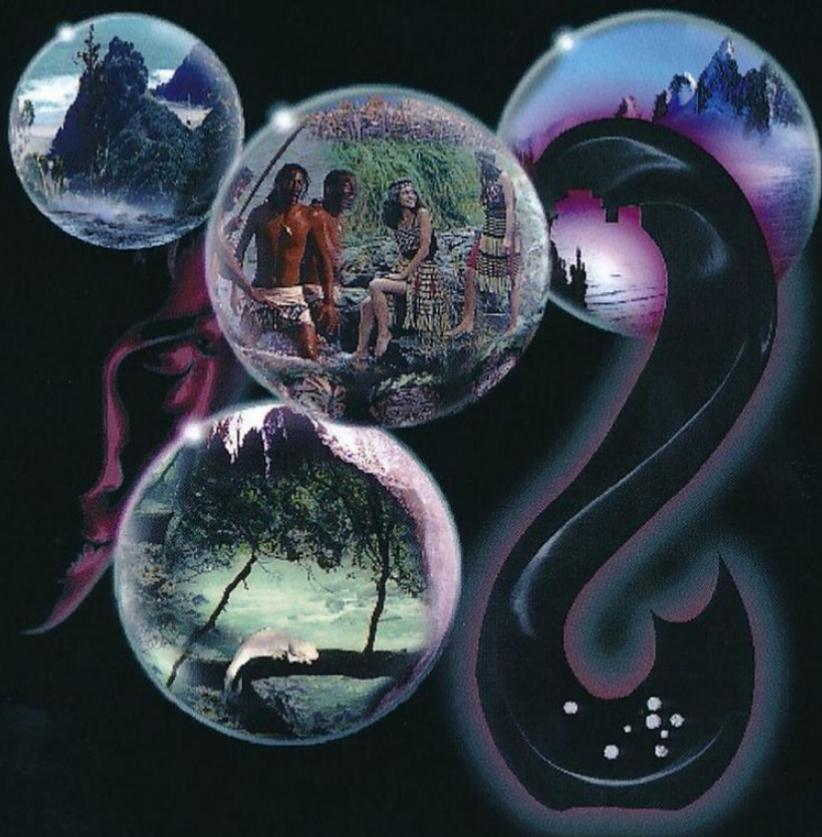


XPERTS



The Paracommunicator

Jennifer Lennon

Hermann Maurer, Coordinator
of The XPERTS Collection

XPERTS:

The Paracommunicator

Jennifer Lennon

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Visit the Website www.iicm.edu/Xperts for the latest on new books in the XPERTS collection!

Preface to “Xperts: The Paracommunicator”

This is one of the novels This is one of the novels in the XPERTS Collection, a collection of novels I am coordinating. Some of them I write myself, but others, like this one are written by others. This one is written by a very good friend of mine from new Zealand, Jennifer Lennon. Like all books in the series this one also follows an outline agreed upon between the author and me, thus making sure that the books fit into a general ‘master plan’. I am reading and editing each of the books as they progress.

Each novel is completely self-contained, yet there is some coherence due to a set of persons that appear in each of the novels at some stage, usually playing a pivotal role.

The books in the collection are an unusual mixture of adventure, human emotions, supernatural powers (‘parabilities’), science fiction with glimpses into the future, and this interwoven with often detailed descriptions of interesting places from all over this world, be it USA, Canada, the Arctic, Europe, Brazil, Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, India, Bali, La Reunion, Borneo... you name it!

Some of the books have been written originally in English, others in German, but they are generally available in at least those two languages.

I want to cordially thank my friends for their continuing support, the Austrian publisher Freya and the US Publisher Booklocker for excellent cooperation, and

my US friend and agent Dr. Andrew Burt for his endless patience.

Send me some feedback, positive or negative, to hmaurer@iicm.edu, will you!

Enjoy the book!

Hermann Maurer,
Editor of the XPERTS Series of books,
Graz / Austria, July 2004

PART ONE: The Mindcaller

Chapter One

The Elders

Eons ago

Eons ago, in the depths of a cave on Earth, four humanoids hunch over what looks like a polished pebble lying on a ledge of rock. Many similar objects, large and small, are visible on other shelves carved into the walls. Some are glowing with a warm golden light.

The beings are not men and women in the earthly sense. They are Elders from another planet circling the distant sun Alpha Cygni. The heads of the four, Alfa, Betha, Ganna, and Deltaa, are completely bald. Their clothes range in color from black to white, and have an uncanny sheen to them, almost like pop stars' stage clothes.

A human being would find the shapes and colors in the cave most peculiar. Amazing formations of stalactites and stalagmites jut from the roof and walls and grow at a rate of inches per day instead of the usual inches per century. There is not a straight line to be seen anywhere. The horizontal, spiraling ones will later be called helictites and nobody will be able to understand how they developed...

The inhabitants, who have an almost drugged look on their faces, are staring, unblinking, at the pebble-like object on the rock workbench. But, perhaps strangest of all, there is no talking even though the Elders are obviously working cooperatively. In fact, they really are communicating, and their

'conversation' holds fascinating words like qubits and quantum gates, and they mention Turing machines several times. Further eavesdropping would disclose they are discussing highly unconventional models of computers not available today, and talking about them as if they were the most natural things in the world.

"We come back to the problem of breaking the Turing barrier. It's the only way we can change space, time, and the thing we need most—speed," Alfa complains.

Betha despairs. "Conventional silicon technology for computing machines, no matter how powerful, is just not good enough."

"Well, how about this for an idea," Ganna says, diffidently. "We put one of our silicon computers into orbit, one of the small ones, and see how close to the speed of light we can get it to go. Relative to earth, that just might provide the speedup we want."

"But just how close to the speed of light would we actually need to accelerate the satellite to?" Betha queries.

"Let's see ..." Alfa says.

Outside the cave a waterfall is pounding onto a small pile of pebbles that have been arranged in a complicated pattern. You may be hard put to guess what their function is: they provide power to the entire settlement!

The stream flows west to the ocean. On its northern bank there is a steaming volcanic mud flat. To the South, on a small path that winds through primeval thickets, there are more cave entrances.

What is most surprising is that there are no outward signs of civilization: no buildings, no roads, and no manmade noises. A few people can be spotted down near the seashore, working in fields. Here, the Elder's predilection for curves can be seen in the furrows and irrigation ditches. They are made in concentric circles and spirals and beautiful shapes, which will be found repeated, later, much later, in the art of the Polynesian people.

Flitting through the fields there are what appears at first glance to be moths or butterflies. On closer inspection, however, it's clear they are tiny paragliders. No more than three inches wide, the banana-shaped parachutes are made of a golden, silk-like material. Underneath each one is strung at least one of the ubiquitous smooth pebbles. Watching them for a time, one can see that each seems to have a purpose. Some drop seeds in or near the furrows. Others carry stone tools many times bigger than themselves. A group of young adults are watching them intently.

The second of the caves along the track is a house with several rooms lit by more of the saucer-shaped pebble lights. One room is obviously a sleeping room. Sleeping platforms made of plaited flax with small stones worked into the patterns along each edge levitate two feet off the floor. In another room the lights are giving off a kaleidoscope of ever-changing colors. Sounds are being emitted from sculptures placed around the room. Perhaps it is music to the alien ears, but to humans it is just a jumble of low-pitched thunder and squeaky noises like a motor scooter.

What is missing in this house are kitchen and bathrooms; these are provided by the mud flats. Hot water is channeled into various pools and cooled by the stream. Some are used for cooking, and others lower down the valley for washing.

Sounds are coming from the next cave down the track. Is it a school? Yes—but a most unusual one. In a large space the youngest children are playing with their pet paragliders. Using single syllable voice commands, they are taking them for 'flying lessons'. Considerable time is spent untangling the strings!

The middle age group of children has stones of a different shape and color under their parachutes. It looks as if they are magnets of some form because the children are attempting to get them to pick up and drop piles of different-colored sand.

The oldest group, however, seems to be simply staring into space while their gliders do circus tricks through hoops, down slides, and bounce playfully on swings.

What should really be just a side room off the main room looks like another world, complete with hot, moist, jungle sights, sounds, and smells! An Elder is pointing out various features to a small class. After the lesson the Elder picks up a rust-colored object and suddenly the jungle scene disappears and all that is left is a smooth-walled cave.

Later that day all the children take their pet gliders down to the beach. Now the activities are harder. The young children shout commands to get their pets to touch the water's edge and 'hump-back' onto the sand. The older children have attached tiny surfboards to the underbellies of their pets and are competing to see who can surf them the furthest distance along the rolling waves.

Most of the Elders of the little community take turns at working day and night in the uppermost cave. It is, as one might have guessed, a laboratory. Of the multiple rows of polished stones and chemical powders, some seem to be just collections of the colored pebbles, while others are heavy black granite. A few are black and flecked with light gray spots of a special chemical.

Betha says, "Our first decision, I guess, is which data model should we choose for our archival and communication modules?" She picks up a transparent phial and gives it a shake. "DNA? Or RNA? This D54 machine is a DNA model with 1,000,408 parallel processes."

"But if we use it, how will we control it?" Alfa argues. "Using the C series by themselves is hard at the best of times."

"Today's kids are getting better all the time," Betha says. "Yesterday I saw a pair youngsters mind-controlling two C100s. The second one was chasing the first one along the crest of a wave!"

Ganna says, "And I saw a little tyke thought-control his P3 through the sound barrier—not that he meant to do it!"

Weeks later they are still working on their fundamental problem: trying to compute infinite sequences in finite times. There is an increased sense of urgency in their work, which is

only interrupted when two young men race into the cave calling to them to come quickly.

Outside the cave, on an outcrop of rock, an Elder is staring at the granite-like rock surface in dismay. "More tremors!" he exclaims. "Big ones this time, and closer to the surface."

"Things are going to blow," Ganna yells, "and soon! An eruption of this magnitude could give out enough dust to plunge the entire world into an ice age."

"Well this is it then," Deltaa says sadly to himself.

"Sound the alert," Alfa bellows. "Activate all life pods. Quickly!"

In an amazingly short time the caves are empty once again, and nothing remains except the strange objects left on the shelves in the caves in the stream.

Overcome with sadness, they look around for the last time.

"We've done what we could," Alfa says. "We've achieved a lot and we're leaving quite a few of our implements in a number of places. Whether our own future generations or other intelligent beings will chance upon them, we cannot say, but we will continue our research into this strange gray mineral when we finally get home."

"But do we have enough of the stuff with us?" Ganna asks, worried.

Deltaa shrugs and says, "Well, our pods have been loaded to capacity. Let us now leave and head for Alpha Cygni." After a moment, she murmurs thoughtfully, "I wonder if some of our people will come to this planet some time in the future."

Eons will indeed pass before the first of the artifacts are found, and the ancient Maoris will weave legends and stories about them and their strange properties. But for many more ages to come, no one will guess that each one has a specific function and is more powerful than any twenty-first century computer.

That their true importance is discovered by the chance meeting of a girl from New Zealand and an Austrian with unusual psychic powers is just one of those incredible coincidences that have formed so much of mankind's history.

Chapter Two

The Kapakapa

January 2000

If you stand on the wild, western coast beach of Karekare with your back to the rolling surf, and follow the line of the Opal Pools stream up to the skyline, you may, if you know exactly where to look, catch a glimpse of the trees at the top of a secret valley. It is not on any map and it is hard to find even if you have been told exactly where to search. It is a valley of many-changing moods often obscured by swirling mists.

It is an idyllic summer's day and a young woman called Aroha stands alone on an old, forgotten dirt track near the top of the valley. To the west she can see down a manuka¹-clad slope to the sea. Across the plains to the east is Auckland where she now lives. But it is to the south, where the land drops away steeply in the hidden valley, that she feels the strongest urge to explore. Clad in shorts, windbreaker, and with a small daypack on her back, she forces her way through dense manuka bushes that are laced with cuttygrass² clumps. When the ground falls away very sharply, she slithers out of control, grabbing onto dead branches, down to a still pool. No sound can be heard here: not a bird, not the sea. In the silence she closes her eyes and imagines that the ancient puriri trees, with their lichen covered branches and shiny red berries, have stood watching ever since the beginnings of time when tattooed warriors waged wars under their branches.

Slowly and carefully Aroha follows a stream down over small waterfalls and through moss-sculptured banks. She forces her way through tangles of supplejack vines, wishing she could swing on them through the treetops, until she come

¹ Low spreading shrub

² Grass with sharp, stiff leaves

to a large boulder in the middle of the stream. She wades across to the rock and absentmindedly eats her lunch while watching the left and right streamlets making eddies below her. They remind her of the two opposing threads of her own life: the Maori³ and the Pakeha⁴. She remembers the Marae, a small Maori village, situated in the far north of New Zealand where she spent the first five years of her life. She recalls listening happily for hours on end to the stories told by her mother's mother, Whāea Kepa (Nan), the matriarch of the family, who ruled young and old with gentle firmness. She kept the ancient customs and encouraged her large extended family to do the same. Aroha knows that, in the old Maori way, Nan adopted her when she was just a few months old. She remembers that she had had to speak Maori with Nan at story time, and English with her aunties when they were weaving flax into baskets or wall hangings. At other times she and the other young children used the kind of osmosis that all children do to mix the two languages while enjoying their endless games.

Coming back to the present with a start, Aroha thinks uneasily about the new life at university she will be starting in just a few weeks time. As she goes on exploring the valley she wonders if she will enjoy majoring in science as much as she hopes she will, and whether or not she will make any friends.

She follows the stream for an hour or so until, crawling on hands and knees under the branches of a dead tree covered with creeper, she comes out into what seems to be another world, a cathedral, from the beginnings of time. Among the moss and lichen-covered branches on the cathedral's floor, bush orchids nestle. Pungas⁵ and palms form a canopy while huge columns of kauri trees reach through them to the sky. It is a place forgotten by time, a very secret place.

³ The indigenous race of New Zealand

⁴ A rather derogatory term for white settlers in New Zealand

⁵ New Zealand tree fern

At the far edge of this clearing Aroha sees that a kauri tree has recently fallen, taking a whole section of bank with it. She clammers down, thinking that it probably came down because of all the wet weather they've been having lately. She looks at the tangle of roots in the rich brown loam and wonders: 'What's that shiny thing stuck up there? Litter? Surely not here.' Getting her hands and knees thoroughly dirty, she scrambles up the roots and slithers back down clutching it. Having brushed off as much of the dirt as she can, she holds it up to a shaft of light. It is in the shape of a fishhook.

She is astounded: it's some sort of carving, very beautiful, and possibly, just possibly, incredibly old!

She slides down to the stream and washes the carving carefully before coming back, sitting on the tree trunk, and looking closely at the beautiful thing in her hand. From geology classes given by her father, a science teacher, she knows that it is made of obsidian: a shiny black glasslike rock formed in volcanoes. She traces around the edges with her fingers. One end has a very odd geometrical shape while the opposite end has a pattern of gray dots on it. There is something strange, weird, and even magical, about it. She becomes aware of a lump forming in the pit of her stomach and tells herself firmly: 'Stop it! You're imagining things!'



All the same, without knowing how, Aroha knows that there are legends about ancient beings that carved weavings of magic into fishhooks. Turning the carving over and over in her hands, she feels its smooth top and bottom surfaces and wonders who might be able to tell her more about such things.

She half closes her eyes and without warning, everything appears to change. She jumps to her feet, eyes wide open. It seems that:

She is now in some sort of cave. Her first awareness is of searing heat. Confused, she feels struck dumb. The steam wafting through the cave has a strong Sulfur smell that makes her gag. Dimly through the misty gloom she glimpses a tall young Maori who is looking intently at something on a ledge of the cave. She calls out, and stumbles over to him, touches him. Incredibly, he does not react – he is totally unaware of her presence.

As suddenly as it came, the cave disappears and Aroha, finding herself back in the Cathedral of Trees, collapses back onto the log, shaking all over. A hundred questions demand immediate answers: 'Why did it all feel so real? Who was the young man? Why did I feel drawn to him? Where was I? What happened?' The experience was so strange she can't believe what she just 'saw'.

Closing her eyes, she 'sees' the glimpse of a *smile* without even being aware of a face. She immediately opens her eyes. She has never 'seen' anything in her mind's eye with such forceful clarity. Closing her eyes again, she glimpses:

Black eyes. With a hint of longing in them.

Seemingly, calling her. What staggers her most of all is that somehow, without recalling a face, she knew immediately whose eyes they were—her Nan's. This puzzles her because she has not seen her Nan since she left the Marae⁶ so many long years ago.

Aroha lingers for long moments, fingering the carving and sending prayers up to Ranginui (Sky Father) and Papatüānuku (Earth Mother). Closer and more tangible than ever before, she can sense the love that created the earth and heavens. She is filled with wonder that Maori names and meanings she has not heard since she was small now come unheralded into her mind.

At last she leaves the holy place and begins to wend her way back to the track by working up the slope on the other side of the stream until finally, considerably scratched, she comes out onto the hanging valley that belongs to her mother's family. After the quiet darkness of the old forest this seems a place brilliant with sunshine. It is a clearing where crickets and bees sing among the wildflowers: blue gentians, white daisies, yellow dandelions and large purple clovers. Native grasses and flaxes bend and dance in the wind, creating ever-shifting patterns that imitate the cloud shapes above. It is surrounded

⁶ A Maori village or meeting house

by bush where tuis⁷ and gray warblers send their songs up to the skies. The echoes of breakers on the beach below are ever-present, a wash of low-pitched sound. Swallows and sea gulls endlessly circle.

Sitting with her back against a spreading pohutukawa⁸ tree, she shreds a piece of flax into three strands and plaits them. This done, she ties the carving to the plait and hangs it around her neck.

Closing her eyes, in a 'flash', she 'sees':

Dark brown eyes.

Bright and shiny as if on a new carving.

But then the image changes. She sees in a glance:

The little stream at the bottom of a tree that led into an enchanted wilderness, where clematis clambered over treetops, making hills with underground caverns that were almost waterproof. These were, meeting places, where she together with the other children had played at being tribal elders talking war.

At the Maori village magic had featured in many of Nan's stories so it is perhaps not so surprising that she then sees:

Silver sky fairies darting around the moon.

Finally, she glimpses herself as a little girl, with black curly hair and brown eyes, out at midnight:

⁷ A native New Zealand bird: its feathers are black with a bluish sheen, except for a tuft of white below the neck.

⁸ This tree, covered with beautiful red blossoms just around Christmas time, is one of the many gifts nature has given to New Zealand

*Down the old karaka tree, through the small gate,
Past the red carving of a warrior, at a run,
On tip toes,
Heart pounding.
Passing an old house,
Over the fence,
In deep shadows
of fern trees,
By the stream—where the ancient ones live⁹!*

Jerking upright, Aroha realizes with consternation that these are the sorts of imaginings she was sure she had grown out of. She knows, as she had been told all too often, that she has an overly active imagination. Now, more than just vaguely troubled, she realizes that never, even as a child, has she seen things in her mind's eye in such a vivid, unique, and inexplicable way. It was not like seeing a movie—the things were not complete pictures. The experience was, she thought, indescribable. The nearest she can get is: 'Something very different from seeing or hearing. Something above and beyond ordinary thinking.'

Back in the City, Aroha keeps thinking over her discoveries. Wanting to know more about the carving, she spends several hours searching on the Internet. Unfortunately, the only thing of interest she finds is a dictionary reference to a neck ornament that was called a Kapakapa. She wonders, as she has often done before, why her mother and father never talked in Maori at home—particularly as they had given her a Maori name. She rather thinks that it must have been at Nan's insistence.

Aroha is so intrigued by the sound of the word Kapakapa (she pronounces it cup-a-cup-a) that it becomes her name for her caving. But she shows it to no one.

⁹ Maoris are always buried with their graves looking toward a stream or lake so their souls can go to water when they need to

Aroha returns to the hidden valley on many Sunday afternoons. Each clear evening she sits at the edge of the clearing watching for a 'green flash' out over the sea. Although she is well acquainted with the principles of physics governing the reflection of light in air of varying density, it still seems like magic when she is fortunate enough to see it. In the final few moments as the sun sets into the sea, it very occasionally changes color from red, to orange, to yellow, and suddenly, for an instant, to brilliant, emerald green. Then it is gone and all is silent.

Some nights she lights a little fire in the middle of the clearing and sleeps out under the stars. In the bright sky, away from city lights, the stars become her friends, too. She knows them by name: the Pointers to the Southern Cross, Orion, Leo, Pegasus, Andromeda, and many more.

One night, as she is dozing off to sleep, a log falls down into the embers sending up a cascade of sparks. Startled, she remembers Guy Fawkes nights with her father putting on fireworks displays for all the neighbors. She can 'see' him now:

Bending over powders on the school science lab benches, making the fireworks himself.

He was 'allowed to' do it because he was science master as well as headmaster. The noises from the old tin cans and the brilliant green lights were legendary.

Then later, as the fire dies down and a chilly wind blows across the clearing, she 'sees':

Her father dying of an 'ulcer' that wasn't an ulcer; her father fighting it to the very end.

She bites her lips, determined not to let tears flow.

It is in those lonely hours in the valley that she first realizes she is 'different'. She has never been 'boy mad' and she always loved her lessons, even mathematics and science. She fingers her Kapakapa, closes her eyes and hears:

Tawhiri (the wind), gusting and singing in the treetops.

Tears come to her eyes as she thinks for the hundredth time: 'I'm not brown. I'm not white. I'm just mocha.'

One hauntingly beautiful evening, Aroha is sitting at her favorite spot overlooking the wide empty sea. Inevitably, her thoughts are drawn back to her vision of the young man in the cave. She fingers her Kapakapa and wonders why she feels so utterly convinced that he is 'real'. She determines that one day she will follow Tawhiri on a quest, seeking the ancient ones who, according to legend, dwell in the rivers, mountains, and valleys of Aotearoa¹⁰. Perhaps, they will help her unravel the secrets of her Kapakapa— and help her find the young man she feels so inexplicably drawn to!

¹⁰ Maori for New Zealand

Chapter Three

Aorama - The World of Light

October 2000

Over time Aroha's memory of the handsome young man in the cave fades. Losing herself in her university studies she determines to put daydreams and magic behind her. She hides her Kapakapa in a bottom drawer and makes a resolution to identify wholly with her European heritage.

Then, when she least expects it, she meets Kalina, and finds herself laughing into her golden, smiling eyes. It is Kalina who now opens doors for Aroha into worlds within worlds of amazing music: stately Polish polonaises; Horas dances in a two-four rhythm still widespread in Romania; Swedish weaving songs; French bourrées that only survive today in the Auvergne; Israeli love duets, and many, many, others. Aroha finds it all new and exciting.

One night, music is playing so loudly inside her head that she feels it could wake up her roommates! Ghostly notes fill her mind's eye with visions: one wood-sculptured note from Dumitru's taragot, and she can see bent backs in long, black dresses chipping at the sun-baked fields of Romania; a haunting phrase from a gypsy's fiddle sends her soul flying to join a mourning mother at a young bride's wedding. She sees a drop of wine, and now she can smell the fire burning on the home-brewed plum wine at a Pentecostal lunch, while a young English speaker pleads for help to escape his country's poverty.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, Aroha takes Kalina out to Karekare where they walk to the headlands and the wind blows Kalina's long blond hair out over her shoulders. Aroha's happiness sparkles on the waves as the ripples catch the sunlight. She has found a soul mate. It is a day without defect, and she thinks, 'Now, here and now, it is a perfect day'. They

smile at the same moments, and laugh at the same nothings. She feels that there must be such a thing as telepathy. And all the while they both hear music in their heads, accompanied by the base notes of the surf breaking on the beach, and the trebles of the birds.

Next day when they meet back in the city, Kalina is full of details about a music festival. Only as Kalina rushes off, leaving Aroha standing a little surprised, does Aroha realize that not a word had been said about the previous day. It is as if it never existed.

In summer they swim in the breakers on black iron-sand beaches. In the dawn light of early mornings, when there is not a soul besides theirs on the beach, they body-surf in foam that surrounds them and caresses them, while light rays sparkle in a blue-green-white translucence, each bubble brilliant in its clarity.

While Aroha takes after her scientific father, Kalina is a musician who plays both the flute and alto clarinet with what Aroha considers to be inspiration. Kalina tells Aroha about her parent's lives in Poland: her father specializes in Eastern European music, and her mother teaches dance. Aroha privately thinks that they certainly imbued Kalina with an exceptionally strong work ethic.

In winter, while nibbling cakes under the trees, they read books—all sorts of good books because, in addition to being a musician, Kalina is a scholar. In return, Aroha introduces Kalina to fantasy and science fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* is the book they love best. Aroha has read it more than once before, but the magic really comes alive when Kalina reads it out loud. Oblivious to stormy west winds that roar in the treetops, they huddle in parkas and rugs, following the Company across time, countryside, and dangers. Again and again they have to helter-skelter to get back to the city by Kalina's self-imposed curfew time.

Over the months, the hidden valley becomes a magic dell for the two soul mates. In late spring and autumn afternoons, when the sun slants across the valley, the native ferns and

grasses take on rich golden hues. It is so radiant that Aroha names it Aorama—the World of Light (another term she finds on the Web). Perhaps it is inevitable that Aroha should think of Kalina as her Lady of the Valley, since she dresses in gossamer, light blues, and yellows, and wears a silver necklace set with blue stones that glitter like the summer sea.

Odes to a Lady

*To Hyperconductivity:
Eyes shining, Blazing,
Luminous
Mirroring the soul
Resplendent
Intelligence
More-than-ness
Compelling, Overwhelming*

*To Creativity:
Lateral thinking
Grandmothers dancing
And crippled boys smiling*

*To Hypersensitivity:
Scratchy cardigans
Compassion
Fingertips seeking
Furrowed brow, silence, and understanding*

To the Cutting Edge:

Language

Persistence

To the Sound of Surf:

Soft places, and a warm drink

Trust

And dawn

To Wind and Driving Rain:

Gentle warmth

Bottomless pools

Peace, infinite

Soundless songs

*To White shirt, White Camellias and Moonlight on the
Water:*

Sweetness

Grecian

To Japonica:

Beauty in smallness, Exquisite

Worlds within worlds, within worlds, within...

To Love:

Flying, soaring

Boundless, joy

Golden circling,

The whole so much greater than the parts.

There are special celebrations when Aroha and Kalina invite other musicians out to Aorama. Music is made with classical guitars, flutes, and recorders, accompanied by the sound of sea. They dance in the moonlight before settling down to the sound of soft, poignant, singing as groups up on the high banks harmonize with those down below.

Occasionally the two friends clamber down into a valley below the clearing where, Aroha feels, a sense of 'presence' is stronger than elsewhere. They call it Secret Valley. There are times when the feeling of magic is so strong Aroha finds herself talking in a hushed voice, only a few sentences at a time. To Aroha, it is rather like being in a church, with huge kauri trees as the columns that hold up the blue ceiling above. Her spirit soars with the clouds, the wind in the treetops, the birds calling to their mates. Kalina points to a bumblebee crawling out from its moss-covered tunnel. They both collect pale green bush orchids with rose blushed centers. And always Aroha is aware of the faint deep-throated echoes of the wind and sea, calling, calling...

After one such day Aroha finally takes her Kapakapa out of its hiding place. Once again she fingers its smooth surface before slipping the cord around her neck. At first she feels apprehensive but as days pass and she experiences no unusual flashbacks, she wears it more frequently—but always well hidden under clothing.

At length there comes a night when events take Aroha by surprise. She has invited all her musical friends out to Aorama for a party. As the sun sets, she becomes aware that animals are gathering among the trees at the edge of the clearing: fantails, tuis, grey warblers, and even young quails are out with their parents. Overhead they can see that all the swallows in the valley have been invited. First there is feasting. In some of the little pots heated on small candles, savory sauces simmer for dipping crunchy bread into. In other pots simmer sweet chocolate, caramel, and nutty fondue.

As darkness falls Aroha feels the presence of the ancient ones become stronger. She is very conscious of the Kapakapa nestled under her layers of clothing. Gradually she becomes aware that the whole valley is joining in their music and dance: the sea, the trees, and the grasses. Kalina plays her alto clarinet with soul-searing beauty.

Chanting:

*Music in movement,
Movement in music,
Tapestries of sound.
Strands,
pulling,
changing,
quickenning.
Ever haunting.*

With feet not touching the ground, Aroha and the others sing and dance with strange, long-gone spirits while the water turns to wine.

Next morning Aroha can't decide where reality stopped and fantasy took over. Clearly etched in her mind are the glimpses of Tanemahuta¹¹, eldest son of Rangi¹², tall as the kauri trees he protects. She can still 'see' his dark, deep-set eyes and the awesome girth of his brown legs. She is convinced that wearing the Kapakapa had something to do with these mind visualizations and the overwhelming feeling of other-worldliness. Then, with a feeling of vague surprise, she realizes that she has never shown Kalina either the Kapakapa, or the Cathedral where she found it. There just never seemed to be a right time.

These are golden times that Aroha thinks will last forever, but the following months see Kalina once again working like a slave. So Aroha takes to revisiting the Valley by herself with her mind turning again and again to the puzzle of the Kapakapa. She did try to question Kalina about the party night and whether she noticed anything supernatural. Sadly, Kalina's response was, as always, one of skepticism and disinterest.

¹¹ God of forests

¹² Sky Father

Frequently, however, Aroha hears Tawhiri, the Wind, blowing up Secret Valley from the sea, calling her. But where to, she still has no idea.



Chapter Four

Rivers and Ridges

June 2001

Halfway through her next year at university, Aroha makes another good friend: Kevin, the epitome of the dark silent type, is training to be a mountain ranger and alpine guide. He is taking the same Geology course as Aroha.

One evening after their mid-semester tests, Kevin takes Aroha and Kalina to the café where a friend of his has a part-time job. Mike is a notable hiker, doing not just four, but six South Island trips a summer; that he is also a top New Zealand scholar almost passes unnoticed. Inevitably the talk turns to hiking.

“Kevin. When was the last time you did any serious hiking?” Mike asks.

“During the May break,” Kevin grumbles.

“Same here,” says Mike. “I just led a very short club beginners’ trip to the Hunuas. I’m hopelessly unfit!”

“How about a get-fit trip in the Waitakere ranges?” Mike suggests.

They discuss various options before Aroha says, “Would you like to come out to my Valley? My family owns ten acres near the coast, and Kalina and I have had magical times there.”

“It’s a heavenly place,” Kalina confirms. “There’s a hanging valley up in the headwaters that Aroha calls Aorama. And a stream surrounded by virgin bush in the valley proper that we’ve never really explored properly.”

“Aorama is quite near the old Cattle Track road,” Aroha explains. “We could sleep over if we take sleeping bags with us.”

“Then let’s make it a weekend trip. I could arrange to leave work early on Friday and not be back until Sunday,” Mike says.

Gradually their plans finalize, so that one Friday evening sees five of them crammed in an old battered van chugging up to the Waitakere foothills. Mike has brought his friend Jeannie, a computer scientist whom he has helped scrape through Quantum Mechanics. He sat by her each lecture and invited her to the Cyber Café where he works most evenings and weekends. Usually they study together but often they just talk.

The guys have insisted that, in order to get fit, they should not take the car all the way. Thus, with much good-natured banter about who looks the weirdest and who has the heaviest pack, they tumble out of the car at an old abandoned Waitakere train station, heft their packs, and walk across fields until they get to a gravel road. This they follow for what seems to Aroha to be miles and miles, and she is glad that her pack is no heavier. Seemingly confident that he knows exactly where he is going, Kevin whistles as he walks. Eventually, they stop by a hole that leads into the dense forest. Night has fallen and it is now quite dark. Following Kevin's example, they take off their packs, turn on their torches (one of the items on a list Kevin gave them), and eat a handful of scroggin (a trail mix of raisins, nuts, and lots of chocolate). After the briefest of stops they bend over nearly double and follow Kevin into the jungle of vines, cobwebs, and mud. Again, to Aroha, it feels like they walk for hours. And still Kevin strides with confidence until they meet up with the old Cattle Track road. Then Aroha leads them down the short track to Aorama that she and Kalina have worn down with their footsteps.

Spreading out their sleeping bags under the old puriri tree, they all make straight for bed. It has been a long, tiring day.

"Did you remember to bring some mozzie repellent?" Kalina asks.

"Yes, but I forgot my deodorant," Aroha replies. "I will smell great! Perhaps that will be enough to keep them away."

"I doubt it," an overtired Kalina mumbles.

Aroha's mind, however, is still in hyper drive. With a sense of excitement she is very conscious of her Kapakapa,

tucked safely under her shirt, and Tawhiri whistling in the trees—calling her to the Cathedral down below Secret Valley.

On Saturday they are up with the birds. After packing small daypacks Aroha leads them to the overgrown edge of the clearing that drops steeply off into the valley proper. Here they all slide and slither down to the stream, laughing and getting covered with mud. Following the watercourse, as Aroha did so long ago, they come to the Cathedral where they all stand in silence reverence, their eyes following the great tree trunks up to the heavens.

Some time later Aroha realizes that Tawhiri is calling more insistently than ever before. She can see him swaying the trunks of two young kauri trees. “This way,” she whispers, pointing. “It’s time to go.”

As they file between the two trees, each becomes aware, to a greater or lesser degree, of a myriad of subtle changes. Aroha, to whom the changes are most extreme, can’t find her voice. She senses a strange change in the light, in both hue and luminosity.

“Look at the color of these trees,” Jeannie whispers.

“There’s something very odd about them which I can’t put my finger on,” Kevin says.

“And what about the smell?” Mike queries. “It’s sort of fresher than I’ve ever smelt in a valley.”

“There’s a feeling of newness,” Aroha suggests, finding her voice at last.

Slowly and carefully they go on downwards. They climb down a series of waterfalls (getting thoroughly wet), slide down slippery slopes on their behinds, and boulder hop when they can. After negotiating a waterfall that looks much larger than any of the previous ones, they stop to eat scroggin at a little clearing.

“You know,” Mike begins, “I don’t recognize any of this.”

“I’ve never, ever, seen a waterfall this high anywhere in the Waitaks,” Kevin mutters.

“Perhaps we got onto the wrong ridge when we left the Cathedral. But I really don’t think so,” Mike says.

“No. I’m sure we didn’t,” Kevin answers firmly. “And another weird thing is coming down didn’t seem as hard as I would have expected.”

“Yes, I agree,” Aroha comments.

“And how do you explain the differences we can see in this flora?” Jeannie asks with wonder in her voice.

“A microclimate?” Mike suggests.

“But how do we explain the strange light effects as we came out of the Cathedral?” Aroha persists.

“What are you talking about?” Kalina interjects. “I haven’t noticed anything particularly different about the light, or the plants!”

They are still arguing when Aroha realizes that the Wind can no longer be heard above the insistent sound of the waterfall. She walks by herself a little way upstream, takes out her Kapakapa, and holds it tightly. Now the feeling of weirdness is greater than ever. The trees are a much lighter green and she gradually becomes aware that the river is chanting. She knows that rivers and waterfalls are often sacred, and it is as if ancestral spirits are singing to her, calling to her—even though she doesn’t understand a word. As she stares into the roiling water she begins to imagine she can make out dark, naked figures, twining.

With a start she hears a hail from Mike, “Aroha. Where are you? It’s time we left!”

Hastily Aroha stuffs the Kapakapa back down her shirt and races back to the others, her heart pounding. When she asks the others if they could hear what sounded like people singing, they just shake their heads and look at her in a puzzled way.

Continuing on down the valley they come to cliffs that look so steep that Kevin makes them stop and rope up in pairs. “When we get down to a safer spot, I will give you all a climbing lesson,” he says with concern.

The three guys tie themselves firmly to a rock outcrop and belay the girls, and then themselves, down to the small clearing below. However, they all get down surprisingly easily.

Half an hour's trek finally brings them out of scrub onto a beach—where they all stop in utter amazement.

“But this is not Karekare!” Kevin splutters.

“It's not any beach I've ever seen in the Waitaks,” Mike says.

“And I can't see any sign of the road to walk back up on,” Aroha says. She is suffering the effects of being very unfit.

“We'll just have to walk back up the way we came down,” Kalina says in a practical tone.

“No, that would be a big yawn,” Mike insists. “Let's see if we can find the usual way down here by going up the other side of the ridge.”

“And get really lost!” Aroha says apprehensively.

“Oh come on,” Jeannie says. “Mike is known for having a rather uncanny way of finding the right tracks. Even in the dark.”

“What's your vote Kevin?” Mike asks.

“Sure, I'm game, if you are.”

“What about you, Kalina?” Aroha asks.

“Let's decide after lunch. But who's for a swim first?”

They run down the black-sand dunes and dive into the breakers.

Refreshed, they race back up to the dunes and continue their discussion about the strangeness of the valley, with their mouths full of bread and cheese. Some of the party are sure that they must have lost their way.

But Kevin is adamant. “No, there is only one major stream that goes from old Cattle Track road down to Karekare.”

“And we followed all the major forks,” Mike says.

“Let's do a bit of exploring and see if we can't find an easier track up,” Aroha suggests, hopefully.

“Well, whatever way we decide to go up, we should certainly practice some rock climbing techniques first,” Kevin says firmly.

They walk over to some cliffs that rise up out of the sand dunes and where there is at least a soft sand landing. Aroha wonders again and again just how Kevin can make climbing seem so easy when she is stretching every muscle in her body.

When at last it is time for the slog back up to the hanging Valley, Mike proves he is indeed a superb route finder. The trip is slow but uneventful, and before too long they are high on the ridge. Here they have another scroggin stop.

"I remember reading something interesting in a Hut Book," Mike says. "It was written by a German tourist. He wrote, 'An often-asked question by hardy souls from the Northern Hemisphere is why hikers in New Zealand wear shorts rather than long pants, in winter as well as summer. It doesn't take them long to find out. As one Austrian put it, 'Tracks? Real New Zealanders never use tracks. They only use rivers and ridges''". The others chuckle.

With dead reckoning, Mike leads them back into the Cathedral. Only then do they all begin to realize what an anticlimax the trip back has been. Everything has returned to normal: the light, the trees, and the air. In fact not one of them can say just when the changes occurred. They also know that there were no vertical looking cliffs and no high waterfalls anywhere on the way back! Kevin, who is bringing up the rear, turns straight round and walks back between the kauri trees, retracing some of their steps of the morning. This time he sees no change of light. All the others, except Aroha, try it too, with the same result. Aroha, however, just listens—noting that there is no sound from the Wind either.

"Weird," Kevin mumbles. "And I bloody well know that there are no cliffs that steep—or waterfalls that high—in this entire valley. And the river goes straight down to Karekare."

Round the campfire that night there is singing—sometimes bawdy and raucous (Oh Sir Roger!)—But often hauntingly beautiful. Kalina and Kevin play duets—Kalina on the flute and Kevin on a mouth organ, and the music and song drifts away to the hilltops and valleys.

The next day they are up late, and they only have time to explore the valley in a rather desultory manner before heading off downhill to the van.

In the van they discuss things further.

“Are you going to tell your folks about what we’ve seen?” Kevin asks.

“You’re going to confess to losing your way on a Sunday walk in the Waitaks!” Kalina exclaims laughingly.

Kevin makes no move to reply but he does look rather uncomfortable.

By the time they are back in the City they are all, except Aroha, inclined to agree with Kalina that it was all due to fanciful over-enthusiasm.



Chapter Five

The Caves of the Underworld

July 2001

Back at university the next day, Aroha, Kevin, and Jeannie are talking in low voices over cups of coffee.

“What did you mean when you said that you could hear voices near the first waterfall?” Jeannie asks.

“Not near the waterfall—in the waterfall, and not in words I could understand but definitely in words. With syllables.”

“Oh? Then, why do you think we heard nothing—other than the sound of falling water?” Kevin asks.

“Perhaps I’d better show you something I’ve kept hidden,” Aroha says after a significant pause.

“Go on. We promise we’ll tell no one. What is it?”

“On my very first trip to Aorama I found this.” Slowly she pulls the Kapakapa over her head and shows it to them.

“Wow!” Jeannie exclaims. “It’s beautiful. Where did you find it?”

“In the Cathedral—the first day I explored it.”

“But has it anything to do with what occurred at the waterfall?” Kevin asks.

“Yes, I think so. From the day I first found it I’ve experienced many inexplicable things. For example, when I was in the Cathedral I found myself recalling chants, prayers, and names of gods that I haven’t heard since I was a preschooler.” She pauses, not finding words to explain how the Kapakapa enhances her mind’s eye.

“Some sort of latent memory?” Jeannie prompts.

“No, there are other senses involved too. The trouble is—I can’t even explain it to myself.”

She puts out her hand for the Kapakapa and Jeannie, who is fingering it with a puzzled look on her face, hands it back.

“I call it my ‘Kapakapa,’” Aroha tells them. “Last weekend, as I was holding it, I sensed Tawhiri in the trees calling me down into the valley.” She looks at it intensely for a moment before saying, hesitantly: “Now I have sensed Earth Mother deep in caves somewhere, and I distinctly heard her call me to her.”

“Shucks, I don’t know where that leaves us,” Kevin says. “In fact, I don’t really see how it helps explain anything at all. As far as I can see, we now have not one but two mysteries on our hands. But one thing is for sure, I would like to go back to your Valley and do a bit more exploring.”

“So would I,” Aroha says with feeling.

“Shall we see if any of the others are free to come next weekend?”

“Sure.”

That evening, without mentioning the Kapakapa, Jeannie tells Mike a little bit about what Aroha had sensed. Mike is plain skeptical. However, he ends by saying: “But just to prove I’ve taken you seriously, I might ask Ian from the Speleological club to come with us. There can scarcely be a cave within a hundred miles of the City that he hasn’t explored.”

“Thanks a million! I don’t know why I believe Aroha so unreservedly, but I do. And just to be on the safe side, I’m going to put a couple of flashlights at the bottom of my pack.”

