

The Last Taken: The Second Coming

By L.K. Samuels

Chapter 1

I took off my glasses, peered skywards and watched an eagle soar high overhead, floating across the air effortlessly. At least it looked like an eagle. I squinted with my left eye. There was something else up there in the bright sunlight. Specks of soaring blackness suddenly came into focus. It was a whole flock of birds spiraling in the thermal updraft. Must be turkey vultures. They could smell death a mile away. Something was wrong.

I rushed over to the hilltop's edge and stared down into a deep, dry ravine. There was poor Rosie on her side, stiff, bloated and dead, next to a twisted juniper. I had been searching for her since early afternoon. I watched the vultures swoop down, feet outstretched, preparing to land. They shouldered up to the tasty feast, hopping about, hissing at each other. In no time, they were dining on Rosie's soft underbelly. They were having a fine feast. I was having a fit. We had just lost our last milking cow.

I raced down the hill, shooed off the squawking birds and examined the body. Her whole hind leg was gone, cut clean off, blood splattered everywhere. Becky was going to go ballistic when she found out. I knelt and shook my head. That was when I noticed the markings on the ground. Dozens of shoe prints covered the sandy ground. The evidence was overwhelming. This had been the work of human buzzards.

I stood and glared at the black-winged vultures. They kept dancing closer to Rosie. I eyed them, they eyed me. It became a waiting game; one that I was destined to lose. Once I left, these ugly-face scavengers would go into a frenzied eating orgy. They would pick the carcass clean. There was nothing I could do.

Cursing under my breath, I trudged back up the steep, rocky hillside. I stopped at the edge, turned around and doffed my straw cowboy hat. I surveyed the wide valley below, past the small town of Bridgeport and the distant lake. The sun was searing hot. I had been out half the day searching for Becky's stupid cow. My throat was parched. My face sweaty; my light-skinned arms and shoulders felt the brunt of the sun's wrath.

I flopped my hat back on and wondered how this could have happened? Why were these hooligans invading our little slice of serenity? We never bothered anyone. We barely talked to the town folks. And yet someone had crawled over our barbed fence, sneaked down the ravine and slaughtered

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Rosie. What was next? Were they waiting in the shadows, watching us for some other purpose?

I knew what Becky would say, that outsiders would hurt us and pick our bones cleaner than a nest of hungry ants. Fate was closing in from all sides. I hated to surrender to misfortune, but it looked as if the die had been cast.

As I walked past gray-green sagebrush, large rocks and a few scrawny digger pines, I could foresee a rapidly approaching tipping point. Something was changing. This was never supposed to happen. We had selected this lonely stretch of high desert to keep our contact with outsiders to a bare minimum. Let society do what it wanted as long as it left us alone. That was exactly why we lived in the remote foothills of the Eastern Sierras, high up in the scrub country, away from what some referred to as intelligent life forms. What a joke. We had become targets. We were now the ones in jeopardy.

This incident forced me to mull over a bigger question. Were things getting that bad down in the flatlands? Were city people that desperate? In my opinion, we had nothing to offer. There was nothing up here—just some old ranchers, wandering burros and aging prospectors looking for the next glory hole.

I decided to walk back to the ranch house. Originally, the building had been a miner's shack thrown up during the gold rush era. After purchasing the property, we enlarged and reworked the structure. Somewhat. The money started to run out and the work was never completed. We had to forgo a few niceties like indoor plumbing and a modern kitchen. But I could deal with that. I had been an avid camper during my younger days in Southern California. The others were not as agreeable to our less-than-comfortable lifestyle.

I stopped in front of the pinewood porch. It was falling apart, like the rest of the house. The wood was splitting in a dozen spots, bleached and weathered by the summer sun and icy winter days. The screen door had lost one of its hinges, barely attached to the wood frame. Our front window was cracked and held together with strips of duct tape. One depressing thought came to mind: *we were living like Okies from Muskogee.*

I rubbed my chin and felt the stinging heat of sunburn making its rounds. Another mistake. I had spent too much time baking under the sun. But Becky was so worried about her beloved cow. I should have paid closer attention to my surroundings. I should have known better. I knew how things got out of hand. How chaos could subdue order. I knew where most of the trouble came from. I thought I could keep away from trouble. But trouble always seemed to follow me like a loyal but stupid dog.

