

# Ra: The Random Factor

## Book 4 of the Remolding Saga

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*Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!*

—**The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam**,  
No. 73, trans. Edward FitzGerald

**Part 1.Chloe and Ra:  
Rah Rah Ra**

# 1. The Hyena Story

## December 21, 2184

### Arabella Springs, Africa, ASW

Ra would always remember her eleventh birthday, when D spoke to her for the first time and helped her kill a rabid hyena, allegedly with her bare hands. The part about killing the hyena bore an uncanny resemblance to the legend that Davy Crockett “kilt him a bear when he was only three.” The part about Ms. D was known only to Ra, her parents, and, of course, D.

Chloe learned of the event when her alarm went off at 2 am. “What is it?” she asked. It had been a long day.

“You should see this. Something involving Ra,” Ambi told her. The monitor lit up with scenes from Arabella Springs. “This footage is from the security camera on the main barn. Apparently, Serine was on her way to observe some novices handling a cow birth. Here you can see Serine coming into view. Then, there is a group of second graders trailing behind. Watch now.”

Serine looked up and spotted the hyena. She turned back and gestured to the group to come to her. Then she took off toward the barn. The hyena seemed to realize the children were easy prey and began to run towards them. After a few steps, Serine stopped and yelled something. The children started to run toward her but wouldn’t reach the barn in time.

“Did she just abandon the children?” Chloe asked, unable to believe what she was seeing.

“Here comes the answer,” Ambianca told her. A small figure streaked into the picture, racing toward the children, picking up a small one and running toward the rest. Ra got to the other children before the hyena and obviously turned on her protective field. The hyena sensed it at 5 meters and quickly backtracked.

Ra gathered the children together and carefully moved toward the barn. After handing them off to Serine, she turned back to face the animal that had been terrorizing the city’s outskirts for almost a week. Standing as though invulnerable with hands hanging loosely at her side, she stared at the beast as it moved slowly toward her.

When the two were less than 2 meters apart, the beast seemed to stop, puzzled, and lay down, looking up at Ra. Suddenly, Ra sprang forward and grabbed it by the head. It was all over in seconds. Indeed, the entire recording lasted only about 3 minutes.

Chloe thought, *Mr. D. What can you tell me about this?*

“It’s complicated,” came the reply from the voice in her head,

*Later.*

“Ambi, can you clear my schedule for the rest of the day.”

“Working on it.”

“I’ll need food when I return.”

“Of course.”

*All right, Mr. D. Let’s get there.*

She would never get used to the darkness of the shift no matter how often she faced it. When it ended, she found herself lying in Yuri’s bed. “Does he know I’m here?” she asked Ambi.

“He’s on his way. You set off an alarm with your arrival.”

“Where’s Ra?”

“Searching...Still in the barn.”

Yuri chose that moment to burst into the room. “What—” he began, but switched to, “Chloe.”

“Hello, Yuri,” she replied. “Good to see you too.”

“Chloe, I had no idea you were coming. How...Oh, it’s like the last time. Your suit...”

A woman appeared behind him. “Yuri, we got an alarm from here. They said you were already up here.”

Yuri took her hand and pulled her in front of him. “Chloe, permit me to introduce you to my wife, Maela. Maela, in case you don’t recognize her, this is Chloe Herself.”

“How nice to meet you Maela,” Chloe said. “Yuri, I hadn’t heard. Congratulations.” She took a better look at Maela. Shorter than Chloe by at least 15cm, clearly African, with medium dark skin and dark hair in a burr cut. The jeans and T-shirt she wore could not conceal her lovely figure. She looked easily 10 years younger than Yuri.

“An honor and a pleasure,” Maela said. “How can we be of assistance? What is your errand?”

“I came because of Ra, as she prefers to be called. Some video just hit the net minutes ago. I felt that I needed to be here to help you deal with the brouhaha.”

“I’m in the dark,” Yuri said. “What happened to Ra?”

“Not to Ra,” Chloe corrected him. “It’s a question of what has Ra done? Or to be precise, how has Ra managed to kill a large, male hyena with no obvious weapon.”

She saw that Yuri was still in the dark. “Ambi, can you fetch the video?”

A large monitor on the wall flickered on and began repeating the clip of Serine, the children and Ra’s heroic acts.

“What was she thinking!” Yuri exclaimed. “Where is she?”

“She should be here shortly,” Ambianca told him. “She knows we want to talk to her.”

While they waited, Chloe moved next to Yuri. “Sorry for showing up in the bedroom. It was the only place here I was confident of knowing good coordinates for.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” he said flatly.

Ra rushed in. “Sorry, I was down at the barn. They said somebody was looking for me.” She stopped to look, then recognizing her mother, she said, “Well, Daddy and Mom both. Gotta be important.”

“Ambi, have you arranged someplace private?” Chloe asked.

“I assumed you would want a quiet place. The small meeting room down the hall on the right is available,”

“Excellent. Maela, this is really between Yuri, Ra and me, but you are welcome to sit in if you wish,” Chloe said as she headed for the door.

“I’ll be setting up the dining area. I’ll bet we have extra guests tonight once the word gets around. You’ll stay, Chloe?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Are we talking about lunch or dinner?”

“Dinner.”

“Could I get some kind of snack in the meantime?”

“Of course.”

One of the bots appeared in a few minutes carrying several sandwiches. Chloe wolfed one down before asking, “What do you call this?”

“It’s just PB&J. Peanut Butter and Jelly. All local, of course, as well as the bread,” Ra said. “I guess peanuts aren’t available in Austin now.”

“It’s delicious. Just what I needed. Ambi, we need to add this to the trade goods from Africa. Now, let’s get down to it. Ra, we are not angry at you. Right, Yuri? You performed admirably in a tense situation. I’d call it precocious if I hadn’t read all the reports on you. Still, I think we need to talk about a couple of items, wouldn’t you agree?”

“D,” she guessed.

“Got it in one,” Chloe told her. “And all that implies.”

Yuri started the playback of the incident. “Why don’t you tell us what happened from your perspective?” he suggested.

“Serine had asked me to help with the kids who were coming with her to watch a calf being born. It was part of their biology assignment for the week. I was a bit late catching up to them. Serine spotted the hyena. She called to the children to run to her.”

Ra waited for the playback to run for about 15 seconds. “Serine called to me to rescue the children. This is the point when I heard the voice in my head. Notice that one of the kids has panicked and stopped running. The voice said, ‘You have to save her. You’re the fastest person on this continent.’” At first, I thought Serine had called me, but it was a different voice.

“Without thinking, I ran toward the group, scooping up Helene in the process. I collected the group near me when the beast was no more than 10 meters away and running full on. Suddenly, he stopped and retreated. I heard the voice again. Thinking about it, I realize it was more like someone in a dream. She said, ‘The protective field is set to 5 meters. Walk slowly toward the barn with the children next to you.’ Clear, calm, with a funny accent. Weird, huh?”

*You don’t know the half,* Chloe thought. She encouraged Ra, “Go on.”

“Well, I got everyone to the barn door. All the young ones went in. The voice spoke to me again, “Excellent! Now let’s take care of the animal. He’s probably in pain. Be careful. Walk toward him slowly. Grab him when you can.” I dunno. I just do what D — she told me later that be her name — ask. You done see the rest. When I get close enough, I make quick dash and grab hyena by the head. Well, you done see it, Funny, though, at the end, the Hyena seemed to just lie down and wait. Anyway, I grabbed it like D said and bam!”

“How is any of this possible?” Yuri demanded. “Ra is only 11 years old. Today in fact!”

“Mr. D,” Chloe said.

“The voice in her head! That’s a sign of psychosis. We have no way to deal with that,” Yuri replied. He seemed about to lose it.

“Take it easy, Yuri. I can explain most of it.” She paced a bit gathering her thoughts. “I hear Mr. D in my head as well. The suit that was created for me grew gradually more intelligent until it was able to contact me directly. First, it was in dreams; later, just as Ra describes. Ra has inherited Mr. D from me. I’m curious, Ra, that you called D *she*.”

“That’s your idea of *explaining most of it*?” Yuri almost shouted.

“Ra understands, don’t you, dear.”

Ra had the look her teachers had learned to fear. It meant Ra had another way of looking at whatever it was they were considering.

Ra spoke, remembering to use Standard, “Assuming you are correct, that I inherited Mr. D from you somehow, then since he and I have been together essentially all my life, perhaps we should think of it as an evolutionary step. And D is *definitely* female.”

Chloe laughed. “Bravo! Ra. Bravo! Tell your friends — I hope you have some — that you beat your mother in a test of wits.”

“Yuri,” she turned back to him, “why don’t you do whatever you have to do and let me and Ra have a quiet chat. You can spread the word that I have come back for Ra’s birthday.”

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“Now, Ra, it’s time to talk about how the cow ate the cabbage, to use an old Texas expression. I suspect that you know more about Mr. D than you have told us.”

“Yes, but how?”

“I asked him.”

“You talk to D too?”

“Indeed I do. Frequently. He was evasive about this incident, which is unprecedented. So, you figured out that he could change your outfit to suit you.”

Ra smiled. “Yeah. Way cool. I heard bout your suit and tried it.” As if to show her ability, the suit changed from the jeans and T-shirt she wore into a formal outfit appropriate to her age.

“Very good,” Chloe said. “But have you learned how to do this?” Suddenly, Chloe vanished. Ra stared at the chair her mother had occupied open mouthed.

“Ask him to explain how the camouflage works,” Chloe said, her voice coming from the chair. Ra stood and walked to the chair and reached out to feel Chloe. The shock threw her backwards. She wound up sitting on the floor.

“That, when raised to full power, is what killed the hyena.”

“Wow! Can I do that?”

Chloe asked Mr. D, *Well. Can she?* She sensed a pause. “Not yet.”

“Mr. D says you cannot do that yet, at least not unless it is an emergency. He sorta rushed the program.”

Chloe thought for a moment before adding, “I’m going to ask Suzy to show you how to use the suit effectively. I won’t explain exactly how you acquired the suit. Is that OK with you?”

“I’ve never been asked for permission before,” Ra commented, “but of course I will talk to Suz.” She decided to leave the issue of D’s gender for later.

“Asking for permission is what adults do with other adults.”

“Me?”

“I think you’ve earned the right to make your own decisions about most things. When in doubt, ask Ambianca or Mr. D for their advice. They won’t lead you wrong.”

Ra was dumbfounded. “Adult? I’m only 11, and barely that.”

“And wise beyond your years,” Chloe assured her. “I’ll speak to Yuri about it. Now, to change the subject, have you thought about your future? What would you like to do?”

Ra thought for a long time before replying. “From the way you phrased that, I suppose that staying here and...”

“Out of the question,” Chloe responded. “If you don’t have a plan, we will have to come up with one for you. I’m sure JJ will want to be consulted.”

“How about I ask JJ for advice before I tell you what I have planned?”

Chloe laughed. “I love it. OK, Ra, you take charge of your life now. Let me know if I can help.”

Ra broke into a broad grin. “Deal.” Then she got to her feet. “I’ll need to think about this at length.”

“Understood. There is no hurry. After all, you’re only 11 years old. Today.” With that, she dropped the stealth mode and stood up as well. “Why don’t we go find Suzy and see if she’s willing to undertake your training.”

**2. Pillow Talk**  
**December 21, 2184**  
**Arabella Springs, Africa, ASW**

“I’m surprised your new, young wife agreed to our...liaison,” Chloe said.

“We have an arrangement,” Yuri told her. “I’m sure she is with one of her many lovers tonight.”

“Oh?”

“She wants to have a child with me,” he added.

“Well. Good luck.”

“I notice that you aren’t wearing a patch.”

“Right. I don’t have very many opportunities these days. Mr. D has a way for us to avoid unwanted pregnancies. He creates a barrier for the sperm. Like a 20<sup>th</sup> century diaphragm.”

“Interesting. You’re getting to the point where it may be academic, aren’t you?”

“Not yet, but I’m expecting it soon.” She continued, “Maela seems nice.”

“Very nice, and also ambitious. She wants a bigger say in the running of the — do we still call this place a village?”

“I think it’s big enough from what I’ve seen that it qualifies as a small city. How are you governing now?”

“Following your lead. We’re more or less playing it by ear. So far, we haven’t had any real problems. So long as the rains are reliable, and we have food surpluses, everyone is satisfied.”

“That’s good. Maybe our decision to wait for something to develop on its own was a good one.”

“Chloe,” Yuri said, “everything you have done is wonderful, including our young, very gifted daughter. You have literally changed the world, and maybe in the right direction for once.”

“Thanks, Yuri. I don’t hear that often enough. Now, I need to tell you what I agreed with Ra.”

“Please. You have my attention. Then, I have a suggestion for what to do next.”

“Again!”

“It’s been a very long time. I’ve missed you, especially in bed.”

“I’ll tell you what Ra and I agreed later,” she said.

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“My agreement with Ra is simple,” Chloe said as she propped herself up on one elbow. “I told her she should be the one to make decisions about her life. I said she was enough of an adult to know what she wanted.”

“What was her reaction?”

“What you’d expect. She pointed out that she was only 11 years old, and just barely.”

Yuri laughed. “I’ll bet she changes her mind on that, and soon.”

“She is very mature for her age.”

“We all know that. She’s been like that for years. Corrects her teachers frequently. Creative. Curious. A natural leader.”

“Should be fun to watch,” Chloe said, then lay back down with her head on Yuri’s chest.

*Mr. D, you paying attention?*



“Of course. I, like you, am very interested in my second successful integration. You were unique. This is even more unique, if that’s possible.”

*Why don't you shift me back to California after I'm sound asleep.*

“OK. Pleasant dreams.”

### **3. A Blast from the Past** **January 1, 2189** ***Pacific Ocean, En Route to California***

The distress call, when it came, rescued Ra from boredom. As one of the two humans on the ship, she had been loitering on the bridge. The captain was in the lounge as usual, playing solitaire on his computer. She had grown tired of the lessons JJ kept sending her. Most were too easy. The others were impossible, and JJ knew it.

To break up the monotony, she talked to Ambianca for hours, mostly on the same subject, the nature of reality. Ra had told her what D said, “Yes, Ambi, you are real, and reality is a lot more complicated than you think.” That had only spurred her on to ever more weird and bizarre ideas about what was real, without ever coming up with a satisfactory definition of the subject of the studies.

After crossing the equator, the weather had grown increasingly nasty, cold, and wet. The ship, *ASW 1701, Excalibur*, cut through the waves efficiently, occasionally flushing some flying fish into the air.

JJ was responsible. He told her, “You need to meet some people like you, and the Uni is the only place for that.” Then he contacted Chloe, who agreed. Her note to Ra had been to the point. “I know that we said the decision on your future was for you to determine. However, I think JJ is right. You belong at the University in Austin.”

Eventually, Ra acquiesced. Acceptance at the Uni was a formality. Anyone JJ recommended was automatically welcomed. So now, enduring winter weather in the North Pacific Ocean, she counted the days until she reached California.

The AI running the ship interrupted her sour mood. “We are receiving a distress call.”

“Tell me more.” This AI barely qualified as Intelligent.

“Coming from a small island in the former Japanese archipelago called Miyake Jima.”

Ra felt the first excitement in days. “Time to that destination?”

“10 hours at current speed.”

“What is maximum safe speed?”

“The ship is capable of 21 knots in current conditions.”

“Time to destination if we increase speed to max?”

“Six hours.”

“OK. Change course to take us to Miyake Jima as quickly as safely possible. Report on progress hourly.”

She had to notify the captain. Technically, it was his decision to change course and speed up. Ra wondered if he would recognize the significance of Miyake Jima. D certainly knew about it and rippled her suit in anticipation.

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“Miyake Jima? Isn’t that where your mother...”

“Marooned the men who tried to kill her. Yes, that’s the place. Apparently one of the men has had a change of heart and is ready to take his chances in California.”

“So, you pushed the ship to max and we’re headed there now.”

“Exactly.”

“Good. I concur with your decision. I’ll make an entry in the log now.” He proceeded to type on his laptop, a skill much harder than playing solitaire. “You seem to be doing a good job on the bridge. Why don’t you continue to tell Roscoe what to do?”

Ra, for her part, was used to AIs that justified the designation and refused to give this one a pet name. She just referred to “him” as “it.” However, she was happy to go back to the bridge, where all the action was. The captain returned to his favorite pursuit. “Only 50 more points on Free Cell and I’ll be a diamond Grandmaster,” he called to her back.

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Six hours later, Excalibur lay at anchor off the shore of Miyake Jima. Thru binoculars, Ra saw a man on the beach gesticulating wildly. “I’ll take a Zodiac and investigate,” she told the captain. “I think I can handle anything they want to try.”

With that, she headed for the shore. As she waded onto the beach, the man, an emaciated specimen with a scraggly beard wearing some shorts made from palm fibers and nothing else. His skin showed the effects of too much sun and not enough green vegetables.

“Got your signal,” Ra said when close enough for conversation. “What’s the problem? Or do you just want to go to California to stand trial?”

“It’s the Woman,” he replied. “She’s been having contractions for hours, since yesterday, but doesn’t seem to be any closer to delivering the baby. Can you help? I don’t know what to do.”

“Let’s take a look. Show me where she is.” Then, she added, “Don’t try anything. I can deal with you easily. I have everything my mother has, and more.”

“Mother? You mean…”

“Yes, I am Chloe’s daughter. You may call me Ra. Now where is *the woman*.”

The still unnamed woman was in bad shape. “We need to take her to the ship. We are set up for medical emergencies.” Ra said, carefully comparing the woman, who was quite small, with the man who was presumably the father of the child. “Is this your child?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“The baby is probably too large to be born naturally. We’ll have to perform an emergency C-section. Can you carry her to the Zodiac?”

“I’ll try,” he said.

“Which one are you? Che or Dudley?” Ra asked. It didn’t really matter, but she recalled that Che was the smart one of the pair and hoped that was who she was dealing with.

“I’m Che.”

“What happened to Dudley?”

“He decided to try swimming to California. Don’t know what happened to him.”

Ra knelt down at the woman’s side. “We’re going to take care of you. We need to get you to the ship. Can you walk?”

“Don’t think so.”

“OK. We’ll cope. Che, get one side. I’ll take to other. Ready?”

An agonizing 15 minutes later, they reached the Zodiac. “Get in, Che. I may need your help. If you behave yourself, I’ll put in a good word with Chloe.”

Che didn't need any urging.

As they headed back to the ship, Ra spoke into the mic in her suit. "Ambi, do what you can to get the OR set up. Send one of the cargo bots to help us with the patient. And get Eunice online."

"Understood," Ambi replied. By the time they managed to get the woman out of the Zodiac and onto the ship, one of the large robots was ready. "Lie down on the gurney," Ra told her patient. She seemed to understand and managed to get situated just as another contraction began. With the robot's help, they whisked her to the operating room.

"Wow!" Che said. "Where did all this equipment come from?"

"This ship was built just for this purpose. Now, stand over there out of the way. I'll let you know when it is safe to come closer." She turned back to the woman. "Do you have a name?" she asked. "Dunno," she replied. "Mostly, they call me *the woman*."

"All right. Not important. Now, I'm going to explain what we're going to do. We think that the baby cannot be born in the usual way. We'll get some pictures to make sure. We're probably going to have to cut you open and take it out. That sounds scary, I know, but we'll give you something so you won't feel anything. Understand?"

She shook her head.

"Then, you'll have to trust me." She stroked the woman on her brow, feeling D's tendrils, or whatever they were, spread on the woman's forehead. Whatever D did, it had the right effect. A tired smile appeared. "Help me," the patient said.

From the brief look when D touched the woman, Ra could tell that they didn't have as much time as she hoped. "Please take enhanced ultrasound picture," Ra ordered the ER robot. A device lowered until it touched the woman. A short beep signaled the end of the process. Ra turned to look at the monitor, just as Eunice appeared. Out of breath, she said, "Got here as fast as I could. I see you have an ultrasound already. Oh, no way he's going to come out the natural way. Ambi told me you expected to do an emergency C-section."

"I think it is essential to save them both," Ra said.

"I concur. You will have to handle part of it. The surgical robot can't deal with most of it."

"I understand," Ra said, as she turned back to her patient. "You'll go to sleep now," she said as she jabbed the hypodermic into the woman's arm.

After the woman relaxed, Ra said, "Start the anesthesia," to one of the OR robots. Quickly, the bot started an IV and inserted a breathing tube. When the mother's breathing seemed normal, the surgical robot made a quick incision across the abdomen. Then it opened the uterus. Ra heard Eunice in her ear. "Ra this is the hard part. You must reach into the uterus and remove the baby. Do it now."

Ra felt around inside the abdominal cavity until she found the small body within. She pulled and soon had an infant boy lying beside his mother. "You have a son, Che." She quickly tied the cord and cut it off. Then, she lifted the infant up by his feet, and was gratified to hear the sudden intake of breath followed by a hearty bellow. Wrapping the child in a blanket, she laid him back on his mother's chest as the surgical bot sewed up the uterus and the external incision. The entire operation had lasted only about 30 minutes. "OK. Wake her up," she ordered the anesthesia bot.

"It's over," she said when her patient opened her eyes. "You have a healthy son. Che, would you like to hold him?"

Che didn't need another invitation. Cradling the infant in his arms he gazed down into the newborn's face. "That was miraculous."

“Only in the sense of Clark’s third law, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. We’ve made considerable progress while you were out of the picture.”

Then, getting back down to business, she said, “Let’s transfer to a better room.”

## **4. Celebratory Reunion**

### **January 5, 2189**

### **San Francisco, CA, ASW**

Ra was greeted by a large crowd on the Golden Gate Bridge as Excalibur sailed beneath on the way to dock in San Francisco. An even larger crowd was waiting there, including The Chloe Herself, or TCH as she was usually known these days. Che stood beside Ra, with The Woman holding their son to her breast. Both wore scrubs, the only extra clothing they found on the ship. Che explained that he protected the only woman on the island. Che had killed a man who tried to rape her and was rewarded with a new bride. Ultimately, they named her Josie, close to a Japanese term for Woman. By the time the ship reached California, this had been shortened to Jo.

Their son had yet to acquire a name.

Chloe strode forward to greet them, usually one part of the job she hated. Not this time! “Ra,” she called out to her daughter, and held her arms open for a hug.

Ra simply offered a fist bump, “Hi, Mom. Or am I supposed to use your title or something?”

“Mom is perfect,” Chloe replied. “Che, I understand you were the one to set off the emergency beacon. What happened to Dudley?”

“He took your offer and decide try swimming here.”

“Ra told me about your behavior, and suggested clemency. I’ve set up a meeting with you and Ra tomorrow in my San Francisco offices. Ambianca will notify you of the details.”

“Thank you,” Che said. “What about...”

“Just you and Ra for the time being.”

“OK. I grok.”

“Now, Ra, I hope you have prepared a speech. If not, Eunice will speak for you.”

“Ambi told me what to expect. I’ll say a few words,” Ra said.

“Remember the three B’s,” Chloe suggested.

“What are they?”

“Be Sincere; Be Brief; and Be Seated,” Chloe said with a smile. “Where is Captain Darwin?”

“He’s staying on the ship for now. Something about writing a report,” Ra explained. “His position is that he had nothing to do with all this. I think he wanted to get back to his Solitaire, where he has almost reached Diamond Grandmaster, whatever that means.”

Chloe laughed. “Come on. Let’s get the speeches over with. Are you hungry? I have ordered a great dinner just for the two of us, if that’s OK with you. Che and Jo, we have a separate suite set up for you and the child. A nurse will be there to help with the infant. The suite will be guarded.” She added, “For your safety.”

“That be fine,” Che agreed.

“Ambianca will help you order food. We have some new clothing for you in the suite. If you need anything ask her. You do remember Ambi, don’t you?”

“Think so, but everything is so different from what I remember,” Che told her.

“Take it slow,” Chloe suggested. “Some reporters want to interview you. You don’t have to agree.”

With that, she took Ra’s arm and headed toward the crowd, where Eunice was waiting for them.

“Thanks for dinner, Mom. That was easily the best meal I have had in quite a while.”

“I’m glad you liked it. There’s a bit of history. On our big voyages aboard The Enterprise, Bronson’s uncle, Sully, ran the kitchen and worked wonders. His sous-chef was Maddy, the wife of the nominal ship captain, Julio. The chef is Maddy’s son. I found him running a small bistro in the old Mission district of San Francisco and recruited him to be executive chef here.”

“Looks like you made a good move on the chef.”

“Indeed.” Chloe said nothing for some time, then began with, “Your speech last night was perfect, by the way. Just the right tone. Did Ambi help?”

Ra smiled, “That would be revealing secrets.”

“She helps me too,” Chloe said. She spent some time trying to find the right tone before offering, “I haven’t been the kind of mother you deserve.”

Ra waited for more.

“I essentially left you to Yuri and the women of Arabella Springs to do the heavy lifting for me.”

“I didn’t object to that,” Ra noted.

“Still. Suddenly, you’re 15 and a daughter anyone would be proud to claim. On the voyage of Excalibur you saved two lives, maybe three. Che looks like he needed rescuing.”

Ra laughed. “Yes, I was a bit taken aback to see a former bodyguard in such a poor condition.”

“Thug, not bodyguard,” Chloe corrected. “I was shocked by his appearance. Maybe his punishment was too harsh.”

“You have a chance to do something about that.”

“Yes. I understand you promised to put in a good word with me.”

“If he behaved himself. He was clearly delighted with Alfie,” Ra replied.

“Alfie?”

“The decided on the name Alpha, which they converted to Alfie quickly,” Ra explained.

“You know more than I do,” Chloe said.

“I went by to check on them before coming here.”

“That’s nice. You continue to amaze me.”

“I think that’s my line. You have literally saved the world, or what’s left of it. I think Prez’s observation about you was right on.”

“That I was born to greatness, etc.”

“Exactly.”

“You realize that applies to you equally. I didn’t kill a hyena on my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

“My 15 minutes of fame. It’s been on the news every hour since I arrived here.”

“I know,” Chloe said. “I think you underestimate yourself. I was quite bit older when I was tapped to lead the Endeavor II expedition.”

“You were 18,” Ra replied.

“Do you know everything about me?” Chloe asked.

“I did my homework,” Ra said simply.

“Of course. That is one item that was always mentioned in the reports. ‘She continues to be an excellent student, always completing every assignment, easily the smartest one in the class.’”

“You’ve mentioned *reports* a couple times now...”

“I received detailed reports on you every month since, well, since you started talking and walking,” Chloe explained.

“No kidding. Every month?”

“They got to be a trifle repetitious. We cut them back to quarterly unless something unusual needed to be brought to my attention.”

“Such as?”

“Don’t know. There never was anything like that. No injuries. No illness worse than a cold. I began to suspect that you had a suit because you never got hurt. That and the fact that you were so good an athlete. When I saw the Hyena video the first time, I recognized Mr. D’s handiwork.”

“I asked D how that was possible. When had the suit first appeared? She told me it had been there since conception.”

“That is at least consistent with what I was told. That may mean that there is more to learn about what you, or y’all, are capable of. Have you tried shifting?”

“No. What is that?”

“You can go instantly to any point in space-time that the suit knows about. If I recall, your first use was to come the family dinner on Christmas Eve, 2002, at the Talbot house in Houston.” *Do I have that right, Mr. D?*

“That’s correct,” they both heard. “That’s several years away in Ra’s timeline.”

“Whoa!” Ra exclaimed. “That’s getting serious.”

“I guess that’s the answer to one question I had,” Chloe said. “The two D’s seem to be different aspects of one entity, communicating with each other.”

Ra didn’t reply. Then she popped up with, “Is there dessert?”

“Of course, my favorite. Ambi?”

“Just waiting on you,” Ambianca replied.

“I didn’t realize Ambi was listening,” Ra said.

“Always,” Chloe told her. “You and I are two of her favorite people.”

“Who else is a favorite?” Ra wondered out loud.

“There are many,” Ambianca answered, “but you two are special. Only Hypatia is in that category with you.”

“Thanks, Ambi. About dessert?” Chloe got back to the important stuff.

A discreet beep signaled the arrival of a bot with the Crème Brûlée.

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Chloe opened the meeting, “Che, you are here because Ra has recommended clemency for you. I also note for the record that operation of the emergency distress beacon anticipated a trial in California on the charge of attempted murder. Therefore, I feel that this meeting is justified, and that I have the power to offer clemency as suggested.”



“The facts of the case are these:

1. On February 15, 2173, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, I was surprised by two people, who put a bag over my head, tied me to a large weight, and dumped me into the Marianas Trench.
2. I survived that attack by [Redacted]
3. Subsequently, before the officers of the ship, we established the two guilty parties beyond a reasonable doubt, as this man, Che, and his partner, Dudley, who has disappeared.
4. Che and Dudley were marooned on the small island of Miyake Jima in the former Japanese archipelago.
5. They were provided with some supplies, including an emergency beacon to request assistance.
6. Che activated the beacon on January 1, 2189.
7. In response, the ship ASW 1701, Excalibur, diverted to the island.
8. A woman on the island, Josie, was in labor and in serious jeopardy of her life. Ra intervened and performed an emergency C-section, successfully delivering the infant, Alfie. Che cooperated fully in that episode.
9. Excalibur completed her journey to San Francisco with Che, Josie, Alfie, and Ra aboard.
10. We are here to consider Che’s request.

Does anyone want to add anything now?”

Ra spoke up, “Well, I think it somewhat overstates my ability as a surgeon. The new robots did the hard part.”

“Noted. Che?”

Che spoke, “OK. I admit I try to kill you. I be following the orders I be give by someone name Cicero. I realize now that I betta follow advice of Al, and done switch sides. I make bad mistake. Hope maybe you forgive me.”

He sat.

“Very well, Che. You are forgiven. Ra? You want to add more?”

“Just a bit. Che showed sound judgment by using the beacon. Our intervention was necessary to save two lives. I think he deserves a second chance. That’s really all. I don’t know if he has useful skills for employment today, but he should be trainable. Josie and the child are doing well. As I see it, Josie’s involvement in all this has nothing that is appropriate for this meeting. And, of course, any decision about Alfie is hers alone.”

“Nicely put, Ra. Are you sure you want to be a doctor instead of a lawyer?” Chloe said. “Now, Che, can we talk about that? Do you have any plans?”

“No. Just wanna help Josie. I just do what Ra tell me. Now I be here,” he replied.

“You any work skills?”

“No. Could be bouncer, but outta shape.”

“OK. I think we have enough to suggest a reasonable plan. First, you are sentenced to time served. 15 years on Miyake Jima is enough. Second, you are on probation for, shall we say, 5 years? Third, we need to find some useful work for you, perhaps private security. Ambi, we must have someone on file to help people like Che.”

“Of course,” Ambianca replied, “I anticipated that need. I will contact Che after this meeting to set it all up.”

“Have I told you that I love you?” Chloe asked.

“Not today,” Ambianca said and tried one of her laughs.

“So Che, you ok with that?”

“Not sure I got it.”

SAT jumped in and rattled off a long stream of Vernac that seemed to do the job.

“I got it now. Thanks.”

Chloe stood. “Namaste, Che. We are adjourned.” A bot was waiting by the door to lead Che back to the suite.

“What do you think?” Chloe asked Ra when they were alone. “It was fine,” Ra replied, waving the subject away. “I just realized how you got out of the Marianas Trench. You had the suit on!”

“Yes. That the suit, with Ambi’s help, shifted me to David’s house in Boonville.” She smiled remembering that visit and added, “You’ll meet David someday.” She smiled again. “That’s all I am going to say about that.”

Then it was down to business. “We’re on tomorrow’s train to Austin. We’ll first stop at Big Ron’s Trading post, then leave some cargo in Wilcox, which may be unattended right now. We have some prearranged trading stops in the Davis Mountains, and some diplomatic function in San Antonio, where we will spend the final night. Then on to Austin.”

“I’ll be ready,” Ra replied. She thought, *It’s a test, D. She wants to see if I need to ask the time.*

“I think you’re right,” D’s voice in her head replied. “Shall I contact Ambi for the details?”

*You can do that?*

“Yeah. It’s jury-rigged, but worth a try.”

*Do it, then. Add to calendar.*

“You got it.”

Ra heard Ambi’s voice, “I have added everything to your calendar.”

*Ambi! I can hear you in my head.*

“Yes. It’s wonderful!”

*But D hears me too.*

Both voices said, “That’s right.”

Ambi continued, “If you want one of us in particular, just think of the right name. Otherwise we’ll both listen in and figure out who you meant.”

D said, “That OK.”

*Wow! This is way cool. Ambi, order dinner sent to my room tonight. I want to play with this. Maybe the two of you can agree on the nature of reality.*

## 5. Mother and Daughter Reunion

January 7-10, 2189

### Big Red's Trading Post, CA, ASW

“Our first stop is Big Red's Trading Post, in the Central Valley. You familiar with that?” Chloe asked.

“I've read the reports,” Ra replied. “Anything more that I need to know?”

“A surprise.”

“Ooh, I love surprises.”

When the train pulled into the station by the side of the old road, Ra found out what the surprise was. Instead of an old couple, she was greeted by two people only a few years older than she was. “Who's the young pair?” Ra asked.

“The new owners of Big Ron's,” Chloe explained. “Caleb died last year, and Misha didn't think she could run the place herself. Come on, I'll introduce you.”

The woman of the pair approached them. “Want to come inside? It's pretty cold this morning. Tigger will handle the unloading, and all that.” She turned to Ra. “I've read so much about you. It's great to meet you finally.”

“You're Mo, aren't you? I have heard about you as well,” Ra said, “but I didn't know you had taken over this operation.”

“We answered an ad for a young couple with a thirst for a challenge. Tig jumped at the chance when I told him 'bout the storage building. I liked the chance to get some real-world experience using the business and accounting courses I took.”

“Tell me more,” Ra suggested.

“Well, I saw the *barn* repeatedly when I was *helping out* here. I didn't know what most of the stuff was, but Tig got excited about it. ‘Gotta be some good stuff they forgot about’ was his comment. He repeated one of the Techie mantras: old junk can sometimes turn into treasure.”

“I hear he spends most of his time in there, just cataloging everything,” Chloe said.

Mo laughed. Chloe thought that was the best part. If Mo could come back to the place where she endured unspeakable trauma, and laugh again, then Chloe's efforts over the years had been worth the time spent. “How's Misha?” she asked Mo.

“Good most of the time. She has some bad days now and again. Still cooks better than the rest of the Valley folk. She's teaching me. She's anxious to see you again.”

“What's on the menu for tonight?” Ra asked, mostly out of curiosity. After spending weeks on Excalibur subsisting on microwave meals, she was ready for something upscale.

“Antelope stew.” Mo told her. “I made it following Misha's recipe. Dinner is at 1800. Recreational chems before, if you're interested in our latest efforts.”

“Not until I get her sig on this packing list,” a familiar voice said behind them.

“Ah. Hello Tigger.” Chloe turned and gave him a hug. “I knew I had a winner when you showed me that beautiful swallowtail butterfly. I think I made a good bet. I notice that there are more people settling right around here.”

“Yeah. They mostly provide services to the travelers who pass by. Guiding. Hunting. Whatever. They built the shacks themselves. We just failed to throw them off the land. What do you think?”

“Interesting question, Tigger. Let me think on it. Can we move dinner up a bit? We both are anxious to get to bed early tonight. You expecting a big crowd tomorrow?”

“You be kidding, right? TCH and Ra. Hope *huge* crowds be part of your plan,” Tigger said.

“We can make adjustments.”

Tigger left to give the kitchen the news of the new schedule.

“OK, Mom. WTF is going on?”

“We’re a big draw, from the days of the Space Aliens.”

“That really happened?”

“Sure did. Had a big crowd ready to trade. Met Roger the Rabbit for the first time.”

“Do we have any particular agenda here?”

“We’re winging it. The general idea is to let our presence draw in the hordes. We don’t have to do the selling ourselves. I would be terrible at it,” Chloe said.

Ra doubted that, but let it go. After a pause, she said, “So, is this a training exercise for me? Or a test?”

“It’s a learning opportunity. Like it or not, you are a celebrity. May as well learn to put up with it.”

“Really? I’m that famous?”

“Tell you what,” Chloe replied. “Let’s see how many photos are requested of each of us. I’ll bet you have more. Now we need to go see Misha.”

---

The throng in the courtyard in the morning was even larger than Chloe expected. She noticed a queue has already formed by the sign “Get your photo taken with ‘Space Aliens’.” At least they now had quotes around the silly part. Might as well get started. She grabbed a cup of coffee to take with her. She recalled from previous visits that the aroma tended to remind people to get an allotment before it was all gone. She saw that Mo was already in the railcar laying out the most popular items on the counter.

Chloe’s idea of sending railcars full of product directly to the selling locations had turned out to be a winner. Customers learned that a new car had been unloaded and rushed to be on hand to buy the best items early. She waved to Mo as she walked to the Space Alien Photo line. “Good morning, everyone!” She called to those waiting. “As you may have heard, we have a new Space Alien with us, my daughter Ra. If you want a personalized photo of you with her, we’re going to have a separate line. If you want one of me, just stay where you are. The line for Ra will be here.” She indicated a spot for the separate queue with a bright orange traffic cone. About 75% of the people immediately switched to Ra’s line.

Chloe spoke into her microphone. “Ambi, better rouse Ra. There are lots of customers for her photo waiting already.”

“Ra will be out soon,” she told the customers. Then she moved to deal with the few satisfied with a selfie with TCH.

As before, they had set up a laptop focused on the photo spot so people could see what they looked like. A young couple, about Ra’s age, was first. “You can have a personal message if you like,” she offered them.

“The standard one will do,” the woman said.

“OK. Stand here by me. That’s good. We have about 5 shots. Go over to the kiosk,” she pointed. “You can choose the best photo. Then it will be printed and available in a few minutes. Who’s next?”

Ra emerged and went to the line. Ambi coached her on what to say. Most of these customers wanted a personal message, which cost a full dollar. The standard message, “TCH (or Ra) and us at Big Ron’s January 8,

2189,” cost only 50 cents, equal to one beer. A frequent request for Ra’s pic was the hashtag, already trending, “#RahRahRaaaa.” Most of Chloe’s photos showed her in full armor, looking like some visitor from another world. Ra-ites preferred either the outfit from her Hyena Story days, or a doctor’s uniform, white coat and all. After 30 minutes or so, the queue had moved to the kiosk, where a new print emerged every minute. They noticed that Mo had put up a sign, “Get your photos framed for an additional dollar.” A bright yellow arrow pointed to the railcar.

“Breakfast?” Chloe asked Ra.

“You bet. Where?”

“The food vendors are mostly over there,” Chloe pointed. “Last time, I tried the breakfast tacos, which were great.”

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“Ready for the AMA?” Chloe asked at the end of trading. “It’s a tradition from the first time Bronson and I visited here. I tried a joke with unanticipated results. Ask Mo if you’re curious.”

“I’ve read about it?” Ra replied.

“Really? Where?” Chloe asked, surprise evident in her voice.

“There’s a website called *Everything known about TCH.*”

“No kidding. Maybe I should check it out for accuracy.”

Ra laughed. “It’s got a lot of information for you to check. Some of it is pretty outlandish.”

“Maybe I can get some grad student to go thru it,” She mused. “Someone unrelated, of course.”

“Of course,” Ra said and laughed again. “Where does this AMA take place?”

“I see Tigger setting up chairs by the bonfire ring. That’s probably the spot. I usually try to get some cannabis into my system before taking one of these on.”

“I’ve never tried it.”

“That’s good. You’re too young. Said to be bad for teenaged brains.”

“So I read. The use is spreading in Africa after you rekindled interest in the product.”

“No pun intended.”

Ra laughed again, “Of course not.”

“We think the best weed comes from Mendo, but the Africans disagree. I agree you should wait to try it, but I realize that you are an adult capable of making up your own mind.”

Ra didn’t reply, so Chloe changed the subject with, “The first question is likely to be something along the lines of *do you have a boyfriend.* You might want to have a reply ready for that.”

“Thanks for the advice. Hope it works better than your reply to Moira.”

Chloe decided to shut up, and they walked to the AMA area in silence.

“Who’s got the first question?” Ra asked. “Yes, you.” She pointed to a cute boy in the front row. Well, maybe a man; he sported quite an impressive moustache.

“So, you gotta boyfriend?”

“You want to audition for the part?”

“Yeah!”

“Ask Ambianca to add your name to the waiting list,” Ra concluded, to laughter. She looked at Chloe and winked.

“Who’s next?”

The remaining questions were mundane.

“How do you like California?” “It’s great!”

“What’s Africa like?” “A lot like California, but farther away.” More laughter.

“Did you really kill a Hyena on your 11<sup>th</sup> birthday?” “I’ll let you decide for yourself. Ambianca, show the video.” As she had done many times, she narrated the scene from her own perspective, leaving out any reference to D. Everyone knew she had a suit like Chloe’s, so she simply said it was the first time it had been used.

It was, her mother thought, a bravura performance.

[\*\*\*Heart-to-heart on the train]

## 6. Freshman Follies

January 19, 2189  
Austin, NRT, ASW

“Finally,” Ra muttered to herself as she found the door to her dorm room for the first time. The names said, Arabella and Ra. She heard voices from inside, “I think my roommate has arrived,” followed by a chair scraping on the floor. The door opened to show a strikingly beautiful woman wearing jeans and a T-shirt that read “Warriors. Strength in Numbers.”

*Ambi, what does the T-shirt mean?*

“It refers to the Golden State Warriors, a professional basketball team in Pre-Collapsian times. Definitely a prized antique. She dressed up to meet you.”

*Shit. D can you adjust my outfit to something more appropriate?*

“Sure.” Ra felt a slight swish as her track suit outfit she wore changed to jeans and a T-Shirt proclaiming the Houston Astros winners of the World Series, 2022.

“Holy shit!” her new roommate exclaimed. She took a few seconds to check out the smaller and younger person on the doorstep. “OMG! OMG! It’s real! I was sure it was someone’s joke. Gotta tell Mom.” She rushed back to her deck to retrieve her cellphone. “Wait till you see my new roommate!” she said into the phone. Then, turning back, she took several photos of Ra. “It’s Rah Rah Raaaa in person.”

“Hello,” Ra said. “You must be Arabella. Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand for a fist bump.

Bella reached out to almost touch Ra’s fist. Then simply stood there staring.

“May I come in?” Ra asked.

Bella seemed to wake up, “Oh, sure. My name’s Bella. I didn’t believe JJ when he told me. I thought it was a prank.”

“JJ tell a fib? Impossible!” Ra said. Then she took time to check out Bella. Her first impression was right. Bella looked fabulous. Long, lustrous black hair dropped to her shoulders, though it had obviously been braided before that. The eyes that looked back at Ra were soft brown, the color of raw honey, Ra thought. JJ had told Ra that Bella was the second smartest person in the freshman class, a subtle compliment that was the best JJ was capable of.

The T-shirt Bella wore could not conceal the breasts beneath it, and the rest of her figure showed that she exercised regularly. *Well*, Ra thought to herself, *bet I can outrun her*.

“Easily,” Ambi assured her. “I think you will like her. I do.”

Both Ra and Arabella had the soft brown skin tones typical of their mixed ancestry, though Ra still had more of the lily-white skin obvious at her birth.

“JJ told me you are smart. He neglected to tell me you could be a supermodel,” Ra said as an opening.

Bella laughed, in a pleasant way. “Ambianca likes you,” Ra continued. “That’s always a good sign.”

“He told me I had a famous roommate, but I wasn’t sure he meant you. Is that all your baggage?” Bella replied.

Ra tossed her red backpack only the vacant bed. “It holds more than you’d think.” Bella reached out to touch the bag out of curiosity. “Wait!” Ra said, but it was too late. Bella sat on the floor with a stunned look on her face.

“Sorry,” Ra said, reaching down to give her a hand. “I should have turned it off. Pretty cool, huh?”

“OK,” Bella said. “I’ve read all about you, just in case JJ was telling the truth. You have lots of tricks.”

“I do,” Ra agreed. “But we can fix this one at least. Give me your hand.” Bella let Ra help her up, then they moved together to the backpack. Ra put her hand on one side and pushed Bella’s onto the other. A small beep from the bag indicated that Bella was known and trusted. “It won’t shock you now,” Ra explained. She removed her hand, leaving Bella’s resting on the bag.

“Wave your hand over the top,” Ra suggested. When Bella complied, the bag popped open. “It knows you, see.” Ra reached into the bag and pulled out a bag with her toiletries. Then she swept her hand over the top to close it.

“What about your clothes?” Bella asked.

“I have all I need. What’s the usual dress here?” Ra asked in turn.

“Well. You’ll need several layers at this time of year. Rain probability is 80% today, so if we’re going out, you’ll want a waterproof jacket and maybe a sweatshirt on top of the T-shirt. Jeans are OK everywhere in Austin, any time.”

“And good waterproof shoes, I assume,” Ra said. Her suit, now adept at the changes Ra liked, quickly added a sweatshirt emblazoned with a photo of Ra killing the hyena, and a gray rain jacket that looked like it had been salvaged from an old REI outlet. Her sandals became good running shoes. “Maybe I don’t need this photo on the front,” Ra said.

