there were no passports. Until someone in Hamburg suggested it, the thought had not even crossed anyone's mind. There followed discrete inquiries to several graphic arts wholesalers and an equally discrete purchase of several very expensive pieces of equipment for producing the elements of passports: the insert pages and the stiffer outer cover upon which would be embossed the 'seal' of Farside: a golden ellipse enclosing a 'B R I' on a somewhat darker blue cover than the too-light-to-be-practical blue of the flag.

The staff of the passport office were mostly volunteers, and for most their duties were exclusively operating office equipment. The original procedure, if one wished to grace it with such a high-sounding name, for issuing a passport involved collecting a photograph of the passport holder, laminating it onto the identifier page, assembling the passport booklet, and taking a color photocopy of the identifier page.

The first 450-or-so passports were all issued on the same day and mailed to their owners. The color photocopies of the passports were 'added to the stack' as each passport was issued. That was the only record other than a manually-updated computer file of who had a Farside passport. Luckily, the advice given them by one supplier they had implemented: the information about the passport owner was printed in a font that could easily be read by the right computer hardware. Therefore, the copies they had retained in a file cabinet could also be read by that hardware. This made the initial work of creating the database easier, if not actually 'possible'.

As each paper sheet was 'read', it was also scanned to create an image, and that image was linked to the passport number as was the detailed information about the passport's owner. In this way, the passport information for nearly a quarter-million Farsiders around the world was gathered in a place from which it could be used to verify the authenticity of any passport.

The simple tasks that had formerly been associated with issuing a passport now became somewhat more complex. As each new passport was approved, the booklet was constructed, scanned, and added to the daily computer file of newly-issued documents. At the close-of-business, a second crew now scanned the new images and database entries to verify that everything still matched, then added the day's activity to the master file. Overnight, the daily activity file was sent to each of the now-72 immigration gates where it was added to their local copy of the master database.

All this activity took place without much fanfare. Outside of the passport office few knew of the changes taking place there, and all the staff were made aware of the importance of not discussing those changes outside the office.

Around the world, each immigration station now became a passport control station with the installation of their new passport readers. A gate agent now merely collected a passport and held it under the reader. The reader's software located the passport number and retrieved from the local database the two files, an image made when the passport was originally issued and a data file containing the same information. These were displayed side-by-side on the agent's computer screen for direct comparison to the passport itself. The press of a single button on the agent's console now posted an entry to the log file to indicate that passport such-and-such had passed through the gate and in which direction.

The change-over happened so smoothly even people who transited the gates frequently never noticed the change except that they sometimes wondered why they now had to present their documents on departure.

Everything now worked so smoothly that it almost became boring. On the outbound gates, the agents might ask "When should we expect you back?" On the inbound gates, it would be "How was your trip?" and "Welcome home."

One thing, however, was so rare that the agents had to be reminded on a regular basis how to handle the situation — a 'mismatch' with the database. The first 'mismatch' caught a bogus passport exiting Farside through the Atlanta, Georgia personnel gate.

When the agent touched the red 'mismatch' button on the console, the gate for that lane reduced power to become a viewer and two security guards received alarms on their radios. The passport's owner was in custody before he knew what had happened.

"Your passport is counterfeit," the station's chief of security informed the suspect sitting across from him in an interrogation room. "Can you tell us how you come to be in the possession of a passport not issued by the proper Farside authorities?"

The suspect admitted nothing and denied everything. He claimed to have made a proper application for a passport and received it in the mail in due course. When confronted with the fact that the passport number duplicated one issued to someone else and several weeks later, he simply replied "I'm not in charge of your passport issuing procedures. I submitted the application and the passport arrived in the mail."

"All such applications are the result of someone attending an orientation seminar. When did you attend an orientation seminar?"

"Never!" the man admitted. "I responded to an advertisement in the *Journal-Constitution* and followed the instructions. By the way, I think charging four hundred dollars for these is outrageous!"

"Don't you know that the processing fee for a Farside passport is never more than seventy U.S. dollars?" The man shook his head. "What do you do in Farside?" his interrogator demanded.

"I vacation. I bring my camping gear and fishing gear and a kayak and I live outdoors for a week or two. It's very relaxing."

"You can't camp and fish in Nearside?" he was asked.

"Too crowded," they were told.

"You don't have your camping gear with you in the car. Did you leave it in Farside?"

"Yes. The locals tell me it's perfectly safe to leave it standing until I come back because no one will disturb it. So far, no one has."

"Where's your camp site?" The security chief offered the suspect a map and he indicated with a pencil mark the place where he always camped. "We're going to hold you overnight while we check all this out," the security guard informed the suspect. "Come with me."

"But... I have an appointment with my doctor early tomorrow morning," the suspect protested.

The security guard shrugged. "You're going to miss it."

With the suspect now confined in a holding cell, the security team examined the passport: "Michael Pennington, Atlanta... what do we know about him? What can we find out quickly? Let's do a profile on this guy." The team scattered to get to work on finding out who their guest really was.

In less than four hours, the experienced investigators had their answer: their guest was not and never was 'Michael Pennington'. He most likely was Miklos Pangyros, and if he wasn't wanted by the local police, he probably ought to be. A trail of negative news stories clustered around his name like grapes on a vine: loan sharking, extortion, protection rackets, and other unsavory pursuits. A scan of the entry/exit logs over the past ten months matched very closely to the times his name appeared in the AJC. The theory that he used his Farside passport to disappear when 'the heat was on' neatly fitted his vacation schedule as revealed by the transit logs.

This also made even more implausible his explanation that he had gotten his passport via mail-order.

A call to the District Attorney's office for more information was connected to the ADA most familiar with the suspect.

"You've met our old friend, Miklos, have you?" the ADA chortled. "I presume he's now in custody. What did you get him on?"

"Passport violation," the ADA was told.

"Passport violation? I would never suspect Miklos might even

have a Farside passport.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, he doesn’t. That’s the violation. The document he used to enter Farside is a forgery. Shall we send him back or keep him?”

“Oh, by all means, keep him,” the ADA chuckled. “You may be able to reform him. We haven’t so far.”

“Okay, we’ll give you a ‘heads-up’ before we deport him... if we deport him.”

Miklos was brought back to the interrogation room. “Well, Miklos, we’d like to give you one last chance to tell us where and how you got your phony Farside passport. Before we get into this, I want you to understand that we don’t have any prisons in Farside.” Miklos smiled at that. “You can’t transit the gate because you don’t have a valid passport, so you’re stuck here.” Miklos’ expression drooped. “You won’t be going to jail because we don’t have any. What will happen may be far worse than you suspect, however.

“All Farside residents are expected to provide for themselves. They may grow crops for food. They may mine gold and trade that for food. They may provide services in exchange for food or gold they can trade later for food. Got the picture?” Miklos nodded, but his expression was becoming somber. “That’s why we don’t need prisons. Farmers who misbehave discover that the local co-op is no longer willing to provide them with tools, supplies, and help. Miners who misbehave discover that they have few or no places to trade for food and supplies.

“Oh, yeah, you can forage the swamps for roots and other stuff that will keep you alive — until winter comes — but there are things in the swamps that have the same idea — about you. So, we don’t really need prisons. Mother Nature handles all our problems efficiently if unpleasantly.

“If we don’t get a straight answer — one we can put to good use — we turn you loose in Farside to sink or swim as best you can in a wilderness containing animals you can’t name because you’ve never seen anything like them before.

“You can’t say that you didn’t know this passport was a phony, because you know your name is not Michael Pennington. Phony-baloney stories about ‘answering an ad in the AJC’ just won’t fly anymore. Neither will bullshit about ‘just arrived in the mail’.

“Bearing all that in mind, I’d like to ask you one last time about your passport: how you got it, who you got it from, who else you know who might have a phony passport, and any other information you think may convince us not to point you toward the door and give you a pat on the ass, because I promise that you will not like it outside. Talk.”

"They're available on the street," Miklos told them, "if you know who to ask. There's a guy named 'Bear' who hangs out near the Med Center sometimes, near the Dome other times. If you ask Bear he can put you in touch with a guy who can knock out a passport. I think the passport guy is maybe a student. He looks kind of young."

"Name?"

While the interrogation continued, another team member called the Atlanta ADA back. "We're interested in knowing about somebody who goes by 'Bear'," the ADA was told, and the ADA admitted knowing about a 'Rashid the Bear' who had been whispered to be involved with illegal activity but on whom they could never quite get enough evidence.

"If you nail him," the ADA finished, "keep him there, too, would you?"

"How about a location for this nameless student?" they pressed Miklos after he denied knowing the passport-maker's name.

"Piedmont over by the interstate. I don't remember the address, but I could take you there."

"Oh, no," Miklos was told, "we want you where we can toss you in the swamp in case your information turns out to be as good as your passport. Description of the kid?"

"Young," Miklos repeated, "thirty-ish, maybe less, sandy hair, wears glasses." While he described the forger, another security agent tapped keys on the computer in the room making an inquiry against the passport database itself. He quickly created a slideshow of passport photographs matching the description.

"Take a look at these photos," they ordered him. "Tell us if you recognize anybody."

As the images clicked by Miklos would occasionally mutter something like "that looks sort of like him..." or "no, the face shape is wrong..." until he exclaimed "That's the guy!"

"Arthur Medved. Father's an engineer. Mother's a pharmacist. He attends Georgia State, so he's back and forth quite a bit, but he lives in Atlanta, not here. Summer before last, he worked in the local passport office. Shall we do a sneak-and-peek?"

"That's probably a good idea. We know where he lives, because his Atlanta address is on his passport. Put a crew on him and see if there's anything illegal happening near him."

"The landscape at 215 Piedmont is very wet in Farside," the construction foreman reported. "Medved's apartment is on the 14th floor, 164 feet above the Farside ground level, if you'll permit the use of the term 'ground level'. I really ought to call it 'swamp level'. It'll take a week to get a base wide enough and steady enough to allow us

to reconnoiter the floor and find his apartment. I recommend against it: too much time, too much effort."

"Alternatives?" the security chief prompted.

"Bag him and tag him," one of the others offered. Everybody else stayed silent.

"Okay. Do it."

Two days later, Arthur Medved turned into a parking lot in downtown near the college followed by a windowless van. As he maneuvered his car into a parking spot, the van stopped behind him and disgorged two passengers before continuing to the end of the row and doubling back to offload two more on the far side of the row.

Medved exited his car, grabbed a backpack from the passenger seat, and locked the doors with the remote control. He turned to discover four men converging on him from two directions, all with guns pointed at him.

"Arthur Medved, you're under arrest." They hustled him toward the van and pushed him inside. The van moved away into Atlanta's busy streets.

"What's this all about?" Medved demanded, but no one answered.

Minutes later, the driver keyed a number on his cell phone and spoke: "We're in position."

In Farside, a team with a viewer saw the white van parked at the curb and moved a larger gate into position just inside the back of the van. When it was correctly aligned, they opened the gate and Arthur Medved and his four captors stepped through into Farside. There, another vehicle transported Medved and the others to the Farside administrative complex, the Farside-side of the immigration gate.

"Arthur Medved, you are under arrest for suspicion of counterfeiting," he was told.

"Are you nuts?" Medved asked. "Money here is gold or silver or personal promises to pay. What in hell would anyone counterfeit?"

"In your case, passports." The security chief held up the 'Michael Pennington' passport. "Here's one."

"Again, why would anyone counterfeit passports?" Medved demanded. "You issue passports to damn near anybody, and the seventy-dollar fee is peanuts. There's no money to be made. What's the point?"

"The point is: we wouldn't have issued a passport to this guy. He's a very seedy character and wouldn't have passed the background check. The only way for him to get into Farside is with a phony passport. We think you supplied it to him."

Medved stared back at them. "Why?"

"Eye-witness identification, and your experience in the passport office for a start. We're going to search your apartment. Give me your keys."

"You can't search my apartment without a warrant," Medved balked.

"The rules of evidence are different in Farside than they are in Nearside," he was told.

"But my apartment is in Nearside," Medved protested. The security chief shrugged, then handed Medved's keys to a subordinate who dashed off, apparently to search the student's apartment.

Five hours passed before the security man arrived back with his detail in tow. "Nothing," he reported, "the apartment is clean as a whistle. There's no paper stock such as you might expect to be used for creating passports, and you can't do those on plain paper. We searched his computer hard drive with no success. There are no files that look even vaguely like a counterfeiting operation — no lists of customers, no printer formats, no documents of any kind. The only thing I can think of is that he's got a removable drive of some sort. What we're looking for could be so portable that there's no trace of it on the machine that gets left at home."

"We've already searched his person," the security chief noted. "He had his laptop with him, but that was likewise 'clean as a whistle', and the portable storage he had with him is also free of anything incriminating.

"His connections to off-site storage facilities we also checked. Clean. We have nothing that even hints at wrong-doing even given our free-wheeling rules of evidence. I guess we let him go."

Arthur Medved was brought from the holding area to a conference room. "Mr. Medved," they told him, "we apologize for having detained you unnecessarily. Although we performed a thorough search of your premises, we found nothing to support our suspicions. You are free to go. We will deliver you to your car or any other place you specify."

In the end, they dropped him off at a campus building in time for his last two classes that day. As he walked toward the parking lot to find his car, he dialed a number on his cell phone.

"What do you know about Farside passports?" he asked his cousin, Lanny Loomis, after the call had connected.

"I have one, if that's what you mean," Lanny replied.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Arthur snapped. "I just spent a middling-unpleasant morning in custody because Farside Security suspected me of being in the 'forged passport'

business.” Arthur couldn’t see it, but on the other end of the call, Lanny’s face had gone white. “They bagged me because of an eyewitness ID. Now, you and I look enough alike to be twins, or at least brothers, so I’m wondering if that eyewitness fingered me thinking I was you. If my cousin were in the ‘forged passport’ business, an eyewitness might be forgiven for thinking that there might only be one such person living in the same general vicinity, so let me ask my question again: What do you know about Farside passports?”

“How much trouble am I in?” Lanny asked conspiratorially. On his side of the conversation, Arthur rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I knocked out a couple as an experiment,” Lanny admitted.

“Where did they go?” Arthur queried.

“Here and there,” Lanny evaded the question.

“Lanny, let me make this so clear even a *putz* like you couldn’t misunderstand: the Farsiders are not going to let this drop. If you’re smart, you’ll disappear, and I don’t mean ‘into Farside’. When they catch up to the person who did this — and I assure you they will catch up with the person who did this — there’s going to be hell to pay.

“My advice? Find all the people you built passports for, get those passports back, and destroy them.”

“I don’t have that kind of money!” Lanny protested.

“Your old man’s a dentist. Get a loan.”

“Besides,” Lanny continued, “I showed another guy how it’s done — for a fee — and he may have made a couple.”

“Yeah, you’re in trouble,” Arthur told his cousin, then snapped his phone shut cutting off any reply.

—==+++==—

Due to the need to develop more and better information regarding the recent appearance of forged Farside passports, the following policy directive is to be implemented immediately upon receipt:

Mismatches with the Farside passport database are to be allowed ingress to Farside, but not egress. All immigration control checkpoints physically situated in Nearside will be moved to the Farside-side of the relevant gate so that any mismatches are detected in Farside.

Holders of mismatched passports transiting into Farside will be detained at the exit of the

checkpoint building rather than at the gate itself to delay warning to accomplices still in line for entry.

—==+++==—

"Mismatch, gate 2, white male adult, Red Sox baseball cap, black rolling suitcase... mismatch, gate 2, white female adult, Virginia Tech sweatshirt, black rolling suitcase... mismatch, gate 2, white female juvenile, pink rolling suitcase..."

"Mr. Carson, Mrs. Carson, would you please follow me?" The security guard moved off to the left followed by the three Carsons who were followed, in turn, by two more security guards. "Leave the luggage outside, please," they were instructed at the door of a conference room. "Are you armed?" Rick Carson indicated the luggage containing their firearms. The six entered the room and took seats around the table except for the two trailing security guards who remained standing.

"Mr. Carson, we pulled you and your family aside because your passports — all of them — do not match our passport database. Can you tell me where and when and under what circumstances you received your passports?"

"We filled out applications, sent them in with a check for the processing fee, and the passports arrived in the mail a few weeks later."

"And where did you get the application?"

"Someone at Susan's job had one and photocopied it for some of the others in the office. Susan brought them home. Is there a problem?"

"There is 'a problem'. Your passports are forgeries." He turned to the woman. "Who, exactly, provided you with the application forms?"

"I don't know who, exactly," she begged off. "There were a pile of forms and I took three for my own use."

"Who else may have taken applications for their own use?" he pressed. Susan Carson began reciting names while one of the other guards acted as a scribe, copying down the names to be cross-checked against the passport database.

"And where did you send the 'application fee'?"

"There was an address on the form. I have a photocopy of the completed applications at home. Are we being arrested?"

"No, merely deported. I presume you're here in Farside because you find the experience valuable?" Susan and Rick both nodded as did their daughter. "If you cooperate with our investigation, you may, sometime in the future, be eligible to have

real, non-forged, Farside passports. If not, not, and we will be filing charges with your postal service for your participation in a mail-fraud scheme." The investigator smiled. Susan and Rick frowned.

"By the way, what brings you to Farside in the first place?"

"It's our vacation," Rick explained. "We spend our free time here in wilderness. We're all back-country hikers and Farside is pristine, if a little on the dangerous side. We've been doing this Summers and weekends for over a year now and I've been making maps of hiking trails, but we haven't seen any brown bears — grizzlies — so maybe it's less dangerous than Nearside." Rick unfolded a hand-drawn map showing the area around the Roanoke, Virginia immigration gate.

The investigator issued a low whistle. "That's beautifully elaborate," he told Rick. "Do you do this professionally?"

Rick shook his head. "Labor of love," he told the security chief.

"You should know that 'cartographic expertise' — and you appear to have some — is considered a valuable talent in Farside. That could be the basis for a successful bid for a real Farside passport.

"For now, however, we're going to escort you back through the gate as we seize these bogus passports. Thank you for your cooperation, and we hope to see you soon, legally."

"What about our cabin?" Susan asked.

"Cabin?" the immigration agent prompted.

"We built ourselves a cabin late last Summer so we would have a place to overnight during the colder months. We can't go back to it? We can't get our supplies out? We have to abandon all that?"

The immigration agent screwed up his face. "I'm sorry. You can't be admitted on the basis of these documents. Somebody has taken you for a ride. It's a shame that you're going to be penalized for the crimes of another. I hope that gives you an added incentive to help us catch those who so took advantage of you."

He escorted the family to the exit gate and saw them all through back into Nearside.

—==+++==—

*The Interior Ministry
Farside*

*Mr. and Mrs. John Spier,
Richmond, Virginia*

The Interior Ministry for Farside requests an appointment for a meeting at your residence at your earliest convenience. The subject of the meeting will be irregularities with your Farside passports.

Please call the Ministry at 303-555-8800 to arrange a time and date for the meeting.

Until your documents are verified by a Ministry official, you should not try to use them for entry to Farside.

*Davy Harmon,
Interior Minister and Minister for Security*

Jane Spier picked up the phone and dialed the number. The call was answered: "Ministry for Security".

"Good evening. My name is Jane Spier. I received a letter from the Farside Interior Ministry asking for a meeting and suggesting my passport is invalid. Am I speaking to the right person?"

"Yes, ma'am," the operator assured her. "Let me connect you."

A moment later, Tony Dinardo picked up the call: "Security, Dinardo. Mrs. Spier? Thank you for calling. I'd like to set up a time and date for one of our operatives to come by your house and verify your passports. When would be good for you?"

"Tomorrow evening would be convenient. What's this all about?"

"Routine security check. When was the last time you used your Farside passports?"

"Oh, it's been months. John and I went through the Roanoke gate in the Spring because someone said the wildflowers were just astounding."

"Who was that?" Tony interrupted.

"Someone John works with. I don't know his name."

"Good. We'll plan to see you around seven tomorrow evening?" Jane Spier agreed and Tony hung up.

At the appointed time, the Spiers' doorbell rang and Jane

admitted their guest, a woman who displayed official-looking ID. She took the passports from John Spier's hand and looked them over, making entries on her laptop computer as she did.

"Yes, indeed," she said, "forgeries. Can you tell me where and how you came into possession of these passports?"

"One of the secretaries, Ellen Lalla, had a blank application and she shot photocopies of it and left them for anyone who wanted to apply for their own Farside passport. I got two, one for me and one for Jane, and we filled them out, sent them in with the \$475 processing fee for each, and the passports came to us in the mail a few weeks later."

"Where did you send the application?"

John Spier opened a folder and began leafing through pages. He handed one over to the agent. It was a copy of the application showing the instructions to send the completed application with the fee of \$475 to

*Passport Services
P.O. Box 16435
Richmond, VA, 23231-6435*

and he followed it with a copy of the canceled check with its endorsement.

"May I keep these?" the agent asked, and John Spier agreed. "Unfortunately, I must seize these passports as evidence, too. While I can almost guarantee the \$950 you spent for these is gone forever, your cooperation may help us to shut them down so they won't scam anyone else." She packed up and left.

Back at headquarters, the agent dropped the evidence on the conference room table. "I say 'hand it over to the U.S. postal inspectors and let them handle it as a case of mail fraud'. They're equipped to handle investigations like that; we're not."

"I agree," Tony Dinardo answered via speakerphone from Boulder, "to a point. I'd still like to know who's manufacturing illegal Farside passports, and I'd very much like to know how many are out there."

12 - Geneviève

When Rand-McNally first floated the idea of an atlas for Farside, it was as if they had offered free money first-come, first-served. Employees from around the world put in for transfers to the 'Farside project' and they did so in the thousands. Armand Rochereau, R-M's vice president for France, took a demotion to get into the project. "It's where all the action is going to be for the next forty years," he told his wife. "If we get left behind it will be the worst mistake either of us could ever make." Audrey Plessey Rochereau didn't need to be convinced.

Because Armand was on a temporary assignment as an employee of a company doing work in Farside he was not expected to homestead land. He lived in a compound with other R-M employees while in Farside and was provided with food and lodging by his employer. Since he was expected to be in Farside for an extended period, Audrey and his daughter Geneviève accompanied him. To them, it was like being on safari. Armand slipped easily into what he had thought were long-forgotten work patterns supervising the collection and cataloging of paired images of Nearside and Farside. The days slipped away so fast he could hardly believe how much time he was spending in Farside, but he was enjoying the experience, and so were Audrey and Geneviève.

Geneviève especially enjoyed taking a sabbatical from her studies at Le Sorbonne and explored the landscape about her father's base of operations, the sleepy little village of Okambo. She still recalled the day she had been exploring out along Westroad and tried to cross the stream to the territory north of the population center.

A middle-aged woman, a 'thirty-something' she recalled someone describing the type, flagged her down as she carefully sloshed her ATV through the water.

"Are you new here?" the woman had asked her.

"*Oui*, yes," she replied quickly correcting her French to English. "I am with the Rand-McNally project... my father is with the project, I mean."

"Ah, I see," the woman responded. "Yours is a face I have not seen around here. Forgive me for being so forward." Geneviève waved her apology away and the woman continued speaking: "I stopped you because you're heading into a much-less populated area where you may encounter unfriendly wildlife and you are not armed."

"Armed?" Geneviève asked with a note of alarm, "you mean... with a pistol?"

"Or something," the woman agreed. "What will you do if you meet a wolf?"

"I suppose I would run away," Geneviève replied haltingly.

The woman shook her head. "You could never outrun a Dire wolf," she told Geneviève, "even on that," pointing to the girl's ATV. "You cannot go into wilderness without being able to protect yourself. Has your father not warned you of the danger here?"

Now it was Geneviève's turn to shake her head and look confused. "No, he didn't, but even so, I am not a citizen here, just a visitor. How would I get a pistol?"

The woman smiled. "You go to the general store and you buy one or you borrow one from a neighbor. You get some instruction in how to use it and you carry it with you whenever you go wandering." The woman put down the shovel she was using to move gravel from the riverbed into her sluice and climbed up onto the shore. "If you wish, I'll go with you and help you select something appropriate," she offered.

"But if I buy a pistol here what shall I do with it when I go back to France?"

"Sell it, I suppose. It will then be 'used' and you might sell it for less than you paid for it, but the difference will be far cheaper than what going into wilderness unprepared might cost you."

Geneviève nodded her agreement. "Yes, perhaps that would be a wiser course. Would you assist me? I've never purchased a firearm before."

"*Certainment*," the woman replied and held out her hand in friendship. "*Je m'appelle Barbara... et vous?*"

Geneviève smiled at Barbara's odd accent. The woman was clearly a speaker of 'Franglais', so Geneviève continued in English. "I am Geneviève Rochereau, daughter of Armand and Audrey Rochereau with the Rand-McNally project," then she paused, wondering. "Barbara... who?"

"Barbara Walsh."

Geneviève looked startled. "Are you not the Queen of Farside?"

Barbara winked at Geneviève. "Sometimes," she told her. Barbara mounted her ATV and the two headed back toward Okambo.

Striding into Moran's General Store with Geneviève in tow, Barbara went straight to the Hunting section. Jerry Moran brushed past the two clerks he employed and moved to intercept them.

"How may I help you this morning, Mrs. Walsh?" he asked Barbara.

"Jerry, I stopped this young lady from crossing into the Great

North Meadow this morning because she was unprepared." Barbara pointed at the girl's waist where no firearm dangled. "There are a few things we need to take care of before we let her go wandering off on her own, don't you agree?"

Jerry looked at the girl's five-foot-four frame and asked her "Have you ever fired a gun?" Geneviève shook her head *non*. "The first thing she needs is training," Jerry said. "After that she can make a better decision as to what she might go armed with." He took his phone and speed-dialed Pat Messier. "Got some time to teach a newbie about guns?" he asked Pat when the call had connected. "Okay, I'll send her over."

"Pat says he can do it right now if she's available," Jerry told Barbara. "I'd take her, but..."

"That's okay, Jerry," Barbara assured him, "I've got time."

Pat Messier also gave Geneviève Rochereau's slight frame a once-over before announcing: "Let's see how she reacts to a .357." He selected a Colt with a 5-inch barrel, checked it for ammunition then placed it on the shelf in front of Geneviève. Geneviève picked it up gingerly and turned toward the target. "It kicks," Pat warned Geneviève. "Hold it with both hands."

She gripped the weapon with her hands as she had been shown and squeezed the trigger. BOOM! The gun kicked back over her shoulder but she managed to maintain her grip on it. A smile spread over her face as she realized the target had a new hole just a few centimeters away from its center. She took aim and fired again. A second hole appeared not far from the first. "*Merde!*" she muttered.

"How does it feel?" Pat asked.

"*Formidable*," Geneviève told him. "It's very powerful."

"Can you handle more?" Geneviève shrugged. Pat took the revolver from her hands and laid it on the shelf, then drew his .44 Magnum from its holster and laid it next to the .357. "Same thing, but bigger," he explained. "Cock the hammer first and get ready for substantially more recoil."

Geneviève took a two-handed grip, used her thumb to bring the hammer back, sighted and (it seemed to her) just barely touched the trigger. Another tremendous BOOM cut easily through the sound-deadening insulation in her earmuffs and the recoil rocked her back on her heels. She put the .44 down.

