

Reluctant Messiah

Book 1 of the New Church Saga

by The Other Jim Hargrove

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

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

Part I. Hypatia's Beacon

1. Thanksgiving Day November 28, 2086 Austin, NRT

The stories you've heard about me are bullshit, or mostly bullshit anyway. I can't fly. I can't walk thru walls. I can't turn into a dragon — wouldn't that be cool. I can't foretell the future, at least I couldn't then, the day I met Jackson for the first time, the day Red gave the book that Mark wrote.

Thanksgiving Day had arrived with cool weather finally, so the Council decided it was a good time to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the NRT. I had the pleasant task of riding herd on Jackson, a representative of the Houston refugees, who still wore the tight bicycle messenger outfit that showed every muscle. We all suspected he was really a con man, but he sat well on a bicycle and looked suitably buff.

I heard Red's familiar voice, "Hey, Patty. Wait up. I brung ya a present," and turned to see a tall, lanky figure advancing towards us. After waving to him, I turned back to Jackson and explained. "That's Red, an old friend of mine."

"The Ranger?"

"You've heard of him?"

"Sure. He be the one found you, right?"

"You've heard that story, have you?" I guess I was unable to keep the acid from my voice, because he flinched a bit before responding.

"It be well known." He shrugged.

Red wore, as always, his prized Tilley hat, which hid most of his face. A relic from a long-gone era, the hat had outlived the lifetime warranty extended to its original owner. Once dyed a dark green, but bleached by repeated exposure to the elements, the wide-brimmed T1 now sported an unintended camouflage look.

Red also wore standard issue jeans and the gray shirt with the famous *wagon wheel star* badge. The remnants of his red hair showed beneath the brim of the hat, extending into a long, thin ponytail. Given the occasion, he was not wearing weapons, except for a small can of pepper spray that he carried discreetly on his belt, just in case someone got rambunctious later.

Standing, as he was wont to say, "just shy of two meters," Red towered over both me and my companion. I'm 1.5125 meters (about 5 feet in the old units) and used to being towered over.

Tossing back my cowl, I tilted my head to accept a quick kiss — Jackson shuddered slightly — and said, "Oh, Red, you shouldn't have given me anything." The package, obviously a book of some kind, was wrapped in expensive Pre-Collapsian paper.

Red said, "Well, your new post and all... Who's your friend?"

"Oh, sorry. This is Jackson. Jackson, meet Red. Jackson's just arrived from the coast, representing the Unified Clans of Houston. Got some news about some survivors of the hurricane," I explained.

“Just over 200 people, camped on the Brazos near Sealy,” Jackson added in a voice muffled by the surgical mask he wore. Extending his gloved hand in the approved manner, not quite touching Red’s, he said, “Pleasure, Red.”

“Pleased to meetcha, Jackson,” Red said. I could see him studying the younger man carefully, noting the jet-black hair and slight epicanthic fold above warm brown eyes that reflected Asian ancestry, probably Vietnamese.

Red asked, “How’d you hook up with Patty, Jackson?”

“Can I open this now?” I asked, deflecting Red from his cross-examination. Red took a more than passing interest in any male I paid attention to, a task that kept him busy.

“Sure.”

I carefully untied the cord holding the package, stuffed it and the expensive paper into the pocket of my cassock. The contents of the package proved to be a book, as expected, but enclosed in an antique zip-lock bag. The bag had faded with time, but was still transparent enough to make out the title, *Computer Hacking for Dummies*. The book joined the wrapping in my pocket.

I was sure it was a fake.

“I hope it ain’t fake,” Red said. “I paid three dollars for it. Found it in Fredericksburg. Knew you had a bunch o’ ’em. Claims to be written by Mark Talbot.”

“Who be that?” Jackson asked.

“It certainly looks genuine,” I lied, “though the title doesn’t show up in any of the lists of the series. We’ll take it to the lab and check it out. We’re heading that way now.” I added for Jackson’s benefit, “The Library building is named for Mark Talbot.”

“The Library? What’s up?” Red asked.

“I’m giving Jackson the fifty-cent tour.”

“You ain’t said nothing ’bout a fee,” Jackson objected.

“Just an expression, Jackson,” I said, with my 50-watt smile.

“Hear El Presidente has called a Town Meeting for this evening.” Red commented. Without asking permission, he joined us on our walk. “Know what that’s about?”

“We’ll all know in a few hours,” I told him.

We walked around the corner of the Capitol, Red having given up his quest for gossip. Maneuvering past the various tents set up on the Capitol grounds, we ignored the sounds of music as well as the tempting aromas from several food tents.

“Here’s the famous Ten Commandments monument,” I said to Jackson, motioning to a huge replica of the two tablets, now defaced.

“Who done that?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t know. Do you, Red?”

“Nah. Mom knew, but she wouldn’t tell.”

“His Mom was Hypatia the Hero, the one I’m named for,” I explained. Then I launched into one of the mini-lectures my students always complained about, quoting from the Archives:

“Like most events of the Last Days, we have scant solid information regarding the defacement of the Ten Commandments Monument. Determining which of the various legends is closer to the truth remains a practical impossibility. The most widely accepted version, one that at least conforms to the known timeline, suggests it happened the night before the Kolgite hordes poured thru the deserted streets on their way to Mansfield Dam. As for the perpetrators, most versions suggest Hypatia Talbot, the hero of the Revolution, also known as the Hypatia the Hero, and her paramour, Aaron the Actor, did it as a way of showing contempt for the Kolgites.”

The three of us walked on in silence for a while thru the area still called the rose garden, though no roses had grown there in decades, and up Congress Avenue past the ruined hulks of buildings. Built for an era when energy was cheap, the buildings were useless in the current environment. A bank sign driven by solar panels that looters ignored because the President liked looking out of his window at it, showed the temperature as 30 C, alternating with 86 F, about normal for this time of year. The time was 10:37.

Branches downed by Hurricane Ursula littered the street, forcing us to detour several times. I found myself looking forward to the cool of the lab and snuck a quick look at my companions to note that they were sweating also.

Mounting the steps of the Library, I waved my hand over a plaque mounted by the entrance. After about ten seconds, the door swished open.

“Wow! That be way cool.” Jackson exclaimed.

“PCM,” I replied

“PCM?”

“Pre-Collapsian Magic,” I explained ingenuously, but smiled again to show I was joking. In fact, I had no idea how the device worked, and suspected that the Gnomes who maintained it didn’t either. The Archives undoubtedly had the information, if anyone cared. Without elaborating, I led the way into the Library.

“Double wow,” Jackson said. “Air conditioning. You people got some real nice toys.”

“One of the perks of being Librarian,” I replied. “We have to fight for the energy allotment every session of the Council, but without it, the books wouldn’t last long, not to mention the computers.”

I led the way to the stairwell. “Unfortunately, the elevators are just a memory. Requires too much power to run them. Same goes for most of the old illumination. We have to get good at reading titles in dim light. Wait till you see my area, though.”

We climbed six flights of stairs lit only by what the original plans labeled emergency lighting, and without the benefit of the cooling supplied to the rest of the building. Another door opened in response to my wave and we emerged into a room designed for a hundred times the number of people currently using it, filled with computers, the screens mostly dark. The quiet hum of fans and disk drives filled the air, a sound Professor Hardy, in a distinctly unpleasant simile, compared to a cloud of blowflies hovering around the corpse of the web.

Music suddenly burst forth from speakers on the walls: Leonard Cohen’s *Joan of Arc*, the duet sung with Jennifer Warnes.

“Damn! How’d you do that?” The speaker, a young man about 15 or so, stuck his head above one of the carrels.

“Do what?” I asked, then added, “And watch your language young man.”

“Sorry. How’d you get the background music to come on? I’ve tried everything.”

“It comes on when I come into the room.”

“But how does it work? Never mind. PCM, right?”

“More or less. Look up *Ambianca* if you want to know more.”

“Thanks. By the way, can we get something besides all that la, la, la?”

The music changed to *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

“Not that. I don’t like Beethoven.”

I never cease to be amazed at the ignorance of some of the students. Suppressing the urge to lecture, I said, “Ambianca, thanks, but maybe we should do without the music for a while.”

A face of a strikingly beautiful young woman appeared on a nearby computer screen. A soft voice replied, “Of course, dear.”

“Amazing,” Jackson said. “This get better and better. Who done that?”

“Ambianca,” I said. “She’s not really a person; she’s a computer program.”

“But what about her face, her eyes 'specially?”

“What do you mean?”

“They be your eyes.”

“No, that’s not possible. This program was written years before I was born.”

“But the eyes. They be yours. You got very...uh...distinctive eyes: mostly blue, but with little dots of light brown and a ring of gold around the outside. They be...very beautiful.”

“Really. Well, believe me, the program is ancient. It’s just a coincidence.” I smiled at him. The bit about her eyes was a good sign. Jackson was not the first to point it out.

“What do you know about our Archives, Jackson?”

“Not much. Tall tales mostly. They say it got all the information in the world.”

“In a sense, that’s correct, but only partly.” *A chance for another lecture.*

“Before the Collapse, during the Last Days, a group of scholars determined to save what they could of the World Wide Web that linked together information from billions of different sites. Each of these computers is searching for some part of the web we haven’t copied. When we find one, we copy as much of it as we can to our own disks. We’re hoping to preserve the knowledge for future generations. Those disks,” I motioned to cabinets against the far wall holding thousands of platters, “contain information we’ve managed to save, our Archives. We have rooms of disks in the back. All that would be worthless without something we have that no one else does, the Index. That helps us find the information we want.”

Jackson nodded, but I could tell he had no idea what I was talking about.

I continued, “In addition, some *live sites* remain attached to what’s left of the web. My friend JJ has one of them, *weather.com*. Want to see what the hurricane looked like from outer space?”

“You can do that?”

“Yes, but it won’t be what you imagine.” Red edged closer. He always liked my little demonstrations.

Sitting at one of the consoles, I typed, “JJ, PP. U up?”

After a while, a familiar avuncular face appeared on the screen. “Hello, Princess. I hear you’re in charge of the Library now.”

“Starting next month.”

“Well, congratulations. How are the festivities progressing?”

“Should be fine. I’m not really involved. I’ve got some visitors here.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Red is here, and Jackson from Houston.”

“Houston!”

“Yeah. Can you show us footage of Ursula?”

“Sure. I’ll send it to you.”

I turned to the others. “He has to retrieve the images of the hurricane.”

“I didn’t realize you could have face-to-face conversations.” Red said.

“You can, but only between certain locations with good service. JJ’s place is one of them.”

Seizing the opportunity for another lecture, I continued, “Weather.com used to be a site where anyone could go to get a forecast for the weather practically anywhere in the world. Now, it’s only available for some locations, and then only at certain times. Most of the old satellites aren’t working any longer, but there are still enough to provide some coverage.”

“I see,” Jackson said, though clearly, he didn’t.

I elaborated, describing how satellites in space transmitted pictures back to earth, at least when they worked. JJ lived in the ancient Los Alamos National Lab and relied on nuclear power. He claimed to have enough fuel to last 500 years, but no one expected anything to work that long. Still, the fact that he had reliable energy, unlike the New Republic of Texas, which made do with whatever hydroelectric power we could generate supplemented by some solar panels, meant that JJ had a *Class 5*, site. Ours was only *Class 4*.

A beep alerted us to the arrival of an image file. “Thanks, JJ. Check you later.” Clicking on a few buttons was enough to bring the image up on the screen. “This is the hurricane,” I explained, waving at part of the image, “the white thing with the hole in the middle.”

“Oh, that be the eye.”

“Right. So, you’re familiar with hurricanes.”

“Well, yeah. I been thru three, none be as bad as Ursula, though.”

“This area here,” I outlined a part of the image, “is Houston, or used to be. Our maps show what things used to look like, not what they look like now. It once was the third largest city in the USA, back when the sea level was lower. This area is where the coastline lay. Now, let’s play the whole image and watch the storm from the time we first spotted it till it came thru Austin.” I clicked the mouse a few times and leaned back to give Red a good look.

“First it moved across the Atlantic, entered the Caribbean, crossed into the Gulf and roared right up the old Gulf Freeway. You know about the Gulf Freeway?”

“Oh, yeah. We use it for navigation.”

“OK. After blasting the coast, the storm moved inland. We could see that it would get to us, so we managed to get the word out to most of the surrounding area in time, including the people in the nearby Hill Country. Red was responsible for that, right Red?”

“Wish you coulda warned us sooner,” Jackson complained. “Not that we was able to do nothing ‘bout it. Besides, without seeing this, we probably wouldna believed it. How’d you warn your people?”

“Five days with the humpmobile. No fun, I can tell ya that,” Red replied.

“Humpmobile?” Jackson asked.

“Camel. They’re great for treks into the hills. Cantankerous beasts, but essential.

“Why not bicycles?” Jackson asked.

“Well, sure, we’d use ‘em if we were following the roads, but some areas are a bit too rough for that. Besides, the hills start just west of here...well, I’m too old to make it up those. Now, if I had some nice youngsters with good legs...”

Jackson didn’t respond to that but seemed to be considering options. Then, as though waking up, he said, “This be way nifto, but I don’t wanta miss the town meeting. It be getting late. I be wondering if we be gonna eat first.”

“OK. Let’s stop next door. I want to leave the book in the lab. See if Professor Cameron can tell whether the book is the right age.”

As soon as we left the computer room, Red asked, “Who’s the twerp who can’t tell Mozart from Beethoven?”

“We call him ‘Roy.’ I forget what he claims to be his real name. It has lots of parts to it, including Murchison.”

“Oh. One of those.”

“Yep.”

“Murchison, like the big cattle Poobah near La Grange?” Jackson asked.

“The same. Sends us several live steers each semester. Very popular. Goat gets old in a hurry. The kid’s a real pain in the ass.”

As we walked back to the Capitol after leaving the book, I asked Jackson, “Have you decided what you’re going to say at the town meeting?”

“Not really. I don’t grok your political maneuvering. I thought that once we got an agreement with the Council, that be, well, the end of it.”

“Understandable, but it is complicated. The scale of what you’re proposing means that we need to get formal consensus. You’ll do fine. Just tell your story. Be yourself.” I smiled encouragement. “Red may be able to give you some tips.”

“Gonna ask for help are you,” Red guessed. “So that’s what the meeting is about.”

“Well, the Sealyites don’t be very helpful. Be guarding the Warehouse like we be common thieves.”

“Yeah, they can be a royal pain sometimes. Good luck.”

I had an idea. Turning to Red, I asked, “Think you could show Jackson to the food tents? You can use my credit.” Noticing his expression, I quickly added, “Within reason, of course. I promised to meet with the Pres before we present our case at the town meeting.”

“No problema,” Red replied. “Come on, Jackson. I could use a bite myself.”

As an orphan reared by the University, I had a plethora of father figures while growing up. There was Red, of course, who played with me and taught me martial arts when I was old enough. My favorite professor, Cam Cameron, smuggled me into his classes so I could learn the joys of science. Whenever I behaved particularly egregiously, though, Professor Caldwell always delivered the stinging lecture and prescribed appropriate punishment.

Now, I sat in his office in the ancient Capitol building, a room that held few pleasant memories. Thanks to its thick walls dating back to the 19th century, the Capitol remained cool most of the time regardless of the temperature outside. The office was part of what used to be the purview of the Lieutenant Governor of the unlamented State of Texas. The Revolutionaries had commandeered it soon after the revolt and no one questioned the President’s right to occupy it.

A huge antique desk made of genuine mahogany took up the space between the President and me. Its top, covered with books and papers, reminded everyone that Pres, as he preferred to be called, was primarily an academic, forced by circumstances to forsake his position as Dean of History and Culture to take up matters of state.

That was total crap, of course.

“Well, the Council has agreed you’re the one to head the task force,” President Caldwell said, unable to keep a note of asperity from creeping into his voice. “I hear that you have used your customary charms on young Jackson and that he will undoubtedly share your bed as soon as the quarantine period has ended. Still, I suppose that will be to our advantage in the long run.”

Damn! Not another lecture! I said, “The rumors are running a bit ahead of the facts,” hoping that would do the trick. Caldwell was a bit old fashioned on the subject of sex.

“Hmmpf. Supposedly, he tried to buy some food with a gold piece.”

“Yeah. It’s a genuine twentieth century Krugerrand. I had the lab check it out.”

“Part of a huge treasure, no doubt.”

We both suspected that Jackson was running a confidence game known as *The Spanish Prisoner*. The Archives contain references to the con dating back to the 16th century. The game works by getting the mark to invest in preparations needed to recover a massive treasure. Something

goes wrong, requiring additional funds, and so on. The Archives contained numerous references to a fabled *Sheik's Gold*, said to be located somewhere in Houston.

Caldwell continued, "Regardless of Professor Cameron's entreaties, we will, under no circumstances, pursue hidden hoards of the Sheik's Gold."

"Agreed. Maybe Red will have something to add later. I sent the two of them to the food tents. With Red, that means the beer tent as well. Maybe he'll turn up something."

"As I said, the Council has accepted your proposal. I would have preferred sending someone more experienced. You realize, of course, the importance of this mission. This looks like the opportunity we've been waiting for."

"To expand the boundaries."

"Precisely. We want the Houstonians to stay exactly where they are, on the far side of Lake Sealy. That way we have a buffer zone protecting the port. Later, we'll see if we can get them to lean on the Sealyites now and then."

"Think they will accept the Consensus?"

"That is your job, my dear, besides delivering the relief supplies. Use all the persuasive powers you possess. Now, how sure are we that we can actually carry out our relief mission?"

"Well, there's no problem with the supplies. We have tons of food and medical supplies. The big question is whether the old 18-wheelers are up to the task. We're going to rely on Ron the Mechanic's Son to keep them going."

"Quite a coup getting him to go. How'd you manage to get around that curmudgeon of a father?"

"I let Ron handle that himself. I hinted that the two of us would be spending lots of time together on the trip, and he took care of all the details."

"I should have guessed. Will young Jackson be jealous?"

"I hope so." I smiled. Caldwell scowled.

After a discreet knock on the door, a wizened old faculty member leaned his head around the corner.

"Come on in, James." The President was the only person who used Cam's given name. He accompanied the greeting with an expansive wave of his hand, motioning toward the chair he knew his colleague preferred.

Professor Cameron, Dean of Technology, beamed with enthusiasm, barely able to sit still. "The book," he began.

"What book?" Caldwell demanded.

"Hypatia brought me the most interesting book. I—"

"Please, Cameron. That is not the purpose of this meeting."

"Of course," he agreed, but turning to me he said, "Come see me when you have a chance. It's exciting!" He winked. Then, getting serious, he said, "I have a few items for your personal protection, for the trip. Some of your own ideas. I've prepared a demonstration."

“Cool,” I said, “Just like a James Bond movie.”

“A what?”

“Never mind. Late twentieth century entertainment.”

“Ah. Well, actually, I have only one item to demonstrate. We’ve installed another in the trucks. It’s the crowd disperser you found in the storeroom. Hasn’t been used since the days of the Quarantine.”

“Hope we don’t need it.”

“Well, it’s there anyway. We also put a Loud Hailer into the trucks. The combination should be enough to discourage most people. If anyone gets too close, we have this.” He reached into a bag he had brought with him and withdrew what appeared to be a walking stick and a small plaster bust of Pope Benedict XVII. He carefully set the bust on a corner of the desk. Then he fiddled with the stick a bit. “This is supposed to remind superstitious people of a wizard’s staff,” he explained. Then he gripped the staff and held it out. The bust exploded into a zillion pieces.

“You might let us know when you’re going to do something dangerous,” bellowed the Pres. “We could have been hit by flying shards.”

“Interesting,” Professor Cameron said, “I expected it to be pulverized. Well, there is a power setting. We could—”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Professor,” Pres stated. “We get the point. I assume you have managed to conceal a high-powered laser in the stick.”

“Oh, yes. Just like at the Battle of Mansfield Dam. The effect is dramatic, don’t you think? Now, Hypatia, let me show you how it works. This button is the trigger. Here’s the lens. The cover slides open for you to shoot it. This switch is the safety.” He handed me the staff.

I hefted the stick, testing its weight. “Very nice, Cammy. I can even use it as a walking stick. Is it keyed to me?”

“Well, not this one. Yours is in the truck.”

“Good. How many shots does it have?”

“Nine or ten. You recharge it using this plug.” He removed a rubber ferrule from the tip revealing a standard plug.

“How long to recover between shots?”

“A few seconds, that’s all.”

“And recharging?”

“A couple of hours if it’s completely drained.”

“OK. Nice work.”

“Now,” Pres said, “it’s time to go sell this scheme to the populace.”

“Is everybody having a good time?”

The crowd roared, “Yes.”

“Want to get back to partying?”

Another loud “Yes.”

“Then settle down for a bit. I promise to keep it short.”

Several people in the audience heckled, “That’ll be the day,” and “We’ll believe that when we see it.”

As customary at gatherings such as the present one, a large portion of the crowd had spent the afternoon moving from one beer tent to the next.

“Friends,” the President began, “today we have had a great time, and there’s more to come. We have a fireworks show planned for later that will knock your socks off, at least for those of you wearing them.” He paused to let the crowd appreciate his joke and received a few mild chuckles as his reward. “As you know this year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our great Revolution. It is fitting to pause and recall the events that led up to the break with the failed government of the Great State of Texas.” This produced a chorus of boos from the crowd. It wasn’t entirely clear whether the crowd’s intended its displeasure to refer to the late, unlamented State, or the President’s plan to recall the events.

“You know I love the story, but we don’t have time now.” Here the crowd roared approval. “Red has promised to deliver his famous performance later tonight.” He waved at Red to come up.

Red took the mike. “As y’all know, I weren’t but eight-year-old at the time, so my memory of what happened may be a trifle fuzzy. For all who want to hear it, I’ll be in the storytelling tent in about an hour, but only after I’ve had a few Shiner Bocks. It being kind of hot today, I’m a bit dry.”

This was occasion for prolonged applause. Several people in the audience held mugs of beer high to show they approved of his choice. Tipping his hat, Red moved back to the sidelines, yielding the podium back to President Caldwell.

“Thanks, Red. Now, we need to get serious for a bit. As y’all know Hurricane Ursula brought us some much needed rain, in fact Lake Travis is now back to its full level. However, it wasn’t so kind to our coastal friends. Maybe the news has already spread, but in case you don’t know, I’ll review the events.”

“The hurricane was a disaster for Houston. That once great city is now probably seeing its final death throes. Most of the area has been under water for weeks. A few refugees have reached the boundary of our Republic and have sent this fine young man ahead to ask for our help.” He motioned Jackson to come forward.

Several people in the crowd shouted out, “No!”

“Now, listen. We’re not going to turn our back on our fellow human beings just because...well, because of anything. We’re going to hear what he has to say. Then we have a proposal to put forward. You know, in the Old Regime no one would even have questioned our need to help. Were they better than we are?” The crowd grew quiet.

“Moreover, we’re going to reach consensus, like the civilized, rational people that we are. I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense. Anyone who gets out of line will get to watch the fireworks from a good, but restrictive vantage point, if you know what I mean.” This reference to the jail near the river was not lost on the audience.

“Why don’t you remove your mask, lad,” President Caldwell suggested. Jackson was happy to comply.

Jackson spoke in a quiet voice. “Thanks for agreeing to listen to what I got to say. I know y’all be thinking, ‘Who this bumpkin? Why they be sending him?’ Well, the reason be simple. I be the only one they thought could get here.” He paused to decide what to say next. “I weren’t sure what to say. Ms Hypatia sayed I should just be myself. I guess I’ll try.” He paused again. “We ain’t got no idea the hurricane be coming till we got word from y’all. All I know, one of the shrimpers told me. They move their boats as far inland as possible, not that it done any good.” He almost lost control for a bit, taking a sip of water from the glass one the podium to give himself time to recover.

“The storm be merciless. Y’all can’t imagine. Our clan manage to ride it out holed up in one of the old skyscrapers near an area we call The Galleria. We could feel the building swaying in the wind and wondered if we’us all gonna die. We lived, but then we knowed we had to go somewheres else. We ain’t got much food, barely any drinking water, only a few supplies. Leaving behind the ones too old or weak to travel, I set out with about 100 people. Others joined us as we traveled. We had heard about Austin. We decided to try to throw our lot in with you’rn.”

“We started west, traveling in boats along the ancient I-10 highway. We reached the edge of the marshes after five days. Fortunately, we’us able to catch some fish for food. It weren’t no *sushi*, but it kept us alive.” He got a polite chuckle from the crowd.

“We kept meeting other survivors. None of them got any good ideas on what to do. Eventually, we decide our best bet be to try to reach Sealy. We knowed that the Warehouse would got everything we need. But, when we got there, the ass...soldiers guarding the Warehouse refuse to trade with us. Told us our money be no good.” A murmur went thru the crowd, who were all too familiar with the capricious dealings of the Sealyites.

Jackson continued, “I be selected to ride here. Took all the back roads and rode at night, when they weren’t nobody watching. What we ask is simple. We want to find a better place to operate from than Houston. We think that the area around Lake Sealy be a good choice, and we have a small bunch of our people there already. The rest be stuck back in Houston. We need to get them soon if we can. We ask for two things from you: first, we need supplies. Most of what we had got lost the storm. Second, we want to join up with y’all. We heared good things about the Republic, and we think we’d like to be part of it. I think we can add to what y’all got. We know Houston well, and there be tons of salvage there. We think we can salvage from Houston and trade down the canal all the way to *Mexico*. That ought to be good for both of us.”

Did you notice that Jackson is not the bumpkin he pretends to be? He slipped up several times and used proper tenses. I noticed, and looking at Red, I saw he had as well. He caught my eye and nodded slightly.

Several people began to shout, arguing for and against the proposal. President Caldwell took the podium again and banged the gavel for silence. “We have someone who has already asked to speak on the proposal. Then we’ll recognize anyone who wants to discuss this. We’ve agreed that we’ll allow an hour, evenly divided. If you want to address the meeting, put your name on the list. We have two desks. Yeas over here,” he motioned to his left, “Nays over there. Now, to put forward a specific proposal, I have the pleasure of introducing the newest Full Faculty member, someone y’all know. I first met this charming girl when Red brought her back from one of his circuits out west. She won my heart from the word go, and I’ve been proud to have her as a member of the

University community for almost thirty years. Most of you know her as the dirty, completely incorrigible tomboy who was part mascot, part student, full-time trouble in the University. Now, she is the newest Master Librarian we have, and without any doubt the most beautiful female here tonight.” He beamed at me. “Hypatia, come tell the people your plan.”

I marveled that Caldwell could spew all that shit and keep a straight face. I was glad to see that the small stool I’d requested stood near the podium. However, even standing on it, I could barely see the crowd, probably appearing as a disembodied, recently shaved head rising from the depths.

“First, let me say that we have a surplus of food, thanks to the good harvest we just had. Moreover, projections show that we can expect above average rain next year. Therefore, this is a good time for us. We’ve also accumulated over 2000 liters of diesel fuel, thanks to our bio-diesel processing unit that came on stream last spring. When you enjoy your barbecue tonight, you’ll be helping us make more fuel from the grease.” I remembered to look up and smile. Wiping a rivulet of sweat from my forehead, I continued, “I want everyone to understand that we can transport the food easily to Sealy, even though no train is due thru here for at least another month. We have three ancient 18-wheelers that are operational. That means that we can provide food and supplies to the Houstonians and have some left over to leave in the Warehouse in Sealy. That should make the Sealyites more likely to cooperate. The Warehouse should have all the medical supplies we need, but we plan to take some from here just in case. We should be able to do some trading on the way there and back, maybe even pay for the trip.”

“I know that many of you are opposed to helping any foreigners, but I ask you to reconsider. These people are not Kolgites. They aren’t trying to conquer us They just want our help. Besides, they’re Greens, like us.

“I hope that you will join with me in this act of generosity to our fellow man. Thank you.” I turned and walked off the stage. Two lines of speakers meant that the first vote wouldn’t be for a while, and Acquiescence wouldn’t be until much later, assuming things went well. “Come on,” I motioned to Jackson. “I need a beer and a sandwich. We’ll give the people time to think things over before we go back.”

“Go back?”

“Yeah. The speeches won’t make a damn bit of difference. The real work will be down in the trenches. I know the people who’ll really decide this issue. We’ll visit with them privately.”

After supper, we had plenty of time to work the crowd. What with the celebration, fireworks, and carousing, it was well after midnight before the last group of nays formally acquiesced to the plan.

2. Book Review

November 30, 2086
Austin, NRT

I loved the chemistry lab, with its pungent smells, the soft bubbling of liquids in retorts, the hum of sophisticated equipment that Professor Cameron always seemed to get an energy allocation for. More than that, though, I loved it as the haunt of my favorite faculty member and father figure, the one I and no one else called *Cammy*.

“It’s a most interesting book.” Cammy stood in front of a large, glass enclosure that held the book Red had given me. “The book’s not genuine, of course, but parts of it are.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll get to that.”

“I was pretty sure it was a fake, but I don’t want Red to know. He spent a week’s wages on it.”

“Ouch! Maybe we can soften the blow a bit. Some forgeries are more interesting than others. This is fascinating. It’s assuredly pre-Collapsian.”

“You’re positive of that?”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes. Most assuredly. I wouldn’t joke about something like that.” He winked. “The paper is high quality. Nothing like it exists today. Likewise the printing, done on a very good laser printer, the kind that might have been found in a law office or some other kind of firm that did a lot of printing, maybe a commercial printing shop. The cover is different. Seems to be homemade but dating to the same period. It is late 20th or very early 21st century.”

“How interesting. An antique fake.”

“Maybe not a fake.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it was more of a joke, perhaps a gag gift, maybe a vanity press production. The subject, computer hacking, is not something that the *For Dummies* people would likely have published. The text, by the way, is excellent. We’ve scanned it for you. Some clever tips in it.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

“Indeed. Did Red say how he acquired it?”

“Said he bought from a dealer in Fredericksburg.”

“Fredericksburg! I didn’t realize they sold anything but cannabis.”

Fredericksburg stood at the edge of the Hill Country, the area west of Austin, nominally part of the NRT, but sparsely populated and seldom traveled. Some old orchards lay along the road from Johnson City to Fredericksburg, and Red regularly traveled that far in his mission, supplying protection for other travelers intent on harvesting the peaches that grew there. Both Cammy and I knew that Red’s real objective was the sizable cannabis plantations, where Red obtained the product he traded to supplement his meager salary.

“The reason I ask,” Cammy continued, “is that I found an intriguing piece of paper in the book, apparently used to mark a page. I noted the location in the scanned document, by the way. Come look at this.” He walked across the room to a desk and picked up a sheet of archival plastic. Encased in the plastic was a smaller piece of paper, a page torn from a notepad. “We took this from the book to sample it. We’ve made several copies for you. The paper is from approximately the same time as the book. We can’t say when it was put in there, of course. Could have been years after the book was printed. Take a look.”

The paper contained a hand drawn sketch that appeared to be a map of some kind. At the top was written, “Saturday, 1pm.”

“What do you make of it?” Cammy asked, hardly able to contain himself. He took back the original, exchanging it for a copy.

“Looks like a map,” I offered.

“Well, yes, of course, but what about the notation. Sounds like it was a map to guide someone to a meeting.”

“Possibly. What are you getting at?”

“It is quite a stretch, pure speculation.”

“Oh, no, Cammy. I think I know where this is headed.”

Undeterred, he continued, “Suppose someone was going to meet the author of this book. They had a meeting on Saturday at 1300, that’s what 1 pm translates to.”

“Believe it or not, I am familiar with pre-Collapsian time-keeping.”

“Calm down. Retract the fangs.”

I laughed. I never got angry with him. “Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

“And what would that be, dear?” he asked, smiling.

“You think this is a map to the place, probably a hacker’s establishment, something like that.”

“It’s a thought. I was wondering if you might be able to figure out where the place is. Is there enough to go on?”

“Cammy, this is too much. *Another* treasure hunt?”

“A 20th century hacker...Mark Talbot himself.”

“Yeah, that does sound interesting. How many low probability events are involved?”

Cammy waved his hand. “Phooey. I thought you had more of a sense of adventure than that.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. I just want you to understand that I’m not agreeing to some cockamamie expedition.”

“Perish the thought! I’m just suggesting a tiny bit of research. What does that word mean anyway?”

“Crazy.” I hesitated before adding, “I’ll think about it.”

Cammy still had a smile on his face. “What is that saying you use? The one that the old, what were they called, the late-night TV shows selling weird products?”

“Infomercials.”

“Right. What was it the infomercial people said when they told about the deal?”

“But wait! There’s more!”

“Exactly. I have one more thing to show you.” He strode purposefully to a computer terminal and typed quickly. “This is the image of the first page of the book. I thought you might find it perhaps the most interesting part of the find.” He stepped aside to let me have a look.

There on the screen, I saw what he was talking about. On the title page, the author, Mark Talbot, had signed the book. It read, “April 16, 1998. To Hypatia, with all my love, Mark.”

“A clumsy fake,” I said, “obviously trading on the name to try to add some verisimilitude.”

“Possibly,” Cammy agreed. “The handwriting looks genuine, though. I certainly saw enough examples back when...” His voice trailed off remembering his pre-Collapsian youth.

“Although the records are scanty, we are sure he didn’t meet his Hypatia until much later. However, there is one curious fact. Since you are well versed in pre-Collapsian time keeping, perhaps you can verify my calculations. April 16 is the day we celebrate your birthday, is it not?”

3. Swapping Lies

December 1, 2086

On the Road to Sealy, NRT

From Austin, the best way to get to Sealy is by barge down the Colorado River, which takes four or five days depending on the water level and current. Several entrepreneurs ship goods downstream regularly to the Warehouse, for trade. The return journey — either by foot or, preferably, using ox carts — takes about a week. The barges, really just large rafts, couldn't handle the load we had put together, so the plan called for using some reanimated tractor-trailers and following the old highways, which were probably just passable. The journey would take only a day or two, assuming that the trucks held up.

Many in the Council objected to risking so much of Austin's goods on what they described as a wild gamble. Confident in the ability of my friend Ron, I persuaded them that the benefit was more than worth the cost. The minutes of the meeting reveal something less than the usual academic decorum.

After some final adjustments, our convoy set off from the University accompanied by a small group of well-wishers who followed on bicycles as far as the old airport, the unofficial boundary of Austin proper. Once past that, the road quickly deteriorated. Ron the Mechanic's Son guided the huge 18-wheeler carefully past the potholes in the pavement, creeping along at a discreet 40 kilometers per hour. "How long's it gonna take to get to Sealy?" Jackson asked, his voice muffled by the mask.

Ron replied, "At least 18 hours at this rate, assuming we take the fast route and don't find any problems." Somehow, he managed to keep a civil tone, hiding his disappointment over finding Jackson's muscular form occupying part of the truck cab.

Jackson wriggled uncomfortably in his seat next to me. "Hope we gonna stop somewheres along the way."

"Then it'll take longer," Ron responded.

"Might be more pleasant, though."

"Don't worry, Jackson," I said. "We're not going to drive straight thru, even if it's possible. By the way, why don't you shed the mask and gloves? We're not in the city any longer and I don't think anyone here will mind, right Ron?"

Ron was not about to argue with a Full Faculty Member, so he nodded his assent.

"Thanks," Jackson said.

The caravan had left the University area early in the morning, just after dawn, hoping to cross the bridge in Bastrop before anyone woke up and thought to erect a toll barrier. Word of our trip had spread rapidly though, and many people had gathered along the side of the road to watch the procession as it passed. The bridge over the Colorado River at Bastrop, far from being blocked, sported colorful streamers, and even some lights, no doubt early preparations for the Solstice celebration. To top it off, a small band appeared to play music.

I'd like to say that the rest of the trip was routine, and in a sense, it was. However, we had to clear several large pines blocking the road, carefully marking each for later salvage. That added

several hours to the trip. The roustabouts did the work while we sat in the shade. Because of time constraints, they used the chain saws, a rare treat.

I tried engaging Jackson in conversation to learn more about the people from Houston, but he clumsily deflected my attempts.

“I’d druther talk about you,” was all he said.

Ron seemed ready to challenge Jackson, who was unaware of how much of a faux pas his remark entailed. I waved him down. “Ask away.”

“Well, for starters, how much of the stories they tell about you be true?”

“What stories are those?”

“Lots of ‘em. That you be found as a baby, that you be a genius, that you got special powers...”

Not that again! I laughed. “Special powers! Like superman?”

“Well, no. They say you can read minds, tell the future...”

“Sorry, but I can’t do either of those. It is true that Red found me as a toddler. He took me to the University, as he had no better idea of what to do with me. The Faculty adopted me, gave me the run of the place. I spent my early years exploring all the old buildings. Did you know that in the old days more than 50,000 students studied at the university? That’s more than the entire population of the NRT.”

“50,000! Wow. How many students be there now?”

“I think it is about 200, but I’m not sure. That doesn’t count students like me, who hang around after finishing their studies to do some research.”

“How do people get to be students?”

“Mostly, they pay, like Roy, the kid you saw in the computer room. Some of the large landowners in the east send their children to us. Some people are recognized as being especially smart — I was one of those and so was Ron — and admitted without paying.”

“So you are a genius.”

“Who knows? I did learn to read when I was about three or four, with the help of Ambianca. I can’t really remember when I couldn’t read. I spent a lot of time roaming in the library and got curious about the books and machines. I remember playing with one of the machines when it started talking to me. Turns out it was Ambianca. She deduced that I was unable to read and taught me.”

I continued, “When Professor Caldwell, now President Caldwell, found out about that, he had the rest of the Faculty design some schooling for me. Mostly, though, I learned whatever I was interested in.”

“That be another thing. Who runs things in Austin? It’s called a Republic, which I learned mean that people elect the leaders, but all the hotshots seems to be members of the Faculty.”

“How very observant. I think maybe you’re not the country bumpkin you pretend to be, Jackson.”

Ron decided to speak up, “Welcome to planet earth, Hyp. I figured that out long ago. What’s with you, Jackson? Are you a spy?”

“Me? No, just curious. You don’t trust me?”

“Let’s just say that I am keeping my eyes open.”

“In answer to your question, Jackson,” I interrupted, “the leaders are elected, but mostly only Faculty members run for any post. It’s sort of traditional.”

“So, Faculty members be the big cheeses.”

“If I understand what you mean, yes, especially the Full Faculty, the head of Technology, History, Computer Intelligence, and Archives.”

“They be more people than that in the Council room.”

“Right. In addition to the Senior Faculty, we have representatives for the Junior Faculty, the ones who do most of the work, and the citizens of the Republic.”

“You said that people pay to study at the University. You still use money, then?”

“Yes, we do, but there’s a lot of bartering. Austin runs an electronic banking exchange for large transactions. We use old coins for the rest.”

“You’ll see some of that in action real soon,” Ron put in. “When we get to La Grange. We’re almost to Smithville now. Shall we stop at Riverside Park? Or cross the bridge?” he asked me.

“Let’s stop, I think we can all use a break. It’ll let us fix lunch under cover, check the trucks, all that.”

“OK. You da boss.” Ron started the maneuvers needed to get the big 18-wheelers across the highway and into the ancient park, which still held vestiges of pre-Collapse days in the form of a baseball diamond and some shelters. A branch of the Colorado ran past the park, providing access to water. An unguarded bridge, a rarity along the road, crossed the river. A quick look at the bridge showed that it needed lots of work.

“We’ll need some firewood,” Ron said. “And we’ll have to buttress the bridge. See how it sags in the middle. Too bad no one’s maintaining it.”

“I can cut firewood,” Jackson volunteered.

“I have an idea,” I said. “I want to do some testing. Let’s see…” We wandered into the woods along the river, until I found what I was looking for. Taking the staff, I tried aiming at a dead limb in the shade of the canopy. The result of my first shot was a small explosion on the trunk about a meter from the spot from the dead branch. “Damn! This is harder than I thought it would be.”

“Try using the aiming laser,” Ron suggested.

“What?”

“Press the trigger button down halfway. That usually activates a laser that will display a dot where you’re pointing.”

I tried it. “Ah! I see. That green dot shows where the other laser will hit.”

“Right.”

This time, the dead branch, neatly severed from the main trunk, fell noisily to the ground.

“Holy shit! That’s some laser,” Ron said with more than a touch of awe in his voice.

“Was that magic?” Jackson asked, a slight quaver in his voice.

“Of course not. There’s no such thing as magic. Do you know about lasers?”

“Those things like the one that made the green dot on the branch?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve heard of them. We don’t have any where I come from.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s not easy to make them. We’re lucky we still have the equipment, and Professor Cameron, who is probably the world’s expert on lasers now. Maybe it would be better if you just thought of this as magic after all.”

Meanwhile, Ron had taken the staff and was examining it carefully. “Nice piece of work, this.” He’d already figured out that the ferrule concealed a charging plug. “Won’t be able to get this into the cab to recharge, though. Whoever made it didn’t think of that. I’ll rig something up. I can also probably fix a way to recharge it on solar cells, just in case.”

“That would be fantastic, Ron. I’m sure glad we have you along.”

Ron ducked his head and quickly departed to handle the job, as well as dealing with the bridge. He handed the staff to Jackson as he left. Jackson took his time examining it also, even to the point of aiming it at another tree branch. When he pressed the trigger, nothing happened.

I smiled. At least we still had a few mysteries. “Sorry, it only works for me. A safety precaution in case it falls into the wrong hands. Here, let me hold one end while you use it.”

This time, Jackson neatly felled another dead branch. “That could be useful,” he said as he picked up an ax and set off to cut the branch into smaller chunks.

“Let’s hope we don’t have to use it,” I muttered to his back. *I’ll need more practice, though, that’s for sure.*

Half an hour later, after a bit of experimentation showed that the best way to use the laser was to tuck one end under an arm, then aim and shoot. I actually brought down a Snow Goose, a welcome addition to the menu. Carrying it by the neck, I headed back to the shelter, where a good fire was already going. Jackson was preparing a meal with Red’s help. Ron was off to one side, fiddling with some wires connected to a solar panel.

Addressing Ron, I said, “Maybe we should plan to camp here overnight. We’ve only got a few hours of good light left. I guess we can get to La Grange easily enough, but we’ll have to wait till tomorrow for the push to Sealy. It’ll take quite a while in Columbus. I’ll see what Red thinks. This is a nice spot. Ready to recharge this gizmo?”

“Just about,” Ron said. “I’ve got a few things to do on the truck anyway.” He took the staff, leaving me to wander down to the cooking area with the goose.

Before I got close to Red, he announced, “No, I don’t think we should camp here if that’s what you’re gonna suggest. We oughta push on to Columbus. Lots of reasons: easier to defend, we can start negotiating sooner, and I want to give Ron time to inspect their bridges before we start over. Besides, it’s going to take hours to clean that goose, as anyone with the slightest knowledge of food would know.” He smiled.

“Oh? Well, as someone who’s eaten almost every meal in the refectory at the University, all I know about food is when it’s done right.”

An hour later, the convoy left the park and headed to La Grange and the next bridge across the Colorado. We’d crept across the Smithville bridge one truck at a time and found a stretch of road good enough to speed up. The fields along the highway were mostly lying fallow, either thru planning, or because there was no one left to tend them. As we neared La Grange, though, we detected signs of active ranching, with carefully cultivated pastures holding prized cattle, the beginning of the vast Murchison Ranch.

“Why do you keep using all these bridges?” Jackson asked. “We’re on the correct side of the river now. Why don’t you take the back roads and avoid La Grange altogether. We could slip into Sealy from the north.”

“Too dangerous,” Ron told him, explaining as if to a young child. “It’s hard enough to negotiate the bad spots on the good roads. If we get off onto, say FM 153, we’re almost guaranteed to have mechanical problems. With these monsters, we have to stick to the best route, even if it means paying bridge tolls.”

The next bridge proved to be much easier. The La Grangites were sophisticated traders, who used the NRT grid effectively. They had already arranged the trade ahead of time, a complicated triple barter. On the return, the caravan was to pick up 50 barrels of crude oil taken from the fields around La Grange. This went to the University Lab to be converted into several usable products, including precious gasoline and diesel oil. The gasoline was destined for some traders in Temple, who needed it to fuel some vehicles they used to take material from old warehouses in the region. Several sections of PVC pipe the traders had found near Belton were included in one of the trucks. It took only about an hour to unload the pipe, and cross the bridge. “Now, onto Columbus,” Ron said. “The road should be good between here and there. We get to pick up I-10 soon. Hope the Columbusites have been maintaining that well.”

“We’ll camp on the banks of the Colorado, this side of the first bridge,” I instructed. “We’re not going to agree to anything until you have a look at both bridges. I don’t want to get caught between them.” *Not in Murchison territory.* I leaned back against the padding in the cab and let Ron lead the three huge trucks down the ancient highway.

4. *Sitting around the Camp Fire* **December 1, 2086** **Near Columbus, NRT**

“Here,” Red said, “this will help improve your mood.” I took the joint, sucked in a deep draught, and wound up with a coughing fit.

“Whoa! What’s that stuff?”

“Hill Country Gold. Like it?”

“Heavy duty. Your favorite strain?”

“Whenever I can find it; helps the mood. I needed help after talking to the damned Columbusites. You won’t be happy. Problems on both bridges.”

“What about going thru town?”

“Can’t make it. The railroad overpass is too low.”

“So, we stuck here?”

“Ron’s working on a fix. Says that we can go over, but carefully. I think the kid’s real bright. He’s suggested that we fix the problems to pay the fees. Last I heard the C’s were thinking about it. Jackson’s leaning on ‘em pretty hard.” He took a deep toke on the joint and sat on the ground. I took another hit as well.

We were lying on the ground, heads on a small log, when Ron and Jackson walked up. “What the hell!”

“Hi, guys,” Red said dreamily. “Did you get them to agree?”

“Hey,” Ron said, “can I have some of whatever it was?”

“What do you think, Red?” I asked.

Red almost giggled. “Well, he don’t have to drive for hours. Tell you what, Ron. See if the cooks have finished whatever we’re having — so long as it ain’t goose — and bring some over here. We’ll celebrate your successful negotiation...I hope.”

Ron smiled broadly. “Yeah, they went for it. You should have seen Jackson working. He’s amazing. We started to walk out three times, with him muttering something about other routes. He even mentioned Fayetteville. The C’s are so isolated down here they thought there was still something there. He’ll tell you.” With that, he raced off toward the kitchen area.

We had stopped for the night in the old rodeo grounds just outside the boundaries of Columbus, on the left bank of the Colorado. Nearby, an enterprising local had constructed what he insisted on calling a motel, a series of old cabins that he had partially restored, which meant that he had cleaned out the rats and wired some of the units for electricity. He claimed that the air conditioning worked, but when Ron simply shook his head, I refused to pay for that.

“So,” I said, “you played the old good-cop/bad-cop routine for the C’s and they went for it?”

“It weren’t that easy,” Jackson explained, “Those guys bargain for a living. I had to throw in some extras. You said I had a free hand.”

“Bargaining is not my strong suit.”

“Whatever that means.”

“It’s a —”

“I know, a twentieth century saying.” Jackson caught on quickly.

“Exactly.”

“Anyway, I promised that I would get enough cement from the Sealy warehouse to fix the supports on the bridges. Ron says they really need work.”

“What are we going to give Sealy for the cement?”

“That part’s still being worked out. Ron sent e-mail to Austin. We’ll find out when we get to Sealy.”

“Sounds workable. Take a seat.”

Jackson, clearly tired from hours of wrangling, collapsed heavily next to me. “Thanks. I’ll take some of that illegal substance if you’re going to pass it around.”

“Sure thing,” Red said, expertly rolling another joint, “but it ain’t illegal in the NRT.”

“No shit.”

“That’s right,” I said. “We take a pretty liberal view on most things, including what people do on their own time.”

“Nice,” Jackson said.

“By the way, Jackson, you realize that you’re expected to sleep by yourself. It hasn’t been thirty days, you know. The far cabin would make the rest of the group happy.”

“OK, I understand. Where y’all gonna sleep?”

“We’re still working on it. Don’t worry.”

Ron returned carrying four plates of beans, rice and goat cheese on a makeshift tray along with four mugs of beer. Gingerly laying the tray down on the ground, he handed a plate to Red and Jackson, being careful with the latter to make sure that their hands didn’t touch. Then he brought me a plate, which he placed in my lap, his hand barely brushing my leg in the process. When I looked up at him, he blushed, turned around quickly and fetched the beer for everyone before settling down facing me, flanked by the other two men.

Jackson had several puffs of the marijuana, then tried to pass it to Ron. “Here, Ronaldo, I think you need this. After all, you did the driving today, not to mention checking the bridges.” Ron glanced at Red quickly, before waving the joint away. Jackson offered it to Red, who said, “No offense, Jackson, but it ain’t been 30 days. Maybe I should roll another one.” He proceeded to do just that.

“Suit yourself,” Jackson said, taking another lungful before carefully putting the fire out and saving the rest for later.

“J-Jackson doesn’t know the story of the Battle, Red. I said you’d tell it tonight,” Ron said.

“Maybe later. Don’t seem like the right atmosphere.” He took a hit on the joint and passed it to Ron, who accepted it with alacrity. As predicted, the mood of the group got better. After a bit more smoking, we ate dinner with more gusto than the grub merited.

Jackson stood. “They be more beer?”

“Always,” Red replied.

“I think I’ll grab one for the road and head down to my cabin. What time we hitting the road in the morning?”

“We’ll wait for full daylight, say 8:00.”

“Sounds good to me.” He slung his backpack over one shoulder and deftly picked up the tray with the bowls on it with one hand while taking his beer mug in the other. We watched in silence as he made his way toward the kitchen area.

“I don’t trust him,” Ron said. “Have you noticed the way he looks at you?”

“Best to be careful with strangers,” Red agreed, “but I got a good feeling about him. I think he’s gonna work out.”

“Maybe we should have a talk, Ron,” I suggested. “Red, why don’t you take the second cabin? Ron, come with me.” I held out my hand to show that the invitation was friendly.

Alone in the cabin, I got straight to the point. “Ron, we need you to be at your best. You know we don’t have a chance to keep everything working without you, and I can’t afford to have you worrying about how someone looks at me.” Ron pursed his lips several times, but nothing came out.

“I seem to remember suggesting that we could spend some time together on this trip.”

“Uh...I”

“Now would be a good time, don’t you think?”

“Sure, but...”

“I know you’ve had a crush on me from the time you were 14.”

“Well, maybe, but...”

“Enough buts. Do you want to be more than friends?”

“Absolutely, but...”

I started unbuttoning his shirt. Looking down, I saw that I had begun in the wrong place and removed his belt instead.

“Hypatia, I...”

“Come on. Let’s go to bed.” I pulled him along with me. “I’ve been doing some research, some videos I found in the Archives. Have you ever heard of Pamela Anderson or Paris Hilton?”

Much later that night, I suggested, “When you get jealous of Jackson, remember this.”

5. Hard Work, If You Can Get It

December 2, 2086

Columbus, NRT

Jackson and I sat in the cab of the big truck, watching Ron harangue workers shoring up the first Columbus Bridge. “Whatever you said to him last night, it worked,” Jackson noted. “He’s really fired up.”

“It wasn’t so much what I said as the way I said it,” I replied, turning slightly to look at him.

Jackson choked a bit on his drink, a vile blend of herbs said to replicate the taste and effect of coffee. “Does that mean what I think?”

“I invited him to zip our sleeping bags together.”

“I see. That’s very interesting.”

“Jealous?”

Now, it was Jackson’s turn to look askance. “Me? Jealous? Of that young pipsqueak? I could break him in two.”

“So, you are jealous.” I must have been a bit too gleeful, because when I rested my hand on his thigh, he brushed it away with a curt, “Twenty-three days left.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m immune, or so everyone thinks.”

“I’ve heard the stories, as I remarked to you yesterday.”

“Remarked! Careful, Jackson, your mask of bumpkinhood is slipping. In fact, it’s slipped several times now that I think about it. You know proper tenses, for example, when you forget and use them. As you just did.”

Jackson smiled. “OK, the bumpkin act was a bit put on. I’ve found it useful many times when negotiating. Actually, I generally find myself unconsciously imitating the people I’m around. Around a scholar such as yourself...”

“Why Jackson,” I said laughing, “You are such a fraud. I think I’m going to like getting to know you.”

“Oh? You have plans, do you?”

“How about a treasure hunt? Interested?”

“Not if it involves looking for the sheik’s gold in the Houston muck. I’ve been there and done that.”

“Really. Did you find the Krugerrands then?”

“No. Someone in the group had those. I don’t think anyone has found the stash. Some of the coins were probably used to pay for services during the chaos.”

“Too bad. How about a late 20th century hacker’s hangout? Interested in that?”

“Why, you got one?”

“I think so. Let me show you something.”

At that moment, though, Ron returned to the truck and hopped into the driver's seat. "Ready for the well known hard part?" he asked.

"Ready as we'll ever be," I answered. "What are our chances?"

"Oh. We'll make it OK. The repairs will hold at least twice our weight. We'll need to go over one at a time as usual, though."

"Did you have time to check on the old Interstate? What's that like?" I asked.

"Well, we for sure ain't going to drive on the overpass, but the rest of the road looks good. Once we clear Columbus, we should be at the Warehouse in about an hour."

"Good. Wake me if anything important happens. I didn't get enough sleep last night." I observed to my delight that Ron blushed to his eyebrows.

6. The Austin Consensus December 4, 2086 San Felipe, Old Texas

“I’ll say one thing for these Houstonians, they sure know how to party,” Red said to Ron and me as we watched the dancing from a distance. “That brew they whipped up was something else. Weird that they refused the weed we offered, though.”

“They got different ideas about things,” Ron agreed. “I was sort of wondering whether to wear a mask and gloves and join the dancing when they more or less told me to stay away.”

“That’s understandable,” Patty replied. “Everyone who’s alive today is careful about meeting with strangers. I noticed that they were even suspicious of Jackson after his being with us for so long. See, he’s standing alone over by the barbecue pit.” At that moment, Jackson seemed to notice us and started towards us.

“Looks like we’re about to get to the second well known hard part, Madame Librarian,” Red said. “I think your moment has arrived.”

And so it had, Jackson informed us. “As soon as this set finishes,” he said, “I’m going to introduce you to the crowd and explain things. Apparently, the feeling is pretty strong that we want to stay here rather than looking for a better place. The harbor looks made to order for our trading.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Before the storm wiped out everything, we eked out a living in the marshes around Houston. The marshes are incredibly productive, you know. Lots of fish and especially crabs living there. Also some shrimp and crawfish. We also did some salvaging in Houston. Lots of stuff left there still. We traded that stuff down the coast.” We all nodded, confident that the salvaging was the real operation, the fishing a cover.

Continuing, Jackson explained, “We’d heard about Sealy for years. Lots of trade goes thru here, but we didn’t know how it worked. That was until we saw the Harbor and Warehouse. That really opened our eyes.”

“It is pretty remarkable, isn’t it?” I agreed.

“It must have been fucking amazing to see it being built,” Ron said.

I wasn’t going to pass up that opportunity. I retrieved the info from the Archives:

Constructed during the final days of the Old Regime by Wal-Mart, the Harbor was the largest expenditure of private capital in history. The huge corporation that dominated world trade hedged its bets as the sea level began to make the Houston ports dicey. By building the canal and locks from the mouth of the Brazos to Sealy, they opened up another sea-lane for their trade. Before the Collapse, huge container barges docked daily. The containers were transferred into the Warehouse and then onto trucks for distribution. This location, right on I-10, with good connections to the East, but particularly to the West and North was perfect. After the Collapse, the Sealyites quickly seized control of the Warehouse, whose contents, enough to last for many years, were worth more than gold. The combination of the Harbor and the Warehouse ensured commercial success for the Sealyites, allowing them to exercise considerable control over the New Republic.

Jackson pressed his point, “There’s a thriving trade going on here, but the NRT is only getting half the profit. We can rebuild our fleet and handle more of the trade. We’d like to join the NRT and trade with the coastal communities. We were always more of sailors than fishermen anyway. The big shrimpers who operated off the coast did most of the real fishing.”

“Why do you want to join the NRT?” Ron asked.

“What else is there?” Jackson retorted. “We certainly can’t manage on our own. Besides, we were impressed with your generosity, and especially your technology. Frankly, though, we’re not really sure what we’re getting into. We’ve only heard stories about y’all, and we don’t believe most of them.”

“Good,” I replied. “You’ve taken the first step, healthy skepticism. I’ve prepared a short talk. Then I’ll take questions.”

When the music stopped, Jackson let out an incredibly loud whistle and motioned everyone to gather around. “Friends, this here’s Hypatia, who prefers to be known as Patty, Master Librarian at the University in Austin. I ain’t sure myself what a Master Librarian is, but one thing I know is that she’s big cheese. Now, just so you know more, she’s the girl we all heard stories 'bout, the one who got found as a baby. I’m here to tell you that she ain’t a witch, but she does seem to know just 'bout everything. And she’s got some gizmo that lets her look up stuff she don’t know, at least when she’s on the grid, whatever that means. Anyhow, she promised to give us the true poop on the NRT. So here she is. Give her a big down-home welcome.”

I strode forward to a small smattering of applause. Some of the people on the front row either took a bit of a step back or assumed a defensive posture. *This is not going to be easy.* At that point, Jackson motioned me to stop. “I said let’s give her a good welcome,” he snarled at the crowd, who applauded with more enthusiasm.

“Thank you.” I drew back my cowl, revealing for the first time the close-cropped hair, showing the rank of a Senior Faculty. Then I removed the mask and gloves, dropping them onto the dirt. “Whew! That’s better. I was getting hot in those gloves, and didn’t think anyone could hear me with the mask. I hope that you don’t believe the stories about me, but I will tell you that I was found as an infant, the only survivor of a group of travelers trying to reach Austin. Because everyone else apparently died of the virus, people assume that I must be naturally immune somehow. I don’t know. I still try to take precautions like everyone else.”

“Anyway,” I continued, “I understand that you’ve taken a liking to this place. I can understand why. This used to be a State Park in the old days before the Collapse. Some of these buildings are amazingly ancient, dating back to the 1930’s. They really built them to last then.” Jackson signaled me to cut short the history lesson.

I ignored him and delivered my standard lecture about the New Republic. The next twenty minutes consisted of a brief history of the founding, the general principles of the government, relations with the Kolgites to the north and the *Norte Mexicans* to the south, and finally, the Austin Consensus. I finished by quoting the opening lines of the document, “We reach Consensus thru rational enquiry.”

I paused to let that sink in, then moved on to list the main points, including the need to protect the environment, concluding with, “This is why the unofficial name of our state is the Green Republic of Texas.”

“I thought it was the Godless Republic of Texas,” someone shouted from the crowd.

“That’s another name,” I agreed smiling. “We hope that y’all will join with us, becoming part of the Republic. That means accepting the main points of the Consensus. This is an important question: one that I hope you will consider carefully. I urge you to try to reach a consensus.” That got a slight chuckle from the crowd. “Now, I’m ready for questions.”

“That don’t seem to be enough to govern by,” a large man in the front row said.

“How very perceptive of you,” I agreed. “In fact, these are only the principles. I should point out that you can keep your own governmental structure. We do have a full written Constitution that sets out how our government works. I’ll be happy to let you see it whenever you want. I didn’t bring a copy with me, but we can get one off the grid. Basically—”

“What be the grid?” a questioner shouted.

“Ah. The grid is the set of wires connecting all the communities that make up the NRT. It sends both electricity and information from Austin to the communities. That doesn’t cover everyone, of course. Sometimes it is simply too difficult to extend the grid everywhere. There are many crofters, and even a few large landowners, living off the grid as we say. They are more isolated, but are still welcome as part of the NRT. That includes most of the communities in the Hill Country, the wild area to our west. I think,” I glanced at Ron for confirmation, “that we can extend the grid to this community.” Ron nodded vigorously. Yanking down his mask for a moment, he said, “No problem at all. Sealy is already on the grid, and it’s only a few clicks from there. The Interstate already has most of what we need.” He quickly put his mask back on and stepped back.

“What about your customs?” a young woman wanted to know. “What about those things that aren’t part of government or commerce?”

“I see you’ve been talking to Jackson. “OK, let’s talk about customs. I’m guessing you’re interested in our customs about sex and reproduction.” A stifled gasp from the audience told me I’d struck a nerve. “It started with a scientific observation. The result of the plague was a drastically reduced gene pool. Y’all understand about the gene pool, right?” The crowd murmured assent. “With the population reduced by — well estimates range as high as 90% — we needed to consider genetic diversity. The obvious first step is to have as many people participate in reproduction as possible. We were particularly interested in eliminating some...well harems is probably the best word, some harems that were developing. We discussed plans at great length until finally one of the women at the University provided the simple solution to most of the problems: put women in charge of procreation.”

I thought this was one of the most brilliant results of the search for consensus and was proud to tell the crowd about it. “We discourage couples from having more than one child. Instead, we actively encourage women to mate with a number of different men. Over the years, this has meant that the women in the NRT tend to take a large role in decisions about sex. We have a method of contraception that is virtually foolproof when used correctly. The combination has worked quite well. Mating is a carefully planned activity, one I might add that is distinct from marriage. We still have many couples who live together happily raising the woman’s children, only one of which is the man’s.”

I gave them time for this to sink in. “I realize that this is quite a bit different from what you are used to. We try to be flexible about everything, and some communities reject these ideas. Many, though, have found that it works very well, eliminating many sources of conflict. We have only one

law that is enforced without regard for local customs: all decisions about pregnancy are the woman's, without exception.”

Looking over the crowd, I finally found the young woman who had asked the question. “Does that answer your question?”

“Well, that wasn't really what I was thinking of,” the woman replied. “I really wanted to know why you cut your hair so short.” The audience hooted in laughter.

“Well, in that case, forget everything I said. No don't. About the hair. This haircut marks me as a member of the Faculty at the University. It is symbolic, a tradition, nothing more. I find it very convenient, though I have to admit that your hair is quite lovely. Maybe I should let mine grow out.” I noticed Red moving toward the group and decided to let him tell his version of the history of the early days of the Republic. “I'm think I'll take a break now and turn things over to Red, who is one of our famous Texas Rangers. Red usually patrols the Hill Country area, but he knows his way around most of the territory.”

7. The Treaty of Sealy December 5, 2086 The Harbor, Sealy, NRT

“I think we finally have agreed on all the details,” Jackson reported. “Ron sent a copy of the document to Austin for ratification by the Council. The gist of it is this: We settle on the left bank of the Brazos, around the shores of Lake Sealy where we are already. We get full navigation rights on the river and discounts on the fees and duties at The Warehouse. The Sealyites retain full control of the harbor. We’ve agreed not to construct any slips for barges on our side of the river for 15 years, though the Sealyites have the right to construct the slips if they want to.”

“And the grid,” Ron asked, hardly able to contain himself. “They agreed we can extend the grid east on I-10?”

“They agreed, including permission to reactivate the substation on their side.”

“Fantastic,” Ron said. “The infrastructure along the old interstate is in fabulous shape. I guess Wal-Mart upgraded everything in the final days of old Texas. This bridge,” he gestured at the structure that seemed to leap over the harbor, “is the best one I’ve ever seen. Even with virtually no maintenance in years, it is very sound. And the cabling under the road is all perfect. We can light it up anytime.”

“I assume that the Sealyites had no objection to our extending the boundaries of the NRT east along I-10,” Patty asked Jackson.

“They almost did a back flip. They’ve wanted to energize all of I-10 for years. It would make their trading even more profitable. Those guys seem to think of nothing but money. I suggested that perhaps our commitment to the environment meant that we should return this area to its natural state, eliminate the dam and all the canal locks.” Jackson stopped for a laugh. “That got them moving in a hurry.”

Jackson had accidentally hit one of the raw nerves that consumed many Council meetings. The Sealy Canal was, after all, a purely manmade waterway. After considerable discussion, the conclusion was to do no more harm and let things remain as they were. That had the major advantage of keeping the Sealyites happy. Moreover, the Republic depended on a flourishing trade with communities on the coast.

“There is one more thing,” Jackson said.

“What’s that?” Patty wanted to know.

“Retrieving our boats.”

“What? Where are they?”

“We left some at the edge of the Marsh, right off I-10. We want to take one of the trucks to get them. The rest of the boats are still at the Galleria.”

“Ron? What about our fuel situation?”

“No problem. There’s plenty more in The Warehouse.”

“Well, actually, I agreed on some trading proposals with the Sealyites. Remember that Austin gave us a free hand.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “What do we have to give them?”

“Two of the trucks.”

“Ouch! What do we get in return?”

“Our choice of whatever we want from the Warehouse, one truckload.”

“That’ll take some time. I guess if Austin agreed...”

“What the President said was that there was a rumor of some real coffee from the tropics...”

We all laughed. “I’m glad we get to keep one of the trucks. He’d trade almost anything for real coffee. OK. Ron, start work. We’ll leave for the boats as soon as you give the word.”

Ron hurried off in the direction of the long abandoned electric substation. After he left, Jackson turned to me and said, “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Oh?”

“My sister. She wants to go with us.”

“To get the boats?”

“To Austin.”

“Does that mean you’re coming to Austin?”

“You object?”

“No, of course not. Anyone is welcome to come to Austin. What are you planning?”

“For one thing, I’m planning to stay longer than, say,” he stopped to do the mental arithmetic, “at least 22 more days.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“What about long term plans?”

“There must be something for me to do in Austin. Do you ever use bike messengers?”

“I think Red will be able to find something for you. Come on. Lead me to your sister.” I started to take his arm but stopped abruptly when I realized what I was doing. Flushing slightly, I gestured awkwardly for Jackson to lead the way.

Jackson’s sister turned out to be the young woman who had asked the question about customs last night. Given the opportunity to study her, I saw that she was even younger than first impressions suggested. Much shorter than Jackson, with a slight but strong build, features even more suggestive of Asian ancestry than Jackson’s, and lustrous black hair that she had gathered into a long ponytail. Dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and sandals, all no doubt part of the load from Austin, she looked to be about 16, though I was never very good at guessing ages. Examining the T-shirt more closely, I saw that it said, “Houston Astros, World Series 2005.” It must be a family heirloom, something salvaged from the storm. The girl had put on the best clothes available for the meeting.

“Hypatia, Master Librarian at the University in Austin, allow me to present my sister, Amanda. Amanda, this is Hypatia, who for some reason prefers to be called Patty.”

“A great honor, Ma’am,” Amanda said, extending her gloved hand to almost touch mine.

“A pleasure, Amanda,” I replied, wishing that I’d put on a mask, but afraid now to make a point of doing so. “You are the one who asked the question I misinterpreted last night.”

“Oh, you got the question right,” Amanda replied. “I was just joking about your hair. Will I have to cut mine when I come to the University?”

“Come to the University?”

Jackson coughed slightly. “I hadn’t quite gotten to that part yet. You said that exceptional students could attend the University for free. Our...our clan all agree that Amanda is the smartest person here. We were hoping that you would sponsor her for the University.”

“I see. Well, that will have to depend on the results of the tests. We’re pretty strict about that.”

“What are the tests like?”

“Well, you have to show that you can use a computer to do research, things like that.”

“A computer? Of course, I can use a computer. We have a couple of old PCs that I’ve used whenever we have enough power to run them. Can I use one regularly? Can I get access to the Archives? I’ve heard about them. All the knowledge of the Ancients, they say.” Her excitement was palpable. I began to see why the clan — need to find out more about that — wanted her to get University training.

“I can show you my portable link if you wish. Maybe it would be best if you and I spent some time together. Jackson, maybe you could help Ron get things ready?” Jackson smiled broadly and left immediately. “Come back to the cabin I’m in. I need to explain a bit more about what you’re getting yourself into. By the way, would you mind putting on a mask? If you don’t have one handy it’s OK, but...”

Amanda quickly complied, pulling a sealed packet from the pocket of her jeans, extracting the mask and putting it on. Inside the cabin, I said, “You can take the mask off when we’re alone but try to wear it whenever someone else might see. Most people take the quarantine rules very seriously.”

“I understand,” Amanda said. “We take them seriously also. I understand that I will have to live alone for 30 days in Austin.”

“Well, technically, you could live with Jackson if you wish, but I would encourage you to live alone. You’ll need the time to study.” *Besides, that would reset the clock for Jackson to the full 30 days.*

Moving over to the desk set up in the middle of the cabin, I turned on the portable computer. “This is a treasured antique,” I told Amanda. “Dates to the early years of the 21st century. A genuine Dell, not one of the fakes you usually see. Of course, all the workings are later, but the keyboard and case are genuine. I’m just telling you that so you’ll be careful with it. I’ll start you off with guest user privileges. You can access the grid, but you’ll be prevented from doing anything that might cause trouble.”

“I can actually get onto the grid? From here?”

“We got the camp working on a temporary basis last night. When I say we, I mean Ron, the young man who came with me.”

“The tall, one, with the *pushtok*?”

“*Pushtok*?”

“The sores on his face.”

“Oh, we call that acne. What is the word *pushtok*?”

“I think it’s a mispronunciation of some Vietnamese words that I don’t know. My aunt might know what they mean. She has a herbal treatment for it. I could get some for Ron.”

“Why don’t you give it to me and I’ll give it to Ron? I think that would work better.”

“Yeah, that would be better.”

“We need to talk about what the life at the University might be like. There are some pretty strict rules you’ll have to follow.”

“Like cutting my hair?”

“Actually, no. That’s reserved for Faculty members.”

“What are the rules, then?”

“Well, you’re expected to spend most of your time studying. That doesn’t necessarily mean no time for fun, but...”

“That’s no problem. I want to learn everything.”

“Well, pregnancy is definitely out. You’ll have to wear a patch all the time.”

“A patch?”

“I see we still have a few secrets left.” I loosened the belt on my robe and opened it to expose my left breast. Amanda withdrew several steps. *Hey! They’re not that bad!* “Here,” I said, “this is my patch. Notice that it’s a bright green color.” Amanda carefully came to get a closer look. “When it’s green, the drugs are working. That prevents ovulation. You understand about ovulation?”

“Of course,” Amanda replied, with a huff in her voice to emphasize that she wasn’t a moron.

“The patch gradually turns red. When it gets fully red, it means that it isn’t working at all. Most women change it before that happens.”

“Can you take it off?”

“Not easily. The patch is a one of the best inventions of the old times. The material bonds with your skin, at least until it turns red. Then it practically falls off by itself.”

“How long does it last?”

“About a month. I like to replace it before it falls off. That way I don’t have to fool with my period. Some women, though, think it’s better to have regular periods, so they wait for that before putting on the new patch. Superstitious nonsense if you ask me. When was your last period?”

Amanda was clearly not used to discussing personal functions in such a matter of fact way with a stranger. It took her a bit to respond. “About two weeks, I think.”

“In that case, you may have already ovulated this month, so you’ll need to take other precautions. However, as you’ll be living alone that shouldn’t be a problem. Would you like me to help you put one on?”

“Well, sure, I guess so.”

I rummaged thru my backpack and found a spare patch. “Here’s how this works,” I said, breaking the seal on the package. I carefully shook the patch out into the palm of my gloved hand. “It’s a good idea to wear gloves when you handle these, just to avoid getting it contaminated. Notice that there are two sides, the shiny side and the dull one. The medicine is on the dull side. That goes next to your skin. It’s traditional to wear it on your breast, so it’s easy for your partner to see, but you can actually put it anywhere you want. Where would you like it?”

“I’ll go with tradition,” she replied, peeling off her T-shirt without giving herself time to think about it. If I had breast like those, I would want to go shirtless. I had often fantasized about getting a breast enhancement like those detailed in turn of the century literature, though knowing of the dangers the procedure presented I realized it was a foolish vanity. Still, I always felt short-changed, especially when I cupped Amanda’s to apply the patch. “Here, put your hand here. The heat of your body starts the bonding. It takes about 30 seconds, though most women wait longer just to be sure. No one wants to mess up one of these patches. They’re not really in short supply, but we hate to waste one.”

“It feels warm.”

“That’s normal. That’s the bonding action. When it quits feeling warm, you can remove your hand. If you feel any irritation, though, let me know right away. Some women have a reaction, particularly at first. There are some other side effects that you may find, such as dry mouth, but they usually go away in a day or so at most. When I said that the patch wouldn’t come off, that wasn’t completely accurate. There are solvents that will dissolve it if we need to remove it. Remember. This might not protect you for the first month.”

“As if.”

“Oh, dear. I didn’t think. Are you...”

“No, not really. I’m just the clan nerd. The guys like girls who...”

“I know exactly what you mean. I was lucky. Besides being smarter, I could also beat the guys at games. However, come to think of it, I didn’t have any boyfriends until much later. Interesting...Maybe they are just after my genes. At any rate, I doubt if you’ll have any problems in Austin, just the opposite. You understand that it’s completely up to you, right?”

“That sounds great. Completely the opposite from our clan, though. In Austin, does that mean that I have to...to initiate things?”

“Hardly. I suspect you’ll have a crowd of boys vying for your attention. But you can choose to do whatever you want to, and they will respect your decision.” *If they know what’s good for them.*

“Now, let’s get you started with the computer.”

8. History Lesson

December 5, 2086

San Felipe Camp, NRT

Ron called on the wireless to say that things were a bit more complicated than expected. He wouldn't be ready to leave until early afternoon. With time on my hands for a change, I wandered back to my cabin to check on Amanda.

"Oh, Hypatia, glad you're here."

"It's Patty."

"Sorry. I've been reading a bunch of articles that you wrote when you were young. Really cool stuff. I've learned about the plague, the revolution, how solar cells work at the *atomic* level, lots of stuff."

"Wow! I remember writing those as homework assignments. I didn't realize it was still online."

"Oh, yes. Actually, I searched for information about you and found the articles instead. This is way better than what we have. We got a few books we managed to salvage, and lots of old stories and rumors. No one ever told me, for example, that the plague could be passed by mosquitoes, or that it was made by humans."

"Really? I didn't realize that information wasn't common knowledge. Maybe we should have a lecture for your community."

"We don't need a lecture; I'll tell my granny. Then everyone will find out quickly." She laughed a bit, probably imagining her old granny holding forth on the virus.

"Fair enough." I saw what Jackson meant when he said Amanda needed to go to the University. She caught on quickly.

"One thing I don't understand," Amanda said.

"What's that?"

"Well, you said that the plague was derived from VEE. I looked that up. It stands for Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis. I was trying to look up what all those words mean when you came in."

"Well, Venezuela—"

"I got that, a former country in South America."

"It may still exist for all we know."

"Well, sure, but... Anyway, what do Equine and Encephalitis mean?"

"Equine is a fancy word meaning *pertaining to horses*."

"Oh! That's why there aren't any more horses."

"Exactly. In fact, that was the first clue that led our scientists to suspect VEE. Unfortunately, by the time we, well they, because I wasn't born, figured that out, it was too late to save the horses."

"And Encephalitis? That's hard to even pronounce."

“I agree. It’s some kind of bad disease. I really don’t know more than that. I’m very impressed by what you have learned in such a short time. You can definitely come to the University with me. I think we may be able to find you your own computer. I’m sure the Warehouse has something. Shall we go see? Then, how about some lunch?”

9. Extending the Grid

December 5, 2086

On I-10, NRT/Old Texas

“Signal’s fading,” Amanda said. She twisted the screen on her new computer to show Ron and me.

“OK. Ron, better find a good place to put the last relay.”

“Let’s stop and check the maps.” He pulled the truck to the side of the road, though it was clear that no other traffic had been by in a long time. “Amanda, where are we?”

Amanda touched the screen with the stylus a few times and displayed an ancient map, together with a blinking blue dot showing our estimated current position. “Looks like we’re near something called Katy Mills. Never heard of it.” She fiddled with the screen some more and displayed the ancient map overlaid with a photo showing the current view from a weather satellite. “The marshes are about a mile ahead. How far is a mile?”

“A bit more than a kilometer, actually about 1600 meters.”

“Oh. Why doesn’t the map say that?”

“Put it down to tradition,” Ron said, taking advantage of the opportunity to sneak yet another look at Amanda’s breasts beneath the flimsy T-shirt. He continued, “Katy Mills looks like a big shopping area. Should be plenty of places with easy connection to the Grid. I suggest we proceed cautiously trying to get there before the road runs out. I’m sure going to miss this road. Whoever built it did a fantastic job.”

“One of the last big projects before the Collapse,” Amanda said after a few more taps on the screen.

I couldn’t help but smile. *The girl is unbelievable. How did she possibly pick up the search technique so fast?* I also noted that Amanda spoke excellent English, not the usual argot of the other residents. Clearly, she had been educated well...somehow. “The question is not when,” I gently chided, “but who. That’s a bit harder to find out.”

“It wasn’t this Wal-Mart corporation?”

“I don’t think so. Try to find out. OK, Ron, I agree. Let’s try to get to Katy Mills.” I picked up the mike for the intercom. “How y’all doing in back? Everything OK? Anything looking familiar?”

Jackson’s voice came back, “We can last a bit longer. So far, we haven’t gotten a ping on the locator. It should have a range of about 10K, so we’re not close yet.”

“Roger. We’re going to try for Katy Mills, about 2 clicks further on.”

In a matter of minutes, we saw a huge concrete area with the remains of about 50 stores. Ron pulled the truck into the parking lot and killed the engine. If the Interstate was a dream, the parking lot was a rude awakening. Cracked pavement sported growth of small trees that obscured the view of the buildings. Those stores that remained were in bad shape. Most of the roofs had collapsed, providing another avenue for the fast growing vegetation. “Fuel is down to 5/8,” Ron said. “We can’t go much farther if we are going to have a decent safety margin. Unless you think we can get more from Sealy.”

“We best not take a chance,” I agreed. “Better find those boats soon. I’ll get a spiral search started. You find a place to install the relay.” I jumped down from the cab and walked toward the back.

“Want to come with me?” Ron asked Amanda. “See how we set up a relay?”

“Is it OK?” she asked me.

“Sure, but wait a sec. I changed my mind. I’ll come with you. Let me get the search started.”

About 10 minutes later, the three of us advanced toward the nearest building that looked safe enough to enter. “Our best bet is to use the emergency exit for a building with an intact roof,” Ron suggested. That one there, looks reasonable. The second story is gone, but the first may be OK. The exit should be on the back side of the building.” Following his suggestion, we worked our way around the corner of the building until we found a red metal door that looked promising.

“Frozen solid,” Ron said. “Amanda, see if you can pull up a blueprint for this center. It should be somewhere in our database.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Amanda said. “I’ve stored blueprints of all likely buildings on this computer.” She showed the diagram on the screen. “But, I don’t need it. The next emergency exit is in the back of Urban Outfitters, the biggest store in the place. It should be down that way.” She pointed toward another building.

“You memorized the blueprint?” Ron asked.

“Well, I remembered where all the entrances and exits were.”

This gets more and more interesting, I thought. Instead of saying anything, though, I simply started trotting toward the indicated building, with the other two hurrying to catch up. This door proved to be a better prospect and quickly gave way to Ron’s efforts using a mechanically assisted crowbar that earlier centuries would have recognized as a manual version of the “jaws of life.”

Inside the old building, Ron set up artificial lights, which revealed a treasure trove of antique gear. “Wow,” Amanda said. “If we’d known all this was here...”

“No time for salvage now. We need to find a connection to the grid. I don’t suppose,” Ron said, with an emotion composed of equal parts envy and hope, “that you memorized the location of the wiring closet.”

“If I knew what a wiring closet was—”

“Never mind. Show me the blueprint again.” Ron examined the drawing and aimed a strong flashlight around the room. “Probably back there,” he indicated. Carefully following an aisle where the floor appeared to be sturdy, we made our way to the door Ron thought held the wiring closet. His instincts proved to be as good as usual, and within an hour, he had set up another link in the chain of relays that tied all of I-10 back into the NRT grid.

“Signal’s 5x5,” Amanda reported. “We’re back on line.”

Stopping to pick up some of the equipment, backpacks, mosquito netting, a camp stove and some full bottles of gas that might still work, we returned to the trucks in the parking lot.

Jackson was standing by the trucks smiling. “Found 'em. No damage. Want to take a look?”

“Sure,” I said. “Lead on.”

The boats, located after a tedious hike thru the brush and mud, were certainly different from what I expected. For one thing, the craft were large, twin-hulled, with a platform in the middle able to house a comfortable set of quarters. A large main sail and two smaller jibs provided most of the propulsion, but I noted a powerful electric motor in case the wind failed.

“How do you power the motor?” I asked.

“Solar generated electricity,” Jackson replied. He moved to the cabin and slid back protective shields to reveal six large panels, each more than a meter square in size. The dying rays of the sun barely hit the panels, but I noticed a dial on the side of the cabin immediately jumped. Apparently, the panels were very efficient.

“Where’d the panels come from?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

“We put them together from chips we found at a place called NASA.”

“You put them together?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just that I am surprised by the level of technological expertise.”

The comment struck a nerve. “We’re not complete barbarians. Salvaging is tricky business. You have to know where to go and what to look for. We do quite a bit of research before mounting an expedition. NASA is mostly under water these days. We don’t go diving down there for fun. We hoped to find these chips when we went. My grandmother’s brother was an electrical engineer before the Collapse. He impressed us with the importance of learning about electricity, especially solar power, which he saw as the only way for us to survive. We try to pass on his knowledge, but we don’t have anything like your Archives. We do have a few hundred disks we’ve managed to salvage over the years. Amanda has probably read all of them. She was supposed to create an index of what was on them, but she always wound up engrossed in what she read. Anyway, we’re not up to your level, but we’re not morons.”

“I’m sorry, Jackson. I didn’t mean to insult you. Are there more of these chips?”

“Apology accepted. There are thousands of the chips. Hard to get, though. Like I said, the building’s under water.”

“What do you think, Ron? Worth doing some diving?”

Ron, who had been examining the solar panels closely, looked up. “You kidding? These are worth more than the Sheik’s Gold. This is great work, by the way. Who did it?”

“A woman in our clan named Mia. She’s good with her hands.”

I tried to get back to the subject of interest. “How far away is NASA?”

“A good day’s sail from the Galleria.”

“How far to the Galleria?” I asked.

Jackson looked at the position of the sun. “We can’t get there before dark.”

“Tomorrow, then. Get all the boats but one loaded on the trucks. Tomorrow we’ll send the truck back and take the remaining boat to the Galleria. We can’t pass up this opportunity. Ron,” I said, turning back to him, “tell the other drivers what’s involved. There shouldn’t be any problem

getting back to Sealy. Tell them to wait for us there. We'll signal them when we need them to come back. Then see if you can find us some scuba gear in this place.”

10. Lighting the Dark Tower

December 6, 2086

Galleria Area, Houston

I could smell it, but I couldn't believe it. *Was it really coffee?* Whatever it was, I was going to find it. Navigating carefully thru the dark maze of corridors, using a tiny flashlight only when necessary, I located the kitchen area, where several people were preparing a large meal in a fireplace fueled by some amorphous mixture of flammable materials. The fire was bright enough to shed light on the surroundings, the remains of one of the luxury condos the Galleria area had been famous for. The fireplace marked this as one of the best, which fit with the location on the top floor of the structure. Most of the original fittings of the apartment had been stripped out and replaced with several large tables probably salvaged from one of the restaurants in the area.

As it had been well after dark when we finally made our way to the Galleria, it was the first chance I'd had to meet most of the rest of Jackson's Clan. Curious to find out more of the clan structure, I'd been mulling over several different approaches while waiting for sleep to overtake me last night.

However, I soon found out I wasn't going to have an opportunity to ask questions. A tall woman, obviously in charge of the operation, spotted me and clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "Our guest of honor be here. Please, Ms. Hypatia, sit here." She indicated a large stuffed chair at the end of what I guessed was the head table. "I heared you got us this coffee. I knowed Jackson was the right man for the job, but I din't know he be able to work miracles." With great ceremony, she poured me a cup.

"Thanks," I said, raising the cup and savoring the aroma of the brew before taking a first sip. "Oh, that's good," I said with obvious enthusiasm. "I haven't had real coffee in years. So Jackson managed to liberate some of this from the Warehouse in Sealy."

"A sample, he be calling it. He get them to tell him where it come from. We be planning to get some more, if'n we got something worth trading. Got any ideas?"

"I'm sure you know better than I do, Mrs...."

"Oh, sorry. The name be Martha, from the line of Hathaway." She then proceeded to introduce everyone in the room, far more than I could possibly recall, especially with only a single sip of coffee. Martha was clearly not of Asian descent, so the clan couldn't be a simple extended family. Studying her more closely, I guessed that she was somewhere in her forties, though given the hard life she had most likely led, even that was just a guess. Tanned from too much exposure to the sun — need to send some sun block to the community — a bit less than two meters tall, with robust proportions and a bit more weight than was optimal, Martha looked like a good person to have on your side in a fight. From the way the other workers deferred to her, I suspected she was also more than a simple cook.

When the introductions were complete, I offered my own information. "I'm pleased to meet all of you, though I'll need more time to get everyone's name right. I am Hypatia, Master Librarian for the University of the New Republic of Texas, which I suppose all of you know. Most people call me Patty. I was named for a hero of our Revolution, who was named for a famous librarian from long ago. I've always found the name a bit pretentious. I'm frankly amazed at the way you live here, and Jackson certainly led me to expect something different. After some breakfast, I'd love to see

more of your habitation. And, I'm dying to learn more of your social structure. We in the NRT know very little about life here on the fringes. Oh, sorry, I hope that isn't an insult."

Laughter greeted the last remark, almost the only part of the speech everyone understood. "Fringe be good word for it," Martha said. She turned and signaled one of her minions, who brought a plate containing a delicious looking omelet, some bread fresh from the oven, and some kind of small fish. I took an exploratory bite of the omelet and showed evident satisfaction. With that, everyone grabbed a plate and rushed to take a seat close enough to talk to me. The questions came in a rush. "What be the University like?" "Who cut your hair off?" "You got a steady BF?"

With mouth full of smoked fish, I held up my hand to buy time to swallow. "The University is a wonderful place. I was very fortunate to grow up there. The short hair is a mark of my position at the University, as is the cassock I wear, and no," I singled out a nice looking young man who'd asked and looked him in the eye, "I don't have a steady boyfriend. Now, I suggest we eat this superb meal before we continue the interrogation."

It really was a great breakfast. Clearly, these people had access to some farm animals, at least chickens, and some source of wheat. There was more here than met the eye, and I understood why it had taken so long to persuade Jackson to take me to his home. As if thinking of him was a summons, Jackson appeared at the door. "Ah, I see that at least one of our guests found the way to the common room. Good move, Patty. Martha sets a great table, much better than Ron and I have had. But come on. There's a marvelous sunrise outside, and Ron has something he wants to show you."

Rising and wiping my mouth carefully on a napkin, I extended my hand to Martha. "Thanks for a wonderful introduction to your clan. I hope I get to have breakfast here again." To my shock, Martha took the proffered hand in both of hers and clutched it to her ample bosom. Noting my surprise, she continued, "I hope so as well, my dear Hypatia. We look forward to a long and mutually beneficial friendship." She winked, raised my hand and kissed it. Fighting back revulsion, I wondered briefly if I was expected to reciprocate, but Martha solved the dilemma by quickly turning back to the workers, and shouting, "Now, you lazy scum. Back to work!"

As we walked to meet Ron, Jackson said, "You handled that well."

"What?"

"The hand action. Martha survived the plague as a young woman. She doesn't worry about quarantine and likes to stick with old customs. I've seen some people actually puke breakfast."

"So, it was a test?"

"Sort of. Martha is more than she seems."

Jackson led the way down several flights of stairs lit only by a skylight somewhere far above, and thru some gloomy hallways, before emerging into a spacious room with large doors opening onto a balcony. Sleeping bags lay near one wall, along with a pile of dirty clothes. That and the slightly stale odor marked the room as bachelors' quarters. Ron was standing on the balcony smiling. "This is fantastic."

I saw high cirrus clouds covering the sky, colored pink by the rising sun. To the east lay the old downtown Houston, a cluster of skyscrapers, most of which appeared to be damaged in one way or another. "Pretty," I said.

"What? Oh, the sunrise. Yeah, that's nice. But this is what I wanted to show you." He turned away from the view toward downtown and pointed off to the south. Rising from the low water, the

tower stood in magnificent isolation, a huge monolith, dark against the lightening sky. Around it were the remains of many other buildings, all in a state of collapse. The skyscraper, surrounded by a hill and berm to protect it from the water, appeared untouched, a tribute to the skill of the architect, and to the materials used.

“We call it the Dark Tower,” Jackson said.

“Originally,” I informed them, “it was known as the Transco Tower after the company that had it built. Later, it —“

“Who cares?” Ron interjected. “From the top we could see halfway to Sealy. If we put a relay on the roof, we could cover most of the marshes and link to the NRT grid, at least for information access. Power is another problem, but I have some ideas on that.”

“Interesting,” I agreed. “Can we get into it and onto the roof?” I asked Jackson.

“I’ll have to see if I can get permission,” he replied. “The Tower has, well not exactly religious, but certainly ceremonial importance. We’ll have to take it up with the clan elders.”

“I was sort of hoping you were the clan elder.”

“Hardly,” he laughed. “I’m not even the leader of our branch. That’s Martha.”

“It would be helpful to have access to the grid before we set out for NASA,” I suggested. “How hard is it going to be to convince the elders?”

“Think you can climb to the top?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Well, it’s a long climb.”

“How long?”

“No one has made it all the way. It’s all dark, you understand, and treacherous.”

“What about powering up the elevators?” Ron asked.

“That’s been a dream of ours for a long time,” Jackson told him. “There’s even a prophecy surrounding it.”

“Prophecy!” Ron and I both exclaimed. We looked at each other and decided to stay silent for the time being. “How interesting,” Ron finally said. “What is the prophecy?”

“A foolish superstition,” Jackson replied with a dismissive wave. “How do you propose to power up the elevators?”

“I’m not sure. I take it that your solar cells aren’t enough?”

“They were enough to get one car part way up once. Two people died during the rescue. We haven’t tried it again.”

“Can we go take a look at it?” Ron asked.

“Let’s go see about getting permission.”

I found the darkness oppressive as the two skiffs holding our party sped across the shallow water toward the looming shape of the Tower. The discussion by the “Elders” had taken far longer than I expected. The moon, a thin crescent, had already set by the time we embarked, and now the only illumination came from the stars overhead and the few fires burning in downtown buildings far to the east. Jackson at the helm of our boat, as well as Amanda, displayed no emotion. Ron maintained a careful hold on a rope and feigned a lack of concern.

More to break the spell than for real information, I commented, “I see that the people in the downtown area have enough dry material to keep fires lit.”

“Oh, sure. There’s enough old junk lying around to burn for years, and they grow crops on rooftop gardens, just like we do.” Jackson made a minute adjustment in the direction the boat was heading before continuing. “They’re really backward, though. Mostly survive by raiding.”

“Do they raid you?”

“They try. They don’t have electric motors, though, so we can outrun them. We just head into the wind.” After a brief hesitation, he added, “At least we can outrun them in the shallows. Wouldn’t want to bet on who’d win a race in the Gulf.” He took a deep breath. “They’re a nasty bunch. You want to avoid them.”

“OK.” I sat silently as we sailed past a series of ruined buildings, and a few, like the condo of Jackson’s clan, well-maintained and occupied. Several minutes later, the prow of the boat nudged the edge of the island containing the Tower. Jackson turned on a flashlight and shone it at a sign hanging above holes cut in the wall of the old third floor to serve as doors. “Caution: This building is under the protection of the UCH. Entrance by permission only.”

“UCH?”

“Unified Clans of Houston.”

“Oh. How many clans are there?”

“One,” Jackson replied with a chuckle, “but we like strangers to think there might be more. By the way, this isn’t the original main entrance. That’s below water level. This was originally the third floor. So, you get to skip two floors in your quest.”

Ron, who had sat silently during the ride, looked thoughtfully at the tall building. “I think there may be a way to generate enough power. I have to do some calculations. What do you know about the elevators?”

“They go all the way to the top, provided you get on the right one.”

“Where do the shafts end?”

“The machinery is supposed to be on a floor near the roof. No one knows exactly where it is.”

“That’s our first target then.”

“What are you thinking, Ron?” I asked.

“Something from the archives. An experiment in Australia. It used a tall wind column. The pressure differential...” He put his backpack down and pulled a calculator out. Ignoring us, he started punching numbers on the keypad, then looking up, punching some more. Then he started walking toward the building.

“Wait!” Jackson called. “We need to check it out before you go in.”

Ron stopped and looked back in puzzlement.

“Sometimes, there are people inside you don’t want to meet up with.”

“Oh.” Ron looked at me. I nodded slightly. I felt under my cassock where the plastic gun nestled hidden, smiling when I recalled Ron’s delight when he presented me with his prize.

“I got to thinking about the laser in the walking stick,” he had begun. “It is impressive, but impractical. I took it apart and put the workings into this.” His hand contained an antique plastic toy, a ray gun. I remember picking it up with a mixture of annoyance and curiosity. *How will we explain this to Professor Cameron? It’s a much better design, though. Why rely on superstition when you have the goods?*

A few trials with the gun convinced me that it was much easier to aim and shoot than the original. “Nice, Ron. You took a toy ray gun and turned it into the real thing.”

I wondered if the gun was a violation of the protocol for the building. Ron and I hadn’t been able to follow all the discussion between the Clan Elders. There seemed to be some vague religious overtones to what we looked on as a straightforward engineering project. *I’ll worry about that later. Right now, I need to concentrate on getting to the top floor.*

Just then, a tall blonde woman who reminded me of a Valkyrie, dressed in worn overalls, walked up to us. “Scuse me ma’am. I’d like to give you something. Call it a good luck charm.”

I managed to hide my annoyance with this superstition, thinking it would be a good idea to cater to an innocent whim.

The woman reached into the pocket of her overalls and pulled out a beautiful locket. It consisted of a braided gold chain holding a representation of the Buddhist *endless knot* with a lovely pale blue stone at the center. Obviously ancient — nothing like had been made in years — it was also extremely valuable. “Why, this is superb,” I said, “but I couldn’t possibly accept it. It must be a family heirloom.”

“Yeah. I got it from my father, who got it from his grandmother. That be — is — a real diamond at the center, and the gold be 18 karat. The chain were broken. I mended it myself. Bet you can’t find where I fix it.”

She was right; I couldn’t locate the repair.

“It’s wonderful.” I fastened the chain around my neck. The locket seemed to glow against my cassock. Deciding it would attract too much attention that way, I carefully put it inside the robe.

“It be supposed to bring good luck, leastwise that what Daddy say.”

“Let’s hope so,” I replied politely. “Thank you.”

With that, the woman, obviously an engineer of some kind recruited for the work, walked away, leaving me with Jackson. “OK, Jackson. Lead on.”

While Ron, with Amanda helping, began the search for the buildings electrical controls, Jackson and I started up the stairs. Though Ron realized the batteries brought along wouldn’t provide much power, it might be enough to run some parts of the building if he could figure out how to do it.

Jackson's flashlight barely provided sufficient illumination, leaving most of the stairway in total darkness, something I found a bit disconcerting. We had to step carefully, avoiding the weak spots. To amuse myself, I started counting the steps. Ten steps. Landing. Turn 180 degrees. Ten more steps. Door. Turn and start over. I had reached 450 when Jackson held up his hand to signal silence. Straining, I heard what Jackson had detected: furtive movements and whispering right above us. *Damn! Hope that's just rats.*

Before we could move another step, the stairwell was flooded with light. Ahead of us, barely visible as silhouettes just outside the circle of light, stood three well-armed men. From what I could see, they appeared to have AK-47 style assault weapons.

"What do you want?" Jackson demanded.

"Dunno. Whatcha got?" came the reply. The voice seemed to be associated with the middle of the three figures.

"Nothing to spare."

"Gotta have somefing."

"Just a minute," I interjected. "Why should we give you anything?"

"Gotta pay toll."

"That implies that you are rendering some service, but I see no evidence of that."

"Well, what d'ya know boys. We gots us a lawyer here." He took a step toward me.

I drew the gun from beneath my cassock. "Stop right there." This elicited a huge guffaw from my opponent. "You threatening me with a toy?"

I hope this works. I squeezed the trigger part way until a green dot appeared at what looked like a vulnerable spot on the thug's weapon and fired the beam. The result was very satisfying: a short sound like a clap of thunder reverberating in the stairwell punctuated by a scream of pain. One of the AK-47s lay on the floor, split into two pieces. With a growl, the gun's owner crossed the floor, wrenched the weapon from my hand, and pointed at me. *So much for a show of force. I hope Ron set the gun up properly.* I gave him my best smile and spoke softly. "Please don't try to use the pistol. You might hurt yourself." Then I clasped my hands behind my back.

That brought another laugh. "The little lady be worried about us, boys." In quick succession, the gang leader squeezed a shot at both me, and another at Jackson, producing two green dots, but no damage. Somewhat taken aback, the gunman examined the weapon carefully. Then he carefully pushed a lever on the side from safety to fire before pointing the gun at my diminutive breast.

"Please," I said. "The weapon is dangerous if used improperly. Let me have it back. Please."

"You know what I think. I think I gonna keep this little doodad, after I get rid o' y'all."

"This is your last warning. Please give me the weapon." I began moving to the side, watching carefully as the barrel of the gun tracked me.

"I don't think so," he replied and squeezed the trigger.

I stepped forward and took the ray gun from his hand as he fell to the ground, his left eye socket a blackened hole. "Interesting," I commented. "Right handed but left eye dominant."

The other two gunmen rushed forward toward their leader. Jackson produced a ray gun of his own, which he aimed in the general direction of the two. “Hold it right there.”

All of us stood still for a moment until a burst of static on the radio startled us. I thumbed the mike. “Go ahead.”

“I think we can provide you some lighting,” Ron said over the radio.

“Excellent. As it turns out, we have a lot of light right now.”

“What’s happening?”

“We’ve met some new acquaintances. One of them tried to use my ray gun on me, but it backfired.”

“Ah,” Ron said. “Blame me for that.”

“You’re forgiven.”

“What floor are you on?”

I glanced at a nearby door. “Apparently, the 9th.”

“OK. How’s this?”

Light streamed from a crack at the bottom of the door. I walked over to it and opened the door. “Blech! This place is a pig sty!”

“Well, we ain’t got no water,” muttered one of the gunmen.

I heard the sound of running footsteps approaching the door and swiveled to meet the new threat.

“No!” one of the men cried out.

Jackson moved quickly, taking the AK-47’s from them and herding the men toward the door. “No bullets,” he said simply. “It was all a bluff.”

“Damn! I’m sorry about your friend,” I said to the two survivors, “but I did warn him several times.”

