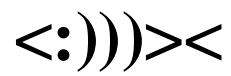


EVOLUTION



A SHORT STORY

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BEGINNINGS

A sudden flapping of wings was the only sound in the isolated pre dawn desert sky as tiny night creatures hurried along making their way back to the dark recesses of a nearby cave. Their fast approach turned into a frenzied rush as the first rays of light began snaking over the painted mountains. Blending into the valley hills the opening was but a small darkness in the rock and indistinguishable from the hundreds of other rocky shadows in the area. But for these denizens it was a place to hide; nothing spectacular except for the series of long, dark tunnels that extended for miles in all directions.

Another dry, uneventful day loomed ahead for the desert town of Horton, New Mexico. Horton was much like any other small town across America; homes with white picket fences, green parks with gaze bos, high steeple churches, Sunday afternoon concerts, picnics on the 4th of July, and Christmas carolers during the holidays. A perfect little community, a town that was 100 miles from its nearest neighbor; a positive feature, since it also housed a top secret government installation two hundred-thirty feet underground.

The massive installation housed 189 special agents whose only purpose was to pour over data relayed from overhead satellites. The super secret facility, whose main function was to observe and defuse any threat to the country, was the step child of, and run by, General Robert Byrd. To say that the general was a super patriot was an understatement. He believed the country had to remain vigilant against threats to their way of life; be they nuclear or biological. 'We must be prepared to take drastic steps to stop any attack against our country,' was his foremost belief. He was joined in his beliefs by his second in command, Lt. Colonel George Stanton.

Stanton saw to it that his men were the fittest and the most prepared in the military. He had the latest technology at his fingertips; the most delicate scanners and cameras, and an A.I. computer that took in all the information and spit out any viable scenarios. His strike teams were on alert 24/7. In the seven years that he had run the 'Talon' squad, they had put down no less than 22 attempts of mass chaos against the country. Each had ended the same way-- no survivors. But even in this era of technological advances there was always a chance that someone a little smarter, someone a little sneakier, would slip thru the net. And there was always a chance that circumstances would cause failure. And so, on a sunny summer day in July, it happened; by the time the group spotted their oversight, it was too late.

At the same time, across the country, a discovery of dangerous proportions was made in a 'super' lab. A substance, accidentally created, proved to be too deadly to handle. It was decided that it would be best if it was separated and it and its counterpart loaded onto two specially equipped tankers and taken to a secret storage site. Once there each tanker would be coated with a silicone substance that in fact would seal them tight. They would then be sealed again, this time in lead, and when the lead hardened and set, they would be moved five hundred feet below ground and entombed in a cement bunker. So in the pre-dawn darkness, the two tankers moved out and began their 2 day journey of anonymity. Spotter choppers would follow at a discreet distance all the way to their destination.

Abby Wilson informed her lover that she had decided to cut her visit short due to the approaching ice storm. If she waited till morning to hit the road she would run smack into the sleet that the storm was pushing before it. Home was only eight hours away and she could drive through the night without a problem. Her lover voiced his objection loudly; he worried about the coming storm; and her driving at night alone. He accepted that he couldn't win the argument; she was stubborn to the point of madness; but he wanted his objections noted. She assured him that she had made the trip many times and would be just fine.

Richard wasn't being insistent out of a desire to be overbearing, quite the contrary. He loved Abby, and he worried that at her age, her reflexes weren't as fast as she thought. She in turn loved the idea of his wanting to protect her. Finding love at this time of her life was a surprise for Abby...and she was enjoying every minute of it.

Abby was a tough old bird, independent and stubborn, born of many hard years of work. Finding love at 65yrs of age was something she had never envisioned. It had softened her a bit, but she was still a force to be reckoned with. She assured him she would be just fine, besides she had Max with her.

Max was a mutt she had rescued one rainy night on her way home from work. She saw a truck in front of her hit the animal and drive off. Totally unlike her to act, she had felt compelled to turn around. She had stopped traffic while she picked up the whimpering animal and placed it in the rear of her SUV. Surprised at how thin the animal was as she set him gently down, she thought he would surely die. But then she had looked into the animal's eyes... there was a connection somehow... he was in pain and she knew it. Dialing her vet, Jim Swanson, she rushed home breaking many speed limits.