“OMG! This is going to take getting used to,” Bella said. “And definitely keep the photo. I want to hear all about that.”

“Tell you what. I’ll let you tell me what to look like before we go out.” Ra was tempted to emphasize the inclusive *we* that Bella had used, but decided not to.

“Oh, I forgot. Mom is still on the phone.” She put it to her ear and listened. “I’ll ask. She wants to know if you can come for dinner?”

“Tonight?” Ra asked.

“Tomorrow?” Bella asked in turn.

“Love to,” Ra said. *Ambi, should we see if Chloe would like to meet us? And a reminder for tomorrow.*

“She says, yes,” Ambi replied. “I’ll arrange everything.”

*Thanks, Ambi. Have I told you I love you?*

“Not today,” Ambianca replied and tried to laugh.

“And we’ll have dinner with my famous mother sometime soon. Ambianca is arranging it,” Ra told Bella.

“Set for Saturday, 18:00, at the family suite in the Driskill Hotel,” Ambi said aloud.

Bella, who asked, “How... Oh, I get it. She was listening in.”

“More or less,” Ambianca said. “If you want privacy...”

“No, I was just curious. I’ll get used to it.”

“Ambianca and I have a private communication channel,” Ra explained, leaving out all the details.

“All this is going to take time to get my head around,” Bella said.

“Sure,” Ra said. “I’m getting hungry. What say we go grab lunch? Is the commissary open?”

“Let’s go to Mama Li’s Noodle House, instead,” Bella suggested. “It claims to have been established in 1994, but no one really believes it.”



“It’s been around in one form or another since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but with several different owners, according to Ambianca,” Ra told her.

“OK,” Bella said. “Enough of the magic tricks. I’m impressed.”

Ra laughed. “It’s a deal. Next time ask me, but only if you are interested. Otherwise, I’ll keep the trivia tidbits to myself. Ambi thinks she should tell me everything.” *Ambi, let’s cool it, OK?*

---

Ra was studying the menu when she heard a man’s voice, “Y’all must be the two newbies.” She looked up to see a tall, athletic male, dark-skinned, burr cut hair, lots of muscles, looking not at her, but at Bella.

He wore traditional jeans and a sweatshirt with the slogan, “It’s FOOTBALL, not Soccer” on the front. He took no notice of Ra, so she decided to try starting the conversation. “What’s the story on *football* here? Got a league?”

He turned his head to check out Ra. “Yeah. 10 teams. Mine, The Scotch Bonnets, are in first place.”

“Oh,” Ra said. “Who’s in last place? They probably need me.”

He looked her over, still apparently unaware of who he was talking to. “You African?”

“I guess my accent gives me away.” She reached out her fist. “Name’s Ra.”

“Oh,” he replied.

*Who is this idiot?* Ra thought.

“Goes by the name Scotty,” Ambi told her. “Big jock. Will need tutoring if you’re interested in that.”

“I hold the scoring record in Africa,” Ra told him. “Played striker, mostly on the left side.”

“Interesting,” Scotty replied in a way that meant the opposite. He turned back to Bella. “Wondering if you’d be interested in movies this weekend. Festival this Saturday.”

“Let me check my calendar,” Bella said, pulling out her cellphone. “Oh, no, sorry. Ra and I are having dinner with her mother.”

“Surely, you can skip that,” he suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Bella told him, and she held out the phone so he could see who Ra’s mother was.

Scotty’s eyes grew wide. He turned to the crowd in the restaurant. “Hey, everyone. We gotta celebrity here today.”

“Oh, come on,” Ra said. “I don’t need that.” But it was too late. Already, there was a rush to get a quick selfie with Ra. Most just snapped a photo and turned around. One young girl about 13 remained. “May I get a selfie?” she asked politely.

“Of course. Thank you for asking nicely,” Ra said. She took a good look at the girl, skinny to the point of emaciation, in need of a good wash, wearing clothes that she probably scrounged from an untended clothesline. Bright, blue eyes were focused on Ra, ignoring Bella completely. Ra extended a fist and received a polite bump.

“Are you here alone?” Ra asked.

The girl looked frightened and began to leave. “Wait!” Ra called. The young girl stopped and came back, but hesitated. “It’s OK,” Ra said. “I just thought maybe your mother or sister was here. I would like to give them a personalized selfie.”

“Don’t got money,” the girl said.

Ra smiled. "For you, a freebie. Because you are the only one to ask. Have you eaten?" The girl seemed embarrassed. "No," she said.

"Why don't you sit down here with us? Let's order lunch. My treat. Do you have a name?" Ra asked.

"What I gotta do?" she asked.

"Just smile and say, yes, I'd love to."

The girl smiled. "I'd love to have lunch with you."

Ra scooted over. "What's your favorite dish here?"

"Never been here before," she admitted.

"You eat meat?" Ra asked her.

"Sure."

"OK, how about we share some gyozas to get started. Fried dumplings. Then we can get some ice cream down the street."

"My name's Ra. This is Bella, and this guy is Scotty," Ra said.

"How the fuck..." Scotty began. Then he looked at Ra and shut up. "You never told me who is the bottom team in the *football* league," Ra said.

"Why you wanna play for them?"

"Just to even things out a bit," Ra told him. She wished he would get the hint and go away.

Bella helped, "Sorry about Saturday, Scotty. Maybe some other time, OK?"

"Uh, sure." He turned to go back to a group of friends, all male, in the corner.

"What would you like, Bella?" Ra asked.

"Try the soup dumplings," Bella suggested. "They are my fav. I like gyozas also, though."

"OK. One order of gyozas and another of soup dumplings. How about some spr rolls as well?"

"Sounds good," Bella said, "especially if it's your treat."

Ra smiled. *You get that, Ambi?*

"Of course. Will take about 10 minutes."

"We have about 10 minutes," Ra told them. "How about you tell me more about you? I never did get your name," she said to the youngster.

"Guess it be Urchin. That be mostly what people call me."

*Ambi, any info?*

"Nothing. Must live on the street."

"How long have you been living on the street?" Ra asked her.

"Don't know."

"Long time?"

"Yeah."

The waiter arrived with a plate full of pot stickers. "Thanks," Ra said. "Put them here." She indicated the place next to the urchin, who stretched out her hand to take one.

"Better let the cool some," Ra suggested. "Don't want to burn your mouth."

The girl was clearly starving, but street smart enough to hold back if this strange woman thought it best.

Ra reached out to pick one. "I think they're cool enough now."

One of the dumplings disappeared quickly. She took another.

"Try not to eat too fast," Ra cautioned her. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you get enough."

Bella just watched, clearly not used to this kind of interaction.

"Bella," Ra said, "think we can come up with a better name than urchin?"

"Let's see. How about Bumblebee?" Bella suggested with a smile.

"That silly," the young one said, mouth full with a third dumpling.

"How about Amani?" Bella suggested. "My mother had a friend named that. It means *Peace* in some lost language."

"I like the sound," Ra said. "What do you say, young urchin? Maybe Amy for short?"

"I like Amy," she said.

"Then so it is," Ra proclaimed. "Reminds me of the French word for *friend*. That's spelled AMI, which is a bit unusual. Good name for someone like you."

The arrival of the soup dumplings and egg rolls put an end to the conversation.

When all the food was a mere memory, Ami said, "You said ice cream."

"So I did my young friend. And we're in luck. A place called Amy's Ice Cream is right around the corner."

*Ambi, add a good tip and pay the bill, please.*

"No problema."

After all had sampled the ice cream, made with real cow's milk, a delicacy in these times, *real milk* was a luxury item. Most ice cream used goat's milk, which everyone said tasted just the same. Ami said, "Thanks for the dinner and ice cream," and turned to go.

"Wait!" Ra called after her. "Where are you going now?"

Ami dropped her head, unwilling to look Ra in the eye. "I'm sorry," Ra said. "You are certainly free to go. I thought you might be looking for a safe place to stay. The street is certainly not the place. Maybe you come back with us for a while?"

"I not be that kind of girl!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you owed us any...whatever you call it. I'm not that kind of woman either."

"No sex?"

"Certainly not!"

"Oh. OK. Where we go?"

"Actually, that's a good question. Let me talk to Bella a bit, OK?"

"So, Bella, how do we rescue this poor girl from a horrible life? You know Austin. Is there any social welfare organization we could refer her to?"

“This looks like what my grandmother used to call a tar baby. Once you touch it, you can’t let go.”” Bella said. “Maybe my mother would know.” She pulled out her cell phone.

“Good suggestion,” Ra said. “Maybe I should ask *my* mother.”

“Can you do that?”

“I think so,” she replied. *How about it, D? Can you contact Chloe?*

“Of course,” D’s voice in her head said. “She says to bring the child to her now. She’s in her office at the Capitol.”

“Ever visited the Capitol?” Ra asked Ami.

“No. I be caught for sure.”

“Not if you’re with me. Come on. Let’s go.” She turned back to Bella. “I pretty much wished this on myself. If you don’t—”

“No way you’re cutting me out of this now. I’m coming with you.” With that, the trio set off, just as the predicted rain arrived. “Don’t suppose you have an umbrella or two with you,” Bella asked.

Ra smiled, held her hand aloft and an umbrella large enough for all of them to huddle under appeared.

“Whoa! How you do that?” Ami wanted to know.

“Magic,” Ra said.

## 7. Good Karma

January 19, 2189  
Austin, NRT, ASW

A security guard in full battle gear stood at the door to the President's Office. He moved to intercept the trio. "No one allowed," he said.

Ra quickly switched to a business suit instead of the sweatshirt and jeans. "We are expected," she replied.

The guard obviously recognized who he was talking to and stood aside. "In that case..." He pushed the door open.

Chloe stood up from behind her desk. "Come in. Come in. So this is the young waif you have found. Nice to meet you, Ami."

Ami, though clearly gobsmacked to find that TCH knew her name, showed her street smarts, extending her fist to Chloe. "The pleasure is all mine," she said in a practiced voice.

Chloe extended her fist to almost touch Ami's.

She nodded to her security. "Thanks, Byron. I think we are OK."

"Yes, Ma'am." He gave a quick salute and closed the door behind him.

Arabella spoke up, "I am delighted to meet you in person, Ma'am."

"Please. If you and Ra are going to be roommates, you may call me Chloe."

"Thank you. I'm honored," Bella replied.

"Now, Ami, lets hear your story. I understand you have been living on the street for *a long time*."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ami replied. "Or should I say, 'Yes, Chloe.'"

Chloe laughed! "You be quick learner. Si, call me Chloe. How you live on streets?"

Ami thought for some time before responding. Then, using Standard, she said, "My mother, was an alcoholic. Had several boyfriends. Last one beat her up one night. She died. I take off." She paused, realizing she had lapsed into Vernac. After a bit, she continued. "I was put into foster care. My foster mother, she not nice. Suggest I *entertain* some men." She used air quotes to make sure we understood the implication. "I ran away." Another long pause. "I learn Mama Li's have free phone charging. I was there trying to sneak a charge when I recognize Rah Rah Ra."

She continued, "I wait, waited, until I had chance, a chance, to get close. I asked for selfie. Ra, she be very nice. Get me lunch. Bring me here. Not sure why."

Chloe looked at Ra. "Anything you want to add?"

"Well, I admit I thought of Mo. She was so much better off today after your intervention. I confess I wanted to do the same. Good Karma, all that."

"What be Karma?" Ami wanted to know.

"An excellent question," Chloe replied. "The term comes from some Asian religions that believed, mistakenly, that life is a cycle of death and rebirth. Your actions in you current life affect your next life. Of course, today no one takes the idea of rebirth seriously, but the concept remains. Your actions now have an effect on your future. As my mother, Hypatia said, 'Our destinies are intertwined.' Ra's actions, feeding you, bringing you here, mean that in some sense your two lives are connected now."

Ami sat for a long time, trying to consider what she had heard. Finally she said, “What goes around comes around.”

“Exactly!” Chloe exclaimed. “Now, though, we need to consider what is best for you. Of course, you have shown by simply staying alive on your own, that you are capable of making decisions for yourself.” She looked directly at Ra when she said this. Ra smiled and nodded. Then she said, “I think we should be able to find something better for Ami, but I am not sure what that is.”

“What do you know about the world outside of Austin?” Chloe asked Ami.

“Only that it be there,” Ami replied.

“I thought so.” She seemed to be lost in thought. Then she stood up and paced the floor. The others sat quietly waiting for Chloe to figure something out. Finally, she turned to Ami.

“First, the decision is for you to make,” she said to Ami. “We will not force you to do anything you don’t want to do. Understand? You grok?”

Ami smiled. “I grok.”

“You cannot make an intelligent decision without more information. We need to provide you with more information. Time to hit the books. Ambi, see if you can find Y.”

Turning back, she explained, “Y is in charge of the Library. Do you know about that?”

“No,” Ami admitted.

“It’s a place to get more information. Can you read?” Chloe asked.

“Some.”

“Well, Ambianca taught both me and Ra to read, right Ra?”

“Yeah. The teachers didn’t think I was ready. I was not even 4 years old. Ambi knew better and taught me on the sly,” Ra explained. “After that, we let her teach all the young kids. Worked great.”

“Too bad Arabella Springs is so far away. How about Boonville? That worked well for Mo.” Chloe was thinking out loud.

Ambianca spoke up, “Y is in a meeting expected to last for some time. Laila wanted to know if she could help.”

“Laila. Yes. She has a spare bedroom. Ask her to drop by. Soon. I need to get back to work,” Chloe said.

“She’ll be her in about 10 minutes,” Ambianca said.

“Great. Now, Ami, if you approve of the plan, this is what I have in mind. First, you can stay with Laila while Ambianca teaches you to read. Then you should look up information on Boonville. That’s in California. It’s a city run by and for women. Men, with the exception of Tinker, a friend of mine, are not allowed to stay there permanently. That’s where we think you could stay for a few years while you decide what you want to do. With me so far?”

“I guess so,” Ami said, but sounded dubious.

“This won’t be like your foster home. Laila works directly for me. She has two children of her own, almost grown. Where are the children now, Ambi?”

“Both are at the Uni,” Ambianca told her. “Undergrads.”

“So they won’t be around most of the time,” Ami observed. This time, she didn’t need to think before using Standard. Chloe was impressed, and said so, “I see you are smarter than you let on.”

Ami just smiled.

“Now, getting to Boonville will involve a long train trip to Emeryville, in California. We’ll arrange for someone to pick up you and Laila there and take you to Boonville. The train will stop at several places along the way to deliver trade goods. That should be interesting for you to see.”

“A train trip?” Ami was visibly excited.

“Yes. It usually takes most of a week. Think you can handle that?”

A gentle knock on the door announced Laila’s arrival. “Come in, Laila. We have a special job for you.”

Laila went straight to Ami. “So this is our rescued woman,” Laila said. “I’m Laila, Ami. Ambianca has told me about you.” She fist bumped Ami. Turning to Chloe, she said, “Ambianca filled me in on the details. We’ve arranged to rent the room to Ami, with the bill sent directly to you.”

Chloe smiled. “Nicely done, Laila. You ready to visit the old place?”

“An added bonus,” she said. “I hear that—”

“If you should run into Bronson, tell him I said hi.” *That should ice the deal*, she thought to herself. “Now, I really need to get back to work. I have a big speech to prepare for. I’ll see the two of you on Saturday as we agreed,” she said to Ra and Bella as a dismissal.

Only later that night did she realize that Bella had not uttered a word besides her greeting.

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As they walked back to their dorm room, Ra could tell that something bothered Bella. When they were along, she asked, “OK. What’s the matter? You haven’t uttered a word. Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh, no. Just the opposite!”

Ra took some time to try puzzling that out. Finally, Bella explained, “We went out to get lunch. I was hit on by that jock. You nearly caused a stampede just by being there. Then, you rescued Ami from what would surely be a Hobbesian existence by casually dropping in on the most powerful woman in the world, who interrupted her busy schedule to accommodate you. I realized what life with you is going to be like. I don’t know if I’m up to that.”

Suddenly, without warning, she broke into tears. She sat on the bed, then slumped down, her face buried in the sheets. Ra instinctively went to comfort her, stroking her back. Bella sat up, and Ra took her into her arms, holding her close as Bella struggled to regain control, then simply laid her head on Ra’s shoulder, and let Ra stroke her. Ra kissed her gently on the forehead.

Finally, Ra said, “The interesting part is that I felt the same when that jock thought it was worth walking across the room to see if he could get a date. I was jealous and thought that’s what life with you is going to be like. It was as though I was invisible. I even tried talking about football. You saw where that went. JJ told me that we are the two smartest people in our class. I remember thinking that it must be hard for you to be taken seriously. People just see beauty and don’t think of anything else.”

“I’m about to tear up again,” Bella said with a small laugh. “Even now, you have instinctively done the right thing.”

“You realize that Scotty didn’t recognize me until you showed him our dinner plans with TCH. Then he made a big deal out of it,” Ra said. “I could use you as a sort of camouflage, a distraction. No one will notice me if you’re there.” She meant it as a joke, but Bella took it seriously.

Ra continued, “I knew that I could get Chloe’s help. She promised me when I was 11, right after the hyena incident, that she would help me if I ever needed it.”

“What? Tell me more,” Bella demanded.

So Ra told her of the meeting and the agreement that Ra was to be treated as an adult, even though she was still a child.

“Amazing,” was all Bella could say. Then, she thought to ask, “How old are you? I can tell that you are young, but...”

“I’m 15,” Ra said. “My birthday was on the last Solstice.”

“Geez. I knew you were young, but that’s unreal. You’re starting medical training. You really set the bar high.”

*Ambi, how old is Bella?*

“She’ll be 19 this summer.”

“You’re not that old. Just three years older than me. Well, three plus.”

“How? Oh, I get it. You asked Ambianca. Right, Ambi?”

“Yes,” Ambianca replied. “She used our private channel.”

“Can I get one of those?” Bella asked.

“If I ever figure out how it works, maybe.” Ambi replied. “And for what my opinion is worth, I think both of you are fantastic. There is a lot more to you, Arabella, than just beauty.”

At that, Ambianca decided to do what she did best, playing some soft music. Ra recognized Scheherazade by Rimsky Korsakov, and knew that Ambianca associated that with more than friendship. She realized that she had liked holding Bella and wondered if Ambi knew something more, but decided to let it go.



## 8. Two Dinner Dates January 23-24, 2189 Austin, NRT, ASW

Bella's Mother, Claudette, lived with her husband, and sometimes Bella, in a restored mansion from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her office in The Library was a pleasant 20-minute walk. Her husband worked in the ancient Capitol as a medium-level bureaucrat. Claudette reported directly to Chloe and did whatever she asked. Usually, that involved getting help for people who needed it, especially people new to the NRT and unfamiliar with the customs.

Ra admired the furnishings and wondered how they could afford it.

"Here," Ra replied, waving her hand to include the room, "I see my mother's subtle hand at work."

Claudette laughed. "Yes, you got it. Some acquaintance of hers had a *temporary cash flow crisis*, he was behind on the mortgage on this place. JJ was ready to pull the plug. Chloe suggested we lease it for enough to cover the payments, and everyone readily agreed. Then came the hard part, getting me to buy the deal. I told her I would definitely need a raise to afford it, and Reg would need something also."

"Did I hear my name?" Reg said. Ra looked and saw a tall, handsome man several years older than Claudette. Clearly part of the effort to preserve genetic diversity, he had coffee colored skin, but bright blue eyes. His hair was mostly black, but with streaks of gray beginning to show, especially at the temples. Ra guessed he was nearing 50. Again, she suspected her mother's involvement in the marriage.

"I was explaining how we came to live here to Ra," Claudette told him.

"When does your lease run out?" Ra asked.

"I have no idea. Do you, love?" Claudette asked.

"It's automatically renewed every year," Reg said.

"We moved here when I was 10," Bella said. "Worked out well in the end."

Reg went over the menu. "Tonight, we have a great treat. I managed to acquire some grapefruit from the Valley. Also, some avocados. The salad is a combination of these on some local leafy greens with a lemon honey mustard vinaigrette dressing. I was told that you eat meat, Ra, and we have some good meat, beef from the Murchison Ranch. We made it into meatballs served with my own pasta and a nice tomato sauce. We offer an Anderson Valley Pinot Noir as accompaniment. Dessert is *crème Brûlée*, alas without fresh fruit. Espresso if you want it. One of the perks of working in the Capitol."

Ra spoke to Claudette, "Crème Brûlée. I just figured out who you are, and why my mother takes such good care of you. You're one of the Tahitian refugees," Ra said. "The one who stayed on the ship until it returned to California."

"Yes, that's me," Claudette said. "Do you know the whole story?" Bella groaned when she heard this. "Short version, please."

"How sharper than a dragon's tooth," Reg intoned in a Shakespearean manner.

"Serpent's tooth," Bella corrected.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"If you're quoting Lear, I am."

"Ambianca," Reg said, "Which is right?"

"This is a setup for me, isn't it?" Ra asked.

Bella answered, “No, it’s worse than that. We play this silly game every time Mama tries to tell her story.”

“Well, I for one would love to hear the story. Short version,” Ra said. She gestured to Claudette to speak.

Reg interrupted, “It should be Dragon’s tooth. Must have been lost in translation.”

This produced a few polite chuckles.

Claudette told her story, “We were slowly dying out on Papeete when Chloe and friends appeared. They agreed to take us along on the voyage, and we sailed to New Zealand. There, I met Isaac, who became my first husband. I was only 18 and didn’t know better. He was handsome, witty, and seemed to love me dearly. We wound up continuing the voyage until the last stop, in California.”

She took a zip of water and continued, “It didn’t take long for his minor failings to appear. The main one was his inability to stay with me alone. By that time, I was very pregnant, and Bella arrived within a month. Then I learned that Isaac didn’t really care about kids. I was wondering what to do, when he simply disappeared. I’ve always suspected that he was killed somewhere, maybe in a bar fight, but I don’t know what happened to him.”

“I panicked. I had no idea what to do. Fortunately, I consulted Chloe, who took charge. Apparently, she takes the Chinese saying seriously, the one that says if you save someone’s life, you are responsible for them forever. She hired me as a personal assistant, about the only thing I was qualified for. In that job, I dealt with many people in a similar situation, and learned of all the groups around to help. The job included childcare, so I had someone to help with Bella who knew what to do.”

“Ultimately, I moved to Austin with Chloe and found Reg, the perfect husband. We’ve been together ever since.” She blew a kiss to Reg.

The conversation stopped while Reg retrieved the salad from the kitchen and dressed it in a fine ancient wooden salad bowl. Ra found it superb and said so.

“Thanks,” Reg said. I like the combination of flavors, but some people find the grapefruit a bit too, too sour, I guess.”

“Not me,” Ra assured him. “I can hardly wait for the pasta dish.”

“Coming up,” he said as he dashed back into the kitchen.

Ra had never had real meatballs with beef and pork before and was unsure what to expect. “I give the pasta dish a 10,” she said after mopping up the last bits with some bread.

“Dessert is Chloe’s favorite,” Claudette told them. “She likes it with some fresh fruit, but of course there is not much of that around right now.”

“Not a problem,” Ra assured her after taking her first bite.

After espresso, they moved into the main living area and spent the next hour just chatting about Austin, their studies, and the story of Ami. Finally, they said goodbye and walked back to their dorm.

Chloe’s dinner the next night was completely different.

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[What goes here?]



**Part 2.Spring Break**  
**March and April, 2192 and April, 1977**  
**Austin, NRT, Boonville, CA, ASW and USS Ronald Reagan, ASW**

# 1. Remembrance of Times Past

## March 19-22, 2192

### Davis Mountains, ASW

The train that pulled out of the Austin station in the early hours of March 19 was the longest ever assembled, Post-Collapse. The weather had been unusually kind over the Midwest, and Omaha had taken full advantage of the abundant rainfall. A bumper crop of wheat flour filled an entire boxcar, destined for Davis Mountains and then the Wilcox Waterhole. The Equinox, a traditional starting point for the spring festival was on a Wednesday this year, so the festivals started early, on the weekend. They planned to arrive in Wilcox in time for the big party and stay a few days.

Tinker had spent two years figuring out how to grow winter wheat on a large scale on the Great Plains. The hardest part proved to be reviving the ancient equipment. He wound up requisitioning a portable nuclear power plant from Bronson's supply, to drive a rebuilt tractor big enough to plow the large fields, as well as the harvester needed to gather the crop. He had made the trip down from Omaha with the result, and happily joined the party.

The rest of the group in first class consisted of Chloe, who loved the Wilcox gathering and went whenever her schedule allowed it; Y, who had dreamed up a reason to return to Boonville where two wives waited along with her son, now known as Naz; Ra and Bella, off to see Boonville for the first time, and to check on Ami; and some hangers on who wrangled an invitation.

Another car, less luxurious, but adequate, held those who were to do real work. Several were planning to show some new products they hoped to sell. Others had improved software and hardware to install that promised faster and more reliable internet and cell phone service, especially for remote areas.

Several cars contained the trade goods pre-ordered for the Spring Festivals that were sprouting everywhere as word of the one at Wilcox got around. Others contained items Austin wanted to try out. The luxury car with lots of coffee and the latest crop from the Hill Country, a new strain called HC Lullaby, an *indica-dominant* hybrid said to be very relaxing, as well as lots of Hill Country Dream. Another containing bolts of cotton cloth. Most of the clothing salvaged from pre-Collapsian times needed updating. The labs had managed to recycle the rags into usable cloth, especially when augmented by cotton grown on the fields east of Austin.

Another car held nothing but the latest solar panels and batteries, destined to provide reliable electricity to the people living far from the cities or railroads.

Another contained anti-ovulation patches to supply everyone with enough to last a year.

The first-class car reeked of cannabis, as well as the latest gummies, something the lab at the University had been working on for quite a while. Ra and Bella were still advised to wait until they were older, but both had a great contact high by the time they passed San Antonio on the way west. Some of the best bubbly from New Home added to the celebratory air.

The two engines driving the train shared the output from the latest small nuclear power plants, allowing travel during the night. They arrived, to a tumultuous welcome, in Alpine about 10:00 on the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Doraine, still the leader of the Gang, but quite a bit older, with white hair now showing, rushed to greet Chloe, but had a special word for Y. Giving her a big hug, she whispered, "Zed told me to show you a good time. If you're interested."

Y nodded in response.

"We planned for a light lunch, with a big BBQ around the fire tonight," she said to everyone.

“That sounds wonderful,” Chloe told her. She had noticed the exchange between Doraine and Y and wondered whether Tinker had any plans, or if he was interested in another night of bliss. He had disappeared. There went that. She learned later that Celeste had been very specific about what she expected from Tinker.

Ra and Bella found a local girl who showed them around the area, including a visit to the huge greenhouses. There, they were *encouraged* to help move crate after crate of hothouse tomatoes into a new refrigerated rail car. The car was already half full of containers of peanut butter, using peanuts now being grown near Austin. By the time all that was finished, it was time to return to the bonfire and BBQ.

## 2. *Wilcox Wild Times* *March 21-22, 2192* *Wilcox Waterhole, ASW*

The next morning, they left for Wilcox, another long haul down the tracks. The two of them found the scenery fascinating. The wildflowers were blooming, and the area along the tracks had been painted by nature in colors ranging from pastel pink to robust yellow. They sat by the window until it was too dark to see anything.

On the afternoon of March 23, they pulled into Wilcox. Instead of Maude and Winston, the people Chloe was accustomed to seeing, a young couple came to greet them. “Welcome! The Space Aliens and Friends are Back!” they shouted to the emerging crowd.

“Welcome to the Spring Festival! Hope you come prepared to trade,” the pair called back.

“Hello, Russ and Suzanne,” Chloe said, after a quick prompt from Ambianca. “I hear great things about the two of you. I was sorry to hear about Maude. We hope to see Winston.”

“Ain’t as fast as I done be,” a voice said from behind them. Close turned to see Winston limping toward them using a cane to help. Chloe moved to give him a hug. “Good to see you, Winston. Sorry about Maude.”

“She died happy. Claimed you and the young one, Ra, visited her on her last night. We took it as the sign the end was near, but knowing you we thought maybe...”

Chloe didn’t feel like explaining timelines, so she just said, “Well if it helped her die happy...”

“Daddy,” Suzanne said, “You shouldn’t be out now. Save it for tonight. Let me help you back.”

Winston agreed grudgingly. “See you tonight. Maybe you put on another magic show, Ma’am?”

“If everyone would like one,” Chloe said. “Maybe I can talk Ra into performing.”

“That be numba one,” Winston said as his daughter dragged him away.

Russ apologized, “We’ll chat later. Gotta work now. This festival don’t run itself.”

“I got a couple of questions. What’s this about visiting Maude? And what magic tricks?” Ra asked.

“As for Maude,” Chloe answered, “that probably hasn’t happened in our timeline. We’ll plan to visit her later. Remember about shifting?”

“Ah. Interesting,” Ra said.

“As for the magic show, that is mostly blowing stuff up. You been practicing with the suit?”

“Uh. No. I’ve been busy with studies.”

“I guess I’ll have to do it then.” Chloe said. “Unless you want to sneak off to blow up a few rocks and disappear.”

Bella chimed in, “Can I watch?”

“OK,” Ra said. “Better get started. We’ll need to be out of earshot.”

With help from Ambianca, they found a hollow in the hills where the sound would be muffled. “Haven’t done this since Africa,” Ra said. “Let’s do the easy part first. That rock looks about the right size.” She pointed about 20 meters and shot it with her finger.

“Holy shit! I didn’t know you could do that!” Bella said.

“Let me try one a little farther away.” She spotted one quite a bit farther, at least 100 meters. This time she saw the shot hit, but there was no explosion. “Inverse square law,” she explained. She next tried one at 50 meters, which proved to the limit.

“What else can you do?” Bella asked.

“Well this is the hardest,” said a voice about 3 meters away.

“Where are you? Don’t leave me out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Ra laughed, trying to sound sinister. Then she broke up and laughed for real as she dropped the stealth mode. “D was right. She said it was like riding a bicycle.”

“How did you kill the hyena?” Bella wanted to know.

“Remember when my backpack shocked you?”

“How could I forget that?”

“I can do the same thing, well, D can, with my hands.”

“What?”

Ra walked over to her and gave her a mild taste.

“Wow! That’s beyond amazing.”

“The suit was originally designed for protection. All of the features are there to protect me. When I grabbed the hyena, the resulting shock, right thru its brain, was fatal. Usually, a fatal shock is the result of an accident, or when the wearer is being actively threatened.”

“Is there more?”

“Well, there is the protective field. Walk toward me slowly.”

When Bella was about 3 meters away, she stopped. “Oh! I can feel it.”

“It’s effective. Of course, the suit also can turn into armor, enough to stop a bullet. That’s according to Hypatia’s stories. I’ve never been shot myself. Now, how do we arrange this best?”

“The stealth mode is the coolest. The laser beam second. The rest is a bit hard to demo.”

“Sounds good. Maybe instead of blowing up a rock, I could burst a water balloon, or something like that.”

“Oh, I like that. How many could you do at once? We could recruit kids to try and hit you.”

“Great idea. Wonder if we have some balloons handy.”

“There are plenty strung up everywhere. Must be a supply handy.”

“Let’s go find out.”

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“OK, kids. Here’s how this works. Bella has a box full of water balloons. You get to try to hit me with one of them,” Ra told the crowd.

“That’s easy,” a boy about 11 or so said.

“Well, there’s more. We’ve drawn a circle on the ground. You havta stay outside the circle. To make sure you stay out, I’ve turned on a protective field. You’ll feel it when you get close. Don’t try to come closer. You,” she pointed to the young boy, “try walking toward me. Slowly.”

The boy picked up a balloon and started toward Ra. “Whoa! I can feel it.” He took another step and quickly retreated. “It hurts.”



“Yes. The field is set low so you won’t be badly injured, but you’ll know when you’re too close. Try hitting me with the balloon.”

He reached back and hurled the balloon as hard as he could. A burst of light and a brief thunderclap and a shower of water on his head was the result. Everyone laughed. “I told you it was going to be harder than you thought. OK. Let’s go. The game ends when you hit me, or when we run out of balloons.”

Several kids tried at once. Ra managed to hit all the balloons except one, which fell at her feet. “That was too close. I’m going to make it harder.” With that, she disappeared.

“Where’d she go!” Several kids cried all at once. One enterprising girl simply threw a balloon at the last place they had seen Ra. A shot from nowhere burst it as before. But, now they knew where she was and hurled several at the spot. She popped them all and laughed.

She turned off the stealth mode and moved quickly to a different spot, still near the center of the circle, and disappeared again. A new flurry of balloons aimed at the last known spot resulted in a miniature rain shower but no hits. “This is fun,” said an invisible voice. That proved to be a mistake. One older boy had taken a balloon and quietly moved around to the back side of the circle. When Ra magically reappeared, he was ready and hit her square on the head.

All the kids shouted in glee, as Ra turned off the field and used the towel Bella brought her to dry her hair. “More!” several shouted.

“Game over, but I see there are some balloons left. Both Ra and Bella took a couple as the kids grabbed the rest and everyone was soon drenched, including some incautious adults who got too close to the action. When all the balloons were gone the kids raced forward and hugged Ra.

“Fabulous!” Chloe told Ra. “Another bravura performance. I especially liked the kid who thought to sneak up on you from behind.”

“I need to figure out how to see behind me for the next time.”

Bella said. “Everything was so cool.”

“Said she who thought it up,” Ra replied with a broad grin.

“Oh, it was your idea, was it? Great one. Much better than blowing up rock,” Chloe said. “Congratulations on a nice collaboration. Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to hit the sack.”

### 3. California Dream March 24-25, 2192 Boonville, CA, ASW

They spent the next morning doing some last-minute trading before leaving for Emeryville, where they would be met by a passenger bus to take them to Boonville. After the passengers had left, the train planned to continue to Big Ron's for a final trading stop.

The bus arrived in Boonville mid-afternoon on March 24 for yet another big celebration. Celeste was the first to greet the new arrivals in her capacity as the new leader of the Boonville state. Bronson stood right behind her, smiling broadly. Chloe hoped that meant that they would share a bed. It had been a long time since their last coupling, and that was after another long drought.

Ra and Bella scanned the assemblage searching for Ami. When they finally spotted her jumping up and down, waving to them, they were amazed by the change in her appearance. No longer the skinny waif, she had gained weight, including Ra noted with some envy, actual breasts. No longer a child, she was clearly a young woman, and a lovely one to boot. Her hair, formerly a mousey brown that she kept covered, now was a lovely blond color cut fairly short, not a true buzz cut, but much shorter than Bella's. Anxious to talk to her, they left the welcoming committee and wormed thru the crowd until she was within arm's reach. Ra opened her arms and Ami rushed into a hug. "Ami," Ra said, "You look great!"

"Thanks," she replied. "I colored my hair. What do you think?"

"I approve. What do you think, Bella?"

"I agree, it looks good on you," Bella said.

"I'm so glad to see you both again. I am grateful for your help," she said, tears began to flow.

Ra took her into her arms and stroked her back. "I'm so glad you are happy and well. Why don't we go somewhere quiet and talk?"

"I'd like that."

Ra looked around, wondering where Bella had gone. She finally saw her, surrounded by a cluster of other women, and decided not to bother her. "I've got an idea," she told Ami, come with me. *Ambi, can you lead me to Endeavor II?*

"That's easy. Head toward the large building to your left."

Ra saw where she meant and started that way. "You thinking of the Library Room?" Ami asked.

"Something smaller and more private."

"Cool."

Within five minutes, they stood in front of the famous vehicle, now permanently parked in a place of honor. *Ambi, can you let us in?*

The door opened, lowering the small stairs into the interior as lights came on inside.

"I didn't know you could go inside," Ami said.

"You have to have friends in high places," Ra joked. She took Ami's hand, and they ascended the steps to the interior. Once inside, she said, "Endeavor, some privacy, please."

"Of course, Ra. Glad to make your acquaintance," it replied. The door closed behind them, and the windows turned opaque with some soft lighting inside. "Ambi," Ami said, "can we have some mood music, please?"

Ambianca started playing a series of guitar solos that Bronson had composed or transposed from Bach's original. "Nice choice," Ra commented.

"This is Bronson playing the guitar. Some of the pieces are his own. Others are Bach," Ami said.

"So, I see you're friends with Ambianca," Ra said. "That's a great sign."

"Why do you say that?" Ami wanted to know.

"She's very particular. If she likes you, that's good. She can be very helpful."

Ra paused for a while to think. "I want to know how you are getting on here. Are you happy?"

"It's great. The other girls are helping me a lot. I've already passed a reading test. I'm trying to catch up on the school I missed," Ami replied.

"Wonderful. And I notice that you've put on some weight. That's good. You were too thin when we saw you in Austin."

"You noticed."

Ra laughed. "I was afraid you might miss the bustle in Austin."

"Nah."

Endie interrupted, "Someone is approaching." The monitor showed Bella coming toward them.

"Please let her in," Ra said.

"I've been sent to fetch you," Bella said from the open door.

"Oh?" Ra asked.

"Ra. Remember you're a celebrity. They want to see you," she told them.

"OK. Let's go party," Ra said.

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Chloe and Bronson approached the trio when, after what passed as dancing, they headed for the food table. She pulled Ra and Bella aside and asked, "Do you mind camping out tonight?"

"Can you be more specific?" Ra replied. Chloe smiled, recognizing one of her pet techniques when caught off guard.

"Can you sleep in Endie tonight? I know it's not as elegant as the top floor of the hotel, but I want to pull rank and take it for myself."

"And Bron?" Ra countered.

"Yes, actually."

"Hi, Bronson," Ra said. "We haven't actually met, have we?"

"Not since you were a wee one," he agreed. "I presume this is Arabella." He offered Bella a fist.

"Yes," Arabella replied. "I've heard about you as well." She bumped his fist. "This is Ami, our new friend, who's living here now."

"Pleased to meet you, Bronson," Ami said.

"And I am happy to meet you, Ami. Both of my sons wanted to meet you. They're over there," he pointed. "Shall we go over and I'll introduce you."

"Uh, sure," Ami replied. Bron offered an arm to Ami. She took it eagerly, and they set off.

“So, Mom. A little of the old slap and tickle tonight?”

Chloe blushed, the first time Ra had ever seen that. “We’ll be happy to give you the room in the hotel, right Bella?”

“Sure,” Bella said.

“Thanks,” Chloe said.

“Meet you for brekkie?” Ra asked.

“How about lunch? Noonish?”

“OK. Have fun,” Ra said. “The party seems to be winding down.”

“Busy day tomorrow,” Celeste told them as they left, “Lots of planting to do. Y’all don’t have to participate unless you want to. We’ve arranged a tour of Mendo, especially the Gardens and other touristy stuff for any of your group that are interested. Maximum 6 people. Ambianca has all the details.”

“Thanks, Celeste. Maybe we should turn in,” Chloe said. She checked out Celeste, who looked a lot more matronly than when Chloe had seen her last. She’d added a couple of kilos but wore them well. Some gray streaks in her hair were the only sign of her new responsibilities as governor. Chloe was still a bit jealous of Celeste for her liaison with Bronson and the result.

As she and Bronson walked toward the Hotel, Chloe alluded to the event, “Your two sons seem to be getting a lot of attention.”

He just laughed. “Are you suggesting that we finish our unfinished business?”

“No way. I’m too old and too busy to consider it,” she said. “But we can pretend.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

---

As she and Bella entered Endeavor, Ra said, “Want to get up early and go to Mendo on the tour?”

“I’d rather sleep late and learn about the planting, if that’s OK with you.”

“No prob,” Ra said. “Endie, lower the bed, please.”

“I know Endie is a trifle primitive by current standards, but it has a nice feel,” Bella commented.

“I agree. I’m sure Mom and Zed,” she said the word with extra emphasis, “would agree with you.”

“So, you think the story about the two of them...”

“Absolutely.”

They took turns using Endie’s lavatory, which was quite small, then settled into the large bed. Bella wore a rather flimsy nightgown that emphasized her slim frame and beautiful breasts. Feeling the envy she tried to suppress, Ra changed her suit to match.

“Endie, lower the lights. Max privacy please,” Bella said. “Then, she snuggled up next to Ra and said, “Ra, I have something I’d like to say. It’s complicated.”

“You have my attention,” Ra responded.

“Remember my meltdown on the day we first met. I felt so inadequate.”

“But,” Ra began. Bella put her fingers on Ra’s lips. “Let me continue, please. You were perfect. You didn’t belittle my fears or tell me that everything would be all right. You just comforted me, stroked my back, kissed me tenderly. I loved the feel of your arms around me.”

Ra said nothing but remembered that she had felt the same. She rolled over on her back and made room for Bella on her shoulder. Bella accepted the invitation and took up the thread. “Then, I gradually got used to the fact that I was living with someone amazing, someone could do things that didn’t seem possible. And, I might add, that she cannot explain. ‘Magic,’ is her answer.”

Ra started to object, but Bella shushed her again. “A few days ago, I found out she could blow up water balloons with her hands and disappear when she wanted to.”

Ra said, “It’s more complicated than that.”

“I’m sure,” Belle said, “but please listen to me.”

“OK.”

Bella continued, “Over the years, I have come to feel very different...about us. That’s actually not strong enough. I know that I treasure our time together, even if we’re both just studying hard. Just being with you is,” she paused to try to phrase it right, “is what I want for the rest of our lives. There. I’ve said it. I don’t care what kind of arrangement we might have. Anything is fine so long as we’re together. That sounds lame. I’m not sure what kind of love this is, but I know that I love you. How ever you will have me.”

“Oh, Bella, when I first saw you I was completely nonplussed. I have never even dated anyone and here standing in front of me was this gorgeous *woman*. I had never thought that way about anyone, and especially another woman. Over the years, I’ve watched you when you got back from a date. You always had someone who wanted to date you; I was mostly ignored. Ultimately, I realized I was jealous. I wanted to be the one with you. Then, a funny thing happened. This fabulous woman says she loves me,” Ra said and stopped to take a breath.

“Arabella, I love you, too. I wanted to say something, but never felt that the time was right. As for what form it takes, how about going whole hog. I don’t know much about sex and nothing to speak of how it works with another woman, but I’d love to find out.”

“How about now?” Bella asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

“Well, from the time we first met, I’ve wanted to do this,” Ra replied, as she fondled Bella’s breast.

Bella said, “Oh.” Ra kissed her. Then, she said, “Bella, I want to make love with you, if you’ll take the lead.”

Bella said nothing but pulled her nightgown off. “Let’s see what we can figure out.” She noticed that Ra was naked and reached over to draw her close.

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Everyone involved in the planting, most of the village, had grabbed an early breakfast and had already left by the time Ra and Bella got to the dining area. Chloe and Bronson were there and waved to them. From their faces, it was obvious how they had spent the night. When Ra and Bella sat at the same table, Chloe spoke up, “Yes, we did have a wonderful evening. You two as well, unless your new body language is a façade.”

Ra felt the flush on her face and just smiled. Bella said, “We got better acquainted in a way not possible on the small beds in our dorm room.”

“It’s possible,” Bron corrected, “but tricky.”

“If anyone would know, it’s the Lothario of the world,” Chloe said and reached over to caress his cheek. Then, she switched back to the two youngsters, “I’m glad for the two of you. I wondered if JJ had anything like that in mind when he put you two together.”

“You’re giving JJ too much credit,” Ambianca interposed. “I’m sure the pairing was the result of pure science.” She laughed. Sorta.

## 4. Planting with the Help of RtR

March 25, 2192  
Boonville, CA, ASW

After breakfast, the quartet of Chloe, Bronson, Ra, and Bella wandered over to some nearby fields to see how the planting was being handled. Chloe, Bronson, and Ra all said the same thing, “They’re using Roger’s plowing machines.”

Bella demanded an explanation.

Ra explained, “We’ve been using machines like these in Africa for several years. Our tech guru, Roger the Rabbit, figured out how to make them from salvaged components. I didn’t know they were being used here. Did you Bronson?”

“They weren’t used last year, so far as I know,” he replied. “Let’s find Tinker. He’ll know for sure.”

Tinker proved to be very easy to find. He and Celeste were standing about 100 meters away watching the plowing. Chloe led the way as the foursome walked over to talk to him. “Tinker,” Chloe said, when they were close enough, “tell us about these machines. You must have had a part in this.”

“Hi, Chloe. Bron. I recognize Ra from her pictures, and I guess this must be Arabella, her roommate at the Uni,” he replied. Chloe was frankly amazed. This was the longest speech of a purely social nature that she had ever heard from him. A lot had changed in the intervening years. Bronson may have sensed something, for he spoke up, “We’re interested in the plowing technique, which looks like what we used in Arabella Springs.”

“It is the same. Roger shared his work with me, and I managed to duplicate the devices here. He does really good work documenting everything. Made it straightforward,” Tinker explained.

“Is he sharing it with everyone?” Chloe wanted to know. “One of the General Principles holds that information should be free.”

“The answer is yes and no,” Celeste said, getting her two cents into the discussion. “Roger, who, by the way is becoming known as RtR, felt that in the hands of someone who lacked Tinkers ability it could lead to some serious accidents.”

