

## GHOST SICKNESS

All the guests had returned to their seats in the Green Lake Room; the weather was very hot, and a humid wind was blowing in from the Inland Sea, so many had cut their perambulations short. Monk ushers had been told to make sure that the entire congregation was assembled for the second hour after mid-day. Generous helpings of citrus fruit, ice-cold sangria, and steaming hot coffee were ready to refresh them.

Abbot Gaudentius moved to the dais, and the monk ushers sounded their bronze staff bottoms on the limestone floor. "All rise to greet the Queen of New Spain," he intoned. The Queen walked slowly to the dais, wearing a different gown--a lighter, summery one--than during the morning. The fabric was unmistakable Baca Silk, with embroideries in white, indigo blue, and cyan green.

There was more cohesion in the assembly now, Don Antonio thought. Rumours had run rampant about what the rest of the short text would provide, but they all agreed it must be something both urgent and ominous. Now Lieutenant Alphonso strode to the dais, alongside the Queen and Abbot. "The Queen has asked me to open this final chapter of the book for this august assembly. Before I do, I will answer three questions that have been brought up by our own Spanish nobility, the Apache Traders, and the Western Bandits."

"The first question is: how do we know that this document is real? The

answer is twofold. Our mysterious Apache Trader related to us all the incidents of the entire book in detail to myself and Abbot Gaudentius, and we had our best scholar, Brother Zhiliguous Baca examine and cross-examine his evidence before we broke the seal, here in the Green Lake Room. He concluded that as bizarre as the story is, it was not beyond the realm of the Gringo technology of last days of the Crowded Earth."

"Second, a royal seal of King Carlos Sepulveda cannot be counterfeited. Within its finest quality red beeswax are threads of gold, designed in a pattern that includes a random calculation that is not repeated in any other seal. Our late King was famous, or infamous, if you believe the Flagellantes, for secreting Gringo technical knowledge into his plans and fabrications. Be that as it may, once broken, the seal cannot be repaired. Brother Zhiliguous examined the pattern using lamps, mirrors, and magnifying lenses, and pronounced it legitimate."

Lieutenant Alphonso continued, speaking to a rapt audience. "The second question comes from the Apache Traders, who have a tradition as fierce warriors. Why did Dona Dina let me live, and not just kill me along with all the other men, women and children? I believe she wished to send a message to New Spain, even though she never once spoke to me. That message is simple: do not seek to replenish the Empty Earth."

"The third question comes from the Western Bandits. Why include us in your great meeting at all? How can what that book contains make any difference

to us, or our help to you?"

Lieutenant Alphonso saw many of the Western Bandits lean forward in their chairs, eager to hear his answer. "For that answer, it will be necessary for all of you to listen very carefully to the Queen as she reads this last section of the book."

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### **Ghost Sickness Part One: The Fetish**

The fetish baked angrily in the sun of the Arizona morning. On its round face, three interlocking sickle moons of black hovered on a yellow background. Three weathered vulture skulls hung on ancient rawhide from the fetish, dryly twisting and clacking together in the hot gusty wind. Beyond it spread the necropolis of Paradise Valley, all blackened streets and crystal buildings at crazy angles like chandeliers turned upside-down.

Rintiala, lithe yet voluptuous, her pale blonde hair plaited down her back in a single braid, slung her recurved bow on her left shoulder and picked up her back pack with her powerful right grip.

"It isn't fair," Rintiala complained. "I shouldn't be here at all; I should be home celebrating with my friends. With Dianire."

"Rintiala, no one is arguing against your accomplishments," her mother

Alathea replied. "But even you must obey the dictates of the Pregnant Virgin if you want to become a First Sister."

"I want that more than anything else in all the Empty Earth," she kept complaining. "But why here? With them? What kind of celebration is that?"

She walked up to the fetish, which was slightly taller than her, and begin to spread out her palms, measuring the width and height of the jaundiced sickle moons.

"Don't touch them," a voice said quietly behind her. It came from a young Apache of medium height, with the sinewy chest and shoulders of a rock climber, standing feet apart on the Pima Highway, arms cradling his lever-action Winchester. "You'll get Ghost Sickness," he finished. His gaze turned away from hers as he turn and stared straight west down East McDonald Drive. "All these streets are made of carbo-crete; I've heard of it, but didn't think it was real. Supposedly it protects itself if you step on it the wrong way."

"Dont' scare the girl, Hunts-The-Ruins," an elderly Apache male said firmly. Grizzled and scarecrow-thin, he walked slowly up behind the two. "Now, young woman, pay attention. No one handles anything unless I say so."

Rintiala responded by leaning as far as she could over the edge of the highway, her left hand not quite touching the fetish. The two males shuffled their feet for a moment, and the elderly Finds-Water spoke. "The yellow-and-black means death by Ghost Sickness. The three skulls are Western Bandit

markings. Three attempts were made to pass through here, and they all failed. No one knows what kind of terrors they encountered."

"Something only we Nueguans can handle," Alathea, First of First Sisters, standing farther east than the other three, stated loudly. She challenged the city with a twist of her muscular neck. She drew back her cloak of white and indigo stripes into which serpentine designs of bright cyan had been sewn.

"That's why you've invited my daughter and I here."

"Oh, Mother, Hunts-The-Ruins is just trying to impress me with his bravado. I can handle him," she said. Rintiala sighed quietly. *Who would be more trouble, Mother or these Apache males?*

"Tell me this again, Rintiala," Hunts-the-Ruins said, smirking. "We're going to step off safe ground, onto no-one's land, and walk five and a half miles of certain death to find something you've only seen in a dream?"

"I'll know it when I see it, Hunts-the-Ruins. And I could run it--be there in twenty-five minutes--if you'd like. Thirty, with this pack."

Finds-Water cautiously stepped a pace closer to the Fetish, then turned around and addressed the other three. "People, here's how it is. We've got until noon to cross through Paradise Valley, get to the Sanctuary at Camelback Mountain, open it..."

"To see if the living dream is true," Rintiala quietly added.

"Explain your dream to again. I'm old and slow," Finds-Water requested.

“It's not a dream like the ones you Apache have. I'm in the Grotto of the Pregnant Virgin...”

“Rintiala, that is a Sisters' affair only,” Alatheia interrupted.

“Like I was saying,” Rintiala soldiered on, “I was in the Grotto of the Pregnant Virgin, and she told me that I could not be made a First Sister until I had completed one final task. I wasn't very happy with that; I'd just spent seven years of my life building a new, bigger, Healing Temple. You'd think that would be enough, but no...”

“You're beginning to vent, young woman; I'm trying to help. Stay focussed on your task for me, please.” Finds-Water smiled.

“She started to speak in her normal friendly way with me, and then her voice changed. She said--no, she commanded me--Find the Crowned Castle on the Garden Mountain. Speak to the Water Woman. Defeat the Sky Wanderers.”

“We Apache knew right away where the crowned castle was. That's the Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain in Scottsdale Arizona. It was the center of the Sky Wanderer's campaign. It's been deserted for over four hundred years. But I don't have a clue who or what the 'Water Woman' is; there's no one or nothing like that in Apache myth.” Finds-Water considered.

“So we are wandering into one of the most dangerous places in the Empty Earth, hoping that dreams and myths turn out to be true?” Hunts-the-Ruins scoffed.

“Okay, maybe it will be a waste of time. But so what? If anything goes wrong, the Apache Police will come and get us. I can see the glint of their binoculars from here,” Rintiala said.

Hunts-The\_Ruins looked at the young woman. "Yes, we have an agreement with the Apache Police. They will keep the Western Bandits away from here until noon, but they won't come looking for us if we don't show."

"Correction," Alathea interjected. "They can't come looking for us if we don't show."

"But the Apache Police will protect us from the Western Bandits?" Rintiala asked, a tone of worry in her voice..

"Just let me handle the Western Bandits," Finds-Water answered. "If they wanted to kill us, we'd already be dead. " He squared his narrow shoulders. " All right people. "It's one thousand feet to Agua Linda Park, our first checkpoint. On my mark. Hunts-the-Ruins, take point. Rintiala, you stay within a dozen feet of him, no matter what happens. Alathea, you and I will take up the rear. Go! "

The young Apache firmly placed his foot on the desert soil that a century of westerly wind had packed along the west side of Pima Highway. Saguaro, prickly pear, yucca and barrel cactus all competed for space until they touched the violet blackness of the roadways that actually made up Paradise valley, roadways clearly of some Sky Wanderer material. His was the first boot to touch it, as he strode, head held high.

As she walked, Rintiala looked over the vegetation with a gardener's eye.

"Mother," she said, " Look at the barrel cactus, about every tenth one. What do you see?"

Alathea gazed across the scrub. " Well done, daughter. They're motiles and old-fashioned ones at that."

Rintiala felt spidery fingers walk across her shoulder blades. Was it the heat? Sweat poured off her, whisked away by her Nueguan poncho. Or was it more? Yes, it was more.

"We're being watched," she said.

"By who? I know the Apache Police have binoculars and telescopes trained on us," Hunts-the-Ruins queried. "It's their job. Or maybe some Western Bandits are hiding in the chapparal? We'd smell them before we saw them," the young Apache chortled.

Rintiala looked at him, scrunching her nose. "Maybe like the way you smell to me?"

He continued his jibes, obviously ignoring her. "Oh, I know, it's those darn stupid Spaniards. They crossed the border into Apacheria, and then walked hundreds of miles, just to catch a glimpse of you."

"What's a motile?" Finds-Water asked Alathea.

"Something Nueguan, old and almost forgotten now," said Alathea to Finds-Water without looking back. "We don't use them much anymore than you



still use dogs to carry packs."

"But they're not supposed to be here, are they? "

"No they aren't. Sky Wanderers wouldn't know anything about them. Motiles were developed after the Sky Wanderers left Earth. "

Vegetation, especially desert flowers, grew more thickly as they moved across the space separating Pima Highway from the Agua Linda gardens. If there were more of the mysterious motiles in these carefully tended gardens, Rintiala could not see them. Evidence of synthetic servitors was everywhere in the neat organization of desert plants, but she saw no humanoid-looking shapes that would give away Sky Wanderer technology.

They walked until they saw the edge of Agua Linda park. More desert vegetation, piled wild and high in embankments, surrounded a giant crystal machine the deepest hues of indigo and violet. Towering over a bubbling fountain of white marble, it looked like a dandelion about to open and spew forth seed. Rintiala noticed a red-and-silver Mandelbrot pattern spreading out from the base of the machine. One closer inspection she saw that it ran underground. Interspersed between desert vegetation and more of the mysterious moties were caps and holes of various sizes dotted the fractal patterns like fruit on a cactus pear.

"Whatever this is, this is the small end, " Rintiala said. "If this is a Mandelbrot, then a big heart-shaped curve of these machines should be circling all of Paradise Valley, but I can't see anything west of here."

"Well, the Sky Wanderers did leave in a hurry. Maybe it's just some sculpture they couldn't finish." Finds-Water offered. "Okay, one hundred more feet and we're in the center of Agua Linda. Then maybe Rintiala can get the bearings on her living dream image."

"At least no one's died of Ghost Sickness yet," Hunts-the-Ruins quipped.

"And just what exactly is this Ghost Sickness?" Rintiala asked.

"Traditionally, the Apache believe that you should never touch let alone use anything that a dead person has used. It makes their ghosts angry, and they will strike you down with illness and misfortune."

"Correct, as far as it goes," Finds-Water added. "But we aren't ignorant savages, young woman. We White Mountain Apache--the most traditional of them all--believe that when you misuse those things given to you by the departed, then you suffer. If we actually believed what Hunts-the-Ruins told you, he wouldn't be called Hunts-the-Ruins. He would be called 'Shunned by Proper Apache Society'. Finds-Water smiled. "And I wouldn't be considering him as a future son-in-law."

"So, you're not so prim and proper?" Rintiala asked Hunts-the-Ruins.

"I got my name by scrounging the outskirts of Old Phoenix, looking for glass. First, just bottles in the sand. Later whole sheets of the unbreakable stuff the Sky Wanderers made. And I never got sick--cursed--once." Hunts-the-Ruins said.

When they came to the edge of the shade thrown by the Sky Wanderer's artifact, Finds-Water motioned for them to stop. "Are you getting anything yet?" he asked Rintiala.

"No," she said, staring off into the west. "But I can see the top of the Sanctuary from here."

"So can I," Hunts-the-Ruins said. "It doesn't take a specially-trained Nueguan to do that. So we just march down East McDonald for four miles, make a short left, and knock on the door?"

"I'm doing the best I can. You don't need to be so snippy." Rintiala answered. She stopped. "Wait a minute, don't you think that it's odd that this fountain is still flowing after four hundred years? She stepped away from the group to investigate, watching Finds-Water scratch his nose in exasperation from the corner of her eye. Something touched her cheek and nose. Intent on the nearly-miraculous flowing water, she absent-mindedly brushed it away.