She half expected Jim to tell her the animal would die, but the mangy curr was made of stronger stuff. He recovered, slowly at first, non responsive and listless. He seemed to improve each time Abby came to see him; the improvement noted by her Vet, who was sure that the animal had bonded with her. At first Jim told her he thought the dog was a Lab-Shepherd mix, but he had since changed his mind. As the 'dog' gained more weight, his true lineage began to emerge; he was more of a Shepherd-Wolf mix. The vet cautioned Abby that the animal could be dangerous; quite possibly feral. Abby had seen his eyes, and they told her otherwise; she wasn't worried in the least. Two months, and twelve hundred dollars later, she took Max home with her and they hadn't been separated since.

When she had been attacked a year later by a drug-crazed teen, the dog had come to her rescue by attacking and keeping the cowered teen at bay until the police arrived. Max had enjoyed a rib-eye steak that night, proper reward for a job well done. Abby felt there was something different about this dog; almost like he had been sent to her for some reason that she couldn't explain. She was sure he understood her when she spoke to him. So she treated him like a friend; this set well with Max and he stayed to protect this human.

Abby became impatient with the long line of cars in front of her; she was making no time at all and her rear-view mirror told her the storm was moving in fast. They were being held up by two tanker trucks about five cars ahead. As they came over a hill she could see that there were no cars on the opposite side of the road coming her way. She pulled out, accelerated and sped by the other cars; two left the caravan and followed four car lengths behind her.

Twenty miles ahead the black chopper escort was thermal scanning the interstate. There appeared to be no heat signatures except for a few coyotes, and other indigenous desert life-forms. The commander of the strike force knew he couldn't afford any mistakes; the cargo they carried was considered Level 5; extremely dangerous. He had every confidence in his men; he knew if there was an incident, they would not hesitate – they would push the button and annihilate everything within a five mile radius. It was SOP, especially with something this dangerous.

At just that moment, a disgruntled, sweaty, and nervous Jimmy Prescott took up his position and aimed his Winchester 70, extreme weather 30-06 rifle at the lead tanker. In his twisted mind he was stopping the military from shipping biological weapons to be used on the poor people of the world. Between the booze, and the drugs, and the careful manipulation of his new friend, Shamir, Jimmy was in a world far removed from reality. Visions of greatness danced in his mind as he pulled the trigger of his rifle - and missed. The flash of his shot pinpointed his location and the strike team silently jumped within seconds and little Jimmy Prescott was no more. Unfortunately, the damage had been done. Prescott's aim was too low, yes, but the bullet hit the underbelly of the tanker and ricocheted off the metal, hitting the ground and bouncing upward under the second tank. A small crack formed; the heavy pressure of the liquid in the tanker pushed the crack open bit by bit and a small leak began to spray a faint mist.

As Abby passed by the tanker at 80mph, the faint mist covered her windshield. She employed the wiper blades and pressed the button for the liquid cleaner. It seemed to make it worse as an oily sheen covered the windshield and she could barely see. After a continuous flow it finally cleared up and she speeded up to 90mph whizzing past both tankers. She was down the road, around the bend and out of sight by the time the chopper arrived on the scene. A proximity alert had gone off and the chopper was responding.

Abby was now ten miles ahead in a deep valley.

The first car behind the tanker swerved back and forth for a bit, then over corrected and careened off the road. It shot down an embankment, rolled over twice and exploded. The thing that emerged from the fiery vehicle was most definitely not human. It seemed to be an oozing mass of gelatinous material. When it shot out an appendage of sorts it was obliterated by the chopper crew. Now the second car came under scrutiny. They watched as it too began to swerve back and forth, slide and skid, over compensate and hit a bridge embankment expelling the driver. As he rolled over and tried to get to his feet, his body began to physically change; the crew of the chopper filmed everything before turning the guns on him too.

Abby was now fifteen miles ahead, down in a valley, shielded by a large mountain.