The next Friday night Kalina has a composition to finish so there are five of them in the van: Aroha, Kevin, Mike, Jeannie, and Ian.

This time they drive all the way up to the old Cattle Track road. From there, it is only a few minutes walk to Aorama. Naturally, they spend a good part of the night trying to convince Ian, and themselves, that something out of the ordinary happened the previous weekend.

In spite of their varying levels of disbelief, there is not one among them who isn't excited to be up and away early the next morning. They make good time down to the Cathedral, where once again they all pause and send prayers up to the heavens.

"OK," Mike says at last. "Where do we begin? North, south, east, or west?"

Aroha turns slowly while the others stand and watch her. For whatever reason, they know that it is her choice.

Aroha isn't sure that she can hear Earth Mother—just the Wind playing in the treetops as usual. Then she sees, to the north, two nikau¹³ palm trees bend, beckoning. With only a small hesitation she walks between them and is followed in short order by Kevin, Ian, Jeannie, and Mike.

As before, there is a subtle change in the quality of the light, particularly around the small stream ahead of them.

"One thing's for sure," Kevin says, "this is not the stream we followed last weekend!"

"There's no sign of our footprints," Mike points out.

"And notice another change in the plants—they are now more stunted," Jeannie adds.

It is a thoughtful party that sets off downstream. They walk for about an hour when Mike, who is now leading, stops so abruptly that Aroha almost walks into him.

The stream has disappeared into a hole under a cliff!

"I'll be damned!" Ian exclaims.

Mike turns to Aroha, speechless.

Rather inappropriately, Jeannie's first thought is: 'How am I going to explain my flashlights to the others?'

"I guess this calls for a large helping of scroggin," Aroha says.

They eat in thoughtful silence for quite a long time before Jeannie voices the question that several of them have been considering. "How are we going to get in?"

"You really do mean to go in?" Aroha asks.

¹³ Native palm tree, sometimes called a cabbage tree because of the edible young shoots

“Certainly,” Ian says, and opens his pack to reveal several ancient looking carbide lamps. “These are things good speleo explorers are never without,” he assures them, jokingly.

Wordless, Kevin pulls out a rope from the bottom of his pack and gives one end to Ian, and the other end to Mike. He then ties it around his midriff using a karabiner¹⁴.

“I’ll go first,” Ian says. “Watch carefully how I do it.” With Mike belaying Kevin and Kevin belaying Ian, he inches along with his legs and back braced against opposite banks of rock. Once Ian is safely inside the cavern, Aroha is roped up and helped across.

Then it is Jeannie’s turn. “But what if I pull all of you off!” she exclaims.

“No problem,” Ian teases. “We’ll all have a cold bath at the beginning of the trip as well as at the end!”

Before too long they are all safely inside and easing themselves along a narrow ledge. Aroha thinks they look like crabs.

After what seems like a very long time they come out into a second large cavern where wonderful formations, untouched by human hands and seen by few (if any) eyes, grow from the ceiling and floor.

Needless to say, Aroha’s imagination runs riot. Wherever she looks (literally because the little lamp on her helmet follows each turn of her head) she sees marvelous creatures in the brown stalagmites: gnomes, dwarves, and all sorts of animals. Each creature has been frozen in time, as if by a spell. In contrast, the stalactites are formations of wondrous beauty.

Further on, still following the long, low, winding tunnel of the stream, there are places with only six inches of airspace where they have to turn over on their backs and inch along with little more than their noses above water. Eventually they come to the top of a waterfall that is too steep for them to climb down. For over an hour Aroha, Jeannie, and Mike sit in near-darkness (they have turned off all of their lamps, except

¹⁴ Metal lock for passing ropes through and around

one, to save fuel) while their 'guides' (Ian and Kevin) look for an alternative route. For a while they talk softly.

"Did you hear that Rada found a whole moa's egg in a cave near here?" Mike asks.

"No, really?" Jeannie says, amazed.

"Yes, it was at the bottom of a deep tomo. It probably rolled down into the mud where it was preserved."

"Do you think there will be DNA that can be used for cloning?" Aroha asks.

The others laugh.

"You've been watching too many movies, Aroha," Mike says.

However, Aroha imagines tall moas¹⁵ running through the variegated native grasses. There are baby ones too, nestling in woven grass nests with their mouths open wide. Huge eagle-like birds circle overhead.

Later, while just sitting quietly and listening to the sound of the water, Aroha marvels at the feeling of contentment. She thinks, 'We're goodness knows how many meters under the earth, and probably lost, but the feeling of more-than-togetherness is almost tangible.'

She puts her hand on her Kapakapa and with a suddenness that catches her unawares, the world around her turns inside out.

Formations on the far side of the cavern seem to spring out at her. She can no longer see her companions sitting right next to her. The low gap to the left of them now looks like a large mouth with two rows of sharp yellow teeth. The iron oxide formations take on the color of blood. She can feel the huge power of Tanemahuta, the son of Sky Father and Earth Mother, as he hurls Sky Father off Earth Mother, letting in light to the world in the days of the creation.

¹⁵ Giant running birds that became extinct around 1850

She can sense the uneasy stresses and strains that keep them apart. She becomes aware of her ancestors congregating around her, laughing at her puny, soft, mocha-colored self. Last of all she 'sees' Hineuitempo, the tragic keeper of souls gone to the night in the underworld, fading away from her. But suddenly she also senses Earth Mother talking to her:

Don't forget this place. You might still need it many years from now, long after you have found the second half of your Kapakapa—as you have named your 'Mindcaller'.

Shaken she pulls her hand away from her Kapakapa with a jerk.

Jeannie notices, and asks, "Is anything wrong?"

"No, I just had a sort of waking dream," Aroha answers. But she knows that it wasn't like a dream at all. In fact it wasn't like anything she has experienced before and she feels shaken to her core. It is with utmost relief that she notices that Kevin and Ian have returned. She feels like flying to Kevin and hugging him close, mud and all.

The party leaves the streambed and edges along a muddy side tunnel on their stomachs and sides. It's full of sticky yellow and orange clay that gets in their eyes, ears, and noses. As for their clothes, there is no trace of natural color left showing. By the end of that experience they are a tightly knit group in more sense than one.

When at last they rejoin the river, there is one further glorious surprise: Glow-worms! They are nestled amongst the formations of an enormous cavern. With only the dripping of water for music, they walk slowly past vistas of light that defy imagination. Gradually Aroha's stomach un-knots and she begins to sense that Earth Mother is once again near her, encouraging her to look beyond herself into a timeless present. Last to leave, she turns back for a final look.

The glow-worms are shooting like stars! They explode like fireworks.

She can't believe that the others don't sense them and turn back.

It is an awe-inspired group that returns to the city that evening. Aroha feels that Earth mother has, for some reason she cannot explain, guided and safeguarded her. She rings Kalina as soon as she can that evening and tries to explain what she had seen and felt. She can't wait to show her at least the entrance to the cavern.

Studies forgotten, Kevin, Ian, and Mike go out again during the week, but without finding anything of interest to report back to the girls. Certainly there is no sign of the cave. Aroha finds this particularly hard to believe.

One evening over a late cappuccino, Jeannie prompts her. "Do you feel like telling me a bit more about your time in the caves? I know that you jumped and said you had a bad dream. But I just know there's more to it."

"Needless to say, it was not a dream," Aroha begins. "It was another mind flash. First the cave seemed to become bathed in blood-red ochre..."

"Hell! I know what you mean," interrupts Jeannie. "I saw something too. At least I thought I did for an instant. The whole cave turned red for a scary moment. I thought I must have just imagined it."

Aroha is delighted to find that Jeannie has experienced something too.

"To me—"Aroha begins tentatively—"it looked like the mouth to the underworld with Hineuitemo—the Keeper of the underworld—flanked by souls of the dead and half-hidden behind huge teeth. And a short time later a series of other flashes were superimposed: characters from the Earth Mother and Sky Father Creation stories. But I swear I've never seen or read any of the details I saw last weekend: the size of Tanemahutu's muscles as he pushed Sky Father off Earth Mother and up into the sky; the colors in the sparkles of

Uru¹⁶'s tears as he wept over the separation of his two loving parents. I'll never forget the look in the eyes of the fish pulled from the sea by Maui!"

"And it scared you?"

"Yes and no. That is the strangest thing of all. The Keeper of the underworld still worries me; I keep looking over my shoulder. But I'm becoming convinced that Earth Mother is showing me these things for a good reason. I now know that in denying my Maori heritage all these years, I shut out my cultural identity, so to speak. I'm only half a person, which may explain why I was so soul-destroyingly lonely all my teenage years. I also suspect that my mother did the same thing when she married my father."

"It could certainly explain why you never spoke Maori in your home."

"And why, after I was five, I never saw my Nan or any of my cousins on the Marae up north."

Although they have solved nothing, both go home that evening feeling unaccountably optimistic that they will find answers.

On the first available Sunday Aroha takes Kalina out to the valley and down to the Cathedral. All is quiet, and although they poke around for quite a long time they see nothing out of the ordinary.

"You really are an incurable romantic," Kalina teases.

"You think I'm just being fanciful?" Aroha asks. "But the others are sure that something funny is going on."

"Maybe so. But there's certain to be some logical explanation," Kalina says with finality.

¹⁶ The "forgotten" son of Sky Father and Earth Mother



Chapter Six

More Surprises And Many More Questions than Answers

January 2002

Six frustrating months pass during which time the five friends try to catch up with a backlog of reading and assignments, and take as many trips out to Aorama as possible. Kevin has been the most persistent, frequently going out by himself and practically searching every square meter of the Valley to no avail. It is after a late evening struggle with a botany assignment that he brings up the subject once more.

“How would you feel about taking a day trip to Aorama next Sunday? Just the two of us,” he asks Aroha rather diffidently. “I love your Valley—even if we don’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

Aroha replies. “Yes, me too. How about next Sunday? And I will make sure I bring my Kapakapa with me.”

“What time will I pick you up?”

“You choose.”

“How about seven?”

“Right. See you then.”

It is a bleary eyed Kevin who knocks on Aroha’s door on Sunday morning. They talk in monosyllables on the way out to the Valley, because, having studied late, they are very sleepy. It is a beautiful morning with golden lights playing on the grasses. They sit in the sun eating scroggin and Kevin gives Aroha all his pieces of chocolate.

“You can see why I called this place Aorama: World of Light,” Aroha says.

“Yes, it must be one of the most beautiful places in the world,” Kevin concurs.

They sit in companionable silence for some time before Kevin asks, “Are you wearing your Kapakapa?”

“Yes, but all I can sense is the Wind at his usual tricks in the trees. No!” Aroha is suddenly alert. To Kevin she seems to be just staring into space.

After a significant moment she gasps, and says, “It’s Nan! I saw Nan again. She’s calling me. I really do want to see her again, and my cousins too. I just know I should. I also saw a visualization of Nan that time in the cave. Hineuitemo¹⁷ could have been calling her!”

“Right. I’ll come with you if you like. But do you know how to find the village?”

“No, but I’ll ring Mum tonight.”

Aroha’s mother is, as always, reluctant to talk about the Marae, but with Aroha’s perseverance she finally gives Aroha directions to the village.

Kevin drives Aroha up north the next free Sunday. During the long car trip Kevin becomes aware of how little he knows about Aroha’s childhood and asks her to tell him a bit about it.

“I can remember the day, not long after my fifth birthday, when Nan called me to her. She was looking unusually serious. Holding up a letter, she told me that the very next day my mother and father would come and collect me. I do remember feeling panicky as I helped Nan pack all my precious paua-shell¹⁸ treasures carefully into a basket.” She is quiet for some time before going on.

“I also remember the surprise I felt when Nan gave me a goodbye hongī¹⁹—with tears that ran down our noses as they touched. There was no talking and no laughter as we drove south to Maungaturoto where my father had just been appointed headmaster of the local school. I certainly felt sick

¹⁷ Keeper of the underworld

¹⁸ Shellfish, abalone

¹⁹ Greeting by touching noses

as the car bounced over the corrugated ruts. One of the first new rules I learnt was that I had to always speak English.”

Aroha points out the town of Maungaturoto to Kevin as they pass it.

“Tell me a bit about your life there,” Kevin prompts.

“Well, I know that I spent hours building hide-away houses in a huge round culvert under the road. And I made earthworks and dams in the mud and water. But I enjoyed school most. Even homework was no problem because I worked at a little table in my father’s office.”

“What about playing with other children?”

Aroha laughs. “There were no children within walking distance. In the evenings we all sat around the fire and read books and listened to classical music” Aroha had been so quick at her schoolwork (and additional French and German lessons that had come by mail from the National Correspondence School) that she was promoted up through the classes until she became the youngest student to graduate from the high school.

At last they come to the township of Whangarei, and, following directions, turn east toward the coast.

At the end of the partially sealed road they come to the gates of the Marae. They stop the car and walk hand-in-hand through the carved entryway. Suddenly they both stop. Kevin’s mouth drops open; Aroha is dumbfounded. The buildings look to be little more than flax-covered shelters, and nothing appears to be as Aroha remembers it. But what grabs her attention most is a beautiful young woman, wearing only a flax skirt, who looks at her with Nan’s eyes. A few moments later the vision is gone leaving both Aroha and Kevin white faced. They shake their heads in mute silence. But even now everything does look old and dilapidated, and nothing like the place Aroha remembers. Her initial reaction is that it isn’t the right spot. However a question asked to a child elicits the information that, yes, Nan lives in the house that is just to the right of the meetinghouse. Their young informant offers to escort them to the house. In her anxiety Aroha is finding it so

hard to breathe that she feels like she has a very large menagerie of butterflies in her stomach. The child knocks on the door, and, with scarcely a pause, the door opens and an old woman envelopes Aroha in her arms, saying:

“I was expecting you. I knew you were coming!”

“How did you know?” Aroha manages to ask.

“Just felt it in my bones,” Nan replies.

At last Aroha remembers to introduce Kevin who is standing back self-consciously.

“Nan, this is Kevin. Kevin, this is Whāea Kēpa–Nan for short.”

After looking at Kevin for what seems to be a very long moment, Nan says, “No, I wasn’t expecting you. But you are very welcome. Come in. Come in all of you.” And she includes all the little children who are peering curiously around the door.

“I see that you’ve learnt to speak English, Nan,” Aroha says playfully.

“Did you think I could only speak Maori?” Nan chuckles.

Looking around the room, Aroha says, “I see that you now have a phone too.”

“Times change,” Nan says wistfully. Then with a little shake, she says, “But tell me how you are. And what have you been doing since the time you were a little button just five years old.”

All too quickly the afternoon flies past. A communal meal is eaten where Aroha is introduced to all her whānau²⁰, young and old, and then it is time for the long drive home. Aroha has Nan’s phone number safely in a pocket and she knows that they will keep in touch.

They drive in silence for a long time as they both think over all they have seen and heard. Not once has the Kapakapa been mentioned. Aroha feels instinctively that her Nan would have understood, but she feels that she just doesn’t know the rest of her family well enough yet.

²⁰ Extended family

"You saw it too!" Aroha breaks the silence.

Kevin doesn't pretend to misinterpret what she is referring to. "Yes. As soon as we passed through the gates."

"Everything looked ancient?" Aroha queries.

"Yes, except for that lovely woman surrounded by children."

"She looked like Nan must have looked twenty years ago. She had Nan's smile. I'm positive she did."

"Y'know this proves that the experiences we had in your Valley were not unique to there."

"Yes, I was beginning to think that we stumbled into some sort of portal, or time warp, in the Cathedral. And, by the way, I've just recalled that the Maori for 'to see a vision' is whakarehu. I wonder if that is significant. Perhaps that is what I should call my carving."

"No," Kevin teases. "I've only recently learnt to refer to it as the Kapakapa."

"Thank you. Thank you, from my heart, for coming with me today," Aroha says shyly, as she tousles his unruly hair with her hand.

"I enjoyed it too," Kevin says. "Particularly the way your young cousins treated me as if I'd never had a decent feed in my life."

"I can't help wondering how many protocols we broke," Aroha says. "Nan used to be extremely strict. Anyway, she seemed very pleased to see us, and sorry to see us go, so we can't have done too badly."

They relapse into companionable silence until, just as they reach the outskirts of the city, Kevin says, "I have to go on a four-week training camp to National Park next Friday."

"So, I suppose I won't see you for a while."

"Would you by any chance be able to come and visit one weekend?"

"Yes. I'd love to. I haven't ever been to National Park."

"It won't be first class accommodation. Rangers are meant to be tough. But I do know that I will have a hut with at least two bunks in it."

Two weekends later Aroha takes the night train to National Park where Kevin meets her. The next day bright sunlight wakes them. Aroha flings open the door and catches her breath.

"It's breathtaking! Come on. Don't be lazy. What am I looking at?" Suddenly she shudders. "What's that fiery mountain? And how come it looks icy cold!"

"On a day like this?"

"Yes. Really cold."

Kevin finally comes to the door. It is then his turn to stand with a look of incredulity on his face.

"B... hell! What's happened? It didn't look like this yesterday! There's a heck of a lot more volcanic activity for starters. And tons more snow. There's something really weird going on."

After a hasty breakfast Kevin says, "Well, what do you think? Do you still want to go walking?"

"Yes, let's go right now before I really do get cold feet."

Only a short distance onward they both come to a standstill.

"Look at how high those mountains are," Aroha exclaims, awestruck.

"And no way are the sides that steep," Kevin mutters.

"Look there! The two on the left are also volcanic cones with wisps of steam coming from their craters."

"And they are snow covered. In fact ice covered by the look of the mountain to the right," Kevin puts in.

"I think it looks a bit like pictures I've seen of Mt. Taranaki," Aroha says slowly, "although there's something odd about its shape."

"Next you'll be telling me that the river that has suddenly appeared in front of us has a Maori name."

"If it does, I certainly don't know what it is."

They both sit down and pick all the chunks of chocolate out of the scroggin bag.

Eventually, with a deep breath, Kevin says, "Let's go." He pulls Aroha up, and hand-in-hand they walk down a slope to a fairly wide river flat.

Once down, Kevin remarks, "It's odd, but the river doesn't look as big as it did from the top of the ridge."

"One more thing to add to our list of crazy happenings," Aroha says.

"Well, is it to be left or right?" Kevin asks.

"Left. I feel a call from there," Aroha says.

They walk for a good hour before the river bends closer to the plateau at the foot of the mountains.

"Look!" Kevin says pointing. "Over there near those trees. It looks like a hut of some sort."

It is little more than a bivy²¹ with some sort of thatched roof.

"Well that proves one thing," Aroha says. "People have been here, wherever 'here' is. And there are even footprints!" she adds excitedly.

She is right, but closer examination shows that they are quite old, appearing almost fossilized.

They look around but can see no sign of life other than flocks of birds.

Feeling that it is lunchtime, they go back to the river and splash about a bit in the ice-cold water before sitting down on two boulders.

"This proves that the strange things we saw on our last two trips are not mere figments of our imaginations," Kevin says. "I was right when I swore that the valley down to the sea is not on any map of the Waitakeres. And Ian was right when he swore that those limestone caves are way out of character for the area. And, by the way, he keeps asking when we'll take him out there again. I keep hedging, but I sympathize with his persistence."

"Kevin, have you any idea what is going on?"

²¹ A small makeshift hut

“Not a b... thing. One thing is for sure though; the scientist in me won't believe in magic, not that I can really believe my own eyes right here and now.”

“But surely there is one thing we do know: what we're experiencing is in some way linked to my Kapakapa.”

“Yes,” Kevin agrees.

“But how?” Aroha goes on. “I think that I shouldn't hide it from the others any longer. At least not from Kalina and Mike. Perhaps they'll have some ideas.”

“I doubt it. Still, you're right. You should tell them. Perhaps we should invite them to come down here next weekend.”

“I hope I can persuade Kalina to come. I'm sure Mike and Jeannie will be game.”

“Of course now the real question is will we find 'here' again next week?”

“I believe so. As Nan would say, I just feel it in my bones. Let's try when we get back to your hut.”

Slowly and lingeringly, as if they both don't want the day to end, they walk back to the hut with arms around each other.

Once inside, Aroha says, “Come on. Let's try and get back out again.” They do, with no problem. The world of fiery mountains is just as they left it.

Chapter Seven

The Old Pa Site

February 2002

Talking with her friends back in the city Aroha finds that, when it comes to it, it is difficult to describe what was out of the ordinary. The others actually laugh at her description of a river that seemed to shrink as they approached it. The main problem, however, is that she had never seen National Park before, so she had to take Kevin's word for it that it looked 'different'. She ends by saying, "Heck, Kevin is a ranger after all. He *knows* his mountains."

"And you're not biased by any chance?" Jeannie teases.

Ignoring Jeannie's quip, Aroha then tells Mike and Kalina about the finding of her Kapakapa and naturally they want to see it.

"Yes, it certainly does look old," Kalina says.

"And the surfaces are amazingly smooth," Jeannie puts in, "except for those small gray spots at the end."

"And they don't wash or rub off. I tried," Aroha says.

"What puzzles me most are the geometrical patterns carved around the top edge." Mike says. "They look like they're there for a purpose."

"I've wondered about them too," Aroha says. "However, and I'm quite serious, I believe there's some sort of link between the Kapakapa and the strange things we've been experiencing. But I've absolutely no clue, how, or why, or what."

Remembering their looks when she told them about hearing voices at the waterfall she says nothing about her visual flashes.

They all agree that the Kapakapa looks like obsidian, and that it is probably very old.

"Except," as Mike points out, "if it's so old, it's extraordinarily well preserved. If I remember rightly, obsidian sheers easily."

"I hesitate to ask this of you," Aroha says looking at each in turn, "and I know it sounds silly, but I would like it to be kept secret."

One by one they nod. Then Mike says, "Given the amount of time we've spent searching around Aorama in the last few months without finding anything out of the ordinary, I'm not sure that anyone would believe us if we did tell them!"

"I agree," Aroha says. "I remember how you looked at me when I mentioned hearing voices at the waterfall in the Waitakeres. Imagine what other people would say if I were to describe shooting stars in a glow-worm cave!"

They all laugh.

"But the point is," Aroha continues, "when I was in the caves I became convinced that the Kapakapa is tied to my Maori heritage. I had a strong sense that it is sacred, hallowed... Damn! I can't think of an English word to describe what I mean. So..."

"So, you would rather that we did not mention anything to anyone until we are more certain of our facts," Mike concludes.

"That'll be no problem," Kalina says. The others, though obviously reluctant, nod in agreement.

"One thing's for sure, I'm going down to National Park again as soon as possible," Aroha says. "Damnation! I've just remembered that next weekend our family is having a small pre-birthday get together."

"Well, how about the following weekend?" Jeannie suggests.

"Although it will be one more week to wait," Mike says. "I bet I'll be unable to concentrate on any research in the mean time."

"Surely the Kapakapa world isn't more interesting than mathematics," Aroha teases.

As they part they decide that, because Aroha and Kevin went upriver on their last trip, this time they will explore downriver.

Later that evening when Aroha rings Kalina and asks her what she thinks about the latest news Kalina hedges.

“You just don’t believe me, do you,” Aroha says sadly.

“No,” Kalina responds. “I would have thought that you of all people would be a bit more logical, and a great deal more practical. Besides, you must be getting very behind in your work.”

With a hollow feeling in her stomach Aroha says goodbye. She feels it is a breakdown of trust.

On Friday morning Aroha has a phone call from Kalina saying that she can’t come because a special quartet that she wants to hear is playing at the music school. Aroha knows that she shouldn’t feel let down, but she does.

Down at National Park, equipped with cameras and warm parkas, the party finds that Mike has stowed five inner tubes from old cars in the back of the van. He looks a bit sheepish when Jeannie asks:

“And what are those for?”

“Can’t you guess? They’ll provide us with the fastest way of getting down the river. Actually, I wish we’d had them with us when we were in the caves.”

Thus, they set off for the hut looking like a party of drunks each with a tire around their necks. Laughing with suppressed excitement, only Kevin and Aroha pause to consider the anticlimax it will be if the strange plateau and river are no longer there. At the hut they stop for the briefest time before following Kevin out into the incredible other world. But the river is still there, with the mountains glistening in sunshine. They all exclaim at the rugged steep slopes and the surprisingly big river.

Having tumbled down the slope, it is soon clear that Mike was right to bring the inner tubes even though, as Kevin points out, the river is much smaller than it looked from the top. In a remarkably short time they bob and bounce in the tubes all the

way down the river to the next tributary. Here they stop and decide to explore the beautiful stream with its pastel-colored, glacier-fed water.

The two girls decide to stay by the stream while Kevin and Mike climb up onto the ridge to reconnoiter. Up until now Jeannie has always seen streams as challenges: raging ones to be belayed across, waterfalls to negotiate, or stream beds to boulder-hop up or down in. However, very soon she decides that Aroha sees things differently. She sees beauty in small ferns and colored pebbles in a streambed. Together they discover tiny wild flowers nestled in between boulders, and Geckos scurrying in the manuka bushes—some green with yellow spots, and some yellow with green spots. There are baby ones too—as bright as little jewels.

The rapids are for massaging tired backs, the pools for quick skinny-dips. They take so many photos it would take a lifetime to catalogue them all. Aroha sketches, Jeannie plays her mouth organ, and they both sing.

When the two guys return, Kevin has some news.

“Look what I found in an old abandoned pa site!” He shows them a small dirt-covered tiki. It looks old although, amazingly, it still has its two paua-shell eyes.



Aroha looks across at Kevin as he stands scrutinizing the tiki. Somehow she feels inexplicably closer to him—as if she knows what he is feeling. When he says “I’ll keep it as a good luck charm,” she knows with a feeling of certainty that he tried

to suppress the thought: 'And just hope that it won't bring me bad luck instead.' She has a strong urge to put her arms around him to keep him safe.

"Can we go and look too?" Jeannie asks.

"Sure," Mike says, "although there's not very much to see. The palisade has fallen down in several places, but it still has a bit of its original red ochre color left to it."

"Are there any buildings?" Aroha asks.

"No, though I did see signs of pits."

"How far is it from here," Aroha asks.

"Not far in a straight line. I found the tiki on the way back here. I could take you there now. It's on the way back to the river anyway."

It is a steep climb but they are all delighted with what they find. Aroha thinks that the palisade of sticks tied together with flax strands is in surprisingly good condition. They find an old hangi pit where fires were lit and food cooked. Other depressions may have been for storage.

While the girls are busy exploring Kevin and Mike set out lunch. The fact that it was Aroha's birthday the previous week has not even been mentioned. Now, however, they find out why the guys' packs were so big and heavy. They had brought large tins of food that heat themselves automatically when opened. There are two sorts of stew, a plum pudding, and even a bottle of wine. Soon shouts of 'Happy Birthday Aroha' echo over the pa site. The gifts are ingenious models of smallness and lightness: a whistle (in case she gets lost), a tiny sundial, and an odd looking contraption that Mike swears is the most efficient 'mosquitoswiper'²² ever designed.

For some reason the incongruity of it all, sitting in an ancient pa site having a twenty-first century party sets Aroha off laughing. Soon all the others are laughing as well.

Aroha thinks of Kalina and wishes she had come. She remembers someone saying that they are an odd pair. It is ironic, she thinks, that Kalina, a composer, has a really down-

²² Mosquito

to-earth focus, while she, the scientist, is developing an increasingly mystical mind.

On the hike back they keep a good look out for any further sign of habitation but find none. They do, however, see several flocks of enormous birds whirling above them.

“Those look like albatrosses!” Jeannie exclaims, pointing. “There are dozens of them.”

To their frustration, they only have time to pause very briefly. In the van they resolve, as Mike puts it, to have a ‘council of war’ at the very next opportunity.



Chapter Eight

Rock, Fire, and Ice Mountains

March 2002

The three friends gather at the statue of Sir George Grey in the University Park for their parley.

"I guess we've all had a lot to think over," Mike begins.

"Yes, but I still find it hard to believe what I think I saw," Jeannie says.

Mike says. "Let's begin by listing some propositions—I won't call them facts. Proposition one: We all experienced a change in the quality of the light."

Aroha puts in, "Proposition two: the water in the Waitaks was green and icy,"

"Proposition three," Jeannie says. "There are mountain flowers like I've never seen before."

"Proposition four: there are trees the like of which I've never seen before," Aroha replies.

"Proposition five: the river did look like it got smaller the closer we got," says Jeannie.

"Proposition six," Mike says. "The mountains looked to be steeper; they seemed younger."

It is this last point that they discuss most seriously.

At last Mike voices what several of them are thinking. He begins by saying, "You know the old adage that when you've eliminated everything that is possible, the impossible must be possible? Well, it's beginning to look as if we've all stumbled on some sort of visual discrepancy. We're seeing things countless years old."

"I'm not sure we stumbled onto it," Jeannie says. "I think it was Aroha."

"Yes, and I still think the Kapakapa has everything to do with it," Aroha says. "On the other hand, I sense that if we

want to find any answers, our only option is to explore the volcanic plateau Kevin and I saw on our trip.”

“Right,” Mike agrees. “After all, if the Kapakapa is obsidian, it just might have been formed there. But it won’t be a Sunday walk. In fact we may need climbing gear. I’ll ring Kevin tonight.”

After much discussion it’s decided that at least four of them will make the attempt on the coming weekend, which happens to be a long weekend.

Once more they drive out to National Park on a Friday evening, arriving after dark when it is too late to see very much. Kevin says that everything has looked disappointingly normal since Aroha left.

At daybreak they are all up and gazing out the window. It is a cold and windy day but this does not stop them dashing out the door and staring spellbound.

At length Kevin says, ‘It’s back again! Look at the volcanic plateau to the left—with Mt. Ruapehu and Ngäuruhoe, both with steam rising from their craters.’

“And over there! Look how active Tongariro is,” Mike exclaims. With that there is a huge bang as the mountain spits up an enormous jet of rock and fire.

“The only one quiet is that one over to the right. It looks like Mt. Taranaki—but younger, much younger,” Kevin says.

“They’re far closer together than they should be. It’s absolutely incredible!” Mike says.

“Does the river down there in front of us have a name?” Aroha asks.

“It can’t possibly be the Whanganui,” Kevin says thoughtfully. “It’s further west. But I can’t think what else it looks like.”

With a start, Aroha recalls another bit of history she had long forgotten. She says slowly “Interestingly, the ancient Maori considered mountains to be embodiments of the sons and daughter of Sky Father and Earth Mother. Taranaki lived with his brothers Ruapehu, Ngäuruhoe, and Tongariro. However there was a great fight between Taranaki and

Tongariro over the beautiful girl Pihanga. Tongariro was the victor and Taranaki left his brothers in sorrow to make his way slowly to the most western part of the land, carving out the Whanganui river valley as he went."

"After what we're seeing, I'm not going to be the one to argue," Jeannie says, turning away.

While absentmindedly munching on cabin bread they stuff all their belongings back in their packs. In spite of being a cold and windy day, they are all eager to be off.

Kevin leads them straight upriver to the bivy that he and Aroha found on their first trip. There, the two girls take one look in the doorway and declare that before anything can be taken inside it has to be swept out. They cut some reeds and take turns in making dust clouds that glimmer in the light rays from the one little window hole. Jeannie puts Mike's one-and-only handkerchief over her face before tackling her part of the job. "This can never, ever, have been swept out properly," she announces.

At last Aroha says, "I'm starving. Let's just call it done and have brunch."

"I'm filthy! I need a swim first," Jeannie insists.

So they all splash in the river before settling into an overdue feed.

Unfortunately, the local mosquitoes that also come for lunch rather spoil it. Mike teases Aroha for not bringing the mozzie swiper he had given her, and then asks, "I wonder what they live on when they don't have humans for lunch?"

"I also wonder how all the millions of evicted dust mites are getting on," Jeannie mumbles through a mouthful of sandwich.

"Do you think they are marching in convoys straight back inside?" Kevin suggests.

"Perhaps we should play marching music for them," Mike says. He starts beating a pot lid with a stick, but seeing as he has no sense of rhythm the others soon laughingly beg him to stop.

"You know," Jeannie says thoughtfully, "I once read in a scientific magazine that researchers have developed mite-sized machines. They're made out of silicon but have moving parts; gears and suchlike. If I remember rightly, they're known as micro-electro-mechanical machines: MEMs for short."

"What could they be used for?" Aroha asks. "Microsurgery?"

"I'm not sure, but I do know that they have complex computer circuitry in them."

"Perhaps for killing dust mites," Kevin jokes.

Naturally, the rest of the lunchtime is spent coming up with more outlandish ideas.

After stowing their gear in the bivy, they spend the rest of the day exploring the plateau. They find several pieces of obsidian but none looks remotely like Aroha's one.

"Notice how much more translucent the thin parts of these ones are," Mike remarks.

Early next morning they set off for the summit of Mt. Ruapehu, avoiding the icy patches as much as they can. Slowly and carefully they make their way up through crusty snow. They pass icicles on some of the rock faces that sparkle like frozen waterfalls. At the top the view is truly outstanding. They can see right across the volcanic plateau and along the river to Mt. Taranaki in the East. Aroha stands on the edge of the crater and looks down into the murky, bubbling, steaming depths and shudders. She then looks across at the steaming crown of Ngäuruhoe. She remembers hearing a story about Ruamoko, the unborn child of Sky Father and Earth Mother, who is known for his kicking and thrashing about in the womb. His tantrums can hurl lava and ash from mountains such as these. She shivers and Mike notices.

"Cold?"

"No, not particularly, just another useless recall."

Traversing around to the right under a sun that is now mercilessly hot, the party keeps sinking through the top crust

layer into several feet of soft snow. Aroha wonders how quickly they are covering the ground.

That evening in the bivy, Aroha says disconsolately, "Unfortunately I don't see that we've got any closer to answering any of our questions about these worlds of ours."

"Can I have a closer look at your Kapakapa, Aroha," Mike asks.

"Certainly," Aroha responds as she gives it to him.

From their findings of the day before, Mike chooses a fragment of obsidian of approximately the same volume as Aroha's piece. He then weighs the two in his hands. "I thought as much. The Kapakapa is significantly heavier!"

In turn, the others hold the two pieces and agree with him.

Next, Mike first holds the new piece, then the Kapakapa, up close to the lamp.

"There are markings on the Kapakapa!" he exclaims. "Down here in the end where it's thinner. There are fine tracings!"

The others can hardly wait to look.

"Well, that certainly suggests it could be manmade," Aroha says.

"Or at least made by some intelligent being," Jeannie says. "If we're going to be open minded about time warps, let's be open minded about time travel."

"Then it could be some sort of computer chip. Or even contain a collection of MEMs," Aroha says excitedly.

"Assuming it is made by aliens, and they are capable of time travel. But do you think they could possibly make a chip small enough to link worlds?" Jeannie asks.

No one is game enough to give an answer.

"If nothing else, at least we've got one possible explanation as to why it is relatively heavy and strong," Mike says, ending the discussion. At length they decide to retire to bed.

The decision to try and climb Mt. Ngäuruhoe next morning is not made lightly. Kevin and Mike are very keen 'just

because it's there.' A near-perfect cone of black scoria, in the summer it frequently rains fiery lava from its summit, while in the winter icy storms blow up around it with practically no warning. In spring literally anything can blow up.

At first light they are ready for the challenge of climbing up to the summit. The sky is clear as they begin the ascent but by mid-morning the wind is up and has brought clouds in from the south. The rock is icy in patches. The four friends doggedly continue on, with the boys competing to see who can make the most encouraging remarks. Frustratingly, by lunchtime the Wind is spitting and cursing them with rain mixed with sleet, and visibility is getting worse quickly. When they suddenly hear a deafening explosion from the direction of Tongariro, they all stand transfixed. The eruption is followed by a series of avalanches that miss them only by some miracle. At last, shivering in their jackets, Kevin orders a hasty retreat from the top. In Aroha's mind the glissade down the scree slopes back to the plateau is by far the best part of the day. Not a single photo has been taken.

That evening they sit around a good fire and talk and eat until they are too tired to do either. Aroha imagines as she drifts off to sleep that there is a Taniwha²³ lashing in the bowels of Mt. Taranaki. But she decides that the shiny armor of ice which plates the mountain should be enough to discourage all but the most determined of adventurers.

By the end of the weekend Mike is quieter than usual. It is obvious to all that he has laid his heart at Jeannie's rather reluctant feet.

²³ A mythical monster

Chapter Nine

Avalanche

December 2002

After their final exams, Aroha, Mike, and Jeannie meet with irrepressible optimism. Aroha has received a phone call from Kevin suggesting that they join him in the Southern Alps where he is currently based. Although Kalina says that she is too busy starting her graduate work to join them, Aroha knows the real reason is that she still does not believe in the existence of the other worlds. As Kalina says, 'Photographs prove nothing in this world of digital enhancements!'

Aroha has taken her Kapakapa out of the little box in her bottom drawer where she resolutely kept it while she was studying.

"Have you felt any more calls from other worlds Aroha?" Jeannie asks hopefully.

"Yes, as soon as I put it on this morning. But this time they are... well, sort of fainter, as if they are further away. But one thing I'm sure of, they come from mountaintops that are extremely cold. Colder, if it's possible, than Mt. Ngäuruhoe!"

"If that's so, this time we'd better go fully prepared," Mike says. "I'll give Kevin a ring and see if he can borrow ice axes and crampons—for all of us."

Aroha and Jeannie offer to see to the provisions. They spend several hours in a supermarket one morning buying what seems like mountains of food: cheese, bacon, salami, milk powder, and dehydrated meals. In the afternoon they use the food list given to them by Kevin to weigh out grams of this and kilos of that. Obviously the guys expect to have large appetites.

They leave the city one Friday at the beginning of January and fly down to the Queenstown. This time Mike has taken a whole fortnight off work.

Kevin meets the tired but excited trio and drives them up to the end of the access road.

"Good God!" Kevin gasps. "Everything's changed! Just like it did at National Park. That's *supposed* to be Mt. Aotaki, or Mt. Cook in English," he says pointing, "but now it's taller, and sort of grander."

"You're right," Mike exclaims. "No way do any of these mountains look anything like normal. They're all far steeper than they should be!"

"Believe me," Kevin says insistently, "they were all completely natural when I left just a few hours ago."

They all turn wordlessly to Aroha. "The Kapakapa..." she murmurs. "And yes, I'm wearing it."

"Well, are we all still game to go up to the headwaters this evening?" Kevin asks.

There is a chorus of affirmations of varied keenness.

Under moonlight they make their way up to the foothills of the mountain range. It is eerie, but beautiful. They are surrounded by snow sculptures above a rain forest with roaring streams.

Kevin has provided them all with ice axes and crampons. Next morning he takes over and plans their day. "See the glacier up there?" he asks. They all nod mutely. "And do you see, about one third of the way up, there's an icefall?" Again they nod. "Well if we can get up that, we should be able to make a snug snow cave at the head of the glacier."

"An ice cave! Great! I've always longed to build one," Jeannie exclaims excitedly. There is now no holding Kevin and Jeannie back and their enthusiasm is contagious.

"We'll call this our base camp and leave some of our things here under that sloping rock. Unless you want to carry that mountain of food all the way up." Mike jokes. Today we'll just climb up to the glacier but come back here tonight. Tomorrow we'll try and make it up the icefall."

On a ridge just below the snowline they practice their rock climbing skills. Aroha finds herself tied down to a rock outcrop, with the slack of the rope fastened to her waist with a

metal karabiner²⁴. At one point during the ascent Kevin is high above her reconnoitering the route and she can no longer see Mike or Jeannie who are still back on the other side of the ridge. She could be alone in that snow covered, silent world. Her fingers go to the Kapakapa. This time, a flash shows her: *Kevin, painstakingly securing the rope so she will be safe.* In that instant she sees how much he loves her.

Above the snowline they learn snow and ice skills. On the lower slopes they practice their self-arrests and dynamic belays (with calls of "Hold!" echoing down the glacier) until Aroha is leaving bloodstains in the snow from rope-burns through her gloves. It's just as well because later that day, coming down off a ridge, there is a cry of "Hold" from Jeannie. With well-practiced reflexes the others fall flat onto their ice axes and stop her fall just short of a hidden crevasse. Jeannie assures them she has had a soft landing.

Back at the camp, while the girls cook a well-earned meal, Kevin and Mike puzzle over the day's bizarreness.

"It's the same thing that we've experienced all along," Kevin says. "Things look to be steeper and fresher than they should be. But when we actually climb them they don't feel so extreme. It's just plain weird."

"I agree," Mike says. "While we were practicing belaying I kept trying to judge the gradient of the various slopes. And every time, judging from the comparative slowness of our slides down, I was out in my reckoning."

"Well, I'm mighty glad that things weren't as bad as they might have been," Jeannie says. "Either on the way up or on the way down."

Aroha heartily agrees.

Up at first light the next morning, the party makes extraordinarily good progress up to the base of the icefall with their crampons getting superb hold in their steps of the

²⁴ Metal lock for passing ropes through and around

previous day. Further on, they have to cross a snow bridge, praying, before carving steps up a vertical ice wall. They are on top of the icefall by mid-day.

During the afternoon they choose a snow-packed slope with great care and by evening they are working on their snow cave. As they plan to use it for several days, it is no small affair. Two tunnels are built, approximately nine feet long and just high enough to crawl through. Working in pairs at the inner end of the tunnels, one shoveling and one pulling out the loose snow, they then dig straight upward. This makes standing room for them to build a sleeping bench. To trap warmth, the bed's surface is carefully designed to be six inches above the top of both tunnels. They round the ceiling painstakingly so that condensation will run down the sidewalls.

Thinking about it later, Aroha realizes that they must have been tired, hungry, and cold with snow falling on their heads and down their trousers, but the memory of that part of the activity is quite gone, buried, like unwanted baggage.

At midnight they try to light the camp stoves (there are thirty-two 'dead-men' matches lying on the floor next morning) but end by eating rock-hard cabin bread for supper. The roof above the sleeping bench is just high enough for the tallest of the young men to sit under. Three air mattresses are placed on top of plastic sheeting on the sleeping bench and then four sleeping bags are laid crosswise on top of these. Placing the end of the bags on packs makes up for the short length. It is relatively cozy although they still need to sleep in nearly all their clothes.