Sure, I had kept an eye on the epicenter of trouble. I keep up on political events. I knew things were getting dicey in the bigger cities. I had read the headlines, heard the lowdown on the riots and civil unrest. Everything was becoming downers. The meltdowns, shutdowns and breakdowns were growing more common. I could feel that frustration even in our little one-street town on the valley floor. Still, until recently, few intruders had invaded our property or bothered our livestock. But why would they bother us? We had so little to offer. We weren't some rich landowners, bathing in luxuries and pleasures. We lived

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in the wilderness; miles up a dirt road, surrounded by bad-tempered rattlesnakes, wild boars, testy ranchers with shotguns and thousands of miles of barren wastelands—a real paradise.

Then again, I supposed nothing ever stayed the same. And yet, I had been counting on rapid change to improve my situation. I thought the future would be brighter, that more time would elevate the human condition. That was my long-term hope. To my way of thinking, humanity would recognize its own stupidity and correct its mistakes. I shook my head. It looked like people were devolving back into Neanderthals. Not a good omen.

* * * * *

When I entered our two-bedroom ranch house I found Becky in a trance-like state. She sat in a broken rocker chair that leaned against the timbered wall. She glared at me and dragged her fingers through her graying hair. Her icy eyes were giving me the second degree.

“What?” I snarled, wondering if I should keep Rosie’s untimely demise a secret. I decided for the sake of peace and quiet, that I should wait a little longer. Becky needed to regain her presence of mind.

“I saw ‘em!” Becky said in her thick Russian accent.

“Saw who?” I took off my hat and laid it on the table.

“You know,... those *chërtov* plebs.”

“On our property?”

“Well, where else?”

“Yeah, well... they do inhabit this planet. So, I guess we can’t help but bump into them from time to time.”

“Stop asinine jokes, Jade. We came out here to get away from bad problems. We gave up good life.”

Before Becky could utter another word, our daughter jumped into her lap, demanding some motherly attention. “Not now,” Becky frowned and pushed her away.

“But there is nothing to do,” Wendy protested, the corner of her lips curved downward. She moved next to me and latched on to my right hand. “The laptop is down again. I’m bored.”

“Where were the intruders,” I asked.

“Near tool shed. They bellyached that they had no work. I told them we had none either.”

“And what was their response?”

“Like always. They whined and grouched. Confessed they had no money. I was sharp with them. Told them to get big, fat *zadnica* off our land. They cried they had nowhere to go?”

“Did they leave?”

“They asked if I were alone.”

“You know how to answer that question.”

“Stop interrupting. *Da*, I know. I’m not some senile old fool. When I started to walk away, one pulled out knife. Hell, I’m too old to deal with such

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foolishness,” she paused, stared at me and narrowed her eyes. “I think they wanted tools. You know, steal them. Stupid worthless tools. Probably pawn their ill-gotten spoils in town.”

“So did you pull it out from the box?”

“There you go again. Stop rushing me.” Becky folded his baggy arms. “You Yankees. Just too impatient for own good. Sure I did. Pointed barrel at pointy heads. You should have seen them quiver. I thought they were going to shit load of bricks.”

“Yeah, well, I assume they scrambled.”

“In Moscow second. They sniveled like covey of little *girlas*.”

“Did you put the shotgun back in its place?”

“*Da*, but that is not what got me riled up. I started to rethink. Why are we in such god-awful mess?” She glared with a wearily expression. “Then my mind focused on you.”

“Me?”

“*Da*, who else? You made can of worms for all of us. Made more trouble than worth. This is all your fault. Got us trapped behind Hell’s gate. When I left tool shed, I could feel my blood pressure exploding. My blood boiled like nitric acid.”

“You know that I can’t do much of anything.”

“That’s bold faced lie. You know that. You could stop all problems. And yet you make excuses and do nothing.”

