

## *BEGINNINGS*

The man leant against the high rail and looked up into the late afternoon sky. His eyes followed the trail of the rocket, streaking away, up into the higher atmosphere. It was a white streamer arcing in the still blue sky. One of the reasons for choosing this planet; all those years ago, was its blue sky. So much like the ancient home of his people. He knew this to be true as he had long studied the archives. The originals, long in the making on the distant home world, lay safe, deep below in the vaults. The final piece of the copy was now on the way to the moon, made in much quicker time thanks to the quantum computer that they had perfected.

He watched the rocket until it slipped from his view. Heading for a rendezvous with the moon that currently orbited the other side of the planet. Probably directly over the great bowl, he thought. The man turned his eyes to the vista that presented itself nearby. He looked across the space before him. Standing at a machine-cut opening in the face of a five-hundred-foot cliff, he was about two thirds of the way up the sheer face. The cliff was in fact part of a great gouge in the ground that formed an almost perfect circle surrounding a flat plain of many miles across. It was as if some gigantic being had drilled out a section of the surface; which was not so far from the truth.

Below on the plain the man could make out the buildings and traffic of the people who worked and lived in this particular gouge. Mainly scientific and engineering types - the launch area, from which the rocket had recently taken off, was only fifty miles away. A matter of minutes travel away; whichever mode of transport you chose. Glancing across at the far cliff-wall he knew there were many other openings like this and that many other eyes had witnessed the rocket's progress and looked out onto the area below. Some of whom were beginning to doubt the great plan laid out by their forebears. The great plan, or philosophy

some might say, had been validated by the quantum computer. Yet still there were mumblings of discontent; some wondered openly while others kept to the shadows.

Leader Jones sighed and shuffled away from his viewpoint. He limped and was bent over slightly, the results of a nasty fall in one of the many similar 'holes' in this, the high country. Despite the best medical attention, he was forever limited by his injuries. He had refused robotic alterations to his body, much to the consternation of his fellow Uplanders. His condition was a reminder to him of the rashness of youth and the inherent fragility of the human form. That not everything could be, or should be, factored into a formula driven society. One that was technologically advanced to the point where all the people lacked nothing; yet a society that was curiously devoid of any original imagination. Where some members feared even to retrace the footsteps of their ancestors.

The assistant to the Leader watched him approach. She was accustomed to his shuffling gait. Assistant Kim often stressed to her incredulous friends that Leader Jones could really shift when he wanted to. That she had to move quickly, at times, to keep up with him when he set off on those hideously deformed limbs of his; scraping the ground in his excitement to be somewhere did little to slow his pace. Coming from the light at the window into the slightly gloomy interior of his main office, Kim could clearly see the keen light in his eyes as he looked towards her. There was a strength in his voice when he spoke. The strength of a person with purpose in his life. Unlike many of the Uplanders that she knew who spoke with an easy, resigned, almost comfortable air.

"Let me see the latest reports on our malcontents, Kim, please." Jones said to her. She frowned as she passed the information from her console to his. She preferred to think of them as misguided, ungrateful even. But not as troublemakers in the very old-fashioned way, from ancient times.

Pressing a few buttons, Leader Jones slipped into his chair. He resembled an untidy heap. "Now let's see what the scum has..." He broke into a loud laugh. Assistant Kim's face had gone from frown to shock to double frown. All accompanied by a sharp disapproving intake of breath.

"It is only a word," he said laughingly. Assistant Kim forced herself to give him the thinnest of smiles. She went back to her work. Jones smiled at her. But he thought to himself, and not for the first time, lately, that there was trouble coming. Something was not quite right here in the paradise of the Uplands. The quantum computer could give him no answers. But a prescience seemed to be in him. A dubious quality from the very distant and very ancient past of his people. From out there he thought and leaned his head to look through the window at the sky. But it was too early to see the stars.

Catching his movement Kim assumed he was looking skywards and thinking of the moon project. Hours from now it would rise, and she would contemplate it and the future of her people entwined with it.

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A thousand miles away equally sharp and bright eyes also watched the rocket rise into orbit. From this position the rocket blazed an orange path in the deepening sky above. The setting sun, briefly, was adorned by a reflective streamer that made its way to the moon. A moon that hung high in the blue-black sky. It reflected the changing colours of the sinking sun until at last it marked its presence with a white glow amidst the stars.

A figure wrapped in a black blanket sat on the edge of what seemed like a bottomless drop. The true depth of the abyss was impossible to judge as a thick white, impenetrable covering of cloud obscured the ground beneath. However, the cloud bank was clearly many,

many feet below the edge. The figure hunched up as the last rays of the dying sun briefly bathed the cliff top with a red sheen. The man would stay here for a few hours watching the stars and the passage of the moon across the night-sky. He had smiled at the sight of the rocket launched from the Uplands. Hidden from his eyes by the curvature of the planet and still in the daytime. He thought of the people there. His people. He had not ventured that far in many a year. Yet he was aware of what transpired there. He knew the life they led; satisfied and served by their advanced technology. The scheme involving the moon was known to him and he approved of its aims. In fact, he did not disapprove of technology at all. There was enough of it here in the 'knuckle' and he was not averse to using it. But his smile and thoughts told of another power. Another energy. A thing that had been forgotten before their ancestors had even reached and chosen this planet for a new home. Forgotten by most of the people that became the Uplanders. However, early in the development of the planet the 'knuckle' had been founded. Here down the years the knowledge of the journey and the aftermath had been preserved. A knowledge that would ensure the rightful destiny to this world.

As the sun set the lights came on behind him and he was aware of voices. Shaking himself from his thoughts of the deep past and the future to come he tried to peer through the now dark clouds below him. There were no breaks and no lights could be seen twinkling up at their position tonight. The man was perched on the edge of a mighty bowl. A bowl that made the indentations of the Uplands seem like motes of dust caught in the straight shafts of sunlight. The rim of this bowl stretched for thousands of miles right around this half of the planet. From space the first people to see it in the advanced party compared it to one of the large asteroids in the home system. The one that had a large crater blasted in it from a previous titanic collision with another asteroid. It was as if something had grabbed hold of the planet and gouged out a great depression that covered half the planet's surface. The early

ships had spotted the unusual appearance and, more importantly, the signs of all the elements necessary for a new home world.

In the centre of the Bowl, or as it was called by everyone Bowl land, covering the lowest points, water had collected since the planet had first settled out of the tumult of its formation. Here was an ocean of water. The only ocean on the face of the planet. Around the ocean lay lands that bridged the distance to the great cliffs that were the rim of the Bowl. The lands were not completely flat, however. There were hills and undulations and in places what could pass for small mountains. These formations broke up the land which also was crossed by rivers and streams of all sizes. All the flowing water could be traced back at source to somewhere in, or under, the rim. In places springs broke the surface at the foot of the vast cliffs. At other points the water gushed forth from breaks in the sides of the cliff face. Some of these holes had obviously been chiseled out of the rock. Their regular dimensions a testament to the skill and power of someone, or some people.

The walls of the Rim, as it was called by the Uplanders, rose almost straight six thousand feet into the air. In places they were nearer seven thousand. They completely enclosed the land and the ocean. There were many plains and forests and growth of flora within the lands; but on the Rim walls no living thing grew or flourished. Their steepness was impossible to fathom from their feet and their sheer extent could only be guessed at from a distance. Although they were often shrouded in cloud.

The man had travelled over much of the lands below and sailed the ocean too. But that was also many years ago. Nevertheless, he knew much of what transpired there in the same way as he was kept informed of the Uplands. The people had been placed in the lands not long after the arrival from the old world. That was hundreds of years ago. They knew that something lay beyond the Rim. They knew of the existence of the Uplanders and that they had great power and technology. The wisest among them learnt what little history they had

and observed the world around them. They made connections and were aware of some of the activities of the Uplanders. But most got on with their lives and feared any more interventions from above. Nobody had tried to climb the rim or find a way up, leastways nobody that they had knowledge of.

If you flew at the height of the rim and looked ahead to the man's position, then on a clear day you would see in the distance several lumps on the surface of the Rim. They resembled the knuckles of a person clinging to the edge of something. The bumps on the otherwise smooth Rim were outcrops of a hard and durable rock. Inside these a station was established at the beginning - a lookout post, from which the colonising of the lands below was supervised. Once this had been achieved the Uplands were developed and the people of the Bowl were left, largely, to their own devices. There was constant monitoring of their activities and of course their progress was managed. Occasionally there was need to intervene in force to prevent their more aggressive tendencies from spilling over into too much loss of life.

Although perhaps forgotten now by many Uplanders, the people of the Bowl were an intricate part of the great plan. Leader Jones knew of their importance and so did the man perched on the Rim edge. He was now staring in the direction of the ancestral home world. It could not be seen with the naked eye and indeed he had no instrument in the stone buildings capable of discerning even the home sun from here. A sudden flash on the moon's surface caught his attention. Yes, plans were being realised up there. His memory allowed him to recall his only visit to the moon. You could not be the Holder and in charge of the Knuckle without a wealth of experience.

He sensed someone coming from one of the doorways. A young voice, male, called to him. "Master, the meal is ready."

"Coming, Rich." He replied without turning. One last look at the bright moon and he carefully rose and followed the youth through the nearest doorway. He had left the blanket by the entrance and now sat at the end of a long table set in the middle of the room. There was no standing on ceremony, eating had begun. He joined in the conversation and helped himself to the food.

During the meal he cast his eye over everyone in turn. Down one side of the table sat the older men and women. These were people from both the Uplands and the Bowl. Obviously, the people from the Bowl were not typical. Some of them had been here for many years. They were all changed from their experiences here, perhaps educated was a better word. They would, when necessary, go down into the Bowl and deal with the people there. The Uplanders were mainly technicians whose job it was to maintain the systems of the Knuckle. They mixed well, and the loudest noises came from their side.

Opposite to them were the younger people; varying in age from five or six to late teens. They were all from the Bowl and unlike some of the older Bowl people they faced, none of them had been to the Uplands. The Holder watched them. Some of them would soon accompany the guide to the Uplands and begin their training. But he knew that not one of them could be his successor. A night like tonight reminded him that his time was coming to an end and he would need to find the one to succeed him, the person to carry on the knowledge and see the destiny achieved. He gave the slightest of sighs to himself, but he did not worry. Always someone had been found in the past, and always someone would be found in the future, until the time came when a Holder was no longer necessary.

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It was going to be a dirty night. The clouds had come in from the sea during the afternoon. At first, they were just white and fluffy, but gradually they had darkened to grey then black. The Rim was lost in the distance and the sun had set with hardly any change in the light level at first. The lights had already been on for hours. Then the rain started. It began quietly with a few splatters here and there, but soon it was tipping it down, as they said all over the Bowl. It was a phrase that was common to all. The wetness covered everything outside while the condensation covered the windows inside. Occasionally the Deputy for Security rubbed the foggy patches from the windows to witness even heavier downpours. He had stopped watching the people going home from work, scurrying along under various forms of protection from the rain. His quickly eaten chicken sandwich from a few hours ago was repeating on him. He was tired of drinking coffee and craved a beer. There had been no more radio transmissions.

The phone rang suddenly. Both he and the radio operator jumped, then smiled at each other.

"Deputy White, here," he said into the receiver.

"Chief Williams, John, any more news?" the Chief sounded tired also, White thought.

"Nothing new, sir. He has stayed in his flat. I doubt if he will go far on a night like this."

"No, I agree. It's a beast," the Chief paused. "The place has surveillance sorted out, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there will be rotating teams?"

"Yes, sir."

"And we are all organised for tomorrow, yes?"



"Yes, sir. Exactly as we discussed." Deputy White knew what was coming and was grateful.

"Well, leave it to them, White, and get some sleep in," the Chief ordered. "My office will handle it tonight."

"Very good, sir." White switched the phone off. He waited until the radio operator had completed the transfer and they left the room together.

White had a room near the Security Station. He did not get too wet rushing back to it. Inside he turned on the radio. He flicked through a few channels until he found one, he liked. He got a beer from the fridge and stood by the window gazing at the dreadful weather highlighted in the streetlamps. This kind of rain usually brought down the muck floating above them in their polluted skies. He imagined each drop of rain hitting the ground and spreading a blackish grime that showed up as a fine dust when it had dried up.

The Deputy of Security for the Northland sipped his beer and listened to the main radio station of the Southland. Some of his neighbours had apparently scowled and commented on his choice of music to the Block supervisor. But they of course said nothing to his face. John White was not the sort of person you normally went up to and had a chat with. White was glad he was not on surveillance tonight. But he had done it all before. His shoulder ached with the damp weather and he rubbed it gently. A legacy of some undercover work in the Eastland, a hot bath would help. He finally left the window, pulling the curtains to, and went into the bathroom. Later as he relaxed in the soothing warmth of the bath he looked forward to tomorrow. The operation should net them an Uplander. He was hopeful, but the words of the Chief percolated through to his brain again.

"Mighty tricky types, those Uplanders, you know. Never heard of anyone getting their hands on one before." This was not strictly true White had found out. No one had got hold of a conscious Uplander before. The unconscious one had only been in custody for a very short

time. White had seen for himself the hole in the ground in the Westland where she had been kept. The Uplanders had come in one of their flying machines and just razed the place to the ground. It was assumed she had perished in the attack. Everybody knew the Uplanders would not hesitate to kill the people of the Bowl lands if it suited them. But that had not happened for over a hundred years.

As White went to his bed his thoughts turned again to why the Uplanders were among them, spying on them. What did they want? But he remembered the Chief's words again. White did not think they would get their man tomorrow. He suspected the Chief knew this all too well. But White was not after the man, he wanted something else.

*"...did you really want to catch him?"*

John White checked that the teams knew what to do. There was an air of 'not again' from some of his more experienced people. But they suffered in silence. Soon they were all out on the streets and in position for the job. The Uplander spy had not deviated from his usual routine of the last few weeks. Up early, breakfast at a local cafe, bus to work, arrive early and start work early. Their contact on the inside had confirmed he was helping with the preparations for lunch. The Uplander had taken a job in the most upmarket restaurant in the town - waiter and general help. He would work through to late evening with an hour break at some point, to be arranged by the manager, depending on how busy they were.

At the Security building White gave the orders for the teams to surround the premises and stand-by. All he needed now was the final authorisation from the Chief. While he waited, he took his usual place at the window and watched the life pass by outside. The weather had turned fine. As yesterday was a typical heavy rain Bowl day, so today promised to be typical of a dry and sunny day. In the distance he could see, just, the towering Rim. It was very hazy and solitary clouds wandered lonely, high above. Sorry leftovers from the storms of yesterday, lost and forlorn they seemed. In the other direction he could see the huge plumes of vapour from the power stations at the coast. Rising straighter and higher, the single column of fumes from the boiler glinting yellow in the early morning sun; they burnt coal there. Looking around the town it was obvious that many houses, businesses and blocks of flats did the same. The fine dust from yesterday's rainy fallout lay on the streets and roofs. When the wind blew gently it rose into the air and mingled thoroughly with the people and their lives. At the outskirts of town, the new hospital was resplendent in white stone, newly imported from the Westland. They would be busy treating the many respiratory diseases that

abounded in this area of Northland; the industrialised and developed heartland. It would not be long, thought White, before the white of the hospital was smudged with a dirty yellow; a touch-up from the pollution.

White continued his scan and gazed out to sea; there were many ships waiting to dock and others steaming away. Trade was flourishing between the four lands of the Bowl. There was regular diplomatic contact and no outbreaks of violence had occurred for over forty years. Of course, covertly the four kept a close eye on each other and various operations had been carried out by all sides against all sides. John White had played his part. He was the only officer currently working for the Northland Security who had experience of working undercover in all the other lands. It was one of the reasons he was the Deputy. It had also afforded him the chance to meet many people from the other lands, with whom he maintained many contacts. Some of these people were also occupying high positions in their own Security apparatus. The contacts, and frequency of which, were yet unmarked by the various Security Chiefs.

Throughout the four lands, only the Security forces were centralised and had jurisdiction over the whole land. The absence of any real government meant that within any land the control was left to small groups of people. These people were largely chosen, freely, by the area they represented. Each land was split into very many such areas. The main purpose of these people was to ensure the smooth running of business, trade, commerce, industry and farming. Each area usually had a specialist activity. Some concentrated on various aspects of farming; they were obviously the biggest in terms of land coverage. Some were industrial cooperatives while some were loose collections of traders and craftsmen. Others operated from the urban areas offering skills in accounting, banking, engineering, design and development, services and anything else that the people needed. Not forgetting the work involved with the sea: ferrymen, fishermen, dockers, and sailors in general. The only other

arm of the 'public' services was the Navy. There had always been interest in and exploitation of the ocean and most of the trade between the lands was still carried out by sea. Protection of a land's interests at sea had always been a priority. Road systems linking the adjacent lands were still not very extensive or very good; within each land however the road system was generally good.

A polite cough woke White from his musings. The radio operator indicated the phone. It was ringing, White suddenly realised. He nodded his thanks.

"White, here," he spoke into the receiver.

"All ready to go?" the Chief asked him.

"Yes, sir."

"Get them moving."

White replaced the receiver and sat next to the radio operator. He picked up the spare headphones and spoke into the microphone.

"This is White. All agents close in and apprehend the suspect. Remember he is not to be killed!"

There was a staccato response of acknowledgement from the radio.

The restaurant was a large single storey building, set about fifty yards from the main river bridge. It had a terrace that was not quite on the riverbank. A path ran by the river edge and people out for a stroll could glance into the terrace and watch the diners. This did not suit everybody who came to eat there. At that moment a few tables were full of people eating lunch early.

The Uplander had been aware of the Security surveillance. His orders were very clear; as indeed were the entire protocols for interaction with the Bowl people. He was serving soup to a couple, who were obviously snatching some time together. The alarms sounded. One of his brain implants had detected the presence of firearms. It was coming from a group of men

who had just seated themselves at the table by the entrance to the restaurant. His fellow waiter, who he knew suspected him, rushed to their table. The Uplander finished serving the soup. He glanced around him slowly.

A group of three people were looking directly at him from the bridge. On the path beside the terrace a couple were making a pretence of some interaction, while constantly checking him out. Further along the path away from the bridge more people lolled uneasily against a tree, one of them flicking stones into the river.

"It's very nice," the male diner said aloud. The Uplander realised that they thought he was waiting for them to comment on the soup.

"Thank you," he smiled back at them. "I'll be sure to tell the chef."

He moved away from their table. The men at the table watched him closely. The other waiter had backed away to the wall. The Uplander was glad now that he had placed the enhancer in the middle of the room. It sensed the approach of more weapons. he stopped and stared at the entrance to the kitchen. Through the doors came two more men, each with their handguns pointing at him. The Uplander could hear the men at the table get to their feet. There was the sound of their guns being drawn. A quick glance around showed him all the others were standing watching the scene; but no guns on display.

"We'd like a word with you." One of the men who had emerged from the kitchen was speaking. The guns were levelled at him.

"I understand that," the Uplander replied quietly. He stared at the wall beside him and sent a mental command out.

"We do not want any trouble," the man spoke again. But his eyes had followed the Uplander's glance. All he could see was what looked like a badge stuck into one of the wooden beams of the restaurant wall.

"No. That would not be good for anybody," the Uplander agreed. They stared at each other. The couple eating had realised something was happening and looked anxiously about. The man's spoon was poised between dish and mouth.

"Of course, you will understand that I cannot allow myself to be captured." The Uplander said and as he said that a red light flashed from the badge. The men in front suddenly grimaced and clutched their stomachs. Turning quickly, he swept his hand in front of him and moved towards the exit. The bemused men reacted slowly, the Uplander had moved past the couple who were eating, before one of them tried to fire his gun. A dull click was the result. The others followed with the same result. The diners were frozen stiff with shock.

Then two shots were fired, and the bullets tore into the wall behind the Uplander. He screwed his eyes tight and swept the area with his outstretched hand as he did a complete turn. The badge flashed with red and blue lights. On the path the woman who had fired cried out and sank to her knees, her gun slipped to the ground. Her companion and the others by the tree and on the bridge, all swayed as if suddenly very drunk and incapable of standing. Some vomited. All could not see properly; the diners were sick in their soup. As the Uplander reached the exit he held his hand up at his side. The men with the guns had fallen over the table and chairs. The suspicious waiter had first felt like screaming as he felt a pain in his head and guts. He leaned breathless against the wall then he slipped to his knees as he fought the urge to be sick. Looking through tear filled eyes at the Uplander, he cringed at the raised hand. But his erstwhile colleague frowned and shook his head.

The waiter said later that he was sure he heard a high-pitched buzzing sound. The badge detached itself from the wall and flew to the Uplander. The waiter could just make out that it embedded itself into the hand of the Uplander and he was gone. A few minutes later and they had all recovered. Rushing out into the street, from the riverside and off the bridge, they searched desperately for their man. But he had disappeared into the lunchtime crowds.

At the Security Building Deputy White listened to the reports given by one of the agents on the bridge.

"Agents Isobel and Gareth in position in front of the terrace.

Agents Smith and Brown have entered the kitchen.

Target serving the soup.

Four agents have moved onto the table at the door.

Agents at the ready by the tree.

Oh! Oh! I think he's on to us.

Just looked right at us. Scanning the area.

He's clocked us sir, I'd say.

Moving away from the table.

Smith and Brown have come out of the kitchen.

They're talking, I... Ugh! I feel ill.

Smith and Brown are down! I can't see straight!"

There was a pause. White and the operator glanced at each other.

"What's happening?" White shouted into the microphone.

"Stomach cramps, feel sick, giddy. We've all got it. Agent Isobel fired two shots, I think."

"You what?" White cried out in disbelief. "What happened? Confirm!"

"She's down sir. Everyone's down. There's been firing. Can't see him in the restaurant. He's gone. What was that?"

The Deputy stared at the microphone. "See if you bunch of idiots can find him again." He shook his head slowly. "Get a move on!" he bellowed into the microphone. The radio operator jumped in surprise. White was usually so calm and collected.



"Alert all agents. Pass on his description to all points," he ordered the operator.

"Yes, sir!" the operator immediately started flicking switches and dials, speaking quickly, but clearly.

For the next couple of hours, White monitored the radio traffic with the operator. There were some apparent sightings. He was heading for the coast. He was on a bus going up country. He had taken a train to the main station. Reports of him being glimpsed in various locations around town. But nothing confirmed. The trail was never there to go dead on them.

The Chief waited until four o'clock in the afternoon to ring through.

"You lost him?" he asked, although he would of course have known the answer.

"Afraid so, sir," White was staring out the window again.

"Anything to go on, White?" the Chief asked hopefully. "Any leads you might have?"

"Does not look like it, sir. He seems to have vanished." White paused. "There might be somebody with something, sir, but it does not seem very likely." A tone of resignation.

"Very well, White. Gather your reports and see me when you are ready."

"Understood, sir."

"Oh, make it before six." In his office Chief Williams was alone. He allowed himself a small but quite satisfying smile.

White gave the order to call in the agents and told them their reports were needed immediately.

Later, just before six, White knocked on the Chief's door and entered. He sat in a chair as indicated. He gave the reports to the Chief.

The Chief picked up the pile and flicked quickly through them. Barely bothering to even scan them properly.

"Anything new?" he asked before he got to the end.

"No, sir." White gave him a rueful smile. "Some interesting descriptions of the effect he had up close, sir. Sounds quite hallucinogenic in parts."

"Really?" the Chief looked at him. "And how would you know that Deputy?" he asked with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Well, during the course of duty, sir, you know." A matching smile.

"Quite." The Chief gave an exaggerated snort. He read the Deputy's summary then placed the reports on the table in front of him.

"Well, did you really want to catch him?" he asked. But before White could reply. "What would we have done with him? I doubt he would have told us anything. What is there to tell? That they are still up there and keeping an eye on us. He probably would have blown the whole building up. Self-sacrifice, self-destruct, whatever." He paused and watched his Deputy shrugging, raising his hands in a gesture of uncertainty.

"No other Security force has managed it yet. We've come the closest yet, here today. Congratulations John. Don't get a fixation about this. Let's concentrate on our world, shall we?" he looked right into his eyes. "After all we have enough to do without worrying about the Uplanders."

"True enough," White held the Chief's gaze and nodded in agreement.

"OK. Now get yourself home and rest." Chief Williams showed his Deputy to the door.

"I will sir. I just have to tidy something up first."

"You work too hard, John. The world will still be here tomorrow."

"I hope so, sir." The Chief shot him a quick look. White smiled at him and left. Chief Williams closed the door and stood thinking for a while. Then he rang down for his car to be made ready to take him home.

Back by the window of his office John White watched a man in a raincoat buy an evening paper from the stall across the road. He stood by a streetlamp and read the paper's front page.

White kept his eye on the man. When the man quickly glanced up at White's window White was ready. He tapped his watch and held one finger in the air. The man below gave a barely perceptible nod. White moved away from the window. An hour from now he would find out what had actually happened to the Uplander and where he had gone to or was going to. If his guess was correct.

*"...perhaps we should not always follow the computer."*

Leader Jones and his assistant Kim left the office room. They were immediately accompanied by a guard. This was more an unchanged old habit, than a necessity for safety. There had been times when uncertainty had bred concern for the Leader's welfare; but that was a long time ago. Only in the very beginning of the founding of Upland had such doubt existed. But the habit of having a guard close to the Leader persisted. Leader Jones was not averse to it.

The three of them entered a transport Shute designed specifically for people. Kim pressed the desired buttons and the three passengers held the sidebars briefly while the initial acceleration took place. During most of the journey they stood easily. Then for the final part, the deceleration, they steadied themselves again. There was no conversation between them. This was a slight disappointment for the guard as he liked to know what was going on at the top.

The Upland area of the planet lay diametrically to the great bowl. It took up a greater amount of the surface. However, the habited part of it was a very minor share. The Upland was in fact a vast plateau, pockmarked by the 'holes' that were the living and working areas. The average altitude was around ten thousand feet. There was a very gradual change in height from the Rim to the plateau. The odd peak rose as high as fourteen thousand feet on the otherwise typical plateau topography. No running water appeared on the surface of the plateau itself; an occasional small lake or pool occupied an indentation. But water was never far away below the surface. Here was the origin of most of the water that eventually flowed through the rim to the bowl world.

The population of the Upland, at its greatest, had been little more than the current number living in the four lands of the bowl. But Uplander population had been in steady decline for

two hundred years now. A point that was often debated. The people of the Upland were scattered all over the plateau. They did not gather together, in any numbers, in any special place; no capital city. There was room to spare in the many gouges and there were many transport links, the whole area was crisscrossed by the Shute system. This allowed the movement of people, materials and small vehicles at very high speed across the whole plateau. It was a system that was set in three dimensions, sometimes lying over the 'holes', sometimes at different levels beneath the surface. But always passing through each gouge whether people lived there or not. No place was longer than an hour away from anywhere else by the Shute system.

The other main mode of transport was to use the short-range rockets, these linked only the major sites. They literally shot straight up and down, more or less, from one 'hole' to the other. In only minutes you could be where you needed to go. For passenger transport specifically; they rarely carried goods. Medium-range rockets were for travelling into orbit and to the moon. Long-range rockets helped spaceships to travel through this system and beyond.

The Leader and his small party were going to the main meeting place on the plateau. When they emerged from their Shute, they joined a general throng of people. These had also just arrived by other Shutes. Most people acknowledged the presence of the Leader but avoided paying any excessive attention to him. No snub was intended; it was merely the way with the Uplanders. The growing group of people were mainly heading in the same direction. Kim noticed some of the council members and their assistants nearby.

After a short walk they came out into the council meeting place. It was very similar to the place they had just left, sheer cliffs surrounding the flat space they now were walking across, with many windows cut into the faces at many different levels. People would watch proceedings from all around. If they were interested. A slightly raised area in the centre was

already enclosed by a crowd of people. Kim could see that about half the council members were standing there, chatting. She followed Leader Jones onto the dais. Greetings were exchanged between council members and between their assistants. Leader Jones sat in his place on one of the crystal chairs. These chairs were made from a single great crystal, specially cut by lasers. The midday sun shining down onto them was refracted into many spectrums of colour. Kim sat a little behind and to one side of Jones, close enough to take instructions or make contributions. The guard stood upright behind the Leader's chair.

Soon all the council members had arrived. The Convener gave the signal and a loud blast called the meeting to order. The Convener made the introductory announcements and in front of the Councillors monitors and keyboards rose from the dais floor. They all plugged in their own hand-held computers. There was a short pause while the Convener, from her position in the centre, coordinated the links between each Councillor and the central computer. The people nearby who could not see and hear clearly would then be able to follow the meeting using their own machines or on the screens dotted around the dais. All was ready. An emergency meeting of the Upland council was about to commence. Meetings usually happened once a month and they had already had this month's meeting, two weeks ago.

Six Councillors, who represented all aspects of Uplander life, and a Leader, all elected by the populace. However, the Leader was elected for forty years while the Councillors for only twenty; re-election was commonplace.

"I call to order this extraordinary council meeting," the Convener would never use a word like 'emergency'. "First the Leader's report."

"If the members and people gathered would consult with their receivers," Leader Jones announced, "a report, obviously with little content, is available." After all it had only been two weeks. It was a little unusual, but perfectly acceptable, way of reporting. Veterans of

council meetings detected a little irritation in the Leader's voice. A short period elapsed while everyone read the information. During this time Assistant Kim scanned the Councillors present. Four were women: Sophie, Jennifer, Joan and Elizabeth. The two men were Henry and Simon. When all were ready to continue the Convener began again.

"Councillor Jennifer has called this extraordinary meeting, Councillor."

"May I draw attention to the attack on one of our agents last night in the Northland of the great Bowl." There was no reaction from the crowd. It was very difficult to keep anything quiet in such a technologically advanced society. Most people could have tapped into the agent's actual report given late the night before. Traditionally there was little attempt at secrecy in the Uplands. Almost everything was in the public domain or could be accessed easily.

"Could the Leader inform the council of this incident." Jennifer added. All eyes turned to Jones.

"First I have to argue that the word 'attack' is too strong a word for a minor incident."

Jones replied calmly. "Nothing new has occurred."

"Details please, Leader," Henry put in.

"The Security forces of the Northland attempted to capture our agent at his cover job at about midday. No harm came to him, in fact they failed to lay hands on him at all. He escaped and reported in."

"They, nevertheless, came close," Joan said.

"His mission has been compromised and he is returning early," Elizabeth added.

"That is true," Jones agreed.

"It has been some years since an incident like this has happened," Simon joined in. "Is that not the case Leader?"

"Yes," Jones answered, "it is fifty years since an agent has been discovered by their security and over a hundred since they actually got their hands on one. Of course, that was for a brief time only."

"So, you feel there is nothing to be concerned about." Joan. "Our operations are not in need of being altered, perhaps."

"No need at all." Jones.

"Do you not feel that there is a more inquisitive element in the North people, currently?" Joan again.

"Perhaps." Jones. "But I doubt there is much to worry about."

"A normal stage in their development?" Elizabeth offered.

"Naturally, we must expect a few to show more interest in their circumstances?" Simon.

"Yes, I believe both points to be valid."

"This must obviously, though, have an impact on future operations in the Northland." Henry stated. "If not in all the lands of the bowl."

"This development must be factored in, that goes without saying." Jones.

"Do you believe this awareness is limited to the North?" Jennifer.

"There is no evidence to suggest otherwise." Jones. "No secret collusion between the four lands. I doubt if there is enough contact between them of a sufficient level to be otherwise."

"So, nothing has changed, and our plans can proceed unaffected?" Joan.

"Yes." Jones nodding.

"Of course, you have factored in this news and run the program on the quantum computer?" Sophie slipped the question in.

"Of course." Jones smiled. "A latest read out is available as normal. There followed a period of consultation around their various computers."



"You will note the negligible change in the uncertainty of the great plan," Jones pointed out. The Councillors all nodded in agreement.

"But have you run a simulation for the effect on Bowl land development?" Elizabeth.

"Will an adjustment not be necessary?" Jennifer.

"I have not authorised a new simulation yet." Jones responded. "An adjustment will no doubt be necessary eventually."

"But you have not run a new simulation, yet?" Jennifer once more.

"I judge it a waste of time at this moment."

"A waste of time?" Henry.

"Yes," Jones. "A simulation is more reliable when you have the most available data to program in."

"And you have not got enough now?" Henry.

"Not until our agent has returned." Simon interjected. "Then anything he could add can be used." Simon nodded his head knowingly.

"Exactly." Jones. "It may be that we have an overzealous Security agent in the North. Or perhaps we are dealing with a particularly perceptive individual who may be in a position to have an effect on the parameters of development. I need more information."

There was a general murmur of agreement here.

"It might require a special mission to keep an eye on this person," Jones continued. "I also want to know the Holder's view on this."

"How useful will that be to us?" Jennifer.

"Variations in the Holder's input have always had scant effect on the simulations for the great plan." Joan.

"He does seem to be an, well, almost an irrelevance these days." Henry.

