

1. Mystery in Mudstone

Tim Ruehn hated his job, but it had its moments. As a paleontology grad student, he had known that the gateway to academia was narrow, and like most PhDs, he hadn't made it. Faced with teaching biology in a junior college or consulting, he had chosen consulting. And he hated the job. Typically he had to run in just ahead of the bulldozers, digging like a madman to snatch whatever could be saved. Even if it was some photogenic fossil that the developer could use for good PR, the bulldozers triumphed over anything like real science, whatever the law said. It ate at him. In compensation for the constant, dark cloud of despair that hemmed his horizons, they paid him...well, something. Little job security of course, and certainly no respect, but at least he could afford a condo. With a roommate paying half the mortgage.

This current assignment was one of those moments. Not good exactly, merely better than average. It was properly hot, dry, and dusty, like any good paleo dig site. Few plants to hide the rocks from view. The site was deep in the California desert, closer to Vegas than the coast. It was true wilderness, square miles of creosote flats and saltbush surrounded by untouched desert mountains, a plain dissected by arroyos that were scoured by infrequent flash floods, floods like the ones that had kept him away from the site for the previous three weeks.

He was surveying the site of a future giant solar plant.

Tim liked solar power, even had a little solar charger with him for his gear. But this monster was something else. His company's client was either a giant multinational or backed by one. Ownership kept changing every few months as the international financial crisis chewed on, and Tim was no longer sure who was in charge. Initially he had hoped that the developers were truly green, but after hearing the results of a couple of high-level meetings, he decided that they were mostly after the money the government was throwing at the green energy sector. He was admittedly bitter about it, no matter that they were paying his salary.

The project site was wilderness, undeveloped government land with minimal legal protection. Through laws dating back to the homesteading days, the touch of a shovel or bulldozer "improved" such land, causing its price to go up. Untouched wilderness was the cheapest land of all. The fact that sane modern people thought wilderness was intrinsically valuable held little legal sway. Early on, the moneymen decided cheap land was best, and that opinion had held even as the site changed hands. They were going to build miles of roads and power lines to get to it, just so they could scrape it bare and build their giant power plant.

Of course there was little water to keep the solar arrays clean. Of course they would drain the desert's few springs dry to keep it working. Of course it would be safer and more efficient to put solar panels on vacant lots or roofs in the cities. Probably cheaper too. Tim thought the whole thing was yet another boondoggle. He figured that he and his fellow consultants were out there to provide environmental camouflage for the politicians, while the builders cleaned up and stuck the power consumers with the bill. And professionals that they were, the consultants did that work.

Tim's biologist colleagues on the site worked under a black cloud of real despair. They were turning up rare plants and animals left and right, but word was that the

agencies weren't in the mood to save them, any more than they'd save fossils. The biologists were there to catalog everything that was going to be lost, and that was the best they could do.

As a paleontologist, Tim was slightly luckier. His animals were already dead. He'd written class papers on mass extinctions, and he knew that, given ten million years or so, Earth would recover from the current mass extinction. The long, cool perspective of the deep past comforted him. He just wondered if there was any way he could get his bones fossilized for whatever intelligence evolved in the next geological epoch, the postanthropocene. Given the current mess, that seemed like the best future he could expect.

At least he was out of the office, away from the paperwork, out hunting bones for another few weeks. It was a good time, he figured. Good enough.

Naturally, he was in an arroyo, walking on the dried mud from the last flash flood. The green rosettes dotting the channel promised a beautiful display of desert flowers, but they also got in his way. He wanted bare rock.

Up ahead was a potential gold mine. The surging flood had undercut a cliff, and the weakened mudstone had given way once the water left. Tim knew that the whole area was a former lakebed dating back about 14 or 15 million years, middle Miocene. He was hoping that he would find some freshwater clams, fish fossils, possibly even something rarer. Maybe a mastodon had drowned crossing the lake.

If it was *really* rare, he probably wouldn't even report it. The whole area was scheduled to be bulldozed flat anyway, and they'd already intimated that Finds would only cause trouble for whoever reported them. That made him angry, and he had made a midnight decision before he started the survey. Anything special he found would contribute to his retirement fund, once he sold it. No one else needed to know.

He clambered carefully across the debris pile, picking his way around dead brush caught in the rocks, carefully checking for snakes, but mostly scanning the rocks, looking, looking for any hint of a fossil.

At first the pillow-sized dark lump didn't appear to be a fossil, but the more he studied it, the less sense it made. Embedded in a slab that had split off a fresh cliff-face, it had fallen to the bottom of the gully. There were things sticking out of it.

Tim hauled out his Hastings triplet magnifier and knelt, examining it closely, over and over. He tested it with his knife point, just to make sure it was a fossil. It was. It was genuine.

Suddenly excited, he scrambled back to the center of the gully, hauling his GPS unit out of its case. As he feared, the cheap-ass unit, a last minute replacement, could barely detect a signal even in a shallow gully, so he climbed to the top of the bank to mark his find. After an agonizing two minutes, the little GPS unit had its initial fix. He knew roughly where he was.

He started to push the buttons to log his find, then he stopped, thinking as the little GPS narrowed its fix down to 100 feet, then 50. Finally, he looked around to see if any of his coworkers were within sight. They were not. Time for a change of plan. Leaving the GPS running and the point unlogged, he scrambled back down to his treasure.

The fossil was heavy, too heavy to carry far, too fragile and important for a hacked extraction. And it was far too weird to show anyone, even admit that he had found it. Not profitable, certainly, but irresistible nonetheless. Sweating, he managed to chip off much of the slab that imprisoned it. Then he painfully hauled the fossil up and out of the gully, away from the doom of another flash flood, to an improvised hiding place, out of the way under a creosote bush, covered with a pile of sand. He wrote down the GPS coordinates for the pile, knowing that anything recorded in his GPS would be uploaded by his employers.

This one would be his and his alone. But he would have to be clever to get it out.

Still, he was a professional. And because he was a professional, he went back down and described the outcrop the fossil came from, as best he could, writing in the blank pages at the end of his notebook where they could be removed. He knew that context would really matter for this find.

Two weeks later, the fossil sat on the dingy beige carpet of his condo. It had taken a secretive weekend jaunt with his roommate to extract the thing, but he had got it home. Now he had to figure out what to do with it.

His roommate Rob Alessio stood over him, looking down. Rob's family had money passed down from the Gilded Age, enough to get Rob a good education. A few years out of school he was into programming, saving the world, and smoking anything interesting, in approximately that order. Even his desert gear had hemp and recycled tires in it.

"Aliens or time travelers?" Rob asked, holding the new little HD video camera on Tim. They'd both agreed that, while taking the piece was, well, illegal, it was vital to document what they were doing. The truth was more important than the law. Especially a law that didn't protect such important fossils.