Hunts-the-Ruins sighed to no one in particular. "I should have stayed home and fixed irrigation pipes. This whole thing is just going to be a waste of time."

"Just a minute here," Alathea interrupted. "If my daughter..."

Rintiala placed her hands on the edge of the fountain, breathing in the smell of fresh water. If her eyes did not deceive her, there were ancient coins and jewels in the water, last wishes from departing Sky Wanderers. Suddenly her forearms itched. Ignoring it as nerves, she looked into the water again, only

to see a head of dark hair hovering over her. Thinking it her young Apache bodyguard, she turned to ask him to give her some space, but when she turned to challenge him, there was no one there.

And that was for the good. Frozen in surprise, Rintiala saw the ricochet scatter sand and gravel before she heard the shot. A piece of flying quartz sliced open the skin on Alatheia's left calf. Blood oozed out immediately.

"Hit the ground!" Finds-Water ordered, and they did.

"Get off our land, you god-damned injuns!" came a Gringo voice from the top of the largest artifact. Rintiala lifted her head up from the dust. Out of the cacti around the base of the artifact a large thickset young man emerged, wearing desert khakis pinned with sage, cradling a Sharp's buffalo rifle. His hat was wide and floppy, and also nearly hidden under of a thatch of sage.

"No wonder we couldn't smell him," Alatheia whispered. "Put your head down, daughter," she hissed.

"Yeah, you Apache ain't the trackers you used to be. Too much easy livin', I reckon," the Gringo said. Rintiala heard rather than saw his heavy boots march right up beside her head. " Well, hello," he said to Rintiala. "You sure don't look like no Apache squaw I ever saw before. " He squatted down beside her, and Rintiala glimpsed flaming red hair from the corner of her eye. "It's all right, missy. You can get up now. Ol' Carl ain't about to hurt no one as pretty as you."

Another shot rang out from artifact, this time only inches from Rintiala's

head. She sneezed dust, and wished she could wipe her eyes, but she did not dare antagonize the shooter.

"You tell that bitch to stay down!" an angry, adenoidal male voice shouted.

"And you put that rifle away, or Seamus'll have your hide, Zeb!" Carl shouted. "I mean it!"

"Come on, I was just playin' with 'em," the voice whined.

Carl got down on one knee, and offered Rintiala his hand. "Next shot's gonna be me, shootin' at Zeb," he said to her quietly. "I meant it when I said no one's gonna hurt you."

Rintiala lift up her right arm, and held out her hand. No more shots were fired. Carl clasped hands, and lifted her up easily, while she brushed dirt and sand from her travelling cloak. "The rest of you can get up. But no sudden moves, okay?" Carl said.

"I demand to speak to your headman," Finds-Water said, lowering the pitch of his voice. "We have an understanding here."

"Well, now, that'd be my uncle Seamus," Carl answered. "But first, you folks take them backpacks off real slow and hand 'em over. The Winchester, too. Oh, and that bow." He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. From the bushes came a female mule covered in eucalyptus leaves and peppermint patches. "I'll put them on Jenny here for safekeeping."

Hunts-The-Ruins took his off first, with the other three following suit. Carl

pointed his buffalo rifle at them, forcing the Apache and the Nueguans to step away while he picked up the backpacks and threw them over the mule's back. He put their weapons in a leather bag slung on one side of her.

A daring and dangerous idea snuck into Rintiala's head. "Come to think of it, it's too hot for these Mothersilk cloaks," Rintiala said aloud. She put her arms over her head, bent at the waist, and wiggled it off, catching the cloak in one hand. Underneath she wore only a tight halter, iridescent green with pearl highlight, that had tiny pockets along its sides, and a short hiking skirt, with large pockets front and side. A large stripe of white inset with indigo ran diagonally from right shoulder to left breast. Her snakeskin boots ended just below the knee. She smiled at Carl, and he put his head down, averting her gaze.

"Woo-wee, sure am glad it was my day for border watch," he said.

Rintiala walked over to him and looked him straight in the eye. "Here, Carl, put this in too. And you'll be extra careful with my pack, won't you?" She changed the subject. "I've never seen a--jenny--before. Does she bite? Can I pet her?"

"Daughter dear, just what do you think you're doing?" Alathea asked.

"What needs to be done. If I have to, I'm going to the Sanctuary by myself, without Apache or Western Bandits, or anyone else, for that matter, looking over my shoulder. If I have to. Is that clear, Mother?"

"Outside of Nuegua you will address me as First Healing Sister," Alathea

shot back.

Rintiala switched to Sister Sign. "Agreed. But make no mistake. I plan to be a First--to wear the Cyan Dragon--when this is over," her lean strong fingers said. "Firsts take risks. Just like you did."

"To wear the Cyan Dragon," Alatheia signed back. "Your risks must succeed."

"A calculated risk,then".

Rintiala smiled at her mother. She then noticed that Carl, Hunts-the-Ruins and Finds-Water were all staring intently at her hands. She turned to Carl, and gently touched his right hand which tightly clenched the pistol grip of his ancient buffalo rifle. "Let's start again. I'm Second Healing Sister Rintiala of Clan Tiala, and I'm here to become a First Sister. Where I come from, that's something like what your uncle Seamus does. It's a very big step."

Carl responded gingerly to her touch, spreading his fingers widely. "Well, I'm Carl Reineke, and I ain't no Western Bandit like the Apache say. This here's my home. And I'm right pleased to meet you, Rintilla." He smiled, revealing a gap between his two front teeth.

"Rin--tee--a--lah," Rintiala corrected him. "Remember, be very careful with my stuff. That's where all the medicines are. Okay?"

Carl stepped back, spread his large boots firmly in the ground, and looked them all over. "Okay, but, I gotta put my foot down. You can't just march into

Paradise Valley any which way. This ain't exactly a safe place for a picnic."

"I had a dream that told me how to make this place safe."

"What? Safe for Apache, so's folks like me get pushed off their land?"

Rintiala moved a step closer, and touched Carl's forearm, the one that cradled the buffalo rifle. Carl's eyes began to squint, but Rintiala held his gaze. "No. I'm going to make this place safe for anyone who wants to live here. I'm a Healing Sister. That's what we do."

There was a silence, broken only by the soft crooning of the morning breeze. At last Carl spoke. "Well, here's how I see it. I think old folks--Gringo and Apache--made a lot of mistakes, and us younguns have to live in the mess they made. If it's gonna get fixed, it's us younguns gonna do it. So, the old Apache and your mom gotta stay here. That way when Seamus shows up, they can all talk about things. Meanwhile, you and me and this Apache buck here--he gestured with his buffalo rifle at Hunts-the-Ruins--we'll fix what needs fixin'. You up for that, Buck?"

Hunts-the-Ruins never looked away from either Carl's eyes, or the buffalo rifle. Rintiala's estimation of him began to rise.

"Yeah, sure. But Rintiala is in charge. Not you or me. Okay?"

"Deal," Carl said.

"Just wait a minute!" Finds-Water protested. "Carl, do you have any idea who I am?"



"Yup, you're the top dog among the Apache Traders," Carl smiled. "And when my uncle gets here, you can decide on how to punish me. Or maybe Zeb will shoot you first. But by then, Rintiala will have fixed everything, and I'll be the new mayor of Paradise Valley."

"Carl, it's already really hot, and no one is supposed to meet us until noon." Rintiala asked. "Can they have their packs back?"

"Well...what if they've got handguns in there? Cause a lot of trouble before Zeb takes 'em down, and then lots more trouble once they're dead."

"You can look if you like, but you've only got two hands, and they're full. Or you can trust me."

Another silence. Rintiala noticed that Hunts-the-Ruins was beginning to adopt a sand-posture, shifting his weight nearly imperceptibly, to prepare for hand-to-hand combat.

"Well, okay, I guess I promised I'd trust you," Carl replied. "They can have their packs."

Rintiala pushed it a little harder. She needed to see what this young man was made of. "And my mother will need my bow. The coyotes around here aren't afraid of people."

Now Carl laughed. "We like 'em that way. And hell, they're nothin'. Wait 'til the desert wolves show up. Sure, she can have your bow."

"It's settled then," Rintiala announced. She motioned to Finds-Water and

Alathea to get their gear, and they slowly collected it up. The old Apache was granite-faced, but her mother's was a tightly controlled mask of repression. Not good for the next person who crossed her, Rintiala thought.

The three began to march west on East McDonald Drive.

"It's best if I take point," Rintiala said to. "If there's any Sky Wanderer's disease hanging around, I'll be the one to handle it."

Carl looked at her thoughtfully. Big and ungainly as he was physically, she sensed a sharp if uneducated mind under that sage-covered hat. "Whatever you do, don't stare in any of the windows," he said. "You can't look for more than ten seconds, no matter what you see inside. Near as we can tell from the last disaster, ten seconds is all you've got, then the ghosts decide we're trouble. Put your head down, if you see anything."

"Like I said to Finds-Water," Rintiala replied, "I don't believe in ghosts. I'll do what I have to do."

Carl turned to Hunts-the-Ruins, the jenny between them. "Beggin' your pardon, Buck..."

"My name is Hunts-the-Ruins."

"Okay, beggin' your pardon, Hunter. Could you talk some sense into Rintiala?"

"Probably not," Hunts-the-Ruins answered. "I'm just here to get my Trader certification."

"I heard that," Rintiala retorted. She began to feel angry toward these two. "Carl, how come you're suddenly so helpful, when just a few minutes ago you were shooting at us?" Rintiala asked.

"Weren't me doing it, Rintiala," Carl exclaimed, puffing at the effort of keeping up with the Nueguan girl. "I had to keep Zeb from winging Hunter here."

"Who is Zeb?" Rintiala and Hunts-the-Ruins said simultaneously.

"That's Uncle Seamus' son, and he really, really hates Apaches. Uncle Seamus sent me here to keep a lid on things, and you've got to admit, nobody got hurt, when they could have."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'm new to all the politics between Apache and Western Bandits." Rintiala replied.

"Come on, Rintiala," Carl said in exasperation. "I already told you I'm not a Western Bandit."

Rintiala was just about to clarify her statement, when more of the spider-webs floated across her nose. Her sharp eyesite saw a tiny mite-shape moving among the fibers. Gently she caught it in the palm of her hand.

"Don't pay no attention to that stuff," Carl said, sounding eager to keep up a conversation. "Them's just wind spiders. They don't bite or nothin'."

Rintiala looked more closely. There it was, the photosynthetic green stripe running down the little creature's back. "It's not a spider at all. It's a motile

spore," she replied.

"Never heard tell of a motile before," Carl answered. "You ever heard of that, Buck?" Carl asked Hunts-The-Ruins.

"Not until just this morning," the young Apache replied. Rintiala glanced up to see him whip his head around, scanning the buildings. He stopped walking, and held up a hand. "Heads up everybody. It's hard to see in the sunlight, but every sixth building has a red running-light, like it's on standby. This place is supposed to be centuries dead, so that's not a good sign."

Carl and Rintiala both began to squint to penetrate this new mystery. "Well, doggone, he's right," Carl said. "It's like there's a blood-red line, real thin, all around the bottom of that building right there, the one with the shiny globe on top."

"You mean the one with the sign that says: 'The Ultimate Boutique'?" Rintiala replied.

"Well, shucks, Miss Rinnie, I reckon you can read and spell better than me."

Rintiala's gaze swept across the east windows of the Ultimate Boutique, bronze now in the morning sun. The glare did not hide the shocking reality: inside, a young woman slender and pale with long dark hair, smiled and waved frantically at Rintiala.

"Carl, there's someone in there," Rintiala offered.

"Hunter! Rintiala! Don't look!" Carl shouted, averting his gaze and lowering his bulk as if being shot at. "Stare at the ground!"

Rintiala got down on her hands and knees, gently allowing the tiny creature to scamper off her palm. A new realization hit her harder than heat of the desert sun. "This whole area is one big web. There's millions of motiles and their threads on the ground, on the buildings, everywhere. She looked up at Carl. "All of those so-called wind spiders are connected, and they allow someone or something to see everything that's going on. We're walking into a trap."

"Are we going to grovel all day?" Hunts-The-Ruins asked. "Can't we just retrace our steps and call the whole thing off?" he groaned.

"Just wait a minute," Carl said. "Nothin' happens in a minute, we'll be okay. Them lights just spooked me, is all. Walked around here plenty of times."

Now it was Rintiala's turn to hold her hand up. "Gentlemen, I'm going to try to find a path that has the least number of motile spores and threads. Use your peripheral vision, and follow me."