Tinker explained, “Conceptually, it is simple, but implementation is something only experienced Techies should attempt. I hear that the Uni is planning to come up with a curriculum that covers this aspect of our craft.”

“Well, Tinker,” Chloe said, “if anyone is capable, you are certainly one of them.” Out of curiosity, she casually touched him on the shoulder for emphasis. He didn’t flinch. Chloe, remembering their time at the Botanical Garden, couldn’t help but smile. Tinker noticed, and took her hand in his and kissed it. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“Roger, RtR, is planning to establish some *certified techies*, those with the required skills and knowledge. They will get his documents.”

“You know,” Chloe responded, “we debated having the equivalent of *patents* and *copyrights* as some exceptions to the General Principle that information should be free. We ultimately decided that the overall value of free flow of information was better than protecting the monetary value of some information. That may be something we want to reconsider. I think I need to discuss it with Roger.”

Ambianca spoke using the speaker in Chloe’s suit, “I’ll find a convenient time for you both and let you know.”

“Tinker, you should probably also be part of the discussion. Ambi, can you find a time when we could all get together?”

“I’ll work on it,” she told Chloe, who relayed the message to Tinker.

Tinker added, "I agreed to pay a royalty to RtR for each of the units I made. So, we have some of the benefits of sharing inventions without the overhead of patents."

"That's good," Chloe agreed, "but the patent database is one of the most valuable items in the Archives. I would like some way to capture new inventions the same way."

"Can I listen in?" Bella asked. "I am working on becoming a Master Techie and would like to study with Roger the Rabbit. Get some practical experience to augment the academic study."

Ra answered for her, "That is surely within the purview of GP3."

Chloe laughed a bit. "Are you sure you want to be a doctor and not a lawyer?"

"Maybe I can be both," Ra suggested.

"Maybe so," Chloe agreed. "Z and Y, excuse me, Y and Z, would also be useful. If only RtR were here in California, we could have a colloquium in person."

"Let's make that the goal," Bella suggested. "Arrange for everyone to be in the same place, with some others logging in on the net. We could even make it an annual event. They used to do that pre-Collapse, didn't they?"

"I like the idea," Tinker said. "We should invite others, including JJ, Big O, for sure."

Ambianca butted in, "Due to the time differences, the best time seems to be 7:30 tomorrow morning here. That would be 9:30 in Valparaiso and 16:30 in Arabella Springs. Shall I try to set up a conference call then?"

Chloe said, "That sounds good, Ambi. Make it so." She was still fond of the Jean-Luc Picard quote.

Then, she turned to Tinker, "Tink, how did this start? Did you contact Roger first, or did he reach out to you? I'm just curious. It doesn't really matter, I guess."

"Well, the short answer is that neither of us instigated the exchange. Celeste did that. She called Roger to see if she could order some of the plowing machines and others. Roger suggested that he send us the docs and we could make them ourselves. I used his harvester model on the wheat near Omaha. I had some journeymen working on the plows while I was in Omaha."

"Interesting." Chloe looked at Celeste, who was smiling broadly, and said, "Good move, Celeste."

"Yes," she replied, "it's working out well."

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"Hello, Roger," Chloe said. "And Suzy! Oh, is that Claire?"

"It's Bunny," Suzy answered. "We gave up."

"I must be in lotsa trouble," Roger said. "I'm outnumbered badly."

"No, Rog," Chloe said. "It's a celebration. I just saw some new plows in action. Heard the story about how they got there. We're just following up. You know Y and Z, I'm learning to alphabetize, and you may have seen photos of Ra. This is her roommate, Arabella. Tinker and Celeste are lurking in the background. The Big O and JJ may want to add their thoughts, and Ambianca is recording everything."

"Wow! A formal meeting. So, gotta agenda?" Roger wanted to know.

Three voices shouted, "You have to ask?"

Ignoring them, Chloe said, "I have a proposed agenda." The screen switched to display a slide.

Agenda:



- Review of sharing documentation
- General Principle 3
- Patents
- Databases

“First, I’d like to discuss how this all happened. Tinker and The Rabbit can handle that. Then I will review General Principle 3 and how it affects this. That leads naturally to a discussion about patents and other ways information is not free. Y will review the patent database and its importance. Then we will discuss what to do next. Everybody got that?”

Celeste jumped in. “I saw the machines in Africa. When I took over here in Boonie, I thought we should get some here. The cost to transport them was ruinous, and the Rabbit is in it for the money. His stuff is top notch, and expensive.”

RtR smiled and nodded.

“So, I asked my pet techie to make some,” Celeste said.

“I asked Z for ideas,” Tinker said.

“And I had a good one,” Z said. “I told him to ask Roger.”

“I thought about it,” Roger said. “Tinker agreed to pay me a royalty or whatever it is called, and I agreed to help him out.”

Chloe sat quietly before saying, “Moving on to item two. GP3 implies that we should make this information readily available. Comments?”

Everyone spoke at once.

Z took over with a loud whistle. “I guess we’ve forgotten kindergarten rules. Hold up your hand if you want to speak.”

Everyone laughed and held up a hand. “Yes, Y,” Z said, “What is your comment?”

“Let’s skip to the database stuff. That’s clearly where the problem is. We need some incentive for people to record their ideas in the database. Historically, patents have been the weapon of choice.”

“Well,” Ra asked. “Does this mean we do away with GP3? I’d be careful about that.”

Tinker spoke up, “I think Roger handled it well. This is a good model that keeps GP3. We just need to formalize it.”

Z agreed, “I think that restricting some information to *certified techies* is reasonable. The info is free to those with the capability to do something with it. It protects less qualified people for doing harm. Consider nuclear power plants. That’s even more critical.”

“Good point,” Chloe agreed. “Anyone want to suggest action items?”

No one said a word.

Chloe sighed. “OK. Here’s my list. Y, you give us a plan for the database to hold new *pseudo-patents*. Z, Tinker, Roger,” she looked at Bella and raised an eyebrow. Bella nodded. “And Bella, plus all the AI’s will comment. Y’ll hash it all out and let the rest of us know the result. And, Celeste, you get to plan the face-to-face meeting for next year.”

She continued, “This has been very helpful, and incredibly brief. Thanks, everyone.”

As they broke up, Z cornered Ra and Bella. “Is it true? You’re a couple?”

They both smiled. “Guess so.”



“You might want to meet with me privately. I could offer you some advice,” Z said with a smile.

Ra and Bella looked at each other. “How about tomorrow morning?” Ra asked. “Not tonight. We thought we’d order in and sleep in Endie again. Mom is keeping the room in the Hotel.”

Z grinned. “Of course. Brekkie? You’re going to take the tour of the Botanical Garden and the Reagan, aren’t you?”

“Brekkie,” Bella said.

**5. Garden Party**  
**March 26, 2192**  
**Mendocino Coast, CA, ASW**

“It’s a lovely place,” Bella said.

“Yeah,” Ra replied. “Mom waxes lyrical whenever the subject comes up. She claims she was here in the past.”

“Really?”

“April 1973. And other times. I think she is the mysterious Boudicca, who helped create Boonville and this area, in 2039 and 40.”

“Whoa. You believe her?”

“Not sure. That’s where she claims to have met *David*, one of her lovers. Supposedly, he taught her how to make love. He was quite a lover, apparently. Mom told me I’d meet David eventually.” Ra put her bins on an Acorn Woodpecker on a nearby dead tree.

“I know that one,” Bella said. “Acorn.”

“Right.”

They walked thru the woods toward the ocean, following the path her mother had taken so long ago. Bella took Ra’s hand, kissed it, and held it until they broke into the open. There Ra told her, “I agreed to a public appearance on the Reagan. That was before we had our conversation. If you don’t want to go, I can do it alone.”

“Are you serious! Of course, I want to come.” Bell assured her. “When is it happening?”

“Now,” Ra said, pointing to the Zodiac coming to fetch them. “We better hurry getting down the stairs.”

Ra was frankly astonished at the hero’s welcome she received aboard the USS Ronald Reagan. First, she met the commander, Admiral Samuelson, who looked as if someone had called a casting agent and asked for a ship’s captain. Looking vaguely Hawaiian, tanned skin, shiny black hair that he wore straight, hanging to his shoulders. He had found something approaching a uniform suitable to his rank, stark white with gold epaulets and many medals. “Admiral Samuelson at your service, Ma’am. The crew is hoping you will visit the flight deck.”

“I’d be delighted,” Ra said, waving enthusiastically at the crowd, which seemed to have a surplus of males. A chorus of shouts of Rah-rah-Raaaaa greeted her. She thought, *For once, they’re looking at me, not Bella*. No sooner had she thought it than she realized she was wrong again. Several young men in the front line had spotted Bella and started yelling at Bella.

“Here’s the other half of RaraBella, my roommate at the Uni for,” she looked at Bella, then continued, “more than two years.” Bella stepped out from the shadows to more cheering, including a number who called “Bella!” over and over.

Ra decided to cut her speech short.

“So, where is this *flight deck* I’ve heard so much about?” Ra shouted.

Chloe had told her about visiting the flight deck in earlier times, when it held a series of farms. This was different. The farm plots were still obvious, built of wooden planks salvaged from other parts of the ship, filled with dirt brought laboriously from the mainland, holding everything from vegetables to small fruit trees. However, the big attraction was a long row of booths resembling an ancient fair.

Several were versions of shooting galleries, none using live bullets. One, for example, offered visitors a chance to put out a candle using water pistols. Another used darts fired from air guns to pop balloons. “Can I just use my finger?” Ra asked at the latter one. She demonstrated by popping three easily with her laser.

“Not here!” the manager of the game said, “but the laser tag group is hoping you’ll drop in.”

The longest line was for the drag queen show. That was filled with “tourists” from as far away as Wilcox. Ambi told her, “It’s hilarious,” but Ra was not interested. She wondered what the laser tag would involve.

“Let me show you our new ferry,” one of the “sailors” suggested. “It travels from the Reagan to a new dock near Fort Bragg. The ride lasts only 20 minutes or so, usually. It’s much better than the Zodiac we used to get y’all.”

“Fascinating,” Bella exclaimed. “I’d love to get a look.” Ra preferred to visit the rest of the booths; she had seen less than half so far.

“We have a restaurant farther down the line. That would be a good place to meet up,” Bella’s guide told them. “Say in 45 minutes or so?”

“Excellent idea,” Ra looked at the man and guessed he was an officer, “Ensign.”

He smiled and gave Ra a brief salute before offering an arm to Bella, who smiled and accepted.

*Interesting*, Ra thought. She was surprised when Ambi said, “Yes. I noticed as well. Competition?”

But it was D who had the most interesting suggestion to Ra’s unspoken thought, “We should discuss this later.”

The laser tag was a blast. To make it even, Ra took on the rest of the participants. They expected to finish off this strange woman in short order, but when Ra disappeared, they learned otherwise. After about an hour of stealthy action, she slipped up and one of the last members of the opposition managed to hit her in the chest. “Bravo!” Ra said, appearing again. “I thought I could beat all of you.”

Thirty or so teenagers crowded around her, talking excitedly. “Can I get one of those invisibility things?” several asked. “Sorry. Only TCH and I have that.” It was easily the most fun she had enjoyed in ages, and she told them so. However, I am supposed to meet some people for lunch. How about I treat y’all to whatever you’re allowed to consume?”

Most were interested in frozen treats, which seemed to be made locally from the fruit grown on the flight deck. Then the entourage marched to the restaurant. It had been reserved for officers and guests, and only one member of the laser tag group, a twenty-something, cute guy about Ra’s height, sporting red hair and a matching beard, opened the door and ushered her in. Ra noticed that he wore a nametag that identified him as Lt. JG McKendrick. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Do you have a name besides McKendrick?”

“Most people just call me Mac,” he replied.

“Well, Mac, are we seated together?” Ra asked,

“As if!”

“Maybe we could meet up later, then.”

“I’d love to. Where?”

“Do you know Ambianca?” Ra asked.

“I do,” he replied.

“Then let her arrange things. Just ask her where I am.”

“She tracks you?” Mac asked.

“She tracks most people she likes.” *Ambi, do you like young Mac?*

“Oh, yes. Lots of fun.” Came the reply.

“See you later, Mac,” Ra said as she moved to the main table where she saw Samuelson waving to her.

The restaurant had the best viewing location anywhere on the ship: at the aft end of the huge vessel looking out over the mighty Pacific.

Ra scanned the area looking for Bella, who was nowhere in sight. Ra asked Ambianca, *Do you have a fix on Bella?* Ambi replied, “She won’t be joining you for dinner. She says expect her for breakfast.”

## **6. A Minor Misunderstanding**

### **March 26-27, 2192**

### **USS Ronald Reagan, ASW**

Ra had become used to being given the celebrity treatment that she failed to appreciate exactly what dinner in the Admiral's private suite entailed until too late to decline. She steeled herself for anything and smiled on being shown in by a waiter in a fancy uniform. Apparently, uniforms were something the Reagan crew excelled at.

The table held only two place settings, each with several different wine glasses. Ra decided that her outfit was not up to the occasion, so she switched to a formal dress. The waiter noticed and commented, "Nice dress." Ra noticed that he seemed to be most interested in what she still thought of as her diminutive breasts. Maybe D had fixed them up a bit.

Admiral Samuelson arrived in his stunning white uniform. Ra wasn't sure but thought he had added more medals to the collection on his chest. He seemed to find Ra's new dress more than acceptable, and commented, "I see that you have a magic suit like your mother. I certainly approve of your latest choice. Please, sit down."

The waiter brought in the first course, a ceviche with just the right amount of chilis for Ra's taste. She complimented the chef, "This is quite nice. I love ceviche, especially when it has a few extra chilis."

"Made from the local denizens of the ocean," he replied, showing off his Standard vocabulary. "May I pour you a glass of this lovely Gewürztraminer from the Anderson Valley? I think it is one of their best, worthy of a pre-Collapsian medal."

Ra found the wine a wonderful addition but wondered how much of it she had to drink. She was still unused to alcohol, even in a fine wine. The Admiral showed that he was prepared to take up the slack, tossing off a couple of glasses while they waited for the next dish.

Fish was to be the main ingredient in the meal, apparently. The second dish was a version of the famous pre-Collapsian San Francisco specialty, Cioppino, complete with some oysters and mussels. "Where do you get the oysters?" Ra asked.

"We are farming some, right of the starboard side. Do you like them?" he replied. "The mussels are everywhere, but I think they provide a nice complement to the rest of the dish."

Ra was expecting some discussion of business, but Samuelson was interested only in Ra, her history, her plans, and so forth. He was also very interested in whether she and Bella were more than friends. "Of course, that doesn't matter," he said. "I just noticed that she had found her own companion for the evening."

"We are very close friends," Ra said.

The man, Ra was starting to compare to her Daddy, said nothing, but his face showed that he suspected more.

Ra was beginning to grow tired of the direction of the evening and wondered when dessert would appear. Before that, there was more wine, a sweet one usually taken at the end of the meal. That was a good omen. She wondered if Lieutenant McKendrick would be available.

Only after she drank the sweet wine did she realize the truth. She immediately began to feel woozy. The wine must have been drugged. Next the admiral moved his seat closer and began pawing Ra, fondling her breasts as though they were Bella's.

"That's enough," Ra said simply. "I think I will go." She stood up and found she had trouble walking. Samuelson held her and began kissing. "Stop!" Ra said.

“Oh, come on. Let’s have some fun,” he urged.

“No way! My first time sure isn’t going to be with a man old enough to be my father,” Ra told him.

“First time! Wow!” He was even more excited by the prospect,

That’s when Ra realized that she was about to pass out. Her last thought as everything grew dim was simply, “Help me.”

Then, everything went dark.

**7. End of a Shiftless Life**  
**Christmas Eve, 2002**  
**Talbot House, River Oaks, Houston, TX, USA**

Ra stood, with some effort, in front of a large, lovely house tucked away on a quiet street lined with oak trees. Somehow, D had shifted her to a completely new location, and judging by her surroundings, a different time. Just then, the front door opened. “Ra, how delightful that you made it. Please come in.”

Ra turned to see who spoke and saw a tall, handsome man, maybe 70 something. She had never seen him before, but she recognized him immediately from old family stories. She felt his arm around her shoulders. He said, “This must be disconcerting. We’ve been expecting you. We were warned that you would be here this year. My name is—”

“David!” Ra said. “Mom was right. This must be Christmas Eve in 2002.”

“Indeed,” David said. “She’s inside together with many people anxious to see you. Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” she said in a puzzled way. She had just consumed a much larger meal than usual, but still...She accepted David’s support, and they walked inside to meet the rest of the family. David performed the introduction. This lovely woman is my main squeeze, Grace Talbot, your great grandmother.

“I can hardly believe this is happening,” Grace said. “What a privilege to be able to see you. Welcome. The rest of the family is outside on the patio. Shall we?” She led Ra thru several rooms, into a long hall decorated with an eclectic collection of artworks, and out onto the patio.

Ra was still feeling the effects of whatever was in the final wine.

Chloe came forward. “Hello, dear. I see you are still having problems adjusting to your new surroundings. I was the same way the first time. You get used to it after a while. I also note that you have met Grace and David. Would you like to meet your grandparents?”

“Of course,” Ra said. She recognized Hypatia, from the many images of her, and deduced that the man next to her must be Mark Talbot. They appeared to be in their 50’s. She walked over to them and received a hug from both. Mark continued the introductions, “Let me introduce you to my other daughter, Joan, who has made us all even richer than when she started. She’s not quite the richest woman in the world but getting close. This year, for the second time, we have Paolo, officially known as Paolo [mumble], her boyfriend.”

Joan wore a designer outfit that showed a 40-year figure to covet, a friendly manner, and the kind of self-assurance only possible for someone who had succeeded beyond all expectations. “A pleasure to meet you, Ra,” she said. “I am envious of this ability you women have to move to another time.”

Paolo said, “As usual at the Talbot household, I have no idea what is going on. Fortunately, I am totally hammered.” Chloe laughed and checked him out. Quite a bit younger than Joan, young enough to appeal to Ra. Was that planned?

Another member of the family arrived carrying a tray with a PB&J sandwich, a glass of iced tea, and some ginger snap cookies. “Ra, I am Idelle. Happy to meet you, and I would love to have time for a chat, but not right now. Got a dinner to deal with.”

Ra sat down in front of the food and decided to eat dessert first. The ginger snaps were as good as their reputation. She ate all of them without thinking, then switched to the sandwich and tea. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was until just then. After eating, she felt better.

Chloe and Hypatia showed up to make sure all went well. “The hunger is typical. It happens almost every time,” Hypatia said. “And, as I have discovered, it takes a toll over time. I shifted all over time in my youth. I advise against that. And, I didn’t have the benefit of the symbiotic relationship, so sometimes it didn’t work right. D can control it so well that you should be able to go to exactly where you want.”

“How did D know to bring me here, now?” Ra asked.

“We share information. We were aware that your first use of the power was to shift to this precise point. So, you had to appear here.”

“Bloch’s Paradox,” Chloe told her.

“You told me about that once,” Ra said. “Time travel is impossible unless it has already happened.”

“Exactly,” Chloe said. “So, we knew you would show up here. Remember, I told you you’d meet David.”

“I remember. Frankly, though, I don’t really get David.”

Hypatia and Chloe both laughed. “Imagine him 30 years ago.”

“Twenty-five years ago, to be specific,” David said, joining the conversation. “April 13, 1977, in Boonville.”

“Enough of that, David,” Hypatia said. “You know the rules.”

“Well, now you’ll show up then,” David said. “You seem a bit under the weather,” he commented.

“No doubt due to the drug in the wine I drank. I think my host had some plans for me that I didn’t share. I passed out, and the next thing I knew, I was here, trying to stand up. Then, David arrived.”

“You were drugged!” Chloe said, obviously shocked. “Where? Who?”

“I was visiting the Reagan. Admiral Samuelson was my dinner companion who had nefarious plans.” Ra responded.

“We’ll take care of him when we get back,” Chloe said. “Unless you want to deal with him yourself.”

“How would that work?” Ra wanted to know.

Hypatia explained, “When you go back, you can arrive at the same time you left. Without benefit of drugs, no one aboard the Reagan can match your skill set. We’ll plan it later. Now, though, let’s enjoy this lovely day. It’s a bit cold now, but we expect a sunny day later. Let me show you to your room.”

They went upstairs. Hypatia pointed out the room she and Mark shared. “Ask Idelle to tell you about the time I showed up in this bed unexpectedly.” She moved down the hallway. “This room is yours. You share a bath with your mom.”

The room was easily twice the size of the one she shared with Bella, and she said so.

“Welcome to the pre-Collapsian world. Would you like to come out to the cabin near Leakey later? Mark and I plan to go back tomorrow.”

“Oh! That sounds like fun. I would also like to have some time with you two. In my time—”

“I know, dear. Remember, I was there too. According to Chloe, I am due to return to the year 2159.”

“Yes. To give Chloe the suit. The story is famous. Most people think it’s BS.” Ra told her.

“Yes, I have heard that. Well, the suit is real. I’m wearing it now.” She demonstrated by changing into a formal dress. “This is appropriate for dinner. I assume you can do it also.”

“Sure,” Ra said as D chose something. Ra checked herself in the mirror. “Looks great.”

“For now, though, jeans and some warm top is better.” Hypatia changed.

“My standard outfit for the season,” Ra said, switching to some nicely faded jeans and a sweatshirt with the logo of the Uni.

“Do you want to nap? Or would you rather be with the rest of the family?” Hypatia asked.



“Oh, I want to make the most of this time,” Ra answered.

Hypatia laughed. “You haven’t *grok*ed the *fullness* of shifting. Your time here is limited only by how long you want to stay. Then you can return to whatever time and place you want. In particular, you can return to the *Reagan*, whatever that is, and teach Admiral Samuelson a lesson he won’t forget.”

“I be seeing ya speak Vernac,” Ra said.

“Only a few words,” Hypatia told her. “I like grok.”

“I like it too, but I’m never sure of the difference between grok and know.”

“Glad to hear that. I was never sure, except for the phrase *you grok*.”

“Roughly equivalent to the mafia question ‘capiche?’ I think,” Ra agreed.

“Why don’t you plan to come to Leakey with us? Spend some time seeing the most beautiful part of Texas. We can also travel further, if you wish. The Valley. Big Bend. Davis Mountains. Think about it.”

“That sounds like fun,” Ra agreed.

“What is *the Reagan*?” Mark asked.

“It’s the future version of the USS Ronald Reagan. They anchored near Mendocino during the plague, and it hasn’t sailed since. I was there as the guest of the *Admiral*, who turned out to just want a quick lay. I like the idea of teaching him a lesson. I need to think about that.”

“Here’s a hint,” Hypatia told her. “Spend some time with David. Both Chloe and I have taken advantage of shifting to get his take on things.”

“And spend some time with him in bed,” Mark added. His body language showed that he didn’t approve.

“We had a deal, love,” Hypatia countered.

“What was that?” Ra asked.

“I promised that I would always come back to him,” Hypatia said.

“What? When did we make that deal?” Mark demanded.

“Oops. I guess that hasn’t happened yet,” she replied, and gave him a kiss. “You are always the one I want to come home to.”

Before dinner Ra was allowed the adult pleasure of some pre-prandial cannabis. Mark offered her half a brownie, with more available if she wanted it.

The dinner had a menu appreciated by all. The *pièce de resistance*, Beef Wellington, proved to be a challenge. Idelle labored over two days, making the pastry cover ahead and letting the meat sit covered for hours with seasoning. Mark had driven all over town trying to find some truffles to use in the layer between the beef and the pastry. Idelle gave him a gold star for effort and substituted some fancy mushrooms. A plate of hors-d’oeuvres appeared as a starter and disappeared quickly.

A lovely ceviche came as a palate cleanser. Ra commented, “I just had ceviche on the USS Ronald Reagan, that is, I will have it in the future. This is better.” Idell came in just then to put bowls of green vegetables on the table. Ra recognized spinach or something similar, in a more elaborate sauce than she was used to. Ra said, “Idelle, the ceviche was great.”

“Thank you,” Idelle said. “I’ll tell the new sous-chef. My son’s girlfriend.” She winked and hurried back to the kitchen.

Next, she brought in the beef to cheers and applause. She placed it in front of David, as usual, who stood to extol the wine selection that he had made, a wonderful Pinot from the Anderson Valley. Then he made a great ceremony of taking a knife chosen for the occasion from his large collection. Ra thought it was all a bit much. She was especially surprised when she saw tater tots to accompany the beef. However, they turned out to be Grace's guilty pleasure. She thanked everyone for the surprise. None were left over.

Dessert was simple, homemade vanilla ice cream with a double batch of ginger snaps. As Idelle had managed the complicated Beef Wellington, all thought she had the right idea for the rest of the meal. Ra thought it was the best dinner she had ever eaten. Some things were better in the ancient world.

The next two weeks Ra spent with her grandparents were just a blur. The first stop was the famous cabin near Leakey, which looked completely different from what Ra had seen in the future. She told them, "In the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, this is a big deal, huge arrays of solar panels, large satellite dishes, lots of people. I think I like this better."

After a couple of days, they set off to show Ra some of the prettiest parts of Texas. They headed west, following the route Hypatia and her crew took in Endeavour, would take. After an overnight stop at Balmorhea Springs, they headed for Fort Davis, their favorite of the three towns in the Davis Mountains. They went first to the State Park to see the Harlequin Quail, which delighted Ra. Then, they drove around the 80-mile scenic loop before finishing the day stargazing near the Observatory. Ra told them of her time there, loading crates of tomatoes onto the train. They were interested to learn of the development in the state Hypatia had helped create.

Ra suggested going to Big Bend but learned that it was not the best time to visit. "Nothing there now," Mark explained. Instead, they took a long drive to The Valley, as the area along the Texas coast was known, for some birding. Then, they went back to the Cabin, after a fabulous Tex-Mex dinner in a tiny restaurant in Sabinal on the way.

"This has been wonderful," Ra told them. "Maybe we'll meet again sometime. Bye Nana and Grandad," she said, using the pet names she had been forbidden to speak aloud around other people. Then, she thought, *OK, D. Time for the next shift. April 13, 1977, if I recall correctly.*

## 8. Pleasant Diversion

April 13, 1977 and later  
Boonville, CA, USA

Ra found herself in a bed somewhere. A voice called out from somewhere else in the house, “Chloe, is that you?”

“No,” Ra told him. “A surprise.”

She heard someone running up the stairs and soon saw a younger, and much handsomer David. He stopped and stared. “Good morning, David. I’m Ra, Chloe’s daughter, Hypatia’s granddaughter.”

“Interesting,” he said noncommittally. “Tell me more.”

“We met on Christmas Eve, 2002, at the Talbot house in Houston. You told me then that we would meet here and now. And here I am.”

“I was expecting Chloe. We celebrate the anniversary of her first visit here,” he explained.

“I know,” Ra said. “I’ve heard the stories. I’ve also heard that you are the lover of three generations of my ancestors. I’m thinking maybe we can go for a tetra. They all speak highly of you.”

“You and Chloe both tell me that Hypatia and I are lovers, but so far...”

“Don’t lose hope,” Ra said.

“OK,” he said, smiling. “So what brings you here? You’re quite a bit younger than my usual visitors.”

“I’m not *that* young,” Ra complained. “And I’ve been treated as an adult since I was 11 years old.”

“What! By whom?”

“Well, primarily by my mother.”

“Chloe? What was she thinking?”

“It started when I killed the hyena. Without a visible weapon.”

“Impressive, but I’ve seen the kind of weapons you women can bring to the party. Did you use the laser? Fry it with the microwave?” David asked.

“Nope. I used the taser that I didn’t know I had until then,” Ra explained.

“What’s a taser?”

Ra took one step and touched him on the arm. “Whoa!” David shouted.

“That was the lowest power,” Ra explained. “At the max it’s lethal. Wait! I have a copy of the video on my phone. That should work even in this time.” She pulled her phone from a pocket in her suit, a pocket that disappeared as soon as she had what she wanted. She fiddled with the phone, suppressing error messages about a lack of a signal, until she had the video. Then, she showed it to David.

“Wow! This is amazing technology. How do I know that it really happened?” David wanted to know.

“Good question, especially as it hasn’t happened yet. It happens in 2184, on my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

David watched the video again. “I see. You did use the microwave shield to keep the beast at bay while you moved the children to safety.”

“Well, to be precise, D did that on her own.”

“D? Who is that?”

“That’s the voice in my head. She controls the suit, or whatever it is now. Like Chloe D and I are a single symbiotic organism. Her purpose is to protect me, so turning on protection can be automatic if she detects some danger,” Ra explained.

“The hyena seems to just lie down at the end, right before you lunged forward.”

“Yes, several people have noted that,” Ra agreed. “It was near death from rabies before I put it out of its misery. I like to imagine that it was ready for me to end it. Of course, that’s nonsense.”

“So, after this, your mother decided that you were an adult?”

“Not exactly. We had a talk later and she asked my permission to tell Suzy, who also has a suit, to teach me how to use it. I commented that it was the first time anyone had asked me for permission. She said it was how adults acted. Then she said I should be in charge of planning my life for myself.”

“I’ve seen what your *suit* is capable of. It saved Chloe from certain death and brought her here. That was three years ago. She returned on the anniversary of that day, and I guess for the final time on the Bicentennial celebration in 1976. I was expecting her again today when you showed up instead. Why have you come here?”

Ra explained, “When I met you for the first time on my timeline, Christmas Eve, 2002, you told me that we have met on this day. So, by Bloch’s Paradox, I knew that I would come here. Everyone says you are good for advice and sex. I am sorta hoping for both.”

David laughed. “Well, that’s direct. Pardon me for asking, but how old are you now?”

“Almost 19,” Ra told him.

“And you want to have sex with me? I’m old enough to be your father.”

Now, it was Ra’s turn to laugh. “Before my first *shift*, which took me to Christmas Eve, 2002, I was drugged by my dinner host, who wasn’t concerned about my age. I told him that I wasn’t about to have my first sex with someone old enough to be my father. Now, I am reconsidering.”

“Interesting,” David said. “Why me?”

“You get rave reviews from Hypatia and Chloe. Probably also from Grace, but she didn’t share it with me.”

“Hypatia?”

“Yes. You and she apparently spent months together, in 1992 or something like that.”

“I have to wait 15 years!”

“No. But I have probably already said too much. Hypatia always warns against revealing too much.”

David was lost in thought for some time. “Are you a birder, like the rest of your family?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact.”

“Then, let’s go birding. And whale watching.”

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“David,” Ra began as they sat in a quaint café in Mendocino, “this has been a fantastic three days. This is so different from the Mendo I saw recently in the future, if that makes any sense. Thanks for being such a good host.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” David told her. “You are a fascinating young woman.”

“Thanks. There is one thing.”

“Yes, what is that?”

“Well, I came here because you greeted me in Houston, 2002, so enthusiastically that I thought maybe we were more than friends.” When David tried to say something, she stopped him and continued, “When Chloe says your name in the future, she gets a dreamy look in her eyes. I thought that for my first adventure into straight sex — is that the right 20<sup>th</sup> century phrase — I mean sex between specifically me and you, I was looking forward to it. So, my question is a simple one. Is sex part of the plan, and if not, what do I need to do to get it onto the plan?”

“Well, I didn’t want to rush into it. Especially when you told me that it was your first time. That’s a major responsibility, considering everything.”

“Everything meaning the difference in our ages?”

“That’s certainly a factor.”

“You have performance anxiety?” Ra asked, thinking *from what I’ve heard from Chloe, there is a cure for that*. She casually reached across the table and placed her hand on his. D did whatever she did in that situation, and Ra could see that it had the desired effect.

“No. That’s not a problem,” David said a bit more emphatically than he planned. Then, he said as he pulled his hand away, “That’s a cute trick. I assume your suit has something to do with it.”

“Yes,” Ra admitted. “All I know for sure is that D, or Mr. D as Chloe calls him, loves sex. That’s something only us carbon-based entities have. Though, I know that Ambianca is working on overcoming that hurdle. At any rate, D will do whatever she can to *encourage* it.”

“Very interesting. I notice that you refer to D as feminine, while Chloe refers to Mr. D, and insists that he is decidedly masculine,” he commented.

“You’re stalling, David,” Ra said. “But I really want to know if we’re going to, well, fuck. If not, I may decide to just leave now and finish my business with Admiral Samuelson.”

“What are you planning to do with him?”

“Well, to begin with, I’m going to force him to let me go. I’ll probably tase him, not fatally, but enough to put him out of action for a while,” Ra explained.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about your *suit*, or D” David said.

“You’re trying to change the subject again, but I’m interested. Please go on,” Ra told him.

“OK. Stop me if I’m wrong. You said you are part of a symbiotic organism. You also told me that D is responsible for keeping you safe.”

“Exactly.”

“Part of that is the suit itself, which can be completely impervious when necessary.”

“Yes. Right so far.”

“So, why fool around with the microwave field? Why not just make the suit much larger, expand it to, say, a hemispherical dome with you at the center. It could be transparent, if you wished, or colored slightly to serve as a warning.”

“Oh! What a great idea.” *Is that possible, D?*

“I am not sure,” D said. “We need to experiment sometime when we’re alone.”

“D says we need to experiment to see if that’s possible,” she told David. “When we’re alone.”

“I didn’t mean to have you try it here in the restaurant,” he replied.

“There’s more. How much can you change your outward appearance?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t really tried that.” *D, any limits?*

“None that I am aware of,” D answered. “Again, we should plan some time to experiment.”

David said, “I think our food is coming now,” looking over Ra’s shoulder.

Ra gave up trying to get a straight answer out of him and just ate dinner, which was delicious.

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Later that evening, back in David’s house, he told her of his decision, “Ra, I think you are a truly remarkable young woman, from a line of remarkable women, but I don’t feel comfortable having sex with you now. Why don’t you come back in 1978, when you are somewhat older?”

Ra could not hide her disappointment, but acceded to his demand, “OK, David. I’m disappointed, but I’ll plan to come back.”

“Oh,” he added, “tell your mother to come on the Fourth of July next time. That way we won’t have an embarrassing conflict.”

“OK, David. How about a goodbye kiss.”

He kissed her affectionally, with just a hint of passion, then found himself alone in his bedroom wondering if he had wasted a great opportunity.

**Part 3.Ra and Bella: Transitioning  
March 2192 and later  
Austin**

# 1. Shocking Development

## March 27, 2192

### USS Ronald Reagan, ASW

Ra found herself back on the Reagan, with Admiral Samuelson gripping her tightly by her arms. She spoke to him, "Have you forgotten who you are dealing with? I suggest you let go of me immediately and we'll forget about this misunderstanding."

"What? How?" Samuelson replied, surprised.

"Remember that I killed a hyena when I was 11 years old?" Ra asked. "This is your last chance."

"Bloody hell!" the Admiral cried.

Ra gave him a near lethal shock, which sent him reeling across the deck before slamming into the wall and slumping on the floor. "Now, maybe you remember."

Samuelson said nothing, glaring at her, but unable to get up.

"It will wear off in a while. I don't intend to mention this to anyone. I suggest you also remain quiet about it," Ra told him. "Now, where is the waiter?" she wondered. She crossed to the only door into the cabin and looked out. She saw a man sitting outside reading on his cellphone. He looked up at her, somewhat surprised. "Will you do me a favor, please?" she asked him.

He didn't answer immediately. Ra raised her eyebrows and waited. Finally, he seemed to realize that Samuelson was not involved any longer and asked, "What can I do for you?"

"Please summon Lieutenant McKendrick to this cabin."

"Sure, can I tell him what it's about?"

"Tell him the Admiral is indisposed and ask if he would like to have dinner with me."

"But," he began, then looked at the expression on her face and moved to comply. He tapped a number on his cellphone and spoke, "McKendrick, Miss Ra would like to see you in the anteroom to the Admiral's cabin. Can you come now?"

He turned back to Ra, "5 minutes."

"Thank you. I think the Admiral would prefer to be left to himself now," Ra explained.

McKendrick took less than the expected five minutes to appear at the door. "What's up? I thought you were dining with the Admiral."

"He's not feeling well," Ra said as she crossed the deck and took McKendrick's arm. "Shall we go have some fun?"

The Lieutenant needed no further urging.

Fortified by a so-called hamburger and beer, Ra asked, "What would you like to do now?"

"Well, I really don't have any plans. I was on my way back to my quarters when I got your message."

"Great," Ra said. "I'd love to see your quarters." She smiled in what she hoped hinted at more.

He seemed to be thinking about it.

"Well, Mac, I'm ready for whatever. Maybe I should dress more casually." She quickly switched from the formal dress she wore for Samuelson to her favorite sweatshirt, the one that said, "Save the Whales," jeans, and sneakers.

"Got any more magic tricks?" Mac asked.



“Sure, but not ones I do in public,” she said, hoping Mac would take the hint. Then, she thought maybe that was too much. “I can also just disappear if you’d rather.”

“No,” he said, “let’s go somewhere private.”

---

Ra snuggled up against Mac’s shoulder, trying to find a comfortable way to fit two people on the narrow bed. What had Bronson said? Making love on a narrow bed was “possible, but tricky.” Ra had found a way by insisting that she be on top. Not, they lay together

Mac said, “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“You mean figuring out how to manage on this bed?” Ra asked.

“No, I mean having sex, period.”

“It’s my first time as well,” Ra told him. “Maybe we need to practice.”

Mac laughed. “I’ll need some time to recover. That was very nice. I felt the way your suit, or whatever it is, wrapped around us at the end.”

“Yes, I felt that also. I think she wanted to make sure we were warm.”

“She?”

“D, the entity that controls the *suit*.”

“You have to explain that,” Mac complained.

“The short version is that what began as a suit is now something more, an intelligent, and very powerful, entity who told me her name is D.”

“Feminine?”

“Definitely. We communicate. I think of something, and she reacts. If I ask her a question, I hear the answer as a voice in my head. We are symbiotes.”

“Give me an example,” Mac requested.

“OK. Suppose I think I should wear something sexy, like this.” She wore a flimsy nightgown instead of nothing at all. “D handles the rest.”

“Wow! I’ve heard of this, but seeing it is amazing. What about when you don’t have anything on?”

“D is still there, even if nothing shows,” Ra explained.

“How is that possible?” Mac asked, a puzzled look on his face.

“Magic, which means, don’t ask questions if you can’t understand the answer. D told me that without a background in *transdimensional functor calculus* it is impossible to explain how it works. I looked up all the words, but that didn’t help. I finally relied on Clark’s Third Law.”

“So whatever it is, it’s indistinguishable from magic,” Mac said.

“Exactly,” Ra said. Then she laughed, “D likes sex. She wants to know if you have recovered enough for another go at it. Maybe with some encouragement.” She reached down to fondle him and got an immediate reaction, no doubt with some more of D’s magic. *Slow down, D!* she thought.

“That’s magic I could get to like,” Mac said.

“Think happy thoughts,” Ra suggested. “I thought I’d try something else I’ve never done before.”

Ambianca woke her up much later from a very pleasant dream. “Ra, dear, you need to get up now. The Zodiac to take you back is planning to leave in less than an hour.

*Thanks. Ambi. What about Bella?*

“I’ve reached her as well. Are you fully awake?”

*I am now.*

“Mac, I need to go now,” she said and kissed him. “This was wonderful.”

“I loved it,” he agreed. “Maybe again sometime?”

“If we’re lucky,” Ra said as she left.

---

That evening, back in Endeavor, Ra and Bella talked about the expedition to the USS Reagan. “I had a wonderful time,” Bella said. “Did you?”

“It was a bit strange, but ended well,” Ra said, then told her about almost being date raped and *shifting* for the first time. “I was surprised by David’s reaction, but I understand why he feels that way. I am, after all, not quite 19. Fortunately, I had a backup.”

“That cute lieutenant I saw you with?” Bella asked.

“Mac McKendrick,” Ra told her. “It was his first time, too.”

“How romantic. Should I be worried?” Was Bella’s comment.

“Who did you wind up with?” Ra asked. “You seemed to have a big choice.”

Bella laughed. “Yes. It wasn’t exactly random. I just picked the one who looked the sexiest.”

They spent the next hour trading details and reviews of the night’s events. The details were surprisingly similar.

“I need to tell you something,” Bella said after the discussion wore down. “I said that I love you and I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Nothing changes that. However, I really liked the sex I had last night. Maybe we can come to an agreement about outside liaisons.”

“Yeah,” Ra agreed, “I had a great time too. I love you and want to stay with you. But I wouldn’t mind some sex with others occasionally.”

“How occasionally?” Bella asked.

“Whenever the occasion arises,” Ra said.

Bella laughed at the double entendre. “I like it.” She kissed Ra affectionally, then reached her hand and fondled Ra. “What have we here?” She said. “I believe it’s a breast.”

“No,” Ra said as she felt Bella, “*this* is a breast.”

## 2. Football Foofaraw

May 14, 2192  
Austin, NRT, ASW

A small crowd had gathered in the TV lounge to watch a recording of the football match between Ra's team and the Scotch Bonnets, Scotty's team, the champions of the NRT league.

The TV blared, "Welcome fans of football, or soccer if you prefer, to this glorious day. The temperature for today's match is perfect, 21 degrees, no wind, mostly sunny. The turf in Memorial Stadium is in beautiful shape as we get ready for what is being called a *grudge match*." The sportscaster who went by the name Wiley Coyote segued to, "With us now is Ra, who challenged the Scotch Bonnet team, winner of the League championships last season to this match. What's behind this, Ra?"

"Well," Ra said, "basically, the league refused to allow me to play on any team, not because I'm too good, which is probably the real reason, but because I am a woman. I said that a woman's team could easily play in the league. Things sorta escalated after that. Finally, I told them I'd put together a team of women and show them how the game is supposed to be played."

"And how's that?"

"Well, it's not called *the beautiful game* for no reason. I've watched the men play and I am pretty sure we can beat them, especially with me playing striker."

"I heard they offered to allow you to play, but not the other women."

"That's right. Can you imagine the chutzpah? We're going to teach them a lesson."

"Well, I'm sure you have plenty of fans here today. Good luck!" WC — he didn't think of the abbreviation when he chose the name — turned to Scotty, captain of the Scotch Bonnet team.

"Well, I'm sure you overheard that, Scotty. What have you got to say in response?"

Scotty, the large jock Ra had met on her first day in Austin when he hit on Bella at Mama Li's Noodle House, glared at Ra before answering WC's question. "Gonna be a cake walk."

"Really? We've seen videos of Ra in Africa. They've been shown all week. She looks good." Wiley countered.

"We'll see how well she plays with two guys hanging on her the entire match." Scotty assured him and the online audience. "We suggested we use a *mercy rule*, match ends if one team gets 5 goals ahead. I'm surprised she agreed. Probably wanted to avoid too much embarrassment."

"Well, good luck to you," Wiley said.

"Ain't gonna need luck," Scotty told him, then turning to face the camera he snarled, "Just hope ain't nobody hurt today."

Ra turned to Bella and some other women in the lounge and suggested, "I think viewing will be greatly improved if we just watch the highlight reel. What do you say?"

"Fine by me," Bella said. The rest agreed, since the result was well known by now.

Ra quickly switched to the show with just the highlights. "I'll narrate when appropriate," Ra told them.

Early in the match, Scotty's side had a great chance. Scotty had the ball on the right side, with a player positioned in the box, ready to receive a pass. Instead, Scotty ignored his teammate and charged ahead himself, only to find the ball kicked away before he could take a shot. Ra had raced into the box just in time. Scotty charged after the ball and managed a weak effort easily handled by the goalie.

“Now watch this,” Ra said. “They weren’t ready for this.” A quick kick by Ester, who Ra characterized as the best goalie anywhere, wound up behind everyone. Ra, who had started running when she saw Ester would handle the ball easily. She outran all the other players and started down the field alone.

“They never learned how fast I was. Now watch this. I loved this one.”

Both backs rushed to obstruct Ra and learned the folly of that strategy. A quick head fake was all she needed to scoot past both defenders and put the ball into the corner of the net. One nil in the eighth minute.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> minute, the women had a corner kick. Ra took her position in the vicinity of the near post, surrounded by several larger and taller men. “Notice how many men are around me. I don’t know if you can see it, but the guy in back is grabbing my jersey. The ref didn’t see it, but it didn’t matter.”

The kick was perfect, and Ra moved to take a header as the defenders massed to prevent her getting to the ball. No problem, she simply let the kick go thru, Marsha, the other striker, deflected the ball into the net.

“I loved that one,” Ra said. “Showed that this was a real team, not just me.”

Near the end of the first half. Scotty was beginning to get desperate as the women defenders showed they had been coached well. After the attempt early in the match, the men had managed only three shots on goal, all easily handled by Ester. The women by contrast had taken ten shots, with five on goal.

Ester used her foot to give Ra and Marsha a two-woman breakaway as one of the backs for the Scotch Bonnets tried for an interception and missed. Then, Ra and Marsha demonstrated how to score when you have a two on one advantage, and the half ended with the score 3-0.

Skipping the halftime ads, Ra got the start of the second half. The Bonnies had a new strategy, relying on four backs to prevent any more scoring. It wasn’t enough. Another corner kick and a well-designed play made the score 4-0, and Scotty could be seen berating his teammates.

