

And Still the Stars Remained
by Anna D. Allen

It all started when Matthew Weston saw the mouse on the techbot's video feed. He'd sent the techbot out to repair a section of solar panels after a sandstorm had knocked them out— causing brownouts in parts of the Buchanan District. As Matthew watched the techbot work on a panel, he spotted movement along the base of a sand barrier. Adjusting the camera to get a closer look, he saw a brown mouse scurrying along in the sand. As nothing could survive outside the dome, he assumed it had slipped out of the city when the techbot went out. Undoubtedly, it'd be dead within a few hours, poor creature.

Matthew pushed it from his mind, but several weeks later, while monitoring a techbot on a routine maintenance check outside, he saw a dandelion growing near a CO venting system. As dandelions were a common problem in the city's

agriculture districts, a stray seed must have been vented out, he reasoned. But he couldn't figure out how it had survived long enough to bloom— perhaps an elevated water table combined with the high levels of carbon dioxide. Besides, everyone knew dandelions were next to impossible to kill.

Yet over the next few days, Matthew found himself dwelling on the mouse and the dandelion, until he ended up sending out a techbot specifically to look for any trace of the mouse or its remains. Finding none, he decided to send the techbot out beyond the miles of solar panels and see what lay beyond the civilized world of the domed city. As an Outside Maintenance Specialist, no one would suspect Matthew of doing anything out of the ordinary. Matthew, however, worried that someone might realize what he was up to and report him. So he carefully made sure no one was around the control room as he sent the techbot on its mission.

Matthew positioned the techbot a few yards beyond the last solar panel and moved the camera to scan the horizon. In every direction, Matthew saw nothing but sand— barren, desolate, endless sand spreading out beneath the blue sky. The day was bright and clear, the wind still, belying the

unbreathable atmosphere and the searing heat that the world had become.

He slumped back in his chair. He didn't know what he was thinking. Nothing could survive out there. He'd been an idiot to think otherwise.

He decided to bring the techbot back. Yet just as he was turning it around, he noticed a strange pattern in the sand. It was just below the crest of a dune, and it looked as if some creature had made its way down the slope and left a trail. Matthew recognized the unique pattern. He'd seen it in old documentary films from centuries ago of life outside. It was, without a doubt, the trail of a side-winding snake. Matthew realized the presence of a snake meant there had to be oxygen out there... unless it was some kind of mutation.

Perhaps the snake would come back, Matthew thought. So he left the techbot out all day, and he watched and waited until well after the sun set. He wondered if snakes might be nocturnal. He wanted to keep the techbot out through the night, but it was too risky, and he'd already made enough excuses to the few people who checked on him that day. He decided it would be safest to come back the following day, but the next day was Sunday, and work was forbidden, except for emergency services.

So early Monday morning, several hours before daylight, Matthew went in to work when no one else would be around. He sent the techbot out to the same spot as the previous time. Then he waited until sunrise.

Daybreak within the sunless dome was always dull and lifeless, the blackness turning gradually grey then the white of full light. The opaque half-sphere of the dome never revealed the hues and tones of the sky, just a general mood. The occasional sandstorm made the light dunnish brown, sunset pallid orange, but nothing more. But this morning, Matthew experienced more.

The techbot was turned slightly to the east, the camera focused on the sand dune, or so Matthew thought. He realized it wasn't when he saw stars in the black sky. He was focused on the distant horizon, the stars quite clear on the monitor. He knew he should pull back and focus on the dune, but he didn't want to lose the image of the stars. He'd seen photographs of stars, and even video images, and while the image on the monitor was just an electronic facsimile, these were real, they were now, and no one else would ever see them.

He turned out the lights in the room so he might see better. Then he watched the night sky until he began to notice a slight change. The sky was no longer black but a

deep dark blue, the stars still present, only shifted. It stayed like that for a long time, but then he noticed another change in color. The sky was a little bluer. Matthew knew the sky was growing brighter and that he was seeing it happen before him, but it was happening so slowly, so quickly, he didn't notice from second to second until the moment of change had passed. And still the stars remained.

The horizon grew bright, and Matthew expected the world to become grey, but it didn't. He saw broken wisps of clouds in the distance, and the horizon began to glow pink, then red, and then he saw the sun seep over the horizon, spilling over the dunes, the whole desert turning burnt orange, then golden brown. And that was how the world began outside.

"Weston?"

Matthew jumped, nearly falling out of his swivel seat. He turned, only to discover it was Simon, a co-worker.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" Simon asked, a plastic cup of coffee in his hand.

Matthew's mind went blank as he searched for an answer. How long had Simon been standing there? How much had he seen?

"Ah...", Matthew began, "I... ah... I was... having problems with this... techbot... Saturday. Its directional system seems to be off-line. I had to leave it out there."

"Really?" Simon said, taking a closer look at the monitor, "Which one is it?"

"R319."

"One of the new ones?"

"Yeah."

"That's really strange. Did you try...?"

"I'll figure out something," Matthew cut him off and turned back to the monitor.

"Well let me know if you need any help," Simon said, sitting down at another monitor nearby— close enough that he might be able to see everything Matthew was doing. Matthew couldn't continue with Simon so close. He decided he'd just have to bring the techbot in, but he'd have to wait awhile. Otherwise, Simon might get suspicious, assuming he wasn't already. But then again, maybe Simon had seen strange things out there, too.

"Hey, Simon?" Matthew quietly asked before he lost his nerve.

"Hmm?" Simon responded without looking up.

"Have you ever seen anything..." Matthew said, already regretting his decision, "anything weird? Outside, I mean."

"Like what?" Simon looked up from his console.

"Like something... alive?"

"Alive? No. Nothing could live outside. Of course, the Elders say there may be mutants, but those are just stories to scare kids. Why?"

"No reason."

"Have you seen anything out there?"

"No. No."

"Cause if you have, you have to report it to the Council."

"I haven't seen anything," Matthew said trying to sound confident and assured, "I was just wondering if anyone ever had. That's all."

"Well, you shouldn't ask questions like that. You could get yourself into trouble that way."

Matthew said nothing more but went about his business as usual for the rest of the day. Still, he couldn't stop thinking about everything he'd seen— the rising sun, the canopy of stars against the black of night, and he found himself wanting to see the moon. He wondered if it really looked like green cheese—whatever that was— or a man's face like in children's books. Of course, he'd seen photographs of the moon in school, but after this morning, he knew photos didn't come close to the real thing.

After work, Matthew left the Maintenance Section and made his way through the multitude of men on their way home to wives and children. Matthew, however, headed up three levels to the Buchanan District, the only residential area on the surface, as the open area beneath the dome was called. Most of the population, including Matthew, lived in the underground sections of the city, the surface homes reserved for Elders, Councilmen, select businessmen, their wives, and families. Most people weren't even allowed into the district, but with his maintenance ID, Matthew easily got through the various security checkpoints. He made his way on the stone footpaths, past the houses, through the gardens, among the orange groves and apple trees, the buzzing of pollinating honeybees in the air along with the perfume of flowers in bloom.

Reaching a wrought iron fence, Matthew stopped, and with his hands clutching the bars, looked through. A grassy area lined with trees spread out beyond the fence, dozens of girls, all dressed alike in white shirts and plaid skirts, playing before their school. It was easy to find the one he was looking for— a small girl, no more than five or six, with blonde hair, the very image of her dead mother. Matthew watched her for a long time, hoping she would look his way. At last she did. She stopped and

smiled. Matthew raised his hand to wave, and she started to do the same, but then she looked toward the school, toward the woman standing in the doorway, and the small girl stopped, her eyes returning to Matthew.

"Ruth's a good girl," a voice said beside Matthew. He recognized the voice immediately— Elder Finley.

"It's obvious she wants to come over and see you," he continued, "but she knows she's not supposed to. Very obedient. Unlike her father."

"Tyler," Matthew corrected, trying not to let the old man antagonize him, "Her mother named her Tyler, not Ruth."

"Yes, well, not a very appropriate name for a little girl, is it?" Finley said, "but then her mother wasn't very...."

"How'd you know I was here?" Matthew asked, never taking his eyes off his daughter.

"The last checkpoint," Finley explained, "They had orders to contact me if you made another unscheduled appearance. You know the rules. Every other Sunday. That's it."

"She's my daughter. I've done nothing wrong."

"Then take another wife and you'll get her back."

"I don't want another wife."

"Nothing will change then, will it?" Finley said, "You will continue your dull life down in Maintenance, and Ruth will remain in state care until she marries."

"Why can't I just have her back?"

"How can you make such a suggestion? You know we can't allow single parent households," Finley said, his voice tinged with anger, "That's how all the trouble started outside. Crime, anarchy. Is that what you want for us? For Ruth?"

Matthew turned and looked at Finley.

"I thought the trouble outside started with all the pollutants pumped into the atmosphere by...."

"I will ignore that," Finley said, his voice controlled, "for Ruth's sake. And I suggest you get back to where you belong."

Finley raised his hand and motioned to two security guards waiting nearby.

"Escort this man home," he ordered. Nothing more was said. Leaving Tyler behind, Matthew simply went with the security guards and returned to the underground sectors of the city.

That night, as Matthew lay in bed, he wondered if the moon were out. He wondered what it would be like to sit in the desert and watch it rise over the horizon. He wondered

what Tyler was thinking as she drifted off to sleep somewhere eight levels above him. He turned over, curling up on his side, and closed his eyes.

A pounding on the door woke him a little after midnight. He switched on the light, stumbled to the door, and opened it. Four security guards stood there before Matthew, each dressed in full uniform from their black boots to their black helmets with the plastic visors down to protect their faces.

"Weston, Matthew Peter, Outside Maintenance Specialist," one security guard said, reading the information off a palm-pad.

"Yes?" Matthew responded, his heart pounding in his chest.

"You are hereby directed to accompany us to ICS Headquarters for violation of the Kingston Act."

"What?"

"Please step into the corridor."

"I don't understand. I haven't done anything."

"We are authorized to use force if necessary."

"Wait, wait. Let me change first."

"That won't be necessary. Please step into the corridor."

As Matthew stepped out into the corridor, two of the security guards took his arms and handcuffed his hands behind his back. Then, still holding onto his arms, they marched down the corridor, a tiny thought creeping into Matthew's mind. Elder Finley must've said something.