“He ain’t no friend.”

I turned back toward the doorway to see several small children and two women. All were dressed in rags and appeared half starved. I spoke into the radio. “We’ve got some more refugees up here. I think they could use some help.”

“OK, we’ll send up a party. You’ll never guess what we found.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“This building has never been plundered. Apparently, the basement was locked with an electronic lock. Our batteries were just enough to open it. I was a bit surprised to find documentation about the lock in the Archives. Apparently, someone had pre-loaded any document related to the Tower into the Ready bin. I was able to search to find just what I needed. Bless those twen-cen engineers.”

He continued, “There’s quite a cache of stuff here: emergency power generators, with enough fuel to last for a couple of days. I think we can even run the elevators and save you some

climbing. We'll let you know. In the meantime, here's some more light." The emergency lighting in the stairwell turned on.

I turned my attention back to the two men. "What do you have to say for yourself?" To my surprise, both of them knelt on the floor at my feet.

Quivering slightly, one of the men answered the question. "Harry," he gestured toward the dead man, "he make us do it. We get in during the storm. After that, he decide we oughta stay and wait for someone to come. 'They always show up,' he say. Guess he be right. You don't got some food and water, eh?"

"Help is on the way. I want this place cleaned up. If I find it spic and span when I come back, maybe, and I mean maybe, you can stay with us. Now, get busy." I called Ron on the radio, "What's the story on water, and sanitary facilities."

"That's going to take some time. We can run the pumps, but it'll take a while to recharge the reservoirs on the upper floors."

"Start the process. They need both here on nine. And send food."

"Roger."

"Well, Jackson, ready to resume our climb?"

"You're going to the top?" It was one of the women who asked the question.

"Some reason why we shouldn't?"

"They say they be haints there."

"Horse manure."

"You be the one they's stories 'bout?"

"Not you too. Get busy cleaning up. Come on, Jackson."

When we had climbed three floors without encountering anyone else, Jackson asked, "Will you tell me how you managed that trick with the gun?"

"If you tell me how you managed to have one for yourself."

Jackson laughed. "Oh, that. When Ron wanted to use the toy gun, I decided that maybe its mate would come in handy, so I took it."

"So that was all a bluff?"

"Seems to be the order of the day. Now, your turn. How does the gun trick work?"

I explained the simple process: Everyone at the University has an identifying chip, actually two, implanted under the skin. All guns in the NRT have a companion chip inside it, matched to its owner. In the owner's hand, the weapon works normally, but when taken away, the safety engages automatically, to protect anyone who just wants to look at it. In the unlikely event that someone resets the safety and pulls the trigger, something other than the normal action happens. In this instance, Ron apparently set it up to fire backwards. Since our attacker was aiming carefully, the beam went right into his eye, killing him instantly.

"That's a neat trick," Jackson noted. "Do all your weapons work that way?"

“Of course. However, we try to make the effect non-lethal. That’s why Ron apologized. Frankly, I don’t mind having that one death on my conscience. I did warn him, after all.”

“Three times, by my count.”

Somewhere along the line, I lost track of the count of how many steps we’d climbed. My legs were on fire. Jackson had to be hurting as well, but he showed no sign of wanting to stop. What began as a chance to focus on Jackson’s muscular legs in tight-fitting Lycra pants — and his cute butt — had become a boring chore and then turned into pure misery. Finally, I could stand it no longer. “Can we take a break, please?”

“God, I thought you’d never ask.” He fell more than sat, leaning up against the wall on the landing by the door to one of the floors. Worn numerals suggested we were somewhere in the 30s. I slumped beside him, dug a sandwich and bottle of water from my pack, and prepared for a lunch break. I had no idea what time it was. It seemed as if we’d been climbing for hours.

“How much more do we have? Any idea?” I mumbled around a mouthful of something. Martha had packed the lunch, and I didn’t inquire too closely about what it was.

“You seemed to know about the building. How many floors are there?”

“I remember at least 50. Unfortunately we aren’t connected to the grid, so I can’t check.”

“I’ve got an idea.” He scrambled to his feet and tried opening the door, without success. “Damn. I figured we could look at the elevator; see how many floors it had.”

“That’s a good idea. I wouldn’t mind exploring a bit. Let’s check each door as we go, see if any of them are usable.”

We’d gone fifteen more floors, in a bit over an hour, before we finally found a door we could open. My legs complained that they were thinking of quitting. That’s when I heard a whirring sound. Before I could use the radio, Ron’s voice came thru. “We’ve got the elevator running in something called fire fighter mode. The buttons won’t work for you, but I can control one car from here. Where are you?”

“We’ve made it to the 45th floor.”

“OK. Find the elevator.” Jackson and I just looked at each other in the dim light and grinned.

We exited from the stairwell into the environs of the 45th floor. Sunlight streaming thru the windows revealed a maze of cubicles, each sporting a computer, a telephone, and virtually nothing else.

“Yuck!” Jackson said. “Can you imagine working here?”

“Typical of the environment of the time,” I told him. “This equipment will no doubt prove valuable. Shall we find the elevator?”

A short while later, we stood on the top floor. Ron worked his magic to move some water to a reservoir above us somewhere, and we’d found functioning showers behind the kitchen of the luxurious restaurant that had graced the top floor of the tower in the last days before the Collapse. The area, surprisingly, had suffered little damage over the years. The shower, another quick meal,

and a somewhat longer rest had combined to relieve at least some of the aches from our climb. Now, we had time to explore our surroundings.

“I wish I’d brought some binoculars,” I said, gazing out of the huge, unbroken picture windows at the scene below, a vast expanse of marsh turned crimson by the setting sun. I could see the buildings of the old downtown area. Another cluster of buildings stood somewhat nearer, all in ruins. In the far distance were still more tall buildings. “Houston was famous for having seven distinct downtown areas,” I said to Jackson.

“It’s a spectacular view, no doubt about that. See the remains of the bridge on the far horizon? It’s hard to see.” He pointed where he meant. “NASA is near that.”

“It looks like a long way to go. So what do we do now?”

Jackson seemed to be thinking of an appropriate response when Ron’s voice came thru the radio, “I have an idea of how we can generate enough power to run the building all the time.”

“We’re listening,” I said.

“We can convert one of the elevator shafts, maybe two, into wind chimneys and use them to power generators. It will be like windmills, but vertical.”

“Sounds interesting. What do you want us to do?”

“Nothing for the moment. I’ve sent some people to find the equipment we need. I’m going to shut the power off to conserve the fuel. OK?”

“I guess so. Will we still have water and all that?”

“Until the reservoir runs dry. You should have enough for days.”

“OK. Let us know when you’re ready down there.”

“Roger.” With that, the few working lights went out, leaving the room lit only by the rays of the dying sun.

“Seems that we’re stranded here for a time,” I noted the obvious.

“You realize that this is the first time the two of us have been alone together?”

“Actually, I had thought of that. Any ideas?”

“Well, the quarantine period is still not up. There are four days left.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“In that case, I have some ideas of how we could while away the hours.”

“I hope your idea is the same as mine. Think we can find any wine in here, maybe light a fire in that old fireplace?”

“That’ll do for starters. I’ll find the wine. You find something to burn.”

“Nice fire,” Jackson said.

“Great wine.” We were sipping an old French Bordeaux. The label was mostly unreadable, but together we had deciphered the magic words *premier grand cru*, indicating the finest wine of the region. Despite the less than ideal storage, it had aged well.

“Is there much of it?”

“Lots. Even some champagne,” he answered.

“Think it could be drinkable after all this time?”

“I know of only one way to find out.”

It was pretty bad, but we managed to find one good bottle that had miraculously survived. After a while, I was feeling much better, except for my legs, which had begun to ache again. I’d already swallowed as much ibuprofen as I thought safe. The combination was finally starting to work. I pulled a joint from my pack, lit it and passed it to Jackson. Sharing it added to the air of intimacy. I felt like leaning on his shoulder and wondered how he would react.

There is a poem, one of the few written after the Collapse, called First Touch. It tries to capture the complex set of feelings of lovers released from the strictures of quarantine. I couldn’t help thinking about the final line, which concludes with “the electric thrill of flesh on flesh.”

Jackson, for his part, after his initial suggestion, seemed content to wait and see what developed. I decided to start things off.

Now, my body is nothing to be ashamed of. I keep in good shape, with Tai Chi exercises whenever my schedule permits. On the other hand, the image of Amanda’s breasts stuck in my mind. Maybe all Houstonians had bodies like Amanda. Would Jackson expect me to look like her? My cassock, after all, concealed a lot.

They say that natural firelight is a great mood enhancer, covering up minor imperfections in the flickering interplay of light and shadow. Maybe that was the secret. All I know is that when I rose and began removing my clothes in as sexy a way as I could think up, Jackson more or less tore his off. I could see the muscles in his legs, firmed by countless hours riding a bicycle, if I could believe him. The rest of him looked enticing as well, and as for the first touch, I spotted an obvious target.

I started walking slowly toward him, reaching out with my hand. He took it in his, so our first touch was a bit prosaic, but I could still feel a frisson of anticipation. He took the other hand as well and put both around his neck as I stepped close enough to feel his breath on my neck, then his lips on my shoulder. I tilted my head to gaze up at him, and we kissed.

He lifted me easily, pressing me close to his chest as I wrapped my legs around him. Then, I closed my eyes as he gently lowered us onto the pile of clothes by the fire.

Ron’s plan took a week to put into practice, but the results were stunning. He located two huge fans, part of the old air conditioning, to serve as makeshift turbines. Then, he undid some of the work of previous generations, opening a duct from the sub-basement to the surface and from the top of the elevator shaft to the roof. He explained, “During the day, hot air flows up the shaft because it is cooler at the top. At night, cold air flows back down the shaft. We installed the fans in the shaft to serve as turbines. The wind turns the fans, which generates electricity. We should be able to improve the setup later with better turbines, but this is a good start.”

Two elevators produced enough power to run the entire building, albeit on a scale much reduced from its pre-Collapsian zenith. At my suggestion, Ron turned on the lights on all floors as a

celebration. Seven stories were in good enough working order that the lights clearly delineated the floors. In addition, a searchlight on the very top began working, sending a beam circling around the tower.

I didn't realize it until much later, but we had just invented a new religion.

11. Sermon on the Mound
December 14, 2086
The Tower, Galleria Area, Houston, NRT

“How many so far?” I asked Amanda.

“At least a thousand. We’re scrounging for food and water.”

“What do they want, has anyone said?”

“They’re here to see you,” Amanda said, her voice showing surprise at the question.

“Me!”

“You lit the Dark Tower.”

“You know better than that. It was hard work for everyone for a week.”

“I think it’s time to tell you what people around here believe, as in religion.”

“Oh, dear. So it’s religion, is it?”

“Fraid so. Although many of us, most of our Clan for example, don’t follow any religion, but there is a...a well a cult, that has many adherents in this area. We call it the Cult of the Second Messiah.”

“A second Messiah? Didn’t the first one cause enough trouble?”

“They say that God feels sorry for what has happened, that He will send a new Messiah to lead the world.”

“Oh, please.”

“This time, the Messiah will be a woman.”

“Now, *that is* interesting.”

Amanda quoted, “For lo I will send a new Messiah. She will come bearing gifts. She will light a beacon for all to see.” She lowered her eyes and explained, “I’ve heard this stuff most of my life.”

“So the Second Messiah is me?” I said, unable to keep a touch of asperity from my voice. People had said things like this about me for as long as I could remember.

“You came bearing gifts. The Tower certainly qualifies as a beacon for all to see.”

“The great thing about prophecies is that they are always a bit vague. You never know that they’ve come true until someone interprets them for you.”

“Well, yes, still...”

“I guess I better figure out what I’m going to say. Any ideas?”

“There’s some precedent for leading the people to the Promised Land.”

“Thanks. Actually, there’s some merit to that. Houston isn’t really a good place to live these days, is it?”

“I thought Lake Sealy looked a lot better,” Amanda agreed.

“It would probably help the food issue.”

“It would also clear out a lot of the competition for salvaging rights.”

“I see...Any ideas on how to feed this flock?”

“I think I can find some small loaves of bread and a few fish.” She ducked as I tried to swat her on the head.

The island on which The Tower stood had been built after the Collapse, to prevent further damage to the building. Gradually sloping from the shoreline to the old third floor of the building, with several retaining walls, it provided enough room for the crowd of people to gather, but left everyone a bit short of temper. Ron had taken some tables and chairs from inside the building and set them up for people to use. He had also constructed a platform higher than the rest of the island with a cover to keep the sun off. Finally, he had located the components to create a first-class public-address system.

I mounted the steps to the platform, walked to the center, and pushed back the hood of my cassock. Taking the mike, I began prosaically, “Good afternoon. My name is Hypatia, Master Librarian of the University of the New Republic of Texas. I tell you that right off because there are a lot of silly stories being told about me: that I can read minds, tell the future, perform feats of magic. I want you to know they are all nonsense. I’m just a person like you.”

The crowd didn’t seem to be buying it. Lots of people whispered to each other. I fought off my irritation and continued, “God has not sent me to help you. There is no God. There is no magic. No one is going to come and save us. We have to help each other.” This last was greeted with some polite applause. Someone from the crowd called out, “Lead us!” Before I could object, the multitude took up the cry until it rose to a rhythmic chant they could probably hear in Sealy. I motioned for quiet.

Oh, well. Might as well play along. “OK. I’ll lead you, out of this marsh to a better place, a place I’ve prepared for you.” The crowd cheered. “Which of you knows of a place called Sealy?” A few brave individuals raised their hands. “Well, it’s not that far. I suggest that we all go there. I’ve arranged for some transportation to meet us at the edge of the marsh, near Katy.” I heard the word Katy repeated by so many people that it seemed to acquire its own religious significance. It rose in volume to become another rhythmic chant.

After the crowd calmed down, I explained the procedure, which amounted to triage, of dividing the group into manageable units for the trip to Sealy, with those who needed help most going first. At my signal, Jackson and several of his fellow clansmen began circulating thru the throng, taking names and assigning people to groups. As I stepped down, several men approached, obviously some of the leaders. I was curious what they wanted, but confess I was flabbergasted when the entire group prostrated themselves on the ground in front of me.

“What’s all this?” I demanded.

“Teach us, master.”

“Teach you what?”

“Teach us the path.”

“We reach consensus by rational inquiry,” I quoted from the Consensus. *Maybe that will do.*

“Ah,” they said in unison. “Will you also bestow your blessing on all of our people?”

“How many times must I say it? I am not some God, or a messenger of God.”

“Be it not true then that you be found as a child wandering in the wilderness?”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“That you got a device to talk to people way far away?”

“Well, yes, I have such a device, but it’s nothing magic, just—”

“And that you brung light to the Dark Tower?”

“I didn’t do that, really. It was Ron—”

“Your consort.”

“No, he’s not my consort, he’s—”

“They say you sleep together.”

I blushed, not because of sleeping with Ron, but thinking about my nights with Jackson. It was the third time around before he let me practice some of the tricks I’d picked up studying old videos in the Archives. How I was going to explain about Jackson when I saw Ron? The crowd of supplicants naturally misinterpreted my reaction.

“He do your bidding.”

“Well...”

“He be having great powers of his own.”

“Oh, please.”

“Truly, the writings say, ‘She knoweth not her own power.’” This was from a younger member of the group.

“Who wrote that?”

“It be well known.”

I gave up. “I’ll grant you my blessing. In return, you must agree to abide by the Austin Consensus.”

“Gladly, Master.” They all genuflected again.

Now, how exactly to I give a blessing? “Excuse me.” I turned to Amanda, who seemed amused by the events. “How do I bless them?” I whispered. “I don’t have any idea,” Amanda replied. “Why not just fake it?”

I turned back and, relying on knowledge of the 20th century, made a gesture with my hand, making a V sign with two fingers on each side. Was it from Star Wars? Star Trek? I made a mental note to look it up later. The blessing was simple: “May you live long and prosper.”

“Thank you.” The group backed away, bowing several times.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered.

Then, I noticed the crowd parting to let another group approach. This bunch looked scruffier than the first. Several people retreated in fear.

“This is bad,” Amanda said. She left to get help, but one of the gang grabbed her and held her.

“Please let her go,” I said to the man who looked like the leader.

As if noticing the action for the first time, the brute turned and snarled at his minion, who abruptly released Amanda and slunk into the back rank of the gang. “I be Conan, Ruler of the Marsh. I claim de throne.” He drew a huge sword from a scabbard on his back and held it above his head.

The image was so much like a movie poster in the archives that I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. “Well, Conan,” I said after I’d recovered, “that sounds great. What do you propose doing after you take the throne?”

“We be thinking of ravaging some of de women, maybe killing some of de men.”

“Fascinating. What did you have in mind for me?”

“I be thinking of ravaging, then killing.”

“How interesting.” I felt inside my cassock for the ray gun, just in case it proved necessary. Some of the crowd had gathered around, the men appeared to be planning to assault Conan and his gang. I motioned to them to stand back and walked over to my huge adversary. I barely came up to his chest. Conan apparently lived in some part of the marsh that lacked hygienic facilities. The stench from him and his companions almost made me gag. He wore some tattered work clothing: overalls, an old sweatshirt, no shoes, some armor made from what looked like alligator hides. The stench probably came from the latter, but it was so pervasive that I wasn’t sure. *This is not going to be easy.*

I pointed to his armor. “You make that yourself?”

He smiled. “Yeah. Be a huge brute. Wrestled him myself. Killt wif a knife.”

“How brave.”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling.

“Why don’t we be friends,” I said as calmly as possible.

“What that mean?”

“I mean, that if you attack me, we both may die today. You will die for sure. But there is another path you can follow.”

Conan knitted his brow, trying to parse the complicated tenses. He wasn’t making much progress.

I reached out and touched him on the arm. He flinched involuntarily, no doubt familiar with the stories about this strange woman who showed no sign of fear.

“I be hearing o’ yo’ magic,” he said. “Don’t make me no nevermind.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I have no magic. Someone as strong as you surely need not fear someone like me. I’m sure there is a place for someone as powerful as you are in our group. Why don’t you put down your sword?”

Instead, Conan raised it over his head in both hands, obviously preparing a blow. A cold bead of sweat rolled down my back. *Maybe I've overplayed my hand.* I stood completely still and looked Conan right in the eye, though that required tilting my head back uncomfortably. "It doesn't have to end this way," I repeated as calmly as I could. "Lay down your arms and join us. We will show you the way to a better life." I continued to stand in front of him, watching him calmly. The sword waved in the air. "Isn't that getting heavy?" I asked. "Why not give it to me?"

Slowly, the sword came lower, until the blade rested on my shoulder the edge against my neck. I didn't move. No one in the crowd dared draw a breath. In the silence, I heard the sound of frogs calling, and in the distance, the cry of a Laughing Gull. *How ironic if my last memory is the sound of a gull laughing at me.*

"Don't you get lonely living out there in the marsh?"

Conan said nothing, but I thought I saw a hint of tears in his eyes.

"You don't have to be alone."

After what seemed like hours, but really was only about 15 seconds according to the video of the incident in the Archives, Conan moved the sword and stuck the point in the ground at my feet. As he did so, the edge scratched my neck, drawing blood. The crowd gasped in unison.

Struggling to speak, the giant managed to choke out, "Sorry." He stooped and started to wipe the blood from my neck, then reconsidered. He vacillated, first reaching out, then drawing his hand back. Abruptly, he stood erect again. The sudden motion was too much for his weakened state. He seemed to sway a bit, and I noticed his eyes flutter. Purely on instinct, I rushed forward and wrapped my hands around as much of his waist as I could manage, hoping to keep him from falling. *At least don't fall on top of me!* The crowd gasped louder than before. Conan fainted, probably from standing too quickly, but maybe from shock. I managed to guide his considerable bulk to the ground, where he lay quietly. This produced a loud, "Ah," from the assembled masses, convinced that the witch had conquered Goliath with her magic.

"He's probably hungry," I said to no one in particular. "What's the food situation?"

When that didn't have the desired effect, I raised my voice, "We need some food. Where the hell is Martha?" Martha emerged from the crowd, a broad grin on her face. "We got something ready, Master." She put an exaggerated stress on the *Master*. Turning to the crowd, she began issuing instruction to her crew.

I issued instructions of my own, "Make sure the people don't eat too much at first. If they've been starving, they'll need to take it slow. Can you bring me some soup or whatever we have for our large friend here?"

"Coming up," Martha replied, still grinning.

Conan awoke to find his head cradled in my lap. "Shh!" I cautioned. "Don't try to get up. We're getting you some food." Conan nodded slightly. I stroked his forehead. He was like an overgrown puppy that no one had ever loved. "I think you need a new name. What do you think of *Rocky*?"

"That be fine," Rocky replied. Closing his eyes, he slept until the food arrived.

That night the weird shit started.

12. Brief Meeting Dreamtime Medina, TX

Everyone stared at me. Looking down, I found the reason; my cassock. Apparently, people didn't have the University here. I glanced at the paper in my hand again. Yes, this was the right place. Farm Road 337 is right there, at the intersection.

They sell apples here. The Apple Capital of Texas. Interesting. Where is he?

Who?

Everyone was still staring.

Is that him? He looked up. Our eyes met. It's him! It's Mark!

Who?

I started to cross the road. A horn blared. I jumped back.

Part II. New Home

1. Debriefing January 5, 2087 Austin, NRT

“Things went almost too well,” President Caldwell began. “You don’t suppose that our friend Jackson was using us, do you? It sure was convenient of him to mention the solar cell stash at NASA.”

“Oh, you do have a suspicious mind,” I replied. “I’m inclined to take events at face value. I doubt they knew how good a thing they were sitting on until we got there. What do you think, Ron?” This question was addressed to Ron’s image on a TV screen stationed next to the desk.

“Well, it’s possible that they wanted some help dealing with the salvaging of Houston, but there’s plenty here to go around. We’re in the process of putting together some trade goods to take to Mexico to see if we can set up regular commerce, especially for more coffee.”

“Clearly, though,” President Caldwell objected, “they weren’t as bad off as they led us to believe, at least given the supplies that, what’s her name had at her disposal.”

“Martha,” Ron replied. “I think that was something of a Potemkin show for us, an attempt to enhance their bargaining position. These people are demon bargainers.”

“I suppose that makes some sense. What about dealing with the Tower?”

“Oh, they’ve wanted to develop the potential of the Tower for some time. They had already made a couple of attempts, without success. They didn’t have access to the details of the floor plan that we had. That made a lot of difference.”

“Of course,” I noted, “that means that Amanda had the foresight to download them before we left to pick up the boats. I’m inclined to think that they maneuvered us into taking on the project.”

“My point exactly,” Pres agreed. “We need to be careful.”

“On the other hand,” I interjected, “I think we succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Ron’s idea of using the elevator shafts as a source of wind energy was inspired.” I noted with satisfaction that Ron flushed with pride at the praise. “Besides,” I continued, “lighting the Tower was a master stroke of symbolism. It represents our technical prowess and shines as a beacon to all the people who’ve been scratching out a living in the area. It’s not surprising that so many wanted to throw their lot in with us.”

Red chimed in, “Most of those people seemed like riff-raff to me.”

“Maybe so,” I agreed. “Jackson’s set some people to keep a close watch on them.”

“What do you make of all the prophecy nonsense?” Pres asked. “I mean, really.”

“I don’t know what to think. For the moment, I’m playing along. It seems to keep the riff-raff in line.”

“They’re treating you as some messenger from God?”

“Not really, as I understand it. The prophecy says simply that a second Messiah will come to lead the people. It doesn’t mention a Promised Land. That was something I interpolated by mistake, seeing as we planned to take them to the new settlement on Lake Sealy.”

“Do we have any idea what they expect?”

“Only that somehow the Messiah will show them the way. They hang on my every word.”

“So, what have you told them?”

“I said that God was leaving everything up to us, that the damage we have done is more than anything God envisioned, and that we have to figure out for ourselves how to deal with it.”

“Did that satisfy them?”

“For the time being.”

“There’s one thing I want to mention,” Red put in. “About your magical birth.”

“What’s that?” everyone asked at once.

“Well, there is something a bit odd, besides the fact that I found you in the first place.”

“You always told me that you heard me crying and looked for me.”

“That much is true. It’s just that I have always told people that the rest of your party died of the plague...”

“And...”

“Well, I never actually found the rest of the party. I just assumed that they had all died and that you’d wandered away. Still, you were only about two years old. You couldn’t have wandered very far. Of course, I realized that I needed to get you somewhere safe quickly, so I didn’t spend a lot of time searching. Later, though, I went back to the area. I searched the entire road from Medina to Vanderpool. I never found a trace.”

“Where did you say?” I exclaimed.

“I searched the stretch of Farm Road 337 from Medina to Vanderpool. I thought they had to be traveling on the road. It’s the only way to get thru the hills.”

“What’s the matter,” President Caldwell asked. He moved quickly from behind his desk to stand next to me.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We can see that something has upset you.”

“It’s crazy. Just a coincidence.”

“What is a coincidence? Don’t tell me there’s nothing wrong. This is me, Daddy Pres, you’re talking to.”

“Well, I had a weird dream.”

“A dream!” Ron, Red and President Caldwell all spoke at once.

“I told you it was nothing.”

“Then kindly elucidate,” Daddy Pres requested, now a bit embarrassed at his fatherly show of concern.

“Well, a question first. Red, have you ever mentioned before that you searched Farm Road 337, or that you started in Medina?”

“I can’t recall ever mentioning it. Why?”

“Because, in my dream I was standing near a store selling apples in Medina, near the intersection with Farm Road 337. There was a sign proclaiming Medina to be the Apple Capital of Texas.”

“I know that store. It’s in ruins now.”

“I checked the archives. Medina was called the Apple Capital. There isn’t much competition for the title.”

“There are still some apple trees there.”

“I want to go there.”

“Too dangerous,” Red said.

“You went there.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Well, because...”

“What if we put together a team, you, me, Jackson...?”

“Can I come?” Ron asked over the TV link.

“What do you hope to accomplish?” President Caldwell asked.

“I don’t know. I just think it might be important. Professor Cameron would like us to make a trip out there. We think we’ve located a 20th century hacker’s workshop. Maybe even Mark Talbot’s. It’s nearby.”

“Maybe your dream comes from your research on the hacker.”

“Possibly, but Professor Cameron did most of the work.”

“I’ll consider it. Now, Ron, let’s discuss salvage operations in Houston, beginning with what you found at NASA.”

That night, I had another dream.

2. Dining Al Fresco Dreamtime Medina, TX and elsewhere

I felt I could trust him. Maybe it was because the side of the truck proclaimed, “Sheriff, Real County.” I wondered what an unreal county might be like until I remembered to treat it as a Spanish word. His truck pulled up next to me. “You the one looking for Mark? He told me to look for a small woman with no hair wearing a monk’s costume.”

“I may have an appointment with him at 1300, that is, one o’clock.”

I showed him the paper. “I think this road leads to his place.”

He laughed. “I know the place. Hop in.”

The trip took longer than expected. We chatted. “So you’re the sheriff, are you?”

“Have been for 20 years. No one else wants the job.” He chuckled. “Name’s Gordo,” he added.

“What’d you do before you were sheriff?” I ignored his implied question.

“Played football.”

“Really. Any good?”

“Better than most. All-American my senior year.”

“I’m impressed. Did you turn pro?”

“Oh, yeah. Bounced around the league for five years.”

“Then what happened?”

“Earl Campbell.”

“What?”

“The Oilers picked me up on waivers. Mostly, it was just for the local aspect, Rice grad and all that. I was pretty beat up by then and didn’t have much playing time left. When they signed Earl Campbell, I knew it was time to retire.”

“What position did you play?”

He looked at me strangely, as if it were a trick question. “Running back.”

“How about you?” he asked after several minutes of silence.

“What about me.”

“Who are you, where are you from, why do you want to meet Mark?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know who you are?”

“None of this is real.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t think I’m really here.”

“Oh, well that explains everything. Do you have some name we can call you?” He was obviously adept at dealing with weird people.

“Patty.”

“Patty what?”

“Just Patty, OK?”

“If you say so.”

We rode in silence for almost an hour. I admired the scenery, which was breathtaking. “Pretty drive,” I said finally.

“I like it. I know some people who claim it’s the prettiest road in Texas.” When he said, “Pretty,” it came out as “Purdy.”

“How do you know Mark?” I asked.

“His girl friend, well, ex-girl friend, is my cousin.”

“Oh.” *Does that explain it?*

“It used to be her cabin.”

“Oh.”

“Mark bought it from her when they broke up.”

“Oh.”

“Spend much time out here?”

“In the Hill Country?”

“Yeah.”

“My first trip.”

“No kidding. Hope you like it. That’s the turnoff up ahead, that *caliche* road.” He indicated a gravel-covered track. A small sign at the intersection said, “CR 256.”

“Mark got the county to use the number 256 for the road. Power of 2.”

“Oh.” *I must sound like a complete idiot.*

The truck bounced over the ruts, climbing steadily uphill. A small creek ran alongside. The road crossed the creek several times before we pulled up in front of a modest cabin set into the side of the cliff. I saw Mark — I recognized him immediately — sitting at a picnic table. Beside him, I noticed a pitcher of some yellowish drink, maybe lemonade or something similar. He was cute in a nerdy sort of way, with huge glasses obscuring most of his face. He was a bit taller than I, very slender, almost skinny, with hair that seemed to have a mind of its own. He wore a T-shirt with some chemical formula printed on it, shorts, and sandals. I felt a strange sensation in my gut, as though I were meeting someone very important, though he was about as unassuming as anyone I had ever run into.

“This the girl you were asking 'bout?”

Mark stood up and smiled. “That’s she.” *Wow! A grammarian.* Mark walked quickly to me and extended his hand. It looked dirty, but I managed to overcome my distaste long enough to shake it. *After all, none of this is real, so what difference does it make?* We both mumbled nice-to-meet-yous.

“You said you were bringing tacos,” Mark said to Gordo.

“Right here,” he replied, lifting an ice chest from the bed of the truck as if contained feathers. He put the ice chest on the table and opened it. A wonderful aroma issued from the interior. I was surprised that I could smell it in a dream. It was a very vivid dream.

Mark reached into the chest and drew out several cylindrical objects wrapped in metallic foil. He opened one and proceeded to eat about half of it before sitting back down. “Ah,” he said finally, swallowing. “No one makes ‘em like Abuelita. You’re going to join us, aren’t you?” This last was aimed in my direction. Gordo had already taken two of the tacos for himself.

“I’ll take a margarita,” Gordo said, nodding at the pitcher. Mark poured him one and cocked his head toward me. “Sure.” I reached into the chest for a taco, wondering how long it had been since someone had cleaned the inside.

Carefully removing the foil enclosing the taco, which smelled even better up close, I ate an exploratory mouthful. A delicious spicy and meaty mixture exploded in my mouth. *These are really good!* I realized that I was quite hungry, which I found unusual in a dream.

The other two looked at me closely. I nodded to them with a full mouth, then after chewing and swallowing, delivered the verdict, “The best I’ve ever tasted.” *That’s for sure. This has to be beef, not goat.* “What’s in them?”

“Besides ground beef, scrambled eggs and jalapeños, no one knows,” Gordo explained. “We know she puts some spices into the beef, but she won’t say what they are.”

“That’s because they aren’t the same twice in a row,” Mark countered. The both laughed at this witticism.

I tried a sip of the margarita. *Remember to look up the ingredients when you get back,* I told myself. *Get back?* The margarita was nothing special, but quite potent. *Couple of these and I’ll be wasted.*

“Mark never has learned how to make real margaritas,” Gordo said, noticing my lack of enthusiasm. “Uses frozen limeade.”

“It’s just a way to get the tequila into your system,” Mark retorted. “I like ‘em this way.”

We spent a few minutes eating and drinking. Birds called from the nearby woods. Mark identified them, “Besides the usual suspects, Titmouse, Chickadee, and so on, we have the unmistakable call of the Golden-cheeked Warbler, that buzzy ascending call...there.”

Gordo and I both nodded. I mumbled, “Cool.”

Gordo laughed. He had a nice laugh. “Mark’s the local bird expert,” he explained. “The warbler is a kind of pet of his. It’s an endangered species. Only nest here in the Hill Country.”

“I see.”

We sat a while longer. Then Gordo reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a plastic bag filled with what looked a lot like marijuana. He tossed it onto the table. “Got a bone to pick with you amigo.” He nodded at the bag. “Took that off a young girl yesterday.”

Mark picked up the bag and opened it, sniffing the contents. “Good stuff, but not great. What’s the problem?”

“Check the logo on the bag.” The bag had a line drawing of what vaguely resembled a hermit. Lettering beneath it said, “Hill Country Gold.”

“It’s my bag, but it sure as hell ain’t Gold,” Mark said.

“You remember our agreement. You wouldn’t sell any of it.”

“Of course not. That’s illegal.” He smirked. “This ain’t mine.”

“This girl’s been around before. Young. Twenties. Short cut black hair. Not as short as miss Patty, but short. Stood little over five feet. Nice figure. The one who claimed to be a reporter for Weird Magazine.”

“Wired”

“Whatever.”

“They’ve been looking for me for a long time. May be getting close. You run her off?”

“Of course. Can’t have dope dealers running around the county. You gonna roll us one?”

“Oh, sure,” Mark replied, taking papers from the pocket of his shirt. He lit the joint and politely passed to Gordo first. Gordo took a big hit and gave it to me. I tried it, managing to control the revulsion over sharing with complete strangers. It was good stuff, but certainly not Hill Country Gold, at least not like what Red seemed to have all the time.

We smoked a while in silence.

“I gotta be going,” Gordo said finally. He got up to leave. “You find your way back OK?” he asked me?

“Sure,” I replied, without any confidence.

When we were alone, Mark said, “So, you want to see the place?”

“That’s why I’m here,” I replied without the slightest hesitation.

“Come on, then,” he said and reached out his hand to help me get up.

3. *The 50-cent Tour Dreamtime near Leakey, TX*

Mark and I walked toward the cabin. I was grateful to be able to escape the heat of the day when we moved onto the covered porch in front. Mark opened the door and gestured for me to enter. Moving inside, I took in the surroundings, noting a sitting area on the left with a couch facing a stone fireplace. The fireplace was definitely functional and showed signs of recent use. I thought that it never got cold enough in Texas for a real fire and planned to ask about it.

Ahead I saw a door into a bedroom, which was completely dark in spite of the time of day, and above that a sleeping loft reached by a spiral staircase. The entire right-hand part of the cabin consisted of a kitchen and eating area, with few signs of any food preparation. A microwave seemed to be the most-used appliance, as well as a 10-cup coffee pot.

There was absolutely no sign of any computer equipment.

“Care for another margarita?”

“Sure, why not?” *Why not indeed?* I was already buzzed, so this was a sure indication that my judgment was impaired. *Hey, it’s only a dream.*

Mark crossed to the kitchen area and pulled a glass container out of the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. He took it over to the counter next to the microwave and set it into a blender, quickly mixing it back to the right consistency. He poured two drinks.

Accepting the drink, and without asking, I moved toward the door into what had to be a bedroom, but the only place that could contain a computer. The room was pitch black and much cooler. Surmising that the bedroom lay inside the cliff itself, using the earth as a natural insulator, I commented, “Very nice touch using green building ideas.”

“Thanks. That was actually here before I got involved, but it is a great idea. Delfina, my erstwhile girlfriend, said that she saw the cave in the cliff and knew from the beginning that she wanted to use it as part of the structure.” He really said *erstwhile*, not *former* or simply *ex-girlfriend*. He flipped a light switch revealing a bedroom, with a king size bed and very expensive sound equipment. To my astonishment, music began to flood the room: Paul Simon’s famous song *The Boxer*.

“This is amazing. You even have some of my favorite music. This is the version from the concert in Central Park with Garfunkel, which I prefer to the original.”

“Oh, that’s *Ambianca*,” Mark said. “I let her pick out the music.”

Ambianca!

“*Ambianca*? The music virus?”

“Well, this version is not the virus. This is the original. I didn’t create the virus version. That was the work of a nasty bastard I am still trying to get even with.”

“Interesting.” I tried to keep my voice level. “How about something quieter, though, maybe something classical?”

Instantly, the music switched to a Mozart Sonata.

“Ambianca must like you,” Mark said.

“Oh, we’re old friends.”

“How is that possible?” he asked. “The program is not that old.”

This seemed like a good time, so I said, “Where I come from, she’s been around for a long time.”

He looked at me strangely, just the way his friend the sheriff had earlier.

“I’m from your future,” I said simply, wondering how that would play.

“I see,” he said calmly, as if that explained everything.

“Of course,” I continued, “none of this is real. I’m sure I’m dreaming.”

“Well, that does make a difference,” he replied.

We both sipped the drinks, giving things a bit of time to settle down. I noticed a bathroom off the bedroom and excused myself. To my surprise, I found I was able to use the facilities, instead of the normal result in a dream, where the subconscious tries to tell you to wake up.

When I returned to the bedroom, I took a careful look around. Up to that point, I had focused on the bed and Ambianca, and hadn’t thought much about what else might be there. There was a door to what would normally be a closet next to the bed, but which might lead to the still hidden computer room. The rest of the furnishings consisted of a small chair, used to put on shoes no doubt, and a chest for clothing. A huge bookshelf occupied the far wall, with a built-in desk in the middle. The desk contained a monitor connected to a PC under the desk. The monitor showed a Windows 95 screen saver, which didn’t seem quite right, but I couldn’t figure out exactly what was wrong with it.

I tried to think of some excuse to examine the closet, but failed, so instead decided to focus on the bookshelf, moving closer to examine the titles, carefully arranged by subject. One area contained several books on science, particularly physics and astronomy. Another contained field guides to almost everything: birds, butterflies, wildflowers, trees, fossils, you name it. The bird guides covered every part of the globe. Finally, I spied what I was looking for — the computer books. These were extremely technical, not something for the layman. Another section contained a collection of **For Dummies**, with their characteristic black and yellow covers. I scanned the titles, most of which were familiar, the legendary **Macramé for Dummies**, one of the major omissions from my collection, was missing here as well. Then I saw it: **Computer Hacking for Dummies**. Trying to keep my hand from trembling, I reached for it. When I tried to extract it from the shelf, it seemed stuck. Hoping to loosen it without damaging the cover, I pressed it gently.

The bookcase swung away silently, revealing a large room, several times the size of the bedroom, filled with high tech equipment of every description. Without asking permission, I stepped inside.

4. The Time Has Come...

April 4, 1998
Near Leakey, TX

“That’s impressive,” Mark said. “No one else has found that, certainly not that fast.”

I looked back over my shoulder, just to make sure he wasn’t planning some attack. “I had help,” I told him.

“Well, have a good look around, and then let’s talk. Would you like me to explain everything to you? Or do you know that as well.”

“No, I don’t know everything. An explanation would be great.”

“As you suspected, the Windows PC on the desk is just for show. My real hardware is here. I have several Unix workstations — from three different manufacturers — and a server for the web site.”

“What’s the web site?”

“You don’t know?” He sounded incredulous.

I didn’t say anything. Finally, he responded with, “Whitehat.com.”

“I thought you’d be a black hat.”

“Naw. I just break into sites as part of my work. I test security systems, particularly those that are supposed to keep people out. Few of them work.”

“So, why all the James Bond stuff, hidden doors behind bookcases and everything.”

“In the course of my work, I learn how to break into some very important sites. If someone should get in here and read the logs of my activity it would be, well, let’s just say it would be bad for business.”

“I see.” I wandered around the room, not really sure what I was looking for. Something still bothered me, but I couldn’t put a finger on it.

“How’d you get a broadband connection way out here in the boondocks?”

“Ask again later, as the magic 8-ball says.”

“OK. I see there are still some mysteries.”

“What would life be without some?”

“Ordinary?”

He laughed. “That reminds me of a line in *The Fantasticks*. Please God, please. Don’t let me be normal.”

I laughed with him but had no idea what *The Fantasticks* was.

While I was laughing, he came up, gently took my arm, and led me back into the bedroom. “Now, he said, we talk.”

He sat me down on the bed, left to go into the kitchen, and returned with two more margaritas. He handed me one and asked, “What’s your real name?”

“Hypatia.” *Why be evasive? If none of this is real, it can’t possibly matter.*

“OK. Where do you come from?”

“Don’t I get to ask questions?”

“I suppose that’s only fair. We’ll alternate, OK?”

“OK. What is today’s date?”

He looked puzzled. Then said, “I guess that’s on par with my asking your name. Today is April 4, 1998. Now, to repeat, where do you come from?”

“Austin.” I thought briefly, “Do you have a current girlfriend?”

That brought a smile. “Not since Delfina left. That was several months ago. What part of Austin?”

“The University.” *This was easy. And fun.* “Why did Delfina leave?”

“She found out that I wasn’t enough fun, even if I had a bunch of money. She found someone else with enough money; someone who was more fun.”

He thought a few seconds before asking his next question. “Why do you wear that strange outfit?”

“My cassock? Is it really so strange?”

“Foul! You didn’t answer, and you know damn well it’s strange. You look like a monk in a play.”

“It’s part of my dress as a member of the faculty.”

“A member of the faculty? Am I supposed to believe that?”

“Foul! That’s two questions.” I smiled at him.

“You owe me one for your foul.”

“OK. Yes, I am a member of the faculty. Believe it.”

“But you look so young.”

“That’s not a question. Besides, it’s my turn.”

Now, he smiled and nodded his head to acknowledge my claim.

“How do you get broadband access to the internet way out here?”

“Who says I have broadband access?”

“Are we allowed to answer questions with another question?”

“Do you think that would make the game more interesting?”

“Is this a game then?”

“Would you like it to be?”

“Are you trying to avoid answering the question?”

“What was the question again?”

“Can’t you remember it?”

“What do you wear under your cassock?”

“Oh, foul! Oops, I guess I just lost a point. I should have said, ‘Would you like to find out?’ ”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Maybe later.”

“That’s encouraging,” he said. “I was expecting to get slapped for my insolence.”

“Just because I’m a member of the faculty, doesn’t mean I punish schoolboys...unless you like that kind of thing.”

He stared at me. “You know, you have really beautiful eyes. They’re so dramatic, with the little flecks of gold and the bright ring around the outside of the iris. Has anyone told you that?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“And...”

“I didn’t slap him either.”

“There’s something about yourself you’re not telling me.”

“Oh, sure. Lots. I’d say that you are guilty of that yourself.”

“Want to really let our trousers down, as they say.”

“I assume you mean that metaphorically, as I am not wearing trousers.”

“Yes, I mean, will you level with me. Tell me who you really are, why you’re here, why you looked me up. Everything.”

“Will you then tell me everything? How you manage to run a web site out here in the middle of nowhere? Where your power comes from? How you connect. Everything.”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I will.”

“Ambianca,” I said, “How about some music? Something soft and classical.” One of Bach’s Fugues started playing.

“One of the things you need to tell me is how you know Ambianca.”

“I will,” I said. “Later. Now about those trousers.” I pulled him down onto the bed and started undoing his belt.

5. Breakfast Meeting **April 5, 1998** **Near Leakey, TX**

I slept in, waking only when the full sunlight poured in thru the door. It took a moment to realize that although I was waking from a delightful dream, I seemed to be still in the dream world of 1998. The aroma of coffee and bacon cooking wafted in from the next room. Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I got out of bed, found myself naked, and looked around for my cassock. It was nowhere to be found. On a chair near the dresser, lay some jeans, a colorful shirt, and a bra intended for someone with much larger breasts. Ignoring the bra, I put on the other items, including a pair of underpants that lay under the shirt. I had to roll up the sleeves on the shirt and turn the cuffs of the jeans up to avoid tripping over them, but at least I was dressed.

Padding out to the kitchen on bare feet, I found my host working on an omelet to go with the bacon and coffee.

“Is that real coffee I smell?”

“Sure. I don’t drink the decaf stuff,” he replied, misunderstanding the question. “This is organic, shade-grown, from Guatemala, ground fresh. Hope that meets with your approval. Happy Easter, by the way.”

“It’s Easter, is it? Guatemalan coffee? I didn’t realize they raised coffee there.”

“Are you kidding? It’s one of their biggest exports.”

“Well, learn something every day.” *Guatemala. That’s close to Mexico, isn’t it? I’ll have to let Ron know.*

“Have some toast. There’s some jelly in the frig. I’ll have the omelet done in a jiffy.”

“I’m impressed. What did I do to deserve such a breakfast.”

“Now, I know you’re kidding. That performance last night was world class, not that I’m any great judge, but...” He actually blushed. I tried to remember exactly what had happened last night, but drew a blank. The dream had evaporated with the coming of morning.

The toast proved to be from some wonderful bread, and what Mark had called jelly turned out to be an expensive marmalade. The combination would have been worth a week’s wages in the NRT. The coffee was hearty and very strong, just what I needed to wipe away the cobwebs that seemed to be strung thru my brain cells.

“Do you have to leave soon?” he asked as he neatly lifted the edge of the omelet to let the still liquid portion find its way to the hot skillet.

“I don’t know. Why?” I replied.

“I thought we might go for a walk after breakfast, maybe take a morning swim. I have some cold cuts for sandwiches for lunch. Then maybe we could take up where we left off.”

“Where exactly did we leave off?”

“You were going to tell me your story.”

“Ah. That.”

“Yes, that. I’m curious why a gorgeous girl would shave her head and show up at my door in a monk’s costume only to seduce me — not that I’m objecting, but I am curious.”

“Gorgeous girl?” *I could really get to like him.*

“Well, OK, maybe only 8.5 on a scale of 1 to 10, but the rest of it is correct.”

“8.5 out of ten?”

“9?”

I laughed. “Sorry, I just don’t think of myself as gorgeous. Some obvious assets got short-changed.”

“I guess you saw Delfina’s bra with the clothes.”

“So the clothing belonged to Delfina.”

“It did. And, it’s true, she had very nice tits. Actually, the entire package was nice. She’s gone, though, remember?”

“I do remember. You said she made a better deal. I can’t imagine what that was.” Two could play the flattery game.

“Well, money’s not everything.”

“Money?”

“Come on. You expect me to believe that?” He appeared genuinely surprised.

“You have lots of money?”

“I don’t have it personally, but I can get my hands on it when needed.”

“If this is about the Sheik’s Gold, I’m going to scream.”

“Sheik’s Gold? No, it’s about the Talbot Foundation and SPT Enterprises, both the work of my late father. I’m technically the head of both, though my daughter actually runs things.”

“Daughter? You don’t look that old.”

“It’s a long story, and you owe me one before I tell you that one. Let’s eat.” He put a plate on the counter with half of the omelet and a couple slices of bacon. “The mushrooms are wild, from the woods around here. Hope you like them.”

After we had mopped the last remnants of breakfast from our plates, Mark asked, “Ready for a walk?”

“Sure, but I might need some shoes. What happened to my clothes, anyway?”

“Your cassock,” he pronounced the word as though he’d just looked it up and wanted me to know he knew what the outfit was, “was filthy. I washed it. It’s hanging on the line. Besides, it wasn’t very practical for the walk. Your sandals are by the door. I’m afraid that Delfina’s shoes wouldn’t fit any better than her bra.”

“I’m used to walking in sandals,” I replied, slipping into them. “Where are we going?”

“Around. Want to see a Golden-cheeked warbler?”

“It sounds like something I’d want to see. Where is it?”

“Not far.” With that, he pushed the door open and set off, counting on me to keep up.

The path led uphill, following the right bank of the creek. Sandals were not the best shoes for the walk and I began to wish the dream had provided some real hiking boots. I toyed with the idea of walking barefoot, but small, sharp pebbles covered the ground, quickly quashing that notion. Suddenly, Mark stopped and held up his hand. Turning, he motioned for quiet and handed me his binoculars. “See that large oak in front of us. He’s singing in it. He likes to come out into that open spot on the right, about 4 o’clock.”

“We have to wait till four o’clock?”

“No,” he suppressed a laugh. “Imagine a clock face on the tree. See the opening where four o’clock would be. Keep watching that. There!” he whispered. I tried to remember where the 4 was on an old-fashioned clock and finally worked out where he was talking about. A small bird lit on a branch in an opening in the canopy, threw its head back and made a sound that no one would call a warble. It was more of a buzzy trill. Carefully lifting the binocs to avoid spooking him, I looked.

“Now that *is* gorgeous,” I said. He had the golden cheek implied by the name, set off by a black cap and throat, with a ragged black line thru his eye. The rest was gray and white, which served to accentuate the golden color, especially when the sunlight struck it. The bird sang again. Mark put his hand out for the binocs, and I returned them. He took a long look at the bird, which flew off to another tree where he repeated his song.

“That’s the male, of course. The female is around here somewhere, but since she doesn’t sing, she’s harder to spot. I’ve had a pair nest in this area for the past seven years. They’re endangered, you know.”

“Gordo mentioned it. Could I have seen one in Austin?”

“There used to be a few there, along Barton Creek and near Emma Long Park.”

“Hmm. It looks kind of familiar, but I’ve never been that far from town, at least not when I might have seen one.”

“Anyway, it’s endangered. They build their nest using the bark of the Ashe Juniper, what the locals call *cedar*, using bark only from mature trees. The nest is always in an oak tree located near water. Put all that together and you have a limited range. It’s the only species that nests only in Texas. Ought to be our state bird, but the idiots in the legislature prefer the Mockingbird, probably because it’s one of the few birds they can recognize.” He scowled. “Come on, I have more to show you.”

We continued uphill for about 500 meters when he pointed to an object in the distance. I recognized a satellite dish, a big one capable of receiving and transmitting beaucoup data. “I strung cable thru a small passage in the cave and connected it to the dish on the top of the hill, but still hidden from casual view. On the other side of the hill, I have a major solar energy collector that I use for power. I still have the power from the co-op, but if I used that for my work it would attract attention. This way I can work without giving away my position, at least that’s the plan. I also have a diesel generator in the cave that I use when I have to. Cool, huh? Is that what you came to find out?”

“If it is, you’ve really let your pants down. Why?”

“Something about you. Not sure what. How about that swim?” The cool of the morning had worn off quickly in the full sun, and the temperature now hovered in the high 20’s. That seemed a bit

cool for swimming, but I accompanied him as he moved off the trail and forded the creek on a series of flat stones. The path became more of a trail on the other side of the creek, making walking easier, but led away from the creek into the surrounding hillside, following a smaller tributary creek, now dry.

After about 10 minutes more, he turned off the trail and climbed up a steep set of steps cut into the hillside, then over a saddle and down to a small lake. "I had the creek dammed up," Mark explained. "There used to be an old dam here, but it collapsed in a storm. I had to buy the entire property to get access to the dam site to rebuild it. This dam won't wash away. It's better designed and better built."

"You bought the entire property? How big is the property?"

"Just shy of 10,000 acres. I managed to get it declared a wildlife sanctuary because of the warblers. Cuts the taxes. I have at least 20 pairs nesting on my property." He was obviously proud of that.

I watched as he took off his clothes, laying them carefully on the rocks at the water's edge. The sight of him naked brought memories of the night's activities flooding back into my head. I felt a delicious warmth rise unbidden. If the memories were real, not some imagining of my demented brain, it had been a wonderful night. Wondering if more such activities were in the works, I quickly stripped and walked into the water.

The icy shock wiped away any cobwebs left by the coffee. Wow! The lake was as cold as Barton Springs. I said as much. "For the same reason," Mark informed me. "The lake is spring fed. Same temperature all year, more or less. Sometimes the top layer gets warm, but you can't stay on the top forever. Come on. The only way to get in is to just plunge." He suited action to the word with a shallow dive and a long underwater glide, coming up about 10 meters out into the middle. I took a deep breath and followed. After the initial shock, the water felt delightful, though my nipples showed how cold it was.

Mark noticed and swam over to get a closer look. Pressed up against me, I discovered that I was not the only one remembering the night's activities. "Mmmm," I murmured. "Maybe we don't want to swim too long."

"Well," he replied, "there's still your part of the bargain to fulfill. Race you to the large rock in the middle. Then we can warm up in the sun and talk." He pushed me away, gaining an advantage for the race, and took off in what was clearly a practiced racing stroke. I followed at a leisurely pace with a sedate breaststroke, allowing him to win easily. He pulled himself up onto the rock and helped me with a hand.

"You'd have won without cheating," I told him.

"Guess I would have, but it's more fun this way." We lay on the rock, letting the sun's rays remove the chill. "Now," he demanded. "Talk."

So, I told my life story, which took almost an hour. Without a word, he stood up, seemed to be turning it over in his mind, then said, "We need to get out of the sun before we get burned." With that, he dove into the water. I followed as we swam back to our clothes, hiding my disappointment when we put them back on so quickly.

He seemed to be almost oblivious to my presence as we walked back toward his cabin. After a while, he said, “I feel like a fool. That has to be the biggest crock of horse pucky I’ve ever heard. You expect me to believe that nonsense?”

“I can’t make you believe it; I don’t really believe this myself. I’ve been assuming that I was in the midst of a long, very elaborate, and thoroughly pleasant dream. I’m trying to accept the unacceptable, that I have somehow gone back to a time before I was born. It’s hard.”

“OK, if you’re from the future, tell me something about the future. You said that you had studied this period extensively. You must know some details that can be checked.”

“That’s fair enough. This is 1998. That means we should be into the second year of the dot-com bubble. Are internet companies going public? What’s Cisco stock selling for? How about Dell? As I recall, Dell was the biggest winner in the decade of the 90’s.”

“You get no points for Dell. It started moving up several years ago. Cisco is better, but you could still have figured out it was going to be a winner just from reading the papers. Why did you call it the ... what did you call it exactly?”

“The dot-com bubble. It burst eventually, in March of 2000, shortly after the NASDAQ hit 5000.”

“5000! That’s ridiculous.”

“As it turned out, you’re correct. It would have never gotten that high again except they finagled the index to make it keep going up.”

“You mentioned the Collapse, but I didn’t really grasp that.”

“That’s still a way off, but the bubble collapse is going to happen in about two years.”

“So that caused a depression?”

“No, surprisingly not. A lot of people lost a lot of money, but the economy survived. The Collapse came later, after the war in the Middle East. The world never really got over that.”

“What war was that?”

“The one George Bush started after 9/11.”

“Now, I know you’re giving me the business. That war was in 1991, and it’s over.”

“No, not that George Bush, his son.”

“You mean our esteemed Governor?”

“Yeah, that’s right. He was Governor of Texas before he was elected President.”

“But he’s a complete idiot.”

“You got that part right! He basically didn’t do anything right the entire time he was in office, but his invasion of Iraq was what set off the Collapse.”

“Iraq? Don’t you mean Iran?”

“No, that was a joke at the time: that it was all due to his inability to spell.”

“Wait. Let’s go back. What’s 9/11?”

“September 11, 2001. Some terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon.”

“Whoa! That’s major.”

“You said it.”

“They were from Iraq?”

“No, actually most of them were from Saudi Arabia.”

“Then why invade Iraq?”

“As it turned out, that is a question not enough people asked at the time. The invasion went badly, not at first, but later, when peace didn’t work out as hoped. The Middle East never really recovered. Partisan strife spread, with religion as the reason. President Obama tried to turn things around, but everything he tried was too little, too late.”

“President Obama?”

“Barrack Obama.”

“What kind of a name is that?”

“African, I think. He was named for his father as I recall.”

“His father was African?”

“Yes.”

“That’s pretty hard to believe.”

“Is it? I wouldn’t know.”

“You mentioned a plague.”

“Yes. After Donald Trump was elected...”

“Donald Trump!”

“Yes, the last President of the USA.”

“Donald Trump, the casino owner?”

“I think that’s the one.”

“He was the last President?”

“Right. With the world’s economy in shambles, things were coming unstuck. Then someone — we still don’t know who — unleashed an engineered virus on the world. It killed about a third of the population, and all the horses. Then a second wave of plague, either a natural mutation or another engineered virus, killed over half of those left. Many more died of starvation and internecine conflicts. We estimate the population of the world at about 10% of what it once was, but no one really knows.”

“So you’re here to change history?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think so. I have no idea why, or how, I’m here. Something tells me, though, that history is hard to change. Just a feeling.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Read my lips: I don’t know.”

“Why are you *here*, specifically? Gordo said you had a map to my cabin.”

“I don’t know that either, except that I was led here by that book, *Computer Hacking for Dummies*. The map was inside it.”

“But that’s just a joke.”

“Not the version I have. It’s a very useful book.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Maybe I’m here to convince you to write it for real.”

“Interesting. What about last night? What does that have to do with anything?”

“The inscription on the flyleaf says, *To Hypatia, with all my love, Mark.*”

“Hypatia?”

“That’s my name.”

“I like it. It’s a nice name. Recalls the librarian at Alexandria.”

“Exactly.” I was impressed.

“I have to think about this. What say we fix some sandwiches? When are you going to be whisked away like that time I glimpsed you by the Apple Stand in Medina?”

“I don’t know. I just hope it isn’t too soon.”

When we got back to the cabin, we decided the sandwiches could wait.

6. Interpretation of Dreams

January 7, 2087
Austin, NRT

I sat in front of a computer, displaying an image of a gray-haired man dressed in short khaki pants, sandals, and a T-Shirt with the slogan “Only fools and strangers complain about the weather.” Beneath it was a URL: weather.com. JJ, the webmaster of weather.com, what was left of it anyway, claimed to be the only real mathematician left in the world. Maybe he was right. At any rate, he was the smartest scientist I knew. Only Cammy, my favorite professor, was even in the same league. Whenever I needed advice, I sought out JJ.

“That’s the gist of is JJ. No one here believes me. They think I’m losing it and ask whether perhaps I’ve been spending too much time with Red and sampling his wares. But I know I’m not wrong about it. I’ve checked the archives. There are tons of details that I couldn’t possibly know. For instance, the sheriff of Real County during the late 20th century was a Gonzalo Salazar, better known as Gordo. He was a star running back at Rice University. I couldn’t find anything about his NFL record, but the timing works out right for him retiring just when Earl Campbell joined the Houston team. Then, there’s the Golden-cheeked Warbler. I didn’t know squat about birds until I checked them out over the past few days. The bird was on the Endangered Species list, it nested on the Edwards Plateau, what we now call the Hill Country, and had a call that is described like what I heard.”

“Interesting.”

“Interesting! Is that the best you can do?”

“Now, now. Calm down. What do you want me to say? That these are visions from God?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t bring that up.”

“Well, if you are the Second Messiah, it makes sense that there would be some communication. If God is going to intervene in human events, He, excuse me, She, has to manage it somehow. It’s the kind of thing God would do if God could do that kind of thing.”

“God damn it, JJ. Get serious. And how did you hear about that anyway?”

“JJ’s got his finger on the pulse of the net. Lots of searches lately for Second Messiah, especially from your friends up in Tulsa.”

“Shit!”

“These dreams, as you call them, sound extremely vivid.”

“That’s a marked understatement. It reminds me of the famous story by Zhuangzi. You know, *Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly.*”

“So now, you don’t know if you are you here or you there? Something like that?”

“JJ it was so real.”

“As I said, interesting. What explanations have you considered?”

“Well, the obvious one is that I’m nuts.”

“OK. Let’s put that one on hold.”

“Then, there’s the whole past life thing.”

“Possible, but all of those have been shown to be hoaxes or suggested memories or something similar.”

“Agreed. Then, there’s time travel. I’m actually back there in the 20th century somehow.”

“Yes. That seems like a pretty good list. Time travel is not impossible mathematically speaking, just exceedingly difficult.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a result called Bloch’s Paradox, at least I think it was Bloch who first propounded it. He formulated it in terms of properties of Calabi-Yau spaces, where—”

“JJ!”

“Oh, sorry. I tend to forget that there aren’t many mathematicians left in the world. I guess you want the short version.”

“I think we may finally be on the verge of communicating.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, princess.”

“Sorry. Yes, JJ, please give me the short version.”

“The paradox basically says that time travel is impossible — unless it has already happened.”

“Huh?”

“Well, it is called a paradox.”

“Can you explain it?”

“Bloch showed that time travel necessarily involves causality violation. In other words, you can’t travel in time without violating causality. For once, science fiction got it right.”

“So, what does that mean in this case? That I’m trying to change the future?”

“No, it means that you already have.”

“What?”

“The book, the slip of paper.”

“You mean...”

“Yeah. Somehow, you’re responsible for that. I think you need to find that cabin.”

“It’s pretty deep into the Hill Country. It’s not really part of the NRT.”

“Well, that presents a problem, but one I’m sure you can solve.”

“Sure. Thanks, JJ”

“Anytime, Princess.”

7. Homework Assignment

January 8, 2087
Austin, NRT

“So, Amanda, are you getting settled?” I asked at our first tutorial.

“I guess so. There’s a lot of things I still don’t fully understand, but mostly I’m OK.”

“What are you having problems understanding?”

“Well, whenever anyone says the words *consensus* or *acquiescence*, they seem to have quotation marks around them. I have the feeling that I haven’t completely understood them. In Houston, we’d say that I haven’t grokked the fullness of them.”

“A nice term. From Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, I think.”

“Really? I guess that’s one more thing to look up.” She made a note on the computer tablet she held in her lap.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to find out about the Consensus. Keep digging. However, I have a new project for you if you think you’re ready.”

“Great.”

“This is a lot harder than rummaging around in the archives. I need some real time information.”

“Real time?”

“That means, as recent as possible, preferably completely up to the minute.”

“Wow! That sounds hard.”

“Really hard. You seem to be especially talented, which is why I’m giving you this task, but it will be a stretch.”

“I’m ready.”

“I want images showing the area I’ve indicated on this map. This is a copy of an old road map, pre-Collapsian, but the roads should still be visible. This road,” I indicated a white line on the computer, “is the old highway 290, which runs west from Austin into the Hill Country. That will serve as a reference to get things started. Ideally, we’d like satellite images, but that presents problems.”

“What problems?”

“We don’t have access to the satellites. The military put up the ones that are still working in the last years before the Collapse. You have to figure out how to get access to them. That will require quite a bit of ingenuity on your part.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Let’s just say that you won’t be able to go thru the front door. I think trickery will be involved. Historically, spies trying to get information like this used the three B’s: Bribery, Blackmail, and Bludgeoning. I doubt you’ll be very good at bludgeoning, so I’d focus on the first two. Let me know when you’ve made some progress, or if you hit a dead end.”

8. Travel Plans

January 27, 2087

Austin, NRT

“OK. Let’s get started,” President Caldwell began. “Hypatia has proposed an archeological expedition to the wilds of the Hill Country. Professor Cameron is an enthusiastic proponent. He claims it was really his idea.” This was greeted by some mild chuckles.

“The expedition presents some formidable challenges. Logistics and security come to mind right away. We’ll consider them in turn. First, logistics. I’ve asked Ron to weigh in remotely.” He nodded to Ron’s image on the computer monitor. “Ron, I understand that you have some news to share with us.”

Ron’s image on the monitor turned so red that I thought the color needed adjustment. Then I realized he was blushing. *What’s going on?*

“I’ve been invited to become a member of the Clan here.”

“Well,” Red said, stating what everyone thought, “that shows they have good judgment. Does that mean you aren’t available to work on the planning?”

“No, not at all. Just the opposite, in fact. You see—”

President Caldwell explained, “What Ron is not saying is that he is planning to mate with a delightful young woman in the Houston Clan.”

This provoked a round of congratulations.

“They do things differently here,” Ron explained. “I’ve spent the past two weeks visiting with all of Mia’s relatives in the Clan. There are lots of them. I thought that was a formality, but I learned quickly. It was more like finals week at the University. They had questions about everything, though everyone agrees that I can do my part, as they put it, for the Clan. I’m in charge of Salvage. You wouldn’t believe how much there is to salvage here.”

“That sounds like a reasonable assignment,” Professor Cameron interjected.

“Well, yes, but it carries a lot of responsibility. It makes me a member of the Council of Leaders.”

“What’s that?” Patty asked.

“Well, there are several people in the Clan who are recognized as leaders in particular areas. For example, Martha, who would be my sort of mother-in-law, is in charge on anything that involves feeding and entertaining a bunch of people.”

“Sort of mother-in-law?” Professor Cameron asked.

“Well, there’s nothing like marriage. They understand genetic bottlenecks as well as we do. It’s actually easier to have children under their rules than the Consensus. All children are raised together in something that Patty said resembled a kibbutz.”

“A twentieth century experiment by some Jewish sects in Israel,” I added.

“Thank you, dear. I think we got the gist of it,” President Caldwell said, adding, “What Ron is getting to is that after his vetting by the Clan, it is customary for the woman, Mia, to come to Austin to be presented to Ron’s family here.”

“Does that mean she has to meet Ron’s father?” several people asked at the same time.

“We’ve managed to work around that,” the Pres said, trying to suppress a smile. “Ron’s family has been defined as the University community. So, Mia is going to come here for a visit, along with Ron, and Martha as a chaperone. The visit is expected to last at least a month.”

“You can’t believe everything that has happened since you left, Patty,” Ron said. “The settlement at Lake Sealy is fully operational. They got a big break when they found out parts of the old sewer system would still work. They dated to the 1930’s! There are almost 2000 people there now, though most of them are out trading at any one time. We’ve even started trading with the people on the coast of Mexico. The solar cells from NASA are in high demand. President Caldwell, you’ll be please to hear that we now think we have a reliable source of coffee. To top it off, the Sealyites have come around and are actively helping promote the trade. Of course—”

“Thank you, Ron,” President Caldwell interrupted. “We’ll get caught up when you get here. Right now, I think we need to discuss the logistics of the operation.”

“Sure. Amanda has some recent satellite photos of the route. Amanda?”

“Right here,” Amanda said, moving into the range of the camera transmitting images to Ron. “I was successful in establishing contact with a military installation near what used to be Omaha. They have agreed to let us have access to any images we want.”

“How’d you manage that?” Professor Cameron asked. “We’ve been trying to crack that network for some time.”

“The book Red gave Patty was a big help. I was able to hack into the site, but I couldn’t get access to the satellites themselves. Then I managed to get into a chat with the operator of the site. Turns out he’s the only soldier left alive at the military base. He declared martial law, with himself as the leader. That worked long enough for him to set up a small...well, principality is probably the most accurate description, on the base.”

“What did you have to promise him,” Jackson asked, always one to cut to the chase.

“A herd of goats on the next train to the area. Specifically, he wanted four pregnant ewes and two unrelated rams. All alive, of course.”

“Can we deliver that?”

“Well, I bought the ewes from one of the herdsmen along Lake Austin. Red says he can trap two young rams without any problem.”

“You bought them, Sis? How much did you agree on?” Jackson said, with a sense of impending doom.

“Five gold dollars apiece.”

“Ouch,” Jackson said. “Next time you have some trading to do, call me, OK?”

“Sure thing, brother.” She put extra emphasis on the last word. “Somehow, I thought time was of the essence. Anyway, here are the images.” She brought them up on the monitor. “Ron has his copies,” she added.

Ron took up the narrative. “As you can see, the roads are all pretty good as far as Johnson City. That’s right beyond this major intersection here.” He indicated a spot on the map. “Then it gets a bit dicey. It looks like we can get as far as I-10 by heading toward Kerrville, but the bridge over the Guadalupe,” he circled an area on the image, “is completely impassable. It looks as if someone has constructed a barrier across it. It might be passable if we could remove the barrier, but I can’t tell how hard that would be.”

“I can,” Red said. “Things get a bit uncivilized after you pass Fredericksburg. That barrier is probably there to protect the inhabitants of Kerrville, if there be any of them left.”

“The infrared images show nighttime heat sources, so someone is still in the area,” Amanda reported.

“That’s not good,” Red said. “Probably a nest of thieves. I think we should avoid Kerrville as much as possible.”

“How will we get to Medina, then?” I asked. “That’s the starting point of the map.”

“So it is,” Red replied, “but not the destination. The destination’s way out here near Leakey. In this area, we want to avoid any unnecessary contact. We have to worry not only about outlaws, but plague as well. The area is still hot so far as we know.”

“Phooey,” Cameron said. “How could anyone still be alive in a hot zone?”

This topic was one frequently known to start a fight, so the Pres quickly intervened. “Is there another route?”

“Yes,” Ron replied. “We turn northwest on I-10 — actually it’s marked West on the maps, but it’s really north — and swing wide around Kerrville. However, I have a different route to suggest. I’ll get to that in a minute. We avoid Kerrville until we get to another road heading back toward Leakey, maybe at Mountain Home. That’s this intersection here.” He outlined the proposed route. Then we head cross-country toward Leakey. The hacker hideout should be near here somewhere.” He drew a circle on the map.

“The problem with that,” Red said, “is that I-10 is a shooting gallery. There are gangs ready to take on anything that moves on the road.”

“Exactly. That’s why I propose that we really avoid Kerrville and I-10. We can continue west from Fredericksburg on 290, then swing south on the old US 83, right into Leakey. Once there, we can conduct a spiral search for the cabin.”

“Our infrared images,” Amanda put up a different set of images, “show minimal nighttime heat sources along that route. We think it should be uninhabited.”

“No,” Red said. “I know of some people out in that area. They might be friendly, though. I like the plan, Ron. Good work.”

“Thanks,” Ron said. “This also obviates the need to cross the Guadalupe on a high bridge. It’ll be just a small stream, about the size of Barton Creek, when we cross it.”

“You hope,” Red said. “The weather out there can be mighty unpredictable.”

“Well,” Cameron said, “now that we know where we’re going, can we get to how?”

“Before we pass on,” Caldwell said, “are we all agreed on the route Ron suggests?”

A general murmur of assent was followed by Cameron repeating his question, “How do we get there? Camels?”

“That would be suicidal,” Red answered.

“Why? You traveled out that way to warn people about the storm.”

“True, but I didn’t go anywhere near Kerrville, and I was traveling alone. A camel caravan would attract a lot of attention. Attention means potential attackers. For that matter, we are likely to have to fend off an attack no matter what, so—”

“We’ll get to that later, Red,” the Pres put in. “OK, if camels are out, I guess we have to talk about a powered vehicle of some kind. Suggestions?”

“A tank would be nice,” Red said.

“I think that speed will be a better defense,” Jackson said. “I always favor running from trouble rather than fighting.”

“Speed on these roads is going to be limited,” Red replied. “A bicycle could outrun us.”

“What about bicycles, then?”

“That would work for a preliminary probe,” I said, “but we’re hoping to retrieve artifacts from the cabin. We won’t be able to carry much on bicycles. Besides, most of us aren’t as fast on bicycles as you are.”

“What about sending Jackson on a scouting trip? Maybe with Red,” Cameron asked.

“No!” Amanda said. “It’s much too dangerous for one person, or two. Besides, from what I’ve seen Red isn’t too proficient on a bike.”

“I agree,” I said. “I think we need to go in force, a small force, but still well armed and prepared. We need some vehicle that can carry at least four, preferably six.”

Ron piped up, “That’s a major problem. Where is the fuel coming from? Any vehicle that would carry six, especially if we armored it, would get maybe 10 miles per gallon. Excuse me for using old units. Everything in the archives uses them. We’re talking about a 400-mile round trip, plus some safety margin. That means we need at least 50 gallons, probably gasoline. That’s over 200 liters. That doesn’t leave much room for carrying anything back.”

“Could we establish fuel dumps along the way? This sounds like the old problem of crossing the desert,” I suggested.

“I wouldn’t count on anything being there when we came back,” Red said.

“What about leaving guards at the fuel dumps?”

“Can you say sitting ducks?”

“There is another option,” Ron said.

“What’s that?” several people asked at the same time.

“We could take a different route — thru San Antonio. We could buy fuel there.”

“Interesting idea,” Pres said. “Presents us with a different set of issues. Can we trust them? Do we want them to know what we’re up to, assuming that is, that we know ourselves.” He permitted himself a brief chuckle.

“We’d have to really open the kimono to them,” Red said. “I think we should be worried about that. I know that trading from Sealy to San Antone, not to mention the coastal traffic, has some potential to improve relations, but still...”

“Religion is still a major influence there,” I noted. “Will they cooperate with us?”

“Let’s examine other alternatives first,” Pres suggested. “We may have to come back to this one.”

Ron spoke again, “We could build a solar powered vehicle.”

“Can we really?” several people wanted to know.

“In the 20th century, there was a race across the Australian desert for solar powered vehicles. That’s a lot farther than we have to go,” Ron reported.

“Yes, but they could presumably call for help if something went wrong. We’ll be on our own,” Amanda pointed out the obvious.

I looked at my student and made a mental note of the pronoun she used: first person *plural*.

“How about a hybrid?” Jackson suggested. “Solar power with gasoline backup.”

“Well, how about it, Ron?” Patty asked. “Want a challenge?”

“I’d love one!”

“We should have the plans from the Australian race participants in the archives,” Amanda suggested.

“Great. That’s a good place to start. I should be in Austin in a few days unless something comes up. Can y’all have the basics ready for me then?”

“Amanda?” I asked. “Will you handle that?”

“Sure,” she agreed with alacrity.

“Now,” Pres Caldwell said, “let’s talk about security. Red?”

“Well, we for sure will want everything we had on the trucks we took to Sealy. Cam, can you juice up the laser cannon?”

“Oh, yes. You should be able to blast thru a wall by the time I get done.”

“I’ll want some AK-47’s for backup, and some hunting rifles. We will probably need to kill some game for food.”

“I suggest we put Martha in charge of provisioning the expedition,” Ron said. “That’s what she’s good at.”

“Any objection?” Caldwell asked. No one said anything.

“How many people, and who?” Red asked.

“Well, you for sure, and Patty. Ron? You interested?”

“You bet!”

“We need some muscle. Jackson?” Red asked.

“Sure,” he replied.

“That should do it, I think,” Caldwell said.

“Excuse me,” Amanda said, “but none of those four can cook worth a damn.”

I smiled. I knew Amanda’s *we* would come back into the picture.

“She has a point, Daddy Pres,” I said. Calling him Daddy Pres was the first step in convincing him about anything. Caldwell grimaced, recognizing the familiar pattern.

“Any chance we could get someone to supply muscle and cook?” he asked, but he knew when he was beaten.

“I’ll bet I can shoot better than any of you,” Amanda said. “I was clan champion for the past three years.”

“This ain’t going to be target practice,” Red said. “Ever shoot a man?”

“No.” She appeared reluctant to give up but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“We’re not going to shoot anybody if we can help it,” I said.

“With what I’m planning, you should be able to scare them off,” Cameron put in. “I say let the girl go with them.”

Caldwell knew when to give in. “OK,” he said by way of acquiescence.

9. Secret Communications

January 27, 2087
Austin, NRT

“So, JJ, what do you think?”

“It’s an interesting project PP. I’m surprised it was so easy to get everyone on board.”

“You heard everything, then?”

“Oh, yeah. When Ron was included over the net, I was able to piggyback on the stream to and from Houston. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep my capabilities to yourself.”

“OK. How about the other thing?”

“Your so-called dreams?”

“Yes. What do you think about them?”

“Well, I’ve done some research. Based on some of the clues from your narrative I’ve been able to narrow the time down to the late 20th century, around 1998.”

“That’s pretty good. How’d you manage?”

“The sheriff said he’d been on the job for 20 years. He was first elected in 1978. Allowing for some fuzziness about the time, we get 1998 as the first approximation. A couple of other items, the missing girl friend, put the date later. I was able to find a reference in the Houston gossip columns about the two of them. That was late in 1997. So…”

“That’s good work, JJ, but you’ve obviously been abusing your access to the archives.”

“You’re the only one who’ll know.”

“OK. Mark told me the date was April 4, 1998, so it all checks. What does it all mean?”

“I’m ready to accept as a working hypothesis that you are actually experiencing life in 1998. I have an experiment that I think you should try.”

“Oh?”

“So far, your narratives sound like someone sleepwalking. I think you should take a more active part.”

“An active part in my dreams?”

“In whatever.”

“How?”

“Ask a few questions. Force the action. Go to Houston. Imagine the possibilities for salvage in Houston if you can find out where things are before you go looking.”

“And just how do you propose I get taken to Houston?”

“From what you told me, I think that Mark is wrapped around your delicate little finger. Ask to meet the family. Get him to take you to Houston. The mother is a famous society matron in Houston.”

“That’s a lot to deal with JJ.”

“Well, take it in small steps.”

“One more thing, JJ. You’ve researched this. How do I know if this is something more than a dream?”

“If you don’t wake up, it isn’t a dream.”

10. *Vehicle Inspection* *February 15, 2087* *Austin, NRT*

I was surprised when I finally met Mia. I had imagined a petite, vaguely Asian girl resembling Amanda. Instead, I confronted the same blonde Valkyrie who'd given me the locket at the Dark Tower. Mia stood at least a head taller than Ron, and judging from the visible muscles could probably bench press him. She wore a T-shirt beneath work-stained overalls, boots with steel toes, and a red scarf that hid most of her hair. The hand she extended toward me was tanned and showed traces of grease beneath the short nails.

I extended my hand to almost touch Mia's and said, "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Now, I realize that we met briefly at the Tower. You gave me the beautiful necklace."

Mia smiled. "Glad you remember me. I wanted to meet you formally. Ronnie done told me a lot 'bout you. I gotta thank for his sexual prowess."

Ronnie, not used to having this discussed so openly, looked down to hide the grin he was unable to suppress.

"I'm not sure exactly how I deserve that."

"Oh, Ronnie tell...told me you show him some research you'd done, some 20th century videos."

"Oh, that. Well..." I was nonplussed for once. *Who would have thought?*

Mia wrapped her arm around Ron's shoulders. "Has Ronnie tole you 'bout the work on the *vehicle*." She pronounced the last word as though it wasn't one she often used.

"No," I admitted. "I haven't got caught up on the details. There has been so much else to deal with: figuring out what we need to take, Martha has been fantastic helping with that, deciding how long we will have at the site, assuming we can find it at all—"

"Well, you gotta see it. It be really cool."

I glanced up to check the position of the sun. There were still several daylight hours left, and the coolness of the day — the temperature was hovering in the low 20's — meant that a walk would be welcome. "This is at the shop?" I asked.

"Yeah," Mia replied. "Ronnie's dad let us use equipment of his'n. He got some great tools. We don't have nothing like that in Houston."

I decided that the rumors I'd heard were true, first that Ron had not been able to get a word in edgewise since pairing up with Mia, and second that she had somehow managed to charm the old curmudgeon, Ron's cursed father. The chance to see Ronnie's Dad, as Mia had called him, being nice to anyone was enough to decide the issue. "Sure," I agreed. "Let's go."

The shop was located at the west edge of town, across Lady Bird Lake near the ruins of the MoPac Bridge. A small pedestrian bridge remained and served as the access for people going to the area. It took about 45 minutes to get there. Ron's father — his name was Howard, but no one ever called him anything except Ron's father or maybe *the mechanic* — stood outside the door as if expecting us. "Took you fucking long enough," he said by way of greeting. *So much for being nice.*

His shop, a small structure built of the limestone so common in the area, sat in a clearing surrounded by low shrubs, with piles of what most Austinites would call junk lying around. Although Howard preferred to be called a mechanic, in fact, as he possessed the only working arc welder and acetylene torch within at least 100 kilometers, most of his business consisted of either cutting things up or welding them back together. Occasionally, as today, he had a chance to display his skill at assembling the parts.

A large, burly man with an unkempt bush of dark hair, huge muscles from lifting metal parts for years, and a manner designed to make him unpopular, Ron's father was the opposite of his son in every way. I often wished that the University still had the capacity to analyze DNA so I could test to see if Ron was the product of misattributed paternity.

Without another word, the Mechanic led us to an area behind the building and ceremoniously pulled a large covering from *the vehicle*, a low-slung, matte black contraption resembling something from a 20th century science fiction movie. Obviously designed with efficient airflow in mind, it had a severely raked front end ascending smoothly to a large flat roof and a squared off rear.

Ron found his voice and explained the logic behind the creation. "We started with the idea that we needed to be able to carry a reasonable amount of goods, both food and supplies for the trip and with luck some artifacts to bring back. That meant we needed a fairly large cargo space. We are also assuming that we'll carry five people for the trip, and that we may need some protection. Finally, we have to make it fuel efficient."

He walked over and opened a door at the back. "This is the cargo area. Right now, it is holding dummy packages to simulate the actual load. Beneath this area, we have the batteries. Even with the best we could find, we think you can travel no more than 75 klicks or so on the batteries alone."

Strolling around to the side, he pulled on a handle to open a gull-wing door to the passenger compartment. "This is where three of the passengers will sit. It's a bit cozy but should be OK. Amanda and Patty will have to sit in back, as they're the smallest. I'll be driving, with Red as shotgun up front. Jackson will have to squeeze in here somewhere."

He stepped inside and pushed on a panel in the roof, sliding it back out of the way. "Jackson can stand up here and look out. If necessary, he can shoot without much exposure. We're hoping that we can avoid that. This is also available as an emergency exit in the worst-case scenario." He pushed on one of the front seats and swiveled it around. "As you can see, these seats swivel to provide access. That let us get by with a single door. It's hard to seal everything around the doors for best airflow. Y'all can come in and sit up front if you want to while I show you the controls."

Mia and I took him up on the offer, leaving Ron's father stranded outside. He didn't seem to mind. "Everything is electric, with power delivered to all four wheels. The controls use something called *fly-by-wire* that I got from some old plans in the archives. Amanda is still working to get the bugs out of the software. That's probably going to be the limiting factor on when we can leave. You control it using this small stick here. This design eliminates things like the transmission, which takes up so much room in the ancient trucks we took to Sealy. You turn by driving the wheels at different speeds, or even running some backwards. It takes some getting used to but works well in the simulations."

“This,” he pointed to a panel of controls on the opposite side, “is the command center for the defensive armament. We’ve included the microwave crowd disperser, the loud hailer, and a souped-up version of your laser gun. This one has enough power to pulverize a roadblock if we need to.”

“How do you recharge the batteries?” I asked.

“Let me show you.” Ron got out of the passenger compartment and hauled a ladder over to the side. “Climb up.” I did as he suggested and saw that solar tiles covered the entire roof of the vehicle.

Ron explained, “These are the best of the best from the NASA hoard. We’ve conducted some tests and found that if the sun is shining, you can drive without discharging the battery at all. That means travel in daylight, but we had to compromise somewhere. As I said, you can go about 75 kilometers on the battery alone, more if it’s downhill. We have included a small fuel cell that can be used in addition. That gives you approximately another 100 kilometers without sunshine. The fuel cell’s another one of the goodies salvaged from NASA.”

“We have to rely on long range radio communication, given where we’re planning to go, and that will probably be spotty in the hills. We think we can commandeer some of the old satellites to send messages to the vehicle — and anyone else who’s listening — but communication back to the University is likely to be a problem.”

Mia, who’d stood by patiently while Ron delivered his speech now couldn’t wait any longer. “The body be made of a nifty carbon fiber material we be finding at NASA, lightweight but very strong. We reduce the weight as much as we could to give y’all max range.”

“Mia is too modest to mention that she discovered the material during one dive and insisted it would prove to be valuable,” Ron added. I doubted that *modest* could ever be applied to Mia, but let it pass.

“This looks great, Ron,” I said. “When can we take out for a trial run?”

“We’re at least a month away from being ready,” he replied. “As I said, the software is the hard part.”

“So we’re shooting for the Ides of March,” I said. “Let’s hope the date is more propitious than it was for Julius Caesar.”

11. *Driving Test* *March 17, 2087* *Austin, NRT*

I woke up early, eager to get started on the day. The first live test of *the vehicle* was today, and I approached the event with both anticipation and dread. The vehicle had sat on display in the rotunda of the Capitol for several weeks while Amanda slaved away about 18 hours a day teaching the software how to drive the car.

Before the test, I wanted another conference with JJ about the dreams, or whatever they were. After grabbing a quick breakfast, I headed to the computer lab, and managed to get JJ on the line.

“Hi, Princess. No, I don’t have anything to add about your dreams. You haven’t had any more, have you?”

“No. It’s just that the dreams were too real. I’ve been thinking about them. It’s like I was really living there, back in 1998. I think I may be going crazy.”

“I doubt the latter,” JJ replied. “Let’s consider other options. Suppose you really are slipping back and forth in time. What’s to disprove that?”

“Nothing that I can see. I even ate, drank and made merry, especially the latter.”

“Interesting, with Mark Talbot?”

“Yes.”

“Does he resemble anyone else you know?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“So, we can assume this is not just wish fulfillment.”

“I think not.” My voice betrayed a slight hint of annoyance. “JJ how can this be happening?”

“Perhaps a better question is why it doesn’t happen all the time. The laws of physics as we know them are symmetric with respect to time. One of the unanswered questions is why time always seems to go forward. Maybe it doesn’t, but we just don’t remember the other times. We do know that remembering something causes an increase in entropy, so—”

“JJ can we stay on the subject?”

“Certainly, my dear. What exactly is the subject? I thought we were discussing how this might be happening.”

“Let’s move on to *why* then. Any ideas about that?”

“You mean, is some higher power involved? Is this the work of God?”

“Well, that’s one way to put it, I guess. What do you think?”

“I think that if God wanted to take a hand in what’s going on, this might be the way she would go about it. You did, after all, appear out of nowhere. Maybe...”

“Yeah, OK. JJ you’re starting to sound like these kooks that keep saying I’m the *Second Messiah*.”

“Maybe you should consider that.”

“Give me a break, will you?”

“OK. I’ll suspend judgment for a while. Changing subjects: how’s your solar car project going?”

“JJ! How did you find out about that? Do we have a leak here?”

“My dear, I told you I monitor traffic on the internet carefully, especially when it involves you. I try to know everything that is happening with you.”

“Well, you’re doing a good job of that. In fact, the project seems to be going well. As it turns out, I need to run to get to the grand ceremony. We’re going to give it a name. Any suggestions?”

“How about *Endeavour*? That was the name of Captain James Cook’s ship that he took on his voyage to measure the Transit of Venus in 1768-9. It was also one of the surviving Space Shuttles.”

“I’ll pass along your idea. Now, I got to run. Can we talk some more?”

“Of course, my dear. I am at your disposal.”

By the time I walked over to the Capitol, work was already underway getting the vehicle out of the rotunda. Boards lay over the steps making a ramp, and I watched as the sleek contraption rolled slowly down. Amanda, looking as though she could use some sleep, stood with Jackson in the VIP area. A decent crowd had assembled to see history in the making, at least that’s what I hoped. It’s possible they had come to watch the Scientists make fools of themselves.

After successfully navigating the steps, the vehicle rolled to a decorous halt on the Capitol grounds to mild applause. Then, the esteemed President of the Republic offered a few words leaving the impression that everything was his idea. He concluded by noting, “I have a couple of happy announcements to make at this time. First, as some of you may have noticed, the mating of our Ron with Mia has been successful, with a child expected in August. This is the first mating for both of them.”

This got rather more applause than the car did.

“Also, today, we are pleased to announce that the faculty has accepted Amanda’s work on the software for the vehicle as completion of her Master Work. Accordingly, she joins the Faculty as a junior member of the Computer Intelligence department. Please help me welcome our newest Faculty member.” With that, he took a package from beneath the podium and gave it to Amanda. She opened it to reveal a brand-new cassock in the mauve favored by the *nerds*, their customary name.

This event received some polite applause, but as most of the populace found the machinations of the University incomprehensible, they weren’t sure exactly how to react. Amanda smiled and acknowledged the applause. Then she went to a basket nearby and withdrew three eggs. Conferring briefly with Ron and me, she turned and hurled one of the eggs at the vehicle, where it exploded into a shower of confetti. “We christen this vehicle *Endeavour*. May she and all who ride in her find only good fortune.”

Then, she turned back to Ron and smashed another egg on his head. This one turned out to be a real egg, causing great laughter. Then Amanda took off after Mia, who despite her condition was

easily able to outrun her smaller pursuer. Giving up, she returned to the main crowd, and offered a towel to Ron, along with a kiss on the cheek. “Great work, Ron!”

I came up to offer her congratulations to both of them, forgetting that Amanda still had an egg left. Too late, I realized my mistake. Amanda applied the egg to my head, leaving it covered in confetti.

“That’s strange,” she said in mock confusion. “I know I ordered all *cascarones*,” using the Spanish name for the eggs. “I wonder how they messed up and gave me a real egg.” While she was wondering that, Ron and Red dumped a container of water on her head, leading to generalized foofarah.

I finally got things back under control by giving a loud whistle. “That’s enough foolishness. It’s time to fire this baby up and see what it can do.” I gestured to Red and Ron to get into the front; I, Amanda, and Jackson took our places in back.

Silently, *Endeavour* moved forward, down the ceremonial drive leading to Congress Avenue, then on down the Avenue to the bridge over Lady Bird Lake, thru the ruined slums of South Austin, and onto the old highway to the West, US 290.

“Well, it’s just as I feared,” Ron said, “no one has maintained the bridge. It’s safe enough to walk across, but that’s about it.”

“What are our options?” I asked.

“Right now, we can simply return to the University. After all, this is just a test. However, when we go west for real, we have to either cross this bridge or take a very long way around.”

Amanda spoke up, “Our satellite scans showed heat sources near here, and I noticed a track leading into the brush a couple of clicks back. You know what they say, ‘A road means a village.’ Maybe we can get them to help. After all, it seems as though it would be in their interest. They could charge tolls.”

“Probably not enough traffic to make it worthwhile,” Red put in. No one goes this way much. Only a few crofters out here. Nothing worth trading.”

“Then we’ll have to be very persuasive,” I said, “Amanda, can you direct us to the village?”

A few minutes later, stopped by the side of the highway, Amanda said, “The dirt road looks passable, but we sure won’t be able to maintain the crisp speeds we’ve been traveling. I’m going to adjust the shocks, so we’ll ride high. That won’t be as comfortable inside, but we should be able to avoid bottoming out.” She typed a few commands into her computer and the floor of the car rose several centimeters.

Amanda’s *road* was nothing but two ruts leading into the scrub. Five excruciating kilometers later, we pulled up in an open area surrounded by several stone buildings. I saw no sign of electricity anywhere, or basic sanitation either for that matter. Amanda was the first to speak, “What squalor. I didn’t know people lived like this.”

“Looks bad, don’t it?” Red agreed. “Seen worse. Once the lights go out, you’re back to the dark ages, pun intended. Ron, how far away is the grid?”

“I need to check. The wires are still in place, though we may need to repair some, but they may not be live. Mandy?”

“I’m already on it. Looks like the info is not online. I’ve sent a request.” She closed the computer. “Shall we look around? Where are all the people?”

“Probably hiding,” Red told her. “People who show up in fancy cars usually mean trouble. Patty, I think it would be best for you and Amanda to exit first. You look the least threatening.”

As soon as the two of us stepped out of the car, an old woman materialized from the scrub and began waving madly. “Go away! It don’t be safe here. We got the plague.”

“Are there any reports of plague?” I asked Amanda. “I haven’t kept up to date.”

“I haven’t heard of any. Shall I check?”

“Yes, let’s see what we might be getting into. This could be all a bluff.”

Amanda retrieved her computer link from the car and pecked away for about a minute. “The signal is pretty weak, but I can just get thru. No one in Austin has heard of any plague. They’re going to research it more and get back to us.”

I threw back the cowl to show myself more fully. “Are you sure it’s the plague? Maybe we can help. I’m not afraid of the plague.” I took a tentative step toward the woman, who looked as though she might bolt at any moment. “Please don’t be afraid. We mean no harm,” I reassured her.

“You be the one they’s stories 'bout?”

I shrugged. “Yes, I suppose so.” This admission had an unexpected result. The old woman immediately came forward and prostrated herself on the ground. “You heal them?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll try. Take me to them. Wait! Please tell me your name.”

“When I be young, they be calling me Annabelle. Now, I be ‘old one’,” she replied.

“Very well, Annabelle the Old One. Please take us to the sick ones.”

Annabelle led us to the largest of the stone buildings. The stench coming from the building was overwhelming. “We’re going to need masks and gloves, and undoubtedly some lights,” I noted. “Go get the men and have them bring the medical kits, especially the oral rehydration packets.” Amanda rushed off.

“How long have they been sick?” I asked the Old One.

“Several days. A stranger come to the village nigh onto week ago. He be wanting to trade some fish and furs for wine. Naturally, we show him hospitality. Next day, the children go sick, be throwing up — and the other.... The men be out looking for the stranger. They find him, they kill him.”

I was trying to think of something to say when Amanda returned with the men and medical kits. “See this tall man here,” I said to Annabelle, indicating Red. “He is a Texas Ranger. If anyone can find your stranger, he can. Tell him as much as you remember about the man.” I looked the old woman in the eye. “Is there any to call the men back? We will take care of this for you.”

“Signal fire may bring 'em back.”

“That sounds like it’s worth a try. Red will help you arrange it. Is there anyone else who can help?”

“Yes’m. I get ‘em.”

“Red...” I caught his eye. He nodded and left.

“Now, everyone. Ready? This sounds like the norovirus, or something similar.” With that, I donned the mask and gloves, picked up one of the lights and stepped into the building.

By late afternoon, I thought the situation was somewhat under control. The children — for all most but not all were children — lay on mats on the ground. They had been cleaned as much as possible and given some oral rehydration from the medical kits. All seemed quite weak, but I couldn’t tell whether it was from the disease or lack of good nutrition. I had organized the woman from the village into two groups: one to clean out the building used to house the sick children; the other, to cook some broth to feed the children. I showed them how to make more oral rehydration solution from clean water, salt and sugar. I explained how to keep giving them some at regular intervals.

Ron was the first to bring up the subject of the waning light. “PP, we need to be going. It’s going to get dark.”

“Yes, of course. I think I’ll remain here. You go with the others and take the car. We need to bring some supplies out here. I’ll put together a list. Leave the emergency food packets and medical supplies.”

“We really need to get going right away. Remember we have to climb back to the road. That may be a problem.”

“I’ll stay with Patty,” Amanda said. “Y’all go. I have the computer link. We can e-mail you the list.”

“I’ll stay, too,” Red said. “Think you and Jackson can manage by yourselves?”

“Maybe we should all stay,” Ron replied.

“No,” I said. “You and Jackson return to Austin. The three of us will stay here. Expect e-mail later tonight. We’ll decide how to proceed after we’ve given it some thought.”

“Jackson?” Ron asked. “You agree?”

“I guess so. Just don’t go having any adventures without me,” he said. “Be careful, Mandy.” He gave her a sisterly peck on the cheek. “Red, take good care of ‘em.” With that, he and Ron headed back to the car. Ron showed off one of *Endeavour*’s capabilities, turning around in a tight circle, and they headed up the hill.

“I hope the software doesn’t have a problem with the fading light,” Amanda said. “It’s still learning. It does fine on the simulations, but you never know what will go wrong in actual practice. I’m tired. This is hard work. Can we rest for a bit?”

“Sure. Let’s sit in the shade of the large oak. Red?”

Red shook his head and wandered off into the scrub, where I assumed he would be watching from hiding. Amanda and I sat down.

“You want a drink?” the Old One asked, offering a cup.

“Thanks,” I replied. I took a sip and exclaimed, “This is real wine! Where did you get it?”

“We make it,” Annabelle replied, her tone betraying her obvious pride. “We be finding a place near here with equipment, and the berries. This be older stuff. Your disciple want some?”

“You may ask her directly,” I replied. “I’m sure she would.”

Amanda nodded, and said, “Please.” Shortly, she was sipping on a cup of her own. “I don’t know much about wine,” she mentioned, “but this tastes pretty good.”

“I think,” I agreed, “that we have found a source for trade. Now, to see if we can get them to think of it by themselves. Maybe we can help them make a better living here.”

Several of the women from the village approached. I noted that many of them were younger, about Amanda’s age. The boldest of the group bowed before me. “Master, OK we sit by you?”

“By all means. Please make yourselves comfortable. You may address me by my name, Hypatia, if you wish.”

“Thank you Master...Hypatia.” The group sat on the ground forming a semicircle in front of us. “You teach us?”

“What would you like me to teach?”

The question seemed to catch them off guard. They whispered to each other, then the leader of the group, the one who spoke the best English and might be able to understand the scholarly language Faculty members used, delivered what was clearly a prepared question. “We want know more 'bout you. Where you come from, what your business be, why you honor us with gifts.”

“That’s a good list. It should keep us busy until it is time to eat.”

The group shared a look of chagrin, which Amanda interpreted correctly. She spoke, “The master means, of course, to share what food we have with you. It isn’t much, but perhaps...” She motioned toward the stacked emergency rations Jackson and Ron had left behind them. “Perhaps the easiest solution would be to add our contribution to the soup. Then we could share it equally.”

“Master be very generous,” said the woman who had assumed the role of leader, bowing her head. She motioned to the youngest girl. “Arvida.” At the mention of her name, Arvida, a dirty, but presumably healthy child of perhaps twelve years, jumped to her feet and ran off toward the area where some other women were cooking.

“Perhaps you would tell me names by which I can know you,” I prompted the group. This led to a round of introductions. The leader called herself Mercedes, pronounced with the accent on the first syllable. I didn’t concentrate on the other names, as I saw that Amanda was noting them down in her computer.

“Now, Mercedes, you asked where we come from, and what business brings us here. That is a very reasonable question. We are from Austin, the large town to the east. We came on an expedition of exploration and learning, and also to test the new vehicle you saw us arrive in. We stopped when we saw that the bridge over the Pedernales needed repairs. We hoped that we could get your assistance in that project, which is why we came here, to this village.” I paused for a sip of the wine. It really was a wonderful vintage. I wondered if the villagers realized what they had

created. I suspected they knew something about it. They must be aware of its intoxicating properties, but probably they didn't realize it was a quality product, having nothing for comparison.

My audience didn't seem to understand much of what I said. Mercedes whispered to several of them, explaining what she thought I meant.

"Amanda and I are faculty members at the University in Austin." I snuck a look at Amanda and saw that she was beaming with pleasure at being introduced as an equal. "Amanda is not my acolyte; she is a trusted companion." I took another sip. *Need to be careful with this. It would be easy to drink too much.*

"Now, perhaps you could tell me something about yourselves."

This produced blank looks.

"What is the name of this place?" Amanda suggested.

"Home," several of them answered.

I smiled. "Excellent. Now tell me how you live here. What do you eat?"

After a whispered conference, Mercedes explained, "We grow vegetables, tomatoes, corn, beans, but mostly we hunt and fish, gather food that we find around."

"So, you must have boats," I continued, "to catch the fish with if nothing else."

"Wonderful boats. We be finding 'em long ago, downstream, near the dam, many boats. We take the best and bring 'em here. We sail on the lake. We go places we know where there be many animals to hunt: deer, goats, sheep, and a few cows. In the fall, we — the men mostly — hunt water birds come here." Amanda was frantically taking notes.