"If they were aliens, they were human-sized," Tim said. "You know, it's going to take months to get it out of the matrix."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Old fashioned way. Dental picks, dremel maybe. Brushes too."

"On this rug?"

"Why not?"

"Ummm, Tanya might not like it. And you know, she's so into Facebook, she'll post it to her 3,000 friends."

"Can't you go over to Tanya's more often?"

“No. Her roommate’s a psycho.”

“So where then?”

“Your room?”

Tim thought about the clutter in his bedroom, the larger of the condo’s two. “I could, but the dust is going to get bad.”

“Rent a storage locker?”

“Lockers don’t have power outlets, Rob.”

“Oh.” Rob ruminated, chewing on his lip. “How about the laundry room?”

Tim considered the options with a sigh. “I guess my bedroom would work,” he said.

“You’ll just have to vacuum a lot.”

“Yeah. Let’s set up a workspace and mount the camera, okay?”

“Okay.”

Summer came and went. The solar project’s environmental impact statement came out, minus any mention of anomalous fossils. The feds approved the project despite the number of endangered animals and plants that would be wiped out, and the desert Indian tribes sued. Buoyed by casino revenues, they were finally able to protect their sacred sites. The project stalled in court as the lawyers lined their pockets by the hour.

With no work on the horizon and his boss getting itchy about the lack of contracts, Tim took his vacation. He told his coworkers that he was going to visit relatives, but instead he spent weeks in his condo, meticulously separating his find from the petrified lake mud that had cocooned it. The noise from the dust collectors he’d installed covered up the arguments that Rob had with his girlfriend, the second after Tanya had dumped him. Megan? Judy? Tim never had been able to keep track of them all.

This fossil was worth his full attention. The more he worked, the more secrets the fossil revealed.

It was the fossilized remnants of someone's daypack, and it looked like it would fit a human. In grad school, he'd once drunkenly wondered how nylon would fossilize, and now he knew: in the low-oxygen mud of a Miocene lake, it fossilized pretty well. A bit over half the fabric had survived in mineralized form, and the mudstone retained the imprints where it had not. The pack's color had disappeared in the dingy mottled gray of the fossil, but it was better than most of the specimens Tim worked on.

One of the shoulder straps had partially survived, along with the remains of a plastic buckle for the second. The pack also showed the remnants of a waist belt and the other useless dangly fittings that pack designers invariably stuck on. Tim had never understood them, and figured it was fashion getting in the way of utility yet again. What remained of the pack showed a clamshell design perfect for any college campus in the U.S. By carefully slicing it in half, he had found a warped plastic water bottle inside and the corroded remnants of 30 shotgun shells, crimped plastic tube fossils surrounding a mass of metal salts, where the shot and brass had all corroded together. These were swaddled in indecipherable mineralized organic traces of whatever had succumbed to the microbes and the mud. He didn't know much about guns, but a few measurements and a few minutes on the internet told him they were indistinguishable from a modern twelve gauge. Undoubtedly it had been dropped by a time traveler.

There had been no sign of a shotgun in the fossil site, or a skeleton. Just fragments of a few freshwater shells in the rock matrix around the pack. Since the pack was filled with petrified mud, Tim figured a flood had swept the pack into the lake. Or the pack had fallen off a boat. Or something.

However it had gotten there, its message was unequivocal: there were time travelers, and they used modern clothes and tools. Tim and Rob sat and talked about it, sometimes over beer, sometimes over a joint,

sometimes over both. They wondered how time travel worked, whether they could figure it out themselves, or whether it was some government or mob conspiracy. They told no one else, being paranoid of discovery, but they meticulously documented the artifact nonetheless.

Despite their caution, their work was noticed, and the observers grew excited. They knew what to do, and they searched for a way to share their precious knowledge.

2. Lights in the Marsh

On the evening of the fall equinox, California Department of Fish and Game Warden Gavin McCormick got the call as he was dressing for his date. A couple of duck biologists working at the Grizzly Island Wildlife Area reported multiple SUVs heading into the reserve at sundown. No one was supposed to be out there but the researchers and the refuge manager, so Gavin and his squad-mate Mark Doyle had responded, speeding west on I-80 in their dark green pickups. The hunt was on.

Gavin had cancelled his date of course, just another night in the life of a single warden. Even if it was allegedly his day off. He'd never wanted to deal with the 9-to-5 world, and he hoped Julie would understand. Again.

Grizzly Island was a swath of ex-farmland being reclaimed by the Grizzly Bay marshes downstream of the Sacramento Delta, a couple of hours east of San Francisco and culturally on another planet. CDFG managed it as a wildlife refuge and hunting area, marshes and fields for ducks and pheasants, roads and trails for the hunters and birders. More importantly, Grizzly Island was the home of a small herd of rare Tule Elk, animals prized by trophy hunters around the U.S. The highly regulated elk season had ended the week before, and both wardens suspected they were going to find poachers, possibly meth tweakers looking for some privacy and maybe a place to deal. Both

were dangerous, and they were the only two wardens within range to respond. As usual.

Gavin hadn't been on the island in over a month, and he had forgotten how very flat it was. The grassy hills leading in were gorgeous, pale and luminous under the full harvest moon that rose above the eastern hills, low in a sky blown clear by a gusting west wind. He spotted Mark's truck behind him, but no one else was on the road. Normal people were home eating dinner, not stalking bad guys through the brilliant night.

They convened at the refuge office, collected statements from the biologists who bunked there, and checked the map before heading off together, driving slowly. Grizzly Island was treacherous at night, the roads poorly paved and ditched on either side.

They stopped now and then, climbing onto their trucks with their binoculars to scan for any sign of the SUVs. They saw nothing as they headed down, past the dry trampled barley fields the manager planted to feed the animals, past each of four dirt parking lots, closer and closer to the waters of Grizzly Bay. Finally, near parking lot five on their map, they saw a ring of lights ahead, white-clad figures within it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Mark, as the mallard hens quacked around them in the ponds and the teals whistled in alarm.

Gavin listened to the drum's regular beat as he studied the figures. "I dunno. Maybe they're witches doing voodoo or something."

Mark hissed his disgust. "Trespassing, whatever they're doing."

"Do you see any signs of guns or watchers?" Gavin asked.

"No."

"Let's have a chat with them." Gavin loosened his nine millimeter semiautomatic in its holster, just in case. Wardens were always outmanned, often outgunned, and

very fast on the draw. He always made sure he could get to his gun. Just in case.

As they drove into the last parking lot, two men in dark hoodies and jeans stepped into the road to block him. Gavin saw they were carrying stout staffs and hit the flashers, red and blue. The men froze as Gavin pulled to a stop.