Matthew spent the night in a jail cell with only a concrete slab for a bed— not that he slept any. His thoughts kept going over his conversation with Elder Finley. Sure, his words violated the city laws against questioning the order of things, but Matthew had said such things in the past to Finley, and nothing like this had ever happened. What was it this time that made Finley decide to report him? But then he realized— Simon. He must've told the authorities about the tech-bot. A quick check of the tech-bot logs combined with Matthew's words, and that was enough.

Much to his surprise and without benefit of trial, seven hours later, wearing nothing but tan trousers, a matching shirt, and well-worn work boots, Matthew was shoved out the only functioning airlock and into the world. His executioners were kind enough to throw a canvas bag out with him. In it, Matthew found a white headscarf, a quart of water, and some saltine crackers.

At first, Matthew didn't know what to do. He stood there just outside the airlock for a long time, nothing but open desert and sky before him, the sun blazing down. All his life, he'd heard stories of people banished from the city— usually decades before anyone around had been born— and how they'd succumbed to the toxic atmosphere within minutes of being thrown out the airlock, that skeletons littered the ground for hundreds of yards, and that those few who survived for more than a few minutes could be heard banging on the dome. To this day, every time someone heard strange noises, they said it was the ghosts of those banished trying to get back inside the city. Matthew saw no skeletons, and at this level, concrete walls protected the dome. And while Matthew suspected life did exist out here somewhere, he feared he might be overcome by the toxic air, and if not that, then the heat. He could stay in the shadow of the dome, but he knew he'd run out of water. Finding water had to be his first concern.

With a sea of dunes to his left and sandy flats before him, Matthew decided the flat would be less difficult to traverse and started walking, still without a clue as to what he was doing or where he was going. He just walked for a long time, a little too briskly at first, never looking back. His pace gradually slowed, the heat taking its toll

on him. Matthew was surprised, though, that despite the heat, it was easy to breath, easier than in the dome.

He stopped, turning to look back. There was no trace of the city, just boundless desert, his tracks stretching far away. He had no idea how long he'd been walking. The sun was still high, the desert surrounding him. He took a drink of water and scratched his head, feeling burning pain as he did. He touched his scalp with his fingers. It felt hot to the touch, and he realized the sun was burning him. Even though it was hot, it didn't feel hot enough to burn. Matthew didn't understand it, but he took the white scarf from the bag and wrapped in around his head. Then he continued on.

As he walked, he stared down at his shadow. Of course he'd seen shadows before, but they'd always been such pale things dispersed by multiple light sources. This shadow was dark, its lines defined. Matthew thought such a thing should be tangible, although he knew it wasn't. Like a child enamored by its own hands, he watched his shadow, and as the day progressed, it became longer and thinner, until Matthew realized the sun was going down.

Once again, unsure of what to do, Matthew decided to stop for the night. He sat down, hoping there were no small creatures which might attack him- or large creatures, for

that matter— no arachnids, no worms, no scorpions, and nothing with a thousand legs. And those were just things he'd read about. God only knew what kinds of mutations were out here.

He ate some of the saltines, drank some water, and watched the sun set. It was just like the sunrise he'd seen... was it only yesterday morning...? but in reverse. It didn't drop behind the horizon so much as it melted, the colors spreading out across the sky. And then for a long time after the sun was gone, the colors and light remained until the sky grew black and the stars appeared.

Pinpricks of light in the canopy of night. Diamonds across black velvet. That's how Matthew had always heard the night sky described. Neither was accurate. The stars twinkled and sparkled as with a life of their own. And there were so many, more than he could've imagined from that video image he'd seen. They covered every corner of the sky, and they were bright enough to still see by... at least, somewhat. Matthew lay back, using the canvas bag as a pillow, despite its flatness, and stared up at the sky.

Matthew expected the vastness to frighten him. The city had been so contained, their world so small, so sheltered, so crowded. Yet here and now, with the universe spread out over him, he felt awe, not fear, glad he had

lived long enough to see the sky for himself. If only Tyler could see it with him.

He slept little that night. The temperature dropped, and Matthew experienced cold for the first time. In the city, they told of the desert's heat, never the desert's cold, and Matthew curled up in a fetal position in an attempt to stay warm. Then, during one of many wakings, Matthew saw his shadow again and rolled over to see the source of light. There, just over the eastern horizon, Matthew saw a barely full moon. He sat up to look at it. It looked to him, not like a man, but like a wailing woman, her mouth open, her eyes wide. And it looked cold and lonely with only the stars for company.

The sunrise awoke Matthew, and he set out walking again, this time with the scarf around his head. The desert warmed up quickly, which felt good after the cold night, but soon, it was very hot, and Matthew was thirsty. He didn't drink, though. He had to make the water last as long as it could, days if need be, and he decided he'd only drink at sunset.

He went on like this for several days, losing count after the fifth day, each day worse than the day before. His lips cracked, his skin burned and peeled, and each step became more labored as his strength ebbed away. The

saltines were gone, the water soon to follow. His eyes were the worst, though. Dry, like his mouth, they burned, and when the wind blew sand in them, no tears formed to wash the sand away, until at last, Matthew could barely see, his eyes mere slits too painful to open.

With the last drop of water gone, Matthew staggered on for another day. He felt the hot wind pick up, gentle at first, then stronger, the sand pelting him, stinging his body, even through his clothing. All around him, the world became brown, the sandstorm blocking out the sky and sun. Unable to continue, Matthew fell to his knees. As he fell forward, his last bit of strength leaving his body, he thought he saw a dark shadow up ahead, but only for a moment. He closed his eyes, the hot sand against his face and in his mouth.

"Khadijah?" he heard a man's voice call out through the din, "Do you see him?"

"Yes, he's here," a woman shouted, quite near. Then darkness fell over Matthew, and he heard no more.

Matthew awoke in darkness, something covering his eyes. He could hear the sandstorm raging, but it was muffled, and he realized he was within something like a room, a pillow beneath his head and a blanket over his body. He seemed to be lying on the floor... or the ground.

His skin still burned, but it didn't feel as painful now.

He moved to touch his eyes.

"No, no," a woman said, grabbing his hand.

"Where am I?" Matthew asked as she tucked his hand back under the blanket.

"It's okay," she replied, placing her hand on his forehead, "you're safe."

"My eyes?"

"You are suffering from desert blindness. You will recover. Here," she said, putting her hand under his head and lifting it slightly. Matthew felt her place a metal cup to his lips. He smelled the water before it touched his lips, and he drained the cup.

"More," he said, "please."

And she gave him more water.

"Please, again."

"No," she replied, "Your body must process the water you've already had. We wouldn't want to drown you. I'll give you more in a little while, and we'll have something to eat as well."

"Who are you?" Matthew asked, laying his head back down.

"My name's Khadijah. What's yours?"

"Matthew. Matthew Weston. Are you from the city?"

"The city? The only cities for a thousand kilometers are along the Great Lake."

"I think he means the domed city to the south," another voice spoke, this one male and not as near as Khadijah.

"Is that where you're from? The domed city?" Khadijah asked Matthew.

"Yes."

"That's at least 160 kilometers from here," the man said.

"But where are the others? Where is all your equipment?" she asked.

"What others? What equipment?"

"No one travels the desert alone, and you are ill-supplied," she said.

"I am alone. I have nothing. I was exiled from the city."

"You traveled through the desert just as you are?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Allah ackbar," Khadijah said, her voice full of awe.

"How did you find me?" Matthew asked.

"We spotted you before the sandstorm hit. While the others set up camp, Javier and I went out in search of you."

"It's a miracle you found me."

"A miracle? Hardly," the man laughed, "A heat sensor. That's what found you."

"Oh hush, Javier," Khadijah said, "if we hadn't spotted him to begin with, we never would've found him with the heat sensor."

"Where are we?"

"Well," Javier said, "I could tell you the coordinates according to the GPS, but I suspect they'd mean nothing to you."

"We're right where we found you," Khadijah explained, "in the middle of the American Desert."

"Not quite the middle," Javier corrected.

"Well, whatever it is...."

"Where ever,'" Javier interrupted, teasing the woman.

"We're still two days from home," Khadijah continued, ignoring Javier, "and if Javier doesn't watch it, he's gonna be walking the whole way, and unlike some people, he can't find his way by the stars."

"So I don't have your skill," Javier said, "but then, that's not my job, is it?"

"Can I have some more water, now?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah," Khadijah said and helped him to drink again.

"Looks like you need some more ointment, too," Javier said, coming closer. Matthew felt the blanket pulled back to reveal his arms and chest. At that moment, he realized he was nude.

"Where are my clothes?" he asked, suddenly embarrassed.

"They don't work with the blanket," Khadijah said as Matthew felt hands rubbing a cream-like substance on his neck and upper chest over the worst of the sunburn.

"The blanket?" Matthew said, feeling like a helpless kid.

"It prevents too much moisture evaporation from your body. We use them in cases of severe dehydration, such as with you. This way, some of that water we're putting back into will stay in you."

"Hopefully, your kidneys still function," Javier said, "It shouldn't take too long before we find out."

"Are you a doctor?" Matthew asked as the blanket was placed back over him. He heard Khadijah snicker.

"No," Javier said, also snickering, "I'm a...."

"He's a camel herder," Khadijah burst out laughing. After a moment, she calmed again.

"I'm sorry, Matthew," she said, "but in your city, does such fundamental knowledge of medicine make one a doctor?"

"No," Matthew began, "I mean... I don't know. It's just you both sounded like...."

"We know how to survive in the desert," Javier said, "that's all. I own the camels in the caravan. I also take care of the animals in the village."

"I guess that would make you something of a veterinarian," Khadijah pointed out.

"I suppose so," Javier said, "I never thought of it that way before."

Matthew heard a noise, like a large zipper being unzipped, followed by a gust of wind, then the zipper sound again.

"Sami," Khadijah said, "Here, let me help you."

Someone else had come in, and Matthew sensed Khadijah and Javier moving away from him and toward the newcomer.

"It's died down a little out there," a girl's voice said. "Is he still alive?"

"Uh-huh," Khadijah said, "and talking too."