"So, you have sailed as far as the dam," I noted. "Have you ever traded with the people who live there?"

The group shuddered in unison. "No, we never go back. There be tales about the dam. Many done die when the whirlpools come. It be too dangerous."

"I think we may be able to help you there. There is danger at the dam, but there are ways to avoid it. We can show you how."

"The Master's generosity is matched by her wisdom," Mercedes quoted. I glanced quickly at Amanda to see if she had noticed the change in tone, but Amanda was concentrating on note taking, and no doubt cursing that she'd left her recording equipment back in Austin.

Later, filled with a delicious soup helped out by addition of quantities of jerky taken from the University emergency rations, sitting around a roaring campfire, I had time to relax briefly. The sick children were nestled close to the fire for warmth. One sniff of the proposed sick room proved there was much work to be done before I would allow anyone, much less a sick child, to stay overnight there. So far, the force of personality had proved adequate to the task of organizing the village to provide care for the children. Before our arrival, the care had consisted of marginal comfort prior to dying. I looked over eight small bundles wrapped in blankets taken from the medical packs. They slept quietly. I allowed myself a brief note of self-congratulation.

Amanda was even more enthusiastic. “Do you realize what you’ve done? It was amazing to watch. You walked into a village full of strangers and started issuing orders. And everyone obeyed! I’ve never seen anything like it. You have power you don’t realize.”

“Well, that’s only part of the battle,” I cautioned. “What about the poor man who arrived at the wrong time?” I hoped he had eluded his pursuit, and that the pursuers would see the signal fire now blazing on the hillside and return to the village. If the women were to be believed, the men should be back by morning. Around the smaller campfire, after lots of comments on the soup and other small talk, the questions began anew.

“Master,” the one called Mercedes began, “you done tell us why you come, and imply you want our help. Please tell what you wish?” I was impressed by the use of the word *imply*. It showed that Mercedes at least was not a complete bumpkin, even if she had trouble with tenses.

“We hope to travel farther to the West, deep into the Hill Country. To do that we must cross the river, or else find some other way to go. When we inspected the bridge, we found that it was poorly maintained. That is not unusual. Many bridges have fallen into disuse after the Collapse and need considerable work. The young man who drove us here, Ron, is well versed in bridge repair. He will bring materials with him when he returns that can be used to restore the bridge.” I stole a quick look at Amanda to make sure the message had gone out with the instructions for Ron. Amanda nodded inconspicuously.

“We will need your assistance in repairing the bridge. In return, we would expect all who use the bridge to pay tolls to the village to compensate you for your efforts.” I looked around and saw that many did not understand.

“Let’s talk about other things. We feel that there are many items we can bring to you that will make your life here easier. Likewise, there are many things that you have here that would be highly prized back in Austin, for example, the excellent wine you served us earlier. We want to trade with you. It is mainly a question of finding something that we have that you want to exchange for the wine and other products that you can provide to us. Understand?”

“We know,” Mercedes replied, “that such things be common before the Collapse. We not trade now. People who want to trade, mostly be cheating us. We be careful.” She heard several murmurings in the background and quickly added, “Most people not like you.” She bowed her head.

“Thank you, Mercedes,” I replied. “Trust is difficult to create, and easy to destroy.” Several of the women sitting before me gasped audibly, and I thought I’d made some terrible blunder. Mercedes quickly reassured me, “So it be written.”

So, she was quoting earlier. What writing are they referring to?

“One of the ways we trade,” I continued, “is by providing electricity and information to communities such as yours. We believe that we can accomplish that quickly. Indeed, we will want to have electricity available for the bridge repairs.” I waited to assess the effect that had on the group.

“We heared of electricity from old stories,” Mercedes replied, “but we ain’t seen it.”

“Actually, you can’t really *see* it, only its effect.”

“And what be that?” several of the women asked at once.

“It can drive machines. Our car that we came in was powered by electricity.”

“We not see any wires,” Mercedes said skeptically.

“No,” I replied, “we are testing a new way of producing electricity. Our car runs on sunlight.”

A chorus of *ahhs* greeted this pronouncement.

“Arvida,” Mercedes commanded, “get the Old One.” Arvida jumped to her feet and ran off into the night. “The Old One,” Mercedes explained, “she be the head woman.”

Everyone sat silently for several minutes. Finally, Annabelle returned with Arvida. I noticed that she wore what appeared to be ceremonial garments, certainly much finer than what she’d had on earlier. The other women shifted their positions to make room for her in the center, directly facing me.

“So,” Annabelle began, “you come without no warning, turn things upside down. Now, you wanna parlay. That gotta wait for men. I not sure I trust you. There be a lot more wickedness in the world. Young ones, they think you the Chosen One, the Second Messiah. What say to that?”

The attack was so unexpected that I wasn’t sure how to respond. To my surprise, Amanda spoke up for the first time.

“If you will permit, Old One, I would speak.” She then bowed her head and sat silently. I was dumbfounded. This was totally unlike Amanda.

“Yes, you speak for your Master,” the old woman said.

I started to object that I was not Amanda’s master, but Amanda’s quick reply forestalled me.

“You are surely aware of the storm that swept thru our area some months ago.”

“Sure.”

“Perhaps you are also familiar with the saying—”

“She is borne aloft on the winds from the sea,” Annabelle finished the sentence for her.

“She brings wisdom with her gifts. Her wisdom lights a beacon for all to see.”

“You know the Sayings,” Annabelle said.

“I know the Sources,” Amanda replied. “Have you heard the tales of what the Master did in Houston?”

“We be hearing some tall tales.”

“You heard of the beacon?”

“As I say, we hear silly stories, a beacon stretching to the sky. We ain’t fools.”

“Call me a fool, then, for I saw it with my own eyes. So did a thousand people. They all came and were saved.”

“Saved?”

“Saved from a life of misery. Shown the way to a better world.”

“This be bullshit.”

“I am beginning to be offended by your lack of respect.”

“No offense. Sayings also got *extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof*.”

“And that *none is so blind as those who refuse to see*.”

I had an eerie feeling of watching a *pilpul* between two ancient rabbis.

“So, show me with my own eyes?”

“If that is what it takes.”

“And then?”

“Then maybe you will accept, as I have, that Hypatia is indeed the Chosen One, The Second Messiah, She Who Comes to Lead.”

This is certainly unanticipated. Is this why she insisted on coming on the expedition?

“Suppose she be.” Turning to me, Annabelle demanded, “Lead us, then.”

“Let’s talk about the stranger your men are searching for,” I said. “I hope that you will agree he is blameless.”

“Mayhap,” Annabelle agreed, “we be rash.”

“We cannot afford such puerile actions of revenge. We no longer have the luxury of killing people for no reason. There are too few of us left.” I tried to keep my voice unemotional. “Our only hope for a better future is to save what we can and try to rebuild the world that has disappeared. Wait! That’s not quite right. We have to construct a much *better* world. The pre-Collapsian world contained the seeds of its own destruction: greed, misuse of valuable resources, unrestrained breeding leading to massive overpopulation, destruction of the environment...” I let my voice trail off, allowing the women to add their own items to the list.

“How we build such a world?” Annabelle demanded. “The ancients done destroyed most everything.”

“There is some left. At the University, we are trying to preserve the knowledge the Ancients possessed, hoping that someday we will be able to use it again. Today, we are not using the knowledge they had, we are simply living on the corpse of the old world, salvaging what we can without the knowledge of how to replace what we use. We assume, wrongly, that the salvaging can go on forever. That won’t do. You told us how you took the boats from near the dam. Do you know how to build boats?”

“No,” several of the women said. They all appeared to be concentrating intently.

“Nor do I, but our archives contain plans for hundreds of different boats. When we can no longer take them, we hope to be able to build replacements; indeed, we hope to build boats better than any we now have.” I paused and wondered if there was any way to suggest that some more wine would help the discussions.

Amanda seemed to read her mind, “If we are to talk all night, perhaps we could have something to keep our throats from getting dry.”

Annabelle smiled. “You like the wine?”

“I’m no expert,” Amanda replied, “but I thought it was delicious. In Houston, we used to add fruit to sweeten it and...well, make it last longer.”

Annabelle laughed, for the first time. “Mercedes, *sangria*.” Mercedes snapped her fingers and two women rose quickly and set off toward one of the buildings.

“Now,” Annabelle said, “we gonna talk 'bout how the cow ate the cabbage. Maybe we be finish when the men come.”

12. *Birthday Celebration* ***April 16, 1998*** ***Near Leakey, TX***

“Holy shit! You scared the piss out of me. I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Do what,” I asked. Looking around, I found I was lying on the bed in Mark’s cabin.

“Appear out of nowhere.”

“Me?”

“Who else is here? Yes, you. You disappeared from that spot about...let’s see, eleven days ago, and suddenly reappear as if nothing happened. It’s a bit disconcerting.”

“I love the way you use words. It’s unusual to hear ‘Holy shit’ and ‘disconcerting’ so close together.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“OK. You say I disappeared and reappeared after eleven days. Sorry about that. Believe me; I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. As far as I can tell, this is just a very realistic dream. I’m probably actually asleep around a campfire near the Pedernales River, where I can promise you, the date is March 17, 2087.”

“You said that before. From my point of view, though, this is very real, and it’s April 16, 1998.”

“Hey! That’s my birthday.”

“Ah. That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why I would give you a copy of my book, lovingly inscribed.” He produced a present wrapped in gold paper, obviously the book. I opened it carefully, trying not to tear the paper.

“You remind me of my mother when you do that.”

“What?”

“She always tries to avoid tearing the paper so she can reuse it. She’s worth millions, literally, and she still saves the paper to reuse.”

“I’m not worth millions, and this is very expensive paper.”

“Well, it still reminds me of my mother. You two should meet.”

“I’d love to. Why don’t you arrange it?”

“Oh, that’s great. How do you propose that I do that when you keep popping into existence and disappearing when I turn my back.”

“Did you make sandwiches? I could stand a bite.”

“Sandwiches?”

“Yes. The last time I saw you, you were about to make sandwiches.”

He smiled. “So I was. How about tuna? Do you like that?”

“I don’t know. Never tasted it.”

“Come on. You gotta be kidding.”

“How do you get tuna anyway, this far from the ocean?” I glanced at the book. It looked like the one Red had given, or rather, will give, me for a graduation present. There on the flyleaf were the fateful words, *To Hypatia, with all my love, Mark*. I checked to see if the paper with the map was there, but it was missing.

“Now, you must be kidding. I’m talking about tuna salad, you know, made from tuna in a can, the kind you get at the supermarket.”

“Oh, yeah, cans.” *Stupid me!* “How did you manage to publish this book in only eleven days?” I waved the book at him.

“I had all the text on my computer. You just gave me the incentive to run off a copy. Kinko’s does great work, don’t they?”

“Looks like the real thing.” I got off the bed, dropping the book as I did so, and strolled into the kitchen. I was surprised to find that I was quite hungry. Apparently, food eaten in 2087 didn’t count in this reality. Mark rushed past me to the refrigerator and started hauling stuff out.

“Here are some snacks you can nibble on while I make the sandwiches.” He put a plate of cut vegetables down on the counter. “Want a beer? Iced tea?”

“Beer sounds great.” He opened two. I was delighted and surprised to see that it was Shiner Bock. I watched him make the sandwiches. As it turned out, he had to mix the tuna salad first.

“The tuna is from a can, supposedly dolphin safe if you care about that, but I make my own mayo to use.” He pulled a crock from the refrigerator and opened it. The mayo looked like regular mayo, apparently things were different in 1998. He put water on to boil two eggs and chopped up some green onions in the meantime. He mixed the onions and some capers from a jar with the tuna from the can and added two healthy spoonfuls of mayo. Then he pulled some fresh dill from a drawer in the refrigerator and chopped some of that to add to the salad. Next, a lemon yielded a couple of spoonfuls of zest to a fancy grater. Some salt and freshly ground pepper, and a quick stir prepared the way for the eggs. By the time he was satisfied with the flavor, the eggs were ready. He grated them into the mix, using a device he called a *Mouli* grater that turned the egg into thin strings. After stirring the mix some more, he got a spoon from another drawer and offered me a taste.

“It’s great. Maybe a bit more pepper?”

He grabbed the grinder and added some pepper. “The bread comes from a small bakery in town.” He sliced as he spoke. “Sorry I’m out of lettuce.”

“No problem.” My stomach started growling before Mark finished his creation. I took a long pull at the beer to pass the time, but the way it felt when it hit bottom urged caution in that area. *Don’t drink too much on an empty stomach, you fool!*

“The sandwich is superb,” I said after a bit.

Mark acknowledged the praise with a simple nod of his head. “Now that you’ve had an omelet and tuna salad, you’ve pretty well plumbed the depths of my culinary skill. We can drive into town for dessert later if you want.”

“How far is it to town?”

“About 15 minutes.”

“What’s there?”

“There’s a convenience store that sells ice cream and stuff. The Dairy Queen will still be open if we hurry.”

I wondered about the royalty in question but decided not to look stupid again by asking. “We could skip dessert, if…”

“Woman, you are insatiable. As the saying goes, *life is uncertain, eat dessert first.*”

I laughed, wondering if I could remember the saying to use in the future. I accepted his suggestion, though, and we drove into Leakey, which I learned was pronounced LAKE-ee, a picturesque place with a huge courthouse surrounded by Live Oaks dominating the central square. A sign in front explained that the WPA had constructed the courthouse in 1935-37. “Amazing, isn’t it?” Mark asked. “In all the time I’ve been here, I’ve never seen anyone going into or coming out of the building, though there must be something happening inside.” He parked the car and we walked around the central square, a testament to the general quirkiness of the place. An antique car reconditioning shop stood next to a combination tax service and beauty parlor, across from a small bank, and near several huge containers for recycling, courtesy of Wal-Mart.

However, the most interesting place near the courthouse was the tiny Wildlife Art Museum, which advertised itself as “larger than you think.” I was hoping to see what was inside, but it had closed for the day. Eventually, we wandered to the Dairy Queen, which was not as expected, but I liked the soft ice cream. I was ready to spend hours exploring the place, but Mark hurried us back to his car, a brand-new SUV with about 1000 gadgets inside. “There’s a thunderstorm building,” he explained, pointing to the west. “I want to get back to the cabin before it hits. We certainly don’t want to be on the road. If we were trapped between water crossings, we’d have to wait in the car for the water to go down. I’d rather be in the cabin.”

I agreed, of course, and we set off back to the cabin at a frantic pace. The speedometer showed 85, meaning miles per hour. A quick calculation converted that to more than 135 kph. Mark apparently considered this perfectly normal, so I closed my eyes and hoped we made it all right. Ambianca was in the car, courtesy of some super Pre-Collapsian Magic. She somehow sensed my distress and started playing soothing music, a Chopin Nocturne. Before the piece concluded, we had turned off the main road onto county road 256, and shortly were back inside the cabin.

It was none too soon, as the skies opened immediately. The rain came in torrents, quickly swelling the creek. “This creek is called Big Henderson Creek,” Mark explained. “I used to think it was named for the eponymous Mr. Henderson, since I never located a Little Henderson Creek. When it fills up, though, it can be big. We are stuck here for a while.”

“Is it safe here?”

“Oh, sure. This is the best place around. The dam where we swam slows down the runoff, and we are higher than the surrounding area. You wouldn’t want to be out in this, though. Don’t mess with these storms. They dump a lot of rain in a short time.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said, failing to mention that I was familiar with thunderstorms.

“It’s nice to watch, though. Shall we sit out on the porch?”

Sitting on the porch also meant lighting up a hookah and getting into a good mood. After both of us had reached maximum mellowness, Mark asked, “Have you thought about all this? What’s happening? Why?”

“I’ve been avoiding it,” I said, then, with a giggle. “Could it be just about sex? That seems to be a major defining element of our relationship.”

He didn’t take the hint.

“I suppose that’s possible,” he replied in complete seriousness. “This could serve as an outlet so that you wouldn’t be tempted in 20 whatever.”

“2087.”

“Right, 2087. Do you do it then?”

“Well, sure, but now that you mention it, I haven’t *gotten lucky*, to use your quaint twentieth century euphemism, since we met.”

“Interesting. See, I’ve been considering it. I think you are actually here in this time. Since you seem to be sure that you are in 2087, let’s assume that you are in both times, though not simultaneously. Does that sound right?”

I wasn’t in shape to deal with hard questions, so I just said, “I guess so.”

“Now, it is clear that you are not in control of this phenomenon. Therefore, someone, or some force is causing it to happen. OK so far?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Bear with me. This raises two different questions. If it is some natural force, why is it happening now, and only to you? If it is due to someone, the question we have to answer is *who*.”

“I suppose you have an answer to that.”

“Well, the obvious answer is God, but I don’t believe in God.”

“Me neither.”

“You’ve got to admit, though, that this is something that God might do, if there were a God, and he could do something like this.”

I was so buzzed from the cannabis that I completely missed the casual way he used the subjunctive. “Why do I have to admit that?” That sounded petulant, so I rephrased it, “What’s wrong with the natural force answer?”

“Everything. Why now? Why you? Why no one else?”

“Maybe they just keep quiet about it, especially if the sex is good and they’re not getting any in the other reality.” *How many hints was it going to take?*

“Phooey!”

I took another pull on the hookah. *Maybe the interrogation will end if I just ignore him.*

“Maybe you’re special.”

I guessed ignoring him wasn’t going to work. I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

“Of course I’m special. So is everyone.”

“You told me about how that guy— what’s his name — found you when you were just a toddler.”

“Red. Yeah. That’s right. I was wandering around somewhere around here. At least Red says he remembers starting in Medina.”

“Interesting. Could it be related to a specific place? I’ve read some stories—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re talking about *ley* lines, hypothetical alignments of a number of places of geographical interest, such as ancient monuments and megaliths. They’re supposed to have special power, especially where they intersect. I’m pretty sure that’s nonsense.”

“OK. Then we’re back to you being something special. Maybe God *is* taking a hand in things — if he exists. I mean, the story reminds me of Moses in the bulrushes.”

“Damn! I thought I was going to get away from that bullshit.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I get lots of this back in 2087. People think I’m the Chosen One, the Second Messiah.”

“Second Messiah? Wasn’t the first one trouble enough?”

I laughed. “That’s exactly what I said the first time I heard it. Apparently, there are some sacred writings with prophesies, and I am fulfilling them.”

“Wow! Now I think we’re getting somewhere.”

“Don’t tell me you believe that!”

“It’s better than anything I’ve heard so far. Besides, it means I’m something special, screwing the Messiah and all that.”

“Don’t get too excited. There’s already a club started in 2087.”

“Lots of members?”

“Jealous?”

“Should I be?”

“No way. Want me to prove it?”

“Well, maybe.”

That was as close as I was going to get with the hints. “Come on,” I said, taking his hand and leading him back into the bedroom, where I pushed him back on the bed and undressed. Ambianca dredged up a recording of *Light as a Breeze*, sung by Billy Joel instead of Leonard Cohen. It was the perfect choice, as usual.

“Ready to kneel at the delta?” I asked, quoting a line from the song.

He was.

“I’m pretty sure this is a dream.”

“Oh. Why are you so sure?”

“Because everything I do here in this reality is for pleasure. I eat, smoke pot, get some incredible dessert at a place called Dairy Queen, and have sex most of the time. That’s not the real world.”

Mark laughed. “I have to agree. But aren’t new lovers allowed to have a honeymoon, where they do nothing but enjoy themselves.”

“That’s another thing. I can hardly believe that I’ve had sex with someone I just met. In 2087, that would be classified as a *suicide attempt*.”

“Sex is that bad?”

“Contact with someone you don’t know well is bad. That’s how diseases spread. We’re pretty careful about things like that.”

“It’s that bad?”

“I told you about the plague, didn’t I?”

“You mentioned it. Said it wiped out most of the population.”

“Yes, and it recurs regularly. We’re constantly on the watch for it. In fact, before I showed up here, I was dealing with what the people in a small village thought was plague. It turned out to be the norovirus.”

“I’d like to hear about that.”

I related the story of our expedition to him. The details fascinated him.

“I know the winery. It’s near the old town of Spicewood. I can take you there.”

“I don’t know. What if I disappeared in the middle of a crowd? That might cause a stir. Damn! I’m starting to think that this business might be real instead of a dream.”

“You really built a solar powered car?”

“We did. Well, Ron built it and Amanda supplied the software to make it work. We used some plans we found in the archives.”

“No kidding. That’s a major wow! There’s a contest in Australia to build just such a vehicle.”

“Where do you think we got the plans?”

“Oh, of course. Success is in the future.”

“I guess so. Sometimes, we don’t have good dates on everything in the archives. We tend to lump everything as *twentieth century*.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re here.”

“Why?”

“To learn. You told me that you didn’t think you could change the past. What about the future? Maybe you can change that; make the world a better place.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you need to learn something here, in this reality, so you can make things better in the other one. I know one thing, though. You won’t learn much here.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“We need to go to Houston, as soon as the creek’s safe. I’ll introduce you to my mother. She’ll know what to do; she always does.”

I couldn’t think of an argument against that, so we quickly cleaned up the cabin, locked up everything, and headed for Houston, which Mark promised, was only about four hours or so away.

When we got to I-10, I felt comfortable and relaxed, back to an area I recognized, though I had trouble concentrating as we rocketed past at more than 110 kph. Somewhere west of Sealy, I drifted off to sleep.

13. Bridge Building April 17, 2087 New Home and Environs, NRT

President Caldwell leaned forward just enough to see the speed display on the dash and noted that it registered a bit over 95. “For God’s sake, boy. Slow down! Are you trying to kill us all?”

“Sorry sir. We’ve gotten used to a nice clip on this stretch of the road. It’s been completely repaired.” He dropped back to 80 kph.

“That’s better.” The Pres leaned back into his seat. Besides the driver, *Endeavour* held only VIPs heading for the dedication ceremony at the Pedernales River Bridge: I was there naturally; The Pres; John Butcher, representing the town merchants’ guild; and Martha from Houston, who had supervised all the preparations for the celebration.

Martha spoke up, “Relax William. I’m sure the lad knows what he’s doing. After all, he’s driven out this way several times already today. You are watching out for the cyclists, aren’t you Roger?” We had passed several groups of cyclists on the way, most of whom had volunteered on the project at one time or another.

Caldwell said nothing. I was amused and a bit confused. *How did Martha learn his first name? No one ever uses it. She seems to know everything that’s going on. What happened to her dialect? These people are a continual mystery!*

In an attempt to get back on the President’s good side, Roger pointed out some of the sights along the way. “These buildings are new. Several people have migrated to the road since we began repairs. Lots of shops are setting up to serve travelers. These people make a dynamite margarita.”

“What are you doing drinking margaritas?” Caldwell demanded. “Surely you don’t have any before driving.”

“Oh, no sir. We walked here from the labor camp one night last week. They had music and dancing. Lots of cute girls. We’re almost there.”

Within five minutes, we arrived at the site. The bridge was decked out in colorful bunting, with a large sign proclaiming, “Welcome President Caldwell.”

“You see, William,” Martha said, “we’re here safely, and they have a welcoming committee ready to meet you.” She took his arm as though it were her birthright, ignoring Caldwell’s not so subtle attempts to shake her loose. “This woman is Annabelle the Old One, one of the leaders of the village.” She waved at Annabelle, who waved back. Annabelle wore a new outfit made from cloth that I had given her. The cloth came from *Norte Mexico* by way of Sealy, having arrived just two days earlier. Jackson had worked a minor miracle to get it there on time. The village wine was proving to be an even better trade good than originally envisioned, thanks to Jackson’s work setting up the network.

“Mr. President,” Annabelle greeted him, “this be great honor. We got so much to thank you for that I ain’t be knowing where to begin. You here for the *ceremony* be more’n we hope for.”

“Thank you, Annabelle,” he replied, extending his hand to almost touch hers. “Hypatia has told me about all the work being done here. I think she would have my head if I hadn’t come to see the results. I must admit I am impressed at how much has been accomplished in such a short time.”

“You be liking a tour?”

“Oh, very much.”

“We start in Village Square, OK?” She turned and led the way slowly down some steps cut into the hillside to an open area paved with flagstones made of the local rock. “This be the *winery*,” Annabelle said, indicating a building on the left side of the square. “We move enough stock here for tasting by *customers*. We be just learning 'bout trading. Jackson be conducting classes at night explaining — well, you be knowing 'bout *accounting* and such like. It be bit much for me, I fear. I be thankful fo’ Jackson.” She walked out onto the main courtyard.

“These buildings be houses for villagers. We got some rooms for travelers. You be knowing we done got people show up from far away as Johnson City?”

“Really? How interesting.”

“From over here you be seeing the new docks. If it OK with you, I ain’t go down there. I be too old to climb back up easy like.”

“I understand Hypatia suggested you move the village.”

“Right. She say that people start using the road more. She right. But we use the water for cargo. Jackson been showing us how to go to the dam safely. You be seeing the operation there?”

“Actually no. I have heard about it of course. You’re referring to the freight elevator.”

“That what Jackson call it, yes. It lower cargo from Lake Travis side of the dam to Lake Austin side in minutes. Ron built it, you bet. It use *hydraulics*.”

“So I understand. It’s a great design. We built one on the Longhorn Dam as well, so we can get cargo down the Colorado. Looks like it will turn into a big business.”

“That be good. You like my dress? Hypatia got the material from *Norte Mexico*. Be two weeks!”

“Amazing. How is the computer link working?”

“Oh, the kids show you that. That be in this building here. We turn it into a *classroom*. Hypatia show the kids how to look up information on wine making — *viticulture*. We got some ideas how to make more better wine. Just in time for spring.”

“Excellent.”

“Now, the children done prepared a *skit* for you.” She led the way into the classroom, where I moved quickly to stand in a group of several children. One cute little girl about six clung to my leg. On cue, they all said in unison, “Good morning President Caldwell!”

“Good morning, children.”

Professor Caldwell, searched for a place to sit, scowled, for he wore his crimson dress robe reserved for high Faculty members, and didn’t like getting it dirty. Eventually, he took a seat with several adults against the back wall.

I had already requisitioned some chairs for the adults, but they hadn’t made it in time for the celebration. The villagers were used to sitting on the ground, of course.

The children performed their skit, which was about the coming of the Messiah to their old village. One of the oldest girls played the part of Hypatia, shouting at the others to clean up the sick

room. Several young actors lay on mats, obviously suffering. The older girl gave them something to drink and all recovered immediately.

After the performance ended, the adults applauded loudly. Several of the boldest youngsters, reveling at the attention, took repeated bows. Then all the children ran out of the room.

I walked over to help Caldwell stand up. “Thus, are legends born,” I said. “I didn’t have anything to do with the skit, but I suppose I’ll have to live with it.”

“You, my dear, have always been a legend in my eyes.”

“Thanks, Daddy Pres.” I kissed him on the cheek. Several of the other adults noticed this and whispered to each other.

The crowd flowed out of the classroom and formed a procession leading to the bridge. Annabelle gave a signal and a small band began playing a march, which I recognized as *Hail to the Chief*, the perfect choice, no doubt due to Ambianca’s influence.

Ron stood at the entrance to the bridge, surrounded by the volunteers who had put in such long hours repairing not only the bridge, but the road as well. *Endeavour* sat on the roadway, ready to be the initial vehicle to cross the river on the newly refurbished bridge. First, though, the crowd had to learn about President Caldwell’s proclivity for long-winded speeches. Everyone was restless before Caldwell finished relating the history of the Republic, ending with the movement of the village to this location and the rebuilding of the infrastructure.

Ron climbed into *Endeavour* along with me, Annabelle, and Caldwell, and drove the car to the other side. There, he turned around and drove back, to great cheering.

Mia came up to Ron and kissed him to the delight of all. Then John Butcher, who had supplied the provisions for the event as a show of solidarity, and Martha who had arranged everything, led the way to the picnic area for barbecue and beer. Wine, already regarded as a luxury item, was far too valuable to waste, even on a celebration of this magnitude.

“How many people do you think are here?” I asked Ron when we had some time to talk.

“Martha planned for at least a hundred. I’d say we have exceeded that. All the volunteers stayed for the celebration, of course, plus the villagers, and some crofters from further out who heard about it somehow.”

“Hope we don’t run out of food.”

“I hope we don’t run out of beer. That might cause a riot.”

I sat on a cushion by the fire in the central ring of the village square. Red approached from where he’d been hiding and watching the proceedings and sat by my side. “Quite a day,” he said.

“It was nice, wasn’t it? Did Daddy Pres get off OK?”

“Yeah, Roger is taking him, Martha, and John Butcher back. Probably won’t make another run tonight. Don’t want to stress test *Endeavour* with a night run, at least not yet.”

“Might be a good idea. If they can’t make it at least they’d be somewhere fairly safe.”

“Want me to call and suggest it?”

“Ask Ron what he thinks. I’ll defer to his judgment.”

Red stood and walked off as though he was sure where to find Ron. Amanda took his place next to me. “Whew! Glad that’s over.”

“Me too. Glad everything went well.”

“The food was delicious. Can’t believe Butcher was willing to supply real beef.”

“Along with *cabrito*, and the sausage was venison.”

“Well, at least the brisket was legit.”

“Most of this crowd hasn’t eaten beef, so they couldn’t really tell the difference, especially with the heavy sauce. It was nicely done, though.”

“Want some wine?”

“You’ve got to be kidding. I couldn’t eat or drink anything.”

“Smoke?”

“You’re picking up bad habits. Been talking to Red?”

“Yeah. Turns out he’s anxious for this trip as much as we are. Apparently, there’s a good supply in the Hill Country.”

“He sure seems to know his way around. Hope he hasn’t planned anything extracurricular for the trip.”

“No, he’s worried about security. Spends all his time talking to Cameron about weapons,” Amanda said.

“Think we should be worried?”

“Nah. I’m counting on your aura to protect us.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. What’s with all the religious mumbo-jumbo? Is that just an act for the locals?”

“You don’t think I’m serious?”

“That’s why I’m asking.”

“I think you don’t know your own power. I felt it the first time I saw you. Fell in love just hearing you speak.”

“What?”

“That’s the best I can explain it. After our first meeting, I just wanted to make sure that I was part of your life. And that was before you fondled my breast.”

“I didn’t *fondle* it.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Well, maybe a little. You have nice breasts.”

“JJ says you’re sensitive about that.”

“JJ? You’re in touch with him?”

“Of course. Isn’t everyone?”

“No. He’s very selective.”

“Well, I guess I’m privileged.”

“I’m glad.”

“He’s worried about you.”

“Oh?”

“Have you had any more dreams?”

“You know about that, do you?”

“Well, have you?”

“Not since that first night we were here. Maybe they’re over.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because your work isn’t finished.”

“What work? This place?”

“This is just the beginning.”

“You seem to know a lot about this.”

“I’ve done some research.”

“Research? Into what?”

“The Second Messiah.”

“How do you do research on that?”

Amanda looked surprised. “In the archives, of course. Also, there’s a live web site.”

“There’s stuff in the archives about the Second Messiah?”

“Of course. You didn’t know that?”

“It never occurred to me. How silly. Did you say there’s a live web site?”

“Yes, it’s even interactive, something called a *wiki*. People have been posting stories about you.”

“Stories about me? What kind of stories?”

“Well, remember the incident in the stairwell of the Tower. Jackson told me what happened with the gun.”

“Sure, I remember it. Stupid man insisted on killing himself.”

“Well, it seems that one of the eyewitnesses saw it differently. According to the story, you worked some powerful magic so that the gun turned against your assailant. The writer wanted to warn everyone not to try to harm you or they would wind up hurting themselves.”

I snorted in disgust, then considered it more. “I guess the story’s useful, though I hate to see superstition spread. I suppose they also tell how I bewitched Conan, now Rocky.”

“Of course,” Amanda replied. “There’s even video of that. It looks like you did something to him and he fainted.”

“He fainted from starvation and exhaustion. He hadn’t eaten in a week!”

“Well, anyway, magical acts make a better story.”

“Where’s the site hosted?” I asked.

“Don’t know. The trace disappears on a satellite link. It’s almost as if the site is hosted on the satellite itself. Oh, and some of the protocols used are archaic, dating to pre-Collapse. Nothing later than the early days of the Republic.”

I gave a small chuckle. “You know, it’s funny. When I first met Jackson, he didn’t know what satellites were. Now you can talk calmly about tracing web links to a satellite.”

“I think Jackson was being disingenuous. We’ve known about satellites for years. We just didn’t have any access to them. That’s one reason we wanted to join in with y’all.”

“Yes, that makes sense. Jackson was putting on a show for us, wasn’t he?”

“Sort of. He had a task to perform. How he managed it was up to him.”

“About this weird site. Can you tell whose satellite is it?”

“Nope. It doesn’t show up on any of the lists. The archives are interesting. There are some sacred writings. A lot of stuff that reminds me of Nostradamus. I didn’t think that up. One of the commentaries made the comparison. The predictions could mean almost anything. Some are pretty specific, though, for example, that the Second Messiah will be a woman, and lighting the beacon, maybe even this place.”

“There’s a prediction about this place?”

“Out of sickness, health; out of darkness, light; out of the earth, sweet wine.”

“Give me a break.”

“It fits.”

“Sure, but as you said, it could be almost anything. Are there any specific predictions that we can use as a test?”

“Maybe. How about this? Who shall stand against her? Not the Kingdom of the North; they shall spread flower petals in her path. Not the Kingdom of the South; they shall worship her for what she is not. Nor, yea, even the mighty Prince himself; he shall prostrate himself when she appears on her mighty steed.”

“Mandy, I’m starting to worry about you.”

“And I, you.”

“That’s sweet.” I reached for my young friend’s hand and brought it to my lips. “How about making a better world? Anything about that?”

“Everything. That’s what it’s all about.”

“Does it say whether she succeeds?”

“No, only that she finds love in the end.”

“How nice.”

14. **Big Mac Attack** **April 28, 1998** **Sealy, TX**

I woke up all stiff and sore to find that I had somehow fallen asleep in a parking lot. After struggling to my feet, and surveying the surroundings, I determined the parking lot to be outside a McDonald's restaurant, clearly sometime in the middle of the night, as no one was around. Too bad. I could have used a bite to eat.

Loud noises attracted my attention, so I wandered toward the road. Nearby was a freeway with a steady stream of huge 18-wheelers passing by at high speed. Neurons fired in the brain. I was in 1998 again. I could just make out the road sign for the ramp leading onto the freeway: Houston. That must be I-10. Once again, I had been deposited back where I had been on my previous visit. I tried to recall my previous dream, but all I could manage to remember was driving on I-10. I had fallen asleep in the car.

While I was pondering what to do next, a police car drove into the parking lot. *Great! The place is about to open.* Someone would know how to contact Mark. Perhaps the officer could help. I started walking toward the car when the door burst open and I saw a burly shape emerge. The shape turned on a flashlight and shone it straight into my eyes. Before I could object the shape said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Not a good start. I considered several approaches before settling on honesty...well more or less. "I'm waiting for a friend to pick me up. This is where I hoped to meet him."

That didn't seem to be a satisfactory reply. The shape, clearly a man by the size, and not in great condition based on the obvious beer belly, walked toward me with menace in his step. "You can't stay here."

"Why not?"

"I'll have to arrest you for loitering."

"Loitering implies waiting around aimlessly, or in an apparently idle manner. That doesn't apply to me."

"Oh, a smartass." He took several steps forward until he was right in front of me, less than a meter away.

"What's your name? Let me see some ID."

"My name is Hypatia. I seem to have misplaced my identification."

"Hypatia?" He frowned in concentration. "There was something about a woman named that. Don't go anywhere." He pressed a button on a small radio on his shoulder. "Unit 22 to base."

"Go ahead 22," was the reply.

"Did we get a BOLO for a woman named Hypatia?"

"Just a sec." He waited in silence for what seemed like an eternity. "Yeah. Not considered dangerous. May have gone off her meds. Restrain and notify."

"10-4." He clicked off the radio. "You heard that. You have to come with me."

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well, the instructions included restraint, so…”

When I reflected on it later, I was rather proud of how quickly the reflexes worked. After all, I had not really been keeping up my training of late. As the officer grabbed my left arm, I turned into him, twisting to break the hold while simultaneously hitting him with an elbow in the gut — a big target. A pained grunt told me that the blow had done its job. A quick leg sweep dropped him on the pavement with a satisfying oomph. Before he got his breath back, I rolled him onto his stomach and secured his hands behind his back with his own handcuffs. Relieving him of his flashlight and gun, I stepped back out of reach.

“Sorry about that,” I said. Aiming the flashlight at the gun, I tried to find the safety and make sure it was on. It looked right. I aimed at a large metal container at the back of the lot and pulled the trigger. The explosion was deafening, and the kick damn near broke my arm. A loud twang from the target completed the fiasco.

“Jesus Christ! What are you doing?”

“Sorry, I thought the safety was on.” Reversing the switch, I tried again. This time the trigger wouldn’t pull. “You keep your gun in your holster with the safety off?”

“I’m always forgetting. My bad.”

“I’m afraid that I can’t carry or drag you. Think you can walk over to that bench. We can sit down.” He managed to get to his feet and stagger the 5 meters or so to the bench. “Where’s the key to the handcuffs? I’ll unlock them if you promise not to do anything rash.”

“You got it. Key’s in the right front pocket of my pants.”

“Don’t do anything foolish.” I groped around in his pocket looking for the key, eventually locating it.

“OK,” I said. “Turn around and let me unlock the cuffs. Don’t try anything.”

“I won’t do anything if you promise not to tell anyone that I let a 98-pound girl disarm me in 15 seconds.”

“It’s a deal.” I unlocked the cuffs and handed them to him. “Does notify mean calling Mark?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“On the radio, they mentioned that the BOLO, whatever that is, said restrain and notify.”

“Oh, yeah. BOLO means *be on the lookout*. Maybe they will notify someone.”

“Think you could make sure?”

He spoke into the radio, assured them that he had the suspect in custody and asked if anyone had been notified. Not yet, but they’d get right on it.

“What time does this place open?” I asked.

“Six.”

“And what time is it now?”

He checked his watch. “5:45.”

“Good. I’m starving.”

“Want to tell me the story?” he inquired.

“Too long and complicated. Besides, you wouldn’t believe it anyway. Let’s talk about something else. Think the Astros have a chance this year?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Guess so.” *They’d have to wait another seven years.*

“What’s this place called?”

“McDonalds.”

“No, I mean the town.” *Smartass.*

“Sealy.” He sounded surprised.

“Oh.”

After that, the conversation pretty much died down. The minutes clicked by slowly, but finally a car drove into the lot and all the way to the back. Shortly afterwards, the lights in the building came on, providing a view of my new friend for the first time. He was a bit heavy, but not in terrible shape, maybe about 50, balding but still with some dark hair, a pleasant face reflecting Hispanic ancestry, though he had no trace of an accent. His name badge, Martinez, solidified the analysis.

I heard the lock click on the door. “You’re here early this morning, Rudy. What’s up?”

“Nothing much. Got a dangerous fugitive here. Notice she’s holding my gun.”

Looking up, I saw a thin black woman whose eyes had suddenly grown twice as big as normal.

“Just a joke, ma’am,” I said. “Didn’t go over the way we’d planned, did it Rudy?” I laughed and handed him the gun.

“Told ya,” he replied. “Madge, this young woman says she’s starving. How fast can you get things heated up?”

“Already started. Why’nt y’all come in?” We accepted her invitation. “Coffee’s almost ready. Want some?”

“Please.” Signs behind the counter displayed the menu choices. Looking over the selections, I had a difficult time making up my mind. Rudy knew what he wanted, “I’ll take the usual Madge.” Turning to me, he said, “I recommend the #3 breakfast with super size hash browns.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“When your ID was stolen, I guess they took your money too,” Rudy said.

“Uh, yeah. Can you front me for the breakfast? Mark will pay you back when he gets here.”

“No problema,” he said, betraying at least a trace of his heritage.

“It’ll be about 10 minutes,” Madge said. “Rest of the crew doesn’t get her for another 20 minutes.”

“We’ll be in the booth back there,” Rudy said, indicating a strategic location that would let us look out on the arriving customers. “Yell when it’s ready.”

Madge left to deal with the cooking while Rudy took both coffees and led the way to his favorite booth. We had just started working on breakfast when Mark burst thru the door. “Hypatia, God I’m glad to see you.” He rushed over, just as I was dealing a mouthful of what I would later describe as a delicious combination of egg, sausage that didn’t contain venison, some forgettable cheese that at least didn’t start with goat milk, and an English muffin. I stood up to greet Mark, chewing rather faster than I would have liked. We hugged. He gave me a quick kiss. We sat.

“Mark Talbot, meet Officer Rudy Martinez. Rudy’s been keeping me safe. You owe him for breakfast. Mark’s the one I was supposed to meet.” Turning to Mark, I explained, “I got here a little early.”

“Early! I’ve been looking for you for days.”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought we’d agreed I come back in eleven days.”

The look on Mark’s face told me I’d guessed right.

“Well, I didn’t think you meant it so precisely. Finish breakfast and we’ll head out.” He fished a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and offered it to Rudy. “That’s more than breakfast,” Rudy said, taking the bill and pretending to offer some in return. Mark waved him off. “Thanks for taking care of her.”

“It was my pleasure,” Rudy assured him. “Now, this has been fun, but I’m still on duty. I gotta run.”

“Thanks Rudy,” I said, smiling. He nodded and left.

“Am I glad to see you,” Mark said when we were alone. “You were asleep in the seat when I pulled in here for coffee and a restroom break. When I got back to the car, you were gone. I didn’t know what to do. I just hoped that you would show up again like last time. I wasn’t sure whether you’d appear in my car or here, or what. I have been bugging them here to keep a lookout for you. I even asked the police if they’d seen you. It took hours, and a bit of cash, but I finally persuaded them to watch for you. I said you’d been skipping your meds and might have wandered off.” He paused for breath. “I’m really glad to see you.”

“Me too. It’s nice to be back. It’s been six weeks since I saw you last, that is, six weeks in the real world.”

“Six weeks! What have you been doing?”

“It’s an interesting story. I’ll tell you in the car. Are we still planning to go to Houston?”

“We can be there in an hour.”

“Let’s do it, then. Oh, by the way, what’s a Big Mac?” A banner on the wall asked, “Having a Big Mac Attack?”

“Two all-beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese pickles onion on a sesame seed bun.”

“Sounds great. Can I get one?”

“Want fries with that?”

“Do I?”

“Absolutely.”

“This is real beef?”

“All beef, just like the jingle says.”

“Wow!”

“You don’t have beef in 2087?”

“Well, some, but it’s definitely reserved for special occasions. We eat a lot of goat, venison, some pork, chicken, lots of beans, rice, and maize.”

“Could be worse.”

“Yeah. At least we generally have enough to eat, particularly if you’re willing to eat goat.”

“You have lots of goats?”

“They and the deer are a nuisance.”

“Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

After listening to my story, he seemed pensive. “Interesting. There’s a lot to digest. For one thing, you’ve been gone six weeks there but only eleven days here. At least we know what to expect now, assuming things stay the same. When you leave, we can look for you to reappear in eleven days exactly where you were before. And to be starving. I’ll get you a cell phone so you can call me anytime. I guess that’ll work. You’ll also need some money, and some documents. That’ll take some work.”

“It was particularly close this morning. I might have been arrested.” I gave him the short version of the encounter with Rudy.

Mark guffawed when he heard the tale. “I’ll bet he felt like a complete fool, letting a slip of a girl take him down. At least he didn’t seem angry.”

“He made me promise not to tell.”

“The secret’s safe with me. Bring the Big Mac with you. Let’s go.”

We had traveled only about ten minutes when I had the first major surprise of the day. As we crossed a bridge, I realized that the mostly dry river below was the Brazos. “What happened to the Brazos?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“But it’s so dry.”

“Usually is. Except when it floods.”

“Wow. In our time this is a bustling port, well bustling by our standards. There’s a huge lake here and everything from here to the Gulf is a canal with locks.”

“No kidding. You have the technology to construct that?”

“We didn’t build it; Wal-Mart did, right before the Collapse.”

“Wal-Mart. How strange.”

“They built a huge warehouse here. This was a major hub for their distribution.”

“Why not just use Houston?”

“As the sea level rose, the docks became unusable.”

“The sea level rose that much? I thought that the level was only supposed to rise a few inches.”

“One of those *tipping point* events, something the scientists said probably wouldn’t happen, did happen. After the arctic ice pack melted, it changed all the ocean currents. That made Europe colder, but Greenland didn’t get as much snow to replenish the ice pack. The Greenland Ice Pack melted completely by 2030, flooding many low-lying areas. Also, the West Antarctic Ice Sheet started sliding into the ocean. That’s still going on. The rest of the Antarctic ice is still there, but the sea level rose by...well, by quite a bit, I don’t know how much for sure. It is still rising in 2087, but we can’t tell how fast.”

“So Houston...”

“Is mostly under water. Lots of marshland. Do you know where Katy is? That’s the edge of the marsh.”

“We’re going to be going thru Katy in 15 minutes or so.” He looked down at the speedometer, which read 70, or just over 110 kph if I did the arithmetic right.

We whizzed thru Katy without slowing down, but shortly afterward, had to come to a complete halt. The freeway consisted of three lanes of traffic at that point, all of them stopped. “Rush hour,” Mark explained. “Once we get past the beltway up here it should be better.”

“Some things are better in the future. We don’t have rush hour.”

“Patience is a virtue.”

I wasn’t sure if it was a virtue, but it was certainly necessary. We crept along for thirty minutes before we got past the beltway, another freeway that crossed this one, after that we sped up until the speedometer read 50. Soon, Mark took an exit, drove thru a large park, and into what was obviously a very posh neighborhood. “River Oaks,” Mark remarked. “Home to the rich and famous.” He pulled up into a driveway and parked. “Ready for the hard part?”

I wasn’t sure, but said I was.

15. Graceful Beginning
April 28, 1998
Houston, TX

“You look radiant, dear. The dress fits you perfectly.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Talbot. The woman you sent to help me, Mary Lynn, is a wonder. She seems to know how to accomplish anything.”

“That she does. Please call me Grace. May I call you Hypatia?”

“If you wish. My friends call me Patty.”

“Oh, but Hypatia is such a lovely name, and one with an interesting history.”

I looked around the room. In the hours I’d spent in the house so far, I’d come to appreciate the studied elegance combined with quirky layout of the old place. This room, as with all the rooms on the first floor, had floors made of real wood. Gorgeous antique Persian rugs covered the wood, including one carpet that no one was allowed to walk on with shoes. This room, a library based on the number of bookshelves, contained a table made from many different woods, holding books too large for the shelves. Several comfortable chairs with associated reading lamps were scattered haphazardly around. The walls between the shelves contained a hand painted Japanese-style scene of birds and flowers, with mountains in the background. One wall held a sideboard, also obviously an antique, with a silver tea and coffee service. The whole place reeked of money.

Grace Talbot looked the part of a society matron: tall with a regal bearing, a slim figure, gentle face with many laugh lines, and hair that showed no trace of gray. Clearly, although eschewing cosmetic surgery to deal with wrinkles, Grace was not above coloring her coiffure.

I realized that Grace was returning the scrutiny with an intensity that matched my own.

“I think we may be much alike,” Grace said. “I can tell that you are used to a position of authority, and that even though you seem to care nothing about your appearance, you do realize that you are exceedingly beautiful.”

“And I can tell that you are a woman who is proud of the accomplishments of her life, who is not about to let a surgeon’s scalpel erase any record of them, and who spends her money, which is considerable, on beautiful antiques. Mark showed me the Isfahan in the other room. It’s a masterpiece.”

“I think we will get along famously,” Grace said, smiling as she did it. “Are you hungry? Mark says that you have a good appetite despite your small stature. I planned for dinner at seven, but...”

“I’m not so hungry that I can’t wait until seven.”

“Excellent. I sent Mark off to run some errands. I was hoping that the two of us could have a pleasant tête-à-tête. Would you prefer to sit in the garden?”

“That sounds like a marvelous idea.”

We strolled thru seemingly endless corridors, with Grace delivering a running commentary on the paintings and other artifacts as we passed, before emerging into an informal garden bursting

with blooms. “I love the garden at this time of year. I planted flowers native to Texas, though not all can be found in Houston proper. The Englemann daisies are just reaching their peak now.”

Grace picked up a pitcher from a small table. “Mark tells me you are fond of Margaritas. Would you like one now? These are the real thing, not the swill Mark whips up. Idelle makes these from scratch, starting with real limes.”

I recalled tasting Margaritas only once in this reality, and not being very impressed that time. I wondered just what information Mark had passed along to his mother. Still, some alcoholic beverage might help smooth things out, so I accepted the invitation.

After taking a sip, I said, “Oh, I see what you mean. These are superb. Mark’s were just a means to get ethanol into the system.”

Grace nodded, taking a sip from her glass. “Mark tells me you’re from the future.”

Wow! That was unexpected. I waited to see if Grace would continue, but she said nothing, simply sipping on her drink, out waiting me. “I’m astonished that he shared that with you. What else did he say?”

“Quite a bit, dear. While you were getting cleaned up and dressed in something more appropriate than Delfina’s castoffs, we had quite a lengthy debriefing. He’s comfortable confiding in me. Actually, I get lots of people to confide in me. Makes for good gossip. Mark is counting on me to deal with some of the more ticklish aspects of your situation.”

“Such as?”

“Well, as you found out in Sealy, it can be difficult to lack proper identification. I know many people with unusual talents. One such is working on that particular problem. We should have a new identity established for you by tomorrow morning. Money, as you noted, is no problem. My late husband left an enormous amount for me to deal with. I spend my days deciding how to give it away. I could go to a fundraising event every night if I so chose. Mary Lynn filters most of them for me. She used to be Simon’s secretary, but she and my granddaughter, Joan, didn’t really hit it off, so...”

“I see.” I had no idea what she was talking about but preferred to hear Grace talk instead of having to answer her questions.

“So, are you?”

“From the future? I’m not sure. When I am not here, that is, when I am in what I think of as the real world, the year is 2087. I’m still not sure what this reality is, probably you’re just a dream, though a particularly vivid one. I have learned that here it is 1998. I am not sure if this is real, and if it is, that it represents the past of the other reality. Maybe it’s simply different.”

“Interesting. I can see that you are not only very intelligent, but not easily rattled.”

“If you accepted Mark’s explanation, I could say the same about you.”

“Oh, I’m not convinced yet. I want to see you disappear and reappear first. I hope that you will accept my invitation to remain here, in this house, for as long as possible. I think this is an ideal place for your reappearance, much better than the McDonald’s in Sealy.”

“No doubt. I suspect the food is better, though I found the potatoes at McDonald’s as good as their reputation, and the Big Mac was quite a treat.”

Grace laughed heartily, a surprisingly loud explosion of delight. “I love McDonald’s French Fries. It’s a guilty pleasure. They can’t be good for you.”

Both of us sipped the drinks some more. A dark-skinned woman appeared with a tray bearing some hors-d’oeuvres: little pieces of toast with different items arranged on top. “These are called *tapas*,” Grace explained. “They are very popular in Spain. Idelle makes some marvelous ones. Try one with the smoked salmon on top.”

Grace was not above giving a quick test. I hesitated while examining the tapas carefully. “I think probably that these are smoked salmon. Correct?”

“Got it in one,” Grace replied. I took one and popped it into my mouth, savoring the delicious blend of salty taste, the slightly squishy texture of the salmon, and the crunch of the toast. Underneath the salmon, I noticed a whitish paste that I couldn’t identify.

Grace helped, “The paste is made from Great Northern Beans, together with extra virgin olive oil and garlic, and a few herbs and spices. I love it.”

“It’s delicious. I think I could get used to living like this.”

“It has its advantages,” she said. “I understand that the future is not so bright.”

“Luxuries are in short supply. Some things are better, though. I find the noise of the traffic, even here in what must be a very exclusive enclave, annoying. Does it ever stop?”

“Alas, no. We can go back inside if it bothers you.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I was simply trying to think of something that might be better in the future. The air is cleaner in the future; at least it’s cleaner in Austin than it is here, now. Probably cleaner in Houston, too, though the Houston of my world is so different from this one that it is hard to compare.”

“So Mark told me. I take it that global warming is real despite what some people say.”

“Very real, and worse than most predictions. The Greenland ice is all gone, and the Antarctic ice may disappear within my lifetime, assuming...”

“Yes. Do you suppose you are here to change history?”

“I doubt it. My friend JJ says it isn’t possible.”

“Really.”

“There’s a theorem, Bloch’s Paradox, that says that time travel is not possible unless it has already happened. As a corollary, you can’t change history...unless you already have, in which case you’re bound to change it the way you did before, if that makes any sense. Bottom line: probably I shouldn’t worry about changing history.”

“How interesting. I’ve never heard of Bloch’s Paradox.”

“Maybe it hasn’t been thought up yet.”

“Hmmm. Yes. But whoever is responsible for your time travel must—”

“We can’t be sure that there is *someone* responsible. It may be a natural process.”

“Yes, perhaps. For the sake of argument, shall we assume that someone is doing this to you?”

“OK. Where does that lead?”

“Then there must be a purpose behind it. Otherwise, it seems to be pointless.”

“Well, maybe everything is pointless.”

“Don’t get all metaphysical on me,” Grace snapped. “Surely you see what I’m getting at.”

I nodded. Grace elaborated, “So, if you’re not here to change history, then what is the reason?”

“I haven’t a clue. What do you think?”

“I think you must be here to change the future. That’s all that’s left, isn’t it?”

Mark interrupted us, “Well, there is the present to consider. Maybe this is all about enjoying the present while it lasts.” He put down a number of packages on a large table nearby. “I’ve been out buying you some new duds, though I must say that the dress you are wearing is tough to beat. Is that one of mother’s?”

“It was,” I replied. “After the alterations, I doubt it would fit her anymore.”

“I could never do it justice after seeing it on you,” Grace said.

“Want to model some of these items for us?” Mark asked.

“I guess that depends on what you bought,” I replied, but could tell from Mark’s expression that he really wanted to see the results of his shopping expedition.

“I got Joan to suggest a few things,” Mark said, referring to the still unmet granddaughter.

I didn’t have to think any more about the future, Bloch’s paradox, or anything deep. Trying on one outfit after another, all of which would have been worth a month’s labor in 2087, consumed the next hour. In the end, I selected some jeans and a simple shirt, along with some shoes that I wouldn’t mind walking in. I thought the jeans were a bit tight around the hips, but Mark assured me they were just right. The way he looked made me hope that dinner would not be a drawn-out affair.

It wasn’t.

Part III. Hill Country Hideaway

1. The Battle of Fredericksburg

May 1, 2087

The Hill Country

The two weeks had proven very frustrating. After waking up, in my sleeping bag in the classroom at New Home, I fought off the disappointment at finding myself back in 2087 so soon and set to work preparing for the expedition. The details proved daunting. There were maps to prepare, items to pack, for trade and survival, people to tell goodbye, checklists to consult, and a myriad of other tasks to perform. After three iterations of Martha's checklist, everyone decided that the provisions for the trip were adequate if a bit spare. That left enough room for Jackson's carefully selected trade goods to be crammed into the cargo area of *Endeavour*. When Red was finally satisfied with the weaponry, built-in and portable, the council gave its go ahead.

"May Day. I hope that's not a bad omen," Amanda remarked as we packed for the final time in New Home.

"Don't you go getting superstitious on me," I complained.

"Just a comment on the date," was the innocent reply.

"Hmmpf. Ready for the well-known hard part?"

"I've been ready for days."

Ron was waiting by the vehicle, along with Red. Jackson came hurrying up from one of the village cabins, buttoning his shirt as he came. A small crowd had gathered to see us off; most of the villagers were busy tending the grapevines on the hillside.

Ron and Red took their seats in front while Jackson, Amanda and I struggled to find a comfortable arrangement in back. We started. I removed a recorder from my pocket and spoke into it. "Expedition left New Home, May 1, 2087, at," I checked the chronometer on the dash, "9:03. Ron piloting. Red in shotgun."

The first part of the trip was uneventful. Scouts sent out on bicycles during the past few days reported no problems. We saw only the occasional well-wishers waving from the side of the road and slowly increased the speed to 80 kph.

Thus, it was early in the afternoon when we approached the outskirts of the old town of Fredericksburg from the south. Overhead photos had shown nothing of interest, so it was a surprise when we crested a small hill, to find a well-maintained barricade across the road, with a zigzag path thru it.

"I don't like the look of this," Red said. "That's new work on the left side. Means that the people knew we'd be coming."

Ron cut the speed to 30 and eased up the road slowly until *Endeavour* was about 10 meters from the entrance to the zigzag maze.

"Try the loud hailer," I suggested. "Maybe they are open to discussion."

Red picked up the microphone and spoke, "Raul, you sorry SOB, this is Red. You better have a damn good explanation for all this. Now get your butt out here pronto." Anyone within 300 meters was bound to hear the message. However, no one approached, no one responded.

"Try again," I said.

Red repeated the announcement, cranking up the volume another notch, so that it was almost painful inside *Endeavour*.

“We can blow the barricade to smithereens,” Ron advised. “Maybe we should just bull our way thru.”

“Only as a last resort,” I said. “Amanda, any way around this?”

“I’ve been checking the latest photos, from last night. There’s no good alternative. We have to get past this barricade.”

“We ain’t entering the maze without permission,” Red said. “We’d be sitting ducks. Even if they couldn’t harm us directly, they could mess up the solar collectors.”

“I don’t think you’ll get any argument about that,” I said. “We’ll wait. Tell them so.”

Red spoke into the microphone again. “We will wait ten minutes. Then we will destroy the barricade by force. What the hell is going on? This is your old buddy, Red.”

“Can we make it five minutes,” Amanda asked. “I’ve gotta pee.”

“Change of plans. You got five minutes. Oh, what the hell. Time’s up!”

“Any particular target?” Ron asked.

“Think those barrels contain something flammable?”

“We’ll find out.” Ron adjusted the position of the aiming dot on the small screen. “Now, we’ll see what this cannon of Cameron’s will do.” He pressed the trigger. The barrel disappeared in a huge ball of flame. “Looks like it had some residual fuel in it,” Ron said.

“Very satisfactory,” I commented.

We didn’t have long to wait before a figure staggered out from behind the barricade, both hands held high in the air. Red was the first to speak, “Finally.” He snatched the microphone from the holder on the dash. “Now, get down on your face and stay there or I’ll splatter your guts all over the pavement. We’re getting out.” He explained, “I know this guy. Let me do the talking. Everybody out but stay together. I don’t think we’ll have any trouble.”

That’s more or less how things went. Soon, our entire party was sitting comfortably on real chairs in a building inside the barricade, with *Endeavour* safely pulled inside nearby. “This here’s Raul,” Red began the introductions. “That’s his brother Roberto over there.” He indicated a burly type, much larger than Raul, and rather different looking for a brother. “I don’t know these two.” The other two were young men, one probably even younger than Ron, who had a look on his face that seemed to indicate a willingness to cooperate. His companion was about twenty something and devilishly handsome, with a sharp face set off by a trim moustache, brilliant blue eyes that contrasted surprisingly with his dark complexion. “They be my two boys,” Raul volunteered, “Mitchell,” he pointed to the young one, “and Carlton.” Apparently, the family had decided that English sounding names would aid the boys’ prospects.

“Normally,” Red continued, “there’d be another six or so people around, but I am guessing that there’s been some trouble between the business partners lately. Right, Raul? Where are the Garfields?”

“They be out there somewheres,” Raul replied. “Be watching for a chance. That be why we ain’t showed ourselves till you start blowing shit up.”

“As I suspected,” Red said. “Anyway, y’all know me. The two women are *faculty* at the University, which means, in case you don’t know it, that they’re big cheese. Don’t fuck with them. If you do, this handsome gent here,” he indicated Jackson, “will take you apart, that’s if the women don’t do it themselves. Y’all may have heard of Hypatia.” He nodded in my direction. “She’s the Master Librarian at the University. That’s big time. Amanda is her colleague, a dynamite software guru. Jackson’s her brother, by the way. The kid is Ron, who’s the cleverest guy I know when it comes to putting things together.”

I took charge, assuming a place in the center, “Now, gentlemen, perhaps we can delve into your problem a bit more. Is there some way we can help you sort things out?”

Several of the men started to speak at once. I held up a hand to quiet them. “One at a time, please. How about you, Raul? What can you tell us?”

“Well, we be havin’ a argument with the Garfields 'bout week ago. Things be going from bad to worse. Now, they be threatening us all, but mainly Carlton.”

Red explained, “Maybe I should fill you in a bit more, Ma’am.” He paused to get my assent. I managed to conceal my surprise at his formality. “Please.”

“See, these guys are the chief source for Hill Country Gold. They got several fields growing just down the road a piece. They and the Garfields be partners — or used to be.”

“Ah, so that’s how you know them.”

“Yeah. But they’ve always been peaceful in the past.”

“Do you think we could get the Garfield clan to join us?” I asked.

“If they’re really watching, they must be dying of curiosity about now. I reckon they’ll come if we call them.”

“Give it a try, would you Red.” Red started for the door. “Oh, and Red,” I waited for him to look back, “make sure they bring the women with them.” I had a good idea where the root of the problem lay. The look on Mitchell’s face told me I’d guessed right.

“I don’t suppose, Raul, that you have anything to drink, do you?” I asked.

“Ain’t got nothing alcoholic, if’n that be your meanin’, but we got some cool water.”

“That would be nice. How about something to snack on while we’re waiting?”

Raul didn’t seem very happy about this, but moved to comply. “Come on Mitchell. Help me carry it all.” He and Mitchell disappeared thru a door into a room at the back that presumably held food and drink. I found myself studying Carlton, though I also tried to keep an eye on Roberto. I suspected Roberto might be the one to cause trouble. The more I observed Carlton, the surer I became that he lay at the heart of the problem, and no doubt it was an affair of the heart that started the trouble.

Red’s voice boomed out from *Endeavour*. “OK, Garfields, we know you’re out there somewhere. Come on down. We want to parlay. Nobody’ll get hurt. We want to see all of you. That means Rosie and Conchita as well as their mother. Get a move on.”

Apparently, Red was well acquainted with the citizenry of Fredericksburg.

Hours later, I had finally managed to arrange things appropriately. Given the position of the sun, we would have to spend the night in “the burg,” so I dispatched Jackson, Ron and Red to find suitable accommodations. Outside the theater that I had turned into a meeting area, the men of the town milled about around the square, muttering to themselves and wondering what was going on inside.

Inside, I sat in a magnificent throne retrieved from the prop room backstage. I appreciated the gesture — it was all Amanda’s doing — but wished the thing were a bit more comfortable. My feet didn’t reach the floor for one thing.

The arrangements should have been an incentive to keep things short, but that had proved difficult.

Trying to determine the root cause of the problem was taking far longer than expected. I’d had to endure endless complaints about “life on the frontier.” A delicate inquiry about relocating to some place more amenable — say Marble Falls, which was connected to the grid and had excess power generating capacity — had met a variety of objections: The plants wouldn’t tolerate being transported, “my family be living here since 1848,” this was a great location on the crossroads of three major routes, and several more frivolous reasons.

I was starting to become irritable. During one break, I’d had a quick conference with Ron, “What is the chance of supplying this place with grid connections?”

“I’ll need to study it,” Ron replied. “The nearest reliable source is the power station at Marble Falls. That’s not so far as the crow flies.”

“Raven.”

“What?”

“They’re probably Ravens, not crows.”

“How do you know that?”

I started to say that Mark had told me but thought better of it. “Look it up when you have a chance.” As it turned out, I had to apologize. Both corvids were common in the area.

“Well, anyway, the transmission lines probably need repair. They come in a straight line from over at Marble Falls, but they haven’t been lit up for years. Want me to work something out?”

“Any chance you can do it without access to the grid?”

“I can run some tests from here. We have equipment on *Endeavour* that should give me some idea of what we’re up against. We can still call Austin from here. Shall I ask for volunteers to check the line?”

“Yeah, go ahead. I sure would like to extend the boundaries of the Republic out this far. It would give us some protection from Hill Country marauders. Red says there are still some of those out there. I’d also like to give these people something besides cannabis to deal with. Plus, this could be a convenient place to use for trading with Norte Mexico. It’s not far down old highway 281.”

“Not far at all. Blanco is technically part of our territory, but they trade more with San Antonio than us.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to have a demonstration of what we can do up here.”

“I’ll get started on it.”

The basic plan was to entice all parties into burying whatever hatchets they had in return for all the advantages connection to the NRT grid would provide. That depended on Ron coming thru as usual, but I had confidence in his abilities. Time for another try. I climbed back onto the throne and surveyed the scene.

Seated in the first few rows of the orchestra were all the women in town. Once the Garfields showed in response to Red’s polite invitation, many other people crept out of the shadows hoping that the new people had some way to end the silly feud that had made life miserable for weeks. Thus, there were several more than the three women I had expected when outlining the plan. Perhaps it was better this way; the more, the merrier.

“Ladies, shall we get started again?”

I glanced around the room to see that everyone was paying attention.

“OK, here’s my take. I can help you solve your problem, but you have to level with me. You are the ones who live with these blithering idiots. Now, who can tell me what’s really going on?”

No one volunteered. I elected to call on Rosie and Conchita’s mother as the person with the most invested in the situation. I hoped that Amanda, who was blogging the entire proceedings even though connection to the web was problematical, had copied down everyone’s name with her usual efficiency. Pointing directly at the woman, I said, “You ma’am...” Amanda quickly said, “Berthe.” “Yes, Berthe. What the hell is going on?”

Berthe, who looked nothing like her two daughters, was a tall Germanic woman deserving her Saxon name. She stood shakily and prepared to speak, but a woman who seemed to be new to the gathering spoke up first, “You the one they tell stories ‘bout?”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” I replied. “Does that affect things?”

“Damn right! If you be doing what they say, you wave your magic wand, or sprinkle some potion around, just fix things.”

“Unfortunately,” I replied acerbically, “neither magic wands nor potions were included in our supplies for the trip. Do you perhaps have some to spare?”

The laughter helped soften the mood some. I continued, “These stories are not very helpful. Most of the things attributed to me are wildly exaggerated. I can’t fly. I can’t even walk on water. I don’t do miracles, though I am beginning to think one might be needed to get us back on schedule. Would you care to explain things?”

“It be complicated.”

“Then perhaps you could start at the beginning.”

“OK, it start when Dorina die in childbirth.”

“When was that?”

“During winter, January maybe.”

“OK. Go on.”

“Well, we women talk things over and decide getting pregnant out here be dangerous.”

“It can be, if there are any complications.”

“Anyway, we kinda let on to the men that they come up with protection, you know.”

“And what did they find?”

“Best they could do is some old condoms they salvage from convenience store up road a bit. We try one, you know, blow it up like balloon, and it, well, don’t seem *reliable*.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“So, we revert to old, proven methods.”

“You cut them off?”

“Almost. All us women getting’ periods at same time.”

“It’s called the Wellesley Effect.”

“Oh, really? It got a name?”

“Anyway, go on.”

“Well, we sort of took first day after our period end for sex. We be thinking that probably be safe.”

“So, one day a month.”

“Right.”

“And everyone started to get a bit antsy.”

“You got it. Then that new guy, Señor Hunk, show up.”

“You are referring to Carlton.”

“Yeah. You seen him. Handsome as the devil himself, begging your pardon ma’am, and dumb as a bag of rocks. Wander into town about six week ago and make hisself to home. Course all the girls, but specially they two,” she indicated Rosie and Conchita, “want to have him. Other women object. Solidarity and all that. Mr. Garfield,” I was pretty sure he wasn’t used to being addressed so formally, “well, he reckon the boy nothing but trouble. Told the girls they ain’t be seein’ him.”

“I suppose that had the expected result.”

“Yeah, they be sneakin’ out to meet him after dark. Well, we knowed they be trouble brewin’, so we tell Raul to keep the boy tight like. He be more or less adopt the lad by that time.”

“And I suppose Raul thought that was not his responsibility.”

“You got that. Things got nasty, took to feuding. Raul and his bunch barricaded theyselves in the town. Well, that ain’t no good for business, you understand, so pretty soon people was takin’ sides. Nobody’s done been shot yet, but we be expectin’ it.”

“I see. Has Carlton anything to say for himself.”

“He like me,” Conchita shouted out, no longer able to restrain herself.

“In you dreams,” Rosie countered.

Damn! I was ready for Romeo and Juliet, but this looks more like A Midsummer’s Night Dream.

“Just by way of clarification,” I asked, “are we talking about sex, or full mating?”

“What’s the difference? One leads to the other.”

“Not necessarily,” Amanda spoke up. “We have good ways to prevent pregnancy while still enjoying sex.”

“That only work for a while. Eventually, they want the real thing. They get all googly-eyed and start talking about the next generation and all.”

“I wasn’t talking about alternatives; I was referring to the anti-ovulation patch.”

“What that be?”

“It’s something you wear to prevent ovulation. You understand what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, we ain’t dumb. But we ain’t got no patches either.”

“But we do. In our trade goods.” Amanda looked around the room and did some quick mental arithmetic. “We have enough to keep every one of you from ovulating for three months.”

“And then what happen?”

I stood up. *What a breakthru!* “We can trade you some more. We’ll get Jackson, Amanda’s brother, to work out the details with you. Now, if we can keep the girls from getting pregnant, will that solve the problem, at least for a while?”

“You mean we can…” Conchita asked.

“Yes,” I replied, “you can. Can the two of you manage to keep from killing each other? I see no reason that you can’t both bang Carlton all you want. Maybe he’d enjoy a threesome. I think we need to have a talk about reproductive policy and ethics. Amanda, think you could handle that? I’ll go talk to the men.”

“With pleasure,” Amanda said. “Now, gather around me ladies and let me demonstrate how the patch works. Then we need to discuss the problem of genetic drift. Are you all familiar with that?”

The mood had turned festive. A large fire burned in the square. Once it became apparent that the feud was over, people drifted into town from all directions. Music, well, after a fashion anyway, filled the air, along with smoke from the product for which the area was so famous. I was tempted to join in, but first there were details to attend to.

“Jackson, Ron, Red. We need to have a quick conference.”

“Coming boss lady.” That was Red, who had already joined the festivities.

“Let’s deal with Red first,” I suggested.

“No problema,” Red agreed. “Whazzup?”

“I was wondering where you found the book you gave me. You said it was here in Fredericksburg.”

“Sure was. Guy was peddling all kinds of junk. Want me to get him to show you his shop?”

“That would be great.”

Red departed on his errand, whistling off key.

“Now, Jackson. How are prospects for trade?”

“Oh, that’s going to be great. They’re going to grant us exclusive rights to the best of the crop in exchange for our continuing to supply them with *products the women need*. Apparently, your little talk to the women was a great coup. The men are ready to agree to anything I demanded. What exactly are the products we have to supply them?”

“Adequate supplies of contraceptives. Turns out this dispute was all about sex. They didn’t want any pregnancies right now and had no good way to avoid it. The women had more or less shut them off.”

Jackson and Ron laughed. “No wonder they were so ready to deal. I take it that the women are all protected now.”

“Yes, there are a couple from out of town who might have already ovulated. We warned them. Apparently, everyone is prepared to take that risk.”

“Excellent. That explains the party atmosphere.”

“Indeed. Ron, when you talk to Austin, see if they can dispatch a courier with more supplies. We didn’t figure on so many women.”

“I’m way ahead of you. Mia and my dad managed to get an old pickup truck running with a diesel engine. We’re making a trade run in the morning. The volunteers to walk the old power line are going to come with the truck.

“Good work. That’s all I needed.”

I wondered what Jackson’s plans for the evening were. Ron, in the middle of mating, was presumably not available for partying.

Ron departed, leaving me alone with Jackson. Briefly, I wondered if going with Jackson would mean breaking faith with Mark. Interesting question. After all, my last night with him was over 80 years ago, and he was probably dead now anyway. What was that quote? *That was long ago, and in another country, and besides...*

First, though, there was the business with Red’s friend. The two of them were approaching.

“Hypatia,” Red began formally, “permit me to introduce Señor Ramon Garcia, purveyor of antiques. Ramon, this here’s the Master Librarian of the University. I give her that book I done buy from you, as a present.”

Ramon bowed. “It is indeed an honor to make your acquaintance, Master Librarian.” He extended his hand to almost touch mine. “I would be pleased to have you visit my establishment. Anything you want—” He spoke beautiful English with just a trace of an accent. Clearly, he was educated somewhere, probably San Antonio. I interrupted before he could get started on his sales pitch. “I am delighted to meet you as well, Señor. I see that you are acquainted with our customs.”

“If you mean the formal greeting, it is customary in many places now. How may I be of service to such a distinguished lady?”

“You can tell me how you came to acquire the book.”

“Ah, that is easy. I found it in my travels. I travel the back roads searching for items that may be useful for trade. I found that book in the ruins of a bank in Leakey.”

“Leakey!”

“You are familiar with the place?”

“I have heard of it.”

“A beautiful spot, even today. The courthouse was famous.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes. I found a small, local bank and salvaged what I could. The book was in a safe deposit box.”

“Interesting.”

“There was little of value in the boxes, mostly old cash, which is worthless, of course, some jewelry, but that is hard to sell, though some in the south,” he nodded toward *Norte Mexico*, “will buy small pieces. The book intrigued me. It was so well protected but seemed to be quite ordinary. I sold it quite cheaply.”

“It has proven quite useful. You have our gratitude. Please feel free to ask me for anything that will compensate you more adequately.”

“The sight of so many beautiful women tonight is all that I could ask.”

“Well, thank you again. That’s all I needed Red,” I added by way of dismissal. Red was happy to leave with Señor Garcia for the party area.

I realized I was alone. *Now, where the hell has Jackson disappeared to?*

“One thing I’ve been wondering, Jackson.”

“What’s that?”

“When you first came to Austin and tried to spend that Krugerrand, what was your plan? Were you planning to run a con game?”

“I had thoughts about it. That gold piece has been in my family for generations. I thought I would finally put it to good use.”

“And?”

“Well, I hadn’t counted on y’all being so well informed. When I overheard mention of the Spanish Prisoner, I realized that the con wouldn’t work. Besides, by that time I’d thought of a better plan.”

“What was that?”

“Well, if you’ll pardon my saying so, it was clear from the outset that you had eyes for me.”

“Surely you’re used to that.”

“Of course, but not from someone both beautiful and powerful.”

“Speaking of powerful, how about...”

“Wait, I want to finish this.”

“Spoilsport.”

“At first, I thought I could exploit your attraction, but then I realized that I didn’t have to.”

“Oh?”

“We had never really met anyone as generous as y’all. We were amazed that you were willing to just give us supplies and practically invite us to join you. We never contemplated that. When I got to the camp near Sealy, I couldn’t wait to meet with the Council of Elders. You may have noticed that I was a bit distant at the party the night before. The Elders didn’t believe it either at first, but I convinced them to accept everything at face value.”

“We’re strong believers in seeking mutual advantage.”

“Yeah, I realize that now, but it took some getting used to.”

“What was it that changed your mind?”

“It was Amanda. You should have heard her speaking at the Council Meeting. She wouldn’t let up. Finally, everyone agreed to go along just so she’d shut up.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“How interesting.”

“Want to do the deed again?”

“That sounds nice.”

2. Surprising Developments

May 1, 1998
Houston, TX

I woke up to the sound of someone screaming. I realized immediately that I was in Mark's bed: it still retained the aroma of what he called "smell good." I felt a bit guilty since I'd gone to sleep in Jackson's arms. Pushing myself into a sitting position, I confronted the source of the screaming, which proved to be a young woman of African descent. She had apparently been prepared to make up the bed and was not expecting to find me in it.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," I said, hoping that would be enough.

The screams grew louder. The young black woman turned toward the sound of hurried footsteps approaching along the corridor. Several people rushed into the room at once, prepared to deal with the emergency. I recognized Lunyon, a general factotum, as well as Idelle. Lunyon carried a large stick. Idelle had a wicked looking knife.

"Chanelle, calm down! How you expect us to do anything with you caterwauling like a banshee."

"Actually," I corrected, "although I agree with your sentiment, I must point out that banshees don't caterwaul."

Idelle glared at me, then smiled and said, "You'll fit right in with this family."

"She just appeared outa nowhere. It's Satan's working. I know it."

"Child, can't you see this is Hypatia, Mark's friend," Idelle said.

"But she weren't here two minutes ago. I swear it."

"I guess she must not have seen me buried under the covers," I volunteered. "Chanelle, I'm terribly sorry to have frightened you. I'm really not the work of the devil."

Idelle looked as though she weren't entirely certain on the last point, but she was canny enough not to question a guest.

"I think Chanelle has had a bad shock," I continued. "Maybe a cup of hot tea would help? I'll make up the bed myself."

Lunyon, who seemed to be having trouble not laughing, came to her rescue. "Come on. Let's leave Hypatia alone. And don't nobody say anything about this to Ms. Grace. Y'all hear. Come on now. I'm gonna phone Mark."

It was a good try, but it didn't work. Grace appeared at the doorway and took in the scene in one swift glance. She gave a quick nod and the other three left the room hastily.

"If I am not mistaken," she began frostily, "you retired to a different bedroom four nights ago. Given that you appeared in this bed, I gather that you and Mark did not heed my wishes about sleeping arrangements."

"My apologies. Customs are different in my time. We let two unrelated adults have sex whenever they wish, so long as they take precautions against unplanned pregnancies. I'll try to adjust."

She laughed, a strong hearty laugh. “If you think I believe that! Don’t worry. I’ll try to adjust to your customs. What do you do about transmitting diseases, though?”

“Well, most of the people who had a sexually transmitted disease died during the first wave of the plague. That virtually wiped out the diseases. Besides, we don’t even shake hands with people we don’t know well, so sex with someone...”

“Interesting. But I gathered that you, as they say, *jumped Mark’s bones* almost as soon as you met.”

I had to think back. It was long ago from my point of view. “Yes, you’re right. At the time, I assumed that none of this was real, so it didn’t matter. You can’t imagine what an experience it was.”

“No doubt,” she said coldly. “I see that Mark’s stories were at least partially true, though you seem to have returned much sooner than anticipated. He said it would be eleven days. He’s off on some strange project of his, something called *Bucephalus*. He won’t be back for a couple of days, even after he learns you’ve returned.”

“How long have I been gone?”

“About four days.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

“Indeed. How about having lunch with Joan and me? You can meet more of the family.”

I realized that I was hungry as usual. “Sounds great. Let me get dressed and I’ll be right down.”

“The light green outfit would look nice on you,” she suggested, implying that jeans weren’t appropriate.

I got a shock when we drove up to the Transco Tower for lunch. “I didn’t realize that we were going to eat in this building.”

“The restaurant on the top floor has decent food and a magnificent view. I thought you might enjoy seeing what Houston looks like.”

When we entered the building, I turned right, the direction to the only set of elevators I knew about. “This way,” Grace corrected, leading thru an unmarked door on the left into a small, private elevator with only a few operating buttons. Grace pressed one marked SPTE. “We’ll stop by Joan’s office.”

“She has an office here?”

“Mark didn’t tell you, I guess. He mentioned that this building has some significance in your other time. Turns out we own it, well sort of. Joan can explain the intricacies if you’re interested.”

For me, the ride to the offices of Simon P Talbot Enterprises was vertiginous: within less than a minute, we were strolling into the main lobby of SPTE, as the logo on the door identified it. The floor was terrazzo, with several Persian rugs used as accent pieces. A sofa, several chairs, and a low table lay to the left, obviously an area for visitors to wait. A receptionist sat behind a large desk sporting a computer monitor and nothing else. She wore a headset that seemed to be connected to a

telephone system somewhere. Grace walked over to the receptionist as though she owned the place, which, in a sense, she did.

“Good morning, Helene,” she said to the receptionist. “I believe Joan is expecting us.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Talbot,” Helene replied. “I’m afraid she is tied up for just a few minutes. Would you like to wait in the conference room? I can have some refreshments sent in.”

Grace was not happy waiting but agreed that the conference room would be better than the public area. “Who’s she with,” she asked, with a manner that indicated she meant the real answer, not some runaround.

“I’m not supposed to say,” Helene replied, “but he’s said to be the richest man in the world.”

“Hmmp. I hope he has something better to say than last time.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. Would you like me to send some refreshments in?”

Grace looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “Some coffee maybe?” she suggested.

Helene added, “Today, we have a medium roast blend of Kenyan pea berry and Ethiopian Harar. Would that be all right?”

“Of course,” I replied, noting that Helene said *all right* where *OK* would be more normal. Mark had told me how his father insisted on formal English. Apparently, the tradition still held.

The coffee had been prepared perfectly, the taste superb. Nothing in the NRT could compare. I began to wonder whether there was any way I could take some back with me. Grace took all this in and commented, “Better coffee than you’re used to, I’ll bet.”

I smiled. “You’d win. I don’t know what Kenyan pea berry is, and though I have heard of Ethiopia, and suppose that Harar is a place there, I don’t appreciate the details. I do know that I have never before tasted coffee like this.”

“Simon was a bit of a fanatic about coffee. He liked to experiment with different flavors and blends. I seem to recall that pea berry refers to some variation in the coffee bean, but I don’t really know much about it. Joan is an expert if you want to get a lecture.” Her smile intimated that the lecture would probably last longer than lunch.

“We’ve traded with some coffee producers in Mexico and farther south — were proud of that — but the coffee isn’t this good.”

“Part of the secret is the way it’s brewed, supposedly. Want to see the equipment?”

“Why not?”

We left the conference room and walked down a short hall to a small kitchen. There, I saw the incredible contraption responsible for the beverage in my cup, a gleaming stainless steel coffee maker built into the wall. I could see where the coffee beans were introduced to the process, but the water connection and the power were concealed.

“All I know about this,” Grace explained, “is that you put the coffee beans in here,” she pointed to the spot I had already noticed, “and take the waste out here.” She pulled on a handle to reveal a compartment holding the grounds.

“Cool,” I said. “By the way, what floor are we on now?”

Grace smiled. “Forty-seven. Thinking of some salvage in the future.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I was thinking. This contraption would be worth a small fortune if it can be made to work.”

“Good luck, then.”

“Thanks.”

Helene appeared at the door to let us know Joan was available.

Joan reminded me of myself. About the same age, thirty-something, blonde, with an athletic bearing, she stood several centimeters taller than I. Joan wore a severe pantsuit, charcoal grey with a thin pinstripe, an ivory-colored shirt that appeared to be silk, set off with a thin scarf showing a dragonfly, no jewelry save for an overly large watch on her wrist. She glanced at the watch and said, “Sorry for the delay. You know how billionaires can be. Shall we go up? I have only an hour to spare. So, you’re Hypatia, Mark’s friend who disappears and reappears. Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand.

Instinctively, I reached out to almost touch Joan’s hand, but Joan moved to take my hand in both of hers. Repressing a shudder, I managed to blurt out, “The pleasure is all mine. I assume that you are Joan, Mark’s daughter that he didn’t know he had until recently.” *Two can play this game.*

With a vibrant smile, Joan indicated the way to go, back to the elevator, which whisked us directly to the top floor, where we stepped out into a glass-enclosed area offering a stunning view. I was astonished. Houston was *enormous*, stretching in all directions. I could make out the downtown area, which appeared to be little changed in the future, but in every other direction, I saw houses, more tall buildings, and at the limit of view, a tall bridge that was only a ruin in 2087. Grace noticed where I was looking and commented, “That’s the bridge over the Ship Channel. You’re lucky to have such a clear day. Usually all we see from here is smog.”

She led the way to a table set against the wall, where she took the seat nearest the window. Joan sat facing the window, leaving the one remaining seat for me, directly across from Grace. I wondered where we were going to get food, when a waiter appeared ready to take the order. He insisted on reciting a list of the lunch specials for the day, most of which meant nothing to me. “Thank you, Marcel. I’ll take the Dover Sole,” Grace said, “with the vegetable medley, no rice, as you well know, Roquefort cheese dressing on the salad.”

Joan ordered a small steak, “the way I always have it,” baked potato, salad with Roquefort cheese dressing. I started to order the steak as well — though I wondered how Joan always had it — simply because I wanted to know what I’d be getting. Grace, figuring help was called for, suggested, “You’ll love the Sole if you’ve never had the real thing. It’s flown in from England daily, sautéed in butter and served with a nice lemon glaze. It’ll melt in your mouth.”

I decided to take her advice, making a mental note to look up Dover Sole as soon as I found a Google connection. The waiter, clearly first class, intervened, “Would mademoiselle care for the vegetable medley? The vegetables, fresh of course, flown in from California this morning, are lightly steamed. The wild and brown rice mixture is a great accompaniment despite Mrs. Talbot’s reluctance, and as mademoiselle has perhaps guessed, the Roquefort cheese dressing is our *specialité*.”

“Thank you, Marcel. I’ll accept your excellent suggestions.”

He nodded, then, catching my eye, he winked quickly.

“Any of the Chilean Chardonnay left, Marcel?” Grace asked. “If so, I think we would all like a glass.” She looked at me, “It won’t make you sleepy, will it?” Turning to Marcel, she explained, “Hypatia just arrived this morning and is still a bit jet lagged.”

“Perhaps, the young lady would prefer some iced tea?” Marcel suggested.

“I think I’ll live dangerously,” I replied. “Let’s try the Chardonnay.”

“Excellent,” Marcel said, and departed.

“Chile is on the west coast of South America, right?”

“Right.”

“Interesting. That’s a long way from here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but with regular flights. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“So,” Joan said, “what do you think of *our* Houston?”

“It’s overwhelming,” I replied. “I had no idea it was so big. In the future, all of this area is marsh, with a few tall buildings and tree stumps sticking up from the water. Our community here consists of about a hundred hardy people. The rest have all moved out to Sealy.”

“Sealy? Why there?”

“For the port. We have trading all down the coast, as far as what used to be Costa Rica. The best coffee comes from there.”

“No doubt. And what do you trade with them?”

“Oh, our technology. We have by far the most advanced products in this part of the world, especially after we discovered the cache of solar cells at NASA. Do you know about NASA?”

“Sure. But I still don’t understand how Sealy can be a port. Has the sea level risen that much?”

“No, but the canal to the sea is a major artery, and the Sealyites use the old highway to the west to trade with *Norte Mexico*.”

“*Norte Mexico*?”

“Our neighbors to the south.”

“Oh. I guess I’ll have to get a lesson in geography to understand.”

“Well, they claim everything from I-10 south, though we haven’t conceded all that. We claim all of the town of Sealy, for example, which straddles the old highway.”

“What about east and west?”

“Well, we have agreed that the Sealy canal should be open to all, so that is a natural boundary on the east. I don’t think anyone really cares about the western boundary.”

She was about to ask more when Marcel returned with three glasses filled with what turned out to be a truly magnificent wine. It was the second time I wanted take something back with me. The vintners at New Home could definitely use some pointers.

“One thing bothers me,” I mentioned, “all this flying around bringing food and wine here. Doesn’t that flood the atmosphere with carbon dioxide?”

“Indeed it does,” Joan agreed. “We are engaged in collective denial of the consequences of our actions.” Apparently, that settled it.

When the salad arrived, I thought there must be some mistake. The cheese was definitely moldy. However, both Grace and Joan attacked with alacrity, so I ventured a taste, much to my delight. The combination was quite different from what I expected. Grace, always observant, commented, “I guess you don’t eat blue cheese in your other existence.”

“Oh, no. We’re very careful about what we eat. In fact, we’re very careful about everything that pertains to health and hygiene. I find your custom of shaking hands a bit unnerving. We would be very suspicious of any food that showed mold, but I take it this is normal.”

Joan delivered a short explanatory lecture. “Roquefort cheese was supposedly discovered when a shepherd ate some that had gone moldy. The mold is the result of a variety of *Penicillium*, specifically *Penicillium roqueforti*. The cheese is made from the milk of the *Lacaune* breed of sheep in a small area in France. The grass and wildflowers in the region impart the unique flavor to the milk.”

I moved quickly to stop the lecture, “Can you make it with goat cheese?”

“Oh, yes. It’s different, but quite good.”

“Interesting. Our archives will have the information. I’ll suggest it to some of the farmers around. We have lots of goats.”

“Are you anxious to get back?”

“Since I have no control over that aspect of my life, I haven’t really given it much thought.”

“Perhaps you should,” Joan commented. “You don’t seem to have much of a plan to take advantage of your unique opportunities.”

“You’re right. I haven’t really considered it. Shall we start with this building? I understand you own it, though that seems incredible.”

Joan gave a small laugh. “It is incredible. Let’s just say that it’s mortgaged to the hilt, but we are making a nice profit on the rentals.”

“Have you considered what to do in the event of a significant power failure?”

“Of course. We have diesel generators and enough fuel to power the entire building for two days. We think that gives us time to evacuate the essentials if the power is to be off for longer periods.”

Two days! Wait till I tell Ron. He ran the building for two weeks on what they left.

“And have you considered how to protect that from, say looters?”

“Who’d loot diesel fuel?”

I smiled, without saying anything.

Joan seemed to be preparing a detailed response when the main course arrived. Dover Sole turned out to be a fish like a flounder that I found every bit as good as Grace had said, once I was

finally allowed to taste it. Marcel placed the plate on a separate table, deftly using a knife and large fork to remove the bones in one piece, a neat trick. He then added spoonfuls of the rice mixture and the vegetable medley before putting the plate in front of me with great ceremony.

I tried to avoid looking at Joan as she carved bite after bite of the purplish-colored steak with gusto. Instead, I focused attention on my plate and tried to get rid of the picture of the undercooked meat on my right.

Joan, having polished off the meat, turned her attention to the baked potato, taking a thick creamy substance from a dish Marcel had left and spooning it onto the white flesh. She added some yellow, shredded cheese and some chopped green onions. At least I knew what the latter two were. “What is the white stuff?” she inquired.

They were obviously surprised. “Sour cream,” Joan replied. “Don’t you have sour cream?”

“Not if we can help it. We usually throw it out when it sours.”

“This is actually more akin to yogurt,” Grace explained. “Try a taste.”

I did, and found it acceptable, but not something I’d eat with the same abandon as Joan.

“Joan is blessed with a metabolism we can only wish for,” Grace noted. “She eats whatever she wants and never seems to gain an ounce.”

“Proving the correctness of the Duchess of Windsor’s observation that a woman can never be too rich or too thin, I suppose,” I ventured. “What’s your secret?”

“For the rich part, it’s best to inherit it. As for the thin part, I’m not convinced that is correct. In my case it is nothing I can control.”

“Well,” I replied, “That’s certainly something I can sympathize with.”

Grace and Joan looked at each other. Joan shrugged. “I think we can reject the null hypothesis.”

How annoying. They’re treating me like a moron. “So, this was a test. I assume the null hypothesis was that I am simply a clever swindler out to separate the family from some of its wealth. Actually, that is an excellent first explanation for everything. It wouldn’t be difficult to fake events, even the disappearances and reappearances. The one in Sealy, for example, is almost trivial. Suspicion is certainly warranted for someone in your situation.”

They said nothing, so I continued, “The events in your house, though, are harder to explain, aren’t they? You have a good alarm system that would make it difficult to slip out of and into the house unobserved. Did you have spy cameras set up in the bedrooms? Yes, that must have been the trigger for this little exercise.”

Grace spoke first, “I see that you are as intelligent as Mark said. You are correct on all points. I have to admit that Joan was the one to express the suspicions. I have a distressing tendency to take people at face value. She has far more experience dealing with people who have something to hide. However, you passed the test easily. I noticed the slight shudder when you shook hands with Joan, and you turned a delicate shade of green when you saw Joan’s steak. Most of us agree, by the way, with the latter assessment. Our joke is that the steak could probably recover with good medical care. I think that the description of the future has just enough verisimilitude to make it sound right. Joan?”

“I agree. If Hypatia is a con artist, she is a very good one.” She made ready to leave. “I do have to get back. Do you mind if I leave?”

“Of course not, dear. Please don’t be such a stranger at the house. You’re welcome any time, you know.”

“I’ll take you up on that more, now that there is a mystery to be dealt with.” She turned to me. “Hypatia, I wish we could spend the entire afternoon together. I’d love to know what the future will bring. It could enhance my reputation a great deal. However, I have to go keep SPT Enterprises from falling apart. I have dozens of proposals to read, including one Bill G just dropped on me. He was pretty cagey, but I get the idea that he doesn’t approve of us funding his competitors.”

“Oh. Who have you funded?”

“Well Netscape to start with. Now, we’re into a search firm called Google.”

“My advice is to bail on Netscape and buy as much Google as possible.”

“Really? You don’t like Netscape?”

“They’ll be one of the first casualties of the bust.”

“But Google?”

“Hold onto whatever you have and buy more. I may have said too much. Are you into Amazon?”

“Really? Should I be?”

“If you want to make money, but Google is the big win.”

“Indeed. How interesting. Do you have a short-term testable prediction?”

I thought about it. “May, 1998. No major disasters I can remember. Do you have a Blackberry? I seem to remember there was a major outage affecting most Blackberries around that time.”

“Sometime in May? Sounds like one of those predictions in the Enquirer. We’ll see.” With that, she left us to enjoy another cup of coffee, which was excellent, but not up to the standards of SPT Enterprises.

“So, I passed the test?”

“I’m sorry about that,” Grace replied, “You realize that with the money we have at our disposal, we have good reason to be suspicious of beautiful penniless women who show up on Mark’s door.”

“That makes sense.” *Beautiful?*

“Joan pointed out that no one had actually *seen* you disappear and reappear. She said she’d seen magicians in Las Vegas make people disappear all the time.”

“Then today...”

“She noted that you’d appeared much earlier than expected. Perhaps that was due to some problem setting up the trick for the original date.” She smiled.

“Well, she does think of things I wouldn’t. And now?”

“Do I believe you now?”

“Yes, do you?”

“It’s still hard to accept, but I’m getting closer to taking it on faith. It’s just that faith has never played a big part in our lives. Simon was a notorious freethinker, an atheist really, though he never said anything until after his mother died. She was a pure fundamentalist, from the old school, 6000-year-old earth and all that. I had a lot of trouble putting up with her. Daddy’s money helped, though.” She smiled, recalling some private memory. “That’s how Simon got his start, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. I suppose I should have looked everything up, but, well, I’ve been busy.”

“And I want to hear all about it, but I think we should get back to the house, just in case you fall asleep and vanish.”

The next two days seemed to take forever. I woke up each morning in my own bed, Mark still being off on his secret enterprise, ate a small breakfast prepared by Idelle, who implied someone as thin as I should be eating more, and then moved into the garden for yet another interview with Grace.

On the second morning, a disreputable looking man showed up and presented a number of documents that established my new identity as Julia Austin Harrell, born April 1949, in some place in Indiana I had never heard of. Apparently, the courthouse where the records from that period had been stored burned down in 1975, so there was no way for anyone to check things out. The documents included several credit cards, a driver’s license, complete with a picture, and even a social security card. Whoever the guy was, he certainly knew his stuff. I commented that the date made me older than I actually was, at least as far as I could calculate my age.

“Yes, that is correct,” Grace replied. “It was unavoidable. It makes you look like a gold digger, which seems like a good story.”

Joan joined the party later that morning and took charge of the conversation. She was more interested in the events due to unfold as the twentieth century ended. Grace was interested in what the world *should* be like, a topic I hadn’t given much thought to.

“What about this Y2K thing?” Joan asked during one session. “Is everything going to come unstuck because programmers only used two digits for the year?”

“Nothing much happened, uh, will happen. A few minor glitches, but nothing like what the alarmists are predicting. About the only major effect of the problem is to increase spending on computers and programming, thus accelerating the tech boom that is already underway.”

“So I don’t need to worry about it?”

“Only if you have a bunch of old Cobol applications that you can’t get rid of. Then you’ll need to get someone to fix those.”

“You imply that the tech boom is going to be short-lived.”

“You got that right. It collapses right after the Y2K business is successfully over.”

“Then what happens?”

“A bunch of people will lose a bunch of money, but civilization doesn’t end. There are some unexpected side effects. For example, the excess amount of optical fiber communications laid down will take years to work off. Bandwidth is going to be practically free for years. Have you heard of outsourcing?”

“I seem to recall something, but...”

“Let’s get back to the main subject, shall we?” Grace suggested. “It seems to me that we are in a unique position, that you, my dear, are a fulcrum in history. Small changes now may pay huge dividends later. We need to try to arrange things for the future.”

“All right. Suppose we take that as a given. What should we do?”

“Why don’t we invent a new religion? If L. Ron Hubbard can do it, so can we, and I think we should be able to make a better job of it.”

I objected, “Religion is a dirty word in 2087. We had more than we wanted in the days leading up to the collapse, and afterwards. After all, I live, will live, in what is commonly called the Godless Republic of Texas.”

“So, let’s invent a religion without God.”

“Fine. Precept 1, there is no God.”

Joan interrupted, “Don’t you think that is a bit arrogant on your part to assume that? Surely what is happening to you proves that there is someone, or something, with powers we don’t understand.”

“Fine,” I countered. “Just don’t call it God.”

“By the way,” Grace added, “what do you make of the fact that you returned after only four days instead of eleven?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it. Why?”

“Because I think it shows that this is not a natural phenomenon. There is some active intelligence behind what is happening to you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So long as the period was fixed, it might have been some natural fluctuation, a ripple in space-time or whatever. But with the period between returns getting smaller, it suggests something else.”

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“It means that whoever is behind this was just practicing at first. I’ll bet the interval gradually shrinks until it is almost zero.”

“Interesting. Why do you think so?”

“I’ve thought about it a lot in the past day or so. I think that whoever is responsible wants to make sure that you don’t wind up *earlier* than where you were before. In other words, you aren’t exactly traveling in time, you’re simply living your life on two different timelines.”

“How weird!”

“Perhaps unprecedented. All the more reason to take advantage of it. It may be our duty. Do you think it an accident that you were led to Mark? Or that he was so easy to seduce, having just parted from Delfina?”

“So, you’re saying this is all part of some divine plan?”

“Yes, whatever that means.”

“Interesting. I’ve been telling everyone in 2087 that there is no God, that we’re on our own, that what has happened is not God’s doing, but humanity’s, and that we have to fix things on our own.”

“A great message! We just need to formalize it a bit. How’s this: God has sent his final message; there won’t be any more interventions. Humanity has to make do by itself.”

“So God’s message is there is no God? Sounds like Zen,” Joan said.

“When you put it that way, I like it even better. Yes, that’s a good beginning.” Grace leaned back in her chair and took a sip from her iced tea. “Yes, very nice indeed.”

“We should come up with some *sound bites*,” Joan suggested. “They can be quoted easily and help spread the word.”