“How about carrying a small weapon, maybe a pistol?” I said, trying to deflect her criticism. “You can hide it easily.”

“Stop acting *gloopy*. You know what I mean.”

“I’m not supposed to use it. You know what could happen. It’s off limits.”

“How do you know? How do you really know?”

“That’s what they indicated.”

“What did they say?”

“It was more of a feeling. That was how they communicated. I saw images. Horrible images. They made it plain and simple. Abuse it and it will abuse me. I can’t explain it any better.”

“Then what is point of having it?”

I shrugged. “Who knows?”

Becky looked away. “Okay. Fine. I will take pistol. But I want 9mm German luger. Shoots real fine.”

“Sure.”

“Now, help me up.”

I reached down and slowly pulled her out of her chair. I had to be careful. She had a number of agonizing ailments, mostly arthritis. And any sudden movement could result in a sudden cry of pain.

“We should never have come back,” Becky stood up, but hunched over slightly in pain. She rubbed her right hip.

“That was not an option. You know that. It’s far better here than out there.”

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“Sometimes I wonder.” Becky huffed. “You know those sleazebags will be back. Plunderers only know how to plunder.”

“The pistol will protect you.”

“Sure, but not from what really ticks me off.” She rested her hands on her hips. “Look at me. I’m an old worn-out *babushka*. My lower back aches. My eyes sting and itch. Lupus assaults my skin. I have red rash everywhere. I have no need of makeup; nothing could hide my decrepit body. Just so *zhestokiy*.”

“I’m sorry.”

“How would you know? You don’t look day past 25. You could be mistaken for my son instead of dingbat husband.”

“It wasn’t my choice. And you know it.” I walked over to a locked filing cabinet, pulled out a ball of keys and fumbled for the right one. After finding it, I shoved the key into the lock, gave a slight twist and opened the cabinet. I grabbed the luger and a box of ammo, and handed it to Becky. “Keep the safety on and—”

“You think I’m some *Chërt* fool. I know about safety.”

“Right. I just want you to be careful.”

“I’ll tell you this, if I see another sleazebag, I’m going to shoot first and dance over grave later.”

“You’re not going to do any such thing. You know who we are. We’re the civilized ones. They’re the troglodytes. We must do no harm.”

“When I lived in Yakutsk with my mother she said the foolhardy should be punished for their stupidity. If idiot dies young, they’ll have less idiot offspring. Fools who swim in deep end of the gene pool should drown. They have it coming. Plain and simple.”

“Yeah, but we’re not judge, jury and executioner. Everyone has a right to be wrong and stupid. Otherwise everyone would be behind bars.” I paused and watched Becky struggling to breathe. It was painful to watch. Life was not a spectator’s sport. “We can’t punish everyone who steps beyond certain boundaries. People make wrong choices all the time. That’s part of being human. And nothing will change that.”

“*Nyet!*” Becky waved her hands in the air. “Not at my expensive. We have lived too long. We have faced too many perils to be done in by some half-witted vagabond looking to steal rusty shovel.”

“Our time will come.”

“Double *nyet!* You mean your time will come. I have little to look forward to. You’re the one who pulled the—what you say—the bull’s golden ding-dong.”

“Ring,” I corrected her. “Anyway, it’s more of a curse.”

Becky cracked a thin smile and nodded. “*Aga*, I know. No good deed goes unpunished. You will get what you deserve. Virtue is never own reward.”

I ignored her offhanded commentary. Instead I put my hand on Becky’s shoulder, watching her examine the pistol with a sly grin. “I wish we had more rounds. Once they’re used up, I don’t think we can secure more.”

“Halfcocked Jack might have some.”

“Maybe.”

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“He once said he had whole warehouse of ammo.”

“He once said he had a conscience,” I retorted.

“There you go again. Jack is trustworthy. He had no choice to turn in Neumans. They’d fired on two snooping IRS agents. What a shame. Too bad they missed those grubby little *súkas*.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” I said. “Someone in town squealed to the authorities. Someone pressured Jack to go after the Neumans. We must have an informer in Bridgeport. I can almost sense a pair of prying eyes wherever I go. Maybe we’re also under surveillance.”

