

Chapter 21: The Dance of Divinity

The next morning, Taylor awoke and dragged herself out of bed. The day of the Dance of Divinity had arrived. Tired from all the training and cramming for her test, Taylor hobbled out of her room to see what Monka was up to. While scratching her head, yawning, and plodding half asleep through the dimly lit kitchen, she realized that the pod was empty. Monka wasn't there. She had definitely overslept.

She had wanted to prepare for the daylong event as all of the Lemurians who were supposed to have done so earlier that morning. Everyone was expected to spend a few hours centering, focusing their thoughts, reflecting on their purpose, exercising their voices, tightening the skins on their drums, or stretching and limbering up.

Taylor decided that she had better forget about trying to prepare, and just get freshened up and go to the temple. Once she washed up and put on her new robe, she started on the path to the central atrium.

As soon as she stepped out of the pod to begin her rushed pilgrimage to the temple, she met up with Zanadar. He was still wearing his wizardly wears. "So, you're heading to the Temple of Light, are you?"

"How'd you guess?" said Taylor, while practically sprinting through the poorly lit tunnel.

Zanadar—not at all concerned about the time—followed Taylor. "You're gonna get quite a light show tonight!" he said, while jumping in front of her. "And from the looks of things around here, they're going to need some new light, too." The zany Pleiadian then started bounding around on the path. "Oh great Boundless Light!" he shouted, as he transformed his body into a bright ball of light, which grew in intensity to instantly illuminate the darkened tunnel. "Oh, Measureless Light," he

exclaimed. Taylor hurried along, trying to ignore him. Zanadar then turned into a beam of light and shot back and forth through the walls of the tunnel while shouting, "Unimpeded Light!" After stopping far down the path, he turned back to human form and, while standing in front of Taylor, burst into fire. The Pleiadian's booming voice filled the tunnel. "*Flaaaaaming* Light!" Zanny then turned again to humanlike form and held stride with Taylor as she sped through the dark tunnel. With each step that they took, Zanadar added something new: "Pure Light... Light of Joy... Light of Wisdom... Inconceivable Light... Light that surpasses Sun and Moon... Light of seven days creation... the hidden light... the primordial light... the light of paradise... the light of creation... uninterrupted Light."

"And God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light,'" interrupted Taylor, by now thoroughly irritated with the crazy Pleiadian. "Genesis 1:3." She nodded her head vigorously.

"You've been studying your sacred texts, I see," said Zanadar, impressed with her quote from the Bible.

"For almost two years! And I could provide some quotes that come to mind from the Koran, or the Talmud, or the four books of the Vedas, or the Tripitaka, or the Tao Te Ching, or the Avesta, or the Adi Granath. But I'm not one to go on, like *some* people we know." She gave Zanadar a perturbed look, under raised eyebrows.

Zanadar smiled back at her, yet went on. "Do you know about the Egyptian sun god Ra?"

"When Ra opens his eyes," Taylor started, "there is light, when he shuts them, darkness."

"Outstanding!" exclaimed the wizard.

"Now Zanadar, I don't mean to be brief..."

"Yes you do! And you should be. You must be off to the temple. But first," Zanadar's voice softened, "temples are space-time structures where one is allowed to contemplate realities

transcending both space and time." By now it was as though Zanadar were reciting a gentle prayer to prepare Taylor for the dance and journey. She was calming considerably. "A temple is a place where we recognize the unity of the invisible and visible worlds. A temple is place where we can awaken our energies and consciousness, and raise ourselves upward to meet the power and light of the transcendent." Zanadar's voice was smooth and soothing. "A temple is a place to behold the beauty of colors and sounds and movement and love."

As Zanadar whispered his last words, Taylor finally turned to look at him, only to notice that he was gone. She stopped and took a deep breath, realizing that Zanadar had left her feeling much more relaxed and enlivened. She smiled, turned to continue walking, and was practically overtaken by a small gang of Lemurian kids. The playful pack had come from one of the tributary tunnels. The small swarm swept her up in a whirlwind of energy and carried her off toward her destination.

By the time she reached the darkened central atrium, Taylor had become sweaty from playing with the puppy-eyed kids along the way. She took her attention off the pack, looked up for a moment, and stopped short when she laid sight on the Divine Design carvings etched on the huge arched doors of the temple. The pack of kids stopped along with her. This was it. She was going. Going in, and going back. Way back in time. And perhaps never coming back. She never did ask anyone whether she would return. And no one ever did say anything, either. She was glad they didn't, really. She figured it out without having to be told. And Zanadar had told her a long time ago, before this ever started, that there would be no going back. So, she had to stay focused on a particular time and place. She had to bring the Sacred Seven back to... where? Where would they go? Somewhere in Canaan. Sometime around 2000 B.C.E. She had to concentrate. Focus. And when the time came, think of nothing else.

While taking a few steps backward to get a better view at the temple, Taylor's eyes climbed the enormous structure all the way to the peak. The bright shaft of light shooting out of the top was now barely discernable. Over the years, the hearty beam had lost much of its power, bringing all of Telos into the twilight. No longer were the bright golden walls a cascading waterfall of light. In fact, they were downright dull in most places. It was as though the waterfall had dried up and left nothing else but the stone wall underneath. The temple's light was definitely due for a tune-up. But the Divine Design, etched in the great wooden doors, was glowing bright. And it was changing from the star-tetrahedron, to the Fruit of Life, then Metatron's Cube, and finally the Flower of Life, just like it had when Monka showed Taylor the design so long ago. The design's heightened activity made Taylor wonder if it was doing it in anticipation of her departure. She felt like it knew she was standing there studying it, as if its driver had finally come after all these thousands of years.

Unable to wait for Taylor any longer, the bundle of babes scurried around her and with one sweeping motion, opened the large, wooden doors. As the Lemurian children filed in, Taylor stepped forward hesitantly. After she had walked through the entranceway, the large doors closed behind her with a loud boom.

Inside, thousands of Lemurians were mingling about. Relieved to know that she wasn't attracting any special attention for being late, Taylor did notice some of the Lemurians standing near the entrance waving to her and smiling. From out of the corner of her eye, Taylor spied Queen Nyla through the crowd. Walking further inside, Taylor quickly became aware that queen was watching her.

Being that this was her first time within the temple, Taylor was awed by the size and design of the great structure. Looking overhead, turning round and round, Taylor saw that she was indeed inside of an enormous cone-shaped spiral. She walked to the center of the temple on the bottom floor and

looked upward and noticed the seven ribbed windings of the ascending interior ramp. This wide, corkscrewed ramp would be where the dance would take place—the dance that would not simply represent the expansion and evolution of consciousness, but that would actually facilitate that growth. Here was the sacred space where everyone would become Divine Immanence, and—as she had been told—the spiral dynamic of the temple would serve to propel the Sacred Seven on a vortex of energy upward to meet with Divine Transcendence, to be transported back in time to save the future.

Taylor had learned that nobody in the Lemurian culture actually measured the movement of the moon, the planets, and the stars; but rather, led by the highly perceptive efforts of Pelleur, they were all aware that a rare, auspicious cosmic arrangement was about to occur. For several days, Pelleur and other drummers had been listening closely and keeping track of the pulses sounding from the cosmos. Increasingly, they were becoming more powerful, more focused, more directed toward their mountain. And, if there were ever a time to call upon the pulse of Divine Transcendence, Pelleur decided, this would be the day.

After this great unifying experience, Taylor had been told everything would be left up to her. Nothing could adequately describe the transport so little attempt was made by any of her teachers to do so. She was told, however, that what she and the others did afterward when they got there was entirely up to them. Pretty much everybody living in Telos had the same idea about what they wanted to do, and they felt that they would be able to work things out once they got there and assessed their surroundings. But nobody had ever talked about how they would return. And Taylor had never asked.

Aside from being skeptical about the entire affair, Taylor was still not sure if she wanted to go. This was supposed to be a journey from which she would never return. Her *final* purpose. The end. Her *telos*. She did not want did not want this to be *her* end. She had to find a way to get back. If she could travel somewhere in a dream, or go back into the past, she *had* to be able to return to the

present. But now that she had this chance to look upon the magnificence of the temple from the inside, she was beginning to believe that there would never be anything like this where the Sacred Seven was going. How would they ever get back? Nothing could ever compare to this.

Surveying the bottom floor, Taylor noticed the priestess Aleva, whom she had sung with during her time with Etruceana. Aleva was standing up against the back wall. Her face was ecstatic and she was singing her song. A number of Lemurian men and women gathered in semicircles around her. With their eyes closed, swaying slightly, they all seemed lost in dreams, absorbing life and energy from what they heard.

Walking up the wide ramp while continuing to survey the inside of this structure, Taylor made her way to the second winding of the spiral. At a similarly arranged place, back near the outer wall, the priestess Zoa was singing. Her tones had in them something mightier, more powerful than those coming from Aleva. The sounds seemed more like those found in the mysterious rhythms of nature. Those around Zoa moved their limbs in cadence with the strong rhythm. Taylor joined in and at once felt a strong connection with the song and the powers acting within her.

Almost without notice, everyone in the temple joined in with the singing. Taylor looked around at the others for a short time, mesmerized by their voices, and then added her own voice to the mix. The beautiful sounds raised the energy in the temple considerably. Then, a subtle, deep, pulsing beat could be heard. Taylor hadn't noticed it before, but drums had been placed all along the back wall of the entire winding structure of the temple. And now, each of the drums, manned by a drummer, was being played.

When it became obvious that one and all within the temple had clearly felt the pulse, the drumbeat began to increase in volume, and the Dance of Divine Unity commenced. At once, a great weaving line of Lemurians moving both up and down the winding ramp was formed. Those in the line

weaving and winding upward, personified the bringing of Divine Immanence up to Divine Transcendence; this was acting out of the aspiration and evolution of matter, body, and self into spirit. At the point of maximum contraction and ascension at the top of the temple's spiral, where the inner journey was said to be complete, each person in the weaving line simply turned and began the unwinding and expansion of the spiral. Here they acted out the bringing of Divine Transcendence down to Divine Immanence, the involution of spirit into self, body, earth, and matter. The weaving procession of Lemurians looked like two giant serpents moving around, under, and over each other. One wound up the spiral, the other down.

As they pranced in time with the pulse, everyone made deep, gentle, loving eye contact with each passer-by to connect the two alternating phases of the path of consciousness. As Taylor continued walking, she was also aware of her breathing. For the inhalation and exhalation of breath, like the waxing and waning of the moon, corresponded with the ascent and descent of the spiral. With each breath, she was able to feel deeper and deeper inside of herself

When varying drumbeats were added to the main pulsing cadence, causing the volume to rise and the call to deepen, the weaving, spiraling line began breaking up into smaller groups and forming circles. Each group looked like a spinning top, ascending and descending the mystic spiral. And as everyone—children and adults alike—sang and danced and spun, their lights began to emerge. First, their bodies became enclosed within a sphere of shimmering, yellow light. Then, inside of the spheres, a colorful, fluid rainbow of light swirled around each dancer. Finally, at the very center of the spheres, emanating from the core of each dancer, a bright, white star of light formed. Each star then mixed and connected with the others, creating the most amazing sight Taylor had ever seen. And as the colorful light inside the temple grew, the chaos did, as well.

People and groups kept breaking off and forming, separating, dancing individually, and then coming back together to form another group. It was a joyous event. Laughter could be heard amongst the drumming and singing, everywhere. And the beat, the unifying deep, sensual beat that pulled at Taylor's very core, drummed on. The beat, more than anything, moved her. Moved her so much, that as she laughed in joy, she also cried in wonder, and moaned in desire.

Taylor was amazed. Amazed at the deep passion and sensuality within her that yearned for expression. All of her senses were acutely aware. Now, finally, everything, each and every part of her being, was coming together. And, as the unity of all of who she was intensified, *her* inner core also began to shine.

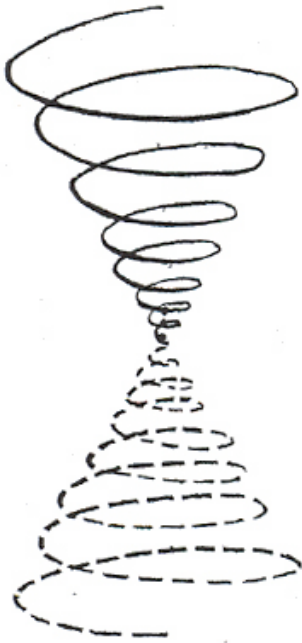
From the base of the central axis of her body, two great coils of light energy spiraled up her spine. Within her, the various centers, the lotuses of energy, were slowly being awakened. Starting at the root of her spine, the two spirals of light twisted upward to her abdomen, then her solar plexus, her heart, throat, third eye, and finally the crown of her head. Taylor was one with Divine Immanence. She was Divine Immanence itself.

Dancing, laughing, crying, screaming with delight, Taylor found herself near the railing of the ramp. She looked down at the bottom floor and saw Queen Nyla. She was dancing on a raised circular altar and her core star was shining. Oh, did the queen dance!: fearless, sensual, full of erotic essence, resonating, unveiled, connected, fruitful. She was poetry and prayer in motion, a pure, fertile light.

A circle of dancers soon surrounded her. While the others held and intensified the queen's energy, Taylor watched a beautiful rainbow of light climb the great temple. At each of the seven levels, the colors gradually changed: starting with bright red on the bottom floor, up to orange, then golden yellow, then green, cyan, indigo, and finally at the very top, a mix of violet, white, and gold.

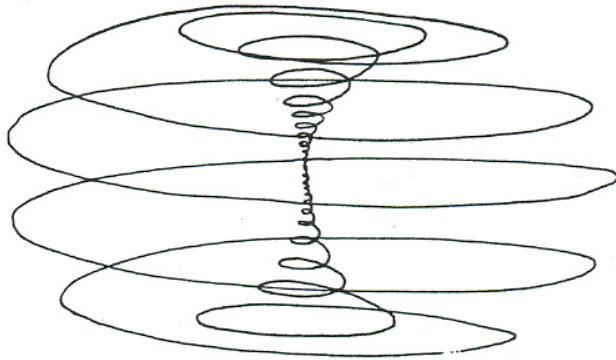
By now, Taylor thought, the drumming must be drawing Divine Transcendence near. At that moment, she noticed that everyone started forming into groups of seven; and she always found herself in the middle of a group. And then, under all the drumming she could hear the voices. A soft, alluring humming unlike any sound Taylor had ever heard. This was the exact same song that she heard coming out of the mountain two long years ago.

Taylor looked upward and an aperture appeared at the top of the dome, above the temple, exposing the nighttime sky. Here was the Axis Mundi, the pole, the center circle at the apex of the inner temple, serving as a canopy supporting heaven and connecting it with Earth. Taylor watched as an enormous lenticular cloud gathered in the darkened sky outside and directly above the peak of the mountain. A ferocious whirlpool of cold winds whipped around the old, isolated mountain. Mysteriously, the lens-shaped cloud gradually formed into a descending cone-shaped spiral vortex—a direct, mirror image of the ascending spiral vortex of the temple inside the mountain. This was Divine Transcendence coming to unite with Divine Immanence.



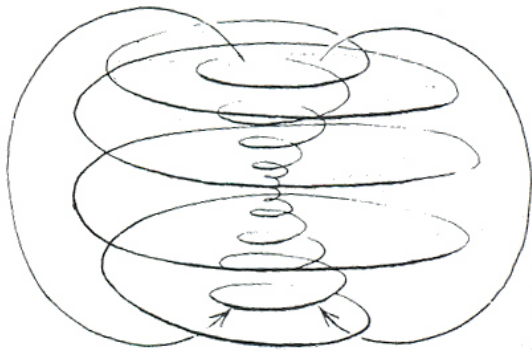
As the dancers' voices climbed and increased in volume, the six dancers surrounding Taylor all moved into position closer to Taylor. At that moment, a light comparable to ten million Suns, penetrated the temple. The ethereal temple of Divine Transcendence, which had crowned Mount Shasta, had pushed through the hymen and emptied into Queen Nyla's pure, fresh temple. Taylor was overtaken and penetrated by the extremely intense and growing bright light.

Having been thoroughly initiated for the experience, Taylor was held in gentle hands. Overcome by the strongest feelings of love, contentment, and bliss that she had ever experienced, the eternal light of Divine Transcendence was emanating all of its creative power through her and the rest of the Lemurians in the temple.



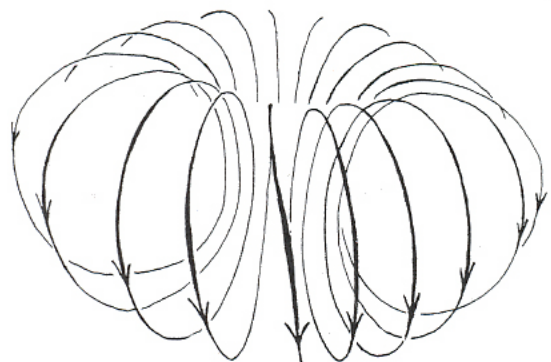
Gradually, a horizontal lasso of light energy shot off from the base of each of the two joined halves of the double spiral. The two lassos—after circling several times around the double spiral—eventually joined, creating a larger spherical vortex around the entire energy

structure. The whole mountain itself was surrounded by an enormous whirlwind of energy. It was now a huge ball of light.



Then, another force of energy and light began to take shape around the sphere. Now, streams of light energy looped through the vertical center of the two joined spirals, creating a donut-shaped torus ring that engulfed the entire sphere. In this state, the energy of the mountain was perpetually turning in on itself; it was a

continuous whole. Here was the true connection of heaven and earth. Divine Immanence and Divine Transcendence had come together in a state of balance and dynamic equilibrium to create the condition the Lemurians called Divine Unity.