"But any student of simulations run on the quantum computer knows the danger in degrading any input." Simon, again knowingly.

Not so much agreement at this point. Discussions broke out around the dais. Jones glanced around him. Discuss the effect of the Holder as much as you like, he thought. Everybody here was missing the point. The Holder did indeed have little to no effect on simulations of the great plan. However, on the development of the Bowl people; now that was different. Everybody that is, with one exception. His eyes held Sophie in their gaze. She looked right back at him. But even you have not run the right simulations, my lady. If you had, then you would really have something to think about.

A blast brought everybody back to the point. The Convener suggested that the meeting had reached a conclusion. Nobody disagreed, and people started to move off. Jones, Kim and the guard stayed long enough to exchange a few pleasantries with their fellow Uplanders.

Back in their Shute hurtling home, Kim offered an analysis.

"That went very well, I think." She smiled confidently.

"Why would it be any different?" Jones was amused by his assistant. Again.

"Well, you know some of them don't like you very much." Almost a conspiratorial whisper.

"Really?" Jones feigned surprise. His assistant looked concerned, then frowned at him in disapproval. Again.

"We have nothing to hide," Jones continued. "Unless of course you have been running some sly simulations of your own." He tried to look stern. But his assistant had stopped playing. When they arrived back at his office Kim busied herself with her work. Jones and the guard went into his inner sanctum.

"She's right of course," Jones said. "Things went well and our suspicions are confirmed."

"Yes, Leader," the guard answered.

"I want you to retrieve ALL the recent information on Councillor Sophie."

"Understood Leader." The Guard left.

Now, thought the Leader, shall I get in touch with the Holder, or shall I go and see him.

Might set them thinking if I went and I could do with a change of scenery. What was it that the Holder said?

'perhaps we should not always follow the computer.' Now that was something to shake up the Uplanders.

*"We are entering a period of uncertainty..."*

The planet's sun beat down on the Knuckle rock formation. The Holder had helped supervise the morning lessons. The next group of young people were ready to be sent to the Upland, their training was complete. There was nothing more they could do for them here and they were eager to go. The others were still at various stages in their training. Drawn from all four of the Bowl lands, they were of mixed age and sex. As the agents of Upland wandered the four lands, spying, so, some of the Holder's people scoured the same lands, searching. They sought out the orphaned normally. Occasionally they persuaded the desperate to part with their offspring. Always the promise of a better life was skillfully portrayed and the hint of riches of knowledge to be gained. If this did not work and the candidate was of a suitably high potential, they were not afraid to use the mind adapters, and no one was any the wiser. They were careful not to attract attention to their 'recruitment'. It had been like this for about a hundred years. Ever since it had become obvious to previous Leaders and Holders that regular infusions of new blood and genes was needed to bolster the waning Uplanders. Otherwise the consequences would be severe; the long cherished great plan would surely flounder.

The Holder was sat in his favourite place at the Rim's edge when the message came. It was a fair day for viewing, few clouds interrupted his gaze down to Northland. The haze prevented clear distance observing. At this altitude the impact of the fossil fuel burning society below was apparent. A multitude of pollution plumes rose up from the habitation and industry of the Bowl people. Some of these yellowy and brownish smokes rose almost to the level of the Rim before today's gentle winds dispersed them. But most broke up and spread out at lower altitudes. In time they would understand the effect of their 'labours' on their lives

and do something about it. But it would be quite a few years from now. Although the Holder had to concede this awareness was one of the more volatile and reactive factors in the simulations. It would be no surprise if changes happened sooner.

The Holder had just made his mind up to find the main Bowl- viewing telescope and enjoy an hour of closer inspection of the life below. He had got to his feet and was walking back to the buildings when the message came through. The Northland agent had activated his enhancer. The Holder got an image of the circumstance their man found himself in. He was able to witness his actions and see his escape. The passage of the bullets, close to the agent, made the Holder jump. He changed his direction and headed for a different stone building. Before he reached it one of his assistants appeared at the door. Seeing the Holder approaching she made to speak.

"I am aware," the Holder said to her, raising his hand in a gesture of acknowledgement. "I am coming. Keep monitoring the situation and have the evac. team stand-by." They had a procedure to assist in all manner of situations that agents in the Bowl might encounter. There was usually no need to get involved directly. The agents normally extricated themselves easily. They had mind adapters and were authorised to use them. But this was a major breach of the agent's cover, too big for any direct interference from the Rim. It was clear that many Bowl security personnel were involved. It would be too much trouble and too much overt interference in their affairs.

Inside this knuckle of stone, they operated all the surveillance devices at their disposal. The Uplanders had put many satellites in orbit around the planet. They had many different uses ranging from monitoring weather patterns to relaying communications (planet-wide and beyond). There were also satellites that kept regular observation of all the Bowl: lands and ocean. They could also manoeuvre individual satellites into position above anywhere they

wished. As the Holder took a seat in the observation building his staff were doing just that. A satellite was moving into position directly above the escaping agent.

But there were other means of surveillance available that few in the Upland were aware of these days: the anibots and nanobots. A whole range of perfectly made animal robots, usually birds of different kinds, that could be activated, then used to watch and listen at very close quarters. One of his staff was operating such an anibot; the data fed to screens and speakers. The agent had some nanobots in his body, as did the Holder. They helped to make the implants function. Indeed, if the agent wished he could let the Holder see what was happening through the interaction of their implants. But to do this for any length of time was too tiring for the agent - they were designed for quick flashes of information. So, after the initial burst of implant activity the Holder settled down to follow the action from the more usual means.

Two hours later the agent had reached a place of sanctuary. He was safe and had attracted no further attention to himself. The security forces had failed to find him. But he had been followed by a succession of people. These people were not members of the security force of Northland; their faces did not figure in any of their databases on all Bowl land forces. But they had very skillfully followed the progress of the agent to safety. The Holder's staff expressed concern over this new development. But the Holder remained unmoved and played down the significance.

"You must always be ready for the unexpected." He reiterated. "In a society evolving like the Bowl land there is always the chance for something apparently unforeseen. It does not mean a breakdown in the simulations. This is why we continue to watch and note and why we alter parameters and re-run the simulations." They settled down.

"Besides," the Holder said finally, "you will find such a variation in outcomes if you check the records."

"Where?" one of them asked.

"Look for it yourselves," he laughed as he left the building.

Standing at the Rim once again he sent a brief message via his implant to the agent. There might be a change in his mission, stand-by.

The next day he noted with satisfaction that his staff had found the variation. Operations and lessons continued with their usual sense of inevitability. Since last night he had decided to use the agent's discovery to slightly change the timetable. Bring it forward a bit. To do this, strictly speaking, he needed the Leader to agree. So, he was not in the least surprised to get a call from the Leader that afternoon.

"Holder, how are you?" Jones asked.

"I am fine, Leader. And yourself?" the Holder responded.

"Fine, also. Everything settled down there after yesterday's excitement?" they knew each other's names, of course, but rarely used them.

"Yes. Not a totally unexpected thing to happen, as I am sure you appreciate."

"No. Some have tried to get a bit panicky."

"Nothing new there, then."

"Indeed. I thought I might come and have a chat to you about things, anyway."

"A good idea Leader. There are a few things we could mull over together."

"Agreed then. I shall come tomorrow morning."

"I was planning to call you anyway."

"What did you want?"

"I propose we bring forward the unveiling of the latest wall of knowledge. The presence of the agent at the sanctuary and these latest developments make me think it might be a good idea."

"It would certainly keep people busy; down there and up here." The Holder could feel the Leader smiling. "It would be a year earlier than scheduled. You don't feel it would have any unseen consequences?"

"We are entering a period of uncertainty and many variations are possible, as you are aware."

"Granted."

"But I judge the time to be right."

"OK. I will see you tomorrow."

"Fine."

The Holder sent a further implant message to the agent and then saw to the necessary arrangements. A staff of knowledge would need to be prepared.



*"A man can have friends outside the service"*

Deputy John White strolled into the bar. It was a five-minute walk away from the security building. He avoided the bars that lay closer to his workplace because they, invariably, were used by his colleagues. Since his promotion to Deputy and move to the main town of the North, this had been his principal watering-hole. He found the corner of the bar where he usually stood or sat and ordered a drink and a sandwich. He pulled out his paper from his coat pocket and began to read the headlines. He was halfway down his drink when he was joined by the man, he had signalled earlier. They greeted each other; there was no pretence at subterfuge. The barman knew them both as regular and good customers. White paid for his companion's drink.

"Well, you were right, I'd say," the man said to White. "It looks like he's on his way to the wall of knowledge." White grunted an acknowledgement. "How did you know?"

"An inspired guess," White replied.

"Yeah, sure," the man said disbelievingly. White smiled.

"Well, think about it." He said to the man. "We spook him. He knows we are onto him. None of the places he's been to recently are safe. We could try to follow him. Trying to leave the land would be difficult. We'd be on the lookout for him. He needs a place that, if we do manage to tail him to, we would not dare, or be able to enter." He paused.

"The wall of knowledge," the man admitted.

"The wall of knowledge," White continued. "We know that they go in there from time to time. Being one of them he could easily get in and once in he'd be safe. We've never been able to get inside. Then he just waits to be picked up by one of their flying machines."

White took a drink.

"But he can't hope to get in without being noticed," the man stated. "The place is always guarded."

"I wonder," White mused. "Who knows what he can do. The agents today were completely incapacitated by him. One of them claimed he tried to grab him as he went past, 'it was like grabbing a handful of mist'. Quite poetic. Another described it as 'like the world was warped all of a sudden. Nothing was where it should have been.' " They both drank.

"And don't forget that they want as little fuss as possible." White again. "They don't want any big incidents that would get too many people talking. I bet if they knew about us." At this point he looked at the man. "We wouldn't be here now. We would have disappeared like all those others." It was the man's turn to grunt in agreement. They ordered new drinks and White asked, "What did he do when he left the restaurant?"

"He walked quickly to the lights and crossed to the market. Walked through it and came out on the bus station side. He then ran down the road towards the stadium. He kept looking back. Luckily Gill was ahead of him. She had moved round when he was in the market. I left him to her. He called a cab and we picked him up in our car as he headed for the outskirts. I left him to Ian and Dave at the bus stop. When he got on the bus Dave stayed with him. Gill drove Ian on ahead. When we were certain where he was going, I came back. Ian got on the bus at a later stop and Gill has driven on to the wall." He glanced at his watch. "According to the timetable the bus should be getting there in five minutes. Gill's going to ring me when it arrives."

White stiffened at the sound of voices behind him. The man by his side quickly glanced round. He nodded at White and began to sidle away, but a hand signal from White called him back. He gave White a 'are you sure?' look, White's eyes said yes. He was looking in the bar mirror at agents Isobel and Gareth.

"Why did you have to shoot the place up?" Gareth said quietly, obviously continuing their discussion.

"I did not shoot the place up," Isobel retorted indignantly and too loudly. Then in a more hushed tone, "Two shots aimed away from him. Two shots only, Gareth." White used the mirror to see if any of the other drinkers were taking any notice. Nobody seemed to be. The barman had spotted them and was slowly coming along the counter. White could see Isobel scanning the bar. However, Gareth's eyes met his, by reflection. There was recognition.

"Where is he Gareth? Can you see him?" Gareth indicated the Deputy in front of them. White turned to them and raised a 'what are you doing here eyebrow'. Agent Isobel took a deep breath and spoke.

"Excuse us bothering you, sir," Gareth raised a dubious eyebrow this time. "But I wanted to talk to you about the operation today." White stared at her for a moment. He could tell from her taut stance that she had something on her mind. Experience of her told him it was best to let her get it off her chest. He could tell from Gareth's expression that this was not his idea, but she was in one of those unstoppable moods. It had been a good decision by him to pair them up. The energy and raw ability of the girl. The cautious thoughtfulness of the older man. They formed a formidable team and had clocked up an impressive arrest record. She was courageous to a fault at times. More than once his experience had bailed her out of dangerous situations.

"This can't wait 'til tomorrow?" White asked her. But he was looking at Gareth who gave White a knowing look and smiled wryly.

"I'd prefer it now, sir." Determination underwrote her answer.

"Ok then. Let me have it." It was the signal for Gareth to find two stools and bring them to White and his companion, he asked if they wanted more drinks, they refused, and he ordered for himself and his partner. She was now deep into explaining her actions that day.

Anxious to make White believe she was not a loose cannon who shot up anything that moved. This was not too far from her locker room reputation. Many felt that Gareth had not calmed her down enough. Gareth had told her to leave it until tomorrow. He knew that White used this place because it was away from all the security people. He doubted it would be wise to disturb him, especially after the botched operation that day. But she had insisted. So, he came along to ride shotgun for her, to limit any damage she might incur on herself. Although he did know that the Deputy liked her, that was clear to him when he told him that he was putting them together a year ago.

White listened carefully to her. He kept his attention on her while she gave an overlong explanation and repeated herself too often. Gareth sipped his drink and studied the man beside the Deputy. He noticed that White had made no introductions. The man attempted to not listen too closely. But it was difficult. It was obvious that he was aware of White's position. Eventually Isobel realised that she had repeated herself yet again and fell silent. Her bright eyes locked onto White. He made her wait. Took a drink. Then merely said, "It's ok. Forget about it."

Isobel was almost disappointed, Gareth could tell. She had come expecting an admonishment. Perhaps not a bawling out; this was not White's way. It seemed a bit tame. The tension went out of her shoulders. She drank a little and fired a quick look at Gareth. He was ready for her and returned a slight shrug of his shoulders. The barman came to them and said there was a phone call for...Gareth did not catch the name. The man next to White went off to the phone at the other end of the bar. Gareth watched him, there was something about him. He struggled to find a memory as he watched him take the call.

"Who's your friend?" Isobel asked with typical bluntness. White and Gareth exchanged smiles.

"What?" Isobel looked from one to the other. "What is it?" she frowned at them. "I don't recognise him. Does he work for us?" she carried on regardless.

"A man can have friends outside the service," White finally replied.

"Well, it's just that you haven't, well introduced him or anything." She blundered on.

White caught Gareth watching the man returning. He would spot any attempted exchange between them. White quickly decided. It was time to implement a long-prepared plan of action. There was no time to warn the man who had now returned to his stool.

"Have they arrived?" White asked him. The man's eyes opened wide for a fraction of a second then he recovered. He just nodded an answer.

"My agents are wondering who you are," White said. Gareth noted that the man looked very carefully at White. He was watching for some sign from White. "I'm going to tell them." The man pursed his lips and looked directly at Isobel and Gareth.

"My friend here is an officer in the Westland security force. His name is Grant." Isobel's eyes narrowed. Gareth tried to tell himself that he had seen him before, but he was not convinced. White continued in the same quiet tone.

"He has just been given a message by another friend, who is a member of Eastland security. She and two others, also members of other lands' security forces have successfully followed our Uplander spy to the wall of knowledge."

"Great!" Isobel exclaimed, jumping up from her stool. "Let's go." Gareth and Grant remained seated, looking at White.

"This is not an official operation, Isobel." White told her. "Sit down." He whispered something in Grant's ear and the man left. "Now listen carefully, I'm going to tell you what we are doing. Then I am going to ask you to do something for me. It will not be official. Am I right? You both have some leave due, is that right?" they nodded back. "I need

somebody to go somewhere that no Bowl person has been to since the beginning." He saw the interest in their eyes. "Well nobody who was not working for the Uplanders," he added.

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Sometime later Gareth, Isobel and White were in a car driven by Grant. They were approaching the wall of knowledge. But before they reached the cleared area that surrounded the monument, Grant turned off. He drove down a side road and pulled up under a clump of trees next to another car. A woman approached them. She had been waiting hidden behind one of the trees. White explained the presence of Gareth and Isobel. The woman led them through the trees to thick bushes where they met Ian and Dave. From that position the view of the monument was uninterrupted. It was several hundred yards away. The cordon lay between them and the structure. But their slightly elevated position allowed them to overlook the fence. They could see the guards patrolling the perimeter. Lights were on in the guardhouse. The structure was lit up on all sides.

Gareth declined the offer to use binoculars. He did not need a closer look. He had visited the structure many times, even using his job as an excuse for an actual touch. It was not really a wall. From afar it looked like an untidy outcrop of rock in the field. But as you got closer you could tell that the sides had been fashioned. There were four flat sections; one for each side. The striking thing was the colour of the rock. White. A white that had not been tarnished by the years. Or the relatively recent pollution.

Each flat section had four panels. On the side facing them one of these panels glinted in the lights. Gareth knew that these reflections came from the markings that filled the panel. These were the most recently produced markings which appeared fifty years ago. They

contained amongst them the designs for phones, cars, better ships, X-ray equipment and many other things. All of which, as he understood it, the various scientists, technologists, inventors and engineers of the four lands had now reproduced. The opposite side's panels were all full. But the other panels around the monument were still blank. The Bowl lands waited for the next instalment. It was known that the information came from those above. A very deliberate input to the development of the Bowl lands. Much of what White had said to them earlier came back to him. He wondered again about this largess from their 'friends' above. Yes, it was true that there had been inventions, developments and discoveries that could not be linked directly with the markings on the wall. But he agreed with White's analysis. They were being manipulated; allowed only certain things in certain areas. There was no independence. No independence of thought, or action. Ultimately, they were doing exactly what the Uplanders wanted. But why? What was it all about? How long had it been going on for? How long was it going to continue?

"What happened when he got here?" White asked no one in particular. He was looking through the binoculars. The woman, Gill answered him.

"He hung about the shop and restaurant until all the visitors left and everything shut. I'm sure he spotted us. Even though we did not contact each other in any way." Ian and Dave voiced their agreement. "Then he joined the group of people who always hang around until the lights come on. One minute he was there amongst them. The next he was gone. We lost him. We ran to the fence. The people seemed to be in a trance. Then Ian saw him inside the fence walking right up to some guards. He had got past the guardhouse. He waved his hand about and that thing on it flashed a bit. The next thing we knew we were staring at the monument and there was no sign of him. The guards were scratching their heads and so were we. He's got to be inside."

"Then I heard one of the people at the fence say something about a new panel," Dave spoke. "Her friends asked her how she knew. But she hadn't a clue. They've stayed. You can see them at the main entrance. Talking with some of the guards."

"So, we might witness a new panel," Isobel said rather obviously. "One for the grandchildren I'd say." Gareth doubted that she really grasped what all this was about.

They waited. White's team were well equipped. Food was produced, drink also. Warm coats were handed out. They chatted generally. Gareth learned more about White's network and what it was trying to do. Whatever happened here, Gareth thought, I'm definitely in. He was not sure what Isobel was thinking. Which was unusual as she was normally so transparent. Then just before dawn, it happened. They did not hear the flying machine approach. Suddenly all the lights went out around the monument.

"Hey up!" Ian alerted them.

Then a dazzlingly bright light flooded the monument. They could see the Uplander standing by the panel. He had something big in his hand. Long and shining. He touched the bare panel with his other hand.

"There's a hole in the panel," Gill reported. "He's pushing that whatever it is into it. The markings are forming, spreading out. They've covered it. He's pulling it out."

With just his eyes Gareth could see the Uplander slam the thing down. A tremendous flash of blue light dazzled them. There were cries from the guards and people at the entrance. It was a little while before they could see properly. The Uplander was gone and the flying machine was rising quickly up into the sky. Light still on. Then there was an almighty crash. Louder than any thunderclap they had ever heard. The flying ship tore off towards the Rim.

White was running from the bushes. They ran after him. The fence was scaled. White kept his eyes on the flight of the ship, marking where it crossed the Rim. The others ran up to the new panel. The guards and the people from the entrance joined them. Everyone was lost



studying the new markings trying to understand them. Gareth pondered a design. What on the planet was that?

But they were not allowed to dwell on the new panel. White knew there were very specific procedures to follow when a new panel appeared. They had been agreed by the four lands many years ago. He quickly established his authority. The others melted away. The guards escorted the people back to the entrance. White prepared a story to explain his presence at the monument. It would have to convince Chief Williams.

As they drove away with Grant, Isobel and Gareth watched the people already heading for the wall of knowledge. The sound and light in the sky had done the job. People were coming from all around. They ducked when the Chief's car sped past, followed by many other security cars. As they finally came to the town Gareth turned to Isobel and asked her the question.

"Well, have you made your mind up."

"Yes", she said. "I'll come with you. But if we haven't found a way up to the Rim in a week, I'm coming back. I'm not wasting two weeks of holiday on some kind of quest thing."

"Nice to know your heart's in it," Gareth said dryly. Grant stared at her. He seemed less than sure about her.

*"could be smugglers"*

They had been travelling for only three days. They had followed White's direction; go past the wall of knowledge until you reach the Rim, then head towards where the flying ship seemed to cross it the night of the new panel. They were in a new vehicle that could cope with the rough roads at the edge of the land, or even go off road. Isobel was driving. Gareth could drive, but she always drove when they were on duty. She was better than him, especially at driving fast. He was not bothered at all as he could take in the views. Mind you she almost certainly would not have let him drive anyway; not without a massive argument. He offered, rather halfheartedly, to give her a rest from time to time. She ignored him.

The boot was full of fuel, just in case. They filled up whenever they came across a filling station as a matter of course. But at the edge of the Rim there was no guarantee of finding many services. So, the back seats were absolutely packed with anything they might need. They were glad that this trip had long been planned by White. Provisions of all kinds were there: especially food and water. They had cooking facilities and slept in tents just off the roadside. Two separate tents. Gareth was handling setting up camp. He put the tents up, made the fire, did the cooking. They were making no pretence of a relationship and openly told any people they met that they were investigating the Rim. They were also armed. Gareth wanted to take only their side arms. But White agreed with Isobel that they also took their rifles with them. She had shot a deer on the first night.

Keeping close to the Rim was often difficult. At the edge of the land there were few proper roads, few farms and villages. They had, at first, been completely overwhelmed by the Rim; as all people were, who made their way right up to it. Gareth had stood looking up its vertical cliffs for so long that he became giddy and almost fell over. He noticed that the

birds of prey flew close to the sheer sides and utilised the thermals that rose there. It was a fallacy that it was completely smooth. From afar it seemed to be so; but up close there were grooves and lines. The grooves always ran vertically. The lines appeared to fit no pattern. Gareth had to agree with the general opinion; it did look as if some monstrous scraper had fashioned the Rim, or at least to have tidied it up. The lines and grooves showed the nature of the rock strata. No growth was seen on the great wall once you got above head height. In front of it grew various forms of bush and tree. Occasionally water issued from the ground or the face of the Rim. Gareth thought he could gaze at the Rim forever. It was particularly enchanting at sunrise and sunset. Isobel soon tired of it. After all it was just a huge pretty coloured slab of rock, that seemed to go on forever.

At the end of the third day they had reached the place on the map where White felt there was most hope of finding something. They had seen no break in the Rim and nothing that could be remotely thought of as a way up. But at this point a thicker than usual wood grew right up to the Rim. Outside it a crossroads formed. Here all the traffic in this area passed through, mostly cross-land trucks and agricultural suppliers. There was no such thing as tourism. People did not just wander around for the love of it. Everything was done with a mind to making a living. There were no hotels or guesthouses. People camped by their vehicles. At this crossroads however, there were some meagre facilities: washrooms, a restaurant, a filling station and garage, a managed camping site and what passed for a few stalls selling local produce. They were looking forward to a good wash. White had instructed them to scour this area and to ask questions. They would stay several days.

The first night they concentrated on getting cleaned up. They stayed by their tents and cooked for themselves again. A few curious pairs of eyes watched them from the restaurant, but nobody approached them. They had paid to use the site for three nights. No doubt this information had found its way to the people who lived there. They had not been asked their

business and they said nothing; the guns had been noticed. An observer from the restaurant smiled at them casting many small dry twigs around their tents - an old trick to warn them of an approach.

As they sat by the fire that night Isobel decided to bait Gareth gently, not for the first time on this job.

"So, you definitely bought all that stuff White when on about." It was not a question. Gareth smiled at her. She was bored.

"Well not all of it, not necessarily," he reacted.

"That stuff about everything always being decided by the Uplanders." She continued. "Right from the beginning. It was all set up. The four lands. We got the best farmland and the wall of knowledge. The others got the iron, the coal, the stone, etc. etc." She drew a breath. "I mean I can see what he's on to with the panels. Anybody can see that. But is it interference or just helping us along?" she waited for his response.

Gareth nodded his head. "Well, White would say it was both. His point being that we don't have any control over it and probably never have. They just allow us to see and develop what's on the panels. They have been manipulating us from the beginning." He thought for a second. "I've been thinking about my family and I can't get past my great-great-grandparents. They came to the town from somewhere in the country. Out here for all I know."

"Yeah," Isobel, thoughtfully herself, "same here really. Mine came from the coast, somewhere." She shrugged her shoulders.

"If White is right and he seems to have done a lot of work on it in all four lands." Gareth paused. "If he's right then all we have is about three hundred years of history that we know about." She did not seem bothered.

"It means you got to ask those questions," he went on, "how did we get here? Where did we come from? If the answer lies with the Uplanders and it does seem likely seeing as we

know about them and their influences on us, past and present. Then you need to ask what is the point of it all? What are they trying to do?"

She stirred herself.

"Questions. All we have are questions. I'm going to bed." She got into her tent and pulled the flap up. Yes, Gareth thought, questions we have in abundance; but few answers. Perhaps we might find some answers. He stayed by the fire going over things in his mind. Why had the four lands been set up the way they were? Was it to encourage interaction? Commerce and trade, rather than conflict. They knew that whenever there had looked like being a serious conflict between the lands, the Uplanders came and prevented it. Even wiping out most of the combined navies a hundred years ago. They used the wall of knowledge to direct them. According to White they kept their progress on the correct path by using key people infiltrated into their security forces and elsewhere. They also caused people to vanish who showed any signs of independent thought and development.

White seemed to think that the flying machines were important. They had none. There were no designs for any on the new panel. They could move across the lands and the ocean, but not into the air and above the Bowl. They had binoculars, but nobody had anything that could see high into the skies, or onto the Rim's top, or could see the moon. The moon where clearly something was going on judging by the flashes that even Isobel had seen. But what also intrigued him was that it had not been made easy for them. They had struggled to survive. The people of the lands had to work at developing the ideas on the panels. They also had to work on living together; there were bad people and always had been, the security forces were needed.

As Gareth retired, he found himself agreeing again with White's analysis. They had been put here for a reason. He could not help wondering what might have happened if they had

been left on their own. To develop in their own way. Like White, he felt that they would be further down the path by now.

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The next morning, they were up early and had breakfast while they watched the truck drivers departing. Gareth bought some food from the stalls while Isobel prepared their packs. When they were ready, they set off on foot. Gareth felt conspicuous with his rifle slung across his shoulders, but Isobel strode ahead of him carrying her rifle prominently in her hands. They headed through the trees towards the Rim. Once more watching eyes marked their actions.

It took them about an hour to get through the trees. Although Isobel had set off briskly it was difficult to keep up the pace. The way was not clear and at times the undergrowth blocked their path, forcing them to deviate. But as Gareth pointed out, they were not in a hurry. When they passed the last trees, they found the Rim towering up before them. They took a break and drank some water. A quick discussion between them and they decided which way to go first.

For an hour they followed the Rim one way and as usual Isobel soon lost interest. She kept her eyes on the wood. Gareth knew she was looking to shoot something. She fired twice; each time Gareth jumped in surprise. But she failed in her aim. Gareth did not see anything new. They came back to the point where they had emerged from the wood and had lunch. Isobel annoyed him slightly by insisting on target practicing with her side arm. She told him that they were not trying to be secret. It might attract someone she told him. He doubted it somehow.

Going the other way, it was not long before they came across something different. A patch of land opened up in front of the Rim at one point. It was a clearing Gareth felt. The

trees and bushes had made no impression on this ground. It was only about twenty yards wide and took an equal amount out of the wood. Gareth stopped and walked slowly around the space. Isobel sat in the centre and paid little attention to him. She appeared fascinated by her weapons, again.

Gareth walked all over the clearing feeling the ground through his feet. Then he walked back the way they had come a few yards. He then walked ahead beyond the edge of the space. Isobel began to watch him more closely. She could tell from his expression that something had got his attention. He had that dogged look in his face and that slight squint in his eyes. She knew it was best to let him be. He needed some room when he had this mood on him. He came back into the glade and this time worked his way around the edge of the trees more carefully.

He called to her and she walked over to him. He indicated that she copy him by holding off one of the branches with her rifle. As her side parted, she noticed that there was little growth behind the branches. The ground seemed flatter here and was that a slight rut there?

"This is wide enough to get a vehicle through." Gareth said to her. "And high enough." She agreed.

"It looks like a track." He had gone past the branch and was kneeling on the ground trying to make out the way it went. "Follow this for a bit, Isobel, see where it goes."

"OK, Gareth," she said and stooping a little she crept forward. Gareth watched her go. It looked like she was expecting an ambush at any moment. He pitied any creature that might suddenly draw her attention. He went back into the clearing, as he felt sure it was. The ground was noticeably harder, drier here. He took a straight line from the gap behind the branches to the Rim wall. The next twenty minutes he examined the stone. From as close as he could get to it and as high as he could reach and see. He stroked it, tapped it, squeezed it,

blew on it, talked to it even. When Isobel returned, she could see him looking at the wall from a very oblique angle. His face suggested he had found nothing.

"Well," he noticed her, "what's the news?"

"It's a definite track for something," she told him. "If it's something like our off-roader then there is the barest room for it to fit through. It heads off to the road, I'd say."

"Somebody keeps it clear no doubt," he said aloud.

"Well, that's the strange thing," she offered dubiously. "There is no sign of any cutting back or breaking off, of the branches." Gareth raised his eyebrows. "It's almost like the trees and things have grown in just the right way to allow the room. And the track weaves as it goes."

"Interesting." Gareth turned to give the wall another inspection.

"Another thing," she added behind him. "Something, or someone is out there."

"Something, or someone," he repeated as he turned slowly around. "How did you resist shooting?" she answered him with a scowl. They sat for a while with their backs to each other. She, looking out to the trees, he, to the wall. They listened. He studied the stone and thought. She held her rifle ready. Eventually she said, "could be smugglers."

"Could be," he replied. A pause, then "But what's with the wall?"

"Reminds me of the wall of knowledge," she prompted.

"Yes, and only the Uplanders can get past it." He got up a bit slowly, moaning and creaking a little. "Let's see where that track ends up, shall we?"

"Why not," she rose smoothly.

"Oh, Isobel," he spoke with mock wariness.

"Yes," she was suspicious.



"Try not to shoot everything that moves will you." She whacked him in the stomach with the stock of her rifle. He was too slow and took the blow with a grunt. "Love you," he gasped.

The track eventually came out of the wood through another hidden entrance. They followed the road back to the crossroads. They had already decided to take a meal in the restaurant that night.

*"I wouldn't bet against her"*

The restaurant was basic. Clean, with good wholesome food. There was plenty of it. They enjoyed three courses washed down with some bottles of beer. The eating area was a rather small side room to the main room where the bar lay. Nobody else was eating at the same time as them. But the bar was quite full and noisy. After their meal they walked through and sat at the bar. A few people said hello, while others merely stared at them then got on with their discussions. Some bar games were going on near the window.

"What will you have?" the barman was also the owner and ran the camping site. He smiled what appeared to be a warm greeting.

"Two beers, please," Gareth replied. He settled himself on the stool. But no sooner had Isobel sat down than she got up again. She took herself off to the ladies. The beers arrived; Gareth refused glasses. It was obviously the done thing. He looked around the bar. There were about six blokes sitting at the bar on the other stools. Four men stood at the far side. Two women sat together at one table and a group of four other men sat at the table nearest the games. They had stopped playing momentarily as a young girl, about fifteen, was collecting glasses. She enjoyed some friendly banter with the customers. When she returned behind the bar, she picked up a tea towel and started to dry some glasses.

The barman had served one of the women and now came back to Gareth. "Mind if I have a chat with you?" he asked.

"Not at all," Gareth reacted. "I was hoping to talk to someone local tonight." He noticed that the girl was inching closer to them. Isobel had returned and gave everyone a quite charming smile. "I'm Isobel and this is Gareth," she said quickly. The barman nodded, "I'm James and this is Chloe." He indicated the girl but looked at the two of them. Gareth saw the

interest in his eyes as he looked from him to her. It was not the first time they had attracted this kind of interest.

"We are not together," Isobel had little patience with it. "We work together." She said this as much to the young girl as to the barman. Gareth noted that she smiled at Isobel and gave a knowing look. When she caught Gareth's smiling eyes she blushed slightly and looked quickly away. James however just appeared more pensive.

"Are you working at the minute?" he asked.

"Yes, we are," Gareth answered, Isobel had lost interest already. The barman waited for him to continue.

"You've probably guessed we're with the security forces." The man nodded. He was a little taken aback. He had not expected such a direct answer.

"We're based in the main town normally."