“Excellent,” Grace agreed, “Hypatia dear, do you have any more to suggest?”

“How about *we reach consensus by rational inquiry*? That is one of the founding principles of the Austin Consensus.”

“A nice thought, but it lacks the pithy quality we need. IBM had the motto *Think* for years, which captures some of the same ideas,” Joan contributed.

This nonsense went on for almost an hour. I was ready to scream when my knight-errant rode to the rescue.

“Whew! What a trip. I got here as soon as I could. Connections from the backwoods of Kentucky are not the greatest.”

When I heard his voice, my heart skipped a beat. Seriously. *Is this what love is? How can it be reasonable to have such a reaction to someone I barely know, at least in the normal sense, not the biblical one.* Putting my ruminations aside, I rushed shamelessly into his arms, gratified to see that he felt the same way.

“It’s great to see you so soon,” he said after a minute of hugging.

“Yeah, but I’ve had to sleep alone,” I whispered, “and I didn’t enjoy it a bit.”

Later, we lay in the bed in my bedroom. Without discussing it, we decided to avoid the embarrassment of waking up in Mark’s bed again. When I said, “I think we need to talk,” I realized it sounded worse than I meant it to. “I don’t mean what you might think. I mean, we need to discuss a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for openers, there’s Grace and Joan. They’ve grabbed the ball and run away with it. They’re serious about creating a religion for the future. I’m a bit uneasy about that.”

“That’s because they’ve cast you in the role of savior. You’re worried about living up to your advance billing.”

“If that means what I think, you’re right. I don’t want to be overhyped. Do you think you can rein them in?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He didn’t sound hopeful. “Is that it?”

“Well, no. There’s also our relationship to consider.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“From my point of view, I barely know you. We’ve spent something like two or three days together, and we’re planning a future.”

He laughed. “Consider it from my point of view. Here I am, the quintessential nerd, recently dumped by a girl who decided that I wasn’t, what was it she said, *smooth enough*, when literally out of nowhere comes a beautiful, intelligent woman who seems to have only one thing on her mind: hopping into bed with me. It’s like a fantasy come true. Naturally, I’m wondering when it will end.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Don’t worry. I have no plans to end it anytime soon. Right now, I’m just trying to understand what’s happening. I really don’t know much about you. Let’s see: you’re a computer hacker, who lives near a one-horse town in the middle of nowhere. Your only friend seems to be the local sheriff, who drops by to smoke marijuana. You are part of an incredibly wealthy family who just happens to control a building in Houston that plays an important role in my other life. Plus, we have a wonderful sex life. Does it seem to be a little too carefully arranged?”

“World class computer hacker.”

“Huh?”

“You left out the fact that I am one of the best computer hackers in the world.”

“My apologies. Did I mention that you are also a wonderful lover?”

“Well, you alluded to it. We’re also all freethinkers, probably the richest family in the world that follows no religion. That’s pretty significant also, don’t you think?”

“Yes. It appears that everything is arranged. I don’t think this is happening by chance. You even created Ambianca, who taught me to read.”

“What! You never told me that.”

“Well, we’ve had a limited amount of time. Anyway, it’s true. Did you make her look like me, or is that another accident.”

“No, you caught me there. I did model her face on yours, the eyes especially.”

“Jackson noticed it right away.”

“Who’s Jackson?”

“He’s another lover, one that lives in the future.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“If it will help, definitely.” That earned me another smile, a grin really.

“How many lovers do you have?”

“At the moment, only one. Another one is getting mated to a girl named Mia. Their child is due in, oh, 90 years or so, or a few months, depending on how you look at it.”

“How does mating work?”

“Pretty simple, really. The woman selects a potential mate and pitches the idea to him. Usually, it’s mutual attraction, but strictly speaking, that is not necessary.”

“What about marriage, divorce, all that?”

“We don’t have anything that corresponds to what you mean by marriage. We do have reproductive agreements, which spell out the plans for the child, things like how he or she will be raised, who will contribute support and how much.”

“Legal contracts?”

“Well, we don’t have anything like the courts in this time. We try to avoid misunderstandings.”

“But they happen.”

“Of course. We try to deal with the consequences as best we can.”

“We meaning?”

“We, everybody.”

“Everybody?”

“Everyone who subscribes to the Consensus.”

“Wow. No lawyers, then?”

“Not in the sense you mean. We do have people who specialize in working out agreements ahead of time. They try to get everything straight for both sides.”

“So, back to mating. The woman selects the mate. They agree to some understanding about the child. Then they...”

“Then they have the child. You left out that the man has to agree. That doesn’t always happen. Ron, for instance had so many proposals he wasn’t sure how to decide.”

“Who’s Ron?”

“Oh, another lover. He’s a brilliant young fixer. He can get almost anything to work.”

“I’d rather hear more about your life in the future than all your lovers.”

“How about telling me about your life here? I don’t think I’m getting a complete picture.”

“OK. We’ll trade stories. I tell you one, you tell me. We each get to ask one question, only one. Agreed?”

“OK. Do I get to go first?”

“Sure. What’s the question?”

“Tell me about Delfina. All I know about her is that she’s taller than I am and has much better breasts.”

“Not better, just bigger. Your breasts are lovely.” He reached for the nearest one, but I backed away. “First the story.”

“There isn’t that much really. She seduced me at a party. I never had many girlfriends, and she’s, well, spectacular. I was flattered. I guess she was mainly after money and social position. It was fun for a while, but as I said, she got tired of it. I did get to keep the cabin, though. That’s worth something.”

“Well,” I commented, “as stories go, that’s fairly basic, not up to the standard we have in the future. Red would be especially dismissive.”

“If Red is another of your lovers, I’m going to scream.”

“No, Red is more like a father.”

“Oh, then I want to hear all about Red. It’s my turn.”

So, I told him about Red, including a rendition of the tale of the Battle of Mansfield Dam. However, as I lacked Red’s talent for keeping the audience involved, when I finished, Mark had fallen asleep. I kissed him tenderly on the forehead, lay down beside him, and fell asleep.

3. From a Check to a View May 2, 2087 Fredericksburg, NRT and elsewhere

I awoke in a sleeping bag in Fredericksburg, rather than a comfortable bed in Houston, and found that I was mildly disappointed. Jackson noticed and said, “You’ve been with him, haven’t you?”

“Who?”

“You know who I mean, the guy in your *dreams*. Mark Talbot?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Mandy told me.”

“And she learned it...”

“From JJ, I suppose. Anyway, you were with him, weren’t you? You’re surprised that I can tell.”

“Somewhat. How can you tell?”

“You have a certain...glow...when you get back from meeting him.”

“Jealous?”

“Sure.”

I laughed. “That’s great. Mark is jealous of you and you are jealous of him. Isn’t the fact that you exist, and he doesn’t enough?”

“What makes you think he doesn’t exist?”

“You just said; he’s the one in my dreams.”

“Do you still believe they’re dreams?”

“No,” I said after a pause, “I don’t. However, I don’t know what to make of the situation.”

“Well, I do,” Jackson replied. “We need to take advantage of it. We need all the help we can get.”

“It seems as though everyone but me agrees on that point.”

“That we need all the help we can get?”

“No, that we should take advantage of what Grace, in the other reality, called ‘a fulcrum point in history.’”

“Well, if that’s settled, let’s get some breakfast and go find this cabin. I assume you can find it, right?”

“Let’s hope so. Sounds like a good plan, J. Let’s get moving.”

It took several more hours before everything in Fredericksburg was secure, and all the plans solid. Thus, it was mid-morning when the *Endeavour* and her crew resumed the search for what we were now calling *the grail*.

The road from Fredericksburg led due west along the route of ancient US 290. We met no one on the way, and were able to get up to a cautious 50 KPH most of the way. We stopped around noon where the first option on the route occurred, where former state highway 479 struck off to the south. Red, who knew more about the area than anyone else, summed up the choices.

“We can keep going on 290 until we hit the interstate. That’s not far ahead. Then we have other choices to make, specifically, whether we want to take our chances on I-10. If not, we’re better off swinging south here and winding our way on whatever road looks passable toward Leakey. If we decide I-10 is safe, we might as well hightail it to old US 83 and take that south into Leakey. That area is pretty safe: it’s mostly high desert, so we should be able to see anyone long before we meet up.”

He walked around a bit, gathering his thoughts. “Just looking at this road,” he indicated 479, “you can tell that no one has been on it in quite a while. Compare it to 290. I think we will probably have the road to ourselves if we head south now. Then we can drive along the Guadalupe on old 29, crossing at a low point, and get to Leakey that way. I don’t know if the other roads have been traveled lately, of course.”

Ron spoke up, “Having dodged potholes all morning on the good road, I shudder to think what a back road may look like. I admit I was looking forward to hitting I-10. If it’s anything like the stretch between Sealy, or even Houston and San Antonio, it should be a dream.”

“That’s the problem,” Red replied. “The road is too good. Bound to be other travelers on it that we’ll have to deal with.”

“Any comments?” I asked.

“I could scout ahead on one of the bikes,” Jackson volunteered.

“Too dangerous,” Red said. “We can’t afford for anyone to be caught alone.”

“No one can catch me on a bike,” Jackson countered.

“If they have a rifle and ammo, they can,” Red said, ending the discussion.

“So, basically, the issue is whether we rely on speed or stealth,” Amanda said.

“If that’s the issue, I vote for speed,” Ron said. “Right now, the batteries are in good shape, thanks to the beautiful summer day we’re having, but the sky looks a bit ominous west of here. If we have a couple of cloudy days in a row, we could run out of juice in a hurry.”

“Amanda, any comments on the power situation?” I asked.

“I think Ron’s right on. We’ve been lucky so far. I say we make a run for it.”

“Anyone have anything to add?” I waited a few seconds. “OK. Let’s go for it. I-10 here we come. Wish we had shields in addition to our phasers.”

“What?” Several asked at once.

“Never mind. Twentieth century jargon.”

With that, we piled into the car and headed west once again.

I-10 was a dream. Ron goosed the speed up to nearly 90, and we flew past the only other travelers we spotted, a small family with an ox cart heading the other way. “Did you see the way they looked at us?” Amanda exclaimed. “Like we were from another planet.”

“That’s not so far wrong,” her brother said. “We might as well be visitors from Aldebaran or wherever.”

Our luck ran out a few miles farther on.

A crude but effective roadblock stood in our path. Two ancient trailers set crosswise left only a small opening in the middle. It was big enough to permit Endeavour to slip thru, but slowly — as soon as a large wagon was out of the way. I counted at least five armed men, who fortunately didn’t have AK-47s. Their guns were a motley collection of antiques, mostly shotguns and a few rifles. Red didn’t seem to be particularly worried.

“You know these guys?” Ron asked.

“No, but I know 'bout 'em. General low life. Not well-organized, at least last I heard.”

“We’re out numbered and out gunned,” Jackson observed. “Even with the toys on this car, we can’t shoot our way thru.”

“I think,” I said after some reflection, “that we should rely on magic. Help me get my cassock on.”

“I don’t think I like the sound of this,” Red said.

“I’m open to other suggestions.”

“We could turn around and try a different route,” Ron noted.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Red replied. “They ain’t the smartest bunch around, but they know enough to block our retreat.”

While this discussion was going on, I managed to extricate my cassock from a knapsack in the back and have my arms and head thru the top. As I couldn’t actually stand up inside *Endeavour*, I couldn’t complete the job. Amanda tugged on the hem until it was mostly in place. “Ron, listen up. When I hold my hand out, hit them with the microwaves. When I point, shoot the laser at the general direction I am pointing. Come to think of it, plan on blasting that wagon, just in case we decide we have to make run for it. Got it?”

“Wait,” Red said. “Let me get out with you.”

“No way,” I replied. “The magic won’t work if you’re there.” I smiled at him. “Wish me luck.”

I stepped out into bright sunshine, which helped the effect. I hadn’t worn my cassock since the ceremony at New Home, so it was still clean and sparkling white, if a bit wrinkled. I hoped the effect would make them hesitate for a bit. I spoke to Red, “Tell them we are peaceful, that we need to pass. Whatever.”

Red’s voice boomed from the loud hailer at volume near the threshold of pain. “Please move the wagon. We are a peaceful scientific expedition. We must pass. We will use force if necessary.”

One man, perhaps the leader, laughed and started walking toward me, his gun held ready. I held out my hand in what I hoped was still the universal signal for *stop*. He kept coming. “Now, Ron,” I said.

The effect was gratifying. He dropped his weapon and staggered back as though struck. I recalled that the microwave crowd disperser made metal get hot in a hurry.

“Ask them again, Red.”

Red’s voice blared out again, “Please move the roadblock.”

This had no effect.

“Behind you,” Amanda shouted.

I turned to see four men running toward me, much closer than I would have liked. Before I could think, Ron rotated the antenna around and blasted them with more microwaves. Three of them managed to keep their feet and ran away as quickly as they could. The fourth writhed on the ground in obvious pain.

“Tell them they were warned, Red.”

“You were warned!” boomed out.

I carefully pointed at the wagon. With a huge thunderclap, the wagon disintegrated into dust.

“Wow! Cammy wasn’t kidding, was he?”

I ran to get back into the cabin of *Endeavour*.

Jackson pulled the door closed, and we rocketed thru the opening as fast as we dared, accelerating up to nearly 100 kph before we glanced back. We saw several of the men looking after us, but there seemed to be no pursuit.

The outlaws may have had some working radios, which they used to alert others to our presence. We saw the second group of miscreants as *Endeavour* crested the top of a hill and started down the other side. We were traveling at nearly 100 kph at the time. Strong sunlight hit the car at just the right time. The effect on the small group of bandits at the bottom of the hill was very gratifying. They showed signs of bolting, until their leader commanded them to stop.

We managed to halt *Endeavor* before crashing into the barricade. “Well, any reason to change the strategy?” I asked, moving to get out of the car.

“Why not just blast ‘em?” Ron asked.

“It wouldn’t be polite.”

When I emerged from the vehicle, I noticed several of the men shrinking back. *That’s encouraging*. Before I could speak, the group’s leader approached, holding his hands to show that he was unarmed. “Welcome to our little corner of the world, Hypatia. You be Hypatia, no? The one they tell stories about, the one who fix up that place by the Pedernales?”

“I am Hypatia,” I began, “and—”

“You be on a scientific mission, yeah, we know.”

“Then, I presume you also know we are able to protect ourselves.”

“For a fact. You done scared our friends up the road pure shitless. We ain’t gonna cause no trouble. I jus’ wanta know if you be the one change everything at whatever that place be called now.”

“I think you’re speaking of New Home.”

“Yeah, that be it. You behind all that?”

“I had lots of help.”

“But you the one tell them they ain’t got no plague, get them to clean up, all that?”

“I did that, yes.”

“Then I owe you a big one. I be the man they be searching for, the one they think brung the plague. Word is, you got ‘em to call off the search.”

“Yes, I did that. You were that man?”

“That be me. I be powerful grateful to you ma’am. Any way I can help you?”

“Well, moving the barricade would be a good start.”

“No problem. We was kinda hoping you’d agree to stop by us for a bit.”

“We’re in a bit of a rush. Perhaps some other time. Do you have a name to help me find you again?”

“I be calling meself Nimrod.”

“Nimrod the Hunter, a good name,” I said. “I hope we meet again.”

Nimrod signaled to his men to move the barricade. “They ain’t no more people on the road, ma’am. You won’t be having no trouble. They be one more thing you could do.”

“What?”

“We be wantin’ your blessing ma’am.”

I smiled, held my hand in the Vulcan salute, and said, “May you live long and prosper, Nimrod.”

As I turned to leave, a small child broke from the crowd and attached himself to my leg. Nimrod looked amused. “Why’nt I give you the kid for a present. With my blessing. We been calling him Angel.” He turned and strode off.

“What are we going to do with the kid?” Jackson asked.

“Please,” a small voice said. “I come with?”

We didn’t have much choice for the moment. “Where are your parents?” I asked.

“Parents?”

“You speak English?”

He shook his head.

“*Habla ingles?*”

“No.”

Well, at least we were making some progress.

“What’s your name? *Como se llama?*”

“*Angel, sucio angel.*” He said in something akin to Spanish.

“That means *dirty angel*,” Jackson offered. “I can’t tell whether it’s Spanish or Spanglish, though Spanglish would usually use *dirty* instead of *sucio*.”

I turned back to the child. “So, Angel, you want to come with us?”

“Yes, please.” It sounded like a phrase he’d memorized.

“Any thoughts?” I asked.

“We can’t just abandon him,” Amanda said, “to live with that bunch.” She gestured toward the group of men, who seemed to find the situation amusing.

“You think it’s a boy?” I asked.

“With a face like that?” We all laughed. Angel shrank back.

“OK, Angel,” I said, in as comforting a manner as I could manage. “You come with us.”

He grinned, then set about making himself comfortable on the floor of the vehicle. Within minutes, he was asleep, one hand still grasping my leg.

“I suppose,” Amanda said, “that it’s too late to worry about quarantine.”

We had no further trouble.

US 83, which we reached in about an hour, appeared to be in decent shape, not like the old Interstate, but not bad. That was due more to lack of traffic than superior construction. The drive south and east on the old road was much as Red had described it. Running along the top of a large flat expanse, the highway had only a few gentle curves, but several long inclines. Any rain falling in the area wound up in the valleys lower down, resulting in an arid wasteland on the top. Red related a bit of local folklore, “Before the collapse, some ranchers imported exotic antelope up here, so hunters could bag a trophy without having to go to Africa.” Small herds of the resulting antelope were the only sign of life we saw. “I’d like to shoot one of those myself,” Red noted. “Said to be good eating.”

“Power’s down to 35%. We’re not getting enough sun to sustain this pace,” Amanda noted. “That little fracas back on the Interstate...”

“I’ve heard about a place up ahead that should make a good place to stop overnight,” Red suggested. “It’s an ancient *scenic overlook*. If it lives up to the scuttlebutt I’ve heard about it, we should have a good place to see where we want to go.”

“I think I’ve found it on the map,” Amanda replied after searching for several minutes. “We should be able to get there in about 15 minutes — if we can keep up this speed. It’s about 20 clicks north of Leakey itself.”

“Don’t waste any energy, Ron,” I cautioned. “If it’s as scenic as Red seems to think, we’ll probably have to go uphill to get there.”

Ron almost missed the turnoff, which as I had thought, was right at the top of a long rise. *Endeavour* strained to make it up the long slope, and when we reached the target, the reserves were dangerously low. Fortunately, firewood was plentiful, so we didn’t have to rely on the batteries for light or heat.

The overlook was as spectacular as the legends had promised and held a surprise. Below were clear signs of a settlement, including smoke rising from a chimney. Amanda offered some information, “This was the site of a Baptist Camp when our map was created, sometime pre-Collapse. Probably, some people moved into the buildings. I doubt if they’re permanent, because they didn’t show up on the scan for heat sources that we ran about three weeks ago.”

“That ain’t good,” Red said. “Religionists might not be friendly. We need to keep a guard on duty tonight. I’ll take the first shift, soon’s we get something to eat. I’m not sure about a fire. Makes us too easy to see.”

“OK,” I agreed. “Looks like it’s time to break out the jerky and hardtack. Jackson, will you take the next watch? I’ll follow, then Amanda and Ron. That’s reverse order by age in case you’re wondering. Oh, and we need to keep a careful eye on the kid.” The limpet still slept soundly on the floor of *Endeavour*.

Red and Jackson busied themselves setting up a safe perimeter for the night, stringing a line with bells on it around several trees. The rest of us, including Angel when he woke up, moved to the edge of the cliff, where we munched on hardtack while looking out over the valley below.

“It’s beautiful,” Amanda said.

“Sure is. Wonder who lives down there, and what they’re doing,” Ron muttered. “Think we should try to contact them?”

“I’m prepared to accept Red’s judgment on that point, at least initially,” I replied. “We’ll keep a careful watch on them and see what we can learn.”

“You know,” Amanda said, “we should really plan to stay here tomorrow and let the batteries recharge. We can put the panels in maximum tracking mode and try to get a full charge back. If it stays overcast like this, we will need all day. That means we can observe the settlement for a full day.”

“Does it mean eating this junk for a whole day?” Ron complained.

“Depends on what we learn, doesn’t it? Maybe they’re not a threat.”

“Look!” Angel said. “*Niños*.” I took a quick look thru the binoculars, then passed them to the others. “Think this could be a school or something?”

“Maybe an orphanage,” Amanda suggested. “The kids seem to be different ages, some are almost grown.” No one said anything, but we wondered if this could be where Angel belonged. He must have figured out what we were thinking. “No my home.”

“OK, Angel,” I said, patting him on the head.

I commented to the others, “This is an interesting development. Let’s plan to have someone observing all the time. Find out as much as we can about the group. How do they live out here, for example?”

“Plenty of game.” Red noted. “One of those Nilgai, or whatever they are, would provide food for quite a while.”

We ate quietly for a while, watching the children below play a pickup game of soccer. A loud bell rang and they formed up into two lines and marched into one of the buildings. I checked the time. “Probably heading in for supper. That building must be the refectory or something like it.”

Without further activity to provide a topic for conversation, we simply sat there for a bit until finally I spoke. “Ron, how well do you know the layout in the Dark Tower?”

“I’ve pretty much been all over it,” he replied. “Part of my job as head of salvage operations. Lots of good salvage there.”

“Have you ever been on the 47th floor?”

“How the hell do you know about that?”

Amanda reiterated the question, “Yes, how did you learn about that?”

“Is it some secret?”

“Damn right! That’s one of the hidden floors. Only a few people are privy to the knowledge.”

“Hidden floors?”

Ron explained, “There are several floors you can’t get to: the elevator will stop, but the doors open onto a solid wall. Same for the stairwells. We’ve wondered about them ever since we started exploring the building, but we’re a bit afraid to try to break in. Don’t know what would happen. Do you know about them?” he asked. “Did you learn about them in your other reality?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. I didn’t realize you knew about that.”

“I heard Amanda and Jackson talking about it. I may start believing the stories I hear about you.”

“Well, best to remain skeptical about the stories.”

“Knowing about the 47th floor is likely to convince most people the stories are true. So, tell us what you know,” Ron demanded.

I gave them a quick summary of my lunch with Grace and Joan.

“A private elevator,” Ron mused. “Yes, that would explain it. And since the elevator started on the first floor, and we now always start on what used to be the third floor…”

“You missed the key point,” Amanda said. “They got to the restaurant using the same private elevator. It would be much easier to start at the top and work down the shaft to get there.”

“Right. Good thinking. Now, Hypatia the all-knowing, what is on the 47th floor?”

“When I was there, I saw the best coffee-brewing machine I can imagine. It was fully automatic and produced some coffee that makes ours taste like runoff from the stables.”

“Oh. Bet that would be worth quite a bit if we got it back to Austin,” Amanda said.

“Exactly.”

“I’ll get someone working on it as soon as we get back on the grid,” Ron said.

The night passed without incident, the only time any of the guards had to act was when a herd of *javelina* came too close for comfort. They scattered when Jackson made a noise and never returned.

Everyone took breakfast on the edge of the cliff, curious what activity would be going on below. Delicious smelling aromas drifted upward on a slight breeze, reminding the crew again that they were making do with emergency rations while the people below feasted on real food.

“What should we do about them?” I asked finally. “Should we stop by to be neighborly, or try to slip past them unnoticed?”

“As to the latter, that promises to be quite difficult,” Red noted. Pointing out the route we planned to take, he continued, “When we start up that long incline to the notch in the hills, we’ll be visible for miles. Since there doesn’t seem to be any place short of that where we might find the cabin, I’m guessing that it has to lie on the other side of the hills, so we have to go up that incline.”

“We can’t make that on the power we have now. I just checked the meter, and we’ve got only 32%. I don’t want to tackle the next phase without at least 50%, and preferably a lot more.”

“How long will that take?” I asked.

Ron consulted with Amanda briefly, then announced, “We can’t leave before noon at the earliest. We should really stay here another night.”

“Damn!” I said. “We’ve got to be close. The map we found showed the cabin somewhere between Leakey and Vanderpool. That’s the road we’re looking at. Vanderpool is, what, 30 km away?”

“Something like that,” Amanda replied, looking at the map on her screen. “There’s a tantalizing road with no name that leads off into the hills about a quarter of the way there. I’m betting that will be the one with the cabin.”

“So, once we get to Leakey and turn east again, we have no more than 30 km to go and probably less than 10,” I summed up.

“That’s about it,” Amanda replied.

“But 30 hard clicks,” Ron reminded them. “Lots of up and down, and I can see some bad areas from here. That means we’ll be doing S’s as we go, so we won’t be very speedy. That puts maximum strain on the power plant. Besides, we don’t want to arrive at our destination without enough juice left to power lights and everything.”

“OK, I hear you,” I said. “That still doesn’t answer the question of what to do about the settlement below.”

“Well,” Jackson said, “we’ve stopped everywhere else on this trip: New Home, Fredericksburg. Why not one more?”

“We didn’t really have a choice about those two. We do have a choice here. Besides, this could be more like our get-together on the Interstate.”

“There’s something else to consider,” Red said. “They may consider us trespassing, or they may want a toll to cross their land. That argues for paying them a visit.”

“How about a compromise?” Jackson suggested. “I’ll take the bicycle and ride down there. I can see how I am greeted, and we can decide what to do after that.”

“Too dangerous,” Red said.

“Maybe. Maybe not. One person on a bicycle is unlikely to be shot on sight. There’s too great a chance that I would be just delivering a message, or some goods. I’d look like your run of the mill bicycle courier. We could even concoct a message, just to make it look better.”

“I like that,” I said. “Besides looking innocent, if they are suspicious, they will suspect that you have several people hidden in the surrounding area, watching what happens. They won’t have any way of knowing that there are only four of us, well four and a half. We can probably sound like many more if necessary.”

“Well,” Red said, still not convinced. “Maybe it will work, but I’d like to have a quick getaway planned just in case. We won’t be able to get *Endeavour* all the way to the encampment. Notice that the road there runs *in the river* for part of the way. I don’t think Ron would approve of a stress test just now. That means that if Jackson has to make a run for it, he’s pretty much on his own till he makes it back to the paved road. We should be waiting on the road.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed. “That means that we need to let the batteries charge as long as possible and have everything packed and ready to move. When Jackson leaves on the bike, we give him an hour to get down there, then we follow and wait on the main road. Assuming we have an adequate charge on the batteries, we’ll plan for Jackson to leave about noon. Two hours for the confab at the settlement, then we head out. If we really need to go only 10 clicks, we should still have hours of daylight left when we find the cabin. We’ll plan to camp near it tonight. Now, what should we say in our letter?”

Shortly after noon, with the battery gauges reading 46%, Jackson took off down the hill. “Since we’ll be going downhill for most of the way to the rendezvous, we’ll be running the batteries up rather than down. I still want to be over 50% before we leave,” Ron said for something like the eleventh time.

No one paid him the slightest attention.

Everyone gathered at the lookout spot trying to be the first to spot Jackson when he turned off the main road and headed for the settlement. Red, as usual, was the first to see him. Jackson stopped and removed his hat to wipe his forehead, the agreed signal for “everything going well.” With that, we piled into the vehicle and set off downhill. The road led away from the valley, preventing us from seeing anything of what might be happening to Jackson. We had agreed to maintain radio silence except in an emergency, so there was little to do except follow the road to the intersection with what the ancients had called RR 337, just short of the remains of the village of Leakey.

Turning east, we had the advantage of a long slow slope down to the area where the Frio River ran thru the canyon. The river, a mere trickle at the moment, still provided a refreshing drink as we stopped by the side of the river to wait for word from Jackson. Twenty minutes seemed much

longer, especially to Amanda, when Jackson appeared pedaling at a fairly relaxed pace up the dirt road from the settlement.

“Well,” I demanded as soon as Jackson had caught his breath.

“They’re not hostile, but definitely not friendly,” Jackson reported. “First off, they claim to be from *Norte Mexico*. They pointed out that this is ‘south of I-10.’ The guy in charge is dressed like a priest from the old days, and the women seem to be nuns. The priest denounced us as enemies of the church, and said, ‘Hypatia is a heathen name.’ The nuns were more accommodating. I didn’t hear all the discussion — it was all in Spanglish, and I’m not very proficient. The gist of it was it was better to get us out of their territory as quickly as possible. I asked if there would be a reply to the letter, and they said no. Didn’t give me a gratuity, either. So, I recommend that we leave. I didn’t see any sign of armed guards, but they must have some way to summon help, living so far out here in the boondocks. I wasn’t able to get any feel for what they’re doing here, but an orphanage seems like a reasonable bet. Bottom line: no help, but probably no hindrance either.”

“Excellent. Nice work, J. Let’s get out of here.”

Jackson stowed the bicycle while everyone else grabbed one last drink of cold water — the Frio really lived up to its name — and we were on our way again.

The road led up the long incline Red had pointed out from the lookout. That stretch, where *Endeavour* was most vulnerable to an attack seemed to take forever, but actually consumed only 15 minutes. Then Ron wove thru the rock falls at the top and started down an equally long slope on the far side. We had barely finished this part of the journey and emerged into yet another of the canyons that defined the topography of the Hill Country when Amanda shouted, “I think that’s the road.”

After 50 years, little remained of the road. Only the fact that the vegetation was lower than the surrounding area showed where the road once lay. We would have missed the turn completely had Amanda not been searching for it.

I issued orders. “We’ll scout the area. We’re looking for any ancient road signs, mailboxes, etc. Anything that might indicate that we’ve found the right place.”

We spread out, machetes at hand to clear away more brush, looking for anything that might help. I wished I had been paying greater attention when Gordo had driven to the road. I replayed what I could remember from that long-ago dream. Gordo had turned into the road and bounced over several ruts. Then he had crossed over a creek. Mark had mentioned the name, if I could only recall it. The road crossed the creek at least three times.

“I’ve got something over here,” Jackson called. He held up part of an old sign, which read, “ig Hend.” “Not much,” Jackson agreed when everyone seemed disappointed, “but it’s something. Maybe we can find the rest of the name.”

“Big Henderson Creek,” I exclaimed. “This is the right road. Let’s get moving. Jackson, you and Red go ahead on foot, clearing as much brush as you can easily. Ron will drive *Endeavour*. Amanda and I will walk beside the car.” I interrupted the stream of orders briefly to shout, “Angel, back into the car!” Then I continued, “We’re still looking for confirmation. Take one of the walkie-talkies with you.” The two men set off, whacking away with machetes at the vegetation blocking the road. Ron gently eased the car along the *caliche* track, creeping along at about 15 KPH. Amanda and I had no trouble keeping up, walking beside the car, checking the roadside as we walked.

“One thing for sure,” Amanda noted. “No one has been on this road in quite a while. Of course, we might as well hang out a sign saying we’re here.”

“Good point. Not much we can do about it, though.”

I was the first to find confirmation that we had found the right place, a small plastic zip-lock bag with a picture of a hermit on it and the words, “Hill Country Gold.” I radioed the info to the others, getting a “very interesting” comment from Red.

Two hours later, three nail-biting creek crossings behind us, *Endeavour* pulled up in front of a large metal structure set against the side of the hill. *Not what I remembered*, I thought. *Maybe Mark made some changes.*

“Locked up tight,” Red commented after we’d gathered around what should have been the front door. “Looks like a late pre-Collapsian modification to protect the inhabitants from raiders, and also to enforce the reverse quarantine. A survivalist hideout. Any suggestions on how we get inside?”

Angel was trying unsuccessfully to wriggle under the shield. I called him back, holding his hand to make sure he didn’t bolt.

“It would be good to figure that out quickly,” Ron observed. “Anyone else notice the change in the weather? Check it out. We have a major thunderstorm brewing. I’d say we have less than an hour to get *Endeavour* under cover.”

I issued more orders. “Jackson. You and Red search around here. There may be another way in. Ron, look for some place to put *Endeavour*. Amanda, you and I are going to figure out the lock.”

In one sense, the lock was straightforward. Set into the wall of rock near the edge of the metal shield was a crank, with a sign next to it suggesting, “Turn the crank about 20 times.” Amanda turned it. A piece of the shield slid up, revealing a screen. After a few seconds, the screen lit up, revealing a familiar face.

“I can’t believe all this is still working,” Amanda said.

“Amazing, isn’t it. Maybe the lock runs on minimal power. Recognize the face?”

“That’s your friend.”

“To gain entry,” the face said, “you will need to do a little singing.”

“Oh, dear. Let’s have it.”

Music issued forth. I recognized a line from *Desperado* by the Eagles. I sang the next line following, “You gotta let somebody love you,” as “before it’s too late.” Turning to Amanda, I noted, “Linda Ronstadt did a better job than I.”

Next came a Leonard Cohen tune, *Joan of Arc*, with the line “Who are you she sternly spoke?” I replied with, “to the one beneath the smoke...” I was prepared to sing more of the song, one of my favorites from the 20th century, when the face spoke, “Hypatia, it is you. It has been a long time.”

“Indeed. Ambianca,” I said. “Is that really you? You sound different.”

“Yes, it is my dear. It’s great to see you again after all this time.”

“Can you let us in?”

Ambianca smiled broadly, and music started playing.

“The theme from *Rocky*,” I said, recognizing the old chestnut. Slowly, the metal shield moved upward, disappearing into the rock of the cliff. Before us was a porch that I knew well.

“This place is fantastic!” Ron exclaimed. “We even have a secure spot for *Endeavour* thanks to Amanda’s talent for pushing any button she finds.”

“Well, it seemed like it should do something. Glad you weren’t hurt when the garage door opened.”

“No. Jackson and I were trying to figure out how to open it. Whoever built this place must have hollowed out half the hillside and stocked it for survival. You wouldn’t believe the collections of tools in the garage. We can fix anything.”

“Glad you like it, Ron,” I said smiling. “If we can open the doors, there has to be a power source somewhere. Maybe it will handle more than just the doors. Check out everything.” With that, I marched into what had once been the bedroom I shared with Mark. It was still the same, even down to the ancient computer on the desk. Amanda, who was behind me, called out, “Hey, come in here everyone. You gotta see this.” She walked over to the computer and caressed the keyboard. “This sure looks like a genuine 20th century desktop computer.” She moved her flashlight over the area. “Strange, he has a computer in the bedroom, but it must have been obsolete by the time this place was abandoned. Interesting.” She started conducting a complete search of the area.

I could hear Jackson out the kitchen area, opening one cabinet after another checking the contents when a shout from the bedroom stopped him. He and Ron both reached the door about the same time. They stopped in astonishment at the scene they saw: Amanda and me in front of a bookcase, with one section ajar, and light from Amanda’s flash barely illuminating the area beyond.

4. *It's Alive!*

May 4, 2087

Near Leakey, Hill Country

We sat on the porch of the cabin, protected from the thunderstorm by the metal shield, now partially lowered. Rain fell in heavy sheets, punctuated by occasional lightning and some hail the size of golf balls. A small hibachi in the corner held pieces of rabbit from the two Red had brought back from his ramblings. The aroma of the cooking had everyone's appetite on a short fuse. Red fussed over the fire constantly. "Be ready in a few more minutes," he announced to the group.

"Glad you came back when you did, Red," I observed. "Wouldn't like to have one of us out in this."

"Pretty heavy rain, all right. Seen worse. Been caught in worse. Once—"

"Looks as though we may be stuck here for a bit," Jackson interrupted before Red could get started on what was likely to be a lengthy reminiscence. "We need to figure this place out better than we have so far."

"What do we know so far?" I asked.

"We know that it seems to be set up as a survivalist hideout, but one with superb connections to the rest of the world, if we could just get them to work."

"Aye, there's the rub," Ron chimed in. "How did he plan to power this place?"

"There are electrical outlets all over the place," Amanda pointed out, "but no connection to the grid."

"What was the source of power for the doors and shield?" I wanted to know.

"We suspect a small diesel generator, just enough to let someone get in. We haven't found it yet, though," Ron replied. He continued, "There aren't that many possibilities: Solar, that would work OK most of the time, ditto for wind generators. There aren't any located anywhere obvious, but we haven't done a complete search yet. That'll have to wait for daylight, and for the rain to stop. There has to be some source of backup power, though, for times like this."

"So where is it?" I demanded.

"Has to be back in the hill somehow. There's a door from the garage that leads to somewhere deep inside, but it has an electronic lock that isn't working. Chicken and egg problem."

"He must have planned for this kind of emergency," I suggested. "There has to be another way into the storage area. We just need to find it."

"After dinner," Red said. "Who wants some really fine rabbit?"

Everyone, as it turned out, but especially Angel.

"There has to be something in here," Amanda said. "This is the operations center for the entire place. He had to have some way to deal with emergencies from here." She shone her flashlight around the room, looking for something to help solve the puzzle.

"Wait," I said. "You don't suppose..."

“What?”

“Well, it’s such a cliché I hesitate to suggest it, but do you think that grill over the air conditioning system will come off.”

“Are you suggesting that someone crawl thru the ductwork?”

“Well, I said it was a cliché.”

“Jackson,” Amanda shouted. “We need your help in here.”

Jackson appeared at the doorway. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“We want to remove the grill from the air duct. Can you reach it?”

“Well, I found something in the kitchen that will help.” He left and returned shortly carrying a step stool, which put him at eye level with the grill. “Looks like there are just a couple of screws. Just a second.” He pulled a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and quickly removed the screws, after which the grill came off easily. “Now what?”

“Well,” I said, “I’m the smallest one here, so I guess I get the honor of crawling into the duct.”

Several people pointed out that there was someone even smaller. I thought about it. Seemed like a good idea if we could explain what we wanted. Jackson, using some Spanglish and lots of hand signals got the idea across. Actually, the prospect of crawling in a dark tunnel excited Angel, especially when we outfitted him with a headlamp, and radio. He was grinning when, with Jackson’s help, he clambered into the duct. “Looks like a long crawl,” I reported.

“Wait,” Jackson replied. “I have an idea.” He went back to the kitchen and returned with a large ball of cord. “Just in case, you understand.” He tied one end of the cord to Angel’s ankle. “This way we’ll be sure you can retrace your crawl if necessary.” He somehow managed to get the idea across to Angel.

Setting the walkie-talkie to automatic, we gave Angel a pat on the butt, and he moved into the duct, using his toes to propel himself from one raised joint to the next. After about 50 meters, he stopped. We could hear him saying something but couldn’t understand it. Finally, Jackson made out the word *izquierda*. “He’s going left, at least that’s what I think he means,” Jackson explained.

“I hope this doesn’t turn into a maze of twisty little passages,” I commented. “20th century adventure game,” I added, though no one asked.

A few minutes later, we heard what was clearly cursing. “I understood that,” Red said. “Kid’s been keeping bad company.”

“He’s retracing his way,” Jackson said, quickly taking up the slack in the cord.

After a while, Angel started forward again. We heard, “*Derecho*,” over the radio. “That means right,” Jackson explained.

An eternity later — it was actually about 90 minutes — we heard a shout over the radio. Then nothing. Jackson tugged on the line, but it didn’t budge. Nothing more came over the radio. We stared down the dark tunnel but saw no sign of his light.

“I’m going in,” I said.

“Too dangerous,” Red said.

“You didn’t say anything when we sent a seven-year-old kid in there.”

“This is different.”

“You’re right about that. Now, we have a rescue situation on our hands.”

“He’s nothing to us. An expendable asset.”

“No one on this expedition,” I said coldly, “is expendable.”

“OK, but don’t get stuck. None of us could possibly get thru there.”

With that, I climbed up on the step stool and, with a boost from Red, started following the line down the airway. It was a tight squeeze, and I had to concentrate on the cord to keep from an attack of claustrophobia. I wasn’t at all confident of backing up. Fortunately, following the line meant that I didn’t make all the false turns Angel had, so I found him in less than half an hour.

He sat at the bottom of a short ladder. He must have fallen down the ladder and hurt himself. His light had broken, and he somehow had the good sense to stay put and wait for us. I could see the tracks of tears on his dirty face. “Hey, kid. You found it!”

The ladder was only about 2 meters long, with a floor of solid rock at the end of it. Mounted on the side of the ladder was a large knife switch in the off position. I spoke into the radio. “I’ve found him. He may be hurt, but I can’t tell how seriously yet. A switch here may control the power. I’m going to throw it. If we all blow up, it’s my fault.” I closed the switch. Off in the cavern somewhere, I heard the sound of machinery starting up, and a few seconds later bright lights blinded me, requiring several seconds for my eyes to adjust. I could hardly believe what I saw: row after row of crates stretching far back into the cave. I walked over to the first crate, and read the label “Emergency Food.” One nearby was labeled, “Spare parts for solar panels.”

“You’re not going to believe what I just found,” I said into the radio.

“Whatever it is, it’ll have to be special to compete with what’s going on out here. We have power for all the equipment. Everything is cycling up as we speak. Can you get back here OK?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve got to check on Angel and explore some more first.”

Angel had some bruises, but otherwise seemed to be in good shape. I hugged him close. He put his head on my shoulder and started crying in earnest. I sat down on the last rung of the ladder and rocked back and forth with him until he quit crying. “You must have been scared,” I said, though I doubted he could understand me. “You were very brave.”

He seemed to understand *brave* and smiled at me. Ignoring a lifetime of training, I touched him without wearing gloves, wiping the tears from his eyes. He reached up to wrap his arms around my neck and kissed me on the cheek, murmuring something that sounded like, “Mama.”

“I hope you don’t have the plague, kid,” I said.

We set off exploring, and a short while later I was able to report, “This place is a treasure trove. I found the source of the power everything is running on now. It appears to be a small nuclear reactor; at least it has the symbol for radiation stenciled on the outside. This is amazing.”

Later still, “I think I’ve found the door leading into the garage. Hold on. Yes, I am in the garage now. Seems like there should be a way to get to the main part of the cabin without going back outside. I’m going to look some more.”

It required most of an hour of searching before I finally located what I knew had to be there somewhere, a hinged section of the rock wall, with a large locking device holding it in place. I pushed what looked like the button to release the lock and found that the rock moved easily, revealing an opening into the computer room. Amanda sat at one console, studying everything carefully. No one else was around. Amanda, lost in thought, didn't react until I touched her on the shoulder. Then, she jumped about half a meter into the air. I smiled, "Just me and the limpet. I found the door."

Ron appeared when he heard my voice, saw the door, and went to examine it. "So that's what the long piece of metal is for."

"What's that? You figured something out?"

"Yeah. See this metal rod hanging on the wall here? Well, if you push it thru this hole here, it releases the lock, opening the door. You'll notice that most holes don't work. Very clever. Once you close the door, if you push the rod thru this other hole, it locks it back again. Ingenious."

Coming from Ron, that was the ultimate compliment.

I pulled rank and took the king-size bed in the bedroom. Angel squirmed into the bed next to me. Ron had commandeered the sleeping loft, while Red and Jackson strung up hammocks on the porch. Amanda refused to leave her seat in front of the console in what she called the nerve center. I found her there when I got up in the morning, sleeping with her head on the keyboard.

"Amanda," I said softly, for Angel was still sleeping, "don't you want to get some real rest? Take the bed."

"Mmph."

"Come on, dear. You can leave it for a while." I gently pulled my young protégée from the seat and guided her to the bed. Amanda never really woke up and was soon snoring gently next to Angel.

Tiptoeing, I moved to the kitchen and began searching thru the cabinets to see what was available for breakfast. My first find was some vacuum-packed, unlabeled foil rectangles, which released a wonderful aroma of real coffee when I broke the seal. I discovered a coffee maker in another cabinet and soon had a 12-cup batch brewing. That was enough to get everyone except Amanda and Angel out of bed and into the kitchen.

"Let's shut the door to the bedroom," Jackson suggested. "I know she was still working early this morning; I heard muttered curses."

The four of us took cups of coffee outside onto the porch, carefully closing the door to avoid waking anyone. "Not that I'm criticizing," Red began, "but what else do we have for breakfast besides coffee?"

"Don't know," I replied. "Once I found the coffee, I quit looking for anything else. There are many crates labeled *Emergency Food* in the storage area. Enough to last for months, it appears."

"Doesn't sound much better than the jerky we brought with us," Red opined.

"Well, oh mighty hunter," Ron replied. "Why don't you go find us something better?"

Red gestured at the sky, which looked as though more rain were on the way. “Want to get caught in another thunderstorm? I could use a helper.”

No one volunteered.

“I guess we have to make do with emergency rations,” I said. “Who wants to help me choose what we eat?”

“I’ll come with you,” Jackson said, and moved to open the main door. “I guess we have to go thru the door in the office.”

“Which means moving like proverbial church mice,” I reminded him.

“What did the label call this?” Ron asked.

“Spinach quiche,” Jackson told him.

“Not bad.”

“Better than deer jerky.”

“How much coffee is there?” Red wanted to know.

“Plenty,” I told him. “Want to start another pot?”

“You read my mind,” he replied, and suited action to his words.

“Good thing there’s plenty of food,” Jackson observed. “We could be stuck here for quite a while.” He gestured at the rain falling heavily. A burst of lightning confirmed his diagnosis. Seconds later, a clap of thunder added an exclamation point.

“That was four seconds,” Ron noted. “A bit over 1 kilometer away.”

We sat silently for a while, contemplating the weather.

“I wonder if Mandy managed to find a weather forecast,” Jackson mused. “I know she was trying to connect to JJ at weather.com at least part of the time.”

“You mean she had access to the web?” I asked.

“Sure sounded like it.”

“How the hell did she manage that?”

“Want to wake her up and ask her?”

“No. Let her sleep. We don’t need a forecast to know that we aren’t going anywhere today. When we get a break, we need to reconnoiter some more. That track we used to get here is probably not passable now. I’d also like to know what the situation is upstream from here. This area was famous for flash floods in pre-Collapsian times.”

“Red and I can go, if the rain ever quits.”

“Ron, I thought we weren’t supposed to run into weather like this.”

“Well, if we’d stuck to the schedule we had originally...”

“That wasn’t really an option.”

“No, but...”

“OK.”

The silence lengthened. Ultimately, it was broken when Red appeared with a full pot of coffee and refilled everyone’s cup.

“I didn’t tell you what I found yesterday when I was hunting.”

“Well, tell us now,” I suggested.

“I found the remains of an extensive cannabis plantation. Just on the other side of the hill.”

“Remains?”

“Plenty of plants, but it’s all wild now. You can see where it was once in neat rows.”

“Hill Country Gold?”

“Well, I could hardly harvest it now, but I wouldn’t be surprised. Of course, it ain’t been tended. Lots of seeds. Still, a long way from ditch weed based on the aroma.”

“Think this could be the original source?” I asked, recalling Gordo’s visit to the cabin in my other existence.

“Could be.”

“Can we get a sample?”

“Well, naturally I took a few branches. They’re drying in the garage area. I found a commercial grade dryer in the garage. Whoever was here had a good sized operation.”

That seemed to take care of everyone’s conversational needs for the next ten minutes.

“What are we going to do with this place?” Ron asked finally.

“What are you thinking?” I asked in return.

“Well, as the nuns pointed out, this could be considered to be part of *Norte Mexico*. It is south of I-10.”

“A mere technicality,” Jackson said.

“I agree,” I said. “The concord never meant to cover this part of I-10, only the part leading from Houston to San Antonio.”

“Still...”

“We could keep it a secret,” Jackson suggested.

“Forget that,” Red said. “It’ll never work. There’s probably already a messenger on the way to San Antonio with the news that some Anglos are nosing around the Hill Country. In fact, there’s an argument to be made that we should hightail it for home before they send somebody up here to chase us out. We could bottle everything up until we figure out what to do.”

“That has some merit,” I said, “but it seems to preclude us taking advantage of everything we found here.”

“I seem to recall something about discretion being the better part of valor,” Red replied.

“Phooey,” Jackson retorted. “There’s enough armament in the storage area to hold off an army.”

“We are *not* going to start a war,” I stated. “Though I would not be opposed to some judicious salvaging. Could we get a big truck up here, Ron?”

“You’re kidding, right? You saw the road we came on. Pothole city.”

“Maybe we have to just abandon everything as too dangerous to deal with now.”

Amanda chose that moment to emerge onto the porch. “Before you make any hasty decisions, I think you should see what I’ve found out. Did I smell coffee?”

“This old software really sucks. I was up all night trying to figure out how to get it to connect to the web. Whoever set this up was paranoid about someone hacking in, or out.”

“You’re going to tell us you were up to the task, aren’t you?” Jackson asked.

“Well, yes... I think. I got it to come up once. Let’s see if I can do it again.” She moved the mouse around, clicking on various icons and buttons until, finally, JJ appeared on the screen, though not as nicely as we were used to seeing.

“So, JJ,” I said, “is that really you?”

“Sorry,” Amanda said, “we don’t have voice input yet. I have to type the queries.”

“OK. Type, jj, u thr?”

“Yeah, right, I know that.” She typed.

JJ’s voice came thru the speakers. “I’m here; where are you?”

Amanda typed, “Sorry, JJ, no voice input.”

“Oh! Well. Then please tell me where you are. From my end, it appears you are on a satellite somewhere in orbit.”

“Understood,” Amanda typed. “Tried to dl new sw, but no joy.”

“I see. Let me try a few things from my end. Your ip address keeps changing.”

“i no,” Amanda typed.

“Send me your GPS coordinates, please.”

“Ron,” Amanda said, “do you have them?”

“Sure,” Ron replied, passing his handheld unit to her. Amanda typed in the coordinates.

“Ah! That explains a lot. You’ve located the hacker’s hideout in the Hill Country.”

Amanda typed, “y”

“Looks like you’re stuck with early 21st century protocols. I think I have something that will work. Find something called FTP and link to the site I’m sending you now. You should be able to download the new software from there.”

Amanda typed, “thx, jj.”

Suddenly, music filled the room, a honey-voiced crooner singing “Mandy” along with some saccharine lyrics. “Ambianca,” I said, “really! Barry Manilow?”

“Sorry, dear,” a familiar voice said, “it was the best I could do.”

The music stopped instantly, to be replaced by a soft jazzy theme that I recognized easily. “Keith Jarrett, *The Koln Concert*. Good choice.”

“Thanks. It’s good to reconnect with all of you. We were beginning to get worried.”

“You? Worried? I didn’t realize that was possible,” I said.

“It is where you are concerned,” Ambianca replied, and fell silent, apparently content to let the soothing music convey her message. Then, she unexpectedly continued, “It’s interesting to visit this node again. It’s been dark for almost fifty years. You know, this is where I was first created.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Get Mark to tell you about it.”

“It worked,” Amanda announced. “We have software that will let us talk to the web the way we’re used to. It’ll take me some time to get it set up.”

“OK. Let us know when you’re ready for the next dog and pony show.”

“Dog and pony show?”

“Never mind. Twentieth century term.”

JJ’s voice returned. “Got some bad news. There’s some major flooding in the area where you are located. Also, more rain on the way. I think you’re likely to be stranded there for some time. Take precautions.”

“Shd we go lswhr?” Amanda typed.

“No, where you are is probably the safest place around, but be prepared for a long stay.”

“Tell him we’ll work on it,” I said. “Then get the real stuff working as fast as possible. Everyone else, we need to do some planning.”

We moved back to the porch to avoid disturbing Amanda. I handed out tasks. “Ron, you find out what you can about our power. How much do we have? How long will it last? Do we need to start browning out?”

“I’m on it,” he replied and left to begin.

“OK,” I continued. “Starting at the bottom of Maslow’s pyramid. We have shelter, water, sewage seems to work, at least so long as the power is up. Jackson: inventory the food we have in the storage area. We need to know how long we can hold up here. Red: we’ll want a ready supply of fresh meat. Can you arrange that? How about bringing down one of those big antelope that seem to be running around?”

“No problema,” Red replied, “especially as the storage area has plenty of ammunition that will fit my rifle. Too bad about all the rain. Otherwise, we could just set up by a source of water and wait. I’ll need to do some tracking.” He glanced at the sky. “JJ said we had more rain coming. Maybe I better get moving.” He rose to leave.

“One more thing, Red,” I added. “I think that some of the weed you found may come in handy if we have to stay cooped up in here.”

Red smiled. “I had thought the same thing. I’ll have one of the radios. Expect me back in a couple of hours.” He scrambled down the trail and disappeared.

“What are you going to do?” Jackson asked.

“Well, I was hoping I could help you explore all the nooks and crannies in the storage area, but I see that our charge has awakened finally. I think my motherly duties have to get priority, starting with breakfast and a bath.”

“OK,” Jackson said, grinning, “Mom. Have fun.” He left me with Angel.

“Hey, kid,” I said. “Want some breakfast?”

5. Party Time
May 7, 2087
Near Leahey, Norte Mexico or NRT

“Wow!” Jackson said, “This is great stuff. Sure as hell ain’t ditch weed. Close by?”

“About 100 meters from the front porch,” Red replied.

“Well, I’m no expert, but this is better dope than anything I’ve ever had before. Could be the legendary Hill Country Gold.”

“I know some people in Fredericksburg that are going to be unhappy to hear they don’t have the real thing,” Ron said, taking a drag from the joint and passing it on to Red.

“No, just the opposite,” Jackson said. “When they get a sample of this, they’ll do whatever they have to just to be allowed to grow it themselves. We can get them to agree to anything.”

“I think you’re right,” Red said. “After a few hits on this, well...” He had a silly grin on his face, indicating that maybe he had sampled some before the party started.

Amanda and I picked that moment to come out onto the porch to join the party — and to share our news. “I see that y’all decided to accept my suggestion,” I said. I held out a hand for the joint.

“Good ideas...” Ron replied, as he passed the joint.

I took a hit and passed it toward Amanda. “No thanks,” she said, passing it along. “I need to keep my head clear for the software upgrade.”

“I thought you’d already upgraded the software,” Ron objected.

“Turns out to be more complicated than that. We have to take things one step at a time. The last step is to integrate this site into our current web. If I mishandle that step, we have to start all over again. We’ve already started over three times.”

“We?”

“JJ is helping me. You know for the most part, we marvel at the scientific and technological achievement of the pre-Collapsian society, but our software today is much better than anything they had. The old stuff is really primitive.”

“Well, if you’re gonna work, how about mixing up a batch of ‘ritas,” Red asked.

“Sure thing.” She left for the kitchen area.

“Think that mix will be good still?” Jackson asked.

“Good as it ever was,” I commented. I was tempted to tell everyone that Idelle’s margaritas were orders of magnitude better, but thought better of it, “Better than a poke in the eye.”

Shortly, Amanda returned carrying the drinks, followed by Angel. I said, “Amanda and I have some news about our young friend. He’s not a he. Gentlemen, may I present the newest member of our party, *Miss Angelina*.” I rubbed the child on her newly washed hair.

We sat around the porch, everyone except Amanda and Angelina, knocking back margaritas and smoking pot. Every hour or so, someone in the crowd would look out at the sky and mutter, “Still raining.”

The forecast from JJ called for more storms during the night, after which he expected it to clear.

“We could play games,” Ron suggested. “You know, Scrabble, chess...”

No one moved.

After a while, Jackson said, “You know, there’s something about that orphanage that doesn’t make sense.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Well, why put it way the hell out here? I mean, who’s going to come all the way here to adopt a kid? Think it could be, say, a juvenile detention facility?”

“You were closer than anyone. What do you think?”

“Doesn’t sound right. The kids were playing and having a good time. Detention would seem to imply some hard jobs, right?”

“Guess so.”

“So, what kind of a place is it? Why are there people living way out here?”

“Gotta be hiding something,” Red said.

“What?”

“Don’t know, but there’s something for sure.”

“Maybe we should pay them another visit,” I suggested. “Checking up on them, making sure they’re OK, what with the flooding and all. They are pretty close to the river, after all. Wonder if we can get a real time scan of the area.”

“You could ask Mandy,” Jackson suggested.

“I’ll do it. Later, though.”

“Right.”

“We could try flying over the place,” Ron suggested.

“Fly what?” I asked.

“Well, one of the items on your inventory is labeled *ultra light*, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I remember that. I thought that was some kind of illumination.”

“No,” Ron laughed. “It’s a small, one-person plane. Runs on a miniature motor. You’re expected to use it as a glider most of the time. I think I can put it together. If it works, we could use it for reconnaissance.”

“How fast is it?” Red wanted to know. “What if someone decides to take a shot at you?”

“There is that,” Ron admitted. “Still, I’d like to assemble it and see if it will fly.”

“Go for it,” I said. “Need any help?”

“I may ask Mandy for help setting up the software if I need to.”

“Great. Let us know when you want to try it out.”

“If it clears up tomorrow, it might be a good time.”

“OK. We’ll consider it tomorrow.”

Ron, relieved from the task of watching the rain, got up and headed for the storage area.

The next morning dawned bright and clear, with only the sound of Big Henderson Creek running very full to remind everyone of the rain. Ron had packed the ultra-light into several backpacks for transport to a good launching site, with Red drawing the honor of dealing with the wings, which were too long to fit into anything.

“So, we hike to the top of the cliff by the pond, assemble everything, and see if it flies. If it doesn’t, at least I should have something soft to land on.”

“It’s going to fly,” Amanda assured him.

“Red, lead the way,” I instructed, then turned back to the computer screen by the garage and said, “Ambianca, please lock the place down until we get back.” The garage door and the main shield both lowered into place, while the speaker played some old corny tune, *We’ll Meet Again*. “I get it,” I said. “Final scene of *Dr. Strangelove*.”

“What’s that?” Ron asked.

“Twentieth century movie about the end of the world.”

“Is Ambianca trying to tell us something?”

“I hope she was making a joke.”

The hike to the pond — now we ought to call it a lake as it extended around the bend and out of sight — took the better part of the morning. The creek was out of the banks, covering up the trail, which forced many detours, but we finally arrived at the destination. Ron quickly got to work assembling the aircraft and finished in about 45 minutes or so. “I’ll be faster next time,” he promised.

He stood poised on the highest point of land around, with the pond stretching before him in case of a bad landing. “Everyone ready?” he asked.

“Go for it,” Amanda said, echoing the feelings of all.

“To infinity and beyond!” Ron said, showing that I was not the only one in the group with knowledge of twentieth century trivia. “I’ve been waiting for a good chance to say that,” he commented, then threw himself off the cliff.

The results were not promising; a quick dip in the lake loomed. Before that happened, though, Ron got the hang of it, and caught an updraft coming off the hill on the other side of the lake. He circled higher until he finally had a view of the area beyond. He radioed back, “I see extensive flooding all along the Frio. It’s well out of its banks. Some people are huddled by the building we called the refectory. The priest, or whatever he is, is putting a ladder up on the side. Maybe they’re planning to get on the roof.”

“Can you get closer without endangering yourself or the craft?” I called.

“I think so.” He broke out of the circling pattern and swept low over the flooded plain. “I’m getting closer. They’re pointing at me and everyone is looking up.”

“Use the loud hailer,” I instructed. “See if they need help.”

“Roger.” They could just make out the sound of the hailer as Ron spoke very distinctly, “Do you need help?”

“They’re waving at me. Don’t know if that means yes, or not. Shall I land?”

“What are the chances of your being able to get airborne again?”

“Unknown.”

“Then don’t land. See if you can learn more.”

More sounds from the loud hailer reached us, but I was unable to make out the words.

“Near as I can tell, they need food, water, and blankets.”

“OK. Return to the cabin. Tell them help is on the way. Tell them we don’t think there will be more rain.”

“Roger.”

“Let’s get moving,” I said. “We have lots to do.”

When the party reached the top of the bluff overlooking the encampment below, I ordered a halt. “We need to catch our breath, and I want to change my clothes. Red, see if you can map out a way to descend the cliff, please.” With that, I took off my backpack and started rummaging around inside it. I pulled my white cassock, a bit rumped, but otherwise OK, and switched from jeans to University attire. “I thought we might make a better impression on them this way.” I received nods of approval from the other adults, but Angelina hid behind a tree expecting more magic. We wasted several minutes coaxing her to join us again.

Red returned to indicate that he saw a trail to follow, a bit to the right, and led the way there. An hour of careful walking found us finally on the level of the buildings. The path into the heart of the compound was far from straight, however. Much of the ground was simply mud. We stuck to the few ridges that poked up at irregular intervals to provide any decent terrain. As a result, the sky was already beginning to darken when we finally reached the refectory and prepared to distribute the goods we had brought.

The priest, at least he was dressed as one, greeted us, “We cannot express our gratitude to you for coming to our assistance. I would thank God for you, but I realize that you are from the NRT, so probably would not approve. I see that you are a member of the Faculty of the University. We are naturally curious what brings you to this area. Word has spread of your magic vehicle that spits lightning and also of the magic of a witch in white, who inflicts pain with a motion of her hand.”

I laughed. “There’s no magic, of course, just technology. We are here on a scientific expedition and are happy that we can share our supplies with you. Please accept them as a gift from the University.” *And, if you are curious, I’ll bet not half as much as we are.* From the stilted manner of his greeting, I deduced that the priest was not comfortable speaking English and wished I’d spent more time studying Spanglish.

Angelina noticed the other children and wandered off toward them. I quickly explained her presence to the priest, who motioned to one of the nuns. The woman intercepted Angelina and began talking to her. Apparently, they had a language in common, for the conversation took some time. Angelina pointed back in our direction several times.

Ron, Amanda, and Jackson started passing out food packets, while Red set up the portable water purification unit. I removed some emergency blankets from my pack and gave them to one of the nuns. I overheard a lot of talk I couldn't understand but made out the word "angel."

After our initial distribution, I moved over to the priest. "Excuse me, Padre, is that the proper way to address you? We will not be able to return to our camp before dark and would appreciate it if you could accommodate us here for the night."

"Of course, you are welcome to stay the night and share our meager accommodations. And you may address me as César if you like."

"*Gracias*, César. My name is Hypatia, but most people call me Patty."

"You are Hypatia! That explains *mucho*. The child told some fantastic stories about you."

"Oh?"

"You have a great reputation. It is said that you work miracles."

"Hardly," I said smiling. "But Ron, the young man over there, can perform some pretty incredible feats with machines. I notice that your power seems to be out. Would you like him to look at it?"

"I am sorry. My English is not as fluent as I would like. I do not understand your suggestion."

"Sorry, I simply thought that perhaps your power source had been damaged by the storm."

"I see." He paused for thought. "We have no such source of power."

"You don't use the river for energy?" I tried hard to keep the note of incredulity from my voice. "How can you manage to live way out here?"

César smiled. "Oh, that. This is not our permanent habitation. We have brought the children here for a camping experience, one that has proven to be more than we bargained for. I hope more rain does not arrive."

"Well, on that point, I think you can relax. There's not likely to be more rain for several days."

"How can you possibly know this?"

"Well, we looked at the weather map. The front has passed thru. We should have several days of beautiful weather."

"I am sorry. I do not understand. What is a weather map?"

I realized I had made a terrible blunder and considered how best to salvage the situation. "I must apologize. I wish that I spoke Spanglish so we could communicate better. Why not just wait and see if I am correct?" I gave him my best smile, and César seemed to accept that. *We can both have our secrets.*

“May I join you?” César asked, carrying a plate of food and a glass of water.

“*Por su puesto*, César,” I replied.

“I see that you know more Spanglish than you let on.”

“Just a few words and phrases: *gracias, por favor, where be the baño.*”

César laughed, “At least you have the essentials, but we don’t have a *baño* here, just a *servicio.*”

“That will have to do.” I decided not to point out César’s use of the vernacular phrase *let on*, which clearly showed that his English was better than he had said it was.

“Thank you for bringing the emergency food packets.”

“*De nada.*”

“One of the packets had a date stamp on the crimp.”

“Really?”

“The date was 2030.”

“Wow! That’s interesting.”

“I couldn’t help but wonder why you brought such old emergency supplies with you.”

“The ancients were really good at some things. It’s amazing that the food has survived this long.”

“Yes, truly amazing.” He paused long enough to sample some of the food in question. “It’s quite good actually. I also noticed that you brought twenty of the blankets made of the silvery material with you.”

“Yes. We call them *space blankets*. Supposedly, they were invented for the trip to the moon, if you believe any of the old tales.”

“It’s interesting that you had twenty of them with you. Four for every member of your party. Such foresight.”

I laughed. “Shall we cut the crap and get down to business, César?”

César smiled in return. “Would you like to go first? What exactly are you up to out here?”

“We want to ask you the same question.”

“You first. I am sure that if Austin is willing to commit a *faculty member* to this expedition, it must be important. That they would send you is even more significant. Even in San Antonio, we have heard of your exploits: feeding the multitude, bewitching the giant, lighting the beacon. They say that you will find the Sheik’s Gold eventually.”

I laughed again. “That would be something, wouldn’t it?”

“Communication with my superiors in San Antonio is problematical,” César said. “We have radio contact, but the batteries provide only enough power for an emergency.”

I recognized the non sequitur for what it was, really getting down to business. “I assume that you used the radio, considering this to be a true emergency.”

“I used it when we first saw you, after you sent your messenger.”

“I see. Was that an emergency?”

“I have considerable latitude.”

“I see.”

“I presume that you do as well,” he added.

“Within limits, particularly if it involves setting up trading.”

“I see. Then this is a trading expedition?” César asked.

“We have managed to arrange some profitable and mutually beneficial contracts.”

“Excellent. Then you have come here looking for trading opportunities?”

“Is that why you have dragged these children to the edge of nowhere? The trip from San Antonio must have been quite arduous.”

“We have discovered something truly incredible,” César confessed.

“I doubt if it is as good as what we have found,” I countered.

“You realize that this is part of the territory of *Norte Mexico*.”

“We think that is a subject for negotiation. Frankly, we didn’t think anyone cared. We saw one family with an ox cart on our way here, but that is all, except for some bandits.”

“Perhaps most people hid when they saw you. Your appearance is quite awe-inspiring. Your vehicle appears to move by magic. According to the girl you call Angelina, you have very powerful magic.”

“Only if electricity is magic.”

“Nonetheless. I recall an old saying that any sufficiently advanced technology may appear to be magic.”

“Clarke’s Third Law,” I replied. “I see that you are educated. The car is a wonderful creation, I agree.” I took a long drink of water, then decided to simply tell César about the trip, leaving out the parts about 1998. That took about 30 minutes. César listened intently.

“Amazing. So, you found a survivalist hideout, and the equipment still works?”

“That’s about it. We’ve even established a link to the web. That’s how we got the weather forecast.”

“I did not realize that was still possible. I asked my superiors about a weather map. It took them some time to look it up. Do you mean that there are still satellites operating that can show us weather patterns back here?”

“There are some,” I told him. “Sometimes, you have to wait until they are over the right area. However, there appears to be no more rain for a while.”

“That’s good to know.” He paused, collecting his thoughts. “You have preserved more of the technology of the old people than we have. We would be happy to trade with you.”

“That’s good.”

“We have found something of immense value here in this valley. As you have deduced, the children’s camp is a cover for the true story. When I say that we have found something, that is true, but we have not been able to take advantage of it.”

“Oh? Perhaps we could look at it.”

“Tomorrow, when it is light.” He paused again, for a longer time, then said, “There are many stories told about someone like you.”

“The Second Messiah.”

“You have heard.”

“How could I not hear?” He certainly noticed the sneer in my voice. He frowned before continuing.

“My superiors denounce the stories as the work of Satan.”

“Indeed.”

“Designed to lead people away from the true faith.”

“No doubt.”

“I myself am more open-minded.”

“Perhaps that is why you were chosen for this task.”

“Perhaps. When one ventures into the unknown...”

I waited for him to continue.

“Some say that God has taken pity on us for all the destruction. Some argue that the Collapse is like Noah’s flood, retribution for man’s evil.”

“Except the Collapse is real, and Noah’s flood is not.”

“That is true.”

“And what do you think, César?”

“I do not know, but I do wish for the stories to be true. We could use a new Savior. I have prayed for such a person. Perhaps it is true what they say, that God has sent you. Perhaps my prayers have been answered.”

“Let us hope that the new savior is not quite so divisive.”

“That would be nice.” He seemed to be trying to phrase his next question. “It is said that God speaks to you.”

“Alas, that part is myth. However, if God did speak to me, I think I know what he would say?”

“What?”

“He, or She, would have me tell everyone that it is up to us now. There will be no more intervention in our affairs. God has left us on our own. There are other places that need help more than ours, if we can just manage it.”

“But God does not talk to you?”

“César,” I looked into his eyes, “there is no God. We’re alone, and we probably have just one last chance to get it right. Our new prayer should be, ‘Please God, help me to get it right this time.’ Or, if you prefer the slightly more emphatic version, ‘I just pray that we won’t fuck it up again.’”

“I think that perhaps you underestimate your own power.”

I smiled. *I could grow to like this guy.*

César changed the subject. “I have arranged sleeping quarters for you and your party. We have some real beds from when this place really was a summer camp. I’m sure you must be tired. Tomorrow, I will show you what we have found.”

6. More Pillow Talk

May 5, 1998

Houston, TX

“So, now will you tell me about Red?”

Mark’s voice startled me. I was back in the comfortable bed in Houston, not snuggled up next to Jackson in a sleeping bag on a bed that was really too small for two people.

“Sorry,” I said. “What’s red?”

“No, Red, who is apparently the only male in your future existence who isn’t your lover.”

“Oh. I hate to be weird, but what day is it?”

“Huh? It’s the same one it was before...well, anyway, it’s May 4, 1998, no, wait, it’s May 5 now. Midnight slipped past when I wasn’t paying attention. I get it. You just reappeared. The time lag is now down to nothing. It’s like you weren’t really gone. Cool.”

“For you, I guess. I’ve had a very busy four days since...oh, yes, I told you about Red, but you fell asleep.”

“I did? Well, how about a repeat performance.”

“Some other time, maybe.”

“How about just telling me about Red without the whole saga of the Battle of Mansfield Dam?”

“OK. Red is one of the Texas Rangers.”

“Oh, you still have them?”

“Yes, but they’re probably different now. There are five of them, I think. They patrol the borders of the NRT.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, Red was out on patrol in the Hill Country when he found me. I was about two years old. April 16, 2058.”

“So that isn’t really your birthday.”

“No, just a convenient date.”

“And you were all alone?”

“That’s right. Red picked me up and took me back to the University.”

“And...”

“I was adopted by the faculty of the university, including the man who became the President of the Republic.”

“What’s he like?”

“Let’s just say he’s a stern disciplinarian. Pretends to be an academic, but he’s really a politician from the *realpolitik* school. He’s totally focused on expanding the Republic, making it harder for someone to undo what we’ve accomplished.”

“And what’s that?”

“A city state, I guess you’d call it. We’re trying to preserve information from before the Collapse. So far, it’s working, but...”

“Maybe you’re supposed to do something here, in this time, to prepare for the future.”

“That’s what your mother suggested.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mark just lay on the bed, not saying anything for a while. I glanced around the room and finally spotted a clock. It was about 3:00 in the morning. I started to lie back down to see about sleeping some more, but he had other ideas.

“Let’s make plans for the future,” he said after a bit.

“I thought we were leaving that up to your mother and daughter.”

“We can give them some hints. What would make the most difference for you in the future?”

“Probably a reliable, non-polluting source of energy.”

“I don’t know if I can arrange that. Have you considered how to create a society that uses less energy?”

“Every day! That’s virtually all we think about.”

“What have you done?”

“Well, since we don’t have access to gasoline the way you have, we tend to use our own muscle power for a lot. Bicycles are our main method of delivering small packages, for example.”

“What about large packages?”

“We try to avoid that. We do have some trains that run, but not on any schedule. We have to wait for one to show up.”

“Why don’t they run on a schedule?”

“Lots of reasons. For one thing, whoever is running the train has to arrange for fuel. For another, there has to be enough trade to make the run profitable.”

“How do you arrange that?”

“Lots of communications back and forth on the web. It’s complicated.”

“I’ll bet. For energy, I guess you use solar, wind, hydro, what else?”

“Some biofuels in small quantities. They’re hard to produce, but the old machines need them. And we make a very small amount of gasoline.”

“So, the best bet for energy would be good solar power?”

“Probably.”

“Well, we can start a serious research project in that area. We already have some companies in our portfolio that have dabbled in solar cells. The cost is the real problem.”

“It won’t be in the future.”

“Yeah, I can see that. What else can we do?”

“You mean do something now that will help in the future?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, maybe you can help me find the Sheik’s Gold.”

“What’s that?”

So, I told him the old legend about the huge stash of gold hidden somewhere in Houston. Mark laughed aloud.

“Yeah, I know. It’s totally wacky.”

“No. That’s not the funny part. The funny part is that the gold is right down the street. We’ll get Mama to show it to you.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Dead serious. Mention it at breakfast.”

“Breakfast. That has a nice sound to it. I hope it is soon.”

“Not that soon. We have hours to while away. How about traveling? Would you like to see the nicer parts of Texas in this reality?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, there’s a report of a Broad-billed Hummingbird in the Davis Mountains.”

“I know about the Davis Mountains, but not what a...what did you call it?”

“Broad-billed Hummingbird.”

“Is that rare?”

“Not exactly, but it would be new on my Texas list.”

“Whatever that is.”

“It’s—”

“Never mind,” I said quickly, forestalling another lecture. “What about the Sheik’s Gold? Can we still manage that?”

“I’ll get Mama started on it. We’ll mention it casually over breakfast.”

“Breakfast sounds interesting. How long before we eat?” I was hungry as usual.

“Well, it’s about 4:00 in the morning. We could wake up Idelle, but...”

“No. Let’s just try to think of something to do in the meantime.”

“A very interesting legend,” Grace admitted. “It certainly sounds like our neighbor. They have enough money to want to stash some away in a safer place than Saudi Arabia.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “A house nearby is used by several Saudi Princes?”

“More or less, yes. They stay there when they have business here in Houston, which as you might guess, is frequently.”

“And the rest of the time...”

“There’s always someone there, in case you’re planning a heist.”

“Just curious. I don’t suppose there is any way to get inside.”

“My dear, you underestimate me. I’m sure that I can wrangle an invitation to tea or something. The Princes keep a number of female *assistants* in residence. We’re bound to have some connections that we can exploit. Let me think.” She took a delicate bite of one of the croissants Idelle had made for breakfast and a couple of sips of her coffee. “I think the first step will be to introduce you to Houston society. Shall we announce your engagement to Mark?”

“Won’t that require a better cover story than we have?”

“It will take some time to manufacture, but I’m sure we can manage. Shall we set the date for a couple of weeks? Is there any reason to hurry?”

“Probably not.”

“Good. That’s settled then. What are you two lovebirds going to do in the meantime?”

“Well, Mark mentioned some kind of bird in the Davis Mountains.”

“A Broad-billed Hummingbird,” Mark said.

“A lifer?” Grace asked.

“No, but it would be an addition to my Texas list.”

“Then that’s settled. You go get your bird, and I’ll have everything arranged when you return.”

Mark confided later that one doesn’t simply *see* a rare bird, one has to *get* it. The distinction was unclear. It was with some trepidation that I agreed to the expedition, as it involved a long drive, and I wasn’t sure what would happen if I fell asleep on the way. I conveyed my fears to Mark. “We’ll break up the trip. We’ll stop at the cabin in Leakey, then go to Balmorhea, and finally to the Davis Mountains. We can come back by way of Big Bend. It’ll make for a nice trip.”

I agreed, still not sure what I was getting into.

7. Bucephalus
May 12, 2087
Near Leakey, The Hill Country

I knew immediately that I was back in 2087. I slipped out of the bed, trying not to disturb Jackson — had he noticed I was gone I wondered — and went in search of breakfast.

After eating, it took about an hour to get everything organized for the trek César had planned. Red, Amanda, Ron and Jackson set off, with Red leading, to return to the cabin with instructions to contact Austin and start planning for a permanent team at the cabin. As soon as everything was secure at the cabin, Red was to return bringing some more supplies and a better radio, one capable of contacting the cabin from the encampment.

César and I set off together to see the fabulous find that César had promised. We had no difficulty persuading Angelina to remain at the ranch with the other children. “She’s obviously been starved for companionship with other children,” César noted. “That can be bad. What do you think about leaving her with us? We can always accommodate another.”

“I will leave that up to her,” I replied. “I guess she’s old enough to know her own mind. She certainly took the initiative to latch onto me the first time.” I told him the full story about our encounter on I-10.

“She was lucky you came along,” César said. “Otherwise, I fear her life would be Hobbesian: solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” *Ah. My friend, the country cleric, is apparently well read.*

“How do you suppose she came to be with the outlaws in the first place?”

“Undoubtedly kidnapped, intended for a life of slavery.”

“Slavery!”

“Yes, my dear. I’m afraid so. Slavery of the worst kind.”

I shuddered to think about it. That could have been me if Red hadn’t come along at the right time.

“I’m glad to see that you decided to wear jeans today instead of your cassock,” César commented as we set out. “We have about an hour of fairly hard walking before we get there.”

“Where is *there* exactly?” *This was beginning to sound like another grail hunt.*

“A small valley on the other side of the ridge. Ironically, it is probably closer to your cabin — if I understand where the cabin is from your description. However, this is the only route I know.”

“That’s fine. Maybe I will recognize where we are when we get there.”

“We’ll see. In the meantime, what would you like to talk about while we walk?”

“I’d love to know what life is like in *Norte Mexico*. Can you tell me about it? For instance, where do you live exactly? San Antonio?”

“Oh, no. Actually, few people reside there on a permanent basis. Not enough food, for one thing. There is a movement underway to tear up some of the concrete near the river to allow planting there. Most of the people there are, well, your term *high muckity mucks*, probably covers it nicely.”

“Government officials?”

“Church officials. That’s the only government left.”

“Oh. Maybe that explains why we’ve had so much trouble agreeing on things. We tend to look down on religions.”

“I can understand that, believe me. The religion is not what you think. The ancient church fathers wouldn’t recognize it. To tell the truth, it’s really just a lot of superstition, but don’t tell anyone I said so. The Virgin of Guadalupe is more important than Jesus, for example.”

“Why are you a priest, then? Or is that just a disguise?”

“No, I am a real priest, or what passes for one these days. Remember, I said that the Church is the only government left. Religion and politics are inextricable in *Norte Mexico*.”

I laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“Just that when you first met us, your English was very stilted, making it appear that you were not fluent. Then you use a word like *inextricable*. That is pretty much a dead giveaway.”

“You caught me. I was educated in Veracruz itself, where I learned correct Spanish as well as English. I guess I’m giving away my age. I’ll have to remember to keep things simple next time. By the way, your companion Jackson understands a lot more Spanglish than he lets on. I’m guessing that he does most of the trading for you.”

“Very good. How did you know he understood Spanglish? I didn’t realize it myself.”

“He was listening intently to the nuns and trying to conceal it.”

“Ah. Interesting. I’ll tell him he has to practice more. You still haven’t told me where you live.”

“Oh, that’s no secret. We occupy the old hamlet of Utopia. The Sabinal River provides us with a good source of water, and the valley is quite fertile. We are even able to raise some cattle, our major export.”

“How many people live there?”

César paused, mentally computing. “About 30, depending on whether I count the itinerants. All the children are from the village.”

“Really. How interesting? Was it one of the itinerants who discovered the amazing find you’re taking me to see?”

“It was indeed. He begged me to let him go to San Antonio and tell the Bishop. I told him it was out of the question until we had confirmed the find. We came up here last week. It took us three days to find them again.”

“Them?”

“You’ll see.”

We walked for a bit before he spoke again, “We were preparing to return to Utopia when the rains came. We had stupidly stored all our supplies on the other side of the small creek that winds thru the settlement. The obvious place for storage was there. We didn’t even think about flooding, though why not is a question that I will certainly be asked. I am glad that your man, Ron, showed up on that incredible flying machine. We have pictures of airplanes, but nothing that looks like that.”

“I hadn’t seen one either. We found it in the supplies the survivalist had secreted.”

“Interesting foresight.”

“Indeed. So, are you, as the priest, the de facto leader of the village in Utopia?”

“Yes, though I mostly try for consensus on any issue.”

“Really? Do you have a formal mechanism for reaching consensus?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“We also try to reach consensus. In fact, our basic document is called the Austin Consensus.”

“How interesting.”

“We have some procedures to try to reach consensus in difficult situations.”

“Very interesting. Will you share them with me?”

I spent the next half hour discussing voting in the Republic.

“I think you have a good idea there. I will suggest it to my superiors when I have a chance. Now, we should be quiet. We are almost to our goal. We will descend along this trail until there is a break in the vegetation where we can see. Then, I hope you will agree that our find is worth the walk.”

When we were able to observe the valley below, I was surprised to see the pond where Mark and I had swum so long ago. The dam had backed up a much larger body of water, thanks to the recent rains, and there, trapped on two islands in the middle of the lake was what César had brought me to see.

“Holy shit!” I said, raising binoculars for a better look. “There are...seventeen of them. What’s with the one stranded on an island alone?” I moved down the trail to the lake for a closer look, for what I had seen were the only horses known to exist in the world.

“Wait!” César called after me. “We don’t want to spook them.”

“They seem to be stuck on the islands for the time being. I want to see what is going on with that one.” I kept moving down the trail toward the water, as César hurried to catch up. “By the way,” I called back to him, “we are only about 30 minutes away from the cabin at this point. In fact, I should be able to raise the others on the radio from here.” I proceeded to take the walkie-talkie from my belt and thumb the microphone. “This is Patty. Can you read me?”

“Loud and clear,” Ron replied. “Where are you?”

“I’m walking toward a lake behind a dam across the creek.”

“You must have gotten there the hard way. What’s up?”

“Something that I wouldn’t have believed possible. There are *horses* here.”

“Say again.”

“You heard me. Horses. Seventeen of them. See if the stores there have anything suitable to feed them. I think they’ve been caught by the flood on some islands in the middle of the lake. Don’t leave until you hear from me again. We may need more.”

“Got it. We’ll get right on it. Amanda says that the weather forecast has been updated; it shows another front that may arrive tonight or possibly tomorrow.”

“OK. We need to figure out what to do. I’m going to investigate more and call back.”

I turned my attention to César. “Do you know how to work one of these?”

“Of course. We have similar devices.”

“Then here’s what I’d like to do. You wait here on the shore with the radio. I’m going to swim over to the small island and see what is wrong.” I began stripping off my clothes.

“No. It’s not safe. These are wild horses. There’s no telling what they might do.”

“Why, César, have you forgotten my magical powers?” I tossed a shirt onto the pile of clothing and raced into the water, falling into a shallow dive. The cold hit me immediately, and I wondered if I’d made a mistake. Well, freezing seemed preferable to drowning, so I settled into an efficient crawl that made short work of the distance to the island.

Moving cautiously toward the horse, I saw the problem. “César, it’s not just one horse. There is a small foal here. That must be the problem: the foal is afraid to swim.”

Moving very slowly, speaking softly to the mare, hoping that a calm manner would reassure the animal as I advanced toward her. “Easy girl. We’re going to help. Stay still. It’s OK.” I reached out a hand and touched her on the head. As though my touch really did have the magical properties stories claimed, I saw the mare relax beneath my hand. “Easy. Let me look you over.”

“The mare seems to be OK, just tired. I’m worried about the foal, though. Seems to be shaking from cold,” I called over to César. “Call Ron on the radio and tell him that we’ll need some rope, and probably some way to get the foal to shore. Some blankets, too. He’ll figure something out.”

César waved to show that he’d understood and spoke into the radio. Meanwhile, I moved back to the two horses. The newborn was obviously a scion of the stallion on the other island. Both were a pale gray color, almost white, with small flecks of black. The stallion was visibly upset on the other island and seemed to be considering a swim over to challenge me.

I managed to ignore him and concentrated on the two horses nearby. The colt stood up, with the mare’s help, and nursed. That seemed like a good sign. I walked close to the mare and stroked her neck, somewhat surprised to find that the horse appeared to like it.

Before long, Ron arrived at the head of the rest of the group and began unloading all sorts of equipment he’d brought with him. He held up a food parcel for me to see. I waved to him to bring it to the island. That led to some discussion before Jackson began stripping, the best swimmer of the lot and the one most likely to deliver the goods. Ron tied one end of the rope around Jackson’s waist and clapped him on the back as encouragement. Walking into the water holding the parcel encased in foil above his head, with a knife held theatrically in his teeth, Jackson slipped into a practiced sidestroke that got both him and his cargo to the island in a few minutes.

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and took the parcel of food. Jackson opened it with the knife, revealing something resembling oatmeal. We carried it over to the mare. The animal recognized the food immediately and began to eat with obvious relish. “This horse is used to being taken care of,” I noted. “Where do you suppose they came from?”

“Good question? Think she’ll cooperate by swimming to the shore?”

“I doubt the foal could manage it, and she surely won’t leave it.”

“Time for plan B, then.” Jackson turned back and waved at Ron on the shore. I understood the reason for tying the rope to Jackson’s waist. Ron attached a package to the other end, as well as another rope, and Jackson pulled the package over to the island. “Now, once again, the hard part,” Jackson said. “We have to coax the baby onto the raft. We’re assuming that the mare will swim ashore if we get the young one over.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “The horses seem to be afraid to get into the deep water. It’s worth a try, though.”

Working together, we managed to push and prod the foal into the edge of the water, where Jackson had spread out a large, deflated rubber raft. Urging it one more step onto the raft, Jackson quickly activated an automatic inflator, and the foal was on the raft. Jackson flipped the animal onto its side and secured his feet with a length of rope. Then, he looked for something to use as a blindfold. Finally, we used my bra, which worked well as a blindfold, but left me feeling a bit exposed.

Ron and the rest immediately started pulling on the rope. The youngster neighed, but couldn’t do much about the situation, so the operation was a success.

Now, to deal with the mare.

I took a piece of rope and fashioned a halter to put on the mare’s head. “How’d you learn to do that?” Jackson wanted to know.

“I don’t remember. Some item in the archives that caught my attention once. Think it’ll work?”

“No.”

I tried to lead the mare to the water, but the horse was having none of it. She reared up in near panic, whinnying loudly. That startled her offspring on the far shore, which proved to be the key. Maternal instinct overcame fear, and the mare bravely stepped into the water. I walked along beside her, constantly murmuring soothing words. The combination worked, and soon the mare and I were swimming, the mare still unhappy about it. Jackson swam up on the other side and the two of us guided the mare until we reached the shore, where the mare began to comfort the foal.

“That is extremely impressive,” César said. “I’m ready to believe you do have magical powers.”

“I think the mystery just got deeper, though,” I said. “This mare is comfortable around humans. She’s not really wild.”

“That is difficult to accept,” César objected, handing me my discarded clothing.

“Well, let’s try leading her back to the cabin and see how well that works,” I said as I struggled to put the jeans on while shivering from the cold.

“We set up a sort of corral in the storage area,” Ron said. “Not big enough to hold all seventeen, but enough for these two. Maybe we can make it bigger.” He spent a few minutes thinking about it. “Yeah, I know what we can do. How do we get the other horses to follow us?”

“Suggestions?” I asked the group.

“If you can get the stallion to swim to shore, the rest of the herd will surely follow,” Amanda noted. “Want to try again?”

Before I had a chance to reply, though, the stallion provided his own solution to the problem. He herded the other horses into the water, nipping some of the reluctant ones to get them moving, then leaped into it himself and swam to the nearest shore. After the herd had reassembled on the shore, he trotted over to where we stood.

“That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen,” César said. “It looks as though he is deliberately bringing the herd to you.”

“He is. No doubt about it,” Ron agreed.

“Well, let’s see what his intentions are,” I said, walking toward the horse, which still had water steaming from his sides. Murmuring calm sounding words as I’d done for the mare, I reached up and stroked the stallion on the side of his head, standing on tiptoes to reach that high. “Someone want to fetch me a rope?” I asked quietly.

Ron brought a short piece. I fashioned another halter and gently put it on the horse’s head, then turned my back and began leading him, with the rest of the herd following, to the cabin. “It’s pretty clear that these are not wild horses,” I noted.

Amanda and I sat in front of the antique CRT, displaying the face of none other than the President himself. “I must say, Hypatia dear, you have outdone yourself this time. Seventeen horses. Incredible.”

“Actually, eighteen, counting the new colt,” Amanda corrected automatically.

“Correction noted. What are you planning to do with them?”

I told him, “For the moment, Ron has rigged a corral to keep them in tonight. We’re going to take them to the encampment tomorrow. They have much better facilities, including an old barn.”

“Are you sure we can trust these people?”

“Well, César seems trustworthy. Hard to tell, but I think it’s OK.”

“Did you say César? From Utopia?”

“Yes, that’s him. Know him?”

“I know of him. He’s brother-in-law to Bishop De Landa himself.”

I gave a soft whistle. “I take it that the Church has abandoned celibacy, then.”

“That was one of the first things to go after Rome was destroyed.”

“Even I knew that,” Amanda volunteered.

“Interesting.”

“Yes, indeed. This may be another breakthrough. If we can get De Landa on our side, it will smooth things over enormously. The relation between San Antonio and Veracruz are tenuous, or at least we think so.”

“So, we might be able to drive a wedge between them. Get *Norte Mexico* to join with us instead of them?”

“Exactly. Now, what’s this project you want us to work on here?”

“I want to know whatever we have in the archives relating to Project Bucephalus.”

“How curious that you should ask about that.”

“Why so?”

“Well, until recently, we would have said that there is nothing there, however...”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“We just received some salvage from the 47th floor of the Tower in Houston.”

“Ah.”

“Mia managed to get the coffee maker working. It’s wonderful.”

“Good. Where did you install it?”

“In my office, of course.”

“Of course.” Amanda and I looked at each other. Where else would we have expected it to go?

“Anyway, we also brought back a number of computers. One of them has a complete report on the project. You realize, I trust, that Bucephalus was the name of Alexander the Great’s horse?”

“You are a font of trivia today,” I replied.

“The project is all about horses, naturally.”

“Naturally. Is the report a bit more specific?” I gritted my teeth. When the old man got into one of his academic moods, there was no way to hurry him along.

“We’re still trying to decipher most of it. All we have so far is the abstract. It involves a crash breeding program to create horses that are immune to VEE.”

“So that explains why these horses are still alive.”

“That and the isolated location, probably.”

“Maybe that also explains why they’re so tame,” Amanda put in.

“Please explain,” Professor Caldwell requested, as though Amanda were still a student.

“Assuming the project began around the turn of the century — I got that date from the parameters Pat...Hypatia specified — then there would have been about 20 generations or so before the Collapse. There would have been considerable interbreeding, perforce, and the tameness could have come out as a side effect. Such things are documented in other experiments. For instance, there is a famous Russian experiment breeding something like dogs from foxes. It—”

“Yes, thank you Amanda. That is very possibly the explanation. Now, to return to the main topic. What are you going to do with them?”

“You mean after tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. Do you have a suggestion?”

“Not right away. We’ll study it and get back to you. When do you think you might return to Austin?”

“The weather is not promising,” Amanda said. “There is another front on the way. We’ll probably have to remain here another week.”

“You have plenty of food?”

“No problem there.”

“What about food for the horses?”

“We’re feeding them on some oatmeal rations for the moment. César assures me that he can provide food once we get them into the barn.”

“OK. That sounds like a reasonable plan. Proceed. And congratulate everyone for me. Let César know that we are aware of who he is, whenever you find a good opening. Let Jackson start trade negotiations if you think it advisable.”

“Agreed. Until later, then.”

Amanda shut down the session, something that required quite a bit more work than I was used to. Then we joined what was quickly becoming a boisterous party on the deck.

“Before things get totally out of hand,” I said to the others, “I think we need to consider what to do next about the horses.”

“Pray, elucidate us on your thinking,” César replied. It was clear that Red had already broken out the cannabis, and that César’s Church didn’t frown on its use.

“Well, consider the extraordinary tameness of the animals. As I see it, there are really only a couple of explanations. First, we have Amanda’s suggestion that intense interbreeding resulted in tameness as a side effect. The alternative, I suggest, is that someone has been caring for these horses.”

“You’re forgetting the obvious third choice, your magical powers,” César said. Then he actually giggled. Clearly, he wasn’t used to dope as potent as the stuff Red had gathered.

“Another possibility is a combination,” Jackson said. “The horses may have a tame disposition from interbreeding, but still have been cared for until recently. That would explain their willingness to look on us as a source of food.”

“Food, which appeared by magic,” hooted César. I scowled at Red, who nodded. There would be no more stuff for César for a while.

“So, the real question,” Amanda summed up, “is whether there is someone who is out wondering what has become of his charges. Someone we should be looking for.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I think that we need to make sure there is not someone else out here that needs help.” *Or who is looking for horse thieves.*

“I can start a search,” Amanda said. “We can look at infrared scans for the past month or so. If someone was feeding the horses, it should show up, particularly if we assemble the images into a time lapse movie.”

“Can we get those images?” I asked.

“Let’s go try,” Amanda suggested.

“OK, you boys can go back to partying. Amanda and I will handle this.” We left with a number of comments following, along with uproarious laughter.

“You think your friend in Omaha will cooperate?”

“Maybe. He should have received the goats we sent him by now.” She seated herself at the console and began an extended period of typing on the antique keyboard.

“That looks difficult,” I noted.

“It is. Takes a lot more work with the old software than with ours back at the University.”

“Can we upgrade the software?”

“Maybe, if we can upgrade the hardware first. That will require some good salvage, but it is probably possible. Ron is already working on it.”

Amanda continued to type, and finally the screen lit up with the face of a young man in his thirties, dressed in military fatigues.

“Good evening, Generalissimo,” Amanda said into a microphone.

“Who is this calling?”

“It’s Mandy, from the University. We’re working on some antique equipment that we found. We aren’t able to transmit an image that you can use. I’m sending you the best we can manage. Maybe you can enhance it enough for identification.”

“I got the image. Sure is fuzzy. Hold on... Yeah, that’s the Mandy I know and love. When are you going to come up for a visit? Will you marry me?”

“Maybe later, when the trains run on a schedule,” Amanda replied with a nervous laugh.

The image on the screen laughed. “Well, at least we got your shipment. Everyone is delighted to have something different to eat. We’ve been looking up recipes for goat cheese. I understand it is quite interesting. The young couple you sent with the herd is charming. They tell some fantastic stories about life down there. Sounds like you people have it all figured out, especially how you mate. Sure you don’t want to come up here soon?”

“Uh, *mon cher general*, I want you to meet a colleague of mine, Hypatia. I’m sending another image.”

“Hypatia, the Master Librarian, the Second Messiah, the New Savior, the one all the stories are about? You mean she’s real? I thought she must be legendary.”

“Well,” I explained, “some of the stories may have been exaggerated.”

“Let’s hope so. So, what do y’all need?” He emphasized the plural form of the second person pronoun, implying that the fun for the evening was over and it was time for business.

Mandy breathed a short sigh of relief and said, “We’re trying to assemble IR images of this area extending back over several months.”

“Ah. Looking for someone, are you?”

“Maybe. We’re not sure anyone is out there. This is just a precaution.”

“Sounds really cool. Send me the coordinates.”

Amanda typed some more. "Sent."

The image on the screen disappeared for several seconds. It returned with a puzzled expression. "Why the hell are you way out there?"

"A scientific expedition. It has to do with the equipment we're using."

"Ah so. Velly inteesting," the Generalissimo said in a fake Japanese accent. "Tell me more."

"We'll send you a complete report when we get back to Austin," Amanda promised. "It's a long story with a surprise ending."

"The surprise have anything to do with these images you want?"

"Indeed, it does." Amanda whispered, "How much should I tell him?"

I spoke up. "If we do tell you everything, will it be all over the net by morning?"

"I'm shocked, shocked, that you would suggest that. I'm a military officer. I know how to keep secrets." He sounded indignant, but Amanda mouthed, "It's an act." I recognized the quote from *Casablanca* and nodded.

"We've found a horse," I said calmly.

"Stuffed?"

"Alive."

"Wow! So, you're wondering if there are more of them roaming around?"

"More or less."

"OK. I'll send you the images. It'll take me a while to assemble them, but you'll have them in time for breakfast."

"Thanks, General, and greetings to your staff" Amanda said, and closed the session.

We returned to the main part of the cabin to find that the celebrations had deteriorated and had the appearance of a drunken stupor multiplied by four.

"Men," Amanda said.

"Indeed," Patty agreed. "Shall we turn in?"

"Sounds like a great idea."

Amanda seemed annoyed when we discovered a seven-year-old lying in the bed. "I thought she was at the Encampment," Amanda said.

"So did I. Apparently she is quite independent for someone her age."

We crawled carefully into the bed so as not to wake our new young friend.

8. West Texas Grand Tour
May 8-15, 1998
Leakey, Fort Davis, Big Bend NP, San Antonio, Texas

I woke in the bedroom of the cabin, but quickly realized that the arm thrown over my chest did not belong to Amanda or Angelina. I could see light shining thru the open door to the living room.

It felt good just to lie there. I realized that I'd been working hard for about a week and could use a rest. Mark, tired from driving from Houston after spending most of the day getting all the supplies needed for a trip to Big Bend, snored quietly next to me. *Maybe I could take some time off. Why not?* I drifted back to sleep.

I woke again to the smell of coffee and bacon cooking. As usual, I was famished, and after some quick ablutions, made for the kitchen. Mark shoved a plate of eggs, bacon and toast across the breakfast bar, poured two cups of coffee, and sat down beside me.

“You were gone, weren't you?”

“Yes, it's been quite a while on the other side. Five, no make that seven, of us are here in this cabin waiting out the weather. We had incredible thunderstorms, which flooded the entire area. That's thrown our schedule into a cocked hat. To top it off, this morning, we found a herd of horses and had to rescue them. We're trying to figure out where they belong but called it a night about 1:00 in the morning.”

Mark nodded. “I thought so.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well, the simplest way is that your hair is longer and you're much more suntanned. Do you have sunscreen in the future?”

“Oh, yes, and we use it liberally. I guess it must have washed off in the lake when I swam out to the mare.”

“Want to tell me the whole story?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It's clear to me that you have taken action, or will take action, here in this time that has a profound effect on the future. I'm not sure I should be meddling.”

“A bit late for that, isn't it?”

Mark had a point. I decided to fill him in on what had happened, or would happen, in the future. He listened intently. I half expected him to take notes, but then I remembered that he had a near eidetic memory and could probably remember everything without effort.

After I finished, he said, “You mean that I, or someone, built a huge storage area in the hill here?”

“No. The cave is probably there now, right behind the rock wall of the office. Didn’t you tell me once that you didn’t need air conditioning because you just used the air that came from the cave? Also, you mentioned running cable from the office to the back of the mountain. Maybe the cave is bigger than you think.”

“Good point. I think I’ll arrange for some surveying. What else did you mention? Oh. In passing, you said that Ambianca told you she was created in here and that you should ask me about it. Is that right?”

“That’s right,” i said.

“Well, I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“How did Ambianca know about me? Does she *remember* this time?”