After hot porridge next morning they leave under a clear sky, but with a strong wind blowing. Snow conditions are ideal; it is wonderful to feel the crampons holding so firmly in ice that they could not force ice axes into. By dawn they are well up on the ridge and the vistas.

They stand, close together, above the clouds, while to the north, south, east and west of them, the great gods of the Southern Alps rise. When the mist comes down they

reluctantly turn around and retrace their steps back to the snow cave.

What fun they have coming back down the final slope, glissading when they can, and sliding on their backsides when they cannot, laughing like a group of crazy kids.

Next morning they find that the weather has really closed in, as it often does in the Alps, so they all stay in bed.

Later in the afternoon Kevin and Mike go off to reconnoiter. Aroha has an odd feeling in her stomach as she watches the two little figures move slowly across what appears to be an endless white desert, and disappear into the mist. She and Jeannie fill in time putting finishing touches to the snow cave: shelves here and there, and better finishes to the roof and walls.

The guys have said that they will be back well before 4pm and it is probably a good thing that they have forgotten to give the girls one of their watches. When she thinks it is 5pm Jeannie sets her alarm clock (which had stopped). They then give themselves an hour before they will start worrying (officially speaking). It is indeed fortunate that Jeannie's guesstimate is out by two hours because the guys do not appear until after eight o'clock. They come back singing:

There's no place

Like a snow place

Like a show place

We know.

They have had great fun, they say, marking a bright purple trail around the crevasses using potassium permanganate crystals²⁵.

Wednesday is another magical morning, with still more time spent in the world of light that for some reason reminds Aroha of Monet's paintings of water lilies. Never mind that the

²⁵ (KMnO₄) a bright purple chemical.

mists come down again at midday. When they return to it, the snow cave seems like a palace.

Thursday is a day of rest because when Kevin crawls out at 3am on lookout duty, Tawhiri blows him right back into the tunnel. With a big grin he throws himself back onto the sleeping bench with a call of, "Sack bashing today."

They spend the day talking about all sorts of food (except the dehydrated versions), playing cards, and talking.

Friday, a fine morning, sees them once again up on the ridge before dawn. Little red clouds are flying in a wind that is somewhat less forceful than that of the previous few days. By 9am they are at the bottom of the final slope when the wind all of a sudden comes up over the divide and lashes at them, blinding them with driven mist and sleet. Once again Mt. Aotaki keeps his secret and the little party makes their way down very slowly because they can't really see where they are going.

By the time they are off the ridge and at the head of the glacier, they realize they might be in big trouble. The guys find that their compass readings, taken so diligently earlier, differ from each other by forty degrees!

It is snowing in earnest now. So for the next two hours they fight their way down against the wind that is blowing up the glacier. They mutely follow Mike, all four roped together for fear of crevasses. Aroha begins to visualize their snow cave as a real mansion—when suddenly it appears right in front of them!

"Hats, or rather balaclavas, off for Mike," Kevin says cheerfully.

The sounds of the quartet drift across the snow wastelands, as their song is changed to:

*There's no palace,
Like a snow palace*

... While they strip off their saturated clothing.

All that night they can hear the storm raging outside. They take turns keeping at least a small opening in the northernmost tunnel clear of newly fallen snow. The next day the snow continues, and the next. By now they are right out of several basic food items, and they are really regretting having left their spare food down at the lower camp. Porridge with milk powder, but no salt or sugar, is becoming extremely boring.

It is in the early hours of the following morning that they are all woken by a tremendous noise. They sit up as one and listen to the prolonged roar.

“Avalanche!” Kevin gasps.

They all sit shivering in their sleeping bags as the sound of the wind is replaced by a much too deep silence, an ominous silence.

Mike lights a lamp and Kevin points mutely to where their tunnels were. They are now both filled with snow!

Aroha voices what they are all thinking. “There could be *tons* of snow blocking us.”

“Cell phone?” Jeannie squeaks.

“No coverage,” Kevin says. “You can try if you like.” He’s right.

“Well, we’d better get digging right away,” Mike says.

“What about air?” Jeannie whispers.

“That shouldn’t be a problem for a good while at least. There’s even air in the snow,” Mike tries to assure her.

“The biggest problem is where we can put the snow we dig out,” Kevin points out.

“And which tunnel should we start on—right or left?” Mike asks. “We’ve no idea of the contours outside now. It could make a very big difference to how much digging we have to do.”

No one moves. They do not seem able to make the choice—a choice that they know their lives might depend on.

Suddenly Aroha stands up pointing not at the tunnels, but at the roof at the far end of their sleeping bench. “Up there!

That's where we should dig!" The others look up in bewilderment.

"I know it's crazy, but I *sense* the wall is thinner there. I can *sense* Tawhiri there."

"Y'know, maybe I'm going crazy too, but for some unknown reason I feel it's worth a try too," puts in Mike.

"Actually, it may not be so very crazy," Kevin says thoughtfully. "It's quite possible that the depth of snow is thinner higher up."

It is amazing how the party's spirits rise. They take turns at the digging. When they begin to hear the muffled sound of wind they continue on with renewed energy. At last, with cheers for Aroha, they break through—only to find that it is still snowing.



Chapter Ten

The Mindcaller

January 2003

It is a long day. They spend it trying to keep their minds off food, digging another short 'long-drop', playing cards and mind games, and talking.

That evening Mike tries to explain the mysteries of cryptology. He uses a spoon and a fork to represent Bob and Alice (the senders and receivers of the coded messages) and he uses up all of his day's supply of toilet paper to illustrate large numbers. He then has them play a guessing game to prove to them how very difficult it is to guess even not so large prime numbers.

Aroha describes her latest work in the physical sciences. She says, "I enjoy it—particularly creating computer simulations of the forces of nature in wind, sea, and earth... But I'm not sure that it is really what I want to do with my life."

"Have you any idea what you want to do?" Jeannie asks.

"Not really. What I dream of is getting into film, or rather documentary production and traveling the world. What about you?"

"I'm a long way from finishing my research."

"Tell us a bit about it," Mike says.

Jeannie feels that it's an almost impossible task. She is now a research student investigating new forms of computer-mediated communication with a brilliant professor from Austria.

"Well, you can think of your ears as an audio-input device," she begins, "and your voice as the output device. We have eyes for visual input. But we've no corresponding visual-output device."

"I never thought of it that way before," Mike says.

"So you're thinking of using computers as sort of eye-mouths?" Aroha queries.

"Yes, that's one way to put it," Jeannie chuckles. "But that's not the real challenge. For starters, the latest research into how the mind works shows how extremely complex our visual thinking is. We don't just run movies in our heads. We probably use complex algorithms and abstractions."

"What do you mean by abstractions?" Mike asks.

"Well, for example, see if you can visualize the answer to this trivial question. What shape is the tattoo on Popeye's arm?"

"An anchor," Aroha says promptly.

"How do you know that it is?"

"I can see it in my mind's eye."

"Now, can you rotate it?"

"Yes," Aroha says.

"No," Mike and Kevin say together.

"Interestingly most scientists think that we all do this sort of thing, but mostly subconsciously. But tell us Aroha; is it just like viewing a movie?"

Thoughtfully, Aroha shakes her head. They are silent for some time.

"Then again—" Jeannie goes on to say "—all animals have mouths and some sort of visual memories, but they only make noises. What we also need is a visual language."

This leads them into debating how an abstract visual language might evolve.

"It would be best if it is mathematical," Mike argues.

"Is it like some sort of photographic memory?" Aroha asks.

"No, that just isn't how our visual memories work," Jeannie contends. "Research suggests that most of us use fragments, generalizations, and abstractions: so called 'hints and flashes.'"

Aroha is astounded. She is quiet for a long time before finally venturing to tell them about her visual experiences with the Kapakapa.

"I remember the first time I used it. For an instant I thought I was in a hot sulfur-filled cave. Then I 'saw' my grandmother's smile. Just a smile—no face, and all in a flash. It was just so vivid! And I hadn't seen her since I was five. Then, that time we were all in the cave sitting in the dark, I visualized Hineuitepo, the keeper of souls in the underworld. I'm not sure even now how I knew it was her. It was plain scary."

"I remember you startling at nothing," Jeannie remarks.

"So you see, I'm beginning to wonder if my Kapakapa somehow effects my mind. So, I try not to use it very much. However, if any of you want to try it..."

For a while no one volunteers. Then Mike, to prove he is a real scientist, takes it.

"Hold it firmly and close your eyes," Aroha instructs.

"Nothing, I see nothing," Mike says.

"Let me try," Kevin says. "No. You must be pulling our legs."

Rather reluctantly Jeannie tries but she cannot see anything either.

"I'm becoming more and more convinced that there is a strong link between the Kapakapa and my Maori heritage," Aroha says. "It's a side of me that I've known very little about until our experiences this year." Reverently, she places the Kapakapa back around her neck. "The Maori for 'see a vision' is whakarehu. Once, I thought it might have been a better name than Kapakapa."

And so the evening passes amazingly quickly. She and Jeannie put their heads together and continue talking about the difficulties inherent in visual communication.

"When we get back to university, let's do some co-operative work," Jeannie suggests. "What you've experienced visually, together with your work with simulations, would be a great help to me."

"I'd very much like to," Aroha agrees.

Both Mike and Kevin are quiet. Mike is deep in thought. Kevin's gentle eyes, deeply set in his rugged face, follow Aroha, more wistfully than usual.

Finally Mike breaks the silence. "Aroha, do we go up or down in the morning?"

"Yes. It's your vote," Jeannie concurs.

Aroha looks at each of her friends in turn. And knows what they are thinking. The peaks are calling. They all feel it. They have to make one last try at reaching a summit. They choose Tititea; anything less would be an anticlimax.

At 3am they dig themselves out for the last time. The sky is spectacular; the stars are brilliant in the clear air. For the first time they see the extent of the previous night's avalanche. They all look wordlessly at Aroha. Beyond doubt she showed them the only way out.

There is, not surprisingly, no sign of their purple artwork on the snow. But this time the miracle they hoped and prayed for comes to pass—the Wind relents for the few precious hours that are needed, and they make it up onto the summit.

In silence, and awe, they watch while the robes of the Great Ones turn from silver to burning gold rising above the roiling clouds below. Indescribable snow sculptures rise from tiered galleries. Aroha and Kevin move closer together. Mike and Jeannie soundlessly exchange vows. For moments, for hours, the little party feels immortal as both pairs of souls wing in wonder out from their bodies.

Brought back to earth by their frozen feet, they glimpse someone on a ridge nearby looking so distinctive he could be real. Standing tall, with some sort of cloak thrown over his shoulders, he is the most handsome young Maori any of them have ever seen. There is a bemused look on his face, and he remains motionless for a few timeless seconds with his eyes riveted on Aroha.

He disappears as mysteriously as he came, and Aroha becomes aware that her Kapakapa is now unusually hot and vibrating.

With the wind rising, the little group looks at each other, and sets off down to the snow cave in silence:

*A mote in the snowscape,
Bonded together,
Closer than 'just friends'.*

Back in their snow cave all except Aroha start talking at once:

"Only now do I realize what you meant by a mind flash," Jeannie begins. "I *saw* the star spirits in the sky."

"I glimpsed a monster deep in the sea," Kevin says. "I can still see its shiny green scales."

"I saw Mt. Aotaki in all his majesty, a god with a mighty presence," Jeannie says. "But I also felt turmoil." Jeannie turns to Aroha and adds, "Now I understand much better what you meant about the presence of Earth Mother in the cave."

Kevin puts an arm around Aroha and says: "And, only now, do I really understand what you've been trying to tell us all along. Only now, that I've experienced it do I understand what you mean by a 'flash'. Only now do I understand the awful powers behind what we usually call this world of ours."

"Yes," Mike says, "I also felt untold tensions between the splendor above and the darkness below."

Aroha says, "I believe that in a holy place to the west of us, one of the greatest canoes that brought my ancestors to Aotearoa lies buried." Then she blurts out what is uppermost on her mind, "But did you see what he was wearing? The guy with the cloak?"

The others look at her, mystified.

"He was wearing a Kapakapa-like mine!"

None of the had others noticed, perhaps because they could not take their eyes off his face.

"I remember," Aroha goes on, quivering with excitement, "way back when I first found the Kapakapa I saw a guy that looked like him. Then later in that glow-worm cave, I was

puzzled by Earth Mother's mention of a 'second half'! Actually, she referred to it as a 'Mindcaller'!"

"An easier name to remember," Jeannie remarks absentmindedly.

"So your Kapakapa is a mind caller. And just one half of a whole," Mike says thoughtfully. "That may well explain a lot."

"Like the jagged bits at the top," Aroha says.

"Let's concentrate on the Caller aspect," Mike suggests. "Perhaps in the excitement of exploring these other worlds we've got things out of perspective. Perhaps we should have considered more particularly the calls that Aroha has always heard."

"Yes," Aroha agrees.

"I remember," Mike says, "way back you said you felt called to a quest to find the ancient ones of river, valley, and mountain."

"That's right," Aroha says. "From the time I found the Kapakapa I've felt a compulsion to delve into my whakapapa²⁶."

"So I think you unknowingly call out to something or someone."

"Using the Kapakapa as a sort of mind link," Aroha says slowly.

"A link to the ancient powers that almost overloaded all our senses today," Jeannie says.

"Or even to the resonance of the rocks," Kevin puts in.

"Yes, but also to people like my Nan who is still alive today," Aroha points out. "But why can I see her sometimes and not other times?"

"The Kapakapa, come Mindcaller, may be something that you have to learn how to use," Mike says. "In addition, you, or the neurons in your brain, may have needed a really strong call to hear anything at all. And, almost certainly, the Kapakapa would work better if it was whole."

²⁶ Cultural identity

“OK, but that still doesn’t explain the strangeness of places like this.”

“No, but I think it’s all tied in. When you were wearing your Kapakapa in the city, you did hear calls from here. However, Kevin, who was actually down here, said that the mountains looked perfectly normal. So it seems the Kapakapa needs to be in the vicinity of a call before it can activate visually, and produce another world, so to speak. Goodness knows what’s behind it all!”

It is a quiet group that walks back down to their base camp. In the van the subject of keeping the Kapakapa secret comes up yet again. Aroha is more adamant than ever before that they say nothing about it. “I feel in my bones it’s not the right time,” she says. “And I bet if we brought some expert to look, we’d probably see nothing out of the ordinary. So he’d think we’re nuts, just as you did when I first said that I heard voices.”

“I guess you’re right,” Mike says. “So, the real, unanswered question is still why do we sometimes experience otherworldliness, while at other times we don’t. And what is the otherworldliness?”

Back home, with a baffling sense of urgency, Aroha and Kevin try to live three lives at once: work, study, and, at least when Kevin is home from the ranges, a life of love. A sense of telepathy between them grows so strong that one day, after a series of half sentences, Kevin gives a laugh and says, “We sound like an old married couple.”

“I know,” Aroha agrees. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s got anything to do with your tiki. I know you’ve always got it with you.”

“Yes, I’ve wondered too,” Kevin, says. “I became aware of it shortly after I started putting it under my pillow when we make love! It made our closeness seem far too precious to put into words.”

However, over time their relationship becomes increasingly strained as Kevin is away in remote places more than he is at home. Aroha is proud that he is making an

international reputation for himself, but she worries because every mountain he climbs seems to be higher and more dangerous than the one before. She knows that he still loves her in his own way, but he seems to be becoming more introverted than ever before. Night after night she tosses and turns, missing him when he is away, but knowing that he misses the mountains when he is at home.

As her mind keeps going round in circles, she frequently thinks of her friends, who are now so much more than just friends, and all they have experienced together. She is very conscious that in a real sense she has found the ancient gods of Aotearoa²⁷. She feels sure that even if she never sees them again, the timeless mountain gods will remain standing, in all their majesty, in her mind's eye forever. And in this way, she tries hard to ignore a growing premonition that Hineuitepo, the keeper of the underworld, is close by.

Nightmare, beyond her worst misgivings, overcomes Aroha the day Kevin dies. He was reconnoitering a particularly difficult rock face on Mount Aotaki when he fell.

Inching along a ledge

The only noise

Crampons on rock.

A broken body

At the bottom of a cliff face.

At peace in the stillness

A spirit climbing free.

Aroha feels she is caught in the breakers of a West coast storm. Wave upon wave keeps pulling her under, and so great is the roar and the thunder, she can scarcely hear anyone speak. She gives up her music and withdraws from all functions. There just does not seem to be any point—it is all just noise, noise, noise.

²⁷ Maori for New Zealand

They spread Kevin's ashes under the kauri trees in the hidden valley.

In time Aroha becomes increasingly aware how much her friends are supporting her. They encourage her to come with them to Aorama but there is no sign of any otherworld. They try to interest her again in the Kapakapa—but she says that she has hidden it away in its little box. When Mike suggests that she show it to someone in the Electrical Engineering department at university who, he says, would be most interested in checking if there is something like circuitry in it, Aroha is adamant—she does not want to talk about it, let alone show it to anyone else. She keeps repeating that she knows it would be wrong.

Slowly Aroha fights back. She throws herself into her work, somehow coping with teaching and research. And she vows she will build a cottage at Aorama—as a memorial.

Chapter Eleven

The Other Half of the Mindcaller

June 2003

On the day that Kevin dies, a young man called Herbert gets a vivid mental picture of emotional devastation while sitting at his favorite spot in Whakarewarewa²⁸. Here, quite a distance from the village and the main places visited by tourists during the day, it is quiet and peaceful. He is staring into 'his' pool: it is little more than a depression in the ground filled with hot water that has the strong sulfuric smell of rotten eggs, so characteristic of Whakarewarewa and Rotorua. Bubbles of sulfuric steam are rising from the bottom of the pool, which looks to be not more than two feet deep. A large rock forms one end of the pool, while the other sides are open but hidden by dense vegetation, so that few people know about this particular spot. He remembers finding his Mindcaller here when he was just ten years old. His grandmother was very excited when she first saw it, and referred to it as a Mindcaller. Sadly, her expectations never came to pass in her lifetime.

In a mind flash Herbert 'sees' a woman sobbing, inconsolable. She is the girl of his Mindcaller dreams! Distressed, he thinks, 'There's no way I can help her! It's incredible, unbelievable that I still don't even know her name, let alone where in the world she lives.' Wanting desperately to hold her and comfort her, he clutches his Mindcaller tightly. It is now as silent as a stone. Frustrated, he cannot help wondering whether he should put the Mindcaller back where he found it, as he almost did three and a half years ago. Waves of sorrow engulf him once more.

²⁸Whakarewarewa is a Maori village in Rotorua, and is often called the "Yellowstone of New Zealand". The area adjacent to the village is volcanically active and contains geysers, hot pools, and mud pools.

He remembers the day, as clearly as if it were yesterday, that his beloved mother died. Two days after her funeral, as a token of his deep grief, he decided to return the carving to the place where he found it. He has no idea that was the same day Aroha found her Kapakapa in the hidden valley.

Now, still missing his mother dearly, Herbert 'sees' the events of his life pass before him; it is a life that has not always been kind to him...

He sees his mother, a young, vibrant, beautiful Maori woman and his father, a handsome German. They meet at one of the 'traditional' dances that are performed for tourists. They fall in love and when she becomes pregnant his father marries her. His mother's Maori clan disapproves of the marriage, and even the financial help that Herbert's father provides for his wife's extended family does not endear them to him. However, the fact they have a Pakeha in their family is finally, if grudgingly, accepted. His parents, still not feeling really welcome, decide to leave for Hamilton, some 100 kilometers north of Whakarewarewa. Herbert's father is very relieved. His mother misses the close contact with her family but loves her husband so much that being with him, and soon with their baby, seems all that matters.

With a smile, Herbert remembers growing up near Hamilton's mighty Waikato River. His father has a good job at the nearby power plant. His mother, full of love and devotion, takes care of him and the ever-growing menagerie of animals. He is allowed to bottle-feed young calves when he is only three years old. Although people are friendly towards their new neighbors, they have never quite accepted them as truly belonging to the local group. This does not, however, matter much to Herbert and his parents. Rather, it has created a particularly strong bond between them as a family, which makes for the best years of Herbert's life. They fish at Raglan and swim in the Waikato.

Herbert's father is a member of a yacht club on the east coast, and he takes them on trips to many of the nearby, uninhabited islands; each one has its own distinct beauty.

Sitting around a fire onshore in the evenings, they sing a mixture of songs—some Maori, some German, and some English. They eat self-picked rock-oysters for breakfast, and catch fish to supplement whatever food they have. Herbert's mother supplements their diet with leaves and fruits from local plants. His father scarcely believes the things his mother picks for them: mustard grass from the dunes that is as hot as horseradish, peppery seeds from some bush related to the wattle family, and many other things. One time they forget the salt and his mother just walks along the shore picking little fleshy leaves from an insignificant plant that, raw or cooked, provides an excellent replacement for salt.

Herbert also remembers loving the meadow and the forest behind their house, and the many animals that they bred. The family has always loved animals, so much so that they often became members of the 'extended family' instead of food as originally planned. His father teaches him the kind of respect for nature that one would usually associate more with Maoris than Europeans. When the road passing their house is widened, his father fights to make sure that a group of trees, used as a nesting ground for many birds, is not cut down. In the middle of one night he wakes Herbert to show him a shower of meteorites. On their long hikes he describes the plants and animals, and his mother contributes the Maori terms and how each plant can be used for eating or medicinal purposes. On one memorable day his father takes him to a small, little-known cave nearby to show him samples of helictites: the formations that do not grow vertically, like stalactites and stalagmites, but in strange spirals more or less parallel to the ground. He remembers his father getting quite angry when he wanted to break one off and take it home:

"Herbert, have you listened to me? How can you want to destroy such a wonder of nature that has taken thousands and thousands of years to grow? Nobody knows how or why they

grow in this form²⁹ so admire the things you see, but never, never, destroy them!"

It took Herbert's grandmother a long time to recognize that her daughter had not just married a German due to a fiery love affair, but that the two of them harmonize exceptionally well. The attitude of the Maoris in Whakarewarewa gradually changed. Finally the multicultural family was fully accepted as respected and loved members of the extended Maori family. There were many mutual visits. Herbert thus grew up between two cultures, appreciating both, as a talented, kind, and happy child.

Now, with an inward sob, Herbert recalls the ill-fated excursion to a famous hot-water beach in the Coromandels. It is one of the big attractions in the area: hot water emerges from subterranean wells just where sandy beach and ocean meet. When the tide is out, people armed with shovels dig 'bathtubs' in the sand. These rapidly fill up with hot water; indeed, the water is so hot that it is often necessary to pour a few buckets of cold seawater into it before they can wallow in the water comfortably. When the tide comes in, the hot pools have to be 'defended' against the waves by building walls of sand. Eventually, the first wave swamps over, the walls of sand begin to crumble, and the tide finally wins. Everyone takes a dip in the cool ocean once in a while, and it's a fun game for young and old.

Herbert 'sees' his parents in a playful mood the day the enjoyable trip ends in catastrophe. On the way back home a truck driver, who has had one drink too many, hits the family car head on. Father is killed instantly, and Herbert and his mother both end up in the Hamilton hospital, badly wounded. Both survive, but at quite a price. After a full three months of

²⁹ Helictites can only be found in a few lime stone caves. There are hundreds of theories why they grow horizontally, but no one really knows how they develop. Anyone buying a helictite in a mineral shop should be aware they are contributing to the likelihood that, sooner or later, these rarities will vanish from their natural habitat.

rehabilitation, relatives from Whakarewarewa take them home to Rotorua. Mother is paralyzed from her hips down; she will never walk again, and both her liver and kidneys are seriously damaged. With multiple fractures in both legs, Herbert is better off. Only 9 years old, he has to hobble around on crutches and is unlikely to ever regain complete agility.

The extended Maori family looks after them with love, but the loss of the husband and father, compounded by financial restrictions and the end of all outdoor family activities weighs heavily on Herbert and his mother. Herbert tries to adapt, and the Maori children are like brothers and sisters, but they are also kids: they are often frustrated that Herbert is unable to participate—and even spoils some of their games. After several weeks he sheds the crutches, but still cannot run properly. Once his much too easy homework is done, he often sits at his mother's bedside listening to the wonderful Maori tales she knows. At other times he roams in the bush near Rotorua, discovering signs of volcanic activity that few people know about.

In almost a trance, Herbert relives his tenth birthday. Family after family comes to him, each giving him a beautiful glass marble. He has always been very fond of playing with glass marbles, particularly the large ones that are almost as big as table-tennis balls and have streaks of color in them. He is deeply touched by this token of 'you belong to us'. It makes him proud to be a Maori and to be part of this sizeable, closely-knit community of often rugged looking, yet gentle and wise people. Grandmother has prepared a big festive meal in the traditional way, and, after hours of chatting and eating, they all retire for a siesta.

In the late afternoon, ten-year-old Herbert takes his bag of marbles, which is now quite large and heavy, and walks to 'his' secret hot pool. He sits down and taking marble after marble out of the bag and placing them side-by-side them on a flat rock. He admires each one and idly wonders whether 'to marvel' comes from 'marble'. Suddenly one of the marbles rolls a bit. He stops it, but brushes another two marbles with

his shirtsleeve, and they roll and drop into the hot water with a splash. He is not particularly worried because he is sure that the water will break their fall. He is confident that as soon as the surface of the pool is without ripples he will see the marbles and be able to pick them up. He waits patiently until all the water stops moving. When it does clear, he is close to panic: he cannot see either of the marbles! He recounts his marbles carefully. Yes, two are missing, and they should be easily visible in the crystal clear water—yet they seem to have disappeared.

Slowly he calms down and tries to think logically. The marbles must have rolled somewhere out of sight. This can only mean that the bottom slopes a little downward toward the rock, and the pool extends some way underneath the surface.

He takes off his clothes and steps into the very hot water with an: 'ouch'. It takes him a while to get used to the heat so he can sit down completely. He reaches underneath the rock. To his surprise, the pool becomes deeper and evidently goes much further in below the rock than he thought. Fighting with the high temperature of the water, he gets out to cool off a bit. He knows that next time he will have to dive in completely to get to the end of the pool below the rock. His only hope is it won't be too far and too dark.

He breathes slowly for an extended period before stepping into the pool again. He hesitates once again before kneeling down and swimming through the water below the rock. Getting nervous he wonders: 'How far does this extend?' Before too long however, he notices that it does not get any darker. He raises a hand: there is now air above him, and quite a bit it seems. He lifts his head carefully.

He surfaces in a small cave illuminated by light filtering through some cracks in the roof. From the outside, this probably looks like one of the many 'smoking' rocks that one can find anywhere in Rotorua. Getting used to the dim light, he can see that a small part of the bottom of the cave is not covered by water. With great relief he steps out of the hot water that has become almost unbearable.

Seeing his two marbles in the pool, he picks them up and looks around a bit: the 'cave' almost does not deserve the term. It is just a few meters in diameter, and most of the bottom is covered by hot water except for the small strip of rock he is standing on. Some four feet above ground there is a narrow ledge of rock. To Herbert's immense surprise, he can see some other marbles in a niche. He touches them carefully: they are a highly polished shiny-black and seem to be stuck to the rock. He is tempted to break one of them loose, but suddenly remembers his father's words when he was about to take a helictite from a cave. Whatever this natural wonder may be, he knows he must leave it alone.

Just as he is about to leave he catches sight of yet another object on the ledge that someone seems to have forgotten. He does feel a little disappointed that someone else has obviously been here before him. This object is also black and is formed like a broad fishhook. It has a very smooth texture except for one end where something must have broken off or have been detached at some stage. Impulsively, he takes it with him.

With his two marbles and the carving he dives into the water once more to get outside, dress fast, and hurry home. Near his mother's bed, his grandmother, who is very old and very wise, is sitting in her favorite cane chair.

'You've been gone for quite a while,' his mother comments.

'I went for one of my walks,' he answers, 'and look what I found!'

He pulls out the carving and shows it to his mother.

She takes it carefully and exclaims, 'It *is* a truly beautiful carving!'

The next moment they are both startled as Grandmother jumps up and grabs at the carving, almost recklessly. She examines the piece very carefully.

Then she turns to Herbert, and looks at him almost in awe before she slowly says, 'Herbert! Today is not just your birthday! It's your day of great good fortune! What you have found is half of what is called a 'Mindcaller'. Somewhere,

someone else has found, or will find, the other half of this carving. And, so the legends have it, through the two halves you will find each other and experience things one cannot even imagine.'

His grandmother tells about him the vague legends that surround the appearance of mindcallers. 'From now on you will have to wear this carving on a string around your neck. Nobody must know what it really is. But you need not be afraid: at any point in time only twelve of the oldest of us Maori know about the significance of these carvings, and most is hearsay. Nevertheless, if one of those twelve elders sees you wearing your carving, they will know that you are a special one, and they will give you all the support they can. One day—it may be today, tomorrow, or in a few years—your Mindcaller will suddenly become active. From there on in it will become your story.'

Herbert loves Maori legends, and what his grandmother told him he simply classifies as another one of those tales. However, he keeps wearing the carving, as he was told to. As years go by without anything unusual happening, the carving gradually becomes little more than a reminder of his grandmother, who did not live to see him turn fifteen.

Over the years Herbert recovers more or less fully from his shocking accident. He helps in the souvenir shops in Whakarewarewa, works some hours in a food court in Rotorua to make some money, and takes a number of correspondence courses—a fact only known by his mother. He absorbs knowledge like a sponge absorbs water. He does not want to spend the rest of his life selling goods in the souvenir shop and being a very fair-skinned Maori model for tourists to photograph! Having been somewhat on his own in earlier years due to his physical handicap, the fact that he is much of a loner is accepted good-naturedly by his friends. If it were not for his worry about his mother, his life would be quite bearable. Sadly, despite Herbert and their extended family's care, her health keeps deteriorating. His seventeenth birthday is

dramatically overshadowed by his mother's sickness. A few days later she dies.

Burnt into Herbert's mind is the afternoon, two days after the funeral, when he resolves to return the Mindcaller to the underground cave where he found it. After undressing by the pool, he once again dives under the far edge, down into the underground cave, and clambers up onto the ledge. He takes the Mindcaller in his hand and removes it from the string. Suddenly he 'sees' something, and knows that it comes from the Mindcaller:

Curly black hair
Wide dreamy eyes
Young kauri trees
The Maori word for love
Arms wide extended

The Mindcaller is more than just a carving—it has come to life! Is this coincidence or is it fate? Just when he was determined to take the Mindcaller off, and after seven years of it doing nothing, it suddenly starts to bring messages. Waves of feeling and new dimensions flood through him so strongly that even if he wanted to, he could not describe them. There is no question now of him putting the Mindcaller back. He hangs it back around his neck, emerges again from the pool, and in the following weeks, months, and years, it supports and inspires him; it brings him emotions and memories from nature and the past; it shows him myths, legends, and true stories that blend the past and present together.

One event stands out. He remembers waking some six months ago from the most outlandish 'dream'. Sweating, yet feeling icy cold, he leaps naked from the bed, and draws the quilted bedcover his mother made around himself. He is vaguely aware that there are mountain peaks surrounding him, but his attention is focused on one of a group of climbers, all muffled up against the biting wind so there is little to be seen.

Yet, he knows without doubt that he is seeing the girl he will love, the girl who has the other half of the Mindcaller!

Herbert's stomach lurches as he comes back to the present. Putting the Caller back in the cave is as impossible as it was the first time. Instead, he holds it tightly in both hands, willing it to show him more. All of a sudden it becomes warm, vibrates, and he 'sees' another image: *A climber falling down a cliff—calling out: 'Aroha...'*

As the vision fades, a hundred questions grow in Herbert's mind. Who fell? And where? And when? However, the most important thing to him is that his Mindcaller girl now has a name. Then he 'sees' *Aroha heartbroken, but surrounded by friends supporting her*. The Mindcaller is warm and somehow comforting.

From now on, Herbert thinks often and with fond feelings of the woman called Aroha. The Mindcaller is not active all the time. Herbert does not know that, being just half of the real thing, it can only act sporadically, and only if Aroha wears her half.

Father, whistling while hoisting a sail

Mother, collecting berries

Grandmother looking encouragingly

Teenagers laughing in a hot pool

A knife that moves down more and more slowly

Where do the visions come from? From which time and place? Do they only come from the past?

One evening he is swimming with a group of friends in one of the pools reserved for Maoris³⁰. After a few beers, a

³⁰ Whakarewarewa, a 'real' Maori village surrounded by hot, steaming pools and erupting Geysers (Pohutu geyser being the most famous one) is a tourist mecca. Between 9 am and 5 pm thousands visit the area, but outside those hours it belongs exclusively to the villagers, and only they are allowed to swim in the pools as their ancestors have done for generations.

quarrel erupts for no apparent reason, though it's probably just because one guy wants to impress one of the girls. Things turn nasty: Suddenly one young Maori has a big knife in his hand and raises it to stab his opponent. Herbert watches with terror. 'This must not happen!' he thinks fervently. To his surprise the downward movement of the raised knife slows down, and the guy who was about to be stabbed evades it easily. The change of mood that now follows is as dramatic as before: the two fighters shake hands and the fun around the hot water pool continues.

Many years will pass before Herbert understands the real implications of this experience.

Chapter Twelve

Marcus

February 2007

Four dreary years have passed, during which the cottage was completed, but it isn't used very much. Kalina wins a prestigious post-graduate scholarship to an overseas university. Mike and Jeannie, though busy, continue to surround Aroha with love, but she frequently rejects them. When she is honest with herself she knows that she is jealous of their contentment in each other's company. She does, however, spend an increasing amount of time helping Jeannie with her visual communication work. Jeannie points out that Aroha is a genius at programming, perhaps because of her total dedication and focus.

It is a long time before Aroha ventures out to Aorama by herself. The cottage stands empty, like the cast of a cicada. The Amaretto bottles are gone from the shelves, the blue-stemmed glasses stand empty, and the smell of rats pervades every crack and cupboard. The silence is complete; even the birds seem to be in mourning. Over and over again Aroha asks herself: 'Were the magic years really just the work of my wretched over-active imagination?'

Aroha is almost glad there is no sign of anything supernatural in the valley because it means that Hineuitepo, keeper of the underworld, is also absent. She relives the day, seemingly a lifetime ago, that they explored the cave, and, with a feeling of relief, realizes that she hasn't sensed Hineuitepo once since Kevin died. Only now does she become conscious that it was Kevin who Hineuitepo was standing behind, not Nan. Perhaps Kevin's finding of the tiki had been a warning.

Time flows on, passing Aroha by, until one day she meets a friend of Mike's, a physicist called Marcus. They have lunch

together and he is so easy to talk to that it is not long before she tells him all about Kevin's tragic accident.

Aroha soon decides that there is something intriguing about the way Marcus thinks about things but she cannot put her finger on it. Certainly, he is exceptionally interested in the visual communication research that she has been helping Jeannie with. She also feels that he knows a lot more than he is letting on. One evening she invites him to her apartment for dinner. It is a great evening with lots of laughter. Marcus, it turns out, loves the islands around New Zealand. He spends a lot of time on Gt. Barrier Island in particular. Aroha asks him if he has ever found the hot springs that are hidden in a river near the middle of the island and sure enough he has. They both laugh over their fun skinny-dipping. They have, Aroha feels, such a lot in common that at the end of the evening she invites him out to the Cathedral to see the memorial grove of kauri trees.

Mike and Jeannie are invited to come too. At the cottage they all have a good lunch of fresh cheese scones accompanied by white wine before going down to the Cathedral.

"There's the kauri grove," Aroha says, pointing up the hillside. "They're older than the ones down here, though these are special in their own way."

Mike and Jeannie give her such meaningful looks that Marcus says, "Is there something I'm missing out on?"

Aroha looks at the medallion that Marcus likes to wear and stammers, "Yes—years ago—I found an ancient neck pendant."

The others outline, in a jumbled sort of fashion, what they think it could do.

Marcus is most interested. "And you say that you walked between these two kauri trees into what appears to be another place and time?" All three nod. "Quite obviously there doesn't seem to be anything special here now."

Mike says, "That's right. It seems we only find a portal when something, or someone, calls to Aroha."

"Can I see your pendant?" Marcus asks Aroha.

“Yes, certainly, but I rarely wear it these days. It’s back in my apartment.”

Marcus asks, “Would you three like to join me for coffee tomorrow so we can talk some more? And I would definitely like to see... what do you call it? The Kapakapa.”

Marcus and Aroha meet again next morning to talk about the latest developments in physical sciences research. By lunchtime Aroha finds herself coming alive once more. It is an incredible feeling. She has fresh thoughts and new ideas as she has not had for a long time! So much so that when they all meet for coffee it is almost like old times. She can hear the enthusiasm in her friends’ voices.

She passes the Kapakapa over to Marcus and he holds it up to the light and nods. “Yes! It’s an artifact of ingenious make.”

He then questions Aroha very closely. She senses that he is barely controlling his excitement. Strangely, what seem to interest him most are the gray spots at the end. She tries to drag what he is thinking out of him.

Instead of answering, he changes the subject. “When was the last time you heard a call?”

“Not since Kevin died.”

“Yes, I understand. I lost a close friend once and for a long time I lost direction completely.”

Slowly, Aroha puts the Kapakapa back around her neck. Holding it tightly she closes her eyes, while her friends hold their breath. Almost at once she sees her Nan: *Waving to her*. Her face lights up. “I see my old Nan. Waving to me! Calling to me!”

“Hey, that’s new—and much closer to home, relatively speaking,” Jeannie says, laughing.

Joy shines out from all her friends’ eyes.

“Well, when are we going?” Mike asks. “She lives up north, right?”

“I’ll ring her this evening. Are you all free this weekend?”

Not surprisingly, they all say, ‘Yes’, mentally shelving other commitments as they say it. Marcus, knowing that he will have to explain to his wife, Maria, why he cannot be with

her for part of the weekend, resolves to convince Aroha to visit them soon on Great Barrier Island, where he lives with his family. He feels that Maria and Aroha will get on well together. The Kapakapa fascinates him because it seems to provide some para-powers to Aroha of a kind he has not encountered before. He thinks that before long he will have to tell Aroha about his family's para-powers³¹, but it is still too soon.

That evening, Aroha rings her Nan as soon as she gets home.

"How are you, Nan?"

"Just fine. And it's wonderful to hear you. How are things going?"

"Things are getting better all the time. I do have wonderful friends to support me."

They chat for some time before Aroha says, "It's strange, but I feel that I've been on a long quest. Seeking the ancient ones told of in the old stories!"

"That is something I would very much like to hear about," Nan replies quietly. "Do you think that you could come and visit me?"

"Would you mind if I brought three friends with me? It has been their secret as well."

"Of course not! I'd love to see them. The more the merrier around here," chuckles Nan.

So, early next Saturday they all ride up to the Marae in Mike's old van.

Aroha is welcomed by her Nan with enveloping arms. Then there is a hongi for all the others too. The children come running to look at them, their brown eyes shining; she recognizes Rawiri, Kahu, Taina, and Anhaheira, but there seem to be many more than when she last visited.

The next thing that Aroha notices, once she has time to look around, is that everything looks cleaner, fresher, and more revitalized than when she last came. When she looks closely

³¹ See "Xperts 1: *The Telekinetic* and "Xperts 2: *The Paradoppelganger*

she can see that the meetinghouse has a whole new coat of ochre stain, and all the broken pieces of paua shell in the carvings have been replaced. It isn't long before she finds out the reason. The settlement has been given a considerable grant of money when they agreed to become a Kohanga Reo, a Maori language nest. Aroha realizes that this also explains the increased number of children. Parents from many neighboring villages have sent their children to the Marae to learn both the Maori language and the old traditions.

Nan looks as if she has a new lease of life too. She loves being Whāea Kepa once more to so many young ones.

There is going to be a hangī³² in the evening to celebrate Aroha's homecoming. The men and boys have already lit the fire to make the stones to white hot. The meat is butchered: lamb, venison, and pork. Aroha and her friends help the women peel sack loads of vegetables: potatoes, kumara (sweet potato), parsnip, and pumpkin. They then load aluminum dishes (relics of take-away dinners) with both meat and vegetables, and cover each with foil.

Fire's ready," Rawiri calls out.

The foil dishes are placed in wire racks and gently laid on the coals, then covered with wet sacks and, finally, earth. Pots full of seafood chowder made from pipis, mussels, and all kinds of fish are simmering on a fire.

As evening falls there is chanting to the sound of log drums. First one, then two, and finally everyone joins in. Aroha finds herself engrossed in primeval music. The songs drift out over the sea.

That night, Aroha's soul is stirred by the traditional Maori music and dancing as never before. Finally, tired out, she nestles by her Nan and they talk in low whispers. Her friends sit quietly by.

"There is something that I've asked my friends to keep secret," Aroha murmurs. "I would like to share it with you too, Nan."

³² A meal of meat and vegetable pieces cooked in the ground.

“And I would like to hear all you are happy to tell,” Nan prompts.

“When I first moved to the city I was very, very lonely,” Aroha slowly begins. “I hiked by myself in the Waitakere ranges, and up from Karekare beach I found a hidden valley. The heart of the valley seems a sacred place, and...”

“And?” Nan gently prompts.

“And I found this,” Aroha says, and pulls out her Kapakapa.

After a very long pause, Nan asks softly, “Do you think there is anything particularly special about it?”

“Yes. It’s hard to explain, but when I hold it and close my eyes I often see things in strange ways. Then, even with my eyes open, sometimes things don’t look as they really are. It’s as if I am using a sense other than ordinary sight or sound. It’s very hard to explain. The others didn’t believe me until they also experienced similar things. Do you remember my mentioning that I felt I’d been on a long quest to find my whakapapa?”

“Yes, you said you wanted to find the ancient ones. Did you not know that some of our people, and I am one, are called ‘ancient’ as a mark of respect?”