"Well, where'd he come from?" Sami asked, "How'd he get out here?"

"He was exiled from the domed city," Javier said.

"No. Really?" Sami said with astonishment, "I wonder what he did."

"You know," Matthew interrupted, "I can hear, too."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Matthew," Khadijah said as he heard them move closer to him, "This is Sami."

"Did you really walk all the way from the domed city?" Matthew sensed her quite close, probably kneeling on the floor beside him, he imagined.

"I suppose I did," he replied.

"What did you...?"

"That's enough, Sami," Javier said, "We have plenty of time for questions on the trip home, inshallah. We should eat now before it gets cold."

Matthew heard the sound of metal against metal, like a spoon scraping the bottom of a pot, and he smelled something good.

"Here," Khadijah said over him. He felt her sit down near his head. Then she lifted his body by his shoulders so that he was resting semi-upright against her body. Again, she gave him some water.

"You doing okay?" she asked him.

"Yes, thank you," he replied, "What are the others doing?"

"They're eating," she said, "Do you feel up to eating something?"

"Yes, I do feel hungry," he said. He felt her move slightly, and then he felt a warm spoon at his lips.

"It's soup," she said, "Sami made it."

He opened his mouth and tasted the soup, a warm and rich broth flavored with meat and a spice he did not know.

"It's good," he said, "What is it?"

"Goulash soup," Sami said.

"What's it made from?"

"Lamb, potatoes, and paprika," Sami said, "but, since we're out here in the middle of nowhere, I used dehydrated lamb. You're supposed to use fresh lamb, or whatever meat you want to use."

As Sami chattered away describing every detail of how to make lamb goulash in the middle of the desert, Matthew ate all the soup Khadijah fed him. When he finished, she gave him more water and laid him back down. He heard the others moving about.

"Good night, Matthew," Sami said, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Sami," he replied, "Thank you for the food."

Again, he heard the zipping sound, but this time, no gust of wind.

"See," Sami said, "I told you it was dying down."

And she was gone.

"What kind of structure are we in?" Matthew asked.

"A tent."

"I've read about such things."

"Let's take a look at your eyes," Javier said. "It's probably time we changed the dressing."

Matthew, feeling much stronger since the soup and water, sat up, the blanket falling down around his waist.

"Well that's a good sign," Javier said next to him.

"Yes, but we shouldn't rush things," Khadijah said.

Matthew felt the bandages over his eyes loosen a bit as Javier undid them.

"Don't worry," Javier said, "this shouldn't hurt."

As the last bit of bandage was taken away from his eyes, Matthew slowly opened his eyes. They burned slightly as he did, but the pain was bearable. Blinking, he looked around. Everything was blurry, but he could see. As he had thought, he was lying on the floor, which was covered in carpets. Next to him sat a man, Javier, and on the opposite side near his feet sat a woman, Khadijah. They were the two most unusual people he'd ever seen. Both had brown skin

with a golden tint to it. Both had short auburn hair, Javier's cut like an ancient Roman's, Khadijah's not much longer. Javier had green eyes while Khadijah's were pale grey. They were beautiful, both of them, the most beautiful people Matthew had ever seen. Their arms bare, Matthew could see the muscles, hers just as defined as Javier's.

"Well?" she asked, smiling, "Can you see?"

"Yes," Matthew replied, smiling back at her, "It's blurry, but I can see."

"Good," Javier said, "because they look awful. We'll change the dressing and see how they look in the morning."

Khadijah stood up, and Matthew saw she was practically naked, her clothing little more than a pair of shorts and a halter top, her legs, midriff, and feet bare. Matthew looked at Javier. He wore a little more than Khadijah, but like her, his legs and feet were bare. Matthew looked around some more. A strange lantern hung from one of the poles holding up the dark-colored tent. There were a few cushions scattered about, some boxes of equipment, a few bags, and what appeared to be a pile of clothing.

"Do you always dress like that?" Matthew asked Javier.

"Like what?"

"In so little?"

"It's 45 degrees out there," Javier said, "or least it was at sunset. How else should we dress?"

"45 degrees? That's freezing."

"I don't know what system you use, but it doesn't get much hotter than 45 degrees. Anything higher and we'd be dead."

"Besides," Khadijah added, "you're the one naked."

"Point taken," Matthew said, pulling the blanket up more.

"It gets cold pretty fast, though," Javier said, "but you probably already know that after so many days out there."

"You know," Matthew said, "I think I need to go."

"Oh," Khadijah said, "that's great. Javier, help him up."

"Umm, uh," Matthew started, "as you just pointed out, I don't have anything on."

"So?" Javier said.

"I understand," Khadijah said, smiling, "Remember your history, Javier. Matthew is probably unaccustomed to walking around in the nude, especially around strangers."

"He should learn to get over it." While he sounded stern, Javier was grinning.

"Javier, shame on you," Khadijah also smiled, "give him a wrap."

Javier went over to the pile of clothes, picked up a tan piece of material, and handed it to Matthew. As Matthew examined it, he found it had large sleeves and a hood. He put it on, tying it in the front, and with Javier's help, stood up, discovering it covered him to his ankles. Javier unzipped the tent and led Matthew outside, Khadijah remaining behind.

Once outside, Matthew looked around. In the darkness, he could see four tents. Nearby, two dozen camels sat in the desert sand, a lone man tending to them.

"Salaam, Javier," the man called to them.

"Salaam, Zahi," Javier replied as he and Matthew moved away from the tents.

"You know," Matthew said, "I can do this alone."

"I'm sure you can," Javier replied, "but Khadijah would kill me if you got lost along the way."

Once he finished-- relieved that everything was functioning as it should-- Matthew walked back to the tents with Javier. Looking up, he couldn't see the stars as his eyes were still too blurry.

"Are the stars out?"

Javier looked up.

"As they are every night."

"I hope I see them again. That was the only good thing about being lost in this desert for so long— seeing the stars."

"I can see that."

"I'd never seen them before that first night out here," Matthew said, "except once on a video monitor."

"Really? How terrible. I can't imagine never seeing the stars."

Matthew suddenly thought of Tyler.

"Do you and Khadijah have any children?"

"No," Javier replied casually, but then his expression changed, "Oh. You think she and I are.... No, we're not together. We're just friends. Known each other all our lives. I mean, yeah, she was my first and all, and we've satisfied each other from time to time since, but that's all. If you want to pursue her, you don't need my permission."

Javier must have seen the look of shock on Matthew's face.

"Have I embarrassed you?" he asked.

"No," Matthew started, completely confused by the strange relationship of his rescuers, "It's just.... You're not married...? But you...? Together...? Sometimes?"

"Right."

"And with other people, too?"

"Right. It's not that way where you come from?"

"No. Men can... sometimes. But women...."

"Can't?"

"Only with their husbands."

"I don't understand," Javier said, "If women can only have sex with their husbands, who are the men having sex with? Each other?"

"No. With fallen women."

"I don't know what that means, but it sounds awful."

"I suppose it does."

"Come on," Javier said, "If I don't get you back inside, Khadijah will be sending out a rescue party."

As they walked back to the tent, Matthew noticed the air was getting cold, his bare feet drudging through the still warm sand. Once inside, Matthew quickly slipped back under the blanket. Just before Javier re-bandaged his eyes, he noticed Khadijah using a device like the lantern, except when she turned it on, instead of just light, there was also heat.

"That'll keep the cold out," she said.

With that, little more was said, and the three of them went to sleep.

They awoke Matthew well before dawn. After removing his bandages, Javier declared his eyes were fit enough, provided he take normal desert precautions. After a breakfast of something akin to porridge, along with dried fruit, and sweet black coffee, Khadijah gave Matthew some clothes, all made from a brown gauzy muslin-like material. Once he had nearly everything on, Khadijah handed him a pair of goggles, the lenses dark red.

"What's this for?" he asked, concerned about how bad his eyes might really be.

"Don't worry," she replied as if she knew his fear, "We all wear them. You'll need them when the sun comes up. They'll protect your eyes."

He put them on, the world becoming a little dimmer—but only a little. Then Khadijah wrapped a long cloth around his head, neck, and shoulders, and showed him how to pull up one flap of material when the sand blew.

"There now," she said, looking at him, "you could pass for one of us." Matthew quickly realized she meant it when he saw all the others when he went outside, the light on the horizon increasing. The night before, both Khadijah and Javier had dressed in so little, now they were covered head to foot, exactly as Matthew was. So was everyone else. At first, Matthew couldn't even tell the women from the men,

but then he noticed that some people had colorful pieces of cloth tied around their waists. As some of these people tended to be the shorter ones, Matthew assumed they were the women. And he was surprised at the number of women, approximately half the group.

"Here," Khadijah said handing him a pair of gloves, "You'll need these too."

With the gloves on, nothing was left uncovered on his body except his mouth and nose, and having spent so many days already in this desert, he felt sure he'd cover those soon enough too.

Much to Matthew's surprise, they broke camp quickly, the camels, all sitting in a line, packed and waiting. Some of them were loaded down with the camp equipment, while others had saddles, but Matthew couldn't tell what the rest were packed with. Supplies for the trip, maybe? Or water?

"This one's yours," someone said to Matthew, taking his hand and leading him to a waiting camel. From the voice alone, Matthew could tell it was a woman, but that was all.

"It's me, Sami," she said, moving the flap of material so he could see her face. She was just a girl, perhaps fourteen, with the same brown skin as the others and grey eyes like Khadijah, except the trace of hair he saw was light brown, almost blonde.

"I remember," Matthew replied.

"Khadijah said I'm to take care of you," she said,
"Make sure you don't fall off and all."

As he climbed into the saddle, Matthew found the idea of this little girl taking care of him amusing. But then, as Javier gave a shout at the head of the line, the camel stood up, Matthew swaying this way and that, nearly falling off as he held on for dear life.

"Whoa, whoa!" he shouted. He heard someone laughing and turned to see Khadijah smiling on her camel as she rode to the front of the moving line.

"It's a camel, not a horse," she said, "Just hold on tight. It's a long walk home."

Home, he thought. He had no home. He had no idea where they were going, but it wasn't his home. As far as he could see, it never could be. His home lay behind him, back in the domed city, with Tyler.

"So what'd you do?" Sami asked riding up beside him.