Inside the mountain, Taylor, who along with the other six dancers surrounding her, had been suspended in midair, absorbed and lifted by the light, ready to be sent back into the past, closed her eyes and began to focus all her attention on the ancient near east, and the land of Canaan. Instead, she witnessed a strange and disturbing sight. It was a vision of an expanding, moving, squirming, indestructible wall of gray. And it was heading directly for Kyle.

At that instant, Taylor was dropped back onto the ramp.



Moments later, she found herself outside the temple, on her hands and knees weeping uncontrollably. She was crying not because she was unable to continue basking in the light; not because of the horrific vision she had seen; but because of the fact that she had let the Lemurians down. The dance was over and the Sacred Seven had not been sent back into the past as planned.

Aware that another presence had moved near her, Taylor looked up. It was Queen Nyla. Her dark skin was wet, steaming with sweat, yet her insides were still beaming with the light that the dance had generated. Taylor, jarred from her crying, was now in close proximity to the deep, dark goddessing power of the mountain. The queen still carried the amazing force that Taylor had watched from above. "I couldn't help it," she said while peering up at the queen. "I'm sorry. I had a vision. And I couldn't stay focused. That's why I'm..." Taylor looked around at the others, "...why *we're* all still here, isn't it? Because, instead of concentrating on where we were supposed to be headed, I saw that... grey... stuff, and..." Taylor stopped herself short, not wanting to admit to anyone that she had seen Kyle, and that he was in trouble. She pushed herself off her knees into a standing position. "I have to go back home. Something terrible is going to happen. I know it. I saw *something*. And I've

got to try to stop it.” Taylor simply couldn’t explain what she thought was going to happen. The vision was beyond her comprehension.

“And you think that you can?” asked the queen.

Taylor wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I have to at least try to save my family and my friends. I just can't leave them behind.” Taylor was thinking about Kyle, as always.

"I understand," said Queen Nyla showing no sign of emotion. Her face had turned back to stone. "You've made your decision." The queen took a few steps away. And her light began to fade. “Now, what we must do is prepare you for your return. For this we will need Zanadar’s assistance.”

That said, Zanadar appeared. For the first time, Taylor noticed that the old Pleiadian was a bit frazzled. He was also wearing a bib. "You just snatched me right up from a wonderful meal. But I was really enjoying watching your show down here in Mount Shasta. Loved all those different vortexes; the spiral, the double spiral; and let's not forget the spherical and torus vortexes. Wow! You sure had it going. You ought to have all the light you’ll need for another couple of years or so, at least."

Taylor could tell that the queen was patient with Zanadar, but not amused.

Zanadar removed his bib and turned toward Taylor. "So, you're going back home, are you?"

Taylor nodded and lowered her eyes to the ground. She then walked with her head down all the long, lonesome way back to Monka’s pod. Only when she reached the door to the pod did she look up to notice how much brighter the light in the tunnel had become, since the dance. Saying good-bye to Monka was going to be difficult. With a huge sigh, Taylor opened the door and walked in.

Monka was sitting at the kitchen table with her hands in her lap. The kitchen, and the whole pod, in fact, was now brightly lit.

“I guess the dance worked,” Taylor said while looking up at the ceiling. “All the light is back.”

Monka picked herself up out of her chair as if carrying a great weight. She walked over to Taylor and threw her arms around her. Both of them needed the hug. They stayed locked together for a long time. Secretly, Taylor was hoping Monka would hold onto to her forever, as if doing so would prevent her from leaving, keep her safe there with her. More than anything, though, Taylor was afraid.

"You'll be okay, Taylor," said Monka, as if sensing Taylor's fear. "And we'll be okay here in Telos, too. Things will work out. They always do." The two broke apart, and then Taylor sat down at the table. Monka joined her but said nothing further. Finally, after a long silence, when Taylor couldn't take it any longer, she picked herself up from the kitchen table, excused herself, and walked to her room. Monka watched her walk away in silence.

Taylor wanted to visit her room one last time before leaving. She entered the room and looked around at everything, the way an adult would when leaving home and their cherished childhood bedroom for the last time. She walked over to a shelf that she had carved during her stay and picked off a small glass vial. She then walked over to the corner where she had once sat, dug herself into it, and covered herself with dirt. Now, as though the soil of this small area were the source of the healing power of the mountain, she scooped up a small handful of it and poured it into the vial. Just then, Monka knocked on the door. Taylor concealed the vial, walked over to the door, and opened it.

Monka reached out and provided Taylor with a new set of clothes. "Here is a new pair of pants, a shirt, and some proper shoes. Now that you're going back... you'll need them to blend in." Without saying another word, Monka quickly turned and exited the room.

Taylor took off her robe and climbed into her new clothes. She tucked the small vial of dirt into a special pocket in her pants, turned, and, without looking back, walked out of the room. Her vial of dirt would be her secret token of this sacred place.

Once finished saying good-bye, Taylor turned, stepped out into the tunneled pathway, and began walking toward the atrium. The devoted Monka followed. Realizing that Monka was trailing behind, Taylor stopped and reached out her hand. As the two walked hand in hand along the path, other Lemurians began pouring out of their homes and gathering behind. After a while, a large crowd had formed. By the time the throng entered the atrium, an even larger gathering was waiting. Monka and Taylor faced one another, smiled, shared a kiss, and then released hands. While Taylor walked down the path in front of Monka, she could see the Temple of Light through the canopy of branches. The entire structure was glowing brightly, and the amazing shaft of golden light was once again gushing out of the apex and pouring over the ceiling and down the walls of the great atrium. The dance had indeed worked. And now the Lemurians would once again have all the light that they needed.

Taylor was proud of herself for having participated in the dance. She was pleased that she had survived and finally had the opportunity to experience, once again, the feelings she first had when visiting Mount Shasta in her dream two long, hard years ago. But now, she had other things to do. She had no idea exactly what that would be, but she had to go back. She knew this. It was something she could not avoid. So, reluctantly, she tore her eyes from the temple and continued walking down the path to the cleared circle where Queen Nyla, Etruceana, Pelleur, Zanadar and a large crowd were waiting.

Etruceana was the first to greet her. She put one of her graceful arms around her shoulders, then placed the palm of her hand on her chest. After closing her eyes for a moment, and intoning while inhaling, Etruceana began to chant. She only did this for a short time, because it was really all Taylor needed. "Remember to keep your chin up, Taylor," she said at last. "And be aware of your breathing. Don't forget to your imagination and your voice. They must always work together."

Pelleur only needed a brief moment. He stepped forward, throbbing as he did. "Be aware of those individuals you will encounter on your journey who will not be able to give up their false sense of power. They hold onto their own personal will. Watch always for those that do. And as you protect your self from those that express only their own will, make certain you listen for the pulse. Always keep an ear turned toward the pulse."

Queen Nyla was next. "We have been very fortunate to have you here in Telos, Taylor. We are eternally grateful. Your presence here will be truly missed." The queen paused for a moment and walked closer to Taylor. She sighed, and then spoke softly so that only Taylor could hear. "I keep hoping that your return home is a good thing, Taylor. Maybe it's even necessary. Perhaps, you won't be able to save things unless you do go back. I keep hoping that something unexpected will happen, that, you'll prevail, and then..." The queen placed her hands on Taylor's shoulders. "To be honest, I don't know what's going to happen, now. I've prepared for far too long to..." And then she stopped.

That's when she stopped being Nyla, and turned back into Nyla, Queen of the Dance, Queen Nyla of Telos. She turned and faced the others gathered there. "Please keep in mind, Taylor, that you will always be welcome here. And you may return whenever you wish, or are able. A long time ago, we knew you would join us here in Telos. Even before Zanadar appeared that night, what for you must seem like ages ago. And now you have chosen to return."

Queen Nyla walked away from Taylor, and then circled around to face her from a distance. "You have made a bold decision, Taylor. For you will face many dangers. You have much work to do and many challenges to overcome. Now, we can only hope that what you have learned here will be of some assistance to you on your journey." Queen Nyla then stepped back slowly and merged into the crowd.

Taylor looked at all those who had gathered one last time, and without saying a word, waved. She had no words to express her feelings, and the crowd seemed to sense this. All of what Taylor had to say was written in her eyes: all the pain, the joy, the love, the warmth, the sadness and the appreciation.

Then Zanadar stepped forward. It was time. Taylor placed her hand in his and walked with him toward the opening of the cavern through which she had once, years ago, entered. They stopped just before the entrance, turned, and faced the Lemurians. Taylor, who until now had been able to keep her composure, closed her eyes, and lowered her head. Tears began streaming down her cheeks. Zanadar put his arm around her shoulders. When she finally opened her eyes, she waved good-bye to the crowd one last time, turned, and began walking with Zanadar through the cavern.



"So, what are your plans?" asked Zanadar, breaking the silence after having walked for some distance.

"Plans? I don't have plans. I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do. I'm not even sure what I'm going to be up against. I just know I need to go back."

"And once you get there?"

"I told you, Zanny, I don't have any plans."

"Are you hoping to come back here, then?"

"I don't know. Maybe I can change things, you know. Maybe I can help to stop whatever that grey *thing* was. Maybe someone will listen."

"And if not?"

"Well, I guess I can always come back, can't I?"

"Perhaps."

Taylor looked at Zanadar in disbelief. She had hoped that she could visit at any time, go back and see Monka, Etruceana, Pelleur, and Queen Nyla.

"So will you be with me? Will I be able to reach you?"

"I will always be watching, Taylor."

"I'm glad to know that I'll be able to get a hold of you when I need to. I think I'm ready to go. Can you put me back at home?"

"Most definitely. But are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure. I need to go back. No matter what it's like back there."

"Farewell then, Taylor," said Zanadar.

In a bright flash of light, she was gone.

Chapter 22: Kyle's Band of Misfits

Taylor found herself standing alone on the sidewalk of a deserted street. Not a single person was in sight. Saturating the air, however, was an irritating, buzzing sound. She couldn't ever remember the soundscape back home being this loud. Taylor looked down the street to her left, then to her right. Tall, beige, white, and gray buildings lined the street. They looked like homes, but Taylor wasn't exactly sure. They had driveways, front doors, and small windows; but these enormous dwellings consumed nearly every square inch of every lot on the street. And the creepiest thing of all was that the exterior landscape of each building reminded Taylor of a cheap cardboard box that had been

dolled up like a present with fancy wrapping, ribbons, and bows. She doubted if anyone living inside of the buildings had ever even stepped on the picture perfect, miniscule lawns.

With a shiver, she turned around to face the other side of the street. Expecting to see yet another huge, nondescript building looming over her, Taylor was shocked when she laid eyes upon an empty lot, instead. And from what she could tell, she guessed that this was where her old home used to be. The house itself was completely gone. The manicured lawn that her parents had paid servicemen to keep neat and tidy had grown entirely wild. The white picket fence surrounding the lot had turned gray and was badly in need of repair. All of the flowers that her mother had once planted were long dead. In their place was an outgrowth of tall, bushy weeds. The only thing that remained of her old home was a deep, square hole bordered by a concrete foundation.

She approached the lot and swung open the gate to the picket fence. The gate's rusty hinges broke, causing it to fall to the ground. Taylor bent over, picked up the gate and tried to return it to its original position, but soon gave up, realizing the feebleness of her task. She then walked up the sidewalk, climbed the steps, and from her place on the concrete porch, looked down into the dark hole.

"Taylor!" shouted a voice from behind, barely discernable above the din.

She turned around and immediately recognized the person standing on the sidewalk just beyond the gate.

"Kyle," sighed a relieved Taylor. With the very same grace and poise that she had witnessed in the queen when first arriving in Telos, Taylor long, muscular legs carried her off the steps and then propelled her down the sidewalk. When she reached him, they wrapped their arms around each other and embraced passionately, warmly, lovingly.

By now Kyle was a mature young man. Handsome. Tall. Strong. He still had the mysterious dark-green eyes that Taylor remembered, but now his wild, black hair was long, and it framed a weathered and chiseled face. His muscular shoulders were wide, his waist thin, his legs long. Taylor was smiling, but Kyle's face was somber. "Your parents are gone, Taylor."

"Gone?" said Taylor, letting go of Kyle.

Kyle held Taylor by the shoulders at arms length. "Come on, there's a lot I have to fill you in on. But first we've got to move. We don't want to be seen here."

Kyle took Taylor gently by the arm and escorted her down the sidewalk at a brisk pace. The sun was setting and it was getting dark quickly. They walked silently, stealthily down the street, and then cut through a lot and into a maze of narrow alleyways. Eventually they walked up a cul-de-sac also hosting huge buildings on small lots. Once they reached the end of the short street, they walked up a long driveway to the back of a lot and scaled a tall wooden fence. Kyle then led Taylor down a four-foot-wide grassy path bordered by the wooden fence on one side and a tall chain-link fence on the other. Through the chain-link fence, Taylor could see a small, forested area. After walking for nearly a hundred yards, Kyle jumped up on a thick, low-hanging tree branch that intersected the path. He climbed up the thick limb and over the tall chain-link fence. Taylor followed.

They were inside of a deserted wilderness park where Kyle and his Band had been hiding out. No one visited the park anymore, except for the Band. The park held a small forest with twisted trees and tall, brown grass. As they walked silently, Taylor noticed warning signs posted on the fence to her right and a set of huge pipes, valves, and pumps sticking out of the ground, on her left. They were walking downhill. Avoiding the wooden stairs to their left, Kyle led Taylor down the hill to a small, man-made pond. Under some trees, adjacent to a patch of cattails on the edge of the pond, sitting quietly in a circle on the soft ground, were five scraggly looking characters.

"Everyone," said Kyle, as they pushed through the tall grass and approached the Band, "I'd like you to meet Taylor."

As if on cue, the Band stood up, opened their circle, and nodded. "Welcome home," they said in unison. They were definitely a motley crew of misfits. People who, it seemed to Taylor, wouldn't exactly fit in with the rest of the contemporary world. Anyone living in a deserted wilderness park certainly had to be considered unusual.

"Taylor," said Kyle, while gesturing to each, "this is Dewey, Armando, Lazarus, Keri and Marshall."

Dewey was the youngest of the group, a scrappy little 98-pound, blonde, teenage boy, with a sweet smile and Tasmanian energy. Dewey wore a baseball cap. It was on sideways. He had baggy, blue pants and a loose sweatshirt. Armando had slicked-back, black hair, dark eyes, and wore a black leather jacket, black t-shirt, tight blue jeans, and black boots. He looked only slightly older than Dewey. Lazarus wasn't quite so assuming. He was the quiet, serious one. Tall and lanky, with a shiny, baldhead and dark skin, he moved with a deliberate slowness that, for some reason, projected a sharp mind and keen intelligence. Keri was a young, bouncy girl with a friendly smile, long, straight, black hair, and slanted, cat-like eyes. She was wearing a beige jumpsuit and shoes made entirely of hemp. Marshall wore a pair of crooked glasses and had short, scruffy brown hair. He was wearing a battered business suit; and, from the way he nervously straightened his dog-eared tie and polished the tops of his scuffed shoes against the back of his dirty pants, Taylor guessed that he was doing the best he could to keep up appearances.

After nodding hello to each member of the Band, and feeling no need to mask her immediate concern, Taylor looked straight at Kyle and started right in with the questions. "So what happened to my parents?"

"They're gone," said Kyle.

"Do you have any idea where they went?"

"Well," said Kyle, "they're actually going to be very difficult to find. That is, unless you have access to a new computer."

"What are you talking about?" asked Taylor, while looking confused.

Lazarus began sitting down first. The others followed. When everyone was comfortable, Kyle continued. "I've been keeping an eye on them since you've been gone, Taylor. They gave up looking for you after the first year. Then, they started following all the latest techno trends. They went through a long series of experimentation and self-transformation, trying everything they could: mood- and memory-enhancing drugs, anti-aging therapies, wearable computers, neurological interfaces. Eventually, they went the ultimate route. They put their bodies on ice and now live as information patterns on a large, super-fast computer network."

"You mean they're living in a computer?"

"That's what he means," said Dewey, faking a smile.

"They're each a unique pattern of patterns in a digital bit stream," said Lazarus. His sleepy eyes were barely open.

"What's happened to this place?" asked Taylor. "How could all of this have happened?"

"It all started with those damn transhumanists," snarled Armando, while whipping out a comb and pulling it through his greasy hair.

"Transhumanists? What's that?" asked Taylor.

"Transhumanists are—or, more accurately, were—," said Kyle while brushing the hair out of his eyes, "people who alter their condition by using the latest advances in technology. They want to live forever, so they're moving beyond being human."

"Transhumans," added Lazarus, "want complete control." He rocked back and leaned on his long arms. "They want control over everything: their bodies, their environment, everything. A transhuman is a transitional human. They're someone actively preparing for becoming posthuman."

"Posthuman?" asked Taylor.

"Yeah, posthuman," said Kyle. "*After human*. Posthumans are humans who first became transhumanists who then became posthuman. They've been augmented to such a degree as to no longer be human. They're not trying to become *more* human. Instead, they claim to have evolved beyond human, beyond mere biology. They've bridged the human-machine divide. Today, most posthumans are completely synthetic."

"Ick!" said Keri, squeamishly, trembling with the thought.

"Of course they claim to be conscious," said Lazarus, "but I think the best they can do is to simulate consciousness. They can produce behavior that mimics the behavior of those of us who are sentient, but they don't have any true internal subjective experiences. No feelings at all. It's a kind of weird, objective, binary consciousness. It's nothing at all like what we're familiar with."

"They ain't worth two beans!" The animated Armando turned his head and shot a contemptuous wad of spit out onto the calm surface of the pond. "They got no animo!"