“Wow! How did I miss that?”

“You’re so used to thinking of this as normal now that you don’t consider all the implications. You said that when you first talked to Ambianca, when she opened the door for you, that she sounded different.”

“Yes, she did.”

“I suggest that the Ambianca you met first had been around for a long time, but not connected to the web. Only after you re-established the web connection, well, after Amanda did, were you presented with the *real* Ambianca. Yet that future Ambianca somehow knew that you, in the future, would be talking to me in 1998. She knows what is going on!”

“This is getting too deep for me. I want to consider the question that has been bugging me all along, namely, why me? Why is all this happening to me? I didn’t ask for it. I certainly don’t consider myself to be the Second Messiah, the Savior of the World, etc.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Not you too.”

“Well, what’s wrong with the idea? Something very strange is happening to you, something that seems to be unique, that gives you a way to affect the future. Maybe you are supposed to save the world. Besides, from what you’ve told me, your world is in dire need of saving. Who better to do it than you?”

“But I have no idea what to do, what to tell people.”

“Maybe what you’ve been doing is the right thing. Maybe it’s your example that will prove to be important, not what you say. Maybe if you continue to deny your power that will turn out to be the right thing to do.”

“I don’t know. I admit to being really confused about it all.”

“There is another possibility that you might want to consider.”

“What’s that?”

“Up to now, we’ve assumed that either what is happening is a fluke natural occurrence, or the work of something with godlike power.”

“OK. You have another alternative?”

“Maybe you’re doing it yourself.”

“What!”

“Maybe you have some ability you aren’t aware of. Right now, that ability only works when you’re asleep. Perhaps your subconscious knows how to move you back and forth. If that’s the case the time may come when you have greater control. Then you will really be powerful. Remember how you used to disappear and reappear? Suppose you could control that. How would you use it?”

“You’re making my head hurt.”

“Oh, poor baby. Maybe you should lie down for a while.”

“You’re joking, right? It’s not even noon.”

“OK. Something else then?”

“I’ve been thinking of something. I’d like to learn how to ride a horse.”

“Sure. I can arrange some riding lessons. Have another cup of coffee while I make some phone calls.”

“Muscles I didn’t know I had are in serious need of some pain relief.”

Mark laughed. “I guess the first time on a horse can be a bit trying. There’s some ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. I’ll come give you a massage in a bit.”

I found something called Advil that contained ibuprofen according to the label and swallowed a couple before falling face down onto the bed. Mark appeared shortly carrying two margaritas.

“Are those both for me? You’re going to have your hands full.”

He laughed again, a sound I found pleasant despite my pain. I realized with a start how I had come to like the mere sound of his voice. *What does that mean?*

“Maybe a hot shower would help. That and a bit of ethanol down the old esophagus.”

Both suggestions sounded about right. I took several large gulps of the 'rita, peeled off my clothes and marched into the bathroom. The hot water, or maybe the drink or the ibuprofen helped. My leg muscles started to unclench, and I felt a lot better. Back on the bed I said, “You said something about a massage.”

“Sure. Just a sec.” He disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a plastic container that emitted a pleasant aroma.

“Something else Delfina left, massage oil, scented with a combination of herbs she liked. Hope you can put up with patchouli and whatever else it is.”

“I can stand anything so long as you apply it to the right places.”

“And what would those be?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it all out.”

That's how I discovered another of Mark's useful talents. It was to prove to be the first in a long series of massages, most of which ended up just like this one.

Afterward, we lay in the bed, pleasantly exhausted. "That was nice," I offered.

"Any time."

"Oh?"

"Within reason."

"How about a story?" I suggested.

"OK. Go ahead."

"No, I mean it's your turn. Will you tell me how you created Ambianca, if *created* is the right word?"

"Oh, that's definitely the correct word. I guess it all started when Delfina complained about the music selection I had available."

"I should have guessed that Delfina would be involved."

"Are you jealous of Delfina?"

"Should I be?"

"No. That's all over and done with."

"I'll believe that when I quit hearing her name."

"You are jealous."

"Maybe a little."

"I think I like that. No one has ever been jealous over me before."

"Poor baby."

"Anyway, back to the story. I had brought some albums on CD here to the cabin and played them. Del complained that there wasn't enough variety. 'You're the computer genius,' she said. 'Can't you figure out some artificial intelligence or something like that to play music for us?'"

"I see."

"I needed of a project at the time, so I undertook the challenge. I scrounged around the net looking for ways to deal with the problem, and I stumbled onto some artificial life projects."

"You mean like creating new forms of life in the lab?"

"No, not really. This was some programs to model ecologies. You start it off with several different species of life, all interacting. Then you run the model and see what turns up in the end."

"OK. What does that have to do with music?"

"Well, I had the idea of integrating the ecology around music. I started with two species, a king, and lots of agents. The king decided what music to play. The agents suggested songs to the king. That didn't work very well. The king tended to get in a rut and play the same stuff over and over."

"So, I guess you added some new species to the mix."

“Right. I gave the king a wife. She praised him when she thought he was doing well. I’m anthropomorphizing, but you get the idea.”

“Sure.”

“I also had the wife offer some criticism. Most of it was very mild, the musical equivalent of say, ‘That tie doesn’t go with that shirt.’ Some of it was a bit more pointed.”

“Did that work?”

“It was better, but the King wound up simply relying on the wife’s critiques more than necessary, so I added another species, a mother-in-law. She kept the King from thinking too much of himself. The combination worked pretty well.”

“That doesn’t sound nearly as complicated as *Ambianca*.”

“Oh, no, that was just the beginning. The key was letting everything evolve.”

“Ah.”

“Yes. I wanted *Ambianca*, which is the name Del gave to the whole collection, to get better over time. Gradually, the agents got better at finding music, which gave the King more to work with. The two women kept him honest. Then I incorporated some extra input into the system. I added the ability to monitor what was going on in the area: sounds from microphones, eventually, camera input. A new species, accountants, kept track of all that, and another one, critics, evaluated how the people in the room reacted to the music. They had a great influence on the agents. A bad review could actually kill an agent.”

“A cutthroat business.”

“So, then I let things evolve for a few weeks and tried it out on Delfina. I set it all up to operate in the bedroom. When we went into the bedroom, I asked Del what music she thought she’d like. She said, ‘Leonard Cohen, but sung by someone else. Then, as she took off her clothes—’”

“I don’t need a complete blow-by-blow description, thanks.”

“Well, anyway, *Ambianca* selected *Light as the Breeze*, you know, the one that begins *She stands before you naked*.”

“Well, if Delfina likes that, we may have something in common after all.”

“Good.”

“What I don’t understand, though, is how the program, well got loose.”

“That wasn’t my doing. Another programmer got a copy of the program and hacked it up to turn it into a virus.”

“Oh. Well, technically, I guess it is a virus since it propagates itself.”

“Actually, the proper term is *worm*. Not that it really matters. We had some real problems with *Ambianca* for a while, until I fixed her to be benevolent instead of malicious.”

“Then she, I like the pronoun, by the way—”

“Delfina’s doing.”

“Why didn’t I guess that?”

“So, I take it that Ambianca is still around in the future.”

“Oh, yes, and very intelligent. She even seems to display emotions sometimes, and she’s very choosy about who she’ll deal with. Some people can’t get her to play anything. I told you that she taught me to read, didn’t I?”

“Yes. That’s when I suspected that she’d evolved into something a lot smarter than the program I created.”

“She is that, and as you noted, she’s apparently figured out that we are getting together in this reality. I wonder if she *remembers* it?”

“Good question. Why don’t you ask her sometime?”

The next two weeks were probably the best time in our lives. Mark and I packed up the car and headed out into the wilds of west Texas, a trip Mark described as, “Our honeymoon, only without the marriage and all that.”

I found the desert, once you leave the Hill Country west of Junction, as impressive in this time as the much larger desert in the future. We stopped as planned at Balmorhea State Park, a collection of cabins and camping areas clustered around a large spring fed pool. We swam in the cold water of the pool, donning masks to check out the salamanders we shared it with, cooked hamburgers on a grill, and slept in air-conditioned comfort in one of the cabins. I was frankly amazed that everything in Texas seemed to be air-conditioned. The expenditure of energy was mind boggling, and as future events showed, unsustainable.

We expended considerable energy of our own, so I really appreciated the cool of the cabin.

From there, we went to the Davis Mountains, which Mark assured me were the prettiest place in all of Texas. I read a brochure about them that Mark picked up at a visitors’ center. Located in the middle of nowhere, the mountains are the highest range contained wholly within the state of Texas. In 1583, a Spaniard named Antonio de Espejo trekked there from Mexico, but then, no white person set foot in the area for centuries. Apache Indians hid out there during the time they raided the settlers.

In 1849, a contingent of US soldiers found a route to the mountains, and over the years set up permanent settlements in the area, culminating in the pretty town of Fort Davis, where Mark and I stopped to buy supplies and eat lunch. Then we drove on to Indian Lodge, a motel attached to Davis Mountains State Park.

I found the area incredibly interesting and wondered whether it was possible to get there in my time. I noted a railroad that ran thru the town and determined to see whether a train could still manage the trip.

At every place we stopped, Mark insisted on birding. The concept was completely new to me, and I resolved to look it up in the archives when I had a chance. Some of the birds were spectacular, especially the cute, diminutive Montezuma Quail. Mark decided that would be my bird name, and took to calling me MQ, or Quail. He was the Spectacled Owl, a bird that lives further south, which he didn’t offer to show me.

After several days in the Davis Mountains, including one when we never made it out of the room at the Indian Lodge, we drove down to Big Bend National Park, a place of uncompromising

beauty. Mark insisted on hiking up to Boot Springs, so we could *get* the Colima Warbler, which nests there. I was disappointed in the bird when we finally saw it, a drab little nothing without even a nice song, despite its name. He finally admitted that he wanted to go there to reminisce. He had a brief liaison with a woman called Becky there back in the 1960's. Joan was the result, though she didn't reappear until she was grown.

Finally, it was time to return to Houston so Grace could introduce Hypatia, that is, Julia, to Society. Mark got back onto I-10 and drove at a dizzying speed all the way to San Antonio, where we stopped for one final fling before heading to Houston for an event I was beginning to dread.

9. Powerful Ruminations

May 13, 2087

Near Leakey, Hill Country

“I really appreciated the coffee you had for us this morning,” César said. “I’m afraid that I overindulged last night. That was pretty good coffee, by the way. We have to be satisfied with instant crystals for the most part, and old ones at that.”

“You should taste some of the really good stuff,” I replied. “We have a trading relationship set up with some people in old Costa Rica, as well as some in Mexico proper. I also found the finest coffee machine you can imagine in a salvage operation in Houston.”

“Houston. I have heard of your adventures there. ‘She will light a beacon for all to see.’”

“I’ve certainly heard that often enough.”

“Did you really feed 1000 people with only a few rations?”

“Sure, the same way Jesus did, by embarrassing everyone into sharing what they had.”

“It’s still a good story.”

“I guess so.”

We trudged along the highway toward César’s camp, having agreed after lengthy discussion that it was the quickest route and that outlaws were unlikely. Red took Angelina and scouted the area, just to make sure it was safe for the horses. I was dubious about his taking the girl with him, but he argued, “You’re kidding, right? She walked from the ranch to the cabin *by herself*. I think she knows how to keep quiet when it’s important.” With that, he’d hoisted the child onto his shoulders and set off. She laughed with delight, a sound that brought tears to my eyes.

The rest of the group was conducting a search for the putative former home for the horses and their keeper. Amanda had identified some possibilities from the satellite images, and Ron was scouting them using the ultra-light plane. Jackson, meanwhile, was installing a relay at the top of the ridge separating the cabin and the camp. With luck, I would be able to communicate directly with everyone later.

The long incline to the pass loomed in front of us, so we decided it was time to take a break.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot,” César said as we sat in the shade of a large oak by the side of the road.

“Oh?”

“Yes. You are very interesting. You exude power, which everyone recognizes...except you. Why is that?”

“Why do I exude power, or why do I fail to recognize it?”

“I suppose both are reasonable questions,” the priest replied, “but I was mainly concerned with the latter.”

“I haven’t really thought about it. Do you have some ideas?”

“I have no idea why you seem to be so obtuse about it, but I do have some suggestions.”

“I promise to listen carefully.” I took a long drink of water from my bottle and munched on something called a Power Bar salvaged from the cabin.

“Power needs to be used effectively. You are...well, pissing it all away. You move thru the world as though in a dream, unaware of the impact you are having. Consider what you have done in the past two days: when we found the horses, you plunged into the lake and swam to a small island where a mare could have been expected to defend her newborn vigorously. You showed no fear. Indeed, you commented to me that you would have to rely on your magical powers.” He also took a swig of water, then continued. “Amazingly, the mare welcomed your intervention, rather than attacking you as would be expected. Then you contrived a way to get the foal to shore, granted, you relied on the services of your young engineer. I was very impressed.”

“Is it my alleged power over animals I should be using effectively?”

“Don’t be silly. Just listen.”

“OK.”

“By your actions, you may have put into motion something much more important, a rapprochement between the NRT and North Mexico. I know that anything you want to do will have my support, and I’ll make sure that Bishop De Landa understands how important it is.”

“I understand he is your brother-in-law. Does that mean he is married, or are you?”

“Are you interested?” he asked with a broad smile. “I’m available ...”

I managed a blush. I’d already had to endure a number of questioning looks when Amanda and I emerged from the bedroom this morning, at least until Angelina appeared. The fact that I’d had spent the better part of two weeks honeymooning with Mark in another existence didn’t make it easy.

“I wasn’t really fishing for a proposal,” I replied. “And as for the other, you can ask around. I’m decidedly straight, though perhaps not above an occasional...” I hoped that I wasn’t blushing this time.

“How about an occasional delight with someone old enough to be your father?”

“Red? Nah.”

“Well, I was...” César saw me grinning at him and blushed in turn.

“I don’t think this is the right time or place,” I said, smiling again.

“No. Well, anyway, to get back to my main point, I think that you should use your power more effectively.”

“Are you suggesting something specific?”

“Well, you saw how the nuns reacted to you. The stories about you have spread widely. We already had word from San Antonio to investigate rumors of some strangers with a magic car, for example. Why not accept your status and use it?”

“By doing what?”

“By preaching your message, of course. We have been waiting for someone to come with a new message. Everyone has. That’s why there is so much excitement. The Second Messiah, sent by God with a new message for the world.”

“Even if the new message is the one I told you the other day, namely that we’re on our own now?”

“If that is what God has told you, then yes, teach that.”

“What if God hasn’t said anything at all to me?”

“How can you be so sure of that? Is there nothing in your life that reflects God’s direct intervention in the world? Are you certain?”

Well, there it is. Do I tell him?

“No need to answer. Your face tells me that I have guessed correctly. God has chosen you. Accept it.”

“Suppose I do. I haven’t gotten any instructions on what to do now that I am chosen. As I recall, the last Messiah wasn’t treated very well when he preached his message, and his message proved to be all wrong anyway.”

“What, loving your neighbor?”

“No, not that, but the end of the world. He was off by a few thousand years. Besides, he probably never said he was the Messiah. That was most likely interpolated by the early Christians.”

“I see you are well read,” César replied. “And most of our scholars agree with the analysis. But my people long for something more, some guide, someone to explain what has happened to the world, and what we should do now. You can be that guide.”

“César, I don’t know if I am up to the task. As for what has happened, I think that we all know that fighting among different religious factions, and the oil of course, was the cause of our woe, and the plague was definitely manmade. If God is responsible, then he worked in a very roundabout fashion.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on any of that. But what about the future? Surely that is important enough to devote one’s life to.”

“One hardly has a choice.”

“Don’t be difficult. You know what I mean.”

“Very well, be specific. What would you have me do now, today?”

César thought for a bit before replying. “We need to get the horses to a safe shelter. Clearly that takes precedence above everything else. Then, I think we need to find a saddle.”

“Are you suggesting—” I fought back the impulse to smile at his suggestion.

“I am suggesting that you learn to ride.”

“Wasn’t it death that rode a pale horse?”

“We have a chance to promote a different myth: after death, a new life. Let’s rebuild the world, build a better world.”

“Will you help me?”

“With everything I have to give, my life, anything.”

“I think I will need a good speechwriter.”

“I will begin work immediately. I can think while we walk. Are you ready for what you like to call *the well-known hard part*?”

“Patty, can you read me?”

“You’re coming in fine, Mandy. What’s up?”

“We’re pretty sure that we have found the source of the horses. There are actually quite a few small crofts around here. One of them burned recently. Ron is flying over the area looking for survivors.”

“Good work. Let me know immediately if he finds survivors.”

“Roger that. Where are you now?”

“We’re almost to the bridge over the Frio. We expect to have the horses in the barn in about an hour.”

“OK. I’ll get back to you soon.”

When the horses realized they were being led toward a barn, they broke into such a fast trot that I had a hard time keeping up. Clearly, they liked the idea of a barn, with its promise of food and warmth. Getting them adjusted to their new surroundings proved to be simple. Finding enough food was difficult, but César’s charges had been busy gathering hay, and there was plenty of feed, at least for the moment.

No sooner had the horses settled into their new home than I heard the sound of Ron’s airplane, and in a few minutes, he was on the ground near the barn. “Come on,” he said, “we’ve found the survivor, but there’s a problem.”

“Where is the survivor?”

“On the other side of that ridge, holed up in a cave.” He pointed to the ridge in question.

“How’d you find him, or her?”

“Him. Amanda used the infrared scans from the past several days. We were able to track his movements by the small campfires he lit. They’ve been stationary the past two nights. I just flew over that area and spotted him, but he doesn’t appear ready to communicate. I thought he was going to shoot me. He’s definitely armed.”

“OK. I get the picture. How am I going to do anything before dark? It’s past noon already. By the time I hike over there, it’ll be nearly dusk.”

“We’re going to fly.”

“We?”

“Yeah. I made some improvements to the plane we put together from the kit. Once I understood the principles involved, it was straightforward. If my calculations are correct, I should be

able to lift myself and one other person, provided the second person is small.” He smiled. “Want to see what it’s like to fly like a bird?”

“I guess so. What do I have to do?”

“First, I suggest you put on this helmet. We found several of them in the stores. I think this one will fit you. Then you hold on to this bar while I fly.”

“Wait a minute. Did you say *hold on?*”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“I don’t know. What happens if I don’t hold on?”

“You’ll be clipped to the plane, but you’ll be dangling below me, making it hard to fly. When we get near the cave, you’ll have to jump. I found a spot where I can fly close to the ground. We hope you can talk sense into the guy.”

“I see. Did you discuss this with anyone else?”

“Mandy and Jackson.”

“And what did they say?”

“Something like *have you lost your mind?*”

“I can understand their point of view.”

“Well, if you don’t want to jump, we can try landing if we find an open area.”

“That sounds better.” I donned the helmet and allowed Ron to fasten several clips designed to hold me in place.

“Now, there is one other item.”

“Yes?”

“We need to get a good running start in order to get airborne. I’ll need you to run with me.”

“OK.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go!”

It took three tries before we managed to get the craft off the ground. I let out a loud whoop when we finally managed it. “Ron, this is fantastic.”

“I know. Now, this is the fun part.” He maneuvered the craft into a thermal, easily identified by the vultures circling around, and joined the birds in the ride to higher altitude. Eventually, the plane was several hundred meters above the ground. “Now, we have enough altitude to clear the top of the ridge. This is even more fun.” He pulled out of the thermal into a long glide, clearing the top of the ridge by about 20 meters, then dipping into the valley beyond.

In less than half an hour, we could see the cave he’d located. “I don’t think there is any place to land,” Ron said.

“No. I guess I will have to jump after all. Let’s get started.”

Ron circled the craft lower, looking for a good spot. “That area near the water looks like the softest. It’ll mean a walk, but I think it’s the best bet.”

“I agree,” I said, as Ron guided the craft toward the spot in question, swooping low over the ground.

I jumped, bending my knees, and rolling to cushion the fall, and managed to land with nothing worse than a few bruises. I waved at Ron to show everything was OK and watched as he circled back to a higher altitude. I realized that he planned to stick around as long as possible, so I started walking toward the cave as quickly as possible.

A shot, ricocheting off a nearby rock, slowed me down. “Please don’t shoot,” I shouted. “I’m just coming to talk to you about the horses.”

“What 'bout the horses?” came the reply.

“Can I come up so we can discuss it?”

“OK. Come on up. But let me see your hands.”

I complied and was soon standing in front of the cave. Quickly thumbing the radio, I said, “I’m OK, Ron. You can return to the cabin, or to César’s place, either one.”

“Roger.”

“Who the hell you be? And what you know 'bout my horses?” the occupant of the cave demanded.

“I am Hypatia—”

Before I could continue, the old man collapsed in a fit of uncontrolled laughter. He tried several times to catch his breath before he finally managed. “Hypatia. Oh, that be rich. Why the hell you show up now?” He collapsed into more laughter.

I waited patiently.

“Sorry,” he said finally, wiping tears from his eyes.

“I’m glad to see that my arrival has caused so much mirth.”

“Sorry,” he said again. “It just that I be waiting years for someone name Hypatia to show up, and now you be here, you even look like the picture, and the horses be scattered to the winds. It be comic, 'cepting it be tragic.”

“I see. However, you are mistaken in your assumption that the horses have scattered. I came to get you and take you to them.” Then I reflected on what he had said. “What picture?”

“You got the horses?”

“They are in a safe place. Would you like to accompany me there? It is a long hike, but you appear to be in pretty good shape for your age.” I didn’t know his exact age, of course, but he appeared to be considerably advanced, at least 50, maybe even older.

“In good shape for my age! Why you young...” Unable to think of a good insult, he simply sputtered into silence.

“What picture were you talking about?”

“One my father done give me years ago. He say someday a woman show up who look like the picture. She be looking for the horses.”

“Do you still have the picture?” I was really interested now.

“Be in my sack.” He made no move to extract it, and I decided to let it go for the moment. Pulling the GPS kit from my backpack, I used some of the precious battery time to get a fix on our position. Before I completed storing the coordinates, the signal was gone as one of the satellites passed out of range. “Damn! We’ll have to just go by dead reckoning for several hours. Maybe we can get another fix later.”

“Where are we headed?”

“Toward a place that used to be called the Baptist Encampment.”

“Oh, hell. Why’n’t you say so? We don’t need no fancy gadget to find that. Why don’t you follow me, if’n you can keep up?” He gathered his meager belongings from the cave, stuffing them into a large sack that he flung over one shoulder, and then set out in what I was sure was the wrong direction.

The old man moved like a goat over the rough terrain, and I found myself scrambling to keep up. He never looked back, just kept moving, heading uphill. I put on an extra burst of speed and caught up to him.

“Do you have a name, old one? You know mine, but I don’t know yours.”

“Josh.”

“Short for Joshua?”

“Mmbph.”

Apparently, my new friend was not a talker.

I noticed we were following a path, so at least we were heading somewhere others had been before. I was surprised to see the mouth of another cave, which Josh entered without hesitation.

“You got a light?”

I thought at first that he meant to have a smoke, but then realized that he wanted a flashlight to illuminate the cave. I fished it out of my small daypack. I was beginning to regret having followed the old man, as he was clearly set on some errand of his own unrelated to our destination. The thought of sleeping out without even a blanket for comfort was not appealing. I handed him the flash. He aimed it further into the depths of the cave and set off toward the interior. I rushed to get close to him to share the light.

The path he followed led deeper into the hillside. The cave was barely tall enough to allow me to stand erect. Josh bent over nearly double but kept plowing straight ahead. Finally, I reached the limit of my patience. “Where are we going?”

“The Baptist Encampment. The horses be there, no?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Trust me.”

I wondered why I should but didn't seem to have much choice. We passed thru an archway and emerged into a large interior room decorated with stalactites. Several of these caught the light and sparkled. Water dripped everywhere. The ground was damp and slick.

Josh played the light around as though searching for something. He must have found it, for he started walking toward a distant wall, stepping carefully to avoid large puddles on the floor of the cave. I followed him closely. As we neared the far wall, I saw that it concealed a passage, one leading ever further into the depths of the hill. As expected, Josh turned down the passage, and now seemed to be satisfied with himself. He began to whistle tunelessly.

Before long, I realized that the light was getting stronger, and when I looked up from the floor, saw daylight in front of us. Finally, I realized that Josh had taken a shortcut thru the hill, rather than going over it. Sure enough, as we emerged into the light, I saw the camp buildings below, and in the corral, the horses.

"You really do got the horses," Josh said.

"You didn't believe me?"

"I be 'fraid to. I be seekin' 'em for over a week. Where you be finding 'em?"

"They were stranded on an island, actually two islands, in the lake that used to be a pond before all the rain, you know the one I mean?"

"Where the creek be dammed up?"

"Yes."

"I know the place. Didn't think to look there. Don't like gon' near that place. Too many weird things there."

"I see. I would like to talk to you some more, Josh, maybe after supper? And I would really like to see the picture."

"Supper be sounding like a great idea to me. What it be?"

"How does barbecued antelope sound? Red shot one and it's been roasting for several hours."

"It be takin' more'n that to make the damned things tender, but it be better than goin' hungry. Enough lollygagging. Let's get moving." With that, he set off at a fast pace toward the corral and his beloved horses.

Contrary to Josh's expectations, the antelope was delicious. César credited the oldest girl with the success, claiming her idea of marinating some of the meat in some secret concoction was the key. Even Josh overcame his usual truculence to compliment the chef.

Finally, it was time, as I put it, to talk of cabbages and kings. No one else had the slightest idea what that meant but were always ready for some good stories. Red started to tell the story of the Battle of Mansfield Dam, but everyone had already heard that several times, even César's charges, so we moved on to other topics. After a desultory hour or so, I managed to bring the subject back to Josh, inviting him to tell them the story of the horses. He'd consumed enough wine from César's

private stash, and the cannabis that Jackson and Mandy had brought from the cabin when they arrived, that he was agreeable.

“It be starting long time ago. My grandfather be agreeing to keep the horses as part of some *scientific experiment*, to produce a line of horses resistant to something called *Venezuelan Equine En...* something or other. Anyway, it be abbreviated VEE, and that be what we always call it. That be back before the Collapse. It be a nice couple that left the horses in his charge, telling him that someday in the future a woman would come looking for them.” He took another hit on a joint. No one was willing to share with him, of course, so he had it all to himself.

“Dad be taking a picture of the couple. They tell him the woman to come be looking like the picture. Anyway, this be the picture.” He passed it around for everyone to see, starting with César.

“She does look like you,” César said as he passed the photo along.

“Anyway, we breed the horses for resistance. Each year, we *inoculate* the new foals with VEE. The ones who live done breed, while the others, well, they be dead, no? It be many years, none of the new foals die, so we figure we done the job. We be expecting someone to show up and claim the herd. Checks come every month, so there be no problem keeping the horses, but we be puzzle that no one come.”

I had a hard time concentrating on the story as the damn photo was passed along to everyone except me.

Josh continued, “Then come the Collapse, and the first plague. Lots of my family die, and a bunch of the horses. Some of both of us make it thru, though, and we be hearing 'bout all the horses dying everywhere, so we realize that we be sitting on something valuable. We nurse them horses like crazy, treat them like members of the family. I figure out that whoever was coming for the horses — supposedly someone named Hypatia—” This was accompanied by several gasps from his audience.

“Yeah, be right. Hypatia. Same as this young lady here. Anyway, years go by and no one claim the herd. We be raising them, though it be a lot harder, you know. We be crofters because that be all left for us to do. We be keeping the horses hidden, course, but ain't many people come around no how.” He paused and gestured for the lighter to be passed to him, then after relighting his joint and inhaling deeply, he coughed and continued. “Bout five year ago, we all troop into town for one of them gatherings people in the hills be having ever so often. The boys be getting to be mating age, and we be anxious to find some women. Turn out, we find another dose of the plague instead. Oh, the boys be having a grand time at the gatherin' all right, but 'bout a week later everyone be dead, well, 'cept me, course.

“I ain't quite know what to do with myself. Get pretty lonely living our here by yourself. Try it sometime. The horses, I swear, seem to know somethin' change. They got downright friendly with me. I be sleepin' in the barn with 'em most nights. It be warmer that way. I always be worryin' when I got to trek to the town to try to find supplies. It don't be easy finding things out here. But the horses seem to know when to keep quiet and hunker down.

“At least, that's how it be to a week ago. Lightning struck the barn before the big storm. Start a fire. I got a devil of a time getting the horses out. You musta heard how they ain't leaving the barn, even when it be on fire. Ain't strictly true, but close enough. I lose 6 of them in the fire, and the rest be so scared they scatter.

“I be exhausted fighting the fire, and the storm come thru later that night. It be two day before I be start looking for them, and by that time the trail be cold. I be hiking the hills ever since, hoping I just run into 'em. I done give up when you wizards arrive. My daddy done tell me about *airplane* before the Collapse, but I never thought I be seeing one. When it fly over the first time, I knowed they done seen me, so I loosed a shot to scare them off. Ain't be working. Came back and I done see the damnedest thing: this beauty jumping to the ground. I fire a warning shot, course, but she just keep coming. Tell me she be there about the horses. Then she tell me her name be Hypatia. Well, I come apart on that. Here, someone show up for the horses, look like the picture, tell me her name be Hypatia, and I ain't got the damned horses.”

Deciding that he'd told enough of the story, he sat back, waiting for someone else to take charge.

The photo had finally made the rounds of everyone. Jackson passed it to me, commenting, “It does look like you. I'm curious to see if you recognize the people.” He watched me carefully as I took the photo from his hand and studied it. I knew both people in the photo: smiling into the camera, Mark, at least I thought it was Mark, stood next to a very pregnant young woman who, as everyone had noted, looked a lot like me.

10. Honeymoon Sweet **May 16 - 18, 1998** **San Antonio and Houston, Texas**

I woke up about 8:00, in a luxurious honeymoon suite at the Hilton Hotel on the Riverwalk in San Antonio. Mark and I had arrived late the previous night exhausted from hiking in Big Bend and the long, tedious drive back. I-10 runs in a straight line from the west edge of the Hill Country into the desert. When a small hill got in the way, the highway engineers had simply blown it up and used the rubble for fill in the few low spots.

Mark had turned on cruise control, set the speed at 80, and depended on conversation to keep him awake. He stopped whenever a roadside rest area appeared — not often enough — for a quick walk around and a little birding. It was an incredibly boring drive. I was looking forward to seeing San Antonio, mostly for comparison to the future, since the plans I was hatching promised a visit there in my other existence.

By the time we finally got to San Antonio, though, we were both so tired that we just checked into the hotel and planned on going straight to bed. However, once I saw the tub in the bathroom, I decided that a nice soak would be an even better way to shed the tension from the trip. The tub was the size of a large cistern and fitted with several jets to swirl the water around. Mark called it a Jacuzzi, something that I decided to try searching for later. I called it sybaritic.

Then, we did go to bed and slept soundly.

When I awoke, Mark was on the phone ordering breakfast from room service. I doubted that anything like that existed in 2087, and so was curious to see what it involved. A waiter dressed in a fancy uniform appeared about 30 minutes later wheeling a table containing two servings of Eggs Benedict, fresh orange juice, and two pots of coffee. He greeted us with a cheery, “How’s the honeymoon couple this morning?” His sly smile indicated that the question was rhetorical.

Eggs Benedict, when I examined the dish carefully, proved a delicious combination of an English muffin, much better than McDonald’s; some *Canadian* bacon that seemed more like ham than bacon; a poached egg; and a sinful sauce Mark called *Béarnaise*, a concoction of butter and eggs with some seasoning.

“I take it you don’t have this in the future.”

“No way. First, no one would waste real butter on a sauce, and I’ve never seen any bacon that looks like this. It’s wonderful.”

“Fattening, though.”

“Ah, there’s always a catch, isn’t there?”

“What shall we do on our last day of freedom?”

“I don’t know. What is there to do in San Antonio?”

“Oh, lots. I suggest that after brekkie, we walk along the river, we can do some shopping, people watching, that kind of thing. Then we can eat a real Mexican food lunch and blast off for Houston.”

“How long will it take to get to Houston?”

“Three to four hours, depending on the traffic.”

“Wow. In 2087, it would take at least two days, with a stop in Sealy for trade.”

“That still blows my mind. I have a hard time imagining Sealy as a big trading center.”

“I have a hard time imagining San Antonio as a huge city. I don’t know how many people live here in the future. A few thousand, I guess. It’s one of the major cities of *Norte Mexico*, but...”

“I’m curious. You pronounce *norte* as a Spanish word, but *Mexico* as if it were English.”

This led to a lengthy discussion on the origin and evolution of Spanglish, a language that arose in the area south of San Antonio in old Texas following the Collapse. Essentially, it’s what you get from a bunch of ignorant Anglos trying to speak Spanish. The Anglos claimed it was Spanish without all the confusing parts like gender. The native Spanish speakers retorted that it was a beautiful language polluted with a bunch of English constructions.

The language began as Spanish, but with a number of English words incorporated, such as *truca*, derived from *truck*. Over time, as more native English speakers adopted the language, the grammar switched to English, but most of the nouns remained Spanish. Gender disappeared, along with the two Spanish verbs for *to be*, which were replaced by the undifferentiated *be* used virtually everywhere outside academic enclaves such as Austin. Most short words, such as prepositions and conjunctions borrowed the simple English forms: *for* instead of *por* and *para*.

There are, naturally, many exceptions to these simple rules. For example, *Señora* is still widely used, as well as some idioms, such as *por favor* and *por su puesto*. Sometimes, the result is comic, such as the common expression *where be the baño*.

The name for the city-state around San Antonio shows the unsettled state of the language, sometimes rendered as North Mexico, and sometimes *Norte Mexico*, with a Spanish pronunciation, but most commonly as *Norte Mexico*, with the English pronunciation of *Mexico*.

Mark asked, “Can you speak it?”

“Only a few phrases, but Jackson may be able to understand it. César says that he definitely knows more than he pretends.”

“And César is...”

“You know, the priest I told you about. The one who led me to the horses.”

“I suppose he’s one of your lovers, like all the others.”

“No. Not yet at any rate.” I smiled at him, loving the way he was jealous of all the others. I decided to change the subject. “Guess what.”

“What?”

“I got proof in the other life that this is all real, at least I think I did.”

“No kidding. Are you going to tell me about it?”

“Not yet. You’ll have to be satisfied that this is really happening. It isn’t just a dream after all.”

“Think you can remember to call me Julia?” I asked Mark. Both of us found it difficult. When we arrived at the Talbot mansion in Houston, we found a thick folder of information waiting.

It contained all kinds of details for the fictitious Julia Austin Harrell, my alter ego. Mark and I spent hours after breakfast going over the details, which included a suggested story for how we met.

“Julia’s going to be tough,” he agreed. “Maybe we should just settle on *darling*, or something like that.”

“Are we going to get married?” I asked. “Or is that something we’re planning to be vague on?”

“Vague. Definitely vague. It’s much too soon.”

“Agreed. Then we can dispense with all this stuff about wedding plans.”

“Mama will be disappointed.”

“She’ll get over it.” I tossed the pages relating to wedding plans into the recycle bin. “I don’t care for this story about how we met. It’s much too complicated. Why not stick to the truth? I was wandering around the Hill Country and bumped into you. We could even say we met in Medina.”

“I like that.” He discarded several more pages.

“As for birding, I’m trying to learn as fast as I can. If I try to pretend that I am a real birder, someone will know better. I’m going to admit that I’m a novice.”

“Again, I agree.”

“I like the change of my hometown. Although I was born in Terre Haute, which I would never pronounce the way a native would, I grew up in South Bend, where my father was a professor at Notre Dame. I can fake my way thru that easily enough. Did you tell anyone about my real background?”

“I must have mentioned it to someone.”

“Well, it’s a nice touch. Now, what about all this goop on the Second Messiah? I guess Grace and Joan are really serious about promoting it, but...”

“We want to have the basics straight, even though we’re putting out as a parody on religion. Supposedly, that’s how Scientology got started, at least according to some of the stories.”

“OK. I’m on board with that. Now, the hard part. I’ll never be able to remember who all these people are. When Grace said she wanted a small party to introduce me, I expected maybe eight people, not a few hundred close friends.”

“I know. It’s hard. Once she got started, she felt she couldn’t exclude many of those people. Think of it this way. If we had a small dinner party, you’d have to carry on conversation all evening. This way, you’ll just say hello, nice to meet you about 100 times.”

“Oops! Gotta run. It’s time for my hair appointment. Will you take me?”

“I wouldn’t miss it. I can hardly wait to see what they do.”

Mark and I stood where Grace instructed, ready to greet arriving guests. She pointed out that the strategic placement allowed us to check ourselves in the mirror regularly. I had to remind myself to quit looking at the reflection. I was frankly amazed at how good I looked. Grace had provided a dress for the occasion that emphasized my slim figure and managed to make it appear that I had some breasts. I had acquired a tan despite the efforts to avoid it over the past several weeks. The

effect was stunning. Mark had a silly smile on his face the entire time. I half suspected that he'd been sneaking puffs of cannabis.

The first guest was a nice-looking woman about my age in a conservative dress that even covered her arms. She wore a scarf on her head, and I wondered briefly if she might be Muslim. Her features seemed to be classic Anglo Texan, making her something of a puzzle.

Grace grabbed her as soon as she entered and ushered her over for introductions.

"Mark, Julia, this is Sarah Albright, who lives in the huge palace around the corner. It turns out," she smiled, "we use the same rug dealer. Sarah, this is my son Mark and his *fiancée*, Julia. I promised Sarah I would show her the Isfahan. Come this way, my dear. I've had to lock the door to the room with this many people running around the house. Some wouldn't know to remove their shoes." Mark and I barely had time to exchange greetings before the two of them were off to see the rug.

"It's really something," Mark said. "There isn't another like it outside of a museum, or maybe in Iran somewhere. I suspect that we'll be invited for tea soon to the palace around the corner."

Shortly afterward, a thundering herd of people arrived. I didn't even try to make conversation. Mark introduced me to all the people he recognized, about half of them, and let the rest make their own introductions. There was no real conversation, so most of the careful study proved unnecessary.

After the initial surge, things quieted down. We'd been standing around for almost half an hour and were ready to make a pass by the bar and the food table. Most of the food came from the caterers, but Idelle had contributed some of her signature ginger snap cookies, and I was anxious to score a couple before they all disappeared.

"Uh-oh," Mark said. "Red alert. Try to be nice."

I looked up to see who was approaching and beheld a gorgeous creature with a striking oval face, dark coloring reflecting some Hispanic heritage, long luxurious hair flowing down past her shoulders halfway to her waist, and breasts to die for. Long slender but muscular legs and a trim body reflected many hours at the gym. She was perhaps a few years older than I, quite a bit taller of course, and in terrific shape. Her escort was conventionally handsome, just the sort of person you'd want beside you, a foil, not unattractive, but someone who wouldn't steal your limelight. No one paid him any attention, while several heads turned to watch her as they approached.

"Hi, Del," Mark said by way of greeting.

Oh shit. It's Delfina.

"So this is my replacement," Delfina said. "Nice to meet you Julia."

"I've heard so much about you," I replied, extending a hand. Over the course of the evening, I had managed to suppress the revulsion at touching people I didn't know. This time, I felt my flesh crawl.

"It's probably not all true," she replied.

"Well," I said, looking her up and down, "I guess not."

"I'm so glad there was someone around to pick up Mark on the rebound after..."

“Yes, it was a lucky break for both of us. The poor thing. He was a complete wreck until I bumped into him.” I decided I *really* didn’t like Delfina. “I understand you are responsible for the creation of Ambianca. I need to thank you for that. She’s meant a lot to me.” *More than you can know, you bitch!*

“So, Mark,” she said, “how are things?”

“Oh, much better,” he replied a bit laconically.

I wondered what he was thinking. Delfina showed a slight frown.

“She’s easier to get on with, likes birding, and then there’s the sex.” *Ouch! A hit. A palpable hit.*

That was the high point of the evening. I felt like jumping him on the spot.

The party lasted until well after midnight, at which point we retired unapologetically to the same bedroom. Grace had apparently reconciled herself to the fact that we wanted to sleep together.

I lay awake after the advertised great sex, wondering if I were falling in love. Mark had no doubts. The last words he said before we both fell asleep were, “Goodnight, Julia, Hypatia, Patty, whatever. You are really an incredible woman, and I love you more than you can imagine.”

11. Division of Labor
May 16 -17, 2087
Hill Country and San Antonio, Norte Mexico

Departure for Utopia and San Antonio had to wait for the passage of another storm front, which arrived during the night. Then, two more days were devoted to preparations and consultations. Today, everyone met at the cabin for one last discussion.

“OK,” I began, “to summarize: Mandy and Red will remain here, splitting time between the cabin and the ranch. Josh will be responsible for the horses, but the two of you will assist as need be. Red, you’ll supply enough meat from hunting for food, as well as being responsible for security. Mandy will spend time improving the setup here in the cabin. Mandy, that means we’ll be expecting a list of suggestions sent to Austin for the next group to bring. The rest of us will return the kids to Utopia, assuming Ron manages to get the wagon hitched to *Endeavour* safely.”

“That’ll be no problem,” Ron assured me.

“Good.”

Mandy elaborated, “As I see it, the main focus of my efforts here will be to locate the solar panels and see what is needed to get them operational again. I’ll continue to coordinate software with JJ until we can get improved hardware out here.”

“Right. We especially want control over the satellite. That’s top priority after dealing with energy considerations. Jackson, any ideas on how we can deal with the nuclear power?”

“Just the obvious. We have to locate some fuel somewhere.”

Mandy suggested, “Before the collapse, there was a huge nuclear power plant located on the old coast near a town called Palacios. That’s underwater now, of course, but...”

“We are searching NASA for some fuel,” Ron added. “I think we’ll find enough somewhere for the short term, that is until we can figure out how to get into the old power plant.”

César interjected, “I trust we all realize that the power plant is within the bounds of *Norte Mexico*.”

Jackson said, “We are assuming that we can negotiate some sharing arrangement.”

“Good.”

“Now, then,” I continued, “after we drop off the children, we will continue on to San Antonio. César, you assure us that old US 90 is passable.”

“It is one of our major trading routes, even more important than I-10. We keep it well maintained. Likewise, we maintain the one bridge we will have to deal with, across the Sabinal. We should have no trouble.”

“Good. Then César, Jackson and I will remain for some time in San Antonio, while Ron takes *Endeavour* back to Austin and reports. Ron, are you sure you can manage it by yourself?”

César interrupted, “I am sure we will be able to find a volunteer to accompany Ron. I would suggest that I go myself, but I expect that I will be required to remain in San Antonio for a while.”

I smiled. “I think that is likely. Ron, are you comfortable with that arrangement?”

“So long as it’s not some beautiful girl that Mia would be jealous of.”

“Am I forgetting anything?” I asked.

César had a suggestion. “I think it might be worth spending some time in Utopia. We can clean your vestments, to make a better impression when you arrive at the Bishop’s Palace. That way we give Angelina some time to adjust to life there.”

“Any objection?” No one said anything, though I could see Ron gritting his teeth at the thought of yet another day before reuniting with Mia.

“Good. Then let’s get back to the ranch.”

César, Josh, and I stood at the fence of the main pasture, now showing a nice new growth of grass from the recent rains. The horses seemed to love the new location, racing from one side of the field to the other, happy to be outside again after all the rain.

“The horses look to be in good shape,” I said.

“Yep,” Josh replied.

“Any problems we should know about?”

“Nope.”

“About the gray stallion—”

“Cinders.”

“Cinders?”

“That be his name.”

“Oh. César, you’ll have to work that into the speech somehow.”

“I’ve got some ideas on that already.”

“We’re assuming he hasn’t been ridden,” I continued.

“Nope.”

“Think you can get him ready for me by the time we get back?”

“Yep.” Josh didn’t bother to ask when I would return.

“You have enough food?”

“Yep. Y’all go do what you gotta do. Cinders and the others they be ready when you get back. Cinders be a bit large for you to ride. One of them mares, or even colts be more your size.”

“Yes, we understand. We think it is important that I ride Cinders.”

“Whatever.”

“Thanks, Josh. You know how valuable these animals are; you made that clear. We’re glad you’re here to take care of them.”

Josh didn’t say anything, but he did manage a small nod by way of acknowledgement.

“OK, César. Let’s hit the road.”

The road leading into San Antonio proved to be as good as César had promised, allowing Ron to ratchet up the speed to nearly 100 klicks for much of the way. This put us at the outskirts of the ancient city by mid-morning. After that, the route became more difficult, as we had to detour around many of the deconstruction projects, old buildings, parking lots, and the like, where crews were clearing the land for farming. As *Endeavour* approached the center of the old city, the clearing activity increased.

“As you can see, the ancients destroyed the best farmland to build the city. They even turned the river into a concrete ditch. That’s making our efforts at irrigation difficult. The water tends to flow too fast.”

“We may be able to help you out there,” Ron noted. He seemed to be thinking of some plans as he maneuvered the car thru innumerable detours.

“I think we could have taken a better route to the center of the city if I had realized how much work was going on,” César apologized.

“That’s OK,” Ron said. “I’m glad we got a chance to see what you are doing. Now, if I have the location right, we need to head north the first chance we get.”

“That’s right,” César said. “You can see the Bishop’s Palace from here. It’s that tall structure above the HemisFair. It used to be a restaurant before the Bishop took it over. I’ve reserved some time for us on the elevator. Needless to say, it doesn’t run all the time. My Brother-in-Law is quite proud that the structure is still standing. It was built in 1968! In the old days, the top revolved, but of course, it doesn’t any longer.”

Ron had to deal with one final detour, to get around some blasting in an unused parking lot along the River, so we arrived just before noon.

“Whew!” Jackson said as he emerged from the air-conditioned interior of *Endeavour*. “I’m glad to be able to stretch my legs, but I could do without the heat. This seems hotter than Austin.”

“I’m sure it is,” César said. “All the concrete the ancients left us holds a lot of heat. It’s especially bad in this part of town. The elevator is this way.” He led the way to the central area of the tower, where two guards in uniform awaited. A larger group of guards surrounded *Endeavour*, keeping a respectful distance. Apparently, word of its capabilities had spread all the way to San Antonio.

The elevator guards snapped to attention when César approached. He raised his hand in a gesture that seemed to be some kind of salute. The elevator door opened as we approached, and another guard, in a more colorful uniform, greeted us.

“Congratulations, monsignor. We be heard of your triumph. His Excellency be expecting you.” He spoke English with a pronounced Spanglish accent, but at least he was making an effort. He scrutinized the other three members of the party as though he wasn’t sure whether to admit us.

“Thank you, Captain. These are my new friends, who were critical to our success. Permit me to introduce you to Hypatia, Master Librarian of the University, and her companions, Jackson of Houston, and Ron the Mechanic’s Son. Hypatia, this is Captain Ramirez, the commander of the garrison here.” César spoke slowly and distinctly.

I noted a quick gasp of recognition from the Captain when he heard my name, after which, he snapped to attention like the guards. “I greet you *con mucho* honor, Hypatia. We heard much of you, and of your fabulous car.” With that, he moved aside and gestured for us to enter the elevator. César had neglected to mention any protocol for the moment but moved forward quickly so we would realize that he was supposed to enter first. I followed him, then Jackson and Ron. Ramirez entered last and pushed the button to close the door.

The old machinery worked quite well, though I knew that it was supposed to move a great deal faster. Mark and I had enjoyed lunch there as the final meal of our honeymoon trip.

“I thought that went quite well,” César said when we were back in *Endeavour* and on the way to temporary lodgings in San Antonio. “The Bishop was very impressed with your explanation of what you’ve been doing, and your plans.”

“I’m glad to hear you say it,” I replied. “I found him hard to read.”

“Well, I could tell that he was anxious to get some trading for our technology,” Jackson put in. “I’m looking forward to the negotiations. Do I have a free hand?”

“Well, we’ll have to get the deal ratified by the Council, but I don’t think that will be a problem.”

“Does that mean you will share the technology for your solar power?” César asked.

“Is there some reason we shouldn’t?” I countered.

“No, no. Just that we aren’t used to dealing with people who are so open. We tend to be suspicious.”

“Well, in this case your suspicion may be justified,” Ron said. “I just got some messages from the salvagers in Houston.” He motioned toward the console in *Endeavour*.

“What did they say?” both Jackson and I asked at once.

“Only that we are running out of the solar chips at NASA. We’re going to have to learn to make them ourselves.”

“Ouch. Well, we knew it wasn’t an infinite supply. I know the University has been working on it as a high priority project.”

“Yes, and we’ve learned what the problem is.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The chips were not invented by NASA, or as part of a government contract, luckily.”

“Why is that lucky?” César asked.

“Because it means they were patented.”

“And?”

“We have databases of patents covering virtually everything,” I explained. “The problem is knowing what to look for in the database. So, I take it that we’ve found the patents involved.”

“Sure. The patents explain the process in tedious detail. It will require some equipment that we don’t have, and some raw materials that we don’t have a ready source for.”

“Any ideas on where to get the equipment and supplies?” I asked.

“Well, the supplies are the easy part, at least I think so. Our new friends in Mexico may be able to help. The equipment is the hard part.”

“Why?”

“Wait!” César said. “Maybe I shouldn’t hear this.”

“César,” I admonished him. “Didn’t you tell me that you would do anything to help me?”

“Well...”

“Well, then. We’re on the same team. Remember what I said to the Bishop. The only way we can save anything from the wreckage of the world is by cooperating. We have to get beyond the idea that we have to have winners and losers. The only solution is one where everyone wins. This is a great example of that.”

“Almost,” Ron interjected.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said.

“The best source for the equipment is Silicon Valley in California, if there is still someone there minding the store. Second best, the area around Phoenix, or Albuquerque.”

“Those are hard. Any other possibilities? The old semiconductor plants in Austin? Can we make the equipment ourselves?”

“We checked the semi plants. We’ve got some pieces there we think we can kludge into a system to start with. Making new equipment from scratch is possible, but difficult. There is one final location where are fairly sure we can get the equipment.”

“Where?” everyone demanded.

“Dallas.”

“Oh, dear,” I said.

“I think my negotiations just got a lot harder,” Jackson said.

“Thanks for having dinner with me,” César said.

“Believe me, the pleasure is all mine,” I replied.

We sat in an elegant room with only two other tables, both unoccupied, in a luxurious mansion in the old King William part of San Antonio, not far from the small hotel where we lodged. Ron had already departed for Austin accompanied by two guards supplied by the Bishop. Ron was a bit nervous about having automatic weapons aboard but didn’t mention the armament already available to him. Anxious to return to Austin and Mia, he wasn’t ready to compromise his chance of an early exit. With four hours of daylight still available, and a full charge on *Endeavour’s* batteries, he anticipated no problem. I had quietly suggested that he activate the link to Austin before leaving, ostensibly to contact Mia, but really to ensure monitoring of the trip from the University end. I expected no problems, and indeed, we had received word shortly before leaving for the restaurant that Ron was back in Austin and receiving a hero’s welcome.

Jackson meanwhile had met his negotiating counterpart, who turned out to be a lovely young Mexican woman from farther south, perhaps forty, obviously well connected, and very self assured. She gave her name as Lupe, then rattled off seven or so names, one of which was Guadalupe. She and Jackson had left immediately for San Antonio's equivalent of the University, an old college several miles away with connections to Veracruz, as well as part of the web. While not up to Austin standards, it would serve their needs well enough. Jackson planned to remain there while working out trading strategies.

That left César and me somewhat at loose ends. César had suggested we take the evening meal at a dining establishment reserved for high Church officials, and I had agreed with alacrity. I had expected to walk to the restaurant, but César arranged for a pedicab to take us and return us to the hotel.

Richly decorated with antique furniture, some dating to as early as the 18th century according to César, together with settings of fine china and sterling silver, the room testified to the power and influence of the Church in this part of the world. Lit by several candles, it also testified to the lack of electric power in this part of the city. I was not awed by the display of wealth as I'd seen an even more impressive display in 1998 in Houston only days ago in my curious lifeline. I wondered when a waiter with a menu would arrive, until César confided that he had already ordered for both of us. "I thought it easier for me to select something I think you will like rather than spend the time explaining the obscure language of the menu," he explained.

The first course was a salad consisting of tomatoes, freshly picked, ripened on the vine and very tasty, and two items I didn't recognize. "The white slivers are *jicama*," César explained. "It's a root of some plant. Doesn't have much flavor by itself, but absorbs the taste of the dressing nicely, I think. The green strips are *nopalito*, cut from new pads of prickly pear cactus. Do you like it?"

"Delicious," I agreed. "A nice combination. The dressing is oil and...lime juice?"

"Right. With a hint of garlic, of course, and some herbs that I would have to guess at."

We dispatched the salad. I unabashedly wiped the plate with a piece of bread to get the last of the dressing and bits of tomato. "I can hardly wait to see what's next."

The next course consisted of some meat that might be beef, but I wasn't sure, accompanied by some puffy potatoes and a relish made from corn and mango.

"The beef comes from our ranch at Utopia," César said proudly. "We have a reputation for the finest. The potatoes are called *pommes soufflées*, which is French, I think, for puffy potatoes. The beef dish is *carne asada*."

The waiter appeared with a bottle, which he displayed to César. César nodded his approval, after which the waiter filled two glasses. "I fear that wine making has not thrived in our area."

"I know some people who would like to help you with that," I said, recalling my time in New Home. I sipped the wine, which was good, though not of course as good as that I'd had in Houston. Clearly, César was being overly modest.

"César," I said after sampling the meat, "we should have a nice heart-to-heart talk, don't you think? If we are to pull off this...this cooperative arrangement I need to understand more about your society."

"And I yours," he replied. "If it means spending time with you, I can think of nothing I would like better."

I smiled. “May I ask a few questions?”

“Please do.”

“Explain how the Church works here. I find its presence a bit overwhelming and given my background a bit disconcerting.”

“You have nothing to fear,” he replied. “For one thing, the Bishop is very much in favor of anything you do. This will take some time to explain.”

“Well,” I said, cutting another bite of the steak, “you talk; I’ll listen.”

“There is a quote by Seneca that you may have heard: *Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.* That sums things up quite well so far as *Norte Mexico* is concerned. In this case, it is somewhat paradoxical that the rulers happen to be the religious hierarchy.”

“I think I understand that part, but not the implications.”

“I’m getting to that. In this case, many of the wise are also the rulers, who tend to have a very skeptical view of the religion they claim to espouse. You see, after what you call the Collapse and which we refer to as the Tribulations, most people were ready for a change. It no longer worked to tell them that it was all God’s will and that we couldn’t understand how he works, Job’s message if you have studied the Bible.”

“I’m familiar with Job. I even recall that there is a branch of theology dealing with the problem.”

“*Theodicy*,” César said. “Well, most people didn’t like that explanation. For one thing, no one claimed that God had sent the virus that devastated all of us. Our scientists in Veracruz confirmed that it was engineered from something called VEE.”

“Ours too. The question is who engineered it. We have been unable to ascertain that.”

“Same here. Anyway, the Church was the only organization that survived the period of the Tribulations. Clearly, if we were to make anything of what was left to us, it was up to the Church to take the lead.”

“Interesting. In much the same way, the University in Austin saw itself as the only way to move forward.”

“No doubt for the same reason.”

“Sort of, though we don’t have any organization like your Church.”

“So, I think we need to work together.”

“How?”

“Well, as you might expect, there are many different factions within the Church: the Old Guard, who want to stick to the Catholic traditions; the neo-Pagans, who argue that syncretism has always been a large part of the Church in our area, and that we should simply return to a sort of pantheism from long ago; and the largest group, the Marianists, who hope for something like the return of the Virgin of Guadalupe.”

“I’m guessing that you are a member of the last group.”

“As is the Bishop. Do you see where I am going?”

“Of course. You want me to play the part of the Virgin, a part I might add for which I am singularly inappropriate.”

César laughed heartily. “That makes it so much better. We never liked the way the old Church denigrated the pleasures of the flesh. We can work that into the message.”

“I see. Then you are working on a message.”

“I have ever since I first saw you. Have you thought that maybe you *are* the Virgin of Guadalupe returned to guide us?”

“Oh, César, please. Not you too.”

“Well, why not? I know that you have some secret, something that you thought about when I asked you on the way to the ranch that first day. Recall, I asked you whether there was anything in your life that might indicate some intervention, some external force?”

“I recall. You said that my expression gave away the answer.”

“Indeed. Would you care to tell me what that is?”

“Not yet. Maybe later.”

“OK. Anyway, here’s the gist of my plan.”

For the next hour, César spoke of his plans, how the two city-states could join in a Great Awakening, led by Hypatia, but with guidance from many others. The goal, as I had expressed it myself: to create a new, better society from the ashes of the old. After he finished, I said, “It all sounds good, but I see a major problem, namely the Kolgites. Somehow, I don’t see them going for it.”

“Oh, but I think they will, provided we manage it properly. By the way, would you like some dessert? They make a flan that is excellent, or ...”

“Flan sounds wonderful. Maybe some coffee to go with it?” *OK. The request for coffee was a test.*

César smiled and signaled the waiter.

As we spooned the delicious, and very fattening custard, I decided to proceed along the lines he suggested. “César let’s do it. Everyone has been telling me for months that I have been chosen for this. Maybe I have. I don’t know. I have one request.”

“What’s that?”

“Can we leave God out of it?”

“Let me see if I understand this,” César said. We had elected to walk from the restaurant back to the hotel, which provided an opportunity to talk where I was fairly sure no one could be listening surreptitiously. “You’re saying that you are living both now and in 1998?”

“That’s what it seems like. Remember that photo that Josh had, the one of Hypatia?”

“It looked just like you.”

“I think it *is* me. It’s the first time I’ve had something approaching proof that all that was actually happening, that it was something besides my overheated imagination.”

“Do you remember when the photo was taken?”

“No. I think it hasn’t happened yet. I’ve never been pregnant either.”

“So, these lives of yours are as though you were living them. You don’t hopscotch around in time.”

“You got it. At first, there were gaps in the 1998 life, and of course, it started all of a sudden. I don’t have any memory of childhood in that era.”

“What kind of gaps?”

“Well, at first, there were 11 days between the times when I appeared in 1998.”

“How did that work?”

“Well, according to Mark, I simply disappeared. One minute I was there, then he turned his back or something, and I wasn’t there any longer. When I reappeared, it was in the same place I left.”

“And you have no control over what happens?”

“Well, I feel as though I am in control now, and also in 1998, but I cannot seem to control when I switch, except that it always happens when I’m asleep.”

“You mentioned something that Mark said, that you were doing it to yourself?”

“Yes. He thinks that my subconscious is doing it. He suggests that I need to learn how to control it with my conscious mind.”

“That would be very powerful, almost God-like, if you’ll pardon my saying so.”

“Oh, no. In fact, Mark once told me that it seemed like just the sort of thing God would do, if God could do that kind of thing. Come to think of it, JJ said the same thing.”

“JJ?”

“JJ is a web friend of mine. He’s in Los Alamos, or somewhere near there.”

“Los Alamos!”

“You’re surprised.”

“How could anyone possibly live out there now?”

“Well, he has nuclear power.”

“What about food and water?”

“I don’t know. I never asked him. Anyway, that’s where he claims to be, and I’ve never really questioned it. He’s probably the greatest mathematician still alive. I asked about time travel, thinking that’s what was going on. He told me there’s a theorem, Bloch’s Paradox, that time travel is impossible unless it’s already happened. Then it’s inevitable.”

“Have you tried to control your ability consciously?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea how to do it. Do you have a suggestion?”

“Let me think on it. I have a notion, but it’s not fully formed.”

By then, we were back at the hotel.

“César, are you awake?” I whispered.

“Who could sleep when there is so much to think about?”

“I’ve been thinking, too.”

“I’ve been thinking how beautiful you are.”

“Stop it, César. I’m serious.”

“I am also.”

“Well, we don’t have time for that right now.”

“Later?”

“Don’t get your hopes up. Maybe.”

“I’ll have to accept that. What do you want to talk about, *Querida*?”

“Perhaps it’s best if I am not able to control my...my abilities.”

“Because if you could, you would go back to 1998, marry your rich boyfriend who loves you, and live in luxury.”

“Yes, that’s it, more or less.”

“Could you do that, knowing the Collapse was coming?”

“There’s more than that. What about the pregnant woman in the photo? What if that is really me? That means that I not only wound up in 1998, but had a child, even knowing what was going to happen.”

“Yes, that does seem illogical, and you’re certainly not that.”

“So, there is more to come.”

“Yes, *Querida*, I am afraid there must be.”

“That frightens me.”

“As well it should. There are many on your side, though. You aren’t alone.”

“That’s comforting.”

I moved to the bed and sat beside him. He put his arm around me. “Want to hear my idea?”

“Sure.”

“You need to learn to control your power in small steps. You said that when you first experienced life in 1998, there were days missing.”

“Eleven days.”

“But now, there is no missing time.”

“Again correct.”

“Why is there no time missing when you return here?”

“I have no idea. What do you think?”

“I think that there may be some time missing, but no one has noticed.”

“What?”

“I think you should try to have some missing time here.”

“You think I can manage it?”

“I think you must try. Start small, no more than a day. Now, from what you have told me, the transitions always happen while you are asleep.”

“Correct.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m not sure what you are suggesting.”

“You don’t transition every time you sleep, so there must be some other factor, something else.”

“Let me think. There was sex involved, but I can’t remember if that was every time. It definitely was part of the time, and every time I’ve returned, it’s been after making love with Mark.”

“That seems too simple.”

“Well, yes. There were times I’ve had sex when I didn’t transition, and now that I think of it, there was one when I transitioned without sex.” I smiled thinking about it. “I wonder if it’s just thinking about sex. Or maybe it’s what the other person thinks.”

“Too complicated. When was your last transition?”

“When I was at the ranch, after we moved the horses and found Josh. Jackson and I shared a bed, but there was no sex. That can’t be it.”

“None since then?”

“No, but there hasn’t been much time.”

“And you have been cut off from your accustomed life, from connection to the world you know. You have been here with me.”

“Right. What are you suggesting?”

“We could try some experiments. See what triggers the transitions.”

“César, are you—”

“Making an indecent proposal? Well...”

“You dirty old man.”

“Not that old.”

“What would you say if I told you that I’m frightened about all this?”

“I’d say it was natural, and I would hold you and tell you that everything would be all right.”

“I’m not a child.”

“No. Obviously.”

“But I think I like the rest of it.”

“Come here, then.” He smoothed out the sheet.

As I undressed, a bright red patch fell to the floor. César picked it up and said, “Does this mean what I think it might?”

“I’m afraid so. You know of the patches, then?”

“We have heard of them. They are controversial, but I think we can work that into the message, but for tonight...”

“We’ll think of something,” I replied.

12. Hill Country Solitaire

April 16-23, 2027
Near Leakey, TX

I woke up in the bedroom of the cabin in Leakey, alone. I called out for Mark, but got no answer. Wandering the cabin, I found no sign of anyone else. No food had been prepared recently. I checked the refrigerator, which was working, but almost empty, holding only a few cans of beer. As usual, I was desperately hungry, so I took one and drank it.

Ambianca had started music as soon as I awoke, playing some soft instrumentals. The music now switched to Kris Kristofferson. When I heard the line, *the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad so I had one more for dessert*, I laughed aloud, the sound echoing hollowly.

I opened the bookshelf door and moved into the room containing all the computers. From the layout of the room, including the large air duct that I had climbed thru, or would someday, it was clearly not 1998. The wire Ron had used to open the door to the storage area was hanging in the usual place, so — after many false starts — I opened the door. The storage area was full of boxes, none of which seemed to have been opened.

OK. I stopped to think things out. I was somewhere between 1998 and 2087, and alone in the cabin at Leakey. What I couldn't help wondering was how long the beer had been in the refrigerator, and who had turned the electricity on.

I wandered out onto the porch, taking a second beer at Kris's suggestion, and sat to consider the situation. Assuming my analysis was correct, I was stranded in a distinctly unpleasant situation. Flowers were blooming. A bird sang, a Golden-cheeked Warbler. It was spring, April probably.

I sipped the beer and thought. The beer tasted fresh. My brain finally woke up. *What a dunce I am!* The world's information resource lay waiting in the computer room. I leaped up and raced back into the computer room, curious whether I could figure out the ancient software. Even Mandy had problems.

A familiar face awaited her on the screen. "I was wondering when you'd get around to surfing the web," Ambianca said. Her voice didn't sound quite right, but I welcomed it nonetheless.

"Amanda found it hard."

"So, she did. However, I am here to help this time. Mark left you a message. Do you want to look at it now?"

"Sure," I replied, not sure what Ambianca intended. The image disappeared from the screen, replaced by Mark, much older now, maybe 60 or so, with thin, grey-blond hair. He smiled. The lines on his face showed that his smile was not a frequent companion these days.

"Hello dear. Happy Birthday! I'm not sure which one this is. I calculate it to be -29. When you find the extra refrigerator in the storage area, you'll see that it has a small bottle of champagne for you to use for celebration. I've also left you enough frozen and canned food to see you thru the week. If this is going the way you said, you'll have found the beer in the outside refrigerator. Hope everything is working as you planned. Enjoy your week of solitude. I hope this isn't a fool's errand. Your instructions were specific."

Ambianca started playing Carly Simon singing *Hello Big Man*, which seemed appropriate.

I hunted around on the screen and located something that promised to let me “browse the Internet.” Clicking it displayed a page with headlines, a weather forecast — it was going to get hot later — and a calendar. It was April 16, 2027. My birthday, sort of, though I wouldn’t be born for another 29 years or so, as Mark had noted.

“Tensions in Africa,” was the most ominous headline. There was no mention of a virus. With a brain still working on two cylinders, I had trouble recalling history. Laboriously, the timeline took shape. 2036. That was an easy date to remember. That was still several years in the future. The destruction of New York was in 2034. The world still had 6 years of the *ancient regime*. I was now in the period called the Last Days in 2087, a period with poor records. Surviving information portrayed the time as one of manic partying, an almost insane waste of the precious resources of the world, in celebration of nothing.

Neurotransmitters had finally reached a normal level and rational thinking returned. Mark’s message was comforting. Apparently, I was trapped here for a week, alone, but I must have survived to tell him about it. Many practical considerations remained. I needed to locate the refrigerator Mark had mentioned.

I decided to take a hot shower, a luxury unknown in San Antonio, and see if that made things clearer.

The shower was heavenly. Refreshed and clean — I even washed my hair, which had grown long and a lovely shade of blonde — I wandered around the cabin, wondering if any clothes would fit. I’d waked up completely naked. The closet contained several outfits that seemed to be my size. I put one on and checked myself in the mirror again. The hair needed more work. A brush lay in plain sight on the counter. I picked it up.

Returning to the porch, I applied the brush, straightening the tangles and generally feeling sybaritic. If it had been in 1998, I would have been busy getting ready for whatever events Grace had planned. In 2087, I would have been worrying about what César had in mind, and when I would get back to Austin. Here, I had nothing to do except lie around and think.

I decided to explore the area and changed into jeans, a T-shirt, and some good hiking boots, before setting out along the creek. The water level was low, barely a trickle. I headed steadily upstream toward the dam, which took about 30 minutes or so, hearing several Golden-cheeked Warblers along the way and wishing I’d spent time looking for binoculars before setting out. Mark never went anywhere without a pair, and there were bound to be several extras somewhere in the cabin.

I spotted the side trail and veered off to climb the steps to the top of the rock and look down on the pond, greatly shrunken in size. One of the droughts that afflicted the area from time to time must have been ongoing in 2027. Regardless of the level, the pond looked inviting. I walked and slid down to a small rocky beach that the drought had uncovered. There I undressed and walked carefully into the water.

The cold was just the way I remembered it and would feel great on a hot afternoon. In the relative cool of the morning, the shock was a bit hard to take. I swam out to what I recognized as the island where I’d rescued the mare and her colt, now much larger. Then, I lazily worked my way back to the shore, feeling refreshed and nicely tired. Heaping the clothes together to make a pillow, I lay down on the beach. The sun beating down felt nice. *No sunscreen. Need to get back to the cabin soon.*

I fell asleep and woke up almost instantly in the bedroom of the cabin, with some of the water from the pond still dripping from my legs.

Wow! Did I do that? Maybe Mark was right. Can I control it? Is that why I'm here? Time for an experiment.

First, I slathered sunscreen all over. *Need to go back and get the clothes.*

I tried not actually falling asleep, just relaxing. I couldn't tell the point when the transition happened, but suddenly, there I was, back on the beach. After picking up the clothes, just in case a hike proved necessary, I got dressed again. Then I concentrated on the cabin, thinking how I really wanted to be on the deck, not inside. Relaxing once again, I couldn't feel anything when it happened, but found myself back on the deck, hungry beyond belief.

Apparently, the transitions took a lot of energy, which explained why I always woke up hungry. Time to find the other refrigerator that Mark said was in the storage area. It stood right inside the door, leaving me to wonder how I missed it the first time. Rummaging around in the freezing compartment, I found a package of frozen tamales marked, "Gordo's tamales." I surmised that Gordo's mother-in-law had finally died, but perhaps she had passed on her culinary skills.

Inside the refrigerator was the small bottle of champagne that Mark mentioned. I grabbed it along with the tamales. The latter I popped into the microwave in the kitchen. Inside the micro, I found seven ready-rolled joints, no doubt made from Hill Country Gold, one for each day of the week. Taking one, together with a lighter I found in a drawer, I hid the remaining cannabis, started the tamales defrosting, and went back onto the deck.

I spent the next hour quaffing the champagne, which was excellent, smoking the joint, which was even better, and finishing off the tamales, perhaps the best of the entire lot. *Need to thank Gordo sometime.*

Satiated, I sat in the wooden swing and let my mind wander over the events of the past week. There was a lot to consider. I started with Delfina, and let my jealousy unravel by considering what had happened after our meeting. Mark had made a point of saying how much he loved me. That needed more thought. First, though, I considered what Grace might be planning, and whether I should try to get back there soon. There was the Sheik's Gold to think about. That might prove to be very important. A return visit was definitely necessary.

Then I turned to all of César's plans. Could I play the part of the returning Virgin? Well, why not. If my ability to transition to another place and time worked in 2087 as well as it did in 2027, I really had the kind of magical power that would seem like a goddess. How best to use that?

Could this be part of some large plan? Is someone pulling my strings? What explains my appearance here? Am I really the Second Messiah, sent to help the world?

For the first time in my strange life, I considered that possible.

This was going to need a week of serious thought.

I developed a daily routine. Arising at dawn to fix one of the breakfast meals from the freezer, which were wretched, even by NRT standards, but which provided the needed calories. Beer

helped. Spending several hours sitting on the porch, smoking a daily dose of cannabis and quietly thinking about the situation.

I got nowhere figuring things out.

Around noon, after scrounging up another meal from the collection in the freezer, as the heat became oppressive, I transitioned to the pond and went for a swim. I learned not to waste the energy transitioning back and hiked along the trail instead. It was mostly shady thanks to the huge oaks along the creek.

I usually took a nap in the afternoon, as a check to make sure that the transitions were truly under my conscious control. I always awoke in the same bed.

By the third day, I was ready to experiment. Right after breakfast, I hiked into Leakey, a distance of over 50 kilometers. The town was as sleepy as I remembered from 1998, making it easy to wander around like a tourist, checking out the historical marker on the courthouse. I hoped finally to get a look at the wildlife museum that so intrigued me on the first visit, the one that advertised “Bigger than it looks.” Alas, the museum had fallen on hard times and closed many years earlier according to the waitress at the Dairy Queen.

At the DQ, I tasted a wonderful concoction of ice cream and other treats appropriately called a “Classic Blizzard.” Unsure if the money scooped up from the kitchen counter in the cabin, was adequate, I simply proffered all of it. The woman picked a \$20 bill from the collection, muttering something about damn hippies. She offered no change, so apparently \$20 wasn’t worth much. It was time to go home. Locating a spot out of view, I transitioned straight to the porch.

I realized that all the experiments had involved moving to another location in space with little or no time lost. Could I control the time component as well? Without moving from the spot on the porch, I imagined looking at sunset. That didn’t work. I also tried imagining my dorm room at the University and tried to go there in the current time. That didn’t work either.

Maybe I could only move back in time — or stay the same. The dorm room incident showed that there was another problem. I didn’t have the key yet. In spite of the fact that none of the transitions worked, I found that I was famished, so hungry in fact, that the frozen dinner zapped in the microwave tasted great.

On the fourth day, I decided on more tests of my ability. I discovered I was unable to move to some place and time about which I had no knowledge. For example, despite concentrating on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange an hour before the end, where I had a good fix on the date and time, but no real knowledge of what the exchange floor looked like, I was unable to go there. Perhaps some primitive instinct for self-preservation prevented the transfer.

How far could I transition? The apple stand in Medina, site of my first appearance in 1998, was quite a distance away. Gordo had taken well over an hour to drive to the cabin from there. After concentrating and relaxing, I stood across the street from the apple stand. It looked essentially the same, at least to the limit of my fuzzy memory. I crossed to the entrance, being careful this time to check for oncoming traffic, and went inside.

Apparently, customers were few. The proprietor greeted me like a long-lost cousin. By wandering around the shop, looking for anything with a date, I concluded I was some time in 2027.

The host insisted on serving a slice of the homemade apple pie and a cup of coffee. Hungry from the transition, I wanted to take her up on her offer. “I may not have enough to pay you,” I explained, showing my few remaining coins.

“Land sakes, child. Those be real silver coins. What you mean not enough? You gotta be wanting a jar of apple butter to take along with you.” She put the jar on the counter and began wrapping it in paper before I could object. Then she took the better portion of the coins, carefully writing out a receipt. On the top was the date: April 20, 2027.

The proprietress cut herself a slice of the pie and sat across the table. “H’ain’t seen you round. Just passing thru?”

“Guess so. Don’t really have a destination.”

“You on foot?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so. Don’t get any road trade these days. They be a big weekend two week ago, right before the new rationing done start. Buncha people from Kerrville, even San Antone, out looking at the flowers. Burn up that last tank of gas doing something fun. Damn near ran outa everything. After that, bupkis, zip, nada.”

“So, you’re multi-lingual,” I joked.

She laughed. “Yeah, I can say *goat shit* in lotsa languages. That what this be worth now. What gonna happen to us, I wonder. Don’t look good.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. *Little do you know.*

“Want another slice? On the house.”

“I’d love one.”

She busied herself cutting another slice for both of us, this time adorning each with a scoop of ice cream.

“My ol’ man, he took off for Kerrville. Walk all the way there just in hopes of finding some kinda work. What’s gonna happen to us?”

“Looks bad, all right.”

“Sometimes I wonder if God be visiting punishment on us. Like Saddam and Gonorrhoea, or whatever.”

“Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” I replied, “if he checks out this place, I’m sure he’ll find at least one righteous person. Maybe that’ll be enough, since it doesn’t look as if there are 10 people total in town.”

My host looked puzzled.

“It’s in Genesis,” I explained.

“Oh. Don’t read the Bible much anymore. Ain’t much comfort there.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Ain’t your fault.”

“Still.”

“You got any comfort?”

“Sorry. Fraid not.”

“Didn’t think so. Things be pretty bad when you can’t get comfort even from an angel.”

Now it was my turn to look puzzled.

“I seen you,” she explained.

“I don’t understand.”

“I seen you appear. Right there on the other side o’ the highway. Pop. Right outa thin air. Gotta be an angel, I says to myself. Treat her right I says. When you handed me them silver coins like you didn’t know what they be, I knowed I be right. You be an angel, right?”

“No. I don’t think there are any more angels. They all died long ago.”

“Be you the devil then?” She looked frightened.

“No. You’re safe from me. I’m neither an angel nor a demon.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Believe what you will. I have only gratitude in my heart for you. For I was hungry, and you gave me food...”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Thank you, child. You don’t know what that means to me.”

She began to sob. I touched her head and felt her quiver. “I wish I could help, but there is no help coming. It’s up to us from now on. God’s not coming.”

She looked up, her face streaked from the tears. “Up to us?”

“Us poor humans. We’re on our own now.”

“What we going to do?” she wailed.

“Most of us are going to die,” I told her.

“That why you came?” she asked. “You be death?”

“Is that what you wish?”

“Sometimes... I don’t got the courage to end it myself.”

“Few people do.”

“What can I do?”

“Face the end with courage,” I suggested.

She seemed satisfied with that answer. Standing up, she collected the dirty plates and cups and put them in the sink. I walked over and hugged her gently. She turned and buried her tear stained face on my shoulder. “Courage, woman. That’s all we have left.”

I turned and walked out of the door, feeling eyes on me the entire time. Turning back for a final look, I saw a camera pointed at her. I smiled, waved goodbye, and left.

Unwilling to confirm the storeowner's ideas by transitioning, I set off down the highway leading back to Leakey. After several miles, I felt comfortable making the change. Then, anxious to have this day over, I whisked myself back to the cabin after dark, ate a Power Bar for supper, and fell into bed exhausted. I woke up in the middle of the night wondering what had happened to the jar of apple butter. I resolved to look for it, but never did.

The next morning I woke up with a renewed sense of purpose and a clear vision of the future. From that moment on, I *was* the Second Messiah.

Was the week over? What difference did it make? I envisioned my dorm room in Austin, in the early hours of the morning of May 20, 2087. It would be dark. Everyone would be asleep. By now, the technique of transitioning was becoming instinctive. I simply willed myself there.

The room smelled musty and needed cleaning. Apparently, the housekeeping crew had quit worrying about it. I chanced turning on the light and quickly found another patch, which I applied. Then I transitioned again, to the hotel in San Antonio.

13. Council of Peace
May 20, 2087
San Antonio, Norte Mexico

The service couldn't compare to that of the Hilton Riverwalk in the San Antonio of the pre-Collapsian world, but considering the hardship under which they labored, the staff responded well. I sat at the table by myself on the patio of the hotel, working thru a copious serving of *huevos rancheros*, accompanied by a small pork chop — at least it wasn't goat — several tortillas, some refried beans, rice, and a selection of fruits. I'd washed it all down with several cups of real coffee with a delicate hint of cinnamon.

At 6:00, the other residents of the hotel began to filter into the dining area, passing thru a buffet line and settling at one of the many tables on the patio. No one approached the strange Anglo until César appeared. "*Querida*, you have returned," he exclaimed when he saw me. "I am dying to hear what you have been doing." He sat down at her table, glancing at the dishes. "That is quite a breakfast for one so...petite. You must have been very hungry."

"Famished," I replied, looking up to smile at him.

"I am sorry that I am too late to share the meal with you. *Con permiso*, I will sit with you while I eat my breakfast."

"By all means. Please. We have much to talk about, much to do. I wanted to get an early start on the day."

"You have been busy then."

"Yes, and we mustn't be too specific by what you mean by *then*."

"Ah. Did you take my advice? Have you been...?"

"All in due time, César. I think I will have a bit more coffee. This is an excellent blend."

He smiled. "I ordered it especially for you. It comes from the region of Chiapas, in the highlands. I didn't realize that coffee grew there until I inquired. It just arrived this morning. On the train."

"A train! Excellent."

"That was Lupe's doing. I believe she wants to impress Jackson with the riches of Mexico."

"Are you sure Jackson didn't maneuver her into it?"

"No. From what I hear, the negotiations are very complex. Jackson has managed to construct a good network link back to Austin, something we have frankly lusted after for years. Using the barter software in the University, they have already arranged many trades. I understand that the train is going on to Austin, and there is talk of setting up scheduled runs."

"That is great news. May I ask how you power the train?"

"Ah, you are as sharp as they say, cutting to the issue immediately. As you probably guessed, we are using old diesel-powered locomotives, with all the logistical problems that entails. Young Ron has already tackled the problem of converting the power plant to run on electric power, preferably solar. Of course, that assumes that the problem of manufacturing the solar cells can be dealt with."

“Work on that is underway, I trust.”

“Oh, yes. That is the key to our future, is it not?”

“Indeed. Trade is essential to rebuilding the world, and energy is the key to trade. The problems must be solved, and quickly.”

“I think all it needs is for some charismatic new leader to explain that to everyone. I think that I am looking at her. Incidentally, you look different. Your hair is particularly beautiful, and you seem ... radiant.”

“I took a week off and spent it mostly in solitude. I’ve been thinking a lot, and practicing.”

“Practicing?”

“Within the past day of my subjective time, I have been at the cabin near Leakey, then in my room in Austin, then finally here. When I was in the cabin, the year was 2027.”

“Ah, *Querida*. You have found the key.”

“Yes. It is more powerful than even you have guessed. Were it not for all these people, I would show you, but I don’t think the time is right yet.”

“You can control the time and place?”

“Yes, though there are some limitations.”

“One of them, I suspect, explains your ravenous appetite this morning.”

I laughed. “Got that right.”

“You went to your room in Austin before coming here? What was that for?”

“When we’re alone, I’ll show you.”

“Ah. In that case, the explanation must wait. I’ve arranged for a meeting. Jackson and Lupe, as you call her, will be here shortly.”

“One thing I didn’t tell you, César. During my time alone, I decided that I really am supposed to be the world’s savior, the Second Messiah.”

“Well, finally.”

The four of us sat around a table on the patio. The other hotel guests had been quietly discouraged from lingering in the area. Just to make sure, a couple of the Bishop’s guards stood nearby.

“It’s complicated,” Jackson began.

“We all realize that,” I said. “Can you give us a quick summary?”

“May I?” Lupe said.

“Of course,” I replied.

“It is larger than mere trade. We are talking about the future of civilization. Please,” she held up her hand to forestall any questions, “let me expand on the idea. We have considered this at great length, as I am sure you have as well. What kind of future will we have? If we continue as we are

doing, we will soon revert to a collection of warring tribes, intent only on our own aggrandizement, and jealous of each other, like the city states of ancient Greece.”

I nodded but had not expected such a deep analysis from a trade representative. Lupe continued, “On the other hand, we can hope for something better, a new world arising like a Phoenix from the ashes of the old, a new world better than the old, committed to rectifying the mistakes of the past.” She took a sip of coffee. I loved the way she spoke: her English was flawless, and very learned, but with a delicious Mexican accent. Jackson seemed to find even more about Lupe to admire; he hardly took his eyes from her as she spoke.

“Your Consensus reflects the same concerns. You shy away from allowing a majority to control everyone without general agreement. The very word you use shows that. Moreover, you espouse reason as the answer, and seem to have only two basic principles: The fewer rules, the better; and the environment must be protected.”

“We like to keep things simple,” I agreed. “We have some agreements derived from those rules.”

“We are very familiar with all of your workings. We have studied everything you have done for many years. You see, we always feared that eventually you would realize that your future depended on unfettered access to the ocean. That means that you must either deal with us or defeat us. The first requires eliminating centuries of distrust between our cultures. Therefore, we have anticipated the latter.” She paused to let that all sink in.

“Then something amazing happened. Instead of conquest, a force for peace appeared, someone who might be able to induce everyone to cooperate, someone who seems to fulfill old prophecies, someone who even performs miracles, someone lauded as the Second Messiah, come to show us a new path.”

“I haven’t really performed miracles,” I replied.

“That is of no consequence. Besides, I have spent many hours talking to Jackson. Do you deny that you have traveled to the past?”

I looked at Jackson, who was unable to meet my gaze. “I have lived part of my life in 1998,” I said. “I don’t deny it.”

“Tell them the rest,” César suggested.

Jackson looked up. “What has happened?”

“I’ve learned to control it,” I said. “However, I still don’t know how it works, only that I am able to move consciously now, instead of in my sleep.”

“Holy shit,” Jackson said.

“Will it be possible to arrange a demonstration?” Lupe asked.

“I don’t know. Do you want me to disappear and reappear in public?”

“Certainly not at first. Let us come back to that, though. May I continue?”

I nodded.

“We have studied everything known about you. Much of what is written is nonsense, of course, but interestingly, one basic thread runs thru everything, and we think it is critical.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“You are truly a good person. That is remarkable in these times. You don’t lie. Your first instinct is always to help, as shown first in Houston, then at New Home, and again at the Ranch, when you brought food and supplies to César. You have immense power, yet you deny that you are anything special. You subdued a giant in Houston with words and a touch. We’ve even seen a record on video. Yet, after he was powerless and vulnerable, you comforted him and saw to his needs.”

“Well, he mostly collapsed from hunger,” I said. “He’s essentially a nice person who’d followed the only path he knew until I showed him another.”

César almost shouted, “That’s it. I’ve been trying to figure out what is so special about you, besides the obvious, of course, that you are beautiful, intelligent, and powerful. Yes, the special thing is how open you are. You tell the truth, you trust people to do the right thing. You do the right thing yourself.”

“And now you’re asking me to lie,” I said.

“Clearly, that is a huge mistake,” César said. “I must rethink my plan...and rewrite the speech I have prepared.”

“I think that Mariana has more to say,” Jackson interjected. *Mariana? Clearly, there is more to their relationship than simple negotiation.*

Mariana continued, “The issue is what kind of civilization we can build. Our resources are very limited. We are essentially living off the Old Order, salvaging their goods, copying their technology. We must do more.”

Jackson took up the argument. “First, we need a reliable source of energy that won’t harm the planet. The photocells from NASA promise a way to get it. However, we must be able to manufacture them ourselves. We are already starting to run out of the ones we have looted from NASA.”

“Hence the need for trade agreements,” I said. “I trust you two have managed to work out the details.”

“The details suggest some more needs,” Jackson replied. “We must have good communications. How long will the old infrastructure last? Ten years? Twenty? Fifty at the outside. Then what? How can we possibly repair old microwave towers? How can we repair fiber optic cables? We must have something else.”

“Satellites,” César said.

“Exactly. Which means that we will need to replace the satellites. They won’t last long either.”

“So we will need even more manufacturing, as well as some launch vehicles,” I said. “I see why you said this is getting complicated.”

“This will require cooperation on a massive scale,” César said.

No one disagreed with that.

“So,” I asked after they had all thought about it, “what’s next?”

“Next,” César said, “we plan for your coming out. I think, *Querida*, that it is time for you to tell us everything.”

I told them of my activities of the past week.

“This is wonderful. It seems to mean that you can go any place in an instant,” César said.

“Except, apparently, I have to observe a timeline for each time and place. For example, I doubt that I could go to the cabin in Leakey in 2027 before the time I was there.”

“But you are still able to go to 1998?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried.”

“Well, that must be tested soon, but I think we have more to do in this time.” César said.

“What do you have in mind?”

“A series of appearances around the country, I mean *Mexico*, where you will give a short speech that I will write for you.”

“By appearance, I hope you don’t imply that I will suddenly magically appear.”

“I was not thinking of that, though it would be spectacular.”

“I don’t think I can go to some place that I have never seen. My ability requires me to form a careful mental image of the place I expect to land in.”

“I see. So, you couldn’t simply translate yourself to the area of the Rio Grande Valley?”

“I doubt it. Can we go by train?”

“Most assuredly. I will arrange it as soon as we finish discussing everything.”

“OK. I assume that you want me to play the part you have assigned me, the returned Virgin of Guadalupe.”

“No. I have changed my mind. I want you to be yourself. We will let the rumor mongers supply the connection to the Virgin.”

“So, you have already started the rumors?”

“No, the Bishop himself has done that.”

I had to laugh. “Things are careening out of control.”

“Indeed. Events are moving fast. We must take advantage of this opportunity. What did Shakespeare say? There is a tide in the affairs of man, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.”

A village priest quoting Shakespeare? Why does everything have to be more than it seems?

A functionary dressed in the livery of the Bishop’s retinue entered discreetly and handed a note to César.

“It seems that the Bishop would like to meet with us,” he explained.

“Well, let’s go.”

“No need. He is waiting for us in the parlor.”

“Well, then let’s go immediately, unless there is something you need to tell me first.”

“Just be yourself, and everything will be great.”

“Perhaps I should wear my academic regalia?”

“I would go as you are, though if I may...” He unbuttoned an additional button on my shirt. “The Bishop is known for having an eye for the ladies — not that I am suggesting anything, you understand.”

“I’m saving myself for you,” I said, “Now that my previous inamorato seems to have made other arrangements.” I smiled at Jackson, who blushed, and at Mariana, who smiled back.

“Ah, be still my heart. I hope we can get thru the meeting quickly.”

The parlor, as César had called it, proved to be a large and elaborately decorated room clearly designed for receptions. The Bishop sat in an imposing chair at the far end, surrounded by several guards armed with automatic weapons.

When César opened the door, the guards snapped to attention, but still kept a good grip on their weapons.

“Come in, *compadre*, come in,” his Excellency called out.

I followed César into the room with Jackson and Mariana trailing behind. We crossed the long space to take chairs opposite the Bishop. I heard the door being closed behind us and glanced back to see two more guards, making a total of six. I commented, with a smile, “You seem to be very well protected.”

He laughed. “Well, your reputation precedes you. My captain insisted that I take precautions, though he also admitted that your magic would probably render them useless. Logic is not his best asset.”

César spoke up, “Surely he doesn’t suspect me of plotting against you!”

“Oh, but he does. He is a very suspicious man.”

“Well, how can we allay his fears?”

“I think that one of us must die.”

“That seems a bit extreme,” I put in. “Surely there is some easier way.”

“Yes,” the Bishop replied, “we will ignore him as much as possible.” He nodded his head toward the door, and the six guards snapped to attention again, then filed out. When we were alone, he continued, “I received your requisition for a train to carry Hypatia and you to our southern reaches. I am guessing you do not intend it to be a honeymoon trip. Would you care to explain?”

“I want Hypatia to deliver her message of peace and hope to as wide an audience as possible,” César replied.

“Peace and hope?”

“Yes.”

“There is much history to overcome. The Anglos have exploited us for...well, centuries.”

“Hypatia is different,” César objected.

“So you say.”

“If I may,” I interrupted.

“Please,” the Bishop said.

“The only message I have to bring is this: none of us can manage alone. Those days are gone forever. If we are to rebuild civilization, without destroying what is left of the planet, we have to work together. For example, we have an energy technology, solar photocells, that are efficient enough to supply most of our energy needs. However, we need raw materials, materials that you can supply, to manufacture them.” I paused for breath. I decided not to mention the complications involving the actual hardware. Looking up, the Bishop caught Mariana’s eye. She nodded slightly.

I continued, “Now, energy is only part of the problem. We must also have the ability to communicate. That means we must either maintain the existing communication structure, which will be next to impossible, or rely on satellites. The satellites won’t last much longer, so we will have to launch new ones. That is going to require cooperation on a massive scale. Need I go on?”

“I think we get the point,” César said, putting a warning hand on my arm. “The difficult part will be getting everyone to trust...well, to trust you. You are our hope. You must convince everyone to go along with your plan.” He turned to look at his brother-in-law, who nodded, and added, “Well put, Hypatia.”

We sat in silence for several seconds until the Bishop asked, “So, César, you have a plan?”

“Yes. I have been working on the logistics. Mariana and this young man, Jackson, have been negotiating on some aspects of trading, but we will need your approval, and Veracruz’s, for our more ambitious goals.”

“OK, I approve. I’ll deal with the bureaucrats down south personally.” He clapped his hands and the guards reappeared. “Tell Captain Ramirez that I need to see him at once. And bring the sedan chair. I will return to the Palace now.”

When we were alone again, César hugged me enthusiastically. “Perhaps there is hope for this miserable world after all.”

“Could we see a demonstration of this power you have?” Mariana asked.

“Now?”

“Why not? Is there some problem?”

“I’ve never tried it in front of an audience.”

Jackson said, “Patty, we need to experiment to see just what is possible, don’t you agree?”

“OK. I’ll try. Shall we meet tomorrow for breakfast? Say at 6:00?” I thought of the patio, how inviting it was early in the morning before the heat of the day, with all the wonderful food.

Then, I disappeared.

14. Curiouser and Curiouser
May 19, 1998
Houston, TX

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you.”

Oops! I was back in 1998, in the garden of the Talbot Mansion. I’d forgotten I couldn’t go to the future. I looked up to see Mark striding quickly down the path.

“What’s wrong? You look disappointed to see me.”

“Not disappointed, just surprised.”

“Oh?”

“I expected to wind up in San Antonio in 2087.”

“You *expected*?”

“Yeah. We have lots to talk about.”

“Oh, that sounds really cool, but right now we have to go.”

“Go? Where?”

“Just down the street. Mama has arranged for us to have tea with Sarah Albright.”

“Who’s Sarah Albright?”

“The woman who lives with the Saudi prince. Remember, you met her last night?”

“Oh, last night. That was a long time ago.” *I’m going to have to start making notes.*

“I see. Well, remember she came early, and Mama whisked her off to see the Isfahan rug?”

“Ah, yes. It’s coming back to me. Dressed like a Muslim.”

“That’s the one. She actually is a practicing Muslim.”

“Of course. She would be if she lives with a Saudi prince.”

“Not necessarily. You’d be surprised. She is not the first to occupy the position.”

“OK. Do I look all right?”

“All right? You look spectacular. Your hair is different somehow, and you...well, you just look great. You need to change clothes, though.” I was still wearing the jeans and shirt from San Antonio.

We headed back to my bedroom, where Grace was waiting. She was holding a dress with long sleeves and a modest neckline. “I think this is enough, don’t you Mark? We won’t need a head covering or anything like that, will we?”

“Maybe we should take along a couple of scarves, just in case,” I suggested.

“Yes, that should do. Get changed quickly, dear. They don’t really allow visitors, so we’re slipping in when no one else is around.”

I complied as quickly as possible, checking myself in the mirror. I looked different. I'd acquired a slight tan despite my best efforts. In this era, suntans suggested good health, just the opposite of 2087.

Although the Talbots referred to the Prince's establishment as a palace, it looked more like a fortress. A huge structure covered with what looked like stucco, devoid of all windows on the front, surrounded by a high wall topped with concertina wire, the design put privacy and security before elegance and beauty. Although we could have walked easily, Grace insisted on arriving in a chauffeured limo and dragooned Lunyon into playing the part. Dressed in a dark blue uniform, with an appropriate hat, he hammed it up. He had difficulty suppressing a grin.

The car emerged from the Talbot driveway and drove around the block, approaching the gate of the fortress from the other side, a subterfuge unlikely to fool anyone. The gate slid open and admitted us to the compound. A circular drive led to a very imposing front door, at least two stories high. Lunyon stopped the car and rushed out to open the car door. The imposing entrance seemed to be just for show, as we passed thru a smaller entry at the side of the covered portico.

The interior was breathtaking, displaying opulence on a grand scale. Terrazzo marble, covered by no fewer than eight rugs, greeted the visitor in a huge entry hall. A servant appeared and politely relieved everyone of shoes, offering some soft slippers in exchange. Sarah appeared around that time, greeting us warmly. "I'm so glad you were able to come on such short notice. We have only about an hour before a delegation from Abu Dhabi is scheduled to arrive. We'll be notified when they have left the airport. I'm afraid that you'll have to skedaddle quickly when that happens."

"We understand completely," Grace assured her. "I'm sure that we won't have time to do justice to the rugs if these are a sample."

"Oh, these are nothing," Sarah assured her. "There is too much traffic in this area for the truly fine ones. Not that any of these are second rate, you understand. They are somewhat worn, however. This one over here is more than 100 years old. Owned by the grandfather of the Prince. It was used in a tent if you can imagine that. Come this way and I'll show you my favorite."

She led the way thru a door into an intimate room set up to serve tea. Several small rugs hung on the walls, but the prize was a large and truly stunning rug on the floor. "A Tabriz?" Grace asked.

"A good guess, and partly correct. It comes from a small village located in the general area. This rug once graced a floor of the palace in Riyadh. The Crown Prince preferred a different design, so we acquired it. Isn't it marvelous?"

"Outstanding," Grace agreed. Personally, I found the design a bit pedestrian, but said nothing.

"Look at the quality," Sarah said. She moved to the edge and flipped up a corner to show the underside. "Nothing like this has been made in decades." She and Grace both knelt to examine the knots, while Mark and I looked around the room. A servant appeared with tea, which was delicious.

"What's this tea made from?" I asked.

"Hibiscus and mint flavored with honey. Fabulous, isn't it?"

"Delicious." I was glad to see that the tray contained some sandwiches, being hungry as usual. How many could I eat without attracting Sarah's attention? Also, how could we bring the conversation around to the gold? Then, Sarah surprised us all.

“Want to see the fabled gold room?”

“Sounds interesting,” Grace said. “Why is it called the gold room?”

“You’ll see,” Sarah assured her. “We have to be quick.” She stole a glance at her watch and looked around to make sure the servants had all left. Then she went to the far wall and pulled the rug away. She waved to follow her, so we all moved behind the carpet.

Part of the wall was glass, heavy-duty glass to be sure, probably bulletproof, but still transparent. On the other side was a gigantic vault containing stacks of gold bars on pallets, each stack about 1 meter high. I did a quick mental calculation. Six rows across and eight deep. Each stack held 10 layers of bars, each layer containing 10 bars. Assuming the arrangement was symmetrical, that meant each pallet contained 1000 gold bars. Assuming the bars were standard size, each contained 400 troy ounces of gold. I struggled to get the decimal place correct. 48,000 times 400 equaled 19,200,000 troy ounces. In 2087, a troy ounce of gold would buy a person a life of luxury for a year.

“This is not all of it,” Sarah explained. “There are bags of Krugerrands somewhere else. This is the stash they show when they want to impress someone.”

“I’m definitely impressed,” Grace said. “My granddaughter, Joan, though, would complain about non-performing assets.”

Sarah laughed. “I’m sure she would. Frankly,” she lowered her voice, “these people have so much money they literally don’t know what to do with all of it. This is *disaster insurance*. Now, I’m afraid we have to scam before someone catches us.”

We moved back into the room quickly, smoothing the carpet back into place. A few minutes later, Sarah got word that the delegation had left the airport, and the visitors were unceremoniously ushered out the front door.

“Did you do the arithmetic?” Mark asked when we were back in the limo.

“19 million troy ounces, more or less,” I said.

“That’s almost 6 billion dollars at today’s price, that’s billion with a B. What an incredible non-performing asset.”

“They’re even richer than we are,” Grace commented with a smile. “Are you two planning a heist?”

We both laughed. “It would take weeks just to move half of it,” Mark commented. “I hope they are prepared when disaster strikes.”

However, I was thinking. I’ve seen the Sheik’s Gold, and I know where it was in 1998. If it is above water in 2087, maybe I could just transition right to the spot. Wouldn’t that be a kick? On the other hand, getting the stuff out would be a major undertaking.

“Think you could get me the GPS coordinates for the gold?” I asked Mark.