Rolling down the window he said, "Fish and game. How ya doing? Could you step off the road and put those sticks down please? Now."

Mark pulled his truck up beside Gavin's, flashers on as well.

"Step away from the sticks," Gavin continued. "Thank you. Keep your hands where I can see them."

They complied. Gavin radioed the situation in to dispatch, killed the engine, and hopped out.

"How you guys doing?" he asked, working to de-escalate the situation.

"You're interrupting our ritual, officer," one of them said.

"Really? What ritual is it?"

"Autumn equinox," the man said.

Beautiful night for it," Gavin said, studying them carefully. They didn't look like they'd fight, but he kept his hands on his belt near his gun just in case, an ostensibly neutral position.

"Yeah." The man allowed.

"Did you know the refuge is closed after sundown?"

"No," said the talker, while the other took a step back.

"Just stand still, please." Gavin told him, then turned to the talker, a twentyish, long-haired white dude with a bulky earring visible next to his fashionably precise stubble. "How many of you are there?"

"There's, uh....twelve in the circle, two of us."

"Are you guys armed? Any guns, knives, anything?"

"Just the sticks. We're supposed to keep people away from the ritual, not hurt anyone. It's private is all."

“I see. Gentlemen, there’s two of us and fourteen of you.” Gavin sighed theatrically, to take the sting out of it. “Just so we all stay safe, I’m going to cuff you, okay?”

“But...”

“It’s just so we’re all safe. Turn around please, both of you. Put your hands behind your backs, palms out. Thank you.” As he and Mark cuffed the men, Gavin said, “You’re not under arrest or anything. This is just for everyone’s safety. Let me help you sit down over here,” well away from their staffs, “and we’ll get this sorted out as fast as we can, so we can uncuff you guys.”

Mark strode ahead to interrupt the ritual, and Gavin jogged a few paces to catch up with him.

The ritualists had showed a shred of sense, at least. Their circle was on the end of the packed dirt parking lot, not on the tinder dry grass a few meters away. Some sort of cluttered altar, decked with fat, sputtering candles, sat in the center of a wide ring of nineteen hissing propane lanterns. They’d stopped their singing and drumming when the trucks showed up, and they were filing out of the circle murmuring as Mark and Gavin strode up.

“Fish and Game, folks,” Gavin said loudly. “How ya doing. Put your hands out where we can see them. Yes, you too ma’am. Now, please. Thank you.”

Mark circled away so they were two separate targets with separate fields of fire. Just in case.

“You’re interrupting our ritual, officer,” said a bearded man. His stained white robes were trimmed with gold braid and billowed out over his paunch. On top he was wearing some sort of white ritual bandana draped on his head, like an ancient Egyptian doo-rag. Gavin saw his beard was dark and wild, the beard of an Old Testament Prophet, and his sharp, pale eyes studied the warden through coke-bottle glasses. Even his English carried an accent, from some odd corner of the British Isles that Gavin didn’t recognize.

“Did you know that the refuge is closed at dusk?”

“No, but we’re not hurting anything.”

“Let’s just work that out, okay? Any of you armed?”

“There’s a bronze sword back in the circle, but we’re not carrying iron.”

“No guns or knives on you, any material?”

“No officer, we’re a peaceful group.”

“But you have a sword?”

“It’s for the ritual. It’s bronze.”

“Uh-hunh. What kind of ritual is it?”

“We’re druids, officer, and we wanted to celebrate the autumnal equinox away from civilization.”

“I see. What’s your name?”

“Bill,” he said, clearly biting off a longer name.

He didn’t look like anything special, but Gavin sensed an aura of power around him, fed perhaps by his group of acolytes behind him. Time to separate him from the flock.

“Can you come here a second, Bill? Mark, can you talk with these good people?”

“Why...” asked Bill,

“Just come with me, Bill. It’s a nice evening, hey?”

Gavin stepped back, keeping everyone in view, as Mark stepped forward to get names. Gavin risked a glance and saw that the guards were still sitting where he’d told them to. He walked slowly until Bill came up beside him, studying him intently.

Gavin studied him back, “Problem, Bill?”

“I feel like I know you,” Bill said.

“Bill, I’m pretty sure we’ve never met. I’d remember.” Gavin said.

“Probably in another life,” Bill sighed.

Gavin refrained from rolling his eyes. “Where are you from, anyway? I can’t place your accent.”

“Grew up in Perth, Scotland,” Bill said. “Worked in Raleigh before I came here.”

“You a citizen?”

“Yes officer.”

“Just checking,” Gavin said, before making his point. “Bill, you hear all those ducks quacking?”

“Yes?” Bill said grumpily, looking away.

“That’s their alarm call,” Gavin said. “There are hundreds of ducks out there that are upset about this. You feel that wind too?”

“Yes, it’s been hard keeping the candles lit.”

“Uh hunh,” Gavin’s cop cynicism hammered through the two, flat syllables. “Do you have anything to put a fire out if those candles fall over or spark the grass?”

“But there’s water all around. The marsh won’t burn.”

“It burns every few years, Bill, and it’s tinder dry right now,” Gavin replied, snapping a dry tule stalk to make his point. “And there’s a strong wind blowing. This isn’t safe at all, and you’re going to have to shut it down and go somewhere else.”

Bill sighed. “I see, but...”

“Gavin, can you come here a second?” Mark radioed quietly.

“Let’s go back to your group, okay?” Gavin said. He walked the druid back, and Gavin caught up to Mark. “What’s up?”

“We’ll need to cuff ‘em,” Mark said quietly.

“Problems?”

“Yeah. The altar.”

“Okay.”

In the next few minutes, they put metal handcuffs and plasticuffs on all of the celebrants.

“This is police brutality,” shouted one weedy looking middle-aged man, scraggly beard jutting out like a defiant billy goat.

“No sir,” Mark said, “There’s fourteen of you and two of us. We respect you, is all. Once we’re done making everything safe for all of us, those cuffs will come off. Okay?”

“It’s not okay, you fish pig, messing up our sacred ceremony.” said the man.

“Calm down Aidan,” said an older woman.

“Don’t you calm me down, Moira, I’ll...”

“Aidan, chill.” Bill said, and the man shut up.

Gavin and Mark glanced at each other, eyebrows raised.

“What’s up?” Gavin asked Mark, as they strode past the hissing lanterns to the altar.