"No, I think I'll stay with the smaller one," she announced.

Pat turned to Barbara. "Well, that's settled. I'll call Jerry and see if he has a good used weapon for her," then addressing Geneviève he warned her: "Just having a firearm is not enough. You must practice and become proficient. Having a powerful gun is no good if

none of your shots go where they're needed. If you shoot at a Dire wolf and connect with less than two of those shots, you will be dinner, and Dire wolves never travel singly.

"Go get your gun, but don't think it's all you need. Understand?"

Geneviève nodded vigorously. She understood, alright.

In the distance a white dome loomed and Geneviève, her curiosity piqued, turned toward it. For more than a quarter mile around it the soil had been tilled and prepared and plants were growing vigorously, some of them in raised beds or platforms. A few of the varieties she recognized, but there were others that only looked vaguely familiar. The road leading toward the dome was wide, 10 meters at least, and had odd-looking tire tracks where the grass had not covered the dirt. She rolled to a stop and got off her ATV. A man in farmer's overalls opened the dome's door and stepped outside.

"Good morning," he greeted her.

"Good morning. Could I get some water to drink?"

He waved her inside. The sun was already high and the air was starting to get uncomfortably warm.

Inside, he drew two one-liter bottles of water from his refrigerator and handed her one. "Something I can do for you?" he prompted.

"Oh, no, I just ran short of water during my explorations and hoped to find exactly this," she explained with an unmistakable French accent.

"So, you're not here with an agricultural or veterinary problem, then?" Geneviève looked confused so the man explained: "I am Dr. Dante Robinetti. I'm the local agronomist/veterinarian. The farmers and ranchers in the area — throughout most of the Capitol District, really — get the bulk of their farming and ranching advice from me."

Geneviève sat down and took a pad and pencil from her backpack. It had started out as a diary, but by now had evolved to a notebook, and someday would be a book of stories about the people of Farside, but that was still far in the future.

"Do you have some time for me to ask you a few questions?" she begged.

Dante smiled. "I think I might."

Geneviève quickly scratched some notes about the date and time and the subject. "Just tell me about yourself in your own words," she urged him.

"My name is Dante Robinetti. I am the only child of Emilio and Rose Robinetti of Loveland, Colorado." Geneviève scribbled

furiously, often misspelling unfamiliar English words. "I received both my bachelor's degree and my doctorate from CSU in Fort Collins and for a brief time had a veterinary practice near Fort Lupton."

"What brought you to Farside?" Geneviève prodded.

Dante paused, began to speak, then paused again. "One night I joined several friends for a night on the town, and I made a serious error in judgment. I met a young woman who appeared to me to be old enough to legally drink, and she and I wound up sleeping together that night. Well as it turns out she wasn't old enough to legally drink and I got charged with statutory rape. Because of some extenuating circumstances and a very good — and very expensive — lawyer, I got a light sentence and a permanent entry on the sexual predator's database — something I still don't believe was fair.

"Several years ago, I was recruited for the Farside project because they didn't see me as being particularly dangerous to the community they were beginning to form. Of course, as a registered sex offender I had to check in twice a month with my probation officer and all my neighbors constantly gave me the fish-eye whenever I left the house. My veterinary practice folded and I had nothing to keep me in Nearside except the requirement to be supervised by a parole officer. They said I'd never have to go back to Nearside — that I would be prevented from going back to Nearside — and so I escaped into Farside.

"I became the official Farside veterinarian and agronomist for a long while — there are a few more newcomers practicing veterinary medicine these days, but I'm still the only agronomist around. That's why I thought you were here with an agricultural problem.

"Anyway, a couple of years back I got into more trouble, this time in Farside. Let me give you a piece of advice: stay on the right side of the Golden Rule. You won't like the consequences."

"What sort of trouble?" Geneviève asked.

"I fell in love with a farmer's daughter," he said and he winked at Geneviève. "We got married. It seemed like a good match and I was plenty happy with Lisa as my wife. She wasn't, it appears. She had an affair with one of the ranchers. I found out about it and went nutz — fire-bombed the guy's house in retaliation. It didn't even take a week for the authorities to point their fingers at me."

"Did you go to jail again?" Geneviève asked, now beginning to wonder if she was safe in his presence.

Dante shook his head. "There are no prisons here," he explained. "They aren't needed. If you're ejected into the wilderness, you had better be Daniel Boone or your remaining lifespan will be measured in months or weeks. If you're lucky enough and skilled enough to survive a winter your life may still not be worth living — you

won't have any neighbors to interact with. They will all treat you as a non-person.

"No, I didn't go to prison. I had to rebuild the house I burned out of my own funds, and I got house arrest — confined to this place and the land within a quarter mile. I can't leave (and I don't dare defy that order) except with an escort by a Farsider, so I rarely get into town unless one of my neighbors takes pity on me and gives me a ride."

"So, this is your prison," Geneviève offered.

"Pretty much," Dante agreed. "I came into Farside to do agricultural research and that's what I'm doing. As long as I'm valuable to Farside I get to do things I enjoy — like eating and sleeping indoors. One day I may be forgiven for what I did. Until then, I'm happy the penalty wasn't more like what I deserved."

"I'll take you into town if you need an escort," Geneviève offered.

"Are you a citizen of Farside?"

Geneviève laughed. "No, I'm just a visitor. Does that make a difference?"

"It does. The terms of my incarceration are that I am confined here unless accompanied by a citizen. If I were to go into town with you as my escort it might be seen as violating my probation. I wouldn't even consider doing that."

"Well, thank you, Dr. Robinetti, for your hospitality and for telling me your story. May I visit you again?"

"Come back anytime."

"Are there other matters to come before the Moot," Barbara asked and was surprised to see a hand raised off to one side of the Moot Hall. "Geneviève, *bienvenue*. Is there something you need from the Moot?"

"I have come to ask for a clarification, *Majesté*. I recently made the acquaintance of Dr. Dante Robinetti and collected his story for my memoirs. He said he is confined to the area of his research facility and may not leave without escort by a citizen of Farside." She paused.

"That is the punishment levied on Dr. Robinetti by the Moot some years ago, yes. Is that what you wish clarified?"

"It is," Geneviève answered. "I wish to know if I qualify to serve as Dante's escort."

Barbara turned toward Melinda Logan who for years had served as the Secretary of the Moot. Melinda stopped taking notes and flipped pages backward through her minutes until she found the right meeting. She took a moment to review her notes, then said to

Barbara "The word you used, ma'am, was 'citizen' if my notes are true."

Barbara turned back toward the audience. "Our secretary says the word I used in pronouncing judgment on Dr. Robinetti was 'citizen'. As you are a visitor and not a citizen I believe you do not qualify. The Moot, of course, can change that if they wish."

"Please, may we ask?"

Barbara turned toward the assembly. "Mlle. Geneviève Rochereau whose parents are here with the Rand-McNally project asks the Moot to allow her, a non-citizen, to nevertheless escort Dante Robinetti when he leaves the confines of the Ag building. What is your pleasure?"

Leroy Starkweather rose to speak. "What, precisely, is Mlle. Rochereau's interest in this purely-Farside disciplinary issue?"

"I think it's cruel to so isolate someone. In Farside, community is life and you have taken away his community. You might as well kill him."

"I think the *mademoiselle* overstates the case. Dante has many visitors and I have seen him doing his shopping at Burke's on several occasions so he is not entirely without community. Let us recall that Her Majesty imposed that sanction upon him for good reason, and let us also reflect that someday the Moot may release him from his house arrest.

"Further, Dante does important work and receives fair compensation for it such that he is able to send a regular stipend into Nearside for his father's upkeep. If anything, we have been too kind to Dante rather than, as Mlle. Rochereau suggests, too unkind.

"I see no need to adjust Her Majesty's rule."

Barbara looked over the upturned faces of the attendees for signs that someone else wished to speak. No one did. "The rule stands," she told Geneviève. "Are there other matters to come before the Moot?" And hearing nothing she continued: "The Moot is ended. Thank you all for your presence."

—==++++==—

Geneviève stormed into the simple Cape Cod that served as *chez Rochereau* these days, unbuckled her gun belt, and hung it from a peg on the wall. Her mother noticed.

"*Comment allez-vous?*" her mother queried.

"They are so cruel!" Geneviève fumed. "They have placed him under permanent house arrest and he slaves away doing their work! It's as though he's working on a plantation!"

"And who is it who is so mistreated?"

"Dante," Geneviève explained, then seeing her mother's confusion, continued: "Dr. Dante Robinetti, the chief veterinarian and agronomist for this part of Farside. I met him a few days ago. Didn't I tell you?"

"I don't recall you mentioning him. Where did you meet him and what are the Farsiders doing that is so cruel?"

"He is forbidden to leave the Ag dome without a babysitter to make sure he behaves himself. A grown adult, a doctor, being treated as if he were a child!"

"There must be more to this that you're not telling, Geneviève. The Farsiders are fair to a fault. They wouldn't single out anyone for such treatment without some sort of reason. What have you left out of this story?"

"Well, he burned somebody's house down..."

"Deliberately?" the mother asked.

"Yes, deliberately. His wife was having an affair behind his back and he burned the house of the man she was sleeping with."

"*Mon Dieu!* With them inside?"

"No, of course not. He waited until the house was empty. He wasn't trying to kill anyone. You would have been mad enough to do the same, I'll bet."

Audrey Rochereau made a face. "Perhaps in France," she admitted. "Here? I would never even consider it. Farside justice is not to be trifled with."

Geneviève laughed. "*Oui*. Dante already warned me to 'stay on the right side of the Golden Rule'. I'm sure he wishes he had taken his own advice."

"So... what's your interest in this 'Dante'?" her mother prodded.

Geneviève shrugged. "Another story for my collection. His is by far the most colorful. All the others are pretty plain: ordinary people living ordinary lives getting recruited to be pioneers in a primitive land and making their livings by farming, ranching, mining, logging, lumbering, fishing, or retailing. There aren't many who break that pattern.

"Even the Queen pans for gold. At least she's unlikely to end up like Marie Antoinette." Geneviève made a throat-slitting gesture and sound, and her mother laughed.

"Well, be sure not to 'get on the wrong side of the law'," her mother warned. "If the Farsiders have given him a punishment, don't you get in the way of their carrying it out."

"No," Geneviève agreed, "but I did ask the Moot today if I might serve as his escort when he leaves the Ag dome." Her mother cocked her head and raised one eyebrow. "They said 'no'," Geneviève

finished.

"Is this 'Dante' someone your father and I ought to worry about?"

"Not immediately," and Geneviève smiled.

—==++++==—

"I'm not convinced you made the right decision at the last Moot," Ernie told Barbara.

"Regarding...?"

"Regarding Dante and Geneviève. What was the purpose of forbidding Dante to travel without an escort?"

"To make sure he behaved himself," she said.

"Would not Geneviève serve that purpose equally well?"

She paused, thinking. "Yes," she said at last, "she would, with this single failing: The agreement we have with Rand-McNally prevents us exercising the typical sort of jurisdiction Farsiders have come to expect. All we can do, in a practical sense, is to deport any employee or dependent who becomes a malefactor. Were Dante to misbehave while in her charge, how might we penalize her, and in the absence of a way to penalize, what leverage do we have over either her or Dante's behavior?"

Ernie smiled. "We escort her through the gate into Nearside and revoke her passport. Why do you think she asked the other day? She has an emotional attachment to Dante. It's her Achilles' heel."

"I realize that, but that's hardly what I would call 'a penalty'."

"In this case, your opinion doesn't count. If Geneviève considers it a penalty, it is. That's all you need: the threat that she will never see Dante again because neither of them can cross over to the other. If Dante feels the same way, it gives you an extra-long lever."

Barbara reached for her phone and speed-dialed Paul Gillman. "Ask the project manager for Rand-McNally to present himself before the Privy Council."

"Problems?" Paul asked.

"Solutions" Barbara replied.

Dean Buckminster entered the domed Moot Hall and turned toward the seated group he recognized as the Queen's Council. Before he could speak, Ernie waved at him and pointed to an empty chair in the circle. "This is informal, then," Buckminster offered.

"Very," Barbara informed him. She was still in jeans and work boots. "Are you aware of the situation *vis-à-vis* Geneviève Rochereau?"

"Ah... no. What has she done now?"

"Nothing serious," Barbara assured him. "At the last Moot, she asked permission to do something allowed only to citizens of Farside. We turned her down." Buckminster looked confused, so Barbara continued: "We turned her down because we don't feel we have the right kind of leverage over her behavior. That is to say, I don't feel..."

"...and my part in all this?" Buckminster prodded.

"I would like to know whether Rand-McNally would object were Mlle. Rochereau to waive the protections she enjoys under article 14 of our agreement."

"...and submit entirely to Farside jurisdiction?"

"In a word, yes."

Buckminster went silent for a while before speaking. "I would not object. Her parents might, and in that case, I have an obligation to protect them and their interests. I would say that were Mlle. Rochereau to waive her article-14 protections and her parents allow it, Rand-McNally would very likely go along. Very likely, not absolutely positively."

"I should tell you, Dean, that I spoke with Geneviève earlier this afternoon and she indicated she had no problem waiving her article-14 protections. I advised her to discuss this with her parents, something I expect will happen tonight. You may be asked to affirm her act within a day or two. Perhaps you ought to run this up the flagpole to see if anyone at corporate salutes?"

"I'll raise the issue to corporate legal before I go home tonight."

—==+++==—

"This is Barbara Walsh," the voicemail message said. "I want to inform the people of Farside that Mlle. Geneviève Rochereau, resident of Farside Capitol District, today submitted herself to Farside jurisdiction. She had previously requested – and been denied – permission to act as escort for Dr. Dante Robinetti who is confined to the Ag building and environs unless escorted. Because she is now subject to Farside jurisdiction, I have granted her original request. Mlle. Rochereau may now escort Dr. Robinetti."

—==+++==—

Gus Schwartz eased his vehicle to a stop before the Ag dome's

entrance, dismounted, and pushed his way into the cool interior.

"What can I do for you, Gus?" Dante greeted him.

"Weird bug. Thought you'd like to see it." Gus held out a screw-top jar inside which were three beetles trying to claw their way through the glass.

Dante took the jar. "I don't recognize these," he told Gus. "What kind of damage are they doing?"

"Leaf chomping, mostly. Diazinon seems to knock them down easily. I don't think we have to worry."

"Okay," Dante acknowledged his report. "Do you want to name it?"

"No, I don't care. You can give it one of them fancy Latin names. Just don't name it after Anna. I already have a bug named after me." Dante laughed. "So, I hear you have a new girlfriend," Gus poked him.

"I do not have a new girlfriend," Dante fumed. "I have a new acquaintance who is becoming something of a pain in the ass — along with several of my neighbors."

"Well, I hear she thinks she has a new boyfriend," Gus chortled. "Hey, I'm heading into town. Do you need anything or would you like to come along?"

"Yeah, maybe I'll come with you... show Mlle. Rochereau she's not all that necessary."

A few minutes later, the two rolled away toward Okambo, riding side-by-side. At one point during the trip, Dante gave Gus the 'slow down' signal and they both braked to a stop. Dante pulled his phone from his pocket and answered the incoming call. "Hello?"

"Dr. Robinetti?" a woman's voice inquired through a noticeable French accent.

"Yes, this is Dr. Robinetti." He already had a premonition and it wasn't positive.

"This is Audrey Rochereau, Geneviève's mother. Might I have a few words with you?"

"I'm on my way into Okambo, Madame Rochereau," he told her. "Some other time, perhaps?"

"We could meet in town... have lunch?"

Dante gritted his teeth. "Turner's Inn, half an hour?"

"Splendid," Audrey agreed, "Turner's Inn in thirty minutes." The call clicked off.

"What was that all about?" Gus asked.

"I hope she's not the Mother of the Bride," Dante growled. Gus laughed.

Dante rose from his seat when he saw his waiter approach

with a middle-aged woman. He held out his hand. "Madame Rochereau, pleased to meet you."

"As I you, Doctor." They sat and the waiter took their orders.

"You have probably already suspected why I wished to speak with you," she began. Dante nodded his agreement. "Her father and I have heard tales —"

Dante held up his hand. "I want to assure you and your husband I have no romantic interest in your daughter. It's true that I have a somewhat worrisome past, but it should not cause you a moment's concern."

Audrey Rochereau looked relieved, yet at the same time concerned. "Does Geneviève know of your feelings — I should say 'your lack of feelings' — toward her?"

"I don't believe she does. I have not spoken with her since the Queen granted her permission to be my escort. That, by the way, was not something I knew about beforehand. Geneviève did that completely on her own.

"I realize I'm treading on dangerous ground here. I feel quite sure Geneviève thought she was doing something I would approve of, and I'm quite sure she did so because she harbors affection for me. I do not want to hurt her, but I'm afraid there's going to be no way to avoid it. Anything you can do to help here will be much appreciated, Madame Rochereau."

They ate in silence save for a little small talk regarding Dante's work and a dissertation by Dante on the flora and fauna of Farside. Audrey Rochereau insisted on picking up the check.

"To be quite candid, Dr. Robinetti," she told him as they parted, "I would have no objection to you as Geneviève's choice. I'm actually somewhat disappointed that you turned out not to be the *roué* I expected," and she winked, "and at the same time I am relieved.

"If you feel it would not be too uncomfortable, Armand and I would be pleased to have you as our dinner guest some evening."

"Merci beaucoup."

"Je vous en prie."

13 - Dante and Geneviève

"I still don't understand why you invited him to dinner," Geneviève pouted.

"I told you: I found him to be an interesting character," her mother explained for what she was sure was the twentieth time. "Whether you like him or not, whether he likes you or not, I like him, and I'm sure your father will like him, too. Now, go to the Ag dome and escort him here. It's starting to get late."

Geneviève huffed and took her gun belt from its hook, strapped it around her waist, and headed for the door. A moment later Audrey Rochereau heard the motor of Geneviève's ATV start. She turned toward the kitchen to continue her dinner preparations.

From the Rochereau's cottage to the Ag dome via Northroad was over twenty miles and Geneviève estimated it would take her an hour or more. Then she and Dante would make the return trip... another hour. In the nearly-a-decade since Northroad was first cut it had been widened but not much improved. It was now a mostly-flat gravel roadway with seventeen truss bridges spanning most of the creeks along the way. The creeks without bridges were, at this point, crossed by gravel paths over culverts that allowed the stream to flow underneath. The trip could be completed without once having to splash through water.

Geneviève honked the tinny horn of her ATV to let Dante know she had arrived and Dante exited the dome, locking the door behind him. He slid his rifle into a scabbard attached at the front of his vehicle, and a bottle of *Chateau Reine Barbara* into its saddlebag.

On a small marker board near the entrance of the Ag dome Dante scribbled a note informing all who came here that he could be found at the home of Armand and Audrey Rochereau in the R-M compound, along with his cell phone number. He started his ATV and the two motored away toward Okambo. In another hour, they arrived at the Rand-McNally compound, parked their rides, and joined the Rochereaus in their dining room.

Armand poured Dante a glass of wine and the two chatted while Armand served as Audrey's *sous chef*, chopping this-and-that, getting plates and utensils ready. Armand told Dante about the methods his crews used to prepare formal maps of Farside's terrain, and Dante told Armand about the difficulties of farming and ranching in a land where much of his formal education about plants and insects was all but useless.

"On the other hand," Dante finished, "I'll be famous in

perpetuity for the discovery of several new species of plants and animals indigenous to Farside. Right now, scientists in Nearside are trying to determine if our Farside chameleon ladybug can be safely introduced there. It's about half again as large as the Nearside ladybug and wolfs down aphids like they're marshmallows. There's a coating on its carapace that can change color to match its surroundings. It's nearly invisible unless you know exactly what you're looking for."

Audrey and Geneviève announced dinner and they all sat at the table, Dante sandwiched between Geneviève and her father.

"What do you know of the terrain beyond the local area?" Armand asked Dante between bites. Dante admitted that he knew virtually nothing other than the tales and rumors related to him by those who had traveled widely. "The reason I ask is that we're doing some infra-red mapping among our other techniques, and I thought you might be interested to see some of the results. You can tell from the shading what sort of plants are growing in a particular area, can't you?"

"Some people claim they can," Dante agreed, "but I've never gotten too deep into that technology. To me, it's still all very mysterious — not too far removed from magic and witchcraft. Besides, with the differences between Nearside and Farside, we would still need people on the ground to compare the images with the varieties depicted and make some sort of equivalence chart, wouldn't we? 'This shade means strawberries' or something like that, no?"

Armand nodded. "I suppose."

"Where are your people working now?" Dante inquired.

"The field people are working their way up and down the west coast," Armand reported. "It appears there is no such thing as 'San Francisco Bay' in Farside, but there's a beach that runs nearly unbroken for almost two thousand miles from Eureka to Cabo San Lucas. In many places, it's a mile wide between the surf and the inland high ground, and except for the occasional river or stream emptying into the Pacific, a nearly-continuous strip of sand. I've heard that the surf in some places can produce pipelines more than twenty miles long.

"We've already completed a gross overview of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevadas, but we'll have to go back and fill in lots of detail. We'll be at this for another fifty years. In fact, our work will probably never end."

Dante looked at him strangely. "Why do you say that?"

"Over time, communities will form, then turn into towns and cities. New roads and rail lines will be built. Every day will bring changes to be added to older maps. It's a never-ending process."

"Dante," Audrey broke in to their conversation, "it's getting late. Would you prefer to stay over until morning? I don't know that it would be a good thing for Geneviève to be out this late."

Dante glanced at his watch and nodded. "I'll call Turner's Inn and see if they have a room."

"You're welcome to stay here," Audrey protested. Dante began dialing.

Turner's Inn was less a hotel than it was a rooming house. Anyone who recalls what a road trip was like in mid-20th century America would have looked at it and said "Oh, 'tourist home'." The rooms were Spartan in their furnishings, and the guests shared several bathrooms. Aloysius "Al" Turner provided any breakfast you liked as long as it was juice, coffee, scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns or single-serve cereals. It wasn't fancy, but it got you a good night's rest and an early start for a very small charge. For farmers and ranchers from outlying areas with business in or near Okambo, it was ideal. The dining room on the first floor had become the *de facto* meeting place for those seeking a face-to-face meeting with a client or supplier. It was rumored that Al Turner had lent his signature as a witness on more contracts than any other person in Farside. The convenience of it all virtually guaranteed a steady stream of clients, few of whom ever stayed longer than a single night.

As Dante was finishing his morning meal, Geneviève entered Turner's and approached him. "Whenever you're ready, doctor," she told him with a wink.

Dante waved at Al Turner and followed her outside where they cranked their ATVs for the trip back to the Ag dome. An hour later they braked their vehicles to a stop in front of Dante's workshop and home.

"Thank you, Geneviève. I enjoyed my night out. I hope we can do it again soon."

"Well, do I at least get a hug for all my efforts?" she asked, striding toward Dante. Dante opened his arms as Geneviève closed on him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and planted a kiss solidly on his lips.

"You know I don't think of you in those terms," Dante scolded her.

"But you will," Geneviève warned him. "I just have to overcome your natural shyness. What are you going to work on today?"

"Quarterly water samples," Dante informed her. "I expect my first samples will be arriving before lunch."

"Would you like some help?"

Dante paused, then, "Yes, I would. Are you volunteering?"

"I am," Geneviève replied. "I'm thinking of staying in Farside when my parents return. I shall have to have a marketable skill if I'm to have such a request considered."

Dante smiled. "Okay. Come inside. I'll show you what you'll be doing."

Inside the Ag dome, Dante showed her the water quality lab area and the cabinet that held the chemicals and equipment used for testing the samples.

"You will make sure the labels are complete and correct, and log each sample in using this computer," he instructed. "When I'm done with each sample, I will hand you the tray and you will enter the results of the tests in the same way, then place the remainder of any samples in storage over here. Any questions?"

Geneviève shook her head: *non*.

As they were getting the lab area ready, a sputtering noise interrupted them.

"Here comes the first batch," Dante informed her. They both stepped outside.

From the east, an autogyro, a sort of poor man's helicopter, angled downward toward the Ag dome. As it neared the ground, the rotor disk tilted rearward and the autogyro settled into a near-pinpoint landing on the dome's paved airstrip. The pilot dismounted and reached into the cargo area behind the pilot's seat to bring out a rack of test tubes.

"Platte Lake?" Dante asked.

"Inshore east and offshore taken yesterday afternoon. The sample locations are marked on the labels, just like always. I'm heading back to East Platteville if you have anything that needs to go there."

"I have two prescriptions that need to be delivered," Dante told him. "One for the Wilsons and another for the Maxwells. Can you see they get to the right places?"

"My pleasure, Doc."

Dante handed two paper bags to the pilot who stowed the cargo behind his seat. The pilot started the small two-cycle engine and got the overhead rotor spinning gently using his hands before motoring down the airstrip. In the space of a few hundred feet, the rotor was spinning quite fast and the autogyro lifted off the tarmac, then turned toward the east, Platte Lake, and East Platteville. A few minutes later the sound of the engine could no longer be heard.

"Let's get to work," Dante ordered Geneviève.

Midday, Dante pushed back from his lab bench. "Hungry?" he asked Geneviève.

"Yes, and thirsty. What do you do for lunch?"

"How about a 'PBJ'?" Dante suggested.

Geneviève cocked her head to one side. "What's a 'PBJ'?"

"Peanut butter and jelly?" Dante asked quizzically.

"I've never heard of such a thing. Is it any good?"

"Come," he ordered. Geneviève obediently followed him toward the living area where his kitchenette was located.

Spreading peanut butter on one slab of bread and jelly on the other, Dante flopped the two sides together, deftly sliced them diagonally in two and thrust one corner at Geneviève who opened her mouth to take a bite.

She giggled. "That's quite tasty," she delivered her verdict, "but it can't be very healthy. Don't you have any real food?"

Dante pointed over his shoulder with his knife at the refrigerator. "Whatever you can find in there," he said.

In the end, Geneviève settled for peanut butter and jelly, and helped Dante fill his slow cooker with the makings of that night's dinner before the two returned to the lab to complete their analyses. Since the first delivery, six other couriers had delivered more samples and there was now a backlog of work to be done. Dante was glad for the help Geneviève provided, and it appeared she had some talent for the work. They both kept their heads down doing the many tasks involved and neither noticed the onrush of sunset. What Dante did notice was that the normally-two-day job of testing, comparing, analyzing, logging, and compiling the water quality results was being completed much faster than he had ever been able to do it alone.

"I may have you help me every month," Dante told Geneviève. "You're being an immense help with this."

"*Merci beaucoup*," she answered him with a smile. "What will you be doing tomorrow?"

"I'll finish up anything that doesn't get done today and then I can start my veterinary rounds, although I didn't really expect to start until the day after. I'll have to see if I can get someone to come get me a day early."

"Do you have to be escorted for veterinary trips, too?"

"I have to be escorted everywhere unless they wish to bring the animals here," Dante explained.

"Well, I'm here," Geneviève reminded him. "Can't I escort you?"

"Aren't you going home?"

Geneviève pointed at the dark sky visible through the windows. "You wouldn't send me home now, would you? A young

lady? Unescorted? In the dark?"