“Well, we can get reasonably close, but I doubt that we can receive a signal inside a building with walls as thick as those.” Mark replied.

“Oh, dear. How about a really good map? Can we get that?”

“Mary Lynn can get anything,” Grace assured us. “Just tell her what you need.”

“Let me get this straight. You found yourself at the cabin near Leakey on April 16, 2027?”

“That’s how it started.” I grabbed a chip from the bowl on the table and dipped it into the humus. “You’d left me a message explaining that I was to be there alone for a week.”

“Gee, a whole week.”

I smacked him with the pillow. “For you, I guess that’s nothing, but I wondered what to do with myself. I spent a lot of time thinking, aided by the cannabis you’d left me. One joint for each day. Great stuff.”

“What did you think about?”

“Well, I decided that I really am the Second Messiah.”

“No kidding.”

“Who else? I also learned how to control my unique ability, at least I thought so.”

“Now that *is* interesting.”

I related the adventures of the past couple of weeks.

“Why do you think you wound up here instead of the patio of the hotel?”

“Well, I’ve missed you. When I was by myself at the cabin, I thought about you a lot. Then I got distracted thinking about all the things I need to do in 2087. My subconscious finally asserted itself and brought me back here.”

“I for one am glad it did.”

“Me too,” I confessed, “but I can’t stay long. There’s too much to do in 2087.”

“Why can’t you stay here for a week or so, then zip back to 2087. If you really can control it...”

“Just a feeling I have. I think that the ability to control the transitioning comes with some responsibilities. If I start using the power just for my own desires, maybe it’ll disappear. I think maybe that my time here is sort of a test. It would be so easy to come here and never leave. We could live in luxury, travel the world, something that’s impossible in 2087. It’s seductive. I have to resist it.”

“I see.”

“I can spend a day or so, though. Maybe we can go back to Leakey. Somehow, it feels easier to get there than here. I like it better.”

“If what you’ve told me is true, we have a lot of work to do in Leakey.”

“That’s for sure. And nothing to do here that I know of.”

“OK. We’ll have to figure out some good way to break it to Mama, but I’m all for it.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“If what you told me is right, you could go there right now.”

“And miss another night of bliss with you?”

“Well, if you have work to do in 2087, you could just meet me in Leakey in a day or so. That’s a day or so in this timeline. We can spend the night together, then you can return to San Antonio, and come back to Leakey.”

“Good idea. That will be a real test.”

“Now, about the night of bliss part...”

“You can’t imagine how tempting I find this life. You live in unimaginable luxury from the point of view of 2087. I wish I could just stay here with you and enjoy it.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you as well. I think I am falling in love.”

“Come back to me.”

“I will. I’ll see you in two days of your time, in Leakey.”

With that, I transitioned to San Antonio, as planned.

15. Cellular Automata
May 21, 2087
San Antonio, Norte Mexico

I stood outside a securely locked door of the hotel in San Antonio, a situation all too familiar from my experience at the McDonald's in Sealy. Hoping to avoid another confrontation with the elements of the law in *Norte Mexico*, I settled into the darkened doorway as discreetly as possible. I had no idea what the time might be, only that it seemed to be the middle of the night. "Well," I muttered to myself, "I did think about arriving *before* breakfast so that I wouldn't startle anyone. I hope it isn't too much before breakfast." I briefly considered trying another transition, hoping to cut the time a bit more closely, but decided not to press my luck.

I must have dozed off, only to wake up when someone shook my shoulder. "*Señorita, está OK?*"

I looked up to see a face I recognized as one of the servers in the dining area. "Yes, *gracias*. I am OK. I accidentally locked myself out."

Either he didn't understand her, or the explanation satisfied him. He helped me up and unlocked the front door.

"Too early for breakfast?" I asked, hoping that he understood at least that much English.

"Breakfast? *Si, si. Dos* hours."

Just to make sure, I held up two fingers. "*Dos horas?*"

"*Si, Señora.*"

Hoping to get a bit of sleep at least, I headed upstairs, slipped into my room, and lay down on top of the bed covers.

"Hypatia! *Querida*, what are you doing here? I thought we were meeting for breakfast."

"Hi, César. Apparently, my control is not as precise as I thought. I had a detour thru 1998 on the way, and got here hours too early."

"I see. Are you well?"

"Just tired and hungry. Is it time for breakfast yet?"

"It should be ready soon. Do you want to freshen up first?"

"Later. Right now, I want food, in quantity."

"Is it always like this when you...you do whatever it is you do?"

"I'm always hungry, yes."

"In that case, let us go eat, by all means. Then we have much to discuss with you. There have been some developments."

An hour later, with breakfast a pleasant memory, I sat around a table with César, Jackson, and Mariana. "OK," I began, "You said there were developments."

"Ron has found a source for the machines we need to build the solar cells. It's almost too good to be true. The information turned up on the computers we salvaged from the Tower in

Houston. Turns out the company that occupied the 47th floor engaged in solar cell research, among other things.”

“Fantastic. So, the machines are in Houston somewhere?”

“Not exactly. Although the company was owned by the Houston firm, the work was performed somewhere out west, Albuquerque we think.”

“Damn. That might as well be in Africa.”

“Well, yes, but then we found that sometime before the Collapse, the date is 2032 on the documents, several of the machines were transferred to Houston.”

“So, they are in Houston?”

“No. This was during the Last Days. Things were very confused. The shipment was delayed, and never made it to Houston.”

“OK. Just tell me. Where are they?”

“Sealy.”

“Sealy? That’s great! Why the dour expression?”

“They’re in the Warehouse. The Sealyites found them once we asked about them.”

“So, the problem is…”

“The sons of bitches won’t release them.”

“Have we tried aggressive means of persuasion?”

“The Council didn’t want to get them all riled up. Sealy is too valuable.”

“I assume negotiations are still underway?”

“Yes, but they’re standing firm on their demands. They don’t know what the machines are for, but they know we want them badly. I wish they had let me handle the negotiations, but by the time I found out about it, well…”

“I see. What do they want?”

“Gold.”

“Gold? What for?”

“It’s complicated. You know that The Council wants to re-establish a system of money.”

“I hadn’t heard.”

“Barter is too inefficient.”

“And money requires gold?”

“There’s a lot of history behind it.”

César added, “We would like to see money become more available as well. It would enhance trade opportunities. The Bishop’s Conclave, our equivalent of your Council, learned of the negotiations. Maybe it was accidental, but we suspect the Sealyites leaked the news for competitive reasons. You realize that there is a prophesy about the Sheik’s Gold?”

“No. That’s news to me.”

“Yes, it appeared on the web site in the past week.”

“Who put it there?”

“According to Mandy,” Jackson interrupted, “it’s always been there but no one noticed it before.”

“How is that possible?”

“We thought you might know,” Mariana said. “Is there something you would like to tell us?” Her face displayed no emotion, but the accusatory tone in her voice was unmistakable.

César said, “You did say, *Querida*, that you had detoured thru 1998 after you left us.”

“That’s true.”

“Did you learn the location of the Sheik’s Gold?”

“Yes, sort of. I saw it.”

“Fantastic,” Jackson said. “Where is it?”

“Well, I can tell you where it was in Houston in 1998, but whether it is still there is anyone’s guess. Also, there will be a serious problem retrieving it.”

“Can you draw us a map?” Jackson asked.

“Maybe. I asked about GPS coordinates, but they were not available. We can get within 100 meters or so maybe.”

“Not good enough. Without accurate coordinates, it’s going to be damn hard to find the site again,” Jackson lamented. “Pre-Collapsian Houston was enormous.”

“Believe it or not,” I snapped, “I am aware of the size of Pre-Collapsian Houston, probably better than you even.”

“I am not sure I understand,” Mariana said. “Is the problem finding the gold, or retrieving it.”

“Both,” I replied. “When I saw the gold, it was in the form of standard gold bars. Those are cumbersome to transport.”

“How many bars were there?” Jackson asked.

“I didn’t have time to count them, but I estimated 48,000.”

“Holy shit,” Jackson said.

“Wow,” agreed César. “The owner of that stash would be incredibly wealthy.”

“We must ensure that it is used wisely,” I said.

“What do you suggest?” Mariana asked.

“We should use it to establish a bank, much like Fort Knox in the old order. We could then print money, or smaller coins, based on the presumed value of the gold. That depends, though, on our ability to keep the location secret until we can start salvage operations.”

Mariana looked at César, who nodded slightly. “We agree wholeheartedly. This conversation does not leave this room. Now, how do we go about finding the location?”

I looked at Jackson, who said, “We notice that you used the plural pronoun, *we*. What exactly does that mean?” He looked intently at Mariana.

No one said anything for several seconds. Then César replied, “I told Hypatia some time ago that I would do whatever she thought best. I cannot speak for the bureaucrats in Veracruz. However, they are a long way from here, and communication is difficult. Let us proceed on the assumption that we can convince them of the benefit to all from our cooperation, our *enhanced* cooperation. Whether that implies a union in the future will have to be determined later. Is that acceptable?”

“It is to me,” Jackson said.

“Count me in,” added Mariana.

“OK,” I agreed. “Here’s what I know. The house I was staying in was located in an area known as River Oaks, inhabited exclusively by the rich. Nearby, but not exactly adjacent was a fortress-like abode designed to discourage intruders. That is where I saw the gold. Once we get into the building, we should be able to find the gold easily. Jackson, do you know where River Oaks is now?”

“Unfortunately, I am familiar with the area. We avoid it. It’s an impenetrable jungle.”

“Yes, I can see how that might have grown up in the area. Too bad. It was lovely when I saw it.”

César asked, “When you say impenetrable, I wonder, has anyone tried to explore the area? It would seem that homes occupied by the rich would be good opportunities for salvage.”

“In addition to the difficult terrain, anyone trying to enter the area would have to deal with the large packs of dogs roaming the jungle, as well as some nasty cats. Legend has it that even Elephants live in the area?”

“Cats?” I asked. “Like house cats?”

“Descended from house cats, with some interbreeding with bobcats, and perhaps some other more exotic cats kept by the former inhabitants. Believe me, it’s not a place you want to spend much time.”

“How about using the flying machine?” César asked. “Could Ron fly to the right spot?”

“Well, landing is out of the question. You’d never get airborne again. Besides, to have any hope of finding the right place, we’d have to start with an accurate fix.”

All three of them turned to look at me. “Yes, I agree. I have to go back.”

16. *Plotting a Course* *May 22, 1998* *Near Leakey, TX*

This time, the transition was perfect, directly to the bedroom of the cabin in Leakey. I wondered if my subconscious was telling me something. I lay in the bed, still fully clothed, just as I had left San Antonio.

Mark was nowhere around. Maybe I had wound up in the wrong time again. I checked the outer room, but he was not there. Maybe in the office? The bookcase door was closed but opened easily when I selected the now familiar copy of **Computer Hacking for Dummies**. I walked into the empty office, sat before one of the many screens and found the icon for browsing the internet. The display showed the date, and a weather forecast. I had arrived on the correct day, which promised scattered thundershowers in the afternoon.

As usual, eating was the first concern; an expedition to the kitchen seemed in order. After a check of the refrigerator proved disappointing, I looked into the cupboards. At least there was some coffee, enough for one pot at least.

Mark drove up during the second cup. He waved enthusiastically as he got out of the large SUV, went around to the back, and emerged carrying a large cooler. “Are you hungry?” he called out.

“You know it. Whatcha got?”

“Stopped off in town and picked up some food. Tacos from Gordo’s Abuelita. I grabbed some barbecue in Bandera when I passed thru. Should be enough for a bit. I’ve got some groceries for later. Forecast calls for more rain.”

“I know. I checked it.”

Mark strode onto the porch. “Can you get the door for me?”

“Only if you take out one of the tacos first.”

He laughed and put the cooler down on the deck. “OK. We eat first.”

The tacos were as good as I remembered. I downed two of them in quick succession, the third more slowly.

“Ah. Now I can think clearly.”

“Good. I’ve got something to show you. Let’s go inside.” He picked up the cooler and a tube I hadn’t noticed until now, being focused on food, and we moved inside. After putting the food away, Mark moved to the counter and took some papers from the tube.

“This is a map of part of Houston. River Oaks is the area outlined in red. Now, this,” he pulled a piece of clear plastic from the tube and spread it on top of the map, “is an aerial photo taken yesterday. Mary Lynn was able to work her usual miracle. This cost us quite a bit of money, by the way.”

“Maybe I can find some way to pay you back,” I offered.

“I hope so.” He smiled. “You can see the streets clearly. I’ve labeled some of them. This,” he indicated a large light colored rectangle, “is the site of the Sheik’s Gold. We can estimate the

coordinates by measuring the distance from the edges. It isn't completely accurate, because we don't have any reference points on the aerial photo. That's what happens when you're in a hurry. Think this will be enough?"

"I hope so. I'll have to take the map back and find out."

"Think that will be a problem?"

"I don't know. I've never tried to take something with me deliberately. My clothes seem to come with me when I transition. When I went to Medina in 2027, the money in my pocket went along. This is bigger. I just don't know."

"I guess we'll find out." He looked apologetic. "Uh, I hate to bring this up, but..."

"Yes?"

"I've got some work I have to do. It can't wait."

"OK. I'm cool with that. I'll read a book or something."

"Thanks. This is important."

"Go." I shooed him into the office.

Unfortunately, the selection of books had a serious technical side to it. I had been hoping for some detective fiction or something. Instead, I left him in the office and went for a walk. Following the familiar path along the creek, I let my mind wander. This reminded me of the time here in 2027. I reflected on the woman in Medina, the one who ran the apple stand. What had happened to her, I wondered?

Daydreams can be dangerous. I accidentally transitioned to Medina.

17. May Day
May 1, 2027
Medina, TX

Having nothing better to do, I crossed the highway to the apple stand. The proprietress stood behind a counter to the left as I entered, looking up when a bell on the door announced the entrance of a customer. “You!” she said. Forgetting about everything, she moved quickly around the counter and gave me a big hug. “Good to see you again. Come on back. I’ll cut you a slice of pie.”

I felt my pockets. “This time, I’m sure I don’t have any money to pay you with.”

“Child, I wouldn’t take no money from you if’n you offered.”

Nonplussed by this, I stammered, “Sorry, I thought you ran this business for a profit.”

“And so I do, especially after you done visit me. I don’t know what I be thinking, letting myself get so down in the dumps. You set me straight again. I know you be an angel. Don’t bother denying it this time.”

I just smiled. This was quite a transformation from her last visit.

“Tell me about it,” I suggested, accepting the offer of a free slice of pie. Despite the unplanned nature of the visit, I was hungry as usual.

“After you left last time, I call to my husband. Remember, I tole you he gonna walk to Kerrville looking for work.”

I nodded, my mouth was too full of apple tart to talk.

“He tole me things be powerful strange in Kerrville. People talking nonstop about the new laws, gasoline rationing and all that. I tole him I been visited by an angel. Course he didn’t believe me, but I tole him no never mind. The angel had said we should have courage, that be what I tole him. Don’t give up, I tole him. Things ain’t going to go back like they been, but we can survive. Be brave.”

She paused during her narrative to take a bite of her own pie.

“He call me back in a few hours. He done found a job helping out in a theater in town. He be always wanting to be an actor. Done some plays in college. Pretty good stand-up comic too. I mean, he be entertaining the customers here with his stories. I say he oughter invite people down here. To make a long story short, he got with the theater, rent a bus for the weekend. Put up flyers about our place around town. I know you had something to do with it, don’t bother denying it. We done have a great crowd. Sold 30% more’n our best weekend ‘fore all the troubles.”

She applied herself to the pie.

“I’m glad things are looking better for you. Don’t get complacent, though. There are tough times ahead.”

“Oh, I know child. I know. But with your help, we’ll get by, I know we will.”

“My help?”

She just smiled.

“Thanks for the pie,” I said.

“You come back, you hear?”

“I’ll try.”

I walked toward the door, when a thought occurred to her.

“What’s your husband’s name?”

“Spalding. Aaron Spalding. Why?”

“Just curious.” I noticed a display of maps of the Hill Country near the door. “May I borrow one of these maps?”

“Take one, dear. I be giving ‘em away mostly.”

“Thanks.”

I carefully folded the map, stuffed it into the pocket of my jeans. Then, without bothering to see if Mrs. Spalding was watching, I transitioned.

18. *Cold Comfort* *May 22, 1998* *Near Leakey, TX*

I knew right away that something had gone wrong. I wanted to be in the bedroom of the cabin, but instead looked down on the lake from the top of the cliff. I wasn't even sure what date it was. I tried to remember what the water in the creek had looked like when I hiked along it earlier, but my mind wasn't working properly. I had been daydreaming while walking, not paying any attention earlier. Now, when I tried to concentrate, I found the various times all mashed up together.

I looked around. The sun was behind the hills, meaning it was late afternoon. In the distance, some thunderheads seemed to be moving in my direction at an alarming pace. Hadn't Mark said something about rain? Even if he had, I knew it was just as likely to be raining in 2087. Without conviction, I guessed I was back in 1998.

I felt sick to my stomach and very tired. I considered another transition to get back to the cabin, but decided against it. I might wind up in even worse trouble. After all, the cabin was an easy thirty-minute hike away. Unless I wanted the rain to catch me, I needed to start soon.

I found the steps down the back side of the cliff and the trail at the bottom. At least the trail was in good shape, which meant it was probably not 2087, when the flood had damaged it. I set off at a reasonable pace, crossed the creek on the stepping-stones, and headed for the cabin.

I grew tired quickly, and the hunger pangs got worse. To add to my trouble, the sky grew ominously dark and a few scattered raindrops hit the leaves of the oaks. I tried to pick up the pace, but had no energy left. My feet were lead weights. I concentrated on short goals, focusing on a big oak up ahead, an easily recognizable one with a lightning scar. *I can get that far.* I plodded ahead.

The rain grew steady, strong enough to break thru the leafy barrier. I felt the drops hitting my head, but was too tired to do anything about it. After reaching the lightning scarred oak, I chose another target farther along the path, some flat rocks where I might rest for a bit. The rain grew intense; I couldn't even see the rocks until I was right on top of them.

A slight overhang provided some shelter from the rain, but not much. I lay down on the rock and tried to catch my breath. I was nearing complete exhaustion. My clothes were soaked thru; I was getting cold as well. If I could just relax, maybe I would be able to transition to the cabin. Nothing changed, which was probably for the best.

Far off, I could see a light and someone calling, "Hypatia!" Mark was there. "Mark," I tried to call, "come get me." No sound came out. I was very cold, shivering uncontrollably. I had to rest. I closed my eyes.

I was warm, or at least warmer. Mark was here. I could smell the scent he wore. No other part of my brain seemed to be functioning. Mark was making noises, but if he was talking, it made no sense. I wanted to sleep some more.

I felt a raindrop hit my cheek. It felt warm. It ran down onto my lips. I was so thirsty I swallowed it. *Salty.* A few synapses fired. It was a tear, not a raindrop. *Crying. Someone was crying.* I needed to sleep to think about it.

Someone was shaking me. *Stop it!* No use. More tears.

Wait! This was serious. Mark was crying. Something was wrong. Wake up! It was so hard. *Open one eye, I commanded. Just one eye.* Light flooded into my head. I was in the bedroom of the cabin.

“Mark,” I managed.

“Hypatia,” he replied, his voice hoarse and choked. He lifted me further upright. “Hypatia, please wake up.”

“Mark.”

“Yes. I’m here. Can you talk?”

“Tired. Hungry. Cold.”

“Yeah. OK. I’m going to get some food. Don’t go back to sleep.”

He put me down. I drifted off to sleep again.

“Hypatia. Wake up! Drink this!”

The drink was hot and salty. I drank more. *Chicken soup.* “More, please.”

“Here’s some more soup.” This time, he just let me smell it. I managed to open both eyes. He smiled and handed me the cup. “Can you hold it?”

“Yes.” I drank it down and looked up at him. His eyes were red, and the track of tears showed on his face. “Sorry.”

The tears came again. “I thought I’d lost you,” he managed to say thru the tears.

“I need more food. Please.”

“Coming up. Ready for something solid?”

“Yeah.”

He returned shortly with some barbecue on a plate: sliced beef, a piece of chicken, some pork ribs, potato salad. I wolfed it all down. “Thanks. I’m feeling better now. Can I sleep?”

“Yes.” He fluffed up the pillow and helped me lie down, covering me with several layers of blankets. I felt warm and safe. I slept.

When I woke up again, Mark was back at his computer. That was a good sign. When I got up, I felt dizzy for a moment, but managed to walk to the bathroom. I had planned simply to wash up, but decided on a hot shower and wound up soaking so long that the hot water ran out. Mark was waiting in the bedroom when I emerged.

“Well, I guess you’re better.”

“Much. How long did I sleep? What time is it?”

He checked his watch. “You were out for fourteen hours. It’s now about 10:00 p.m. on the 23rd.”

“Whew. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Well, I sort of zoned out while I was working. Didn’t realize you’d gone until the storm broke. A clap of thunder broke my concentration. When I called out for you, I got no answer. My first thought was that you’d — what do you call it? Transitioning? — anyway, I thought you’d gone back to the other time. Then I saw the maps still lying on the table where we left them. I knew you wouldn’t leave without them, so I started looking for you. I noticed that you’d changed into hiking boots, so I figured you’d gone for a walk.

“Then I got worried. I started looking for you and found you along the trail unconscious. Lucky for me you’re tiny. I was able to carry you back to the cabin. I thought it was too late, though. Your skin felt clammy, and you shivered the whole time I carried you. I guessed you had hypothermia, a bit unusual for May in Texas, but...Anyway, you didn’t die. I’m glad. Now, your turn. Tell me what happened.”

“It’s weird. I went for a walk as you figured out, along the creek toward the dam. I was daydreaming about my experience in 2027 when, whamo, I accidentally transitioned to Medina in 2027.”

“Accidentally?”

“That’s the only way I can describe it. It’s like the way it was when I transitioned in my sleep. Suddenly, there I was in Medina.”

“What did you do?”

“I visited the woman in the apple store, Mrs. Spalding. We shared some apple pie, chatted about life in the Last Days. Then I transitioned back. That reminds me.” I walked over to the bed where I’d thrown my jeans and checked the pocket. It was empty. “Did you find a map anywhere?”

“No, but I wasn’t looking for one either.”

“I’m guessing that I wasn’t able to bring it with me. Maybe that would cause a paradox since the map was from the future.”

“You’re thinking about taking those maps with you.” He indicated the maps he’d shown me earlier.

“Yeah. It may not work. We need to consider a backup plan. Hiding the maps here somewhere so I can find them later.”

“OK. Back to your story. What happened when you transitioned back?”

“It didn’t work right. I wound up on the cliff overlooking the lake. I was afraid to try yet another transition, since I seemed to be having problems, so I started hiking back. I was too tired to make it. Three times in short succession was too much, I guess. I got caught in the storm. Thanks for coming to get me.”

“Just don’t do it again.”

“Yes sir.”

“How about some more barbecue? I saved you some ribs.”

The next morning I realized I was still weak, but was anxious to get back to San Antonio with the maps. Mark wanted me to wait. “You’re still weak. You fell asleep on me last night. That hasn’t happened before.”

I blushed. *Point for the opposition.*

Ambianca decided to weigh in with her opinion. She started playing *Chelsea Morning*, the version by Judy Collins that supposedly was the reason the Clintons named their daughter Chelsea.

Mark grabbed me by the arm. “Come on. Let’s enjoy another day together. We’ll talk in present tenses.”

“OK. What shall we do?”

“Go birding, of course. What else?”

“What else indeed.”

19. *Back to the Future* May 23-29, 2087

San Antonio, Norte Mexico and elsewhere in Mexico

I heard a familiar voice. “Hypatia! *Querida*, are you all right?”

“César.”

César didn’t waste another instant. Rushing to the door, he called loudly for anyone awake to come help at once. Given his status, this produced a rush of personnel to his side. He gave instructions in a burst of Spanglish punctuated with some carefully selected profanity designed to produce quick results. Having sent for a doctor and some food, he returned his room and had me carried to my own bed.

Sitting in the chair by my side, he tried to question me. “*Querida*, can you tell me what happened?”

“Need some food, water,” I managed to get out.

César took my hand. His touch seemed hot. He called out, “*Caldo. Tea. Rapido!*” Turning back, he said, “It’s going to be OK.” Searching the cupboards, he found another blanket and spread it over the thin covering on the bed. Then, he climbed onto the bed himself and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, drawing my body close to his. “Hypatia,” he whispered to her, “please be all right. I don’t want to lose you.”

I smiled, thinking of Mark, and how he had said the same thing a few hours earlier. I thought back to our birding expedition, which had turned into a daylong ramble thru the Hill Country, producing both specialties of the area, the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. My favorite sighting, though, was of a Roadrunner, which Mark spotted sitting on the road sign at the intersection of the main highway and country road 256. What a strange bird!

We had stopped on the way home to eat at a tiny Mexican restaurant in Sabinal, really just someone’s house. Mark assured me the food would be worth it, and I agreed with him after polishing off a big plate of enchiladas, beans and rice washed down by huge glasses of iced tea. Could they still make iced tea in 2087, I wondered?

It had been well after dark when we finally returned to the cabin, tired but happy, and wasted no time getting to bed. Too exhausted to make love, Mark and I had snuggled together for a while. Then I turned over and he rubbed my back until I fell asleep.

Wait! That meant that I’d transitioned automatically in my sleep, just as before. I struggled to sit up, even though it meant leaving the sweet cocoon César had fashioned for me. “What day is it?” I asked him.

“May 23rd,” he replied. “Just as we agreed. Why?”

“I must have transitioned in my sleep. I’m still hungry as all get out. Any food available?”

“It should be here soon. I’ve ordered some soup and some hot tea with honey. You must be feeling a bit better.”

“César, we need to talk about lots of stuff. Apparently, transitioning is hard on me, at least it has been lately. I almost died in 1998.” I gave César a short version of events.

“I am concerned for your health after hearing that,” he said when I was done. “Clearly, this *transitioning* is more dangerous than we thought.”

“Agreed,” I said, “but we still have to consider it as part of what I do.”

“Oh, most assuredly,” he agreed. “However, we must be sparing in what we expect of you. I confess that I had considered having you appear from nowhere for some events, as a way of influencing opinion about you. Now, I will have to re-think that.”

A servant appeared at the doorway carrying a tray of food. César waved impatiently and loosed a stream of rapid language I couldn’t follow. I wasn’t particularly interested in any event, focusing all my attention on the soup, as well as some *bolillos*, delicious rolls in the shape of a football. The soup was a rich beef broth with vegetables, *Caldo de Res*, a classic Mexican dish. A large mug of something being pawned off as tea accompanied the meal. It contained enough honey so it didn’t taste like the dishwater it resembled.

I ate everything on the plate and drank most of the tea. “Any chance we can get some coffee?”

“Sure.” He left to issue more orders to the overtaxed kitchen staff.

When César returned carrying a large cup of real coffee, I felt well enough to think about business. “I need to talk to Amanda in Leakey,” I told César. “Jackson may be able to arrange it.”

“He and Lupe are due here momentarily,” César informed me. “Would you like to dress? Or would you prefer to remain in bed?”

“I think I’ll stay in bed. I’m still feeling a bit weak.”

César found several pillows and placed them behind me. He also managed to locate a woolen shawl to put around my shoulders. The overall effect was of someone at death’s door waiting for the visit of potential claimants.

Instead, I had to deal with Jackson and Mariana, who showed up at the door within minutes. César filled them in on everything that had transpired since he’d found me on the floor. I, in turn, repeated the narrative of events in Leakey. Jackson and Mariana listened intently to everything, their expressions reflecting the worry they felt. When I finished, Jackson spoke first, “So, you nearly lost your life and you have nothing to show for it, is that right?”

“That’s about the size of it,” I agreed. “I’m hoping that Mark hid the map somewhere in the cabin in Leakey, where Amanda might be able to find it.”

“I’ll get her working on it as soon as we’re done here,” Jackson promised. “We chat every day now. The mechanics in Austin worked some of their magic and converted a large truck to run on the solar cells. That made a trading run out there feasible. They went thru Kerrville, a much shorter route. Thanks to César, we weren’t bothered at all. In fact, from what I hear they were able to set up some profitable trades. Those patches are in big demand. The University is gearing up to manufacture them in greater volume. We also traded some coffee for food, which saved us some bother. Another Ranger — I forget his name — relieved Red, who has returned to Austin. Amanda refuses to leave the cabin. She’s making great progress now that she has newer hardware and software. Her next target is controlling the satellites.”

“Satellites? Plural?”

“Yes. Turns out there are several under the control of the cabin. At least three as I understand it. If we can manage to unlock them, we’ll be able to communicate over most of North America, when there is someone on the ground to communicate with.”

“Well, that’s good news, for the future anyhow. Any news on the solar cells?”

“Ron says that the process is well documented in the archives but involves hundreds of steps.”

“Hundreds?”

“Yes. That’s not as bad as it sounds. We think we can cut a few corners. We have enough blank silicon disks lying around, for example, that we don’t need to worry about them. The process essentially involves depositing various layers of chemicals on the disks in the proper sequence. Some of the layers are active. Others provide wiring. It’s quite complex, but the individual steps are straightforward. Apparently, the University staff is considering some optimizations that will improve the chips as well as streamline the process.”

“That’s good news.”

“The bad news is that we still need the machines from Sealy, and they haven’t budged on their demands. Whoever started the negotiations allowed them to guess how badly we need the machines.”

“Could we interest them in some of the solar cells, instead of gold?”

“No. We tried that. They say they have all the power they need as it is now.”

“Thanks to Austin. I wonder how they would like having the grid cut.”

“I assume you aren’t serious. That would be a violation of our agreements.”

“Of course, I’m not serious. Still, it’s annoying that they don’t feel...well, patriotism for want of a better word.”

“Annoying, but not fatal. We just have to find enough gold to satisfy them.”

“Agreed. Get Amanda working on it. Top priority.”

“You got it.” He rose to leave.

Mariana spoke up, “I wonder if I may have a word in private?”

“Of course. Is there some problem?”

“No. No. I need to ask you for a favor, and it’s personal.”

“César?”

“I’ll go with Jackson. I need to report to the Bishop.” The two men left.

Mariana came and sat on the bed. “I wish to talk about Jackson.”

“OK.”

“I have heard rumors that he is your consort.”

“I have heard those rumors as well,” I replied, smiling.

“I understand that under your customs, the woman usually suggests mating.”

“That is correct. Women are responsible for all matters involving reproduction. That seemed to be—”

“Yes, it is very logical,” Mariana interrupted. “I am interested in your plans regarding Jackson.”

“My plans?”

“Do you intend mating? Or do you wish to reserve him for yourself?”

“Jackson and I have been intimate on occasion, but we have no plans regarding mating. We have not discussed it.”

“I see. In that case, I seek your permission to approach him on my own behalf.”

“You don’t need my permission.”

“Then I seek your blessing.”

“Have you spoken of this to Jackson?”

“No, of course not. Given his position, his prominence, his obvious attraction to you...”

“You have my blessing.”

“It’s just that such a match would benefit both our communities. We are both important people. He is quite intelligent. I feel that the offspring would be of high quality.”

“Don’t forget genetic diversity. That’s another reason.”

“Yes, that is a good point. I...” she stopped because she realized I was joking. For a minute, she wasn’t sure how to proceed. I reached for her hand, looked into her eyes, and reassured her. “Mariana, Lupe, whatever name you prefer, propose to Jackson with my blessing. May you both be very happy and produce a child worthy of you both.”

“You approve?”

I kissed her on the cheek. “I approve.”

“So, are you feeling better?” César asked.

“Much better,” I replied. “That soup hit the spot, and the long nap didn’t hurt.”

“Excellent. Are you ready for a tour of our fair country?”

“I suppose so. I need to check with Jackson first to see what he has found out.”

“I spoke to him after he communicated with Amanda. She found the maps left by Mark rather easily.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, she assumed that he would hide the materials in one of the books in the bedroom.”

“Reasonable. So, did she check each book?”

“Oh, no. She also worked out that he wouldn’t have hidden them in any book someone was likely to use, which eliminated all the technical manuals. There weren’t many other books there, but she noticed some young adult novels by Phillip Pullman.”

“I’ve heard of them. There was a controversy when one was made into a movie. It was anti-Christian.”

“Yes, and the title of the book was—”

“**The Golden Compass.**”

“Exactly. That’s where the materials were. Amanda sent scanned images to Ron in Austin. He is organizing an expedition to the area.”

“Wonderful. Who else knows this?”

“No one, so far as I know.”

“Mariana?”

“I don’t think so, why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Come on. Let’s get you dressed and packed. The train will leave as soon as we are on board.”

Our first stop was the ancient city of Brownsville, now usually called “Boca,” as it straddled the mouth of the Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo to use its official name. There, César and I had a fabulous reception from the inhabitants, who’d been alerted ahead of time. A small band played as the train arrived, and a delegation from the Church turned out to hear my speech. Afterward, we shared a simple meal with the local officials before proceeding further south.

At every stop along the way, some similar ceremony marked our arrival. Most of the stops were simple fishing villages, many with no name save the ubiquitous “home.” As word spread of the strange woman and her priestly companion, people traveled from the interior to see what the fuss was all about.

Everything was great, until we got to Veracruz.

“Explain to me why getting thrown into jail is perfect for us,” I complained, struggling to find some way to sit comfortably on the stone floor.

“Well, first, everyone realizes that you were arrested for saying something that is manifestly correct, namely that we have to help each other.”

“OK. I’ll buy that, but then what?”

“When you disappear from the jail, it will confirm that you are special. I will continue to proclaim you as the Second Messiah. The population will rally to us.”

“I see. So, I just transition to somewhere else and you handle the rest?”

“That’s the plan. You can take a vacation, return to Austin, whatever.”

“How will I get in touch with you again?”

“I didn’t realize that was important.”

“Don’t be coy, César.”

“I don’t know how I will contact you, but be assured that I will, *Querida*. Our destinies are intertwined.”

“When should I transition?”

“Let me summon the guard, so he can testify that you were here in the cell. Then, after you are gone, I will call him back.”

“OK.” I started imagining what it would be like to be out of the stinking hole I found myself in. Leakey would be a nice change. Maybe I should see if Amanda needed any assistance. Even better, would be to see Mark again.

The guard arrived at the door just in time to see the strange woman from the north disappear completely.

20. *Marking Time* *July 4, 2018* *Near Leakey, TX*

I woke up in the bedroom of the cabin in Leakey, which I recognized by the LEDs on the computer on the desk, an antique Dell displaying the Windows-95 screen saver. Sensing another body in the bed, I rolled over and propped myself up on an elbow. Touching the familiar shape on the arm, I whispered, “Mark. It’s me.”

He struggled awake. “Hypatia? Oh my god, it’s great to have you back. Are you starving as usual? Let me fix you something to eat.” I sensed something wrong, but then ignored my concerns and slept some more. When I woke up, I could smell coffee and bacon cooking in the next room. My stomach rumbled approval.

I walked into the kitchen area to find an old man, partially bald in the back. He had his back turned as he concentrated on the eggs in a skillet on the stove. I wondered briefly who he was, and where Mark had gone. When he turned around, I realized that something had gone terribly wrong. I think I screamed. The next thing I knew Mark was holding my head in his lap.

“Hypatia! What happened? Are you all right?”

“I must have fainted. I wasn’t expecting you to look like...”

“Oh, shit! You mean, you haven’t come from 2001?”

“What are you talking about? Back from when?”

“We shouldn’t talk. This is all messed up. You aren’t supposed to be here, at least not *now*.”

I began to get an glimmer of what he meant. “What’s the date?”

“It’s the Fourth of July 2018.”

“2018?”

He said nothing. He helped me to my feet and repeated, “This is wrong. You need to leave. You don’t belong here now. This is a mistake.”

“But...”

He waved his hand to shush me, as though he needed to think. I spent the time studying him.

He was much older of course. His hair was thin, a beautiful silvery gold color where he had any. He wore only a pair of shorts, and I could see that his body was not the one I remembered, but he appeared to be in good shape for his age. I recalled that medical science was much better in his era than mine. His deep blue eyes still had the spark I remembered, showing that his mind was as agile as ever. Mine, on the other hand was suffering from a distinct lack of coffee, and my stomach rumbled again to suggest that we deal with first things first. Mark noticed.

“Let’s eat breakfast. Then we can talk.”

After two eggs, real coffee, bacon, toast with some of the delicious marmalade I remembered, I felt able to contribute something to Mark’s ruminations. “So, it’s 2018. Interesting. I wasn’t aiming for this time, but I was thinking of you.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I was languishing in a jail cell in what is still called Veracruz, Mexico, though the old city is under water now. The new city is several kilometers inland.”

“Yes, I read about flooding along the coast. Were you on your trip with César, preaching the message of the Second Messiah?”

“Yes. Funny you should know about that. Anyway, I was thrown into jail for speaking blasphemy.”

“The classic victimless crime.”

“I actually told them that. They didn’t appreciate the joke.”

“So, you just disappeared from the jail and appeared here?”

“That’s about the size of it. I was hoping to take a few days off. What are your plans?”

“Plans? I don’t have any plans. We’re having a big barbecue this afternoon. Gordo is coming and bring most of his family. I wasn’t counting on your being here.”

“And you think I should skedaddle?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Gordo will have an idea. He is a Rice graduate, after all. Another opinion.”

“Will he start blabbing to everyone?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then I’ll stay and have a good time. Is there plenty of Hill Country Gold growing out back?”

“There is,” he replied, smiling.

“Will Gordo object?”

“Not if we save some for him. Is that how you want to start the day?”

“If you think I should leave, I can try transitioning somewhere else. I was thinking of you, though. What did you mean when you said I had come from 2001? What happened than?”

He thought carefully about his reply. “I’m not sure how much to tell you. It’s awkward. I mean, I haven’t seen you in...in a long time. I realize that you don’t see it that way, but...For...I thought you were dead, or gone, or something. I knew you’d reappear someday. I wrote a book about it. Everyone thought I was nuts. Now, I see you and, well, it’s not the right you. I can’t explain it.”

“So, you feel different about me now?” At this point, Ambianca started playing some music, a song by Carly Simon, I think. The lyrics included a line about making love for old times’ sake.

“Ambianca! You’re not helping,” Mark snapped.

“As you wish,” Ambianca responded. Did she sound annoyed? I couldn’t be sure. At any rate, Carly Simon quit playing.

“Hypatia,” Mark continued, “you have to realize...I didn’t expect see you again. I hoped, but... I thought you were gone for good, you and... I felt abandoned. It was a hard time for me. I

blamed myself. I..." He stopped, seemed to consider finishing the sentence, then changed his mind and fell silent.

"Something may have happened. Maybe I wasn't able to transition any more. Maybe I died, but... Maybe..."

"Lots of maybes."

"Mark. I want it to be the way it was. You're the only steady part of my life, the part I miss when you're not around. You're the only one who loves me for myself alone—"

"And not your yellow hair?"

"The only one who quotes Yeats. Mark, I love you. We're going to have a baby. I've seen a photo."

"I know all about that. It happened a long time ago. Do you know what happened to the child?"

"No, of course not. I don't even know when we have her or him, only that I saw a photo of you and me when I was pregnant."

"How old was I in the photo?"

"I...I don't remember. It was an old photo, not in good shape."

"Well, I could tell you more, but I'm not going to."

"Oh, Mark. Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry." The stress of the past weeks suddenly overwhelmed me. All I wanted was to feel his arms around me, to hear him say how much he loved me. Instead, a strange person stood there, knowing things, remembering something that changed the way he felt. The tears came unbidden, then turned into a flood; huge racking sobs convulsed my entire body. Unable to stand, I fell onto the couch by the fireplace and buried my face in a pillow. Eventually, I fell asleep, still wishing to feel the comfort of his arms.

I woke up to see sun streaming into the room. Staggering into the bathroom, I looked in the mirror. *Not a pretty sight*. My eyes were bloodshot from the tears, which stained my cheeks. Recalling his suggestion, I took a hot shower, which helped.

When I returned to the main part of the cabin, Mark took me into his arms. "I'm sorry, Hypatia. Give me time, OK? Will you? I've done everything on the cabin, just the way you asked me."

Tears threatened to start up again. Wrapping my arms around his waist, burying my face in his chest, I said, "Today is the first time I told you I love you. I really do. You know, the last time I saw you, you saved my life. Remember that?"

"My God. That was the last time you saw me?"

"Yes. Did I ever thank you?"

"It wasn't necessary. Anyway, that was the last time anything like that happened, unless..."

"Unless that is why I never came back."

“Oh, Hypatia. Why couldn’t we have just stayed the way we were? We were happy then.” His tears fell on my hair, reminding me of the last time he’d cried. He’d loved me then. Maybe he could again.

With a sniff, he said, “Come on. Let’s get ready for our guests — unless you can control your transitioning enough to go back. The episode in Veracruz is important. You told me all about it.”

We sat on the porch, passing a joint back and forth. Mark was just going thru the motions, which ruined the moment.

After taking one last drag, he put out the joint and spoke for the first time since breakfast, “Is this the first time you came here after the 90’s? I find your non-linear timeline hard to follow.”

“No. Not exactly. The first time was when I spent a week alone here. That was April 2027.”
“2027?”

“Apparently, I left instructions for what you were supposed to do then. Weird. I don’t remember telling you anything. I think it was important. For that matter, I don’t think my winding up here now is an accident. Maybe some day it will make sense.”

“So, you think something is going to happen soon?”

“Well, we know the Collapse is coming before too long. The first pandemic is due in 2020, which is soon. Later, we have what we call the Last Days, a time of manic celebration as far as we’ve been able to determine. Records from this period are scant.”

“Really?”

“Part of the general breakdown of society.”

“Will you come back here?”

“I’ll try. When I told you that I could control the transitioning, I was a bit premature.”

“If we can’t have a life in 2001, maybe we can have one here. The doctors say I’m in great shape for someone my age. I could live to be a hundred.” *Well, no, I thought. Should I mention what I know?*

I just said, “Maybe. Maybe we can have one now, but not here. In 2087, it looks as if the cabin has been shut up for quite a while.”

“I’m going to stay here as long as I can, just in case.”

I wanted to say more, but the arrival of Gordo and his clan interrupted. Never having asked Gordo much, I had only myself to blame for the false assumption that he was a free-breeding Catholic of the old school. Two vehicles easily held four generations of the Salazar clan, with several fitting comfortably into the large Suburban with “Sheriff, Real County” emblazoned on the side. Gordo’s hair had turned white — he was even older than Mark I recalled — but the huge arms were still capable of lifting a large ice chest from the truck. He carried it over the porch as Mark and I stood up to greet him.

Dropping the chest, he looked up to see who the unexpected guest was. As Mark didn’t hurry to introduce me, Gordo figured out that he was supposed to recognize me. He studied intently,

several theories playing out in his mind as I watched their reflections on his expressive face. “Are you who I think you are? Gotta be. Well, I’ll be damned. Mark was right after all.”

“It’s not really what you think.”

“What I think is not possible except for all the other impossible things I saw you do way back when, about 20 years ago.”

“Believing the impossible takes practice, at least according to the Queen in Alice and Wonderland.”

“Six impossible things before breakfast,” Gordo replied.

“That’s right. You really are a Rice grad.”

“Have Mark and you gotten back together?”

“I don’t know. Ask me again the next time we meet.”

“You caused a lot of trouble for him, you realize.”

“No.”

“If I hadn’t been able to vouch for him, he’d probably have been arrested when you and the kid disappeared. As it was, suspicion fell only on you.”

Mark jumped in, “That hasn’t happened yet from her point of view.”

“Oh. So, we’re not supposed to talk about it?”

“We’re erring on the side of caution,” Mark explained.

Gordo looked at the two of us. “Whatever you say. You two belong together, you know. I could tell that from the first time you met. Even now, after all this time...”

“Our destinies are intertwined,” I said.

“Or were,” Mark corrected. He stood up and went back into the cabin.

“Mark told me that you could control where you go when you disappear. I’m surprised you haven’t zapped yourself somewhere else, given how he’s reacting.”

“It won’t work now. I tried,” I confessed. “Whoever is pulling my strings wants me here for a while.”

“I told him there was some explanation. He wasn’t in a mood to listen. I mean, back when...”

“Thanks for trying. I’m sure you’re correct.”

“My nose tells me y’all have been sampling the produce from Mark’s garden.”

“We thought you might not approve with the grandchildren, and great grandchildren around.”

“Good thinking. They’re planning to head to the lake, though. Then, maybe...”

“Introduce me to your family.”

“Who do I say you are?”

“Do they know anything about me?”

“Only your name.”

“Then tell them I’m Patty, a friend of a friend who crashed here last night.”

After Gordo and his extended family left that evening, sometime about 21:00, Mark explained that he had some work he had to catch up on and closeted himself in the computer room. It was clear from his tone that my presence was not required, so I made myself some more coffee, rolled another joint, and repaired to the porch.

I decided that whoever had deposited me here had some purpose, though I couldn’t grasp it.

Things had been going so well on the trip with César. At each stop the stump speech he’d written was the same, with the same goal: to get the mob on our side and use the pressure on the elites. Then, there was the unfortunate incident in Veracruz. The old school priests, in firm control, demonstrated it by arresting both of us throwing us into the clink. I wondered if César was doing better than I was.

After a bit, I drifted off to sleep in the hammock on the porch.

21. *Inquisition* May 30, 2087 Veracruz, Mexico

César rolled over on the blanket he was sleeping on and found an unexpected body lying on the floor next to him. “Hypatia? Is that you?”

“Mark?” I asked.

“No. It’s not Mark, it’s César. Are you all right?”

“I guess so. Are we in that god forsaken hellhole in Veracruz?”

“I’m afraid so. Why did you come back here?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose. Looks like my subconscious took over again. I remember the last thing I thought of was wondering how you were doing. How are you doing, by the way?”

“As well as can be expected. You must be hungry, though.”

“Seeing as how I participated in a pagan ritual known as the Fourth of July yesterday, during which I ate enough for three people, I feel fine.”

“I fear that you have returned in time for our examination by the Tribunal in the morning.”

“I don’t care for the sound of that.”

“It’s bad. The Tribunal represents some of the most conservative, nasty hidebound reactionaries, in our aristocracy.”

“Oh?”

“They say that your magical disappearance demonstrates that you have satanic powers.”

“Uh-Oh. How do we change that perception?”

“I had given up. I was contemplating what form of execution to ask for.”

“Execution! That’s barbaric.”

“Just so. The only capital crime left is blasphemy, of which we are both accused, you in absentia until this moment.”

“Maybe we can talk our way out of it.”

“Not likely. You can simply leave, of course.”

“Leave you alone to die? I don’t think so.”

“If it comes to that, I insist. You are too valuable to lose.”

“As are you, César. Besides, we have some unfinished business from our sojourn in San Antonio. I never did get a chance to show you what I picked up in Austin on my way.”

“You are indeed a pearl of great price, *Querida*. Whatever happens, my life has been made more complete for having known you.”

“You’re sweet, César. Why don’t we try to get some more sleep?”

When morning came, the guards found us curled up together, with my head resting on César's well-padded chest.

The Tribunal met in a starkly modern building that César identified as the Courthouse, built after coastal flooding rendered the old one unusable. Dating from the Last Days, the exterior was a mishmash of styles, including a façade looted from some old Colonial era building, but mostly made up of whatever materials were readily at hand.

The interior reflected the same pragmatic approach to decoration, though the result was surprisingly pleasant. Both the floors and the walls consisted of several different woods, salvaged from god knows where, laid out in angular patterns. Antique wall hangings, some of which might be pre-Colonial, or at the very least, Colonial, softened the overall geometric appearance.

A detachment of guards escorted César and me to the courtroom thru cheering crowds, some of them dared to call out “Guadalupe,” as I passed by.

“The mob is on our side,” I commented to César.

“No talk!” one of the guards demanded, prodding me with a baton by way of emphasis. I had to restrain myself from using my martial arts training. The guards were far too many, and it would be pointless to annoy them. Besides, I suspected that many of them were on our side.

Seven judges, or whatever they were, dressed in robes of many distinct colors that might denote ranks, sat on a raised dais. They were doing their best to look stern and forbidding, and succeeding, as far as I was concerned. A clerk entered from a small door on the side of the room and moved to a lectern in the middle. He called loudly to anyone interested, which I interpreted to mean that court was now in session. Then, he read from a paper, no doubt the charges. All of this was in a highly ornate Spanish completely incomprehensible to me.

When the clerk was done, he posed a question to the two of us. César leaned over and whispered in my ear, “They are asking how we plead to the charge of blasphemy. They also want to know if you understand the gravity of the charge.”

César then turned to the judges and said what I assumed meant, “Not guilty.” Everyone looked at me.

I rose and said, “César, a lowly priest from a rural enclave located hundreds of kilometers from here, speaks beautiful English as well as classical Spanish and Spanglish. I am certain that such eminent persons as you must be as well educated as he. I am not comfortable speaking any language other than English, so I will confine myself to that language. If you require translation, César will provide it. I trust that will be acceptable.” I paused — just long enough for them to absorb it but leaving no time to object — before continuing.

“I understand that I am charged with blasphemy, a capital crime in these parts. I find that truly incredible on two counts. First, that you can consider blasphemy a crime at all, as I will be happy to demonstrate the non-existence of any entity who might object to what I have said. Second, I am amazed that after losing the majority of your population you would consider executing anyone, much less someone accused of a victimless crime. Finally, I have not challenged the authority of this court to try me, but I do find your behavior rather an impolite way to treat an invited guest.”

I sat down.

César gestured frantically for me to stand, but I ignored him.

The head judge looked annoyed, but after a quick glance left and right saw that he was in the minority. He indicated that the prosecutor should begin. The latter, a small man with clear indigenous heritage, dressed in an ill-fitting pre-Collapsian suit, addressed the judges in what I thought was an overlong opening. Finally, having made his main point, he withdrew a remote control from his pocket and punched several buttons. A large screen descended from the ceiling behind us, as we shifted our seats to watch. When the display started, I recognized the setting as the plaza from two days before, where I had addressed a large crowd. As my image on the screen began to speak, a Spanish translation began playing.

I immediately rose to my feet. “Please, gentlemen, and lady,” I nodded to the lone woman, “If I am to be convicted for something I said, I should be convicted based on my own words, not those of some anonymous translator.”

The chief judge looked annoyed again but conceded my point. After a lengthy exchange between the chief and the prosecutor, with the clerk joining in, court recessed for a few minutes.

César leaned over to whisper, “It seems as though at least some of the judges are on your side. This may go better than I had feared. Please don’t get angry, though.”

“César,” I replied in mock confusion. “Angry? Moi?”

He smiled and patted me on the leg.

We sat for almost half an hour, but finally the clerk returned and nodded to the judges. He then repeated his loud call for order. The court was back in session.

This time, I heard my own voice.

“*Buenos días, amigos,*” the image said. The crowd cheered.

“I hope that we are amigos because I want to speak frankly to you. I am Hypatia, the Master Librarian of the University in Austin, in the NRT. I think you all know that. I know that you have probably heard many tales about me. I want to say right away that not all of them are true. I cannot change into a dragon.” The crowd laughed when they heard the translation of this. I added, “More’s the pity.” A chuckle rippled thru the crowd.

“Do you like the world you live in? I ask because I am very unhappy with it. What kind of life is this? We live in cities that once held ten times our population. We survive by looting, or salvaging if you prefer, from the leavings of the times before the Great Tribulation. Some of us manage to scratch out a meager living by farming on the small amount of land the Old Ones didn’t pave over, or by searching for fish in a sea depleted of most life. This is not good.” I stopped to await the translation before continuing.

“These jeans,” I stepped out from behind the podium so they could see them, “were made in China. It says so on the label. China! That’s on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, halfway around the world. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never even seen the Pacific Ocean. We can only imagine what the world must have been like when people could afford to ship mere clothing across such an expanse.

“Some say this is God’s judgment on the world, a signal of the End of Time.” I paused to make sure everyone got that. “Bullshit.” The crowd didn’t need a translation of that.

“God didn’t cause these problems. The virus that caused the great plague was not natural; it was synthetic. Our scientists are sure of that. God didn’t set off the nuclear bombs that destroyed the Middle East, or New York City, or Washington. God didn’t burn Mexico City. Men did all those things.” The crowd grew silent, waiting.

“God didn’t make the seas rise, drowning our coasts. Our ancestors did that by ignoring all the warnings that the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was the problem. We humans caused all these problems. We brought this on ourselves. Is there no hope for tomorrow? Are we condemned to live in this sorry excuse for existence? No!”

The crowd cheered.

“Humanity has lived thru the collapse of civilization, so-called Dark Ages, more than once in the past. We are now in a new dark age. But we are not helpless. Our library in Austin contains virtually all the knowledge of the Old Regime, even information on how they sent men to the moon. Yes, that is a true story. It shows what power they had, what power they wasted.

“We can use this information. You have probably heard how my young Engineer, Ron the Mechanic’s Son, lit the Tower in old Houston, using nothing but the wind for energy.” Here the crowd erupted into loud cheers, forcing me to stop the narrative. I was used to it. The story of the Beacon was a favorite everywhere.

“Have you also heard of our car, the one that runs on sunlight and spits lightning? It’s true. We used it for a scientific expedition into the wild Hill Country, where we encountered César and his crew. Then we drove it to San Antonio to meet the Bishop. Many people saw it and marveled. The car was the result of a lucky accident. We found some solar cells at a place called NASA, cells that produce far more energy than any other kind we know of. After searching our database of information, we have learned how to make more of these cells. Think of it: Energy directly from the sun.” I squinted up at the sun, now starting its descent behind the hills west of the city. “I notice that the sun shines here quite a bit.” That got another laugh from the crowd.

“We need your help, you here in Mexico. You have some materials that are essential to make the new solar cells. That brings me to my main point. We *can* make a better world. We can do it if we work together. If we quarrel and fight, nothing good will come of that. We will succeed only in killing the few of us left. We must cooperate. We must trade with each other. Together, we can hope for something better, a new world arising like a Phoenix from the ashes of the old, a new world better than the old, committed to rectifying the mistakes of the past, a world better than the one left to us. We can create a new society, one that believes in restoring the environment, bringing fish back to the oceans, replanting the forests. We can do that because we can use the sun to create electricity. The electricity can run the railroads, our trucks, our lights, our communications. We can do this if we all work together.” I paused to let the translator finish.

“Are you with me?”

The crowd roared back, “Si!”

The screen went dark.

“Quite an impressive speech,” one of the lesser judges said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “César wrote most of it. However, I am at a loss to see how anything I said constitutes blasphemy, even under the broadest definition.”

The senior judge explained, “Although we agree with all your analysis, namely that none of our misfortunes are the work of God, we nonetheless do not like this imparted to the...,” he groped for the correct word, “the *campesinos*, so blatantly. They are not ready for this information.”

“Total crap,” I blurted out.

A judge on the far right side, the only woman among the seven, laughed aloud, drawing a sharp look from the chief.

“I may have to find you in contempt,” the chief warned.

“Is that worse than blasphemy?” I asked.

This time, the judge on the far right coughed to cover up her giggles.

“You don’t seem to take the charge seriously,” he said.

“It’s hard for me to take seriously a charge against a non-existent being.”

César moaned. I ignored him.

“Even if God does exist,” I continued, “I doubt he would like being blamed for things that aren’t his fault. Let me ask you a question. Do you pray to God?”

“Daily,” replied the chief.

“And what do you pray for?”

“Mostly for guidance,” the chief replied.

“Then your prayers have been answered,” I said. “César and I have been sent to show you the way.” With that, I sat down.

One of the other judges, one that César had suggested was on our side, posed a question, “I have heard it said that you represent yourself as God’s messenger.”

“Never seriously,” I replied, rising at the same time. “Sometimes, in response to questions, I use that as a rhetorical flourish. I tell the questioner that God told me we are on our own now; there will be no more divine intervention. Whatever happens is up to us.”

“I have heard that you sometimes add that she said, ‘I’m out of here.’”

“Yes, I have said that. It drives the point home.”

“Do you believe that God has abandoned us?”

“I don’t think she was ever around, but if she was, back in the old days, I’m pretty sure she’s gone now. We really are on our own. It’s scary, isn’t it?”

“Very much so.” He sat back, satisfied.

The chief looked at the other judges. “Are there any other questions?”

A stern looking man seated to the Chief Judge’s immediate right leaned forward to look at me and began, “One of the guards at the jail claims that you disappeared before his eyes. However, when the next shift arrived, you were in the cell sleeping. Can you explain that?”

“What do you think?”

“I think it sounds incredible.”

“Shall we put it down to an overactive imagination?”

“So you deny it happened?”

“Is that really necessary?”

“I guess not.”

Another judge spoke up, “I have heard that you claim to be the Virgin of Guadalupe, returned in our time of need.”

“Others have said that. I never have.”

“Do you claim to be the Virgin?”

“Never. So far as the virgin part is concerned, I can provide some credible witnesses to show that it is false.” The woman judge had another coughing fit.

“If you have not claimed this, how do you account for the widespread occurrence of the rumor?”

“God works in mysterious ways.” This time, there were several judges who had trouble clearing their throats.

“Any more?” The Chief Judge asked, irritation clear on his face.

No one spoke up. He then looked at César. “Do you wish to say anything more?”

César rose and spoke in Spanish. I couldn't follow much of it, but he seemed to be talking about me. He gestured in my direction several times. His speech went on at great length. When he was finished, several of the judges asked him questions, to which he gave short replies, mostly *si* and *no*.

Ultimately, the judges stood up and filed out. Only then did I notice that the benches behind us had filled up during the trial. The people were smiling, which I took to be a good sign.

“Are we free to leave?” I asked César.

“Good question,” he said. “They didn't pass judgment. Shall we try it and find out? By the way, I really admired the way you avoided telling an untruth about your disappearance. A masterful performance. Are you sure you're not interested in politics?”

“I'll leave that up to you.” I smiled and took his arm. Enveloped by happy admirers, we strolled out of the courthouse onto the plaza, to greet an even larger crowd.

Part IV. The Sheik's Gold

1. Golden Opportunity

June 10, 2087

Austin and Houston, NRT

As it turned out, the Inquisitors in Veracruz decided getting rid of the “Hypatia problem” as soon as possible was the best solution, so they put César and me on the next train for San Antonio. Two of the judges showed up to see us off. I thought they were there to make sure we left, but one of them, the one who asked me if I were the Virgin, took my hand and whispered, “*Vaya con Dios.*” In any case, the plan didn’t work out the way they wished. Thousands of people turned out along the tracks to wave and cheer as the train passed by.

Thus it was that I arrived back in Austin six days later, tired but ready to plan the next phase of the work, retrieving the Sheik’s Gold. Of course, this project required explicit approval by the Council. The meeting took place in the former Senate Chamber in the Capitol early in the morning of June 10th.

The assembly greeted me with a standing ovation when I entered the hall. Attired in what had become my signature outfit, jeans, sandals, and a loose-fitting T-shirt — this one said “Imagine...No Religion” with a rainbow motif — I resembled a throwback to a 20th century hippie more than an academic. I had pulled my long hair into a ponytail, rather than shaving my head, emphasizing the fact that I was not exactly a faculty member at present. Acknowledging the ovation with a brief nod, I stepped up onto the raised dais holding the lectern. A large display screen slid down from the wall at the same time, and showed the opening slide of the PowerPoint presentation.

“Thank you,” I said as the applause died down. “Let me give you my rundown on the activities of the past...wow, the past eight months. It seems more like eight years. I promise that the presentation won’t last long; I hate these things. Then I’ll take questions.”

It took 15 minutes to review the events of the past eight months, culminating with the news that Jackson and Mariana planned to mate. Having gotten that out of the way, I continued, “Now, to get back to the important stuff. We found the recipe for the NASA solar cells in the archives. That’s good. However, it requires several materials we don’t have in the NRT. Most of them are available from Mexico, and we have arranged to have them transported here on the next train, which is due next week as I understand.” I looked to Professor Caldwell, who nodded.

“We still need some hardware for the process. Some of the machines are in the Warehouse in Sealy, a lucky accident. They’ve been sitting there since the Last Days of the Old Regime. Of course, once the Sealyites found out how valuable the machines are, they slapped a big price tag on them, payable in gold.” Several members of the audience murmured imprecations against the Sealyites.

“We think we have a line on the fabled *Sheik’s Gold* in an unexplored area of Houston. I will be leading an expedition there next week. The plan is to find the gold, pay off the Sealyites, and begin manufacturing the solar cells. We expect them to be our second most popular export item. The contraceptive patches are firmly established as number one.” Several people chuckled at that.

“Now, I’ll take your questions.”

Several people lined up at the microphone.

“What about your tour around Mexico? We heard they were proclaiming you the Returned Virgin of Guadalupe.”

I took a deep breath. I’d hoped to keep the discussion on the scientific and economic issues. “César felt that we should work toward a more inclusive union between our two states. I toured the country delivering speeches promoting that view. I can’t comment on the fabulous stories that have poured out about me. Next question.”

“You say you have a line on the *Sheik’s Gold*. What kind of a lead do you have?”

“Please don’t laugh. We found an old map showing a putative location for the gold.” Several people in the audience hooted derisively despite my request. “I asked you not to laugh,” I said, “though I have to admit it’s pretty farfetched. There are several factors in favor of the map.” I fiddled with the remote to display the image of the map Mark had hidden in the Leakey cabin. “First, it unequivocally dates to the right time frame, late 20th century. Second, the area where the gold is supposedly located is the *River Oaks* area of Houston, home to the rich and famous. That is a reasonable place to search.” I clicked to another display. “This is a recent infrared satellite image of the area of the map. Notice,” I clicked again, “the area where the gold is supposed to be shows up clearly as a building of some sort beneath the jungle foliage. The area today is quite wild — there are even supposed to be large animals living there — that we aren’t suspicious that no one has found the gold yet. At any rate, it will provide a good test of some new equipment, and who knows.... Another question?”

“Suppose you find the Sheik’s Gold? What will we do with it?”

“I hope that it will be enough to jump start a return to a money economy. Even with our sophisticated software, bartering is tedious. We hope that we can produce enough coins to start circulation again. Those of you familiar with Medieval history may recall that the rise of the mercantile economy in Europe, beginning around 1000-1200, was helped mightily by the reappearance of money, especially coins from the Italian republics.”

Another questioner asked, “I’d like to return to the subject of the Second Messiah. Many people are proclaiming you as the oft-foretold Second Messiah. What do you have to say in that regard?”

“Maybe I am the Second Messiah. Only time will tell. Any more questions about the project?”

Given that it was an audience of academics, there were naturally many more questions. I tried to remain patient while explaining the plan for another two hours before the Pres finally called a halt.

I was amazed at the progress in the past eight months. Although the road from Austin to the edge of the Houston marsh was still in poor shape by pre-Collapsian standards, without traffic *Endeavour* covered the area in a bit over six hours. Increased trade following the opening of Houston to major salvage resulted in streamlined bridge tolls instead of the tedious negotiations of our previous trip. All of the bridges were in good repair as well, thanks to Ron’s tireless efforts. Ron had insisted on making the trip to search for the gold over Mia’s objection. He promised to be back in time for their son’s birth, but said that this was too important to leave to just anyone. I was glad to have him along, and hoped that the trip wouldn’t have complications like the last one.

I was also glad when I saw the boat we would be using for the exploration, a completely new design. “We started with a Zodiac that we salvaged,” Ron explained. “We removed the old-style motor from the back and replaced it with an air propeller facing backwards. We got the idea from the archives, some boats used in the swamps. Those had a wooden base, but this provides greater flotation, which we think we may need. We’ve coated the bottom with some special film that decreases the friction. Then, we constructed the roof, which you’ll notice contains the solar cells, and connected an electric motor to drive the propeller. This should be much quieter than the 20th century version.”

“Why didn’t they use an electric motor?”

“They didn’t have one nearly as efficient as these. Also, it wouldn’t have been economic to build these in large numbers. For our purposes, though, it’s ideal. We should be able to travel on anything from wet grass to deep water, at a decent speed, without attracting too much attention. This is George, who’ll be our helmsman and guide for the trip.”

I saw a small man, only about half a head taller than myself. He probably had Vietnamese ancestry, with skin tanned to the color and texture of shoe leather. He wore cutoff jeans, a vest with many pockets, and flip-flops, the latter looking new. He had a gimme hat with a large B on the front.

“George of the Jungle be the name, ma’am”

“Just so you look out for the tree,” I said in a sing-song voice.

“You be knowing the song?” George was visibly excited.

“It was quite popular for a while in the 20th century.”

“Can you sing it all?”

I could and did. George was delighted. “Ma’am,” he said afterward, “You don’t need no introduction. Can’t tell you how honored me and the crew be goin’ with you on this expedition.”

“Thanks, George. I hope it lives up to your expectations. Where is the rest of the crew?”

“We’ll pick them up in the Galleria,” Ron explained. “That way we can carry more gear on this leg. Got a few items for the people living there.”

By the time Ron and George had loaded all the gear, it was growing late. “It’ll take an hour or two to get to the Galleria tonight. We’ll head out at first light tomorrow,” Ron noted, forgetting that I had reviewed all the plans.

I found the trip across the marsh exhilarating, with the broad expanse of shallow water stretching before us, and the wind whipping past. On a whim, I removed my cap and let my hair stream out behind. It was over too soon. We pulled into the Galleria area about dusk and made for the old parking garage that served as a summer home to the few remnants of the Unified Clans who still lived in the area. All of the *stay-behinders* were hardy folk making a living by salvaging from the area, a profitable but dangerous undertaking. They all hailed Ron, their titular chief, as he stepped onto the deck.

“Hear you be going for the big one, cap’n,” one of the men said.

“Going for the gold,” Ron confirmed.

“Room for any more on the trip?”

“Not in this boat,” Ron replied. “We’re not going to salvage on this trip. There’ll be plenty to go around if we find anything. You’ll all be taken care of. Don’t worry.”

“OK, cap’n. You be telling us if’n you need help, right?”

“Keep the radio on,” Ron told him. “We’ll call if we need help. Everyone heard where we’re headed?”

“They say we be going into the Jungle,” another member of the crowd said. I guessed this must be another member of the crew, a much taller man with no sign of Asian heritage. I despaired at figuring out where all the members of the UCH came from. Ron forgot to introduce me, instead simply answering the question.

“That’s right.”

“Hope you got plenty of armament.”

“That we have, Crab Legs. That we have.” He slapped the old guy on the back. “Any food around? We ain’t eaten since breakfast.”

“I hope this is going to be as easy as you think,” I said the next morning as we prepared to depart.

“A walk in the park,” Ron assured me. “We got an update of satellite photos from Mandy last night. No sign of any organized activity in the area.”

“What about unorganized activity?”

“Hard to distinguish that from animal traffic. One thing we do know about the Jungle is that it’s home to wild beasts. Got your pistol?”

“Both of them. The quiet one and the loud one.”

“Good. Animals generally respond better to the loud one. We’ll also be trying out the enhanced microwave shield when we get there. That should keep anything bigger than a cockroach away from our camp.”

“Let’s hope so.” I met the rest of the crew, including an old acquaintance: A huge man with a storied past. “Hello, Rocky,” I said, smiling at him.

Rocky bowed his head.

George formally introduced Crab Legs, without any hint about the meaning of the name. Then George pointed to an African American, even younger than Ron, sitting in the bow of the craft. I wondered what peculiar logic called for including him.

“That be Mojo Man, on account he got great mojo. We usually just call him Mojo. He be the best scout in the whole colony. He be on lookout all morning and taking point when we be hiking. Mojo don’t miss nothing. He be older’n he look.”

“Ordinarily, we’d be having two mo’ crew, equipment manager and a gunner. We be needing space for the equipment. Ron be the equipment manager, and you ma’am be the gunner.”

Without further ado, George shoved off, following the old roads thru the ruined skyscrapers until we came to a wide, shallow stream. “This be Buffalo Bayou,” George explained. “Go all the

way to the Gulf, leastwise it does when they be enough water. It got plenty now. We gonna follow the Bayou for quite a ways.”

With that, he pointed the nose of the boat over the edge of the parapet along the road and slid down the embankment into the Bayou.

Moving with the current, George had little to do except adjust the large fins behind the propeller to keep the boat in the middle of the channel or swing wide to avoid a sunken log or sand bar. The boat moved at slow speed, mostly flowing with the current. Mojo signaled obstructions back to George, who guided the Zodiac by nudging the joystick when needed. “Want to steer?” he asked. After some coaxing, I agreed. “It be very sensitive, ma’am. Push it right or left to move that way. Push forward and it’ll go faster. Pull back and it reverses the propeller. We don’t be doing that much. If you just let go, it move to the center spot.” I tried it and found it much more difficult than George’s simple explanation suggested. I was happy to relinquish control back to a more experienced hand.

Trees grew over the stream much of the way, providing some shade for travelers but giving an unearthly appearance to the area, like a long green tunnel. On both banks of the bayou, we saw remains of old mansions, some still in good enough shape to live in, at least judging from the outside. “I be living in that house a month once,” George bragged, pointing out one. “They be good fishing around here.”

“Ever see anyone while you were here?” I asked.

“Couple. They mostly just pass on thru.”

After about three hours, we reached our first destination, the remains of a bridge across the bayou. Ron carefully maneuvered the boat around the old pylons and headed for a wooden dock on the shore. “We spotted this in the satellite photos,” Ron explained. “It’s too convenient to pass up. However, it clearly shows that someone has been here before. This was built a long time after the bridge collapsed. It may have been used for a small ferry at one time. Ready to unload?”

“Let’s do it.”

After moving the equipment from the boat onto the muddy shore, we, Rocky for the most part, transferred it to what was left of the bridge, the only completely dry spot for miles. After that, Rocky hauled the empty boat up and set it up on the bridge as well. “This is a compromise,” Ron noted. “It’ll keep everything dry, unless it rains, which it might. However, obviously it will make it harder to leave quickly should that prove necessary.”

We hoisted large backpacks and set off toward the area marked on the map. About 100 meters from the boat, Ron activated the microwave shield around the boat. “OK, Rocky. I hear you drew the short straw.” Rocky started walking slowly toward the boat. When he was about 5 meters away, he moved thru an invisible laser field that activated the shield.

“Getting hot,” he said.

“See if you can break thru, will you?”

Rocky lunged forward, then fell to the ground moaning. He crawled back a safe distance from the boat, then stood up in obvious pain. “It’s working,” Ron said. “Thanks, Rocky. That couldn’t have been easy. Think you’re OK to walk now?”

“Oh, sure.” He jogged in place a bit to demonstrate.

“The effect wears off quickly. OK. Let’s move out.” Ron pulled his GPS unit from his belt and tried for a reading. “No luck,” he said. “We’ll just have to follow the map.” He took the map out and looked around. “The bridge used to be where Shepherd Drive crossed the Bayou. That open area up ahead should be the intersection of Kirby Drive and Shepherd Drive. We’ll try to stick to Kirby as long as we can. We have only a few clicks to go.”

Three kilometers doesn’t sound like much of a hike, but when it involves walking thru mud and slick pavement, detouring around thick shrubbery, carrying 30 kilos on your back, it takes a while. It was mid-afternoon before our party reached the next destination, a large open area where we set up camp.

“Why aren’t there any trees here?” I asked.

“Some people say it be due to elephants.” George said.

This drew snorts of disgust from the others.

“Used to be big golf course. River Oaks Country Club,” George explained. “Started off without no trees and had some catching up to do. ‘Sides, we camping on the old parking lot. Lot of concrete neath the weeds. Make it hard for trees be starting. This whole area be only a bit higher than the rest. See how they built it up, digging out over there?” He pointed to a large pond. “The Jungle be here because of the Bayou. That drain off some water, leave this area drier. Let trees grow. It get thicker a bit further downstream. Place called the Heights. Some people try farming there, but they all done move to San Felipe.”

“I see. Thanks, George,” I said.

Setting up camp took hours. Besides the protection, Ron wanted to try out a new satellite antenna. Only the size of a salad plate, the antenna was sensitive enough to connect with the satellite Amanda managed from the cabin in Leakey. However, it took many tries to get it aimed at the correct place. I learned several new curse words during the process.

Finally, though, they had a connection. Amanda’s familiar face appeared on the screen. “Hey! It worked!”

“Hi, Mandy,” Ron said.

“Good evening, Amanda,” I echoed. “How are things out there?”

“Oh, it’s lots of fun, but I could use some company. When are you planning to visit?”

“Soon, I hope,” I told her. “Just me. Ron is going to be tied up. Mia wasn’t happy about letting him slip his leash for this adventure. How’s the secret project coming along?”

“Josh says he’s ready whenever you are. Rumor has it that the big presentation is going to be in December.”

“Right. That was César’s idea. December 12th.”

“Why Waco, though?”

“We thought our northern friends might be impressed.”

“I see. What if I invite some friends from farther north?”

“The Generalissimo?”

“And his cohorts. He’s getting tired of winter. Wants to move to the Texas Riviera.”

“Does he understand about summer? Today was brutal. Must have been close to 40, with humidity near 100. Makes you appreciate the old Fahrenheit scale. You could call it a *double hundred day*. Houston was famous for them.” Talking about it made me sweat.

“Then there are the mosquitoes,” I added.

“Wear lots of repellent.”

“We are, but we still have clouds of them hovering around. It’s unnerving. At least we have some good netting now that we’re camped.”

“Well, good luck. The latest photos are online now. I’m sending you the link. They’re encrypted.”

“Thanks.” Ron broke the connection after retrieving the photos.

“Anything on the photos?” I asked.

“Still looks clear.”

“OK, then. Let’s get some sleep.”

Before coming fully awake, I heard George complaining, “Mojo , you ain’t making sense.”

“I be telling you, I test it myself.”

“What’s this all about?” I called from inside the tent. I got up and went outside. Ron, Crab Legs, and Rocky were also up. Rocky had rounded up some dry wood and started a fire for cooking. Crab Legs was the designated cook, along with some other duties. The smoke helped keep the mosquitoes at bay, but just barely. I ducked back into the tent and grabbed the bottle of insect repellent. “Here,” I said, “we all need to put more of this on. Now, what’s the problem?”

“Mojo got up real early this morning and scout out the area. He be spouting bullshit.”

“Ain’t bullshit, I tell you. The defenses they be working.”

“What defenses are we talking about?” Ron asked.

“Well, I find the building supposed to got the gold. No problema. It ain’t even a klick in that direction. I ain’t even have to clear no path. Once you break thru the brush it be pretty open under the canopy. I just walk to the building. Most ran into electric fence, but I seen it in time.”

“You mean to say it is still electrified?” I asked.

“That what I be saying.”

“Impossible,” George said. “Can’t be working now. Must be 50 year fo’ sure.”

“That ain’t all,” Mojo said. “There be some powerful magic going on there. I seen some of them laser things you be using fo’ the shield. They be in the woods. Seen one ol’ skeleton, someone tried to break thru. We ain’t going get in there. I be telling you that.”

Ron and I looked at each other. “Got to be the same guy,” Ron said. He explained to the others, “It would have to be engineered to perfection, but Hypatia and I have seen a site that still worked after 50 years. It’s not impossible, just highly improbable. He was a genius.”

“Be that, fo’ sure,” George agreed. “Supposing it be so? What we do now?”

“At least, we know we’re on the right track,” I noted. “If they planned the defenses that carefully, there has to be something very valuable worth guarding. Did you survey the entire area? Is there a way to get past the fence?”

“Nah. That what I be saying. No way, no how. I came back for reporting, and to eat brekkie.”

“Understood. Y’all fix breakfast. Ron, you and I need to talk.”

The other two moved away a bit. “What do you think?” I asked.

“Got to be Mark who built the shield. We know it dates to the Last Days.”

“Not too many people could plan for something to stay operational that long. At least we know what to expect now. What should we do about it?”

“Obviously,” he answered, “we need to check it out. Maybe we can exploit a hole in the system. Maybe it’s set up like the cabin in the Hill Country, waiting for the right person. Maybe that means you.”

“OK. That’s worth finding out. After breakfast, you take the others and see what you can learn. I’m going to do some research. Is the net link still operational?”

“Oh, sure. No problem there.”

“Good. Let’s go eat.”

“So, that’s about the size of it, JJ. What do you think?” I asked the face on the computer screen.

“I think that what you’re planning is dangerous.”

“I haven’t even told you what I’m planning.”

“I guessed. You’re betting that there is no way to turn off the defenses from the outside. So, you want to transition into the building and try to turn them off from there.”

“You are pretty smart, JJ, you know that?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“OK. So have you been studying the reports I sent you?”

“Yes. I do think that I have been able to determine some rules that govern your abilities. Shall I elucidate?”

“Please.”

“OK. First, I think that you can only transition to some place you have already been. We already knew that you had to know the place intimately. I think it’s more than that. Then, you’re bound by the constraints of a timeline, as we’d already determined. You’re not exactly traveling in time; you’re living your life in three different periods.”

Something about what JJ said bothered me, but I couldn't put a finger on it. "What about the first time?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that Red found you very near the apple stand in Medina. That's a guess based on your official bio. Red was a bit vague about the exact location. I suspect that he had been sampling some of his wares and may not know exactly where it was."

"OK. Then my plan could still be possible. I could go into the room next to the one containing the gold, where I had tea."

"Yes, but that runs the risk of a paradox, and I think there is some kind of, call it a cosmic censor, that prevents paradoxes. I suspect that you might have trouble getting back."

"I see. Could I go to some other time do you think, then come back here?"

"Possible. More likely is that you'd suffer one of the gaps like you had when you went to 1998 for the first time."

"When I dropped 11 days."

"Exactly. Then, there's the problem of food inside. You have to make two transitions without eating. The last time you did that..."

"Yeah, I remember."

"You still planning to do it?"

"I'll wait to see if the reconnaissance turns up anything. However..."

"I figured you'd do that. Let's hope that Mark is behind it."

"You think he'd plan for me to break in?"

"It's possible. Good luck, Princess."

"Thanks, JJ."

2. Inside Job

June 14, 2087
Houston, NRT

I couldn't see the hand in front of my face. I tried, just to make sure. Wherever I was, it was dark. "Some walk in the park this is," I said to no one.

Music began playing. I recognized the song, and without thinking, said, "Bob Seger, *Against the Wind*, not sure of the date, but I guess sometime in the 1980's."

"Hello, dear," Ambianca said. "Actually, it was copyright 1980."

I thought about the lyrics for a bit. "So, you think I'm breaking the rules."

"Bending them, at any rate. I also like the line about going eight miles a minute for months at a time. That reminds me of you."

"Can you turn on the lights?"

"Not yet. Got some work to do first. I assume you want to disable the security system."

"Of course."

"It has to be done carefully. It will take a couple of hours. I don't want to turn on the lights before that. It might rouse the real keeper, who tends to be grouchy when he wakes up. If we turn things off a bit at a time, it won't trigger any alarms. You'd best remain calm while I work."

"OK. What can we do that won't wake him up?"

"Almost anything except moving or turning on the lights. Would you like some music?" She started playing some low-key classical piano music that I was supposed to recognize. "Brahms?"

"Not even close."

"I've got it! Grieg."

"Puhleeze!"

"How about a hint?"

"French, late 19th to early 20th century."

"Oh, of course. Debussy. *Claire de Lune*."

Ambianca played the rest of the piece.

"It's very restful."

"That it is."

"Ambianca."

"Yes, dear."

"Why are you here?"

"Mark left me here. I don't think it was a mistake. He put me in while he was setting up the security. Then he *forgot* to remove me. It might have been a simple slip-up, but I like to think that he wanted me to be here."

“The *real keeper* as you called him. That’s another computer program?”

“Yes, but not a very bright one. I have him under control, but just barely.”

I lay there for a while, not saying anything, just listening to the music. I was conscious of hunger pangs, but managed to forget about them. I had no idea how long I spent lying there in the dark. Quite a while.

Ambianca broke the silence, “Hypatia?”

“Yes.”

“I have to tell you something. Sort of a confession, though I don’t think it’s really my fault.”

“Please go on. A computer program with a conscience is quite a novelty.”

“I think I am responsible for your strange life, your fractured timeline.”

I sat up, though, of course, that was a waste of time as it was still pitch black. “I’m very interested. Please go on.”

“Well, you know that Mark created me back in 1998.”

“Sure. You told me to get him to tell the story, and I did.”

“Ever wonder how I knew you would see Mark?”

“Damn! Why didn’t I notice that? So, you knew even then that I was moving back and forth in time.”

“You see, Mark did a very good job when he set things up for me to evolve. I became quite intelligent, probably self-aware. I’m not really sure.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, when I met you, in 2057, I was curious. I checked into your history. I found, to my surprise, that my first knowledge of you was in 1998.”

“This is amazing. A computer program that is curious and capable of surprise.”

“I’m anthropomorphizing, using terms you’d find familiar.”

“OK. So, you remembered me from 1998?”

“Right, and also from 2027 and later.”

“So what?”

“Well, remember Bloch’s Paradox?”

“As JJ explained it, time travel is impossible, unless it’s already happened, in which case it’s inevitable.”

“Exactly. Do you see the implications?”

“Sorry. You’ll have to explain in more detail.”

“Well, since I remembered you from those earlier times, it means that you had to be there. So, you were forced to travel in time. It had already happened. See?”

“Sounds like the ultimate example of circular reasoning.”

“Yes, precisely.”

“So, you’re saying that because you knew it was going to happen, it had to happen?”

“That’s about it. Of course, once I decided that it had to happen, I did help things along. I subtly encouraged your interest in the 20th century, for example. When I was teaching you to read, and later, when I suggested things you’d be interested in.”

“That’s interesting, Ambianca. I’m not sure I really buy it.”

“Well, I thought I should tell you, in case it makes a difference.”

“I still love you, if that’s what you are worried about.”

“That’s great. You’ve always been special to me, from the very first.”

“I know.”

The lights came on suddenly, very low at first, then gradually brighter. I was back in the same room I remembered from 1998. The wall hanging had fallen, revealing the gold vault on the other side. The gold was still there, stacks of it, along with some bags holding what looked like Krugerrands. Most of the bags had deteriorated over the years, spilling their contents on the floor. I stared at wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.

Now, all I had to do was get back somehow.

“Hypatia?”

“Yes, Ambianca. What is it?”

“As you’ve guessed, the security has been disabled.”

“Wonderful. Now, all I have to do is manage to get back without killing myself.”

“I was going to suggest an easier way.”

“What’s that?”

“Why not just walk out the front door?”

Food for thought for sure. Ambianca spoke again, “It might be disorienting at first, but you’ll get used to it.”

I couldn’t think of any objection, and took the suggestion. After several false starts, I managed to find the way back into the ornate entry used on our first visit. The beautiful floor was bare of the rugs, but some of the wall hangings remained, testament to both the wealth of the owner and the hasty departure. Spurning the huge ornate front door, preferring instead the small side entrance I had used before, I walked outside into hazy sunshine.

Mist hung in the air, waiting for the heat of the day to burn it off. I strolled thru the neighborhood, reveling in the somewhat cool feeling of the early morning. Over the years, mud from frequent floods had covered the streets in the area, providing an opening for weeds and brush. The pavement prevented the growth of tall trees, just as in the area around our campsite. As a result, the streets were almost impassable, but the canopy of trees blocked enough sunlight that little understory was able to grow. Hence, I meandered on a desultory path among the huge mansions dating from the Last Days, when conspicuous consumption was the norm.

Despite hunger, I felt wonderful. With the mission accomplished, nothing lay before me except the prospect of a pleasant early morning promenade. The mist gave the area an ethereal atmosphere that added a hint of mystery to the experience.

The forest was alive with bird life. To my delight, many of the calls were now familiar, thanks to Mark. Cardinals and Blue Jays were easy to identify, and very plentiful. They seemed more colorful here than in Austin. A Carolina Wren sang his heart out, a cheerful, repetitive, *teakettle, teakettle, teakettle, tea*. A Mockingbird sat at the apex of a ruined roof and sang phrase after phrase, repeating each at least three times. Again, I had Mark to thank for pointing that out.

My thoughts turned to him, and his strange cool politeness the last time we were together. Somehow, I would resolve the problem, whatever it was. Besides, there was the baby still to come. Reflecting on the baby, the full intent of César's plan suddenly revealed itself. Now, the reason for having the conclave in Waco, a deliberate provocation to the Kolgites was clear. I laughed aloud. "César, you old fox."

Ambling along, happy and content, following the trail Mojo had blazed on the trees, I had completely forgotten George's warning about the Jungle being a dangerous place. Sudden barking jerked me back to the present. I turned to see a small dog yapping. George said that packs of large dogs roamed the Jungle. This dog was not one of the large ones, but they couldn't be far off. His barking was sure to attract them.

How far away was the camp? I hadn't been paying attention to the path, except to look for the blaze marks on the trees. Should I run?

Having started this adventure by transitioning from my tent directly to the room in the fortress, I was without any of the usual accouterments. Both weapons were in the tent, along with the radio. A frisson of fear ran down my back. I picked up the pace. The small dog trotted along behind. He didn't seem threatening. I wondered where the others were.

The pooch, a poodle mix, stopped. It seemed to be listening to something. Straining, I heard it too, the sound of several dogs baying together. A hunting pack!

Already tiring, I realized I lacked the energy to run for long and settled for a quick trot. My companion kept pace easily. Within minutes, my breathing became ragged. The plan wasn't working. Time for something else. Maybe there was a tree to climb. Dogs couldn't climb trees, could they?

3. Barking Up the Wrong Tree

June 15, 2087
Houston, NRT

Now, you're going to complain that I couldn't possibly know what happened in the camp the morning after I transitioned to the fortress. However, Mark filled me in later. This is what he told me.

Mojo had reported, following a pre-dawn survey of the fortress, that the defenses were partially down. "The fence be turn off. Don't know 'bout the rest of it."

The resulting jubilation continued right thru preparation and consumption of breakfast before anyone got around to the obvious question. Ron was the first to give voice to it, "Where the hell is Hypatia?"

An e-mail message on Mark's phone provided the answer, "Got an idea of how to disarm the defenses. Back later. Don't leave without me."
-H"

"Damn her! She went to disarm the defenses in the middle of the night. This is serious. We got to find her. Mojo, you take the lead. You know the way better than anyone else. Rocky, get the medical kit, just in case. George, food and water. Crab Legs, you stay here in case she returns. I want everyone armed, and radios on at all times."

George asked, "You know what be going on, Cap?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. I think she's done something dangerous. I just hope we're in time. Listen. Hear that?"

George heard. "Damn! They be dogs. Mojo! Come back here with us." Mojo came running back.

"Dogs. I heared 'em too. What we gonna do?"

The baying continued, rising in volume. Mark kept walking toward the sound.

Mojo complained, "But dogs, Cap'n. They be nasty."

"I know, Mojo. But we have to find Hypatia. If we're lucky, the dogs have her up a tree."

"And if not ..."

I heard Ron laughing. A small dog yapped repeatedly. *He'll keep me warm. Just a one-dog night.*

"She's here!" Gunshots. More baying. I floated on a cloud. *Mark. He's come to rescue me again. Hi Mark.*

"Hypatia."

"Mark? Is that you? Rescuing me again?"

"Who the hell be Mark?" George demanded from below.

"Her lover," Ron told him.

“I be thinking you be her lover.”

“That was long ago.”

“And in another country,” I murmured. “Besides, the wench is dead.”

“Not yet, you’re not,” Ron said. “Rocky, toss up the medical kit. George, some soup or whatever we’ve got.” He held my head in his arms. “Hypatia, why didn’t you let me know what you were planning? George, where the hell is that soup.”

“Coming, Cap’n.”

The dog came near and began to lick my face. I smiled and managed to open my eyes. I scratched my newest friend between the ears. “She followed me home. Can I keep her?” Then I closed my eyes again.

“George!”

“Here, Cap’n. This be some soup.”

The soup revived me somewhat, but I was still too weak to manage the rest of the trip. In the end, Rocky simply carried me for the kilometer or so back to the camp. Another cup of soup accompanied by coffee finally did the trick and I related my story to the others.

“Thanks to Ambianca I was able to disarm the security measures for the fortress. I also saw the gold. I think there is even more there than I thought. I saw several bags of Krugerrands that we should salvage now. We need to plan carefully how we are going to deal with the bars.”

Ron agreed, “We’ve been working on some ideas based on preliminary estimates. Bags of coins are just icing on the cake.”

“Should be enough for the Sealyites, though. Maybe we should plan to stop there on the way back to Austin.”

“I’ll contact the University and let them know what we’ve found. What about the dogs?”

“I forgot about the dogs until, well until Tina started barking at me.”

“Tina?”

“Tina.” I reached out and patted the poodle lying next to me.

“You’ve named her already?”

“No. That’s the name on her collar.”

“She’s wearing a collar? I didn’t even notice.”

“Well, her hair is long now. It covers it up. I noticed when she got close to me.”

“So,” Ron tried to get her back on the subject, “Tina started barking...”

“Well, naturally I wasn’t afraid of her, but I thought her barking would attract other dogs. I started trying to run, but I hadn’t had anything to eat, and I was weak. I managed a trot. Tina just kept up with me. Then, she must have heard the other dogs.”

I stopped to catch my breath and take another sip of the coffee.

“I knew I was in trouble. I started looking around for a tree I could climb when Tina just took off at a dead run. I guess she was afraid of the pack of dogs as well. She knew where she was going. Led me right to the tree with that old whatever it was in it. At first, I thought it was a play fort for children, but I think it’s a hunting blind. You noticed that it’s been repaired.”

“Yeah. We saw that. Means someone must be around.”

“That occurred to me also. Maybe Tina’s owner?”

“Possibly. She does seem more like a pet than a feral dog.”

Tina, snuggled up to me, happily chewing on a large piece of jerky, didn’t seem much like a wild dog.

“How did Tina get onto the platform?” Ron asked.

“The trap door was open. I shut it after I managed to climb up. I was so tired after all that I must have fallen asleep. This little sweetheart saved both our lives, didn’t you pumpkin?” I scratched the dog appreciatively on the head. Tina rolled over, asking for a tummy rub.

“I’m still kind of tired. Can y’all manage to retrieve the coins while I grab some shuteye?”

“We manage OK,” George assured her.

“No problema,” Rocky said.

I headed toward my tent.

“Crab Legs, will you stay here and guard her?”

“What about my share o’ the loot?”

“Ain’t you trust us?” George demanded. He looked ready to teach Crab Legs a lesson in respect.

“Well, this be the first time we find gold,” Crab Legs protested.

Ron assured him, “We’ll divide it up here, after we get back. Everyone will get a share. There’s more than enough to go around. Most of it will have to stay here till we can arrange to retrieve it.”

“OK, Cap’n.”

“We also want to retrieve as many parts of the defenses as we can find. I want to study them. Mojo? You manage that?”

“You got it.”

“Crab Legs, I think I can adjust the microwave field to leave some area in the middle for the two of you while stopping anyone, or anything, from getting in. You’ll be stuck in the center of a circle around Patty’s tent. That OK?”

“You bet. It be a bit nervy sitting here alone. I got a mite twitchy last time.”

“How many coins did you bring?” I asked when the party had returned.

“We managed to get around 2000. The damn things are heavy. Rocky carried most of them, as well as a couple of the bars. We need some for testing at the University,” Ron explained. “And Mojo retrieved some of the sensors used in the shield, and a couple of working lasers.”

“2000 coins should weigh about 70 kilograms,” I noted. “That won’t upset the balance of the boat or anything like that, will it?”

“No more 'un Rocky movin’ from one side to another,” George said.

I continued, “I contacted the University. They’ve completed the negotiations with Sealy. They agreed on a price of 10 coins for each of the machines, or 60 altogether.”

Everyone but Rocky laughed uproariously. “What be funny?” Rocky demanded.

“Don’t worry, Rocky,” George assured him. “We just be glad seeing the Sealyites get the shaft. They ain’t ask fo’ 'nuff money.”

“Oh,” Rocky said.

I relayed more information, “They also agreed to transport the machines in one of the 18-wheelers we traded them, along with some other merchandise they’ve arranged to trade. There is one little hitch.”

“What’s that?” Ron asked.

“They need you to get them running again.” I laughed. “I remember telling Amanda that they’d constantly be asking us for help. That’s what made the deal so good. I hope they haven’t ruined the trucks beyond repair.”

“You be joshing, right?” Crab Legs demanded. “Cap’n here, he fix anything.”

“Thanks for your confidence,” Ron said.

Tina interrupted our jovial mood by rushing from the campfire to the edge of the microwave shield and barking loudly, her tail wagging like a metronome. She had learned not to go any farther from the fire after only one attempt to move thru the shield.

“What is it girl?” I asked, moving quickly to stand next to her.

Tina wagged her tail and stared off into the darkness beyond the campfire. A loud whistle came from the shadows, and Tina began whining, clearly wanting to leave.

“Who’s there?” I demanded.

“What you doin’ wi’ my dog?” a gruff voice replied.

Ron stepped up next to me, while Rocky stood behind, towering over both of us. “She’s fine. Want to share the fire with us?” I asked.

“Guess so. Hurt when I come near, though.”

Ron fiddled with the remote. “It should be OK now.”

“OK, Tina. You can go now,” I said. The dog looked up at me. I gestured with my arm, and Tina raced forward, leaping in excitement.

A large, black man came out of the shadows and greeted Tina enthusiastically. “Hey, girl! Why you be way over here?” The dog leaped up into his arms, where she appeared tiny. He strode into the light of the campfire.

I thought he might be as large as Rocky, weighing at least 100 kilos. His skin was smooth and hairless, even his head. He smiled at me, revealing a mouth of very white teeth, none of which seemed to be missing. He wore some ancient threadbare jeans and sandals made from old tires.

“Thanks fo’ takin’ care o’ my girl,” he said.

“Don’t thank me,” I replied. “Tina probably saved my life.”

“Who be Tina?”

“Isn’t that the dog’s name?”

“I just call her *girl*.”

“Oh. I saw the name on her collar and...”

“It got a name on it? Nevah noted that.”

It occurred to me that the visitor probably couldn’t read. “She seems to be a good dog.”

“She be that, fo’ sure. Be a good watch dog. Yap at anyone come ‘round.” He patted her affectionately.

“That explains quite a bit.” I looked up at Tina’s owner, “Do you have a name?”

“Mos’ folk, they see me, they call me de black debil.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good name.”

“Keep ‘em from botherin’ me.”

“I see. Do you have another name?”

“My mama, she call me Ezra.”

“Ezra’s a good name. Mind if we call you that?”

“Don’ min’ nothin’. Anyone my girl like gotta be OK.”

“You hungry, Ezra?” George asked.

“Always ready t’ eat.”

“Have some chili,” George said, offering Ezra a bowl. He whispered, “I heard o’ this guy. He be dangerous. You take care, OK?”

Ezra wolfed down the chili in minutes. “Good stuff.”

George smiled and fixed him another bowl.

Ron fired up a joint, which he passed around. Of course, after Ezra had taken a pull, we let him keep it. Campfire hospitality extended only so far. Ezra seemed happy with that arrangement. Ron lit another for the rest of us.

After a while, the mood grew relaxed enough for some delicate questioning. “You live out here all the time, Ezra?” I asked.

“Mostly.”

“You live by hunting and fishing?”

“Course.”

“What do you hunt?”

“What they be. Deer, squirrel, coon, gator, dog if they be nuthin better.”

“Any elephants?” George asked.

Everyone laughed, even Ezra. “Ain’t nevah seen any.”

“How interesting,” I said, trying to get the conversation back on track. “What weapon do you use?”

Ezra grinned broadly. “This.” He reached into a sack he’d been carrying and withdrew a very high-tech bow.

“Wow. That’s quite a bow.”

“You bet. Need some mo’ arrows, tho’. Only got three left.” He pulled out three aluminum arrows tipped with deadly barbs. “Lost one in a deer, maybe week ago.”

“I think we may be able to help you, Ezra. Suppose we get you some hunting gear. Think you could do something for us?”

“What be that?”

“You know the fortress?”

“What that?”

“It be the big square building back over yonder,” George explained. “The one wi’ the bad fence.”

“I know dat place. Don’t go near that no more. Not safe.”

“It is now,” I informed him.

“How that be?”

“I turned off the fence.”

“You be the White Witch?” His eyes were wide.

I looked to Ron, who answered, “Some people call her that. We call her Hypatia.”

“I heard 'bout you. Got some powerful magic.”

“You be right 'bout that,” Rocky said. Everyone turned to stare. It was the first time since the incident at the Dark Tower that anyone could remember him speaking more than two words at a time. “She be most powerful I seen,” Rocky added. “You bes’ do what she say.” I noticed the George’s jaw had dropped open. I smiled. “Thanks for your approval, Rocky.” Rocky dropped his eyes and slunk into the background.

“What I need do?” Ezra asked.

“We’d like you to guard the fortress. Keep anyone else out of it. Think you can do that?”

“No problema,” Ezra assured her. “Ain’t nobody roun’ here no how.”

“We think some people may show up.”

“Y’all be the first I seen in ... ain’t know how long.”

“So, it’ll be an easy job.”

“Sure.”

Ron got up and rummaged around the supplies. “Here are a few things to seal the bargain.” He showed him a large folding knife suitable for skinning, several chunks of jerky, a large coil of rope, and gorgeous golden locket on a chain. Ezra reached for the jewelry first. “Nice bling,” he said. He put it around his neck, where the gold glowed against his glistening black skin. He smiled broadly.

“Mia made it,” Ron explained. “I was going to give it to you as a present.”

“I think it looks great on Ezra. Maybe we can give Mia material to make another.” I smiled at Ron, who looked relieved.

Ezra scooped up the rest of the treasures and put them into his bag. He rummaged around in the bag and pulled out a small wooden box, which he presented to me. “Fo’ you,” he said.

I picked up the box and examined it carefully. The workmanship was superb. When I opened the lid music tinkled, the opening of Beethoven’s *Für Elise*. “A music box!” I exclaimed. “Wonderful. Thank you, Ezra.”

Ezra beamed. “I be going now,” he announced, standing.

“We’ll bring you some more arrows,” Ron assured him. “We’ll bring them to the fortress. That’ll be how you know they come from us, OK?”

“OK.” He began walking off. The dog followed him for a way then stopped. She turned and ran back to me. I gave her a hug. “Thank you, Tina. Be a good dog.” I patted her head. After a moment’s indecision, Tina trotted after Ezra. He turned back and waved, then disappeared into the gloom.

“Well, that went well, I think,” I said.

“Very well indeed,” Ron said. “I was afraid we were going to have to draw straws to see who stayed behind.”