The chopper sanitized the area without hesitation; a ball of flame lashed out and licked across the entire area. The chopper then notified Stanton and he in turn pressed a button under a clear plastic casing. As soon as he did the red button lit up on both tankers. Having seen what was happening behind him in his rear view mirror, the driver wasn't too surprised. He took a deep breath and tearfully said a silent prayer as he reached for the shiny red button. In an instant the sky lit up and caught fire; as the tanker disintegrated. The black chopper flew over the area and deployed the napalm as instructed.

Abby never saw the fire in the sky; she was busy belting out Janis Joplin's rendition of 'Me & Bobby McGee' along with the radio as she sped along. She was totally oblivious to what was taking place 25 miles behind her.

The commander of the strike force watched the fire burn and reflected on the photos they had showed him. He had questioned why they created something this deadly and had been told that for once, it really was accidental. A lab assistant had tripped and fallen against a series of chemicals. The bottles had broken and contaminated the original formula. The blending had been instantaneous, and so had the effects. Not even the bio suits had protected them. A flash burn had been initiated to keep the solution from spreading. One scientist had come out of it alive; and only because he was in the adjoining room, still in his bio suit. Hours later he began to exhibit symptoms and had to be put down. Then three assistants in the Lab down the hall began to show symptoms, several violently. In the end the military decided that the entire facility had to be sanitized; they couldn't take a chance with a substance that deadly.

So when the tanker exploded, the military took great pains to see that everyone within a five mile radius was eliminated too; every bird, mouse, dog, cat, man, woman or child. The entire area was flash burned... sanitized, just to be sure. A cover story would claim that underground gas pockets erupted and took out the area. But they too forgot about the wind. With any explosion you have an expanding field, an outward and upward burst of particles, and then the fire-burn. No one took into consideration that the wind could grab a small sample of these particles and drag it towards the jet stream, and eventually send it around the world.

But before it did that it would join another, more deadly virus; and in combining they would become something else altogether. This is what would be deposited on the mountains of Europe and Asia.

Unaware of the tanker explosion, Abby had continued on her way. An hour from home she began to feel the beginnings of a massive 'hot flash'; or so she thought. She turned down the air conditioner in the car to its lowest setting but it did nothing to alleviate the heat she was feeling. She thought she was having the longest 'hot flash' ever recorded. Finally arriving home she could barely make it up the stairs to her apartment. Max dragged himself behind her in no better condition than his mistress.

Once inside, Abby turned down the air to its coldest setting. She then consumed two large glasses of water; and filled Max's bowl twice as he was just as thirsty. Assuming she caught a 24/hr bug, she took two Tylenol and climbed into bed. Max howled and joined her as he was suddenly cold. Abby pulled back the covers and Max crawled underneath curling up at her feet. Both slept for twelve hours straight waking only once to consume more water.

During their sleep, each bonded with the chemical virus on a cellular level. One will never know what in their systems allowed this to take place, why they didn't mutate as the others had, why they reacted differently. Perhaps because their dose was a purer version; but more than likely it was a combination of things. Still, the virus did cause changes; they became more in every way. They would be fitter in body; quicker in thought and action; stronger than most. Their brains would be affected; they would be able to use 40% more of their brain power. They would read faster, understand more; their intellect would increase by leaps and bounds; the new evolved human.

When Abby woke she rolled over, stretched, and threw off the covers. She lay there for a moment, mentally checking herself out. She definitely felt better, the achy feeling was gone. She got up and went into the bathroom. Max rose also; stretching he sat outside the doorway to the bathroom watching her. While brushing her teeth she looked at him thinking to herself that he seemed different.

An unbidden thought came into her mind;
If you think I am different, you should look at yourself!
Abby shot a quick look at the dog.
Go on, turn around and take a look.

Abby slowly turned and looked in the mirror. Staring back at her was the girl she used to be forty years ago.

Oh my God... was the first thought that came to her mind.

I doubt He had anything to do with this, answered the gruff voice.

Abby spun around and looked at the large dog.
That... was you Max, wasn't it?

Yes Mistress, we are now able to communicate, replied the dog sitting in front of her.

Abby dropped to her knees and fell back against the wall.

And that was just the beginning...