"So, what brings you out here?" Gareth noticed that a few the men at the bar were now trying to listen in. Isobel was chatting to Chloe. When he had looked about earlier, he had tried to spot any contraband. But the place was clean. They would not be so stupid as to leave it on show for him to see. Gareth felt the place was ideal for smugglers. He could feel a tension in the air.

"We are not interested in smugglers; I can assure you." The man held his eye calmly. But a few faces turned sharply in his direction. "You may laugh at us, actually."

"Really?" the barman had not relaxed his stare.

"Yes. I am interested in the Rim. I think there might be a way up to the top round here somewhere." The barman feigned surprise, Gareth felt. But his shoulders dropped slightly. Gareth noted that the girl also relaxed physically. She kept her eyes on Isobel but her ears on Gareth.

"If I find the way," he glanced sideways. "I am going to go up there and see."

"And see what?" one of the men scoffed beside them.

"I don't know. Whatever's up there." The man laughed. "What do you think's up there?"

Gareth asked the man.

"How do I know?" he replied. He was sidling away from them.

"Aren't you interested in finding out?" Gareth queried.

"NO! I'm bloody not! If they had wanted us to go there, then they would have made it easy for us."

"Who do you mean? The Uplanders?" Gareth persisted. "How do you know they don't want us up there." The man said no more and went to sit with the women.

The barman returned Gareth's mischievous smile and smirked as he went to serve one of the games players. Gareth watched the effect as the news of the strangers spread. But nobody seemed concerned. There was amusement mainly. The barman busied himself at the other end of the bar for a while. Isobel and Chloe were quite deep in conversation. Gareth noticed that Isobel had started to glance regularly over at the games where play had now resumed. He knew what that meant. Surreptitiously he checked his gun in its shoulder holster. They were both wearing jackets to conceal their weapons.

The barman returned with a second round for them. Gareth was paying as usual. He lingered. Gareth asked him directly. "What do you think is up there?" James did not hesitate. "There are buildings on the edge of the rim, and they keep a watch on us from there." He kept his eyes on Gareth and it seemed as if one was waiting for the other to crack.

"And after that?" Gareth asked.

"After that there is a long way before you get to the Upland plateau where all the Uplanders live. They live in great dents in the ground." Gareth was confused. His face showed it.

"What's a plateau?" he asked.

"It's a raised bit of land that's flat on top." He got a piece of paper and drew it for Gareth with a pencil. They looked into each other's eyes.

"How do you know this?" Gareth could not tell if he was being taken for a ride.

"It is an old story around here. Handed down over the years."

"You've been up there?" Gareth fought to hide his excitement.

"No, I haven't, but I know someone who has."

"You do? Can I meet him?" the excitement was leaking into his voice. But the barman ignored him, his attention taken by something going on over at the games table. Gareth then noticed that Isobel had slipped away. Chloe was introducing her to the men playing at the table. There was some laughing and hand shaking. Gareth recognised the scene. Isobel was about to work out her frustrations. He looked at her, short and solid. Not unattractive but not beautiful either. She had a fine pair of breasts it had to be admitted. They went well with her generally athletic build, good strong looking legs and a tight backside. Her best asset Gareth always felt were her eyes. He told her regularly. But she seemed to be preoccupied with making up for her lack in height with her strength. Not to mention her abrasiveness. The strength came from hours of exercise. He sweated just watching her. The abrasiveness she was born with. There was no sign it was softening with age.

James had been studying her first few shots. He wanted confirmation, "Is she any good?"

"I wouldn't bet against her," Gareth replied as he watched her knock two balls down quickly. The barman scuttled off to the end of the bar to accept some bets. Chloe was back. She smiled at Gareth. "She says she's good."

"Oh, she is." Gareth agreed. "She is."

"Tell me, are those men tough?" Gareth asked her.

"Yes. They are all good players. Oh, good shot Isobel!"

"No, I meant are those men tough? Can they handle themselves? Do they fight?" slowly realisation dawned on Chloe.

"Oh! They wouldn't hit a girl. They're not like that!"

"That's what they always say. At the beginning."

"What are you talking about?" James was back. "There won't be any trouble."

"My partner's middle name is trouble."

"But surely she won't start anything here?" James was sceptical.

"She won't start it. But she will finish it. She can look after herself." Turning to watch the drama unfold, he added "And she likes the practice." James and Chloe exchanged curious glances.

It followed a familiar pattern to Gareth. The first few games were fairly equal, and the mood was humorous. Then Isobel upped the stakes and started to really turn it on. She worked her way through the challengers. Occasionally the sight of her holstered gun could be seen. This intimidated some, but infuriated others. The banter became more pointed and personal. Drink fuelled tempers were rising and Isobel switched into really irritating mode. Gareth gave James and Chloe knowing looks. He could tell that the barman was starting to get concerned. Chloe on the other hand was fascinated.

Finally, Isobel triumphed with a particularly irksome mannerism. Now was the telling time, if one of them succumbed it would be a fight. Some more words. Something flew at Isobel which she batted away with ease. The final insult, and one man lost it. As he tried to slap her face she went into action. Slipping inside his strike she felled him with some fast punches to his midriff. As he slumped to the floor, she kned him in the face. Unnecessary. But that was Isobel. She was so fast.

Howls rang around the room. The women looked aghast. The men at the bar clapped. A challenge was uttered by Isobel. She turned, threw her gun at Gareth, then went outside and

waited. The men who had played with her were stunned. They looked at each other, then at this woman waiting for them outside. There was a certain amount of baying from the customers. James rushed along the bar taking more wagers. The men trooped out and everyone went to the window to watch. Gareth stayed put. Chloe got precariously on to a stool and then stepped onto the bar. Gareth thought to himself that this was another thing. This style of fighting. Where had it come from? Who started it? For that matter all the weapons they had; the guns had been developed from the panels but things like bows and arrows they had from the start. The start. When was it? What was it?

Loud cries brought him back to the situation. Isobel had made short work of the three men. They had not touched her once. All three were concussed on the ground. The people were impressed. Money changed hands and Isobel was cheered when she came back in. The women, Gareth noticed, were not so sure what to think. James bought them another round before he went outside and tended the men.

"Happy now?" Gareth asked. She ignored him and rubbed her knuckles gently. Chloe bombarded her with questions. Gareth turned his attention back to the sketch of the plateau. He picked up the pencil and drew in the rim, land and ocean. He tried to make it into a planet shape. But he lacked the skill. So, this is where they lived. Now, that was another thing. Everybody knew what a planet was and that they lived on one. There were images. But how could any of them have seen it? All those years ago.

What did this man, James, know? Well he would get nothing more out of him tonight. Isobel had seen to that. He was far too busy enjoying the night's events with his regulars. Gareth left the bar quietly and went back to the camp. The fire was barely glowing. He soon had it going nicely again, not too bright and hot. He gazed into the flames and soon lost himself in thought. In the bar Chloe had spotted him leaving. She picked up the drawing, gave it a brief glance, screwed it up and threw it into a bin.

Later, Isobel returned. Gareth was still sat there. She sat down and joined him staring at the flames. She passed him a bottle and they drank together.

"Sorry," she said eventually.

He did not respond.

"You know me."

"Yeah, well as I've said before, 'I'm glad you're on my side'." He poked the fire. "I may have a lead."

"Really?" she wasn't interested. He went to bed.



*"I will especially need my guns"*

The next morning Gareth rose early and made sure that he could clearly be seen, with his rifle. He relit the fire. However, he took breakfast in the restaurant. Isobel's victims were eating before they departed. Gareth exchanged a few well-meaning words with them. They left soon after. Gareth stood at the window and watched them go, he held his rifle before him. Chloe stood beside him. When they had passed out of sight he returned to his coffee. There was no sign of James yet. Chloe was running things. She asked him many questions about the main town and his job there. But the common thread throughout was Isobel and his knowledge of her. He was honest, as always, in his appraisal of her. Chloe listened well. Gareth found her perceptive in her questions and prompts. She had an older air about her this morning.

The time passed quickly, and Gareth found out much about the area and the people. There were other stories that had been handed down and remembered. Chloe showed no surprise, or concern, that the Uplanders might, from time to time, come among them. She said it was to be accepted. They were, after all, looking out for the Bowl people. She would not say whether she had seen anything out of the ordinary. Ordinary. What was ordinary? She laughed gently.

Isobel joined them and ordered some breakfast. Chloe smiled at her and rushed to prepare the food.

"You didn't wake me, Gareth?" she asked him and not waiting for his reply. "You're not tiring of this waste of time, are you?" a hint of hope was in her voice.

"Not when we are so close, my dear." He mockingly implored her. She screwed up her face and sighed. Her coffee came, and she drank eagerly. He said nothing more to her. But

he continued his examination of Chloe. She was a little vague of her background. An orphan, from not sure where. Taken in by James and his wife. The wife was visiting relatives at that time. She ignored his inquiry of where she had gone to school. She would not even say how long she had been here at the crossroads.

"Leave the girl alone, Gareth." Isobel finally ordered him. "She's not one of your precious Uplanders." Chloe smiled. But Gareth was not so sure. She might not be an Uplander, but there was something about this girl. He felt she could tell them more. There was no sign of James returning so Gareth decided to go back to the clearing by the Rim. He made sure the girl knew which path they would be taking before they left. He found that Isobel had prepared their packs before she had come to the restaurant. So, they wasted no more time and set off down the road. Finding the hidden way, they took the track to the spot by the Rim.

During the walk to the Rim they stopped frequently. They argued over whether something had travelled on the track since yesterday. Gareth was suspicious, she was scornful. He could tell it was going to be a long day with her. When they started the sky was clear of clouds. As they emerged into the glade, he noticed a few clouds above. She immediately sat down in the middle while he searched the perimeter again. When he came back and sat down by her, she got up and mumbled something about hunting. He watched her disappear into the trees to one side.

He drank some water and then crawled towards the stone scrutinising every patch of ground. He concentrated on a line between where the track came out of the trees and where it would hit the rocks. He had given up on this when he heard a couple of rifle shots in the direction Isobel had taken. Perhaps he should shoot at the wall. Maybe then it would yield its secrets. He was pondering the stone and looking for some hidden pattern when he thought he heard a noise behind him. Before he could turn, he heard a shout. There was the sound of

a struggle. The shouts of two people. He recognised both. Turning he watched Isobel dragging Chloe into the opening - not so gently either. The girl was trying to struggle. Useless as Isobel had a good grip on her. The look the girl gave the woman was a mixture of anger and shock. She did not seem so taken with his partner now, Gareth thought.

"I thought someone was following us, again, so I went that way and fired a few shots, then backtracked around." Isobel explained. "Took her quite by surprise." She did not let Chloe go. The girl had stopped struggling but was obviously poised to make a break for it.

"I'm glad you've joined us," Gareth said. "You see I have a problem. I know there's a way in here. But I don't know how to get in." The girl said nothing.

"Now I'm thinking that it is probably like the wall of knowledge. Have you been there?" he asked her. She shook her head. "You see if I was an Uplander I would have one of those metal things on my hand and I'd just wave it over the right spot and whoosh. The stone would open." She looked at him intently.

"Now you wouldn't happen to have one of those things, would you?" she pushed against Isobel and shouted "No."

"You do know what I mean then?" he smiled at her. She abated her struggle again. She said nothing.

"Now I'm guessing that those things," Gareth went on, "are meant to work for only one person. It would not be sensible to let anybody be able to use them. Would it? I might get hold of one and be able to get in here. No. They would be tied into one person somehow. Am I right?"

She still said nothing. Gareth thought she looked more confident now.

"I'm also guessing that even if we got a person and their, key, shall we call it?" the girl's eyes narrowed. "We still wouldn't be able to use them."

She said nothing.

"Let her go, Isobel."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Even if you killed her, I doubt it would help." Chloe looked sharply from Gareth to Isobel. She stepped back quickly, Isobel watching her closely. Then she stopped and watched Gareth. He was back to inspecting the wall. He looked higher up.

"You know, I think I have an idea," he said aloud.

"You often do," Isobel responded.

"Come here and bring your guns, Isobel." He indicated. She pulled out her side arms and walked towards him. Chloe stepped back another pace. But they did not seem to be interested in her. Gareth was pointing to places on the wall. He came back to where Chloe was standing. Isobel began firing. Chloe cringed slightly, "What's she trying to hit?"

"Nothing in particular," he answered. He watched as she fired shots into the wall at regular intervals from five yards up, to the ground. Then she reloaded and repeated the pattern about two yards apart. The noise of the shots reverberated in the space, bits of stone flew off and the whine of the ricochets made Chloe jump. At last Isobel stopped. She reloaded, and Gareth walked to the wall to see what had happened. But before he got to it, he heard the vehicle approaching. Isobel had swung her rifle into position and dropped to one knee. Gareth pulled his gun. The branches lifted, and a car bounced into the clearing and came to an immediate stop.

James was behind the wheel. He took in the scene. Then he raised his hands. Gareth motioned him to get out. He did this slowly and carefully. Isobel kept him covered. Chloe, Gareth noted, was neither surprised nor particularly pleased to see the arrival of her guardian. She made no acknowledgement to him. Isobel frisked him; he was not armed. He did not say anything.

"Come to join the fun?" Gareth asked him.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked Gareth.

"Find the way in. Do you know how to do it?" the man shook his head. He shot a quick glance at Chloe which Gareth spotted. But she ignored him. Gareth went to the wall. Isobel kept watch. He looked at each of the places she had fired at. The higher ones were easy to mark as there were signs of stone chipped away by the bullets. But lower down, from about head height he could find nothing; the stone appeared untouched by the bullets. Bending, he scoured the ground and found the bullets. They were flattened. As if they had hit something extremely hard.

"Look at these," he threw the ex-bullets at Isobel. She caught them. Her eyes widened as she examined them, and she looked to the wall. Gareth was pointing to the parts of the wall that the bullets had hit. She could see no marks.

"Let's try again shall we," Gareth walked up to her. "This time use the rifle, go for a cross pattern between those points." He pointed with his outstretched arm. Isobel nodded. She got extra ammunition from her pockets and prepared to fire. Gareth went and stood between Chloe and James.

"This should be interesting, I think." He said it more to himself. James looked a little anxious. "Aren't we a bit close?" he asked.

"The odds against us being hit are high," Gareth grinned at him. "But I don't think we will get many ricochets, do you Chloe?"

She said nothing but looked rather thoughtful. It was louder than before, but soon over. Gareth and Isobel approached the wall, James followed, Chloe hung back. There were no marks within a certain area. Many flattened bullets lay on the ground.

"Now if I'm not mistaken," Gareth paused, "there's a door here. Not big enough to get a car through mind you." He felt the stone, running his hands all over the area. At one point he stopped suddenly. Something had happened. He felt a slight twinge in his hand. It had

spread from his index finger up to his elbow, like a fleeting stab of cramp. He put his hands back onto the stone. It took him a while, then he found the exact point. He pushed lightly against the stone. A jolt, as if from a weak electric current passed from one hand to the other. The stone changed colour and then became transparent. He could see what appeared to be a metal plate behind the stone.

Chloe gasped out loud. Isobel said "neat." James looked curious.

Gareth could see a small red light on the plate and as he pushed with his hands it flashed. What now he thought. There was a movement by his side.

"Here try this," Chloe said handing him her necklace. On the end of it was a small, flat piece of metal, slightly curved at the edges. He took it off her. Turning it over he knew it was meant to go on his hand, but he was now unsure. He looked at Chloe. "It goes on like this," and she put it on his upper hand. The edges sank into his hand; it felt like a very slight cut. He looked closely at it, turning his hand around. Isobel watched him closely while James kept staring at Chloe. Chloe flexed her fingers, "do this" she encouraged him. Gareth repeated the movement. A red light, tiny, flashed suddenly. Gareth experienced a surge of satisfaction. He smiled at them. Isobel was not so sure.

"Now try it," Chloe pointed to the stone.

"What do I do?" Gareth asked her.

"Just run your hand over it and think 'open'." She gestured with her hand showing him. "Think 'open'." He did as he was told. The slight twinge returned but he ignored it. The red light on the plate behind the stone flashed strongly. Then a blue light appeared and the whole section of wall changed colour. They all stepped back as the section fell away, swinging open.

"That was quite impressive." It was Chloe. "Once you had found the door then that meant I had to let you in. But I didn't think you could open it yourself. Never heard of it before.

But they'll know above now." She pointed up with her thumb. "James, you will have to sort things out down here. Take care of their vehicle and tents, you know?"

"Understood." He turned and headed for his vehicle, reaching for their packs as he went.

"Oi! Leave it you!" Isobel shouted at him. She rushed after him and grabbed the packs off him. He looked to Chloe. She gave him the sign to go. He got into his car, turned it expertly in the small space and drove away. Gareth was peering through the door. Chloe tapped him on the shoulder. "I'll need that back." She held her hand out. He reluctantly prised it off his hand. The merest feeling. There was the faintest of marks left behind. He saw them because he knew where to look. He handed back the necklace. Chloe detached the chain and put the flat piece of metal on her hand. It flashed again. Looking back at Gareth she told him, "you'll have to have your own by the look of it. Let's go."

But they stayed put.

"What's going to happen to our stuff and the off-roader?" Isobel asked.

"They'll be taken care of." Something in her tone was less than convincing.

"Where are we going now?" Isobel again.

"We have to go up to the Knuckle. You have found the door, so you have to go up and see the Holder."

"The Knuckle. The Holder. What are they?" Isobel shouldered her pack.

"The Knuckle is the place on the Rim where the Holder lives."

"This Holder is in charge?" Gareth enquired. Chloe nodded.

"I'll stay here and wait for you," Isobel spoke to Gareth.

"Ok," Gareth moved through the doorway.

"No. That can't happen. You both must come. You have seen the door," she pointed at Isobel, "and you have opened the door," she stressed the words. "If you don't come now you will die before you return to the town." Isobel planted her feet, "Oh really!" Chloe's face

was grave, "You cannot escape the Uplanders. They can kill you here, now, if they wanted to."

Isobel glanced round suspiciously.

"What will happen to us up there?" Gareth asked Chloe. She frowned and shook her head.

"I don't know. This has never happened before," she gave Gareth little confidence. But this was what they were here for. There was nothing to decide in his mind.

"Well, I've got to go partner," he said. "Are you coming, or are you going to take your chances down here?" Isobel held her rifle in her hands.

"What do you reckon my chances are?" she asked him.

"Oh, down here I'd say zilch. Up there a bit better."

"Hmmm," she deliberated. "You are the brains in this outfit. Or so they say."

"Do they. Well you are the muscle, I heard." He moved further into the doorway. "And I could do with someone to look after me." She followed him in.

"You don't need those packs." Chloe remonstrated.

"I'll decide what we need or don't need," Isobel said forcefully. "Got it." She prodded the girl with one of the packs.

"Well you won't need the guns," Chloe persisted.

"I will especially need my guns."

"Let's get going." Gareth interjected. Chloe waved her hand near the door. Lights came on. The door eased back into place. Gareth and Isobel could see the space. It seemed like a garage to them. But the vehicles were not in. In the far wall were two metal panels fitted together.

"Now, I'm guessing," Gareth said, "but I expect that there is a quick way of going up behind there." He pointed.

"You'd be right," Chloe said. "But I've just got a message saying we must use the stairs."



"A message. From where?" Gareth looked quickly around. Chloe put her finger to her head. She walked to one side and lights lit up a flight of stairs ahead of her. She began to climb, "It's a long way."

Gareth groaned, and Isobel laughed, "Here, catch! If you think I'm carrying your pack all the way up there, you're dreaming." She followed the girl. Gareth shouldered the pack and grumbled to himself as he began the ascent. This was not a good start. He would probably die of exhaustion before he got to the Rim.

*... "you couldn't possibly just throw it over the edge"*

One hour into the ascent to the Rim Gareth already felt in trouble. The girls kept a steady pace. He felt that there were definite signs of competition developing. The young girl was obviously fit. This was unlikely to be her first climb up; perhaps it formed part of a training regime. The woman, he knew to be fit, kept a fixed distance behind the young leader. The problem for Gareth was that he soon fell far enough behind the females that the lights went out on him. He observed that as Chloe climbed, the lights came on only a short time ahead of her. Then as she passed, they stayed on for only a short time. He was soon following in partial darkness. He called out to them to stop. They waited for him to reach them. He, pantingly, explained the problem. Chloe said she would increase the duration of the light. She set off once more, Isobel followed, and Gareth took a quick swig of water before he did the same.

Each step was about four yards wide and a foot deep, he estimated. Each flight was made up of a hundred steps. Then there was a wider platform. Then it repeated itself. There were ten of these stages each rising in the same direction. An even bigger platform was then reached, and the entire layout was repeated, but going up another side; there were four sides, encompassing a central shaft. The climb wound itself on, flight after flight, stage after stage, side after side, up through thousands of feet. Gareth soon lost interest in keeping count and kept close to the wall, stopping often to lean against it. He avoided going near the edge of the deepening drop. Nothing broke the monotony of that hewn, colossal stairway. Gareth could see at some levels that there were doors. Where they led and to what purpose he could not imagine. He was very low on imagination, concentrating almost exclusively on the physical effort demanded by the ascent.

It was therefore a big surprise when he saw the small stone, a fragment of what he had no idea. The wall remained remarkably smooth throughout the climb and no break appeared in any of the steps. He picked it up. It was a pebble, smooth and ovate. What are you doing so far from the sea, he asked it? No answer came. He crept carefully to the open central shaft. Pausing for just a second, he dropped the pebble into the void. Quickly he retreated to the safety of the wall as if he expected instant retribution. He listened. But no sound came up from the deep. Disappointed and a little confused he began to climb again. He looked ahead and there were Isobel and Chloe watching him from the next platform. They waited for him to arrive. Gareth could make out a smug smirk on Isobel's face. The young girl looked serious.

"Are we stopping?" Gareth asked more in hope really.

"Yes, time for some food and drink," Isobel replied taking his pack off his back. He noticed they were sweating heavily like him. But it was his body making all the gasping and rasping noises. He sat down with his back to the wall trying to control his heaving chest. Chloe was looking at him with a quiet disapproval. Isobel noticed his uncertainty and laughed.

"I've just won a little bet with our young leader here." Gareth looked from one to the other. "What about?" he asked.

"Well, I suggested we predict what you would do if you found a pebble on the step." She reached into a pocket and produced a similar pebble to show him. He resisted the temptation to ask her why she had some pebbles in her pocket.

"Chloe thought you couldn't possibly just throw it over the edge." Chloe's brow furrowed. "But I knew you would not be able to resist it." Isobel laughed again. "I think she's disappointed in you." Gareth felt curiously guilty. He ate something then said, "There was no sound of it hitting the bottom."

"Of course, not", Chloe, a riposte. "There are mechanisms. Nothing is allowed to fall. Motion sensors activate the nets. A falling object is caught and put back onto the steps."

"What are motion sensors?" but as he said it, he could guess the answer. "So, the pebble is back on a step below somewhere?" he quickly asked. Chloe said "Yes." He enjoyed the prospect of the pebble waiting there until someone else came by and dropped it, as he had done. How long might it take to get to the bottom - thousands of years. Then they were on their way. He just as quickly lost touch with the women.

The fatigue in his body was starting to really get to him: terminal heavy breathing, all over body sweat, aching limbs, stooping more and more. He had not looked ahead for what seemed an age. Then he gradually realised the quality of the light was changing. He halted and achingly tried to stand straight. Daylight! Isobel and Chloe were not to be seen. They must have already passed through that opening above. The artificial lights suddenly went out. He felt a panic and rushed on until he came out into the light. Bright sunlight fell on him. The doorway behind eased shut. Isobel and Chloe sat a few paces away, drinking some water. He joined them.

Looking around him his joy at emerging into the sunshine was soon dampened. They had not reached the top. Before them a stream tumbled away into a hole and disappeared. The stream snaked its way through a wide, gently sloping vale. A grassy carpet strewn with many coloured flowers covered the vale. Occasionally rocks and boulders broke through. The way led on and up - an obviously constructed, smooth link. In the distance Gareth could see what, he thought, must be the Rim. But it was probably a thousand feet higher up. Well at least it would be more pleasant walking here and the absence of steps a bonus. Chloe refilled some water containers from the bubbling stream, and they set off once more. Gareth thought, for a moment, they would walk with him now. But he was mistaken. They soon left him lagging.

But he noticed that now they walked beside each other and talked. He heard them laugh and noticed that he was smiling broadly. He didn't know why, except it was nice up here.

Partly because he was interested, partly because he was so very tired, Gareth wandered. He often left the way to walk in the grass and examine the flowers. He scattered beautiful butterflies as he strolled. Also, the stream drew him, and he jumped from rock to rock until his weariness warned him away. The women stopped, now and then, and watched him. He waved at them. They were too far away for him to see their expressions clearly.

The source of the stream was passed, and the meadow failed. The terrain was now rocky, and he stayed on the way. Eventually Gareth reached the top. The vale lay below and now he stood on the flat edge of the Rim. To one side, yards away, he could see where the Rim fell away. To the other side the ground was flat, very flat, for as far as he could see. In front of him a hundred yards or so he could see the rounded stone buildings that must be the Knuckle. A number of people waited for him, Chloe and Isobel amongst them. As he neared, he was not surprised to see that Isobel now held her rifle. However, the people seemed not to be bothered by this. Her pack lay at her feet and Gareth dropped his onto hers.

"Hello," he said to everyone, smiling as much as he could. There were greetings, hands shaken, names given. Gareth knew he would remember few of these names in the morning. Fatigue was upon him, suddenly he realised that his vision was blurring, and he felt giddy. He tottered; Isobel steadied him. But his legs gave way. He thought he said 'sorry'. Then nothing. He lost consciousness as he slipped into her arms.

*"There is a lot to know, a lot you must learn"*

Gareth woke with a start. He sat up quickly. Immediately he was disorientated. He lay in a bedroom, small and rectangular. No decoration on the bare stone walls. The low ceiling looked little taller than his height. Sunlight streamed through an opening in one wall. It hit the bed at an angle and warmed him through the sheets. He was naked. His clothes were neatly arranged on a low chair beside the bed. Then his muscles got his attention. How he ached and groaning quietly to himself he remembered the long climb.

Getting off the bed he looked out through what passed for a window. There were no curtains or glass. He noticed some wooden shutters that could be pulled in from outside. The sun was obviously on the rise. Next morning, I suppose he thought to himself. Then the memory of a bank of cloud or fog below him; and he, falling into it came back to him. He had fainted - a good first impression to make. He could see nothing from his vantage point. Just sky and the Rim top and the hint of the great drop nearby.

The door to his room opened and a young girl poked her head around it. She urged him to get dressed and come and eat some breakfast. She gave him no second look and the door remained ajar. He dressed quickly, found his comb in one of his pockets and ran it roughly through his hair. As he left the room, he realised that his pack was nowhere to be seen. He followed the corridor in the direction of voices, young and keen. A large room with a table set in the middle came into view. Chloe sat there with many boys and girls of a similar age. She looked up at a gentle nudge from a neighbour. "Sit here, Gareth. Breakfast is still going." He sat opposite her. The youngsters smiled and nodded at him. No attempt was made at any introductions. Gareth was hungry, and he wasted no time, he began feeding.

As he ate the others finished and left in turn. Finally, only Chloe was left at the table. She waited for him. "We are last, so we tidy up," she said, jumping up. She started to gather all the dishes and plates from the table. Gareth joined in and soon they had everything in the kitchens, to the side. Together they cleaned up and washed up.

"Sorry I, ... I, collapsed there, yesterday." He said at last.

"Oh!" she smiled at him, "don't worry. It's nothing unusual you know. The first time you come up here gets most people some way." She laughed then, "We were setting a pace, Isobel and me." His turn to smile. "It is higher of course and you have never been so high before."

"Where is Isobel? She's alright I hope?" he asked her.

"Oh! She's fine. No problems I think." She gestured with her hand, "She's outside." A short pause. "She wouldn't let anyone else put you to bed. Stripped you and tucked you in. One of the trainers checked you and we left you to sleep it off. Isobel took your pack too."

Gareth stretched and felt his sore body, "It'll take more than one night's sleep for me to recover I feel." When they had finished Chloe excused herself saying she had to see the Holder. She disappeared down another corridor. Gareth walked out into the mid-morning sun. He looked around him. He had been in the biggest of these stone structures. He considered them and decided that they were probably part of the original surface. The Uplanders must have just carved out their interiors. At the same time, they finished off the Rim, no doubt. None of the Rim people were about as far as he could see. By the edge of the Rim he could see the figure of Isobel looking out at the view. He walked over to her.

She heard him approaching and turned. She gave him a funny sort of grin, he thought, and turned back. When he reached where she stood, he realised that she was right on the edge of the Rim. It was too close for him, he stepped back a few paces and seeing a stone obviously meant to be a seat he sat down. They said nothing to each other for a while.

"When we got here, yesterday, the cloud was everywhere." She said. "You couldn't see a thing... But today... Today it's magic."

"It's an amazing view," he agreed.

"You know I can see the ocean. I can make out our town." He followed the line of her arm. "We live in a beautiful land, Gareth, from here it's just majestic. I wish all people could see it." Now that's a point he thought. Why have we been prevented from seeing this marvellous view of our home? He remembered they were here for some answers.

"Have you met many of them Isobel? Talked much to them?" he asked her, noticing for the first time that her rifle lay at her feet.

"Not really Gareth. Once we'd got you to bed, I joined them for a meal. They obviously knew we were coming, as Chloe told us."

"Is Chloe definitely one of them, then?"

"Well, I'd say so," she came away from the brim and joined him in the stone seats. "But I think there's two kinds up here. The older ones, the adults, most of them I'd say were your Uplanders. But the youngsters, have you seen the really young ones yet?" he shook his head. "Now, I think they are like us, from the Bowl lands. All four too, not just the North."

"So, what are they doing here?" he wondered.

"School." She replied.

"School?" he was surprised.

"Yes. They are brought here for schooling. Special schooling, I expect. Chloe's one of them. She told me that she remembers the sea as a young child, but little else. Most of her memories are from being here on the Rim."

"So, what was she doing at the crossroads? How does this James character fit in?"

"I don't know for sure." She came back, rather cryptically. Gareth looked at her. "Well? What do you think?" he enquired impatiently.



"Well, if you look around, you'll see things that have come from the Bowl. And things that definitely haven't, as well. They must be getting it from somewhere or someone. Hence James, the clearing and so on."

"So, is James a real Bowl person?"

"Chloe says he's never been to the Rim, so I'd say yes."

"And Chloe? What was she doing down there?" Isobel was thoughtful. Had she heard him? "Well?!"

"Now, Chloe, judging by her reception yesterday, she's a star pupil. I'd say she was there to get real experience of the Bowl. And us." They thought this over for a while.

"But I think she might have a problem now," Isobel said.

"Why do you think that?" his interest flared.

"Well she's back too soon. She should still be down there. Might not be so easy to go back now."

"We messed it up for her, you reckon?" he asked.

"Hey! Isn't that what we're good at?!" she laughed. He smiled at her and shook his head. Someone was coming. They both turned their heads. A man was approaching. He was without doubt the oldest person Gareth had seen yet. Part of him was happy because up to now he thought he was the oldest one up here. Isobel turned back. "Now this is the creepiest one of the lot," she said quietly.

"Creepy?" he matched her tone.

"Yeah. Creepy." She repeated. "Feels like he's looking right through you when you talk to him. Feels like he can read your mind." She shivered exaggeratedly. "He's the boss. The Holder." She looked pointedly into his eyes. "Quite concerned about you he was, last night." Gareth rose to meet the man. Isobel, however, dragged her rifle close to her with her foot.

"Gareth, nice to meet you." A strong handshake. The older man fixed him with piercing eyes. Gareth understood what Isobel meant. He felt he was being examined. "Have you both caught up with each other?" it was a funny way of putting it. Gareth thought, he knows what we've been talking about, I bet. He returned the man's gaze and gave his best smile. The older man smiled broadly back at him. He held his hands out before him, "It's a great Bowl-viewing day, as we say here at the Rim." He was the same height and build as Gareth. But he seemed to stand straighter, despite his age, Isobel considered. They both had that quiet thoughtfulness about them. She suddenly felt restless.

"Isobel, I believe there will be something of interest to you arriving very shortly." He said to her. He turned to look beyond the stone structures. Round one of them a man appeared. He waved at them. "Isobel," he beckoned her. She recognised the man. Then with no apparent sound a flying machine seemed to appear suddenly, above the structures. It circled and landed behind them. Gareth felt vibrations through the ground. The man beckoned again and walked out of sight.

"See you later, Gareth," Isobel was up and racing after the man. The older man smiled and turned to Gareth. "She is more technical than you?"

"Well, maybe," he answered. "She's more mechanically minded than me. But I'm not so sure she's more technically able than me."

"I'm sorry, I have not introduced myself, I am the Holder."

"No first name, then?" Gareth quipped. He immediately regretted it. A curious look passed the Holder's face and then he laughed. Gareth relaxed and smiled again.