"Okay," both the men said, sighing. *Neither seemed very excited about following an order from her, she thought.*

A strong and supple hand grasped hers at the wrist. Thinking it to be Hunts-The-Ruins, Rintiala looked up, careful to divert her gaze from the Ultimate Boutique. "I said follow me, not drag me, Hunts-The-Ruins." Only

it wasn't the Apache. The same young girl was standing above her, pulling her toward the building with one hand, gesticulating with the other, and speaking without making a sound. Then Rintiala's ears popped.

"Okay, Cy, I've got audio," the young woman suddenly said in a musical soprano. "Please come with me. We've got to get you away from the Inferiors."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Rintiala shouted.

"Who the hell are you talkin' to?" Carl asked. "There's nobody here but us three."

"And why are you holding your arm like that?" Hunts-The-Ruins asked.

The young woman looked at Rintiala with the clearest blue eyes she had ever seen. Her irises shifted from indigo to cyan. "You can't enter the Sanctuary without me," she said, her voice suddenly low and husky. "These others will only make your journey harder. Trust me," the new voice said.

In agony Rintiala couldn't decide what to do next. How did this woman, or this waking dream, know who she was? How could this creature know about the Cyan Dragon, and what it meant to Rintiala?

"No! Rintiala! Keep your head down! Don't look at nothin'!" Carl pleaded in vain. The building began to light up as he watched in dismay.

Rintiala made her decision. With the solemn steps of a sleepwalker, she directed her steps to the opening doors of the Ultimate Boutique. From the

corner of her eye, Rintiala watched as the two men froze in stunned silence.

"Don't follow me, either of you."

"Carl, we either run away, or we run to help her." Hunts-the-Ruins said, seeming to Rintiala to be miles away.

"I'm goin' to help," Carl replied, dragging on the reins of his jenny, who wisely tried to resist. Hunts-the-Ruins broke into a run, doing his best to keep his eyes on the carbocrete.

The two men caught up to her quickly enough; the raven-haired woman looked over her shoulder at them in disdain. She threw her head back, and pulled harder on Rintiala's wrist.

"I'm sorry, Hunts-The-Ruins; I'm sorry Carl Reineke. She's right. This is the only way," Rintiala said. The young woman-thing motioned to the sliding glass doors of the Ultimate Boutique. They opened with a hiss.

Something dark and evil emerged.

Darkness at desert noon.

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## **Ghost Sickness Part Two: The Ultimate Boutique**

"Keep your head down, bitch, or I'll have to knick one of those pretty earlobes

off," the sniper taunted. Alatheia slumped back down behind the stone bench that protected Find-Water and herself.

"Well here we are again, old man" she said. "Pinned down by Western Bandits, and no backup."

"Trying to rush him won't help. We don't want to shed first blood."

"Tell that to my leg."

"That was a ricochet. The Trader's Council will still rule that we kept to our agreement."

"You can sump your agreement with the Western Bandits. My daughter's out there, and she's in danger. That's all I care about right now."

Rintiala and her two men had barely gone a block when Alatheia went to retrieve the bow and arrows. The sniper had fired a large caliber bullet with devilish accuracy, passing over her left shoulder, cutting off a lock of her hair. As she ran for cover, he fired shots only a finger's length from her, demonstrating his control of the situation. Then the taunts began. Find-Water was becoming weary of it, but not to the point of losing control of a situation the Apache Police would remedy in short order.

"Tell me something. If I can retrieve that bow and those arrows for you, will you at least wait until I give the order before you use them?"

"How can you ask me that? I've always followed your orders, even when I thought you were just a clueless old fart," Alatheia said grinning. She turned



to look him in the eye. "No mayhem until you say so, agreed."

"Finally someone listens to reason." Just then a loud donkey braying broke the stillness after the last echoes of the gunshots were fading away, followed by high-pitched yips and growls, and in short succession, wolf howls. Finds-Water put up his hand. "I'll get you that bow."

He undid his shirt, and wrapped tightly around his scrawny waist was a pearlescent-blue rope of Mothersilk. "Gift from the Clan of Builders," he said. "I need you to be my eyes without getting your head shot off. Can you do that?"

Alathea crawled on her hands and knees to the north side of the bench, her face nearly touching the dirt. A bullet whizzed in front of her hands, kicking back dust into her face. "I'm getting very tired of him," she said coughing.

"So?" Finds-Water asked.

"The bow is straight ahead of us, about ten paces," she said. She looked at the lariat in his hands, and then peeked around the side of the bench again. Another bullet, this a few finger-lengths away--just to show the sniper was still paying attention--kicked up dust. "You're going to fetch my bow with a blind overhand toss?" Alathea asked.

Finds-Water pulled out the lariat end of the rope, and rubbed the loop against itself furiously. It responded by twisting and turning, extruding tough bristles that gleamed with thick liquid.

"This stuff will dry in a few minutes, so we'll only get a couple of tries. Here goes."

Finds-Water duck-walked away from the bench, and began swinging the lariat on a low circle, not quite touching the sand. He then flicked it over his right shoulder. It landed with a sticky thud.

"Hah, hah, ain't you desperate now?" the sniper jeered.

Alathea squeezed her thumb and forefinger together. "You missed by that much."

"Just getting my range," Finds-Water said quietly. He swung the lariat more vigorously, sweat beginning to pour off his brow. Finally he flicked his right arm and wrist in the air over the bench, for a second exposing them to the sniper. Finds-Water could see the dust wave as the bullet passed through the center of the lariat. Again it landed with a thud, but this time he could hear it dragging something along with it on the dirt. A bow and arrows.

"Damn!" the sniper yelled. Several shots rang out, all true to their mark, but Alathea's muscular arms brought in the rope in an eye-blink. Soon she was checking her weapons.

"Black powder and lead balls are no match for Mothershell," she said, plucking the bowstring, and checking the fletch on the arrows.

"We're going to come out now," Finds-Water shouted to the sniper. More shots were fired, but none kicked up dust near the bench, and the sniper did

not respond.

Alathea peeked over the top of the bench. No shots, though gunfire could be clearly heard a block away.

"Time to tempt Fate," Finds-Water said. "I'm going to stand up, and you can fire at will Alathea." He stood up behind the bench, an easy target. But nothing happened.

Alathea ran to the nearest artificial flower, slinging the bow onto her back as she moved. While she picked up speed, she pulled Nueguan climbing gloves out of the deep pockets of her hiking skirt, and lifted herself up by main strength along the stem of the flower. Finds-Water walked slowly and deliberately down the center of East MacDonald.

"He's gone! Where'd he go?" came Alathea's voice from the artificial flower.

"He's bold, but not that bright. I just saw him crawl into his hiding place. Look west of the flower, near the base. You'll see an artificial hill, with a circular door just large enough for a young man. The crack will be hairline thin."

"Yeah, I see it," Alathea replied. "But how am I supposed to flush him out?"

"You don't need to. We need to figure out what pulled him away. What can you see from up there?"

"Some overdone building just lit up. Ah, I see it. Your friend Carl is looking really sick, and his jenny is trying to fight off a pack of coyotes."

"Don't worry about the coyotes. Do you see any wolves?"

"Wait a minute. Yeah, just to the north. All I can see are noses and paws sticking out of the scrub."

"Follow my directions to the letter. Put an arrow in the jenny's eye, then kill the first two coyotes that come up to claim it. Forget about Carl, he's probably dead already."

"Done." Three green-feathered Nueguan arrows--each made of one piece of Mothershell--flashed out between the petals of the artificial flower. The jenny went down screaming, and two medium-sized coyotes leaped to the opportunity. They died as the Nueguan arrows passed through their throats, dead before they hit the ground. "Now what?"

"Just wait." A moment of silence. The sun was getting hotter by the minute, Finds-Water thought. "Cover me." He began to stride briskly toward the dying jenny. As he arrived at the scene of the mayhem, he noticed that the doors of the Ultimate Boutique were tightly sealed, though lights were still on inside.

Finds-Water stooped just beside the dead body of Carl and faced north. Coolly, he watched the last agonies of the jenny, waiting for the silver-grey snouts and paws to materialize into the desert wolves. After a moment the alpha male made its way out of the tunnels the pack had dug in the scrub, and stalked toward the old Apache. Two of its confederates flanked it, one on each side. They stopped less than a dozen paces from Finds-Water. The lead

animal looked Finds-Water in the eye and growled a challenge. Finds-Water merely tipped his head toward Alatheia's location; that was enough. The alpha male barked twice, and the confederates each ran up and grapped a dead coyote, dragging them backwards into the scrub. Finds-Water pointed his right hand toward the sun, and his left toward the jenny. He then bent his right wrist back fifteen degrees, all the while never losing his eyeball connection with the alpha male. The wolf growled deeply, and then never turning around, stalked backwards in the scrub, until only its snout could be seen, lounging in the tunnel.

Alatheia climbed down from the flower and ran up beside Finds-Water.

"Would you like to tell me just what happened, you crazy old Apache, or are you going to give me myths and legends?"

"Those are spirit wolves, protectors of this place. The big one understands that we are here for some monumental change, and we negotiated. Two dead coyotes for now, the jenny after we are gone."

"You know what I think? I think that they're genetically engineered SuperDogs that went wild. Standard Sky Wanderer attack animals."

"Both points of view are true, Alatheia. But to more pressing matters. Your daughter is inside that building, and we have to get her out."

"How? I say first we check the medical supplies in the packs, and then figure out what disease is loose. Here, help me. Even I can't roll this jenny over by myself."

"As you wish." Finds-Water assessed the situation. The jenny had fallen on the medical packs, and likely a good portion of the highly reactive Nueguan medicines were ruined. The Winchester, on her upright side, was unharmed. He pulled it out of the leather bag, and drew back the lever, checking action and barrel. "All right, now we're both armed."

Alathea squatted down and hooked her arms on the downside of the jenny's quarter, near the stifle. "Um, whenever you're ready, old man."

Finds-Water hooked his arms under the shoulder and together he and Alathea heaved. The jenny, still twitching, flopped over to the opposite flank. Alathe quickly put her hands into the saddle bag, coming out with three pouches wrapped in the indigo-and-white of the Healer's Guild. She opened the largest pouch, made a face, and flung it aside. "The general-purpose salves are useless, their vials are broken."

She took out the smaller second pouch, pulled out a translucent tube of crystalline Mothershell, and peeked into its depths. Immediately she wrapped it up. "The good news. The Little Doctors are fine. But they won't last long in the heat, not after I've had to expose them to the sun."

She opened the last pouch and made another face. "The jenny landed on the Motherfruit and squished it good."

"No aphrodisiacs tonight, I'm afraid," Finds-Water noted.

Alathea tossed the last statement off with a wave of the hand. "If your information is correct, the only thing Rintiala has to worry about are Sky

Wanderers diseases in that building. The synthetics don't have offensive weapons. Right?"

"That's the Western Bandit story, and they paid a high price to find out."

"Let's examine Carl, then." She walked over to his prone body. His hat had been thrown off, and he lay spread-eagled on his back. She put an index finger into his mouth, yanked out piece of black and bloody phlegm, smelled it, then swished it around in her mouth before spitting it out.

"So?" Finds-Water asked.

"Standard Black Bear aerosol, airborne lifespan of three minutes, radius one hundred paces, unless there's stiff wind. Rintiala and I were inoculated for this back in Clan Tiala. No problem, and luckily no problem for you, either. It's deactivated."

"Well that's good news." Finds-Water said quietly. He was about to form a new plan of action when a shot rang out from another artificial flower further west. He felt a burning pain in his back, just above his left kidney, then watched with horror as the lead ball emerged from his abdomen, taking half a handful of flesh with it. "Alathea..." was all he was able to say.

"That one's for Carl, you sons-of-bitches!" Zeb screamed.

Powerful hands gripped Finds-Water's undamaged right side and lowered him down gently, using the jenny for cover. They ripped the bloody remains of his shirt away.

"Stay awake, old man. The more conscious help you can be the better. He heard something like glass twist and snap, and then small warm wet things began to crawl into the hole made by the black-powder weapon. He saw some of them clamp their vice-grip jaws onto spurting veins and arteries, quickly arresting the flow of blood.

"That's better," Alathea's voice said from behind him. Now a powerful right hand began to squeeze termite guts onto the outer surface of the wound. Where the gunk landed, it began to writhe and spread, forming a ghostly white second skin over the torn-up hole. "Old man, I'd like for us to wait here until the Little Doctors are finished working, and the boutique door opens, but we're too exposed. I'm going to tie you onto my back and haul you out of here."

"Where are we going?" Finds-Waters asked weakly. Suddenly he felt the most enormous thirst. Without asking, Alathea put a canteen to his lips.

"Sump your agreement. This is first blood. We're going to take the battle to them. All of them."