“That’s why we’ve got to stay clear of everyone. Keep distance. Uncle taxman takes whatever he can shake loose. Far better not to have much money. Can’t steal what you do not have.”

I had to grin. It was hard to live without money. Some things could not be bartered. Some people wanted cold hard cash and not a tub of cheese. We once tried to pay our property taxes with several big wheels of cheese. The assessor turned us down, mostly due to his allergic reaction to dairy products. That was why I had to find a better source of income. And it was around that time I discovered how to wring small amounts of gold from an abandoned mine on our property.

I had never told Becky about the gold. It wasn’t a lot. The gold vein had been mined out long ago in the 1870s, but there was still a few flecks left in the old tailings. It was hard work. I had to crush the rubble with a sledge hammer. Then shovel the crushed rocks into the dry sluice box. Give the box a little shake and a few specks of gold dust would sift out. Nothing to get excited about. But it kept us alive.

I turned to Wendy. I decided that it was time to send her outside. I wanted to announce Rosie’s death. Since my daughter loved that cow too, she would undoubtedly unleash a spigot of tears. I hated to see Wendy explode into a crying tizzy. Let her learn about the ugliness from somebody else. Let Becky be the bearer of bad news. She reveled in telling stories about horrible loss, untimely deaths and eternal suffering. Must be a Russian thing.

“How about drawing some water for dinner?” I asked Wendy. For years the hand-pump in the sink had been broken, sending out small spurts of dirty water. That forced us to draw water from a spring down the road by a grove of willow trees.

“Not again.” Wendy protested. “I was not trained to be a water servant.”

“True. I always applaud your technological skills but what else is there to do? Besides, the laptop won’t be fixed for a while.”

“I know,” Wendy looked down with a pout. She turned around, snatched the water bucket and marched outside.

I next approached Becky and attempted to find the proper words to explain Rosie’s fate. Both Becky and Wendy adored the cow. My wife would confer with that stupid animal for hours on end—especially after we had locked horns in a heated argument. She always said Rosie was a far better listener than me. That was probably true.

“You know about Rosie and...”

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“Did you finally find her?”

“Yeah, I found her and...”

“Have you fed and watered her?”

“Let’s just say I found a way to save money on feed.”

Becky turned away and reached for a few pieces of wood. “Just a minute.” She crammed the old Ben Franklin stove with chunks of firewood. We had an arrangement: she was the cook, and I was the wood splitter. She never liked that arrangement. She thought I should do all of the chores.

“In the case of Rosie...”

Again, Becky moved in another direction. She had other things on her mind. She opened a can of beans and placed it on the stove to heat. Then she used a few pejoratives to belittle the broken hand-pump in the sink. I was not sure what I could do—we had no money to drill another well. I could tell she was miffed over the hand pump, but failed to nag me about my husbandry duties.

“Anyway, we have a problem,” I said.

“Another one?” Becky reached for one of our old copper pots to boil water.

“Rosie is gone.”

Becky stopped, turned and faced me. “I know that, silly.”

“You do?”

“Sure, that is why you’re looking for her.”

“No, someone... probably those sleazeballs.... well...”

“Go on!”

“She’s not with us anymore.”

Becky dropped the copper pot.

“She’s now in the company of vultures.”

I thought she was going to faint. She took a step back and slapped her hand across her sagging breasts. She closed her eyes.

“Are you okay?” I rushed over to her.

“This is last straw.” Her eyes shot daggers at me. “If you will not do anything, I will. We must get sheriff. We must stop thievery. Do something.”

“They’re just doing what comes natural.”

“Is that what you think? Everything is natural. Somebody killed our cow and that’s all you got to say... it is natural?”

I hated it when Becky slipped into one of her emotional dither.

Becky leaned back and sighed. “We cannot survive without Rosie. What will we trade?”

