

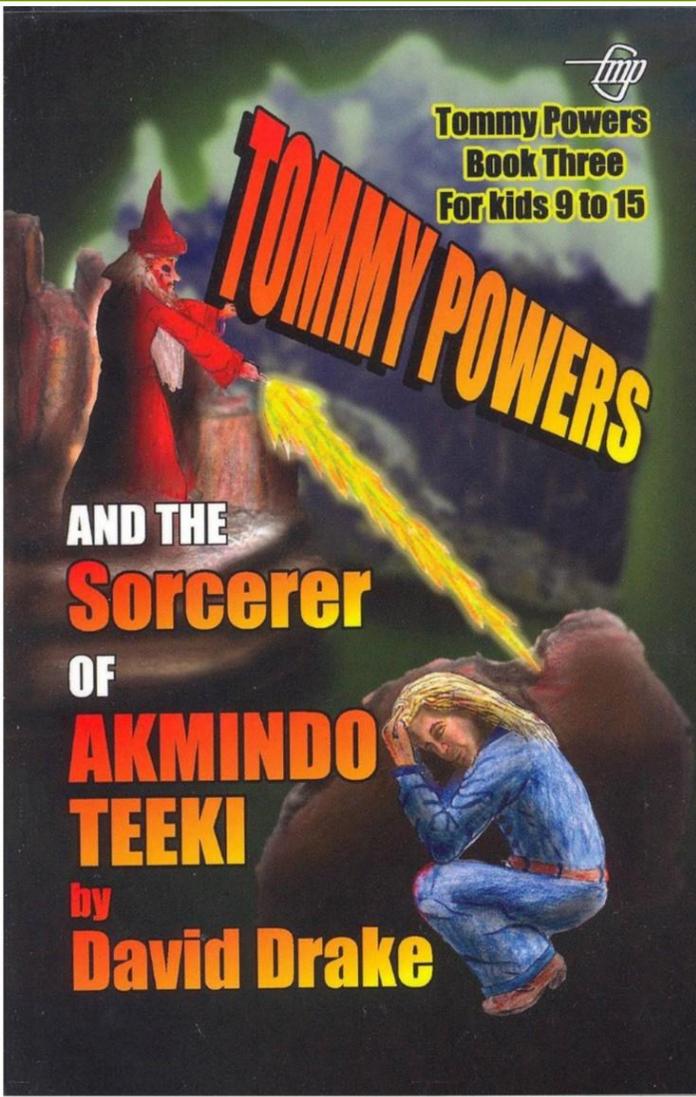


Tommy Powers
Book Three
For kids 9 to 15

TOMMY POWERS

AND THE
Sorcerer
OF
AKMINDO
TEEKI

by
David Drake



Tommy Powers and The Sorcerer of Akmindo Teeki

(Book Three)

**A magical experience for nine to fifteen year olds
(And those who ever were nine to fifteen year olds!)**

By

David Drake

Books should be read in order.

Book One: The Sage of the Calibrators

Book Two: The Mutant Stranger

Book Three: The Sorcerer of Akmindo Teeki

Book Four: The Replicator of Rio Azul

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THE COVER

Thanks to Neil Merritt, Age twelve, for the cover art work. Neil's drawing was selected from nearly fifty entries. The author also wishes to thank all the other young people who contributed their artistic renderings.

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PREFACE

The reader will want to read Books One and Two in the series before beginning this one. The story continues here and assumes that the reader knows about the Calibrators, Tommy's powers and certain of the evil forces they go up against.

Tommy, the naturally appealing, uninhibited young hero of this story, is not only unique in the almost magical powers he possesses, but also in the things he believes about life and how to live it. Some of his ideas may be different from yours and those of your family. All Tommy asks is that you think about the usefulness of the values he treasures and uses to guide the way he interacts with other human beings. Some of those things might be topics for interesting family discussions.

– Enjoy the adventure!

- DD

Again, my deepest thanks to Peggy Treiber for her intrepid editing of this manuscript.

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CHAPTER ONE

Birthday Number 14

(Well, sort of!)

As Tommy Powers, the young Calibrator, I will forever remain 13 years old when performing my missions. As Tommy Powers, the kid who lives in the loft by the ocean, however, I'm about to have my 14th birthday. It is a Time-X thing and the reader will just have to take my word for it. I'm home from Calibration Hall for a short vacation with my family.

The five folks who raised me here by the bay insist on giving me a birthday party, which necessitates making a list of folks I want to invite. Abby – beautiful, wonderful, soft, Abby with her brown eyes and long black hair – is my most important friend. Her father is a Calibrator, which means she lives at Calibration Hall, the wonderful old rustic mansion high atop Calibrator Mountain – a place not designated on any map and unknown to any but the Calibrators. Since my Confirmation a year ago, it has become my home base and I now spend most of my time there with my roommate and Mentor, Gus, whose alter ego is the 1,000-year-old Sage – the leader of the Guild of the Calibrators.

Abby has never visited my loft or met my Wharfies – the name I gave the five people who took me in and raised me. She is allowed minimal contact with the outside world, but I feel certain her parents will permit this outing.

“So, how many invitations shall I make?” Tina asked as the six of us finished breakfast around the large, wooden table toward the rear of the long wide room.

“Well, let's see,” I said, beginning to think aloud. “There

will be Abby and Gus, of course, and my new friend, Andrew. Then the kids from my old school: Ted and Kate, Jerry and Tasha and Marcus. I'd really like to invite Amy the Bagel Lady, but that might seem odd since she's pushing forty."

"Since when has 'odd' ever stopped any one of us from doing what we thought was right?" Tina asked to the emphatic nods of the others around the table.

"Okay, then, and so long as odd is in, I'll add old Charlie from the newsstand and Carl, the kid who helps him there. It will be 11 plus you five. That's 17 with me. That will surely be a record for the most folks to ever be up here in the loft at one time, won't it?"

"You're probably right," Otto began. His dark eyes twinkled at the others as he continued: "Except for those wild orgies we used to have before you came to live with us."

It was a joke of course. Not that they each didn't have a fully satisfactory, romantic side to their life, but that had always been private and mostly took place away from the loft, probably in deference to me. None had married. I hoped my presence had not been the reason for that.

The older I grew the more I came to understand just how much they had modified their lives so I could become a part of theirs. Taking care of a helpless baby and then a little kid is a huge amount of work and responsibility, not to mention expense. I loved them for what they had done for me. Well, I just loved them. It was not a matter of paying them back for it, of course. They raised me because they wanted to. They loved me and when you love someone, you'll do whatever you can to assure their comfort and security.

My recent studies concerning the functions of the human mind had revealed that the Deep Mind's Prime Directive – to keep its person alive at all cost – could only be overridden by a couple of things. One of those was love. A parent would almost always sacrifice itself for the safety or well-being of its child. I decided that one of my next school projects would be studying the topic of love. I'm pretty sure it is the feeling I am growing to have for Abby.

But I ramble on about things, don't I? Since that is what I do, I suppose you'll just need to get used to it.

Turning 14 is an important benchmark to me in several

ways. It means I am now well established as a teenager – no longer a “new teen”. My body is definitely more that of a man’s than a boy’s. I really like that! I expect that I will begin noticing some change as I switch between me as a 14-year-old and the slightly younger Calibrator. I assume that at Calibrator Hall I’ll remain 13. (More Time-X stuff!)

One of the biggest events of my 14th year is having the chance to meet my biological parents on my birthday – if I choose to. Meet may be the wrong term. I’ll get to spend time with them, but once it’s over, the event will be erased from their minds, so it will be a strictly one-sided event in the long run. They understood that from the beginning, when the Calibrators explained to them the nature of the baby the mother was carrying, and they decided some other environment was necessary to raise me properly.

Growing up, I’ve often thought about how it would be to meet them. I’ve gone over the pros and cons in my mind. Of course, I’m interested in who they are and why they felt they were unprepared to raise me. On the other hand, I don’t want anything to come between me and my five wonderful, Wharfies here in the loft. I have to give Gus my decision by the evening before my March 9th birthday. This is the last day of February, so that’s just nine days away.

I still haven’t decided if I will go through with it. It’s a huge decision, and I have no one I can talk it over with. Abby isn’t to know about the arrangement. Gus will say he doesn’t want to influence me. Since no one else knows about the Calibrators, I’m pretty much on my own.

Come to think of it there may be one person – Andrew. Because of the part he played in a recent mission involving the recapture of his father – Antipathy, the most evil villain the world has ever known – he is the one mortal who does know about the Calibrators. He’s a bright kid, exactly one year older than I am. Hey! We can make it a double birthday party. This is finally getting exciting!

“Hey, guys,” I said addressing my Wharfies as Otto and I began doing the dishes. “Andrew’s birthday is the same as mine. Can’t imagine how I overlooked that. Can we make it a double party?”

“Sure. Why not?” Tina said.

The others nodded their approval. They didn't know Andrew. In fact, I'm sure it was the first time they had even heard me speak of him. For their safety, my Calibrator life had to remain a secret from them although they were aware something wonderful had happened to me during the past year.

"I need to make one other request about it all," I said battling my way through the pile of soapsuds to locate a stray fork. "The party can't be on the ninth. I have a commitment I may have to meet on that day. How about the next evening – Saturday?"

Again, it was nods all around and no questions were asked of me. Tina did ask, "We'll need the list of guests that Andrew's wants to invite."

"Add his mother. I doubt if there will be anybody else. We pretty much share the same friends."

It was set. Tina and Molly got to work on the handmade invitations. I would have been happy to just ask folks in person, but the women wouldn't hear of it. It was my first birthday party at which there would be people from outside the family. They saw it as a milestone of some sort. I suppose it was, like a rite of passage signifying my new role beside the others as an adult – well in many ways at least – and that I had a life outside the loft. The party was rapidly shaping up to be a pretty cool event.

After breakfast, I flew to the apartment house where Andrew lived with his fashion-model mother. He was still asleep. After a few moments of small talk with Mrs. Parker, I entered his room and pummeled him into consciousness with the pillow from the top bunk. His initial expression of puzzlement quickly turned to smiles and he retaliated with his own pillow.

"So, to what do I owe this early morning rousting?" he asked. I took a seat in the recliner by the window and he sat up arranging his pillow against the wall for support.

"We are having a birthday party!"

"We?" he asked. the puzzlement returning to his face and tone.

"Yes, we! Remember? We share March 9th, old man of almost 15."

“Oh. So we do. I suppose you have everything figured out.”

“Well, tentatively, at least. My Wharfies decided to ...”

He interrupted.

“Your what?”

“Wharfies. That’s what I call the folks who raised me. It’s the name used down at the docks for the poor folks who live there along the bay – most of them in one-room shanties or makeshift shelters.”

“I see. Okay. Sorry I interrupted.”

“Well, they decided to throw me a birthday party. I decided it would really be great if we made it a double-decker for the two of us.”

“In most ways, we hardly even know each other, Tommy. I’ve been too busy trying to kill you and you’ve been too busy insisting on becoming my friend. You sure you really want to include me in your special day?”

“Positive, providing you won’t show off and light the candles with that laser vision of yours.”

Andrew snorted and smiled. He nodded.

“You are something else, you know,” he said. “Nothing like I’d envisioned a Calibrator would be.”

“Bad and evil, you mean, the way your father had described us to you?”

“No. I mean after I got past that. I figured a race of people with such tremendous powers, who were committed to keeping the world safe from evil, would be more serious and stuffy. Come to find out, I’m the one who’s serious and stuffy. But you did promise to help me change that, remember?”

“I remember and it will be my pleasure. That pillow fight was just the beginning.”

He smiled at me and tossed the extra pillow in my direction. I caught it.

“Pretty quick reflexes – for a little kid.”

I smiled and we fell silent for a few moments.

“Thanks for pounding on me like that this morning,” he said at last. “I’ve never had a friend I’ve felt close to in that way – close enough to do that kind of stuff with I mean.”

“Just wait ‘til my Mario Wharfie puts you over his knee at the party and gives you 15 swats to your behind.”

“Really? That’ll be so cool! I want you to tell me all about them. It will have to be later, though. I have a T-shirt modeling shoot this morning.”

“On Wednesday – a school day?”

“Have to take them when they come. Mom sprung me from the big brick dungeon for the day.”

“Okay, then. I’ll leave my phone number and you can give me a ring. It’s the number at the loft. There aren’t any phones at ... at the place where I live with the Calibrators.”

I must have frowned over the fact I couldn’t tell him about Calibration Hall.

“Hey. It’s okay. I understand your Calibrator stuff is private. I can see it has to be that way. Believe me, I really don’t want any more information that I’ll have to keep secret for the rest of my life.”

It was his turn to frown. I figured I knew why.

“I suppose you’ve been wondering how long the rest of your life will be – whether it will be more like your father’s five centuries or your mother’s regular human lifespan.”

He nodded and his forehead wrinkled.

“It will be whatever it will be,” he said. “It’s just that if I knew, I could begin planning, you know? Adjusting to it or for it.”

I nodded fully able to understand what he was going through. The idea that I would live for dozens of centuries had still not really sunk in.

“I’ll let you shower and dress in peace,” I said. “I’m going to see if I can con your mother out of a sticky bun before I leave.”

“No con necessary, I’m sure,” he said. “She loves you like a son, you know.”

I nodded suddenly feeling quite serious.

“That okay with you, is it?” I asked, needing to understand his real feeling about it.

“Of course. If my knowledge of family structure is accurate, that would make us brothers, and I can’t think of anything cooler than that.”

A powerful WOW! shivered its way through my being. I had to agree that would be excellent.

“Okay then, Bro,” I said standing and delivering a swift

fist to his shoulder. "I'll see you after you make yourself presentable."

I finished my goodie in the kitchen and left the apartment while Andy was still singing his heart out in the shower. From his mother's reaction, I figured she hadn't heard that very often. My first stop was Charlie's News Stand. Carl hadn't arrived for work yet.

"He starts at 10," Charlie reminded me after I inquired about him. "It was a great day when you brought him here, Tommy. He's like the grandson I never had. Just been here a few months and he can already run the place – knows how to order, do the banking, keep the books. Like I said, it was a great day."

"Glad it's worked out so well. When are you going to start taking some time off?"

"Time off. Then I wouldn't get to be with Carl."

It seemed part of my plan had backfired but, like Amy had said, he probably wouldn't know what to do with himself if he didn't go to work every day.

I moved on to Amy's Bagel Stand two blocks east and one block south. There were half a dozen folks waiting to be served, so I took a seat on a bench in the nearby park to wait and watch.

Amy knew most of her customers by name – as well as those of their children and grandchildren. She sincerely cared about them and I figured that got passed on. They understood she cared about them and in turn they made it a point to show others that they cared about them. What a wonderful happy cycle began with Amy every day. I could see it spreading like suddenly energized ripples from a single pebble dropped on a quiet pond.

Eventually, it was my turn. During the past several months, it seemed I could eat 24 hours a day. I supposed I was coming into a growth spurt, which I would welcome.

"Saved you back the blueberriest this morning," Amy said as we traded pecks to the cheeks.

We always hugged. She administered wonderful hugs – special in some way I couldn't define.

"Where's Gussie?" she asked as she prepared my bagel.

“I haven’t seen him yet today. I’m sure he’ll show up. He usually does, doesn’t he?”

“Unless he’s out of town and he seems to be out of town a lot for a kid his age, I think.”

It was the only time I’d heard her make a judgment like that. She was usually pretty close-mouthed with her opinions. I didn’t know how to put her mind at ease about it so I chose not to try.

As she presented the treat to me, sporting layer after layer of cream cheese, Gus strolled up clearly aware of her earlier comment. They exchanged hugs and kisses.

“Never know what you’re going to have. Not predictable like the kid here.”

It was the second time in less than an hour I’d been referred to as a “kid” – me, the almost-ready-to-turn-14 young man. I wasn’t sure what to think about it but, since I refused to accept put-downs, I defined it as their reference to some wonderful quality of eternal youth and went on.

“Cinnamon-apple, if you have any left,” Gus announced.

“Well, of course I have one left,” She said, hands on her hips. “I save back one of every kind ‘til you’ve been here. How else did you think I’m always able to fulfill your request?”

“You’re a special friend. Thank you,” he said, missing her forehead with his lips as she turned back toward the counter to retrieve his treat.

It was as close to being at a loss for words as I had ever seen him. We sat on the bench and talked. Well, mostly, I talked.

“My Wharfies are throwing me a birthday bash and, even though you will be receiving a proper written invitation, I wanted you to know so you could save the evening of the 10th – it’s a Saturday. I’m reserving all day the 9th in case I decide to visit my parents.”

“Not made that decision yet, the way it sounds.”

“I’m leaning pretty far in one direction but, no, I haven’t made a final decision. Can you come?”

“Of course, I’ll come. I suppose dress for the occasion will be black tie and tails (a tuxedo).”

“If you want to stand out like a sore thumb, sure. Knock

yourself out! I think I'll just wear the sweater Andy's mother gave me."

"Just a sweater? You might find it a little chilly from the waist down," he joked.

"Jeans, Gus! I'll wear Andy's sweater and my JEANS!!"

I liked it when Gus joked with me like that. I had the idea that up until he met me he had lived his life as a pretty serious-minded dude.

"I suppose Abby's folks will let her come, don't you?" I asked with a positive spin, hoping for a little support before I delivered the invitation.

"I just imagine they will. Have you thought about how you will transport her? We don't far-jump with Hall folks, you remember."

"I'll ask Ted. I'm sure he and his dad will be happy to come and pick up the two of you. My, that suddenly presents another problem."

"What's that?" he asked.

"The kids from school probably assume that I live up past the church in the woods, too. It's where they have always dropped us off after a party. Now I'm inviting them to my birthday party at the loft – a good two miles south of the church."

In one of the few outright suggestions Gus had ever made to me, he offered: "I suppose you could explain that since Abby and I live near each other, you see her home after the parties and then stay the night with me. It would be the truth since we share quarters."

"Thank you. You're beginning to think more and more like me every day," I joked. "Still a problem, though. To explain your presence there as my father, as well as Gus, I could say that after I see Abby home, my dad and I walk to our place. That would also be close enough to the truth, wouldn't it?"

"I think it would pass. I forgot about needing to account for my appearance there as your father coming to meet the car late at night. Yes. Very good. Just remind 'your father' to drop in on the party. How will you explain having a father, but living with the Wharfies?"

"Welcome to the Guild of the Wharfies, Daddy!"

He understood I meant he would just make it appear he

was one of the loft residents.

“Next item,” I said.

“Oh. There is an agenda with items this morning, is there?”

I smiled and nodded and gave his comment no more attention.

“Andrew is now a part of my life and I think he is going to remain that way. It’s like we were meant to be friends. He’s intelligent so we can talk about things many other kids aren’t interested in; we share many physical skills and capacities that others don’t have; there’s Calibrator blood flowing through both our veins even if far less in his; we share a similar positive philosophy; and, of course, he’s the only one outside the Calibrator’s ranks that knows about us in general and me in particular.”

“Was there a question hiding in there somewhere?” he asked patiently.

“Implied, I guess. Is there any reason for him and me not to be close friends?”

“I can see no such reason,” he answered sounding more like the Sage than Gus. “You have to realize that you will have to walk a very fine line regarding what you may and must not reveal to him about us.”

I had been thinking about that very thing. Andrew understood the tremendous responsibility that came with sharing information about us and up to that point he had made the right decisions – not wanting to know unless it was necessary or unavoidable. I was certain Gus already knew that.

“He has handled it all right so far, correct?”

Gus nodded several times indicating more than casual agreement; he had no doubt about it either.

“How have I done in sharing things?”

I needed to know what he thought, and he understood that.

“As in most matters, you have used very good judgment in this relationship. Remember, though, it is one matter to share things as friends. It is quite a different matter if the two of you begin teaming up to confront the bad guys. Andrew is in no way your equal when up against the worst

mankind has to offer. He could quickly become a liability rather than an asset on a dangerous mission. You would not want to carelessly put him in harm's way. He would become yours to protect."

"Thanks for putting it into perspective that way. I'll give it lots of thought."

Then as an afterthought I said:

"Clearly you know I've been fantasizing about Andy and me working together sometimes. You understand none of that is intended as a plan to replace you or our relationship. But when you are needed elsewhere, and I'm sure that's most of the time, I figured it would be good to have some backup – when you think I'm ready to handle that kind of thing."

"Of course, I understand. Use your best judgment. Remember that he doesn't have any of the 'star' powers and that you are centuries away from having some of the Calibrator skills that might be necessary to protect him."

I nodded. Put that way, being 14 seemed like being an infant. It was a great responsibility to include him. I'd have to sit down with Andrew and lay it all out.

"Your word 'centuries' raised a question for me. Any idea what Andrew's life span will be?"

"His father's kind – the mutant Antipathies – live about five hundred years. His mother's kind about 80 or so. To my knowledge there has never been an 'Andrew' before. He is strictly a one in a trillion-trillion being. Depending on which of his genes were modified his life span could resemble either parent or be anywhere in between. My guess would be the latter – somewhere in between. Maybe two or three hundred years. Has he asked?"

"We spoke of it. I figure he will again. I understand there can be no promises about it, but now I feel comfortable talking with him."

"Good. What's next on that agenda of yours?"

"He knows that you and I are best friends. I'm sure he suspects that makes you a Calibrator, although he's never brought it up. I'm not sure how to handle it if he does."

"How about making that a 'need to know' item? Only reveal it if it clearly becomes absolutely necessary. It would load a heap of responsibility on his shoulders, and that

probably wouldn't be fair to him. I can erase the information from his mind later on, of course, if that seems necessary."

Again, I nodded at his wise answer.

"One last item," I said.

"How is it you have actually just been answering my questions this morning without turning them back on me as other questions?"

"A teacher questions his students. A partner answers the other's questions."

I wasn't prepared for that. I understood that my days of learning from Gus were not over, but what he said moved me up a huge notch away from just student and toward a full-fledged partner. It was at once the most wonderful and most terrifying realization I had ever had. As a student, I could always defer to my teacher, my Mentor. As a partner, I was now expected to pull my share of the weight independent from Gus's approval or suggestions. For a moment, I longed to be a 9-year-old kid again, swimming off the docks in the hot summer sun, diving for clams, and puttsing along on my back, pretending to be some grand ship off on a wonderful new adventure. Those days were gone. I could see that my 14th birthday represented a whole lot more than just another year on the calendar. It was time for me to take my place as a full-fledged, fully responsible Calibrator.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Alliance

By noon the invitations were ready and by one o'clock I was delivering the last one to Marcus at his apartment in one of the poorer areas of the city, not far from the school.

"Hey, Tommy Bro," he said meeting my high-raised knuckles with his own, clearly pleased to have me drop by.

"What's up?"

I handed him the invitation, but explained before he really had a chance to read it.

"My family is throwing a party for Andrew and me. Come to find out we share the same birthday. We'd really like you to be there. My loft. Seven p.m. on the 10th."

"I never miss a party. What's this with you and Andrew? All the kids are wondering about it. It used to seem like you were worst enemies or something and now you're sharing a party? What gives?"

I hadn't been prepared for the question. I should have been, but I wasn't.

"Oh, things change when guys get to know each other, you know."

It had been a lame response – though true – but he seemed to accept it. I rushed on before he could revisit the topic.

"Bring a present – something for one of the kids over at the children's hospital. Eight to 12-year-olds in the hospital's cancer ward. Andy and I don't want gifts."

"Pretty nice. I think I'll do that at mine – it's in May. You help me make the arrangements?"

"Sure. Actually, Charlie at the news stand is my

contact. Why don't you work directly through him?"

As Marcus nodded he turned serious.

"You probably should keep your distance from this area for a while, Tommy. There's a gang war brewing. The Skulls and Stiletos have always hated each other, but right now they seem to hate white kids even more. It ain't safe for you around here. I'll walk you down to 69th Street. That's pretty much the northern boundary of the two territories."

"What's happening? What's come up between them?"

"Not sure. I've spent my whole life trying to keep away from them. It's not my intention to get close enough to find out, at this point."

I understood – well not really. I had never had to resist the pressure to join a gang. I admired Marcus for having been able to do that there in his gang-dominated neighborhood. Though I could have exited the neighborhood safely on my own, I accepted his offer to walk me out of the area. He was a good friend. I hoped that being seen with a white kid wouldn't cause problems for him.

It brought up an interesting thought. Next to most white kids I looked tan – deep tan like a light-skinned version of an Indian. But next to Marcus, who had beautiful, shiny ebony black skin, I looked as pale as a sheet. I was light in one group and dark in another, which told me skin color certainly made no difference whatsoever. Clearly, for some reason, it did to the Skulls and Stiletos.

I figured it was a Deep Mind thing. Somehow their Deep Minds had come to believe bad things about some white people and it had generalized that to ALL white people – probably as a means of self-protection. I'd not deny there were white folks who had probably done them wrong in some, even many, ways. I was ashamed about that, but they were not me and it seemed unfair for me to be lumped with them without a hearing on my own individual merits.

I sincerely doubted that every black person they had known had been 100 percent good to them and yet they didn't hate all other black people because of it. The Deep Mind was an intriguing mechanism. It was obvious that the Skulls hated all black folks who were also Stiletos, and all Stiletos hated all black folks who were Skulls.

It was, of course, a lazy man's way of making decisions. Find some single trait to hate and then hate everybody who possessed it, regardless of what other traits they might have. That way you didn't ever have to take the time or make the effort to actually get to know the members of that group personally.

I would look into it. Some would say that if rival gangs want to kill each other off, let them go at it – that the world would be a better place because of it. I believe that's pretty shortsighted. Just think of the sorrow such a catastrophe would bring on the young peoples' families. Think of all the human potential that would never be reached. The Sage said, "A bad guy defeated was still a bad guy. A bad guy converted into a good guy became another powerful force for good."

I say a dead guy has no chance at all of helping to improve the world and the lot of mankind.

I'm rambling again. I like to ramble. When I ramble, I often hear myself saying things I've never said before – things I've never thought through well enough to put into words.

Sometimes it's rubbish, but often it's pretty good stuff so, I choose to keep on rambling (sounds like a Country and Western song title). I'm glad I've had my Wharfies who were always willing to listen to whatever I had to say. It's really important to have people in your life who will just listen to you and not argue points. It gives you a chance to listen to yourself, and that's often what's really most important.

I mind-talked to Gus about the brewing gang war and, even though I was on vacation, suggested I wanted to help. He was soon at my side as I headed across the park toward the docks.

"Rama Ksaki, also known as the Sorcerer of Akmino Teeki," Gus said without further comment.

"More, please?" I asked.

"He's a well-known magician-type in Europe and Africa and wherever he goes, terrible things happen."

"You're saying that he's here and that he's behind the gang thing?"

"He's been here several weeks. Packs them in during two shows daily at the Paramount Theater. It's a combination of magic and hypnotically induced mental illusions. He was

raised by a group of misguided, self-centered, treacherous monks high in the mountains of Tibet – a remote area known as Akmino Teeki. He mastered their ancient mind-control techniques and accepted their malevolent (evil) philosophy lock, stock, and barrel.”

“The philosophy? Tell me more.”

“They believe that only they possess the Truth and that only those who live by their version of the Truth deserve to live. Beliefs that are at odds with theirs have no value, and therefore those who hold them have no right to do so.”

“That would seem to give them the right to destroy those who resist their philosophy,” I said, shivering at the thought.

“It does, indeed, either by the outright massacre of nonbelievers or by forcing them to live according to the monks’ dictates.”

“They have a name?”

“The Society of the Enlightened. They’ve been around for thousands of years perfecting their techniques. It’s only during the last few years that they have begun their organized attack on the world. They have strived to produce a super-intelligent race through selective pairing of mates.”

“Married monks? Never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s less about marriage and more about producing brilliant offspring. Only the smartest and strongest are allowed to have children. There is no real family life involved, and children often don’t even know who their parents are. Their total allegiance is to the Society and their single purpose has become imposing their philosophy on all the people of the world.”

“It sounds more frightening than Antipathy. There is only one of his kind at a time. How many of the Enlightened are working among us?”

“We don’t know for sure. We are tracking several dozen – all male and all in their 30s. Most use the entertainment industry as their means for influencing others.”

“And by ‘their means’ you refer to mind-control methods?”

“Yes. Their most proficient are on a par with the best we Calibrators have to offer.”

“Mind Clouding, Mind Seeping, Mind Talk – things like that, you mean?”

“That’s how it appears. They have developed a technique I have come to call Integrity Encroachment.”

“More, Gus.”

“As you’re well aware, humans have an Integrity Path – it’s a mental process really. Integrity is the state of always living up to one’s positive value system – being the best human being possible. The human Integrity Path has two distinct ends – the positive, where we need to remain at all times if we are to maintain a human-friendly society, and the negative, where folks find themselves when they are doing things that are destructive to society – stealing, lying, living a selfish life, putting others down, or in related ways being hurtful to others.

“Obviously, there is a point at which the positive and negative ends of the Integrity Path meet. The Enlightened have developed a technique that allows the negative end to gradually take over the positive end – to encroach upon it. Eventually, it destroys it completely. At that point a person is fully vulnerable to the Society’s self-centered philosophy.

“They really only want bright folks as disciples, so they tend to persuade those who they assume are less intelligent to destroy themselves or each other. Then they go to work on the rest, gradually eating away at the positive ends of the Integrity Paths.”

“So, the monks who run this society don’t have positive paths, then.”

“Oh, yes, they do. In fact, they live most of their lives on the positive path. They take good care of their own. They are kind and compassionate and caring – loving, even – to their own. But, it is all controlled by one insidious, all-powerful spot on their negative path that allows for no other points of view. It is the area of total self-centeredness – the most destructive and most indestructible of all human convictions.

“When you believe you know the only Truth, any attack on your position has to, therefore, be false – has to be the untruth you could say. So, they possess no power for self-evaluation of their position.”

“It sounds like their converts will be without the positive

path you say the monks have. I don't understand."

"Once they have destroyed the positive path and the specific values it held, they rebuild it after their own model so that mind cannot easily return to what it believed before."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Couldn't the path installed by the Enlightened Ones be destroyed and then rebuilt to be the way it had been before?"

"An interesting concept, Tommy. Use the Enlightened Ones' destructive tactics to return folks to the way they had been."

"It presents a moral dilemma right from the git-go, doesn't it," I said.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Gus said.

"If we reversed it we'd be playing God ourselves, saying the old way was right – the Truth – and the Enlightened Ones' way was wrong – the untruth."

"Think about a middle ground," Gus said.

I thought as we approached the loft.

"I see. You mean to return the person's path to a place where it could make a decision between one or the other – to be able to examine both and make a decision based on reason and not blind, thoughtless loyalty."

"I think we may have a plan," Gus said, squeezing my shoulders and pulling me close to him.

"This saving the world thing could get to be a major drag, you know, Gus?" I said with a sigh.

Gus laughed out loud.

He held-his-stomach laughed.

He sat-on-the-wooden-railing laughed.

He slid-down-onto-the-dock laughed.

I couldn't resist, of course, and was soon sitting there beside him, enjoying fully uncontrolled, wet-faced laughter.

Apparently, we had not gone about it quietly. Molly had obviously heard us. She poked her head out the upstairs window and called down to me.

"Andrew is on the phone for you, Tommy."

I nodded and waved, still unable to control myself enough to speak. She understood and I struggled to my feet.

"Gotta go," I said looking down at Gus's still jiggling belly. "And I meant what I said. It can be a drag?"

It started him all over again. I was determined to keep my composure so hurried to the door, content to smile myself up the steps to the loft. Andrew and I arranged to meet at the gravel pit to talk. It was the same place he had once tried to suffocate me under tons of clay and rock. Perhaps it was in some way symbolic to him of when the first kernel of our friendship began. Maybe he just wanted to go for the coldest swim of his life. Either way was fine with me.

I hadn't been there since that encounter and was interested to see that the cliff near the shore had collapsed further, forming a pool-sized pond perhaps 20 feet wide and 60 feet long. It looked to be eight to 10 feet deep.

Andrew was sitting, cross-legged, near the edge of the water – strangely, water with steam rising from its surface. I figured I understood, but asked anyway as I took a seat beside him.

“What’s the deal with the hot water?”

“Felt the need to exercise my laser vision so heated it up – just the new pool here. A pretty nice spot the way it looks to me.”

“Let’s see. Here at the pit where you tried to do me in. And now a pool. If I recall right, the last time we were in a pool together you also tried to do me in. Anything I should be concerned about?”

Andrew smiled his wonderful smile, apparently knowing I was kidding and ignoring my question.

“I still don’t see how you escaped from me at Kate’s pool,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m really glad you did. Just don’t understand.”

I winked at him.

He nodded.

“Ah. Calibrator secret stuff,” he said. “I won’t ask again.”

“Talk or swim?” I asked.

“Both?” he said, part suggestion and part question.

“Sure. Both is good.”