"Where will you sleep?" Dante demanded. "I don't have facilities for overnight guests."

Geneviève smiled an impish smile. "I don't bite. I've seen your bedroom. There's room for two... if you can control yourself." She winked at him.

"I'll sleep on the couch," Dante told her.

"Oh, no. Me being here so late was my fault, not yours. If anyone is sleeping on your couch, it will be me, although I think you're just being a puritanical *bourgeois* American."

"Think whatever you like," Dante scoffed. "I'm very careful these days about who shares my bed. That little bit of paranoia has served me pretty well."

"Well, then, you have a house guest overnight." She dialed a number on her phone and her mother answered.

"I'm helping Dante with some lab work. It's too late now for me to go home alone and there's still work to be done tomorrow. I'm staying here overnight, and I'll call you when I start home." She hung up.

After another hour or so, Dante called it 'quits' for the night and he and Geneviève abandoned the lab for his living quarters and dinner. They watched a movie on Dante's disc player before he and Geneviève made up the couch for her bed.

As Dante turned to leave, Geneviève stamped her foot and Dante turned back with a quizzical look. "I've done a great deal of work today, Dr. Robinetti," she began. "Don't I even get a decent good-night kiss for all that?"

Dante smiled. "Yes, you do." He took her in his arms and gave her the kiss she had been hoping for.

"Are you sure I have to sleep alone?" she begged.

"I'm sure," Dante confirmed.

A shaft of sunlight sneaked between two slats of his bedroom's Venetian blinds and Dante turned his head to avoid the unpleasant sensation. Next to him in the bed was an obviously-naked Geneviève Rochereau face down and hugging her pillow as if it were a life preserver. Dante slipped from beneath the covers and into a robe draped strategically over a nearby chair. As stealthily as he could manage, he opened his dresser drawer and extracted underwear, fetched a second bathrobe from his closet, placed it carefully on the chair nearest Geneviève, then equally as stealthily opened his bedroom door and exited, closing the door behind him. In the adjoining kitchen, he set to work making coffee and preparing breakfast.

The smell of coffee brewing eventually brought Geneviève out from her slumber. She yawned and stretched, rolled her head to one side and discovered Dante missing. Rising, she made her way to the master bathroom, brushed her teeth using the only toothbrush — probably Dante's — she could find, and, still naked, pushed open the door to the kitchen.

"Aw," Dante objected, "that's not fair. I left a bathrobe for you next to the bed."

Geneviève wound her arms around Dante's neck and kissed him full on the lips. He knew he shouldn't, but he returned the kiss anyway. "I don't need it," she told him. "I'm not ashamed to have you see me in the nude. In fact, I rather enjoy it."

"Geneviève, you're — what? — eighteen?"

"Nineteen. I'll be twenty in ten more days..."

"...and I'm twice that. Why don't you pick on someone your own age?"

"Because I've decided to concentrate on you. Go brush your teeth. I'll keep track of breakfast."

"Go get dressed," he ordered her.

She used my toothbrush, the little witch, he thought as he rinsed the one and only toothbrush in his bathroom, then proceeded to clean up for the start of his day. *But it will be an easier day because she's taking lots of workload from me,* the thought formed, and he smiled. *She's an awful temptation, but keeping her around makes life so much easier...*

In the kitchen, Geneviève was no longer completely nude. She had donned an apron to protect her from grease splatters as she flipped the sausage patties now frying on the stove. Dante picked a fresh wooden spoon from the utensil drawer and smacked Geneviève on an unprotected buttock. She shrieked more in surprise than in pain.

"You'll pay for that," she warned him, brandishing a spatula. "I'll tie you to the bed and use you as I wish until you beg for mercy."

"Get the eggs out."

She slipped her arms around him from behind and whispered into his ear "My eggs are already waiting... for you. We can turn the heat down out here, slip into your bedroom, and turn the heat up in there..."

"I'm going to tell your mother..."

Geneviève let him go and turned back to cooking. "She already knows. That's how I got here." She giggled. Dante soon joined her in giggling. Geneviève opened the refrigerator and took out a package of eggs, broke four into a second fry pan, and pushed the

bread down into the toaster.

"A few more remarks like that, young lady, and you will be in more trouble than you can imagine."

"A few? How many? I only ask because I just want to know how much work is ahead of me."

Dante turned toward her, gripped her behind the neck and pulled her to him for another kiss which she avidly returned. "You're serious, aren't you? This is not simply a game," Dante said, wonderment beginning to replace the fear that had so far pervaded all his interactions with this beautiful French maiden.

"I'm serious," she asserted. "This is not simply a game. I love you, Dr. Dante Robinetti, and I will not stop pestering you until I am your wife. Now, will you please propose to me so we can stop teasing each other to death?"

"I'll have to speak to your father..."

"*Bourgeois* Puritanism again. When we are married, that is the first bad habit I intend to break you of. My father will jump for joy when he hears you've surrendered. After you left for Turner's last night — no, it was the night before last, wasn't it? — he told Mother and me how much he enjoyed talking with you and he congratulated me on making such a good choice. 'Ask my father'... I'm only surprised he didn't ask you!"

She flipped all the burners to 'off', grabbed the lapel of Dante's bathrobe, and dragged him toward the bedroom. With her spare hand, she undid the bow holding her apron closed and pulled it free, dropping it on the floor as she went.

—==+++==—

"I now pronounce you 'husband and wife'. You may kiss the bride." Geneviève leapt into his arms, her arms around his neck and kissed her love. Tears cascaded down Audrey Rochereau's cheeks. Friends and neighbors crowded around to give the pair their heartiest congratulations.

Barbara and Ernie waited until the hubbub had died down before approaching the two. Geneviève turned and curtsied toward Barbara who wagged a finger at her. "Improper," Barbara remonstrated. "The crown is safely stowed in its box."

"Regardless, we are very happy you could share our special day with us, Y... Barbara."

"The pleasure was mine," Barbara assured them. "It was so much a pleasure that I can't wait to give you your present."

"We have everything we need," Geneviève told Barbara, gripping Dante's arm even tighter.

"I know the feeling," Barbara assured her. "In this case, though, I'm taking away something you don't need. Dante, as of this moment you are released from parole. Don't burn down any more houses, please."

Turning to Geneviève, "I expect that you will not give him reason to contemplate a return to the habits that brought you two together."

Geneviève laughed. "He'll never leave my sight, nor I his. I am his and he's mine." She looked at Dante. "Don't worry."

14 - Affairs of State

Luis Reynosa reined his horse in at the front of the new domed building that now served as the Okambo Moot Hall and housed various Crown offices: The Chancellery, the passport office, Tom Plummer's Crown Office for Nearside Commerce, and Tony Dinardo's security department. He had called ahead to make sure Tony would be having office hours today.

Tony rose and extended his hand toward Luis as his visitor entered. "You're very mysterious today, Luis. What's so security-related that it can afford to wait for a face-to-face meeting?"

"I have a problem," Luis started. "My passport application was not entirely truthful," Tony looked askance at his visitor as Luis continued: "I'm married. I have three children. I want to correct those 'inaccuracies' and get my family into Farside. I want to do that very soon." He wore a worried look.

"Why...," Tony started, then paused. "We investigated you, as we do everyone who applies, and we found nothing out of the ordinary. What's going on? What's behind all this?"

"Before I go an inch further, I want your assurance that I will not be deported from Farside," Luis' tone was almost one of pleading. "If I get deported, my life may be in danger, certainly my job prospects, and my family will be hurt."

Tony thought quietly for a few moments. "Let's get Minister Harmon on a conference call," he announced as he started dialing his desk phone.

"I have a situation," Tony advised Davy after the Minister for Security had answered the call. "I'm putting you on speaker." He switched on the unit's speaker.

"I have in my office one Luis Reynosa, a mechanic and jack-of-all-trades. Luis just announced that he fudged his passport application. He has a family that he didn't bring into Farside with him, and he's now worried about getting deported."

"He should," Davy interjected.

"I have valuable information that I want to trade for you overlooking the falsification on the application," Luis added. "I think it's important enough that you'll be willing to trade. I just want some assurance before I open up that I'll be protected against being deported. Basically, I'm asking for asylum."

"From whom?" Davy demanded. Luis remained silent. "You're not giving us much to go on," Davy prodded. "How can we judge the value of your 'information'? How can we know whether it has any

value at all?"

"Look," Luis responded, "I've just given you everything you need to deport me as it is. I'm exposed. Would I have done that if I wasn't trying to make amends?"

"I just don't understand," Davy shot back. "Why lie initially, and why now come clean? And how did you manage to hide your family from our investigators?"

"That's the information I'm willing to trade," Luis answered. "Now it's time for you to match my offer."

"What about your family?" Tony asked.

In response, Luis handed him a manila folder with four completed passport applications: one each for his wife and his three children. "They're with me on this. Issue their passports and you get almost all the rest."

"Almost all?"

"Everything you need," Luis explained, "nothing you don't need."

"I want to run this past the Privy Council," Davy finished. "We'll let you know on which side of the border you'll be reunited with your family."

He hung up and immediately dialed Paul Gillman.

"On the heels of the passport-fraud situation, we have something else: someone walked into Tony's office today and admitted to fraud on his application. Normally, we'd say 'Bummer, dude' and deport him. This one is asking for asylum." Paul laughed and Davy could hear it through the phone. "No, seriously... he says he'll be in danger if deported. He wants to bring his family over to get them out of danger, too."

"Danger from whom?" Paul asked.

"He wouldn't say."

"Deport him," Paul advised Davy.

"That was my first instinct, but he claims to have information to share that we will find interesting or valuable. I'm considering asking Barbara to let him stay."

"Shall I raise the issue to her?" Paul asked. Davy asked Paul to take it forward. "We'll call you back as soon as we have a decision," Paul told him.

Barbara's phone rang a minute later. "Hi, it's Barbara..."

"Your Majesty..." Paul began.

"Oh, I hate conversations that start out like that," she whimpered.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid this is official." Paul gave her the run-down on the morning's events and paused in case there were questions.

"So, our number-one go-to-guy is here on false pretenses, and the only way we'll find out what those are is to grant him immunity from deportation." Paul grunted in acknowledgment. "Summon the council. Bring Reynosa."

—==+++==—

Luis Reynosa stood before Barbara and her council, all except Nell Gruder who was presently in Texas.

"You lied to get into Farside," Oscar recapped Paul's summary of the situation. "Why?"

Reynosa looked at a distant corner of the ceiling as if he hadn't heard the question. Paul answered for him. "He says he'll tell us when he and his family are safe in Farside with no danger of deportation." There followed a long silence while everyone contemplated what they were being asked to do. Finally, Barbara spoke.

"I'll allow it — on the presumption that what Luis tells us is significant. If Luis gets his asylum and then pops some phony-baloney, worthless piece of gossip on us, I'll rule that what I promised was obtained by fraud. In that case, Luis, having perpetrated a fraud will be unable to claim my promise was fraudulent. That's the way the Golden Rule works, isn't that right, Luis?"

Luis bowed from the waist. "Her Majesty will have no reason to withdraw her gift."

"Alright," Oscar prodded, "spill it."

"When my family is here," Reynosa replied, "not before."

The four new passports were rushed through and hand-delivered to the Reynosa family in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The following morning, the four crossed through into Farside at the Albuquerque personnel gate with all their portable worldly possessions.

"I work for the CIA," Reynosa told Tony Dinardo after hearing from his wife that she and the children were through the gate. "I was sent here to find out everything I could about gates and how they work. I've generated more real wealth for myself and my family in the eight months I've been a Farsider than I have in eleven years as a CIA agent, and so far, I haven't had to kill anyone or set the wheels in motion that will end up getting somebody killed.

"I like that. I want it to continue. I think I can do more for world peace and the continued security of the United States here as a Farsider than I could ever do while working to destabilize foreign governments."

Tony absorbed all this slowly, letting it pervade his senses like a sip of brandy. "How extensive is this program?" he asked Luis. "I

mean, you're not the only CIA agent involved in this, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Luis admitted. "That's what I meant when I said, '*almost everything*'. I want the chance to give the others the opportunity, at least, to do likewise. I intend to call each of them and give them a brief time — four hours, maybe — either to exit Farside or to defect to Farside. At the expiration of the warning period, I will give you all their names. If they haven't by then either defected or departed, I don't care what happens to them, but it has to be their choice."

Tony mulled this new development briefly. He was sure he did not have the authority to make the decision he was about to take. "Okay," he told Luis, "I presume you want some privacy, right?" Luis nodded. Tony exited the office and closed the door behind him.

As soon as he did, Tony dialed Steve Okambo Jr.'s number. Steve answered on the first ring.

"Luis Reynosa is about to make a series of phone calls. I'd like to know who those calls go to. Can you do that?"

"I think so," Steve answered. "Let me talk to the phone techs and see what they can do. When do you need this information?"

"I need it yesterday," Tony told Steve. "This is a super-high-priority matter-of-national-security rush job. As fast as you can."

"I'll call you when I have better information," Steve assured him and hung up to start on the task Tony had set for him.

Inside Tony's office, Luis dialed a number in Virginia. "You're about to be compromised," he told the person on the other end, "by me. You have four hours to be gone from Farside or to turn yourself over to the authorities and ask for asylum."

"You god-damned slime ball," the other snarled, "you'll never be safe anywhere you go. I personally will hunt you down and kill you, you and your whole family. You're dead, you son of a bitch."

Luke was always the least likely to take that news well, Luis mused. *Good thing I got him out of the way first*. He dialed the next number and gave the same message to Maureen somewhere in France.

"Why, Luis?" she pleaded. "If you didn't want the assignment, you could always have refused. You could have called in and demanded you be pulled back. They would have extracted you the same day. You know that. Why?"

"I've always been the good soldier, Maur; you can vouch for that, but assignments like this have always involved regimes that had no redeeming value. Can you say this regime has no redeeming value, Maur? You know you can't. You know it's got more value, maybe, than our own, and what are we trying to do? We're trying to bring it down.

"Not me, babe. I'm not going to help rip down a nation that's freer and more open than anything we're familiar with. You know I'm speaking the truth, don't you? Tell me I'm lying. Tell me I'm doing the wrong thing. You can't. You're too honest yourself; that's your problem. That's the 'why' I had to deal with, and it's why you should defect with me. It's the only way for us to stay on the side of the angels.

"Do it, Maureen." Luis hung up.

Luis then called Ben, the third and last person he knew of, although he didn't know where except that it was in North America, and gave him the same ultimatum: in four hours, depart or defect.

"Who else have you squealed on?" Ben demanded curtly. Luis declined to proceed down that conversational path. "That's treason, you know," Ben informed him. On his side of the conversation, Luis shrugged. He was doing what he thought he needed to do, for himself, for his family, and for his country, a country that he now felt sure was making a catastrophically horrible error in international diplomacy.

—==++++==—

"Reynosa made three calls in the space of twenty minutes around the time you alerted me: Luke Painter somewhere in Virginia, Maureen LaMotte in France, and Ben Quigley near St. Louis. Then he went dark, not making another call for almost two hours. That's all we have."

"Okay," Steve Okambo told the tech, "pull the call record for each of their phones for the period immediately following Reynosa's call to them. I want to know if they alerted anybody else."

Steve dialed Tony's number and gave him the information he received from his technician. Tony called the passport office. "Invalidate the passports for Luke Painter, Maureen LaMotte, and Ben Quigley. Detain them at the border if they try to exit. I want that to happen right now. Do an emergency download to all passport control stations."

At the Pauillac passport control station, Maureen LaMotte approached the *chargé d'affaires*. "*Je m'appelle Maureen LaMotte,*" she informed him, "*Je voudrais demander l'asile politique,*" and she handed over her passport.

The *chargé* looked confused. "You are a citizen of Farside," he asked, clearly confused, "why might you need asylum?"

"Irregularities on my original passport application," Maureen explained.

"Come in. Sit down." The *chargé* made an inquiry on his computer terminal to the main passport database and printed a copy of LaMotte's original application.

"What, specifically, here constitutes an 'irregularity'?" he asked.

"Specifically, my employment record is charitably called 'a fabrication'." The *chargé* raised an eyebrow. "My last employer, actually my current employer, is the United States government, specifically, the CIA. I was sent here to spy, specifically to develop information about the operation of the gates. I've decided that I don't want to be a spy anymore. That means I can't go back through the gate. I will be arrested and charged with any number of crimes, I will be convicted, and I will be hung. I am requesting asylum in Farside."

By this time, the *chargé's* mouth was agape. He picked up his phone and pressed a few buttons. Marcel d'Hourtin answered the call. The *chargé* recounted what he had just heard to the Regent who did not appear very surprised.

"As a matter of fact, I just got off the phone with Davy Harmon who warned me that your guest might try either to exit Farside or to seek asylum. Tell Mlle. LaMotte to return home and resume her normal Farside existence and that we will be in consultation with her presently.

"She is not, of course, to contact her employer until authorized to do so."

—==++++==—

Paul Gillman stepped to the lectern to address the gathering composed of the Privy Council, all the ministers including Nell Gruder who had flown home from Pecos-in-Farside at Oscar's request, and several deputies.

"Luis Reynosa made several calls to several people immediately after determining his family to be safe in Farside. Steve Okambo Jr.'s —" he nodded toward Steve Jr. "telephone technicians intercepted the numbers and linked those with names: Luke Painter, Maureen LaMotte, and Ben Quigley. This marked those three as 'probable undercover CIA agents within Farside' and their passports were voided as soon as we could download a corrected database throughout the system.

"Luke Painter seems to have exited Farside almost immediately upon receiving Reynosa's warning. The Roanoke gate log shows him passing through into Nearside barely one half hour after Reynosa's call. We had not, at that point, downloaded the database changes that would have shown his passport as revoked. We had not

yet, in fact, completed the actual revocation.

"Maureen LaMotte presented herself before the Pauillac, France, gatekeeper and requested political asylum about ninety minutes after Reynosa's call to her. Her case is being looked into by d'Hourtin. I expect their decision will be presented before Her Majesty within a day or two.

"Ben Quigley was detained as he tried to exit via the St. Louis gate. He is being held in a secure facility pending review by the Privy Council. His cell phone was seized to prevent him contacting others.

"Painter made one call from Farside to a '202' area code number — Washington, D.C., probably to the CIA or a cut-out. That's all we know.

"Reynosa is, of course, livid that we tried to capture his three colleagues. I explained to him that we were under no obligation, having made no promises to let them escape, and that having one or more of them detained within Farside would exert exactly the kind of pressure upon the United States that we are typically unable, because of the Golden Rule, to exert by ourselves. He seemed unmoved by my explanation. Her Majesty has scheduled a formal audience with Reynosa, the full Privy Council in attendance, for tomorrow. I expect it to be somewhat unpleasant."

—==++++==—

Reynosa entered the Moot Hall and strode resolutely toward the dais. He gave Barbara a perfunctory bow, a gesture Farsiders would universally interpret as not directed at the person of the Queen, but rather at her crown.

"Please be seated." Reynosa took a chair.

"You are unhappy with the way things have turned out *vis-à-vis* your CIA colleagues," Barbara opened.

"That's putting it mildly," Reynosa answered. "I thought I would be able to give them the chance to exit Farside gracefully if somewhat hurriedly. Apparently, I was mistaken. Mr. Dinardo allowed me to be mistaken even though he was completely aware of my intent which was, by the way, one of the conditions under which I made my amends. Or am I mistaken there, as well?"

Barbara looked at Tony for a response. "I was aware of your intent, yes," Tony confirmed, "but to my knowledge no one agreed to allow that. It was not part of the concession Her Majesty offered you. Had you been more open about your requirements, it is possible Her Majesty might have allowed you to *shoo* your cohorts from Farside. You were not. She did not. As far as I am concerned, you were not treated unfairly.

"In fact, one of your colleagues actually made good his escape before we could detain him, and another has chosen to remain in Farside voluntarily. Only one, therefore, has been involuntarily detained. Since all four of you lied on applications for Farside passports, I think you are ill-situated to argue that I 'allowed you to be mistaken'."

Barbara looked back at Reynosa to see if he had a retort. The only thing she could read in Reynosa's face was seething anger. "Are we moving in the direction of a solution?" she asked him. Reynosa looked at her but did not speak. "Are we moving away from a solution?"

"I still think I was treated shamefully," Reynosa answered. "Until we can deal with that, I can't imagine I'll be relieved of the negative feelings I have toward Farside and many of its inhabitants."

Barbara pursed her lips in thought. Everyone let her have the time she seemed to need to compose her words.

"Luis, all of this," she spread her arms wide in an encompassing gesture, "began with your government — and, by extension, you — doing something that friends don't do to friends. I refer, of course, to 'spying'. You came here to spy. That, alone, places you in an inferior position. You do not have the 'moral high ground' here and, quite frankly, I don't see how you might easily regain it.

"I appreciate your desire to become a good citizen of Farside, but you didn't start that journey from 'zero'. You started from a position of serious moral deficit.

"I also appreciate the fact that you really cannot leave Farside and return to your former ex-Farside existence because of your actions on that journey. That presents both you and us with something of a problem: we're stuck with you, and you're stuck with us. If we're all on good terms with each other, that's not a problem.

"You could have simply exited Farside and told your boss you weren't going to spy on Farside anymore. Basically, that's where you are now except that you and your family would not be in Farside. You could have then phoned your colleagues and warned them to bail out before you exposed them, but, again, you and your family would not be in Farside.

"The difference here is that you wanted to be in Farside with your family, and that's what you got. Luis, what do we get? With just you alone, we get a defector whose connection to the CIA will be officially denied. To the eyes of the world, you're an immigrant with a bizarre and barely believable story. With your love and loyalty, we have something else: we have enhanced security because we can now use Maureen LaMotte and Ben Quigley as a prod to get your former

employer to stop doing unfriendly things like spying.

"I would like to think that your love and loyalty might be expressed by recognizing that Farside has legitimate security concerns and that you might help us address those rather than, as it now appears, placing your loyalty to others above your loyalty to Farside.

"The key question here, Luis, is 'how do we get your love and loyalty?' because it appears that we don't yet have it. If we can't get it, I think you're going to find life in Farside much less pleasant than you anticipated. You must answer that question, not to my satisfaction, but to Farside's. When do you think we might have a definitive answer?"

"Stated in those terms, Your Majesty, I can see that I have very little cause to complain," Luis responded, chastened. "Farside has had my love and loyalty for a long time. That is why I decided to act as I did, abandoning my CIA career for my new life here." He turned toward Tony Dinardo. "I accept that you had no obligation to me that you violated and that you acted as you did out of love and loyalty to Farside. As far as I am concerned, we are on good terms."

"As far as I am concerned, we are on good terms," Tony repeated.

"Luis," Barbara finished, "welcome to Farside."

—==++++==—

*The Foreign Ministry
Farside*

*His Excellency Pierre Longstreet,
The State Department*

Three employees of the CIA have been detained in Farside after their exposure as spies. Luis Reynosa, Maureen LaMotte, and Ben Quigley were detained by Farside immigration authorities for passport irregularities, specifically: that they misstated their current occupations and employers when applying for entry to Farside. A fourth CIA agent, Luke Painter, departed Farside ahead of his impending arrest on the same charge.

You are probably aware of the fundamental law which governs Farside. On that basis, the people and the government of Farside deem that you have granted us permission to spy on your government.

Her Majesty's Privy Council would relish an opportunity to discuss with you in fine detail the manner of the future conduct of relations between our two nations. Other relevant officers of your government should also be party to those discussions that would lead directly to full disclosure of the compacts mutually entered upon within the last several years.

The alternative is war.

*Paul Gillman,
Foreign Minister*

—==+++==—

Those of us in the blogosphere have been saying for a year or more what everyone in Washington has been denying: there must be at least one secret treaty between us and the Farsiders. The net effect of that is that it legitimizes the Farsiders' squatting on territory that really belongs to all of us. They're occupying our land, and they're doing it with the consent of our government.

Let's face it. Without us, Farside is nothing. They have no airplanes, cars, buses, or trains. They have no telephones, radios, or TVs. They have no supermarkets. They have no factories. They rely on us for every convenience of the modern world, and they still insist on restricting access to Farside to only those they approve. Screw that!

I say: restrict access to our world! Make it a capital offense to be caught in possession of a Farside passport! Line them up against a wall and shoot them until they agree to open Farside to one and all! See how long they can hold out without us. They'll be knocking on our doors next week.

Farside is ours just as much as it is theirs, and we want our share.

—==+++==—

"We deny, categorically, that any of those you named were employees of the CIA or any other government agency," Pierre Longstreet, Secretary of State, blustered. "To say otherwise is clear evidence that you have been swindled by unscrupulous persons whose motives we highly suspect.

"The United States government has not been spying upon

Farside, and we would be very distressed to discover that Her Majesty's government was spying on us. As you rightly point out, that is not something friendly governments do to each other.

"Anyone in Farside who claims to be an employee of the CIA is either known to you because that person is there as part of a liaison mission, or that person is lying."

"Such things are easily checked," Davy Harmon offered softly. "I'm presuming your government will not object to us checking. We would never suggest, Mr. Secretary, that you are offering us a deliberate falsehood, but it must be admitted the possibility exists that it is a falsehood, nonetheless — that you, yourself, have been deceived."

"How would you go about checking such a thing?" Longstreet asked, but he was met by an uninformative stare from Davy Harmon.

"Revealing that would not be in the best interests of Farside. It is possible, however, and we will check it in due course. Thank you for your time, Mr. Secretary."

They each hung up and Davy turned to his deputy. "How would you handle that assignment?" he asked. "When you have a plan, let me review it before you start."

15 - The Diplomats' Dance

"I think the most secure way to approach this is to make Luis Reynosa prove he knows what he's talking about." Davy Harmon lifted an eyebrow and the deputy continued: "Let's have Reynosa give us a guided tour of CIA headquarters. We'll do a walk-through with viewers and have Reynosa give us a running commentary as to what we're seeing or about to see. If he really works for the CIA, he should know something about what's inside the building."

Davy Harmon smiled. "I can think of fifteen different excuses Reynosa might give for not being able to do that," he told his deputy. "What do we do when he offers us four or five of them?"

"Well, we have more than one person we can run this drill on," the deputy parried. "There's the LaMotte woman from France —"

"They can both use the same excuses: I've never been in this part of the building before... Wow, this sure has changed a lot since the last time I was here... Man, they don't tell us field people anything... And what are you going to say in response? Accuse them of lying? With what proof? No. Get a better plan."

The deputy grimaced in acknowledgment of Davy's points, turned, and left.

—==++++==—

"Mlle. LaMotte," Marcel d'Hourtin addressed her, "you have been summoned back to North America."

"By whom, may I ask?" Maureen responded.

"By the Queen," d'Hourtin told her. "You are summoned to a meeting of the Privy Council at a safe house near Washington, D.C. I have obtained air tickets for your use."

"Is this something I should worry about?" Maureen asked.

D'Hourtin shook his head. "I don't believe so, unless there are further 'irregularities' in your past. Is that something you should worry about?"

Maureen LaMotte laughed. "I have been one hundred percent honest with you, Regent d'Hourtin. If you reported my testimony as I delivered it to you, all is well. It is possible, however, that my U.S. passport may have been revoked when I decided not to continue as a CIA agent."