I wanted to tell her about the small amounts of gold that I occasionally traded in town for paperbacks. In fact, I had opened a bank account. The gold assayer refused to give me cash. Said it was the law. Anyway, Becky would never have disapproved. “We will find a way.”

“We’re down to our last *rubles*. I don’t know what to do.”

“I will find a way. Trust me.”

“Cowless and moneyless. How can this be?” Becky voiced cracked. She took in a deep breath and tried to regain her composure. “And now hooligans

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howl and bang on our door. How did we get so destitute? We had so much more.” She slowly inched her way over to the wooden rocking chair and sat, leaned over and gazed blindly at the floor.

The sudden quietness was deafening. I followed her to the chair and looked down. “This will pass.”

“Not in my lifetime.”

“Just keep the pistol handy. Someone must be watching us. They know about our sorry predicament. They’re like wolves waiting for the weak to falter.”

Becky straightened up, and then nodded. “Funny what you say. Those two Cossacks said something strange. Something about getting it good before it was over.”

“They must be planning to break in and steal everything not nailed down. I knew it would happen someday.”

“Now you oracle!” Beck thundered as Wendy walked in with her heavy bucket of water.

“Well, maybe.” I muttered. “There had been these dreams. They’re beyond the pale of sanity. I see a horde of men in black surrounding a building. I was captured at gunpoint. Then I’m shoved under a hot spotlight, interrogated, naked and alone.”

Wendy plunked her water bucket on the table, ran over and gave me a big hug. “You’ll never be alone, papa. We’re all here for some reason. We have purpose. You’ve always said that.”

“Yea,” I pondered what she had said. A number of physicists had claimed that matter had purpose. What a strange idea. If that were true, one might be lead to believe that it also include humans. Now, if only someone could discover what that purpose was. “Well, we must exist for something. Things do organize for some purpose. Chaologists are still trying to answer that.”

Wendy inched closer, reached out with her small fingers and interlocked with my hand. I glanced down with a smile. She looked up with a glint in her eye. I enjoyed watching her face lighten up when we meshed science with philosophy.

“Nonsense,” Becky flailed her arms overhead. “We’re alive because of own ingenuity. There’s no purpose to anything. Sheer dumb luck. We should have never survived ordeal. Should have died. Siberian wasteland almost swallowed and buried us.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that.” Wendy’s face fell into a scowling frown. “It’s so depressing. I thought we were going to become freeze-dried mummies.”

“I thought you liked icy-cold places.”

“Quit teasing, papa!” Wendy backed up and folded her arms. “My ears almost froze off.”

“Then you wouldn’t have to worry about your deformity.” My little droll statement launched Wendy into a hissy fit.

“That’s not true!” Wendy nose scrunched up with displeasure.

“Stop taunting her about her ears,” Becky snapped. “You know she’s sensitive about her auricle.”

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I put up my hands. “Okay, I surrender.”

“My ears aren’t deformed, papa,” Wendy almost shouted. “That’s who I am. And stop telling people I’m related to elves, fairies and orcs.”

“But you have so many of their facial traits.” I grinned. I loved to improvise with a little tomfoolery.

Wendy stomped her foot. “You know they came that way. I’m not a freak! I mean,” she paused for a moment, “that was not their intention. They wanted eternal children.”

I lowered my head and looked longingly at the floor. “Okay, you’re right. You’re just as normal as any human.”

“Well,... that’s not exactly right either,” Wendy demurred with a trace of irritation in her voice.

“Stop teasing!” Becky bellowed. “More work, less talk.”

“Alright,” I said as I tried to conceal a grin. Incredibly, my scheme to distract Becky had worked. Amazing how a little racist slur could disrupt someone’s train of thought. She had come out of her funk about the cow. I chalked it up to the limited duration of short-term memory. It was a blessing to hustlers.

Becky grabbed the chair’s arms and struggled to get up. Once up, she hobbled over to Wendy and nudged her over to the kitchen. “You need to help with dinner. We all have chores to keep occupied.” She pointed her finger at me. “That includes you, Jade.”

“I know what to do.” I walked over to the china cabinet and pulled out three white bowls, napkins and spoons. I arranged them on our wobbly card table.