With a long sigh Aroha murmurs, “No, I didn’t know.”

“Now, getting back to this carving, do you know why the top is such an unusual shape?”

“No, I’ve often wondered,” Aroha responds. The others move closer, holding their breaths.

“This is part of something from the beginnings of time. The tall ones with no hair on their heads, who lived in Aotearoa before the coming of our people, made it. They were great craftsmen. Once your Kapakapa was joined with another shape. Similar, but different, the two parts are made to come apart, and be put back together. The whole will be much more powerful than the two halves.”

“But what is it?” Aroha asks.

“It is a whakarehu, a visualizer, a mind caller,” Nan explains. There are gasps from her friends. “Once in many

hundreds of years one is found. And always, so it is said, if one half is found, the other part is found by someone else.”

“You mean that someone else found the other half about the same time I found mine?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

They are all quiet for a long time before Nan says, “Hold your Kapakapa tightly, close your eyes, and picture it with both halves joined together.”

Aroha can see the whole Kapakapa clearly. Then through it she ‘sees’ Sky Father, Earth Mother, and their sons.

A warm feeling seeps through Aroha’s mind and soul. Mike, Jeannie, and Marcus have all moved closer still. But she can sense Kevin with her too. How glad he would be to know that at least some of their theories about the Kapakapa have been confirmed. As she looks into her grandmother’s eyes, the morning sun rises and she knows that the time for new love and new experiences will come.

In Rotorua, Herbert’s Mindcaller comes alive again, and his heart leaps as it displays, more clearly than ever before, curly hair above a smiling face. He has glimpsed her so often, that now he feels he knows her intimately. He calls out to her: ‘Aroha!’

Coming from way beyond the Marae, Aroha hears the new voice. It is so compelling she immediately opens her eyes. She whispers, “From far away, someone called my name!”

“You do remember what your name means, don’t you?” Nan asks.

Almost under her breath Aroha whispers, “Love.”

At length, Nan says, “I believe that you must go back to the city; your students need you, your research remains unfinished. But the legend foretells that you will find your soul mate. The new lover, who has waited all these long years for you to find yourself, your whole self, is now calling you to him.”



March 2007–November 2011

Much to both Herb and Aroha's frustration, their Mindcallers provide them with no further clues as to each other's whereabouts.

Herbert continues to both work in Rotorua and help in the village. He studies a wide range of subjects to prepare himself for the future—a future that no one could conceivably predict. And he keeps listening to the Mindcaller. When it remains inactive for long periods, as it did for many years after Kevin's death, Herbert misses it. But somehow, he still feels confident that one day it will come alive and stay active.

Aroha concentrates on her visual-communication research, along with programming visualizations, and in a very short time becomes renown in academic circles worldwide. Kevin's death has forced her to grow up. Marcus, true his resolve, invites her out to Gt. Barrier, and she has one exceedingly adventurous time with him in Rotorua³³, but she has declines his requests to join his group.

Marcus's group now includes people with a wide range of parabilities—Marcus is a strong telekinetic, his wife Maria has para-sight, their son Stefan can communicate with animals and birds, and their three-year old daughter Lena can sense para-powers. Cynthia, another member of Marcus's team, can make people forget specific memories. Marcus's salvage company SR-Inc, Auckland, is a front for their para-operations.

It is a very fortuitous chain of events that finally leads Aroha and Herbert to their long awaited meeting. Maria's daughter, Lena, using her parability on a trip to Rotorua, noticed that a man 'glowed'. This indicated a para-phenomenon, but, being young, she did not think to pass this fact on to anyone. Only later, overhearing her parents talking, did she inform them that the other half of Aroha's Mindcaller was with: 'Herbert ... the man in Rotorua's Mexican

³³See Xperts : "The Paradoppelganger"

restaurant!' Maria passed the information on to Aroha at their next meeting.

Now, on a Friday evening in November 2011, Aroha walks into the Mexican restaurant for the first time and Herbert reacts by dropping the glass he is holding and spraying Tequila over them both. He grins at her, and says, "Just wanted to ensure it's a memorable meeting!"

PART TWO: Para-Discoveries

Chapter Thirteen

Two Halves and a Whole

End of December 2011

In a secluded cove on Waiheke Island, New Zealand, Aroha is lying by herself on the white sand, her golden body soaking up the sun. Her only item of apparel is the rare obsidian carving she wears on a plaited flax band around her neck. She quivers and turns over on her back. She is torn between excitement and apprehension. In just a few hours, Herbert, Mike, and Jeannie are coming to put the two halves of the Mindcaller together for the first time.

Aroha has come down to this favorite cove of hers to try and regain some sense of balance. She has a feeling that things are moving too fast for her. She is convinced that both Herb and Marcus³⁴ are rushing her. Just this morning she received another urgent email from Marcus asking her to take a more active part in SR-Inc³⁵. This time he hinted that an overseas assignment could be coming up for her and Herb.

Intuitively liking and trusting Marcus, Aroha cannot help but be interested in his company SRI-Inc. Carrying the weight of the business on his shoulders, Marcus is usually serious, although a love of wine, women, and song comes out at the most unexpected moments!

³⁴ See Xperts 1: "The Telekinetic" and Xperts 2: "The Paradoppelganger"

³⁵ SR-Inc. stands for "Salvage and Rescue Inc." This corporation was formed by Marcus as a cover for his group who have para-psychological abilities such as telekinesis and telepathy.

Aroha's biggest problem at the moment is her relationship with Herb. There is no doubt that Herb, aided and abetted by Marcus, assumes that they should be a twosome, and he cannot understand why she is not showing the affection she did when they first met. After all, her Nan predicted years back that Herb, as the holder of the other half of the Mindcaller, would be her husband. She has a niggling feeling that in her heart of hearts her affection still lies with Kevin, whose death was more than eight years ago now.

Stretching, Aroha looks backwards over her head to the top of the cliff. A golden haze of fine spray silhouettes the pine trees that line the top. Its beauty sidetracks her and she sits up, thinking, as she often has before, that this is the most beautiful place in the world.

Unusual patterns are forming on the water. Silky smooth patches of dark green water contrast with choppy white-tops, and she wonders whether her Mindcaller is up to its tricks again. Apprehensive, she wonders what the result of putting the two halves together will be. Her fear is that it could become uncontrollable.

With her feelings as mixed as ever, Aroha realizes that it is time to dress and drive to meet the others at the wharf. It is a merry meeting with lots of hugs all round. As they walk along the waterfront to the car, talking nineteen to the dozen, Herb suddenly stops. He points to a large, handwritten billboard that proclaims: 'N.Z.'s first GE free zone!' "What does that mean?" he asks.

"Something Waiheke residents are proud of," Aroha explains. "They have set up a Web site where the majority of residents have declared their properties to be 'Genetic Engineering Free Zones.'"

"I suppose it goes along with New Zealander's pride in their country being Nuclear Free," Jeannie says.

“Yes. Remember when we took on the French over the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior³⁶,” Mike says. The others nod thoughtfully.

At Aroha’s holiday home up on a hill overlooking the ocean, the party has a quick lunch. They all have one thing, and one thing only on their minds: What will happen when the two Mindcallers are put together as one?

At Aroha’s suggestion they walk down to her favorite beach and settle down together in a circle. Herb’s impatience shows itself as he tangles his carving in his clothing trying to jerk it off. Aroha takes hers off more slowly, respectfully. Then, as agreed previously, they both hand their pieces to Mike (as a neutral participant). He looks at the two halves closely, obviously puzzled as to which way they should go.

Aroha, having seen the Mindcaller whole in a mind flash, says, “Here, I will draw it in the sand—looking as it should be.”

With the sand drawing as a template, Mike aligns the pieces and with a slight pressure the two parts become a seamless whole.

For several moments nothing happens, and no one says a word. Then one by one they let out the breaths they have been holding in and look at each other. The looks on their faces are comical.

“Nothing! Nothing’s b... well happened!” Herb exclaims.

“We’ve looked for clues up and down all New Zealand without any real success,” Mike says, “and now, when I was absolutely sure we would finally discover at least some scientific explanations, we experience nothing!”

Mike hands the Mindcaller to Aroha who says, “I’m not sure what I expected, but I expected something! We’ve searched from deep in the glow-worm caves to the top ...”

That is as far as she gets. Simultaneously, all four friends see a series of flashes depicting the images they saw from the top of the Southern Alps. This time, however, they also see

³⁶ Greenpeace nuclear protest boat

what each of the others saw: the sky gods and the star spirits singing in the sky, and more.

As usual, the flashes disappear quickly and the group sits in silence for a considerable time.

At last, Mike says quietly, "Did you experience what I did? I caught a glimpse of what each of you said you saw back then."

"Yes," Jeannie says. "This time I saw the deep-river Taniwha that Kevin described, with its shining green scales."

For a long time they sit thinking of Kevin. Kevin, whose rugged face belied the deep love in his soul for all that exists in this universe—sky, mountains, rivers, animals, and, most of all, Aroha. In this moment they feel him very close.

At last Aroha passes the Mindcaller back to Mike.

"Look at the way the two halves have fit together so snugly" Mike comments. "And, and... it's warm. Very warm in fact."

He hands it on Herb and Jeannie, who then passes it back to Aroha. Aroha feels its warmth but then becomes aware of other sensations, almost bombarding her.

"What's happening?" Herb asks seeing the look on her face. "Tell us."

"I can sense more strongly than ever before the directions of the wind that is playing with the wispy clouds up there, the movements in the ocean currents, and the rain in the distance."

"What else?" Jeannie prompts.

"Grains of sand moving against each other as some critter tries to escape from under my towel!" Aroha laughs and moves her towel. Sure enough a Sand Hopper hops away. A few minutes later she says thoughtfully: "I'm also very aware of the directions that sounds are coming from—the position of the grey warbler hidden in that pohutukawa tree for example."

The four friends sit, each with their own thoughts, until Mike looks at Herb and Aroha, and says, "The next question is how do we get it apart again? If we don't, you two will have to decide who's going to have it!"

"Assuming it's meant to come apart," Jeannie puts in.

Herb looks at the Mindcaller carefully and notes that at one end there is a slight depression. He presses it with a fingernail and to his relief the two halves separate. Silently he hands Aroha's half back to her. The feeling of warmness and aliveness is very apparent to both of them as they each put their own half on again.

When hunger strikes they buy a takeaway meal of fish and chips (New Zealand style, wrapped in newspaper) and eat it sitting on a headland and watching the sun sink into a golden sea. Herb and Mike wander over to the cliff edge and discuss climbing routes down to the beach. Both girls admire Herb's muscular brown body that suggests hours at a gym—however, he has never ever considered belonging to one! He loves the outdoors, where the sunshine has tinged his brown hair with gold.

Jeannie smiles to herself as she notes that, in contrast to Herb, Mike looks very white. He is an academic first and foremost, almost a walking encyclopedia. He is, however, very strong and has an uncannily good sense of direction. Most important of all, she knows that he loves her dearly.

Aroha and Jeannie fall into a comfy coze. Understanding Aroha better than anyone else, Jeannie has stood by her steadfastly since Kevin died. Unfortunately they do not see as much of each other nowadays, because as a loving wife to Mike, Jeannie is content to be tied down at home with her two bonnie children.

Before long Aroha is telling Jeannie all her worries about Herb and Kevin.

"Have you talked it over with your Grandmother?" Jeannie asks. "There is no one wiser than she is."

Aroha pulls her e-helper out of her backpack and calls Nan right away. After some catching up with family news she mentions her fears. She still cannot say Kevin's name without stuttering.

"Did you ever find Kevin's tiki?" Nan asks.

"No. I think it must be still on Mt. Aotaki where he fell. The search and rescue party only found his body and his

daypack. Later I searched in his daypack, clothes, and our house without success."

"I have a feeling," Nan says after a pause, "that it's important that you should find it—if you can."

After the phone call Aroha tells Jeannie what Nan has said, and that Nan is probably concerned that a closure ritual has never been sung over the tiki. They sit, thinking over their times together in the Alps, until Herb and Mike come back and suggest that they return to Aroha's home.

At midnight one of Waiheke's frequent tropical storms blows up.

"Looks like we're in for a wet day tomorrow," Herb remarks.

"Yes. Any ideas what we could do?" Mike asks.

"We could explore the tunnels at Rocky Batter," Aroha suggests.

"Tunnels? What tunnels?" Jeannie wants to know.

"They're an interconnecting system of caves at the easternmost end of the island. Not many people know about them because they've only recently been re-opened to the public. The only access is across private land owned by a wealthy farmer."

"What were they used for?" Herb asks.

"I really haven't a clue," Aroha says. "But I think that there's a small one-roomed museum at the entrance."

"Sounds like a great idea for a wet day," Mike comments.

The next morning four water-proofed shapes are walking briskly under steady rain along the track leading to the tunnels. Regardless of the weather they all enjoy the walk. To the right of them are vineyards.

"Vineyards?" Herb queries. "Is wine produced on Waiheke?"

"Yes, certainly. And it's expensive. Most of it becomes collectors' items."

Just then there is a rapid volley of shots. They all stop in their tracks.

"What's that?" Jeannie exclaims.

“Probably some farmer chasing away birds,” Aroha says. “Waihekians are noted for shooting stray deer, stray cats, and introduced birds. They really are passionate about preserving native flora and fauna. But by the looks of those scrumptious bunches of grapes I would guess that it must be nearly harvest time when any sort of bird is considered to be fair game!”

The little group continues on warily but there is no sound other than the persistent rain. “Actually,” Aroha says, breaking the silence, “I once saw a bumper sticker which said: ‘They say it’s the tourist season. Why can’t we shoot them!’” The others laugh.

Half an hour later they come to the end of the track where they see the small, ugly, concrete barrack at the entrance to the tunnel. A generator is running at the cave entrance but there is no sight or sound of anyone around the place. They tumble inside the cabin leaving their coats in the entranceway.

Sure enough, it is a small museum with photos and artifacts from World War II in display cases all around the walls. Herb and Mike are particularly interested and systematically walk around the room looking at all the material, including photos, maps, and old weapons. Jeannie and Aroha, having no interest in war memorabilia, rest on a sofa considerately placed in the middle of the room and chat. Aroha points out the large flashlights that have been left by the visitors’ book for people to use. They don’t need them as, on Aroha’s advice, they have brought their own.

After signing the visitors’ book they don their raincoats again, and, since it is still raining hard, make a dash from the doorway to the tunnel entrance. Here there is a long gently sloping tunnel that eventually turns into a stairway. By this time there is practically no light from the generator and they have to switch on their torches. The stairs are steep, slippery, and so covered with mold that they make slow progress down to the bottom. A short way further on they come to a side room that they enter excitedly. To their astonishment one wall seems to be stocked with ammunition. Closer inspection however shows that it is just a picture on a wall, but a most unusual

picture, seemingly imprinted onto the wall surface. They all look at each other.

“The Mindcaller in action?” Herb suggests.

“I guess so,” Aroha says thoughtfully. “But it somehow seems different from the sort of thing we’ve experienced previously.”

“Yes,” Mike agrees. “What we saw before weren’t just images. They seemed to be like real things, real mountains and rivers, just bigger and steeper than they should be, and with strange colors.”

Images are also projected in the next few rooms—kitchen, bunkrooms, and so on. A few hundred feet further on the tunnel widens into a large area with two sets of stairs rising up at the far end, one on each side of a sludgy water channel.

“Y’know—” Herb says, “—I can’t help wondering whether the projections we’re seeing are being produced by my half of the Mindcaller, or Aroha’s, or both.”

“Well there is one way of finding out,” Mike points out. “You take Jeannie up the right-hand stairs and I’ll take Aroha up the left hand set. Then later we can try putting both parts together and seeing what, if anything, happens.”

“OK, but make sure you look after Aroha,” is Herb’s parting shot.

They are all scrambling up the stairs that are quite steep when all of a sudden out of the stillness comes a rush and rumble of water and rocks down the channel.

The two little groups stand in shocked silence as the import of it all sinks in. They could have been killed. Mike yells to Herb and Jeannie to see if they are OK but it is hopeless over the noise of the torrent of water.

“What do you think happened?” Aroha asks.

“I would guess that one of the farmers’ dams has broken with all the heavy rain,” Mike replies. “It could take ages for the water to subside.”

Aroha and Mike sit down on the cold damp concrete floor and discuss what to do. They feel as if they are in a real mess.

There are two exits from the cave they are in and of course they have not got a clue which one they should take.

"I wish I could communicate with Herb," Aroha says. "What use is a mind caller if you can't call anyone with it when you really need to? I assume that there's no e-helper coverage down here." Mike tries, but as expected there is none.

Aroha, wishing desperately that she had looked at the maps on the museum walls, visualizes the whole Mindcaller and immediately a map appears on the floor in front of them! They are jubilant and both get down on their hands and knees to find where they are. It takes a little while, but before long Mike has not only found the tunnel they came down but worked out where they should go. Fortunately it is not very far—through the rightmost door, two lefts and a right should bring them to an exit. There is a rather strange circle marked on their route. What it is they have no idea.

"Of course we have to trust to luck that the door it is unlocked," Aroha says almost under her breath.

"The sooner we go, the sooner we'll find out." Mike points out.

"I can't help wondering how Herb and Jeannie are getting on and if they have a map too," Aroha says, picking herself up from the floor. Mike nods in agreement.

Taking hands, and using only one torch, in case of emergencies, they exit into the rightmost tunnel and then take two left turns. Soon they see light ahead, but it does not come from an exit, it comes from the ceiling! They find themselves in a large circular tank.

"Goodness knows what this was for," Mike says. "Maybe it was for guns. But it is obviously the circle we saw on the map, which means we're on track."

Before too long they can see light at the end of the tunnel and scramble through blackberry bushes to push their way outside. The first thing they do is to ring the fire department—a volunteer group that rescues everything from pets to people.

The fire truck arrives with sirens ringing. Six men haul the extension ladder off the truck and run with it down the tunnel.

Aroha and Mike follow more slowly, wishing they had boots with big treads like the firemen do. By the time they arrive at the flooded part of the tunnel, the firemen have already bridged the water using the ladder and are explaining to Herb and Jeannie how they should handle it. There is a joyful reunion once they are across. They decide to donate two crates of beer, instead of the customary one, to the volunteers.

Back at her holiday home, Aroha sets the Waiheke grapevine working and invites her many friends to come around for a party. Before long the large living room is filled with the scent of macrocarpa burning in the wood stove and the sound of laughter. Food brought by the guests looks to be enough to feed them all for a week. Guests mingle and mix and, as in any small community, the latest gossip, including the tunnel adventure, is laughed over. In one room people are laughing over Tarot card readings. On the back veranda a group is smoking—just what they are smoking is best left unsaid.

Aroha becomes aware that she is sensing the interplay of energies and tensions between the various guests as they intermingle. She tries to escape the almost suffocating feeling of rampant energy by going out onto the balcony. Sitting on the steps she closes her eyes reliving the day and its happenings. Without thinking, she visualizes the Mindcaller, whole, and immediately she is bombarded with vivid Technicolor flashes and a cacophony of sounds. In self-defense her eyes fly open and, to her relief, the sensations diminish. Herb joins her.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, seeing her shaking.

“I saw a series of flashes. They were different than before. This time I sensed that what I was seeing were my friends inside the house—but as abstractions! Representations! Pairs of colored circles represented couples. I recognized Mike and Jeannie but I have no idea who the others were, which is just as well because I could also sense emotions and inhibitions dissolving and reforming!”

Music from several guitars starts up and Aroha slowly is able to relax and finally go inside to join the others singing and dancing to old favorites like 'Dancing Queen'.

Sitting on the beach the next day, Aroha tries to describe to the others what she experienced at the party. She explains to Mike and Jeannie how lovely their relationship looked to be. "I saw two auras, so to speak, circling around each other. They were in lovely pastel colors and the pattern they made, though intricate, was obviously stable. They were particularly good when compared with some of the other partnerships in the room which, although bright and shiny on the outside, were dark and angry gray-blacks on the inside, and visibly unstable."

"Could you tell who they all belonged to?" Jeannie asks with interest.

"No, fortunately, I only recognized yours—probably because I know you so well that I often sense you even when I can't see you."

"Can you still see them?" Mike asks.

"No. Just as with my other flashes they faded quickly," Aroha responds.

What really disappoints Herb is the fact that Aroha can't 'sense' him.

After having said farewell to Mike and Jeannie at the boat back to Auckland that evening, Aroha and Herb have dinner out at a little Indian restaurant. They discuss the weekend in detail and finally Herb persuades Aroha that they need Marcus's help with understanding how to use the Mindcaller in one piece, as well as in halves.

Chapter Fourteen

Mind Games

January 2012

Herb is waiting on the wharf at Gt. Barrier Island, and ready to welcome Aroha who is coming to stay for a long weekend.

Over a lunch of fresh seafood salad and homemade bread, Aroha and Herb tell Marcus and his wife Maria about their experiences in the tunnels. Marcus shows intent interest in Aroha's comments about the differences between her previous experiences and what she saw in the rooms. To her frustration, Aroha finds it very hard to explain the differences. "Things always looked sort of *real* before. The tunnel ones just looked like photos," she explains as best she can. Marcus suggests that they should discuss it further after lunch.

In his office, Marcus begins by saying, "From what I've seen and heard, I believe that your Mindcaller is an amazingly powerful computer—particularly for its size. It can project images that it has previously recorded. Perhaps the most remarkable part of your account about your tunnel experience is the fact that only you, Herb, looked at the photos and maps. Yet it was Aroha that projected them when they were needed. In other words it looks as if Herb's half of the Mindcaller recorded the images, and then passed them onto Aroha's half."

"I bet you're right," Herb says, while Aroha nods in agreement.

Aroha suggests, "I suppose the reason we found it unpredictable was that we haven't learned how to use it yet."

"Yes. Exactly," Marcus agrees, "and the whole Mindcaller may be even more powerful and, hopefully, more user friendly than the halves. So now, I suggest that you take every possible opportunity to practice using it in all sorts of ways. Try to play

with it. Have fun with it wherever, and whenever, you can this weekend.”

“Will do,” Herb readily agrees.

“Of course—” Marcus continues looking more than usually serious, “—when other people are around, you should continue to be careful that no one else sees the Mindcaller—or what it can do.

“Now, please excuse me because I have another meeting coming up. But make the island your home and we’ll meet again at dinnertime. We will discuss the SR-Inc project I mentioned on Monday morning before you leave.”

On the beach, they put the Mindcaller into one piece again.

“Right, where do we start?” Aroha asks.

“Assuming it’s a computer,” Herb responds, “there should be some way to control it, right?”

“Yes, I thought of that,” Aroha says, “but I’ve looked carefully and, except for the indentation that is formed when it’s put together, there isn’t anything remotely resembling a button.”

“I agree. I’ve been thinking about what you told Marcus. You wished you had a map of the tunnels—and one appeared. This suggests that the Caller can be mind controlled. So I propose that we try thinking about something we were both involved in recently—the tunnels.”

“OK,” Aroha agrees. “Let’s both touch the Mindcaller, close our eyes, and imagine the first storeroom we saw.”

They shift so that they are both sitting cross-legged on the sand, and facing each other with their hands around the Mindcaller. They look as if they are part of some spiritual meditation group!

Almost immediately they both ‘see’ the cave with one wall lined with ammunition. Both open their eyes and lose it. They try again and again before they manage to hold the image with their eyes open for nearly a minute.

That evening they practice looking at a candle flame in a dark room and they are excited when they make the whole room glow with light. They ‘blow’ out the candle and light up

the room again using only their minds. Next they take turns and it becomes obvious that Aroha is the stronger projector—either because of the functionality of her half of the Mindcaller or because she has had more practice.

The sun is pouring into their bedrooms the following day and Aroha jumps up and opens the curtains with delight. It is a priceless summer morning and they plan to snorkel in the bay further along the coast. Maria, Marcus's wife, will join them at midday.

Herb is delighted to be alone with Aroha. Having loved her from the day he first heard her answer his call using her half of the Mindcaller, he assumed that it would be the same for her. Night after night he sees her in his dreams, with her black hair a mass of curls and her brown eyes shining. He looks at her, wanting to run his hands over her, but realizing she has withdrawn from him he worries he may have rushed her.

All morning they alternate snorkeling and practicing with the Mindcaller. They revel in the underwater world with its bright blue mau mau fish than swim in shoals around them. They explore the kelp-covered rocks and chase crabs out of their cracks. When their hands are all water-wrinkled they come out and dry out on the warm sand. Here they have fun mind calling—either together or separately. Their first real success is when Herb imagines Aroha's legs (of course he doesn't tell her that they are her legs) running along the sand. Aroha rotates the image 180 degrees and sends it back to Herb, making him laugh. He spontaneously leans over and gives her a kiss. Without thinking Aroha withdraws and only when she sees the hurt look on Herb's face does she realize what she has done. In an effort to cover it up, she sends back a vision of the legs dancing the Can Can—complete with music. With practice they manage to produce brief flashes of dancers slipping and sliding on the water.

They are both laughing when Maria arrives carrying a large picnic basket.

“Share the joke,” she demands. They are trying to describe what is happening, when she suddenly giggles. “Yes, I can see it too! It’s amazing!”

They have a playful lunch, taking little notice of the delicious sandwiches they are eating. When they are finished, Herb suggests a walk around the rocks but both Aroha and Maria opt for sunbathing. For a while they sit quietly taking in the breathtaking view.

“Look at the acres of diamonds sparkling out there,” Aroha says, throwing her arms out. To her delight Maria has a soul-felt feeling for them too. Before long, Aroha finds herself telling Maria intimate details about her life. Maria is a very good listener and soon Aroha is pouring out her uppermost worries.

“I’ve been down right confused lately,” Aroha says.

“How come?” Maria encourages.

“For starters, too many bizarre things have happened since I found the Mindcaller, and sometimes I fear for my mind!”

“Don’t worry. You’re definitely in good company here. We’ve all had weird experiences. Marcus will tell you about it when he thinks the time is right.”

“He’s said that he will talk to us on Monday. But my biggest problem at the moment is that I just don’t know what I really feel about Herb. When I first met him I just assumed that we would be partners because of the Mindcaller. Now I’m not so sure any more.”

“So you think that everything is happening too fast.”

“Yes! Way too fast. And the fact that Marcus wants me to join Herb on an assignment makes things doubly awkward.”

“I can understand that! However I think Marcus is planning for there to be at least a third person with you.”

“That will help.”

“Do try. I know you’ll find fulltime work with us interesting and never boring, and you may learn a lot more about yourself and the Mindcaller.”

At this point Herb comes back and they decide to walk over the ridge to the surf beach. Here they have a great time

bodysurfing. Aroha revels in the feeling of tons of water pounding her in all directions.

As arranged, Monday morning sees Herb and Aroha once again in Marcus's office.

He gets straight down to business by turning to Aroha. "Have you made up your mind yet about joining SR-Inc?" he asks outright.

"I had a chat with Maria yesterday," Aroha begins. "She hinted that you've all experienced inexplicable things."

"Yes, we certainly have," Marcus says.

"The trouble is that I still don't know what SR-Inc is really involved in. I know that it's not just a salvage and rescue company. I'm sure it's a cover."

"You're right. The problem is that I can't tell you very much about what we do as that would endanger the whole group. I asked you to join us because you have, like us, unique abilities. You can't really explain yours yet, although I know that you've got some clues about it. As for you Herbert, I guess that you've no idea what your special ability is. Right?"

Herb shrugs his shoulders.

"One thing I can say," Marcus goes on, "is that although your abilities involve your minds in unusual ways, you need not worry that you're 'odd' or 'weird'. Everyone has special abilities of one sort or another, whether they know it or not."

"I guess so," says Aroha unconvinced.

"Also, I can assure you that if you ever need help our group will always be willing to lend a hand. We're a very loyal group. What's more, in our line of work, the more minds the better! I can promise you, though, that you'll find the work fascinating with lots of overseas travel. And you'll both learn a lot more about the Mindcaller."

There is silence for a time.

"OK, I'll join you," Aroha says, "although I'll have to make arrangements for quitting my job at University."

"Great!" Marcus enthusiastically shakes her hand.

"Congratulations!" Herb says. "One thing is for sure, it's a very special group."

“Now there is just one other piece of advice I’d like to give you,” Marcus says. “I suggest that you take the Mindcaller to the place where Aroha found her half, and see what you can discover there now it’s whole.”

It is fun driving out to Aorama again in Mike’s ancient van. To Herb’s secret disappointment, Aroha has insisted that Mike and Jeannie come too because, as she put it, ‘they have a right to see the Mindcaller whole because they were in at the beginning of things.’

They stop for a quick lunch at the cottage while Aroha collects several flashlights.

“What are those for?” Herb asks.

“With luck we might find the caves we found last time,” Aroha replies. “In which case you’ll be far too well dressed for the conditions there. Look at Mike and Jeannie—shorts, bush shirts, and hiking boots, and whatever happens today it’s unlikely to be a Sunday walk. I think we’d better see if we can find something that fits you.”

Herb feels like a real tramp in the assorted clothes he is given. Certainly they are more practical than the ones he had on, and he realizes that he unintentionally dressed up in an effort to impress Aroha.

Aroha leads the way down to the Cathedral: the grove of ancient trees where she found her half of the Mindcaller just on twelve years ago. The group stops and Herb puts the two halves of the Caller together. At first, to his frustration, nothing out of the ordinary appears to happen.

“I guess I should’ve expected this,” he says with disgust, “but I did hope I’d see some of the changes you saw back in 2002.”

Aroha, however, gradually becomes aware that she is now more sensitive to physical forces than before. She senses rain clouds out over the sea, air currents and wind directions, and that the river stones are being ground ever smaller.

They stomp around but everything looks frustratingly normal.

“Talk about a downer!” Herb says. “But we may as well take a walk while we’re here.” Herb passes the Mindcaller over to Aroha, expressing his frustration in his movements.

Aroha looks at the two kauri trees her Caller led them between on their first adventure and almost subconsciously visualizes the forest beyond, as it appeared that day. Straight away they can all see a change of light through the trees. Herb, in particular, is delighted.

“Heavens alive! This, I gather, is the track to the big waterfall. Let’s go!”

Aroha turns towards the two nikau palm trees where more changes are visible. “We don’t have time to do everything we’d like to,” she says. “I would like to see if the cave is still here. What do you think Mike? Jeannie?”

“I agree,” Mike says.

“But that would mean crossing that wretched big river at the cave mouth again,” Jeannie points out.

“I’ve thought of that,” Aroha says. “Mike, do you think that you could find the exit we came out, rather than the entrance?”

“Assuming that things haven’t changed—yes I’m sure I can.”

They follow Mike through the trees and Herb, having been brought up by his father to be quite a naturalist, keeps stopping to exclaim about differences in the flora and noting the unusual colors. At one point they stop to look across the valley to some very steep, rugged cliffs that Mike says are quite out of character for this area of the country.

A further hour’s walk and a bit of bush crashing sees them unerringly at the exit to the cave system.

“That was a superb bit of route finding Mike,” Herb says.

“Yes, he seems to have a gift for finding his way, map or no map, day or night,” Jeannie says with admiration in her voice.

Crawling through the cave opening, Herb understands why a white shirt would not have been a good idea: the tunnel is mud filled.

Before long they come to the glow-worm caves. As before, its beauty enchants them all.

"Exactly where did you see the shooting stars?" Jeannie asks half jokingly.

"There," Aroha says, pointing to a rock wall that is covered from floor to ceiling with glow-worms. Wanting to prove she was right, Aroha deliberately visualizes shooting stars. Almost immediately shooting stars, like a fireworks display with a musical accompaniment, dance across the wall. It is incredible!

"God! I'll never get used to this sort of thing happening," Jeannie says softly.

"Me neither," Mike whispers, awestruck.

"Well, whoever archived this on the Mindcaller must have had a sense of humor," Herb says equally softly.

Naturally Herb wants to explore further into the cave system but the others outvote him, pointing out that both he and Aroha have boats to catch.

They make very good time back to Aorama where they take a chocolate break at Aroha's favorite spot overlooking the sea. Evening is coming on and sky and sea are golden. They sit in companionable silence before Jeannie asks, "Can you change the color of the sunset Aroha?"

"I've never tried," Aroha replies.

"How about trying with the Mindcaller whole," Herb suggests. Almost right away the color of the sea changes to blood red. An instant later it is orange-green-blue-indigo-and violet. It is fantastic and they all laugh with pure pleasure. Aroha goes on experimenting. This time she imagines all the primary colors mixed together and making amazing patterns. Tiring of this she tries, and succeeds, in changing the scene in front of them to appear as different times of the day, morning through to evening, and then different seasons. The pohutukawa trees are covered with bright red flowers, and the kowhai tree with yellow blossom. Flocks of birds arrive and fill the air with wonderful birdsong. Winter, following a glorious autumn, fills the sky with ominous dark clouds and

the sea turns to black ink. As the storm rages, lightning splits the sky. The sound is deafening.

“Hey! This is a bit too realistic!” Jeannie exclaims shivering. At this point Aroha panics. Lightning flashes across the wave tops; a scaled monster rears up, heading for a cave that glows blood red. Aroha’s Nan, young, then old, and finally ancient, appears at the cave entrance calling to her. Mountain gods throw lightning bolts. The images are now senseless, erratic, and speeding out of control. The noise becomes increasingly frenetic. Aroha’s increasing panic is tangible and frightens her three friends. Herb puts out his hand to comfort her but she just bats it away. He feels powerless and hurt. Aroha’s eyes are opening and closing repeatedly in quick succession.

“We should have expected something like this,” Herb mutters.

In desperation Jeannie moves over to Aroha and puts her arms tightly around her. Aroha tries to struggle but Jeannie holds her more tightly still.

“Aroha?” she whispers insistently into an ear. “Aroha, can you hear me? Can you hear me? Clear your mind! Be still. You can do it. Meditate.” Jeannie’s voice has taken on a singsong sort of chanting quality. Gradually the crazy images slow down. The noise fades away. The sea and sky return to their original beautiful golden color. As her friends gradually relax a little, Aroha bursts into a flood of tears.

“I didn’t know how to stop it! I thought I was going crazy!”

Herb feels both distraught and helpless.

“You’re not crazy Aroha,” Jeannie says. “As you know, any computer scientist can do just what you did. We can access countless digital libraries of video clips, using IP80, and download random files from all over the world. They can subsequently be played at different speeds, with randomly chosen sound tracks. We do it all the time, just like you did just now.”

Aroha gives a little giggle and wipes her eyes.

“Yes!” Herb almost stammers with excitement. “Marcus confirmed that the Mindcaller is an extremely powerful supercomputer. It can probably store mega quantities of documents for display.”

“In that case, there was certainly a crazy DJ at work!” Aroha points out in an attempt at humor. “There was even street-rap in that mess!”

The others start to playact being DJs and making such outlandish sounds that they all end up laughing.

“We’d better go right now, or you’ll certainly miss your boats,” Mike says.

In the van driving back to the ferry building they discuss the day.

“How did you know how to help Aroha clear her mind Jeannie?” Herb asks.

“I didn’t know. I just desperately hoped it might help,” Jeannie responds.

“Well, how come, Aroha knew what you meant?”

“Way back, when we were at Varsity, Aroha and I went on a retreat where we did yoga, meditation, and Dances of Universal Peace, among other things. We practiced clearing our minds using a form of chanting.”

“Yes, and thank goodness we did, or who knows where I’d be now,” Aroha says as she mentally resolves to have another chat with Maria as soon as possible.

“One thing still really puzzles me,” Mike says, “How does the Mindcaller make things like hills and mountains change?”

“One minute the bush in the Cathedral looked normal,” Herb says, “and the next instant it didn’t. It was incredible!”

“The snow slopes always puzzled me too,” Mike says. “They always seemed less steep when we actually climbed them.”

“And the steepness and height of waterfalls,” Jeannie puts in.

At this point Aroha gives herself a mental shake.

"I gave it some thought as we climbed back up the ridge this afternoon. As Marcus said, the Mindcaller is a very powerful supercomputer. With compression algorithms being what they are today, this means that, even with today's technology, it can archive many lifetimes of material. However, not even Marcus's group has seen anything like the technology that's imbedded in it."

"Aliens could have made it," Herb, who loves science fiction, states.

"It's a possibility," Aroha says. "You see it's possible that what we see was recorded eons ago."

"When the world was much younger and slopes were steeper," Jeannie says.

"So why don't we see the recordings just as a video-like movies—much as we saw the tunnel pictures?" Mike asks.

"That's what I find most interesting," Jeannie says. "It probably uses strong transformation rules. It transforms aspects of images such as height, steepness, and color. It may apply the transformation and then transmit the modified light waves to our retinas, or it could transmit the algorithms themselves directly to our minds."

"Great!" Aroha exclaims, her voice vibrant with sarcasm.

"It makes sense," Mike says slowly. "You could be right."

"I can't help thinking of the strange black-stones I found along with my half of the Caller." Herb says. "Heavens! If they were made by aliens I wonder when they'll be back for them!"



Chapter Fifteen

Assignment

Mid January 2012

“Namibia?” Incredulity sounds in both Aroha and Herb’s voices. Cynthia, who is the fourth person in the Marcus’s office that morning, receives the news with resignation. She was briefly introduced to Aroha some weeks previously, and, having just returned from an overseas assignment, she is still feeling jet lagged.

“Yes,” Marcus says. “We’ve a political assignment scheduled for you. A particularly sensitive one.”

“What I’d like to know,” Herb says, “is what connections does New Zealand have with Namibia? They don’t even have an Embassy in Wellington.”

“Not much connection in the past,” Marcus agrees, “but quite a bit is happening right now. I can’t give you many details because I don’t know much myself. But you’ve an appointment with the Prime Minister in Wellington at 2pm this coming Tuesday; she’ll fill in things for you.”

Aroha and Herb look at each other, most intrigued. Cynthia looks enquiringly at Marcus.

“The President of Namibia and the New Zealand Prime Minister have both been alerted of a multi-million dollar scam involving both countries. The PM asked for our help because she believes SR-Inc is one of the most hi-tech groups in the world. Of course, she doesn’t know that we rely on parabilities—not technology—and, I might say, we’ve encouraged her to think this way. She believes, and I quote, that with the superior knowledge management system she is sure we have, we should be able to identify and track down the suspects, their associates, and their whereabouts!”

"There's just one little problem," Cynthia says. "I doubt that we'll have ready access to any sort of computer management system in Namibia!"

"You have the Mindcaller," Marcus responds. "I wouldn't be surprised if it has a superlative management system. Your problem, of course, is to work out how to access it. In the meantime I want you to simply use the Mindcaller as a recorder and projector. Your brief's simple—at least to start with. You're to visit several of the major towns in Namibia, starting with Windhoek—it's the capital," he adds grinning. "You're to film people at certain locations of political significance. The PM will provide you with a list, together with film and dossiers. Keep your eyes, minds, and Mindcallers open—filming as much as you can and sending it back here. We'll look for correlations between your film and those in the ministry's collection. Report anything of particular interest directly to me. On no account are you to take any direct action yourselves. We need to have more facts before any real move is made. Understood?"

They all nod.

"By way of an introduction to the Namibia you may want to take a tourist trip to the Etosha wildlife park. We can book you in with a guide—his name's Dan. He always has his ears to the ground and when he talks about the country's politics, and he always does, you should listen carefully.

Aroha is particularly keen to see the park that was often mentioned in biology classes.

"However, at the risk of appearing alarmist," Marcus goes on, "I must emphasize that you'll need to learn to work as a closely-knit team. The assignment may be more dangerous than I first thought. It's why I've asked Cynthia to go. She'll not, however, be going to Wellington because she needs a couple of rest days.

"Now, as it's a cloudy day, I suggest that you all spend some time this morning getting to know each other in the hot pools. We'll probably meet again at lunch."

They automatically take turns under the hot waterfall, each lost in their own thoughts.

"I guess that we should start by saying a bit about ourselves," Cynthia says at last. "Certainly I don't know much about you two."

Neither Herb nor Aroha knows where to start.

"Where do we begin? Our combined life histories could keep us talking for approximately sixty years," Herb jokes and the others laugh.

"Just highlights please," Aroha pleads.

"I'll start first if you like," Cynthia suggests. "Not that it's easy. Please keep what I'm going to say confidential, and, harder still, trust me. You'll soon see why. I was born in Gastein, Austria. And had a pretty normal childhood because I didn't become aware of my parability, as Marcus calls it, until I was an adult. By the way, I did ask Marcus if I could tell you about my talent and he said that it would be a good idea if I did."

She censors the fact that Marcus went on to say that it was probably better for Aroha and Herb to come terms with it now, rather than in the middle a crisis situation!

"I can remember the day that I became aware of it very clearly. It was sometime after Marcus invited me here. I know now that the reason he invited me in the first place was that Lena had alerted Maria to the fact that I had parability. SR-Inc was called to help with a disaster, not long after I arrived. This meant I was left to my own devices a good deal. I was rather homesick, though I did love swimming in the ocean—something I'd never experienced before. So, one day I was lying in a deserted cove when I heard voices up on the cliff behind me. Two words jumped out at me. 'Used telekinesis'. At those two words lots of things clicked into place. I had, of course, been following the national news about the disaster with close interest, and I'd always been interested in paraphenomena. So with a bit more sleuthing I was pretty sure that I knew what was going on. I didn't say anything to Marcus.

“Sometime later there was another job for SR-Inc and I arranged to go with the team. A fire had erupted in the basement of a multistory building. It was night and I was watching from the opposite sidewalk when a guy, who said he was a reporter, questioned me about what was going on. Things were at a critical stage when, without thinking, I divulged that I thought that they might be able to use telekinesis. He immediately started to drag me towards his car. I was petrified. Of course I knew I’d said something I shouldn’t have. In a desperate reaction, I wiped the memory of it out of his mind! His reaction was incredible. He stopped in his tracks and asked what we were talking about!”

At this point Aroha interrupts. “You mean to say that you can make people forget things?”