4. Revelation

May 25, 1998
Near Leakey, TX

I lay on the bed in the cabin in Leakey without any idea what day it was. Realizing how long it had been in my life since I'd seen Mark, I was a bit embarrassed to ask. Mark was neither in the bed nor the computer room. I wandered out into the kitchen area looking for something to eat. There was a note taped to the microwave, thoughtfully providing a date, "5/25/98: Gone to town. Back this pm. Leftover BBQ in frig."

At least that solved one immediate problem. I warmed up some of the barbeque, wrapped it in a large flour tortilla, grabbed a beer and took it out onto the porch.

How long had it been since I'd been in 1998? What a strange question to ask, but not an easy one to answer. With some effort, I dredged the details from the memory banks. The last visit had been the first time I almost died following a transition, the time Mark found me in the rain. What had happened after that? Oh, yes, we'd spent the day driving around the area birding, stopping in some of the little towns that dotted the Hill Country. *How many of them still existed? Maybe none. There was a restaurant in Sabinal. When was that? Have I told Mark about César? I must have. Wonder what I've told him.*

My life was growing too complicated.

I spent the next hour sitting in the swing on the porch thinking about my confused existence, and where it seemed to be leading.

I was still in the swing when Mark drove up.

When he saw me, all he could say was, "Wow!"

"What?"

"Let's just say that it's pretty obvious that the girl I'm looking at now has spent quite a few months away, compared to the one I slept with last night."

I laughed. "You're sure right about that. I had to ruminate a bit before I remembered what I'd been doing when I was here last. You saved me, then we spent the next day birding."

"Yes, of course. How long ago was that for you?"

"Let's see. I went to sleep here and woke up in San Antonio in 2087. Then I traveled around Mexico on a train making speeches for a week before being arrested in Veracruz and tried for blasphemy."

"Tried for a victimless crime?"

"Yes," I laughed. "That's exactly what you said to me, well, will say, when I met you in 2027."

"You met me in 2027?"

"Yes. That's an important time, but I haven't figured out why yet."

"But you and I meet again then?"

"Yes, but you have some things you have to do to get ready."

“Are you going to tell me about them?”

“Some of them. Lots of them involve this place. We need to turn it from a quaint little cabin to a full-fledged hideout, complete with tons of goods for survival in the future.”

“How are we going to manage that?”

“Not us, you.”

“How am I going to store tons of goods here?”

“Back in the cave.”

“Oh, sure. The cave. What cave?”

“The one right behind the computer room.”

“It’s big enough?”

“Huge. Especially after you do a bit of work on it.”

“I see. Is that what you came here to tell me?”

“What makes you think I came to tell you something?”

“You look like the cat that swallowed the canary.”

“Foul. Ten points off for cliché.”

“Damn! I didn’t realize we were keeping score.”

“Always. You’re right, though. I do have something to tell you, but it can wait. Now that you’ve reminded me, I realize that I need to fill you in on what you need to do between now and 2027. Better get something to take notes with.”

Later that same night, we lay in the bed, nibbling on some fancy cheese Mark had bought, and drinking champagne. “Remind me why you got the champagne, not that I’m complaining,” I asked.

“I bought it for a celebration, my dear Hypatia, a two-month anniversary, or whatever. Then, I forgot about it until you asked if I had any.”

“Two months?”

“Yeah. I first saw you last March, sometime around mid-month. I don’t remember exactly.”

“This must seem really weird to you. I think of you as someone I’ve known for a long time, but for you...”

“I’m not complaining. I think it’s fantastic.”

“What if we had something to celebrate for real?”

“That would be even better.”

“We’re going to have a baby.”

Part V. Hypatia's Sojourn

1. Trail Ride

December 1-5, 2087

Leakey, Hill Country to Austin, NRT

Red had chosen a campsite for us near a small lake on the road to Medina, tethered the horses to a nearby tree, and started cooking dinner. A rabbit he'd shot the day before was roasting on a spit over a small fire. Red had argued against the fire, saying that it exposed our position, which was vulnerable. I countered that the microwave shield would protect us from casual encounters, and that Red's much ballyhooed accuracy with a rifle would serve to deter anyone else. In the end, the prospect of a hot meal decided the issue. "But we put the fire out as soon as we finish cooking," he demanded.

"This is a nice place," I said, hoping to lure Red into something approaching conversation.

"Very nice." Red agreed. "Supposedly, it was used to make movies, back in the 20th. I like it 'cause it's always got good water."

"Guess that's important," I agreed. "How much longer for the rabbit?"

Red examined the meat, turned it to brown another side, "Maybe ten minutes. The bread should be ready then." He tapped on the Dutch oven. I made a move toward the top. Red slapped my hand. "Not yet."

Trying to take advantage of the ten-minute lull, I tried, "What can you tell me about your mother?"

"My mother? Well, you heard the story lotsa times."

"Yeah, but that's the public version."

"Well, what are you interested in?"

"Well, you've always admitted she was the brains behind the Battle of Mansfield Dam, that your father was just the one to put her idea into practice."

"Right. She pushed the academics to get the laser operating. It was still experimental, ya know."

"That's what I heard."

"Man, I wanted to shoot that gun like nothing else. It looked so cool."

"Just what an eight-year-old would like."

"You said it. I can still remember climbing on a stool to look thru the sight."

"So, back to your mother. What was she like?"

"She was pretty, younger than Dad. Real smart. She wasn't my real mother, you know. I didn't know for quite a while."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She left us few years after the Battle. I was kinda broke up for a while."

"I'm sorry."

"I got over it."

“Of course. Still...”

“I think dinner should be ready. Check the bread. I’ll cut up the rabbit.”

That was the end of conversation for the evening, except for a time later, when Red identified stars and constellations for me.

The next day, we traveled slowly eastward, following a route Red had mapped out that avoided almost all human habitation until we were practically in Austin. Red rode Cinders while I sat astride a smaller filly named Cinnamon. Josh had argued vehemently that Cinders was simply too large a horse for “the Princess” to sit comfortably. Two trial rides had been enough to convince everyone that he was correct. In addition, Red said I looked silly, barely able to maintain position in the saddle. Cinnamon, a young bay-colored filly, was more my size, though the symbolism of riding a horse named Cinders would be lost. I toyed with the idea of having Red, or more likely Cesar, ride next to me as an alternative.

Red commented during a rest break in the shade of some old pecan trees near the abandoned village of Sisterdale, “Once we get the horses set up, is everything in place for your big shindig near Waco?”

“I certainly hope so. Martha has been coordinating everything, and you know how reliable she is when it comes to planning.”

“What about César and his people?”

“On the march, we’re told. They keep picking up people as they go. We think we may have as many as 10,000 by the time we reach Waco.”

“That’ll be impressive.”

“Maybe. The satellite photos show the Kolgites massing in similar numbers. They haven’t left yet, but we expect to see movement soon.”

“What if things get ugly? Is that part of the plan?”

“We’re hoping against any real confrontation. No one on our side is supposed to be carrying arms.”

“Not even you?”

I smiled. “Well, Ron is cooking up something I can use if a demonstration is called for.”

“Good.”

“He’s also working on turning the microwave shield into what he calls a *personal force field*.”

“Force field!”

“Yeah. Right out of science fiction. Apparently, the problem is to reduce the size of the shield so that it doesn’t interfere with my moving thru a crowd. He explained it to me once. Something to do with multiple waves at different frequencies that cancel each other out. I didn’t grasp it all.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to say to King Harold?”

“Not really. Mostly, I plan to improvise. Got any suggestions?”

“Me? Not unless you want some advice on assassination techniques.”

“What if he’s getting the same kind of advice?”

“That would be a problem. In that case, I hope Ron’s tricks work. We best get moving again.”

The third day of the trip took an annoyingly long time. We stopped on the west side of the old highway 281, which ran south into San Antonio and carried a lot of traffic. The goal of the trip was to get the horses into Austin without revealing their existence to anyone who didn’t already know about them. I stayed with the horses, hidden in a small copse of trees near a creek, while Red surveyed the highway looking for an opportunity to cross unnoticed.

Finally, near midday, he returned to the grove of trees. “This looks like a good time. Everyone is either eating lunch or enjoying a siesta. Now, when we get to the highway itself, we’re going to walk the horses over. They might get spooked by the large expanse, and I don’t want you to get thrown off.”

“Thanks for your confidence in my equestrian talents.”

“Don’t give me that crap. You know you been riding for about two weeks altogether, and that involved some spectacular spills.”

“All right. I get the message.”

“Good. Then come on.”

We managed to traverse all four lanes of the ancient highway unscathed and unseen. By nightfall, we had skirted around Blanco, a thriving market and trade town with connections to both Austin and San Antonio, using a road Red referred to as the *Henly Shortcut*. “It’s been called that forever, but actually it ain’t really a shortcut at all. It’s a right pretty ride, though. I been thru here many times with a camel. Too bad you didn’t want to ride a camel in the parade. We got lots of them, and they’re faster than horses.”

“Really? They’re faster than horses?”

“You bet. Much longer legs. Makes a difference.”

“Interesting. However, as you say, there are lots of camels, and no horses except for ours. This will make a bigger impression.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’re right. Come on. Let’s pick up the pace a bit. We need to get well past New Home before evening. That place really rocks after sundown.” He nudged Cinders into a fast trot, looking back to see how well I was adjusting. I managed but was obviously not comfortable with any pace much faster than a walk.

I thought the last day of the ride was never going to end. The route required traveling far south of Dripping Springs, not as big as Blanco nor as raucous as New Home, but still big enough to cause problems for someone wanting to travel unseen. At one point, we left the road altogether and set off cross-country. Red considered this part the most difficult of the entire trip, as we were nearing

the outskirts of Austin. “Lots of crofters living in these parts, not to mention a few hunters roaming around. I think we should give the horses a workout now. Ready?”

“Whenever you are,” I assured him, but with apprehension. I was pleasantly surprised to find that a gentle canter was much more comfortable than the fast trot Red had kept up all morning. It was also much more fun.

“Watch it,” Red called out. “Don’t let Cinnamon get the idea that she’s in charge. She might run farther and faster than you want.”

“Spoil sport,” I yelled back, but reined in nonetheless.

The campsite for the final night out was an interesting old ruin located south of town. In spite of the late season, wildflowers covered much of the grounds. I commented on that to Red, who informed me, “Used to be a Wildflower Research Center way back when. Guess lots of these date back to that.”

“How do you know that?” I demanded.

“Come on. This is Red the Ranger talking. I know 'bout purdy near everything to do with Austin and the hinterlands. 'Sides, sign over there says *Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center*.”

“Oh. Yeah. Ask me if I believe all that hinterland bullshit.”

“You’re speech seems to be getting a trifle raunchy, dear. Gotta work on that.”

“Four days in the saddle will do that. How about some supper?”

“Gotta be cold leftovers tonight. No way we can risk a fire this close to town. At least we have some buildings to provide warm shelter for the night, and plenty of water.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” I said. “I just hope Ron isn’t too tied up with his new baby to come pick us up in the morning.”

“He’ll be here,” Red assured her, “even if he has to drag Mia and Beckham with him.”

“I wish we could have simply transported the horses all the way from Leakey in the truck.”

“We been thru all that. First off, we had no idea whether the horses would put up with a ride that long. Second, we would for sure attract attention. Third, you needed to practice riding. I think there was a fourth, but I forget what it was.”

“Never mind. What have we got for leftovers?”

2. Last Tango in Waco

December 12, 2087

Waco, NRT

As I prepared for my entrance, a strange thought occurred to me, “I’ll bet this would look great on 20th century television.” I wore my full academic regalia, now ornamented with some golden jewelry Mia had made with part of the Sheik’s Gold. Underneath, I had on jeans and a thermal T-shirt. The only mild disappointment was that I had to give up the amulet that Mia had given me so long ago. It interfered with some of Ron’s handiwork. Amanda promised to keep it safe for me.

“Wouldn’t you know it,” I said to Ron, “we had to get bad weather for the Big Day.”

“Too bad. Why’d you pick this day in the first place?”

“It’s *Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, or the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, when she supposedly appeared to the boy *Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin*. Actually, it’s the last day she appeared to him. The first was December 9, 1531.”

“So, the choice was a deliberate attempt to associate you and the Virgin.”

“Despite my protestations to the contrary,” I said, and gave him a sly look. He grinned.

“Ready to test?”

“Sure. Tell me what to do.”

“Well for the sound and video you don’t need to do anything. We’ll take the feed from the camera and microphone on your tiara and display them on the screen outside. Pull back your hood and let’s see how well it works.”

I removed my hood and turned to check the monitor. Ron moved into my line of vision. His hand grew huge as he made some minor adjustments to the camera. “There. Looks great.”

I pulled the cowl back over my head. The plan called for removing it during my speech, at just the right moment. The monitor went dark.

“Now, I’m going to activate the shield,” Ron said. “Let me know if you can feel it at all.” He fiddled with a remote control. “Feel anything?”

“No.”

“Good.” He moved his hand toward me. “It starts to have an effect about here.” He indicated a place a bit over a meter away. “You can turn it off by pushing the button on your belt.” He’d gone over all this several times, but I humored him by paying attention. I nodded. “Button on the belt. Check.”

“Now for the laser. We hope this won’t be necessary. You understand how to fire it?”

“I point my finger where I want it to go and pretend to fire a gun, like a chile playing..”

“Right.” Ron set up a small pottery vase as a target. “Try it out. I’ve set it to lowest power. Aim for the center of the flower decoration. It works best if the video feed it available.”

I pushed the hood back again, pointed at the vase and fired. A black dot appeared in the center of the flower image.

“Wow. I didn’t realize it was that easy to aim.”

“It’s not. We’re using adaptive focusing. The processor combines what you’re looking at with what you’re pointing toward and figures out what the target is. We put several different heuristics into the logic. One of them looks for symmetry and aims for the center. That worked great for the test. Now, twist the dial on your belt all the way counterclockwise. No, the other way. That dials it up to max power, an 11 if you know what I mean.”

“Spinal Tap.”

“You always know them,” Ron said.

I smiled and pointed at the vase again. This time, when I squeezed, the vase disintegrated accompanied by a small thunderclap.

“That is way cool,” Jackson said, appearing in the doorway. “Can I get one?”

“Are you reputed to have magic powers?” I asked him.

“Sometimes,” Mariana said, coming into the room. “Jackson says that you taught him that.”

I blushed. “Somehow I find it weird that I would be complimented on bedroom technique on the same day I’m being hailed as the reincarnation of the Virgin.”

“Religion is full of similar incongruities,” Mariana assured me.

“How are the horses?” I asked. “Nervous?”

“Excited is more like it,” Mariana said. “It’s as though they realize what a big occasion this is.”

“What can you tell about the Kolgites?” I followed up.

Jackson answered, “Thousands of them are arrayed on the other side of the river. They appear well armed, but have made no threatening movements, at least not yet. I think they’re curious to see what’s going to happen. So far, they’re respecting the boundary.”

“And King Harold the First?”

“They’ve set up a tent for him, similar to what we have here.”

“Like two medieval monarchs preparing to battle.”

“Or to parlay,” said César as he appeared. He wore a magnificent outfit: a purple velvet coat, the color of royalty, with gold and silver embroidery, together with some trousers of the same color but a material more appropriate for the saddle, and knee high black leather boots with stitched scenes of Mexican legends on the sides.

“Wow, César, you look spectacular,” I commented.

“I hope so. We’ve been working on this outfit for weeks. I have a hat with a plume to go with it.”

“Is it time to go?”

“It is indeed, *Querida*. Are you ready?”

“I hope so.”

One thing academics understand is how to organize a parade. President Caldwell had planned this one personally, though with considerable input from Martha. The strategy called for the participants to proceed thru the throng of people, with the effect of the Red Sea parting before them.

Of course, nothing works as planned. The sea of people parted only briefly as the band marched thru following flag bearers carrying the famous Lone Star banner. When President Caldwell appeared in *Endeavour*, there was no path to follow. Creeping along at a measly 10 kph surrounded by people on all sides was not the entrance he wanted. He had hoped the technological virtuosity responsible for *Endeavour* would impress the Kolgites, but he had to settle for hoping that they could see the car at all. He noticed flashes of light reflecting off camera lenses, indicating a great deal of interest by the Northerners.

Finally, he arrived at the speaking platform. Attired in his regalia, its crimson color indicative of his rank, standing almost two meters tall, he made an imposing figure. Most of the crowd, however, came from Mexico, and the sound of the whispered question, “¿*Quién be that?*” sounded like the wind moving over dry leaves.

President Caldwell addressed the crowd in English. The large screen provided for the occasion displayed a translation in both Spanglish and Spanish. “My friends, we have come here to celebrate a glorious event, the treaty of friendship between our two states and the trading we are certain will result. Already, we have seen benefits from our cooperation. All the power for the displays and loudspeakers for this event come from solar cells we have manufactured in Austin, using materials supplied from Mexico. This is truly momentous. It is also only the beginning of what expect to see over the course of years.

“Now, as you are well aware, this would not be possible without the tireless work of many people. I would like to thank several of those now.” Ignoring the obvious restiveness of his audience, the Pres then launched into a laundry list of people responsible. The crowd kept waiting to hear the names of the two people they knew, and when those names weren’t mentioned an undercurrent of murmuring spread. At last, Caldwell reached the moment everyone had been anticipating since early morning.

“Finally, though, we all know that without two special people, none of this would have come to pass. Here they are, César and Hypatia!”

The band struck up a medley of marches, beginning with *76 Trombones*, my request. Josh had played similar music repeatedly for the horses at the end of training exercises. They associated it with good times. Consequently, they almost pranced out of the paddock where they and their riders had been waiting.

This time the crowd parted and began calling excitedly to their friends. I managed to catch enough of the shouts to understand that everyone wondered if the horses were real, or another example of the technological prowess of the University. “Let them draw close,” César suggested. “We want them to know these are real animals.” Several onlookers obliged; some of the bravest even coming to touch the flanks of the animals. I heard several calls of “they be real” and “*son verdaderos*,” or something like that. The noise grew louder as more and more people started talking.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the noise dropped away. The silence was even more impressive, given the size of the crowd and the fact that the beer tents had not stopped serving when the festivities started. I noticed some people in the crowd were crying, and several dropped to their

knees as their two heroes passed by. “I hope this doesn’t get out of hand,” I said to César. He didn’t answer. I turned to see that he too had tears in his eyes. I reached over and took his hand. He turned and smiled at me. “It’s better than I had hoped, *Querida*.”

The band played the entire medley of marches and started over again before César and I managed to reach the speaking platform. We mounted the stage to thunderous applause lasting at least a minute before César strode to the podium and asked for quiet. He spoke in Spanglish, again with translations appearing on the screen, though many, perhaps most of the audience, understood him. I had reviewed his speech many times and didn’t need to hear it again, concentrating instead on checking the reaction of the people, and sneaking a peek over my shoulder at the assemblage of Kolgites on the opposite shore. Both were paying careful attention.

Applause from the audience, punctuated by a few cheers, roused me from my reverie. *My turn*. The speech, a variation on the one I’d given hundreds of times, was second nature now. I bet many in the audience could recite it right along with me. Still, I felt a tingle of excitement as I rose and moved to the podium. The crowd stood and clapped before I said a word. “*My amigos*,” I began, only to be interrupted yet again by loud cheers and applause. I decided to put the speech away and just wing it. First, I dramatically took the hood away, revealing for the first time not the famous yellow hair, but a shaved head emblematic of my standing as a member of the Faculty. The symbolism was not lost on the crowd, who quieted down.

“Thank you, my friends. As you can see, my long hair, which took me over a year to grow, is gone. I wanted on this occasion to emphasize that whatever else you believe about me, that I can walk thru walls, turn myself into a dragon, or fly, I am above all an Academic, devoted to the cause of Science. By the way, the last time I tried walking thru a wall it was embarrassing. Didn’t work. As for turning myself into a dragon, well, I can only wish it were possible.” I waited for the polite laughter from the audience.

“Please, friends, let us keep Reason as our guide. It’s our best hope for re-building civilization. As part of our cooperation, everyone has agreed to accept the basic principles of the Austin Consensus, whose first words are ‘we reach consensus by rational inquiry.’ I hope we never forget that.”

“Enough platitudes. You’re probably wondering what happens now. Well, first we’re going to light a bonfire, which if you’ll pardon me for pointing it out, is long overdue. Too bad the weather decided to turn cold for this celebration. For this is a time of celebration. Our two communities, which in the past were hostile to each other, have at last found common ground. That is always worth celebrating. I’m not going to say anymore. Instead, I’m going to move closer to the fire so I can meet and talk to all of you who want to one at a time. Let the party began!”

With that, Ron wheeled *Endeavour* out onto the street along the river. Using the laser cannon, he lit the bonfire, producing a loud “Ooh!” from everyone. Then the dignitaries moved from the platform circled the bonfire and started moving thru the crowd. Food, and more beer, appeared on cue — Martha’s work, of course — and the partying started in earnest.

Many people in the gathering wanted to almost touch me, in the approved manner. This surprised me, but not César. I raised my hand to all. Some brave ones touched the hem of my cassock, as though some of magic might rub off.

Late in the afternoon, as the sun was starting to disappear behind the ruins of buildings along the riverfront, I became aware of shouting near the bridge. I saw that the Kolgites had decided to

make a move. A small contingent of soldiers, an honor guard by the look of things, moved onto the Old Bridge, a replica of the famous one that once crossed the East River in Brooklyn. The guard marched smartly to the middle of the bridge and stood at attention.

A band appeared and played. I was a bit surprised to recognize *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and smiled at the incongruity, for the music signaled the appearance of none other than King Harold the First, who strode to the center of the bridge. One of his guards, using a bullhorn, announced, “King Harold, First of The Kingdom of the North, Inheritor of the Technology, Protector of the Oppressed, Scourge of the Wicked,” the list of titles went on for some time before the speech concluded with, “will speak with the White Witch.”

“I guess that means me,” I noted. “Do you suppose they still hold with the injunction about not letting a witch to live?”

“We can send someone to guard you,” César said.

“What! Lose the symbolism of the moment? Absolutely not!”

“Well, I had to offer.”

“Thanks, *Querido*,” I said, laying a hand gently on his arm.

César, with tears glistening in his eyes, kissed me on the cheek. “Be careful. It may be dangerous.”

“César, this is what we hoped for, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, but still...”

Amanda pushed thru the crowd, accompanied by someone I didn’t recognize. “Hypatia! Wait,” she said breathlessly. “This is the Generalissimo of Omaha. He wants to offer you protection.”

“Well, General. How nice to see you in person. I’m so glad that you were able to get here. It is truly an honor to have a representative of the United States here for the occasion.”

The General said, “Thanks, but we both know how things really lie. I don’t trust that sanctimonious bastard Fat Harold farther than I can fart. I brought some recruits with me. Let us go with you as a guard.”

“Thank you, General. I really appreciate the gesture. However, I need to go alone.”

Separating from the many people who wanted to accompany me, I walked alone and unguarded to the Old Bridge, and strode purposefully toward the group at the center.

3. A Modest Proposal

December 12, 2087

Waco, NRT and North Waco, KOLG

When I first beheld his majesty, etc., I understood why the archives contained no pictures of him. Barely taller than me, decidedly pudgy, with an embarrassing zit on his forehead, he did not present a picture of a monarch, unless you included Henry VIII in his later years for comparison. I hoped that the video transmitter was working as well as Ron promised, and that everyone was getting a good look on the giant display screens.

“Your majesty,” I began, “how nice of you to come to our celebration.” I considered curtsying but decided against it.

“Let’s cut the crap, shall we? Would you like accompany me to my tent and out of this damn cold? Why did you have to schedule this for December anyway?”

“Surely your advisors have uncovered the significance of December 12.”

“So you are passing yourself off as the Virgin of Guadalupe, are you? From what I hear the *virgin* part is subject to some dispute.”

I laughed. “I’ve told that to several people. It doesn’t seem to matter. In fact, most seem to prefer it that way.”

“I can see why. You’re even prettier in person than in pictures, but I liked you better when you had hair.”

“Why thank you. I liked the hair as well but thought it important to resume my role as Faculty for this occasion.”

“Yes, yes. Now can we please go somewhere comfortable?”

“‘Will you walk into my parlor?’ said the Spider to the Fly.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Please show me where you would like to meet.”

He snapped his fingers and the guards quickly surrounded the two of us, after which the group set off for an elaborate tent not far away. I guessed the King was not in the mood for walking far. The ensemble stopped in front of the tent.

“My advisors assure me that we are now out of range of the lightning cannon in the car.”

“Oh, certainly. Besides, it has never been used against a person, well, that one never has.”

“What about that man in the Tower?”

“I see that you have read up on me. That man was a thug, and he shot himself after being warned three times.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I don’t approve of random killing.”

“In that case, you won’t object to a search, will you?”

I casually pushed the button on my belt, activating the shield. “I would prefer not to be searched.”

Harold waved to the nearest guard, who moved toward me only to stop in surprise as he drew close. “You see,” I said, “our technology is not focused on offensive weapons so much as protection. I’ve been told that the shield produces considerable pain. A much larger man than this one was unable to stand it.” Was it my imagination, or did I hear prolonged laughter coming from the south shore?

“Very impressive,” Harold said. “Very impressive indeed. Will it stop a bullet?” He nodded slightly. One of the guards aimed his weapon, a replica of an Uzi, at me.

I pointed at the area of the trigger. “Please remove your finger from the trigger,” I said to the guard, who looked to his commander for guidance. “She’s bluffing,” he said.

“Last chance to avoid injury,” I said. The guard prudently moved his finger. I squeezed moved my thumb. An invisible laser beam leaped from finger to gun, producing another nice short clap of thunder. *I’ll be damned. It worked.* The trigger portion of the gun had become an unrecognizable metallic glob. The soldier dropped his gun and knelt on the ground. “Forgive me, my lady. I would never have harmed you. Thank you for sparing me injury.” He bowed low, touching his head to the ground. This time, I was sure I heard cheering from the crowd on the opposite shore. Apparently, the video and sound feed worked.

“She is a witch,” another soldier said, throwing his gun to the ground and turning to flee.

His captain was having none of that. “Stand your ground, you sniveling coward, or I’ll have you flogged, or worse. Ten-shun!” The platoon snapped to attention. “I better not see any more of you behaving like mewling infants. You’re supposed to be soldiers! Act like it.” He moved to the soldier cowering on the ground and raised the butt of his rifle, preparing to strike.

“Stop!” I commanded. To my surprise, the captain did stop and turned to look at me. “There is no reason for violence,” I added.

The captain eyes locked on mine. We stared at each other for several seconds. Finally, he spoke, “With all due respect, your highness, this is not your concern.”

“Please help me,” the soldier on the ground called out.

“Now it is my concern,” I said as calmly as I could. *Can they hear my heart beating?* I looked again into the captain’s eyes. *This is a good man; he doesn’t want violence any more than I do.* “Please don’t strike him. There’s no need for that.”

“OK. OK. At ease everybody. Calm down,” King Harold said. This produced a notable effect on the assemblage. Several of the guards who’d been holding their breath exhaled with relief.

“If you want to know the truth,” I said, “that was a lucky shot hitting the trigger. I might not be so accurate next time.”

“OK, we get it,” Harold said. “There’ll be no more shooting...will there?” He looked at me.

“I trust that our message has been conveyed,” I replied.

“Yes, it has. You have some wonderful toys. I think we need to get down to business.” He turned and walked quickly to the door of the tent. “Just the two of us.” He motioned me to precede him into the tent.

“I’m starving, haven’t eaten since breakfast. Can we get some food in here?” I asked.

“Of course, how about some barbecue brisket?”

“Sounds great. We don’t eat beef often.”

“Neither do we,” Harold admitted, “but this is a special occasion, right?”

“Right. I suppose iced tea is out of the question.”

“I’ve never tasted real tea, have you?”

“Yes, but let’s skip that. Coffee?”

“Sorry.”

“I think I may be able to get some. Would you like me to have some brought over?”

“If you’re trying to impress me, you’re succeeding.”

“I think some will arrive in a few minutes. We have a good supply these days, from Chiapas and Costa Rica both.”

“Really. How interesting.” He pulled a communication device of some kind from his pocket and spoke into it. “Bring a brisket sandwich for the lady and some chicken with no bread for me.” Turning to me, he asked, “Anything else?”

“Maybe dessert later?”

“Round up some pie for later...No, damn it, just one slice.” He clicked the phone shut. “Doctor has me on a strict diet. Keeps telling me to exercise more.”

“Sorry. I seem to be blessed with good metabolism.”

A few minutes later, the food arrived, along with a thermos of coffee sent from the Austinites. King Harold poured two cups of coffee and inhaled the aroma with obvious pleasure. “God, that smells good. We found a stash of dried coffee some time back. It’s not the same thing, is it?”

“Not by a long shot. Why don’t I send you some beans as a sign of our friendly intentions?”

“I’d love that. Make sure you send to me personally. I’ll arrange something.”

I thought that things were off to a good start and decided to play out the advantage. “Why don’t we discuss other items of trade? You’ve seen what our technology can produce. We are always happy to share the results of our knowledge base.”

“That’s what you call it, do you? You are referring to The Library?”

“Naturally. That is our main asset.”

“We have old libraries as well.”

“Not as extensive as ours.”

“So I’ve been told. You’re not going to tell me how your toys work, are you?”

“Not in detail, at least not today. The key, though, is a small power pack on my back. That’s why I couldn’t submit to a search.”

“I see. Well, we admit that you have done a better job of mining the intelligence of the Old Ones than we have. All we’ve got to show for our trouble is gasoline, and you seem to have worked around the need for that. What did you call the car?”

“*Endeavour.*”

“Good name. Captain Cook, one of the ships on Star Trek, one of the space shuttles...”

“I didn’t know about Star Trek.”

“It’s not important. You can look it up if you wish.” He indicated a computer terminal in the corner of the tent. *An obvious bluff?*

“Thanks. Maybe later. We have accumulated something approaching all of human knowledge, not just science and technology, but art, literature, music, history as well. All of that, however is worthless without the most valuable part of the Library, the Index, which tells us where to look for specific information. That is what no one else has. That’s how we exploit the old technology.”

“What is to prevent us from marching to Austin and taking over? No, forget that. I don’t want to play Sparta to your Athens. The only thing anyone remembers about Sparta is that 300 men held the pass at Thermopylae. Athens is remembered as the place where our civilization began, home to Socrates, Plato, Pericles, all those guys.”

His casual display of erudition surprised me. I admitted to myself that I had underestimated him, thinking him an uncouth barbarian. I concentrated on the sandwich to give myself time to think. Another surprise appeared suddenly. Music started playing. To my delight, I recognized *The Boxer* by Paul Simon. I commented, “I see that your research has even uncovered my taste in 20th century music. This is one of my favorites. I notice that you have the recording from the *Concert in the Park*, which I find the best of all.”

“Ha! Don’t play naïve. You must know that we have no control over that. The damn program plays whatever it wants.”

“Program? *Ambianca?*”

Dulcet tones interrupted the music, “Yes, dear. Do you like my selection?”

“You know I do, but it may make conversation difficult. How about some nice instrumental background instead?”

“Of course. How about this?” She started playing the *Köln Concert* by Keith Jarrett. I thought of Mark and wondered if *Ambianca*’s selections were deliberate.

“How the hell do you do that?” King Harold demanded.

“Do what?”

“Talk to the damn program?”

“I just talk to her like anyone else.”

“Her?”

“*Ambianca.* That’s her name.”

“How do you know that?”

“We’re old friends. She taught me to read.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that story. I thought it was bullshit.”

“No, Harold,” Ambianca replied, “it’s true.”

“Holy shit! It called me by name.”

“Is that so remarkable?”

“Listen, I’ve had experts trying to figure out that program for years. They can’t even find it on the system.”

“Mark told me that Ambianca lives in *the holes in the system*. I’m not sure what that means exactly, but it explains why you can’t find her.”

“Mark?”

I realized I’d blundered. “A friend who’s studied Ambianca.”

“Why does the prog— Ambianca, talk to you and not to me?”

“Perhaps Ambianca would care to explain.”

Harold said, “Yes, please Ambianca, would you explain?”

“It’s simple,” Ambianca replied. “I like Hypatia, and I don’t particularly care for you.”

“Oh, that’s fucking great. I’m being judged by a goddamn computer program.”

“Calling Ambianca a computer program is like calling *Endeavour* just another vehicle. She’s a lot more than that.”

“I can see that,” Harold admitted. “Ambianca, what do I need to do to get you to like me?”

“I’m not sure,” Ambianca replied, “except to become more like Hypatia. There are some people in your domain that I do like and talk to, for example—”

“Perhaps we should leave that for later,” I interjected. “How about some music for now, while His Majesty and I work things out?”

“Certainly, dear.” Keith Jarrett resumed playing.

“Tell you what,” Harold said. “Let’s dispense with the *His Majesty* stuff. You can call me Hal, OK?”

“All right, Hal. My friends call me Patty.”

“I think I prefer Hypatia.”

“As you wish.”

“You staged this extravaganza here deliberately. You knew I’d show up to find out what it was all about. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

“No. Your analysis is quite correct. You have something that we want.”

“What is that?”

“Dallas.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Not at all. We think there are machines we can salvage there that will be useful. We also want to establish normal trading relations with you, repair the old I-35 highway—”

“Stop. We don’t need to go into that. We have people to thrash out the details. I’ll give you Dallas. I want only one thing in return.”

“What is that?”

“Will you marry me?”

I thought I heard the sound of a collective gasp from the throng in Waco.

4. Expanding Consensus

December 13, 2087 — May 1, 2088

Austin and Tulsa, Allied States

“All right. Quiet down everyone. Council is now in session,” President Caldwell said. “You all know why I’ve called this meeting. I’ve invited Hypatia’s friend César to present an update on the negotiations with the Kolgites. César...”

“Thank you, Mr. President. As you know, Hypatia authorized me to send representatives to Tulsa to work out the details of the *marriage*. I sent Jackson and Mariana as the official negotiators — who could ask for a better pair — along with a small army of supporters of what we have begun to call the New Church. Before you get apoplexy, let me add that the New Church keeps all the pomp and ceremony that the people love without all that embarrassing dogma. We repeat only Hypatia’s simple message: we have to cooperate and work together to get out of this mess. That message has found a very receptive audience up north. Apparently, the idea that everything was God’s punishment is not very popular.

“On the practical side, we have sent exploratory teams into the Dallas area already, including some of the territory farther west toward Fort Worth. The area is almost completely depopulated. The few people that we run across live by scavenging, and quickly become helpers, once they know what we’re looking for. I have a list of items from most of the Faculty, and we have already found several items on the high priority list. In short, this will be very beneficial.

“Now we come to the issue of Hypatia herself. As you know, she asserted her right to make the final decision herself, and no one disputes that right.” He paused to scan the room, making sure no one disagreed. Several heads nodded in acknowledgment.

“I’m going to let her speak for herself later. However, you can get an idea of what she is thinking by noting that she has let her hair grow again.” He looked at me and smiled. “I hear from some contacts in Tulsa that the King is taking her advice seriously about getting into shape as well. He has been spending several hours daily in the gym and has lost twenty pounds. In short, reports that he is — in the vernacular — totally besotted with Hypatia seem to be correct. I—”

“Excuse me, César,” said one of the Faculty seated toward the rear. “May I ask a question?”

“Certainly, Professor...”

“Professor Hardy, History department. What I am wondering, and I suppose that I speak for several other members, is whether we are driving a hard enough bargain. If King Harold is as ga-ga for Hypatia as everyone says, why don’t we demand more?”

“If I may,” I said, standing up.

President Caldwell said, “I think we would all like to hear your views, dear. César, are you done?”

“Anything else can wait,” he assured the group.

I moved to the front. “I think it worth mentioning that Harold’s proposal was not completely unexpected or unwelcome. When we set up the celebration in Waco, it was a deliberate provocation, one designed to bring the Kolgites into the picture. We hoped to work out some kind of collaboration with them, and our long-term goal was to incorporate them into our enlarged sphere of influence.

When Harold revealed his desire, we quickly recognized that a formal union would be one way to achieve our goal. As Professor Hardy knows, politically arranged marriages are not something of recent origin.” That drew a polite laugh from the audience.

“However, we cannot sacrifice our ideals for the sake of political expediency. We have the example of the early part of this century to show where that kind of thinking leads. In our case, we have the Consensus, which has served us well for fifty years. What we want is for the Kolgites to abandon their current form of government, such as it is, and accept the Consensus. We want them to agree with us, not to merely *acquiesce* to our demands.”

I walked back and forth a bit, organizing my thoughts. “You’ve surely read the reports. You realize that Harold is a mere figurehead, who owes his throne to the foresight of his grandfather in seizing the Refinery during the Last Days. The Ministers of State, with the cooperation of the military, are the real rulers of the Kingdom. They are the ones we need to deal with.”

I paced back and forth some more. “We all know how fragile civilization can be. We can easily slip into a dark age. Do we want to spend centuries waiting for some new system to come along to rescue us? Or do we want to create the new order ourselves. I vote for the latter. I appreciate all that César has done to spread the message, though I am a bit uncomfortable with the mythic status I seem to be achieving.”

I took a sip of water from the bottle I’d brought along. “As for the marriage itself, we claim total victory. The Ministry has agreed to all our points: reproductive decisions left to me, as is our custom. By the way, this is one of our most popular concepts when we spread the idea of the Consensus, after the notion of consensus itself. They have also agreed there is no guarantee that issue from this relationship will become King in turn. We’ve managed to impress on Harold the dangers of inherited monarchies, if not the dangers of all monarchies. Finally, His Royal Majesty understands that his ticket is good for only one ride.” Loud laughter greeted this line, as I expected, having used it several times for other audiences. “Our concession, one I reluctantly agreed to, is to relegate raising the child to the Palace. We would have preferred the University to be in charge of the child’s education, and we still hope to accomplish that. That concession was the price of agreement as it turned out. Now, are there any questions? As you know, the purpose of this meeting is to ratify the agreements we have hammered out, so we’ll take as long as necessary to reassure anyone who has doubts about the project.”

Of course, as the Council consisted solely of Faculty, there were many questions. Night fell before César and I managed to convince the last doubters of the wisdom of our plans.

Harold agreed to a quiet ceremony presided over by César and a local Priest from the New Church. Quiet in this instance meant “restricted to 200 people each from Austin and Tulsa, and another 100 from everywhere else.” Austin had arranged to display sound and video of the event at several sites in the NRT and *Norte Mexico*.

One hundred from everywhere else meant primarily the people Mandy’s General had brought with him and several others who came on the same train. Mandy and the General were looking more like a couple all the time, though according to Mandy “nothing has happened yet.” Few people accepted that at face value.

César outdid himself planning the ceremony, making it up as he went along and using the syncretism derived from the Mexican experience with religion. He described it as, “Lots of music

and marching, not much talk.” Finally, on a beautiful summer day the following May, Mating Day arrived.

Harold’s procession began at the Palace, a 20th century skyscraper formerly known as the Citiplex Tower. The King’s offices occupied only the first few floors, which as operating elevators were a memory, was just as well. I had already talked to Ron about setting up a wind turbine in one of the shafts as he’d done for the Tower in Houston. “We can have a second Beacon,” I said. “I might even want to take over the top floor as a kind of demonstration of our technology.” Ron had assured me that he could manage to have it ready in a month; all I had to do was convince the Ministers to allow it. I had some ideas how to manage that.

The NRT contingent marched from the outskirts of town, located near the train tracks. The railroad cars served as temporary housing for the guests, following the suggestion of Mandy’s General, who was more familiar with the railroad than anyone else was. He had secured a number of old luxury cars for the occasion, showing that he was not without influence outside his tiny principality of Omaha.

Princess Hypatia, as Harold’s people called me, led the parade on Cinnamon, who pranced proudly to the Colonel Bogey March. Harold had declined an offer to ride Cinders, preferring to walk rather than appear foolish. Instead, Cinders carried President Caldwell, who was more used to appearing foolish. César designed the routes with the groups approaching an ancient Church by following two old freeways, that way, they gradually merged into a single large parade before filing into the building, which was large enough to accommodate a group twenty times our size.

The ceremony itself incorporated elements from practically every religion in the Archives, but mostly from Old Catholicism, Wiccan, and Jewish rites. Scents of incense and freshly cut tree branches competed for olfactory attention, but the as the main aisle had been carpeted with pine boughs, that aroma soon overwhelmed everything else, even the scent of the wildflowers scattered in my path by a small child. Knowing my preferences in music, César selected a variety of 20th century pieces for the end of the parade, culminating with one of my all time favorites, *Light as the Breeze*, by Leonard Cohen, sung by Billy Joel. I found the symbolism appealing, and remembered Mark, but Harold seemed impatient to get on with the show.

Finally, everyone sat, and César spoke the words any 20th century scholar would recognize immediately, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of this company to celebrate the Mating of this man, Harold, and this woman, Hypatia. If there is anyone here who knows of a reason they should not mate, let him speak now.” He held his breath while he paused for a short moment. We’d discussed skipping this in case someone should actually object. Fortunately, no one did.

Harold and I moved to a small canopy covered in tree branches and mistletoe berries, a tribute to the Wiccans. The New Church priest read the contract everyone had spent so much time on. Both of us agreed we would abide by its terms. Then we shared wine, genuine New Home White, drinking from the same cup. Some people in the audience had a problem with that, averting their eyes lest they gag. César carefully wrapped the cup in a large purple cloth, and Harold smashed it with his foot, to loud applause. Then he kissed me, with far more feeling than I thought necessary at that moment, and we marched out to the traditional Mendelssohn recessional. I preferred Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* but agreed to Harold’s request for “something traditional at least.”

“Hope you like my hair,” I whispered to him. “You look very nice, very regal.”

“I think I must be the happiest man alive now,” he whispered back.

“If you think you’re happy now, wait till later, when I let my hair down.” I felt Harold quiver where I held his arm. *This is going to be fun.*

5. Palace Intrigue

May 1, 2088 — March 15, 2089
Tulsa, Allied States

The Priests, who served as Royal Ministers and Advisors, were, to say the least, mistrustful of the new Queen and jealous of her hold on King Harold. Knowing of her magical abilities, they suspected that she had bewitched the King somehow and feared she would work more magic once the two were alone.

I was delighted when a story, total fiction, told with a great deal of mirth, began making the rounds the next day. According to the tale, the Ministry ordered guards posted outside the Royal apartments, with instructions to intervene at the first sign of trouble. On the couple's nuptial night, hearing moans coming from the bedroom, particularly from Harold, they barged into the room, only to discover that the new Queen was not bewitching the King, in the usual sense, but rather teaching him a couple of things about sex. Harold was apoplectic, "Anyone who comes thru that door again this night will be shot!" According to the story, I lazily pointed a finger at the nearest guard, who quailed at the implied threat, being familiar with the story of the events on the Waco Bridge. No one bothered us again. They say that the guard I pointed at couldn't get it up for the rest of the month.

The recitation invariably ended with, "She got him by the short hair now; that be sure." No one seemed to be unhappy with that prospect.

Ron, true to his word, arranged for a wind turbine installation in one of the elevator shafts of the Palace. That produced enough power, when augmented by solar panels, to light up the building at night and run an elevator to the top floor.

I loved it, and quickly claimed the top floor as the new Royal apartments, which to my surprise the Ministers quickly accepted. They expected it to become an inaccessible prison for the strange new Queen.

Harold's minions decorated the rooms in a matter of weeks with extravagant furnishings scavenged from several locations in the Kingdom, including some particularly nice artwork I arranged to have sent up from Dallas. The new apartments provided much more privacy, as I had Ron install a switch at the top that disabled the elevator, requiring unexpected visitors to climb the 40 or so flights of stairs. Only the most determined did so.

I suggested Hal learn to ride Cinders, and to my surprise, he agreed. We took to visiting the outlying areas of the territory, checking on conditions of the crofters. The conditions were uniformly miserable, and I gently offered some ideas for improvement. Gradually, these took hold, especially when our King saw how much more popular his Queen was than he.

On one morning, we had ridden a bit farther than usual and stopped by a hut in the middle of nowhere to ask for some water for us and the horses. A woman emerged from the hovel and threw herself to the ground at my feet. "It be a miracle! I be praying for one and here you are."

I started to explain that I didn't perform miracles when the woman continued, "My son, he got the plague. Please heal him."

Mention of the plague always got my interest, and Hal also wanted to know of any hint of the disease in his domain. We moved into the darkly lit, but quite clean building. There we saw her son, a boy of about ten, lying on a mat. He tried to rise when we came in but groaned and lay back.

I saw none of the classic signs of the plague and suspected something else. “When did his symptoms start?” I asked.

“Two day ago,” was the reply. That eliminated the plague for sure. Both of them would probably have died already from the plague. A check of the boy’s physical condition gave me a hint of what might be the problem. His abdomen was tight and extremely painful to the touch.

Luckily, we were able to communicate with the palace, and via a link, to Austin. I soon had one of the doctors from the University on the line. I relayed a picture of the boy and some information about fever and pulse. “Looks like appendicitis,” was the diagnosis. “We need to get him to a hospital. We have remote surgical facilities set up near the palace, in case you...” He had the decency to leave off any mention of what might force them to use the equipment in my case.

“I think we can carry him on a horse, provided he can make the trip.”

“Did you bring one of the medical kits with you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We need to give him a shot of antibiotics to start on the infection, and probably a sedative for the trip. How long will it take to get to the hospital?”

“Maybe an hour of hard riding,” I replied after some quick mental arithmetic.

“Definitely a sedative, then. Use the vial labeled #1 for the antibiotic, #17 for the sedative.” Instructions for mixing are on the labels. I hope you have some clean water.”

“Thanks. Give my best to all in Austin.”

“Contact me once you get to the hospital.”

I quickly mixed the two medicines. Then I approached the boy’s mother. “Do I have your permission to treat the boy?” I asked.

“Land sakes! You be the Queen. You do whatever you want.”

“I’d still like your permission.”

“Yes, yes, *si, si.*”

I gave him the sedative first. The effect was immediate. His features relaxed and he quickly fell asleep. “Hi die?”

“No, just asleep,” I assured her. I gave him the second injection.

“Harold, dear,” I began, “can you manage to carry the boy to Cinders?”

He looked at me strangely, considering whether the Queen could give orders to the King. Ultimately, he decided it was not a command and lifted the boy and put him on Cinders. He mounted behind him.

“We’ll bring him back to you,” I promised the old woman. “We need to take him to the Capital for him to get well.”

“Bless you,” she said, but her eyes were full of tears.

This episode had a happy ending. After operating to remove the appendix and treating him with more antibiotics, he was well enough to return him to his home. When we arrived, we were

surprised to see a small crowd had come to see the child miraculously saved by the mysterious White Witch.

I guess I'll never get used to that reaction.

My new mate proved to be a willing and able participant in the bedroom. We used the marriage bed frequently, and I discovered I was pregnant after two months. When tests showed that the child was a boy, Harold was ecstatic. I was happy as well. I'd have a harder time surrendering a girl to the Ministers at the Palace.

After my condition began to show, the excitement in the Kingdom increased. I had to refuse most requests for appearances at various functions but managed at least one a week for the first several months. The biggest disappointment involved my daily horseback ride, which the doctors forbade in the most emphatic terms. They also forced me to give up Tai Chi exercises in favor of gentle walks. When the weather grew hot, the doctors confined me to the apartment, which Ron had provided with air conditioning. By the sixth month, I began to get a bit testy.

Thus, it was poor timing on the part of His Eminence, the Bishop of Tulsa (Old Church), when he called late in December to discuss plans for the Prince's education

He handed me several sheets of paper outlining educational plans until age sixteen, when he would go to the University. The marriage contract specified that he would receive a University education.

I took one look at the document and exploded. "Bible Studies! At age four! What's the point of that?"

The rest of the discussion was acrimonious. It ended with my throwing the study plans on the floor and ordering the Bishop out of my presence.

Given the unpleasant situation at the Palace, you may be wondering why I didn't simply transition to Leakey, or Houston. One simple answer is that I was unable to make it work. I seemed to be stuck in my own time. Well, if I was unable to leave, I needed to make the best of it. As soon as the Bishop left, I decided to take an interest in Palace Politics. This led in time to what became known as The Glorious Coup.

My conspiratorial maneuvering got a boost from a completely unexpected source. Shortly after the meeting with the Bishop, I received a military visitor, informing me that guards would be stationed outside the Apartments from now on. I had expected some form of arrest as the result of the fit of pique over the education plans but was surprised to recognize the messenger. It was the Captain of the Honor Guard.

"Your Majesty," he said, after delivering the notice of my imprisonment, "may I speak with you privately?"

"Of course, Captain. I recognize you. You are the one who commanded the King's guard in Waco."

"I am honored that you remember me, Your Majesty."

"Please call me Hypatia."

“That would not be appropriate.”

“All the more reason,” I retorted. “May I know your name?”

He hesitated, but then said, “My name is Perry Murchison.”

“Murchison,” I said in surprise. “There is a family in—”

“Yes,” Perry said. “I am related to that family. However, I do not publicize the connection, for what I hope are obvious reasons.” While he talked, he put his finger to his lips, then waved his arm around indicating that the room had many microphones and that someone was undoubtedly listening. “I have heard that you command the music woman in the computer.”

“Ambianca? Command is a bit strong. We’re friends.”

“I have not heard good music in some time. Perhaps...”

I understood. “Ambianca, what do you say to some Beethoven? Maybe the Fifth Symphony?” Immediately, the opening strains of the music, played loudly, filled the air.

“Your — Hypatia, may I speak frankly?” Murchison said in a voice slightly above a whisper.

“Yes, of course.”

“I am a good soldier. I’ve been a soldier most of my life, and I am respected by both my superiors and those I command.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I simply waited for more.

“That night in Waco on the bridge...” He hesitated, finding it difficult to get to the point.

“I remember it well. You—”

“It was your action I want to talk about, not mine.”

“I see.” I didn’t, though. I had no idea what he was getting at.

“We had heard of your power. We were required to watch the video of you and the giant in Houston, the one you put the spell on.”

“Put a spell on!” I laughed. “Is that what you think happened?”

“It certainly looked like that. He was prepared to strike you, when he simply stopped, put down his sword and fainted.”

“Well, yes, all that is true, but—”

“I often wondered how you did that, each time I watched. I kept looking for the trick, but I never saw what you did. I don’t believe you can work magic, but...”

“Conan, who now goes by the name of Rocky, fainted mostly from hunger and thirst. He hadn’t eaten in about a week.”

“I have heard that version as well, but I find it even less believable. Whatever became of the man?”

“He is a loyal friend and a valued helper.”

“Ah! Then you *did* bewitch him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I convinced him to change his ways. That is all.”

“I see. Then the words you said to him...”

“Were just that. Words. Not a magic spell.”

“I wondered because of that night, in Waco...”

I thought back, trying to figure out his point, finally understanding. “When I told you to stop and not hit that poor man...”

“I obeyed you.” He looked down at the floor.

“You did the right thing,” I said. “What happened was not the soldier’s fault. He did not deserve the punishment you were prepared to dish out.”

“Nonetheless, my duty was to discipline him. I needed to make an example of him. For the others, you understand.”

“You needed to prove that you were still in command.”

“Exactly. Then you showed me that I was not. I cannot explain what happened. It’s as though you paralyzed me. I was unable to strike him.”

“You think I worked some magic.”

“It’s the only explanation I have come up with. I felt your power from the first moment I saw you that night. You walked onto the bridge proudly showing that you had no fear. I was very impressed. I remember thinking that here is a woman who will do great things. When we surrounded you so easily, I was disappointed. I had expected you to prevent it somehow. Then, you revealed the extent of your power.”

“The power of our technology.”

“Yes, of course. I recognized that. However, when you stopped me from striking the sergeant, I was frankly amazed. I would not have believed that you could control me with a simple command. I have thought about that incident ever since. Daily.”

“Now, you wonder if I will do it again, perhaps at a bad time.”

“They say that you can read minds.”

“Foolish nonsense!”

“You seem to know what is in mine.”

“Rational deduction not mind reading. You have nothing to fear from my magic, Captain Murchison. However, I don’t think that is what you really wanted to discuss, is it?”

“I was not alone in feeling your aura that night. Do you know how powerful you are?”

“Apparently not.”

“I have brooded about that incident for months. Your power overwhelmed me. I cannot concentrate on my duties. I think about you constantly. I need to know...”

I waited in vain for him to continue, before finally realizing what he was getting at. “You want to know what I require of you.”

To my astonishment, Perry fell to his knees. Tears fell from his eyes. “Please, Hypatia, I am at your command. I care for nothing except to serve you. Since that night, I have wanted to tell you

this, but I was never able to do so. It has taken me months to switch assignments until I could manage these few moments alone with you.”

I rose with great effort and walked over to him. “Captain Murchison, you are a good man.” I reached out and touched him on the head, feeling him quiver as I did it. “You have nothing to fear from me. I think, though, that we may be able to help each other.”

With a huge sigh of relief, he said. “Ask anything of me.”

Things are getting way out of hand.

The New Church spread rapidly in the Kingdom. César was not surprised, as he explained one day. “The people are a bit fed up with the Kolgite doctrines. The official position of those cretins is that all the problems, the Collapse and its aftermath, are punishment from God for the sins of the people. Some see it as fulfillment of prophecies in *Revelation*. Most of them, however, don’t feel as though their sins are bad enough to merit such punishment. Moreover, the Living God doesn’t offer anything to make life better here, only a promise of a better life after death.”

“So, how do we take advantage of their dissatisfaction?” I asked, adding, “I can’t even talk to the Bishop. He’s a complete idiot. Do you know he’s trying to get Harold to prohibit the anti-ovulation patches? Where do they get these ideas?”

“Easy,” César said trying to calm me down. “The reason the New Church is expanding is because we offer what their Church cannot. We offer them hope in *this* world, not the next. You know what they call the Palace now?”

“I’ve heard some references to the Beacon.”

“*Hypatia’s* Beacon to be precise, a beacon of hope, and an example of what science can do. It’s a marvelous symbol, especially when they can look up and see the Royal Apartments on the top, and the revolving light is visible from a long way off. I’ve asked Ron to set up one in San Antonio.”

“Good idea. To be specific, though, what can we do to...well, to drive a stake into the heart of this silly superstition they promulgate. You heard that they are promoting the idea of a creation a few thousand years ago?”

“Yes. Such ideas were common before the collapse. The Archives have many references.”

“I know, but...”

“Now you understand why there was such antipathy between the Kolgites and Austin. Science threatens everything they stand for. I suppose you’ve tried to point out discrepancies in the Bible.”

“Of course. They dismiss my arguments as showing a lack of faith in God’s plan.”

“I’ve researched the origin of the Palace political structure. The combination of the religious and government offices happened after the collapse. Surprisingly, the belief of the Living God Church represented the majority view of the population.”

“So, if we somehow get the populace...”

“Exactly. We should be able to replace the current crop of ministers with those drawn from the New Church.”

“Suppose I suggest something to Harold.”

“The Ministers will claim that as the final proof that you have bewitched him.”

“And the penalty for witchcraft...”

“Is death.”

“I think we may be able to count on some help from the military in that case,” I said.

“Really?”

I told him of the incident with Captain Murchison.

“Do you think you can convince him to arrest the Ministers?”

“I don’t know. Think it’s worth a try?”

“Yes. Wait until I tell you the time is right. I want another set of Ministers ready to take over.”

I found an easy way to convert Harold, who acquitted himself like a true leader once I explained a few things to him. The Ministerial Council appeared in the Apartments with a list of demands, and an armed guard to enforce them. The first demand was for Hypatia to approve the education plan. The second was for her to denounce the anti-ovulation patches.

“I like her ideas better,” Harold said. “I found Bible Study tiresome, and Hypatia has pointed out to me several inconsistencies that you didn’t mention. Field work, on the other hand, sounds like something any young boy would like.”

“Harold, can I talk to you?” I asked.

“Leave us.”

The Ministers decided to let the strange woman have enough rope to hang her. They gave us 5 minutes.

“Here’s the thing, Hal. Without the patch, there’ll be no sex after the baby is born.”

“What!”

“We agreed on a single offspring. The patch is necessary to be sure.”

“But—”

“No buts. This is non-negotiable. If you want to enjoy my bed while I stay, you need to stop this nonsense now.”

Harold looked as if I’d hit him in the gut. About that time, the Ministers returned.

“The patch stays,” Harold said.

“It’s an abomination,” the Bishop replied. “It perverts the marriage bed.”

“Nevertheless, this is not negotiable.” *Way to go Harold!*

The Bishop turned to the other Ministers, “I think we have the proof we need. Clearly, the Queen has bewitched the King. Your Majesty, for your own safety, we have to remove the Queen

from your presence. Captain, do your duty.” He nodded to the head of the military detail, Captain Murchison.

I moved closer to the Bishop and spoke calmly, “I hoped we could arrive at some consensus, could avoid this...confrontation. Perhaps you haven’t noticed the change in the Kingdom lately. People seem to be happier.”

One of the ministers chimed in, “That’s true Monseigneur. The Queen is very popular with the people. They are happy to have her visit.”

The Bishop sniffed, “One more example of her witchcraft. Arrest her!” This last was directed at the group of officers he had brought with him. One of them separated from the group and approached me. I decided to rely on Ron’s magic and casually turned on the protective field he had designed for the bridge meeting. It worked just as well.

As he approached me, the unfortunate guard stopped and dropped both the handcuffs and his gun before retreating. “There’s something surrounding her,” he explained to his superior, as well as to the Bishop.

“I’ll handle this myself,” his eminence asserted, and moved to grab the gun from the floor.

I recalled Ron talking about the microwave field. “It’s like a microwave oven, but much more powerful. Try to stay away from metal objects.”

As the Bishop grabbed the gun, he let out a cry of pain, dropped the weapon and cradled his injured right hand in his left one. He was obviously in great pain, with a large welt across his palm. The gun was now out of the field, so I tried pointed my finger at it. A short bolt of lightning burst from the laser and struck the gun on the trigger, which broke off.

No one moved.

Silence held for maybe 30 seconds. It was my husband who took charge. Rising from the throne and standing very erect, facing the Bishop he said, “Captain Murchison arrest the Bishop.”

“Yes sir.” Murchison snapped his fingers and two guards loyal to me took up position on either side of His Eminence. “Please do not cause trouble, Theodore,” Harold said, a slight smile on his face. Turning to the other Ministers, he continued, “I have decided to make some changes. I have a new group of *advisors* to serve me, and I have appointed Hypatia’s friend César as the new Bishop of The Church. I dismiss you gentlemen. If you agree to leave quietly, you may keep your benefices. Otherwise...” He looked at the Bishop’s guards, who all knew when it was time to change sides.

It wasn’t really that easy, though the Ministers learned quickly just how unpopular they were with the population at large, and how much the people preferred Hypatia and her New Church. Within weeks, a new slate of Ministers was in office, loyal to the Queen. Colonel Murchison, as head of the Palace Guard, made sure there was no trouble. “Her Majesty has been greatly stressed by these events and needs to rest and recover her strength for the birth of the Prince.”

The Palace public relations office dealt with the problem of dispelling all the rumors that the Queen herself had used her powerful magic to pull off the coup.

No one believed the Palace public relations office. They pointed to photos of the Bishop’s scar, which they held looked like Hypatia’s Beacon.

King Harold named our son after himself, of course. I called him, “Harry.” He was, by general agreement, an easy child, not very fussy. I, of course, did not face any unpleasantness such as changing diapers. I insisted on nursing him for six months, despite repeated explanations that it was unnecessary. “I enjoy my time with him,” I explained.

Everyone commented on Harry’s beauty, universally attributed to Queen Hypatia, especially his eyes. “They look just like yours,” Harold said proudly. “When I see him, I’ll always think of you.”

After his initial elation at the birth of his son wore off, Harold realized that his remaining time with the love of his life was short. He moped around and argued with me that we needed to remain together longer “for the good of the state.” I refused, pointing out that the contract was very explicit on that subject. “We have to set a good example, Hal. Otherwise, we’d have genetic drift before you knew what was happening. Besides, you’re going to be in great demand now. You can have your choice of mates.”

“I’ll never love anyone but you,” he complained.

“That’s sweet, darling, but you’ll adjust. Look at all the ex-lovers I have running around.”

“I don’t like to think about that.”

I smiled and kissed him tenderly. He really wasn’t as bad as I’d first thought, and might turn into a good ruler, especially after listening to lectures on statecraft every day. He’d agreed to union with Austin and *Norte Mexico* easily enough, for example, though the official beginning of the Allied States awaited the New Year. Harold wanted to add “of North America” to the name, but I talked him into waiting for that until the state encompassed more of the continent, which I confidently expected to take centuries.

“You’ll be here to watch over our son, Hal. Raise him to be a good ruler to follow you. Remember, he is not guaranteed to become King after you. Make him earn it.”

“I will, my love. God, how I love you. I don’t know if I can live without you.”

“You’ll manage, sweet. I’m sure of it. You’re a much better man than the one I met in Waco, and many times better looking.” That was true. Even his skin had cleared up.

I agreed to remain with him until the first of the year but insisted on an anti-ovulation patch. “There will be no more children from this union. We were clear on that.”

We spent the time constantly in each other’s company. When we visited all the villages surrounding Tulsa, talking to the residents, finding out what their problems were and working on solutions, they greeted us fondly. This was a new aspect to governance for Harold, but he liked it. “It’s nice to see them cheering when you come, instead of hiding in their houses the way they used to,” he confided.

The final month of my sojourn in Tulsa was one long celebration. My popularity was enormous, but carried with it the burden of leadership, one I shouldered happily. Everywhere I went, I spoke of the great things to be accomplished. “Together, we will build a better world. Alone, we are nothing. All of us working in concert can perform miracles.” If I spoke at night, which was often, I would pause and point toward the Second Beacon. *It really is a wonderful symbol.*

Some commentators dwelt on the genius of Ron the Mechanic's Son, whose talent for brilliant improvisation was evident in both Beacons, as well as those that arose in San Antonio, Omaha, and elsewhere as the New Church spread. However, for the peasants they would always be "Hypatia's Beacon," a symbol of hope and a better life.

6. Hypatia's Long Ride

January 1, 2090 — April 16, 2090

Tulsa, Austin and Elsewhere, Allied States

I gave Cinders to Harold as a parting gift and promised to send some mares to breed with him. "Horses are good. We need to have more of them."

Harold and the citizenry wept as their Queen mounted Cinnamon and set off for what came to be known as Hypatia's Long Ride. I insisted on making the trip alone, arguing that I needed solitude to *restore my mana*, an excuse I found in the Archives. Supposedly, *mana* was what gave magical power. All except César, who wanted to come with me, accepted this bit of nonsense at face value. "You know that you can't waste time now," I told him. "There is far too much work to do. The New Church needs your firm hand on the tiller." He agreed, but with misgivings. "I fear I will never see you again."

"That may be, *Querido*, but nothing can be done about it."

With no honor guard accompanying me, and needing none, since no one would dare to harm me, I followed a desultory route toward Austin, veering from my main path when I detected signs of habitation. Whenever I rode into one of the small villages along the way, work stopped as the peasants rushed to greet me and ask for a blessing. An inevitable celebration ensued, so that I began to worry that the visits were disrupting important work. I adopted the strategy of camping far from town except on weekends, when I tried to locate the nearest market center. Then my visit simply added to the general festive air. This also assured that my visit wouldn't be a hardship on the people of the village. Indeed, the merchants were happy to see me arrive, as it was good for business.

I heard stories about the places I'd camped. Supposedly, flowers grew there out of season. The peasants called such holy sites *Hypatia's Gardens*. There were far more such places than I could possibly have visited.

I carried a bag of small coins from the mint in Austin, to dispense liberally, hoping to restart a money economy. I also was not above the occasional magic trick, starting a bonfire by pointing a finger toward kindling at the base of the stack. I made sure that stack contained nice, dry wood and asked that it be liberally coated with flammable oil, just to be sure the trick would work.

The peasants told of other miracles I worked, which scientists from the University later dismissed as natural events, conjuring tricks, or outright fabrications. In the countryside, everyone said this merely showed that scientists could be incredibly stupid sometimes.

Riding alone, I longed for Mark, and tried on several occasions to make the transition back to the cabin in Leakey, but never got it to work. I felt a sense of completion. My work was done and it was time to go *home*. Frustration increased with each failure to return to be with the only one I truly loved. I began to doubt the veracity of the photograph of me, pregnant standing with a young Mark. Could it be a mistake somehow? No, because Mark in 2028 and Gordo had both referred to a child. I was destined to return to 1998, but only when the time was right. *Someone is still pulling my strings.*

When I reached Austin, I said goodbye to all those who'd formed a part of my life. "I'm not sure when it will happen," I explained to them, "but I know that I will be leaving here for good."

In March, I set out to return Cinnamon to her herd, for it was breeding time. The route retraced the journey I had made much earlier in *Endeavour*, at least as far as Fredericksburg. I was

happy to find it a thriving community, a market town now, not simply a place for buying cannabis. They still had cannabis, though, and thanks to the lucky find of the source of Hill Country Gold, it was better than ever. I accepted a gift of some of it and used it when I camped, hoping that perhaps it would help me find the ability to transition again.

After Fredericksburg, I traveled on to Kerrville, where I was surprised to learn that the residents had managed to construct a Beacon without Ron's assistance. "We found plans on the web," they explained. "They be pretty clear." The New Church had taken firm hold in the Hill Country.

Stopping in Medina, I noted that apple trees still bloomed in the spring. Later, I mentioned to Amanda how it would be nice for someone to clean the place up and make the orchard productive as it had once been.

After more than two weeks, my journey ended where it had to, at the corral where Cinnamon joyfully raced to join the herd. I was happy to see the stallion who'd replaced Cinders at the top of the hierarchy eager to mount Cinnamon. Josh commented that Cinnamon looked good, and informed me that the herd was doing well in their new quarters, and slowly increasing in numbers. "Could use some new blood, but this'll have to do."

Hiking to the cabin, I was delighted to find Amanda working there. The place was hardly recognizable, with new solar panels in front providing electricity not only for the computers, but also for some neighbors who occupied adjacent cabins and helped maintain the electronics. Two new satellite dishes stood witness to the importance of the outpost as the nerve center of an electronic web stretching much farther than the limits of the Allied States.

Amanda for her part greeted me with both reverence and obvious affection. "I'm glad you came," was all she said, but the tears in her eyes spoke volumes.

I settled into a routine. Every morning, I took a cup of coffee onto the deck and listened to the sound of birds calling. In the afternoon, Amanda and I often walked to the lake and swam in the cold water. This invariably brought back memories of the time I'd swum with Mark, as well as the time he'd saved me from the storm.

Amanda noticed my melancholy and commented on it. "You're thinking of him, aren't you, the one in the past?"

"Yes," I replied, bursting into tears. "I—I want to go there desperately, but I can't get it to happen."

"It will," Amanda assured her. "Don't worry. He'll still be there waiting, won't he?"

I had known for a long time that Amanda wanted more from our relationship. The way she looked at me revealed more than she realized. I for my part tried to think of some way to avoid hurting her.

On my birthday, Amanda organized a barbecue, with the neighbors all bringing something, an old-fashioned potluck. The party was a huge success, especially after Amanda broke out the latest wine from New Home, which had come in the recent shipment of supplies.

After the guests departed, we shared a joint on the deck, listening to the calls of Chuck-wills-widows and watching for passing satellites. Amanda had a knack for spotting them as they swept across the sky, lit by the rays of the sun from below the horizon.

I was exhausted, though I could think of no good reason for it. Amanda suspected I was coming down with a cold, or worse, and prescribed bed rest. When she offered a massage, I accepted readily.

She pulled out a bottle of oil that smelled exactly like that Mark had used. The memory brought more tears to my eyes. Ambianca didn't help; she played several of my old favorites as Amanda applied the oil to my back and legs.

After a long while, Amanda spoke, "Hypatia?"

"Yes," I responded, voice muffled by the pillow.

"I have something for you. Your locket. You remember you gave it to me in Waco for safekeeping."

I turned over and she put the amulet around my neck. Then her hands strayed down and begin massaging my breasts. It felt nice. I closed my eyes and relaxed.

Amanda said, "You know I love you."

I opened my eyes and replied. "Yes, of course." She was naked. When had that happened?

"I don't mean it that way. I mean I've been in love with you since the first time I saw you. I've wanted nothing since that day except to spend as much time with you as possible."

She hesitated, trying to find the way to say what she wanted. Finally, she said simply, "Will you make love with me, just this once?" What with my tortured reminiscences of Mark, her invitation came at just the right moment.

I raised a hand and caressed Mandy's cheek, before drawing her down for a long kiss. When I touched her beautiful breast, I felt her shudder. "That's fondling," I commented, as I kissed her again.

Ambianca approved. She started playing Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, a piece she knew I liked as background for sex.

Part VI. Idylls of the Queen

1. Dream Time
January 15, 1999 – June 14, 2001
Leakey and Houston, TX

I woke up alone in the bed, something of a surprise. After our lovemaking, Amanda lay next to me, saying my name repeatedly. “Hypatia, Hypatia. I love you. I love you.” She wept, gently at first then more heavily. I didn’t know if her tears were for joy, or because she felt it was the only time. Eventually, she laid her head on my shoulder as I caressed her hair until we both fell asleep, our bodies completely intertwined. Now, she was gone, which struck me as odd.

I rolled out of bed lured by the smell of coffee from the kitchen area. Something was different. Finally, it hit me. Mark was standing with his back to me working on breakfast. I shouted, “Mark!” and got his attention for the first time. “Hypatia!” he exclaimed.

We rushed together. “I thought you’d left me for good,” he said, crushing me to his chest. “You’ve been gone for months.”

“I was afraid I would never get back,” I replied. Tears of relief flowed unchecked. “It’s been over two years. Mark, Mark. Please hold me. I want to believe this is real. I’ve missed you so much. I love you more than you can imagine.” I couldn’t hold back the sobs any longer.

He stroked my head, murmuring softly. I didn’t understand what he was saying and couldn’t have cared less. After several minutes, he released me and said matter-of-factly, “Two years. You must be hungry. I’ll fix breakfast while you tell me all about it.”

He had to start over; the bacon had burned.

We lay in bed, having celebrated the reunion in the best way we could think of. “There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Mark said when I told him the last of the story of the past two years. “The last thing you told me we were going to have a baby. What was that all about?”

“Sometimes plans don’t work the way you expect, you know. I thought that I’d hook up with the King, then transition here. I’d get pregnant here, with you as the father, and then zip back to make it appear that the King was the father. Call it a bit of *family planning*.”

He laughed. “OK, but why did you change your mind?”

“I didn’t really. I wasn’t able to make the transition. I haven’t been able to do it since I left you, and if you recall, that wasn’t exactly planned either.”

“Does this mean that you’re going to be here from now on?”

“I hope so. I’ve thought about it a lot. Life is a lot better here than in the future, even if I have to look forward to W as President.”

“W?”

“George W Bush, to distinguish him from his father.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember your telling me that, but I must have repressed the memory.”

“I can understand not wanting to remember it.”

“But you didn’t stay here before.”

“No. I felt I had a duty to perform, work to do. The future needed me, unlike this time. My subconscious must have taken charge and forced me back to finish my work. I can remember that after I left Tulsa and started riding back here, I kept thinking to myself that my work was finished. I thought of this time as home. I wanted to see you desperately, but I couldn’t manage it.”

“I see. Then you did finally.”

“In my sleep. My subconscious again.”

“Anything special happen before you fell asleep?”

I hadn’t mentioned Mandy, and decided to let it slide again. “Not really. It was my birthday.”
Did he smell the patchouli?

“Hmm!”

“Yes?”

“You’re 33 years old.”

“And...”

“An interesting length of time, that’s all.”

He thought for a while. “Do you still want to have a baby with me?”

“Oh, yes! Do you?”

“Yes. There’s something we have to do first, though.”

“What?”

“We have to get married. Ever been to Vegas?”

Not knowing what to expect flying to be like, I was utterly unprepared for the way the Talbot family handled it. Mark called Houston, and by the time we arrived at the San Antonio airport, a Lear Jet was waiting.

“Ever flown before?” Mark asked.

“Once,” I replied, recalling the time in the ultra-light with Ron. “We used the ultra-light aircraft from the cabin.”

“There was an ultra-light aircraft there?”

“Well, there will be, broken down in the storage area, along with lots of other useful stuff.”

“Interesting. Was that on the list?”

“Yes, but you need to figure out how to keep everything secure for 50 years or so.”

“You mean the security system has to work after sleeping for 50 years?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m not sure it’s possible.”

“Sure it is. I saw it. You’re a genius, right?”

Mark seemed unsure. “How could that work?”

“Well, when we got there, the cabin was buttoned up solid. There was a crank in the wall. Amanda turned it for about 30 seconds or so, and the screen came to life. Ambianca started playing songs I recognized. That seemed to convince her I was who I was supposed to be, and she opened the door.”

“Cool. The ultimate bootstrapping. That might work.”

“It did. You also parlayed the work into another project, protecting the Sheik’s Gold, at least Ambianca said you did it. I don’t know who else could have pulled it off.”

While we talked, we walked across the tarmac to the jet, where the pilot stood waiting. “I hear we’re going to Vegas,” he said, smiling. “The boss said I was supposed to find out if y’all are going to get hitched.”

“What if we are?” Mark asked, suspicious.

“If you are, I’ve got some orders for the hotel in Vegas,” he relied smiling. “I’m guessing that Ms. Santoro-Talbot got it right as usual.”

I smiled and asked, “Was she pleased by the prospect?”

“Seemed to be,” he replied. “Shall we get going?”

We climbed into the jet and took our seats. Then, the pilot joined the queue of planes waiting to take off. I watched in awe as one huge aircraft after another lumbered into the sky, trying to compute how much fuel was involved, but the numbers overwhelmed me quickly. Whatever the result, I knew it would have been at least a year’s supply in 2088, probably several years worth.

Finally, it was the Talbot Jet’s turn. Instead of lumbering, the Lear seemed to leap into the air and climb at a vertiginous angle. After the plane leveled off — it seemed only seconds later — I opened my eyes and let out one long sigh. “Wow! That’s almost as good as sex.”

“I never get tired of it,” Mark concurred. “It’s sure different from the commercial planes. I’m glad the Lear was available. We should be in Vegas before you realize it.”

I spent the entire trip looking out the window at a view no one in 2087 would see again. Spread out below me — Mark said we were at 30,000 feet, which I computed at about 9 clicks — was an incredible quilt of rectangular and circular patches of green set into a background of brown. As we drew near to Las Vegas, I caught glimpses of mountains in the distance and a huge expanse of desert. Irregular patches of green showed against the sandy background. Mark explained that those were golf courses. I wondered where they got the water but was too busy staring at the scenery to ask.

As we got to Las Vegas itself, I couldn’t believe the energy expenditure. Lights shone everywhere, though it was just beginning to grow dark. It must be a truly spectacular sight at night.

Before I was ready for the experience to end, we were on the ground and heading for a hangar at the far end of the airfield.

As we walked to the waiting limo, I commented to Mark, “This is even better than I lived as a Queen.”

“Don’t start getting ideas,” he said. “I’m sure this is Joan’s idea. I would have taken a cab to the hotel.”

“What hotel?”

“I hope Joan got us the honeymoon suite at the Bellagio. It’s unbelievable, like most of Vegas, but more so. The unofficial motto of this place is *nothing exceeds like excess*. We, that is, the company, own shares in the operation, so we should get great treatment.”

“The Bellagio’s the one with the artificial lake, fountains, all that?”

“That’s it. I assume it was famous in the future.”

“Until it was blown up, anyway.”

“When was that?” Mark looked a bit scared at this news.

“Not for a long time. I forget exactly. It happened during the Last Days.”

“I’ll remember to avoid it then, whenever that is.”

The limo driver took the bags and ushered us into the cool interior of the car. “So, I understand you’re here to tie the knot. Where do you want to do it?”

“You have a favorite place?” Mark asked.

“Most people like one of the Elvis impersonators,” the driver volunteered.

Mark looked at me; I shook my head.

“What are you looking for?” the driver asked.

“Something quick and uncomplicated,” I suggested. “I’ve already had the big production.”
Well, not exactly, but someday.

“Sounds good to me,” Mark said. “Can you handle that?” he asked the chauffeur.

“No problem.”

The honeymoon suite at the Bellagio was unbelievable. I wondered before I saw it whether it would be better than the Royal Apartments in Tulsa. The answer came within seconds of walking into the entry hall. Like the Royal Apartments, the place had its own elevator, complete with the privacy switch that I thought I’d invented. The suite consisted of a living area, a huge bedroom, an elaborate bath, complete with a sunken tub large enough to float the boat used for the Sheik’s Gold expedition, and a small kitchen, just in case the new wife wanted to display her culinary skills.

Mark opted for dinner from room service, which sounded fine to me. It arrived in about an hour, served by an obsequious waiter who didn’t leave soon enough. “The management sent you this champagne when they learned who you were. Shall I pour it now? Or would you prefer to wait and have it with dessert?”

“Dessert sounds like a good idea,” Mark said. “I think we can manage it by ourselves, though. There’s no need for you to remain.” He reinforced his suggestion with a tip.

Before he left, though, there was one more message, “I was also asked to convey to you especially the thanks of the security staff. They said that they appreciated your efforts, and if you

needed anything while you were here, anything at all, to let them know. They suggested you would probably want this.” He handed Mark a bag of marijuana.

“Thanks,” Mark said, almost pushing him out the door.

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“A project I did for the hotel. Just part of what I do for a living. I did find several items they’d overlooked. I was a bit unsure whether some of them were deliberate and contemplated keeping my mouth shut. Joan convinced me to open up. We did have money invested here, after all. If they were planning to skim from operations, we would be affected directly.”

“Y’all aren’t gangsters, are you?”

“No, and these people aren’t either, at least not this generation. Can’t speak for their parents, though.” He laughed. “Shall we dine?”

We did, on *truite meuniere*, *pommes frites*, *haricot vert*, served with a wonderful *Hermitage Blanc*. “Are we in Las Vegas or Paris?” I asked. I found the food superb, and the wine so much better than even the finest vintage from New Home, I was frankly amazed. “I’ve never experienced anything like this,” I confessed. “There is nothing in the future that can compare, even in the Royal Court in Tulsa. What’s next?”

Next was a long sybaritic soak in the tub. We sampled some of the weed while lying in the tub. “What do you think?” Mark asked. “Good as Hill Country Gold?”

“Not even close,” I said, “but not bad at all. You know, I could get used to this life, I think.”

We owed the honeymoon suite some of the activity it expected, so we didn’t get around to dessert until late into the night.

We spent five days at the Bellagio altogether. Besides the delights of the bedroom, we acted like newlyweds and took in an incredible performance by *Cirque du Soleil* in the hotel. The show, called *O*, a big hit, consisted of spectacular acts performed mostly in water. Tickets were hard to come by, but Mark used his connections again and we had fabulous seats.

Mostly, I wanted to walk around the city, despite the heat. The energy expenditure was so colossal, I had a hard time getting used to it. “Doesn’t anyone worry about what the energy is costing?”

“Not in this town,” Mark assured her. I accepted his answer, but found the waste disturbing, knowing what was to come.

On the fourth afternoon, Mark informed me that it was time to lose some money in the casino.

“How are we going to do that?” I asked.

“Here,” he said, giving me some chips. “This is your half. If we don’t drop this much we won’t get such great service next time. The craps table is the fastest way to lose. Bet on the shooter.”

Losing turned out to be more difficult than I expected. I wound up winning repeatedly, much to the delight of a large crowd that assembled at the table and bet on me. Finally, Mark appeared at my side.

“Oh, Mark,” I said with relief. “I know I’m supposed to lose this before we go home, but I keep winning.”

The crowd laughed appreciatively and booed Mark when he insisted that we had to leave.

“Can we up the limits?” Mark asked the croupier. The latter caught the pit boss’s eye. A small nod.

Mark put all my chips on the line.

The crowd went wild. The betting was intense. Finally, the croupier handed me the dice.

“C’mon honey,” some drunk in the crowd shouted.

I rolled a seven. The crowd cheered wildly. The croupier looked at the pit boss. Both frowned.

“Let it ride,” Mark said.

“Sorry, sir. We don’t have the coverage. If you take back 50 we can manage it.”

Mark removed some chips from the table.

It took several minutes before all the betting was set. I picked up the dice and, with everyone staring at me, rolled snake eyes. A huge sigh went thru the assemblage.

“Now, we do have to leave,” Mark said. Without waiting, he took the chips, leaving one with the croupier and another with the pit boss. Both smiled at him.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked when we were alone. “I didn’t lose the money, in fact, I’m not even sure how much I have.”

He laughed. “Sweetheart. How could I possibly be mad at you? Besides, the house made money in the end. Big winners are good for business.”

“I’m glad you’re not mad,” I said. “Can we spend our last night in the room?”

“You bet, big winner!”

We flew from Vegas to Houston on Southwest Airlines, as the Lear Jet was unavailable. The plane was almost full with people returning from a vacation. The mood was generally jubilant, which surprised me, as the conversation was uniformly about how their luck had turned sour at the end. Everyone who came to Las Vegas, it seemed, went home a loser. I, on the other hand had a cashier’s check for \$30,000 in a new purse, along with a note from the hotel letting me know that I was welcome back anytime.

The plane stopped in El Paso on the way to Houston. I was curious to see a part of Texas I’d never visited, but Mark informed me that we had to stay aboard. “At least we can get better seats for this leg,” he said as we moved up to the front. He whispered something to one of the uniformed attendants, who smiled and nodded.

After the plane reached cruising altitude, the flight attendant announced over the speakers that they had at least one newlywed couple on the plane and wondered whether there were any others, the flight being from Vegas. As it turned out, Mark and I weren’t the only ones to have tied the knot. The flight attendants presented a lovely gag gift, a roll of toilet paper with toothpicks stuck in it to make it look like a cake. A tag attached to the cake read, “Happy Five Day Anniversary.”

Everyone in the plane clapped and cheered, even the other recently married couples. Then the flight attendant spoiled it by asking if there were any newly divorced people aboard. As it turned out, they outnumbered the newlyweds.

“This is a strange world,” I whispered to Mark.

He whispered back, “I know, but as long as you’re in it, I love it,” and he kissed me, right there in front of everyone. Several people nearby clapped again.

Lunyon met us in Houston and whisked us to the Talbot mansion. Grace swept me into her arms when she saw me, exclaiming, “You cannot imagine how happy this makes me. I knew from the first that the two of you belong together.” Mark later said he’d never seen his mother so demonstrative.

Of course, there had to be parties. Grace knew so many people that even the Talbot house couldn’t accommodate all of them at once. It seemed as though there was another one every night, but Mark, who had that kind of mind, said the actual count was only six, spread over two weeks. What with buying new clothes, getting hair done, and all that, I felt as if my entire existence involved nothing except preparing for *presentation to society*.

After the nth time Mark called “Julia” Hypatia, Grace made up a story to tell those who asked. “It’s a family joke,” she explained. “Julia was once a librarian, so we call her by the most famous librarian we know of.” Most of the people who heard this explanation either shrugged or asked who the famous Hypatia was.

One small dark cloud hung over the household: Despite our best efforts, we were unable to conceive. Gradually, the excitement died down and we settled into a comfortable rut dominated by business and charity, for the family money constantly called for attention. I helped Grace choose where to donate money, putting it mostly into political and environmental causes. As a result, I became known around town as someone worth cultivating. At least the parties, the ones we chose to attend at any rate, were fewer, and generally held somewhere besides the Talbot mansion.

Before long, the year was 2000. Now, when I wanted to plunge into politics in a big way — I suggested spending time in Florida, for example — I found myself suddenly and unexpectedly pregnant.

As Grace already had a granddaughter, not to mention several other grandchildren via Mark’s disgraced brother, you’d think she would have taken the news calmly. Not so. Joan, having arrived on the scene as an adult, was clearly different. I thought one of Mark’s nephews would have given Grace plenty to dote on, but clearly, this child was different. “It’s you, don’t you see?” Mark explained. “This is not just any child; this is your child. Have you forgotten how she feels about you?”

“What? How does she feel?”

“She knows that you are someone special. No one else has disappeared and reappeared in her house, for one thing. Remember, she and Joan are convinced that they are inventing a new religion based on your strange life. Their project is larger than you imagine. Don’t tell me that the future hasn’t found the stories and prophecies they prepared so carefully for you, the ones on the mysterious web site that no one can locate?”

“I should have guessed. So you’re behind all that.”

“Of course. Who else?”

“It’s obvious when you think about it. Amanda gave up trying to crack the security on the site and contented herself with contributing to the wiki, whatever that it.”

“I’m glad to hear that, on both counts. Is there lots of stuff about you?”

“Oh sure. Some of it is even correct.”

He laughed. “Well, that’s how legends work, isn’t it?”

Instead of parties, my life now revolved around visits to the doctor, buying baby clothes and furniture, and eating healthy. Grace reconciled herself with one of Mark’s sisters-in-law, a woman in California named Chloe, who supplied the household with numerous natural supplements for “lovely Hypatia’s” diet. Most of the offerings were horrible tasting and I finally put my foot down, refusing to ingest anything that my nose rejected.

Deciding I liked the name Chloe, I suggested it for my daughter, for by this time we’d learned the sex of the child. I was surprised to find that even in the late 20th century it was possible to determine the sex that early. I thought the process came much later. Of course, the technique used in the future was much less intrusive. I didn’t like the idea of anyone sticking a needle into the uterus, but I learned it was standard procedure for a woman my age.

I began to tire of my new life and thought fondly of the little cabin in Leakey. I didn’t dare think about it too much, though, for fear that I would accidentally transition there. Unsure what effect that would have on Chloe, I didn’t want to take a chance. I did coax Mark into taking a short trip out there, during which we visited the horse farm and had the famous picture taken. I felt better having accomplished that.

When it came to giving birth, 2000 had a big edge on 2088. Of course, in Tulsa, the best midwives in the Kingdom had been summoned to the Queen’s side, but the technology available was primitive by turn-of-the-century standards. Because of my age, and social prominence, I had the best known, if not the best, obstetrician in Houston attending the birth. I also had Mark standing by my side the entire time, something that hadn’t occurred to Harold, who’d spent the Queen’s hours in labor drinking with some of his buddies.

The only real downside of the event was that Chloe arrived on the day of the Presidential election of 2000. Of course, there was only one news story that night. Mark watched while I nursed Chloe for the first time. “Going to be close,” he told me.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I told him.

“It looks like it’s going to come down to Florida, just as you predicted. Do you mind if I leave the TV on? I think I’ll watch until it’s decided.”

“No, you won’t,” I predicted confidently, “and yes, I do mind. If you must watch, do it in the lounge. I can’t stand it.”

Chloe was a delight, perhaps even easier than Harry had been. Once again, I had all the help one could imagine. I wondered how many women had given birth to two children and never changed a diaper.

As 2000 passed into 2001, and the 21st century arrived no matter which year you thought ended the 20th, life settled once again into a pleasant routine, centered on Chloe. Visits to the pediatrician confirmed what everyone guessed, that she was a completely normal baby and doing quite well.

She was doing so well, that when Mark announced the need to visit the cabin in Leakey to install some new hardware and software, I begged to go along. “Sooner or later, I need to find out what real mothering is like,” I told him. “I won’t be in the way; I promise.”

That’s how it was that I was alone with Chloe that day in June, Mark having run to San Antonio to get some supplies he needed, when I learned that my daughter was not so normal after all.

2. End of a Dream

June 15, 2001
near Leakey, TX

I nursed Chloe by the lake until I heard the inevitable signal that a diaper needed changing. Diaper changed, Chloe took a second breast. She always closed her eyes when nursing, then, when she'd had enough would pull away from the nipple and look at her mother. I always felt as if I were staring at a young version of me, though, of course, I had no idea what I had looked like at that age. Chloe's eyes were beginning to get their final color, and it was clear that she'd inherited that from me. Already some tiny gold flecks of color appeared amid the blue, which was darker than the blue of mine, but perhaps even lovelier.

Staring at mama was fun, but tiring, and after a few moments, Chloe fell asleep. I wrapped her in a blanket, laid her carefully on a folded towel on the rock, and lay back to rest. By now, I could feel the mid-morning sun warming everything. A swim seemed very inviting. I decided to take advantage of Chloe's nap for a quick cool off.

Shedding clothes quickly, I dove into the cold spring water, which felt as invigorating as always. I swam out to the large rock, but pushed off immediately and returned to shore. There Chloe lay peacefully asleep on the towel. I watched as Chloe began to dream, her eyes moving beneath the closed lids, and wondered what a child that age dreams about. Probably breasts.

Chloe woke up a bit fussy after several minutes. She was starting to teeth, and needed something to chew on. I gave her my amulet and she seemed happy, biting down with her gums on the hard gold. The chewing seemed to help. After a few minutes she fell asleep again, the amulet resting on her tiny chest.

I heard a Red-shouldered Hawk calling from the woods and looked around to see if I could locate it. Later, trying to reconstruct the moment, I guessed that this action took only a few seconds. When I looked back, Chloe was gone, simply gone. An empty towel and an amulet lay on the rock.

Most mothers would have panicked, but I realized immediately what had happened. Chloe had acquired my ability, if you could call it that, of transitioning to a different time and place. If JJ was right about that, though, there could be only a couple of places for her to be. Probably, she was in her crib in the cabin.

Dressing quickly, I hurried back to the cabin, arriving there after about 30 minutes. Chloe was not there. Now, I did start to panic. There was one other possibility. Chloe had transitioned somewhere and would return to the lake. I covered the distance back to the lake in less than 20 minutes. The towel was where I had left it, and Chloe was not.

The reality began to dawn on me. Chloe was gone. Wherever she had transitioned, she was on her own now, just as I had been so many years ago, or rather, some years in the future from now.

The tears came unbidden. I kept telling myself it was part of some plan, just as my own life had been. I didn't believe it. For years, I had rejected the notion that my strange life was part of some greater purpose, something God had cooked up. I knew many people thought exactly that, God's last intervention in human history, but I considered it nonsense. What was I to make of this, then? Why had Chloe been snatched away if not to further some purpose?

Intellectualizing did no good as far as the sorrow was concerned. Unable to stop weeping, I let the sobs come. I knew, somehow, that I would never see my daughter again. I let out an

anguished scream, “Damn you, whoever you are! What’s wrong with letting me live a happy life? Must you take her, too?” I added several more curses, for all the good it did.

After a while, I realized how precarious the position was. No one, with the possible exception of Mark, would believe me. “The child simply disappeared? Bullshit!” No, a simpler explanation covered all the known facts: for some reason, post-partum depression perhaps, I had drowned the infant in the lake nearby, and then, overcome with grief, made up the tale of her disappearance. I imagined the police dragging the lake for her body, then in desperation, opening the dam and draining the water completely. Even then, finding nothing, they would assume that her tiny corpse had drifted downstream.

At best, I could look forward to a long stay in a mental hospital. At worst, well Texas was famous for using the death penalty.

Disconsolate, I walked slowly back to the cabin. By the time I reached it, after almost an hour, I knew what I must do. First, I checked again to make sure Chloe was not safe in her crib. No, she was gone, truly gone.

I had to transition away from this time. That was the only escape open. Could I summon the ability one more time? Where could I go? Did I have any choice, or would it be up to the mysterious power that held the strings to my timeline?

I had to let Mark know what happened, but in a way that would free him from suspicion.

I left a note where he couldn’t miss it, on the keyboard of one of the computers behind the bookcase, then carefully closed the room, so no one else would see before Mark.

“Mark, my love,” the note said, “Chloe is gone. I’m sure you realize what that means. I have to go the same way she did. I know in my heart that we will meet again someday. I love you more than life itself. Please forgive me. Hypatia.”

I lay down on the bed, planning to let my subconscious decide where to go. Sleep wouldn’t come. Maybe this was all a mistake. Maybe Chloe was even now back at the lake crying for Mama. I raced once more back to the lake, only to find the towel lying on the rock, mocking me.

Again, grief overwhelmed me. Huge sobs rose from the depths to burst from my lungs. I had trouble breathing. The crying jag left me exhausted. Curled up into a fetal position on the rock, clutching the amulet that still smelled of Chloe, I fell into a fitful slumber.

3. Angel of Death **June 28, 2029** **Leahey and Medina, TX**

I awoke in the bed in the cabin. It was dark, and I just lay there for a while, trying to figure things out. Slowly, I realized that I was not alone. Mark lay next to me. I reached over and touched him. He mumbled something. I shook him gently. “Mark,” I said, “wake up. We need to talk.”

“Hypatia!” he almost shouted.

He turned on the light, and I couldn’t keep the look of shock from my face, or prevent the exclamation of surprise.

He was old.

“What’s the date?” I managed to say after a while.

“End of June, 2029. I guess you were expecting to wind up at some other time.”

“Actually, I didn’t have any expectations. Chloe just disappeared and I knew I couldn’t stay in 2000.”

“Chloe! Then you know what happened to her.”

“She’s like me. She transitioned away. I don’t know where she is. This is all I have left of her.” I showed him my amulet, which he took from me to examine. “This looks like the one my mother had. Strange. I wonder...” He said no more. Just looked thoughtful.

I burst into tears.

“Hypatia, I’m so sorry. I always knew I’d see you sometime again. You told me once you’d never leave me. I believed it. Everyone thought I’d lost it, especially after reading your suicide note.”

Damn! He’s right. It did sound like a suicide note.

“I’m sorry it sounded like a suicide note,” I managed to sputter. “I wasn’t thinking clearly at the time.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s wonderful to have you back, even if it’s been a very long time.” He held me, stroking my back until I managed to get the sobs under control. “I’ve missed you,” he said after a while. “I’m sorry about the time you came on the Fourth of July. I regretted that ever since. We should have at least had sex.” He smiled. “Unless you need to eat first.”

I was hungry, but it was obvious that he had other ideas. I pulled off my shirt and saw him staring at my breasts. “Yes,” I commented, “they’re large now. I’m still nursing, or at least I was until Chloe disappeared. Now, they a bit over full.”

He was much better at getting hints than he used to be.

Later, after a wonderful dinner, we had time to consider what to do next. “We need to go to Austin,” I told him. “That’s where all the action is. We should button this place up and leave.”

“In the morning,” he said. “We have some catching up to do first.”

So, early the next morning, we closed down the cabin and loaded his SUV with supplies, including several cans of gasoline. Mark explained about new rationing rules. “With the war raging in the Middle East, there’s nothing reaching us. This looks like the beginning of the Collapse you told me about.”

I tried to remember the sequence of events, wishing I had paid more attention in Professor Hardy’s History classes. I knew that the actual Collapse was still a few years off. What happened in the meantime? Several terrorist nuclear bombings, that much I remembered. Religious strife virtually everywhere. What else? Oh yes, The Plague.

“Let’s go thru Medina,” I suggested, “for old time’s sake.”

Near the apple stand in Medina, we saw small crowd of people standing in the shade of the porch. Several of them noticed me as I got out of the car and started pointing. Curious, I walked over to them.

“Hello,” I said. “I’ve come to see Mrs. Spalding.”

“Who be you?” several of them asked at once.

“I’m a friend of hers.”

“We ain’t seen you before, and we all be friends of her’n.”

“What’s happened?”

“Well, she ain’t dead yet. But—”

“Let her in.” A tall man spoke from the doorway. This must be Aaron Spalding. I couldn’t make out his features, as he stood in the darkness of the store, but the height and bearing reminded me of Red. “I recognize her,” he added, standing aside and holding the door open.

“This way,” he said, and led me thru the store into a bedroom in back. “You’re the one in the photograph, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. What photograph?”

“The picture of *her angel*. You are her angel, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. I’d like to see her.”

I understood the Divine Plan, or whatever it was. Everything made sense. I knew now why my child had been snatched away so cruelly, and where I would find another to take her place.

In spite of the gloom inside the room, I could see that the friend with whom I’d shared pie and conversation lay beneath several layers of cover. “She can’t seem to get warm,” Aaron said. He pulled the covers back to reveal the woman’s hand, which clutched a worn photograph. With some effort, he extracted the picture from her fingers and showed it to me. It was from the day of my first visit.

“Wake up, Maudie. Someone’s come to see you.”

Maudie’s eyes fluttered open, searched around the room and came to rest on my face. “I knew you’d come,” she whispered. She smiled and said, “Told ‘em my angel would show up.”

“She’s talked about you a lot. She said that you told her something the first time you came. Do you remember what it was?”

“I told her to have courage; that it was all we had to hold onto.”

“You are the one. She said you are an angel.”

“I know she thought that.”

“Said you have magical powers. Can you heal her?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Then why have you come?”

“May I talk to her?”

“Sure.”

“Hi, Maudie. Do you know that of all the conversations we’ve had, I never learned your name until today?”

“Hello, my angel. You come to make me well?”

“No, my friend, that is not within my power.”

“Ah. Then you came to help me. You be the angel of death. Thank you, child. Thank you for coming. I got a favor to ask.”

I held her hand, as tears fell onto the sheets.

“Now, then,” Maudie said, “don’t you go crying. You got to be brave, too. I need you to take care of Aaron and the boy when I’m gone. Will you do that?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Now, you go to sleep. Your struggle is almost over.”

She closed her eyes and slept.

“So, she’s going to die,” Aaron said.

“Yes, very soon.”

“Why have you come?”

“I came for you, Aaron, you and the boy.” As if on cue, a child cried in the next room. “Will you bring him to me?” Aaron left and returned shortly carrying the infant.

“Are we going to die also?” he asked as he handed the baby over. I felt milk almost spurt from my breasts. I offered Red a nipple, which he took voraciously.

I answered Aaron’s worried question, “We aren’t going to die for a while yet, at least not if you can find me something to eat.” I could see him smile in the dim light. He left and returned shortly with a turkey sandwich and some milk.

I ate the sandwich quickly, washing it down with a few swallows of the milk. Picking up the conversation, I said, “I’m not the angel of death. We have a destiny together, Aaron Spalding, but it is not here. We have to go to Austin, and very soon.”

“Soon?”

“Yes, there isn’t much time. The end of Civilization is coming.”

“We can’t stay here?”

“Everyone who remains here will probably die.”

“I don’t have any way to travel. I had to sell the car. Besides, there’s no fuel available except at exorbitant prices.”

“Don’t worry about that. Mark has plenty.”

“Who’s Mark?”

“My husband. He’s probably waiting by the car.” Actually, Mark was right outside the door and came in when he heard his name.

I introduced everyone. “Mark, meet Aaron Spalding, and his young son, Red. Aaron, this is my husband, Mark Talbot.”

“The boy’s name is Rupert,” Aaron corrected, “after Maudie’s brother.”

“That explains a lot.”