Wendy stirred the beans and boiled some eggs. She began to eye Becky as if she wanted something. She cleared her throat and announced: “By the way, I’m up for a bedtime story.”

“Not sure, my *malenkaya*, I’m pretty much exhausted.”

Wendy turned to Jade and stared with pleading eyes.

“Well,” I hemmed, “maybe.”

“*Nyet* science fiction,” Becky said. “Much too scary.”

“How about some science with facts,” I grinned.

“You know what that does. Brings back dreadful memories. Horrific nightmares. She’ll toss and turn all night.”

“There’re not that bad,” Wendy spoke up in my defense. “That is if it’s not too creepy.”

“But the scary narratives are the most exciting,” I continued with my playful antics. I guess I could not help myself.

Becky shook her head and snickered. “Your father has memory lapses. He’s an ennobler.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” I said, “but I think you meant enabler.”

Becky huffed a disbelieving breath. “She should read nice book on history or evolutionary biology. Read something useful.”

“I’m not an invalid. I can select my own books.” Wendy said defiantly. She gravitated towards a long shelf, sat on the floor, pulled them out and made

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a stack of books. She took her time, thumbing through some of her favorite tomes.

“About those intruders,” I addressed Becky, “just put your pistol on your night table. Have it cocked and ready. I’ll have mine in my room.”

“You could join me tonight?” Becky cooed with a bashful grin.

“You know you hate my snoring.”

“Well, just for a while. Wendy won’t mind. And you will help warm up bed.”

“Maybe.” I had little interest in cozying up to a cold-blooded woman. We had a long-term understanding. Never shall the twain ever meet in the dark of the night. Although, I had to admit that our agreement had been breached several times in the distant past. But that was not going to ever happen again.

* * * * *

Not long after dinner, Wendy pushed her way into my bedroom, plopped her thin, olive-skinned body next to mine and expected attention. Without saying a word, she handed me her selection, grabbed a white pillow and fluffed it up. She rested her head on it and gazed fixedly at me. “Read!”

When I refused, she pushed the book closer to my face. “Come on. We don’t have all night.”

“I thought mother had promised?” I eyed her with a suspicious squint. I knew I was her favorite bedtime reader.

“She said she’s too much to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well...” Wendy looked away, “actually to be truthful, she stubbed her toe again. She’s in an awful bad mood. I didn’t want to hear her curse and swear after every word. Even her Russian expletives are getting tiresome.”

“I see. But you know, if it weren’t for her fine art of foul language, she would never have anything important to say to me.”

“Stop teasing,” Wendy reached over and tried to slap my face. I leaned out of the way. But she finally poked me in the stomach, hard. That was her routine when I displeased her. She was never satisfied until she had inflicted some minor injury to my body. But her lame attempts to stop my wisecracking never worked. I would go on the offense, and pull on her black hair. She would fake a scream, then laughed with a blissful glee. I pinned her down and accused her of turning into a professional wrestler. She pushed me to the side and said that her real persona was a pot-bellied truck driver who spit chewing tobacco. Now who was the expert teaser?

It took some time to get Wendy to settle down. After I accomplished that feat, our small pet jumped on the bedspread and begged for affection. Eyes as bright as gems, Tinkle wheeled around, completed a full circle, then squeaked with a high pitched, shrilling noise. Wiggling its long ears, it strolled over to Wendy and rubbed against her leg. I had left Tinkle’s cage open again. Actually, he had free range of the house, which bothered Becky to no end.

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Wendy leaned over and scooped up Tinkle. She began to pet and play with the brown-furry animal. It was the size of a four-week old kitten, but with a row of sharp teeth which commanded respect. We sometimes referred to it as a rare hybrid cat, but that was obviously a lie. It had odd features of a possum, beaver and ferret, but without much of a tail. Whenever an outsider came in contact with Tinkle, I had to make excuses—hinting that it was an endangered species related to a long-haired feline from the Himalayans. Nobody believed my story, but would nod their heads nonetheless.