We were soon in the water – more like a hot tub, but rather nice on a cool, early March afternoon. The sun felt great, and the morning breeze had stilled.

“I spoke to a knowledgeable colleague about your probable life span – just in case you ever want to know his

best guess about it," I said.

"His best guesses usually pretty good, are they?"

"I'd put them up against any."

"I'd like to hear, then. This is scary, you know?"

"I'm sure. Lots of scary things in my life, too."

"Well?" he asked signaling he was ready to hear what I had to say.

"Probably two to three hundred years, give or take a century."

"It's what I figured on my own, after you told me about Antipathy's life span. I have to wonder what he really looked like, you know?"

"Your father?"

"Antipathy," he said, apparently wanting to distance himself from the man's bloodline.

I nodded and shrugged. I had no idea what he really looked like since he could appear any way he desired.

"I guess you have the privilege of looking any age you want to," I said, referring to his inherited ability to take on the appearance of others.

"I've tried it some the past few weeks. I can do younger kids real easy. I can't hold the looks of older folks for more than a few minutes. It's like from the moment I assume their form, my body starts getting tighter and tighter until I can't hold it anymore and I spring back to me."

"Fascinating stuff!" I said, indicating my excitement at his discoveries.

Andrew smiled.

"I just imagine that while you were buried over there under all that dirt you were lying there saying, 'Fascinating stuff' to yourself," he said shaking his head and snorting in disbelief.

"I must admit it crossed my mind," I said, smiling.

He moved closer, put his hands on my shoulders and dunked me playfully. I swam underwater to a spot behind him, rose up out of the water and planted my feet on his shoulders sinking him completely to the bottom of the pool. He sputtered to the surface, giggling away his remaining air and sinking once again. I figured he'd struggle back so waited. He did.

"Fantastic stuff," he said, looking directly into my face.

I must have looked puzzled. He explained.

“Friendship.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Fantastic stuff for sure.”

We swam awhile, from end to end and side to side. We dove for rocks and found many things to laugh about. It was a good time. At last it was my turn to talk.

“I’d like to share something very personal with you and get your advice. It involves some Calibrator stuff, but nothing on the classified list. I won’t go into it, though, if that bothers you.”

He shrugged.

“If you trust me with it, shoot.”

It was more difficult to begin than I had imagined it would be.

“Calibrator babies are mutations and are usually not raised by their biological parents. It seems to take a very special kind of home environment to prepare the child for his destiny as a Calibrator. It is like the ultimate act of love when they give over their baby into the care of others.”

I felt an unexpected stream of tears begin to flow. Andrew splashed my face as if to disguise the event. Crying was okay to me. Apparently not to him. From his perspective, what he was being a good-guy friend.

“Anyway, when the child turns 14, like I will on the ninth, he gets a chance to spend a day with them so they can get acquainted. Afterward the parents’ minds are clouded, so they don’t remember the specifics of what went on. It’s a way to relieve them of the responsibility of knowing the identity of a Calibrator and protecting them from evil forces that might try to take advantage of that knowledge. It is all agreed to before the child is born.”

“As somebody I know would probably say, ‘Fascinating stuff!’” he said.

I’m sure I smiled and Andrew returned it. We continued facing each other, treading water in the center of the pool.

“Well, I have to decide if I want to meet them or not.”

“What’s to decide? I’d think you’d be terribly curious.”

“I am, of course. It’s mostly selfish that I’m reluctant. What if I decide I should really be with them? What if they need me? What if my bond with them is so strong it changes

the way I feel toward my Wharfs? Those possibilities are really scary.”

“I can see that,” he said, beginning to understand where I was coming from. “I didn’t have to go through any of that. One day while I was walking home from the library, this man came up beside me and said he was my father and that he wanted to get to know me, but didn’t want to upset my mother after all those years. I asked for proof and he produced a long string of things. Anybody could have learned about a few of them, I supposed, but knowing all of them was unlikely.

“I asked for some incontestable proof. He said to ask my mother what his special name for her had been. It was something I suspected he only used during their romantic times together. It was ‘Pooky’ of all things.

“I asked her and she blushed, but told me. I forget just how I got around to the subject. She confirmed the name. I was convinced he was my father. I wanted to believe him, I guess. I missed having a father. It made me feel so different from most of the other kids. When they’d ask about my dad, I’d say he had been killed in the war. I found that shut them up and got me some sympathy as well.

“Here I go on about myself again. This was supposed to be about you. Sorry.”

“No. You’ve really helped me. It didn’t turn out the way you had hoped, I’m sure. May I ask if you have any regrets about having got to know him?”

As soon as I asked the question I wished I hadn’t. There must have been nothing but regrets the way it turned out.

“Regrets?” he began. “Sure. I wish he had given some really good reason for having been away all those years and had worked things out with Mom so we could live happily ever after. But that didn’t – that couldn’t – happen. I don’t regret getting to know him. I’m terribly sorry for him, that he has no choice, but to be the evil person he is. At least now I know. And, for me at least, Tommy, knowing is a whole lot better than not knowing.”

“You’re a great friend, Andrew – Andy. Thanks for that. Of course, there is one obligation between friends you may not know about.”

“His brow furrowed and he listened intently, waiting for what I was going to say.”

“That obligation is to inflict pain on a friend at every possible opportunity.”

“I leaped out of the water at him and grabbed him around the neck, submerging the two of us to the bottom. He pounded at my abdomen. I didn’t let go. He pounded on my back. I didn’t let go. Then nothing for a moment, followed by a gentle tickling motion to my ribs. I immediately let go and struggled toward the surface working to put some distance between the two of us. He had found my weak spot.”

He surfaced, laughing, and headed in my direction. I made a bee-line for shore and scrambled onto the safety of dry land. He stopped at the water’s edge and we laughed on for some time. Andrew was going to be a great friend. I would work hard to be the same for him.

That time together had raised an important question. As useful as I was sure he would be, should I include him on my Calibrator missions and put his safety in jeopardy? Later, I spent a good deal of time thinking about it.

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CHAPTER THREE

Vacant words. Vacant heads.

The iron pipe, which was rapidly closing in on the side of my head, led me to believe that I just might be an unwelcome visitor there in that alley between 66th and 67th streets. I initiated a two-minute Time-X, freezing the 10 of them in the moment to give myself some time to think.

It had been dark for some time when I arrived in the area 15 minutes or so earlier. I made it known to those I passed on the street that I wanted to speak with the leader of the Skulls. Some laughed at me. Some spat at me. Most called me strings of foul words, the logical sequence of which usually escaped me. I wondered if they could actually speak without profanity.

They weren't really communicating ideas, of course. In place of most meaningful nouns and adjectives, they inserted vacant words – swear words – which provided no real information. One I particularly liked went something like: "You blinkin', blockin' white dude ain't got no blinkin', blockin' business blookin' around this blankin' turf."

Well, it might as well have gone like that for the words used, conveyed no more meaning than my substitutes. Just vacant words, you see – vacant – empty of any real meaning.

Folks who rely on profanity are lazy thinkers. They just pull vacant words out of the air instead of thinking about what they need to be saying. Lazy thinkers can't, of course, ever really say what's on their mind because they don't know what's on their mind – they haven't taken the time to figure it out. They live in a mental cloud of vacant profanity.

So, they don't know what they really believe about most things. And, of course, nobody they "talk" to really knows what they believe, either, because it is never expressed clearly enough to pass on the specific ideas or thoughts.

It's one of my pet peeves, I guess. I've spoken of it before.

But, back to the iron pipe and the 10 'blinkin' dudes who were closing in on me. Let's see. What kind of dudes were they? Were they big, were they black, were they angry, were they laughing, were they talkative, were they educated, were they dropouts, were they Republicans? No way of knowing from that sentence, is there? Let me try again.

Back to the iron pipe and the 10 unfriendly dudes who were closing in on me. After about 10 minutes of walking the sidewalks I had been approached by a 10-year-old with a message. He told to me go to this alley, and Dwayne would talk with me. Dwayne was apparently second in command.

I arrived in what appeared to be an empty alley. I was about halfway into it when the young men appeared – five in front and five behind. One stepped forward with the pipe, repeatedly hitting it against his other open palm.

"Dwayne, I presume," I said smiling and extending my hand.

It was clearly not the way they did things.

"We gots bigger things brewin' than talkin' to a blankity-blank white kid. I'm gonna teach ya ta keep your blankity-blank blank outta the Skulls' blankity-blank turf."

"I don't get the meaning of your term, blankity-blank," I said, tormenting him just a bit. "It seems you just used it in three completely different ways. Very confusing to an outsider like me."

It was at that moment that he raised the pipe and began to swing. My hopes of speaking with the head Skull were rapidly drawing to a close. I figured the evening shouldn't just go to waste, so I set the stage a bit just before the Time-X ran out. I replaced myself with one of them – the pipe was still about a foot from his temple. Then I unscrewed the one light bulb there in the alley, leaving it dark. I flew up to a fourth-floor fire escape and sat, feet dangling over the side, and watched.

The unfortunate kid I selected as my stand-in got

bashed in the skull. I had taken time to wrap the pipe in a scarf so the boy wouldn't be badly hurt. Even so, I winced. I did have to chuckle at a Skull getting bashed in his skull by another Skull. The others looked around, fully bewildered. They had come to do serious damage to an outsider and it seemed I had let them down. What a shame! They were clearly disappointed as they tended to their stunned comrade.

I did my best two-fingered whistle and got their attention just long enough for them to see me there in the moonlight before I waved politely and disappeared. I didn't stick around to listen, but could imagine the high-powered communication that probably ensued.

"What the blank you mean, hittin' on Malvin that way? Where'd that blinkin' blankin' little bloonker go to? Nobody jist bloonkin' disappears. Ain't blankin' possible. Blonk! Blonk! Blonk!"

I would need a new approach. I'd talk some more about it with Marcus in the morning. He had grown up among the two gangs and would be my best resource. Of course, I'd have to be sneaky about it since he had no idea what I was really about.

My curfew at the loft was 10 on week nights, and I was cutting it close. Otto was down on the dock smoking his pipe. He greeted me in his always casual way, and we moved toward the door together. I have to admit it was really comforting to finally come upon a friendly looking black face that evening.

"You weren't waiting up for me down here, were you?" I asked.

"Me. Wait up for you? What? You think I'd be worried about you or something? You, the youngster that I love more than anything else in the entire universe. No. I'd not be waiting up for you."

He ruffled my hair. I administered a major hug to his waist, shook my finger at him – indicating his pipe – and followed him up the stairs. Like most kids, I suppose, I seldom considered the fact that when I was away from home my folks worried about me. I knew I was okay, but they had no way of knowing that. There's no complete solution to it unless one of them accompanied me everywhere I went. Like I'd want that,

no matter how much I loved them. I guess being home when they expected me to be home was the best compromise. I'm proud to say that I've almost always come through for them in that way. I'm a pretty responsible kid – thanks to them.

Inside, Yorka was playing his violin and Mario was singing something from Figaro. Tina and Molly were working on party decorations. I made small talk while I fixed a snack and washed it down with a glass of milk. I made the rounds, delivering my usual nightly hugs and kisses and then turned in. I was tired and figured the next day might be long and hard.

* * *

I was up at five o'clock, quickly in and out of the shower – chilly by any standards – and was sitting at the table eating the scrambled-egg sandwich I'd fixed for myself, when Otto joined me.

"Thanks for putting on the coffee," he said, pouring a cup and taking a seat beside me.

I nodded, assuming it had been the aroma that had awakened him. Otto was a coffee guzzler – another thing that occasionally became the recipient of my finger-shaking. I had often wondered how something that smelled so fantastic could have such a revolting taste. More than that, how did folks come to actually enjoy drinking the nauseating brew?

It had been a restless sleep for me. I kept coming back to Otto's remarks down on the dock the night before. They indicated a suddenly higher level of concern about my welfare when I was out of his sight. I imagined it had to do with the new life, which he suspected I now had and which I had more or less confirmed by not denying it during our one talk on the subject. I wanted to set his mind at ease and yet I was not free to provide him the specific information that would do that. During the night, I had hatched a plan.

Otto was an extremely bright man. He and I had always communicated well with a minimum of words. We understood each other and knew the other's minds. We trusted each other completely. I decided that I would say just one more thing to him on the subject of my new life. I hoped it would provide him some peace of mind even if it had to be cryptic (less than clear).

I put my sandwich down and wiped my mouth. I looked

directly into his face as I spoke.

“I understand that you are concerned about my welfare – considerably more it seems now, than before ...”

He nodded that he got my meaning and I continued.

“I’ll say these five words just once because I know you will believe me. They mean exactly what they say.”

He put his coffee cup down, prepared to listen.

“I can never be harmed.”

There it was. The message I hoped would set his mind at ease forever. He nodded – long and slow.

“Thank you, Tommy.”

He took a sip of coffee. I took a sip of juice.

“The women folks are going all-out on this party,” he said, indicating the previous topic was now closed forever. “Be prepared for decorations like you’ve never seen around this place and enough food to feed an army.”

“Well, most of the guests are teenagers so I imagine they’ll be able to put away whatever amount of goodies the ladies prepare.”

We sat in silence studying each other’s faces for some time. It was at that moment I realized that even though the nature of the relationship between a child and his parents changes from time to time, the nature of love does not. The revelation sent wonder-filled tingles up my spine and down my chest.

“You’re not in your bed,” Mario announced, making it appear like some major discovery as he yawned and stretched his considerable bulk into a chair beside me at the table.

“I’m not? Where do you suppose I could be, then?” I said chiding him for his phrasing. Mario always woke me in the morning, and it was to that he was referring.

“Coffee?” I asked getting to my feet and moving in the direction of the pot, knowing his answer well before he delivered it.

“Si! Grazie!” (“Yes, Thank you,” in Italian).

I placed the drink on the table in front of him and kissed him on his temple, then repeated the same with Otto.

“Got stuff to do this morning, guys, if you will excuse me. I made my bed, policed my area, took out the trash and deposited my dirty duds in the hamper – a perfect 15-foot

swish, by the way.”

“When will we see you again?” Mario asked.

“I’ll be starved by noon so you can count on me at least by then.”

“Well, you be careful out there,” Mario reminded me, wagging a finger of his own. “Remember this is a city brimming over with all of a city’s bad stuff.”

Otto gave me a private wink. It told me he had relaxed about my well-being. It also seemed to say how proud he was of me – for whatever it was I had become. It was a special moment between us. It was intriguing to me how sometimes a split second like that between folks was remembered for a lifetime while entire months might easily erode from the memory forever.

During the night, I had mind-seeped to Marcus, suggesting he wanted to get to school early. I left the reason open, but indicated Tommy would probably be there.

I was messing around with the basketball when he jogged up to the playground. His quick full-out smile always teased out one in response from everybody who witnessed it.

“Hey. Tommy. Had a feeling you’d be here, bro. Hoops?”

“How about talk instead this morning?”

“Sure.”

He looked puzzled but accepted my preference. I explained.

“I have a project I’m working on. It’s about the gangs here in this part of the city. I figured you’d be my best starting point since you’ve grown up with them all around you. Will you talk with me about them some more?”

“Of course. Picnic table over there by the back door? I’ll spring for juice,” he said.

We were soon settled in and sipping juice through a straw from a box.

“So. Shoot,” he said. “Remember, though, I’ve lived here on the fringe of gangland so I’ve been a lot luckier than the kids deep inside. I’ve never had to be a part of that life.”

I nodded that I understood.

“There are two main gangs as I understand it. The Skulls and the Stiletos.”

“Right. The Skulls are mostly black kids. The Stilettoes area a mixture of blacks, Hispanics and a few whites. The two groups hate each other’s guts.”

“How did that come about?”

“It’s just the gang mentality, I guess. We’re the good guys and they’re the bad guys sort of thing. You protect your own and you hate everybody else. It’s about all that gives their lives any purpose – protecting and hating. If the two gangs didn’t have each other to hate, they wouldn’t have their main reason for being.”

“That simple? Really?”

“In the beginning, it was. They’ve been around this area now for 30 years or more. During that time they’ve done some really bad stuff to each other, so now they have more specific things to be angry at each other about. Lots of boys have died. It’s really sad. Just last night there was a fight. I hear four kids were killed – all Skulls. So you know they’ll be out for revenge big time. That’s how it goes. You do something to us, and we’ll do something worse back to you. Four dead Skulls will probably mean six or eight dead Stilettoes. It’s terrible how it works.”

“What’s stirring things up now?”

“Not sure. It’s all been pretty quiet during the past six or eight months. The Skulls have been staying up here where they live and the Stilettoes down south in their territory. Then, bam! All hell broke loose. Pardon my language.”

“Who are the gang leaders?”

“Dante runs the Skulls. He’s probably in his mid-twenties now. Damien heads up the Stilettoes. About the same age, I’d say. Maybe a little younger. I’ve never actually seen him.”

“What about Dwayne?” I asked.

“Plays second fiddle to Dante – like a two-star general to Dante’s five. In charge of finances – that means robberies, muggings, drug sales, things like that. Just turned 19 and he’s really full of himself. Someday he’ll put a blade in Dante’s back and move up to top dog.”

“That’s how it works?”

“Yup. Once you start up the ranks you can never trust anybody. Always lookin’ over your shoulder. Most of these

guys don't expect to live past 25 and, sadly, most don't."

I couldn't remember when I'd felt so empty. It was a culture within a culture – a lazy, self-destructive mini-culture that fed off the hard work of the larger community. It represented so many wasted lives. They didn't value life – either that of those in the other gang or, I was now discovering, the lives of those in their own gang who might get in the way of their personal ambitions. They most certainly lived large parts of their lives on the negative ends of their Integrity Paths.

I read an essay once titled something like "A Sense of Precious." In it the author made the case that unless children come to understand how precious they are, they can't ever really believe other people – other lives – have any value either. I figured the gang members' homes had done a pretty lousy job of helping the kids learn how precious they each were. Certainly the gangs were doing nothing to promote it. Instead, you learn that you gain worth because you're a Skull or Stiletto. It has nothing to do with your value as an individual human being.

I felt so sorry for all those kids. It wasn't like they really had a choice. Old Stella, the woman I met in Crazy Carl's apartment building, pretty well summed it up, I suppose, when she said, "All these kids have to fill their lives is bad." The good, positive alternatives just don't seem to be available.

The year before, some of my friends and I had turned it around for one similar group – Marcus's immediate neighborhood – by replacing a drug-based life with work and self-respect. This gang thing was much bigger and more complex. It was going to be far more difficult to handle.

If the Sorcerer was behind it, as Gus had indicated, I had to find some way of determining just how he was pitting the gangs against each other. I had one more question for Marcus.

"What holds the gangs together?"

"The rank and file members – all the little guys, you might say – are intensely loyal to their leader. Blindly loyal. If they aren't, they know either they or their family will be hurt big-time. The leaders don't allow disloyalty. When they speak, a member better jump or he'll find some body part broken or

his little brother floating face down in the bay. Gang members live in constant fear – fear of the other gangs, fear of the police and fear of their own leaders.”

“And why, then, do kids join the gangs?”

“Believe it or not, it represents the good life to them – the best one they can see out there in the big world. They will be protected – gangs do protect their own. Then, of course, there’s the problem of not being a member. You’ll find yourself beaten to a pulp three times a week until you join.”

It made me sick to think how all those kids were trapped in a life that only allowed fear and destructive intentions. It appeared, from what Marcus was saying, that most of them didn’t even know better alternatives existed. I wondered how they interpreted what they saw on TV – the happy families, the safe streets, the love and compassion. Fantasy, I suppose. As much a fantasy as Superman or Mickey Mouse. Television had to represent a make-believe world to them, except the most violent shows, perhaps. Those probably seemed comfortable because they showed life as they knew it. Something they could trust.

“I’ll have more questions later, if you’re willing.”

“Of course. You gave me my life, remember. I’ll always be here for you.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond so I did the knuckle thing with him, smiled and left for Amy’s Bagel Stand. To my surprise, Andrew was there. I gave Amy a long hug and kissed her cheek. Andy raised his knuckles and I met them with mine. What a good feeling being there with two of my best friends.

“She wouldn’t let me pay,” he said, jerking his head in Amy’s direction.

“She’s more into hugs than currency,” I said, offering a feeble explanation.

She handed me my usual blueberry saying, “Looks like we have another blueberrier among us.” She indicated Andrew with her glance.

“Tommy got me hooked on them,” he said, sending me a quick wink.

“I suppose you two have never been officially introduced, have you,” I said. “Amy, Andrew. Andrew, Amy.”

They nodded politely at one another somewhat

awkwardly, which indicated the absurdity of what I'd just done. I went on addressing Andrew.

"Surprised to see you here so early on a Saturday morning."

"Figured I'd find you. I called your place and they said you were out 'til noon. Hope I'm not intruding. Thought maybe we could hang if you weren't too busy with ... other things."

I ushered him to the nearby park bench where Gus and I often sat to talk.

"You once joked about us being a superhero team," I said. "How serious were you?"

"Totally. I've spent a lot – and I mean a LOT – of time the past month thinking about what my life should represent. I mean, what I should do with my life? My good looks and fantastic body won't last forever, you know, so someday I'll have to give up modeling."

He paused and looked me in the face to make sure I understood he was joking. I shook my head and chuckled through a grin, indicating that I caught his intent even though it was in every way true. He went on.

"One thing I've discovered is that I'm a little jealous of you. Not you because of all your powers. I'm cool with the fact we are different that way, though I do want to use the few I have to help others. But I'm jealous that you seem to know exactly what your life is about. I don't. I'd like to save the world. That sounds stupid, I suppose, but it's the truth. It's what you're working at every day, and I don't seem to know how to go about getting started."

"Sounds like you just did."

"Did what?"

"Get started."

"What?"

"You want to save the world. Me too. There is one thing I've learned this past year as a Calibrator, Andy. I can only save the part of the world I can touch. Just think what would happen if everybody tried to save the part of the world he or she could touch. The whole world would soon be in good hands, wouldn't it?"

"I guess I'm beginning to see what you mean. It's like dividing up the world up into little overlapping circles, with one

person taking responsibility for improving things within his circle. For little kids the circle might be small and just include his family or his family and the old lady who lives next door. For older kids it would be somewhat larger and might take in the whole neighborhood. Teenagers might move beyond the local area and join groups that are already working toward their goals like Habitat for Humanity or volunteering at church or at the Boys and Girls Club or a hospital.”

“Boy! When you run with an idea you really get places fast,” I said sincerely impressed. “I’ve spoken with ... well, let’s just call him my Mentor about the two of us. His concern is that by drawing you into things I most certainly would be putting you in dangerous situations. He cautioned me to make certain that you understood that, and that I was willing to assume that kind of responsibility.”

“It seems to me if our relationship up to this point has proved anything at all, it is that we are both pretty much indestructible,” Andrew said.

“We have put it to the test, haven’t we?” I agreed, nodding and smiling into his face. It seemed settled. Of course, I had to pull his leg a bit.

“So, do you want the pink tights and the red cape or the orange tights and the black cape?”

He caught my intended humorous, reference to the comic book superheroes and flashed his wonderful grin.

“I really don’t care so long as I get the mask with the pointy ears.”

Again, we chuckled.

“We need to seal this alliance in some special way and I think I know just how,” I said.

“How?”

His eagerness was clear.

“Knuckles at 30,000 feet.”

“What? You do talk in riddles a lot,” he said.

I stood and hitched my head for him to follow me into the patch of bushes a few yards to the south. Once there I made my suggestion.

“Let me get a firm hold of the back of your belt. There. Now, we’ll make ourselves invisible and I’ll fly us up above the clouds.”

It took far more mental effort for him than it did me, but his image gradually faded from general view. We lifted off, and, accompanied by Andy's giggles, were soon high above the city. The buildings looked like blocks from a child's toy chest, and the people and cars were too tiny to be seen.

"I assume you're warm enough," I said.

"I'm fine. Seems to be something about invisibility that keeps me that way," he said, indicating my own finding.

"Well, let's test the real conditions up here," I suggested, materializing as I slowed us to a standup hover.

The air was cold at that height, but the sun, unhampered by atmospheric dust and fumes, warmed our bodies. Andrew was soon fully visible beside me.

"You know," he began, "If we do the knuckle thing, you're going to have to let go of my belt. And if you let go of my belt I'm going to begin a long, feet-first free-fall back to Earth. This body of mine has remarkable powers of recovery, but I'm not at all sure it was intended to make a comeback from being splattered across the pavement."

"You trust me?" I asked.

"Of course, I trust you."

"Then, what about this? I let go. We do the knuckle thing and just enjoy the free fall for a while. Then, I'll take hold of you again well before 'The Dreaded Moment of Splat'."

"Actually, sounds like a pretty cool thing," he said. "Let's do it."

As we hung there facing each other, I let go of his belt, slipping earthward with him, and made a toast of sorts: "To our never-ending friendship and our new alliance."

Andrew responded: "To the love of brothers, whatever our future may bring."

We tapped knuckles with great enthusiasm, which pushed us, tumbling head over heels, away from each other. Andy whooped and hollered like he was riding a bucking bronco. He twisted himself one way and then another. He turned and rolled and spread his arms as if flying. I stayed with him, enjoying the little boy I'd never seen before. I also suddenly realized the tremendous responsibility I had just taken on. Andrew trusted me and that meant I had no alternative but to be 100 percent dependable where he and I

were concerned for the next – well, for at least the next several centuries.

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CHAPTER FOUR

A Flair for the Dramatic

When at last we touched down, it was behind a loading tower at the docks about a block from my loft.

“Come up to my place for lunch,” I suggested.

“Really? Sure. I’ll have to check with Mom.”

“You can call from up there.”

Tina was gone selling the lunches she made for the dock workers. The rest were there. I made the introductions. Beautiful Molly teased him a bit, chucking him under his chin and saying to me:

“Where you been keeping this doll?”

Then she turned to him.

“Got a steady girl, Andy? I’m prepared to dump my guy in a minute if you give me the least bit of encouragement.”

She ran her fingers through his long black hair. Andrew blushed even though he knew it was all a good-natured put-on. He came back.

“What? You think I can’t handle a half dozen like you at one time?”

The room filled with laughter.

Tina soon joined us, and she and Molly grilled Andrew about all aspects of his life. By the time lunch was finished it was nearly one o’clock. I had learned some things about him I hadn’t known. He played piano – well enough to accompany the junior high school symphony orchestra – and held a black belt in some oriental martial art with which I was not familiar. He dabbled in magic in eighth grade – before the unstable period that overtook him just after his 13th birthday. That year

he also won the all-school public speaking contest.

Andy insisted that he and I do the dishes. By the time we were finished we were both sopping wet from the waist up. The dish towels were slightly damp as well. It had been a good time with lots of silliness and side-busting laughter over nothing at all. By 1:30, with the floor freshly mopped, we were on the sidewalk headed back into the city.

“I don’t mean this as any kind of putdown,” Andy began, “but you really don’t have much privacy up there, do you?”

“All I’ve ever needed. I suppose that growing up there in that situation I never learned to be a modest kid. I always felt sorry for those who were. So many situations seem to make them uncomfortable. I have ways of arranging private time whenever I want it.”

He nodded and the subject was closed at least for the time being. He had another concern.

“Up there above the clouds when we were facing each other just before you let go of me, you looked different – younger I guess.”

“There will be lots of things you are just going to have to take on good faith where my Calibrator stuff is concerned, Andy. I can tell you this, but I can’t explain it to you. When I am doing most Calibrator things I return to being 13. That’s all I can say. So, yes, up there I’m sure I did look younger. It’s nice to know that I actually look older now that I’m pushing 14. Thanks for noticing.”

We walked on in silence while we both digested all we had learned during those past several hours. It became his turn to ask the big question.

“You know you can trust me, don’t you, Tommy?”

“In all ways, my friend. If I or my Mentor had so much as a smidgeon of doubt about that, you and I wouldn’t be here together right now. I would never risk the security of the Calibrators by associating with someone I can’t trust.”

“Your secrets are safe with me. You can count on it.”

He smiled into my face and nodded.

I did the same, accepting the sincerity of his commitment.

“Is this the greatest thing or what?” he said, adding a few little skip steps to his stride. “Are we on some secret

mission, yet?"

I laughed out loud and put my arm around his shoulders as we walked on.

"Number one: Yes this is the greatest thing! Number two: Yes we are on a very serious secret mission. The world's future is in our hands."

He became sober in a hurry. He swallowed hard and slowed his pace. His forehead furrowed and he turned his head to look into my face.

"The comic book fantasy is over, I guess."

"It is over. Sorry about the mask."

He managed a brief, faint smile.

"I'll learn to live without it!"

As we walked I filled him in on what I knew about the Society of the Enlightened and about the Sorcerer of Akmindoo Teeki.

"Mom and I have tickets for one of his performances next weekend. They're hard to come by. He must put on some spectacular show."

"So I've heard. You and I can't wait until next weekend. I want us to take in the matinee this afternoon – from 2 to 4, I understand."

"What will we do for tickets?" he asked.

"What would we do without tickets?" I said, suddenly sounding a lot like Gus.

"Ah! I asked the wrong question, didn't I? I suppose there will be two extra, invisible kids there in the audience."

He was a quick study. I knew he would be. I hoped I was up to teaching him – cut that. I hoped I was up to facilitating his growth the way Facil and Gus were facilitating mine.

The show was spellbinding from the moment the Sorcerer first appeared out of a puff of smoke in the center of the darkened stage until he made his exit, flying up to and then right through the ceiling. He wore a loose black satin outfit, not unlike the Calibrators, though his long flowing, red-lined, black cape immediately bestowed a stunning, commanding appearance. He was tall and slender, and handsome, I suppose. He moved majestically and spoke distinctly, but with enough of an accent to impart an air of

mystery. Something about his dark eyes and steady gaze made him irresistible, overpowering even. He had four assistants – two girls and two boys – all appeared to be teenagers. They moved with grace and flair, bringing and removing props and providing distracting movement on stage at crucial moments.

Afterward, back outside, I asked Andrew for his impression.

“Well, he’s more than a magician. It’s as if he creates some power or hold over the audience, directing them to see what he wants them to see and blocking out what they are not to see. He may be an evil dude, but by golly he sure puts on a cool show.”

“I’m totally impressed with your observations, Andy. What did you see that he would not have wanted you to see?”

“You mean besides that one boy helper kissing a girl helper backstage between scenes?”

“Yes. Besides that.”

“He made frequent suggestions about how something was going to appear just before it took place. I didn’t see most of those things, but from the reaction of the audience it was clear they did. It was like hypnotic suggestions were administered one after the other throughout the program.”

“Which meant what kind of preparation?” I asked.

“Mass hypnosis early on in the program.”

“If not early on in the program, then when?”

“Wow! You are good, Tommy! Before the program began. During the music that played as the audience gathered. It had an oriental or Middle Eastern flavor. Nothing I’m actually familiar with, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll bow to your knowledge of music on that one,” I said. “We need to make a recording of it so my guys can analyze it. I’ll go back to this evening’s performance and take care of that.”

“What about me?”

“You’ll be there, too, but I want you to memorize the moves of the two boy assistants. One of them is going to come up sick tomorrow and you will be on hand to replace him. We need somebody on the inside.”

“And I am that somebody?”

“Welcome to the world of entertainment,” I said trying to lighten what was truly a very serious and perhaps even dangerous assignment.”

“I must admit I never dreamed my first super hero mission would involve dancing on stage and twirling a long, red silk scarf,” he joked. “Although, kissing one of the girls back stage might not be so bad!”

I chuckled. He had given up the idea of the black mask with pointy ears but not the super hero label.

* * *

Andrew explained to his mother that I had invited him to the Sorcerer’s performance that night, but that he still intended to accompany her the following week. I made the recording, and Andrew diagrammed the boy’s moves on a yellow pad using a notation system with which I wasn’t familiar.

After the program, I walked him home. Mrs. Parker had double chocolate cake with whipped cream frosting waiting for us. A large chunk of cake and two glasses of milk later I was ready to leave. As usual, at the door, I gave Mrs. Parker a long, lingering hug. It had become our custom while Andrew had been ... well, away.

“Next,” Andy said as I stepped back from his mother.

He opened his arms and we shared a guy-to-guy kind of hug. I suppose many guys would feel uncomfortable doing that, but we didn’t. We loved each other like brothers and had no hesitancy about demonstrating it.

It was 9:30 p.m. and my curfew was 10. I had plenty of time to deliver the recording to Chem at Calibration Hall. I made it a low-key sort of flight, soaring lazily this way and that. I took my time and enjoyed the rush of the air through my long hair and the way it rippled my pant legs and flapped my shirttail behind me.

