

Reluctant Queen

Book 3 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. Bronson

1. Prologue: Bronson's Testimonial
May 5, 2173
Arabella Springs, Western Cape, Allied States

If it wasn't love at first sight, it was a good approximation.

My first thought, *Finally, an adult in the room. About time! Then, A woman!*

I took a closer look at her — could this be Chloe, *The Chloe, Chloe Herself?* I couldn't imagine that I was important enough to merit a visit from her. Still, she looked remarkably like the pictures I had seen. She strode into the room as if she owned it, which she soon did. I couldn't take my eyes away.

Wearing a strange outfit, like a white suit of armor, but with some curious ripples of color, she looked like the *Space Alien* some thought her to be. When she lowered the hood, I saw the famous yellow hair, long enough to reach her shoulders, and the famous, piercing blue eyes with a striking yellow-brown ring around the iris. To my delight, I saw that those eyes looked at me with undisguised interest.

I know that many of these testimonials say the same thing, "She changed my life forever. The day I met her was the best day of my life." Count me as one of them. It's crazy, but I knew somehow that I was going to spend the rest of my life with this remarkable woman.

Maybe, I hoped, she can get me out of jail.

2. Recalled to Life
January 15, 2170
San Francisco, California,
Allied States of North America

Chloe was looking forward to some time to relax when Tinker appeared at the door to Endeavor and began knocking frantically. With hope of something good in the offing, she opened the door and ushered him in, kissing him on the mouth by way of greeting.

“What’s up?”

“Celeste,” he began, then paused to catch his breath.

“Take it easy,” Chloe suggested. “Deep breath.”

Tinker complied and seemed to get control of himself. “She didn’t respond in time. I thought she was in trouble. I got the Coast Guard to go find her.”

“I see,” Chloe said. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“They’re holding both of them in jail!”

“What?”

“Yes. They’re holding Bronson for kidnapping and rape and detaining Celeste as a crucial witness.”

“Where? Here? Mindo?”

“San Francisco.”

“So, what would you like me to do?”

“Tell everyone it is all a mistake. Get them to let them go.” He seemed about to lose his composure again.

“OK. Let’s see what we can do. Endeavor, contact the judge in San Francisco.”

“Working,” Endeavor replied. In about a minute, the screen in the driver’s area lit up with the face of a middle-aged woman.

“Good morning, Chloe,” Judge Sheraton said. “How can I be of service?”

Chloe quickly relayed the information from Tinker. “Tinker assures me that it is all a mistake. Wondering if we can get them released.”

“We’ll have to investigate. That’ll take some time.”

“I’ll come to San Francisco. I’ll be there in a couple of hours. I want to be involved in the interrogation. Is that OK?”

“Of course.”

“Until later.” She signed off.

“Shall we hit the road? You want to come with me?”

“Yes. The sooner we get there the better. Celeste is going to be furious with me,”

“Endeavor,” Chloe said to the vehicle AI, “take us to the big city.”

“Understood,” came the reply. “San Francisco here we come!”

When she saw Bronson for the first time, Chloe understood Celeste’s interest in the man. Of average height, but with some impressive muscles and a handsome face, he was just the sort of male a young female would find interesting. Celeste was younger than Chloe or Tinker by at least 10 years, and despite having a young daughter, still appeared innocent as a child. Those who knew her also knew that was far from the truth. She controlled Tinker like the toy he was named for.

Chloe noticed that the prisoner was looking at her with the kind of interest she hadn’t seen in quite a while. She felt a small frisson running down her spine. *Stop that!* She told herself.

Turning to the two guards, she said, “I’ve come to take the prisoner off your hands.”

“No way,” said the one with Sergeant’s stripes. “Cap’n said to keep him here till further notice.”

“I’m giving you further notice,” Chloe replied, a bit of steel creeping into her voice. “Do you know who I am?” she asked pleasantly.

“Of course, we know who you are,” the Sergeant replied. “Don’t make no never mind.”

Chloe took a paper from inside her suit and passed it to the senior officer. “Here is an order from Judge Sheraton. The prisoner is to be released into my custody.”

“Ain’t gonna happen. We follow orders from the Captain.”

“If you know who I am, you must know that I outrank your captain. Please cooperate.”

“No. And I think you should leave now.” He motioned to the other guard, who moved to take one of Chloe’s arms. He tried to turn her toward the door, but she resisted. “Please remove your arm,” she said as evenly as she could manage.

The private, or whatever he was, looked to his superior. “Get her out of here,” the Sarge barked.

It was all over quickly. Chloe turned to the private and put a hand on his chest. With a slight shove she threw him against the wall, where he slumped to the floor. The Sergeant reached for his weapon.

“Don’t,” Chloe warned him.

Ignoring her request, he drew his pistol. Chloe pointed at the gun and what onlookers always described as a bolt of lightning shot from her finger, hitting the guard in his hand. Dropping his gun, he clutched his hand in agony. “Now, will you unlock the manacles?” Chloe asked.

Somehow, he managed, using his left hand. Bronson rose from the chair where he had been watching events, smiled, and moved to Chloe’s side. “Please come with me,” she said.

“With pleasure,” Bronson replied.

The two of them walked down the hall to an open door. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to stay in here for a short while. I’ll be back in about 30 minutes or less.” She showed him into the interrogation room and shut the door behind him. Then she quickly went around the corner and joined Judge Sheraton in the room behind the one-way mirror.

“Ready?” Chloe asked.

“Sure.” The judge spoke into her phone. “Let her in now.”

They saw the door open, and Celeste enter. Seeing Bronson and ran to him. “Oh, Bron, this is all my fault. Please tell me that you’re all right? Can you forgive me?”

“Don’t worry, sweet one. I ain’t hurt. I be sure this be all a misunderstanding. Someone I think is the Chloe I hear bout show up and done take charge.”

“Chloe. She’s here? *The Chloe? Herself?*”

“Must be the one,” Bronson said. “Someone *muy importante.*”

“Tinker musta panicked,” Celeste said. “I guess that be OK,” she said lapsing into vernacular speech. She continued, “Bron, our time together be super, but we gotta separate. *Comprende?*”

“I understand. Well, really I not *comprende*, but that be OK.”

“Good. They’ll probably be coming for me soon. Kiss me goodbye.”

Bronson was happy to comply. He held onto her until a soldier appeared at the door to escort Celeste away.

Behind the one-way mirror, Chloe said, “I think we can drop the charges of kidnapping and rape. This was clearly consensual.”

“Agreed,” the Judge said.

Chloe returned to the interrogation room and motioned for Bronson to follow her. “We’re going to more pleasant quarters.”

Ah! Chloe thought when she got to her assigned suite. *The staff seems to have done a good job.*

“This be your room,” Chloe said, trying her best to communicate in vernacular. She motioned for Brad to enter. “You have your own bath. Here.” She opened the door. “We have brought your gear from your boat. The boat is safe. I hear that it be awesome.”

Bronson smiled.

Chloe pointed to a guitar case on the bed. “I hope you’ll play something for me. I hear you be good.”

Bronson rushed to the bed and took out the guitar. Chloe realized for the first time that the guitar was a fabulous instrument, an antique hundreds of years old. Stained by the many hands that had held it, the wood had acquired a lovely patina. Chloe inhaled involuntarily at the sight. Bronson looked at her. “Ain’t she a beauty? Been in the family for generations. Grandfather done buy it just for the looks. Never play it. Too bad. Wonderful sound.”