"That should not be a problem, Mlle. LaMotte. You will be traveling on your Farside passport."

"I didn't realize we had that sort of international recognition,"

Maureen mused.

"Things change," d'Hourtin explained.

Maureen LaMotte's passport was accepted without question at Bordeaux-Mèrignac airport and at Charles deGaulle airport in Paris where she caught her transatlantic flight. When she presented it at Dulles Airport's immigration control desk, she was arrested. Her escort was permitted entry on his Farside passport, but Maureen was whisked away by immigration officials.

Within the hour, Paul Gillman was on the phone with the U.S. Secretary of State to inquire on what basis Maureen LaMotte had been detained.

"Maureen LaMotte was arrested on a charge of impersonating a federal employee," Longstreet told Gillman. "That's all I know at this point. I'll be sure to keep you in the loop."

"Maureen LaMotte was traveling as part of a diplomatic mission. Would she not be accorded the same protections as any diplomat in such circumstances?"

"Miss LaMotte is not a credentialed diplomat. No, she would not be protected by diplomatic immunity," Longstreet informed him, "not even when 'traveling as part of a diplomatic mission'."

"I would like to meet with Miss LaMotte, if that's possible," Gillman asked Longstreet, "either myself or my representative."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. Let me make some inquiries and get back to you."

Later that day, Longstreet called Gillman. "I have arranged for you or your aide to meet with Miss LaMotte," Longstreet told him. "Where may I send a car?"

"That won't be necessary," Gillman responded. "Just tell me where she's being held and I'll have someone go there to meet with her."

"I already asked," Longstreet responded. "I was told her whereabouts was not a topic for discussion. If you want to meet with her, you'll have to let the FBI provide transportation."

Emile Valcour pushed through the revolving door of his hotel and was greeted by a well-dressed man. "Mr. Valcour? I'm your ride."

The car crossed the Potomac into Arlington and headed south toward Alexandria. Emile was not at all familiar with the DC area and didn't know where he was being taken, but the GPS device in his brief case knew. The safe house in a quiet residential area in Old Town provided the perfect spot for sequestering a politically sensitive prisoner. A scant half-mile behind the car carrying Emile Valcour, a truck driven by Tony Cusumano homed on the GPS' signal.

The first requirement for a 'safe-house' is to be unremarkable, and the older two-story on a quiet street in Old Town was nothing if not 'unremarkable'. Emile Valcour was caught by surprise when the car finally pulled to the curb. "We're here," he was told.

Behind them, a rental truck rolled through the neighborhood, the passenger scanning the area through a small type-II viewer.

"What does it look like?" Tony asked his assistant.

"It looks like a river," came the reply. "The Potomac, probably. It seems to be offset from Nearside by a half mile, maybe more. We can't operate here."

"Maybe it will be drier where they're holding LaMotte," Tony offered hopefully.

But it wasn't. As they rolled past the safe house, the image in the viewer was 'water, water, everywhere'. The truck kept moving until it could turn and move away from the Old Town neighborhood.

Inside the safe house, Emile Valcour was led to the basement room where Maureen LaMotte was being held. He introduced himself and shook her hand.

"We're working at getting you free," he told Maureen. Maureen smiled. "It doesn't look good for anything quick," he continued. "Their excuses for why they're holding you are so weak it looks like they didn't even bother trying to come up with anything rational. It amounts to a charge of 'slandering the CIA'. I'm trying to prevent the Security Directorate taking independent action."

In the adjoining room, agents listened covertly to the conversation between LaMotte and Valcour and grimaced at this admission from Emile.

"Of course, if the Security Directorate commences operations it will have to be preceded by a formal declaration of war. Her Majesty will insist on that. In such a case, Maureen, we may not be able to guarantee your personal safety. Things could go south very quickly. Even I might be interned. This administration has been shooting from the hip in all their dealings with Farside. Just put on a happy face and hope for the best. Is there anything you need me to obtain for you?"

Maureen shook her head. "They've been very solicitous. Medications, personal care items, and even luxuries they have willingly supplied me. My phone, not so much."

"Alright. Sit tight and give us some time to work at getting you released." Emile Valcour rose, shook Maureen's hand, then rapped on the door behind him to be let out.

The ride back to his hotel was quick, but not so quick that Tony and his assistant didn't arrive first. "What did you find?" Emile asked when they were behind closed doors.

"The Potomac in Farside does not follow the same course as in Nearside. In a stroke of the absolute worst luck I have ever witnessed, that safe house is in the middle of the river. It would take us weeks to get a platform in place from which to work. LaMotte will have been moved to a second location long before that. In fact, I'd be somewhat surprised to find she hasn't been moved already." Valcour nodded his agreement.

"It might be a promising idea," Valcour mused, "to ask for a daily meeting with her in hopes that eventually they will move her to a place from which she can be recovered."

"Diplomacy will probably be faster," Tony offered.

—==+++==—

Gillman's call was taken by the Undersecretary for Farside Affairs as a way of insulating Longstreet from what he suspected was going to be a fairly unpleasant confrontation. Gillman understood. He had, in fact, wondered when Longstreet would get around to buffering himself and was surprised that it had taken so long.

"Minister Gillman, the State Department is doing everything in its power to smooth this out. Understand that the FBI is not under our control..."

"But you do have the same boss," Gillman interrupted. "Both State and the FBI report to the President. It's not as if you have some sort of inter-branch conflict. You can pick up the phone and call the White House. I'm sure it happens several times a day even in the normal course of business, and I am absolutely certain your call is answered by someone fairly high up in the administration.

"Let me give you some incentive to make the call. We — and I'm speaking here for and with the authority of Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh and her entire Privy Council — we consider what your FBI has done to be a deliberate provocation prelude to war.

"We do not wish to go to war with the United States, and I can assure you absolutely that you do not wish to go to war with Farside. If we find it necessary to close the borders and take up arms, you will find yourselves engaged in a conflict you are ill-equipped to fight.

"If it comes to that, we will not be chopping wheels off airplanes this time. We will be chopping heads off politicians. And let us be clear: it is politicians, not people, who start wars, and it is politicians, not people, who end them. In the meantime, I must insist that Miss LaMotte be released from custody so that our consular personnel may escort her to her meeting.

"My reading of the mood of the Privy Council is that they are ready, reluctantly, to start punching."

—==+++==—

FLASH MESSAGE TO ALL GATEKEEPERS: THE BORDER IS CLOSED OUTBOUND FOR ALL AND INBOUND FOR ALL NON-RESIDENTS. SECURE ALL GATES. BE PREPARED TO EXERCISE SECURITY DIRECTIVE #3. BECAUSE OF SD3, 24/7 STAFFING FOR GATE ACCESS/ SECURITY BEGINS IMMEDIATE AND CONTINUES UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. UPDATES WILL FOLLOW HOURLY OR MORE FREQUENTLY.

SIGNED: D. HARMON, MIN/SEC.

COUNTERSIGNED: P. GILLMAN, FOR/MIN.

—==+++==—

Longstreet addressed the President and his cabinet:

"Farside has closed its border stations, and observers in Nearside report that nobody is exiting Farside and few are entering. Apparently, if you do not have a valid Farside passport you will be turned away if you try to enter Farside. They've gone to ground. There is no doubt they are preparing for war, but we have not yet received formal notice of the opening of hostilities."

The President looked at his National Security Advisor who took the cue to begin his briefing:

"At this point, it's 'posturing'. Nobody at NSA thinks they will start a war over one detainee, but if they do, we have assets in Farside to deflect the blow. Farside authorities have not, it seems, shut down communication channels, so we can still contact our undercover forces.

"Six gates have been targeted for take-over and troops are standing by ready to cross into Farside the instant the gates have been secured. It's possible the take-over of some of the six gates may not be successful. Our plans cover, we think, all the more plausible scenarios. All the targeted gates are paired gates. That is, there are multiple gates at each targeted site. This allows us to move a gate into Nearside at any secured site. We've wanted our own gate to examine for several years now. This may be our chance. This may be our only chance. It's all or nothing. Go for broke."

"But we're not going to hijack a gate unless and until hostilities break out, is that right?"

"That is our plan," the advisor agreed, "but we have assets in place waiting for the green light just in case."

The President smiled. "So, the object of the exercise is to get them to strike the first blow."

"Correct."

"And if they don't?"

"Plan 'B'," the adviser answered. The President's expression invited him to continue. "There's always a way to get them to strike first. Eventually, they will have had enough and they'll decide that everything that has already happened amounts to a 'strike' and they'll strike back. We then put our *surprised faces* on: *what did we do?* At that point, we have our excuse."

"So, for now we wait?" the President asked.

"Exactly."

—==++++==—

In Farside, the Potomac flowed roughly parallel to Nearside's Potomac but displaced between a mile and three-quarters of a mile to the southwest. In both universes, there was dry land where the CIA's headquarters building sat. After all the other disappointments related to working within the District of Columbia, this was a delightfully welcome change. It meant that Davy and his crew could make plans and expect to implement them.

As he had done with the NSA lab in New York City, Davy's crew now constructed a four-inch pipeline from the Potomac-in-Farside to the CIA complex, some seven hundred feet. A survey crew had already located the main plumbing lines for the building in a crawl space near an accessway to lower floors of the building. Without heavy equipment to do trenching, they wouldn't be able to gain access to those lower levels, but the water could. Davy knew that he could simply slice those pipes and use the CIA's own water to flood the basements, but it would be too easy to just turn a valve which, knowing the CIA, they could probably do with the flick of a switch.

Davy wanted the flow of water to be under his control. As in New York, the pipe began with a bend reaching down into the river and was capped at the end by a rope-operated valve. Nearby, an upward T-fitting with its own valve allowed the pipe to be pre-filled with water so that a siphon would start as soon as the two end-valves were opened. At hundred-foot intervals, additional valves were installed to allow the pumps to fill those sections of the pipeline that had already been finished. At the terminal end, a third crew dug a pit to allow the delivery end of the pipe to be below the river's surface, the other necessity for a siphon.

When the pipeline was complete and filled with river water, the valve on the T-fitting was closed, the river-end valve was opened, and a small gate at the CIA-end was powered on. When the valve on the CIA-end was opened, the water started flowing immediately,

pouring twenty gallons per minute into the CIA's basements.

It wasn't a great deal of water, but it was enough that it was noticed within the first quarter-hour. In the basement were stored the servers that handled the CIA's internal computer network, and they were for the most part unattended because their operation was so automated. In fact, the 'server farm' typically operated in complete darkness, there being no need to provide any visibility. Because it was in a basement, water sensors protected the expensive equipment and they did so by triggering multiple alarms in the control center. The responders quickly found the source of the water and began their investigations by opening the plumbing closet and trying to locate the leak with their flashlights. As soon as the beams of their flashlights started sweeping the pipes above, the CIA-end valve was shut and the gate powered off.

The CIA maintenance crew would find the highest wet spot in the plumbing closet, but they would not find any leak. They would be able to speculate on its cause but not prove it.

—==+++==—

A swamp boat skimmed the surface of the swamp that corresponded with Washington D.C. in Farside, its pilot carefully picking a route through the hanging foliage while his navigator signaled with his hands to turn this way or that. For most of the trip, the image in the viewer was of pavement and lawn just a few inches below the navigator's eye-level.

"Slow," the navigator cautioned, then signaled for a left turn. "Right here," he said, finally.

Climbing down from the raised seat, he squatted in the bottom of the boat and carefully turned so the viewer would give him a 360-degree panorama. When he was satisfied there was no one in view, he switched the power setting to 'full' and plunged the device into the muck next to the boat. After a few seconds, he lifted the frame out of the ooze and switched the power setting back to 'viewer'. Once again, he scanned the area in a circle to satisfy himself that the White House kitchen floor was now covered in smelly swamp water.

"We're done here," he told the driver.

—==+++==—

A Cessna 172 cruised as slowly as the pilot dared — 50 knots — two hundred feet above the ground while the bombardier watched the landscape roll by beneath them. In front of the pilot, a viewer offered a straight-ahead view for navigation. Next to the bombardier, a picnic cooler sat inside a small framework taped to the floor of the

airplane. A half dozen Styrofoam blocks lifted the cooler an inch off the floor.

"Get ready," the pilot ordered. Ahead of him the distinctive shape of The Pentagon told him he was on course. "Ready... ready... drop."

As the aircraft crossed the innermost ring, the bombardier pushed the button to briefly power the gate on. The plastic cooler plunged through the hole into Nearside, accompanied by six fragments of Styrofoam and arced toward the inner courtyard and a copse of trees. The branches of the trees slowed the cooler's fall and allowed it to fall relatively softly to the ground where the top cover separated from the rest of the cooler. Alarms began to sound throughout the complex. The Cessna continued on its path unseen by anyone or anything on the ground in Nearside.

A bomb disposal team responded to the scene almost instantly and set up blast-proof walls around the device. A robot was sent in to get a closer, more detailed look. The images the robot sent back were of a completely empty plastic box, its lid lying several feet away. On the grass nearby, the robot found a stiff cardboard sign on which was printed a single word: "BOOM!".

—==+++==—

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Gillman protested to Longstreet. "Farside doesn't have an Air Force with which to carry out bombing raids. It is possible some independent actors are at work here, but let's be serious for a moment, shall we? A picnic cooler dropped from an airplane or any other vehicle is hardly what any sensible person would call 'an attack' despite any warning messages that might have been connected to it.

"It does, however, illustrate what I said to you a few days back: you are ill-equipped to fight a war with Farside given that we can, if forced to such an extreme, attack at any time and in any place without you having so much as an instant of forewarning, and you will be unable to strike back.

"You have and have had an opportunity to avoid war. That you haven't taken full advantage of that opportunity is telling, don't you agree? What conclusion can anyone in Farside draw from your apparent disdain of a chance to live in peace with your neighbors? I'll tell you what conclusion is being drawn: Farside concludes that you are not interested in peace, that your primary interest is rather conquest. If we are wrong, you need to demonstrate that wrongness and you need to do so quickly. If, instead, you give us evidence for our suspicions, I solemnly assure you you will be ankle-deep in

Nearside blood before you have a chance to offer your surrender. Don't go there." Gillman hung up, not giving Longstreet a chance to respond.

—==++++==—

"Don't go there," the recording ended. Longstreet turned to the rest of the President's Cabinet.

"The government of Farside is quite young as governments go. They have not yet developed the diplomatic skills that allow one government to send messages to other governments without actually saying anything." A chuckle rippled through the room. "Because of this, they leave themselves at a diplomatic disadvantage as in this case. By dropping that picnic cooler on The Pentagon and following that with Gillman's words, they have effectively declared war upon us, possibly without realizing it.

"We are now entirely justified in commencing operations against Farside. Fire when ready."

The Secretary of Defense pressed a few buttons on his phone. "Taken care of," he confirmed.

A phone rang in Wichita Falls, Texas and was answered with an expressionless "Yeah".

"Green light," a voice on the other end announced. "Oh-one-hundred Zulu."

At precisely seven p.m. that evening, four well-dressed men and one woman pushed through the main door at the Wichita Falls, Texas immigration point where the two gates had been set for 'view'.

"The gate's closed for outbound traffic," the attendant informed them.

In response, the five produced firearms and pointed them at the lone gatekeeper. "Not for us," their leader barked.

The attendant looked somewhat startled at first but seemed to recover quickly. He casually waved toward the six cameras covering the gate area. "It's all being observed," he informed them calmly. "I don't control the gate directly. I just signal the control room and they open the gate." The attendant smiled as if he just announced 'checkmate'.

"Where's the control room?"

The attendant shrugged. "I don't know. I don't work 'control'. It might not even be in Texas.

A raider turned toward the gates and began stripping insulation from wires so that the power-on chip could be bypassed. At that moment, all ten chips — five on each gate — popped, propelled

by dabs of explosive material hidden behind them. The raider with the wire-stripper jumped back at the sight and sound of ten mini-firecrackers going off simultaneously.

"What just happened?" the leader demanded.

"That was the sound of your operation going up in smoke," the gate attendant told him as a team of armed civilians entered the building. "You're under arrest. Put down your weapons and put your hands in the air."

The strike-team leader aimed his pistol and fired, first at the gate attendant who ducked behind his desk, and then at the militia team charging them. The militiamen stopped, took aim, and shot the five raiders dead.

—==+++==—

"See this?" the technician asked pointing at the photograph. "This seems to replace the 'power-on' switch of which there aren't any on this particular gate. There looks to be an antenna of sorts taped up along the back of the frame. We're talkin' 'major crude'. This is totally amateur.

"I suspect power is switched on and off remotely, either through this device or the matching one on the other side, although the other one also has separate leads going to each control node. Either one could be the 'power on/power off' controller. I don't know and there's no way for me to determine.

"My advice, however, is to take both devices out of the circuit on all the gates in the area just in case. After that, you can hotwire the power to your hearts' content."

"If we have time..." the observer noted.

"Of course... if you have time."

At eight o'clock that night, a raid team entered the Indianapolis immigration gate building. One raider went directly to the control room and executed the two clerks there while the remainder attacked the gates with wire cutters.

In the remote control center, controllers frantically raced to disable the gates. One of the raiders put his hand on top of the gate frame and swung through to find the wires on the other side. At that moment, the controller sent the 'power on' signal for the gate, and the unlucky raider's body was severed into two parts, both furiously squirting blood. Then the controller sent the 'destroy' signal and the one remaining intact gate committed suicide.

With only one gate still intact, the raiders could no longer pull a gate through. Their mission was a failure and they had lost a man. They knew if they stayed in Farside they would be found, tried for

murder, convicted, and executed.

Their lead tech quickly stripped two wires and twisted them together. The gate came active. Two of the raid team picked up the two pieces of their fallen comrade and they all passed through the gate.

Moments later, a militia squad arrived at the gate building and found the active gate. Examining it, they also found the twisted wires and disconnected them, closing the gate.

—==+++==—

Longstreet's secretary buzzed him. "Paul Gillman on line two," she announced.

Longstreet picked up the phone. "Minister Gill..."

"We are at war," Gillman told him before brusquely hanging up on him.

—==+++==—

Emile Valcour's diesel Ford pickup towed the trailer carrying his boat down a dirt road leading to the James River until he arrived at the gate. Passing carefully through the giant opening onto another dirt road, this one in Farside, he continued for another two miles to a rocky beach where he wheeled the rig around and backed the trailer into the water. His crew clambered aboard the boat and made ready to depart.

It had taken several weeks of part-time labor to cut that road-to-nowhere but the work had been undertaken almost immediately after the four scientists had escaped from Hammburg. Mark Hamm was sure that it would be needed one day, and today was that day.

From their starting point near Hog Island, they had more than twenty-five miles of the James to navigate before they arrived at Hampton Roads, but once there their task was simple.

Using a small gate affixed to the end of a long pole, Emile sailed his power boat alongside a vessel in Nearside while one of his crew scored that Nearside vessel below the waterline. In the space of thirty minutes, sixteen destroyers, five cruisers, two aircraft carriers, and seven dry docks went to the bottom still moored. A shore party made a foray to the nearby Naval Air Station and inflicted small damage, much of which would not be discovered until the engines were started, to several dozen planes. The Navy would wind up doing stem-to-stern maintenance on every aircraft on the field before allowing any of them to take to the air.

Senator Dora Murphy-Rollins reached over to turn out the light

on her bedside table and her hand fell off. At least, that's what it looked like to Dora. One second her hand was attached to her wrist, the next it was lying on the bedroom rug leaking blood while her wrist spurted blood all over everything. She screamed and gripped her stump as hard as she could until her husband arrived and took over.

At the hospital, the ER staff called in their best micro-surgeon.

"Cleanest God-damned cut I've ever seen in my life," he remarked. "I can reattach this one easily."

The following day the Senate passed a resolution condemning those who would try to steal gate technology from the Crown of Farside and reiterating their four-square support for a peaceful resolution to any conflicts.

16 - The Gatekeepers' Guild

"What shall we do for your birthday, Princess?" Ernie asked Penelope.

"Oh, do I have to work that day? Because you know, Daddy, that I'm not a Princess when I'm not working." She winked at her father. Buck laughed.

"But you're always my princess, working or not." Ernie leaned down and gave her a big hug.

"In that case, I would really like to see the mammoths in real life."

"I think that could be arranged," Ernie mused. "Maybe we'll make it a family vacation." He dialed a number on his phone and waited until it was answered.

"Where would the best place be to see mammoth in the flesh at this time of year?" he asked.

"Minnesota or the Dakotas, I would guess," the aide responded. "Do you need a more precise answer than that? I can put a surveillance airplane up and pinpoint the herds if you want."

"Penny wants to meet a mammoth live as her birthday treat," Ernie explained.

"I'll call Sioux Falls colony and have them give me a forecast. Will you want a car and driver?"

"Probably," Ernie confirmed. "I expect the whole family will be there together. Better make it 'three cars'."

"Will do."

Ernie next called the Clancys. Peg answered the phone. "We're going to the Dakotas to see the mammoths next week. Would you and Moira want to come along as baby-sitters?"

"Love to," Peg bubbled, "and Moira will get a big kick out of it, too. When do we leave?"

Ernie's finger traced along the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall to check Barbara's schedule over the next two weeks. "I'm guessing Thursday or Friday next," he answered somewhat distractedly. "Right after the Moot we'll probably fly up and have cars waiting for us when we get there."

"I'm already packed," Peg told him.

—==++++==—

"Anything else?" Barbara asked the Moot, and seeing no hands raised for recognition, finished: "Thank you all for coming."

The hall rose and began to sing:

*Peaceful the life of our people.
Freedom the air that we breathe.
Justice the goal of our fellows.
Mercy the legacy we leave.
With strength we defend our conviction.
With hope we disperse all our fears.
With joy in our heart
We link arms at the start
For our journey will last all our years.*

She waited until the anthem finished then stepped back from the microphone and slipped the ring from her head, placing it carefully into its box.

"Happy birthday, Princess Penny," Paul Gillman offered.

"Thank you very much, Minister Gillman. Will you be coming with us on our trip?"

Paul shook his head. "No, I make it my policy not to intrude on family matters. I do hope you enjoy yourself, but be careful. Mammoths are said to be very docile, but that might not apply to all of them. Pay attention to your father and mother and be an example for your classmates to emulate."

"I will, Minister. I'm looking forward to hearing the rest of the story you started last week about the Ottoman Empire and the Great War."

Paul smiled. It was good for a teacher to hear that his efforts were appreciated, especially by sixth-graders who were traditionally not terribly other-centered. Ernie and Barbara — and Buck, he added as an afterthought — had done an excellent job raising a rambunctious soon-to-be-11-year-old and he was certain they would do as well with Eugene, Deirdre, and Mark trailing behind her.

"I'm *outahere*," Barbara announced to Paul, extending her hand. "You're 'it' until we get back from vacation. Call me only if you think it's a necessity."

She took a few moments to change out of her gown with Peg's help, and stepped back into public wearing her favorite jeans. The party of nine boarded a mini-bus outside the Moot Hall for their trip to the airstrip where Dennis' Cessna Citation Ten waited for them.

The pilot saluted Barbara as she mounted the stairs. "I understand you're my co-pilot this morning?" he asked Barbara. She nodded and moved into the right-hand seat to begin pre-flight checks.

The 500-mile trip between Boulder and Sioux Falls took barely

more than an hour. At Sioux Falls, a trio of SUVs waited for them. Barbara released the pilot and the plane with instructions to fly them all home eight days hence.

"There are at least six medium-to-large herds about forty miles north-northwest and four more about twenty-five miles east," the local expert informed them. "My advice is to stick with the smaller herds — the *eight-to-fifteeners* — because they're less likely to get *antsy*. I don't know why, but the bigger herds always seem to be less friendly to outsiders. If you'd like a smaller group, there are two or three about ten miles south. That's what I'd recommend."

"Are you saying the animals become aggressive in larger numbers?" Barbara asked.

"No, not 'aggressive'," the expert clarified. "Let's say they get careless. I've seen some accidents. You're safer with smaller herds."

"Then let's go," Ernie encouraged the group. In twenty more minutes, they were rolling southward toward several small herds of woolly mammoth still lumbering northward as summer came to its peak. In another few months, the herds would all turn east into Minnesota and Wisconsin before heading south again.

Following the articles in *National Geographic* and *Conde-Nast Traveler* highlighting the Farside Woolly Mammoth several people had applied for permanent entry to Farside citing their occupations as 'mammoth wrangler' or 'wool gatherer'. The immigration staff got a chuckle out of that, but approved the applications anyway. Over the past decade, mammoth wool had gone from 'scientific curiosity' to 'trendy fashion innovation' to 'winter gear necessity', first for being rare, then for being more effective than goose down for keeping a body warm. Several thousand professional mammoth wranglers annually descended upon the migrating herds as they turned north in the Spring and they made a handsome living off collecting, processing, and exporting mammoth wool. In the off-season, they often functioned as guides for curious Nearsiders wanting to experience the closest thing to a true Pleistocene environment anywhere on Earth. In fact, it had been Farside's unique fauna and the resulting clamor among Nearsiders that had finally moved the Foreign Office to approve 'tourist visas' for Nearsiders who did not intend to move to Farside 'more-or-less permanently'. It had been a gold mine for a newly-formed tourist industry in Farside.

A quarter mile ahead of the advancing herd numbering a mere thirteen — two older bulls, one younger *alpha* male, four cows and six calves — the quartet of SUVs rolled to a stop widely separated to allow the herd to come to them. Buck, Ernie, and Penelope climbed onto the

roof of their vehicle, Barbara and Eugene on another, while Peg and Moira watched the procession with the younger children from inside their vehicle.

The herd, already largely stripped of their Spring molt, looked rather slender for mammoth, but being 'old-timers' they recognized the garden rakes held by the adult humans as an opportunity for a scratch. One by one, they sidled past the SUVs as both wranglers and tourists stroked them gently with the metal-tined rakes.

In the late Spring, as temperatures rose, their winter coats would become loose and the rakes wielded by the wool gatherers would strip the wool in clumps from the docile animals making it unnecessary for them to find a convenient tree for the same purpose.

Now their mostly unprotected hide called for softer treatment, but the mammoth seemed to appreciate the attention even from the amateurs who may not have been as gentle as they ought.

"My God, they stink!" Barbara called over to her husband. Buck, Ernie, and Penelope turned toward Barbara and laughed out loud, Buck's booming *guffaw* most prominent. At this, the cow Barbara had been raking turned her head to follow the unusual sound. The huge tusks swung across the roof of Barbara's SUV high enough to miss Eugene, who ducked anyway, but not high enough to clear Barbara. Instantly, she was swept off the roof of the truck and fell to the ground at the feet of the mammoth cow.

The Chief Wrangler was at her side in seconds to push her under the truck as a way of protecting her from a careless step by an 8-ton pachyderm, but he needn't have worried. The mammoth cow, realizing she had something underfoot, carefully edged away from the truck and wandered off with the rest of the herd.

"Are you alright?" The Chief Wrangler asked Barbara.

"My left leg hurts," she admitted.

The wrangler started probing her left leg until she winced and cried out in pain. "You broke it," the wrangler informed her as Buck, Ernie, and Penelope raced up to assist. "I'll go get a stretcher."

