

BAND OF VISIONARIES

STEVEN FRANSSEN

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Dedication

For Hazel, who was very kind to
me for many years.

For Tuffy, who taught me about
curiosity and adventure.

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BAND OF VISIONARIES

Chapter 1: The Decimation of Society

Asteroids pummeled Earth with relentless fury. Roger Livet watched from his observation post on the topmost deck of the Vault as a massive tsunami approached from the Ross Sea by way of the Southern Ocean. He pulled the hood of his coat tighter over his ears to shield himself from the Antarctic wind. The enormous shields designed to deflect and withstand the shock of extreme tidal forces closed in quickly on the few exposed sections of the Vault. The installation had been built into the side of the Transantarctic mountain range.

“We lost the entire fleet,” said Gordon Beck as Livet walked into the horticultural wing of the facility.

A small thud was heard as the tsunami hammered the mountainside.

“The one out of Lyttleton?” he asked his senior.

"All nine ships were destroyed. The only activated rescue beacon is sinking. We think the hull of the escape pod was compromised. Linda was on board. I'm sorry, Roger."

Roger slumped into a chair. Linda had been his romantic partner for three years. He wept for several minutes, consoled by Gordon's hand on his shoulder. His heart was broken.

"The second fleet?" he asked meagerly.

"We're in contact but they may be in grave danger," Gordon responded grimly. They were on their way from a port on the southernmost part of South America.

They sat in reflection. Gordon gazed at the plants he had cultivated in the previous two years. He tended to the Vault's gardens and aquaponics systems in his spare time. His slender hands reached out for the leaves of a small shrub. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Roger's tall figure, seeking a moment he could offer further condolences.

"All project members please report to the command center," said Sean Brennan, the onsite director of the Vault.

Gordon slowly rose up to go, feeling the weight of his sixty-five years, and glanced back at Roger. Roger was lost in thought and scratching at his dark beard.

"Let's see what's happened," said the older man.

"As I'm sure you all have heard, a kilometer-wide asteroid impacted off the shore of Christchurch earlier today. The city has been completely annihilated. Wellington has burned to the ground. The debris field has affected the eastern seaboard of Australia and all of its major metropolitan areas. Several key satellites are unresponsive.

There are also preliminary reports of a major impact expected tomorrow at approximately 600 nautical miles south of Hawaii. It could be larger than anything we have yet confirmed. All human life will be erased from the major islands of Hawaii and the lesser island of Kiribati within the hour of impact,” said Brennan to the seven other men in the room. “The resulting tsunami from the Christchurch impact overtook the refugee fleet scheduled to arrive here tomorrow morning and there is no trace of survivors,” he continued.

All eyes turned to either Roger Livet or Luis Medinas. Luis’ wife of thirty-five years had also been aboard one of the vessels. Both men had been told of their terrible misfortunes before the meeting. They both sat awash in tragedy. Luis scanned the room with watery eyes. He was grateful for the sympathetic looks that met him.

“Did Jacob and Adona make it out of McMurdo?” asked Eddie Adler. Eddie was a retired Swiss doctor who had contributed significant funding and research efforts into the building of the Vault. He was more or less the founder of the Vault.

“Our scans show the tsunami’s main point of impact as a hundred yards east of the base. They’re gone, Eddie,” replied Brennan. “No radio contact. Nothing.”

Groans and murmurs filled the command center for several moments. McMurdo was only a snowmobile’s ride away. Now it lay beneath the ocean’s waters.

“What else?” asked Roger. His arms were folded and he was leaned back into his chair.

“We lost one of our satellites,” said Brennan.

“I told you we should have contracted for a third with the Chinese,” barked Nick Williams. A lock of his red hair fell into his face as he shifted angrily. Nick was a mechanical engineer and programmer who had made a small fortune from his work in driverless car systems. The small group had come to trust his brilliance with the mechanical systems he had designed for the Vault.

Cong Yu spoke up for the first time in a group meeting in several days. He had spent almost a week trying to contact his son, who was tying up loose ends at their home in Jinan, China. Cong's hair seemed to have turned grey overnight when a news bulletin came through to him about martial law being declared in his home province.

"We needed the funds for the fuel cells, Nick. The price was too high. We needed the cells. We have them. Whatever happens, we're safe here...for decades...maybe centuries."

"We may be safe but there are no women," said the last member of the group, Herman Nyakane. At age 47, Herman was the second youngest man of the Vault members who were onsite. "What good is a 135,000 square foot facility in the side of a mountain if there are only men inhabiting it? We have power for 400 years but we need women to populate if we're even going to make it a single generation!"

Brennan looked at him and said, "We're looking at global extinction, Herman. Where there is a will, there is a way. Svalbard is fully operational. NADP is fully operational under Cheyenne Mountain. Kohnen on the other side of the continent is making last preparations with a fully balanced population of 80. The second fleet out of Punta Arenas is three quarters of the way here."

"And it sounds like deep space punched a hole into the side of planet out in the Pacific, Sean. Don't talk to me about the North Americans and the Norwegians. They're thousands of miles away and worse off than we are. We have the best facilities. And Kohnen? Kohnen is nothing. They're a little hole in the ground," replied Herman.

"Just be glad you're here," growled Nick.

Nyakane walked out of the room. One of his servbots could be glimpsed attending to his orders as he stormed off in the direction of his laboratory.

“We have time. Stop scaring them, Sean. Life won’t be snuffed out overnight. The worst of it will be over soon enough,” said Eddie. He was the oldest and calmest of the onsite members. He wore a grey tweed jacket every day, whether he was in Antarctica at the Vault or in his home in Saint Moritz. He was a man of poise and intellect, haunted by a vanity he sought to resolve in his old age.

The lights in the command center dimmed as Project Leader Brennan activated the holographic function of the large table in the center of the room.

“The major impacts are expected to occur between Seoul and Tokyo here, possibly the worst of them in the Celtic Sea, one near this quadrant in the southwestern Black Sea, the center of the Gulf of Mexico, and here, 100 miles east of Curitiba. Other major impacts are expected in the East Siberian Sea, in the south of the Kara Sea here, and in the western Arctic Ocean. You can clearly see a diagonal distribution of the impact points across the surface of the Earth. Between 75 and 95 percent of total human population is expected to be lost from the impacts and their effects. We don’t yet know what the atmospheric outcomes will be from this catastrophe,” said Brennan.

“That’s enough for me,” said Nick Williams. “Do you have any other news for us, Sean?”

Nick cracked his large knuckles and stroked his forearms to calm himself down.

“No. There’s no more news. I’m glad you all chose to be here. It’s a horrible shame we were caught off guard. I applaud your individual commitments to the Vault. Most of you have forgone conventional family and social lives to contribute to this sanctum. I offer my deepest sympathies to Luis and Roger for their losses. We have built the Vault with our wealth, our years of effort, and against many odds. We are here now and our mission is to weather the horrific storm outside. We will survive. We will hold out hope for others to come. Our extreme isolation is our great savior but, perhaps, it will also be our undoing. Let us hope our lines of communication to the rest of the world stay unfettered. I have nothing more to say. Please, take as much time as you need until you’re ready to reconvene.”

Chapter 2: Calm Before the Calamity

Roger slept in his quarters. He dreamt of Linda. They were on a mountain path, climbing higher and higher. He could see giant sequoias in his periphery. There was something he was focused on. He couldn't quite make it out. First came bright lights, then they died down and were replaced with a low glow. He took Linda's hand. When he looked at her face he could see there was something off. She had platinum blonde hair, wildly different from the dark brown he was accustomed to. She walked robotically. He looked at her closely. There was a tattoo on one of her eyes, a barcode. Roger felt confused. He turned his attention back to the low lights. The mountain path gave way to a facility. At first the facility was scattered among the rocks and shrubs of the mountainside, a little panel here or a piece of machinery there. Then it all came together at a door. He looked for Linda at his side but she was gone. He looked at the door as carefully as he could. He ran his hand through his thick hair. There was something scary beyond the door. It looked like a panther. It paced back and forth, watching him from behind the glass. It growled. He narrowed his eyes to see more clearly and saw it was standing on its back paws. The panther noticed Roger's gaze and growled at him. He woke up in a panic.

The full spectrum track lighting slowly came on in his quarters as he sat up in bed. Roger winced and snapped his fingers twice to turn off the lights. He wanted to lay in the darkness for a time. Today was different. He felt a need to think back on something. What that something was eluded him. It was something important. His fear eventually softened and subsided. He waved his hand at his window and the shields parted to show him the Antarctic continent below.

Roger prepared himself a cup of coffee and set about tending to the various projects for the day. He had to assist in some of Nyakane's experiments. The knowledge that Linda was gone had returned to him. It had been four months since he'd seen her last. He had grown accustomed to her absence but the thought that she was gone and never coming back tore at his insides. He sat down at his desk to blubber.

A knock came from the entrance into his chambers. The door slid open. It was Gordon.

"Luis is gone," he said to the grieving figure at the desk.

"What? Where did he go?" asked Roger.

"We don't know. He took the *Spade*," Gordon offered, referring to the speed ship used by the Project for rapid two-person transportation. Ten years prior it had been among the fastest non-military ships in its class.

"He disabled the navigation systems. We can't track him," he continued.

"Do you think he went to look for his wife?"

"I think so. Nick is furious, the stubborn bastard. Luis is doing what any of us would—"

"No, it's okay. I've accepted it."

"Honestly, I thought you'd be the one to go. I was surprised to see you here. No one actually saw the *Spade* leave harbor. Nick went to see if the wave did any damage to the shielding and saw it was gone."

"And you? How are you taking things?"

"I watched the southern half of the Great Barrier Reef get swept away. It's an absolute ecological catastrophe. The rare flora and fauna of Oceania are on the brink of total decimation. So many people have died so suddenly. There's no ocean traffic. There's nothing. I'm shattered... but after all, we expected something like this. It could get even worse."

"Yes, it could get worse."

"We shall have to see how the atmospheric aftereffects play out," said Gordon.

“Are you and Herman working together today?”

“As usual. A specimen died last night after the meeting.”

“I wish you two would stop by my laboratory more often. You’ve not seen the work I’ve done in the last six months. Stop trying to replicate Angus. You’ll be hard pressed to replicate such a creature. He is a miraculous oddity. Leave it at that.”

“If we got Angus right, we can get others right.”

“The future is in robotics and bionics, not cellular regeneration or gene modification or whatever it is you two are cooking up.”

“Tell that to Angus. How many dogs do you know that will live thirty years? Machines have seen their time.”

“Thirty years is no feat. Plenty of dogs have lived that long, Roger.”

“No basset hound has.”

“Right. Well, he’s six months old. Let’s see how long he makes it before you declare him a success.”

“There will be others, Gordon. Angus is the first of many. Imagine if we apply the techniques to ourselves!”

“You first.”

“Maybe I’ll get the chance.”

“You should really stop by sometime. Nick has been lending a hand. A lot has happened.”

“I think I will.”

“Well then, cheerio,” said Gordon as he left Roger’s room.

Roger drank from his cup of coffee and returned to his blubbering.

Sean Brennan was busy writing his morning’s log. It was a daily duty assigned to the Vault’s leader.

June 23rd, 2094, 13:45

Vault, Antarctica

Brennan Log

Morale is low. Both Luis and Roger have lost their partners. There are no women on base, which poses some serious challenges. Major impacts have been observed and recorded in several locations in the SE hemisphere. A tsunami destroyed the first refugee fleet. We maintain contact with the second fleet but our communication lines are in danger of being destroyed permanently as we have access to only one satellite in orbit. We anticipate the orbital path of the second satellite to be in perfect position to be destroyed when the second wave of major impacts strike the planet. I haven't shared this information with the rest of the staff. If we lose communication to the outside world, we will have to patch communications systems from the Spade into the mainframe. That is, unfortunately, an impossibility at this point as Medina has taken the Spade. We have no idea of his location.

My thoughts on the staff:

Nick Williams is holding up well. I believe he is the best-suited for our extreme isolation. He busies himself with maintenance of our solar energy and waste-disposal systems. We have a long exile ahead of us. I'm sure he will keep at us at full operational capacity in anticipation of the arrival of the second fleet. He noted no structural damage from the tsunami that struck yesterday. I'm concerned about a confrontation between him and Luis when Luis returns. Nick is so protective of the Spade.

Roger Livet spends his time in his quarters. I have no updates on the progress of his work with Herman Nyakane. Their work on modified felines remains untouched in light of yesterday's tragedy.

Cong Yu has continued to surprise me with the versatility of his offerings to our operations. He spends much of his time working in his kitchen. I think it helps him pass the time. His thoughts remain with his son on mainland China. He is the only non-scientist of our group.

No updates on Gordon Beck.

No updates on Herman Nyakane.

Katie Thompson is wrapping up some affairs in Zurich. We have no timetable for her return. I doubt she will find passage.

Eddie Adler has settled well into our medical clinic. He anticipated a lengthy secondary screening process of all arriving members. He will be hard at work when the passengers from the second fleet arrive. We have the finest medical doctor in Europe on our staff.

Jacob Fairfield is missing. He is presumed dead along with Adona Campana. They were at McMurdo base when the tsunami struck. I can only hope they were underground but I am not confident.

As for myself, my physical health is with me. I am deeply troubled by the hundreds of thousands of deaths in New Zealand and Australia. Stradbroke Island shielded the city from the worst of it. I wonder what will come of the 2.5 km wide object that crashed into the middle of the Pacific. Gordon mentioned the Great Barrier Reef sustained heavy damage. I have not been to the command center since yesterday's meeting. All updates to my quarters have been disabled. I will learn more soon enough.

I am beginning work on predictive room control systems for the Vault this afternoon. Nick Williams will be helping me in his spare time to implement the necessary hardware configurations for the predictive systems. This work should take me two weeks from start to finish. I will then turn my focus toward neural modifications on the Angus Project. It will be a delicate procedure but I am confident that with Adler's help and Nyakane's oversight we will be able to preserve the specimen in perfect health. I have already completed much of the programming.

I have not scheduled another onsite meeting. I will be holochatting with Aina at Svalbard in 2 hours.

Cong Yu stroked the grey hair on his chin while he stirred the large pot of stew before him. Several kitchen servbots approached him for instructions and scurried away upon receiving a tongue-lashing from him in his native Mandarin. The servbots annoyed him with their awkward movements and unnatural voices but they made his work much more pleasurable. In the kitchen he could do as he pleased with the full knowledge that all of his messes would be cleaned the moment he stepped out.

Herman Nyakane entered into the kitchen and whistled at Cong. Cong motioned for Herman to wait a moment. He ordered a servbot to fetch his favorite Ningxia wine from the cellar beneath the kitchen.

"Where did you send it?" Herman asked as Cong joined him at a small steel table at the back of the kitchen.

"Down into the cellar." replied Cong.

"I was a boy the last time I saw a wine cellar."

"I had it dug by some of Nick's servbots last fall. There's a charm to having a wine cellar."

The servbot sent to the cellar moved back into the kitchen at an astonishing speed, deftly maneuvering around the other servbots who were attending to various instructions. It poured two glasses of wine with perfect precision and set them before the companions.

"To my son," toasted Cong.

"To your son," replied Herman. "May he make it to your bunker on Chongming."

"Yes, I certainly hope so..."

"I want to run something by you."

"Go on."

"Have you noticed anything peculiar about Luis' personal quarters?"

"You know, I have never been in his quarters. I didn't think anybody had. It's behind an airlock."

“Exactly! Why does a physicist need an airlock? I was hoping you could give me some sort of clue since you were with Brennan when the final designs were approved,” said Herman.

A loud clatter broke their concentration. They whipped their heads to face the source of the sound. There stood two servbots, both tugging at the same cutting board. The smaller servbot, a blue one, was losing out to the larger one, a lesser yellow servbot, due to the size of the yellow’s arms.

“Sha bi!” Cong yelled in alarm as he jumped to his feet. He chided the servbots and thrust a second cutting board between them. The blue, with the superior programming, relented and took the cutting board in its hands. It shot what seemed to be a look of contempt at the victorious servbot.

Cong stopped to test the stew before returning to the table.

“They don’t actually fight each other do they?” asked Herman as the master chef returned to his seat.

“No! Of course not!”

“Wasn’t Bai involved in some scandal in Ukraine with aggrobots?”

“That was Tauron, a subsidiary of Bai. We had very little to do with them. Sean has no interest in fighting characteristics. You were saying about Luis’ quarters?” asked Cong.

“Something’s not right there. He’s not keeping any of my specimens for me. To my knowledge, there is absolutely no need for him to have that airlock. What can you tell me about his work?”

“We don’t know what Luis does with his time. We know that Nick set up some osmotic power generators 20, 27, and 50 miles away from here. The lines feed into his quarters and feed into the shielding machinery as a secondary source.”

“Is that it? What about what he did before the Vault?” asked Herman.

“We don’t know.”

“How the hell did he get on site? How do we know he’s going to contribute to our mission?”

“He got on site because he paid double what Eddie or Nick paid for their places. He paid in gold bullion. He signed the pledge, just like the rest of us. I am a businessman after all, Herman. We needed funding for the satellites and we needed funding for the shielding to be manufactured ahead of schedule. Luis filled our gaps.”

Herman had finished his glass of wine. The same servbot that poured the glass sped over, gently plucked the empty glass from the table, and refilled it. The sweet scent of stew filled the air.

“I didn’t want another glass,” said Herman.

“Aiyo! I’ll take care of it,” said Cong. He poured the wine back into the bottle through a small funnel. He tossed the funnel over his shoulder and onto the floor. He winked at Herman as a yellow servbot came and picked up the funnel.

“What else can you tell me about him?”

“Mostly what I can tell you is what we don’t know about him. Additionally, we don’t know how he disabled the navigation system on the *Spade*. As far as Brennan knows only Nick, he, and I have access to the navigation system. We don’t know how old he is—

“Late fifties at the most,” offered Herman.

“Yes, I agree. At the most. We don’t know what his wife did. We think he is Chilean or Argentinian, based on his accent and mannerisms. He refused to provide us with a blood or hair sample for the background check.”

“Why did you take him on?”

“Like I said, money talks,” said Cong.

Herman crossed his legs and scratched through his dress sock at his ankle. He winced in relief. A thought crossed his mind.

“I’m going to see what he’s keeping behind the airlock,” he said to Cong, who was back on his feet and tending to his stew. Cong waived his hand dismissively at Herman.

“You have no chance of bypassing his safeguards, Herman. Stick to your work. Luis will prove his worth. We just have to wait and see. He’s the reclusive type.”

“That’s if he comes back,” said Herman.

“Lunch is ready.”

Eddie Adler sat in a large leather desk chair and read from a book documenting the link between the degradation of social systems in the 21st century and the exploitation of children by adults. Major companies around the globe launched humanitarian campaigns aimed at improving the lot of children in the world. Public schools were displaced by homeschooling institutions and digital academies of arts and sciences where the children had say in the hiring and firing of faculty.

He stood and set the book down.

His study was attached to the medical clinic. Several framed diplomas lined the wood paneled wall above his desk. A cigar room had been installed off to one side of the study. Large wooden cross beams adorned the ceilings, their deep color shone brilliantly from the light of Victorian era light fixtures that hung from them. Red velvet seating stood in the center of the study. A large holographic work table stood between the chairs and couches.

Adler opened the door to his cigar room and sat at a comfortable chair. Luis and Roger both losing their partners brought many memories to mind. He thought back on the day he told his wife he wanted a divorce. The memories were slow to come up but with a few deep breaths he gained his focus.

She had been sitting in a chair in the sun room of their villa in St. Kitts. He ran his hand across the thin fabric of her white blouse and sat down next to her.

“You’re back,” she said absentmindedly as she looked out on the beach.

“Was Abe here last night?” he asked her.

"Is there any point to pretending he wasn't? You know he was here. He told me you were waiting across the street in a driverless when he left."

"I'm not bothered by it, Nora. I've known for months."

"When did you first know?" she asked.

"In Sydney. At the conference there. I'm not going to hold you to the prenuptial, by the way."

She gripped his leg with her hand and held his eyes with a look of shock in her own. He felt the ring on her finger digging into his beach pants.

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't have a good reason. I'm old. I'm tired. I want to spend my remaining years living for a legacy beyond wealth and splendor. You've been a fabulous companion for the last eight years. You're still young. I don't have any fight in me. Were I younger man, I would make sure you didn't see a single bit of my money. But now I am older. I don't wish to squabble. My terms will be generous, given your infidelity. However, you showed me some good times and I am grateful."

Nora was speechless.

Adler stood up and walked out of the sun room and over to the railing of a porch where he could see the beach with greater clarity. Nora followed him. She rested a hand on his back. His lean figure towered over her. His silver locks waved in the breeze.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I'll tell what I won't do," he said with anger mixed in his voice. "I won't spend the last of my days with someone who doesn't love me. I have pursued a life of conventional success and exceeded by every measure: wealth, land holdings, professional esteem, privilege, a wife coveted by every man she encounters, and so on and so forth. I won't continue to pretend these distractions have provided my life with any meaning. I won't live for social approval."

"Oh, Eddie," said Nora with a pained look on her face.

“I wish to be alone now, darling, alone with my thoughts. Please send my regards to Abe. I’m flying to Berne tomorrow. Our divorce papers will be served to you. I’m sure you will accept the terms.”

He kissed Nora on the forehead, looked into her eyes one last time, and walked out of her life.

Eddie stirred from his memories and stood up to leave his cigar room. In a mirror he could see a single tear rolling down his cheek. He wanted repose and now he had it. He found himself longing for another companion. Maybe he was foolish in leaving such a woman, despite her flaws. None of the onsite members appealed to him. He wondered who he would spend his last years with. The vague threads of an idea started to form in his head. He thought of some of the recent work Herman and Roger had been doing. His thoughts turned to Angus.

Chapter 3: Despair on the Open Waters

Milena Overlook hugged her knees to her chest and shivered. She was a young girl of nine years old. Her hair was chestnut brown. She was on a bed in the cabin of a 105 foot speed yacht named the *William Gates*. Her brother, Hunter, sat down next to her on the bed.

"What are they arguing about?" she asked him, motioning to the adults up on deck.

"Dad is saying we should turn back," he responded.

"What for?"

"I don't know. I wasn't listening."

The two children noticed the engines begin to work harder. They exchanged worried glances and inched off of the bed to be nearer to the arguing adults up the hall.

"It's going to catch us! We need to turn back. We're sitting ducks out here," their father bellowed over the din of the other adults gathered.

"What's going to catch us?" Milena whispered to her brother.

"Just listen," he said.

A younger Chinese woman walked past the siblings, smiling at them as she went to see what the row was.

"We have no chance of beating the waves that thing has put up. We need to turn back," their father continued.

"We're pushing ahead," spoke a short, stout man wearing a blue pea coat.

Most of the other adults on deck parted so that the two opposed men could speak with one another.

"Franco, I own this boat. I'm paying for the fuel. I can buy us passage into one of the bunkers in Patagonia. Turn us around."

"That is impossible. The Patagonian bunkers have no room."

"How could you possibly know that?" asked the father.

"Calm down, Matthew. I know it because I tried selling this ship for a ticket in. They're all closed. There were only two sites anyway, both of them deeply landlocked. We have no chance."

Milena's father fumed at the thought of his yacht being stolen out from under him.

"May I say something here?" said Olivia, Milena's mother. She stepped into the ring that had formed around the two alpha males aboard the ship.

She continued, "There is no way we can turn back." She gave a hard but sympathetic look to her husband.

"Maybe there's something in Argentina. There's got to be something!" Matthew lamented, raising his arms in resignation.

"Darling, we can't turn back. We have to press forward. We only have hours. We have the best engines in this fleet. The best engines in the South Pacific. Let's be real. We're the only ones in this fleet who can make it before the tsunamis arrive."

Murmurs swept through the people assembled. Milena studied her mother's confident posture. She admired the way her mother shifted her weight from hip to hip, her delicate hands resting at her waistline.

"I think we should try for the Vault ourselves. We can't wait for the rest of the ships. They're already too far behind us," said Olivia.

"No! How could we do that to them?" cried Sebastian Martinez, an optical engineer from Montevideo. He had been leaning against a wall, watching the conflict intently and hoping to weigh in with his compassionate viewpoint.

Discussion splintered off into several groups. Arguments and counterarguments were exchanged. The ship's captain brought things back into focus the moment he sensed tensions ease.

"It sounds like we go for it," said Franco. He had been a captain of many voyages in this region. He liked their odds.

"I'm for it," said Matthew. The look of despair cleared from his face.

"Shouldn't we ask the other ships captains what they think?" asked a short, blonde-haired woman who had been sitting at a small table.

"I will tell them. They will understand," said the captain. "We don't have time for their opinions."

"Do they have any chance?" asked Sebastian. "Is there any way we can help them?"

"I can take on five more people if I offload some of the non-essentials," said Franco. "We don't need the lifeboat. It wouldn't survive what's coming, anyway."

"What's coming?" asked Milena, stepping from her place behind a counter.

"Very big waves are coming," said Franco, bending slightly to accommodate for her young height. "We can outrace them. I am a good captain and we will be safe but we will have to leave the other ships."

"Will they die?" asked Hunter. He stepped next to his older sister, imitating her courage.

Franco was at a loss for words.

"They might," said Sebastian, who had grown fond of Hunter in the ten days he had known the boy.

"I'm scared," said the boy. His body trembled.

"It's okay to be scared," offered his mother, bending down to console her son.

"Brennan says we'll only make it if we switch the turbines to full throttle within the next hour," said Matias, the ship's first mate, stumbling into the cabin from the wheel room.

Milena began to cry. Her mother held both of the children. They were the only children on board.

Franco left for the wheel room with Matias. They studied data sent to them by Sean Brennan. What Franco saw staggered him.

He immediately radioed the four other ships in the fleet. Altogether they were carrying forty passengers. These people were mostly specialists and wealthy passengers who had assured their stay at the Vault either through monetary means or through their needed skills.

“My friends, if you have the data from Central Command, you too must understand our horrible predicament. We have discussed our circumstances here on board. Given our extended capabilities, we have made a grim choice. At a little over 400 nautical miles from the Vault’s main dock, we can reach safety in 5 hours and 7 minutes. The mega tsunami from a major impact recorded 10 hours and 55 minutes ago will reach the Vault in 5 hours and 37 minutes. I can push our water jets and the turbine to 80 knots to buy a little more time. We have room for five more passengers if I jettison the lifeboat, the servbots, and some of the low priority medical equipment. We must leave the fleet and go on ahead. You must choose one person from each of your vessels for the *William Gates* to bring aboard. I will choose the fifth. I will choose a female as there currently are none at the Vault.”

The ships in the fleet came abreast of one another. Three of the five chosen for the *William Gates* were women. The five passengers boarded, all with tears in their eyes. Milena cried as her father dropped her servbot overboard. He consoled her. The servbot had been with their family for her entire life. It was a red, the second highest class.

Franco waved farewell to the captains of the other ships. It was conferred among the remaining captains that the fleet would race for a large inlet north of Marie Byrd Land in the hopes that the land mass would shield them from the effects of the mega tsunami. Should their fleet survive, they would make their way to the Vault.

Matias stood next to his captain and took comfort in the pitometer showing max speed.

"I can't talk for long, Aina," said Brennan to the holographic image standing before him.

"What's the matter?"

"The second fleet: they've split in two with the *William Gates* using everything she's got to get here before we're hit again. I'll need to get back to Command in case anything happens."

"Right, I understand. How are you holding up?"

"I'm anxious as hell. Medina took the *Spade*. We have no idea where he went with it. It takes nearly a whole day at full speed to get to Melbourne from here. Our only guess is that he's gone to try and find his wife."

"-no, I'm not asking how things are holding up, I'm asking you how you've been feeling."

"The world is falling apart. I'm terrified."

"I'm scared, too. A lot of people have died," she said.

"With the worst of it to come."

"How is Cong?"

"He's fine. I don't think he can wrap his head around how much things have changed in the past three years. He's been drinking more."

"I don't blame him. He's holed up in Antarctica with a bunch of scientists!"

"Right," said Brennan with a chuckle. "You should have come."

"I don't want to have that conversation again, Sean. I'm here. We can't change it now."

"I guess not."

"Tell me more about Cong. Please? I miss you both."

"He's taken up cooking again. He loves having Nyakane here. The man has built a veritable Noah's ark when it comes to biodiversity. The biosphere is incredible. Here's some footage a silver recorded."

"You've got your servbots filming documentaries?" Aina laughed. She gasped as the footage began to play, it surrounded her in all directions as a hologram.

"What do you think?"

"There's a stream!"

"And plenty more."

"I can see that. There are birds!"

"I told you: you should have come."

"No kidding. Our biosphere is tiny compared to this."

"You should see the one they built in Switzerland. Eddie saw it."

"It won't last, not like yours. You have wind, nuclear, solar, tidal, osmotic...this is just incredible!"

She marveled at the scenery surrounding her in her quarters.

"Why didn't you come? Come on, Aina. Tell me."

"My work is here. I can't come to you."

"Then why do we still do this? You could have done the same work here." he asked angrily.

"I don't know why we still do this."

"Yes you do. Don't bullshit me."

"I need to go," said Aina.-

"If we lose the second satellite?"

"It won't happen."

"It might. There's a good chance."

"I'm going."

The call ended. Sean ran his hand through his red beard and grimaced. She would come around but not today.

An urgent message alarm sounded in his quarters and he was pulled from his reflection. He dashed to the command center.

A grave complication had arisen on the *William Gates*.

"I'm working on it!" Matias growled at his captain. A crewman stood with him, tinkering with the failed turbine.

“¡Prisa, hombre! Our window is closing. There’s no help coming. Fucking do it!” Franco yelled over his shoulder as he stomped away.

He wiped the sweat from his face, cursed his lack of composure, and ran up the metal stairs before him out of the engine room. He was met by Olivia as he moved through the doorway.

“Why have we slowed down?” she asked, falling into step with the captain.

“The turbine is down. We don’t know why,” he said sharply, continuing toward the wheel room.

“What’d you say about a ‘closing window’?”

“Mrs. Overlook, I don’t have time to explain. I must radio Command and let them know our situation.”

“I’m coming,” she said firmly.

“Of course. Please.”

On their way to the wheel room they passed Milena and Hunter, playing with a robotic teddy bear Hunter had been gifted for his birthday a month prior. Olivia motioned for Matthew, who was nearby watching the children, to tend to them more closely. He gave her a confused look before getting to his responsibility.

“Command, come in,” Franco spoke loudly as he entered the wheel room.

“Got you, Franco. What’s the ship’s status?” asked Nick Williams from the command center of the Vault. He was seated in a large leather executive chair facing a large console with various holographic projections intermixing.

“Our turbine is down.”

“What’s the diagnostic say?” asked the engineer.

“Nothing. It says nothing. The CPU fried. Matias thinks it was running too hot. No replacements on board. Can you send the *Spade* out with a replacement?” asked the Captain.

“One of our residents took it out early this morning. He disabled the navigation systems. We don’t know exactly where he went with it. I’m sorry, Franco. We have no way of reaching you before the tsunami hits.”

“Hijueputa...” Franco muttered.

Brennan dashed into the command center, breathing hard from the long run.

“What’s their status?” he asked

“They’re about 25 minutes short, more if they keep going at this rate.”

“What happened?”

“Mr. Brennan, our turbine is down and the CPU is fried. We can’t run a diagnostic. We don’t have a proper mechanic onboard. One of our crew members is doing what he can with the help of my first mate. I don’t think we’re going to make it,” said Franco.

Olivia’s shoulders slumped. Her confident posture was erased in the blink of an eye. She walked to the water dispenser in the corner of the wheel room and filled a large cup. She steeled herself for what she would have to tell her family.

“What about the Niao?” Brennan asked Nick, referring to Cong’s rotorcraft.

“No can do. I took apart the transmission day before yesterday. It would take me half a day to get it back together and operational,” the engineer replied.

“We don’t have time to double back and rendezvous with the rest of the fleet. We may as well be dead in the water,” said Franco. A deep stoicism was washing over him.

Olivia held her hand over her mouth, holding back her sobs.

“I’m sorry,” said Brennan. “There’s nothing we can do for you. I’m so goddamn sorry, Franco.”

“Thank you. We will try to get the turbine operational. Please stand by,” said the captain.

He left for the wheel room, determined to restore the ship to full power. He did not yet want to notify the passengers they were short on time. Olivia went to speak with Matthew about their predicament.

Nick Williams and Sean Brennan sat in silent contemplation as they monitored the progress of the *William Gates*. They were soon joined by Nyakane, who quietly took a chair of his own after being informed of the situation.

They searched their thoughts for solutions.

"Don't the Kiwis have a base near here?"

Nyakane asked, remembering an old map he had once seen of Antarctica.

"No. They abandoned it last year. Threw everything they had into their facility in the Southern Alps," grunted Nick.

"It's washed out, anyway. Same as McMurdo," offered Brennan.

"Franco's a good man. He'll figure something out," said Nick.

The hiss of an automated door opening and closing brought their attention to Gordon Beck's brisk entrance.

"Herman, I've been looking for you," said Gordon.

"What is it?" asked Nyakane with a curled lip.

"You're still upset with me?"

"Gentlemen, I'll ask that if you're going to squabble you do it in another place," said Brennan.

"I can't be bothered right now, Gordon. Haven't you heard?" Nyakane asked.

Gordon took a chair, sensing the pain in Herman's question. He was briefed of the situation and joined in the glum mood that pervaded the room. He paced the room, fretting after several plants he had installed there on Brennan's suggestion the previous year.

There came a measured beeping from the main console. It took some moments before the men noticed it.

"What is that?" asked Nyakane.

“It’s the *Spade!*” Nick hollered.

Chapter 4: Paring Down

“Command, come in,” Franco said as he re-entered the wheel room of the *William Gates*.

“Loud and clear, Franco,” Brennan responded.

“My radar is registering a ship approaching our location at extreme speeds. Is it the *Spade*?”

“It certainly is!”

“The *Spade* should be alongside us in less than two minutes. Please stand by, Command.”

Franco notified Matias of the *Spade*’s presence over the ship’s intercom system.

Luis gently navigated the *Spade* toward the portside of the *William Gates*. He motioned Franco to slow down. Franco held his radio handset up and pointed to it. Luis shook his head. The ships slowed down and Luis took to his narrow starboard side deck by squeezing through a doorway largely obstructed by something difficult to distinguish. He held onto a short rail for support. Franco stepped out of the wheel room and waved to the new arrival. His heavy boots glided along the deck, hardly making a sound.

“*You are the one who took the Spade this morning,*” Franco said in Spanish, raising his voice to be heard over the hum of the engines.

“Yes. *I’m at your service,*” said Luis.

“*Is your engine diagnostic CPU removable? Our chip burned from the heat. We need a scan for our turbine. Otherwise, we won’t make it to the Vault before the wave.*”

Matthew, with knowledge of the situation shared with him by his wife, joined Franco on deck. He listened quietly, slumping his large arms on the rail in front of him. His windbreaker flapped noisily.

“*With that I can’t help you,*” said Luis. “*Our diagnostics are hardwired in. They’re not programmed for wireless scans. It’s an older system at this point.*”

Franco's heart dropped into his stomach. He swallowed and took a deep breath before speaking again.

"How much room does the Spade have?"

"It has little space. There's equipment here I can't part with. Maybe two people will fit, three if there's a child."

"Mother of God! Nothing more? Equipment?"

"Forgive me, there's no more space. I cannot leave the equipment. It is impossible."

"You're not going to reach the Vault if you stay here much longer," offered Franco.

"We have to choose who is going to go with him," said Matthew, understanding every word. He rose from his stooped position and regarded the others with a look of resoluteness.

Luis nodded in agreement.

"One moment," Franco said as he turned for the wheel room.

"Brennan, please give me a calculation on how long the *Spade* can stay with us. We need to choose who will go with her."

"With a full passenger load, the *Spade* can stay with you for less than twenty minutes," came the response from the command center.

"Thank you. Please stand by, Command."

He returned to Luis and Matthew. A third person had joined them in his absence. It was Sebastian Martinez.

"I'll gather everyone. We have extremely limited time," said Franco to his passenger. "Please rouse everyone immediately. We will meet in the main cabin in exactly 60 seconds."

Matthew and Sebastian hustled through the hallways of the yacht, beckoning everyone to come. Olivia was in a room full of passengers. She had told them of the failed turbine. They all stood and immediately made for the main cabin. Any who were missed by the efforts of Matthew and Sebastian were made aware of the emergency gathering by an intercom message.

With everyone gathered in front of him, Franco spoke, "There is no time for questions or specifics. As I am sure you have been made aware, one of our engines has failed. The rest of the fleet is nearing their temporary destination. We are faced with a choice. The rapid transport craft, *Spade*, from the Vault is alongside us. The *Spade* has room for two, maybe three passengers. Cabin space is extremely limited. I think we could secure one more person to his deck railing and equip them with protective gear. The *William Gates* will make directly for the Ross Ice Shelf. We will try for a break in the ice. My hope is that it will shield us some from the tsunami."

All eyes were on the handgun strapped to Franco's hip.

"You must choose who among you will board the *Spade*. If you have not chosen in four minute's time, I will choose for you. Please forgive my barbarity," he said with tears in his eyes.

"We must think of the children," Sebastian appealed to the eighteen people on board. Of them, only two were children: Milena and Hunter.

"I would like to go," said Xiao Ma, an industrial heiress and professor of psychology at the Peking University who had previously been on sabbatical in Santiago, Chile. She was wealthy in cryptographic currencies.

"Milena and Hunter must go," said Olivia in as certain of a voice as she could muster. "Is everyone agreed?"

"I am staying with the ship. I'll be in the engine room," said Matias.

"I'm going with him," said Roberto, the crewman who had been helping with the failed turbine.

"I stay with Franco," said the last crewman.

"We have two minutes," said Franco.

"Milena and Hunter *have* to go," Olivia repeated herself.

“Who will go with them?” asked Walter Hollobaugh, an Argentinian footballer. “Surely a man should go.”

“The three assets we can offer the Vault are fertility, ability, and youth,” said Sebastian. “I will not be going ahead of the women or children.”

There were seven females on board: Milena and her mother Olivia, Xiao Ma, an older actress named Tanya Monroe, a young newcomer to the boat that no one knew, a banker named Lynn de Claren, and a diminutive Brazilian woman in her forties named Vera Maurer.

“There are only men onsite at the Vault,” offered Matthew.

“I’ve had my time. I’m going to be alone now,” said Ms. Monroe. She walked out of the room as gracefully as she had once walked the red carpets of Dubai, Shanghai, and Mumbai. Her luxurious dark brown hair and earthy skin dazzled the men. She knew she had no chance of being selected.

“We can’t take the children from their mother. I will go, the children will go, and Olivia will go. I am willing to take the risk of being secured to the deck,” said Xiao Ma.

Milena began to understand that her father would not be coming with her. She clung to him and cried. Hunter was too dazed to understand much of the situation. He clung to a basic empathy for the fatalistic outlook of everyone who was present. This awareness disturbed him but he was compelled to stay with it.

“What about the rest of us?!” yowled Walter, rising to his feet.

Franco put a hand to his weapon.

“We’re staying with the ship. We’ll take our chances,” said a man in the back of the room, speaking on behalf of himself and his brother. They left the room. Two more men, their companions, left as well.

“30 seconds,” said Franco, his hand still hovering over his weapon. He kept Walter in his peripheral vision.

"Can't we try for two people against the railing?" Vera Maurer asked in a resigned tone.

"That railing won't hold two people. I checked it. It's flimsy. It's held in by maybe four screws, at the most," said Matthew. He gave his wife a sorrowful, knowing look.

"Women and children, huh? This is some feminist bullshit!" barked Walter, his chest heaving.

"Easy, Walter. They need women as a simple biological fact. They need specialization, which none of us aside from Franco, Xiao Ma, and Sebastian have. What need do they have for a retired actress, a bunch of businessmen, a soccer player, and a painter? No offense meant, Vera."

"None taken," said Vera sarcastically.

"Bullshit!" roared Walter as he slammed his fist into the wall on his way out of the room.

Hunter was startled by the violent sound and moaned softly. Olivia began to soothe him.

"I paid five year's salary for this shit! This is pathetic!" Walter continued as he made his way down the hall and away from the others.

Franco's tension eased away from the weapon. He quietly noted the time.

"I have no specialization," said the unknown woman. "I'm a college student. I was picked because all of the other women on our ship were mothers and didn't want to leave their children."

The attention turned to the last woman.

"I want to go as well," said Lynn de Claren.

"What can you do?" asked Matthew.

"I've worked at a bank since I was 15," Lynn replied.

"We don't have any more time," said Franco.

"There's no need for a banker at the Vault, nor a student. Come, Olivia. Bring your children. We need to leave," said Xiao Ma.

Lynn began to protest but thought twice about it when Milena made eye contact with her. The look on Milena's face was one of pure sorrow. The college student sat in quiet despair. She began to weep.

Franco and the decisive professor Xiao Ma left the room. They were followed by the Overlook family.

“It won’t be for long,” Matthew called to his children from the deck of the *William Gates*. They fidgeted and whimpered. Both were uncomfortable with the impossibly small breathing room they had as they stood facing each other next to the *Spade’s* hatch door.

“I love you. Stay safe,” Olivia called to her husband. Tears streamed down her face. A voice within her told her to fight for his passage. The voice became drowned by Olivia’s sorrow.

Xiao Ma sealed the hatch door. She was wearing a dark helmet and a thick leather jacket given to her by one of the crew. Franco fastened her in place between the railing and the door. He stepped back on to the deck of his ship and waved the *Spade* goodbye as it picked up tremendous speed.

Matthew dropped to the deck and sobbed uncontrollably.

Franco took a moment to go to the starboard bow and look out over the ocean. He unstrapped his handgun from his hip and threw it out into the waters. He cursed it and spat. There was work to do.

He ordered Roberto at the helm to turn to port and make for the Ross Ice Shelf. The water jets fired up to full power. Matias continued his struggled with the massive turbine engine down below.

“Sir?” came a voice from the door of the wheel room.

Franco turned to face it. It was the young college student.

“Yes?” he replied sternly, consumed by his mission.

“Is there really nothing we can do to get to the Vault?”

Her head barely peered into the room.

"I think not. But we have a chance."

"How?" she asked.

"With good fortune, the waves will toss us up onto the ice shelf. It depends on how high we're thrown and how hard we land whether we survive or not. There exists the possibility that we will be crushed upon the glacier themselves. I don't know. I will try to position us as best I can. The deeper into the Shelf we can make it, the more the Shelf will take the impact and the less we will be at the mercy of the ocean. Is that all, miss?"

"What can we do to prepare? Is there anything?"

Everyone on board was ordered to secure all cabinets. All large items that couldn't be secured were placed in a single cabin. All anticipated with great fear the oncoming destruction.

Franco and his crew did their best to prepare everyone.

Their best efforts would soon prove to be vain.

A wave nearing the height of a mountain obliterated them just as they reached a break in the ice.

The men gathered at the Vault command center left the room before the *William Gates* was lost. None could bear to witness the loss of life.

Luis Medina and his passengers made it safely to harbor at the Vault. Milena marveled at the shielding that opened up in front of the *Spade*. A large tunnel cut into the side of a mountain was revealed to her. It widened into a cavern where there was a dock and a brightly lit building overlooking everything. Luis left the passengers at a primary dock, safe in the consoling arms of Roger Livet and several other onsite members, before he guided the *Spade* to his own private dock. No one remained to see him unload two tall crates from the ship onto his private lift.

Chapter 5: In Sickness and in Health

TWO YEARS LATER:
October 22nd, 2096, 13:45
Vault, Antarctica
Brennan Log

Today has been a peaceful day thus far. I spent some time topside. Nick is upgrading the solar cells on the shielding and asked for my help. There's so little sunlight to draw from these days. I told him he should consider abandoning his efforts at improving our solar cell efficiency and redirect his attention to the other power sources we have. He was able to get the schematics for the work we did today from NADP before we lost the satellite uplink a week ago. It cost us some of Nyakane's research notes. We were glad to trade. We have no idea what happened with our satellite. It sputtered into operation for approximately two hours about 36 hours ago and then went offline. It was likely damaged by the debris field that passed through Earth's orbit on the 15th.

I've felt quite tired in the past few months. It has been more than I can bear to watch the planet die a slow death. I don't want to think about it again. I've written enough about it in the last two years. I'll save it for another day.

I could focus on some positive thoughts...Milena is picking up genetic algorithms much faster than I anticipated. She pesters Nyakane with some of the things we do in here. I can tell she does it to get a rise out of me. She's a spunky girl when she wants to be. She gets it from Olivia.

I'm considering leaving. Aina refuses to leave her research facility. Aside from Milena, I feel no strong connection here. Now that the calamities have died down, my leadership isn't needed. Mostly and more than anything else, I can't bear to be out of touch with Aina. It will be impossible to communicate with her if the satellite uplink has failed completely. I'm feeling tired again. I'll leave it here.

Eddie walked the corridors of the Vault with Angus by his side.

"Are you excited to see Gordon?" he said to the dog.

Angus responded by looking up at the older man and raising his eyebrows.

Since Angus' neural implants were installed, he and Eddie had become inseparable partners.

"How are we today?" Eddie said to Gordon as he stepped through the automated door into the ailing man's quarters.

"Better than yesterday, worse than the day before that," said Gordon. He was now spending much of his mornings in bed.

Angus made his confusion known by sputtering and emitting a brief yowl.

"He's still sick," Eddie said to the dog. He turned his attention back to his patient.

"How is your compendium going?"

"Just fine. Just fine. I've dictated the majority of it. The stimulant you had me on is wearing me down. I've gone off the pills," said Gordon.

A robotic hummingbird fluttered into the room, dropping a pill into Gordon's palm. It had been cued to its task by the word "stimulant".

Angus let out a small bark in surprise.

"You like it?" Gordon asked the dog. "Hunter built it."

He turned back toward Eddie and said, "Nick designed the energy core."

A whistle came from somewhere outside Gordon's small quarters. The hummingbird flitted toward the sound.

“Hello boy!” Gordon beamed as Hunter made his way into the room and sat down by Angus, placing a loving hand on the dog’s head. The hummingbird sat on his shoulder. It gently chirped a song the boy had taught it.

“Look at you! When I was nine years old I was learning how to ride a bike. You’re doing such wonderful things,” Gordon praised his young protégé.

“Thank you,” he chirped before turning his full attention to an implant he and Gordon had installed at the base of Angus’ tail after it had been rendered limp by an accident in Nick Williams’ workshop.

“Xiao Ma has really helped the boy hasn’t she?” Eddie said approvingly to his peer.

“She certainly has.”

They both adored the boy for a moment before Gordon spoke again. His voice was hoarse from the effort of his morning’s dictations. He was compiling the full body of his scientific work on robotics over the previous 45 years into a single source he hoped would benefit Hunter and others long after his oncoming death from melanoma. Unbeknownst to all but Roger Livet, he was making major advances in the field of bionics. His illness was inescapable and now he must document what he could.

“What brings you in to see me, Eddie?” asked Gordon.

“Nick mentioned to me over breakfast that you were outfitting a servbot to help him with his work.”

“That’s right.”

“I was curious to know if you could upgrade the silvers in my clinic. Would that take you too far out of your work?” asked Eddie.

“What do you have in mind?”

Eddie slowly raised his hand and held it parallel to his shoulder. It shook noticeably. This caught Hunter’s eye and he turned his attention away from Angus.

"Do you see?" Eddie asked the roboticist.

"I do," Gordon replied glumly. "It started to happen to me about eight years back. We could probably fix you up with some implants. There's no need to fiddle with your silvers."

He winked at Hunter. Hunter was eager to be useful to the people around him, grateful for all the knowledge they had given him. A second hummingbird flew into the room and perched itself on his shoulder next to the first. They chirped a song of greeting to one another in perfect harmony.

"I didn't know you'd made a second one," said Gordon.

"This one is called Blue and this one is called Red! Do you like Blue, Professor Beck?" the boy asked.

"He has a splendid paint job. Who helped you with that? Was it Cong?"

"Uh-huh. He showed me how they paint in China. Eddie, do you need me to help you with some implants? We could do it all in Herman's lab!" exclaimed Hunter.

"Charmed, Mr. Overlook. I'd love your help but I think I'd prefer the silvers were upgraded before we put yours truly under the knife."

"What is 'under the knife'?" the boy asked.

"It means 'to be operated on'," said Gordon.

"Okay, you want the silvers to be fixed up first. Makes sense to me!"

"Good. Do you have time for it?" Eddie asked Gordon

"Certainly, most certainly. Send them by and we'll outfit them. Brennan seems to be pretty listless these days. Maybe he has time to help you work out any bugs that may come up with the tracking synchronization," said Gordon.

"Thank you. Anything you need from me?" asked Eddie.

Gordon hesitated and considered his needs.

The room was filled with the gentle hiss of sprinklers letting out cool mists of water over the plants filling every corner.

“Angus and I are going to see what Cong is doing,” said Hunter as he and the dog bounded out of the room.

The two older men smiled in their direction and waved goodbye.

“There is one thing I could use some help with,” Gordon said as he leaned back and reached for a chess set on the shelf behind him.

“Very good,” said Eddie, beaming.

“Is there any way you could send more of them? The noise is unbearable! I can’t concentrate on my work,” Xiao Ma said to Nick Williams over the communication system linking everyone’s work spaces.

“Lady, I sent you all the reds I have. Hold your fuckin’ horses. We’ll get it done,” Nick growled back to her.

“Mr. Williams, I appreciate you sending me the reds but I don’t appreciate the admonishments or the coarse language. I’d like it if you apologized. I experience more space between us when you speak to me that way.”

“Alright, alright, I apologize. It won’t happen again. We’re doing the best we can. I’ve got all my blues on the shielding project. The yellows are tied up with something else.”

“Any silvers available? I need the renovation done ASAP.”

“Are you out of your...I mean...Ms. Xiao Ma, I can’t send silvers to do chiseling and excavation work.”

“I thought I would ask. Can you build me some reds?”

“Why don’t you have Gordon do it?” the man asked.

“I don’t want to ask too much of him. He has so much on his plate already. What do you say?”

“It’ll cost you,” Nick said with a grunt.

“Of course it will cost me! What do you want for them?”

“I want out of two therapy sessions.”

“Mr. Williams-“

“Would you stop calling me that? It’s been two years and you’re still calling me that.”

“Pardon me, Nick. As I was going to say: you’re free to come and go as you please. No one is forcing you to attend sessions. It’s a purely voluntary endeavor. You don’t have to bargain your way out of sessions, though I think that’s very interesting information...”

There was a loud clatter on Nick’s end of the call. Xiao Ma saw the blur of a machine speed through the background of the video feed.

“Ah, shit! One sec, Xiao Ma.”

She waited patiently, wrinkling her nose at the sound of red drills chiseling into the mountain rock in the vicinity of her counseling office. They had been tasked with renovating and expanding her office and quarters. She had tasked herself with writing a treatise on the social problems plaguing the planet before asteroid impacts had destroyed a large majority of the human population. The latter part of the book was designed to address psychological trauma and way to recovery. She was in the process of planning when the renovation work began.

“Alright, I’m back,” said Nick.

“What happened?”

“One of the goddamn blues programmed a yellow to drive forklift. Pardon my language.”

“And?” she pressed him.

“Didn’t you see?”

“I saw something!”

“It drove the friggin’ thing into the workbench! Smashed up all my goddamn stuff!”

“I can see you’re feeling quite angry and it makes sense why,” Xiao Ma offered.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...so you needed some reds built?” he asked in a calmer voice.

“Please. Three, if you could. It would make things proceed much more quickly here.”

“Sure thing. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Goodbye,” she said with a smile.

The grating sound of drilling was replaced by hammering. Xiao Ma stood up from her stainless steel desk and made her way to the materials warehouse. Aside from the harbor and perhaps Luis Medina's laboratory, it was the quietest place in the Vault. She'd had a pair of blues place a large leather chair near the timber storage. She loved to sit there with the smells of the wood and dictate her thoughts.

Chapter 6: Learning Time

Milena did not begin to perceive the odor of freshly-caught fish filling Cong's kitchen until she stepped in through the steel double doors. She sidestepped several servbots attending to various tasks to have a closer look at the fish hanging on the hooks. She marveled at their silvery scales and pink flesh. She remembered fishing trips with her father on various chartered ships. Sadness filled her face. She felt the agony of losing him return. She spoke to the agony gently and eventually felt calmer.

A lowly yellow servbot approached her and held out its hand. She stepped out of the way and watched it take a fish down and pass it on to a blue that was in the middle of tending to a large, boiling pot.

She clutched her piano books to her side and continued on back through the kitchen. Beyond an elegant door at the end of a kitchen lay an entry room. A large painting of dragons and warriors toasting each other's deaths with glasses of wine adorned the wall. The mood lighting placed special emphasis on Cong's paintings and on several jade statues of birds placed on pillars of varying heights.

Milena reached out her hand to gently touch one of the statues as Cong entered the room from the piano studio that lay beyond.

"That is a Swinhoe's storm petrel," said the experienced instructor as he approached his pupil. He was dressed in a black suit and bow tie, a formality he insisted on regardless the venue of his lessons.

"It looks like a pigeon," said Milena.

"Yes, it is an ugly bird. However, it is also a very shrewd bird. My father loved them. He would paint them in his spare time and sell the paintings for money for my own piano lessons. Verily, he himself was an ugly but shrewd man."

“Do you have any of the paintings he made?”

“Unfortunately, I do not. I kept them in a vault in my home in Jinan which is under approximately 30 feet of water at this point.”

A silver servbot stepped into the entry room, intent on notifying Cong of some development regarding the day’s meal.

The servbot’s presence angered Cong. The silver darted out of the room as quickly as it had come in, sensing the man’s elevated heart rate.

“Mr. Yu, why are you so mean to the servbots?” Milena asked.

“They are a horrible thorn in my side, always pestering me!” he proclaimed to some unseen audience. “They steal scraps of food and hide them in my quarters, those little abominations!”

Milena crinkled her nose in confusion.

“Why don’t you have Mr. Nick run a scan on them? It would take him five minutes. Or maybe Hunter could help you-“

“Never mind that, Ms. Overlook. We have *Invention in C Minor* to attend to today!” Cong said in a huff, beckoning the girl to her bench seat.

“Yes, Mr. Yu,” said Milena, stifling a giggle.

“Very well then, let’s begin.”

Their lesson ended after an hour in which Cong’s precision-sensitive teaching style came out on full display. Milena was inspired to greater heights by his encouraging words and subtle hints guiding her in the right direction. The majesty of Cong’s early adulthood came alive once again in the warm light of the studio, irreverent of the fact that all of the world’s major theaters were destroyed, decaying, or buried in rubble waiting to be unearthed one day.

“Remember: five plays behind four which plays behind three. Master it and we will move on to synthesized movement, young lady. Very good, then,” he said as he motioned to the door.

Milena scampered out of Cong's luxurious quarters, through the now-quiet kitchen, and into a long, brightly lit walkway that overlooked the dock far down below. She ran past a massive maze of tubing, pods, and wheels built into the wall behind a half inch of glass that housed a large colony of hamsters her brother and Roger Livet had built the installation. She was careful not to bump into two yellow servbots that were cleaning out the mazes and setting out feed for the small creatures within.

"Hi, Millie!" Hunter greeted her loudly as he ran in the other direction through a parallel corridor, many of his animal companions in tow. His walkway veered to his left and into the cavern wall. She presumed he was going to visit Eddie Adler.

She entered into Herman Nyakane's laboratory, jumping as high as she could to touch some ivy Gordon had planted in the entryway. Herman emerged limping from the laboratory's operating room and bent down to give the girl a hug. There was a noticeable limp in his gate.

"What are you working on?" she asked him.

"Same as yesterday, my dear," he responded. "The right knee has received the platelet treatment. I shouldn't even be walking on it."

"I can ask Mom if she wants you to have the standing wheelchair," she offered.

"That's alright. Let's not bother her with that. Two days and she'll be out of it, anyway."

"Okay," she said, setting her books into a storage nook specifically designed for her use.

Herman scratched his nose and considered the girl before him. He cared deeply for her. Milena had grown very close with most all of the adults in the Vault. The way she dove into her lessons was an inspiration for Herman.

"Can I see the lion den again?" she asked, turning to face her tutor.

"Of course we can. Let's go do that first and then come back here. I'll have a silver set up an experiment while we're out."

“Yay!” Milena cried in delight.

They laced up their hiking boots and made their way to the biosphere. Milena whistled the melody of a song she had recently learned on the piano.

Chapter 7: Bedroom Talk

“Sean is thinking of leaving,” Roger said to Xiao Ma, who lay naked across her own bed.

“Aina?”

“Yes, her.”

“It’s a shame nothing developed between him and Olivia,” she said.

She rolled onto her side and propped up her head to see Roger more clearly. She smirked at him and said, “Then he wouldn’t have to try and sail across the plane to get some pussy!”

They broke into laughter.

“I’ve never heard a Chinese woman say ‘pussy’ before!” howled Roger over their laughter.

“Can you guess who taught it to me?”

“It *had* to have been Nick!”

“No, I knew you’d guess him though.”

“Who then?”

“Cong!”

“How the hell did you learn ‘pussy’ from Cong?” Roger asked.

“He calls one of his Yellows ‘yīn dào yán’ which means ‘vaginal infection!’” she blurted out with a snort.

They howled with laughter.

“Oh, my god! I have to pee,” said Roger.

He stood up and giggled the whole way into the bathroom.

“That’s disgusting!” he called from his place on the toilet.

“He has names for all of them. You never knew?”

She wrapped herself in her red satin sheet and sat at the head of the bed.

“No, I had no clue.”

“Yes, well, he *hates* the yellows. He keeps pestering Nick and Gord to build him new ones. They won’t do it! He’s offered them a bunch of money but they still won’t.”

Roger emerged from the bathroom. He held a shaving laser to his face while pulling his boxers back up with his other hand.

"Still, it'll be sad to see him go. What do you think? You're the one with the psychological insight here," he said.

"You know I can't discuss it. It's confidential."

"You talk to him like once a month!"

"Even if I talked to him just once I wouldn't say a word. Come on, Rog."

He jumped onto her bed and circled the shaving laser in her vicinity, pretending to threaten shaving her head. She wrestled him playfully and held his legs under her full weight. She tickled his feet and he squealed.

"Give up?" she asked.

"Yes! Yes!"

"Good, now let me have the shaver."

He handed it to her.

"You missed a spot," she said, aiming for a spot under his cheekbone.

"Thank you," he said and then kissed her shoulder before she pulled away.

"Do you see Milena much? It's so hard to keep track of everyone in this massive complex."

"I only see her when I'm at Herman's. She seems to spend most of her time with Cong, Herman, or you. Yesterday I saw her in the biosphere. She was with Herman," he said.

"Doing what?"

"Watching the lions again."

"Ah, it's incredible what you and Herman have done: three unique ecosystems feeding.."

"Four ecosystems," he corrected her.

"Four?"

"The river feeds into the ocean now. Nick helped us reroute it."

"I had no idea! I haven't been in the biosphere in ages."

"Why not?"

"It's too...natural there. I'm scared to cross paths with one of the predators."

"I don't think you have to worry about that, darling. We've scaled everything down."

"I know you have. Still, I feel unsafe knowing there are tigers, lions, and bears roaming around...even if they're half the size they would be out there," she said, pointing to some unseen continent beyond her room.

"We're thinking of expanding the biosphere. Would you like some sort of aviary where you can sit and reflect? Our resources are close to but not quite unlimited at this point. We made a viewing station for Luis yesterday. It took two hours, built it out of the back of his personal quarters."

"Could you do that for me? I don't need an aviary, just a place where I can look out onto the landscape while I work on my writing."

"Of course," he responded.

He took Xiao Ma in his arms and brushed a hand across her forehead and through her hair.

He asked, "Have you thought about us getting married?"

"Is that what you want?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've thought about it some. I don't know what the purpose of it is."

"I think it's to show others that you're both committed to each other's growth."

She scratched his back. A blissful look came over his face.

"I hadn't thought of it from that perspective. I always thought of it as a way of showing others that there's a definite boundary they cannot cross: the union of one person to another."

Xiao Ma pulled away from him slightly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The thought of a union to another person frightens me."

"Why is that?"

"I don't want to be in a union with another person. I don't want to be 'melded' or 'one'. I don't like the idea that all of your outcomes become my outcomes and vice versa. Reminds me too much of my parents' marriage. They stake their entire identities around their so-called 'union'. I'm more than that. I've been my own person for so long that the thought of becoming 'one' with you scares me. We're so different!"

"I see. You don't want to get married then."

"No, Roger. That's not what it is. I'm not sure you heard me just now. I was expressing a fear of doing what my parents did."

"Right, okay. I don't think I heard you at all. When you leaned back I kind of got lost in my own head."

"That makes sense to me. Something about that triggered you. I can see that."

"This is getting pretty intense for me. I don't know how much longer I can hang with you on this. I'm still just learning all these strategies. You've been an expert for years. I can't hang."

She stood up from the bed and set the shaving laser on her nightstand. She gave Roger a warm smile.

"I think you're wonderful," she said. "It's very sweet of you to bring up marriage. I think you did it because you want to be closer to me. I don't see a single fault in that."

Roger rubbed his forehead in relief.

"Good...okay. I'll think about this some more. Commitment to each other's growth- I'm going to think about it some. You don't want to repeat what your parents did, got it."

"Oh shoot!"

"Late?"

"Almost," she responded as she began dressing herself.

She had a visit with Eddie Adler scheduled.

"Thanks for the sex!" he sang to her on his way back to the bathroom.

“Oh my god,” she chortled as she dashed out of her quarters, sidestepping the brand new Reds at her doorstep.

The Reds looked at each other and decided the best course of action was to power down and await her return.

Chapter 8: Making Friends

“What the fuck does that do?” Nick asked Luis.

He was pointing to a large column shelled by some sort of whitened metal. It sat in a rear corner of Luis’ laboratory.

“Nothing, it does nothing, Nick. I told you I’m not answering any of your questions while you’re in here. You’re here to work on the coupling and nothing more.”

“Looks like a nacho maker,” Nick snickered.

“If you know where I can get an avocado tree, I’d be happy to make you some *salsa*, *sapo*.”

“I don’t understand a damn word of your *espa-ñol*, *amigo*.”

“Please, Nick. Just fix the generator and be on your way.”

“Alright, alright. Easy, *compadre*. I’ll get to it.”

Nick laid his toolbox by the side of the power generator, grunted as he squatted down, and set to work. Nick wore a pair of overalls and a set of leather work boots. He was the only tobacco smoker of the group, a fact that earned him considerable fuss from Eddie Adler. He was considering quitting. It was an archaic habit and he knew it.

Luis would not allow outside servbots into his laboratory. He was suspicious of outsiders viewing his work. He maintained closed circuits on all systems in the laboratory, save for the climate control and the power sources feeding into his section of the Vault.