I also thought about hugs. I’d grown up with wonderful huggers, though each had his own approach. Marco, for as large a man as he was, gave surprisingly gentle, Italian hugs, with his hands on my shoulders and a kiss to each of my cheeks. I would return his in kind. Tina’s were also gentle, but hers wrapped me up and she held them for a long time. She always whispered that she loved me – and always in my left ear. Otto’s was the most physical – very German-like, I

suppose. He'd often lift me up off the floor. No kisses from him. Proper English Molly, put her hands on my waist and administered a delicate sort of hug – pulling me close and kissing my forehead. When we separated she always looked me in the eyes and said she loved me, then drew me back for one more short hug. Yorka's was Russian from start to finish. No words of love though I understood the entire process demonstrated that. His hug was a one-way operation. It was a bear hug with my arms captured and pressed against my sides unable to administer a hug in return. It would be my turn later if I chose. His always ended with a short, mouth-to-mouth kiss as was the custom between men from the small town where he grew up. It seemed strange to most folks in my culture, but it was how he had learned men were supposed to express affection to one another. So, I'd always return his hug and kiss in the way that seemed comfortable and natural for him.

Finally, I arrived at the Hall and went directly to the lab. Chem said he would get to work analyzing the tape for hypnotic suggestions first thing in the morning. He'd have a preliminary report ready for me by noon. I really wanted to stop in and see Abby, but it was late and there wasn't time, so I hurried on back to the loft. Otto was not waiting for me on the dock. Unexpectedly, I missed seeing him there, but I took it as a sign that our talk had relieved his mind about my safety.

The next day looked to be another busy one, so I was soon to bed and right to sleep.

I met Gus at Amy's at 7 and, as we munched on our bagels, I updated him on my investigation of the Sorcerer. He said he would look in on Chem and let me know what had been found. I wasn't yet sure how we would use those findings, whatever they were. I left Gus and moved on to Andrew's place. I smiled at his opening comment as I entered his room.

"Here it is Sunday morning and I'm up at the crack of dawn. I'm never up this early on the weekend."

"Welcome to my world," I said smiling.

"So, when do we make our move on the Sorcerer's assistant?"

"I'll take care of that. How are you coming on the kid's

routines in the program?”

“Got them down pretty well. You have no way of knowing this but Mom insisted I take modern dance until I finally rebelled when I was 12. Who knew it would actually come in handy some day?”

“You continue to amaze me, my friend,” I said.

“Really? Me? Thanks. Wow!”

“Last night I noticed the Sorcerer has a rehearsal scheduled for 10 this morning. I’ll see that one of the guys calls in sick just before that. You be there looking your handsomest – if that’s a word. Even if it isn’t, look that way.”

“I’ll wear loose-fitting duds and no socks so I can easily get barefoot, the way they work on stage. That should help give me an edge.”

I left and went in search of the assistants. Turned out they were local kids and names and addresses were easily obtained from the records in the office the Sorcerer maintained there at the rear of the theater.

I soon realized there was a problem. There was an understudy boy and girl – backups – who were available for just such emergencies. It appeared that several of them would need to catch some harmless malady before 10 o’clock.

Thinking he might run in the substitute girl if both a boy and his male understudy were unable to show up, I decided that all three of them needed to be gently put out of commission. Within an hour all three had reported in – sick with vertigo (dizziness) – unable to stand up, let alone perform. I seeped the minds of the two regular girls and the one remaining boy with information about some new flu running through the teenage population, so – if they were asked – they could provide credence to the excuses the kids had given.

Andrew and I got our heads together and concocted a story for him to use.

When the Sorcerer and the others gathered on stage, Andy was there, dancing.

“Oh, s-o-o-o sorry,” Andy began. “Didn’t realize you’d be using the stage this morning. I come and practice here sometimes. I sort of dream of being on stage with you, but I know that will really never happen. Excuse me for interfering.

I'll leave."

"You've seen my performance?" the Sorcerer asked, circling Andrew and looking him over from all angles.

"Oh, yes, Sir. Numerous times."

"You have any experience in this type of thing?"

"Eight years of modern dance, if that counts."

"You have a feel for the routines?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. I've gone over them many times in my head. Why are you asking, if I may ask? Sorry, that sounded dumb. I'm really nervous talking to you like this."

Andrew had played it just right, feigning innocence and feeding the man's ego.

"It seems my assistants caught that flu that's going around. Do you want to give it a try?"

"Me. Sure. I don't believe this is happening, you know."

"We'll try the opening scene. If you can cut it, we'll see about working you in."

He motioned toward the balcony and the lights came up, the music started, and the routine began. I took a seat in the darkened balcony and watched in amazement. I quickly decided two things. First, I had found a really cool new partner. Second, I had finally found my dancing teacher.

With very few errors, Andy continued through the entire program and received the Sorcerer's somewhat reserved applause. I figured that was probably the best he ever gave anybody. I mind-talked a "Well done, partner," to Andy. At that moment, the Sorcerer looked about as if in response to my mental message. I would need to be more careful in the future, but the error provided useful information – the Sorcerer had some super-sensory capacities, himself.

A large, generally unattractive man came on stage and handed him a note. I flew down to take a look. It was a quickly done background check on Andrew and his mother. With nothing negative in the report, the Sorcerer sealed the deal with a handshake, saying that if his mother would sign the contract, Andy had the job.

"Will that be a problem?" I asked him as we left the theater. "Getting your mother to sign the contract."

"I can handle Mom. Will you feel how soft this outfit is," he said, pulling the shirttail out of the sack he'd been handed.

He rubbed it against his cheek.

"It is that," I said, reaching out and feeling it, mostly just to satisfy Andy. "I think satin is definitely your color."

He shook his head and smiled at my absurdity.

"You need a lift home? I'm soon to be past due for lunch at my place."

"I'll be fine," he said. "I'm to be back at the theater in 90 minutes. What am I looking for by the way?"

"Hard to know. Bottom line is any information that ties the Sorcerer to the recent increased activity of the gangs. Particularly anything that might indicate what's up next. BUT, be careful. Don't ask leading questions. Just listen. Don't do anything that will make you appear suspicious. One or more of the kids may also be in on it so don't take any of them into your confidence."

Then, in case his Deep Mind was listening, I rephrased it all in the necessary positive way. "Remain above suspicion at all times and keep the mission to yourself."

"In other words, play dumb and remain aloof," he said trying to tie it all together in an even more Deep Mind friendly way (fewer words).

I nodded, gave him a hug, and flew back to the loft, arriving just outside the door at the top of the stairs at exactly 11:59. I was inside with seconds to spare. It was what they had grown to expect so I felt I had done my duty well.

I still hadn't heard from Gus. I could see that this having to be a regular kid with family responsibilities could severely limit my freedom as a Calibrator. I could, of course, live with it for a few more days because it was so special being able to spend time with them again.

During lunch, Gus contacted me through Mind Talk. I replied and arranged to meet him at 1 at Chem's lab. As I had suspected the night before, it was becoming a very busy day.

At the lab I presented my hunch about things before Chem had an opportunity to begin relating his findings.

"Posthypnotic suggestions and subliminal messages?" I asked, assuming I had it nailed.

"Almost, Tommy," he said.

"Almost subliminal or almost suggestions?"

I was puzzled. Chem explained.

“Subliminal refers to messages delivered at a frequency just above the level - the limen - of human hearing or sight. The idea is that even though people don't consciously recognize the messages, the brain is still somehow able to receive them. It's a pretty shaky concept and the research is not generally supportive of the theory.

“What I am referring to,” he continued, “could be called at limin or at threshold processes. These messages are set at a frequency just within the upper limits of human hearing, but it is mixed in with some far more dominant stimulation – unusual, exotic, music in this case – so people don't consciously recognize the words in the message. The mind, however, does, and once the message is received, the person may then act on it later. It's very clever and quite powerful.

“Listen to this passage of the music the Sorcerer uses to provide the background for his third illusion – soft, complex music.”

I listened.

“Soft, complex music,” I said, nodding my agreement with his previous description.

“Now, let me filter out the music. What do you hear?”

The simple message was very plain: “Buy and listen to the CDs in the lobby.”

“I didn't think about them playing any role in this. I saw them there, but didn't get any. You did, I imagine,” I said, addressing Gus.

He nodded and Chem went on to explain.

“There are four CDs. Purchase them all and it's barely more expensive than buying any one of them. The Sorcerer isn't out to make money, but people typically do pay more attention to what they buy than to what is given to them. His goal is to make sure the CDs are listened to so the messages hidden in them will begin to do their devious work.”

“Brainwashing, of a kind, I suppose,” I said.

“Big time brainwashing – Deep Mind washing, to be more specific,” Gus explained. “By the time a person has listened to all four – close to 10 hours of messaging – the typical, mainstream American values have been systematically attacked and the way paved for them to be replaced with those of the Society of the Enlightened.”

“And that would be?” I asked, needing more specific information.

“That would be blind obedience to the teachings found in the Book of the Enlightened.”

“I didn’t see any books for sale,” I said trying to think back about it.”

“There weren’t any. It is a well-conceived plan. Nothing to tie the Sorcerer’s performances with the Society. Bookstore sales of the Book of the Enlightened are up over a thousand percent here in the city since he has arrived, however.”

I nodded, understanding the problem and having some possible solutions to offer.

“So, we begin by remixing the CDs without the verbal at threshold messages, except for the one suggesting the purchase of the book.”

Gus frowned and asked, “But isn’t one of the reasons for eliminating the message on the CD to stop the sale and reading of the book?”

“The book, yes. But we can replace the book contents with either harmless material or material that makes a case for a generally acceptable, generic, positive, social philosophy – no one version in particular. If the book sales suddenly stopped, you see, the Society would know something was wrong and investigate. As long as book sales continue they will assume they are still on track toward their own socially destructive goals. It buys us some time.”

“You certainly win the prize on this one, Tommy. That is an insightful plan,” Gus said putting his arm around me. “Mine was too shortsighted.”

He turned to address Chem, who was still nodding his agreement.

“The Sorcerer has been moving his CDs to nearly 400 people each performance. How soon can we have our cleaned-up substitutes, ready?”

“We can have a thousand ready by this evening’s performance. But, you realize in the two weeks he’s been here, he already has his music into over 10,000 homes.”

“We’ll need to replace as many of those as we can find,” Gus said. “I’ll call a General Guild Meeting for 3 o’clock today. The Sage will outline the plan.”

General Guild Meetings were rarely called. Every available Calibrator was expected to come to the Hall and attend. Clearly Gus – well, the Sage, I assumed – saw the Society of the Enlightened as a major threat to the well-being of humanity.

At three o'clock Andy would be in the middle of his first performance. I knew I had to be at the theater with him. Gus agreed, and we decided I would listen in on the meeting by way of Mind Talk.

"The books?" I asked.

"I will have Facil and Philo, the social philosopher, select essays to include in the substitute version. Printing can be started as they work and there should be several thousand copies bound and ready to be placed in stores by midnight. With our entire force of Calibrators at work we will have the replacements on the shelves by morning and should have obtained records of most of the sales during the past several weeks so we can find those who made purchases.

"Over the next few days we will make the replacements for those already bought and do just enough Mind Clouding so those who have begun reading them will not realize the change, but feel the need to begin again."

"What about the posthypnotic suggestions in the pre-program music?" I asked.

"They are there, just as you assumed they'd be," Chem said, "but they pose no permanent risk and do enhance the entertainment value of the performance."

"This is a huge, big hairy deal, isn't it?" I said, thinking aloud.

The two of them nodded, seemingly amused at the term I chose to use.

"And this is just the beginning," Gus said. "Once we learn how to get things under control here we have to backtrack and do it all over again in each place the Sorcerer has performed. I only hope we aren't too late. He and two dozen of his colleagues have been on tour worldwide for some time, remember."

It seemed an overwhelming task. The 9-year-old who still lived inside me REALLY wanted to go for a swim off dock 6! He did!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Kidnappings

When a Calibrator is invisible, others cannot see him, of course. However, they cannot really see through him either. The body establishes a visual blur that the mind ignores. That's why, although I remained invisible, I stood at the rear of the balcony to watch the Sorcerer's performance and keep my eye on Andy. Quite honestly, I probably kept my eye on the two girls more than I did on Andy but ...

The program went off without a hitch. The three other assistants had nothing but good things to say to Andrew after the final curtain. Even the Sorcerer himself put in a, "Nice job, kid." I guess I hadn't expected that of a man like he was. It forced me to remember that he was only really a "bad" guy when it came to his belief that everyone had to believe like he did. Otherwise, he might well be a loving, kind, compassionate person. I was more than a little ashamed that I had categorized him as a total bad guy on the basis of just that one trait.

It interested me how one group of intelligent people could believe "Value System A" – theirs – represented the only Truth, while another group of equally intelligent people could believe that only their "Value System B" represented the Truth. More puzzling yet, it seemed to me, was how each group could just ignore the more basic question of how they happened to be the ones who were right if other intelligent people were just as strongly convinced that another point of view was right.

I saw it everywhere: Hindu, Christian, Moslem, Shinto; Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic; Republican,

Democrat, Green; liberal, conservative, Skulls, Stilettos. They just couldn't all be right, and yet each group certainly believed it was and the others were not. Fascinating! Frustrating! Fallacious! (Can't be).

I suppose that once you accept the fact that you are right you stop searching for other possibilities. You put up a wall that won't let you rationally and fairly examine other points of view. (That's how our Deep Minds tend to work, remember.) That was going to be my basic problem with The Sorcerer – making sure he had to honestly evaluate alternatives in an open-minded way.

I wouldn't try to force my beliefs on him if he wouldn't try to force his on me. I guess in a way I was trying to force at least one of my beliefs on him – the belief that each person has the right to hold to his own beliefs so long as they aren't harmful to others. It seems to me that is what my country stands for. That's probably where many groups come into conflict – trying to define what is and isn't harmful to others.

It made my head swim just trying to put my thoughts into words. Sometimes it seemed I didn't really understand what I believed.

I joined Andy as he came out the back door of the theater.

"Nice going in there. You are really good at that stuff. Are you learning all kinds of magic secrets?"

"Not really. He has things set up so any one of us only knows some small part of each trick and illusion. When we all do our parts right, the whole thing comes together into something spectacular. It's a kick, I'll tell you that. He's sure a nice guy for being such a bad guy. I guess that doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah. I think it does. I was just thinking about it myself. Did you learn anything about his gang-related activities?"

"Not for sure. I caught a quick glimpse of three guys – who looked like thugs – dragging a young man up the back steps. I don't know where they lead and didn't have a really safe opportunity to take a look."

"Anything special about the guy?"

"Besides being unconscious, the bloody face and the fact his eyes were swollen shut from the beating he'd

received, you mean?”

“Really! I’d better go back and check it out.”

“By yourself?”

He made puppy dog eyes and I couldn’t resist.

“Okay you can come, but it will be in and out quickly and I won’t be able to send you mental messages. I got the idea the Sorcerer can pick up on them at least when they’re sent over long distances.”

“How do we get in?” he asked, clearly excited.

I looked up at the rear of the building.

“We’ll fly up and see what we can see through the three windows. If it’s not enough we’ll find the safest place to enter through the wall and go inside.”

“Through the wall? Cool! This stuff just keeps getting cooler.”

We went behind the dumpster, became invisible, and I latched onto Andy’s belt. We were soon hovering outside the south window some 60 feet above the ground. Inside was a small room, perhaps 12 feet square. It had probably been an office or dressing room originally. It was empty now.

The middle window opened into a large open area. Some 40 feet into the building it became the catwalk that encircled the top of the stage below. It was the area where ropes and pulleys guided the sets into place and such.

The north window was blocked off with a shade. We couldn’t see in. I decided to go back and enter the small, empty room on the south and make our way around the area from there.

“You’re about to have a spectacular experience – flying right through a solid brick wall, but you must save your enthusiasm about it until we’re long away from here,” I said.

Andy nodded. We entered. I smiled as Andy felt his arms and legs as if to see if they were still attached. I hitched my head for him to follow me out into the main open area. The door was open. No one was in sight so we made our way across to the north room. It was an old building and still had doorknobs and keyholes like in the old days. We approached the door and I knelt so I could see through the keyhole. Directly across the room, on the floor, lay the young man Andy had seen earlier. He was breathing but otherwise did not

move. I tried the knob. It turned but I found the door was locked.

I moved Andy to a spot against the outside wall several yards away and indicated for him to stay put and stay invisible. Carefully and slowly I stuck my head through the wall, just far enough to get a view of the entire room. There was nobody there except the kid. I went ahead and entered and crossed the room to examine him.

It turned out to be a guy in his mid-20s dressed in expensive jeans and a black, genuine leather, jacket. There were a dozen well-worn, light-colored circles around his fingers indicating he usually wore rings that had been removed. A similar ring around his neck indicated a missing necklace – or, more likely, several. Three holes in each ear were empty of the studs or rings that would be expected to be there.

The man's pulse was strong and his breathing regular. I opened his shirt. His abdomen was badly bruised. It was clear that he had suffered a severe beating. I searched for his wallet. It was gone. In the center of his chest was a tattoo – a large white skull with five drops of red blood dripping from the left eye socket like tears. Each drop was a slightly different color, making me think each one had been added at a different time – perhaps like stars to a general's collar.

I went to get Andy and took him into the room so he could get a good look at the man. As he began rousing into consciousness, Andy backed away toward the door. Remaining invisible, I helped the young man sit up against the wall beside the window.

He squinted through his swollen eyes and touched his cheeks as if to determine how severe the damage was. I materialized sitting back on my legs a few yards in front of him. He blinked as if to make sure I was really there.

“Dante, I assume,” I said.

“Who wants ta know?”

“Just think of me as your fairy godbrother.”

“Never heard such a load a crap.”

He looked away. I felt Andy's hands on my shoulders indicating he was right behind me and still invisible.

“Believe it or don't. It's up to you. But believe this. I am

the only one who can help you out of this.”

“This what?”

“I’m not sure. Hoped you could help me understand. Clearly you’re in a bucket of trouble.”

“You talks funny.”

“I’m sure I do. What would you expect from a fairy godbrother?”

Andy giggled and, unexpectedly, Dante, worked up a slow grin. It hurt too much to hold so he was soon back to his sober, mean-looking, self.

I tried again.

“What’s going on?”

“A dozen guys – two with AK47s – jumped me earlier and dragged me into a van. I remember them beginnin’ to beat on me. I don’t think any a them said nothing. That’s it ‘til I just now come to.”

“How could it happen to a gang leader of your status?”

“There was a message from the Stilettos. Damien wanted to meet me face on. Cases like that I take six and he takes six and we meet at the old water tower.”

“Six bodyguards, you mean?”

“Six soldiers, kid. Where you grow up? Fancy pants hill.”

“Damien didn’t show?”

“Don’t know. We was jumped before we got there.”

“A set-up?”

“By somebody. Not Damien. He’s a man a his word. Hate his guts, but he’s a man a his word. So am I. It’s how do things.”

He looked around.

“Where am I?”

“Not going to tell you. It looks to be about 60 feet above jump-down height though, in case you’re thinking of leaving through that window.”

He nodded as if he understood.

“Anybody been interfering in things?” I asked, fishing.

“Interferin’? Like how?”

“I don’t know. Horning in on your business enterprises, for example.”

“Not really. You seem to know things you shouldn’t.”

“Probably. I have ways of knowing things.”

He made a grab for me, and I near-jumped 3 feet to his right. I heard Andy gasp. So did Dante.

“What the?” he said.

“Maybe the blows to your head fuzzied up your thinking,” I said trying to provide him with a reasonable explanation for what he’d just witnessed.

He sat back and made no more advances.

“You gonna git me outta here?”

“Nope. Not now at least. I figure since whoever did this to you didn’t kill you they must want you alive. I’ll check back with you. You be thinking about whom it might be and why they’d want to kidnap you.”

“Whom? Fancy Pants Hill talk, for sure.”

I stood and held out my hand in Andy’s direction, indicating that he should take it. He did. His palm was wet with sweat and his grip was not delicate.

“Look away if you will, please,” I said to Dante.

He continued to stare at me.

“Look away!”

He folded his arms and put on a disgusted look. He looked away.

I joined Andy in invisible land and we exited the way we’d come in. Just as I was about to suggest that we materialize, we heard somebody coming up the stairs across the open area near the empty little office. It was the man who had brought The Sorcerer the message on stage before. He was carrying a stepladder and a window shade. He entered the little office.

“Want to guess who that’s reserved for,” I asked over my shoulder to Andy who had suddenly become my firmly attached shadow.

“Damien from the Stilettos,” would be my guess.

“Bingo! Let’s get out of here. I really need a bagel.”

I grabbed his belt and we rose through the roof and lit out back. Dante was looking out his window. We rounded the corner and materialized behind a fence.

“Boy, Tommy! You were the coolest in there. I can’t believe we just did that. I mean I really can’t believe we just did that! This is what you do?”

“Often, when I’m not watching those gorgeous girls you were performing with on stage.”

He shook his head.

“I thought you had a girl.”

“I do. Abby. The love of my life.”

“And you still look at other girls?”

“Number 1: I’m a guy. I think it is physiologically impossible not to look at girls. Number 2: Just because I really like one special kind of cake doesn’t mean I can’t look at the other desserts on the menu.”

“You do crack me up, Tommy. By the way, is it actually Thomas like my middle name?”

“Nope. Just Tommy. When I was named, my Wharfies arranged the first letters of their names and it came up Tommy.”

“That is so-o-o-o great. You really are a part of them.”

“That’s exactly how I’ve always thought of it.”

He became sober.

“You’re named after a bunch of wonderful, altruistic, folks and I’m named after the evillest man on the Planet.”

“How wonderful!” I said further sobering his face and furrowing his brow.

“Wonderful?”

He shook his head.

“Yes. You have the grand opportunity to make the name represent all that is good and human friendly, my brother.”

He nodded as we walked.

“You take the worst possible stuff, twist it all up inside that head of yours and then spit it out filled with sunshine and promise.”

“You have a wonderful way with words, you know, Andy. I can see how you won that public speaking contest a few years back.”

“And,” he continued, ignoring the fact that I was trying to change the subject, “You never take credit for all the good stuff you do. I don’t get it.”

“What does taking credit accomplish?”

“Well, for most folks it’s like a pat on the back for a job well done. It’s like verification of what a good guy you are.”

“And if I already know I’m a good guy, because I work very hard every day to be one, why would I need that kind of verification of my worth from anybody else?”

“Wow! I see. Okay! Man! It’s a lot coming at me all at once – the Calibrator stuff and the Tommy stuff.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I understood as he continued to explain.

“You’re like a real live course in how to be the ideal human being, you know?”

I stopped and looked him in the face. I addressed him slowly.

“That is, without a doubt, the best compliment anybody’s ever given me. Probably exaggerated all out of proportion, but great. I’ll probably cry. I do that, you know. Hope it doesn’t tarnish my image for you.”

“Not in the least. I’ll gladly start carrying an extra hanky just for you if that becomes necessary.”

It required a hug and then an arm around his shoulder the rest of the way to Amy’s place. It was going on 5 o’clock.

“Suppose one of your little delights will spoil our appetites?” I asked, joking with Amy.

“At your ages, the only thing I’ve ever heard of that could spoil a boy’s appetite, was the sight of a pretty girl.”

It got a good chuckle all around. This Amy was a wise person and a keen observer of people. I suddenly realized I had grown to love her like a Wharfie. For no other reason than that, I leaned down and kissed her on her cheek. She smiled her special smile into my face as she delivered two blueberry bagels dripping with cream cheese.

Andy seemed genuinely pleased as he watched the interplay between us. We made our way to the park bench.

He had a question, of sorts.

“I suppose there was a reason that you took me into the room to see that Dante fellow.”

I nodded.

“My plan allows for the possibility that you may need to impersonate him at some point. What are the chances you can do that?”

“Like I told you. Older is hard for me. Younger is fairly easy – for short periods of time.”

“Can you give me a preview of how close to him you can come?”

“Here? Right now?”

“Yeah. Use the bushes for your transformation and then come and let me see.”

He nodded.

“I can do this. It helps if I have something that the person has touched.”

“Like this headband?” I asked, pulling it from my pants pocket. I borrowed it when I was examining him.”

Andrew took the small, white scarf and felt it. He smelled it and put it up to his mouth and inhaled. He nodded and went into the bushes. Seconds later a slightly younger version of Dante emerged and moved toward me.

“What you wantin’ wit me, Whitey?” he said swaggering in my direction.

“Unbelievable!” I said. “A little young but in the shadows of a darkened alley, it will work. The voice is right on. Like I said, unbelievable!”

He stood there, awkwardly, as if needing direction. He was Andrew and yet he wasn’t Andrew. He was mostly Dante. It was strange. I spoke to put things back in order.

“I’d like for Andrew to return now. Please go back into the bushes and see to it.”

Again, it only took seconds for Andy to reappear and take a seat alongside me.

“How was it?” he said, as if he didn’t remember the comments I’d made to him less than a minute before.

“It was fantastic. How do you feel when you take on the form of somebody else?”

“I feel mostly them and yet a little bit me. My father said that with practice those percentages could gradually become reversed. I’m nowhere near that yet, though.”

“Do you remember being here with me as Dante?”

“Some. I know that’s a strange way to answer your question, but that’s the best I can do.”

“There will be some specific things we’ll want you to say when you put in your appearance as Dante. Can you learn them as Andy and then repeat them as Dante?”

“I have no idea, but I’ll practice. We’ll find a way to

make it work. Finally, I feel like I'm really going to be able to make a contribution to this partnership."

"Be patient. With your arsenal of skills, there is no doubt you will make a very special contribution."

I needed to move onto other things.

"The performance begins when this evening?" I asked.

"Seven. I have to be there at 6:30 or he docks my check by 10 percent."

"I forgot about that added perk – pay," I said actually pleased for him.

"It will be the first contribution to my STWOPAAT fund."

I giggled, fully unable to repronounce it back to him to ask what it meant. I shrugged. He understood and answered.

"Save the World One Person at a Time fund. After our talk the other night I decided on this as one of the things I can do. Build up a little cash reserve for when a need arises for somebody. Some would say your influence is rubbing off on me. Of course, I'd never admit to that."

Our smiles met, confirming more than just friendship. It had become a commitment to our lifelong quest for a better world.

I deposited him on the lawn beside his apartment building and then flew to my loft by way of Mike's Vegetable Stand. It was my night to cook so I figured a wonderful tossed salad with French bread and cheese should hit the spot. It would also save time and I was growing short on time.

I should have thought to bring a selection of fruit bagels for dessert. As it turned out, Molly had.

"You know that sweet little bagel lady, Annie, I think."

"Amy," I said.

"Yes. That's the one. When I told her you were my son, she insisted on just giving me the whole bag. Can you believe that sweetheart?"

I knew the Wharfies referred to me as their son and that was fantastic. Suddenly, however, with my 14th birthday looming only days away, the whole idea of the term son was taking on a new meaning.

CHAPTER SIX

One on One

It had been a busy night. I arrived home from the performance at 9:30 and was in bed by 10 there in my darkened area of the loft. By 10:05 I had arranged pillows and such under my cover to give the illusion I was still there. Once I turned in at night they allowed me my complete privacy so it would not be a problem. It was the first time I had ever attempted to deceive them in that way, and I must say it didn't feel quite right. Invisibly, I left through the near wall and met Gus and the others back at Calibration Hall. It was bustling with activity.

"We made the CD substitutions just before the theater opened its doors for the evening performance," Gus announced, beginning to catch me up on things. "Our next project is to replace the books in the stores. About half the guys have already left and begun that. By the time the stores open tomorrow morning, it will be complete. I saved the area near the school for us to handle. Figured you'd know the territory better than the rest of us."

The books were heavy, 700-page hardback editions so even with the two of us it took several dozen flights back and forth from the Hall. Both the books in the showroom racks and the reserve copies in the storerooms had to be exchanged. Eventually, of course, we would replace our copies with the originals. People have the right to read whatever they choose to read. The current problem was they did not have free choice in the matter.

We kept our flight paths close to the rooftops to avoid any undue alarm from military or airport radar. By 4 a.m. the last of the Calibrators had checked in, finished for the night. The work had not been physically hard, but the missed sleep

began to take its toll. Back in my bed at last, I hoped to sleep in until 6.

When Mario shook my shoulder at 5:30 – my usual time – I requested an extra 30 minutes and was soon sound asleep again. Promptly at 6, Mario’s booming tenor voice began belting out some lesser-known aria from some lesser-known Italian opera. It would have been fruitless to remain in bed. I showered, dressed and scarfed down cereal and toast. Then, I was off to Andrew’s place.

I really wanted to go have breakfast with Abby, but that would have to wait for some other day. Andy and I were soon back at the theater, again, invisible on the top floor.

We had been right. Damien had been kidnapped and was recovering from his beating in the small south room. We entered. I snatched his hanky and passed it on to Andy who was to study him for future reference. Eventually I materialized and repeated essentially the same conversation I had had with Dante the day before.

It seemed the horrific fight some nights before, which left the Skulls with four fewer members, had been over a girl so was only marginally gang-related. Damien had nothing to report about anybody trying to disrupt or take over any of the Stilettos’ “business” enterprises. In fact, he seemed surprised at the question.

I had no illusions that either one of the gang leaders really trusted me, but I was their only contact with the outside world so they offered at least minimal cooperation.

“How often do they check on you up here?” I asked.

“It varies. Once every hour or two. Hardly at all last night. Think if I busted that door down I could get out?”

“Only if the thug with the automatic pistol on the stairs is a really awful shot,” I said.

He nodded.

“Why they holdin’ me? What they wantin’?”

“They haven’t said?” I asked.

“Not a word. They jumped us, took me, beat the ‘blank’ outta me and I woke up here. It has to be the Skulls, but the misunderstanding over the girl last week wouldn’t be big enough for this. Dante missed a meetin’ with me a few nights ago. That’s not like him. He’s always been good to his word.

Can't figure it."

The way I had it figured, the Sorcerer had taken the two gang leaders and would somehow confirm to each gang that the other one had kidnapped their leader. The assumption was that would start a bloody gang war that would wipe out both gangs. It was one way to clean up the streets, I supposed, but certainly not a civilized way. That was the main problem with folks who were so sure they knew the truth. They believed it gave them the right to get what they wanted regardless of the way they had to go about doing it. I shuddered at the thought.

I had only had time to quickly skim through the Book of the Enlightened, but it was clear that group had no scruples against just killing off huge numbers of people they considered inappropriate for their retraining program. If folks didn't read, the Sorcerer's current plan would not work. For those folks who did not fit his brainwashing scheme, the grave was his next best solution. Arranging for such groups to kill each other off made his job that much easier and, unhappily, it often seemed to take very little to release that kind of mutual hatred.

I had to somehow stop the potential slaughter. I had a plan. Andrew would appear to the Stiletos as Damien and to the Skulls as Dante. Each leader would assure his gang that things were fine, but that he needed to be away for a short time and that regardless what they might hear, the other gang had nothing to do with his absence. He would designate a second in command to run things. That would buy us some time and prevent the immediate blood bath the Sorcerer hoped to initiate, the way his colleagues had done in the Middle East and parts of Africa.

Andy and I left to plan the strategy. He understood and had numerous, good suggestions. At last we were convinced we had the whole package ready to move. Unknown to Andrew, Gus had been monitoring our conversation. He would accompany my new sidekick and make sure he was protected. Andrew felt confident that he could near jump himself out of any difficulty. He was probably overconfident, but there was no time for reality training. He left to undertake that part of the mission.

I returned to the theater. It was my intention to put the

two gang leaders together and make them hash things out – well, at least provide them the opportunity to hash things out. Clearly, there was one thing in favor of success – the two respected one another – hated each other, but respected each other. If I could make the point that another group was trying to get them to kill each other off, I just might get something good going. What would be the opposite of that old saying, “Divide and conquer”? Combine and survive? Not really very clever, but it would do for the time being.

It wouldn't be as simple as that, of course. Alternatives! That's what the two of them needed. Alternatives to the artificial power struggle they had invented and maintained over the years. It was that power struggle that seemed to give the gangs their only purpose. Like I said. Artificial. Not related to real life at all. They needed a variety of new objectives, not to mention methods of leadership other than the use of fear.

I began by clouding the mind of the man who was on guard at the stairs. He would forget to make his hourly checks until I released him.

I entered Dante's room invisibly. He was standing at the window. I materialized behind him out of his range of vision.

“Hey, I'm back,” I began as gently as I knew how.

Still, he was plainly startled. His fists were firmed well before he spun around to face me. What a sad life it must be to always expect you'll need to defend yourself.

“You bug me, kid. I don't know how you come and go. It bugs me.”

“I can certainly understand that. I can't explain, but I do understand.”

“What you want?”

I figured that even such a gruff question was better than being ignored or attacked.

“I want to save the world.”

It had been intended to confuse him and it did. He frowned and shook his head.

“You really don't seem like the kind of guy who likes seeing his young friends get killed off – week after week, year after year.”

“It's how it is.”

It was no answer and yet it was the accurate answer.

“How about a life without fear and bloodshed? Could you live with that?”

“In your dreams, Fairy Kid.”

“Yes. That’s right. It’s long been my dream. Life without fear and bloodshed. Life in safety and happiness.”