Six days later, on a sunny morning, (as two Talon Strike Teams were racing to neutralize the problem), terrorists posing as window washers set off a low yield nuclear weapon from the top of the Chrysler Building in midtown Manhattan. In the blink of an eye four million souls were vaporized; a smoking crater the only testament as their cries of surprise filled the ether. Hours later, over three hundred thousand of the burned and injured joined them.

In the immediate aftermath there was chaos in the surrounding areas. Manhattan proper was obliterated; all that remained was a wall of fire burning out of control. Wall Street, the financial center of the country was wiped from the earth. And twelve hundred billion in gold bullion, stored in the secure cellars of JP Morgan Chase, was rendered useless. The Metropolitan Art Museum with its rare possessions; the Museum of Natural History with its priceless artifacts; both gone forever along with their treasures. ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox, the news centers of the world, simply went blank.

The surrounding boroughs of New York City proper were in flames, and there was no way to put out the fires. All aid would have to be flown in from military bases in the surrounding area. The head of FEMA halted all rescue attempts until the radiation threat could be assessed. All the rescuers could do was deal with the outlying areas and hope for the best.

Needless to say, the Government went on high alert; the President and her children were removed from the White House and taken to a fortified bunker in an undisclosed area along with the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. The Cabinet and many Senators were flown to Artemis Mountain in Idaho. The Vice-President and his family had been in New York planning to attend the opening of a play.

Little old ladies across the country, watching their favorite soap operas, were suddenly left with blank screens. Fans of the morning news shows were cut off without warning. All the feeds from the East Coast went down; phone services, texts, computer feeds, news services; all dead at the same time. It didn't take a genius to figure out that something had happened. Within an hour the news began to reach the rest of the country. Reports started filtering in to Atlanta from people in the surrounding NYC area. Amateur cell phone camera shots of what looked like a mushroom cloud hovering over what was once New York City left no doubt. The unthinkable had happened!

An intrepid and brave young pilot confirmed it for everyone. Flying high, he circled the outer reaches of the city (in a stolen Beechcraft airplane), and captured on film a tangled mass of metal and concrete that spread for miles in all directions. Flames at the outer reaches of the mass were consuming whatever was left. The footage was stark and horrifying. The brave pilot had flown along the coastline until he found an area with cell phone and internet service; then he sent his footage to Fox News in Atlanta and called them with the report. Before signing off the good-looking young man sadly indicated that he was too 'hot' to land and felt it would be best if he headed out to sea. With a brave smile he declared that he had always wanted to attempt a crossing of the Atlantic in a Beechcraft, and now seemed like a perfect time to try.

Wide-spread panic engulfed the country when the footage was aired. Fearing they were next, California closed off its borders and halted all flights to and from the state. Martial law was declared and people were warned - anyone on the street after dark would be shot on sight - after five deaths the order was obeyed. All illegals were rounded up and deported; no quarter was given. California, the great bastion of the Liberals, became an armed and frightened society.

Small towns across the country closed their borders to outsiders; many even went so far as to barricade the roads. Many people took to the mountains hoping to find some semblance of safety there.

It was during this time of chaos that the terrorists unleashed their 2nd weapon; a biological one. Detonated exactly 1 day after the NYC bomb, from the top of the Arch in St. Louis, Mo. They had thought that this would finally destroy the West; but for all their careful planning they neglected to take into account the delivery method used. For you see the small amount of radiation that was released when the bomb detonated unexpectedly bonded with and mutated the biological virus before it was dispersed. This bonding created something totally different, something completely alien from what was intended. And before it could be diluted by weather patterns and moisture, the jet stream carried it away where it met up with a similar substance, and when they united, the real changes began.

The Middle East, long in opposition to anything western, especially medicine, felt its effects first. Those secretly funding anti-western groups all the while condemning those attacks, paid for their hypocrisy with their lives. It was ironic that the very people who unleashed death upon the western world were the first to feel its effects. Their populations were decimated within weeks; males dying twice as fast as females. The last report out of the area indicated that the women had risen up and taken control of the government. The Imams and their gospels of hate were their first targets; no more of their children would be sacrificed on the altar of such ideology. So died the great Jihad. It soon appeared that only the Nomadic tribes roaming the deserts were spared.