He rarely allowed anyone at all to enter his laboratory. It was a sacred place to him. He preferred not share the nature of his work. He left his section of the Vault only to conduct field experiments far away in places he could not be tracked by overhead satellites. He did not want a soul to see what it was that he was doing. The omnipresent tension in his posture and the permanent crease in his brow were a testament to his intense dedication to secrecy.

The generator Nick had been tinkering away at suddenly came to life. Luis turned from his perch overlooking the cavern bay and smiled in gratitude at his husky comrade.

"*Gracias*, you have saved me a lot of work," he said, turning to face the fixed machine.

"You betcha'. It's gonna' cost you, though," replied the engineer.

"Ever the businessman, Nick. Ever the businessman. What will it be?"

"You have to tell me what *that* is," he said as he pointed to the large white column.

"Nonsense, I'm not going to tell you a damn thing about anything I do in here!"

"You drive a hard bargain, my Mexican friend," said Nick smiling.

"No. I'm not going there. You know I'm not Mexican."

"Just fucking with you! Easy, brother. Lookie here."

Nick removed the topmost tray of his toolbox and revealed two beers to Luis. The beers happened to be his favorite kind, a pale lager brewed in Santiago, Chile.

"*Chelas*...how did you get them? There hasn't been a new supply run in ten months."

"Well," said Nick with a shrug.

"Have a seat, please," he beckoned his guest to a small brushed metal table. He moved some things off the table and onto a nearby cart.

While Luis was tidying up the sitting area Nick sat down, crossed his legs, and looked around the laboratory. It reminded him of the inside of a nuclear missile silo: a large tubular open area going up several dozen feet surrounded by a staggered series of small rooms at different levels. Massive server walls could be seen within the rooms. Beneath the tube was a large rectangular work area and near the center of the area, several yards left of the table and chairs, stood a massive mechanism the likes of which Nick had never seen before.

"I wasn't sure you drank," Nick said as Luis sat down.

"I haven't in years. I used to drink these when I was a researcher at Llano de Chajnantor. ¡Salud!"

"What the hell is that?"

Luis peered over his bottle and into Nick's eyes.

"You know what I don't get about you, Nick?"

"What's that?"

"Why you are so rough and rugged. You're a world class designer and engineer yet you speak as though you were a plumber. Why is that?"

"I didn't come here to be psychologized, buddy. Xiao Ni Hao Ma already does enough of that."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to psychologize you or anything. I'm merely curious."

"I haven't thought about it much," he replied, leaning back into his chair and belching.

"I've never met a man as wealthy as you speak the way you do."

"I like things simple. 'Simple' is what made me all that money. 'Simple' is what the market wanted. 'Simple' is how I keep my designs. I use simple language and live as simple as I can. I do good work and my reward is the knowledge I did well. That's all I can really think of."

"I understand," said Luis.

He took a long drink from the beer in his hand and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“Well, what’s your deal?” asked Nick. “What in the hell are you doing in here?” We get massive power readings going into this place every couple weeks.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on. Give me somethin’! Maybe I could help you with whatever you’re doing.”

These were the magic words that unlocked Luis’ ambition and melted his steely resolve. The rare beer had its effect as well.

“You know...” began Luis.

“What?”

Luis gently shook his head and refocused his attention back on his companion.

“Do you have another beer?” he asked.

“Yup, I got two more. Then I got two more after that.”

Luis smiled for the first time in months. He was still mourning his wife.

“Why didn’t I ask you to repair something for me sooner?” he said as he set down an empty beer bottle.

Nick popped off of the gold-colored cap of a fresh beer and handed it to the astrophysicist.

“That’s two beers and fully-functioning generator. *Now* you gotta tell me what that thing is over there, amigo,” said Nick.

“You can’t tell a soul what I’m doing in here,” Luis said with a cold look in his eyes. His thick eyebrows bore down on the robust engineer.

“Deal,” Nick replied.

They clinked beers and stood to inspect the mysterious column. Later they would tour the entire laboratory.

Chapter 9: A Gift to the Boy

"You're going then," Gordon said to Brennan as he entered into Gordon's quarters.

"You didn't ask me here to dress me down did you?" Brennan asked.

"Come, let bygones be bygones, Sean."

He beckoned the man to sit down next to him.

"I asked you here because I want to go with you. Nick tells me there's enough room on the boat he and Cong built you."

"You want to try to make it to Norway with me?" Brennan asked incredulously.

"No, of course not. No. I'm weeks out from dying. I don't have that long. I want to die *out there*, not in here."

"There's nothing out there, just darkness, scavengers, and deadness everywhere. You don't even like *me*, Gordon. Why would you want to spend your last days in those conditions? You could be here with Hunter and Angus and all of this," said Brennan. He waved hand across the large quarters to indicate the beautiful plethora of plants that Gordon kept. "Hell, fly to Colorado in the airship if you're short on time and want to see some pretty sights."

"The boy knows. He wants me to go."

"I know I shouldn't be surprised. Why does he want you to go?"

"You really want to know? He thinks the adventure would be good for me: one last ride. He said I'd die more alive that way."

"How old is he?"

"He's nine."

"Unbelievable."

Gordon rose from his bed and walked slowly to a tray atop an end table. He served tea for the two.

“So, what do you say?” Gordon asked as he handed over a cup on a saucer.

“Gord, you can hardly walk. That’s what I say. You’ve got cancer everywhere in your body. You shouldn’t be on a boat. Take the airship.”

“Is that a ‘no’? I don’t think I’ll be a burden to you. A pair of silvers will attend to me. I’ll be just fine.”

“I worry but yes, you can most certainly come. I know that Gordon Beck, of all people, is not someone to be underestimated,” said Brennan.

“Speaking of that, I’d like to show you something I’ve been designing. Come.”

Gordon donned a hooded sweatshirt and smiled at Sean before rising and stepping gingerly into his slippers. An android unlike any of the servbots came into the quarters from Gordon’s laboratory and immediately made his bed. It was six feet tall, nimble and graceful, and covered in a black chrome material that gave it an artistic quality. Its bosom and ample hips reminded Sean of some of the androids he had seen at trade shows in Europe. The android would cease to function soon after Gordon’s departure. Its components would later be salvaged by Hunter.

The two men stepped into Gordon’s workspace. They walked past various workbenches, 3D printers, a forge, and many machines related to the roboticist’s work. A hovering drone the size of an apple traced them with its cameras before settling into its charging station. The air had a metallic smell to it and the sounds of a silver servbot arc welding reverberated through the surroundings.

“It blows me away every time, Gord. You have a *jungle* in your quarters. This is the complete opposite.”

“Fits with the theme, doesn’t it,” replied Gordon. He held his arms crossed behind his back. “Bisexual, bi-cultural, bilingual...what else...ambidextrous. It’s how I like things.”

“Bifocals,” Brennan said with a smile.

“Right you are. You know, Hunter is going to inherit my quarters and my lab.”

Brennan stopped in his tracks and gaped in awe at the roboticist. He said, “That’s quite a gift,” and resumed his pace.

“I love that sweet boy. He will do amazing work in this place.”

“He already has judging from the number of hummingbirds zipping around.”

“Almost there,” said Gordon as they continued their trip.

They stepped up to a vault door built into the mountain wall.

Gordon keyed in a passcode, held his face to a scanner, and said, “I had this built in case we were invaded by one nation-state or another.”

“They’re all- wow! What is it? Oh!”

Two silvers paused their welding as Gordon entered into the large chamber with his companion in tow. Above the servbots towered a large, humanoid form. It had the head of a panther.

“It’s amazing, Gordon,” Brennan said as he circled the robot that towered before him.

“Hunter designed it. I did the grunt work. The programming is incomplete. I’d like your help. You’re the AI genius.”

The two silvers formed into a chair as Gordon approached them. He sat down wearily.

“What do you want it to do?” said Brennan.

“It’s an antecedent, a rough sketch for what is to come. Basically, we want it to amble around, play with Hunter and Milena if they want, and defend the Vault if need be. ”

Brennan thought of the voyage to Scandinavia.

“I don’t have much time. There’s much to prepare.”

“Much of the basic groundwork is already covered with servbot programming. There are gaps in my programming knowledge that you shore up. “

“Living tissue?!”

Brennan ran his hand along the knee the imposing form.

“Glad you noticed.”

“These are incredible. The world has never seen anything like this yet.”

“It seemed like a logical next step after what we were able to accomplish with the Angus Project.”

“I’ll give you every free moment I have in the coming week. Consider it a gift to Hunter.”

Hunter lay asleep in bed, dreaming. A fast song played while many young students danced. He was in a park under a night sky. He wanted the music to play more quietly, so he walked up to a stack of machines and unplugged them one by one. The sound of frogs could be heard. The scene changed and he was outside of a bunker in a war scene. He couldn’t hear anything. A black cat walked out from the bunker and stood on its hind legs. It moved its mouth but no sound could be heard. Hunter mounted a motorcycle and raced the cat toward a beach. He stepped onto the sand from the edge of a road and his sense of sound returned. Before him he saw a mass of humans. They were all watching something out in the ocean. They were scared. Hunter began to feel scared until he remembered the cat. It stood next to him. He put out his hand and held the cat’s paw. They walked down near the shore. Hunter’s fear began to leave him. He put one foot in the surf, then another. The cat wrinkled its nose and then stepped in up to his waist.

“I wish you were real,” he said to his friend.

“We could hunt for fish!” cried the cat.

The dream vanished momentarily. He flashed back into it and there were fish all around him. He swam underwater with the black cat. He could not hear again.

The dream ended and he woke up. He slid out of the hammock in the biosphere's viewing station and dashed off to find his mother. He wanted to tell her about the dream. Together they could discuss its meaning.

Chapter 10: In Good Hands

"I'm going with them," Herman said to Eddie and Xiao Ma. He would be joining Gordon and Brennan on their voyage north.

They sat in three leather chairs equidistant from one another.

Eddie crossed his legs and asked, "Really?"

"Have you told Olivia yet?" Xiao Ma asked.

"Yes, I'm going and no, I haven't told Olivia yet. I almost told Milena last week when we were observing the lions. She knows something is going to change. I don't think it will catch either of them by surprise."

"What about the biosphere? What about the work you were doing with Roger?" Eddie asked.

"The biosphere is in Milena's hands now. I've trained her well. She has deep knowledge of every flora and fauna present. Roger has exceeded me by every possible measure...I'm redundant here. They need my specializations at Svalbard. I talked it over with Sean earlier today."

"I thought you'd have gone to the research station in Lesotho, not Norway. You had a good relationship with them," said Eddie.

"They don't have the biosphere that Norway has. The lead researcher at Svalbard was mauled to death by one of his specimens. They've asked me to take his place. That's why I'm going."

"Dear heavens," muttered the Swiss doctor.

"They have been stupid to neglect scaling down their fauna. I'll remedy it."

"There are more women there," offered Xiao Ma.

"Yes, that's part of it. I'm 49. There's still time for a child if I find the right partner."

"Have you spoken with anyone there?" she asked.

"No, I haven't. I didn't scale down my involvement with my projects until a week ago when I heard Sean was leaving. Soon after that I received the invitation. There are thirteen unattached women there. I didn't read their public files."

"So you have no idea who you'd pair with?" asked Eddie.

"How do you feel when you consider that?" asked Xiao Ma.

"I've mostly felt curious to see who is there and how I will fit in. I won't be propositioning Aina, that's for sure," he added jokingly.

"It's a shame you and Olivia didn't get on better," said Eddie. "You're much like Matthew was. Actually, maybe that's not a good thing."

"Really? I don't think so," said Herman. "I think Cong is much more like he was, at least from what Milena tells me."

"Let's stay with the feelings here, gentleman. Eddie, how do you feel hearing that Herman is leaving?"

"Sad...that's what I can say at this point. Herman and I--"

"He's here," she reminded him.

Eddie acknowledged his misstep, turned more toward Herman, and said, "You and I got on well. I've enjoyed our many cigars and long talks. I feel sad when I consider that you're leaving."

Herman held his hand to his chest and sighed.

"It's okay," Xiao Ma reassured the two men.

"I've benefited from your company more than words can express," continued Eddie.

Tears rolled down Herman's cheeks. He stood and offered his hand to Eddie. They shook hands. Herman clasped Eddie's hand with both of his.

"You too, Xiao Ma," Herman said as he turned his attention to her. He held out his arms and they shared a warm embrace.

"You've done good work," she said to him with her chin resting on his broad shoulder.

Herman sat down and said, "That came out of nowhere."

"I'm sure it was very difficult to tell us within this context," the psychologist replied.

"It would have been easier to mention in a message," said Herman.

"I agree," said Eddie.

"You've shown a lot of vulnerability today," said Xiao Ma.

The gentle notes of Chopin's Fantaisie in F minor floated from the grand piano in Cong's studio. They built in intensity and he played as if he were easing into an old memory. Thoughts of his young adulthood and the glory of his performances at Avery Fisher Hall and Royal Albert Hall flowed through from his heart into his arms. The energy filled his hands. He remembered the young tension, the promise of his youth and the great unknown that lay before him. He forgot the pain of his failed marriages and the loss of his son. He forgot the mistakes of his years. He embodied the mystery and the elegance of the notes. Tears flowed from the depths of his aged eyes. He remembered the joy of meeting his first love at a car race in Monaco. With a final flourish he finished the piece and retired to a velvet chair and wept for the loss of all the beautiful places he had once roamed. He thought about his departing friends and how he would miss them very much. He had turned down their offer to join them. Parting company was so bittersweet. Gordon was a good friend. Cong was happy the man would die a peaceful death out at sea.

Chapter 11: Lessons Paying Off

“This is the chiracahua mudwort. It’s an annual,” Milena proudly said to her mother.

They were within the biosphere in a hundred square foot vivarium dedicated to desert.

“Which is your favorite?” Olivia asked with great curiosity. She loved to prompt her daughter and learn more about her tastes and preferences.

“The *adenium obesum*! Come, I’ll show you.”

Milena’s pigtails bounced against her shoulders as she trotted over to the large potted plant. Olivia followed along, wiping sweat from her forehead with her forearm. The lamps above burned their artificial sunlight down on the heated desert floor, causing her all of the physiological effects a real desert would entail.

Milena bent down and said to her mother, “Here it is!”

“What is it?”

A yellow servbot in charge of watering the plants rolled by and chimed at Olivia.

“*Adenium obesum*,” it said in a neutral voice.

“Hey!” cried Milena.

She wrinkled her nose at the simple Yellow. It continued on with its tasks, unable to comprehend her reaction.

“What else do you know about it?” Olivia asked her daughter as she came to stand above the plant.

“It drops its leaves and goes dormant at the end of its growing season! I love the beautiful flowers, see?”

The girl ran her inquisitive hands over the bright pink flowers and then over the intricate branches beneath them.

“The larger it gets, the less it needs water. There’s another one over there, too. I also really like this one. Its flowers look like an artichoke.”

The yellow servbot ambled by and said,
“Protea gaguedi,” in its emotionless voice.

“Yellow, go back to your charging station,”
said Milena in a friendly but firm voice.

The Yellow had been programmed to provide
information on the various desert plants it tended to
within the enclosure. It performed this task with
particular vigor.

“Maybe Hunter can reprogram it?” Olivia
suggested to her daughter.

“Maybe...he’s really busy making all those
robot animals.”

“Oh, yes. There are so many now.”

“We should go see him and Angus!”

They left the desert vivarium and walked until
they could exit through one of the facility’s large,
automated bay doors.

The sturdy engineer looked over at his work
partner from across the large workspace. Luis’
laboratory was beginning to look crowded with the
inclusion of many new tools and implements.

“Are you sure? You better be damn sure,”
Nick called sternly to Luis.

“I’m sure.”

“Goddamn it. I hope you’re sure!” he yelled as
he threw a large lever to one side.

The massive column that Luis had once
quietly transported into his laboratory shot to life.
The air near the column crackled and a dimensional
portal the size of a bottle cap opened for a brief
moment. The laboratory computer systems blared
various warnings and notifications.

Luis began to dance and yell out in pleasure.
Nick wiped the sweat from his forehead and
beamed.

The experiment was a success.

Chapter 12: The First Banquet

"It is beautiful," Xiao Ma said in Mandarin as she entered into the banquet hall.

The venue was decorated with all manner of opulent wares, utensils, tapestries, chandeliers, and art that Cong had been keeping in a storehouse.

"I thought I would be using it if my son got married," Cong responded.

"I'm sorry he couldn't be here to see this," she said.

She placed a hand on his shoulder in a rare gesture of physical affection between the two.

Over the next half hour the rest of the members of the Vault made their way into Cong's venue. Every Red in the facility was busy tending to the master chef's culinary orders. Two massive dining tables stood parallel to one another. Their profound walnut colors shone in the light of the hundreds of light sources dotting the dome ceiling above. A large skylight in the center of the ceiling allowed for the stars in the sky above to be seen.

On one end of the banquet hall, Hunter studied a gramophone playing the overture from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. He longed to open up the gramophone and disassemble it. He sat cross-legged on a luxurious rug, looking up at the enchanting device. One hand was engaged in scratching behind Angus' ears. The hound rolled around in delight.

Luis and Eddie stood engaged in casual conversation at the other end of the hall. They had not seen each other in several months. Neither cared for the other but the mutual respect was evident. Their dialogues were mostly limited to lamentations about the oncoming extinction of the human race.

Cong badgered his servbots from his post at the entrance of the kitchen. He quietly cursed the current disinterest in spirits on the part of his guests. He longed for a nip to quell his anxieties. He reached toward his liquor cabinet, settling for a pair of walnuts to rotate in his palm. He wanted to limit himself to only drinking socially.

Milena was attempting to teach the massive, panther-like cyborg how to dance. It merely remained in place and looked around in a confused manner; the calculations involved in mimicking Milena overwhelmed its nascent system. She giggled and sang over and over the name she had given it: Yama. This further confused the cyborg.

"Could I have everyone's attention?" Sean Brennan called over the din of the gathering. He stood at the head of one of the large tables, a glass of orange juice in hand.

Everyone gathered near Sean to hear what he had to say. A chair was pulled aside to make room for Gordon in his wheelchair.

"It has been an honor to serve as the director of the Vault for the past three years. I have learned so much from the responsibilities you all have entrusted to me. I'm sorry, this is really hard to say," he trailed off. Tears filled his eyes. He continued, "I hope to have a child as wonderful and brilliant as Milena and Hunter are. I really feel Aina and I came to terms in our last call, before we lost the uplink. I want to try to reach her. I don't want to wait until spring. It is so hard to leave you all..."

"You'll be back," offered Nick.

"True," said Brennan. "I'll be back. It may take a couple years but it'll happen, even if it's just a visit."

"We will miss you very much, Sean," said Xiao Ma.

"Yes, we will," said Olivia.

"Thank you. I will miss you all, as well. You have been very good companions and colleagues. This is very bittersweet for me."

"Shall we?" Herman asked Brennan in a knowing manner.

"Yes, it's time we chose a new director," said Brennan. "We can deliberate on it and then—"

"Dinner!" Cong exclaimed, his anxieties getting the better of him.

"Yes, dinner and dancing," said Milena. She was busily engaged in twirling her hair between her fingers. Her hips shifted gleefully.

"So, do we have any nominations?" Brennan asked the gathering.

"I nominate Angus!" Hunter said loudly.

The room burst into giggles. Angus pranced about, charmed at being met with so much positive regard. This brought on deeper laughter.

"What about Eddie?" Cong asked when the moment had passed.

"I'd rather not. I'm much too fond of my time in solitude these days. It's too much responsibility and activity for me at this age. However, you honor me with your nomination," said Eddie Adler. He was wearing a blue tailored suit he had bought in Geneva. He gave off a regal and dignified air. Inwardly he questioned himself. His habits of prestige mattered little in the Vault.

"Why not Hunter?" asked Milena, continuing to wiggle her hips. She was in an exuberant mood.

"Now there's a thought..." said Nick.

"That's a wonderful idea, darling," said Olivia.

"I'm for it," said Roger, relieved he wasn't nominated.

"What do you think, my boy?" Eddie asked Hunter.

Hunter put his hands in his pockets and wriggled anxiously.

"I'm a little scared," he said.

"What are you afraid of?" Milena asked her brother.

"I'm scared I won't always know what to do."

"It's okay if you won't always know what to do," said Brennan. "There have been many times I haven't known what to do."

"What did you do when you didn't know what to do?" Hunter asked with a smile that displayed his curiosity.

"I quieted things down and searched inside for the answer."

"Inside where?" asked the boy.

"Inside himself," said Xiao Ma. "He probably took deep breaths, calmed himself, and then let the answer come to him from his subconscious."

"I'm scared I'll have to choose who lives and who dies," he said as he burst into tears.

His mother came and held him. There were sympathetic looks on the faces of all gathered.

"I miss Dad," said Milena.

All heads were bowed in veneration of the children's grieving.

"I think I can do it," Hunter said as he pulled away from his mother's embrace after some time.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, Hunter. I'm sure someone else will do it if you don't want to. The last thing any of us would want you to do would be to self-sacrifice," said Herman.

"I can be the leader if everyone helps me."

"We *will* help you, dear boy," said Eddie. "You are precious to us. We will all help you to become a very good leader. We will give you and Milena the very best of what we know, just as we have been since you both came here."

"Can I lead sometimes?" Milena asked.

"Of course!" said Brennan.

He walked over to Olivia and her children and asked as he hunched down to their eye level, "How often would either of you like to lead?"

"I want to lead on some things and she can lead on others," the boy offered.

"We can do it based on who is best at what," the girl offered.

"Why didn't we do this sooner?" Brennan laughingly asked the other adults in the room. Most of them nodded their heads or offered smiles in return.

Cong sensed the time was right to order his silvers to serve the feast. He snapped his fingers toward the kitchen and hissed, “Kuài diǎn!” at the pesky machines. He nodded nervously along with everyone else when he saw his behavior had drawn some attention.

The heavy tables were pulled together and the gathering was seated. The silver servbots worked meticulously to set everything the way Cong had instructed them. Their nimble and precise movements all around the tables were hardly noticed by the humans. Most people were engaged in various conversations.

“You’re better at botany,” Hunter said to his sister.

“You’re better at building things,” she returned.

They sat next to one another, their small voices unheard by the others.

“You’re better at music, way better!” he said.

“You’re better at animal biology.”

“But you’re pretty good too. You’re better at planning stuff.”

“You can make everyone laugh a lot more,” she said.

“You make them inspired more often. How are we going to lead at all this stuff?”

“I think we don’t actually do much leading. I think they just ask us what we want and then they do it.”

Milena was again busily engaged in twirling her chestnut hair, a habit she took to when she thought hard about things. Freckles dotted her pensive face and the light of the chandeliers shone marvelously on a formal dress her mother had sewn for her.

A spinach salad was passed to the children. They took pause from their speculations to serve themselves.

“Not now,” Luis said to Nick. He shook his head at his work companion and widened his eyes to signify his seriousness.

"You're right, you're right," said Nick, silently cursing the weight of their exciting secret.

"Tomorrow, when they've set sail...we can talk about it then."

"You sure you don't want Sean and Herman to know?"

"We don't know the people at Svalbard. Some of them may be Statists for all we know. It's not exactly something people keep in their files these days," said Luis.

"Goddamn it, you're right. We trust our people, though."

"Once they leave harbor, they're not 'our' people anymore."

"Sure, I get it. Loud and clear, hombre. I gotta' tell someone though," said Nick.

"Give it some time. When we have something more concrete we can share it with the rest of them."

"Okay, okay," Nick said. He scratched the side of his head and winced in frustration. Most projects he was involved in were ordinary and unspectacular. His current work with Luis reminded him of the buzz and bravado of the work he once did, the work in driverless systems that had made him wealthy beyond his humble imagination.

On the other side of the table sat Herman, Brennan, and Xiao Ma.

"Aren't you worried about raiders or some government getting in the way?" the psychologist asked her dinner companions.

"No one is going to bother with us, as banged-up as we've made the exterior look," said Herman.

"Really?"

"Besides, we have countermeasures," said Brennan.

"Such as?"

"There's an EMP generator on board. It has a quarter mile radius. We fire it and engage our diesel engines."

"I had no idea. That sounds dangerous. By the way, Roger said you are making a port call in Lisbon. Why there? That sounds *really* dangerous."

Xiao Ma furrowed her brow and leaned back in her elegant chair. She was wearing beautiful pearl earrings on her ears and a look of concern on her face.

Brennan took a drink from a sparkling cider and said, "We'll need to resupply at some point. We're taking some potted vegetables and full spectrum lamps to barter with."

"How are you going to navigate without seeing the stars?"

"We ported a really old personal locator beacon we found in storage last week. It was with Eddie's antiques, a little thing his father used to use for hiking. It's *ancient*. We linked it with the ship's navigation but the corresponding source has an encrypted data cap I haven't been able to bypass yet. We get barely a trickle but enough to guide us the whole way."

"I had no idea we were connected. There's so much I need to check on!" Xiao Ma said excitedly.

"It's a *trickle*. We're talking 50 bits per second," said Herman.

She sighed and pursed her lips in frustration. She drew much hope from the sliver of fresh information posted by a few key remaining outposts in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Many of the underwater Internet cables had been destroyed and many had been destroyed by governments bent on isolating populations in the face of civil unrest and food shortages. New information was very scarce and access to the broader digital world was very limited at the Vault.

Course after course was presented to the gathering and they ate with special delight. Eddie pulled himself away toward the end of the dinner to cue a Strauss waltz over the hall's speaker system. He motioned to Olivia. She rose to take his hand and dance with him, her beaded evening gown flowing as she moved gracefully. Eddie moved with the strength of a much younger man as he stepped round and round with his partner. He looked into Olivia's beautiful face and the tension around his eyes softened. She moved gracefully across the floor, remembering their many lessons under his tutelage. She felt his hand across her back and thought momentarily of his mild tremor. It wasn't there. Her eyes softened in return.

Milena jumped from her seat with a giggle and beckoned her brother to dance with her. He straightened up from slipping scraps to Angus and joined her. They did their very best to imitate the older pair with an awkward shuffle of their own. Hunter sneezed loudly. This caused Cong to erupt in giggles. He met eyes with Xiao Ma, who made her own offer to dance. Soon they were dancing together as well.

Gordon shifted in his wheelchair, aching from the pain deep in his bones. He shed tender tears of pleasure as he watched his friends celebrating their lives. He felt held in his own care, unashamed of his oncoming death. He knew these two wonderful years at the Vault were the best of his life. He placed a hand on Roger's shoulder and rubbed it as if Roger were a son he was very proud of. Roger met his look out of the corner of his eye and nodded quietly before turning his attention back to the dancers.

As the waltz built into its final moments and the dancers left the floor, Herman raised a glass and proclaimed, "To my friends at the Vault. I will miss you dearly!"

The send-off the following morning was a mix of sorrow and gratitude. Sean Brennan, Herman Nyakane, and Gordon Beck had contributed so much to the Vault and to its inhabitants. Several last details were attended to. There was some mild surprise when Herman deigned to sprint up to his old laboratory and caress one of his specimens one last time, a bat whose eyesight he was attempting to improve with cybernetic implants. Milena promised to release the creature into the biosphere within the day. This satisfied Herman and he stepped aboard a tri-hull boat that had been built to especially for this voyage.

As the giant shield doors opened to allow the boat out of the cavern harbor, Hunter sent three of his hummingbirds to the men who had been his teachers. The little electronic creatures battled against the rush of wind blowing into the harbor. Each alighted upon a shoulder of the three men and harmonized a beautiful tune Milena had composed. The men turned and waved to the party standing at the docks as the shield doors drew to a close.

Chapter 13: Ezra's Lament

TEN YEARS LATER:

May 1st, 2106, 06:32 AM

Vault, Antarctica

Hunter Overlook Log

We have had some stunning breakthroughs in the past several days and I have had scant time for an entry. We brought the Ezra Specimen out of incubation last night. He is the most advanced clone we have yet conceived in our facilities. Eddie is with him now. We had none of the complications we experienced with previous clones: no respiratory complications, no organ failures, no erratic behavior up until this point, and no catatonia. I can see now it was a very good choice to keep him in incubation until his biological prime. His body is the equivalent of a 30 year old male. From conception, it took 8 months to bring him to this point. I think with some of the research Herman has sent over I can halve the aging process during incubation. I will process the data later this afternoon.

It was decided yesterday that the psychological imprinting for the Ezra Specimen will be modeled after the historical figure Jesus Christ. We uploaded portions of Luis' and Eddie's psychological schemas into the modeler, as well as the very best non-fiction research we have in the library on the personage. We chose this as the basis for his personality because research pointed toward this being one of the most non-violent personalities throughout history. The Winston Specimen taught us the importance of choosing morality and honesty as the root basis for personality. We have included in Ezra components of Winston Churchill's personality but only lightly so.

I think this is an important step in the right direction since our directive switched over from mere survival to global repopulation when Milena and I took over operations nearly ten years ago. We have yet to nail down biological reproduction in the cloning process. Ezra will be sterile. That's the big one. On the upside, we are coming closer and closer to reproducing full neurological capacity in our specimens. I would have thought it would be the other way around with neurological capacity being the great mystery. It is apparent to me, with the stagnation in Sean's work, that AI is still hundreds of years behind what we need it to be to reproduce workable consciousness in a cybernetic organism. I'm sure he could crack biological fertility in a matter of months if I set him to it but at this point I'd prefer we have fully rational and stable clones incapable of reproduction rather than the extreme archetypes we've been able to put out. We will be taking the Tuffy Specimen out of incubation in about 72 hours.

Luis is still out in the Spade on another of his missions. We'll hear from him by the end of the week. I don't think he'll find anyone. There just aren't people out there. They've all died off or are in the few bunkers we know remain operational. Sean estimates there are less than 500,000 humans left on the planet. I'm starting to believe him. His drones haven't picked up anyone in greater Europe for nearly 3 months. I think there are many times the number he quoted but thus far the evidence is on his side.

I find that I am despairing often these days. It seems so endlessly futile to focus on creating the best clones I can possibly create so that someday they may be able to withstand the ultra-harsh environment out there and reproduce within it. The planet is poisoned. Building humans and animals that can withstand the poison is starting to seem beside the point.

How do you purify a toxic atmosphere? How do you heal gaping craters in the most fertile zones of the Earth's surface? How do you restore light when all there is darkness? Do you plow under the graveyard of billions of dead bodies and hope they will make the soil fertile again? Do you leave them open to the air as a reminder? I find myself questioning my motives. Will I create a perfect clone just to see it go on to repeat all of the arrogance and mindlessness of the past in a world that can hardly sustain it?

"How are you doing, Ezra?" Olivia asked the robed figure as she entered the desert vivarium. She often saw him in this section of the biosphere. It was their shared favorite place in the entire Vault.

"Imagining a better world as usual, my child," he responded.

He stood before a stand of large cacti, lean arms crossed and gazing out over the small horizon in front of him. He was wearing leather sandals he had made for himself. His olive skin and bright green eyes were beautiful to Olivia.

"You know you don't have to call me that. You know you're only a few weeks old, right?"

"I know. It's a difficult habit to break. I'm sure you understand. It's not exactly easy to feel all these urges to behave a certain, pre-determined way. The training wheels are still coming off."

"Something Xiao Ma likes to say is, 'Where you have awareness, you have choice.' You're aware of yourself, so you can change."

"Why imprint me in the first place?"

"I don't know, Ezra."

Ezra sighed and sat down in the sandy earth.

"This station is too limited, too narrow. I need to break out of here and make the world a better place. Hunter and Milena don't know what they're doing," he said as he pouted.

Olivia bent down and rubbed Ezra across the shoulders.

"That feels good," he said.

“Good. I trust Hunter and Milena will figure out a way to bring greater meaning to this world. You’re an important part of that.”

“Why? I’m a part of it simply by being alive?”

“Well, no. You’re a part of it because you’re virtually indestructible. Your body was designed to be hardier than ours. You tumbled down that thing,” she said as she pointed to a large hill, “and didn’t even suffer a scratch. You got lost outside overnight and it didn’t even faze you.”

“Faze me? It was terrifying!”

“I’m sorry. I was speaking in terms of your body. Ezra, you can survive out there. You can see in the darkness and you can go through temperature extremes without it bothering you. I’m not even sure your bones can break! But yes, the emotional component is painful. I understand,” she said as she continued to rub his shoulders.

“It’s excruciating. I can’t have children. I have all these compulsions I can’t make sense of. Yet, somehow I’m a stepping stone to world repopulation. My Lord and Savior is a 19 year old genius with a cloning machine. It’s ludicrous! One moment I’m pondering the basics of my existence, the next I’m trying to figure out how to save the world.”

They remained in silence for a time. Olivia continued to rub Ezra on the shoulders. Eventually he held his hand up for her to stop. She respected his wish. He stood up with a resolute look in his eyes.

“I don’t want to self-pity. That is sinful.”

“Well, that’s good,” Olivia said awkwardly.

“I’ll submit to more testing and if need be, go into self-imposed exile in order to help Hunter and Milena.”

Olivia couldn’t decide if she pitied Ezra or respected him.

Chapter 14: An Idea Bubbles Up

"I know what they represent," Milena said angrily to Xiao Ma.

They were seated facing each other at two large brown couches in the horticultural wing of the Vault.

"Then why don't you stop it?"

"What's there to stop? They're already in existence. Do you mean 'stop making more of them'?"

The older woman paused to drink from a short glass that had been on the coffee table between them.

"Yes. I don't think you should make any more of them."

"But they're each so perfect! We could make more of them."

"You can do better than that."

"How? I'm infertile. You and my mother are too old. It's too much of a risk to go to Svalbard at this point. There is no facility left on the planet that can pull together the resources we would need to make an attempt at rehabilitating the atmosphere. Cloning is our only recourse."

"What *about* rehabilitating the atmosphere?" asked Xiao Ma.

"No. It's a dead end. We don't have the technology to operate on that scale."

"You've done wonders with the Vault..."

"I can't even wrap my head around the magnitude of such an undertaking. It's beyond us. We'd need a million servbots, thousands of engineers, fifty times the materials we possess in our stores."

"More cloning?" Xiao Ma asked skeptically. "What about the hummingbird we sent back?"

She was referring to a drone they had managed to pass through a time portal in Luis' lab several weeks prior.

“It took a week’s energy stores to send it back. Hunter and Nick are skeptical about sending a whole being back. They don’t know that one of us could make the jump in one piece.”

“The hummingbird is in one piece.”

The drone had been sent back 40 years prior. It flew to specific coordinates very nearby the future building site of the Vault and nestled itself into a nook where it went into hibernation for exactly 40 years. Then it activated itself and was recovered about half a day after it was originally sent out, showing many signs of having aged. Every precaution had been taken to disrupt as little as possible in the past.

“What would someone who was sent back even do?” asked Milena.

“Warn the world about its impending catastrophe. Give the coordinates of the asteroid field for the given time to the right people. Perhaps intervene in some social crisis.”

Milena focused her eyes tightly on the older woman and bit her lip in concentration.

“That’s plausible...I’d have to run it by Luis and Hunter...”

“-and Nick”

“Right. Him as well. It’s plausible...”

Xiao Ma gave a gentle smile to her companion. They had been meeting weekly for creative brainstorming meetings as a way of getting a break from their extended periods of solitude. This was the first serious idea in days.

Chapter 15: Questioning It All

Jake sipped from a cold beer he had brewed the previous fall and eyed the dark horizon. Next to him sat the even larger and more imposing figure of Yama. Jake rubbed his eyes and sighed sonorously from his diaphragm. His thick legs lay out before him. He leaned back into the snow bank and lit a joint.

“Thought I’d figured it out, huh?” he asked Yama.

The cyborg turned its head and looked at the big man vacantly.

“Well I was wrong. Nothing much for me here, is there? Took me nearly a year to figure it out.”

The cyborg looked away and scanned the area uselessly.

“I’m sleepy as a bear in winter.”

The THC hit Jake’s bloodstream. He hummed a song and chuckled as an electric hummingbird came and landed on his boot. Between his fingers he held a small pendant attached to his necklace. He turned it over and over and went into a deep reverie for a time. He was startled by the sound of footsteps nearby.

“Hi, Jake!” Hunter called as he trudged up the hill to see his friend.

“Howdy, Hunter. What are you up to?”

Hunter noticed the joint and asked, “Are you feeling sad again?”

“Oh yeah, feeling a little blue.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“I had something going, Hunter,” he said airily as he took another puff. “Was friends with the writers and visionaries, wrote songs, traveled around like a nomad...those were good days. I had everything my way, even had a trailer down in La Ventana. Sometimes I miss that life.”

Jake had been a touring musician in the American West before the asteroid impacts. He eked out a life as a musician for a few years beyond the catastrophe before eventually coming to terms with the need to do something more attuned to the needs of the times.

"There's been too much death," said Jake. He regarded the boy with more respect than he had given to anyone aside from himself as an adult. He liked talks with Hunter but worried he was taking more than he gave. "You've grown up away from all the death. I'm glad for that."

"I'm sorry you saw everything you saw," said Hunter.

"Not a damn I can do about it. I'm doing what I can to get over it. I think this doesn't help much. Well, it helps push it away for a little bit. I need that sometimes. I don't want to spend every single day in grieving. I need a break. I need a little fun. But now, I don't have much of a purpose. What do grieving and mumbling to myself for months on end have to do with saving the world?"

"You can help, Jake. We don't know how yet but you'll find a purpose here."

"You may as well put me on babysitting duty for the clones you put together."

"I think that's a fine idea," Hunter said, emulating his mother's tender encouragement. "Tuffy needs a minder. Why don't you spend some time with him?"

"I could..." he trailed off as he took another puff from his joint. "I don't think I can trust him. I think he's been stealing food out of my pantry."

"I stumbled into him stealing from Cong's kitchen. He's learned how to disable servbots," said Hunter.

Hunter smiled and rubbed his chest to keep warm. A very gentle breeze had picked up.

"That explains the missing food. My only silver was disabled when I found all the smoked fish was missing," said Jake.

"He's a rascal isn't he?"

"Sure is, the little bugger"

"You know he broke into Brennan's old quarters?"

"No way-, " said Jake.

"Yeah, he was bragging about it. He said he found an advanced scrambler technology Sean was keeping in there. He says he can scramble any wireless device in a thousand foot radius. He convinced Nick to build the tech into his collar. The collar feeds into his neural net. We have no idea what he's capable of, *if* he is indeed telling truth."

"Have you seen him use it yet?" asked the large man.

"No. He could just be lying again. Nick won't say a peep."

"Must've done Nick a big favor..."

"I don't think so. I think Nick did for fun," said Hunter.

"For the shits and giggles."

"Exactly. Do you know who imprinted him? I wasn't there when he came out of incubation."

"I don't know much about that," said Jake as he leaned up against Yama as a way of steadying himself to stand up. "I'm heading in. I told Eddie I'd have a drink with him. Your sister was looking for you earlier. She said you weren't pinging on the map."

"Yeah, I had my locator turned off."

"I hear ya'," Jake said as he patted a very thin digital strip woven into the fabric of his chest. It was a locator beacon the Vault members generally wore that synced them to a map where any one of them could be located at the convenience of any of the others.

They began walking toward a large hatch protruding from the frozen ground near the base of their mountain. There had been nearly no sunlight for five years, a fact no one had become accustomed to.

"Feels good to talk to you, Hunter," said Jake.

Yama walked behind the two humans, its lumbering steps quieted by the snow.

“How is that?” Hunter asked.

“You’re more healed than I am. You’ve had a better life, in a lot of respects. You’ve never been spanked, you’ve never been yelled at, and you’ve never been met with sarcasm or teasing. You’re the sweetest young man I’ve ever met and I’ve met a lot of wonderful young people.”

“Thank you. I think it’s true: that I’ve had a very good life. I think it was a massive hole to fill when my father died and all of the great men who have mentored me helped to reduce the trauma there.”

“I’d say Xiao Ma had a good hand in that, too. She’s...”

“She’s done her work,” the young man offered.

“She has. She’s done her work. I can’t fathom all of the deep conversations you guys have had over the years.”

“She’s good but I think her relationship with Roger limits her...and him. Maybe that could change. I don’t know.”

Jake thought about the last romantic relationship he had been in, eight years prior.

“We ought to visit more,” said Hunter.

“I’d like that. It’s a learning experience every time.”

“How so?”

“You’re at ease with yourself, Hunter. I have demons. I have rough edges.”

“You also have awareness of your wounds and that is incredibly valuable.”

“There it is-“ Jake said as he tossed the joint roach to the ground, “-finding just the right words to mellow me out. I’ve seen too much damn death and destruction. It’s paradise here. I’m glad I get to be with you all.”

“I don’t think it’s paradise here.”

“Oh?”

"I think the planet itself was a paradise. I think humans fucked everything up before and after the impacts. Very few were prepared for the destruction. Everyone went bonkers in the aftermath—"

"—and governments started killing everyone," offered Jake.

"—right, and places that lost Internet connection reverted to this ugly regionalism and raiding the remnants of which we see today. It was a clusterfuck and the few who were adult enough to stem the tide were either killed or took to living underground. I'm sick of living underground!"

"Amen."

The three figures entered the installation. Jake was thinking about a place he knew where many of the people did not live underground.

"I think it's time I pulled away from them some," Olivia said to Eddie as they stood on the observation deck outside his quarters.

They both leaned against the railing and looked out onto the biosphere. They had been conversing for the better part of an hour.

"That sounds right. If anything, I think you should have pulled away a bit sooner. It's hard to grasp when exactly a mother should encourage her children to leave the nest. It depends on the children, I'd say. I've never had children so how should I know?"

"Is this upsetting for you?" asked Olivia.

"No, my dear, I don't get the sense that it is. How about yourself?"

"You bring up an interesting point. Perhaps I should have pulled away sooner."

"Maybe you've pulled away more than you know. Maybe it has sprung up from the natural process of being attuned to their needs to whatever degree you're capable."

Eddie thumbed his coat pockets gingerly in the hopes of bringing some more circulation to his hands. He rubbed his thumbs through his palms and felt small bursts of warmth pass through the skin there. His elbows were becoming sore from holding onto the metal railing.

"I haven't talked to them about this for a while. Maybe it's solving itself," said Olivia.

"I would ask for their point of view. See what they say about your level of involvement. Do you feel less efficacious? Is that part of it?"

"Not so much. I've found other things to do."

"You certainly have. The vivariums are stunning and absolutely massive."

"What is it?" she asked the aged man. She noticed him considering her few grey hairs.

"How often do you think of Matthew?" he asked.

"Not too much anymore. No, not really at this point. It was a horrendous trauma but I grieved him for years. I was there for the children in their grieving. We did what we could to raise them with our village...I'm sounding like Ezra, aren't I?"

"I think Ezra would speak of fish and bread at this point, wouldn't he?" Eddie asked with a chuckle.

Olivia smiled and met Eddie's humored look.

"I don't know that I'll have another partner," she said. "If the right man comes around, perhaps..."

"Perhaps you will meet someone. Sounds like you have some hope. Come, let's sit. My knees and back are tiring from all this standing."

Eddie groaned in pleasure as his body came into contact with the cushions of a wicker loveseat he kept on the observation deck. Both he and his companion spent some time observing several birds pecking at the ground beneath them, foraging and hunting for worms.

"I was thinking about this the other day and tried to find out. The information isn't on file in the system..." said Olivia.

"Go on," the older gentleman encouraged her.

"I'm wondering...who founded the Vault?"

"Now that is a question," he said as he leaned to his right to pour himself a glass of iced tea.

He looked at her and said, "I did."

Olivia gladly accepted the glass he poured her.

"I thought you were a late-comer. I thought maybe Sean or Cong or maybe even Nick had founded it."

"They did the heavy lifting when it came to designing and building the place but it was originally I who conceived it and sought the financing for it. The idea came to me about fourteen or fifteen years ago."

"Why did you create it?" she asked.

"It was made to be a shelter for geniuses from the post-apocalyptic madness."

"Why this place, though?"

"I wanted a place where brilliant minds could work together in harmony, free from the bonds of conventional society. Originally it was borne out of loneliness but I knew that foundation wouldn't hold steady for very long. I learned a thing or two from my history. I tried to take it to a more mature space, to make the project into something greater than myself. The funding basically presented itself when it became apparent life had to go underground.

I vetted Sean Brennan, Cong Yu, and Nick as my original investors and contributors to the project. There were also Jacob Fairfield and Kate Thompson. I chose these individuals for their willingness to march to the beat of their own drums....and for their wealth. If I could appeal to each of their great drives for independence and creativity, I would know I had a winner on my hands. Does this answer your question?"

"If you were so thorough with them, something tells me you were thorough with the members who purchased passage to come here- the ones that died from the tsunamis."

“Most of the year before the initial impacts saw lengthy screenings. Toward the end we were letting anyone onto the fleet that could afford passage and would swear to abide by the non-aggression principle. I saw to medical quarantine procedures. Unfortunately, it was all for naught. There are only ten of us now...”

“Twelve if you count Ezra and Tuffy,” she offered.

“Let’s count them as well.”

“What do you think of them?”

“I like them. Yes, they’re essentially good. It’s apparent their personalities are rather extreme but I don’t think they pose a threat to anyone here. They’re peculiar, aren’t they?” the older man asked.

“I’ve spent some time with Ezra. He’s very kind but yes, there’s a peculiarity. Xiao Ma calls him a sub-self.”

“What’s that?”

“She means he’s not a full personality but a part of a larger personality.”

“Makes sense to me, given what Hunter told me about the imprinting technology. He’s not destined to be a fully integrated human being for some time, is he?”

“I think he’s dimly aware of it. He was indignant about something the last time I saw him. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what he was upset about. There was a whole subtext to what he was talking about that I think I understand better.”

“Hmm...I don’t know. I haven’t spent enough time with him to really understand. I’m sure part of his difficulty stems from being so alike in appearance yet so different beneath the surface to us. He must feel an intense sense of alienation,” said Eddie.

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“He’s made to survive extreme conditions. He has an expected life-span of 130. All that life and vitality poured into a nascent psyche...”

“I see what you’re getting at.”

They stopped to admire a small robin that had landed nearby. It cleaned itself and took off for a different perch.

Eddie asked his companion, "And Tuffy, what do you make of him? He's a charming little rogue, isn't he?"

They shared another humored look.

Chapter 16: Tuffy The Rascal

Tuffy trotted down a long, immaculately lit corridor toward the banquet hall and Cong's kitchen. His silky, charcoal-grey fur had just a hint of blue to it. The fur around his hind legs billowed out as though he were wearing bloomers or pantaloons. His lime green eyes scanned the oncoming bend in the corridor and his fuzzy ears perked up as he heard a servbot just out of sight. He pulled himself up against the wall and sat back on his haunches.

A hapless yellow servbot ambled into view, pushing a kitchen cart. It was on its way to serve a meal to Nick Williams. Tuffy darted at the Yellow, leapt up, and bounced off the thing, sending it flying onto the floor. It tried to get up but Tuffy deactivated it wirelessly through the transmitters embedded in his tail, simultaneously casting a haughty look at his victim. He didn't need the Yellow tipping off the others in the network that he was coming for a raid. He rummaged the cart and paused to lick at some gravy around a steak before continuing on his trot.

Cong Yu rested at his customary steel chair in the back of the kitchen, drinking a supplement Eddie had prescribed him. He rubbed his feet together for circulation. He thought of little and idly sighed, readying himself to stand up and begin preparations for a meal with Milena. He was now 73 years old. In order to distract himself from having to get up and move his body around, he mused on the different ways he could trap the devilish cat that had repeatedly pilfered his stores and disabled his servbots.

Cong pulled at his mustache and considered simply poisoning some treat that would be too irresistible for Tuffy to avoid. The thought fizzled out when a bit of warmth for the cat arose in his chest. He liked the cat, at times. It was a good lap cat when it chose to be so. Yet, the cat talked. Why did Hunter and Roger design a cat that could speak? It did make good conversation, even if it didn't know much about anything.

Tuffy paused as he reached the large swinging doors that led into the banquet hall. His ears searched his surroundings for any sign of danger. The red and silver servbots were capable of zapping him with tasers. He paused for a bit more and sniffed the air, smelling remnants of what had been on the food cart. He rubbed the sides of his face on the dart and then darted in.

Alarm sounds exploded all around the fierce cat. He knew his time was extremely limited, so he made a direct line for a section of the kitchen he knew to have bacon bits and jerked meat. A Red came slashing at him, wielding a cutting board. He flicked his tail and the servbot crumpled to the floor, disabled.

Cong yelled obscenities in Chinese as he did his best to make it through the massive kitchen to where he figured the cat would be. Silver servbots tromped by him as though they were storm troopers on a grim mission.

Tuffy smashed the padlock off of the cupboard before him with his modified paws and bit into the largest hunk of dried meat he could find. Several glass containers crashed to the floor far below. His eyes burned brightly as the taste of the meat sunk into his tongue. The flavor motivated him and inspired him. Then he saw the silvers rounding the corner and slowing into a stalk, like two predators honing in on their quarry. Tuffy was tempted to scamper down from his high position until he saw Cong Yu hobble into position behind his praetors.

“Tuffy...” said Cong in a voice of warning.
“Tuffy...,” he repeated.

Tuffy whimpered as his body stiffened, readying him to pounce. He chattered anxiously.

“We can do this the hard way or the easy way,” offered the old man, eager for the challenge.

Tuffy curled up into a fighting position with his ears flattened. He yowled. The alarms stopped and all was quiet. The silvers had moved too close.

“Get back!” Cong yelled at his precious silvers.

They obeyed but much too late. Tuffy was on the earlier production model of the two, taking advantage of its slowed retreat. It beeped wildly and swung its taser in an effort to complete Cong’s directive of protecting the kitchen meats. This only served to infuriate Tuffy, who swiped with his claws at the soft neck of the silver.

Cong slapped his palm to his forehead and cursed the demise of the servbot in colorful language. “The net!” he yelled at the surviving silver.

Tuffy understood the word and scampered away, his claws failing to find much traction on the hard tile floor as the loud “thwoomp” of a small net shoot out of the arm of the silver. The net missed and made a horrible racket as it slammed into a pile of metal serving dishes.

Cong picked up the broken silver and observed how intricately the cat had destroyed the component in the robot that scrambled incoming wireless commands. The silver could possibly be restored but the component would take some time to replace. Tuffy had been very thorough about slashing the micro systems all around the component.

“Clever little devil,” Cong muttered as he walked back to his steel chair. He ordered the surviving silver to take its companion to Nick’s workshop for repairs. Cong was left with one servbot immune to the cat’s technology. Perhaps he’d have to try diplomacy with the furry prince.

Far away in a small cave overlooking the lion's den in the biosphere sat Tuffy chewing at his prize. He chuckled as he watched a male lion stupidly yawn and roll over. It had been a good hunt.

Chapter 17: A Father Makes a Difference

“You know what I’ve been thinking about lately?” Hunter asked his sister. She was standing over an examining table, inspecting the stems of a plant she was nursing back to health. Her lean figure worked with methodical precision. The plant was making a turn for the better.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“We haven’t talked about Dad dying in a long time and something about it feels unprocessed. I feel like I’ve processed a lot of things but there’s just something that stands out to me as a kind of...blank spot. Do you ever think about what happened?”

“I only think of him when we go out on the *Spade*. I can’t help it. I start to feel sad and the memories come. Oh, I also think of him when I see Tuffy. He’s like a living teddy bear. Something about that reminds me of Dad’s hugs.”

“They were wonderful,” the brother offered.

“They were so warm. He was so strong, so tender. Remember how he used to scoop us up onto his shoulders?”

“I do. I can see the teddy bear analogy. He gave the best hugs.”

A moment of sorrowful silence passed between them.

“I feel angry about something,” said Hunter.

“What’s that?” she asked again.

“Something is gnawing at me. Why did he die? Why did he choose not to come? He must have known that ship wasn’t going to make it to anywhere safe. I just get this anger that comes in now and then about it.”

Hunter leaned his swimmer's shoulders up against a wall to the side of the examining table. They were in Gordon Beck's old quarters. The place had been remodeled into a healing and restoration center for all of the flora and fauna in the biosphere. A breeze blew from a vent, causing the skin on the back of Hunter's neck to form goose bumps.

"What does the anger have to say?" asked Milena. She pulled her attention away from her work and turned to face him. She looked up at his face and noted his angry contemplation.

"He had to have known he wasn't going to live. Why would he just give up on life like that? Why didn't he fight to be with us?" asked Hunter.

"I don't know. I feel like I want to talk about something else, change the subject or something, but I think this is really important."

"Right...why didn't he fight to be with us? What do you think?" he asked.

"I remember...there was something about there not being enough women at the Vault. I think. I'm not totally sure. I think that's what the deal was. We were the only kids on that boat. There weren't any women here."

"Do you remember that meeting?"

"That's what I'm talking about. That's when they talked about there not being any women at the Vault. At least, that's what I think. Have you ever asked Mom these questions?"

"No," he answered Milena. "It's only coming to me lately, really since we made Tuffy and Ezra. Something has felt really off to me since then. I can't put my finger on it. I've been having long periods of time where I blank out. It's like there some big truth I'm not quite hitting on. I get close and then I fog away."

"I've had a hard enough time even being present for this conversation. I think I've been experiencing the same thing since those two were brought out of the incubation process. What do you think is off with it or them?" she asked her brother.

"It's going to sound really bizarre. Hold on. Let me get a drink of water. Do you want a glass?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Milena spent the two minutes her brother was gone idly handling several plants on a platter. She tended to a wounded songbird, feeding it a medicine through an eye-dropper, all the while considering the line of thinking her brother had introduced.

"Here you go," Hunter said as he returned with water. "It's murky but there's something around questioning my motives for bringing Ezra and Tuffy into this world."

"We all voted and agreed on it," said Milena.

"Right, I know. There's something gnawing at me about it. I question everyone's motives. Why are we bringing them into this world? Do they really stand a chance to change the world as it currently is? Something is off to me when I really dig deep on the motives we all have basically left unacknowledged around these two."

"We created extra resilient beings to withstand the harshness of the outside environment," she said, shifting uncomfortably.

"It runs deeper than that. I just can't see it very clearly. The anger is there."

Milena took a deep breath and said, "I'm with you. I'm picking up on something within me now. There's a correlation between the fact that we haven't talked about dad's death openly and..."

"I've talked to Xiao Ma about it. Have you?"

"Yeah, I have too. Maybe we didn't cover it all though," she said.

"No, maybe we didn't. I mean, it's bizarre but it's like you and I had to dig into it to tease out whatever this new thing is."

Milena began to cry. It was a gentle trickle of tears. She said, "I wish he didn't choose to die. I wish he didn't abandon us like he did. He could have lived!"

Hunter began to cry as well. He slowly settled down onto the floor as he sniffled and wiped at his cheeks.

They each sat with their own pain and sorrow.

"Seems like all anyone does around here is grieve," said Hunter.

"It's true."

"When do we shift gears? When do we burst forth? No, I take it back. I know the answer. We do all the time."

"I think they grieve a lot more than we do. This is nice, though. It's been a while," said the sister.

"Yeah, it's refreshing to come into this. I think we made Tuffy and Ezra because they were the best parts of our father."

"Wow, you're right. That's...wow, Hunter."

"And I don't think we should create any more resilients. I think there's a better way. I don't know what it is but it's not fair to Ezra or Tuffy. I think this pain has been too deep for too long. We can't compensate for Dad being gone by creating people who will kind of fill the role he filled. It's not fair to them. They're fucking imprinted. They don't even get a choice."

"Maybe they can reorient themselves. They're still so young."

"This is really fucked up. I didn't realize the connection."

"No one did. Not even Eddie or Xiao Ma," she said.

"There's some sort of disconnect the others unconsciously picked up on with us and I think they let us go farther with Ezra and Tuffy than they would have if..."

"It's not been up to us to sort ourselves out. It was up to them to *really* make sure that you and I were able to question Dad's motives and strip away any idealization that was there."

“Who do you hold responsible?” Hunter asked her. He took a big drink of water. It felt refreshing and rewarding going down into his stomach.

“My gut says Mom. It’s like I default to her but I think it’s true. Also, I fault Xiao Ma but much less so. She had to have been aware of it potentially fucking us up to step in like she did. She practically butted Dad out of the picture.”

“I don’t think so. I think he had already decided not to go at the point,” said Hunter.

“I don’t remember the meeting well enough.”

“I don’t think it was so much what he said as much as what he didn’t say. I remember a kind of non-assertiveness from him. Plus, it’s Xiao Ma’s personality to be really up front about what she wants. I agree that she’s at fault, too. I’ve had a thought pop up sometimes that her acting as our therapist for a time when we were first here had to fuck with some kind of boundary since we basically live with her, even though the Vault is as huge as it is. It feels like this is where there’s a conflict of interest.”

“I think I follow. Like: how could she be an effective witness in helping us both to grieve his choice and his passing *together* when it was in her self-interest to ensure it was her not him that got on the *Spade*?”

“Bingo...wow, Mill. That’s good.”

“Did she betray us?” asked the sister.

“Fuck. I don’t know. I don’t think so. I really don’t know. I think I need to think about things more on my own. Are you good if I go?”

“Yeah, I need time to process. Thank you,” said Milena.

They shared a warm embrace before parting company.

June 9th, 2106, 09:09 AM
Vault, Antarctica
Xiao Ma Log

I'm tired. I didn't sleep enough last night. I had a strange encounter with Milena two days ago that left me feeling unsatisfied. For some reason I've been fixated on the fact that I haven't really worked as a psychologist here at the Vault for three years. There's a sense that maybe my work wasn't finished. Maybe I left a stone unturned? It's been keeping me up but I'm not getting much of a grasp on it.

Something else very out of the ordinary is that Roger mentioned yesterday he saw something moving on the southern ridge just outside of the plains entrance. We haven't had anyone new come here since Jake. Rog tried getting a scan on the movement but nothing turned up. Yama was sent out to patrol the area. Again, nothing turned up. Hunter is sending several falcon drones, probably as I dictate here and now, to do a more thorough scan.

I've noticed a shift in myself since Ezra and Tuffy have been around. It's harder to grasp my purpose. I've done all this work to understand the subtlest nuances of human psychology to the best of my ability yet there are so few people to share this with. The few who I can share it with are on the same wavelength as me. They've benefitted from my discoveries. They're contemporaries. There's so little market out there for what I have to offer. I've turned to other pursuits: dancing, painting, and writing. It's as though being around these engineered beings, who don't operate on the same wavelength as my contemporaries, has reminded me that there are still more people out there who could benefit from what I have learned. In this sense, the only person I have felt truly useful for in the past year has been Jake.

Am I done growing in my giving capacity? No, I think that would be hubris. But I feel very stilted and stunted. What do I do if I cannot give freely and nurture others? What do I do if all the people around me are very well self-contained and don't need what I have to give? No longer am I a guru. In fact, I've been surpassed by Hunter and Milena. There are blocks here I'm not getting around. In a way, it's refreshing.

Chapter 18: A Course is Charted

There was a gathering at a large fire in the desert portion of the biosphere. The massive overhead sunlight transmitters that loomed 150 feet above had been powered down automatically as they had been hundreds of hundreds of times before. Night simulation in the biosphere brought an essential balance to the ecosystems within.

Tuffy prowled nearby in the sandy crags overlooking the campfire. He preferred to use his time in the biosphere to toy with the different, much stupider creatures that lived there. Presently he was tracking a scorpion and thinking of a song Jake had recently written. Angus ambled into view, wondering what Tuffy was up to. The dog's appearance disturbed the scorpion. Tuffy was very displeased.

Sitting around the fire were most of the inhabitants of the Vault.

"We're here to discuss possible futures for our mission here," said Hunter. He was standing while the others sat. His hands were in the pockets of his corduroy pants. "I've been thinking about it for a long while now and it's pretty clear that our mission here must change. I wanted Ezra and Tuffy here because I think their opinion matters a great deal in the matter."

"Go on, my son...sorry," said Ezra.

"You're okay," offered Hunter. "I've talked it over with Milena and we've decided to shut down the cloning facility. There will be no more clones for the time being."

Ezra was visibly relieved. All the others carried looks of curiosity.

"Well, what's next?" asked Nick. He had aged remarkably, looking much the same as when the two youngest members of the Vault had first arrived. Only some white hairs in his beard and the deep creases of crow's feet around his eyes marked the passage of time.

"There's no clear answer at this stage, at least not from me," said Hunter.

"We searched our motivations for creating Ezra and Tuffy and found some really unresolved material. Ezra and Tuffy, as convoluted as it sounds, we made you out of a desire to fill our needs. Namely, we wanted to fill some of the unresolved void of our father dying. We don't want to use you toward this end..." said Milena.

"But we acknowledge that this is unconsciously what we set out to do," added Hunter. "Every mechanical or cybernetic being I've created since I've lived here has had something to do with this unconscious motivation. I thought if I could just keep creating and keep creating, eventually I'd create the perfect being. To keep myself confused, I shaded into the equation the notion that this being would be instrumental for repopulating the planet. What I really wanted was a stand-in for my father."

"Same goes for me," added the sister.

Tuffy left the shadows and curled up near the light of the fire next to Eddie's feet.

"This is remarkable," said Eddie. He reached a hand down and rubbed Tuffy's head. "It falls into place for me perfectly, almost as though it were right beneath my nose the entire time. It saddens me yet, I am relieved. Good for you two."

"Makes a lot of goddamn sense," said Nick.

Luis added several large pieces of wood to the fire. It crackled and popped, much to everyone's pleasure. "Do you abandon your creative works altogether?" he asked the siblings. "Are they all just reflections of inner unmet needs?" He secretly worried about what his own pursuits said about himself.

Angus lay down next to the cat and they cuddled for more warmth.

"I don't necessarily think so," said Hunter.

"I don't either," said Milena. "To help the world, we must share our gifts. We must be the change we want to see in the world, not pawn off the work onto proxies." She looked at Ezra, unsure of what response to anticipate.

"Nor must we pawn the work off onto children we're going to have," said Hunter.

"We failed you and we're sorry," Milena voiced her agreement.

Ezra sighed heavily. This drew the attention of Eddie.

"You didn't choose to be made," said Eddie. He offered the robed man a sympathetic look. "What do you make of their apology?"

"I think it is sincere. If I'm really honest, I think I need to leave this place and set out on my own," said Ezra.

"But...you're only like three months old," said Nick. He was dumbfounded.

"I have the mind of a 30 year old, don't forget." Ezra tapped his head and winked at the sturdy workman. "I've been wanting to break out of here since the second day I was alive. I've felt a burden. On some level, I knew the reasons for my creation weren't completely benign. I've been traumatized, however gently or consciously, by my creators." He turned his attention away from Nick and spoke directly to Milena and Hunter, "If you both accept you made me out of unmet needs, especially you Hunter, you must understand why I want to leave. I cannot grow under your wing. I want to get out on my own. If your needs remain unmet, though acknowledged, who's to say you won't use me again?"