Finally, Wendy released Tinkle, grasped the book, cracked open the cover and thumbed through the pages. She held up the book and pointed to particular section. “Here, read this.”

I studied the page as Tinkle curled up on Wendy’s lap. “I’ve read this section not long ago.”

“I know. I want to hear it again.”

I smiled. It was the climax scene where Frodo refuses to throw Dark Lord Sauron’s ring into the volcano. Before I could start, the lights flickered off and on, dimming the whole room. We both glanced overhead at the fading light. Nothing was working today.

“I thought you got a new one.” Wendy moaned, disappointedly.

“No, I just substituted a dead battery with a less dead one.”

“Why not get a new one?”

“You know why. We can’t afford to buy anything new right now. Times are tough.”

Wendy inched closer to me, almost face to face. I could see a tinge of fear and doubts swelling in her widening eyes. “Are you saying the money has run out, that we are... poor?”

“Well,” I paused, trying to stall. I was not sure how to answer that loaded question. “We just choose to spend less.”

“So, I’m right. We’re impoverished?”

“Let’s just say we’re poorer than some, but richer than others.” I slowly lifted the book up to hide my face. I knew my vague response was not going to satisfy her curiosity or dispel her disbelief.

“That’s cheating! You’re not telling me anything.”

I could see I had raised a hell-raising skeptic. Good for her. Often awkward for me. Now I waited for the hammer to strike the firing pin and explode.

“So, what’s the answer!” Wendy reached over and pushed down my book. Her big round eyes stared back into mine. “Have we spent all the money? I thought we had enough forever. I mean, we don’t even have indoor plumbing. And I’m tired of using that smelly outhouse.”

“Okay, you win. Let’s just say we’re currently income-challenged. So I guess when it comes right down to it, we’re a little... ah... poorer than before. But there’s more to life than having a large bank account.”

“Bank account?”

“Yeah, you know, where people put their excess money, if they have any.”

“I thought you hid our assets inside a shoe box.”

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I laughed. “Banks are safer places to store money. At least, they used to be.”

“We can’t continue to live like this. Everything is breaking down. I need my laptop fixed to do my research. There is so much to learn here. So many treasure troves of secrets and mysteries.”

“I know. But things will improve.”

“How do you know?”

“Don’t they always?”

Wendy cocked her head, causing her pigtails to flap over her ears. She champed down on her lips, deep in thought. Finally she shook her head. “No. Not really.”

“Listen, don’t tell mother, but I think I can afford to buy a new battery and revamp your laptop. And perhaps acquire a satellite dish that could give us fast downloads.”

“What about a smart phone instead? That’s still ancient technology. Shouldn’t cost much.”

I shook my head. “They can use its GPS chip to determine cell phone locations. We cannot afford to be tracked.”

“Where will you get the money for the battery?”

“You know. Sell the gold I occasionally... find.”

“But I thought mother didn’t want us to go into town. You know, never talk to strangers.”

“I have little choice. Besides, mother is always talking to outsiders. How do you think she sells her cheese and butter? That’s how it works in human society; everyone is dependent on one another. I need what you have and you need what I have. We all trade to live better lives. Nobody can survive in isolation for very long. You know that. Of course, success is not always assured.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, but it’s important to understand. Everyone is both dependent and independent—a two way street. I know it’s a paradox, but it ties together the social fabric of society. Understand?”

“Of course, I do. That’s part of the autopoietic paradox.”

I scratched my head like a muddled monkey. “Who told you that?” I could not recall discussing that particular paradox with her before.

“From one of my guardians. He may have looked like an ugly toad, but knew his stuff, especially the statistical mechanics of quantum gravity.”

“Okay, so you do have an inkling of what I’m saying.”

Wendy smiled and giggled. “Yes. I may be stranded in a world of crazies, but I’m not a full-fledged member. Besides, you’ve alluded to this kind of thing before.”

Hopefully, I didn’t keep running at the mouth.”

“You did. Reruns over reruns, ad nauseam. Not a pretty picture.”