China was reduced from her famous 200 hundred million to a mere four hundred thousand or so; mostly farmers spread across mountainous regions throughout inland China. All that remained of her repressive government were a few military types who tried to take control, but they were largely ignored by most of the remaining population. The mighty dragon fell with a whimper.

South Korea faired pretty well, her gentle people helped each other over the worst. Except for a few border guards asking for help, no word came out of North Korea. There was a great quiet from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and other Asian nations.

Japan sealed it's borders and ordered it's population to don gas masks, (that had been handed out earlier), and hoped for the best. They faired pretty well, only losing about a third of their total population.

Australia was hit hard, but they were made of a sturdy people who looked at things realistically. Those in the know took to the Outback and heeded the advice of the little Bushmen, who had foreseen this event in their ancient prophecies. The primitive little men had survived for millennia in the harsh outback, never changing. Small groups of people who had made it out beyond the cities, banded with others, and found refuge with the little men in hidden underground caverns; a secret the Bushmen had kept for thousands of years.

France was practically wiped out except for a few hundred intrepid souls who managed to make it to the Lascaux caves and barricade themselves inside. Several of the other caves probably boasted the same, but without phone service or ham radios it was impossible to know for sure. The Grotto at Lourdes and the immediate area around it was spared any contamination. Yet the Basilica in Rome was awash in bodies, as was most of Italy.

England was wise enough to close themselves off and hunker down. They took to the subway underground system, as they did during WWII, and waited it out down there till the cloud system carrying the contamination passed.

Princes William and Harry, ministered to many of the sick with their wives helping, setting an example for others to follow. Neither brother was ever affected by the virus, perhaps a natural immunity; but secretly, many believed their mother, Lady Diana, protected them. The Queen and Prince Phillip, who insisted on staying, along with Charles and Camilla, were not spared the horror of the virus. They were lost as was most of the staff at the palace.

For some strange reason Austria and Switzerland were barely affected by the virus. Perhaps the high altitudes and cold weather were a deterrent. Hearing this, what was left of the Russian government sent word that they were headed for Siberia. They reasoned that it was too cold for the viruses to exist there. Their fate was as yet undetermined.

America fared quite well; her population was a melting pot, the fact of which may be why she did so well. She was a product of the blending of a variety of races for over two hundred years resulting in a very hardy group of people. People came down with the virus and got sick, yes, but after a week or so they were back on their feet again. Some were lost, mainly the very old and infirm, but for the most part the people managed quite well.

The world press began to call it the 2018 Pandemic. Everyone had believed that sooner or later it was bound to happen, so there was no great outcry. It wasn't till almost three years later that word spread to the people that it was caused by a biological terrorist attack. The great outcry the government was expecting never came. By then, no one really cared anymore, it was enough that they were alive.

And through it all the small installation under the desert of New Mexico remained on line, monitoring the end of life as we knew it. They were immune to the effects of the bios, snug in their self contained bunkers below the surface. Unfortunately, thru overhead satellites, they were silent witnesses to the results of the deadly attacks. Powerless to do anything to help; all they could do was watch. Many cracked under the pressure of what they saw; and after three suicides, anyone showing any sign of stress was immediately sedated.

For three years they watched and waited.

And then the changelings began to appear.

EMERGENCY

Abby pressed herself against the wall of a burned out building in downtown Denver. She didn't like coming into the large cities, but the boy she was trying to save was hiding out somewhere deep inside. The Hunters were on his trail too, and they were very close. She had to get to him before they did. It was almost midnight and she knew he would make his move soon.

Are you sure he's headed this way Max? She asked her alert companion.

I told you I picked up his scent, Max snorted. He's very close, and the Hunters are right behind him.

He took a step forward and sat, scanning down the street.

Abby leaned back and waited; Max would tell her when it was safe to move.

She let her memory slide back to that fateful morning that changed them forever. When she got over the shock, she figured out that something had happened to them on their journey home from Richard's. She had gone over the newspapers with a fine toothed comb looking for anything, any clue as to what could have caused these changes in her and Max. She finally found it in the Alston Gazette, a small town newspaper about 160 miles from her home. On the back of the sports section, in a one paragraph story it reported that two tanker trucks exploded along the Interstate on the evening she and Max had traveled.