"What's that?" asked Marshall, after clearing his throat and pushing his glasses up the bridge of his runny nose. Marshall didn't look too good. He seemed to be nursing a cold.

"Spirit! Courage!" yelled Dewey, while turning his cap backward. "Right, Armando?"

Armando scowled and nodded his head.

"How do you know?" asked Marshall. "How do you know they don't have any spirit? Can you tell for sure?"

“Just look into their beany little eyes, amigo,” said Armando, while pointing to his own with his small, black comb.

“If they even *have* any eyes,” said Keri.

“There ain’t nothin’ there,” finished Armando. “They got *nothin’* on us!”

“The thing is,” continued Lazarus, “you can’t tell for sure. Internal experiences are entirely private and accessible only to the one experiencing them. They can’t be measured. So there’s no way to know for certain whether or not anyone or anything really does have subjective consciousness.”

“Besides,” added Kyle, “To get to where they’re at, they had to twist and manipulate their physical brains to such a scary degree, it’s hard to imagine what kind of consciousness that could produce.”

“How could all of this have happened?” asked Taylor. “Weren’t people thinking?”

“Hell no!” said Marshall. “We’ve got nothing but a bunch of somnambulists walking around.”

“What’s a somnammm...?” asked Dewey trying to pronounce the word.

“Sleepwalker,” said Lazarus.

“Nobody really thinks independently anymore, Taylor,” said Kyle. “Schools made sure of it. And you, most of all, ought to know that. They say they teach critical thinking, but they gave that up long ago. Nowadays, schools are only about test scores.”

“It was a real trendy thing in the beginning, Taylor,” said Lazarus. “A few big celebrities bought into it—then everybody wanted to go get implants and uploads. You knew that if you didn’t do it, then you’d be left behind. Soon, people’s thinking never ventured from the box.”

“It’s our rampant consumerism,” said Marshall with a sniff. Again he pushed his glasses up his sweaty nose. “Create a perceived need. Commercials everywhere leading the cheer. I’d sit on benches in the city and listen to everyone repeating the same droning slogans, over and over, again and again.”

"Materials, baby!" Armando interrupted. "That's all they want. Consume. Consume."

"Yeah," said Dewey, "everybody wants things."

"Heck," said Keri, "everybody wants to *become* things."

"After a short pause, Kyle went on. "The world's looking more and more like a huge machine."

"What do you mean it's looking like a machine?" asked Taylor. "The whole world?"

"The entire biosphere!" blasted a now angry Keri. She picked up a small pebble and threw it into the dark.

Lazarus continued. "Just like their thinking-in-the-box human predecessors, everything the posthumans did was for their own selfish needs, really. They considered humans and the environment in many of their decision-making options, but only as it concerned themselves. They really weren't interested in coexisting with the rest of the natural world. You see, the posthumans' brains were uploaded with the thinking first established by those humans operating within the dominant box to begin with. And the foundation of *that* thinking was that we humans stood above the rest of the natural world. So when the humans originally thought they were instilling a 'higher' moral code inside of the trans- and posthumans they were creating, this so called moral code was actually flawed to begin with. And now, the posthumans with their enhanced capabilities of accelerated returns are creating an environment that is becoming more and more machinelike."

Taylor noticed how tired everyone in the Band looked. They were all slouching, and their heads were hanging low. Kyle especially. "And so, because all of you didn't want to be a part of this, you've dropped out, checked out, and have been hanging out here in the park, avoiding it all?"

Everyone in the Band nodded their heads. "Yep," said Armando.

"Tell us about you, Taylor," pleaded Dewey.

"Yeah, that's what I want to know. What's it been like where you've been?" added Keri, obviously pleased that another woman had joined the Band. "Kyle told us all about you. When you were found missing, he knew that you had gone somewhere, knew that you would be all right and would return. Every once in a while, he'd tell us about you. Told us that we had to hold on, that you'd return and when you did, things would be different. We knew that the personal location device that your parents had put under your skin wasn't working. The authorities lost all contact with you. It was like all your systems went dead, and there was nothing left of you."

"Yeah," said Lazarus, rising off of his arms and leaning forward, "when you left, it was all over the news. The CEO of Revelation Corporation, Barry Allison, took it personally that a young customer in one of his stores had disappeared. So he set all kinds of intelligence in motion to find you, like surveillance cameras and satellites. And he even released small remote-controlled planes around the city to sprinkle clouds of smart dust everywhere."

"What's smart dust?" asked Taylor, while looking at Kyle, whose eyes were still fixed on the ground.

As Lazarus explained, Taylor kept her eyes on Kyle. "Brilliant eyes, they call them—no larger than a grain of sand. Their laser technology can relay information about your movement back to commanders out in the field. And, he also used a new form of *supersmart* dust. They come with tiny wings attached. They're able to fly, and work together, like a swarm of killer bees."

"You know, I bet Barry is in on the Artificial Intelligence Assembler Arms Race," added Keri. "He's probably got an under-the-table arms contract with *some* rich country."

"*Some* rich country?" interrupted Marshall. "More like several. Barry isn't just in on the AIAAR. You can bet his company is the leading force in the race."

Dewey, who hadn't taken his eyes off of Taylor shifted forward in the circle, and directed the conversation back to Taylor. "So how did you escape all of that surveillance, Taylor?"

Everybody in the Band closed up the circle trying to get closer to Taylor. Except for Kyle. Kyle rolled over on his back, plucked a tall, dry blade of grass, and placed it between his teeth. He laced his hands behind his head, crossed his legs, and stared off through the branches of the trees up at the gray clouds in the dark sky. As Taylor began to tell the Band about her dream and the experience in the store with the Pleiadian, she glanced over at Kyle only to notice a small tear rolling out of his left eye. Catching Taylor by surprise, she paused, if only for a moment, but then gained her composure and continued telling the Band about how she ran into Saint Germain and his panther.

"You mean you actually got to pet and play with a real wild panther?" asked Keri, wriggling with excitement. "I love cats, especially the big ones. But I've never even seen a panther in real life. What was he like?"

Of course Taylor told Keri and the others about her encounter, and then explained how the panther later saved her life while sacrificing its own. She told them about the drum that she made from its skin. Keri was saddened by what happened. But Dewey, more than anyone, was interested in the drum.

Then she told them all about the sound of bells on the mountain. "That was one of the things about the mountain. It was a different kind of world. There it seemed that what you *heard* was more important than what you *saw*. Sound was believed to show the inside of things.

"Everyone in Telos—that's the name of the city under the mountain where I stayed—lived there all their lives. And they were never away from all the quiet and the beautiful sounds. It wasn't noisy like it is here. But from time to time, you could hear the bells. The sounds of the bells penetrated everything."

Dewey interrupted. "Aside from Saint Germain and that Zanadar guy, who else did you stay with?"

"The Lemurians," answered Taylor.

"Lemurians!?" shouted everyone but Kyle and Lazarus.

"Tell us about the Lemurians," pleaded Dewey.

Taylor paused for a moment. She had to keep herself from getting too emotional. Already she was missing them all. "They were the people who lived in the mountain. I stayed with a Lemurian woman named Monka. She became like a mother to me. But there were a lot of others, too. I had teachers. But they were different than the teachers here. And they definitely taught different things."

"Like what? What did they teach you?" asked Keri.

Taylor told them all about how the Lemurians lived in connection with their environment. She told them about Etruceana, Pelleur, and Queen Nyla and what they had to teach. And, of course, she also told them all about her experience in the Temple of Light.

"You found your spirit, huh?" said Dewey.

Taylor paused for a moment, looking across the circle at Dewey. "Maybe."

"Yeah. You got it. I can tell," he said, "because I can see the animo in *your* eyes. I could tell when you first came to our hiding spot with Kyle. It's shining bright."

"Si! She got animo," added Armando.

Taylor nodded politely. She was also smiling, admiring how cute Dewey was.

By now, Kyle had picked himself up off the ground and was now standing with his shoulder up against a tree, tugging at the long blade of grass that he had placed between his teeth earlier.

When Taylor finished telling them about the mountain she paused for a moment, and looked at all of them still listening. "It was a beautiful place, a real special place. I'm glad I had the opportunity to go there. And I'm also glad that all of you let me tell you about it. Thanks."

"So when do we get to go?" asked Dewey, exuberantly.

The question initiated an avalanche of excitement throughout the group. Everyone wanted to leave immediately. Knowing of nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, everyone wanted to go to Telos. Everyone except for Kyle, that is. Kyle, who was still standing, leaning against the tree, looked at Taylor knowingly.

"But wait," exclaimed Taylor, "we've got to do something *here*. There must be something we can do to change things. We can't just leave."

The Band froze. All eyes turned to Taylor. "There's nothing we can do here." Lazarus broke the sullen silence. "We don't even want to fight any longer. We're done trying to change things. The only thing we worry about anymore is our own survival. All our years of struggling could be over."

Kyle interrupted. "I think it would be best for us to bed down for the night. Perhaps a good sleep will help. Maybe it'll help put things in perspective."

The Band nodded their heads in agreement. Dewey, Armando, Lazarus, Keri, and Marshall slowly picked themselves up and walked over to a place in the tall, brown grass where they found their hidden backpacks and pulled out their sleeping bags. Kyle and Taylor watched the Band as they disappeared in the grass and climbed into their bags.

As the everyone began to fade off to sleep, Kyle and Taylor, alone and at rest for the first time, stared into each other's eyes. Before long, Taylor closed her eyes, rolled onto her back, stretched out, and felt the ground under her. She could feel that the dirt directly under her was still, but something

else—some *strange* something else—deep in the earth, was buzzing, churning away. Whatever it was, was far away, but its sound and energy was building, coming closer.

“Will you be wanting a sleeping bag tonight, Taylor?”

When Taylor opened her eyes Kyle was standing above her holding onto a spare bag. How he got up, fetched a bag and brought it over to her, without her hearing, or feeling his movement, in that short of time, was beyond Taylor’s comprehension. Kyle had surprised Taylor, but she answered his question calmly and with an appreciative smile, “No thanks, its warm out tonight, and I like the ground.”

“Helps you feel connected, huh?”

“Yeah. I think I’m going to need its energy.”

Kyle smiled, then turned and began walking off into the grass. Before fading away into the darkness, he paused, and turned back around. “Good night, Taylor.”

“Good night, Kyle,” said Taylor, while rolling onto her side and propping herself up on an elbow.

Kyle started to go, but then turned again to face her. “It’s really good seeing you, you know?”

“I know,” said Taylor. “It’s really good seeing you too, Kyle.”

Kyle nodded, then turned and slipped into the darkness. Taylor listened to him take a few steps and then fall as quiet as a feather into the tall, brown grass.

Chapter 23: The Gray Goo

Early the next morning, the Band awoke to a rising sun hidden by a thick veil of fog. Taylor liked the fog, for it seemed to muffle the air and make her feel as though she were somehow sheltered from the world. As the haze thickened and then descended upon the park, filtering its way through the trees, the Band gathered in a circle at the edge of the pond to dine quietly on a light breakfast of oranges and avocados, provided by the resourceful Lazarus and Kyle. After a time, Taylor broke the silence with a question. "So who do you think I should talk to? I've got to try to get my parents back. Maybe I can change their minds."

Marshall gulped down a piece of an orange, sniffled, and then wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Change their minds?" he wined. "You can't change anyone's mind!"

"I've got to try, Marshall," said Taylor desperately. "I just can't give up."

"Well," said Kyle, "your parents' bodies are probably in the vaults at Revelation Corporation. We could go and talk to somebody there."

"Maybe you'll get lucky and run into the CEO, Barry Allison," said Keri.

"You're not going to *run into* the CEO!" shouted Marshall. "Jeez!"

"You know, I took a tour there once," added Keri. "Maybe you can take the tour, sneak off, and then hop into the CEO's office."

"Weren't you listening?" frowned Marshall. "You can't just go waltzing into Barry Allison's office! Security will be everywhere. You'll never get off the tour."

"Kyle can," said Dewey, while turning his cap around and spitting out a few seeds. Juice from the orange ran down his sticky chin.

“Yep, Kyle can. Kyle can. He da man. Da man!” Armando liked to think he was a good rapper, but he was far from it. Luckily for Armando, every one in the Band tolerated his occasional outbursts.

Lazarus’ head bobbed up and down, giving off the impression that he was nodding off. “He’s the only one of us who can. The only one of us with no markings. He’s not in their system.”

“Markings?” asked Taylor. “Oh, I know. You mean he’s the only one of the Band that’s not identifiable.”

“Nope,” Kyle kicked at the dirt. “You are too, Taylor. All of your tags were made useless when you left for Telos. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah but won’t Barry’s security system at headquarters probably have an image of Taylor when she was last in his store?” Marshall had taken off his glasses and was fumbling around with the frame, trying to straighten them, putting them on and taking them off over and over again. “And won’t they be able to identify Taylor with some sort of age projection simulation or something like that?”

"Don't you think this all might be a little dangerous?" asked Keri. "For Taylor, I mean?"

"Dangerous?" said Taylor, looking to Kyle for reassurance.

“Maybe not,” said Kyle. “I have a feeling that the CEO may actually *want* to talk to Taylor. Remember, he tried real hard to find her once. And I’m sure he hasn’t forgotten.”

“I doubt it’ll do much good, though,” said Marshall.

"I have to go," said Taylor. "Even if it's just to see what things are like there, or to try to find and talk to my parents. Trouble is, I don't know what I'll say when we get there."

Taylor had some thinking to do. She was a little hesitant about the whole idea, but then again, she had nothing else better to offer. After eating the remainder of her breakfast in silence, Taylor, in

spite of Kyle's objections, took a solitary walk back to the lot of her old home. Maybe there, she figured, she would be better able to contemplate the task ahead.

Arriving at what was left of her home, Taylor walked up the sidewalk, climbed the stairs, and then jumped down into the dark hole of the foundation. Standing there, surveying what remained, she found herself thinking about her parents, and actually surprised herself when she realized that she didn't feel very much for them at all. In her eyes, she never was very connected to either of them. She didn't even feel like she was a part of them. Never had been, really. It was almost as though they came from two different families, two different worlds. At first she was disappointed with herself for not caring, but rather quickly, she decided that there was no use in feeling guilty, not being concerned, by their loss. She had grieved for them when she was in the mountain, and there was no need for her to do so again, now.

Taylor walked first into the area of the hole that had been the living room, and then to where the kitchen would've been, then to Mom's and Dad's room, and finally to her old bedroom. She thought back to all the homework she had done in here, the endless nights of drill and practice using her trusty handheld. How she dreaded those hours of labor. After a time, Taylor wandered over to where the foot of her bed would've been. When she stopped, she realized that she had just stepped on something wooden, a board of some sort, covered by a thin layer of dirt. She stepped back, squatted down, and began sweeping the dirt away with her hand. A red board began to emerge, and immediately, Taylor realized that she was uncovering the antique toy box that her parents had once given her for Christmas.

Digging frantically around the box, Taylor was eventually able to pull it up out of its hole. She sat down on the ground in front of it and opened the lid. Many of her childhood toys were inside. Some she remembered fondly; but with most—as she had when first receiving them—she wondered

why her parents had given them to her at all, like all of the PC games, for example. In spite of her father's urgings, she simply could never work up the interest to plant herself in front of a computer for hours to play God and Creator, controlling every aspect of a family, and the society and world in which they lived, such as was done with the simulation and strategy games. Her father could, though. He loved playing the role of omnipotent master, looking down on all that he had created, and at times torturing or killing his characters, or wreaking devastation or havoc on the imaginary world of his own making. Taylor could even remember how he would giggle every time one of his game's characters dropped down on their knees to pray to him. Her father used to tell her that it was the ultimate power trip, and that it would ease some of the tension that had accumulated from a long day at work.

When finished perusing her old games, Taylor returned the toys to the box. Then while standing up and lifting the box to put it back in its place, she also looked down into the hole and noticed a strange, fuzzy, gray goo bubbling up from the bottom. She watched the goo for a moment and then dropped to her knees. "That's it! That's what I saw!" she said aloud.

"Indeed it is!" said Zanadar's booming voice, behind her.

"There's a gray goo in there, Zanny. That's what I saw when I was dancing in the temple! It was the vision. I couldn't make sense of it then. But now... everything is going to turn into..." Taylor stopped short of admitting anything to herself or Zanadar.

"Precisely," said Zanadar, knowing full well what Taylor had envisioned.

Taylor put her hands on the ground to get a better look at the goo. It was squirming and murmuring. "The whole world is..." Not able to voice the words, Taylor paused. "I can see it."

"I know you can." Zanadar walked around Taylor to survey the foundation. "It's like when you first visited the mountain, or when you spun the globe and your finger landed on Mount Shasta."

Zanadar turned and faced Taylor squarely. "It's like the Akasha Chronicle, the talking tomes and your vision in the temple. You must recognize them for what they are. Do you realize the extent of your talents?"

Taylor had been listening, yet her eyes remained focused in the distance. She was revisiting her vision of the goo, and Kyle. She stood up quickly. "Zanny, I don't know what to do. We have to try to stop it before it's too late."

Taylor then picked up the red box and tossed it back into the hole as if doing so would somehow slow the goo. She then turned and ran to the concrete wall of the foundation, pulled herself out the hole, and sprinted down the sidewalk and the street, through the alleyways and driveway, over the fence, along the path, up the low hanging branch, and into the park.



Joining the Band under the trees by the small artificial pond, Taylor decided not to tell anyone about her horrible vision. To do so now, before she had a chance to change things, would be a mistake. While convincing Kyle that it was necessary to leave immediately, Taylor's eyes glimpsed a few small, gray bubbles rising to the surface of an otherwise calm pool of water.