Quiet tears rolled down Hunter's face. Milena sniffled and dabbed her nose with a handkerchief Nick had handed her.

"You're right," said Hunter. During the span of Ezra's discourse he had sat down. He faced his creation with heavy sorrow.

“With time and distance, given our dedication to becoming healthier, I think this rift can be mended. For now, it’s best for me to leave,” said Ezra.

“I want to leave, too,” said Jake.

This stunned most everyone but Hunter, who knew of Jake’s dissatisfaction with life at the Vault.

“Where will you go? It’s a barren wasteland out there. The plant life is all but dead. There remain but a few scattered, underground colonies with perhaps a tenth the resources we have,” Eddie asked the two who had made verbal commitments.

This question completely stumped Ezra and Jake.

Luis stood again and added several pieces of wood to the fire. When he finished he said, “I know where they can go...” He met the gaze of Milena and Hunter, who both knew exactly what he was referring to.

“Don’t be preposterous,” said Nick. “We don’t have the energy capacity for the two of them.”

“What’s this you speak of?” Ezra asked Luis, who was now very old and grey.

“We sent the hummingbird back in time...” the older man responded.

“You’re saying we should try to send them back in time?” asked Eddie.

“It’s an option,” said Hunter. “We uncovered a new kind of energy reactor in Gordon’s vaults recently. We have the output for it, at least theoretically. We may end up drawing quite heavily on our reserves. We’ll have to run some tests. Ezra, I support you doing anything you feel you need to do in order to be resolved on what we have done to you.”

Ezra crossed his legs and leaned forward to say, "I hadn't thought of what Luis has suggested. I mostly considered trying for South America or Europe. Tuffy will be coming with me, regardless of where I go." He produced a jar of olives from a satchel he carried everywhere with him and began to eat. The cat stretched up from his resting spot and walked over to claim an olive for himself.

"And you, Jake?" asked Milena. Her eyes were puffy and reddened.

"Go back in time? That's fine by me," he answered. He looked tired and sad. "What's keeping all of us from going back? It's awful here."

"Speak for yourself," said Eddie. "I like it here. I like being of use to Milena and Hunter in trying to help in the crisis our planet is faced with."

"I feel the same way," said Nick. "I had a good go of it when there were plenty of others around to talk to."

"I won't go," said Hunter. "My mission is here."

"Who knows what you could accomplish if you were sent back," said Luis. He again placed another log on the fire.

"What do you think? Are you willing to try for it?" Luis asked Ezra.

"I'm willing to try. I could try to spread my Gospel...er my ideas to an earlier generation. We could warn them of the coming catastrophe. I could find myself, who I really am."

"Isn't this a bit...irresponsible?" Eddie asked the gathering. "Something tells me this could be disastrous."

"We need someone to volunteer to go back," interjected Luis. "Ezra and Jake could volunteer to go. They're the only ones who don't want to stay here at the Vault."

Tuffy huffed out loud.

"Yes, but shouldn't we try to guide this some?" asked the old doctor.

“What are you suggesting?” asked Ezra. “Are you suggesting we aren’t capable of contributing to the mission? I want to do my part in helping save the world. I am capable. *You* all,” he said pointing to everyone, “made me, by the way. You made Tuffy. You haven’t given Jake a single thing to do besides journal and self-reflect. In a different setting we could prove ourselves.”

“Isn’t this about you gettin’ some distance between you and us?” asked Nick.

“Well, that too. You imprinted me with a prophet’s values. I’m going to want to help the world no matter what but at least this way I will have some space for myself, for my own self-discovery. Jake and Tuffy are fine companions. They want the same for themselves.”

“It is pretty damn desolate here,” added Jake.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Ezra, startling Angus from his nap. The dog exhaled loudly and rolled over.

“Still, I think we should lay out some parameters for this,” said Eddie.

“Haven’t we already?” asked Luis.

“I think we have...to a degree. If they are sent back in time and affect the world in major way would our present lives be altered somehow?”

“Posiblemente,” said Luis.

“How far back in time would we send them?” asked Eddie.

“Perhaps 2100 years or so?” hinted Ezra.

“No, that’s out of the question,” said Hunter. “You’d be skewered alive.”

“How about sometime just before the proliferation of the Internet?” asked Nick. “It seems to me that would be an important time to send them back to.”

“Are we sending them back for maximum potential impact on human society, or minimal, or somewhere in between?” Eddie asked openly. His brow was furrowed with concern.

“Let’s roll the dice,” said Milena. Her eyes were clear and carried an inspired twinkle. “This has never been done before. Let’s see what Jake and Ezra-“

“-and Tuffy,” said Ezra.

“-and Tuffy can accomplish if they’re sent to a point in time where perhaps maybe they could do something toward staving off the meteor strikes, divert them somehow. At the very least, humanity could be better prepared for what will face them.” She smiled as she spoke, focusing her attention mostly on Eddie. “I think Nick’s suggestion is perfect. Let’s send them to the American empire. They’ll have the most potential impact there. This is up to you three, of course.”

The fire was slowly dying down.

“What are the risks of going back, the trip itself?” Jake asked Nick and Luis.

The two old inventors looked at each other.

“You got it?” Nick asked.

“Sure. Jake, the risks are low. We sent the hummingbird back without a single complication. The process is scale-able, given we have the resources to power your jump. We can create a portal for you to come back but *that* is time and location specific,” said Luis. “We can place you in any time with a high degree of accuracy. Location is...slightly less accurate.”

“Also,” began Nick, “it will take some time for our energy resources to return to the level they’d need to be to open the portal after your initial jump, but that’s on our end. We could put up a portal at whatever point in time you choose. At a minimum, three months would pass here. The energy we’re going to have to put is going to take us a good while to restore. How long would you want to stay?”

“Three years,” said Ezra.

“Any particular reason?” asked Nick.

“No, it’s just what my gut tells me. I think we could impact the world in a major way with that amount of time. How does that sound to you?” he asked Jake.

"Three years and then back here? Sure," said Jake.

"You can stay as long as you like," Eddie suggested.

"I'll give it a whirl. Three years is fine."

"If you any of you miss the jump, it's another 3 month's wait," said Luis. "For us, at least."

"I consent to this," said Ezra. "We are the misfits here. We'll find our way in a different time. If we're successful, perhaps we'll save billions of lives. God knows what wiping the face of the Earth clean with a flood...sorry, I forget myself."

A magnificent tenor voice entered the discussion for the first time. It came from the candy cane red collar around Tuffy's neck. Eddie had chosen his favorite singer, Luciano Pavarotti, as the model for the voice.

"A talking cat isn't going to go over well with anyone," he offered as he craned his neck toward everyone. He had a very satisfied look on his face.

"Point taken," said Hunter. "Should we disable your transmitter?"

Tuffy's ears flattened and he gave a quick look to Hunter. "No, that's a very bad idea," came the voice from the collar.

"One run through a metal detector and the...cat's out of the bag," mused Milena. This caused everyone to laugh.

Tuffy gave a smug look to everyone and began to bathe himself. He sat back in a slouch and began licking at his pink anus.

"Aw, Jesus Tuffy," groaned Nick.

"Yes?" Ezra responded instinctively.

Milena and Luis broke into wild laughter. Hunter's nose was scrunched in disgust. Eddie grabbed a handful of sand and tossed it onto Tuffy's stomach. The large cat jumped up and hunkered down into a crouching position, ready to pounce on the old man. He thought twice about it and settled down on his front paws and blinked passively.

Milena refocused everyone on the task at hand by saying, "We should send them back to the Dot-com bubble."

"Brilliant, Milena. That's simply brilliant," said Eddie as he wiped his hands onto the sides of his pants.

"What kind of bubble?" asked Ezra.

"It was a speculative bubble, economically speaking. Right around the turn of the 21st century there was massive speculation in companies that were Internet-based. Stocks flew to the sky—

"—to the heavens," Ezra blurted out spasmodically.

"—yes, to the heavens," said Milena, "and eventually companies overspent themselves into oblivion—"

"—to Hell," Ezra added again.

Tuffy yowled in annoyance. Ezra straightened up immediately apologized for his nervous tics.

"So sorry," he added.

"The companies overspent, speculation dried up, governmental regulators swooped in, the economy crashed, there was a major terrorist attack on New York City, there was some infighting between major-merger companies, and a few very wise people sold high and got out of the Internet sector while they could. We could send you three to this time. You could ride the bubble and sell high, and use the profits to make a major impact on the world. You could show the scientific community the location of the then-oncoming asteroid field and publish the findings in major publications," said Milena.

"Why don't we just steal the money? I could hack any banking system in the world and put any amount of money in an account for us," said the cat.

"No," said Ezra, holding up a hand.

"Commandment number seven: thou shall not steal."

Tuffy slinked off into the darkness, no longer interested in the details of the mission.

"The Dot-com stuff sounds good to me," Jake chimed in. "I've never been rich. I've always wondered what it would be like to be rich."

"You have to promise to keep to the mission or we won't send you," said Luis.

Jake pulled his main of wavy light brown hair over one shoulder and nodded in acknowledgement.

"Does this appeal to you, Ezra?" asked Hunter.

"If I understand it correctly we are going to go back in time, amass a considerable fortune, and use the fortune to fund any efforts we can conceive toward warning humanity of its oncoming destruction?"

"That's right," said Milena.

"I will use some of the three years for my own ends. I need to break away from the Vault and find myself," said Ezra.

"That is fine," said Hunter.

"Well, I reserve the right to leave the mission altogether as it was not me who conceived it. If I find a better path on the road to salvation, I will not hesitate to take it."

"That's perfectly okay," offered Milena.

"Then I'm for it," said Ezra.

"Me, too," said Jake.

"Tuffy, are you coming?" Ezra asked Tuffy. With his genetically-enhanced eyesight he could see the cat in the darkness.

"Of course I'm coming," a voice sang out. "I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

Tuffy had been thinking of the ways he could have fun in a more primitive society. His verdant eyes twinkled in the darkness.

Chapter 19: Trapped

The three forms of the time travelers materialized into existence sometime in the late 20th century.

“Where are we?” Jake asked as he rubbed his eyes wearily.

“I don’t know,” said Tuffy. “Looks like the jump erased almost every single bit of my data storage.”

The cat was visibly displeased and his behavior was erratic.

“What about the coordinates of the asteroid field?” asked Ezra.

“Gone, totally gone,” Tuffy whined.

Ezra groaned in agony. The effects of the time travel caused him to vomit several times.

Nearby were tall chain link fences topped by barbed wire. The night was warm and thousands of cicadas filled the night air with their songs. The ground was covered in a thick and resplendent grass unlike anything the three travelers had seen before. Large bushes and palm trees were all around. Birds flew overhead and the very distant rumbling of a truck could be heard. Tuffy took in a deep breath and smelled all sorts of animal life he had never encountered before.

“It looks as though we’re in a prison yard,” said Ezra. “Nick *did* say that our geographic placement would be random within a particular range. We should be in Minnesota.”

“We’re sure as shit not in Minnesota,” said Jake. He was wary of jungle climates.

Tuffy scampered up the side of the chain link fence using his powerful claws. He walked through the immense coils of barbed wire for a moment before pausing to stretch and yawn.

“What do you see?” Ezra asked the cat.

The cat paid no mind to the leader of the expedition. He chose instead to bathe his paws. He needed to pee and scanned the foliage for the possible places he could do so.

Lights shone suddenly on Jake and Ezra from a distance. Shouting and the stomp of boots rang out through the jungle. A small troop of armed guards ran up to the men to arrest them. They regarded Ezra momentarily before another shout from their leader sprang them into action. Jake resisted in an impressive show of strength until the leader drew a weapon. He screamed in Spanish at Jake to halt. Jake relented and was handcuffed along with his companion.

Tuffy scampered off into the night.

The time travelers had been just outside of a prison grounds in Central America. They were taken into the prison, questioned, and told they would be held until their origins could be determined. Many prisoners and guards alike crossed themselves at the sight of Ezra, noting the uncanny resemblance to the common iconography of the historical figure Jesus Christ.

Several days passed with Ezra and Jake in a holding cell awaiting more official word on their fates. They had become much more acquainted during their time together under the sun. They bonded on more shallow things, such as their long hairstyles and ability to sing. They discussed deeper ideas such as how they were going to impact the world once they got out of prison. Jake showed Ezra how to play harmonica. They learned a folk tune from one of the prisoners and sang it to much applause from the small following they'd gained.

The holding cell was under an expansive awning in Guatemala's most dangerous prison. In the last year the prisoners had more or less taken over the daily operations of the prison. The guards and prisoners were separated by the infamous "line of death", a yellow line painted on the ground. Special exception was made for those guards who made their pilgrimages to see Ezra in his tunic and sandals. Mention was made several times to the two prisoners of "El Toro", the leader of the prisoners, but he remained somewhere on the other side of the prison grounds attending to other business.

Tuffy lived a miserable existence in the jungle during this time. Many a time he winced in disgust at the unsanitary conditions and whimpered through rainstorms that caught him unawares. He found hunting real flesh and blood animals to be a far and repugnant cry from mashing Cong's servbots to bits. He was lost in a world of primal instincts. Many of his data banks had been scrambled nearly beyond repair due to the time jump. While he hunted for food in the external world, his cybernetic mind struggled to repair itself. He slept in the sunshine when possible, his scanners searching for predators in the area. At night he roamed in madness, eagerly reforming his logic centers as expediently as possible. His thinking began to take more order and shape. His higher functions sputtered back into existence. His self-reflection told him that he preferred the company of his friends over the madness of the wild. With this realization firm in mind, he returned to where he had last seen Jake and Ezra.

He appeared to his friends late one evening when the commotion around their cell had died down. At this point the cell was littered with gifts of alcohol, short stabbing weapons Ezra had convinced many prisoners to relieve themselves of, fruit, and even a small monkey tethered to one of the bars.

Tuffy meowed melodically to announce his presence.

"Tuffy!" the two men exclaimed at the same time.

Tuffy's rich voice rung out, "I'm back."

"Where have you been, kitty-kitty?" asked Ezra.

"I was afraid and so I ran. I tried to make the jungle my home but I'm afraid I'm too civilized. I must be with my people now."

"We could really use your help," said Jake.

"How so? There are no electronics here, nothing for me to manipulate. I already checked the area. This prison is medieval."

"Maybe you could bring us something to help us get out of here..." Jake offered.

"Great idea!" the cat sang as he darted back out into the night.

"Tuffy! Come back!" Ezra called out.

It was too late. The cat had set his mind to something.

Chapter 20: El Toro

“Wake up,” barked a hideous looking inmate with a heavy accent and muscles to match. He banged on the iron bars of the cell. Ezra and Jake stirred and sat up.

“On your feet!”

They stood sleepily and rubbed their eyes.

“El Toro is here to see you,” said the Brute.

The small crowd that was gathered parted to allow through a dashing handsome inmate who walked with swagger. He was in his early 30’s. He had a dark mustache and hair slicked back with pomade. He wore the same uniform as all the other prisoners but it seemed his was styled by a tailor.

He approached the cage and said, “You know, you look like *Jesus*. You both look like *Jesus*. But are you *Jesus*? I don’t think so. Not both of you can be *Jesus*.”

“Yes...” said Ezra.

El Toro began to pace along the side of the cage. The other prisoners gave him a very wide berth but listened intently.

“I’m thinking now, you know?”

“Okay...” said Ezra.

“They say you came from nowhere. The warden, he don’t know where you are from. Your fingerprints: nothing. You have no nationality. What the fuck?”

“We’re from the-“

“Don’t,” said Jake, cutting his companion off.

“Where are you from?” said El Toro as he leaned against the bars with special interest.

“We’re from...Israel” said Ezra.

Jake rolled his eyes. El Toro caught this and began to pace again, a little more excitedly this time. He stopped in his tracks when he noticed a hang nail on one of his fingers. He nibbled it and then returned his attention to his subjects.

"You know, my man, you look exactly like *Jesus* from all the paintings. And you, you look like *Jesus'* gringo brother. I bet you two are from America."

"What do you want with us?" asked Jake.

El Toro turned sharply to face the question. There was elegance to his movements. To Ezra he seemed to be playing a role, aware of his own acting on some level.

"I want to know what you two are doing here in my prison. I want to know why you look like *Jesus*."

Ezra began to sit down.

"Up!" barked the Brute nearby. His arms showed the scars of many knife fights. The scars made ugly lines through the tattoo sleeves he bore.

"It's complicated," said Jake.

"What do you want? You want some drugs? You want some women? I can be very nice," said El Toro.

"First of all, it'd be nice to know your real name," said Ezra defiantly.

El Toro snapped his fingers at the Brute. The Brute produced a knife. Another in El Toro's gang unlocked the door to the cell. The Brute stepped through and in one swift movement made an attempt to stab Ezra. The crude knife barely punctured the skin.

The Brute made one more attempt to stab Ezra and then dropped the weapon, completely dumbfounded. The small crowd gathered was turning into a very large one with guards and prisoners alike.

"Toro... he doesn't bleed," stammered the Brute.

"Oh, I'm bleeding but only a little bit. I'm genetically--"

"Easy," interrupted Jake.

El Toro stood dumbfounded. Ezra could see a kind of intelligence flickering to life within the man.

El Toro turned and walked away from the cell, his posse in tow. The crowd parted but less so this time. Many men had fallen to their knees in prayer.

Jake stood in front of his friend and took a look at where the knife had been pressed against Ezra's skin. He found not a scratch. He looked Ezra in the eyes.

"I didn't want to hurt the man's feelings," Ezra offered sheepishly.

Tuffy had managed to arrive in Guatemala City by way of a large truck carrying crates of fruit. He proceeded to the nearest ATM and manipulated the ancient electronic infrastructure of the bank into providing him with an account and a modest sum of money. He walked the streets of the city for the better part of the afternoon before deciding it was too ugly, too dangerous, and too far below his standards. He resolved himself to be gone as soon as possible.

He went to the nicest part of the city he could find. He charmed a nice old woman with a large house into taking him in. He used her telephone in the early evening when she had gone to bed. He phoned several police bureaus in the city, with his voice disguised as a French journalist, and asked anyone he could about the relevant mercenaries and gang members in the area. During his second night's stay the old woman walked into his midst as he was piecing together a plan of rescue with the underworld contacts he had made. He dropped the phone, purred and meowed, and acted as if he was very hungry. Her momentary disbelief passed. She came to her senses and decided she must have been sleepwalking. She served him a plate of chicken scraps outside on the back patio. She shut the door behind her, prompting Tuffy to break into the house and finish his phone calls when he was sure she was fast asleep.

A plan was put into action. Tuffy wired \$100,000 to the offshore bank accounts of two mercenary groups operating in the region. He would again wire the same amount when Ezra and Jake were freed from Pavon Prison and safely aboard a bus out of the country. Tuffy would join them for the private flight.

The date was September 29th, 1998. The prison break would not occur for another four days, giving Tuffy ample time to spend alone time in the beautiful tourist city of Antigua, Guatemala. He overlooked the fact that any delay on his part would inconvenience and perhaps endanger his friends. After all, he still very much was a cat. Some of the finer points of human empathy eluded him.

Chapter 21: Religion Is Madness

El Toro and his posse returned in the late afternoon to see the two special prisoners.

“How come the knife didn’t hurt you?” he asked while smoking a homemade cigarette. The smoke wafted all around his face.

“I don’t know,” Ezra responded.

Jake and Ezra had conferred throughout the day and decided they would not divulge Ezra’s special genetic character.

“There’s one thing El Toro doesn’t like and that’s bullshit!” barked the Brute.

“Thank you, Brusco. It’s true. I could not have said it better myself,” said El Toro. “I’ll tell you what, you look just like *Jesus*. A lot of my people here, they don’t want to follow my orders. They say that there’s a new leader: you. I say that’s *mierda*. I’m the real boss here. The knife and the *puño* rule here. I can punch. I can fight with the knife. Okay?”

“I’m not sure how you want me to respond,” said Ezra.

“You won’t make a fool out of me!” cried El Toro. He ordered his men into the cell. Some unpleasant murmurs could be heard from the crowd that had gathered but no one yet dare cross El Toro in favor of Ezra. The men apprehended Ezra. Jake gave no resistance, fully aware that he was not genetically enhanced in any manner.

“If you really are *Jesus*, we are going to put you to a test. If you really are His second coming, we will let you go. Then you can go back to your country.”

Ezra simply bowed his head. Somewhere in the back of his head he felt compelled to prove his authenticity to his growing number of followers in the prison yard.

He was taken out of his cell for the first time since he arrived. Jake demanded to go with him and was allowed.

At the far side of the prison yard a table had been set up. Ezra was led to stand before the table. El Toro stood on the other side. A ring of prisoners formed around them. There were many murmurs and hushed whispers.

"This is the test," proclaimed El Toro. As he spoke he motioned and a boy emerged from the crowd. The hardened men of the crowd cheered and whistled at the boy's entrance.

"What is a child doing here?" Ezra asked in a growl. He was seething. A hard nudge from Brusco tempered him.

The boy set a basket containing five loaves of bread and two small fish onto the table.

"Jesus-fucking-Christ," Jake muttered. Ezra shot him a dirty look.

"This is what you gonna' do," began El Toro. He stopped to pull a comb from his pocket and run it through his fabulous head of hair. "Okay. You gonna' make that bread and that feesh into enough food for all of the people here."

Those who spoke English in the crowd roared and jeered. Word was passed around to those non-speakers present and a renewed roar soon emerged from many more inmates. Those who had laid down their weapons for Ezra and Jake, a small minority at this point, stayed their tongues and waited anxiously.

El Toro raised his hand for silence.

"Let's see what you got, *Jesus*," he said. He stepped back and crossed his arms, ready to witness a miracle or perhaps a fraud.

Ezra stepped forward, cleared his throat, and said, "Look, I can't feed you all with this meager amount of food. There are hundreds of you. This is enough food to comfortably feed maybe ten people at the most. I know in Matthew chapter fourteen it says that Jesus fed five thousand people with this much food. I know that many of you expect me to do this but it's literally impossible. There doesn't yet exist molecule replicators in this time—"

“Ezra! Come on, man-“ Jake blurted in. He was summarily jabbed in the ribs by Brusco.

“Right,” said Ezra. “I’m sorry. I am confused. It’s all this heat.”

“So what?” asked El Toro. He had begun clipping his fingernails with a clipper he produced from his pocket. “You say you are from Israel. You look like *gringos*. You know the Bible but you can’t perform a miracle? What the fuck?”

“My name is Ezra and his name is Jake. We’ve been in this prison for a week. We didn’t choose to be here. The prison administration is taking forever to get us out of here. You’re just making this worse for us.”

El Toro’s eyes jumped to attention at Ezra’s moment of criticism. He waved off the Brute, who was in the motion of striking Ezra from behind.

“I can make this very easy for you but first you have to prove that you are *Jesus*. Then I will worship the ground under your feet. So what do you say? Are you going to turn the feesh into more feesh?”

“No! I am *not* going to turn the fish into more fish. It’s impossible! The technology does not exist yet!” roared Ezra.

“Okay,” said El Toro. He held up his hand to Ezra to quiet him. “Okay, then who are you?”

Ezra and Jake looked at each other, both realizing they had never invented a cover story.

“I am...Ezra from Israel. I like...Charlie Chaplin films and...Tesla driverless car systems.”

“You are lying! Your name is not Ezra!” exclaimed El Toro.

“My dear Heavenly Father, please forgive this man’s stupidity,” Ezra prayed aloud. He caught his gaff a moment too late.

"I am not stupid! You were talking to God! You think I am stupid, huh? I know some things, *Jesus*. That's why I'm in charge here. If it looks like a duck, acts like a duck, and talks like a duck, guess what it is? It's a duck. Just like you! I think you look like *Jesus*, act like *Jesus*, and talk like *Jesus*! So what does that make you?"

"A duck?" Ezra offered.

Laughter rippled through the English speakers gathered. The moment was translated and more laughter rippled through the congregated. For a split second it appeared as if El Toro was about to let his guard down and join in the laughter. He stiffened up and tightened his gaze instead.

"We are going to put you to another test! *Oye!*" El Toro yelled to some unknown person far behind him.

"Should we fight them?" Ezra quietly asked Jake. "We don't have time for this. We need to get out of here and get on with our mission."

"I'm not so knife-proof. We can't fight. We have to try to reason with this guy," Jake responded.

To the horror of Jake and Ezra, a large cross was brought out from the bowels of the crowd and posted into the ground.

"You're going up on the cross!" El Toro yelled.

Ezra was grabbed and tied firmly to the cross. No stakes were driven through his palms as El Toro and his gang were too afraid to make another attempt at puncturing Ezra's skin.

Jake was poked and prodded back to his cage some distance away. He looked over his shoulder in desperation at his beleaguered friend.

Ezra's first words when he was affixed to the cross were, "Father! Why have you forsaken me?" He thought of Hunter and his brief childhood at the Vault. He began to feel self-conscious about his momentary grandiosity.

Many men gathered were in awe of his piety.

Nearby stood El Toro, turning over in his mind whether or not he should level with this stranger and reveal his true identity. Perhaps it was best he continue fanning the fires of religious fervor in the prison. He was the man at the top and intended to stay that way.

Yama walked his usual rounds outside the Vault grounds, scanning the horizons and mountain peaks for any differences worth reporting to Hunter and Milena. Nothing had turned up since his discovery of the remains of a Russian satellite several weeks prior. His massive, lumbering steps shook the snow powder all around him. In his mind played a very basic song Milena had taught him when she was still a girl.

He walked for miles upon miles. The wind picked up as he approached the edge of a massive sheet of ice overlooking the Southern Ocean. He gazed out onto the water. The ocular implants and sensing equipment he bore in his cybernetic skull worked rapidly to discern any changes since his last visit to this spot.

Yama was sometimes joined in his walks by Angus or Jake. Sometimes Hunter joined as well, though less since he had become an adult and fully involved in his biological engineering endeavors. Yama was only dimly aware of how alone he was. He was much more machine than beast. His duties were simple: patrol the territory, scan for changes, and report back any findings.

Yama kept a secret from the rest of the inhabitants of the Vault. He knew of a number of Weddell seals that lived on a pebbly beach many miles away from the Vault. He thought them to be beautiful. He derived a very simple pleasure from sitting nearby and watching them socialize. He liked their blue fur and the sound of their bark. There were three hundred of them. Their numbers were expanding rather than contracting for the first time in the eight years he had been visiting their colony. Yama did not know or nor could possibly fathom that they were the last colony of Weddell seals in the world.

Today he was walking to go see them. It would help him feel better about Jake's absence.

Jake was allowed to see Ezra in the evening.

"I brought you some water," he said as he approached the cross.

"Thank you," Ezra responded.

"I don't think they realize that you're going to be up there a really long time," said Jake.

"Yeah, it's a preposterous thing. I'm going to shit myself in a little bit. I've already pissed myself. This is humiliating. All for what?"

"Have you thought about how to get down?"

"I really don't know."

"Some of them are absolutely convinced you're the second coming of Christ."

"Blame it on Hunter and Eddie. They're the ones with the Messiah complexes. I wouldn't be in this mess if they hadn't designed me to look like every picture of the guy crossed with some kind of 20th century rock star. "

Ezra was dejected. The muscles in his neck had started to ache. His chin drooped down toward his chest.

"I think you're gonna' have to convince them that you really are the second coming of Christ," Jake said with a deep, exhaling sigh.

"If it gets me off this God-forsaken cross, I will do it," Ezra said. "How do I do it?"

"You're the one that read the Bible like ten times. You tell me."

"Jake, are you smoking a marijuana cigarette again?"

"It's a spliff, more tobacco than pot."

"Your body is a temple. You can't put toxins in it."

"It helps me relax. Come on, Ez. Don't bust my balls. I'm trying to help you out here. Doesn't Jesus die after like three days on the cross and then come back from the dead and kill some Romans?"

"Don't change the subject. We're talking about your choice to smoke marijuana cigarettes," Ezra said with renewed vigor. His head was upright and his eyes pierced his companion.

"I got it from one of the guys who worship you, Suarez. He speaks a little English. Well, don't look at me like that..."

"Again, Jake, your body is a temple. As Xiao Ma says, if you want to push away sides of yourself that you find too unpleasant, there are less forceful ways of doing it. Psychedelics stunt emotional growth."

"Lecturing doesn't help me. It's just a smoke."

Ezra looked up into the sky and thought about how he could encourage his friend to let go of his habit.

"Look, how were you feeling before you were smoking that cigarette? Really think on it."

"Ez, we have like five minutes left. Do you really want to spend it on this?"

"I think it's really important. Just humor me. How were you feeling?"

"I had a little bit of heartburn from some chili peppers a guy gave me," Jake offered.

"How were you feeling *emotionally*?"

"Um...tired, I was feeling tired."

"Anything else? Come on, really try to feel back on it."

"I was feeling..."

“*Vamos!*” grunted Brusco. His heavy footsteps stomped on the packed dirt surrounding the cross. He beckoned to Jake, letting him know the visitation was over.

Ezra gave his friend an encouraging look and they parted company until the next morning.

Chapter 22: Feminine Beauty

Many miles away Tuffy basked in the setting sun on the roof of a sprawling villa in Antigua, Guatemala. He breathed heavily, full of a chicken breast he had poached from the middle of a fancy meal going on below. His massive strides put to shame several servers who had given pursuit. They soon gave up, astonished at his remarkable speed.

For the first time in his life, Tuffy encountered a female cat. She appeared before him, a fancy calico. At first he paid her no mind, content to ponder the upcoming jailbreak, but she sauntered over to him and meowed in delight.

In typical cat fashion, she said her name as a means of initiating conversation. “Jasmine,” she said in a sultry voice.

Tuffy struggled to understand her. He was somewhat unfamiliar with her particular dialect of cat-speak. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Jasmine,” she meowed again.

“Tuffy,” he responded.

“Why are you here? You’re not from here. I’ve never seen you in the neighborhood. You certainly don’t belong to my master.”

“I’m here because I’m on vacation,” he said.

“What is that?”

“It’s something humans do. They leave their homes and they go far away for periods of time. I’m doing the same.”

She was very impressed with the operatic timbre of his voice. She quietly noted the luster of his charcoal mane.

Tuffy was similarly impressed with the calico cat before him. He considered her a tropical beauty. His cocksure demeanor melted at her curiosity. Thoughts of the oncoming jailbreak flitted away. He thought of a tunnel of love with swan boats and red hearts. He’d seen an old cartoon with a tunnel of love one time while spying on Cong Yu.

"I know what you're talking about. My master does a vacation many times a year. He takes his litter with him. What do humans do during the vacation time?" asked Jasmine.

"They rest, like me. They lay in the sun and sleep, just like me."

"You're different than any cat I've met. Are you part human? What is going on with your tail?" she asked as she cautiously inspected him up close. Tuffy stirred and stretched and yawned.

"Ah, that's good. I'm not part human. I'm part machine."

"Is that why you can run so fast?"

"Yes, that's why."

"And your tail?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he asked in a devilish tone. He coyly tilted his head toward her, licked his paw, and began to bathe the top of his head.

"Oh, you're very different than any cat I've met. Your ears don't smell normal. They smell like...metal."

The contagiousness of his yawn reached her and she opened her mouth wide. Tuffy flicked his tail toward her mouth and jerked it away at the last second to throw her off balance.

"Hey!" she yowled. "No fair. Your tail is too fast. It must be a machine!"

"Now you're catching on," he said. "Are all female cats as pretty as you? Your fur is very fluffy."

"Why...that's very sweet of you," she blushed. "What do you do with a machine tail?"

"I hack computers, manipulate telephone connections, and disable security camera systems among many other things that I can do."

"I know what a telephone is!" she exclaimed, happy to be knowledgeable about the world of this strange and handsome cat before her.

Tuffy thought of Ezra and how Ezra had mentioned that people in this time would be much more primitive in their technological capacities but not in their artistic capacities. He admired Jasmine's personality all the more given this insight that bubbled up.

"Tomorrow I have to go to Pavon Prison. I want to spend the rest of tonight with you," he said.

"You have to go to prison? The masters keep birds in prison. They also keep their litter in prison when they're very small. Why are you going to prison?"

"I have to save my friends."

"Why can't you stay here with me for a long time? We could have a litter together. I don't have a mate, you know."

"You don't, huh?"

Tuffy looked off to the east and thought of his mission to support his friends in saving the world.

"I can't stay here a long time," he said to Jasmine.

She was distraught. She lay down and looked up at him with princess eyes.

"Are you sure?" she asked, draping her voice in honey.

"I can only stay tonight. Tomorrow I have to go to the prison to get my friends out. They're locked up. One of them is squishy, like you."

"What?"

"One of them is skin and bones, like you. He's in danger. The other one, he's like a..."

He thought of an example he could give her. His cybernetic brain scanned several databases while his organic brain guided the process.

"...he's like a crocodile."

"Oh, no! You're going to save a crocodile?"

"No, he's *like* a crocodile. His skin is as tough as a crocodile's. It's very hard to kill him. One time we left him outside overnight in the cold as a joke. He didn't even notice the cold! He was very angry though..."

“Why did you do that to your friend?” she gasped.

“Well, it wasn’t just me that did it to him. Angus helped, too. Okay, it was mostly me.”

“So you can only stay one night with me?”

Tuffy lay down next to Jasmine and she began to knead her paws into his side.

“Sure, I’ll stay with you but I’m going to be hungry later. I’m going to have to raid that banquet again. Also, we can only snuggle. I’m not going to make babies I can’t raise. That’s the responsible thing to do.”

“You’re a very unnatural cat,” she said in a disappointed voice.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he said.

“Tell me, then. I like your stories,” she said. “Tell me where you’re from.”

For the rest of the night he regaled her with stories of the Vault, the future times, and all the creatures in the biosphere he had outwitted. They prowled the neighborhood as the stories poured out of Tuffy. Jasmine showed him all her favorite napping spots. They delighted in one another’s companionship.

Yama rested on a large rock near the seals. There were breaks in the clouds where miniscule amounts of sunlight shone through. It was the first sunlight recorded in several weeks. The continent was seeing more and more sunshine each year as the dust and ash thrown up into the atmosphere from the meteor strikes had begun to dissipate.

The huge cyborg opened a large metal case and gently withdrew some measuring equipment Hunter had assigned him. He also withdrew a bag of smoked fish he had catalogued as payment with the warehouse system for his rounds. Many seals teetered over to him and raised their voices to try and draw his attention. He obliged them and began tossing out the fish. A simpleton’s smile cracked on his face.

He set the long range scanners to work and unpacked a silver from the case to help him. It zipped to life and took over duties for the makeshift scanning station. Yama waded into the colony of seals, checking if any needed medical care.

The scanners ringed an unfamiliar tone that drew his attention. He lumbered back to the station and peered at a console. It showed a heat signature in the sky. He tapped the silver on the head. It rapidly pressed several buttons on the console and then returned to its former position. Yama scratched his head at the readings. He was intellectually underprepared to infer their deeper meaning. Maybe it was a large bird? Maybe the sun had a baby?

The heat signature on the console grew larger and larger. Yama's internal sensors registered electronic chatter emanating from the heat signature as he pinpointed it in the sky. Something deep within him told him to run for his life. His massive legs began pumping and he left the area with astonishing speed. He dove into a snow bank to hide from any thermal scans.

Thirty seconds later a precision guided missile struck the station, destroying the silver and several seals nearby.

Chapter 23: A False Resurrection

Ezra raised his aching head to see Jake coming early the following morning.

"I thought about what you were asking me yesterday," said Jake as soon as Brusco left them alone.

"Did you bring water? Water first. Then let me hear it."

Jake wet a clean rag and placed it on a stick. He held the stick up to Ezra's mouth several times.

"Much better, thank you. Dear Lord, I need that. Please, go on."

"I tried to feel back on it and I decided I felt lonely. I felt lonely as hell."

"Go on..."

"My parents died in the impacts," said Jake as he sat onto the ground and looked up at his friend.

"That's awful, Jake. I'm so sorry. Where were they?"

"They were in Santa Rosa, California. I wanted to be with them. They sold everything they had to put me in a bunker in Sun Valley, Idaho. They were gone in the first tsunamis. I lost a lot of friends too: a bass player buddy in San Diego, a drummer up in Seattle, a bunch of people I met at shows...they all got wiped out. I had a woman friend I saw sometimes in Oregon. She made it. I got to her after a couple years."

"What happened to her?"

"She died from breast cancer," Jake said. He looked up at Ezra with heavy tears in his eyes.

"My heart weeps for you. You've been through so much."

Jake felt an intense respect for his companion rising in his chest.

"Thanks. Feels good to open up. It gets easier with people like you around. Since we don't have that long, I want to change the subject if that's alright."

"Go ahead," said Ezra.

"We need to figure out how to get you down from there."

"I can last another month up here if they keep letting you bring me water. Tuffy will figure something out by then."

Several of El Toro's posse walked by. Their strides were arrogant and they cast dirty looks at Jake.

As soon as they were out of hearing range, Jake said, "Tuffy hasn't shown us he can be relied upon. You're up there and you might be up there a hell of a long time."

"My skin can take it. I'll be fine. I just need water. If it gets bad, I just send my body into hibernation and they'll think I'm dead," Ezra offered.

"Wait! What?"

"I'll be fine. I just need water."

"The next part--"

"If they think I'm dead, they'll take me down."

"That's right. That's exactly what you're going to do!"

"What?"

"You're going to play dead for them, starting tonight. Play it like you're starting to die. Slow your heart rate or whatever it is that you can do. I'll get in a fight with Brusco and they'll stop me from bringing you water. Refuse to take any water from anyone else and by tomorrow or the day after they'll think you're dead."

"Then what?" asked Ezra.

"Then..."

"Then I rise from the dead!"

"Shhh, quiet!"

"Right, right. It's brilliant."

"Can you pull it off?"

“Yes, I can. I’m designed to go into a deep stasis in order to survive extreme weather conditions. I tried it the night Tuffy locked me out of the Vault and disabled all the entries. I reached an inner quietude one can perhaps only attain after 40 days in a desert.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Jake.

“It’s not important. Let’s give this plan a try.”

At that moment Brusco came by and began to accost Jake, pushing him back toward his cell. Jake pushed back for a moment, which was enough to lose his visitation privilege that night. It also gained him a black eye.

Chapter 24: Peeling Away a False Self

“He’s not looking too well, boss,” one of El Toro’s underlings said to him the following morning.

“Good. Maybe he will die just like *Jesus* did for all our sins,” El Toro mused from his perch atop a table in the dining hall within the prison. He turned aside and flinched, out of view from his underlings. Something about what the underling just said bothered a part of him.

“Boss, that’s kind of fucked up. I mean, he’s just a guy. He’s not *El Padre*,” replied the underling in a meek voice.

“Do you want to go up on a cross, too?” hissed the leader, returning his attention to the issue at hand. He jabbed a spoon full of beans in the direction of the dissenter. The beans spilled out.

The dissenter bent down and cleaned the food from his shoes. He looked up at El Toro with sorrow in his eyes. It was enough to dissuade the leader from any further action.

“Where is Brusco?” asked El Toro.

“He’s in the yard,” responded a gangly-looking inmate with long hair in a ponytail. “He’s checking on *Jesus* now.”

“Tell him to come here. Wait, I will go to him. I want to check on our guest.”

El Toro stopped on the way out of the building to inspect his immaculate hairstyle in a mirror specially erected at his behest. This allowed him to regain his vicious composure.

“There he is...” El Toro said defiantly as he walked up to the man on the cross.

With the weariest look he could muster, Ezra brought himself to face his torturer.

“Hello,” he said weakly.

“You aren’t looking so good, *hermano*.”

“I don’t feel very well. I am weakening,” Ezra lied.

"That is too bad," El Toro said with a tisk.

"What do you want?" asked Ezra.

"Me? I want to be 'El Toro'. Who else could I be?"

El Toro stood in a wide stance and viewed Ezra with a haughty look.

"I don't understand you," said Ezra. "Perhaps you don't understand yourself either."

"What's there not to understand? I'm in power and you are not. You had the audacity to pretend to be *Jesus* and I'm making you pay for it."

"Okay. But why are you here? What crime did you commit?"

"It's none of your business."

"I think I am dying, El Toro. It's my dying wish to know what crime you committed."

This moved the leader of the inmates.

"You better not be trying to make a fool out of me," said El Toro.

He sent away his many minions, including Brusco and the gangly inmate.

When they were gone he turned his attention back to Ezra and said, "This is a very strange request for you to make. Nobody has ever asked this before. Why do you ask this now?"

"I am..." began Ezra. He feigned a struggle to find the strength to speak. This brought El Toro in closer. They were only a foot apart with El Toro at eye-level with Ezra's knees.

"Speak, *Jesus*. You have something to say. Say it while you have the strength."

"I am...dying, El Toro. Always I want to understand the world better. I want to know the life of the man who put me on this cross. I want to..."

Ezra's head slumped but his eyes remained loosely focused on El Toro.

"You know, you have touched my heart a little bit," replied El Toro. "I will tell you my story. I am afraid you don't have much time, so I will keep my story short."

Ezra nodded weakly.

Jake watched from afar and wondered what El Toro could want from Ezra. He saw how well Ezra played the part of a dying man and was nearly fooled by the act. He felt concern rising in his chest and an urge to medicate it with a joint. Then he remembered his vulnerable disclosure to his friend. A sense of tenderness flowed into him and he relaxed.

"I am a dual citizen of America and Guatemala but please don't tell a soul. They will kill me if they find out I am a gringo," said El Toro.

"You...can...trust me," croaked Ezra.

"I was working for a finance services firm in Guatemala City until I was brought here. The company provided private banking services for high net-worth individuals. We had certain liberties granted to us through a close relationship with the federal government. We leveraged our status into strategic wealth management and tax planning the circumvented most of the normal overhead associated with banking in Guatemala. Some of our clients included Muammar Gaddafi, Ariel Sharon, and Nawaz Sharif. You look surprised..."

"Please, go on my son."

"I was the head of the advisory services department. Basically, I was the firm's minder for any client visits to Guatemala because of my fluent English. It was my job to get our clients what they wanted when they wanted with no questions asked. Now you see how it has been easy for me to assume control of this prison? Well, I once had a very good job. I made a horrible mistake and now I am here. I had an affair with the daughter of a very powerful man. She betrayed me to him when I could not perform sexually."

El Toro paused to check Ezra's reaction before continuing, "I was given a choice when the details came to light: die or spend the rest of my life in this prison. I chose this prison and it is my home now. The powerful man is in his 80's. I do not suspect he will-are you laughing at me?"

"No, my son. I am coughing," Ezra croaked again.

"Okay, just making sure. The man is very old. He will die soon. Then I will take my chances and leave this place."

"You have not sinned. You are an innocent man."

"Not so innocent, *Jesus*. I have spilled much blood here in my reign. In this place I have become El Toro. I wield the knife like a raging bull. Many men have bled. You have touched me with your compassion today. You didn't try to make a fool out of me like so many other men have. I will make sure your friend can leave for America."

"Thank you, El Toro. You have made a confession of sorts. You will receive the...kingdom of heaven," said Ezra, doing his best to sound sure of himself.

El Toro turned and stomped away. A tear trickled down his face.

Chapter 25: Try A Little Tenderness

After an evening of nimbly shunning Jasmine's advances with his own stories and songs, Tuffy was on his way back across the countryside of Guatemala. He was headed to the final rendezvous point before the rescue was to occur. He stood on the back of a fruit truck gazing out on the beautiful scenery before him. He admired the lushness of the trees, the smell of the domesticated animals in the air, the human commerce all around him, and the fact that, because of his advanced technological capacities, he was master of it all.

A boy about the age of eight accompanied him in the back of the truck. They were alone together. The boy stroked him from time to time during the long drive. The boy's parents were in the front of the truck, the father driving. They were very harsh with the boy. They yelled at him and threatened to hit him for not obeying their orders immediately. Tuffy pondered off and on whether he should speak to the boy. Would it be safe? How would the boy react? He questioned himself for a time and finally thought of a way he could make contact with the child. He sat in the boy's lap. The boy welcomed him excitedly and murmured gently as he stroked Tuffy's rich fur.

Tuffy began to hum. Rather, a humming tune gently made its way out of the speaker built into his collar. He hummed a nursery rhyme selected from his melodic database, "Rock-a-bye Baby".

"That's funny," said the boy in Spanish. *"You can sing. I never met a cat who could sing before."*

Tuffy tilted his head up at the boy and let the boy see the warm smile across his face. He purred along with the tune.

"You are a very nice cat. I wish my mommy and daddy were nice like you."

Tuffy again looked up at the boy. He nuzzled at the boy's hand, almost as if he were urging on the boy to continue sharing. He began to hum a Hispanic traditional tune he thought the boy would recognize, "A la nanita nana".

"Oh, I like that song. My grandma used to sing it to me. She was nice when we visited her. She's gone now. She used to make delicious arepas with her own recipe. I like to eat them and play with her pet armadillo. He lived in the backyard. He liked carrots especially. Now he lives with my grandma's neighbor. We don't ever go over there. Momma and Papa say we have too much work to do. I miss my grandma..."

The boy cried a little bit and continued petting Tuffy. His tears ran down his pale cheeks, down his chin, and dropped onto Tuffy.

"Tuffy," said the cat very gently.

"What?" the boy asked.

"My name is Tuffy."

"My name is Diego...you can talk! You're like a cat in the movies! How come your mouth doesn't move when you talk?"

Tuffy pawed at his collar.

"You talk out of there! Like a radio."

"You are a very good boy. You were so nice to me by not telling your parents I was hiding on your truck. Now we get to be friends for a little bit," said the cat in perfect Spanish.

"Are you an angel?"

"No but I am a very special cat-"

"-because you can talk!" Diego blurted out.

"Careful, sweetheart. We need to keep quiet or your parents will hear us. They wouldn't want us to be friends."

"Okay."

The boy eyed the cab of the truck warily. His parents couldn't see him past all the crates loaded on the bed of the vehicle.

"I am a special cat and I want to tell you something you must never forget. Can you promise me you'll always remember what I tell you?"

"Yes, I can promise. I promise I'll remember."

Tuffy rolled onto his back and showed his belly to Diego. The boy giggled and petted the cat on his stomach.

"Thank you. That felt very good. I trust you because you are a good boy. Diego, listen very closely to me. I'm going to tell you that very important thing: it's not your fault that your parents are mean to you," the beautiful voice emanated from the collar. *"They are mean to you because of their own fault, not yours. It's not your fault. You're a good boy. You helped me. You work hard to move fruit and help your parents. One day you're going to be big and strong and you must remember then that you're a good person and it's not your fault, no matter what your parents say. Do you believe me, Diego?"*

"Yes, I believe you. I think you are an angel," said Diego as he continued to cry.

"What is it that I want you to remember?"

"That I'm a good boy and it's not my fault my parents are mean to me."

"Yes, that's right. Always remember that. You're a good boy. Tuffy loves you very much."

"Can you be my papa?" asked Diego. *"I want to live with you and help you with your business."*

"No, I'm sorry. I can't be your papa. After all, I'm a cat! This world isn't very safe for cats. It's safer for humans. Now, what is it that I want you to remember?"

"I'm a good boy and it's not my fault my parents are mean to me. But why is it not my fault?"

"It's not your fault because you're a good boy, of course! They didn't learn how to be nice before they had you," said Tuffy. He was a little surprised at his show of kindness to the boy but then again, he had had some very tender moments with Eddie at the Vault. Eddie was the only person Tuffy had truly taken a liking to there.

"Will you hug me? Momma and Papa don't ever give me hugs."

Tuffy did his best to give the boy a hug and wheezed when the boy squeezed him back.

“Diego, we only have another hour together on the truck and then I have to jump off and go my own way. Will you tell me all the things that hurt you and all the things you like with the rest of the time we have together?”

Tuffy continued to be surprised at his own tenderness. Where was this coming from? It felt so good to be so sweet instead of his usual self. Maybe this boy unlocked something inside of him that didn't get activated in his life at the Vault surrounded by adults? He shrugged off the thoughts and turned his full attention to Diego's many stories, making careful note of all biographical details in case he wanted to contact the boy again.

The end of the bumpy ride came. Tuffy gave Diego one last nuzzle and darted off in the direction of the prison. He now had two new friends in the world. Perhaps he wasn't just a charmer. Perhaps there was more substance to him than he had imagined. He hardly noticed the soft earth beneath his powerful claws. He paid no mind to the many people who stopped to notice his great size and great speed. He felt happy as he ran.

Chapter 26: The Leering Eye of Suspicion

A sleek, blackened plane set down vertically over one of the larger side entrances to the Vault. A ramp extended down from the plane revealing large crates, industrial machinery, and several men bearing automatic rifles. The men streamed out of the plane and onto the dimly lit, Antarctic terrain. They moved with precision to the large security doors at the side of the mountain beneath which the Vault lay and set to work hacking through the electronic systems holding the doors shut and sealed tight. As they toiled away, an unarmed man emerged from the plane. His name was Frank Noris. His movement was stiff because of back problems that had plagued him since he was very young. He wore all black aside from a deep blue necktie and spectacles with a frame of the same color. He peered through these spectacles at the world in front of him. He studied the movement of the troops and checked his watch to ensure all was on schedule.

Frank took his time walking up to the security doors. A man wearing an expensive combat suit nodded to him to indicate that he could pass through the doors. A pair of troopers pushed the doors apart and Frank walked into the Vault.

The brightly-lit corridor leading from the side entrance into the main complex was empty save for a silver servbot coming toward the invaders. It was a hundred feet away. Frank and his men waited for it to come to them after an electronic scan revealed no weapons or explosives within it. It arrived and stood five feet away. Two of the seven men accompanying Frank trained their weapons on the silver.

Frank had no use for a high quality servbot but its presence served as an indicator for things he could use.

“Why are you here?” said a voice transmitted through the servbot.

“To whom am I speaking?” Frank asked in his leathery baritone voice.

“This is Hunter Overlook. I am charged with the care of this facility and its operations. What do you want and why have you come in force?”

“We have come for our own purposes,” responded the man in black.

“You’re not welcome to use force here. The doors and the scanning equipment you destroyed are going to cost us a lot of time and resources to replace. You’ve entered our Vault without permission. We’re within our rights to seal the corridor and pump it full of sarin gas,” Hunter said with full conviction.

Security doors that had rested concealed behind the walls of the corridor came to life and slammed shut behind Frank and his squad.

“You have ten seconds to lay down your guns. You will be allowed to leave if you disarm,” spoke Hunter through the silver.

“Passive”, “insular”, and “non-violent” were the terms that dotted Frank’s intelligence reports on the Vault. They flashed to mind as he made the decision to set an explosive charge on the security door that had sprung up out of nowhere. He motioned to his men and they set to work immediately.

Frank had called Hunter’s bluff. There was no gas delivery system built into the corridor. He let a slight smile pass over his face as he watched the silver dash off in the direction of the main complex. Hunter quite obviously wanted to spare the robot from its sure destruction. Frank perceived a weakness in this gesture.

The lights in the corridor and in all of the outer units of the massive complex shut off. The men in the squad released small flying drones that brightly lit the way before them. The drones were shaped like hockey pucks with sharp, angular weapons systems that peeked out from their sides. The whirring of their propellers and the boot steps of Frank's men was all that could be heard.

Outside and a ways away from the Vault was Yama. He emerged from the snow bank he had encased himself within like a giant yeti emerging from hibernation. He rubbed his eyes and stretched and lumbered toward the Vault. An encrypted message reached the communication systems embedded in his skull. He ambled toward a secret entryway into the Vault some distance away.

For several minutes the group of invaders proceeded carefully through the outer workings of the great facility. One of Hunter's oldest electric hummingbirds appeared momentarily before being chased away by the puck drones. Security cameras swiveled and tracked the interlopers before being disabled by a systems specialist at the rear of the troop. Frank knew he was getting closer to the inhabitants of the Vault when the polished stone floors became carpeted. The multitude of common plants lining the walls soon changed to fruit-bearing plants and rarer flowers.

There began to be windows in the corridor revealing servbots at the ready in distant corridors, shining their lights at the intruders and chattering in their unique way to one another. Frank heard a wider and wider variety of sounds as they continued. The narrow corridor opened up to reveal a large open area with a series of closed security doors at the far end that led to personal quarters and sections of the facility more important than the heretofore-seen maintenance and security features. The mercenaries stood by awaited Frank's command.

His second in command held up a wrist-bound device to Frank. It was attached to an advanced combat suit called the Powersuit. The wrist device emitted a holographic scan of the Vault that bore discouraging information. Frank grunted in frustration and stopped to think.

An angry looking basset hound appeared from beneath a metallic white table where he had been napping on an electric blanket. He sniffed at the troop and chortled arrogantly before trotting away. He pawed at a pad on a wall and a pet door revealed itself to him. He took one last look at Frank and his armed men before disappearing.

"Can anyone hear me?" Frank called out. He shook his head silently at his squad when they began to enter into the large chamber. He wanted them to remain in the corridors.

Milena and all the others were gathered in the command center watching the movements of Frank and his men.

"We ought to send some drones loaded up with grenades at em'," Nick grunted.

"We don't want to damage our facilities," said Xiao Ma. "This has been a peaceful place for so long. Let's try to resolve this without violence."

"At some point we're going to have to be willing to use violence," said Hunter.

"I agree with him," said Milena.

"The silvers can fight. We can give them kitchen knives..." Cong Yu offered darkly. He had a scowl on his aged face. He'd been watching the action from a reclined chair with his arms crossed and resting atop his belly. His sense of safety was deeply disturbed.

"This man is an idiot," said Eddie in his dignified way. "The men with him are idiots. Using violence is the way of the idiot. They've invaded our boundaries. They've destroyed our property. Thank goodness they didn't harm Angus when he did his little thing. They're idiots! I don't care how sophisticated this fellow in the fancy clothes looks, he's a brute."

Eddie rose gingerly and stood at the holographic image of the great room and the interlopers within it.

He spoke again, "If you fight with idiots, they'll drag you down to their level and beat with you experience. That is a mantra I have lived by. It's something Mark Twain once wrote. I read it just before I decided to become a doctor. No one fought with me because I was damn good doctor. I was the master of my field. We are the masters of this Vault of ours."

"But we're not masters of violence," said Hunter.

"We don't have to use violence," said Eddie.

"Grenades *would* do the trick," said Nick.

"No," said Eddie. He turned and regarded his companions. "Unless they are sadists, I refuse to engage them in violence."

"All this time I had no idea you were a pacifist," said Cong in his somewhat noticeable Chinese accent.

"They came here for something," said Eddie. "The trick is to convince them they don't need it...or some variation of this."

"Things could bloody really quickly. I don't trust these guys," said Nick with a grunt.

"A man does not acquire a suit that luxurious and resplendent in this day and age by charging around, killing people," said Eddie. "Governments are dying. Their tax bases are gone. The butchers are going the way of the dinosaur."

"Are you implying this man has achieved his means through negotiation?" Xiao Ma asked. She was seated next to Roger. Their shoulders were touching and his hand rested on her leg.

"No, I don't think he has. I think he is cunning, a cunning idiot. He's willing to use force but I think he is vain. Who dresses like that for a tactical operation?"

"So what do we do?" asked Hunter.

"We appeal to his vanity. We stubbornly refuse to give him what he wants until we figure out how to get him out of here," said Eddie.

"I still think we should arm the silvers with kitchen knives. This is my home and I want them out of here," said Cong.

"It's up to you two." Eddie said to Hunter and Milena. "You're the leaders here."

A moment passed before Hunter and Milena looked at each other. Hunter shrugged and said, "Let's see about Eddie's way of doing things. It's been so long since anyone fresh came through, marauder or not. Let's test his ideas."

"I'm interested to see where this goes, too," said Milena.

She leaned over the command console, enabled the intercom throughout the great room, and said to Frank, "We don't want any bloodshed. You will not engage our defensive measures if you lay down your rifles, the fellow with the Powersuit takes it off and powers it down, and you all come in through the chamber we will unlock. You may retain your side arms if it pleases you."

Back in the great room Frank called out, "With whom am I speaking this time?"

"I am Milena Overlook. I am co-commander of this facility. Hunter is my brother."

"What assurances do we have that you won't attack if we disarm?" asked Frank.

"I don't know what to say to him," Milena said to her companions as the intercom was muted.

"Tell him we'll cook him a meal," offered Cong Yu. "Everyone likes a good meal. Tell him, tell him!"

"We...can make you a meal," Milena said dryly. "We can offer you food and accommodation."

Frank whispered some words to the squad leader and they conferred for a moment.

“Very well,” began Frank, “your offer is...strange but we’ll accept on the condition that you give us a thermal readout of your entire facility. We want to be sure you’re not hiding any personnel. We know some of your construction projects have been...quite ambitious. We want to be sure there are no surprises.”

“That is acceptable,” replied Milena. She input some commands on the console.

The massive steel sliding door protecting the residential quarters slid open. Dozens of electric hummingbirds flitted out and waited as Frank and his men disarmed their heavier weaponry and recalled their puck drones. The birds zipped down upon the rifles, the Powersuit, and the grenades as they were laid down and clasped them magnetically with their tiny claws. They hummed a calming song with many harmonies and flew away with the guns, gently setting them down in neat rows on a white table some distance away. The interlopers watched in awe. They entered into the residential wing of the Vault soon after the hummingbirds went back to where they came from.

Chapter 27: Certainty on Religious Matters

Ezra was taken down from the cross when attempts to revive him failed. A prison medic could detect no pulse from his body. Ezra had gone into a deep hibernation, in keeping with his genetic design, and no one but he and Jake knew that there still remained life in his limp body. He was laid on a table inside of a shipping container. The table was adorned with flowers. A steady procession of believers streamed by the makeshift mausoleum. Many men wept and touched Ezra's toes as a kind of benediction until Brusco put a stop to the touching, on El Toro's orders.

Jake put on a good show for those who were concerned. His position in the prison hierarchy had risen considerably when it was learned that he would attain his freedom and be allowed to leave for America in a few days. He stood by the shipping container and told many stories about Ezra.

"When *Jesus* was living in Jerusalem, he helped to broker the peace deal between Israel and Jordan," he proclaimed loudly.

Whispers translated his words from English into Spanish carried through the assembled.

"He was in a room with Mr. Bill Clinton, Hussein I, and Yitzhak Rabin. They all came to hear his Word. *El Presidente* Clinton said to *Jesus*, 'Jesus, thanks for joining us today. We hope you will help us find some way for peace to rule this land.' Do you know what *Jesus* did? He looked at *El Presidente* and told him he was a sinner. He looked at Hussein I and Yitzhak Rabin and told them they were sinners too. 'You're all a bunch of fucking sinners!' said *Jesus*. He told them all to confess their sins. All of the Secret Service men, *hombres de secretos*, were told to leave the room. Then *Jesus* heard the confessions.

Bill Clinton said that he had done many terrible things. He confessed that he wasn't the real brains of Clinton brand. He confessed that he had done many sexual positions with Gennifer Flowers in the back of a travel trailer. He also confessed that he was a very neglectful father to Chelsea Clinton. *Jesus* listened carefully and closely. When *El Presidente* was done confessing, *Jesus* told him to say six Hail Mary's. He also told him to brush his teeth. Then *Jesus* performed a miracle, *un milagro!*"

The numbers of illiterate prisoners swelled at the mention of a miracle. Jake paused for dramatic effect. Furious whispers reverberated through the gathering, the English speaking men taxing themselves to keep pace with the tale.

"But before I tell of the *milagro*, let us hear what the other two men confessed."

The crowd groaned in anticipation.

"Hussein I kissed the hand of *Jesus*. Yes, this deceased man lying nearby had his hand kissed by the King of Jordan, an Arab! *Jesus* listened as Hussein confessed to conspiring with powerful men in Jordan to overthrow his older brother Talal by having him proclaimed a schizophrenic. Hussein I took power through illicit means. He also confessed that he had been a habitual masturbator for thirty years."

"Tell us about the miracle!" shouted El Toro. He had joined in throng and was sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, captivated by Jake's yarn. He rested his chin on his hands and leaned forward. Brusco stood above him and hissed at everyone to quiet down.

"The day the peace treaty was signed was the day that Ez... *Jesus* performed the *milagro*," said Jake. He emphasized what Spanish he could to get his point across. He was doing anything within his power to stoke the flames of belief in the prisoners. If he could get them to buy into the myth, they would perhaps react in a pandemonium upon Ezra's "resurrection".

Jake cleared his throat and said, “*Jesus* held Mr. Bill Clinton in his arms after he confessed his sexual crimes and his neglectful parenting. Clinton cried many tears. *Jesus* passed his Holy hands over the tears and presto, they turned into blood!”

“*Chinga*,” muttered El Toro. He was spellbound.

“Mr. Clinton asked why his face was like wine and *Jesus* told him that the statues of the Blessed Mother bleed because Mary was a virgin. *Jesus* reminded the *Presidente* that he too was once a virgin and that when he had affairs on his wife, God wept tears of blood. Mr. Clinton begged for forgiveness once more and *Jesus* told him to say seven Our Father’s and send flowers to his wife with an apology card. *Jesus* passed his hand over Clinton’s face again and the blood was gone. There were only watery tears there. It was a miracle.”

Jake surveyed all who were listening to his haphazard sermon and decided to take things further.

“Let us bow our heads and pray,” he said. “Dear Lord, you sent your only son to this Earth a second time and he remained behind the scenes for most of his 33 years. When he lived in Heaven with you he was immortal but alas, the body you gave him here on Earth failed him after three days of being strapped to a cross in the burning heat. Now he is dead and we all beg your forgiveness. Amen.”

Many men were crying. Their rough and leathery voices betrayed their remaining inner softness. Jake had gained Ezra many new followers with his sermon and prayer. The crowd dispersed as it was time for a meal.

El Toro approached Jake and asked him, “You really believe he was *Jesus*?”

Jake gulped down his years of identifying as staunch atheist and said, “Yes, of course.”

“Do you think he will come back from the dead and ascend into heaven?”

Jake adopted a scholarly voice and replied, “*Jesus* told me that the last time he was on this planet was when he came to America, shortly after his life in Jerusalem. He died from Native American arrows during a terrible war between tribes of believers and non-believers. He told me that that time his body resurrected after six hours. It’s safe to assume that his body will resurrect again. We have to find a cave for him to go to, or at least a room where no one can see him, so that he can complete his passage to Heaven.”

“*Mierda*,” El Toro muttered. He pulled at his plentiful mustache and eyed some of his henchmen. He thought about the nearest cave and whether he could obtain permission for a small religious party to visit it. He shook his head and decided it was impossible. “We can’t put him in a cave. Is too far. We can put him in a room where no one can see. There are some rooms underground that we don’t use. Do you think he will resurrect soon?”