“I don’t get you.”

There it was again. People just kept telling me that. I continued.

“Here’s the first of several probable bottom lines I have in mind. You and Damien, here in this room, face to face for the next three hours, working on ideas that will show some promise of giving back some kind of a useful and productive life to the members of both gangs.”

“You talk funny.”

“Damien made the same comment, I believe. See. You already have something in common. What I hoped to hear was, ‘Okay, bring him on’.”

“Can’t. Ain’t got no ground rules.”

“I’m providing the ground rules. One, no violence and a minimum of profanity – I want you talking about real things with meaning-filled words. Two, the talk stays focused on improving the lives of your members and their families and neighbors.”

He shrugged. I took it as his agreement or at least not his disagreement. I became invisible and took on Damien. He was a harder sell, but eventually gave me a single nod. Let’s see now, a shrug from Dante and a nod from Damien. Probably more than such a cockeyed plan deserved.

I clouded Damien’s mind and transported him to Dante’s room.

“I believe you two have met so I’ll dispense with the formal introductions.”

“You believe the way this little dude talks?” Dante asked, throwing a quick glance at Damien.

“Never heard the likes,” Damien came back.

They had started talking. I took that as positive.

The room then grew silent. Damien picked at his fingernails, and Dante crossed his arms and sighed repeatedly.

“Okay. Good start, guys. Here we are pickin’ and

sighin'. Let's start someplace – anyplace. How about with this? Could your members – say those 18 and older – go get real jobs if they wanted them?"

"NO!" they said as one, then looked at each other, as if surprised, holding the glance for some time.

"Why not? They aren't that dumb, are they?"

"It ain't them. Nobody'll hire 'em." Dante said.

"So, whose fault is that?"

"The guys who own the businesses."

His tone suggested disbelief that I didn't understand that fully and completely.

"Can your kids read well enough to handle the training manuals, invoices, manifests – things like that?"

Silence.

"I'll take that as a 'no'. How can it be the fault of the businessmen if the kids don't have the basic skills they need – reading, math – you know?"

More silence and a lot of uncomfortable fidgeting. Damien spoke.

"They wouldn't give 'em jobs even if they could do that stuff."

I figured it had been a fully unsupported attempt to save face.

"Why not? Makes no sense. Neighborhoods where folks earn a good living are safer neighborhoods for everybody. The buildings are kept up better. There's less domestic violence. I'd think they'd be happy to give them jobs."

More silence. More fidgeting. Both added scowls to their faces in an effort to distance themselves from the uncomfortable turn I'd forced in the conversation.

"Placing fault clearly isn't going to solve the problem, is it? Let's try another tack. If they can't get jobs because they don't have the basic skills, then ..."

I dropped it hoping one of them would take it up. Neither chose to finish my sentence, but Dante did speak.

"Me and Damien ain't no teachers."

"Let's see, now, where might we actually find some real, experienced teachers?"

Dante raised his eyebrows. They both understood my

reference to schools.

“What percent of your guys dropped out?”

“Percent?” Damien said as if asking for a definition. Pretty gutsy, I thought, for one gang leader to admit he didn’t know something, especially in front of his rival leader.”

“Like half, a quarter, three-quarters,” I said, indicating no putdown in my delivery while realizing it hadn’t been a truly accurate definition.

He nodded and looked at Dante.

“What ya say? Three-quarter?”

“Probably more, I’d say.”

“How many kids would that be?”

“We don’t tell numbers,” Damien snapped.

“Hey. It’ll never leave this room. I’m sure you both know anyway. You’re obviously smart guys.”

Again, they looked at each other.

Dante provided the information.

“Skulls about two hundred. Stiletos about three.”

I looked at Damien for confirmation. He nodded.

“Wow!” I said feigning surprise. “Nearly 500 kids. That’s about 20 classrooms-full you know.”

“Lotsa them is too old fer high school.” Damien said.

“Some got kicked out and can’t go back,” Dante added.

It sounded to me like they were finally really thinking about the possibilities.

“Got any who can read?” I asked.

They looked at each other nodded.

“Got any who are good at math?”

Again, they nodded. I remained silent, hoping they would take the next step by themselves.

“They could maybe help the brothers who can’t,” Damien said at last. “They ain’t really teachers, though. Don’t know how they’ll know how to teach.”

“Who could help them learn how, do you suppose?”

“Some teacher, maybe?” Dante said.

“What are you willing to pay a couple of teachers to help get things started?” I asked.

They shrugged.

“Don’t know what they make,” Damien said.

“Not much,” Dante offered as a partial answer.

“Probably not enough, for sure,” I added.

“You willing to go as high as 20 an hour?”

“Don’t recall sayin’ nothin’ about doin’ nothin’,” Dante said looking away from both of us.

Damien folded his arms and looked in the opposite direction.

“You’re not really chicken, are you?” I said, prepared to jump from there to Rhode Island at the first sign of intended violence.

“You not makin’ no sense again, kid,” Damien said, not as visibly upset as I had expected after my ‘fowl’ comment.

“Once your guys gain saleable skills they won’t need you two anymore, you know. Bye, bye, Skulls and Stilettos.”

I continued on high alert. Still, neither one made a move toward me. Suddenly, it seemed they were both just pulling my leg. They weren’t really serious. They were probably laughing at me on the inside. I sighed and disappeared, remaining in the room.

After some initial confusion, they settled back against the wall.

“So?” Dante asked, looking at the floor.

Damien shrugged. “So, what?”

“You know?” Dante answered.

Damien looked over at his longtime rival. “Think the squirt is tryin’ to scam us?”

“What he got to gain?”

Silence as they thought.

“Who you suppose he is?” Dante asked. “What did he call himself – God Brother Twinkle Toes?”

Damien snorted and finally broke a smile. Dante laughed out loud. Neither one was bad looking when they let up on the macho scowl they insisted on wearing. I sensed they were relaxing a bit.

“We gotta promise none a this ever leaves this room no matter what comes a it,” Damien said.

Dante nodded his agreement then asked:

“What you s’pose the guys that took us is gonna do with us?”

“Depends on what they’re up to, I suppose. If it’s like the twink kid says, they’ll probably waste us.”

“Ya think the kid would let that happen?” It was again Dante’s question.

“You make it sound like he’s some super hero or something. Didn’t see no cape, if you get my drift.”

“Well, you have to admit there’s somethin’ about him.”

“Yeah. Guess so,” Damien agreed. “Somethin’... Ya trust him?”

“I like the way he looks you in the eye when he’s talkin’ to you. Yeah. I guess I trust him. Don’t understand where he’s comin’ from, but guess I mostly trust him. Bound to have some angle, though. Can’t figure it.”

“So, what’s next?” Damien asked.

“I gotta sleep on it. Maybe he makes sense. Maybe he don’t. But this is the only way a livin’ that I know, ya know?”

“Yeah. I hate you more than the devil himself so why’d I agree to anything with you?”

Dante nodded, sneaking a look at his adversary out of the corner of his eye.

“When d’ya suppose Twink Punk will come back?”

At least they finally got my initials correct.

“How about right now,” I said reappearing as they looked on. “Seems it’s enough for one day. We’ll get back together later on – if you’re still around later.”

I motioned to Dante to stand up, clouded both of their minds – short term – and immediately moved the leader of the Skulls back to his room. I returned the guard to normal and flew to my special thinking place on the roof just outside the big window on the front of the loft. My watch read 8:30. I felt I had put the first two hours of the day to pretty good use.

I was certain Andrew could pull off his part of the plan. That would buy us some time, but probably not more than several days at the most. I had D and D talking. I’d go back later in the day and try it again after they had each had time to go over it on their own.

I figured the best thing I could expect was that they would each agree to get some reading and math activities going within their own gang. That was a start, even if it really didn’t involve direct cooperation. The leaders would have agreed on something positive and long-term for their members. That would be encouraging and even constructive.

The next step had to involve some joint activity – preferably the establishment of a business to employ kids from both gangs who were not yet ready for real-life employment on the outside. It had worked in Marcus’ neighborhood, but then there had been Mr. Hanson and all his money behind it. It would likely take more money than I would want the gangs to try to raise – stepping up drug sales and muggings was not my idea of a good way to fund a bank account.

I figured Gus would contact me when Andrew had finished his impersonations. That would give me some time to work out a plan for helping the Sorcerer see the light. It was a fine line I needed to walk. All I wanted to accomplish was for him to agree we each had the right to come to our own values and beliefs. Granted, that was a long way from the approach he was holding to, but I had some ideas – actually, I had some of his ideas I hoped to be able to turn on him.

I went inside the loft and took a yellow pad with me to the big couch just inside the big window that overlooked the bay. I soon had a general outline down in black and white – well, blue and yellow I suppose would represent the facts more accurately.

I wrote out what I thought was a logical presentation of how the world would be better off if we each had the freedom of belief. I quoted from the Declaration of Independence, the Magna Carta, the Constitution, Buddha, the Bible, the Koran, and other lesser-known documents. I needed to have Facil and Philo look it over, smooth it out and phrase it for use as hypnotic messages aimed at the Deep Mind. Then I would see if the Sage himself would record it. He had a voice that would soothe the angriest beast and instill confidence in the biggest coward.

Then, that recording would need to be transferred to something the Sorcerer regularly listened to. Finally, his copy of the Book of Enlightenment needed to be replaced with the new version and some posthypnotic suggestion implanted so he would not be suspicious of its modified contents as he read in it nightly.

I knew that, in his case, I was up against a race of masters when it came to mind control, but then, I was a Calibrator and our skills weren’t all that shabby. Excitement

grew within me as I pondered the possibility of winning the Sorcerer over to join the good guys.

We would use him as our guinea pig. Once we learned how to make the plan effective and efficient, we would go after his colleagues all over the Western world. If we did things right, they should then come around in quick order. Just what we could do about the damage they had already wreaked on the human race remained to be seen. And there was the group of monks back in Tibet at the home base of Akmino Teeki. They would need to be dealt with eventually.

It was suddenly 10 o'clock. I mind-talked to Gus asking how things were going. He said Andy was performing like an old pro, but it would be at least another hour. I decided to look in on Abby at Calibrator Hall. It had been over a week since I'd spent time with her. Since there weren't regular classes at the Hall, I'd start at her apartment and see if I could convince her to take a break from her studies.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Dough Balls and Snorkeling

I told Molly I was meeting a friend for lunch and that I probably would not be home until nearly 6. I received her hug and her ‘I love you’, but not her usual caution to be careful. I assumed Otto had passed on the message relative to my indestructibility.

As we stood there holding each other I realized that Molly always smelled like Molly – nothing bad, mind you. In fact, very nice. A combination of her shampoo, soap and perfume, I supposed. Thinking about it, each one of the Wharfies had his or her own smell. I wondered if I did. On my way down the stairs I tried to get a whiff of myself but couldn’t. I read there is a brain thing that turns off the sense of smell for any constant aroma after a short time. That was probably a very good thing back in the days when people only bathed a couple of times a month.

I was soon at Abby’s door. Her little brother answered.

“Hey, Tommy! Sis! It’s Tommy!”

He jumped up and I caught him, his legs locked around my waist. Abby appeared from the kitchen.

“We managed a less than perfect kiss, having to work around an excited, squirming, possessive little brother.”

“I got a couple of hours. You free?”

“Gotta baby-sit. Mom and Dad are gone for the day. He’s back here on assignment, I guess, so they get to have some time together. That’s nice. He’s gone so much, you know.”

“Daddy and I went fishing yesterday,” Jesse said,

pulling my face back so it was looking into his.

“Catch anything?”

“Naw. The fish in the pond are too smart to go for worms on hooks. But that didn’t matter. It was great. He was telling me about the green mountains of Sherbet.”

“That’s, Tibet, I think, Jesse,” Abby explained.

“So, anything says we both can’t baby-sit?” I asked.

“I’m not a baby. I hate that!”

“You’re right,” I said. “You are definitely not a baby. We need a new term immediately. How about ...” I thought for a moment “... W.M.S.W.I.L.S.M.ing?”

“What!?”

“The abbreviation for our new term: watching my sibling whom I love so much.”

“Okay with me. Okay with you, Sis?”

“I’ll have to write it down to remember it but, sure, my little S.W.I.L.S.M.”

“I get it. My little sibling whom I love so much ... Is sibling a good thing? I guess I don’t know how to sibble.”

“It means brother or sister,” Abby explained.

“Okay, then,” he said loosening himself and dropping to the floor.

“So, what we going to do?”

“How about doing some fishing?” I suggested.

“Fish too smart, like I said.”

“I have a method that works every time. I’ll share my secret with you if you’ll promise to keep it just among the three of us.”

“Great! And I promise not to stick my finger down my throat when you two kissy-kissy.”

He giggled himself into his room in search of his fishing gear. Jesse’s promise or not, Abby and I took advantage of his absence and allowed our lips to get reacquainted. All too soon he reappeared.

“Get three pieces of brown bread – white won’t work,” I said.

“This some trick to get me to make sandwiches?”

“No trick, though sandwiches do sound good.”

We spent the next few minutes putting together a half dozen PB&Js and packing them and a half-gallon of milk in a

picnic basket. Jesse preferred to stuff his bread into several of the dozen pockets on his baggy, camouflage pants. We were soon on our way down the magical path that was never there until one of us needed it. I still hadn't asked Gus about that.

Speaking of Gus, I mind-talked to him to let him know where I was and what I was doing.

'You're doing what?' he asked in response to my message that Abby and I were W.M.S.W.I.L.S.M.ing. I ignored his question. If he were really interested, he could set aside a millisecond or two and come check it out.

We were soon all barefoot, and Jesse and I had shed our shirts. I instructed him in two forms of surefire fish bait: First, remove the crust and break it into 3-inch-long strips. Feed that onto the hook like a worm and drop the line. Second, squish the remaining bread into hard little balls about three-quarters of an inch in diameter. Spit on the mixture to hold it together. Wouldn't work without a good portion of spit. Smash it around a hook in place of a worm.

"Guaranteed to get a bite?" he asked.

"Guaranteed to maybe get a bite someday under optimum conditions after a long fish city famine," I said with great sincerity.

"Okay then!" he answered in kind and made his way around the pond to the far side – his 'lucky' spot – the spot from which he had never caught a fish. Lucky for the fish, perhaps.

He missed my attempt at humor. I enjoyed it. Abby seemed to think I was deceiving the boy – not that she really minded.

"You're still coming to my birthday party, right?" I asked, feeling certain nothing, including parental requests for more W.M.S.W.I.L.S.M.ing, could keep her away.

"Yes. I'll be there. Do you know what the other girls will be wearing?"

"Clothes, doggone it?" I said, expecting to get beat on.

I did. We giggled and tussled and eventually I pinned her on her back and looked down into her wonderful face. We kissed, the kind of special kiss I always thought about when I thought about such things, and since I thought about such things often, it was the kiss that I thought about all the time.

(The boy's in love. Don't make him diagram that last sentence.)

"What?" she said, catching me sniffing her hair and cheek and hand.

I explained my earlier revelation about people each having their own aroma and added that hers was without a doubt the finest I had ever encountered. In response, she sniffed me. I hoped no one was watching for we must have resembled a pair of fox terriers meeting for the first time.

We ate and talked and just enjoyed being there, close together. I told her I had been spending quite a bit of time with Andrew. She seemed to be happy about that. I was finding ways to share more and more of my life away from the Hall and not breach any Calibrator security concerns. I wanted her to know all about me. I wished I could talk with her about meeting my parents – the problems I felt about it, really – but that was strictly a Calibrator concern and I wouldn't violate that trust. Andy had helped. I knew it was my responsibility to make the decision and no one else's.

A dozen really good kisses and three perch later, the three of us – each happy in his own way – made our way back up the path. I told Abby I'd find out what the girls were wearing and let her know in plenty of time.

At the door, I kissed her and whispered into her ear. "Happy W.M.S.W.I.L.S.M.ing, my love."

It garnered two rapid blows to my chest and was worth each one.

Since neither Jesse nor Abby had been hungry, I forced down four of the six sandwiches and most of the milk so was not in need of lunch. A little dessert, however, did sound tempting, so I made my way to Amy's Bagel Stand.

"Tommy, my boy!" Wondered where you were today."

"I have to check in and out with you now, do I?"

"Well, it would be nice."

She pretended to have been put off by my grievous oversight. I kissed her cheek three times announcing the purpose of each one.

"Number one to make up for my inconsiderate behavior. Number two because I love you. Number three to con you out of a bagel."

“At least he’s an honest lad,” she said as if to some invisible friend left over from childhood – ignoring me completely.

I was soon enjoying both the bagel and the small talk with Amy. She seemed to always know what to say or not to say in case I wanted to just ramble on about Abby or some more esoteric (hard to comprehend) topic. That day she listened.

“I’ve been thinking, today, about, the individual aromas each of us has. I believe if I were blindfolded and all my friends were lined up in a row in front of me, I could identify each one by just using my nose.”

I bent close and sniffed Amy’s hair and hand. Several passers-by gave me odd looks, but it was their problem for not taking the proper steps to find out what was really going on. It suddenly hit me. Abby and Amy were virtually tied for first place on my all-time favorite list. In all honesty, Molly probably made it a three-way tie.

“You’re still coming to my birthday party, right?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it, honey,” she said patting my cheek. “I’ll get to meet this Abby you speak about?”

It had been a question.

“Oh yes. I was just talking about it with her. She’s all concerned she won’t wear the right thing. I don’t understand that about people, girls in particular. It’s like the clothes are more important than the person inside them. It’ll be sweater and jeans for me. And for you, let me guess – sweater and jeans?”

She nodded and we laughed.

“I only hope the others will be able to tell us apart.”

I enjoyed spending time with Amy. I suppose I shouldn’t have, but I felt sorry for her being all alone now that her husband had died. Amy didn’t seem to feel sorry for herself so I guess I shouldn’t either. I never liked it when people felt bad for me because I was an orphan or I was poor. I had a great life filled with people who loved me. How could anybody ever really need more than that?

Eventually I got a message from Gus that their mission was over. Presently, they met me in the park. Gus first and a few minutes later, Andy.

“He did everything we could have expected from him,” Gus said, just before Andrew emerged from the clump of bushes into which he had near-jumped.

“Man. What a rush!” he said before realizing Gus was there. Thinking he was just another friend of mine and, of course, unaware that he had been by his side every second, Andy reined in his enthusiasm for later, not wanting to say the wrong thing in front of an outsider.

Gus sensed the dilemma and soon excused himself.

“So, spill it all,” I said as Andrew took a seat beside me on the bench.

For the next 10 minutes, he talked nonstop. He filled me in on every detail.

“When I take on another persona (personality) like that I get to know the person’s mind so well. It is as if part of it sticks in mine. I’m very sure both gangs bought my impersonations.”

“We need to go back and check in on the real Damien and Dante,” I said. “Need a bagel first? Must be past your lunch time. Your mom knows where you are, I assume. I totally forgot about you and school today.”

“Parent-teacher conferences. She knows I’ve been gone a lot lately, but since I’m with you she never questions me about it. I have a performance with the Sorcerer in 90 minutes and need to be there just a bit early.”

“On second thought, then, you go be with your mom and relax together for a little while. I’ll find you after the matinee at the theater.”

He nodded his agreement.

“I’ve been jumping – you call it Near Jumping – a lot the past few days. You have me on quite a schedule. It’s great!”

We both walked to the bushes and departed for our separate destinations.

“So, gentlemen,” I began after having taken Damien to Dante’s room: “What’s it going to be?”

“What’s it going to be, what?” Damien asked.

“Happiness and safety or fear and early death?” I answered, trying to lay it on the line as plainly and forcefully as I could.

The two looked at each other. Damien slid his back down the wall and took a seat a few yards away from Dante.

“I’m hungry and thirsty,” he said. “They ain’t fed me since I been here.”

“Me neither,” Dante said.

I felt Gus tapping me on the shoulder. He whispered in my ear.

“I have a bag of bagels and a couple of liters of soda here. Turn around and take them from me. That should add to your prestige around here.”

I did as he suggested. When I turned back around with the goodies, the two of them looked at each other, but neither spoke.

“Bagels and pop,” I said, putting the sack on the floor halfway between them.

They scooted toward each other and spent the next five minutes in silence, eating and drinking. Drinking and then eating to be specific. The human body has to have that fluid.

Dante was the first to speak.

“So, you must be that magician guy I been hearin’ about who come to the city. Thought he was older – lots older.”

“He is actually. In fact, he’s the one trying to pit your gangs against each other. He’s the one who had you brought here. I’m sure he’ll never let you meet him, but take my word for it. He’s the bad guy in all this.”

“I can have a hundred guys armed to the teeth raid this place in a hour if you’ll take out my message,” Damien said.

“And I can match it,” Dante added.

“And that will move your neighborhoods toward happiness and safety, how?”

“He gotta pay for this,” Dante said.

“Yeah. Can’t let him get away with it.”

“Well, we’re going to. I know you don’t understand and I really don’t have time to convert you.”

“You gonna get us outta here then?” Damien asked apparently bowing to my power. It was clear that the two of them did understand power, if nothing else.

“No, actually, I believe everybody is safer if you two remain here for just a day or so longer.”

“How’s that?” Dante asked.

“The war that the Sorcerer expected to break out,

didn't. That means he still needs you, so you're safe. I'll have a guard – one of my guys – on each of you 24 hours a day from now on. You won't be able to see him, but he'll be here. We'll see that you are fed and have something to drink. You been warm enough at night?"

They each nodded.

Dante smiled.

"Could use a girl or two if you got 'em."

The two of them broke into laughter – I mean out and out, full-bellied laughter. It was a wonderful sound. It was a wonderful sight.

"Sorry. Wouldn't put them in such danger even if I had them to bring."

I seemed to have made my point as they nodded and clearly enjoyed the smiles that lingered on their faces. Gus tapped my shoulder again.

"Communicators," he said as I felt something the size of marbles being slipped into my pants pocket.

I understood. They were miniaturized transmitter-receivers. I had examined some earlier in Chem's laboratory. I removed them from my pocket.

"Got some gadgets here for you to use. You plug it in your ear like a hearing aide. When you talk, it transmits to the other one. I'm leaving them with you hoping you'll get down to some serious discussions about the futures of your members and your neighborhoods. If you come upon something you can't work out, remember it. I just imagine I can find somebody who will know how to help."

They each plugged in and for the first 60 seconds played with them like 6-year-olds with new Christmas presents.

"007 calling M. Come in M."

"That ain't the way it goes. It's M who's always calling 007, you 'blank' head."

I shook my finger at him for the empty language and they both grinned.

"I really want this turnaround to come from you two," I said. "You are the leaders. You are the respected ones. You can become the good guys – the real heroes – in all of this. If not from you, however, I do have a very strong plan B in mind

and part of it involves you two sharing a permanent cell together upstate – without girls – for so long you won't remember what to do with one when you finally get out."

They reminded me of two little boys who had just been scolded by the principal. I took Damien back to his room and then met Gus out back.

"You saved my tail in there, Gus. Thanks. Food, drink, communicators. I guess that's why you make the big money."

We chuckled because, of course, Calibrators receive no salary. All our needs are met, but no cash is involved.

"Your suggestion about bodyguards for them was a good one" Gus said. "They may be safe, like you suggested, or the Sorcerer may decide to have them done in and dropped off, with a note pinned to their hearts from the other gang."

"Whoops!" I said.

"It's just another option, Tommy. You're such a nice, kind-hearted sort that you have difficulty thinking like bad guys. It's something we have to work on."

"I hope you're not planning for me to come by that knowledge by sending me upstate to live in a cell with Big Bubba."

It was worth another chuckle.

It was also time for the Sorcerer's afternoon performance to get under way. Gus would watch over things there in the theater while I ran several errands.

The first was to Tasha's house. I could have gone to Kate's but I got queasy in my stomach every time I thought of all that money Mr. Hanson had put into his mansion – money that could have been doing such wonderful things for the poor and uneducated and sick in that city.

As it happened Tasha and Jerry were being very friendly in the swing on the front porch. So friendly, they hadn't seen me come up the walk.

"When you guys come up for air I have a question for you, Tasha," I joked.

I was met by two broad smiles as they unfolded and proved there really were two young people there on that swing.

"What's up, Tommy? Have a seat."

"There being no chair I sat on the steps, my back

against the railing post.

“Abby’s in a dither over what to wear to the birthday party.”

“Kate and I are wearing short skirts, pullovers and sweater vests. Anything goes, really. She can’t go wrong.”

“Thanks. I’ll relay that to her.”

“She could have just called.”

“Didn’t have your number and forgot your dad’s name.

She nodded, accepting my explanation, which had all been the truth. Living in a huge mansion on top of an invisible mountain with no phones becomes pretty hard to explain!

“I’ll let you guys get back to your snorkeling or whatever you were involved in there,” I said, standing and starting down the walk.

“See you at the party,” Tasha called.

I waved back over my head. They were good friends. I felt fortunate to have found them.

Seeing other kids being romantic always got my blood flowing so I flew a couple of cool down laps around the city before returning to the loft.

“Well, look who actually arrived early for supper,” Tina teased. “Life out there in the big city get boring, did it?”

I kissed her and took over setting the table from her.

“I know it must seem like I’ve been away a lot, but there’s been lot’s of stuff. Anything you need help with about the party.”

“Party. What party? Anybody here know anything about a party?”

Everyone shook their heads and tried to maintain a serious face. That lingered on for all of about five seconds before they burst into laughter.

I sniffed – this time the air for some hint about supper.

“Swiss steak?” I asked. “Who robbed a bank?”

“Seems there was some extra money in the grocery jar this week. Strange, actually. Two twenties. You put them in there?”

“No. I don’t understand.”

That was not entirely honest. I did have a thought. Could it be that Andrew had fed the kitty when he was there? I would have to speak to him. If he had, we needed to have a

serious talk. We made our own way. We didn't take charity. It was not his job to support us.

I was getting upset before I knew the actual facts. That was dumb! It was not like me. I never did that. It was a waste of time and effort and got emotions all riled up where none were needed. I was always in control. What was wrong? I was acting like a teenager. Oh, my!

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I Looked Fantastic!!

Supper was over by 6 and we guys had the dishes done by 6:15. I excused myself and said I'd be back by 10:30. Five great hugs and kisses later I was flying down the stairs (well, not really flying in this case, but you get my drift).

My destination was definite – Andrew's. My mission was not. I wanted to confront him about the money and get it over with. I didn't like to have things hanging like that – things that could be taken care of. On the other hand, I didn't want to upset him so he would mess up during the performance that would begin at 8 that night.

I was soon airborne and a few minutes later landed by the wall in the lawn beside his apartment building. I went to the front door and buzzed the Parkers' apartment. I was invited up. When I looked down to reach for the knob I realized I was still invisible. That would not do – not for Mrs. Parker anyway. I made certain no one was looking my way and fixed things, then entered the building and made my way up the stairs. There was an elevator, but I seldom used them. It always seemed like cheating to me, like parking in a handicapped space when I wasn't handicapped. I had this great pair of strong legs so I figured they should be used. Elevators were fine for those who really needed them. I felt fortunate that I didn't.

Mrs. Parker was happy to see me. After some friendly, standing, chit chat in the living room, I made it known I needed to speak with Andrew.

“He's just finished his shower. Second one today. I

think he's sweet on one of the girls in the Sorcerer's show. He's in his room."

I knocked on the door – that dum dum dum dum dum thing we do and nobody really understands why.

"Anybody home?" I called.

"Come on in. Just putting the finishing touches on this gorgeous being, known far and wide as Andrew Thomas Parker."

He was kidding, of course, and since I was no judge if a guy was gorgeous or not I made no attempt to comment.

I took a seat in the recliner.

"So, your mother says you're sweet on one of the girls in the show," I teased.

"Sweet on? They did talk strange back in her day, didn't they? A moderate case of the hots would describe it better these days. The other kids are all 17 so I'm sure I don't have a shot, but I figure smelling good can't hurt. What's on your mind?"

He sat on the edge of his bed and leaned down, beginning to towel his hair dry.

"Something I need to ask you. It's not an accusation, understand," I said.

He sat up straight and looked me in the face. There was a question on his brow. He didn't speak so I continued.

"We found some extra cash in our grocery money jar. I just need to know if you put it there."

He went back to working on his hair.

"From your tone, I assume it would be some kind of problem if I did," he said.

"Some kind, I'd say. Some big kind!"

"I guess I'm guilty," he said sitting up again, towel in his lap. "I'm sorry. I thought I was helping. Mom and I have so much and you and your family has so little."

"I can accept your motivation. It's really cool to help other people, but you have to look beyond what you define as their need. You're right that we don't have lots of stuff, but just look at me. Clearly, they've been able to feed me pretty well over the past 14 years. You stepped on our pride and that hurts regardless of how good your intentions were."

"Hey, man. I'm really sorry. You're right. I didn't think it

through. You've done so much for me and I never seem to get to do anything for you. I did it on impulse. I was there. The jar was open. I had the bills in my pocket. It just happened."

"Friendship is not a contest to see who can help the other one the most, Andy. Friendship is accepting and enjoying the other person for who he is and what he has."

"I know you're right. Like I said, I wasn't thinking and I really am sorry."

"The women already spent the money so I don't have it to return to you. Considering that, I guess I need to say thanks for the best Swiss steak supper I've ever had in my entire life."

The matter was settled. He knew it. I knew it. We were still friends and partners. We had a new understanding and I felt much better. I hoped he did.

One thing Andy didn't understand was that my Wharfies could have earned a whole lot more money if that's what they decided to do. Instead, they each only worked as much as they had to in order to provide what we needed. We weren't into having lots of clothes and stuff and gadgets. We were into enjoying each other's company and playing with ideas and discussing what we were reading or studying at the moment. We liked to make our own fun. Mario loved to sing so he sang. Yorka loved playing the violin so he played the violin. Otto loved reading and writing and teaching. For Tina, it was cooking and painting with watercolors, and for Molly sewing and crafts. We all did what we enjoyed doing. It didn't take money to do what we loved to do. We enjoyed entertaining ourselves rather than being entertained by somebody else or some gadget. That seems to be quite different from most folks these days.

Of course, we each spent time every day doing things for others who were in some kind of need. Otto read to a blind man. Yorka and Mario put on programs in the hospitals. Tina cooked for those who couldn't and put treats for the kids in the dock workers' lunches. Molly mended and updated clothes dropped off at the thrift store run by The Salvation Army. I ran errands for the old folks in my neighborhood. It was the one thing I really missed being able to do when I was away as a Calibrator. We saved 20 percent of our income after taxes to give to worthy charities. And still, we managed to have some

left over at the end of each week to put in the rainy-day fund – the bank account in case an emergency came up.

“So, you haven’t said how you like my new red boxers with white suns and stars on them?”

He twirled around as if modeling for me.

“I’m really not used to commenting on other guys’ underwear. I guess they seem appropriate for a Sorcerer’s performance.”

He opened his closet door and sighed.

“I never know what to wear. Look at all these clothes. There’s stuff in here I’ll never wear. And a chest full of sweaters ...”

He went on and on about it, making me and my tiny wardrobe seem quite superior I thought. I hoped he didn’t offer any of his to me. That would indicate that he really hadn’t caught the gist of our previous conversation. I was committed to a simple life fairly free of all the stuff that seemed to get in the way of creative thought and natural fun for lots of kids.

“Maybe kids in the rehab centers could use some of it,” he said.

I was relieved and, I suppose, not really surprised. He continued.

“I’ll talk with Mom about cleaning things out in here. I don’t want to make her feel bad, you know. She gets me stuff because that’s what she does. Lots of it was given to me after modeling shoots, so it isn’t like we’ve really spent as much as it seems.”

He grew silent as he slipped into some white jeans and a white, long-sleeved turtleneck.

“You know, Mom and I make our living modeling fancy clothes that nobody really needs, and, if they’d be satisfied with less, they could feed the city’s hungry children or care for the sick old folks with what they’d save. I’m a hypocrite, I guess. I say I believe one way, but I live another. Getting to know you has really confused the hell out me, you know.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad of that,” I said smiling.

“What?”

“Confusing the hell out of you. I’m sure you really didn’t want it in there in the first place, did you?”

He smiled. “Sorry about the language. It slips out

sometimes when I get emotional.”

I shrugged, then added, “I think it would probably be useful for you to figure just what – if not the hell – it does confuse out of you.”

He nodded as he slipped into white socks and white suede shoes.

“Do well-dressed folks really wear suede shoes these days?” I asked. “I thought they went out with Elvis.”

“This well-dressed folk does. It’s a Tommy Powers thing. I like the way they look so I wear them. Who knows, maybe I’ll become a trend-setter.

“Should I buy stock in a suede company?”

He ignored my question, which, of course, required no answer. It was just a humorous comeback to his joke.

“It really is a cool-looking outfit,” I said. “All white like the good cowboys in the old westerns. If we were into wearing costumes, that would really be a great one.”