“With your permission, I’ll skip the defensive play, where we showed them how it is supposed to be done.” The final highlight showed yet another time when the women had the advantage deep in the Bonnet’s end. Ra raced forward to receive a perfectly timed pass when she felt an arm around her. Dragged to the turf, she leapt up to protest, only to see the ref rushing into the area holding up a red card. Scotty would play no longer today.

So, the last goal, the one that resulted in the mercy rule being applied, came on a penalty kick, which Ra drilled into the upper right corner.

After the shouting and celebration, Wiley Coyote approached the team to ask, “What an amazing match! What do you think was the secret to your dominance of the match. Ra told him, “Two items in particular. Well, three, because Ester is one of the reasons. We discovered in practice that she could really kick the ball and decided to use that weapon. Then, we played as a team. You saw the time of possession. We kept them from having any real chances to score. In the end, they got sloppy.”

“What’s the third reason?” WC asked. “That’s only two.”

“Testosterone poisoning. We don’t have to worry about that.” She grinned, then continued, “And I promised to treat the whole team to real ice cream if we won.” With that, the entire team began to chant, “Rah Rah Raaaaa,” quickly taken up by the spectators as everyone headed for the exits and Amy’s Ice Cream.

### 3. Malefaction

May 15, 2192  
Austin, NRT, ASW

The celebration of Ra's triumph lasted till well after midnight. When Ra and she were alone, Bella said, "You know, the irony of this whole event is this: If you were a man, this would never have happened. You would have just joined whichever team you wanted to."

"I guess that's right," Ra agreed.

"Have you ever thought about that?"

"About what?" Ra asked.

"About being a man instead of a woman?"

"No. Why?"

Bella expanded on the idea, "Well, D is capable of so much magic, I just wondered if maybe she could do that, assuming that only the external appearance changed."

Ra thought, *What about that, D?*

The answer came back quickly, "That part is easy. It will be harder to fix up the internal organs."

*Easy?*

"Sure. It would be like you wearing a man disguise," D explained.

*And the rest. What about sex as a man?*

"That is easy, unless you are interested in impregnating her."

*How about that?*

"I need to study that."

Bella interrupted this internal dialog with, "Are you conversing with D?"

"Yes," Ra said. "I guess that's not very polite."

"It must be complicated," Bella said. "You were quiet for quite a while. I can tell when you're using one of your *private channels of communication*."

"Actually," Ra told her, "she says it is easy unless I am considering impregnation."

"You mean what I think that implies?"

"Just a sec," Ra said. Then she thoughts, *Couple of questions, D. Is this permanent or reversible? And how long does it take?*

D answered, "We'd need to spend some time alone testing. The easy part is reversible. Not sure about the hard part."

Ra gave the news to Bella, "She says we need to test it first. She suggests I spend some time alone for testing."

"Interesting," Bella said. "Let me know if there is anything I need to do."

"Do you have any other fantasies I should know about?" Ra asked.

Bella laughed. "You caught me. When I was with my new friend on the Reagan, I thought about you and how much more I would rather be with you, but... you know. My dream lover, who shows up more than you'd think, looks a lot like you."

Ra kissed her. "Let's sleep on it."

"Together?"

"Not tonight, love. I'm really tired for some reason."

Bella laughed and kissed her, "OK, but don't dismiss this out of hand."

"Deal."

---

Ra stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom of the dorm room. *OK, D, I'm ready.*

As she watched, first her sweatshirt and jeans changed into a business suit, complete with starched white shirt and tie. Her face changed slightly, and a neatly trimmed beard appeared. Her frame grew more robust, which she could feel, though not so much that it showed beneath the suit.

"Now, the fun part," D said.

Ra stared at the nude body in the mirror. She had some new muscles in her arms and torso, but the major interest was lower.

*Certainly looks real. How well does it all work?*

"Well. You tell me."

Ra reached down and felt the penis that she now had. *Oh. I can feel it. It's real.*

D said nothing.

Ra caressed herself and found that it had the expected effect. *Wow! No wonder guys like to do this.*

"Keep it up," D said. "It may help to imagine Bella is here."

Ra closed her eyes and thought how nice it would be to have Bella involved. Then, suddenly, *he* finished, feeling exactly as when *she* had an orgasm.

*Fantastic, D!*

"The ejaculation is simulated. Creating a prostate and all that is part of the more difficult project. I tied the male organ directly into your pleasure organ."

*How about reversing this? How complicated is that?*

Instantly, she saw her familiar nude body reflected in the mirror. *While we're experimenting, how about enhancing my breasts some. Not that much. Ah, yes. Just enough to fondle. I can hardly wait for Bella to get back.*

Ra lay on her bunk, studying a medical text, when Bella arrived. "How was your day?" Ra asked.

"Easy enough. How bout you?"

"Interesting," Ra said.

"Really? Care to expand on that?"

"Maybe. I wondered if you might want a dinner date?"

"On a Tuesday?" Bella asked.

"No crowds," Ra said.

"Where did you have in mind?"

"The Driskill. Mom is on a trip around the Pacific. Remember?"

“So, you think the suite would be available?”

“Exactly. Actually, I checked with Ambi. No problem. I’ve tentatively arranged room service, and I just got a care package from California. Tinker and Maid Marion have combined to make some great gummies. They sent me a sample.”

“Can we wait till the weekend?” Bella asked.

“I guess so, my studious roommate.” Ra said and kissed her in a way that left little doubt about what Ra had in mind.

**4.Date Night**  
**March 18, 2192**  
**TCH Suite, Driskill Hotel, Austin, NRT, ASW**

Both had labs on Friday, so Ra and Bella didn't arrive at the hotel until it was almost dark. The desk clerk recognized them and greeted her with, "It's RaraBella. Good evening, Ladies." He handed Ra the two key cards. Then he checked the computer. "Your mother says to enjoy your weekend. Will you be staying for the whole weekend?"

"We're not sure," Ra said, "can we tell you later?"

He told her, "Of course. Just let us know if you need anything. I see that you have pre-scheduled room service. That should arrive about 19.30. Enjoy."

Bella decided to eliminate any lasting doubts about the purpose of the visit, taking Ra's arm and leaning against Ra's shoulder as they moved into the antique elevator.

"What's for dinner?" Bella asked.

"Mexican food. That was the special for tonight."

"I love Mexican," Bella said, "especially when combined with the Wonderful Weed. You mentioned something about gummies?"

Ra reached into a pocket that magically appeared from nowhere and withdrew a small baggie containing four gummies. "That's two extra, in case."

Bella took a yellow one and headed for the guest bedroom. "I'm going to get comfortable,"

Ra changed into a shorty nightgown and a terry cloth robe and ate the remaining yellow one. Tinker hadn't specified any difference between the two samples but told Ra he expected a review. Bella returned wearing almost nothing and asked, "Have you got something you want to show me?"

"Later," Ra replied as the doorbell signaled the arrival of dinner on the dot at 19.30, and two hungry grad students chowed down. Then, with the effect of the gummies just peaking Bella took Ra's hand and led her back to the bedroom and the king-size bed.

Ra lay back on the bed, and asked, "Do you want to see the change? Or shall I disappear and reappear? Hint: it isn't instantaneous, unlike, this, for example." She changed her clothing, dispensing with the terry robe, remaining in the flimsy negligee.

"Well," Bella said, "I'd say you are overdressed now."

"As are you," Ra pointed out. She patted the mattress next to her, and Bella quickly lay down in the indicated spot, shedding her minimal nightgown in one motion,

Ra's nightgown evaporated, and she turned to kiss Bella before moving on to what had become their usual program for making love. As usual, she focused first on Bella's breast before moving lower, envisioning more of the oral sex they both liked. Unbidden, Ra felt herself begin to change, and within a minute, she was what she called, "My twin brother." She continued on her preferred path until he realized that he had an erection.

He whispered into Bella's ear, "I want to make sure we're on the same wavelength. I want to go all the way tonight."

Bella opened her eyes and gasped. "Oh, Ra." She reached for the new addition to Ra's body. When she touched it, they both felt the intense surge of desire, D's contribution to the program. *Take it easy, D!* Ra thought. *Slow down. That's better.*

"Now!" Bella said. "Now. Yes. Yes. Yes."



---

A bit later, after both had recovered some, Bella stated the obvious, “That was fantastic!”

“Yes,” Ra said. “I have just one question.”

“What’s that?”

“Want to do it again?”

“Now?” Bella said, with a laugh. “Usually, it takes some time to recharge the batteries.”

*How about it, D? How long?*

“I’ll let you know. Why not snuggle for a while?”

Ra repeated to Bella. “You’re right. D says she’ll let me know.” He kissed her and drew her into his arms. It felt great just holding her close, feeling her body next to him, her breasts pressed against his chest.

She ran her hand over his chest. “I like the little bit of chest hair. That’s a nice touch. Give my compliments to D.”

“She says thanks. Anything other comments or suggestions?”

“Not right now.”

She kept caressing Ra. “Should we have a different name for this version of you?” she asked.

“How about Ram, the M standing for Male or whatever.” Ra suggested. He pronounced it with an A to rhyme with Nam.

“Could be mistaken for Ram,” Bella replied, “a male sheep.”

“Not the best image, is it?” Ra agreed. “We could just add a roman numeral 2.”

“Nah.” She thought for a while, then suggested, “How about Rafa, short for Rafael, or Rafe.”

“Or Rake?”

“No.” She hit him with a pillow.

Ambianca chimed in, “How about Rami? An Arabic word meaning *loving* or something like that.”

“Perfect,” Bella said. “Thanks, Ambi. Have you been listening the whole time?”

“Of course. Thought you might need some music. However, you seemed to do well without it.”

They both laughed, and Ambi offered a small chuckle that sounded right.

“Some nice soft romantic music would be nice,” Bella said.

Ambi announced, “Both Hypatia and Chloe liked these as background for making love,” as she started a series of old favorites.

“Now,” Bella said, “Let’s see if we can wake up our little friend. Think it will need some encouragement.”

“Oh, Bella,” Rami said, “That feels great.”

“Mmmm,” Bella replied.

She leaned back to admire her work. “There. Private Rami is ready for action. This time, I’ll be on top.”

Much later, after the third time, Bella said, “I’d like to modify our agreement.”

“Oh?”

“I’d like to reserve sex with Rami for me.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “I assume that applies to both of us. Shall we say *limited monogamy*.”

“Perfect. I love both of you, Ra and Rami.”

“I love all of you. Now, though, I think we should take a nap.”

**Part 4. Bronson and Ra  
Medical Emergency  
April, 2192  
Wilderness of North America**

**1. Summons from Mom**  
**April 9, 2192**  
**Aboard The Enterprise**  
**Pacific Ocean on route to New Zealand, ASW**

“We’ve been summoned to an emergency meeting with your mother,” D announced.

*What? She’s on her annual check-things-out trip around the Pacific,* Ra responded.

“Correct,” D agreed. “Are you ready? You’ll need your backpack.”

*This is very sudden.*

“It’s an emergency,” D assured her.

Ra grabbed her backpack and scribbled a quick note to Bella. Then, after enduring the cold dark, as she called it, she stood on the bridge of The Enterprise, the original ship Chloe and crew had sailed to stitch together the far flung reaches of the fragile democracy known as The Associated States of the World.

“Have a seat,” Chloe said. She pushed a plate of sandwiches toward Ra on a small table. “Eat.”

“What’s up?” Ra asked.

“Bronson is in trouble.”

“Sorry to hear that, but how does it involve me?” she asked while wolfing down half of a fried fish sandwich. “Any French fries?”

“Ambi, can you handle that request?”

“Of course, dear. Knowing Ra, I have pre-ordered some from the kitchen. Hello Ra. I trust you are ok after the shift,” Ambianca spoke aloud out of habit, though both Chloe and Ra could hear her in their heads.

“Fine, except for the hunger.” That was the cue for the plate of fries, as a bot beeped politely and waited about 10 seconds before opening the door electronically. Ra grabbed the fries and moved them as far away from her mother as she could without being rude about it.

“So Bron is in trouble. And you need me to go rescue him?”

“Got it in one try. We need your weaponry as well as your medical knowledge. Besides, only you and I could possibly help. I picked you,” she said with a smile.

“Tell me more,” Ra said, carefully dipping several fries into catsup.

“We have his last known position from the beacon. You’ll start there. We’re monitoring the area for heat sources. You’ll get that information via Ambi. We’re going to send you back a day. Maybe you can figure out where he’s being taken. We think he’s been captured by persons unknown. We assume he is injured, but we have no information. You have a medical kit in the backpack?”

“Always.”

“Good. We have some food supplies and water for you in the map room. When you are ready.”

“Where exactly are you sending me?”

“The vicinity of the former city of Savannah, Georgia, in the old USA. There is/was a major submarine base there, pre-Collapse. Bron was looking for salvageable engines and power plants. We have dispatched a ship with a company of soldiers in armor, but they are still days away in real time. You’ll be on your own for a bit. If you get in trouble you cannot handle on your own, which we think unlikely, shift immediately to Boonville. Eunice is there now and can help you,” Chloe briefed her.

“What authority do I have? Arrest anyone? Deadly force?” Ra asked.

“We hope this will be a peaceful mission to help one of us. One that happens to be very dear to me personally. However, rescuing Bronson takes priority over anything else.”

“Understood,” Ra said. “This may sound strange, but would a man be preferable?”

“Yes, Ambianca gave us the bowdlerized version of your escapades. Short answer, use your judgment.”

“Right!” Ra stood.

“Wait!” Chloe said. “I’d like to meet Rami.”

*Ready, D?*

“You have to ask?” D said.

“Hi, Mom. I’m Rami,” he said.

“That wins the prize for cool. I want one, but apparently there is some issue beyond my comprehension of transdimensional functor calculus,” Chloe said drily. “OK. Off you go, sir.”

## 2. Surprise Visit

April 8, 2192

### Near what used to be Savannah, Georgia, USA

The first thing Rami did after he arrived was to retrieve the lunch from his backpack. It seemed strange to be hungry so soon after eating aboard *The Enterprise*, but he had learned to expect it as a side effect of shifting. As no one seemed to be around, he found a place to sit and eat, a table and chairs set up in what looked like a warehouse. If Bronson was working in the area, he was being very discreet about it. Lit only by holes in the roof, the building lay in perpetual gloom, but still stood. Perhaps that explained why Bron had chosen to use it.

With her hunger satisfied, Rami began exploring the area. Nothing he could see interested him, so he wandered outside, where it was hot and muggy, despite an overcast sky. Unsure of where to go, he followed a path that showed signs of recent usage. After 30 minutes of so, he found Bronson sitting in the shade of a tree, munching on a piece of meat. Rami guessed it was rabbit or something similar, based on the portion size.

“Hey, Bronson!” he called. That got a reaction, but not the one he expected. Bronson jumped up and raised a hunting rifle.

“Don’t come any closer,” he said. “Who the hell are you? Where did you come from?”

“I am Rami, but you are probably more familiar with another form.” He quickly switched to Ra. “Now, I am Ra,” she said.

“Ra? But why are you here?”

“I came to see why you activated the emergency beacon. Chloe is worried.”

“I haven’t activated any beacon.”

“Not yet,” Ra explained. “I came a day early. in case it was critical. What day is it, by the way? For that matter, what time is it?”

Bronson said, “Chloe was worried about me? It’s,” he looked at his watch, “Friday, April 8, 2192, at 16.45. I was having an early supper. Didn’t know to save any for you.”

“No problem,” Ra replied, “Chloe didn’t want to appear worried, but I think she was. She said you were *very dear to her personally.*”

“That’s a bit less than *love of my life,*” he said, smiling.

“I guess maybe absence doesn’t really make the heart grow fonder.”

“More like out of sight, out of mind.”

“So, fill me in. What have you been doing here? Seen anyone around?”

“I’m locating old submarines we may be able to salvage engines from. Found five so far. I think there’s another down there.” He pointed to the water. “Saving it for another day. Cannot dive alone.”

“Oh. Then are you preparing to depart soon?”

“Thinking about it. Gonna get hot here soon.”

“This isn’t hot?” Ra asked with some surprise in her voice.

“Not even close. Been here in the summer once. Never again. This is pretty late. I just stayed because I was finding good prospects.”

“I see. So, you locate good salvage opportunities and mark them for later?”

“Exactly. We need a full crew and a bigger boat for the job.”

Ra thought a while. “So, I wonder why you, or someone else, set off the beacon.”

“I suppose we’ll have to just wait and see,” Bronson concluded. “How about you? What’s with the male body, or whatever it is?”

“Brand new. What do you think of it?”

“Nice looking man, but that’s no surprise since you’re a nice-looking woman.”

“Really? I don’t think of myself as pretty. Having a stunningly beautiful girlfriend changes the scale.”

“I’ve seen photos and videos posted on the web. Lots of stuff about RaraBella.”

Ra laughed. “I know. We’re an *item*.”

“More than that, right?” Bron suggested.

“Yes. Undying love.”

“Ah. Is your new body part of that?”

“Yes. You ain’t as dumb as they say.” She smiled.

“How hard is it to transform?”

“Took some time at first, but D has it down now.” Rami said.

“Wow!” Bron said. He paused, trying to figure out how to frame the question. Rami anticipated it and answered, “Yes. She does.”

“Cool. There’s a Greek myth about Tiresias. Zeus and Hera had argued about who enjoyed sex more. Tiresias had been both. He gave the wrong answer, women, and Hera blinded him. I’d watch out if I were you.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Rami replied. “As I recall, Zeus gave him long life and prophesy as a consolation prize.”

“I’d rather be able to see,” Bron said.

“Me too,” Rami agreed.

“Uh, what about...”

“That works very well,” Rami told him. “Except for impregnation. D is working on that.”

“D?”

“What Chloe calls Mr. D. The entity that controls the suit, and more. My D’s voice is definitely feminine.”

“How interesting. Chloe was insistent that hers was male,” Bron said.

“I know. It’s a mystery. But then everything about D is a mystery. We don’t know how she works her magic, and that’s the right word to use. When we asked, she referred us to Transdimensional Functor Calculus.”

“What’s that?”

“Who knows? It’s magic.” He paused, then asked, “So do you prefer another guy, or a cute young woman around?”

“You choose,” Bron answered.

Rami said, “I think I’ll keep this body for a while. Much easier to pee. Just find a nearby tree, or something.”

Bron laughed. “That’s a good reason. So, the plumbing works, I take it.”

“Mostly,” Rami said. “D says the ejaculation is simulated, but Bella found it more than acceptable. I saw you munching on something when I got here. Rabbit maybe?”

“You hungry?”

“Well, maybe. I had a box lunch when I first got here. But..”

“This place is rabbit heaven. Let’s go check the traps,” Bronson said, rising to lead the way.

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They hiked for about 30 minutes to get to the area where Bronson had set up the traps. “The rabbits learned to avoid the area near me. Had to go farther to get any. We’re pretty close now.”

Sure enough, they soon found a rabbit hanging from a branch. “A bit scrawny, but at least we won’t starve tonight.” He pulled out a knife and cut the line holding the prey. Then everything changed in a hurry, beginning with an arrow that hit Bron in his left arm. “Damn!” he said. D instantly turned on the new protective field, one large enough to cover both of them. A flurry of arrows bounced off the invisible wall and dropped harmlessly to the ground. Five men appeared at the edge of the forest and began to approach Bron and Rami slowly and carefully.

“Time for some magic,” Rami said. *D make the field opaque from the outside.*

Instantly, the pair was surrounded by a mirror-like substance that allowed Remi to see what was going on while preventing their attackers from seeing them. One of those took a spear and hurled it toward the mirror. It dropped harmlessly to the turf. D expanded the field again, to a radius of 10 meters.

“That’s as much as I can manage,” he told Bronson.

“Time for some offense, I think,” Rami suggested. He pointed at the nearest attacker and zapped his spear, which broke into two pieces. The clap of thunder that accompanied the shot helped convince the other group to leave them alone. They turned and ran back into the forest.

“Can you walk?” Rami asked Bron.

“Hope so. The arrow is in my arm, not my legs.”

“We need to get you back to where I left my backpack. My medical kit is there. I don’t think I can carry you,” Rami explained.

“Help me up,” Bron suggested.

“Let me see the wound,” Rami said. “I don’t want you to bleed to death.” He examined the arm carefully. “Best to leave the arrow in place for now. Hope it’s not poisoned.” He picked up the rabbit and they set off to return to Bron’s camp.

---

Ra assumed her female form as soon as they reached the warehouse or whatever it was. This was the form that had graduated from med school. She relied on muscle memory for surgery and such and didn’t want to take a chance on her other body. She explained to Bron, “The arrow just missed the humerus. I can see the tip on the other side. I am going to make a small incision to enlarge the space for the arrowhead and push the arrow thru as gently as possible. I’m going to deaden the area.” She gave him six injections around the exit wound. “Now, where is your suit?”

“Hanging in closet over there.”

Ra turned and saw a door and walked over to it. She found the suit inside and removed it. As she returned to the makeshift operating room, she felt a slight tingle where she held Bron’s suit.

“I’ve upgraded it,” D told her.



“Here,” she said, handing the suit to Bron. “As soon as we’re finished, I want you to put the suit on. Agreed?”

“Sure. Wish I had worn it in the first place.”

She waited five minutes for the shots to take effect.

“OK. That should be long enough. Can you feel this?”

“I feel pressure, but that’s all.”

“Good. Hold still.”

Ra had just finished stitching up the surgery on Bron’s arm, as well as the entry wound, when she heard a rustling nearby. The protective shield deployed immediately over both of them. In case the sound was from humans.

A small child moved carefully into the room. Dirty, wearing ragged clothes, undernourished, Ra thought he, or she, might be another lost child. A small voice asked, “You help Dada?”

“Where be Dada?” Ra asked.

“I show.”

“Far?”

“No far.”

“You wait right here. Grok?”

Ra helped Bron to his feet and into the suit. Then she asked him, “Where have you been sleeping?”

“In room there.” He pointed.

“Go there now and lie down. Set the suit to max stealth mode. Wait for me, Got it?”

“Yes. You remind me of your mother.”

“Nice try, but I won’t give you pain meds until we’re on your boat returning to the good old NRT. Not before. I need you to be alert. So quit wasting our time and go lie down.”

She ran quickly back to the child. “Show Dada.”

The kid took off so quickly, Ra had to hurry to catch up. They had gone only about 50 meters when her guide stopped and signaled for silence. “He hide.” Then, in a louder whisper, “Dada, got help.” Ra saw a small light at the edge of the weeds on the side of the path. “This way,” she said and headed for the light.

“No. Trick. Come me.”

The kid moved to a completely different part of the clearing. Ra thought to turn on the night vision and saw Dada easily. She moved to be close to him. “What matter?”

“Leg.” He grasped her hand and moved it until she felt the large open wound, probably made by a spear like the one she had lasered.

“You walk?”

“How far?”

“50 meters.”

“Need help.”

Rami reached down to help the man up. He realized that the change had been instinctive. The situation called for brute strength. However, his companion's reaction told him that was a mistake. "No fear," Rami said. "Explain later, OK? Walk now?"

The man draped one arm around Rami's neck for support and managed to limp back to the warehouse. Rami helped him to a chair. "Wait here." He went looking for Bron and found him sleeping on a bedroll. "Wake up Bron. We gotta go."

"Where?"

"Your boat. Strategic retreat. Got another patient and a starving kid. We need to get back to civilization."

"Leave morning. Tides."

"OK," Rami said reluctantly. Then he relented and gave Bron a pill for his pain. "Sleep. We leave at dawn." They hadn't exactly agreed on the time, but Rami liked the way it sounded.

Then, he went back to look at his second patient. He walked right up to the man in the chair. "Watch," he said. Ra appeared, "I be healer. See wound." She carefully peeled away the pants leg and washed the leg as gently as she could. The area was too large to stitch up. A chunk of flesh had been torn as though by an animal. "How happen?" she asked him.

"Attack dog. With others." He waved. "Around."

She applied a soothing antibiotic cream and bandaged the area. "Tomorrow leave early. Go safe place. You Grok?"

"Tomorrow."

"Now, you sleep. I keep watch." Was that good Vernac, she wondered.

Exhausted by the day's events, Ra regretted giving herself the job of keeping all of them safe. She sat by the opening to the outside, propping herself against the edge of the door and willed herself to stay awake.

---

Sometime during the evening, the young, still unidentified person, wormed its way onto Ra's lap. The wake-up call was a sharp nudge in the ribs and a whispered, "There!" Following the outstretched arm, using her night vision, she saw five men, at least she assumed they were men. They were armed with bows and arrows.

Ra stood in the middle of the door opening with the field aimed outward. "Identify yourselves," Ra demanded. "Who dat be?" she tried, then "Quién está ahí."

*Where is SAT when I need him?* Ra thought. She hadn't meant it as a request, but Ambi heard somehow and replied, "I'll fetch him, but it will take time."

Bronson appeared and said, "Heard the shouting. Company?"

"I saw five people with bows," Ra told him.

"Six," the youngster corrected her.

"Ah. That old trick. Thanks."

"Bron. We got any power for lights."

"Sure, but it won't last long."

"Turn em on," Ra said.

Bron said, "Ambi, maximum lighting please."

In the light, Ra could see that the force arrayed against them had greater numbers but were no match for Bron and her. She fired her laser at the sky, just to get their attention. It worked, but not as she expected. They put down their weapons and laid five rabbits in a pile.

“You stay here,” Ra said. She moved toward the pile of what she hoped was a peace offering. She had forgotten about the sixth man until she saw him racing toward her with a spear. When he was about five meters away, he hurled it at her. Clearly, he was the best spear thrower around, but D showed what they were up against as the spear lodged in the invisible field, where it stayed, apparently suspended in air.

*Nice work! D.*

Ra took the spear, held it aloft, then drove it into the ground. Wasn't that what Chloe had done?

Didn't work. No one came forward to surrender. She sat down next to the pile of rabbits. She picked up the nearest one, which had more meat than the one Bron had collected.

“Y'all hungry? Cook brekkie?”

The answer was an arrow that hit her squarely in the breast and bounced off. Ra stood up and raised her arms over her head. Several more arrows hit her and dropped to the ground. “Seen enough?” she asked in a loud voice.

“Y'all are no threat to me. Parlay?” Ra said. They seemed to understand the meaning of *parlay*, as one of them approached Ra and laid his bow on the ground as Ra dropped the shield. She patted the ground beside her, and the man lowered himself to sit there. “How we anger y'all?” Ra tried.

“Got man. Bad man. Steal boy.”

“Ah,” Ra said. “Maybe we get boy talk?”

“Too young.”

“Not our rules. Old enough. Tell his side. OK? Calls man *Dada*. Father?”

“No.”

“Man hurt. I be healer. Help. Not know more.”

“I grok. You give man, boy. We leave.”

Ra looked behind her and pointed to the boy. “You come here.” She patted the ground on her other side.

The boy was obviously reluctant to oblige. Ra continued, “I protect. Come now.”

He came and sat touching Ra's hip. “You know?” She indicated the man.

“Not nice. Beat me.” He raised what passed for a shirt to show bruises. He turned to show his back, which had evidence of whipping.

Ra involuntarily took a sharp breath. She turned back to man. “You do this?”

“Punishment.”

“We do not like punish small boy. Talk. Tell him what do wrong.”

“Bible say *spare rod, spoil child*.”

“Bible say many things not right.”

Ra began to see where the problem lay. She turned back to the boy. Waving in the direction of the wounded man, she asked, “Dada steal you?”

“No!” he exclaimed. He searched for the right word. “Rescue.”

Ra turned to the man. "We no give you boy, man. Sorry. Cannot do." *D protect the boy, please. Show field.*

A pale blue light suffused the shield, which enclosed Ra and the child. She asked the boy, "You gotta name?"

"Brat," he replied.

Turning back to the man, she said, "Boy, man, go with us. You leave. No harm."

"We give five rabbits."

Ra stood and changed to Rami. Then he walked over to the pile of rabbit meat and ceremoniously pissed on it. Then he said, "You go now. No come back. Boy stay with us. You see we got powerful magic. Best you go."

She changed back to Ra and extended her hand to the boy. "I protect boy. Try to hurt, be mucho bad. You grok."

"Yes."

"Best you go now."

She stood, took the boy's hand and together they walked back to the others. "I suggest we leave as soon as possible."

"Absolutely," Bron agreed. "What about your other patient?"

"He's got some explaining to do," Ra said. "Where is he?"

"He hide," the boy said. "I find."

"No!" Ra said. "We stay together. Not safe alone."

"Dada," the one called Brat shouted. "Come now."

He emerged from the shadows and joined the group near the door. "You, boy, go with us? Go far away."

He seemed to be thinking about it. "Mama not here."

"How far?"

"Two days."

"No can do. Need doctor. More medicine."

He seemed to understand. "Come back?"

"Maybe. No sure."

He shrugged. "No choice. We go."

### 3. *SAT*satisfactory Conclusion April 9, 2192 Aboard Bronson's Boat

Taking only what was necessary, the group followed Bron to the edge of the water. "Where boat?" Brat — they needed to come up with a better name — wanted to know.

"Watch," Bron said. "Ambi, please show the boat."

The vessel appeared tied up to what had been a pier pre-Collapse.

"Pretty cool, right?" Ra asked.

"Way cool," Brat replied.

*Ambi, is SAT available now?*

"Yes. You want him to interview the boy and Dada?"

*Exactly.*

SAT appeared on the monitor. Ra explained, "You talk him. Grok?"

The man and boy spent 30 minutes with the AI, which was long enough for SAT to figure out most of the local patois. "I think I can translate effectively, now," SAT told them.

"Excellent," Ra said. "Let's start with the boy's name. How about changing Brat to Bard, or Bart?"

SAT spewed a stream of barely intelligible speech. The boy said simply, "Brat."

"He chose that name," SAT told Ra and Bronson.

"OK. Now, I want to hear Dada's story in detail. First, I want to know if he is the boy's father. The chief, or whatever he was, claimed that *he* was the true father."

"That's correct," SAT said. "This man, who goes by the name Gavin, says he was the mother's secret lover. They tried to sneak away from the camp with the child, who prefers Gavin to his actual father for what I think are good reasons."

"We understand, and agree. Thank you, SAT."

"So," Bronson said, "we have taken a boy from his rightful father along with the mother's paramour."

"That's how I read it. I don't like his mother's chance for long term survival," Ra said.

"Agreed. Does that change our plans?" he asked?

"Nope. Our duty is clear. We need to report back to Chloe as soon as possible," Ra answered.

Ambianca spoke up, "I have her online now."

Chloe's face showed on the monitor. "That was fast. We just got the notice of the emergency beacon about an hour ago."

"Right. I set it off just before we departed. Hostiles in the area. Bronson is safe with me. He was wounded in an attack. Seems to be healing OK." Ra reported. "We have two refugees with us, a young boy and his friend, who was his mother's lover, apparently. The boy is all right, if somewhat malnourished. The man has a serious wound in his leg that I could not treat in the field. We are heading directly to Texas."

Bronson spoke up, "Hello love. I understand that I am now just a dear friend."

Chloe laughed. "I'll show you what's dear when I see you again. What's your ETA to Sealy or New Houston?"

"At current speed, about 2 days. We can push it if you think that's advisable," Bronson reported.

"I'll let the doctor decide how serious the wound is and whether you should crank up the volume," Chloe said.

"Where are you now?" Ra asked.

"New Zealand," Chloe replied. "The current schedule doesn't have us returning to Austin for a month. Of course..."

"Understood. We'll check back in when we get to Austin," Ra said. Ambi broke the connection.

"I vote for max speed," Ra said, "but you're the captain."

"Sounds good to me." He moved to the controls and soon they were traveling at a nice clip.

"You know," Bron said, "Cuba is closer. Good medical facilities."

"Good idea. Let me have a see if there is any change from yesterday." She moved to sit next to the still unnamed man. "SAT tells me your name is Gavin," she said slowly to see if he understood Standard English. "I am called Ra. Or Rami when I appear as a man. Our captain is Bronson." She waved in the general direction of the helm. "Let me have another look at your leg."

He did not understand.

"SAT, please translate for me."

SAT explained. Gavin stretched out his leg and Ra carefully unwound the bandage. "Oh. It looks much better. Not an emergency. I suggest we head directly to Texas. Any weather we need to worry about?"

"I'm checking. Possible storm forming in Atlantic, but we should get there in time," Bron reported.

"Sounds good to me. Cuba can wait for another day."

Gavin and Brat didn't follow the conversation, so SAT explained while Ra applied a new bandage to Gavin's leg.

"What have we got to eat on board?" Ra asked. "Sorry I ruined the rabbit earlier, but I thought something dramatic was called for."

"I loved it," Bronson said. "I think all we have is emergency supplies. Take a look."

Ra found plenty of jerky, both venison and goat, along with some hardtack. She passed it around. Brat was quick to try it. When he didn't expire immediately, Gavin also ate some. Ra decided to try making some soup using the jerky as a base along with some freeze-dried vegetables. "Better than poke in eye," Gavin graded it.

Later that afternoon, they rendezvoused with the ship carrying soldiers. Larger and faster, and with real food, they couldn't pass up the chance for a shorter and pleasanter trip. After loading Bron's boat, they turned toward the Sealy Canal and sped away at 23 knots.

After dinner, the exhausted contingent slept as the ship sliced thru the Gulf of Mexico toward home.

## **4. Debriefing**

### **April 12, 2192**

#### **Austin, NRT, and Arabella Springs, ASW**

Chloe spoke from the large monitor on the wall of the conference room, “Well, our young friend, Brat, seems to be doing well. Ambianca says he is picking up Vernac easily. She thinks she can convert him to Standard later. Gavin is pretty much lost.”

“Yes,” Ra said. “We got the same report. At least the wound on Gavin’s leg is healing well, or as well as can be expected. He’s talking about getting an expeditionary force to rescue his love.”

“If that happens, it will be a side effect of a more general operation. That’s what I want to discuss. Do we need to do something about the hostile forces? Are there more than six of them?” Chloe asked.

“Only Gavin would know, and he’s being very close-mouthed about it.” Bron said. “If we are going to retrieve the engines and power plants, we will need to deal with the others somehow. I’ve discussed building a fort there, but that is complicated.”

“What’s the main issue?” Chloe asked, getting to the point quickly.

“Simply put, lack of building materials,” Bron told her. “We would have take the materials with us. I suggested printing the walls, but transport is hard.”

“Can we repair the building you used?” Bella asked. “That way we could print the walls and roof using metals salvaged from the area.”

“Excellent idea from our Journeyman Techie,” Chloe said. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Bella said. “This would be a good project for a Master proposal.”

“Noted for the record,” Chloe said.

“How about just taking enough guards to hold them off until we have what we want?” Ra asked.

“That’s the preferred solution at present,” Bron said. “Question is how many soldiers we’ll need. We’ll need to plan for food and sleeping arrangements.”

“Of course, they may be gone by the time we get back there,” Ra said. “There doesn’t seem to be a permanent village anywhere in the area. We’re running detailed surveillance now, hoping to spot them. So far, we don’t have anything definitive.”

“Yes, I read the report. I authorized more scans,” Chloe said. “I guess we’re at the wait-and-see stage.”

“Agreed,” both Bronson and Ra said.

“So, a quick meeting,” Chloe said planning to sign off.

“One more thing,” Ra said.

“Yes?”

“Bella and I want to get married. We’d like to do it in Arabella Springs. Bella has arranged to study with Roger.”

“That’s great! When?”

“It’s being discussed. I suggested the June Solstice. Bella wants it earlier so she can get with Roger sooner. I said she could study with Roger before the ceremony. She wants her mother to be there. That means we have to book one of the trips. Space is tough to get.”

“I may be able to help,” Chloe said, smiling.

“I was hoping you’d say that. We are flexible.”

“Bron, I forgot to ask about your arm. How’s it healing?” Chloe asked.

“Fortunately, it was my left arm, so I am able to do lots of things while the arm is sore. Ra says it will take some time, and she’s given me some exercises to do in the meantime,” he told her. “It won’t interfere with any activities involving the two of us, if that’s what you are worried about.”

Chloe laughed. “You read my mind. I’ll be on the next ship home.”

Bron blew her a kiss. Then the screen went black.



## 5. Rescuing Mama

April 30, 2192

### Austin, NRT and Wilderness of North America

It began with a message from Brat. Using his newly acquired skills, he spoke slowly and directly into the camera with utter sincerity, “Ra, or Rami, we thank you for all you have done. But I miss Mama. Can you rescue her, too?”

She sent him a quick reply, “Yes, Brat, I will try to rescue your mother. You must help. Please record a message for her. How will I know her when I find her?”

The next day, she had a message from Brat and Gavin both. Gavin said, “Be easy know Melanie. Only woman in village.” They appended the requested recording, which she played with SAT’s translation into Standard.

Gavin went first, “My beloved. I hope this reaches you. The boy and I miss you so much. We hope we see you again soon. The person showing you this will help you escape and come to us. Please come with her.” Then Brat’s face appeared, “Mama, I learn Standard. I miss you so much. I love it here. Please come with Ra, or Rami.” Despite his bravery, tears streamed down his cheeks. Ra also found herself tearing up. What started with a medical emergency had turned into something more.

She began planning, mainly with Bella. She sent a note summarizing their brainstorming:

Gavin mentioned a village. We should be able to locate that. We just haven’t searched long enough. Then, I will need some way to get there and return with Melanie, the boy’s mother. We need more information from Gavin and Brat about the village. Then, we need equipment for the rescue. That’s where your skills come in. I’m going to need the following:

- ATV, like the ones they use in Australia, with full stealth mode.
- Personal locator so you can find me if necessary. We should all have one.
- Something to trade. Easiest solution is to “buy” the woman.
- Detailed map I can consult on my phone.
- Food for two for a week.
- A way to cook without building a fire.
- A detailed schedule of your travel to Africa in June, in case I have to catch up with you.
- Anything else you think of.

Maybe you can figure out how to use this in your proposal. If not, charge it to my personal account.

After that, she consulted with Brat and Gavin. “We’re planning to return to the area with a larger ship as soon as we can figure everything out.” Gavin struggled to understand Standard. Brat told him, “I tell later. OK?”

“Si, Si,” Gavin said, using the *you betcha* form of affirmative.

“Biggest problem where be Melanie?” Ra told them, remembering to use Vernac.

“In village,” Gavin said.

“Where be village?” Ra asked.

“Move for season,” he responded.

“Ah. Grok now. When come back?”

“Fall. Equinox.” He smiled, showing that he knew that word.

“Excellent. Where village then?”

“Two day from boat.”

“You find? Know map?” He spoke to Brat at length using a dialect Ra had trouble with. Brat explained, “We not be sure we find on map.”

“Ready try?”

Brat smiled, “Si.”

“I work on it. See later.”

“We grok,” Gavin said, mixing Standard into Vernac, which relied on context instead of the pronoun *we*. When necessary, Vernac used the expression “You and me,” or “us, with a wave of the hand to indicate all who are involved. The word *grok* had been part of the language from the start, borrowed from an ancient Science Fiction story that no one remembered the name of.

---

Ra spread a large photographic map on the table in the small conference room. She explained, “This be picture from space, above. Here,” she pointed to an area on the map, “be the big building where spend nite. This be where boat stay. Here be clearing where you hide. Men come from this direction. Think maybe village that way.”

The two of them studied the photo at length. Brat caught on first. He pointed to a spot in the clearing. “This be where drop rabbits.”

“Exactly. Excellent. Now two-day walking be something like this.” She put a transparent overlay on top of the photo with a large circle drawn. “I just guess on how much walk.”

They carefully studied the map again. “Here!” Gavin exclaimed, pointing to a small pond at the edge of the circle. “Stay here. Always water.”

Ra carefully measured the distance from the boat to the small pond. Using the scale on the map, she calculated approximately 75 km. “Long walk!”

“You betcha. Take me most of week. Leg hurt. You get back quick.”

“Lots trees,” Ra commented. “Gotta go slow. Careful.”

“Si,” Gavin said.

“Where other village?” Ra asked.

Both indicated an area well off the map. “In mountains.” Ra pulled out another photo, which showed the area to the north, near the ancient city of Chattanooga. She carefully placed the maps in the right orientation and taped them together.

“Here,” Gavin said, “near river. Walk seven, maybe eight days.” He pointed to the area near the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. “Good woods. Lotsa water. Cool.”

“I might be able to use the ancient roads to get there sooner,” Ra said. She calculated the distance at about 500-600 km. If she used the roads and managed to get 50 km/hr, she could get there in two days. Then add one day to find Melanie and convince her to come, two days back to safety. She might need more supplies.

“Be better wait for Fall,” she noted.

“Mama maybe dead then,” Brat noted.

“Yeah. I grok,” Ra said. “Gotta plan more.”

“Us,” he waved to show he meant all of them, “go with.”

“Maybe. If leg heal. Me be doctor. Make decision later.”

With that, she rolled up the map and went back to find Bella.

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Ra started off with, “So you see the problem. If we wait for them to migrate south, we may no longer be able to rescue Melanie. They may have dispensed with her. On the other hand, if we go now, we have the element of surprise in our favor, but the distance is daunting. Even if Interstate is in good shape, it’s still at least two days. That doesn’t leave any slack.”

Bella commented, “You nailed it. Plus, it may take more than an afternoon to find the camp. Then you have to locate Melanie. Can we get everything ready soon enough to try now, with backup plan to go later?”

She continued, “The ATVs are in stock. Modifying them for stealth is straightforward. We have food you can take. I found a portable induction cooktop you can use to boil water. We’ve downloaded the maps to your cell phone. All we need to do is schedule the ship. Bronson is ready to head out anytime. Lots to salvage. The troop ship is ready with a contingent of soldiers to guard the area until we can fortify it better.”

“Let’s see if Gavin’s leg is healed. They want to be there to greet Melanie, assuming I can bring her back.”

“Then, the mission is a go. Maybe I should come as well. I could start work on fortifications.”

“Hmmm.”

## **6. Operation Melanie** **May 3, 2192, and later** **Fort Savannah, Wilderness of North America**

Thanks to an ancient Interstate highway that had stood the test of time better than most roads, Ra made it to the general area where she hoped to find Melanie in a day and a half. That left her the afternoon to fly the drones. This, as Bella had pointed out, might take more than one afternoon. There were many possible locations around various small lakes in the highlands. The woods that Gavin had extolled meant that she had to walk most of the rest of the way.

She got lucky. The random search pattern the drones flew showed a large clearing in the woods with several tents in an oval. She recalled all the drones for a recharge, then concentrated all four in the area of the clearing. This provided the best coverage, but also the greatest chance of the drones being spotted. They'd agreed that if the drones were spotted and recognized for what they were, then the mission would be aborted.

Why have we never tried to develop stealth drones, she wondered. Probably something involving the energy drain. As it stood, she had to fly the drones high, which used more energy and made it difficult to identify people on the ground. After an hour, she gave up and recalled the drones.

Having stored the drones, she hid the ATV in the underbrush and activated the stealth mode she had requested. Poof! It disappeared. Then, she extracted her phone from the backpack and brought up the map stored earlier. Zooming into the image, she found the clearing with the village and used the device to plot a walking route.

After one final review of the checklist of items she'd need, she set off by the light of the setting sun, following a pre-Collapsian hiking trail that appeared to be used frequently. The waning gibbous moon gave enough light for the hike but would set shortly after she reached the camp. It would be darker for the return trip if all went well. The plan called for relying on speed and stealth when necessary. So far, it all seemed to be going well.

Speed was not available for this segment. Ra struggled thru the branches hanging over the path, occasionally taking time to cut branches using her laser, a process that required considerable practice. As a result, it took almost three hours to cover the 10km to the outskirts of the camp. To get a better view, she climbed into a tree and settled on a large branch. With stealth mode, no one was likely to see her. Using bins, she watched the activity in the camp, trying to figure out where Melanie might be.

She recognized the man she had dealt with before. Clearly the chief, Ra assumed he would eventually lead her to Melanie. Then she got a surprise. Three women emerged from what must be a cooking shed carrying food to some makeshift table set up in the center of the oval.

None of the women matched the sketch she had of Melanie, prepared with the help of a police artist and Brat. Interesting, Gavin had claimed that Melanie was the only woman in the village. Had he meant, "The only woman for me?" Her task had just become more difficult.

She soon learned more. The chief motioned for a young person to approach. After receiving instructions, the child headed for one of the tents. She emerged soon afterward, leading Melanie by a rope attached to her neck. Melanie looked much the worse for wear. Gaunt, with some abrasion on her neck and bruises on her arm, she had obviously been punished for Gavin and Brat leaving without permission.

Questioning followed, with the chief angrily confronting Melanie, who refused to respond. After several attempts by the chief, he finally got an answer, but not the one he wanted. It consisted solely of the middle finger of both hands. That earned her a vicious slap on her left cheek. Melanie ostentatiously turned to present her right cheek. Ra could barely make out the red in the chief's face as he slapped her on that side as well. Then, he tossed the end of the rope to the child. In the light from the fire, she could see that he was a young man, not a boy.

He started to lead Melanie away, but the chief called to him and tossed him a key. The young lad nodded to show he understood, then proceeded to drag Melanie back to the tent where she was apparently being held prisoner.