“Check these out,” Mark said, shining his light on the altar. The wobbly portable table was covered with a white cloth embroidered with some sort of Celtic-y knotwork pattern, the top full of a clutter of stuff, spattered by the wax of the candles that burned atop it. On the north side of the table sat a pair of enormous straw-colored bear paws, almost certainly from a grizzly. On the east side was the wing of some raptor Gavin couldn’t identify by flashlight. The south had an elk antler, perhaps from a Tule elk, perhaps not. The west side held the dried body of a huge salmon, a Sacramento River Chinook if Gavin wasn’t mistaken. A sheathed short sword and a bronze sickle sat beside the candles, along with a big quartz crystal, some singed white sage in an abalone shell, and various other gewgaws and ritualistic things Gavin couldn’t identify. He hauled out his evidence camera, made sure the flash was on, and started taking pictures.

“Anything else?” He asked Mark.

“Not without doing a search of all their bags. That’s sword’s sharp, by the way. Don’t let them near it.”

“Uh-hunh. Let’s start getting names and addresses first, okay? Then we’ll search them and their vehicles.”

It took over thirty minutes, because half the ritual participants didn’t have identification, and those that did had left their wallets in the SUVs. Mark and Gavin took turns calling the names in to Dispatch. They were all clean, as far as Dispatch knew.

“So when are you going to take these things off of us?” asked William (“Bill”) Arthur McEwan, the leader of the would-be druid band. Gavin had taken him out of earshot of the rest to interrogate him, while Mark tended the other druids, who were getting more vocal about the cuffs and the cops.

“Bill, whose bear paws are those?”

“They’re mine.”

“Did you buy them?”

“I got them from a friend up in Alaska.”

“Did you pay anything for them?”

“I paid shipping. He sent them as a favor.”

“You got any paperwork to show that?”

“Not with me. Why?”

“How about that hawk wing?”

“Found it under a power line.”

“And the antler?”

“It’s a shed antler, found it in the woods up on the North Coast. It’s from a Roosevelt elk. Why are you asking all these questions?”

“Uh-hunh. And the salmon?”

“That’s Aidan’s.”

“And the abalone shell?”

“Bought it at a store years ago. Why are you asking me all this?”

“You’re telling me the whole truth here?”

“Yes, I’m an honest man, officer. Is something wrong?”

“Bill, I’m glad you’re being honest. Sale of bear parts is a felony in California, and possession of any part of a hawk is a federal crime under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. I can’t identify that antler, so it’s not a Roosevelt elk, which I’ve hunted, and the salmon looks like a Sacramento Chinook, which means it’s probably another endangered species. That ab shell looks like a black abalone, which is also protected. Is there anything you want to change about your story?”

“No officer, I’m telling you the truth.”

“I hope so, because if I find out you’re lying to me, it’s going to add to your penalties. Nothing to add?”

“No.”

“Okay, let’s get you back. I’ve got to talk with the others.”

Another half-hour of checking confirmed that everyone had consistent stories. A search of the site and vehicles failed to turn up anything other than a few marijuana buds and a medical marijuana license. Mark and Gavin loaded the illegal animal parts in the lockbox in the back of Gavin’s truck, then uncuffed the restive druids.

“Okay Bill, since you were honest with us, we’re going to write this up, rather than taking you and Aidan to jail for felony possession of endangered species and bear parts. We are confiscating those pieces, and we’re going to be visiting you both tomorrow to get the paperwork on those items. All of you are getting cited for trespassing.”

Moira quieted Aidan’s complaint about the fish pigs yet again. Gavin and Mark let the remark roll off without reacting.

After the paperwork was all signed and countersigned, the wardens watched as the druids dismantled their ceremonial site. The two lawmen stood well away, aware that the druids had potential weapons, but they just doused the lanterns and piled their things into the car.

“I’ll drive out first,” Gavin finally said. “Bill, have your people follow me, and Mark will come along behind. Okay?”

Bill nodded grimly, stepping into his dark Chevy SUV.

Gavin fired up his truck, carefully turned it around to avoid bogging in the marsh, and waited until the perps lined up behind him before leading the cavalcade back out of the refuge.

The potholed dirt road went past a triangular pond, cattails on its edge, drainage ditch on the other. Halfway down the pond, a man in muddy jeans and a gray hoodie

scrambled out of the cattails ahead of Gavin, waving his arms frantically. Gavin slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting him, praying that he wouldn't get rear-ended by the SUVs. He didn't. Checking his gun was free, he rolled down the window.

"Fish and Game," he called. "What's the problem?"

"Officer, you gotta see this," said the man, his face a pale oval shadowed by a beard.

"Wait a sec." Gavin radioed the situation to Mark, then stepped out of the truck.

"What's up?"

"This." A brilliant flickering green light engulfed Gavin's vision, freezing him in place for a terrifying, timeless instant. Training finally pulled him out of it, and he ducked behind the door. His night vision was gone, and he was sure the man had just flashed him with a powerful laser pointer. He drew his gun as he glanced quickly into the cab, grateful that he could still see its beige interior.

Using the door as a shield, he stuck his gun and his light around the edge and shouted, "Freeze! Drop the laser!"

There was no one standing on the road.

Gavin stood, in full adrenaline panic, spinning to try and find the green flasher. Not only was the man gone, the vehicles behind him had vanished as well.

As he looked back, another white flashlight flashed him.

"Mark! Don't shoot!"

"Gavin! That you?"

"Yes."

"Where the hell are those fucking witches?"

There was no one on the road between them, no SUVs, no people, no tracks, not even the dust the vehicles had kicked up.

Gavin dove back into the cab, scrambling furiously for his binoculars. Jumping into the truck bed, he desperately scanned around them. He could see a small elk

herd nearby as they splashed away, and ducks were airborne in the moonlight, quacking in full alarm. But there was no sign of any vehicle, any people. They had all vanished.

“What the fuck?” Mark said. He was junior to Gavin, six months out of rookie probation, and he still got zits where his uniform rubbed his throat. But he was now pale and scared under the full moon.

On a stomach-turning hunch, Gavin checked the locked case in the back of the truck. It was still locked, but the bear paws were missing, as was the raptor wing, the antler, the salmon, and the abalone. So were all the citations from his pad and the notes from the spiral notebook in his pants pocket. Mark’s paperwork had been similarly stripped. The pictures in their cameras were gone. Gavin finally checked his watch and noticed that forty-five minutes had passed.

“Now what do we do, Gavin?” Mark asked plaintively.

“Write down everything you remember about those fuckers first. Then we call the L.T. and ruin his evening too.” Gavin prided himself on avoiding profanity, preferring to reserve it for when he truly needed it. Now was a good time.

3. Into the Private Sector

Julie dumped Gavin a week after the incident, claiming she wanted someone who knew when to take a day off. He'd heard it before. Twice. He'd figured an ER nurse would get it, but he was wrong.

No one believed Gavin's and Mark's story of the disappearing druids, especially when they couldn't find system records of their calls to dispatch. They had remembered names and even a few addresses, but the people did not live there, hadn't lived there for years. Their lieutenant put up with their investigation for a few days, but finally advised them to forget it if they wanted to keep their jobs. They did.