He returned in minutes with a field stretcher that he quickly assembled. The men gently moved Barbara onto the stretcher and carried her to the wrangler's Jeep now rigged to accommodate it.

The caravan turned north to head back toward Sioux-Falls-in-Farside. Ernie rode with Barbara.

"I can't believe it," Barbara wailed.

"You're lucky it was only your leg," Ernie commented. Barbara looked at him. "It could have been your back," Ernie continued. "It could have been your neck. You could have been killed by the fall."

"I'm fine," Barbara snapped. "It's a simple broken leg."

"You have a family that needs you," Ernie retorted. "You have an entire world that relies upon you. Where would we be if there had been a sharp rock in the wrong place today?"

Barbara grimaced. "You're right. I'm sorry I snapped. I'm actually angry at myself for being so careless."

"Good," Ernie continued. "While you're in a receptive mood, there's something else I want you to think about." Barbara looked at him intently. "There's only one person we know of who can build a gate — from scratch: you. This accident today could have been a disaster on several fronts: a family that loves you would be devastated, and a world that depends on you for its continued existence would have been put on the road to oblivion."

"I need to share the knowledge, don't I?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Ernie nodded silently. "It almost doesn't matter who, but somebody needs to know... just in case of calamity."

"Do you have any suggestions?" she asked.

"I do not, but it should be someone who can understand the physics and the mathematics. Whoever it is, I bet that you already know who."

She smiled. "I do."

It was a break, but it wasn't a bad break. The doctor at the dispensary had Barbara in a cast within hours, and dosed with pain killers before that.

"Avoid putting pressure on it for the next six weeks and go easy on it after that. Take your meds as directed. Use the wheelchair whenever possible. The crutches are for when that's not possible. Enjoy what's left of your vacation."

Barbara huffed at the doctor. "No, I think this just turned into a 'working vacation', doctor. I'll just slow these other mammoth hunters down if I go into the field with them. Besides, I have several tasks that have just popped to the top of my priority list."

"As long as you're sitting," the doctor agreed.

Her email to Paul Gillman came as no surprise. The hospital had notified him as a matter of routine as soon as they were told Barbara was on her way to be treated for injuries sustained. The content of the note was a surprise.

Paul, please set up a family-style dinner date with Dan Murphy and his family. Schedule at their convenience for after our vacation. Find their address in my desk calendar.

Do the same for Dr. and Mrs. Robert Larreau of UCB, but not the same date as the Murphys.

*Thanks,
Barbara*

Tricia picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Good morning. My name is Paul Gillman. I am the Foreign Minister for Farside. Am I speaking with Mrs. Murphy?" Tricia agreed he was. "I am calling to extend an invitation to dine with Her Majesty and her family at your convenience."

"I'm flattered," Tricia admitted. "I didn't know we were still remembered."

"Her Majesty forgets very little, and never her friends," Paul assured her. "If you let me know what date and time is convenient for you and your family, I will be pleased to make all the other arrangements."

"What's this all about, Mr. Gillman?"

"I honestly have no idea, Mrs. Murphy. I received a note from Her Majesty yesterday afternoon asking me to set up dinner with the two families after the Walshes return from the Dakotas but with no further clarification. She did indicate it was to be 'family-style', so no need to dress up. I presume the Walshes will be in casual attire and you should be as at ease as you would at your next-door neighbor's barbecue. Any date after Friday-next."

Tricia was all the while scanning her calendar for an open date. "How about Saturday-next?"

"Saturday-next it is," Paul agreed. "If you wish, I will assign someone from the Foreign Office to pick you up at your convenience. If you would like to see some of Farside before dinner, your escort will be able to give you a tour in whatever depth you desire."

"Noon?" she asked.

"Noon Saturday-next your transportation will be outside your front door."

Mrs. Larreau had a very similar conversation with Gillman later that day and opted for dinner the Tuesday following but without the tour.

As promised, at noon the following Saturday a heavy-duty

military vehicle somewhat like a Humvee pulled to the curb outside the Murphy residence. Dan and Tricia and their two girls boarded and the truck rolled away toward the County Road 28 equipment gate.

For the next five hours, they lumbered through the landscape northeast of Okambo visiting the farms and ranches west of Platte Lake, stopping occasionally to talk with farmers and ranchers, and often being invited for refreshments and tours. As the shadows began to lengthen, the truck turned southwest toward the town of Okambo where dinner awaited.

In the dozen years since the founding of Farside, many of the earlier settlers, having made small fortunes from mining and other pursuits, had upgraded their original cabins to modern dwellings, many of them products of Tester-Cameron Builders, a firm partly owned by Dennis Cameron. Barbara and Ernie kept their cabin at the riverside and had Tester-Cameron build them a more formal structure closer to the Okambo town center, a building the locals now casually referred to as 'the palace'. It wasn't anywhere near as grand as the name might imply, but it was a pretty nice place to hang one's hat.

It was here the truck brought Dan, Tricia, Jane, and Grace Murphy in time for 'cocktails and clean-up' as Buck called it when he greeted them at the door.

Jane Murphy paired up immediately with Penelope while Grace became Eugene's charge. "These are our guests," their father prepped Penelope and Eugene while they waited for the Murphys to arrive. "It's important that you make them feel welcome enough to want to come back, yes?" and both Penelope and Eugene agreed that they understood the duty their father had placed on them.

This gave the grown-ups a chance to mingle on the back deck where a grill smoked under steaks and chicken parts. Buck and Ernie watched as Barbara, Dan, and Tricia caught up after a separation of a dozen years or more.

"What did you do to your leg?" Dan asked pointing to the outstretched limb and the wheelchair.

"Accident," Barbara explained. "A woolly mammoth cow got distracted and managed to sweep me off the top of an observation truck with her tusks. I hit the ground both hard and wrong. Even so, I was lucky to only break a leg. Several people have pointed out that it could have been much worse."

"I'm surprised everything is not more... 'regal'," Tricia noted with a hint of a laugh as she glanced around her surroundings. "We were told you were the Queen of Farside."

"I am," Barbara explained, "but it's much more an honorary position than it is real. For all but a few hours each month I'm just

'Barbara Walsh'. Those other few hours I am 'Barbara Regina the First of Farside' and I function almost exclusively as Farside's Chief Magistrate. I preside over the local moot and I get the final voice concerning policy decisions here and at seventy-two other colonies scattered hither and yon.

"That is largely because I created this place and I'm the only person we" — she indicated herself, Ernie, and Buck — "know of who knows the secret handshake that creates the interdimensional gates.

"That brings us to the reason you're here about to enjoy the finest Farside beef and poultry. Tell me: have you ever considered emigrating to Farside?"

Dan and Tricia looked at each other before looking back to Barbara. "The thought crossed our minds briefly," Dan admitted. "We very much wanted to, but our impression is that this is — or was — a largely agricultural community. Neither of us is quite cut out to be a farmer."

"It started out as an agricultural and mining operation, but that was a long time ago," Buck responded. "It is still very rural, that's true. We have four towns locally because they're scattered so far and wide that it's difficult for their denizens to attend our moots, our village councils, so they have their own independent moots.

"We have schools, a hospital, a pharmacy/dispensary, a sawmill, three independent home builders, two general stores just here in Okambo, two restaurants, a hotel, and seven or eight other businesses I can't name off the top of my head. It's still a lot like a western frontier town of the 1800s with a few modern conveniences. In Texas, several oil companies are pumping twelve to fifteen thousand barrels of crude per day and refining it for retail sale. Barbara's royalty for that is seven percent of the refined output. My daughter and her family are very well situated, economically, and Farside itself is getting ready for a period of explosive growth.

"In St.-Louis-in-Farside, two companies manufacture aircraft for sale in Farside, and I hear they sell quite a few.

"We're looking to expand that base of businesses to include lots of other stuff. We understand that you've formed your own company to produce specialty lasers, so now I get to ask you: how's business?"

"Business is booming," Dan replied. "Every day, it seems, we discover a new use for lasers or a new way to produce a beam. The future is all 'up' as far as we can see. Would moving to Farside give us any benefit we wouldn't already have?"

"Taxes," Ernie interjected. Dan gave him a quizzical look and Ernie continued: "There aren't any. Everyone here is very self-sufficient, there's little or no need for government services and thus

little or no need for taxes. When we need to fund some special project, we do it with contributions from those who think it's worthwhile. No contributions... no special project. It sounds nuts, but it seems to work okay."

"Well, that's an attractive proposition," Dan remarked. "Would it mean that the production crew would have to move to Farside as well?" Barbara and Ernie both nodded. "What if they don't want to?"

"Somebody would want to," Barbara answered. "You might have to hire and train staff especially for the Farside operation, but I don't imagine that's an insurmountable problem, is it?" Dan smiled and shook his head.

"There is, however, an ulterior motive behind all this. I very much want you and your family as Farsiders because I... we... Farside needs the kind of expertise you and Tricia can provide: sophisticated command of physics and mathematics."

"May I ask why?" Dan probed.

"We need to develop some additional expertise regarding gate technology. There are opportunities for the right kind of person."

"What defines the right kind of person?" Tricia asked Barbara.

"The right kind of person is someone who understands quantum physics and advanced mathematics and who would be willing to become citizens of Farside, renouncing all other allegiances. That's because this is a government job with a very serious obligation of secrecy. The position reports directly to me or the Privy Council in my absence."

Dan glanced over at Tricia. "We should consider this," he told her. "It has the feel of a golden opportunity."

—==++++==—

Robert and Emily Larreau enjoyed the ride in a chauffeured limousine from their home to the Okambo rental yard and then to the Walsh residence.

For this 'adults only' soiree, Moira Clancy picked up the Walsh children in the afternoon and ferried them to Platte Lake for an overnight camping trip on one of its many islands. Three of her sorority sisters from UCB joined her for the dual purpose of helping her with four active Walsh children and seeing the landscape of Farside for themselves. If any of them felt uneasy over the Ruger .44 Magnum hanging from Moira's belt, none of them voiced it. Over the last several years, the presence in the alley between Platte Lake and the foothills of the Rockies of herds of beef cattle had slowly but surely lured Dire wolves to a part of Farside they had rarely visited before

and Moira still vividly recalled her mother's tale of coming face-to-face with one.

For the Larreaus, Barbara brought out the best china and the best linens, and hired Samantha Burke as their chef for the evening. Samantha prepared Chateaubriand and put aside several bottles of *Chateau Reine Barbara* to go with it.

Ernie greeted them at the door and welcomed them in.

"I asked around about the proper mode of address," Robert Larreau whispered to Ernie, "but no one is quite sure. How do I address the Queen?"

"You address her as 'Barbara' unless you prefer the more formal 'Dr. Walsh'," Ernie advised him. "Barbara doesn't stand on ceremony but for the few hours each month when she dons the Crown of Farside because it's expected. Tonight is strictly 'unofficial'. The Walsh family is hosting the Larreau family for cocktails and dinner because Barbara wants to rekindle old friendships.

"The kids are on a camping trip so it should be a nice, quiet evening. Come on in."

Ernie touched the 'master bedroom' button on the hall intercom. "The Larreaus are here," he told Barbara.

"I'll be there in a minute," she answered. A few moments later Barbara rolled her wheelchair into the lounge and went straight for Robert Larreau.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Doctor," she greeted him with an outstretched hand. "It's been a long time."

"Allow me to introduce my wife, Emily, and since we no longer have a professional relationship, it's not necessary to address me as 'doctor'. I'd much prefer 'Bob'."

Barbara laughed. "Good. Then let's all be on a first-name basis, shall we? It will sound less like a comedy sketch if we're Barbara, Ernie, Buck, Bob, and Emily. Something to drink?"

They sat and sipped and chatted while they waited for dinner to be ready.

"Are you retired yet, Bob?" Barbara asked.

"Next year," Emily Larreau admitted. "I've got to find something to keep him busy lest he drive me crazy being home all day."

"I may have the perfect solution, Emily," Barbara smiled back at her. "I'm hiring for a very special position that has just become vacant. Interested?"

"Sure," Bob glowed. "What are the job requirements?"

"You would be working for the government of Farside," Barbara started. "Of necessity, you would be required to live here, both of you, and this particular position would also require you to

renounce your U.S. citizenship, becoming citizens of Farside.”

“That sounds ominous,” Bob offered. “What sort of job might you offer an old, worn-out academic that also requires exclusive allegiance to Farside? And why and how did it just become vacant? And what does it pay?”

Barbara chuckled. “It became vacant the instant I created it, and it pays very little... an honorarium, no more, but you will find it very easy to survive here even on that little bit. The advantage of having an entire world full of untapped resources is that we can generate wealth as easy as wishing for it. The necessities of life, therefore, are very cheaply produced and are marketed barely above their cost-to-produce.

“The nature of the job... that is a more difficult topic that I prefer not to elaborate upon quite yet. For the moment, I can tell you that it is a position of substantial trust and requires a fluency with quantum physics as well as esoteric mathematics.”

Randy Burke entered the lounge area. “Dinner is served,” he announced. The Larreaus followed Ernie as he pushed Barbara’s wheelchair into the dining room.

After dinner, the five moved back into the lounge to allow Randy and Sam to clean up while the principals continued their discussion.

“I’ll be designing gates,” Bob blurted.

“In a word, yes,” Barbara confirmed.

“Maybe we should have taken that tour,” Emily mused.

“While you will get paid very little for your part-time position, you may amuse yourself and make money doing so in whatever way seems to fit your personalities,” Barbara continued. “Once you have acquired the knowledge of how to build a gate, you will be guarded day and night in order that that knowledge not become common knowledge and cross over to Nearside.”

“Will we be able to leave Farside?” Emily asked with some trepidation.

“I won’t say unequivocally ‘no’,” Barbara answered, looking straight into her eyes, “but you should not plan on it. The safety and security of Farside is dependent on control of the technology. We have, more than at any time in human history, a true ‘genie in the bottle’, a true ‘Pandora’s box’. Once the box is opened, there is no closing it. I have implicitly promised the people of Farside that that won’t happen, that their peaceful existence will not be sacrificed.

“For any reason.

“Dr. Larreau... Bob... if you and Emily decide to accept this offer you will become a key player in Farside’s future. If you harbor any doubts — any doubts at all — you should probably reject this.

Experience has shown us that Farside provides an Eden-like existence for those who approach it with the right mindset, but only disappointment for those who do not.

"If you see this as an opportunity to live out the remainder of your lives in a small-town setting surrounded by people you will come to know and respect, doing valuable and respected work, Farside can fulfill that probably beyond your wildest imaginings.

"If you see this as a separation from the world you have grown up in, it would be a mistake to entertain this offer any further."

"That's rather blunt," Emily noted, clearly disappointed.

"We really want you two to join us," Barbara answered her, "but you must do so with your eyes fully open. Bringing you into the Farside community while you held any misconceptions would not be good for us and it would be catastrophic for you. If you are to do this, you must do so with full knowledge of the risks as well as the benefits. I wouldn't have it any other way, would you?"

"I appreciate your candor," Bob Larreau told Barbara, "but I'm still not clear on what you expect from me and what you expect from Emily. Are there mysteries about gates that you still do not know? What would I be doing?"

Barbara smiled. "This was all precipitated by an accident," she explained, indicating her outstretched leg. "Ernie pointed out that I came very close to a fatality that day, and that would have left Farside with no one who knew enough about gate technology to ensure Farside's continued existence. Over time, as chips broke or were otherwise damaged, the number of gates would decline to zero and Farside would be isolated forever from Nearside. My Foreign Minister, Paul Gillman, has already posited that, on our own, we are several thousand years from becoming a modern technological society, and he is obviously correct.

"What we require of you, Bob, is to ensure that we are never left on our own no matter what happens to me. No, there are no mysteries regarding gates we — I — don't know, but I'm presently the only person who does. I need to correct that very quickly.

"As to Emily, I think she will find life in Farside to be far less stressful than anywhere else she has ever lived. It's somewhat rural to be sure..."

"I won't be shopping at Nordstrom's," Emily interjected.

"No, not this year, but there are two general stores that can supply you with just about everything you'll need to lead a comfortable Farside existence, and as long as you aren't addicted to moonlight strolls, you'll probably find Farside to be much safer even than a gated community in Nearside."

"What's wrong with moonlight strolls?" Emily asked.

"This is wilderness," Barbara explained. "There aren't miles and miles of concrete and asphalt and street lights to discourage feral animals. You've heard of the Farside Dire wolf?" Emily and Bob both shook their heads: *no*. "Ah, well, it's time for a geography lesson, I suppose. This part of Farside is a forty-mile-wide corridor between Platte Lake on the east and the foothills of the Rockies on the west. We think that Platte Lake, 200 miles from north to south, may have discouraged migrations from the Great Plains beyond, and so animal life a dozen years ago was quite sparse here. Predators therefore didn't find the spot very attractive.

"About ten years ago, we started farming and ranching on a large scale — dinner tonight is some of the best beef from Farside — and before we knew it, we had attracted predators, chief among them the Farside Dire wolf which went extinct in North America over ten thousand years ago but which still dominates much of Farside, those parts that correspond to North America, Europe and Asia.

"That means moonlight strolls are pretty hazardous, given the right conditions. As you walk around Farside, you will notice that almost every adult and many of what you might consider 'children' go armed, some with very impressive weaponry."

"You said earlier your children are on an overnight camping trip," Emily challenged Ernie. The look of fright on her face was palpable.

"Not to worry," Ernie reassured her. "They're camping on an island in Platte Lake — clear of predators — and they're with people we trust and who, by the way, are armed to the teeth."

"This sounds pretty 'wild west' to me," Emily told Bob. "We'll have to get you a six-gun and a cowboy hat."

"Laugh all you want," Ernie smirked, "but our violent crime rate is zero and in twelve years we've only had one arson and two cases of drug addiction."

"That's remarkable," Bob enthused.

"What's remarkable is how the drug problem was handled," Buck butted in to the conversation at last. "The pusher was identified publicly and suddenly found herself unable to buy food and supplies. No one in the community would deal with her. The Minister for Security invalidated her Farside passport and she couldn't leave to escape back into Nearside. The Nearside authorities had already been alerted and didn't want her back in any case. She was stranded in Farside where no one would talk to her, no one would deal with her, and no one would help her."

"What happened to her?" Emily asked.

—==+++==—

Kenny Dipietro sat upright in his hospital bed with a tube dripping fluids into his left arm. He shook his head. "No."

"Now listen to me, Kenny," the doctor snarled, "we have no obligation to treat you for your drug overdose. If you like, we can pull all this stuff" — he waved his hand at the room's equipment — "and let you deal with it as best you can on your own." Kenny had a startled look on his face. "Part of the price of this treatment, which includes my skills, is that you do your duty to protect your community. Right now, that duty involves giving us the name of your dealer."

"No name; no treatment." Dr. Burrus reached over and thumbed the IV valve closed. The steady drip-drip-drip of fluids halted immediately.

"No!" Mrs. Dipietro shrieked. "You can't let him die!"

Dr. Burrus turned and shrugged. "But Kenny can let his community die? Kenny can let one of his friends die of the next overdose? Why am I not allowed to prevent that?"

Mrs. Dipietro began sobbing on her husband's shoulder.

"Janice Callaway," Kenny muttered. Burrus reached over and thumbed the IV valve open and the fluids resumed their drip.

Within the hour people began stopping Janice on the street to accuse her of being a dope peddler. Janice, in return, merely sneered. It was not illegal here to sell drugs, and she wasn't twisting anybody's arm.

When Janice stepped inside Burke's General Store, the other customers parted like the Red Sea before Moses. Laura Messier looked up from her tasks behind the counter but didn't speak.

"Laura, is my order ready?" Janice asked her.

"It isn't, Janice."

"Do you know when it will be ready for pick up?" Janice asked. "I'll only be in town another hour or so."

"I'm pretty sure it won't be ready in time, Janice," Laura informed her.

"What's the hold-up, Laura?" Janice demanded, exasperation clearly showing on her face. "I placed that order two days ago."

"Mr. and Mrs. Burke have decided they don't want your business, Janice. Mrs. Burke personally canceled your order about ten minutes ago. Perhaps Moran's General Store..."

Janice stormed out onto the street and made a bee-line for Moran's.

"What do you want, Janice?" Jerry Moran asked as she strode toward the counter.

"I need to pick up some supplies..."

"Not here," Jerry cut her off. "Company policy — we don't do

business with pushers.”

“Jerry, we’re talking about food, here — necessities of life...”

“No, Janice,” Jerry answered her, “we’re talking about poison, here — dead kids and wounded families — damaged people and broken communities. I don’t want to be connected to that.”

Janice sat on her ATV on the street outside Moran’s and pondered her options. Winter was fast approaching and she would need food and fuel and it appeared she could not obtain those in Farside. What else might she be unable to obtain in Farside? Help from her neighbors, most likely...

Food and fuel she could probably import from Nearside suppliers, but her accounts would have to be settled in dollars at prices that far exceeded those she paid for Farside-originated produce. Kerosene for her cabin heater sold here for one-tenth what it would cost in Nearside. The same was true of gasoline for her ATV, as well as meats and vegetables.

She had not paid much attention to her mining claim because her other source of income made that unnecessary and she had therefore not accumulated much in the way of gold for trade purposes. What little she had was adequate — if she could purchase supplies in Farside. If she had to get her supplies from Nearside, it would be a cold, lean Winter, and even that would make it difficult or impossible to fund another purchase from her connection come Spring, not that that mattered anymore.

Now that she had been outed, it was very likely she would be unable to continue selling drugs in Farside. The drugs in her cabin, \$17,000 at wholesale, were now a sunk asset. She couldn’t turn them back for a refund — her supplier didn’t do ‘returns’.

On what would have been Groundhog Day in Nearside, the kerosene heater in Janice’s cabin flickered and went out having exhausted its fuel. Janice, herself, was badly in need of refueling. She had eaten the last of her remaining provisions four days ago and the gnawing in her stomach was no longer ignorable and there seemed no solution to her problem. She had last talked to any of her neighbors that fateful day in Okambo when she found out she was a pariah. She had tried to make amends. Her neighbors were simply not interested.

Next to her cabin under a lean-to shelter her ATV sat covered with a tarp. Janice whipped the tarp off and looked briefly at the fuel gauge. It, too, was near empty. She was not completely sure she had enough fuel to make it into town, but she would have to try. A moot was scheduled starting at 11:00 this morning. Janice shrugged into her parka, strapped her snowshoes to her back, and climbed onto her

ATV. She headed for Okambo. Halfway there, the ATV's engine sputtered and died from lack of fuel. Abandoning the vehicle, she stepped into her snowshoes and continued the trek into town.

The moot was well underway when Janice arrived at the entrance. She stood her snowshoes to one side and entered.

Several faces turned toward her when she pushed through the door into the hall. A slight murmur rippled across the audience. Danny Okambo had been addressing the moot, but he stopped talking as Janice stumbled down the main aisle. Danny moved away from the microphone and Barbara rose from her seat and replaced him there.

As Barbara looked down on her from the raised platform, Janice dropped to her knees, her hands at her sides and tears streaming down her face. "Mercy," she said, and then collapsed, exhausted.

"No!" Hank Dipietro shouted, and voices nearby muttered their agreement.

Barbara bit her lower lip and paused, thinking. She turned and whispered to Ernie and Paul Gillman who descended the four steps to the main floor, scooped Janice up, and carried her to a room off to one side.

"I find myself unable to refuse Janice's plea," Barbara announced to the gathering, "but I wish to hear your voices as well. This is, after all, your community."

"She's a danger to the community," Hank Dipietro shouted.

"Even now?" Moira Clancy challenged him, rising to her feet.

"What do you mean, 'even now'?" Hank snapped back.

Moira pointed to the spot on the floor where Janice had lain until a few moments ago. "That sure looked like 'repentance' to me," Moira explained, "and I can still recall you, Hank Dipietro, using the phrase 'every dog gets one bite'. Why not here? Why not now? Why not Janice?"

"She damn near killed my son!"

"Ah, so it's 'personal'. I see.

"Your Majesty," Moira continued, turning her focus toward Barbara, "emotionalism makes a poor basis for public policy. Mercy." She sat down.

Susan Hopkins and her son Kirk rose from their seats. "Mercy," they said almost in unison.

Several others applauded, although the audience was very far from unanimity.

"Let's think it over," Barbara suggested, "while Danny finishes telling us what he has to say." Danny Okambo re-took his place at the microphone and the moot continued.

Laura Messier knocked softly on the door of the room where Ernie and Paul had taken Janice, then entered. Janice had a two-handed death-grip on a mug of hot chocolate but looked up at Laura.

"Her Majesty suggests that you make your plea directly to the community," Laura explained to Janice. "She, herself, is inclined to reward true penitence and a return to righteousness, but the community is very divided in your case. They have to hear it from your own lips." Janice nodded, but her eyes reflected a reservoir of fear. "Take five minutes to compose yourself," Laura added before exiting the room.

Barbara rose and stepped to the microphone after the last agenda item had been handled. "Are there other matters to come before the Moot?" she asked the assembly.

Janice entered the hall from the side room flanked by Ernie and Paul, ascended the four steps that led up to the speakers' platform, and walked toward the microphone. Barbara stepped back to give Janice her spot.

"Until last September, this community has ever shown me only love and affection," she began. "I repaid that love and affection by providing your children and some of your adults dangerous and addictive substances, while at the same time ignoring my responsibilities to the people and the community. My pledge to produce more wealth than I consumed I let go unfulfilled and instead placed those same loving and affectionate people and their community at risk of sickness and death.

"When those short-sighted actions finally caught up to me," she said while looking straight into Kenny Dipietro's eyes, "the people of Farside became righteously angry and cast me out. It was no more than I deserved. It may have been less than I deserved.

"I apologize to all of you for placing you and yours in harm's way. I beg you to forgive me and to grant me one single chance to redeem myself in your eyes."

She knelt next to the microphone stand. "Mercy," she entreated them, but she heard only silence.

Janice remained kneeling there as Barbara again moved to the microphone. "Are there other matters to come before the Moot?" she asked, and hearing nothing from the audience, added "The Moot is ended. Thank you for your presence."

—==+++==—

"She almost died that winter. Out of food, out of fuel for heat, and no one to turn to for help and comfort. On her last remaining

energy, she managed to convince the community to give her one last chance to be a good citizen. She seems to have kept her part of the bargain. Even so, there are still some here who will turn their backs rather than have to acknowledge her presence."

Emily looked shocked. "Prison sounds like it would be less cruel. That's pretty vicious."

Ernie shrugged as Barbara looked on. "But nobody else has ever gone into the addictive-drug business in Farside since. Nothing succeeds like success."

"And if I don't succeed at my new job?" Bob Larreau queried Barbara.

"If I suspected for an instant that you could not handle this job, Bob, you and Emily would not be sitting here enjoying my favorite *Bordeaux*. Stop worrying."

—==+++==—

It took a year because Bob Larreau insisted on retiring on schedule and Dan Murphy found out just how difficult it could be to build a high-tech factory in a low-tech world. Contrary to his initial doubts, he had no trouble recruiting staff for the new venture. Many Nearsiders had heard traveler's tales about life in Farside and all of them were glowing accounts of a land of peace and prosperity in a cloyingly bucolic *early to bed and early to rise* existence.