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### **Ghost Sickness Part Three: Tili**

Hunts-the-Ruins awoke flat on his back. A large black bear clamped its jaws



around his larynx as it prepared to rip out his Adam's apple. He closed his eyes and began to chant his death song.

In a moment when he opened them again, Rintiala's face was inches from his own. "You think a black bear is trying to eat your lungs. It's a hallucination. Open your mouth."

Hunts-the-Ruins did as instructed. Rintiala's lips pressed tightly to his and her tongue slid around in his mouth, probing deeply. He couldn't control the phlegm that he hacked up. Rintiala didn't stop kissing him. Instead she methodically swallowed the bloody mess.

Rintiala straddled him, arms over her head, busily removing her halter top. The black bear landed on him again, this time even more adamant about dining on his lungs. Images of Rintiala's face interwove with the bear's drooling tongue and yellow teeth.

"Open your mouth, and suck. Don't get he-manly with me either. You've got about five minutes to live." A broad pink nipple found its way into Hunts-the-Ruin's mouth. He sucked greedily, a frightened child.

Pearlescent magical smoke flowed from the nipple, down his windpipe into his lungs. As it flowed, the image of the black bear began to vanish the way a drawing disappears under the artist's eraser. He sucked even harder.

"Careful there. Remember, you've got teeth," Rintiala complained.

The bear reared on its hind legs, arched, and fell backwards, disintegrating

into curlicues of light as it did so. The nipple pulled out, to be replaced by another. Now Hunts-the-Ruins could see himself on the floor inside the entrance of the Ultimate Boutique, surrounded by gently flashing commercial displays. A sweat-soaked and topless Rintiala held him down with her powerful thighs while she massaged his chest.

She rolled off him, quickly moving behind, helping him to his feet, her hands under his armpits. "Try to walk and act normally. I distracted the sales girl, but not for long."

"What happened?" It hurt to say two words.

"You were sprayed with a generic Sky Wanderer's disease. You are one lucky Apache."

"Why?" It hurt to say even one word.

"Because it could have been anything, instead of the old standby Black Bear. It makes you hallucinate while it destroys your lungs. Mother and I prepared for the standard ones before we left Nuegua. Just in case."

"Just in case," Hunts-the-Ruins croaked. "Who did it?"

"I thought I saw some kind of waking dream that the motiles were transmitting: a girl with long black hair. Her name is Tili. She told me I had to trust her if I wanted to get into the Sanctuary at Camelback Mountain. Once I got inside, I found out she is a synthetic, and she has light-bending skin to make her invisible to Western Bandits. Even that doesn't quite work

right; she couldn't talk at first. She's some kind of sales girl, and she's a complete bubblehead. She doesn't remember a thing about what she supposedly said outside."

"You're saying I was nearly killed by a pretty young girl trying to make a sale? Her presentation needs a lot of work," Hunts-The-Ruins croaked, coughing.

Rintiala leaned across his left shoulder and smiled. "I didn't know you Apache had a sense of humor. That's a good sign." Her smile faded, concern lines forming around her mouth. "I've fed you the raw antidote: my breast milk. Apache need to have it diluted. It could affect your judgement."

Rintiala looked up, past Hunts-the-Ruins, and put her finger to her lips.

Hunts-the-Ruins, heeding Rintiala's admonition to act normally, looked up to see a tall slim man, or at least a synthetic thing that looked like a man, walk over to the two of them.

The man had a badge on his shirt pocket that read: "Cy. Security." He looked over the Nueguan and the Apache and said in a clipped voice. "What seems to be the problem here? I've got a report about an Inferior invading the premises."

The curvaceous young woman synthetic, now wearing a muumuu and a large fresh-cut hibiscus flower behind her right ear, ran up behind Cy. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" Tili exclaimed, putting a well-formed hand to her perfectly round mouth. "I set the alarm off."

Cy stepped closer to Rintiala and examined her slowly, his eyes unfocussing. "Well, this one's a Sky Wanderer, and an Advanced one at that. You gave her an open house account, I presume?"

"Don't you think I know how to do my job?" Tili replied.

"Well, did you or didn't you?"

Tili produced a gold card from behind her left ear, like a Gringo card trick Hunts-the-Ruins had once seen. "It's right here."

"Well, give it to her then."

Tili proffered the card and Rintiala accepted it with a gracious 'thankyou'.

Cy now directed his attention to Hunts-the-Ruins. The Apache felt he was being sized up by a rattlesnake, for all the human warmth that Cy radiated.

"And this must be the gentleman you thought was an Inferior. He registers as an earlier Sky Wanderer model, that's all," he said, turning to Tili.

Looking over to Rintiala, Cy said: "You're quite young, and probably haven't seen the shock a Translation from Asteroid body to Earth body can cause. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"That's it exactly," Rintiala said.

Cy wagged a finger at the synthetic sales girl. "Now, Tili, don't go using the nuisance protection just because there are different kinds of Sky Wanderers. That's very rude."

Tili put her beautiful head between her hands, her ebony hair shaking loose,

all the way down to her waist. "I'm so sorry." She peeked one eye through her fingers. Rintiala supported Hunts-the-Ruin's weight against her chest, while Tili made cooing noises to the Apache.

"You'll have to be patient with Tili," Cy explained. "She's programmed for frivolity; it helps make sales."

He extended a hand to Rintiala. "Am I right in my assessment of you? You are presently nineteen years old, with a lifespan of two hundred years, menarche beginning at twelve, menopause at eighty?"

"Correct," Rintiala replied. She squeezed Hunts-the-Ruins' left arm, a gesture for silence.

"You appear to have a proactive immune system, connected to your mammary glands. You are in lactation, although you're still a virgin. That's very interesting. There's no mention of that in my files."

"Cy!" Tili cried. "And you say that I'm rude!" She turned her head to Rintiala. "Tell that big creep to apologize!" she insisted. Rintiala gently patted her hand in response.

"Yes, it's a new feature," Rintiala added. She began to turn with Hunts-the-Ruins toward the entrance of the Ultimate Boutique.

Cy went on, oblivious to her body language, Hunts-the-Ruins thought. "And practical," the synthetic prattled. "Who knows what kind of biological surprises the Sky Wanderers will find when they return from the asteroids?"

I assume you two are part of an Advanced party?"

Hunts-the-Ruins just wanted to get out of this place of madness. "An excellent way of putting it, Cy. I'll be sure to put in a good word for you to the rest of the Sky Wanderers."

"But you haven't actually answered my question," Cy replied in a light tone.

"Will we need to prepare for a large group tonight? Tomorrow? Almost nothing organic is ready."

"We've got to get going," Rintiala insisted, pulling Hunts-the-Ruins with her toward the door.

Cy had a pained look on his face to Hunts-the-Ruins eyes. "Yes, but where? We have to turn down sheets, arrange flowers, that sort of thing..."

"We're going to be staying at the Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain. We've got reservations." Rintiala replied.

If Cy could have crossed his eyes at her statement, Hunts-the-Ruins wouldn't have been surprised. "The Sanctuary! My goodness, no, it's been out of commission for over a century...and..."

"What Cy is trying to say is that it is haunted, and he's a little embarrassed by the whole thing. Aren't you, Cy-sweetie?" Tili interrupted.

"Haunted?" Both Rintiala and Hunts-the-Ruins asked.

"Well, yes, there's been some corruption in its networks, and for the life of me I can't find it. You won't tell upper management, will you? They might

decommission me for having left it go for so long."

Now Hunts-the-Ruins put his finger to his lips. "Not a word."

Cy began pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back. "Perhaps this is the perfect time to clear this haunting business up once and for all. Tili, would you please accompany them to the Sanctuary?"

"Would I?" Tili said bouncing on her tiptoes. She stopped Cy by placing her hands on his shoulders, and kissing him on the cheek. "Come on Rintiala, come on you big hunk of Apache cuteness, we're going for a stroll." She made a flourish and the door hissed open.

Hunts-the-Ruins shrugged his shoulders, a silent message to Rintiala to let go of him. Just as she was doing so, Tili stopped her. "But what am I thinking? Rintiala, you can't go out in public like that. I mean, topless is soooo tasteless!"

"Well go get my top, then, the striped blue one."

Tili looked around then under a few display counters. "I don't see it anywhere," she said, biting her lower lip.

"Then find me something. This is the Ultimate Boutique, isn't it? I'm in a bit of a hurry. I have to meet a ghost you know," Rintiala winked at Tili. "They can't be kept waiting."

Tili let out a hoot. "Not a problem. I've got a silk sash that will work. It's a bit daring...but..with your figure...I'm sure no one will complain."

"All right." Rintiala lifted her arms over her head, and Tili pulled a sash of the sheerest ice-cream colored silk around the young Nueguan's bosom. Hunts-the-Ruins watched as Tili tied a double knot of machine-quality precision.

"You know, Rintiala, if I weren't synthetic and a female, I'd go after you myself," Tili giggled.

Rintiala turned around, checking the knot in the body-length mirrors on each side of the main doors. "We're going now."

"But not without a group photo," Cy insisted.

Hunts-the-Ruins could see a pained expression in Rintiala's face as the trio stood in front of the main doors for their shot. Cy brought out an old-fashioned camera that seemed quite large and ungainly to Hunts-the-Ruins eyes, but then, he hadn't specialized in either optics or computers in university. Who could tell what kind of idiosyncracies these synthetics had developed over the centuries?

"Say cheese," Cy smiled.

"Okay, Cy, we're really, really going now," Tili said. With that she took Rintiala and Hunts-the-Ruins in arm and they walked into the midmorning sunlight of Paradise Valley. "The first thing we're going to do is play with the puppies".

All three stopped motionless. Not more than two strides away, a pack of



coyotes had descended on Carl's dead form. His face was ashen, and his eyes had rolled back into his head, leaving only the whites exposed. He had swallowed his own tongue in the last agonies of Black Bear. The jenny lay dead, the backpacks gone, the weapons also. A Nueguan arrow, green-feathered and chased in silver, stuck out of her eye socket. Oddly, the coyotes stayed clear of the dead mule. Finds-Water and Alatheia were nowhere to be seen.

Rintiala crouched down beside the jenny, ignoring the coyotes. She brushed her hand over some blood drying on the carbocrete, and lifting up her fingers, smelled them testily. "This is very bad, Hunts-the-Ruins. Finds-Water has been seriously injured." She stood up and gazed across the sand and scrub that led to the closest artificial flower. "She's carrying him along with supplies and weapons. That means she's very, very angry."

"Are there other Advanced with you?" Tili asked, stepping daintily around the bodies. "We've had quite a problem with Inferiors lately. I'll get Cy to clean this up."

"Don't bother," Rintiala said.

"Well, at least let me get rid of the animals," Tili replied. She gestured. Voices rising in pitch began to speak from the carbo-crete, first going through and then past the human range. The coyotes began to writhe and yelp, moving away reluctantly, eager to enjoy the feast of new flesh. Finally they ran off, looking for another kill.

Hunts-the-Ruins looked at Carl's corpse. He no longer saw a Western Bandit, or even a Gringo. Just a poor man who had trespassed a possession of the Sky Wanderers.

Rintiala took Hunts-the-Ruin's arm. "Won't that Zeb start shooting at us out in the open?"

"Oh, that nasty boy, you mean?" Tili asked. "Don't worry about him. I've added a slight electric charge to all the roofs. Things are going to get very jumpy up there." Tili had no sooner said that, when she was answered by a rifle shot a block away.

"Did you hear that?" Hunts-the-Ruins said to Rintiala. "That long whistle at the end of the shot means it's a Sharp's Buffalo rifle. Black power, lead ball. Not the best gun, but easy to maintain."

"Why would I care?" Rintiala huffed. Another shot came from the same general area, this time short and barking like a dog.

"Because that's my Winchester, and I'll bet that's your mother returning fire. Is she any good?"

"If Zeb so much as hangs a thumb out in view, she'll shoot it off. But she'll mostly likely try to put a bullet right down the barrel of his Sharp's Buffalo Rifle."

"She can do that?" Hunts-the-Ruins asked in amazement.

"You brought your mother with you?" Tili asked. "Oh, Rintiala that's just so

warm and homey."

"You haven't met my mother yet," Rintiala answered.

"Great, they can keep each other busy. I'm going to charge your mother for all the spent shells. Brass costs money." Hunt-the-Ruins continued. He took Rintiala by the arm. "Let's go," he said. His anger rose as he thought of what these people--Nueguans and Sky Wanderers alike--did to those they considered lesser beings. "You've got a lot of explaining to do," he said gruffly to Rintiala.

"And I will. But first things first," Rintiala replied, hurt in her voice. She turned to the synthetic woman. "Tili, my boyfriend and I are having relationship problems right now. We need to talk, with nobody listening. Why don't you go ahead of us?"