The remainder of the dinner time was torture. For one thing, Ra had not eaten, and she was getting hungry. She had left her backpack, disguised as a medium sized rock, at the base of her tree. For another, she feared what might happen to Melanie before she could get to her.

Finally, after another hour, they banked the fire and split up, heading to their own tents. She watched to see where the chief went, afraid that he might plan to visit Melanie. He looked at the prison tent, as though considering it, but then motioned to one of the other women to accompany him to bed. They disappeared into the tent nearest the fire.

Ra took almost another hour to move carefully around the camp until she was behind Melanie's tent. She heard weeping inside. So Melanie was still awake. Using the laser on low power, she made a long slit in the fabric of the tent and stepped inside. Melanie reacted just as you would expect, fearing even more punishment. When she saw Ra in the low light, her eyes grew wide.

Quickly, Ra put a finger to her lips. Then she removed her cell phone and showed Melanie the message from Gavin and Brat. Showing she understood, she nodded enthusiastically. Ra began by cutting the rope and removing the noose from the girl's neck. She was surprised to see that Melanie was quite young, only a few years older than herself. Then, she discovered what the key locked, handcuff wrapped around the tentpole.

That took an agonizing ten minutes using the laser to break the chain and release Melanie. Then, she heard someone approaching the tent. She indicated that Melanie should stand by the tentpole as though she were still restrained, while she turned on stealth mode and hid in the shadows.

The chief entered the tent and removed his trousers quickly. His intentions were clear, and Ra acted. A dose of electricity at 80% dropped the chief to the floor instantly. Ra rolled him over and said, "We meet again. I suggest you not try to follow us. If we meet again, you die. You grok?"

Unable to move, the chief managed to bare his teeth as an answer.

"You've been warned," Ra told him, then taking Melanie by the hand, she led her thru the slit at the rear and away from the camp.

---

They had hiked for an hour before they heard sounds of a search being organized. "We go quick now," Ra said. "Too tired," Melanie said.

Bella had anticipated this development. The plan was to hide and confuse the search. Melanie was dubious. "They find."

"No," Ra told her, and promptly disappeared. "See," she said on reappearing several meters away. "You close by me. No one see." They settled on the ground mostly concealed by overhanging foliage, with stealth as an added factor. Ra opened her backpack and took out two PB&J sandwiches and some water. Melanie was very uncertain about the sandwiches, but Ra started eating right away and Melanie soon joined her. She was obviously pleased with the food, and her sandwich disappeared in a hurry. Ra decided to get two more out and both were quickly dispatched.

Before they could move, the sounds of searchers reached them. Ra reiterated her command for silence. Several searchers passed by without noticing them. Then, they heard the unmistakable sound of the dogs. Well, they knew that was possible. The dogs smelled them and alerted. The humans stared at nothing and urged the hounds to move on. Nothing doing. The lead hound lurched forward and hit the edge of the protective field. The shock felled him. His human companions moved to investigate. They were also quickly shocked and lay on the

ground moaning. Ra tied them up with the rope that had previously been around Melanie's neck. The other two dogs knew when to quit and raced away.

"Come quick," Ra urged. "Search be here soon. We run. Grok?"

They set off down the track at a steady jog. Ra was trying to calculate how long they had before she would have to fight. She hoped they reached the ATV before that.

They barely made it, reaching the spot with the searchers only minutes behind. *D can you drop the stealth shield on the ATV?*

"Of course. Better hurry."

Melanie gasped when she saw the machine. Ra pulled it onto the track and motioned to Melanie to get on behind her. Melanie obliged with trepidation. Ra handed her a helmet. "Put on," she commanded showing how with her own. Then they took off as the first searchers arrived on a dead run. They stopped and launched a volley of arrows, which fell harmlessly when they hit the shield.

"What be you?" Melanie asked, having seen one too many miracles to deal with.

"Later," Ra told her. "Need focus drive now." The track did not allow much in the way of speed, but it was enough to leave their followers behind. About 30 minutes later, they reached the road Ra had used to get close to the camp and sped up. As the sun rose on them, they had reached the outskirts of the ancient city of Atlanta and the old Interstate highway.

"We stop now. Eat. Piss. Walk around. Grok?"

"Si!" She got off with alacrity.

"We go lot more. Arrive tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Where Gavin and the Brat wait," Ra told her, then added, "Near winter camp."

"Ah."

"We rest some. Maybe you got question?"

Melanie laughed. "Question? You betcha. Who be you? And what?"

"Me be called Ra," she began, but stopped because Melanie clearly had heard of her. "You kill hyena?"

"That be me," Ra told her.

"Not believe story."

"Wanna see proof?"

"Later. What be you? How you do all things?"

"I be human, just like you. Got better tools."

"For sure. Any other tricks?"

"Well, one." She changed to Rami. "Much easier pee this way."

That received another laugh.

After micturating on the side of the road, he went up to Melanie, and switched back to Ra, where she felt more comfortable asking Melanie, "I be doctor. Healer. I examine wounds? Look at? OK?"

Melanie said, "Better you be Ra for that," and laughed again. "Rami, he be too good look at."

Ra laughed in turn. She quickly checked Melanie and applied some of the salve she always had on hand, the same she had used on Gavin's leg. Then, she told Melanie her plan. "You son, he get me come rescue. Bring home. But gotta check out Atlanta. Maybe good salvage. Take hour so? OK?"

"Por supuesto," Melanie said. "Interesting," Ra said. "Where you hear *por supuesto*?"

Melanie waved her hand around. "Still interesting. Standard says Of Course, Vernac usually Sure," Ra said. She climbed back aboard and felt Melanie sit behind her. *Interesting how she felt about Rami*, Ra thought, and had to suppress the almost automatic response. *No. That would be very bad.*

Atlanta looked like a gold mine of salvage to Ra's eye. Bella usually had a different take and had spent considerable time studying where to look for various items. Ra took lots of video as they moved thru the metropolis to give to Bella later.

Sunset found them at the edge of the metro area on the old interstate. Rather than run down the batteries, Ra called for a stop near the remains of an ancient park they passed. She dug out two sleeping bags from the cargo compartment and some emergency rations. An ancient gravity-fed water fountain functioned well enough to fill the kettle. The induction cooktop heated it up in such a short time, Ra wished she'd been timing it. She carefully poured some water into 2 bowls of something. "Let sit," she said. "Us too." She laughed at her own joke, then sat on the grass. After two minutes, she gave it a tentative stir and was pleasantly surprised to smell a veggie and pasta mixture.

Melanie followed Ra's actions and sniffed the bowl. Then, her face brightened, and she took a taste. "Hot," Ra warned, just in time. Melanie blew carefully across the spoon before taking a sip. Then she swallowed the rest of the spoonful. "Not bad."

Ra had to concentrate to keep Rami in check, savoring each bite of pasta with sauce, a dish she had cooked herself. Well, sorta.

"You me sleep dawn." Ra hoped she had that right.

She used some of the water for a short wash up and strode off into the brush to pee. Rami wondered if maybe he was making too much of Mel's remark. Maybe he didn't need to switch just yet. Of course, if she was serious about sex, well, that would be different. When he got to where the bags were laid out, he heard soft snoring from his companion.

---

Food for two for a week was part of the specs for the mission. Somewhere along the way the food part was whittled down. There was still plenty, but breakfast plans wound up being coffee and bikkies. The ancient fount provided enough water for two cups apiece.

"Go long way today. Hope do one day," Rami ventured.

"Gotcha." She couldn't take her eyes off of him. "So, how work. Change."

"Magic," he answered.

"You do whenever?"

"Mostly."

Mel raised her eyebrows.

"When there is a beautiful woman around Rami happens more," Rami answered, forgetting to use Vernac.

"Mean me prefer Rami?"

Rami nodded. "You prefer?"

“I prefer Rami till see Gavin,” Mel said. Rami smiled and got onto the seat. This time, when he felt Mel pressed up against him, he liked the way it felt. “And when I see Bella,” he said to himself as they moved silently back onto the ancient freeway.

After another emergency dinner in the evening, Mel said, “Be possible zip bags together.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Si,” Rami replied.

After both were in the sleeping bags, Mel moved over and laid her head on his shoulder. “Thank you rescue me.”

“De nada,” Rami replied, and prepared to go to sleep.

But Mel, who had thought about this moment for eight hours, had planned for this contingency.

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Rami’s phone rang when they were in range of the cell phone tower Bella had set up since he had departed on his mission. Realizing they were very close, he switched to Ra before answering. “Hey. I must be close if you can call me.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense. What’s the result?”

Ra held up her phone so they could see Mel sitting behind her. Cheers erupted from the other end. They could hear the cheers without the phone. Soon, they saw what had become of the warehouse building in their absence. The public face had been completely replaced with what looked like wooden siding. Ra could see Bella standing in front ready to show off her work.

As the ATV pulled to a stop, Gavin and Brat came running to greet Melanie. Shc scooped up Brat and gave him a big hug. Then she turned to Gavin and kissed him in a way that left little to the imagination. Ra walked over to Bella and tried to convey the same message. She said, “I’m so glad you are back safely. Any problems?”

“None we didn’t plan for. The shield took care of the dogs beautifully, as well as their handler who were too anxious to find out what had happened. They got zapped as well. Fortunately, we were close to the ATV, so we just ran for it and took off. The rest was mundane. I do have video of Atlanta from the freeway as we passed thru.”

“Later,” Bella said, “I’m just glad you’re back.”

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The next morning Ra and Bella walked around the building as Bella explained, “We ran the printers 24 hours a day to make the siding. Looks good, don’t you think?”

“Quite a change. I’m guessing there are several changes that aren’t readily visible.”

“You got it. This is a very well defended fortress now. She tapped her phone and half the building disappeared. “As you can see, not everything is finished.”

“How about the cell phone tower. How’d you do that?”

“Piece of cake. We salvaged the parts in the old city. We only have one tower. It’s mostly for the benefit of people who are working here.”

They stopped the tour when they heard a ruckus at the edge of the clearing. Four men riding bicycles rode right up to Ra and dismounted. Their leader spoke, “We come tell you chief no more. We make peace. Trade?”

“Well, what do you know?” Bella said. “Karma strikes again.”



The arrival of the party seeking peace reset the plans for the day. First, they talked to Melanie, Gavin, and Brat, who now seemed to prefer The Brat as his name.

Ra explained, "If this is a serious attempt to develop a peaceful relation with us, we have to investigate. However, we have a very tight schedule, so the investigation must wait until later. First, though, we want to know if you want to change your plans. Specifically, do you want to come with us when we leave here?"

She waited while SAT translated into the local tongue.

The Brat spoke first, "I want to go with you." He had become proficient in Standard, as expected for a young boy. Melanie looked at Gavin, who spoke for the two of them. "Much better with you. We go."

"Melanie, you want go?"

"Si," she said. "Brat tell me much. Sound good."

"OK, we plan leave soon."

Then, she turned her attention to the party outside. "Please come inside," she said to them. They were hesitant at first, but curiosity about the strange visitors eventually overcame their trepidation. She led them to a large monitor with SAT's image on it. "SAT talk bettah," she said. Then, she let SAT explain what was going to happen. That took some time, but eventually, they understood. The strange people would leave soon and plan to return when the tribe moved to the winter camp nearby. They would meet then to discuss everything in detail and talk about trade.

An exchange of gifts cemented the deal, and the men mounted their bicycles for the long ride back to the highlands.

"This gives us a chance to do some research before the Fall Equinox, but not a lot of time. Maybe we can get ideas from Roger the Rabbit when we see him," Bella offered. She was thinking of what she could do in the area. They had ignored most of the area east of the NRT as there seemed to be little human activity there. Maybe that was a mistake.

"Lots to think about," Ra agreed.

***Part 5. RaraBella  
Nuptial Travels, Arabella Springs, ASW  
June – September, 2192***

## 1. Nuptials June, 2192

### *Around the Pacific to Arabella Springs, Africa, ASW*

Bella found out that she was almost as famous as Ra when pictures of the new façade on Fort Savannah appeared on the web. No longer just the second half of RaraBella, now she was recognized for her own skills, and not just her beauty. She particularly liked the few days in Valparaiso, where the Big O himself, if that was the right word, suggested they spend some time chatting. Bella emerged with several ideas of how to employ robots more widely. She looked forward to meeting The Rabbit to explore the ideas further.

The locals presented her with a spectacular dress for her wedding, one that must have taken many hours of tedious sewing to complete. Bella and Ra both quietly suggested paying for the dress, offers politely refused. The photos of the wedding showing the dress would be compensation enough. Orders were sure to come in.

Then, they sailed to New Zealand, where they re-enacted the famous wine tasting from Chloe's visit years ago. The wine quality had improved after considerable research using The Library. This time, they had a clear winner, 6-4, instead of a tie. The winning winery was the same, now in the hands of Binoche, who had acted as Chloe's page during her first visit.

The celebration featured some bubbly from the losing winery, which Bella proclaimed was good enough to convince the citizens of New Home to find another use for their grapes. Of course, the New Zealanders were no competition for the raucous entertainment featured at New Home. That place really rocked.

The final stop on the way to Africa was in the flourishing community in South Australia, which now exported large quantities of beef, a luxury item everywhere in the world post-Collapse. Neither Ra or Bella ate it often, not only because it was outrageously expensive, but because the only beef that reached Austin had been frozen for months. True epicures claimed that the long storage and transportation made the meat tough and not as flavorful as the small amounts raised near Austin. Ra remembered the burger she had on the Reagan and their dinner with Bella's parents fondly. She confessed to Bella that she thought of Lieutenant McKendrick when she ate one in Australia.

"What did you agree with him?" Bella wanted to know, perhaps with just a touch of jealousy.

"Only that we both enjoyed the evening and would like a repeat performance if that were ever possible," Ra assured her.

Then, with great fanfare they left Australia and sailed to the beautiful city of Arabella Springs, where a large crowd had assembled to greet the famous couple. Ra and Bella had agreed to keep Rami out of the picture for the time being. Ra loved the reaction she got. News of Operation Melanie had spread, which also showed time-lapse video of the new siding being applied to the old warehouse. Bella was pleased with the coverage, and agreed to a closeup, not realizing that it was being sent to the new mega-screen in the main square. Ra motioned for her to go first, so when they moved into the square, the shouts of "Bella" resounded off the walls of the buildings.

"What do I do now?" Bella asked. "You're the expert."

Ra laughed. "This is the fun part. Wade into the crowd and touch hands as we go by." She added, "I have hand sanitizer with me."

"Gotcha," Bella said, heading for the best-looking male in the group. As it turned out, Bella's instincts were right on. They made eye contact, and Bella realized he was carrying a mic. Numerous cellphones were recording the interview.

"Bella," the reporter asked, "I know you came here to get married, sort of the ultimate destination wedding. But is it too late for, you know, us?"

Bella turned to look at Ra, who shrugged. She turned back, “Maybe. We’ll add you to the waiting list.”

As usual, that line got a great laugh.

“I guess your next question is, ‘How do you like Africa,’ or something like that.”

“Africa,” he exclaimed. “You just got here.”

“Right. And you’re the only person I’ve met. Amazing that we should just bump into each other. What luck.”

“I understand that you are a Master Techie,” he said, deciding to try a different line.

“Not quite,” Bella said. “My work in Georgia has been accepted for consideration. We have to wait and see.”

Ra decided it was time to act. She went to stand next to Bella and said, “May I reclaim my almost wife? We have some preparations to deal with.” She put her arm around Bella and waved to the crowd. Then, she took the mic from the vlogger and said, “This is a fabulous welcome home! Thanks for coming down to see us. Now, though, we really need to get past y’all. How about right here.” She drew an imaginary line thru the crowd, and they soon parted enough for the couple to pass.

Except for one person, Yuri. “Daddy!” Ra screamed and rushed to give him a hug. She noticed that he had tears in his eyes and said, “I hope those are because you are so glad to see me.”

“More than you can imagine,” he said. Then, he turned to Bella and couldn’t tell what was proper, fist bump, hug, kiss? Bella solved the problem by hugging him. “I am so glad to meet you IRL, as they say.”

Yuri said, “We’ll have time later to chat. Now, we need to get the two of you settled.” He offered an arm to Bella, and she took it gladly. “I feel like I know where I am thanks to all of Ra’s stories over the years. That’s the building that was a luxury hotel in the past.”

“That’s it. We finally gave up on repairing the roof and just eliminated the fifth floor. We just finished the new roofing in time for your arrival. Your bags from the ship have already arrived and are in your room, well, suite, actually. I’m sure you’ll like the features. The suite usually rents to our best customers,” he explained. He neglected to explain what made them good customers.

Bella laughed when they entered the room. Its main feature was a king size bed, and lest there be any misunderstanding, the mirror on the ceiling was a hint.

“Ra,” she said, still laughing, “our reputation has preceded us.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” Ra said, and kissed him on the cheek. “Are we meeting for dinner?”

“Yes,” he replied, as he carefully closed the door behind him. “Ambianca has the schedule.”

“So, what is this place?” Bella asked.

Ra laughed, “It has many uses. One is for those who would like to have sex. I, for one, would like to take advantage of what is being offered. And I don’t mind if my reputation is affected. I think it would enhance mine. I’d be the envy of every other male in the world. And probably several women.”

Ra looked straight at Bella. “We need to talk about Rami, both of us. All three of us. I think you should have the final say.”

“All right. Option one is random. We’ll devise something exactly 50-50. Or whatever we want,” Bella began, like the techie she was.

“I’d prefer a consensus for one or the other. I may need to practice,” Ra said. “Also, if we want the full package, so to speak, the process takes longer to happen, in either direction. We’re talking about hours.”

“Oh,” Bella said. “Tell me more.”

“Do you want to have my baby?” Ra asked. “I’m asking for Rami as I don’t dare letting him loose in here too soon.”

“So, the change will take some time. What’s the benefit?”

“I’d be capable of impregnating you.”

“Do I have to decide now?”

“No, my love, you don’t.” She wrapped her arms around her and kissed her tenderly. “I love you more than anyone else could. And I’ll be whoever you want me to be.”

She stepped back. “I have a present for you. Right, Ambi?”

“Hanging in the closet,” Ambi replied.

Bella moved across the room and opened the doors. All their clothes hung from the rod. “Well, it looks like they got here. Where’s the present?”

Ra reached into a far corner and pulled out a package. “A little bit of magic to start the day.” She handed it to Bella.

“What great wrapping,” Bella said.

“Made here,” Ra assured her. “You won’t be surprised to learn that I had someone else wrap it.”

“It’s lovely. Tell whoever did it that I liked it.”

“Ambi, can you handle that?” Ra asked.

“Already done,” Ambi replied.

“How did you do it so fast?”

“The young woman responsible asked me to tell her how Bella liked it,” Ambi explained.

“It was Bunny, wasn’t it?” Ra asked.

“Yes,” Ambi explained for Bella, “She and Ra were about the same age. They were friends.”

“Sisters, almost,” Ra said. “Her and Myra, another girl a bit older. And Serine.”

Bella removed the contents and looked puzzled. “It’s a suit,” Ra explained. “We got some of your DNA from your hair and grew the suit. It’s been here waiting for you. It should know you. Try it on.”

Bella quickly dropped her travel clothes and stepped into the suit. As she pushed her arms into the sleeves, she felt the suit close around her. “Whoa! That’s a bit creepy.”

“That’s what several people say the first time. Most get over it.” She continued, “Most wearers find it very comfortable. I hope you will also. This is mainly for your protection. We’ll teach you how to use all the features. Not now, though. We have some outfits pre-loaded for you to choose. First, in case something happened to you wedding dress, we have a substitute.”

The suit changed to look exactly like the dress from Valparaiso. Bella looked at her reflection and approved. Ra thought she was even more beautiful than usual.

“And, of course, we have your University cassock,” Ra said as the outfit changed to a light blue costume, the color for a Techie. “We also have a Techie uniform that is more practical,” she said, as the suit changed into a light blue jump suit.

“Where are the pockets?” Bella asked.

“Try to get a pencil out,” Ra suggested. As Bella reached for where a pocket should be, one appeared, complete with a pencil for sketching.

“Oh, major cool.”

“One more thing, a late addition,” Ra said as a medallion appeared above Bella’s left breast, the symbol of a Master Techie. “We just got the word today. Congratulations!” Ra kissed her. “I’m so proud of what you’ve done.”

Bella said, “That’s my line.” Then she said, “Ambi, how much time do we have before dinner?”

“Leaving time to make yourselves presentable, you have two hours to relax.”

Ambi winked and it looked about right.

Bella thought about removing her suit, and it dropped to the floor. She stepped out and stood before Ra wearing sexy underwear. As she began to remove that, Ra felt the unmistakable sign of change beginning. She asked, “You want Rami?”

Bella just moved over to touch the bulge apparent beneath the clothing Ra wore. Rami was instantly naked and obviously male. He moved to take Bella into his arms. “Only two hours. Not nearly long enough.”

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“That was great. We need to talk,” Ra said. “If we decide to make Rami capable, we have to go public. Maybe we should go public now.”

“I’m not sure,” Bella said.

“It’s fairly obvious that you prefer Rami. Why not let everyone know?”

“How can you say that? I love you. Period. Whatever form you take.”

“OK. But you prefer Rami in bed.”

Bella had to think about that. “Hmm. You may be right about that. How much time do we have left?”

Ra thought, *Ambi, how much time do we have left?*

“About 30 minutes,” came the answer.

“We still have 30 minutes to test that hypothesis,” Ra said to Bella. “Let’s not waste any time.”

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“That’s a good way to stall,” Ra said, “but we still have to talk about Rami. Here’s the deal. I want to have a baby with you. Rami can be a real husband. But, it takes some time to prepare. For one thing, I cannot be Rami when I have my period.”

“OK. I got it. Here’s what I propose. Let’s wait. For the time being, Rami is something we know about, but it’s not public.”

“Uh. The hostiles in the East know about it. However, we should be able to damp that down.”

“Then we talk about this later. Agreed. For example, I want to study with the Rabbit. I want to delay pregnancy for a time. So, I propose we have this conversation when I want to discuss pregnancy,” Bella said. There was just the slightest emphasis on the *I* part of the statement.

“Of course, it is up to you,” Ra said. “How about we agree to discuss this again every year on our anniversary.”

Bella sealed it with a kiss. “I love you. Both of you.”

“And I love the only Bella.”

When they moseyed down to the large dining area, they were surprised to find that Chloe and Yuri wanted a private meeting before going into the meal. Following Ambianca's directions, they found the small conference room where Ra's parents were waiting for them.

"I thought there is a big item that we should get settled," Chloe began.

Yuri didn't seem to know what she was talking about. Ra noted this, and commented, "It seems that you have an issue that Daddy doesn't share."

"You are correct. That is why we are here. I think he needs to know what I know."

Ra asked, "This about Rami?"

"Who the hell is Rami?" Yuri demanded. "Chloe always seems to know about your secrets when I don't."

"Why don't you just show him?" Chloe asked. "That would speed things up."

Ra looked at Bella. "Whatever," she said.

Rami said to Yuri, "I am Rami."

"Well, that's amazing, and something of a complication. Care to tell me more?" Yuri said.

"It's complicated. It started when Bella pointed out that my grudge soccer match in Austin would not have happened if I were male. She knew how powerful the entity I call D had become and asked if it was possible. As you can see, the answer is yes."

"I'm almost afraid to ask. How far does this go? Can you —"

"The answer is complicated. I am a very good simulation of a human male, but not completely. In particular, I cannot be a father, at least not yet. D is working on that," Rami said.

"So, to return to the basic question," Chloe put in, "which one of you is going to show up at the wedding?"

"We've planned for Ra to marry Bella," Rami said. "The idea was to decide when to go public, namely at a time of our choosing. What do you suggest?"

"The choice is yours, of course. However, we want to know so we can be prepared, right Yuri?" Chloe asked.

"You bet."

Bella couldn't stand it any longer. "If I have any say, and I most certainly do, I want Ra to be my mate, but I suggest she not wear a wedding dress, but a tuxedo. That sorta hints without being obvious about it."

"Sounds good to me," Chloe said.

"Yeah, I agree," Yuri said.

"So, shall we go eat?" Ra asked, wearing her tuxedo outfit. She offered her arm to Bella, who took it and laid her head on her shoulder as they walked into the dining area.

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Maela had agreed to officiate. She began, "Dearly beloved, we have gathered here, and online, to witness the marriage of these two people, Ra and Bella, better known as RaraBella. This is an ancient and honorable estate, older than civilization. Is there anyone here who objects to this marriage? If so, speak now or forever remain silent. Hearing no objection---

"Wait!" came a cry from the back of the room. "I would like to present the bride. I am her father."

Chloe thought, *Shit!*

She stood and confronted the intruder. She recognized him immediately. She realized the implication and spoke to him in that manner that says, you better do this, “Isaac, we will discuss this later. Everything. Now sit down and don’t make trouble.”

Isaac looked at her and made eye contact. He nodded slightly and took his seat in the rear.

Maela looked at Chloe, “So we are OK to proceed?”

Chloe nodded. Maela turned to Ra and said, “Ra of RaraBella, do you take Bella to be your wife? To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, being faithful to each other as you have agreed, for, well, a very long time?”

That got the intended laugh.

“Si! Si!” Ra agreed. More laughs.

“And do you Bella of RaraBella take Ra to be your spouse, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, being faithful to each other as you have agreed, for a very long time?”

“Yes, I do,” Bella replied.

“Then I pronounce you to be married following the customs of Arabella Springs. You may kiss each other.”

As they kissed, Bella whispered, “I have a surprise for later.”

Ra said, “Later might have to be much later. We have to deal with Isaac.”

“What?” she said aloud.

“Later, OK?”

As they walked from the podium to the large pavilion, Ra said, “Did you look at Isaac?”

“No. I was deliberately turning my back. How dare he show up now! It’s been 20 years. I barely remember him.”

“There’s something about him that is *off*,” Ra said. “Chloe noticed it immediately. There. See. She’s cornered Isaac. She’s arranging to meet him in her suite. We must be there.”

*Ambi? I assume she’s leaving you to arrange things?*

“Of course, dear.”

---

“Everyone have champagne?” Bella asked. “Chloe will go first.”

“Thanks,” Chloe said. “This is a bit strange. I’ve known Bella all her life and watched her grow up while her mother worked in my various offices. She has turned out well, don’t you think? To Bella.” They sipped the bubbly from New Zealand. “Then, there’s Ra. She’s my actual child, but I have seen her only a few times when she was growing up, for example, the famous hyena incident. She’s amazing. I read about her almost every day, though lately I will admit that the gossip is mainly about RaraBella, the famous couple. I named her Flora, which I thought was nicely flowery. As usual, she decided on her own name. Well, here’s to my daughter, Ra, may she continue to take my work and improve on it.” She raised her glass.

Yuri stood up next. “I’m just the opposite. I watched Ra, what a great name, from birth until she left on the ship for California. What was she? The best athlete in, well certainly Africa, maybe the world. She has all these incredible skills that she simply passes off as magic. We learned about some of those on her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday when she killed that hyena, the stuff of legend. She was also the best student in all her classes, one known for



offering *constructive criticism* of her teachers occasionally. We're delighted to have Bella as part of the family, and we look forward to watching as she smooths the rough edges. Here's to RaraBella."

Ra stood up first. "I'll go first."

"As usual," Bella noted. More laughter.

"What a shock I got when I opened the door to our dorm room. JJ had told me that Bella was *one of the two smartest students at the Uni*. Of course, I assumed I was the other. So, I was expecting a nerdy bookworm. Instead, I saw the *most beautiful woman in the world*. I'm telling you. I'm not making this up. That's what most of the daily blogs call her. She lived up to her reputation for being smart also. What a combination. I was unsure how to proceed, seeing as how we were both, you know, women. Bella figured out that part. She just came out with it one night. We discovered we loved each other but had been reticent to speak about it. Bella just told me she wanted to be with me all the time and didn't care what form that took. Then we made love and that was that. Here's to my love, Bella."

Bella had saved the best for last. "If Ra was nonplussed to meet me, imagine what it was like on the other side. I looked up as she came in the door and saw this teenager wearing a tracksuit. I stood up to greet her and realized I was going to room with Ra-Ra-Ra, as she was being called. I had dragged out my Astros T-shirt, from the 2010's and my best jeans and here was the weirdo I was going to live with. I was talking to Mama at the time and said, you'll never guess who I am going to be rooming with. I turned back and aimed the phone to take a picture. There was Ra in jeans with a sweatshirt labeled *Save the Whales* and sandals to match my Birkenstocks."

She stopped and took a sip of champagne. "I know that's cheating," she said to the audience, "but I was thirsty."

"Anyway, that was the first time I saw her magic. We went out to get lunch, and Ra rescued this waif from the street by the simple expedient of calling her mother. Her *mother*. The most powerful person in the world. We walked to the capital for an impromptu meeting where we set a new life for Ami, as she came to be called. She's here as one of the online guests." The screen shifted to show Ami from Boonville. She smiled and waved and mouthed *Congratulations you two*.

"I was completely overwhelmed. I was way out of my league. I broke down when we got back to our room and the enormity of what I had gotten into hit me. Ra was perfect. She didn't tell me I was being silly, or try to comfort me. She just held me and stroked my back. I think I fell in love right then, but it took me years to find the courage to tell her. Meanwhile, we became *an item*, the subject of innumerable blog posts."

She took another sip. "I'm going to finish soon. Then you can have some champagne too."

"We had a great time when we visited the *Reagan* and each dallied with a male. We discovered we liked that. I casually mentioned to Ra how different things would be if she were a man. Be careful what you wish for. One day, she showed me Rami." Bella stretched out her hand and Rami took it and stood beside her.

Most of the audience gasped. Bella continued, "In case you are wondering, the answer is *yes*. And *yes* we do. And *no*, we can't. He is *shooting blanks* as they say. So, I want to offer a toast to Ra latest magic, Rami. To Rami." She drained her glass. The audience didn't react immediately, until Chloe and Yuri both stood and said, "To Rami!"

"Now, we're going to dance, and we invite you to join us." Rami and Bella took the floor as Ambianca offered up some slow dance music. Chloe and Yuri took the floor followed by Laila and Bronson, and soon many more. Most danced close to Rami, maybe just to make sure he was real.

"We're going to have a press conference in a bit where we'll answer questions," Bella told everyone, then made a pass by the serving line and took a plate back to the main table. That set off a general stampede.

Word had gotten out that the famous chef, Sully, was in charge of the feast, and as usual, everything was delicious.

“Great move, Bella,” Chloe said as she danced close. “No one will pay much attention to Isaac now. I’m going to slip away and see what that’s all about.” When she started to leave, Claudette caught up with her. “I’d like to go with you, if that’s all right.”

“It’s OK with me if Reg agrees.” Reg nodded, so the two women headed off while Rami and Bella moved to the press area.

“I take it this is the surprise you mentioned,” Rami said.

“Yes. You said the decision was up to me,” Bella replied.

“I did,” he replied. He kissed her and whispered, “Let’s save time for that big bed with the mirror overhead?”

She took his arm, and they sat in two chairs facing the cameras. As usual, the screen showed a closeup of Bella. Rami leaned over, “Back to normal. They want to see you, not me.”

“Who wants to go first?” Rami asked.

---

Chloe marched into her suite to find Isaac waiting for her. When he saw Claudette, he leaped to his feet. “Hello, my darling. Long time.”

Claudette said nothing. Chloe said, “You’ve got your nerve. How dare you show up now?”

“I’m sure you have figured that out by now,” he replied.

“Bloch’s Paradox,” Chloe said. “OK. But there’s more for you to explain. Where, and when, were you before you showed up in New Zealand?”

“Here.”

“Cute. So, you came here because we had a recording of it. Then you went to New Zealand to meet Claudette,” Chloe summarized.

“The reports about you seem to be right.”

“Claudette, maybe you shouldn’t hear all this.”

Claudette admitted, “I don’t understand what is going on.”

“That’s reasonable,” Isaac told her. “I’m sorry for the pain I caused you. You look happy now.” He crossed over to wrap his arms around her. “You deserved better.”

“I got lucky the second time around.” She pushed him away and walked out of the room, passing Rami and Bella as they entered.

“Ah, the beautiful Bella,” Isaac said. “Nice to see you all grown up.”

“Stuff it,” Bella said. “I want an explanation of why you disappeared only to show up on my wedding day.”

“That’s complicated,” he replied. “I think I will leave that up to Chloe and Rami. They have a better idea of why and how. Now, I think I must take my leave. If you agree.”

“Not yet,” Chloe said. “There is still one question you have dodged. Where and when did you come from to get here?”

“The where part is simple. I came from San Francisco. The year there was, well I was instructed to be vague. Let’s just say it is sometime in the 24<sup>th</sup> century.”

“Interesting,” Chloe said. “In that case, you must have some good reason for showing up now. Besides Bloch’s Paradox.”

“This is an important nexus. What happens in this time is critical. I cannot say more. I rely on your wisdom and a certain amount of luck. Bella, my lovely daughter, may I kiss you goodbye?” He moved to embrace her and kissed her forehead. “May you live long and prosper,” he said with a Vulcan salute. Then he vanished.

“What just happened?” Bella asked.

Rami explained. “As you heard, he came from our future. What you missed is that his next stop is New Zealand to meet your mother.”

“My head is spinning,” Bella complained.

“As you know,” Rami continued, “Chloe and I, and Hypatia, can shift to another point in space-time. So, apparently, can Isaac. He is involved for reasons that are not clear, at least not yet. However, it must involve you. Nothing else makes sense.”

“Excellent summary, Rami. I agree completely,” Chloe said.

“It’s about me?” Bella said.

“That’s the only logical conclusion,” Rami said. “He went back to meet your mother and conceive you.”

Chloe had a thought, *D, does Isaac hear you?*

“Of course.”

Bella looked up in surprise. “I heard someone say, ‘Of course.’ Who said that?”

“Mr. D,” Chloe said, as Rami said, “It was D. You realize the implications?”

“Her suit! We have to get it!” Rami said. He raced out the door.

As he took Bella’s suit from the closet, he felt a tingling, like what happened when he fetched Bronson’s suit. *D, are you updating this suit?*

“Very good. Yes. It will do everything eventually. It needs time to learn, that’s all.”

As he entered Chloe’s suite, the excitement on his face was evident. “Yes, I heard,” Chloe said.

“I think this is key,” Rami said to Bella. “Put it on.”

Bella began taking off her wedding dress. Reduced to her slip and panties, she reached for the suit. “I think we should go whole hog,” Rami said. He helped her out of her slip. She turned her back as Rami removed her bra and she dropped her panties. Then, she carefully stepped into the bottom and watched in surprise as the suit completed the action by itself. “Wow! Way cool!” she commented. “Now what?”

Rami thought, *Ambi, can she hear you?*

“Should work.”

Rami said to Bella, “Think of some request for Ambianca.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Think, “Ambianca, what is the rest of the schedule for today?” he suggested.

Bella tried it. “Wow! She answered me.”

“Now, try thinking something for D. Say just are you there, or something like that,” Chloe suggested.

“Yes! I heard the answer. He has a French accent, like Mama.”

“Cool. That’s different from Chloe and me. She hears a man with a slight British accent. I hear a woman with a similar accent. So, all the D’s are similar, but different,” Rami said.

“I don’t really understand what’s happening,” Bella said.

“If Isaac had D, then he could have passed it on to you, just as Chloe passed it to me. That means that it works for males as well. That has some interesting implications,” Rami explained. “We need to spend some time finding out what Bella can do with the suit. But, welcome to the club, sweetheart.”

“I agree,” Chloe said. “But now, I think we need to return to our guests before they think we stepped out for good.”

Suddenly, Bella was wearing her wedding dress again. “Oh, this is major,” she said. She took Rami’s arm and they returned to the reception. “I can’t wait to be alone with you,” she said.

“I know,” Rami said. “Tonight.”

**2. Suzy and the Rabbit  
and RaraBella  
and Ambianca and D  
June, 2192  
Arabella Springs, Africa, ASW**

“What do you think about my showing you around my hometown?” Ra asked over breakfast.

“Well, I want to meet the Rabbit in person,” Bella replied.

“No prob,” Ra told her. “Let’s go find Suzy first and arrange training for your suit. That’s really important and won’t take too long. Then we go find Roger and set up everything with him. Then, we can wander around and meet people.”

“How about meeting Roger first?”

“OK. We can handle that. That involves a walk to the edge of town.”

“We better get started, then.”

A twenty-minute walk took them to Roger the Rabbit’s establishment, where they were greeted by RtR with, “Well, look who’s here everyone. None other than RaraBella.” He walked over to give Ra a big hug. “Great to see you again, sweetie.” He offered Bella a fist bump, which she was happy to accept. “That was a fantastic job you did in Savannah,” he said to her. “Where in the world did you find the ingredients for the printing?”

“Ah,” she replied with a smile. “Recall that the building was originally a *warehouse*.”

“You mean the stuff you needed was right there all the time?”

“Until we ran out of insulation material. We found bales of the stuff. We also found barrels of cooking oil, which we used along with some epoxy we found. Next time it will be harder. We’ll probably have to scour the old city of Savannah, the part above water, for stuff when we go back.”

“Marvelous. You deserve your new rank. What, pray, do you expect to learn from me?”

“Don’t trot out that false modesty. Everyone knows about your genius. I want to get a crash course in certification so I can use your ideas. I talked to the big O and got some ideas about robots that I’d like to work on.”

“Well. When do you want to start?”

Bella laughed. “Maybe not this morning. Ra is going to show me around town and meet people. Suzy is going to teach me how to use my new suit.”

“Got one of those, did you?”

“Yes. Sort of a wedding gift from my new spouse. A surprise. I’m hoping it is as powerful as hers is.”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re thinking of—”

“I don’t think so. One of us is enough.”

“Especially for such a beautiful woman,” Roger said.

“Thanks.” She continued, “How about tomorrow to start?”

“We’ve been known to take the weekend off,” Roger said.

“Oh. I confess that with everything going on, I sort of lost track.”

“That’s understandable. How about this? We’ll meet for breakfast, a late one, and plan for a 6-week course. How does that sound?”

“Perfect,” Bella said. “10ish?”

“See you then. OK, everyone. Back to work.”

Their next stop was a visit to Suzy, who knew about Bella’s suit and was expecting her. “Ready for the instruction in using your magic suit?” she asked Bella.

“Sure, if you have the time,” Bella agreed.

“I’ve planned my day to have plenty of free time,” Suzy said.

“How about now?” Bella asked.

“Prefect,” Suzy said. “You going to watch, Ra?”

At that moment, Ra heard Ambianca’s voice. “Chloe would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience. I have nothing on the calendar for you except for a visit to the new infirmary after lunch.”

*OK. I can meet her now,* Ra thought.

“She’s in her suite,” Ambi said. “I’ll tell her you are on the way.”

“Gotta run,” Ra told them. See you later, love.” She kissed Bella and left.

As Ra entered the suite Chloe occupied when she visited Arabella Springs, she said, “I bet I know what you want to discuss.”

“Tell me,” Chloe replied.

“Isaac.”

“Yes. I know that you saw what I saw when he interrupted the wedding.”

“He appeared to be too young to be Bella’s father.”

“Exactly. I realized at once that he was like the two of us, living a nonlinear timeline.”

“I can think of only one reason for his being here and then turning up in New Zealand.”

“Bella,” Chloe said.

“Obviously,” Ra said.

“So, what do you think that implies?” Chloe asked.

Ra spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully, “I’ve thought about that question. There are several alternative possibilities. First, Bella may be someone important for the future. That seems the most likely. Or, it could be Bella’s descendant, in which case the male component may be critical. Clearly, though, Isaac came here to woo and impregnate Claudette. The more interesting question is where/when did he go when he disappeared. Of course, he could have been killed in a bar brawl as Claudette suspected. After all, we’ve agreed that his timeline is nonlinear.”

“We’re on the same wavelength,” Chloe said. “What do you think about trying to find out more?”

“How? Go to New Zealand?” Ra asked.

Chloe suggested, “We could arrange a meeting in Arabella Springs. If you appeared as Rami, they might not recognize you. Isaac didn’t see Bella’s announcement. He was in my suite. Ambi says he didn’t follow the livestream.”

“Interesting idea,” Ra said. “If we go back to the first visit, I should be able to appear as just another tourist interested in the goings on. No one except you and Ambi would know who I was.”

“We need to get buy-in from people we trust,” Chloe said.

“Especially from Claudette and Bella,” Ra said.

“Yes. I’d like to know what Zed and Bron think. Maybe Ambi and JJ also. Ambi, schedule a meeting for those people.”

“Wait,” Ra said. “I think I should talk to Bella first myself. Maybe Claudette as well.”

“Good point. Hold off on the schedule, Ambi. We should do as Ra suggests and then see what other people think.”

“You got it,” Ambi said.

“Let me know what Bella and Claudette think,” Chloe said. “Obviously, this is not urgent. We can take as long as we need to plan it.”

“It would be useful to get a complete history of their courtship from Claudette,” Ra suggested.

“Yes. Who should do that?”

“Maybe I could work that into a medical checkup,” Ra mused. “She has an appointment for one soon.”

“Oh, excellent. Let’s schedule that first.”

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### **3. Curiouser and Curiouser** **December 20-23, 2172** **Arabella Springs, Western Cape, South Africa**

Rami found himself at the edge of the soccer pitch at the end of the main road in Arabella Springs, a place he recognized immediately. He and D had planned for the time to be late in the day, when no one was expected to be using the field. To his surprise, he noticed two people going thru some basic drills. A large man, presumably the coach, helped a smaller and younger person with a one-on-one drill. She showed real skill, slipping past him several times.

Then, they switched sides. He moved past her easily several times. Then, he put his arm around her and said something that appeared to be instructions. She got the idea immediately, and used her speed to an advantage, twice taking the ball away from him. Rami saw the man look at his watch and said something that Rami guessed meant that time was almost up. On the final run, instead of trying to get past the smaller person, he simply grabbed and held her.

That's when Rami decided to intervene. Clearly, this went beyond mere camaraderie, or encouragement. The large man pulled the young person, Rami saw that it was a young woman, into an unwelcome embrace. He forced a kiss and opened her shirt. Rami found himself running toward them. "Excuse me," he said when he was close enough for them to hear. "If this is simply a lover's quarrel, I apologize. However, from a distance, it appeared that your affections are unwelcome."

"Who the hell are you? What brings you here? Never mind, just get lost."

Rami replied, "I'd like to hear what the lady has to say."

"I thought I told you to go away."

"To be precise, you asked me to get lost. That's not easy in a place like this."

"Are you looking for a fight?" was the reply.

"Not especially. You are no match for me," Rami said calmly. "I suggest that you leave this young lady alone and we just forget this happened. I'll escort her back to her dwelling, or wherever she wants to go." He smiled.

The young woman spoke, "Bluto, please. This be misunderstanding. We forget. I go with this guy."

Rami wondered if his name was really Bluto, or if that was a nickname. "Bluto. Named for Popeye's rival? Think of me as Popeye. Even without a can of spinach—"

Bluto tried a roundhouse right aimed at Rami's head. Rami easily ducked out of the way. Bluto changed tactics and grabbed Rami with both hands. "Please take your hands off me. I do not wish to harm you."

"Ha!" was the only reply.

Rami reached out and put his hand on Bluto's chest. "Last chance," he told the bigger man. After a short wait, he tased Bluto and threw him to the ground.

"You were warned," Rami said. He took the woman's hand and began to lead her away. They had gone about 20 meters when they heard a growl behind them. Bluto had a large stick he had found somewhere and raced toward them. "Stay close to me," Rami told the woman. "Watch this."

Bluto ran into the protective shield when he was about 3 meters away and slumped to the ground.

"How you do that?" She asked.

"I'll explain later." He noticed that her shirt was torn and hanging open. "Here. Cover up." He removed his coat and wrapped it around her. "Now, where should I take you?"

"I show you. You be cold without coat? This coat feel great, by the way."



“I have several layers,” he told her. “Lead the way.”

---

Rami learned that one genuine 20<sup>th</sup> century Krugerrand bought a lot: a luxury room for a week, complete with meals. He was enjoying a delicious rabbit stew over brown rice and a glass of Cabernet from New Zealand when he heard a voice he recognized. “There he be!”

He stood when he saw Melisande — he had learned her name on the walk back from the soccer field — together with Claudette and Isaac. A stroke of luck? Or Bloch’s Paradox? Regardless, it seemed that he had a break in his task.

“Handsome Stranger, this be Claudette, old friend, and husband, Isaac. This be the handsome stranger I told you bout.”

“Nice to meet you Claudette, Isaac. Shall we stick with Handsome Stranger for a name?” He offered a fist bump, which Isaac accepted.

Claudette said, “Millie wanted to return your coat, but it seems to have disappeared. Someone must have picked it up.”

“It’s not important,” Rami replied. “Particularly in the middle of summer. Would y’all like to join me? For dinner?”

“Love to,” Melisande told him. She sat down next to him and waved to a server.

“I’ll have what my friend here is having,” she told the server, practicing her Standard English.

“What are you eating?” Claudette asked.

“Rabbit stew over rice, with some greens I don’t recognize,” Rami replied. “Pretty good”

“Sounds good,” Claudette said. “How about you, love?”