While matters plodded along in Nearside, Barbara devoted herself to recreating Alfred Beddowes' exposition paper and annotating it with explanatory footnotes that Al had neglected to provide or that he had deliberately omitted, along the way fixing the seven key equations to eliminate the deliberate errors Al had inserted in the version he provided in print.

She then began her own exposition document, explaining therein the discovery of the two unnecessary equations and detailing the way the individual chips were rigged to drive separate power supplies for sets of electromagnets to cause the gate to come active. Although Ernie and Buck proof-read the text, the mathematics was far over either of their heads. They could catch spelling and grammatical errors, but that was the extent of their contributions.

Bob Larreau stood before the Great Moot next to Barbara, clad now in her traditional blue gown, the ring of gold perched in her chestnut hair. "I solemnly swear by the love I hold for my wife and family and by the love I hold for Farside and the Crown of Farside that I will faithfully execute the duties of the office to be conferred upon me," Larreau announced to the crowd.

"Therefore I, Barbara, ruler of Farside, confer upon you the title 'Master of the Gatekeepers' Guild'. Welcome to Farside, Master Larreau."

Dan Murphy replaced Bob Larreau at the microphone. Barbara reached behind her and fetched a Christian Bible which she held out for Dan's hand. He placed his left hand on the book and raised his right. "I solemnly swear before God and this company that I will faithfully execute the duties of the office to be conferred upon me, so help me God."

"Therefore I, Barbara, ruler of Farside, confer upon you the title 'First Keeper of the Gatekeepers' Guild'. Welcome to Farside, Keeper Murphy."

Tricia Murphy strode toward the microphone as Dan retired and placed her hand upon the book Barbara still held. "I solemnly swear before God and this company that I will faithfully execute the duties of the office to be conferred upon me, so help me God."

"Therefore I, Barbara, ruler of Farside, confer upon you the title 'Second Keeper of the Gatekeepers' Guild'. Welcome to Farside, Keeper Murphy."

The audience exploded with applause.

"Are there other matters to come before the Moot?" Barbara issued the standard challenge, expecting silence. Peg, Moira, and Walt Clancy rose from their seats and walked toward the stage. "With Her Majesty's permission, we wish to present the new Gatekeepers with their badges of office," Walt announced. Barbara, somewhat surprised by this, waved them up onto the stage.

Taking a gold chain from her father, Moira draped the chain over Robert Larreau's shoulders, then did the same for Dan and Tricia Murphy. "May these gifts of Farside gold chain you to your duty," Moira told the three, "and may they link you always to the land and the people." The audience rose as one and thunderous applause erupted.

When it had died down, Barbara once again spoke to the microphone: "Are there other matters to come before the Moot?" and was greeted, at last, by silence.

"The Moot is ended. Thank you all for being here."

17 - Fences

Tricia Murphy sat in her first-class compartment on the Boulder-to-St. Louis express monorail reading Barbara's treatise on gates: 217 pages consisting of the original Beddowes exposition plus Barbara's recollections of the days surrounding the first type-I gate opening into Earth-II, the discovery of the redundant field equations, the creation of the first type-II gate and subsequent improvements, plus page after page of hand-drawn diagrams. Ernie and Buck even had their own appendices for their recollections. This was 'chapter one' of Farside's history, and Tricia found it fascinating and disturbing.

At the monorail's typical open-range cruise speed of 234 miles per hour, the trip would take barely over four hours despite stops at Eads in Colorado, and Salina and Overland Park in Kansas before the last stretch across Missouri. The LAN port in her armrest even gave her connectivity to the world-wide web while she traveled, and that made it possible to video-conference with her husband and their boss, Robert Larreau.

Across the compartment her two children stared in rapt attention at their video screens and listened to the soundtracks through headphones that isolated them completely from the real world.

The absence of significant population along the route made construction of the monorail system a breeze and it had happened so fast people marveled at the speed with which it became possible to reach out into the great plains from the existing Farside population centers. The competition among prospective builders operated to drive the cost down — somewhat — and made it possible for the House of FitzGibbon to fund the initial work from oil revenues.

As had happened in the 19th century, towns sprouted without warning along the route wherever the route architecture called for a bypass or a spur. Almost all the bypasses, quarter-mile long sidings approximately every forty miles or ten travel-minutes apart, had turned into stations. Surrounding populations swelled as newcomers brought new and unusual skills into Farside and, along with those, new wealth-generating ideas. Entrepreneurs immigrating from Nearside soon made the monorail corridor not simply an agricultural cornucopia, but industrial as well.

The express didn't swing through any bypasses other than Eads, Salina, and Overland Park except when an oncoming train got within seventy miles. In that case, the routing and traffic software

picked the train nearest a bypass and routed it off to the side where it could wait until the other had safely passed. Tricia Mullins-Murphy herself supervised the IT staff that wrote, maintained, and constantly tested the software that largely ran the line, relegating the engineer in the front compartment to an observer whose function was merely to watch for anything unexpected.

"Entering the Ellsworth bypass in three minutes," the computer's voice informed the engineer as the train began an abrupt deceleration. "Boulder Flyer will pass on the mainline in eight minutes twenty seconds." The express pulled into the Ellsworth bypass on schedule and waited. Five minutes later the Boulder Flyer roared by on the mainline, and the B-SL express resumed its eastward journey.

Thirteen years into its existence, Farside was poised to become the world's leading producer of cereal grains, and the monorail route that had made it possible now soared seventy feet above the waving fields of wheat, barley, oats, and corn.

The first monorail route constructed — having started just months ahead of the Boulder-St. Louis line — ran between Boulder and Pecos following the route laid out for the pipeline that brought gasoline and diesel to Boulder. Wind turbines took advantage of the southwest's and Midwest's wide open spaces to generate electricity to run the highly-automated systems, the pumps that pushed fuel through the pipes and the motors that pushed monorail cars along the undercarriage guides. The turbines created so much power that communities alongside the tracks got an extra developmental push by being able to tap into the excess.

Some communities expanded their stations by adding spurs and marshaling yards. This enabled the monorail system to attach freight cars which could themselves be uncoupled a few miles before their destination station. The self-propelled freight cars could detach and slow themselves down so that the part of the train going straight through would have already passed through the junction before a switch routed the freight car off to an unloading/loading area away from high-speed traffic.

"This is the third time I'm reading this," Tricia explained to her husband and Dr. Larreau, "and I'm beginning to appreciate the difficulty of dealing with such a complex subject. Nevertheless, I think that the current crop of type-II gates provides a real security exposure and I'm assigning myself the task of closing it, unless someone has an objection."

"Not at all," Larreau answered her. "Does your security exposure have anything to do with the model of 'five types of driver

chip'?"

"Yes, it does. In fact, that is the exposure. Now that we know the 'how' of gate technology, it would be at most a few weeks' work for any of us to reverse-engineer those five chips and build our own gate from scratch, and if we could do it, so could anyone else given a few essential factoids.

"Our first task should be to make that impossible."

"How?" Larreau asked.

"First, there should be a single integrated processor to handle all five waveforms. The technique Barbara — and Al Beddowes before her — used was old technology then. Modern processors can handle all that those five chips did and plenty more besides and do it so fast it is for all practical purposes like having multiple simultaneous processors running.

"There should be one chip that handles everything: running the five field generators, listening for external commands, disabling itself when conditions warrant... The process can be buried in microcode so deep that there is no plausible danger of anyone ever backing into a solution.

"Further, the process itself can be modified slightly to provide what I've heard some others call 'security through obscurity'. There are five individual pulsing electromagnetic fields all of which must be provoked simultaneously and in synchronization to open the portal. The original gates that Beddowes created used seven field generators and got a wildly different effect. We know from anecdotal evidence that NSA was never able to build a working gate from specs and now I know why. If synchronization is off by even a little bit, no gate. It is a piece of cake to provide one or two or three additional field generators and simply have them not pulse at all when the gate is in operation. Anyone who does manage to replicate the chip's programming has to get everything absolutely perfect or they will wind up with one or more unnecessary field generators destroying the integrity of the field."

"...And therefore, building a gate that does everything except open the portal," Larreau finished for her. "Brilliant. I can hardly wait to see it. When will you be back here?"

"I'll be visiting my family in Cape Girardeau for about a week and heading back after that."

"Don't take your computer into Nearside," Larreau warned her.

"I'll be leaving the research material in Farside," she told him. "The computer is no risk without that."

"Okay," Larreau agreed. "Have a good trip," and he disconnected.

"Give your folks a hug from me," Dan advised, "and make

sure the kids don't destroy anything. Love you."

Tricia laughed. "Love you too," and then she disconnected.

A soft *bong-bing-bong* from the overhead speakers heralded an announcement. "Station stop O'Fallon in twenty minutes. All passengers please prepare to debark at the end of the line."

—==++++==—

Tom Plummer's phone rang and he pushed "connect" to start the conversation. "Hello?"

"Mr. Plummer, this is Pete Cosgrove with American Metals Climax. Oscar Gruder gave me your number. Is this an inconvenient time?"

"No, not at all, Mr. Cosgrove," Tom answered as he scratched notes about the caller and the call. "What can I do for you?"

"I proposed to Oscar that AMAX would like to prospect for minerals in Farside and he suggested I run that offer by you. Specifically, AMAX is interested in uranium. There's a lot of it in the American West and we suspect Farside is similarly blessed. You wouldn't, by any chance, have Farside colonies corresponding to Australia, would you?"

"At the moment, no, but if there is an 'Australia' in Farside, it would be something we would like to consider. Why Australia?"

"Heaviest concentrations of uranium on the planet, Mr. Plummer," Cosgrove explained.

"And what would AMAX be doing with uranium it mined in Farside?" Plummer asked.

"We would be exporting it to Nearside."

"Let me consult with the Privy Council and get back to you," Plummer concluded the call.

The following afternoon, Tom Plummer attended Barbara's regular weekly briefing so that he could raise the issue to the entire council.

"For those of you who may not have heard," Barbara addressed them, "Arlo Rubinstein passed away over the weekend. Farside has lost a dear friend.

"Laurel Hamm's wedding will be this Saturday in case any of you wish to attend. She's marrying another Hammburger, so she's keeping it in the family, so to speak.

"I see Tom Plummer is with us today. Tom, do you have any more Nearside companies looking to join the throng?"

"As a matter of fact, Barbara, I have a very intriguing proposition received yesterday from a friend of Oscar's. Pete Cosgrove

of AMAX is interested in uranium mining in Farside. I wanted to get the sense of the council on that."

Oscar rose to speak. "Some of you may know Pete Cosgrove. Barbara certainly does. He was my contact at AMAX when the first gold was discovered in Farside. I hadn't spoken with Pete for several years until he called me out of the blue last week and we talked about this. Since it's really 'commercial development', I bucked it over to Tom, but I should add my own opinion that uranium could be a very profitable business that we haven't considered, really, at all. Like petroleum, we could demand and get a substantial royalty for the sort of operation AMAX typically runs.

"Plus, nuclear power would solve a vast range of problems that I can see cropping up within the next decade or two. Unless there is unalterable opposition from the council, I think we need to pay attention to this proposal."

Most of the council seemed pleased with the overall idea. "What sort of cut could we demand, Oscar," Barbara asked.

"I would start by insisting, just as with the Texas petroleum deals, that AMAX export no crude ore. Make them process it at least to refined metal before they ship it across. That means they will have to do more than just dig in Farside.

"They get a huge benefit from not having to deal with a Nearside bureaucracy with all the costs of permits and inspections and environmental impact studies that entails. We'll have to do our own inspections, of course, but they can be of a very practical sort: making sure that what's reported on output bears some reasonable relationship to what's coming out of the ground. We have a decade of experience in Texas doing exactly that. Uranium mining is not qualitatively different in that regard.

"I think you could demand 55% of the metallic output be left in Farside and AMAX would leave that negotiation smiling. Given the cost structure here, 45% of what they pull out of the ground would give them lush Nearside profits. Along the way, we get the ability to generate more electricity than we will be able to use for the foreseeable future.

"If AMAX buys that deal, and I can't see why they wouldn't, we probably will need to start talking to General Electric about getting a steamer built. We should probably also start thinking about where we want it situated."

"Any objections?" Barbara asked her council, but no one raised any. "Okay, Tom, tell Cosgrove we're interested in hearing what he has to say."

—==++++==—

Tricia Murphy arrived at the Mullins' homestead driven there by her personal armed escort, a measure of her importance to Farside. A second security operative assisted with the children. She was welcomed with warm hugs from her parents and her younger brother who immediately set about informing her of their plans for the time she would be with them.

"So, you're now officially a Farsider?" her brother asked. "What brought that on?"

"Oh, Her Majesty made us an offer we couldn't refuse," and she laughed.

"I hope they're paying you well," her father added.

"They're paying us hardly at all," Tricia admitted, "but there are other forms of payment." The others cocked their heads as if inviting her to elaborate, so she did. "Dan has started to move *Innovative Optics* into Farside. The first phase, to get the Farside operation up and running, is nearly complete. His corporate taxes will evaporate, and salary levels in Farside are generally much lower than Nearside because of the super-low cost-of-living there. All his customers are used to paying Nearside prices for his lasers, but he's producing them in a Farside cost-structure. There's a serious impact on the bottom line of those cost reductions, enough that Dan thinks he'll be able to reduce his prices and gain enormous market penetration. None of his competitors have the same advantages because they all suffer from their Nearside cost structure.

"Plus, I've taken a position with the Foreign Office, so I have actually become a civil servant." She smiled.

"What in the world does the Farside Foreign Office need with a software geek?" her brother squeaked.

"They use software," Tricia protested. "Passport processing is very computer-intensive and that's not the only place it is. I'm doing a review right now of some of their systems."

"If you figure out how to build a gate, I know a couple of people who'll pay well for the information," the brother remarked with a smirk.

A dark thought flashed through Tricia's mind. "There won't be any of that," she said. "Nobody other than Barbara Walsh knows that secret," she lied, "and you should expect it to stay that way for a long, long time."

—==+++==—

"I'm beginning to wonder whether we may not have given up more than we're ever going to get back," the head of the Customs branch remarked. "Yeah, we get to duty incoming petro shipments,

but I just heard that Farside has rustled some high-tech companies from us. What's going on with that? Why would high-tech companies relocate into wilderness?"

"Cost," his aide explained. "Costs are much lower in Farside and our tariff agreement means we can't equalize costs to protect our own manufacturers. Any business relocating into Farside gets a big bump in the 'profit' column."

These facts had also occurred to many others, primarily business owners potentially affected by the threat of low-cost competition but also to politicians.

The Secretary of Commerce, Dick Schoonover, listened to the most recent concerned legislator calling to find out what could be done about Farside's 'poaching' of Nearside businesses. "No, Senator, there's nothing we can do until the tariff agreement expires... I appreciate your concern, Senator. Allow me to remind you that *I* did not vote to approve that tariff agreement but that *you* did. Allow me to further remind you that the original agreement did not have an expiration date and would have been passed without one had it not been for the urging of *my* staff that our own economic well-being required it... Yes, well, thank you for calling and I will make sure your concerns are recognized when negotiations start on a replacement tariff agreement."

A replacement was still three years away. *There'll be plenty more complaints by then*, the Secretary mused. He immediately dialed Tom Plummer's number.

When are you going to be in DC next?" he asked Tom after the call was answered.

"A week from Tuesday," Plummer informed him. "Why?"

"I think we ought to put some time aside, have dinner maybe, talk about some matters that are causing stress..."

"Like 'rustling'," Plummer interrupted.

"Yes. Your behavior in that regard is not very Golden Rule-ish, is it?"

"But it *is*!" Plummer objected. "We want you to poach our businesses away from us. We welcome the competition. We crave it."

"You're being disingenuous," Schoonover snapped.

"Yes, a little," Plummer admitted, "but only a little. We would not object at all were you to start grabbing businesses away from us. It would force us to get leaner and more aggressive in building up our industrial base, although how we could get much leaner than we are is problematic. So, who's complaining now?"

"Who? Everybody's complaining, mostly Senators and Representatives, corporate executives and captains of industry who can see Farside competitors about to launch a price war they can't

fight.”

“Because...?” Plummer prompted.

“Because they don’t have Farside’s cost structure,” Schoonover blurted.

“Well, then, there’s the solution right there, no? Give them a similar cost structure and they can compete on an equal footing.”

Schoonover paused a long time, thinking. *Plummer does realize we have taxes here to support the functions of government, doesn’t he, and that his government provides none of those functions?*

“You think we should dismantle the government?” Schoonover asked finally.

“I wouldn’t want you to tell me how to structure my government. I’ll be the last person to tell you how to structure yours.”

“Even so, we’re going to have to come to some sort of *detente* on this subject or it’s going to heat up and get out of control,” Schoonover warned Plummer.

“Yeah, let’s get together and talk. Dinner a week from Tuesday. I’ll buy.”

—==++++==—

Ensenada pesca roja was, everyone who tasted it agreed, a lot like grouper but sweeter, maybe because *pesca roja* didn’t grow to nearly the size of Nearside grouper. Its name derived from the iridescent pink color of its skin. The colony at Ensenada relied heavily on the nearby Pacific Ocean to enable them to ‘produce more food than they needed’. The excess was packed in ice on board the fishing boats that plied Farside’s Pacific Ocean and went through the gate into Mexico where it was snapped up by the locals.

Every once in a while, a portion would slip past Customs at Tijuana and grace a California dinner table that evening. At two dollars per pound, nothing at any of the local supermarkets — whatever the quality — could be had at twice its price. At the urging of California’s fishing industry, Farside fish was subject to onerous customs inspections that could delay passage until the fish spoiled. Farside strawberries fared no better.

Tom Plummer had several items on his agenda for when he and Dick Schoonover would sit down to lay the groundwork for the renewal of the trade agreement between Farside and Nearside North America, and treating perishable food items as if they were perishable was at the top of the list.

Tonight, twelve pounds of *pesca roja* waited in the kitchen of Sammartino’s, Plummer’s favorite restaurant in DC, having arrived by Farside diplomatic pouch directly into the hands of Emilio Sammartino,

Plummer's favorite chef in DC. Plummer and Schoonover would enjoy the blend of fresh Pacific fish and Emilio's practiced hand. Whatever was left over was Emilio's to do with as he wished.

Emilio had already whispered into the proper ears, and the remaining portions already allocated to favored customers. Emilio liked doing business with Tom Plummer.

"Alright, Dick," Tom started the 'business' part of the conversation, "what do we have on the table?"

"By the way, Tom, that was great fish. I presume you smuggled that in by diplomatic pouch." Plummer smiled. "The top item on my agenda is 'unfair competition', subheading: 'poaching high-tech'. I've heard lots of moaning and wailing about long-time American tech firms migrating into Farside and shipping their low-cost low-priced product back into Nearside. I don't have to tell you where this is all leading."

"Protective tariffs," Plummer offered and Schoonover nodded. "With one exception, I haven't solicited any of those businesses to set up shop in Farside, Dick. I'm letting you use the verb 'poach' just to not start an argument, but I hope you realize the government of Farside isn't doing anything to actively recruit new business.

"All these businesses except one came to us — to me — asking how they could begin trans-gate operations. They're all volunteers looking, like most Farside immigrants, for a clear shot at success. Just the fact that we have assets in Farside that aren't replicated in Nearside is probably enough to give your economy heartburn, but you're profiting nonetheless, aren't you? I mean, a dozen years ago people considered themselves lucky to find a dining room set in black walnut veneer. Nowadays it's perfectly normal to find the same set in solid walnut for about the same price while the veneered sets are sold as build-it-yourself kits through IKEA.

"I could go on and on about the thousands of ways your standard of living has improved just because Farside exists. I won't bore you. I will point out that failing to yank the leash on Customs actually reduces the standard of living for your own people by denying them the benefits of Farside produce..."

"...At the expense of Nearside producers," Schoonover interrupted.

"Nobody's penalizing your Nearside producers. We're not selling product into Nearside at lower prices than anyone else pays save only the added cost of shipping and customs duties. Your business people could have set themselves up as middlemen. When I went looking for wholesalers to handle Farside seafood, for instance, I didn't get any takers. Why are they complaining now?"

"Have you asked again?" Schoonover queried.

"Naah, got tired of hearing 'no', but you have my phone number and I haven't heard from you, either. Tell them you have an 'in' if they've changed their minds. We're still willing to deal. Of course, they're still going to have to cope with overly rigorous Customs inspections that may make it as difficult for them as for us to operate and duties that are, frankly, not supported by the agreed tariff. Or perhaps you can do something to eliminate that roadblock." Plummer winked. "We don't condone smuggling in Farside, but a determined person can always find a way..."

"I get the message," Schoonover sighed. "I'll see what I can do about Customs."

"And I'll be less aggressive with my recruiting," Plummer finished.

—==++++==—

Tricia, Jane, and Grace passed through the immigration gate and the girls' chaperone escorted them to the boarding lounge while Tricia and her escort went to the Gatekeeper's office. The Gatekeeper rose as she entered. Tricia waved him back into his seat.

The Gatekeeper opened a locked desk drawer and withdrew the envelope Tricia had entrusted to him a week prior. She examined it to satisfy herself that it had not been tampered with, then ripped the tear strip and poured the contents, two USB memory modules and a document marked "SENSITIVE - RESTRICTED - TOP SECRET", into her hands.

"Have a pleasant trip back," the Gatekeeper wished her, and she and her escort left to rejoin her children where they all had a light lunch as they waited for the monorail to depart for Boulder.

A pleasant *bong-bing-bong* from the overhead speakers presaged an announcement: "*All passengers may board at their convenience. Departure for Boulder in twenty-five minutes. Please have your travel documents ready for the gate agent.*"

The five moved toward the waiting train and found their compartments, the children staying with the bodyguards at Tricia's direction so that she could work on the presentation she was preparing for Dr. Larreau. The week of rest and relaxation with her family in southeast Missouri on the banks of the Mississippi River had both refreshed her and given her time to let her mind wander down unexplored and unexpected channels. The experience had provided her some insights into how to secure gate technology she was now anxious to get onto paper before the thoughts faded away.

She opened her laptop and began to work as O'Fallon smoothly slipped away toward the rear of the train. She was eyebrow-

deep into her writing when, fifty minutes later, the overheads announced: *"Station stop Overland Park in seven minutes. All passengers for Overland Park please gather your belongings."*

Her concentration broken, she watched out the window as the train decelerated into Overland Park. Another forty-five minutes would have them in Salina, eighty minutes more into Eads, and another hour into Boulder. She got back to work.

She drew rough sketches onto the screenface of her computer and labeled the bits, outlining the architecture of a new breed of integrated chip that would control her type-III gates. The landscape flew by.

"Bong-bing-bong... Station stop Boulder in twelve minutes. End of the line. All passengers please prepare to exit. We hope you have had a pleasant journey."

At the stroke of 3pm, the monorail came to a lurch-free stop at the Boulder platform and the doors slid open. Passengers trailing luggage poured onto the platform and made for the terminal and the greeters waiting to meet them. Dan Murphy hugged Tricia and his girls and shook the hands of their bodyguards.

"It's good to have you back," Dan told her. "How far did you get with the architecture?"

"Finished," she beamed. "You can look it over tonight to make sure there's nothing I missed, but I'm very happy with the way it turned out. The segments for gate control, security, and communications are fenced out separately and can all operate in parallel. I've added one additional feature for those areas where VORs operate: A gate can be nailed to a particular spot by setting its required VOR configuration. If the gate is moved more than a few hundred feet the configuration no longer matches and the field generators are locked out."

"No more stolen gates," Dan offered with a smile.

"No more stolen gates," Tricia confirmed.

"I know several people who will be pleased to hear that."

18 - All that glisters

August Nijpels and Jiji Mgabwe arrived on separate flights into Denver International within two hours of each other, not that they would have wanted to meet casually or by accident.

Nijpels, an attorney representing DeBeers Consolidated Mines, and Mgabwe, representing Soweto-in-Farside, were here for a meeting with the Queen and her Council with an eye toward ironing out what DeBeers claimed was unfair trade practices by the diamond miners of Soweto-in-Farside. Each was met by a limousine flying the flag of Farside and whisked away to the Foreign Ministry campus in Aurora.

Over the years, small pieces of property south of the airport were acquired by various Farsiders and held until they could be consolidated to form a respectable building site. The building was designed and built by Tester-Cameron and paid for by funds donated by prominent local citizens, notably the Clancys, the Gruders, the Burkes, and several others.

An oversize personnel gate now operated inside the two-story Ministry building that also provided office space for those staffers who regularly interfaced with Nearside interests. This was the primary mail drop for letters and parcels transiting into or out of Colorado-in-Farside. Beyond the gate in Farside, an almost identical building occupied an almost identical footprint. Next to the Ministry building in Farside, Radisson operated a hotel suitable for visiting dignitaries. When they arrived, both Nijpels and Mgabwe went straight to their rooms to recuperate from their jet-lag.

The following morning Nijpels and Mgabwe joined Paul Gillman and his staff for breakfast in the hotel's dining room. It was the first time each had seen the other this trip. They each greeted the other cordially, although it was plain they were far from being friends.

"Did you have a pleasant trip, Mr. Nijpels?" Jiji asked his counterpart.

"Yes," Nijpels answered, "but I suspect the travel will be the most pleasant part of the trip. Your miners are destroying DeBeers, you know."

"It's certainly not intentional," Mgabwe shrugged. "It's just that we don't have your costs."

"Do you not pay royalties on your operation?" Nijpels asked Mgabwe.

"Certainly," Jiji responded, "the Crown gets two percent, and we are required by royal decree to escrow eight percent for pensions."

Nijpels grimaced. "It costs us more than that in inspection fees for the government monitors! By the time we get through paying taxes, we wouldn't have enough left to escrow eight percent for anything, and all our salaries come out of what's left. What do you pay your workmen?"

"We pay them comparably to your Nearside operation," Jiji protested.

"That's not what I heard," Nijpels blustered. "I heard you pay your workers what we pay our managers, and you pay them in diamonds."

"But Farside diamonds are much less valuable than Nearside diamonds, so we aren't really paying them that much. Besides, happy workers are productive workers. You should know that."

"Farside diamonds are not less valuable than Nearside diamonds!" Nijpels spluttered. "Diamond is diamond. They're merely less expensive than Nearside diamonds."

Paul Gillman interrupted. "Gentlemen, can we hold this until the meeting starts? We're risking ruining everyone's breakfast before it's even finished."

After breakfast, they all headed back to the Ministry building via the second-floor connector and found the large conference room where they would all meet. Barbara, meanwhile, traveled in her private monorail car with her Privy Council from Boulder to Aurora. When she entered the room clad in her traditional blue gown, all rose as a gesture of respect.

"Please take your seats," she urged them. "Mr. Nijpels, welcome to Farside. Mr. Mgabwe, welcome to Aurora-in-Farside. Good morning, Paul. Would you care to start the meeting?"

Gillman rose. "You all should have the Ministry's briefing notes in your packets. Allow me to summarize: we have with us today Mr. August Nijpels representing DeBeers Consolidated. Mr. Nijpels pleads that the diamond mining operation in Soweto-in-Farside is having an adverse effect on his Nearside operation. In particular, the generally elevated wages paid to Farside miners tends to draw down the available workforce in Nearside as workers move toward the higher compensation. The remaining workers are often lower-skilled, but because of their reduced availability nevertheless demand higher wages than they might otherwise expect.