Nine months later, California state budget cuts made the issue moot, as Gavin and Mark's jobs evaporated, like a vernal pool under the merciless July sun of a new fiscal year, in a state trying desperately to close a yawning budget deficit. The chronically understaffed wardens took the losses hard, but there was little they could do. Everyone had known it was coming, and Gavin had saved some money from his meager salary against the day. Still, wardens more junior to him kept their jobs, and he wondered if the Grizzly Island episode had cost him his career.

Worse, due to ongoing budget cuts throughout the local governments, few police or fire departments were hiring, and there were a lot of experienced people chasing

the few jobs available. Gavin read the employment websites grimly, trying to figure out what to do next.

Two days later, Carol decided to treat Gavin to beer and sympathy. She was a friend from college, a fellow hunter who had gone to grad school at Davis the same winter he had entered the warden academy. Now she'd dragged him down from the hills, and if the brewpub was more upscale than his usual haunts, at least its cold beer beat the dusty heat of a Sacramento Valley summer. The outdoor seating area was bustling that July evening, young professionals taking the edge off the day.

"Four hours looking online, and I didn't find anything," Gavin said in disgust. "It's bad all over."

"How far are you looking?" She asked, as their waitress put their order down.

"All over the state. I'm not thrilled about moving to L.A., but another few months, I might even go there. Better than being a mall cop."

"You'd die in the smog, Gavin. And don't forget the traffic," she said, with the certainty of a So-Cal ex-pat. How her father had taught her to hunt in those dry hills was something that Gavin had never fathomed.

"It's not that bad. Remember I put a year down in San Diego as a rookie."

"Not the same thing, but you're always a glutton for punishment." She paused to taste her stout. "Any other ideas? I know you hate the nine-to-five world. What about grad school? You can choose which 60 hours of the week you work too. Maybe see some of the kids you busted, all grown up now."

"Yeah right. The UCs got hammered by that budget as hard as Fish and Game did." He paused. "You're going to be okay?"

"Yeah," She sighed. "The army funding helps. They're going green in a big way, so we've got the contract for another year." she frowned, then shrugged. "Better than

some of my friends here. They're hitting the Prozac pretty hard right now."

Gavin nodded, draining his bottle and waving to the waitress for another.

"So tell me what happened last fall," she said, raven eyes sharpening on him, insatiably curious.

"What do you mean?"

"I know you said something really weird went down before Halloween, but you couldn't talk about it. What happened?"

Gavin studied her. "You know I can't..." He stopped, looking around. The patio tables were filling in, people brushing past the table as he talked. Gavin instinctively checked them for trouble, but they were simply carrying glasses and pitchers. No perps here, he reminded himself.

"Never mind," he continued. "The answer is that officially nothing happened. Unofficially, I'm not sure whether we ran into a CIA operation or a bunch of ghosts." He told the story of the disappearing druids, then shrugged. "I've never heard anyone else tell a story like that, so either Mark and I were hallucinating, or we ran into something seriously weird. Whatever it was, it didn't leave any traces we could follow. Even Brian's service dog couldn't find a human trail out there, and she's pretty damn good."

Carol shook her head. "And I thought grad school was strange. Wait til I tell Joanna." At Gavin's raised eyebrow, she said, "I thought I told you about her. We've been together for six weeks. Thinking about getting a place together in the fall."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks, anyway, she's into that kind of weird stuff. Ghosts, chi, yoga."

"Ah, come on, Carol. Keep it quiet. That story maybe cost me my job, you know. No reason to tell everyone I'm nuts."

She studied him, then shrugged. “You just repeated it in a bar, and you want to keep it secret?”

Gavin smiled ruefully. “True. But seriously, I want to look normal so I can get another job.”

“What about getting a suit and joining the nine-to-five world?”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t know. What would you be good at?”

Gavin considered, running his fingers through the brown buzz cut he still kept regulation short. “I like law enforcement. Not the office so much.”

“But these days you’ve got to keep all your options open. You’ve got a big skill set, and didn’t you tell me that warden training was the best in the state? You should be able to find something.”

A woman paused as she walked by the table. “I’m terribly sorry to butt in, but did I hear that you were looking for a job?”

Gavin checked her over. At first he thought she was Hispanic, but on second glance, he changed that to Indian, probably a northern California tribe, tanned skin and dark brown hair, late twenties like him, pleasant round features, alert black eyes behind thick-rimmed glasses. She wore the anonymous clothes of a grad student or field worker, jeans and a t-shirt, small silver pendant, rings and shoulder bag. Her t-shirt advertised some old conservation conference.

“Maybe,” Gavin said. “Why?”

“Can I sit down for a sec?”

Gavin nudged a chair out to make room. “Sure,” he said neutrally.

A gangling thirtyish man came over to her. His memorably ugly face was camouflaged by an Abe Lincoln beard, and his bushy eyebrows telegraphed concern from behind his glasses.

“What’s up, Imya?” He said.

“These guys were talking about job hunting. I thought I’d stop and ask. You know we’re looking.”

“In a bar?” he asked.

“It’s Davis. Better chance here. I’ll be along in a sec, Sven. Tell them to save me some beer.” Imya turned back. “I’m really sorry to interrupt, but we’re short-staffed. If you’re looking for work, we’re looking for people.”

“What do you do?” asked Carol.

“We’re environmental consultants, out of Berkeley, and...”

“Not interested,” Gavin said.

Imya studied him thoughtfully. “Let’s do this properly. Can I get you anything to drink while I make my pitch? No commitment, just me taking your time.”

Gavin thought, then shrugged. “Sure. Thanks.” he lifted his bottle and drained it.

“Happy to oblige. Hang on a sec.” She noted what they were drinking and got fresh ones from the bar. “I’m Imya Davis.” She got their names. Gavin expected a soft handshake, but her hands were firm and calloused. “Now, if I can be nosy, you look like you were in law enforcement. What branch?”

“I was a warden. Fish and Game.”

“Sorry you got laid off. What happened?”

“Budget cuts. Two days ago.”

“That sucks,” Imya said with real sympathy, and paused to take a polite sip. “Let me tell you what we’re working on.”

“I’m not interested in working in Berkeley or being a consultant, Imya,” said Gavin.

“Not even doing environmental law enforcement?”

Gavin studied her. “Tell me.”

“We do all sorts of environmental jobs, Archeology too. Lately, because of the hammering CDFG and the Coastal Commission have been taking, we’ve been working with an environmental law firm. Developers are really cutting corners with EIRs and tech reports, a few of them flat out lie. We’ve found that it’s profitable to document what they’re doing wrong and sue them under CEQA or

NAGPRA. Every time the lawyers win, we invest in the winnings finding more cases.”