Matthew ignored her question.

"Look," he said, pointing to the horizon as the first ray of sunlight fell over the desert. What a strange sight they must be, he thought looking over the caravan— all of them dressed alike in dusty desert brown, the camels the same color.

"So?" Sami asked again.

Matthew decided he might as well get it over with.

"I was an Outside Maintenance Specialist," he began, "What I did was send out technical robots to make repairs outside the city. I monitored them. Made sure everything was as it should be. Nothing spectacular. Quite boring, in fact. One day, I sent a techbot way out beyond anything. Just to see what was out there. The authorities found out about it, and I was exiled."

"But what did you do?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

"What did you do wrong?" she asked.

"I sent the techbot out to see if anything existed outside," he explained.

"And that was wrong?"

"Yes."

"That's stupid."

"No, you don't understand. The Elders teach that nothing lives outside the city, that we are the last of Mankind. It's wrong to question these beliefs."

"Even though they're wrong?" Sami said, "'Cause here we are, and there are billions more just like us all over the world."

"Billions?"

"Last world census counted five billion people."

"Five billion people?"

"Give or take a few million. Course, they didn't count the people in the domes, but then, there are only seven left."

"Seven? There were twenty-three. What happened?"

"I'm not very good with history. I know a couple were destroyed when the oceans rose. Flooded them out completely. You'll have to talk to Gavriel when we get home. He knows all that stuff."

"The village elder or something?"

Sami laughed.

"No," she said, "He's fourteen. He's the librarian."

"Library?"

"Yes, as in books. We can read, you know. We may live in the wilds of America, but we're not barbarians."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean...", he stammered.

"I suppose most people think Americans are barbarians. I think it's because of the Abandonment."

"Sami," Khadijah shouted back to them from up ahead, "Matthew doesn't need you bothering him. He's been through enough without having you pick his brain."

"It's alright, Khadijah," Matthew said, "After God knows how many days I spent alone in the desert, it's nice

to hear someone rattling on." He thought of Tyler and how she would chatter away, her words barely comprehensible half the time.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Matthew suddenly asked.

"Our village, Misra," Sami said, "in the Wadi el-York. We'll be there sometime tomorrow, assuming we don't run into anymore sandstorms."

And so the morning went, Sami talking incessantly about her friends in Misra, the information of little use to Matthew as it dealt mostly with who liked who and what so-in-so said to so-in-so about it. He did find it interesting, however, to discover that the children of Misra, even the teenagers, like the adults he already knew, intermingled freely, males and females together with no regard for the consequences.

Just before noon, Matthew saw something up ahead. Beyond an outcrop of rock, he saw some kind of man-made object, apparently painted green. As the caravan reached it, he realized it wasn't painted green but that small green plants surrounded it. It appeared to be some kind of pump, a large dry basin, nearly ten feet across, next to it. With a shout from Javier, all the camels sat down, Matthew holding on tightly so he wouldn't fall.

"I thought we'd never get here," Sami said, dismounting.

"Where are we?" Matthew asked, also dismounting, along with everyone else in the caravan.

"Bir el-Incan," she said, "also known as Waterhole 27."

Matthew pulled the cloth away from his face and watched as Javier and Khadijah went over to the pump. Javier simply pulled a lever, and water began gushing from a pipe and into the basin—pure, clean water, the basin quickly filling up.

"Camels first," Javier said, but as he did, Matthew saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and everyone turned to see what it was. From behind the outcrop of rock, another group of travelers appeared, several dozen, all on foot and all dressed in black desert fashion. As they moved toward the well, all of Matthew's companions seem to take a collective step back, the air tinged with fear.

"Cover your face," Sami ordered Matthew, and to his surprise, he obeyed the young girl without question. As they all backed away, Matthew noticed Javier held something in his hand, a small device.

"Don't use it unless they present a real danger," he heard Khadijah whisper to Javier, and he saw Javier nod

slightly. It was only at that moment that he realized Khadijah, not Javier, was the leader of this group.

Khadijah walked forward toward the black clad travelers. One of them, the leader of the group, stepped toward her, but there was still a great distance between them. He was tall, the tallest person Matthew had ever seen, with wide shoulders. He removed his scarf from his face. It was a black man, although his skin was hardly black, but more like a dark chocolate brown. Matthew had never seen a black man before, and he was impressed.

"Greetings and salutations," Khadijah said, her voice loud and confident. She held up one hand and bowed slightly to the man. "I am Khadijah of Misra."

"I have heard of your village," he said, "You have a doctor there."

"Yes," Khadijah said, "Do you have need of a...?"

"Banjoko!" one of the others snapped at the leader, "You waste time with these Gamutiens."

No one said anything for a moment, then Khadijah spoke.

"Please," she said, motioning to the water, "we will wait until you have finished."

Banjoko said nothing more, but nodded to Khadijah as his companions went to the water. Only when she stepped

away did he take his gaze off of her. He turned to one of his companions, a small person, a woman Matthew suspected, and helped her to the water. She seemed to be having difficulty walking.

"Who are they?" Matthew whispered to Sami.

"Far Ones," she said.

"Are they dangerous?"

"They can be if they feel they've been insulted, and they are easily insulted."

"Is that why Javier has the weapon?"

"Shhhh," was her only reply.

The Far Ones quickly finished filling their water skins, and one by one began heading back the way they'd come. Banjoko stood there a moment longer, nodded once to Khadijah, and then followed the rest of his people. Yet right before he disappeared behind the rock outcrop, Matthew saw him turn and look back at them, just once, then continue on. Only when they were all gone did anyone move toward the water.

As the camels drank, Matthew went over to Javier.

"What was that weapon you had?" he asked.

"A neurological disruptor," Javier said, "Purely defensive."

"What does it do?"

"It disrupts the central nervous system, causing temporary paralysis and unconsciousness. There's no permanent damage, and the effects last thirty minutes at the most."

"Amazing."

"Ancient technology."

"And that word the one called you? Gamut...?"

"Gamutiens," Javier said, "It's a term for racially mixed people like ourselves. He meant it as an insult."

"So you are a minority?"

"No. Most people in America are Gamutiens. The only ones who aren't are Dome Dwellers like yourself and the Far Ones, and interestingly, both are a dying breed."

"I don't understand."

"The Far Ones believe in keeping the bloodlines 'pure.' Their numbers were few to begin with. They sounded too much like the Dome Dwellers for people to join them. They're not many left. Too much in-breeding. Darwin was right. Those who can't adapt, die. The Far Ones and the Dome Dwellers couldn't adapt, and they're both dying."

"My city is fine."

"For now."

"We need to get moving," Khadijah said, walking over to them.

After everyone had filled up their water bags, they continued on their way. Just before sunset, they stopped and made camp, only this time, they slept out under the stars.

"Khadijah," Matthew asked as he looked up at the night sky, "Is it true that all the stars have names?"

"Well, some of them just have numbers," she replied, "but yes, it's true."

"What's that one there called?" He pointed to a bright star high over the western horizon.

"That's the planet Jupiter."

"A planet? I didn't know you could see them."

"Yes... well, actually, you just see the sun reflecting off them. When we get home, I'll have Gavriel take out his telescope, and you can look at all the planets you want."

"That'd be nice," he replied, but said no more, looking up at the stars until he drifted off to sleep.

The next day, they continued on their way. Just after midday, his back and hips sore from being on the camel for so long, Matthew noticed something up ahead in the desert. At first, it was just a flash of sunlight, quite bright, reflecting off something. Then he realized it was a solar panel. As they got closer, he saw more equipment, several

antennas, not very tall, and what he believed to be a satellite dish, along with more solar panels, all just there up ahead in the middle of the desert. Matthew thought it strange, but then he noticed a jagged line stretching across the earth, and before he knew it, it grew wider, until he was looking down a great expanse, a wide, deep, and very green river valley, the equipment on the opposite ridge.

"Welcome to Misr," Khadijah said.

"So this is the Wadi el-York?" he asked.

"Yes."

He never could have imagined such a river existed in this vast desert, and he never would have seen it except by standing here, right on top of it. Trees lined the river, while the steep valley slopes were terraced and cultivated. Just below the opposite ridge, there were caves, dozens of them, with perfect little arched entrances. And among it all, Matthew saw people—down by the river, on the terraces, before the caves—and children playing, their shouts and laughter reaching up to the caravan.

Javier led the caravan down a dusty path, weaving back and forth down the valley slope among even more cultivated terraces, many of them vineyards, until they reached the valley floor and the river, which Matthew soon discovered

was not so much a river but just a wide stream, shallow enough for the camels to quickly cross without their riders getting wet.

"Khadijah!" someone shouted.

Matthew looked up the valley slope to the caves above and saw people turning and looking down at them. Then, as if with one mind, they all rushed forward, running along the paths down to the stream, dozens of people, all smiling with excitement. Matthew saw more people running through the vineyards and from along the stream banks. And all of them looked like his rescuers— brown skin and auburn hair.

Javier stopped the caravan on the stream bank in a cool spot under tall shady trees. Matthew turned his face up toward the sky, the sunlight now filtered by the leaves and branches gently swaying in the breeze. So, this is shade, Matthew thought and found he liked it as much as the stars.

As all the camels settled down to the ground, everyone gathered around to search for their friends and family. Matthew saw a woman pulling Khadijah from her camel and hugging her tightly, all the while shouting her name.

"We expected you days ago," someone said to Javier.

"It took longer than expected. Then we ran into a sand storm," Javier replied, getting off his camel, "And we

picked up a passenger." He pointed to Matthew. Several people turned and looked.

"Everyone," Javier said, his voice rising over the throng, "This is Matthew."

Pulling the flap of material away from his face, Matthew saw the eyes of the villagers widen. He took off his goggles and pushed back the headscarf, freeing his head completely. The villagers stood there with looks of amazement on their faces, everyone quiet with only the wind in the leaves filling the silence.

"He's white," at last a child whispered.

"How did you find a European?" someone else asked.

"Where did he come from?"

And everyone started speaking at once. Matthew felt a tug at his hand and looked down to see two children pulling off his glove. Once exposing his hand, they turned it over, examining it carefully.

"He's not white. He's red. Why's he red all over?" one child asked the other.

"The sun burnt him," the other explained.