"Additionally, the lower cost of operating in Farside allows a lower cost for the product both at wholesale and at retail and this is making the relatively-more-costly DeBeers product more difficult to market. DeBeers claims that they have little or no control over the cost-to-operate because of South African regulations, fees, and taxes, and begs the Crown for relief.

"Also with us today is Mr. Jiji Mgabwe, Chief Financial Officer, *Diamonds Farside*, who has offered his experience and knowledge of the *Diamonds Farside* project. Mr. Mgabwe has some interesting insights I am sure he will share with us later." Paul Gillman sat down.

"Mr. Nijpels," Barbara addressed their guest, "is there anything additional you care to add to Minister Gillman's summary?"

Nijpels rose to address the group. "I would merely point out that you of Farside claim to live according to the Golden Rule: '*do unto others as you would have them do to yourself*'. Destroying one's competition economically as *Diamonds Farside* is doing to DeBeers we think hardly comports with the cornerstone of your philosophy. DeBeers merely asks that you show the same consideration toward us you would hope to get from us." Nijpels sat.

"Mr. Mgabwe?" Barbara invited.

Jiji Mgabwe stood. "For over a century, DeBeers has exploited the people of South Africa, paying them minuscule wages and holding them in a virtual serfdom, completely beholden to the whims of the company, destroying those who objected or who tried to better the conditions under which they and their families and friends labored. It may not have been slavery in any technical sense, but it was in every other sense. Once consigned to the diamond mines, very few ever escaped.

"At the same time, their government was exploiting DeBeers, taxing them, regulating them, skimming profits off the top as it were, and DeBeers did not object because they were still making money hand-over-fist because of the monopoly position granted to them by that same government.

"What Mr. Nijpels is complaining about is that his monopoly has been broken, yet the government is still skimming them. Mr. Nijpels is ill-equipped to lecture us on the needs of adhering to the Golden Rule. He needs instead to lecture the government on the value of a broken monopoly.

"In fact, we do hew as closely as we can to that law Her Majesty imposes on her *demesne*, the so-called 'golden rule': we pay our workers a wage that allows them to support their families as their Farside citizenship requires; in obedience to Her Majesty's order for pensions we escrow with an independent agent chosen by the workers themselves an amount equal to eight percent of our output; many of our workers have invested their own funds into the coffers of *Diamonds Farside*, becoming part-owners of the firm in the process.

"Nevertheless, we are ready to hear any solutions to the problem Mr. Nijpels cares to offer and to consider implementing them if we can do so without causing greater harm."

"DeBeers would much rather restraint be imposed by Farside

from within as by increasing price for their product as opposed to that restraint being imposed from without as by protective tariffs. If *Diamonds Farside* were to act to equalize the wholesale prices for their stones that would immediately solve the problem of DeBeers being unable to market their product against the lower-priced Farside equivalent. Another possible route would be to designate DeBeers as the exclusive Nearside outlet for your stones. Failing that, DeBeers has no alternative but to petition the several governments to protect their own industries and force the price of Farside diamonds into equilibrium."

"If *Diamonds Farside* were to market exclusively via DeBeers," Nell Gruder asked, "would it make economic sense for DeBeers to continue mining in South Africa?"

Nijpels pursed his lips. "It would not."

"Then," Nell continued, "that option would cause the immediate closure of all DeBeers sites in South Africa," — Nijpels nodded — "and every one of the miners currently dependent on DeBeers for their livelihood would become instantly unemployed."

Mgabwe turned toward Barbara. "Your Majesty, I would very strongly oppose any such plan. We would be condemning an entire region to economic destitution."

"There's no need to worry, Mr. Mgabwe," Barbara assured him, "that option is not one we may consider."

"Mr. Nijpels, would you care to take a short tour of Farside? I have a pilot and aircraft standing by outside and she can give you a bird's-eye view of some of Farside's wonders if that would please you. It will also give us time to consider what actions we might take to ease your pain and prevent any of our own."

Nijpels, sensing that he had been dismissed, rose and left the room. Outside, Ellen Messier greeted him, introduced herself, and escorted him to the airstrip where her Cessna 152 waited.

"East and southeast of us is Platte Lake, quite beautiful and very scenic. To the north are many of the farms and ranches that keep the Farside colony fed. To our south is a westward extension of the Great Plains. We could see buffalo there if that would interest you."

"Is it possible to see any mammoth?" he asked.

"Let me check." She dialed a number on her cell phone and waited for the call to be answered. "Hello, Mammoth Watch," she greeted the voice on the other end, "I'm in Aurora. Where would I find the nearest herd of mammoth?"

She listened to the answer and then turned to her charge. "Two hours there and another two back," she told him. "I don't think we have that much time. Perhaps on your next visit?"

"Then I suppose I shall have to content myself with buffalo," Nijpels said dejectedly.

They boarded the plane and Ellen started the engine.

—==++++==—

"Basically, Nijpels is threatening to have Nearside governments jack up the prices of our diamonds until they're more expensive than theirs are. Can he get away with that?"

"Most of the trade and tariff agreements we have with other countries — not all of them, of course — prohibit that," Paul Gillman started his answer, "but there are any number of countries with whom we have no agreements at all. There would be some small pressure, I'd like to think, to disincline them doing something naughty, but this is all guesswork at this point. DeBeers has been around a real long time. There's no telling what kind of contacts they've accumulated over their life span. I don't know."

"If we sell our stones at an inflated price," Jiji continued, "we could still be hit with protective tariffs and that would make our stones too expensive to compete with DeBeers."

"But it would take away their argument that they need protection," Nell Gruder added. "If a government imposed tariffs on us after that, it could only be because they're trying to keep Farside products out. I can deal with that. It only hurts their own consumers in any case."

"What?" Barbara asked. "Doesn't it hurt us?"

"No," Nell explained. "The effect of a protective tariff is to raise prices for the people who might buy it. That includes the importers themselves who are almost always nationals of the country imposing the tariff. Lower-priced goods have their price artificially boosted so people who might have benefited from being able to buy certain products then find they can no longer afford those same products at the artificially higher prices.

"Diamonds, like oil, are what's called a 'fungible commodity'. Oil from Farside is almost exactly like oil from Nearside. Diamonds from Farside are exactly like diamonds from Nearside. If we can't sell oil into Romania, we'll be able to sell the same stuff into Hungary. The market price eventually evens everything out. It's the same for diamonds. We don't get hurt at all. The people who can't buy Farside diamonds at a sixty-percent discount are the ones who get hurt."

"Interesting," Barbara mused. "I never thought of it in those terms. So that's why whenever anyone suggests import duties you object?"

Nell shrugged. "I object because we don't need the money. If

we ever do need the money, I'll object because it only hurts Farsiders."

—==+++==—

Ellen Messier soared over the carpet of buffalo at 1200 feet as August Nijpels marveled at the vast number of them. "Is that what I'm smelling?" he asked, "Buffalo?"

Ellen gave him a 'thumbs up'. "There are a lot of them. From this altitude you can see forty, maybe fifty miles. Between the two herds you can see there are probably two hundred thousand buffalo, maybe three hundred thousand. The surprise would be if we couldn't smell them."

At about that moment, near the edge of the herd a pack of seven Farside Dire wolves attacked from cover and had a buffalo calf down in a matter of seconds. The rest of the herd edged away from the carnage but didn't stampede. Nijpels looked on in morbid fascination, unable to tear his gaze away from the scene as the wolves began to feed.

"Ghastly!" he uttered softly.

"Life and death in the wild," Ellen explained. She banked the plane and turned northeast to continue her tour along the eastern edge of Platte Lake.

"Hello, what's that?" she asked rhetorically as they passed the peninsula the locals called 'Kiowa Point'. She pushed the yoke and eased the power back to put the plane into a long westward slide toward the ground. "You wanted to see mammoth," she announced to her passenger, "we are pleased to present you with mammoth."

Ahead of them moving away from the water as if they had already bathed or drunk, twelve woolly mammoth plodded, five juveniles and their mothers along with two bulls, one young, one old. Ellen orbited the group at four hundred feet as Nijpels snapped frame after frame with his camera, smiling broadly all the while.

—==+++==—

"Then we're agreed," Barbara looked at Jiji Mgabwe, "we will adjust the price of Farside diamonds to make them more expensive and thus less attractive to buyers in hopes of avoiding punitive protective tariffs?"

Jiji Mgabwe grimaced. "Reluctantly," he mumbled. "If it's a choice between us keeping the excess or letting some Nearside bureaucrat keep it, I agree that we ought to keep it. There's plenty of infrastructure needs we can invest it in, transportation chief among them. The interior of Farside's Africa has hardly been explored at all.

There's no telling what we may find when we finally do get around to surveying it. We might even wind up developing a tourist industry if there's the kind of animal life there that you've found in North America."

Paul Gillman dialed a number on his phone and connected with the Aurora aircraft radio station. "Contact Ellen Messier and tell her we're ready for her to bring her passenger back," and was told that Ellen acknowledged the message and was returning immediately.

Within the half-hour, Ellen escorted her passenger into the Foreign Ministry building and up to the second-floor conference room where she had collected him two hours earlier.

"Any problems?" Paul Gillman asked her as she handed over her charge.

"Quite the opposite," she told him smiling. "We even found a herd of mammoth for Mr. Nijpels to photograph. He has a souvenir of Farside he will not soon forget, which reminds me..." She dialed Mammoth Watch and reported the existence of a small previously unobserved herd near Kiowa Point, heading east.

Inside the conference room, Nijpels took his seat.

"*Diamonds Farside* will refrain from undercutting DeBeers when pricing at the wholesale level," Jiji Mgabwe informed Nijpels, "in exchange for DeBeers' irrevocable commitment not to seek protective tariffs and to support *Diamonds Farside's* protest should any nevertheless be imposed."

"If you will put that in writing, I will present it to my principals. I feel certain they will agree," Nijpels responded. *...and all such protests will fall on deaf ears no matter how much support DeBeers provides,* he mused silently to himself. *Those governments will want their share.*

"We will have the appropriate documents drawn up overnight and be ready for your review in the morning," Nell informed him. "When did you plan to return to Luxembourg?"

"I have no instructions that require my immediate return. I was sent here with orders to 'get this problem fixed'. I believe we are very close to a fix for this, so I could return soon. I plan to stay here until all parties have inked signatures on the agreement. I expect that will happen within a few days."

"Then Her Majesty wishes you to consider Miss Messier to be at your service for flights wherever and whenever you wish in Farside for the duration of your stay."

"Her Majesty is very kind. Please extend my thanks to her for her kindness."

"You'll be able to do that yourself, Mr. Nijpels. Her Majesty is changing into more comfortable traveling clothes for the trip back to

Boulder. She should be here momentarily.”

As if in response to Nell’s words, Barbara swept into the room now clad in jeans and a checkered blouse, the crown still on her head. Nell waved her over toward Nijpels.

Nijpels chuckled as she approached. “What’s the joke?” Barbara asked.

Nijpels indicated her outfit. “I’ve never seen an absolute monarch so casually attired,” he explained.

“I’m really just a country girl at heart, Mr. Nijpels. Did Nell tell you I’ve put Ellen Messier at your service for the duration of your stay? Until we get an agreement finalized and while there isn’t work for you to do, please feel free to get Ellen to take you wherever you wish.”

“Mrs. Gruder did tell me of your generous offer. Thank you for making me feel so welcome. Mrs. Gruder tells me you are returning to Boulder?”

“Yes. I’m not needed here and my father is not in the best of health. Despite that, he still insists on working our claim. I’m going back to help.”

“Your claim?” Nijpels asked.

“Her Majesty, along with many of the original settlers in this part of the world, works a gold-mining claim near Boulder-in-Farside,” Nell explained. “It’s how Farside got its initial funding.”

“And the ruler of all Farside actually works the claim?”

Barbara nodded vigorously. “Uh-huh. My status as ‘absolute monarch’ doesn’t absolve me of my responsibilities to the community, one of which is to pull my own weight. As we say in this part of the world: I put my pants on one leg at a time just like everybody else.”

“Amazing!” Nijpels remarked. “I’ll have to give serious thought to emigrating to Farside.”

“Hmmm... What skills would you bring to the community as an inducement to allow you to join?” Nell asked.

“I’m a very skilled attorney,” Nijpels began.

“But there are so few laws here that there’s almost nothing that’s ‘against the law’. Why might we need attorneys?”

“For drawing up contracts?” Nijpels suggested. “To prevent one party slipping dangerous provisions into a contract and then using that as a wedge to gain financial advantages?”

Barbara laughed. “That would happen once, Mr. Nijpels, after which the word would get around ‘don’t do business with X; he’s sneaky and underhanded’. Farside is a lovely place to live and work unless your neighbors won’t talk to you.

“Nell, I really must be going. I’m counting on you to watch out for *Diamonds Farside’s* best interests. Let me know if you need

anything from me.

“Mr. Nijpels, it’s been a pleasure meeting you. Enjoy your time in Farside.” She extended her hand and Nijpels shook it.

—==+++==—

Lisette and Peter Gansler had been hard at work since arriving in Sydney five weeks ago with their cargo of gate components and survey gear. These ‘official national gatekeepers’ first constructed a viewer and contracted with a private flight service out of Adelaide to fly them over the lake country of South Australia. Several weeks of boustrophedonic passes north and south at 700 meters had provided them with pictures of the terrain adequate to enable survey teams to know or guess what obstacles they would encounter when trekking overland in Farside. By the time the AMAX advance team arrived, the cartographers at Rand-McNally’s ‘Farside Special Projects Division’ had turned those photos into an acceptable map.

Peter had also found an inconspicuous spot at a turn-off for the A87 northwest of Port Augusta where he could slip into Farside and build an equipment gate large enough to handle the trucks and vans that would soon need to cross through. Lisette, meanwhile, surveyed the heavy equipment dealers in the area for vehicles suitable to the tasks ahead.

Rodolfo Gonzales, team leader for the advance team, shook hands with the Ganslers, introduced himself and his team, and admired the maps from Rand-McNally. Lisette briefed him on the trucks she had located and the cost. Gonzales agreed and the following day, using the checking account AMAX provided for him through a local bank, purchased three campers and a fuel tanker. For a small additional fee, the dealer took care of the registration paperwork and had the vehicles plated.

As the sun set, the convoy set off northward along the A87 from Port Augusta and soon arrived at the turn-off. Checking to see that traffic on the highway would not observe their activity, Peter set up a small gate and passed through, whereupon the large equipment gate opened to admit the AMAX convoy.

Peter kissed Lisette good-bye and re-entered Farside, shutting off the equipment gate. Lisette shut off the smaller gate and broke it down for transport. On the way back to her hotel, she used her cell phone to notify her guild master that the team had transited and where the Farside equipment gate could be found.

She now had three weeks of enforced vacation on the south shore of Australia. She rented a sailboat, packed it full of provisions, and pointed the prow toward the Great Australian Bight. In a small

utility bag, she carried all the gate chips that existed in Australia and she was prepared to toss the bag into the drink on a moment's notice.

The convoy picked its way northwest from Port Augusta weaving through the landscape to avoid driving through patches of triodia grass. The hard tips of the leaves tended to break off and clog the vehicles' radiators causing the engines to overheat and fail. They had three weeks to do their survey and none of them wanted to have to walk back.

Fifty miles north of their starting point, as near as anyone could figure, the clicking of the Geiger counter began to change noticeably. Gonzales got out and wandered around the area making notes in his notebook for each hot spot they encountered. Occasionally he would take a sample and mark the map with numbers to indicate where each note was made and each sample taken.

By the end of the second week they estimated they had reached out about two hundred miles and had investigated forty potential dig sites.

"Let's wrap it up and head back by an alternate route," Gonzales ordered. All the crew members agreed that was a good plan. The rough terrain made for slow going and it might take them the bulk of the week to get back to their starting point.

Sunburned and tired, the crew could justly claim to have earned their pay, and the photos and videos they had taken during the trip was the icing on the cake. They had seen not a single kangaroo or dingo, but rats were plentiful along with emu and what may have been something like a dodo. Snakes ran to the large end of the spectrum, approximating Nearside boas and pythons, except that most of the snakes encountered in Farside Australia were vipers and almost certainly poisonous. These preyed on the rats, and it was rare to see a snake without the characteristic bulge suggesting a rat being digested. There were also a few distinct species of sea birds that became rarer as the survey pushed inland. It was considered very likely there would be more and different animals in the interior. Tracks found near fresh water also hinted at the presence of large cattle-like animals but no one wanted to stay up all night just to find out.

About the same time, Lisette Gansler returned from two weeks of solo cruising devoted to relaxation and meditation and turned her boat in to the rental agent.

"Good time?" the agent asked her.

"You have no idea," she assured him. "Nothing slows the pulse like two weeks alone at sea."

She first called her boss, Robert Larreau, to inform him that

she was back ashore and preparing to retrieve the survey crew, then began reconstructing a viewer from her supply of chipsets. Her next call was to the flying service they had used originally to obtain the matched photos for Rand-McNally. She chartered a plane for a loop northwest of Port Augusta in hopes she would be able to spot the survey party from the air and from that determine when they would arrive back at the pick-up point. She took with her a two-way radio such as the survey party used for themselves.

Sitting in the rear seat with her viewer hidden by her open laptop computer, she directed the pilot to follow tracks in the terrain the pilot could not see. "Steer a little left... that's good. Hold that course."

Two hundred two miles from their starting point, Lisette told the pilot "Head south from here, please." The plane banked left to 180° as Lisette observed the course of the tire tracks below.

"Can you put down anywhere near here?" she asked.

The pilot scanned ahead for a flat spot and began his descent. Shortly he identified a flat area. "How's 'at?" he asked pointing.

"Anywhere is fine as long as we aren't moving."

"Air sick?"

"Nope. I want to get a close view of the land... feel the dirt."

Crazy Yanks, the pilot mused and flared out with the wheels 15cm above the ground. Lisette didn't even feel the wheels touch down.

Lisette moved away from the aircraft and periodically reached down to grab a handful of sand letting it spill through her fingers. When she had put 30 meters between herself and the waiting pilot, she took a small saucer-sized ring from her fanny pack, switched the gate on and ran the antenna of her radio through it into Farside.

"Survey one, how do you read? Over."

"We read you fine, Lisette," Gonzales replied. "All present and accounted for."

"Where are you, Gonzo?"

"Hard to tell," Gonzales replied, "but we think we're about thirty miles out of Yardea according to the landmarks we're seeing. We should make the pick-up point 'long about Thursday. The spinifex is pretty thick out here so we have to take it slow. Marty rigged cow catchers for all the vehicles so we squash most of it down as we go, but we still have to take it easy so we don't raise any chaff. How are things on your end?"

"I'm fine," Lisette confirmed. "I've been following your tracks by air and decided to give you a shout since I seem to have run past you."

"Alright, good, see you Thursday. Survey one, out."

—==+++==—

“In nineteen days, we found seventy-two unique sites where the surface radiation indicates it’s worth exploring,” Rodolfo spoke to the AMAX executives gathered to see and hear about the recent survey trip to Australia. “As with all of Farside, it is starkly primitive. We will need to make very detailed arrangements with the local gatekeepers to keep our crews supplied with the necessities of life.

“The only thing we don’t have to import is water. There are hundreds of square miles of fresh water lakes that we can pull water from. Farside Australia seems not to have fresh water crocs, but they have something potentially far worse: we got to see one of their snakes — like a python or boa — attack a goat-sized ‘something’ from beneath the surface, and it was all over but the bubbles in under four seconds. The damn thing was lightning fast, at least as fast as a croc. We’re lucky not to have lost anyone.

“We surveyed the Lake District northwest of Port Augusta and up beyond Woomera. This is not considered top-tier uranium country, but as you know the decision was made to have us survey the second- or third-choice fields so we would know what to expect up and down the scale.

“Unless we find that Farside Australia has a very different allocation of uranium than Nearside Australia, we’re all going to be billionaires.” The executives were smiling broadly, exactly the effect Rodolfo thought he would have on them.

—==+++==—

“This arrived by diplomatic pouch,” Paul said when his turn came to speak before the Privy Council. “It’s addressed to Barbara, so I did not open it.” He handed the package wrapped in plain brown paper to Barbara who took it and started stripping the covering as if it were Christmas morning.

Inside, an obviously-custom-built rosewood box glowed in its own highlights. Barbara tipped back the cover and gasped. In a royal blue velvet-lined bed, a fist-sized pear-cut diamond sparkled and flashed with each tiny movement. Rainbow colored spots covered the walls and ceiling of their meeting room. A small brass plaque affixed to the velvet lining named it “The Soweto Pear — a gift to Her Majesty Barbara I from the grateful people of Soweto-in-Farside”.

Paul unfolded a note as Barbara and the others marveled at the massive size of the rock. “A separate note from Jiji Mgabwe informs me that The Soweto Pear is 528.1 carats, making it just a shade smaller than The Star of Africa, one of the Crown Jewels of Great Britain. Congratulations, Your Majesty, you have just entered

the Big League.”

Oscar Gruder tapped some keys on his calculator and announced: “Three point seven ounces. That rock is almost a quarter pound of diamond.”

Barbara grinned. “I can’t wear it. It won’t fit on the crown.”

“Into each life some rain must fall,” Nell said and chuckled.

19 - Passages

Dr. Assan listened to Buck's heart through his stethoscope and frowned. "You sound terrible. Have you been taking your medications?"

"Like clockwork," Buck asserted.

"Well, you're not showing any improvement. You know what's next, right?"

"Surgery," Buck mumbled.

"Almost," Dr. Assan told him. "Angioplasty. I'll set it up with Dr. Passoulakis. In the meantime, no more sluicing. Go easy on yourself... doctor's orders."

Buck nodded his acquiescence and shrugged his shirt back on.

Outside in the waiting room, Barbara used her laptop computer to catch up on correspondence. She looked up as Buck pushed through the door. "What did Dr. Assan say?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Buck lied, "but he's going to do some more tests. I have to come back on Tuesday."

Barbara saved the note she was working on, an informal message to Marcel d'Hourtin in what Marcel jokingly called '*Franglais*', and closed her computer. "Okay, I'll drive you home."

"No, you've got things to do and I need the exercise," Buck told her. He gave Barbara a kiss and turned for the door.

Buck walked the half mile from the dispensary to the house he shared with Barbara, Ernie, and the grandchildren, mounted an ATV and drove to site 2 to see if Ernie needed any help.

"How did your visit with Dr. Assan go?" Ernie asked him.

Buck shrugged. "I'll need more tests next week," he told Ernie, "and he told me to take it easy until then. Need any help?"

"Not from you," Ernie answered. "Sit down and relax."

"I'm fine!" Buck protested.

"Me, too," Ernie retorted. "Have a seat."

Buck sat where he could watch the operation. Ernie shoveled some riverbed into the sluice and sprayed it with water from the water tower they shared with four other families nearby. He pored through the leftovers and picked out a few of the larger flecks and put them into a small plastic container.

"How much?" Buck asked.

"It's early yet. Maybe six... maybe seven grams. I could take half an ounce or more at this rate."

"I can help," Buck told him as he rose from his seat.

Ernie took the phone from his pocket and began to dial. In a moment, the call was answered. "You tell him," he spoke into the phone and then handed the instrument to Buck.

"Daddy, you are forbidden to work the sluice until Doctor Assan gives you a clean bill of health. Are you going to make it necessary for me to make it official? I will, you know. I'll be out there in twenty minutes, crown in hand, to do it. Do I have to do that?"

"Doctor Assan said I'm fine," Buck protested. "I can work the sluice."

"That's not what Dr. Assan's note to me said. He said he ordered you not to work the sluice. That's why I called Ernie ten minutes ago and warned him. You are not working the sluice until your doctor allows it. Period. Am I clear?"

"Clear as a bell. Some 'patient confidentiality' my doctor is providing," Buck fumed.

"I'm only doing what I hope someone would do for me were I as stubborn and pig-headed as you — in accordance with our law. Dr. Assan merely obeyed the command of his sovereign. He doesn't fink on all his patients, just a select few. Next Tuesday you have an appointment with Dr. Passoulakis to be stented. He says you'll be up and about by the afternoon. Until then you're under arrest — hopefully not the cardiac kind. Have a nice day, Daddy, and I mean that sincerely." Barbara hung up as a way of cutting off any possibility of debate. Buck made a snarly face at the phone before handing it back to Ernie.

"Okay?" Ernie asked.

"Yeah," Buck agreed and retook his seat by the stream-side.

"You're outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked, you know," Ernie advised him and then they both laughed.

—==+++==—

Dwight Vanner looked over his creation approvingly. The 32-foot sloop he had designed and built with the help of the others in his community would, if he asked it, take him around the world. All he wanted it to do was to take him and the others to New Jersey. It was the culmination of the decision they had made three years ago when it appeared they were going to get no more help from the Farsiders. That was neither a crippling blow nor unexpected. The Farsiders had often reminded them that they were responsible for creating and maintaining a viable community, but forty scientists with varying skill sets would eventually die out without a breeding population, and the only two women on the team had paired off leaving three dozen others to live as monks.

They knew there was a community near Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and they felt sure they could find it by trekking overland if they could just get to the vicinity of Perth Amboy. So, the group, enforced bachelors for the most part, decided to escape before old age caught up to them.

The first group boarded the unnamed ship — one of them suggested they call it 'Exodus' after the steamer in the Leon Uris book of the same name — for the trip across New York harbor. The wind was westerly and the tide was going out.

"Cast off forward," Vanner ordered. "Cast off aft." The craft eased away from the makeshift dock and moved into the current. Vanner pushed the rudder over and pulled the boom closer. The boat pointed itself toward where Governor's Island would have been had there been such a thing in Farside and picked up speed. Its seventeen passengers gazed hopefully at the looming bulk of Staten-Island-in-Farside and held on to whatever was handy.

Vanner steered SSW into the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island, then SSE toward the Lower Bay where he could aim SW and WSW to skirt the island. Neither Vanner nor anyone else knew what to expect as they rounded the southern tip of the island, and were pleased to see toward the northwest the mouth of a river where he expected the Raritan river to be. Vanner aimed for it. "Tacking!" he shouted, then pushed the rudder hard and ducked under the boom as it snapped to the other side.

He tacked for another forty minutes working his way upstream against a slow current and adverse winds before calling it 'quits'.

"This is as far as I can get you," he told the shore party. "Get your campsite established here and I'll be back early tomorrow with the next group."

The shore party loaded the dinghy with people and supplies, their crossbows first because they had no idea what sort of wildlife they might encounter, and pulled for the shore. They were back in half an hour for the next load, and after six trips the last of them waded ashore in New Jersey. Vanner pulled up his anchor — a large rock rigged in a woven rope basket — and ran downwind into the Lower Bay heading home.

The following morning, he repeated the trip and by the third day the rear guard of the 'Manhattan Project', as they had called themselves for several years, boarded the boat for the last voyage it would ever make. At the New Jersey beachhead, the now crew-less and unloaded boat was anchored at three points and abandoned, probably forever.