Gavin nodded. “Clever. But I’m not a CEQA expert. Why do you need me?”

“We’re mostly biologists and archeologists,” Imya said. “We’re running into all these legal requirements about chains of custody for our evidence, and that’s not something we’re trained in. Plus we need people with the instinct to know when we’re being lied to, which is a lot. The CEQA part is easy.” She paused. “Honestly, I’ve been hoping to find an ex-warden or someone similar, because we’re seeing some pretty sketchy stuff right now.”

Gavin nodded. “Makes sense. I apologize for blowing you off, Imya.”

“Apology accepted,” She reached into her purse. “Here’s my card. Give me a call if you want to know more.”

Gavin studied the card. “Ohlone Consulting?”

Imya nodded. “Name could be worse. At least it’s pronounceable.”

“True. If I can be nosy for a second, are you guys all in the tribes?”

“No. Why do you ask?” Imya’s face grew still.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to give offense. I know about the Ohlone tribe, and you look like...Yurok?”

Imya’s eyebrows went up. “Not quite. Karuk. Good guess.”

“Beautiful area up there. Carol and I went to Chico, and we liked to hike out there whenever we could.”

Imya nodded, relaxing. “Yeah, that’s where my folks are. Getting back to Ohlone, the owner liked the name is all.”

“I’ll have to check it out,” Gavin said. “Thanks for the beers.”

“Any time.” she had a broad white smile. “Now I can expense them. Give us a call.” She stood and vanished into the crowd as Gavin shook his head.

Carol studied Gavin. “You’ve still got weird stuff happening, Gav,” she noted. “I’ve never had anyone come up and offer me an interview. Weird thing was, she wasn’t hitting on you. Maybe she really wants to give you a job.”

“Makes up for getting canned.” Gavin said. “I’ll check them out before I do anything about this, make sure they’re legit and not a front for a drug gang. That’s a great scam though, if they’re actually making money suing developers. We had so many big-scale pot grows and poaching rings to bust that we had to give the developers a pass.”

“And if they’re honest?”

Gavin grimaced. “Berkeley?” He took another pull on the bottle and shrugged. “It’s something at least, if nothing better turns up.”

“Hey, at least you won’t have to drive up from LA to go hunting. We’re on for deer rifle season this fall, right?”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Good. Joanna’s never tasted venison, can you believe it? I’ve got to get her outside more.”

July simmered on, and nothing better turned up. Gavin checked out Ohlone. Their website was blandly commercial, so he asked around and heard no complaints about them. They seemed legit.

Finally, after an email exchange with Imya and her boss, he dry-cleaned his “urban camouflage” interview suit (the one he wore to blend in with the office herd) and headed west down I-80.

He hated Bay Area traffic, but when the I-80 merged with the 580 by Albany, he had to enter the melee, his veteran Ford 250 four-wheeler out of place among the commuter cars and panel trucks. Dourly, he wondered if this job would force him to get a Prius and learn to drink chai lattes. Or how he would hunt without horrifying his coworkers. And more importantly, how he could afford to live in Berkeley.

Ohlone Consulting occupied a shambling three-story monster of a Queen Anne mansion. A stalwart painted lady repurposed for a beige age, her old growth redwood frame would hold for at least another century. She was surrounded by the fenced lots and square anonymous buildings of industrial west Berkeley. Gavin was amused to note that they had native plant landscaping, the weird dark ceanothus cultivar that the nurseries cranked out by the acre, guarded by big tussocks of purple needlegrass that appeared innocuous until touched, discouraging dogs and other vagrants from getting into the landscaping. Clever. So were the viciously spined gooseberries lurking under the discretely barred windows.

The inside, past the green front door and Alice the cheerful Nikkei receptionist, it was renovated Ikea modernist blond wood, bland and surprisingly comfortable. Photos of animals and native flowers decorated the walls above the massed filing cabinets, while notebooks and reports piled in drifts in every unused nook and corner.

Imya's supervisor was one Ruis Ortega, a weather-beaten Hispanic with a trim graying beard, long dark hair in a ponytail, lively eyes under bushy eyebrows. He startled Gavin by having a perfectly normal So-Cal surfer accent.

The interview was normal too; the subject of druids never came up. A week later, Ohlone offered him a job with a salary about twice what he'd earned as a warden. They even helped him find an apartment while he looked for more permanent housing. He wondered if his earlier glum speculations about the Prius and the chai lattes were about to come true too.

He bought Carol and Joanna dinner in celebration, before he packed up his place in the hills and headed towards his new urban life. Carol shook her head, amazed by his change in fortunes, but happy for him nonetheless. Joanna was sure he had a guardian angel.

4. Upper Barstovian

A thin shell of mist swirled around them, as the cold, damp air of a Berkeley winter condensed the moist spring air of somewhere else. The mist sparkled, swirled, effervesced as realities merged. They fell a few inches onto dust, swayed, and stood looking around in awe. It had worked.

They stood in a dusty circle surrounded by a warm savanna, hip-high tussocks of grass, wildflowers blooming all around them. To the west rose two dormant black volcanic cones, encrusted with advancing green. The savanna around them was broken by copses of spreading oaks and other trees, canopies browsed to three meters off the ground. Off to the west they could hear water, and the creek flowed through a tall stand of straight sequoias, branches grown out of the range of browsers. Game trails led enticingly away from the dusty oval, dimpled with tracks and spattered with droppings. Fluffy white clouds blowing in from the west across a blue, blue sky. The air was clean, high mountain clean, the lack of the background urban roar a shock to their civilized ears. The loudest noises around them were birds singing, caterpillars chewing, and the flies buzzing around on fly business.

“Where are we?” Rob said.

Tim stood beside him, attempting to identify everything he could see, for once wishing he’d paid more

attention in botany. The heavy, fragile fossil pack filled his backpack, and he had carried little else, not even a camera.

John Matus chuckled behind them as he rested his wood staff on the ground. "You're in the Miocene, boys. First time lucky." he said, in his high nasal drawl, his face shaded by a battered fedora eccentrically decorated with cabochons of amber and plastic encased insects.

"Where and when, specifically?" rasped a deeper voice. That was Hannibal Alessio, Rob's uncle, the well-heeled financier of this impossible jaunt. More than Tim and Rob, he had come prepared, backpack over duster, new Stetson and worn hiking boots, postmodern cowboy. But his duster concealed the enormous .44 magnum long-barreled revolver he used when hunting hogs down South. The beast mounted a cutting edge holographic gun-sight on its rail, and Hannibal carried it in a custom holster. The artillery balanced the big coffin-handled bowie knife that Hannibal carried easily on his right hip, surrounded by the pouched speedloaders on his webbing harness. His well-used pack held water and survival gear.