“Yes.”

“Hell! I don’t want you f..ing around with my mind!” Herb exclaims.

“Now you understand why I said that you’d have to trust me.”

“It sounds like we mightn’t have much choice,” Herb mutters.

“Naturally I made an appointment to see Marcus as soon as I could and he showed me that I wasn’t unique in having a parability. Nevertheless, I’ve used it as little as possible. One thing you can count on, I promise you both that I’ll never use it on you—just as I’ve sworn to others in our group. Actually, I can’t see how there will be any reason to use it on the Namibia assignment. It sounds as if we’re just going on a tourist trip. Now, after all that, it’s your turn Herb.”

“I was born in Hamilton,” Herb begins. My mother was Maori and my father German.”

“German!” interjects Cynthia. “Can you speak German?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I can. Why?”

“Namibia was colonized by Germans so it might be very useful. But sorry, I shouldn’t have interrupted.”

"I had a very happy childhood until my family was involved in a car crash. The only thing really out of the ordinary was my finding one half of the Mindcaller."

He takes it out from under his shirt and shows Cynthia.

"Aroha has the other half and we've only recently tried putting the two halves together, with very mixed results. According to Marcus the Mindcaller is a powerful computer and with my half I can capture images and Aroha can project them. Aroha, why don't you tell Cynthia about your experiences with your half?"

Aroha, uncomfortable as usual talking about herself, gives a very brief outline of last weekend's trip out to Aorama, emphasizing how scared she was when she could not stop the projection.

"It certainly sounds scary," Cynthia says. "I guess you'll need a lot of practice at getting it under control. Now, though, I'm thoroughly waterlogged, and it must be nearly lunchtime, so I suggest that we go inside and get dressed. Later we should do a bit of Web surfing to find out a bit about Namibia."

After lunch Marcus says they can make use of the center's supercomputers.

"Heavens! Look what it says here," Herb exclaims looking up from his computer screen. The others leave what they are doing and look over his shoulder.

"Namibia is the world's fifth largest producer of uranium!"

"Great! That's the last thing I'm interested in," Aroha says.

"But see here, they produce loads of diamonds too," Cynthia says.

"Gold and silver as well. What more do you want?" Herb says teasingly.

"Well guarded by tigers, I've no doubt," Aroha says.

"No, you've got your continents wrong. Guarded by leopards or lions perhaps."

"I can certainly see why Marcus said that it could be dangerous," Aroha remarks.

"I wonder," Cynthia says, closing down her search engine.

It is late afternoon before Maria is free to chat. Aroha is constantly amazed at all the coming and going in the big establishment that Maria oversees. Somehow though, Maria always manages to see to the small things that are so important to everyone's comfort. This afternoon she has tucked a flask of coffee and some cookies into her pack. Sitting in a sheltered corner of the beach, Aroha and Maria sit in silence and simply enjoy the sound of the breakers crashing on the rocks contrasting with the pleasurable sensations of the hot coffee and cookies.

"Isn't this what really puts life into proportion," Maria comments. "Now, do tell me how you got on last weekend."

"I'm not sure where to start," Aroha says.

"Perhaps at the beginning."

"No. I'm one of these people who likes to get the worst over first. I ended up panicking! It was a shock, partly because at first nothing very spectacular happened—beyond the fact that I could sense the forces in the wind and the sea more clearly than ever before. And, with a concentrated mental effort I did succeed in setting the glow-worms performing like shooting stars. The others were impressed."

"So you were able to find the cave again?"

"Yes—when we put the two halves together."

"That suggests that the whole might be more controllable than the halves right?"

"Yes. No! Just wait till you hear what happened."

Maria listens in silence while Aroha tries to explain what occurred while they were overlooking the sea.

"I was terrified," she ends, with a sob in her voice.

"Anyone would be! Come now, let's go back inside and see what Marcus has to say about it. I think he's between meetings," Maria says looking at her e-helper.

Inside the house, Herb meets them in the hallway and Maria suggests that he come too.

In one of the lounges that overlook the sea they put the Mindcaller together. Aroha is extremely nervous. She begins

by mentioning the fact that she once again senses the physical forces around her.

"I would guess that this is an inborn parability that the Mindcaller enhances," Marcus says. "Now I would like you to try and demonstrate the episode that frightened you. I'm sure that this time it'll be all right. Everyone has an innate fear of someone, or in this case something, messing with their mind."

Concentrating on the 'Now', Aroha feels herself unwind. She is filled with wonder that such a cloudy day, with only a single patch of blue sky letting the sunlight through, can create such a dramatic ocean panorama. She focuses on the waves as they rear up to form green walls that turn to sparkling silver just before being enveloped in coverings of white foam. Very gently she tints white bubbles apricot pink and watches it spread along the beachfront as the wave unfolds along it. Then she changes the silver to gold and the green to dove-gray. There is a wonderful feeling in the artistry and the others beside her hold their collective breath in awe.

Building up confidence, she rapidly changes the seasons. For just an instant, which only Marcus notices, the images become chaotic. During a winter scene, she adds the music of a cello, and then the sounds of multiple wind instruments that harmonize dramatically with the roar of the waves.

Herb cannot resist having some input too and with his inimitable sense of humour he adds fish to the scene—flying fish that dance to the music on their tailfins! They all, with the exception of Aroha, relax with laughter. However, she quickly discovers that she is able to clear her mind and stop the images.

"It's all very well for you to laugh," she says, "but I'm still not convinced that I'll be able to control things every time."

"I'm sure that you will." Marcus says emphatically. "It was a hard lesson that you learnt last weekend. I know enough about parabilities to say confidently that with just a bit more practice you'll always be in control. Also, did you notice that there was an instant this time when the images did become a bit chaotic?"

Aroha shakes her head.

"I suspect you subconsciously brought them under control."

"I just hope you're right."

"I've spent quite a bit of time trying to work out how you can capitalize on your abilities with the Mindcaller," Marcus says at breakfast the next morning. "Obviously it doesn't give you telepathy in the usual para-normal sense. However, it seems to provide you with a sort of visual telepathy. I was particularly interested in your account of the party where you saw people and their auras represented as concentric circles. This also makes me wonder whether the Mindcaller has an inbuilt symbol dictionary that, at the moment, you can only access intermittently. I suggest that you spend some of this morning practicing sending each other visual thoughts and see what you can develop."

In between swims they practice for a couple of hours and, as is his way, Herb turns the session into a playact of fun and laughter. He takes Aroha's symbol of herself and animates it, expanding it, multiplying it, exploding it ...

Tiring of this, they practice creating symbols by outlining objects that they visualize. This is harder than they expected as it is extremely difficult to isolate an object of interest. Once they succeed in a rough sort of way, they send symbols to each other, modifying them all the time. The only downer of the afternoon is when Herb cannot resist sending Aroha symbols representing the two of them intertwined in bed. Herb is again hurt by her strong negative reaction to his wishful thinking.

Lying on their backs after a swim they rest for a while.

"I wonder if we can send each other non-visual thoughts," Aroha remarks.

"Let's try," Herb says enthusiastically. "For some situations it's definitely awfully limiting not having words."

Not too surprisingly they do not have any success. Even when Herb thinks with heart, soul, and mind, 'I love you,'

Aroha 'hears' nothing, and only 'sees' indeterminate red flashes.

"I suppose that it's no use trying to spell out words." Herb suggests.

They try, but the letters fly, morph, and end up unrecognizable.

"Hopeless, hey?" Herb says, and Aroha agrees. Thoughtfully they walk back to the house for dinner.

An employee of Marcus's named Jack flies Aroha and Herb to Wellington next day in a Moller. Jack, who owes his life to Marcus and Maria, is loyal far beyond the call of duty.

When Aroha and Herb walk into the Prime Minister's office, the last thing they expect is for her to go off into a peal of laughter.

"What a couple of tramps!" she exclaims shaking her head. "How do you think you can be Ambassadors for New Zealand looking like this?"

For a few moments Aroha thinks that Maria made an awful faux pas when she had decked them out as student backpackers.

"But, excuse me, but ..." Aroha stammers.

"No. You're probably perfect for the parts you have to play. It's just that I'm going to have to introduce you to our Minister of Foreign Affairs and I just know what he'll think. He has already expressed strong views that we should leave this job to the professionals. Naturally, he doesn't know anything about what I've learnt about Marcus and his so called *salvage* group!"

Aroha and Herb do not know what to say, but fortunately they are saved from embarrassment by a knock on the door. One eloquent look on the newcomer's face tells them who he is.

"Frank, this is Aroha and Herb, undercover agents for the Namibia assignment. I would like you to provide them with all data, and I mean all, that concerns the job. Pay particular attention to the highly suspect links between the President's right-hand man, Mr. Gibsen, and his contacts in Rotorua."

She turns to Herb and Aroha. "Namibian money is pouring into banks in both Rotorua and Queenstown. Big money." Turning back to Frank she says, "I want you to arrange for all data you have on file to be transmitted to them. And while they're here, I think you should show them the classified videos and photos."

"All of them?" Frank splutters.

"Yes, all. I know it'll take a while, but it's important."

"They'll never remember the half of it,"

"Yes, we will," Aroha says confidently. "Herb has a near-perfect photographic memory."

Herb is hard put to keep his composure.

"Good," the PM concludes. "I'll hand you over to Frank. Best wishes." With handshakes all around, she ushers them out of her office.

There is certainly a mass of information. Before long it becomes clear to both of them that the Namibian president's assistant, Gibsen, and his retinue are spending money like water in Rotorua, and more surprisingly, in Arrowtown, which is a small town near Queenstown. In fact Aroha thinks that they look to be living like kings.

On the plane back home they are too tired to say much. However at one point Herb sits up and says, "You wretch! How could you say that about my so-called photographic memory? I had real trouble not laughing."

"Actually I think that the minister ended up quite impressed at how fast you appeared to absorb things."

"Of course we really don't know whether the Mindcaller did capture it all. I haven't tried to capture half as much before."

"I guess we'll have to look at it all pretty carefully tomorrow. I'm too tired to even think about it now," Aroha says, closing her eyes.

At the debriefing next morning with Marcus and Cynthia, Herb and Aroha relay their experiences with the PM and the Foreign Minister. Herb ends by saying, "I only hope that we did capture it all."

“Obviously you’ll have to spend the rest of this morning going over the files,” Marcus says, “all of which I sincerely hope you’ve recorded and can successfully replay. Good luck!”

There are several frustrating false starts before Aroha and Herb manage to synchronize their visualizations of the starting point, and thus get the projection going. To Herb’s relief it is all captured—all five hours of it.

Aroha, Herb, and Cynthia concentrate hard, taking particular care to commit the faces of the key suspects to memory.

For the rest of the day the group hovers over maps and travel guides from Marcus’s well-equipped library. Having never lived in desert conditions before, they finally decide to get acclimatized by first visiting Etosha National Park.

“Good heavens,” Herb exclaims looking up from his monitor. “This site says that some African countries allow the culling of elephants because there is not enough forest left. Other countries don’t. So now there’s an active ivory laundering trade! Perhaps that’s where our friend Gibsen gets his ready cash? This could be exciting.”

Aroha, however, has the last word, “Exciting, certainly, but let’s hope it’s not too exciting.”

Chapter Sixteen

The Great White Space (Etosha)

February 2012

Traveling by van in Northwest Namibia to the Etosha National Park (The Great White Space), Aroha experiences the buzz of excitement mixed with apprehension that she always felt at the start of their previous Mindcaller expeditions. Namibia, however, looks very different from anything she has seen before: pale blue sky, stark bare trees, and milky-golden grasses bending in the hot dry wind.

Every move she makes brings home the seriousness of this assignment. They are all wearing the latest model Desert Survival Bodysuits, which they were fitted with before they left Gt. Barrier. They were shown their functionality, and told to practice using and maintaining them. Marcus's last words were, "Think of them as second skins. And always wear at least the midriff section!"

This morning, back at the Windhoek hostel where they spent their first night in Namibia, Cynthia suggested that they treat this week in the wildlife park as a training exercise, preparing them for survival in the desert. In line with this, she recommended they wear the complete suit, and Aroha is finding it hard to get used to—not because it is actually uncomfortable (she is most grateful for its first-class, solar-powered, cooling circuits) but because it has an uncanny, almost alive feeling to it.

They have joined a small tour party made up of their guide, Dan, and two fellow travelers, Aron, a Danish geologist, and Barbara, an English zoologist.

As Marcus had indicated, Dan is certainly a mine of information on everything from flora and fauna to politics. He points out animals and birds: large tawny eagles, white-backed

vultures (many of which will be cruising out of sight, a mile up in the sky, to swoop down on any body that lies still for long enough) and countless beautiful small birds such as the crimson-breasted boubou. Aroha wonders what weaverbirds built their nests in before electricity pylons existed.

The first night is spent in the center of the park at Okaukuejo lodge. Aroha gets a real surprise when she opens the door first thing next morning—there are four long legs on the doormat! After a double take she grabs a camera and gets two excellent photos of the giraffe—one of the bottom half and one of the top.

At the Etosha saltpan early next morning they see how the park got its name. The saltpan is flat, white, and treeless as far as the eye can see. It is one of the few places where tourists can get out of their cars—the possibility of a lion approaching unseen is next to nothing!

On the way back to the lodge, Aroha admires the vistas of glistening white pebbles, white tree branches, and golden acacia blossom that animals love to eat.

“Dan,” she says, “There’s a Ghost Tree Forest marked on the map. Are they the same as the white ghost-like trees we’re seeing?”

“No way!” Dan laughs. “What you see here is just limestone dust coating everything. The forest is another story altogether. The ancient Africans say that when God was creating Etosha he had trouble with the moringa trees.” With only one hand on the wheel, Dan playacts God swearing at them like a regular trooper before throwing them down upside-down.

“Now they’re called ‘Ghost Trees’ because they look as if their roots are waving in the air.”

Over dinner that evening, Dan comments, as he has dependently done several times already, that there has been no rainy season for the past three years. This means that the animals and birds are forced to come to the few remaining waterholes. The only plus side to this is that tourists can enjoy seeing greater numbers of animals.

To Aroha each waterhole is more fascinating than the last. "Look! Hundreds of elephants!" she exclaims, exaggerating, as she is still prone to do.

Two large herds come ponderously from opposite directions. Certainly they total more than fifty and their antics as they horse around in the water are spectacular. Two baby elephants keep close to their mothers but two young males, true to character, are the reluctant last to leave.

The climax of their stay in Etosha occurs at the last waterhole of their final day. It is little more than a mud patch where oryx browse on the waterhole side of the road and a large herd of zebra grazes on the other side. Their sharp-eyed guide is the first to see that there are three lions between the two herds. He is surprised because, although herbivores usually come to the waterholes by day, carnivores typically come out at night. The three lions are spread out in a triangle that is some fifteen yards on its shortest side. It feels quite unnatural that enemies such as these should rest so peacefully together. The stillness reigns for some twenty minutes before one of the zebras decides to cross the road, limping.

"She's a gonner," Dan says under his breath.

"She's probably very thirsty," Barbara says.

"I guess there's no doctor around," Aron jokes.

"Look at the female lion over to the right," Dan whispers. "See how she's now lying flat in attacking position?"

"And the one on the left too," Aroha exclaims with her heart in her mouth.

For what seems an age nothing happens except for the zebra's slow painstaking progress across to the waterhole. Then, as if on a signal, all three lions attack. The zebra finds strength enough to break into a limping run. It is a close race, but it soon becomes obvious that she will not make it back to the safety of the herd. Both Aroha and Herb, having both been brought up to protect wild creatures, feel sick to their stomach. So much so that Herb unconsciously reaches out with his thoughts and to his amazement and relief, the foremost lion

slows down. Incredibly, the other two lions then slow down as well, giving the zebra the time it needs.

"That was unreal," Dan says. "In all my twenty years of guiding, I've never seen anything like it. There was absolutely no reason for those lions to slow down like they did."

"I can't help but feel a bit disappointed," Aron says. "Just think of the photos we've missed."

Aroha and Herb, however, feel almost faint with relief. Cynthia looks at them but says nothing.

They talk about very little else on the way back to the lodge. Over dinner, Aron and Barbara mention that they will be spending a couple of days in a concealed riverbed further north, outside the park boundaries. They are going to try to find a rare type of weaverbird. When Aroha says how much she would like to come too, Barbara says they are most welcome.

"The more pairs of eyes the better chance of success," Barbara adds.

Only Cynthia has reservations, pointing out that they have work to get started on. She is, nonetheless, outvoted.

As they drive out of the park gates in Aron's van, Aroha notes with approval the strong barbed wire fence that surrounds the park.

"Do animals ever escape?" she asks.

"Extremely rarely," Aron replies. "I read somewhere that a lion got out some ten years ago by climbing up on a large pile of road metal that was thoughtfully, from its point of view, dumped too close to a fence."

"I've certainly never heard of carnivorous animals in the valley we're going into," Barbara says. "It's part of the reason why birds thrive so well there."

The first day they spend in the watercourse is uneventful. It is during the second morning that trouble strikes. Having driven further east, Aroha, Herb, and Cynthia are clambering up a new ridge, while Aron and Barbara continue exploring another dry tributary. Cynthia's little party reaches a clearing at the top of the ridge and sits down for a rest. Barbara has

provided them with a picture of the bird they are looking for, and a powerful pair of binoculars. It is Aroha's turn to look.

"I see something moving through there. It's big!" she says, pointing to some shrubs and handing the binoculars to Herb.

"Where? No! It's got spots!"

They all freeze. Nothing moves for what seems like ages. Then several things happen at once. A leopard springs, only to slow down and drop mid-flight. Shots sound as three park rangers race out from the other side of the ridge and shoot it.

"You all right?" a ranger asks in broken English.

They both nod.

"This one escape," the second ranger explains, "using broken tree. Elephant pushed it over."

The three friends nod mutely.

"You're mighty lucky," another ranger comments. "I've never seen animal literally fall from sky like a stone."

Having heard the shots, Aron and Barbara call out louder and louder. Herb shouts back and when the sweat-covered pair reaches them they are flabbergasted at what they see.

"Have any more escaped?" Barbara asks, horrified.

"No. No. Only tracks for this one," a ranger assures them.

It is a very subdued party that makes its way down into the watercourse again. Both Aroha and Herb are still feeling shattered.

Over lunch they begin to relax and talk about how lucky they were. Aroha explains to Barbara and Aron how the leopard seemed to fall in mid-flight. Cynthia looks at Herb with such a quizzical look that he realizes with a start something he only knew subconsciously before. He used a parability! He opens his mouth and then closes it firmly as he sees Aron and Barbara both looking at him questioningly. He finds it difficult to wait until he can be alone with Cynthia and Aroha.

By mutual agreement they stay in the valley together all that afternoon. Herb surreptitiously practices using his newfound talent to slow birds down for Aroha to photograph. When Aroha shows Barbara the photos on her e-helper

Barbara is amazed at the quality. Willingly Aroha gives her copies.

In the evening Herb, Aroha, and Cynthia discuss the day and Herb's newfound power.

"I did it!" he says. "It was me that slowed down the leopard!" He can scarcely believe it.

"Just as you slowed down the lions," Cynthia points out.

"Yes! You're right!" Herb says excitedly. "And, now I think of it, ages ago I slowed down a guy fighting with a knife. I guess it was the danger that made me use it. I just wish that it could have required a little less excitement."

"So do I," Aroha heartily agrees.

Cynthia points out that frequently it takes a real fright to make a para-power manifest itself.

"You certainly saved our lives," she says very seriously. "Body suits would be no match for those fangs."

She moves a little closer to Herb, and looks up at him with admiring eyes. Herb glances at Aroha but she seems lost in her own thoughts. He cannot understand her. After all, he *did* save her life too. Exasperated and feeling like giving her a shake, he turns back to Cynthia.

While the two guys do some geologizing on the third morning, the three girls continue 'weaver-watching' as they call it. They have seen lots of different types of weaverbirds: sociable weavers with their large colonies of nests filling in complete trees, the common red-billed weavers, and red-headed weavers. But there is no sign of a chestnut weaver. The birds are small with a very soft call, which makes them harder than ever to find.

"Ten years ago, chestnut weavers were quite common in Namibia." Barbara says. "Even though its populations were erratic, and it was thought to be nomadic. But it's now extremely rare. No one knows why. So we belong to a team who are doing surveys trying to find out what's going on."

Further up the valley they find many types of semi-precious stone, including beautiful red jasper. Herb collects so much that Aron teases him, saying that their airplane will not

be able to take off with his heavy pack in its hold. This does not deter Herb in the slightest. He has a Rock-tumbler at home that he used to tumble greenstone in. He now plans, he says, to make jasper jewelry.

During a rest stop Herb tells Aron that they are hoping to visit a diamond mine while in Lüderitz, and questions him in detail about diamond production—all the while searching the Mindcaller for supplementary information. When Aroha overhears Herb playing one-upmanship using his Mindcaller knowledge, she does not know whether to laugh or not. She does, however, flash him a warning to be careful.

Under a thorny acacia bush Aroha spies a lilac-breasted roller bird. Thinking how exquisite the purple on its wings is, she realizes that its feet are tangled in some netting. She quietly points it out to Herb. Using his rather inexpert skill he tries to make it stay still so he can loose it, but it struggles madly until Barbara comes along, holds it expertly, and skillfully frees it.

Finally, near the end of the afternoon, Barbara comes across a nesting pair of the chestnut weavers. She is ecstatic! Herb points out what a masterpiece of design and construction the nest is. It is made of beautifully woven grasses and the inside is lined with fine, white, soft down.

While Barbara is intently photographing the nest, Herb helps Aroha get a beautiful photo of the male by slowing it down as it flits amongst the tree branches with outstretched wings. She thanks him absentmindedly, making him rage to himself, 'Damn her! Damn, damn, damn her. After everything I've done for her. Even rescuing her from that lion. She can't even thank me properly! As for love...'

He reacts by showing a marked interest in Cynthia, asking her to sit by him on the trip back to Windhoek.

On the way back Dan entertains them with amusing political anecdotes. He talks about the highs (for government officials) and lows (for everyone else) of wage fixing.

Cynthia expresses interest in a comment he makes about the 'filthy' rich and he makes a small detour to show them a

new development of luxury houses funded by tax breaks. The water fountains flaunted in front of each house are in themselves an affront to the poor. Dan points out a mansion owned by Mr. Gibsen, the President's right-hand man. He play-acts stripping off his clothes and washing them in Gibsen's fountain until an irate voice at a top window yells at him to get out. Aroha senses that his humor, both dry and bawdy, is a cover for his distress at the way things are going.

At the safari hotel they keep their heads down as they check in. Only when the doors of the elevator close do they all burst out laughing.

"Did you see the look on the concierge's face when he saw us?" exclaimed Aroha.

"Yes. And the Bellboys didn't even offer to carry our dust-coated packs!" Cynthia says.

"I don't think tramps are usually allowed in here," Herb says, "so I guess it's time for showers and respectable clothes. See you downstairs for dinner."

Because Namibia was at one time a German colony, the group dines in luxurious surroundings in a room that could have been taken straight out of a European castle. Gold and red furnishings complement the yellow paneled walls. The chairs and tables are made of exquisitely carved wood. Crystal glasses are placed on immaculate tablecloths. The couple at the next table speaks fluent German with the *Maître de Maison* as they drink beer from tall glasses.

Lingering over coffee and *Crème Brulée*, the trio's thoughts return to their assignment.

"Tomorrow we have to film a bank, a sporting goods store, and a gemstone gallery," Cynthia says.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing the gallery," Aroha remarks. "By the way, when I was talking to Marcus this morning he mentioned that it's time we tried the Mindcaller whole again."

Herb heartily agrees but Aroha, understandably, is still reticent.

“No time like the present,” Herb says. “Your half please, Aroha.”

Aroha hands her half to Herb and he slots the two pieces together.

“Yes, that’s better. I can now clearly hear the couple at the next table talking—in German.” He pauses, listening. “But nothing of interest.”

He hands the Mindcaller to Aroha. As soon as she touches it she is bombarded with flashes, and almost throws it back at Herb.

“It’s too much!” she exclaims. “The energies in here are like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. There are really disturbing undercurrents among the staff—as well as amongst the guests. I can’t stand it. Herb, please separate the Caller. I guess I’m just too tired.”

In keeping with their plan of being tourists, the group spends the next morning seeing the sights of Windhoek. Herb carries the whole Mindcaller in a pocket. There are no surprises in store for them at the bank. At the so-called Sports Store there seem to be enough guns to supply an army. Herb walks up and down the rows of ammunition filming minute identification symbols.

The crystal gallery is something else! They are searched on entry, but the guard gives only a cursory glance at the Mindcaller Herb has hung around his neck. Big signs say, ‘No cameras allowed,’ and Aroha thinks it’s probably so that tourists are forced to buy expensive, glossy photographs instead. In a relocated tunnel they look in awe at the magnificent floor to ceiling crystals. The tunnel is dark and there are guards standing like statues at every corner. The crystals are cunningly lit and both Cynthia and Aroha are awe inspired. They dig their hands deep into pools of tumbled blue-lace agate and rose quartz and let the pieces run through their fingers, marveling at their smoothness and vibrancy. Behind bulletproof glass there are displays of some of the finest and largest precious stones in the world. They are to learn very

much later that one of the diamonds they filmed that day turned up in a shop in Queenstown.

Aroha is again perturbed by the almost constant bombardment of emotional conflict. Everywhere there is evidence of the sharp divide between rich and poor. Worn out, she asks Herb to take the Mindcaller apart and give her back her half.

Over dinner Aroha senses a new source of turbulent dark energy.

“Over there, in the corner near the door—three guys are scared silly.”

“I’d love to know what they’re saying,” Herb says.

He asks Aroha for her half of the Caller and holding it in both hands concentrates hard. Gradually he begins to make out isolated words. He swears under his breath when, before long, the three guys get up and leave.

“Blackstone. They repeatedly referred to Blackstone. And, in between swear words, they mentioned the names Jan and Danie several times. It sounded as if they were... well, scared of them!”

“Pity those are two of the most common names in South Africa,” Cynthia remarks. “What language were they speaking?”

“A mixture of German and Afrikaans.”

“So, I guess we know where we’re heading after this,” Cynthia comments.

“Exactly where in Namibia is Blackstone?” Aroha asks.

Cynthia pulls out her e-helper and soon all are absorbed in making plans and bookings for the next day.

Herb keeps them all amused, at least for a part of the trip west to Blackstone, by using his Caller to ‘translate’ Hollywood movies into abstract movies, and projecting them onto their e-helper screens. He gets them to guess the title of each movie. To make it harder for them, he restricts himself to dynamic, abstract, symbols (not real images) from the Mindcaller’s database. Although a few films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, are easy to guess, most are

impossible—mainly because of Herb's taste for X-rated and erotic movies. Fortunately for the girls the scenes are difficult to symbolize explicitly!



Chapter Seventeen

The Blackstone Uranium Mine

Mid February 2012

“Daredevil dune-bike riding! Thunder-ball rolling down the dunes—strapped into a chair inside a steel ball! Paragliding! Where do we start?” Herb waves the pamphlets he has collected from the Blackstone hostel foyer.

“Come on!” Cynthia says, “This isn’t just one grand holiday you’re having! We’ve an assignment to get on with.”

By common consent, Cynthia has assumed leadership of the small team and both Aroha and Herb are amused at her gentle but firm ways of getting them to keep to their purpose.

“Suppose so,” Herb says mock-grudgingly. “But it does seem a pity to waste an hour of good daylight. What have you in mind?”

“Tomorrow we’re taking a tourist bus out to the Blackstone uranium mine. Once we’re there, you can use the Mindcaller to record as many of the employees as possible.”

“That’s all very well, Herb says. “But what’s the use of us going around archiving loads of video if we don’t know what we’re looking for?”

“That’s just what we have to do,” Cynthia says. “As I’m sure you know, the whole power of KM systems lies in the fact that they can take loads of apparently meaningless, trivial, data and come up with useful correlations.”

“I wish to heavens we could use the Caller better,” Aroha says. “Think of the advantages of real time analysis. We’d know immediately if we’d discovered something.”

“Yes,” Herb heartily agrees. “But how? Unfortunately the voice command ‘correlate’ doesn’t work!”

“It’s fascinating how very dependent on language we are,” Aroha remarks. “There must be ways of doing it mentally or visually.”

“OK, I guess we’d better start work by using trial and error. Unfortunately, there’s usually more error than trial in our work,” Herb says so soulfully that the others have to laugh.

For the next few hours they grapple with the problem of comparing various representations of objects in the Mindcaller data-files. They both find it surprisingly exhausting. The only positive outcome of having to skim so many files is that they discover that the Mindcaller has recorded excellent footage of the guards in the dark Windhoek crystal gallery.

“I’ll send these files of the guards to Marcus immediately,” Cynthia says.

Aroha projects selected clips of their visits to the bank, sports store, and crystal gallery onto Cynthia’s e-helper, and Cynthia transmits them from there. It all takes a considerable time.

“How clumsy can one get?” Herb grumbles. “It makes me wonder why we didn’t just use an e-helper to film the stuff in the first place.”

“Except that no cameras were allowed in the gallery and it was pitch black.” Cynthia points out.

The next morning they ‘Case the Joint’, as Herb calls their tour at the uranium mine. On the way there he delights in pointing out two road signs saying, ‘Road to Nowhere’ and ‘Keep our dessert clean.’

The road looks just like a graded stretch of desert with spaced rocks for the curbing. Their guide however points out that most of the desert sand contains saltpeter, which is not good for road making or, unfortunately, house building.

In places the silicon in the sand glitters and Aroha finds it easy to imagine it to be countless fragments of diamonds. However, the landscape changes dramatically as they approach the mine.

“Good God!” Aroha exclaims. “This place looks like Mordor!”

“It’s as if thousands of gynomous graders have stripped all the topsoil off and put the substandard stuff into piles over there,” Herb says pointing to a mountain of slag.

Looking at the bare, parched, gray flats that stretch out before them, Aroha cannot help contrasting them with the beautiful, green, island that is her home in New Zealand. For a moment, the differences make her feel homesick.

Before long, each of the little party is daunted by the enormity of the opencast mining area. Any thoughts they might have had about exploring it are quickly dispelled. To north, south, east and west the desert rolls on with only the occasional low building or bush contrasting with the endless plains. In the far distance large, black, rock outcrops can be seen rising like islands in an ocean.

Their bus follows a narrow, toy-like railway track to a tiny station at the head of the opencast mine. Here they see a fenced compound containing a hospital, training center, fire, and ambulance sheds and numerous unmarked buildings. They see two armed guards, but no one else.

"I wonder how many people actually work here," Aroha queries.

"I read on the Mine's Website that there are about 800," Herb answers.

The iron gates in the fence open ponderously when the bus driver swipes his pass card. They stop at a visitor's center where a guide called Dave gives them a safety brief, which is underlined by photos of a disastrous fire back in 1978. They all listen with various degrees of interest as Dave explains extraction processes. He picks up a large piece of granite, strokes it, and explains that the uranium ore it contains is extremely hard to extract. The large percentage of schist also makes the job very difficult.

During the presentation there is one item that particularly interests the group: a few years back plans were in place to shut the mine down because of uneconomic production costs. Clearly, this would have been an economic disaster for the employees and the region as a whole.

Four factors enabled the mine to stay open. Firstly, the market price of uranium rose significantly. Secondly a large deposit of sulfur was discovered nearby, which meant that the

mothballed sulfuric acid plant could be re-opened. Thirdly they were given government permission to operate their own nuclear power plant. This made a big difference because now they do not have to import power from South Africa.

And last, and most significantly, a small but dedicated group of local scientists, whose livelihood depended on the plant staying open, worked day and night to perfect a RMA—a Radio Metric Analyzer. This made all the difference to the productivity of the mine because it can be used to accurately predict where the particles of Uranium are embedded. The RMA uses a computer program based on highly complex statistical algorithms.

There are quite a number of questions asked at the end of the talk. Interestingly, the one question in nearly everyone's mind is not asked.

After a pause Dave says, "I know what the question is you're not asking—'What's the danger of radioactive poisoning?' Right?"

There are several nods. Dave spends quite some time assuring his audience that because the uranium ore is so sparse, the radiation levels are well below international requirements.

As a scientist, with considerable computing skills, Aroha is most interested in the RMA process. "How I wish that we could meet Dr Zachariah Petrus," she says when they are back in the bus. "He heads the group who developed the RMA process and is world renowned."

"At least amongst geologists," Herb quips.

"Perhaps we can meet him," Cynthia says. "It may be a good way of getting into the rest of the mine complex. Marcus has remarkable ways of making contacts. We'll mention it when we get in touch with him tonight."

At the hostel that evening they gather in Herb's room.

"This is not going to be easy," Herb begins.

"Did you really think it would be?" Cynthia chides.

"No—but not this hard. We didn't see more than half a dozen people all the time we were there. How can I build up a

database on samples like that? I wish Marcus had briefed us a bit more.”

“What I often wonder,” Aroha says, “is why we were chosen for this assignment in the first place. As far as I can see, the Minister of Foreign Affairs was right, we’re just hopeless amateurs, and...”

“I was thinking on the way back,” Cynthia interrupts, “about the fact that the workers are taken to and fro by company bus. Let’s see if we can arrange to be out there when they arrive in the morning. Then you can record them getting off the bus.”

“Good idea,” Herb agrees. “Let’s contact Marcus right now, and see if he can get us a special appointment with Dr Petrus first thing tomorrow morning.”

Within ten minutes Marcus, or one of his assistants, has managed to get them the appointment—and arranged a rental car.

As planned, they arrive at the plant next morning ten minutes early. They sit quietly in the car and no one questions them for a considerable time. Several buses have unloaded workers before a guard comes over and asks what they want. Aroha and Cynthia give a roundabout explanation while Herb continues to covertly concentrate on the unloading process.

Formalities take a considerable time but eventually they are taken to Dr Petrus’s office.

Aroha and Dr Petrus hit it off immediately and are soon on first name terms. Zach (as he prefers to be called) has read some of Aroha’s research papers. They are soon deep in a technical discussion. Aroha’s extensive knowledge of geology, coupled with her expertise in programming simulations, soon leads to a discussion on how the complex process of uranium extraction might be simulated. Zach is sure that it would take weeks to do, but Aroha is positive that it can be done in a much shorter time, particularly with the help of her modified e-helper.

Several times while they are talking, mind flashes momentarily distract Aroha. Zach’s aura is unusually clear and

sharp but there is also an area dark with worry. She tries to question him, but he parries her queries.

As Herb drives them back to town, the sun sets and transforms the desert into a breathtaking panorama: ranks of dunes are colored from red to mauve to blue, and she doubts that even with hours of practice she could ever simulate such beauty. In the far distance the hills appear to contain mist-filled valleys, but she knows it's just white sand.

Aroha and Herb work until the early hours of the morning trying to match workers captured by the Mindcaller with people on the Ministry files.

"Well, that got us nowhere," Herb sighs. "After all, I only recorded about 300 faces, which is not even half. But I guess I should send what I've got off to Marcus."

A little later they receive another call from Marcus. To their delight he has made a match with someone in the Ministry's files. It's not any of the workers Herb focused on, but the guy who chased Dan off Gibsen's property in Windhoek.

"How come I captured him?" Herb asks, extremely puzzled. "I never even saw him."

"Interesting," Aroha says thoughtfully. "This means the Caller can automatically film at all times and in all directions, and we don't even know it's doing it."

"It seems to me," Cynthia says bringing them back to their present problem, "that we have two ways of tackling things. One is to continue filming and hope Marcus's KM program can isolate suspects. The other is to see if we can access the company's computer records."

"We could get arrested!" Aroha exclaims.

"I know, but I feel that we should give it a go," Cynthia insists.

"Have you done anything as dangerous as that before?" Herb asks.

"Yes. And more so," she says so nonchalantly that both Aroha and Herb look at her with new respect.

They discuss how they can possibly get into the complex without being seen. Herb is keen that they dress up as workers with the helmets, goggles, and the dust masks most workers wear.

"No one would recognize us with our faces covered like that," he insists.

Both Aroha and Cynthia refuse to have anything to do with the scheme.

"Did you see any manual workers with skin our color?" Aroha objects.

"Let alone female!" Cynthia points out.

"OK, OK!" Herb concedes with a grin.

"Aroha, I would guess from hints that Marcus dropped that you're capable of hacking into the system," Cynthia says.

"Yes, in theory. I've sat in on a computer security class," Aroha admits. "Some of the students were renowned for their hacking abilities and got expelled from the University for breaking into the academic records database. I kept up with them—at least in theory—but I never dreamt I'd be asked to put my knowledge into practice," she adds with a frown.

"OK. That's settled then," Herb says.

But Aroha is far from convinced. The more she thinks about it, the more her altruistic academic mind is affronted. And the more the others try to convince her, the unhappier she feels. She agrees with reluctance only when Herb points out that Zach's problem might be related to the scam they are trying to unearth.

Using her enhanced e-helper, Aroha is confident she can crack the security codes. What worries her is whether she can do it without trace, and she certainly does not like doing it behind Zach's back.

"The next question is how do we wangle a second appointment with Zach?" Herb asks.

"I've been thinking about that," Aroha says. "What I suggest, is that I write the simulation program that he would like to have. Then we can go to the mine so I can demonstrate it him, and adjust the parameters."

“Good idea. How long will it take you to write it? Cynthia asks.

“Seeing as I’ve already given it considerable thought, I should be able to get it finished by the day after tomorrow—that’s Friday, right?”

“In the meantime we should get a plan of the complex from Marcus,” Herb suggests. “And then, if Aroha doesn’t mind, Cynthia and I can spend the day seeing the sights.”

Because Aroha actually enjoys working on simulations she is happy to let the other two go off to see what fun is to be had. Returning in high spirits, cheeks aglow, Herb is full of praise for Cynthia’s bravery in their hair-raising activities. Over dinner Aroha becomes aware of how much Herb is admiring Cynthia and is conscious of a few twinges of regret.

She gives them a demo of her simulation after dinner and they are most impressed.

As hoped, they do get the second appointment. Arriving at the mine, an hour or so later than on their previous trip, Herb captures more employees—some arriving in very expensive looking cars.

The formalities complete, Zach shows them into his small, immaculately kept office. His computer system is an outdated one, and to cover his embarrassment, he says, “This is only a low-security system, but it’s all I need for my day-to-day work. The high security network, with full retina based security control, etc. is kept in the building you can see over there.” He points out a window.

“Any chance of us looking in there?” Herb asks.

Zach replies with an emphatic “No”. Cynthia and Herb are, naturally, disappointed. Aroha experiences such a sense of relief at the reprieve that she immediately smothers it with feelings of guilt.

As they all watch Zach’s fingers fly over his keyboard entering the required security codes, Aroha senses his outward calm belied by excited mental auras.

While Aroha demonstrates her simulation to Zach, Cynthia and Herb go over to the window. Herb practically falls out trying to see through a window of the out-of-bounds building.

Zach is amazed at what Aroha has achieved and before long he is using the simulation to check the production figures that have been worrying him. He gives no outward indication, but Aroha senses his depression at the results. They match his previous conclusions exactly. At the end of their meeting he invites them all out for a drive to the Lunar Landscape on Sunday.

Herb and Cynthia bemoan their lack of success all the way back to the lodge. However Aroha has had an idea that she works on after dinner. She plays back the Caller's film of Zach entering the security codes, slows it down, and is able to duplicate the keystrokes on her e-helper! Before long she has accessed a server and located the personnel file. There are names for all employees, and photos for all except the top brass. To their delight there are listings for a Jan and a Danie, but without photos. Elated that their excursion was not a complete waste of time, they send this information, together with the rest of the day's filming, off to Marcus.

Saturday is thoroughly frustrating. Working with the Mindcaller as a whole, they have another go at trying to correlate files. They finally quit, exhausted.

"We've made some progress," Herb says, "but I'm damned if I know how far we're from being able to control the thing properly."

"Agreed," Aroha says, stretched out on one of the beds. "Still, we're now much better at locating and matching known objects."

Herb nods, appreciating, as he has many times before, what a good working team he and Aroha make. "I feel we're missing something. It shouldn't be this hard."

In the silence that follows, Aroha replays onto a wall the section of film Herb has captured of the high-security building. She discovers how to 'zoom' in through the window and to

their amazement they can clearly see men, executives judging by their dress, talking.

“One up for the Mindcaller,” Herb says. “The quality is fantastic.”

With a little more experimenting Aroha discovers how to ‘turn up’ the volume. Now the four men can be heard discussing a forthcoming meeting at a place they refer to as ‘the lodge’. Two of the men present are referred to as Jan and Danie.

After surprisingly short delay Marcus sends them congratulations, and tells them that Jan and Danie were among the workers who arrived at the mine in expensive cars.

Zach picks them up in his the van next day and they make polite conversation for a while. Then all four become silent, each deep in their own thoughts. Zach’s problems are exacerbated by what he has learnt from Aroha’s program.

“OK,” Zach finally says. “If you tell me what you three are looking for, I’ll tell you a little about my problem. I notice that you—particularly Herb—are looking intently at every black guy we meet!”

Herb and Aroha blush bright red and both stutter.

“Damnation. How embarrassing!” Herb says. “I guess it would be silly to deny it, but it’s obvious that we’ve seen too many ‘whodunit’ movies.”

It is left to Cynthia to give a brief explanation.

“I see,” Zach says, “although it doesn’t take much intelligence to know that isn’t the whole story. I think you, Aroha, may have guessed my problem. I picked up a shortfall in our uranium production and my bosses say that there is a bug in my program. But now, with the confirmation of Aroha’s simulation, I know I’ve been right all along. I’m scared. Stealing uranium is a capital offense, and I don’t know who to trust. It could be anyone. The trouble is that it must involve some real high-ups in the company and—”

At this point Aroha interrupts him, looking really worried: “Zach! I sense a sand storm coming!”

“No! The forecast was fine when I checked,” Zach says emphatically.