"No. No first name, yet." The Holder responded. "Perhaps in the years to come." He put his arm around Gareth's shoulders and led him away from the Rim edge. "You have arrived here sooner than I thought. Sooner than some predictions have suggested."

"I have?" Gareth reacted uncertainly. His mind was dealing with the phrase 'in the years to come'. "What predictions are these?"

"There is a lot to know, a lot you must learn." The Holder guided him towards the furthest stone building. "You have many questions. You will have many more. Some of the answers I can give you. Some you can find from the people here. Others you may work out for yourself. It might take years." There it was again.

"Years?" Gareth stopped, and looked directly at the man, the Holder. They stayed like that for a while. The Holder's hand was on Gareth's shoulder. Gareth was not sure what happened to him then. He saw things. Scenes. Images. Brief flashes of information exploded in his brain. He never told Isobel what he experienced. It would have been hard to explain anyway. But Chloe watching with one of the trainers from another stone structure knew what was happening. She asked her trainer a question. But he did not know the answer. The Holder shook Gareth gently.

"You must spend some time with us," he spoke to the blinking man. "Then you will have to go to Upland. Quite a stir you will cause there I've no doubt. Then probably back here." He led on. Gareth followed. He had more than a feeling that he was not going back to the Bowl for some time to come. Maybe never. But what about Isobel he thought suddenly. The Holder turned at the entrance, "There might be problems there," he said as if Gareth had asked him out loud. "She is difficult to program into the simulations. A real problem. The first for many years."

Gareth did not understand what he meant. He stepped into the building after the Holder.

"There is much to see. There is more to take in." The Holder informed him. "It will take days." Gareth's face frowned briefly. "Let's start here shall we." It was not a question; Gareth followed the older man down the corridor.

*"But you could manage it, with practice?"*

That first day at the Rim Gareth learnt about the surveillance of the Bowl. He found out about far-vision and monitors, and how they enabled them to see what was going on in the Bowl. The anibots were demonstrated to him. He was completely fascinated by them. He played with one example they had. The highlight was being allowed to operate one back in the town. He flew it to his security building and perched it on one of the telephone lines. From there they could clearly see White standing at his window. It was amazing. He felt he had only to reach out and he would touch him. The operators laughed when he playfully called out to White. But White was unaware. But not totally unsuspecting, Gareth thought.

He found out about satellites and how they were put into orbit. He also got a quick look at all the different types of flying machines they had and what they could do. The words 'plane', 'rocket', 'nuclear', 'space', 'gravity' became known to him. Many others too. He understood little of it and wondered how he would learn it all. There was so much happening here. He could see their planet in one monitor. The whole Bowl lands and ocean in another. But he spent most time staring at the monitors that showed the Uplands. He could see much of what went on up there in some of the main indentations. One of the first things he was told was the nature of the Upland part of the planet.

He could see the people and watch them travelling. They did not look any different to him or Isobel. They were leading lives, working and producing like the Bowl landers. Alright there were some curious looking things going on and some strange objects and machines. But basically, it did not appear much different on the surface. It was hard to tell, his first impression was of a busy people, but there did not seem to be that many of them. He was

sure that more people lived in any one of the lands below. Perhaps they were hidden away in the places underneath the holes, or in places in between.

The operators and the Holder explained many things to him and showed him how to use the machines. They were patient and answered most of his questions. But he noticed that they did not talk about the moon. Or show any pictures of it. One bank of monitors was off all the time he stayed in the building. Any questions he had about the moon were politely met with refusal. Anything else he chanced upon the Holder merely told him 'later'. But nevertheless, he was suffering from an information overload when he emerged into the late afternoon sunshine.

The Holder left him. They would meet again at evening meal. They had joined the operators in some snacks earlier, so Gareth was comfortable. He walked back to the stone seats. Sitting there he sipped water and watched the sun set. He thought a great deal. He had not asked why. Why were they watching? Why were they watching everybody and every place? Us and them. Down there, and up there. As he continued running things over in his mind the sun went down. He became aware of the moon in the darkening sky and for the first time in his life, he felt, he studied it. But nothing happened. No flashes. No rockets flying.

During the day he had sensed that the Holder was studying him carefully, watching how he reacted. Evaluating how quickly he picked up things, marking the questions, he asked. The Holder, he felt, was not the only one interested in his performance. The operators, no doubt, were also involved. Then a late thought occurred to him. If they could see the Upland easily then it would be sensible to assume that the Upland could see them. The Holder talked about 'the Leader', a 'he'. Well he had to be in Upland. He would have to go to Upland. The Holder had made that clear and Isobel would have to come too. It was always interesting to see how she reacted to situations.

Stirring himself he wondered what had happened to her. Probably flying that machine around knowing her. Then he was aware of someone behind him. He turned quickly. It was Chloe.

"Oh, it's you," he said, relaxing. "How long have you been there?"

"I've been sitting here for about ten minutes. You seemed lost in thought. And a Rim sunset is not to be spoilt by idle chatter." How this girl had changed he thought. First, she was an innocent Bowl girl interested in strangers. Then worried with a secret about to be discovered. Next, she was leading them, obeying orders. Now she was like an older sister keeping an eye on him. "How long is it to the meal?" he asked.

"About half an hour." She came and sat with him. He noticed she was now wearing the same clothes as the other young people. They sat quietly, staring at the stars.

"I don't suppose you know what happened to Isobel, do you?"

"She flew off with the supply ship." It did not sound from her voice that this was the 'done' thing. "I've never been allowed to go in the supply ships, let alone fly away in one." Gareth felt a sudden worry. Was she alright? Had they split them up on purpose? He was feeling uneasy and started looking about for her. Chloe sensed his concern.

"It's alright they came back before you came out of the monitoring station."

"Oh, good," he calmed down.

"And that's another thing," she sounded slightly annoyed. "I've never been in there to see the monitors directly. I've only seen the training school versions and I'm the best trainee here, and I've got a .... a ..." She trailed off, just stopping herself in time. She looked away quickly, obviously upset with herself for almost letting something slip. He pretended not to notice.

"Where is my partner then?" he asked.

"I'm just behind you." They both jumped. Isobel laughed loudly. "You don't think I'd miss a Rim sunset, do you? Not after everybody today told me how lovely they are."

"So, where've you been exactly?" Gareth enquired.

"I went for a walk along the Rim."

"See anything interesting?" he again.

"No. Just Rim, drop, and lands below."

"Did you have a good day?" he turned to face her now.

"Now, that was interesting. I got to fly that ship for a little bit." Gareth could see a frown on Chloe's face. "Just to get a feel for it, out over that massive flat area." He realised that Isobel was rubbing it in. Chloe got up and started back, "Must be time for the meal soon," she said quietly. They watched her go. Isobel smiled slyly.

"What was it like?" he asked her hurriedly.

"Piece of cake." She said confidently.

"Really?" he demanded. "You flew it all over the place I suppose. No problems. Hey?"

"Well, they let me fly it a bit once we had taken off. I reckon I can manage it. Now taking off and landing that's another thing all together." She was more restrained now.

"But you could manage it, with practice?" he, encouragingly.

"Well, yes. But it's gone back to Upland now."

"Yes, but I bet they've got a ship of their own here," he whispered. "Get familiar with it, learn how to drive it."

"Fly."

"What?"

"You mean, fly it."

"Oh, I see. Yes, fly it. When the time comes it might be our only way out."

"Why are we whispering?"

"Because, I think they can listen to most of what we say."

"Oh, and whispering is going to make a difference is it?"

"Who knows?" a bell rang. "Time to eat."

The meal was a chance for the Rim people to say goodbye to a group of the oldest youngsters. When Gareth asked where they were going, he fully expected to be told the Bowl. But the Holder told him that they set off for the Upland tomorrow. The Rim was mainly a training ground for youngsters who were then sent to the Upland. He did not explain why. Gareth wondered why they did not fly there. The Holder said it was a tradition to walk part of the way. He did not elaborate, except to say that a guide would lead them. The guide was the Uplander that they had tried to capture back in the town. Isobel pretended, jokingly, to shoot him. He smiled gravely at her. Gareth noticed the Holder studying Isobel intently. What was she? Difficult to program into the simulation. Whatever that meant.

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During the next few days Gareth and Isobel saw little of each other once breakfast was over. He spent his time with the Holder; she with the technicians of the knuckle. She was learning how to operate the machines and sometimes she even claimed to understand how they worked. He found this difficult to believe unless she was getting the sort of science and technical input that he was receiving. It did not seem that way. She was also learning to fly. The Holder said she was doing very well. Gareth sensed that the Holder was having to change his appraisal of her by the day. Probably running new simulations; he still did not know exactly what that meant. Chloe also joined Isobel in the flying which made her happier.



Gareth was taken to every part of the knuckle by the Holder or the operators. He tried to understand it all. It was difficult. The Holder assured him that he did not understand everything. He doubted that any one did. But he needed a good level of general understanding. Gareth was the main student in the school. The next cohort of youngsters had not started their training yet. Usually, Chloe joined him, they found that they could help each other understand better.

A few days had gone by and Gareth felt mentally tired. But to his amazement he was doing well in the constant tests. Chloe deflated him when she told him that there was something in the food which helped his mental processes. Also, that she thought the Holder had the capability of increasing their abilities in some way. She would not discuss how she knew. Gareth remembered her gesture at the foot of the Rim. The Holder did seem to be aware of their thoughts most of the time. He recalled also the Uplander who turned guide. He was able to affect them. But he never saw a metal thing on the Holder's hand. Chloe however wore hers constantly. She had said that he might need one of his own. But the Holder had made no reference to it so far.

That they were being prepared for something was obvious. But Isobel had not realised they were going to Upland. Gareth was surprised one evening to assure her she was correct in thinking that they were to be sent to Upland. She seemed to have the idea that they would be kept at the Knuckle. Or, worse, be sent to spy on their own people. This of course she would have refused and then they would have made their escape with all this special knowledge. It was straight forward. He also assured her that he was going to Upland. White would expect it. She was not so sure. She felt he would be quite happy with the information they had. He had to see what Upland was like. He did not tell her that he expected to be kept either there or here. He had come this far; he was not going to miss the chance to go to Upland. They had no choice any way. He told her she could come with him or take her

chances trying to get away. She asked him what he thought her chances were. He told her nil here, but better with him. Besides he still needed looking after. She resigned herself to the situation. Gareth was happy. The Holder was happy. Her trainers wondered why she became somewhat sullen.

Then one evening at the meal the Holder informed them that they would soon follow the youngsters to Upland. Chloe and Gareth smiled; Isobel scowled openly. Just a few things remained, Gareth would get his hand device. He would need training in how to use it; Chloe needed some extra training too. Isobel would also get some extra training. The Holder was sure it would please her. They were all intrigued. The last days would be interesting.

*"And we have no guide?"*

Not entirely understanding, was now a familiar frustration to Gareth. The science and technology behind most of what he had experienced at the Knuckle fell into this category. But all seemed well as far as the Holder was concerned. Gareth was now proficient in most of the systems he would encounter in Upland. Isobel worried less about understanding. She just wanted to master the operation of a machine and system.

The hand devices were different. Gareth immediately felt something when he put Chloe's on at the foot of the Rim. He could not explain it. An indefinable feeling, somewhere, somewhere in his head, somewhere in his guts, both at once. The flushes of electric currents when he flexed his fingers did not worry him, rather he found them pleasant in a ticklish way. That was the effect of wearing Chloe's device.

The Holder passed to Gareth what would be his own device and showed him exactly where it should fit on. As before, it eased its way through his skin with barely any feeling. But at once Gareth felt more connected to this device. The link between his thought and a reaction from the device was more immediate, the electric currents passing down his body, not just his arm, more substantial. Yet not unpleasant or uncomfortable. He played at making the red and blue lights flash. He could not stop himself letting a childlike giggle escape his lips.

"It feels different to the other one, Chloe's," he told the Holder and the operators present. They nodded.

"Yours is tuned to your particular body." The Holder explained. Gareth gave him his 'don't follow you' look." All our bodies give off a signal. Remember what you have learnt

about electromagnetic radiation and the different types. The various workings of the body's components emit a spectrum of these radiations. The spectrum is unique to that person."

"Like fingerprints and dental records," Gareth offered. "Yes, and voice patterns and retina blood vessel patterns too," one of the operators cut in. "You remember them too?" Gareth nodded his agreement.

"The device will now react to your spectrum, amplifying it and emitting it. You will be able to affect any systems using the same or similar radiations. But it is not as easy as that. It takes training to manipulate the device efficiently and effectively. You will need to exert a control over mind and body to utilise the device: effectively so that you can achieve what you intend to; efficiently so that you expend only the minimum energy needed to execute the task. Learn now the first and most important thing. Your fitness and alertness, physically and mentally, have powerful effects on the device. Fatigue and depression will lead to debilitation." They then proceeded to instruct him.

During the instruction he asked them one of his telling questions.

"So, how come I was able to get something out of Chloe's device?" the operators glanced at the Holder. He considered for a short time.

"Remember we told you a little about genes and how they were important in the processes of life?" Gareth nodded. "Well, for you to be able to work her device partially then you must share many of these genes, and in the same arrangement within you." The Holder studied Gareth. He expected a follow up question, but he appeared to be busy with practice. However, he could tell that the man was thinking this over. Putting this information together with other pieces of data. His brain would process it, running its own simulations to come up with an answer, if that was what it was. There, he felt the man's thoughts centre on one solution. It was stored, and his thoughts moved on. Would he say something?

Gareth caught the eye of the Holder. He said nothing, smiling the smile that told the Holder that he knew what he was thinking, so, what was the point in saying it. The Holder smiled back and left them to the training. It was time to inform the Leader of progress to date. The Uplander programmers had been working overtime these last few weeks. Countless simulations had been run, new variables introduced, older variables tinkered with. Such excitement in the Upland community had not been experienced since the moon phase had been initiated. Their own simulations were showing interesting outcomes, although he doubted some parties in Upland would think so. The Holder and the Leader knew that there was no point in taking any simulations too seriously until Gareth had been to Upland. The results of which would then be programmed in. He could not help thinking as he entered his private facility that the impact of Isobel and Chloe would also be significant, but what would happen exactly, no machine or body could tell. That was the real wonder of life.

Chloe was excited by the training. She had been fast tracked from early in her initial training, years ago, as a small child. Now she was getting advanced hand device instruction. But the significant development was the use of her implant; she had a brain implant inserted a year ago, here at the Knuckle. The period of acceptance by the body had gone well but she had had only minimum training. She could receive messages from the Holder and transmit in return. But it was only a low-level use, audio only. Now she was getting the ability to provide vision too. There were other uses that were now explained to her and she thought that she must be getting close to full spy/guide status. But she also found it gruelling, a permanent headache added to the physical drain. But she was happy at the prospect of going to Upland.

Isobel's mood had gone from sullen right through to joy. Gareth thought that he had not seen her so happy since their bust of the Black Bridge gang. Then she had taken two of them out in a vicious fight after shooting dead four others. He had managed to capture the gang

boss, otherwise, he covered her as she did her thing, violently and effectively. The reason for her joy this time was twofold: weapons, introduction to and firing of; combat skills. Guns and fighting. Two of the great loves of her life. It was bliss for her.

The Knuckle people showed her Upland weapons. She learnt about blasters and lasers. She learnt their operation and maintenance. All sizes of weapons she tried, and practiced with, from hand-held to the ones on the ship. She joyously and accurately smashed up targets on the great flat area a safe distance from the Knuckle buildings. Already very proficient in hand to hand fighting techniques used in the Bowl lands she now learned other skills from other methods of combat. She appeared at the evening meals, bright eyed and bruised, tired and happy. It was hard to get a word in, so keen was she to tell him and Chloe what she had done that day. She was, of course, quite uninterested in what they had done.

Then the morning came. They were to depart the Knuckle. A map was shown to them illustrating the journey ahead, it was printed on paper which was very unusual. In their time at the Knuckle they had rarely seen paper. Everybody walked around with hand-held devices that they knew, now, were called computers.

"The ship will drop you at this point," the Holder showed them. "The route you must take is marked by these crystals." He held a deep blue crystal up for them to see. "You will find the land very monotonous and if you stray from the road it may be difficult to find it again. There is little to eat, and rarely will you find water on the surface. So, you will find your packs heavy." Gareth groaned aloud. "The road has very little elevation in it." He laughed at him. "You may find useful things on the way but be careful!" he looked gravely at them.

"Why have we got the laser guns?" Gareth asked. Isobel scowled at him. He noticed that she still had her rifle slung over her back, and her other guns, also, he expected.

"You will be tested," the Holder answered him. "We do not let just anyone into Upland. You have been trained and must expect to be tested on your journey. Hopefully you will return to the Knuckle having been successful and visited Upland."

"And we have no guide?" Gareth again.

"No. You have to manage without one." The Holder replied. "But then between you there is much talent and experience. Remember your training."

Their equipment was provided; their old Bowl clothes had gone and the packs too. Everything was now in new Uplander materials which were meant to be lighter, stronger, warmer and cooler if necessary. Gareth familiarised himself with all the items in his pack. Then they were led to the ship and waved a farewell to the Knuckle people. Isobel took the controls, previously arranged, and flew them to the drop point. They disembarked, watched the ship disappear in the direction of Upland, shouldered their packs and set off.

A familiar pattern soon established itself, the women pulled ahead while Gareth brought up the rear. The land did not change in appearance all day.

*"What the hell does he mean promising?"*

"So, it is true," Councillor Sophie had just had the news confirmed. Councillors Henry and Elizabeth had returned from their 'urgent' meeting with the Leader.

"He made no attempt to deny it," Henry said.

"Well, he could not deny it," Elizabeth argued. "All Upland knows."

"He would not try to deny it," Sophie joined in. "We know that new simulations have been run."

"He says that the new simulations will be available within the hour," Henry said excitedly.

"We will be able to check them and do some runs of our own," Councillor Joan now spoke.

"Yes, we need to do that urgently." Sophie sat down; the others followed suit. They were in Sophie's private quarters. No other people were present. "Elizabeth, Henry can you see to the simulations." They nodded. "Make it as public as possible, lots of opportunities for Uplanders to get involved."

"If he is hiding anything," Joan interjected, "then someone will find it."

"Perhaps," Sophie sounded unsure. "I doubt there will be any difference to the Leader's runs. He has had the time to make sure of that."

"You are convinced of that?" Elizabeth asked. "That there was a delay in the news arriving here?"

"Can you see the Holder not knowing about these spies at the Rim's foot? How did they get in the door? They must have had some help of some kind." Sophie paused. "If they did discover the door, as it is said, they still could not get in without the help of someone from



the Knuckle. This trainee spy that brought them to the Rim, she must have been given some order."

"She has an implant," Henry reminded them.

"And that means the Holder could contact her," Elizabeth added.

"It takes hours to climb the old stairs," Joan was not going to be left out, "the Holder informs the Leader and no one else at the Knuckle needs know yet."

"Thus, the Leader has a few hours to run some simulations before news breaks at the Knuckle even." Henry finished off.

Sophie nodded along with the analysis. "No, I do not think we will find much wrong with the latest runs, but we must check anyway." The others agreed.

"The next thing, of course," Joan began, "is what is to be done with this pair of Bowl landers. It has never happened before."

"Get rid of them," Elizabeth offered.

"What? Kill them?" Henry suggested.

"They certainly cannot be allowed to return to the Bowl land." Joan insisted. Their faces turned to Sophie. She seemed lost in thought. They waited, slyly exchanging glances. Sophie stirred herself. Looking at her fellow Councillors she saw the mildly amused expectancy, then she realised.

"Yes, they cannot be allowed to return to the Bowl. But that will not happen. The Leader and the Holder know there would be shock and alarm if that did occur. But they would not want it anyway." She paused, here and rose from her chair to look out the window. Over there one of the lights marked the position of the Leader's office. "I doubt that the Leader, or the Holder, would willingly kill our unexpected visitors. No, they would prefer to keep them at the Knuckle, or here in Upland." She stared out into the night, then turning towards the others, she asked, "and the Leader did not seem concerned at all about this development?"

"You know him," Henry answered, "thinks everything is amusing."

"I actually asked him 'what happens next?'" Elizabeth said. "He gave us one of those shrugs and said the Holder would assess them for a few days. 'We will wait for his judgement' was all he would say."

"Well, wait we shall," Sophie said. "But we need to know what happens at the Knuckle. Can you handle that Joan?" Joan assured her with a nod. "Right, we will await developments everyone."

When they had gone Sophie turned back to the window. She tried to make out the Leader's window again. What are you up to? She thought that sometimes he liked to stir up the Uplanders. Deliberately allowing things to happen that caused some concerns and got people a little roused. However, he could not have arranged this new occurrence. But how would he use it? What point might he try to make? Well, we will see what the simulations show first, then wait to see what goes on at the Knuckle.

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"Promising!" Elizabeth was indignant. "Promising!" she repeated. "What the hell does he mean promising?" she and Henry had just returned from another meeting with the Leader. There had been meetings every day since the two Bowl landers had appeared at the Knuckle. Two meetings since it became clear that the two would be spies were being trained by the Knuckle people. Sometimes all the Councillors were present, sometimes other various combinations.

First, they had been told that the Holder had decided to give them training. This was of course confirmed by their own sources. Then the performance of these Bowl landers encouraged the Leader to authorise more training. The council had seen all the reports

produced by the Knuckle trainers. They had also seen a lot of footage of the two in action. They, in addition to this, had some of their own film which they viewed privately. Now the Leader had just informed Upland that the two Bowl landers showed 'promise' and that he intended to bring them to Upland. They would have to, naturally, negotiate the usual journey through the vast empty terrain that led to Upland. The normal tests would be in operation.

The initial concern that Uplanders felt at the arrival of the newcomers at the Knuckle had calmed when the results of the runs had been analysed. Many people run the simulations for themselves; the more enlightened, and the more concerned, tried a few variations of their own, or thought were their own. But there was nothing to be alarmed about. The worry was replaced by a growing interest in their training. Curiosity was high among the Uplanders to see how these Bowl landers would manage. It was clear that the Holder and the Leader thought a use could be made of them. That was enough for most of them. The work on the moon phase and other aspects of the great plan continued. No doubt when they arrived in Upland there would be a surge of interest at first, then it would die down, like all things did in Upland. The only constant was the continuing work for the future.

"I do not care how promising the Leader thinks they are!" it was Henry's turn to voice his annoyance. "I shall not be taking these two Bowl landers seriously. Honestly! How can he even think that a week's training can go anyway near to a lifetime in Upland? Not to mention all our years of extra development."

"I do not think the Leader, or the Holder, intend that to be the case." Sophie said calmly. "He is just bringing them here to let us see them, and them to see us." She smiled at her two fellow Councillors. "Now is this not typical of our Leader?" she asked. "Already some of us are disturbed by it."

"It does seem clear that they will eventually return to the Knuckle," Joan joined in. "Let them come. Everything suggests they will make little difference to the outcome."

"I just wish we could make it more difficult for them somehow," Elizabeth put in.

"They have not made it yet," Joan conceded. "They have no guide, so they might fail. Or at least get into such difficulties that they have to be rescued by the guides."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth responded. "But this young girl is almost a guide. I expect the Holder will give her some extra help."

"I cannot see the Leader letting them make the journey if he did not think they could make it," Henry sided with her. Sophie was considering Elizabeth.

"You have something in mind Elizabeth?" she asked her.

"Yes, I do." Elizabeth said no more. Sophie looked quickly around the others.

"Of course, we know nothing of this."

*"Get your weapon ready"*

"This is an incredibly boring land." Isobel said more to herself than anybody else. She had been muttering a variation on this theme all afternoon. Gareth and Chloe were ignoring her. They agreed with her, but they were ignoring her. The land had not changed from this generally grey and white rocky surface. It was a plain that appeared to be perfectly flat as they walked along, however, if you looked back carefully after a couple of hours you could just make out a very slight incline. Although the landscape was basically a plain there were outcrops of rock here and there, boulders of many different sizes from pebbles to houses littered this flat land. There appeared to be no plant or animal life up here. There were no clouds in the sky and the sun shone strongly, but it was not hot, rather cool and the first night had been chilly. They used the fire rocks that had been demonstrated to them at the Knuckle.

As they walked, Gareth constantly surveyed the ground about the path, collecting any fire rocks he saw. He had also cautioned them about conserving their water. Chloe, when pressed, said she had little idea how long their journey was in miles. All she knew was that along the way they would have to find the means to keep going and speed up their passage. Gareth interpreted this as meaning that they would have to find water, at least, on the way. He also told them that having seen a map of the whole Upland area leading down to the Rim, half a planet's worth, the distance they had to cover was vast. It was too far for them to cover on foot with the supplies they had. It would take months. So, he told them, one of the tests must involve finding transport, otherwise they would starve or die of thirst before they got anywhere near the actual plateau where most of the Uplanders lived.

Isobel, although always appreciating a challenge, wondered why there was this walk and tests on the way. Chloe had no clear answer for them. It had always been done this way. A

way for the trained Bowl landers to show their worth to the Uplanders. It was a rite of passage. But Gareth and Isobel were not sure what she meant by this. Gareth argued that it could not mean too much because the youngsters were accompanied by a guide. This person would no doubt see that no real harm came to the group. Chloe was not so sure about this. The walk had a dangerous reputation. She reminded them that she was not a full guide yet. There had been no communication to her from the Holder, indeed, he had told her she would get no message from him until they had reached Upland. Also, there would be no relaying through her of their circumstances. They were on their own, she confirmed to them.

Isobel taking all this discussion in and seeing that they were not short of laser weapon energy cartridges, began instructing them. They practised before they ate each evening. If the lasers were there for a reason, then they all needed to be able to use them. Gareth soon became comfortable with them; Chloe took a little longer to gain a measure of proficiency. Isobel did point out to them, however, that these lasers were merely training standard for beginners, they could damage a person but would not be fatal. It seemed to reinforce Gareth's opinion that it would not get too perilous for them. They left some scorch marks around their campsites but little else by way of smashed rocks.

The blue crystals were easy to see. They were to be found in the ground on the path or set into the rocks alongside. Gareth and Chloe soon realised that they could feel the presence of a crystal through their hand devices and they began to anticipate their appearance. This was a dubious exercise as they appeared, seemingly, at regular intervals by distance along the path. All three walkers had now got this distance well fixed in their minds. Occasionally a crystal was missed at first, being covered by small stones or obscured by other boulders. But they soon realised and retraced their steps until Chloe or Gareth detected the crystal. So, as the days went by, they remained confident and hopeful.

The girls, in less than a day, had become quite bored and walked with Gareth. Thus, ensuring that they each got on each other's nerves at times. Gareth had a store of fire rocks and their food was lasting well, but after a week he started to worry about the water supply. They had not come across any water to replenish their stock. He estimated that what they had, keeping to current usage, would barely last another week. There had to be a way of getting water as they travelled, it would be impossible to survive otherwise.

Each night they stopped at what seemed like natural campsites. Usually a matter of only feet away from the path, often inside a ring of stones, or in a natural hollow. Frequently they knew the place was right because there were signs of previous use. The remains of old fires being the most obvious. How many past groups, they were following in the footsteps of, they could only guess? Gareth began to search the areas around each place they stopped. He persuaded Chloe to help. Together they combed the area hoping to get some hint or better still a signal.

Gareth looked for a pattern in each campsite and the area surrounding it. He thought that the water must be beneath the surface and there must be the means to retrieve it. The whole land through which they trudged portrayed no indication of the presence of water. It had to be below and there had to be a connection with their devices. Then one night as he stared at the stars, so brilliant up here, it came to him. The women were asleep. He crept quietly away from the camp.

An hour later he returned carrying three full canteens of water and wearing a very satisfied smile. He had hoped to get back without them noticing, he planned to substitute the canteens and then wait for the surprise in the morning. But it did not happen like that. He edged quietly up to the camp and squeezed through a gap between two large boulders. The women were not there. His heart stopped. There was no sign of a disturbance. The fire was still

aglow. He could not see the lasers, something warned him against revealing his position. He stayed where he was, stepping back one pace.

He felt something poke into his back. He froze. Whatever it was, pressed harder and he flinched a bit. Then a laser bolt erupted at his feet and he jumped up in the air. Just a few inches, but up he went. Then he heard a laugh from the other side of the stones. Chloe appeared out of the dark pointing her laser at him. He glanced behind him; Isobel had lowered her laser. She pushed him through the gap, roughly. He was going to say something, but he could tell she was upset, the smile was fixed on her face.

"I found the water," he said hopefully. "Worked it out. Filled these canteens." He held them up in the light of the fire. She was not going to let him get away with it. He sat down by the fire. It was better because she had the habit of lashing out when annoyed like this. Then she told him exactly what she thought of him sneaking off into the night without telling them. How Chloe had woke up, found him missing and raised the alarm. How anxious and afraid they were that they could find no sign of him. No apparent struggle. No clues. They were worried that this was part of a test. Chloe admitted that she had been afraid. Isobel was so angry at him for not telling her what he was up to. He sat there, took it and said sorry. They blanked him for the rest of the night.

They kept it up for most of the next day. They watched him shuffling around every time they came across a crystal. Each time he eventually found the flatter stone that covered the waterhole, heaving it up to reveal, underneath, the rope system that allowed him to haul up a container of fresh water. He kept their stocks topped up as they went gloomily on. Chloe refused to see how he used his device in conjunction with each crystal to give him a direction to concentrate on. She sulkily ignored him. He knew, now, how uncertain they were about the situation they found themselves in and the walking was getting them down, the



changeless scenery depressing them. This was of course one of the tests, but they were not so keen to listen to him.

Then a feeling of unease descended on Gareth too. But it was formed by a new worry. Each campsite they passed, or stayed in, now had a common feature: there were scorch marks, produced by laser fire, they could be seen on the stones and boulders all around. Also, the ground, the areas by the fireplaces were scarred similarly. Gareth spent time examining each one. Finally, Isobel shook off her anger with him, realising he had that look about him again. He suggested that they start keeping watch at night, she was particularly impressed when he began walking with his laser at the ready. They expected an attack of some kind.

One night they had finished eating. Gareth had refilled their water holders. On his way back to the camp he sensed something. He thought something had passed by overhead, but he could see nothing. He rushed back to find Isobel standing still, listening intently and staring into the distance.

"You hear something?" she asked him quietly. Chloe was asleep.

"I felt something. Didn't see a thing though." He picked up his pack and reached in for the spare energy cartridges. He saw his side arm, checked it and put it in a pocket. Isobel indicated her own weapons ready by her pack. Suddenly Chloe woke, she sat up quickly.

"Something's wrong," she whispered.

"Yeah, we reckon," Isobel whispered back. "Get your weapon ready." Gareth could feel Isobel going into warrior mode. It was always reassuring. She told them what she wanted. They left their packs visible in the fire light. They drew the covers on each sleeping place. Gareth built the fire up strongly. Then they split up. Chloe and Isobel moved to one side hiding behind a low line of rocks about twenty yards from the outer edge of the camp. Gareth retired to a position forty yards to the other side. The direction from which Isobel

expected company lay at the third point of the triangle formed by their placements. They waited.

An hour passed. Gareth felt the tension building in him. He could not see Isobel and Chloe, but he could sense them, particularly Chloe; his device was affecting him. He felt more alert than ever before. Knowing about infrared they were trying to use the stones to mask their positions. Gareth doubted that whoever was out there would be tempted by the camp. They should be able to tell that no persons were in the camp, so, they should ignore it, skirting around the edge. Isobel had the only infrared sight on their side, if she picked them up, she would fire. Then if he was careful, he could watch for the return fire and aim accordingly.

A sound. From the right direction. Then Isobel fired a short blast.

Gareth started and looked quickly to where she had fired.

There was a shout that was quickly cut off, but no return fire.

Isobel fired again.

This time Gareth saw a figure slump against a rock at the edge of the camp. Then four lasers fired back at once. They raked Isobel's position. But she should have moved already. Then the lasers fired again, and the sleeping places were destroyed. He could see smoke coming from the materials and their packs.

He fired at the nearest laser to him. The glow of the burst allowed him to see his target more clearly and he fired again. His beam knocked the laser out of the person's hands. But he did not have time to enjoy his success. Lasers flashed at his position and he ducked under cover.

Then it struck him. The sound of their lasers wasn't right. It was different. Then parts of the rock he was sheltering behind flaked off and fell on his head. There was the smell of scorched rock, accompanied by bits of it being knocked off. Their lasers were more

powerful. They could do no more than hurt them or possibly stun them with their weapons. But what could their attacker's lasers do?

This was not a time to find out. He ran as fast as he could to another rock. The lasers flashed past him, ahead and behind. He dived for cover. A beam caught him as he dived and luckily only the material of his trouser leg was damaged. He could hear the now telltale sound of Isobel and Chloe's lasers. He crawled away from the rock in a direction at right angles to where he had dived in. The stronger lasers were ripping chunks off the rocks where the women had fired from. Gareth kept crawling and slowly turning so that he was moving back towards his first position. As he went, he watched the girls continue moving and firing and moving. The laser fire attracting a deadlier reply each time. He pulled his side arm out. It would be handy if he had his rifle now.