Without any preparation at all, Kyle and Taylor left the Band at the edge of the pond. Kyle then led a rather frantic Taylor through the busy streets of Los Angeles. Everything in the city made her feel uncomfortable: all the nanobot assembled cars and trucks, steel and glass buildings, even the concrete sidewalks and asphalt streets. As she walked, all of the material—the matter—of which most any object was made, seemed to scream out to her in pain, as if it had been twisted and tortured into place in order to meet the needs of someone, or something, other than its own.

Arriving downtown at Revelation Corporation's headquarters, Taylor stopped and stood on the sidewalk across the street from the main entrance of the enormous nanobot constructed high-rise. As if sizing up her adversary, Taylor paused for a moment to survey the ominous structure. Standing in the middle of the fast-moving crowd scurrying along on the sidewalk, Taylor looked first left, then right, and realized that the building consumed an entire square block of the city. Her eyes then scaled up the black-mirrored surface in search of her foe's crown, but it was not to be found. For the head of this giant was hooded in fog. Taking a deep breath, Taylor marched directly through the busy traffic, across the street, and into the lobby. Kyle followed.

Reaching the reception desk, Taylor announced that she desired to speak to the CEO. The receptionist tilted her head stiffly and looked at Taylor as though she were crazy. Taylor could tell that she wasn't at all human, too perfect. No highly evolved posthuman would have taken the mundane task of receptionist, so it had to be a robot of some sort.

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked.

"No, I don't," said Taylor. "But he may be interested in seeing me. It's rather urgent."

"Well, who should I tell him is calling?"

"Tell him Taylor Thomas is here to see him. He might remember the name."

The receptionist then suggested that Taylor and Kyle join the others waiting in a small vestibule off to the left. Walking to the waiting room, they found a vacant corner of a couch and sat down.

Taylor and Kyle watched the fast-moving crowd of people, or trans- and posthumans, traveling through the lobby. Nearly everyone there appeared to have subjected him or herself to some kind of self-experimentation. Some had computers embedded in their bodies, others had apparently used cell-repair and enhancement nanomachines to alter their bodies in some strange way. Some had

especially long arms or legs and seemed to prance through the lobby as if unrestrained by any physical limitation. Others had hands with extra fingers, or extra long fingers, and still others had eyeballs that came out of their sockets and floated like helium filled balloons above their heads, providing a better all around view of their surroundings.

Taylor looked down at the large, square coffee table in front of her and noticed a neatly arranged assortment of magazines. She leaned forward, picked up a copy of the latest *Wired* magazine, and thumbed her way to the table of contents. Uniquely arranged on a colorful page were the following articles:

Itsy Bitsy...

Sex in a Chip

Losing It Bit by Bit

Dealing with Deathists

Can You Live Forever?

Detecting Your ChipMate

Augmenting Augmentation

Successful At-Home Uploading

Digital Supermind: Uploading God

Replacing Religion's Hold on Heaven

Resurrection... The Technological Way

Sell Your Soul for an Information Pattern!

Create Your Own Designer Digital Paradise

Talking to Humans: A Necessary Inconvenience

Shocked by its contents, Taylor hurled the magazine back to the table.

"Kinda creepy, isn't it?" said Kyle, while keeping his eye on the lobby.

"I'll say," said Taylor. "My stomach is turning into knots."

Finally, the receptionist approached the waiting area. "Ms. Thomas?" she asked politely.

"Yes," said Taylor.

"Mr. Allison will see you now."

Taylor looked at Kyle and realized that he wasn't at all surprised.

"Follow me, please."

The receptionist escorted Taylor and Kyle through the lobby toward a long empty hallway. When they reached the hallway, first the receptionist and then Taylor and Kyle, were swept up by the floor they had stepped on. Moving along by tiny microrollers embedded in the floor, the three passengers were transported through a long, twisting series of hallways.

Little by little, the solid right wall of the hallway turned transparent and became a floor-to-ceiling glass wall. Taylor and Kyle were given a view of a large room where a number of white-coated technicians were rushing about, darting around. A parade of various sized boxes moved swiftly along the floor in assembly line fashion through the middle of the room. At the far end of the room, the boxes passed directly through a semi-transparent wall, into another room. Occasionally, a robot rolled by, picked a box out of the line, and then skirted off in another direction.

As Taylor and Kyle continued to be carried down the hallway, they next saw a huge, room-sized, solid metal cube. Thick electrical cables, pipes, and valves ran around, over, and into the cube. A technician opened a large double door giving providing a view of two, smaller, refrigerated, meat-locker-looking cubes, inside. Each of these smaller rooms had a sealed door with a small rectangular

window. “Those must be their cryogenic vaults,” whispered Kyle. “Your parents’ bodies might be stored in one of those.”

While Taylor continued to be swept along she stared through the window at the vaults until they passed out of sight. Eventually, the hallway ended the trio’s trip by stopping directly in front of a wall. Then as if out of nowhere, the wall opened to expose a large, mirrored elevator. Stepping into the elevator, Taylor looked down at her feet, and notice that she was standing on a transparent floor. As she gazed through the floor, at the long elevator shaft below, they began their ascent. As the elevator accelerated, both Taylor and Kyle watched the receptionist as she became consumed with her own reflection in the mirror.

When the elevator doors opened, Taylor and Kyle were once again swept along after the receptionist into an unmarked hallway. While listening to the voices of company workers just out of sight around a corner, they were transported through the hallway and around a few corners, until eventually stopping in front of another large wall. The receptionist placed her hand on the wall and immediately an opening appeared.

“Mr. Allison will be with you in just a moment.” The receptionist motioned for Taylor and Kyle to enter the room. “Please try to make yourself comfortable.”

Taylor and Kyle filed into the middle of a large, circular, concrete room. The room was dimly lit and completely empty. There was no furniture anywhere. Except for the amplified echoes of their footsteps, Taylor and Kyle could hear nothing. Walking around the circular room, looking around for any trace of life, Taylor felt as though she was being watched—intently so.

“*This* is his office?” asked Kyle in a whisper.

“I guess so,” said Taylor in a normal voice.

As Taylor and Kyle walked around trying to make sense of their surroundings, the overhead lights gradually began to brighten. Then vents on the circular wall, floor and ceiling opened, and in poured a steady flow of flying nanobots. The bots began to swarm, condense, and slowly furniture started to appear. But the furniture didn't just come into view; rather, each piece, one by one, began to form and grow from the floor up creating the most plush office either of them had ever seen. Then, a body began to take shape in a black leather chair behind a huge glass-top desk—or, rather, a nanobot swarm of a man—began to fill up the chair. Eventually, a full-fledged man, clad in black shoes, black suit, and black turtleneck sweater sat in front of them.

“Who are you?” asked Taylor. For some reason that she wasn't able to explain, she wasn't at all afraid.

“My name is Barry Allison,” he said. Barry was a slim and trim, middle-aged man with slicked-back, graying hair, and a neatly trimmed black and gray beard. Barry leaned back in his chair and folded his legs. “And you're Taylor Thomas, the young girl... *well*, you're not a girl anymore.” He smiled while looking at Taylor from head to toe. “The young girl who disappeared from one of our first stores.”

“That's me,” said Taylor.

“And, who is your friend here?” he asked. “Wait. Give me a nanosecond, let me check my face-recognition data bank.” Barry's eyes rolled around inside of his head for a moment, searching for information. When it was apparent that he was unable to access any information, his eyes refocused on Kyle again.

“It's not important,” said Kyle. “I'm just an escort.”

Barry stood up and walked around his desk to get closer to Taylor and Kyle. After concentrating on Kyle for a moment, he turned toward Taylor.

“And you’re the one,” said Taylor, “who took my parents away from me. You’re the one who almost uploaded *me*.”

Barry ignored Taylor’s comment. “Do you have any idea how much money I spent on intelligence trying to find you? I didn’t like it one bit, knowing that a young high school girl had disappeared from one of *my* stores. And right into thin air, mind you. Now *that* certainly was an anomaly.” Barry leaned against his desk. “Where did you go?”

Taylor wasn’t at all interested in explaining something that he wouldn’t believe anyway, so she turned the conversation back on him. “Why, Barry? Why have you done all of this? Why have you become . . . *this*?” Taylor’s nose and upper lip screwed up into her face. She was disgusted with this person in front of her, and had no idea where these hidden feelings were coming from.

Apparently, she was harboring more anger than she had been aware.

“Well,” said Barry, while walking over to a wet bar that had formed near the wall. He poured himself a drink but neglected to ask his guests if they would like the same, “I was always the type to indulge in quests for unprecedented thrills and dangers. I scuba dived with sharks, flew stunt planes, hunted cape buffalo in Africa, scaled Mount Everest, raced a kayak off Fiji, thrashed in a raft on Class V rivers, and trekked through Antarctic snowfields. I traveled around the globe in a hot-air balloon, swam the twenty-one mile English Channel, mushed a team of sled dogs to finish Alaska’s grueling Iditarod, and set a speed record sailing around the world.”

“Wow Barry, that’s *really* interesting,” said Taylor.

Not about to stop, Barry walked with his drink around the periphery of his office, admiring the artwork hanging on his walls. “I’m the second richest posthuman in the world!” he said, while pausing at a nanobot-produced painting. He then turned with an overly dramatic flare to face Taylor and Kyle.

"And I'm just about to surpass my arch rival to become first on the Forbes' list of the world's wealthiest. My personal net worth is..."

"Not really interested, Barry," said Taylor. Kyle remained silent at Taylor's side.

Barry walked closer to Taylor, while Kyle stealthily left Taylor's side to take a look at the artwork. "But you've got to remember," continued Barry, after taking a sip of his drink, "people in the CEO category were pushing hard in every aspect of their lives. All of us CEOs—at least those of all the top companies—we *knew* we were special. So when we weren't working our minds, we were working our bodies to take the stress off."

"Yeah, yeah, Barry," Taylor said. "I know all about *your* story."

"You think you know *my* story?" Barry was offended. His voice had grown louder.

"Yeah, I know your story." Taylor stood calmly in the center of the room. Kyle turned around to check on Taylor, but then continued making his way around the room, examining all the nanobot-produced objects.

Barry sat down on a huge, camel hair sofa, set his drink down on a glass coffee table and then sat back, crossing his arms and legs. "Okay, I've got a little time, let's hear it."

"I'll tell you what, Barry," said Taylor while she held her chin and began pacing around the room. "Let's create a storyboard. We'll focus on the setting, characters, and plot."

"OK. That sounds like a good idea."

Taylor turned to face Barry. "Let's start first with your setting. Basically, your story considers the world to be a type of complicated machine. You think of the cosmos, for example, as a mostly empty, material, machinelike place that, like a clock, works according to strict mechanical laws. Earth, traveling neatly in its orbit, is considered to be a giant mechanism, composed of dead matter; a mindless, purposeless, material resource left alone to run according to very specific natural laws. And

of course these laws are to be learned, mastered, and manipulated by the characters of your story to get what you want. Master the laws, and if Earth doesn't provide you with what you want, all you do is manipulate things; and, presto, you've got what it. If you want to create a mechanistic overlay of the *entire* planet, to make sure that you *always* have what you want, well, all you need to do is to continue manipulating the laws; and presto, it's yours. Pretty magical stuff, huh Barry?"

Barry leaned forward and picked his glass up off the table. "I've got no argument with you, yet." Barry brought his drink to his lips, and took a long, slow sip. "Pretty good so far. What about the characters?"

"As for the characters of your story," said Taylor, "well, they too are looked upon as some type of machine. Carefully and meticulously, over time, you developed a very precise and tidy view of human life. Your story explains that human consciousness comes from the mechanistic world of space, time, and matter. And that it's nothing more than a mere by-product or *epiphenomenon* of the passive, intrinsically inert and insentient, dead matter of the brain. And, at birth this brain was nothing more than a blank slate on which knowledge could be imprinted through simple sensory experiences."

"That's about all the human characters are made of," said Barry. "But what about us posthumans?"

"Well, that's where the story starts getting really weird. To explain the trans- and posthuman phenomena, we have to examine the plot of your story."

"Oh good," said Barry.

"Now," continued Taylor, "the plot in most stories has an exposition, a complication, a few good conflicts along the way, an exciting climax, and then a peaceful resolution. For the humans preceding you, this plotline was to play out in the following manner: Humans arose and were born as products of biological evolution, the result of a few simple chance

mutations. This was the exposition of their story. As the plot continued, humans experienced their various complications and conflicts along the way. But then, no matter how exciting the climax, no matter how much they labored, all their devotion, all their inspiration, all the brightness of their human genius, was still destined to be resolved with an inevitable death and a return to the vast emptiness of a material cosmos. And nothing could be done to preserve these humans beyond the grave.

"But not you, Barry. Thanks to you, the story has taken a profound turn. You've made it through all the conflicts, won the great climax, and now, your resolution has been transformed. You have modified the ending. You don't have to live out a plotline that's doomed to end with an inevitable biological death. No Barry, you've restructured the plotline to go on forever!

Barry applauded Taylor and her speech. "Yes! That's good. That's very good, Taylor."

When Barry had quieted down again, Taylor continued. "You and your technologist toolmakers, who explained how technological developments would eventually change society and enhance your conditions, created the eugenics movement, life extension, cryonics, and, for you especially, Barry, computers, electronics, and molecular nanotechnology. Because of you and all of these big thinkers, scientists, and electrical engineers, the ancient desire of acquiring godlike attributes has been achieved."

Barry huffed and said, "You betcha it has."

"Over time, you were able to crack the DNA code to compose the new 'Book of Life'. You sequenced the proteome and figured out how a linear string of amino acids folds up into an intricate three-dimensional molecule. You mapped out the corrugated surface of the brain, cracked its algorithm code, took control of it, and then improved upon it." Taylor paused for a moment, and then concluded. "This is your story, Barry."

“And an amazing story it is, I might add,” said Barry.

“Perhaps,” said Taylor. “But it’s a sad story, Barry.”

“What do you mean sad?” Barry sat up straight on the sofa.

“It’s sad because your story has completely destroyed the subjective and interior domains of individual and collective human experience. With your story, any quality of feeling, anything of intrinsic value and purpose and meaning, anything spiritual at all, anything that can’t be measured has been reduced, denounced, and virtually eliminated. Your obsessive tinkering with the plot of your story has turned you all into a horrific aberration. You and all of your uploaded cronies are nothing more than an ugly mass of meaningless computer brains... stuck in the goo!”

Kyle looked at Taylor, alarmed with her behavior. He certainly hadn’t expected her to carry on like this.

Barry put his drink down and stood up quickly. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Did you say goo?”

Taylor didn’t stop to answer him. “You’ve become *things* designed entirely of objective processes. You have no insides, no values, no meaning, no depth. You couldn’t measure love, envy, wonder, compassion, insight, purpose, value, or meaning, so you eliminated them all. Your scientism has eliminated anything of beauty, anything good or right, and all you have left is a desacralized, disenchanting, dull, gray goo.”

“You did say goo!” Barry was shouting now, as he walked closed to Taylor.

Kyle positioned himself between Taylor and Barry.

“Yeah, Barry, I said ‘*goo*’!” Taylor’s face was turning red with rage. “And you’re stuck in it! You see, Barry, your place is here in this story. The story heard all the time, not just through ordinary means such as propaganda and education, not just through every medium of communication, but actually within the very environment itself. It’s everywhere! A story of little machines buzzing and

humming away. You pull the chain, and the gears crank and turn. You've crossed the human-machine divide, Barry, so there is no humming and buzzing in the background. You've become the humming and buzzing itself!

“But, you know what, Barry? There’s something happening to your story.” Taylor backed off, turned away from Barry, and looked around at the room. “Something that even *you* won’t be able to control.”

“Ha!” shouted Barry angrily. “There’s nothing I can’t control.” He drew even closer to Taylor.

While Kyle extended his arm, ready to place it on Barry’s chest should he get any closer to Taylor, a crowd of technicians filed into the room. They moved forward to close in around Taylor and Kyle.

Kyle grabbed Taylor and pulled her toward the back of the room. This time, however, after Kyle placed his hand on the wall, the door wouldn’t appear. Taylor's eyes remained focused on Barry. She made no attempt to defend herself.

But then, just as the technicians were about to grab them both, small gobs of sticky gray goo began oozing into the room, crawling through the vents, growing larger and larger.

While everyone stared at the goo, another white-coated technician barged into the room.

“Sir, we have a problem!”

“What happened?!” shouted Barry.

“We’ve got some runaway goo on our hands.”

“I can see that!” Barry was shouting above the humming and hissing noises coming from the goo.

The nervous technician stood in the center of the room shaking. “They were supposed to be confined in our sealed vats. And the small chambers were supposed to implode and burn up if the self-

replicators penetrated the walls. But it didn't work. Something gave way. The replicators figured how to negate the vat's implosion. They got out. They've evolved, sir."

"How long has this been going on?" Barry's voice was booming. "How could the replicators have made it this far? Why wasn't I informed? You people were supposed to develop stringent safeguards to prevent this scenario. Look what you've done. Fools!"

Barry walked over to the technician, grabbed him by the collar of his white coat, and brought the young man's face close to his own. "How many release sites are exhibiting this behavior?"

The technician was sweating profusely. "All of them, sir."

Barry pushed the technician and he fell backward onto the floor, into a small pile of goo. The technician jumped to his feet, but with the goo now sticking to his back, he ran screaming from the room.

"Ecosphere Surveillance System, on," barked Barry, paying no attention to the technician. "Display image." A model of a three-dimensional, rotating planet Earth appeared in the center of the room. The image provided continuous, comprehensive infrared observation of the Earth's surface. "This system comes from our army of Revelation Corporation geostationary satellites. They monitor the Earth's biomass in order to detect any hotspots that would have formed due to the waste heat generated from the emission of the byproducts of the bots' growth."