Herb tries an e-helper but gets just static.

They stand and listen to an eerie silence. The desert looks particularly beautiful. Rich reds in the foreground blend out into vivid purples in the distance.

“We should trust Aroha on this one,” Herb says.

“Right,” Cynthia concurs.

Zach is puzzled but turns the van around. They are nearly back to Blackstone when the storm strikes. Zach’s driving is superb as the van bounces around like an untamed rodeo stallion. Large metal road markers are thrown down like dominoes. As they rush to the hostel entryway Aroha is aware that her water bottle is making a singing noise.

Chapter Eighteen

Dad's Army

Last week of February 2012

Back at the hostel they all shower and then, with the exception of Zach who neither drinks nor smokes, order strong drinks.

"That was a near miss," Zach says. The others agree wholeheartedly. Zach, fascinated by Aroha's ability to sense the storm coming, questions her closely. As they both relax Aroha tells him a little about the Mindcaller. Zach understands implicitly and before long they both feel that they have much in common. Only as they finish their drinks does Aroha sense another wave of worry well up in Zach.

"So, what's next?" she asks, turning to Herb and Cynthia who have also been having a comfortable coze.

"I've been thinking," Cynthia says. "Zach. Would you like to join us when we drive down to Lüderitz tomorrow?"

"Yes, I sure would. I've masses of holiday leave owing at work. Would you like to use my van?"

"That would be fantastic," Herb says. "We were going to rent a car, but your van with you driving will be heaps better."

"And the fact you can speak Afrikaans will help as well," Cynthia adds.

"I'll tell you something else," Zach says. "My cousin Samuel works at the Victoria mine at Lüderitz. I'll see if he can wangle us a visit."

"Great," Herb says. "So it's all agreed. Lüderitz here we come! "

"But you might want to break the journey up," Zach suggests. "By spending a night at the lodge that is not far from Sossusvlei."

"Why?" Cynthia asks.

“First, it’s in one the most striking dune areas around; second, it’s on our way; and third, and more to the point, the Blackstone company owns the lodge—in fact some of our top brass are meeting out there this week.”

At the two words ‘lodge’ and ‘meeting’ the others are instantly alert.

“Fantastic! This may be the breakthrough we need,” Herb exclaims.

When Zach drives his van into the Lodge’s large parking lot he is surprised to see it half full. “Looks like it’s a big meeting.”

“Looks like a bloody fortress,” Herb says, looking at the lodge.

“Built to withstand desert storms,” Zach replies.

They pick up their gear and file into the reception area. The receptionist is frazzled, and, according to Zach, far from his usual welcoming self. He says that they can have two rooms in the East wing just for tonight, but the place will be totally booked out tomorrow night.

Before dinner they have drinks at the bar and Zach introduces several friends and colleagues. He chats with one particular friend and learns that they will be assembling in the ballroom after dinner for the opening ceremony. In the morning they will separate into small groups.

At dinner they are assigned a table in a corner, which suits them well. Herb films each person as they arrive while Zach gives a running commentary on those he knows. It is, however, Herb who is the first to recognize a latecomer.

“That’s Jan!” he gasps.

“And Danie!” Aroha exclaims.

“Yes. But how did you know?” Zach asks.

“First, we heard them being discussed when we were in Windhoek,” Herb explains. “At least the two names were mentioned there. Later on, the Mindcaller enabled us to “eavesdrop” on a meeting they were at in the high-security room at your Mine; we got visuals of them.”

“Did you just!” Zach exclaims. “I’m impressed. You were lucky though; those two guys rarely put in an appearance.”

Cynthia takes charge next morning. They see Jan and Danie disappear into Meeting Room Thirteen, closing the door behind them. When all delegates are in their allotted meeting rooms, Aroha is very surprised when she walks by the door of Room Thirteen and senses that no one is inside! Cynthia tries the door, finds it is locked, and coolly takes a small gadget out of a pocket and proceeds to pick the electronic lock. The door opens and they slip inside and close it behind them. With the help of his Mindcaller, Herb finds a hidden door leading to some stairs. Leaving Aroha to sense if anyone is coming, the others descend the stairs in silence, using a faint light from Herb’s Caller. Cynthia slowly opens the bottom door, while Herb concentrates on using his Caller as a noise canceller. Five men sit at a table in a cellar looking at an electronic display. The one at the head of the table looks up, and, thanks to Cynthia’s parability, promptly forgets what he has seen. Cynthia closes the door and they retrace their steps as quickly as they can.

Zach can scarcely contain himself. “That was old Brisco!” he exclaims once they are all in Cynthia’s bedroom. “And Jan and Danie. But why in hell was Brisco chairing the meeting? He’s the lodge’s caretaker.”

At this point the lodge receptionist calls them. He explains that a tour of the Namib dunes has been arranged for the afternoon and they are welcome to take part. Naturally, Herb thinks it is a great idea and accepts for them all.

They are most surprised when they find out that they are the only members of the party. The driver of the dune buggy, who Zach knows as a nice enough guy, explains that there has been a change of plan but they are still very welcome to come. It is an enjoyable trip out over the dunes. When the driver points out a large chasm they are all keen for a closer look.

They stand in awe on the edge of a huge chasm formed by a towering golden-red sand dune that curves up and over like a

massive ocean wave towards a sheer rock face. It is some five hundred meters long, ten meters wide, shallow at the southern end, and becomes deeper towards the northern point.

Everyone feels dwarfed by the immensity of nature's awesome creation. They talk in whispers. Silence surrounds them as the omnipresent east wind has dropped for the moment.

"When was it formed?" Herb asks.

"During that storm we were nearly caught out in. I'm not sure how long it'll last though," Zach replies.

At this point their driver receives an emergency call and yells out to them, "Hey you lot, I've got to go—it's urgent. Someone else will pick you up later." With that, he revs the dune buggy's motor and takes off in a spray of sand.

The noise fades into silence. In the wide, hostile desert, they are all overcome by a feeling of total insignificance; they are just small dots, here today and gone tomorrow.

Cynthia is the first to shake herself out of it.

"I've a bad feeling about this," she says slowly. "A very bad feeling."

"Me too," Aroha says, having sensed a flash of puzzlement in their driver's mind.

"Yes," Zach agrees. "We could be stranded in big trouble, and I'll bet someone from Blackstone is behind it. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have involved you."

"No," Cynthia says shaking her head vigorously. "When all's said and done, it's definitely part of our assignment."

Herb agrees with her.

"Yes," he says. "This could be fun."

"It could be dangerous," Zach says. "Life-threateningly dangerous!"

"How far are we from the nearest settlement?" Herb asks.

"Goodness knows," Zach says. "It depends entirely on conditions how long it takes to go anywhere in the desert."

As if to remind them that desert conditions are rarely favorable to man, a gust of wind wraps around them.

They sit down in the shade of the cliff and try to discuss what they will do if no one comes to collect them. They go round and round in circles, always coming back to the same problem—water.

They each have a bottle, and everyone but Zach has small dew collectors as part of their survival equipment. But the water collected amounts to very little, not enough to live on in these conditions.

As the afternoon turns to evening without any sign of a vehicle, they begin to seriously consider the prospect of walking out. They bring up a map of the area on one of the e-helpers and it is all too obvious that they have very few choices. They zoom into a topographical map of the ridge they are sitting next to, but they cannot find any indication of water in any of the gullies. Water is marked in a few canyons in the uplands but that would mean a full day's walk, if not longer, across sandy desert—followed by a hard scramble up the foothills. And as Zach repeats, how long it will take is entirely dependent on the weather.

Later, when pangs of hunger strike, they still have not decided what to do. Assessing how much food they have between them depresses them further; it is another thing that must be carefully rationed. The food bars in the survival kits are high tech nourishment but there are only enough for a couple of days even if they are careful. Cynthia settles on half a bar each for dinner.

“My head is telling me that I’ve had all I need to eat,” Herb comments. “But my stomach just doesn’t believe it.”

They are still up at midnight. No one is talking. Each is intensely aware of the vastness that surrounds them. The bright, crisp stars in the sky speak of galactic distances. The silence is only broken by the eerie calls of two hyenas.

Aroha shudders and suggests that they should try and get some sleep. They clamber down into the shelter of the chasm and dig hip-high holes in the sand. Lying down, they all toss and turn and wonder why ‘soft’ sand always feels so hard when you try to sleep on it.

Sometime in the middle of the night Aroha wakes from a nightmare. She is immediately aware that the sandstorm from her dream is now almost upon them.

Zach, also woken by some sixth sense, sits up. "Sandstorm!" he shouts.

But shortly after he says it, the storm hits so hard that it slices the peak off the sand-ridge and dumps it on top of them. The noise of the wind is deafening as they try to 'swim' to keep their heads above the sand. The sand gets in their mouths and lungs making them all cough and splutter. It is utterly terrifying.

It's pitch black until Aroha and Herb simultaneously visualize light: Aroha makes a candle, but it is overpowered by the blinding fluorescent glare Herb makes. Trying not to panic, he manages to transform it into a weird yellow-orange ambience.

Herb struggles to get closer to Aroha who is in serious trouble. He has no thought for himself as he puts all his strength into trying to keep her from drowning in the sand. It is like being in quick sand. After what seems forever, he manages to get his arms around her. As the force of the avalanche weakens an almighty effort pulls her clear. She lands on top of him and relief surges through them both. For a few precious moments Herb savors their closeness.

"Of all the dumb... stupid... fools," Aroha splutters. And Herb, assuming she is referring to him, feels a knife pierce his heart.

"I'm the worst!" Aroha carries on. "If I'd only given it a minute's thought last night I'd have known that we were asking for trouble sleeping in this spot."

"I don't think we had much choice," Cynthia points out quietly.

"At least if we'd been prepared I wouldn't have lost my rucksack!" she says. She had tried to keep hold of it—which was part of the reason she got into such deep trouble. With her voice filled with self-condemnation she adds, "Some scientist!"

Both Herb and Cynthia have lost their packs as well. To make matters worse, Cynthia, who had thought of putting a message through to Marcus, dropped her e-helper.

Deciding that it is wise to wait until morning before searching, they feel their way carefully up to the rock face to try and rest. Here there is less sand and more stones.

The wind blowing from the east across the top of the chasm makes a noise like a thousand organs. Tiring of shouting to make herself heard, Aroha sends a visual message to Herb, asking, 'What now?'

To their surprise Zach answers in visual form. He suggests that they should wait until morning when things will probably seem better.

At dawn they slowly and carefully dig down the hole Aroha erupted out of, and to their relief, they manage to salvage her pack, impregnated with sand. They try to find the other two packs. Looking at the significantly lower wall of sand, Herb calculates that there must be tons more sand in the chasm now. To make matter worse, below a certain depth the holes fill up faster than they can clear them out.

Exhausted and giving up at last, their thoughts turn to the consequences of having lost two water bottles.

"Do you still have your e-helper Aroha?" Cynthia asks anxiously.

Aroha gets it out but predictably, given the amount of sand in the pack, it will not even turn on.

They all realize the grave implications of all of this.

"How long can anyone survive without water in the desert?" Aroha asks.

"Though there are certainly lots of tales of people who have," Zach says, "it's extremely difficult," You should read the book *The Sheltering Desert* by H. Martin. Two German geologists escaped internment by hiding in the desert for about two years. They managed, but they did have a truck and other mod cons."

"Great," Herb says. "The trouble is we don't have a truck. We've only shank's pony."

Their options are few. On Zach's advice they decide to head for the Northwest Upland Region where John, a friend of his, lives. This has the advantage of being in a totally unexpected direction. Zach has persuaded them that they should keep out of sight. Out here, it is the law of the jungle—people shoot first and ask questions later, particularly when there is trouble brewing.

By mutual consent they set off next morning across the Namib and make for the uplands. The day's trek across the burning sand is hell. They are dehydrated, exhausted, and desperately worried. The three with dew catchers, which fortunately are still attached to the shoulders of their survival suits, take turns letting Zach have sips of the insipid water. By evening their feet are a mass of blisters.

Desperate for liquid, and not knowing where or when they will find water, Herb and Zach leave the girls sheltering under a rocky ledge and go hunting.

It takes them all their strength to crawl up onto the ridge top. Springbok grazing on dry grass roots immediately catch wind of them and start to move off. Herb metaphorically flings his parability at the last of them, slowing it down. Zach throws a well-aimed knife, and, jubilantly, the two guys take turns dragging it back to where they left the girls.

There is no question of cooking the meat—there is no wood in sight. Sucking the blood and eating raw meat is probably one of the hardest things Aroha has ever had to do. She only just manages to eat a bit by trying hard to visualize her portion as a very rare steak cooked by the chef of a top class restaurant!

Their luck changes next day when they come across an abandoned bushman's camp with a pile of branches near a fire pit. Their hopes rise higher as they realize there is probably water nearby. Sure enough they find a sizable water hole in a small canyon just half an hour away.

The trek over and around the Upland ridges could have been a nightmare; the sun is hot and merciless, the land is bone-dry and covered by sharp rocks, and there is always the

possibility of being attacked by wild animals or spotted by a Skycar from the mine. That it is tolerable is mostly thanks to the two guys. Herb has drafted them into a division of 'Dad's Army', with himself as Sergeant Major. Scout Zach leads the division, Corporal Cynthia is rifleman, and Private Aroha is in charge of camouflage, while Herb, of course, commands from the back.

Zach, keeping his usual serious expression, follows Herb's commands to the letter:

"By the centre, quick march," Herb orders in a muffled 'bellow' as they set off. "On the double. Hit the decks, when a plane is spotted...Enemy three degrees NNW..."

He tells Aroha to try getting her Caller to blend them into the rock and sand by saying, "On the double. Camouflage!"

Obviously Herb loves calling 'on the double.' "On the double. Scratch butts."

Zach does so, and the serious look on his face is only belied by the laughter in his eyes.

The sharp rocks play havoc with their body suits and they run out of adhesive mending strips. Splits soon let sand in and the itching is almost unbearable.

"De-lousing stop," Herb calls, and they all form a circle and remove whatever sand they can get at in each other's suits.

"Not there!" Cynthia shrieks as Herb tries to get his hand into a sensitive place. She is very ticklish!

Progress is slow. They 'break camp' while it is still dark but are forced to rest during the hottest part of the day—which is most of the day. With the demise of the e-helpers none of them have timepieces. It is often so exhausting 'quick marching' over exposed ridges that they have to rest in the gullies. Hunting takes time too—even though Herb and Zach make a formidable team.

At the end of a long day they force themselves on as Zach points to the valley where his friend John lives. Herb and Zach are practically carrying the girls by the time they arrive at the house. Zach has never been so pleased to see John, who is shocked at their appearance. He does, however, know how to

cope with desert traumas and by the next morning they are all feeling a great deal better.

Zach explains as much as he dare to John who, fortunately, is an understanding friend and only too willing to help. After some discussion Herb contacts Marcus on John's transmitter and Marcus agrees to have a van meet them in the evening at a point designated by John.

After a dinner they all declare to be the best of their lives, John takes them to the meeting point in his dune buggy, where, to their surprise and delight, Dan, their affable tour guide, is waiting for them. Zach does give a passing thought to his van that is, he hopes, still in the lodge's parking lot. Dan and John know each other from way back.

"Well, well, well," Dan says looking at the party's tattered and torn apparel. "It sure looks like you four have seen a bit of trouble! Hop in and tell me about it."

They wave goodbye to John with many thanks and promises to keep in touch.

To their delight Marcus has ordered Dan to drive them all the way to Lüderitz.

"Guess he didn't trust you to get there by yourselves," Dan says cheerfully.

In the back of the van they see four new packs, suits, and sets of boots.

"Marcus!" Herb exclaims. "How did he manage it this quickly!"

"I've always thought he was a bloody magician," Dan says with satisfaction.

Dan hands Herb a copy of the local paper.

"Hell! Listen to this. And I quote 'Lack of diamond inspectors allows smuggling near Lüderitz!'"

"You must be kidding," Cynthia says. "Surely not in this day and age!"

"It goes on to point out that smuggling was rife ten years ago. But who would've believed it's still going on today," Herb says, handing the paper over to Cynthia.

“I’ve heard rumors from Samuel,” Zach says. “I guess they were right. We may be in for interesting times.”

Looking at Zach, Aroha suddenly notices his black, glittering eyes, his white teeth, and his intricate dreadlocks, and she realizes how very handsome he is.

After their latest experiences she, once again, hopes that the mine trip will not be ‘too interesting’—and she is more than just delighted that Zach is coming too.



Chapter Nineteen

Down the Tubes

Beginning of March 2012

“Smuggling!” Aroha exclaims. “It’s unbelievable! Could anything look more beautiful and serene than lots of fishing boats going about their business?”

Aroha has opened the window of their hostel room in Lüderitz and the Atlantic Ocean is so close it is almost at the door. The sound of the waves gently breaking on the shore wafted her to sleep just as it always did on Waiheke.

“Exactly!” Cynthia agrees. “Smuggling is the last thing anyone would think of.”

They join Herb and Zach at breakfast.

“Did you notice the number of fishing boats in the harbor?” Cynthia asks.

“Yes,” Herb says. “And nineteen out of twenty of them will be going about their lawful business of crayfishing, leaving only one greedy group to be the smugglers.”

“Or, ‘have-nots’ jealous of the ‘haves’,” Zach says.

“Desperate to just feed their families,” Aroha adds.

“Yes, I know that you’re probably right,” Cynthia says, “but they could also be the swindlers who are bleeding this country dry.”

Zach’s cousin Samuel has said he will be happy to meet them after work to discuss a visit to the Victoria Mine. Left with a whole day to fill, they decide to do two tourist trips: one to the old ghost mine, and the other to the Elizabeth mine which was only abandoned a couple of years ago.

It is rather sad listening to the guide’s account of the great and glorious days at the height of the diamond rush. Prospectors found diamonds the size of plums—some were discovered laying on the surface, while others were hard won by sieving sand and stone through salt water.

It is clear that many fortunes were made and lost. Germans with visions of great prosperous towns poured more money than they could afford into dreams of making paradise out of the desert. The remnants of abandoned castles and farms are still visible. The ghost town echoes long gone sounds of beer drinking in the casino, bowling alleys, and bars. According to their guide, pretty ladies were treated to bubble baths of champagne because it cost no more than fresh water.

In the shop there are cut diamonds to be bought—at a price. Even the guys are impressed with their beauty.

They drive around part of the perimeter of the forbidden diamond area, on the packed-sand road, pretending not to notice the bright orange signs every few yards that proclaim, in three languages, ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’. Marcus has provided them with an aerial map of the mining area. It is huge, and in only one place does it come close to a road. They keep their eyes open but see no sign of the actual mine, let alone people working. Stopping by a waterhole, where dozens of pink and white flamingos make a lovely sight against the copper-colored dunes, they get out of the car.

The hot easterly wind is now stronger than it was in the morning. By mutual agreement they turn back to the town. As the wind gets stronger it makes interesting sand patterns on the roads and before long the road is covered. It is another hair-raising drive back to the hostel with Zach driving by sheer intuition.

They are not at all surprised when Samuel sends a message saying that he will not be able to make the trip into the town this evening because of the road conditions. The foursome lingers over dinner before Herb and Cynthia depart to look at electronic maps using Herb’s Mindcaller. Zach orders two more guava drinks and Aroha tells him a bit about what the Mindcaller can do. She is very conscious of how clearly she can sense his aura, still tinted with dark worry patterns. She projects her concern back to him and he picks it up and looks at her in amazement.

“It’s a sort of visual telepathy. Right?”

“Yes. We know that there is a dictionary of visual symbols stored in the Mindcaller, but we don’t really know how to use it yet.”

“What can you pickup from me?” Zach asks.

“Only that something is worrying you, and that it concerns your work and the people there.”

“Do you know who the people are?”

“No. They are purely abstract representations.”

“You’re right as far as you go. I’m worried crazy. I’m positive that uranium is being stolen. I don’t know by whom, but I know that my boss is also very worried. He told me that if I know what is good for me, I’ll forget about the losses.”

“Which you can’t do?”

“I can’t. Think what a disaster it would be if it were discovered. And even if it isn’t discovered, the mine may become too unprofitable to run. In either case it could be closed down, and that would be a calamity for the workers; some of them will literally starve to death.”

Aroha moves closer to Zach and puts an arm around him. They snuggle together and it is 2am before they finally go off to bed.

They meet next evening and Samuel looks so much like Zach that Aroha thinks it is a good thing he has short hair rather than dreadlocks or it would be difficult to tell them apart.

They give Samuel an abbreviated version of what they would like to do.

“Not asking much are you?” Samuel says grinning at them. “Just a stroll into the most highly protected land in the country. And an illegal fishing trip to boot!”

The others smile back at him hopefully.

“I would’ve said that it’s hopeless because we’ve been in the media lately, y’know, for smuggling. However, the really strange thing is that there has been no increased security—at least not that we’ve seen. In fact, if anything, things have become a bit quieter than usual. So, I’m pretty sure I can get you a tour to the new Victoria mine where I work. I will ask

my boss Herr Müller, who for some unknown reason goes out of his way to help me, for the necessary permits. The mine opened just two years ago and has very modern facilities. You'll find the security process draconian, and it works, so don't try to be clever!"

"What we'd really like, is to skim through your personnel file," Herb says. "Do you think you could manage that?"

Samuel looks questioningly at Zach who nods.

"OK," Samuel says. "I'm system analyst for the company so I should be able to manage it for you. But it'll take a day or two to get the paper work signed and sealed.

"In the meantime, I do know the skipper of a decommissioned mining boat," Samuel goes on to say. "And he owes me a favor. I'll ask him if he'll take at least a couple of us."

Herb is an experienced scuba diver, and mad keen to try, but Zach has to stay behind because he cannot even swim. Aroha offers to stay with Zach, while Cynthia says she has work to do. Herb wonders whether Aroha's apparent keenness for Zach's company means anything significant or not.

Putting Aroha out of his mind, Herb concentrates on the job at hand. He primes the Mindcaller to recognize diamond sediment by comparing samples with a video clip he captured in the Ghost mine.

The skipper sails his boat out to a cove he knows that is just outside the forbidden area.

Putting on a wet suit, gas tanks, mask, and flippers seems to take a considerable time, and Herb laughs at his own impatience. With a conventional back flip, he follows Samuel down into the water. They work as a team hauling away the top layer of rock and stone, and manhandling the vacuum hose to probe any likely-looking sludge. They take turns at choosing the area to be vacuumed. Usually only the most skilled divers have mastered this science. They have to note the smallest differences in color and texture of the deposit. Herb puzzles Samuel by his determination to pass over one likely looking area after another. By matching the Mindcaller's analysis with

what he is seeing, Herb has increased their odds of finding diamonds a hundred fold. When they are called to the surface, the pilot presents each of them with a bucket containing their day's taking—of sludge! They are told that in view of the fact that every diamond found should, by law, be registered, the skipper of the boat would rather not know if they were lucky enough to find any!

Herb is puzzled as to what he should do with his messy looking bucket. He cannot take it back to hostel. Samuel solves the problem by taking Herb to his home. Here he provides Herb with a sieve and leaves him to sluice his sludge. They both agree not to say whether they have been successful, but from the barely suppressed sparkle in Samuel's eyes, Herb can make a good guess.

They both have trouble evading the girls' persistent questions. Samuel and Zach have a few quiet words together before Samuel diverts them all.

"Zach has told me how you're working for us by filming. I think I may be able to help. I've set up, with some close friends, a twenty-four hour watch of the harbor for smugglers. We're trying to keep track of the comings and goings. As you can guess, we're in a much better position to do this than the police because we're so much part of the scene. We've got a few leads, which of course makes it increasingly dangerous. I'll be on watch tonight when one of the suspect boats comes into port. If Herb would like to come too, he may. But I must emphasize—it is dangerous."

The night trip appears to be a complete success with Herb getting some very good coverage of the suspects' activities. The Mindcaller has remarkably long-range night vision.

When the others view the film next morning, everyone except Zach is surprised that such a multi-ethnic group is involved. With the help of the Mindcaller, and using racial features, such as skin color, and speech intonations etc., they identify races from Europe, the US, Africa—and New Zealand. When they send the file, Marcus expresses pleasure at their progress once again.

At last the paper work comes through from the mine and Samuel collects the party from the hostel. On the way out he explains that the Victoria mine is a very modern one.

"It's not an opencast mine like the old Elizabeth mine. It is more like the old Kimberly mine—a pipe mine. Our kimberlite pipe that was hidden many feet underground was only discovered using newly developed Cr..."

He stops mid-word as Zach gives him a telling look. He goes on to emphasize once again that the mine protocols are particularly strict. There are some rooms, such as the boardroom, that they must not on any account enter. Naturally, this immediately raises the group's curiosity.

They have now reached the first of the gates. Their papers are checked and new ones issued. On the back of one form there is a list of seventy-five rules and regulations.

"Just look at this!" Aroha exclaims. "We mustn't roll down any hills or throw stones! I ask you!"

Samuel introduces them to his boss Herr Müller who is all smiles. For some reason she cannot put her finger on, Aroha is very uneasy in his presence. Samuel shows them into his office and very shortly Herb has the list of employees archived—only to find that it does not have any of the company directors, board members, or managers on it.

"Are there any photos anywhere at all?" Herb asks.

"There's a couple in the cafeteria," Samuel says. "I don't know who they are of."

"Let's go," Cynthia says.

They pass the boardroom on the way but the door is closed and guarded. The photos in the cafeteria are disappointing.

As they follow Samuel back through the maze of corridors, they come to the boardroom again and Cynthia unobtrusively detains Herb. Nonchalantly, she gives the guard a steadfast look and opens the door! Herb does a very quick sweep of the room with the Mindcaller. The board members jump up, but as the door closes they are left, one and all, with absurdly puzzled looks on their faces. The guard gives a small start and goes back to his job of staring at a wall.

"They'll have totally forgotten what they saw?" Herb asks in a whisper.

"Yes, completely," Cynthia replies.

Fortunately the others, who are chatting, are now further ahead and do not appear to have noticed anything untoward.

Samuel has arranged for them to go underground. They all have to don coveralls and then they have the fun of sliding down a long tubular pipe into the underground tunnels. A grumpy guide accompanies them.

Aroha is most interested in the whole process. She discusses with their guide the various types of rocks and impresses him with her knowledge. At one point she stops and says:

"There's a major fault in the rock just here. What is it?"

A look of surprised worry crosses the guard's face.

"No!" he insists. "There's nothing there. Come! We must hurry on."

To others the whole complex looks like any other underground mining operation—tons of rock being excavated, sorted, and processed. Nowhere do they see a sign of a diamond.

The final separation process is out of bounds. They are also told that the cutting processes are done miles away in several other locations.

Up on the surface again, they look out over the vast, dry, windswept dunes dotted with piles of excavated rock that look like mini volcanoes. Any inclination they may have had to explore rapidly disappears.

If they thought that getting into the mine complex was difficult, getting out is much more so. They are all x-rayed and strip-searched.

"Is everyone searched every day?" Aroha asks.

"No, it's done randomly using a system of red and black dots. Each day the employees choose their colors and the system makes a random choice."

Back at the hostel in the privacy of the guys' room they discuss the day.

“What did you sense when you mentioned a fault in the tunnel?” Zach asks.

“There was a considerable change in geological energies. It was completely unnatural.” Aroha says.

“Let’s see if the Mindcaller saw anything extraordinary. I tried to take some footage into the wall.” Herb says.

The projected scene surprises them all. Looking like some sort of radar, or sonar, image, it shows a laboratory. They immediately display the official map of the area and are not altogether surprised that it is not shown.

“No wonder our guide, come guard, hurried us on,” Cynthia says. “I bet Marcus will be most interested in this.”

Herb says, “What I can’t help wondering is if security is this tight how are any stones smuggled out?”

“It’s extremely difficult,” Samuel says. “But sometimes groups cooperate and form sort of relays to get stones, from point to point, and out to the perimeter where workers have been known to dig tunnels under the fence.”

“If guards are in such short supply, why put a guard outside the meeting room?” Cynthia asks.

“That’s because there are such tensions between the top brass and the workers,” Zach replies.

“While you’ve been here you’ve been protected from the real Africa. On your fancy tours and in your rich hotels you’ve seen nothing of the ghettos where 80% of the people live in sickness and poverty; it’s a dreadful sight.”

Zach’s tone is not anger, but something much more heart rending. Aroha senses his soul is laid bare. He cannot carry on and Samuel takes over.

“There’s still deep seated racial tension as most of the profits are creamed off by the fortunate few. Some of us are working hard to redress the balance. But we’re fighting an uphill battle when even our President is sending the country down the tubes by buying up a whole section of Windhoek to build a palace for himself and his cronies. It’s not the first time of course. Similar things were done years back.”

It is a very thoughtful group that retires for the night.

A vivid mind flash from Zach, depicting Samuel disappearing, jerks Aroha wide-awake next morning.

"Something's very wrong," she says to Cynthia and, pulling on the first clothes she can put her hands on, she races to the guys' room.

Herb opens the door, an e-helper in his hand. Zach is sitting on the edge of a bed, still not dressed, and working frantically with his e-helper.

"Samuel has disappeared without trace." Herb says. "He left here at midnight and didn't get home. And in this country that is very bad news."

Zach puts the e-helper down with a gesture of despair and sends Aroha a mind flash showing himself being hunted like an animal.

"We all have to leave," Herb says. "I've been in contact with Marcus and he's arranging flights. He says that Zach must come too."

With a distinct sob Zach puts his head in his hands. Aroha sits down beside him and puts her arms around him.

"You will come," she pleads. "You must come! You see that, don't you?"

Zach nods but projects an image of his mind in turmoil.

"We're leaving the hostel as soon as possible," Herb says. "The airport will be a safer place to wait."

They pack hastily and call a cab. As they approach the hostel doors Aroha becomes aware of a malevolent energy outside. She flashes an image to Herb who then commands the group to race to the cab in a tight group with Zach in the middle. On the way down the stairs, a guy standing beside a palm tree starts to raise a revolver. Herb slows his reactions just enough for the team to tumble into the cab and slam the door shut. The bullet misses its mark as the cab driver, needing no instructions, takes off.

The trip back to New Zealand is very different from the outgoing one. There are no fun and games from Herb. Aroha encourages Zach to release some of his tension by sending her

a series of mind flashes that she then projects for the others to see.

His home back in Swakopmund; his mother and six brothers and sisters in the two bedroom house; men with guns breaking in and searching for Zach; his mother in tears; empty cupboards; men evicting the family out of the company house; homeless in the ghetto.

“Will they really be evicted?” Herb asks.

“And left with no food or shelter?” Aroha asks in horror.

“Without my pay packet there will be nothing, nothing at all, for any of them,” Zach replies in utter despair.

Chapter Twenty

Bad Publicity

8th March 2012

One glance at Marcus, who has personally driven to the airport in the Moller 600, fills Aroha with apprehension. They alerted him of the latest developments while on the plane, but she senses that he is holding back news that is really bad.

After a quick shower and lunch they find both Marcus and Maria waiting for them in the meeting room.

"There's very bad news, Zach," Marcus begins, and he doesn't know how to go on.

"Samuel!" Zach gasps. Aroha wordlessly moves closer to him.

"Yes," Maria says.

"How?" Zach asks with supreme control.

"His body was washed up two hours ago with a bullet in his head."

The whole group is so devastated they can think of nothing to say. Quietly Marcus says they are all off duty for the foreseeable future and if there is anything at all he and Maria can do to help, they have only to ask. Wordlessly they all take off down to their favorite beach and lie in the warm sand—Aroha's arm across Zach's back.

From the way Zach hurls himself at the breakers next day, no one would guess he has never swum in a pool, or river—let alone the sea. At first the others are glad to see it because they know that he is expressing his anger and hurt at Sam's death. However, as days pass, and Zach ventures deeper and deeper out to sea they begin to worry. They try and explain dangers such as 'rips' but Zach obviously does not understand what they are talking about. To him water has always been precious, life giving. He cannot comprehend that it might be really dangerous.

One morning, following three days of stormy weather, Zach goes swimming alone. The waves are running high and fast and almost immediately he is swept out beyond his depth. Aroha, who was working in the garden, senses his cry for help as he struggles to keep his head above water. She rushes down the path to the beach scattering loosened clothing as she goes. As she passes Herb, who is in the hot pool, she yells at him to come too. As one they dive into the water and swim strongly out to the point where Aroha can sense Zach. There is no sign of him but Aroha knows exactly when and where to dive. Jubilantly, as they bring him ashore, she senses that, though unconscious, he is still alive.

While Aroha applies mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Herb retrieves some of Aroha's cast aside clothes and rubs warmth into Zach's body.

Zach comes round with a shudder and a gasp and Herb races up the hill to get help. While they wait, Zach looks intently into Aroha's eyes. He is very aware that she has saved his life, and feelings of love unconditional well up inside him.

With the first-class care of his friends, it is not long before Zach is up and smiling. Nevertheless, everyone notices that he has become more serious than ever before. He still loves the water but when Herb suggests, as he has done several times before, that he should have swimming lessons in one of the sheltered bays, he is content to accept.

Zach's recovery is also helped by Marcus's suggestion that Cynthia give them flying lessons in a Moller 500. Although Cynthia is a harder taskmaster than any flying-school officer they all enjoy it, especially Zach. They practice 'Search and Rescuing' each other, taking off and landing above cliffs and in small clearings in the forest.

Finally, more than a month after they have returned from Namibia, Marcus calls Zach into his office. Zach, sensing that it will be a serious talk, is happy to see Maria in the room too.

"Zach," Marcus begins, "we've asked you to come and see us because there is a difficult decision for you to make. I will be asking the others in your party to take up the surveillance

assignment again. Unfortunately, it will be considerably more dangerous this time—particularly for you.”

“But...”

“Just a minute. Hear me out. As I’ve mentioned, for a time after you left Namibia private detectives mounted a worldwide search for you. In fact two agencies were involved: one commissioned, not surprisingly, by the Blackstone Mine, and the other by someone at the Victoria Mine in Lüderitz.”

Marcus pauses and looks intently at Zach.

“Why the Lüderitz mine?” Maria asks.

Zach shakes his head but both Marcus and Maria are left feeling that he does know, but is not telling. Marcus goes on:

“We haven’t heard of any activity concerning you recently—but that doesn’t mean that you’re off the hook. Detectives have long memories, or to be exact, first class computer management systems have long memories!”

“Please. I must take part. I have to! Sam’s name is at stake.”

“Just think for a minute. Your name, background, and photos will all be on their files.”

“I’ll change them. And I know you could help.”

“Even losing your dreadlocks?” Maria asks gently.

Zach looks taken aback for only a second. “Yes, even them.”

Both Marcus and Maria look at him intently. Marcus sighs and says, “Maria guessed as much. OK, let’s call the others in and see what they have to say.”

Marcus emphasizes the danger Zach would add to the assignment, but they are adamant that the disadvantages of having him come are far outweighed by the advantages.

“You can be bait,” Herb says cheerfully.

“Herb!” Aroha says, appalled at the thought.

“Where are we going?” Cynthia asks.

“Probably Rotorua,” Marcus replies.

“Hey,” Herb exclaims, “that’s good! It’s my old hometown. I can take you trout fishing—disguised as anglers!”

“Are you never serious?” Maria asks shaking her head. “I’ve given this quite some thought. I think it’ll be best if you go as corporate executives. We should be able to jack up some conference or other for you to attend.”

“When do we leave? And what about clothes?” Cynthia asks.

“We don’t know yet,” Marcus says. “We’re waiting for word from Wellington.”

Maria delights them all by proposing a weekend shopping trip to Sydney, Australia. She also recommends that Aroha grow her hair. The trip to Sydney is lots of fun; first Maria escorts them to the very best clothing boutiques where there are timeless labels such as Versace and Hilfiger. Herb, who has never been inside such places in his whole life, is adamant that he prefers the Kitch and Kooky fashion shop! He keeps them chuckling with comments such as, “I look geekish! Can I kneel down—or will the fly split open?”

Once suitably attired they visit top-class beauty parlors. Zach bemoans the loss of his dreadlocks but declares that he is now perfectly safe from pursuers because not even his mother would know him. When finished they take stock of each other. Herb far preferred Aroha’s curly hair instead of her new slick, sweptback look. Aroha, however, doesn’t see past Zach’s smiling eyes and wry smile.

As they wait for their assignment, Herb and Aroha spend hours with Maria practicing using the whole Mindcaller for communication. Marcus has pointed out that it uses a frequency on an unknown telecommunications band, and that if they could use it for keeping in touch, it would be of great advantage as there would be no danger of being intercepted.

The group gets the call to leave just as Zach is about to have his first scuba diving lesson. Knowing what is expected of them, they race back to the house and within an hour they are all seated in a Moller on their way to Rotorua—where both Jan and Dannie have been seen recently.

They have a driver called Jack who will look after parking the Moller for them. Excitement runs high as they realize that it is good to have the waiting time behind them.

Again Herb asks himself the question: 'Why, if the Secret Service is involved, have we been asked to come and quite possibly muddy the traitors' trails? Is Zach really being used as bait?' Obviously the Mindcaller can help—particularly with its multifunctional surveillance. But Herb is sure that is not the real reason.

After settling into their hotel Herb wants to know how they are going to spend the evening. Aroha and Cynthia want to window shop. Herb persuades Zach to come black-water rafting.

Herb contacts a friend from his schooldays called Ruka who now has a small rafting company. With a bit of fast-talking he persuades Ruka to lend them equipment, and to come too.

"Which river?" Ruka asks.

"One I found when I was a kid," Herb replies. "Jack will take us there in the Moller."

At the river they jump into black inner tubes and 'hook up' in a line by putting their feet into the tube in front of them. With Herb as leader they float as a train slowly towards a cavern in the rock face some twenty yards downstream.

Entering the tunnel, at first they are unable to see a thing, however, as their eyes become adjusted, they look at awesome limestone formations.

Traditionally, black-water rafting groups proceed in silence—having been told that this is the best way to ensure seeing glow-worms. But Herb, true to form, soon starts rocking the 'boat'. Before long they have all capsized laughing.

Without them noticing, the river has become wider and the current stronger. With little warning it sweeps around a corner into a large pool in an enormous cave. Here the glow-worms are magnificent and, as Herb points out, if they have frightened a few thousand into turning out their lights, they are not

missed! They paddle their way, using their hands, into the current that goes out an exit at the far side of the pool. Shooting around a bend in the river they come out onto shallows. Carrying their tubes, they start to climb up a ridge to their meeting point with Jack.

“What the hell are you doing here!” a deep booming voice yells at them from the other side of the river. “Get off my land!”

The largest man that Zach has ever seen comes pounding down the slope towards them.

Herb uses his parability to slow him down and give them a chance to reach the Moller.

The guy keeps trying to run with his immense stomach shaking. His frustration builds. “I can’t bloody-well run,” he splutters, panting. “It must have been all the ruddy sex I had with that chick last night!”

Herb and Zach decide that it will be diplomatic not to tell the girls, but they have a real laugh over it later that evening.

“He looked like an enormous blubbery sea lion!” Zach says.

“Yes. Imagine how the bedsprings sounded,” Herb says. “And here we are. Two strong healthy males with no one sharing our beds!”

“From something that Cynthia said, I thought that you and Aroha were a partnership,” Zach says.

“I thought so too,” Herb says. He finds Zach to be such a good listener that he unloads his frustration in graphic detail.

“She saved my life. I owe her everything,” Zach says softly.

“I know. I know.” Herb says. “But I just can’t believe things were supposed to turn out this way.”

“What do you think of Cynthia?” Zach asks.

“She’s good fun, but too much of a workaholic for my taste. So, there we are. To bed, perchance to dream.”

Next morning, all four dressed in their corporate best, sign in at the conference Marcus has registered them for. The first speaker is unspeakably boring. Herb amuses Zach and himself

by first morphing the speaker into wild animals, and then by sketching last night's farmer at fun and games in bed.

"What are you doing?" Cynthia whispers as they shake with suppressed laughter.

"Just teaching Zach how useful abstract movies are," Herb says innocently.

Herb and Zach have had enough by morning teatime and arrange to meet the others at lunchtime. As they wander aimlessly down the main street, Herb suddenly recognizes Jan and Danie getting into a taxi! He runs full tilt down the street with Zach following hard behind. As the taxi begins to move Herb tries to slow it down by making the driver relax his accelerator foot. He is only partially successful and the car judders. Jan and Danie look back, see Herb running on the road, and yell at the driver to get going. As the car jerks forward Herb jumps onto the back bumper, only to lose his grip, and fall backwards onto the road. Bystanders watch, incredulous, as Herb gets up out of the gutter and absentmindedly brushes dirt off his once immaculate, high fashion, corporate suit.

Over lunch Cynthia has a lot to say about unwanted publicity! Both she and Aroha are feeling scratchy after sitting through another boring talk.

"Obviously you can't be trusted," Cynthia says sternly. "So I suppose I'd better miss this afternoon's sessions and stay with you."

Aroha, knowing that Cynthia is secretly pleased to have this excuse, decides to give the rest of the conference a miss too. They spend most of the afternoon lazing in thermal hot pools. On the way back to the hotel they stop by a jeweler's shop where, amongst the greenstone and bone ornaments, there are fine diamond rings. When, on impulse, Herb asks where the diamonds have come from the jeweler says she does not know. Whether she's telling the truth or not, they can't guess.

It was a tiring day, made more frustrating by the fact that they have no idea of what they are really looking for. Herb is very vocal on the point.

In the evening when he contacts Marcus and sends the Mindcaller's day's input he asks again asks Marcus what they are supposed to be looking out for. Marcus insists that, by following instructions, they are doing all that is required of them at the moment.

"If we were told more about what is going on, we could do more to help," Herb reiterates later on. "Which makes me wonder where our orders actually come from. The SIS³⁷?"

"Do you think they could be watching us?" Aroha says aghast.

"Welcome to the club," is Cynthia's rather unnerving reply.