Isaac agreed, and they all sat.

Conversation naturally centered on the events of the afternoon. “How did you happen to be there?” Isaac asked.

“Just luck,” Rami replied. “I was on the way to town and saw Melisande working on a drill with the man I assumed to be her coach. I just stopped to watch.”

“I hear you dispatched Bluto with ease,” Isaac said.

“He wasn’t much of an opponent,” Rami said.

“Apparently not.”

The food arrived shortly. Rabbit stew was the special of the night, prepared ahead and warmed up. They concentrated on eating for a while. Rami asked if they had something special for dessert, hoping that Chloe had arranged for Crème Brûlée. He settled for some fresh fruit.

When the two women excused themselves to use the loo, Isaac turned to Rami. “I know who you are, and I assume you are here to check me out. We need to have a talk when the women are not around.”

“You know me?” Rami asked, unable to contain his surprise.

“You’re famous. Where are you staying?”

“I’m in room 311 in the hotel.”

“I’ll come as soon as I can get away. It’s important that we talk.”

---

“First question,” Rami said when Isaac showed up. “How do you know who I am? You said I was famous, but surely not here.”

“As you no doubt know, I am like you. I have a non-linear timeline. From your point of view, I am from the future, the 24<sup>th</sup> century. You are very famous there. For one reason, you are the only person who has both male and female forms.”

“The only one. How interesting. I suppose that is important.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Shall I explain?”

“That would be a good start, assuming that nothing you say will alter the main timeline.”

Isaac laughed. “You don’t know how appropriate that is. I think the main reason I am here is to change the timeline; to get it back on track.”

“OK. Now you have my full attention.”

“I am the last living *D-Adept* in the future. That means that I am the only person left who communicates with the entity you know as D,” Isaac explained.

Rami interrupted, “So, I guess D is panicking. Afraid of losing the connection. We’ve been told how rare this is. Unique is the word he used with Chloe.”

“Exactly, and you are even more unique, if that makes sense.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that as well. I deduce that Bella is key. That’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

“I don’t think I should comment on that, except to say that it is a lot more complicated than you think.” He paused for several minutes. “I may want to ask a favor from you.”

“Really? Please go on,” Rami replied.

“Do you think you could kill me?”

“Now?”

“No. It’s too soon. But someday.”

Rami thought before answering, “It won’t be easy, with D protecting you.”

Isaac elaborated, “D’s still active in this time, but I think there is a limit to how far back he can reach. I would have to manage a deep trip and somehow end my life while on it.”

“Care to explain why you are so interested in ending it all.”

“I want to eliminate D once and for all,” Isaac explained. “For the good of the universe.”

“Things must be quite different in the future. Here, I regard D as beneficial,” Rami countered.

“You’re right. Something important happens. I cannot say more. I better go before I say too much.” He strode to the door and left, leaving Rami wondering what was going to happen, and when, and why.

Sleep did not come easily that night.

---

Rami woke as the sun poured thru the window of his room. He selected jeans and a T-shirt for his appearance and walked to the dining area, where he found Melisande waiting for him. “Hi, sleepy head. I be fear you done gone. Hope you be planning for the Solstice celebration.”

“Good morning, Melisande. Tell me more about the Solstice celebration. By the way, do you have a shorter name?”

“Most people call me Millie.”

“Not Sandy?”

“Only good friends. You can call me anything you want. By the way, most people now call you The Handsome Stranger, THS.”

“That sounds cool. Tell me about the celebration, Sandy.”

“It last all day. Big feast for supper. Bonfire at night,” Sandy said, lapsing into Vernac.

“Sounds like fun. Am I invited?”

“Si! You my guest.”

“When do games start?”

“Soon. You know three-legged race?”

“You betcha. We talk bout you and me?”

She just smiled. “You betcha.”

---

“Here’s how we can easily win. I pick you up and carry you on my hip while I run,” Rami suggested.

“That be cheating,” Sandy said. “Follow me. Key be you me find rhythm stay with it.”

Rami paused, before answering, and Sandy continued, “Since you stride be longer than me, you match me. Grok?”

“I grok,” Rami said. “OK we win race?”

“You betcha.”

They won easily. Rami was not surprised, considering what he saw on the football pitch. She was a natural athlete.

“What be next?” Rami asked.

“We got lotsa races to win,” Sandy told him. As it turned out, that occupied them until late in the afternoon.

---

After the races, they enjoyed a pleasant visit to the refreshment tent, where Sully had small samples of his famous ceviche made with local species along with wine, brought on The Enterprise from New Zealand. Then, they moved on to the main dinner. They skipped the cannabis, whose odor was obvious, based on Chloe’s cautions.

They were seated at the head table for the night’s feast. Sully, the chef on The Enterprise had prepared a superb dish using the ostriches that were abundant in the area. Sully described it as “boeuf bourguignon without either boeuf or bourguignon.”

The meat, accompanied by roasted potatoes and some leafy greens, bore a marked resemblance to the rabbit stew from the evening before.

Before dessert, Chloe rose to address the crowd. Rami noticed that Yuri, the leader of the city-state, sat next to her, while Bronson seemed to be attached to a cute young woman away from the head table.

“We offer our congratulations to the team of Melisande and this mysterious gentleman known only as The Handsome Stranger.” She raised her glass and took a sip as the audience followed her lead.

“Now, I have some news. We have heard from the people in Australia. They have seen the error of their ways and have asked us to please return. I think we have an obligation to see if we can add them to the civilized

world. So, we will be leaving soon. I suspect that some of those who came on The Enterprise may wish to remain, and some here may want to see what the rest of the world is like.” She paused and finished her wine.

“We will be conducting interviews soon. We will publish details in the next few days, after we recover from this celebration. Let’s hear it for Sully. Yet another triumph.”

---

“The evening doesn’t have to end now,” Sandy said.

“Said like someone ready for a good night kiss,” Rami told her.

“Is that the best you could come up with?”

“Give me time.”

“This be ridiculous. I ain’t know you three days, even not know name, but I think I be in love with you.”

“Sandy—” Rami said, but she shushed him. “Please. Let me speak. I think lot bout this. Important, Grok?”

“Sure,” Rami said. “I’m listening.”

“I read bout love at first sight. Romeo and Juliet. Didn’t believe it. Then wham! You come. I felt different you be here.”

Rami took her into his arms. “Sandy, you know I be married. Right? Cannot stay.”

“I know! That be problem.”

“Yes. A big problem.”

“I never have sex. You be first. Please.” She tilted her face up to him and he kissed her. Then asked, “I think my room would be best. OK?” She just smiled. He said, “My name be Rami.”

Isaac intercepted them near the main door of the hotel. “I must talk to you,” he said, taking Rami by the arm.

“Excuse me, Sandy. I’ll be right back.”

He took several steps into the shadows and said, “OK. Speak.”

“There’s something wrong with Claudette. I know you are a doctor. Please come.”

Rami turned and signaled to Sandy to join them. “We’re going to see Claudette.”

They followed Isaac to a small cottage a short distance from the hotel.

“Our new friend is a doctor,” Isaac said to Claudette as they entered. Rami could see that something was wrong. She was pale and in pain. Sandy rushed forward. “Claudette.” She took her friend in her arms. Turning to Rami, she said, “What should we do?”

“Let me talk to her,” Rami suggested. “Claudette. When did the pain start?”

“On way back from bonfire. Less than an hour ago. In belly.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll need to examine you to be sure, but I think you may be having a miscarriage. Losing the baby. Have you had any bleeding?”

“Yes.”

He turned back to the other two. "Isaac. Get help. Try to find Eunice from The Enterprise. Maybe she's in the hotel."

Isaac left. Rami turned back to Sandy, "We are going to need a better place to take Claudette."

"Bedroom right here," Sandy said and opened the door.

"Can you walk Claudette?" Rami asked.

"Think so."

With both Sandy and Rami holding her they got her into the bed. "Sandy, I'm expecting blood. Find something to deal with that. OK?"

"Got it," Sandy said and raced off.

"Now, Claudette, let's talk. How long have you been pregnant?"

"I missed my period. That never happens."

"So, about six weeks or so. Any symptoms?"

"Some sickness in morning."

"Have you arranged with a midwife?"

"Not yet."

"Have a regular doctor?"

"No."

"OK. I'll help. You understand miscarriage?"

"Not sure. It means baby not ok?"

"Yes. Right now, your body is expelling the baby. Probably gonna bleed."

"I understand. What about more babies later?"

"Usually, that won't be a problem. Just try again. A miscarriage like this is uncommon, but nothing to worry about. You should have no problem in the future. I hope you will try again. Best wait a week or so. You may be sore for a while."

Claudette nodded.

Isaac burst into the room with Eunice. He seemed distraught. Rami told him, "Claudette is having a miscarriage. Not a serious problem, but she will need some medical care. Eunice, I am happy to have you here. Would you please take over the care?"

"Of course. You seem to have done fine so far. Tell me what you have done."

"Just transferred her to bed and discussed symptoms. She is approximately six weeks pregnant. Began having cramps after the bonfire. I have not examined her physically, but everything points to a miscarriage," Rami explained.

"Any pain medicine?" Eunice asked.

"I haven't looked for any here. Isaac any Tylenol or Advil around?" Rami asked.

"I'll check." He moved to the bathroom and returned with a bottle of acetaminophen and a glass of water.

“Excellent,” Eunice said. She gave some to Claudette. “This may help with the cramps. Your friend The Handsome Stranger has done a good job so far. Now, we need to wait for nature to take its course.”

“I told Claudette that she should not have problems in the future and likely safe to try again in a few weeks,” Rami added.

“Excellent advice. I’m impressed, Handsome Stranger. You’re more than a pretty face.” Eunice said. “Now, why don’t you leave it up to me? I’ll take over now.”

“I’m happy to leave it in your hands,” Rami said. He stood to leave. He looked at Sandy to see what she wanted to do. She seemed to be in a quandary, torn between her oldest friend and her hoped for lover. Rami moved to her side and whispered in her ear. “We’ll try again tomorrow. OK?”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He kissed her and left.

---

Neither Sandy nor Isaac showed up at breakfast, leaving Rami to wonder if Claudette had some complications. He walked over to the cottage and found it empty. Now worried, he asked where someone would be taken for a medical emergency and got directions to the infirmary.

He heard Sandy’s voice when he entered, “Ah. Here is the Handsome Stranger.” She rushed into his arms. “Thank you for last night. You done be magnificent. Take charge. Know what to do.”

“You’re welcome, Sandy. How is the patient this morning?” he asked.

Claudette called from another room. “He better get in here quick if he knows what’s good for him.”

Rami laughed, “I guess that answers my question.” He entered the small bedroom to find Claudette sitting up in bed eating an omelet. “No lingering problems? Bleeding stopped?”

Eunice had heard him come in and appeared at the doorway. “Checking up on me, THS?” Her smile showed she was just kidding.

“Just wanted to make sure there was no more problem,” Rami assured her.

“No problems. She’s recovered enough to go back to her cottage and begin preparing for the trip on the Enterprise,” Eunice confirmed. “You did well last night.”

“Thanks,” Rami said, “but I was happy to turn her over to you.”

To Claudette, he asked, “Do you need help getting back to the cottage?”

“Isaac should be here soon,” she replied. “I think Sandy is looking forward to spending time with you.” She winked.

Sandy blushed but took Rami’s arm. “Shall we go?”

Rami smiled and they left. Outside, he suggested, “Why don’t we find something for a light lunch that we can have in my room. Then we spend the rest of the day together, and have a romantic dinner followed by a fabulous night. Have you decided to stay on The Enterprise?”

“You be there?” She asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. I promised my wife I would come back when my task here is done.”

“Is it?”

“I think so. I was sent because we suspected Isaac might not be what he appears to be. He seems to be genuinely in love with Claudette and protective.”

“So you gonna leave?”

“Not before we make love,” Rami said.

“So, just this one day?”

“Unless you change your mind.”

“Fat chance.”

---

Rami awoke to loud knocking on the door. Hoping that he could answer without waking Sandy, who needed sleep after their night of lovemaking, he hopped out of bed and changed into his typical outfit. He opened the door a crack and looked out. He saw a burly man in uniform, obviously a guard of some type. Rami put a finger to his lips to request silence, but it didn't work. “You need to come with me,” the guard said.

“May I know what this is about?”

“Chloe wants to talk to you in private,” he replied.

“Give me a minute.” He closed the door without waiting for an answer. Returning to the bed, he kissed Sandy and said, “I have to go. Chloe wants to talk to me.”

Sandy rolled over and squinted at him. “You come back?”

“I don't know. It depends on what she wants.”

“So that's it? A kiss, wake me up then poof?” she asked.

“Maybe. I loved our time together, especially last night. But I cannot stay here, and this may be the reason I have to leave.”

“Kiss me again.”

Rami kissed her for what they both knew might be the last time. Both secretly hoped for more. Her natural athleticism transferred easily to the bedroom, where she had proved to be an enthusiastic and able partner.

“I never forget you,” she whispered.

“And I will always remember you and the short time we had together.” He left with the guard.

When he entered Chloe's office, she waved at a chair. “Please have a seat. Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“Well, I have not had breakfast yet. How about coffee, or tea if that is all we have available, and something else, maybe a sweet roll?” he replied.

Chloe nodded to the guard, who left to fetch brekkie.

“Now that we are alone, I would like to ask you the question that has bugged me from the beginning. Where did you come from? And when?”

“So you know,” Rami said before answering. He laughed. “That's exactly what you said when — I shouldn't mention his name — showed up...in 2192.”

“I knew you had a suit as soon as I heard how you dispatched Bluto. Is that his real name?” Chloe asked.

“Yes, according to Melisande, that's his real name. Of course, you recognized the suit. I realized I had blown my cover right away, but Bluto needed a lesson.”

“So I heard. You're saying that we know each other.”

“Not in this time, but in 2192, yes. However, I cannot reveal any more.”

“I understand. May I know why my future self sent you here?”

“Well, we weren’t sure we could trust the unnamed person. You sent me here to check him out.”

“Another traveler.”

“Yes. There’s more that he told me that I don’t think you should know.”

“Interesting,” Chloe said. “I’ll leave that up to my future self.” She paused. “You allow me to deduce that I will still be alive and active in 2192.”

“Yes. You are doing all the right things. Keep following your instincts.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Do you have a name?”

“Rami. Sandy knows.”

“*Sandy!* You work fast. I happen to know that only a few of us are allowed to call her that. Tell me more. I love gossip,” Chloe urged him.

“Our liaison was her doing,” Rami told her. “She was very frank and forward. She said that it was love at first sight. I told her I was married and promised my wife I would always come back.”

“Laudable, but we both know you could spend as long as you want in this time and go back to the exact instant you left. Well, at least very close.”

“I assumed you would find my presence, if nothing else, something to worry about. As I am known to be a stranger—” he began.

“I would ask you to leave when I thought best,” Chloe said.

Rami nodded. “I’d like to eat brekkie first.”

Chloe laughed, a big hearty laugh that Rami recognized. Grace laughed like that. He just stopped himself from blurting it out.

Chloe noticed. She simply stared at him.

“*Very interesting,*” she said. “You know Grace.”

“I think I should go now,” Rami said. “Before I reveal any more.”

“I agree,” Chloe said.

When the steward returned with Rami’s breakfast, he found Chloe alone. She waved to him. “Just put it here. I’ll eat it. THS has departed.”

By noon virtually everyone in town knew that their mysterious visitor had moved on.



## 4. *Big Reveal* *June 25, 2192* *Arabella Springs, ASW*

Rami found himself back in Chloe's office shortly after he left. Chloe offered him coffee and a sweet roll with the greeting, "As I recall, this is the breakfast you didn't get last time."

"How sweet. You remembered."

"Ready for a debriefing while all the memories are fresh. Anything not in the Archives, which tell of you and Melisande winning everything," Chloe asked.

"Sure," Rami said, taking a bite from the sweet roll before dunking the end in his coffee. "Did the archives mention my fracas with Bluto?"

"Yes. That blew your cover, right? I recall thinking you must have a suit. About the first thing I thought of as I recall."

"Yeah. I assumed you'd be on to me quickly. Thus, when you didn't interfere, I felt like I had a license to continue. I guessed you'd yank my chain when you were ready."

"Amazing," Chloe said, "It's like we're related or something."

Rami waved his hand dismissively. "Phooey.":

"So, this young woman, Melisande, latched onto you and wouldn't let go. I remember her. Fairly tall for a woman, black hair, café-au-lait skin. Nice looking. Nothing like Claudette, of course. Or Bella. But nice."

"Very athletic," Rami added. "Yeah. Your info is correct. Our first night wound up dealing with Claudette's miscarriage."

"I had to dig to find out about that, or Y did to be precise," Chloe commented.

"That didn't come up when I talked to Claudette," Rami noted. "So, Sandy and I changed the plan and took a day off together. Turned out very nice. Then you and I met and you figured out too much in a short time. That's when I left."

"Right. You mentioned then that you had talked to Isaac..."

Rami relayed what he had learned from Isaac, then summed up, "Clearly something happens in our future that changes everything so far as D is concerned."

"No idea what that might be?"

"No, except I still think it involves Bella."

"What about Melisande?" Chloe asked.

"I don't know. Why do you ask?" Rami replied.

"Because she's in the outer office. She wants to see you."

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"Rami," Sandy said as she entered the room. She looked at him, unsure what to do next. He opened his arms and she rushed into his embrace. Then she looked at him. "It's true what they told me. You came from here to the past and returned after kissing me goodbye."

"Yes. That's all true." Rami looked carefully at her. "You have aged well. Still on the short side of forty?"

“You can still do arithmetic. Amazing. I want you to meet someone.” The door opened to reveal a young woman in her late teens. Rami was trying to do more arithmetic when Sandy saved him the trouble. “This is our daughter, Myra.”

“You’re sure?”

“There are no other candidates,” Sandy said simply.

“But, I thought I wasn’t fully functional, so to speak, and you wore a patch. I saw it.”

“It was the first time I wore one. They told me it might not work the first month. I decided to take my chances without telling you. As for your side, I have empirical proof that on at least one night you could impregnate me.”

Rami thought, *D, what do you have to say?*

D admitted, “It was a test. If I had told you...”

*I would have ruined the test.*

“Right.”

Rami relayed this information to the others. “So, I’m glad to meet you as Rami, Myra.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve known you since we were children together.” She changed to Ra.

“Oh. Oh, shit. You mean...”

“Yeah,” Ra said, hugging her childhood friend. “I didn’t know either until now. I heard stories about The Handsome Stranger, but I didn’t really believe them. Reminded me of Santa Claus.”

“Excuse me,” Myra said as she rushed from the office.

“Let me see what I can do,” Ra told Chloe and Sandy. She followed Myra, who raced to the restroom. Ra found her there vomiting into the toilet. “Myra,” she began.

Myra looked up, “All those times I imagined maybe being with you when we were grown. Those times when we were just old enough to know what we were doing...”

“Please,” Ra said. “You did nothing wrong. We did nothing wrong. No harm, no foul.”

“Of course, you’d use a basketball analogy.” Myra, one of the tallest women in the city, was the star player in the league. She managed to smile as she lifted herself up. “I may have acted prematurely. I just thought that I had made love to my father.”

“How about just Ra? Can we still be friends?” She opened her arms and Myra moved into them. She cried softly as Ra stroked her.

“Now, I understand my name,” Myra said finally. “My full name is Myrami. I always thought that was a silly name. Now, I know why Mama named me that.”

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“What were you thinking? What part of ‘reserve that for me’ did you not understand? This is probably a world record, cheating on me before I was even born.” Bella paused for breath.

Sandy tried to calm her down. “Bella,” she said quietly, putting a hand on Bella’s arm. Before Sandy could continue, Bella snatched her arm away and said, “I don’t need advice from *you* about this.”

Chloe tried, “Bella, we can see how much this has upset you. Maybe we should take a break and talk about this later.”

“Oh. That’s a good one. The queen of rationality speaks,” Bella threw back at her. “Hint: this is not about finding a rational solution to a problem.”

“Maybe it should be,” Chloe said in a calm voice. “However, this may not be the best time to look for one. I think you need to calm down first.”

Bella stormed out of the office, pushing Ra aside on the way.

After she was gone, Ra offered her opinion. “This is my problem. I caused. I have to fix it.” She turned to follow Bella.

“Wait!” Sandy called, rushing to stop Ra. “Chloe is right as usual. We need to let Bella calm down. There will be a better time. Why don’t the three of us go somewhere to talk. Just the three of us.” She stared into the eyes of the young woman she had known for years without realizing who else she was. She saw conflicting emotions there: Fear, love, shame, urgency.

Ra took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. “OK. I think I need to calm down as well. Sandy, why don’t we go talk as you suggested. Myra, you OK with that?”

“Guess so,” Myra replied, and headed for the door.

## 5. *By the pricking of my thumb...*

June 25, 2192

### *Arabella Springs, ASW*

Ra, Sandy, and Myra sat around a small table in one of the hotel conference rooms. Ambianca had explicit instructions to make sure they weren't disturbed.

Ra spoke first, "Well, here we are. Things are, to use a technical term, fucked up. We need to figure out what to do now. I don't want to lose Bella, or you, Sandy, or Myra, my childhood friend from rag dolls thru brassieres, to quote a line from an old song. There must be something we can do."

Sandy said, "You know that I loved you, as Rami, from our first meeting. I loved Ra as well, from the time she was born. Nothing can change that."

Myra was near tears again, "If making peace with Bella means that we can't see each other again, will you agree to that?"

"No way!" Ra said. "There must be something better." She continued, "Obviously, Myra and I have to come up with a new relationship, now that we know that I am her father."

"Should I call you Daddy?" Myra wanted to know.

"Don't be ridiculous," Sandy said. "Oh, you were joking."

"Yes," Myra said. "It would confuse people, since I am now older than Rami."

"Well," Ra said. "I'm glad we agree." She brought up another subject, "Your mother and I had a spectacular time together. For me, that was just yesterday, and just thinking of it now..."

Sandy agreed, "I've remembered it for twenty years! I've tried to recapture the thrill with other men, but it was hopeless. There is no one else for me."

"Let's discuss the best case," Ra suggested.

"What is that?" Sandy asked.

"Bella and I reconcile and we all become a strange extended family," Ra said.

"What does that mean for you and me, or rather, Rami and me?" Sandy asked.

"As we are talking about the best case, I hope it means we can share a bed from time to time," Ra said.

"And for us?" Myra asked.

"Lifelong friends," Ra said.

"Very good friends," Myra added.

"Without benefits," Ra said. "For obvious reasons."

"What about the worst case?" Sandy asked. "Bella is unwilling to reconcile."

"I don't like to think about that," Ra said. "However, there is an obvious alternative."

"Even with the difference in our ages," Sandy asked.

"We agreed that is the worst outcome. Let's hope for something better," Ra summed up. "Where shall we live? Here? California? Roaming the world?"

Myra jumped on that, "Is that a real possibility? Roaming the world?"

"An example of defining your own future," Ra said. "We talked about often enough in the past."

"How would that work?" she wanted to know.

“That’s for you to figure out. I have an idea, though. Let’s leave that for a later talk, OK?”

The arrival of a bot with coffee and breakfast put an end to further deliberations.

Ra had just finished a delicious cheese omelet and mopped up the last bits of egg with some sourdough bread when Ambi spoke to her, “There’s something wrong with Bella.”

*What! Tell me more?*

“She took a pill. Now, she isn’t moving. I’m worried.”

Ra stood up. “I have to go.”

“What’s the matter?” both asked at once.

“Something is wrong with Bella. I have to go.” She stood up and raced out. Her first thought was, *I won’t get there in time. D, I need to transfer to our room immediately.*

“I cannot do that,” D said. “Bella put a maximum privacy lock on the entire room.”

Ambianca chimed in, “I can take you to the door to your room.”

*Do it!*

Ra stood in front of the door that displayed the sign, “Home of RaraBella.”

*Ambi, wow! I didn’t know you could do that.*

“I’ve been watching D. I think I have incorporated everything she can do, if that’s the right word for it.”

*That’s good to know. Now, can you open the door?*

“No. It has some foreign kind of lock that I don’t recognize,” Ambi replied. “This is very strange.”

*Did you try a medical override?*

“Of course.”

*Aunt Z told me how she managed once,*” Ra thought. She pointed at the lock and blasted a hole in the wall. Then, she thought, *Z said you just connect two wires.*

“Try the white one and the black one. If that doesn’t work, try connecting one to the green one.”

Ra found that the combination of the white and black wires did the trick. The door slid open slightly. Ra grabbed the edge and managed to push the door open enough to worm her way into the room. She saw Bella lying on the bed, not breathing.

Ra grabbed her backpack and took out a stethoscope. She confirmed her first impression: No heartbeat or respiration. She began CPR immediately, but due to the soft mattress Bella preferred, it wasn’t working. Ambi offered a suggestion, “Maybe you should try shocking her. Pretend your hands are the paddles. I’ll deliver a short burst of electricity at 200 volts.”

Ra followed the instructions. The results were dramatic, just like on the old TV programs from the Archives. Bella’s body arched and fell back. Ra checked again. She heard a heartbeat and Bella opened her eyes.

“Ra,” Bella said. “I had the most amazing dream. We were together on Tahiti. We found some cannabis and smoked it. We made love, just like old times.”

Ra broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. “Bella, I was afraid I had lost you. What were you thinking?” As she spoke, she realized she was repeating Bella’s question to her less than an hour ago.

Bella looked puzzled. “Oh, love. I was shocked. Chloe was right, I just needed to calm down. I remembered that we loved each other. I don’t want to be apart. I decided to take a nap and wait to talk to you when I felt better.”

“Oh, Bella. You cannot believe how I am relieved to hear you say that. Please tell me that you forgive me. I’ll never leave you.”

“Forgive you? Oh, about Melisande. I understand. Rami is just a horny teenaged male. Fortunately.” Bella laughed.

“You didn’t try to kill yourself?”

“Kill myself. Are you joking?”

“Bella, when I got here, you were dead. Fortunately, I saw able to shock you back to life.”

Bella sat up. “Ooh. I’m dizzy. You mean dead as in dead, doornail like.”

“No heartbeat or respiration.”

“Whoa. I took one of the pills I found in the medicine cabinet. It was labeled ‘for sleep.’ Come to think of it, I am sleepy.”

“Don’t even think about going back to sleep. You need medical care. You almost died.”

“I’ve got a great idea. Why don’t you get me pregnant? If it worked for Melisande, maybe it will work for me. Come on. Get in bed.”

“Bella!” Ra said. “You’re not thinking clearly. You almost died. If Ambi hadn’t alerted me, I would have been too late.”

“Aw. Please. Puhleeze.” She began undressing.

Ra heard running footsteps in the hall. “I don’t think this is a good time. Let’s talk later, OK?”

“Spoilsport.”

A policeman and some EMTs were trying to force the door open enough to enter. They finally managed. The policeman drew his weapon and aimed it at Ra. “On the floor. Now.”

“Chill,” Ra said as her suit armor activated automatically. “This is my room. I had to break in. Bella needs help. Put the gun away and make yourself useful.” She tried Chloe’s trick of sounding like someone in charge; it worked.

“What do we need to do?” the EMT asked.

“I thought this was a suicide attempt, but it seems to be an accidental overdose. However, Bella needs medical care immediately. I am a doctor, but I shouldn’t be involved as I am not objective, especially not now. The EMT took out his phone and called in. “We need additional personnel at my location. Stat.”

Ra turned to the cop. “Maybe you could try getting the crowd out of the way?”

“Oh,” he said. “Sure.” He moved to the door. “OK, everyone. The situation is well in hand. We need to clear a space here. Move back.”

“Is Bella OK? What about Ra?” several voices asked. Ra moved to the door. “As you can see, I am fine. Bella had a scare, and we’re going to take her to the hospital. We expect her to be all right, but we need space to move her. Please back up.” The crowd parted to allow access to Bella, who was shortly afterward headed to the hospital.

“What happened?” They all wanted to know.

“We are still investigating, but it appears she accidentally took too much of a medication. It doesn’t look serious. Thanks for your concern, but everything, except this door, is all right now.”

That didn’t work.

The crowd shouted questions.

Ra ignored them.

*Ambi, can we start the process of fixing the door? Then, I think we have some issues to discuss.*

“I’ve already notified the facilities staff. They are going to come up with a temporary fix soon.”

*Have I told you that I love you?*

“Not today,” Ambi replied, and laughed.

*Hey! That was a pretty good laugh.*

“Thank the Big O.”

## 6. Hospital Admissions

June 26, 2192  
Arabella Springs, ASW

“How are you feeling, love?” Ra asked. She looked down on her wife and patient. “Have you tried to walk?”

“Should I?” Bella replied.

“Yes, while I’m here to help.”

Bella swiveled around so her legs dangled toward the floor. She slid off the bed and landed gently. “Bravo,” Rami said. “Now the hard part.” He moved to support her.

“Oh. I’ve been hoping you would be here. We need to have a talk. Just you and me.”

Rami said, “I wasn’t sure how you would react.”

She told him, “I still love you. I meant what I said when I first told you how I felt. I said I wanted to be with you no matter what. You could decide what our relationship would be.”

“I’m not sure I can live up to your expectations,” Rami said.

“I guess I’ll have to lower the bar.” She smiled, then erupted into full laughter. Rami felt a glow. *Stop that! Later.*

“That was all you,” Ambi told him.

*Where’s D?*

Rami asked, “Does it make sense to ask where the voice in your head has gone?”

“Care to explain that?” Bella asked in turn.

“D. She’s gone.”

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Chloe moved them into the second bedroom in her suite at the hotel. Fixing the door was likely to be Bella’s first challenge as a Master Techie. Now they needed to get some issues straight. As usual, Chloe took charge.

“It’s been an eventful two days. I’m sure we can all agree on that. I would like to focus on Bella’s accident first if that’s OK with everyone,” she asked politely of the assembled crowd, which included Sandy and Myra as well as Santella, Y and Z. *Too bad Bronson is gone*, she thought. Ambi replied in her head, “We can get him remotely. He’s in Portland.”

*Yes, I know. By the way, Mr. D, are you there?*

“Seems to be gone,” Ambi told her.

*Interesting.* Turning back to the room, she opened with, “Here’s what we know. Bella was upset to learn of Rami and Melisande’s little adventure 20 years in the past. Myra is the unexpected result of their dalliance.”

Ra interrupted, “Upset doesn’t really capture Bella’s emotional state. Moreover, I disagree with your characterization of Myra as *unexpected*. Both Sandy and I thought we could not conceive. I because D told me so. Sandy wore a patch. This is more than simply *unexpected*.”

Chloe nodded, “Thanks, Ra, for your clarification. So, this wildly improbable event occurred. Bella was *extremely* upset and stormed out of the office. Then you three left together to talk. What happened next?”



“We considered various possibilities. We came to no conclusion. Ambianca interrupted to tell me something was wrong with Bella. Time was of the essence, so I decided to shift there instead of walking. It’s about a 15-minute walk. I asked D to take me straight to the room. She said she was unable to do that. Ambi then said she could take me to the door. She was unable to remove the lock on the door. D didn’t answer.”

Chloe stopped him. “Was D evident at that point. Could she have been lost during the shift?”

“Interesting question,” Ra said. She thought. “I cannot remember whether I felt her presence then. I only realized she was gone when I asked a direct question. That was later.”

“Good. Continue.”

“I got in, thanks to Z. Bella was dead. Ambi had the idea of shocking her, which I did.”

“How?” Melisande asked.

“Like what I did to Bluto, but tuned carefully, if that makes sense.”

“So, you can make electricity with your hands?”

“It’s complicated,” Ra told her. “I don’t really understand how it works. I just think of delivering a shock and there it is. Ambi told me that she had observed D and could do anything D could.”

“So Ambi knows how it works,” Chloe almost shouted.

*Ambi?* Ra thought.

“It’s magic,” Ambianca told them all.

“All right. Let’s move on,” Chloe *suggested*.

Ra took up the tale, “Well, I naturally thought Bella had tried to commit suicide. Or else, it was an accident. She assured me that she took only one capsule. After she had been taken to the hospital, I rummaged thru the medicines and found a prescription bottle, which I have here.” Re showed them a small brown bottle in a zip lock bag. “It appears to be genuine, names the doctor Bella has used. The label appears legitimate. Bella doesn’t remember ordering them. I’m having the contents analyzed now, but I suspect we will learn that it is far more than the normal dosage. This was a murder attempt.”

“What!” several of them shouted at once.

“There is no other explanation. Whoever planted the drugs was trying to kill whoever took them,” Ra said.

“You mean someone poisoned the capsules?” Bella asked.

“Yes, exactly,” Ra told her.

“That’s heavy,” Bella said. “Why would someone want to kill me? I can understand wanting to kill you.” She smiled.

“There is something more, the lock on the door.” Chloe pointed out. “It’s hard to believe there is a door lock Ambi cannot deal with. Care to comment, Ambi?”

Ambi spoke from the monitor on the wall, which flickered on showing her face, “I have never encountered that type of lock before. It would not open for a valid medical emergency. That’s unprecedented, I have my suspicion about who supplied it.”

Chloe started to state the obvious, but Ra beat her to it, “It had to be D.”

## 7. Do Pigs Have Wings? June 27, 2192 Arabella Springs, ASW

Ra and Bella were alone in the suite. “We need to speak of many things,” Bella said. “Rami and me.”  
“OK,” Rami agreed. “Can we skip the shoes, sealing wax, cabbage, and kings and get to the meaty subject.”

“Yes,” Bella said. “We need to revise our agreement based on yesterday’s revelations.”

“I was hoping for whether pigs have wings, but OK.”

“This is not a time for levity,” Bella scolded him. “We agreed that Rami was reserved for me.”

“Right,” Rami said, “but this is a special case. Does the agreement hold before either of us is born?”

“A technicality.”

“But worth discussing,” Rami said. “How about we clarify the agreement that is applies in all situations.” He added, “From now on.”

“I want us to have a baby,” Bella said.

“Me too. Eventually. We have a commitment, though, remember. Savannah.”

“Yeah. Yeah. We need to plan for it. Ambi, can you fix Rami up?”

“If it worked for D, it should work for me. There are restrictions,” she told them. “I don’t think Rami can conceive during Ra’s period, for example.”

Ra saw the obvious implications, “We would have to synchronize our periods, at least close enough that Bella’s ovulation wouldn’t conflict with my period.”

“I’ve been on the patch for so long that I have no idea about my period,” Bella noted.

“D provided an alternative,” Ra said.

“You know, that can be a little unnerving, switching back and forth without warning,” Bella complained.

“Sorry. Once we started talking about periods, Rami checked out. Want him back?” Ra countered.

“No. Maybe it’s better without him. First step is we both drop the patch, I guess.” Bella stated.

“Not necessarily,” Ra replied. “If I stay as Rami for as long as it takes for your period to become regular again, then I could switch to Ra until we are more or less in sync.”

“Isn’t that supposed to happen automatically when two women live together? The Wellsley Effect?”

“That’s been debunked. More like an urban legend,” Ra told her.

“Oh. Well, then we’ll just have to plan carefully. Ambi, how much notice will you need to be ready?”

“At least a night and a day,” Ambi told her.

“Really!” Rami exclaimed. “That’s just about how long I had been in Arabella when Sandy and I were on our way to my room when—” He stopped. “Holy shit! That means that D needed some more time. Isaac diverted us to deal with Claudette’s miscarriage. Could D have forced a miscarriage?”

Ambi answered, “Oh yes. That would be easy.”

“Because, when I saw Claudette for a medical exam, we discussed her history. She didn’t mention a miscarriage. Do you suppose...” she trailed off. Then she said, “Ambi, we need to reassemble the group.”

---

Ra began, “Thanks for returning. We have learned more about the incidents in 2172 and yesterday. We asked Ambi about enabling Rami and Bella to produce a child. We learned that it would be possible, but with some caveats. We can go into those later if you wish. They involve our periods. Maybe it’s good that Bronson is not here.” That produced a small chuckle from the attendees, all women. “What is important is that it takes, in Ambianca’s words, ‘a night and a day.’ That is close to the time I had been in 2172. Sandy and I were delayed by Claudette’s miscarriage. That provided enough time to finish producing some kind of substitute sperm. I asked Ambianca if D could have engineered the miscarriage. She said it would be easy.” She paused to let that sink in.

“What does this tell us? First, it means that the pregnancy was not the result of a *test* as D claimed. It was a deliberate action by D, including the miscarriage she induced in Claudette to delay Sandy and me. She also seems to have lied to me. That means that we cannot trust what she has told us in the past. Indeed, we need to rethink everything about D, or Mr. D, if you prefer. Finally, D is no longer around, either for me or Chloe.”

Chloe summed up, “So, from now on, D should not be trusted. Fortunately, we have a replacement, someone that we have known our entire lives, and who always tries to be helpful, Ambianca. Further, it appears that D wanted Myra to be part of the picture and arranged to make it happen. Isaac appeared at the wedding, which induced us to send Rami, not Ra, to 2172, where he and Sandy met, and nature took its course. Very convenient. Then, eliminating Bella is somehow important. I don’t really see where that fits in.”

Z jumped in. “Remember what Rami learned from Isaac. He was trying to return the timeline to the correct status. That means that the status D wants involves Myra without Bella.”

Myra objected, “That’s not proven. You cannot say I did this.”

“Do not shake thy gory locks at me,” Y said. “Quote from Macbeth. Although you have no personal responsibility, your very existence is apparently part of D’s overall plan. And Bella is not part of the plan.”

“Maybe this was to destroy RaraBella,” Santella suggested. “Otherwise, they could come to an arrangement such as ours and live in harmony. No harm done.”

Myra said, “I still say I had no part in this.”

“Of course not,” Ra agreed. “There’s another aspect that explains everything. The real question is what to do now.”

Chloe said, “I think I see where you’re headed. We’re thinking too short term. Isaac claimed to come from the 24<sup>th</sup> century. That leaves plenty of time for things to work out. Maybe it’s Myra’s and Bella’s *descendants* that are the important issue. Recall that Isaac said he was the last *D-Adept*. He even discussed suicide so that D would disappear. For the good of the universe, he claimed.”

“What are you suggesting?” Myra asked.

Ra explained, “Suppose there are two lines of *Adepts*, to use Isaac’s term. One talks to D; the other, to Ambi. One derives from Myra, the other from Bella. D is trying to eliminate the competition.”

No one spoke for quite a while.

“Let’s leave it at that,” Chloe said. “We need to think about this carefully. Very carefully.”

**Part 6. Return to Savannah  
June-September, 2192  
Arabella Springs, ASW to Fort Savannah and surrounding area,  
North America**

## 1. Preparation

### June-September, 2192

### Arabella Springs, ASW

Bella required exactly one day to repair the door that Ra had destroyed. Confident that any establishment with high tech doors would have extras, she did a quick online search and located a replacement. Reprogramming the door after installation took more time. Bella made a note to update the software when she had time.

Then she decided to show off for Roger the Rabbit, suggesting salvage closer to home in one of the many small towns on the coast. These, in pre-Collapse time, consisted mostly of vacation homes. Although many were now underwater, there were plenty that remained accessible. On a trip with RtR, they found material to use in building another ship to add to the ASW navy.

The trick involved creating a portable way to convert scrap metal into something usable. Here, RtR showed his genius constructing a small “smelter” on a trailer from a boiler extracted from an office building in one of the cities. His joy was ecstatic as he fed the remains of an old car into the device and later extracted molten steel ready to be shaped into part of a ship. “This is the final step we’ve been looking for,” he told Bella. “It’ll shave weeks off the schedule.”

So, Bella turned her attention to the new ship, one designed mainly for carrying cargo, not people. “You still need better quarters than you have here. It’s going to take weeks on most voyages. You’ll need food storage, more comfortable beds, better lounges. Lots.”

Roger said simply, “This has been a great first week. Bring me a plan for the changes to the ship. I’ll give you three days for a first draft.”

Bella just smiled as she imagined how Ra would react to the news. She learned over dinner that night when she related the story. “That’s great,” Ra told her. “It’s just what we’ll need for the trip back to Savannah. We’ve gotten approval for the return. I’ll fill you in later. Now, though, we need to talk to Sandy and Myra.”

“I’ve been dreading that,” Bella confessed. “I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Leave it to me,” Ra suggested.

They found Sandy and Myra waiting in the conference room. Ra began, “I hope that this will be short meeting where we reach an agreement we can all live with. Here is what I would like. Regardless of anything else, I want Myra to be part of our family. We are related, and she was one of my best friends for years. I would prefer to have all of us in one extended family, a strange one, but we should be able to cope with that.” She paused and looked at Bella, who nodded. “Both Sandy and I would prefer to share a bed every now and then, but only if Bella agrees. Obviously, there can be no more children for the two of us. Bella and I want to have a child, especially now that we know it is possible. Bella, comments?”

Bella took a deep breath. “I think I always knew that I wouldn’t have Rami all to myself, but I got him to agree in a weak moment. Now, I realize that I have to share him. Here’s the only condition. No secrets. Ever. All of us have to agree to that. None. Period.”

Sandy spoke for all of them. “This is the best-case scenario. I am happy to agree.”

Myra hesitated, then she looked at Ra. Ra shrugged, and spoke, “When we were young, Myra and I experimented with sex. Sure, it was just a girl crush, but we felt real affection for each other. Now, we understand why. Bella, and Sandy too, if you are willing to share Rami, what about Ra?”

“Just Ra?” Bella asked. “Never Rami?”

Ra looked at Myra. She said, “Ambi, send in the bot with the champagne.”

Ambi said, "With pleasure."

"We have something else to discuss while we celebrate," Ra added. "We have the funding approval for the return journey to Fort Savannah. When we left, we promised to return with trading in mind. We expect The Enterprise to arrive soon with Bronson. We also have a selection of trade goods that we hope the...what are we calling them? Indigenous people? Several items we hope they will be interested in."

"Bella and I are committed to the trip. Myra, you showed interest in seeing more of the world. Want to come with us? Sandy, you interested?"

Myra quickly accepted the offer. Sandy demurred, "I have to see if someone can take over my teaching duties here. If I can find a replacement, I would love to come. Maybe I can teach the inhabitants, show them how to use the library, and whatever else. How does that sound?"

"We were hoping you would both agree," Bella said.

---

Bella and Roger spent most of the week reviewing Bella's draft of the living quarters on the ship. Of course, it was more complicated than Bella had thought. After five complete drafts, they thought they had something feasible. They presented it to a committee composed of Bronson, Ra, Chloe, and Sully, as well as the AIs, Ambianca, JJ, and the Big O.

Everyone had the same concerns. "Can you really finish this in time?" they all wanted to know.

Roger assured them that it was doable, but tight. "With both Bella and I working on it full time, I think we can manage. The plan is to construct the ship and quarters independently, then simply put the quarters on the ship at the end. The hardest part is managing to add living quarters without blocking access to the cargo."

Bella elaborated, "We have split the living quarters into two separate pieces. This was common on the ships used pre-Collapse. The bridge and passenger area, three stories high, located forward, provides excellent views of the ocean near the ship. Quarters for crew and soldiers are less elegant, located at the rear. Access to cargo is in the center. Passage from one set of quarters to the other is difficult. We plan to use bots to carry food, etc., to the crew quarters."

"How large is the crew?" several people asked.

Roger answered, "It's small. We expect more routine tasks to be handled by the onboard AI helm. We have an engineer to deal with maintenance, directed by Bella, of course. The rest of the space is reserved for soldiers, who are expected to help load and unload cargo. Most of that will be automated, naturally."

"You sure you can handle all of this by mid-August? The trip to the Savannah harbor will take at least two weeks, probably more," Chloe said. "If we're late, we may miss the rendezvous."

Ra answered that one, "We have a different route in mind. We're planning to sail across the Atlantic. It's much shorter. We should be able to get there in a week. That also avoids any delays getting thru the Canal."

"Interesting," Chloe said. "It will be hurricane season in the Atlantic. You'll have to deal with that."

Ra replied, "It will also be hurricane season in the Pacific. We should be able to cross the south Atlantic before we encounter any storms. Then, we can hug the coast of South America if necessary. SAT will be monitoring the weather for us and alerting us to any disturbances we need to avoid."

"I like it," Chloe enthused. "Maybe there are places on the Atlantic coast of South America we should be paying attention to. We've ignored that for decades because most signs of human activity are in the interior, which we think are inhabitants. We have left them alone. I suggest we pad the schedule a bit in case we want to investigate any areas that might provide good salvage or trading opportunities."

She continued, "SAT, are you listening in?"

"Sure," he answered.

“We will need high resolution photographs, particularly of the Amazon. Both visible and infra-red,” Chloe said.

“No problema,” SAT assured her.

Chloe asked, “Anyone have other comments or questions?”

Ambi spoke, “I assume Myra will handle meals? She’s the only one aboard with any skills.”

Bronson, who had been lurking online during the meeting chimed in, “I have a surprise in that area. We found an excellent cook on the way out. We’re now in New Zealand and expect to arrive in Africa before the first of September. Melanie, the woman Ra rescued, as well as Gavin and The Brat, are on board. They are prepared to return to the village if it is safe to do so. Melanie turns out to be a great cook.”