"How many release sites do you have?" asked Kyle.

"We've got them all around the world," said Barry, without turning away from his global image. "Some are buried under land. Some are planted in the strangest of places. Some are lying on the ocean floor. Some are flying around in the sky."

"Why?!" yelled Kyle. "Why did you do it?"

Barry turned, looked directly at Kyle, and grinned. "Because I could, boy. Because I could."

Kyle was keeping a close eye on the growing piles of gray goo squirming on floor, walls and ceiling. “So, let me guess. We’re about to get hit with not only gray goo, but also dust, plankton, and...”

“More,” finished Barry. “Yes, more. Much more. Much, much more.”

While Barry continued to ponder the depth of the destruction, keeping an eye on the image for growing hot spots, the self-replicating nanobots right there in the room, continued consuming all matter within its reach. Each bot’s submicroscopic robotic arms worked faster and faster, grabbing each and every molecule, taking apart, breaking it down, and reconfiguring into an exact replica of the very *bot* that had taken it apart.

Barry stood wringing his hands, watching his image of the planet, oblivious to the gray goo gathering around his feet. “They’re our badbots; nanobots capable of launching attacks designed specifically to destroy any local energy substrate.” Barry turned and faced the young technician still in the room. “And the vats were only supposed to be activated by central command!” Barry turned back to the image. “It was supposed to be a basic two-phase process. First, the bots begin replicating with maximum speed to a critical nanomass population. In the second phase, most of the nanobots cease replication and begin the destructive phase. These are the badbots. They’re designed to destroy. It’s our build destroy strategy.”

“Yeah, and now your badbots have taken an unexpected turn,” said Kyle, stepping over a gob of goo. “And why were the vats planted around the world, anyway? What kind of deal did you have going on Mr. Soon-to-be-richest-man-in-the-world? You’re not going to be able to stop this stuff. These things are going to consume the entire planet. Even you, Allison! You won’t be able to escape.”

The nanobots continued replicating. The gray goo grew, turning everything into itself, changing the structure of *all* matter, reproducing itself, over and over again. It was growing so fast, the white-coated technicians had to dart and dance around the squirming goo.

“Has the goo made its way into the vaults where all the bodies are kept?” asked Taylor, thinking of her parents. “Has it consumed the bodies of the people who signed up for one of your cryonic procedures?”

The technician, who had entered the room to warn Barry, looked at Taylor and said nothing.

“It has, hasn’t it?” said Taylor, this time directly to the technician.

Still the technician said nothing.

Just then, a large chunk of the office wall toppled on top of the growing gray goo. Parts of the ceiling also began dropping on top of the goo. The goo squirted out onto Barry and his group of technicians. They stood paralyzed with fear and wonder as the goo began squirming and crawling all over their bodies.

“Move!” Kyle yelled, while grabbing Taylor and pulling her away from the goo.

Another large slab of the office wall leaned and then fell backward onto the floor behind Taylor and Kyle. With an opening provided, Kyle tugged at Taylor trying to get her out of the office.

“Come on! We’ve got to get out of here,” yelled Kyle.

Taylor allowed herself to be pulled along by Kyle, but her eyes remained fixed on Barry. Barry stood surrounded by the goo, staring at Taylor. “How did you know?” he asked. “How did you know?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Barry. It’s all just an anomaly. Something you and your story could never explain. Let’s just say I had a *real* prophetic learning experience. Bye, bye,” said Taylor at last, as Kyle pulled her out of the room.

While the office collapsed behind them, Kyle and Taylor ran around the goo, through the hall, and then into and down the stairway. Everything around them was beginning to collapse. The entire building was breaking apart. Aside from the incessant humming, buzzing, hissing, and churning of the goo, Taylor and Kyle could hear the giant structure creaking, moaning, booming, banging and clanging. Running down the stairs, they could feel the building staggering and swaying. They dodged huge slabs of concrete cracking off the walls, falling all around them. Pillars, posts and beams, bundles of wire, pipes and tubes were breaking loose, crashing down around them. The stairs below their scrambling feet began to splinter and snap. The gray goo was consuming everything. Every material thing was melting into the goo.

A huge chunk of the stairs that Taylor and Kyle had been descending broke apart from the rest and began sliding downward on a thick river of gray goo. Taylor and Kyle hung onto the railing, riding the jagged chunk of concrete like two kayakers on a raft through the rapids. When their cement raft crashed onto the street, they rolled off, miraculously avoiding the goo sprawling all around them.

Out on the street, as the gray goo advanced, Taylor and Kyle looked up and briefly watched what remained of Barry's building melt into the goo. Then, with the horrifying cries and screams of people, trans- and posthumans saturating the air, Kyle grabbed Taylor, pulled her around the mounting piles of goo, and ran with her, side by side, as fast as they could, around the corner, through an alley, and away, down the streets of the city.

Behind them, the rest of the metropolis continued melting into the ever-growing gray goo.

Chapter 24: On the Run

When Kyle and Taylor reached the wilderness park, they joined everyone in the Band standing at the edge of the pond to watch the gray goo bubbling up to the surface. Dewey bent over, picked up a long stick, and poked it into the rising goo. When he pulled it out, there was nothing left of the stick save the small part he held in his hand. Holding the stub up close to his face to examine it, Dewey realized that it was slowly being eaten away by the nanobots that had managed to crawl up it. Disgusted and scared that they might also jump onto him, he threw it back into the growing pile of goo in the pond. Within seconds, the wood melted into the goo.

The goo was humming now; thumping, hissing, pulsing, vibrating. And the noise was growing louder.

“Listen to it,” said Keri. “It keeps making the same sounds over and over. More, more, more, more. More, more, more, more. It wants more!”

“Damn, it’s irritating!” snapped Armando.

The pile of goo shifted its form as if feeling its way around, searching for something else to consume. Everyone in the Band, except for Taylor, took a few precautionary steps backward, away from the gooey pond. Taylor stood at the edge, staring into the goo, thinking.

“What do you suppose they’re made of?” asked Kyle while bending over trying to get a sniff of it.

Lazarus scratched his forehead, then examined his hand, looking for a bundle of bots that may have landed on his face. “They’re probably made of a diamondoid material.” Lazarus stopped looking at his hand and gazed skyward.

“Those things are made out of diamonds?” asked Armando.

“That means they’re able to eat through anything,” added Marshall.

Lazarus started backing up, looking skyward. “Plus, we may have gray dust floating around up there already.” The rest of the Band followed him, gathering around a tree’s trunk. “I’d say Barry and his boys probably concocted their bots to be unstoppable.”

“It’s going to eat up everything, isn’t it?” asked Keri.

Nobody said a word. Nobody dared to.

“What’s that smell coming off of it?” asked Armando.

“That’s a byproduct of its consumption,” explained Kyle. “A gas.”

“Are we going to see any of its shit?” asked Dewey from his side of the tree. “Cause all I’m smelling is one big nasty fart.”

“Look!” cried Keri while pointing at the pond.

A black-brown sludge was oozing out from under the pile of goo.

“That’s its shit!” yelled Marshall while holding his nose.

Taylor stood there with her back up against the tree. She was silent, thinking. There’s nothing I can do to fight this stuff. I can’t sing or drum or dance this goo into submission. There isn’t anything that I learned in Telos that can help us here. Taylor sighed heavily, frowned, and then stepped out from under the tree and faced the Band. “We’ve got to get out of here,” she said aloud, finally.

“I’ll say,” said Marshall.

The rest of the Band nodded their heads in agreement.

“You know,” said Kyle, “it looks like this goo is using the city’s infrastructure to move its way around. And it looks like individual clumps of the goo are thinking for themselves. I have a feeling this goo is going to spread through the city’s sewer system before making its way toward the natural environment.”

"We've got to move, then," said Lazarus, "because the water in that pond is fed by all kinds of pipes and pumps below the surface. There's nothing natural about it."

"We'll be on the run?" asked Keri.

"Cool!" said Dewey. "Band on the run."

"But where will we go?" asked Marshall.

Everyone looked at Taylor. No one dared ask, but she knew what they were all thinking. The Band wanted to go to Mount Shasta to join up with the Lemurians. And it made sense, too, she thought. Maybe the goo wouldn't be able to make it inside the mountain.

While the others were looking to Taylor for answers, Kyle had walked silently away. Taylor watched him make his way through the cattails, around the pond, and up to the top of the hill, where he now stood gazing off into the distance to the north. She could see his tall silhouette standing there, leaning up against a tree. His back was toward the Band, and a strong, steady wind was blowing, tossing his long, dark hair. Taylor knew he was already busy at work, thinking, searching from his solitary vantage point for a way to get them all safely away.

Most of the Band had been camping in the park for sometime now, so being on the run would be a welcomed change. The Band decided that they would need to avoid all obstacles if possible, stay low, and travel light. Sleeping wouldn't be a problem. It was warm enough, and by now all of them had learned how to find safe spaces to bed down in—even Marshall, the most recent Band member. Dewey and Armando, especially, were old pros at this. Together, the two close friends had been sleeping next to, in, and under all kinds of houses, fences, piers, freeway turnoffs, junkyards, civic buildings, tunnels, or parking garages for quite some time. So this would be easy for the entire Band. Transportation would be limited to their own feet and hitchhiking thumbs. Food would come from a

variety of sources. There was always an ever-present supply of day-old, expired foods to be found in trash bins behind any supermarket along the way.

Kyle thought that it would be best to stay near the coastline if at all possible, for the beach offered some relief from the ever-expanding concrete jungle—things he figured these nanobots would be more prone to gravitate toward.

After packing up their backpacks, the Band took off, running through the streets of Los Angeles. Scurrying along, they could hear, the constant churning of the goo as it continued growing and eating away at all the buildings, automobiles, streets, sidewalks, trans- and posthumans in the downtown area. The black-brown sludge byproducts of the bots consumption was now running steadily along the curbs, draining into the sewers, and out toward the ocean. And the horrible smelling gas permeated the air. Sirens could also be heard through the humming. It seemed as if every fire engine, police car, and ambulance was making its way toward the city to fight the goo. Hovering above the downtown area were also numerous helicopters, some of which were from the police force, others from firefighting units and still others from various news stations eager to get a good story. People everywhere were in the middle of a mass panic. Everyone was frantically packing their vehicles and heading out of town. The streets were jammed and traffic was at a standstill. Others, unable to respond, stood in shock on their balconies or out in the streets watching one building after another disappearing from the city's downtown skyline. The Band, however, drew little attention as they made their way through the crowds to the beach at Santa Monica, where they ducked under the pier and set off north along the coast. Eventually, they made it to the narrow, sludge-stained beaches of Malibu where the Band was barely able to stay ahead of the goo, as it marched along behind them, munching away at the exclusive, multimillion-dollar mansions lining the coast. One by one, like a long line of falling dominoes, the manors melted into the goo.

Once the Band reached the small, secluded Paradise Cove, nightfall was upon them. In the dark, they quickly climbed a tall staircase to the top of Point Dume. From the rocky point, the Band looked southeast toward downtown Los Angeles. Where once they would have seen a bright, glowing dome of city light, in its place was an expanding circle of darkness. The smell of the gas was heavy in the air. And an occasional siren could still be heard; but, now more than anything else, the Band could hear the chewing and churning of the rising, gray goo.

Having seen, smelled and heard enough, the Band headed east, dashing through the traffic traveling northward on Highway 1 trying to escape the goo. After continuing northeast on the shoulder of a road intersecting the highway, they found an unmarked trail leading into the dry Santa Monica Mountains. The Band took the trail, hurried over a ridge, and began hiking through the mountains. Occasionally, they had to cross a number of jammed highways, which had only recently been cut through.

After crossing one such highway, and then climbing another ridge, the Band stood together, looking down on yet another stretch of road to cross. "You know," said Keri to Taylor, "all these highways cut straight through a bunch of wildlife corridors. The animals living here once used them for traveling from one habitat to another. But, because of these huge strips of concrete that we're looking at, the animals were prevented from moving about. The highways completely cut the pathways off and jailed the animals in these cages. Dozens of species became extinct."

Keri paused for a moment and shook her head. "Some of us tried to clear these blocked corridors and to preserve the open ones; but it wasn't enough. And now..." Keri stopped and sighed. "Oh well," she muttered under her breath, while marching down the hill.

The rest of the Band followed. Except for Taylor. She was left standing at the top of the hill, looking down at the highway, trying to get a sense of the earth under her feet. She could feel the

buzzing of the goo. She could tell that it was moving. But strangely enough, it seemed to be moving away. Maybe the goo was content with the meal the extensive, mechanized infrastructure of the city provided.



Several days later, just before daybreak, the Band emerged from the mountains to find themselves on the top of a hill above Highway 1, looking directly into the entrance of a government firing range. Across the highway, a tall chain-link fence with barbed wire surrounded the entire range. Posted on one of the double doors of the large gate leading into the range was a no trespassing sign. On the other door, another sign was posted notifying any potential intruders that this was a restricted area: "Keep Out, Authorized Personnel Only." An unmanned security tower carrying a red warning flag loomed over the entire compound. Under the watchtower, a set of bleachers had been erected for spectators to witness firing sessions and demonstrations. Eighteen, human silhouette targets lined the back wall of the shooting range.

Not liking what they had stumbled onto, the Band walked cautiously down the hill and skirted north along the eastside shoulder of Highway 1. For now, the road was empty. No traffic was to be found. Lining the road were a variety of forbidding signs, reminding the Band of the world they were attempting to evade. On the horizon to the north, were the lights of another very official looking military post.

Kyle, who was leading, stopped, turned around to face the Band, and whispered. "That's the Point Mugu Naval Pacific Missile Test Center. And it's *way* too quiet around here. I don't like it."

The Band formed a huddle. "Something's gotta be up," added Dewey, also in a whisper.

“I don’t like it, neither.” Armando kept shifting his weight back and forth, looking north, over the heads of the others.

Marshall shivered. “The whole area gives me the creeps.”

Dewey turned around his hat and pulled it low over his eyes as if pretending to be some military personnel. “You’d think they’d be busy launching all kinds of attacks on the goo.”

“Maybe they cleared out, expecting a rush,” said Lazarus between heavy breaths.

“A *rush*?” asked Dewey.

“Of goo,” said Lazarus.

Kyle turned and hurried along the shoulder looking for another trail that would take them back over the hill. While the others followed Kyle, searching for a trail leading eastward, both Taylor and Keri crossed over to the west side of Highway 1. They found themselves looking through a chain-link fence into a large lagoon. Together, they paused to read the large sign that had been posted behind the fence. It told of all the rare and endangered birds and plants present in Mugu Lagoon and asked visitors to the area not to disturb any of the protected species. Keri and Taylor sighed heavily, thinking of all the species that the goo was going to consume.

Then, the two young women heard Kyle whistle and turned to see him waving for them to come along. Luckily, he had found a trailhead on the east side of the road. Keri and Taylor crossed the road; and, just as Taylor was about to disappear over the first hill with the rest of the Band, she looked back. At that moment, a small caravan of Army trucks stormed by. As she watched the caravan roll northward on Highway 1, headed toward the missile test center, she noticed the ground moving directly under the Transcontinental Cable Route sign. Then, as if someone were pulling up a long, thick cord from under the dirt, a line of slimy gray goo ran along the ground. It looked like the streak

of goo was in pursuit of the caravan. She turned and ran to catch up with the Band, but said nothing about what she had seen.



By the time the Band had reached the outskirts of the city of Camarillo, they were out of food. Everyone was tired, and famished from all the traveling, so they slipped off their backpacks, and sat down on the hard, dry ground to rest. They were tired and dirty, sweaty and hot. And off on the horizon they could see a single gray cloud hanging low over the dark, quiet city.

“We’ve got to get something to eat,” said Dewey. “I’m starvin’.”

“That cloud over the city you’re looking at, Dewey,” said Lazarus raising his hand and pointing, “could be bot dust, you know. I don’t think you want to go into the city, looking for food.”

“But I gotta eat!” said Dewey in exasperation.

“I’m hungry, too,” added Armando.

Dewey and Armando looked at each other, nodded, said “Yep” in unison, popped up off the ground, poured out the contents of their backpacks, flung them over their shoulders, and started running off toward the city. “Don’t worry,” said Dewey, looking over his shoulder while continuing to run. “We’ll bring back something for those empty bellies.”

Before anyone had a chance to stop them, Dewey and Armando, the best dumpster divers in the Band, disappeared over a rise, leaving the remainder of the Band behind to rest in the field. Nearly an hour later, the two came running back, huffing and puffing, with stuffed backpacks bouncing, and plastic bags dangling from their straining arms.

“It was a cloud of bots, alright,” said Dewey while laying down his bags.

“Badbots,” said Armando trying to shake off his heavy backpack. “You could tell. Just by the way it moved and the sounds it made. It was calling out to us.”

Dewey was already digging in a bag. “But it didn’t come down on us. It left us alone.”

Within seconds everyone was sprawled out on the ground feasting on a rich supply of yogurt, cottage cheese, old bananas, and muffins.

“Hey Dew,” said Marshall, after gulping down his first container of yogurt, “what happened to your shoes?”

Like the others, Dewey was sitting on the ground with his feet out in front of him, except the soles of his sneakers were missing. Between bites of his blueberry muffin, Dewey explained. “I was in a dumpster when all of sudden, the bottom fell through. Before I knew it, I was standing in the stuff. The goo, ya know?”

“I had to pull him out,” added Armando. “And by the time I did, the goo had eaten away his soles.”

“Are you going to be alright?” asked Keri between bites of her banana. “Will you be good to travel?”

With muffin-stuffed cheeks, Dewey nodded. “Once,” he said, after swallowing some of it, “I went a whole month without shoes in L.A. That toughened up my feet a *whole* lot. I’ll be okay.”