"Well, he should've worn his sun block," the first child said.

"Octavia, Nikolai," Javier scolded, coming over to the children. Javier took the glove from the boy and handed it back to Matthew.

Javier raised his hands to quiet the villagers, "Is this any way to welcome a guest?" he said.

"How did a European end up in the middle of the American desert?" a woman asked.

"Did his transport crash?"

This time, Khadijah raised her hands, and the villagers turned their attention to her.

"He's a Dome Dweller," she said in a matter-of-fact way.

The villagers looked at each other, and Matthew noticed a trace of fear mixed with disgust in their eyes. No one said anything, and for a moment, Matthew was worried. But then he saw Sami.

"They exiled him," she explained, and with those words, looks of understanding passed between the villagers.

"Ah, then he is one of us," a man said, and everyone laughed. Matthew smiled. Someone slapped him on the back, and several villagers shook his hand, while others wished him salaam.

"C'mon," Khadijah said, taking him by the hand and leading him up the path. Several children followed, some

holding onto his robes. Glancing back, Matthew saw everyone else crowd around the camels as they began to unpack them. He wanted to see what they carried, but Khadijah and the children wouldn't let him stop. Reaching the leveled area before the caves, Khadijah led him to one of the entrances where an older woman stood, her skin golden brown like everyone else's but her hair black and peppered grey.

"Go on. Get," she motioned to the children surrounding Matthew, "I'm sure Javier can find something for you to help unload." The children obeyed without a single word of protest and quickly ran back down the path.

"Matthew," Khadijah said, "this is my mother, Locklyn."

"So you're the Dome Dweller Gavriel was just telling me about," Locklyn said shaking Matthew's hand.

"Where did Gavriel disappear to?" Khadijah asked, "I saw him just a minute ago."

"He's watching the Auckland-Kinshasa match. He'll show up during the next commercial."

"I should've guessed," Khadijah said, grinning, then turned to Matthew, "Of course, if it'd been Santiago and Riyadh, no one in the village would've noticed our arrival."

"The Auckland-Kinshasa match?" Matthew asked. He recognized the names of the ancient cities, but from all he'd ever been taught, he believed them long destroyed. Yet as he had already learned since leaving the city, nothing he had been taught about the world was accurate, and these cities, he gathered, somehow survived.

"If Gavriel doesn't have his nose stuck in a book," Locklyn explained to Matthew, "he's somewhere watching a match on TV."

Matthew nodded his head in partial understanding, realizing they spoke of a sports game between two international cities large enough to broadcast the event.

"Soccer?" he asked, remembering the sport's past popularity.

"Cricket," Locklyn said, "but on any other day, it could be rugby or hockey, depending on the season."

"Soccer's his last resort," Khadijah said.

Matthew just nodded, amazed at how little the world had changed despite appearances.

"Enough of sport," Locklyn said, turning to Matthew, "Let's take a look at you. A bad case of desert blindness, from the looks of it. Come on inside so I can get a closer look."

Stepping over the threshold, Matthew noted the absence of a door. Instead, only a pulled-back curtain separated the cave from the outside. Once Matthew's eyes adjusted to the interior of the cave, he realized the cave was manmade, carved into the rock. The ceiling was barrel-vaulted, the room long and not very wide, with two doorways leading to side-chambers. Persian carpets covered the floor, and the room was furnished like the main room of anybody's home—table and chairs, a couch, and more chairs. A video monitor set in the wall was on, a dark-skinned woman reading the news.

"Opposition Leader Ngila Campbell had no response to President Moilanen's statement," the woman said, "Turning to sport, after weeks of negotiating, the All-Blacks have signed Jonathon Yoshito...."

Locklyn turned the TV off.

"Sit," she ordered, pointing to a chair at the table.

Like the children outside, Matthew obeyed without question and sat down in the offered chair. Locklyn took hold of his face and examined it.

"Looks like Khadijah did a nice job," Locklyn said, taking a small flashlight from her pocket, turning it on, and shining it into Matthew's eyes.

"Thanks," Khadijah said, smiling proudly.

"Are you a doctor?" Matthew asked, remembering Khadijah's words to the Far One Banjoko.

"Yes," Locklyn replied, "only one for a thousand kilometers. Well, the only trained doctor. Every village has a medic."

Finishing her exam of Matthew's eyes, Locklyn turned off the flashlight and stood up straight.

"Well," she said, "no permanent damage, but you need to take it easy for the next few days. Any other problems I should know about?"

"No," Matthew replied, "Everything seems to be working normally."

"Good," Locklyn replied, "If anything changes, let me know."

At that moment, a teenage boy entered the cave. He didn't look very happy.

"Who won?" Locklyn asked, although Matthew could tell from his face that it wasn't the team he wanted to win.

"Well, it wasn't Kinshasa," the boy replied, slumping down on the couch.

"I'm sorry, Gavriel," Khadijah said, sitting down next to him.

"It's okay," Gavriel said, although he didn't sound like he meant it. "Carlos Singh was out with an injury, so what do you expect?"

As Matthew listened to them talk about the match, a thought entered his mind, something he remembered from geography lessons as a kid.

"I'm sorry, but I have a question," Matthew said, "Kinshasa played Auckland, right?"

"Right."

"If I recall correctly," Matthew continued, "wasn't Auckland on the water, and if so, why wasn't it destroyed when the oceans rose? Javier told me three domed cities were destroyed when the oceans rose."

"Auckland is now a series of islands," Gavriel explained, "some natural, some human-made. I'm Gavriel, by the way." The teen held out his hand to Matthew.

"You can ask Gavriel anything," Khadijah said to Matthew as he shook Gavriel's hand, "The Abandonment and the Adaptation are his great passions in life."

"After Cricket?" Matthew asked.

"Of course," Gavriel smiled.

That night, the village held a great celebration to honor the return of the caravan as well as the arrival of Matthew. The villagers built a bonfire, and while they sang

songs in languages he didn't recognize, Matthew lay on the ground and stared up at the flames, sparks rising into the night sky to mingle with the stars. And he wondered about Tyler.

Over the following weeks and months, Matthew adapted to life in Misra. The villagers soon decided Matthew needed a cave of his own, drew up plans, and began carving one out of the rock. In the meantime, Matthew enjoyed sleeping out under the stars every night. With only a pillow and a few blankets, he would sleep before the caves, a small fire for warmth in the cool desert night. The children found the idea of sleeping outside amazing, and soon, several of them convinced their parents to allow them to join Matthew's makeshift camp.

As for the daytime, the villagers had no problem finding work for Matthew. Something always needed to be done— early mornings helping Javier feed the animals, preparing lunch with Sami, assisting Gavriel with repairs to equipment, or simply watching the children play in the shallow waters of the stream and making sure no one drowned, although Matthew couldn't see how he'd be much help as they all swam better than him.

Whether digging irrigation ditches, working in the fields—as the villagers called the terraces— or fishing

with nets in the stream, Matthew enjoyed the work. It was the most difficult and exhausting work he'd ever done, but it was also the most satisfying.

And it never failed that some child would tag along after him, sometimes just watching, other times quick to lend a hand, but always fascinated by the strange man with the strange colored skin. Or at least it was strange when he arrived. Now it was almost as brown as everyone else's.

The best part— other than sleeping out under the stars— was the daily afternoon siesta, when all the villagers would find a cool spot somewhere and doze for an hour or so. Matthew would lie under the shade trees, sometimes catnapping, but more often reading one of Gavriel's books on the Abandonment and Adaptation as well as works of fiction forbidden in the domed city.

But life in the village was not as simple or as antiquated as Matthew first believed. Nor was it isolated. Every few days, caravans traveling north and south along the stream passed through Misra, each bringing supplies and goods from the rest of the world, like some ancient postal service. Matthew learned that hundreds of little villages existed along the stream, and what's more, there were cities further to the north and east along the Great Lake.

He even learned what cargo Javier and Khadijah had been transporting when they found him— American antiquities dug up from the desert sands. Khadijah turned over the cargo to the first caravan heading south, for she already had a buyer— the Institute of American Archaeology in Nairobi. At first, Matthew assumed she looted the antiquities, but as it turned out, Khadijah held the exclusive right— given by the Protectorate Government in Quebec— to excavate a half-dozen sites in the American Desert, provided, of course, she carefully documented the excavations and made that information available to the rest of the world.

It was in this that the villagers surprised Matthew the most. Rather than being the remote provincial backwater Matthew believed, the village remained in constant contact with the rest of the world via a complex communications system. Gavriel spent half his free time talking to some girl in Kiev until he learned she was a big Damascus fan— something to do with a trophy with ashes in it, Gavriel explained to Matthew. The children's favorite teacher taught them electronically from New Delhi. Javier's sister lived and worked as an Egyptology professor in Perth. Sami's brother was currently working on his doctorate in economics in Johannesburg. And everyone talked to everyone

on a daily basis, as if they resided next door rather than on the other side of the world.

Matthew found himself drawn into this unfamiliar electronic community when news of his arrival in Misra spread over the communication system. Soon, he was receiving communiqués from historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and school children all asking questions about life in the domes. He didn't understand their interest, but he answered their questions, which only led to more questions, and every morning when he awoke, he'd find more communiqués and would spend at least an hour answering them— just as most villagers spent that same time communicating with friends and family in far off parts.

However, Matthew failed to grasp the villager's taste for cricket. He tried to learn the game by watching it with Gavriel and the others. He cheered when they cheered. He moaned when they moaned— even though the audience on the TV just politely clapped at those moments— but it was no use. He couldn't even figure out what a wicket was.

So on the night Riyadh played Santiago in a test match and the whole village crowded into a few caves to watch— half of them rooting for Riyadh, the other half for Santiago— Matthew went for a long walk along the stream.

Already quite late, the night air cold, Matthew wandered down the stream bank, the sky bright with stars and a waxing moon. A slight breeze stirred the leaves and branches of the trees overhead, and other than the sound of the water flowing past, Matthew heard crickets and frogs in the darkness as well as the movement of the animals in their pens and the occasional collective cheer or moan from the caves. Then he heard another sound coming from behind him— a rustling in the tall grass near the water's edge. Matthew turned and in the moonlight saw a small face staring up at him from a crouched position— Nikolai. As Matthew spotted him, he stood up, a flashlight in hand.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Matthew asked the boy.