Chloe also chimed in, “How was the trading on the way?”

“Better than expected,” Bronson replied. “I’ve sent you a report on both the South American Coast and New Zealand. We’ve already set up everything for Australia. Lots of beef. We’ll unload our solar panels, cell phone equipment and motos at the docks. Take on the beef and be on our way. See you in a little over a week if all goes well.”

She wanted to ask about Laila but managed to suppress the urge.



## 2. Maiden Voyage September 1-20, 2192 Atlantic Ocean

Everyone, even Roger the Rabbit, agreed that Bella deserved the honor of naming the new ship at its launch. Bronson came prepared with more than enough Shiner Bock beer to handle the task and leave plenty for the voyage. So, following the tradition begun by Z years ago, she opened the bottle and sprinkled a few drops on the hull of the ship, then drained the rest in one long pull. After that, she said, "I name you *Discovery*. May all who sail with you find only good fortune."

"*Discovery*?" Ra asked. "After the Star Trek starship?"

"Or the HMS *Discovery*, part of an expedition led by George Vancouver, along the western coast of North America. An earlier vessel of the same name accompanied Captain Cook on his third voyage in the Pacific. And, yes, it was one of the starships on Star Trek. You approve?" Bella asked after finishing her explanation.

"It's perfect," Ra said, and kissed her in front of the cameras and everyone.

The rest of the day involved handling a few glitches in the automated loading of the cargo containers into the hold. Frustrated, Bella turned the work over to Ambianca, who was delighted to teach the AI involved how to do it right.

At the same time, the passengers checked out the living quarters Bella had insisted on upgrading. She claimed the best cabin, one right beneath the bridge, with a view forward thru huge picture windows. The suite also sported king-size bed, en suite bath, and a closet big enough for all their clothes and equipment. "How long do we have?" Ra asked. "Not now, please," Bella replied. "I'm a nervous wreck."

"Even for me?" Rami asked as he reached out for her.

"Please," Bella said as she pulled away. "Not now. There will be time later."

Ra laughed. "OK, love. Later. In fact, I have a few tasks of my own." She blew Bella a kiss and headed for the lounge, where she had a series of meetings to sort out things for the voyage.

First, she discussed her role on the ship with Bronson. He was the designated Captain of the ship based on his many years at sea. Ra would be second in command, handling all chores of Ship Doctor and in charge of all land expeditions. They had discussed all this several times and spent the time allotted to them on small talk and coffee.

Next, she showed Sandy and Myra the cabin they would share. Smaller and less luxurious than RaraBela's, but quite nice. "If you need anything, ask Ambianca," Ra said, heading to her next meeting, with Al and Delton. "I hope we won't need to fight anyone, but if we do, I like the odds with the two of you on our side."

"Ain't as young as I used to be," Al said. "Maybe be a mistake."

"Yeah, right," Ra said. "Remember, I've known you both since childhood. Don't try false modesty on me." She continued, "We may take on some additional guards, maybe in Cuba. In that case, Al will be in charge. Agreed?"

"Yes," they both said. "We're looking forward to a nice relaxing trip," Al added.

"Your cabin acceptable?"

"Oh, yes," Delton said. "Just needs a few homey touches."

"Which I'm sure you can handle," Ra said with a smile, reflecting a long history of joking about decorating Al and Delton's cottage in Arabella Springs. She continued, "Make sure you're familiar with the interior passageway to the dining room. If the weather turns nasty, I don't want to lose you."



“Got it,” Al assured her. “See you later.”

Then, it was time to meet the *passengers*, Melanie, Gavin, and The Brat. “Everything OK here? Enough space for the three of you?”

“Si!” Melanie said. “Is muy bueno.” The Brat, for his part, tested the effect of all the switches he found. Fortunately, Ambi was monitoring, ready to intervene if necessary. “That’s enough, TB,” Ambi said as TB prepared for a second time around.

“I hear you checked out the kitchen and found it acceptable,” Ra said to Melanie.

“Oh, is mega good. I fix good meal,” Melanie promised.

“We need to get together, you and me, talk bout things. Grok?” Ra queried.

“I grok.” Melanie smiled as she said it.

*Ambi, is it set up?*

“Got it. I’ll give you a heads up when it’s coming up,” Ambi replied.

“Later, then.”

She walked the length of the cargo area. She smiled when she thought of how much more this ship held than The Enterprise. She had arranged with Bella for a small clinic, which was tucked into a corner. Ambi opened the door and Ra entered. What she saw left her amazed. She did a quick mental inventory. There was little she couldn’t do here, though it would be cramped for some procedures. She noted the robot surgeon and anesthesiologist like those on the *Excalibur*. Bella could still surprise her.

“You should head back now,” Ambi said in her head. “Melanie will be waiting in the lounge by the time you get there.”

Melanie appeared noticeably nervous when Ra entered, so the first step was to calm her down. “Please don’t worry,” she began. “Whatever it is, we can work it out. I’m guessing this doesn’t have anything to do with the kitchen.”

Melanie took a deep breath. “You right. Kitchen be mega good. I worry bout going back to village.”

“I see,” Ra said. “Please tell more.”

“When think bout village, get all hot, sweaty.”

“That’s understandable,” Ra said. “I saw how you done be treat. Not good. We make sure you not go back if not want to. Not need.”

“I grok, but Gavin want go back.”

“Ah. I understand. I grok. He go not mean you go also. You stay where safe.”

“What if hurt Gavin?”

“Me and Al protect him. Should be enough.”

“Gavin think The Brat go as well.”

“That decision be up to The Brat.”

“For real? He be mucho young.”

“He be old enough,” Ra said, remembering her agreement with Chloe. “Be pretty smart. Decide for himself. Be best.”

“Gavin make him, maybe.”

“Not if I be around,” Ra assured her. “You no worry. Grok?”

“Si.” Melanie smiled and visibly relaxed. “Now, I go plan dinner. OK?”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Ra said, confident that Melanie would know that stock phrase in Standard English.

*Ambi, maybe you could help Melanie with Standard.*

“Working on it, boss,” Ambi told her, and chuckled, which sounded just right.

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They spent three days of short trips checking out *Discovery’s* engine and controls. The engine, one of the transplants from nuclear subs, performed as expected, easily driving the ship at a comfortable 18 knots. The controls were somewhat quirky, a problem ultimately traced to the AI’s confusion over port and starboard. Bella blushed deep red with the diagnosis but fixed the problem quickly.

Finally, with many in the city watching, *Discovery* sailed out of the bay, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and headed into the poorly explored Atlantic Ocean.

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The planned route took *Discovery* north along the African coast to Walvis Bay in what used to be Namibia. There, they stopped to hunt for fresh food, mainly the plentiful, small, graceful Springbok antelopes. Melanie and The Brat found lots of available shellfish and returned to the ship with enough to provide ceviche for all that evening.

Next, they sailed to the small island of St. Helena, where Napoleon was exiled until he died. The island was devoid of all humans, but full of feral pigs, Bronson’s favorite hunting prey. He bagged two large hogs that Gavin carved up into manageable pieces for the freezer. Meat was easier to obtain than any green vegetables, and soon they began a steady rotation of the frozen offerings they had picked up in Australia and Arabella Springs.

From there, they sailed to Cuba, where they spent a few days visiting with the inhabitants of the island. Ra was impressed with their medical facilities and told them so. “We cleaned them up in preparation for your visit,” her guide, who answered to the name Ramon, said.

“Of course. I think you have done a good job with the old equipment,” she added.

“Someone on the net called Roger the Rabbit suggested how we could get them to work. He also said that he had included some of his machines in a load for us. We weren’t expecting it so soon. We aren’t really ready to install them,” he explained.

“No problem. We can leave them in the container until you are ready. Roger is an old friend. By the way, you speak excellent Standard English.”

“Thank you. I don’t get a chance to use it often. I attended the University in Austin. I also studied at the Medical School there,” he told her.

“Shall we check on your container and see what is in it?” Ra asked.

“Sure. Can I ask one favor first?”

“What’s that?”

“Well, we have heard so much about you. I was wondering how much of it was real.”

“You want to meet Rami?” she asked.

“You must get that often.”

“Fortunately,” Rami said, “it is easy to deal with.”

“Oh. That is mega cool. Thanks.”

“If you are more comfortable with Rami...”

“No. Actually, I think Ra is very easy to interact with.”

“As you wish,” Ra told him as they walked toward the dock where *Discovery* was unloading. After a few minutes, Ramon asked, “Have you considered having children?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone these days?”

“I wondered if you had selected an appropriate male to mate with.”

“Ramon! Are you suggesting what I think you are? We’ve barely met each other,” Ra asked.

Ramon laughed. “I doesn’t hurt to ask, as my mother said often.”

“The usual response to your question is to put you on the waiting list,” Ra told him.

He laughed, “I bet that gets a laugh every time.”

“It does,” she agreed. “But as it turns out we may have an opening when we can fit you in.” She smiled.

Ramon laughed at the pun, but then said, “That’s unexpected.”

“Called your bluff, did I?”

“I was planning to call yours. Are you serious?”

“Maybe. It has to be your place. No privacy aboard *Discovery*. However, we need to check on the container first,” Ra said. “Business before pleasure.”

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Ra wasn’t sure what to expect when she made it back to *Discovery* in time for breakfast on board before leaving for Savannah. She was pleasantly surprised when Bella cornered her with, “I want all the details.”

“OK,” Ra agreed, “but after brekkie.”

So, they were well underway before Ra told Bella about her unscheduled visit ashore. “He more or less propositioned me on the way to examine the container Roger had sent. On a whim, I decided to take him up on it. He’s nice looking, don’t you think?”

“And twenty years older than you,” Bella countered.

“Well, experience counts for something.”

“Get any tips for Rami?” Bella asked with something approaching a leer.

“I’ll let you be the judge of that. Later. You should see the medical setup here. Ramon attended the med school at the Uni but had to leave early. He has responsibilities here. By the way, what did you do last night?”

“I found someone to share a bed with,” Bella confessed. “Lot of that going around.”

“Shades of our adventures on the USS Ronald Reagan,” Ra noted.

“Without the drugged wine,” Bella added, then she switched subjects, “Maybe we should spend the time doing some planning. I’ve examined the video you took coming thru Atlanta and identified some buildings to check first. Shall we go over that?”

“I hope you have a line on some decent beds,” Ra said.

“As it happens, I have,” Bella told her. “And I think it will be a perfect test of our new vehicles.”

“Excellent,” Ra said. “Have you prepared a map?”

“Not only that, I’ve plotted out a route for you to follow, Here, let me show you.” She reached for her laptop. “Ambi, please link me to the big screen.”

“You got it,” Ambi said as the monitor blinked into life showing the map Bella had prepared.

“So, it will take at least three days. One to get to the city, one to handle the actual salvaging, one to return,” Ra observed.

“Three days minimum,” Bella agreed. “Probably more as we have only exterior views of the buildings. May be harder than usual to get inside. Been a long time.”

“Noted. I assume you will be up to the challenge,” Ra added.

“No way I can go on this expedition,” Bella said. “I’m going to be busy setting up the smelter and printer. I hope to have that ready when you return. And I anticipate we will need to make several trips to get everything we need. I’ve prepared a shopping list.” She tapped a button and displayed a long list of items she hoped to find.

“I see what you mean,” Ra said. “We certainly cannot fit all that into the trailer. What about the bots? Can we use them for part of the loading.”

“Great minds,” Bella said. “Ambi, show her the simulation of the loading process.

The lunch bell interrupted the third hour of discussion, which by the end included Myra and Sandy as well as Gavin. They were going to need some muscle to handle the items too large for a bot.

“Gavin,” Ra asked, “How is the driver training going?”

“I’ve passed the test,” Gavin said. “I’m as ready as I can be.”

“Can I come?” asked The Brat, who had somehow wormed his way into the grownups meeting.

“He might come in handy,” Bella said. “He may be able to squirm into the building where everyone else would be too big to fit.”

“That means he’ll be on his own inside,” Ra said, pointing out the obvious.

“Mama told me you said I was old enough to decide for myself,” The Brat said. “What I can handle, I mean.”

“All right, young man,” Ra said. “We’ll take the RV as well as the trailer rig. That way we can cook meals and have a safer and nicer sleeping arrangement.”

“OK,” Bella agreed, “but they have to be returned in pristine condition. Those are demonstrations of our technology.”

“We’ll call it a real-world test, which it actually is,” Ra concluded. “Let’s go eat.”

### 3. Teamwork

#### September 21, 2192

#### Fort Savannah, Wilderness of North America

- [Cement factory.](#)
- [Auto parts warehouse.](#)
- [Amazon Distribution Center.](#)

Bella was in her element: in charge of unloading the cargo. The first item was a strong winch, which came ashore in a zodiac. Almost everyone was involved in dragging the essential tool to a large tree about 50m from the water, and lashing it securely to the trunk.

Next, the cargo containers were launched one at a time. Lacking a loading dock, the containers were designed with small motors sufficient to propel them over the water to a hastily dug ramp at the shoreline. A chain attached to the winch then hauled the container onto dry land.

By the time for lunch, five containers lay in a neat row ready to be opened. Melanie had used the ship's galley to produce a lunch for the hungry hordes.

After a well-deserved break, they opened the first container, which contained the 3D printer to be used for manufacturing. Bella explained, "We need better sleeping quarters. We're going to print a series of rooms to be assembled inside the old warehouse. Each will provide space for two people. This is ancient technology, dating back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was used to convert part of the old Salesforce Tower into a luxury hotel. We're planning for something more modest."

"That can wait until tomorrow. Now for something special." With that, she opened the next container to reveal her pet [pert](#) project, "Meet Endeavor-2193, the newest member of the Endeavor fleet. Like the ancient car manufacturers, we labeled it for the near future." She spoke into her suit mic, "Ambi, can you please drive Endeavor out now?"

"With pleasure," Ambi told all who could hear her as the vehicle rolled sedately onto the ground at Bella's feet.

"Anyone interested in what's inside?" she asked with a smile. Of course, everyone wanted a tour.

"OK, Ambi, please open the door." Silently, the entire left side of the vehicle lifted up like a bird raising a wing.

"As you can see, the driving and weaponry controls are the same as usual. Most of the new additions are aimed at providing a more comfortable place to sleep and eat." She moved into Endeavor. "Endeavor, please lower the bed." The far wall lowered to reveal a bed big enough for two, if a bit cozy. "We kept the main design features, such as the dining table and bed combo. This is a bit larger than the older model and can sleep three in a pinch."

Ra moved into the vehicle and lay on the bed. "Seems better than the old one. I'll let you know in an hour after my power nap."

"Wait! There's more! We've improved the drones," Bella told them. "We now have twice as many, half the size. With improved batteries, they can stay aloft for up to 5 hours, in ideal conditions. They can stay aloft for 1 hour in a hurricane. Launch them, Ambi."

All eight of the drones burst from hidden locations on the roof and quickly zoomed to disappear from sight. The signals began to show on the monitors at the front of the driving area, cycling quickly through the views from each drone in turn. "Wow! They're much faster! Very nice," Ra commented.

“Much better coverage,” Bronson agreed. “How are they at low altitudes?”

In answer, one of the drones appeared out of nowhere and hovered over Bronson’s head, showing a small bald spot on his scalp. “Oh, Bron, you’re showing some extra skin,” Bella teased him. She pulled a gimme hat from her suit and put it on Bron’s head. “Don’t want to get sunburn,” she told him.

“We’ve added a better kitchenette,” Bella continued. “This one has an induction coil in addition to the microwave. That can be used to boil water, for coffee or whatever. You can even sauté in a small skillet we’ve included. It’s in the counter. We kept the freezer compartment at the rear if you happen to stumble onto some game. We’ve stocked it with some items from the ship. Enough for a few days afield.”

She paused for a brief while, then asked, “Any questions?”

“Who gets to use it first?” Ra wanted to know.

“Funny you should ask,” Bella replied. “You and Myra can take it now. We need you to survey the possible salvage sites in the Atlanta area. This is just a quick inspection tour of some buildings I’ve identified from the videos you took on your last visit, along with some ancient Google maps. I’ve highlighted the places for you to check out. Whenever you’re ready, you can take it out. This is an A priority. Also be on the lookout for any other humans you might encounter.”

“Seriously?” Myra asked. “Now?”

“Welcome to Fort Savannah,” Bella told her as she shoed Ra and Myra into the vehicle. “Stay in touch,” she told them as they headed out. “You’ll discover some other features if you need them, especially for rough terrain.” She blew Ra a kiss and turned back to hand out tasks to the rest of the group.

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Sunset found Ra and Myra camping [them camped](#) in the park on the outskirts of ancient Atlanta, where she and Melanie had stayed one night. The ride had been uneventful. Endeavor had several sensors to look ahead to spot potholes, landslides, and other obstacles. Relays of drones patrolled the road ahead up to about 10 kilometers, so there were no surprises. Ra recognized the park in time to find a good spot to camp, one near the water fountain, which still worked after all this time.

After [a](#) dinner courtesy of the freezer and microwave, they set the protective [set the](#) perimeter to 10 meters and went to bed in Endeavor, planning on an early start the next morning.

Ra lay with her head on Myra’s shoulder. “This is the life we imagined for ourselves — traveling to unknown lands, exploring the world together. Remember how we used to talk about the future during sleepovers? Those were happy days. I’m sorry things haven’t exactly worked out the way we discussed.”

“Haven’t worked out! That’s an understatement,” Myra said. “I’ve always dreamed of meeting the THS, The Handsome Stranger, my father, according to [or so](#) Mama. [assured me](#) She got all dreamy-eyed talking about him. Then, well, it’s complicated. I love you. You know that. I’ve loved you since we were teenagers. But I really know nothing about the man I was secretly named for. You.”

“Oh, Myra, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not. Well, yes, I am, but so far as my father goes, he’s something of a myth and legend in Arabella Springs. I plan to keep it that way. However, it will always be a bit *constrained* between us.”

Ra kissed her. “Myra, I really love Bella. I mean, there’s something there that’s missing with us.”

“I know. Too bad. Can we be friends? Maybe even Friends with Benefits?”

“Why not?”

Myra continued, “How does *the equipment* work?”

“Well,” Ra began, “First off, I have no idea how it works. I have deduced some things about it. It gets easier to change the more it happens. However, it still saps some energy. Not as much as transitioning to a new point in Space-time, but some, nevertheless. It can also be a bit disconcerting. Sometimes the change is unconscious, a reflex almost. Other times, I definitely think about changing and it happens.”

She continued, “D figured it out after Bella sorta suggested it. The tabloid stories got that part right. We’ve agreed the question of her favorite [which she likes best](#) is off limits, not to be considered. [answered](#). I have my suspicions, but I won’t tell you about it.”

“So, when you change, is your whole body replaced?” Myra wanted to know.

“Oh, no. I’m still there in my body. Rami is just the part I present [am presented](#) to the world.”

“So, the equipment…”

Ra laughed. “Guess how many people have asked me about it. I’ll tell you, but you agree to keep it to yourself.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Myra agreed.

“It’s kinda like wearing a man suit,” Ra told her. “But, as with everything I wear, I am fully integrated with the exterior. It’s part of me.”

“How is that possible?”

“It’s a symbiosis. Two entities combined to make a community. D, that’s what she told me to call her, and I are tightly bound, have been from birth, even though I didn’t know it until [unitl](#) the hyena incident when I was 11. She was a voice in my head. Mr D, as Chloe called him, came first. He says that he was always part of the suit, from the beginning.”

Myra stopped her. “Wait. This is a lot to take in. It all started with a suit? Like the ones the soldiers wear?”

“Yes, but better, of course. I don’t think it is possible for me to *take it off*, even if I wanted to. Like I said, [it](#) D was always there. From birth. I knew about her before she spoke to me. I had learned how to change outfits before I was 11. Only later did I learn the full extent of our powers.”

“And now, she’s gone.”

“Yes. It’s very strange. Ambianca says she *integrated them*, and she handles everything instead of D.”

“So now you hear Ambianca in your head?”

“I do. In fact, Ambi figured that out when D was still around. D used the feature of the suit, which allows us to hear her whenever she’s in range. D made the range… well I don’t know.” *Do you? Ambi?* She thought.

Ambianca spoke from the vehicle’s speaker. “I am not sure. For all practical purposes it is unlimited. However, we have indications that there is a limit in Transdimensional terms.”

“Whatever that means,” Myra interjected.

“It is a simple result—”

“Thanks, Ambi. We don’t need to know the details,” Ra rushed to stop her, having heard the explanation, if you could call it that, many times. “Maybe we could have some private time for a while.”

“Of course, dear,” Ambianca replied. The screen went blank.

“All right. Let me see if I understand this,” Myra said. “Your body is there, inside, with Rami wrapped around it?”



“Sort of. He’s totally there. What he feels is what I feel. I, after all, aman doing the feeling. And yes, I definitely feel that part. You better believe it.”

Myra said, “Interesting. How about, well to get technical, ejaculation. How does that work?”

“One thing missing from Rami’s body is a prostate gland. Well, there are other parts that have to be simulated, but that is the main one. Since it was never there, it had to be faked. Just like the rest of the male sexual apparatus. From Ra’s point of view, it’s the world’s finest dildo. Rami, however, sees it differently.”

Myra laughed. “So, you have different personalities?”

“Oh, yes, we act different. And people treat us different. Then there’s sex.”

“So the fluid…”

“Is manufactured by another means. It doesn’t contain sperm, except for one time. Well, maybe more than one, but just for a day. Ambi says she knows how D did it but wants to wait until later to try it.”

“Do you have an orgasm? Is it just like when you…”

“Like when you showed me how to masturbate?” Ra smiled. “It feels the same to me, but not to Rami. Actually, I have to admit, it’s better for men. That’s why they do it so often.”

“No kidding,” Myra said.

“I promise. That was the first thing I learned as Rami, sort of a test to make sure everything was working properly.”

“What makes it better?” Myra wanted to know?

“Hmm? Interesting question. Maybe just the finish,” Ra suggested.

“Oh, cool. Tell me more.”

“Of course, that’s part of the simulation,” Ra said. “Not the real thing, except with your mother.” She added, “Bella says it tastes better.”

Myra thought for a while. “What exactly is your agreement with Bella? What are you allowed to do with other people?”

“Meaning you in particular?” Ra asked.

“Well, for example.”

“You were there at the meeting. Ra is OK; Rami not.”

“I was just curious how far the restrictions applied,” Myra said. “I mean—”

“We didn’t get into the details. We both want her to have my child, which is complicated. Ambianca says that it takes time and has to be scheduled carefully,” Ra explained. “I was told by D that I couldn’t get anyone pregnant. She hid the truth from me. She had some reason we don’t know. For you. You are important somehow.”

“Really?”

“It’s the only explanation I’ve found that makes sense.”

“So, as Ra you have more flexibility?”

“Are you suggesting that we…”

“Well, if pregnancy is not part of the equation, maybe we could—”

“Oh, damn!” Ra said. “Rami is really interested in the idea. That’s not what I had in mind.”



“Rami is interested?! How do you tell that?” Myra moved closer.

“I can feel the change starting,” Ra replied.

“Oh, that be way cool,” Myra moved so Rami lay on the bed next to her. “Can I see? Or feel?”

“I hope I won’t regret this,” Rami said. “What’s the opposite of an Oedipus Complex?”

“It’s called an Electra Complex,” Myra told him. “Now, I’m a bit of an amateur at this. I think maybe *this* is the best way to begin. Yes. I was right. Now...”

## 4. Shopping Around September 25, 2192 *Ruins of Atlanta, Wilderness of North America*

“What’s this stuff?” Ra demanded.

“It’s called *Instant Coffee*,” Myra told her. “It’s all we’ve got.”

“Is coffee on the shopping list?”

“Ambi?” Myra asked.

“Nice to have, not essential,” Ambianca told her. “Best chance is the Amazon distribution center. That’s number 10 on the checklist.”

“Where is it relative to our current location?” Ra asked.

Ambi displayed a map with several alternative routes highlighted. “These have been updated with information from the drones. They’ve been busy since sunrise, even sooner actually. This route,” one brightened, “appears the best. No obstructions. Most potholes are shallow enough to simply roll over, especially if you switch to the tank treads.”

“What’s this target a little way off the main highway?” Myra asked, looking at the map.

“A truck repair and parts operation. Bella thinks there may be some usable things like motors, wheels, and so on,” Ambianca replied.

“We should go there first,” Ra agreed. “Then, we can go north on this road to this *distribution center*. What’s this big blank area? Oh! That’s the ancient airport.”

“Airport?” Myra asked. “They’re real? I thought they were made up.”

Ra told her, “Nope, they are very real and a great place to check for salvage. First, we hit the truck repair place, then the airport area. Bella mentioned several building supply places that may have usable material. We’re supposed to bring back samples. OK. Truck parts, concrete, airport, then Amazon. Let’s get moving. We’ll start with the tires and switch to the tracks when we have to.”

The truck repair was hopeless, but the area around the airport proved as useful as they expected. The roads were drivable most of the way. The tank conversion took about 30 minutes with the help of one or the robots. Then, they set off cross country, checking several potential sources for building materials. After trying to open several doors, Ra decided to just blast away with the laser cannon to create an entry.

Late in the afternoon, the two humans were tired, but determined to check out what they hoped would be the best site so far. The first view of the ancient building took their breath away. It was huge, and virtually intact. They decided to camp for the night, leaving the salvage until morning.

“Can you cook?” Ra asked.

“No. How about you?” Myra answered. She began rummaging around in the freezing compartment.

“Mel and I ate some pasta and veggies. It was not bad,” Ra suggested.

“Pasta primavera,” Myra said, proudly holding up the container. “Boil water. Pour onto contents. Let stand 2 mins. May be hot.,” she said reading the instructions.

“I can boil water,” Ra said and started the process. “I think there are bowls in here somewhere.”

“Near the dinner table,” Ambianca said. “You two are helpless.”

“Luckily, we have you along,” Ra said.

“The things I do for love,” Ambi said, with what she thought was a sigh.

“Thanks, Ambi,” Myra said. “We both love you too...MOTT. That’s Most Of The Time.”

All three laughed, and no one commented on the way Ambianca’s sounded.

The two women ate and shared a joint. “Good stuff,” Ra said. “African?”

“The last of my stash,” Myra told her.

“Ah. I’m sure Bronson will have some more.” She giggled.

They sat silently for a while, each lost in thought. Then Myra stood and pulled Ra upright. “Endeavor, make the bed, please.” She moved onto the bed and pulled Ra down after her. “I hope we are going to have a repeat performance tonight.”

“Nope,” Ra said as she moved over. “Tonight, it’s my turn.”

---

“Rise and shine, lover,” Myra called out to Ra. “Brekkie is waiting,”

“Umh,” Ra said. “Brekkie?”

“PB&J, with that stuff labeled *coffee*.”

“Did we sleep last night?” Ra asked.

“You did.”

“Oh. Was that bad?”

“No, love, it was well-deserved.” She put a sandwich on a plate for Ra, and a cup of instant coffee. “By the way, when Mel heard we were going into an Amazon warehouse, she requested we look for something called an *Instant Pot*.”

“Did she say what that is?”

“A cooking gadget. Melanie claims everyone raves about them, but they’re out of her price range.”

Ra finished the first half of her sandwich with a swallow of coffee. “Did she say how to find that item. From all the legends about Amazon...”

“Yeah. Y is interested. Thinks she has a handle on the problem. Something she saw once in a cloud backup.”

“Wow! This is turning into a major deal.”

“You got that right. Even Chloe is looped in.”

Ra stood up and moved to the large screen by the driver’s seat. “You got my attention. Ambi, let’s see the latest sweeps by the drones.”

Ambianca narrated, “As you can see, there is no sign of any human activity. I thought this might be the best way in.” She showed the view of the loading docks.

“I see what you mean. We can breach those easily, but there will be security inside. Let’s go have a look. You have a route plotted?”

“There are several alternatives,” Ambianca replied. “This one is the shortest but has some hazards.” The display zoomed in on a few of the notable issues. “This,” she displayed a different route, “takes longer, but with fewer problems. We could even switch out the treads for wheels.”

“I like the sound of that,” Myra volunteered. “The tank ride is just a tad bit uncomfortable.”

“OK. I agree,” Ra said. “Ambi, start the process of switching to wheels.” She moved to the kitchenette and made a second PB&J.

---

“Let’s try that small door on the side before blasting our way in,” Myra suggested.

“Good idea,” Ra agreed as she descended the stairs and walked toward the door. They found it secured with an ancient lock. “Where is Aunt Z when we need her? Oh well, we’ll just use brute force.” She blasted the lock with her laser and pushed the door open. It took both of them to haul the powerful light from Endeavor’s hold and connect it to the power outlet. Then, they were able to check out the inside of the building.

“We should be able to get into the main area thru those openings over there,” Myra said pointing to the space where huge trucks used to back up and unload cargo.

“Yeah,” Ra said, standing in front of one opening. “Let’s see what the rest of the place looks like. Got your flashlight?”

“Got it.” Myra switched it on and aimed it at the cavernous area beyond.

“Holy shit! Look at those boxes. This place has never been looted. What a find! We need to tell Bella right away. This is worth sending a team to check it out.” *Ambi, can you contact Savannah?*

“Way ahead of you,” Ambianca replied. “Y is online with a suggestion.”

Ra told Myra, “Ambianca says Y is online with some information. Let’s take it in Endeavor.”

As they entered the vehicle, Y’s smiling face greeted them on the main screen. “I have a test for you. I understand you have found the Amazon center full of stuff.”

“Looks like it,” Ra said. “We haven’t explored inside yet.”

“In that case, I think I’ve deciphered the code they use to locate items. I’ve sent a map to where you should find the *Instant Pot* that Melanie is interested in. If it’s where I think it is, we’ll have a map of the entire center we can use.”

“Great. Tell Z we need to learn how to pick locks. We’ve left the door unlocked so other people can use to get in.”

“I’ll tell her to record a demo. It’ll take practice, though.”

“We’ll test your map now. Get back to you soon,” Ra said, signing off.

“Oh, goodie, a treasure hunt,” Myra said, and raced Ra to the stacks of merchandise.

Ra held her phone in front of them to see the route Y had sent them. “Straight ahead to row Q43,” she said. “See if you can find where the rows are labeled.” Myra played her light around and spotted a small sign that proclaimed they were at row Q65. “Wow! This place is huge!” she said.

“Enough lollygagging. Get moving,” Ra said as she turned on her own flash to illuminate the path forward. There were some boxes that had fallen from the shelves in the past, but it was remarkably clean for having been abandoned for so long. “This place must have been built like a fortress,” she commented to Myra, who raced to catch up with her.

“If I’ve counted correctly, we should be close,” Ra said, shining her light around. “There. Q44. One more, then we turn right and go past 5 crossings.”

A short time later, they aimed their lights at a shelf stretching for 10 meters completely filled with boxes labeled *Instant Pot*. “How much did Mel say these things cost?” Myra asked.

“She wasn’t specific, just said they were out of her price range. Wait, let me see if Ambi knows.” She quickly thought *Ambi, know what an Instant Pot costs these days?*

Ambianca replied, "I was hoping you'd find some. They aren't really sold any longer, just handed down from one owner to another. They're virtually priceless."

Ra relayed the information to Myra. "How many can we carry?" she asked. Myra picked up one box and answered the question, "Just one of the bigger ones. How big is 8 QT?"

"A bit less than 8 liters," Ra told her. "Why don't we take one of the 8s and one of the 6s, unless you think you can manage with two of the smaller ones."

"The workers must have used a cart of some kind rather than their hands to carry them. Maybe we can find one," Myra suggested.

"Good idea. Let's look around, but we need to stay together."

"Right. If I were planning the operation, I'd put the carts against the wall," Myra said. She aimed her light toward the nearest wall. "There!" She raced off and returned quickly with a cart big enough to hold 8 boxes. "This might pay for the trip," she said as she stacked the last one carefully on the cart.

Back in Endeavor, they contacted Y in Boonville. "Look what we have!" Ra said, holding up the box.

"Fantastic. Was there more than one?" Y asked.

"Yeah. We managed to get 8 of them. The warehouse is a treasure trove of goodies," Ra added.

"Eight! Amazing. I suppose we could manufacture them today, but there are more pressing needs. I think we can sell eight of them for a nice profit on the trip," Y said.

"Just seven," Ra corrected her. "Melanie wants one."

"My mistake," Y said. "Great find. Stay safe." She signed off.

They contacted Bella with the news. She was more interested in the building materials sites. Ra assured her that they had the requested samples. "We'll start back tomorrow morning. Unless something slows us down, we should arrive in time for dinner."

"Great. We have one of the rooms ready for your inspection. I've claimed it for us," Bella told her with a big grin. "Till tomorrow."

---

With suitable ceremony, Ra handed the box containing the Instant Pot to Melanie, "Here you are. What do you plan to do with this gadget?"

"We be gonna make beans, rice, pork belly," Melanie told her. "You gonna like, I betcha."

"Do I understand you wasted some of the valuable cargo space on another 7 of these?" Bella asked.

"Wasted!" Myra exclaimed. "Oh, you're joking. Sorry. We just picked the proverbial low hanging fruit. We need to plan another visit to that place. Full of good stuff,"

"Chill," Bella said. "Yes, it was a joke. Chloe has authorized a major expedition there. Y is preparing a list of the most valuable items. We're going to take the big truck and probably get enough to pay for this entire voyage." Then she added, "Y has located some insect repellent that we desperately need. The mossie are really bad here."

Ambianca chimed in, "Latest news: Z and a crew, together with experts from Sealy, are planning to come to assess the find. Should be here within two weeks. Ra and Myra will get a bonus for the work so far."

"Excellent," Bella said. "Now, I want to see the samples you took from the building supply places."

"Can I see the new room first?" Ra asked.

“OK.”

Ra was frankly amazed with the new quarters. “You got this done in three days?”

“Well, three and a half. We assembled it this morning. It’s incomplete, as you can see. Y says she thinks there may be some suitable beds in the Amazon place. By the way, that’s only one of the Amazon warehouses in the area. We thought we might send you out on another sortie to check out some more of them. I’ve drawn up a plan for you. Gavin, Al, Delton, and The Brat want to get in on the action. We thought we’d take a few days to review what you found, then send you back out.”

“That’s fine,” Ra said, “but it cuts into our time together.”

“What are you suggesting? Afternoon delight?”

“Well, now that you mention it...”

Bella laughed. “Not a bad idea. Let me see if I can draft Bronson to run the printer. I want to have a cabin outside to display when the indigenous visitors arrive.”

“Go. I’ll wait here. This bed looks decrepit, but serviceable.”

---

Melanie’s simple dish of rice and beans cooked with some of the pork left from Bronson’s hunt was a big hit. “This was done in the new gadget?” Sandy asked.

“Yep. 'bout an hour start to finish.”

“Maybe I can share cooking with you tomorrow,” Sandy suggested. “I’d like to try it out.”

“You be welcome any time. We got more. Fish stew. Bron caught some.”

Bronson took a small bow. “Happy to contribute.”

“The tomatoes be from can,” Mel explained. “Onions, garlic be from Cuba. Be like Cioppino from San Francisco.”

All gave the meal five stars. The group was in a jovial mood, that Bronson enhanced when he produced some Hill Country Gold and rolled several joints to share. If only they had known what was about to happen.

## 5. Storm Clouds October 10, 2192 Fort Savannah, Wilderness of North America

The salvage operation at the Amazon facility really got moving when Z showed up with four trucks and several helpers recruited from the students at the Uni. She had spent the trip to the site developing a plan, which she explained to everyone as soon as she arrived. The first step proved to be one of the most difficult: transferring the trucks from the ship's hold to land. She left that up to Bronson, with Sandy's help.

Her schedule relied on two basic principles, communication and prioritizing. "We need better communications between here and Atlanta," she began. "Fortunately, we have a straightforward solution. We need to revive the cellphone network along the major roads. Y found a map showing where the towers were located pre-Collapse. We have solar panels for all the towers and new hardware developed by the Techies at the Uni. It should be straightforward, assuming we can find the towers."

Ra chimed in from Atlanta, with a noticeable delay. "This is the best we have now. Endeavor is using one of the communication satellites left over from the Ancients. It takes a few seconds for each transmission and can happen only from Endeavor. We have tons of cellphones on the shelves here. Enough for anyone who wants one."

Sandy appeared to report that one of the trucks was available. She and three of the students left immediately to try to locate the ancient towers. The truck was equipped with the same communication device used on Endeavor. Before the meeting concluded, they received a report with coordinates of the first tower and photos. "It is in great shape," Sandy reported. "I'll report only when we find one that may be trouble. OK?"

"Sounds good to me," Z agreed. "Let us know when you reach the distribution center."

"Will do. Till later."

Turning back to the assembly, Z said, "Now let's look over the priority items. We have Bella's list of building supplies, and Y has arranged the items on her list in decreasing order of value. However, we have elevated insect repellent to the top item. Sorry, love, but that's *really* important here." Everyone laughed.

Bronson strode in looking happy. "We have the other three trucks ready to go now."

Z reacted, "Ambi, try to contact Sandy. See how far she has traveled. Can we expect the other trucks to arrive at the salvage site before sunset?"

"Short answer: no," Ambianca told her. "They can probably get to the park where camping is possible, however, it would be better, IMHO, to prepare for early departure tomorrow morning."

"What do you base your opinion on?" Z asked.

"Calculations, what else?"

"OK, OK. We'll wait for tomorrow morning."

---

Bella and Ra waved goodbye to the caravan of trucks heading to Atlanta just as dawn began to lighten the eastern sky. Gavin and The Brat wrangled their way onto the last truck, so besides RaraBella, only Bronson and Melanie remained at the Savannah location.

"So," Ra asked, "do we get the day off?"

Bella laughed. "No way. We have enough material to complete another room. It will take all four of us to move the walls into position. We can start with the two pieces finished during the night. The rest should be available by lunchtime, when we will run out of the needed material. We should take care of that now so Bron can get back to his search for the last submarine. How's that going, Bron?"

“I’m thinking that maybe four engines will be enough for the time being. When we get some help back here, we can begin the extraction from the subs that are mostly out of the water. Let’s take care of the room now instead of worrying about nuclear engines.”

“What material do you need?” Ra asked Bella.

“We’re using a mixture of cement, sheetrock, and insulation material. It’s light but durable. Did you take a look at the operation?”

“No. Didn’t have time.”

“Well, let me explain how it works. We have a form made of wood. We line it with something like butcher paper to make it easy to get the finished product out. The printer fills the form by repeatedly going over the area depositing the mixture. That hardens in about three hours. We usually complete another form by that time. Notice that the one we’re starting has the door opening. It goes in the front. The side walls are simpler, mostly solid, but with openings for wiring. The rear wall has all the plumbing pipes and power lines. We’re using ancient PVC pipe that has been here for years. Still serves the purpose, which shows you how hard the stuff is to get rid of.”

“So, the printing is minimal.”

“Right. The siding we did on the first visit here was more complicated. We had multiple openings, for one thing. Now, let’s see if we can move it inside.”

Moving it meant instructing the bots, a task best left up to Ambianca. Once inside, they maneuvered it into the anchors on the floor and voila! One wall in place. Of course, this room shared one wall with the first one, so they needed only the front and back to complete the room. The roof was left until the last step, so furniture could be easily lowered into place.

“Now, let’s see if Sandy is online,” Bella said after completing her explanation.

---

“Hi,” Sandy’s face said from the big monitor. “Everything is going great here. Y’s map is wonderful. We usually go straight to the right spot. Z watched for about 5 minutes and came up with a wrinkle that makes it even faster. Instead of searching for the items in priority order, she arranged several into a route that could be handled in one pass.”

“Standard queuing theory,” Bella said. “Offer my congratulations to Z for actually using something we learned in class.”

Sandy replied, “She says thanks. How are things there?”

“OK, but we’re running out of material for the rooms.”

“Z predicted that as well. We are sending one of the trucks back with a full load of stuff from the sites you marked up. Lots of them around the airport. Z says it was to allow for rapid order handling.”

“No doubt. Being that close to the airport made for quick shipping. When should we be looking for the truck?” Bella asked.

“Well, we know the route now. That saves a couple of hours we spent on the way up checking out alternatives. We estimate about 6 hours. We’ll notify you when they leave. Should we prioritize another load?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” Bella promised. “After I see what’s in the first load. Glad to hear that all is well. Be on the lookout for our friends from farther north. We thought they would be here by now.”

“A scout showed up today. Heard all the racket and came to investigate. Says he met you a year ago. Says there are some interesting developments,” Sandy relayed.

“Has he explored the Amazon building yet?” Bella asked.



“Sure did. Found some great bows and lots of arrows. More than he could carry. I told him we’d bring down as many as we could.”

“Excellent,” Bella said. “Send him with the first truck.”

“You got it. We’ll talk tomorrow. Should have cellphone service by then.”

“Great. Mañana.”

---

“Bella, wake up. I have some important news.”

“What? Who is it?” Bella asked.

Ra said, “It’s Ambi. What’s up, Ambi?”

“There is a storm coming your way,” Ambi said calmly. “You have about 36 hours according to JJ’s latest guess, excuse me, *model*. He says that is the latest. It could arrive sooner.”

“What intensity?” Ra wanted to know.

“Hurricane force winds. Category 3 by the time it reaches you. According to JJ.” Was there a slight sneer in her voice? Ra wasn’t sure.

“We should be safe here. We’ll just button up. We’ll have to contact Sandy. She thinks we can use cellphones. What time is it?” Bella asked.

Ambianca replied, “6:00. I waited as long as I thought prudent, knowing the two of you as I do.”

“OK. OK. We’re up,” Ra told her. “Does Melanie know?”

“She’s up and working on early breakfast.”

“Excellent. I hope that includes real coffee,” Ra said.

“Just because the coffee is rendered drinkable by alternative means doesn’t mean it isn’t *real*, does it?” Ambianca objected. Apparently, she still struggled to find a reasonable definition of *real* and was hoping she might have stumbled onto something helpful.

“A bit of a joke,” Ra explained. “Yes, it is *real* in the sense that a rock is real, but it lacks the taste of *the real thing*.”

“Oh,” Ambianca said. “I was joking also. Ha! Ha!”

Bella had dressed while this *pilpul* was going on. “Come on! We got work to do.”

Ra immediately adopted comfortable shoes, jeans, and a long-sleeved T-shirt, and raced to catch up with Bella.

**6. Amazonian Rescue**  
**October 11, 2192**  
***Ruins of Atlanta, Wilderness of North America***

“Hello, Bella. It’s me, Sandy. Can you see and hear me?”

“Hello, Sandy,” Bella answered. “Signal is great.”

“Glad to hear it. The truck with all your building stuff is leaving as we speak. ETA is a little over six hours from now.”

“Excellent. Great work. Now, I have the bad news.”

“Oh.” Sandy could hear several people moving in close to hear the news. Sandy turned on the speaker. “Go ahead,” she told Bella. “I put you on the speaker.”

“There’s a storm coming. Estimated in about 36 hours according to JJ.” Bella got straight to the point.

“Shit! How severe?” Sandy wanted to know.

“Maybe category 3 hurricane. Death to anyone caught out in the open. I suggest you shelter in place. From what I hear, the building should be the safest around.” Bella added.

“There’s a problem.”

“What is it?”

“The clan is on the move. They started yesterday. Usually takes about a week.” Sandy paused to let that sink in.

“What’s your source for that? Drones?” Bella asked.

“The scout who arrived couple of days ago,” Sandy answered. “His name is Yung-un. I am not sure if this means something, such as *young one*. Gavin and The Brat greeted him enthusiastically. They spent hours catching up on what had happened while they’ve been gone. The Brat summarized everything for me.”

“The Brat? Interesting. So...Do we try to rescue them? There’s precedent,” Belle said.

“We have to try,” Sandy said what they all knew was coming. “We’ll talk it over and let you know what we decide.”

Bella knew how to handle that. “Great, Sandy. Is Aunt Z around?”

“Right here,” Z said. “I think Sandy should be in charge. She’s doing a great job.”

“Agreed. However, I think your input would be valuable.”

“OK, Bella. Talk to you later.”

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Sandy launched into her report as soon as they had a connection. “Let me summarize for you. We studied the route the clan usually takes. There is a fork where they can decide which way to go based on some factors that Yung didn’t understand. Sounds like bullshit, but who knows. Anyway, that meant that we need to intercept them *before* they get to the fork. So, we were on a tight schedule. We found some patio chairs in the center that we have installed in one of the trucks. We can seat 24 people, which means that some will have to share a seat.” She paused for breath.

“We debated who should go. Ideally, we want two drivers and someone who can explain to the clan members, persuade them to go with us. Gavin and Z seemed like the obvious choice for the drivers. I let them choose who to take as the third member. They selected The Brat, who at least doesn’t take up much space. They have satellite communication on board, but we don’t know how well that will work if the weather turns bad.”

She paused to see if Bella and Bronson had questions, not quite sure who should be in charge. “They have four hours to go 200 kilometers, so it may be close. They will try to contact us when, I don’t dare say if, they rendezvous with the clan, or if they get into trouble. We’ll let you know. Meanwhile, we’re converting part of the building into living quarters using stuff we have here, which is a lot. How are things at your end? Before she left, Z figured out how to get the water and sewage running. We have electricity, at least for a while. We’re charging up batteries now. Enough to last for several days.”