“It’s possible. It’s certainly possible. Our timeframe is between six hours and 3 days. He’s been gone about six hours now, hasn’t he? Yes, certainly possible.” Jake thought of smoking a joint. The thought was nudged out of the way for a perplexed feeling and ideas on where Tuffy could possibly be. He returned his attention to El Toro and said, “Let’s put him in one of those underground rooms. No one can be in there with him or else he won’t resurrect.”

El Toro was impressed with Jake’s certainty on religious matters. He ordered his men to carry Ezra’s body down into the prison’s underground. They set to work immediately, lifting him onto a stretcher and marching into the bowels of the prison. Jake could have sworn he saw Ezra wink at him as Ezra was carried into the gloom of the building. El Toro signaled for Jake to come down into the underground with the small procession.

“You will stay outside the room?” El Toro asked.

“Of course.”

Jake was beginning to like El Toro. Ezra's continued presence in El Toro's life had softened the gangster somehow. Brusco had stayed his fists in the day prior. Things were easing up for Jake and his imprisonment. He wondered if El Toro was getting at something he couldn't yet perceive.

Chapter 28: Tuffy's Wild Ride

Tuffy watched from the top of a nearby roof, pretending to bathe idly in the afternoon sun, as several small groups of hardened mercenaries met outside an abandoned warehouse in a dilapidated industrial district. Within the warehouse rested five unmarked vans. Each van had a rack mount on top of it loaded with various plastic crates containing diversionary devices that the men could access via a sunroof. Within the vans were rows of gas-powered tranquilizer guns, net launchers, and various other riot control related implements. On tables beside the vans were tear gas canisters and bulletproof vests. Tuffy eyed all that he had culled together with the zeal of a small boy eager to play cops and robbers.

The man in charge of the rescue operation stood at the doors of the warehouse and oversaw the patting down and disarmament of all the men involved. They entered the warehouse, sat down at rows of foldable metal chairs, and awaited the mission briefing. The leader of the operation stepped in and took his place at a projector screen as soon all the participants were disarmed and into the meeting space.

Tuffy slunk into the warehouse through an opened window and found a cozy perch atop a stack of barrels from which to watch the proceedings.

"We are all here because of the Grey Man," said the tattooed presenter.

Every man present spoke in unison, "All hail the Grey Man!"

Tuffy snickered through his whiskers at the formality he had included in his instructions.

The rescue plan was summarily laid out. Few questions were asked and all seemed to be going according to plan when the sounds of police sirens rang to life in the near distance.

“No rescue, no money!” announced Tuffy’s proxy. “Let’s go!”

The warehouse doors were opened and the twenty mercenaries jumped into their respective vans. Tuffy scrambled from his place on the barrels over to a ledge near the rear van. He hunkered down momentarily to build the courage to leap. He sprang with all his might, landing in large plastic crate he had ordered be left empty. He braced himself against the side of the crate as best he could.

Tuffy poked his head up from his spot to see police cars slamming into the sides of a van up ahead. He’d paid off the prison authorities but forgotten to pay off the local police force. Several other police cars joined up in the chase. They were only a few miles from the prison but the police presence promised to be a pesky thorn in the side the whole way.

A mercenary in each van rose up through a sunroof and began hurling Molotov cocktails from the crates at the police. Tuffy yowled when the mercenary in his van blindly reached into his crate and pinched him in hopes of finding a bottle to throw. He curled up further into a corner of the crate and remained unnoticed in the commotion.

Attempts by the police to board the vans were met with taser fire from the windows of the vans. The police still remaining in the pursuit quickly learned to keep their distance from the caravan of rescuers.

The prison came into view. Tuffy murmured in anticipation of seeing his friends again.

Chapter 29: Looking for a Man

The hummingbird drones dispersed out of sight when Hunter entered into the room. Frank stayed seated at the far end of the conference table. His men flanked him, all standing in guarded positions.

Hunter nodded and took a seat at the other end of the table. Milena, Eddie, and Cong Yu entered into the brightly lit room and seated themselves on either side of Hunter.

“The thermal scans will appear before you momentarily,” said Hunter as he pointed to a small instrument emerging from the table. “We have never had trespassers here. You are the first. We require restitution for the damage you have done to the scanning station and the entryway.”

“In gold or in crypto?” asked Frank.

“Preferably gold,” replied Eddie.

Frank took some time to think. He crossed his arms and leaned back into his chair. He turned his head back toward his second in command and whispered something.

He returned his attention to his hosts and said, “I would like to send my men away. There is no need to return to them their arms. They will await me on our ship. They know the way out or you can escort them if you would like.”

“And the gold?” Eddie insisted.

“It is on our ship. We can convey it to you by way of servbot...”

“That is acceptable,” said Hunter.

“We require seven ounces: three for materials, one for repair time, and another three to add to our materials store should we need to,” Eddie said sternly.

Frank tapped his fingers across his cheek and grimaced, visibly displeased with the high cost. He leaned back and conferred with a second man in hushed voices. He returned his gaze to his hosts and said, "Very well. The restitution stands at seven ounces. We will include a reasonable sum in crypto to offset for environmental destruction from our rockets."

"That is reasonable," said Milena. She whistled and the flock of hummingbirds returned. "Please show the soldiers to their ship," she said to them.

The hummingbirds whirled and sang as they flitted to the exit. Frank's men followed. Cong Yu breathed a sigh of relief knowing some danger had passed.

"The offer for food and accommodation still stands, if your men are interested in returning at any point," said Hunter.

Frank gazed at the digital readout of the thermal scans before him. He then made eye contact with Hunter and said, "Thank you. I see you are keeping large biomasses here and here. What are they?"

"We have a biosphere with over thirty species of fish, sixty species of mammals, ninety species of birds, two thousand species of insects, and a number of plants we estimate to be in the several thousands. It is the centerpiece of this facility," Eddie responded with pride.

"The second, smaller biomass you see is workshop that bridges Hunter's wing of our facility and a wing once inhabited by researchers who have since left us," added Milena.

"I see," said Frank. He crossed his lean fingers and held his hands near his chin, rubbing the space between the fingers together. He exhaled slowly and asked, "What is in the workshop?"

Hunter raised his hand gently and said, "We have shared plenty enough with you. We don't even know your name. Tell us about yourself and we will share more."

Frank considered Hunter's point and returned his gaze once again to the thermal readout.

"This is us here?" he asked, pointing to where it seemed he was on the map.

"Yes," said Cong Yu.

Frank pursed his lips and thought of what to say.

"My name is Frank Noris," he began. "I am from the San Martin de los Andes commune in western Argentina. We came here searching for something that is no longer here. We knew this when our scans completed as we approached the core of this facility. We have no need to use force."

"What were you looking for?" asked Milena. She was visibly chilled by Frank's cold countenance.

"A man. We know he is not here but that he *was* here," said Frank.

"Describe him to us," said Eddie.

"His name is Jake Walker. He keeps his hair long and usually has a beard. He's tall and broad-chested, has a deep voice. He flies airships. He used to sing before the meteor impacts. We traced him to a port in Valparaiso, Chile where he purchased a sailing boat. He is of considerable value to my people and we wish to speak to him. We know he was here but now he is gone. Where is he?"

The others looked at each other for a moment before Hunter asked, "What do you need him for?"

"I won't be revealing that at this time," responded Frank.

"You're willing to use considerable force to retrieve him," Eddie noted as he furrowed his brow in contemplation. "He's left the Vault permanently...he is likely somewhere in the southeastern United States at this point."

"There's nothing there but waste and ruin. What use would he have for going there?" asked Frank.

“He’s going to one of the remaining population centers in the region. We don’t know which one. He wouldn’t say and we didn’t pry,” Eddie lied. “He was tired of living here. There weren’t enough people for him. He was withdrawn and sullen for most of his stay. We did not get to know him very well. He did some work for us and left in his boat nearly a month ago now.”

“I have traveled a long way to hear this. Our ship has crisscrossed the Western Hemisphere many times as we have followed down many rumors of his whereabouts. We had heard he was in Alaska. We were there two days ago,” said Frank in a disappointed voice. “It is very important we find him. Please, allow me a moment here.”

He stood from the table and turned his back to his hosts. He spent some time muttering information to his troops into a communicator. He returned to the table, offering a thin smile as he sat back down. He looked at Milena and said, “I have tasked my men with repairing the damage we have done, with your permission of course. It will take us the better part of a day. “He then addressed all of his hosts and said, “I apologize for the fright, hardship, and anger we have caused you. Jake Walker is a dangerous man and with his presence here we had to regard this facility as a military installation. Does your offer for a meal and accommodation still stand?”

Chapter 30: Prison Break

Pistol fire peppered the white rescue vans as they rammed through the gates of the prison. Guards scattered to avoid being run over by Tuffy and his crew of mercenaries and resumed firing from cover. The vans screeched to a halt, forming a semi-circle. The battle-hardened men streamed from the relative safety of the vehicles into an inferno of rioting prisoners, confused guards, and sweltering jungle heat. They hurled fire bombs at a perimeter of police cars. They fired nets at any prisoners who dared to get too close. A small contingent of the mercenaries trotted in formation toward the prison yard cage Jake and Ezra had been kept in. Seeing it empty, they took to subduing nearby prisoners and questioning them on the whereabouts of the ‘gringos’.

Tuffy watched nervously from his perch atop one of the vans. He was well-concealed but some of the pistol fire had come too close for comfort. His intelligent eyes scanned the grounds for any sign of his friends. He noticed a very handsome man flanked by a large brute and a slender prisoner walk calmly toward the small group of mercenaries that had broken away from the van formation. He wiggled his ears to position the directional microphones within them to capture every word he could.

“I am El Toro. This is my prison yard,” El Toro asserted loudly to the tattooed leader of the rescue mission. He had chosen to speak to this man after watching from afar how he was deferred to by the others.

“We’re here for the two gringos,” the tattooed man barked over the din of the chaos swirling around them. “Show us to them!”

“Ok, but you’re not gonna like it!”

They trotted purposefully toward the underground room where Ezra was being kept. The prisoners, on El Toro's orders, had taken up the struggle against the uncorrupt guards and the few arriving police. This aided the rescuers considerably and opened up the mission's window of opportunity.

There was less and less sunlight for the mercenaries as they made their way down into the bowels of the prison.

"He is in there," said El Toro, pointing to the door next to Jake. Jake stared wild-eyed at the sudden arrival of so many people.

"Very good," said the squad leader as he began to move toward the door.

"You can't go in there!" shouted El Toro. "You will spoil the resurrection!"

Jake rose sharply and said, "I heard the sounds of a resurrection behind the door maybe fifteen minutes ago. There was a painful howling and then the cracking of bones. I meant to tell you, El Toro, but I was deep in prayer."

El Toro and his two companions dropped to one knee and crossed themselves. The mercenaries moved past Jake and into the room. After a brief exchange of words they emerged with Ezra, who was smiling.

"Jake, these guys are here to rescue us! The 'Grey Man' sent them," he said. "Can you believe that rascal?"

"You guys are leaving?" asked El Toro. Panic flooded his nervous system. His elaborate 'El Toro' ruse was crumbling.

"Sure as shit we are!" said Ezra, beaming.

"No, no, no! Don't leave! I need you here. Please don't go."

"*Walk with us if you're going to talk to the gringo,*" said the tattooed squad leader.

"Why don't you want us to go?" Ezra asked El Toro as they walked side by side.

"*El Toro! We took the guard tower!*" a man screamed as he sprinted by with a large iron bar in his hands.

El Toro ordered Brusco and the slender prisoner to accompany the man into the fight with the guards. He returned his attention to Ezra and said in the same vulnerable voice he'd had when he shared his troubles with Ezra earlier, "Look, I know you guys aren't sent from God. I know you're not *Jesus*. There's something different about you but I don't know what. 'El Toro' is an act just like all that bullshit you talked is an act as well. Prison is fucking horrible. I haven't been honest with a single person since I've been in here. You two are the first reasonable people to come around. You can't leave me here. I still have so much life ahead of me. I don't want to rot in this prison. We can't overcome the military when they get sent in. I'll be hanged as one of the ringleaders here. Take me with you."

"You've been nothing but a dick to us. Why should we take you?" asked Jake.

"You're right, you're right. I had an image to keep up. I swear I wouldn't have done it otherwise. Besides, I have connections."

"Where do you have connections?" asked Ezra.

"*Los Angeles and Nueva York.*"

"Is Los Angeles near where the dot-com bubble is?" Ezra asked Jake.

"I believe so...I thought the dot-com bubble was more of a widespread kind of thing. Either of those are good, I think."

"Hey," Ezra said to the lead mercenary escorting them, "we want to take this guy with us."

"I will ask the Grey Man."

The mercenary spoke into a two way radio mounted to his shoulder, "Grey Man, *Jesus* and *The Buffalo Man* want to bring someone with them. Yes...yes, he's a prisoner here. No. Okay."

The group had reached the edge of the prison yard. The vans were maybe two hundred feet away.

"You three, come with me," the main mercenary ordered Ezra, Jake, and El Toro. "*The rest of you, back to your vans. We have 50 seconds on the timeline.*"

El Toro smiled to himself and regarded the chaos all around. The prisoners would fail to completely overthrow the prison administration but it looked as though they could perhaps return to the uneasy peace they'd been keeping for the better part of a year. He sprinted to catch up to Jake and Ezra. They loaded into Tuffy's van not knowing the brave cat was right above them. Soon all of mercenaries were back into the five unmarked vans. They screeched out of the prison yard and back onto the roads.

Tuffy dropped down from his perch into the cab of the van through the sunroof.

"Tuffy!" Jake and Ezra cried in unison.

Tuffy eyed El Toro and then glanced at the single mercenary at the front of the van. He returned his gaze to El Toro.

"This is...what's your real name?" asked Ezra.

"I am Curro Belmonte."

"Sick fuckin' name, El Toro," said Jake.

"Why are you talking to this cat?"

The two men disregarded the third's question.

Ezra reached over, petted Tuffy, and asked, "What's next? Where are we going?"

Tuffy nodded his head toward a metal case mounted to the wall of the van and whimpered. The van picked up speed considerably as it entered a highway. Two of the vans had broken off from the caravan as diversions for the few remaining police still in chase. The coast wasn't quite clear but was getting there.

"Let's see what's in the case," said Ezra.

He opened the metal case. It contained tens of thousands of dollars in cash.

"Not bad, Tuffy," said Jake.

"I imagine you didn't get this by the most legal of means," said Ezra.

Tuffy shook his head. Curro's eyes widened a little bit as he began to notice that this large grey cat was capable of communication with humans. He focused intently on the creature. He was humbled and awed by this development. Deep inside himself he felt an intense devotion spark up for these strange people who had saved him from his pit of despair.

"What are we going to do with this money?" asked Ezra.

Tuffy leaned closely in towards Ezra's ear and whispered, "We're going to buy fake passports and go to the USA."

"Tuffy, did you steal this money?" asked Ezra.

Tuffy nodded in assent. Curro remained stupefied.

"Let's keep this as a one-time deal. You got us out of prison. We were in dire straits. We have enough to get a strong foothold in the USA. Let's leave it at that. No more taking money out of bank accounts, agreed?"

Tuffy wiggled his ears with an irreverent look in his eyes and said, "Maybe..."

"That cat is talking to you!" Curro exclaimed. "What the fuck? How did you get it to talk?"

"Listen, El Toro, if you're going to come with us on our adventure there are some things you're going to need to know about us," said Ezra.

Chapter 31: The Lonely Widow

Olivia stood standing at a large bay window overlooking one of the forest portions of the biosphere when Frank approached her from the side. A hummingbird drone flitted about several feet above his head, monitoring his movements through the Vault. Olivia was watching Nick trim the trees with Yama's help. Many of Hunter's larger drones could do the job with the help of servbots but Nick insisted on doing the work. He loved heights. When Frank was alongside her she said, "You must be the fellow who came for Jake."

Olivia was now in her early 50's. She retained much of her youthful beauty. She didn't wear makeup and she did not waver from the same basic outfit for months at a time, regardless of the feasts and festivals Cong Yu hosted in his ballroom.

Frank noticed her beauty as he responded, "Indeed I am. Did you know him well?"

"He was here a short time. I spoke with him perhaps on three or four occasions. He manned a couple of our ships and different rigs for some work with Nick. He mostly kept to himself. He spent some time with Yama," she said as she pointed down to the lumbering giant.

"Yama...I've seen something similar to him before. There's a small workshop in the Hida Mountains of Japan where an old man spends his days creating cybernetic creatures. They're much smaller than Yama, less capable."

"Your ship left, why?" Olivia asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, they'll be back within a half day. They're scouting the other colonies on the continent. We've never been this far south on the globe."

"You don't know?"

"What?"

"The other colonies were swept away by the waves. We're the only one."

"Interesting..."

"I think it's sad," she said.

"What's your function here?" he asked.

"My function? I work with Eddie Adler. Well, mostly we don't work. Everyone here is in perfect health and has been for years. Most are aging, so our medical work is centered on that. We monitor physical health at this point. Eddie is getting quite old so I fill in when he needs more rest."

"No children?"

"Hunter and Milena are my adult children."

"Is he your husband?" Frank asked, indicating Nick down below.

"That old fuddy duddy?" she asked with a laugh. "No, he wouldn't have a wife anyway. He's too busy working and thinking. I think the only man here who would have a wife is Roger but Xiao Ma won't marry him. There's something I'm curious about, however. Why come here with all that force and then become as quiet as a cat when you find out Jake's not here?"

"The question answers itself, doesn't it," he said. "Jake Walker is a very dangerous man."

"Didn't seem like it when I saw him," she said with a hint of defiance. "He mostly smoked dope and did his work quietly. His pot plants are still in one of the greenhouses by the vivarium section. Nick keeps them going."

"Can I see them?" asked Frank.

"Of course. They're this way."

They began walking through the sloped corridors leading down to the greenhouse where Jake's plants remained. Frank admired the abundance of plants all around and the many servbots tending to them.

"I'm surprised there aren't more children here. All I see are servbots and those little hummingbirds everywhere," he said, conscious of the one buzzing above him.

“We had plans for more people and more children at the start but we lost most of our people when the strikes came earlier than anticipated. For a time we tried attracting people here but pirate activity in the Southern Ocean kept them away. When the pirate activity died down we had already lost our satellite uplinks. Getting a message out became very hard. We’ve heard that many of the bunkers have failed or been overrun by governments. Those who had the resources to come out here decided to stay put. I don’t think we promoted very well before the strikes,” said Olivia.

They rounded a bend and saw Roger Livet sitting in large chair, reading a book and taking down notes on a tablet device.

“Hey Rog,” Olivia said to him.

He stood and said, “Hi. This must be Frank Noris. How do you do?”

The men shook hands and Olivia spoke, “We were heading down to visit Jake’s plants. Frank’s here only for a short while longer. His men went to check on McMurdo and the other stations.”

With a whistle Roger said, “They’re not gonna’ find much out there.”

Roger spent most of his days researching new ideas for Hunter and when he wasn’t busy with that, he was reading for pleasure. He was now almost 40 years old and had not left the Vault in 12 years. He displayed eccentricities to the others that Xiao Ma explained as “long-burn cabin fever”.

Frank and Olivia parted company with Roger after a few more exchanges.

“What do you know of the remaining bunkers and underground colonies?” Olivia asked Frank. “You’ve been around the globe plenty.”

"I know that the colonies are consolidating in an effort to vary the gene pool. Ours in the Andes of Argentina is the largest on the South American continent. There are few government bunkers left. They all killed themselves off or starved because their central planning failed. Several in the Middle East remain but they are structured around their royal families. Our scans didn't pick up anything in Central Asia. Nothing. Not a blip. It's eerie. Thousands of miles and no signs of life. The most populous region remains southern China. We figured there were fifteen to twenty-five thousand people in their cave systems. I don't know how they make it without sunlight and without deep stores. Is there anywhere you're interested in?"

"Tell me about North America..."

"The major colonies and bunkers left are at Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado, Raven Rock in the Blue Ridge Mountains though they only have around 10 people left, and there's a place in the Canadian Rockies we haven't made contact with yet. It's rumored they have an underground lake to draw from. Above ground it's mostly small camps with traders and greenhouses. There's also a place in the Sierra Nevada Range but we haven't heard from them in five or six years. I'd say there's perhaps a million people left on the planet but there could be bunkers in Eastern Europe unaccounted for. We have not traveled there. The last time an airship from our continent was in their airspace it was shot down by surface to air missiles."

"His plants are there," Olivia motioned to a corner of the greenhouse.

She followed him as he walked over to the plants. His steps were decisive. He bent down and examined them for a short while. He began to finger through the dirt of several of the containers of soil holding the plants. When he was satisfied he rose stiffly, holding a hand to his aching back and regarding Olivia with a gentle smile.

"What were you looking for?" she asked.

“I’d rather not say, Olivia. Maybe at some other point I will be more at liberty to share.”

He glanced up at the hummingbird drone and was surprised to see a look of sympathy on her face.

They left the greenhouse. Olivia closed the door behind them and asked, “Are you thirsty? We have many varieties of tea if you’re interested.”

Together they left for Olivia’s quarters. Nick watched with suspicion from afar atop his tree perch. He had seen Frank digging in the dirt.

Chapter 32: Ways of Saving the World

It had been three weeks since Ezra and his band of friends had escaped from prison in Guatemala. After the prison break they realized they could not fly Tuffy in on a conventional airline given his cybernetic enhancements. They chose to cross the Mexico-United States border illicitly. From Guatemala they rode a bus into Mexico. The group chartered a private jet from Oaxaca to Chihuahua, a city in northern Mexico. There they met up with a *coyote*, a smuggler facilitating the migration of people across the Mexico-United States border. After a near run-in with United States Border Patrol they made it to the United States. With the last of Tuffy's money they signed a one-year lease and paid rent in-full on an apartment in Los Angeles. The spacious apartment was above a barber shop off of Santa Monica Boulevard near the Paramount Pictures studios.

They had been in the apartment two days when an important conversation took place.

"Now that we're settled in, I think we should get down to brass tacks," said Ezra. He was helping Jake cook a meal of turkey chili and cornbread. At a table in the kitchen sat Curro. He was listening intently while sipping from a can of Tecate beer. Tuffy was hunched over a food bowl on the floor, chewing big bites of a gourmet cat food he'd convinced Jake to buy for him.

"We need to build a web company," Ezra continued. "We'll build a web company founded on truth and first principles and we'll spread the truth to the world."

"I told you already," said Jake in his baritone voice as he looked up from his cooking, "we're ten years too early for that. We're already like 2 years late for the dot-com boom anyway. We need a bullshit gimmick and a very rich corporation to buy us out. I did the research already. We need to follow the trends. We need the cash. Network and cable television still rule the day. If you want to make a big splash, you need the cash."

"I know we need money. We need truth even more. Truth will make the biggest impact on the world. Truth spreads like wildfire. We can build an ethical startup, get it financed by a venture capital firm, and then *buy* the network time we need. We shouldn't sacrifice on truth. Trust me, I know," retorted Ezra.

"Will you hand me the cutting board?" Jake asked Ezra.

"Sure."

"I think we should buy Coca-Cola stock and use the money to feed the orphans," said Curro, formerly El Toro.

"That's a horrible idea," growled Tuffy.

"Curro, we're trying to save the world. We're trying to tell them there's a terrible natural crisis that's coming and man's moral and emotional fiber is going to make the difference between whether the species fails or survives. Feeding orphans is a very kind gesture and I think Coca-Cola will be around for a long while to come--"

"62 years to be precise," interrupted Tuffy, surprised that this was one of the facts his organic brain had chosen to retain through the time jump.

"-but maybe try to think bigger? We have to impress upon people the magnitude of what's coming. Billions of people will die. If humans around the world can come together decades before the asteroids strike, there's a good chance billions of lives will be saved. There were maybe a million people left when we left our Antarctic sanctuary."

Curro nodded his head along to Ezra's words and said, "I will try to think more deep, maybe something to do with wealthy people. I know how they think."

"That's the spirit," Ezra encouraged. "There's nothing wrong with catering to the wealthy, so long as we're clear and consistent on the purpose we're engaging them."

"I've been thinking," started Jake. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm and went back to chopping chili peppers. "We live right near Hollywood. Why don't we use show business as our platform? We could become celebrities and spread the message that way. I always wanted to be famous."

"Don't be led astray by the adulation of the masses," said Ezra. "Life as an idol is as fake and dissatisfying as it was two thousand years ago...I think. Besides being a celebrity won't do you any good. The best you could do is an environmental feel-good cause that would get you on some billboards."

"The big time gatekeepers will never let you talk about something real," Tuffy chirped.

"My, someone's cranky," said Jake. "I think I could buck the trend. Where's the encouragement for me?"

"You'd have a better shot at changing the world in any way as a drug dealer. At least you'd get rich," said Tuffy.

"Why don't I do both?"

"What about my plan, guys? What about the truth-based Internet company? Isn't that the whole reason we came here?" Ezra asked as he turned away from his meal preparation work.

"I thought that was 'Mom's' plan," said Tuffy in an incredulous voice. "I thought we were coming here to get a break from our creators, from the boredom of the Vault."

"If I'm honest, I came here cause I want to get famous," said Jake. "I think it's really fuckin' important to tell people about what's coming, but who says I can't have my fun at the same time?"

"Hey, I'll do whatever you guys want. You guys are my *amigos*. You got me out of prison," said Curro. "Becoming famous sounds good."

"Why did *you* come here, Tuffy?" Ezra asked Tuffy. He was bothered by what Jake and Curro had said and wanted to know where exactly his furry companion stood.

"I came here for many reasons," said Tuffy. He sat back on his haunches and began to bathe his face by licking his paws and wiping them across it. Between wipes he said, "I came because the Vault got boring and I wanted a challenge. I came because I love mischief and there's probably more mischief here. There's higher stakes, anyway. There's no way I'm getting captured alive while we're here—"

"Of anyone, you're probably the one who should keep the lowest profile," said Jake.

"...well, I...plan on doing everything on the Internet. You're going to see a lot of me around here once I get a computer for us."

"Great, we can use it for the Internet company!" exclaimed Ezra.

"I don't think you know how computers work. You spent all your time in the biosphere with the books Eddie brought you," Tuffy chided him. "I also came here because..."

"Because what?" asked Jake.

They waited many seconds while Tuffy put the finishing touches on his facial wash.

"I came because I wanted to be around children and because the fish during this time is way better than in our time..." Tuffy added.

"Any other reasons?" asked Curro.

"Hmm...I also came to help Ezra because I think he has a shot at changing the world."

“Even though Milena came up with the idea originally, I think we can make it our own. We don’t have to abandon good ideas as a reaction to our parents. We can improve on their ideas.”

“She didn’t float out much of an idea anyway. There’s plenty of room to make it our own,” said Tuffy.

“But the Internet company has to be based on truth and love,” said Ezra.

“It’s your funeral,” Tuffy responded.

“How about this?” asked Curro. “Tuffy you make your Internet company however you want, Ezra you make your Internet company your way, and Jake you try to be a celebrity or whatever. I’ll help all three of you with my connections and my abilities.”

All three looked at Curro in surprise. It was agreed they would each try their own ways of doing things with Curro’s support.

The group sat at their thrift shop furniture eating their discounted food with their dollar store cutlery while Tuffy remained perched on the railing of the porch overlooking the street below. The sun was going down on what had been a hot day. Only Jake had been uncomfortable with the weather. Ezra, by design, barely noticed the heat. Curro, by heritage, noticed not the small beads of sweat on his scalp. Tuffy, by virtue of the built-in cooling system Hunter had engineered, was happy to be charging his robust batteries with the sun’s energy instead of with his tail stuck into a charging station. Each was basking in the satisfaction that came with charting one’s own way. The food was hearty and the mood was high. It was in this atmosphere that Jake chose to share something personal.

Chapter 33: Jake's Story

"I've been thinking about it some and well, I think you guys ought to know something about me. I don't know how much I can say but you should at least know the basics," he said.

Ezra slowed his eating pace. Tuffy turned an ear. Curro stretched and yawned a happy yawn.

"Three years ago in our time, the future," he said as he looked at Curro for a moment, "I was making my way down south through South America. I'd heard there was more sunshine down there when I was still living in Baja Sur. Someone told me one of the colonies down there was treating the sky somehow. Food was running out and the Sea of Cortez wasn't offering up much anymore. I decided to go. It took me nearly a year to get down near where I thought there'd be more sunshine coming through the clouds and the dust. I broke my leg in Panama and was laid up there in a hut with a little old lady for three months till it healed. I was robbed and kept in a jail cell for two weeks by an unfriendly colony in southern Colombia. Eventually I made it down near Patagonia. There was a little more sunshine, sure as shit. Not many people, though. In fact, most of Peru and Bolivia had been empty.

I met two people on the road through there. One gave me a ride for two days. I get down there where there's a bit more sun and I search for days to find someone else. There's nobody. Not a soul. My food is running low and the bicycle I bought with the last of my gold off a trader way is too banged up to get me to the coast. I'm about dead in the water so I decide, fuck it, I'll head east toward where I think the break in the clouds is centered. I run out of food the second day. I'm walking on this road and things are getting brighter and brighter. I rest on the side of the road in the trees when I get tired and keep on moving when I'm good again. I dump the bike when I start getting too weak and the road is real steep. I get to a lake, Puyehue I think it was...something like that. For the first time in months it's a body of water with fish in it. I get back to the lake and I see people for the first time in a long while- since just south of Santiago- and they're friendly. Ingrid and Belen were their names."

He stood up from the table, poured himself a glass of water and sat back down. Ezra did the same, anticipating a longer story. Tuffy came in from the porch and sat at his favorite spot in the apartment atop the couch.

"They were a pair of older lesbians, in their late 50's. I was by the lake's edge. They approached me from the woods. I knew they were coming. I brought in my line and sat down with my hands open on my lap. They asked me what I was there for, where I was from, where I was going. They knew something about the sunlight coming through. I could see it when I said where I was going. They asked me what I did. I told em' I sang and they lightened up to me. They searched me for weapons. All I had was a hatchet. They let me keep it.

Took me to their cabin and offered me something to drink. There was a guitar there. I asked if I could play. We became friends pretty fast. They said they could trust me since I was from far away. I didn't know what that meant but I'd come to find out. Beneath the small cabin they had a bunker with everything they needed. They had water treatment, power generators, a hefty greenhouse, and rows and rows of books. They also had an old data server that they mostly kept powered off.

I was there a few days before I asked about the server. They wouldn't tell me at first. It took another couple days of doing work around the place for them before they trusted me. They put me to a bunch of grunt work but between doing that and singing em' some songs, they decided they'd tell me. The server, they said, was connected to a mainframe thirty miles away...further up in the mountains. I asked what the mainframe was for. They wouldn't say at first, of course. They looked at each other and made excuses. So I did some more work for them. Shaved my beard. They had a dog I took for walks. The dog cost them a fortune. They bought it off a merchant who'd passed through seven or eight years prior. It was a beautiful blue Australian shepherd, Brewster. The merchant was an older fellow. Tried selling them on some miracle juice or something, I don't remember the details now. They gave him two ounces of gold for the dog. He was the last merchant that came through for many years.

I got to be pretty good friends with Brewster. They told me what the mainframe was for eventually. I was there two weeks at that point. Anyhow, they said there was a colony at the mainframe. It was the San Martin de los Andes colony, headed by a council of elected officials. Ingrid, the quieter one of the two, said they'd had some trouble with the colony over a purchase of power cables they'd made the previous fall. She didn't go into any more detail than that. I got the sense there were more troubles than the gals were letting on but I didn't press. I asked if I could power up the server. They turned me down, said it wasn't worth the trouble. I asked if they knew whether the air clearing up had something to do with the colony. They said it did then nothing more. Was it safe to head over there? They said it indeed was safe since I was an outsider.

I spent a couple more days with them and their dog. I put in hard work on their greenhouses, getting them ready for the fall. I left when the project was complete. They bid me farewell and told me I could come back anytime. I headed for the colony up the highway. It took me half a week to get to it. I started to see a few more people along the way but they weren't very friendly. They were mostly suspicious of me. One of em' told me that outsiders hadn't come through in a long time. Another fellow asked me if I was going to the colony. I said I was. He nodded and kept going in the opposite direction. Everyone was dressed pretty well and nicely stocked up. I didn't know what to make of it at the time.

I got to the colony gates early in the morning. I remember it because the sun was rising up and the mist on the lake there looked so beautiful. It's one of the most beautiful things I've seen. They had these giant swinging doors and a wall about 25 feet high. There was scarring on the sides of the walls like someone had tried to break them down at some point. A woman called down to me, asking me why I'd come. I told her I wanted some food and some rest and then I'd be on my way. She conferred with an older fellow who took a place by her side. The doors swung open and I was beckoned in.

They kept me in a waiting area for three days. It was in a gymnasium with tents and cots everywhere. There were maybe five or six other people in there with me at any given time. Some stayed for only a short time. One guy, when I got to talking to him, told me he'd been there for two weeks. He said he figured it was because used to work for a government and had some government ID on him. They kept coming around and interviewing him until they were clear on his motivations. They let him stay. I was interviewed once on the third day and then they let me stay.

The air was pure. I spent my first day at a pub getting drunk and full of food. It was the first alcohol I'd had in weeks, damn near months, since it was so expensive out on the road. They had a distillery and everything, very professional. The food was glorious: pulled pork, bread rolls the size of my two fists put together, hearty stews, and fresh veggies- didn't cost much either! They had fresh farm eggs, fried fish, and wild berries. I spent the whole fuckin' day eating. They had big leather chairs around a roaring fireplace in the center of the eatery. You could just post up there and nap for as long as you wanted.

It was on the side of a mountain so you could look out onto the slopes and even see a few people skiing. They looked funny with their air masks on. It was almost like living in the times before the impacts. I paid a woman a silver ounce to massage my feet and back. It was glorious! Seemed like the life of privation was behind me. Hell, even at Ingrid and Belen's it seemed like I'd struck it rich. Didn't have a clue about the Vault at that point.

The second day I found the machines that were cleaning the air. They were under heavy guard. I only spotted them because of a hole in the fence surrounding them. They were also on the mountainside, above the main village. You could hear them whirring from a good distance away. I was shooed off before I could get a real good look at them but they looked like massive versions of the air filters you see in helicopter engine intakes. Strange looking machines. I was shoved off by a couple of guys wearing uniforms. They told me only citizens had access. I didn't like that much but I moseyed off.

There was a luthier in the village. Well, everyone called it a village but it was more like a small town. The guy did a bunch of other things, too. They had a playhouse and he was the stage director. He also was a carpenter..."

"-ah!" Ezra interjected with pleasure. Curro took the moment's distraction to fetch himself a glass of water.

"The guy's name was Elliot," continued Jake, "and he was originally from Vermont. He had a real strange way of looking at the world, kind of whimsical and folksy. He took to liking me when I stepped into his shop and strummed around on a couple of the instruments he had there. We got to talking for a while about the old days and eventually a woman I hadn't seen before came in to the shop. She introduced herself as Lara and sat down with us. She was Argentinian. She was as beautiful as a cover model. She didn't wear any makeup, had a relaxed way about her, and was a bit of musician herself. I was smitten. She had strange teeth, I'll say that," he said with a hearty laugh. "But they gave her a charm. She didn't hide them when she smiled. The three of us talked for hours. They mostly wanted to hear my stories but with some poking around I learned this colony had a weird social structure to it."

"Government?" asked Ezra.

"Sort of. It was run by a small council of the wealthiest citizens. They had a security force they called 'the Vanguard'. It handled common disputes while the council weighed in on more complicated arbitration," said Jake.

"What's arbitration?" asked Curro.

"It's when two parties use a third party to settle a conflict," Tuffy said impatiently. He was eager to hear where the story went.

"Elliot talked about there being two men who had the most power at San Martin de los Andes. One of them was some old fellow named Lucius. I only saw him from far off. The other was a man named Frank Noris...."

"What is it?" asked Ezra.

"Just feeling tired, really tired," said Jake.

Tuffy stood and stretched with a look of displeasure on his face. He trotted off in the direction of his favorite cardboard box and sang, "I need to pee-pee. Wait for me." behind him as he turned a corner in the spacious apartment.

“Do you need to go to bed?” Curro asked Jake.

“I’m fine. Just went through a lot with that guy, Frank Noris...”

Tuffy peered his head around the corner and eyed his companions with curiosity.

“You done, Tuffy?” Jake asked.

Tuffy meowed coyly and withdrew out of sight.

“We’re waiting for you,” said Ezra.

“Not coming!” Tuffy chirped. He stepped out from the shadows and began to preen and stretch. He had a very satisfied look on his face.

“Come on, kitty-kitty,” Ezra beckoned.

“That felt very good,” Tuffy’s rich voice billowed out of his collar. He preened some more, happy to be the center of attention for a bit longer.

“Did you flush?” Curro asked. Curro was the neatest of the roommates and was in charge of cleaning the bathroom until a maid could be hired.

Tuffy scampered out of sight and returned moments later to the sound of a toilet flush. With a clipped meow he leapt back up to his perch and nodded to Jake, indicating his desire to hear the rest of the story.

“What was I on?” Jake asked. He rubbed the back of his neck and pushed the tag of his shirt back beneath the fabric. His large arms rippled. His thick eyebrows shaded his eyes from the overhead light, giving his storytelling a quality of intensity that captivated his friends.

“You were talking about Frank Noris, el jefe de San Martin de los Andes, and how you were with Lara and Elliot,” Curro prompted the big man.

“Right, that’s right,” Jake said. He cleared his throat and resumed. “They were telling me about this guy, one of the two big shots at the colony. He was on the council. The council gave him a lot of power over the security force but he spent a lot of his time underground at the research and development center. Apparently that was the place that was guarded I had stumbled on earlier. Lara started to warn me about this guy when who else but the man himself comes walking into Elliot’s shop. He was cold as ice. The shop door opened and slammed shut. My back was to the door. Elliot and Lara tensed up. I saw that and turned and there he was, dressed in a black suit and a dark blue tie. He was wearing gloves, which I thought was really fucking bizarre. He was stiff, stiff as hell. He asked me who I was in this really robotic voice. I told him the truth: that I was interested in why the air was so clean in this place. He didn’t like that. It was almost like he was jealous, really nervous that I was going to take something from him. He tried not to show it but beneath that robotic mask I saw rage and murder. The guy spooked the hell out of me. He started in on how I got drunk and stuffed myself at the pub and compared himself to me, saying he didn’t do that stuff. He said doing that stuff made me fragile. He said he was the most conscious person at San Martin de los Andes and probably in the whole region, too. It weirded the hell out of me. Elliot tried talking to him, something to change the subject and the mood, but this Frank guy held up his hand and stopped Elliot in his tracks. I could tell Elliot was scared of this guy. I was starting to feel that way, too. I started to get a sense of his power in this place. It was clear he didn’t like me and didn’t want me at the colony but didn’t have a good enough reason to boot me out.”

Jake paused and began to chew at a callus on his hand with a look of concern on his face.

"It felt like I was under a spell. It was clear to me how intelligent he was. Lara engaged him for a little while on some clerical thing. While they were talking I got to wondering why he had come to Elliot's shop to engage me. Like, if he didn't want me here...why didn't he just send some goons to boot me out. I started to realize he'd come by to test himself against me, to compare himself to me. When Lara was done talking with him, he turned his attention back onto me. He didn't ask me about my travels or where I was from. He didn't ask much of anything but he did talk about himself in this way that got me to thinking that he wanted me to offer information about myself. He talked about his habits and about how he was so accomplished at this and that here at the colony. I started to talk about my life as a singer but I eased off when Elliot gave me a look that reminded me this guy was not all the way there. Suddenly, Frank decided to leave. I spent the next little while talking with Elliot and Lara about the encounter. They told me that Frank was really insecure and really high maintenance. I was surprised cause he'd put on such a strong cold front but I saw the sense in what they said. Lara told me to steer clear of Frank. That he often made enemies out of newcomers he felt threatened by. I stuck to her advice over the next few while I was there at the colony. Hold on, let me get a drink of water. Right, so I took a room to rent over Elliot's shop and did some work for him. The whole while Frank kept his eye on me, either by coming around and trying engage me at whatever work I was doing or he'd send one of his goons to stand nearby on the block and watch the shop. I hadn't been regarded with that much suspicion since I was a boy in school. Then I found out what he was hiding."

"Dear Mercy," exclaimed Ezra. "Was he a pedophile?"

"What? No, I don't think so," said Jake.

"He sounds like one: a usurper of the youth."

"No, I'll tell you though. He was in love with me."

"*Chinga*, he was in love with you?" asked Curro.

"Yes, in a really weird way. It wasn't so much sexual or romantic, though I think a bit of that was in there. He wanted me to rescue him. He was miserable. There at the colony he was known as a robotic, cold and calculating power seeker. He had a reputation, one worked that he worked hard to establish within a tightknit community, and then I came in from the wilderness, had my fun, and immediately made friends with two of the most loved and respected people in the community. Frank envied me, desperately. At the same time, he was terrified he would lose his position of power because of me. Somehow, I would take this position of power from him. And it's true, in a way I did perceive tyranny in his approach to interacting with others and the emptiness of his position in the community but I didn't take a single step to fight him on any of it. I simply saw it for it was, his fakeness, and he hated me for it."

"Sounds really messy," said Ezra.

"It was! I came to breathe cleaner air, make some friendships, and find a place where I could live in peace. But Frank wouldn't have it. I think on a deeper level he saw I simply didn't agree with the values of the colony. This was another thing Frank was massively threatened by. He'd staked years of work, posturing, and manipulation of others into his position."

"What do you mean?" asked Ezra.

"It's so funny. I came to this colony, seeing how they were rehabilitating the air with their incredible technology but they didn't seem to even care. Their mission was to reproduce children. They decided the world needed more children. The council, especially a man named Barker and an elderly man named Lucius, placed tremendous emphasis on raising children. I went to a town hall meeting and it was all about 'having children'. I thought it was a little strange but didn't think much of it till later.

What I did notice was, and mostly because he came around so often comparing himself to me in these weird interactions, that Frank did not fully live the mission of the community. He'd built up all this power and reputation but he didn't have a female partner nor did he make any efforts toward that end. He was more invested in the terraforming tech and the police force, the 'Vanguard', than in what the colony founders were espousing. No one seemed to notice. I saw him as really hemmed in. I think the healthiest sides of him saw that I was wild and free and thus he gravitated to me but then this bizarre hostility and suspicion would set in. He'd get contemptuous..."

"Super messy," said Ezra. "Why didn't you just tell him you weren't interested?"

"I was foolish. I thought if I made friends with him, I'd be more accepted in the community. I wanted a home so badly and this guy had so much influence there but the more I responded to him, the more his intense stuff came out. I felt very confused at one point. He started accusing me of being manipulative. He'd send his 'Vanguard' into the shop undercover and I wouldn't know it was one of them until the person gave me the cold shoulder when I'd try to engage with them."

"Of course he was threatened by you! You saw that he wasn't fully sincere about the mission of the colony and that it would cost him so much of his power and reputation if he were sincere. You saw it because you weren't aligned with the values of the colony either!" exclaimed Ezra.

“Bingo, I think you nailed it there. If I’m really honest, I think he was a deeply repressed homosexual. I look at it in myself and know there are homosexual sides in me that triggered his. I especially got the sense of it because he’d look at my lips every once in a while when I was talking. It’s my pet theory so I won’t treat it with too much certainty but I will say it’s *really* hard to fit in in a community that’s all about raising children in whatever manner when you’re a closeted homosexual. I was in touch my homosexuality, out in the wilderness and also when I stayed with the lesbians, that’s how I think I saw some of this in Frank. Eventually, I got really tired of this drama. No matter how conciliatory and honest I was when I engaged, it was not enough for this guy. He had it out for me. In hindsight, I can see that I probably should have just left the colony when I found out what their mission was and knew that I didn’t belong there. But I don’t want to be too hard on myself: I came cause I saw the air was cleaner, tried to convince myself I belonged, and then left when I got tired of the stress it was causing me to speak honestly about my intentions. Turns out there was only room for one great pretender in that community. I left back for the wilderness, parting on decent terms with the people there who mattered the most to me: Lara and Elliot. It was in the wilderness I met Hunter.”

“What about the thing about Frank wanting you to rescue him?” asked Ezra.

“Yeah, good question. I think his healthiest sides saw that I didn’t belong to that community either. I think he wanted to learn from me how to be a person who had the strength to go into the wilderness for extended periods of time, the courage to enter into community wearing one’s intentions on one’s sleeve, and to leave when a deeper truth called. He wanted to learn this from me by trying to be my friend but he had really bad boundaries and personally, I found it really hard to form a connection with the guy given how robotic and insecure he was.

Reflecting back on it, I think if he’d engaged me through my employment at the shop somehow...like maybe in the form of lessons, he would have got what he wanted. I think his hubris got in the way. He was too emotionally invested in his power position in the community and too addicted to the adulation he got when he’d unveil some new component of the technology he was working on. He was treated as a master scientist there but in his heart he wanted to be a kind of truth traveler. Funny thing is that I heard that after I left he built an airship and travelled around. Mimicry is a start but it’s the strength of character he secretly craved...well, at least his healthiest sides. Even in the face of all the nastiness and contempt from him, I still wish him well. Maybe he’ll find the courage to leave that community. Something tells me he’ll be in limbo for a long time to come. It was a good lesson for me. I was too willing to compromise and make friends out of my loneliness. I stayed too long in that community. I think I have a good deal more traveling in the wilderness to do. Also, and probably most importantly, I was not secure enough in myself to be firm about the boundaries and the personal growth disparity between us. I don’t think I was secure enough in myself in this particular...relationship because I hadn’t yet worked through my own feelings of envy around his position of power in the community.”

“Sounds painful, for both of you,” said Ezra.

“It was. It really was. I feel for him. It must be very lonely, scary, and even dangerous to cling on in a community you’re not fully synchronous with. He’ll be found out eventually if he doesn’t just come out and declare himself. Declaring takes a lot of guts, however. Guts take time to build up if you’ve had a rough past. Anyhow, I wanted something he had but I recognized my desire was trauma-based and was actively working through it. I am good enough. I don’t need the adulation of a community and a position of power within it in order to be good enough. Now I feel much more secure in myself and I’d respond much differently if someone came into my life with a lot of envy, contempt, comparing, and emotional stiltedness. I don’t think I’ll be seduced and put under a spell by whatever power or adulation a person comes into the interaction with. My proof of this, besides the awareness I’ve shown here, is my friendship with Hunter back at the Vault. I was proactive and I chose a friend instead of waiting for someone to come along and to get emotionally involved with them. I’ve learned that when you burn bright and walk your own path, moths will be attracted. Their hideousness will try to blot out your shimmer but their healthier instincts will try to share in your warmth. It’s a complicated dance. The more I engage with people on a deeper level, really since the impacts, the more I see they’re a mix of healthy and unhealthy. Usually it’s tilted in one direction but yeah, it’s a complicated dance.”

“I’d say,” said Ezra. “Just so you know, Jake, I don’t feel threatened by you or envious toward you. I feel a deep kinship toward you. It took a lot of courage to leave San Martin de los Andes and to leave without drawing a lot of wrath upon yourself. You didn’t fight them, it sounds like.”

“No, I didn’t. They had weapons there they said were only for self-defense but I just got a creepy vibe, like they were rationalizing the presence of these weapons. I also didn’t want to mess with Frank’s ‘Vanguard’. Compared to him, they were loose cannons. I left quietly and quickly.”

“Very good story,” said Tuffy. He yawned, licked his chops, and felt fast asleep.

“I’m pretty tired too,” said Jake. “Anything more you guys want to know about before I close the ole’ brain book for the night?” he asked Curro and Ezra.

“*Buen hecho*,” said Curro. His handsome face shone on Jake in admiration. “You stayed true to yourself. *This* is why I like living with you guys. It has given me new life!”

“If you see it in others, you’ve got it yourself,” Ezra said encouragingly.

“I’m gonna’ hit the hay,” said Jake.

The friends bid each other goodnight and went their separate ways to ponder Jake’s story.

Chapter 34: A Confrontation

Frank had been at the Vault for nearly a week and his visits with Olivia had become more frequent when Hunter and Milena entered into their mother's quarters to confront her.

"Mom, do you have a minute?" Milena asked her mother as she entered in with her brother.

Olivia was seated on a chaise lounge chair drinking tea. She had been listening to Frank talk about his brief stint as a security advisor in the Middle East when her children walked in. She was wearing one of her smartest outfits, a deliberate choice given the budding feelings between herself and the visitor.

Frank excused himself from the room, sensing his presence wasn't welcome.

"This must be the first time you've both been in here in months! Please, make yourselves comfortable," Olivia said with pleasure. She asked them if they would like some tea and poured some for Milena when she consented.

"We want to talk to you about Dad," said Hunter. He chose to sit in the large red chair Frank had been sitting in. They were all seated around an elegant coffee table covered with picture books and used sketchpads.

Thinking this conversation would somehow connect Frank's presence to something with their deceased father Olivia answered, "What is it?" in a nervous voice. She shifted to make herself more comfortable, crossing a leg underneath herself and leaning into the back of her chair.

"We're not clear about some things with him," said Milena. She was radiantly beautiful at this point in her life. Her girlishness was slipping away and giving room to the poise and charm her mother had once embodied before she'd brought her children to the Vault. "We don't remember *why* *exactly* he didn't come with us on the *Spade*."

"The best we can remember is that there was something about there not being many women at the Vault at the time," added Hunter.

"Well, that's exactly it," said Olivia. "The commander of the fleet got word that there weren't enough women or children here so those were the kinds of passengers that got first priority when the fastest ship had to break away from the rest of the fleet. It was a process...of....elimination," she added with a grimace.

"Can you walk us through why he didn't come on the *Spade* with us?" asked Milena. She was on-point with what she needed to know from her mother. The faintest traces of a deep anger that resided within her could be noticed in the tone of her question.

"We were on the *William Gates* and one of the engines gave out. We were losing time and wouldn't make it to the Vault before the tsunamis did. Sorry, I'm having a hard time remembering. One second-" said Olivia. She stood up and walked to the viewing window that overlooked the biosphere. She took several deep breaths and came back to her children. She had noticed Milena's anger and had an idea of what it meant. The insight had caused her to panic for a moment.

"The captain of the ship called a meeting and we decided who went. One or two of the men wanted to go but it was pretty clear that women and children should go. Xiao Ma volunteered herself and it was clear that you two and I would go."

"Why didn't Dad volunteer himself?" asked Hunter.

"I don't know why. We didn't have time to talk after the decision was made in the meeting."

"We talked it over and we think that Dad could have volunteered himself," said Milena.

"Oh, I see," Olivia responded glumly.

"But he didn't," prompted the daughter.

"No, he didn't."

"And you could have volunteered him," said Hunter.

"Yes, I could have."

"Yet you stood by while Xiao Ma made her case and that was that."

"It's true..." said Olivia.

A heavy silence began to form until Milena asked, "Why?"

She regarded her mother with searching eyes.

"It was a long time ago. I don't remember now," the mother protested.

"Remember back on it, Mom," said Hunter.

"Think about it for a minute. Why didn't you fight for Dad?"

Olivia's eyes widened and she breathed deeply into her chest. She tried hard to remember back on the painful day. She bit her bottom lip and uttered, "I didn't fight for him because..." The words wouldn't come to her. She rubbed the tip of her index finger across her eyebrows. She shook her head. "I didn't fight for him because I thought the others were right in preferring the women and children."

Her shoulders slumped and her eyes turned down.

"You didn't fight for him because they preferred Xiao Ma," said Hunter in a heavy tone.

"Yes..." Olivia said weakly.

"Why didn't he fight for himself?" asked Milena.

"I wish I knew the answer to that."

Olivia looked exhausted.

"He could have fought to keep our family together," said Hunter, "yet he didn't. They might have even let him come, don't you think?"

"Why are you asking all these questions?" Olivia asked her children.

“You know why. We have to know. Xiao Ma never went into the ‘why’. Everyone’s acted like it was a forgone conclusion that she would be on the *Spade*. She and Roger haven’t borne any children. She’s too old now. No one’s confronted anyone on this. Why was she included? We could have had our fucking father!” Milena growled. “You could have fought for him. He could have fought for himself! Yet you did nothing. You shut your mouths and let our family crack apart.”

“I was afraid,” Olivia said solemnly. “He was afraid.”

“The damn soccer player had more fight than you guys did!” Milena said in a raised voice.

“Who?” asked Hunter.

“There was some idiot soccer player there. They nearly shot him because he fought against the decision,” Milena responded. “Mother, you were supposed to fight for our family.”

“I know...” Olivia offered weakly.

“You were strong so many other times back then. You’ve always let Xiao Ma dominate you. Why?” the daughter continued with her questioning.

“I don’t know.”

“Until you know, I don’t want to see you,” said Milena with finality. She stood and left the room. The door hissed shut behind her and her heavy footsteps could be heard for several seconds as she went down the hall.

“We talked about it,” Hunter began, “and we think we need space from you. We’d prefer it if you stayed out of the west and south wings.”

“You planned this?”

Hunter looked blankly at his mother before shaking his head in anger and disgust. He left the room much the same way his sister did.

Chapter 35: Talk Shows and Start-Ups

“That’s right, I’d like the custom leather option for both of them please,” Tuffy chirped into the telephone. “When can you have them delivered by? Yes, that’s perfect.”

He hung up the phone and his two opposable thumbs retracted back into his front legs the way two slices of bread click into a toaster.

“Those the Aeron chairs you were talking about?” Jake asked in a monotone voice. He was peering at the Sunday comics over his reading glasses. He paused to drink from a glass of orange juice and regard the large grey cat that was sprawled out on the hardwood floor six feet in front of him. Tuffy looked away from his computer supply magazine and winked at Jake.

“You gonna’ buy a computer?” the big man asked.

“Thought about it but I don’t need one,” said Tuffy. “Got plenty enough hardware up here.” He tapped his skull with his right paw and winked again.

“No global Wi-Fi though.”

“Nope, there’s just dial-up in our area. They’re putting it in tomorrow.”

“That’s gotta suck for you,” Jake said as he brought the newspaper back up to his face, blocking his eye contact with Tuffy.

“It limits me, for sure. Uploads are going to take forever. The Internet company said they’d have DSL in a couple of months, much better...so much better.”

“You have a name for your Internet start-up?” Jake asked. He was scanning the comics again for any inspirational material for his songwriting.

“It’s going to be called RazorGlobe.com.”

“Sounds...intense, Tuffy. What is the company about?”

"It's an e-commerce site. Anything you want, besides drugs and guns, we'll sell it."

"That's a huge undertaking," Jake said as he paused to take another drink of orange juice. "You sure you're up to it? I don't know a damn thing about what goes into something like that."

"Oh I'm not building a *direct* competitor to Amazon—"

"Ama-what?"

"Right, you've never had a record of human history sitting in your head at any point. It's not important. The point is," Tuffy said as he perked up onto his haunches, "I'm trying to get me that sweet venture capital money."

"Why not just hack a few banks and put a bunch of money into an account of your own somewhere?"

"Ez wants me to do this ethically. I respect him enough to try it that way. Besides, it's more of a challenge this way."

"I thought cats don't like challenges."

"I'm not all cat," said Tuffy as he demonstrated the clicking of his opposable thumbs in and out of his frame to prove his point. "Besides, I have a sneaking suspicion Hunter and Milena imprinted me after someone they know. My best guess is Sean Brennan but there's not enough info in his personal file for me to be certain."

"What are you gonna' do if you get the venture capital?"

"Pump up the perceived value of the company and then sell it for as much as possible," Tuffy said nonchalantly.

"I guess that's more ethical than stealing outright."

"I'll leave some chunks of XML code in one of the digital assets so that whoever buys up the company will have a three, four year head start on office-productivity tools and other stuff like that. I'll leave the basics so that someone clever enough can build on it and just maybe get rich."

Tuffy gave a self-satisfied grin to Jake.

“Why not just release the blueprints for self-driving cars and half the Vault’s cloning facilities while you’re at it?”

“We’re trying to influence the world’s progress, not dazzle it with technology. You wouldn’t give shotguns to Medieval knights would you?” Ezra asked as he entered into the living room in a huff. He plopped down on the couch and nervously scratched at his patchy facial hair.

“Well good morning to you,” said Jake. “What’s got your goose cooking?”

“I just got off the phone with a talent agency. They said I should bring three headshots to the meeting we have scheduled.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” asked Tuffy.

“I’m not looking to be a sex symbol. I want a talk show so I can spread my message. They’re fools if they think they’re going to market me based on my appearance. I won’t leave these robes. I won’t cut this hair,” he held up his long locks, “and I won’t put makeup on my face. The truth is deeper than appearances.”

“If the truth is deeper than appearances, shouldn’t you be willing to do all that to serve the truth?” the cat asked.

Ezra’s eyes narrowed and he continued to scratch at his facial hair. He looked toward the hallway that led to the bedrooms and he called out, “Curro!”

There were rustling sounds, the creak of a door opening, and then Curro shuffling into view with sleep in his eyes. Even in his half asleep state he looked as radiantly handsome as a Hollywood leading man.

Chapter 36: Up on a Mountain Top

As the Vault's energy output had risen over the years since its founding so too did the scale of the biosphere greatly expand. Teams of servbots had drilled and drilled deep into the mountain range to create more livable space for the ever-expanding variety of plant, animal, and insect species introduced to the ecosystems. Massive columns of stone supporting the weight of mountains were left in the wake of the servbots work. Nick Williams' handiwork of artificial landscaping and huge artificial sunlight reflectors etched up on high into the ceilings of the many caverns of the biosphere could be seen wherever one went. He was the master builder and with guidance from the others he had crafted his expansive masterpiece. The latest phase of biosphere expansion, which had lasted four years, was drawing to a close.

Roger Livet was reminded of the sheer immensity of the biosphere on assignments such as this one. He was asked by Hunter to locate a pregnant lion that had taken to living on the slopes of the mountainous portion of the biosphere. The lioness was encroaching upon the territory of the few bears that lived in the region. He was tasked with tracking her down and tagging her so that several hundred hummingbird drones could come carry her away back to the plains area of the biosphere. For some reason, her tracking implant was malfunctioning.

Roger was turning 40 soon. He had led a bookish life and it was only in the past several years with the expansion of the biosphere that he had taken a more rugged and adventurous tack on life. He trudged up the slope of one of the tallest mountains in the biosphere, Mount Gloire. Its peak rose to 1,400 ft. Strapped to his feet were brown hiking boots that had been 3D printed and then assembled by servbots.

He paused to again survey the vast landscape below him. There were no residential quarters yet overlooking the expansions to the biosphere. It was a rarer treat to get out onto the fresh slopes and away from the hive-like atmosphere of the Vault's main terminals. Eventually there would be a maglev train running along the valley floor of the entire expanse of the biosphere. Roger looked down below at the servbots already setting to work on the project in preliminary survey teams undoubtedly tasked by either Nick or Hunter.

He breathed in deeply, smiled, and continued his trek.

As with the rest of the animal species in the biosphere, the lioness had been genetically engineered to be less than half the size of a standard lion in the wild. This was both for the protection of the humans living in the Vault but also for the scale considerations that existed when the biosphere was originally constructed.

Roger reached the summit of the mountain and for the first time in many hours saw an encouraging sign. There was a small pile of dung poorly buried at the foot of a grove of saplings. He ran a scan of a small sample of feces using some equipment he carried with him in a backpack. The genetic signature was of the lioness. Her droppings were six hours old. The lioness still posed a threat at more than two feet tall at shoulder height and nearing 170 pounds but Roger was armed with a net launcher whose design had been perfected after many misfires at Tuffy on the part of Cong's silvers. He wore a helmet to cover his face and a massive stun beacon was strapped to his left palm. He could manage.

Careful said a voice inside Roger. *She could be anywhere around here. You don't want to disturb her. Just tag her and move out.*

"I'll be careful," he responded. "I can do this. I won't put us in danger."

Good, she could be extra protective. She's close to giving birth. We don't know how lions act when they're like this.

He slowed his pace down and began to look at his surroundings with more caution. He watched his footing as he made his way off the summit and out of sight of the main facilities of the vault almost a kilometer away. Faintly, bit by bit, a scratching sound made its way to his ears. There was something just beyond a rock wall ten feet in front of him. He bent down and withdrew a small electronic device from his backpack. He placed on the ground and it opened up like a clam shell. Out flew a hummingbird drone. He signaled it to go beyond the rock wall and send him video feed of what it saw.

It was Nick Williams.

Nick noticed the drone and whistled for it to come near him. It landed in his hand and he saw it was one belonging to Roger.

"Rog? You around here?" he yelled out.

Roger rounded the rock wall and smiled at Nick as he approached the older man. They shook hands and patted each other on the shoulder in a warm greeting.

“Good to see you,” said Nick in a fatherly tone. “Been a bit since I seen you, kid.”

“I thought you were the lion Hunter sent me out here to track. Freaked me out when I heard you digging. What are you working on?”

“Nuthin” Nick said as he stepped in front of the hole he was digging.

“Come on, what is it? You haven’t seen the lion by chance, have you?”

“I’ll answer your question with a question: have you noticed Liv and that fuckin’ Frank Noris gallivanting about?”

“Sure, if by ‘gallivanting’ you mean ‘getting acquainted’,” replied the younger man. “They take walks all the time past my reading spot. I don’t pay them much attention.”

“I don’t trust that fucker and no, I haven’t seen the lion. Saw some of her shit up over the ridge there back where you came from.”

“I don’t trust him all the way either. I really don’t like how he showed up. First impressions mean something. He still won’t let on anything about Jake no matter what way Hunter or Eddie ask him.”

Nick was wearing workman’s overalls and a green cap. He wiped his sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and said, “Alright, you can see.” He parted to one side and let Roger see what he was working on. It was a capsule-shaped machine that looked very heavy. It was the size of a mailbox.

“What is it?” Roger asked. He removed his helmet to get a closer look.

“Clean tech. It’s a terraforming machine, a prototype anyhow.”

“Why are you burying it?”

“Generally you’d set up a bunch of these in a grid like fence posts and then hook em’ up to a power station, preferably a power plant...or two. That’s how it goes in theory, at least. I’m burying this one because it’s the only prototype and I don’t want that friggin’ lunatic Frank Noris to get his greasy paws on it. Luis and me think he’s here to steal our terraforming tech.”

“Why do you say that? To me it just seems like he showed up to take Jake in and when he wasn’t here the only reason to stay was Olivia.”

“Me and Luis been watching him. Here, have a seat.”

Nick had brought with him one of Cong’s servbots specially outfitted with a refrigerated compartment for transporting freshly caught fish from the exterior of the Vault to Cong’s kitchen. He snapped his fingers. The servbot darted over to the two men sitting on a rock ledge jutting out from the rock wall. The servbot’s chest compartment opened up and revealed several bottled drinks cooled to perfection.

“Snazzy, eh?” said Nick. He grabbed himself a home-brewed beer and let Roger grab what he wanted. He snapped his fingers again and the servbots returned to its resting place atop the transport vehicle Nick had used to bring the terraforming pod atop the mountain.