Now Isobel would know how useless their lasers were and she did have her rifle. The sensible thing to do would be to leave Chloe holed up somewhere that had already received heavy laser fire in the hope that they would think they had gone. If Isobel could get into a good position, she could hurt them with her rifle. He needed to get their attention, draw their fire. Two weaker lasers flashed away to his right again. Close together. Too close together he thought. Stronger lasers blasted back. Gareth leapt up and firing his laser with one hand he rushed towards his old placement. Before he ducked back behind the rock, he fired his gun once, hoping that Isobel would hear it amongst the furious volley of laser beams that tore at him.

He did not stop there though. He crawled quickly around the side of the rock and was almost at the next rock closer to their foes position when one spotted him, and a blast knocked his laser from his grip. He rolled, and the laser fire flicked at him, catching him one glancing hit on his shoulder. It hurt, and he could smell the burn, but there was no bleeding with these lasers. That was something to be grateful for.

He guessed Chloe was firing the two lasers, they screamed out their protest. Then he heard the crack of the rifle. Twisting carefully, he peered around the rock. A single laser fired at him and he pulled back. But he was smiling grimly as he crawled away again. The person that Isobel had hit originally with the laser, he was not slumping anymore, Gareth had noticed, he was laid flat out with a bullet wound in his head. There was no laser fire for a while. Gareth guessed that they were wondering what had happened to their comrade. Would they know about Bowl weapons? Would they have any fear, or respect for them? Gareth hoped that Chloe was moving.

But she had not moved, and she fired another salvo at their attackers. It drew a heavy response. All their three lasers fired, converging on her position. He heard Isobel's rifle firing rapidly. He could see the rock sheltering Chloe disintegrating. He jumped to his feet and shouting as loud as he could he stormed forward emptying his side arm in the general direction of the three lasers. He weaved in and out of the rocks, ducking and diving. Rolling to one side he had reached the edge of the camp. He lay flat behind a low stone while he reloaded.

This was not a good place, he realised. He tried to move but was immediately pinned down by the fire from two lasers. His protection was being blasted away in front of him. He was about to just risk it when Chloe opened fire again from a new, closer position. She must have hit one of them or unnerved them. There were shouts and a figure emerged from the rocks opposite. He fired at Chloe repeatedly. Gareth raised his head and aimed his side arm. But a laser blast hurled the gun from his hand, he yelled in pain. The standing figure turned towards him. Gareth felt his stomach tighten, while through his mind other similar situations flashed. He screwed his eyes up and then the sound of Isobel's rifle cracked out. The figure was hit three times in quick succession and Gareth saw the patches of blood appear on the chest as the figure was spun off its feet.

Chloe continued firing her lasers and Gareth rolled to safety. From behind another more substantial rock he gathered his breath and listened; there was no sound. Then Chloe started firing again. He risked raising his head. Immediately he was fired at. The laser beam scraped his hair and he fell backwards. There was one rifle shot. Then nothing. He just knew it was over. But he waited still, rubbing his hair gingerly. Chloe's voice came across, steady. "It's over. You got them Isobel."

Gareth heard the approach of Isobel. Then she was standing over him. Rifle held ready. She looked him over. "You alright?"

"Just a flesh wound, I think." He sat up.

"Chloe, come and see to Gareth. I'll just check our testers, if that's who they are."

"Partner." She eyed him almost suspiciously. "Yes?"

"They tried to kill us," she nodded in agreement. "See that they are dead."

"Understood."

She moved away cautiously, replaced almost at once with Chloe. She gave his wound a close look and said she would fetch what was left of their packs. A few minutes later she was tending his laser burn when a single shot rang out. She looked sharply at Gareth. He returned her gaze.

"Sounds like it's over now," Gareth said. Chloe nodded at him, but her look was not one of approval. Isobel came back and dumped four lasers on the ground beside them.

"Was that the kind of test you had in mind?" she asked Gareth.

"No. I'd say that was a bit over the top," he answered. "Don't you Chloe?"

"It does not seem right somehow." She began to tidy up the camp.

"You can say that again," Isobel called after her. She sat down by Gareth and punched him in his wounded shoulder.

"Ow!" he shouted.

*"Use it to predict where the next one should be"*

They remained on edge for the rest of the night. Their mood was not improved when the full scale of the damage wreaked by the lasers became apparent. Their food supplies were severely burnt out and their sleeping places reduced to one useful combination. Water supplies remained good. They swapped lasers with their assailants. The four bodies were dragged into the camp by Isobel. Gareth and Chloe examined them, however, they found nothing except evidence of Isobel's marksmanship. The four men who had 'tested' them had no objects on their persons apart from their weapons and clothes. None of them were recognisable to Chloe.

They decided that the men must have got to them by ship and it was probably out there somewhere, unless any others remaining from their team had flown away in it. They did not feel like searching for it in the dark. At first light they would see if they could find it. Gareth kept the fire going while Chloe put some food together. All three had expressed a desire for something to eat. As the night passed, they sat by the fire sipping water from their canteens, more powerful lasers at the ready.

Chloe agreed with Gareth that the device had somehow heightened her senses. She too had felt Gareth's presence, she thought. She imagined that he had managed to influence Isobel in some way. But he denied it.

"But you reacted in exactly the way Isobel said you would," Chloe looked disbelievingly at him. "You must have got something between you."

"No. Isobel did what I expected her to do," he told her, "and I did what she thought I might do because we have been in situations like that before." He remembered the memory flashes. "We always seem to know what the other's going to do."

"It's experience and knowing each other," Isobel cut in, "nothing more than that. We work well together." Chloe was not totally convinced.

"We're good," Isobel added. Gareth pondered that there were all kinds of training. The Uplanders did not have the monopoly on it. Just living in the Bowl was a training of a sort. It had plainly done them no harm during the night attack. He wondered again about this 'test'. It did seem to be ferocious and of a degree of danger beyond what he had expected. Had there been a real attempt to kill them or wound them badly? What would have happened if they had surrendered? Well, faced with an assault like that, he and Isobel would never hesitate. They had not survived the rough side of Bowl life without developing certain abilities. He found it hard to believe that the deaths of four people were an accepted outcome of this test. It was a bit drastic. But perhaps that was what it would be like in Upland, a more cavalier attitude to life. Somehow, he found this hard to believe too. The Uplanders would have a more cavalier attitude to Bowl landers' lives, but not their own. After running things to-and-fro in his mind, he suggested to the women that something was wrong here. They should stay on alert and treat anyone they met with caution. This was unlikely to be over. They had come to the same conclusion. Gareth felt that Chloe had a sterner core to her now. She's been blooded he thought. Isobel was just bloody good, thankfully.

At dawn they left the camp and headed out in single file, lasers at the ready. Isobel on point, Chloe next, Gareth at the rear carrying what was left of their gear. Half a mile away they found the ship and the answer to one question: it had been left open. There was no one else to be seen. Isobel checked it out. Soon they were flying low over the desolate terrain; it had enough fuel to last a day's flying she calculated. They had to pick their way as they were still trying to follow the blue crystals. Gareth had searched the ship and found only what must have been emergency rations.

He suggested that there must be maps of some kind in the ship's systems. Chloe and he soon found some schematics. "This is what we're looking for." He stabbed at a line on the screen. "Check it out Chloe, I bet that shows the position of the crystals." She worked through the system and announced he was right. The information tied in with where they had come from.

"Use it to predict where the next one should be," he ordered her.

"Yes sir!" she mocked him gently. He gave her a hurt smile. She soon had the results. They checked the next three crystals, to be on the safe side. Gareth topped up their water. Then they left the low-level flying and Isobel flew them directly to where the crystals stopped according to the ship's data. As they were on their way the ship received a communication from Upland, they assumed. They wanted to know their status. A brief discussion followed between them. They decided to answer only that everything was fine. Isobel increased their speed and they ignored further attempts to contact them.

By evening they were circling the location of the last crystal. Their eyes and the ship's sensors could find no sign of people. They landed. Taking a great deal of care, they left the ship and found cover nearby. Nothing happened. They scouted around the site but found only a campsite, very recently used too.

"There must be some other form of transport from here on." Gareth was sure. "This is the last leg of the journey, use your device Chloe, see if you can get anything."

Isobel scrambled up on to a large boulder and kept watch. She also kept an eye on her two companions scurrying about beneath her. They followed a line from the crystal towards the rock she was sat on. Twenty yards from her Gareth halted and bent over a stone, it seemed flatter than the rest. Gareth did that thing with his hand device. He shouted for Chloe to join him. She used her hand similarly. Isobel could tell from their expressions that it had not worked. She glanced around slowly. Nothing in this lifeless land.



Gareth and Chloe were talking, then together they waved their hands over the slab. It had worked. They looked up at Isobel eyes alight; very pleased with themselves she thought. Gareth crouched down and pressed something. There was a sound like a heavy clang and the area between them and Isobel gave way, an opening appeared, and Isobel slid off the rock. Gareth picked up the pack and led the way down the now visible steps.

As they descended Chloe tried her device. Lights came on. About thirty yards under the surface they came to a platform. Beside the platform a carriage of some kind hovered. It looked like it travelled in a tunnel that disappeared from their sight. They stood eyeing it for a while. The huge slab of stone closed above them. Lights came on inside the floating compartment. Wasting no more time they entered. Isobel sat at the front, laser in hand, staring ahead, Chloe sat behind her. At the back Gareth found what must be the control panel. He put the pack on the seat in front of him, his laser he leant against the side.

Passing his hand over the panel he thought, 'controls'. The panel lit up; there were symbols and coloured lights. He guessed correctly and shut the doors to the compartment. Concentrating in the way he had been taught he held his hand over the panel.

'Forwards', he thought. Lights on his device flashed and lights on the panel answered. The compartment started to move off.

"Hang on, here we go," he called out. They made no reply. They just stared ahead.

*"Nonsense!" "Ridiculous!" "What is all this?"*

The journey lasted many hours. It was impossible to tell how fast the transport system went. In all the journey there were only occasional lights and signs on the walls that surrounded the compartment - Gareth felt they were moving very fast. After about twenty minutes he sat down in a seat and, despite himself, fell asleep. He slept for a couple of hours. Chloe woke him and together the three of them consumed the last of the undamaged food. They sipped the water and spoke little, Isobel stayed at the front while Chloe dozed in the middle. He experimented with his device, manipulating the control panel and the subsequent movement of the object they travelled in - until they told him to leave it alone. An attempt was made to contact them again, but they completely ignored it. Chloe decided one display was an indication of where they were in relation to the whole journey; they were just past halfway. There was nothing to do but sit it out.

Finally, they noticed that the compartment was slowing down, it did this gradually. Before it came to a halt, they were ready. Sitting low in the seats and lasers levelled they were poised for anything; Chloe had moved closer to Isobel. The compartment, now at walking pace, emerged into a large chamber, brightly lit from high ceilings, a space of about fifty yards by a hundred could be seen from the windows, rectangular. They pulled up on one of the shorter sides. At the far end Gareth could see many tunnels, lit up, disappearing in different directions. There seemed to be rooms along the sides. The space before them had no objects on it, however, a group of people were assembled, obviously waiting for them. Gareth scanned the people. They did not appear to be carrying any weapons. He looked down the sides again. It was impossible to tell what was in there. He looked up at the ceiling. There were objects in the ceiling; lights flashed, and things moved, turning around.

Clearly these were monitors relaying what happened here. Gareth suspected that in amongst them would be weapons.

The three of them did not move. They remained crouching behind the seats, lasers pointing out at the people waiting outside. The faces on the people, a mixture of sexes and ages, changed from smiles to curious doubt to worried uncertainty. Gareth noted that when the compartment stopped the people were forming a bunch. Now, at the sight of these people with lasers levelled, the bunch was spreading out, forming a line.

"Welcome to Upland," a voice suddenly came from a speaker inside the compartment. All three of them visibly jumped. A few of the people outside smiled. "Please leave the Shute." The loudspeaker voice added. They ignored it. The greeting was repeated but they ignored it once more. Two of the people from the group moved closer to the Shute and talked quickly to each other. Then the doors opened, Isobel shot a scowl at Gareth who shook his head in denial. The two people outside came slowly nearer to them. But they stopped immediately they saw the man and woman move quickly to take up positions either side of the opened doors. They were pointing the lasers at them. The two Uplanders consulted briefly.

"We have been expecting you," the woman spoke. "It is Chloe, Isobel and Gareth, yes?" She spoke calmly. "We did not expect you to arrive from the journey this soon, but we see you are here." Gareth noticed that she and her male companion were careful to keep their hands in front of them. They smiled but there was a wariness about them. It was matched by Gareth and Isobel continuously looking about them. The nervousness spread to the other people outside.

"Welcome," the woman repeated, "this is Upland, all change please."

Humour.

She kept smiling encouragingly. The man beside her wore a bemused smile. This was quite extraordinary. Gareth and Isobel maintained their posture and said nothing.

"Is this another test?" Chloe asked from inside.

"No! No!" the woman shook her head vigorously, the man joined in. Behind them a light laughter was heard. "No. The tests are all over. As soon as you entered the Shute and set off you had finished all the tests." She now smiled more in amusement.

"You see we would not want to spoil our arrival by shooting a few of you dead before we realised this was not a test," Gareth spoke now in explanation. A ripple of laughter broke from the line behind.

"Kill us?" the man spoke. "We would not want that, certainly. But you would find it hard with those lasers. Were you not given them at the Knuckle before you set out? They can at worst stun." Knowing smiles outside. A little condescension creeping in Gareth thought.

"That is true," Gareth replied, "those lasers did just that. These lasers, however, we took off some people who attacked us. They are different, shall we say." The man kept smiling.

A voice from behind, "the attackers use the same lasers. What is this nonsense?" she scoffed. Murmurs of exasperation and impatience. Gareth fixed the man and woman in front of him with his eyes.

"We were attacked with these lasers, fearing for our lives, we killed the attackers. Four of them."

"Nonsense!" "Ridiculous!" "What is all this?"

But the man and woman looked into Gareth's eyes, they could see he meant it, they were wondering what this meant when Isobel joined in.

"I'll just try this on that!" she shouted and fired the laser at one of the ceiling objects. The sound of the laser was loud in the hall. The flash made the people outside jump. They looked up to see one of the surveillance boxes completely destroyed, smoke and fingers of flame accompanied the ruined part as it fell to the ground. The people instinctively jumped out of the way.

"Now, would anyone else like to see if this is the normal laser." Isobel had moved out of the compartment. She pointed the laser directly at the line of people.

"Do you usually greet newcomers with this type of laser?" with that she aimed it above their heads and blew out another unit further down the hall. This time the people shouted out in alarm and cowered, raising their arms in front of them. People had gathered at the entrances to the tunnels beyond. The woman looked incredulously at the man beside her, he shrugged and shook his head.

"As I said," Gareth waited for them to face him. He had lowered his laser and had stepped from the Shute. Chloe stood in the doorway behind him. "We left four of your people back there. I assure you; they are quite dead." They believed him; he could see. "I do hope something has gone wrong and this was not supposed to happen." It was his turn to smile with a faint air of derision.

"No. Something has gone wrong." The woman agreed. "This has never happened before. An investigation will have to be carried out."

"You can start with this," Gareth handed the laser to the man who immediately began inspecting it.

"I am very sorry. The Leader and the Holder will be told. We will find out what happened." The man showed her something to do with the laser. They gave each other a grim look. "At the most the test is meant to see if there is a readiness to fight, to see how people, respond to being fired at for real, and being hit. Sometimes they have got a bit out of hand and people have been knocked out, but the guide is meant to stop things getting that way. Of course, you had no guide. You would not know any different." She paused and took the laser from Chloe. "I think I would have been concerned if someone was firing one of these at me."

"You can say that again," Chloe replayed their grim face.

Out of one of the tunnels a group of men and women came running. They crossed the space, lasers in hand.

"What's the problem here?" the woman in the front called out.

"Isobel. Isobel, leave it. Give them the laser," Gareth told her. To the woman he urgently said, "Care is needed. My partner is not one to forgive easily." The woman understood. She walked towards the other woman, "Captain, no need for the lasers. There is a problem but not here." She stopped by Isobel and held her hand out. Isobel gave her the laser. "This is what has occurred, Captain. Someone is going to have to fly out to the wasteland immediately."

Gareth looked at Chloe in mock disbelief when Isobel handed over the weapon with no complaint, "I thought she would at least shoot one of them," he joked.

"Yeah," Chloe joined in, "perhaps she's tired, or something." The man looked at them suspiciously. Isobel was back with them. Gareth could see the man eyeing Isobel warily.

"Don't worry, she's on our side," he informed him. The man gave him a wan smile before going to join the others.

"Well, she's on our side anyway," he emphasised to Chloe. She smiled.

The three travellers now watched the discussions taking place in the hall. There was much gesticulating and talking into hand-held communicators. The surveillance cameras above were trained on them always. At one point the woman Captain fired one of the lasers to see for herself.

Chloe bowed her head. Isobel glanced at her, "you OK?"

Chloe said nothing but put a hand to her temple.

"Getting something?" Gareth asked. She looked up.

"It's the Holder. Wants to know what has happened. Sending him our experiences." She had a faraway look for a few seconds. "Right, got that." She said to herself. "He does not seem too unhappy. Said he knew we were alright; the devices."

"Oh great!" Isobel cut in, "what about me?"

"He says we are to go to the Leader," Chloe carried on, "nowhere else."

"Looks like they've sorted themselves out," Gareth announced. The first woman and the Captain were coming over to them. The other people disappeared into the rooms at the side. The guards who had arrived with the Captain were moving towards the tunnels. The small crowd that had gathered there had drifted away.

"The Captain, here, will take you to the Leader," the woman informed them. She said no more and went to inspect the Shute. They picked up what was left of their possessions including the rifle and side arms. The Captain raised an eyebrow, but she just said, "follow me."

She led them across the hall and into one of the tunnels. A few remaining people watched them curiously, Gareth smiled pleasantly. Chloe was thoughtful; had they got the entire message from the Holder, he wondered. Isobel appeared a little surly, always best to start the way you mean to go on.

Soon they were on a Shute, very similar to the one they arrived on except smaller. They were accompanied or guarded by the Captain and one of her people. The journey lasted minutes - they did not talk. Leaving the Shute, they emerged into a small chamber, there was nobody waiting for them. The Captain pointed to a door, "The lift will take you to the Leader." She watched them enter the lift and then rejoined her comrade.

In the lift Gareth experienced some trepidation, Chloe was nervous, but Isobel was ready, she had her hand on her side arm in her waistband. The lift stopped. The door slid open.

They paused for a fraction of a second, then they walked out. They were in an outer office.

A woman jumped up and came around a large table to greet them.

"Hello, my name is Kim, I am the Leader's assistant." She seemed genuinely happy to see them. "This is the Leader's personal guard." A man sat in a seat in one corner. He smiled and raised his hand in welcome. He did not have any weapons at hand.

"Go straight through," Kim opened the door for them, "we have been looking forward to meeting you." They walked into a larger room. A figure was standing at the window, he turned and came into the light, a stooping misshapen man who stared at them with smiling, blazing eyes.

"Do come in. I am the Leader" his voice was warm and had an honest quality Gareth thought. "An eventful journey, I understand," he winked at Isobel. She smiled back in surprise; Gareth could see her relaxing.

"So good to see you again, Chloe." The girl blushed a greeting.

"I expect you are hungry, yes? We had some food brought in." He indicated the spread to one side of the room. Their reaction made him laugh. Assistant Kim was already handing them plates.

"It is hungry work travelling in the great wasteland," she smiled again.



*"Now forgive my joke everybody..."*

That first night in Upland was a pleasant one. They ate and drank. The food was little different to Bowl land food; as at the Knuckle. Some of the drinks were different. But there was nothing that they did not like. The Leader and his assistant joined them. Kim took some food out to the guard. They were obviously tired by the end. Gareth and Chloe did little to hide their fatigue, both had allowed themselves to relax. Even Isobel was finding it hard to hide her tiredness, although her suspicions had not been completely assuaged.

Once they were finished eating, they were taken out of the Leader's office and led by Kim to their rooms. These were down one level from the Leader's office. Kim operated a hidden door in the outer office that led them to their quarters. A room for each of them, a window, which she assured them, gave a good view of this 'hole' in the daylight, a list of instructions for the operation of various gadgets was provided in case they had trouble. She left them to it. They waited for her to go then had a brief discussion together before they retired.

In the morning they met outside their rooms. An enjoyable night of sleep had been achieved and they felt rested. Kim was in the outer office. She gave them directions and a few minutes later they were being served a breakfast along with other people who worked in the Leader's offices. They realised that this was an administrative centre. They were on the ground level of this hole. From their table they could see the cliffs and the offices and rooms set into them. The ground in the middle was crisscrossed by Shutes and paths, and roads. There was quite a lot of traffic of various kinds. No buildings could be seen on the mini-plain.

During the meal they found themselves the object of much attention from their fellow diners. Gareth caught scraps of conversation. The news of their journey and the killings was

common knowledge. Gareth and Chloe smiled at everybody. They asked the person bringing the food many questions about the Upland. Mostly trying to find out what people did and how they were expected to behave. After a while Isobel settled on a half-squint face. Gareth wondered if this was deterring other Uplanders from talking to them, or whether their previous exploits were a factor.

When they had finished, they chose to linger in the area observing the people and seeing what went on. They strolled out into the space a short way and were watching the traffic in the skies with much interest when a messenger arrived. It was one of those anibot type machines. But this was just the basic machine; there was no attempt to surround the workings with an animal cover. It seemed to suddenly be there, hovering above them. A voice came out of it. "Can you please return to the Leader's office." It was assistant Kim. They made their way quickly back.

She ushered them through once more. The Leader sat at his desk.

"Well rested I hope?" he cast his eyes on them in turn. "Had a look round too. Good." He beckoned them to sit by the desk.

"All the reports are now in," he began. "They do confirm what you said. A most unfortunate incident. Most unfortunate for those men who attacked you so violently." He winked at Isobel again. "They miscalculated your skills and bravery." Gareth was not sure. But he thought he could detect the slightest hint of a blush from Isobel. "We discovered that they were not one of the usual teams employed on this duty. They had only recently returned from work on the moon project." He smiled again. "Of course, this means little to you, now. More of that later in your stay. But it is not your fault, this business. People do not remember but this kind of thing has happened before. A long time ago, hundreds of years ago, when we first started the journey as a final test to joining Upland."

"Were you around then, Leader?" Chloe asked breathily. Gareth gave her a quick glance. She was obviously in awe of the old man. A result of her prolonged training at the Knuckle he expected. The Leader was laughing richly.

"No, no, no. I am old Chloe; but not that old." He shook his head and his broken frame quivered. His eyes were brighter than ever. Gareth thought about the fact that this man, and the Holder were the only people they had met on their travels who could really laugh. A proper 'no care in the world' belly laugh that made their shoulders heave and their eyes shine; some people came close, at the Knuckle, he wondered if they would find anyone else here in Upland who could. Kim tried but there seemed to be something holding her back, her laugh started and ended in her face.

"How old are you?" Gareth asked. It seemed the right time to ask. He caught the looks exchanged quickly between Kim and the Leader. Her face had a fixed expression. It was like the face criminals put on when they did not want to give anything away. Chloe was interested to know; Isobel had a curious look to her as she appraised the old man.

"How old do you think I am, Gareth?" a sharp intake from Kim at this, Gareth saw her give the old man a sharp look.

"You'll have to excuse my assistant," he laughed. "But she is one of those people who believe we should not tell you our ages."

"Why?" Gareth enquired.

"We will leave that for the moment. Come on, how old am I? A guess? Chloe? Isobel?"

"It is said at the Knuckle that people live long in Upland," Chloe offered.

"About seventy to eighty, I'd say." Isobel did not hesitate. The Leader turned to Gareth.

"I think you could be nearer a hundred," he decided. The Leader turned to his assistant. She seemed to be urging him with her eyes not to tell.

"Nearer two hundred would be more accurate," he finally admitted. Chloe's mouth fell open, Isobel quietly sneered, Assistant Kim looked down in despair. Gareth held the old man's eyes for a short while. Then he examined the areas where you could usually get an idea of age from: the neck, back of hands, face. From his experience the man was old. He appeared like a very old Bowl lander. But, was he as old as he suggested? But this was the Upland. Who knows what could be the case here? He believed him.

"My assistant here is actually seventy."

"Really! That is quite enough!" she scolded him. The Leader laughed aloud, and Gareth joined in. Kim frowned at him, Isobel was quite incredulous, and Chloe did not know what to think; the Leader was old, but Kim?

"I am sorry Kim. I do apologise," he was serious, if still smiling. "You see women are conscious of their age in Upland just as they are down below," he said to Gareth.

"Now forgive my joke everybody, let us look at what is to be done." He called them to business. Assistant Kim immediately got up and from the side brought each of them a hand-held computer. They looked just like the ones the Knuckle people used. She sat back in her seat and taking hold of her own machine, she started to tap away with her fingers.

"If you will view your screens please," the Leader instructed them. "We have prepared an itinerary for each of you."

"We're going on another journey?" Gareth interrupted, sounding disappointed.

"No, indeed. Not like the journey here," he stressed. "Rather it is a list of places for you to visit each day of your stay. A list of things to do. I would expect you to return to your rooms here each night. I can see no need for you to stay anywhere else."

"It would be safer for us here, no doubt," Isobel contributed. The Leader looked at her and smiled slowly. "I must be honest and say I am not sure. The nature of the attack on you has cast doubt on your safety. It is very likely that you will be safest here." He opened his

hands. "However, I cannot guarantee your safety at all, anywhere in Upland." He let that information sink in, then added, "I would say, though, that I think any further attempts to harm you are very unlikely."

Isobel and Chloe were confused. Were they in danger, or not?

"Perhaps we should return to the Knuckle," Isobel suggested, looking at Gareth, and implying the Bowl land and home. Gareth looked to Chloe.

"I'm staying," she was adamant. "I've been trained for this and I've been looking forward to it for years." The Leader smiled, understanding.

"Yes, well I did not come here for one night. I want to see what you've got," Gareth said to the Leader. But he was looking at his partner. She gave him one of her 'do you know what you are doing?' looks. He shrugged. They consulted the machines in their hands.

"Good." The Leader was happy. He winked at his assistant this time.

"We think you will find many things of interest to you," Kim began, "paying careful attention to Isobel. She then detailed what was going to happen today and outlined the next few days. There were times when they would be together; but much of the time they would be on their own. Gareth felt a slight doubt enter his mind. He looked at the old man opposite. As with the Holder, he sensed the man knew what he was thinking. The Leader nodded encouragingly at him.

"I have many questions now," Gareth thought he spoke. It seemed for an instant that they were the only ones there.

"I expect many more," the Leader responded.

"Did you say something?" Chloe asked him. He looked at her funny. Snatching a glance across the table, the Leader was busy looking at his computer. Gareth saw that Isobel was also preoccupied with her machine.

"Ah, no, Chloe." He gave his attention to the screen before him. Chloe watched him curiously, then looked over at the Leader. He raised his head and a big smile formed on his old face.

*"So, Kim, where's all the food?"*

They spent that first day together. Assistant Kim was their guide. She gave them a whirlwind tour of Upland. It was virtually non-stop - a 'here it is, there it was' type tour. They travelled entirely by Shute, getting out occasionally, to stretch their legs more than to see something in more detail. It was an itinerary designed to allow them to understand the extent of Upland. Also, they were able to glimpse the range of activities being pursued by the Uplanders.

They saw many of the living areas, passing through places at the edges of Upland where few people lived and the deep valleys where large groups of people settled. These valleys were like gouged ruts as opposed to the more common holes where most of the activities were performed. As they travelled, they saw many of the Upland people but had little opportunity to talk to any of them, at this time. Mostly, people lived in habitation cut into the sides of the holes and valleys; the buildings in the open were where the work was done.

There were what must have been factories, Gareth thought, along with assembly plants, material processing, testing and quality control - lots of transport links devoted solely to the industrial traffic. Above them whenever they passed into the open air, they could see constant air traffic: carrying people and goods to all areas of Upland. They saw research facilities full of scientists and technologists. Occasionally they came across areas where, Kim informed them, they were not allowed to enter. Guards were in evidence. Otherwise there was a marked absence of uniforms. There were guards at the main crossroads and meeting places, but they were few in number.

They were all slightly shocked when they passed through the food processing region. Gareth had noted the complete absence of both animals and plant life so far in Upland, just

some green grassy mossy type of growth sometimes seen in the middle of the larger open spaces. So, when Kim said that they would next pass through the food processing region, he expected an explosion of life, and colour. The Shute came into the daylight at the top of a steep-sided valley. Below them was running water; very rarely seen in Upland on the surface. The Shute followed the course of this narrow gorge until suddenly they emerged into easily the biggest open space they had yet seen in Upland. The water fed into a large lake around which lay a huge plain. Dotted about in this plain were many large tanks, each tank was fed with water from the lake. Many channels led away from the lakeside, but not all found their way to the tanks, some seemed to dive into the ground and disappear. Each tank was also serviced by various Shutes and surface connections, roadways that looked busy. Isobel pointed out a rocket port too.

They got out at the larger than normal station on the passenger Shute system. Kim would not let them go far. They surveyed the food processing region for a while and Kim suggested they eat some of the food they had brought with them. Gareth finally voiced the question they were all wondering.

"So, Kim, where's all the food?" he asked. "I can't see the plants and animals. Don't tell me you keep them in those great tanks?" it was only a half laugh that followed.

"Oh, no!" Kim answered. "There are no animals in Upland at all, the altitude is difficult for them." They had experienced problems with the altitude since their arrival. The Leader had told them it might take a week or more for them to acclimatise; Gareth was suffering the most. Chloe was largely unaffected having spent most of her life at the Knuckle and Isobel was coping admirably. That was the verdict of the medical person who examined them before they set off that morning.

"So, no animals." Gareth repeated. "None at all?"



"None. No animals in Upland." Kim confirmed again. "All the animals were put into the Bowl at the beginning. None have ever found their way up here. Well, none of the bigger ones. Very occasionally the tiny ones, insects and the like, can be blown over the rim and end up here, but they do not live long or are detected, captured and returned to down below." She had made a few references to 'the beginning' already, however, she would not be drawn into saying more about it.

"So, what about the plants then?" Gareth once more.

"Only this grassy like stuff can grow." She indicated some of it close to where they stood. Isobel wandered over to have a closer look at some of it. Kim was vague concerning the plant and Gareth realised she knew little about it. He pressed on.

"So, where do you get your food from?" he insisted. "You don't steal it from the Bowl, surely?" he joked.

"Oh, no, no. Certainly not." Kim reacted. "That would involve too much interference in the Bowl. That would never be allowed, it would greatly affect the simulations." Another question for later: simulations. "Our food is manufactured in those tanks. Everything we need, be it food or drink, is made in its most basic form inside those tanks by many different types of algae, bacteria and other microorganisms." She could see a look of dismay on the faces of Isobel and Gareth, Chloe knew much of this. "Do not worry, it is perfectly alright. Nothing can cause you harm in the process." They did not seem convinced. Isobel was eyeing her food suspiciously. Gareth was examining his with more scientific interest.

"It is the way we have always done things in Upland," Kim continued. "The elemental constituents of all food are brought here, and the conditions are set in the tanks. Add water and any nutrients for the microformers, as we call, them, then they do the rest." She smiled hopefully at them. "You have been eating it with no problem since you arrived."

"But it does not come out of the tanks looking like this, does it?" Gareth asked.

"No, the food base is made into what we recognise as our food by the human transformers. They are working in units inside the walls of this valley."

"So, where do the original ingredients come from?" Gareth was not finished.

"Within the Upland area, at different levels below ground, there can be found every element known to us on planets. There are many years of supplies still left. Some material is brought from space." She indicated with a finger pointed up.

"What about these microorganisms, do they come from Upland?"

"No, they came with us from ...ah... They have been with us from the beginning." She smiled hoping he would not pursue the questions. Gareth could see she had had enough for now.

"Well, they must be working overtime, those bugs," he said, and he finished eating his food. Isobel had done the same.

"They are not as busy as they have been in the past," Kim led them back to the Shute. She set the controls and sat back. The Shute set off on the next stage of their tour. "They do say that once you have tasted the food in the Bowl our food is never quite the same." A hint of melancholy had slipped into her voice, Isobel and Gareth looked at each other and slowly smiled.

"You know I never noticed any difference 'til you said," Isobel confided. "Can't say I can now."

They passed through a few quieter places where it did not seem much was happening. Recreational areas for moon project workers was all that Kim would say. Next, they stopped and watched a rocket launch, a passenger rocket, which interested Isobel more. Kim announced that the next stop, a half hour from now, would be the space port. They would be getting out again.