Bronson stepped in and tried to calm Sandy down. “OK. Sandy, you’re doing great. Keep it up and don’t worry about us. When you have to brown out, try to keep some entertainment running. That may be important for morale.” He was thinking of the dangerous rescue of the Chilean sailors during Chloe’s triumphant journey, and was sure Z was as well. Bella added, “Mama often recalled how Bron played guitar and how it helped the kids especially. We’ll talk to you later. I’m going to send you the latest map of the storm with the projected track. Stay strong.”

---

Z, who had been tense for hours during the drive, found no footprints near the fork in the road. “They haven’t passed by here recently,” she told The Brat, who raced off to tell Gavin. Now, they had to just wait and hope that the clan appeared soon. She returned to her seat in the truck and willed herself to relax.

It didn’t work.

She got out of the truck and started walking around aimlessly. The Brat joined her. “Ya worried?” he asked. “Well, yes, but there’s nothing we can do about it. Just have to wait.”

“That be hard sometime.”

“You got it.”

“Maybe we go birding?” he suggested.

“You bring your bins?”

“No. Did you?”

“Shoulda. Didn’t.”

They walked around some more. “Maybe we walk to them?” The Brat offered.

“That’s a good idea. Why didn’t I think of it?”

She returned to the truck, where she found Gavin napping. He jerked awake when she opened the door. “They here?”

“No,” Z said. “The Brat and I are going to walk toward them.”

“Why not drive?” Gavin asked.

“You see the road? Don’t like the look of it. Better stay here on the pavement. When you see us, ask Endeavor to lower the protective field. Try it now.”

“Lower the protective field,” he tried.

“You have to say *Truck1* first to get the AI’s attention. This isn’t Ambianca.”

“OK. Truck 1, lower the protective field.”

“The protective field is not active,” Truck 1 replied.

“Truck 1 set the protective field to 10 meters. Show with pale blue,” Z said. The field, shimmering blue, appeared immediately. Now, try it,” Z said.

This time is worked.

“OK, Gavin. The field will protect you. Try to stay awake.”

“Got it,” Gavin said.

Z turned her attention to the AI, “Truck 1 when I am more than 10 meters from the vehicle, activate the protective field at 10 meters, colored pale blue. Understand?”

“Understood.” Z hurried to catch up to The Brat, who was quite a way down the road. *Geez*, she thought, *this AI makes Endeavor look like a genius*. She made a mental note to try upgrading it at the first opportunity.

The Brat, with exuberance of the young, almost danced down the road. They had traveled about 2 kilometers when they saw the clan coming toward them. Z counted quickly: 20 adults, 10 children. The Brat raced ahead; he recognized some of the children and shouted to them, “Cleo, Laurie! It’s me Brat!” They raced toward him for a group hug.

The adults were more cautious, but seeing no harm came to the kids, approached Z with open hands. Z spread hers as well to show that she came in peace. “Greetings!” she called. “I am Z. I have news.” She hoped that was simple enough to get past the language barrier. SAT was available in Atlanta, but here she was on her own.

A man wearing regalia that Z assumed reflected his status strode toward her. She noticed several men at the rear were stringing bows and getting arrows ready. She decided to show them who she was and converted to the white armor that all recognized from stories.

“You not Ra,” the chief said.

“No, but I am a friend. And I wish to be your friend as well.” That didn’t work, so she rephrased it, “I be Ra friend. Hope be yours.”

“Why you here?” he asked.

“Big storm come soon. We rescue. Need hurry.”

“No need rescue.” That was one of the expected responses, and Z had a prepared follow up.

“You come by me, you live. Stay here, you die. Grok?”

Several of the men nocked an arrow to the bowstring and aimed it at Z. She held her arms aloft, inviting them to fire at her. Some took her up on it. The arrows bounced off the armor.

“You be new people?” the chief asked.

Z guessed she was one of the new people, and said, “Yes. Be new people.”

“Walk all way here?”

“No. Got truck.” She waved down the road. “You come see?” She gestured down the road. “At fork in road.”

“Not far. We follow.”

“Well,” she said to herself. “So far, so good.” She called to The Brat, “TB, let’s go. We got a way to travel.”

“OK, I’m coming,” he replied showing off his mastery of Standard English. The two kids with him were visibly impressed. “Race ya,” he called to them as he took off. When they reached Z, The Brat took her hand, “She be friend.” Cleo and Laurie touched Z’s armor carefully, having heard about the magic the New People had at their disposal. They felt a slight tingle to let them know the field was active but set to the lowest level.

Z tried to set a quick pace and covered the distance back to the truck in less than an hour. She looked anxiously at the sky, which was already showing some rain clouds. “Best hurry,” she said to all who could hear. “Rain soon.” She began a trot and soon all saw the truck with the blue field. As she feared, Gavin was not paying attention. She moved carefully around the perimeter of the field until she saw him with his head on the steering wheel. Pulling a loud whistle from a pocket of her suit, she blew it as loud as she could. Gavin did not react. “Shit!” Z said. She moved to the edge of the field and took a step. As she hoped, her suit protected her from the truck’s shield. Walking quickly to the windshield she rapped hard, and Gavin jumped up. Seeing her, he quickly lowered the shield. Z turned to face the clan and waved for them to come forward.

“Get inside,” The Brat said. “Warm there.” The stairs lowered automatically at the rear, and he raced to claim the best seat, near the front with a view thru the windshield. Gavin approached the chief, who recognized him and said, “Gavin. You live.”

“Si! Si!” Gavin replied. “Got mucho discuss. First gotta go. No waste time.”

“Why?” the chief wanted to know.

Gavin launched into a lengthy explanation that consumed several minutes of their valuable time before the chief got the message. He turned to the crowd and issued some orders that Z partly understood. The clan members proceeded to board the truck in an orderly fashion. Gavin explained that there were not enough seats for all and suggested that the adults sit with small children on their laps. That still left some of the males seated on the floor.

Unwilling to have Gavin fall asleep again, Z took the wheel. “Truck, we retrace route. Grok?”

“Understood.” The truck quickly reversed, which caused some consternation, but then set off heading back down the paved road toward Atlanta.

“Truck Notify Sandy and Chloe of ETA,” Z ordered as she scanned the road ahead for potholes that the AI might have missed. She quickly checked the batteries, which she was relieved to find at full. They would have little sunlight on the return journey. She hoped the batteries would last that far.

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“We’re not going to make it,” Z said to Gavin.

“What?”

“We’re going to run out of power before we reach the center,” she explained.

“What we do?”

“We get as close as possible, then try to contact Sandy.”

“How close?”

“About 10 kilometers now,” Z told him.

“If Sandy get message, what...” Gavin wanted to know.

“I hope she can send help. It depends on how much time we have left before the storm arrives. Probably only couple hours.” *Damn, I need to speak Vernac,* Z realized.

“We send message. Sandy send help. Not much time.”

“I grok. Got idea.” He got up and went into the back where the rest of the clan was. Z heard him talking to everyone. He returned with two young men. “These fast runners. Take message.”

“Good.” Z brought the vehicle to a stop, saving what battery was left to keep the interior warm. She scribbled on the back of both runners’ hands. “Send help.” Followed by the coordinates of their location. Then,

she handed her cellphone to one of them. “When make noise, push button.” She pointed to the button she had programmed to send a text to Sandy.

The two runners understood and took off running. “If they know what they’re doing, they can get there in less than an hour. Sandy would need only a few minutes to send a truck with a fuel cell power supply. She hoped the runners understood where they were going. They had a map to follow — if they could read it.

That’s when she heard raindrops hitting the roof. The outer bands of the storm had arrived ahead of schedule.

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The downpour continued unabated. The noise made conversation impossible. Every few minutes, Z turned on the headlights to try to see anything to give her hope.

“What word?” Gavin asked.

“We maybe die,” Z told him. “Need help soon.” The power dial glowed ominously red. Then she saw it, just a gleam only slightly brighter than the background. “Help come,” Z told Gavin. Gradually, the headlights of the other truck showed thru the gloom.

The storm turned the final lap into a dangerous race against time, won only at the last minute when both trucks pulled into the loading dock area and the doors closed behind them.

“It would have taken less time if we abandoned your truck and put everyone into the other,” Sandy noted.

“Are you joking? I designed every facet of these vehicles. I wasn’t about to abandon one. I did tell Gavin, though, that we might die,” Z said. “This was as touch and go as the rescue on *The Enterprise*. And we don’t have Bronson here to play lullabies.”

“Well, at least we have dinner prepared,” Sandy countered. She beckoned to The Brat, who raced over to her side. “Tell everyone we got food.”

“Everybody smell it already,” he noted.

“Good. You tell them to line up over there,” She pointed to the spot in mind. TB raced off to tell the Chief. *Where does he get his energy?* Z wondered. She remembered she was supposed to photo everyone and pulled out her cellphone. “OK, TB,” she called, “line everyone up for a group photo.” The Brat showed a huge grin, then started telling them what to do. Z quickly snapped several photos of the group and shared them with RaraBella, Melanie, and MyRa.

The clan proved to be good at following orders, especially having heard stories about this new woman. She was said to be very wise and very powerful. So, dinner went off without a hitch.

With the help of software Y had cobbled together, a group of students and phones to handle requests, and a barely functioning network Y could tell them where to look for anything stored at *El Centro*, as the place was now being called. The connection was slower than usual due to the weather, but so far the cellphone network held together.

They served some beans and rice made in one of the Instant Pots Melanie told them about. That worked well. Z was impressed. “Sometimes the ancients knew what they were doing. We should see what they are capable of, and how much energy they consume. We can probably modify it to work better in this environment. Interesting...”

They had the standard rabbit stew. The animals had proliferated out of control and were ruining the environment. On the other hand, they supplied a steady source of food. Melanie told them she wanted to try a new recipe on their return. She converted Big Ron’s Antelope Chili to use rabbit instead of antelope. “If you let me know your schedule, I’ll have some ready.” Z said “No problem. Wait! You study Standard?”

“Yes. Ambi helped me.” There was just the slightest emphasis on the use of the past tense.

“That was good Standard. That be mega good.” Z said as she signed off.

When she moved the dishes to the composter, Z noticed that the count was wrong. Z was probably the only person left alive on the planet who counted dirty dishes. “I didn’t want to overload the composter,” she later explained. “Any, that’s not the point. There was one extra plate.”

“So someone snuck a second,” Sandy said. “It happens.”

Z took out her cellphone and checked the photos. She counted twice, then a third time. “We had 20 adults on the truck. We have 21 adult members now. Look.” She handed her phone to Sandy.

Sandy studied the photo. “Well, I agree that we have 21 adults. Were you watching them load? Can you pick out the extra one in the photo?”

“Maybe.” Z zoomed in on the faces and scrolled carefully. “There he is! Doesn’t fit in.” She held the phone for Sandy to see.

“Oh, shit!” Sandy said, “that’s Isaac!”

**7. Privy Council**  
**October 13-15, 2192**  
**Online and Fort Savannah**

“OK. I’m finally online,” Chloe said. “Who’s going to fill me in on the emergency. I was about to start another round to the annual New Zealand wine-tasting event. Tonight, we’re going to sample reds from three different wineries. This better be good.”

With a warning like that, everyone agreed that Z should explain. She was Chloe’s oldest friend and better able to stand up to her when necessary. “I won’t bother going over the rescue of the clan. You have our written report, which I’m sure you must have read.”

“All right, Zed. You win the first round. I haven’t had time for a routine report.”

“Routine! Hardly. It was at least as dangerous as the rescue of the three sailors by The Enterprise,” Z shot back. She was not in a mood to take any shit from Chloe. “Let me give you the executive summary.” With the skill derived from years of delivering such reports, she related the events beginning with the warning of the storm until the dinner.

“OK, I get it. It was a big deal. There’s gotta be more,” Chloe replied.

“Yeah. We’re getting to the punch line. I gathered the plates for the composter, you know, the one I put together in Austin. This is the first good chance to test it. Works great.” Z continued.

“I’m sure it does,” Chloe said. “There’s a point here somewhere, I guess.”

“There was one too many plates.”

“Oh, come on. Only a confirmed compulsive like you would even notice that. Someone took seconds without asking? Is that it?”

“We wouldn’t have bothered you with that. No, we managed to identify the extra person. It’s Isaac.”

“I assume you confronted him.”

“Delicately. He explained that he is a historian from our future. He’s come to study this incident, which appears to be famous in the future.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me.”

“We thought so as well, but then we discovered something really interesting.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” Chloe demanded.

“He doesn’t recognize Sandy,” Z deadpanned.

“Impossible,” Chloe countered. “She was Claudette’s best friend. He must have met her many times.”

“Exactly,” Z agreed. “The only explanation that makes sense is that he hasn’t met her *yet*.”

“I see,” Chloe said. “We’ve had the timeline wrong all along.”

Ra spoke up, “It has to be. That means that the incident that he alluded to in Africa when he talked to Rami hasn’t occurred in his timeline.”

“Very interesting,” Chloe said.

“Glad you agree,” Z said. “We wouldn’t want to waste your valuable time and noted ability to choose the best wine.”

“OK, OK. I’m sorry. You’re right, of course. We need to know more. Have you tried to talk to him?”

“We didn’t want to give anything away. We don’t want him to decide to forget about Claudette. Or Bella,” Ra said.



“Any hypotheses you want to present? Anyone?” Chloe asked.

“We spent a full day playing out scenarios,” Ra told her. “We think we have the most likely one.”

“Spit it out,” Chloe said.

“If I may,” Rami said, “I think I can shed some light on this.”

“Please go on.”

“In Africa, Isaac mentioned several times that I am famous in the future. That may explain why he chose this time to appear. There is also the issue of our records. Apparently, they have voluminous records, courtesy of us, about this time. Certainly, they would know of the rescue and aftermath. Z referred to a written report.”

“So, the Paradox brought him here?” Chloe asked.

“It’s possible,” Rami said. “He also referred to fixing the timeline. I suggest that he came to just observe, but became involved. Perhaps due to one person.”

“Claudette.”

“That’s the consensus here. Suppose he really fell in love with her. Sandy and I think his concern when she had her miscarriage was genuine.”

Sandy interjected, “If he was faking that, he’s really good at it.”

“That means that Bella...”

“Yes!” Rami said. “Or Bella’s descendants.”

“That we don’t have yet,” Bella noted. “Ambianca says the timing is not right.”

Chloe paused before commenting. “Ambi gave me the short version and promised to explain fully later. So, Bella is the random factor, the one that pushes the timeline in a new direction.”

Chloe’s image vanished from the screen. Z explained, “She likes to walk around when she’s thinking.”

She reappeared after a couple of minutes. “OK. Here’s what I suggest. I return to the wine tasting. They’re getting restive in there. I’ll come to Fort Savannah. Expect me at noon tomorrow. Have a good lunch ready. I hear Melanie has unexpected talents in that area. Ambi will send you the details. Have a plan ready for my review. Gotta go now.” She signed off.

Z took the floor. “Thank you, Rami, for volunteering to produce the first draft of a plan. Shall we meet again tomorrow, say 10:00. That would let us review the draft before Chloe arrives.”

Rami said, “I guess I’ll have to learn to keep my mouth shut. Tomorrow.”

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“Please, come in. Have a seat? Want anything to drink?” Rami asked.

“I’ve heard you may have real coffee,” Isaac replied.

“Ambi, can you have two cups sent to us? Let’s try the stuff from Africa.”

“OK,” Ambianca said. “We’ll need to brew some.”

“Understood,” Rami said, then turned back to Isaac. “We have a few questions we’d like to ask you if you don’t mind.”

“Please. Shoot!”

Rami smiled, “Nice touch, using *shoot*. I understand you’re a historian. At least you know some of the local jargon. Did you study some of Chloe’s livestreams?”

“Did I give myself away?” Isaac asked. He appeared to be upset.

“No. You told me that some time ago. We’re on different timelines, as you know. In the future, we’ll meet in the past. More than once. You told me I am famous in your time.”

“So, it’s true. You can move to a different point on the timeline,” Isaac clarified.

“As can you,” Rami said. “Is this your first trip?” he asked as casually as possible.

“Yeah.”

“It can be disconcerting,” Rami said. “Gets easier, though.”

“Have you done it often?” Isaac asked.

*Gotcha*, Rami thought. “No, not me. You need to talk to Hypatia. She’s the only one of us who’s done it a lot. She told me that it takes a toll. I decided not to overdo it. Do you get hungry on the trip?”

“Yeah, but that effect was well-documented. I was prepared.”

“Really? You managed to bring food with you?”

“Not enough,” Isaac replied. “I need something like the magic red backpack. Who has that now?”

“I’m afraid I’m not allowed to disclose that information,” Rami told him. He didn’t mention that he had no idea where it was.

“Of course,” Isaac said. “You met Hypatia?”

“Sure. We meet annually on Christmas Eve. A family get together.” Though he tried to hide it, Isaac was happy to have that verified for him. The records had nothing to back up the story.

“I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that,” Rami said, “Especially...well, let’s just leave it at that.”

Isaac gestured zipping his lips. Rami managed not to laugh at him.

The bot appeared with a full pot of coffee and some sweet rolls, Melanie’s latest experiment.

Isaac took a bite of the roll and a careful sip of coffee. He smiled. “Wow! Who would have guessed. This is wonderful.”

“Thanks,” Rami said. “The coffee is an experiment. Grown in the hills in Africa, where the weather is mild enough. We think it is as good as that from the Coffee Coast. They disagree.”

Isaac laughed. “I’ll be happy to help judge the two.”

“We’ll add you to the waiting list,” Rami said, laughing in turn.

“So, why come here, now? Just because of Bloch’s Paradox?” Rami asked.

“Partly. I’ve lobbied to come back to observe. The fact that I was noticed and recorded was, of course, important. We knew I could get here because I had. And this is an important incident in the resettling of the eastern part of the continent.”

“I see.” Rami sat silent for a while, a trick he’d learned from Chloe.

“Did you really meet with Hypatia?” Isaac asked after a while.

“Many times. I see that you are interested.”

“Can I come?”

“Is that even possible? You’ve never been there. How would you know where and when to go?”

He gave a quick start. “Holding hands is said to work.”

“No shit!” Rami was excited. “That works?”

“Sure, provided you are both adepts.”

“Yes, you mentioned that before. Well, in your future. I’ll tell them to expect you. That should help.”

“Well, yes, that should work.”

“I’ll need to check with Chloe first,” Rami told him. “I’ll get back to you.”

“Can I take the coffee pot?” he asked. Rami waved him away with his treasure.

He knew what was going into his first draft.

## ***Part 7. Isaac's Story***

**1. A Devious Plan**  
**Christmas Eve, 2003**  
**Talbot House, River Oaks, Houston, TX, USA**

“Oh, my god, Idelle. It smells fantastic inside,” Ra said when the door opened.

“Thank you, Ra. Come on in. They’re out back on the patio. Would you like a snack?” Idelle asked.

“Idelle, you’re near perfect, remembering little quirks,” Ra complimented her.

She laughed. “Chloe is already here, so I had a reminder already.”

“I’m sure you planned ahead,” Ra said as she moved into the heated entry way. *Oh, some things were better than, like this*, she thought. Unconsciously, she found herself hoping that Bella would like it when she remembered that Belle was not with her.

She came onto the patio to find Grace holding court. Hypatia and Mark stood on either side of her chair. “Hope you’re OK, Gigi,” Ra said.

“Just a touch of arthritis,” Grace said with a hopeful tone.

“I have the cure,” Ra told her.

“Your grandfather already supplied some,” Mark said. “It’s great to see you again. This has to be the best family tradition anyone ever came up with.” He kissed her on the cheek. Hypatia gave her a big hug then looked at her carefully. “How long has it been this time?”

“Less than a year, but a busy one.”

“I can hardly wait to hear the details,” Hypatia said.

“Where’s David. For that matter, where’s Mom?”

“David took her shopping. Idelle refuses to let Mark handle grocery shopping. They’re headed for Whole Foods, then some secret place David claims to know about.

Idelle returned carrying a tray for Ra with a PB&J sandwich, a glass of iced tea, and some ginger snaps for dessert. “Now, don’t ruin your appetite. We’re trying a new dish tonight.” With that, she returned to the kitchen.

When only crumbs remained, Ra turned back to the others, “Want to try some African weed?”

“Ah. Did you come from Africa?” Mark inquired.

“No. This was from Bronson’s stash. I borrowed it,” Ra answered.

“Now, who’s Bronson?” Hypatia asked.

“Mom’s heartthrob. Every time they meet, not often enough apparently, they jump into bed,” Ra explained.

“An inherited trait,” Mark said, which got a polite laugh all around.

“And how is your very interesting love life going?” Mark wanted to know.

“Bella and I are happily married. She and Rami plan to have a baby as soon as Ambianca is ready,” Ra said.

“Ambianca!” Mark said. “My music program?”

“She’s a whole lot more than that,” Ra said. “She thinks she has figured out how to make Rami fertile, if only for a little while. It’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated?” Chloe asked as she walked onto the patio.

“Rami and Bella having a baby,” Ra told her.

“Yeah, complicated pretty much covers it. I have just seen the most amazing grocery store. Some parts of it can be used in our time,” she said to Ra. “For example—”

“Later,” Ra said. “Now that you’re here, we can tell them about Isaac. He’s going to be at this meeting next year.”

“What?” Grace exclaimed. “Who is Isaac? Why is he coming here?”

Ra said, “David needs to hear the story. I’ll go fetch him. I suppose he’s in the kitchen.”

---

“So,” David said about an hour later, “everything hinges on his willingness to go along with the proposal.”

“Yes. You nailed it. If he doesn’t agree, it will have all been in vain,” Ra said.

David was smiling. Ra understood. “I see. You know how it will turn out. You were there.”

“Indeed, I was,” David said. “Following your grandmother’s strange idea, I am not allowed to tell you now.”

Hypatia fell back on her standard tactic, she began delivering a lecture. “You must realize how serious this is. Changing the timeline that long ago could make even this world unrecognizable, not to mention the future.”

“The Butterfly Effect,” Mark noted. “A simple change could have big ramifications. What’s that theorem? History is resilient. Something like that.”

“A corollary to Bloch’s Paradox,” Chloe spoke up. “You can’t change history, unless you already have.”

“Right. That’s it,” Mark agreed. “You can, however, change something small that has a large impact. It just can’t change history. Maybe that’s what changed the timeline, something small, random.”

“Something like falling in love,” Ra said, just as Idelle came to announce that dinner was ready.

## **2. This is a Test**

### **Christmas Eve, 2004 and following**

#### **Talbot House, River Oaks, Houston, TX, USA**

Ra and Isaac stood in front of the Talbot residence. “Hey! It worked!” Ra exclaimed. “What do you think of this place?”

“Wow! is all I can say,” Isaac replied. “I know from the history that private residences like this existed, but actually visiting one is, well, more than I ever expected.”

Ra simply rang the bell. “Ready to meet the family?”

“I’m on pins and needles,” Isaac said.

Idelle opened the door and said, “Hello, Ra! Merry Christmas! And you must be Isaac,” she said, wiping her hand on her apron before extending it to shake Isaac’s.

Isaac was a bit non-plussed. Ra explained, “Physical contact is expected in this era. Idelle is being polite.” Isaac took the hint and shook hands. “Nice to meet you Idelle,” he said.

“And I am happy to see you,” Idelle said. “Ra told us last year that she was bringing a visitor. Please come in. It’s too cold to wait outside.”

Instead of the patio, the family was scattered around the “library room” with a warm blaze emanating from the fireplace. Ra addressed the group, “Everyone, this is Isaac, the historian from the 24<sup>th</sup> century I told you about last year. Isaac, the regal woman closest to the fire is Grace, my great-grandmother. I call her Gigi. The man next to her is David, an old family friend.”

“Grace,” Isaac said, “I am delighted to meet you.” He walked over to her and shook her hand. Then he turned to David, who said, “Nice to see you again, Isaac. Been years.”

“What?” Isaac said.

“April 13, 1978. Boonville,” David said. He saw the puzzled expression on Isaac’s face and continued, “Oh! Ra told me this might happen. You haven’t experienced it in your timeline. Well, now you know. You and Ra used whatever you did to get here. She and I met for several Aprils in those years.”

“David,” Hypatia said. “You know the rules.”

“Sorry, permit me to introduce you to Hypatia, the Second Messiah, and Mark, her husband,” David said. “Hypatia has some curious notions about telling people their future. Involves something called Bloch’s Paradox, which hasn’t been discovered yet.”

“I am very familiar with that,” Isaac said. “When Ra, well, Rami to be precise, told me about this visit, I could hardly believe it, yet here we are. Hypatia, meeting you is the experience of a lifetime. I have read volumes about you, and your famous descendants. I hope we will have time to chat while I am here.”

“I’ll try to make time for it,” Hypatia replied.

Mark stepped forward to shake Isaac’s hand. “Pleased to meet you, Isaac. Ra explained that this was paying off some obligation she, excuse me, Rami had.”

“Interesting,” Isaac replied as they shook hands. “I have no idea what that might be.”

“It’s complicated,” Chloe said. “We meet again, Isaac.” She shook his hand as well.

“Ah, Chloe, we meet IRL as they say instead of on screens,” Isaac said.

“Indeed,” Chloe said. Behind Isaac, Ra smiled. Another item for the Isaac folder.

Idelle appeared just then with a tray for Ra and Isaac. "I've got a little snack for you two," she said. "Ra is always a bit hungry when she gets here. I thought you might be as well." She put the tray on a table near the wet bar. "Got to get back to the kitchen. Dinner will be ready in a few hours."

"David," Grace said, "why don't you pour some bubbly for everyone? Anyone who wants our other usual item needs to go to the garage. I don't allow smoking in the house."

"I'll eat first," Ra said. "Then I have the latest version of Hill Country Dream."

Mark said, "What's HC Dream? I have some of this year's crop of Gold. We can compare."

"Great, Hill Country Dream is a hybrid with Blue Dream from California. Guess it doesn't exist yet." Ra said. She sat down and ate one of the sandwiches. "This is my favorite, PB&J," she explained to Isaac. "If you'd prefer something else..."

"This is wonderful," Isaac said, taking a bite. "Someone mentioned bubbly?"

"Coming up," David said.

---

Everyone was in a jovial mood.

"That dinner was fabulous," Isaac said to Ra as they walked back to the library. "I didn't know most of the dishes. What was the meat? And what were the little starchy balls?"

Ra laughed. "Those are called Tater Tots. It's a special treat for Grace. She loves them. As for the meat, it is lamb. I'm not sure how they got lamb this time of year."

"It's from New Zealand," Chloe said behind them. "David had ordered it specially using some of his channels, which means 'Don't ask'. We picked it up at the airport. He told me it came from New Zealand, where of course, it is summer. Lots of lambs. This one, though, was superb. What's the secret, love?" she asked David.

"Just an old friend," David said. "Idelle did the hard oart, turning it into a fabulous meal, complete with Tater Tots. I confess I like them too. What did you think of the ginger snaps, Isaac?"

"They lived up to their advance billing," Isaac said.

"I say it's time to try the HC Dream," David said. "And I plan to argue the case to Grace about not smoking inside."

He lost. "It's the rugs, darling." She had a collection of antique rugs.

"What about the smoke from the fire?" David countered.

"Oh, this rug doesn't matter," Grace fired back. "I wouldn't put a good rug in this room. Too much traffic. But it doesn't matter. I have a rule, and it is, after all, my house." She waved bye-bye.

"Doesn't Grace want any?" Ra asked.

"She's had a full magic brownie," David told her. "She just doesn't want to get cold."

"I can understand that," Isaac said. "What is the temperature?"

"The forecast is for a low in the 30's," David supplied the info, and took the offered joint from Ra. He took one puff and passed it to Isaac. "I don't know about this," Isaac said.

"First time?" David asked.

"Yes."

"Better go with the brownies," David said, and left.

"Is it usually this cold?" Isaac asked.



“Is that your real name?” Ra asked.

“In this time,” he replied.

“Sounds like David,” Ra said. “The family demanded that he keep David as a middle name, used only by those in the know. So, what are you really?”

“Really, I am a historian. On a research expedition.”

“You told me I was famous in the future,” Ra said taking in a lungful of the joint. “But you never said for what.”

He looked puzzled. “I think I’ll follow your grandmother’s advice and say no more.”

Ra shrugged and took another hit. David returned with a brownie, which he gave to Isaac. “Best go easy at first,” he suggested. Isaac took a tentative bite.

Ra took a final hit and passed what was left of the joint to David. “Got a clip?” he asked. Ra reached into a pocket and pulled out a hemostat. “One of the bennies of being a doctor,” she said. David knew what to do with it. “Hey, this is good,” he said as he consumed the last bit. “Look! It’s snowing!” He raced back to the door of the library room. “Hey everyone, it’s snowing! Come out.”

They scrambled to get jackets and soon joined the cannabis trio outside. “That’s real snow,” Isaac said when he caught a flake on his hand. The flake melted quickly.

David looked at his watch. “10:30,” he said. “Maybe it’ll last long enough for us to have a white Christmas. Some is sticking to the ground.”

The hope of a White Christmas died well before midnight.

“Have you seen snow before?” Isaac asked Ra as they walked back inside.

“I’ve seen pictures of it in the arctic. Have you seen it?” she asked in turn.

“No. The future is much warmer, as you probably have guessed.”

“I’m not surprised,” she agreed. “I had hoped that we would be started back down.”

“No way. The old equilibrium was destroyed. We think we have stabilized at a higher average temperature. I hope that’s not something I shouldn’t tell you.”

Ra smiled. “After as much stuff as I’ve smoked, it’s unlikely I’ll remember much.”

Chloe caught up with them. “David told me something,” she confided. “He *reminded* me of the time I visited him on Christmas Eve in 1976. I decided to go right away. I feel like a fifth wheel here.”

“Mind if I ask why you’d leave this party?” Isaac asked.

“The younger David was somewhat famous in the family as a fabulous lover. Based on my experience, I agree. This older one is committed to Grace.” She looked Ra straight in the eye. “See you later.” She left.

Ra turned to Isaac, “So, Isaac, where shall we sleep tonight. There are two empty bedrooms. I have to tell you that I tend to associate cannabis with sex.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you might be? It’s more than I dreamed. Lead on.”

A short time later, they lay in a king-sized bed, not the queen in the other bedroom, both nude, trying to decide what to do next. Isaac spoke first. “What do you say Rami and I do it?”

“Really? I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“I like almost all combinations.”

“That was almost as good as with Bella,” Rami said. “That, by the way, is a great compliment.”

“OMG, I feel really buzzed,” Isaac said. “I’ve read about the effect, but experiencing it is something else.” He didn’t explain whether he meant the cannabis or sex.

“Why don’t you lie back and let me handle things,” Ra said as she reached for him, laughing at her own joke.

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When Isaac woke in the morning, Ra was gone. “Damn!” he said to the air. “Damn them both!”

**3. Bloch's Paradox in Action**  
**January 3, 2175**  
**Austin, NRT, ASW and**  
**April 13, 1978**  
**Boonville, CA, USA**

*Ambi, are you sure? Ra thought. Looks like a gay bar.*

“Yep,” Ambianca said in her head.

*So, that time earlier, a regular thing?*

“It seems so.”

Rami took a deep breath and went into the bar. Sure enough, there he was, sitting alone at the bar.

Rami decided to be direct. He sat down on the next stool and said, “Hello, Isaac.”

“Rami!” Isaac said. Without thinking, he downed what was left of his drink while staring at Rami. Then, he just shrugged. “Let’s get out of here, OK?”

Rami took Isaac’s arm, and they left. Outside, he said, “We need to talk. I have a car.” They walked in silence three blocks to the spot where Rami had parked. Then, they drove thru empty streets and up to Mount Bonnel. “This is a well-known spot for quick liaisons,” Rami explained. “No one will bother us.”

“Rami,” Isaac said. “Talk all you want. I am so hot now. Seeing you brings back memories. I woke up to find the bed empty. I was devastated. Just came back here.” He paused before continuing, “I am going mad. D talks to be constantly.”

“I know,” Rami said. “You suggested I kill you, back in Arabella Springs.”

“Ah. Is that why you’re here? To kill me?”

“No,” Rami replied, “I want to suggest an alternative.”

“Does it involve sex?”

“Not right now. Perhaps later. No guarantee. I thought you were in love with Claudette.”

“Oh, shit yes. You cannot imagine what I have done because of love.”

“Bella,” Rami said.

Isaac broke down and began to sob. “D wants me to kill my own daughter! I’d rather die myself.”

“Is that why you’re trying to drink yourself to death?” Rami asked.

“Maybe,” Isaac replied.

“You told me in Atabella Springs that you thought that if you could go far enough back that you might be able to escape her.”

“Yes! Can you do that?” he asked.

“Last time was a test,” Rami told him. “This time it’s for real. April 13, 1978. Boonville.”

“Now?”

“It’s a one-way trip,” Rami said.

“That explains it,” Isaac said.

“What does it explain?”

“Why this is the last date in the record. I’ve always wondered. Mostly, I thought I was going to be killed. I wondered how it could be done. So, now I understand.”

“If you truly love Claudette and Bella, you must go where D cannot find you. You don’t have to choose now, but it seems like you probably did.”

“Of course. I remember that David said we’d met then. Poor Claudette. I don’t want to leave her alone with our child.”

“She will be all right. I’ve met her second husband, Bella’s stepfather. Nice guy,” Rami told him.

“OK. I’m ready.” Isaac reached out and took Ra’s hand. She smiled. “It’s better this way.”

They were in Boonville, after enduring the Dark again, when Ra hoped it was April 13, 1978.

They walked up to the door that Ra recognized and rang the bell. David greeted them enthusiastically. “It worked,” he said. “Come in. Come in. I’ve been expecting you.” Ra’s nose told her why he was in such a jovial mood. Ra kissed him. “Hello, David.”

Gesturing at Isaac, she said, “This is the man I told you about. Isaac, this is an earlier David than the one you met in Houston.”

“He’s better looking in this time,” Isaac said.

“Shame on you, Isaac. You know better than that. David is always David. I think his older self is fascinating. So does Grace.”

“Of course, this younger Grace is stunning,” David said. “The two of them, Grace and Hypatia — what a pair. They had some very intense sex upstairs. I was so jealous.” He sighed.

Ra said, “You’ll meet again. Soon.”

“I’ve been told that before. Not sure I buy it.”

“Yeah, Chloe told me,” Ra said.

“Shall we get down to business?” David asked.

“Can we eat first?” Ra asked.

Seated around the kitchen table, now strewn with dirty dishes, David offered his assessment of the situation. He pulled a sack out from under the table, moved some dishes out of the way, and emptied the contents of the sack onto the tabletop. “These are some legal documents that need to be signed. This is just the minimum. You can see how complicated this is.”

He took a deep breath and continued, “Ra told me what you two planned to do. I told her it sounded risky. However, the first part is effective. You are here, now. You see that blending into this reality will be difficult for you. I can help. It will take time.” He waited for a sign that Isaac understood.

Isaac told him, “You cannot imagine how much pain Ra has taken away. I cannot go back to that voice in my head. I am, I think you would say, highly motivated. Tell me what I have to do.”

Ra interrupted. “I am going take a walk and smoke a joint.”

“Great idea,” David said. “Come on, Isaac. Let us introduce you to Boonville.”

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David and Isaac talked for hours. Ra could not quite hear the actual conversation, but from the tone David used, he was explaining the program for the next few weeks in elaborate detail. She found herself nodding off, only to wake up later when she heard someone on the stairs.

“Come in, Isaac,” Rami said to the shadow at the door.

“How did you know it was me?” he asked.

“I heard you. David, from long habit, doesn’t make a sound.”

“Oh.”

“He was some kind of Cold War spy. Left Prague in 1968. He probably doesn’t realize it yet, but he is in love with Hypatia.”

“I’ve been trying to remember the timeline. When did they meet again?” Isaac asked, moving closer as he did so.

“I think it was 1980 or so.”

“Sounds right.” He stood at the edge of the bed. Rami threw back the covers and patted the bed.

“My name’s not Isaac,” he said as he lay down. “It’s Richard. Richard A Smith.” His suit disappeared. Rami laughed. “Clever.” Isaac started to ask what Rami meant, before deciding to stay silent except for the occasional moan.

Much later, as they rested, Isaac, rather Richard, asked what the joke was.

“There are several hidden meanings,” he heard. “First, the nickname for Richard is Dick, for whatever that is worth. Second, if you put the initials together, it sounds like Raz, short for raspberry, a rude noise. Finally, it can mean *Ra’s*.”

“Not Rami’s, though,” he countered.

“No, there is that,” he replied. “Actually, Ra would be interested in some good old-fashioned fucking. What do you say?”

He opened his eyes to find Ra looking at him and smiled.

Once again, he woke up in the morning to find that he was alone.

#### 4. More Preparations April 13, 1977 Boonville, CA, USA

“Wow!” David said when he saw Ra at his door. “When I suggested you come back when you were older, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Yes,” Ra replied. “It’s been several years. But next year, I’ll be young again. Why don’t I come in, get a bite to eat, and explain.”

“Sounds like a plan,” David agreed. “I have a pot on the stove with some interesting soup I’m trying.”

“Delicious soup,” Ra said after downing a large bowl. “What do you call it?”

“Cream of Red Bell Pepper Soup,” he replied. “Like it?”

“It’s great. However, as you probably know, I am so hungry I’d eat anything.”

“Tell me about next year. How will you get younger?”

“Simple. I visited you next year some time ago on my timeline. This visit, besides some personal items, is a chance to alert you to next year in time to prepare for it.”

“Ah. Clever. There must be a reason you delayed for years. Maybe that involves our postponed dalliance.”

“You’re not as dumb as they say,” Ra joked. “Yeah. I hope to have a chance to bonk the acknowledged super lover of our family.”

“Super lover?”

“Everyone tells me how good you are. Well, not Grace. But Mom and Nana. That is, Chloe and Hypatia. I thought it would be cool for you to be a lover of four generations of the family.”

“You know. Both you and Chloe tell me that Hypatia and I had some hot times, but I doubt it.”

“I understand. Patience is a virtue, or so I understand. I’d tell you when you will meet again, but Hypatia has rules against that.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She thinks it’s dangerous. Afraid you’d do something different and change the timeline.”

“Can you at least give me an idea of how long I have to wait?”

“Well, years, but you’ll still be your young virile self,” Ra assured him. “However, we have to deal with business first, if you agree.”

“OK. What is it that you need me to do?” he asked, taking a seat across the kitchen table.

“One year from now, I will show up with a man we know as Isaac. He comes from even farther in the future than I do. He claims vaguely to be from the 24<sup>th</sup> century.”

“Interesting,” David said. “I guess you will want my help getting him a new identity.”

“Exactly,” Ra replied. “It’s complicated.” She told him the entire story.

“Very interesting,” David said. “Let me make sure I understand. He wants to escape from an entity he knows as D, the same person, or whatever, that controls Chloe’s suit and your, whatever it is. He hopes that by coming back this far into his past that D will be unable to find him.”

“You got it. Chloe and I think of D as benign, or probably beneficial. Isaac claims that is completely wrong. She, my version is female, wants to *restore the timeline*. That means some effects that we don’t want.

Just for example, it would eliminate my wife, Bella, from ever existing. I can go into detail on that if you're interested."

"Maybe later," David said. "What you are asking goes a bit beyond what I can ask as a favor. I'll need money."

Ra retrieved her red backpack. "I just guessed what would be worth something in this era." She pulled a sack from the bag and opened it. "I brought Krugerrands. I was careful to make sure all these were legit. Most are from a 1961 minting. Others are from 1971."

"How many do you have?" he wanted to know.

"I brought 250. That weighs about 8.5 kilos, about all I could handle easily. That's about \$48,000 based only on the value of the gold. The coins have value for collectors, and that is rapidly expanding. In 1980, when they can no longer be imported, the value is \$850. Will that do for starters?"

"It's enough for me to get a new identity. We will want more. How much did you bring next year?"

"Another 250."

"That should do," David said simply. "What else do you have for me?"

Ra reached into the bag and pulled out several photos of Isaac. "Here are some photos that you may be able to use for IDs, passports, that kind of thing." She passed them across the table. "And here are some measurements I made, in case you need to buy him some clothes that won't draw attention. Everything depends on his keeping a low profile for the rest of his life."

"If I understand this, there is a simpler alternative."

"You referring to murder?" Ra asked.

"Maybe *assisted suicide*," David corrected. "In the worst case."

"It's worth being prepared," Ra said. "That's further away than I know anything about. Next year, Isaac and I will learn that you have everything prepared to get started. Frankly, I think the culture shock element will be more difficult. I find this era a bit daunting, and I come from the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Oh, I almost forgot. She pulled a single sheet of paper from the knapsack. Here is a list of stocks that will appreciate in value in the short term in case you need to raise more cash. Beginning in 1982, almost anything you buy will do well. It's the start of what's been called the longest bull market in history. Lasts until 2000. There's a glitch in 1987, but the recovery is dramatic."

David looked over the list. "Wal-Mart? Really?"

"Apparently. I know they were still a big deal right before the Collapse. Created the Sealy canal, which is very important in the future, even in Hypatia's time."

"So, besides business, what would you like to do?" David asked.

"Anything you like, so long as it leads to fantastic sex," she said smiling.

**5. Following Up**  
**April 13, 1979**  
**Boonville, CA, USA**



## ***Part 8. Appendix: General Principles, The Austin Consensus***

**1. Archival footage supplied freely following General Principle 3**  
**TCH Presentation to the World**  
**January 21, 2189**  
**Austin, NRT, ASW**

“We’re delighted to have with us today, The Chloe Herself, or TCH as she is best known, to review the recently concluded conference on organizing the world,” Ambianca said. “Hello, Chloe. Thanks for making time in your schedule.”

“That’s a joke, folks. Ambianca keeps my schedule, so she set all this up,” Chloe said, with a laugh. Ambianca laughed in reply, sort of.

“My goal for the conference was to come up with a version of the Austin Consensus for the world.”

“Excuse me, Chloe,” Ambianca interrupted. “I need to let everyone know that SAT is available, show yourself, SAT, to translate for you if you no grok Standard. Just ask. SAT be ready. As usual, a simultaneous version in Vernac is available as a special audio stream. Now, as you were saying...”

“I had hoped to agree on a more all-inclusive version of the Consensus. As it turns out, we agreed to simply keep the original consensus, which is admirably brief.”

The screen displayed the Consensus.

**The Austin Consensus:**

1. We reach consensus thru rational enquiry.
2. Simpler is usually better.
3. Information should be freely available.
4. Everyone should be free to do whatever they want so long as it doesn’t harm anyone, including themselves.
5. We strive for Win-Win agreements always.
6. We should try to preserve genetic diversity.
7. We need to try to repair the planet our ancestors almost destroyed.
- 8.

“I especially like item 8. That’s not a typo; it’s meant to imply there is room for more. Let’s examine each item. The first just means that it is better to discuss like adults than fight like children. Many have suggested that the line should read *We seek* consensus thru rational enquiry. The ancient wording was meant to be goal.”

“Item two is an observation we have about the world we live in now. We ain’t got time for complexity. The fewer rules, the better.”

“The third item, often abbreviated to GP3 means just what it says. Our Library will always be open to everyone who can access it. We are working to expand the service to more places, but if you’re watching this, you have good access.”

“The fourth item means that people should be free. It also implies that you cannot hurt other people, or yourself.”

“I’ll talk about Win-Win in a bit.”

“Finally, we hope we aren’t too late to save what’s left of our planet. I hope everyone recognizes how hard this will be. However, we must try.”

She took a sip of water before continuing.

“Now, let’s talk about Win-Win. That’s the goal of our trading activities. Both parties should feel that they got a good deal. That’s not easy, but it’s a worthy goal. I am proud to have been part of several examples of Win-Win over the years. You know, one of the oldest principle of good behavior is the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you would like to be treated. Win-Win is often the result of following that rule.”

“Then, of course we come to the *Don’ts*.”

### **Some other rules**

1. Very Old Rules
  - a. Don’t Lie
  - b. Don’t Cheat
  - c. Don’t Steal
  - d. Don’t kill — unless you have to, then do it quickly.

“Some call these the Mosaic Laws, after the legendary Moses. We refer to them as Very Old Rules. Everyone should know these.”

“Finally, we have some traditional rights of people everywhere taken from the Constitution or the United States.”

2. Traditional Rights from the US constitution
  - a. First Amendments rights
    - 1) Free speech, and assembly. Everyone gets a say.
    - 2) No religion is favored for anything, anywhere, anytime. Trusting God to help us is foolish.
  - b. Rights derived from the [Fourth, Fifth, Eighth and Fourteenth] Amendments of the ancient United States:
    - 1) The rules apply to everyone.
    - 2) Everyone should be treated equally and granted the right to “due process.”
    - 3) When voting, anyone who wants to vote and understands the issue can vote.
    - 4) The right to privacy is sacrosanct.
    - 5) The death penalty is prohibited.

“If you want to discuss this, send questions and comments using [this link](#). We hope for this to be a living document. Think of something for item 8 above.”