He hadn’t ignored that comment as indicated by his faint smile.

He draped a towel around his shoulders and began brushing his long black hair. Well, it wasn’t long, long like mine, but it covered his ears and its natural wave held it close across the back of his neck.

“I have it on good authority that the gang members bought your impersonations lock, stock and barrel. I was thinking on the way over here how cool it is that you are using that skill for good things, now. It’s probably the first time in human history that an Antipathy skill has been used in a positive way.”

“Wow! That is pretty cool. ‘Thank you, Daddy, where ever you are.’”

He chuckled as he looked himself over in the mirror one last time, patting one side of his hair and wetting his lips with his tongue. He clearly did care about how he looked – on the outside. He was my friend. I accepted that as being a part of him. I didn’t understand it, but I accepted it. One thing was certain: We made a very odd-looking pair walking down the street together.

As we left the room I sneaked a peek at myself in his mirror. Hair uncombed. Shirrtail out. Sweater sleeves so long

they covered my hands (convenient for the cold temperatures at high altitudes!). I looked fabulous!!

“We’re going down to the yard,” Andy said to his mother, kissing her cheek.

“Dinner in 30 minutes,” she said. “Better take a dish towel along to sit on down there. White pants and benches or steps don’t do well together.”

She tossed him a towel and we left. Again, I couldn’t understand why you’d choose to wear something you couldn’t just be yourself in. Again, I accepted it as just being a part of my friend, Andy Parker – no, that was definitely a part of Andrew Parker.

Outside we got down to more serious business. I began.

“Damien and Dante are talking – really talking, I believe. I feel good about it. We have to find a way to work Marcus into things. He knows more about saving a neighborhood than any of us.”

“And, he understands the magic of education,” Andy said.

“There you go creating beautiful word images again,” I said. “The Magic of Education. That’s a great phrase. When you have the magic of the basic subjects, you’re ready for success out in the big world – and it does work just like magic.”

“And don’t forget that kid Carl at the newsstand. He’s become a world-class reader since he went to work there. He reads to the kids at the hospital and helps the kids in his building with their homework.”

“You seem to know a bit more about him than I do. How come?”

“You’re so busy that I decided one way I could be of help was to follow up on stuff for us. Like Carl and what’s going on out at Shady Rest. By the way, the shelters for abused kids and their moms need books. We need to find some for them.”

“I have a connection,” I said. “Since you’re our self-designated follower-upper, I’ll give you the name and number of a publisher who gives books away on a regular basis. Mention my name, tell him what’s needed, and you and I can

fly down and pick them up.”

“Down?”

“The Arkansas Ozarks. Ever been there?”

“No. I’ve read about the area though. You know the books about the Little People of the Ozark Mountains?”

“Sure do. That’s the publisher you’ll be contacting. Spring is beautiful there. We’ll have a ball. Those mountains are filled with great forests and super climbing trees.”

“Not to mention the magical Little People,” he said grinning.

“I think tonight will be your final performance. It doesn’t seem like the other kids are involved in the Sorcerer’s dirty deeds and we pretty well have things under control there. I’ll see to it that the ‘flu’ epidemic is suddenly lifted. You’ve missed too much school as it is.”

“Just Spanish, actually, my last-hour class. Languages come easily to me. I won’t be falling behind.”

I nodded accepting his information, interested that I, too, seemed to have some special skills in languages. I had always just figured it was because of the unique environment in which I grew up. Perhaps it was partly a Calibrator thing.

“I assume the performance went well this afternoon.”

“Everything on cue,” he said. “The Sorcerer did say he was feeling strange, but brushed it off as probably being ‘that flu’. I assume you had something to do with his condition.”

“We’ve been able to determine which CDs he plays most frequently for himself away from the theater. They’ve now been doctored to present messages that should force him to rethink his position on world conquest – well, at least the conquest of everybody’s belief systems. How long does his engagement last here?”

“Through this weekend. Then he opens in Detroit the following Sunday.”

“I’d like to have this thing wrapped up by then. At some point he will need to be confronted about it all. I’m assuming that his apparent ability to ease in and out of invisibility on stage is just some physical illusion he has devised.”

“I couldn’t say. Like I said before, I’m only allowed to know one small part of each trick. I assume like you do, however, that it is just an illusion rather than like our thing.”

“Do you see him disappear from where you are standing on stage or in the wings?”

“Interesting question. Not always. If it’s done with mirrors or something, I may be at the wrong angle sometimes for it to work.”

“Or ... ,” I said thinking aloud about possible options.

“Or,” Andy continued, “he really does have powers similar to ours. He can cloud the minds of the audience and appear to be invisible. I may be partially immune to his power because of how I’m put together.”

“A good option to keep in mind. If his mental powers are really that highly developed, he may be immune to the messages we fixed on his CDs. I think a trip to Akmindoo Teeki in Tibet may be in order. We need more information about just what skills they really possess. There are lots more Sorcerers to confront once we get our game plan smoothed out here.”

“Me, too?” he asked meaning if he could accompany me.

“Not this time. I’ll consult with ... my consultant ... and if he thinks it’s wise, I may go during your performance this evening. I need to be home by 10:30 – I promised.”

Andy laughed out loud.

“What?” I asked, unable to keep from chuckling along with him even though I had no idea what was going on.

“Here you are, the most powerful kid in the universe and you still have to get home by curfew. It just seems really humorous to me.”

“I suppose, but I am still a kid in lots of ways, remember. And nobody’s above their responsibilities.”

He nodded. His mother called out the window that his dinner was ready. I took a rain check on her invitation and went in search of Gus.

The search lasted all of 20 seconds. He was at my side as soon as Andy disappeared inside.

“Your idea is sound – visiting Akmindoo Teeki. Our information about the Society of the Enlightened is mostly secondhand. Abby’s father has done some preliminary scouting for us. We need to follow up. You have any loose ends to tie up here before we leave?”

It was good to hear him talking like my partner again.

"I should check in on D and D, I suppose. Have they been fed and watered?"

Gus chuckled.

"You make them sound like livestock. Yes, they have been well taken care of and no move has been made against either one of them."

"Are they talking?"

"Their chatter hasn't stopped since you left."

"Do they have a plan yet?"

"It seems there has been less talk about planning and more about getting to know each other. Seems they share some relatives and appreciate the same features in their feminine companions."

"That's good. Maybe even better. It's hard to maintain feelings of hate for somebody once you find out he's not a half-bad sort of guy. It seems they have stumbled onto the best starting point all by themselves – establishing friendship and trust. I'm just too impatient about things sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Gus said, raising his eyebrows.

"Okay. So patience is something I need to work on. It is one of my New Year's Resolutions."

"From what year?"

We had to laugh.

We were soon back on the top floor of the theater. I gathered the two of them back into Damien's room. Gus watched invisibly. I was met with an impatient question.

"How long we gonna have to stay here?" Dante asked. "We can't get on with things setting up here gettin' splinters in our butts."

"It may be several more days. We have to let the Sorcerer think his plan is working for just awhile longer. I can arrange to have some special mattresses brought in if that will help."

"Special?" Damien said, somewhat suspiciously.

"You'll know they are there, and they will be soft and comfortable, but you won't be able to see them. That way when the guards check on you everything will seem normal."

"Magic like yours rattles me, ya know," Dante said.

"But, a nice soft mattress," Damien said. "Come on!"

"Okay, but not a word of it once we leave here."

Everybody'll think we're nuts."

They again sealed the agreement with nods.

"So, what's the plan so far, guys?" I asked taking a seat cross-legged on the floor. They sat as well, clearly surprised the mattresses had apparently already arrived. Dante spoke.

"There is some things we need in both our territories. Baby-sittin' for kids so the moms can go to work. Has to be cheap or it ain't worth their goin' to work. We need better ways to get to jobs. The bus takes too long and cabs is way too expensive. For the tutorin' we figure to start with readin' and writin'. It's really hard for most of us to write stuff like teachers want it. It's like some foreign language, ya know? We suppose employers will want it done that same school way. We think a trade-off thing would help get things started."

"I love it so far. What do you mean by a trade-off thing?"

Damien explained.

"Nobody got no money to start with, so we is gonna set up a trade-off thing where one guy does somethin' for somebody else and then he'll do somethin' else back. Like one grandmom would baby-sit for some young mom and then she'd do some housecleaning for the grandmom in a trade-off. When we gets some a ours who can do some teachin,' then the kids who gets taught can do stuff for them."

"Sounds pretty cool, but it'll take a lot of work and coordination – lots of record keeping."

"There is lotsa girls who loves ta run other people's lives, ya know. We think if they is doin' this, they won't be b---- in' about everything else all the time."

They chuckled. In a general way, they were right. People who thought they had important things to do usually felt good about themselves, and people who felt good about themselves had less reason (and time) to meddle in other people's affairs. It made me wonder.

"So, who will get into the tutoring program?"

"Any guy who needs it," Dante said.

"Guy? What about all the girls?"

"Girls? Most a them done went through 11th."

"I've found that being in school doesn't automatically translate into skills and knowledge. Some kids are there just to

pass rather than learn and prepare themselves for life.”

“You mean they could a just been screwin’ around and not learnin’ all that time.”

“That’s what I mean. Some might make good tutors, though, if they really made good use of school.”

They looked at each other. Damien spoke.

“Girls is in then, as far the Stiletto’s is concerned.”

Dante nodded, also accepting the idea. It was clear neither really believed females had the same level of worth as males. That would be something to work on later.

“Those earpieces still working okay,” I asked.

“Don’t pick up rap, but I guess they’s workin’,” Damien said. “Dante won’t shut up long enough so a guy can catch forty.”

It may have indicated that Damien was more serious about the project. It may have just indicated they worked on things differently – Dante by talking it out and Damien by thinking it out. Folks are different in those ways. Bottom line was that Damien had not removed the earpiece to distance himself from Dante. That’s all it would have taken.

With Gus’s help I supplied each one with a yellow pad and ballpoint, indicating they should slip them under the mattresses so they wouldn’t be seen. They watched them disappear, slipping them in and out and in and out. They were speechless. I figured it was time for me to leave.

Outside, Gus had some bad news. Another two dozen members of the Society of the Enlightened had left their home base in Tibet. It appeared they were stepping up their attack worldwide.

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CHAPTER NINE

Spelunking at 2,000 Feet?

As it turned out, it would be Gus and I who would be going to Tibet in search of Akmindó Teeki. Not being accustomed to Far Jumping halfway around the world, I took a secure hold of Gus and we were soon there. Amazing!

We lit on a mountaintop across a narrow, green, valley from the old fortress – one the monks had occupied for centuries. Fortunately, it was daylight in Tibet. We checked out the compound with our eyes.

At the top of the steep mountain was the central building – a castle-like structure made of huge, brown and red stones with towers and roof tops at odd, angles as if the edifice had grown without mortal supervision. Encircling it was a massive wall, it, too, made of stones. They looked to be 10 feet square by 40 feet tall and appeared to be growing right out of the surface of the mountain. Where could they have come from? How could they have been transported to that remote spot? From our vantage point – a half mile as the crow flies – they resembled a ring of toy soldiers standing at attention. Until the recent age of airplanes it would have been an absolutely impenetrable compound.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Gus said.

“It is that. It must cover, what, a hundred acres?”

“Perhaps two. They grow much of their own food inside the wall – crops, livestock, orchards.”

“Population?” I asked wanting to get some feel for the odds we were up against.

“About a thousand, according our best count. Mostly

men.”

“How can that be?”

“Only one in five female babies is kept. The rest are taken to a monastery in the valley and placed into area homes from there. The women have but one role – mother. They have and care for the children, just enough to maintain a steady population. Every aspect of life inside that wall is regulated by the leaders as they interpret the philosophy of the Society of the Enlightened.”

“What else do we know about them?”

“Very little. Until recently they were content to live apart from the rest of us, following their traditions there on the mountaintop.”

“What changed all that?”

“I hope we can find out. It began about 20 years ago – on a small scale. Trial runs, I suppose you could say, to learn how to go about the process of altering the belief systems of other groups of people. It probably involved learning the new languages as well as the social patterns. They have been isolated for thousands of years so I doubt if they had much solid information to go on.”

“Much like our own current state of knowledge regarding them,” I pointed out.

Gus nodded.

“To be on the safe side, we must assume they have developed a series of potent mental powers, although we actually don’t know that,” he added. “In their writings, they make reference to their ‘special capacities’. Reading their books, it its clear they are a meditative society – they spend many hours – six to eight – each day in deep-trance states developing the spiritual and mental aspects of their being.”

“And I have trouble sitting still through supper,” I said, partly in humor, but mostly impressed.

“Let’s move closer,” Gus said. “I’ll jump to the top of a wall pillar directly across the valley, landing on my stomach to stay out of sight. Once you spot me, come and join me. Keep low. I’d rather not use any of our powers like invisibility in case they can sense such things. Later on we’ll experiment to find out. Ready!”

“Ready.”

Gus made his jump. I was alone on a mountaintop in a mostly unexplored area of Tibet. Not something I had always dreamed of doing, let me tell you. It told me something important, however. I was being treated in every way like a full-fledged Calibrator. Working in a foreign country. Dealing with an international conspiracy. It was a sign to me that I had arrived.

I located Gus, sighed and jumped. (I may have crossed my fingers, but that will remain our little secret, okay?) I lit on top of him, but rolled off immediately. Gus pointed. I looked.

The inside of the fortress was beautiful. There were green lawns and meandering cobblestone walkways. The men wore long, unbelted, hooded robes that would surely have dragged the ground had they slouched the least little bit. Most of the garments were brown; some were black; and a few were white. The men were unshaven, some with beards that hung below their wastes. They moved in an unhurried manner, taking time to look at the birds and flowers and each other. I can tell you, I liked what I saw. It seemed very comfortable.

Aside from the castle – which was the only building that could be seen from outside the wall – there were dozens of smaller, lower, buildings – all of stone and all with wooden shingles applied in patterns of curves and arcs to the steeply pitched roofs. At the lowest spot, to our far left, there was a huge pond which looked to have been gouged out of solid rock. The water's black color suggested great depth. It was a catch basin into which the rain and melted snow settled. A thousand people would require tons of water every day. I assumed the compound was far too high for wells to have been dug down to

the water table.

In the distance were fields shaped to the contour of the rolling land. I saw no familiar-looking crops. There were many tall windmills the purpose of which I could not immediately ascertain. Some probably pumped water. Others may have run machinery of some kind – grain grinders, sewing machines, tools, printing presses. Those were just my guesses.

There were no vehicles. Water buffalo seemed to be the motor of choice here. Carts pushed by teams of them

carried all sorts of things. The construction of the carts was fascinating. They had two large wooden wheels – one on each side – and a single wheel up front that turned to guide it much like the front wheels of a child’s wagon were turned by the tongue, which, in this case, protruded in front and was guided by a single man walking ahead of it. A pole extended back from the center of the box of the wagon and was secured to the animals with harnesses. Why push rather than pull I couldn’t figure.

Gus heard my wondering about it and had an idea.

“Water buffalo are low-land, flat-land animals. Seeing the hills and steep trails ahead of them might make them balk. Looking at the back of a cart they have no idea what lies ahead so just plod on their way.”

“Fascinating!” It was probably the 10th time I’d said it, but it was the only word that seemed to fit. Gus was ready to get down to business.

“See how all the walks lead to that large building just this side of the castle. I assume it is of some central importance for them.”

“Maybe it’s the dining room. My stomach is growling.”

He ignored my comment.

“Let’s investigate. I’m going to make one pass over the area invisibly to see if we can determine if they sense the use of that power or feel my presence. You sit tight right here.”

He was soon gone. Just as soon bells pealed out from a half-dozen different towers. Apparently, Gus’s original caution against using our powers was well taken. He was soon back at my side, fully visible – if only to me.

“Well, I guess that answers question number one.”

The bells soon stopped. The alarm had sent the people scurrying inside buildings. The shutters that had been quickly closed over the windows swung open again. The coming and going below us resumed.

“At least no anti-aircraft guns rolled out,” I said, trying to lighten the moment.

“No one even looked up, did you notice?” he said.

“I hadn’t, but now that you mention it I do recall that.”

“It makes me think they only knew there was an intruder with powers, but not where he was. Perhaps my rapid

motion confused their warning system.”

“But, knowing there was somebody here, won’t they be on alert now?” I asked, really offering it as a caution.

“Perhaps. Maybe they get false readings sometimes – sun spots or satellites. The people we can see certainly don’t seem to be concerned anymore.”

“If that’s the case I’d think the worldwide increase in the use of cell phones must be driving them nuts,” I said.

“We still need to get to that central building,” Gus said.

His form flickered beside me and I knew he had just taken a short side trip somewhere. Two brown robes returned with him.

“Brown is by far the most common color down there. I figure we will be relatively safe wearing them.”

As we put them on Gus had a suggestion.

“We may need to get out of here in a hurry. Get a mental picture of where we were over there across the valley. If anything threatening happens, far-jump to that point.”

I nodded that I understood and worked on developing the precise image I would need to call upon.

“Got it,” I said. “Apparently, your jumping, just now, wasn’t picked up. I wonder why?”

“Jumping is not intrusive; it does not involve our affecting their minds in any way. Invisibility does. It requires the clouding of their faculties. That may be the difference. I imagine it is.”

“So we can near jump to the building, then. Why the robes?”

“Once there we would stand out like sore thumbs in our street clothes.”

“Yes. Of course. I wasn’t thinking. Okay, then, I’m ready. Pick our spot.”

“See the shrubs just to the right of the front door? Between them and the building. Looks to be a space of perhaps three feet. Be accurate. I don’t have time to scrape you off the wall and mold you back together.”

It had been both humorous and serious. I understood. We were soon there.

“No splat!” I whispered to him, pointing to the wall.

He shook his head and smiled at my little joke.

“Here we go then.”

We walked across 10 feet of lawn to the stone path, holding our shoulders back and our heads high, which seemed to be the expected posture there. I must admit it immediately made me feel good – confident you could say. We turned toward the double doors in front. They were 12 feet high, arched at the top, and made of foot-wide planks 4 inches thick. Gus pulled on the knob and it opened silently and with ease. We entered and carefully closed it behind us.

A black-robed man approached us. I swallowed hard, keeping that escape picture at the front of my mind. He nodded, smiled and passed us, leaving through the door we had just used. I sighed. Gus sighed. I checked to make sure I hadn't wet my pants. I hadn't.

We moved ahead through a wide corridor with white stone walls. The floor was polished marble, also white. Every 20 feet or so, there was a black door on each side. We came to a T in the hallway. We moved to our right down a narrower hall, which was otherwise identical to the first section. After about 30 yards it bent left, at a 90-degree angle presenting a larger area resembling an open reception space focused on a set of tall, red doors at the far end.

Immediately, Gus moved to the doors. I followed close behind – very close behind. He bent down and peeked through the large keyhole. He motioned for me to look. I took my turn. I assumed he was reading my thoughts and “seeing” what I was seeing.

It was a vast, round room with perhaps 100 tiny, open-front cubicles around the outside wall. Each one was occupied by a single man, stripped to the waist, and sitting cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, facing into the room. They were humming, low – the “C” below middle “C”, I believe. They were Black Robes, for lack of a more accurate term. The open, central area had several large supporting columns, which rose to meet the colorful domed ceiling some 50 feet above. Three men in bright red robes were performing some sort of ritual on a wide, raised platform at the far side – the front – of the room. It was accompanied by their own, quite different, somewhat melodious and more upbeat chant. Whatever they were doing involved frequent bowing to one another and stretching of their

arms, which served no immediately obvious purpose. They appeared to be very old – and I’m talking Sage old, here! Two wore flat, white caps and one, the central figure, a tall, pointed, red hat. It appeared we may have found the leaders – priests of some kind, perhaps.

The three older men in red – I’ll refer to them as the Red Robes – then faced the assemblage, held hands and raised them high. The unison humming raised an octave. It immediately became louder and ... robustly energized – that’s the only way I know to explain it. As the intensity grew so did the most amazing thing I have ever witnessed.

The sitting men raised their arms straight out in front of them. They spread their fingers wide, pointing toward the center of the room. Their eyelids flickered open, revealing only the whites of the eyes that had turned up and back in their sockets. A ring of ... energy, I suppose would describe it ... intensely red and wavering just a bit, connected the men’s hands forming a circle completely around the room.

That ring then began to spread out into the room doming slightly like the upper portion of a soap bubble. It was at once transparent and yet the brightest red I had ever seen. Random bolts of orange and green energy rambled across its surface.

The far end of the bubble rested on the front of the platform. The man wearing the tall, red, cap proceeded to walk out onto it and slowly made his way to the very top – some 30 feet above the floor. His only support was the bubble or dome itself. With no apparent movement of his feet he rotated, slowly, there in the center and raised his arms – straight out from his shoulders, left and right. An inverted dome, like the bottom half of a bubble, radiated from his hands. Its edges curled up and reached the outer circle of the round ceiling. It, too, showed flashes of energy. The men’s humming took on a harmony – four-part if I’m not mistaken. It was constant, never varying up or down.

The Tall Hat Red Robe continued to turn at the center of the spectacle. It went on for 10 minutes or longer. Then he dropped his arms, and the upper bubble seemed to be sucked into his head and shoulders. He made his way back down to the platform, stepped off the lower bubble and turned to face

the room. The humming gradually returned to the original, single, low tone. The energy field worked its way back to the circle of red and eventually flickered away entirely. The humming stopped. The men fell backward, unconscious, mentally and physically exhausted.

I turned to Gus and whispered.

“I’d say it is safe to assume they have some powers.”

“I’d say so. It isn’t really clear what they are or how they can be used in any practical way, however.”

“I’m not sure I want to find out – certainly don’t want to be on the receiving end of them.”

I’m here to tell you, that all too soon, that very fear I had just voiced became a reality.

As we turned to leave, around the corner came five, huge, white-robed men. They each wore a gold sash that draped from their right shoulder, across their chests, to their left hips. They carried long, golden swords slung from a metallic belt and wore the overly serious look of security guards or police.

Gus put out his arm, as if to hold me back as he took a step forward to meet them. He had always said that when a situation turned frightening it was important to put on your most confident face. He had. I seriously doubted if I had.

The five of them drew their weapons and moved toward us cautiously. Sparks – no, short bolts of energy rushed up and down the blades. Some extended beyond the ends of the swords, growing in length and intensity as we just stood there, amazed.

In a brilliant flash – a golden bolt – was unleashed in our direction from the sword of the man in the middle.

“This might be a good time to jump,” Gus said to me over his shoulder.

I agreed and didn’t wait around to politely let my mentor go first. We arrived across the valley at the same instant.

“A good first contact, I’d say,” Gus said nodding as if quite satisfied with his comment.

“A great first escape, I’d say,” I added, the beads of perspiration on my forehead beginning to drip through my eyebrows, burning my eyes and flowing onto my cheeks below.”

"I'll grant you that, as well," he said smiling.

"I guess we learned something about the 'practical' use of their energy that you spoke of," I said mostly serious.

"At least one use," he came back reminding me to consider additional possible alternatives.

The tower bells began to peel out again – longer this time and from more of the towers. A ring of energy, similar to that we saw initiated by the meditating, black-robed men in the round room, appeared atop the stone wall and pulsed around its entire circumference. Gradually it rose to a height of 12 or 15 feet. Akmino Teeki had clearly moved to a state of high alert!

"They don't seem to be coming after us," I said at last, scanning the mountainside and sky above for any signs of life.

"They probably think we still have to be inside the walls. The energy field is clearly to keep us inside – not to keep us out."

It made sense.

"They are probably searching for us in there, then," I said.

"That's my best guess, too. It seems a shame to let such a fine distraction go to waste, don't you think?" he said, his fingers drumming against his chin.

I was certain I didn't want to hear what he had in mind, but I asked anyway.

"What are you contemplating?"

"There has to be an entrance of some kind. When I flew over the grounds I saw no gate in the stone wall – no opening anywhere."

"And, now that all the White Robes are scurrying around in there looking for us, you think it would be a safe time for us to search around out here."

"I like that plan," he said as if it had been all mine. He winked. "We'll fly low and slow around the mountain, well below the base of the wall. We won't need to become invisible because there will be no one to see us."

"And we are looking for an entrance down there?"

"It certainly isn't up here."

I felt dumb that he had to point that out. I shrugged and nodded. We flew low, close to the treetops, as we descended

the slope from where we had been standing. We crossed the valley and began making our way around the mountain. Gus moved higher and I remained 50 feet below him so, together, we could scan a larger area.

“I think I found it,” I mind-talked to Gus.

He joined me where I was hovering some 50 feet off the slope and several dozen feet above what appeared to be a wooden bridge to nowhere. From an opening in the rock face of the mountain, extended a massive bridge-like structure. It was perhaps 12 feet wide and 30 feet long. It was supported by huge beams, which jutted up diagonally from below. Gus motioned and we moved closer.

Its function became obvious. There was a 10- by 10-foot opening in the floor at the end of the structure farthest from the mountain. Above it were two large wooden wheels, each supporting a thick rope as it made its way from the mountainside to a large square platform that swung just below the opening. There was a ladder leading down from the bridge into the platform – better described as a large wooden bucket, with a door that doubled as a ramp, hinged at the floor.

Gus and I understood its operation at the same moment. The ropes were attached to a huge drum up on the mountainside. It was set in place at the base of a large windmill, which supplied the power to turn it. The bucket was raised and lowered to and from the valley below and transported people and supplies.

Gus pointed down and I understood. We flew low to the spot where the bucket would land on another wooden platform. It had a ramp, which led to a well-worn trail some 10 feet wide, which wound its way north along the valley floor.

“Been spelunking lately,” Gus asked, a grin growing across his face.

I knew the word. It had to do with exploring caves. His meaning came to me in a flash. We were about to enter the passageway at the other end of the bridge and see where it led back into the mountain.

Let’s see, I thought to myself. As a regular kid I could be stretched out on the couch back in my nice warm loft with a good book, safe and sound as I munched away on a Red Delicious apple, or as a Calibrator I could be here in a cold,

windy mountain valley in Tibet, having just escaped being fried by flashing swords, about to go right back into the most dangerous place I'd ever imagined."

I was so lucky to be a Calibrator!!!

"Let's go," I said enthusiastically.

There was no guard posted. The gigantic double doors were not locked, understandable since it was a 500-foot drop down a sheer cliff to the valley floor. Gus stuck his head through the door to make sure it was safe before we both far-jumped our ways inside. Opening the door might have set off some alarm.

The passageway had been chiseled through solid rock. Two dozen workers at a time couldn't have torn away more than a few inches a day. At 50 feet a year it had been an enormous undertaking which might well have spanned a full century depending on its actual length.

High along the right wall were small openings that provided a flashing, flickering source of light. The passage was a consistent 10 feet wide and high. The floor was smooth and level; it raised by one step about every 10 feet. It wound in a gentle arc to our left – probably a spiral by the time it reached the top of the mountain.

"You still have that escape image in mind, I assume," Gus said.

"Like one of the posters of French ladies on Andrew's wall," I answered emphasizing the vividness with which I had it burned into my memory. He chuckled and shook his head.

We walked on for 10 minutes, gradually climbing higher inside the mountain. It was cold and the constant breeze at our backs made it even more uncomfortable. I would have been much warmer had I been invisible, but that was not an option since it would apparently give away our whereabouts.

Eventually we came to a sharp left turn. Gus cautioned me to slow and remain quiet as he peeked around the corner. He motioned me to take a look, his index finger on his lips. He moved back and I took his position.

Three White Robes, arms crossed and feet spread, were standing in front of another set of tall, wide, wooden doors. I pulled back and Gus mind-talked to me.

"I am going to cloud their minds and put them to sleep."

“Won’t that give us away?”

“I’ll carefully direct the clouding just to those three. Never try it yourself – well, not for a century or two at least.”

I nodded acknowledging both his plan and his caution. The big men dropped like mosquitos in a bug Zapper. We proceeded, and again Gus cautiously put his head through the door. He motioned and we passed through. To our right was a long, gently up-sloping ramp. Straight ahead a stairway of 12, wide, white marble steps. We moved up the stairs to the landing and the door it presented there.

This would be another keyhole event as Gus clearly didn’t want to risk the head thing. I assumed he figured we were at the top of the tunnel, and the door opened into some kind of structure with the likelihood of people beyond it. He knelt and peeked through the hole. I got to my knees beside him in anticipation of taking my turn.

At that moment, the door opened in – away from us. A dozen White Robes towered there, clearly not happy about our presence. A dozen golden swords were drawn and without hesitation flashed in our direction. Gus was hit. I was hit. We fell toward the floor in smoldering heaps.

CHAPTER TEN

Deep Mind Mastery Rides Again!

As terrifying an experience as it had been, I found it humorous watching Gus rematerialize from little more than a pile of ashes and a wisp of smoke. During the process, he flickered between his two forms – Gus and the Sage. When at last he had returned, I teased him.

“Seems to take you old guys a lot longer to reconstitute yourselves than it does us more youthful beings.”

“You have to remember there are two of me to reconstruct and only one of you.”

“One thing’s clear,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“None of the three of us came through the experience with so much as a stitch of clothing.”

There we sat, naked as the day we were born. Our clothes had been burned to a crisp. It seemed quite humorous and we had a good long chuckle as our bodies gradually filled out, regained strength, and returned to normal.

“I suppose this calls for a far-jump directly back to our room,” I said at last.

“Most definitely,” he agreed.

“Not sure how I’ll explain to Molly about losing an entire set of duds. That cuts me back to just two.”

There is an upside to that of course,” Gus said, smiling and getting to his feet.

“What’s that?”

“You no longer have to make any choices when you get dressed; one set is dirty; one set is clean; you wear the set

that's available."

"Pretty cool, actually," I said.

"Speaking of cool," Gus said putting on a shiver, "My buns are freezing. Let's get back home."

We were instantly there. I entered, still laughing at his last comment. I was also interested that when he said, "Let's go home," it felt right to be coming back to Calibration Hall. Clearly my two homes had come to hold some equality in my mind.

Getting "home", however, may have solved Gus' problem, but it did nothing for mine. I had no street clothes there since I had taken them all back to the loft when I left for vacation. I wrapped up in a blanket and tucked it in under my crossed legs as I sat on the couch. My shivers were still having shivers and my lower jaw quivered as we began reflecting on the mission.

"So, what did we learn?" Gus began.

"Well, number one, that they have highly developed mental powers and have somehow harnessed a form of electrical or electro-chemical energy that seems to be central to their culture. Also, that their social order is apparently divided into strata. I assume the Brown Robes are the basic class, like the worker bees in a hive. The Black Robes seem to be something higher and engage in long periods of intense and exceptionally skillful meditation and mental development activities. The White Robes are the security force and can use the power in pretty precise ways. The Red Robes seem to be the leaders – maybe religious leaders or priests or maybe just the governmental leaders. Probably both, I'm guessing. Then somehow the women and children have to fit into the picture. It reminds me that we didn't see any women or children."

"And their technology?"

"Seems rather primitive if the ox carts, the windmills and the lift up to the entrance on the side of the mountain are any indication. On the other hand, there is the use of the power to light the passageway and power their weapons."

Gus nodded, agreeing with my assessment.

"I guess I need to give their big book some more serious attention," I said. "I'm not sure what their beliefs are."

"What they believe is probably far less important than

the fact they are determined to force their beliefs on the rest of us.”

I nodded, understanding and agreeing with what he said. Still, I wanted to find out what their philosophy was all about. Before I returned to the loft in search of both clothes and food, I would stop by the storeroom there at the Hall and pick up a copy of the book – in its original edition.

It was exactly 10 o'clock when I appeared back at the loft dressed in what was clearly a completely different set of clothes from the ones in which I had begun the day. (I had first dressed invisibly.) Molly took note, but made no comment. Perhaps that was part of their new hands-off-Tommy's-life-when-he's-away-from-the-loft policy. Perhaps it was because she was busy making tea.

Molly loved tea as most British folks seem to. She also loved to do many other things. The two frequently came into conflict. At an early age I noticed that often her tea water would be heated and then reheated and perhaps even reheated again before she finally got around to using it. I figured that if water enjoyed being heated, it really liked her, but if it hated being heated, it probably wasn't all that fond of her. It was one of those unanswerable questions, but I still loved to wonder about it.

I spent some time talking one on one with each of my Wharfies, feeling somewhat guilty about the amount of time I had spent away from them while there on my vacation. It was a great time. We loved each other so much and we could still talk about anything – well, almost anything.

I went to bed and slept in until 6. After breakfast, I read and caught up on some homework. After lunch Gus and I conferred for some time in the park. I spent time with D and D and caught up with Andrew at his apartment after school.

I found him pacing the floor of his room, plainly upset about something.

“We got a problem,” he began.

“Hi. Glad to see you as well,” I joked. He didn't see it as amusing and went right to his concern.

“Chris, the other boy assistant, has gone off the deep end.”