"Sure," Tili said brightly. "I'll meet you in the park area just in front of the Sanctuary. One block south, and one block west of here. That's where my puppy lives." With that Tili began to dance down the street, twirling and picking up speed as she did so. Flower shops, bakeries, restaurants, bistros, antique shops, book and vid stores, all began to light up. Paradise Valley was awakening.

As Tili's form receded into the distance, Hunts-the-Ruins could see that she had abandoned even the pretense of having womanly bones and hips. Her strides became too elastic for any human, even he supposed, a Nueguan.

"I don't like any of this at all. It's too easy," Rintiala said to Hunts-the-Ruins

as they walked away from the corpses. "Tili just happens to show up as soon as we figure out how to deal with the Western Bandits, then gets us a pass key to the Sanctuary with the blessing of the security synthetic, and now shoos away coyotes. What else can she do? And why is she helping us?"

Hunts-the-Runs sighed in relief. "I am so glad you're talking like this. I was sure Tili had fooled you completely."

Rintiala raised an eyebrow. "I've been dealing with artificial intelligences my whole life, Hunts-the-Ruins. Tili's no different."

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### **Ghost Sickness Part Four: The Sentinel Flowers**

Alathea looked over the top of the last artificial flower. She stood still for a moment, nostrils flaring. Trying to smell the enemy out, Finds-Water thought.

"As of right now, old man, I think your agreement with the Western Bandits isn't worth the shit it's printed on." She sat back, stroking her bow.

"If you go out with blood in your eye, you'll kill a few Western Bandits. That I'm sure of. And they'll kill your daughter. It's that simple," Finds-Water replied between gasps, trying to find a way to sit that didn't make him lose consciousness.

"Well, then tell me what I'm supposed to do, but don't tell me to do nothing. As a matter of fact, start telling me the truth about this whole affair, or maybe I'll offer you in trade for my daughter's safety."

"You would do that. All right then, the whole story, or at least as much as I know of it. I haven't had to a chance to speak with the synthetics, so I'll have to guess as to their motives. Fair enough?"

"Fine," Alatheia said, hunkering down in the base of the flower.

"Now I know how much of a hard-headed practical type you are," Finds-Water began, "but I have to speak in metaphor."

"Just keep it short."

"All right then. The whole thing is best viewed as a game of four-way poker. The Sky Wanderers are leading with the strongest hand, followed by you Nueguans, then my Apache, and trailing at the end..."

"The Western Bandits, with the weakest hand. And they know it."

"But when you join a high-stakes game, you should always ask yourself: 'Why now?'"

"Because Rintiala had a living dream in the Grotto of the Sacred Virgin..."

"Yes, your not-quite-a-secret organic artificial intelligence. Anything you dream there is recorded in full."

"And all the Sisters could replay it and analyze it. I was the first to do so. Are you trying to tell me I didn't do my job?"

"What I'm trying to tell you is that you're so good at your job, and so immersed in your work, that you didn't lift your head up to see the whole game being played. Who created that dream? It wasn't Rintiala. You Sisters can prove that."

"You're saying it came from here? How?"

"I don't know. But the timing of it convinces me that some great change is due on the Empty Earth. You Nueguans are ready to burst from your cocoon. And Rintiala is about to become the first butterfly."

"You're mixing metaphors, old man. Stick to poker."

"You've now got a card on the top of the deck. And Rintiala is the next to draw. Something wonderful, something horrendous, is going to happen to your daughter today. And when it does, Nueguans will be playing the strongest hand. The Western Bandits will be forced to fold. But we Apache want to play to the end, because we believe the synthetics will decide it is in their best interests to align themselves with the new winners."

"Finds-Water, I've only played poker with you a few times, and then only for diversion, when we ran out of Mother fruit. Make your explanation a little clearer, please."

"The synthetics of Paradise Valley are the Sky Wanderer's crowning achievement in artificial intelligence. They're non-violent, they have a sense of humor, but above all, they know how to look out after their own synthetic interests. And that means aligning themselves with the best and strongest of

the organics. That combination is Nueguan and Apache.

"Finds-Water, there are only ten thousand Nueguans, and then only one thousand of the Healer Clan. There are going to be millions of returning Sky Wanderers."

"Who aren't due back for a least a century. That's five generations if you breed freely."

"With who?" Alathea asked. "Oh no, you don't mean..."

"Of course that's what I mean. You'll toss your silly taboo about intermarriage with other humans, and you'll create a new race of Apache/Nueguan hybrids."

"So, the goal of today is to enslave Nueguan women, to bring back the good old days of female servitude, living only to have babies?"

"Or have the Sky Wanderers wipe all of us out. Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"That's it," Alathea hissed. "I'm going to hand you over to the Western Bandits, right now."

Finds-Water leaned over, and gasping with pain, handed Alathea the Winchester butt-first. "There's one last thing I need to you do."

"What? Shoot you?" Alathea asked, grabbing the rifle. "Where's all that Apache nobility?"

"Right where it's always been," Finds-Water replied, "With the safety of my people. What I want you to do is to shoot someone for me."

"My pleasure," Alatheia grinned, canines showing. "Who?"

\* \* \*

Hunts" the Ruins scratched his head in bewilderment. "What do you mean Tili is no different?"

Rintiala crossed her arms across her chest, and appeared to be closely examining the carbocrete as they walked. "All artificial intelligences love to play games. That's the world they came from. They never answer questions directly, even if you think they are. That's their joy in life."

"Joy? A machine?" Hunts-the-Ruins answered.

"You Apache. You learn how to make methane from buffalo shit, to drive your piston-powered trucks, and you think you've got technology all figured out. Tili is a person, Hunts-the-Ruins. She's a she--not an it--and she's more devoted, more self-sacrificing, and more loyal than any human you'll ever meet. Just like the Pregnant Virgin of the Grotto."

"Rintiala, Finds-Water specifically forbid me to ask you any questions about Nueguan technology, and now you're giving out answers freely?"

"Not because you'd misuse the information, but because it would confuse you. You probably think we should have gunned down Tili and Cy the first chance we got, and be done with them."

"Not me. I'd let the Apache Police do that."



"Who would understand the situation even less than you do."

"Then tell me what the situation is. My poor civil engineer's brain will attempt to keep up."

"There's something or someone in the Sanctuary who sent me my dream. Tili and Cy can't locate them, which means they're not synthetics. But they can't be living humans either, because Cy's old-fashioned camera would have tracked them down."

"And you think..."

"Whoever made Nuegua in the first place left a piece of themselves behind in the Sanctuary, waiting until I showed up in the Grotto of the Pregnant Virgin. More than that, Tili and Cy can't just barge in looking for traces. Whatever it is can confuse their synthetic minds enough to be perceived as a ghost. The Sanctuary is haunted, all right." She looked up from the carbocrete, her face a mask of concern. "Any more questions?"

"Just one. Why did you save me and not Carl?"

Rintiala smiled out of the corner of her mouth. "And I was going to ask you that question: why were you worth saving?"

"Superior stock, I suppose."

"Maybe. My body decided that you could be hidden by my milk. Not Carl. Sorry, but that's how we Healers work. It's not about thinking; it's all intuition."

"That makes me want to ask another question: Why did Cy think I was a Sky Wanderer?"

"I thought you would have figured that out by now," Rintiala sighed. "We Nueguans are the antidote to the Sky Wanderers. And we can mimic them."

"So we're safe now?"

"No. Not since Cy took that group photo. And probably my top. He's got my entire bloodline--all the Nueguan DNA back to the first of us--analyzed by now. Subterfuge isn't going to work. And what Cy knows, Tili knows."

Rintiala stopped, looking to the south for a sign of Tili. She put her hand on Hunts-the-Ruins chest and said: "And now it's time for my last question: why are you of all people here? I thought you were just some Apache stud bodyguard who would get killed in the first ten minutes, and that's almost what happened. But then you bounced back, faster than any human outside of Nuegua. Whatever you are, you're not what you appear."

"I'm Phoenix Apache," Hunts-the-Ruins replied.

"There are seven Apache tribes, none of which is named Phoenix," Rintiala answered.

"If I survive today, I'll be named an Apache Trader. And once that happens, there will be a Phoenix tribe of Apache, with full rights and honors."

"Ah," Rintiala said, "But until then, you and all your people are outsiders, not quite fitting in anywhere. Thanks, I've got my answer. Now let's not keep

Tili waiting."

The two of them made the final left turn. Ahead lay the grounds and buildings of the Sanctuary, Camelback Mountain rising in the background. An adobe fence with a wrought-iron gate ringed the entire complex, wide, but not especially high. More cosmetic than protective, Hunts-the-Ruins thought.

Half a block away, Tili twisted her neck to the right, and spoke. "I can't find my puppy anywhere."

"Well, what's the problem?" Rintiala asked.

"I used my dog whistle, but he didn't respond."

Hunts-the-Ruins heard a skittering sound behind him, and turned to see a silver-grey shape fly past him. It materialized into the largest wolf he had ever seen. The wolf ran up to Tili, put its paws on her chest, and began licking her face.

"Puppy!" Tili cried. "Did you miss me? Did you miss your Tili-kins?"

Rintiala picked up speed and ran to Tili. The wolf stopped licking Tili and ran over to Rintiala, whining and barking as it did so. It circled the stationary Nueguan girl more and more tightly until it stopped with its snout sticking in her crotch.

Hunts-the-Ruins walked slowly up to the scene. The wolf began to growl in short puffs. The Apache stopped in his tracks.

"He says you must stay a dozen paces behind Rintiala. He says it's for your own safety," Tili told Hunts-the-Ruins.

"Not a problem," the Apache answered. "He's a spirit wolf," he said to Tili.

"No, silly, he's a SuperDog." Tili answered, walking over and nearly climbing on top of the animal so that she could scratch him behind his ears. The animal sighed softly, clearly in bliss. "He really likes this," Tili said to Rintiala.

"Well, he may be a SuperDog, but the accent is on dog," Rintiala answered, backing away a little. The wolf or whatever he was lifted his head and barked twice. Hunts-the-Ruins began to get the eeriest perceptions from the sounds the animal was making.

"Rintiala, the spirit-wolf or SuperDog can talk," Hunts-the-Ruins said.

"Well of course he can," Tili said, giving the animal a hug. "It's in the overtones. They carry much farther than human speech. He can talk to the rest of the Puppies right across town when he needs to. Can't you, my puppykins?"

Tili turned to the pair of humans. "This is as far as I can go. It's time for us to tell each other the truth."

"You listened in, didn't you?" Rintiala asked.

"Yes, I'm just too curious," Tili replied, biting her lower lip again.

"So? What more surprises could we possibly have for each other?"

"The biggest one I'll bet. Rintiala, I can't enter the Sanctuary. But I've got this compulsion programmed into me to do so. Every time I've tried, I black out and wake up on the street here. That's how I met Puppy. The Western Bandits were going to take me apart with iron bars, but he stopped them."

"You're the big chance everyone is has been waiting for. Rintiala," Tili continued. "Cy and I are just caretakers. There isn't some army of synthetics hidden underneath Paradise Valley waiting to destroy all invaders. It's just a residence. We tried to shoo the Western Bandits out of the homes around the edge of Paradise Valley, but they just wouldn't go. And then I had my blackouts, and Cy got worried. So we used the only protection we had."

"The diseases. And even that's not going to work much longer."

"Not with you here, no."

"So, I if open the gate and walk through, all our questions will be answered."

"That's what my compulsion tells me, yes." Tili's brows furrowed. "So, what do you want me to do next?"

"Knock on the front door, and say boo!" Rintiala answered.

\* \* \*

The front door turned out to be a small cupola of wrought iron that flowed like water from the ground up, and around, then flowed down again and extended itself into a rail—it was too low to the ground to be called a fence—that ran completely around the Sanctuary. It was just large enough for one

adult to stand on the rounded base; the cupola was finished with two bronze doors, each with a clapper of the same flowing design. Rintiala thought it was exquisitely beautiful for something that would stand in the weather year after year.

Tili looked at Rintiala longingly. "I really, really want to help you too, but to tell the truth, I don't remember what happens after this point."

"I'll say it again. Try knocking. I'll be right here if you black out again," Rintiala suggested.

Hunts-the-Ruins hunched down and began to inspect the rock formations of the Sanctuary. "Rintiala, these rock formations aren't natural. The Camelback Mountain formation is supposedly weathered quartzite, but there are no fissures to be seen in the rock. Everything is held together by some matte-finish glossy material." He stood up and looked around. "This whole mountain has been enhanced or replaced by Sky Wanderer glass. It's a fortress, not a resort." He smiled at the Nueguan girl. "They don't call me Hunts-the-Ruins for nothing."