Wait a minute... when we passed the tanker something was leaking from it. It sprayed all over our windshield, I remember! It smelled like rotten eggs, and stunk up the car.

Her new improved memory supplied every detail clearly. The name on the side of the tanker she had passed was Carter Industries. She back-tracked that information only to find it belonged to a town that suddenly didn't exist anymore. Carter, New Mexico had been destroyed in a horrible accident as an underground gas pocket had exploded. And all this happened one day after the supposed tanker accident...coincidence (?)... not likely! Further exploration on the internet told her what Carter Industries dabbled in... genetic exploration and experimentation. Looking further, she finally found enough information to surmise what happened; she and Max had been changed on a genetic level.

During the next six weeks both their minds were raised to a new level of consciousness; something far outside the human experience. Abby read voraciously, and at a speed unheard of devouring everything she could get her hands on about genetics, mutating cells, and DNA. Max tagged along with her and learned as she did exactly what had happened to them, and eventually she was able to prove it. She and Max had bonded with some kind of virus on a genetic level, and somehow it changed them – evolved them!

Abby also guessed correctly that the wind most surely would have taken some of the virus to the heights. It would make its way to the general population eventually; true, a very watered down version, but it still would spread throughout the world.

Max pointed out that with their new found status they would need to keep themselves invisible; off the radar so to speak. Their abilities would make them stand out and that was something that could be very dangerous. They did not want to draw attention to themselves at this time. Considering what had happened to the plant and the town, Abby agreed with Max; they needed to disappear. It was then that Abby and Max both felt a strong pull to the mountains.

Abby called Richard and went by to see him. His mouth dropped open when she and Max got out of her car. She explained in detail what had happened and what she had discovered. He never questioned her sanity; he totally accepted what she said as truth. It was almost as if he was expecting it. He suggested his cabin in Utah, in the mountains near Zion National Park. He told her it was the safest place for her and Max. There was also a series of underground caves nearby that only he knew about. He would show her when he returned but first he had to get his son and his family to safety; the attacks had made a deep impression on Richard. He left for Idaho to bring them to the safety of the mountains; but Abby never heard from him again.

As time went by, Abby found that her other senses were heightened also; she could smell when something wasn't 'right'; and she could feel when danger was near. She could make things appear to be different, manipulating molecules at a subatomic level. Most profound and surprising, she found that she could teleport; as long as she knew where she was going. She also developed an uncanny ability to pinpoint areas where other 'gifted' people were located. And when they emerged she found she knew their names, sex, and age. She also found something else disturbing. Just as their new powers began to emerge, some children were being snatched up by a shadowy government agency she called 'Hunters'. Where these children were taken was a mystery, but sufficed to say, they were never returned to their parents. Careful tracking led Abby to one conclusion; she and Max had to get to these children before these so called 'Hunters' did.

Time would prove her right; these men were part of a concerted effort to erase any link between the Government and the mystery virus. The Government scientists warned them that there was a 90% possibility that the toxin had gotten 'out'; and they were sure that the very young in our population would be the first to show 'signs' of changes in their DNA.

Within three years Abby and Max had built up a very secure base of operations and set about rescuing these children. They frustrated the Hunters efforts, and built up a pretty good record of retrieval. Thirty-two young souls had been saved to date, and under Abby's tutorage these children were encouraged to explore their abilities. They had blossomed under her care; and Trent, her second in command, taught them what they needed to know to survive.

So here she was, five years after 'The Change', trying one more time to save another innocent from the Hunters; a young boy of eight or nine, extremely emotional and scared half to death.

He's beginning to move; Max rose, he's very close... the Hunters haven't spotted him yet.

Where is he? Abby exasperatingly asked, scanning the area.

I'm right behind you, answered a small voice. *Are you the ones sent to help me?*

Ho...damn, Abby jumped, spinning around; *you scared me to death little one!*

She gave him a big smile and he immediately calmed down.

My but you are good at hiding. Big smile on his face.

She went down on one knee and hugged the boy. His arms flew around her neck and he held her tightly; Abby could feel the raw emotions the boy was experiencing.

Yes Jerry, we're here to help. She took his hand and went to the back of the alley.