I thought I understood, but needed to clarify.

“He’s acting weird, depressed, out of control – what?”

“All those things. I think I traced it to a CD the Sorcerer gave him the other night. He gave us all one, but neither the girls nor I have listened to our copies yet. Chris calls us ‘pagans,’ meaning nonbelievers, I assume. He speaks somewhat disjointedly about The Book and accuses us of being ‘unclean’.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Two days. I’m afraid I haven’t made it one of my priorities and now I’m feeling guilty about that. There is good news, though, I think. After the performance today, he came to me and confided that he felt like he was being taken over by some demon – some evil force.”

“Why to you?”

“He said he trusted me because I was an outsider. I took that to mean not part of the troupe that traveled together with the Sorcerer. He joined them just before they opened here in the city.”

“And you told him ...”

“I told him that, of course, I would help him and asked him not to speak with the Sorcerer or the others about it. He agreed. He’s waiting for me now in his hotel room. I’m afraid I got myself in way over my head this time.”

“We can help him. We will help him. I need the assistance of one of my Calibrator colleagues. You will need to be present to maintain Chris’s confidence. That means you will meet a Calibrator of great stature within our group. He may insist that your mind be clouded afterwards so you will not be able to recall the encounter.”

“Not a problem,” Andrew said, visibly relieved. “All that’s important is helping Chris.”

I received a Mind Talk from Gus who had apparently been monitoring our conversation: “Go to the hotel room. This is a matter for the Sage. He will meet you there once you gain the boy’s confidence and his permission to help him.”

“Here’s the plan,” I said to Andy. “Take me to Chris. I’ll lay the groundwork. Then my colleague will appear and attend to Chris’ problem. What about your mom?”

“I’ll just be going out with you. She’ll love it. That’s not a problem.”

It wasn't. We had soon flown to the hotel and materialized in a linen closet. From there we made our way up the stairs to the 5th floor, room 505. Andy knocked.

"It's Andrew, Chris," he called, quietly.

The door opened a crack, the security chain still in place. It then closed, the chain rattled, and we were invited inside.

"This is Tommy. He has a friend who can help you. Don't be fooled by his youthful appearance. His friend will be able to do everything that is necessary to get you back to being your old self. Is that okay with you?"

He extended his hand and we shook.

"This friend of yours knows his stuff, does he?"

"There is none better anywhere in the world!"

I offered the comment with power and sincerity. He nodded, accepting me at my word.

"Okay, then, he said. "I know I can trust Andrew. He's become a good friend in the short time we've known each other."

I needed to explain further.

"I have to ... warn you, I suppose is the term ... that the man's appearance will startle you. He is very old and looks the part. He is kind and gentle and would never do anything, but what he is sure will be helpful to you."

"I can tell that I can believe you. When will he arrive?"

"Right now if you are ready."

"I am."

"Please face the wall and close your eyes. I can't explain."

Without hesitation, he turned and followed my instruction. The Sage materialized beside me. Andrew's mouth dropped open. Humorously, the Sage reached over and pushed it closed with a wink and his wonderful smile. His touch immediately put Andrew at ease. The Sage took a seat in a chair beside the head of the bed.

This would be the first time I had watched the therapeutic aspect of Deep Mind Mastery being used on somebody else. Gus had helped me learn the techniques and I began regularly applying them to some of my own little problems – directives that either should not have settled into

my Deep Mind or ones that, even though they were useful when I was younger, were no longer helpful.

The Sorcerer's CDs had been expertly designed to implant directives into unsuspecting people's Deep Minds in an attempt to take over their beliefs and values and eat away at the positive end of their Integrity Path. It was serious business and I was happy to let the Sage deal with Chris.

The Sage addressed Chris, while Andrew and I found seats on the floor, our backs against the wall.

"Chris. I am Tommy's friend. I am called the Sage though that is probably of little significance. I just assumed you'd like a name to go with the wrinkled old face you are about to see. Turn around now and look me over. Let's get the initial shock out of your system."

Chris turned slowly, his body following the lead of his head. He nodded, apparently not as shocked as we all anticipated he would be.

"Thanks for coming. Glad to meet you, sir. Tommy and Andrew assure me that you can help."

"Let's get right down to business, then. Remove your shoes and loosen your belt. Lay on the bed on your back with your head resting comfortably on a pillow."

While he made himself ready the Sage pointed to me and then to the overhead lights. I turned them off, leaving the room dimly lit from a lamp on the table by the window.

"What you are about to learn are skills that you can use, yourself, over and over again throughout your life – when things inside you seem to be leading you in the wrong direction, when you have fears or find yourself doing things you really don't want to be doing. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Chris comforted himself into the bed and pillow.

"You have said you want my help."

He nodded.

"Close your eyes now. Your only job from this moment on is to listen to my voice and consider those things I ask of you. At any time if you are uncomfortable with the process, just open your eyes and it will come to an end. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Although this may seem like what you understand hypnosis to be, it will actually be very different because you will always be fully in charge of what is happening. I will make suggestions and you decide whether or not to carry them out. I cannot force anything on you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me of your anxiety – describe what you want to get rid of.”

“I feel like there is a war going on inside me. That suddenly an alien army has invaded my mind and is trying to take over – to change me.”

“Change you in ways you don’t want to change?”

“Yes, sir. It is like two neon signs are on, constantly, in my head. One says, ‘The Way of the Enlightened is the Only Way’. The other says, ‘It is your duty to make others believe in the Enlightened Way’. I seem to be forced or compelled to read in The Book – the one on the table. It was here from the time the Sorcerer got me the room. I don’t like what it calls the Truth, but I can’t keep myself from reading and rereading it. After a while it’s like what I used to believe and what the book says I have to believe got all mixed up together and then I found myself searching the book for my answers. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

“All of that will soon be over. Is that what you want?”

“Oh, yes, sir. That is what I want. I want to be able to make my own decisions about what I believe and how I go about living my life.”

“Listen to me then. Picture yourself in a darkened, completely safe, movie theater. It can be as large or small as you like. You are there alone sitting in a very comfortable recliner, facing the huge screen that glows with a peaceful, friendly light-blue tint. At the front end of the right arm of the chair is a joystick with a black ball at the top. Take hold and move the stick forward and backward to get a feel for how it works... . That’s fine. Now, see the red button on the top of that black ball. Make sure it is within easy reach of your thumb... . Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, construct a picture in your mind of a sign that

says what you'd rather be reading – instead of what you see on the two that have popped up in there recently... .”

He thought for several minutes. I could see his eyeballs moving back and forth behind his lids. At last he spoke.

“I want it to say something like, ‘Everybody has the right to hold and live by their own beliefs and values’.”

“I’m going to ask you a question about that,” the Sage said.

Chris nodded.

“Shall those who believe it is all right to hurt others be allowed to live among us, according to those beliefs?”

“I see,” he said. “Thank you. Let me revise it.”

Again, he thought. Again, his eyeballs moved.

“Everybody has the right to hold and live by their own beliefs as long as they don’t hurt other people.”

“Is that the sign you want to live by at this point in your life?”

“Yes, Sir. It is.”

“You then have two processes to complete down in the deepest part of your mind. The first is to get rid of those unwanted neon signs. They are really what I call Deep Mind Directives – orders given to you by the part of your mind that forces you to behave in certain ways. The second process will be to replace those signs with your new sign. Tell yourself one more time what you want it to say.”

“Everybody has the right to hold and live by their own beliefs as long as they don’t hurt other people.”

“I will now tell you specifically what you are to do. It will sound so simple it may be hard to believe it can work, but it will work. The Deep Mind is powerful and it is eager to serve you well. When it believes it understands what you want from it, there is almost nothing it won’t do to make it happen. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. Simple. Powerful. Eager to change and be helpful. Got it, sir.”

The Sage smiled at the boy’s extended, military-like response, then proceeded.

“In your mind’s eye, you must now develop two very different pictures – vivid, intense, powerful pictures. One will be of what you want and the other of what you do not want.

When using this procedure, there must always be those two opposite views if it is to work. They will each have several parts.

In the first picture, place the two neon signs near the center of a large canvas on which you are going to make your painting or collage. Around the edges place pictures that represent your feeling about what those signs say. Maybe pictures of how people will be affected by that philosophy or point of view. Add some pictures of your own face showing your displeasure and discomfort with what they are trying to accomplish. Across the bottom maybe a long picture of people from all nationalities and parts of the world being driven along a path by men with whips and those neon signs for faces. Now, fill that entire canvas – entire picture – with the very same uncomfortable feelings you have been having about this situation. Turn the black ball to the right – that will increase the intensity of the emotion. Feel how terrible and frightening it feels. That picture you will call the “Get rid of picture.”

Chris’s head turned from side to side. His body twisted and turned, one knee raised, as if he were experiencing the greatest of pain.

“Now, turn the ball back to the left and the picture will turn off for a few minutes while you construct the second picture. Your emotions will now return to normal. Put your new sign in the center of this new canvas. Around the edges apply pictures that represent the wonderful world you believe the values represented on your sign will allow and encourage. Perhaps happy children of a variety of races playing together. Smiling families talking or having a meal together. Put a brilliant sun up in the sky. Fill the canvas with wonderful feelings – peaceful, happy, confident, safe, feelings. Use bright and cheerful colors. Feel the love. Turn the black ball and increase those great feelings until the wonder overtakes your entire being. This is your ‘Wonderful future life picture’.

Chris relaxed and smiled. His arms rose up off the bed as if to indicate a feeling of complete freedom and openness. His body felt light as the good feelings overtook him washing away the weight of the burden he had been carrying. Clearly his emotion at that moment was the most wonderful set of feelings he had ever experienced.

“Now turn the black ball back and that picture will disappear. Recall how the joystick moves forward and backward and remember where the red button is.

It is time to make the change. Pull the stick toward you and on that wall-to-wall screen in front of you, the blue tint will be replaced by the huge, full-sized, ‘Get Rid Of Picture.’ You will feel the dreadful mixture of unwanted emotions. Hold them in your mind for several seconds. . . Now, move the stick forward and gradually the picture will become smaller and smaller until it is the size of a postage stamp in the center of the screen. You will say goodbye to it forever and press the red button. That will blast the little picture into a billion pieces of dust, and a wind will come up and blow it all away from you so it can never come together again. Now, slowly, pull the stick back toward you and the ‘Wonderful Life’ picture will come up, filling the screen, and you will see and feel that it has fully and totally replaced the harmful picture. Enjoy the tremendous feeling of relief and know for certain the hurtful directive is gone forever. Your Deep Mind will immediately set to work fulfilling your new desires as stated there on your new sign.”

I really thought the smile on Chris’s face was going to burst his cheeks. It didn’t. The Sage had one final suggestion for Chris.

“Once in a while some of the old fearful feelings that were associated with those neon signs may seem to be coming back. In the Deep Mind, emotions from one directive tend to rub off a little bit on those that are sitting there close by. It is never serious, but if you sense some are still there, repeat this process by yourself and in short order you will be free from all the old, unwanted harmful feelings. Do you understand?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Thank you, sir. This is the most fantastic journey I’ve ever taken. I don’t want it to end.”

“Such good journeys can return anytime you choose to return to your recliner in your private theater there in your mind. Sit, relax, pull the stick toward you and see your ‘Wonderful Life’ picture. The grand feelings will return along with your deep-down determination to live according to the words on your value sign. You can always add to it or change

it as you feel the need. One further caution, Chris. This procedure is only for you to use on yourself. NEVER try it with others. Teaching the process is only for thoroughly trained facilitators – teachers. I'm sure you would never want to unintentionally harm someone else. Do you understand?"

Chris nodded and opened his eyes. Eventually he sat up and scooted back against the headboard. Somewhat humorously, I thought, he checked his hands and fingers as if to make sure they were still there. (Seemed to be a lot of that going around!) I supposed his deep state of relaxation had rendered them unimportant.

"I feel fantastic. How can I ever repay you?"

The Sage answered in typical Sage fashion.

"Live your good life according to your Wonderful Life picture and the whole world will benefit. There can be no finer repayment than that. By the way, I wouldn't listen to that CD anymore. When you feel you're ready you can read the book to find out just what the Society of the Enlightened believes. Who knows? There may be some very useful ideas in there. They have a long and thoughtful heritage to draw upon."

Chris nodded.

"Now, I will be on my way," the Sage said.

He stood. Chris stood. They shook hands. The Sage looked Chris directly in his eyes. Chris frowned – ever so slightly. I understood that the mind-clouding process had taken place. The Sage then looked at Andrew, but surprising both of us, he merely patted him on his shoulder and nodded. Andy's memory of the event would remain.

Not so for Chris. It was as if he suddenly awoke from a deep sleep, standing there facing the wall. We hurried onto our feet and went to him.

"Well, I assume you feel fantastic," I said, enthusiastically using his own word.

"Wow! Yes. What happened? How did you do it? Who? Where?"

"Remember, before it all began, I mentioned you'd not retain most of what happened and you agreed that was acceptable," I said.

He nodded, clearly somewhat disappointed, but that soon gave way again to his wonder-filled feeling of freedom

from the burden that had been dragging him down – making him so frightened and unhappy.

I had one final caution before we left.

“Give it very serious consideration before you share this experience with anyone else. They’ll probably think you’re a bit loopy, you know. You’re not. Believe me!”

He nodded his agreement and Andy and I left his room, feeling exhilarated ourselves!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Changes in the Air

“The Sorcerer cancelled the rest of his performances here in the city,” Andrew announced as we met at Amy’s Bagel Stand the next morning.

“What reason did he give?”

“None, so far as I can tell. He’s not been feeling well, maybe not feeling right would describe it better. He messed up two illusions the other night and cut the program short by about 20 minutes.”

“Interesting,” I said.

Andrew continued his explanation.

“He always has two big, rough-looking guys with him now. I have seen them around before, but they weren’t such constant companions.”

“Any idea whose idea that is?”

“What do you mean?”

“His or theirs?” I explained. “I’m wondering if those muscle men are there to protect him or to keep him in line.”

“I see. I don’t know. You think they may be from the Society of the Enlightened.”

I nodded. If the CDs we fixed for the Sorcerer’s personal use were working, he could be expected to be confused and act in erratic ways that his colleagues might find suspicious.

With things changing so rapidly I figured the time had come to spring D and D. The four of us were soon discussing our next move in Dante’s room at the theater.

“I believe the time has come, guys,” I began. “Things

are becoming alarmingly unpredictable and I don't want to jeopardize your well-being."

Dante grinned at Damien. "There he go, talkin' his fancy-pants talk again. Think we'll have to learn how to talk like that?"

"Better not. None a our homies'll know what the ... lazy word ... we're sayin'."

It produced chuckles between them. His substitute for the swear word tickled me. Perhaps saying 'lazy word' was one step better than what he was used to using. It still provided no real information although its use did recognize that very fact.

"How we gettin' out a here?" Damien asked, getting to his feet.

"It's not for you to know," I said and then immediately clouded both their minds so they would have no concerns or questions about how I was going to far-jump them to safety.

I had never jumped more than one person at once and figured it was not a good time to practice. I addressed Andy.

"I'll far-jump Damien back to his territory first, then return for Dante. You'll be third in line, I guess.

He nodded. I took Damien by the hand and was soon at the front door of the building that served as the Stiletto's headquarters. A few minutes later Dante was back in his territory.

On my return trip to the theater, flying invisibly, I hovered just outside the window before entering the room where Andy was waiting. All was not going well for him. The Sorcerer and two of his men were in the room confronting him. I mind-talked to Andrew letting him know I was there and asked him to find out all he could from the men before I removed him to safety. I entered the room invisibly and listened.

"What are you doing up here, punk?" the uglier of the two men asked through a heavy unfamiliar accent. The Sorcerer stood back, looking on.

"I came up to check the place out," Andy answered. "It's a wonderful old structure – in the National Register of Historic Places, you know. Built in the early 20th century for plays and later converted to also accommodate movies.

“Where’s the kid who was in here?” the man asked looking around as if expecting to find him in one of the corners. He looked at the other man – a bit smaller and not quite so ugly – and motioned with his head for him to go to the other end of the floor to check on Damien.

“Kid? Here? You must be mistaken. Look around. There’s no kid here except me.”

The big ugly man called out the door for the guard on duty at the head of the stairs. He arrived on the run.

“The kid is gone. It will be your neck, you know.”

The guard put his hand to his throat as if there was no doubt in his mind the big ugly man meant exactly what he said. The second man came back and shook his head indicating that the other room was also empty.

The first man growled his displeasure, raising his arms like an old gorilla distressed that some young buck had just made off with his mate.

The Sorcerer’s cooler head led him to ask the more reasonable question.

“Who planted you in my organization?”

Andrew frowned and played dumb. The boy could act, I’d give him that.

“None of you are making any sense, you know,” Andrew said shaking his head.

The second man moved toward him, arms extended as if prepared to do him harm.

“Time to leave,” I mind-talked to Andrew. “Become invisible and meet me just outside the door to the room.”

I was there in an instant. Andrew arrived a few seconds later. Had we not bumped into each other it would have been hard for me to locate him. I grasped his arm and far-jumped us to the bushes in the park near Amy’s stand.

We materialized and looked at each other as if checking to make sure all our parts were still there. (They were.)

“So, what did we learn?” I asked as we made our way to the bench where we collapsed as teenagers will do whenever they get the chance.

“Well, that big ugly guy seems to really be in charge and he is driven more by emotion than logic. His accent

suggests he's probably straight from Akmindó Teeki in Tibet. I'd say their system of justice is swift and to the point. Seemed they were ready to do me in on the spot, and the poor guard clearly knew his hours were numbered."

"Wow! Excellent, Andy! You're a keen observer. They also now know one more thing."

He thought for a moment and then asked, "What's that?"

"They know for sure you have exceptional powers – you vanished before their eyes. Logically, that suggests that you were, as the Sorcerer suspected, a plant from some other group. Before the invisible thing your presence could have been interpreted as merely being from some rival magician who wanted to steal his tricks. Now, however, they know they are up against something far more serious than that. You can bet that their leaders back in Tibet will hear of it immediately. Combined with the commotion that ... the Sage ... and I caused in their fortress a short time ago, they will certainly conclude they have been found out."

Andrew nodded, understanding the importance of what I was relating even if not the specifics. He had a question, which, initially seemed off the topic.

"The Sage is your leader? Maybe I shouldn't ask that. I'm sorry."

"Quite obviously, the Sage trusts you. He knows your mind. He didn't cloud out the event with Chris. Yes. The Sage is the leader of the Calibrators."

"Can't he fix it some way?"

"It?" I asked.

"What the Sorcerer and Big Ugly now know about us."

"If he believes something needs to be done, he will. The Sage only interferes when he believes it is absolutely necessary. It may be good for them to know their adversary is at least as powerful as they are. It may make them rethink their current mission."

Andrew nodded.

"How much interference – that's probably the wrong idea – how much guidance will we be giving Damien and Dante?"

"Let's give them a little time and see how serious they

really are about it all. What they have to propose to their gangs is a 180-degree turnaround from most everything they have always stood for. They have a fine line to walk between the old and the new. They can't come off looking weak or uncertain, or they and we will have lost."

He nodded.

"Do we need a back-up plan in case they can't pull it off?"

"I'm always in favor of back-up plans. Even if they're never used, it's good practice and usually a lot of fun devising them."

"You have a remarkable way of enjoying every moment, don't you?" he said.

"Not sure if it's remarkable, but I do try to find the good and useful stuff wherever I am and whatever I'm doing."

"So you enjoyed all those times I did my best to destroy you?"

"Enjoy would not be the best word. I was fascinated by what you were doing. I was intrigued by what force could have possibly been strong enough to cause you to behave so differently from your true values. I was pleased each time I'd see you express even the slightest interest in the alternatives I suggested with the questions I asked of you. So, you see, enjoy might not be the best term."

He nodded and we sat in silence for a few minutes. Then he spoke.

"I assume any back-up plan for the gangs will be based on the Socratic Method – asking leading questions and letting the gangs find their direction in response," he said thoughtfully.

"I assume so, too. Most leaders – like most of us teenagers – don't like to be told what to do. Part of what drives them to become leaders is that they believe they can run things better than others. It's especially true in the case of gang leaders and some parents. Taking suggestions is like admitting you don't know it all. It is viewed as a weakness, and followers get very uneasy when they sense weakness or uncertainty in their leaders."

"I've read on the subject," he said, nodding his agreement. "Dictators are often allowed their powers by the

citizens not so much because of how they believe, but because they seem so confident and certain and strong. It's like assuring their own security is often more important than any other issue.

"Take Hitler, for example. He told his people they were the greatest, most superior group of people – he cleverly referred to them as a super race – that had ever lived, and because of that they had the right to have or take whatever they needed or even wanted. People always eat up the idea that they are super special. Leaving logic and good sense behind them the majority seemed to buy into his fairy tale. They tried to ignore the rest – his atrocious (terrible) methods.

"I suppose when you believe you are the greatest or your beliefs are the truest, you tend to also believe that you have the right to impose them on others – to make others accept them or at least live according to them. It's terribly frightening."

Andrew smiled a long and broad smile into my face. It seemed out of place considering the somber subject of his preceding monologue.

"What?" I asked.

"I love these talks we have about really important stuff. At school, all anybody ever wants to talk about is who did this and who did that and who said this and who said that. It's like all that's important to them is all that really unimportant stuff. The world's going down the toilet and they can only be interested in who will be going to the dance with whom."

It didn't really call for my response, but I moved to make one anyway.

"I suppose there needs to be room for both kinds of interests, but in general I agree. We often let the big, important issues slip into the background and become ignored. Maybe we clutter up our minds with the little stuff so there isn't room or time to think about the really big – really important – stuff. Lots of it can be downright scary to think about."

"I think you're being too kind. You spend your whole life trying to make life better for everybody you come in contact with, and lots of kids never even think about improving the world for anybody but themselves. They make fun of kids that are different. They talk about each other behind their backs.

They bad-mouth other groups without ever trying to get to know them. Lots of kids are just really mean-spirited animals! It's like they try to invent people or groups that are inferior to themselves so they can feel superior to somebody. How sick is that?"

"I know all that goes on. I wonder if that's one good reason for you to be in school with them?"

"A question for me to answer. Very good. I see. While I'm there with them I need to be modeling the beliefs I have on all those topics. I shouldn't be so standoffish. I should do more than just NOT go along with it. I should mingle and let them see and hear how I believe. I should act friendly to those the others shun and avoid and make fun of. I should try to discuss important issues with them."

"Wow! You got all that out of just one little question? Remind me to ask you things more often."

I chuckled out loud. He grinned and soon joined in. It was great having Andy as a friend. It was always wonderful to see somebody grow and develop into a caring, thoughtful, helpful person who understood what was really important about being a human being – simply helping each other.

It was nearly time for Andy to leave for school. We went our separate ways agreeing that I would meet him at the playground at 3:30. Then we'd go check in with D and D. I was starved. (After all, it had been all of 90 minutes since I'd had breakfast.) I jogged home, feeling particularly energetic for some reason. I bounded up the steps two at a time and entered the loft with flair and gusto.

"Starved boy on the premises!" I announced to an almost empty loft. I shut the door behind me and looked around for folks who, mostly, were not there.

It seemed my grand entrance would be lost on all but Tina and Otto. Tina was working on the lunches for the dock workers so I worked around her in the cramped little kitchen area, scrounging what I could from the fridge for a sandwich. The prospects looked very good, actually: two pieces of oat-nut bread, low-fat mayo, lettuce, tomato, a huge hunk of leftover roast beef, all drowned in catsup.

With my masterpiece complete, I munched along on it as I helped Tina sack up her morning's work. It was like old

times. It felt good.

“Wash your hands.”

“Don’t cough out over the table.”

“Don’t lick your fingers.”

“Don’t forget the candy for their kids.”

“Be sure you crimp the edges of the sacks realmente firmemente. (Really tight in Spanish).”

It was the same things she had said every day since I had begun helping – back when I had to stand on a chair beside her and I could do little more than open the sacks. Like I said, it felt good.

Then, I did school work until noon. Yorka and I did the dishes and then played some duets on our violins. He raised his eyebrows from time to time indicating I had clearly been slacking off on my practicing. Molly and I went to the thrift shop and picked out a replacement outfit for the one I left smoldering on the mountain in Tibet. I thanked her for not asking. She smiled. No more was said about it.

By three o’clock I was making my way along the sidewalks toward the school. I detoured by Amy’s.

“I saw you over in the park earlier with that nice boy – Andrew, I think. Figured you must have been really busy to pass up a bagel.”

“Sorry. Yes. I wasn’t ignoring you. It’s a very busy time right now.”

“Got a blueberry warming.”

“How can I possibly pass up that offer?”

While I enjoyed my treat, we chatted about the weather, and the birds in the park, and how nice that the sun was warming things up on that particular, early March afternoon. Some might have seen it as meaningless chit-cha, but for us it was really saying that we cared about each other and enjoyed just being together. Gus and I could accomplish the same thing by just sitting quietly together in the same room. I had noticed it was usually different with females. They seemed to need words as well as closeness. I could handle that. I’d always loved to talk – well, that’s not entirely true.

My Wharfies tell about the first time I strung a legitimately complete sentence together. Apparently, they took such close care of me that I didn’t really need to talk – ask for

things. Plus, I had that mind-power thing going and seemed to send them mental messages from a very early age.

At any rate, on my second birthday they report that while I was helping fix things for my party, I sighed a huge sigh, put my hands on my hips and said, in a most disgruntled tone, “Otto, I need your assistance because I can’t get the cotton-pickin’ candles to stand up straight in the cotton-pickin’ cake.”

From then on, according to them, I never shut up. I have to be amused that in my first sentence, even I used two lazy phrases – the double cotton-pickin’ references. Shame on me!

I arrived at the playground just as the kids began coming out the doors. Jerry spotted me first and ran over to say hello. There was also something else on his mind.

“You’ll never believe it but, stuffy old Andrew’s been acting like a real human being lately. He was joking with us at noon. Any idea what’s got into him?”

“No telling. You guys must really be having a positive effect on him.”

“I hope so. It’s been a long time coming. Gotta go. Tasha has plans for us and that usually involves some serious lip to lip time.”

I chuckled and waited for Andy. He appeared out the back door surrounded by kids with whom he was in deep conversation. Jerry was right. Andrew had all quite thoughtfully begun a new and improved phase in his social relationships.

“I just had a fantastic day,” he said as he closed the gate behind him and joined me out on the sidewalk.

“Fantastic, yet!” I said, chiding him about his choice of word.

“I’m going to have to rethink my position on the shallowness of kids my age.”

“Oh. How come?”

“I found that when I opened up serious, meaningful, topics, most of them were willing – eager, even – to enter into a discussion. See. Fantastic!”

“Looks like a pretty full book bag. Lots of homework?”

“No. Mostly library books about stuff that came up

today. I don't want to be caught just relating opinions about topics that should be dealt with in facts."

Andrew was sharp. I mean I had known that all along, but his level of awareness about things was way beyond what would be expected of a kid his age. He understood that while it was okay to base some judgments on opinions – what clothes he liked and didn't, what music he liked or didn't, what authors he liked or didn't – there were lots of other areas in which facts, not mere, unfounded, opinion, were crucial. Areas like how to raise well-adjusted kids, how to separate emotion from real issues in politics, how to decide what courses to take in school depending on what you wanted to do with your life after graduation, what foods are healthful and which are not. Things like those that have actual, well-substantiated data on which to base decisions require the use of facts.

Lots of lazy-thinking folks don't ever even stop to think if there might be facts or reliable answers available somewhere. That way, I suppose, they don't have to make the effort to look. Maybe they're not lazy at all but just plain ignorant (uninformed). They don't understand about the important differences between opinions and facts.

One of my biggest wonders about education was why schools didn't place more emphasis on how to determine if solid answers had already been found on topics and where to look for them. It became the difference between basing one's life on saying, "In my opinion I think such and such is probably true," compared with being able to say, "I found the facts, and the facts tell me such and such is probably true."

Again, I babble on.

I put my arm around Andy's waist and we moved out toward his place.

"We can drop off your stuff and you can change clothes before we go check in with Dante and Damien," I said.

That quickly done – and two slices of chocolate cake with milk not so quickly done – we set off for Stiletto territory. As we approached Andrew had a question.

"Be better to go in there out in the open like this or invisibly?"

"Probably better not rock the boat for Damien. Invisible may be better."

Andy nodded. We found a secluded spot and made the switch.

Damien was meeting with his closest assistants. We just listened as the discussion progressed.

"It's time we started takin' better care a our own instead a worryin' so 'bout the Skulls. What do we really need?" he asked.

"Money." Came the answer from several at the same moment.

"Money for who?"

"You, us, you know," they said puzzled he would even ask.

"What about your ma, Jason? What about your sister, Jamal? What about your six little brothers, Hec?"

The others looked confused and had no reply.

"I decided it's time we take care a our own. We need money, sure. How do we get money for our grandmas and sisters and little brothers?"

"Mug. Drugs. Rob," came the usual answers.

"Who ya gonna rob, Hec?"

"How 'bout Jenkins store?"

"What does he sell?"

Hec looked baffled. "You know. Bread, milk, soda, chips."

"And where you mama gonna get bread and milk and soda and chips if Jenkins closes his store because he's tired a gettin' robbed?"

Hec shrugged.

"We been robbin' from our own people. We been muggin' our own people. We been runnin' out everything old that can help us down here. That rep in our neighborhood keeps every new thing out that can help us. We gotta find a better way or we's gonna be a little, filthy island here with nothin' comin' in and nothin' here to take care a us."

"Where's all this comin' from, Damien? You don't sound like the Big Stilet no more."

Damien stood and leaned slightly forward, putting his hands on the table. He stared around the table into each face.

"You sayin' what I said is wrong?"

The five of them looked at each other around the circle

and shrugged. Hec responded.

“Guess not. Whatcha thinkin’? Movin’ the muggin’ and robbin’ north to Skull territory. That’ll be really dangerous.”

“You guys have a ... lazy word ... one-track mind. Think away from muggin’ and robbin’ and drugs.”

I tapped Andy on his shoulder and mind-talked a simple question: “Seen enough?”

I felt his head nodding. I far-jumped the two of us back outside. Andrew had the first comment.

“I suppose you noticed we forgot to get the earpiece communicators back from them.”

“Forgot? Who forgot?”

“You sly fox. You did that intentionally so D and D can continue to talk without anybody in either gang ever knowing about it.”

“Sometimes I’m so brilliant I just can’t stand myself,” I joked, twirling around several times as if in celebration.

“I guess that’s why you get the big bucks,” Andrew said meeting me joke for joke.

“Speaking of that,” I said mostly seriously. “You got any money? I found a wonderful little ice cream shop over on Virginia Avenue not long ago. My soul is just crying out for a two-scoop, fudge ripple cone with those light brown sprinkly thingys on top.”

Ten minutes later my soul was well on its way to being coolly satisfied, thanks to the enthusiastically generous nature of my friend. (Sometimes, you have to let those who enjoy helping you, just help you!)

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chloroform, Explosives, and Andy

I left Andrew in front of his building about 5 o'clock and flew around for a good fifteen minutes before returning to the loft. Even up at a thousand feet the air was very warm. As I flew I removed my shirt and promptly lost it to the breeze. I dived after it. There was no way I could afford losing any more clothes that week. It was becoming way too expensive for my Wharfies.

The task of recovering a wayward shirt at that altitude was not as simple as I had figured. The heat of the city below caused wild, sporadic updrafts, which caught the shirt and drove it hundreds of feet above my head in seconds. My task was akin to capturing a gnat; I'd get close and my motion would blow it away. Up. Down. Right. Left. It even twirled in circles! It was great fun and I laughed out loud. I needed to apply my gnat-snatching skill. I knew that would come in handy someday.

I formed myself into a circle by bending forward and taking hold of my ankles. Then I flew sideways, sneaking up on the unsuspecting, fluttering shirt. I moved it inside the circle, released my ankles and soon had it in my grasp. I looped it through my belt and secured it there.

* * *

After supper, I spent a few minutes mind-talking with Gus, catching him up on my recent activities and passing on my impression of Andy's growing skills. After the dishes were done Yorka got out the cards and we played our favorite game, Oh Heck. Its original name had, I imagine, been altered slightly for my young ears. The object was to form tricks of

either four of a kind or four in a row of the same suit. At the beginning of each hand, after the players looked at their cards they each stated how many tricks they thought they could take. You got a point for each trick, but only if you took exactly that many. More or less and you got nothing.

Cards changed from person to person by taking turns, in order, drawing a card from the person on your left. It was really not a game of skill because as the cards were dealt for each successive hand, one fewer round of cards was dealt. When the six of us played, we were first each dealt eight cards with four left over (in the trash, we called it). We never knew which cards were left over – not in play there in the trash. The second hand we had seven, third six, and so on. Like I said, there was very little skill involved so nobody could ever feel bad about losing or good about winning, although we did tend to boast and strut a bit about it and more than a few, “Oh, hecks,” were heard during the course of a game. It was the process of the playing with friends that made it so special and so wonderfully entertaining.