"What can we do about that now?" Rintiala replied, exasperated. "I've got no idea what could be waiting for us. My living dream stops right here, except for one important detail. I'm supposed to be meeting the Water Woman right around now. "

"I've got my courage up," Tili said. She walked up the wrought iron gate, and grabbed the knocker handles. "You'd think there'd be some fancy high-

technology around here, wouldn't you?" she said, looking back over her shoulder, and winking at Rintiala. At her approach the handles, its doors and all the wrought-iron work of the cupola began to move, to writhe like a nest of baby snakes.

"Don't touch them, Tili!" Rintiala shouted, running up and pushing the synthetic away. Rintiala was surprised at how light Tili was. She weighed no more than a human woman, and seemed as fragile, for all that Rintiala knew about her synthetic frame. "It's a machine, and it's changing shape."

And so the knockers were. They unfolded, to become spiders made of glistening, sliding worms. When they finally stopped writhing, they were perfect copies of Tili's hands, palms-up.

"Usually, I just grab the hands when they form," Tili explained. "But then, I always wake up hours later, on my back, with Puppy looking over me."

"Perhaps I could try, instead?" Rintiala offered.

"Then you could wake up on your back with me staring at you," Hunt-the-Hunts-The-Ruins said.

Rintiala rolled her eyes.

The SuperDog, or Puppy, used its massive shoulders to nudge Rintiala. He whined, and Tili translated. "He says it's for you to open, Rintiala, though how he'd know, I don't have a clue."

Puppy spoke again, with short barks as consonants. "He says you know how

this works. Clap your hands." Tili explained.

"Clap your hands if you're happy!" Rintiala cried. "Tili, Hunts-the-Ruins, that's the first thing you learn when you start to Sister Sign." she said. She looked at Puppy. "You know more than you let on." Puppy answered by twining around her so closely she had to crouch a little to keep standing.

Rintiala placed her hands on the upturned palms, which flowed for a moment, and then became perfect copies of her own longer fingers. .

"Clap your hands if you're happy," Rintiala hummed to herself. When she did lift off her hands preparing to clap, the knockers flowed away into the bronze doors, which began to open. They did not, however, open into the walkways and tended gardens that were just over the rail. Instead Rintiala looked upon a three-dimensional model of the Sanctuary—again in the colors of indigo, pearl white and cyan—that hovered in the air in front of her, evanescent yet real.

Rintiala touched the model, which glowed bright pink where the tip of her fingers met its edges. As she stroked its surface—for it felt physical, cool and smooth like a pebble—the pink lines moved. When she touched the center, however, the pink lines fanned out across the model, and formed a tube that ran down to the bottom and below. After that, the fanned lines and the tube remained stable, now matter how Rintiala's fingers stroked the surface of the model.

"Rintiala, aren't you going to clap your hands?" Hunts-the-Ruins asked.



"Not right now. Something serious is going to happen when I do, and we've got to prepare for trouble. When I clap my hands, leave me. Locate Mother and Finds-Water. Try not to get shot by Zeb."

"How about Tili does that instead?" Hunts-The-Ruins countered. "She'll take a bullet or two better than me."

"Oh no, I won't!" Tili protested. "I'm a gardener, not a soldier. Rintiala, you decide." Both of her allies were showing trepidation at a time when she could use some real help, Rintiala thought.

"I've already giving you your marching orders, Apache. That's an order from a Sister, and you'd better obey if you really want to be a Trader."

"All right, all right." Hunts-the-Ruins complained. "I'll take up a station on that east ridge, then start my search, though without my Winchester I don't know what good it will do." He marched off.

"Okay, Rintiala, on three, " Tili said. "One, two, three!" Tili and Rintiala clapped their hands in unison. .

The model of the Sanctuary disappeared, replace by cyan droplets that run up, against the flow of gravity. Then they reversed their direction and began to pool around Rintiala's feet. She caught flashing specks of green, at the limit of her visual acuity. "Tili, it's hundreds of thousands of those motile spores!"

"Oh, you mean those cute little cacti I planted everywhere? I wonder how

they got in there? No worry, they're harmless," Tili cooed.

"Really? I can't move my feet. They're stuck," Rintiala complained.

"Do you want me to try to pull you away?" Tili asked.

"Okay, but pull like a synthetic. I'm very strong, you won't hurt me."

Then the unmistakable voice of Alatheia bounced off the quasi-rock of the Sanctuary. "That's more than enough. Step away from my daughter. Now!"

Tili moved closer to Rintiala, who strained to turn her head to the left, to see Alatheia marching down the center of the street, Winchester rifle at the ready. "Who's that awful woman?" Tili asked looking over her right shoulder.

"That's my mother."

"Well, hello Rintiala's mother," Tili burred. "Could you help us? We've got a little problem here."

Alatheia responded by pointing and firing, aiming the rifle at the small of Tili's back. A crack of rifle fire, and Tili arched, writhing. "What are you doing?" she screamed. Tili dragged herself to her knees, and held herself close to Rintiala.

Alatheia quickly strode up to the two of them, placed the muzzle of the Winchester on Tili's navel and fired point-blank, nearly cutting the synthetic in two. "All right, a favor done," Alatheia said. "Daughter, what do you need me to do?"

A rumbling growl erupted from the throat of Puppy. He lept at Alatheia, who

dropped into a crouch, and hit him in the throat, her fingers formed into a blade. A single choked yelp, and he twisted and rolled off bouncing down the street. He landed on his back, flipped over and came running back at Alatheia. Rintiala tried to turn her head to see what he was doing, and he appeared to be running in place.

Rintiala leaned against the portico, the rivulets now covering her knees. "Go now, finish your fight. You've done enough damage here, Mother."

A low rumble, so low that Rintiala tasted rather than heard it, began to build from the center of the Sanctuary. Wavelets of sand began to vibrate.

Rintiala thought she was seeing double as all the buildings shimmied and shivered, reflections of the morning sun bouncing off their windows in all directions.

Rintiala noticed that the landscape was changing. Nearby houses appeared to be receding into the distance. At the same time, the artificial flowers that she had expected to be there were emerging from the ground in a ring all around the Sanctuary, their petals opening up, this time a virulent pulsing blue color.

It hit her what was happening. Tili had told her the truth. There was no need of armed sentries in the Sanctuary. The entire complex was a sentry.

Rintiala looked over her right shoulder to see Hunts-The-Ruins running toward her. Another bucking of the ground, and he not only lost his balance, falling on his back, but he began to slide east. The homes and buildings of

Paradise Valley were receding as she watched. Angry blue artificial flowers were now rising out of the ground as far as her eyes could see.

Alathea went to protect her daughter, but Tili caught her with a solid kick to the solar plexus. It sent Alathea tumbling down the north slope, now several stories above street level. Rintiala heard the growl of Puppy as he renewed his attack on the Nueguan woman.

The cyan rivulets ran up Rintiala's back, formed a ring around the her scarf-bustier. and then stopped moving. Finally, the stanchion with Rintiala alone on it began to descend down a smooth shaft into the depths of the Sanctuary. Coughing from the desert dust that slowly filtered down the hole with her, Rintiala closed her eyes and prepared to meet her fate.

\* \* \*

Hunts-The-Ruins came to laying on his back, covered with burrs. He sat up, nearly impaling himself on a saguaro that he had miraculously missed on his slide down the newly-altered southeast slope of Camelback Mountains. He heard war cries and wolf growls off to the north-west, but his awareness of Rintiala's plight took precedence.

He was standing and dusting himself off when a large very old model automobile cruised up, nearly touching his hip with its fender. An Apache got out, in traditional white denim, wearing a turquoise Spider Woman necklace that declared him a non-combatant.

"I've got to get back..." Hunts-The-Ruins slowly looked up at the Sanctuary, "...up." The gate of the Sanctuary, now off to his left, was at least three stories above his ground level.

The driver of the antique held out his hand. "Name's Long-Jumper, from the Jicarilla Apache." Hunts-The-Ruins took it, and pulled himself up.

"Hunts-The-Ruins, Phoenix Apache. I'm here doing field work for my final Trader certification."

Long-Jumper raised an eyebrow for a moment, then smiled and nodded his head. "Looks to me like you're in trouble. You only crossed into Paradise Valley an hour ago, and so far, you've lost your rifle, and that Gringo blonde that you're supposed to be protecting. No offense, but you won't make Trader at this rate."

"How do you know all this?"

"I keep a sharp lookout," He pointed to the binocular holster on his belt.

"But, I'm here to help. If you Phoenix Apache pull this off, we're next in line for advancement. I get to be the next Trader."

Long Jumper stared at north-west slope of Camelback Mountain for a moment. He sucked in a breath and said. "You could try climbing it, but I've got a better idea," the Jicarilla newcomer said.

"What do you mean we?" Hunts-the-Ruins countered. "I though you were just observer, and couldn't get involved in the confrontation."

"Consider me a mechanical consultant," he smiled slyly. "You can always bill me later."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Well, you see that real small, sharp ridge just in the center of the other peaks?"

"Yeah, it's called the Praying Monk. The rock-if that's what it is--is only a few feet thick. Kind of a big razor blade."

"Well, if you drove up one of these nice residential streets the Sky Wanderers left behind, and hit the dirt on the mountain fast enough, you could practically fly over the Praying Monk."

"Come on, nobody's got a truck with that kind of speed and power."

"Really? Well, I do." Long Jumper looked at him, as he was judging Hunts-the-Ruins' weight and size. "You ever race before?"

"No." Hunts-the-Ruins replied.

"Well, let's hope you're one quick Apache when it comes to learning things."

Long Jumper began running backwards before he turned around to reach his truck. "Did you notice anything odd about my rig?"

"Yeah, it isn't a White Mountain Standard. What year is it?"

"Near as I can tell, it's somewhere between 1932 and 1977. All tooled from original Ford specifications, except for the methane converter, solid rubber

tires—custom made in New Spain, would you believe?--and..." He opened the driver's door, jumped into the seat, and brought the engine to roaring life. He then pulled a knob located beneath the steering wheel. A high-pitched whine started up, making Hunts-the-Ruins' ears ring. "...that."

"What is that?"

"That my practical friend, is a supercharger. We'll get you flying over that ridge, pronto, Tonto."

Normally, Hunts-the-Ruins liked to sit down to his drafting board and his slide rule, to calculate the trajectories of such a launch. But now, the images and formulae floating in colored sparkles on the inside of his eyelids: the images on the left, formulae on the right. He blinked and they were still there. Was this what Rintiala meant about his judgement being compromised? Or was this what it meant to be a Nueguan?

Hunts-the-Ruins chose. As soon as he thought of possible problems in angular momentum, a series of solutions emerged from the dark of his consciousness. When he considered possible deviations from true because of desert vegetation, all the formulae but two faded out. They hovered, one cyan, one violet. Instinctively he chose the cyan.

"Okay, I've got it," Hunts-the-Ruins said aloud to Long Jumper.

"Got what?"

"The answer to how we have to move this thing over Praying Monk Ridge."

"But..." Long Jumper protested. "You've never seen the west slope yet! How can you know?"

"Trust me," Hunts-the-Ruins answered. "I've got it all worked out."

"It's your Apache funeral." Long Jumper scuffed the ground, a sprinter waiting at the block. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

### **Ghost Sickness Part Five: The Water Woman**

With her eyes closed, Rintiala began to be aware that the vibrations from the rock were making her hip bones sing in response. She was about to focus on that when the tremors hit her. Her Nueguan body reflexively began to contract and release its muscles, optimizing blood flow for combat.

The stanchion dropped several feet lower, and then began to warm and light up. Softly glowing cyan snails appeared to defy gravity, crawling up the well.

Finally Rintiala came to a stop. An antechamber of cyan, white and indigo, all interwoven in some pattern she could not detect from her vantage point, led into an expansive area filled with motiles. Light from both external and internal sources made her squint.

Before Rintiala's booted foot could leave the platform, the motile filaments flowed away towards the light ahead of her. In spite of all her Grotto training, she looked on in wonder as an image of herself as a small child grew to womanhood. The form shimmered in the gentle breezes that blew



out of the greater room. Rintiala could see dust motes dancing through it. At the apex of her development, the woman's shoulders expanded, and her hair turned from gold to red. Shocked, Rintiala stared at an amalgam of herself and Alatheia, not quite one or the other.

The apparition opened its mouth, and slowly began to speak to Rintiala in Gringo English, with an accent unlike anything Rintiala had heard before. "There seems to be a problem, Sister," it said. "You're not the one I was waiting for."

\* \* \*

"Okay, I've got to give you a crash course in how a supercharger works. It uses screw compressors. They're positive displacement superchargers. They reach boost instantly, no lag time."

"Could we get technical later? I've got a Gringo blonde to save," Hunts-the-Ruins said.

"Hey, I'm helping you, remember?"

"Okay, go one..."