The space port was the second biggest enclosure they had seen. It was split into two areas. One was clearly military in nature; they did not go there. But the ships landing and taking off could easily be seen from the civil side of the space port. Isobel and Gareth noted that these ships had what must have been weapons of some kind. There were various ship sizes with some very large which Kim would only say had missions off-world. The civilian and military sides shared one thing, the regular launches to the moon. This was the busiest place they had seen. The three of them were sat in a restaurant. Kim had left them alone while she chatted to the local administrator on another table.

"I think she's tired of showing us around," Isobel stated bluntly.

"No. I wouldn't say that," Chloe disagreed. "It must be quite difficult for her to show people like us around the Upland. It's so different to the Bowl and the Knuckle."

"You mean 'thickie' Bowl landers like us," Isobel snorted. "I hope we're not slowing you down, you, being a whiz kid and all." Chloe, now being used to Isobel, replied, "That's OK. You're not slowing me down much. I'm new around here too." Gareth laughed at her sarcastic tone. They poked their tongues out at each other playfully. But he was not going to get off either.

"Of course, it might help if we didn't have someone asking questions all the time." Isobel kicked Gareth under the table.

"Ow! Watch it! Easily bored." He rubbed his leg. Chloe was laughing and then mimicked Gareth's questioning. She was good; they all burst out laughing. The sound attracted some looks from the other people sat around them. It seemed to be unusual, such noisy fun. Gareth was aware they were being talked about. He could see Kim and she was smiling. The official said something to a person on the table next to them. Her eyes widened and looking at the three of them, she nodded her head. She told her companion and she

leaned over to a neighbouring table, and so on. It was not long before they were known to everybody there.

"Don't look now kids, but we're the centre of attention." He whispered. Naturally, they looked. Gareth smiled at everyone, as usual, Chloe joined him, Isobel tried. It was quite a good effort for her. Gareth had noticed that the Uplanders at the space port were a bit different. They seemed more purposeful in their manner: the way they walked, talked, and the way they held your eye. Even the person serving them had more of an attitude. Not awkward or difficult, just a way about them that suggested that there were things to do and they were going to get on and do them. He could tell Isobel felt more at home here, she could sense the mood. Chloe was always interested, she looked at everyone who passed as if she was keeping an eye out for someone. It was not long before some people approached them.

Two men and a woman sat down with them. They looked about Isobel's age so that probably meant they were twice his age, Gareth thought. He glanced at Kim. She was asking who these people were. Her administrator friend informed her. She nodded in recognition. While the Uplanders stayed at their table she did not interfere but kept an eye on them. The newcomers introduced themselves. They had all been spies (watchers they called it) in the Bowl lands and had also been guides on the journey. One of the men and the woman were now working on the moon project. They would not say what. The other man said he worked for the military and was normally based on another planet. In answer to Gareth's question he would only say that it was not in this system.

One of the men had worked for a while at the Knuckle and he talked mainly to Chloe about the characters working there. There was happy reminiscences and laughter. The other two were keen to know all about the events of their journey. They admitted to knowing the team that attacked them. Gareth wondered if there would be trouble, but they showed no anger at them for the killing, just surprise that the team had been used for the 'attack' job and

that they had been killed. Isobel became the focus of their interest as she recounted the whole of their journey (they had insisted) from the Knuckle to the reception hall. People at other tables nearby leaned closer, some people got up and moved closer to them. A silence descended while Isobel told their story.

Gareth found himself rather superfluous, he answered the odd question that was asked of him and offered a few nods of agreement when needed., instead he sat back and studied the people surrounding him. There was the usual interest in other people's misfortunes and good fortune. The news had to be corroborated and perhaps their own slant put on it. Physically these Uplanders appeared no different to the people of the Bowl. Except for more uniformity of physique. He might be the tallest person in the room he judged, but only just, a matter of inches. The women were shorter by just a few inches to the men, but each sex was consistent within their range. He could see no very tall men or any very short women; Isobel was easily the shortest person they had seen yet while Chloe fitted into the Uplander woman norm. Gareth looked out the windows and could see no difference in the people passing by.

There were some polite questions about aspects of the Bowl land but mainly they wanted to know all about the deaths. Gareth was only asked by one person what he had been doing at the foot of the Rim in the first place? Why he had wanted to try to get to Upland? Gareth played down their interest and tried to blame their progress on blind luck. The woman stared at him and told him that luck was a random variable that she paid little attention to, then she disappeared into the slight crowd that had developed. Gareth was not sure what she meant. He decided eventually that she did not believe in luck.

He was pleased to see Isobel enjoying the limelight. He knew from the looks she was being given by some of the Uplanders, that they were trying to reconcile the story being told, with this smaller but solidly built woman narrating it. Isobel rather proudly showed them her side arm and let them handle it. The majority of the Uplanders who had never been to the

Bowl were amazed, if not confused, that it could cause such damage. The ex-spies smiled wryly with Gareth and Isobel.

Eventually the scene broke up. They were congratulated on their bravery, resourcefulness and sense. The Uplanders went about their business, Assistant Kim returned to them. Soon they were back in the Shute. Time had run out and Kim directed the Shute to return to the Leader's administrative centre. Within an hour they stepped off the Shute and Kim left them to report to the Leader. They went back to their rooms and spent some time showering and resting.

*"That will stir up a few people."*

The following days they were split up. Each morning they had breakfast together with assistant Kim who gave them the details of the day ahead, then someone came to pick them up and they left to find out more about Upland. In the evening they met up again and, usually, had their evening meal with Kim and the Leader. The personal guard was always present. They asked many questions, but rarely were they all answered.

Isobel was given more experience in operating the machines and technical systems of Upland: she was exposed to more flight training. This was at the express order of the Leader. In private, reports were produced on all three of them. The Leader learnt that Isobel had a natural propensity for flying. She quickly learnt how to handle all types of craft and her instructors confirmed the opinions of the Knuckle personnel. She exhibited the highest capability yet found among Bowl born students, easily outstripping those born at the Knuckle or brought there at an early age. Her hunger for knowledge and ability to learn quickly from mistakes was noted. Her sometimes testy character, in turn, provided a challenge for her instructors who were accustomed to younger, more malleable cadets. However, her performance was still below any recorded for Upland born students; a fact that was dwelt on by the Councillors - the Leader's secret tapes revealed their analysis. However, they failed to see the significance of the data being collected on Isobel. Even if she was a little special in her natural abilities, the trend was showing an increase in performance levels from Bowl people. They were developing quicker than the people of Upland could see fit to acknowledge.

The highlight for Isobel was a trip around the planet. It was not in one of the surface craft as Gareth at first assumed. She had been aboard a routine orbital maintenance flight. Only a

passenger and at no time taking any active role; she just went along for the ride. That evening there was little room for any other topic of conversation. Isobel was effusive and unstoppable. Every detail of her day was related, Gareth was surprised to see her so excited, this had been even better than shooting up the bad guys. She told of the launch from the space port, the ride into orbit, and she tried to explain the feeling of weightlessness - even admitted to being space sick. Her descriptions of their planet from space impressed them with their lyrical quality. The Leader observed Gareth's obvious happiness at his friend's joy, a slight watering of the eye was evident. The others were also transfixed by her account of every minute facet of the operation. They were only servicing and replacing satellites, but Isobel made it sound like the greatest job you could ever hope to do. When she expressed her desire to go on a spacewalk the Leader stepped in and gently put a brake on that ambition. Secretly he very much doubted she would be around long enough to achieve it.

Chloe told them how she had met friends who had preceded her to Upland. She had joined them in some classes while for others she seemed to be on her own. She was learning in more detail about Upland and the systems that allowed it to function. One day she returned with questions for Isobel and Gareth; she had started Bowl land studies. It was clear that she would have to be comfortable with all aspects of Upland life before she underwent the extensive training required of a spy/watcher. It was also clear from what she said that her original precocity had been well founded. The Leader implied she was making immediate strides; there was great potential. The decision to give her an early implant was justified. But, Isobel and Gareth soon realised that something else was happening that Chloe would not talk about. She said less when the three of them were alone.

The first day Gareth was in the hands of a senior technician. The man was a sprightly hundred-year-old and he did not understand Gareth's quips about his age. He was very enthusiastic and determined to show their unusual guest just what exactly powered the



Upland. During the day Gareth got answers from the man on many technical points. But he got no further with the key questions. He did learn something of interest. The man claimed to be one of the youngest Uplanders, "Not including the 'Knucklites' of course." "Of course." Gareth echoed. In a quiet moment on the tour Gareth asked, "If you are only a hundred, I assume your parents are still alive?" the man, for an instance, lost his veneer. His face contorted briefly, then his control was back. "In a manner of speaking they are," was all he would say. Then he launched into a lengthy description of nuclear fusion.

What Gareth saw on that first day was remarkable. It was a long tour. They first took a Shute to the top of the Upland plateau and Gareth was introduced to solar power. On the ground all around were many solar panels, as he learnt to call them. This particular array was providing power for the Leader's administrative centre. It was explained that near every habitation in Upland, clusters of these panels could be found. They provided the primary power for living quarters and each habitation had what Gareth understood as batteries in which electrical energy was stored as a back-up, or for emergencies.

"Do you get many cloudy days up here?" Gareth asked. The man grinned, "We number them per decade."

They next flew to an area close to the food processing plants; the man flew them in a small flying machine. Throughout the day they were accompanied by a guard who reported to the Leader's personal guard at the end of the day. It was curious. Gareth had a guard with him, but the women did not.

On leaving the ship they descended in a Shute; it took a while. Gareth noticed many different Shutes and other shafts and tunnels. The man spoke to him, "When we step out, we will be at one of the deepest points in Upland." For the next hour Gareth learnt about nuclear fission and radioactivity. He had a hand computer which Kim had filled with information for him every day, he had to constantly refer to it during the tour. The man was patient and good

at explaining things. Gareth was grateful for the extra input he had received at the Knuckle. There was enough fuel here to work the nuclear power station for hundreds of years. But it was not online presently, in fact, it had not worked, except for testing, for some time. The man told him it was used at the beginning but once other, better and safer, power sources were developed, it was mothballed; it was buried, here, deep in protective rock.

"Will you ever use it again, do you think?" Gareth asked.

"Who knows?" the man shrugged. "It is still programmed into the simulations."

"Talking of which... What exactly..."

"Right, next stop, next generation nuclear power," he quickly said smiling at his joke.

They travelled by the small ship to a deep gash that appeared to be more isolated than others and where a gigantic cable seemed to reach up high into the sky. Gareth had noticed something from a distance away as they approached. The man tried to explain how it all worked. A satellite was fixed in position above this point - Gareth knew about geostationary objects. Other satellites could be moved into position when required. The other end of the cable was controlled by the satellite above. However, the bottom end of the cable was free. It must be hundreds of feet up in the air thought Gareth. He was struck by how little it seemed to move. He did not understand the science well, but somehow dragging this huge cable through the upper atmosphere produced massive electrical currents: electromagnetic induction on a heavenly scale. These currents were passed to the satellite above. Another cable, which was withdrawn at that time, then conducted this electricity to the station below. Such huge currents were needed to help trigger and then confine the fusion reaction. It was shut down for routine maintenance this day. Normally the energy output easily exceeded the electrical energy used in the process and hydrogen was available in enormous amounts in space as fuel. The energy from this plant drove many of the heavy industrial needs of Upland.

During this day Gareth also learnt about small scale hydroelectric plants, wind farms around the edge of the rim and geothermal energy stations which were the deepest delved of all. A plan of the latter showed them to be scattered all over Upland, generally, at the same depth below the plateau. They were kept operating at a minimum output. They were however the ultimate back-up for the entire Upland.

"What about the moon and the moon project?" they were almost home. Gareth could see that the guard had responded to his last question by staring intently at the technician.

"What about them?" he was cautious.

"How do they get their power? Is it supplied from Upland?"

"Some of it. They have their own nuclear fusion plant and can be totally self-sufficient."

He thanked Gareth for his attention and interesting questions, but he could not tell him anymore. Gareth thanked him and wished that he could have understood more. They parted, and Gareth made his way towards the Leader's offices. The guard had a final word with the technician and then he hurried after Gareth who went to his room. The guard then reported to the Leader's personal guard.

The next day followed a similar pattern. Gareth and the guard accompanied an expert around some of the manufacturing centres of Upland. He learnt about new materials and processes, most of which had not even been dreamt about in the Bowl. He was exposed for the first time to the complexity involved in a space faring society; much of it went over his head, but he struggled on and maintained his interest throughout. He confessed that evening to being very tired 'in the head' as he called it. He retired to his room early and did not talk to the women for long after the meal. Later, as the Leader checked the secret monitors with his personal guard, he was not surprised to see Gareth still awake, sitting by the window he studied his hand computer.

At breakfast the following morning assistant Kim gave Gareth a surprise. He was to go with the Leader that morning. He watched the girls go off and then waited in the outer office. Kim was busy with her work and he left her alone. He studied something called a quantum computer which she had downloaded a file about into his computer. Gareth felt that he had got to grips with how these complex machines called computers worked. He was becoming familiar with the jargon, he now knew what programming was, but this quantum computer was another thing altogether. His science tutorials at the Knuckle, and here in Upland, all seemed to fade into a haze that he associated with a headache - this quantum knowledge was going to be beyond him, he just had a gut feeling about it.

The Leader came out of his room and Gareth tagged along behind the personal guard. His personal guard tagged along in turn. They walked and used lifts to reach the next hole to the administrative centre. The Leader acknowledged and spoke to many people on the way. Always, Gareth was introduced, and simple greetings exchanged. Sometimes the Leader talked for a few minutes. Mostly it was just pleasantries.

The entrance to the quantum computer was guarded but they swept through unchecked. The Leader pointed out to Gareth that there was a genetic checker at the entrance. Everybody who came through was identified and logged. Every single person alive above the Rim was in the database. In truth, every person who had ever lived in Upland was registered. Gareth was sure there would be a few matches for people currently living in the Bowl lands. Corridors led to a large room where dozens of computer workstations filled the space and offices lined the walls. They went into the biggest of these offices. Gareth was introduced to some operators who sat at stations at the front of the office.

"Do you understand how the quantum computer works, Gareth?" the Leader asked once they were all settled. Gareth pursed his lips and looked about him. No one appeared to be paying much attention.

"No," he replied firmly. "I'm not convinced I fully understand your normal computers." Smiles around the room. His guard had reported his constant willingness to admit a lack of understanding.

"I am not so sure that I follow all the workings of it," the Leader confided. "But you understand that a computer is just a machine that can do what we can do, just much quicker." Gareth acknowledged this. "Well the quantum computer can do a lot more and a lot quicker."

He went on to explain much about the supercomputer; helped at times by the technical staff. Soon after the beginning the plans for the quantum computer were finished and it took some time to build. This area was split into several levels. The public face and the obvious operation of the computer took place on this level. This was where the data was input, and the output collected. Analysis could also take place here. But, significantly, there were also great banks of standard supercomputers on this level, into these the results of every run were fed and stored. This was done as a matter of course. Results of simulations, as they were called, were stored on the quantum computer itself. But these could be lost easily.

The quantum computer worked at extremely low temperatures - fractionally above absolute zero. The special state of matter that formed the actual calculating core of the computer was surrounded by supercooled helium. This core was illuminated with equally special lasers whose operation performed the actual processing. If the temperature was not maintained or helium leaked away, then the computer would fail, and all the information stored would be lost. Accidents in the early days persuaded the operators to install the standard super computers so that information could be stored.

Gareth watched a few simulations that the Leader had called for. The running of these and the initial analysis of the results took the best part of the morning. The Leader promised to explain the point of these simulations and to give him some answers to his questions. Gareth would be told the history of the planet: Upland, the Bowl, and where their peoples had come

from. It would take the afternoon; they would take their time. The Leader told Gareth this news just before they left the quantum computer office. The reaction from the other people present was interesting. The Leader's guard did not react except to cut off the immediate response from Gareth's guard. The computer operators at the front did not try to hide their amazement at the words from the Leader.

Back in the corridors the Leader was chuckling to himself. He smiled at Gareth who was walking beside him, "That will stir up a few people. Those operators will be busy for the rest of the day. Before we get back to my office what I have just said will be all around Upland." Gareth had learnt early on that there was little in the way of state secrecy in the Upland. Everything that the Leader did and said was quickly common knowledge, and subsequently much debated. Gareth had experienced it himself the day before. When they had arrived at one stop, news of what the Leader had said that morning was being discussed.

Such apparent openness left Gareth wondering. As he looked at this physically crooked man, he knew that there had to be more to it. The Holder and the Leader did so much publicly. What other activities did they engage in, behind the scenes? Where did he fit in? He appeared to be a part of their plans, otherwise, why was all this happening to him? He might find out more this afternoon.

When they got back to the Leader's office orders were given that they were not to be disturbed. "Especially when the Councillors call," he stressed to Kim. "Tell them there will be a special council meeting in the morning." Assistant Kim closed the door. Her expression was worried.

"A time has come for some answers Gareth," the Leader sounded conspiratorial. "But first we will eat."

*"Now I think you can find a way of satisfying us both*

"You have news Deputy White?" Chief Williams burst into White's room.

"Just got a message from our people up by that crossroads place I told you about, Chief."

White failed to keep the excitement out of his voice. He handed the transcript to his Chief.

Williams read it with interest. Then he said, "We'll go there, White. I think we can spare you. Take another car."

"OK, Chief." White jumped to his feet. "Are we going today?"

"No point now, it's too late. By the time we get there, it'll be dark." The Chief was at the door. "First light tomorrow." White nodded, as he followed the Chief from his office.

"I'll radio them we're coming," White said to the back of his boss.

"You do that." The Chief disappeared into his office. White radioed the message through himself, then went back to his room. Standing at the window he looked out on another wet and grimy Bowl day... News at last!

The Chief had been unhappy with White. Both agents: Gareth and Isobel on holiday at the same time, so soon after a bungled operation, too. White had explained that they both had time due and it was normal practice to allow partners to take their holidays at the same time. Williams had been stunned when he realised that Gareth and Isobel had actually gone on holiday together. Agents had to tell where they could be contacted if they left the town. Or at least which part of Northland they would be in. Williams became suspicious quickly. Why had they gone together? A more unlikely couple he could not think of. White had shrugged; he didn't think it was like that. Why had they gone up there? There's nothing up there except boring, endless Rim, and woods. Hardly any people. Why hadn't they gone to the coast like everybody else does?

The Chief kept looking at his Deputy and asking awkward questions. White realised the story was not going to work. He tried another tack. He asked to see the Chief in private. Then he told him the 'truth'. Isobel had got some information; a tip-off about smugglers. She wanted to act on it quietly. He made some vague comment here about too many eyes and ears in the security building at times. White implied that she had been very mysterious. She had also been very adamant, and you know how she can get. She said that she would go anyway, so, he had suggested that she take a holiday and go investigate the claims. Then he made Gareth go along too. To keep an eye on her. You know, try to limit any damage she might cause to people and things. He told the Chief that Gareth had been very unhappy about this and that he only agreed when White consented to count it as a real mission. That it would not come off their holidays.

The Chief snorted his disapproval at this arrangement. "That will depend on what they come up with, Deputy," he said starkly. He then told his Deputy exactly what he thought about clandestine operations. White apologised and mentioned the chance of a leak from within the building again. Williams let White off with a warning and the guarantee that he would be informed of any developments, straight away. White had been happy to get Williams off his back; he seemed to buy the story. He also began to check for any leaks in the security structure.

But all that had been over a fortnight ago. He had not expected Gareth to contact him unless they found something significant or were in trouble. In truth White expected little to come of it. His investigations had led him to believe there might be a link with this area and the people from above the Rim. At most they might unsettle some real smugglers. How good it would be if they could discover anything about the Uplander activities in the Bowl. The fortnight passed, and no news came through. The night they should have returned White waited for them outside Gareth's apartment. No sign of them. He had put all units around the



town area on alert for them. None of them had spotted their new off roader. He decided to ring Williams at home. It did not go down well with the Chief, another black mark for White. But Williams did sanction the mobilisation of agents to search and contacted the area police Chief.

Two days later they had found the off roader parked up, almost half- hidden behind a crossroads restaurant. No sign of Gareth and Isobel but a few people who had seen them. The restaurant owner insisted he was minding the vehicle for the agents. Tomorrow they would see what more there was to learn.

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The two cars pulled up outside the restaurant. Williams and his driver got out of one, White and one of his agents climbed out of the other. Waiting for them were two men, sheltering in the entrance from the rain. One of them was White's agent. The other was introduced as one of the local policemen. Williams demanded a report. The agent pulled a notebook from his coat and before he started asked if they wanted to go inside. Williams led the way inside. He picked a table as far away from the other people as he could. White had noticed only a few vehicles in the car park.

A worried looking man rushed up to serve them. White's agent ordered coffees and teas. When the man left, the agent indicated him as the man James. The owner of the restaurant who maintained he was keeping the vehicle safe for Gareth and Isobel. He returned with the drinks and the agent told him he might be needed shortly. The man glanced around the table; concern furrowed his brow. The agent gave his report.

It appeared that the two agents had arrived here on the third day after setting off. They made camp and did not come into the restaurant on that first night. Numerous witnesses had

seen them arrive. The next day they were seen going into the forest here. The agent pointed to the trees on the other side of the campsite. They returned later that day from that direction on the road. In the evening they ate at the restaurant and an incident happened. As he described Isobel's behaviour, White and Williams exchanged resigned looks. There were several accounts of this fracas; the locals had not seen anything like it in years. The next morning, they had gone into the forest after a late breakfast and nobody had seen them since.

The agent expressed his doubts about James, the owner: "he's hiding something sir." He also drew their attention to the missing girl, Chloe. James was her guardian and she had been working in the restaurant. The locals said she talked a lot with the agents, and they had not seen her since that morning either. James at first said she had gone to relatives of his. But then he admitted he had not seen her since that morning. He thought she had gone with Gareth and Isobel. They had told him they were agents and he feared saying anything to anyone.

Williams asked if there were any clues in the off roader. Having seen it he was beginning to wonder where they could have got it from; on their pay. White told him that he had hired it. The agent told them there was nothing to suggest where they had gone. James had packed up their tents and put them in the vehicle. He had done that after they had not returned in three days. He then moved the vehicle to his back yard. The campsite had been used by a few other clients since then.

"So, what does he say the agents said to him?" Williams asked.

"Oh, he doesn't say they said anything to him, sir, he just took it on himself to 'look after' their stuff."

"It looks like good smuggling country," Williams looked out the window, "any evidence about."

"No, sir," the local policeman this time. "There is minor trafficking in the area. If you wanted to, you could pull everyone in for miles around for having something dodgy. But there are no big-time villains. This is more like a distribution point for places like your town, sir." Williams sneaked a smile at White. He did not want to tread on these country boys' feet. They all followed his glance at James behind his bar. The man visibly quailed at their concentrated attention. He shuffled along his bar and tried to talk to his customers. But they were reluctant to engage him in conversation. They kept casting wary eyes at the agents in the corner.

"We're going back to the car, I need to radio in," Williams stood and his driver headed for the door. "See if you can get any more out of our friend there. Will you, White. If you would just stay here officers, while the Deputy... ah... does this."

"Yes, sir," the local policeman reacted. White's agent nodded his head a little too vigorously. White finished his drink, he slowly rose and walked towards the bar. His agent whispered furiously to the local officer. White was a tall man, well-built, physically he gave the impression of power. He had dark hair and bushy eyebrows. He could combine these to produce a brooding malevolence, an effect that often-persuaded villains to tell him what he wanted to know. As James watched White approach, he felt this threat. White stood between some people, sat at the bar.

"There's a few things I need to talk to you about." White glanced to either side. The people sat there quickly grabbed their drinks and moved away. James did not move. He eyed this formidable looking man and was glad he still had something to say. White indicated the end of the bar. They walked round to it.

"Now then," White began. His voice was reasonable. He spoke quietly, "Listen to me. I sent those agents here, specifically here." James' eyes narrowed.

"I'm not interested in any smuggling crap, you understand." A cautious nod. "We know that you are holding back. My boss wants a reasonable explanation for his agent's disappearance. I want to know if they went up to the Rim." James' eyes widened.

"Now, I think you can find a way of satisfying us both." James could not hold the man's gaze. "See, if you can persuade us of these things, then I think we will go away and things could get back to normal around here. But if not..." White's face was now quite close to James'.

James could see the whole bar watching. He shifted so that nobody could see his face. His face was drawn and his hands a little shaky. He whispered to White. As he muttered White's face slowly formed a smile.

"I'm sorry people but the bar is now closed." White shouted out. "I'm very sorry, but James here is going to assist us with our enquiries for a short while."

He and the other officers ushered the customers out; there were few grumbles. "Thank you. Thank you. Come back later to find out what happened," White called after them, a big grin across his face.

James locked up and got into White's car. The agent and the local policeman either side of him. He led them to the hidden opening and the track to the clearing. The Chief followed in his car. Soon they bumped their way into the clearing. Everybody got out. James pointed to the Rim wall. White and the others walked up to it.

"Chief, the man says he last saw Gareth and Isobel finding the track." White informed him. "Locals apparently believe this to be a smuggler's meeting place. It looks like they were onto something."

"I never knew this place existed," the local policeman was excited.

"Here!" White's agent and Williams's driver were bent over something near the stone face. "Bullets!" all of them examined the find. They scoured the clearing. Bullets were found near

the rock wall. However, cartridges were only found in one place near the centre. They found the bullet marks on the stone. Some theories were proffered. James kept silent. White stood close to him and studied the wall. They could find no other items. Nothing that belonged to Gareth and Isobel. Particularly, there was no blood, or any other sign that harm had befallen them.

White caught James' eye and flicked one of his eyebrows. James' eyes rolled up and there was a slight nod of his head. White studied the wall and the bullet marks again. He moved first closer, then further away.

"I don't think we'll learn much more," Williams eventually called them together. "Keep a close watch on this place if you will." He said to the local officer.

"Certainly, sir. What do you think happened?"

"We can't be sure," Williams said, but White could tell he had made his mind up. "I think our people were surprised here, fired at. Not hurt though, I think. I suspect they were taken by people, yet unknown; smugglers no doubt. They've been taken away and who knows what's happened to them since?" to White, "It does not look good. I want a land wide search. When we get back, see to it." Williams headed to his car.

James gave White a quick look. Then he called out to Williams, "What about Chloe?"

"It looks to me that she has got herself mixed up with our agents. Like them, she could be alive, or dead."

They dropped James off. White's man stayed with the local officer. James was more relaxed. He offered the men free drinks, muttering something about glad to get that off his chest. They accepted, warning that they were going to keep an eye on him.

White's car followed the Chief back to the town. They arrived late, but White immediately went to work on organising the search for his missing agents. Much later he had time to reflect on the developments. Gareth and Isobel had found a way up to the Rim. They

had taken Chloe with them, or perhaps she had taken them. This had happened about two weeks ago. He wondered where they were now; were they in Upland itself? Were they still alive? Would they be able to get back? He would have to wait now, to see if they returned. He contacted his team and they moved to keep watch on the Rim area in general. It was an impossible task, but if Gareth and Isobel made it back, he had to get to them before Williams.

If, after a while, they did not return. Then they would have to go back to that clearing and try to emulate them.

*... "have you become completely reckless in your old age?"*

Gareth sat and listened to the Leader. He gave his undivided attention to the old man, trying not to ask many questions during the first hour. They were alone in the Leader's office. He learnt the history. To help the Leader illustrate the lesson there were visual aids and Gareth was soon completely immersed in the subject matter.

Billions of years ago on another planet in a different part of this galaxy life had developed; a map of the galaxy highlighting relative positions meant little to him. The images of the system of planets and especially the home planet, interested him. Almost all life on this planet was derived from the original home. Animals and plants were brought here from the first planet. Gareth was given a fast tour through evolution and the myriad lifeforms that arose on this distant rock. He marvelled at the many different shapes and sizes, the varied habitats they lived in, the range of the life far exceeded that of this planet. The Leader explained how life had always developed, evolved in different ways, but it also died out to. Sometimes because of the natural effects of the planet: Gareth witnessed for the first-time things called volcanoes; there were also great lumps of rock that smashed into the surface of the world from space, he saw a model of the possible formation of this planet from similar cataclysmic collisions; there were also more swinging climate changes over thousands and millions of years which had effects.

Gareth thought this other planet more beautiful than their home, more beautiful and more varied; but also, more dangerous. Conditions were more settled here. They had some climate in Bowl land; but not on this scale. Some might say it was more boring, he thought it more comforting. The sight of those volcanoes had made an impression on him. But that was not all: people had come along, and they had also changed things. He saw in brief a history of

their development, the different cultures and societies, the wars and empires, the discoveries and inventions. All over this other planet he was shown the variation in physical characteristics that the various peoples of this world enjoyed. Here he realised, and wondered, why all these traits were not represented in the features of the Bowl people, or Uplanders.

The Leader showed him how the people of this planet began to explore space. How they started to colonise their system, reaching out from their world. But unfortunately, on their home planet things were becoming critical. For many years there had been a growing divide between the richer, more developed peoples and the poorer, less developed majority. Resources were being stretched beyond sustainability, or even completely used up, wasted by the minority. The planet was becoming polluted, corrupted, great swathes of it were ruined perhaps beyond repair; conflict was inevitable. Gareth learnt about something called religion. It was confusing to him; the Bowl landers had never thought about such ideas. They were down there and the Uplanders were up there and that was all there was to it. He did not think that the Bowl landers thought of the Uplanders as gods, more like interferers, who occasionally gave them scraps of knowledge and who could, when they wanted to, harm them. But otherwise they just got on with their lives.

In the original world all the different pressures produced a period of great unrest and turmoil. There were many wars. Some of these involved the use of tremendous nuclear weapons - Gareth sat mouth agape, face aghast as the pictures passed before his eyes. Billions of people died in the conflict or because of the aftereffects: starvation, disease, genetic disorders were but three. The planet had suffered serious damage. Not only were the people affected but many animals and plants had been lost. There was some attempt to collect genetic information from the disappearing life.



Eventually a point was reached, and a decision made, and an enormous engineering project was begun. A vast spaceship was built. The remnants of some of the animal and plant life, about one quarter, were stored aboard. Some people went on to this colossal ship and they set off. But the people who went came from only one side of the conflict, the winners, obviously. The ark, Gareth understood this word, left that system and journeyed into space looking for a new home.

The journey took hundreds of years. During this time, the people who would eventually be settled in the Bowl lands, were kept in a kind of deep sleep. Their memories were altered and some of them had their genes tampered with. Some problems that could be passed on were erased making them generally healthier than when they left. In this way thousands of people; whole families and generations were preserved. The people who would become the Uplanders piloted and run the ship. During the long voyage great discoveries and technical developments were made not least of which was the extension of the life span of the people in the future generations.

But at last the people running the ship grew tired of the seemingly endless search for a new home. Originally it was meant to be as good as the old home planet. They wanted a mirror image no less, but many planets were just uninhabitable while the others lacked certain desirable factors. However, patience began to run out. The scout ships spotted this planet with a huge gouge on one side and a relatively boring one-dimensional opposite. The people decided, and the journey was halted. The great ship went into orbit and the planning began.

The first stage was to enhance the initial studies of the planet: geology, geography, topography and so on. Detailed information of the planet was produced. Then they began the preparation of the Bowl and the Rim: The Bowl was for the people in the great hold of the ship to live in; the Rim was to keep them in. There was little indigenous life on the planet.

Some of the earliest work was to establish the compatibility between the old-world life and the new. This established, the process of moving the plant and animal life from the ship to the Bowl and the ocean was started. Years passed while this process was completed, and the ecosystems given time to take hold on this new base.

During this period the planet was monitored closely. The mineralogical resources were mapped out. The region of space they now inhabited was explored and more resources identified and charted. The Upland was developed; the Knuckle had already been established. Then finally they were ready to introduce the people into the Bowl lands. Before they did this the wall of knowledge was built and most importantly the rules for Uplander involvement in Bowl affairs were defined. The Bowl society would be allowed to develop, and the mistakes of the previous world would not be repeated to the ruination of the planet. The Bowl people had certain memories removed and certain attitudes reinforced. For example, they 'naturally' did not go in for large families. Competition of only a strictly engineered level was allowed between the lands. This being necessary to drive development and advancements which were not directly produced by the wall of knowledge. A grand plan was set out. It would last hundreds of years and need tweaking from time to time. The spy program was set up.

To help the Uplanders run this sublime scheme they had developed bigger and faster machines. Once the Upland had been settled and the Bowl people successfully living their lives, work was begun on the quantum computer; the design of which had been completed during the voyage. It had been much more difficult to achieve than anybody thought at the time and it was a long time before it was fully operational. Such importance and hope had been invested in the great machine, although all ideas about religion were not part of the Uplander life it seemed that the store they placed in this machine was verging on the religious. They run their entire lives around what the machine churned out. Their hinted at

great plans were constantly tinkered with to accommodate the results of simulations. A whole separate industry had sprung up involving programmers, operators and analysts.