Impatience flickered momentarily across John's weathered face, under his eccentrically decorated fedora. "This is the era when that fossil pack was deposited. Tim, what did you say about those beds?"

"Upper Barstovian stage, middle Miocene, 14 something million years before present," Tim recited automatically, still looking around.

"But how do you know?" Hannibal pressed, automatically adopting his executive-grilling-an-underling manner.

Tim took a deep breath and turned. "Mr. Alessio, I read the geology report on the project, of course. Does this look like Berkeley or the Mojave desert to you?"

"Of course not, Tim," Hannibal was looking around, eyes sharp, watching for any threat. Or prey. "But you said that fossil backpack came from a lake, and I don't see any lake around here."

“The spirits took us to a safe place nearby as I directed,” John said. “If we’d emerged over the lake, we’d have drowned before we got to shore.”

“Do they ever get it wrong?” Hannibal said, turning to study the sorcerer.

John simply shook his head. “We’re in the right spot. I can tell.”

“How?”

“Oaks. Their leaves and acorns change through time. Study oaks and they’ll always tell you when you are. Let’s go over and look at that one. Watch for snakes, boys.”

Tim snorted quietly, but obediently followed John and Hannibal over to a nearby tree. Urban Rob brought up the rear, checking each tussock and bush.

“Anyone recognize this oak?” John asked, standing under one tree. A drooping branch brought the leaves down near head height.

“That’s an oak?” Hannibal said sharply. “Those look like laurel or willow leaves to me.”

John merely pointed to the acorn cups above them.

“It’s *Quercus simulata*,” he said. “Extinct in our time, but well known in the fossil floras of mid-Miocene Nevada. Looks more like the oaks down in Florida or Mexico, eh?”

“Yes it does,” Hannibal said quietly. “What animals live around here?”

“All sorts of things,” John said. “Camels, horses, bears, llamas, gomphotheres, grizzly-sized beardedogs... Calm down Mr. Alessio. They’ll leave us alone.”

“Too bad,” Hannibal said, taking his hand off his gun. “It would be a great trophy.”

“And how would you explain a fresh beardedog pelt on your floor?” John asked. “That’s the rule: you can do anything you want, as long as you don’t leave traces.”

Hannibal snorted. “Like that fossil pack?”

“Yep. Like that pack.” John said. “Maybe we should get a pack like that, put in the lake ourselves, destroy the

fossil. That would close the loop and leave the secret with us.”

Hannibal nodded. “Great idea John. Too bad we didn’t bring one with us.”

“Gotta find that lake first.” Tim pointed out.

“Uh, what if we get it wrong?” Rob asked timidly, still checking every tussock for snakes.

“Might,” said John simply. “Closing a loop is always tricky business.”

“Can you get back to this time and place again, John?” Hannibal interjected.

“Sure,” John said. “We’ll mark this place before we go.”

Hannibal nodded. “Wonderful. Then you’re willing to bring us back here again, to close the loop?”

“Depends,” John said, with a crafty glint in his eye. “Not just anyone can journey through deep time, you know.”

“I’m willing to support as many trips back as it takes to do it right,” Hannibal declared. “As you said, figure out how to close the loop, that sort of thing.”

“That can be arranged,” John said loftily, then he scowled. “Hey Rob, don’t do that!”

“Why not?” Rob asked plaintively, the acorn still in halfway to his pocket

“No anachronisms. Doesn’t matter whether it’s a beardog pelt or an acorn. You don’t want to keep evidence that you’re time traveling. Ever!”

Rob glanced at Tim, who shrugged minutely. They’d both heard John brag how he’d harvested his staff in the paratropical forest of Paleocene Greenland. Tim pulled his right hand surreptitiously out of his pant pocket, where he’d put his own acorn.

Rob ostentatiously dropped the acorn, and John nodded.

“Right,” Hannibal announced. “I’m happy, Mr. Matus. We can go back now, or we can look around more. Your pleasure.”

“Of course, Mr. Alessio,” John said, grumpily. “We might as well head back.”

“You’ll mark this spot, so we can come back here again?”

“Sure. I’ll need nineteen rocks, head size or bigger. You three spread out and find them, while I’m setting up. Bring them back to that camel wallow we set down in, while I set up for the return. Be careful!”

Three hours and fourteen million years later, they were hiking out of Berkeley’s Tilden Park on a foggy cold winter night, their exhausted jubilation restrained only by the need not to get caught by a cop. The fossil pack had unlocked the past to them.

Tim and Rob’s anachronistic adventure began months before, out in the baking heat of a Mojave summer. Rob, a tithe-paying member of the Church of Momentary Enthusiasms, decided that he wanted to be a rockhound and learn more about the fossils that Tim worked on. Tim knew the symptoms well enough to recognize another hobby in the infectious stage, but having an understudy doubled the treasures he could lug out, and Rob was better company than most of Tim’s cynical fellow consultants. He was also soft-footed and surprisingly discrete, all to the good when you were walking a fossil across a fence line that some would have kept it behind.

Out on highway 14 south of Indian Wells, they’d stopped at the Jawbone Canyon store for burgers and cold drinks in the shade. The store served the Jawbone Canyon Off-Vehicle Road area, and Tim had suggested a little side jaunt to show Rob the weird geology of the region.

Unfortunately, the store was busy, mostly teenage boys wearing their Kevlar off-road armor, bragging about the steepness of the slopes they had conquered that

morning and pointedly ignoring the EMT ambulance refueling at the gas pump outside. Worse, the deck out front was full of sunburned adult-morph off-roaders, the cardboard recycling box was full of recently emptied beer bottles, and the party was only starting. Tim and Rob were about to leave when they spotted an odd man of indeterminate age, sitting by himself at a scratched formica table inside the crowded store.

“He’s got a couple extra seats,” Rob said. “You think he’d mind?”

Tim shrugged. “Can’t hurt to ask.”

As they closed in, Tim worked out his contact strategy.

“Wow, where did you get that neat hat?” he asked.

It was an obvious question. Even indoors, the man wore a battered fedora, its band a tanned snakeskin studded with insects and fossils, all encased in smooth cabochons of amber and yellow plastic.

The man turned and looked up at him. “Made it myself,” he said gruffly, not inviting contact.

“Sorry,” continued Tim, “Just admiring that diving beetle in the front. Isn’t that a giant Paleocene formicid ant? How’d you manage to get that?”

The man looked up, blood-shot blue eyes taking them in. His face was lined, leathery by the sun, weedy brown beard streaked with gray. His expression flickered between suspicion and genuine interest.

“How’d you know?” He asked.

Tim shrugged. “I do some biology and paleontology work. I’d never thought of putting those on a hat band before.”