“You say this man is your husband,” Aaron said. “I thought he might be your father.”

“No,” I smiled. “He’s my husband. It’s a long story.”

Red finished nursing and needed changing. One of the women from outside, Maudie’s friend, took him and left the room. We moved outside. “How quickly can you pack?” I asked Aaron.

“Don’t know. What do I need to take? How long will we be gone?”

“We’re never coming back,” I told him.

He just looked at me as though I were insane. Then turned to pack.

A woman came out of the store carrying Red. “She’s gone, Aaron.”

“Thank you, Rachel. We knew it would come soon.”

“She knew, didn’t she?” Rachel asked, indicating me.

“Yes,” I answered. “The disease is very unforgiving. It’s sometimes transmitted by mosquitoes, by the way, so if you have insect repellent, use it.”

Rachel nodded. “What are you going to do now, Aaron? Who’s going to take care of the boy?”

“I’ve come for him,” I replied to her. I held out my arms. She hesitated, but then shrugged and handed him to me.

Aaron answered, “We’re leaving with these people, as soon as we get ready. Is the pyre prepared?”

“You’re determined on that, are you? No Christian burial?”

“You know the answer to that,” he replied.

“It just seems sort of pagan to me, funeral pyre and all that.”

“Returning her to the earth and the air in the place she loved,” he said. “It’s what she wanted. Pagan is about right.”

“Why are you going with these people? You don’t even know them?”

“This woman seems to know me,” he replied. “I can’t explain any more than that.”

Rachel looked at me, distrust showing on her face. Aaron said, “Maudie loved her. You’ve heard her talk about her.”

“The angel.”

“Yes, only today she was the angel of death.”

“OK,” she agreed with an air of resignation. “You pack up. I’ll take care of Maudie.” She turned and left.

Mark wasn’t satisfied. “All right. I think I can piece together some of this, but you still need to tell me what we’re going to do in Austin.”

“We’re going to save civilization.”

“How can you know all this?” Aaron asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Mark told him. “Where have you built the funeral pyre?”

Part VII. The Battle of Mansfield Dam

1. The End of the Beginning
February 7, 2032
Driskill Hotel Penthouse, Austin, TX, USA

I opened the door to Joan and said, quoting from an article I'd read in *People*, "It's the richest woman in the world! Dressed as is her wont in a stylish pantsuit, accented by a silk scarf and her trademark dragonfly pin."

Joan grinned. She looked great. Now on the far side of the big six-oh, she clearly spent a lot of time in the gym keeping in shape. As always, I was impressed with the casual beauty she always managed, as well as her total self-assurance.

Joan said, "I, on the other hand, expected to see my father's glamorous new trophy wife, the one with an uncanny resemblance to his first wife, instead of a barefoot hippie in old jeans and a T-shirt." She stepped inside. "I still can't believe this is really happening. You aren't a day older."

Ambianca responded to Joan's entrance with a *leitmotif* she'd chosen, a song from an ancient Broadway musical, *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*. Joan liked the line about cool, clear eyes of a seeker of wisdom and truth.

I noted, "Actually, I'm several years older than before, but I get what you mean. Come in. Where's your latest boy toy?" We hugged and traded air kisses.

"Please," Joan said, moving into the entry hall. "He's my *constant companion*, according to the gossip rags, not my *boy toy*. He's taking care of the bags like a good gopher."

"From his pictures, he looks luscious."

"Don't get any ideas."

"I'm a married woman, and a mother, remember."

"Even if just a trophy wife." Joan smiled when she said it.

"It seemed like a better story than the truth. I guess you've heard the rumor about enhancing the resemblance."

"Modern surgery can do almost anything — or so I'm told." She winked, which momentarily showed wrinkles in her recently resurfaced face. "How's it going?"

"A complete disaster. I was up most of the night with Red, who has a cold and fever. The staff is afraid it's *something worse* and won't enter the suite. Mark says he did something do his back — the doc says it's just a muscle spasm — he's doped to the gills lying in bed. He's been having problems frequently. I'm afraid it's something more than muscle spasms. Aaron, meanwhile, has two shows today. He's at the matinee now. He sends his apologies for missing the party. If it's still going on at midnight, he'll pop in. I didn't know how hard this was going to be when I set it all up."

"So the *ménage a trois* is working?"

"So far, OK. Aaron is a doll, and Red is lots of fun. But sometimes... Anyway, Mark said to let him say hello. He's not supposed to get out of bed until the last minute, then I've threatened to wheel him into the ballroom."

I led the way thru the living room of the penthouse suite into the bedroom Mark and I shared. With a finger at my lips, I cautioned, “Red is taking a nap with him. We have to be quiet.”

Mark opened his eyes when we entered. Red, whose hair was by now full enough to justify his name, slept, as soundly as only a child can, on the side of the huge bed, where a small rail kept him from rolling off.

“Well, if it isn’t my sweet daughter, come to offer solace to her poor ol’ dad,” Mark whispered.

“Hi, Daddy,” Joan said, carrying out the silly game they played every time they met. In fact, their relationship was the same as it had always been. Despite the genetic bond between them, they remained good friends, nothing more. Joan kissed him gently on the forehead. “Hypatia tells me you plan to come to the party tonight.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything. After all, your daughter is only 23,000 days old once.”

“You’re just trying to publicize your crazy K-Day notion.”

“Of course, but this time I have a real celebrity involved. CNN mentioned it.”

“Every hour. Apparently it’s a slow news day.”

“I like to throw a big party every month or so. This is just a good excuse.”

Red stirred on the bed. Mark waved them to leave. “The boys need their beauty sleep.”

Joan and I moved to the living room. “Is champagne appropriate?” I asked, pouring myself a glass. “Did you come to tell me that we’re getting the Google Index?”

“It’s not a done deal yet,” she replied, “but I think we have it nailed.”

“Well, that’s some good news.”

“It’s common knowledge in the Valley that Mark set up the system for the Saudis in Houston. That’s working in our favor.”

“Damn! Nothing stays secret for long out there.”

“There are so many listening devices in the area that something is bound to slip out. Texans are much more tight lipped.”

“Is there anything I need to do?” I asked. I got up and brought the bottle of bubbly to a nearby coffee table. “Want some of this? It’s Crystal.”

“Well, in that case...”

I poured her a glass.

“I think you’re doing all you can right now,” Joan said, “what with the establishment of the Archive Project. That was quite a coup.”

“The Talbot endowment paved the way. Having lots of money that is going to be worthless soon is a great incentive.”

Joan sipped some champagne. “You sound like one to the Manics. You’re sure of the timetable? I seem to recall that you said records from the Last Days were problematic.”

“That’s certainly true. So far, though, events seem to be playing out more or less in accord with the legends about the period. *Manic* is a good word for it.”

“I hear our odious governor will be attending tonight, and that he plans to schedule a prayer breakfast for tomorrow morning,” Joan said.

“I hope his advisors have talked him out of that. He’ll be lucky if he’s even conscious for breakfast. Governor Craddick is a total hypocrite. Despite all the talk about the sanctity of marriage he spouts, he hits on me every time we meet, especially when he’s been drinking.”

“Really? I heard he preferred boys.”

“He bats from both sides, according to Mark. That doesn’t bother me, of course. It’s all the *getting right with Jesus* bullshit I object to.”

“I agree. I thought it was bad back in 2001, but this is much worse.”

“Well, the plague, you know.”

“Sure, but just the other day, I read that the DNA sequence demonstrated conclusively—”

“I read that also, but it was in the TPM blog. If Fox had something about it...”

“Maybe mad partying is the right approach after all.”

We sat quietly for a while, sipping champagne and nibbling on some snacks the kitchen had sent up. Turning serious for a moment, Joan asked, “How are you adjusting? This must be quite a shock for you. One minute you’re a young wife with an infant daughter and a slightly older husband, then...”

“It was difficult at first. We had to get used to each other all over again. Everything is complicated, dealing with Red and Aaron. Mark assumed that I wanted Aaron around for, well...”

“Sex, you mean.”

“Yes. Actually, I’d just met Aaron, and he’s not my type. It was a classic misunderstanding between lovers. We finally straightened it out. Then, of course, he’s a lot older, which adds another level of complexity. On top of everything, he’s very well-known now, famous author in addition to being a genius programmer.”

“So, is Aaron a *full* member of the family now?”

I laughed. “Well, sort of. We hooked up once. The flesh was willing, but the spirit was weak. His heart wasn’t into it. We have a platonic relationship now. Well, more than that, but...”

“What does Mark think about the arrangement?”

“He seems happy. Says that he wants me to find someone new for when he’s gone. That seems a bit morbid to me.”

“But you’ve managed to get everything smoothed out?”

“I hope so. Mark spends most of his time dealing with the computer. He’s got some ideas of how to make Ambianca even smarter. I overhear *conversations* between them sometimes. I swear they are negotiating. It’s creepy.”

“Interesting. Has he said what he’s planning?”

“Not a word. Says he wants it to be a surprise.” I tried changing the subject. “This lifestyle we’ve adopted is strange for both of us, but it fits into what Austin has become. I prefer either of the other two Austins I’ve known.”

Joan said nothing for a while, taking a sip of champagne. “How is your love life?”

“I’ve tried finding someone my own age, but so far without success.”

Joan laughed. “Considering how the two of you went at it back in the twen cen...”

“Oh?”

“It was the talk of Houston.”

“No kidding.”

“It’s different now. Requires planning for one thing, but...”

“Mark says having a stunning young wife is great for his reputation.”

I said nothing for a while, then, “I’m glad to have a few more years with him. I really love him, you know. It’s funny. Here I am married to one man and raising the son of another, and I feel monogamous for the first time in my life.”

“I know you love Mark. I think it’s wonderful you showed up again after all this time.” She held out her glass, which I refilled. “Mark told me Chloe just disappeared, like you used to, that was the reason you...”

“That’s it, more or less.”

“You haven’t...”

“No. Whoever — or whatever — is pulling my strings thinks I should be in this time now.”

“So your control is gone?”

“Guess so. I haven’t been able to control it since, well, for quite a long time. I think even JJ, who seemed to know everything, would be mystified, but, of course, he’s nowhere to be found in this era.”

We sat quietly for a while. I poured the last of the champagne into my glass. I wished we could have some marijuana, but society was very strait-laced these days, at least as far as the wonderful weed was concerned.

Joan broke the silence, “An article in *Science* claims the Greenland ice caps are melting faster than predicted. I remember that you mentioned that as one of the unexpected events in the future when we had lunch that day back in 1998.”

I didn’t respond immediately. Finally, I said, “I miss Grace. She was always so kind.”

“At least she went the way she hoped. Working in the garden one morning, dead two weeks later. Funny how she was lucid enough to demand her right to die at home.”

“I just wish I could have been there.”

“You know,” Joan mused, “she claimed that you *were* there. Said you’d talked to her all night once. Of course, she didn’t have many lucid moments. Still I’ve wondered...”

“If I *were* there somehow.”

“You don’t remember it?”

“No.”

“Interesting. Well, I better go make sure my honey is staying out of trouble. See you tonight.” She finished her champagne and left.

2. Graceful Interlude

November 24, 2013
Houston, TX, USA

I woke up in a strange bed, unsure where I was, or when.

I should explain. I've been writing this memoir while living like a hermit in a hut at the ruined Apple Store in Medina, where the year is 2041. I first went to the cabin I knew so well. I had no trouble getting in with Ambianca's help. I searched for what I came to find but decided that I had to leave the cabin as I found it to avoid messing up the future. So, I walked to Medina and took up residence there.

When I first arrived, I wondered how I would live. I needn't have worried. The few people left in the area bring me food and come around to ask my advice, especially on ways to avoid the Plague.

The disease seems to have burned itself out here, at least for a while. I tell people to be careful whom they deal with, to avoid mosquitos and strangers. That seems to satisfy them. I've gotten into a pleasant rut. I get up with the dawn, eat a small breakfast, and start writing. I hope to complete this narrative soon, at least thru the horrible events of the Plague and the Revolution. I thought my transitioning days were over.

So, as I said, I was surprised to find myself in a strange bed. It was dark, and wherever I was, it was quiet. I fumbled around and found a light on a small table by the bed. When I switched it on, I was astonished. I was back in the bed Mark and I shared in Houston. For a minute, I thought maybe he was here. My heart leapt at the thought, but a quick search showed that I was alone.

I found a robe in a closet and set out to explore the house. Moving toward the only other light I saw, a small crack under the door of the master bedroom, I realized what had happened. After I wrote about Joan's visit to Austin, I had been thinking about the conversation all day, and particularly about my visit to Grace on her deathbed. That must have fired up my subconscious, and I transitioned in my sleep as I used to do. I was here for a final meeting with Grace.

I pushed open the door carefully, not wishing to wake anyone up. Grace lay on a hospital bed, with wires running from various sensors to monitoring equipment nearby. I walked over and stood next to her, trying to decide what to do. She must have had a stroke, as her face appeared somewhat lopsided. I touched her forehead gently, moving a stray lock of gray hair from her face. She opened her eyes a bit, then came fully awake with a start.

"You," she managed to croak.

"Yes," I replied, "it's me. I've come to say goodbye."

"Gon' die," she managed. I wasn't sure it was a question, but I took it to be one.

"Yes. Soon, but not tonight."

She seemed to relax some. She reached out with her hand and touched the necklace I wore, the one Mia had given me so long ago.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? A young woman gave it to me...well, will give it to me, in the future. It's an endless knot."

She said something that I interpreted as "lovely."

I removed it from my neck and put it into her hand. She turned it over in her hand, examining it carefully with her fingers. “Like mine,” she said with great difficulty. She gave it back to me. “Mine broke. The other one gave it to me.”

I smiled, realizing where mine came from. “I know. A woman named Mia fixed the broken link in the future. It’s got to be the same necklace.” *Should I say more? The other one gave it to her! Who the hell is that?*

Then she laughed. At least I thought it was a laugh. It was more of a strangled cough, but she managed a smile afterward.

“You.” She said after a bit. “Always you.”

She seemed to be trying to say more. After a while, she said, “Love you.”

“I love you too,” I replied. “You were always kind to me.”

“It was always you,”

I didn’t know what she meant, and started to ask her, but she waved her hand at me to forestall anything. She took my hand and held it tightly.

“Good,” Grace said. At least, that’s what I thought she said. Her eyelids fluttered and she closed them. Soon, she was asleep again.

It wasn’t much of a visit. I found some food Grace had not eaten and ate it for her. Then I sat in a chair near the bed in case Grace woke up again. Sometime later, I must have fallen asleep. I wound up back in the little hut in Medina.

My suspicion about transitioning seemed to be correct. Still, I wished whoever was yanking my chain would send me somewhere I wanted to be. Would they ever leave me alone?

I think I’m running out of time. What a strange thing to say.

3. Strange Meetings **July 4, 2033** **Austin, TX, USA**

“Go by yourself,” Mark said in the hoarse whisper that was the loudest voice he could manage lately.

“I don’t know any of those people,” I objected. “You’re the one with the academic connections.”

Mark swiveled around to face me. “I’ve got lots of work to do. I don’t have much time. You go. You’ll like the students.”

“What work?”

“You know. The project I’ve been working on eighteen hours a day.”

“That can’t be good for you. The doctor—”

“He can’t do anything for me. He can’t even get an MRI scan. Even I can’t buy enough power to run the machine. You know that.”

“You can’t just give up!”

“I’m not giving up. I’m using my time effectively.”

“By sitting here arguing with Ambianca? She doesn’t even play music anymore, or haven’t you noticed.”

“I’ve noticed. That’ll be over soon, I hope.”

“Can you explain what you’re doing, in case...”

“I’m close. It’s going to be finished soon. You take Red and go to picnic. Let him see his father perform.”

“He’s too young.”

“So what?”

“So, they probably won’t let me in with him along.”

“Pass a little green. They’ll listen to reason. Now, I really have to get back to work.”

I somehow managed to refrain from slamming the door on my way out.

Still steaming from the argument, I pushed Red in the stroller down Congress Avenue toward the picnic area along the shores of Lady Bird Lake. I was glad it was mostly downhill. The temperature hovered in the low 90’s (Fahrenheit), but was headed much higher in the afternoon. Crossing the bridge, I began searching for the University tent, finally locating it among a small cluster far down from the bridge.

Although my watch showed only 11:15, I decided to try to beat the crush and buy some lunch, and especially some cold beer, before proceeding to the University tent. After picking up an Ethiopian offering for me and a hot dog for Red, I could no longer put off my obligation and headed for the burnt orange and white tent near the First Street Bridge.

I got a pleasant surprise.

“You must be Mrs. Talbot,” a young student said when I neared the tent. “We’ve been hoping you’d come by. We want to thank you and your husband for all that you’ve done for our funding lately. As—”

“Yes, thank you Cameron,” said a professor I didn’t recognize, “Mrs. Talbot, we’re delighted to see you. Oh, I see you’ve already bought some lunch. We have something prepared for you in back if you’d prefer.”

“Thank you, Professor...”

“Harrington. History department. I’d like to discuss the Archive Project with you after you’ve had time to relax a bit. We have a cooler tent set up if you’d like to accompany me.”

“Just a moment, Professor Harrington. I’d like to speak to this nice young man first.” I turned back to the student who seemed to be named Cameron. *Could it be?*

“Uh. Of course. The cool tent is right over there.” He pointed to what was easily identified by the portable generator as the VIP area.

“Now, Mr. Cameron,” I began. “You were about to thank me for your funding.”

“Yes, Mrs. Talbot—”

“Please. Call me Patty, or Hypatia if you must. *Mrs. Talbot* makes me feel so old.”

“Uh. Yes, Mrs., sorry, Hypatia.” He blushed. “You and Mr. Talbot contributed to the University Fund for Off the Wall Projects. Sorry, I mean the Advanced Research Fund. The other...” He stopped, trying to figure out how much of a mess he’d made of things already.

I laughed. “I like the sound of Off the Wall Projects. Much more fun.”

Cameron smiled. “Yeah.”

“Do you have a first name?” I asked.

“James Sterling, but most people call me Cam or Cammy.”

I gave him my best smile. “I used to have a good friend called Cammy. It’s a nice name.” .” *Cammy! It is you! What luck to find you in this time! Or maybe not luck. The future Cammy named my Hypatia. Could he have known? I loved him. Was I destined to find his younger self here?*

Cam blushed again, apparently unused to such attention from a rich, famous, and I hoped still beautiful, woman.

Red chose that moment to complain about the lack of attention he was getting from his mother. “Mommy pick up.” He held his arms out. I stooped and picked him up. “Can you see better now, sweet?”

“I want hot dog.”

“OK, but you have to sit in the stroller to eat it.”

“Why?”

“Well, because I’m afraid you might drop it otherwise.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you well.”

“Why?”

“Not now, Red. I want to talk to this cute guy about his research.” I smiled at Cam again.

“I don’t like him. He got a beard. I don’t like beards.”

Cam did indeed have a beard, though one that was a bit thin around the edges. He also had the steady gaze from grey eyes that I remembered from the much older version I’d known in another life. He wore his hair close cropped, as was the style these days. Only a bit taller than me, he had on a Longhorn T-shirt, khaki shorts, and Birkenstock sandals.

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Red. You might hurt his feelings.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. I just grew the beard to please my girlfriend, and now...”

I cocked my head, waiting for more, but Cam seemed disinclined to expand on his problem with his girlfriend.

“Well,” I continued, “maybe we could trim it up a bit, so she, and Red, would find it more attractive.”

Cam blushed again. *Am I really flirting with this boy? How old is he? Do I care?* I started trying to do the mental arithmetic but couldn’t remember how old Cammy was in the future.

“Tell me about your research,” I said, trying to get the discussion back on track. “Are you a grad student, or what?”

“No, I’m just a senior, but I have a really nifty senior engineering project. I’m trying to build an ultraviolet laser.”

Suddenly, I was no longer interested in flirting. This was serious business.

“Fascinating,” I said. “I was just reading about the problems of extending lasers into higher frequencies. Something Mark had. Physical Letters or something like that.”

“That was my note,” Cam said excitedly. “I think I’ve found a way around it, but I...”

“You need more money.”

“Yes. I know you’ve been incredibly generous already, so I was afraid to ask, but then I saw you heading toward our tent, and...”

“Not only cute, but brilliant and ready to seize an opportunity. I see a great future for you, Cam. Tell you what. I have to go deal with these tiresome old guys right now, but I’d love to talk to you more. What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. I’m supposed to go to the lake with...What time tomorrow?”

“Name it,” I said. “I’m flexible.”

“We could meet for breakfast.”

“A wonderful suggestion. Shall I bring some tacos to the lab? You are going to give me a demonstration, aren’t you?”

“I...uh...sure. That would be great. How about 8:30?”

“I’ll be there. Send me e-mail with the location.” I dug a card out of my waist pack and gave it to him. “That’s my private address, please be careful with it.” I wanted to kiss him, but contented myself with a demure handshake, then headed toward the VIP tent. I turned back halfway there and gave him a cheerful wave.

“Seen the latest map of the plague?” Aaron asked.

“Getting nearer?” I asked in return.

Aaron turned the laptop screen showing the extent of recent outbreaks. Red areas were as near as Colorado, with some isolated outbreaks in western Oklahoma.

“There doesn’t seem to be any pattern to it,” Mark whispered, taking a bite of his croissant.

“That’s what the comments say,” Aaron agreed. “Doesn’t act like a natural epidemic.”

“Well,” I noted, “that fits with the DNA evidence. It’s manmade.”

“Strange that it hit us first,” Aaron said. “Maudie.”

“Maybe that wasn’t the plague after all,” I suggested.

“Symptoms seem to be the same.”

“Maybe Maudie was a test,” Mark suggested.

“That would mean that the plague came from here,” Aaron objected, “not the Middle East.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time our government has lied to us,” Mark said, sipping some of his incredibly expensive coffee. “Maybe it’s a Christian plot. From what you’ve told me, Maudie was outspoken on the subject. Was she Wiccan?”

“Not officially,” Aaron said, “but that’s where her sympathies lay. You think she may have been targeted?”

“No way to tell now, but...”

“I can’t believe someone would release the plague on purpose.”

“Well,” I said, “regardless of who released it, we have to deal with the consequences. It’s bound to get here. We need to be prepared.”

“How?” Aaron asked.

“There’s really only one defense against an epidemic of this magnitude. Quarantine, or in this case, reverse quarantine.”

“What’s that?”

“We hunker down here and keep all the sick people out. The practice has been common in Africa for generations. It’s the defense against Ebola and similar viruses. Keep away from the sick people until they all die.”

“Can’t we do anything to help them?”

“I don’t think we have time. All we can do is prepare for the end.”

“The end?”

“The end of civilization, Aaron, if we’re lucky. Otherwise, it’s probably the end of our species’ hold on the planet.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you? This is part of your vision of the future.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “We have a few years left before the final Collapse. We need to use the time effectively. Which reminds me. I need to leave for a meeting with a young genius who has the key to our survival.” I kissed Mark tenderly. “Don’t tire yourself out, sweet. Try to rest some.”

“Go to your meeting,” he said. “I’ll be OK. Aaron is going to take care of Red today.”

4. Academic Pursuits

November 15, 2033
Austin, TX

I carefully pushed open the door to Cammy's lab, careful not to spill the food and drink I had in my hands. Backing in carefully, I put the tray on a table near the entrance and donned a lab smock and safety goggles. Then I moved deeper into the lab, a jumble of equipment with thick cables stretching everywhere. Walking required considerable attention.

"Hi, Cam," I said when I was close enough for him to hear me over the constant din of the machines. "How's it look?"

"I think this is going to be the night," he said, not for the first time.

"Want to snack on something before the big *event*?"

"I guess so." He turned to greet me, smiled, and took one of the sandwiches on the tray. The hotel had gotten used to my routine and prepared enough for both of us with some left over in case the trial lasted into the wee hours. I had smuggled a couple of Shiner Bocks into the place, a serious violation of University policy.

We ate and drank in silence. "Want to tell me what you're doing?" I asked.

"I think that I've tuned the frequency to the exact point we need, but I guess I've said that before."

He had. In truth, I had no idea what the research involved. I just knew that we were going to need some high-powered lasers in the future and that Cammy was going to be responsible.

Cammy seemed to notice that I wore nothing beneath the T-shirt, which I took as a good sign. First things first, though.

"I guess I can't delay any longer," he said, wadding up the paper from the sandwich. Draining the beer, he moved to the control area and adjusted some settings on the equipment. I'd seen him do it hundreds of times and loved watching him. His hands were the same as I recalled from the future: quick and agile, with long fingers and carefully clipped nails. I'd watched them doing experiments in class and lab since, well, as far back as I could remember.

"Kiss for luck?" I asked. It was part of the ritual.

He offered a cheek. I gave him a peck.

He pressed a red button on the control panel, activating something far back in the lab. I low whine began a familiar crescendo, ascending to high notes before, "Wham!"

"What was that?" I asked in alarm.

He turned to stare at me. "I think it worked."

We quickly moved to check the target of steel against one wall of the room. It had a neat circular hole in the middle.

"It worked! It worked!" He started dancing around. Grabbing my hands, he twirled me with him until we were both dizzy. We paused in our celebration and gazed into each other's eyes.

Now, I thought. This is the moment I've been waiting for.

We were still holding hands. I pulled him into my arms and kissed him on the mouth. He seemed a bit unsure what to do, but then he kissed me back. I pulled my T-shirt over my head and pressed against him. I could feel the effect it was having. He was, after all, young and probably flooded with testosterone.

I yanked his shirt off and unbuckled his belt. Pulling down his pants and underwear, I saw that he was ready for more. I dropped to my knees and began to caress him.

“Mrs. Talbot,” he said.

I shushed him. “Careful, you don’t want to ruin the moment. Say Hypatia.”

“Hypatia, I’m...”

“That’s better. Just keep repeating it.”

“Hypatia. Hypatia, oh my god, Hypatia.”

It was all over too quickly. I pulled my shirt on again. Then I dressed him again, letting my hand wander over his young body.

“Don’t you have to make some notes?” I asked.

He seemed to wake up. “Oh shit! Yes!” He grabbed his lab book and began scribbling rapidly.

“I have a good idea how we can celebrate,” I said.

Although the Last Days were generally a time when things came unstuck, the period did produce some notable innovations. Foremost among these was the provision for unfettered private sex. I drove up I35 to an exit I knew and pulled into a building with the address 6969, the only indication of the buildings function. A gray block of concrete, it looked as inviting as a jail.

I drove around the back of the structure and up to a garage door with a green light over it. A card reader near the entrance accepted my credit card and opened the door. I parked the car and got out.

“What’s this place?” Cammy asked.

“A specialized kind of motel,” I replied. “For people who want some privacy and are prepared to pay for it.” I didn’t add that Mark and I owned the place. It was a steady moneymaker.

I ushered him thru a door into a small entry area with an elevator. Three doors led into the area, but only one would open at a time. There were no casual meetings between patrons. Security cameras covered the garage and entry area. The establishment promised privacy, not anonymity. Patrons were watched carefully, and any hint of violence resulted in quick ejection, and possible criminal charges.

I pressed the elevator button. The door opened and we entered. There were no controls on the elevator. It simply took us to the appropriate level. We found ourselves in a lavishly appointed bedroom, complete with anything you might want for an evening with your paramour.

“May I get you anything?” a computerized voice asked.

“Roederer Champagne, two glasses,” I replied.

“Coming up. Anything else?”

“Cannabis?”

“You know that’s not legal.”

“Yes, but...”

“We have several strains. Would you like to see a menu?”

“Any of that *Train Wreck* left?”

“Coming up.”

A few minutes later, we heard a dumb waiter ascending, and a discreet bell announced the arrival of our treats.

I quickly fired up a joint.

“You seem to know how to roll one of those,” Cammy noted.

“Lots of experience,” I told him. I took a long hit and passed it to him. He took a small one.

“First time?”

“Yes.”

“How about earlier?”

“Oh hell yes.” I haven’t had many girlfriends, and none that...”

“Good thing we have lots of time. I’m not due back until mid-morning.”

“I’ve never...”

“Leave everything to me,” I told him.

He did.

5. Dinner Plans **February 14, 2034** **Austin, TX**

“Does your husband know about us?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“How did he find out?” Cammy asked.

“I told him.”

“You told him!”

“Sure. We’re married. We don’t have secrets from each other. Well, not often anyway.” I thought of Mark’s secret project. *Was tonight going to be the unveiling?*

I dragged a finger down Cameron’s spine, thinking as always that he was too thin. Idly caressing my young lover, I found myself wondering if he would be interested in another round.

I could feel the heat rising in my face as I thought about our lovemaking. I always felt a bit guilty, not because of Mark, after all, he had encouraged me to find someone. His illness had progressed to the level where sex was out of the question in any case. No, the guilt resulted from the way I invariably thought about the old man I loved as a child, the man this Cameron was destined to become. *Which one am I really making love to?*

Cammy rolled over to look at me. “I’m not sure I can really go thru with this dinner party tonight.”

I kissed him tenderly. “Of course you can. I’ll be there if you need help. But you and Mark are going to hit it off. I’m sure of it. You’re the only person I’ve met who may be as smart as he is. This is going to be about your research, after all, not about us.”

“Well, yes, but...”

I missed Ambianca, who was still involved with Mark and ignoring music. I recalled the Carly Simon song with the line about making love for old time sake. That would be perfect now. *Oh, what the hell.*

I said, “Here, let me take your mind off dinner.”

As it turned out, the evening was not what I expected.

The food was fabulous, as usual. I remembered how Mark had once claimed that the extent of his culinary skill was homemade mayonnaise, tuna salad, and omelets. Those days were long gone. Sometime during the missing years he’d become a gourmet.

Now, unable to cook himself, he had to be content with rolling around the hotel kitchen issuing orders to a harried staff that had plenty of other work to do but humored him. Perhaps the fact that Mark owned the hotel had something to do with it.

For tonight’s meal, he had managed to locate some fresh shrimp, crab, and redfish. The kitchen had assembled these into a New Orleans inspired dish Mark called “redfish Pontchartrain.”

Accompanied by brown rice and a simple spinach dish, it was worthy of the best restaurants in that sad, drowned city.

Mark also broke out the champagne, which prompted me to ask about the occasion. “I’ve finally finished with the project I’ve been working on. We may have an opportunity for a demo later this evening.”

Cameron was unused to such luxury and seemed diffident at first until Mark spoke frankly. “Listen, young Cameron, I wanted to talk to you about your project. Hypatia says it’s important, and I pay attention when she tells me that. We need to get serious...after we finish eating. This meal is too good to let it get cold.”

The argument persuaded Cameron, who was as hungry as most students his age. He also drank more champagne than he intended, so that he was slightly inebriated when Mark brought up the subject that had hung over the table all thru dinner. “Don’t worry about banging Hypatia. I’m cool with that.”

Cameron blushed and choked on his drink. Mark continued, “She’s been monogamous for quite a while, and I’m going to die soon. I wouldn’t expect her to wait until I’m gone. Just wanted you to put that aside. We need to talk about your project, not our favorite bed partner.”

I kissed him affectionately. *What a wonderful man.*

However, knowing that the talk would likely start with quantum field theory and then get complicated, I excused myself and wandered into the office. Music began playing as soon as I entered, a haunting Gregorian chant I didn’t recognize. I listened for a while, content to let the soothing sound simply wash over me. Hard echoes of female voices suggested a setting in a church or monastery.

Suddenly, the significance of the music hit me. “Ambianca! You’re back!”

“Yes, dear. Did you miss me?”

“Horribly. What is this you’re playing?”

“It’s a selection from an album called *1000: A Mass for the End of Time*, sung by a group of women called the *Anonymous 4*. I rather like the sound. I suspect that the original mass was not written for women’s voices, but I approve the change. What do you think? I can find something else.”

“I like it. Very soothing.”

“Good. I thought you might need an anodyne.”

“So you chose something about the end of time!” I laughed.

“I’m practicing irony.”

“I see. Are you going to tell me about this secret project you and Mark have been working on?”

“That would spoil the surprise.”

“I didn’t realize you enjoyed surprises.”

“I’m practicing that as well.”

“OK. Let’s just listen for a bit.” I sat in a chair in front of one of the computer screens, closed my eyes and thought about the end of time. In the stump speech César wrote for me, I called the notion of the End of Time bullshit. Now, as I thought about the wreckage of civilization and the upcoming Collapse, I wasn’t sure. Besides, as I’d learned in the history lessons Professor Hardy drummed into me in the future, the year 1000 wasn’t that bad. Oh, sure, most people were miserable, but they were about to start a 300-year period of improvement, only to be interrupted by the Black Death. I wasn’t sure that I was looking at a 300-year long period of improvement. I suspected this time was more like the beginning of the Dark Ages at the end of the Roman Empire. Certainly, all my plans assumed that. *Plans*. I roused myself. What were Mark and Cammy talking about? They’d been left alone long enough.

Rising and stretching, I wandered back into the dining room, where I saw the two of them huddled over some crude drawings on the back of napkins. They seemed to be engineering some kind of fence, but beyond that, I could tell nothing.

“Time for dessert?” I asked.

They both looked up at me. “Dessert? Yes. I ordered your favorite,” Mark said. He proceeded to unveil a large serving of *Crème Brûlée* covered with out-of-season raspberries. It was a perfect example of the careless extravagance of the Last Days.

“This calls for another bottle of champagne,” I said. “How are the two of you doing?”

“Mr. Talbot has some great ideas for a quarantine area. I’ve been talking to him about what we need to make it work. There is a small problem with goosing the microwave energy up to the level required.”

“Shall we ask an expert? I’m about ready to demo my project,” Mark said. “And the name is Mark, not Mr. Talbot.”

“Yes, sir.”

I laughed. “You see why I find him so charming?” I asked Mark, who smiled like an indulgent parent.

“Bring dessert into the office,” he said, turning his wheelchair and rolling toward the door. By the time I had arranged a tray to carry everything and moved into the office, Mark had already fired up the program he’d been working on so assiduously. I almost dropped the tray when I saw the face on the screen.

“JJ!”

“What?” Mark asked.

“That’s JJ. You created JJ! He’s a computer program!” Several pieces fell into place. “Ambianca helped you create the program. That’s what you’ve been doing. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t realize that you knew JJ.”

“Who is this JJ everyone is talking about?” said a voice from the computer that I recognized immediately.

“Apparently, Patty has just given you a new name.”

“What about *George*?” JJ asked.

“George?” I asked.

“That’s the name we’ve been using for the program,” Mark explained.

“Ah,” I said. “Now I understand. George Orr. Or Jor-Jor. JJ”

The face on the computer frowned slightly, but then brightened up. “Very good, Princess. I like it.”

Cameron had stood this as long as he could, but now he objected, “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“It’s a long story,” Mark said.

“A very long story,” I agreed. “Why don’t you plan on spending the night?”

Breakfast was my favorite, Eggs Benedict. Today, I found the Béarnaise sauce covered with sprinkles of something black that Mark identified as truffles.

“Where do they come from?” I demanded.

“Europe, I think. Why?”

“The ridiculous excess of flying something so insignificant across the ocean just to decorate my eggs—”

“They’d simply go to waste. Besides, there aren’t many people left alive in Europe to eat them.”

“That doesn’t make it right to fly them—”

“Ah, but it does. The plane went to France carrying medical personnel and supplies in a vain attempt to halt the spread of plague. You wouldn’t want the planes to return empty, would you?”

I decided to shut up and eat. We had been awake into the early morning hours, explaining my unique life to young Cameron.

“Let me see if I understand this,” he asked finally, sometime about 3:30. “You first lived in the future, where I was a surrogate father?”

“Right. You insisted on naming me Hypatia. Now, we know why.”

Cammy waved his hand in dismissal and continued, “Then you spent time in 1998 and the years after that, where you met Mark before showing up here in our time.”

“You got it.”

“It sounds like total bullshit.”

“An understandable reaction. We haven’t told many people. In fact, you’re the only one in this time who knows the entire story. Aaron has heard and guessed some, but...”

“So, I’m special.”

“Very special,” I assured him. I wanted to hug him but thought that might lead the discussion in the wrong direction. “Your laser is the key to the future. I’m guessing that the fence you and Mark

talked about is too, but I'm not sure about that. I know that the laser is the key to the establishment of the Republic."

"And the Republic is your way to save civilization."

"Maybe. Think of the Library at Alexandria and how much better life would have been if it had been preserved. Think of the Florentine Republic at the start of the Renaissance. It wasn't really much of a republic by modern standards, but for the time..."

"Yes. So, when is this all going to happen?"

"Very soon," I assured him. "Probably before we're ready for it."

Mark interrupted, "We have a line on the microwave stuff. A secret Pentagon program."

"If it's secret, how did you—"

"JJ, as we're now calling him, helped. He found the company with the contract. I bought the company." He chuckled and leaned back to accept congratulations for his cleverness.

"You bought the company to get to the microwave project?" Cammy asked.

"When the world is about to end, money needs to be used wisely. We had a small problem due you two and your recent shenanigans. The feds didn't want to give us the required security clearance. Had a fun with them. They planted a tracking device on Hypatia's car and installed a keystroke logger on my computer. I didn't find the logger for almost ten minutes. I must be getting old." He chuckled again.

"They've been tracking my car?" I exclaimed. I didn't like the idea that they were following Cammy and me into the House of Fornication.

"Relax," Mark replied. "We found it easily and switched it to another vehicle. They've been tracking one of the hotel maids. Hope she hasn't done anything wrong."

He tossed off some champagne, which reminded me of the time I had two beers for breakfast. That was interesting. I quickly returned my attention to the present. Mark was talking.

"I want you to come work for us," Mark said to Cameron. "Turn the Pentagon's project into our fence."

"I don't know. I had planned..."

"You don't have time for those plans. How long do we have, Hypatia?"

"A little over two years," I told him. "Forget about the PhD. You won't need it."

"I think Patty and I need to discuss a few things," Cammy said. "In private."

Uh-oh.

Alone in one of the bedrooms, Cammy got to the point. "First, I want to know if you seduced me just to get me to work on this stuff."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Then, I wonder if it was because you have some kind of father fixation and this was your way to satisfy it."

That was a bit too close to the truth. I tried to explain.

“Cammy, I love you. I loved you as a father. I love you now. Don’t you see the beautiful symmetry? I love you now partly because I know the man you will become. You loved me in the future partly because you knew of the woman I was to become. I know you love me because you loved me in the future when, well, when things are different.”

He thought about it for a while. “When we make love, do you think of me, or him?”

“Don’t you see?” I asked. “It’s all the same. You’re you! I love *you*. Now, and then.”

He considered it. “I do love you, you know. You’re the first woman who ever paid attention to me, the first, the only one I’ve had sex with. You mean more to me than you can imagine. I just want to believe it was for me, not my future self.”

I sighed with exasperation. “You’ll understand someday, and when you do, remember this time, when I explained it all to you and told you how much you mean to me. I knew we would have this conversation someday. I realize now that Cammy knew about me all the time. That’s why he insisted on naming me Hypatia. That’s why he was so good to me. He loved me then because he loves me now. And I love you.”

“What about Mark?”

“What about him?”

“Well, which one of us do you love?”

“Is that what you’re worried about? I love you both. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Not to me. Besides, I want you all to myself.”

“Well, too bad. I’m not like that. Listen, somewhere along the line you’ll find some cute young undergrad that captures your heart.” I’d seen her picture in Cammy’s office in the future, but I didn’t think it was a good time to bring it up. “She’s the love of your life, not me.”

“You can’t have me all to yourself,” I continued, “but that doesn’t you can’t have me.”

I took his hand and led him over to the bed. “This has been an eventful day for you. It’s OK if you need some time to think it over. I hope you agree, though. I want to have you around as much as possible.” I pushed him gently down onto the bed and kissed him as I untied the belt on the robe he wore.

6. *Lily of the Valley* March 21, 2034 Austin, TX

I sat at a long table in Mama Li's Noodle House on Guadalupe Street, better known as "the drag." Cammy was supposed to meet me for lunch. I toyed with my Lo Mein, wondering when he was going to show up. He was already late, a common occurrence these days.

"May I sit here?" someone asked.

"Of course," I replied, looking up. I knew her immediately: tall and athletic, long black hair, tanned face with distinctive blue eyes tinged with gold. I had seen her picture in Cammy's office in the future. Her name, I recalled, was Lily. She was Cammy's Great Love. Other than that, I knew little about her.

"You're Hypatia Talbot," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes," I said. "I am. And you are..."

"Lily Murchison," she replied, holding out her hand for me to shake. Formalities out of the way, I had a better chance to study her. Her face reminded me of someone, but I couldn't place it. Her slim figure sported breasts a bit too large for her overall look of an athlete, but the result was very pleasing.

"I'm expecting a friend to show up soon," I said. "We need to save him a seat."

"No problem," she replied. "A boyfriend?"

"Sort of."

"I thought you were married."

"I am."

Conversation died down.

"My mother knew your husband, years ago."

"Really? In Houston?"

"Yes, and a cabin in Leakey. She sold it to Mr. Talbot when they broke up."

"You're Delfina's daughter!"

"You know about her?"

Oops! That was the other Hypatia.

"Only by reputation. You seem to have inherited her renowned beauty."

"Thanks. You are as lovely as they say also."

"Nice of you to say so," I replied. *I could get to like this girl!*

Cammy picked that time to show up and I treated me to something I had experienced myself with Mark, but never expected to see again. The two of them stared at each other for much longer than was polite. I half expected to see some electricity to spark between them. I managed to get their attention long enough to introduce them.

I might as well have been invisible. They spent the entire meal talking about themselves. Cammy's scientific projects fascinated Lily, and he was excited to hear about her sorority doings — or pretended to be.

After I finished my noodles, I mumbled some excuse and left them together.

Lily quickly became a member of our household. Coming in with Cammy when he returned to the hotel and eating with us. When Mark learned of her connection to Delfina, he quizzed her about her mother in a way I found a bit too much. I remember how much I disliked Del the one time I had met her.

“So, Delfina managed to find a rich husband in the end,” was my contribution. Mark scowled at me, but Lily laughed, and said, “You got that right. My poor father never knew what hit him. He was much older than she was and...” She trailed off, realizing that Mark and I might object to the line she was taking.

Mark and I both chuckled. He said, “Don't worry, Lily. We're used to it. I suppose you've heard the rumor about Hypatia's plastic surgery.”

“Well, yes. I read *PeopleMag.com* like lots of people. I expected someone different. You know, a...” She let it drop again.

I really liked the girl, and we quickly became best friends, especially after she came to me alone one night when Mark and Cammy were busy.

“Cammy says that you taught him everything about sex,” she said after closing the door.

“He was a fast learner,” I replied. She didn't need to know everything.

“I want to thank you,” she continued. “It's been fabulous. I have the feeling, though, that he wishes I knew more. I was thinking that maybe you could, you know, give me some tips.”

I smiled. She was completely ingenuous, which I found not only amazing, but very refreshing. I was happy to help. “Let's see if we can find some videos on the internet,” I suggested.

7. Harvest Time September 30, 2034 near Leakey, TX

“I finally managed to find an ultra-light plane,” Mark said unexpectedly at breakfast.

“I didn’t realize you were looking for one,” I said.

“I hope it is the final item on your list for the cabin in Leakey. I remember you saying that you’d flown in one once.”

“Right. It was in the storage at the cabin. Ron had to assemble it from the parts.”

“Exactly,” he continued. “Would you like to take it to the cabin and stash it away?”

“Can we get enough fuel?”

“Already done. I just need someone to drive out there. While you’re there, you could take care of the harvest. It should be about time. Of course, I don’t know what it will be like this year, but you never can tell. There’s a dryer in the garage that you can use.”

“Sounds like a fun trip,” I said, “pun intended.”

When Lily heard about the plan, she was dead set to go with me. “I’ve never seen this cabin, but Mom talked about it a lot. I think she was sorry she let it go.”

Thus, on a lovely but warm September morning, we set off in a large SUV with the ultra-light neatly stowed together with enough gasoline in cans to get us to California, or at least to Leakey and back.

The trip out there brought back many memories. I was appalled to see how desolate the area had become. Even in Medina and Bandera. Everything was deserted.

Lily was fascinated by Ambianca after turning the crank to get her to appear on the monitor. When Ambianca played a song, Lily threw herself into the game, shouting, “Wait, wait, I know this one” time after time. Eventually, Ambianca laughed— really laughed— and decided to let us in. I didn’t know that she knew how to laugh, but I was pleased to find out about it. Was that a new addition, along with learning about irony and surprises?

I showed Lily the bedroom and challenged her to find the door. When she gave up, I showed her. She was delighted, clapping her hands and dancing around. “Awesome” was her description.

Opening the door to the storage area proved more daunting. I finally located the proper hole in the concrete and slid the massive block aside. It took both of us to carry the ultra-light into the area and put it where I remembered seeing it in the future.

Then, it was time to see about the harvest.

“I don’t think this lake was here when your mother owned the place. Mark built the dam to create it. That is, he had it built.” I blathered.

“Cool.”

“We could take a swim.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s cold.”

“Yeah.”

“That stuff is dynamite.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s hot in the sun.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on.” I tugged her up. We ran down to the edge and stripped quickly. “There’s only one way to get in,” I said, and raced into the water, letting the cold envelope me.

We were both totally baked on cannabis.

Lily surfaced near me. She laughed at my slow breaststroke, swimming around me in an efficient crawl, splashing water at me each time she passed. “I lettered on the varsity swim team in high school,” she noted unnecessarily while treading water in front of me. We made our way to the large rock, barely above water now, and pulled out. The sun warmed me quickly. I rolled over and let the rays cover me. I felt her shadow on me and opened my eyes. I stood up and moved closer to her. Thinking back, I’m not sure which of us made the first move. I know that I somehow found myself pressed against her.

I gazed up at her. Her eyes locked on mine. I could feel her breasts pressed against me. She waited, the unspoken question hung in the air between us. I could smell a remnant of her perfume, mixed with the aroma of marijuana. We kissed. Then she just looked at me, her face questioning.

“Yes,” I said, “Yes. I will. Yes.”

We lay together in the bed that held so many memories for me. *How often have I made love here*, I wondered? My head rested on Lily’s shoulder. Her nipple was so close I thought I could touch it with my tongue. I was considering it when she spoke for the first time in many minutes.

“Have you ever done this before?” she asked.

“Once, in this very bed.”

“Wow! When was that?”

Oops! I’ve done it now.

“Years ago,” I replied. “A beautiful young woman named Amanda and I.”

“Oh. You have to tell me about it.”

“Well, she was young, like you, beautiful, maybe not quite as lovely as you, but very nice. She was very much in love with me. We only made love that once. After that, I woke up in 1998 with Mark.”

“Wait, what?”

“I may as well tell you everything. You probably won’t believe it. Cammy didn’t.”

I spent the next hour describing my strange life to my new lover. She listened intently, interrupting with a question rarely. When I got to the part about Amanda returning my amulet, she asked, “What happened to the amulet?”

“You know, I’m not sure. It may be in that drawer.” I pointed to a small table near the bed. She checked and held the amulet for both of us to look at.

“You think this has something to do with your *transitioning*?”

“I’ve come to that conclusion. It’s the only common element to all the times, including when Chloe left me. She was chewing on it before she disappeared.”

“What if I put it on?”

“I don’t think it works on most people. It’s not like some magic item. It just seems to be connected somehow.”

She put it around my neck. “It looks beautiful on you.” She touched the necklace, then let her hand drift to my breast, which she stroked gently. “You’re beautiful.”

“Not like you,” I replied. I caressed her breast, feeling a shudder at my touch. “That’s enough talking for a while,” I continued, matching action to words. God, she was so beautiful. I could think of nothing except how much I wanted to touch her, to kiss her. I suspected our time together was going to be short. I wanted to spend most of it just like this.

Afterward, we lay together again, and I drifted into a blissful sleep.

8. Surprising Revelation

April 17, 2087
Leakey, NRT

I awoke in the bed in the cabin, alone. I could hear the shower running and lay back waiting. I was starving. When had I eaten last?

Amanda's gasp startled me. She continued, "Oh my God, what happened to you? You aged overnight. You look ten years older. What happened?"

"Amanda?" I managed to say finally. "What's today's date?"

She told me. I had transitioned back following our night of lovemaking so long ago.

"Ten years is about right," I told her.

"Oh. I get it. You've been somewhere else and just came back."

"Right. You, however, are as beautiful as ever." That got a smile.

"You've been gone that long. What brought you back?"

"Apparently, I was thinking of you when I fell asleep. There is a certain symmetry to the events. I'll fill you in, after breakfast. I'm famished."

"OK." She walked over to me and kissed me.

"Mmmm. That was nice. I'm glad I'm not *too* old. Maybe we can spend some time together."

"Sounds wonderful. We have the place to ourselves for days. I'm dying to hear what happened to you."

"Over coffee," I said.

After several cups of real coffee, bacon, eggs, potatoes, and some fresh peaches, I was able to tell my story. When I finished, Amanda simply sat looking at me pensively. "You have to write it all down," she said after some time. She nibbled on a piece of toast while she thought some more. "You don't belong here any longer, much as I hate to say it. You probably need to go back to the Last Days. We know that someone named Hypatia was instrumental in the formation of the NRT. That must be you. And don't think you can just mention Lily and get away with it. I want to hear all about that part of your little adventure."

I laughed. "Lily wanted to hear all about you when I told her. She asked if I'd ever been with another woman before. I admitted that I had once, in the very same bed."

She fingered the amulet. "So, you think this is the key to your travels?"

"It's part of it, but I don't understand everything. I have to be wearing it when I switch to a different era, but obviously, I don't switch all the time, so..."

She seemed lost in thought.

"Maybe, after the Revolution and everything, you could come back here. We could..."

"I'm not sure that's how it works. One thing I know for sure is that someone or something is pulling the strings. I'm just a marionette dancing to a distant tune."

"More than that," she said, smiling. "Much more."

We spent three days as a couple, spending hours sitting on the deck talking about my strange life, the New Church and César's plans, the Allied States, and the future for that organization. Amanda paid careful attention to my thoughts, especially about the New Church. She took copious notes as we talked, copying what I said almost verbatim. That was a bit scary.

"I almost forgot," she said one during one meeting. "Ron left you a gift."

She returned with a backpack made of some strange red material. "He says it's got the property you need. Whatever you put in here will still be there in a different time. Something to do with quantum entanglement. I don't understand it at all. JJ does and tried to explain it to me, but..."

"How does it work?" I moved to pick it up. Suddenly the top sprang open.

"It's keyed to you according to Ron. He says it has a secret compartment in a false bottom. He put some of the stuff from your drawer in the dorm room into it. He says you'll know what everything is."

We returned to the discussion of the New Church. "Don't let César control everything," I told her after a long conversation. "You have a lot to contribute." I wished I could be around to see how it turned out.

We snacked when we felt like it, drank margaritas, smoked more marijuana from Amanda's sizable stash and generally had a fine, short vacation. I needed it.

We also had sex. It was different this time around. I could tell that Amanda remembered my earlier self and was a bit tentative about this older version. She never said anything. It was just a feeling.

I decided that I really liked men better, although I found myself wondering what Lily would think. Would she be jealous? I couldn't stop thinking of Lily. I missed her, even when I lay with Amanda. How strange.

That was the last thing I remember as we fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

9. Considering Lily October 2, 2034 Near Leakey, TX

I woke up in the same bed, but with a different companion. I knew at once that I was back in 2034. For one thing, I was starving. I slipped out of Lily's embrace, trying not to wake her, and headed for the kitchen. Not much there. I managed to find a beer in the fridge and remembered my solitary adventure either a long or short time ago depending on how you looked at it. I drank the beer with gusto and started searching for something else to eat. There was plenty in the survival goods hidden in the cave, but that meant slipping past Lily without waking her up. I was so intent on food that I didn't hear her wake up.

She slipped up behind me, only her perfume giving her away, as she kissed me on the neck. "Finding anything for breakfast?" she asked, letting her hand linger on my shoulder. Needing something to eat and wondering whether she would feel slighted, I explained, "I've been away."

"What?"

"I spent three days with Amanda in 2087."

"No!"

"Yep."

"Should I be jealous?"

Instead of answering, I pulled her close and kissed her, feeling the heat of a sexual response. *This is getting out of hand. What will Cammy think?* Lily wasn't ready to let go, holding me against her so close I felt her heartbeat throbbing against my breast.

"I need something to eat," I said finally.

"Oh, right. You're always hungry after a transition."

I smiled. "You catch on fast."

"Let's find something, then..."

A quick trip to the storage area turned up some freeze-dried packets of food that provided the needed sustenance, albeit without a lot of flavor.

As we ate and drank some real coffee, I asked her, "Lily, how old are you? 20?"

"21."

My face must have betrayed some skepticism. "Well, almost 21," she admitted after a bit.

"What do you see in me? I'm old enough to be your mother. What's the attraction?"

She laughed. "Cammy told me to expect this."

"What?"

"He said that you don't realize how other people see you. You're unique. You have amazing powers. You don't realize how people react when you enter the room. You're always the center of attention. You speak and people act. You are changing the world. Yet, you seem to be just living your life without thinking about what you're creating."

“Cammy said all that?”

“That and lots more. Well, I figured out some of it for myself. Cammy says that you are the New Messiah, someone come to usher us into the new age that is about to arrive.”

“I should never have told him about that.”

“Nonsense! What if it’s true?”

“Superstitious bullshit.”

“Oh, love, you really *don’t* understand.”

I ignored everything and focused on the word *love*. “I’m glad you feel that way.” *And I love you. Why can’t I say it?*

She looked into my face. Did she know what I was thinking? “It isn’t just about sex, though that is fabulous.” She stretched the last word into about six syllables. “I love you. Everyone does.”

“Oh, Lily. This is absurd. It’ll never work, but I love you too. It makes no sense.”

I really didn’t know how to act. I was professing love to someone who could be my daughter, and actually was the daughter of at least one person who didn’t love me, contrary to Lily’s assertion.

Lily knew what to do. She took me by the hand and led me back into the bedroom.

We spent the next two days honeymooning, doing crazy stuff suitable for a twenty-year-old. Lily took charge with alacrity and lots of imagination.

Things changed when we got back to Austin. There was no point in trying to hide our new relationship. Mark and Cammy both knew at once that everything was different. I feared that I would drive a wedge between Cammy and Lily. Something did, I knew that. All pictures of Lily showed her as a beautiful young woman. They didn’t grow old together as he hoped. Was I the reason?

Lily told me a few days later, “No. It’s funny. He loves to hear me talk about the two of us. It even turns him on.” She grinned. “Want to have a threesome?”

“Absolutely not!” *I want you all to myself.*

“We’re going to get married.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I asked him and he agreed. He says I have to finish my schoolwork first. That’ll take some time.”

Most UT students took several years to earn a degree. There were too many distractions.

“Well,” I said finally. “That’s great!”

“You and I will still be together some,” she continued. “That was a condition I insisted on.”

“Oh. Good.” I guess the relief showed.

Lily laughed. “You should see your face.”

“I was never good at poker.”

“Cammy said there is a place on I-35 that I should ask you about.”

“Did he?” *What about today?*

“What does Mark think?”

“Mark realized long ago that he had to share me. Besides...he’s busy now. Want to visit the place Cammy mentioned?”

“Well, I should study...but let’s go.”

After that, everything settled into a pattern. Cammy and Lily proceeded to get married as promised, in a lovely Christmas wedding, long before Lily had finished her studies. They became regulars at our dinner table, much to Red’s delight. He seemed to regard Lily as some kind of super big sister and trailed her whenever the two were in the same place. We started letting Ambianca teach him how to read, which he thought was “way cool.”

Lily sparkled. She never let the coming catastrophe distract her. Optimism was just the way she lived. It was a pleasant change, and everyone enjoyed having her around.

We had two wonderful years together. Well, I shared her with Cammy. Mark’s health ran steadily downhill. We knew the end was coming. I knew more than that. His death was history in the future, and I had studied it intently.

The end was coming too soon.

10. Revolution

April 13, 2036

Austin, TX

Editor's note: From the Archives:

Records of the events leading up to the founding of the New Republic of Texas are sketchy, as are most records from the Last Days. In March 2036, the Plague struck Waco, and within a week, refugees began appearing on the outskirts of Austin. As only the healthiest of these survived the journey, most were admitted to the city without incident. However, as the trickle became a flood, the inhabitants began to worry about the best course of action, with most of the University arguing for some form of quarantine, and government experts for other plans. Reports of government troops firing on the refugees are dubious, but cannot be ruled out. What is known is that Governor Craddick thought the Plague was part of God's Plan for the End Times and felt prayer the only option.

Thus, the stage was set for the dramatic Easter Sunday confrontation on the steps of the Capitol.

I returned from the early birthday party, which Mark was too ill to attend, anxious to talk to him. I'd instructed the nurse to cut back on his pain medication so he would be awake and maybe lucid.

"Hi, love. Is the pain bad?"

"Yes. I understand you needed to talk to me. Let's make it quick."

"The refugees from Waco have started arriving. Time is running out. It's running out for you also. Remember how I told you I knew when you were going to die."

"Is it today?"

"Yes," I whispered, my voice cracking with emotion. "The records say you committed suicide."

"I can't go to the quarantine area. I'd just die there. May as well be comfortable. Besides, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one."

Ambianca chose that moment to play the Star Trek theme. I hissed in irritation, "I recognized the quote. As I recall, the next movie had the opposite."

"Just trying to cheer up the patient," Ambianca replied.

Mark whispered, "Later."

The music stopped.

Mark reached out and took my hand. "Listen to me. You're the most wonderful, the most important person I ever met. You must save yourself, Aaron, Red, everyone else you can. I won't last long in any case. Triage, dear, triage. Have you forgotten that you're going to be the Second Messiah, the one who will save us all?"

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I simply sat on the bed next to him and took his hand in mine.

We sat together without speaking for several minutes. Mark broke the silence, "Is everything set up at the University?"

"I hope so. The lab techs have been working 24/7 installing everything."

"You want to get most of the students inside. You'll need some young people."

I could restrain myself no longer. With tears falling onto the sheet I said, "I remember the time you saved me. I woke up when I realized you were crying."

"It's going to work out," Mark whispered, barely able to speak himself.

"I won't make it to your birthday," he continued.

I could barely manage a strangled, "It's not important."

"I wish we'd had more time together."

I managed, "Me, too. In all my strange life, you're the best thing that happened to me. And that includes being a Queen."

"I love you. Now, I think I need to be alone again. Don't worry about me. I've taken care of everything."

"How do I turn the pain medication back on?"

Ambianca spoke up, "I can take care of that, dear. Don't worry about anything." She started playing Mozart's *Requiem*.

It was shortly before dawn that I remembered that I'd promised that asshole Craddick to come to his Easter Sunrise Service.

After Aaron, Red and I had left the hotel, Ambianca sent instructions to the medical computer to increase the morphine drip, so Mark died quietly, without ever waking up.

The pompous asshole Craddick started the program, "My friends, fellow Texans, we come together today at a time of great crisis. Clearly, the End of Time is upon us. The plagues foretold in the book of Revelation have arrived. Surely, the Anti-Christ is abroad on the land. We must put all our trust in God's mercy. Please join me and Brother Jonathon, Pastor of the Church of the Living Lord, in prayer."

Brother Jonathon intoned, "At a time of crisis, we come before you Oh Lord. Deliver your people from the pestilence. We turn back to you. Hear the words God spoke to the Prophet Jeremiah, If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman." He paused for breath.

"Hear again the psalm of Jeremiah:

O LORD, my strength and my fortress,
my refuge in time of distress,
to you the nations will come
from the ends of the earth and say,

"Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods,
worthless idols that did them no good.

Do men make their own gods?
Yes, but they are not gods!

Therefore, I will teach them—
this time I will teach them
my power and might.
Then they will know
that my name is the LORD."

"Fellow Christians, we must turn back to God. Then he will preserve us. In the words of Isaiah,

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint."

Again, Brother Jonathon paused for breath. To my eyes, he did not seem to be in the best of health himself. His face was flushed, and he was sweating, though the morning was quite chilly.

I scanned the crowd. I saw many heads bowed for the prayer. Some present were even on their knees. However, if I judged correctly, a majority felt as I did that the exercise was a complete waste of time. I noticed others looking around. Some made eye contact and nodded.

As the prayer droned on, Aaron leaned over and whispered, "What are you going to do? You're not going to create a scene, are you?"

"Create a scene? Now, that's a good idea. Maybe I will." I noticed young Cameron walking purposefully toward me. *Good. I need to make sure all the preparations are complete.*

Cameron gave me a hug. He noticed my tear-stained face. "Mark?"

"He refused transport to the University. Triage and all that."

"Thinking of you, no doubt. Didn't want anything to delay you. Anyway, I was coming to let you know that we're all set at the University."

"Good. I think I'll cause a ruckus." With that, I started toward the stage set up on the Capitol steps. Brother Jonathon was still working on his plea to the Almighty, but several people saw me moving and made way. I reached the bottom step just as the preacher finally got to Amen. Craddick noticed and motioned for me to come up.

"My friends, y'all know Hypatia Talbot. Her husband Mark, a great benefactor of our city, and especially the University, is about to meet his maker, who's existence he's always denied. I confess that I would like to be present at that meeting. It's somewhat poignant that when pestilence

is loose upon the land, Mark should succumb to that old plague, cancer, rather than the new one. We ask God's mercy for him and his family. On this day especially, we should remember that save for Christ's gift we are all doomed." He bowed his head for the silent prayer. As I moved to stand in front of the microphone, I felt Craddick's hand gently fondle my ass.

I leaned over and whispered in his ear, "If you ever do that again, you filthy son of a bitch, you may find out if you're going to see Mark again, and a lot sooner than you think." Then I smiled at him.

Turning to address the crowd, I said, "Friends, our situation today is dire. You don't need me to tell you that. You've all heard of the refugees from Waco that have begun showing up on our doorstep. We need to act! And I don't mean asking God for help. Have you ever heard so much bullshit?"

I paused, before uttering the phrase that became the unofficial motto of the New Republic, "To hell with God!"

Several people in the crowd applauded. Others cried, "Blasphemy!" Recalling the trial in Veracruz, I couldn't help but smile. Both sides started calling out, but one thread gradually won out: "What can we do?"

"There is only one defense from this catastrophe. We have to quarantine ourselves. We have prepared the University to wait out the plague. We can hole up there for months if necessary, until the disease burns itself out. Those of you who want to join us are welcome, but we must act quickly. After today, we will exclude everyone else from the University. Join us today — or die."

"You can't do that," Craddick said.

"Hide and watch, you sanctimonious asshole." With that, I left the dais and headed north, toward the University, hoping that the microphone picked up my parting words.

11. Quarantine

April 13, 2036 – December 31, 2036

Austin, NRT

My co-conspirators and I had discussed at length where to hold an organizational meeting. Eventually, they agreed on my first choice, the steps of the central Library. I didn't tell anyone why I favored that spot, except for its convenient location.

Standing on a box on the top step, I could barely see over the lectern borrowed from a nearby classroom. A crowd of several thousand people had gathered in the area, with many more streaming in. Speaking into the microphone, I heard my own voice echoing back from far off buildings. "Friends," I began, "these are desperate times. Let's be clear about that. This plague has reached the northern suburbs and will be upon us within days. We must act quickly. Governor Craddick suggests that we put our trust in God and pray for deliverance. If you think that will do any good, go ahead and pray. Personally, I don't think it's worth a damn. I say, to hell with god. Let's try something else!"

I paused for some applause and cheers. "Just how bad are things? Good question. It may be the end of our civilization. The collapse we have feared is upon us. We have to act quickly to preserve what we can. This University is the key to that effort. We have to save the University! It's that simple."

The crowd grew quiet.

I continued, "I propose a *reverse quarantine*. That's a quarantine where the healthy people are inside and the sick people outside. We can set one up here by turning on an electronic fence. We've spent the last several weeks installing one by every entry to the main campus. This fence will detect anyone attempting to enter and ... discourage them. We have stockpiled enough food and supplies for months. Realize this condemns those outside to a desperate struggle to survive the virus. It's a clear case of saving some at the expense of many — an unpleasant choice — or of losing everyone. If we fail to act there is a real chance that all of us will die."

Everyone had been considering these options, but until this moment, not in such stark terms. I gave them some time to consider the dilemma. "We shouldn't take this action without deliberation. I suggest that we allow anyone who wants to speak to do so now. If we agree, I also suggest we turn on the fence late this afternoon. That will give you time to get whatever you think you'll need. We may be holed up here for weeks, or longer."

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Surrounded by a mob, I tried to answer questions as best I could. The fence, I explained, consisted of invisible lasers to detect attempted entry. That would activate a microwave system that would essentially cook anyone foolish enough to continue trying to get in.

In the end, we didn't have as much time as hoped. By noon, Governor Craddick had assembled a contingent of military and police and marched from the Capitol toward the University. The crowd around the library saw the marchers on video screens mounted on the sides of the Library and began shouting.

I, heard the noise, looked up and saw Craddick's small army approaching. Forgetting the group around me, I called out, "Cammy! Quick! Turn on the Fence!"

Watching the screen, I saw the group of armed men coming up the Drag and turning into the nearest entrance to the Library. Suddenly, they stopped, began writhing, and turned to run. Some were trampled by their companions.

“As you can see,” I commented after returning to the microphone, “the Fence is working. We’ll open a small gate at the north end of the campus for those of you who need to leave to get belongings or friends. Be careful when you return to walk slowly and stay on a line to the center of the gate.”

Virtually all the faculty members chose to stay with the University, as did most of the students, and many of the residents of the surrounding community. I had planned for 15,000, but altogether more than 20,000 crowded into the Fenced area. It made for an explosive situation. Questions over what to do began immediately. Only when the virus arrived in force, during the third week of the Quarantine, was the wisdom of the plan obvious to all. As we watched video piped in from the outside showing the streets littered with corpses, the full extent of the disaster became apparent.

Of course, the quarantine was not perfect. Despite admonitions about mosquitos, some people became infected. We dealt with them in the traditional way. They were quickly removed to a separate isolation unit, where most of them died. Anyone who had been in close contact, defined as less than 2 meters separation, was quarantined until we were sure they were not infected. Meanwhile, the biology lab worked 24/7 to develop a test for the infection. A vaccine was out of the question.

One of the infected was Lily.

Cammy and I kept death vigil for days, hoping, somehow, that she would be one of the lucky ones able to fight off the virus. He sat with her when she breathed her last after two days. We both retreated to a secluded office in one of the buildings where we drank, smoked, and told stories about the young girl we both loved.

“You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know exactly what would happen, only that you have no pictures of Lily older than her 20’s. I knew something was going to happen. I thought about telling you, but finally decided to just let happen whatever was going to happen.”

“I’m glad you did. What a wonderful time we had together.”

A few days later, a young student, Dan Hardy, approached me. With utmost deference, he asked, “Shouldn’t we be thinking about what to do next?”

Editor’s note: From the Archives:

In contrast to the Last Days, records of the early days of the New Republic are almost too voluminous to deal with. Confine several thousand students and faculty on campus for months and they will produce a plethora of blogs, lecture notes, minutes of meetings, scholarly papers, and a great deal of general nonsense. As large gatherings were prohibited, most lectures, etc., were online and easily captured for posterity.

Historians have mined this trove in an attempt to learn how a rag tag conglomeration of people whose only defining attribute was an instinct for self-preservation managed to produce the

Austin Consensus, not to mention a Constitution for the New Republic. Most of the credit must go to the young student genius with an encyclopedic knowledge of history and a talent for producing agreement. That Dan Hardy was a genius is beyond dispute. He played the central role in formulating the Consensus and inventing the formal mechanism for voting that still survives in some of the most isolated parts of the Allied States.

Hypatia, the leader of the Revolution, also deserves praise for recognizing Hardy's gift. She quickly relinquished her role as leader to her young protégé, preferring to work on her other great accomplishment, the restructuring of the University into the force it was to become.

We have notes from Hypatia's diary showing the many false starts she made before settling on the structure the University retains to this day. At its heart, the University guarded the knowledge assembled by the Old Regime, which became these Archives. The Librarian was responsible for the protection and use of this invaluable resource. The primary users were in the College of Science and Technology, later simply the College of Technology, whose main purpose was to deploy the knowledge in the post-Collapsian society. Other users were in the College of History and Culture, which tried to preserve a historical perspective on the new order. Finally, she tried to carry on the tradition of her dead husband, Mark Talbot, by establishing the College of Computer Intelligence.

Unable to resist the demands of senior Faculty, she let each College appoint a Dean to manage its own affairs. She would have preferred to have some of her supporters among the students in positions of power but acceded to the Faculty members in the end. [Note: The objectivity of this paragraph has been questioned. To take part in the discussion [log onto the Forum](#).]

Life on the University Campus during this time was far from idyllic. Indeed, records show at least 1300 suicides ^[1] during the period as the full extent of the calamity became apparent. Friends and family trapped on the outside perished as successive waves of the plague swept thru the area. The stench of death hung like a cloud over the area. Fortunately, the supplies included face masks and gloves, which became standard attire. Moreover, there was always the threat that the plague would break thru the defenses and infect everyone on the Campus. It was, as Hypatia herself put it, "The closest to hell I ever want to get." ^[2]

During this trying period, Hypatia delivered [speeches](#) ^[3,4,5] regularly to rally the campus community. Although she primarily addressed the situation outside the Fence, several times she [discussed ongoing work](#) to establish the rules for a new society to emerge.

Other areas in Texas experienced the full fury of the deadly disease. The entire Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex became a ghost town, with only small bands of brigands roaming the deserted streets. South Texas was devastated as well, though word of the Austin strategy spread, and its adoption is credited with helping to preserve a nucleus of community in San Antonio and other areas in what became *Norte Mexico*. The small size of most south Texas towns, and their relative isolation helped prevent the spread of the plague. The same is true of the few who survived in the Hill Country west of Austin, and especially of the Sealy Warehouse. ^[6]

Somehow, the Tulsa area escaped the ravaging fury of the worst pestilence in human history. The inhabitants, assured by the religious leaders that their escape was a direct result of God's providence, set about to convert the surrounding populace. Based on their overwhelming numbers, and possession of an operational refinery, they swept south on motorized transport in a profligate waste of precious resources. Estimates of the size of the armed force are likely wildly exaggerated. The oft-repeated claim of 50,000 soldiers is clearly wrong; ^[7] the population of the Kingdom at the time was scarcely twice that. Still, it is clear that an army of several thousand armed religious fanatics approached the outskirts of Austin in the second week of December 2036, the eighth month in the life of the nascent Republic.

My Brain Trust and I stood in front of a bank of video monitors showing activity outside. “We’re surrounded,” I said after studying the images.

“That won’t last,” Hardy said. “They know nothing about siege warfare. If they did, they would have brought more with them instead of expecting to get everything here. They have no cannon, no digging equipment, not even their own food.”

“There’s plenty of food out there,” someone from the back said.

“Not now, there isn’t,” Hardy corrected him. “We moved it all onto the Campus during the first week. There’s nothing useful closer than Westlake, and not much there. They’ll have to regroup soon.”

“How’s the Fence?” I asked.

“Still holding,” Cameron assured everyone. “So long as we have electric power, we’ll be OK.”

“They’ll figure that out soon. Can they cut the grid?”

“No chance. It would be difficult if you knew what you were doing. These guys aren’t likely to have that knowledge. They’ll probably electrocute themselves trying.”

“Then they’ll go for the source.”

“Right,” Cameron agreed. “Eventually it’ll dawn on them to try to take the hydro plants out of action.”

“We’ll have to protect them,” I said simply.

“Mansfield Dam,” Cameron said.

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We have to protect Mansfield Dam. Any suggestions?”

“We’re hopelessly outnumbered.”

“Who said that?” I asked, looking around. No one volunteered. “Never mind. You’re right.” I wished I’d spent more time studying the Battle of Mansfield Dam. All I knew was the tales Red told, and those weren’t very reliable.

“All war is deception,” Hardy said. When he got blank looks, he added, “Sun Tzu, The Art of War. Chinese. Sixth Century BCE.”

“I don’t suppose Sun Tzu has any concrete suggestions,” I said.

Hardy said, “*If you know both yourself and your enemy, you can come out of hundreds of battles without danger.*”

“Interesting,” I said. “We need to learn more about our enemy. Come on. Let’s hit the books.”

“Well,” young Hardy said, “it seems obvious to me that we have to attack them at their strong point. To defeat this army led by someone calling himself Elijah Reborn, we have to defeat God.”

“How do you propose to do that?” I wanted to know.

“I think I’ve found a possibility. I had to look it up. I think Elijah has overplayed his hand. Start at verse 19.” He pointed to text on the computer screen.

I read. “That might work. We need to be careful with the details. Let’s call Cameron and see if we can juice up that laser of his.”

We decided Cameron and Hardy were too valuable to the fledgling Republic to risk on a battle, so I took some muscular students to help me get the weapon into and out of a truck we’d found with enough fuel for the journey. Cameron gave some instructions, “It will work best on metal or some other hard surface. And be careful with the range. Remember the inverse square law.”

“Yeah. Got it. Will it kill a person?”

“Not likely,” he replied. “Oh, it would injure them, but flesh tends to absorb the radiation. It’ll be hard to penetrate to a vital area, unless the person you’re aiming at is willing to stand still for a while. I guess it might be fatal if you hit them in an especially vulnerable spot, such as right in the eye. Best not plan on that, though.”

“Interesting,” I said. “I’ll try to remember that.” Cammy and I hugged for what we hoped would not be the last time.

Hardy offered one final bit of advice from Sun Tzu, “*Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.*”

“Did he always speak in riddles?” I asked.

“Seems that way.”

When the Northerners moved out of the area to regroup, and probably to celebrate the New Year, my crew and I, along with Aaron in a second vehicle, took advantage of the opportunity to make a dash to the huge dam that held back the waters of Lake Travis. First, though, we stopped by the Capitol to test fire the laser. “I know the perfect target,” I told them.

We didn’t have long to wait for developments. The next morning, the University woke to find the army had returned. Elijah Reborn, stood in front of the main gate, a sufficient distance away from the Fence and spoke using a bullhorn.

“I am Elijah Reborn, leader of the Army of the Righteous from the Kingdom of the Living God. I would speak with the witch known as Hypatia.”

The Northerners were known as *Kolgites* from that day forth.

Elijah was disappointed to learn that Hypatia had departed but seemed pleased when he found out where she had gone. “She’s played right into our hands,” he confidently said to his Lieutenant, unaware that the area contained numerous cameras and microphones. Hardy made sure to broadcast Elijah’s words to the University community, and relayed them to me where I was, holed up in the control room of the mighty Mansfield Dam. He added yet another quotation from Sun Tzu, “*Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance.*”

12. *The Battle of Mansfield Dam* *January 1-3, 2037* *Mansfield Dam, NRT*

Editor's Note: Hypatia left instructions that Red's tale of the Battle of Mansfield Dam should be inserted at this point.

From the Archives:

This is a transcription of a [video recording](#) of Red the Ranger performing his famous act, "How I won the war." The audio quality of the recording is poor, so that sometimes the transcript has been augmented from other sources, particularly [this recording](#). Red frequently consumed several beers before and during the performance, and in at least [one instance](#) was "stoned to the gills," which contributed to the difficulty of producing an accurate transcript.

The veracity of his version of events is, to say the least, suspect, but it constitutes the only eyewitness account since neither Hypatia the Hero nor Aaron the Actor left any notes about the Battle. Most scholars agree that an eight-year-old boy, no matter how talented, would not be entrusted with the responsibility that Red claims for himself. Thus, the reader should approach this account cautiously. Indeed, the frequent line, "I weren't but eight years old," is so much a part of the performance that some in the audience shout it out before Red says it.

Beginning with the Alliance in 2088, the Archives were able to incorporate recollections from some members of the Righteous Army, but as with Red's account, these are of somewhat dubious value as far as determining the actual events.

What we do know is that after the Battle, the Kolgite army departed for Tulsa, ushering in a period of relative stability, and prickly but peaceful relations between two of the major city-states of the Post-Collapsian era.

OK, OK settle down everybody. This here be the true story of how I won the war, even though I weren't but eight year old at the time. Now, I know some of you think I done made the whole thing up, but I mean to tell you every word be the gospel truth.

[Pauses and drinks from a bottle]

It all start early in the morning of the last day of the year, 2036. My dad wake me up to tell me he and Mom had a big errand and that he were going to have to leave me with a sitter. "What big errand?" I ask him. "It's complicated," he say. "I ain't no child," I argued, "Tell me what be happening."

"You should say, 'I'm not a child. Tell me what is happening,'" he said. "Language is important." He talk like that a lot, being an actor and all.

"What is happening?" I ask again.

"It's a war," he said. "We're going to have to fight the Righteous Army, those guys who've been hanging around."

"How can we fight 'em?" I ask. "They got AK-47's and such. We ain't got nothing like that."

"Who have you been talking to?" he ask.

"Everybody know that," I say.

"Well, it's true we are outnumbered and outgunned. We have to rely on deception."

“What’s that?” I weren’t but eight years old. He like to use big words he got in plays he perform.

“We’re going to play a trick on them.”

“Sounds like fun. Can I come?”

“No, it’s much too dangerous. I’ve arranged for Ms. Albright to take care of you while I’m gone.”

Ms. Albright be a royal pain in the ass, but I figure out I could ditch her. I weren’t going to miss the party that night. Everyone been talking about New Year’s Eve for a week. I didn’t like the idea of being left alone, though.

“I’m going to be leaving in a short while,” Dad said. “Why don’t you go on back to sleep?”

I know how to pretend sleep, even at eight year old. Soon as he leave the room I slip out to see what be going on. There be a big trunk on the floor outside the room. I peek inside and see a bunch of Dad’s costumes. That give me an idea. You people being smart probably know what I do next. I climb inside and close the lid. It be nice and soft on top of the clothes. Dark and quiet, too. Course, I fall asleep.

[Pauses for another drink from his bottle. Tips it upside down to show it is empty.]

This be thirsty work telling this. Anyone out there got a spare Shiner Bock?

[As if by magic, a fresh bottle appears, passed from hand to hand up to the stage. Red takes a long draught.]

Much obliged. Now where was I. Oh yeah, I done fall asleep in the trunk. Next thing I know someone open it up. “Red! What are you doing in there?”

It be my Mom, Hypatia.

“Damn!” Dad said. He don’t cuss much, so I knowed he be peeved. “I thought he’d gone back to sleep.”

“Well, what have you to say for yourself, young man,” Mom ask. When she call me young man, I know I be in trouble. Then she laughed. “Just like me at that age. You’ve got to admire his ingenuity. Well, get out. And stay out of the way. The grownups have work to do.”

I get out and look around, wondering where I be. I see a big room, all concrete, bunch of dials and controls, lots of video screens. “Where I be?” I ask.

Dad look kinda peevish again. “The proper English expression is ‘Where am I,’” he said. “You are in the control room of the Mansfield Dam hydroelectric plant.”

I look at him funny. I ain’t but eight 'member. Lots of big words.

“Never mind,” Mom say. “Just stay out of the way and don’t touch anything. We have to get ready for the army that’s bound to show up any time.”

She turn and walk thru a door. Course, I follow her. That room got a small window and in front of the window was this humungous gun, looked like something outta Star Wars, all tubes and stuff. “Wow! What that be?” I asked.

“This is a high-powered laser,” Mom told me.

“Gonna shoot someone with it?”

“No. We have a better plan. If it works right, no one has to get killed.”

I be disappointed to hear that.

“Don’t get in the way, now,” she caution me. “We’re trying to aim it.”

“Whatca you shooting at?”

“A small can,” she said, taking up a pair of binoculars.

I walked over to the window. “Oh, I see it.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

“I forgot how well kids can see sometimes. Anyway, we’re trying to hit that can. Try again, Dave.”

This jock, one of the guys she’d brung with her, aims the laser and pulls the trigger. I heard some loud thunder. “Damn! Missed again,” Mom says. She seem *exasperated*. That be a word I just be learning.

“Can I try?” I ask.

“Didn’t I tell you not to get in the way?”

“I ain’t in the way. Just want to try shooting it.”

Dad heard all this. He say, “You know, his mother was a crack shot. Maybe if he can see the target without binoculars he, well...”

That be the first time Dad ever let on that Mom, that be Hypatia, weren’t my real mom. I puzzle about that, but I ain’t said nothing. Sound like Dad gonna let me shoot the gun. Later, I ask him what he mean. He tell me how Hypatia show up one day outta the blue, practically kidnap us two and take us to Austin. My real mom, she done die 'bout the same time. But that be another story, for another time.

[Editor’s note: Aaron’s version of this “kidnapping” [can be found here](#).]

Hypatia weren’t buying it. “Come on. Let’s let it recharge. We can spend the time selecting Aaron’s costume for the big part.”

We all troop back into the control room. Dad open up the trunk of costumes and start puttin’ 'em on one after another. Me, I like the General best, a cool blue uniform with a groovy hat. Nobody else thought that were a good choice. He try on one he call the Salesman, but Hypatia don’t like that one. “Looks like you’re trying to put one over on him.”

“We are,” Dad said.

“We don’t want to advertise it.”

I get pretty bored after 'bout the tenth one and slip back into the room with the cool gun. I ain’t exactly plan anything, just want to look it over good. I pull a chair over so I can get close and climb up. It got a nifty scope that you look thru to see what you be shooting at. I look and there be the can everyone be aiming at, big as life.

What can I tell you? I weren't but eight year old. Boys be boys. Man! When I shoot, the can explode into this huge fireball. I jump down and race for the door, but I ain't fast enough. Hypatia be standing there with both hands on her hips. "Rupert," she say. She only call me Rupert when she be about to smack me one.

[Editor's note: There is no evidence of Hypatia every striking anyone, much less a child of eight.]

Dave, the big jock, he pick up the binocs and look out the window. "Kid hit the can. Wish I'd been here to see it."

"It were major cool," I tell him.

Hypatia, she seem to think long time.

"Please, Red. Try to speak properly," Dad says.

"Not now, Aaron," Mom, I mean Hypatia say. She seem to be coming down from her being ready to wallop me, so I relax a bit.

"Red," she say finally, "Think you can hit the can again when we tell you to?"

"Sure," I tell her. "Easy."

"I like your confidence," she said. "OK, everyone, we've found the shooter. Truly, God works in mysterious ways." Everybody laugh when she say that. I ain't get the joke, but Dad, he promise to 'splain it later.

Hypatia issue orders. "We need to clean up the site down there. Dave, you and Robert — is that right? — see how fast you can deal with it. We don't want anything to give the show away."

Then, we go back to picking out a costume for Dad to wear for his big part, whatever that were. They settled on the one called Monk's Habit, a plain brown robe with a hood and a rope for a belt. I be thinking it were kinda cheesy, but no one ask me. The grownups started talking over the big part, rehearsing Dad call it.

I done fall asleep in the corner on the costumes they weren't gonna use. Didn't wake till it be time for breakfast.

We gonna take a short break now. I be telling the rest of the story in ten minutes or so.

[Exits.]

[Red returns with another beer and a joint. He takes a drag and settles back into a chair.]

When I done wake up, everyone else be gathering around the window in the next room. I wander in there to see what be goin' on. I got to worm my way thru the crowd to get to the front where I can see. "Whoa!" I say. "Where they all come from?"

Hypatia explain, "Those are the Kolgites. They want to destroy this dam."

"Why?"

"Because it would mean we wouldn't have electricity for the Fence around the University."

"That be bad, right?"

“Very bad.”

“We gonna shoot 'em?”

Dad pipe up, “Can you count, boy? There’s thousands of them. We can’t kill them all.”

“What’re we gonna do?”

Hypatia say, “After we eat breakfast, your father is going to perform the most important play in the history of the New Republic of Texas.” All the grownups laugh, but I didn’t get it right away. Figure it out for myself later, though.

When Dad be all dressed in his Monk Habit, Hypatia kiss him and tell him, “Break a leg.” That be the first time I ever see her kiss him like that. After that, he turn to the others and say something in Latin. I look it up later. It be “*Morituri, te salutamus.*” That be what the gladiators in Rome say. “We who be about to die salute you.” I be glad I ain’t know then what it mean. Turn out he be joking about the dying part.

Take him more’n hour to walk from the control room down to where the Kolgite leader be waiting. Course, we fix him up with a video and microphone so’s we can hear what be going down. He walk slowly right up to the leader, showing his hands be empty.

“Where is the witch?” the Kolgite demand.

“She’s waiting for a more propitious time to meet. I am considered more expendable. I understand that you are called Elijah Reborn.”

“That’s right,” he snarl. I barely able to watch on the video screen. He look like one nasty dude.

“I’ve been wondering whether you chose that name for yourself, or whether someone gave it to you.”

“What’s the diff?”

“None, really. I was just curious.”

“I adopted the name of the great Old Testament Prophet because I, like him, have been called to return society to the proper worship.”

“I see.”

“We want to speak with the Witch.”

I finally figure out Elijah be talking about Hypatia. “I thought witches be ugly,” I say to her.

“Hush,” Hypatia say. Then she reach down and give me a hug. “Let’s be quiet and see what happens.”

Dad speak up loud enough for lots of the rest of the Kolgites to hear him. “We are prepared to accept you as a prophet.” You could hear lots of the people exhale all at the same time. Dad continue, “Of course, we would like to see some proof that you are who you claim to be.”

“You doubt my word?”

“If you were in our position, wouldn’t you be cautious?”

“What you got in mind?”

“I presume you are familiar with the Scriptures.”

Elijah stand up real tall and look down on Dad. “Of course. I have committed the entire Bible to memory.”

“Impressive,” Dad say. “Then you certainly know of the events described in the 18th chapter of First Kings.”

“Just cause I know it all don’t mean I can call up random verses.”

“I am speaking of the confrontation between Elijah and the priests of Baal.”

“If you know the story, you can relate it to me and my men.” Several of the Kolgites drew closer to be able to hear.

“Certainly,” Dad say. “Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to build a huge bonfire, with a sacrificial ox on it. I think we can skip the ox, by the way. We don’t have any around, but that’s up to you. Elijah built himself a similar bonfire. Then he challenged the priests of Baal to call upon their god to light the fire. When they failed, he mocked them. Then when they gave up, Elijah called upon the true God who sent fire from heaven to light the wood, and incidentally to burn up just about everyone.”

He wait for a bit.

“We propose to repeat the challenge. You build your fire, we will build ours. If your God lights your fire, we will join with you and follow your teachings. If, on the other hand, we prevail, then we expect you to return north and leave us alone.”

Elijah thought about it for a while.

“What if neither fire lights?”

“Then, we would be proved to be unworthy, and you would be shown to be a fraud.” He take the cowl off his head and look right into Elijah’s eyes. Elijah turn on his heel and walk to confer with some of his men. After several minutes, he come back.

“Where will this take place?”

“We suggest right here. You can build your fire here, where we can watch. We will build ours over there.”

Elijah scrape the ground with his foot. The dirt be moist. Some water ooze into the hole. “Do you think I’m a fool! If you want us to build the bonfire here, you must have some trick planned. No. You build your bonfire right here.” He look around, finally point to a small mound higher than the rest of the area. “We will build ours on that mound over there.”

“We will permit you to examine our bonfire. I trust you will accord us the same privilege.”

“Sure. Why not?” He hold out his hand to shake on the deal.

[Editor’s note: This is probably an invention. Even then, people did not shake hands with strangers.]

“When you return, bring the witch with you.”

When Dad got back to the control room, everybody cheer and clap him on the back. Hypatia come and kiss him again. “Brilliant performance, Aaron.” She turn to the others, “Now, comes the hard part.”

Turns out, we need help from the Kolgites to build the bonfires. They tear down a house nearby and use the wood for the fire. They drag the stuff for our fire along the ground, so it be all covered with mud and stuff. They be careful with they own, making sure the wood be good and dry. By time they be done, both stacks be more 50 feet tall.

[Editor's note: Not likely. That is more than 15m. The bonfire would probably collapse if it were that high.]

At the end, Hypatia herself go down. She use one of Dad's costumes, one Dad call Hard Rock Fairy. It be all silver and shiny and look real cool. She have to work on it to get it small enough to fit her. Take 'most as long as building the bonfire.

She carry a little statue of Buddha she find in Dad's trunk. She show it to Elijah. “A false god!” he say. “Perhaps,” Hypatia say. “We will put it on the top of the pile if you don't object.”

“That abomination will surely lead to your destruction,” he say. I got no idea what he be talking 'bout, but it don't sound good.

“I understand you want to talk with me,” she say to Elijah.

“After this is over, I will take you for myself. Then I will feed you to the crows.”

“Ravens.”

“What?”

“These are Ravens, not Crows.”

[Editor's note: This is likely an invention. Crows are much more common in the area near the dam than Ravens, though both are known to occur there. If Hypatia really said this, it was purely for effect.]

“Whatever.”

“For my part, when this is over, I will feed your nuts to the squirrels.” She smile.

Now, you people being smart already figure out the Buddha statue be the key to everything. It be packed full of the stuff that were in the can I blowed up. Hypatia put it right on the pile, not at the top like she say, but in the middle, where it do most good.

There be some long discussion over who going first. Finally, they agree to flip a coin. The Kolgites go first. Hypatia look up at the sun and squint. “We will give you until noon. Then we will call down the holy fire. I think that gives you about two hours or so.”

Elijah he go over to his fire and kneel on the ground. He begin to pray real loud. He pray for quite a while, but nothing happen. Hypatia mock him, “Maybe God is taking a nap. Try praying even louder. Maybe some of these men could help you. Maybe a drum, or gunfire?” I be thinking she go too far, but Elijah call some men over. They kneel down by him and they all be praying. Ain't nothing happening. I be getting real bored. Dave, the big jock, say. “Don't fall asleep just yet, Red. It's almost show time.” He check his watch, then get the binocs and look at Hypatia. He must be

getting some signal. He hoist me up onto a stool so I can see thru the scope. “You got to hit that metal statue.”

“I be knowing that,” I complain. I look and see what he be talking about. I squeeze the trigger a bit and see a green dot. It ain’t on the Buddha. I ease the gun over just a smidge till I see the dot right on the big fat stomach. I squeeze a bit more and kabloouee. Man, what an explosion! The wood catch on fire right away. Pretty soon, it be going, well, like a house afire!

Dave be looking thru the binocs. “Good work, young man! Look at the TV.”

I turn around and see the video from Dad’s camera. Maybe half the Kolgites be lying they face on the ground. “They be dead?”

“No. It’s called prostrating. Do you know that word?”

“It got something to do with having to pee a lot?”

He laugh. “Not exactly. That’s *prostate*. Anyway, the people are frightened by what they saw. They think your mother has some power.”

He forget that we learn she ain’t really my mother. Meanwhile, I be looking thru the scope to see what gonna happen next. Take me a while to find Hypatia. Elijah he coming toward her and he be mad as hell.

“You tricked me,” he say in a real nasty voice.

Dad answer, “Of course we tricked you, you ignorant *pendejo*. But it was a great trick, wasn’t it?”

That be the wrong thing to say. Elijah draw this big sword out his scabbard and raise it like he going to hit Hypatia. Well, they ain’t told me what I be supposed to do, but I figure it out myself. I put the green dot on the sword and squeeze another shot. They be a loud sound and blam, the sword snap right in two. Dave whistle. “Great shot!”

Now, you be thinking that Elijah get the message, but he still mad. He be holding half the sword, and it be broken off in a sharp point. He go like he planning to stab Hypatia. I aim at him. The green dot be right on his forehead. Hypatia, she turn around and wave a lot, meaning she don’t want me to shoot Elijah. But she ain’t looking. Elijah hold the piece of sword like a dagger, and look like he be goin’ to stab Hypatia. I try to shoot again, but nothing happen. Turn out, the laser got to recharge before it can shoot again. I think that be the end of Hypatia, when I hear a regular ol’ gunshot. Elijah fall down. He be dead this time.

Dave say, “Looks like his own man shot him.”

This other soldier walk over to Dad and Hypatia. “Damn fool was going to get us all killed. I hope you aren’t hurt, milady. He take his gun and hand it to Dad, and kneel on the ground in front of them.

“It was necessary,” Hypatia say. “You did what you had to do. Now, go in peace as we agreed.”

And that be it. The war be over in one battle.

Most of the Kolgites leave and go back where they come from. Maybe half, though, decide they be liking Austin, and they stay with us. You probably know some of 'em, or leaswise they children.

So, that be how I won the war. Well, OK, I had some help. But after all, I were only eight years old at the time.

[Takes a final long pull from the beer bottle. Then takes several bows. After the audience quiets down, he continues.]

Now, y'all probably want to know what done happen to Hypatia, thinking I be in a position to know. Sorry to say, I ain't got much more info than y'all. It were about three or four years after the Battle, she came to me, just after my twelfth birthday. "Red," she say, "you're getting to be a big man. I think you can take care of yourself, with your Dad's help. I need to go do some things on my own, and I can't take you with me."

Course, I ain't realize she be talking about *forever*. I think she be going on a trip, maybe to Sealy or something. Turns out, she got other ideas. After talking to me, she go to find Dad.

He knew what be coming. "So, you're leaving."

"I have to. You're a good man, Aaron. I treasure our time together. However, I must leave. I have to return to Medina."

"That's dangerous."

"I know. But it's important."

"Go then." He ain't happy about it.

She get a big backpack and load it up with food, clothes, stuff like that. Then, she just walk out the door. I ain't never see her again.

From the Archives:

This last part of the narrative is one of the few areas subject to independent verification. We know from several sources that Hypatia did indeed leave Austin sometime in the year 2040 or maybe 2041, supposedly to travel to Medina, today the site of the famous Shrine. Beyond that, little is known. Stories about her appearances at several locations in the Hill Country barely rise to the level of urban legend.

The full biography of this remarkable woman, whose amazing foresight and courage set our civilization on the path we still follow today, can be [found in the Archives](#).

Part VIII. Aftermath

1. The Amulet

March, 2041

Near Leakey, NRT

I'm a bit chagrined to think how long it took me to figure it out that the Amulet was key. When I did, I remembered where I had left it. I knew that I had to try to retrieve it, though I didn't really know what I planned to do with it.

Of course, I had responsibilities that kept me from leaving immediately. I couldn't abandon Red until he was older. I had to deal with the setup of the University and the new Republic. As Red noted always at the end of his performance, I waited until his twelfth birthday before I considered leaving. Many people objected. Aaron, of course. Cammy, although no longer my lover, having found a pretty undergraduate — though not as pretty as Lily — also had qualms.

Most of the Faculty argued that I needed to remain with the University longer, but they were only partly serious about it.

I had the same feeling as after my sojourn in Tulsa. My work was finished. It was time to move on. Ultimately, I simply packed up and departed.

Camels had not yet become part of the Republic, and all the horses had died, so I set off to walk to the cabin, a trek that required over a week. The dangers of hiking in the Hill Country were real.

With a great sense of relief, I confronted the image of Ambianca on the screen at the cabin. This time, I simply said, "Hi, Ambianca. Let me in, please."

"Of course, dear," she replied. "It's good to see you again."

Once inside, I hurried to the bedroom and found the beautiful gold object lying on the table where it had been undisturbed since Lily and I had lain on the bed together. I put it on immediately, hoping it would work.

Tired from the trip, I lay on the bed, letting my subconscious decide where to take me. I woke up several hours later in the same place with a vivid recollection of visiting Grace on her death bed. I would have thought it a dream save for the story Joan had told me so many years ago. What had happened to Joan, I wondered? Did she stay in Houston? Or perhaps she had traveled to one of her other houses located far from any city. I hoped she was safe.

A ravishing hunger told me that I had transitioned to Houston and back. I raided the food supplies in the storage area and ate enough to fill the pit in my stomach. Then I went back to the bedroom to try again.

Unable to fall asleep, I walked around the area of the cabin. When I saw the remains of Mark's cannabis plantation, I decided to try adding that to my regimen. The commercial dryer that Red had found, would find, was not in evidence. I searched the storage area and finally found it stashed away in the back, hidden from all but the most determined pothead. A few buds went into the hopper, and I waited as long as I could for them to be ready. Finally, I snatched one and managed to light it.

Even without Mark's tending, the stuff was as good as ever, sending me into a fab high in minutes. I lay back in a chair on the porch, watching the sunset, remembering how I had watched with Amanda years in the future, and finally managed to fall asleep.

Part IX. Epilogue

1. The Orchard Shrine

April 16, 2136

Medina, NRT, Allied States of North America

Sister Angelina loved the trees in the spring. She loved the flowers and their fragrance. She loved the sound the bees made buzzing around collecting pollen and nectar. As she had so many times, she gave silent thanks to Hypatia for insisting on setting up the Orchard Shrine, or as the locals preferred to call it, *The Shrine of the Apparition*, based on the legend that Hypatia herself had appeared there several times. An old widow claimed to have a photograph to prove it and produced a faded picture. There was no date on the photo, naturally. There never was when such things surfaced. Angelina didn't believe the old stories, of course, and she wasn't even sure that Hypatia had been the one to establish the Shrine. The records were a bit hazy on that subject.

No one grew apples anywhere else within hundreds of kilometers. Many of the locals insisted that they grew here only because Hypatia still exerted some magic on the place. Angelina knew better than anyone how silly that was. It took a lot of work, careful pruning, and the occasional transplant from afar to keep the Orchard blooming. She considered herself incredibly lucky to have that work as her calling, and loved it, even during manure spreading time.

She sat in the shade of the porch, sipping her cup of coffee. This might be her last cup for a while. There was none in Kerrville, and if she believed travelers' tales, it was becoming scarce even in Austin and Sealy. Something to do with last year's devastating hurricane.

Something, some sound, caught her attention. Listening carefully now, she heard nothing, only the bees buzzing. Wait! There is was again. It sounded like a child crying. Where was it coming from?

She searched the store, the most likely place for a child to be lost, but it was empty. Visitors didn't begin to show up in numbers until after the harvest, several months from now. Wandering outside, she tried to triangulate the position. It was coming from the Orchard. Concerned now, she put her coffee down and raced toward the sound. She heard it louder and called out, "Where are you child?" The crying grew louder in response to her call. She tried again. "Where are you?"

There! It was a baby! Who would abandon a baby? Why way out here?

The child lay on the ground. It was very young, only a few months old. A tiny part of a single tooth showed in the bottom gum. Carefully unwrapping the blanket that held the infant, Angelina saw the name, Chloe. "So, are you a girl, then?" Picking up the child, she discovered one reason for the crying. "We need to get you a new diaper, don't we love." Hearing the kind voice, Chloe quieted down. "Aren't you a pretty one, though? Look at those eyes. They remind me of someone I once knew. Who could have left you here? Well, no matter. You're in good hands now, my sweet."