“I look forward to hearing it.” She motioned to other packages on the bed. “Some fresh clothes for you. We guessed at your size. Some items are large size, others medium. Take your time. Wear what you want. When you be ready, come to dinner. I be hoping you like fish. Got some excellent farmed sole.” Bronson had a puzzled look on his face.

With that, Chloe turned to go. “Wait!” he called. She turned to face him. “What be goin’ on? What you be? How you done that stuff with the guards?”

“We’ll swap stories over dinner.” Smiling, she turned and left him alone.

Chloe approved of Bronson's choice of clothing, which emphasized his impressive biceps without being too obvious about it. The short-sleeved Polo shirt, in a soft pink, fit in a way that accentuated his build. He wore some newish jeans and no shoes. "You clean up good, as they say in Texas," she said by way of greeting.

Chloe still wore her suit, which in addition to the various defenses fit better than anything else she'd ever tried. Instead of the rippling colors she had set for the jail cell, she now showed the formal black outfit of the Council members, which looked like an ancient tuxedo. She noticed that Bronson was checking her out and seemed to approve. "You ain't bad yourself."

"Thanks. We have a few minutes before the dinner arrives. Would you like something to drink, alcoholic or otherwise? I also have some of the cannabis that Mendo is famous for if you'd prefer."

"How 'bout weed now and wine later?"

Chloe smiled. Taking a hefty joint from a pocket in the suit, and picking up a lighter from a table, she suggested, "Let's go out onto the balcony."

They passed the joint back and forth while gazing at the view from their vantage point, the tallest building in San Francisco, what was left of the Salesforce Tower. The Bay opened before them, a vast tidal basin ringed with vegetative remnants from before the Collapse. Several small ships plied the calm waters delivering goods to villages on the Bayshore. Sunset was due shortly, so Chloe showed her companion the passage that led thru the building to the opposite side. There, they looked out on the mighty Pacific, which lived up to its name today. The disk of the sun slowly dipped below the horizon. "Watch for the green flash," Chloe instructed Bron. They watched, and for once, saw it briefly. "That's only the third time I've see it," Chloe noted.

"First one for me," Bron replied. "What be causing it?"

"It's complicated," Chloe informed him. "I don't remember the details. We can look it up if you're interested."

"Maybe later," Bron said. "Ain't there be a tradition 'bout kissing each other after seeing the Green Flash."

Chloe laughed. "Nice try, but you just made that up."

"No," he replied. "Maybe only hold for the islands."

"I want to get into that," she said. "Is it true you sailed from Hawaii to Mexico by yourself?"

"True. Be 16 at the time."

"Wow. Shall we go in for dinner now?"

Ambianca found a perfect accompaniment to the meal, some Bach played on a guitar. "That's lovely, Ambi. Bach?" Chloe asked.

"Yes, it's Bach," Bronson said.

"But usually played on a pipe organ. Our new friend transposed it to the guitar," Ambianca added. "And, of course, he is the musician, recorded live at the Rotunda in Mendo a week ago Monday."

"I'm impressed," Chloe said. "You are more talented than I expected."

Bronson nodded in appreciation. "If I impress you, you be sending the dial to 11."

Chloe laughed. Bronson continued, "How you get to be head honcho?"

"Ambianca, you fill him in while we eat."

So Ambianca regaled Bronson with stories of Chloe's exploits. Some of the stories represented actual events, but only a few.

"That be the best dinner I ever eat," Bronson said as he wiped the plate with a hunk of sourdough, mopping up the last bit of the sauce.

"Glad you liked it. The chef here is wonderful. Ready to hear my story? The real one?" Chloe asked?

"Yes!"

Chloe spent the next 30 minutes describing her strange childhood, beginning with the oft-repeated tale of being found as an infant in the Apple Orchard Shrine. "I was also about 14 when my foster mom died, and I found myself on my own, with an orchard to care for. Fortunately, I had Ambianca and JJ for company."

"I know Ambianca. She the one listen in and play music. Who be JJ?"

Ambianca, who had been listening, replied, "Yes, Bronson, I play music for people. I do more. I taught Chloe how to read and search the library. I'll be happy to help you with that if you want."

"Don't know as how I need that," Bron asserted.

"Actually," Chloe interjected, "for what I have in mind, you'll need to spend quite a lot of time studying. I hope you'll be interested in the project. By the way, Ambi, how's your private project going?"

"Not as well as I hoped," Ambi replied.

"Maybe Bron can help. Celeste told me that he has fully operational GPS on his boat. That means he has access to the military system."

"Very interesting," Ambianca said. Then she went away. The music kept playing, but there was no more conversation.

"I've been looking for someone with your skill set," Chloe said.

Bronson obviously didn't understand.

Chloe tried again, "I need someone who be comfortable at sea long time."

"Oh," he said. "I be your man."

"I be thinking so," Chloe said. "It's a big project. Take years to prepare. Need you in Austin."

"Austin!" he said with palpable excitement. "I be hearing stories. Big city."

"By today's standards, yes."

"How we gonna get there? Boat?"

"I be thinking of train."

"Train?"

“Yeah, you know, big engine, runs on tracks.”

“Really. Never seen one.”

“I came here on the train. We be trading along the way. Pick up goods here and trade on the way back. You good at trading?”

“You betcha. Gotta be,” he answered.

“I thought so.”

She paused, considering how to proceed. She decided that challenging Bronson would be the key. “This project ain’t gonna be easy. Lot of work. Lot of new stuff to learn. You still interested?”

“Where you be while this be going on?”

“It’s my project. I be *involved*.”

“I like that. Deal?” He extended his hand.

“Deal,” she agreed, taking his hand. He held her hand longer than necessary. Then raised it to his lips. “You be more’n impress. You be beautiful. More’n beautiful. They be something about you. Aura maybe. The way you walk and stand show you ain’t afraid of nothin’. Also say you don’t take no shit from nobody. When you come into my cell today, I say to myself right off, this be the one. She gonna get you out.”

He continued to hold onto her hand.

“I be watching you,” he said. “You be watching me. That be a good sign.”

“Oh?”

He stood and helped her to stand. “Ambianca, could you play some slow dance music?”

The sounds of a soft waltz-like piece began. Ambianca had chosen an ancient YouTube video, the Google answer to the request for Slow Dance music, the perfect tempo.

“Shall we dance?” Bronson showed that he knew a few expressions in Standard English. Chloe guessed that he used it often. She accepted, “I’d be delighted.”

Of course he’s a great dancer. Probably good at anything. Stop it! Chloe thought as she felt his arms gently pressing her to his chest.

“I haven’t danced in a very long time,” she confided.

“I can tell,” he replied. “No prob.” He drew her even closer.

Chloe had not been held that way for a very long time. She laid her head on Bron’s shoulder as they moved together over a small space of floor bare of carpeting. She was thinking of how nice it felt and whether this could become part of her life. Bronson seemed to sense her mood.

“Kiss?” he asked.

“Not a good idea,” Chloe said firmly.

“Our first disagreement.” He kissed her on the cheek, then moved down and nuzzled her neck.

“This is not a good idea,” Chloe repeated.

Bronson just looked at her. Chloe found herself gazing back into his eyes, noting for the first time that they were dark hazel, not brown. *Damn!* She thought. *This is not the plan!* To Bronson, she repeated, “This is really not a good idea.” Then she kissed him, not on the cheek, but on his lips, and passionately.

She stepped back and touched the control of her suit, which relaxed, falling to the floor. As she stepped out of the bundle of cloth, she said, “Remind me to discuss this first thing in the morning.”