Suddenly, the ceiling light stopped flickering. The light grew stronger and brighter. Wendy looked up and shook her head. She shot her right hand out

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and pushed the book up to my face. “You can go on now. The photons have returned back to the living.”

“Just a minute. It’s my prowling hour.” I got up, grabbed a black bag, inched my way to the door, and peeked outside. I could see that Becky was asleep in her bed next to the kitchen area. I sneaked over to the stove, pulled out a ceramic cup, a napkin, and a small bag of coffee beans. I laid the beans on top of the napkin, overlapped the cloth and quietly hammered the beanies with an old iron stapler. The cloth sort of muffled the sound. Next, I poured the black grounds into the cup. I reached over to the stove, grabbed the teakettle and poured lukewarm water into the cup. It was dessert time.

I tip-toed past Becky and stopped. She was sleeping so peacefully and soundly. I noticed the pistol laying on her small night stand. That would give her a sense of security. Normally, she was a restless sleeper, tossing and turning all night long. She would wake up every 20 minutes or so, mutter a few words of Russian gibberish, rough up the pillow and go back to sleep. I wished there was something I could do to help her.

I moseyed back into the bedroom. Wendy always found my secret, late-night forays into the kitchen amusing. Coffee did not grow in the high desert. So I had to hide my coffee addiction from Becky. Actually, it was not all coffee beans. I combined a few cocoa beans inside the mix. I preferred hot mochas, but sadly, this was the best I could do.

I climbed back into bed and took a sip of my concoction. As Wendy snuggled closer to me, I started to read out loud, but softly. Like always, she enjoyed my performance. I would change my voice for each character, trying to bring more drama to an already overdramatic story. I read the Lord of the Ring for about 20 minutes until Wendy started to look puzzled. I stopped, put the book down and stared at her. “Now what?”

“I don’t get it. Why couldn’t Frodo just throw away the ring? He was right there, standing next to the volcano. Why?”

“The ring held too much power. Not until that moment did Frodo realize that he wanted to possess the ring forever. Most people have the same secret desire. They want the power of control.”

“If only we had some power for our house.”

“Come on. You know what kind of power I mean—the brutal power of one over another. Like a bully who forces you to do stuff that you don’t like. Understand?”

“Yeah, I know, but you have such a nice way of explaining it.”

“Well, this is one reason why we avoid the authorities. We don’t want to get caught in their megawatt obsession with controlling every aspect of our lives. That’s why we lie low and....”

“So, that’s why we have nothing.”

“We’re not really...”

“Don’t lie. We’re dirt poor. And that’s no fun. We could do so much more. We could show them who’s boss.”

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I set my coffee cup on a nearby table and stared. “Don’t give in to hate, Luke. That leads to the dark side,” I acted out my lines in a slight British accent.

Wendy sat up, stuck out her chest and lowered her voice. “Give me the plans to the death star or see your home world of Alderaan destroyed.”

I pushed my chin out. “No can do, Vader. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought onboard.”

“You *don't* know the power of the dark side.”

“Good, I can feel the anger. And that’s because it’s your... bedtime.”

Wendy lunged at me. I dropped the book. She loved to act out mix and match dialogue from Star Wars. She kept trying to poke me in the stomach. I had to defend myself with my arms, using them like lightsabers. When she finally calmed down, I retrieved the book and said that it was indeed getting late. But I had to get in one last parting shot. “I bet you could be seduced by the dark side.”

“No way. Not going to happen.” Wendy made a sour face. “What a terrible thing to say.”

“Power can be very tempting. Wouldn’t you like to be rich and more important than everyone else? Wear expensive clothes. Have your own army of servants beckoning to your every whim. You know, people bowing to you in fear of their pitiful lives. Isn’t that appealing?”

“Nah, I would rather be poor.”

“Well, I guess you got your wish,” I smiled.

“Wait, I thought you said we weren’t...”

“It’s all relative.”

“You tricked me.”

It was getting late. I sat up and showed Wendy back to her small bedroom. Of course, I knew she would eventually crawl in bed with Becky. It was warmer and cozier next to the stove.

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