I want you to hold on to my hand Jerry, and do not let go, do you understand? The child nodded. *Close your eyes and take a deep breath.*

A bright light formed about the small group and suddenly the vision blurred. The surrounding area seemed to fade away. The light blinked out and the alley was empty. Ten miles outside of Denver, in a picnic area off the highway there was a stirring as the wind began to kick up. Suddenly there was an electrical discharge and a quick flash of light and there stood the woman, the boy, and the dog.

"That's one of my gifts Jerry," Abby explained, "do you know what yours are yet?"

Eyes wide the boy looked up at her.

"That's the first time I heard them described as gifts. I'm not sure exactly what they are; but I do know they have something to do with water."

"Good, good," Abby smiled, "we'll help you discover them Jerry, along with the other children."

"You mean there are others like me," the boy asked in wonder.

"Oh yes Jerry, there are many others and they are exploring and learning about their new found gifts just like you want to." Holding out her hand Abby asked, "Would you like to meet them?"

"Oh yes!" Jerry exclaimed grabbing her hand and shutting his eyes tight.

Abby smiled and winked at Max. She concentrated once gain and the small group next appeared at the base of a large mountain in a tall stand of Pine trees. A tall thin teenager stepped from the trees and called to the group.

“Momma Abby, I was beginning to get concerned.” He walked up to the group and patted Max on the head, “Hi ya Max.”

Max answered with a deep ‘woof.’

“Trent,” Abby leaned over and kissed the young man on the cheek, “yes it took longer than expected; Jerry here is very good at hiding,” Abby explained ruffling the young boy’s hair. “He’s come to stay with us. Jerry this is Trent, he’ll show you around.”

Abby watched the boys take off up the mountain.

Well, we managed to save another one Max.

Indeed we did Mistress, but the Hunters were way too close. They are getting better and better at their job.

Yes they are, Abby sighed, we will be forced to take action one of these times. And we both know what that means.

Yes, Max growled, blood will be shed.

Abby had thus far been able to avoid any contact with the 'Hunters'; but Max was right - they were getting better and better at their job. So far they had no idea Abby or Trent existed, and she wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. But Stanton was getting too damn good at figuring out the whereabouts of 'gifted' children. Abby was beginning to wonder about him.

Well, no use guessing at things now. We'll face that can of worms when it comes.

Both turned and headed up the mountain towards their encampment.

Five hundred miles away, deep underground, the leader of the 'Hunters' was dressing down a Lieutenant for loosing the boy.

“What do you mean he got away? We had him nailed down to one building! How could a boy of eight slip thru your fingers?” Colonel George Stanton shouted at the beleaguered man

“Sir, I don't know; one minute he was there, and all of a sudden," he explained, "he was gone!"

“Damn it to hell!” Colonel Stanton slammed his fist down on the desk in front of him. “How the hell do these kids keep slipping thru our fingers? They have to be getting help from somewhere. It's got to be someone who knows; someone we haven't picked up on yet.”

The lieutenant remained at attention as the Colonel drummed a pencil on his desk.

“Go on, get out of here,” he finally shouted in anger. The young man all but ran from his office.

“Sir, I may have something,” said his second in command.

Captain Steven Hanson was just a few years younger than Stanton. Both men were firm in their conviction that these kids were abominations. They and their mutant abilities were a product of the virus and a threat to the country. Both men knew of the blast at Carter, (they had ordered it). Now, years later, the sudden emergence of children with unique abilities and strange 'powers' was just a little too convenient. Stanton's own son had been infected and he had seen to it personally that he had been 'put down'.

“There was a significant power surge in the alley behind the building next to where we believe the boy was located.” Stanton looked up at his friend. “I don't think that surge was from any electrical facility in the area.”

“Aha! We finally have something!” Stanton jumped to his feet. “Do you think we can find a way to use this to our advantage?”

“Let me get my boys on this George, see if we can find a way to track this.” Steven smiled, “Maybe we can track them back to their base of operations and get the whole group at one time.”

“You do that Steve and I will personally see that you get the Medal of Honor.” Stanton slapped his friend on the back.

“Sir, excuse me sir,” called a corporal from the front room, “Thunder Mountain is on the line.”

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