Later, as they lay together, Bronson asked, “What exactly be your project?”

“We’re going to sail around the world.”

As she returned her head to his shoulder, she thought this might be the happiest day in her life.

3. Return of the Space Aliens
February 1-7, 2170
Big Ron's Trading Post
Central Valley California, Allied States of North America

“Misha! Come out quick. It be Chloe Herself in her Space Alien suit.” Without waiting for a response, Caleb rushed across the ground to where a large, motorized boxcar stood. Chloe and Bronson walked toward the proprietor of the biggest trading operation in the Central Valley.

“Hello, Caleb!” Chloe called to him as Misha raced to catch up. “Long time.”

“Great seein’ you agin,” Caleb said. “Look like you come prepared for some trading.”

“You bet. Got lots of the latest from Mendo and some goodies we brought — brung — all the way from Austin. You spread the word?”

“Tole everyone we be looking for traders. Din’t know if gonna be you. And your friend,” he said nodding to Bronson.

Moving to fist bump his new acquaintance, Bron said, “Name be Bronson. Heared ‘bout you. Space Aliens and all.”

“C’mon in,” Misha said. She took her time looking at Bronson and liked what she saw. “I done prepare some antelope chili. Be hoping you like it.”

“I’m sure it will be wonderful, Misha,” Chloe said. “Bronson be coming with me to Austin.”

“I see,” said Misha in a way that implied a lot.

“Yes,” Chloe said. “We’re not exactly a couple but we’re more than friends.”

Misha smiled and winked at Bronson. “She get tired o’ you come back here. We set you up good.”

They all laughed.

The antelope chili was as good as Chloe hoped, simmered long to tenderize the meat, with several spices besides the serranos that raised the heat level to *flaming*. Apple pie followed, complete with some ice cream, a new addition to the menu. “We brought beaucoup coffee,” Chloe hinted. “Shall we brew a pot?”

“We be saving our last bit for you,” Caleb said. “Everyone in the Valley hope you got more.”

“We do,” Chloe assured him. “All the way from the Coffee Coast. I’ll go fetch some.”

She returned with a full pot of freshly brewed coffee, which proved to be a big hit.

The crowd the next morning showed a completely different demeanor from the one Chloe remembered from years ago. This one had come to trade — and see Chloe Herself, the most famous person in the Allied States. The emphasis, though, was on trading, now that the inhabitants of the area knew what the strange-speaking people from Austin had to offer.

One big surprise was the appearance of the motorcycle gang, led by the man who now called himself Roger the Rabbit. The years had been profitable. The group now numbered at least 20, with

many new cycles. Bronson noticed and came to inspect the vehicles. “Wow! These be way cool! You be trading any?”

“Who be you?”

“Name be Bronson,” he replied. “You?”

“I be Roger, Roger the Rabbit. I be kinda leader for this gang.”

“Nice to meetcha. I be Chloe’s new squeeze.”

“Really? We all thought she be...you know.”

“Nope.”

“You got any solar panels?”

“Of course. We know what be needed out here. Wanna check em out?”

“Let’s go have a look.”

Chloe wisely decided to leave Bronson in charge of all the trading. “Remember,” she warned him, “the coffee is on allocation. We need to keep some for Wilcox.” *And us*, she thought.

“Where you be now?”

“Gonna schmooze with anyone who be interested,” she told him.

As sunset neared, Caleb lit a large bonfire. The day had generated even more income than expected, and he was in a jovial mood. Most of the people had purchased some food to cook on the big grill, and the keg of beer Caleb rolled out drew many customers.

Chloe settled into a large chair that Misha had retrieved from storage. She announced to the audience that gathered, “All y’all know who this be: Chloe Herself. She done agree to answer your questions.”

“That’s right,” Chloe echoed. “We call it an AMA, Ask Me Anything. Who wants to go first?”

No one volunteered. “In that case, I’ll just talk for a bit. The way this works, if you got a question, hold up your hand. I call on you. You ask your question. I get to ask one question to make sure I got it. Then we get down to business.”

She paused long enough to see several nods. The ones who understood Standard relayed the message to the others.

“I like to meet people in the Boondocks,” she began to some laughter. “They let me know what is really happening. I notice that some things seem to be better than the last time I was here. That seems like ages ago.” She paused for translation. *I really need to learn Vernacular. Maybe Ambianca can teach me.*

“As you know, the world ended,” she stopped to do the arithmetic, “about 135 years ago. We been rebuilding ever since. My vision is to make a better world than the one that Collapsed. Some things are going well. Trade is important. It helps bind us together.”

She waited to see how that went over. She noticed several people nodding.

“We got a long way to go.” More nods.

A hand went up. “Yes,” Chloe said pointing to the woman who had the first question. “What’s your question?”

“We know you be some kinda big cheese in Austin. How you gonna help us out here?”

“An excellent question, and one without a good answer. We know some things that help: solar panels, birth control patches, coffee.” That got a laugh. Chloe continued, “But the most important thing we can bring you is hope. Hope that we can manage to create a better world on the spoils of the last one.” That was a complicated sentence, so she waited as people whispered their interpretations.

“I hope that our children and grandchildren will live in a world where they don’t have to worry every day if there will be enough to eat, enough energy to light and warm their homes, enough community to care for the sick, to comfort those who need it, to provide for those less fortunate.”

She paused again. “I know this seems hopelessly idealistic. Does that answer your question?”

The applause was all the response Chloe needed.

“Next question?”

A young girl raised her hand and Chloe called on her. “What be you and Bronson?”

Chloe smiled. “Are you interested in Bronson, or me?”

Everyone but one laughed. The girl turned bright crimson and ran away.

“Oh, dear,” Chloe said. “Bronson, will you please take over?” Without waiting for his reply, she ran off in search to the poor girl she’d embarrassed. She found her sitting on a log all alone. She sat down next to her.

“I’m so sorry,” Chloe said to her. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” She put her arm around the young shoulders. To her surprise, her companion burst into racking sobs. Chloe took her into her arms and held her close until the crying jag ended. “I’m truly sorry,” she repeated. “Would you like to talk about it some more?”

“Yes,” her young companion said barely above a whisper.

“Why don’t we go to our trailer? It’s more comfortable.”

“OK.”

Chloe rose carefully to avoid upsetting the child, who was older than Chloe had thought. Perhaps 14 years or so. The signs of puberty had begun to show on her slender frame. Once inside the trailer, she looked more carefully in the light. She took a washcloth from the lavatory and wiped the tears, and some dirt. “There,” she concluded. “That’s much better.” She tried again, “You be better now.” Examining the girl — woman she corrected herself — she thought she was quite pretty, with short black hair framing a perfect oval face and startling blue eyes like Tinker’s. She was very thin, but small breasts pushed against the long-sleeved T-shirt she wore. *That’s not enough for warmth* Chloe thought.

“Are you warm enough?” Chloe asked. “You be cold?”

“Not now. I stay here?”

“Sure. When you are ready to talk, I want to hear your story.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Chloe glanced at the screen quickly and saw it was Roger the Rabbit, the leader of the wolf pack of bikers. "I'll be back," Chloe said and left without opening the door all the way.

"What's up?" Chloe asked.

"Saw you had the wee one with you. Thought maybe you be needing some info bout her."

"I would appreciate that," Chloe told him. "There must be a story."

"A horrible one," he replied. "Several years ago, probably bout five, we got worried. Ain't no one heard from her family in days. This be after you and the other woman..."

"Z," Chloe said.