That evening the games went on for almost two hours. Then Yorka played, Mario sang, Molly mended, Tina painted and Otto and I read. From time to time I’d interrupt everybody to read them a passage or ask their ideas on something prompted by the book. Otto would do the same. Everything stopped while we discussed whatever it was.

That’s the way it had been for as far back as I could remember. I loved those evenings together like that. At ten o’clock I turned in, planning to meet Andy for a bagel breakfast at Amy’s about seven. I figured I’d have time to introduce him to my new pastime – Catch the Shirt at a Thousand Feet Over East Town.

* * *

I was there at 7:00. Amy was there at 7:00. Even Gus showed up a few minutes after 7:00, but there was no Andy. I excused myself and flew to his place. His mother said to go on in and roll him out. She’d called him twice with no success.

Andy wasn’t there! How should I tell his mother? Straight out, I supposed.

“He’s not in his room. His bed looks like it was slept in, though. Could he have gone somewhere before you got up?”

“Oh, dear!” She said. “I don’t understand.”

“Does he ever go running early?”

“Not often and he would have left me a note on the board by the door if he had – well, if he had gone anywhere.”

I was immediately fearful that the Sorcerer or Big Ugly and his assistant had kidnapped him, or worse. I didn’t pass that on to Mrs. Parker, of course. I did have a question for her.

“Did he mention to you that he and I were meeting for a bagel this morning?”

“Yes. He did. It slipped my mind.”

“Would he have left a note in that case – since you knew where he’d be?”

“Probably not, now that you mention it.”

I take it he didn’t show up, though, or you wouldn’t be here, now.”

“That’s right. I’ll go look for him. Maybe he misunderstood where we were meeting. I’m sure things are fine.”

I wasn’t, of course, and was uncomfortable with the fact I had out and out lied to her. I figured it was in the service of keeping her calm until we had some facts at hand. I would explain that to her later, or would I? Could I? It depended on what had happened. I left, assuring her I’d check back within an hour.

I contacted Gus as soon as I was out on the stairs. He met me down on the sidewalk. We hurried to the theater. Andrew wasn’t there. Neither was the Sorcerer or Big Ugly. I didn’t know in which hotel he stayed. The one he’d put Chris in was pretty plain. I figured he’d go for something fancier.

Gus pressed ‘911’ on his star and seeped a tag-along message asking every available Calibrator to check out hotel registers and locate the Sorcerer. We paced and waited. Ten minutes – going on a lifetime – had passed when word finally arrived. It was Calibrator Practitioner Rex who materialized between us.

“The Saxon Hotel. Has a suite on the 20th floor, numbered simply 2000.”

We thanked him, called off the search, and made for the Saxon. We entered the hall outside the suite and Gus carried out a reconnaissance mission inside – invisibly, of

course. A few minutes later he was back with disturbing news. Andrew was there as a prisoner, all right. My first reaction was relief. We'd just jump in, get him, and far-jump with him to safety.

Come to find out it would not be that easy.

Aware of his power to become invisible – and undoubtedly suspecting more – the Sorcerer had devised an ingenious situation. Andrew was on a single bed. One leg of the bed rested on a weight-sensitive triggering device. If Andrew left the bed, the reduced weight would set off an explosive charge under the bed. Gus had delved into Andy's mind and recovered his memories of what he had been told by the Sorcerer.

"Leave the bed and enough explosive will be detonated to tear this floor right out of the building. Invisible or not, you will be destroyed. There are no wires so don't think about leaning over the edge of the bed and cutting them. It is all done with tiny transmitters. Move the explosive and it goes off."

As an added precaution, he had brought his two girl assistants into the room and tied them onto the bed beside Andrew. The Sorcerer sensed Andy's compassion for others and felt sure he would not risk the girls' safety.

I mind-talked to Andrew, letting him know we were close by and that we were working on the problem. I added that I hoped he would use his time wisely and enjoy the company of the two beautiful girls.

Gus's search of the rest of the suite at 2000 found it empty. The clothing and other possessions had been removed. The Sorcerer and his men were long gone. I was sure he wouldn't leave town without his illusions and stage sets. We needed to keep an eye on the theater. Gus saw to it, then put in a call for Chem to join us. He was soon there looking over the detonator – invisibly.

He returned to us in the hall.

"It's not a particularly sensitive device. Probably only accurate to within 25 pounds so the boy's normal movements won't set it off. That gives us a good edge in getting the boy out of there in good shape."

"First," Gus said, "let's get the girls to safety."

I nodded and followed him into the room. He needed to remain invisible, since Andrew did not know about his relationship to the Calibrators. I clouded the girls' minds, untied them and escorted them into the hall. Gus then took them to safety.

I returned to work on the problem with Andy. He was less nervous than I would have thought.

"Hey! It's Tommy and the Calibrators to my rescue! What can possibly go wrong?"

"How did you get here?" I asked.

"Big Ugly and his helper drove up in a limo as I was on my way to the bagel place. Before I knew what was going on, they had me inside. I could have gone invisible but I can't go through walls like you can, so saw no margin in it. I figured that once we got to wherever they were taking me and I got out of the car I'd make my move and escape. One problem."

"What?" I asked, thinking his plan had been a good one.

"Chloroform. They held a rag dampened with it over my nose and I felt my lights going out before I could mount any response. When I woke up I was here on the bed and Big Ugly laid out the situation to me. I suppose you already know all about that."

I nodded. Chem arrived and materialized. It hadn't represented a wise move on his part, but scientists often tended to have one-track minds.

"Andy this is Chem, leader of the Calibrator Science Team. If the Sage thinks it's unwise for you to know about him he'll erase your memory, you understand."

Andrew nodded and shrugged. He certainly had grown to trust us.

"What do you weigh, young man?" Chem asked.

"One-fifty stripped, I imagine I'm wearing about five pounds of clothes -155, I guess."

Chem nodded and produced a wire from his bag. He proceeded to loop it around the weight-sensitive gadget and draw it tight over the large, flat, button on which the bed leg was resting. From time to time he pointed a key-ring sized device at the wire. He explained.

"Measuring tautness. Needs to reach a measurement

of 155. That will exactly equal your body weight. The pressure from the wire will maintain the same amount of pressure as your weight and you will be free to leave. Then we will just transport the entire device out over the ocean and drop it in. Upon impact, it will blow itself to smithereens.”

“Wow! Or as Tommy would probably say, ‘Fascinating!’” Andrew said trying to imitate my voice.

“There you are. More than likely it will work,” Chem said, his eyes twinkling at his little joke. I only hoped it was a little joke. Chem was masterful when it came to his science so I really harbored no doubts.

Andy sighed and shrugged. He draped his legs over the side and scooted forward until his feet touched the floor. Then he gingerly transferred his weight from the bed to his feet.

“No kaboom!” Chem said, clapping for himself.

Andrew and I laughed, more from nervousness than as a reaction to Chem’s comment, although upon reflection it had been a funny bit.

Gus had things removed, and safety reigned again there in suite 2000. Chem left. Andy’s mind was clouded, not because Gus didn’t trust him, but because he didn’t want him carrying the burden of possessing such information.

* * *

Andrew understood he needed to go take care of things with his mother. I had no suggestions for him, but felt confident he’d handle the situation well. Gus and I made for the theater. The bellman had seen the Sorcerer and the others leave the hotel at just about the time we arrived.

“It’s your show unless you want my help,” Gus said as we hovered over the big limo parked behind the theater. Two large rental trucks were backed up to the loading dock. Nobody was in sight outside.

“I will appreciate your presence somewhere in the background. We’ve seen the power this group possesses.”

“But,” Gus reminded me, “We don’t actually know if it is available for them to use outside that fortress, do we?”

It was an interesting point. Ugly Guy had not used it. His sidekick, Smaller Guy, had not used it and Andrew had not

reported the Sorcerer ever using it or anything like it. Still, I was going to proceed as though they did have it at their disposal. We entered through the back door and made our way toward the stage.

Until the kidnapping of Andrew, the Sorcerer had really done nothing blatantly illegal – well, there were the brainwashing tapes, but I really didn't know where the courts stood on such things. They seemed to give advertisers lots of leeway and he could claim he was just trying to sell the Book of the Enlightened.

I spotted the Sorcerer on the stage directing a group of men as they disassembled the huge sets he used as backdrops and other focal points for his show. He had little patience with the workers and his tone grew loud and short.

Both Ugly Guy and Smaller Guy were there. The former stair guard was nowhere to be seen. I assumed that by then he was probably swimming with the fish in the bay – or perhaps even swimming in the fish in the bay. I shivered at the horrible thought.

I walked out onto the stage directly toward the Sorcerer. I figured I needed to let him know something about me, since we had not met. So, once he spotted me I flickered a few times between visible and invisible. I figured that would mark me as an associate of Andrew – someone he did know who possessed that particular power.

He lifted his arms, palms moving toward me as if to signal me to leave. It seemed fully out of place. It made me wonder a number of things. Before I had time to develop those thoughts, Ugly Guy appeared across the stage. He drew a short dagger from his belt and pointed it at me. It was not held in the manner one would hold it if he intended to throw it. It was not held in the way one would hold it if he intended to run me through with it. It was held the way the White Robes had held their swords back at Akmindó Teeki.

As I was thinking it would be foolish to just stand there waiting for the energy bolt to be sent in my direction, the Sorcerer pulled a rope hanging from up in the rafters – often called the flying area because it was where the sets were lifted (flown) out of view when not in use. A huge mirror dropped into place on the stage. It stood twenty feet tall and made Ugly

Guy look like he was in two different places. I figured it was making me appear to be in two places as well.

I immediately jumped to where I assumed it had placed the image of me – based on the way it worked for Ugly. In effect, I had just traded places with my reflection.

The ray of energy shot forth from the end of the dagger, hitting the image and shattering a portion of the mirror. I had to wonder: Had the Sorcerer really tried to protect me or had it been another one of his slip-ups like had happened in his final performance?

I located Ugly Guy across the floor that was by then strewn with sparkling broken glass. He saw me but did not fire immediately. Aha! I thought. Perhaps it takes a number of seconds for his weapon to recharge. The Sorcerer rushed toward me and pulled me several steps to my right. A large tube, perhaps 8 feet wide, rose from the floor and trapped the two of us inside. If he, too, had a magic dagger, I really needed to get out of there. A child couldn't miss from that range.

He put his hands high above his head and began speaking.

“The cylinder cannot be seen on stage. It is one of my illusions. I have no intention of harming you whoever you are. I assume you are with Andrew – the boy with the powers. I want political asylum. I must not return to Akmino Teeki. Something has come over me and I am unable to complete my mission here. I have trained for this all my life. I will be of no use to my people anymore. I have no future back there.”

By ‘no future’ I assumed he meant NO future. It had been a lot to absorb in just a few seconds. Could I trust him? There had been noticeable changes. The assigning of the two ‘bodyguards’ to shadow him seemed to prove that. Andrew’s reports also weighed in on that side. Yet, he was clever. Perhaps he was merely trying to keep me contained there until Ugly or Smaller could make their way to me with their recharged energy sticks.

I tried to read his thoughts, but they were confused and jumbled. I couldn't be sure.

“You stay right here,” I said.

I far-jumped up onto one of the beams in the flying

area. Both big men were searching the stage below. Smaller had drawn his knife as well. They conversed in their native language – nothing with which my ear was even vaguely familiar. The time had come for this foolishness to end.

I put the two of them into a short Time-X. It took extra effort as if their minds were stronger, tougher, than those I had encountered before. Once certain they were in la-la land, I descended and took their weapons. I patted them down for others, but found none. I walked to where I knew the big tube should be although, as the Sorcerer had reported, it was not visible. I located it all quite scientifically; I bumped into it.

“You still in there,” I called, rapping on the side.

“Yes.”

“Can you come out? I think things are under control.”

“Yes.”

Apparently, the tube retracted into the floor and the Sorcerer appeared as if by magic materializing from head to feet. He spotted both of his bodyguards standing as if frozen in space and spoke a word of warning.

“The energy comes from them. The weapon merely focuses and directs it. Disarming them does not render them harmless.

He pointed his finger at a distant wooden chair and a burst of energy wandered in an uncertain path, eventually missing it and hitting the concrete wall behind. It charred the paint and chipped away pieces of the wall. It made a believer out of me.

“Is there any way to turn it off?”

He shook his head no.

“Does it derive from mental processes?”

He nodded his head yes.

I mind-talked to Gus, and the Sorcerer was immediately removed to a place of safety. I wondered what would happen if they released the energy toward each other. I wouldn't chance allowing them to hurt each other. It wasn't our way.

With some difficulty, I dragged each one to the closest metal radiator – it was an old building and still heated by steam. With wire coat hangers from the wardrobe boxes, I made a loop around each of their necks and twisted the wire together behind their heads in a position making it impossible

for them to reach. I wound the other end of the hanger around unpainted spots on the radiators. My idea was that being grounded like that, the energy would flow through the wire, into the radiator, and through the pipe into the grounded boiler in the basement. It would not be long before my hunch would be tested.

Both men successfully struggled against my 15-minute Time-X cutting it short by 10 minutes. I stood 20 feet away from them, about the distance the chair had been from the Sorcerer, hoping they would be no more accurate than he had been.

Ugly Guy roused first. He immediately raised his hand in my direction and fired. The energy flowed not from his fingertips, but from his grounded neck, following the wire into the radiator. Smaller Guy did no better. The experience clearly sapped them and they slumped into unconsciousness.

I stood there surveying the stage. I sighed. Gus appeared and sighed. A half dozen Calibrators appeared and took the two men away.

“Nice job!” Gus said.

“Can you tell if the Sorcerer is sincere in what he said to me?”

“He appears to be. He has begun spilling his guts, I mean, providing a good deal of information that will be valuable as we set out to stop the rest of them.”

“Sounds like good old-fashioned gut spilling to me,” I said chuckling.

“Have your laughs now. We still have to return to Tibet and put a stop to those meddling monks.”

“Meddling monks? Sounds like one of Andrew’s phrases.”

“I must admit it is. I should have footnoted it, I suppose.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bagel Number 399

My morning bagel had been delayed three hours. I hoped my system could handle that. More than missing the goodie, I missed the time with Amy. Aside from Gus, Amy was the first, real-world person outside my Wharfie family I truly felt close to.

I had mixed feelings about those times when other customers crowded around waiting their turn to make a purchase. On the one hand I was happy that she was taking in some money. Everybody seemed to need some to provide the necessities of life. On the other, I was a little jealous they were occupying her time while I was there. Dumb, of course, but feelings are feelings. I'd have to spend some time with my Deep Mind and take care of that. It would be fairly simple – I would get rid of the jealousy picture and come to take pleasure in the picture of her enjoying the other people and accepting the money for her wares.

By nine o'clock those crowds had pretty well died out – folks needing to be at work by then – so later might actually be better than earlier.

"I'm looking forward to that birthday bash you're having Saturday night," she said kidding me about it being some kind of wild party.

"The last bash we had at the loft was when Molly took out after a mouse with my ball bat. Lots of bashing. Little success. I was relieved because I had been feeding the little fella all winter."

We enjoyed a smile and short chuckle over the story.

She handed me my still-warm blueberry bagel. I thanked her.

“This is number 399, you know.” I said with a grin.

“399?” she asked, clearly puzzled.

“Bagel. This is the 399th bagel I’ve eaten here by your stand. The 399th bagel you haven’t let me pay for. Tomorrow, Friday morning – my actual birthday – will be number 400. Can you imagine that, Amy? We’ve known each other for 399 bagels.”

“Better take one today for tomorrow then,” she said. “I’ve decided to take off both Saturday and Sunday this week. I deserve a little vacation, don’t you agree?”

“Certainly. But I will hold you to that second bagel before I leave.”

We chatted on, in and around the few customers who wandered into the area and were tempted by the wonderful aroma of the cinnamon-stick water Amy kept simmering on a back burner. Then I went to check on D and D. Andrew was in school. I should have been catching up on the studies I’d been missing lately. I missed my homework – not many 13-year-olds would be caught saying that, I imagine!!! But I loved to learn things. I wanted to become wise, and I understood that acquiring knowledge was the first, important step in that direction.

Again, I figured an invisible visit would be best. I began south in Stiletto territory. Damien’s headquarters was a tempest of activity. People were in and out. Trucks were making deliveries. Folks of all ages were busily attending to things – just what, I could not determine. I went inside. As the second floor was being cleaned out of its junk through the back door, it was being refurnished through the front. Tables, chairs, bookcases, rugs, and a dozen brand new computers were being set in place.

Downstairs, Damien was deep in discussion with a small group of young adults – 17 to 25-year-olds, I’d say. Apparently, I was getting in on the tail end of the meeting.

“By five o’clock, you understand?” I heard Damien saying more than a little forcefully. He seemed very different there than how I remembered him at the theater. He continued.

“I want lists of everybody in Stiletto Land under the age

of 25, and I want to know how long they stayed in school, what jobs they've had, how long they held them and what they're doin' right now."

The others nodded. Each had a clipboard loaded with yellow pads. The man was serious about getting started.

As they left, two young women entered his ... office, I suppose it would be called. It was in the stone-walled basement and had a dungeon-like appearance – intentionally so, I assumed. It was dark except for the table in the center of the room, well-lit by a fixture hanging above it. I counted 10 well-worn beanbag chairs against the walls outside the circle of light and an equal number of sleeping bags piled in one corner. The large screen TV was off. Music was playing in the background. The lyrics were not what you'd call uplifting and their message was unclear – sounded more like an exercise in stringing swear words together than in trying to convey actual meaning. I figured it reflected the sad way they looked at life – perhaps, even realistically so.

The girls took seats across from Damien. One spoke.

"We've found about two dozen adults who finished high school and have agreed to work as teachers on that Trading Time arrangement you set up. Only problem is 20 a them is women and you know how boys hates to take orders from females."

"I think my plan will handle that."

He had come up with a most ingenious system to keep the young people at their studies. It was all drawn out on a newly finished large chart which the second girl unrolled on the table for him to approve.

For every hour a student was taught, he owed an hour in Trading Time to the neighborhood. But, if, at the end of the week, he passed every assignment he would only owe 50 minutes the next week. Nothing lower than a grade of "C" and he only owed 40. "B's" cut it to 30 and "A's" to 20.

It was, of course, backwards, but paying more for learning more (making As) – which was certainly to a kid's benefit – would not make sense to most of the youngsters in that neighborhood. It would be fascinating to see how the plan worked.

"Gettin' anywhere on findin' a couple a real teachers?"

he asked.

“Got one maybe. Teachers is scared to come into this area. He’ll only come during the day – if he decides to take the job.”

Damien nodded.

“We’ll guarantee his safety. Provide guys to go in and out with him. Has my word on it.”

Clearly Damien didn’t understand that his word was not respected outside his little area of gangland. I was impressed with how rapidly he was moving on it all. I needed to see what was going on up in Skull territory.

What was it with basements? That’s also where I found Dante’s office. Maybe gang leaders were addicted to things that were smelly, damp, dark and dingy. He was deep in conversation with four of his associates. They were looking at a crude hand-drawn map of Skull Land. He was speaking as he pointed to various spots on the sheet.

“So, we got six centers set up. Each one will have a teacher who we hire from outside and two helpers who we’ll get from here. How’s that comin’?”

The oldest of the group spoke.

“Got three teachers so far – retired – all men. Twenty bucks a hour plus five hours a Trading Time for every day they show up. Startin’ out six, half-days a week. Comin’ in startin’ on Monday to work things out with the helpers. Got all 12 a them – six women and six men. Old women, young men.”

Another spoke.

“They’s not promising to stay around if the kids don’t behave.”

“Tell them there won’t be any acting up. If there is, the kid’ll answer to me in the alley.”

It wasn’t my idea of appropriate nurturing, but it was what the kids in that area seemed to understand so that’s where he would need to begin. I’d gradually work on extending his disciplinary options

“What ya still needin’ for the classrooms?” Dante asked.

“Got most a it donated. Teachers says we need two or three computers in each place. Nobody ’round here has none ta donate and ya seems to be down on getting’ them the usual

way.”

“Take one a the teachers and get what they needs. How much a computer cost?”

The youngest answered.

“Should be able ta get what a school would need for under a thousand bucks and that’ll include a load of software.”

Dante went to a cardboard box on a shelf and pulled out a stack of hundred-dollar bills counting out \$20,000 without really putting a dent in it. There was certainly no secret about where he kept his petty cash. I was sure that everybody within a 20-block area knew better than to dip into it, however.

“I expect change,” he said, looking the young man directly in the eyes as he handed over the money.

Clearly, he got the message. He stuffed the bills inside his jacket and left. So did I.

I felt great and wanted to share the good news so flew invisibly to the school and spotted Andy in a classroom. I also felt impish so ... I removed the pencil from behind his ear and placed it on his desk. He was bewildered only for a second. He picked it up and wrote on his pad, “Hi, Tommy.”

I mind-talked to him that I had good news and would meet him out back during lunch in about a half hour. Outside again, I found a sunny spot and sat with my back against the brick building. It was warm and away from the wind – a good spot for a chilly, breezy March morning in the northeast. I took a paperback from my jacket pocket and began reading. My thoughts soon wandered away from The History of Tibet, however, and toward Abby. Not seeing her every day was the worst part of taking vacations.

For Valentine’s Day I had made her a gift – I always made the gifts I gave. It was less expensive, of course, but that wasn’t the reason behind it. When you gave a gift that you just went out and bought, the emphasis was on the gift and not your feelings that were behind it. At least that’s how it seemed to me.

I liked the idea I’d read about in the books about the Little People of the Ozark Mountains. The Little People didn’t even have the word “gift” in their vocabulary. Their word was something like “lovieth” – I’m not sure that’s exactly it – which stressed the feelings behind the gifts. The object you received

was just a symbol, a reminder, that the person who presented it to you loved you and appreciated you – cherished your friendship. They always made them by hand because that way they felt they put a part of themselves into the gift – the lovieth.

No Little Person would ever consider exchanging a gift because the thing itself was all quite unimportant compared to the motive – the feelings – that led the giver to want you to have it.

Ted got Kate gold earrings with little diamonds in them. She loved them and showed them off to everybody. “See what Ted got me,” she’d say. “I just love him for it.” No reference was ever made to the feelings he had for her that prompted the gift. It was only the gift and the fact that it pleased her that took center stage.

When Abby displayed my gift to others it was with words such as: “Just imagine all the time and thought he put into making this for me.”

I hand-fashioned her a heart out of paper mache. It was about 6 inches tall and sat up in a wire stand I also made – out of a coat hanger painted gold. (I’d gotten a lot of mileage out of coat hangers lately!) I painted the heart red. It said “I love you” in white letters in my handwriting, and in the center had a small picture of the two of us – just our heads leaning against each other.

Abby understood about it. When she opened it (wrapped in red tissue paper around a cornflakes box) she looked at the heart and then at me. “It’s just wonderful, Tommy. There has never ever been anything like this before and there never will be again. It is the most special gift I’ve ever received. Thank you for your thoughtfulness and thank you for your love.”

She didn’t look for the name of the store on the box (it would have been Kellogg’s!). She didn’t look for the name of the company that printed the card (I made that, too). In fact, it wasn’t until later that she began talking about how she liked the various features of the actual heart itself.

It wasn’t a great piece of art. In fact, it was rather primitive – I wasn’t an artist. Bottom line: The quality of the object was completely unimportant to her. It was only the

quality of the feelings and the motivation behind it that mattered. Abby wouldn't have traded it for anything.

Kate, on the other hand, had exchanged her gold earrings for silver, so they would match a bracelet her father had given her. You see, for her it WAS the object that counted. I felt sorry for her.

Andrew appeared at noon with his sack lunch in hand. He joined me, sitting there against the wall and offered half his sandwich. I was still full so declined, but appreciated the thought behind the offer – the lovieth, it suggested. I caught him up to speed on the rapid movement both Dante and Damien were making toward getting some educational programs started. We spoke of the contrasting motivational – leadership – methods the two were using.

Damien was rewarding those who applied themselves and made good grades. Dante was threatening to personally beat senseless anybody who got out of line. Where Damien was stressing learning, Dante was stressing behaving. I figured that in Stiletto Land behavior problems would be greatly reduced just because the kids realized they needed to be spending their time on school work to get the reward: less Trading Time owed for good grades. Dante would probably soon learn he needed to modify his approach or it was doomed to failure. His method seemed to have been modeled after the child-raising techniques, which, for generations, had been such a disaster in his neighborhood. I understood why he didn't know about other options. I wondered how Damien came to such a different approach.

It was partly a Deep Mind thing. In the case of Damien's program, it was telling the kids what to do. In Dante's program, it was telling them what not to do. That, of course, seldom works and, in the long run, never as well as the positive approach.

Andy informed me that Kate was having a pool party on Friday night and had asked him to pass on an invitation to me. I would be busy all day – my birthday. I had decided to go ahead and meet my parents. I explained to him that I had other commitments. He assumed they were Calibrator activities and didn't pursue it. I suppose in a way it was a Calibrator-related activity so letting it pass in that way seemed

honest enough to me.

“Who you going with?” I asked.

“Margie.”

“I don’t know her, I guess.”

“A sophomore. Easy to talk with. A scholarship student. Single mom. No brothers or sisters. Makes good grades. Sees education as her ticket out of the welfare thing her family’s been in back two generations.”

I was impressed that he hadn’t referred to her looks once. It was all about Margie the person. That seemed like a big step for the looks-conscious Andrew of old.

“Been out with her before?”

“Twice.”

“That going to be some kind of a record – three dates with the same girl?”

He shoved at me playfully, but he understood my point.

“Kissed her?” I asked.

It was really none of my business, of course, but it was what guys talked about.

“Yes.”

“So, how good?”

“About eight on a scale of zero to 10.”

I nodded. It was as far as I’d take that line of questioning. I had done what was expected of me. I was happy for him – about finding a girl with whom he felt comfortable, not just that she kissed like an eight (though that couldn’t be all bad either!).

“Got time for some hoops?” he asked wadding up his sack and missing the trash basket by three feet.

“Although I see you’re having an off day, and as much as I’d really like to beat your butt, I have stuff I need to get on with. Probably won’t see you ’til our birthday party Saturday night. It’s for both of us remember. Sorry it has to be a day late.”

“No problem. It’s for both of us. That makes it the most special birthday I’ve ever had, you know,” he said.

“Me, too. Thanks for being born on the 9th.”

“Certainly – as if I had anything at all to do with it.”

We grinned and managed a short chuckle. I pulled out a card I’d made for him and handed it over without any words.

On the front I'd drawn the skyline of the wharfs looking out into the bay. In the sky, I put two, slightly curved, streaks – one blue and one white – like they were meeting up there. They represented the two of us getting together in friendship. He nodded as he looked at it, understanding its meaning immediately. Inside I had written a single sentence: "Having you in my life is making it wonderful."

Again, he nodded. He gave me a hug and carefully put the card into his shirt pocket. The way he handled it told me it was precious to him. Girls would have talked and talked and talked about it all. We didn't have to say a single word. It wasn't that our way was right and theirs was wrong – the sexes just seemed to have different ways about such things – different needs or beliefs about it, I suppose.

I left as Andy joined Jerry, Ted and Marcus on the court. I would check in with my Wharfies and then had a planning session with Gus about our trip to Tibet.

"We waited for you like one pig waits for another," Molly announced as I entered the loft a few minutes late.

They were finishing lunch. I got a glass of milk and joined them at the table. After a few minutes of listening to Marco and Yorka disagree over the country's policy in the Mideast, I was able to direct the conversation to a topic of my own.

"I know I've been away a lot lately, but I have to be gone most of Friday and maybe Saturday morning. I should be here for breakfast and to sleep so it won't be like I've abandoned you completely."

"Oh, good," Otto said looking around the table at the others. "While he's sleeping, we can gather our chairs close around his bed and watch."

It was mostly humorous, but I understood it also meant they really had missed having me around. If Gus and I could quickly wind things up in Tibet, I should be able to hang out with my Wharfies for the entire final week of my vacation. Then it would be back to Calibration Hall, getting on with my new life there.

Sometimes I forgot that – because of Gus's special Time-X thing – my six-month stints at the Hall only seemed like a few days to my family. So, the tinges of guilt I felt about

abandoning them were really misplaced. I'd have to have a long talk about that with my Deep Mind. It would be one of those remove the old, inappropriate guilt feelings and install more realistic, pleasant feelings sort of sessions. It should work fine if I took the time to carefully build each picture and fill them with great gobs of appropriate emotions.

I met Gus at Amy's.

"Better fill up today," I said to him, referring to her bagels, "because she's going to be closed tomorrow."

"I understand you're going to be gone, also, so it shouldn't affect you," he pointed out. "My fantasy is that the two of you are sneaking off together for a wild weekend in Atlantic City."

His comment was met with smiles all around.

The subject was closed and he and I moved to the park bench to talk.

"You're okay about tomorrow, then," Gus asked.

"Yes. I am. I've worked it through in my head. It seems the right thing to do – to go ahead and meet my parents."

"Let's see," he said stroking his chin the way the Sage did. "Today is Thursday. Tomorrow will be Friday – your birthday – and then Saturday – your party at when, seven o'clock?"

I nodded.

"That puts us on a tight timeline. We will leave for Tibet right after your time with your parents is over Friday evening. Sorry to do it that way, but you are a Calibrator and our lives are based on what the world needs not just on what we want."

"That's fine. I can handle it. I'll get extra sleep tonight. So, what's the Tibet plan, anyway?"

"In some way, we have to convince the monks to stay where they are and stop meddling in the outside world. I'm open for suggestions. I will say that the other Calibrators are having great success using the methods we devised here. Most of the several dozen sorcerers that were working Europe and Africa have been deactivated."

"Deactivated. An interesting choice of words," I said.

"Seems appropriate. They went from actively working to impose their value system on the people of the world to finding themselves unwilling to continue doing that."

"I agree. It's a great word. Just one I probably wouldn't have come up with. By the way, how is our Sorcerer doing?"

"Well, I believe. It's clear that the recent kidnappings and such were the doings of the two other men – White Robes, I'm quite sure, sent to keep him in line. They are each being held on a dozen different charges."

"So, what's really left for us to do if their entire program has fallen apart?"

"Rex has been monitoring the situation at Akmino Teeki and senses an increased level of activity. He can't be sure about its purpose. It may well be they had a plan "B" ready in case the first one failed – which it did. We have to make sure any additional efforts on their part are terminated."

"So what you are saying is that you have no idea what we will need to be doing or what we will be up against once we get back there."

"That pretty well sums it up, I suppose."

"There is an upside to it all, you know."

He smiled waiting to hear my odd take on it.

"Since we don't know what will be needed, we won't have to spend any of our precious time here, making plans."

"Right," he said emphatically, slapping his knee for emphasis. "Probably even have time for a fudge ripple, double-dipper, cone if we play our cards right."

"I'm flat busted, I'm afraid," I said, knowing I couldn't finance the treats as delicious as they sounded.

"I suddenly have this strange, green feeling," Gus said closing his eyes and touching his forehead, putting me on, Sorcerer-style.

"Green feeling? You lost me."

"Something about you looking under the bench."

I looked. There it was. A crisp, new green ten-dollar bill just waiting to be spent. I hadn't been told how the Calibrators came by money when it was needed. I hadn't asked. I was sure it was completely honest, of course. I figured he'd done his flickering thing while I wasn't watching and not only got the money, but planted it behind my feet.

"Seems I'll be treating, after all," I said, standing and motioning him on his way toward the ice cream shop.

Gus was fun. Amy was fun. Andy was fun. Abby was

fun. My Wharfies were fun. No wonder my life was such fun! I hoped they felt the same way about me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Date of a Lifetime!

As I paced the loft that morning, I questioned whether or not my decision to go ahead and meet my parents had been a wise one.

To merely say I was nervous would not come close to catching my frame of mind. I had been to the bathroom four times. I had combed then messed, then combed then messed my hair. I couldn't decide whether to show my parents the neat me or the real me. Eventually, I went with the real me. I changed clothes three times, starting out with my newest-looking least-patched shirt and pants. They weren't my favorite though, so I changed into the set I liked best. They needed washing and I hadn't planned ahead very well so I compromised and went with my only other set – a blue sweater, and light blue jeans. I had no clean socks – I'd been so busy I'd forgot to put things in the hamper – so I sniffed all three pairs I owned and selected the least offensive. I figured once inside my shoes they couldn't be smelled anyway. I tried a ball cap but it scrunched my hair together and made it stick out, witch-like, at the bottom. I ditched the hat.

I brushed my teeth so often Molly said I'd wear them out. She was convinced I had an all-day date and I didn't say anything to alter that idea. After all, what could I say?

In my mind, I had tried out dozens of opening remarks to use at the moment I met them:

“Long time no see!”