Armando playfully kicked at Dewey’s feet. “Yeah. Them dogs were made for walking.”

Dewey smiled, raised his feet, then wiggled his toes and barked. “Ruff! Ruff!” Muffin crumbs flew out of his mouth.

Taylor watched Kyle, with stuffed cheeks of his own, smile briefly at Dewey, and then swallow hard. His eyes turned serious, his jaw tightened, and he got up, and started stuffing the remaining bags of food into his backpack. She watched him, all the while wondering how he had

survived all these years out on the streets since she'd been gone. He was so brave and strong and smart.

Realizing that the goo was close behind, everyone followed Kyle's move and shoved as much food as they could first into their mouths, and then into their packs, and started off. They took a cautious, low-profile route around the west of Moorpark, forded the Santa Clara River, then skirted the city Santa Paula, until finally reaching the Los Padres National Forest area. Neglecting to purchase an adventure pass at a forest service office, the Band entered the 220-mile stretch of land. Heading north by northwest, they traveled on, crossing trails for hikers, equestrians, mountain bicyclists, and off-highway vehicles. Mostly, however, they tried to avoid the beaten paths, preferring instead to traverse the more primitive backcountry.

Eventually, the Band reached a ridge that offered a view of the 125,000-acre Cuyama area. Keri, once again standing at Taylor's side, explained what they were looking at. "Once, there were no roads running through here; but, with all the oil below the surface, the energy industry got interested in this area. This whole place was once the home of the California condor, the San Joaquin kit fox, and the California jewelflower; but, with all of the new access roads connecting the drilling sites, pipelines, and processing plants, everything got messed up.

"At one time, the oil here was locked up tight by environmental protection laws, but politicians gave the oil companies the chance to lease more and more of this public land every year. And, of course, the oil companies drilled and drilled away. They wiped out everything. Now look at it. All you can see is an endless supply of old drilling sites."

Then, as if by all of her talk Keri had called "action" for a scene in a movie to begin, the Band watched each and every one of the oil pumps begin to sink into the landscape. Soon the entire valley was nothing more than a haphazard array of deep, gaping holes. And then, from each dark hole, the

gluttonous, gray goo came crawling, spilling out into the valley. Within no time at all, the goo, and its ugly black-brown sludge, filled up the entire valley, climbed up the rise, and began to pursue the Band as they sprinted along the ridge, just out of reach of the greedy goo's grasp.



The Band traveled north by northwest, remaining in the diminishing backcountry, avoiding the city of San Luis Obispo entirely. Passing quietly through Morro Bay State Park, the Band climbed a trail lined in chaparral, eucalyptus, oaks, pines, and coastal shrubs. When the trail peaked, they were on top of Black Mountain. Altogether there were a total of nine peaks standing high above the surrounding landscape. From the Band's view, they could see the famed Morro Rock, the northernmost of the crests, serving as a landmark for the beach community of Morrow Bay. Obstructing the otherwise beautiful view were three tall stacks of a nearby power plant.

Before advancing any further, the Band surveyed the area looking for any possible signs of trouble. The small town was deserted. No cars were moving, no people walking on the streets. Seeing no signs of nanobot goo, dust, or swarms, they looped their way around Morro Bay and then continued traveling north along the coast. The Band was on the wide, flat beach just north of Morro Bay, strolling along for the moment, enjoying the sounds of the surf, when they heard a horrendous blast from behind. Everyone stopped, turned, and caught a glimpse of huge gobs of goo flying through the air, directly at them. The power plant had exploded! And before the Band had a chance to turn and run, giant-sized, runny raindrops of goo began pouring down all around them.

The Band took off sprinting up the beach, darting around the jellylike glops of goo. The goo was squirming, eating away at the sand and shells, water and crabs, fish and seaweed. Some of the

bigger drops started joining together, making it difficult to get around. Once, Dewey almost got caught. The goo surrounded him and shut him off from advancing on the beach with the others. But, luckily, the big, long, squirmy gob of goo thinned in a section. Dewey picked up a flat piece of driftwood and half surfed, half skateboarded, across the glob. His makeshift board didn't make it through, but at least he got away from the gobbling goo.

For the moment, the goo seemed to dig down into the sand rather than advance any further along the beach. Breathing a sigh of relief, the Band kept moving northward. They made it all the way through the town of Cambria, then into San Simeon, where they were offered a view of the famous Hearst Castle nesting comfortably on a hill to the east.

As the Band trekked on, Dewey looked back, stopped, and pointed, "Hey, look! Hearst's castle is oozing down the hill."

"Yeah," said Kerri while making her way to the front of the Band, "and it's coming our way, too."

Immediately, the Band, picked up their pace and didn't slow down until arriving in the Ventana Wilderness and Santa Lucia Range.



Everyone's spirits were low, and now concern was mounting as to whether they were going to make it safely through Carmel and Monterey. After a restless night's sleep, and no food, with no decision made as to what to do, the hungry Band took off. While trudging alongside of Highway 1, a large, multicolored school bus pulled up and stopped beside them. The sudden appearance of the bus took the weary Band by surprise. The door of the bus opened and a thick cloud of pungent, herbal smelling

smoke poured out. Everyone in the Band gathered near the door to see who, or what, was inside. And when the smoke cleared, they peered in on an old, old man wearing a floppy denim hat, goggle sunglasses, a dirty, white tank top, and bell-bottom jeans. Long gray hair fell out the back of his hat, blending nicely with his even longer gray beard. His exposed skin was covered in sunspots. After taking a lengthy look at the tired Band, the old codger exposed a nearly toothless smile.

"Hey," he said with a scratchy voice, while flipping his scraggly thumb toward the back of the bus, "we're packed full of hippies in here. And we're heading for Santa Cruz. But we got room for more."

"Are you offering us a ride?" asked Taylor from the rear of the Band.

The old man snickered. "Not unless ya got any ass, gas, or grass, missy!"

"Shut up, you dirty old man!" shouted an attractive, longhaired woman who had moved behind the old driver. She was wearing a loose, tie-dyed dress and had beads around her neck, wrists, and ankles. She elbowed the old guy and turned to the Band. "Come on in. If you're walking, you're never gonna be able to avoid that awful gray goo. And don't mind him. He's harmless." She smiled, then playfully, yet not so gently, smacked the old man on the back of his head. The old man snickered.

Without hesitation, the Band accepted their invitation and climbed into the bus. After saying hello to the driver, whose name was Mo, the Band filed into seats near the front of the bus. Mo reached out for the swivel handle, closed the door, put the bus back in gear, and took off north on Highway 1.

The longhaired woman, who called herself Moon Star, proceeded to introduce the Band to her friends. As Mo had said, the bus was full of hippies; but Moon Star only knew Grass Hopper, Mourning Dove, and Sun Shine. Grass Hopper was the only male of the four. He, too, had long hair and wore a tie-dyed shirt and bell-bottom jeans. The other two looked almost identical to Moon Star,

in that they also had long brown hair and wore baggy, tie-dyed dresses. After the round of introductions, and after the Band had filled their bellies with the food the hippies generously shared, within no time at all, the "Tie-Dyed Quartet"—as they had decided to name themselves, some time ago—had the Band singing.

And the sign says long haired hippie people need not apply

So I tucked my hair up under my hat and went in to ask him why

He said you look like a fine outstanding young man, I think you do

So I took off my hat, and said imagine that, huh, I mean it wasn't for you

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign

Messing up the scenery, breaking my mind

Do this don't do that

Can't you read the signs?

The Tie-Dyed Quartet had most of the Band singing that song—and its remaining verses—over and over and over again, all the long way to Santa Cruz. Aside from the original remark about the gray goo made by Moon Star, no other mention was made of the current state of affairs at all. The hippies seemed much too happy and carefree to be all that concerned about the gray goo following them.

While riding along, listening and watching Marshall, Armando, and Dewey still singing, Taylor noticed Kyle sitting alone in the seat directly in front of Lazarus and Keri. He was staring out the window, keeping a cautious eye on the passing coastline. Thinking that he looked so alone, as he

always did, Taylor picked herself up, moved around Moon Star who was sharing the seat with her, walked across the isle, and sat down next to Kyle. Saying nothing, Taylor reached out, and held his hand. Saying nothing, Kyle looked down at their hands, turned Taylor's over in his, and without looking up, reached over with his other hand, and began caressing her palm and fingers.

At that very moment, Lazarus leaned forward, draped his arm over the seat between Kyle and Taylor, and pointed out the window. "Look," he said with no sign of emotion, "it's a swarm." And that's exactly what it was, too; riding on the horizon, out at sea, just over the water, a small twisting tornado.

"Badbots," said Kyle.

"I wonder if it's from the goo," said Lazarus. "They could've sprouted wings, and broke away from a pile of goo, and now their out on their own, hunting something."

Together they watched the small, dark gray swarm as it continued whirling south over the water until fading out of sight.

"Well," said Taylor, "at least it's moving in the opposite direction."

"For now, at least," offered Kyle, while holding Taylor's hand more firmly than before.

When the bus finally arrived at a parking lot along the beach in Santa Cruz, the Band got off with the rest of the hippies. Moon Star and the others supplied the Band with as much food as they could spare, and then everyone in the Band thanked them for the ride and hospitality, and said good-bye. Hurriedly trying to get out of town, some of the Band could often be heard humming the song. The hippies never did tell them the name of the song, so they were left to their own devices to create a title. Marshall would always call it the "Long Haired Hippie People" song. For Armando, who had unexpectedly loved the singing, it would always be known as, "Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign." Like the hippies, Armando hated signs.

After walking a couple of miles out of town the Band's pace slowed. The singing and humming, and all the good food calmed the Band considerably. Yet Taylor, who had somehow felt the goo's energy on the rise while in Santa Cruz, turned and looked back anxiously at the city. At that very moment, *all* of Santa Cruz began bobbing up and down in a great, rolling puddle of goo. Taylor gasped when she saw the hippies' colorful bus riding a huge wave of goo bullying its way over the incoming surf, out into the ocean. Taylor's gasp caught the Band's attention, causing everyone to turn around only to watch the hippies' bus sink into the sea.



Hiking at a rapid pace, the Band continued northward until reaching Half Moon Bay. Taking a trail on a beach with low, sandy hills and clumps of cordgrass, they cautiously made their way past the Montara Lighthouse. By the time the Band had made their way along a number of coastal trails on the outskirts of San Francisco, they found a place to rest on the soft grass in Crissy Field of the historic Presidio near the south entrance of Golden Gate Bridge. It was dark in the park and a fog was beginning to build, hindering the Band's view of the bay. While walking on the trails, the Band had noticed that the city was silent. Not a single person had been seen.

By now, nearly everyone in the Band was in an exhausted state of despair. Their cheeks were emaciated, their expressions were desolate and haggard, their clothes ragged and torn. The situation was growing hopeless; and there seemed to be no end in sight to all this madness and running. The Band sat on the cold ground looking at each other. Taylor was hoping Kyle would take charge and get them up and moving, tell them what to do or where to go. But instead, he too sat there exhausted, saying nothing, staring out over the bridge at the end of the continent.

The riches of the Orient were supposed to be shipped through this gate. And what an amazing gate it was. Here stood a proud, glowing testament to man's power and achievement. The bridge was eight thousand, nine hundred and eighty-one feet long. Its thick cables supported two-hundred million pounds. It had twin towers that were comparable in height to two, sixty-five-story buildings. And it was completely covered in a peculiar orange paint.

“I wonder why the goo hasn't taken down the bridge,” said Taylor leaning back on her elbows. “And why did all of Los Angeles slide into the goo, but for some of the other cities we've been in, all the buildings were intact?”

“Where have all the people gone?” asked Dewey. “That's what I want to know. There's nobody here anymore. Did everyone in San Francisco just leave?”

“Come to think of it,” said Armando, “we haven't seen anybody since those hippies back in San Jose.”

“I have a theory about that,” said Lazarus. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure,” said Keri.

“I think the bots are becoming more selective. They're choosing what they want to consume. And, as for the people, I think their minds became one with the bots; the goo, the dust, and maybe even the swarms.” Lazarus paused and when it was obvious that no one was going to laugh, or start arguing, he continued. “Maybe something was turned on in their brains, causing them to become one with the badbots. Dewey, Armando, you remember when the cloud was calling out to you, in Camarillo? Maybe the bots call out, and some answer. And I'll bet that anybody with one of Barry's uploaded brains heard the bots' call quite clearly. I think they're all one with the goo.”

“That's a weirdest collective consciousness if I've ever hear of,” said Keri.

“I’ll bet that means their badbot brains ate away their bodies from the inside out.” Armando was staring off into space, scratching his head as if anticipating the badbots to come running out of his head at any second.

“I sure wouldn’t want to see that,” said Dewey.

“Let’s make a pact, right here and now,” said Kle. “No matter what, no matter how much the badbots call, we won’t listen, we won’t go into the goo.”

“Done,” said Lazarus, Dewey, Armando, Keri, and Marshall. It was the Band’s long held agreement that whenever someone requested a pact, they would all listen, think about it, and within seconds provide an answer. Everybody was looking at Taylor because, not having known about the custom, she had been silent. Taylor nodded her head firmly and said, “Done.”

Without passion or enthusiasm, Kyle stood up and said, "What do you say we get moving."

The Band picked themselves up, followed Kyle to Fort Point, and then fell in line and began heading northward across the bridge. It was after 3:00 a.m. and a bone-chilling wind had just kicked up and was now gusting across the bridge, cutting through the clothing of each Band member. In the distance, across the bay to the east, through a break in the fog, was the solitary Alcatraz Island.

The hike across the bridge was wearing on the Band's nerves. Surely, anyone walking on this great structure, completely out in the open, would be a logical target for the goo. Not to mention a cloud of bots that might float by. Or even one of those swarms that could attack. Armando, Dewey, and Marshall were particularly afraid; and, occasionally, one of them would look down at the water below. And the longer they walked on the bridge, the more they looked down into the water. It was almost as if their eyes were being drawn to it. Then, while Marshall was again looking down into the waters of the bay, he stopped and shouted, “Look! Under the water. It’s the goo! It’s filling up the bay!”

And it was. The goo was there, growing, turning the murky waters of the bay gray. Then, all of a sudden, like a gigantic leviathan that had been roused from its slumber, the goo rose up out of the sea, and swallowed up the few ships that had been floating in the bay. The beast then slid back to its hiding place under the surface and a dark, smelly smoke rose up out of the water.

“Come on! We’ve got to get off the bridge,” shouted Armando, while running ahead of Dewey and Marshall.

But Marshall had stopped and wouldn’t move any further. Instead, he began to climb up the tall chain-link fence that had been erected to prevent people from jumping over. He was heading for the goo! By the time he reached the top and swung his leg over the edge, Dewey turned and saw him. He tried to run back to stop him, but it was too late. He would never make it to Marshall in time.

Taylor, who had been walking ahead of the three, turned and saw Marshall at the top of the fence. “No!” she yelled. And then, with a mysterious energy that seemed to tug at her heart, she launched herself through the air, over Armando and Dewey, and landed high on the fence to grab Marshall’s leg.

Marshall, who had been looking down at the gray goo with tears in his eyes, turned back to Taylor. At once, he saw that her eyes were glowing. In fact, her whole body was radiating light. “It’ll be okay, Marshall,” Taylor said calmly. “We’ll get out of here. I know it.” She nodded reassuringly, and then grinned.

Taylor’s voice had soothed Marshall, and now he wasn’t able to take his eyes off of her. He pulled his leg down off the ridge of the fence; and, together, they climbed down and joined Dewey and Armando back on the walkway.

Dewey and Armando were both staring at Taylor. Now that she was down on the walkway, her body returned to normal. The light was gone, but for Armando, Dewey, and Marshall, the memory of Taylor's light was burning in their minds.

"How the heck did you get up there?" asked Dewey.

"Your whole body was glowing," said Armando.

Marshall said nothing, but couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Without a word, Taylor turned and started marching north, trying to catch up to Kyle, Lazarus and Keri. She was hoping that Dewey, Armando, and Marshall would follow her and forget about her glowing, and the horrible goo, which she had also seen, and felt calling.

Dewey, Armando, and then Marshall did start running after Taylor. Then a rain started to fall, lightly at first. Then the wind kicked up, and the rain fell harder, and sideways. Taylor, Dewey, Armando, and Marshall caught up to the others and by the looks she was receiving Taylor could tell that they also had seen all she had done. Having witnessed her glow, they now looked to her with hope in their eyes; especially Marshall, for he had seen her eyes.

At that moment, the bridge started to shake and roll. It also began to lower into the bay. The twin towers of the bridge began sinking, lower and lower, into the water. The Band took off running faster than they ever had in all their lives. Overhead, the cables of the bridge snapped apart and whipped through the air. The bridge plunged into the water, and everyone in the Band managed to scramble off safely onto land. But then, just when they thought they were in the clear, the goo began climbing the hillside. As the Band struggled up the slippery slope, looking as if they too were about to be gulped up by the goo, the gob gurgled and then regressed back into the icy water of the dark, gray bay.



After getting their wits back about them, the Band pushed through the pounding rain and continued trudging north. Nothing further was mentioned of Taylor's amazing feat, absolutely nothing about her mysterious glow. But now everyone in the Band looked at her a little differently. Marshall, more than anyone else, gazed upon Taylor with gratitude and reverence.

Taylor was also silent about her unexpected quality. She had amazed herself, even frightened herself with this newfound ability to fly through the air. She was also aware that she had become all luminous and lit up like a ball of light. No one in Telos had explained to her that this would happen. Yet maybe they weren't supposed to. This glow, this skill, was it because of the experience in the Temple of Light? What was it all for? she wondered. And how could she use this newfound power of hers?