"It seems daft to me leader," Gareth wondered aloud. "That such a great people, marvellous in their technological achievements, should be a, well really a slave to one of its creations. You seek to define and order our lives, yet you seem to have lost the ability to run your own without the consent of some machine." He shook his head. Not for the first time he was less than impressed by Uplander ways. The Leader smiled at him.

"Do you perceive this as a weakness of ours, Gareth?"

"Yes, I do."

"The Holder was right about you. You are perceptive," his bright eyes held Gareth. "He is right too, about the faster than expected development in the Bowl land; of which you are all an example." The old man thought for a minute.

"It is a weakness. We seem to have lost the ability to make our own decisions. But it is not the only problem we have in the Upland..."

"There aren't enough of you; there are no kids," Gareth ventured. He guessed the old man had probably overheard their recent conversation.

"Yes, you impressed me with your analysis the other night. There has not been a natural birth in Upland for a hundred years." Gareth whistled softly. "When we arrived here, although we did not realise at the time, it was not a moment too soon. The years and years of space travel had affected us - we were becoming sterile. It has not been properly explained but in some way the exposure over all that time to general space radiation has genetically altered us. The people kept under store inside the ship were unaffected. The Bowl people are complete, we, however, cannot reverse our deterioration."

"So how have you managed?" and as he said it Gareth got it, "the influx of people from the Bowl that you train up."

"Yes, that is true." The Leader however appeared grave and Gareth realised there was more.

"But at the rate that you take our people it would hardly seem to make a difference, even with your longer lives." He looked at the old man. There was more.

"You know now about embryos and how we are able to produce many of our health improving measures from them?" he asked Gareth. Gareth nodded; he was beginning to see a possible answer.

"Well, I think you have failed to grasp the scale of this activity. There are very many depositories of these embryos throughout the Upland. The embryos are at various stages of development into people. It began soon after we finished Upland. We realised that there was a problem and people began to, on their own at first, retrieve their unaffected sex cells. Many were put in storage while some were combined to form new people. The babies of the next generation were produced in the laboratory, it was too random and inefficient to leave it to natural methods, to be certain of producing offspring healthy sperms and ova are collected and fused under the microscope." He paused.

"This is the way that we have maintained a reasonable, if low, population these years. But it is not enough to make Upland viable in the future and it is too soon for the Bowl people to take our places, if they are to develop along the correct and planned lines. It would be the most heinous crime to accelerate the Bowl future and not even the most selfish Uplander would even contemplate it. From the beginning the separate, but controlled Bowl development has been of primary importance and nothing must corrupt it."

"So, will you die out before we are ready to climb up to the Rim?" then Gareth added, "But why is it so important to keep us from..." He lost his words. The Leader smiled.

"When we first arrived here," the old man said, "we remembered the real mission, the reason why we had come so far. But as time went by, people first chose to not acknowledge

it, and then to forget. Newer generations never learnt the proper history. Only a few people retained the information: every Holder and Leader, and their closest aides."

"Kim?" Gareth interrupted.

"No, my personal guard," Gareth was slightly surprised. "Because our ancestors had made such a mess of the home planet the primary motive behind our exodus was quite simple. To set up a new society that was untarnished by the history of the old world. That would have none of the prejudices and hatred. It would be viable, self-sufficient, small in numbers but vibrant. A world that could be left to develop into what the old world should have been; with a little guidance from the Uplanders. That was the main purpose."

"Once a certain level had been reached," the Leader continued, "the intention was to return to the old world. They expected to have new and better technologies. The return would be quicker. They would sleep this time. In the years that had passed the people left behind were expected to have died out, or maybe slumped to a lower technological level. The planet may have healed its wounds. They would return as gods perhaps. They would correct the errors of yesteryear. They would come in peace to order the old world. They would make a paradise of the home world." The old man chuckled quietly to himself. He paused again.

"But to do that the great ship must still be around, or you'll have to build another," Gareth said.

"The ship is still available, I assure you," the old man's eyes twinkled at Gareth. Then he went on, "Now, because of the sterility, and worrying trends in attitudes, the return must happen much sooner than planned. The ship is ready to make the trip, but the people must be persuaded the time is right. There is of course the matter of the Bowl people. What is to be done with their development? Can we leave them? Should some of us stay behind to continue our guidance?"

Gareth had something on his mind, "What happens to the newcomers you take in from the Knuckle?"

"Most of them are absorbed into Uplander life, they take up a variety of positions. I would expect them to go in the ship. Some return to work at the Knuckle, especially the spies, some of them might choose to stay," he appeared to ponder this.

"Actually, I meant what happens to them when they first arrive?" Gareth explained. "They must be messed with..." He indicated down below with his hand to the groin. The Leader understood.

"Indeed. The males are expected to produce sperms regularly for collection and storage. The females have their ova removed, regardless of the stage in their development," he saw the slight grimace on Gareth's face. "It is quite harmless. Nobody is hurt during the procedure."

"Maybe not hurt physically," Gareth stated bluntly. He was thinking of Chloe. The Leader hid the smile that had fleetingly formed on his face. Gareth was exactly what the Holder had foretold. He was going to be the answer that they had been hoping for. It was so important that he had come to them freely. Now he had to get him away from here.

"I think we will need to precipitate a crisis," Gareth thought he was talking more to himself. Then assistant Kim's voice broke into the room.

"I am so sorry Leader. But it is the Councillors they are most insistent," she sounded agitated.

"Do not worry, Kim." The Leader's voice oozed calm. "You have done a brilliant job to keep them off our backs for so long. On the communication panel Kim's face relaxed and a grateful smile appeared. "I will put them through."

"You do that. Gareth come and stand by me. You have not seen my fellow Councillors before." The screen cleared and then immediately Gareth could see four women and a man.

They looked to be about Gareth's age, so centenarians no doubt. He could tell they were taken aback to see him standing there with the Leader. All of them scowled except for one of the women. She was the only one sitting while the others stood around her. The Leader quickly told Gareth who was who. He had a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Councillors, what can I do for you?" anticipating their objections, "do not be afraid of speaking in front of our friend from the Bowl." It had the effect he desired. Most of the Councillors standing, seethed, they sneered and one replied, the man, "We do not worry about the Bowl lander."

"Really?" the Leader responded as if in doubt. Gareth felt the woman sitting was slightly amused. "I have just explained to Gareth here our history - the real history." The Councillors all gasped and looked shocked. The sitting woman sat up sharply and frowned at them.

"You have done what?" Elizabeth cried out.

"I hope you are making one of your insufferable jokes, Leader?" Henry enquired.

"Certainly not. Gareth is now aware of the journey from the old planet and what happened here in the beginning." Their reaction was doubly dismayed. Sophie almost said something, but was beaten to it by Joan, "Have you become completely reckless in your old age?" she screamed at him.

Suddenly the others joined in. It was a confused noise. The Leader leaned to Gareth and quietly said, "See how the attitudes are poor even amongst the Upland council." Sophie said something at their end and gradually the others controlled themselves.

"Now I agree that telling Gareth about us is drastic," the Leader sounded reasonable, "but in the light of recent developments I felt it might be wise." They mumbled together. "I assume you are now aware of the extra interest at the Rim near the Knuckle?" he ignored the look Gareth gave him. The others nodded. "No doubt you are running your own simulations and are awaiting the results." Sophie acknowledged it. "I believe that we will need a

meeting tomorrow, a public one, to discuss the results. Of course, we cannot allow these people to return to the Bowl now." He again ignored the look from Gareth. He was happy to see them taking in Gareth's natural reaction.

"We shall see you in the morning, Leader," Sophie ended the communication. The Leader looked at Gareth in a very calculating way, he felt. The brightness of his eyes was undiminished. "I think you will find that Isobel and Chloe have returned." He was finishing their time together. "Go and see them Gareth. Tell them whatever you wish about what you have learnt here today. Think carefully about the knowledge you now possess. As you have seen, it is dangerous knowledge." Gareth walked to the door. Just as he was about to leave, he turned and asked.

"Are our comrades searching for us?"

"Of course. That man White is another fascinating Bowl lander, as you and Isobel are." Gareth left to find the girls. His mind was working on a plan.



*"Oh, no. This is just awful."*

Gareth was quiet during the evening meal; coy even. Isobel knew that he had been with the Leader that day and she knew he was going to try to find some answers to their questions. He was not as responsive to her prompting as she wanted. He wanted to know exactly what they had been doing that day. Isobel noticed that he asked Chloe if she was alright once too often. Chloe was becoming curious at his reticence. He obviously had something to say but was struggling to come out with it. Isobel and Chloe waited. They glanced at each other often.

Once they had finished eating and he was sat with a beer in his hand, he began to tell them. He started with the business of the quantum computer and how he thought it limited the Uplanders. On cue, Isobel scoffed at the thought of a machine running their lives. She gave Chloe one of her 'you should know better' looks. But Chloe was not very familiar with the workings of the super machine. Then he told them of the history. He told them everything. It lacked the depth of the Leader's version, but it contained the important details. Isobel's face grew increasingly strained with the telling. She was holding her temper in check. Chloe started with a calm manner, but she grew more concerned. He could see the doubt building in her.

Gareth had deliberately left the part of the embryos and the use of the fresh Bowl landers to last. Chloe had sensed where he was heading with the story. She began to give Gareth nervous looks, wondering just where he was going to finish. Now, Isobel was receiving stolen glances from the younger woman. Isobel realised that a revelation was coming concerning Chloe. The young girl now sat with her head bowed; not having any eye contact with either of them.

Then Gareth explained the use of the embryos by the Uplanders. Isobel was simmering nicely he thought. He recounted how they got fresh supplies and waited for the explosion. Isobel kept her eyes on him for what seemed like a minute after he stopped speaking. Hoping that he was perhaps having her on in some way. But he did not change his story or raise a cheeky smile for her. Then she turned her gaze to the younger woman beside them. Nothing was said but the weight of that stare bore down on Chloe. Eventually she slowly lifted her head and they could see into her eyes, a slight watering was evident, and her face had become quite sad.

"Is this true?" it was an empty question from Isobel. The whole demeanour of Chloe screamed the veracity of it. Gareth kept out of it. He was not sure of Isobel's reaction. She was plainly very angry. But he felt this was something for the women to sort out; his views may not be appreciated at this moment.

"But why, Chloe?" Isobel's eyes pinned Chloe down.

"It's what's expected of us," a helpless shrug.

"Did you know about this before you got here?" Isobel seemed to be getting closer to Chloe, but without really moving.

"No, not really, I, I, knew something happened. But it was not really explained at the Knuckle." Her voice was close to breaking and her head dropped again.

"Does it hurt, when they do it?" Isobel's voice was being taken over by emotion. The anger was about to spill, Gareth thought.

"No, they just wave their thing," she made a vague movement of her hand near her belly. "They just... you don't feel anything... and then they're gone." Her shoulders started to rock, and the sobs came softly, at first. Isobel quickly moved to hug the young woman. They held onto each other and their tears flowed. The younger one was bent with sorrow and loss; the older with a shaking wrath.

Gareth felt a little ashamed at how he had manipulated the situation. He left them to mourn for a while, saying nothing. But when they had settled down, he did not hesitate.

"Can you take us to these embryo depositories, Chloe?" he bluntly asked. Isobel shot him a fiery look. But it was met with a steely response and with his eyes told her it was important. Necessary. Then Isobel found a reason of her own.

"What do you think?" she softly asked Chloe. "Can you take us there?" but Chloe had now found her sterner side once more. She dried her eyes and wiped her face, "Of course, let's go." She got up from the table and Isobel followed her.

"Will we have trouble with guards?" Gareth asked her.

"There will be guards at the embryos," she told him.

"I'll deal with them," Isobel said with some menace.

"There will probably be someone at the bottom here," Gareth told them as they left their rooms and took the lift down. "Let me handle these ones. OK, Isobel?" he told her. At the bottom of the administrative block they came across some guards. One of them was Gareth's personal guard. Gareth explained that they wanted to take a stroll in the night air. It was stuffy, and Gareth said he could show the women the solar arrays on top. The guards did not question them but did insist on giving them a single escort.

Chloe led them to the Shutes, and they all got in one. She controlled it using her hand device. The guard was interested. Most Uplanders did not have these, only the spy/guides wore them. Hundreds of years ago, he informed them, most of the Uplanders used them. But they had stopped for some reason. He did not know why. He was not sure that any of them knew how to use them anymore. Chloe changed the direction of the Shute. She gave Gareth a quick knowing look. He understood and motioned to Isobel behind the guard's back.

"Where are we..." Isobel hit him on the back of the neck. He fell in an instant to the floor.

"I hope you haven't killed him, Isobel." Gareth bent down and examined the guard. He was alive. "Remember, I said I don't want anyone killed. You got that." He said to her.

"Alright! I heard you," she reacted in a tone that gave him little confidence.

"We'll swap Shutes here," Chloe explained to them. "I'll send him somewhere else." The Shute pulled up to a junction point. They quickly left the Shute. A few people were about. Chloe immediately sent the Shute, complete with prone guard, straight on. She walked to another Shute. They checked no one else was going to use it and stepped in. Soon they were heading directly for the embryo depository that Chloe had been taken to. Gareth tried to estimate how much time they might have before the guard was discovered. His intention, he had not told them, was to see for himself the stored embryos, then they had to try to escape Upland. To do that they needed to get hold of a ship.

As they approached the entrance to the depository the corridor became fully lit. Gareth noticed in the roof ahead, surveillance outlets. He whispered to the women. There were two guards at the entrance. They watched them making their way towards them. Underneath the surveillance gadget they stopped and huddled together, whispering and looking towards the guards. The guards watched them curiously. They recognised Chloe. They guessed the other two with her were the Bowl landers who had arrived with her. The man and Chloe had their backs to them.

Together Gareth and Chloe concentrated on the word and above them the device ceased to function. In front of them Isobel was doing a good job of acting reluctant. Isobel took a hand from each of them and they walked on to the guards. Isobel's hands masked the devices on Gareth's and Chloe's. They all smiled at the guards. The guards were relaxed.

"Sorry to be a nuisance," Chloe gushed at the them, "but I was hoping I could show my friends around the depository." The guards, who had been smiling too, put an 'afraid not' look on their faces and slowly shook their heads.

"We won't be long. Just a quick look around." The guards shook their heads again, "no one is allowed in at this time without proper authorisation."

Gareth nodded an understanding. Isobel looked disappointed but relieved. The guards were curious about her.

"We're really interested. My friend's a bit scared. But I'm sure she'll be fascinated inside," Chloe persisted.

"No, sorry we cannot let you in." The guards were firm. Gareth and Chloe looked at each other and concentrated again. Isobel was ready, she released their hands.

The guards suddenly felt a surge in their stomachs. They thought they were going to be sick; both raised a hand to their mouths as a giddiness swept over them and they tottered. Isobel struck. Four sharp blows and the guards crumpled. She held them up. Gareth and Chloe opened the door with their devices. Quickly, they helped Isobel heave the guards inside. They dumped them to one side and Gareth shut the door. He wondered whether to jam it in some way. There had to be another way out and he was about to do it when Isobel's voice made him spin round.

"Oh, no. This is just awful. Look at this Gareth?" Chloe was walking slowly into the room, lighting it as she went. Even more slowly Isobel followed her. She stopped to look at the things in the glass flasks, her fingers pointing, and her mouth open in horror. From the lights Gareth could tell they were in a large room. The ceiling was low. To one side was a bank of instruments and panels where various lights pulsed or shone steadily. A low-pitched hum was all around them. The machines were operating the flasks. They were laid out regularly as far as they could see, mounted on tables and fed by tubes and wires, there were hundreds of them. They walked further into the room, passing among the flasks whose contents were at eye level. Bowl medicine was well advanced in this area and they knew what they were looking at. Human embryos in various stages of development: some barely

bigger than a bloated worm with a stubby end in one; fingers and toes wriggling in another, with unopened eyes seemingly sensing them; beating hearts and a red fleshy glow in many of them.

They were slightly separated towards the centre of the room. Gareth was trying to gauge Isobel's mood. The anger was rising. She touched a flask as if expecting the embryo inside to reach out in turn to her. Chloe, nearer to him, was more sombre, a resigned set to her shoulders. They had spent enough time here Gareth felt, and he was about to call them together. When...

All the lights came on suddenly and from the far end of the room voices and running could be heard.

"This way! Quickly!" Chloe shouted to them. She ran to one wall and opened a door. They followed her into a corridor. They ran. Very soon the pursuit came upon them, Gareth was shocked, looking behind as he ran, he saw other guards running much faster after them. Chloe was a few yards ahead and Isobel was running alongside him, checking her speed.

"They're going to catch us Isobel."

"Yes, and soon too."

"Do something about it will you." As he said it Isobel seemed to start to lag slightly and he moved ahead. He looked around just as Isobel's feint was taken. The nearest guards looked ready to spring. She stopped suddenly, spinning around and crouching slightly she threw one of the guards over her shoulder. The other tried to stop but it took him a few paces. The next guard slowed down enough to feel the full benefit of a kick in the body from Isobel. He gasped and doubled up. Gareth had stopped and he watched the fourth guard warily approach Isobel. He waited because the second one was now behind her, but she was aware of him. She jinked between the two of them landing various blows with her feet and hands. The fourth one was getting shakily to his feet. Gareth stepped up to him and hit him a

few times. The guard went down. The others had managed to hit Isobel, he could see a red mark on her face. But this had sealed their fate. Enraged, but under control of her skills she knocked them out, they hit their heads on the corridor wall and slid to the floor in a heap.

"Come on!" Gareth called out to her. She came running up, unable to resist giving another kick to the remaining guard as she passed. They ran on after Chloe, the lights were on ahead. The corridor emerged into a small square space and they had run into it before they could stop. Twenty yards away voices shouted out at them, they could see a group of guards, lasers were aimed, and a blaze of energy shot over their heads.

"This way!" Chloe was directly ahead, ten yards away, hiding in another corridor. They sprinted to her. As they ran into the corridor the lasers fired against the walls. Chloe was already moving ahead. They followed, catching her up.

"Alright?" she asked them, panting. Gareth was in no shape to reply properly, he just grunted. Isobel kept looking back.

"Here we are," Chloe suddenly said and stopped dead in her tracks. She opened a lift door and they crammed inside. They could hear their pursuers nearing as the door closed. They heard laser fire as the lift swiftly rose.

"Where are we going Chloe?" Gareth gasped. He noticed that Isobel was hardly breathless.

"This should take us to one of the main concourses. We might be able to lose ourselves and get in a Shuttle." She was breathing heavily.

"We need to find a ship. We've got to get away from Upland." Gareth was getting his breathing under control, slowly.

"That could be difficult." Chloe was not confident.

Soon the lift came to a stop and Chloe opened the door. They did not get out. Peering carefully out they could see just a few people standing near a Shute. Other Shutes were open and ready for use. It was quiet. Isobel's senses were on full alert.

"I don't like it Gareth," she said.

"Neither do I," he agreed. "But I don't think we have a choice." They waited, still. Chloe looked at them anxiously.

"We can't stay here. They can call the lift back."

"Follow me," Isobel stepped out, and pausing only fractionally to glance around, she walked slowly towards one of the waiting Shutes. Chloe followed her, and Gareth tried to stroll nonchalantly behind them. They got to about ten yards from the Shute when they were surrounded. It happened so quickly the only reaction they made was to bunch up slightly. The guards had rushed upon them from corridors and lifts. Some had been hidden in the Shutes. Lasers marked them, they were caught, Gareth sensed Isobel tensing, he reached out and held her shoulder, "Easy, partner. We're finished today. But I think we'll have another day." She relaxed.

The Leader's personal guard was in charge. When other guards came running up, he dismissed them saying that the Bowl landers would be taken to the Leader. In the morning they were to appear before the Council. He marched them away with his men in attendance.

Soon they were back in their rooms. The Leader had met them, dismissed all the guards except his personal man and the guard assigned to Gareth. They promised not to try anything foolish again.

"You are needed at the meeting tomorrow. It is very important." The Leader told them, but his eyes were on Gareth. He went back to his office with his personal guard. As they went to their own rooms Gareth could see the expressions change on his guard's face - they went from anger to disappointment to amazement.



*"I can think of no one better."*

The next morning at breakfast a small crowd was assembled. The Leader had insisted that they all have the meal together: Gareth, Isobel, Chloe, Kim, the personal guard, Gareth's guard and the Leader. Kim was upset with their actions the previous night and let them know her feelings. Gareth's guard felt and acted awkward. The others were in good spirits. Nothing more was said about the visit to the depository. The conversation was general, based mainly on the things they had learnt recently. Very soon, it seemed, they were ready.

An escort of the personal guard's men waited for them by the Shutes. When they got to the council meeting place these men fanned out around the platform while some stayed close to the Bowl landers. The Leader and Kim took their places. A very large number of Uplanders were in attendance. Everyone had a hand computer; most were consulting them. The other Councillors then made their way through the mass. Their own guards accompanied them; far fewer in number than the Leader's squad. Soon everyone was in position and the Convener called the meeting to order announcing that the Holder would also take part. They could see his smiling face on the big screens set around the platform.

Gareth glanced meaningfully at Chloe, was she getting any messages his silent features asked? She nodded negatively. The first Councillor rose to speak. It was Elizabeth.

"I would like to draw this meeting's attention to the reckless recent behaviour of the Leader, and the Holder." Muttering around the platform. "Both of these, hitherto, respected leaders of our people are guilty, I believe, of endangering the security of Upland." It was strong language. The Uplanders were not used to it - stronger muttering broke out. The

Leader and the Holder remained smiling. The Leader whispered something in his assistant's ear.

"The Councillor will explain this claim," the Convener called.

"I will." Elizabeth then began to criticise the actions that led to Gareth, Isobel and Chloe arriving at the Knuckle, their treatment there and subsequent activity at Upland. "These people should have been eliminated before they reached the Knuckle." Gareth could feel Isobel reacting beside him. She fixed a stare at the lady Councillor. Elizabeth continued to complain about the training given to them and the implication that they could be fitted into the great plan and that they could serve a useful purpose in Upland. "Councillor Henry will now show you a very recent development at the foot of the Rim."

"You will see on your screens," Henry stood, "an incident that happened very recently." He repeated. "The men have been identified as the Chief of Northland security, Williams; the Deputy of security and the man who is these agents' boss." He pointed to Gareth and Isobel. "The other people are various agents and one of our Bowl land contacts, a man named James. These people were looking for these agents and as you can see, they are paying particular attention to the area directly in front of the hidden doorway." He paused and allowed a tape of the action to run. The camera zoomed in on the people and their voices were heard.

Gareth and Isobel exchanged glances and raised their eyebrows. What was Williams doing there? What had White told him? Henry was speaking again.

"Our contact was able to throw them off the scent, as you have just heard. However, he was only able to do this because the man White, privately, gave him the option. He said he would leave him alone if he could confirm that the agents had gone up to the Rim. He told James, secretly, that this was their mission. James has verified the previous interest shown by Gareth, here. But I doubt that any one present can fail to realise the significance of this

information." There was a real noise at this point. A few questions were shouted out. Henry could not help smiling at his fellow Councillors as he sat down.

Jennifer rose, "these developments have been programmed into the quantum computer. If people will take the time to study these latest runs. Please also note the difference between our worst-case scenarios and the result put out by the Leader's office." It took a few minutes for the people gathered to absorb this data. Gradually the mood was becoming more and more concerned and more questions were shouted out. Joan now stood.

"Can the Holder and Leader tell us, now, that they knew nothing about this apparent interest in Upland from elements of Northland security. This is well ahead of any predictions derived from simulations. As we have all seen the consequence for the great plan is now measurable."

The two men looked at each other. Gareth could not help thinking there was some communing happening. The man on the screen smiled and nodded his head as if in agreement to something the Leader had said. The Leader did not rise. He spoke clearly.

"We have not discussed the full extent of this matter with Gareth and Isobel. We were aware of this man White. His attempt to catch one of our spies, recently, is well known." He paused and looked to the Bowl landers. "Why do we not ask them to tell us what they know?" there was a gentler mumble from the crowd.

"How do we know they will tell the truth?" Elizabeth was just a little too excited. The Councillors had never thought that the Leader would allow the Bowl landers to speak, exposing them to the crowd's direct examination. The Leader and the Holder were both grinning widely.

"Really, Councillor," the Leader was almost laughing, "there are many ways of telling if the truth is being spoken. Go on Gareth, say whatever you wish." A hush now descended on the crowd. Gareth stepped forward, he cast his eye around the platform and the crowd

beyond. He took his time. They waited, only Henry exhibited an impatient change of position in his chair.

"It is true that we have never talked at length about our reasons for coming here, to either the Holder or the Leader." He did not reveal that he had always wondered why they had not been interrogated more." As you have just found out we were sent, by White, to try to find a way up to the Rim." A low sound of surprise spread around. He then told them in detail about White and his theories; which now appeared largely verified. They heard about what they had witnessed at the wall of knowledge, the network that White had set up and how it comprised people from every land's security forces; the questions they were seeking answers for. He reminded the Councillors and stunned the crowd with the news that the Leader had told him the history and that he had told Isobel and Chloe.

During his speech there was much reaction. When he had finished Gareth listened to the explosion of hubbub: the Councillors were frantically trying to speak to Sophie all at once; the people in the crowd shouted at each other and the platform. Kim was as shocked as anyone but when she checked with the Leader, she found he was staring at his friend the Holder on the screen. They both smiled. The only ones to do so. The Convener eventually brought the meeting under control.

"I would like to add something," Gareth addressed the Convener.

"Go on."

"I have heard many cries for the killing, the assassination, the murder," he chose the words deliberately and spat them out contemptuously at the people listening. "Of myself, White, Isobel." She positively bristled, and the guards stepped back a pace eyeing her warily. "And anyone else you think is a threat." He paused, and many repeated the wish. "But you don't realise it is too late. Too many Bowl landers would be affected. Too many questions would be asked, even Williams would start to wonder. Think of the resulting effects on your

simulations. You might kill us or keep us here, but we have already caused a significant change."

"And don't think your society is so wonderful!" Isobel ranted at them. "You can't have your own children. You are a dying people. Those embryos are a disgrace!"

Consternation abounded. A lot of confused voices shouted out. The Convener struggled to restore order and the guards shuffled nervously. Then a loud noise issued from the screens. The Holder wanted to speak, and everyone settled down.

"While it is true that we did not fully suspect what was happening in the Bowl." His voice had a calming effect. "It was only a matter of time before this situation arose. We have been investigating, ever since Gareth and Isobel arrived at the Knuckle. Investigating the activities of White and his associates. More importantly there has been a new wall of knowledge revealed. The reaction in the Bowl to this is being constantly monitored. Here is a preliminary report." Everyone consulted their computers.

"You will see that the evidence suggests that, rather as these examples Gareth, Isobel and Chloe have demonstrated, the Bowl landers are changing. They are changing quicker than the simulations have predicted. I must say that the Leader and I have not been slow to realise this. Please study now the very latest simulation that the Leader and I have run. Note the starting parameters have been changed. I think there must be time for this information to be understood and verified. A recess would be in order, I suggest, Convener."

"Granted. Would one hour be sufficient?" nods all round approved this. During this period Gareth, Isobel and Chloe kept close together while they watched the Uplanders around them carefully. The Holder disappeared from the screens and the Leader and Kim were deep in conversation; Gareth noted that Kim's face grew increasingly worried. The personal guard stood beside them.

"They're not going to let us go," Chloe spoke softly to them. Isobel was about to burst forth with a menacing line of defiance, but a sharp look from Gareth stopped her.

"And what exactly are you going to do?" he quizzed her. "You'll get us all killed. I agree Chloe, I don't think that you will even be allowed to go back to the Knuckle. If we are going to get away from here, we will need some help."

"Who's going to help us now?" Chloe looked around dubiously.

"I think we'll have to see what the result of this latest run brings. But I've a feeling that the two people who have looked after us so far, will not let us perish. Once this meeting is over, we will need to look for a means of escape as our priority." He watched the Councillors and the Leader as the analysis proceeded.

The Holder came back to the screen - he was just as cheerful as earlier. The meeting resumed, the mood was very sombre and nobody appeared keen to speak first. The Leader kept his gaze on Councillor Sophie. She rose to speak.

"The results from this run are grave." Quiet assent. "I would like to clarify the position as I see it." The crowd listened as she listed the main conclusions: bowl plan severely disrupted (80% chance of failure); the great plan likely to need overhauling, schedules advanced, (50% chance). She paused and looked at the Leader.

"Leader. I cannot help but feel that you have brought this on us, you and the Holder," bitterness in her voice. "You could have done something to stop this. Now what are we to do? Some difficult decisions have to be made." The Leader and Holder did not reply, remaining impassive.

"Whatever is decided these agents must be held here in Upland," Henry spoke spitefully, "if they are not to be killed, to be on the safe side." But there was little response to him. There were greater considerations to be pondered than the fate of these Bowl landers. Sophie

ignored Henry but kept her eyes on the Leader. She expected a response from him. The Leader made them wait.

"To the charge that I could have done something about this crisis," he spoke steadily, "the answer is yes. Yes, I could have prevented these agents coming here. They could have been killed. They would never have been found by the Bowl landers. But I fear you still miss the point. This measure would not have stifled the growing curiosity of the Bowl people. Before long other people would have come along and tried to get on to the Rim and beyond. It is after all an inevitable outcome of the great plan. What I have done, I admit, is to use their appearance to precipitate this crisis." There was only muted shock at this admission.

"What has happened would eventually come about in a hundred years from now, maybe later. Believe an old man, this way is better, better for all concerned: Uplanders and Bowl landers." Many doubted him. "It is time to make some decisions, you are right. In a way our rough Bowl lander here is also right. Our society is failing. It is stagnating under the weight of a must-be-followed plan." He let these words sink in. "I have an answer that may offer the chance of success yet." He looked about him, they were watching him here, the whole of Upland would have ground to a halt now. "Will you listen to your Leader's plan?" he spoke to Sophie. She considered him and replied, "We will listen."

Then it came. The basis of the plan had been worked out a few years ago by the Leader and the Holder. It had been fine tuned in recent days. They had not been waiting for Gareth and Isobel specifically, but for someone from the Bowl land. An impetus to force change upon the Uplanders. But more importantly to preserve the development of the Bowl as it had been primarily intended. This option promised more chance of success than the current situation.

"Councillor Simon, is the great ship space worthy?" the Leader asked the quietest member of the council who was responsible for the great ship.

"Yes, Leader. It is ready to go at any time."

"How long would it take to load her up for the long journey home?" stirrings amongst the crowd.

"A week at the most, assuming it was given top priority." The Leader thanked him.

"The time has come to make the journey home. If we wait another hundred years or more, I believe we will not be in any position to help when we finally return to the old planet - we are decaying here. It should now be apparent that if we stay then we will come into conflict with the plan for the Bowl, more and more." He could see the interest growing around him, particularly in Sophie and her fellow Councillors. The old planet was much more beautiful than this world. What would they find there? They were not allowed to interfere in the Bowl; but what good could they do back there?

"The truth," he stressed, "is that we are not supposed to return until a certain level of development has been achieved by the Bowl people. But unfortunately, that might not be achieved without our direct interference which would contravene the original aims. The conditions have changed. We must change with them. There is little else most of the Upland people can achieve here, on this planet." Another pause to gauge the mood.

"I propose two things: that we return to the home planet; that a small number of our people stay behind to continue to implement the plan as best as possible." There was now general discussion. The Holder's sound broke through again.

"The Leader and I will be staying. Any who wish to join us are most welcome. I, as you well know, have no successor. Without a Holder the plan cannot hope to succeed. I will stay and train the one who will follow me." There was a lot of noise again. But it was more considered in nature.

"Holder have you a successor in mind?" Joan asked him.

"I do, now, Councillor."



"If the Leader stays behind, who will lead us on the journey?" Elizabeth asked.

"What will we do without the quantum computer? We cannot take it with us on the great ship," Henry was almost wailing. The Leader laughed loudly. The sound brought a hush to the proceedings.

"The great machine has been part of the problem," he stated. "Do you not see that yet, Councillor Henry. You must learn to make your own decisions once more. As for the Leader I think that is an obvious appointment. I propose that I stand down at the end of this day and that Councillor Sophie become the Leader." There was general approval for this. The Councillors congratulated her, Sophie looked at the old man with an uncertain expression.

"I can think of no one better," the Leader reinforced his proposal, "she has the qualities required to lead our people home. Let the proper process begin Convener." It was obvious that he felt the meeting was over. The Convener began to close the meeting.

"One more thing, Convener," Sophie interrupted the official. "One thing remains to be decided. What is going to happen to these Bowl landers?"

The Leader looked grimly at her. Gareth, Isobel and Chloe became anxious.

"I suggest that they are returned to the Bowl." A howl of protest sprang up.

"No. No. They should be returned so that the present interest can be abated; but only after their memories have been modified. We can still do this."