“The other day we caught Frank sniffing around Luis’ lab. Well, he was by the elevator anyway. He said he was ‘admiring the harbor’ or some nonsense like that but we saw it in his face: he was gonna hack the scanner and go up to the lab,” Nick said as he held his beer to his chest with a thumb looped through the strap of his overalls.

“Why not take him at his word? Maybe he really was just checking out the harbor,” Roger said tentatively. He was still thinking about the lioness and her present whereabouts.

"Nah, I don't think so. That's what my gut says. He came all fire and fury and now he's as peaceful as a pussy cat? Nope. I'm not buying it. He's hanging around for a reason."

"There's Olivia."

Nick rubbed his eyes and squinted. His eyes darted in the direction of the Vault's main interior facilities and he said, "That's one of the reasons..."

"Occam's Razor," Roger said with budding confidence. He took a deep drink from his bottle of water. He tilted his head, about to change the subject, when the lioness came into view down below on the mountain side.

"Looks like the lion you're supposed to be after. I can tag it from here if you'd like," Nick said lazily. He was a little inebriated from the harsh sunshine wearing down on him from above from several million angled mirrors on the cavern's ceiling.

"Really?"

"Sure, it's a cinch."

Nick pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, aimed the tip at the lioness, pressed a button, and the pen fired its point. The point flew the several hundred feet down to the lioness. It pierced the skin of her rump and she let out a wild scream before bounding out of view.

"Cool huh? Little thing left over from when we used to need to deter birds from driverless routes on the main ways. You look ornery. What is it? Water no good?"

"That little device would have saved me a lot of time. How come you haven't told Hunter about it all these years? There are so many times it could have come in handy!"

"Ah, well, didn't think much of it. I usually just use it to shoot down drones for fun. Doesn't damage em' much. It's kind of fun. You think I should send one over to Hunter and have him scan it?"

“I’m sorry. I’m just a little stunned. You have this incredible piece of technology for tagging and tracking animals just sitting in your pocket and it’s the most casual thing in the world for you. In all the years I’ve known you you’ve never shown me this...”

“I dug it up out of my storage unit in the warehouse, going through all my old stuff last year. Not as casual as you think, amigo. This thing is like a toy to me. It’s been fun! I got all sorts of cool gadget shit in my unit. There and in my workshop. I just don’t leave it lying around for everyone to see. Wouldn’t want someone like Frank Noris poking around and getting into it.”

“What’s the tracker synced to? I need the signal so I can give it to Hunter.”

Nick obliged his companion and after a time they resumed their conversation about the visitor.

“He’s not just here for Liv. Occam’s Razor or not, he’s here for something more.”

“He did say he came for Jake but since Jake’s not here...”

“I think he’s a tech thief,” Nick grumbled. “Here, help me finish hiding this thing. I helped you, you help me.”

Roger relented and they finished burying the prototype. The sunlight prisms up above were lowering their output in order to simulate a sunset. Nick patted Roger on the shoulder and they headed back toward the main facilities of the Vault. Angus joined stride with the pair from nearby. He had been marking spots in the area as was his instinctual custom.

Chapter 37: The Deal

“We’re going to be honest with you, Curro. You’re a total unknown. That doesn’t bode well for ratings. You have no ties to the area, no education to point to, and you have a slight accent. Why should we spend the thousands of dollars it’s going to take in order to shoot a pilot with you as the host?” said an older man in a brown suit sitting across from Curro at a large conference table. He was an executive for a Los Angeles area TV station and the brother of the station’s owner. Seated on either side of him were producers in their own expensive outfits, a man and a woman.

“Tell him that you’re here to tell the truth to everyone and spread a message of self-love,” said Ezra’s voice in Curro’s ear. Ezra and Tuffy were outside of the TV station’s building using Tuffy’s internal computers as an audio monitoring station. Ezra was busy telling Curro what to do through a tiny earpiece transmitter.

Curro was about to repeat what he was told when Tuffy butted in for the first time and said, “No. Don’t say that. We’re *this* close. Tell them you’re the handsomest man in Los Angeles County and you have a plan for going national.”

Curro pretended, as he was instructed, to be deep in thought as he listened to what his friends had to say. He rubbed at his thick goatee and held the pose of a thinker. He repeated to the gathered station higher-ups what Tuffy had told him. They murmured to each other and then the executive said to Curro, “Please, give us a moment. We need to talk about this in private.” He stood and motioned respectfully toward the door of the conference room. Curro stepped out and fixed himself a cup of coffee at a nearby refreshment station.

"I still think you should have told them the absolute truth," whined Ezra. "We're among the most honest people who have ever walked this planet. We have a message to spread."

"Don't listen to him," said Tuffy. "At some point you have to cut a couple corners so that you get the maximum number of viewers. These guys are the gatekeepers. We can play the game without getting burned. What do you think I'm doing with my Internet company? First you have to get the big bucks, then you can do whatever you want!"

Curro hummed and sipped the coffee nervously. He was overwhelmed with the dialogue going on in his ear. He believed in Ezra and Tuffy. Tuffy's technological marvel was enough to convince him that his group of friends truly was from the future.

"Try to get a private office for yourself if they take you," said Tuffy. "I want a nicer place to run my company out of."

Curro continued to hum nervously. In truth, he had wanted his own TV show for many years. It was a fantasy of his. His mother had worked in television. He had a vested interest in doing what it took to secure the pilot. He checked himself out in the reflection of a window overlooking the street below and then said to his friends, "What should I say if we get the pilot?"

"Just speak your best English and try not to cuss. We will handle it," said Tuffy.

"I can't keep just waiting for you guys to say something. These guys, they like can't think I'm a genius forever."

"Of course they can!" exclaimed Ezra.

"It could be part of your shtick," offered Tuffy.

"Look, Curro. In this culture anyone who pauses before they say things is looked at like a wise man. This is perfect for your image. You're the vessel for a higher power. It's perfect!" said Ezra.

"Okay, but something has to be in it for me, too. I want to go to the *futuro* with you guys if this is successful."

"Deal," said Tuffy.

"Tuffy!" cried Ezra. "You can't just make these kinds of decisions without Jake and my say. We're a team remember?"

"No, you're two humans. I'm a cat. We do what we want."

"Curro, let's shelve talk about you coming back to the future with us," said Ezra.

"Shhh! I hear them moving," said Curro.

"Curro, please come in," said the female producer. She wore her hair high up in a bun and wore thick-brimmed glasses. She was slightly overweight and carried a very serious countenance. Her name was Elaine.

Curro resumed his place at the conference table. He sipped from his coffee as the higher-ups reseated themselves. They too were drinking coffee.

The older executive said, "We're going to give you a pilot episode. We like you, Curro. You're gorgeous. You're obviously a deep thinker."

Elaine leaned in and said, "You just seem...connected. I'll admit: I was really surprised when you came into casting but your headshots were spectacular. You read your lines with such conviction and our test panel has been raving about you. There's a charge about you."

"-but don't let this go to your head," said the third higher-up. He was a very young man who had risen the ranks of the station in just a short two years. His name was David. "You've got to prove yourself. Give us a good pilot, we'll see if the affiliates like it, we'll run it by test audiences, so on and so forth. It's a long road."

"What do you say?" said Perry, the head executive.

"Do it!" Tuffy squealed in Curro's ear.

The deal for the pilot was signed that day.

Eddie stood with Yama outside on the snowy plain at the foot of the mountains where the Vault was located. He was watching in quiet contemplation as Frank boarded the airship that was to take him back to San Martin de los Andes. Olivia was going with him. She turned and waved to Eddie one last time. In the days since her discussion with Hunter and Milena she had turned to her elderly friend for insight and perspective. They both agreed that her departure seemed like the best idea given Frank's overtures, the possibility for space and self-reflection away from her children that existed in the Andes, and the faraway colony's need for more medical staff.

Frank had given satellite access codes to Hunter and Milena at a more than fair price. The information running in and out of the Vault had gone from a tiny trickle to a surging torrent in the last two days. Eddie knew that little had changed, regardless of the entertainment and logistical value of the information uptake. He had a real connection with Olivia and now they were parting company. He was entering the final few years of his life and their companionship served as a gentle reminder of the need to continue to connect with his own self. Information meant nothing if there was little human connection to be had. This was a fact that Frank Noris didn't yet seem conscious of. There was a certain stiffness in Frank that Eddie perceived. It was the same stiffness that had come over Olivia since her children had confronted her. Eddie mourned the lost connection with Olivia. She would not be growing with him. He did not press her when the stiffness took hold of her. He simply helped her weigh her best options. He did not pierce her denial. She was convinced her children had plotted against her. He let her be. She had turned cold and stony. Her presence in the Vault had become unwelcome. She looked for excuses to get out of the Vault. Frank was there waiting with open arms. She told herself she needed to leave these people in order to find herself. Eddie saw through it all.

Yama sensed the old man's sadness. He placed a massive paw on Eddie's back. When the airship had gone they turned together and headed back into the Vault. Eddie still had very important, transformative work to do. He let go of Olivia.

Chapter 38: A Woman's Healthier Sides

It was the last song of Jake's short set at The Mint, a live music venue near the Beverlywood neighborhood in Los Angeles. His voice was a haunting baritone. His guitar strumming was baroque and rhythmic. He stood tall and delivered a song he had penned as a result of many conversations he'd had with Hunter on their walks together in the snow:

*Don't look for heroes in the movies
Don't look for heroes in uniform
So long as you search away from yourself
You'll never find what's good enough
Don't search for romance on the run
Don't live by the law or by the gun
The hero is in your heart, in your heart
Don't listen to those filled with envy
Those who always try to measure up
Don't listen to the man who uses words
to trick you into trying to give it up
Listen closely to the fabric of your thoughts
You are your own leader and that's enough
The hero is in your heart, in your heart
From this place I see the rest of the world is on
fire
Only got one life to live and I choose to never
tire
The hero is in your heart*

“Thank you. My name is Jake Walker. I’ll be playing at The Honey Rey this Saturday at 7 PM. You guys have been great,” he said to scattered applause coming from several tables and some standing patrons. He made his way off stage, pausing to step aside for the next act: a short woman in fashionable clothes. He regarded her for a moment. She wore a big, floppy hat and bright red lipstick. The audience cheered her as she took her place upon a stool and fumbled with a capo she produced from her pocket. Jake stepped offstage and into the backstage room where he locked away his guitar in its case.

He sat in a chair and rubbed at his chin for comfort. He listened to the songwriter who had taken the stage after him. She was telling the story of the second song in her set. Her grandmother had been a Polish woman who had fled Europe to escape tensions preceding the Second World War. She made her way to Wichita, Kansas and met a man there who was a cattle rancher in a tiny town west of the state capital. They married, had two children, and had a prosperous business.

The pretty songwriter began singing her song. She sang of her grandmother’s car accident on a dusty road. She had been driving in the late afternoon into town. Her husband came across the wreck. She’d been hit by a drunk driver who swerved into her lane at a very high speed. She was still breathing when her husband got to her. The drunk driver was dead, his car having slammed into a utility pole at full speed. The husband held her hand as the life passed out of her. She couldn’t speak to him. He held her eyes until they withered into a milky haze. He passed his hands over her eyes and shut them.

The intensity of the song caused Jake to order a beer from the bar as it ended with the songwriter’s fading fingerpicking on her elegant guitar. The small audience burst into applause.

“Fuckin’ a,” Jake muttered to himself as he took a seat in a booth.

The pretty songwriter eventually finished her set, which had been twice as long as Jake's, and was enveloped by a gaggle of female fans that took her picture and pressed for her autograph. One of the fans was wearing a very similar hat and it was cause for plenty of chatter among the small gathering that had formed near Jake's booth as he listened in.

"Where'd you get yours?" the adoring fan chirped. She was a heavier-set woman carrying a disposable camera in one hand.

They conferred some more on the hat until another fan asked a question.

"Oh my god, that song about your grandmother was so touching. I can't believe you wrote that for her. She would be so proud of you. What happened after she died?" asked a braver, athletic-looking woman.

"My grandpa raised his daughters with all the love he could, that's what my mother says. He sold the ranch for a good price, bought a house in San Clemente, sold ocean shore real estate while the market was in a boom, and remarried. He paid for my mom and my aunt to go to college. My mom had me when she was 28 and...here I am," said the songwriter. "I'm so fortunate because of my family. We're really close," she added with a hand over her heart.

"Oh my god," cried the athletic woman. "Can I give you a hug? You're so amazing."

The group of fans left the club with promises of catching the songwriter's next show. Each had a CD in hand and plenty of pictures to mark the occasion.

"That was really impressive," Jake said to the songstress as he entered the backstage room and leaned his back against the wall and crossed his arms. He had a gentle smile on his face.

She latched her guitar case shut and said, "Thanks, you too. You have a big voice, reminds me of Johnny Cash. I haven't seen you around before. Are you new to the scene?"

"In a way..." he responded. He began to think about how he had played The Mint several times before in his own time. He shook away the thought with a turn of his head and said, "I've played a few spots. I was making a living where I was before but now it's tighter, I'm going off savings until I can get up and running again."

"It's a good time to be here in LA, lots of people getting signed. I've only been here four months but I feel like a veteran already. I think you'll get a good look. Not a lot of people doing what you're doing. Your songs are... they remind of Warren Zevon if he was a really big guy," she said with a happy laugh.

"It's an experiment so far," Jake responded with a smile of his own.

"What is?"

"I didn't used to play songs like this. I used to sing about the Old West and hard living and beer and shit like that. Kind of a mountain man thing. I'm trying to sing more honest stuff, stuff that gets at the heart of my point of view. Anyhow, you've got a good thing going. That song about your grandma packed a real punch. It's good writing. You've got good stage presence too.."

"Thanks! You make the strumming look easy. Do you want to sit together for Ariel's set?" she asked.

"I think I'm rolling out soon. My roommate needs me for something and it's a long walk home."

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"I live in East Hollywood."

"I could give you a ride," she offered. "I'm Miranda, by the way. I know you know that but it makes it more personal if I introduce myself."

"Yeah, you're right- Jake."

They shook hands. They decided to stay for part of the following act's gig. Miranda took her hat off and kept it in a very large handbag filled with musical odds and ends for the rest of their time together. At one point Jake nodded his head toward the door. They collected their pay from the house manager and went to Miranda's car.

They had been riding in the car for less than a minute when Jake asked, "Do you think lyrics from a song can change the world on a fundamental level?"

"The world? The Beatles said 'all you need is love' so why not? I think the world got more tender because of that song."

"I want to change the world with my songs," he said. "I want people to wake up..."

Jake wasn't sure how much he wanted to share with his new friend.

"What do you want for your music?" he asked her.

"I haven't thought about that in a while. I know I want to get signed. I know I want people to love each other more because of my music, especially families. I want money. I want to be famous but I also want to help people with my message," she said.

"If you had a hundred million dollars and didn't have to work for the rest of your life, what would you do?" Jake asked.

"Hmmm..." she said as she took a short time to consider the question. "I'd start my own record label and sign songwriters like you. I'd hire great session musicians and put out quality music. I'd probably go to big events and promote the label. I'd also pay for my kids to have good educations. And you? What would you do?"

"I'd probably do what I'm doing right now. Gigging and helping out my buddies if they need something from me."

"I like that about you," said Miranda.

"Keeping it simple. What do your friends need help with?"

“They’re trying to change the world, too.”

“Impressive. Tell me more about them.”

“One’s really fiery and certain about things.

Sometimes I think he’s got a bit of a messiah complex but I think he sobers up to it pretty quick when it starts to flare up. The other’s pretty wild and does things on his own terms. He doesn’t like rules. He can be gentle and sweet but most of the time he’s really driven and a little crazy. I tend to be the mellow one the group. There’s a new guy we’ve been hanging out with. Handsome as the devil. He’s a bit like me, mellow and likes to be useful. What are your friends like?”

“Well, I was pretty close with my mom but she moved to Boston when I graduated from college. That was five years ago. We still see each other twice a year but it’s not the same. She has a concierge service out there that she’s really focused on. My roommate is Jessie. She’s a youth outreach coordinator at the ‘Y’ in Crenshaw. She’s been with them since she was 16. She’s probably my closest friend at this point. I also have a super awesome friend named Dominique. She’s a marketing consultant for Macintosh.”

Miranda continued to tell Jake about her friend as they neared his home. The flicker of romantic interest he had felt for her when he first approached her backstage at The Mint was gone but in its place was an appreciation for her candidness and friendliness. She was nice. She had some ambition. She was a decent driver. She showed genuine interest in others.

“Here’s the spot, up on the left,” he signaled to her as they approached the apartment.

“Your place is huge!”

“Yeah, my buddy who has an Internet company put us up with the place. There’s four of us living in it.”

She pulled the car to the side of the street and put it into park. She turned to Jake and said, "It's been really great getting to know you, Jake. Hey, I'm playing a showcase at the The Troubadour. Can you play any other instruments? It's a short set. Just three songs. It's not for two weeks. What do you think?"

"I can play a little bit of drums and I can do harmonies alright, if it's what you're after."

"Great! I know a guy who's got a rehearsal space. How about this weekend, Saturday morning?"

Jake's eyes searched up into his thoughts for any prior standing appointments. "They got a kit there?" he asked.

"Sure do. What's your number? I'll give you the address."

They traded information and shared a brief hug. Jake didn't sense any romantic feelings coming from her in the hug and he felt relieved. As he got out of the car he reminded himself that he didn't want to spread himself thin with commitments. He was dedicated to helping Tuffy out with his Internet company and also wanted to be available for Ezra should anything come up. He waved Miranda goodbye. He caught himself chuckling at the mechanical simplicity of her lemon yellow Toyota Corolla as it drove away.

Wish I could take her for a spin in an airship, he thought to himself. *That'd make her shit her britches.*

"Now, come on. That's not the most mature thing to say," said another voice.

Just sayin', she'd shit herself if she knew I was from the future. No harm in thinking that.

"You're right. I guess I was concerned you'd say something like that to her."

Like what?

"Like, the fact that we're from the future."

Well I want to tell someone.

"She'll think we're really fucking crazy. She won't believe us. Even worse, what if she tells everyone I'm crazy?"

If she reacts that way we'll know more about her as a person and we'll take space from her. Are you okay if we just test the water a tiny bit? Just see what her level of comfort is? We don't want to overwhelm. We have a good radar of whether she can handle the truth or not. She's shown herself to be trustworthy so far.

"That's okay. You make a good case. I trust you know what you're doing. I wouldn't have thought of that angle myself!"

Well, good. We'll test the waters a little and see if she's trustworthy. We need allies if we're going to spread the message of truth. That's what Ezra, Eddie, and Hunter say and I agree.

Jake stirred from his reverie and went inside to see what it was that Tuffy wanted his help on.

Chapter 39: Bad Boundaries

Cong whistled nervously as he walked the halls of the Vault. He was in a section of the colony he rarely visited. The industrial maintenance functions were in this area. For the most part this was the realm of Nick and when he had been living there, Jake. There was an energy plant visible through an acrylic window on his right. He slowed to look at it as it had been more than five years since he'd last looked. He wondered if anything had changed. After a brief scan of all that was visible he saw that nothing had. The same black chrome androids stood at the same stations overseeing the same functions they always had. The sameness bored Cong and he moved on.

He approached the storage closet where Jake's things were kept. There wasn't much. What little there was remained packed away neatly in a series of metal drawers and storage racks.

Cong Yu was looking for anything that would give him a clue as to why Frank had come to the Vault. He wanted to know why Frank had come in with guns blazing, refused to mention anything deeper about his motives, and had left the Vault inhabitants with a warning about Jake before going back to his home on the South American continent.

Drawer after drawer yielded nothing beyond musical implements and instruments, small keepsakes, books, and clothing.

He's hiding something, Cong said to himself.

At last there was something out of the ordinary. He'd found it in the heel of a hiking boot. It was a data drive, older tech from more than two decades before. It was the size of a thumbnail.

Cong sang to himself in triumph and marched toward his personal quarters as quickly as his 74 year old legs would take him. When he began to tire from the walking he pinged two of his silvers to speed to him and convey him the rest of the way. There *had* to be something on this drive, some sort of vital information that Frank sought...something to cause one reason to fear and hate Jake. There had to be a secret terrible enough to cause a manned aircraft to fly all over the globe in search of one man.

Cong placed the drive on a scanner pad atop his holographic work table. The drive was corrupted. All system attempts to divine its contents fell short. Cong's disappointment was thick. Perhaps Hunter could crack it.

Chapter 40: Radical Awesome Tubular Launch Party

A massive banner bearing, “RazorGlobe.com” in wildly colorful lettering towered over the entrance to the music hall where Tuffy’s launch party was taking place. Fire dancers swirled and leapt in dizzying circles on the main stage as crowds of people milled about from the open bar to the art show to the dance floor and many other wild attractions. The logo for RazorGlobe featured a cartooned version of Tuffy’s face licking his chops while peering down upon a globe. One could see the logo nearly anywhere they looked at the launch party. The baristas working the open coffee bar were instructed on how to create foam art featuring the cat’s head.

Grapes Wang stood at the coffee bar and sipped a mocaccino. He was a Cantonese immigrant who moved to the LA area ten years prior to be a famous actor. The opportunity passed him by when he couldn’t rid himself of his native accent. Now in his mid-50’s, he had amassed a considerable fortune as the owner and CEO of a successful discount store chain in the LA, Sacramento, and San Francisco Bay areas. He had struck up conversation with Curro in a men’s bathroom at the studio lot where *Belmonte* was being filmed. Enthralled by the idea of breaking into the dotcom boom, Grapes offered his services as a business advisor to Curro, Ezra, Jake, and the “Grey Man”. This turned into a partnership as Grapes proved his worth by showing knowledge of the finer points of raising venture capital. He was now committed to RazorGlobe nearly fully time, leaving the management of his discount store chain to his three sons. Unbeknownst to the time travelers, Grapes was fiercely allergic to cats.

Tuffy had hired 100 beautiful people from the LA area to fill the ranks of the launch party. They would each leave at a designated time as the party filled up more and more with the bigwigs of the California tech industry. Once Tuffy had secured \$15 million from a venture round, he felt he could spare no expense with the launch party. In his mind, this event had to cement in people's minds the status of RazorGlobe as *the* premier e-commerce site on the web. Minor celebrities walked about, mingling and posing for pictures from any one of the fifteen photographers on-site. A line of Asian women wearing bikinis danced awkwardly to the house music blaring over the extensive music system. The music penetrated most every corner of the music hall. The uncoordinated dance moves of the Asian women angered Tuffy. He watched the entire affair from far above in a mixing control room overlooking the venue.

A pack of cats had been rescued from various local shelters, spayed and neutered, and set loose upon the evening's events so that Tuffy could walk about with relative anonymity. It *was* hard to miss a cat of his size, however. Party goers were encouraged to visit an adoption information table with the cat of their choosing so long as the cat bore an identification number on its collar. Dreadlocked college students manned the table, carrying with them clipboards and a tip jar for the "Pizza Fund".

Jake, at Tuffy's behest, wore a white tuxedo with a pink bowtie. He was a sight to behold given his large frame, thick beard, and flowing locks of mane. To hide his discomfort he wore Ray Ban sunglasses that only helped to disorient him further. His responsibility for the night was to attend to potential investors in the VIP section of the dining area. Many young women bothered him, hoping to get their pictures taken with him. He grumbled to himself now and then about his lowly status as a concierge to the high rollers. He sipped at an Arnold Palmer and watched the richest of the rich smoke their cigars, dine on food from three renowned chefs, and gamble away their pocket money at blackjack and roulette tables.

It was nine in the evening. The venue was designed to house five thousand people and there were already over three thousand people present. A boy named Napoleon manned the front door with two large men from the Paramount studio lot working as his aides in their off hours. Napoleon was the son of the barber that worked beneath the time traveling group's apartment. He was ten years old and was in a boys' choir that performed in the LA area on weekends. Tuffy, via Jake, had booked the choir to perform at RazorGlobe's launch party. Napoleon watched over the line of people, making sure no one cut and that no "poor-looking people" were allowed in. He performed his role with a relish appropriate to his namesake.

Ezra was upstairs in a backroom adjacent to the control room where Tuffy presided. He sat on a couch and rehearsed for the main presentation of the evening. Tuffy would be addressing the gathered masses. Ezra would be manipulating a puppet crafted to look like Tuffy while Tuffy read from a scripted speech. Live video of the puppet would be transmitted to all the closed circuit televisions and projectors in the venue. Jake, Curro, and Tuffy had all agreed that Ezra would be most fit for the job of puppeteer largely because they feared he would dash into the middle of the proceedings and begin flipping tables, admonishing the event-goers for their greed and vanity. Ezra was largely unaware of the majority of the proceedings for the evening though it did please him to hear that young Napoleon's choir would be performing on stage. They would be singing a personal favorite of his, "Ellen's Third Song" by Franz Schubert.

Tuffy entered into the backroom. He ducked under the considerable amount of studio television gear filling the small space and leapt up to the couch to sit next to Ezra.

"Ooh, the fabric on this couch is really...comfy," he purred in pleasure as he plopped down on his side and rolled around on the padded cushion. Ezra reached over and pet the cat while maintaining his gaze on the script before him. He was studying closely the different cues that were written into the script.

"Have the investors arrived yet?" asked Ezra. He could not hear the roar of voices and music down below because the room was soundproofed.

"Yes...most of them are here. Jake's attending to them. Did you know he said the fish was overcooked? We had to throw it out. What a waste!"

"It wasn't served was it?"

"No."

"You know, you didn't have to throw it out. What about all those cats wandering about?" asked Ezra.

"I'll be back!" the cat called as he dashed back to the control room to discuss with Jake over two-way radio the fate of the fish. It was seen to that the fish was taken from the clear garbage bag it had been dumped into and brought back to the kitchen to be worked into the pâté that would be served in small bowls around the venue to the roaming cats.

He reentered the backroom, shut the door behind him with a powerful movement of his right hind leg, and took up his spot next to Ezra.

Ezra set down the script and asked, "Is Curro on his way? This camera won't operate itself."

At the far end of the room there was a waist level high news desk surrounded by professional lighting and a top notch news set. Ezra was to hide within its bowels and work the puppet while watching a teleprompter tracking the words Tuffy would be saying in his speech.

"Speak of the Toro!" sang Tuffy as Curro entered into the room.

"Are we ready?" asked the handsome man. He had watched the camera men with special interest during the filming breaks of his pilot, *Belmonte*, and knew he was to track the puppet's movements and keep it in focus. He was a quick learner and proving himself to be a valuable asset to the time travelers. He stood at the large camera on a massive tripod and tinkered with its settings. He had been dancing with a wealthy painter from San Francisco. Sweat ran down from his forehead and he dabbed at it with an embroidered handkerchief he kept in his shirt pocket.

"Let me put out an announcement," said Tuffy. He sprang from his spot at the couch, scratched at the door, and looked up expectantly at Ezra. Ezra gave Tuffy a loving look before letting him out. The cat obviously knew how to open doors but continued at random to ask to be let out, regardless. He winked at Ezra before making his way back to the control room.

The music on the house system quieted as Tuffy, in a disguised voice mimicking the voice of a woman manning a grocery store intercom, told the event goers to please find their way to seating. The main presentation would begin in 10 minutes. Downstairs the attendees looked at each other in bewilderment until they were ushered along by Jake and his fleet of staff wearing bright yellow polo shirts. Cats dashed around in confusion at the sudden change in atmosphere.

Outside at the front door Napoleon let in a flood of people before turning over his duties to the two large men who were assisting him. He dashed to the backstage area and met up with the 29 other members of his boys' choir, all donning robes and obeying the directives of their choirmaster.

Ezra took his position beneath the news desk and awaited the introductory song from the boys' choir. Tuffy would begin speaking when a countdown timer ended twenty seconds after the boys finished their song. Ezra watched religiously for the timer to begin.

The boys' choir sang its stirring rendition of Schubert's classic song. Many in the multitude of people gathered were in tears by the end. The timer counted down 3...2...1...

"RazorGlobe...go with the simplest solution: worldwide commerce for the information age," Tuffy's rich voice resonated through the venue.

Upstairs Ezra was busy puppeteering the movements he knew would match Tuffy's tone and inflection. They had practiced the speech on a timer several times in the week prior. Displayed on the massive screen of the main stage down below was a graphic of a spinning globe with arrows crisscrossing rapidly and landing in different parts of the globe as it spun faster and faster.

"Hello, I'm Razor the cat," said Tuffy. The video feed of the puppet in the news studio appeared. The song "Tubthumping" by Chumbawamba blared. "Who wants to get rich?" he yelled enthusiastically.

Upstairs Curro hurled scores of hundred dollar bills at the news desk in front of him.

The attendees howled in delight. Many clinked their drinks together. To the side of the stage the fire dancers jumped up and down enthusiastically.

A digital dancing banana joined the puppet in an awkward-looking dance. The photorealism of the banana far outstripped the available computer graphics of the time. It wowed the crowd. Their enthusiasm redoubled.

"I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down!" sang Tuffy in his beautiful tenor. "That's right," he continued as the music faded away, "let's give a round of applause for Tumbabanana, the rad-tacular banana who's got all the moves! Yeah!"

A graphic of a big-box corporate store appeared on screen.

"What if I told you we could fit this big beast—"

The image of a personal computer appeared.

"—onto this? Crazy mondo, am I right? We're going into the future!"

Tumbabanana reappeared on the screen and in a squeaky cartoonish voice said to the Razor puppet, "What's this all about, Razor?"

"Right, you're all here to get the news. Let's get down to business and then let's party!" Tuffy exclaimed.

"That's hella' far out, Razor! Lay it on em'," the dancing banana said as it adopted a hip hop inspired pose. It faded out as Tuffy commenced his speech.

“RazorGlobe is a one stop shopping solution for the digital era. We aim to build the world’s most complex and efficient warehousing system. We aim to employ 10,000 employees in the first year of operation. 40,000 in the second. Need groceries? We’ll get there. It’s going to take 15 years for us to have the infrastructure. Trust us, we’ve got the vision and the planning to someday soon out-compete the entire grocery industry as it currently stands. Want a flying robot drone to deliver diapers to your apartment in Manhattan? We’ll get there. The technology will be here and scalable in about 18 years. Trust us, we know. We’re talking about the future here! We will open up our distribution and delivery system, the core ingredient of our success, to common vendors. We’re talking about spurring on small business while competing at a national level. We’re talking data servers that will make the US government shiver. We’re talking about selling books and CDs to everyone across the nation. Want a bicycle deliver to your door in one day? We’re working on it! We’ve got back end developers, front end developers, programmers with physics degrees, monkeys with laser brains, key contacts with major distributors and suppliers, we’ve raised 15 million in a two week venture round, and we’re looking for more. You want California jobs, right? Talk to our business manager and say ‘yes’ to California jobs by pouring all your money into this startup!”

A picture of Grapes Wang, wearing a business suit and a million dollar smile, appeared.

“Now let’s party!” Tuffy’s collar transmitter blared into the microphone dominating the event. The screens in the venue jolted to footage from a popular song of the day. A video DJ took over duties for the audio-visual needs of the night.

“Big speech, Tuffy. Well done!” Curro congratulated the cat as he re-entered the backroom. “Those people down there are really excited for this company!”

“Not enough truth value, if you ask me,” grumbled Ezra. He was disentangling himself from the tight enclosure where he’d just performed his puppetry.

“You know, Ez, you’re right. I agree. That speech was fluff,” said Tuffy.

“I didn’t think so,” said Curro. His accent was disappearing thanks to a voice coach the TV station had hired for him.

“Tell me more about that,” said Ezra to Tuffy.

“The speech was fluffy. We’re not here to run the business. We’re here to sell it. We’ll sell it and get a bunch of money. We won’t stay on as advisors. Grapes will. He’s taken small businesses and made them regional. We’re the pitchmen. I’m not going to pretend that speech was profound. It wasn’t the platform for it. That speech was to make people money drunk and make a difficult choice a lot simpler. This company is going to sell for a lot of money. We’ve been over this, Ez. Our audience doesn’t exist yet. With the money we make from the sale, we’re going to *carve* out an audience.” Tuffy added with a demure look on his face, “You never know, this business model we’re selling might outdo Amazon. We could slip in a little bit of era-inappropriate tech and a couple of ‘anticipatory measures’ that will make this company recession proof for all of the financial shit storms that are going to hit the US economy in the next 25 years. This business itself could do much more in the free market than any of us as orators could in communicating the truths we possess.”

“Holy Trinity...I hadn’t thought of that! That’s brilliant, Tuffy,” exclaimed Ezra. Part of his pleasure stemmed from the fact that Tuffy had uttered more words in previous half hour than perhaps in his entire existence. It continued to be a pleasure to learn what personality lay behind those sparkling green eyes.

Tuffy registered Ezra’s pleasure and preened, “Fluffy Tuffy?” He turned his body coyly.

"No, I shouldn't have doubted you. You're right. This company could be a way of advancing Western society to the point where our message would be much better received."

"We build in just a few little slants to things that will nudge things in the right direction. Let's call it a kind of backup plan in case none of our more direct efforts take effect."

"Such as..." Ezra prodded.

"Advocacy for child rights, private security companies, driverless car systems, stuff like that...all timed to emerge in our company culture a couple years before each of those hit the cultural zeitgeist."

"Whoa..." said Curro. "*Put a madre*, you have a really good idea...but don't you think you need someone to influence things as world events come up. If you build these anticipatory triggers into a computer system, people will get wise to it very fast and try to hack in and see what else is set to come up. You need a person to stay with the company."

"You do it!" said Ezra. "You're perfect for it."

"Not bad," said Tuffy. He was lost in thought. He shifted down onto his front paws and covered them with his chest as he squished down into the floor. "You know," he said as he sprang up, "we've got a party to see to! Let's get down there."

They all walked downstairs and joined the festivities. Ezra spent most of the evening on a lounge chair discussing Roman history with a Stanford University professor. Curro was seen on the dance floor with a host of different women, enjoying his budding celebrity status. Jake continued to tend to the high rollers and fend off picture takers. Tuffy chatted some with the few remaining cats who were not adopted. He bored of their company, finding them too primitive and aggressive for his taste. Eventually he returned to the couch upstairs and took a lengthy nap. He dreamed of an English gala of royalty where he was watching the proceedings from a high spot inside the ballroom where everything was taking place.

Napoleon and his boys' choir left soon after their song was done but not before being hugged goodbye and thanked by Ezra. Grapes Wang spent the night flashing his cheese ball smile and vigorously shaking hands with the seventeen different investors that had each contributed more than a million dollars in exchange for varying amounts of equity in RazorGlobe. Grapes not only had this investment success to celebrate, he was also recently divorced from the mother of his three adult sons. He was as fresh on the market as RazorGlobe was.

The night was a tiring but smashing success for the troupe.

Chapter 41: Fuel to the Fire

Eddie was the last of the inhabitants to arrive at the meeting taking place at the customary spot in the biosphere. A campfire was crackling. Comfortable seating had been brought by yellow servbots to rest in a semi-circle around the fire. The yellows hurried back to their charging stations, following the red that was directing them. Eddie slowly made his way to the last remaining chair. He chose to remain standing for a time so that he could stretch his body and listen to what the order of business was.

At this gathering were Hunter and Milena, Cong Yu, Xiao Ma, Nick, Roger, Luis, and Eddie.

“Something happened a few weeks ago that was very troubling for me,” began Hunter. “With all the expansion of the biosphere going on, I didn’t get a chance to dwell on it a whole bunch. In the last few days I’ve come to some ideas I wanted to share in-person.”

The gathering was attentive, eager to hear what the leader had to say.

“What happened was that Cong came to me with data drive that belonged to Jake. He found the drive by going through Jake’s personal effects in his storage unit.”

“It’s true,” Cong said in a disappointed voice. “I regret doing that. I apologize to all of you. I would also like to apologize to Jake, in person. It eats me up that I got as desperate as I did.”

“Thanks for that,” said Hunter. “I bring this up not because I want to out Cong or place him on some kind of parole, I bring it up because it caused me to think about our community here. In the last few months we’ve moved away completely from cloning, stepped into terraforming, and aggressively expanded the biosphere. This is all very good but I’m not satisfied that these changes are enough. Like I said, Cong is not on trial. The point is that the fewer there are of us here, the more intense the sense of isolation becomes. Even if I didn’t respect him as a person, Frank’s presence reminded me of a feeling I got when Jake first came around: hope. It might be a bit sick and twisted but when Frank was hanging around here, with our permission of course, I started to think with hope that he would soften and become a friend. After all, I’m kind of lonely! It’s the kind of loneliness that tells me to interact with new people and sample from the cornucopia of human personality that exists in the world. I’m beginning to feel tremendously isolated here, particularly with Jake and the others being gone. I think it’s good they’re gone and I wouldn’t have it any other way but...my theory is that others here are feeling the same way. I think we’re going a little stir crazy...”

“I agree,” said Cong. “I want some excitement, some intrigue. Hunter and Milena are grown. It took a village but it’s been my life’s pride in my old age to see you two become magnificent human beings.”

“It feels like ‘mission accomplished,’” said Xiao Ma.

“Agreed,” added Roger.

"I think we each had our limitations, Olivia included. With strong boundaries with the unhealed sides of ourselves, between us all we were able to raise you two with very little abuse present. That's not for me to decide, however. It's simply my estimation," said Eddie. He was rolling his shoulders back and rubbing at his forearms to help bring blood circulation to them. "I feel as though we all, with some rare exceptions, brought our most healed sides to the adult-child interactions."

"I haven't felt like my growth has been impeded here, at least nothing major," said Milena. "Xiao Ma and I worked something out recently and I'm glad for that. It was the only lingering thing for me."

"Me as well," added Hunter.

"I did show up to some of our early lessons far too anxious and distressed," Cong offered to Milena. "I'll admit that I'm the least evolved of the adults here. My dysfunction did bleed into some of our interactions."

"Yes, but only very early on," said Milena. "I picked up on it and let the other adults know."

"You worked on your boundaries and grieved your son further," Xiao Ma said to the elderly Chinese gentleman.

"For me, the biggest betrayal was Mom's lack of clarity on Dad's passing. I see more and more that it had less to do with you," Hunter indicated to Xiao Ma, "than it had to do with her self-sacrifice: her weakness and inability to fully process her own father's death and how this led her give up our father as weakly as she did."

"You all tried to create a paradise here for Hunter and me," said Milena. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I've been very happy here but now I feel my life's mission is shifting, same as my brother. Frank coming here was a reminder. If we don't come out of this sweet solitude, which has begun to sour into isolation, something will bring us out of the isolation in a way that will expose us and hurt us. Frank was evidence of that."

"I hear ya'," said Nick. "You guys have been having growing fits the last year, I'd say. Seems like you want to stay and you do things to try to make this place better but then it's not enough for you. You see the fundamentals at the root of what you're doing and then retool."

"Looks like another big change is in order," said Eddie. He was now seated comfortably in his chair.

"We were raised, out of circumstance and tragedy, in the most peaceful place on the planet. Creating Ezra and Tuffy...and the failed Winston Specimen, was a misguided attempt to fill this place with people. The terraforming push we've been making has its merits but what we've been doing in the past year, essentially, has been prepping this place for others to come here. I want to offer others this space, this vast palace of riches and automation, as a place where they can raise children..."

"Both inner and outer?" asked Eddie.

"Yes, we have to be able to ensure a certain standard of psychological health for those we recruit here," added Hunter.

"Gonna' need an airship for recruitment," Nick said with a smile. "Something like Frank's, huh?"

"Something like that," said Milena, returning the smile, "without the weapons systems. It'd be built to keep people safe and secure, not for destruction and raiding."

"This is exciting!" said Xiao Ma. "Hunter, what about those standards for psychological health?"

“Milena and I talked it over and we want to be absolutely clear that the purpose of our mission is not to be a child-rearing facility. The function of this place has a deeper purpose: to serve and rekindle life. That’s been the mission since Eddie founded it. Child-rearing, at times, has something to do with that mission but child-rearing is not a fundamental principle to live by; it was a biological imperative up until governments induced massive overpopulation through all their wickedness.”

“Wouldn’t you say the biological imperative is restored?” asked Luis, adding wood to the fire as was his custom at these occasional meetings.

“There are so few humans left.”

“As I said, childrearing is not a fundamental principle...to live in accordance with reality and to serve life *is*,” said Hunter.

“I like where you’re going with this,” said Eddie with encouragement. “It’s brilliant.”

“You all were chosen by Eddie and the other founders for your great gifts, your wealth earned in the freest markets of society, and your capacity for rational self-reflection. This brought a certain level of psychological distinction to the operations here. Since my sister and I arrived here you have all dedicated yourselves to strong boundaries, intense personal development, and our raising,” said Hunter.

“We have Xiao Ma to thank for a lot of that framework,” said Roger.

“It’s true,” continued Hunter. “You’ve been the bedrock of a lot of the strong boundaries here. It’s apparent you poured your entire life’s energy into helping my sister and I grow up in a healthy environment. I feel I had two mothers here and seven or eight fathers!”

Everyone laughed and began to feel more and more at ease with what Hunter and Milena were likely going to propose. They were all tuned in to the same ideas, the young siblings being only a step or two ahead of the rest.

“Knowing you two and playing my limited role in your development saved me from making the mistake of possibly marrying and having a child of my own. I saw my limits,” said Xiao Ma.

“Same goes here,” added Roger.

Xiao Ma smiled at Roger and said, “I agree with something Cong said earlier. It took a village and it has been my life’s pride to not only see you two become who you are but to raise my own inner child up into a more mature person.”

“I can’t say I’m quite there in my own stuff but I feel I’m close,” said Nick.

“I’m with him,” said Luis.

Nick and Luis, who were longtime best friends, reached out to each other and patted each other on the shoulders. They were both in their late 60’s but retained much of their vitality and strength even in old age. Their long conversations and countless creative projects had forged them into much better men than when they had arrived.

“What I want to propose is this: we scour the globe in the airship Nick will build,” said Hunter. “We go first to Svalbard and Toubkai first since we know they’re uplinked and have a few people there we’re already interested in. We find any other remaining colonies we can. We recruit those with the highest psychological health to come here. We vet them to determine whether they have the motivation and capacity to raise their inner children to adulthood. The environment is the Vault. The evidence that place is *the* environment is reflected in our life’s experiences. We bring only two or three children for the first two years and only with the condition that their parents undergo the rigorous training on boundaries, self-containment, and self-therapy that the guiding philosophy that Xiao Ma brought to our early years here. We cannot tolerate or advocate any behavior on the part of parents that delays the growth of their children. Therefore, if no suitable already-existing parents are out there, the focus will be purely on affording to those who want to heal all their childhood traumas a place to do so.”

“Why not skip the parent stuff and go with the childhood trauma healing center component only?” asked Eddie.

“Any parent who is willing to adhere by our standard of zero tolerance toward child abuse is a parent who has the courage to see their child raised by a community of healed adults and the humility to step back when they feel their own trauma overstepping their inner boundaries,” said Milena. “Such parents may not exist but we can always look. With enough healed adults around during the times in which the parents, one or the other, aren’t fully available to the child, we could provide the child with enough nurturance and support. Between all of us we could be available fully to one or two children. Given there will be increased commitments with other people being here, it’d be best to start with one if possible.”

“One child to eight healed adults plus two far above average parents...sounds worth a shot,” said Roger.

“These are the kind of standards that make sense,” said Eddie. “This seems like a natural extension of the work and the mission we’ve been keeping here. Let’s give it a try, shall we?”

“I’m skeptical but I’m willing to try. We need to try new ways of living and being. I don’t think these standards and this healthy of a social environment has ever been presented to a child. I’ve never read about a community where the adults are all actively engaged in healing their inner child as a way of being. Retreats? Sure, but not an instance I can think of where it’s been done deliberately in community,” said Roger.

“We’re the first,” said Luis.

“Let’s try,” said Hunter. “We’ll find capable, healthy people.”

“If they exist...” said Nick glumly.

“You’re right,” said Hunter.

“Let’s give it a try. I’m for it,” said Eddie.

The plan was agreed to by all. Everyone began to go their separate ways when Cong approached Hunter and Nick, who had been talking the major endeavor to come.

“May I speak to you guys about something?” he asked in an atypical timidity.

“Fire away, bud,” answered Nick.

“I’ve been thinking about it and it really is bothering me what I did. I want to make it right. I want to apologize in person to Jake for what I did...”

“You mean...” Hunter said as he trailed off in consideration.

“If it’s possible.”

“I don’t think it is,” said Nick. “We’re recharging from the last jump. We’d set them back by at least half a year if you went through. Unless you can come up with some massive energy source to power a jump, there’s not much we can do.”

“I was thinking about it while we were all talking about bringing people here: I have tremendous wealth and little to do with it. It’s been collecting dust in my stores. I’m tired of my piano and tired of my art collection. I need to get out into the world. I could buy whatever is on the market at nearly whatever price to match the energy output I’d need for a jump.”

“Why not just wait two months and tell Jake then? Why spend all that money? You don’t even know if the tech you need is on the market,” Nick interjected.

“I have a nagging suspicion that Jake will stay,” said Cong.

“I’ve had that, too,” said Hunter. “He hates the desolation in our time.”

“He’s not the only one but at least some of us make the best out of it,” Nick said with a scowl. “If you can put the resources together, there’s nothing to stop you. I’ll tell you what to look for.”

Chapter 42: Business Getting Personal

It had been a year since the RazorGlobe launch party. Ezra and his band of friends now lived in a small house in the Hollywood Hills largely thanks to the wealth Curro was accruing as the majority stakeholder in “Spread”, RazorGlobe’s rebranded name, and the modest salary he was making from his daytime TV talk show, *What’s Going On?*

Tuffy, Ezra, and Jake had signed over their ownership in Spread so as to not draw attention to themselves from authorities. Curro retained his ownership and a cadre of lawyers at the behest of the time-travelers. Spread was growing rapidly as a company. Though it had fallen short of the 10,000 employee goal Tuffy had set forth at the launch party, it was nearing 4,000 employees in the greater LA area. Most of the jobs were centered on company headquarters in Burbank.

There were customer service centers being built in Tacoma, Washington, Lexington, Kentucky, and Toronto, Canada. More service centers were planned for construction in the coming months. Fulfillment and shipping warehouse facilities were springing up in Illinois, Kentucky, California, Texas, and Washington, with several more planned for construction in the Northeast.

Tuffy kept a plush, secret office in the Burbank headquarters where he handled massive swaths of the company's data processing and logistical coordination using the supercomputer that rested in his skull. Only Curro and Ezra knew of Tuffy's part time job as the mainframe of the entire operation. When the company had accrued enough cash assets, it would buy a large stage in a microprocessor company based out of Oregon. This would allow Spread to quietly oversee advancements in the industry that would revolutionize processing power and bring technology more or less up to the speed that would allow Tuffy to quit his job and return to living more of a cat's life.

Grapes Wang was pressing the California State Legislature to lessen all existing state-level trade restrictions with China using a small army of lobbyists. His business savvy and craftiness proved a valuable asset to Spread. With some suggestive nudging on the part of Tuffy via Curro, Grapes decided it would be extremely advantageous for Spread to open up its customer-reviewed vendor's market to outfits operating out of Asia. Since the first several dozen vendors dictated the efficacy of delivery of services through their standard of business proficiency, Grapes himself was spending a lot of time overseas in Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, and Singapore.

On his recent trip to Shanghai, Grapes had met with several potential investors hailing from the banking sector. These men also happened to be higher level officials in the Communist Party. The rowdy group had spent the better part of five hours at a traditional Chinese dining room style restaurant, gorging themselves on hard liquor and chicken.

Traditional instrumentalists floated in and out of the private dining room, regaling the wealthy men in designer suits with old-time songs and sentimental tunes intended to stoke their patriotism for their Chinese homeland. By the end of the meeting, Grapes had secured an important strategic alliance with the investors and their cabal of kingmakers. Spread would gain an important distribution foothold on the Chinese mainland.

Large deal after large deal for the aggressive expansion of Spread was being secured thanks to the boundless energy and enthusiasm of Grapes. His pitch was a mix of all necessary financial knowledge relating to the company, his knack for honing in on the most powerful person in the room at any given time and an ability to lower their inhibitions, and his willingness to improvise his way through any situation in order to gain Spread a favorable advantage.

Being recently divorced, Grapes tasted during his trips the fruits of the tree of young women seeking the wealthy. Many of these women were hired by his local hosts to serve as arm candy and escorts. His dalliances were fun for a time but now the intensity of his bachelorhood was wearing off and he had begun to long for a mate of comparable age. There was one woman in particular he had noticed. Her name was Rosita and she was a cleaning lady at Spread headquarters.

Rosita was a middle-aged woman with no living children. She'd had a son once but he had died of a meningitis infection back when their home had been rural Mexico. Full of disillusionment with the family life she'd tried to create for herself, she left her drunkard husband in the dust and moved to Houston, Texas to make a better life for herself. By this point she was in her mid-30's. Houston's humid climate bothered her and after several years of failed work prospects, brief and unsatisfactory romances, and stressful case of recurring hemorrhoids, Rosita moved to the more arid climate of southern California.

First she lived in San Diego but felt bothered by the military climate of the coastal city. She took a personal assistant position with television host Daisy Fuentes in Los Angeles but failed to live up to expectations given her rough command of the English language. Daisy took pity on Rosita and ensured the now-aging lady of ample bosom and hefty hips got a choice position on the grounds crew of a local television station. This happened to be the same station that filmed Curro's talk show.

Curro took a shine to Rosita as she reminded him of an aunt of his that used to spoil him with baked *empanadas* and mighty hugs. When grounds crew and office cleaning staff were needed for the Spread headquarters in Burbank, he thought of her immediately and ensured her a lucrative position of "Head of Cleaning Staff". Rosita was given to bouts of snippy displeasure over small details gone awry in the overall presentation of the office facilities but by in large she was an amiable and soothing presence.

Grapes had felt charmed by her when he noticed she made sure the hand towels in his personal bathroom were folded decoratively. The charm turned to fancy when whilst admiring her comely figure stooped over his toilet with a scrubbing brush. He noticed the lack of a wedding band on her ring finger. He sent some feelers out through his support staff and bit by bit learned some of her life's story. He was too shy to approach her. He was worried about the language barrier between them. Yet over the last few months was able to signal his interest with admiring looks in the rare moments he found himself in the same room as her. Rosita knew romance was on the horizon but held to the chastity that guided her out of the nightmare of her son's death long before.

On this particular day, Rosita was cleaning out a small storage closet on the first floor of the Spread headquarters. She had gained access to the space by convincing the maintenance man to pry the door handle off of the door using a crowbar. Her maid's intuition told her there were dust bunnies afoot. She set to work cleaning the dirty space and breathed a sigh of relief knowing she was doing a good job.

What she didn't know was that Tuffy's secret passageway into his hidden office surfaced through the storage closet. She was scrubbing a wall clean with a brush and soap when she saw a large cat dart from one exposed air vent to another along the floor of the closet. The cat and the maid made eye contact for a brief moment. Both pondered immediately thereafter their next moves.

Tuffy hoped the maid would be a one-time occurrence so that he wouldn't have to reroute his highly convenient personal passageway into his hidden office. Maybe the maid would move on. He scanned her employee profile for signs of hostility in her personality. There was the time she had been defiant toward an HR manager and earned herself an official warning. The conflict had been over a point of disagreement on furniture arrangement in the HR bullpen. Tuffy decided he would continue to use the passageway. His secret was out but this woman did not seem meddlesome enough to disrupt his equanimity.

Rosita was selective about the cats she loved. She adored cats that did not shed. Cats that shed, as Tuffy did, earned her ire. She knew that animal dander posed an allergenic risk to some of the headquarters employees and that this large cat could be problematic, given his voluminous mane. She did retain some curiosity about the cat. He was very cute and had a darling collar. Rosita decided she would check in on the storage closet later in the week at the same time of the day.

The day came when she waited for his passing. She had spent 20 minutes fumbling around the closet, making much ado about nothing, when she heard Tuffy's heavy trot along the metal vents. The trotting stopped. Tuffy leaned his head out from the vent and gazed up at her. She cooed to him, sat down on her heels, and called for him. He turned back into the vent for a moment but relented, deciding she could be trusted. He nuzzled her hand with the side of his mouth, checking her scent, and began to purr and she worked her fingers across his fur.

"Eres un gatito lindo," she cooed to him. She took a cat treat from her apron and set it on the ground in front of him. He ate it with relish. This cemented their friendship.

Every day they would share this exchange of pleasantries and then Tuffy would be on his way. Rosita was impressed by the cat's timeliness. She decided she would keep his presence a secret from her co-workers. His company was a relief to her, given all the stress of her employment. He seemed to know just how to soothe her with his nuzzles and gentle chirps. She named her new cat friend "Garbanzo".

As the weeks passed and Rosita maintained her daily presence, Tuffy began to wonder if he could trust her with his digital voice.

Chapter 43: The Talk Show

“He’s a former professional athlete turned techno-entrepreneur and intuitive healer. Everybody please welcome the star of the show, Curro Belmonte!” an announcer with a schmaltzy car-dealer voice cried out to a studio audience. Applause signs blinked to life and everyone stood as Curro walked out onto a stage where a mother and daughter were seated. He bowed to the audience and waved before assuming his seat in a high stool to one side of the pair who had come for his help.

“Welcome to *What’s Going On?*. You are Kasia, I presume. Yes, pleased to meet you. Ah, Hanna, pleased to meet you as well,” said the dashing host. “So, please, tell me...”

“What’s Going On?!” the studio audience cried in unison.

The mother, Hanna, was a nervous-looking middle-aged woman. She had her arms crossed over her chest. She wore a purple dress and was overweight enough to take on a pear shape. Her face was neither beautiful nor ugly. Her skin was withered from a cigarette smoking habit she had kept for twenty years. She was the first to speak.

“Well, my child is never home when I want her to be. She has to get the last word in every time we meet,” she spoke in a noticeable Polish accent. “She is breaking the walls down, just to be bad girl. She takes her time just to show the world she is proud. She is just child! She wear the different clothes that everybody wishes nobody owned. She is my daughter but I don’t even know her!”

Through an earpiece in Curro's ear Ezra said, "Sounds like you have a lot of dissatisfaction." Curro repeated the words to Hanna. Ezra had eased off some from his interventions since the early tapings of the show. Now he mostly prompted Curro at a few key points, watching the taping from a production booth in another part of the studio, but largely left the process up to Curro.

On this day Ezra was joined by Jake in the production booth. They had spent many nights in the previous year working together to get Curro up to speed on being an effective listener and communicator within the format of the evolving and growing show. Much of what they themselves had learned from Xiao Ma, Eddie, and Hunter was now being passed on to Curro and the tens of thousands of viewers of the show. Through this collaboration the travelers had developed a trusting relationship and now worked seamlessly to bring what help they could in the narrow frame of the TV show's limits.

Middle-aged Hanna groaned, "Yes, very dissatisfied. She is constant disappointment."

"I don't think that's fair," complained Kasia. "I'm 16 now. I should be able to do what I want. *Mama's* from the old country. I do all of my homework, I have a good GPA, and I paid for my car with my own money. She should take a chill pill and let me do what I want."

"Is not right that she can do whatever. I'm her *mama*. She can't go out with boys when she want. She has responsibilities," complained Hanna.

"Let me get this straight," said Curro. "Kasia, you break things around the house when you don't get what you want?" Curro was wearing a navy colored suit with a green collared shirt and a white handkerchief in the suit pocket. His health was the best it had ever been in his life. His tan skin shone under the studio lights, well-pampered and cared for during his recent weekend at a golf resort in Indio. He never tired of the work, counting his lucky stars given the horrible situation he'd only recently been in as "El Toro".

"I break things because she won't listen to me!" growled Kasia.

"And you'd like her to listen to you," he prompted her.

"Yes," Kasia said with a pout.

"Let her know," he prompted the teenager again.

"I want you to listen to me," Kasia said to her mother.

Hanna began to tear up and spoke with a quavering voice, "I want her to listen to *me*. Her boyfriend is trouble. I know these boys. He wants one thing and nothing more. I won't say it. Is not for my daughter."

"Hanna, how did you feel when Kasia told you she wanted you to listen to her?"

"Well done," Ezra's voice said through the earpiece.

"She is making fool of herself with that stupid boy," snapped Hanna. Her tears dried.

"I hear you, Hanna. A part of you is really concerned about Kasia and how she looks when she is with her boyfriend," said Curro. He glanced at Kasia for a split second to check to make sure his empathy was accurate. "Stay with that part of you that is really concerned. How does it feel?"

Hanna did not wish to disappoint Curro. She and her daughter had driven down from Sacramento to be on the show. Her countenance softened again and the tears returned. "How does it feel..." she trailed off for a second before reengaging Curro's gaze, "I feel..." She muttered self-consciously in her mother tongue. "I feel scared."

"What does the fear have to say?" asked Ezra. Curro simply repeated the words.

"That Kasia will get pregnant," Hanna admitted. Her tears began to flow and her nervous posture eased up. Some murmurs of gentle encouragement could be heard from the audience. They had all been prepped on the finer points of being "witnesses" for the show's proceedings.

A producer signaled to Curro, holding up a single finger.

"We have to go to break now, Hanna. Stay with that fear. If it's okay with you, let's visit with Kasia when we return from break," Curro said tenderly.

The audience applauded gently as several camera operators whirled around the studio filming a variety of shots. One of Curro's production assistants approached the stage to discuss technical information with another crew member.

"I hate this part. Where's the structure to hold these people through break? It's so invasive!" Ezra protested in Curro's ear. "I'll never get used to this."

Curro had no way of responding to Ezra but he nodded his head to the side affirmatively in the hopes that Ezra would see. He leaned over to Hanna and said, "We all are very grateful for your vulnerability here." He then addressed both the mother and daughter and said, "I know it can be overwhelming with all these people here. Obviously our time here is really limited so, like Elaine mentioned, we want to hear both sides of the story and see if you two can start to work to have a safe space for more communication. We're not going to try and 'fix it'." Both women gave him sympathetic smiles. He noticed their attraction toward him and remembered in a flash the many words of help Ezra had offered him for this common occurrence. Curro's much diminished vanity and need for sexual attention had been at the forefront of the personal transformation he'd experienced in the previous year since coming into contact with such healthy companions. He did not react with need to the smiles of the women.

The floor manager barked out orders to prompt the entire production for readiness. The audience began in again with its applause and on cue Curro spoke into a designated camera, "We're back. If you're just joining us, Kasia and Hanna are here to talk about some of the painful things going on their home-life: broken walls, fear and anger, boyfriends, rebellion, parental criticism, and so forth. There's a lot going on. Kasia, we'd like to hear from you if that's okay."

"That's okay," she said in a timid voice.

"How was it for you to hear that your mother is afraid you'll get pregnant?" he asked.

"She should know. She got pregnant with me when she was young!" she hissed.

Hanna was about to start in with her anger again when Curro gave her a look of asking for permission to stay with Kasia's perspective. Hanna relented immediately, trusting Curro's powerful presence.

"We know the father's not here. Don't go too deep. Not on a show like this. Remember, she's in our care," Ezra said into the host's ear. Curro took a deep breath as he sometimes did when Ezra took more time than the customary second or two to get his information across.

"I want to hear you on your anger, Kasia. Something tells me that's an important place to go right now. Your *mama's* willing to give you the space to express yourself. What does your anger say about her?"

"May I cuss?" she asked. There were some chuckles from the crowd.

Curro smiled and said, "If you feel like it." He darted his eyes over to his producer, taking Kasia's attention with him for a moment, and asked, "It's alright if she cusses, right?"

Elaine nodded, giving him a thumbs-up, and said to Kasia, "Go for it."

Kasia took a deep breath and said, "*Mama* gives me all this shit for being with Chase. She says I'm gonna get pregnant. I don't think it's fucking fair. I'm not going to make the same mistake. She needs to take a fucking chill pill, I'm serious."

"I'm glad your anger is here, Kasia," Curro said with encouragement. "You want her to know that you're not going to do the same thing she did, is that right?"

"Yeah..." said Kasia. She had been expecting to be admonished for her outburst. "But she won't listen to me. She doesn't trust me."

"*Mama*, what are you afraid will happen if you trust Kasia to make the right choices with Chase or any other boyfriend she has? See if the fear is willing to share with us again."

"I still can't fucking believe this makes it onto TV," Jake whispered to Ezra as they both watched the playback monitors with wild intensity.

Hanna's sniffing returned and her eyes began to water. She said, "If I trust her...I'm afraid she don't need me anymore." The woman burst into tears. Tears came into Curro's eyes and he wiped them gently away. Kasia was visibly moved.

"You've had a very heavy job to do, *Mama*," said Curro. He was as calm and gentle as a feather floating to the floor in this moment.

"Yes, yes. I not want her to forget my hardship."

"*Mama!* I will never forget your hardship," cried Kasia. The young woman was sobbing. The mother and daughter embraced. Hanna's role of badgering her daughter was burned away by the intensity of the embrace and the heat of the tears. Hanna apologized profusely for the pain she'd inflicted on her daughter.

The director, through the floor manager, signaled for break and the panning shots by the camera operators were done with the utmost silence.

“See about contracting the safe space and let’s bring em’ home,” Jake spoke into the microphone linked to Curro’s earpiece.

Curro spent the final minutes of the taping working with Hanna to see if she would agree to paying for a family therapist, discounted to a special rate as a courtesy from one of the show’s main sponsors. Hanna gave her word to Curro. He rebuffed her and asked her to give her word to her daughter, which she did. Curro then bid the viewers farewell.

The show’s outro featured intermixed shots of the audience clapping to a celebratory song Jake had composed for times when the guests on the show came to some sort of resolution and shots of Curro sitting at a table, discussing with Kasia and Hanna a paper contract that lay before them. The contract was quietly designed for the restitution of children by their parents and included clauses that could be invoked for family therapy, individual therapy, financial compensation, and emancipation. The language of the contract was obscured as best possible to mask the degree to which the show, namely Curro and his friends, actually sided with the child.

Chapter 44: The Only Way Out is Through

Jake took the stage at a singer songwriter festival in the Central Oregon a little under thirteen months into the expedition back in time,. He had made only a bit of headway in his musical endeavors. Due to his involvement in the projects of his friends, he was not where he had once been in the same amount of time performing in his younger years. The festival featured booths of homemade food, carnival rides, a main stage for the musical acts, a side stage for magicians and a talent show, pig races, an eating contest, and fireworks to finish off the night. It was the tail end of warmer weather for the year.

The song Jake sang was inspired by a summer he had once spent living in Texas in a co-op house of musicians. He sang:

*I'm going to the land of the sun
Where everyone tells me I belong
It's the land of all the black soil
Where I can make the best out of my toil
I belong
I'm going to the place I know best
Where I can lift this weight up off my chest
Here I'll grow strong and tall
I'll be a mighty tree above it all
I belong
All that is grey is coming back to life
All that is black is coming back to life*

He stomped his boots on stage and sang heartily, belting the notes of the chorus and smiling in pleasure as his smooth vibrato kicked into gear. It was a song about adventure, trying a new place, and growing as a person. He had written it during one of his sunset reveries above the Vault, sitting on the snow and passing the time in rest from his work with Nick.