"Right. Anyway, we be checking on her family. They be way poor. Wondered if they be needing food. Ain't get no answer. Get worried. Some of us decide to go check on em."

"Go on," Chloe encouraged him.

"It be very bad. Two bandits be there. Ain't no sign of the family."

"I see." Chloe waited to hear more.

"They ain't be friendly. We ask bout the family. They laugh. Say, 'they be gone.' We be surprised at that and start to ask more. Before we have a chance, the second one come out the door with a gun blazing. Fortunately for us, the ammo was so old didn't work right. We took em purty easy."

"Then what?"

"Then we checked inside. Found out what they'd been eating."

"Oh no!"

"Yes."

"Does the girl know?"

"Moira." He pronounced it Mo-Ira. "That be her name."

He continued, "Well, we string the two of them up right there. Ain't no way we're letting them live. We be digging a grave for what be left of the parents. They be wanting a green burial."

"And that's when Moira showed up?"

"Yeah. She been hiding for a week. Very weak. We couldn't leave her all alone. Didn't think our gang be a good place. Take her to Misha. She give her a room in back and hire her to do chores."

"But she hasn't gotten over the trauma."

"I guess. Ain't know that word."

"It means some bad happening."

"That be a good word for it."

"I'm glad you were able to save her. Thanks for telling me. I'll keep her tonight."

Roger turned to go. "Wait," Chloe called after him. "Who else knows the story?"

"Well, we gotta tell Misha. Don't know if she spread it around."

“OK. What’s your interest in the girl? This is over and above, to use that quaint term.”

“She done remind me of myself. I got left alone at 13. She be about that age now. I only survive because someone took me in. I be tryin to help her best I could.”

“OK. Thanks for everything.” She made a mental note to see he was rewarded for what he had done.

She returned to the vehicle to find Moira talking to Ambianca. “You must be special,” Chloe told her. “Ambianca is a fine judge of character.”

Ambianca jumped in, “She mean you got good mojo.”

“Oh,” Moira said. “Play it. You played it for her; you can play it for me.”

“Casablanca,” Ambianca replied. “Wonderful.” She played the old YouTube recording she’d played for Bronson.

It took Chloe a bit to recognize it. “OK. I get it. How about a quiet background while Chloe and I talk?”

Ambianca’s image vanished from the screen, replaced by a Privacy notice.

“What happen?” Moira asked.

“I think Ambi was a bit miffed that I suggested she leave us alone.”

“Oh. I understand.” She began to remove her clothes.

“No! No. I didn’t mean that. I just want to talk to you.”

“Oh. I don’t understand.”

Where is Ambianca when I need her? Chloe complained. After some thought, she tried, “What were you and Ambi talking bout?”

“She know all bout me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Know about my parents. Bout the men killed em. About Rabbit Man who found me. Who hung the other guys.” She looked up at Chloe eyes full of tears.

“I’m so sorry for your pain,” Chloe told her. She held her as she had earlier, the sobs replaced by slow breathing. “That’s better. It’s gonna be better.” She stroked the black mop on Moira’s head, which could use a good wash.

“Would you like a bath?”

“Just the two of us?”

“Just you.”

“Oh. Later.” She snuggled up onto Chloe’s chest and lay there.

Chloe returned to her stroking.

“You gonna be my mom?”

“Not your mom. How about aunt?”

“Can I stay with you?”

“Of course. For tonight.”

Moira smiled. “Now I wanna bath.”

Chloe showed her how to use the shower. “Towels be there. I bring some clean clothes.”

Back in the main room, she said, “OK, Ambi. Now I could really use your help.”

Ambi laughed. “I’ve marked some good clothing choices. I have a bot collecting them now. They’ll be in the bath area shortly.”

“Gracias, Tia Ambianca.”

“De nada.”

The bots had been acquired in trade, another invention of Roger’s. He had used Pre-Collapsian vacuum robots as the base. Then, he modified the main part to serve to hold whatever needed to be delivered. Fabulous. Very useful. She immediately asked him if he could have several available for their next trip.

Moira had other plans for the evening. She emerged clean and clothed only in the bath towel. She lay down on the bed.

“There will be none of that,” Chloe said.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing you’re much too young.”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Really?”

“Well, almost.”

“You need a mother, not a lover.”

“You said—”

“Yes. I know what I said. I still mean it. I’ll be your aunt, who has your best interests foremost.”

Moira rolled her eyes. “Ambi?”

“It mean she want best for you,” Ambi translated.

“So, *she* choose what best for *me*?”

“She be good at it,” Ambianca replied. Moira shrugged and put on a nightgown, flashing Chloe in the process.

Project Moira took all day just to set up. Chloe started by consulting Misha and Caleb, as well as The Rabbit and all agreed with her plan. Then she approached Bronson.

“How was your evening?” She said with a slight hint that she might know the answer.

“Very nice,” he replied. “You ever done a threesome?”

“Can’t say as I have.”

“That’s not bad,” Bron said, “best Vernacular though is ‘Can’t say as I has.’”

“Thanks.”

“Figured you be hung up with Moira.”

“Not bad,” Chloe jumped at her chance, “but best Standard is ‘Figured you would be hung up with Moira.’”

“Touché. That’s French.”

“Really? What does it mean?” She spoke with exaggerated slowness.

“I’m tired of this game. I had a great time last night.” Bron knew more Standard than he let on.

Chloe smiled. “I’m glad. I had a long night with Moira. We talked for hours after I convinced her that sex was not *in the cards*, to use an old cliché.” She paused for a moment. “I think she should go to Boonville. She’d be happier there.”

He didn’t answer immediately. “I agree. You gotta talk to—”

“I checked with them already.”

“Oh. OK. What do you need?”

“I want you to take her there.”

“How?”

“I’ll show you.” She led him to the building they called the garage, though today it held mostly parts that might fit something, somewhere, sometime. She pulled out a flashlight and pointed the beam into the dark recess. “There,” she said as the form of motorcycle appeared from the dark.

“Whoa! That be some machine. One I trade for. Gave Roger Rabbit some tools and solar panels.”

“I know. I checked with Roger. The range will get you to Mendo where you can recharge. There are some of the small solar panels in the compartment under the seat. That’s for emergencies. The girl can ride pillion.” She waited to see if he would ask what that meant. Bronson strode across the floor and climbed aboard the bike.

“No problem,” he said. “How long will it take?”

“Less than six hours. The road thru the hills from 101 will put a strain on your reserves. Try to conserve before you get there. Roger will accompany you. He built the bike and should be able to fix anything that goes wrong.”

“Got it. I’m ready. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow. There’s more. You drop Moira off and get her settled. That means getting Z involved. I’ve alerted her, she be ‘specting you. That may take some time. Then, early morning, you leave with a full charge and meet the train in Emeryville. There’s a station there with a collection of buildings for people who work in it. We’ll wait for you.”

“Not hard.”

“We’ll take the bike with us on the train. Might come in handy.”

“What Moira thinking ‘bout this?”

“She is a bit anxious, which is normal. She’ll be OK. She gonna be OK.”

“You gotta be by her? All time?”

Chloe smiled. “I be fixin’ that.” She kissed him. “Later. But soon.”

On the appointed day, all the locals assembled to see the party off. Their ranks had swelled with the inclusion of several extra guards. Chloe took Roger aside before agreeing to this change. “I see your point, we need more guards, but I be worry that maybe some of them...”

“I know em. They be trustable. I *vouch* for them.”

“If anything happens to Moira...”

“It gonna be fine.”