The other Councillors nodded vigorously. Henry smiled at them with all the slyness he could muster. The Leader and Holder made no attempt to communicate with them. Isobel and Chloe shouted out in anger, but Gareth remained calm. A feeling he had been experiencing a very short time ago had dissolved; he tried to bring a cold concentration to bear on their plight.

The meeting was over, and everybody moved away. Soon the Leader and his entourage were back in the administrative block. Isobel and Chloe had been openly sullen during the short trip, Isobel was worrying the guards. Her unpredictability unnerved them. Her reputation was now well known. Chloe gave the impression of one deeply betrayed. Assistant Kim was embarrassed, finding it difficult to say anything meaningful. The Leader and his personal guard were quite relaxed and happy.

The escort was dismissed at the entrance to the lift. Their concerned looks were waved away by the Leader and his personal guard. In the outer office Kim quickly sought sanctuary behind her desk and a completely new set of arrangements to begin.

"Nothing much will happen for a few days," the Leader tried to sound caring. "You will have to stay in these offices and rooms. I am afraid it will be for the best." He offered his hand to Gareth. Gareth took it.

"It has been interesting, has it not?" the Leader clasped Gareth's hand between both of his. He winked mischievously. His eyes shone as bright as ever.

"You could say that Leader," Gareth did not seem so sure. He walked to their rooms. Chloe followed him still downcast. The Leader had informed her on the way back that she would go back to the Knuckle with her memories modified. She would not be sent to the Bowl as a spy. Isobel swore at them all. Kim failed to hide behind her desk. The personal guard and the Leader watched her, keeping a cautious distance. Finally, she blew herself out and prowled after the other two.

"What's the matter with you?" she shouted at Gareth, when she found them. He and Chloe were standing close together at the window in his room.

"Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you punch the old git?!" she raved.

"Calm down, partner," he turned to her, "there's nothing we can do." He made a movement of futility with his hands, opening them to her, then closing them quickly. She

caught sight of something in one of his hands, as he intended. "At least we'll be going home."

Isobel came to the window cursing aloud. She joined them looking out the window. Gareth slowly opened his hand to reveal a scrap of paper, which itself was unusual. Printed on it were the words:

### ESCAPE TONIGHT

He screwed it up in his hand. Chloe reached out her hand and the paper caught fire. Gareth let it burn then dropped it out of the window. It disintegrated, small black bits fluttered in all directions.

Gareth and Chloe then switched off all the surveillance machines in the room using their devices.

"We still have these," Gareth indicated their hands.

"I still have this," Chloe pointed to her head.

"And we still have you!" Gareth added, punching Isobel in the arm. She squealed, "Ow!" but there was a smile on her face.

*Was he mad, did it nod back?*

Had it been raining for weeks? Or did it just seem like it. White was dodging as much of the downpour as he could, skipping under shop awnings, ducking into shop doorways, loitering inside bus shelters. He had almost gone to the bar. Almost, but he had been every night for a week, so he told himself to give it a miss. He had eaten at the security building. It was an act of both convenience and deliberation. Convenient, because it would be late when he left work and he did not fancy cobbling something together back at his apartment. Deliberate, because it seemed very likely that he had lost two of his best agents in Isobel and Gareth. He needed to keep up with the agents under him and especially the younger ones. The younger ones usually ate in the security building canteen before they went home.

No news yet, he thought again, as he jumped out of the way of a splashing car at the side of the road. Days had passed since they had visited the clearing up against the Rim wall. The official enquiry, as he informed Williams, had produced no new leads. The whole security force had been involved at one time or another. Every known smuggling outfit had been pressurised; but nothing. Similarly, his network had seen nothing in the region where they had disappeared. They remained out there waiting for a sign. White worried because their limited resources were running out. He kept in regular contact with Gill, Dave and Ian through Grant. White met Grant as normal in the bar. Grant drove to the others bringing supplies and brought what reports they could give back. White feared the worst. Isobel and Gareth had been taken up to the Rim. He doubted the Uplanders would let them come back. If they did there might be something wrong with them. He had, grudgingly, given up hope.

It was time to organise another attempt. Who could he pick this time? How could they spend time at that clearing without drawing attention from Williams and the local officers?

White tried to shake the water off his coat at the entrance to his apartment. He unlocked the door and went in, hung his coat up to dry and checked the heating was on, entered the kitchen, filled the kettle, switched it on and pulled a mug from the cupboard, put a spoonful of coffee into the mug. Then he had a minor panic and checked the fridge: yes, he had some milk. His coat had leaked a little. He decided to light the fire. Quickly he placed the paper, small sticks of wood, and coal in layers, lit the fire and watched until he was sure it had taken. The kettle had boiled. He took off his wet sweater and stretched it out on a chair near the fire. A few minutes later he was sipping his hot drink, standing in front of the fire staring at the glowing coals and the flames licking them. A good fire; he could stare at it for ages. Memories of his gran flooded back to him. As a youngster he would chop wood for her and fill her coal scuttles. His reward had been a nice cake and a mug of sweet tea. As they sat by the fire, chatting.

White shook himself free from his reminiscence. Better close the curtains he thought. He looked to the window and then he saw it. An envelope was lying on the windowsill. On the inside! He quickly looked back at the door. There were no signs of a forced entry; he would have noticed immediately. He walked back to examine the door anyway - the windows in his apartment were never opened unless he was in, he always shut them before leaving. He could find nothing. Walking to the window he was more curious than worried. Someone had left him a note. They had got into his apartment but had only left him this. He picked it up. It looked just like any typical Northland envelope. He held it up to the window. It was too dark. He was about to turn when his eye caught some movement outside. A lone bird was perched rather precariously on the telephone wire. It wobbled slightly in the rain, which bothered it little. The bird seemed to be watching White.

He twisted and held the envelope up to his room light. It told him nothing except that there was paper inside. No marks were on the outside. He slit it open with his nail and pulled out the paper. A short message,

EXPECT TWO

VERY SOON

IN THE WATER

NEAR THE WALL

he read it and re-read it. A soft noise outside, the bird was flying in tight circles beyond the window. Then he watched as it hovered in the air at eye level. It made a noise and did something with its wings before it flew off. It soon disappeared into the night.

White stood at his window for a few minutes. He kept looking from the note to the outside. The rain kept coming. His drink was forgotten on the sill. Then he crossed the room, opened his wardrobe and picked a coat. Collecting a few things, he left the room and locked it behind him. Almost running, he soon found himself outside the bar. A familiar sound came from above, the strange bird was now on top of the streetlamp. He nodded at it. Was he mad, did it nod back? He walked into the bar. Where was Grant, they had two people to pick up - his heart was beating.

*"Well we must be sure to give them a little help."*

The Holder turned away from the monitor. He was happy. The monitoring building at the Knuckle was empty except for a few of his most trusted operators. It had been quite a long day, but it looked like events were moving the way they wanted. He thanked his team and strolled outside. It was clear and dry up here at the Knuckle. He would watch the stars for a while before he caught up with some sleep; there was little else he could do. They would just have to trust to their planning, and luck, and to the skills of the people involved. It was meant to be, he was convinced of that.

After the council meeting, he had had a secret meeting with the Leader. It was obvious to them that Gareth and Isobel had to escape Upland and return to the Bowl. The Leader had added that bit about changing their memories to make people think they were still in control of the situation and to provoke a reaction from the Bowl land agents that would be consistent with their unhappiness at their position. A reaction that the Uplanders could witness and revel in, if they wanted to. Some had done just that.

No memory altering was intended by the Leader and himself. They would arrange for them to escape complete with whatever they had stored in their minds. The Leader trusted Gareth to realise that they could take no Upland objects with them. The Holder knew that they would not try to change things drastically when back in the Bowl. What exactly could they do? They would have to tell White and his network. It was wet down there. White had understood the message and accepted the anibot quickly. It was up to them now to find Gareth and Isobel when they emerged. But even when they had returned what could White hope to achieve? Gareth would understand what to do. He would know that White and his network needed to be restrained. But also, that they would need to have something to focus

on, some target to reach for, some work for them that would help the Bowl land strive for more development. The Holder knew that he and Gareth could find the right kind of interesting activities.

After their secret talk the Holder had called his closest team of operators together. All these people had graduated from the Knuckle and were of Bowl stock. In fact, they all shared the same gene markers that Chloe and Gareth had. At the beginning some of the Bowl people had been 'seeded' with these genes. It would give them and their ancestors certain useful traits and make them susceptible to hand device technology. His people were all committed to the future of Bowl land; the return to the old planet meant nothing to them. He had told them exactly what had happened at the council meeting, then he had told them what he and the Leader hoped would happen next.

Some of his people then took a couple of ships and flew to a point in Upland and prepared for future fugitives. He and the others had mobilised their spies in the town. White had been constantly monitored ever since he had returned from the clearing. The message had been left for him. He was then observed to ensure that he acted on the information. Once he had entered that bar looking for Grant, he had satisfied the Holder that he would do the right thing. He left his team, here, and down there, to monitor the situation. Now it depended on what they did in Upland. He was glad it was not raining here.

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The Leader, after he had conferred with the Holder, sought out his personal guard and the secret monitors that were available to him and his closest staff. Similarly, to the Holder, his handpicked team were committed to the true great plan. They were not interested in making



the long journey to the home world. This was their home. They would stay here and help the old man, and his successors, to order the future of both parties in this world.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

"They have gathered in Gareth's room. He has shown them the note. They destroyed it, quite neatly really." The man described the incident. The Leader smiled. "Then they switched off all the surveillance machines with their devices. They of course do not know we can monitor them from outside, through the window. They have made plans to get out after the meal, which they have ordered to be delivered to Gareth's room."

"How do they think they will get out of the block?" the Leader was asking the obvious, he knew.

"They will use their devices and fight their way out if necessary," the man was failing to conceal his excitement.

"Well, we must be sure to give them a little help," he sat down with his personal guard and glanced at some reports offered to him. "So, our friends in the council are pretty quiet I see." His guard nodded at him. "Except for poor Simon. I am afraid he will be so busy from now on." The smile broadened on the guard's face. "We must keep an eye on them. Guarding all the ships may not be all they will do. Have you got our guests' weapons ready?" the guard produced them and placed them on the table.

"Curious things when you consider them," the Leader said.

"But deadly, none the less," the guard spoke.

"Well, let us hope that they get away without firing them tonight." As he said it the Leader doubted it.

"Somehow, I doubt that Leader. The fighter Isobel is not in the mood to go quietly, I believe." The Leader returned his grim smile.

*"Time to go you two."*

The meal was over. They waited until there seemed to be very little activity below in the hole. They had decided to go down the main lift to the bottom of the block. Creeping out of their rooms Gareth and Chloe followed Isobel. At the door to the outer office she carefully opened it a tiny amount and peered out. Instantly she drew back.

"It's Kim," she whispered, "the girl's still working." Gareth gave the instructions quietly.

Kim looked up from her table as Gareth walked into her office.

"Working late, I see," he said smiling. He was making for the main door.

"You work too hard, Kim," Chloe said as she came in and moved towards the door to the Leader's office. Then Isobel came next. She walked straight over to the assistant.

"You know what these are Kim?" Gareth was holding his hand device up to her.

"And this?" Chloe did the same to her side. Kim glanced from one to the other. Her hand began to move across the table. Then she saw the flicker of tiny lights from Gareth's device. Her body convulsed with cramp. She turned her head to see the little lights flash out of Chloe's hand. Then in pain and clutching her stomach she raised her head. Isobel was right on top of her. Smash! She remembered later that Isobel had hit her. Kim was unconscious before she slid from her chair to the floor.

Chloe ran over to Gareth. Isobel reached for objects laid out on the table.

"Look! Our guns!" she held up the rifle and one of the side arms.

"Bring them," Gareth told her. She gathered up the weapons and joined them. She slung the rifle over her shoulders and handed Gareth his gun. They checked the handguns. All were loaded, and Isobel had picked up the spare clips.

"There were these, too," Isobel showed them two hollow, cylindrical metal pieces.

"I know what those are," Chloe took one from Isobel and taking Gareth's gun she screwed it onto the barrel of the gun. "It's a silencer. When you fire, it muffles the sound of the gun."

"A silencer?" Gareth repeated. Isobel copied Chloe and pointed her gun towards the prostrate figure of Kim.

"Isobel!" Gareth said fiercely. Isobel smiled cruelly. Chloe looked shocked. Then Isobel fired her gun. But the shot buried itself in the side of the table. Gareth and Chloe relaxed.

Isobel looked closely at the gun, "Now, that's handy." She was impressed.

"Let's go." Gareth stepped into the lift. As it descended Isobel reminded him, "We're not going to get away without shooting anyone Gareth."

"I know that, Isobel." Chloe could see the determination in his face. "Have I ever let you down?" she nodded briskly, negatively

At the bottom the doors opened, and Gareth and Isobel strode out into the entrance hall. There were two people at the reception desk and two guards at the entrance to the block. Gareth was nearest the desk. He raised his gun and fired two shots quickly - one was hit in the forehead, the other in the throat. They slipped off their chairs; one made a horrible gurgling sound. The two guards had turned around at the sound of the doors opening. They raised their lasers, but Isobel had fired twice. Both guards suddenly developed two bloody petals on their brows. They fell backwards through the entrance. Gareth and Chloe moved quickly to the entrance; Isobel stopped to pick one of the lasers up.

Gareth was studying the corridor that led to the Shutes.

"You're sure the message said to head for the top," he asked Chloe.

"Yes!" she hissed at him. He must have asked her ten times already. He smiled apologetically and set off across the space. They followed and quickly found themselves in the lift to the top. Waiting for them, there, should be a ship the implant message had said. No one had noticed them so far. They went to the top.

When the doors opened, they got a surprise. It was very brightly lit, ahead of them five guards had their backs to them. They were gazing into the night sky, distracted by a ship hovering erratically above them. The ship was not running in silent mode. The three of them ducked behind some supply crates. One of the men turned to see the doors closing. But he could see nobody, so he turned back to the entertainment above. What idiot was flying that ship?

Another ship had already landed. It lay in front of the guards. Chloe grabbed the laser off Isobel. She pointed it at the scene ahead of them and flicked on the night sight.

"Steady." Gareth reached out.

"I'm not going to shoot," she said. "Yes, I can see a Knuckle person at the controls of the ship on the ground."

"Take a few out with the rifle, Isobel." Gareth ordered her. She already had the rifle back in her hands. She aimed and fired. One of the guards spun around and fell to the ground. The nearest to him turned and stared at him. Then the rifle fired again, and the guard was knocked to the floor beside his comrade. The others had now realised they were under attack and threw themselves to the ground. But not before Isobel caught one with a bullet that spun him around making him lose grip of his laser.

The ship above stopped behaving erratically, lurching around. Its lasers strafed the position of the remaining guards. The ship's noise had been switched off, Isobel fired again, and Chloe laid down laser fire that kept their heads down. The guards were in a perilous position, Chloe and Isobel firing in front of them, the ship above them. Then to compound their predicament the door of the grounded ship opened, and an armed woman appeared. She fired at the ground around their feet.

Gareth stood and held his arm up. The firing stopped.

"Surrender!" he yelled. He was ready to dive back to cover. The ship dropped closer to the ground menacingly and the woman in the ship fired a warning. The guards on the ground slowly got to their feet leaving their weapons on the floor. Arms raised, they waited. The wounded one just rolled slightly and lay there. Gareth rushed up to them keeping his gun trained on them. Chloe ran past and greeted the woman; she stood at the door and beckoned them on. Isobel had retrieved the laser from Chloe, when she reached the guards, she destroyed their lasers with her captured one. Gareth examined the wounded guard. She had shot him in the shoulder.

"Get help for your friend," he shouted at the guards. Then he followed Isobel into the ship. Immediately it rose up and rapidly moved away. The other ship followed closely.

"Next stop Knuckle land?" Gareth asked cheerfully.

"Not exactly," Chloe informed him. Gareth and Isobel exchanged suspicious looks. They kept hold of their weapons easing them into defensive readiness. Chloe noticed the movement.

"No. Take it easy," she talked calmly. Her eye on Isobel, particularly. "No. I mean I am going to the Knuckle. You are going home to Bowl land. But it's not going to be very comfortable, I'm afraid." On cue the ship veered sharply. The woman told them to strap themselves in, she sat down at the weapons console. Screens switched on and she talked to the pilot as lasers streaked past the ship. The ship changed direction again and increased its speed.

"Sit back and enjoy the ride," Isobel was grinning broadly.

"Yeah, sure," Gareth retorted sarcastically. "What's going to happen Chloe? Will you be safe at the Knuckle?"

"Oh, yes. Once we get safely to the Knuckle they will not dare to attack. It would take too many ships and much loss of life, and ships. They can't afford it now that the journey home is going to happen." He did not look convinced.

"Remember they can't interfere with the Knuckle without causing too much change to the Bowl plan. Besides you did not see everything when you were at the Knuckle, planet scale defences are hidden there. But first we have to drop you off."

The next twenty minutes the two ships fought off the pursuing Uplanders. Gareth watched, hands gripping his seat, as they flew at very fast speeds in and out of holes, down valleys and over the Upland. Two chasing ships crashed into cliffs. Two others were shot down. Then there was no close pursuit. Their ship dipped into a hole and landed. During the flight Chloe had been talking earnestly with Isobel, glancing frequently at Gareth.

"Time to go you two." Chloe opened the door. They scrambled out. Isobel still had the laser in her grip.

"The laser, Isobel," Chloe demanded. Isobel studied the weapon one last time.

"Come on! You haven't got time," Chloe, urgently.

"Isobel!" Gareth said firmly. "We can't take anything back with us, you know that!" he was looking anxiously upwards. The other ship was hovering, firing. Other ships were coming. Isobel threw the laser inside the ship.

"You know what to do?" Chloe asked her.

"Yes." She turned and running past Gareth she urged him, "Come on!"

"Bye, Gareth," Chloe smiled at him. "I'll see you again."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes. You will be the next Holder."

He stared at her for a second. Then he smiled. A beaming smile. The door shut, and the ship lifted off.

"Gareth!" Isobel was standing at the entrance to a tunnel. "Will you get a move on." She ran into the tunnel. He raced after her. She had stopped about twenty yards inside. It was dark. They looked back to the opening wondering if they had been spotted. In answer a laser beam tore into the roof above their heads. They bolted down the passage.

"Gareth, lights!" Isobel yelled at him. He flicked his hand out and the lights came on ahead of them. Laser fire crashed into the walls behind them. They ran for all their worth. Isobel was soon racing ahead; but he kept as close as he could, luckily the tunnel twisted and turned. Gareth, his survival instincts cranked up, found that not only could he switch the lights on ahead, but he could turn them off behind him as he ran past.

He came running around a bend to find a small cavern. The sound of rushing water filled the space, Isobel was thirty yards in front, bent over two objects. He ran up to her. Along the side of the tunnel a water channel had been cut into the rock - a smooth U-shape. The water came out of a hole in the rock, ran down the channel, then disappeared through another hole. It sounded like there was a drop beyond the lower hole.

As he got to her, she raised one of the objects off the floor and then she held it against the flow in the channel.

"Get in this," she said sideward at him. He hesitated. "Gareth, get in this. Now!" she screamed at him. It was body shaped. He stepped into the water and lowered himself into the casing. She immediately zipped up the front, right up to his throat.

"Chloe says keep this in your mouth and breath normally," she twisted a butterfly shaped object and put it into his mouth. He felt a gas entering his mouth. She zipped the casing shut and let him go, he did not have time to argue. The casing was transparent and the last image he had as he was carried through the hole; Isobel bent over the channel, the rifle slung across her back, a streak of laser light hitting the roof above her.

He felt his stomach turn as the casing fell over the drop. He fought to keep calm, the casing material pressed in on him, the thing in his mouth slipped slightly and he found he could move his arms a little. He wiped the saliva from his lips and tucked the breathing thing back into place, he folded his arms in front of him and tried to control his breathing. The casing was buffeted as it made the descent. It sloshed around in the channel bashing against the sides. Sometimes it shot forward in straight sections, sometimes it was held up as it waited to be carried through a narrower part. It was completely dark; Gareth could see nothing around him or above him. He could feel the coolness of the water surrounding the casing and the claustrophobic pressing was unnerving. The worst point was when he was turned suddenly upside down. He travelled for a short while like this, fighting to keep the nausea at bay. Then just as suddenly he was flicked the right way up. His heart was thumping and his breathing noisy. The transport raced on; Gareth passed out.

He woke with a start. There were stars above. He remembered where he was. The casing was being roughly manhandled. He saw a pair of arms pulling. Then he must have been dragged ashore. The casing was unzipped, and fresh air fell onto his face, he spat out the breathing aid.

"You fainted, didn't you? The best ride of your life and you fainted!" Isobel stood over him, laughing loudly. He could tell she was very excited. She kicked the casing. "Come on, get out partner!"

He struggled to get up. She gave him a helping hand. She was soaking, but she didn't seem to notice, as she chided him for not looking out for her.

"How did you get on up there?" he asked her as he finally got both feet on the bank.

"I just fired a few shots at them," she recounted. "Didn't hit any of them, they were very close, so, I dumped the rifle. I had the breather in my mouth, I jumped in the thing and I was



still pulling the zip up when it went over the edge." She was still exhilarated by the experience. "What a ride!"

"You're soaking," Gareth stated rather obviously.

"Yes, well once we'd shot clear I wasn't going to risk the open current," she mocked him gently, "I unzipped, tipped over immediately, found my feet, and got to the bank." She looked around her. "Then I went searching for you. I had to run along the bank for half a mile before I could fish you out." She punched him in the arm. "We made it Gareth! We got away from Upland!" she looked around again. "Where do you think we are?" she was beginning to calm down.

"I'm not sure," Gareth surveyed their surroundings, "but I think we are upstream of the wall of knowledge. A mile or two I'd guess."

A sound like a twig being stepped on cut the night air. Gareth had noted that it had been raining recently. They both crouched down and reached for their side arms, still tucked into their waistbands.

"Gareth! Isobel! Is that you?" a familiar voice called out from the darkness.

"Yes, Ian!" Gareth responded. "We're over here.!" Ian emerged none too quietly from the murky black.

"Well! Well! It is you," he sounded amazed. He talked into his radio. "I've got them! They're alright! Isobel's been for a moonlight dip by the look of it." He laughed down the radio.

"Ha. Ha." Isobel shook her wet clothes.

"We're up past the footbridge. OK?" he waited, there was excited voices the other end.

"OK, got that." He put the radio away.

"We're not safe yet, Ian," Gareth told him, anxiety in his tone. Isobel shot a look at him. "While we are here out in the open, they could still get us without causing too much fuss." He explained to her.

"We're on it, Gareth." Ian tried to reassure him. "The car's coming now." He pointed to a pair of lights approaching, they could hear their off roader. It drove up to them and they clambered into the back. White was driving, Gill in front with him, they greeted each other happily.

"We've got to get to the wall of knowledge." Gareth told White. "It's the only place we're guaranteed safety from the Uplanders." White drove off quickly. After five minutes they stopped to pick up Dave.

"Never thought I'd see you two again." He shook their hands. "What's that on your hand Gareth?" the others turned to look. Gareth could see White straining in the mirror to see.

"Well, Dave, truth is they gave me one of these devices." He showed it to them. "But I don't know how to work it properly." He was an accomplished liar; it came with the job. But these were trained, experienced agents. He covered the device with his other hand, so they could not see the tiny lights flash. He concentrated on the people in the car. He ignored Isobel.

"Yeah, he's useless," Isobel chipped in breezily. "He tried but they gave up on him." She gave him another playful tap on the shoulder. He hardly flinched. Her comment had diverted their attention. He had managed to plant a feeling in their brains: it's nothing, it's useless. Gareth eased the device off his hand and put it safely in a chest pocket.

They were approaching the monument. White cut the lights and idled to a stop. "What do we do now?" he swiveled around in his seat to face them.

"I don't know." Gareth seemed to be deep in thought. "We're going to need a distraction of some kind." He stared out at the monument entrance in the distance.

"How did you know where to find us?" he suddenly asked aloud.

"White got a message," Gill smiled, "from a bird." She shook her head. "That's what he said anyway." White's face frowned.

"I understand." Gareth nodded and smiled at White. He described it to White. White's smile grew bigger and bigger. "That's it!" he glanced sharply at Gill. The disbelieving smile was frozen on her face.

"Like that thing out there, you mean," Isobel said smoothly. They all jerked around to follow her pointing finger. Sat on the bonnet of the vehicle the bird made a typical bird movement, dipping its body and flapping its wings. Once it was sure it had got their attention it fluttered off the engine cover and hovered in the air.

"Let's go, Isobel," Gareth opened his door and got out. "I can't explain now," he said to White and the others. "But the people who sent the bird - it's a clever machine by the way - have helped us to escape. We going to have to go inside the monument. This, this thing can open it up for us." Isobel was stood by him. "Watch us, as we go."

"How long are you going to be inside it?" White asked.

"Be here in a week's time. There will be a sign from up there," he poked his thumb straight up to the stars. Then we will be ready to appear again." He thought again, "mind you I suspect you'll get another message telling you when."

"Yeah. Watch out for birdie, here." Isobel sounded tired, the thought of a week inside the monument, with Gareth! Just when she thought it was all over. The down from the recent high was kicking in.

"Williams," Gareth said to White, "we will need to have a good story prepared for him." White looked worried for a moment. "It needs to have smuggling across the four lands." Gareth suggested, "with a hint of involvement from above." This time he indicated the Rim. "You know, interfering with us again. That sort of thing." White nodded more hopefully.

"Come on partner our bird is waiting for us." Gareth pulled Isobel gently. The bird was flying in tight circles twenty yards away, they could just about make it out. They followed it towards the gates.

White and his team got out of the vehicle and watched them through their binoculars. The bird flew up to the gate. It wheeled around making a noise. The guards laughed at it, curiously amused. Then they collapsed to the floor. The bird flew on while Gareth and Isobel crept carefully through the gates. The bird flew around the monument, knocking out all the guards one by one.

They could see Gareth and Isobel standing where the Uplander spy had stood - it seemed so long ago now. The bird hovered above Gareth. They saw a thin, bright light come from the bird. It hit the monument. Nothing happened. They fidgeted at the vehicle, but their eyes never left the scene. The illuminations lit them up. Gareth raised his hand and the bird dropped onto it, bobbing on the perch. Then the door opened, swinging backwards. They all gasped by the car. Isobel went in, the bird flew away, Gareth waved once then he entered. The door shut fast and merged seamlessly with the panel.

They lowered their viewing glasses. The guards at the gate came to and got gingerly to their feet.

"Look!" Gill shouted out. "Up there!" they looked to where she was pointing. A darker patch was rising silently and swiftly into the night sky. They lost it against the distant darkness of the Rim.

White sighed, "I can't wait to hear all about their adventures."

"Adventures?" Gill was gently mocking him once more. "That's a very old fashioned, almost romantic way of putting it."

"Shut up, you!" White replied. But he was smiling as he got back behind the wheel.

"Come on, we've got a story to concoct." They were well down the road before he put the lights on and changed up through the gears.

*"Now that should get the people talking, don't you think?"*

A little over a week went by. White and his network produced a believable story to tell Williams once Gareth and Isobel emerged from the wall of knowledge, which of course they had to do without being noticed. They were able, through their connections in the four lands, to gather 'evidence' that they could give to them before Williams saw them. As Gareth predicted, the machine bird duly revealed to them the time to be ready for. They travelled to the wall of knowledge and waited.

Once Gareth and Isobel had safely entered the monument the pursuit from the Upland was recalled. A ship stayed ready throughout the week on the Rim, watching, waiting to see if they would come back out, ready to pounce on them if they did. But they did not show. The ship was the last to join the great ship before it left; such was the vengeful hope of some in the Upland.

As the door closed behind them, Gareth and Isobel came under the direct protection of the Knuckle. Chloe's ship, battered and smoking, made it to the Knuckle. Gareth would have stared in awe at the fleet that rose to greet them and shepherd them back to the Knuckle. Stared and wondered where it had come from. Sophie and her fellow Councillors screeched in protest. They tried to arrest the Leader. But they failed. The Leader's personal guards made it clear that they would not let that happen, easily, and the Holder warned them against any rash actions. He urged them to press on with their preparations for departure. Sophie accepted the advice of her military advisers and let the matter drop. Enough Uplanders had died and the people were excited by the prospect of the return journey. There was much to

do; not the least the careful transfer of the embryo stack to the great ship. Every person was needed to work.

After a few days the Leader and the people who had decided to stay removed themselves to the Knuckle. That part of the Rim filled up for a short time with temporary facilities. When the time drew near all the people gathered at the Rim's edge to watch the exodus begin. There was a mixture of excitement and sadness. Chloe stood with the Holder and the Leader; she took comfort from the never dimming brightness in their eyes. Their mood was quite jolly.

Isobel, wet and tired, was a little miserable as she entered the monument. But her spirits soon recovered as she explored the rooms inside. A room, obviously intended for a female, had a choice of fresh clothes for her. She showered and dressed. Gareth found the room intended for him, but he fell asleep on the bed and Isobel did not wake him. He slept for many hours. When he awoke, he showered and changed into fresh clothes. The clothes were standard Bowl land attire. He went to find Isobel.

She had mastered the various functions of the monument and instructed him on how to get food, how to set the monitors so that they could see around them and the Rim and other areas of Northland. They were connected to the satellites and the Knuckle, they had several conversations with the Knuckle: with the Leader, the Holder, Chloe. Surprisingly they did not irritate each other, although they did spend a lot of time in different rooms.

On the last night she turned to him and said, "So you will be the next Holder." He had hoped she had not heard that comment from Chloe. They had been having many discussions about what they were going to tell people when they reappeared. Isobel favoured telling them everything except the fact that Gareth could work the hand device, now she mentioned it, not telling them he would be the next Holder, also.

"That's what she said." Gareth replied. "Funny isn't it?"

"Yeah. Hilarious," she said dryly. "You'll have to have one of those implants like Chloe."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Bet that hurts." He laughed at her, not rising to any bait.

"What does the Holder do anyway?" she asked. "What exactly is his role. Or hers."

Perhaps Chloe will be a Holder after you? We know what the Leader does; leads Upland."

She watched Gareth.

"I don't think Chloe's going to be the Holder after me, somehow." He answered.

"Why's that?"

"We're too close in ages. The job lasts for years and that after years of training. No, I think she'll be there to help me." He paused. "Anyway, that will all be a few years away yet.

We've got to help, and hinder White before that can happen."

"You haven't answered my question?" she pressed him.

"What?"

"The Holder, what does he do?"

"Perhaps he holds back the Uplanders," Gareth offered. "Or holds down the Bowl landers." She warmed to that one, but it wasn't what she had in mind.

"What do you think then?" he asked her. She obviously had something in mind.

"The Holder," she spoke solemnly, "holds all the knowledge." They looked at each other. "All the knowledge of this world and that old world out there." She gestured vaguely. "The Holder controls when that knowledge is passed on and how it is developed. The Holder runs this planet."

They stared at each other for a full minute, it seemed. He broke first.

"I think you're right Isobel. Do you think I'm the right man for the job?" she considered him for a while. No expression was on her face. He began to be edgy.



"I can think of no one I've met, who'd be better." He smiled and relaxed. "Of course, I haven't met that many people," she stressed. They laughed together.

They would tell White and his network as much as they could remember, they decided in the end. As Isobel pointed out, telling them about things was not going to enable some engineer, technician or scientist to reproduce them; overnight, or over decades more likely. Finally, they got the message to stand-by.

During the week many Bowl landers noticed many lights in the sky around the moon, and on it. Every day and every night, visibility willing, they observed Uplander activity. Then as eyes watched from the Rim there was a sudden movement of the moon. It rotated around. A very low and penetrating sound seemed to spread down from it, alerting all the people on the planet to something momentous about to occur. All eyes were on the shiny moving moon.

The people on the Rim cheered and shouted farewells that could not possibly be heard. At the wall of knowledge guards cast confused and astounded looks skywards. Outside the cordon, White and his network stared in utter amazement at the now rapidly disappearing moon. All over the four Bowl lands people ran to watch and stood together as the moon dwindled to a point of light.

"Now that should get the people talking, don't you think?" Gareth and Isobel had slipped out of the monument unnoticed and found White and his people. So, preoccupied where they were with the vanishing moon that they barely spoke. Finally, when the moon could not be seen at all, they stirred.

"Right, let's take you to Williams," White said. "After that though I'm not sure he's going to be too interested."

"We'll tell you the story on the way," Gill walked with Isobel.

"And you can start to tell us what happened to you," Dave said.

"It's a long tale." Gareth walked beside him.

Chloe watched the moon, the great ship as she had only recently realised, disappear. It would take them years and they would sleep most of the way in storage. What would they find when they arrived back at the home planet?

"Well, that's over." The Leader said to the Holder. "Now we can start to organise things below properly." They moved away from the edge of the Rim. Chloe stared down. Somewhere down there Isobel and Gareth would be starting to live their Bowl lives once more. She would see them sooner than they thought.