Two days later, three wooden-wheeled oxcarts having been cobbled together according to the plan they had meticulously worked

out, they loaded their worldly possessions onto the carts and began their trek west-southwest, with magnetic compasses their only guide for the seventy-mile trip.

None of them had brought with them into Farside any skills suitable for frontier living. None of them had even been in the Boy Scouts. None of them had ever been on a camping trip, nor had any of them ever hunted. What skills they now had they learned during the dozen years of their exile on Farside's equivalent of Manhattan island.

One of the engineers with an inventive bent designed and built a rudimentary crossbow for hunting because it combined power, accuracy, and silence in such a way as to improve the odds of a kill. It also served as protection against wildlife although none of them had ever had to use it that way. Over the years, everyone had acquired one and the skills to put it to use. Now that they were on the mainland of North America-in-Farside, with whose wildlife they were unfamiliar, they fully expected they would stay alive only so long as they were prepared to defend themselves against predators.

They knew, of course, about the Farside Dire wolf. The Farsiders had told them tales of the northern hemisphere's apex predator, hair-raising tales. As they pressed on through the woods, two forward lookouts always preceded the main party, and everyone kept their bows handy.

On the eighth day, they reckoned they were within shouting distance of Hammburg or they had completely missed it. They set up their base camp in an open area a mile and a half wide and made preparations for surveying on spokes radiating out from this fixed point, seven spokes spaced 45 degrees apart, starting with the north, south, and west spokes.

The ninth day's thrust was to the north and by evening the patrol returned with a negative report: no contact. The tenth day's patrol was westward and while they didn't make contact, they did report seeing smoke in the northwest. The eleventh day's patrol was to have been to the south but was retasked to reach out northwest. That patrol encountered cattle grazing and found a ranch house belonging to members of the Hammburg community. When the patrol returned to the base camp in the evening, they carried with them a VOR receiver, a gift from the dairyman, and were told to home on a particular frequency.

On the afternoon of the twelfth day, the forty members of the Manhattan Project dragged their oxcarts into the Hammburg town square and were welcomed by the Hamm brothers and three NSA scientists who were now firmly committed to living in Farside.

—==+++==—

Barbara's phone purred in her shirt pocket. "Hello, Laurel," she answered it, "is this 'official' or 'casual'?"

"'Official', ma'am," Laurel informed her. Barbara slipped her mind into 'monarch' mode.

"We had visitors today," Laurel told Barbara, "forty persons, the entire Manhattan colony as far as we can tell."

"Hold," Barbara ordered. "I'm putting you on speaker. I have Davy Harmon and Tony Dinardo here for dinner. They probably need to hear what you're reporting. Start again."

"We had visitors today," Laurel repeated for Davy's and Tony's edification, "forty persons, the entire Manhattan colony as far as we can tell. They apparently got tired of living in isolation and escaped the island, making their way here overland. They're asking for permission to join the colony at Hammburg."

"Okay..." Tony Dinardo prompted. "And what?"

"I want some guidance," Laurel explained. "What shall we do with them? Can we let them join the colony or should we send them back?"

"Laurel, you're the Hammburg regent," Davy Harmon explained as if he were teaching a child. "What do you think you should do?" Barbara covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a snicker.

"I..." Laurel started and hesitated. She still, five years into her regency, did not understand the extent of her authority.

"As regent, Laurel," Barbara re-injected herself into the conversation, "you have all the authority I would have in the same situation. Unless your decision is catastrophically at odds with The Golden Rule, I don't need to be involved, although I appreciate you keeping me informed. What do you think would be best for Hammburg in this case?"

"I think it would be a good idea to keep them, ma'am."

"Then keep them," Tony advised her.

"Just like that?" Laurel asked.

"Just like that," Barbara confirmed.

"I think the Manhattan group will be very relieved. Thank you." She hung up the phone.

"Apparently, they decided they didn't want to die of starvation," Davy concluded.

"They seem a resourceful bunch," Tony added. "I'd be interested to hear how they got off the island without a boat."

"I'm presuming this is another group of Farsiders who are not to be allowed access to gates." Barbara nodded her affirmation of

that. "It might be a good idea to interview them in isolation to assess the potential for another breakout."

Davy pursed his lips. "I'll have that taken care of."

—==++++==—

Douglas Walker, Chief of the Oneida Nation, sat at a large table with all the elders of the community, a hard-bound Atlas of Farside open to 'Michigan'. "The worst that can happen is that they say 'no'," he told them. The others looked at him noncommittally.

"What's in Farside for us?" Yolanda Gleason demanded.

"A clean start for those of us who want one and an escape from the destructive economics of living on a reservation," he answered. "A century ago we gave up the freedom of our ancestors for the security of a prison without barbed wire fences. What's in Farside for us? Freedom!"

"For everybody?" Yolanda snapped back.

Walker shook his head. "Not everybody here wants freedom. Not everybody can handle it. There are plenty of us — too damn many, if you ask me — who would prefer getting a check every month and spending it on garbage. The drunks and the druggies and the gamblers won't want to exert the effort it takes to be free. I wasn't talking about them."

"So, you're going to strip our community of all the workers and the doers and leave everyone else to rot?"

"Believe me, Yolanda, if I could isolate all of the wastrels in their own community, I would. Right now, they act as an anchor, slowing down all of us who want to make a difference in our community. Yes, I'm leaving them to rot. It's an act of self-preservation. If we don't, then we all rot. Farside provides the clean break we need to separate ourselves from those who have given up hope. I'm sorry for them, but what would you have us do? Staying here is like being part of a suicide pact."

"I agree with Douglas," Etocha Owl-on-the-branch butted in. "Anyone who looks at our recent history and doesn't see us sliding into the pit is deluding themselves. We're surrounded by people — and, damn it, they're our own people — who are dragging the entire community down as they slowly destroy themselves — and us. It's time to cut our losses."

"That's hateful talk," Yolanda hissed, tears of anger making their appearance on her cheeks. "I suppose you're going to abandon all the grandparents, the elderly who can't '*pull their own weight*', too."

"Nobody's going to be left behind just because they're old,"

Mark Runs Fast yelled at her, rising from his seat so that all could more clearly hear him. "What the hell kind of people do you think we are?"

"I vote 'no'," Yolanda finished, sitting down at last.

The vote was six-to-three for opening negotiations with Farside for an emigration of Michigan Oneidas.

—==+++==—

Penelope sat on the stage facing the Privy Council, Barbara and Ernie off to one side, as the members of the Council peppered her with questions, some of them pretty difficult for a 14-year-old.

"There's a forest fire reported in the Wyoming district and it's spreading south," Davy Harmon posited. "It will, if things go as they are going, reach the farms north of here in about a week. What are you going to do about it?"

"What do the people of Farside want me to do, Minister Harmon?" she asked in return.

"I have no idea, Penelope. How should I know?"

"I think that's an important consideration, Minister Harmon, don't you?" she asked. "I would convene the Moot on an emergency basis and ask the community if they wish me — and, by extension, themselves — to take action to combat it. What the Moot authorizes, we should do. This is, after all, their community. It's not a question of what I would do, but rather, what they would do."

"I have no further questions," Davy Harmon told the Privy Council.

Paul Gillman moved to the microphone. "Are there questions from the floor?" he asked.

Susan Hopkins stood and faced Penelope. "There has been a massive crop failure in Pecos. Financially, times have been pretty bad for the last several years. The treasury is empty," she posited to Penelope, "and most of the people are stretched thin. They can't manage to do much for their neighbors in the Pecos community. Do you have any suggestions?"

"While the House of fitzGibbon has an income, the treasury cannot be empty," Penelope told her. "The House of fitzGibbon stands ready to 'go for broke' to ensure the viability of Farside."

Susan performed a little bow from the waist to acknowledge Penny's perfect answer. "I have no further questions."

Seeing no further effort to test Penelope, Paul Gillman announced: "Recess, thirty minutes," and the people in the Moot Hall rose and began milling about and talking among themselves.

Thirty minutes later, Paul moved to the microphone and called

to the Moot: "May we please come to order?"

Everyone took their seats and Paul continued: "Has the Moot decided?"

Deena Messier rose to speak for the Moot. "The Moot confirms the request of the Privy Council," she called out in a clear voice.

Penelope rose and moved to the forward edge of the stage where she knelt facing the audience. Behind her, Samantha Burke lifted a simple gold ring from its box and approached. "How shall you be called?" she asked Penelope.

"Alice," Penelope responded.

Samantha lowered the ring onto Penelope Alice's honey blonde hair, then turned to the audience. "I present you Her Royal Highness, Princess Alice of Farside." The hall exploded in applause and the Privy Council stood as a gesture of respect, as did Ernie.

Barbara rose from her seat, took Penelope Alice's hand, and helped her rise from her knees.

"Farside has work for you, Alice," she told her daughter and handed her an envelope.

Penelope Alice curtsied to her mother. "Yes, ma'am."

—==+++==—

The Cessna Citation settled onto runway 36 at Green Bay's Austin Straubel International Airport and taxied to the General Aviation area where a ground crewman directed it to a parking spot. A waiting limousine transported Penelope and her two bodyguards/advisers to the Oneida community and a meeting with the Council of Elders.

As the three visitors entered the meeting room, the elders rose in greeting, but a look of concern swept across their faces at the sight of a young teen-age girl in the company of two very serious looking young men. Douglas Walker approached them and extended his hand. He was surprised when Penelope grabbed it and shook it.

"We expected someone older," he stammered to Penelope.

"Training mission," Penelope explained curtly. "Mr. Walker?" she inquired. Douglas blinked. "This is not considered a difficult negotiation," Penelope explained, "so my mother assigned it to me as a way of getting my feet wet. I hope you're not disappointed."

"Oh, no, not at all. Surprised, but not disappointed."

"Well, let's get to it, then, shall we?" They all took seats. "By now, almost everyone in the world is aware of the requirements for immigration to Farside," Penelope began. "You must homestead your land, up to three thousand acres per family, and exploit at least twenty percent of it for eight years straight. On net, the community

must produce more food than it consumes and more energy than it consumes. Generally, that means wind power and/or solar power and/or hydroelectric power.

"Her Majesty, my mother, has received your proposal and the Privy Council has sent me here to get an idea of how you expect to meet the homestead requirements so that I can report back to them whether it appears you are ready to become citizens of Farside." She handed Walker an envelope. "In here are forms that you should copy and have filled out by all those who intend to immigrate to Farside. The information on the forms will enable us to do basic background checks and determine if any of you are unsuitable for life in Farside. If any of you have criminal records in Nearside, rest assured that that is not a barrier to Farside citizenship... as long as your criminal past stays well in the past. Farside is a particularly bad place for criminals.

"Part of 'becoming citizens of Farside' is that you assert your allegiance to the Crown while you are in Farside. You will have dual citizenship with the United States and with the Oneida Nation should you choose to retain either or both, and we recognize that you have obligations of allegiance elsewhere when you are in Nearside."

Walker listened to Penelope's prepared *spiel* with his jaw slightly agape. If he noticed that Penelope was occasionally referring to notes on a series of slips of paper, he didn't mention it.

"Before we get started, do you have any preliminary questions?" Penny asked.

"Who... who are you?" Walker asked.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Penny apologized. "I am Penelope Walsh, daughter to Her Majesty, Barbara fitzGibbon-Walsh, and myself officially 'Princess Alice of Farside'. I should have introduced myself earlier; forgive me."

Walker smiled at a mental disconnect. "You are 'Penelope' but you are also 'Princess Alice'... Why not 'Princess Penelope'?"

Penny smiled. "It was an honor to my maternal grandfather, the only one of my grandparents still living. 'Alice' was my maternal grandmother," she explained. Walker bobbed his head as if to indicate understanding.

"So, we have all the prospective immigrants fill out these forms and send them back with you? Does this have to be done today? I wasn't prepared to have everyone gathered to fill out forms. In fact, at this point, we don't even know all the people who might want to join us."

Penny smiled. "No, take your time. The packet has an address in Colorado where you can send the completed forms whenever there's enough to justify mailing. You'll know you've been approved when your passport arrives in your mailbox.

"I presume you'll be the group's leader, at least until they choose someone officially. Have you started planning for how you will cover the homesteading requirements?"

"Yes. Several of the probable leaders have put aside funds for the purchase of a half dozen windmills. We're planning for a late-Spring kick-off because we'll need as much warm weather as we can get to construct shelter and start gathering wood. I expect it will be some time before we produce anything by way of crops given the weather. I hope we can get some sort of extension on the requirement to be self-sustaining..."

"There's no problem with that, Mr. Walker," Penny told him, "all the land in Farside starts out as 'open range'. The clock starts ticking when you stake out your acreage."

"What if we never stake out homesteads?" Walker asked.

"No one has ever asked that question before that I know of." Penny leaned back to talk to her bodyguards/advisers. They both shrugged in response to her whispered question. "The requirement is that you be self-sustaining as a community," Penny continued. "How you accomplish that is strictly your business. As far as I know, there's no requirement that you claim a homestead. In the Okambo district there are many people who work farms as employees but have no homestead themselves. We expect that eventually they will claim their own land but if they don't, there's no penalty that I know of."

"So... a community garden on the open range would be..."

"I'll check with the Privy Council, but I think that would be fine."

One of the bodyguards/advisers leaned forward and whispered into Penny's ear: "You are Alice of Farside," he told her. "Whatever you decide, the Privy Council will support."

She nodded. "Go ahead and plan for that, if that's what you think will work best."

"Would you care to meet and speak with the ones we know are planning to move into Farside?" Walker asked.

"I would like to meet them. Perhaps they have questions I need to address."

In a larger adjoining room three dozen others waited for the official meeting to end and their chance to meet the representative from Farside. None of them expected a 14-year-old girl to be that representative and looks of confusion flitted from face to face.

"Allow me to introduce Princess Alice of Farside," Walker began and some of the confusion seemed to ebb away. "Her Highness is the official representative of Farside and she will take any questions you may have for her."

"You're somewhat young to be representing all of Farside,

aren't you?" one asked.

Penelope laughed. "That's why they give me the easy jobs."

"We knew Farside had a queen," another spoke, "but nobody mentioned a princess."

"My father tells me I've always been a princess to him, and there have been occasions in the past where I officiated — unofficially — at the grand opening of this or that community center, but I've only been formally titled for three days. That title, by the way, is not obtained by the circumstances of my birth, but at the recommendation of the Privy Council and with the approval of the people of Farside."

"And you are how old?" a third asked.

"I've heard that one never asks a lady her age —" Penelope winked and the audience laughed, "— but since I'm not yet a lady, I admit to being fourteen."

"How long do you expect the process of starting up a Farside community might take for us?"

Penelope turned and spoke *sotto voce* to one of her companions. "I'm told that one community was up-and-running in four months, but they appear to have been very-well-funded. The current record at the other end is 'three years' and there is another community still forming that could break that record. You're worried that you are not well-funded and that it might take you a long time to get organized. You shouldn't worry. As long as you are making progress toward fulfilling your homestead requirements, no one will take you to task. Farside is not an escape hatch, though. When you stop making progress, the deal is off. Just like in football, if you can make your ten yards you get another first-down. Just like in football, not enough yardage, and somebody else gets the ball.

"Someone from the Interior Ministry will visit your community periodically to assess how well things are coming along. I'm told their inspectors are real pushovers because they want to encourage rather than discourage community formation. As long as you're making an effort, you'll be rewarded for the effort."

"How do we get to Farside?"

"When your leaders notify us that you're ready to get to work, we'll send a team of gatekeepers and gates to let you take people, vehicles, and equipment through. The gatekeepers will be permanently stationed here as part of your community, and you'll be expected to feed and shelter them in exchange for their services."

She looked around the group but no one else seemed to have questions. "We're looking forward to welcoming you all to Farside," she concluded.

—==++++==—

Farside One, Barbara's personal aircraft, touched down at the eastern end of runway 26 and taxied to the hangar with the huge golden ellipse painted on its side. Once inside, the hangar doors slid closed and a giant gate came active. The pilot inched the throttles forward and the Honda rolled smoothly into Farside.

Ernie was there to welcome his daughter home. Penny launched herself at him and they hugged each other as if it had been years since they last saw each other.

"Good trip?" he asked.

"Easy," Penny told him. "I hope they're all like this. I can't wait to report to the Council."

"There'll be time for that later," Ernie told her. "Your mother needs to see you." The two moved toward the hangar door and the car that would take them to Okambo and their home.

As the car eased away from the airstrip, Penny looked out the window at the scenery sliding past. "Daddy, why are the flags at half-mast? Who died?"

"That can wait, too," Ernie told her.

Penny turned toward him, a look of trepidation on her face. "Grandpa Buck?"

Ernie nodded. Penelope burst into tears.

20 - Eventide

The State Funeral for Buck fitzGibbon was attended by all the highly-placed operatives of Farside, but he wasn't important enough to draw Nearside heads-of-state and Barbara and Ernie truly believed he would have preferred it that way.

The heaviest impact of his loss fell upon the grandchildren, all of whom had spent considerable time with him learning — although they all thought it was playing — about life in Farside. Eugene, especially, missed the old man and considered it supremely unfair that his life should change so very drastically. He resolved to do something about that.

Penelope, newly fascinated with the task of overseeing the development of an entire world, coped with the loss by drowning herself in '*administrivia*'. Something deep within her whispered that being up to her ears in things-to-do would hide the pain even if it wouldn't erase it altogether.

"I need to be busier," Penelope told her mother as she was getting dressed for school the first day after a short national period of mourning.

"School will keep you plenty busy," Barbara explained.

"School is irrelevant," Penny retorted.

Barbara turned toward her daughter. "Considering all the things you could have said," Barbara smiled, "I think 'irrelevant' is a thorough-going refutation of that position. Not many 14-year-olds think in those terms, so your schooling has done some very nice things for you."

Penny smirked. "I had a very long chat with Chancellor Burke over the weekend," Penny continued. "You know she's..."

"Here's your ride," her mother interrupted. "We'll talk about this later. Right now, your main job is 'learning'. Scoot. All of you."

Penny kissed Barbara, then Ernie, and herded Eugene, Deirdre, and Mark outside to join the 'posse' of youngsters on their way to school, most of the younger children astride Farside Ponies, animals Dr. Gregory Urbaniek had tentatively identified as 'probable dwarf *pliohippus*', a species that had gone extinct in North America about two million years ago. Their size, about one meter at the shoulder, made them near-perfect mounts for smaller riders.

"Irrelevant!" Barbara told Ernie after the posse rode away. "Who ever heard such things from a 14-year-old?"

"Clearly, she doesn't think she's fourteen," Ernie explained.

"She's been doing lots of jobs no typical 14-year-old gets to *think about doing*, much less *actually doing*. She has job experience you'll find in no other child her age, and she's been doing okay at it for the most part."

Barbara pursed her lips. "I admit I was more than a little uneasy when the Council suggested making her unofficial status official, but it has worked out well, hasn't it?" she asked rhetorically.

Ernie winked. "If Farside wishes to keep this form of government after you're gone," he mused, "at least they'll have a viable candidate. She thinks like her mother."

"Does she..." Barbara muttered distractedly.

"What were you saying about Chancellor Burke this morning?" Ernie asked Penelope over dinner that evening.

Penny put her fork down and quickly swallowed what she had in her mouth. "I got a chance to talk to Sam —"

"Chancellor Burke," Barbara interrupted.

Penny rocked her head side-to-side like a bobble-head doll. "— Chancellor Burke... quite a bit over the weekend. She's been Chancellor now for almost as long as you've been Queen," she addressed her mother, "and she says she's still depressed over how far we still have to go. She said, '*ten thousand years*' several times during our chat. Do you really think we have that much ahead of us?"

Barbara looked off into space as if contemplating her answer. "No," she said at last, "I don't think it will take that long. We're making giant leaps thanks to having a well-developed industrial society right next door, as it were. Sam is right to this extent: Farside will be mostly rural or wilderness for a very long time, even if we do nothing to slow our admittedly prodigious progress. I expect your great-grandchildren to fully understand the life we're living now.

"And I think that's a good thing, generally speaking. Wilderness is good for the soul, and people need a frontier to keep their hopes alive. The Nearsiders have had to establish national parks to preserve their wilderness. I can't begin to imagine when we'll need to start thinking about imitating them.

"In the meantime, we have a unique world that provides wilderness and a frontier for Farsiders and Nearsiders alike. All we have to do is keep it safe."

"Safe. Yes," Penny muttered as she resumed eating.

—==++++==—

"Why does Penny get all the fun jobs?" Eugene asked his father as they cleared away the dinner dishes.

"I suppose because she's older," Ernie suggested.

"She was no older than me when she started cutting ribbons for grand openings," Eugene continued his protest.

"So, you're looking to get into the family business?" Ernie asked rhetorically. "I'll talk to your mother."

Barbara laughed when Ernie told her of the conversation, but Ernie didn't join her laughter. "I think you ought to take this seriously," Ernie warned, "as seriously as Eugene takes it."

The smile drained from Barbara's face. "I think I've made a catastrophic error," she told Ernie.

Ernie made a *moue* with his lips and nodded. "Yes, but 'how to recover' is the active question."

—==+++==—

"Eugene is making noises about getting into the family business," Barbara told the Gruders over lunch.

Nell turned her head slowly to look at Oscar as Oscar turned toward Nell. Both their eyes were wide. They turned back to look at Barbara. "Have we made a tactical blunder?" Nell asked.

"I've nearly come to that conclusion myself," Barbara agreed. "I haven't concluded how we might undo any damage. Suggestions from anyone will be mighty welcome, but I think we ought not make this a public issue quite yet."

Oscar blinked twice. "We've been playing with this issue for some time now because we didn't think we had to take it seriously. We have, after all, what — seventy-some-odd regents — scattered around the globe, and we call them 'regents' — official representatives of the queen. I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to quietly begin referring to them as 'governors' or something similar, moving the terminology, at any rate, away from implications of royalty."

"Hmmm..." Barbara muttered, "I wonder if we ought not gather the regents and lay the problem before them. Seventy-two heads, they say, are better than one."

"We've never done that before," Oscar mused, "but it might give us a good excuse to use the new displays in the Moot Hall. Have a 73-party video conference. It'll be chaos, but it will be historic. Include the communities or exclude them?"

"I think for the present, I'd like to restrict this to 'management'," Barbara told Oscar. Oscar nodded.

—==+++==—

Barbara strode into view of the camera covering the stage in

the Okambo Moot Hall dressed in a gray suit such as she might have worn when teaching and carrying a black walnut case under her arm. She set the case on a low table and opened it to show the crown in its velvet-lined depression.

"Today, I am just another regent like all of you. I want your unvarnished thoughts. You should hold nothing back because of my presence here. Although the Crown is present, the Queen is not. Floreat Farside."

A rumble of '*Floreat Farside*' from 72 regents rattled the speakers in the auditorium.

"Rumors have been circulating that you are threatening to abdicate," the Regent of Delos opened. "Is that true?"

"No, it's not true," Barbara assured her. "I will wear the crown for as long as the people of Farside demand it. When the people of Farside stop demanding that, there will be no need for me to abdicate. I will merely close the lid on that box for the last time. No, but the matter I have called you together to discuss is equally serious, however.

"You are all aware, no doubt, that Penelope Alice was recently given official royal status. This is causing some consternation among her siblings, principally Eugene Steven who has not been so graced, and may not be. There's some concern brewing that a hereditary monarchy may not be a good idea for Farside." Barbara paused to allow the Regents to interject their thoughts. She was not disappointed.

"I don't see that as a problem," Gideon Matowa, the Regent of Johannesburg offered. "Can you elaborate on the problems you foresee?"

"I think what the Crown is suggesting," Marcel d'Hourtin interrupted, "is that she is the ruler of Farside at the behest of her people because they see her as a wise, just, and efficient ruler. We have no such assurances for her children."

"I see," the Johannesburg regent offered, "and is Eugene Steven of the opinion Farside needs a Crown Prince?"

"I believe that is what he has in mind," Barbara told the group. "With Penelope, it was largely 'a role-playing game', and I believe Penelope sees it that way, too. Eugene may be taking it all a bit too seriously."

There followed a long pause while the Regents mulled the situation. "Is this something we need to address with urgency?" one finally asked. "Are we worrying about something that ought not cause us worry — yet?"

"How shall we answer Eugene?" Paul Gillman asked.

"We elevate him. Make him a Crown Prince, but make it clear

that no one rules Farside without the consent of the people and that he may not, either, regardless of any title granted him."

"There are two more following behind: Deirdre and Mark."

"Same analysis. Barbara rules because she has the trust and confidence of all Farside in her pocket. Who could rule a world — a universe — without that? When the day comes that Barbara puts away the crown for the last time, whoever inherited that trust and confidence will also have inherited the crown.

"Further, placing Eugene in an apprenticeship position will give us a chance to see what he's made of."

"You're singling Eugene out because he is my son?" Barbara asked. "Why not your son or daughter? Might they not make a better ruler for Farside than one of the Walsh children?"

"Don't get me wrong... My children will have a 'proprietary interest' in Farside that would be hard to find elsewhere. Hard to find, not impossible to find.

"History gives us more than ample evidence of hereditary princes who were catastrophes for their people. That is what we are trying to steer a course around today. We are trying to avoid picking a poor leader on the basis of genetics. Yes, Eugene or Penelope or Deirdre or Mark may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to Farside, but what are the odds? Who wants to place a wager?"

"I have always wanted, and will to my dying day, whatever is best for Farside. I will be disappointed if one of my own does not carry on in my place when I'm gone, but I would be much more disappointed were one of my own to become a liability for us. I will not allow that to happen."

The Regent of Bohemia pounded his 'bid' button to bring the camera's focus on him as he stood. "Then you and you alone must choose who will succeed you. No one else has a better claim. No one else would make a better choice. Floreat Farside."

The built-in scoreboard suddenly went all green as seventy-one regents pushed the 'approve' buttons on their consoles.

Ernie slipped his arm around Barbara where she sat, mouth opened in awe-stricken surprise and random tears cascading onto her lapels. "You are the Queen we love," he told her

—==+++==—

*The Chancellery
Farside*

Ivan Deruschka of Ukraine-in-Farside, greetings.

You are commanded to appear before the Privy Council at noon on Wednesday next in Okambo, Capitol Region, Farside to be examined for suitability to be enrolled in the Farside Institute for Political Science. Passage will be arranged by your Regent, Nadya Simonova. You may address any questions to the Regent.

*For and with the authority of the Crown,
Samantha Burke, Chancellor*

—==+++==—

“You instructors are the future of Farside. What you teach these youngsters will determine whether Farside goes on to be a success or a failure.” Ernie paused to take a sip of water. “All that Farside may be hangs on what you impart to the young men and women placed in your care. You and you alone will determine whether this experiment proves the worth of the human species. We have a chance here to demonstrate that a better world is, indeed, possible even given the flawed nature of our race. We — you — can prove that humans can live in peace with their fellows even in the face of a history of eons of wars. You can prove that power is not the seducer it has seemingly always been for the last ten thousand years. You can prove that, given a chance for a clean start, humans can overcome the political viruses that have sickened us since we learned to speak. You can prove it by giving us a generation of men and women whose goal is to see Farside become the model which all others wish to emulate.

“Farside is counting on you. Do not fail us.”