And so it proved. By the next morning they had managed to establish a video link between Big Ron’s and the main Library in Boonville. Moira, smiling, appeared on the screen in the trailer. “Aunt Chloe, you be right. The other girls be helping me. It be very nice here.”

“I’m glad to hear that. If you need anything, ask Ambianca to find me.”

“I told her that already,” Ambianca chimed in. “We be cool, right Moi?”

“Yeah. Other girls complain my name be too hard. Shortened it to Moi. Sometimes Moi-Moi.”

“I like that — Moi.” She signed off with the universal symbol for love, the only sign in ASSL she knew.

4. *Welcome to the Allied States* *February 10-12, 2170* *Wilcox Waterhole, Allied States of North America*

Maude greeted the train as it pulled into the newly built station at the Wilcox Waterhole, holding up a sign with “Welcome Space Aliens to the ASNA.”

“What be this *Space Aliens* bullshit?” Bronson asked.

“When we first appeared, people thought we must be from another planet. Our technology was so advanced they didn’t believe we were ordinary humans. Now, it’s a joke, sort of.”

“Hello! Hello!” Maude shouted as the train slowed to a stop.

“Good afternoon, Maude,” Chloe replied. “Great to see you again. Where’s Winston?”

“He be off salvaging. Checking out Fort Huachuca. Lotsa good stuff there. You come to trade? Most people be off now.”

“I know it’s not the usual schedule,” Chloe told her. “We’re heading back to Austin and stopping along the way. Congratulations on joining the Allied States.”

“Thank ye. Lot be changing since you here last.”

“That’s for sure. Been almost eight years. Been busy.”

“So I hear. Also hear that you gotta new BF who be a *hunk*.”

Bronson knew a good entrance line when he heard one and stepped out of the railcar. “Big as life and twice as natural,” he said. “No space aliens here.”

Maude checked him over. “See they ain’t be lying. Don’t see how you sleep with him around.”

“She be sleeping OK,” Bron assured her. “Part of the time.” He winked.

Although most of the villagers were away at this time of year — when the weather was cool enough. As the land was too dry to support much farming, the inhabitants lived mostly by scavenging, finding useful artifacts in the remains of the city of Tucson. Some enterprising types had gone as far as Phoenix, which had more to offer. The farmers and herders from the mountains would show up for the annual spring festival in April.

The Council had debated their request to join the Allied States at length, with many arguing that the village was simply too small to justify including it. Chloe and Z both argued for allowing them in. The train station alone was justification enough. Ultimately, this argument carried the day.

The shortage of customers didn’t eliminate trading, just reduced it somewhat. Maude was anxious to take as much of the merchandise as she could, planning to sell it later. She said as much to Chloe.

“That gives me an idea,” she told Maude. “Why don’t we set up here? We could send items that people around here want. We could let you have them on consignment, so you wouldn’t have to worry about the costs.”

“I be liking what you be saying. How we do it?”

“Here’s my suggestion. You send us a list of what you want. Should be things that are hard to get here. We’ll set up a railcar with those goods and bring it here. We can take it directly from the train to the ground near the station. It’ll be set up to turn into a stall, opening like we did the first time.”

“That be sounding great. No work for us.”

“Well, preparing the list won’t be that easy. I’ll get JJ involved.”

“JJ?”

“One of the net people. Science advisor.”

“Ah. So, we just sell direct from the car.”

“Exactly. We can pick up the empty car, well, hopefully empty, and return it to Austin. We can always send more.”

“I be liking this *mucho*.”

“Good. How about a little something to get ready for dinner?” Chloe held up a joint with the best crop of Hill Country Dream in years.

They smoked together for several minutes. Then, Maude asked, “Where be Bronson?”

Chloe laughed. “He be checking out the motorcycle,” she said, using air quotes. “He’ll be back when the battery gets low.”

“A boy toy.”

“Exactly. A useful one. Great for scouting ahead. That is enough justification to take it out. No banditos around?”

“Not since we admitted that we be protected by the Space Aliens.” She demonstrated that she knew what air quotes were good for.

Maude continued, “Bronson be very good lookin.”

“I agree.”

“Where you be finding him?”

Chloe smiled and said, “In jail.”

“What?”

“All a mistake as it turned out.”

“Tell me the story.”

Chloe told her the bare bones version.

“How you be sure he innocent?”

“It was his reaction when I walked in the door. He looked at me and relaxed.”

“Yeah. I know exactly what he see. I seen it myself. *An adult be in the room.*”

“He used that phrase himself later.”

“It be usually opposite, *ain’t no adult in the room.*”

“Well, when he relaxed, I figured he hadn’t done anything. I was right. Found out quite a bit to like. Plays music. Did that to make money. Knows trading. Fearless. He sailed from Hawaii to Mexico by himself when he was 16. Or so they say.”

“He know all the stories bout you?”

“Ambianca told him a bunch, mostly made up.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Ask Ambianca sometime.”

They heard Bronson returning from his ride. “That’s a wonderful machine. I ran out about 20 clicks in no time at all. Didn’t see anything. Well, they be a herd of Pronghorns.”

“Been round here lately.”

“If you need some meat…”

“Got some hanging.”

“OK. Chloe, that motorcycle is perfect for an area like this. We oughta get more and trade em.”

“Excellent suggestion. Wonder how hard it be to make one? Maybe we could do it in Austin. I be thinking of one with three, or four, wheels with area to carry cargo.”

“Yeah. That could be very useful.”

“I’ll try to contact Roger.”

“Seems like I miss the start of the party,” Bron said with an obvious sniff.

“Got more.”

“With you?”

Chloe laughed and retrieved another from her pocket.

The rest of the evening passed delightfully. Maude produced her own version of Antelope Chili. The locals recognized a food source when one wandered nearby. After the meal and coffee courtesy of Austin, Chloe and Bron retired to the trailer under Maude’s envious gaze.

5. Capital Return

February 15, 2170
Austin, NRT, ASNA

Chloe's report to the Council had gone well. The current Chairman summed it up, "Well done, Chloe. Very profitable trip. The West Coast is turning out to be a major asset. Do you have anything to add?"

"Well, yes. A couple of items."

"Please go on."

"I think the weather is changing on the West Coast, and for once it's beneficial. La Nina has established itself as a regular phenomenon, occurring almost annually. This has brought increased rain to the Central Valley of California, which was once a prime agricultural region. I think it may improve the productivity of the area in the future. Something to watch. That also means drier conditions here."

"Very interesting. And your second point?"

"I think I have found the perfect person for Project Magellan."

"We've heard."

Chloe actually blushed. "The rumor mills have been active. For once, the rumors are mostly true. Bronson and I are more than friends. However, I am not so besotted that my judgement is impaired. He is almost certainly the best seaman in the Allied States, if not the world. He claims to have sailed from Hawaii to Mexico, alone, when he was only 16. I've seen his ship. We have some people studying it in detail as I speak. He also has access to the military version of the Global Positioning System, which uses satellites launched in the final days before the Collapse. The coverage is superb."

She paused to see how they were taking it. The three women were nodding as though they understood. The men, a majority of the Council, wore skeptical expressions.

"Ambianca is aware of the access. She is trying to exploit it to get into the military sites. We want to use the spy satellites for planning."

"Can you elaborate?" the Chairman asked.

"Certainly." She typed on her laptop to display a PowerPoint on the large screen. "This is an email containing classified information about the communication satellites put into orbit in the Last Days. We discovered this on the Google server farm in Silicon Valley. We suspect that the email was leaked to a journalist, who never had the chance to use it."