Miranda met him backstage. They had not been in the same place for several months but had kept up infrequent phone calls when Miranda's busy schedule allowed.

"I love it!" she beamed to him.

"Wanna' talk in the camper?" he asked. She smiled and nodded.

He cased his guitar and walked with her into the camper van her father had bought her to help with touring. She seated herself on the sleeping pad. She was wearing her customary layers of jewelry and a floppy hat upon her head. Her chestnut hair was silky and shone in the dying light of the day. Jake sat along the back opening of the van and leaned against the wall to face his friend.

"It's good music. I think it's some of the best I've written but it's not catching like I'd hoped," he said. "I get better every year but I'm nearing my mid-40's. The sun is setting on the rock star thing."

"Yeah, that's true," she said tenderly, seeing her friend was troubled. "Yet your message is the truest it's ever been. Jake, you're brilliant. You're not a rock star. You're something else. Something deeper. You have to evolve. You have to change into whatever that is. You can't keep beating yourself up over what you can't control. You don't make the pop hits. You make music that makes me look inside myself. I know other people feel that way too. Be gentle with yourself, sweetie."

"What do I do?" he asked nervously.

"Do what your music says you're doing, be true to yourself!"

"You really listen, don't you?" he asked her.

"Yes, I do. I really do. You're very gifted. You're powerful up there, like a hungry lion. But you don't sing about conventional things. You *have* to sing about conventional things if you're going to have conventional success as a singer. That's not you."

"That's not really you, either," he said with a chuckle.

"No," she said with a laugh in return, "but what I'm doing works for my career. I think if I covered any more Sheryl Crow I'd get a record deal from Sheryl herself!"

"I have to expand, don't I?"

"Yes, but I do too. Your music inspired that for me, Jake. I don't want to sing about romance, breakups, and all that stuff."

"What do you want to sing about?" he asked.

"I want to sing about surfing. I want to sing about chats like these. Stories about people connecting. It doesn't have to be about love and coffee shops every time."

"It does if you want to be on the radio," he corrected her. "You can go for it. You have a huge fan base."

"Yeah, but when the sunflower withers, where do they go?" she said unenthusiastically. "I'm going to change my image to something truer but not until I get a record deal." She took off her floppy hat and ran her fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp.

"Don't give up your fame on account of me," said Jake. "You've got the whole package. That's what they want."

"Don't you ever listen to your own songs, Jake?"

"You're right."

"Tell *me* what *you* want to do. Where are you going to go from here? You sing these hearty songs about getting real and you get maybe one in twenty who give you any sort of engagement."

"Maybe I'll make songs about the ways I'm miserable," he offered.

"That's good!" she exclaimed. "People can relate to that. People can't as much relate to getting real and living like a hero. I hate to say it."

"No, you're wise to say it. I can see the value in sharing my miseries. While the triumphant stuff will always be there, it's probably time to dip into the well of..."

it.”

“Has a nice ring to it,” he said. “I can do that.”

“What else?”

“What else what?”

“What else can you do?”

“Are you coaching me?” he asked her.

“No, I’m genuinely curious. You have a brilliant brain and I want to see what’s going on inside it. I’m learning from you!”

“Well, I did really enjoy composing Curro’s theme song. They paid me big bucks for that.”

“How much?” she asked.

“Three thousand bucks plus a small residual.”

“That’s big money!”

“I could make more instrumental stuff, scoring for film and shit like that.”

Miranda leaned over and withdrew a pair of seltzer waters from her mini-fridge.

“Let’s have a toast!” she said in delight as she handed him his drink. “You name the toast.”

“To...responding to and pivoting at creative impasses,” he said awkwardly.

“No!” she cried out. “To the ‘Well of Woe’”

They listened to the music coming from the stage some distance away and analyzed what they heard. It was a songwriter from the East Coast who crooned love ballads, accompanied by a banjo player. As Jake finished his drink, he returned the focus of the conversation to the substance of their own art.

“I was read something recently that hit me like a shot of lightning in the dark,” he began.

“Poetic,” she observed and took a sip of her can of water. She was relishing the thought that perhaps she would never wear a floppy hat again.

"It said, 'No amount of external praise will ever compensate for my internal deficits.' It rang true. I think I've been chasing fame for too long. I'm never going to get the love I want from being whatever it is a large mass of people want me to be."

"Do you think that's why you've written the songs you have?"

"No, I don't think so. Well, in a roundabout way. I think I've written about becoming who you really are all these years as a way of snapping myself out of seeking external validation for my internal deficits. That's not the exclusive reason but likely one of the main ones. I do think there's value in listening to the hero in your heart and that people can benefit from that message but I think that message is for me...and I'm finally listening."

Tears began to form in his eyes.

He continued, "It's always terrified me, the thought of giving up on being famous, but I think I have to let it go. I'm good enough on my own."

Miranda tried to find the words to support her friend but was left dumbfounded.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I think you touched a nerve for me, feels weird. I'm okay. It's just that suddenly I don't give a fuck about something. Not sure what it is. Oh, I know. I don't give a fuck about what my dad wants for me. He wanted me to be a famous songbird and I've played the part to a "t" but being around you time and time again reminds me of what I really want to do: I want to sing about relaxing and connecting with people, just like what we're doing right now."

"Big changes," he said.

"Indeed."

"I still want to reach a lot of people with my message."

"I think you will," she encouraged.

"Same goes for you."

"I want a lifestyle," she admitted. "You want to change the world."

"First by changing myself," said Jake.

“Once I have my record deal I’m going to think long and hard about what you’re doing,” said Miranda.

Chapter 45: Missing Persons

Cong Yu was seated at a table at Victor's Cafe enjoying a churrasco con chimichurri dish with a four year old cabernet sauvignon. Later he would walk to the New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street and pay top ticket for the Broadway show The Lion King. He was happy to be in Manhattan even with the freezing cold weather. It was early January 2000. He had hoped to catch the Y2K celebration for New Year's but Luis Medina had dialed in the wrong date into the time portal, misunderstanding Cong's requests. Nevertheless, Cong was excited to be living a century earlier than his own time.

Cong relished the Black Angus steak, sipping at his red wine between bites. The name of the steak brought to mind his recent deliberations on whether to bring Angus the dog with him on the time jump as a means of reuniting the dog and his friendly cat companion, Tuffy. Cong was seated beneath a wall of pictures with Victor himself posing alongside various celebrities and people of import. The walls were covered by luxurious red paper. The lights were dimmed at Cong's request. This was the kind of setting Cong felt most comfortable in.

The waiters gave him a wide-berth, having been instructed so by the house manager when Cong's wealth was perceived. Cong had spent half of his wealth acquiring the necessary energy resources in order to make the time jump. He was feeling the money crunch but reminded himself that relative to the era he found himself in, he came from dazzling splendor and unending riches. To the waiters and waitresses at Victor's Cafe, he was a golden goose. They watched from a distance to ensure his every wish was catered to. He ate slowly and breathed in deeply. It was his 74th birthday. He was reading the Daily News and muttering to himself a steady running commentary. Mostly he was lamenting his decision not to have purchased something a bit higher-brow.

When Cong had arrived in New York's Central Park carrying his personal effects he had immediately walked to the nearest expensive hotel he could perceive. He had requested to speak to the manager and when the manager came he momentarily flashed open his large briefcase to the man, revealing rows of gold bars. He said to the manager, "I'm tired from carrying this heavy load. Please put me in contact with the wealthiest person you know." The flummoxed manager made a phone call and within a half hour Cong had a financial advisor from J.P. Morgan & Co. sitting with him in the hotel lobby. The hotel manager was rewarded handsomely, though to Cong it was a pittance, and the financial advisor was put to work safeguarding the gold. Cong was able to hire one of Manhattan's finest private detectives through this financial advisor. It was at Victor's Cafe they were to meet.

At present, the private detective stepped through into the lounge where Cong was enjoying his meal. The detective was a handsome man with blonde hair and a stout, muscular frame. His nose was crooked from a fight some years past. He wore a tailored suit in blue with an open shirt collar and a five o'clock shadow across his face. His hair was slicked back with pomade. He was originally from Boston but his accent had melted away over the years. He was 31 years old. Cong beckoned him to sit down.

"Cong Yu," said the elderly man as he held out his hand.

"Scott Malloy," responded the man.

"Would you like something to drink?" Cong asked, peering over his reading glasses. The old man's brown lips were puffy. His cheeks were dotted with liver spots. He was aging well thanks to his daily walks around the Vault and the healthy diet Xiao Ma had convinced him to take up. This steak and wine was a rare indulgence and he hoped to enlist the detective in his mischievous behavior.

"That's fine, I don't drink," said Malloy.

"Do you eat?" Cong quipped.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Yes, I do. I just had lunch. I'm full, thank you."

"Oh, eat something. You're a young bull. You need more meat. This is a Cuban restaurant, you know. There are very good steaks here, my treat."

He's a cranky old man, Malloy thought to himself. "No, that's quite alright."

"Are you sure?" Cong asked despondently. His Chinese accent colored his question.

"I'll take an appetizer and a Coke," said Scott Malloy.

"I see you are not a man to pass up a free meal," the old man observed. "Very well, you have passed my test. I will employ you." He motioned for the waiter to bring a menu for the private investigator. Amidst Malloy's looks of bewilderment Cong continued speaking, "The test was simple: if you refused a free meal, I would know you were not the kind of man who could find the terrible thief I need you to find. After all, if you can't think like a thief you can't outsmart a thief."

Malloy delayed a response while he named his preferred menu choices to the waiter. He took a deep breath and responded, "Right, you're looking for a thief."

"Hmm... perhaps that is not the person you should be looking for. You're too primitive. You wouldn't understand. You'd probably just turn him over to the government. Bah! No, I'll have you search for someone else. No need for the test."

"Do I still get a free meal?" Malloy asked.

"You thief! Of course you do but double-cross me and I will crumple you like a paper swan. Excuse me," Cong stood and went to the bathroom. He returned ten minutes later, walking a slow shuffle from the bathroom with bored look on his face.

"The waiter said your food would be another five minutes."

"Oh, never mind him. So, I need you to look for someone."

"Of course--"

“I would like you to find a man who dresses like Jesus. He looks like him, too. By my calculations, he is in one of the major US metropolitan areas: New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Washington D.C. He could possibly also be in London or Toronto. He’s somewhere where the tech industry is currently exploding, so probably not London or Toronto. Forget I said those. He’s most likely in San Francisco or Seattle but you never know. It would be smart of you to check Dallas, Houston, and Denver as well. He dresses like Jesus and he is an idealist. He could also be a prophet, very concerned with the end of days. He is brunette, tall and slender with long hair. When I knew him, he wore his hair loose and open. Is that enough information for you?”

“Does he have any known associates or family members? Do you have a picture of him? What’s his name?”

Cong’s eyebrows raised and he cocked his reading glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. He gave a sly look to Malloy and withdrew a picture from his inner suit coat pocket. He showed it to Malloy.

“Oh my god! That’s an enormous cat.”

“Never mind the cat. The man you see trying to hold the cat is Jake Walker. He is a singer. He dresses like a mountain man. He does not like my cooking nor does he like classical piano music. He plays a guitar and writes music. He may be trying to play music in whatever city he and Ezra, the Jesus man, have settled down in.”

“Are these men dangerous?”

“Not in the conventional sense. They have some interesting ideas. Jake Walker is a dreamer. He smokes marijuana, spends a lot of time alone, and has been all over the world. Ezra tries to live like Jesus, not worship him. So yes, they’re dangerous. If you spent too much time with them you might become profoundly dissatisfied with the state of the world. Ah! The food is here. Move your arms off the table.”

The food was served to both of the men. Malloy waited for Cong Yu to begin eating before commencing his own meal. Some time passed before Malloy chose to speak.

“Do you have a copy of that photo?” he asked.

“No, I do not. Polaroid pictures are very rare where I come from.”

“Can I have that one? I could make a copy of it and return it to you today.”

“No, you may not. That is my photo,” Cong responded firmly.

“I have a disposable camera. I will take a picture of it and develop it post-haste,” Malloy said as he grabbed for the photo.

“I have a sketch of the photo. I made it earlier today. You may have it but not the original picture.”

Cong chuckled inwardly at how difficult he was making the job for his private detective.

“That’s fine. Just hand it over,” grumbled Malloy. He took the crude sketch on a napkin in hand while eyeing the photo as closely as he could before the old man re-pocketed it.

They spent the next ten minutes with Cong asking Malloy about his business, his daily life, and his interests. It amused the old man greatly to be in a different time with a man who was so of-the-times.

As they began to part ways Cong added, "By the way, those two men are trying to help the world in a significant way. You may find them involved in some technology start-up or at the head of some social movement. They're activists and Ezra is an intellectual. They're not ones to stay quiet and hidden. If you find them in the next two weeks, I will double your pay. They will most definitely be using the Internet as part of their platform."

"The Internet? Like Netscape?"

"Yes, that's right. You have one month to find them for me. I will be traveling the United States, sampling the cuisine of your great country. If I find them before you do, you will receive no pay."

Malloy considered the unusually high finder's fee he would retain for his work and replied, "Sure, I'll do it."

"Very good, young man. Remember, they may also be here in New York City. Look far and wide. You'll find them. I'm confident of it. Now, I have a musical to catch. Help me to my cab."

Cong left Malloy with an email address written on a scratch piece of paper where he could be reached with any results of his search. The gesture bewildered the private eye, so unused to the budding world of computer technology. He watched the old man ride away and pondered how he would begin to use the Internet. He thought of a computer training video he'd once seen the cover of. It featured two actors from his girlfriend's favorite show, *Friends*.

Chapter 46: Good Times at Svalbard

Hunter and Milena landed their airship upon the helipad at Svalbard and were greeted by Herman Nyakane and Sean Brennan and his wife, Aina. Everyone wore air filtration masks on their faces. The men who had once lived at the Vault were now in their 60's and aging gracefully. Aina was only slightly younger, at age 54 herself. They walked out in simple garb along the large metal catwalk that led to the helipad. Servbots emerged both from the facility and from the airship, coordinating with each other in the background to disembark some of the supplies the Vault inhabitants had brought with them. Low lying coastal fog set in on the helipad, giving the scene a dreamy quality.

Luis stepped out of the airship. It had been twelve years since he had last seen Sean or Herman. He had never really bonded with either of them and was certain they would be disappointed to see him, hoping instead to see Cong or perhaps Eddie. He was unsure of himself, unable to read the smiles on the faces of his hosts. His hesitation melted at being embraced by Herman and then by Aina.

Hugs were given all around and the happy group of friends made their way into the Svalbard facility.

"It's only been a couple years since we had you two here," Sean said as he glanced back over his right shoulder at Hunter and Milena, "but Luis, since you're new to Svalbard it'd be good to give you a lay of the land."

Herman smiled warmly and grasped Luis on the shoulder for a moment as they stepped through an airlock.

“Our facilities are humble compared to the Vault. We have a biosphere but most of it is used for crops and large gardens. There is an aviary. It’s modest but it’s growing. According to the metering, we have approximately one-twelfth the energy output of the Vault. Don’t care to share what that reasons were for that massive energy fluctuation six weeks ago, would you?” Sean asked Hunter.

“I’m sure we’ll get into it in due time,” responded the bright-eyed leader of the Vault.

Further behind the men, Aina and Milena maintained their own conversation.

“We have some candidates for you all. Naturally we’re concerned about lowering the standards of our own colony by sending you the best of who’s here but some of us are very attached to living here regardless,” said Aina. “We continue to be best-equipped as a research station regardless. There was something else...right, by the way, I heard what happened with your mother. I’m terribly sorry. If you need to talk about it while you’re here, let me know. I find these kinds of conversations *always* go better in person.”

“Thank you, Aina. I really appreciate it. Maybe I’ll take you up on it.”

“I think it will turn out well for you, both you and your brother. They’ll catch up to us,” she said, indicating the group of men. They were stopped at a point of interest. “Come, let’s see your quarters.”

She and Milena continued on. A group of silver and red servbots followed them.

Sean had stopped at a large viewing port and was talking to the others, primarily to Hunter and Luis. He was indicating to a machine beyond the viewing port.

“Frank Noris was here.”

“You kidding me?” asked Hunter incredulously. “That’s guy’s everywhere.”

"It was a week ago. He left us with it. It's one unit. Apparently you need another fifty to clear up any sizable amount of air mass. With the winds here, this thing wouldn't even register. He didn't leave us the technical drawings. It was really strange."

"Was it like he was trying to showcase his intellect?" asked Hunter.

"That's exactly it. He said it was a gesture of good faith between our colony and his but I didn't get that sense. He didn't do anything wrong during his visit, per se, but his motivations were strange. He behaved with a lot of contempt, especially toward Herman."

"That's right," Herman commented. "He talked about the potential for a great alliance between our colonies. He mentioned all sorts of personal things. When he was first here I thought he was a merchant. I was wrong about that. He has power at that San Martin colony. On the first day, Svalbard was on common ground in his estimation. By his last day, he mostly had criticism and contempt as Sean mentioned."

Luis leaned in close to the viewing port and beheld a large metal cube with large mesh ports on two of its sides resting apart from

"We'll get around to reverse-engineering the thing. We took thorough scans of it. Do you want copies?" Sean asked Hunter. He noticed Luis and said, "We can go in and look at it if you'd like."

Luis thought of the terraforming system he had designed with Nick's help. A part of him jumped at the chance with anxious delight. Another part of him turned away in perplexed disgust. He took note of the crudeness of some of the workmanship but also noticed a feature perhaps he and Nick had not thought to include in their own designs.

"It's okay," said Luis. "Not this time."

"Let's catch up with the ladies, shall we?" Herman prompted the others.

Those from the Vault spent the rest of the day touring the facility, meeting many of its inhabitants, and discussing the screening they were to undertake in the following days with the help of the Svalbard leadership. For Luis in particular it was a daunting outing. He had not left the Vault in a number of years and the effects of the isolation had worn him down. He was uncomfortable beyond his own company and that of Nick Williams. This was a chance to meet new people, stretch his social legs, and examine his own experience of himself through a new light. He anticipated needing some time to acclimate himself to the increased social interaction. His tendency was to remain in his room and busy himself with calculations and ponderings related to the upcoming time jump only five weeks away. The first jump had been a massive undertaking. Cong's jump was easier. It was bringing the time travelers back that caused his brilliant mind fits.

To help himself "stop and smell the roses", Luis left his quarters and sought out the company of a horticulturalist whose acquaintance he had made during his tour of the facilities. The fellow caught his interest because of his similar appearance and the intensity of his dedication to his work, which was described by Sean Brennan

Luis had not read the public profiles of any of the Svalbard inhabitants. Such social considerations had not crossed his radar. He met with the intense horticulturalist, named Eric Dominguez, and slowly but deliberately connected with the man on a number of common interests. There was some slight tension around the nature of Luis' presence at Svalbard but this evaporated as Eric was able to name some of his failings as a father to a woman who now lived in a colony in the Rocky Mountains of the United States.

Eric kept a living and working space that reminded Luis of his long-deceased friend, Gordon Beck. Eric was harsher than Gordon had been and shared none of the interests in cybernetics that Gordon had. In more candid moments, Luis was able to express to Eric some of his concerns that the standards for entry into the Vault were too high and that these same standards had not applied to the initial inhabitants nor the drifter Jake Walker when he had come.

After a pair of hours Luis began to feel very tired, feeling the night hours come on. He excused himself from Eric, pleased he had made a new connection. He walked the corridors of Svalbard, smiling at an occasional passer-by, and returned to the spot where the terraforming cube had been. He studied it at length, filling his mind with questions and observations that he could share with Nick upon his return to the Vault.

His eyes became very tired and he returned to his sleeping quarters. He bid Hunter and Milena a good evening upon seeing them leave their quarters. They were off to see some of Herman Nyakane's works. Luis hoped for successful days to come. The next day he would visit with Eric some more and walk the halls of Svaldbard together.

Late in the afternoon two days later, Hunter and Milena were seated on the floor of a playroom for a child. It had been the master bedroom of the family's apartment. Once the child was old enough to walk, it was remodeled for the child's benefit. Nearby Hunter and Milena was a young boy 14 months old and his father, a gardener for the facility, both busy at play.

"Tell us about how you were both raised," Hunter prompted the woman sitting before him, mother of the child.

“Robert’s parents were trauma therapists in Upstate New York. His mother Amy stayed at home with him for the first six years of his life. He’s an only child. They raised him on an acreage with a small hobby farm. When he was seven, I believe, he decided he wanted to go the Sudbury School in...darling, where did you go to school when you were a boy?”

“It was in Kingston,” he said to her and returned his attention to his brown haired son. The boy was busy piling blocks on top of a plastic container.

The attractive woman drank from a glass of water cradled in her lap and then said, “He was there for a number of years before starting the farm. Myself...let’s see. I was raised without violence or raised voices, same for Robert. My father owned a grocery chain. He was very warm and available to me, especially when I was a teen and he backed down from managing the business. My mother was a nurse but became a doula after I was born. My younger brother was born when I was five. My mother worked only sparingly until we were both out of the house.”

“Ida, what would you say was the most traumatic event in your childhood and what steps have you taken to recover from it?” Milena asked the woman.

The woman pondered the question for a long time, watching her son and her husband at play. She began, "Hmm, my mind keeps going back to my mother's addiction with comfort eating. She would eat when was nervous or anxious. Not all the time, only sometimes and especially during the holidays. She broke contact from her parents when she was in her early 20's but kept some contact with my aunt. I think the unresolved stuff between them would flare up at the holidays. That's when they spent the most time together. I think my aunt was on my mother's side pretty firmly. She herself gave up contact with my grandparents. There was something there between them. I lost my mother in the impacts. Those were very traumatic but that wasn't in childhood. I was nineteen. As an adult I didn't get to ask her about her eating habits and I was only able to save one of her journals. She kept most of them on storage drives. Those were destroyed.

I didn't ever feel like she was fully available when she would engage in the comfort eating. She'd space off, dissociate. We talked about it a little bit when I was a girl and she toned it down. It never fully went away for her. Eventually she coopted me into the habit. That was wrong of her but I knew on some level at the time. I was in therapy for a few years when I lived in a colony in northern New Mexico. I had to stop when the colony shut down. The water supply was poisoned by the atmosphere when a drilling team made some really stupid mistakes. I was on my way with the therapy by that time. I don't engage in my mother's behavior. I haven't for four years. That's when I felt comfortable to have Samuel. It felt like the biggest childhood issue on the table for me. The loss of my family with the impacts has been the biggest challenge overall. Robert and I both have suffered so much from that.

I don't think I'm fully healed by any means but we're pretty clear on the transference that goes on. Samuel is not here for any of our needs. The neighbors are here all the time, too. They're an older couple. Ron and Darlene. She was infertile so they have dogs!" she said with a laugh. "We're a family by choice. I guess they're the grandparents here. We'd really like to come to the Vault. Herman has said a lot of wonderful things about it over the years but we didn't take it as seriously as we do now knowing the project you have going on."

Samuel fussed for a moment, drawing Ida's attention.

"Is he thirsty?" she asked her husband. She stood and filled a toddler's cup with room temperature water from a faucet in the en suite bathroom. She brought it to her husband before returning to her spot on the floor with Hunter and Milena.

"He gets thirsty from the play. He might get hungry soon," she said to the siblings.

"We'll wait if he gets hungry or needs you for anything," said Hunter. "We'd rather delay the interview than get in his way."

"Thank you," said the mother.

"I know you filled this out in the questionnaire but we thought it would be good to ask you directly: in what ways do you feel you've impeded Samuel's learning and growing process?" asked Milena.

Samuel squealed in delight upon knocking over a tower of blocks. This drew everyone's attention and they watched on admiringly.

"One of my biggest regrets as a parent has been that we don't have the 'village' it takes to raise a child fully. Ron and Darlene are a great help but most of the other people here, aside from a few families, are dedicated to research and maintenance for the colony. He's hungry, isn't he?" she asked her husband.

Robert nodded his head. He gently picked up his son and brought him over to his mother. She took him to her chest and began breastfeeding him. She stood, cradling the boy, and swayed gently.

"I can continue," she said. "If he gets fussy we'll bring down the lights a bit and finish our chat later. So...I was saying that there's so much work going on at the facility that childrearing has not yet been put at the center of the agenda here. We're still regaining our balance from the raiders the men repelled last fall."

"They did horrible damage to the storage facility. Half of our stores were pillaged or destroyed and the facility itself didn't get rebuilt until a few months ago," offered Robert. "You go ahead, though," he said to his wife. He smiled and looked at the siblings and said, "Ida put a lot of thought into your question this past week."

The mother continued, "Before we had Samuel we talked about getting more people here at Svalbard on board with the idea of putting the majority of everyone's efforts into raising children like Samuel in a peaceful manner. We are fairly familiar with how trauma is passed down from parents to children, the bulk of it occurring at a subconscious level. We wanted everyone here on board with creating the kind of atmosphere it would take to see the unconscious acting out, shield the children from it and help them to process it if they were touched by it, and to truly hold parents accountable in a loving but boundaried sense. Your project at the Vault is perfect for us. We couldn't garner enough interest here."

"Some have helped, yes, but the majority of the people here aren't as enthusiastic about our ideas. There is a fair amount of nihilism. To be fair, a couple of people have forgone having children and birthed incredible work...much of it keeps us very secure and on course here at Svalbard. They're not the nihilists, however," said Robert.

Ida gracefully resumed her spot on the floor, satisfied with the stretching of her hips she had done while nursing Samuel from a standing position. She chimed in, "Herman's ecosystem in our small biosphere has kept us all fed and Sean's work has made the facility an intuitive paradise. Yet, there's a *love* that is not present here. A heart warmth that is missing. We perceive it in you two. We have since we received news of your project. We have known for these many years there was something different going on at the Vault. We've read many of Xiao Ma's essays. I actually met Eddie Adler in New York City before the impacts. He was speaking at a conference on nanotechnology and biochemistry. We've known since you sent over the application that the Vault is where we want to be."

"But we don't want to take Samuel away from Ron and Darlene," said Robert. His green eyes flashed with inspiration and his stout jaw shifted gently. His conviction shone.

"To stay on point and answer your question directly," began Ida, "I have stood in the way of Samuel's growing and learning process by emasculating his father in his presence. I sometimes behave girlishly and give Robert pet names. I think it comes from a place of love and adoration but I also know there's a deficit from my childhood there. Robert engages me on this sometimes but I also know it pushes him away. Samuel is very sensitive to this and he's cried a few times. He knows that sort of adoration should be given to him, not Robert. I've worked on myself to limit my behavior and more importantly, to work through the childhood material. That's the greatest shortcoming that comes to mind."

"I'm complicit in it. I like that kind of attention," admitted Robert. "I don't think either of us truly listened to our feelings of loneliness before we got together, at least not all the way through. On the one hand, the world has gone to shit and it's practically impossible to get any kind of true solitude. On the other hand, we've had so many years to work things out and haven't."

"You don't have a recourse for when those parts of you get triggered and blended with you?" asked Milena.

"We often ask Ron and Darlene over when this stuff comes up but no, not enough of a plan anyhow," said Robert. "We now need more of a support network than we used to, at least until Samuel is 6 or 7. Had we resolved this *before* he was born, we wouldn't have the needs we do now. That's on us and we own it. That being said, like Ida said, we think we can have better boundaries with this dynamic between us if we can get to a healthier, more wholesome environment."

"Right, environment does make a huge difference," mused Hunter.

This utterance sparked the hope of the married couple. The moment was not lost on anyone in the meeting.

"I really like what I see," said Milena. "What do you think, Hunter?"

"I agree. Your answers on the questionnaire are up to our standards. The quiz we asked both of you to take came up with no philosophical inconsistencies or disagreements in parenting styles. Your son still needs to be checked out by Eddie but preliminary medical scans show he's as brain and body healthy as he appears to be. More than that, I like you both. My feelings tell me good things about you two and your motivations. Sis?"

"Same here. I'm glad we came. Herman recommended you two initially, so we have him to thank. We'd like to speak with Luis before we make any final approvals but let's say it's a tentative 'yes'."

Robert and Ida beamed with joy. They embraced one another and then embraced the siblings who had come from so far away to visit them. They thanked their interviewers. Farewells were given after some down time with Samuel receiving the attention of all the adults gathered.

Chapter 47: Balls In A Vice

The boardroom at LABCTV, the station that carried Curro's show, was a scene of organizational glory. The assistants to the CEO of the company were meticulous in the way they arranged the scene. All the chairs were arranged at perfect 45 degree angles facing the center leather executive chair at the head of table. The CEO had an unconscious habit of ordering assistants to the boardroom when he anticipated trouble with any of his talent or partner companies. The shades were drawn but to be opened in the moments before the meeting was to commence. Short vases filled with marigolds rested on the side tables pressed up against the walls of the room for decorative effect. Half of the fluorescent lights of the room were turned on and soon all would be switched on. It was two in the afternoon.

The procession of meeting attendees filed into the room, some of them murmuring to one another. Present were several LABCTV executives including Elaine and the CEO. An advertising director came into the room, discussing with a subordinate the details of a project. An assistant rushed into the room, opened the shades, and then began taking drink orders. Curro walked in wearing a black business suit and his hair slicked back as was his custom. Ezra followed him in. He was wearing an Egyptian cotton band collared shirt open at the neck. It was one of only three shirts he owned. It made a severe impression on the television higher-ups. They were uncomfortable with Ezra's long hair and facial hair, his shirt open at the chest, and the sandals he wore. They eyed him suspiciously.

Up until this moment, he had only been a rumor to these people. His visits to the studio's monitoring booth for show tapings had been inauspicious and confined mostly to the realm of low level production assistants and lot employees. This Messianic figure set them very ill at ease. Above all others, the CEO questioned the strange man's presence at this meeting. It was a meeting about the show's Nielsen ratings, not a Christian ceremony. A short fellow with a grave countenance and thick brimmed glasses walked into the room holding a briefcase and a cup of coffee. He looked like an academic. He was unknown to Ezra or Curro. A woman from one of the show's sponsors walked in, rounding out the gathering.

"Shall we begin?" Elaine called out to the group as she determined most of the drinks had been ordered by the attendees. She had had a child in the previous three months and was showing some extra weight since Curro had last seen her on set.

"We're here to talk about sweeps," said Harrison Baum. He was seated at the large leather chair. His presence commanded the room's entire attention. "Specifically, I want us to open up a dialogue about this show's future. Ratings are down and there have been some *concerns*," he said with special emphasis. "Many of our people on-set have expressed *concerns* about the direction and philosophy the show is taking. I've watched some of this season's episodes and I'd have to say that at certain points, I think these concerns are well-founded."

Harrison Baum was a serious businessman with hairy knuckles and coarse hands. He had bushy eyebrows and was in his early 60's. His parents had come to the Los Angeles area in the late 1930's to escape extermination at the hands of Nazi police. Walter preferred wearing brown business suits. It was a habit both he and his brother, an executive at the station, were prone to. He wore a thick gold band on his ring finger. Once in a rare while, if you were lucky, you could spot the flash of a gold filling on the right side of his mouth if he laughed. He was in need of seeing eye glasses but his stubborn pride kept his brow bare.

"To be frank with you, Curro," said a male executive seated to the right of the CEO, "some of the advice you have been giving to some of these families in duress has been highly questionable. We'd like to run some tape by you and get your input."

The executive motioned to someone in the back of the room and soon a large television set was wheeled in and a taping of the show was played. In it Curro was speaking to a young woman aged 16 seated across from her parents:

"You're saying the 'spankings' haven't stopped?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "Dad starting using a belt when they decided the hand wasn't hurting anymore."

The parents both tried to interject but Curro motioned with the tilt of his head and hand that he wanted space for the girl to speak.

"How does it feel when you're hit?"

"It feels horrible. It's...humiliating."

"It's not welcome?"

"No, it's not welcome at all!" the girl exclaimed. "I want you to stop!" she cried at her parents.

Curro paused briefly and then said, "Mr. and Mrs. Mathews, what you two put your daughter through is considered violent assault where I'm from."

“Let’s stop it there,” said Harrison. “This is part of what’s been brought up. Joe, you go ahead.”

The man seated to his right spoke again, “What you brought up at the end there is highly questionable. We don’t understand what you mean by ‘where I’m from’ and we don’t think it is appropriate that spanking be conflated with ‘violent assault’. This is also inappropriate.”

At home Curro and Ezra had already discussed what could possibly result from *What’s Going On?* having its first episode dealing with the subject of ‘spanking’. They were prepared for possible backlash regarding Curro’s use of terminology and his resolute stance against the use of strikes as part of parental discipline.

Harrison spoke, “Curro, this is Dr. Bill Tyson. He is the chair of the psychology department at University of Southern California-“

“Where? Never heard of it,” said Ezra. The faintest flicker of rebellion passed over his face. He had been observing the professor for some time, having identified him as the surest agent of the State in the room.

The professor was visibly ruffled and turned to Harrison for support. Harrison spoke again, “Curro, please offer us the courtesy of introducing us to your friend.”

“Yes, of course,” said Curro. He rose and indicated to Ezra with a gesture of his hand and said, “This is Ezra...”

“Ezra will do,” said the robed friend.

“Ezra is one of my advisors and personal friends. We met on a backpacking journey in Guatemala,” finished the show host.

Ezra laughed, exhaling through his nostrils and smiling.

“Thank you, Curro. Pleased to make your acquaintance...Ezra,” said Harrison. “Let us now return our attention to the matter at hand. Dr. Tyson?”

"Yes, the station asked me for my input on the taping of the aforementioned show and- should I stand?" he asked Harrison nervously.

Harrison raised his arm for the man to stand, showing a face of disdain and boredom. It was generally either Joe or Elaine who consulted with academics on matters such as this. Harrison had no taste for it.

The professor stood and continued, "According to the California Welfare & Institutions Code 300 section a, it is acceptable for a parent to use 'reasonable and age-appropriate spanking to the buttocks' so long as there is no serious physical injury to the child. Mr. Belmonte, what you refer to as 'violent assault' may indeed be a crime in your culture and your society but here it is perfectly appropriate and lawfully sanctioned behavior. Speaking as a tenured professor who has lectured on developmental psychology and contributed to several peer-reviewed publications on the subject not only was your claim to that child legally inaccurate, it was inappropriate and irresponsible on an academic level. Personally, and speaking as a father, I'd challenge you to examine where your erroneous beliefs about spanking and child discipline came from--"

"Thank you, Dr. Tyson. That will be sufficient for now," interjected Harrison in his deep, croaking voice. "Please, have a seat. Joe?"

"Curro, the parents of that girl are threatening to litigate if we air the episode-defamation. They have big money on their side from someone in the family and that person has a hundred times the political reach that we do," said Joe. "We can't afford this kind of scrutiny...this show can't afford this kind of scrutiny during sweeps."

Elaine pulled the mug of hot tea that had been served to her away from her face and said, "Ratings have dropped and a complication like this could sink the production. You could be tied up in court and we could be out a lot of money."

“Didn’t the waivers cover this?” Curro asked. He gave Ezra a worried glance. Ezra remained calm and collected.

Harrison said, “Son, I don’t think you understand what Joe is saying to you. He’s saying these people have *political* power in the family. The man’s brother is a goddamn state senator.”

“So, screening didn’t do its due diligence,” Curro stated forcefully.

“I’ve already fired Kimberly and Mischa. It doesn’t matter at this point. The words came outta’ your mouth. You don’t know the shit storm that’s brewing if we don’t nip this thing in the early stages” said Harrison. “Elaine, show him the retraction.”

Elaine passed a sheet of paper with a typed statement on it. As Curro began to read it, she said, “It’s still a first draft. We can edit anything you’d like.”

Ezra leaned over and peered at the three paragraphs wherein Curro was to repudiate the use of the term ‘violent assault’ and attend a seminar on developmental and childhood psychology by Dr. Bill Tyson.

“The family’s legal representation?” asked Ezra as Curro finished reading at a slower pace.

“Their lawyer wrote that up. He’s the same guy who works for the senator. If we don’t roll with this, his whole firm comes in here and stomps on our throats,” said Harrison.

“Haven’t you been dealing with this sort of thing since the station was founded?” asked Ezra.

“Nothing on this level.”

“You’re not going to fight for Curro?”

Harrison pursed his lips and rubbed his chin stubble with the back of his hand. “They’ve got our balls in a vice on this one,” he said.

Both Ezra and Curro grew pensive. Their sadness filled the room. The advertising director and her subordinate excused themselves from the meeting.

"Looks like you guys have our balls in a vice," Curro said after a long repose. "I can't sign this."

He pushed the repudiation back over to Elaine.

"Now goddamn it. You think about this," Harrison rumbled.

"You're not going to fire Curro," said Ezra. "You're about to wrap the second season of the show. Your ratings are strong with housewives. Curro was just on the cover of two tabloids. He's the best thing to happen to your station in ten years. Have some guts, man."

Harrison pursed his lips even harder and his nostrils flared. He tapped his fingers on the table. His face vacillated from anger to confusion. This show had potential and he was hesitant to pull the plug on it. The lawsuit the station faced if the episode went to air wasn't enough to ruin him but it was enough to close off some potential avenues to expansion he had been wrangling for the better part of five years.

"We can't go straying into talking about paddlings again," said Harrison. "We'll take this one on the chin for you, Curro, because your friend is right: you are a commodity at this point. We want to stand by that. But you can't go near that issue with a ten foot pole right now, I'm sorry. That's the way it is. If these housewives start getting this stuff into their heads, we might have protestors coming down here and lawsuits up our asses. We don't have the resources for that. We're taking this one on the chin as it is. We'll air the episode but you guys gotta cool it down there for a while."

"But the truth..."

"The truth can wait!" bellowed Harrison. "This is television. Anyone with hurt feelings and a halfway competent lawyer can make our life a living hell here. This is risk enough as it is."

"We've stood by and watched the tapings go to some interesting places," said Elaine. "Everyone here in upper management has been fine with that. When things start to go against the legal grain, it puts a pressure on us."

"We're not late night radio with Art Bell," said Harrison. "Our business is entertainment and that's the bottom line."

Ezra and Curro both contemplated the stance of Curro's bosses and then looked to one another with sidelong glances.

"Please give us one minute," said Curro. He and Ezra stood and walked out of the room, Ezra patting Curro on the shoulder as they went through the doorway.

Inside the conference room the management team shifted uncomfortably and tended to their daily planners and paperwork. The professor asked Harrison if he could leave but was rebuffed by a harsh wave of the hairy hand.

"What do you think?" Ezra asked his friend. They stood at a window overlooking the studio's parking lot.

"I want to do this show. This is more money and more meaning in my life than I ever had before. There is no crime. There is no stealing. I deal with real people and real problems but..."

"You're seeing the limits of the medium," Ezra offered.

"The *que*?"

"The 'medium', the means of communication. In this case: television. For example, Tuffy is working hard at Spread and that company's medium is mostly the Internet."

"Oh, I know that word. Yes, I see the limits," said Curro.

"They worry so much about lawyers and government and what professors have to say. They won't let us speak freely on set anymore. This is censorship. It's wrong for us and it's wrong for the world. They're going to want to negotiate for a third season eventually."

"I want to do this job, Ezra. It's the best thing that has happened to my life."

"Are you willing to accept the compromise? What about the next time they decide you can't talk about something?"

"It's limited but it's better than nothing," said Curro. "Are you thinking of leaving? I don't know if I can do it without you."

"Oh no, I'll come around if you're here. I'll support you in whatever you do, Curro."

"Did you know that when I was a boy I wanted my own TV show? It's the truth. I would arrange my *peluches* and speak to them about things with a toy microphone. This is one of my childhood dreams. I was in hell when you found me. I'm not ready to leave this yet. I was so dissociated only so recently. I need this for another year. This brings structure to my life."

"I'm with you, then. Just remember that they're going to move the goalposts on you. First it's 'spanking'. Next it will be your remarking that parental obesity is child abuse. Keep it in mind. The window is closing."

"I know it's closing, amigo. I will leave after the next season. I will have enough money to live the way I want to. I will have more choices. I don't get to travel forward in time to a palace of technology and peace like you do. I am here and I have to make the best out of this opportunity."

"I hear you," Ezra said and clasped his friend on the shoulder again. "Do the show and save your money, Curro. I'll help you manage them when they give you trouble. We can still do good work."

The friends returned to the meeting, agreed to the terms Harrison was driving for, and began negotiation on Curro's contract for a third season of *What's Going On?*.

Chapter 48: The Second Banquet

There was a tremendous banquet arranged for all employees of Spread in celebration of the profits in the previous quarter. Employees were allowed to bring family members, marriage partners, and domestic partners. The banquet took place in a convention center very near Spread headquarters. The convention center routinely held operas, symphonies, and visits from international choirs. Lengthy tables adorned with deep grey and green table cloths stood in row after row, each holding serving dishes and trays of food. Men in business suits stood, speaking in huddled groups with plates in hand. Much of the event's details mirrored Spread's launch party only the adult events of gambling and drinking were replaced by a petting zoo featuring goats, sheep, dogs, and pigs. Mothers attended to children captivated by the furry creatures within the picket fences of the attraction. They placed morsels of food in the gaping, awe-struck mouths of their children. They took pictures if their sons and daughters were small enough to be allowed on the backs of the barnyard animals. It was in the midst of this activity that Tuffy made his entrance into the Spread banquet. He knew the petting farm would give him a relative amount of anonymity and allow him to satisfy his curiosity about the kinds of foods that would be present at the banquet. He was also curious about the children, having had only marvelous experiences of children up to this point. He stepped out from between bales of hay stacked on a truck platform and sniffed the air. It was delightful to his senses. He smiled to himself at seeing all the children learning about animals. His lip curled in disgust at seeing a woman chide her child, revealing a razor sharp fang. Tuffy dropped down from the truck platform and was immediately noticed by a little boy who was off and away from the rest of the children.

The boy was blonde and blue-eyed. He wore suspenders and an orange sweater. He was five years old. He walked over to Tuffy, bent down, and said, "Here, kitty kitty" in a singsong voice.

Tuffy mimicked the tonal notes of the boy's call by humming. This elicited a delighted giggle from the boy. He called over his little brother, Liddy. He had been sitting up against a hay bale while his mother retied her shoes. The three year old boy waddled over as his mother looked on, stunned at the size of the behemoth housecat.

"Look what it does," he said to his sister. "Oh, kitty kitty!"

Tuffy flashed a look at mother to make sure she was out of earshot and then repeated the trick that so delighted the first boy. The two boys giggled. The giggle of the younger one turned into a squeal that drew the mother over. Tuffy became very wary and turned to rubbing the side of his face and body gently against the older boy's legs. With a satisfied meow and a flicker of his tail, Tuffy bounded off in the direction of a stage that would remain unused for the day. He perceived a vantage point on a stack metal lighting cases from where he could observe the juiciest dishes of the whole affair.

Tuffy truly enjoyed events such as this one. It had been his pleasure to mix and mingle in his limited way at many Spread events over the previous months. Sometimes he thought of his wintry home in Antarctica and the kind people there who numbered so few. He wondered if hidden here in this large assembly of people was some person or some forbearer of a person who would fit in with the intellectual and emotional standards of the Vault.

He thought of his faraway friend, Jasmine in Guatemala, and her simple curiosity and kindness. She was truly different. She would most certainly fit in at the Vault but she was only a cat. She would not serve much utility to the ends of the humans there nor would she understand them. The other cats in the area had shunned her, wary of her comparatively advanced mental standing.

Not with me at the Vault, Tuffy thought to himself. *She's different somehow. I wish she were here but then again, I don't! It wouldn't be safe for us here. No, far too conspicuous. Ooh, that pan of food over there looks good.* The optics embedded within his eyes zoomed in on a pan of wild-caught salmon braised with lemon and butter. Slices of steamed zucchini lay on all sides of the salmon fillets. Tuffy began to calculate the path of least exposure to his prey. He caught himself for a moment anticipating the presence of those pesky servbots and chuckled to himself. The words of Xiao Ma floated up into his thoughts, "We repeat as adults the dramas of our early childhood." He thought of his stressful but invigorating campaigns into the hot zone of Cong's kitchen and the succession of upgraded after re-upgraded silver servbot he had disabled or demolished. Most were destroyed by his metal claws and fighting prowess. He remembered with special delight a servbot that had been ruined by the onrushing waters of a spilled cauldron of boiling water. A devilish look crept over Tuffy's face until he regained the principle Xiao Ma had said in his presence. He knew he would be putting himself at risk by conducting yet another raid into hostile territory but something deep within him egged him on. There was adventure and learning to be had. He was a cat, after all, and the hunt coursed in his marrow.

Some distance away, nearby the pan of warm salmon in fact, sat Rosita. She was now the Head of Housekeeping at Spread. She was busy half-heartedly resisting the advances of Grapes Wang, seated to her right in a luxurious banquet chair arranged specifically for his exclusive use. Romance *had* been in the air for them for some time but Rosita had found a new male companion in Luca di Abate. They had met on a Disney cruise to Hawaii that Rosita had won in a company raffle.

Rosita had first been attracted to Luca when she noticed him smoking a cigar on the sun deck of the cruise liner. She was curious about the tan man wearing the aviator glasses and an open chested, short-sleeved collar shirt with a gold chain around his neck. She mistook him for a fellow Latino until he removed his sunglasses to look down at the drink he had spilled. In this moment she had seen the flash of his blue eyes. Her fascination gave way to an intense need for action, given there was a spilled drink to be attended to. She sped over to help the man out.

Luca wasn't a very useful man. He had inherited a fortune from the passing of an uncle. With this money he had bought a house in the Los Angeles area, where he had always wanted to live, and drove a yellow Lamborghini. He mostly concerned himself with chasing women and buying the good opinion of other men. Rosita reminded him of his mother back home in Milan. He needed her as a mother more than anything. She had been happy to play the role for the first few months, initially charmed by his wealth, but these days she was tiring of his vanity and fragility.

She valued her job at Spread too much to be swayed by his overtures toward world travels and extended cruises. Their time together was winding down. They had separate lives heading in separate directions and the momentum of their romantic cruise to Hawaii together was fading. Still, the couple did have some fun when Luca managed to get a drink or two into Rosita. This was the case this early afternoon at the Spread banquet.

“Rosita, will you ask Luca if he would like me to pass the salt? Perhaps he would like to salt his skin. He looks like a piece of meat on a hook out in the sun,” Grapes mused as he smoked a cigarette.

There was a great deal of conversation going on at the table and many others around it so beyond two feet it was difficult to hear most anything anyone said.

“I heard my name,” said Luca to his woman. “Mr. Wang, did you require something of me?”

Luca had come to the banquet in the hopes of angling himself a lucrative foothold in the exploding company. Beyond buying real estate, expensive vehicles, and gold bullion, he had no idea how to navigate the world of business.

“Ah, no. Nothing to concern you very much, Signor di Abate,” Grapes called through a puff of smoke. He had leaned back far enough in his opulent chair to look around the back of Rosita and make eye contact with Luca. His Hong Kong-made business suit had flecks of ash on the lapel and his hair was disheveled from the long flight he had just arrived in on. “Tell me, in Italy...do they have good laundry machines? Do they have good Laundromats? Do you put your women to work in the river or in the brick and mortar store? Hah!”

Grapes was hoping to intimidate Luca and win Rosita’s heart. He had seen the two together at a different Spread event some weeks prior. It was a yacht tour of San Francisco Bay. Business meetings with entrepreneurs in the area had kept him occupied and thus unable to interfere in the romance he did not know was already fading away.

“Mr. Wang, we have very good laundry machines in Italy. They are built by the women themselves, in China!” Luca fired back.

Not to be outdone, Grapes responded, “Ah yes, China. It’s a very good place now. Much is changing there. I just did a business deal there for 1.4 million US dollars. Yes, it’s a good place. Much money to be made if you are a businessman. Tell me what you do again? You have some houses don’t you. That’s something now, isn’t it?”

Rosita stood partly in disgust and partly out of hunger left the two to squabble. She went and visited with some of her friends near the taco bar.

“Good, she’s gone now,” said Luca. “Let me tell you this, back home the Sicilians would not take very kindly to your kind of talk, Mr. Wang. But come, let us drink a toast. This is a beautiful banquet and I am an honored guest, honored by your generosity.”

This gesture pleased Grapes greatly and his countenance softened considerably.

“You have done me a great honor by inviting me to dine with you at the best table in the house. To your generosity, Mr. Wang,” Luca said with great deference.

They drank and ate for a time, both watching the chatter around them. Grapes thought to himself, *this clever Italian knows how to hold his ground. Ms. Rosita will be mine but I must be patient and look for an opening.* His thoughts then drifted off to the performance of his expansion committee and some of their early reports on the possibility of a shipping center in Billings, Montana.

Luca, likewise in his turn, set his mind to defending his territory from the wealthy invader. *I can't spoil this opportunity for myself. I need to find a way into Spread. This is a cash cow if I ever saw one. They can't make me work though. I refuse to do it. I have to find a way to use my assets here to make more money without having to work for the company as an employee. Maybe they need real estate speculation? Something...think, Luca. You're sitting with the CEO of the company. It will be a Fortune 500 company within a year. Think!*

Rosita looked over from her gaggle of ladies from the maintenance and cleaning department to see the two men awkwardly swirling the ice around in their drinks, both lost in thought. She was relieved, imagining both were on their best behaviors. She grabbed herself a rare second beer from an ice chest on the final table of the taco bar and turned to her companions to bid them farewell for the time being.

It was amidst these circumstances that Tuffy decided to make his move on the platter of salmon fillets resting atop the premier table of the event. He would have to be swift and shoot the gap between the two men who were with his housekeeper friend. She was such a kind woman, feeding him treats for many months now. He would do his best not to earn her ire as he went in for his prey. It would be a quick job: in and out.

He licked his chops and sauntered down from his high place. The regal laziness in his manner was replaced by the verve of a hunting adept. He crouched down as if he were a sprinter. His computer brain played the opening notes from the Triumphal March from Aida, stimulating his organs with the majestic reverberations. He licked his chops again and suddenly, everything was silent.

He dove into the fray.

Rosita was on her way back to her seat now as Tuffy rocketed toward his mission objective. She turned her head slowly to greet the sound of a waiter tripping and dropping a platter of drinks. Her eyes followed the trajectory of the other eyes in the immediate vicinity of the accident. It seemed a shark was tunneling through the floor, slashing ornate rugs along the way with its dorsal fin. She caught the flicker of a cat's tail and immediately guessed the source of the increasing commotion. She hurried her stout legs after the cat, surprised to see he was heading straight for her place near Luca and Grapes.

Tuffy burst into view, the wildly unsuccessful stealth portion of his mission over, and leapt onto the table. With his jaws he grabbed the largest salmon fillet he could and turned to run out of the banquet. At this moment Grapes threw his coat over Tuffy and wrangled the cat, stopping the food run dead in its tracks. Grapes held the cat down onto the table at the expense of his fine suit coat's destruction. Amid the dozens of disturbed diners standing for a better view of the commotion came Rosita.

She called, "Is my cat. So sorry. My cat. Please, I left him in his crate in the back. He gets out sometimes. Please."

Hearing Rosita's voice calmed Tuffy and he came to his senses, realizing this was his only chance to eat his salmon. He scarfed down what he could before he felt Rosita's arms lift him up from the table. She grunted from the effort and pulled away the covering from the cat's face, revealing his charming features. Diners resumed their seats and the din of a hundred conversations picked up.

Grapes and Luca were not so convinced.

"You don't have a cat," said Luca. "I have been to your apartment, there is no cat there. Where does this cat come from?"

"Rosita, we don't allow pets on the premises," Grapes chided her. He sneezed and his eyes began to water.

She was momentarily at a loss for words. She petted Tuffy, who was content to be held by her and let her sort out the situation. She stepped closer to her two male companions so as to not be heard by prying ears and said, "He is my new cat. He is a special Russian breed. I buy him from a dealer and he give him to me in a crate." Her accent was slipping through, given her agitation.

"But I came here with you, darling," said Luca. "You did not leave a crate anywhere. You came only with your person. This is not your cat."

Looks of suspicion and anger were painted onto the faces of Grapes and Luca. They regarded the cat with confusion and awe, given his massive stature and almost human-like facial expressions. The cat was busy licking the one paw he had easy access to, cleaning the salmon smell away.

Rosita unwrapped Tuffy from the coat. She labored as she sat him down on the table and picked him back up again once he was free and clear. He was much heavier than she had anticipated, perhaps weighing as much as a five gallon bucket full of mop water.

Grapes began to come to his senses and took notice of his expensive suit coat, now in tatters because of Tuffy's iron-clawed kicks. "That animal is not welcome here. Please take him away, Rosita. I don't care who he belongs to. I am allergic to cats." He motioned to the servers standing by to take away the plate of salmon. They set to work tidying up the space.

Luca began to walk with Rosita but she rebuffed him, "Please, Luca. I want to be alone. I will get a taxi. Is no problem."

He stood, relieved of his social obligation, and regarded the woman and her cat walking away from him. He turned his attention back to Grapes and soon forgot all about the incident. He was eager to make some money.

Rosita did not hail a taxi when she reached the convenience desk at the entrance of the convention center but instead walked outside and in a direct path to the Spread headquarters. Tuffy began to squirm, tired of being held, and murmured in displeasure until she set him down. She wiped the sweat from her brow and regarded him as he sat and cleaned himself. He was very unhappy about the smell of cigarettes that had come over him. He continued to murmur in displeasure, the sound punctuated by the licking motion of his mouth.

Rosita said to the cat, "You got in a lot of trouble over there. You are lucky I helped you. Come on."

She motioned for him to come with her and he did. They entered a back entrance of the headquarters and made their way through the halls to the only place Rosita had seen the cat before: the unused utility closet. She was surprised he was following her this far with none of the usual delays and fears that normal cats displayed when trailing a human.

They reach the closet and Rosita let him inside. He strolled over to the passageway he'd come and gone through so many times. He emitted a grateful meow and winked at her before darting away to his secret office. There he would await Jake's arrival and ride home with him.

Rosita now understood this was a creature of intelligence. He was no longer an abnormally large stray doing his rounds while a nearby owner awaited his return. She perceived a greater depth to his existence, something yet unexplainable. Her mothering, nurturing instincts told her to keep him safe from Grapes and any others who would do him harm. This was the most peculiar thing ever to have happened to Rosita. It was stirring something within in her, sparking her to thought in a way she hadn't experienced since she was a young girl.

From that day forward she began to consider him as a sort of angel.

Tuffy, in his turn, sat in thought about what had transpired. No one had shown him the kindness that he had just experienced from Rosita, not during one of his raids. His animal companion Angus seemed to sympathize a little, sure, but nothing like what he experienced from this woman. He hoped that somehow this marked a new chapter for him, one in which his roots as a hunter could find expression. To his friends he was a clever researcher and a good lap cat. To the strangers he had met, he was a tender presence and an advocate for children in his own way. This was something new. Someone had looked out for him and accepted that he was a hunter at heart. That was how he interpreted the experience, at least.

Tuffy's optimism burned bright. He set to work on some of the final coding work for the last of his projects at Spread. Something new was going to come. At the very least, he had an idea of how things could be for him at the Vault when he returned to the future.

Chapter 49: Cong's Got a Notion

Jake was standing in the shower, letting time pass by and the water rush over him without thought to when the experience would end. He was engrossed in an inner dialogue over his future as a musician, imagining how best to go forward in a way that would give him satisfaction given his knowledge of future events to come. He wanted to leave a mark of beauty before it was time for him to return to the Vault and a much more desolate, depopulated future.

He was disturbed from this state of mind when Tuffy came rushing into the bathroom, yowling and yelling with both of his voices.

"Holy hell! What is it?" he exclaimed to the cat as he pulled back the shower curtain. He grabbed his towel after shutting off the faucet. He held the towel over his privates and stepped onto the bamboo mat on the bathroom floor.

"Cong! It's Cong!"

"What do you mean?" the big man asked.

"A man came by. He said he was here on behalf of Cong Yu."

"What man?"

"Ezra said his name was Scott Malloy. He said he's been looking for us for a long time."

"He left already?"

"Yes, but he said that Cong is in Los Angeles. He should be here later today."

"How the fuck..." Jake murmured and trailed off. His eyes were fixed on the cat but his gaze stared deep into his own thoughts. "He must have made a jump. Does that mean..."

"I don't think we're here another year. They wouldn't do that without our permission," said Tuffy.

"Is Curro here? I didn't see him earlier."

"We're all here. They're in the kitchen. Come on!" Tuffy called as he scampered out of the bathroom and to the kitchen on the other side of the house.

Jake towed off, put on a change of clothes, and went to speak with his friends.

The friends spent some of their afternoon together, speculating on the news about Cong and the nature of the mysterious man who paid them a visit. It was eventually agreed that all would go their separate ways but stay around the house for Cong's expected visit. Of the group, Jake remained the wariest that something wrong would happen and perhaps they would be apprehended by government agents. He remained in his spacious, basement-level room near the only weapon in the house: a twelve gauge shotgun he had bought in Northern California while on a small tour with Miranda.

The doorbell to the stately home rang in the early evening. Tuffy was with Ezra on the back porch with a view of the Hollywood Hills. He was curbed by Ezra the moment he sprang to his paws to go and answer the door.

"Wait, Tuffy! We don't know who's going to be at the door," the calm companion reminded the cat.

Ezra rose and went to answer the door. Tuffy trailed closely behind.

Sure enough, it was Cong Yu who greeted the two friends. Curro and Jake were only a step behind. There was much rejoicing and hugging between all of the friends. Curro and Cong were introduced to one another. Cong broke into song for a brief moment. Tuffy played quickly an instrumental accompaniment from his voice box on his collar for the moments Cong was in song. It was a tune they knew together. When Ezra and Curro took notice of Scott Malloy standing by the driver's side door of a town car, Cong waved to the private detective. The snub-nosed man waved in return and drove away, several bars of gold richer. Cong had paid him anyway.

With a toothy grin, Cong grabbed his two suitcases up off the patio and accompanied the other time travelers into the kitchen.

"How did you make it here?" Jake asked as he sat down upon a bar stool.

"Same as you three," Cong beamed. He accepted a glass of water from Curro and joined Jake at the breakfast bar. Its dark granite sheen impressed him and felt good under his hands. He cracked his knuckles and exhaled with pleasure, moaning, "Ay ya!"

"Does that mean we're here another year?" Ezra asked despairingly.

"No, rest easy. I spent much of my money to acquire the energy resources for the jump. It cost me all of my fine art, my crypto, and nearly my grand piano. I brought this with me, however," said the old man. He opened his briefcase and showed the rows of gold bars to his friends. Tuffy noted that the rows were not perfect, being dotted by a missing bar here and there. The old man cleared his throat as he closed the briefcase. He said, "Judging by this house, I am assuming you fellows are doing quite well for yourselves."

"We made some savvy investments," said Jake. "Curro has made some good coin, too. We started a company and sold it. I made some chump change touring, enough to get me by. Tuffy stole some money when we first got here but he promised not to do that anymore."

Tuffy curled downwardly in guilt. Ezra rubbed a hand over his back and helped him feel more at ease.

"Are you making the jump back with us?" the cat asked.

"I will be. We have about eleven months. Put me to use. I have been traveling the globe, sampling all of the very best dishes every city and every cuisine has had to offer. I was tired of all that anyway when Scott wrote me to say he had found you. Now I know you're here and you must be up to something good. I want in on your mission."

"Is this why you came? Surely the Vault could have sent Roger or Xiao Ma, someone younger to help with the mission," said Ezra.

"I came for my own selfish purposes. First and foremost because I wanted to make an apology to Jake." He turned to the bearded man and said, "Jake, while you were gone a man named Frank Noris came to the Vault. He was violent at first. He had an airship and men."

Jake wore a look of intense surprise on his face.

"When he saw you weren't at the Vault, he calmed down. Hunter and Milena allowed him to stay around. That wasn't pleasant. The Overlook siblings allowed it, however. He stayed. He asked questions about you. He spent a lot of time with Olivia. She left with him eventually. I didn't let him near my kitchen. No way! But he did tour some of the grounds, especially the biosphere. I don't think he went into any of the major workshops. He was very strange. He definitely was interested in you. Nick and Luis talked of killing him but his men were set to return for him. The whole encounter was very, very strange. He left with Olivia. They went to a colony in..."

"South America," said Jake. "I know him."

"I did something stupid and I've regretted it ever since. It's why I'm here. I didn't know if I'd see you again, Jake. I thought maybe there'd be a chance you stay here in this time or that something bad would happen to you. I couldn't live with myself if that were to happen. Can I smoke in here?" he asked Ezra.

"No, not a chance," the man replied.

“Bah, stressful. Anyway, I went through your personal storage container after Frank left. I’m sorry. I felt insecure. I thought our community was at risk so I went snooping. That was wrong of me. I’ve spent millions to tell you this. I didn’t want to leave it to chance. I want to die having righted as many wrongs as I possibly could and I knew with this there was the chance to rectify things, however slim. Among your things I found a data drive. I tried to crack it but couldn’t.”

“There’s nothing valuable to anyone else on that thing, Cong. Just lyrics, maybe some private keys to a couple crypto ledgers I have, and a few recordings. You didn’t miss anything. Frank was looking for me because he’s ashamed of himself and the power position he’s in. He won’t leave that cultish group he’s in and he resents me for leaving. I think he wanted me to be his teacher but I can’t and won’t. Damn, I hadn’t thought about this in a little while. I’m glad it’s coming up though and I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’ve apologized, Cong. I’m mad, no doubt. You can’t do that shit to people, Cong. I respected your space the whole time I was there. Don’t go pokin’ around my things.”

“I know. I made a mistake. It’s the most immature thing I’ve done in thirty years. I didn’t want you to be taken from me. I didn’t want to lose my community. I already went through that once. I lost my son. I love you and Ezra and the kids like my own children. I felt so wrong about doing it. I’m sorry. I have no excuses. I did bring you something... Mr. Curro, are you a man to be trusted? Better yet: do you three trust Curro?”

“Like a brother,” said Jake.

“He’s lived truthfully since I’ve known him. He’s growing and we’ve done a lot of good work together. Yes, he can be trusted,” said Ezra.

“Yes,” Tuffy added simply.

Cong bent over and opened his second briefcase. Inside was the Powersuit Frank Noris' second in command had left at the Vault. Cong strained slightly to raise the suit up by the shoulders and present it to Jake. It was sleek and black, made of scales modeled after a snake's.

"I've had it on a clothesline wherever I've gone. It's lost none of its charge since I left the Vault," said Cong. "Take it, it's yours. It's the least I can do for the stress and insecurity I've caused you."