The Band finally came to rest when they entered yet another extremely thick fog bank at the Point Reyes National Seashore of Drakes Bay. They stayed and rested there throughout the night. The following day, with the soupy fog to protect them, the Band picked up and walked north on an old ranch road through a rich pasture spotted with yellow poppies, orange fiddleneck and purple iris flowers. After the Band passed by a small pond and a eucalyptus grove, they practically stumbled upon a herd of tule elk wandering and grazing about. The elk mesmerized Keri, and it took much prodding from Taylor to keep her moving. While Taylor was tugging on Keri's arm, from out of nowhere, a small pile of goo began slithering along the top of the ridge like a sneaky snake. Taylor and Keri both froze. Gathering in a pool in a small indentation in the ridge, the goo rose up into a tall column, as if getting a better look at its surroundings. After a moment, the goo melted back into the

pool. Lying there, the goo started expanding and contracting, pulsing really, almost as if breathing. Yet it was quiet. Gone was the constant churning and hissing.

Suddenly, a baby tule elk wandered near the pulsing pool of goo. Sensing the animal's presence, the goo moved into a long cord and surrounded the small elk. When the elk tried to jump up out of the trap, three small swarms rose up out of the goo, and threw themselves on the baby elk. The elk twitched and turned, attempting to shake off the bots. Its head jerked and pulled, giving signs that its insides were being eaten away. Finally, with the baby elk's entire innards and skeleton gone, its body wilted, and then its hide slid into the slime.

After the goo was done with the first elk, the swarms rose up from the goo, and like efficient teams of bees each traveling in their own individual formations, the three swarms gathered together, and then darted off, attacking one tule elk after another. And when they did this, one elk after another, the two young women could hear the swarms and the pile of goo now chanting the same mantra over, and over again. "More, more, more, more."

Taylor jerked Keri by the arm and started running all the way up to the high vista at Tomales Point where they caught up with the rest of the Band. When Taylor and Keri reached the Band, they were standing with the mouth of Tomales Bay directly in front of them.

"Let's swim it," said Dewey. "It's not that far."

"Are you kidding?" shouted Marshall, pointing to the gaping mouth of the bay. "I can't swim that."

"And there's probably some of that goo down there, just waiting for us get within reach," added Lazarus.

"We'll just have to turn around and go all the way back then," said Kyle.

"We can't," said Taylor, now that she had caught her breath. "Swarms are back there."

“They’re eating all the tule elk,” said Keri. She was staring at the ground. Her eyes were blank.

Kyle turned around and looked down the steep hill searching for a way to descend the lofty point. “We’re going to have to chance it.” Without argument, they all followed Kyle down a rough trail. When they reached the water, they threw off their backpacks, which they had miraculously carried the entire trip up to this point, waded into the icy water, and began swimming across the bay.

Taylor, who was picking up the rear, head only above the water, kept glancing back, watching for the swarms. When she saw three swarms soar down the hill, she turned to the Band and shouted. “They’re coming!”

“We’re going to have to get under the water while they pass,” shouted Kyle. “Deep breaths everyone. Here they come!”

The Band ducked under the water. From a position just a few feet under, some of the Band looked upward hoping to see the swarm swing by, others looked down fearing the goo that might come from below to gulp them up. Everyone stayed down for as long as they could, hoping the swarms would be gone. When they all surfaced, one after another, they finished the long swim without a glitch; even Marshall, who surprised everyone, including himself, with his newfound strength. When they reached the other side, without even stopping to dry their clothes, the Band trudged on.



Several days later, the Band was able to avoid the same mistake they made at Tomales Bay, and passed around the Bodega Bay area without having to swim through any more icy water. After

rounding the bay they struggled through the shifting sands of the tall Bodega Dunes and then continued up the coast. By the time they approached the Russian River, the wind had picked up and was blowing strongly. From the grassy shoreline they could see the huge Goat Rock located off of Highway 1 near the mouth of the river. When they finally did reach the sandy shores of the river, the Band met up with dozens of resting harbor seals. This was pupping season, and many newborns were lying about. Armando made the mistake of thinking that the cute seal pups were docile and tried to pet one of them. But like all wild animals, the seals frightened easily, and Armando narrowly escaped a few serious bites by the mature seals that quickly came to life to protect the defenseless little one.

The Band rested there on the sand near the mouth of the river, behind a rock to block the wind. Then, at night when the wind had calmed down, the Band decided once again to cross the waters. After fording the shallow water at the mouth of the river, the Band dried off by making their way along the winding curves of Highway 1. Traveling up and down, over and around the many hills of the beautiful, yet lonely, headlands, the Band made friends with the many cows that they encountered on the shoulder of the coastal highway. Eventually, they passed, and avoided, the formidable looking stockades of ancient Fort Ross.

By no means did the Band figure that they were in the clear. The badbots could be lurking anywhere, growing, gaining power, and they all knew it, especially Taylor. Yet, as the Band pushed on, Taylor felt as though she, too, were gaining power. She didn't feel confined at all, and the traveling was actually doing her good. As in Telos, the landscape here along the coast was coming alive. Everywhere she looked, everywhere she stepped, it felt like sacred ground. Most of the time, she knew that wherever she was, she was connected in some intimate way with everything around her.

After another full night of walking, with the morning sun approaching, the Band decided that they needed to rest for the day. Luckily, they found a thin, lonely asphalt road that led inland from

Highway 1. Taking the road, they entered a beautiful redwood forest. The sheer loftiness of these cloud sweepers, combined with their distinguished age, inspired feelings of awe within the Band. They walked silently amongst the titans, while straining their necks, staring upward, to admire the cathedral-like majesty of the forest. The redwood forest, which also contained an abundance of Douglas firs, grand firs, and tanbark oaks, was quiet and still except for the occasional squawking of a Steller's jay that hopped from branch to branch among the trees and shrubs.

It was then, while under the protection of the forest canopy, that Taylor began thinking about the Lemurians. She wondered whether or not they would be capable of fending off the gray goo. Would they be able to keep it from infiltrating their city? Why hadn't she thought of this before? Did she avoid doing so, simply because she *needed* to believe that there would be a safe haven for her and the Band? She quickly became frustrated with herself for being so naïve as to believe that she and the others would be able to hide from the badbots in Telos.

Unable to rest in the shade of the redwood giants, Taylor got up to walk around. She had been wandering for a while when she found herself in a small clearing traversing a tiny path of pink blossoms, sitting on the ends of the lower branches of evergreen shrubs nearly twelve feet in height. The bushes had leathery, elliptical-shaped, dark green leaves. But what was most delightful about the plants, of course, were the large, fragrant clusters of bright pink flowers crowded on the ends of the branches. By this time—now late in the spring—the pink flower clusters had matured into cylindrical capsules.

Admiring the beautiful blossoms, Taylor started to hum and tone, just like Etruceana had taught her. All at once, wondrous things started to happen. Nature seemed to bolt awake: Steller's jays flew nearer, redwoods above began to sway and moan, squirrels gathered at her feet, the small shrubs' branches began twisting and bending, moving closer to Taylor as if trying to touch her, and the pink

blossoms turned and faced her like an attentive audience of admiring listeners. And as Taylor continued to tone, more softly now, she took a good long look at one of the blossoms. She counted seven flowers in all on this one stem. Each of the pink corolla flowers had a narrow tubular base, five wavy pointed lobes, and five stamens with hairy filaments. Taylor didn't know it, but these were rhododendrons, and the short looping trail she was on, was all that was left of the Kruse Rhododendron National Reserve.

Taylor felt a strange and strong connection to the rhododendrons, but she knew that the horrible badbots would soon make their way into this forest. And when that happened, it wouldn't be long before it came after these little plants, and all the pretty pink flowers. To Taylor, it felt as if the fragile flowers knew this. She could even hear their cries of sorrow, begging her to help. But there was nothing she could do. All she and the rhododendrons had left was this opportunity to admire and be admired. It was then that Taylor gazed down upon the top of another seven-flower cluster now tickling her chin; and when she did, the Fruit of Life design flashed into her mind. And the sight of it aroused something deep within her. In a way, it reminded her of the experience in the Temple of Light. But it also seemed to hint at something yet to come.

This is when Taylor finally decided that she would start paying more attention to her visions. For she was beginning to realize that she would probably have to be the one to get the Band out of the predicament they were in. And maybe it was time to acknowledge and even begin using her supernatural powers.

Chapter 25: The Interdimensional Vehicle

When night approached, the Band stirred from their slumber, picked themselves up, and decided to follow the small road eastward, deeper into the forest. Eventually, the asphalt road became gravel. After a short time, the stone road bridged a river. The Band walked down the riverbank, and proceeded northward alongside of the slow-moving waterway. This was the south fork of the Gualala River.

The Band had traveled quite a distance north in the thick forest of redwoods, fir, and pines, until the river took a westward bend to eventually empty into the Pacific Ocean. By this time, in spite of the Band's improved attitude from witnessing Taylor's mysterious glow, everyone was tired and much in need of rest. It was therefore decided that they should stay in the thick redwood forest close to the river until feeling strong enough to go on. After doubling back quite a distance, the Band found an excellent resting spot near the river, up on a small hill, under a circular grouping of redwoods.

The next day, while the Band was sitting in a circle, still gathering strength, a heavy fog rolled in. Taylor took a survey of the Band. Dewey was examining the small garter snake crawling under his shorts. Armando was trying to drag his comb through his messed up hair. Marshall was scratching his insect bites. Keri was playing with a baby tree toad. Lazarus was staring off into the fog. And Kyle, who was squatting with his back up against a redwood, was keeping an eye on the clearing, watching the land.

Taylor noticed that he had become much more fidgety, as of late. Right now he was chewing on a stick, wringing his hands, scanning the horizon. "It's coming," he said, and then looked directly at Taylor. "I can feel it; it's on the way." All the others stopped whatever they were doing, turned and

looked at him. “It’s far away yet, but it’s coming right at us. It’s tall. Taller than the trees here, I think. I don’t know how long it’ll take, but it’s going to be here, all at once, right on top of us.”

“What is?” asked Dewey. “What’s gonna be here?”

“A wave,” Taylor added. “A tsunami-sized wave of gray goo.”

“We’re not going to make it to Mount Shasta are we?” said Marshall.

“We need to get off the planet,” said Lazarus

“Off the planet?!” yelled Kerri and Armando in unison.

“Oh, sure,” said Marshall sarcastically. “What d’you expect us to just walk off?”

Taylor looked skyward through the tall circle of redwoods. There were six redwood trees, all of them surrounding a large redwood stump in the middle. This was the mother redwood from which the six others sprung. That made seven altogether. Taylor looked around at the other six members of the Band, and just like when she was staring at the rhododendrons, the Fruit of Life design flashed through her mind. And then it clicked. “No,” she said. “We’re going to dance off.”

“Dance?!” said Dewey, Armando, Kerri and Marshall, together.

“Come on,” said Taylor while standing. “Follow me down to the river bank.”

They all got up and followed her down the hill.

“Look,” said Taylor once she reached the sand on the riverbank. “This is all I can think to do at this point. I learned a little something while inside the mountain that just might be able to help us out. And with that light thing happening to me back there on the bridge, well, I got to thinking.” Taylor hesitated for just a second. “Maybe there’s a chance that with this new power of mine we’ll be able to do something. You see, there’s one thing I haven’t told you. Back when I was in the mountain I was supposed to lead a team of seven. We were to be called the Sacred Seven. And we were going to go back in time, so that we could change the past to save our world in the present.”

“Ha!” said Armando.

“And now,” said Taylor choosing to ignore Armando, “if you look around at us, there *are* seven of us. And check out that ring of redwoods up on the hill. There’s one redwood stump in the middle and six big redwoods that have sprouted around it. Seven. That’s quite a coincidence, I think. Plus, I don’t know if you know it or not, but this river flows south to north. I don’t think there’s any other river in all of North America that does that. And we’re directly on top of the San Andreas fault line. I can feel it.”

“*Soooo*,” said Armando.

“Armando!” snapped Lazarus. “Shut up a minute. Unless you’ve got a better idea.”

Taylor continued. “That just tells me that we’re in a high energy spot. And there’s something about all of this that makes me want to at least try *something*. Something the Lemurians had me doing in their Temple of Light.”

“Let’s give it a shot,” said Kyle.

“Yeah,” added Dewey. “I’ll do anything to get out of here.”

“So what do we have to do?” asked Keri.

Taylor squatted and proceeded to draw the Divine Design in the sand for the Band. “OK, this first circle is for me. For this dance, I’ll be the one in the center. The rest of you,” Taylor drew a six pointed star-tetrahedron around the center circle, and then the circles at each of the points, “will be stationed around me. This is the pattern that the Sacred Seven were supposed to be in while dancing in the temple. It’s part of the Divine Design. The six others and me were supposed to be shot through the hole at the top of the temple, on a journey back to the past. But, maybe if we perform the dance, while we’re all in this pattern, and with this light that came from me, maybe...”

“What?!” huffed Armando. “This dance is going to be our time machine?”

“You ain’t got nothin’ better,” sneered Marshall.

“It’s an incredible design, actually.” Taylor began to draw circles directly between her inner circle, and the six outer circles. “When you put these circles in between them all, you create the Fruit of Life design. These are the circles you must all dance into, when you come toward me in the center circle. “Once you do, if this goes the way I hope it will, all of you will be connected to me by these lines of light. These lines will form a design called, Metatron’s Cube.” Taylor connected all the circles in the sand with straight lines to draw the cube, and then stood up to admire her sand carving. “And when all of this happens, and if we’re in the right positions, the Flower of Life is supposed to emerge. It’s what the Lemurians call the Divine Design. It’s what was supposed to send the Sacred Seven back into the past.”

“OK,” said Kyle while running back up the hill. “There’s a large clearing where we’ll have some room. “Let’s get moving. Come on! We’ll do the dance up there.”

After the Band ran into the middle of the grassy field, Taylor grabbed a stick, and then started carving out the thirteen circles in the dirt. When she was finished she called everyone to attention. "Now we're going to start by first putting me in the center circle." Taylor took her position. “And each of you has to take a position in the outer circles. Keri, I think it would be best if you were in the circle to the north. Dewey, you should be in the circle to the northwest. Armando, take the circle to the southwest. Marshall, I'd like you to be in the southern circle. Lazarus in the southeast. And Kyle, you should be in the northeast circle."

Everybody took their positions. "Now, when you begin," continued Taylor, "you'll all start in the outer circles. After dancing for a while..."

“What do you mean dancing?” asked Kyle. “Exactly what kind of dancing do you want us to do?”

“Yeah,” added Armando. “And we don’t even have any music. How do you expect us to dance without any music?!”

“Well,” said Taylor. “I think the only thing you’ll need to do, will be to twirl.”

“Twirl?” said Keri.

“Yeah,” said Taylor. “You know. Just spin. Like you all used to do when you were little kids.”

“Like this?” asked Dewey. He was already spinning like a top.

“Too fast,” said Taylor. “Go slower.”

Dewey slowed down and kept from getting too dizzy.

“That’s it!” shouted Taylor.

“OK,” said Kyle. “That’s easy.”

“And then,” continued Taylor, “after you’ve been spinning a while, all of you will have to advance on a straight line to the center of the inner circles. I’ll remain stationary in the center circle.”

"How will we know when to move into our inner circle?" asked Lazarus. "We'll need a signal or something, won't we?"

"Good point," said Taylor. "And I think that should come from me. Since you'll all have your eyes focused on me, I think it would be best if I nodded my head. That will be your cue to advance to the center of your inner circle." Taylor looked at everyone to make sure they all understood. "I'll start first by looking and nodding at Keri, who will advance from the north. Then I'll rotate, counterclockwise, looking at each person in turn, until I finish with Kyle."

Taylor stopped and looked pensively at the ground

"Are you forgetting something?" asked Kyle.

"Well, I seem to remember... oh yes!" Taylor looked up and searched for Keri. "I almost forgot. Keri, you have to twirl clockwise, Dewey counterclockwise, Armando clockwise, Marshall counterclockwise..."

"Clockwise," said Lazarus as Taylor turned to face him.

"And counterclockwise, for me," said Kyle.

"And what about you?" asked Keri.

"Yeah," said Dewey. "What are you gonna be doin'?"

"Which direction will you twirl, Taylor?" asked Kyle.

Taylor looked around at the redwoods trying to search for a clue. She couldn't think of anything. "I don't think it matters, really."

"You don't think?!" said Armando, with more than just a tinge of anxiety.

"It'll be OK!" yelled Kyle. "Quit worrying."

At that instant, a white whirlwind of light and energy descended from the fog and landed at the edge of the large clearing. Everyone but Kyle and Taylor stepped back in a state of wide-eyed shock. Kyle was smiling. But, Taylor wasn't smiling at all. She knew exactly who it was.

"What you *need*," said Zanadar in his booming voice after the light had subsided, "are these!" He held out a handful of coins.

Dewey started to run, holding onto his cap.

"Dew!" yelled Kyle.

Dewey skidded to a stop. Armando jutted his black comb out like a knife. Keri whimpered and rubbed her eyes. All Marshall could do was to mumble, "Wha, wha, wha, wha?" And Lazarus stood staring at the Pleiadian, cocking his head one way and then the other.

"What are you talking about?" asked Taylor calmly.

"If you're going to create an interdimensional vehicle," continued Zanadar. "You're going to need these." He held out his huge hand again exposing seven coins. "One for each of you. You're the new Sacred Seven."

"The Sacred Seven?!" asked Taylor incredulously.

Dewey crept back to the circle. Armando, Keri, Marshall, and Lazarus stood in place, still suspicious of the tall, old man.