To their delight their assignment next morning is unexpectedly interesting. Their appointment is at the new steel foundry at Raglan harbor, on the West Coast. They take turns driving the Moller and the flight itself is enjoyable as they cross, lakes, forest, and rich looking farmland. At the factory they present their credentials and are warmly welcomed. They are given coveralls to wear and travel in two electric cars from area to area in the enormous factory. Robots are everywhere, while people are few and far between. Zach and Aroha are most interested in the computer room where they discuss the techniques in depth with the systems analyst. The factory is a one-stop-shop using iron-sand from large deposits on the beaches further north. It produces everything from army knives to aircraft bodies on-demand. Aroha is fascinated by the Operations Research behind the production scheduling. Nothing seems to be closed to them and they all part good friends, promising to keep in email contact.

They follow Marcus's instructions in the afternoon and visit Whakarewarewa, a well-known tourist spot with volcanic activity much like Yellowstone National Park. The group mingles with the other tourists who are fascinated by the geysers, the boiling mud pools, the beautiful colored limestone terraces, and the Maori singing and dancing. Just as they

³⁷ New Zealand's Security Intelligence Service

decide they are ready to retrace their steps back to the exit, Aroha senses that an entirely new geyser is going to blow! Aroha and Herb yell at the others to scat. Unfortunately, they are not alone at the spot. Two American tourists look at them as if they have gone mad and refuse to move. In exasperation Herb picks up the woman, throws her over his shoulder, and runs. The look on the husband's face as he follows panting and yelling is a sight indeed. When out of danger range Herb stops and puts the woman down. The roar of a newly born geyser completely drowns her husband's outburst. Officials come running and in the general commotion, with the Americans taking center stage, Cynthia herds her party away as quickly and quietly as she can, faintly aware that photos are being taken.

"Talk about unwanted publicity! Let's get away from everyone," Cynthia says. "Do you know anywhere quiet within walking distance Herb?"

"Yes. I've always wanted to show Aroha where I found my half of the Mindcaller. Follow me."

He winds through scrub to his favorite pool where he spent so many hours when he was young. It brings back both happy and sad memories of his youth.

He feels the water with his hand, and is surprised to find that it is not as hot as he remembers. He explains to the others how, while looking for two large glass marbles that rolled into the pool, he discovered the underground cave. All of them, particularly Zach, are keen to have a look at it. They strip off their good clothes, and with Herb leading the way, they dive one by one under the ledge at the far end of the pool. Spluttering and shaking the water out of their eyes they crowd onto a small ledge. Herb shows them the exact place he found his Mindcaller and then points to the group of Black Stones. They are of various shapes and sizes, many of them round and smooth, with a definite non-natural look about them. The effect on Aroha is almost immediate and appalling—she passes out. They exit the cave as quickly as they can, dragging Aroha

with them. Calling Jack to bring the Moller, they get Aroha back to the hotel and into bed as fast as they can.

When they meet for their regular pre-breakfast meeting, Aroha assures everyone she is just fine. Gently, Cynthia asks her to try and explain what happened in the cave. A shudder passes through Aroha as she looks at each of the expectant faces and knows that she must try and give some explanation.

“It was, in a way, like the time I first used the whole Mindcaller out at Karekare. The raw power of it freaked me out. Somehow those stones can connect directly with the Mindcaller and my Mind! I felt...pressure build up. Rapidly. I was aware that I was supposed to respond. But I didn't know how. It was awful! Then I guess I just blacked out from the overload.”

“Did you feel anything Herb?” Cynthia asks.

“I'm not sure. It all happened so quickly. And the look on Aroha's face scared the shit out of me. But when I thought about it last night—I couldn't sleep—I recalled my Mindcaller getting hot and vibrating strongly. Heavens knows it's all about.”

Cynthia contacts Marcus and they transmit both visual and verbal copies of the previous day's activities to him. He questions them all closely but they cannot add much that is new. He certainly thinks the black stones warrant further investigation, but not by Aroha. He ends by suggesting that they all have a quiet morning—perhaps having brunch at one of the other hotels.

After spending some time choosing between the many great restaurants Rotorua boasts of, they enjoy a good lunch. Being free agents, they then decide to visit one of the new interactive museums featuring Maori history and culture. They separate as Herb finds the games room most fun, the girls become absorbed in natural history sections, and Zach is totally engrossed in the Early Maori room. Suddenly all four e-helpers vibrate and display the message ‘Back to the Moller! Get lost!’

Running through the foyer, Cynthia notices a photo of them all prominently displayed on the front page of the local paper! She swears under her breath. As they race to where the Moller is hidden a stranger hails Zach, who was the last to leave. He runs faster, but unfortunately in his panic takes a wrong turn.

Aroha and Herb stop by the shop behind which the Moller is parked and look back anxiously. Aroha senses Zach's distress call and receives a flash of him running and darting among houses, but she does not know where. They are pacing up and down when they suddenly hear a gunshot, and then a second. They freeze. In the deathlike stillness that follows Aroha senses that Zach is being chased by at least two men. She strains every mental muscle she possesses trying to see where he is. In anguish, she demands that Herb give her his half of the Mindcaller and with well-practiced speed puts the two parts together. Now she 'sees' two men, coming from opposite directions, trying to force Zach into a blind alley. She is frantic and does not even hear Herb's insistent demands to be told what is happening. The images she projects feels like a bizarre computer game.

"Herb," she hisses. "When a guy appears from Hazel Street—there on the right—freeze him."

When Zach finally comes into sight at the bottom of the hill, he is obviously exhausted. Herb and Cynthia start to run towards him. Desperately Aroha tries to mentally give Zach energy for the final sprint. Incredibly, to her utter astonishment, she sees what looks like copies of him drop off his back like discarded clothing! The men chasing him come to an abrupt stop and shoot blindly in the air. Zach looks back, and gets such a fright that he almost catapults himself up the hill and through the door of the Moller. He falls into his seat sick with exhaustion, confusion, and fear.



Chapter Twenty-One

Mind Over Matter

May 2012

“B... Hell. Damn and damnation!” The others have never seen Cynthia so upset. “Are you OK Zach?”

Zach nods mutely.

“Did you see? We’re b... heroes. On the front page of the b... paper! We’ve blown Zach’s cover! And ours too. Those damned tourists at Whakarewarewa. Heaven’s knows what Marcus, the PM, or the damned SIS will say!”

Jack, who is flying in circles, interrupts: ‘More to the point, where should we be going?’

Simultaneously, both Herb and Aroha get a flash sent by Maria of an area in the Northwest of the South Island. Herb quickly brings a map up on the Moller’s control screen and the others lean forward to look.

“The Heaphy Plateau!” Herb protests. “Why on Earth there?”

“I guess that it is one of the last places Zach’s pursuers would expect him to go,” Jack says. “They may even suspect Marcus.”

“Also,” Cynthia adds thoughtfully, “the Powers That Be may still be interested in our making our way down the South Island to Arrowtown. Remember Arrowtown is one of the places money is flowing into.”

“So it seems we’re on our way to the middle of nowhere,” Herb says trying to act cheerful. “Has anyone been to the Heaphy Plateau before?” They all shake their heads.

Cynthia and Herb spend some time searching the Moller’s local database urgently looking for information on the area. Aroha turns her attention back to Zach.

"They tried to get me!" Zach says, his voice still shaking. "Like they got Samuel."

"No," Aroha says gently. "No, I'm sure they weren't. They fired into the air. I saw them."

Both of them think over the consequences of what happened.

Everyone is silent for quite some time before Zach says, "I recognized one of the guys." Cynthia and Herb look up from the computer. "It was Adel Golzar—one of the vice presidents of the Blackstone Company—not that he ever shows his face there. I only recognized him because Samuel once showed me a Web photo of Golzar and Golzar's brother. I remember we laughed over the fact that they looked like Mafia members even though they are Iranian.

"Good grief," Cynthia says. "That is interesting—and useful. Have you any idea who the second guy was?"

Zach shakes his head.

"Clearly they didn't want to kill you," Herb says.

"But they tried to trap him in a one-way street," Aroha points out. "So they did want to catch him alive, but goodness knows what then!"

"Jack are you listening to all this?" Cynthia asks.

"Yes, and recording. Automatic procedure. Marcus will ask for a debriefing."

"Good," Cynthia says.

"But what happened to scare them off?" Zach asks. "I swear I was followed by hundreds of guys who looked as terrified as me!"

The others laugh with pure relief.

"I think I can guess what happened," Aroha says. "I think that the Mindcaller produced dozens of holographic images of you. I was desperate to help you, so I guess I did—mentally!"

"Yes," Herb says. "Did you notice how they seemed to flow into each other?"

Aroha and Cynthia nod.

"Another thing for you to practice Aroha," Cynthia says. "But not now."

This brings the others back to their current plight with a jolt.

“Jack, do you know a good landing come hiding place in the allotted area?” Cynthia asks.

“Sure do. There are several—but as it is getting dark, I suggest we choose the handiest.”

“Is there a hut?” Zach asks.

The others laugh.

“Hut!” Cynthia exclaims. “No way! When Marcus says: ‘Get lost’, he means it. And there’ll be no possibility of electronic communication with anyone either.”

“What about food?” Aroha asks.

“Actually, it is possible to live off the land,” Herb says. “My Mother taught me how when I was young.”

“Things shouldn’t be that bad,” Cynthia says. “The Moller is equipped with some survival stuff. Right Jack?”

“Yes, enough to last for a week if you’re careful.”

Shortly they descend to a comparatively level tussock area where Jack sets the Moller down. He unlocks a compartment at the back of the car and they unload a pile of stuff. When Jack takes off, the group members have feelings varying from abandonment to excitement.

The pile of equipment contains a small four-man tent and four packs each containing a sleeping bag and some rations. Exhausted they just eat a few cookies, drink some cold water, and collapse into sleeping bags.

The Heaphy Plateau is a unique microclimate where short bonsai-like plants grow in a profusion of color. Not having anything better to do, the group spends most of the next four days just lounging about, enjoying the beauty around them. The only exception is that Cynthia organizes them into sorting out gear and provisions, and assigning individual responsibilities.

Aroha and Herb also spend time practicing with the Mindcaller. Aroha discovers how to produce and control holograms using just her half. Some time back they discovered

that once they have learnt how to use the whole Mindcaller for some purpose, it can then usually be achieved using only half.

Each morning and evening they contact Maria visually. With practice they are certainly improving. Maria has indicated that they must stay where they are out of sight, and avoid all forms of telecommunication until they hear otherwise from her.

A week later, Maria signals that they should move southwest. She visualizes a point on a ridge top, by the first fork in the Heaphy River, where Jack will drop more provisions. There are cheers all round.

A most unwelcome surprise awaits them when, hot and out of breath, they finally make it to the appointed spot on the top of the ridge. The provisions are there all right, but the net bag they were dropped in has been cut open! They are standing thinking about the implications of this when an elderly Maori guy comes out of the nearby bush and asks:

“This kai³⁸ yours?”

They nod.

“Pity. Thought we’d found a windfall.”

Liking the look of him Herb introduces himself and his friends.

“I’m Hema,” the old man says. “Reckon I should be going.”

Aroha, trusting her instincts, throws caution to the winds.

“No stay and have lunch,” she says.

While Hema hesitates, Zach and Herb put some interesting food out onto a large nikau palm leaf that was lying nearby. To their delight, there are also several loaves of their favorite wholegrain Vogel’s bread, some slightly pulped tomatoes and fruit. Aroha flashes thanks to Maria and receives a warm feeling in reply.

Just as they start eating Cynthia follows Hema’s glance to where a young Maori boy is standing by the edge of the bush.

³⁸ Food

She calls to him and, rather sullenly, he comes over. Hema introduces him as his grandson, Esau.

Esau remains grumpy throughout the meal despite the others' attempts to include him in the conversation. It does not, however, prevent him from eating more than anyone else!

They chat well into the afternoon. Hema is a Maori of the old school, honoring the ancient traditions. Aroha is impressed at the loving way he handles his rebellious grandson.

When a cold wind springs up it is obvious that the ridge top is not a good place to spend the night. Herb asks Hema if he knows of a good camping area not too far away. He does, and helps them transport their stuff to it, all the while pointing out things of interest in his gruff way. Amongst the many ferns that taste awful, he shows them a few which have delicious korus³⁹ that are sometimes served in top-class restaurants.

Hema rouses Esau at daybreak, puts his few belongings in his old rucksack, picks up his beautifully carved walking staff, and says goodbye and thanks for the kai. Both Herb and Aroha feel that they would have liked to know them better.

With no instructions coming from Marcus, Cynthia decides they should slowly wend their way across the plateau towards the coast. They breakfast, and are starting to break camp, when Herb discovers his e-helper is missing. Shortly after, Hema appears leading a very recalcitrant Esau.

"Hand it over," Hema commands.

Slowly Esau goes over to Herb and hands him the missing e-helper.

While Esau is spilling his guts to Zach, Hema is deep in conversation with Herb and Aroha. He starts with an attempt at an apology.

Herb interrupts: "Forget it. No harm done."

"There might have been. That's a fact," Hema states forcefully.

"Tell us a bit about Esau," Aroha begs. "Please. I sense that he's a clever lad—but bored silly."

³⁹ The spiral tip of the fern

Hema looks at her closely for a while before deciding to open up—something he rarely does with strangers.

“Esau’s father, my boy, is a university professor.” The pride in Hema’s voice is obvious. “But why he had to hang a name like Esau onto a Maori kid beats me. Too much bible reading befuddled him I reckon. Heck, the boy has been teased from the time he was a small kid. Esau’s mother is a three-quarters Pakeha. They spoil the kid, I reckon. He was a great kid until he went to school. They had him tested—or some such nonsense—top 2% they said. Not that he got any benefit from it. He was in trouble with his schoolteachers from day one. Swore at them good and proper. They put him in a special school—and that did more harm than good if you ask me. Got in with the wrong sort of kids. Then he started playing hooky and got into drugs. It was all downhill from there. Ended up in the Can. Child Youth and Family organized a whanau⁴⁰ meeting. I offered to try my hand on him.” He sighs. “Often wish I had had the guts to. So, here we are. No better off if you were to ask me.”

There are tears in the old man’s eyes.

“So I guess we’d better be off. And thanks for the kai.”

“Hey, hold your horses, chief,” Herb says, taking an arm and gently but firmly sitting him back down.

“Maybe we can help,” Aroha says. “I like the boy. And notice the way he gets on so well with Zach.”

They look over to where Zach and Esau are still talking.

“If you ask me, you guys have big troubles of your own, Hema says shrewdly. “Ten to one you’re on the run yourselves, though what high-flyers like you might have done beats me.”

Herb laughs and says: “I can assure we’re in trouble so deep that a bit more will not make much difference. We’ll talk it over with Cynthia and Zach, but I’m sure they’ll agree.”

Cynthia is concerned that they could be putting Hema and Esau at great risk. They give Hema an expurgated version of

⁴⁰ Family

what they have been through without downplaying the violence angle. But Hema declares that danger is good for the soul, and Esau's eyes sparkle. Cynthia also brings up the fact that they might get orders to take off at any time.

"Probably at some inconvenient time. Murphy's law," Herb adds.

In the end it is agreed that Hema and Esau will join them for at least part of their trek southwest.

Three days later when they arrive at the coast, Hema offers to share some venison with them for the evening meal. Cynthia looks away while Hema wipes maggots off it. After days of canned meat they all say that the so-called 'fresh' meat is a luxury.

Hema gets up at dawn next morning.

"Best time to catch fish," he mutters as the others sit up. "Much better kai than deer."

Zach jumps up with enthusiasm saying that he would like to come too—he has never been fishing. Hema shows him how to make a fishing rod using a branch, plaited flax line, and shell hook.

Herb makes himself a spear using a branch and belt buckle tied on with string he salvaged from the netting. When Hema sees it he just shakes his head.

Hema, Zach, and Esau head to the northern end of the beach, Herb heads to the southern. Esau is delighted to show Zach how to fish. With great perseverance they manage to catch three rock cod.

When Herb comes back to camp sporting two sizable blue cod Hema looks at them with admiration. Herb gives Cynthia and Aroha a conspiratorial wink. Cynthia and Aroha think how much nicer fish will be to cook than maggoty venison.

They are camped in a large patch of nikau palms that Hema says is the largest stand of the South Island variety. Several large fronds are lying on the ground, and Aroha notes that they are bigger than North Island ones.

"Have you ever ridden these down sand dunes?" Esau asks Zach, picking up two large fronds.

“No, but I’ve ridden all sorts of things down the Namibian dunes,” Zach replies. “Bet I beat you in a race.”

The rest of the afternoon is spent in laughter as they slide, capsize, and roll down ever-steeper slopes.

Slowly they make their way south. Hema proves to be a superb guide, avoiding populated areas and private land, while taking them to secluded bays and good fishing spots. Zach and Esau enjoy themselves swimming, surfcasting, and deer hunting. So much so that Esau has started whistling while he walks.

Herb finds Cynthia in no mood for flirtation as she is obviously deeply concerned about their plight. She questions Zach endlessly about Blackstone and Lüderitz and why two separate groups should be searching for him. He answers what he can, but always keeps something back.

Herb has another thing on his mind. He keeps getting flashes of the tiki that Kevin lost on the slopes of Mt. Aoraki when he slipped and was killed. He discusses it with Aroha and finds that she is experiencing similar flashes.

“I guess, it’s just because we’re getting closer to the area it’s in,” Aroha suggests.

Herb asks Aroha for all the details she is willing to give him about the tiki and its loss. Herb is an understanding listener and somehow as they talk about it they feel closer than they have for months. He is thinking that they do everything so well together and very well matched—certainly more than ‘just friends’. He asks himself for the umpteenth time, ‘Why ... why can’t she love me?’

One day as they are rounding a point, they see a pod of dolphins cavorting in a bay. They drop their packs, shed their clothes, and silently enter the water. The dolphins slow down, diving and twisting amongst them with graceful, languid movements.

“I’ve never seen dolphins so seemingly lackadaisical,” Hema says looking at Herb and Aroha suspiciously. They try and avoid his glance.

One glorious morning, Herb, Zach, and Esau are swimming off the rocks at the end of a beach, while the others are sunbathing nearby. Carelessly, Zach grazes his leg on an outcrop of oyster shells and swears roundly.

"You should go and get that looked at by Granddad," Esau says with concern.

Zach just laughs and dives straight back into the water again. Before long, Esau is appalled to see a shark's fin on an interception course with Zach. He yells loudly enough to attract both Zach and Herb's attention.

Herb races down to the water's edge, and stands staring intently at the shark. It slows down and moves around in circles, in a confused sort of way. This gives Zach the time he needs to get out of the water.

For the second time Hema gives Herb and Aroha a penetrating look.

"Zach! Your leg!" Aroha exclaims as Zach limps over to the breakfast coffee 'pot' next morning. His leg is swollen from the previous day's scratches that are badly infected and inflamed.

"I know. My just desserts I guess," he says with a wry smile.

"Come with me," Cynthia says. "The first-aid kit is in my pack." A short time later, she points to several large mosquito bites. "And I don't like the look of these either."

"Heavens!" Aroha exclaims. "They're small mountains!"

"Yes, I guess I'm allergic to your bugs," Zach says.

"There's no doubt that we'll be seeing millions more of the blighters as we go South," Herb points out. "I've read of people being eaten alive at places like Sandfly Point!"

Aroha and Herb alert Maria to Zach's problem and Marcus arranges an emergency drop of medicine and mosquito netting. Maria has once again added some fresh produce to the airdrop and they all party around the fire in the evening.

As the fire dies down to a layer of red-hot embers that emits the occasional crackle, each of the party becomes lost in their own thoughts. Herb's heart aches more than ever as he

realizes how hollow his flirtations with Cynthia were. Looking over to where Aroha and Zach are now deep in conversation, he despairs.

Abruptly Hema gets up to bring over another armful of manuka branches. He remains standing and looks down at Aroha and then Herb.

"I've something to say," he says. "I know that you two are carrying a sacred object of great power and incredible antiquity—its purpose always kept hidden." He salutes them with his staff, and says, "It's an honor to have known you."

Somehow Hema seems changed. Instead of talking in the gruff stilted voice of an elderly man, he is now an orator. His eyes glisten in the firelight.

Aroha senses that he is one of the dozen or so Maori Elders who know the legend of the Mindcaller. She takes her half off and indicates that Herb do the same. She puts the two halves together and hands the whole to Hema. He looks at it long and hard, turns it over and over, and runs his fingers admiringly over its smooth surfaces. With a long, heartfelt sigh he hands it back to Aroha.

Aroha has been looking at him with admiration in her eyes. She never knew her mother's father and Hema is just the sort of man she would have liked to have as a grandfather. As she takes back the Mindcaller, she is thinking of Hema as the handsome young man he must have been.

All of a sudden, Hema spreads out his arms and begins to chant. In the distance there is an answering call. With a cry that shakes the forest he leaps in the air. Paint covers his face and torso, and his legs and arms swell with rippling muscles. He is dressed as a warrior, his colored grass skirt swinging. With a spear in one hand and a greenstone mere⁴¹ at his waist, he is splendid to look at.

Hema's whanau⁴² now stand behind him. Awe-inspiring, they perform a haka, chanting, leaping, and swaggering,

⁴¹ Club

⁴² Extended family

tongues extended, pounding their feet into the forest floor. Fires appear around the edge of the clearing as another tribe of warriors appears on the far side. Cynthia and Zach melt into a stand of trees, but Herb, Aroha, and Esau stand firm with spears in their hands!

With deafening screams the two tribes fall on each other. Warriors go down, and there is the smell of blood...

As suddenly as it had appeared, the illusion vanishes, leaving the group hyped up, sweaty, and exhausted—as if they were really involved in the battle.

Hema and Esau look around confused, and Herb says, “Aroha! Give us a bit of warning next time!”

She looks sheepish and signals her inability to do so with a hand gesture.

Cynthia who has kept amazingly cool throughout, says, “Could be very useful in a tight corner. Some holographic animation!”

“It should get an Oscar,” Herb quips.

“But what happened?” Hema demands. “Where did they come from? Where did they go?”

Aroha points at the Mindcaller that she still has in her hand and Hema shakes his head in disbelief.

“And you control it with your mind?” he queries.

“Yes, it’s just mind over matter!” Herb says, laughing.

They discuss the Mindcaller long into the early hours of the morning.

As they finally retire to bed Hema puts an arm around Esau and says in a gruff voice, “Proud of you son,”

“Proud of you too Granddad,” Esau responds with a newfound respect that will now always be with him.



Chapter Twenty-Two

The Crystal Resonance Detector (CRD)

Mid May, 2012

An Skycar buzzes over their heads like a persistent yellow-banded wasp determined to spoil a summer outing. They have all dived for what little cover exists on the plateau they are crossing. Aroha is reminded of the graphic description in the *Lord of the Rings* where Frodo and company are spied on by evil black crows that circle high in the sky.

Suspecting that someone must have spotted the Moller making its emergency airdrop, Maria has sent an urgent message saying that they must hasten to a pick-up point.

They struggle through dense bush, and cling to overhanging cliffs, in an effort to avoid being spotted by the unrelenting Skycars. Along with this, there is another thing on their minds as they battle up the last slope—food. They realize they should have been more sparing with their rations. Knowing the countryside well, Hema has guided them unerringly but there has been no time to fish or hunt.

Exhausted, they break out into the clearing to find no sign of a Moller! The looks on their faces, particularly Esau's, are comical.

Then with a call of "Hi there!" who should walk out of the bush but Marcus! They are completely nonplussed.

"Well I did expect to get a warmer greeting," Marcus says cheerfully.

"Did you bring some food?" Esau blurts out.

"Food? Oh. Food! There is some—up there!" he points to the top of a tall beech tree.

It is there all right. Right where the wind tossed it after Jack had ejected it on his flyover. Now it is good and properly stuck. Fortunately for Marcus, his parachute was only caught on a relatively low bush.

Marcus gives them a rundown on what has been happening and explains why he felt he should come. While talking, he absentmindedly uses his pseudo-hands⁴³ to separate the tangled netting from the beech tree branches. Hema and Esau watch, mystified.

“As you know,” Marcus says, “there was an intensive search for Zach after the Rotorua episode. Unfortunately, this did not, as we hoped, die down. In fact it has, as you know all too well, intensified in the last few days. There’s hardly a secret service anywhere in the world that’s not interested. We definitely know one reason—the missing uranium. Some of Zach’s Blackstone colleagues have been, shall we say, detained.”

“Have they been hurt?” Zach asks, anxiously.

“No—just as a group tried to catch you without hurting you, and they could have you know—they’ve been captured and put in a very nice, but high security establishment.

“But there’s a second and perhaps more important reason why people want Zach alive. Zach knows what it is. We, and unfortunately at least one person in Lüderitz, have guessed what it may be.” Zach looks nervously at Marcus. “No, I’m not going to ask you to confirm our guess. The fewer people who know the real reason the better.

“So, I want to make a few facts quite clear to all of you.” He looks hard look at Hema and Esau. “First, Zach is in great danger, but, second, the rest of you are now in even greater danger because Zach’s pursuers have no reason not to kill you! And third, things are not going to get easier. The PM has requested, or should I say demanded, your continued help.”

Herb interrupts.

“But what I’ve wanted to know all along is why does anyone think that we can do better than the SIS when they have all the available info while we’ve been kept completely in the dark?”

⁴³ See “Xperts 1: The man with telekinetic powers

"Yes, I understand your frustration," Marcus says. "The fact is you're not trained espionage agents. You know it and the SIS knows it. However, the PM guesses that you have some advantages—though exactly what, she has no idea—and she is very pleased with your data collection so far. It has been of use to the SIS. Note too, and this is important, that you're now much better prepared than you were a few months back. You've brought the Mindcaller from the status of an interesting toy to a very valuable piece of equipment. In particular you now have the advantage that you can communicate, if only visually, without the opposition being able to eavesdrop. That's more than the SIS can do."

A heavy silence reigns as they all think about the ramifications of what Marcus has told them.

"Well, what next?" Herb asks at last.

"Until this whole thing is cleaned up Zach will have to remain hidden. Once again I suggest that he leaves the group."

And once again there is a howl of protest.

"OK. OK. It's your party so to speak. So, what we have to do now is get you down to Arrowtown ASAP, and without being recognized."

First they discuss where they should cross the Alps to get to the east Coast. Herb, with an ulterior motive that Aroha picks up on straight away, suggests that Jack drops them on one of the glaciers on the eastern slopes of Aoraki—west of the National Park headquarters.

"As good a place as any," Marcus says after giving it a few moments thought. No one mentions the tiki.

"Then how will we get south from National Park?" Cynthia asks.

"We certainly can't use the Moller in public," Marcus says. "We've reason to believe that Zach's friends are monitoring nearly all Moller use over the entire South Island. So my suggestion is that you go as tourists using a tourist bus. Just be very careful you don't get involved in publicity of the sort you did in Rotorua. We don't want any more photos in newspapers!"

“Damned tourists,” Herb mutters.
They spend more time discussing options. They arrange for Jack to pick them up at dawn two days from now, at a spot some six hours walk further south.

Finally, Marcus turns to Hema and says, “Hema, Cynthia has assured me that I can continue to leave the group’s lives in your hands—just as I’ve done for the past weeks. We have, as I’m sure you guessed, thoroughly checked both your and Esau’s backgrounds. So now I’d like your opinion on what’s the best thing for you to do, from your point of view.”

“Thank you sir,” Hema says, as courtly as any ambassador. “I’ve put some thought into this, and my suggestion is that we separate for a while. As you’ve no doubt found out, our Maraë is not too far from Arrowtown. Esau and I will make our way back there.” He pauses and looks sympathetically at Esau who is naturally very disappointed.

“However,” he says turning back to Marcus. “I suggest that you might consider using the cabin on my farm as a bolt hole for the group.”

“That sounds ideal,” Marcus says, and the others agree.

“It is now well past the time I said that we would be home,” Hema says turning to Esau. “And I’m not one for high-country treks.”

As they are drinking Billy Tea out of aluminum mugs after dinner, Esau says, apropos of nothing much, “Zach. What does your name mean? I’ve never heard it before.”

“It’s short for Zachariah,” Zach says with a grin.

“Zachariah! That beats the pants off ‘Esau’! And biblical to boot!” He laughs so loudly that the others soon join in the laughter. After so many days in Zach’s company, Esau is no longer the rebellious sulking bear he had been.

Zach turns to the others and says, “A laborer is worth his pay, right?”

They all nod, puzzled.

“Then I think that Esau deserves to have his own e-helper: a programmable one, with some tricks like ours have.”

Esau's mouth opens soundlessly as Zach, with ceremony, passes his over to him.

"But what about you?" Esau exclaims.

"I'm hoping that Marcus will see to that."

Marcus smiles and nods.

"And this means that we'll have a way to contact you in an emergency," Zach says. "You and I will have to work out some un-crackable code signals." Esau sits up straighter at the responsibility entrusted to him. He gives Zach a real Maori hongi⁴⁴, with so much respect in it that it says a lot more than mere words.

"And I'll keep my part on our contract," Esau says mysteriously. Zach smiles conspiratorially.

Cynthia brings up a high-resolution map of the area after dinner, and they carefully plan the next few days.

Marcus rouses them all at dawn. He leaves for his one-hour's walk northwards to where Jack will pick him up. Hema and Esau say goodbye and disappear westward to the coast road where they will hitchhike home.

Somehow Cynthia's little party seems much smaller than it was before they met Hema and Esau. Making their way to their appointed pick-up point, they all realize how much they miss Hema's route-finding skills, and Esau's whistling. Jack picks them up on schedule, and when they land on the glacier they make their most efficient exit yet.

Marcus has provided them with top quality alpine equipment, including skis, self-heating coveralls, balaclavas, goggles, ropes, and ice axes.

"It looks to be pretty straight forward," Herb says, looking down the glacier. "We can ski halfway down, then work our way up over to the cliffs."

"Once we've found the tiki it should be just a half-day trip down to the Hermitage," Cynthia finishes.

Skiing down the glacier they have to take time avoiding crevasses. It is then a heavy slog in the soft snow carrying

⁴⁴ Touch of noses

packs and skis up to the base of the cliffs. They find a sheltered spot near the edge of the southern slope to pitch tent. It is a breathtakingly beautiful view; the peaks look as magical as they once did before, and Aroha feels that Kevin is very close by.

All goes according to plan next morning until they get to the cliffs where Kevin fell. One look at the vertical drop and they are all utterly daunted. The tiki has been calling increasingly clearly all day, so there is no question about the direction they must take. They spend hours looking to see if there is an easier way down. There isn't. In the end they decide that only Herb and Aroha will make the attempt next morning.

To lighten their packs, Herb and Aroha leave most of their equipment with Zach and Cynthia, who plan to dig out a sort of bivy in the lee of a large rock.

With infinite care and attention, Herb and Aroha belay each other halfway down the cliff to a rock ledge. They edge along the shelf until they come to an outcrop of stone marked with a small, white-painted cross. They both stop in reverence and sadness. Depressed, but more determined than ever, they follow the direction the tiki is calling from—to where the end of the ledge drops down into a deep, narrow, crevasse of rock and ice. It is clear why the search party never found it.

It is treacherous work climbing down. Aroha leads and she needs all her natural senses enhanced by the Mindcaller to find holds that are firm enough.

At the bottom, Aroha and Herb can still hear the tiki's humming call, but they cannot see any sign of it because it is totally covered with fallen rock and ice. Taking turns lifting stones and scraping snow and dirt away with a dinner plate, they dig. At last they see an ochre-colored corner. Herb lets Aroha be the one to finally unearth it and pick it up.

Aroha is shaking as she scrapes the last of the dirt off. In what seems like an instant, she re-lives the most poignant moments of her life with Kevin. She sobs and Herb puts his arms around her. Time passes without either being aware of it.

“Hell! A storm’s coming!” Aroha shouts, and pulls herself away from Herb and looks up to the mouth of the crevasse. “It’s starting to snow. And the wind is rising.”

Herb cannot see or hear anything but he knows better than to ignore one of Aroha’s warnings! They hastily put their gear together and start the climb. They feel the sting of driven sleet before they’ve gone far, and they are soon driven back. They unpack their belongings and put on practically everything they brought with them. They are particularly glad of the metallic self-heating survival covers.

As the storm builds up and the noise of the whistling wind increases, it is hard to know what is real and what is Mindcaller or tiki enhanced! In the snow above them they both “see” Kevin’s aura—strong, quiet, loving, and one with nature. Amidst the noise, a profound sense of peace comes over them.

With a sense of incredibility, Aroha becomes aware that she can now see Herb’s love for her as a strong vibrant image.

“Herb!” she exclaims. “I can now see your emotions, and vividly! I can see your love—it’s never-ending.” She pauses. “I’m sorry. Desperately sorry, that I can’t return it.”

Herb takes her in his arms and strokes her hair as if she is a long-lost sister. Tears roll down his face.

The storm has blown over by dawn and in the stillness Aroha hears Zach’s call.

“Aroha. Herb. Are you OK?”

Aroha shouts back that they are fine. From the bottom of the crevasse they can see an easier way up. It was hidden from the top by a rock outcrop. This is exceedingly lucky because the storm has covered most of the rock with a coating of ice and snow. Even now, it takes all of Aroha’s concentration to get them safely up. There are hugs all round when they finally make it.

“Right, let’s skedaddle,” Cynthia says, as they finish drinking hot chocolate.

They are all in such high spirits that the ski run down to the Hermitage is pure fun. When they reach the office it is confirmed that the only bus to Arrowtown leaves at 9am in the morning; so they book a chalet and enjoy a convivial evening drinking mulled wine around a fire.

Dressed like skiers with dark ski glasses still on they blend in with the passengers to Arrowtown without difficulty. The owner of Arrowtown's wildlife park, where they are to stay, picks them up from the bus terminal.

At first the foursome are glad to relax, doing nothing more than wandering through the park admiring all the animals. Even so, it is not long before Herb gets restless. He knows that one of the most spectacular bungee jumps in the world is not all that far away. Cynthia relents when, failing to convince the others to come, he says he will go alone.

"OK," she says. "But only under certain conditions. Come with me."

They disappear into Cynthia's bedroom, and an hour later reappear, barely recognizable but for Herb's irrepressible grin. Cynthia is dressed as a man, complete with a stubbly beard, and Herb makes a handsome, athletic looking young woman! Cynthia, they find out, always travels with a small makeup kit for subterfuge, just in case...

While Cynthia and Herb are away, Aroha and Zach find a comfortable spot under a large tree where they discuss what they can possibly do to occupy Herb during their enforced confinement.

Aroha, remembering that Arrowtown is famous for its gold-rush history, searches on her e-helper and comes up with a small, little-known riverbed within walking distance of the park, which still has trace deposits of gold. Zach asks their host whether he can supply them with a gold pan. This is no problem because gold panning is a favorite tourist pastime (usually with the gold dust being added to the water by the commercial proprietors).

One of Cynthia's 'conditions' for the bungee jump is that they should not have photos or video taken by the bungee

organizers. Instead, they arrange their turns at jumping so they can capture each other on their e-helpers. Arriving back at the chalet full of themselves, Cynthia admits it was something she always wanted to do.

Predictably, the first thing Herb asks right after lunch is, "What now?"

When Aroha tells of the possibility of gold panning, both he and Cynthia are delighted.

They collect the four gold pans their host has located and head out to the river. They have little luck until Herb whispers to Aroha that he wants her half of the Mindcaller. In a remarkably short time he finds a deposit and hands Aroha back her half of the Caller.

When Aroha 'gets lucky' soon after, both Cynthia and Zach cotton on to what they are doing, and beg them to find deposits for them as well. Laughingly Herb and Aroha help.

"You know," Zach begins, "if word got around about the Mindcaller and what it can do, I wouldn't be the only one who's being hunted!" Aroha gives him a telling look.

"I've been trying to make Herb see this for ages," Cynthia says. "I wish you could succeed where I failed."

As it happens, even with the Mindcaller's help, the gold pickings are poor. Only Herb's first flush is of any significance.

"Zach," Aroha says later that evening when they are alone. "I know that it is your work that is the core of the Uranium extraction software. It seems to me that, theoretically anyway, it is only a relatively small step from there to diamond detection, analysis, and extraction. Right?"

"You said it."

"And you've done it?"

"Yes," he says, nodding. "How did you guess?"

"When you said we would have to be careful with our use of the Mindcaller—or we'd get hunted like you—I remembered Samuel talking about the discovery of the Victoria Mine using a newly developed Crrr... And you shut him up! What do you call it?"

“The Crystal Resonance Detector. CRD for short”

“And with another relatively simple modification to the program, it could also be used to find gold, right?” Aroha pauses as Zach nods.

“In fact any mineral! Oh God!” she exclaims, and puts her head in her hands.

When Zach says nothing she asks, “Who else knows about the software?”

“I thought it was only me. I’ve heavily encrypted the core Uranium subroutine, and the diamond function I wrote only for Sam. They were desperate. We used it to find the Victoria deposit and then, as agreed, I purged all trace of it.”

“Now I know what Marcus was hinting at,” Aroha says. “No wonder half the detective agencies in the world are looking for you!”

They discuss implications of the software being leaked—such as what it would do to the price of minerals.

They do not need to be clairvoyant to imagine the financial catastrophe that would occur, not only in Namibia but also around the world, if the bottom should drop out of the global gold, diamond, and valuable minerals markets!

Chapter Twenty Three

Nuclear Free

End of May 2012

Aroha and Herb get Maria's signal just as they are setting out to gold-pan at a new spot. Jan and Danie's Moller has crashed in dense bush in South West Fiordland. Maria implies that the crash was not entirely accidental.

Jack picks them up and once airborne he tells them that they are to collect Hema, but not Esau, from the farm, before flying directly to the crash site.

Aroha, noting that they are in a small Skycar, which has only four passenger seats, points out, "There won't be enough room for all of us."

"Zach isn't coming," Jack remarks.

"Of all the lousy, underhand, mean tricks!" Zach exclaims. "And I don't suppose you could be bribed to take me!"

"Wouldn't be worth losing my job, whatever you offered," Jack responds coolly.

"And Marcus said that you guys are in more danger than me," Zach says turning to Herb and Aroha.

"Things change," Cynthia says pragmatically.

They pick Hema up at his farm, leaving Zach and Esau to console themselves by capping each other's derogatory descriptions of Marcus's character. Tiring of this, Zach asks Esau what he has been doing lately and Esau tells him that he has successfully completed two modules of an Online University computer-programming course. Zach is impressed and offers to help him complete more in record time. This may help to keep their minds off what the others might be up against.

Jack has expertly landed right beside the crashed Moller. This way his landing spot is indistinguishable from the other

vehicle's skid marks. He tosses four brand new packs and made-to-measure bush-survival body suits to the ground.

"Get into the suits right away," Jack informs them. "I'll take your old stuff back with me. You're to leave as few traces as possible." He hands a data card to Cynthia for updating their e-helpers.

"Where did Marcus think he got my measurements from," Hema grumbles as he forces his beer belly into his suit. He continues to grumble as the others throw all unnecessary stuff into the Moller.

Within a very few minutes Jack has left and they are on their way into dense bush. Their mission is to try and track Jan and Danie as far as they can. The task delights Hema who rightly prides himself on being an expert tracker, whether it is of boars, deer, or men. Years ago he was an officer in the army and on their hike down the West Coast beaches they had often heard him singing "Maori battalion marched to victory..."

Determined not to leave any tracks behind, Hema manages, one way or another, to keep to deer tracks going uphill and streams going downhill, while always keeping two hours behind their suspects.

This starts Herb, who is a pretty good tracker himself, thinking. He realized early on, when Hema did such a good job of leading them up the coast without their being seen, that Hema's abilities are truly exceptional. He never seems to be looking for footprints, broken branches, or bent leaves as most trackers do. He is either looking at the sky, the sea, or most often, he is keeping his eyes open for edible plants.

"Hema," Herb says, "how do you know our friends are two hours ahead?"

"Dun' know," Hema replies. "Just do."

"And how come you don't even follow their tracks?"

"Do some times. Crossed them just a few minutes back. Looked like elephants had passed by."

Aroha turns to look at Herb and he knows what she is thinking: a parability!

"Hema where were you born?" Herb asks.

"Rotorua? Why?"

"Same as me," Herb says, filing a mental note to pass these interesting facts on to Marcus.

It is not until they have made camp and are settling down for the night that they have time to examine their new suits.

"I'll bet these are bullet-proof inserts!" Herb exclaims running his hands over hard segments.

"Ever tried sleeping on rocks?" Aroha asks, not liking the feel of the Kevlar pieces.

"Your choice. To live or not to live," Cynthia says, lying down fully dressed, her boots sticking out from the end of her survival cover.

Hema is impressed with the stuff in his pack. He is fascinated by the lightness and cunningness of it all—except for the electronic toothbrush.

"Not needed. A twig will do in the bush country," he tries to convince them.

Cynthia wakes them at dawn to a cold breakfast of cheese and ham on cabin bread. They walk all day crossing one ridge after another through the jungle-like forest. During the following two days they frequently receive mind flashes from Maria warning them to lie low for an hour or two. Occasionally they hear Skycars circling in the distance.

Cynthia keeps track of their progress using a compass and high-tech walking-distance meter in her boots. As far as she can make out they are heading towards West Cape, a no-man's land, relatively speaking. Each evening Herb relays their progress to Maria.

It is on the fourth day of their trek that trouble strikes. It is nearly nightfall and having just climbed to the top of a ridge they pause for a short rest.

"The two buggers appear to have speeded up," Hema says. "Their tracks are now three hours old."

"That means we'd better get a move on," Cynthia says. "Anyway, this is certainly not a suitable camping spot."

They have gone on for another hour or so when Aroha exclaims, "It's going to snow! I sense it."

“Here?” Zach asks. “I thought this was tropical rain forest we’ve been forcing our way through.”

“Maybe,” Hema replies. “But we’re some thousand meters above sea level.”