"If someone would have caught you with thing..." Ezra said in horror.

"Relax," replied the old man. "To anyone of this era it looks like a strange jumpsuit, nothing more."

"This is a hell of a gift. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it though. There's got to be only like 20 of these things left in our time. Why not sell it then?" Jake asked.

"I didn't feel it was truly mine to sell. I got it from--"

"I know where you got it from. We didn't have any use for it so we left it in the depot. I didn't think anyone would pick it up."

"Well, it's here. You can use it however you like. I tried it on before I made the jump. It has very little neural integration. I don't think those exist anymore. It's the simple, body-mechanics model."

"I appreciate the gesture, Cong," said Jake. "I don't have any use for it."

"What is it?" Curro asked.

“Oh, right,” said Cong. “It’s a Powersuit. It’s from 40 years from now, roughly. Well, this is a very basic model from maybe 70 years from now. This one belonged to a soldier who was with Frank Noris, the man who came with his goons to the Vault. Does he know about the Vault? I’m assuming he does. Right. We coaxed them into disarming and then Frank did a weird 180 where he tried giving us a bunch of things we didn’t want. We held onto this. The soldier didn’t ask for it back. We didn’t have a use for it. Roger...does he know about Roger?”

“Yes,” said Ezra. “He knows about everyone and most everything that’s gone on for us at the Vault. He knows how Tuffy and I were created and he knows about Jake’s childhood. He’s all caught up. Well, what do you think?” he asked Curro.

“I feel caught up,” said Curro. “So, this suit gives the user power somehow?”

“That is correct,” continued Cong. “It greatly enhances movement speed, agility, strength, and reduces body impact. In fact, impacts charge the thing. It was invented by a madman named Jason Christmas. He lived and died by his Powersuits. He was one of the richest men in the world until he bit off more than he could chew and tried deposing the Banking Confederation of China.”

“Stupid move,” Jake chimed in. “He had to go though. He had too much power. He was a mass murderer.”

“Before he died the blueprints got out-“

“On the Internet?” Curro asked.

“More or less, yes,” said Cong. “The limiters and attenuators that were on all of the standard, exercise-associated Powersuits were finally bypassed and there was a brief craze in the 60’s where it seemed like everyone was wearing one form of a Powersuit or another. People got bored with them. Global violence was dropping anyhow. There was a parenting revolution in the later part of...this century and things faded out. They became gimmicky gifts. There was a neural healing component to the suits but it was found the effects were only temporary, six weeks at the most and efficacy of the treatment went down with repeated use. No one has been able to crack that enigma.”

“No short cuts to self-knowledge,” Ezra said sternly.

“No short cuts for sure,” Jake added forlornly.

Curro sat in awe of the Powersuit. Memories of his time in prison and the scenes of violence he endured as a child flashed in his mind. He felt a wickedness rise up in him. He considered these feelings and the fantasies that emanated from them. He could use the suit to gain incredible power in this day and age. No, he couldn’t. He would be captured and the technology stolen off his body, dissected by a government, and ultimately put to use against the citizenry by police and military forces. Then the situation would dissolve further when some terrorist or crime lord got his hands on the technology. There would be open chaos on the streets. Curro would likely be killed. This technology was beyond him and he did not want to be the point of origin for the consequences that would likely come. His covetousness calmed down and he regained his composure. Only Tuffy noticed the change in him, thanks to Tuffy’s near constant biometric scanning of his loved ones.

“I don’t think we have a valid use for it,” said Curro. He wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Yeah, I can’t see myself using this thing. It’s a great gift,” Jake said to Cong, “but I think we need to keep a tight lid on it.”

"The markets aren't ready for this yet. People aren't mature enough yet," said Ezra. "We're forty years away from any stability in the Middle East. No, this is a weapon of mass destruction in the wrong hands. People, en masse, are too primitive to know what to do with it. Let's keep in in the suitcase and take it with us on the jump. No more to it. Is everyone agreed?"

There was agreement among the companions.

"What all have you done? Tell me about your adventures," Cong said enthusiastically to his friends.

"I had a job," Tuffy blurted out. "I started a company called Spread. I basically ripped off Amazon.com but made it a lot better. We took on a business partner who helped us expand in Asia a lot faster than Amazon did. We sold out our shares and now the business partner mostly runs things."

"I have a ceremonial position there as a spokesman," added Curro. "It's mostly nothing at this point, though. They don't need me. They have money to hire big celebrities now if they need to."

"You don't have your job anymore," Cong asked the cat.

"Well...I still go sometimes to the headquarters. Jake drives me there. I dabble but no, the core of my contribution is complete. The work I did we pretended to contract out to a programming firm in Denmark. Nobody knows it was me. I had to hide a bunch of language I used because it technically hasn't been invented yet. It's set to delete itself if anyone sniffs around too closely."

Curro began cooking dinner for the group. The sumptuous aroma of chicken thighs cooking in lard and herbs rose up through the house. Tuffy began to be distracted from the conversation, drawn to the meal being put together.

"I've been working as a singer," said Jake. "It's been rough. I make more money when I sing my fluffier stuff. It drives me nuts. I made a good friend, hey! I'll invite her over. Her name's Miranda."

He left and made a phone call. He returned with a smile on his face and focused in on what Ezra was saying.

"I've mostly contributed to Curro's work for a show here in the area called *What's Going On?*" said Ezra. He rubbed at a callus on his palm. His hands bore long, thick fingers that worked nervously. "I've been very troubled by this world we're in. Abortion is common. The terrorist attacks are coming. The last vestiges of Western wealth are being squandered. The most enlightened gurus and philosophers remain hopelessly dissociated. The 'global warming' frenzy is about to begin. I can't stand what's being done to the children in this era. Good things are happening, too. The Internet is spreading. The old media gatekeepers are stumbling. Violence is diminishing. Secularism is spreading. It's a mixed bag, for me. I still work every day at my meditation and my journaling, living as mindfully as possible. I take stimulants from time to time, mostly coffee or tea. I cope. I'm often stressed. We do less and less real work on the show. The criticism, censoring, and bickering is getting quite intense at the studio."

"Amen to that," Curro said over the simmering of the food. "The studio bigwigs are showing their true colors."

"Sometimes there's the temptation to start a cult," continued Ezra. "It would be so easy in this day and age to turn people into psychological manipulators of one another and call it 'honesty'. It would be so easy to tell the followers to have children, leaving off that they're abandoning their inner children in the process. Get them terrified by current events and offer the 'only solution'. I think about what's to come and the fragility and reactivity of even the most gifted and I wonder how in the hell something like the Vault ever came to be. My thoughts have been heavy these days but I feel I'm growing."

"I think you are growing," Curro added.

"You seem to have grown a lot," said Cong. "When I first knew you all you wanted to do was react to people and badger them with your version of the truth."

"A cult leader in the making," mused Tuffy.

"I think we were all at least a bit more reactive," said Jake. "Miranda's on her way. You're not too tired for more company, are you?" he asked Cong.

The man shook his head and pursed his lips while scrunched his nose.

"We may have jumped too early in time," said Ezra. "Maybe even by only five or six years. Social media isn't yet a thing. We could have capitalized on that a lot more effectively, in my opinion."

"Early to the party," mused Tuffy.

The meal was nearing completion and by this time everyone's hunger had been stoked.

"The meat is farm raised," Curro mentioned to Cong, who had been leaning forward and peering at the contents of the frying pan. "Miranda gets it from her father's neighbor. He owns an acreage on the coast and lives without electricity or running water. We pay big bucks for it."

"That's the next thing we could do," said the cat. "We could run an eco-conscious grocery store. Sell cultural Marxism to champagne socialists."

"I'm telling you, the *gato* comes up with all of the good business ideas," said the cook.

"He doesn't come up with them. He researches trends on the Internet and in his database and then says where we should participate. There's a bit of a difference," said Ezra. He was fully aware that Tuffy didn't seem to have to toil away as much on his self-work. The cat danced along one good idea after another.

"Do I detect a hint of envy?" Cong asked. "I'd love to have a cybernetic mind, myself. Tuffy, you are a gifted creature."

"Perhaps there is some envy. You are truly gifted, Tuffy. *Do you* come up with these ideas?" asked Ezra.

"I process the information and good ideas just seem to come up. That's how it works. I'm not too interested in exploring it much further. It works for me and I'm happy with it. I'm not troubled with my creative process. The world is troubling to me, too, but I'm more concerned with getting a good meal than solving all those problems. That's where you come in, Ez," the cat said in his luxurious voice.

"Right. Since you last saw me I've learned something valuable, Cong. He touched upon it a little."

"What's that?" asked the old man.

"I've learned that though this world terrifies me, really it's the degeneracy of society, I've got to process the terror for myself. I have to be present with it, working with it every day. If I don't do enough of that, I begin to fight with people. I begin to want to incite those around me to fight the evil and degeneracy. Wars are not ever won. Though wars and preparation for wars makes for great oratory, it is the inner work I must do. I have learned to lead by example, by doing my work. I carry the terror and the anxiety but I don't spill it out onto others. When I was doing more of that, very early on in this adventure of ours, I came across as grandiose to myself. I knew something was off. I must hold the terror," said Ezra.

"We've all got to hold it for ourselves," said Jake.

"You're beginning to sound like Eddie or Xiao Ma," said Cong, "but I agree with you in principle. It seems you have spent most of your days in contemplation."

"Well, I have helped Curro with the show. He's been fulfilling a lifelong dream, helping people with a public platform."

"That's a dream for many of us," Jake said with a sigh.

"The *gato* is the one that has made the real money," said Curro. He began to dish out the meal to the friends. "He was very clever and we have all benefitted."

“Good, that’s good,” Cong said as he rubbed the cat behind the ears. The cat responded by purring. He had missed the old Chinese cook and his eccentricities.

“It would be easier to fight, wouldn’t it?” Jake asked Ezra.

“It would be. There would be a lot more acclaim. I tend to remember that the wars of today pale to the grim death that awaits the majority of the species. Those at the Vault and wanderers like you survived because you chose to take a much less trodden path. I was made by those people. You survived to continue to create. We live because of awareness, consciousness, self-reflection, and mastery. We do not live because we fought what was unstoppable.”

“Aren’t you going to warn people of the strikes?” Cong asked with concern.

“Ezra tried that already. No one listened. When he tried to prove it by combining the advanced knowledge of...what was it?” Jake asked the robed sage.

“The Kentucky Derby,” said Ezra. “It was the only statistic relating to this time period that I remembered besides some of the information of the September 11th attacks.”

“Yeah, he picked the winner and the time. Didn’t convince them anyway.”

“Who were you trying to convince?” asked Cong.

“Some people at California Institute of Technology. They laughed me out of there.”

“What about Tuffy’s data banks? Couldn’t you give them some hard numbers, the coordinates of the asteroid field? Some sort of advanced knowledge of other events?” Cong asked.

“The jump erased most of my data storage,” said Tuffy. “I was basically feral for the first few weeks we were here.”

“Ay-ya!” exclaimed Cong.

“Yeah, making the jump with a few books in hand would have been useful,” said Ezra. His head sunk down near the plate of food in front of him, heavy with disappointment. “You would think someone could intuit some of the things I’ve said or some of the things we’ve covered in *What’s Going On?* but no one seems to think very far ahead. No one pieces together deeper themes and estimations on what’s to come based on those trends, psychologically speaking.”

“Everyone wants numbers and coding,” mused Tuffy.

“Right, but if you look deeply enough you’ll see trends in the unconscious panic, terror, trauma, anger, and sadness. You’ll see the desolation of childhood. You’ll see that everyone lived it in their early years and that it will be recreated within society as it is coming out, as people eventually process it and puke it back up. The asteroid strikes merely catalyzed what was already going on.”

“Then won’t humanity fail to learn its lesson?” Curro asked. “Won’t people just confuse the strikes and the desolation and overlook the psychological component.”

“Not if we have our way,” said Jake.

“Agreed,” said Ezra.

Jake continued, “People like Frank Noris are confused on it. He seeks to remake the world back into what it once was. He addresses the environment, the actual physical realm. He fails to see the psychological underpinning. We don’t. We see the trauma that is resurfacing. Right now, and for the next 25 years, it will be anger. Then it will be sadness and people will begin to truly reform. Then...”

“The desolation and the loneliness,” said Ezra. “Curro, if we have our way and continue to lead by example, we will go back to the Vault and help Hunter and Milena find the way for humanity. That is more our mission than anything else.”

“We *should* tinker while we’re here though,” Tuffy was quick to add.

"I agree," said Ezra.

"I do too," said Cong.

"We made Spread," offered Jake between bites of food. He sipped at a beer.

"Isn't Frank onto something though?" Curro asked.

"How so?" asked Ezra.

"Everything you've ever told me about Frank Noris makes him sound like a *tipo raro* but just because he's so dysfunctional interpersonally doesn't mean that his point of view is completely and totally invalid. Maybe you dismiss him more than he merits. After all, he *did* get to his position of influence by some means and there is that tension in him, at least as you see it Jake, that he would like to become the outsider...the man apart. He has some sort of ambition and his unconscious motives can't be all bad," said Curro.

There was some confusion among the friends and Tuffy spoke, "Frank Noris wants to make things like they were, at least with the environment. Is there something wrong with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Jake, perceiving the question was directed at him though Tuffy was facing Curro. "He's really creepy with boundaries. In essence, he doesn't have them."

"But we have good boundaries, don't we?" Tuffy asked in a child-like voice.

"We do," replied the big man.

"Something I'm noting is we have yet to experience him in a neutral site. Cong experienced him at the Vault and Jake experienced him at the colony but in both those situations the deck was stacked one way or another," said Ezra. "Curro is on to something though. It's not like Frank is dedicated to taking over other vaults and colonies. He's trying to rehabilitate the atmosphere and he's dysfunctional when it comes to interacting with other people. He's misguided but at the very least wants to do some good in the world somehow. There is value in addressing the environment directly."

“Oh, for sure,” said Jake. “I don’t want you all having the impression I thought Frank had no redeeming qualities but yeah, I’ve been a bit slanted that way haven’t I?”

“I was under that impression,” said Curro.

“Well, glad you mentioned something,” said Jake.

“Tinkering...” Tuffy mused aloud.

“We should do whatever we can to maximize our impact here,” said Cong.

“Without drawing negative attention onto ourselves,” said Ezra.

“That’s impossible. You and I both know it,” replied the older man. “The jump back to our time is on...”

“September 13th, 2001,” Tuffy purred. “The coordinates are for set for a warehouse in upstate New York that has been abandoned for... I don’t remember now. It was in my digital banks. Gone now.

“I remember the address,” said Ezra.

“That’s very interesting,” said Cong. He stood up and walked to large bay window overlooking the Hollywood Hills, crossing his arms behind his back.

“I think I know what you’re thinking,” sang the cat.

“Oh my god! I hadn’t thought of that,” said Jake, suddenly illuminated to a notion that both Tuffy and Cong held in their body language. “Who picked the date of arrival?”

“Nick and Luis,” said Cong. “None of us at the Vault ever thought to ask. We all assumed you’d ride the dotcom bubble to glory and that’s all there was to it. Things shifted when Frank Noris showed up and I guess we overlooked this detail.”

“I’m sure Nick and Luis didn’t,” said Ezra. “Do you think they chose it deliberately?”

“Yes,” said Cong. He was rubbing his elbows with his hands and gazing out onto the beautiful scene before him. “They’re rascals. They probably programmed it in after a couple of beers.”

“Bad boundaries,” said Ezra with a click of his tongue.

“I mean, I’ll be goddamned that we never thought of it. We’re jumping out of here almost right after the September 11th attacks,” said Jake.

“I thought of it a couple times,” said Tuffy.

“Maximum impact,” mused Cong.

“What are you all talking about?” said Curro. He was thoroughly confused with the trajectory the conversation had taken.

“On September 11th, 2001 there will be massive Islamic terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center towers in New York City. The Pentagon will also be struck,” said Jake. “The US government will manipulate and lie to the American people and become embroiled in a drawn out war in Iraq that will contribute massively to the destabilization of the Middle East. Fucked up, huh?”

“Oh my god!” exclaimed Curro.

“Yes, it’s truly horrific. The perpetrators fly planes into the two buildings, somehow causing a third building to fall some distance away. Something like four thousand people die,” Ezra said with heavy sadness.

“Americans lose their fucking minds,” Jake muttered.

“Yes, revenge fantasies stoked up. Hardly anyone self-reflects. It’s the last nail in the coffin for the empire, though it does peter on even through our time a hundred years from now. The US government keeps the lid extremely tight on the actual forensic facts of what happens,” said Ezra.

“You’re thinking of intervening in this?” Curro asked Cong.

Cong did not respond. Tuffy rolled onto his back and yawned.

“I think it’s a stupid idea,” said Ezra. “I’ve never held a gun before in my life. How could we possibly kill or disable terrorists who have hijacked a plane? Jake’s the only one who’s ever shot a gun.”

“We have the Powersuit,” said Tuffy. “I think we should do it.”

“We agreed not to use the suit,” said Ezra.
The cat rolled over in displeasure.

“It’s intriguing, the idea of intervening in the September 11th attacks,” said Cong as he stepped away from the window. “I think we should leave that sort of thing to the professionals. We should tip off the local authorities.”

“The only thing I have on file is ‘Flight 93,’” said Tuffy. “It’s a fragment. No connecting information to it.”

“So we don’t know what that flight’s target is...” said Cong.

“I know offhand that Osama Bin Laden was supposedly the mastermind of the attacks,” said Jake. “I didn’t study history much in school but that name pops out to me. It’s said that Bush knew about the attacks beforehand.”

“We can’t seriously be talking about this,” fumed Ezra.

“It’s uncomfortable to talk about but it’s worth considering. It’s the old ‘would you kill Hitler?’ dilemma,” said Cong. “It’s a chance to dismantle evil before it spreads. The American government destroys most of its wealth through wars and inflationary spending in the 20 years after the attacks. A lot of people suffer for what these idiot Islamists do.”

“You want to tip off the local authorities about a ‘Flight 93’ the day before the attacks?” Ezra asked.

“Something like this,” said Cong. “We could call in bomb threats. It could do a lot of good. We could call in bomb threats on all of the major airports in the nation.”

“It would be a cinch,” Tuffy proclaimed as he tapped a paw to his skull.

“You’ve been with us for two hours and you’re already talking about calling in bomb threats on all of the major airports in the USA. How am I not surprised?” asked Ezra.

“I’m being serious,” said Cong.

At that moment the doorbell rang and Miranda joined the gathering. All subversive talk ceased and was not resumed for a number of weeks as the companions all embarked on different schedules and commitments. Of the group, Cong and Tuffy remained most preoccupied with the nascent plans discussed.

Chapter 50: Bunker Mentality

It had been almost two weeks since Hunter and Milena had visited Svalbard in the hopes of recruiting families to the Vault. Thus far they had only brought Robert and Ida and their son Samuel to the colony in Antarctica. They had been accompanied by Ron and Darlene, the older married couple that so often watched over the very young boy. All of them were adjusting well to the new living environment, nestled in the new expansion of the biosphere. The family spent the majority of their time together in the lush grasses fronting the residential quarters of the expansion. Though at a far distance, neighbors from high above like Eddie and Xiao Ma, with their balconies, could look down upon the family with admiration. Ron and Darlene walked their dogs in the early evenings under the fading artificial lights. They were careful not to stray their beloved pets beyond the enclosed areas that ensured their protection from the modified predators roaming the biosphere. Many visits were paid by the inhabitants of the Vault to young Samuel and his parents, particularly from Nick Williams. Samuel was enchanted with Nick's ruddy beard and tugged at it endlessly as the aging engineer held him in his arms. It was a joy for all to behold the young family and to speculate at the arrival of more good men and women.

Far away at San Martin de Los Andes, Hunter and Milena had begun their vetting process in earnest. They had just paid a brief visit to a tiny colony in North America but no suitable parents were found. Attempts to establish contact with a colony in Colorado had failed, pushing forward the arrival date at the colony helmed by Frank Noris and the other members of the council seated there.

After an icy welcome from Frank and a companion of his named Barker, a welcome which Hunter and Milena's mother Olivia dared not attend, arrangements were made to have the siblings interview families at a gymnasium. Luis had again accompanied the siblings, happy to be helping them in their mission. The supersonic flight down from the American Rockies had tired him. He sat with a slight hunch in a rolling office chair beneath a basketball hoop.

Next to Luis were two leather couches facing each other. Luis considered the haphazard stitching of the cushioning. This furniture would have been a luxury in years past but thanks to the advancements in the colony's air treatment technologies, small pastures in the mountain valley were now inhabited by grazing cattle. The colony had purchased, at a steep price, calves in embryonic suspension. Scientists had confirmed survival viability for pasture grasses. This important reclamation of a once-common agricultural staple was not lost on the Vault citizens when they had flown over the South American colony. Luis had learned of these developments by asking laborers who had set up the interviewing station.

Seated upon one of the couches were Hunter and Milena. Across from them were a pregnant woman and her husband. The woman was neither beautiful nor ugly. She had wide hips and a strong figure. Her breasts were neither big nor small. Her hair was sandy blonde. Her name was Mary. The man's name was Boone. He was a dark-haired man from Virginia. He had worked at his father's investment firm there before the strikes. He was very tall and broad. His legs were thick and his posture erect. Both radiated a gentle warmth that was inviting to their interviewers. Boone worked as a banker in the colony. Mary was a painter. Her murals could be seen here and there the surrounding town.

The interview was coming to a close and both Hunter and Milena had good feelings about the couple.

"I think what you all have been nurturing there at the Vault has been mighty fine. With bringing in outsiders, as rigorous as the requirements for entry are, there is going to be a need to establish trust between parties. So far, you have been a family there as I understand it. You're transitioning to a community. There's going to be a need, eventually, for some kind of assurances in trade between parties. Personally, the two of us are going to want to *buy* a plot of land from you. We won't know the details until we've landed there, the security concern being a valid one of course, but something tells me I'd rather own an apartment or a living space there than be a semi-permanent guest. There would be a financial transaction. We may not be able to afford the space right away. We will need to work and engage in trade. No longer will you all live off of your savings and the work of the servbots, at least...at some point. So, I would be interested in opening up a small bank," said Boone with an air of decency and self-respect.

"I agree with him," said Mary. "We would like to homestead, within the covenant of the Vault."

"No aggression initiated and absolutely no neglect of the needs of the children," said Boone.

"And it may be that we don't build up a business or two until our son is older but we need that kind of freedom."

"We don't want to be permanent guests. We're looking for a new home. Between us," Boone said, leaning in, "the hierarchy here is unsteady. You all have based your many years on self-improvement and emotional connection. Here the uppers are driven by data analysis and control experiments. There's a spooky detachment going on and neither Mary or I want to be around when that denial bubble gets popped. We don't trust the council or their cronies."

Luis spoke, "Do you think they mean to make war on others? Noris used an attack ship on the Vault before he completely changed his approach."

"No," said Boone. "I don't think they're going to make war on others. I think they're driven by science and they will seek to devise the most logical society. Only, they're not driven by their emotions at all. They're pure intellect."

Milena shifted uncomfortably at the thought of her mother being drawn into such machinations. She knew her mother would stay with Frank Noris for some time. They got along well and she had been very lonely in the past few years. She imagined the two of them marrying. She imagined her mother going along with whatever Frank posited because he was strong-willed.

Boone continued, "I think they will enforce social expectations through ostracism and they'll derive those expectations from research findings they deem relevant. They will curtail dissent through ostracism. All means through ostracism. We've seen it already. The slightest misstep, according to their preferences, and instant cut-off of contact. There have been proclamations in the town square, warning all others of the misdeeds of others."

"We see very little capacity for self-reflection among these people," said Mary.

"Do you have a name for them? Do they go by anything?" asked Hunter.

“Noris has a police force and they’re called the ‘Vanguard’. They subject to a lot of public scrutiny. Some of them are good guys. But when their actions are called into question, they deflect and project and ostracize. A few have lost their jobs but the better they are at sophistry, the better they can hold onto their positions,” said Boone. He looked around the gymnasium and up into the air to check for drones and then continued, “There’s also the Seeing Eye. They’re the intellectuals that are tied in with the council or sit on the council directly. It’s a cloister of gossip. They’re the ones who ran Elliot out of town last month. One of the women called him out as a ‘toxic abuser’ in the town square. Once upon a time they’d been dating. Mary, you tell them. You were friendlier with him.”

“The two were dating. He never touched her in an unwelcome way, never raised his voice, and never lied to her- at least that’s what he and Lara said,” said Mary.

“Lara’s his friend. She’s running his shop, hoping that at some point he’ll be accepted back in,” added Boone.

“The woman that called him out said she regretted dating him, that everyone should really think twice before talking to him, and that if her reputation mattered to anyone, they would believe her and stay away from him. She said he ‘emotionally dumped’ on her,” said Mary.

“What is that?” asked Luis.

“It’s when you talk about way too personal of details at way too soon of a point in the relationship and share more than the other person can handle,” said Boone.

“I think she made most of it up,” said Mary. “I don’t think he did anything like that. You can hardly get a word out of Elliot unless you talk to him about music or money.”

"So she denounced this man and then what?" asked Luis. His brow was deeply furrowed. He remembered a false accusation of plagiarism his colleague had once come under when they were both researchers at an astronomical observatory.

"He didn't fight her on it. It broke his heart. I think he was still in love with her. We don't know why they broke it off but whatever shape he was in, he was not in the shape for the fight she brought to his door," said Boone. "Frank Noris was there with her when she made her denouncement. He put his arm around her as she cried."

"That was terrifying," said Mary. "I mean, what do you say to a person who says if she has good reputation with you, you'll believe her for what she says? It was like an inquisition, watching Elliot walk away like that. You two may know the woman. She's friends with your mother."

"We don't speak with her," said Hunter.

"Oh, pardon me. I really didn't know," said Mary. She winced and put her palm to her cheek, disturbed by her misstep.

"It's perfectly all right," said Hunter. "She's here and so are we. Most families don't split apart these days. You were saying she's our mother's best friend?"

Mary sighed in relief and said, "Yes, her name is Oshey. She runs a deli, the only deli I suppose. She had stellar reputation with everyone. She has two clerks working for her that everyone loves. Most people believed her. Elliot's kind of a recluse and doesn't make friends easily."

“But we didn’t see it that way,” said Boone. “That was a hatchet job. Anyhow, this is far off topic and not what we’re here for anyway. Luis you asked about their war faring and I thought you deserved the rundown. This is the environment we’re living in here. If you take objection to what the Seeing Eye does or how the Vanguard enforces social norms, it will be pointed out that you had an anxious-ambivalent attachment with your parents and that you should have more empathy for yourself. They play dirty. We don’t want to be around them. I want to found a currency, a mint, and a new bank away from here. Mary wants to continue her painting and raise our child. We need a better community for ourselves and our future family. You were going to hear of this stuff one way or another. It was Elliot last month. Who will it be this month? Those public outings sicken me.”

“I have a feeling Noris is behind them,” said Mary. “Things have gotten more...militant. Your mother is in with them.”

“This is really intense,” said Hunter.

“Lucius...the name is familiar,” said Luis. “I knew of a Lucius once. A secularist author, I think. I thought he’d be dead by now.”

“He’s in his 90’s,” said Boone. “He’s one of the founders of this community. He came over when the anarchist enclaves in southern Chile were overrun.”

“He sold millions of books, didn’t he?” asked Luis.

“Over a hundred million,” said Mary. “I painted the walls of his courtyard. He’s a nice old man until you get to matters of philosophy and family. Then he’s a pit bull, even in his old age. Noris brought him here. Risked his life to bring him out of the prison he was being kept in. He spent a lot of his fortune making that happen.”

“Lucius is the man who says that unless you have climbed the mountaintops and stood where he has stood, you have no grounds by which to criticize him. The Seeing Eye maintains this. He shares his renown with them and they are shielded,” said Boone. “We don’t fit in. We don’t have hardly anyone to talk to about this. We want you to know the conditions here, even for your own assurances. You have a different atmosphere at the Vault and it’s on very tenuous grounds that you’ve been allowed to be here.”

“What about the private property of the town’s people?” asked Hunter. There was anger in his voice and a determined look on his face.

“Frank could disavow your return and tell others that if he had good reputation with them, they would turn you away...particularly because they don’t know you. You three are outsiders. Anyone who didn’t fall in line would be ostracized and labeled a ‘toxic abuser’ or a ‘narcissist’, something like this,” said Boone.

“Since the thing happened with Elliot, we’ve been keeping a very low profile,” said Mary.

“Boone’s got a lot of assets. The Seeing Eye tries to get him to come to their meetings but he keeps his head down.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can keep it up. Things are ramping up here. Lucius is talking about the end of society and people are getting frightened,” said Boone. “I’m frightened. I don’t even know if anything immoral will happen but the atmosphere will get more intense and this slow burn psychological manipulation will keep going.”

“Does no one stand up to them?” Luis asked. He was very troubled by the experiences of this couple.

“They’re told they’re being emotionally reactive. As they are not empathizing with the Seeing Eye members, empathy shall not be afforded to them...and out they go,” said Mary. “Some people leave but new people are coming here all the time now that the air is getting clean around here. Word is spreading. Those who come are eager to fit in. It’s not that hard, yet, to get on the council or have a position of influence with them and so...”

“New recruits,” Luis said with an air of disappointment.

“Lucius and Noris have a lot of pull,” said Boone. “They dominate the intellectual and social narrative here. Science is on their side, after all. But we’ve noticed things, Mary and I. One week they’ll tell people to relentlessly question their friends and family on their values. The next week the word ‘relentless’ will be replaced with ‘persistent’. The underlying principles are rotten but the flies that buzz over the rot are continuously trained and retrained to be as logically consistent as possible.”

“I can only speculate but I think Elliot saw some of this, too. He had a friend who stayed with him a while and even worked for him. The man came and stayed with you all, if the rumors are true,” said Mary. “Frank Noris hated Jake Walker. Jake wouldn’t bite, though. He kept his distance. Boone and I think that Jake was immune to the stuff that is going on and decided to move on when he couldn’t make headway here as an artist.”

“The art is dying here,” said Boone.

“Yes, the world is ending. It’s starting to be passed around that the world is on fire and those who find time for creative pursuits are not contributing enough. They’re shunned and sometimes ostracized. I get less work than I used to,” said the woman. She drank from a glass of water and peered up out one of the large windows beneath the rafters of the gymnasium. She wiggled her hips into a new position in order to get more comfortable.

"One cannot exceed the scope, grandeur, and level of achievement of Lucius," Boone lamented. "Come to think of it, a lot of the people that have left are artists. There's a little artist's commune sprouting up by a lake about three days' walk southwest of here. I don't think they'll go very far though. There's some San Martin de Los Andes tech over there, keeping things going. But who knows."

"We don't want to be here for all of this," said Mary. "The clock is ticking, however. I'm not going to uproot our child once he's born and completely change his surroundings. If it's going to happen, this is our opportunity."

"It's not all bad, either," Boone added. "The air is clean here. The water is pristine. There is hardly any crime. I've never felt in physical danger. It's a surrender of resistance the uppers are seeking from all of us here. I don't think my resistance, or whatever it is they're after exactly, has ever put anyone in danger. I think it is what makes me unique and I won't give it up unless it's my only option. Our child *must* have a secure home."

"Your informational gave us a lot to hope for, though I do get the sense you played things close to the chest," said Mary.

"No comment," said Milena with a smile that revealed little.

"Things *are* different at the Vault, as you know," said Hunter. "I don't know how much detail we can go into but we could ask you questions that weren't on our intake and see if your values align with ours and if you would fit in with us at the Vault."

"We're not going to go over on time?" Boone asked.

"There's just you people and the Glisans," said Luis. "That's it."

"Wow," Mary said, her voice rising.

“We’ve know some bits and pieces of what you’ve described here,” said Hunter. “We were highly selective with our vetting here. Frank Noris isn’t exactly an enemy to us but he is certainly not an ally...I say that in confidence.”

“That’s no problem,” said Boone.

“The fact that you’ve been able to see so much of this and not get yourself tangled up in it says a lot to me,” Milena. She turned slightly toward her brother, her muscular frame moving with grace, and said, “I’m okay with just a couple questions. I have a good feel about them. They’re the kind of people I would like at the Vault. Boone, I am slightly concerned you won’t be present enough for your child. Could you tell me how you plan on being present?”

Boone nodded many times and furrowed his brow while collecting his thoughts.

“I imagine you have the concern given my involvement in my work at this point,” he said.

“Precisely,” said Milena.

He sat up a little straighter and said, “I don’t need to work for the next five years if I can sell off all of my assets here and bring our two servbots. They’re top of the line silvers. Cost me a good amount of my inheritance. I can be at-home full time with my child.”

“What’s your self-knowledge regimen like?” asked Hunter. “Have you been to therapy?”

"I lived with a psychologist in a bunker for the first two years after the strikes. It was his bunker. I spent a fair amount of my inheritance on that, too. In exchange for the money and for some maintenance around the place, he let me stay and he worked with me on some things: namely my relationship to my anger. When it became safe to go outside again, I went south to a colony in the Catalina mountains. I finished my training in economics and finance there under an Austrian economist in his late 70's. He talked about self-knowledge. Between my experiences with those two men, I became self-reflective. My parents raised me without hitting or raised voices. My father used his anger to intimidate me. My mother was a caffeine addict. I spent five years learning lessons from those facts. Then I went and I built my financial house at a colony in the Andean mountains outside of Medellin, Colombia. I worked as a trader and, when I had the capital built up, a banker. You know that but what I didn't write in the intake is that I met Mary there and realized quickly that I was still very needy and unresolved emotionally. Mary liked me, tolerated me-" he said with a smile to his wife, "and was very patient while I did more unearthing and feeling. She kept strong boundaries with me. I learned to journal every single day. I learned to meditate in the mornings or in the evenings. I learned to talk with the sides of myself, especially the dark ones. It's ongoing. I don't feel as invested in the process as I'd like to be. We've had ongoing conversations about having a child since we got married four years ago. I'm forty-two now and she's thirty-six. It didn't make sense to wait any longer."

"He's been cashing out accounts and selling off assets for the last two years," said Mary.

"It's been a slow process," said Boone. "I talk big talk about contributing there at the Vault but I think you've got me dead-to-rights, Milena. I lost my parents in the strikes and only salvaged a small portion of their wealth. If I hadn't salvaged it, I may have ended up serving in a military or a militia."

“Not many of those left...” Luis said to himself in a quiet tone.

“We are established here at San Martin but...”

“There’s more for us, I think,” said Mary. “I want to live at the Vault but on the condition you all consider changing its name.”

The three visitors were surprised and intrigued. No one had ever made mention of changing the name of their home. It was a name that Eddie Adler had chosen and that had stuck ever since. With sidelong glances at one another, the visitors agreed amongst themselves.

“What do you have in mind?” Luis asked.

“I don’t know,” said Mary. “I’ll have to see it,” she added coyly.

This elicited laughter from Luis. He stood up and stretched. He yawned slowly and said he was going for a walk. His sibling companions took this as his way of giving approval to the prospective couple.

“Last question from me and I’m going to cut to the chase: can you raise your child without abusing him, not even once?” Milena asked with special intensity.

The couple calmly looked at each other and considered the question for some time.

Boone was the first to speak, “No. I don’t think we can. Something’s going to get passed on. That may not be the answer you wanted to hear but it’s the truth. I *can* say with a lot of certainty that we will only have one child, that I’ll work my ass off if I make a mistake, and that between Mary and I, I’ve got the most work to do on myself. We need a support network. If we have a good support network, our child will flourish. I’ll never raise my voice, raise my hand to strike, misuse my anger, or lose my patience.”

“Will you ever dissociate?” asked Milena.

"Never around our kid if at all possible," Boone said emphatically. "When I do, I will keep it contained and I'll reach out and get help and work on it."

"I feel the same way," said Mary.

Hunter and Milena graciously thanked the couple for their time, telling them they needed to get lunch and deliberate over their decision. Boone and Mary lingered for a moment. They hoped for some kind of sign from the siblings that their application for entrance into the Vault had been accepted.

Mary thought to herself, *I'm glad I said what I did about changing the name of their colony. A 'vault' is a place where things are stored beyond great protection. I don't want to be in storage. I want to live! I hope I didn't turn them off by mentioning this.* She glanced one more time over her shoulder at the siblings exiting the gymnasium and walking in a different direction. She hooked her arm through her husband's large arm and nestled close to him, her sandy blonde hair covering part of her field of vision. She had great hopes but sensed trepidation in Hunter and Milena. This troubled her.

Hunter and Milena sat down at an eatery. It was a simple café with austere furnishings. The walls were painted shades of deep green and olive. The man who owned the place shared the building with the town's library. There were several benches and reclining chairs in a sunroom at the rear end of the establishment, primed for the book reader to relax in. A tomcat stalked the walkways of the café. A fishbowl sat near the old-timey register manned by a teenager. The siblings ordered their meals, and discussed their recent interview.

"You're not fully satisfied are you?" Hunter asked his sister.

"No, I'm not quite fully satisfied. Something's a little off and I mostly pick it up from Boone," she said.

"I could sense that. What were your feelings telling you about him?"

"I felt sad. He doesn't seem to fully believe in himself. He's caught up in his financial concerns when his resting state is quite secure."

"I had a similar sadness coming up for me. Do you think he'll be able to work it out?"

"I do think he will. We don't have any conditional acceptance terms set up. I don't know when he'll work it out by. I don't think it's enough to stress his wife out while the baby is in utero. Boone can probably work it out by the time his son is born."

Their server approached gently and said in a meek voice, "So sorry, we ran out of spinach for your omelets. Our runner is going to get some more. Do you want to wait for him or would you like to substitute? Again, so sorry."

"How long's the wait?" Hunter asked.

"He'll be back within 15 minutes. Your order should be up in 20 minutes at the most," the server said. He was a newcomer to the colony, eager to prove his merits and add value.

"We can wait. Millie, you wanna go for a walk?"

She agreed and they gave notice they'd return in ten minutes' time.

"It's a beautiful town," Milena said as they left the café and stood on the sidewalk. She put on a stocking cap and they commended their walk.

"I love the pines," the brother said. "They remind me of Big Sky, that summer we were out there with Uncle Norm."

They walked in silence for some time. The streets were dotted with vendors and people walking to and from their places of work. A driverless car went by, its electrical components whisper-quiet in their operation. A group of puck drones flitted past the siblings, pausing to document them before continuing on to their charging docks.

“Something I see in Boone and Mary is a deep and abiding love. You see it in their body language. They don’t advertise it in the things they say but it’s there. It’s something I noticed about Robert and Ida as well. Their love for each other was like walking into a warm room,” said Milena.

“I noticed it, too,” said Hunter. “Boone and Mary love each other and they’re good allies. Boone is very obviously in mourning, from my perspective.”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of it that way but it makes sense,” said Milena.

“How are you feeling about your reservations around Boone?”

“I’m feeling better, more clarified. Talking about their bond helps me to see that they will work very hard to meet the standards we have back home.”

“To what degree is abuse acceptable?”

“You and I both know the answer to that, Hunter. It’s completely unacceptable. I think we will get further with Boone and Mary by appealing to their true selves, not by actively setting limits with them. In this environment here they’re choked with limits and gossip and intrigue. I don’t want that.”

“I don’t want that either, not for them or for anyone. If we offer them a way out of here, I don’t want to take it back. They’re either in or they’re out,” said the young man.

“We should probably head back to the café.”

They resumed their table in the café. Milena stopped to admire a framed picture on the wall of salmon climbing a short waterfall.

“Here you are,” the server said as he set down their plates. They had just seated themselves. Both were pleased at the timeliness of the food and set in on their meals.

“Either they’re in or they’re out...” said Milena. “They’re definitely more on the edge of things for me but that could be the environment here coloring things as well. Robert and Ida had virtually none of the concerns that they do.”

"I think that's cause Sean and Herman set the tone over there," said Hunter. "They spent enough time with Eddie and Nick and Roger to know how important it is to keep a community decentralized and laissez faire."

"We have that same responsibility."

"It's a hard one. We do need standards"

There was some silence as the two ate.

Hunter watched the beads of condensation form on the outside of his drinking glass. He thought about a book he had been reading on self-inquiry and metaphysics. The formation of droplets of water reminded him of something he couldn't place his finger on.

"Have you thought about Mom much since we've been here?" he asked his sister.

"I've thought about her *all* the time. It feels like I'm somewhere really historical even though I've never been here before. It's not so much an anxious experience as it is mildly uncomfortable, like one of my socks is wet from stepping in a puddle," she said. She rubbed at her upper back. It was slightly sore from the exercises she had been doing aboard their airship. "What about you?" she asked.

"I've thought about her some. A bit more than that, I've had this looming sense of dread that something is going to happen with Frank Noris and that he's going to somehow involve Mom."

"Do you think any of that is transference from Boone and Mary?"

"I hadn't considered that much...I don't think it is. I was feeling some of this on our way over here. It definitely has been triggering up a bit of my historical discomfort to be here. It's like being around Mom and Dad again but a little more intense on the Dad side of things."

"I think we should have strong boundaries with Frank and steer clear of him as much as possible," said the sister.

At that moment, Luis walked by their window booth in the café and took notice of them with a start. He tapped on the window and smiled warmly at them, motioning that he would come in and join them. They motioned in return, happy to see him.

"The food is good here, what do you think?" he beamed as he gently and slowly sat down next to Milena.

"Yes," said Milena. "Very full flavors and very nutrient dense, if I had to guess."

"Oh, no thank you," Luis said to the server who approached the table with a look of nervous concern in his face. "I already had lunch."

The tall, slender young man turned away and busied himself with helping a yellow servbot in mild disrepair bus some dishes.

"Where did you eat?" Hunter asked the older man.

"There was a barbecue place near the gymnasium, a small stand an old woman was running. It was delicious. The beef on this continent is delicious. I had forgotten. Much better than those strained pea patties we have at the Vault."

"We have some beef," offered Hunter.

"And more if Nick and Herman have their way," Luis said with a smile. "I had a very satisfying walk just now. It is good to see these people rehabilitating the environment with all of their trade. I saw two boys trimming bushes by the park. It reminds me of when I was your age, living in Uruguay. The children had unions there. It was bizarre but exciting, to say the least."

"Remind me again how old you are?" Milena asked as she leaned her head against his shoulder and nudged him playfully.

"I will be turning 70 in three months. What do you two think of this couple? I like them. I think they have a good nose for staying out of trouble."

"We were talking about our feelings on them," said Hunter.

“They have good boundaries,” said the sister. “Boone is more unresolved than I would like him to be but part of that is exacerbated by the social isolation these two have been living in.”

“I think Boone would make friends with Nick,” said Luis.

“Friendship does so much good,” said Hunter.

“What’s the final verdict? We should get going,” said Luis.

The siblings looked at each other and nodded their heads in agreement.

“Very good,” said Luis.

Hunter paid for the meal and patted the young server, who happened to be the same age as him, on the shoulder as he left with his sister and his older mentor. They walked through the streets at an ambling pace, contented to talk a little more about the prospective couple and about their observations concerning the colony they were in. Luis caught himself looking into the air for the puck drones that had once so maliciously flown around the Vault. They could be spotted from time to time over this small town. Luis suspected that perhaps something was afoot. Nick’s voice played over and over in his thoughts, warning him to protect the Vault.

His suspicions were confirmed when, upon arrival at their work station in the gymnasium, Frank Noris could be seen at the far side of the workspace accompanied by two of his ‘Vanguard’.

Chapter 51: Let Others Pop Their Own Denial Bubbles

“I want to use this last half of our final broadcast here at *What’s Going On?* to speak to you about some things which I think are important,” Curro announced to the audience on-set. He was dressed in a blue business suit, a small yellow flower pinned to his lapel. He strode the stage with unshakeable confidence.

“Yes, it’s true,” he continued, “we have not been renewed for another season. This is it. The producers here have been so kind as to give me *carte blanche* for this episode and it has been good to spend some time looking back on what we achieved with this show. For now, I would like for you to look forward. We’re taping this in late May and I assume you will see it in early June of this year, 2001. Before I begin, I would like you to know that we’re going to do a guided meditation. There’s nothing mystical about this one. I’ll keep it focused on your relationship to yourself.”

“Remember to ask for permission,” Ezra spoke to Curro through his earpiece.

“I’d like your permission before we start. I will not lull you into submission. This is a basic meditation exercise and I don’t view it as being the same as hypnosis. I am not going to reach into your mind and ‘heal’ you. It’s you in charge and you may stop the process at any moment you feel comfortable. I encourage you to feel your feelings throughout this. Please don’t push them away and if at any point you would like to stop, please stop and come back when you feel right to do so.”

“Very good,” said Ezra.

Curro, with the full attention of the studio audience, stood at the center of the stage and said, "Take a deep breath. We're going to begin now. Breathe deep into your stomach. Close your eyes. Set aside your concerns for the day and step into a wider perspective on your life. With the most honest appraisal you can muster, I want you to consider who you hurt. Who do you hurt with your words or with your actions? Keep those eyes closed and keep breathing in deeply. Imagine yourself hurting them, as you have done in the past. Now step back from that, in your mind's eye. Picture a scene in front of you. You are seated in a chair, watching this scene play out in front of you. In this scene are you and the person you're hurting. Remember to breathe in deeply and relax. Watch the scene play out. Now rewind it and play it again but play it at half speed. Zoom in closely on the face of the person you're hurting. Watch the emotions play out on their face. Track the emotions and name them as they occur to you in slow motion. Remember to breathe in deeply. Maybe they feel anger. Maybe they feel terror or sadness, fear and pain. Whatever those emotions are, track them as the scene plays out once again. When the scene is over, play it through again. Now, experience what they are experiencing as the scene plays out. Feel their feelings. Feel the pain shiver through your body. Feel the sadness drag your face down. Feel the anger course in your chest. Feel whatever they're feeling. I want you to rewind the scene one more time and freeze it in time before the action begins, before you initiate your hurting of the others person.

Now, breathe in deeply. Relax into this next portion. Breath down into your core, down into your stomach. Slowly and gently, replace the person who you've hurt in this scene with the image of you...as a child. This may take a moment but stay focused and do it gently. Really remember who you were as a child. Pick an age before 12. Now, let the scene play out with the actions of the actors remaining the same as they were. Let it play out at half speed. Feel the feelings of that child...you. You as a child. Experience the pain of that child in your body. Experience the unpleasant feelings going through the child's body. Breathe in deeply. Exhale slowly and remain connected to the scene that has played out in front of you.

Now, in the aftermath of the exchange, step into the scene- no longer an idle viewer. Allow yourself to be noticed by you as an adult and you as a child. Step into the conflict. Show both sides curiosity as you continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Show them your regard and tenderness for them. Squat next to the child that you were and face the older, adult version of yourself that had just been hurting the child. Tell the adult that this hurting, this abusing cannot persist. Breathe in slowly and deliberately as you say these words. Know that you are in command of this scene. You come in peace and with full focus. Feel solid all the way through your core as you tell the adult the hurting and the abuse cannot persist. If need be, contain the adult with a field of energy should they lash out. You are the center around which the scene pivots. Pull back from the child gently and slowly, remembering to breathe deeply. Show the child your love for him or her. Let the child search your face and touch your hand if it so pleases. Give the child your warmest smile. Take a minute now and tell the child, with your deepest compassion and sympathy, all that is good about the child and worthy of loving. Continue to breathe deeply."

Curro took a seat upon a studio chair and continued to speak, "Pace yourself in your words. Be kind and measured. Ask if the child would like to leave this scene with you. Let it know that it will be leaving for somewhere better and calmer, a place that is healthier. The choice is for the child to make. If the child agrees, go with it now to a wonderful place you have made with your imagination and enjoy in the splendor of the new place. If the child is unwilling, address its concerns. Stay connected with the child and breathe deeply into your stomach. Take some time and be here.

Alright, wrap up whatever is going on for you. The time is coming for us to part with the child. Let the child know you will be back. Make a contract with the child. Perhaps you will be back in an hour, perhaps in a day. Perhaps in your dreams this evening. Let the child know, this child who is you as you once were, that you care for it deeply. Let the child feel your love and admiration one more time as you begin to say your goodbyes. Breathe in slowly and notice the breath coming into your lungs, filling your chest and your stomach. With a few blinks, start to return to the room. Stretch if you need to. Rub your face. Yawn. Whatever you need in order to feel alert and connected to what is happening now, in real time. Thank you. We'll be back. Mute the commercials for this break if that's what feels right to you. If you need to go for a walk and be with your feelings, please go do so...even those of you here in our studio audience."

Elaine stood off set and shook her head in discomfort and disbelief. She shrugged at Curro when he smiled at her. The stage director gave the cue for a filming break and Curro stepped away from the set and toward his friends awaiting him in their viewing room. They had a half hour to talk things over before the final footage for *What's Going On?* would be captured.

"That was good," Jake said as Curro stepped into the viewing room.

"I thought so, too. It flowed," said the show host. "I have a doubt. I'm not sure we should do this next part. I think it would confuse people."

"They need to know," pressed Ezra. "Horrible things are going to befall them. We have a moral obligation to do something."

Ezra was seated in a leather executive chair. He was wearing a business suit, an extremely rare change of clothes for him. He had begun to recognize over time that the specific style of his dress was becoming less and less important to him. This fact did not make his suit any more comfortable, however, and he fidgeted from time to time. He was experimenting with different manners of dress.

"This is tricky..." mused Tuffy. He was curled up in a large ball atop a cabinet containing audio-video equipment. Such great heights were easy to attain on account of his ability to calculate the physics of any leap he undertook.

"Where do you stand?" Ezra asked Jake. Ezra was more and more often deferring to others, learning their preferences and watching with curiosity as those preferences played out.

Jake cleared his throat of the faintest of residue from a salad he had been eating and said, "What's the time? Right. I agree with Tuffy, it's tricky. We've been over this a bunch. I think if we don't say anything now, we'll probably do something later. I mean, the Feds are going to be up our asses if we talk about the terrorist attacks in September. I still feel like we should do something but I'm leaning toward Cong's ideas on this. Sorry, Ez."

Ezra was visibly disappointed but willing to accept his friend's standing on the matter. He looked at Curro with curiosity and asked, "What's your doubt?"

Curro watched the TV feed of the on-set cameras. People were milling about and chatting in the audience. He could see the stage director ordering for changes to be made. Elaine was sipping from a tall cup of coffee and murmuring over her shoulder to an assistant.

"I think it would confuse people," said the host.

"I say we tell them the truth and let them sort their feelings out for themselves," said Ezra.

Curro looked calmly at Ezra and said, "I don't think people can sort their feelings out for themselves."

"That fits in with what I was saying," said Jake. "People with the truth and little ability to sort out their own feelings use the truth to pump up their grandiosity. They use it as a weapon. It's basically giving a wounded child a superpower. Just look at how everyone in this time is brainwashed by the mass media. The gatekeepers know the truth and they use it as a tool for manipulation—"

"To pump up their grandiosity," Tuffy chimed in.

"Thanks. Yes, exactly that," said Jake.

"I mean, we're talking about telling people about terrorist attacks," said Ezra. "It's not like we're going into the childhood stuff..."

"There's another element here I just don't know about," said Curro. "I don't know if it's right to tell people now. We've helped them get in touch with their inner child. It's like doing a bunch of journaling or meditation and then going and watching a documentary on some atrocity. There's an imbalance there."

"At some point we have to speak the truth, unabashedly and courageously," Ezra spoke in steady cadence. "It might not be here and now though. I think your hesitations are onto something," he said to the well-dressed host sitting in a chair before him.

"We'll find the platform," said Curro. "After all, I'm staying in this time. I have to have some kind of career here."

"You could be a jet-setting billionaire," said Tuffy.

"Spread is going to make you very rich," said Jake.

Curro smiled up at the cat. He addressed Jake and said, "We'll see. Yes, if I become truly independently wealthy I think I will travel the globe and use my clout to nudge everyone toward the things we know and the things you three have seen."

"What about intervening in 9/11?" Jake asked.

"I don't have anything against that. I just don't think this is the time or the platform for it. We're going to have to do it more subtly," said Curro. "There's no point in rotting in a federal prison, off the books, because we outed what few details we know about some upcoming attacks."

"Logically speaking, the closer we intervene to the attacks the less risk we put ourselves at when it comes to the government's predation," said Ezra.

The sound of an intercom buzzed into the room and Elaine could be heard saying, "Curro, we're going to need you on-set in 30 seconds. We have a few things to go over."

He looked at his companions and said, "I have a backup plan."

"I know what it is!" Tuffy sang to the group. He was very pleased with himself.

"What is it?" Ezra asked.

"I'm going to read from an Alice Miller book and give my thoughts on it," beamed Curro.

"Good luck!" said Ezra. His eyes were full of admiration for his intelligent friend.

Curro embraced his supportive friends, thanking them for supporting him during the course of his subversive stint as a TV show host. He had done it true to his values, as true as the format would allow. He had remained boundaried and measured when he needed to, in order to keep the show on the air. He had pushed the envelope where he felt he could. The show was coming to an end but some of the biggest excitement was yet to come.

Chapter 52: Out of the Bunker

In the gymnasium at San Martin de los Andes stood Frank Noris and his 'Vanguard'. They regarded Hunter, Milena, and Luis with steely eyes.

"Good afternoon," said Frank as the visitors approached. He held out his hand to each one of them and greetings were exchanged. Not a person in either party was pleased about the circumstances.

"Shall we have a seat," Frank said as he motioned to where the visiting committee had previously been interviewing potential families.

"I'd prefer to stand. Here is fine," Hunter said with firmness.

Frank tracked the faces of Luis and Milena and saw that they were in solidarity with the bold young man from the Antarctic.

"That's fine," Frank said, thrown off by the assertiveness in front of him. "We're here because we need you to tell us your thoughts on Eddie Adler."

"Right...just to be clear, are you asking about our personal relationships with the man or our perspectives on his public works?" Hunter asked.

Frank was again thrown off and said, "Well, we just...we wanted to know if you could answer a question directly or not. People of courage are able to answer questions that are put to them. It seems you cannot give us your thoughts on Eddie Adler."

"Ergo we're not people of courage?" Hunter asked.

Frank squirmed and asked, "How are you feeling right now, Hunter? What is the thought that accompanies that feeling? If you are a person of courage, you will answer my question directly. You have nothing to hide, so why not answer truthfully so that all gathered may know the nature of your character?"

The Vanguard on either side of Frank stood with arms crossed. They were men of European descent, tall and intense. One was muscular and the other looked as if he tended to a special diet and nothing more.

Hunter glanced at his sister before returning his look to Frank and saying, "I must say, Mr. Noris, this is a very bizarre encounter for me. You stand here demanding to know my emotional state and details about my relationship with someone I know and if I don't answer your questions, thereby validating your approach to interpersonal communication, you will shame me as a kind of coward who cannot stand with the truth."

"So, you're feeling confused and the thought is that this is a bizarre encounter for you?" Frank asked. Frank stood coiled like a venomous snake, barely contained within his finely tailored black outfit.

"I'd prefer not to be engaged the way you're engaging me," said Hunter. His voice was firm and he remained undaunted by the size of the Vanguard facing him.

"Sounds like you have a protector up for you," said Frank. "I would prefer to speak to your True Self. Can you ask that part of you that is working very hard to protect you to step aside? We need to engage in the moment and in reality."

"And if I don't engage you on these terms you've set forth?" Hunter asked.

"This is a very strong defense for you, it seems but perhaps I'm wrong," said Frank. "While I don't appreciate the fragility with which you've conducted yourself, I will say that it seems we are in disagreement. It is my preference engage in the moment and through reality. You seem to have a different preference. Since we are in disagreement, one of us is in a defense. By communicating in real time, we will be able to determine who is in a defense and who isn't."

“And if I choose not to engage in this dialogue you want for us on the terms you’ve set forth?” Hunter asked again.

“Well then, I would lose interest in you knowing that you do not want to engage in reality from philosophical principles. I would know that you are a person who does not live his values, given that you claim to have a principled community there at the Vault. I would disengage from all social contact with you knowing that you have turned your back on truth and are doomed to live in corruption until you have apologized to me and made full amends for your inability to process reality here and now in this interaction. I would tell everyone I know that if they cared about truth, they would ask me my experience of this interaction. They would know it was a negative experience for me and since I have credibility with them, credibility I have earned as a philosopher in this community, they would be fully aware of your corruption. I won’t let someone like you poison our community, Hunter. I’m beginning to suspect you’re a toxic abuser. Since you have not engaged me in a conversation in the moment, you have turned your back on a win-win dialogue. I expect an apology from you but know that I say this to appeal to your more mature sides-“

“I’m not interested in listening to you anymore,” said Hunter.

“I’m the healthiest one here. I set the standards,” said Frank, almost in a growl.

“I’d rather not be engaged by you any further,” said Hunter. “Are you two interested in what he has to say?” he asked Luis and Milena.

“I’m not,” said Milena. She had a resolute look in her face.

“I’m not either,” said Luis. His arms crossed over his belly and his feet inched apart in a powerful stance.

“We’re not going to leave,” said Frank. “This is our community. You’re not welcome here. You’re not going to get your vampiric supply here.”

"Alright," Hunter said, wincing and deflecting Frank's comments unrelated to his own interests. "We need to pack up," he said to his companions.

"You're not welcome to take anyone with you," said Frank.

Hunter, Milena, and Luis began to activate their servbots and their airship. The wheels were set in motion for their departure.

"Ignoring someone is the most abusive act of them all!" Frank called out to the trio as they began to move away, becoming preoccupied with their affairs. "If you take anyone with you, we will first have to confer with Lucius..."

The visiting trio was heading out of the gymnasium, watching their servbots carry cargo toward the awaiting airship some distance away in a grassy field.

"That guy is a prick," said Milena. "I can't believe Mom spends time around him. She must be so lost."

"That felt like a tentacle trying to reach up into my stomach," said Luis. He tugged at his suspenders and felt his body begin to relax.

"People like him get zero access to my inner world. Feels like we're running out of time here. What should we do about Boone and Mary?" Hunter asked his companions.

"They're welcome to come if they want," said Milena. "I agree, we're kind of on a short timeline here. I don't know what his Vanguard will do."

"*Bastardos*," Luis muttered in anger.

They attended to the last of the logistics before their airship could take off. It felt as though this mountain community was closing in on them. They were greeted with looks of suspicion at several points. They questioned if this was the work of the Vanguard. The looks had been so tolerant only a short time ago.

They neared the cabin where Boone and Mary lived and saw that Vanguard were standing outside of it. A woman with auburn hair sat upon a horse, wearing the uniform of a Vanguard. She eyed the trio stoically as they knocked on the door.

Boone answered the door.

"Hey guys," he said with a kind of disturbed alertness.

Frank Noris came and stood several feet behind Boone and could be seen through the doorway.

"These are internal matters," Frank called to the trio. "You have to pay membership dues and meet our community's standards to be here."

"What's going on?" Hunter asked Boone.

Boone grimaced and stepped through the doorway and out onto the porch, fully aware this would displease Noris.

"They want us to confer with Lucius before we leave," he said to the visitors.

Behind the trio the horse neighed in displeasure. Its powerful hooves clomped on the ground as it steadied itself.

"You don't have to do that," said Milena in a loving voice.

Frank stepped with precision into the doorway of the cabin and said, "This affects the community. You're not a part of the community, as you are not willing to communicate in real time and adhere to our values here. Please leave."

The woman on the horse leaned over and talked to a bald man wearing the uniform of the Vanguard. He had a wild look of fervor and devotion in his eyes. Luis shuddered as he regarded the two whispering to each other.

A quiet settled over the scene. Boone looked long and hard at Hunter and Milena, unsure of himself and unsure of their motivations. Within him stood two men, at odds and in a heavy discussion. A chorus rose in his thoughts and died down. The child inside him wept.

“Mary,” he called to his woman. “Let’s get the suitcases. We’re leaving.”

Mary stepped away from the many Vanguard in her living room and grabbed what she could carry. Boone joined her in gathering their things. He lifted his bricks of gold in their large suitcase as if they weighed little more than a feather. Hunter and Milena helped as well.

The woman on the horse bullied her way to the front of the porch, blocking the way out.

Immediately Frank Noris checked her misbehavior with the sudden outstretching of his hand and the raising of his palm toward her. He emitted a curt hiss, “Don’t break the non-aggression principle. Let them through. Boone and Mary don’t value the opinion of our leader. We can’t force them to. We only get one chance at greatness. They have lost theirs. Don’t let them take you down with them.”

The woman on the horse pulled away from her course of action and returned to the side of her bald companion. They were romantic partners. They each bore a matching ring on one finger.

The visiting trio led their new companions away from the cabin. They all looked with hope to the airship.

“Thanks for seeing all that,” Mary said to Hunter.

“Thanks for coming,” he replied.

The group walked to the airship and flew away from San Martin de Los Andes, never to return again.

Chapter 53: Mentor and Mentee

Eddie Adler and Xiao Ma sat on the wicker loveseat on his observation deck overlooking the biosphere. They had made it a point to visit every other day, at the very least. Eddie's health was slowly deteriorating. His eyesight was fading, his heart was weakening, and his mind was slowing. Both of his parents had died in their mid-80's. He was now 85 years old. He sat calmly and contentedly to the left of Xiao Ma, dressed in a white collared shirt tucked into elegant, dark blue pants. He wore thick brimmed glasses on his weathered and aged face. His silver hair that had been so thick and lustrous only a year before was now thinning and receding. There was a proud look etched into his face mixed with sadness and some grief. His once muscular body had become more and more birdlike, lanky and bony. There was a noticeable tremble in both of his hands. The tremble had grown recently and could now be seen in his neck and his head. This did not trouble Eddie.

Xiao Ma was 46 years old. She had not borne any children with Roger or any other partner. She had dedicated her life to her studies and to the growth of Hunter and Milena when they had come into her life. She looked after Nick Williams as well. Her time spent with Eddie was that of pure pleasure and connected relating. She loved the old man. She loved him more than she had loved her own father. Between Eddie and Xiao Ma there had been some acceptance that the woman would love the older man as a father. It bothered them only slightly.

"Our band of travelers will be returning soon," said Eddie hoarsely. He cleared his throat but such a behavior was losing its efficacy.

"It seems like they've been gone a week," said Xiao Ma.

They looked out onto the biosphere. It had grown considerably in size and there many logistical and structural problems beginning to show themselves. Nick Williams could be seen faraway on a wheeled vehicle, hauling a piece of machinery to an unknown destination.

"I wonder if they'll have succeeded in their mission," said Eddie.

"Luis said there's a bunker near Mt. Lyell in the Sierra Nevada that wasn't there a few months ago. We haven't made contact with them yet but they look to be very advanced," said Xiao Ma.

"A bunker in the Sierra Nevada, that is impressive," said the old man. "It's bizarre to consider these things flitting up into existence, or rather, it has always been there. It confuses me."