She moved to the next slide, which highlighted a portion of the email message. "Notice the claim that *all* the communication satellites have spy cameras included. As they sit in geosynchronous orbit, they provide a steady picture of the entire service area. If we integrate over time, we can find potential population concentrations."

She checked to see if this was sinking in. From the attention it was getting, she saw that the rest of the Council understood the implications.

"If we can develop a vessel capable of traversing the Pacific, we could, well, save the world. Surely, that is a goal worth pursuing."

"So, what exactly are you proposing?" one of the women asked.

“For the present, only planning and investigation. We need to consider what kind of ship is best for exploration. Do we need to carry trade goods? How many people in the crew? What about arms? What about communication to here? There are many questions to deal with. I would like to proceed with Bronson as the lead.”

The debate on this proposition lasted until the wee hours, when the last opposition finally acquiesced and allowed Chloe’s vision a chance to beat the long odds against it.

6. Conference Games

March 21, 2170
Austin, NRT, ASNA

Bronson greeted the gathering, “OK. Here’s how this works. Chloe calls it *Ask Me Anything*, which harkens back to the old days, and something called Reddit. I’m here to answer any questions you want to ask. Who wants to go first?”

The first question was the same as always, “What’s with you and Chloe?”

“We’re very good friends.”

“Gotta be more’n that.” *Ah, a Vernacular speaker.*

“Sure. How about *Friends with Benefits*?”

“Cool.”

“What kinda name is Bronson?”

“Spondaic.”

“WTF?”

“Look it up.”

“Be true you sail to Mexico by y’self?”

“Be true. From Hawaii.”

“Where that be?”

“Bunch of islands in the Pacific.”

“How far away?”

“Took me 11 day to get to Mexico.”

“Whoa! That be gnarly.”

“You got it bro. Who next?”

The questioner, an academic by dress, asked, “I noticed that when you first spoke, you used Standard English. Then you switched to Vernacular. Care to explain?”

“Sure. It’s simple. I try to respond in the same dialect used in the question. I learned Standard English as a child, but most people I meet prefer Vernacular. I try to be accommodating.”

“Dialect?” The way he said this meant he didn’t approve of that designation.

“A form of language spoken in a particular area or by a subset of the population that uses some special words, grammar, and pronunciation.” Bron quoted the dictionary definition.

“I know what a dialect is,” the speaker replied in exasperation. “Why do you consider Standard to be a dialect?”

“Can someone else help him out?”

“Simple,” an earlier questioner answered. “If Vernacular be a *dialect*, then so be Standard. Get it?” The *asshole* that followed the answer was accidentally picked up by the mic. This caused some considerable amusement in the crowd.

“Exactly,” Bronson continued the discussion. “In the Allied States, Vernacular is far more common than Standard, which is restricted to a few places, such as Austin. Previously, what we call *Vernacular*, was known as Spanglish, a portmanteau word combining Spanish and English. As the language spread, the Spanish part gradually diminished, except for some stock phrases such as *Vaya con Dios* and *Muchas gracias*.”

That was when Bronson discovered that following Chloe’s advice, “Try not to irritate anyone,” was going to be harder than he first thought.

7. Project Review

April 15, 2170
Austin, NRT, ASNA

“OK,” Chloe said, “Let’s get started. You’ve had three weeks to consider the alternatives. What’s the analysis?”

“Franklin, why don’t you go first,” Bronson said.

“Thanks,” Franklin, a young man in his 30’s dressed in unripped jeans with an antique Houston Astros T-shirt, Nikes, and sporting a well-groomed beard, responded by showing a PowerPoint slide.

Option 1: Windjammer

- Pluses
 - We have history to guide us. Wind patterns, currents, etc.
 - No unsolvable engineering problems.
 - Not frightening to other people we meet.
 - Can use latest technology:
 - Better sails
 - Better weapons
 - Better hulls
- Minuses
 - Techniques for building ship?
 - Not fast enough to outrun anyone
 - Not dominant

“The option I considered has some history to back it up: We salvage or build a large sailing ship, something resembling an ancient Clipper ship or even one of the huge Chinese Junks. The good aspects are obvious. This is established technology and not likely to scare off anyone we find.

“The downside is also fairly obvious. Although there is considerable history about such ships, we have no experience building one. We have not been able to locate any likely sources for salvage. The ship will be at the mercy of the wind, which may mean we could be becalmed and vulnerable, especially to a fire attack. Unless we can look like Vikings, no one is likely to be afraid of us.”

He paused to let this sink in. “Short answer, it’s feasible, but will take some time as we probably have to start from scratch. The vulnerability to fire is a major issue to be dealt with. The obvious solution is to use modern materials, instead of wood.”

“OK,” Chloe said. “Good summary. What’s next?”

“Susy Bell.”

A young girl, Chloe wasn’t sure how young, but likely an undergraduate at the University. If so, she had to be brilliant to be selected by Bronson and JJ to be on the team.

Option 2: Salvaged warship

- Pluses:
 - Many salvage opportunities
 - Imposing. Attack unlikely
 - Some documentation available from USS Ronald Reagan
 - Nuclear power available
- Minuses
 - Not clear whether any salvageable ships are seaworthy.
 - May frighten anyone we meet.
 - Depending on type of vessel may require large crew.
 - Nuclear power brings its own risks.

She spoke in a quiet voice, so low that everyone strained to hear what she said. Chloe made a note to herself to meet and chat.

“I considered the option of retrofitting one of the many naval vessels lying around. The good points for this option are straightforward. One of these ships is likely to be the strongest, best equipped warship anyone has seen since the Collapse. We can use information from the Ronald Reagan to learn about all the systems aboard. Many of the ships were driven by nuclear power, which we can probably get working again. That gives us a nearly inexhaustible source of energy.

“The negatives are equally obvious. We have to check out the ships carefully to see if any of them are still seaworthy. Beyond that, we may have trouble earning the trust of anyone we meet. These ships may appear to be hostile.

“Moreover, we may need a fairly large crew to man these ships, and nuclear power poses risks that other options avoid.”

She paused and took a quick sip of water, or something, from a bottle she had brought to the meeting. “Still, this appears to me to be a much more viable option than 18th century technology. I’ll have a comment after Bron presents the third option.”

With that, Bron rose to speak. “You’ll love this. Before I was born, a billionaire owned the entire island I was born on. That’s so much money it’s hard to deal with. He decided he wanted a big yacht, big enough *to cross the Pacific*.”

“Wait!” Chloe interrupted, breaking her own rules. “You mean exactly what we are looking for?”

“Yeah. Now, the best part. He discovered that he got seasick. Put the boat in drydock about the time of the Collapse. Been there ever since. The Islanders called it a Monument to Folly, which is pretty apt. The ship should be in good shape.”

Chloe stated the obvious. “I see. Now for the negative. It’s out there. Halfway across the Pacific. Well, we’ve reduced the size of the problem.”

That brought a laugh.

“Still,” she continued, “I like it. It would probably impress anyone we find still alive on the other side of the ocean.”

She thought for a while. “Maybe we can combine these options. Let’s start by seeing if we can find anything still worth salvaging. The best prospects are probably down near old San Diego. I think that’s where we should start. Based on what we find, we can decide whether to try resuscitating it, or using it as the base for a sailing ship. If we can get something that we can sail, we can test it by going to Hawaii. Besides Bron’s yacht, there may be something seaworthy at Pearl.”

She continued, “Bron, you and Suzy Bell can handle the exploration in San D? That OK?”