“Anyway, it’s starting to rain now,” Aroha points out unnecessarily.

They find a ledge under a bit of an overhang and make camp as best they can. It is another cold supper as rain turns to sleet. When they send their nightly memo to Maria they sense her worry. At midnight the sleet becomes snow.

Rising before dawn, cold, tired, stiff and sore, it is a subdued party that, taking cheese and crackers in their hands, set off in pursuit once again. The storm has cleared and their spirits can’t help but rise when they see the beauty of a world transformed. Snow is caught in the cusps of tree ferns, and raging waterfalls appear to fall out of the blue sky above.

There is now no doubt that Hema is using more than natural stalking ability to follow their quarry’s snow-covered tracks. There is also no question that anyone searching for his party will have no problem following their footsteps!

Hema leads them up onto a ridge where the afternoon sun has melted the snow. They hurry on that evening by moonlight. There is a full moon and little scrub cover.

“Hema,” Cynthia says. “We’ve got to stop. It’s midnight, we’re tired, and with this clear sky it’s possible we could be seen—I heard a Moller just a short time ago. We’ll have to find some cover.”

“OK,” Hema replies. “But we’ve had no choice—we had to get beyond the bluffs down there,” he says pointing downwards.

After half an hours further walk along the cliffs, they slip-slide down to the river. It is so steep in places that Aroha is glad that it’s too dark to see the vertical drop below her! At the bottom of the cliff there is a waterfall by a mossy bank, and its sound is so soporific they all fall straight into an exhausted sleep. It is Aroha who wakes them.

“Wakeup,” she hisses. “I sense two guys. Close!”

Jumping up, Cynthia and Herb pull out guns.

To their surprise Jan and Danie tumble down the slope on the other side of the stream. The pair stares open-mouthed before remembering their guns. Herb slows their actions down to a halt.

“Why are you here?” Jan asks, recognizing Herb. “This is a restricted area. You’ve no right to be here.”

“Never you mind,” Cynthia says. “Just mind your own business and get going.”

They take off like hares and as they go Cynthia erases all memory of the meeting.

“Sorry folks,” Hema says. “We got ahead of them last night with our shortcut down the cliffs.”

“What do you think he meant by a restricted area?” Herb asks.

“There’s none here that I know of,” Hema responds. “It’s mostly national park. We’re getting near the coast, so they should be getting to where they are going pretty soon now.”

“OK. We’d better follow them more closely,” Cynthia, decides.

The use of guns brings reality closer and the little party tries harder than ever to emulate Hema by walking soundlessly and leaving few traces.

Wishing they were better camouflaged Aroha plays with changing the color of Herb’s pants, shirt, and then hair. It is a while before he notices, but when he does he is delighted. They all stop to admire Aroha’s efforts. She tries to have them all camouflaged at once but, as usual, she finds it hard to control and it does not last for long.

Before they continue on, Herb whispers, “Make Hema look like Marilyn Monroe.”

Aroha does so, and even with his own body-shape he looks fantastic! Smiling improves the mood of the party—they feel significantly more optimistic about things. Unfortunately this is to be short lived.

They let the two in front climb inexpertly down a high waterfall before following them. They are barely down when Aroha shushes them.

“We’re surrounded by men with dark, messed up, minds!” She is almost overwhelmed with the force of the mental energy. Both she and Herb instinctively flash messages to Maria.

Before they can decide what to do, a dozen men surround them with guns at the ready. Without thinking, Aroha reacts by replaying the Mindcaller’s Maori war scenes. The sound of all too real guns mingles with the war cries. When Aroha creates multiple clones of themselves in army camouflage gear, the men retreat back into the bush as fast as they appeared.

The silence that follows is uncanny. The effort of maintaining so much imagery makes Aroha feel emotionally drained and she looks deathly pale. With a struggle she tries to pull herself together.

“They haven’t gone far,” she whispers.

“Are they all round us?” Cynthia asks.

“No, just to each side. Not up river or down river.”

“I don’t like this spot,” Cynthia says, “and the waterfall stops us going upriver. So I guess we’ve no choice but to go downriver.”

As they make their way downriver Aroha senses the movement of people on either side, ready to ambush them.

A strong flash from Maria stops both Aroha and Herb in their tracks so fast that Cynthia almost bangs into Aroha.

They ‘see’ themselves dropping their packs and running down the deer track by the side of the river.

“Hema! Cynthia! Drop your packs and run!” Herb yells.

Herb leading, they throw all caution to the wind and run as fast as they can. Another much clearer flash shows them running across a small clearing and making a big fracas. Herb passes the message on. Neither Herb nor Aroha have time to wonder at how vivid Maria’s images are.

They come to the clearing and with yells they charge across, accompanied by numerous clones of themselves and a

full Maori war party! They are all making enough noise to wake the dead. They dive into the bush on the other side and turn to look back.

First they see a ragtag army of about two dozen men pour out of the bush on either side of the stream. Then several things happen at once. Nets appear to fall from the sky. A few moments later a full army regiment with rifles drawn surrounds the netted rebels, and three Mollers appear in the sky above them.

The group watches with apprehension as one of the Mollers comes down to land on the gravel riverbank, close to where they are standing. Then they see frantic waves from two of the windows. It's Zach and Esau! Maria is there too and the group meets with hugs and hongis all round.

An official in uniform comes across and talks with Maria. He shakes hands with them all and congratulates them on what they have achieved. He tells them if they want to wait around for an hour or so until the area is cleared, they will be given a guided tour of the establishment.

"Heavens knows exactly what we've achieved," Herb mutters.

"Or what this establishment is," Cynthia comments.

"Just be patient a little longer," Maria requests. "Let's eat while we wait."

She gets a box out of the Moller and they relish the fresh food. Only now do they realize how hungry they have been.

After what seems an age, the Commander in Chief comes back and introduces them to a young private who is to be their guide. They follow him along the riverbank to where it turns south and, to their surprise, disappears into the mouth of a cave. The long tunnel, which extends from the back of the cave, is in fact the disused tailrace tunnel left over from the work of damming Lake Fraser. It is well lit by a sophisticated lighting system in the roof and walls. There are caves off to one side filled with all sorts of metal paraphernalia scattered about the floors. Shortly they come to an electric trolley

system that whisks them right under a ridge into the next valley and through a hidden door.

“Good god! This is the new smelter on the Newton River,” Hema exclaims, “the most modern in the world!”

The group looks around at the large and busy works. It reminds Herb and Aroha of the Glenbrook works. After a relatively short tour they are taken over to a landing strip where Jack now has their Moller parked.

Three hours later they are back in Wellington, showered, fed, hyped up, and impatiently waiting to talk with Marcus.

“Congratulations! It’s a fantastic achievement. You’ve busted one of the most well planned operations we’ve ever seen.”

“What operation?” Herb asks, laughing at his own persistence.

“Let me start at the beginning,” Marcus insists. “Back in 2005 three guys formed a syndicate which they called the U3. They met, as far as we know, once and only once, in person. Each part of the whole operation was to operate autonomously—with a member of U3 in control. You’ve met two of the three members. First, and probably the ringleader, was Brisco.”

“Brisco! You mean the caretaker of the Blackstone lodge?” Zach almost falls off his chair.

“Exactly.” Marcus agrees. “The last person you’d think of. In fact, the PM told me just yesterday that it was your Mindcaller film of the Blackstone lodge meeting that was the breakthrough the SIS had been looking for.”

“Now they tell us,” Herb murmurs, with disrespect.

“According to a SIS memo we received just last night, Brisco began planning before he built the lodge and installed himself as caretaker. His main job was to bribe Blackstone workers to siphon off uranium. He chose Jan and Danie as leaders. Jan provided the syndicate with yellowcake uranium. The lodge was an ideal place for ‘meetings’. He bribed the President’s right-hand man, Mr. Gibsen, to cover up a host of

illegal financial dealings. He was also in control of logistics such as supply and demand details.

"The second member of U3 was Samuel's Lüderitz boss, Herr Müller. I think you met him. He was responsible for raising the necessary cash."

"Obviously by diamond smuggling!" Cynthia says.

"Partly. He also fiddled the mine's finance files. The SIS first cottoned on to him when they interrogated the smugglers that Herb filmed using the Mindcaller that night he went out with Samuel. Suspecting Samuel, Müller did his best to befriend, bribe, and entice him. But in the end he was the one who organized Samuel's death!"

Zach's hands clench but he does not interrupt.

"Another breakthrough was that set of radar-like images you filmed in the Victoria mine shaft. Officially, the room was Müller's 'top-secret' research laboratory. He also used it as his U3 communications room.

"The third and final member of the U3 group is a guy you've never met. He was an overseer of the construction of the new Newton River Smelter, and later he became an executive of the company—very useful! He saw to the construction of the side tunnels and doors connecting the tailrace tunnel to the smelter and to their headquarters in the caves near West Cape where they molded and assembled their goods."

"What goods?" Herb cannot contain himself any longer.

Marcus grins. "Oh, just nuclear missiles to sell to the highest terrorist bidders!"

"Nuclear missiles!" Cynthia exclaims.

"In nuclear-free New Zealand!" Aroha explodes.

"The last place anyone would guess, right?" Marcus says. "The first consignment was due to be shipped in two day's time!"

The group is completely staggered.

"And Zach," Aroha asks at last, "you implied that there was more to the search for him than was obvious."

“First, he had Brisco, head of the Blackstone group, after him when his program indicated that uranium ore was going missing. Second, Müller suspected that Samuel had told Zach about the smuggling operations at Lüderitz. There is a third reason, but I’ve asked Zach to keep that strictly to himself.”

Marcus is quiet as he censors the fact that Herr Müller was perhaps the most dangerous of all to Zach. It was he who put big money into the search for him. He’d been watching Samuel for some time, having always been suspicious of how comparatively easily Zach had discovered the Victoria mine. Wanting Müller to give the group a permit to visit the mine, Samuel had unwittingly let out the fact that Zach was his close friend, and more damning still, a brilliant programmer. So Müller, suspecting the existence of a CRD, was frantically trying to research and develop one in his ‘top-secret’ lab. Experiencing problems, he wanted Zach brought back alive to help him.

“But at the moment Zach,” Marcus concludes, “you’re a free man to come and go as you please—except that your President wants to see you ASAP. But now let’s go into the dining room and celebrate.” And they do—until everyone has to be helped upstairs to bed!



Chapter Twenty Four

Full Circle

June 2012

The Prime Minister's laughter fills the small Wellington restaurant as she toasts them with French champagne. Both Marcus and Maria are with them. Herb has just finished giving a highly colored version of their part in the proceedings, often making the PM laugh with delight. Marcus suspects that much of the PM's amusement covers relief that her gamble in employing them paid off! No one else is in earshot and they can talk freely.

"Zach you will be glad to know that your friend Golzar and his mate are safely behind bars. Both Müller and Gibson are out on hefty bail. In fact all three U3 syndicate members and their associates are either in jail or out on bail."

Excitedly, they can hardly hold back their questions.

Zach anxiously asks the first one. "How were my Blackstone Mine colleagues treated? The ones who were innocent."

"Royally," Marcus replies. "They were held at the Blackstone lodge. It was a perfect prison."

"I bet," Herb says. "The place looked like a fortress."

"Maria hinted that Jan's Moller crash was planned," Aroha says. "Was it?"

"Sort of," the PM replies. "My friends at SIS didn't want them to escape too far so they siphoned out about half their petrol and jimmed the meter. Unfortunately they miscalculated. They didn't count on the Moller having to making an important side trip—to a brothel!"

A laugh ripples around the table.

When it dies down, Aroha asks, "Was the steel foundry we visited at Raglan part of the plot too?"

"No," the PM replies. "The syndicate had their own smelter right at their doorstep, so to speak. They did, however, have one of their workers trained at Raglan."

"I'm glad," Zach says. "I liked the guys at Raglan."

"So," Herb says thoughtfully, "with uranium from Blackstone, molted metal from the smelter, high voltage power from the Fraser power plant, and money to burn from Lüderitz diamond scams, what more could they want!"

"In fact," the PM begins, "perhaps the most important thing of all was cover for their operations. What they chose was near perfect: a wilderness area in Nuclear Free New Zealand with a smelter nearby where they could appear to have a legitimate business. Their boats moored openly at the smelter's wharf and their airships landed at its landing strips."

"And a readymade, well-concealed tunnel to transport stuff to and from their works in the caves," Cynthia says. "Incredible!"

Their questions continue until midnight. As they say goodbye, the PM hints that they should check their bank balances in a few days time.

Back on Gt. Barrier celebrations continue: Marcus and Maria invite all their friends, including Mike and Jeannie, to a dinner dance. Crayfish, scallops, and mussels, all of which were in the sea just a few hours previously, are superbly presented.

The dancing is so very energetic they end up in the freezing-cold sea at midnight, with swanky clothes on, or off. Phosphorous shines on the water, on them, and on the sand when they run laughing to shake the sparkling water off.

In the early hours of the morning Zach breaks his news with a heavy heart. He must return home immediately because his country and family urgently need him. Numbness descends like a dark, dank fog on the four friends. They were all so busy celebrating that they had each shut out the future in their own way. Aroha looks at both guys, so dissimilar on the surface,

yet so alike underneath: Herb usually so playful, Zach always serious, yet both steadfast, caring, and unconditionally loving.

Suddenly, they all become trapped in a Mindcaller vision. They 'see':

Themselves as bits of flotsam being driven by unknown forces upriver and against the current. Flashes of the past weeks, good times, bad times—all of them bonding times.

Relentlessly they feel the future closing in. Aroha's vision changes as she sees:

The 'river' dwindles, to be replaced by a chasm of sand: hot Namibian sand. She is holding a water bottle with a few precious drops of water—no, crimson blood—in the bottom. She senses both young men calling her, needing her, desiring her. Zach is reaching for her through scorching sand.

She looks despairingly at Herb. With a soul-searing sob he turns and leaves the room.

Zach takes Aroha in his arms and gives her a lingering kiss. She holds onto him, a lifeline in her turmoil. He envelops her with love that is overlaid with wonder.

Regardless of all Zach's arguments that life in Namibia will be a nightmare, Aroha insists on coming with him.

"I want to come and meet your family," she says, hoping she may be able to help them in some way.

Herb says farewell to Aroha with his heart breaking. He knows how hopelessly he loves her and he feels sure he will never see her again. Over the past week he felt that they were getting closer. They worked as such a great team. But now he sees that he deluded himself; it was only because Zach was not with them.

Aroha and Zach make all haste to Zach's village near Blackstone. Aroha is horrified at what she sees when she is introduced to Zach's extended family. Two of Zach's sisters have contracted the virulent new mutation of an AIDS virus, which is sweeping the country. They all look anorexic having, since Zach left, eaten at most one skimpy meal a day. Zach was right in thinking his salary would be stopped.

Aroha does all she can to help around the home, but the family's pride means that this is very little. Only when Zach insists, do they let her fill the cupboards to her heart's content. They do their best to make her feel one of the family.

Hundreds of villagers come to Zach pleading for help. Again and again Zach is so overcome that he forgets what he is saying, and Aroha has to flash him a mental prompt. It is more than he can bear and it is only Aroha's strength that keeps him going.

Wanting desperately to solve all his beloved county's problems at once, Zach becomes physically sick. Weeks pass as Aroha gently prods him to focus on the 'Now' and doing what they can with it. She helps him plan clinics, and ways and means to fund them, all the time knowing it will take untold time.

One of the first things Aroha did when she arrived was to call Maria and ask her to pull as many strings as she could to get some of the expensive new AIDS drugs sent to Zach's family and friends. Aroha insisted on paying for them out of her newly earned funds. Gradually they see some signs of hope.

One weekend Zach takes Aroha down to Lüderitz. They discover Samuel's pitiful grave and Zach arranges for an honorable burial back home. While there, Herb calls to say that while cleaning out his pack he found a piece of paper stuck in a pocket with his Lüderitz memorabilia. Only three words are written on it in Samuel's handwriting: 'Under mistletoe-S'. It means nothing to him, but when he passes the message on it means everything to Zach. Aroha and Zach go to Samuel's place and at the base of a bougainvillea plant there is a large stone. Under this is a packet. It contains Samuel's diamonds from the trip with Herb, along with a hastily scribbled note saying: 'To my best cousin and friend Zach. I know you'll use them well.' Tears flood down Zach's cheeks.

Herb is sure he knows how Zach will use them—on an engagement ring for Aroha.

With time, Zach becomes his country's hero. He is called away for endless talks with the Namibian President and with the heads of both the Blackstone and Lüderitz mines. Marcus's lawyer has spent weeks doing deals with the President's lawyers so that Zach has the patents for his RMA (Radio Metric Analyzer) routine and the CRD software. Most importantly, he retains 'control' over their use during his lifetime.

Politics never interested Aroha and as Zach becomes stronger in himself he no longer needs her support. He also spends considerable time talking to local groups around the country, trying to see what can be done to help now he is a very rich and influential man.

Because Zach is so rarely home Aroha becomes increasingly homesick. Even the climate feels alien with its endless blue sky and constant hot winds. It is nearly Christmas time, and she has repeated flashes of red pohutukawa blossom overhanging blue sea sparkling like crystal.

Zach watches with concern as the smile goes out of her eyes and she gradually gets thinner and more exhausted with the least effort. Zach constantly projects his steadfast love. They discuss their futures at length before sorrowfully agreeing they must part. In their heart of hearts they both know that while Zach's life and work is in Namibia, Aroha's is in New Zealand.

As Aroha has arranged, Jack meets her at the airport and takes her directly to her holiday home on Waiheke. After the hot, dry, sickening adversity of Namibia, Aroha feels that she will never take the beauty enveloping the island for granted again. Her home and garden, kept in some sort of order by friends, is a mass of flowers. The scent of the violets and freesias around the door overwhelms her so that she is glad to make use of Jack's large shoulder.

She tries to sublimate her distress at leaving Zach by getting to work cleaning her house, where she lovingly relocates her hundreds of guest-spiders. Several times while working she is startled to hear Zach's voice not just as mind

flashes, but as almost audible words. Much to her frustration, they are masked by static.

After a full month of surfing, sunbathing and scuba diving, Aroha feels ready to once more take part in SR-Inc activities. Moreover, it does not take any parability for her to know that Herb is waiting anxiously for her to come back to Gt. Barrier.

Herb meets Aroha at the Gt. Barrier wharf just as he did all those months ago. It seems like years. During lonely times while Aroha was in Namibia, Herb was frequently in touch with Aroha's Nan. On several breaks between assignments he visited her at the Marae up north. She has steadfastly maintained her implicit faith that the Mindcaller will bring Aroha back to him 'when the time is right'. Although many times Herb despaired, it was this faith that kept him going. Now, he greets Aroha with a hug and, as usual, tries to cover his deep feelings by teasing her—this time about her sun-bleached curls.

Marcus has several comparatively low-key assignments for them over the next few months. What impresses him most is how well Herb and Aroha can now use their paracommunication in difficult situations. During a bank holdup, for example, the transmission of instantaneous and unspoken instructions gives them the needed edge for a successful conclusion.

One of Marcus's chief difficulties working with the SR-Inc team has always been the problem of keeping their parabilities secret while working with police, fire crew, paramedics, and the individuals being rescued—as well as countless spectators. Using the Mindcaller, Herb and Aroha cover 'irregularities' with suitably modified projections of the scene!

At every appropriate moment Herb courts Aroha with all the skill of a seasoned courtier. Searching her heart, Aroha knows she can truly say she does love him. Nonetheless, the truth is that she knows something is missing. She fears that the painful times with both Kevin and Zach may have 'matured' her beyond youthful, passionate romance, and she recoils at the thought of offering Herb 'second best.' Sensing each other's

emotion creates difficulties, but with time and understanding they begin to appreciate the special bond it gives them.

After the successful completion of a particularly difficult rescue in which all members of the SR-Inc team were involved, Maria provides a special 'feast' on the beach at Gt. Barrier. They swim in the hot pools, dance, and sing until the early hours of the morning. Exuberantly, Herb chases Aroha right down to the end of the beach, where they both stop to get their breath back. Herb puts his arm around Aroha and feels her relax.

"Can you? Could you, possibly, be my partner?" he asks her. His love and longing for her is projected as such a strong, steadfast image that looking into his wistful brown eyes she sends him her quiet, steady, acceptance.

"You mean it?" Herb says, seemingly searching her soul. "You really mean it! You will be my partner?"

"What! Only your partner?" Aroha responds. "No engagement ring? No wedding ring?"

"Is that all it'll take for you to agree?" Herb responds teasingly, "Come. Let's see what I can do about it." And he chases her back down the beach.

Herb knows that parts of Aroha's heart are still Zach's and Kevin's, but somehow that does not seem to matter any more. They join the others and tell them their news. Amidst much laughter, they are both thrown into the sea.

Celebrations become a champagne breakfast.

"I wish Nan was here," Aroha says wistfully. "She always knew you were the one for me."

"Give her a call now and she'll feel part of it," Herb suggests.

Nan is joyous at the good news. Aroha projects some of the highlights of the day back to her and Nan is almost overwhelmed.

"You must be married up here. You can invite all your friends. Please come," she begs.

While Aroha was talking to her Nan, Herb slipped back to his bedroom. Returning, he knocks on a crystal glass to get everyone's attention.

"Just in case these celebrations are premature," he begins, effectively subduing everyone present, "I must tell you that before she said 'Yes', Aroha put me under an obligation. I have to produce a ring."

He pauses, while everyone looks at him in expectant silence.

"Will this do?" he asks handing a little box to Aroha.

Opening it Aroha is utterly speechless and her friends gather around. It is a ring with the largest cluster of diamonds any of them have ever seen.

Marcus is the first one to open his mouth. "Smuggled! I bet none of those diamonds saw any form of tax."

Herb just laughs.

"Did you? Did you find them the evening you went out with Zach and Samuel?" Aroha asks.

"Yes," he acknowledges. And then whispers: "The Mindcaller performed some of its magic that night."

"And the gold in the band?" Maria asks.

"Yes," Herb says, blushing a bit. "It's also made from my ill-gotten gains—gold-panning in Arrowtown."

Both Herb and Aroha laugh from pure happiness and hear Nan's laugh joining them. Aroha passes on Nan's invitation to the wedding. Marcus and Maria unfortunately cannot come but the others, including Hema, Mike, and Jeannie are more than happy to.

Standing with her friends on the Marae two months later, Aroha's heart swells with pride as the ceremony for placing the tiki in its final resting place unfolds. A large and handsome group of young warriors, with powerful muscles, lead the hakas. Beautiful young girls sing, dance, and chant.

On the last verse of the invocation Aroha turns towards Nan who holds her eyes. Deep, deep into the past they journey together before Aroha feels the invisible forces that surrounded

her heart dissolve and disappear. A rush of pent-up passion for Herb overcomes her, and as the last chord of the chant fades away and the tiki is finally at rest, and she makes a dive right into Nan's ample bosom!

It is a far from ordinary marriage ceremony that Herb and Aroha have planned. Aroha remembers her long-time friend Kalina telling her about a poignant marriage ceremony she saw take place in a graveyard in Romania. Guests draped themselves on and around the gravestones and the dead were part of the party. Nan said their burial ground is tapu (sacred) so Aroha chooses a place between the cemetery fence and the eaves of the forest. Lights are placed with care and when night falls they create fabulous patterns.

The old Maori songs are soul stirring, the ceremony simple. And both Herb and Aroha are not surprised to see their mothers and fathers (all long dead) leaning over the cemetery fence waving joyfully to them.

The banquet is, at Aroha's request, a repeat of the hangi she and Kevin were given years back.

Replete, Aroha and her friends sit in a semicircle facing Nan, reminiscing. Wishing both Zach and Kevin were here too, the words of an old *Dances of Universal Peace* song keep running through Aroha's head:

May the circle be open

But unbroken ...

Merrily part. And merrily meet again

"Now I really would love to see the Mindcaller-whole," Nan says, bringing them all back to the present.

Herb puts the two parts together and hands it to her. Straight away, history plays itself out on the water. Canoes come from Hawaiki. Great Maori wars are waged. Cynthia does have the wits to hold up an e-helper and pretend that the show is being projected from it.

When Nan finally passes the Caller back to Herb the scene changes and highlights of their Namibian trip are displayed.

Lions chase a Zebra on the waves, and Zach leads them unerringly through the desert.

"I wish I'd met Zach," Nan says softly.

"But I'm with you! I can hear you!" It is Zach's voice, loud and clear and with no static at all. "And Esau is here too. He sends his best wishes. Working with me is his 'reward' for completing his programming course!"

The excitement is tremendous. Cynthia points out that this is a real breakthrough for spy-proof communication. It's clear that verbal transmissions can only be 'heard' by people with one of the Callers, and close friends with particular parabilities (or latent parabilities in Zach's case).

"And it can work without power, e-helpers, or relays," Herb says. "I wish we could've used it like this when we were in trouble in Namibia."

"I guess," Aroha says slowly, looking at Herb with love shining from her eyes, "that before the whole can work properly, both wearers of the Mindcaller halves have to be truly bonded with each other."

"Yes. I'm sure you're right!" It is Maria's voice, from Auckland.

"Maria?" both Herb and Aroha ask simultaneously.

"Yes, and even at 2am in the morning I'm thrilled to hear your voices so clearly. I can't wait to tell Marcus. It's the Para-Communicator he's been hoping for. He'll be thrilled."

They say goodnight and goodbye to all their friends worldwide and take the Caller apart. Silence descends once more.

Aroha thinks back to the time years ago when, sitting at this very same spot, Herb used the Mindcaller to call her to him. How much they have learnt over the past years. She is convinced, however, that the Mindcaller still has a few more tricks up its circuits. She snuggles closer into Herb's warm embrace. They have come full circle.

Information on Books in the XPERTS Collection

All books are available in German from Freya Pub.Co., see www.freya.at and can be ordered via all good bookstores, but most easily via www.iicm.edu/Xperts . All English versions can be ordered through www.booklocker.com . However, due to the high shipping costs, international customers outside the US and within the European Union can order “The Paradoppelganger” and “The Paranet” at lower cost through www.iicm.edu/Xperts . Within the US, Booklocker is the best source. Outside the US readers are encouraged to either neglect the high postage ☺ or to buy the e-book versions from www.booklocker.com : No delay, no postage, lower price, and you just download the file, and print it out locally.

Here is a summary of the books in the Xperts Series currently or soon available. The series is growing rapidly. All books, where no author is mentioned I have written myself. For the others I have written a ‘script’ and edited the resulting book. If you have any questions, suggestions, or are interested in becoming one of the authors of a book in the Xperts Series, contact me at hmaurer@iicm.edu . If you want to find out more about me than you ever cared to read, consult www.iicm.edu/maurer . I will answer all emails (nothing worse than being ignored) except if I am really down ☺ .

Note that although there is a thread through the books (some persons appear in each book) the novels are completely self-contained and can be read independently of each other in any order. Those marked bold are available as of 2004. I have arranged the book in more or less chronological order (according when they take place), so this might be an obvious order to read them. But, feel free to start with anyone that tickles you!

“Xperts: The Telekinetic”: In a way, this is the first book in the collection. The student of physics, Marcus, discovers that he has telekinetic and timewarping powers, and uses them to seduce girls, to make money, and to help people. He is also very much aware how dangerous this ‘parability’ can be for him. He is eventually captured by a para-military group of the European Union with dubious motives, and manages to escape only with the help of his girl friend Maria, who will be his big love for life. They flee to New Zealand to start a new existence. Marcus and Maria (and other persons) are the thread that holds the Xperts Series together....

“Xperts: The Paradoppelganger”: This is another novel involving Marcus and Maria. Their daughter Lena discovers a strange para-gifted person. In the process of trying to make him join the group the reader visits Brazil and Europe, and is drawn into historic mysteries, extending back in history even to the Egyptian pyramids. This novel also gives a glance at what future PCs and the Net might look like... a tribute to the fact that the Editor (and author of this book) is a computer science professor. However, don’t get turned off: this is a novel not a scientific book!

“Xperts: The Paracommunicator” (by Jennifer Lennon): Aroha, a young Maori woman, finds half of an ancient device in the hills near Auckland, New Zealand. Herb, also of Maori origin, independently finds the other half. Their function, and that of the mysterious black ‘stones’, cannot be fully understood. However, on a dangerous mission in Africa (Namibia), given to them by Marcus, it is clear that neither Aroha nor Herb would have survived without the help of the strange artifact.

“Xperts: The Parashield” (by Sam Osborne): The West-Australian Ryan finds out, as he grows up, that he can shield himself and other persons nearby, by creating through mental powers an impenetrable shield of energy. If not for

his girlfriend Hannah who has some awesome 'parabilities' his enemies would eliminate him before the team of Marcus can intervene. This novel is written with a South-Western Australian background and the suspense and complexity increases as it develops.

"Xperts: E-Smog!" (by Ann Backhaus): An Australian researcher, Mandi, discovers by a fluke the dangerous side-effect of elector magnetic fields, as emitted by just about any electric device. With the background of an authentic description of the Australian West, of Malaysia and Singapore, Mandi tries to put up an impossible fight against huge international companies, and succeeds to some extent, due to Marcus' group and her brilliant negotiating skills (release planned for 2005)

"Xperts: The Parawarriors": We are in the year 2019. A nuclear war between Pakistan and India seems to be unavoidable. Marcus and his team try to avoid the worst, at horrific costs. All efforts seem to be in vain. Yet, after interludes in India, Bali and La Reunion some form of normality returns, only to be disturbed (or helped?) by super-computers from an ancient civilization millions of years ago, and a strange intelligent animal "The They" that remains a mystery for a long time.

"Xperts: The Param@ils" (by Peter Lechner): This novel gives a different twist to the Xperts Series: the economy is all that matters! A story of intrigues, human emotion and some strange emails capture the attention of the readers, with Marcus' group again playing a pivotal role in solving a complex scheme. (In preparation)

"Xperts: The Paranet": In 2080 the then existing network of computers breaks down completely, throwing the world into total chaos. This novel shows how dependent we are going to be on computers and computer networks, and how civilization will virtually cease to exist if such a total breakdown ever happens at a stage when mankind is

'Sufficiently networked'. Billions of people are about to die, is there any hope for them? Yes, by mounting a terrorist attack in the past!

“Xperts: Supervision”: Big brother with cameras, flying cameras, intelligent databanks and total security is catching up on us. This is a chilling novel, with a bright line of hope shown on the horizon, if we just decide to act NOW. (In preparation)

Check the Website www.iicm.edu/Xperts to stay up-to-date on all developments concerning books in the XPERTS Collection.

A Preview of... XPERTS: The Parawarriors

1. The Second Nuclear War?

December 2019

For seventy-four years, mankind has restrained itself from using nuclear weapons. The devastating effects they had on Hiroshima and Nagasaki weighed heavily on our minds. This restraint is now coming to an end.

In May 2019, the civil war in the Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir has once again reached critical mass. Of India's twenty-eight provinces, Jammu and Kashmir is the only one with a strong Muslim majority; almost two thirds of its population practice Islam, while Hindus dominate in all the other provinces. Contrary to the Indian law, Hindu fundamentalists have been trying to win a direct influence on the legislature for almost twenty years. Because of the growing number of Muslim fundamentalists, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir has been becoming increasingly tense.

There is no doubt that Pakistan supports the Muslim agitators. The border between India and Pakistan has been closed since June 2019, diplomatic relations between the two countries are frozen, and another war is in the air. Pakistan seems to be just waiting for the Islamic rebels gain control of most of Kashmir, and despite massive military efforts on the part of the Indian government, their success can no longer be ruled out.

December 8, 2019, 8:00 Delhi Time

Tired and dejected, Indian Prime Minister Arun Vajassa enters his office in Delhi. Several worrying phone calls interrupted his sleep. The reports he finds on his desk confirm his

worst fears: his government is losing control over Jammu and Kashmir.

There is no longer much room left for reasonable solutions. Over the past few weeks, Vajassa has tried to persuade the UN and the superpowers to act as a mediator between his country and Pakistan. Unfortunately, his efforts failed because this 'civil war' is considered an internal Indian issue, unlike the earlier open wars over Kashmir. Vajassa cannot help thinking back to the last international effort to try to resolve the conflict at Kashmir Conference two years ago. Vajassa still remembers what General Ibn Muhammed Yussin, who still governs Pakistan, said in a private conversation there: "Six wars over Kashmir have not won us the province, but, should our Islamic brothers ever come to power there, and should they ask us for help, we'll be there for them. And we will make sure that there is no resistance from your side: our nuclear weapons will be aimed at every large Indian city."

For the last two years, and despite international protest, the number of Indian and Pakistani nuclear arms has sharply increased. Would General Yussin really carry out his threat? After all, Pakistan has held the nuclear first strike doctrine since 1988.

Suddenly, Vajassa's thoughts are interrupted by a knock on his door. His secretary tells him that the General Staff has been waiting for quite a while now. Vajassa looks at his watch. It's already 9:20. He has been brooding over the situation for more than an hour, and has already kept his generals waiting for twenty minutes.

He rushes to the conference room. It is clear that the meeting will be unusually tense. The air force general in charge of the nuclear arsenal summarizes the situation:

"Unfortunately, I have mostly bad news. Let me start with the worst. Pakistan has moved an unexpectedly large number of nuclear weapons from Dalbandin, their test area in northern Baluchistan, to the missile silos close to Dalbandin and southwest of Islamabad. We have to face the fact that this would allow Pakistan to wipe out all large Indian cities. A first strike could kill two hundred million of our people. The radioactive contamination

and the breakdown of any infrastructure would probably spell the end of our country.”

Vajassa remains composed. “This news does not come unexpectedly, but we seem to have reached a new level now. How about the situation in Kashmir?”

“Terrible. We’ve lost control of most of Jammu and Kashmir. Massive Pakistani forces have gathered at the Line of Control. They have 2000 tanks and 280,000 men there. We don’t have much to counter that, but we do have thirty percent of our entire armed forces at the southern border of the province. If we were to go in, we’d be sure to face huge resistance. We know that the rebels have long been preparing to blow up bridges and other strategic targets in such a case. We have reports that almost 800,000 Hindus have been arrested over the past several days in order to guarantee that the majority of the population supports the rebellion. The rebels have taken over the radio station in Srinagar. They keep calling for more support and are now officially asking Pakistan for assistance. And Pakistan seems to be preparing to acquiesce.”

Vajassa pales: the words of the Pakistani general still echo in his head. So they will march in! Indian forces will not be able to stop them. Should we just give them Jammu and Kashmir without a fight? No! That is unthinkable. They would kill all the Hindus there. And who knows what the Hindus in “the rest of India” would do to those one hundred million Muslims living in India in retaliation! That could even force Iran and other Islamic powers into the conflict.

Jammu and Kashmir must be defended: India has no option but victory, and after all, India’s army is, as a whole, superior to Pakistan’s. Shouldn’t that guarantee success? Pakistan has desperately tried to match India’s military strength, but they realized that they could never keep up with an opponent who is economically five times stronger. That is why General Yussin threatened to take India’s cities as nuclear ‘hostages’.

The members of the General Staff wait for Vajassa’s reaction. They know that he has to make a difficult decision. Following an ancient Indian ritual, he breathes deeply seven times. Then he speaks:

"We have no choice. The very existence of our country is in danger. We must eliminate the nuclear weapons in Pakistan." The generals gasp. They know what this means.

The Prime Minister continues, "We will arm the missiles we have in Chandipur⁴⁵ with nuclear warheads and destroy the two bases in Pakistan. How quickly can we do that?"

Without hesitation, General R. Rao answers: "It will take about three hours before we can launch the rockets from Chandipur—2 p.m. would be realistic. Our base in the Thar desert could be ready even faster."

The Prime Minister shakes his head. "The Thar base is too dangerous. Pakistan could already be trying to neutralize it at this very moment. They would find it much harder to deal with our base on the East Coast; they have only a few inaccurate medium-range missiles there and cannot deliver the warheads to more distant targets."

They all nod. This argument has been discussed very often.

Vajassa continues, "Begin preparing for the destruction of the bases. Use impact detonators to minimize the radioactive contamination in the area. Don't forget, we don't want to destroy Pakistan; we only want to get rid of their nuclear weapons. At a little after 2 p.m. General Rao and I will activate the nuclear weapons via a high security connection. Even though we're in a hurry, we have to make sure that Pakistan has no idea that our first strike is on its way; otherwise, the first strike could be on us."

In spite of this last warning, Vajassa knows that Pakistan and other countries, will soon know about their preparations: it will be a race against time. If Yussin carries out his threat and rains nuclear bombs over India before they can stop him, it could spell the end of the subcontinent. The nuclear fallout could also mean the end of the world.

⁴⁵ Chandipur nuclear base on the coast of Orissa province

December 8, 2019, 11:00 a.m. Islamabad time.

In a bombproof bunker in Islamabad, General Ibn Muhammed Yussin, President of Pakistan, discusses his plans for an invasion of Kashmir with his general staff.

Suddenly, General Massuda bursts into the room. "The Indians are opening their silos on the East Coast! They're getting ready to attack!"

"Are you certain? Are those the only silos they're preparing?"

But the agents's reports all agree: whatever the Indians are planning, it is not merely a major attack, but a nuclear assault on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Yussin is horrified. He had always thought that threatening Vajassa two years ago was enough to keep him from having to take any extreme actions. He had hoped that this would force Vajassa to accept the Pakistani annexation of Kashmir. He was wrong. He knows exactly what the Indians have in mind: they "only" want to eliminate his nuclear weapons and then lead a conventional war in defense of Jammu and Kashmir. India's military strength would guarantee success in this case.

Not even for a second does Yussin consider giving in. He could still prevent an Indian nuclear assault by halting the invasion of Kashmir, contacting Vajassa and agreeing to the nuclear disarmament treaty that has long been on the table. But wouldn't he lose face that way? Without hesitation, Yussin decides to set the course for the greatest catastrophe in the history of mankind:

"There is no way we can prevent the nuclear attack but our enemies will have to pay the price. I order you to aim all available nuclear missiles at targets in India, including all their large cities. Make sure to set the bombs to explode at the optimal altitude to guarantee maximum destruction. When can we launch them?"

"We are already prepared. The first missiles can be in the air by 1330 hours, but...won't the Indians retaliate with all their might?"

"Not if we destroy them immediately and completely. Our attack will hit them so fast that they will no longer be able to

launch their missiles. They are the same kind of weaklings as the USA. They made sure that they need two authorities to activate their nuclear weapons.”

They interrupt the meeting of the general staff to initiate the attack. The generals cannot keep from shuddering: even if Yussin’s plan is successful, they’ll still murder hundreds of millions of civilians. The radioactive fallout will contaminate their own land, and rest of the whole world.

India’s preparations are noticed in other countries too. However, everyone underestimates the seriousness of the situation. What they don’t know is that both sides will launch their missiles at the same time: 1330 in Islamabad is the same time as 1400 in Delhi.

The superpowers have so far considered this confrontation to be just like all the others in the region’s long history of conflict. Now, they are slowly beginning to realize the weight of the situation. The lines of communication run hot. There is enormous pressure on India and Pakistan. Soon it is clear that Pakistan will not withdraw. Under these circumstances, some governments even empathize with India’s decision to launch a preemptive strike.

Even New Zealand gets into the matter. The Prime Minister contacts her man in Pakistan: “We’re in a state of Emergency. The Indians are activating Chandipur; the Pakistanis are activating both their big nuclear bases. Have all precautions been taken yet?”

She gets a hasty response: “Yes, besides the usual uncertainties. We also know that the missiles will be launched at exactly 2 p.m. Delhi time. Let’s hope for the best.”

The PM thanks her “communications agency” on Great Barrier Island⁴⁶ for putting together the secure connection. It’s late in the evening in New Zealand and the PM knows that a long

⁴⁶ An island just off the coast of Auckland

night is yet to come. Difficult telephone calls to the USA, Russia, and China lie ahead of her. The governments of these countries will be stunned by her optimism.

December 8, 2019, 14:00, Delhi

General R. Rao reports to the Indian Prime Minister Arun Vajassa: “Everything is ready in Chandipur. We can now initiate the launch sequence.” ...

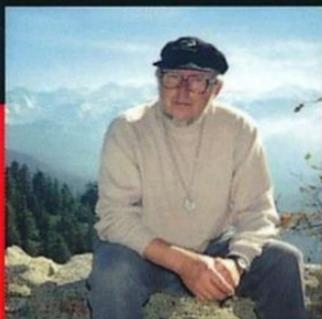
Continued in XPERTS: The Parawarriors

About the Author

Jennifer lives on a South Sea island that is a mecca for artists and alternative thinkers. The energies of the rolling Pacific surf are reflected in her work. As a computer scientist specializing in visual communication, she is a crusader for the rights of visual thinkers in a verbal world. She revels in the time spent collaborating with her long-time friend, mentor, and inspirer – Hermann Maurer. Jennifer has, to date, three children, five grandchildren and three blue-eyed Ragdoll cats.

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**Hermann Maurer, Coordinator
of The XPERTS Collection**

Jennifer Lennon



The Paracomunicator is a uniquely carved artifact from prehistoric times. Composed of two segments, one half is found on the wild West Coast of Northern New Zealand by Aroha, a beautiful though unsophisticated young Maori woman. The other half is discovered by Herb who is also of Maori origin. The Paracomunicator establishes links with Aroha and Herb and becomes active, with unforeseen consequences...

"A seamless and unique blend of science fiction first with New Zealand and later with Nambian background and folklore. You will lose yourself in the beautiful descriptions of some of the world's most interesting wilderness areas, all the while trying to unravel the scientific mystery that is the Paracomunicator."

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"This novel gives a glimpse into the grand layout of the Xperts Series by giving a first glimpse at the ancient ones, who designed the paracomunicator and some very mysterious black spheres. As those artifacts are discovered, some ten million years after their production they transform the lives of many people. One can't help wondering whether not all of humanity will eventually be affected."

(Bernd Schuster, Villach, Austria)

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