"My mother said I could stay up to watch the match," Nikolai replied walking over to Matthew.

"Well, the match is up there." Matthew pointed toward the lights of the caves.

"I prefer rugby," Nikolai said in a matter-of-fact way, "More blood. Fewer teeth. Sorta like hockey."

Matthew smiled at the boy's words. He found it surprising that a desert people would enjoy hockey. But then, everything about this world surprised him. These people had the ability to go anywhere in the world, to do anything, but they chose to live here, in the middle of the

American Desert, where camel was the fastest means of travel because transports couldn't deal with the sand. But why would they want to go anywhere when the world came to them via the communications system? And even the villagers who left to go work and study in the busy metropolises around the Indian Rim always eventually returned home to Misra. And Matthew was beginning to understand why, only he couldn't explain it. It was a feeling. It was the smell of the night air— wet earth, desert flowers, even the animal pens. It was the sound of water flowing by, wind filling the trees, laughter from the caves. It was so much more. Something made him want to stay in this place, as if this were the way the world was supposed to be and the domed city had been a brief dream. And Matthew would've believed that if not for Tyler. He knew that somewhere, hundreds of kilometers away, in a dormitory filled with dozens of little girls, Tyler slept.

Someone coughed nearby in the darkness, and both Matthew and Nikolai jumped. They turned toward the direction of the sound, Nikolai shining his flashlight. Matthew saw a darkly clad figure move trying to avoid the light. He grabbed the flashlight from Nikolai and tried to follow the figure with the light. It wasn't difficult. The figure slipped in the mud along the riverbank and cried out

in pain. Then Matthew saw another figure, also darkly dressed, crouching over the fallen form.

"Far Ones," Nikolai whispered, taking Matthew's hand and holding it tightly. The boy hid slightly behind him.

"Please," a voice called out, "please, don't hurt us."

The figure looked up, raising his hand to protect his eyes from the light, but Matthew saw him clearly. He recognized him. It was Banjoko.

"Nikolai," Matthew said, "go get Khadijah and the others." The boy obeyed, running off toward the caves.

In Banjoko's eyes, Matthew saw both fear and desperation. He wanted to help the man and his companion, but Matthew remembered the villagers' fear when they had encountered the Far Ones before in the desert. So he did nothing.

Within moments, Nikolai returned with many of the villagers, including Khadijah, Javier, and Locklyn. Several carried lanterns, and they crowded around the Far Ones. No one spoke. The villagers just stared at the two figures.

"I know you," Khadijah said at last. "You were at the waterhole. You're the one they called Banjoko."

"Yes," Banjoko said, smiling nervously for a brief moment, his face still filled with fear.

"Where are the rest of your people?" Khadijah asked, the villagers looking around for other Far Ones hiding in the night.

"You needn't worry. We came alone. The others would never come here. After all, you are Gamutiens."

"Then why have you come here?" Khadijah asked.

"You said there was a doctor here," Banjoko motioned to his companion, "My mother. She is not well."

Locklyn stepped forward and knelt next to the fallen figure. She moved the black scarves away from her face to reveal the barely conscious woman.

"I fear she is dying," Banjoko said quietly to Locklyn.

"A premature diagnosis, I'm sure," Locklyn replied. "What is her name?"

"Ismenia."

"Let's get her inside, and we'll see what the problem is." Standing up, she motioned to Javier, who, before Banjoko could protest, picked up the small figure of Ismenia and carried her toward the caves. Banjoko rushed to follow, but Khadijah laid her hand on his arm and stopped him.

"Let my mother examine her," Khadijah smiled, "Once we know what's wrong, then you can worry."

Banjoko, still looking worried, simply nodded.

"Your mother is the doctor?" he asked.

"Yes. I am Khadijah," she said, holding out her hand to him. At first, Banjoko just stared at the offered hand, a look of disbelief on his face. But then, slowly, he took her hand and shook it.

"I remember," he said, his voice soft and low.

Many of the villagers still stood around, staring at the Far One, the man a good head taller than the tallest of the villagers.

"Go back and finish watching the match," Khadijah said to them, "I believe Santiago was about to beat Riyadh." To which, there erupted several protests claiming Riyadh would come from behind, and even if they didn't, there was always the next match. But the words were sufficient enough to send the villagers back to the caves, leaving Banjoko to walk up with Khadijah, Matthew, and Nikolai, who once again, clung to Matthew's hand. As they reached the glow of light from the caves, Matthew noticed Banjoko staring at him.

"You're white," Banjoko said.

"Yeah," Matthew replied realizing he was probably the first white man Banjoko had ever seen.

"Are you lost?" Banjoko asked, curiosity in his voice.

"Well, I was for a while," Matthew smiled, "but now I'm right where I should be."

"Have you eaten?" Khadijah interrupted.

"Not for several days," Banjoko replied, still staring at Matthew.

"Well, I'm sure we can find something for you," Khadijah said leading him to the open space before the caves where Matthew slept every night. Matthew had already started a fire and rolled out a carpet for his bedding. Khadijah ordered Nikolai to find Sami and have another carpet and cushions brought out as well as a meal for Banjoko. Nikolai ran off, and within minutes, Sami and several others came out with the requested items but not the food. With the carpet and cushions spread out, Khadijah, Banjoko, and Matthew sat down around the fire. Nikolai soon reappeared and sat next to Matthew. During all this time, none of them spoke, Khadijah and Matthew carefully watching Banjoko as he watched them, each seemingly curious and fearful at the same time.

Sami, accompanied by Gavriel this time, returned carrying a tray of food. Before Banjoko, she set down a plate containing an open face sandwich made from flat bread, shaved roasted lamb, fresh greens, and a yogurt dressing. Next, she set down a basket of more flat bread, a

dish of hummus, and a bowl of ripe figs. Gavriel set down a jug of water and a glass. Gavriel immediately returned to watch the match, but Sami stood waiting— Matthew imagined to see Banjoko's reaction to the food. But he didn't touch the food, although Matthew could tell he wanted to. Banjoko just glanced down at the meal and then back at the others sitting around him. No one moved.

"Sami," Khadijah said at last, "bring some tea for the rest of us."

Only when each of the others— including Nikolai— held a cup of hot tea in their hands did Banjoko begin to eat. And much to Sami's obvious satisfaction, he ate every last morsel, even wiping down his plate with bread to get the drippings of lamb and yogurt dressing from the sandwich. All the while, the others sat silently sipping their tea.

At last Locklyn came out of her cave, Banjoko and the others standing up as she reached them.

"How is she?" Banjoko asked.

"She's sleeping," Locklyn replied, laying her hand on his arm, and while the words sounded reassuring, she looked concerned.

"What's wrong with her?" Khadijah asked.

"I don't know what's wrong with her," Locklyn spoke to Banjoko, "I'm still running tests, and I've consulted

several colleagues, but they didn't recognize her symptoms either. I'm having a search done at the Shanghai Medical Library, but until something is found, I don't know how to treat her. I can only treat the symptoms."

"Is she going to die?" Banjoko asked.

"Not at the moment," Locklyn replied, "but I don't know."

"What are her symptoms?" Khadijah asked.

"Her primary symptom is a dangerously high blood sugar level," Locklyn said, "and I can't figure out why."

"Does she have sores on her legs?" Matthew suddenly asked.

"Yes."

"My grandfather. He had diabetes," Matthew continued but then noticed everyone staring at him. Feeling self-conscious, he stopped.

"What?" Locklyn asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm not a doctor. What do I know?"

"No. Go on," Locklyn ordered.

"It's just that the symptoms you describe sound like his symptoms, and he had diabetes."

"Diabetes?" Khadijah said, "I've never heard of it."

"An ancient disease," Locklyn said, her face lighting up, "If I recall correctly, it had something to do with insulin production. A cure was found centuries ago."

"If a cure was found centuries ago," Banjoko asked, "how come my mother has it now?"

"The same reason Matthew's grandfather had it," Locklyn said, "Neither of your peoples ever benefited from the discovery of the cure because of their isolation. If you would excuse me, I have some research to do, and if Matthew is right— which I think he is— we should be able to cure your mother."

With that, she headed back to her cave. Banjoko turned and looked at Matthew, but he said nothing.

Ismenia did have diabetes, and Locklyn found the cure within a few hours. By the next morning, Ismenia was well on the way to recovery. Soon, even the sores on her legs began to heal, although she still had difficulty walking around, and Matthew usually saw her sitting in the shade of the trees, sometimes with other women but more often than not, she sat alone watching the children. Matthew never heard her speak to anyone, and he wondered if she could.

As for Banjoko, when he informed them that his people would never allow him or his mother to return, the villagers put him to work, just as they had with Matthew.

This resulted in the two men often working side by side, but Banjoko never spoke to Matthew, despite Matthew's attempts to exchange pleasantries.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Matthew commented as he cleared an irrigation ditch. Banjoko looked at him for a moment, opened his mouth to say something, but then kind of shook his head a bit, looked down at the ground, and said nothing.

"Kids sure are having fun." Matthew pointed at the younger children playing naked in the river shallows. Banjoko just walked away. Matthew didn't understand. Centuries after the Abandonment and this man, along with all his people, still held a grudge— for something Matthew didn't even do?

On the morning Locklyn pronounced Ismenia fit enough to leave her care, a problem arose— where would Banjoko and Ismenia live? Since their arrival, Ismenia had stayed in Locklyn's cave, Banjoko sleeping just outside the entrance. Now, the villagers decided, they needed their own home. It never occurred to anyone—including Banjoko and Ismenia— whether or not they wanted to stay in Misra. Everyone just assumed. The problem was where to put them. No one had enough room for both of them. Then Matthew said they could have his cave, which was almost complete. This shocked the

villagers. To share your home was one thing but to give your home outright? Matthew didn't mind. Besides, he preferred sleeping out under the stars. So when work was completed, Ismenia and Banjoko moved into the new cave.

That night as Matthew lay by the fire, the village quiet as everyone prepared for bed, Banjoko came and sat down beside him. Matthew didn't know what to think. He sat up, expecting Banjoko to say something. But Banjoko remained silent for a long time, staring into the fire, occasionally looking up at the stars. At last, he looked at Matthew.