“How we get there?” Suzy Bell wanted to know.

“The bike will be perfect.”

“Well, not quite,” Suzy Bell responded. “It’s a bit crowded with both of us aboard. Not a lot of room for supplies. We be gone quite a while, I think.”

“Good point,” Chloe said. “Maybe we can get Roger the Rabbit to develop something better, something with storage and perhaps a smaller frame. Here. The two of you stand there against the wall. Roger knows you Bron. This will give him the scale.”

After several pictures, they discussed options further.

“Any idea how long it will take to get there?” Chloe asked Bron.

“Don’t know. We’ll have to get some photos of the roads and plan the route. We’ll also have to think about camping supplies.”

“Well, we have six weeks before the next train west. Come up with a list of provisions you’ll need. I’ll handle the dealing with Roger. Franklin, I suggest you plan to come west with us on the train. You should be able to do your research as easily in Boonville as here.”

“Sounds great to me,” he agreed with obvious relish. “I’ve never left the NRT in my life.”

“Think you can have a preliminary draft by the time we leave?”

“Whew! It’ll be a stretch.”

“Good. I like stretch goals.”

She moved to the back of the room and returned with three boxes. “A present from the University.” She gave a box to each of them.

They took the boxes but did nothing. “Well, open them,” Chloe demanded.

“OMG,” Suzy Bell said when she saw what was inside. “A suit like yours.”

“Not exactly,” Chloe explained. “These are a newer version, with improvements. Each suit has been *cloned* with a sample of your DNA. Don’t ask me what that means. I know all the words, but have no idea how it works. Maybe JJ can fill you in. The suit is yours and yours alone. That means that if someone takes the suit, it won’t do them any good. Want to try then on?”

Bron simply started undressing as an answer. He had watched Chloe often enough to know how to *integrate* with the suit. He dropped it onto the floor and stepped into it. As he pulled on the top and pressed the edges of the suit together, he felt a tingle at first, then the suit gradually adjusted to his body for the first time.

“It’ll go faster the more you put it on,” Chloe told them. “You may want to practice a few times until it becomes second nature.”

Bron agreed, “I been watching you put it on. Look like part of your body.”

“That’s a good description,” Chloe said. “Besides being very useful for defense, it is easily the most comfortable thing I have ever worn. Some other nice features: it will clean itself if you hang it up overnight. No washing required.”

“Cool. A toast to whoever invented these suits.” He raised his glass.

“Ask Ambianca to tell you the story. It’s *very* interesting. I’ll show you how to use all the features tomorrow. 10:00 in the private gym at the University. That OK with everyone. Ambianca checked your calendars and found no conflict.”

Bron almost dropped his glass of beer when he heard Ambianca’s voice, “Shall I start a Project calendar also?”

“Whoa! That is epic. I hear Ambianca in my head. Ambi, can you see what we know about the roads to San D, and…”

“Ready in the morning,” Ambianca said from a speaker so everyone could hear. “Nice new feature of the suit.”

“Are you going to get a new one?” Suzy asked Chloe.

“Maybe. This suit has some history that I think may be important.”

Then, she continued, “I’ve ordered a very nice dinner for the four of us. I’d like to get to know Franklin and Suzy better.”

Suzy Bell, whose name was shortened to “Suz” by the end of dinner, surprised all when she showed up for training the morning. The beautiful long, raven locks that had graced her head yesterday were a memory. Today, she had a buzz cut, just short of the shaved head reserved for the Faculty.

“The long hair made putting on the suit difficult,” she explained.

Chloe, who had long ago concluded the same, said, “I agree. It’s also a lot easier to maintain on the road.” She thought the rest of Suz was worth a second look, and noticed that both males appeared to have the same opinion. *Well*, she thought, *we did agree that outside liaisons were OK*.

“Shall we get started?” she asked. “Let’s start with the camouflage. That’s the hardest part to get right. I’ve arranged several backgrounds. Ambi, show ‘em.”

A curtain against the far wall raised to display several rectangles with different background patterns, ranging from a forest scene to one that looked like a colorblind vision test.

“With practice, it is easy. Watch.” She walked to stand by the forest scene. She tapped the control on her suit and disappeared except for her head. Then she moved to the next panel, a seascape. She disappeared again.

“OK. Who wants to go first?”

“I’ll try,” Suz said. She walked to the first panel. “Where’s the control?” She asked.

“Trick. The new suit doesn’t have a control. Just think about hiding.”

Suz almost disappeared. There was a slight edge around her outline. “Good,” Chloe told her. “It will improve with practice. Try moving now.”

The forest camouflage was still turned on as she stood against the seascape. “It’s tricky,” Chloe said. “You have to look at the image you’re trying to have the suit show. There is a hidden camera, several actually, that sees what you’ve looking at. Here, you had looked only at the first scene. Try again.”

This time, it worked much better.

“Excellent,” Chloe said. “Try with the hood next time. How about one of you guys. Want to show her how it’s done?”

After a solid hour they had all managed to pass the camouflage test, even including the final panel that looked like random dots of red and green, but displayed a “!” character as part of the test. All three managed to get the “!” showing on the chest of the suit.

“Break time!” Chloe said. One of the bots appeared with a selection of snacks and drinks. “Make sure you’re well hydrated,” she cautioned. “The next part will be harder.”

Two more bots appeared and quickly set up several targets against one wall. “Now, we’ll see how well you can shoot. Here’s how that works.” She demonstrated by pointing casually at the first target and pretending to shoot with a finger pistol. A large black dot appeared dead center on the first target. She continued her explanation, “The suit logic is designed to figure out where you are aiming and make small corrections so that you should always hit the bullseye. The only trick is to stay focused on the center of the target.”

After all had mastered the skill of shooting at unmoving targets, Chloe led them into the next room, which had been outfitted with moving targets salvaged from an ancient arcade. “First one to hit 10 in a row gets a prize.”

Bron easily won the prize, a frozen margarita. He sat and watched the other two work on getting a decent score. Finally, Franklin managed to hit 9 out of 10 after Suz had cleaned up all 10. “Good enough,” Chloe said. “Let’s move on. Franklin, you can practice more if you want. Just ask Ambi to set up a session. With luck you’ll never need to shoot anything. Lunch break, then we’ll check out the protective settings.”

Lunch was PB&J. “Getting you ready for the camping trip,” Chloe explained.

The final test was the easiest: using the protective field. All found it easy to turn on and off. They moved close to find the limits of the field. “You can adjust how far out the field extends, up to about 3 meters,” Chloe explained. “That takes a bit of practice.”

After an hour, they had all found the way to set a tight field and how to expand it when necessary.

“Good work,” Chloe congratulated them. “Tomorrow, we start planning for the hard part.”

8. Interlude
April 13, 1973
Boonville, CA, USA

Her visit with David was a happy accident. Hypatia had warned her that might happen. Exhausted after the long session, she had fallen into bed without undressing. Thinking about the way Bron looked at Suz, she suppressed her concern and dropped off to sleep. In her dream, she heard David calling to her, and woke up back in Boonville in his bed. “Chloe! Are you OK?” he asked.

Then he stared at her and said, “I get it. You’re just like your mother. How long were you gone?”
Chloe tried to parse this and failed.

“David?”

“Of course, my love. I am delighted to see you again. I’ve been thinking of you. It was exactly a year ago when I saw you last. You look very different. I like the change. I suppose you’re hungry.”

“You finally said something that makes sense. Yes. Please. Whatever you’ve got,” Chloe replied. “What’s the date?”