Man nodded, relaxing. “Glad to meet a comrade. That water beetle is in the *Matus* genus. Put them up there because that’s my name. Matus. John Matus. Ant I bought in Tucson a couple years ago.”

Tim and Rob ended up eating lunch with Mr. John Matus. They learned far more about the hatband than they

really cared to know, but both of them were used to people with odd obsessions, and John's hat was more original than those of the adrenaline junkies sitting around them. John, it seemed, was another freelancer, mostly doing entomology surveys on endangered insects, fossil hunting here and there, another drifter in the environmental field. Perhaps he was a bit stranger than most, but that didn't bother Tim. Given American society's insectophobia, entomologists were always unique individuals, happiest away from the main stream.

After lunch, they'd all piled in Tim's SUV and four-wheeled up Jawbone Canyon, avoiding the dirt bikers and off-roaders by the simple expedient of trespassing onto one of the giant ranches that surrounded the BLM land that the bikers used. John had little trouble springing the locks that should have stopped them, but he used his body to conceal his technique from the boys. They spent a pleasant afternoon off by themselves, high on windy ridges, admiring a pair of golden eagles patrolling the valleys, combing the hillsides for fossils and obscure mineral formations.

Tim and John exchanged business cards on parting, and Tim had expected that to be the end of it. But two weeks later, John emailed him looking for potential contracts, and Tim scored points with his supervisor for finding a good "bug dude" (his boss's words) for a rushed contract proposal that, miracle of miracles, they actually managed to land.

The contract put Tim and John together in a dusty little motel for a couple of weeks, as they monitored construction on a pipeline project deep in the hills. Mostly it was an exercise in boredom, Tim jumping in to excavations a few times to check odd rocks and certify they weren't fossils or archeological artifacts, John flagging off areas where the pupae of rare butterflies lay hibernating under scraggly bushes, waiting for the kiss of spring to emerge.

That left them most of each day to talk. John, a lonely soul, talked about old jobs, talked about his adored mother, sick and dependent on him now for support, talked about how it used to be, back in the early noughties, when cheaply built subdivisions metastasized across old farms and consulting gigs were plentiful. But he also had some wild stories, stories that made Tim doubt his sanity.

Tim toyed with the idea of showing Oddball John the fossil pack. He wasn't sure whether it had been too many beers, or just the powerful desire to see if John could be rendered speechless, but the temptation goaded him. He convinced a skeptical Rob that it was a good idea. So, for some Halloween fun, they invited John and his bizarre hat up for a small party, beers and conversation.

Then showed him the pack. John sobered up in a hurry, cocking his hat back as he studied the fossil.

"This is important, man," John said, quivering. "You've got an anachronism just sitting there on your floor." His blue eyes drilled into Rob. "And you haven't told anyone?"

"You're the first."

John sat silently. "Figures. Maybe that's why we've gotten along so well." He mumbled, chewing his lip. "Shit. I'd like to buy that thing off you. It's dangerous, and I should make it safe..."

"How would you do that, John?" Rob asked.

John chewed his lip, weighing some heavy decision. Finally he stood up and said. "Let me show you something, boys. You're going to have to wait three minutes, got that?"

"Three minutes?" Rob said, disbelief dripping his voice.

"Demonstration. Mark the time. Got it Tim? Yes on your watch. Good." John straightened his clothes. "Watch this."

Tim cringed. Those words usually led to something bad.

But John merely crouched and spoke a string of jagged syllables. The air shimmered and fizzed, and John fell away in an impossible direction, vanishing from the room. A gust of wind knocked papers around as the air moved into the bubbling space he'd vacated, where reality effervesced like newly poured beer.

"What the fuck?" Rob yelled, jumping back.

"Three minutes," Tim said, grabbing his watch in a death grip.

Reality settled back down over the next nine seconds.

Three minutes and nine seconds from his departure, John reappeared an inch off the floor. The wind of his arrival buffeted the room, but he had prepared well, falling into the crouch. The room sparkled for a few seconds as it accommodated him.

"How long?" John asked as he stood straight.

"Three minutes, nine seconds about."

"Damn. Have to work on that." John sat down, wiping his forehead. "It's hard to do that well after a couple of beers."

"What was that, John?" Tim asked.

"Time travel," John said smugly. "Or, if you prefer, magic. They're the same thing."

"Soooo...was this your pack?" Tim asked slowly, edging away from John.

"No. But the problem is that anachronisms like this, how to say it? They attract spirits, and spirits control time travel. We probably got along pretty well because you had this damn thing in your closet, making the spirits want us closer. Without telling me, all this time!"

"Sorry John, but you never told me you were a time traveler." Tim said.

"It's not safe, Tim. I'll bet you've thought about what it would be like to go back to whenever this is from and look around, right?"

"Of course. Anybody would with this pack."

John nodded tensely. “That’s how it always starts. That’s the spirits, pushing you. Even if we powdered this thing, until we dumped it in the ocean, the spirits would always be around it, provoking that old, old dream. It’s not a good dream.”

“So what’s so bad about time travel?”

John shrugged. “It’s dangerous in the past. It’s like alien worlds piled on top of each other back there, and they get more alien the deeper you go. And it takes a lot of energy, which is why I’m tired after that little stunt. And there are those who don’t want you to do it, try to stop you. So you’ve got to be crafty, make sure you don’t get caught. Leave no traces. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise? How many time travelers are there?”

“I don’t know,” said John. “Guy named Nick trained me long time ago. He taught me that you had to stay hidden, always. There have been time wars, fights over the past, shit like that. As I said, the spirits find you if you’ve got an anachronism. Pretty soon you learn the magic, maybe the words start coming to you in a dream or something, or a teacher shows up. Synchronicity picks you up and pulls you in. The spirits want people like us to travel, I think.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Put things right, is my guess. Like this pack.”

“Can you help us make this right?” Rob asked.

“Sorry Rob, not now.” John looked regretful. “I’ll show you how to keep it safe though. You’re good kids, you don’t need this stuff. But I’ve got to take care of mom. That’s why I came back. I’ve been all over deep time, boys. For all the dangers, it’s fun back there. But mom wouldn’t come with me, and she’s sick, so I’m here until she gets better. And that’s really expensive, it looks like. She doesn’t have insurance. So I’m stuck.”

Rob looked sad. “That sucks, John. Hey, what’s it worth to take us back to where this pack came from?”

“I’d think about it, but you guys don’t have much money either,” said John.

“No,” said Rob. “We don’t, but I’ve got a rich uncle. He likes helping people. Maybe we could get him in on this, and he’ll pay to take care of your mom. What do you think?”

John shrugged. “Safer than trying to game the lottery again. What’s his name?”

“Hannibal. Hannibal Alessio.”