"I want to thank you, my friend," Banjoko said. Matthew did not expect that.

"I have been unable to find the words to express my gratitude," Banjoko continued. "You may very well have saved my mother's life. And now, you have given us what was to be your home. You have shown us nothing but kindness, and I thank you for your friendship. I am in your debt."

The words completely shocked Matthew. All along, he thought the man hated him, when in reality, he felt gratitude. Matthew didn't know what to say, and he sat there dumbfounded until he noticed Banjoko staring at him. Matthew knew he must look like an idiot, his mouth still

slightly gapping from the surprise. So Matthew said the only thing he could.

"You're welcome," Matthew managed to get out.

The two men sat for a long while, neither speaking, the sounds of the night filling the silence.

"How's your mother doing?" Matthew asked.

"Very well, thank you," Banjoko replied, "I think she likes it here."

And again, they fell silent.

"Javier told me all about you," Banjoko suddenly said. "He said you came from the domed city, that you walked more than a hundred kilometers. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"He said you were exiled."

"Yes."

"For what crime?"

Matthew smiled. "For questioning our ways and beliefs."

"Then you and I are alike," Banjoko smiled, "only, my exile was voluntary. So what exactly did you do?"

"I began to show curiosity about the outside world, about whether or not anything could live out here," Matthew explained, "They said I was a threat to our society and to my daughter."

"You left a family behind?" Banjoko sounded surprised.

"I have a daughter," Matthew said quietly, "My wife is dead. There is no one else."

"You left your child behind?" Banjoko said, his voice filled with concern.

"She is well cared for, I'm sure," Matthew assured him but failed to convince even himself.

Banjoko said no more that night, but for the next several days, Matthew noticed Banjoko talking with the villagers, usually Javier and Khadijah, sometimes Sami, Gavriel, or Locklyn. He saw them looking in his direction and knew them to be discussing something of importance, yet when he approached them, the subject of conversation always dealt with some trivial matter such as the grape harvest or the arrival of the next caravan from the north. Matthew sensed this was purely for his benefit, and he believed some plan was in the works. After a week of this, during the siesta hours when Matthew sat reading under a tree, Banjoko and Javier finally came to speak to him.

"We have decided to go and get your daughter," Banjoko blurted out without warning. Matthew jumped up, dropping his book as he did.

"What?"

"It's true," Javier said, "Banjoko told us you have a daughter back in the domed city, and we've decided to go get her."

The possibilities flashed through Matthew's mind—Tyler here in Misra, happy and free to live and play under the sun and stars. But the impossibilities of it all quickly overshadowed any hope Matthew held. They had no idea what they proposed. Matthew shook his head.

"It's impossible."

"You do not want her?" Banjoko asked.

"No, that's not it," Matthew said, "It's just impossible. What do we do? Just break into the city and steal her?"

"Yes," Banjoko replied, as if it were that simple.

"Besides," Javier added, "how can you steal something that already belongs to you?"

"You don't understand," Matthew said, feeling frustrated with his inability to explain the dangers of the plan or the risks they would run by entering the city. "The security...."

"When you saw my neurological disruptor," Javier said, "you were amazed by the technology. What is the most advanced weaponry used in the city?"

"Guns," Matthew said, "but...."

"Guns?" Javier asked.

"Projectile weapons," Banjoko explained to Javier, "Crude but effective. We will require body armor."

Banjoko turned back to Matthew.

"Matthew," Banjoko continued, "do you want your child to live her life in the domed city or do you want her to roam free in the world?"

The answer to that was easy. It was everything else that bothered Matthew.

"I don't want her to remain in the city," Matthew said, "but I don't want anyone to risk their lives just to bring her out."

"Understandable," Banjoko said, "but that is our decision to make, not yours. All you have to decide is whether or not you want her here with us."

Matthew nodded slowly.

"I want her here," he said.

"Then that decides it," Javier said.

It took a week to plan. Gavriel obtained detail schematics of the city based upon a recent satellite survey. Khadijah ordered more neurological disruptors, lightweight body armor, and other equipment. To Matthew's surprise, they arrived within four days, by horse, no less. Banjoko and Javier planned the route— a straight line

heading southwest across the open desert, away from caravan trails and the waterholes. They estimated they could reach the city in three days, maybe two. The trip back would take longer— due east toward a caravan trail that would lead to waterholes and eventually the Wadi el-York and up to Misra.

The entire village turned out to wish them well on the day they left— a dozen camels, a dozen men and women, including Matthew, Banjoko, Khadijah, Javier, and Sami. Everyone wished them luck and a safe return, and as Matthew was about to climb onto his camel, he felt a hand on his arm. He turned to see Ismenia.

"What is the child's name?" she asked.

"Tyler."

"I will keep her— and all of you— in my prayers," she said then placed something in Matthew's hand. He looked down to see a small silver cross.

"For luck," she said.

"Thank you."

And she smiled.

Just before sunset on the second day out, they spotted the domed city on the horizon— dull and grey in the orange glow of the desert, like a bruise on an otherwise perfect fruit. The sight of it made Matthew's stomach turn.

About a kilometer away from the city, they made camp in the shadow of some rocks. They wouldn't enter the city until well after midnight, so for now, they rested. They had no real idea what kind of resistance they might encounter once inside, nor did they know whether or not they might be pursued out into the desert, although Matthew seriously doubted that. Still, they might have to make a hasty retreat across the desert, and they prepared for the probability that they would be up all night.

Khadijah passed out the equipment— body armor worn underneath their desert garb, neurological disruptors for everyone as well as night vision goggles. Khadijah would also carry a bag with extra equipment they might need.

In the dark early morning hours, they headed across the desert on foot toward the city. Sami and another stayed behind to break camp and prepare for the journey east once they escaped the city. The short trek to the city was easy, the desert flat, and Matthew quickly found the airlock through which he had left the city. Only Matthew didn't know how to get back in. Fortunately, Khadijah had figured that one out already. A few dabs of a putty-like substance around the airlock, a wire stuck into each dab, and Khadijah ordered everyone to take cover. With the press of

a button on a hand-held device, Khadijah blew the door off its hinges. It fell away with just a shove.

The section of the city they entered Matthew knew well. It was part of the city's water reclamation system-- a tangle of pipes, large and small, snaking for kilometers. Off limits to the general population, only maintenance workers ever came here. Dark and dank, it smelled of mildew, and Matthew heard water dripping somewhere. Khadijah coughed.

"How can you breath in here?" she whispered.

The air was stifling, and Matthew didn't remember it being so difficult to breath in the city-- just used to it, he guessed.

"Recycled air," he said.

Two men remained behind to guard the entrance-- or more accurately, their escape. Matthew led the way through the maze of pipes, Khadijah and Banjoko behind him, with Javier bringing up the rear. Six Gamutiens, one Far One-- towering over his companions-- and one ex-Dome Dweller crept through the inner workings of the city, all in desert fashion, their heads and faces covered, with night vision goggles over their eyes and neurological disruptors in their hands.

Reaching the first public area, Matthew stopped to get his bearings. It was the shopping district just below the

surface residential area— part of the Buchanan District. Shops lined the wide corridor, trees, flower planters, and park benches down the middle. All stood dark and quiet. Other than the intruders, nothing stirred.

The maintenance access corridor they wanted was about a hundred meters down the corridor, a security door separating it from the public area. It would take them directly to the surface. Matthew cautiously made his way down the corridor, the others following close behind.

At the security door, Matthew stopped, the others spreading out to keep watch as he punched in the access code. As he typed in the seven-digit code, he held his breath. He placed his hand on the doorknob and heard it click as he tried to turn it. They were in. Matthew smiled, realizing the code probably hadn't been changed in a hundred years.

Down the corridor and up a flight of stairs, they reached the surface. Immediately, everyone removed their goggles because the streetlights— still called such despite the absence of streets— rendered them useless. They crouched in the shadows between a garden wall and a row of orange trees until their eyes grew accustomed to the light.

All was quiet, the houses of the city's elite dark. Matthew pointed to the school where Tyler lived. Then he

pointed to the security checkpoint which stood between them and the school, two guards on duty, one sitting with his feet up while the other chatted with his back turned to the intruders.

Khadijah signaled to Javier who nodded in response. Then she pulled off her headscarf, quietly slipped out of her hiding place, and calmly walked toward the checkpoint. As she passed under a streetlight, the guards spotted her. Desert clad, golden-brown skin, close cut auburn hair, she looked like something out of a storybook. Both men moved toward her as she approached, and Matthew saw Khadijah smile at them. It had the desired effect. The men smiled at her, and Matthew saw Khadijah raise the neurological disruptor. A flash of blue light and the guards lay unconscious on the ground.

The others rushed from their hiding places, careful to avoid the light. As Khadijah dragged one of the men into the shrubbery and Javier hid the second guard, the rest continued on across to the school without stopping. Khadijah and Javier rejoined them a moment later at the school fence. One by one, they climbed over the fence, and within seconds, they stood in the grassy play area. The back of the school loomed before them, an ancient brick

façade with ivy growing up the walls and glass doors leading inside.

Matthew reached the doors first. He slipped on his goggles again and peered through the glass pane to see a classroom. He tried the door handle but found it locked. So he punched his fist through the glass, reached in, and unlocked the door. Six of them went in, two remaining behind to keep watch.

A light coming from the hallway outside the classroom forced Matthew to remove his goggles again. As he entered the hallway, he saw the source— a small lamp left on as a night light near the stairs. Matthew headed up the stairs, Khadijah, Javier, and Banjoko following him, but again, two stayed behind to keep watch, this time at the base of the stairs.

On the second floor, there was another hallway. Matthew checked the first door he came to and opened it. Looking inside the large room, the light spilling in from the open door, he found approximately thirty cots, a little girl asleep in each. As Matthew began to walk down the row of cots, Banjoko followed him, Khadijah and Javier standing in the doorway. Passing each cot, Matthew carefully looked to see if the sleeping girl might be his child. He couldn't tell. In the darkness, they all looked alike. But then he

noticed the light falling across a nightstand next to one of the cots and illuminating a photograph there— his wife, happy and beautiful before her illness. He moved quietly toward the cot and stared down at the small sleeping figure of Tyler. He sat down on the cot, the movement stirring Tyler. She opened her eyes.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Tyler, it's me," Matthew said taking her into his arms, holding her close, and not wanting to let her go ever again. After a moment, he pulled back a bit from her and looked down at her face.