Zanadar grinned and closed his hand around the seven coins. While Taylor stood there dumbfounded, Zanadar turned to the others. "With these," he said while raising and shaking his hand, "you'll be able to create a transportation device that will put you on a timeline that will transport you all the way back to the beginning of the universe, if you like."

"You mean the Big Bang?" asked Marshall.

"I sure do," said Zanadar.

The Band was settling down. Taylor figured that they must have remembered her telling them about Zanadar when she had first arrived in the small wilderness park. They moved in closer to get a better look at the coins.

Marshall's attention was riveted, his curiosity piqued. "You mean to say that, as we travel in this interdimensional vehicle, we'll be passing through the gray goo unnoticed?"

"Yep," said Zanadar. "Like a car through a snowstorm."

"Awesome!" shouted Dewey. "Let's do it! I'm ready."

Lazarus was a little more skeptical than the young and somewhat naive Dewey. "Exactly how are we going to create this interdimensional vehicle thing?"

"Well, we'll start you off with something simple, this time," explained Zanadar. "A late model vehicle, perhaps. We wouldn't want you getting too much horsepower. Not yet anyway."

The Band looked around at one another, not sure if he was kidding.

"First, you'll be creating a vortex," said Zanadar. "The vortex will serve to create an energy field that will connect all of you."

"What's a vortex?" asked Dewey.

"A vortex," said Zanadar, "is like a whirlpool or tornado. You know, a big twister. It's a place of concentrated power and energy, a place where energy comes to a point of focus."

"And what's the timeline all about?" asked Armando. "How does that work?"

Zanadar paused momentarily. He faced Taylor, rolled his eyes, and turned back to Armando. "Think of it as being a kind of giant superstring that's laced around your entire planet."

"Oh yeah, superstrings," said Armando finally. "Even I've heard of superstrings."

"Plus," added Zanadar, "you're in a terrific energy spot here by the river. You're right on top of the fault line, too; perfect conditions for your purposes. Can't you feel it?"

Everybody in the Band looked at Taylor. They knew that she had suspected they were in a high-energy place all along.

"How do you know about all of this?" asked Lazarus.

"Well, I come from the Pleiades," said Zanadar. "And we Pleadians have been doing time travel for... ever."

"Yeah, right," scoffed a sarcastic Armando. "Sure you have."

"OK," interrupted Kyle, now anxious to get busy. "So let's see those coins of yours."

Zanadar held out his hand and opened it. All seven of the coins were spread out in his enormous hand. The coins were glowing with a faint self-luminescence. Etched into the surface of each coin were thirteen circles. "You'll notice that each of them have the Fruit of Life design on it."

Then the coins rose and flipped over to expose a bunch of straight lines. "And on the other side is Metatron's Cube."

"Those are just like the designs Taylor was explaining to us," said Keri.

"Exactly!" said Zanadar, getting rather excited.

Everybody looked at Taylor again. Their mouths were hanging open. They were now convinced that Taylor had to be on to something.

"Of course," continued Zanadar, "once all of you start generating the right energy, with these Fruit of Life and Metatron's Cube designs, and as you focus your energies, and then move into the right positions... you'll be off! You'll be in your interdimensional vehicle, traveling the superstring timeline!"

Zanadar then moved closer to Taylor. "So you see, you'll still lead the Sacred Seven after all, won't you, Taylor?"

Taylor grinned and when she looked at Kyle, tears came to her eyes. She had been successful in reaching Kyle, and now all she had to do was to get them all out of there.

The Band stood still for a while, soaking in all of Zanadar's energy. "So, how are we supposed to generate the right energy?" asked Lazarus.

"Well, for one, by now you should all be aware of Taylor's ability. Right?" Zanadar raised his big, bushy eyebrows. Everyone in the Band nodded enthusiastically. "What Taylor did to acquire this ability is similar to what you'll have to do here."

The Band looked at Taylor. "But, we're not in..."

"Ah, but you don't need the Temple of Light," interrupted Zanadar. "You've already figured a lot out, Taylor. You recognized the design in the grouping of redwood trees, and you saw it in the vision you had while gazing at the rhododendron. You knew enough to put everyone in formation."

You're finally learning to trust your intuitions." Zanadar pointed toward the redwoods. "You see those trees over there? All you have to do is to get some wood from the redwoods and make some bullroarers. It won't take that long. Once they're made, you'll twirl them around over your head with these coins embedded inside, in the formation that Taylor had you in, and with Taylor's help, you'll be gone!"

"What's a bullroarer?" asked Dewey.

Kyle was already examining a redwood. He fingered its fibrous, reddish brown bark. Taylor watched Kyle intently.

"It's an ancient instrument," said Zanadar. "Your world's Aboriginal cultures in Australia used it. It's basically a small, quarter-inch-thick piece of wood about twelve to eighteen inches long, and three to four inches wide. It's elliptical in shape so the tips are tapered; it sort of looks like a long leaf. It also has a long rope attached. You pierce the rope through one tip of the wood. Then you grab hold of the string and whirl the piece of wood around over your head, through the air. While the wood is spinning on its axis, the rope makes a trilling sound."

"What's a trilling sound?" asked Keri.

Zanadar demonstrated by making a whistling sound with a vibratory or quavering effect—a simple rapid alternation of two adjacent tones.

"Oooh," said Keri. "It's a warbling sound. Kinda like a bird, huh?"

Zanadar nodded his head. "Each of you will have to swing one of these bullroarers. You'll each stand in your circle of the design. Then you'll start swinging, in the same direction that Taylor said you should all be twirling, and then the trilling sounds will start. Eventually, a globe of sound will form around each of you. This is the vortex. Then each of you in the outer circles will move, on a

straight line, one at a time, to the center of the inner circles. And if everything goes right, the bullroarers will automatically converge and collide, and you'll be off!"

"Let me guess," said Lazarus. "When the bullroarers and the coins inside collide, we'll all vanish in a shower of quarks, gluons, photons, muons, kaons, bosons and pions, and be transported on the timeline back to the beginning of our universe."

"Exactly!" said Zanadar, getting even more excited.

"What are... quarks and glu...?" asked Dewey with a screwed up face.

"Subatomic particles," said Kyle.

"We're creating our very own particle collider," added Lazarus.

Dewey nodded his head rapidly. "Radical, man."

"Now we're talkin'!" shouted Armando.

"We'd better get started," said Kyle. "We don't have much time left." Throughout Zanadar's explanation, Kyle had been keeping watch, listening for the encroaching goo.

The Band made their way around the redwood circle to a place deeper in the forest. Once they found a good spot, Zanadar pulled out some woodworking tools from under his cloak. After he passed them out, the Band began constructing their bullroarers. Taylor insisted that they only use the wood from the felled redwood logs left over from the logging camps that once controlled the area.

First, they worked on acquiring long sinews of fibrous bark for the strings. They had to pull off pieces of bark slowly and carefully, making certain they would be strong enough to withstand all the winding they would be subjected to. Then, after prying off the bark, the Band cut proper-sized pieces of wood from the logs. The straight-grained and durable redwood would serve the Band well. After shaping their pieces of wood to the proper size and smoothness, the Band then punched holes in the tips and attached their strings.

Zanadar then pulled the seven mysterious coins out of his pocket. "These," he said, "need to be fitted into the center of your bullroarers. Doing this will transform these primitive wooden bullroarers into magical wands."

"Magic wands?" asked Armando. "Ha. I knew it."

Zanadar continued. "When your bullroarers—and the coins—are rotating, you'll be able to pull the energy out of the universe like an antenna and store it in your bodies. This wand, then, will be an indispensable implement for all of you."

Zanadar then passed out the coins. They looked like silver, but were nothing of the sort. They were heavy and felt warm in Taylor's palm.

"Hey," said Keri, while bringing the coin closer to her eyes, "it's warm."

"Mine, too!" said Dewey.

Kyle stepped closer to Zanadar and whispered, "It's getting closer, Zanadar." The rest of the Band heard him, however. They trusted Kyle's judgment and, therefore, grew extremely anxious.

"OK," said Zanadar hurriedly. The Pleiadian then instructed the Band to first use their tools to trace a hole around each coin on the wooden bullroarers. Then he explained and demonstrated how to carve out the hole in the center of the wood. He watched over each of them carefully, checking to make sure all the holes were perfect. "The coins have to fit tightly so they don't fly out when you're twirling your bullroarer overhead. Now fit your coin into the hole in your bullroarer." Everyone pushed their coins into their holes. The coins clicked snugly into position, adding to the weight of the wooden bullroarer. "Good," Zanadar continued. "Now, as I've said before, you must think of these bullroarers as your magic wands. And to make these wands work, you're going to have to say a few magic words."

"Magic words?!" shrieked Armando. "I knew it."

"Cool," said Dewey.

"What are the words?" asked Taylor hurriedly.

"Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon," said Zanadar in his deep voice.

"What does that mean?" asked Keri, while she began winding-up her bullroarer, twisting the string as tightly as she could.

"Holy mackerel it's coming, get us the heck out of here!" answered Zanadar.

"Really?" asked Keri, as she continued twisting up her bullroarer, winding it tighter and tighter.

"That's not what it means," said Armando, ever the skeptic.

"That's right," said Zanadar. "That's *not* what it means. I was just messin' with ya."

"What language is it?" asked Lazarus.

"Zanadarian," said Zanadar, smiling.

"It's probably Pleiadian," said Taylor in a chastising tone. "Quit fooling around, Zanadar! We don't have time for this."

Properly reigned in, Zanadar cleared his throat and got serious. "Never mind what language it is, or what it means. It'll work. That's all you need to know."

"As long as it gets us outa here, that's all I care about," said Marshall.

While holding onto the string, Keri let go of her bullroarer, allowing it to dangle just above the ground. Immediately, the string started to unwind, putting the bullroarer in a rapid spin.

"Hey look, everybody!" shouted Dewey. "Keri's coin is glowing!"



Morning was fast approaching. The Band had been working in the dark all night. Hidden above the fog was a new moon. This was the day of the summer solstice, the shortest night of the year.

“So once we get in this interdimensional vehicle and travel the timeline, where will we go?” asked Keri.

“Ah!” said Zanadar. “Good question. That’s up to Taylor.”

Everyone looked at Taylor who was staring off into the distance, thinking. This was it. She was going to get her big chance. She could go where and when she wanted. And she would be with Kyle. “I want to go to the Ancient Near East. Somewhere in the Fertile Crescent. Maybe to the Land of Canaan.”

“Why there?” asked Lazarus.

“I’m sure she has her reasons,” added Kyle. “We’ll just have to trust that she knows what she’s doing.”

All of a sudden, a strange noise could be heard in the distance. It sounded much like the bots, but this time, the humming was accompanied by crunching sounds. This, Taylor surmised, was the sound of the great redwood forest coming down, being devoured by the ravenous goo, or maybe by a cloud of bot dust, falling through the fog.

“No more time for talk!” said Kyle. “We’ve got to get started, Zanadar.”

"There's one last thing you'll all need to know," said Zanadar. "The frequency of the energy you'll be generating will create changes in your brainwave patterns. These energies may affect your body's biophysical rhythm. So, some of you may get dizzy, or disoriented, or want to throw up."

"Dizziness?" said Armando. "What happens if one of us..."

"Well," said Zanadar, while sighing, "that's one of the risks."

"That's just great," said Marshall. "On top of everything else, now this."

Then, to make things even worse, bright flashes of lightning began ripping through the sky, striking the tops of the giant redwoods on the border of the clearing. Peals of thunder roared directly overhead.

"Let's not worry about that," said Kyle, trying to keep everyone focused on the task. "We've got to hurry!"

"Now, this is where I must be going," yelled Zanadar above the thunder. "I leave all of you in good hands. Taylor will take you the rest of the way."

Suddenly, in a great whirlwind of light and energy, Zanadar himself was off and away.

"We need to get started," said Kyle. "Now! It's getting close. Very close."

With all of the members in their assigned positions, they started swinging in their specified directions. Each bullroarer started twisting; and, within seconds, the ropes started singing; the roaring, howling, trilling voices of the strings called out in an oscillating harmony of sounds. Zanadar's coins spun within the magical wands, flashing Metatron's Cube and the Fruit of Life designs over and over again. The coins started to glow, and then the chanting began. Each Band member with a clear, loud voice, recited the magical words over and over again:

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

As the swinging, glowing, and chanting continued, Taylor herself started to glow. Her shine grew outward from her body into a shimmering sphere of light. Then, emanating from a point directly

above her navel came a bright, white star of light. The star's arms reached outward from her body, and the center circle, and connected with everyone in the Band.

Taylor looked directly at Keri and nodded, signaling her to step forward to the center of her inner circle. When she reached it, Taylor's light, supported by the glowing light of Keri's bullroarer, enveloped Keri. From within this growing cocoon of light, Taylor smiled at Keri, then turned northwest to face Dewey. He was swinging proficiently, hopping around a little as he swung. When he reached the center of his inner circle, Taylor's light grew around him, too. Then Taylor turned southwest to meet the wildly intense eyes of Armando. He was fiercely swinging his wand overhead, bellowing out Zanadar's chant as loudly as he could. He reached the center of his inner circle and again the light grew. Turning southeast, Taylor noticed Marshall having difficulty keeping his bullroarer swinging in full force. His face was sweating profusely. He looked dizzy. But he summoned his strength, kept his composure, and made it to the center of his inner circle, where the light enveloped him, as well.

By now, the whole Band could feel the energy rising, but Lazarus and Kyle were still not yet in their inner circles. Taylor then turned toward Lazarus. He was swinging his bullroarer like a tall willow twisting in a cyclone. As planned, Lazarus stepped forward toward his inner circle. When he reached the center, the light grew and intensified again, and the group's energy soared.

Everyone was waiting in anticipation, still swinging vigorously, chanting loudly, when the ground started to shake and rumble. Huge hailstones began to fall, thudding on the ground all around the Band. Flames from the now burning trees reached out into the grassy field as if trying to grab hold of the Band. While everyone struggled to remain upright, Taylor turned toward Kyle. Once Kyle entered his inner circle, the bullroarers were supposed to converge and collide, and then they were

supposed to depart. After Taylor's nod, he moved carefully forward, his hair getting whipped around from all the circulating, swirling, churning air. His eyes remained focused on Taylor's.

To Taylor, it seemed as though Kyle were walking in slow motion. She could see each syllable of the magical chant forming on his lips. She could hear his deep voice singing at a tone slightly lower than the others. His chiseled face broke into a smile, exposing his shining teeth. His striated deltoids and pecs pulsated with the effort.

He stepped forward slowly, placing his right foot on the center of his inner circle, then his left. And just as the event horizon of the gray goo was about to lurch forward out of the forest into the grassy field, the circle was complete. The swinging bullroarers weaved in layers, each counter to the others. The voices were at their loudest. The magical wands flipped back and forth, over and over again. The bright light from Taylor's body, the bullroarers, and now the bodies of each Band member, grew in intensity. Each Band member's energy vortex had joined and together had formed a miraculous, bright sphere of light. This ball of seven spheres lit up the sky. And then the Band slowly lifted up off the ground.

When everyone was clearly suspended above the ground, enveloped in a large sphere of bright light, the tall grass directly below began bending, laying down. The grass stalks were weaving in six different directions, the same six directions the Band members had traveled to reach the inner circle, thus creating a strange wreath of plants.

And as the tall grass continued to weave, Taylor focused on what she thought life would look like, sound, feel, smell and taste like, somewhere in the Fertile Crescent around 2000 BCE. At that moment, all the bullroarers converged and collided. Then, the incandescent ball shot out a straight beam of golden light. And like a giant bead sliding on a long, *long* string, the Sacred Seven were gone.

Behind, lying in the Band's wake, neatly woven into the bent grass stems, was a Six Petaled Flower agriglyph, imprinted in the now empty field. But the crop circle didn't last long, because within seconds, the ground started breaking apart, forming a deep crevasse around the clearing. And then a tsunami-sized wave of gray goo, led by an army of badbot swarms passed over the grassy field.



The Band traveled the on the secret superstring timeline around and around the entire planet. On the timeline there were no seven-day weeks. No twelve-month years. No five-day workweeks. No nine to five. On the superstring timeline, there was no Gregorian calendar to live by. No clock to watch. No time to keep.

The Band passed through the gray goo completely unnoticed. They streamed their way along the superstring timeline, darting this way and that. Together, they were tightly enveloped in their ball of light; the very same light that Taylor experienced in her Dance of Divinity in the Lemurians' Temple of Light deep within Mount Shasta; the very same light she had caught a glimpse of in her dream.

After traveling for an immeasurable period of time, the ball of light began slowing down. Each Band member's individual embodied light began to subside, while his or her physical body began to form and take shape. They could even hear their own loud, clear voices chanting the magical words over and over again:

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

Kahza cam abon rama zon dama gon

In time, the Band's incandescent ball came to a stop. The giant superstring disappeared. The bubble descended from the sky, and its light dimmed.

The Band was left standing in formation with their bullroarer wands hanging from their tired arms directly in front of a soaring, three-stepped, brick tower. The smell of saltwater and animal dung was heavy in the air. It was dusty, dry, and hot. People standing all around were wearing dirty robes and sandals. Some of them were holding onto ropes attached to donkeys or carrying baskets full of grain. And all of them were staring at the Band, Taylor in particular, because she was still glowing.

Within seconds, a fearsome company of chariots, pulled by hardy horses, thundered into a circle around the Band. In each chariot stood a driver and a helmeted warrior holding a bow at the ready. Rushing through the gathered chariots came a small battalion of foot-soldiers. Forming a wall with their shields, the soldiers leveled their spears, and began closing in on the Band. As everyone in the Band started backing up into the center of the circle, the white star of light began to radiate out of the core of Taylor's body. At that moment, a loud masculine voice called out from on top of the brick tower and the foot-soldiers halted.

THE END