"This gives you unbelievable torque and horsepower numbers," Long-Jumper lectured on, clearly in love with his car.

"And that's important because?"

"You have maximum power at low RPMs as well as high RPMs." Long-

Jumper smiled, revealing a gold tooth.

The importance of the lecture sprang like a hiding cougar into Hunts-the-Ruins' mind. "Because I need maximum power not only when I leap, but when I land. To control this thing."

"This thing? My car! Hey, right now I'm trying to deal with the fact you're probably going to crack my windshield."

"Bill me when this is over."

"No. I want your word now that you'll outfit my new ranch house completely in Sky Wanderer glass." Long-Jumper smiled again. "As if I didn't know about your reputation." He closed the driver's-side door. "I'm out of here. It's all yours."

"Done. Your house in glass. If I live."

Hunts-the-Ruins went through the mental drill on more time. Approach Praying Ridge, upshifting all the time to gain traction, and don't fire up the supercharger until just before shifting into fifth gear. Downshift while in mid-air, and land in first, turning the steering wheel to adjust for angular momentum. Don't crack the windshield. He grinned at the last point.

The doing of it was less stressful than the worrying about it. He roared past gorgeous Sky Wanderer homes, trampled their intricate desert gardens under the Ford's solid-rubber tires, and finally caught the edge of Camelback Mountain. The Sky Wanderers were sloppy, he thought, not calculating for

the grit that the endless desert winds would deposit.

He hit the knife edge of Praying Monk, simultaneously igniting the supercharger and shifting to fifth gear. Airborne for the first time in his life, his war-cry jumped from his heart to his lips. This beat laying pipe any day. What a thing to be a Trader.

It was then that he noticed a small, angry, blue, artificial flower, tall and slender, translucent as glass, had emerged just below the edge. His back axle caught the delicate edge of one of its' top petals. Inexorably, he began to feel the automobile rotate on its long axis.

The interior of Camelback Mountain, all garden and tended sand, looked soft and inviting. Unfortunately, it was three stories below him, and he could feel his weight increasing on his left side as the Ford slowly rolled.

\* \* \*

"What do you mean?" Rintiala challenged the amalgam.

"You are supposed to be three years old. That's why the puzzle is easy, and you were asked to sing. I expected you to be here with your mother. She should be your age."

"I'm the only one that the Pregnant Virgin ordered to come to the Sanctuary at Camelback Mountain. Me. So get used to it," Rintiala said with irritation.

“Who is the Pregnant Virgin?” the amalgam asked.

“The organic virtual reality that rules Nuegua.”

“I have never heard of such a place. My consciousness is limited to a fifty-mile radius of this Sanctuary. There are two synthetics and a few primitive Old Humans. That is all I know of the outside world.”

“Let's negotiate,” Rintiala suggested. “Right now—outside this room---the Sky Wanderer warning beacons have been activated. For all I know, there won't be a world outside this room very soon, or maybe both you and I will be gone. Tell me how I am supposed to fix that, and keep it short.”

“In order to truly defeat the Sky Wanderers, you must accept the transformation into the Bright Queen. It has to be done consciously, which for a Nueguan girl is three. I'm sorry, but my forecasts concerning the changes that will occur in your body, and especially your brain, aren't good.”

“Can't you just do it to me?”

“No, volition is part of the new psychic structure. You will given the ability to see into time and space in a way no one else can. You were to prepare for it during your childhood and adolescence. Instead it will come unpredictably.”

“You mean the ability to see ghosts, and witches, and spirits?” Rintiala scoffed.

“The ability to command ghosts, and witches, and spirits,” the almalagam corrected her. “You cannot defeat the Sky Wanderer's physical weapons with

physical aggression. By now, those weapons are centuries beyond what you can understand. You must defeat their minds.”

"You know what I think? I think that you're a rogue artificial intelligence with delusions of grandeur. Ghosts, witches and spirits are myths that the Old Humans created to entertain themselves. A Nueguan Sister can't be fooled by such nonsense.

Rintiala felt that there were two of her, one cold and calculating, one passionate and furious. She had risked everything to come here, and the only true help she got had been from a synthetic her mother had permanently damaged. She decided to let the passionate, furious Rintiala out; after all her calculating self had led her into this predicament.

"I've had enough. Make me the Bright Queen or whatever fantasy you've conjured up, waiting all this time down in the dark."

The amalgam responded by melting into the floor, and flowing across the walls and ceiling of the room. "You've think I've been just waiting?" the amalgam said, its voice emanating from the walls of the antechamber in a way Rintiala couldn't fathom. "It took a century to get Tili to plant all the motiles, so that I could finally manifest here.”

"Liar," Rintiala countered. "How could wispy old you fool Tili?"

"Liar, am I?" the amalgam's head emerge upside-down from the ceiling furrowing its brows and puffing out its cheeks, which was an odd effect, seeing how the cyan lights of the antechamber were glowing through them.

"Centuries ago, I made one last tiny change to Tili's gardening database. I added an entry for endangered cacti. The rest, as they say, is history."

"And you changed her, gave her a compulsion to enter the Sanctuary? How can motiles possibly effect a synthetic? No Sister in Nuegua could do that, and we're a lot brighter than you, I'll wager."

"Let's just say there's carbon polymer chains, and then there's carbon polymer chains. But you wouldn't understand any of that."

"Then show me how it all works, or I'm going to find my own way out of here, collect my stuff, and go home."

Hunts-the-Ruins was right, she thought, with new admiration for the Apache. It had been a complete waste of time. Why should she argue with this arrogant, worn-out artificial intelligence, when she could just go home and ask the Pregnant Virgin what the real truth was?

"Ah, so you're ready to become the Bright Queen? Ready to develop the powers to see beyond time and space, to enter into the world of spirits and sorcerers?"

"Finally caught you," Rintiala widened her stance to a fighting pose, pointed her finger, and shouted back at the amalgam. "There's no such thing as those kinds of powers; there aren't any spirits, and sorcerers are just ignorant old people practicing medicine without responsibility."

"Then turn around, and prepare to have your world turned inside out," the

artificial intelligence said quietly.

\* \* \*

Hunts-the-Ruins was amazed by how much time there was to think while he was hurtling to his doom. He thought that if he had it to do over again, he would have gotten married and had children at his ripe old Apache age of twenty-five, rather than devoting himself to his career. But then again, he would be leaving behind a grieving family. He was also amazed by the calm detachment he had while the desert and buildings rose up to meet him.

"Just open the door," a little voice said to him. "And what, jump?" Hunts-the-Ruins replied to himself. "I'm strapped into all this leather webbing that Long-Jumper built. No, I'm not going anywhere."

"Just open the door," the voice whispered again, this time bringing up images and formulae of possible outcomes of his predicament. One formula glowed in cyan, this time blinking. All he had to do was open the driver's-side door, and his spin would increase, allowing him to land right-side up.

"All right, I'm agreeable to that," he said to himself. "After you," and with that he hit the handle hard.

The calculations were correct. With the slow solemnity of a Sundance ceremony, the Ford continued to roll. Hunts-the-Ruins had a fleeting thought that maybe this was all a dream, and that he was going to wake up in his sleeping roll out in a cold desert evening beside a dying campfire. But the ground was coming up too fast for that. The Ford was going to land right-

side up, all right, but balanced on the edge of a infinity pool, one end in cool water, the other end dangling five stories above the desert floor. The slightest miscalculation of that magical cyan formula, and he would go crashing motor-end down, this time dead for sure.

*Impaired judgement is so embarrassing*, he thought.

\* \* \*

The amalgam flowed again to the center of the room, spurting up like a fountain. Rintiala now faced an translucent, aqueous form of herself. She watched in awe as cyan worms now crawling on every surface flowed into position directly in front of her. In two heartbeats, its arms and legs began to move, imitating Rintiala's own.

“A woman made of water, just like the Pregnant Virgin said.” Rintiala mused.

“Embrace me. Do not be afraid,” the Water Woman said.

Rintial strode up to the amalgam and put her arms around her. Water Woman was as solid as Rintiala herself, her translucent heart beating in synchrony to Rintiala's own.

“Are we going to have sex?” Rintiala asked suspiciously.

“Something better,” Water Woman responded. “Kiss me.”

The Water Woman opened her mouth. Tiny shapes began to writhe within it, and baby coral snakes—the most poisonous creatures in all of the Empty



Earth-- turned to look at the Nueguan girl in unison, their eyes bright and cold, their tongues slithering.

"Let them bite you," Water Women said, her voice now a slithering legion. "It is the only way."

Rintiala placed her hands on the Water Woman's chest and pushed her away.

"No kiss? So be it," the Water Woman hissed.

The Water Woman's entire body writhed and snakes leapt across the space between them to land on Rintiala's heart. Fire exploded in Rintiala's chest, and pain worse than anything she had ever felt coursed through the major nerve channels of her body. Rintiala perceived it as being frozen, burnt and beaten to death simultaneously as the snakes altered her body at the cellular level. Then her perspective shifted. She became a disembodied head, watching in awe as she was created and destroyed, and recreated many times in the space of heartbeat.

"You must not dissociate," the amalgam insisted. "If you try to separate yourself from the process, you will go mad. "

Rintiala screamed with all the power she had. Her eyes froze and exploded; her ears were burnt and punctured, her skull crushed. Then an instant of non-being. .

Rebirth.

Rintiala's consciousness began to reassemble. She could sense the living

things all around her as a glow the color of bright wood smoke; she could hear and feel the presence of the humans and animals near the Sanctuary. It was like listening to muffled voices behind closed doors.

“My task is completed. My program will now purge itself,” Water Woman said, her human voice returning. “You, Rintiala of Nuegua, you are the Water Woman now.” Her form gracelessly splashed to the floor, disappearing.

The floor she stood on began to glowing with inward-pointing rings of indigo, white, and cyan. It began to drop precipitously.

She found herself at the top of three-storey high stem made of shimmering motiles; how it could hold her weight was a minor mystery at this point, for what she saw beneath her beggared her comprehension. Below her was a wide spiral staircase, with nine steps made for a giant. Each step had three shelves; each shelf had three pods of three Cactus Mothers, of a type she had not seen before: more primitive, but their number made for astronomical power. Every time she passed a step, every Cactus Mother began to glow in shades of green and blue; inside their translucent form floated a copy of Rintiala, in a fetal position. As she passed them, their eyes opened, pupils of indigo, irises of cyan.

“Hello First of us. Hello Sister,” they all chanted.

When she reach the base of the stem, it parted bloomlike, setting her free on the floor of the atrium. Glowing worms ran on every surface, moving light

and food to keep their Cactus Mothers fed and fulfilled.

“Three times three times threes times nine times nine,” Rintiale pondered aloud. Two thousand, one hundred and eight-seven copies of myself.”

“We are here for you. Command us,” they all said, shifting their position to look at her.”

It was then the other power—the new, unknown one—passed through Rintiala. She felt fear, anger and desparation in a form she knew all too well.

“Mother is in trouble, bring me to her,” Rintiala commanded.

Rintiala put into her mind the image of the place she needed to be. A cupola, an exact duplicate of the one at the gate of the Sanctuary, formed behind her. She turned and entered it. The cupola began its journey upward, and then along a level tunnel, shimmering with wind spiders. A short turn upward, and at last Rintiala found herself at the garden gate, right where she had entered the Sanctuary.

A bark and rushing form. Puppy bounded before her, whining. Rintiala could not understand what he was trying to tell her. Her new powers had their limits.

"Puppy, say it slower and lower," Rintiala insisted, kneeling down and looking him in the eyes.

"Am...tel" he barked, clearly in distress. "Name...Amtel"

"Okay, Amtel, what's wrong?"

"Ti...li...kill..."

"No, Amtel, Tili's not dead, she's just broken. We'll get Cy to fix her."

Amtel threw back his head and howled his reply. "No!" he said, the nasal consonants causing him real pain. "Tili kill you...me...everything!"

Rintiala ran into the pool area, only to see a crippled Tili on a paddleboard, headed for a dais slowly emerging from the center of the infinity pool. A single slender tourquoise stamen, grew out of it, ending a tip of inward-flowing circles of indigo, white, and cyan.

Rintiala dove into the water, but even damaged as she was, Tili still reached the dais first. She dragged herself up on it as Rintiala touched its base

"Stop," Tili pleaded. "I have to do this. Kill me after, please."

"What are you going to do?" Rintiala asked, hauling herself by main strength out of the water, and then crouching beside the outstretched Tili, her pale and delicate hand just touching the tip of the stamen."

"What I have to do. I have to send the Sky Wanderers a warning. That is my compulsion. Until you came, something or someone always stopped me. The Sky Wanderers gave me this power, not Cy. But I'm giving it to you. You decide if I should press it or not."