"But Elder Finley said you went to Heaven," Tyler whispered.

"He just thought I did," Matthew replied, "I left the city. But I came back to get you, and I want to take you with me now."

"But it's the middle of the night," Tyler said.

"I know, but it was the only way I could get you."

"I understand," Tyler said, "It's because they won't let you have me."

Her comprehension of the situation disturbed Matthew. She was too young to know such things, but soon she would be free of this world and its rules.

"You have to be very quiet," Matthew said.

Tyler nodded. Matthew pulled the small quilt off the bed and wrapped Tyler in it. As he did, he noticed the smell of perfume and realized it came from the quilt. He held it up to his nose and breathed in.

"Smells like Mommy, doesn't it?" Tyler said. Matthew smiled and nodded. She had made it while expecting Tyler.

Matthew stood up with Tyler in his arms. He handed her to Banjoko, then grabbed the photograph of his wife, and shoved it into the folds of his clothing. Turning, he saw Tyler staring at Banjoko, her eyes wide with amazement at his uncovered face.

"This is Banjoko," Matthew said to Tyler. She smiled.

"Banjoko. What a funny name."

"Tyler. What a funny name," Banjoko smiled as he handed Tyler back to her father.

Making their way from the dormitory, Matthew saw a little girl sit straight up in bed. Banjoko stood closest to her.

"You're dreaming, little one," he whispered, "Go back to sleep."

"If I'm dreaming, how come I have to go back to sleep?" she asked the man towering over her bed.

"Because I said so," he replied, his voice even deeper than normal.

With that, she quickly laid back down, pulling the covers up over her head.

With Khadijah and Javier, they headed down the stairs and rejoined the others. Once outside the school, they made their way across the play area. As they scrambled over the fence, Matthew handed Tyler over to Banjoko standing on the opposite side then climbed over. Yet as Matthew was about to take Tyler from him, he noticed something amiss at the security checkpoint. A handful of security guards stood there, paramedics examining the two unconscious guards. Before Matthew and his companions could react, the security guards spotted them. Immediately, both the security guards and the intruders raised their weapons and took aim, but no one made a further move.

"A Mexican stand-off," Khadijah whispered, grinning.

Matthew saw the security guards look at each other, and he realized their confusion. They had never seen people who looked like them, dressed like them, or held weapons like them. Matthew was the only white man among them, and even his face was brown from the sun. The others would look alien— tall Banjoko, black skinned and holding a tiny white child, Khadijah, golden brown as well as a woman, and the others, their faces still covered by their desert dress.

"Uncover your faces," Matthew said to Javier. They looked at him then did as he said, revealing their brown faces and auburn hair. The guards looked even more confused. They glanced back and forth between the strangers and each other. Matthew slowly started to walk towards them, the others following his lead. The guards, in turn, stepped back, obviously fearful. One of them held a palm phone, and he moved to call for help.

"Don't do that," Matthew ordered, taking another step and aiming his neurological disruptor at the man.

The man obeyed, nodding his head slightly. But then Matthew realized a possible way out.

"Call Elder Finley," Matthew said, unable to hide his contempt for the man, "Tell him Matthew Weston is here to get Tyler. I believe I have some Sundays to make up for."

The guards looked at each other, and Matthew knew their thoughts— how could someone like him know Elder Finley? After a moment's hesitation, the security guard called Finley, and they waited for him to arrive.

As the minutes went by, the Gamutiens stood perfectly still, never moving, never dropping their gaze or their aim from the guards, and even Tyler just watched silently from the safety of Banjoko's arms. The security guards, on the other hand, fidgeted with nervousness. Matthew knew they

had never prepared for an encounter like this— invasion from the outside world, a world they believed with all their heart and soul to be dead. Matthew wanted to laugh.

A look of shock covered Elder Finley's face when he finally arrived. Matthew smiled.

"Like Lazarus, I've come back from the dead," Matthew said as the older man reached him.

"Matthew," Finley began, but then stopped, his mouth open but the words wouldn't come out. "I'm speechless," he finally said.

"Well, that makes it all worth it," Matthew said snidely.

"How did you...?" Finley asked, "How did you survive?"

"Survive? Survive what?" Matthew snapped, "The desert?"

"The desert, the air, everything?" Finley asked. Matthew saw him looking at Banjoko holding Tyler. "And where did these... people come from?"

"From the outside," Matthew said.

"There were survivors?"

"The entire world survived," Matthew shouted at him, "It only ended for us."

"What are you talking about?" one of the security guards asked.

"While we were all stuck in here," Matthew said, "the world went on. There are five billion people out there, and they're more advanced than we could ever hope to be."

"You're lying," Finley said and motioned to Matthew's companions, "You expect me to believe this riff-raff is more advanced than we are?"

"Javier," Matthew grinned, "a demonstration, if you please."

Without further warning, Javier pointed his disruptor at one of the guards. A flash of blue light and the man collapsed unconscious to the ground.

"Don't worry," Khadijah said as one of his companions rushed to his side, "He's not dead. He'll regain consciousness in a half-hour or so, none the worse for wear."

"Can your weapons incapacitate a man without doing him any harm?" Matthew asked Finley and the guards. No one said anything in response.

"If we had been living out there instead of in here," Matthew continued, "my wife would still be alive. They wouldn't have sent her home and said, 'Sorry, nothing we can do.' And even if they hadn't cured her, they wouldn't have stopped looking until the very end. That's how they are. They consult doctors around the globe. They exchange

information. I talk to people all over the world everyday. Children. Here, I'm not even allowed to see my own daughter, but out there, teachers encourage their students to send me communiqués. They ask me all sorts of questions—what's my favorite food during Ramadan, how do I think the All-Blacks will fare next season. I don't even know what that means."

"What do you want, Matthew?" Finley interrupted.

"All I want is to take Tyler home with me."

"Home?"

"Back to Misra, the village where we live. I plan to show her the stars."

"You want to show her the stars?" Finley said, "You want to take her from everything she's ever known just to show her the stars? With people like this around her?" He waved his hand at Matthew's companions.

"That's right," Matthew said, "Now we're leaving. So get out of our way or all of you will be lying on the ground with your friends."

Matthew pushed his way past Elder Finley, but as he did, the older man grabbed him.

"No," Finley shouted. Finley tried to shove Matthew, but they both fell to the ground. For a split second, everyone started forward but then stopped, as if unsure of

what to do. Matthew rolled away from Finley and ended up next to the unconscious security guard, the man's gun still in his hand. Matthew picked up the gun.

"Just leave," Finley continued, "Go back from wherever you came from, and just leave us alone."

Matthew jumped to his feet, reached down, and pulled Finley up.

"Having a crisis of faith?" Matthew said putting the gun to Finley's head. "Now, as I said a moment ago, we're leaving, and you're escorting us out of here."

There were no more arguments. The security guards moved out of the way as Matthew marched Finley to the maintenance access corridor, the others following close behind, Javier bringing up the rear as before but this time keeping a close eye on the security guards who followed them. Reaching the shopping district, Matthew found more security guards waiting, but like the others, they moved out of the way, backing up slowly as the intruders approached. Glancing around, Matthew saw others among them, civilians here and there.

Matthew stopped as they reached the water reclamation area through which they had passed earlier. He looked around to make sure the way was clear, and then he motioned for the others to continue. Again, the security guards

followed. At the blown airlock, Matthew stopped again, this time turning and waiting until all the others made it outside where he saw Sami with the camels, the eastern horizon already growing bright. Once everyone else was out, Matthew, dragging Finley with him, backed out the airlock. A moment later, half a dozen security guards emerged from the airlock, all looking around, fearful of the world.

"You're out," Finley said, "Now let me go."

"As soon as everyone's mounted up," Matthew replied. He watched carefully as everyone climbed onto the camels, Banjoko still holding Tyler.

"Wait," Finley said, pointing at Tyler, "Does she even want to go with you, Matthew?"

"Ask her," Matthew said.

"Ruth," Finley said, "Do you really want to go out into the wilderness with these people? What about all your friends back at school? Won't you miss them?"

For a moment, Tyler did not reply. She just stared down at Finley from atop the camel. Then she looked at her father, and Matthew nodded.

"My mother named me Tyler," she said to Finley. Matthew smiled.

"I guess you have your answer," he said.

With everyone mounted up and the camels ready to go, Matthew let go of Finley and backed away from him toward his own waiting camel. He opened the gun, dumped the bullets out, and tossed the gun aside. Once mounted up, he turned to the Dome Dwellers standing outside what remained of the airlock. Even more men had emerged and now stood in the desert sand.

"If any of you want to leave," Matthew said to them, "head east. There's a river several days journey from here. You'll find people there. They can help you contact me."

"He lies," Finley shouted, but the men didn't look like they believed him.

"Let them find out for themselves," Matthew said to Finley. With that, Matthew signaled to Javier, and the caravan headed out toward the ever-brightening horizon.

A week later, on a cool night in Misra, Matthew sat before his campfire and waited for Tyler to join him. Ismenia had gone to get her from Gavriel, who, Matthew expected, was already attempting to teach Tyler the intricacies of cricket. Given the speed at which Tyler had already learned the communication system, Matthew had no doubt she would soon comprehend the game.

"Here she is," Ismenia said, smiling as she carried Tyler to him.

"Where were you this time?" he asked standing up.

"I was talking to Jiro," Tyler said as Ismenia put her down.

"Jiro?"

"In Kyoto," Ismenia said.

"When we visit the world," Tyler asked, "can we go see him too? He said it would be alright with his parents."

"We'll see," Matthew said, smiling.

"Try not to keep her up too late," Ismenia said, heading back to her cave, "Banjoko is taking the children fishing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, ma'am," Matthew replied, taking Tyler's hand and sitting down with her. They both laid back, Tyler resting against her father as they looked up into the night sky.

"So what was the last thing you remember before you fell asleep last night?" Matthew asked.

"Umm, Orion's belt," Tyler said.

"Can you find it?"

And Tyler pointed up at the stars.

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