“Imagine meeting you here!”

“The funniest thing happened to me on the way home

from the hospital!”

I didn't want to say anything to offend them but I did want to put them at ease. One of us needed to be at ease and I could tell it was not going to be me. I told myself it was no big deal, but it was. I told myself we'd get on fine, but I really had no way of knowing that. I told myself a lot of things, but in the end what would happen, would happen.

Should I shake hands or hug. If I hugged should I kiss? If I kissed, where should I kiss? If I hugged my father should I kiss him, too? What if my mother cried? Women always cried. I made sure I had a hanky in case there was a tear emergency. All mine had holes in them so I borrowed one from Mario.

I fretted for a while about whether or not that might be cheating – presenting a hanky that made me look good instead of going with the one that more honestly represented the real me.

I had never been one to worry, and yet there I was worrying about virtually every aspect of this meeting. It was probably a good experience in at least one way – it reinforced the idea that I really hated to worry!

I decided to go with a long, firm hug to mother with no kiss or comment. Then I would shake hands with my father and, looking at them both, say, “I'm really glad to meet you.”

It probably wasn't award-winning but it seemed natural and honest, and if they couldn't handle natural and honest it would have to be their problem. I hoped I really believed that.

It was five before seven and through our big, front, window, I could see the morning shift of longshoremen drifting onto the docks. Where was Gus? He said he'd be there at a little before seven.

Finally, he arrived. I made the rounds of my Wharfies, with long hugs and kisses for and from everybody. It seemed like a very special moment to me, but, again, that had to be my secret. Otto slipped some money into my pocket, whispering, “Just in case you're low on funds.” I nodded and smiled. He knew it was my “thank you”.

I was down the stairs and around the building to Gus in a flash.

“So, it's that time already,” I said, trying to act casual

about it all and pretending I had lost track of time.

“As if you haven’t been up since, what, 4:30 nervous as a cat,” he said.

I smiled and put my arm around him as we turned toward the city and began to walk. “Four o’clock, to be accurate and at least as nervous as a cat.”

He pulled me close for a long moment. It was his way of reassuring me things would be okay. Maybe it helped.

“So, how we going to do this? They’ll know what’s going on while I’m with them and they know that after it’s over you’ll cloud it all out of their minds. Is that how it’ll go?”

“Mostly that way. Afterwards they will remember that they met you, but not who you are, and they will keep the positive emotional responses they have from the occasion. The rest will be clouded, as you say. They agreed to it all before you were born. It will come as no surprise.”

He became serious as he continued.

“There is a sad element I have to forewarn you about. Your father will not be there. I will let your mother explain.”

I felt an immediate letdown – a tinge of anger, even, that my father would pass up just about the most important event of my entire life. I wanted to know why right then and there, but wouldn’t press. Gus said I would have my answer shortly. A sadness tried to creep into my being and I had to fight to keep it at bay. My smile helped. Telling folks along the way to have a wonderful day helped. Having Gus there beside me helped a lot.

I had often wondered about my parents. Tall. Short. Fat. Slender. Serious. Funny. Rich. Poor. I wondered what they did for a living. Doctor. Teacher. Storekeeper. Truck driver. Fireman. Street cleaner. Dock worker. I didn’t care which. In my fantasies, each kind of job had its excitement and upside.

“Do they ... does she know I’m a Calibrator?”

“They knew from before you were born that you belonged to a very special race of people and that your mission in life was to make the world a better place for all humanity. Specific knowledge about the Calibrators is not to be shared. You can, of course, relate anything you want while you’re together, but remember, they will mostly just take away

the feelings they acquire while they are with you.”

“Gotcha! Make it a feeling, wonder-filled time together. I can do that.”

“Oh, yes, Tommy Powers. If anybody can do that, you can!”

I looked into his face.

“Thank you, Gus. That’s a really great compliment. Every day I try so hard to make other people feel good about themselves and life. It’s really cool to hear someone I respect so much tell me it’s actually working out that way.”

It was my turn to pull him close.

“Sounds like this is going to be a meeting of the Deep Minds,” I said, thinking out loud.

“What?” he said smiling and waiting for the explanation of what he clearly assumed – coming from me – would be some off-the-wall take on it all.

“Emotions are the stuff of the Deep Mind, right? And that’s what she will take away with her – feelings.”

“I see. Yes. What an interesting way to look at it.”

“What does she know about me?”

“That is an interesting question. Usually, down through the centuries, I have been able to tell the boy that his parents knew nothing about him. I can’t do that this time. She knows you and yet she doesn’t. You will understand presently.”

“You make it sound mysterious.”

“It is what it is.”

“Now, you sound like the Sage.”

He smiled. We continued to walk the familiar streets of East Town, the area of the city closest to my loft. It was bounded on the east by the docks, on the north by the woods, on the south by a park near Andrew’s place and to the west by City Hall. It was a small portion of the city, but for me it had pretty much been my entire town as I was growing up.

“Where are we going, by the way? I asked. “I thought we were to be there by seven.”

“We will be there on time. Are you ready?”

“NO! But that won’t stop me, you understand.”

We were immediately in the small, cramped first-floor entry hall of an older apartment building. They all looked pretty much the same on the inside with narrow, winding, dimly lit,

wooden staircases leading from floor to floor. Prison green painted walls in the halls with dark varnished, wainscoting covering the lower three feet, probably there to protect the plaster as folks tried to maneuver their heavy furniture in and out through the far-too-narrow hallways.

As we reached the third floor, Gus pointed at a door, his eyes sparkling. The face he wore showed his excitement – for me, I assumed, but it seemed to suggest something more.

“Let me go in first and prepare her,” he said. “Then I’ll come for you.”

More waiting. I’d about had it with the waiting! Gus knocked, opened the door, and entered. I craned my neck to see inside, but I couldn’t. I paced back and forth thinking for a moment that I should know where I was. Like I said, though, when you’ve seen one of these walkups you’ve seen them all.

Presently the door opened and it was the Sage who offered his arm, motioning me inside for the introductions. I gulped, took a deep breath, ran my open fingers back through my long hair and entered with a genuine-issue, Tommy Powers, smile.

The Sage spoke.

“Mother, son. Son, mother. You have 12 hours. Feel free to stay here or do the town. I’ll return at seven o’clock this evening. Have a wonderful day, together.”

Gus had been right. I knew the woman. I was surprised and yet I was not surprised. It immediately seemed right. It immediately seemed wonderful. My plan about hugs, but no kisses went down the drain. I moved right to her and enjoyed the hug of my life. We held it for a long, long time. I couldn’t tell for sure if she was crying, but I knew I was. She spoke first as we reluctantly moved apart.

“I brought a sack of my very, very blueberriest bagels, Tommy. I just knew it was going to be you, Son.”

I had one of those mental flashes in which a thousand things seem to come into focus in a split second. She smelled like mother – probably the first real sensory experience I had after I was born. She had on occasion, recently, called me “son.” I knew from Gus that she was the daughter of a Calibrator and had chosen to leave the Hall at 18 and live out in the world. Her husband – my father – had been killed in the

war so, of course, could not be present. I felt pretty sheepish about my earlier angry feelings toward him and his absence. I had failed to appropriately consider possible options.

“You can’t know how right this feels to me,” I said through my own tears, studying her face and seeing things I had never seen before. I offered the hanky and continued.

“For all the time we’ve known each other, I’ve really been told just a tiny bit about you.”

“Our Gussy?” she asked moving us to her couch.

“I didn’t know if you knew about him.”

“One of the few things I remember from my years there at the Hall. Just who and what he is remains fuzzy, but I assume he has some importance.”

“Yes. That would be a realistic take on it.”

She took my hand in hers patting it gently, over and over again.

“I want to know everything there is to know about you, Tommy. I know it will be erased, but at least for this short time I’ll know.”

“Well, I’m the youngest Calibrator, but then I’m sure you’ve figured that out. I’m Practitioner-level now. Gus is my mentor. We share a room when I’m at the Hall. I love him dearly. I guess you know my family – the folks in the loft – I call them my Wharfies.”

“I got to know them very well – from a distance – before you were born. Never actually met them. I still have the folder of information David and I gathered on them when we were making our big decision. Where they live was clouded out of our minds, of course.”

“David was my father’s name?”

“Yes. Forgive me. I was going to tell you about him right off so you wouldn’t wonder. That’s a picture of him there on the table.”

I stretched out and picked it up, studying it as I spoke.

“Gus told me about your husband so I made the connection just now while we were hugging.”

“He was a professional Marine – it was one of the main reasons we decided to place you where we did – where there would be lots of stable people – good role models – always there for you.”

“You made a fantastic choice, I’ll tell you that. You’ll get to meet them at the birthday party Saturday night. You’ll love them. What did my father do in the service?”

“He was a field physician. He could have had a safer hospital assignment, but he wanted to be with the boys when they needed him most.”

“How did you meet?”

“I was a secretary at the medical school he attended.”

“So from secretary to business woman.”

“Hated typing. Love bageling.”

I understood and nodded. I admired her for that decision. She continued.

“Your father would have loved the way you’re turning out. It’s not the Calibrator stuff I’m talking about, but the person stuff. You spread joy wherever you go, you know. Sometimes I think I can see your smile a block before I can make out your face.”

“If that’s truly how I am, then it’s something you and I have in common,” I said.

She patted my hand again. I wanted to dance. There was music (good old Gus). Mom and I danced and twirled and dipped. She taught me the dances of her era. I taught her what I knew of the newer ones. We had a wonderful time that overflowed with smiles and laughter.

“You’d wear a girl out, Tommy,” she said. “We must find some way to do this more often.”

We took seats back on the couch.

“But you won’t remember later on.”

“Maybe not, Tommy. But you know, the first day Gus bought you by my stand I had my suspicions about you. Not sure what it was. That may be clouded away, too, of course. Let’s not worry about it, now. What will be about it will be.

“I do love you, you know. I loved you as Amy. Now I love you as my mother.”

“It just can’t get much better than double love, Son. I can certainly say the same for you – first as Tommy and now as my own flesh and blood.”

“May I ask if you had a name in mind for me while you were pregnant?”

“David. I never mentioned it out loud once I knew I’d

have no say in it, but I could think of no one better to share a name with than your father. He was a loving man, brimming over with compassion and integrity.”

“I have to assume your father and mother – my grandparents – are still at Calibration Hall.”

She nodded silently. A single tear wound its way down her smiling cheek.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to make you sad.”

“Just a tear. Not really sad. Do you want their names?”

Dumb as it sounds, I had never thought much about my grandparents. At that moment, I couldn’t be sure that I wanted to know who my grandfather was. Knowing that, might change my Calibrator relationship with him.

In the end, of course, I couldn’t avoid knowing her mind. It was Rex. He and his wife – my grandmother – lived in an apartment close to Abby. I decided not to pursue the topic with her and explained why.

The rest of the day was wonderful. We walked the neighborhood and she pointed out places that held special meaning for her. I saw the building where she and my father had lived while he finished medical school. I bought her an ice cream cone – interestingly, blueberry was her favorite – and we had lunch at a small café that had been operated by the same Italian family for three generations. We talked and laughed and wondered together. The day was over way too soon.

When the Sage arrived, I folded my arms and announced that I was not going. He shook his head and smiled.

“I never promised it would fair, Tommy. Five more minutes and then I’ll expect you out in the hall.”

In five minutes I was there. The Sage clouded mother’s mind and she went back inside her apartment.

“The woods in Indiana or the porch roof in front of your loft?” he asked, knowing full well I’d need some time to get my head together.

“Porch, I think,” I said nodding.

“Alone or with company?”

“Alone I think. Thanks, though.”

He nodded.

“You can have an hour, then it’s back to work.”

At the bottom of the steps I turned and looked back – just for a moment – and was then on my way. Gus understood about my need for solitude and said his good-bye about halfway back to the docks. He turned north and I turned south. I walked slowly, kicking a lonely looking pop can three blocks before depositing it in a trash container where it seemed happy to cozy up to others of its own kind.

Amy’s stand was closed. I wondered how often that had happened since she opened it. Not many, I bet. I stopped and touched it. I ran my finger along the counter in front of the heavy wooden shutters that closed it up against the weather and vandals at night. I told myself I was touching where my mother had touched. It made me smile and feel warm inside. I took a deep breath and left a tear behind before moving on.

By the time I had cleared my mind, out on the roof, my hour was up. I made my way inside. Molly playfully checked my collar for lipstick. Tina smelled my hair for a girl’s perfume. I went along with their fantasy and put on a happy face.

“It was the date of a lifetime and that’s all I’ll have to say on the matter.”

I returned most of the money Otto had given me and went directly to bed. Using my pillows-under-the-covers technique, I again left through the nearest wall to meet Gus.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Showdown at Akmindó Teeki

Gus didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that it would be just him and me up against all the monks at Akmindó Teeki. I had my own reservations, but didn't voice them. He must have known something I didn't. I'm the impatient type so I asked.

"You have a plan or know something I don't?"

"Not really. Confidence. I have great confidence in both the Calibrator powers and in Powers' ingenuity."

It should have been humorous referring to my ingenuity in that way. At the moment, however, it just seemed to put a big burden on my shoulders – a burden Gus didn't seem to be concerned about. I was a Calibrator, though, so I would do what I had to do.

By nine o'clock we were flying north up the ever-curving, deep, green valley toward the monks' fortress. Gus decided it would be well if they knew we were coming. We were there for a confrontation, and we couldn't have one if they didn't sense our presence. It was daylight in Tibet so we went in making a point of being seen.

Because of the special nature of the mission, Gus had us wear our dress uniforms – his scarlet and my blue silks. I must admit I felt very special at that moment. He figured it might not be all that impressive for us to meet the long-robed leaders of the Society of the Enlightened in our street clothes. Appearing to be 13 would present enough of an obstacle, I thought.

As we neared the huge, stone wall, the energy barrier

along its top shot skyward, that time a full 20 feet if an inch. They knew we were on our way. We were sure that since our last visit they had received numerous reports about us from their men in the field. Still, since we had shown so few of our powers, they remained in the dark about most of them. I hoped they thought they knew more than they did. It might instill a degree of overconfidence that would work to our advantage. Come to think of it, our youthful appearance might also help foster that. They would expect less than we could deliver.

“How do we begin this adventure?” I asked.

“We need to know where the women and children are so if the monks turn things violent we can lead the confrontation away from them. They should not have to suffer for the monks’ miscalculations.”

I understood and nodded my agreement. We far-jumped into the wardrobe room and once again donned brown robes. It would buy us some time even if, perhaps, not much.

I had noticed on our first visit that the building to the far north of the compound had no traffic in or out of it. If the women and children were kept isolated from the rest, that just might be where they stayed. We made our way in that direction.

White Robes with swords drawn were everywhere. Brown Robes were less numerous than before, although there were enough out and about to make our presence seem legitimate. Thirty yards from the building we paused and looked around. Since there was so little traffic in or out, it might seem suspicious if we were seen entering.

It appeared that we were being completely ignored so we moved ahead and entered through the small, single door at the front. The building had few windows and was two stories high. The pointed roof was very steep and had two rows of dormers suggesting two more floors within the attic area. Sleeping lofts, I imagined.

We pulled the hoods close around our faces which were both too young in appearance and without the required beard. My darkening upper lip just wouldn’t qualify! It was

suddenly clear that my suspicion about the building was correct. Immediately, we heard the happy voices of children coming from the rooms along each side of the corridor into which the front door opened. It was a bright and cheery area with the walls painted happy colors in swirls and swishes, and the entire area well lit – by the same energy waves we had discovered in the tunnel.

At the end of the hall were double doors. Gus cracked one open, ever so slightly. I knelt below him so I could also get a look. There were dozens of children of all ages playing games in a room resembling a gym. They were obviously having a good time. Several women were overseeing the activities.

We had determined what we had come to find out, so left the way we entered.

“I suppose it’s time we get on with it,” Gus said, beginning to remove his robe.

I followed his lead. Within seconds we were surrounded by White Robes and escorted to the main building – the one with the huge round room we had investigated on the previous trip. It seemed to be the quickest and most direct way of getting our dialog started.

Inside we were taken down the same hall we had followed before and arrived at the same tall double doors that provided entry into the circular room. Two White Robes opened them and four urged us inside and remained behind us as we approached the ... platform, I think I called it before. It resembled the front of many churches I’d seen. There were, however, no statues or other obvious symbols of a religious nature.

We were some 20 feet from the steps when the White Robes indicated we should stop. The overhead lights dimmed and a flood of light bathed the area in front of us. A huge puff of smoke appeared and from it stepped the Tall Red Hat we had seen before. In short order the two Short Hats appeared in a similar fashion. Whether their arrival was through some actual mystical means or merely by some cheap magician’s trick I couldn’t tell.

The Tall Hat raised his arms toward the ceiling and shot short bursts of energy from each hand. It was clearly a show

of power. Gus met show with show. He turned to me and winked. Then, using a form of his Far Jumping powers, ran his hand back and forth through my neck, front to back. Then lowered his arm and repeated it through my chest and finally through my waist. It tickled but I managed a sober face.

He turned back toward the platform and nodded his head once as if to say, "What else ya got, big boy'?"

The Tall Hat gradually rose to a height of three feet off the floor, remained there for perhaps a minute before returning to the platform.

Gus turned to me and made a suggestion: "Leap frog at three meters?"

I got his meaning. We flew – hovered actually, I suppose – to a height of three meters and then leapfrogged over each other's backs for several minutes moving in a rather tight circle 30 feet in front of the three red-robed men. Then we returned to the floor. Again, Gus nodded.

Tall Hat closed his eyes, a pained expression mounting his face. He grew to a height of nearly 10 feet. He again raised his arms and delivered bolt after bolt of energy into the upper recesses of the empty room.

I noted that they did no harm and had to wonder how that could be. On our previous visit the bolts from the White Robes that hit us certainly had the power to do great harm. That reminded me; they owed me a set of clothes. A robe or two would make a nice souvenir of our association with these people.

"Stand back, Tommy," Gus said. "It's time for the Sage to appear and appear and appear."

I moved to the side several steps, not certain what his triple reference had been. I soon understood.

The scarlet-clad figure of Gus began twisting and bending and morphing in shape. It grew to a height of nearly seven feet before the brightly colored swirl of the Sage's robe gradually emerged from the jumble of features. He stood there for only a moment, staring up into the eyes of Tall Hat. Then, his body broadened to each side until his bulk tripled in width. At that point two additional Sages appeared, flanking him right and left. There were three of him.

I had to smile. The whole sequence of events since we

entered the room reminded me of two little boys having one of those, “Oh ya?” “Oh ya?” “Oh ya,” confrontations on the school ground as if those words would prove who was the toughest. I did figure that three Sages probably beat one Tall Hat, even if he had grown an extra 4 feet. Apparently, that was Tall Hat’s take on it as well. He motioned to the White Robes who were soon pressing the point of a sword at each of our throats. The Sage reconstituted himself into just one being. Two of the swords were left hanging and were soon awkwardly lowered by a pair of bewildered White Robes.

The Sage had one more trick up his sleeve – one I certainly was not expecting. His eyes began to glow red – like Andrew’s. He focused on the sword that was accosting him and it melted, burning the hand of the man who held it. He repeated the procedure with the sword held against me. It too, fell into a disfigured mass on the floor.

I wished I had let Andrew tutor me in the art of laser vision, because I had the idea it would soon come in very handy.

The Tall Hat disappeared in another puff of smoke. His two Red Robes remained behind, apparently ready to sacrifice themselves to protect their leader. It was the leader we needed.

“Find him,” the Sage said to me. “I’ll handle things here.”

As I prepared to far-jump beneath the floor of the platform to begin my search, a platoon of White Robes entered the room from the double doors behind.

“I’ll be fine,” the Sage said. “Go. Don’t let him get away.”

I made my way through the floor into a hallway below. It was clear Tall Hat’s disappearance had been rigged with a trapdoor and lift. It began looking more and more like the Wizard in the Land of Oz – all smoke and mirrors. I could go left or right. Left felt right ... well, you know what I mean.

I moved quickly down the hall. It curved toward what I assumed was north, then straightened out. Presently, I came upon a single white door. It was locked. I far-jumped through it and found myself in the tunnel that Gus and I had explored as we made our way into the compound from the opening in the

cliff. Tall Hat was making his escape.

To where, I wondered. Perhaps there was a safe haven built for just such an emergency. I started on the trot down the tunnel figuring my strong, young legs would easily catch such an ancient-looking figure. Around the first turn I was stopped in my tracks. From there on down the tunnel in front of me were energy beams forming X after X – ceiling to floor – several feet apart as far as I could see. They were projected from small holes about a foot below the ceiling. That gave more room at the top of the Xs than at the bottom, where I was allowed no room at all. Even knowing the devastating power of the rays, I had to take the chance.

I would attempt to fly between the upper legs of the Xs. They formed a V, but the rays quivered and wandered slightly not keeping to a steady line. It would be a tight squeeze at best. I could, of course, fly through the mountain and wait at the other end, but there might be some secret turn-off he would follow. I needed to stay with him. I raised myself off the floor and turned my body horizontally. Then, slowly and carefully I entered the tiny corridor of space near the ceiling. At that point, I figured even an old Tall Hat could go faster than I was going. I'd have to take a chance and speed up.

With my arms stretched straight out in front of my head and my legs pressed tightly together to narrow my bulk, I picked up my speed. I had a thought – a question, really. Would the beams of energy have any effect on me if I were invisible? They already knew I was there so I had nothing to lose if they sensed my presence.

I moved into invisibility and extended my little finger on my left hand, carefully catching a beam with it. No damage. I exposed my whole hand. No damage. I increased my speed dramatically, cutting right through beam after beam. I mind talked to the Sage.

“The energy has no effect if you're invisible.”

“Just determined that myself. Nice going,” came his immediate response

I sped on, taking care to examine the walls for doors and such. I found none. Soon I was at the entrance in the side of the mountain. Tall Hat was nowhere to be seen. Had I lost him?

I walked out onto the wooden platform that supported the huge bucket that raised and lowered people and material. He was not there. I turned back toward the mountain and there he was. He had climbed out onto a precipice 20 feet above me. It jutted out some 10 feet from the side of the mountain. He approached the front edge and looked straight ahead. It was a drop of hundreds of feet to the valley floor below and it appeared that's where he was headed – unless he could fly.

I had read enough history of the region to know that disgraced leaders were often expected to kill themselves. If he wasn't poised to fly away, then I imagined that was what he had in mind.

I called up to him, hoping to distract him or at least delay him while he tried to defend himself with a bolt or two directed toward me. He looked down at me and I believe he smiled – it was difficult to see from that distance.

It presented a huge problem for me. Should I interfere and save him if he jumped or should I not interfere and let him end his life, according to his beliefs. I was there to save the world from having him impose his beliefs on us. Would it be proper, therefore, for me to impose my beliefs on him by saving him?

I tried a Time-X. It hadn't been very successful on the Sorcerer's henchmen, but I tried 10 minutes' worth. He froze in place. I felt sure it wouldn't last. Then fate stepped in. I'd rather think of it as a chance event occurring, but either way, the reader will understand.

The wind, which constantly roared its way through the valley, pushed against him and, not being able to compensate by moving his feet or bracing himself, his time-frozen, ridged body tumbled over the side and began spinning toward the rocky valley floor below. I had my answer – well my short-term answer, at least.

Since he had not intentionally jumped, I would not be supplanting his values with mine if I rescued him. Later on, the Sage could help me with the final decision.

I dove off the platform and flew at top speed. By then his body had a long head start. I concentrated like I had never concentrated before, flying faster and faster. It was at a point

just 10 feet above the valley floor that my arms scooped him up and stopped his fall.

Sometime during his descent, he had come out of Time-X so he understood what had happened. I returned with him to the entrance to the tunnel and set him down, his back against the stone side of the mountain.

On my way to his rescue I had encountered his tall, red hat and grabbed it, looping it through my belt. I took it out and handed it to him. The frigid temperatures must have been cold against the bald spot that graced the top of his head.

He put it in his lap and shook his head. I thought I understood. He felt he didn't deserve to wear it after having failed his people. I wouldn't interfere with that although I really wasn't sure what to do with him or how to treat frostbite on an old guy's bald spot. For sure I couldn't leave him there, cold on the mountainside. I didn't know how his people would react to him, so I felt the need to guard him against them.

"You wouldn't happen to speak English would you, Sir," I said grasping at straws.

"Not so pretty good," came his response.

"So pretty good I'd say," I said, figuring the relationship suddenly had some possibilities.

"Rama Ksaki," I said, repeating the actual name of the Sorcerer Andy and I had come to know back in the city.

"My son."

His face lit up for a short moment.

"He is well," I said, not at all sure where my conversation was going to go.

He nodded and looked me in the face for the first time.

"Others?" I assumed it had been a question about the fate of the others that had been sent out from Akmino Teeki.

"Doing well. Changed, I'm afraid. Can't continue the mission."

He frowned a deep, sad, dejected frown and sighed.

"Me?"

"I don't know. I'd rather you didn't take a header off the cliff, though, at least not until we can think all this through together."

He probably didn't know all the words I had used, but he seemed to get my message.

He pointed to himself.

“Abu Ksad, Chief Priest.”

He pointed to me. I replied.

“Tommy Powers, Calibrator.”

“Young,” he said reaching out and touching my face.

“Wise,” I said doing the same to him.

“I once thought so,” he said.

“My Sage says that sometimes even wisdom can get sidetracked.”

“You are a kind child.”

“Thank you. I strive to be just that, every day of my life.”

“Your religion?”

It had been a question referring to my kindness.

“More like my philosophy for living.”

He nodded again.

“How will you execute me?”

“You really have a one-track mind, you know that, Tall Hat, ... I mean Abu Ksad, Sir.”

He frowned.

“We Calibrators don’t harm anybody. It is our hope that we can all find ways to live together – each according to his beliefs – in peace and prosperity. We cherish life and love and compassion and increasing our knowledge so we can become wiser and plan more appropriately for our future generations.”

“A strange philosophy. How can you live not believing you are the best?”

“I believe I’m precious and that is different from best. When you know you’re precious you no longer need to be the best. You already have your value, you see. You never have to prove it.”

“Very strange. Fascinating, but very strange.”

I smiled as he used one of my favorite words – fascinating. It seemed I had him hooked on my take on life. He’d have to consider it. How about that. I’d just delivered a series of seeps directly into the Deep Mind of the Chief Priest of Akmindoo Teeki.

“Can I see my son?”

“I’m sure you can, eventually. While we’ve been talking here I was thinking how you and he need to have a really long talk about philosophy and values and power. He can

undoubtedly explain what I've been trying to say in ways that will make more sense to you since it now makes sense to him."

"He was to have succeeded me as Chief Priest. Now, I have no one. The line will stop with me."

"And why can't he succeed you?"

"Because he has changed. He can no longer preach the ways of our ancestors."

"Maybe the ways of your ancestors were great for them, but not so great for your people now, as they begin touching other cultures and societies."

"Start over, you mean?"

"No. Take what's still useful from your past and create or absorb from others things that make sense for today and tomorrow."

"You are wise beyond your years, Tommy Powers Calibrator."

"I can't take credit for it. I listen well to my very wise Sage."

He nodded and smiled and patted my hand. He spoke.

"Our Book has a saying about wisdom. Wisdom is a combination of knowledge and experience, learned well.

I was amazed, of course, because it was almost word for word how the Sage defined wisdom according to Calibrator beliefs. Perhaps our cultures weren't so different after all.

"I can see your son by your side," I said. "I hope you and your advisers can, also."

He didn't commit himself, but again, it would have to be something he'd be required to consider. I had one more point to make.

"Experience, learned well, you say. I see no blemish on your wise leadership if you reflect on this experience and grow your culture from it."

Again, he nodded with no comment. I had always taken pride in the fact that I learned from my mistakes. Granted, none of them were as big as his, but the principle should still hold.

I returned with him to the big oval room. The White Robes were all sitting on the floor, their swords wrapped around their ankles making it impossible for them to walk. I

assumed the Sage had been having some fun.

Gus had returned and was sitting on the front edge of the platform, dangling his feet as he watched over his white "flock." He slipped to the floor and stood as we appeared. I assumed he had been listening to our conversation on the mountainside.

He addressed Tall Hat.

"If you will guarantee his safety, we will return your son here to you."

"You Calibrators are a peculiar lot," the Chief Priest said. "You win and yet you ask for no reparation (compensation) and seem to take no satisfaction in your conquest. You threaten no punishment."

"How would any of those things improve the lot of humanity?"

The question was met with silence and a furrowed brow. The old man shook his head and leaned back against the edge of the platform.

Gus continued, "You clearly have a rich heritage of which you can be proud. You have developed powers of the mind beyond those of virtually any culture the world has ever known. Your downfall, however, is your belief that only you have found the Truth. Our world will surely be destroyed if cultures or religions attempt to force their values on others. We believe that peaceful diversity among cultures is to be cherished and that a willingness to contemplate each other's beliefs is essential for the continuation of the human race.

With the Tall Hat's promises to call off his crusade to impose his version of the truth on the world and to allow his son to live among his people in safety, the Sage returned the Sorcerer to the side of his father.

We would keep tabs on them, of course, but things felt right as we left (there I go again!).

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EPILOGUE

The Party (At Last!!)

I have to admit I'm excited. It seems odd to be excited about a birthday party at my age. I can see being excited when you know something out of the ordinary or some big surprise is about to happen, but this is just a get-together with my best friends. I get together with at least some of them every day so why the excitement about this evening?

They'll begin arriving any moment. I went with my blue sweater and light blue jeans. I made sure I'd have clean, white socks, so I could go stocking-footed. I'd rather go barefoot, but thought that was a bit too informal for a party. I must admit that I even ran a comb through my hair. Hope everybody recognizes me.

It's a double party – Andrew and me. He is 15 today. I'm 14. I'm sure it will be a good year for me. I used to always ask my Wharfies if my next year would be a good one. They always said yes. They were always right. This year I'll ask them again, but not because I need their reassurance. Just because they'd feel left out if I didn't.

The presents will go to the children's hospital. Everyone who's coming knows that. I figure that way if anybody tries to cheat and bring me something, I'll be able to find an older kid at the hospital who will like it. I hope nobody does that.

There is Andy's knock at the door. I hope his mother decided to come. She was thinking she'd be out of place at a kid's party. I think I convinced her otherwise. According to my count my friends will include eight adults and six kids – eight including Andy and Gus, nine including me. That's about as

close to 50-50 as you can get by pure chance.

“Hey, Andy! Mrs. Parker! Come on in, Birthday Boy and Birthday Boy’s Mom,” I said.

They hung their light jackets on pegs. His mother offered me a lingering hug and then moved to shake hands with my Wharfies. Andy administered a just right guy-to-guy hug. He had presents in a sack and I guided him to our All Season’s Tree. It was Tina’s creation and had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember. It was just a bare branch stuck in a flower pot filled with gravel but it resembled a little tree about three feet high. It sat on a small table. The tree got painted various colors depending on the occasion. It was blue for my birthday. Homemade ornaments were hung from its little limbs, again depending on the season or festivity. That night there were decorations in the form of cakes and bikes and wagons and all things a little boy might want for his birthday. It was clear I’d always be their little boy. A large blue ball had been added this year with the number 14 on one side and 15 – for Andy – on the other. It was nice to share center stage with my good friend.

The presents were placed on the floor beneath the tree. I pulled out one I had made to give in Andrew’s name. He nodded and added it to the pile.

The kids from school arrived next: Ted, Kate, Jerry, Tasha and Marcus. Charlie and Carl arrived laughing about some private joke between the two of them. Gus and Abby came next and finally, Amy with her very large sack of bagels. I knew she wouldn’t come empty-handed.

“They’re for the kids at the hospital so keep your mitts off them,” she announced looking directly at me over the top of her glasses as she slapped playfully at my outstretched hands.

I pretended to be shocked that she’d even think such a thing of me, then moved to give her a hug. How special it was to be holding my mother. It had taken 14 birthdays for that moment to arrive. I wished so much that she knew about us.

As we held the embrace, she whispered into my ear.

“Happy Birthday, Son.”

It sounded wonderful even though I realized “son” from her really just meant “young man.”

“Thank you, Amy, and thank you for coming.”

She had more to say and delivered it in a very low, confidential tone.

“I’m of the old school, Tommy. I don’t think it’s proper for you to call your mother by her first name.”

I pulled back and looked into her smiling face. I’m sure mine looked puzzled. She put her finger to her lips indicating a secret, then pulled me back down with my head on her shoulder – my ear next to her lips.

“Not even the most skilled Calibrator’s mind-clouding ability is powerful enough to keep a mother from remembering her son.”

She kissed me on my cheek. I glanced across the room at Gus. He knew. He smiled and shrugged. I pulled my mother close, finally understanding the phrase “tears of joy.”

It would be a GREAT year! There was no doubt about it!

The End