Rintiala finally let the truth of the Sanctuary flow through her. Everything that had happened this day had all been to lead her to this decision. How much more prepared could Nuegua be for their threat, if not today?" She

made her decision.

“Do it, Tili. Warn them; call them down on us.” Rintiala said firmly.

Tili placed her hand on the stamen. “No, Rintiala. Put your hand on mine, and you push.”

Rintiala did so. She placed her hand over Tili's and with the lightest touch pushed the glowing top, which began to recede into the stamen, which then telescoped itself back into the dais. Rintiala grabbed Tili, held her above water, and side-stroked back to the edge of the infinity pool. With one arm on solid ground, she pulled them both up, and deposited Tili face down in one of the white sun-bathers' chairs.

“Decommission me, Rintiala, I can't go on like this,” Tili began to sob. “Cy can't fix me.”

“You can call me Rinnie, if you like,” Rintiala replied quietly.

“On my pelvis, there's three tiny buttons. Press them altogether. And then I won't bother you anymore, Rinnie.”

“You've been a help, not a bother,” Rintiala said.

“You know what hurts the most?” Tili asked sweetly, closing her eyes in preparation.

“What?” For all her toughness, Rintiala could feel tears forming.

“We could have been friends.”

Rintiala lightly traced the three buttons on Tili's pelvis through her muumuu.

“Wait!” Tili said forcefully. “I have one last thing to tell you about yourself.”

“Another secret?” Rintiala said, trying to smile.

“Do you want to know why you passed through Cy's security?”

“Sure.”

“Your mother is a Nueguan, but your father is a Sky Wanderer.”

“That's impossible.”

“Ask your mother next time you see her,” Tili opened her eyes for the last time. “You can press now.”

Rintiala did just that.

\* \* \*

### **Ghost Sickness Part Six: High Noon.**

Rintiala stared across the infinity pool as a large old-fashioned motor car hurtled through the air, to land on its ledge, rocking back and forth. The edge of the pool began to crack audibly from the impact. She saw Hunts-The-Ruins in the drivers seat, struggling to get free.

“Don't move,” she shouted, “I'll be right there.”

She ran to the motor car, to find the Apache dazed, and bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Rintiala leaned over the undid his harness.”

“I can't see much,” he said.

“That's okay. I'm going to pull you out.”

Rintiala grabbed Hunts-The-Ruins by the waist, and pulled so hard that both of them fell backwards into the pool. The change in the center of gravity was enough to send the motor car hurtling to its destination at the bottom of Camelback Mountain, two storeys below the pair. There was a crash and then the sound of breaking glass.

“I think you cracked the windshield,” Rintiala said.

“Very funny,” Hunts-The-Ruins answered as they paddled to the edge. “What happened to Tili? And what's that statue in the center of the pool?”

“Tili's gone. That statue marks the end of the world, I suppose.” Rintiala answered.

“You suppose?”

“Don't worry about any of that right now; we've got to go help Mother.” Rintiala said.

He got up. Rintiala looked him over, and adjusted his headband to cover the bleeding above his left eye. “You're lucky, it's just a scratch.” she said.

Hunts-the-Ruins marched up to and opened the main Sanctuary gate doors from inside, nearly losing his balance. The sidewalk and street were gone,

replaced with a skree-filled slope. Squinting, he could see Alatheia battling with Western Bandit snipers two stories below. He dropped down onto his belly, motioning Rintiala to do the same. He pulled out his binoculars, and surveyed the situation in detail.

Alatheia was wrapped in her Mothersilk cloak, wielding her Winchester one-handed, firing from her hip., She was using the voluminous sleeves of her cloak to catch the bullets the snipers fire, moving far past the speed of old Gringo humans.

“Your mother is pinned down, and those sharpshooters are just playing with her. Sooner or later, she's going to get tired, or run out of ammunition. Here take my binoculars,” Hunts-The-Ruins said.

“I don't need them,” Rintiala replied, her gaze fixed on Alatheia. “They've already knicked her twice, once on the ear, and once on the calf.”

“We've got the high ground, but no weapons,” He looked around at the scree. “I suppose we could throw rocks at them.”

“Not a bad idea,” Rintiala replied. She stood up, picked up a smooth rock from the poolside garden, and assumed an overhand throwing posture. Hunts-The-Ruins watched in amazed as blueish-tinged threads flowed around Rintiala to points on the scree. In a moment, a dozen translucent green. Rintialas were standing on the scree with the same posture.

She threw her rock first, aiming the sharpshooter on the roof closest to her. She looked to her right, and six Rintialas threw rocks with blinding speed



and accuracy, knocking one sharpshooter right off his perch. As the sharpshooters on the right began to take notice of the Rintiala copies, the other six did the same on the left. This time Hunts-The-Ruins could hear the scream as the sharpshooter's trigger hand and arm were broken in several places.

“That's only going to work once,” Hunts-The-Ruins said forcefully. “They'll have you triangulated in a flash. We've got to get down there, now.”

“And what are we supposed to do when we get there?” Rintiala objected.

Hunts-The-Ruins took up his binoculars again. “Well, I'll be dipped in buffalo shit. Long Jumper's car landed right side up.”

“And that's going to make a difference?”

“Yes, it will. The motor is still running.”

Hunts-The-Ruins got up off his stomach and grabbed the reluctant Rintiala by the arm. Together, they ran sideways down the slope, serpentine fashion. Rintiala's copies kept throwing rocks with deadly accuracy, but all round them, the Rintiala copies were being cut down. He had to admire how the Western Bandits were adapting to the insanity of the Sanctuary.

They reached the bottom of the slope before the sharpshooters directed their aim at the Apache. He and Rintiala crouched down on the rear bumper of Long Jumper's Ford. “Here's what we'll do. I'll drive; you get in the backseat and open the right side rear door as we pass Alatheia and pull her in. This

Ford can withstand black powder rifles just fine.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rintiala said. “On my count, let's go...one, two..three!”

Hunts-The-Ruins went to the left and opened the driver's-side door, only to have the last unbroken window smashed by a sniper's bullet. He pulled himself into the seat he had vacated only a minute ago it seemed, keeping his head down, and pushing his left boot into the accelerator. The motor roared, still supercharged. Rintiala had opened the passenger's side rear door, unnoticed by the sharpshooters.

Hunts-The-Ruins gunned it in low gear, kicking up huge clouds of dust and gravel, fish-tailing while driving in a curve behind Alatheia, giving her the camouflage cover that she needed.

“Mother, get in!” Rintiala shouted. Instead Alatheia ran like a cougar alongside the car, vaulting into the dust and smoke. “There! On the roof!” Rintiala said to Hunts-The-Ruins.

Alatheia had used the opportunity to take down her primary antagonist. She leapt off the roof, keeping a writhing, scrawny, adolescent Western Bandit under her. They landed on the sand and gravel with audible grunts. She held a Nueguan arrow to his right carotid artery. Again Hunts-The-Ruins was impressed; the shooting stopped as if by command.

“Yeah, yeah, you got me,” he taunted, spitting blood, “But my daddy Seamus is gonna kill you for sure.”

Down East MacDonald at a full gallop came a Western Bandit in full leathers, brandishing a saber of unusual color.

“That's no ordinary sword,” Hunts-The-Ruins said, peeking over the dashboard. Seamus Espinoza, leader of the Western Bandits, held an indestructible ceramic Sky Wanderer saber in his right hand.

He wheeled in between his son Zeb and Alatheia, leapt to the ground, and fired a .50 caliber Colt at her heart. knocking her off her feet with a single shot.

“Mother!” Rintiala cried.

“Seamus Espinoza, I am an Apache Trader. I call for parley,” Hunts-the-Ruins called out. “We must stop this madness.”

Seamus looked up, nodded to Hunts-The-Ruins, and holstered his weapon.

“Agreed. No more shooting except on my order.” He looked around at the rooftops. “You two troublemakers, come out of that car. You have my word for your safety.”

Unsteadily, wheezing from the broken rib the bullet gave her, Alatheia stood to face her Western Bandit opponent. She removed her poncho to reveal Rintiala's cloak triple-wrapped over her torso, secured with the rope from the Clan of Builders . Zeb got up off the ground, hobbling towards his father.

Hunts-The-Ruins noticed that Rintiala had not yet come out of the car.

Running down East McDonald Drive faster than humanly possible, Cy, now

the last synthetic, came charging with what looked like a gardening tool over his head. It had a resonating blade of some sort of glowing material that Hunts-The-Ruins could not identify. No sniper dared to challenge Seamus Espinoza's order so he ran right into the middle of the fracas. Using the blunt end of his tool, he sent both Seamus and Alatheia flying, striking the ground simultaneously two bodies-lengths apart. When he got near the motor car, he swung at the right front fender, cutting through it, the rubber and the wheel itself as if they were butter. Long Jumper's beautiful motor car groaned and sagged.

Rintiala emerged dressed in smooth indigo fibres from head to foot. A visor like the Old Spaniards used flowed around her head, covering her face completely. Hunts-The-Ruins understood immediately. No other fight in Scottsdale really mattered except the one between Cy and Rintiala. Between them, the fate of the Empty Earth would be decided.

Cy raised his weapon high. Rintiala blocked it with her right forearm, and the blade split the fibres, but became fouled in them. Cy had to keep swinging in an arc until the fibres flew off; in the meantime, Rintiala's armor had grown back.

They crouched and circled each other, Cy's weapon whistling a tune of death. Rintiala came in close to strike, her spine bending nearly to the breaking point to dodge his blows. His synthetic speed was faster than her Nueguan responses, but he was unarmored, and Rintiala's protective clothing grew

stronger--more tightly woven—with every heartbeat.

Cy changed his tactics. He twisted his grip until his weapon became thrusting spear. He singed her armor twice more, but each time it grew back stronger, thicker and more twisting in its weave. Finally he turned the blade off, flipping the weapon around to its heavy, blunt end, preparing to club Rintiala to death.

Hunts-The-Ruins came to Alatheia's side and helped her up. Both of them knew that if they distracted Rintiala, it would mean her death.

Finally, Cy jabbed with all his synthetic strength at the center of Rintiala's visor, hoping to knock her unconscious. Instead she twisted her head at the last minute, and without moving kicked from deep in her hips, directly into Cy's right arm, a kick so powerful it sent him spinning. His weapon went skittering away on the carbocrete.

Cy jumped to his feet like a cat, but Seamus came from behind the single-minded synthetic, beheading him in a coup-de-grace. Cy's head rolled away. Rintiala removed her helmet in triumph,

“Thanks,” she said breathlessly.

Without flinching, Seamus placed the tip of his blade under her chin. “I promised no shooting, but I didn't say anything about stabbing.”

Faster than Hunts-The-Ruins eye's could follow. Alatheia responded by putting her arrow under Zeb's chin. The boy cried out: "Daddy! Help me."

"My daughter for your son. That's the deal," Alathea said.

"You'd better agree, or you'll both lose a child," Finds-Water said quietly. Seamus dropped his saber. Rintiala bent down and picked it up as she backed away.

"The Colt also," Finds-Water added. Seamus drew it, and pointed it at Finds-Water's chest.

"Why shouldn't I just get rid of all of you right now?" he asked. "I've got other sons."

"Daddy, don't do it!" Zeb pleaded.

Dirt, dust and noise. From the southeast and southwest, dozens of dune buggies, with armed and armored Apache Police pulled up. Some of the dune buggies were carrying Western Bandit prisoners, those snipers who had slinked away.

Seamus dropped his gun.

\* \* \*

The four---Rintiala, Hunts-the-Ruins, Finds-Water and Alathea, stood in a circle, surrounded by Apache Police. Finds-Water took the Trader's medallion from his neck, and draped it on Hunts-The-Ruins.

“Hunts-The-Ruins, in the name of the Trader's Council, I declare you to be a full Apache Trader..From this day forward, the Phoenix Apache are now the eighth tribe of Apacheria, and Paradise Valley is their new administrative capital.” the old Apache solemnly intoned.

“No!” cried Seamus Espinoza, standing in front of Find's Water's dune buggy  
“This is the only home we've got!”

“In the presence of all,” Alatheia began, removing her Cyan Dragon cloak, and draping it on Rintiala's shoulders. “I, Alatheia of the Healer's Guild, declare you Rintiala to be a full First Sister. May you lead your people wisely.”

The whole assembly turned their vehicles around, heading back down East MacDonald to Agua Linda park, to debrief.

Finds-Water asked Hunts-the-Ruins: "So what do you think of your first day as an Apache Trader?"

"Those I thought to be enemies were not; those I thought were allies couldn't be trusted." Hunts-the-Ruins answered:

"About normal, then," Finds-Water replied. "But you can't judge the Nueguans too harshly. They're not really human anymore."

"I'm not sure how human you and I are anymore," Hunts-the-Ruins answered sadly.