"It confuses me as well. Things seem to be going well here. I almost question our whole use of time travel in the first place," said Xiao Ma.

"It has muddled things up, hasn't it?" Eddie said with a chuckle. He coughed gently and took a sip from a glass of water. "Parts of me are still very curious about going back to my boyhood and rescuing myself from my parents...I will say."

"It's an interesting idea. Would probably be really tricky to execute, though."

"It's another thought for another time," said Eddie. "Meanwhile, our band of travelers continue on in their own way. I wonder how they are doing."

"I'm looking forward to seeing them again," said Xiao Ma. "I think of Jake in particular. I loved his songs. It will be so wonderful to hear his music again. He'll have three more years of songs under his belt. He sings so many of the things I feel. It's hard to see those boundaries, though: that I have served him as a therapist. It will be easier now that there are more people here. Somehow it will be easier."

Xiao Ma was very fit. She had taken up a dedicated yoga practice in the previous five years, learning from archived videos and more recently from intermittent VR broadcasts from a woman living in colony in the mountains of northern Japan. Xiao Ma's body was lean and muscled. She could stand on her head with ease and was beginning to master a head-to-foot pose. Her face had thinned over the years. There no signs of grey hair on her head. Her lips were gaunt and her eyes were focused and searching.

"I think it will be easier," said Eddie. "I have enjoyed Robert and Mary and their son Samuel. They have brought to mind for me the fact that this place is not a paradise. It cannot be. It must become an open system. We will do our best to nurture the healthiest community we can conceive but there will be conflict and tension at times. The facilities will not hold up forever with one or two minders and an army of servbots. I think Hunter and Milena are on the right track."

"We are all on a good track."

"Indeed, we are."

"There's something I've been thinking about," said Xiao Ma.

"Go on," Eddie prompted her.

"I'm considering leaving my practice. I mean, though I haven't seen anyone as clients for a while...I think I will abstain from my practice going forward."

"Why is that?"

“I’m conflicted about it. I think that’s why I brought it up with you. On the one hand, I perceive there could be a use for my skills and perspective given the newcomers. I’m sure there will be at least another family or two beyond Robert and Ida to come. Then again, my heart isn’t in psychology right now. I want to do different things. Roger wants to travel, now that the air isn’t as toxic as it was. He wants to rock climb. It sounds like fun. We want to go to Shanghai and see what’s left there. Overall, I just don’t see myself serving as a therapist to these new people that are coming to the Vault. Yet, isn’t this where my strongest talents lie? Shouldn’t I want to provide value to a new community in the way that I am best capable and trained? These are my hesitations. For so long I have held an advanced perspective, in some respects, but I’m tiring of that life. I’m tired of pointing out the signs along the way. I’m tired of dispelling others from mythology. I want some adventure of a different kind. Does this make me neglectful and isolating?”

The woman gave the old man a vulnerable look as she finished her thought. He was touched by her tenderness. He had grown accustomed to her headstrong qualities over the years but he knew there were other sides to her.

He coughed into the back of his hand and then he spoke, "Growth comes in many forms, I think. Maybe you think your growth is taking you in a direction away from your practice. There's no 'should' in regards to staying around here and helping those you can with your insights and perspective. Perhaps we would all be better served if you and Roger went on your adventures together. If your heart isn't in your work, you have to take a chance and find a new way. Or perhaps you will return to your practice, invigorated with new perspectives and lessons. I wouldn't make a vow to continue to practice because you see some people could benefit from it. Your growth is at the center of your life. Speaking as your friend, I treasure your growth. I don't expect you stay around here. I may have founded this place but I hold no expectations for tenure from anyone."

Xiao Ma took one of Eddie's trembling hands into hers and said, "Thank you, Eddie. That's useful. You're right. Since Hunter and Milena have really gone their own way, I have felt this role of 'therapist' drifting out of my grasp. Maybe it will come back, maybe it won't. You are right, anyhow. There's growing I need to do. Growth to be seen to that resides far outside that old role. It served me for a time."

"When did you first know you wanted to work in psychology?" Eddie asked his friend.

"I knew when I was...seven years old. I was in a small classroom outside of Shanghai. My friends were seated with me. There was- have I told you this story before?" she asked.

"You may have but tell me again."

“There was a conflict between two of my friends. I took an interest in it. They were both very nice girls, from my point of view, yet they quarreled. They reproached each other. They lost their cool. It was over a drawing they disagreed on. I remember listening to them both and, as it was a matter of aesthetic preferences, hearing their deeper emotional needs. It wasn’t my place to fill them. I knew that on some level. I was able to speak to their needs and bridge the divide that had opened up between them. Nima and...Ting were their names.”

“Did the teacher notice?”

“Our parents were there. It was a parent-teacher conference. No, I don’t think any of the adults noticed at the time but I did tell my parents about the situation later that night when they asked me about my night. They said they were proud of my empathy and proud of me for speaking to the good in both those girls.”

“One of the better things your parents did, I’d imagine,” said Eddie.

“Most certainly so.”

They both relaxed into the loveseat and gazed out onto the biosphere. Birds flitted through the air. Fish could be seen in the waters. A small deer grazed in the grass and then another peered into view from a wooded thicket nearby.

Far off in the distance, Nick Williams could be glimpsed heading toward his work. He had returned again and again to the far side of one of the very few small mountains within the biosphere. He wove through the rocky crags of the mountainside in his wheeled vehicle, whistling a tune to himself and thinking about what he would have for lunch. He passed by Yama, who was carrying a large rock away from a quarry. Nick slowed his pace as he approached his work site. Nestled into the ground sat the semi-hidden terraforming pod, the valuable piece of technology he and Luis had taken out of their workshops and into the woods. Roger stood near the pod, monitoring a software test on the device through some uplinked hardware on a large table.

"You hungry?" Nick asked his younger friend, wiping sweat from his forehead using a handkerchief. He placed the handkerchief back into the front pocket of his overalls and dismounted his vehicle.

"Yeah, a little," said Roger. "What do you have?"

"Nothing, that's the thing," Nick said wryly. "You wanna' go for lunch soon?"

"After this," Roger said, indicating the test running in front of him.

"I got word from Luis. He said they're bringing another family here. This one's from San Martin, that colony that Frank Noris is running. Hand me that, would you?"

Roger handed over to Nick the pen-looking device he used for tagging animals.

"This might make a nice toy for Samuel," said the older man.

"If he doesn't shoot someone's eye out with it first."

"Hell, you're right. Maybe when he's older."

Nick took a bottle of water out from a servbot and drank. He burped loudly and said, "Luis and me were talking and he says that Frank Noris won't come here again. He said he was damn sure of it."

“How’s that?” asked Roger.

Roger stepped away from the table and sat upon a rock beneath a juniper tree. He began tying the laces of his boot, keeping his eyes on his older friend.

“He told me they had an encounter with the guy and that he showed a lot of disdain toward them. He said Noris decided to act like he was too good for the Vault. He’s now ‘strongly urging’ people to not associate with us, especially Hunter and Milena. He says we’re all toxic and should be avoided. Something crawled up *his* ass, I’ll say,” said Nick, continuing to drink from his bottle of water. “I’m thinking it over. Luis sounded pretty serious. I think he wants us to stop working on this thing up here. I don’t know, though. Maybe the new fella’ they’re bringing here...what’s his name?”

“His name is Boone,” offered Roger.

“Maybe Boone’s a plant. You never know. He could steal our tech,” Nick bristled.

“I don’t think he’s a plant.”

“You don’t think so? Huh, why do you say that?”

“He’s got a kid on the way, that’s all I really know,” said Roger. “But that’s enough for me to know he’s not going to mess around where he’s not wanted. Fathers don’t take unhealthy risks like that, especially ones that have applied to come to the Vault. I think Boone is square.”

“Goddamn it, I know you’re right. Luis was saying that Boone and Mary aren’t welcome back at San Martin. We’re the best bet they’ve got. He’s not going to screw around. That’s my nerves and my suspicions at it again.”

“Friends to your anger,” added Roger.

“Now you’re talking,” Nick said encouragingly. He threaded his thumbs through the straps of his overalls as he often did and said, “It’s been fun having this thing up here. There’s something exciting for me about doing work near a mountaintop. There’s a mystique to it.”

“Well, we don’t need a sterile environment to do our work here,” said Roger.

“You sound like Xiao Ma talking about sex,” Nick ribbed his younger friend.

This comment drew a bemused smile from the quiet man. Nick walked past him on his way to the table and pressed a loving hand onto Roger’s shoulder, giving the shoulder a gentle pat.

“Holy hell, this thing is ready to rip!” he called out when he read the test results. “That Nick Brennan is one generous fellow.”

“Anytime you can have a coder of his caliber on a project, you go for it,” said Roger. “Why don’t you build a work lab up here, Nick?”

“Might as well build a little cabin up here while I’m at it,” said the stout man. “This life suits me well. Reminds me of my childhood: building driverless systems in my dad’s backyard, hoping to change the world. It’s the same darn thing, I just traded redwoods for the Picasso’s pallet of fruit trees you fellas’ cooked up for this place. So funny that I brought all this out here cause I was worried about Noris coming back but now it doesn’t bother me at all, thinking about him. It’s almost like I did what I truly wanted but did it in reaction to him showing up. I brought this prototype out here to keep it safe from him but, in general, the underlying idea is that I just feel more safe out here. Anyway, I feel like I’m getting a little away from the question you asked. What was it?”

“Why you didn’t just build a lab up here...”

“Right, yeah I think this is the place for me and I think you’re onto something with that. I guess I’m a kind of homesteader out here, even though so much of the landscape has been gone over a hundred thousand times by servbots with tools. You can’t hardly fart out here in the woods without running into one of them and I should know cause I tasked most of their projects!”

“Are you pleased?” Roger asked with the same bemused smile as before.

Nick laughed resoundingly from deep within his chest and then said, "If we could just figure out how to make it snow in here, I'd be a regular mountain man!"

"We could open up the roof," Roger quipped, pointing up at the distant mountain rock ceiling.

This caused much more laughter for Nick.

"I think I'd like to find a woman if I'm going to have a little cabin up here," said Nick. "It's been since before the impacts that I've known a woman intimately. I never really felt like I had time for them and then that whole mess happened. I don't know. Something's clicking for me. I'm 65 years old and haven't kissed a woman since I was 40. In generations past that would have been damn unnatural. I hear the winds of change blowin'. I'm going to live on this mountaintop and I'm going to have a woman, if she'll have me."

"Better have Luis start looking for you," said Roger, moving from his place beneath the tree toward a ledge facing away from the residential area some ways away. He had been peeing over this ledge in the past weeks since joining Nick in his work. He unzipped his pants and did as he was accustomed to.

"I'll call Herman, too. See who he knows up there in the Great North. I feel free to love, for some reason. It's beautiful, Rog. I don't quite understand it. I feel profoundly safe here, safe to love," the older man said with a tear forming in his eye. "It makes me happy. I've been working so hard to make this place beautiful and now it is and it's safe. I want to share that with someone."

"Makes a lot of sense to me," Roger called over his shoulder.

"Let's shut it down for the day. There's other stuff to do right now!" Nick called to his younger companion as he hopped back onto his vehicle. "You coming?"

Roger trotted over to the vehicle and sat on the back, smiling at a servbot that retracted its legs to make room for him. The vehicle roared to life and headed toward the residential zone at a steady clip.

Chapter 54: Fighting With Idiots

Jake stalked Terminal A of the Newark International Airport. It was early in the morning, nearing 7 AM. On his back there was a large traveller's backpack. Inside the backpack was Tuffy. Tuffy was busy scanning the sound in the terminal for Arabic. Jake was busy watching every male that neared the United Airlines check-in desk. In his coat pocket was a can of bear spray. Nearby, sitting on a bench was Ezra. He had purchased passage on United Airlines Flight 93 for September 11th, 2001 but had no intentions of boarding. He was also on the lookout for any possible hijackers of Muslim origin.

Cong was at a hotel in Newark, ready to call in a bomb threat at 7:30 AM on the airport.

Curro circled the airport terminal in a black getaway car, specially equipped with a powerful engine and rotating license plates bearing reflectors. Curro was the most heavily armed of the group, carrying a small caliber pistol.

The group was primed and ready for action, particularly Jake. He had a grandfather die in Muslim terrorist attacks in Birmingham, UK several decades before he had come to know the inhabitants at the Vault. His own father had grown up without a father because Muslim UK nationals had overpowered security, stormed a football match, and thrown grenades and pipe bombs into the crowds gathered. Jake knew the psycho-historical effects of murder and fatherlessness. He was eager to prevent what further ruination he could. From moment to moment his thoughts shifted and refreshed. He questioned whether there would be any hijackers in this place. He looked around and noticed a pair of airport security staff. He noticed the expandable steel batons pinned against their black pants. They noticed him watching them and he smiled a harmless, wearied smile. Airport announcements chimed on from time to time. The airport was coming to life.

“Get a read on that guy, Tuffy,” Jake said to his companion.

A small head poked up through the top flap and the cat said, “Where? Your head’s in the way.”

“Okay, right there,” said Jake as he turned to allow the cat to see a man who looked familiar to a man in a “Farewell” video that had been released by a terrorist organization earlier in the year.

“I can’t be sure...he looks Saudi but maybe he’s Latino,” whispered the cat. “Bring me closer. Let’s hear his accent when he checks in. What time is it?”

“7:02 AM on the dot. How close do you want me?”

“20 feet maybe, not anything more. They’ll want you to check in if you get much closer. Be cool,” said the cat.

The man wore a white collared shirt and was of Middle Eastern descent. He had a grim face with a square jaw and wide features. He was not carrying luggage.

"I think that's a hijacker," said Tuffy. "He's got an Arabic accent."

Jake glanced over at Ezra and indicated with another glance the man checking in without any luggage. Ezra rose from his seat and walked directly to his two friends.

"Tuffy thinks that's a hijacker," Jake said discreetly to his companion. "Should we roll on him?"

"Let him through," said Ezra.

"Are you fucking serious?" hissed Jake, wary of his voice carrying.

They remained unnoticed by airport security or by their target.

"One guy can't take over an aircraft," said Ezra. "Let's see if he meets with anyone."

"If he meets up with another brown skinned guy, his goose is cooked," Tuffy chirped from the backpack.

"There he goes," said Jake. "He's not meeting up with anyone. He's going to the gate. We don't know how many more of these guys there are. Let's roll on him."

"Give it a few. Let's see," bade Ezra.

The minutes passed unbearably. Ezra returned reluctantly to his bench seat. Tuffy hunkered back down into his hiding place. Jake began to sweat in anxiety. He pulled his great mane of hair from his face and shifted uncomfortably. He set down the backpack and took off his coat, setting it on the bench near Ezra.

"I see something," Tuffy gasped. This failed to grab the attention of Jake. Tuffy meowed loudly. Ezra and Jake heard the call. It had also aroused the attention of the pair of airport security staff, previously content to lean against a large stone column in the midst of talkative morning. Tuffy's friends met again. Jake placed the backpack upon his back. He was happy to be without his stifling coat.

"That's another one," said Tuffy.

"Flight takes off in...36 minutes," said Ezra. "There aren't going to be too many more. Maybe one or two more."

"Let's roll on this young lookin' fucker," said Jake. His muscles heaved in anticipation of combat. He realized he'd left his only weapon sitting in his coat, some fifteen feet away. The two security guards had begun to walk a patrol and were between him and his coat. A dark thought passed over Jake's mind and his fists clenched tightly.

"He might be a Latino," said Tuffy. "Mexican or something."

"That man is Middle Eastern," said Ezra. "Everyone in the last 15 minutes has been white. Cong's going to be calling in the bomb threat any minute. Let's roll," he said to Jake. Ezra walked swiftly outside to signal Curro to be on the ready for the getaway.

The young man of Saudi Arabian nationality, named Ahmed, approached the check-in counter for United Airlines carrying a single bag.

Jake had not been in a fight since fending off bandits on a highway a decade before but the violence came back into him. His adrenaline surged. He was about to subdue the much smaller man, not knowing if he carried weapons. Similarly, an eerie image flitted into Tuffy's mind. It had come to him out of his many days after his birth when Eddie and Hunter had placed him in front of a learning screen set to show him video footage of the major events of the last two centuries. It was an image of bodies leaping out of a tall burning building. This memory had remained in his biological mind, not subject to the erasure the time jump had caused. The searing signature of the memory came forth: a blistering anger. He leapt out of the backpack, only momentarily surprising Jake. Jake immediately guessed the cat's motives. Several awaiting passengers murmured in surprise, one of them letting out a yelp that brought the attention of the hijacker directly on the approaching behemoth and his grizzly human friend.

The terrorist made eye contact with Tuffy and was astonished...horrified at the brutal intent he saw gleaming in those green pools of lightning. Both Jake and Tuffy sprinted the last ten steps to the criminal and pounced with equal ferocity.

The man was slammed into the counter by Jake, two of his ribs breaking in the process. Tuffy tore away at the man's eyeballs with his sharpened steel claws, blinding the man as he yelled in agony. Screams let loose in the terminal.

The doddering security duo flashed to life but had no mental recourse for the spectacle before them. A grey housecat the size of mid-sized dog tore at the belly of man while the mountain man looking fellow who had smiled at them earlier stomped the downed man in the face.

Panic broke out in the terminal. One man made an attempt to stop Jake from his violence but was promptly zapped into spasms by the flick of Tuffy's electrically charged tail. A loud "zap" resounded.

"There's a goddamn bomb on Flight 93!" Jake bellowed at the attendants behind the counter. They trembled in fear and ducked down, afraid for their lives. "Do you hear me?" he yelled again. "There's a bomb on that fuckin' plane. This guy is goddamn terrorist."

The bloodied terrorist lay in an unconscious heap on the floor. Tuffy's digital mind began hacking the security camera relays in the area, focusing them all onto the feeds coming from gate A17. This was where boarding for Flight 93 was to occur. He spotted a third terrorist coming into sight at a long distance. The man was obviously deliberating as to whether or not to come to the aide of his compatriot.

Ezra dashed through a rotating door, having flagged down Curro in the precious minutes that had passed, and yelled, "Boys! We need to leave."

Jake trotted toward the door, slugging square on the jaw the unfortunate security guard who had tried to divert him from his exit. People continued screaming. The attendants nearby began calling the airport police and security. Jake looked to his right and saw Tuffy making a beeline for a man who was now running for his life.

“Clock’s ticking,” Ezra called to Jake as Jake rerouted and ran after the cat.

From the distant hotel, Cong was calling in a bomb threat to the police emergency line. His major emphasis was to repeat the words “Flight 93” and “terrorist”. He would soon vacate his room and head for a rendezvous point at a grocery store on the outskirts of the city.

With a yelp, the third terrorist went down. Tuffy had tripped him and was now tearing into his back near his kidneys. The man tried to fight off the ferocious beast but his fists were met by unnatural strength and a metal alloy skull. Jake was up to the man, kicking him at a full run in the face. The loud crack of a broken jaw was heard. The terrorist tried yelling out “Allah” but spurted out blood instead.

“Cat! Let’s go,” bellowed Jake.

They sprinted to the door Ezra held open. They bouldered through several men who were slowly approaching Ezra. They had been attempting to talk him into disarming himself from the hand he concealed in his coat pocket.

The group piled into the car, just barely out of sight from the police cars that arrived moments later. Curro stepped on the accelerator. The black car made its way out of the terminal, meeting no resistance.

“Holy fuck! We were just in the shit!” said Jake, panting in exhaustion. “That was awful!”

His body was overwhelmed with adrenaline and he began to quiver and shake. Tears filled his eyes and began flowing like rivulets.

“What happened with the bear spray?” Ezra asked from the front seat, confused and angry.

"I took off my coat. I got nervous! It was in there," Jake said between sobs.

Tuffy licked his claws in a daze. He had never attacked a human before. His higher emotions were in a tornado but his deep animal side felt sated.

"What happened?" Curro asked, his accent very thick.

"We might have killed one of them," cried Jake. "I've never attacked anyone before. Oh my god!"

"They'll live," Tuffy said between licks.

The car sped along, entering a highway. Tuffy and Jake panted heavily, their bodies heaving with adrenaline. Curro glanced again and again at his rearview mirror. He checked his watch and said, "Twelve minutes till we get to Cong."

"He has the Powersuit," Tuffy added calmly.

"He what?" Ezra asked in a loud voice. "I thought he left it in the cabin. If he gets caught, there's no telling what kind of future we'll have to go back to!"

Jake wiped snot from his nostrils with his shirt and said, "We scared the hell out of those people."

"We did what we did," said Ezra. "Those guys aren't getting on that plane and I bet there's no chance that plane is taking off. Perhaps it would have been one of the ones flying into the towers. We're talking thousands of lives, the course of Western society for the next 30 years." He placed a hand on Jake's leg.

Jake looked out the window and said, "I'm better now. This was the only choice we had. No fucking way any of us were going to Federal prison for sniffing out a high level terrorist plot and phoning it in."

Tuffy began to snuffle and cry, finally overcome by a sorrow that told him that even if this was one of the planes to strike the towers- a second would strike them. He asked for a drink of water. A cup from a thermos was held back to him by Ezra. Tuffy took the cup with his opposable thumbs and his paws and washed the blood away from his mouth. Jake took the cup and tossed the water out of the window when the cat was done with it.

"That was awful," said Ezra, "but I'm proud of you two. Those men would have murdered everyone on that flight."

"As we were running out of there I checked the flight roster. There were four men with Muslim names," said Tuffy.

"We missed two of them," lamented Jake.

"There's no way that flight is getting off the ground," said Ezra.

"Five minutes," said Curro, breathing more and more easily as he put distance between them and the airport.

The minutes passed as the group came into silence, each in repose. Tuffy reflected on the memory that had come to him in the moment before the violence. Jake felt an overwhelming sense of resoluteness, a kind of certainty that washed over him and stayed his blood. He felt a friend to his anger, the anger that told him the story of his grandfather as he watched out the window at the scenery flying by. Curro worried about how he was going to live the rest of his life in this time, knowing what he knew. Ezra thought of his creator, Hunter, and wondered what Hunter would have done with the scant knowledge possessed among the group. Would he have taken a similar course of action? Would he have convinced everyone to stand by and let the tragedies consummate? Were Luis and Nick conscious of the timing they chose for the jumps?

"Here," said Curro as they pulled into the parking lot of a budget grocery store. Cong sat in a grey sedan at the edge of the lot, its engine running. He was in the passenger seat. The group of interlopers piled into the sedan and drove north toward the Garden State Parkway and their eventual destination near Minnewaska State Park.

"There was awful violence, wasn't there?" Cong asked, having looked back at Jake and Tuffy through the rearview mirror.

Jake nodded, heavy with sadness.

"Did you kill them?" the old man asked.

Jake shook his head. Tuffy could be seen falling asleep, lulled by the easy rumble of the vehicle on the streets leading to the parkway.

"That is good," said Cong.

"You brought the Powersuit?" Ezra asked, his eyes searching the older man in the front seat through the side view mirror.

"Only to wear if I had to find you all, if you had not arrived on time," offered Cong.

"I understand," said Ezra. He petted Tuffy. Tuffy had begun to breathe heavily once again. His stomach expanded and contracted quickly. His breathing settled into a purr.

"*La radio*," Jake said to Curro.

Curro turned on the radio. There was nothing of note on the first few stations but eventually the dial came upon a station carrying reports of a vicious assault at Newark International Airport. The attackers had not yet been located. All flights out of the airport had been grounded for investigation and further details were not yet known.

Several of the friends in the car let out pleased groans upon hearing the news. The pleasure turned sour when a detailed description was given of Jake and his "attack animal".

"I saw scissors in the bathroom at the cabin," Curro joked from the driver's seat, making light of the reports of long, curly blonde hair.

"I think we are in the clear, no problem," said Cong.

"I see what has happened now," said Jake in an other-worldly voice. "We have been living in the past for too long. We have become more and more of this time."

Jake hesitated. Ezra pleaded with him to continue.

"We made violence just now...to avert a greater violence. We've been losing our perspective by remaining here in history for as long as we have. This current time is actually our history."

"We've fought idiots at their level," said Ezra.

"More or less," said Jake. "In our time...where we're from, there are so many more options for averting violence and there is so much less violence. There's desolation but there is actually little violence. We can use reason and logic and negotiation much more so than this time. We've stayed here longer than I am comfortable with."

"We're using our incredible gifts to fight idiots at their level," said Ezra.

"Agreed," sighed Tuffy between his sleepy breaths.

"I just stomped a man in the face. Now, he deserved it in that my action contained him from acting out his rage in a way that would have killed over 30 people. Perhaps hundreds more, thousands and tens of thousands after that if we nailed the guys who took down the towers in New York. But these are the bargains one makes in this time. Not in our time, though. We're from a healthier society, a healthier community. We engaged these fucking bastards in the only language they speak. In the greater scheme, we lost a bit of our dignity today."

"We moved away from Spread too soon," said Tuffy, rousing himself to a seated position.

"It's through Spread that we did our best work, work that actually helps the dimmer people of this time," said Ezra with clarity.

“Yes, we became too enthralled by the events of the day and lost our greater perspective: that we have an incredible Vault to return to. A home, though not without its flaws and problems, where our greatest abilities go almost fully utilized. We stayed in this backwards age too long. And Curro, please learn from our mistake. We’re leaving soon. We won on a tactical level today but we failed our highest values on a strategic level,” said Jake.

“I influenced things in this direction and I want to own it,” said Cong. “I brought the Powersuit and perhaps even introduced an unconscious element of violence that wasn’t here before.”

“We all bought in, though,” said Ezra. “It’s within us. Relative to the standards of today, what we did was heroic but fundamentally, it was done in a way that won’t be decoded accurately by people.”

“Exactly,” said Jake enthusiastically. “We scared those people. They weren’t held by our violence. They were terrified. It may even come out that we diverted a terrorist strike and we may even be lauded as heroes. But our deeper and truer heroism, the fact that we created a vital business serving an important purpose will be overlooked. Curro’s work with *What’s Going On?* will stand, however.”

“It’s a mixed bag isn’t it?” asked Cong, stretching his palms out in front of him onto the dark dashboard.

“I guess it is,” said Jake.

Some silence passed. Ezra sat with crossed arms and a furrowed brow. His head was tilted forward in contemplation.

"To riff on what you were saying," Ezra addressed Jake, "on some level our grandiosity drove us to try and intervene in current events. We did that at the expense of being proactive about the deepest trends that drive human behavior: the need to be seen as virtuous, the need for love and purpose, the compulsion to repeat traumas. Our business tended to these things. We stepped away from nurturing people to take care of themselves. We stopped offering options and solutions and love. We spent our precious energy and final days intervening in horrible abuse in a way that won't truly be understood by anyone of this time."

"Except for maybe me," chimed in Curro.

"Right," said Ezra. "And to be understood by people of this time and for our intervention to have made sense, we would have to reveal ourselves as the travelers that we are..."

"People would go coo-coo," chirped Tuffy.

"We've been walking with the dead for too long and our standards are dropping," said Ezra.

"And my standards have risen so far in such a short time that the thought of being without you guys is horribly painful," added Curro.

"I feel likewise, my friend," Ezra said, placing a hand on the driver's shoulder.

There was general agreement in the car.

"I wish you could come with us," Tuffy said to Curro tenderly. "Maybe you can..."

A sad mood settled over the friends.

Eventually they came to a rest stop some distance away from any town or city. They each stretched, used the bathroom facilities, and took to walking the grounds of the rest stop for fresh air. Eventually they gathered at a picnic table. The morning mist still lay over the grounds. The sky was cloudy and the air was cool.

“I want ask you all for something,” said Curro. “I want you to bring me with you. If you won’t or you can’t for some reason, I would ask that you leave me copies of the journals you’ve kept since living in this time so that I may learn from them.”

They spent some time talking over a plan for bringing Curro forward in time to the Vault. They resumed their travel.

Eventually there were reports on the radio about a major terrorist attack on New York City. The mood among the friends dropped through the floor and dragged on the road. They awaited news of a second plane striking the towers and were soon enough met with what they awaited. They had not succeeded in averting a major component of the attacks. Ezra groaned in agony.

“I’m feeling sick,” said Tuffy.

The car pulled over. Tuff threw up by the side of the road. He sniffed the vomit after it was out of him. Then he was done.

The group arrived at the cabin where they were to stay until their jump forward in time. It was a spacious cabin rented from a vacation rental agency in the area.

Jake took the car and drove back into town. He pulled over at a small convenience store and asked to use the phone.

Chapter 55: Say Goodbye to Hollywood

“Hello,” answered Miranda. She was at her apartment watching the television.

“Hey, it’s me,” said Jake. His awareness was heightened as he scanned his surroundings. The concern showed in his voice.

“Have you seen what happened? Are you okay? Were you affected by it?” his friend asked.

“I’m okay. Miranda...”

“What is it?”

“I wasn’t being honest when I said I was moving out here. That’s not all of it, at least.”

“What do you mean? This is terrifying. Are you sure everything is okay?”

“I’m in one piece. I saw the news, too. I might be *in* the news at some point.”

“What? Are you in the city? Are your friends okay?”

“They’re okay, too. We’re not in the city. I was mixed up in something though...”

“Related to this?” asked Miranda, gesturing at her television and totally absorbed by the moment.

“Yes, somewhat. I might be on the news for stopping one of the planes, I don’t know. I don’t know how far the news will spread and what the authorities will do. I wanted you to hear it from me.”

“Hear what from you? What did you do? What are you mixed up in?”

“It’s really long and complicated. I don’t have much time. I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t want to lie to you. The truth is hard to believe.”

“Tell me what you need to tell me, Jake.”

“We had some advanced knowledge of what’s been happening today. I can’t give you a lot of specifics. Let’s say that Cong was very involved. We knew there’d be a flight today that would be hijacked. We showed up to the airport and intercepted two of the men that would have taken the plane. We disabled them with force. They’re alive but they’re not getting on a plane-“

“Where did you do this?” interrupted Miranda.

“Newark. We were in Newark. Now we’re far away. The police are looking for us...I can’t be on the phone much longer.”

“I knew you were into some strange things...I don’t know what to say, Jake. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I don’t know what to say either. You’re my friend and I wanted you to know what I did. I don’t know if we’ll be able to talk again. I really wish I could have told you everything. I don’t know how good of a friend I’ve been to you. I think it’s painful for me to leave things like this.”

“Jake, it’s disturbing for me but I’m not angry with you. You and your friends made a fortune in the time I’ve known you yet you’re an artist and seemed to want to have nothing to do with all that money. It never added up to me anyway. I didn’t tell you what I thought. That’s on me. You’ve been good company. It sounds like you did something good today but it’s hard for me to believe. It’s really out there.”

“The government might come looking for you. Tell them I moved to New York City and that’s the last you heard of me, would you?” he asked.

“I’ll do that. I’ll miss you. I don’t know when we’ll talk again but if you ever find a way, please send me a note or something,” said Miranda.

Jake’s friend asked him to explain one more time what happened to him. They exchanged their goodbyes and parted company. Jake drove to the cabin and rejoined his friends, unnoticed by the locals.

Two days later a portal opened on the property and everyone but Curro stepped through.

Chapter 56: The Third Banquet

Hunter and Milena returned with their passengers on the same day that Ezra and his companions appeared from a time portal and into the comforting sight of Luis' laboratory. The time travelers spent most of their late morning and afternoon undergoing medical testing at the colony's health clinic. Hunter and Milena helped the family of settlers to their temporary quarters and then each went their separate ways, eager to unwind and process the events of their journey around the planet. It was made known to everyone that the next day Eddie would be holding a banquet in the dining hall aside Cong's great kitchen. All colony members were invited.

The night was restful. There was much excitement on the part of those that had been away, eager to see their friends and the new members of the Vault.

An extended banquet meal was also a useful excuse to limit power usage to only the most vital functions of the Vault. The portal to bring the travelers back had used massive amounts of the colony's energy supply.

Tuffy approached Cong's kitchen with his usual stealth but was surprised to find no resistance on his way in. His senses had been primed for the fun game of disabling servbots. None were in sight. Instead he saw a new face in Ida, tending to a dish, and her husband nearby watching her movements lovingly. Tuffy thought of the friend he had made several years before, Jasmine. She was such a nice cat. He missed her. A tenderness in his heart arose. He was happy to see these new people.

"I've met Angus. You must be Tuffy," Ida said when she saw him peer around the corner and look up at her coyly. She delighted in the fact that there were semi-sentient animals running around this place.

Tuffy simply meowed at her. He noticed Samuel on the floor near Robert's feet, contentedly picking at Robert's shoelaces.

Tuffy continued on into the kitchen, still wary of servbots. He heard a chopping sound and took the risk of leaping up onto a counter to get a better look. It was Cong chopping an onion upon a large wooden cutting board. He could also see Milena hard at work at a stainless steel counter, tending to vegetable slices and the fryer they would be going into. In Tuffy's periphery was Eddie, resting at Cong's small table in the kitchen. The aging man contented himself to singing to an old song that was coming through on the sound system.

Cong smiled at Tuffy, unaccustomed to the change in environment since his return to the Vault. The cat approached Cong cautiously.

"Where are the servbots?" he asked the chef.

"They're not here today. Maybe tomorrow. You never know," Cong replied. He winked before turning his attention back to the onions. He did miss the servbots but Eddie wanted no robotic help for the meal.

Tuffy continued his tour through the area and stepped out under the swinging doors leading out of the kitchen. His powerful tail knocked one of the doors open as he passed by. He walked past the bar and stools beside the kitchen and into view of Boone, Jake, and Yama. The three of them were busy moving the large banquet table, Yama on one end and the two on the other.

Boone said to Jake, "That must be Tuffy." He called out to the cat, "Hi, cat!"

Tuffy meowed politely and moved on. He caught the scent of Milena. She was sitting at Cong's grand piano near the entrance of his quarters adjoining the banquet hall, playing a simple song and chewing a stick of gum. Jake had accidentally brought a pack of gum with him in his pocket during the jump and had since given out most of it. Tuffy hopped up onto the piano bench and laid his head on the piano player's lap.

He napped, soothed by the soulful playing of the young woman he had come to miss so very much in his time away.

Several songs later he was roused by Milena and told the meal would be served soon. He hopped down onto the red rug and trotted out of the room.

He entered the banquet room and saw that most people had arrived. He perched himself at his custom seat and turned his attention to Ezra, who was speaking very close by to a few people around him.

"I stopped dead in my tracks, absolutely terrified, as they patted me down and asked me where I was going," Ezra said with some anxiety. "They told me it was better for me to head in the other direction and get out of that neighborhood. They said my appearance could draw negative attention to me and sure enough, I noticed some young men watching me from a porch maybe half a block away. I simply had no idea it was like this! The officers saved me a lot of trouble, I'd imagine."

"Wow!" exclaimed Boone. "My grandfather told me about the great government experiment of 'integration' and how it had utterly failed, particularly where there were large concentrations of blacks and Hispanics. It's amazing you experienced some of it firsthand."

"Oh yes," said Ezra. "There were brawls in the school districts between the blacks and the Latinos at several points while we were living in the area. There were helicopters circling above and police cruisers rolling in by the dozen. There were definitely a lot of tensions boiling. Last night I was reading into it some more and in the following two decades there was a lot more voluntary segregation, especially in southern California. It makes a lot of sense, given what I saw."

"Was Tuffy with you?" asked Roger.

Ezra said, "No" and Tuffy shook his head at the same time.

"We only felt safe taking him out when we'd go to rural places, for hikes and camping and such. He was nearly found out by Grapes, the fellow we were telling you about earlier," Jake chimed in.

"It was hard when we just had the apartment," offered Tuffy. "No room to play and run around..."

"And the hardwood floors got really scratched up," Ezra added with a chuckle.

Roger excused himself as he needed to go and check on a chore Nick had left to him for the day. He said he would return in 10 or 15 minutes.

"How was it to trade in fiat for everything?" Boone asked Jake, his curiosity reaching toward his natural inclinations.

"It was strange as hell," said Jake. "It felt surreal. Every transaction felt fake. I kept wondering to myself where all the crypto was, where the gold depositories were...stuff like that."

"I got used to it," said Tuffy.

"Tuffy, you never bought anything," Ezra said in a surprised tone.

"Doesn't matter, I got used to it."

"I didn't," said Jake. "It was amazing to me how blind people were to government predations. Like, how did anybody not figure out how many schemes and games the government can play when its highest echelons can manipulate the currency at the slightest impulse?"

“Good to hear you say this stuff,” said Boone. “Reminds me of the European Federation falling just before the strikes.”

Eddie approached the growing gathering of males at the corner of the massive table and took up a seat next to Tuffy. He placed his hand on the cat’s head, petting him gently while listening to the conversation.

“Cong brought a suitcase of gold bars with him,” said Tuffy, figuring Boone and Jake would talk about it some. He was correct.

Ida came into the dining hall from the kitchen, carrying a large tray of food with her. The tray held dishes of vegetarian dips and blends of varying origins. On her back she carried Samuel in a simple carrier. Cong came to her assistance, helping her to divide the dishes evenly among the plates and glassware already assembled on the table’s surface.

“You don’t say?” Boone asked, looking to Ezra and Jake. He noticed Cong’s presence and glanced at him. He hoped to make eye contact with the old chef but was disappointed.

“He brought a Powersuit, too,” said Tuffy. The cat began feeling pleased with his social contributions and thus started purring.

“A Powersuit?” said Boone, “Those are awfully rare these days. Did you use the suit at any point?”

“Cong spent some of the gold,” said Ezra. “I believe he went on a bit of a ‘culinary tour’, as he put it. Between his jump and finding us there was time some time to kill. His private detective took a while to find us. Cong flew to Beijing, Hong Kong, Sydney, Dubai, Paris, and a few other places, simply to try out the food.”

“He left the rest of the gold to a Jewish man for his legal defense fund for tax evasion,” said Jake. “Cong’s read some of the guy’s books over the years. It was like meeting one of his heroes. I forget the guy’s name.”

"We gave Cong some of the Spread money we made," said Tuffy. "He bought some knives for his kitchen."

"Did you bring anything back?" Eddie asked the darling cat.

"Just some memories," the cat said. "We saw the Three Tenors in Chicago. I had to pretend I was Jake's 'therapy animal'. They put a blue vest on me that said, 'Please don't pet me.' It was really wonderful!"

Eddie gave a puzzled look to the cat. Jake saw the look and said, "You couldn't bring animals into public places with you back then, not in the West."

"Oh, right, right," said Eddie.

Hunter entered into the banquet hall with Nick by his side. They were laughing about a story Nick had told. They smiled as many people in the hall greeted them or made eye contact with them. Nick patted Hunter on the back and walked into the kitchen. Hunter made his way over to where Yama was. The big creature picked him up in a gentle embrace, just as he had taught the thing to do so many years before.

"And what about the suit?" Boone asked Tuffy, seeing how the cat freely offered up information.

"He brought it back," said Tuffy.

"We didn't use it," added Jake.

Eddie gave him an approving look. Jake had a warm feeling of pride rise up into his throat.

"Cong wanted to use it," said Ezra. "We thought it would attract too much negative attention. Besides, too many sociopaths in key positions of power at the time. People in the free market were not yet well-positioned enough to use the tech for virtuous purposes."

"Well, there *was* Bill Gates," offered Tuffy.

"Yes but he was too busy being a 'good boy' and teaming up with governments at that stage in his life," said Ezra.

"What did each of you learn?" asked Eddie.

Milena entered the hall wearing a flowing yellow dress. The straps of the dress lay delicately over her lean shoulders. Several of the men, including Jake, noticed her beauty and admired her grace.

As Jake was distracted and Ezra was deep in thought, it was Tuffy who responded first to the question put forth by Eddie.

"I learned that that society was horrible for children to grow up in," said the cat.

"Please, go on," Eddie said as he leaned in with attention to his young friend.

"I met children at various points in our time there and I can only imagine how fake they had to be in order to survive, to get their needs met, and to be included in the group. I was in a child's position in that society, given my outward appearance. I was treated like a three year old boy everywhere I went. It got so bad that I started to stay in a lot more often. Everywhere I went, people were patronizing to me. They were exclaiming how cute I was and how big I was and that I was so charming. It was suffocating. I may be all of those things but no one really saw me for who I was. I guess that may have been a good thing, given what's in here," he tapped on his head. "There was only one person who saw me for me in any capacity. Her name was Rosita and she worked for housekeeping at Spread."

"The company you built?" asked Eddie.

"Yes," responded Tuffy.

Everyone within five feet of Tuffy was listening to him intently including Jake and Ezra, both dislodged from their reveries by the earnestness of the cat's confession. They had only rarely heard him speak so many words in a row. Most of the time he was content to offer his opinion in a concise sentence or two.

He continued, "Rosita had an inkling that I was special. She was mired in her own stuff, mostly to do with men, but I could sense that on some level she was aware of me. Of all the people in all the places I went, she was the one who wasn't dazzled by the spectacle of an outsized cat. She showed me curiosity. She engaged me as though I were a sovereign person. Were it not for Jake and the others and this woman, I think I would have felt a lot more lost in that world. I think I would have acted out a lot more. I didn't start well...I stole some money at first. It was for a good cause, to get Jake and Ezra out of jail, but the temptation persisted even through a lot of my time with Spread. It was Rosita's kindness and her patient friendship that helped me to maintain my perspective. How many children during that era, finding themselves in that 'sub-adult' status, didn't receive any sort of true recognition like I did? I'd wager that perhaps 99%. Here, in this community, I am much more free to pursue my creative genius; To feel my feelings and display them if I feel I need to. In that time, I mostly had to hide away and do my work behind the scenes."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, my dear friend," said Eddie, looking down on the person seated next to him. Many others nodded in agreement.

“I had a similar experience,” said Ezra. He looked at Tuffy for permission to contribute his own thoughts and was pleased when the cat nodded. “We talked about this some at the cabin but since most of you weren’t there, I’ll repeat some of it and maybe happen upon some new stuff in the process. It was a real stranglehold for me in that the Internet had yet to propagate on a massive scale. This meant, essentially, that the means for communicating subversive ideas to a large audience did not exist yet. Any advocacy I had planned for things such as radical self-reflection, anarchism, children’s rights, and so on and so forth was derailed by the simple fact that the power of the gatekeepers had not yet been eroded by the Internet. We showed up in a time where the major publishing houses, television and media networks, and ticketing agencies had it in their best interests to quietly support and enable the very ideas that bolstered the state. I did some research last night in Xiao Ma’s office and found that these ideas didn’t really hit the mainstream until 30 years after we left. They didn’t gain any sort of foothold in the consciousness of any but a supremely rare few until about *five* years after we left. It was a good guess several years back, I guess months for most of you, to think we could ride the dotcom bubble into something. The philosophical and psychological standards unfortunately did not yet exist in the market to the extent that we could launch and sustain any sort of social commentary platform that would affect paradigm change. We built up the money, sure, but the people just didn’t exist yet...not the people that would hear us on these ideas.”

“It was like living in a mud hut in the Middle Ages,” said Jake. “Some of it was fun but the ‘human capital’ aspect of it was deeply impoverished.”

"Yes! Like I was saying a few days ago, it was like, 'Where are all the adults?' There were none in sight. Even the most 'healed' people just seemed really delusional," said Ezra.

"We reached Curro," said Tuffy.

"No, he saw us...somehow," said Ezra. "He was really on a religious kick when we met him."

"Who was this?" Boone asked.

The meal was beginning to pick up steam. Ron and Darlene, Samuel's godparents, stepped into the hall with Nick Williams. The three older people could be seen loading up plates of food from a long table that Cong and Ida had been attending to. Milena queued up behind them and this triggered several others that had been milling about into action. Tuffy leapt from his chair and dashed off to the kitchen to see if Cong had made him anything. He returned promptly with the old chef in tow, who carried a plate of food for the cat. The plate was set on the table. At the swipe of a paw, a shelf mechanism opened up beneath the plate and lowered it slightly to the cat's chest level where he could eat without difficulty.

At the table Ezra had begun to speak, "Curro is a friend we made in our first weeks after the jump. Well, he wasn't a friend at all at first. He was deeply skeptical of me. He was a prison boss."

"Luis screwed up the coordinates for the jump. We were supposed to appear a ways outside of Minneapolis, in the former United States...feels weird saying it that way. We were just there. Instead we came to right outside a prison in Guatemala," said Jake. "Food's on. I'll be back." He rose and left to grab himself a plate of food.

Boone, Eddie, and now, once again, Roger listened on with captivated minds. Roger was back from his errand.

"One of his goons tried stabbing me and well," Ezra paused to grab a table knife. He jabbed his forearm resolutely, to Boone's surprise, and revealed the absence of a wound by bringing his arm up into plain view.

"I've never seen that before," Boone gaped.
"Are you a clone?"

"More or less," said the man. "Curro and his goons discovered this...anomaly-"

"Things got weird!" Tuffy exclaimed. He was hunched over and eating without the use of his hands as he sometimes did. It could be strange for others to hear him speak yet see his mouth engaged in something completely different than speech.

"It was like watching a man sober up from years of being drunk," said Ezra. "Curro was actually in some trouble. We helped him out of there. He knew something was really different about us. He didn't rely on us, though. He had a bunch of money in an account he let Tuffy get into. Anyhow, he was completely self-sufficient."

"It didn't surprise him much the first time I talked," added Tuffy.

"Only a little," said Ezra. "With some time, we learned that his father had been a Norwegian businessman and his mother had been a news anchor-"

"This is boring," Tuffy huffed in a voice unencumbered by food. "Get to the good stuff!"

"I happen to think this *is* the good stuff," said Ezra. "It took three months before we knew this about him, he was wound up so tight."

"Was he violent?" asked Roger, happy to be back and in the thick of things.

"No, he wasn't. We were really surprised. He said his Catholicism was a huge act to keep him from getting attacked while he was in prison. He seemed to have a good sense of boundaries, too. We didn't know this about him in the prison. It was like a light bulb came on for him when he saw that we would be able to leave. We were very careful with him at first, thinking he was putting on an act for us but it just wasn't the case."

Jake had returned with his plate of food and ascertained it was Curro being spoken about. He made eye contact with Ezra and was welcomed to speak.

"We asked him about it later. He said it was my hair. My hair reminded him of his father's. This clicked something for him and he knew he wanted to be near us," said the burly man.

"Isn't that something," mused Eddie. "Your hair..."

"He was still very rough around the edges, even for the first year," said Ezra. "Yet, he was very driven toward self-reflection. His time in prison allowed him to reflect on the things he regretted as an adult. I talk about some of Xiao Ma's ideas and he took to them."

"We took a lot of nice walks together," said Jake. "He really blossomed into so many of the things he'd had to deny himself over the years."

"He told me that Tuffy was the 'proof'," said Ezra. "He said it completely disarmed him. Seeing my physical hardiness and seeing this furry marvel here...that's what did it for him."

"He's one of the most devoted people I've ever met," said Jake.

"His parents?" Eddie prompted.

"They were around plenty until he was a teen. His father died of cancer. His mother chose a politician as her next husband. She was ravishingly beautiful and used it to her advantage," said Ezra.

"That's what catalyzed this life he was leading before he met you three, wasn't it?" the old man again prompted.

"Yes," Ezra said sorrowfully.

"I would have loved to have met his father," said Jake in a similar tone.

"Curro is very handsome," Tuffy blurted, unaware of the shift in mood of the conversation. He had been watching a hummingbird drone flit by. It was one of Hunter's oldest models: a rare sighting for the cybernetic being with ancient hunting instincts.

"It's true," said Jake. "Handsome as the devil himself."

Milena quietly sat next to Eddie, checking with him if anyone was in the seat before she took it.

“We scored a talk show on a network of stations in the Southern California region, largely because he was so dashing handsome,” said Ezra.

“And cause you guys acted like you were a big deal,” Tuffy chirped.

“That we did. The show was mostly on off-hours broadcasts but still, it was an achievement of sorts. We did a lot of good with it. He wanted to be on TV and I wanted a platform for my ideas. It was an imperfect arrangement with some very traumatized people at the helm but some good came out of it. We did nearly three seasons. A famous psychologist Xiao Ma has told me about, John Bradshaw, did a similar show some 20 years before so it wasn’t like this thing was without precedent-”

“You did name ‘spanking’ as child abuse,” Tuffy again chirped.

“Right, and we did a few other things that pushed the envelope and got us into hot water.”

“They didn’t renew Curro for another season so we changed gears,” said Jake. “Cong came along and got us to thinking about how we could have the maximum impact.”

“We got to thinking about the fall of Europe and the sectarian conflicts that were to come in the USA and thought that perhaps we should intervene the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 on the City of New York,” said Ezra.

“You know,” said Milena, chewing on a small stick of celery and casting a pleased look to the group, “I’d thought of that, too, at one point. I never really thought about who chose the dates you’d be there. I sort of just ball-parked it when we talked about it. Who *was* in charge of that?”

“Luis was,” said Tuffy.

"You may want to have a word with him, I'd say. I know some of the others know a lot about what went on but I haven't the slightest. I've been in my study, resting, since your return. Tell us what happened and what you learned. You're here in one piece and that is very good. Please, go on," said Eddie. He turned gingerly in his chair to greet the plate of food Cong was lovingly placing in front of him.

"We intervened," began Ezra. "It's troubling, really. We talked about this at the cabin some. We all began to focus outwardly in the months preceding our intervention."

"That can be useful, though," said Boone, thinking of the many economic indicators and trends he tracked daily.

"Some of it was useful but as I said the other day, I began to lose my sense of grounding. With Spread and with *What's Going On?*, the show we worked on, we were proactively oriented. We were building upon our values and leading by example. The horror of what we knew was to come became more and more overwhelming...I really should only speak for me though. My knowledge of what was to come was overwhelming. I knew a lot of people were going to die. I forgot most of the specifics but between us and especially with Cong showing up with a fresh slate, we knew enough to be able to make a calculated and decisive intervention on the morning of the attacks."

"I lost my focus, too," said Jake. "I was entering humble new territory, writing songs about my darkest sides. I was looking to cross over into compositional and soundtrack work. There were even a couple opportunities that arose out of Curro's show that I could have hopped on. We had talked about filming a documentary, the four of us. It began to nag at me to look into these coming attacks...I'm still rocked by the horror of the footage. To us, that happened four days ago. I need to get some food. I'll be back."

The dining had started in earnest at this stage. Nick and the older couple of Ron and Darlene could be heard laughing and discussing plans for seeding various crops in the biosphere. They were tailed by Angus the dog, who'd recently taken to following Nick around wherever he went. He liked the beef jerky Nick kept in the pocket of his overalls. Yama could be seen leaving the dining hall to walk his rounds outside of the Vault. Hunter was with Robert and Samuel, talking about Samuel's eating habits and sleep schedule.

Hunter held in his hand a glass of wine, his first in a year. It would remain mostly full until the end of the night when it was dumped out in one of the kitchen sinks by a servbot. The lights were dimmed gently by Xiao Ma, the last to join the gathering. Tuffy dashed over to greet her and brought her near the conversation that was ongoing with the time travelers. She took a seat next to Milena and leaned into the young woman, both gently touching shoulders and smiling before turning their attention back onto the conversation at hand. Cong finally came out of the kitchen, satisfied with his work, and joined in on Nick Williams' conversation. Jake returned from his calming trip to the table adorned with serving dishes and desserts in time to hear Ezra open up the realizations he'd had in the last few days.

“Something I’ve thought about,” began Ezra, “is that were it not these attacks on New York City, it would have been something else in some other form. I can’t quite pin my finger on exactly why I have come to think this way but I do think that human psychology and philosophy is scaling, in terms of complexity of concepts. More advanced concepts such as a grasp of free market mechanics or multiplicity of the mind come after say, Keynesian economics or Freudian psychology. Or for example, anarcho-capitalism is a more advanced and complete system of thought compared to democratic governance. Maybe I’m rambling a bit here but I’ll say that during our stay in this former time, I got a sense that there was a kind of frequency at which the society operated...led by certain thought leaders and power brokers. There was a lack of general intellectual resolution on the dangers and horrors of Islam. The society, generally speaking, was still very much enamored by the religious concepts of ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’.”

“Humanity was in a kind of slumber, you’re saying,” Eddie contributed.

“Exactly, a stupefaction in the face of considerable evil...just as with Keynesian economics or democratic governance. The point being, there existed considerable opportunity during the time we visited for a Muslim terrorist organization to act out and cause massive havoc. The average participant in society was not yet inoculated and resolute that the Islamic mind virus- of so many floating around at that time- ought to be dismantled thoroughly in keeping with the best interests of children and a peaceful world. There was a kind of idiocy, born out of the great abandonment of reason in the 1960’s...”

“Yuck,” pouted Tuffy.

“-that had people propagandized and naïve. We did what we did thinking that dismantling the attacks themselves would preserve those components of society that would be ravaged by decades of war in the Middle East. Our decision making did not fully comprehend that so long as the average person participating in society was willing to verbally abuse his neighbor and manipulate him with calls for ‘tolerance’ for the kind of mind viruses that were floating around, the decay would be inevitable. It is the majority of people themselves that required reformation, not just the key actors,” said Ezra.

“That’s where gold-bugs on the ground like my grandfather came into play in the 2030’s,” said Boone.

“Right, the social and economic collapse that came 20 years after us was what sobered a lot of people up and turned them towards child rights and away from ‘diversity’ and all that other ilk,” said Ezra.

“Seeing children starve en masse in Europe of all places really sobered a lot of people up,” added Jake.

“And we didn’t know this well enough going into things,” continued Ezra. “We had some pinpoint, precision kind of successes with the TV show and with the online shopping company. I’d say we even did some good with our intervention with the hijacking. But we were grandiose in our expectations...and we showed up a bit early. We could have really done a lot more had we made the jump as world Internet speed averages started to hit the gigabit range. Something like *What’s Going On?* would have done a lot better then. Something that dismantled the mind viruses of the day. Still, I feel I learned a lot from our three approaches: commerce, philosophy, and in-the-moment protection of the innocent.”

"With self-knowledge to boot," said Eddie. "I think you learned a lot as well and I'm happy for you, Ezra. You certainly did some good and I don't think it was a failure for the three of you to go. Would you do it again?"

"No," Ezra said emphatically. "Our world has benefitted from the lessons people have learned, largely because of market forces outside of their control, in the century since. There is no greater educator than reality itself. Yet, I do think our exploration has given me a stronger template for understanding what I want to do with my life now."

"Go on."

"I want to be here and spend my time enriching my life in the very best possible environment for me. I don't want to live for others or try to save the world. I want to live for myself exclusively. By changing myself, I think I will change the world on some level because I am part of the world. In my hurt and anger at Hunter and at you," he said to Eddie, "I went on this journey with my friends. We did great things but I don't think I lived enough for myself."

Milena took opportunity of the several moments of silence that proceeded Ezra's words to put a question to Jake.

"What do you think of what Ezra's been saying here?" she asked.

"I generally agree with him but I would go back. I made a few good friends back there. As for what he's said about people's general receptivity toward some of our ideas...that's an interesting one. For me, it was really highlighted through a friendship I made with a woman, Miranda. We ran in the same music circles. She wasn't a particularly gifted singer. Couldn't hardly play her guitar and was passable on the piano. Her lyrics didn't have emotional depth either but they were very sentimental. That's what sold: the sentimentality. That and she had a keen sense of style. She was aware of most of this, too. That's what I liked about her."

"She gave good pets," cooed Tuffy.

"She was a nice person...but fundamentally those things her fans loved her for had nothing to do with communicating truths. That's how I saw most people. They were uninterested in truth. The few I met that *were* interested in truth wanted to turn our conversations into debates or conflicts. It was truly bizarre. Why antagonize someone else if you're both genuinely interesting in talking about truthful ideas?"

"Psychological defenses...roles to play and posturing to keep up," offered Milena, immediately smiling to herself as it was exactly the kind of thing Xiao Ma would say.

"I almost think there *had* to be a certain level of defended-ness even the healthiest had to possess in order to participate in that society," said Ezra.

"It would make some sense," said Eddie.

"And who wants to get really rich and just drop out?" asked Milena.

"Isn't that what you did with the Vault?" asked Ezra, looking to Eddie.

"No, what we did was preserve life in the face of annihilation. It was preventative in nature," said Eddie.

"That brings me to a thought," said Jake.

"Thinking on Miranda. I'll say that the more honest I got in my art around others, in public, the more I saw people just get up and leave out of discomfort."

"Woulda' been different with more Internet," said Tuffy, leaning back in his chair. He was full of food. A satisfied countenance lit up his face.

"Could it be that the healthier you become, the more you appear to others to be defended?" Jake asked Eddie directly.

"That could be true. I don't quite know myself. I really didn't embrace my own self-knowledge process until the last 15-20 years. I was mostly away from the public when I began," said the old man.

“Based on what I experienced from the people at San Martin, I’d say that there is a shunning that happens as you outgrow the people around you,” said Boone.

Jake shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the mention of “San Martin”.

“I think it’s healthy to have boundaries with people you experience as less healthy than you. It’s exceedingly disorienting for that category of people to happen to be most everyone you meet as was the case being in that time,” said Ezra.

“And beyond that to have certain perspectives, knowledge, and emotional connection that allows you to move with some ease through society,” Milena offered in addition to what Ezra said.

“On the topic of moving through society with ease, it’s worth mentioning no one ‘sniffed me out’ in our three years there. I am interested though: Boone, you mentioned San Martin de los Andes. Did you experience Frank Noris ‘sniffing you out’? Like, he saw your healthy independence and sought to curtail it in order to bring you in line with Lucius? He tried pulling that with me and it’s a big reason why I left. You and I didn’t get to talk much while I was there,” Jake said to Boone.

Eddie excused himself to go to the bathroom. Hunter slipped into the vacant seat playfully and rubbed Tuffy on the head. He was happy to spend some time with his fellow travelers. Tuffy groaned at having eaten too much food, the head rub making him slightly queasy.

“Neither Mary or I ever felt right there, especially when Frank started gaining more influence. Yeah...his behavior had a kind of...invasiveness to it. It pulled me out of my focus on my family and on my own work. I learned that I was prone to that kind of thing, given how much I liked hearing Lucius counsel people publicly in the library like he did. Why don’t you and I talk about this sometime over at my place?” Boone said to Jake.

The response was in the affirmative. Eddie returned from the bathroom and took the seat of Tuffy, who had managed to roll himself onto the floor and onto the feet of Milena. She rubbed him gently with her toes. He took a catnap.

Ezra gave an expectant look to Jake. Jake nodded, giving his sanction.

Ezra spoke, "Hunter, Milena, Eddie- since the three of you are here I thought it would be a good time to ask you for something."

"What's that?" asked Hunter. He was wearing a short-sleeved yellow shirt that quite nearly matched the exact hue of his sister's dress. The color was reassuring to Ezra, who felt unsure of his request.

Ezra again looked at Jake and said, "We'd like to bring Curro here. We told him that if it was agreed upon here, we would open a portal for him there on December 13th, 2001 in the same place we made the jump from yesterday."

"There's a risk to acknowledge and that's that one or both of us could have been identified by the government authorities and linked to Curro through our show in Los Angeles," said Jake. "But there's little to no chance that Curro would divulge his knowledge of the portal even if he were apprehended."

The siblings, Hunter and Milena, glanced at one another. Hunter spoke first.

"I don't know much about Curro. Only the brief bit Ezra told me this morning. Can he live by our values here?" he asked.

"He lived with us in the Hollywood Hills. Yes, he is an ethical person. I love him and respect him. I want him here," said Ezra.

"Same," said Jake.

"Same!" Tuffy called from under the table. This elicited some chuckles from those gathered. Roger peeked his head under the table and smiled down at the cat.

"I don't see any issue with it," said Milena. "Is he the only one?"

“Yes,” said Ezra. He breathed in sharply and asked Eddie for his opinion on the matter.

“We will need to confer with Luis on the technical details but yes, I am open to it this one time. It’s going to use massive amounts of our energy reserves and we’re quite strained as it is,” said Eddie. “You’ll work to get us back up to speed?”

The petitioners of the request agreed readily. The conversation dispersed some as Ezra went over to speak to Nick and Luis. Jake served himself his long overdue meal and went and ate with Robert and Ida, happy to meet them and their son, Samuel. The young toddler was asleep in his mother’s arms. The afternoon was really setting in and a few people could be seen taking naps. Tuffy had calmed down and was again sleeping. Cong was nodding heavily under the weight of a turkey sandwich from which he had drawn too much sustenance. He rested in a royal red loveseat in a window bay filled with rare potted plants, the ancestors of which Gordon Beck had once tended.

Eddie, Hunter, Boone and his wife Mary, and Milena were still in discussion at the dinner table.

“Hunter, I wanted to ask you how it has been for you to have done all this work these past months on bringing people here,” Eddie courteously prompted the younger man. “What have you learned? Will you continue on in this work?”

Hunter sighed, relaxing slightly upon hearing Eddie's soothing voice. He rubbed at the hair on his chin as he began to speak, "I've loved the work. I'm still with it 100%. I'm happy you're here," he said to the married couple near him. He turned his focus to Eddie, "I think there's a *lot* more work to be done. There are so few colonies to recruit from. There are...four women here now? We could use more women but not at the expense of our principles for this place. I do think we have means of incentivizing people to do the work in order to be able come. In the last hour it's crossed my mind to talk with Ezra and perhaps Curro about putting together promotional materials for this place. As far as what I've learned...the jury is still a little out on that one. Well, in San Martin I was reminded of the importance of standing my ground and helping those who *are* curious about my goals and mission."

"Amen to that," Boone said with a hint of gruffness in his voice.

"With Svalbard," said Hunter, "I was reminded of the importance of having allies in this world. Herman and Sean run a good place over there. It's no Vault but I respect them nonetheless."

"They won't come here," said Milena.

"I'm glad they're there," said Eddie. "We have very good friends at the Svalbard colony," he mentioned to Boone and Mary.

"I feel I've learned a lot from having Jake and the others back," said Milena. "They had a rich and varied experience of which we've only heard a fraction, I'm sure. Ezra certainly has matured a lot. I'm curious to meet their friend Curro. I feel a lot of excitement thinking about what's to come for us here."

"I'm glad our band of visionaries has come home," said Hunter.

"Me too," Tuffy called up from the floor to the delight of the adults above.

Cong Yu had his piano wheeled into the room and was soon playing on it. He played for the better part of two hours, each song progressively lowering in energy. Listeners came and went, standing by the piano and absorbing the sound. Milena in particular delighted in her mentor's playing. She stood by for the entirety of her mug of hot chocolate. Cong became heavier and heavier with a tired satisfaction most present in his shoulders. He was happy to be home. He had heard that Curro was coming to the Vault. This was deeply pleasing to him. By the time he was done playing, most of the people in attendance had gone their separate ways. With the help of Yama, he wheeled his piano back to his studio. He passed by his kitchen and ensured the servbots were busy cleaning up the day's mess. He made his way out to the biosphere for a long walk

His good work for the day was done. After his walk he would rest.