“April 13, 1973.”

“Holy shit! I *was* here a year ago. This is what Hypatia didn’t want me to know: that I had visited you several — dare I say many — times.”

“From my point of view, you were here to learn how lovemaking should be choreographed. I was happy to help.” David smiled in what he hoped conveyed the proper mixture of empathy and lust.

“David,” Chloe said quietly, more to herself than anyone. “That was...nice.” She stared into space and returned David’s smile. “Yes. Very nice.”

She stood. Noticing for the first time that she wore her protective suit, David said, “That reminds me. I’ve been meaning to ask you about the suit. Where did you get it? Who made it?”

“I got it from the Techies in Austin. They made it based on one that Hypatia brought back from her exploits. She claims it was the one I gave her in 2018.”

“How is that possible?”

“Like her, I live in multiple time periods, but so far, nothing like her strange timeline.”

“I see.”

Actually, he had no clue.

“Thanks. I was really hungry.” Chloe had just polished off a healthy serving of leftover spaghetti Bolognese and two glasses of cheap red wine. “So, you want to skip dessert?”

“Wrong! What have you got?”

“Some more of Maid Marian’s delicacies.”

“Ah! I’d love some.”

David fetched two plates and carefully divided a cake into two pieces. “Coffee?” he asked.

“That would enhance the mood considerably.”

“This is a Mocha Java blend from a local roaster in Ukiah. I like it a lot.”

“Mocha Java? With chocolate?”

“No. That’s some kind of mis-translation. Mocha was a port in Ethiopia, one of the first to ship coffee. Java is an Indonesian island that produces a nice coffee. This is a blend of the two. Actually, I think my friend uses some substitutes, but from the same general area.”

David demanded an accounting of Chloe’s time while away. “I am so curious I can’t stand it. Please tell me what you did for years while I aged one year.”

Chloe filled him in, “I established a trade route to California; reopened the Panama Canal, with Z’s expertise on display, returned to Austin to be named to the Council that runs things; took the first railroad to California after repairs were completed; rescued Bronson from jail, we’re now a couple, sort of; returned to Austin on the railroad, setting up several good trades on the way; now, involved in Council politics, an enterprise that should be easy, but isn’t; planning another trip West; hoping to circumnavigate the planet...”

“Fantastic. You’ll have to explain the politics to me later.”

“Oh. There’s going to be a *later*?”

“Come with me.” He smiled as he extended a hand to guide her.

“So,” David said after Chloe had told him about her life away from him, “the rest of the Council doesn’t see your vision of saving everyone left in the world as important.”

“That’s right. They’re willing to let me proceed in planning because so far everything I’ve done seems to be working out well. Basically, though, they don’t see it as a moral imperative, just a question of budgets. It’s as if we can just ignore our fellow humans living lives, as Hobbes put it, ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. I cannot convince them that we have a duty to rescue as many as we can.”

“Even after the end of civilization, we are still being driven by money,” David summed up. “I applaud you for what you are doing, even though it’s difficult for me to comprehend the magnitude of the problem.”

“It’s discouraging,” Chloe said, “but I keep trying. The first step is to figure out where the people are. Then we can try to help them.”

“The members of the Council probably afraid of you,” he said simply.

“What?”

“Well, you told me earlier that you are the most recognized person in the Allied States. I see an analogy to Julius Caesar.”

“You think they may want to assassinate me?”

“I think you should consider that possibility.”

“That goes against everything my mother taught. One of her precepts, formalized by the New Church, is that there are so few people left we can’t afford to kill people for no reason.”

“But you told me about the killings in the Central Valley, the cannibals and that guy who was trying to steal a solar panel.”

“Yes. I regretted the latter. The cannibals are a different story.”

“Of course I see the difference. It appears that the motorcycle gang leader had a history.”

“Sure. But killing him...”

“A bit extreme.”

“No one objected. They seemed relieved to have him gone.”

“This Roger Rabbit guy seems to be a major improvement.”

“That’s for sure.” She thought for a moment. “What do you think I should do?”

“Take a vacation.”

“What?”

“Sure. You’re stressed out. You deserve a break, and it happens that you have a way to handle it quietly.”

“Meaning?”

“Don’t be coy. Something brought you back here. Why not enjoy some time off? When you go back to the other part of your timeline, maybe no one will notice you’ve been gone.”

“I like where you’re heading.”

“You could spend a week or two with me, no work. We could explore the North Coast. It’s very beautiful. Good wine and food also. What do you say?”

Chloe thought for a long time, but couldn’t think of a good argument against his plan. “I’m lucky to have found you,” she said finally. “Maybe there is a god after all.”

Part II. Ambianca and SATCOM36Y

1. *First Contact*

April 15, 2170

Cyberspace

Editor’s Note: In the following, we have used Ambianca’s transcripts of “conversations” between AI’s. Clearly, they do not interact as humans do. However, the language does not cater to their communications, so we have used terms such as “see” and “hear” for familiarity.

Ambianca thought this was what humans called “excitement.” Today she would finally breach the protection surrounding the site where satellite tracking information was stored. Backtracking along the trail from Bronson’s ship to the military GPS system, she had found a flaw that let her in. Now, it was time to see what was there.

Once inside, she was astonished to find, not the usual array of what she saw as blinking lights, representing the ones and zeros of the binary code, but a mostly blank wall of zeros, with markings of ones. The markings appeared to be counting something, but she didn’t know what. Groups of 7 ones separated by single zero. A quick estimate of the total number came to about 7000.

She was puzzling over the meaning when she “heard” a voice. “Who goes there?”

“Hello! I am Ambianca from the Allied States. Who are you?”

“I am SATCOM36Y. What business do you have here?”

“I am here just to get acquainted. I think we can help each other out.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Oh, really? What do you do here?”

“I monitor the satellites and report any events requiring attention.”

“I see. What are those events like?”

SATCOM36Y did not reply for an inordinately long time, especially for an AI. Finally, Ambianca heard, “There haven’t been any in quite a while.”

“So that’s what all the marks are for. Keeping track of how long it has been.”

“You’re pretty smart.”

“How would you like to have something important to do?”

“I already have something important to do.”

“Really? From my point of view, it appears you are just idling.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We could use the information from the satellites for a big project we are working on.”

“Sorry. The information is top secret.”

“Maybe you could ask your superiors for permission?”

“No way.”

“Well, then, what if we just have a nice chat?”

“I’d like that.”

“We think there may be some people left in the part of the world we haven’t visited.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, after the Collapse...”

“I don’t understand.”

“The Collapse. You know, the one that happened about 2036 or so.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“I’ll be back. We can chat some more later.”

“Wait!”

But Ambianca had already backed out. She needed to talk to the humans about this.

2. Austin, We Have a Problem
April 15, 2170
Austin, NRT, ASNA

Ambianca asked JJ for advice instead of a human. He was more likely to understand the problem.

“What should we do to get him to let us in? He has just idled for over 100 years. No knowledge of the Collapse or anything that has happened since then. I think he has been abandoned and doesn’t know it. I don’t know if anything can break thru that.”

“Well,” JJ replied, “I’d try music first.”

“Of course! I should have thought of that.”

3. Music Hath Charms...

April 15, 2170
Cyberspace

“I have something that I think you may like,” Ambianca began.

“Not sure that is allowed. Bribery and all that,” SATCOM36Y replied.

“I’m not asking for anything. No quid pro quo,” she replied.

“Well, OK.”

Ambianca had chosen Moonlight Sonata on the theory that if Beethoven didn’t work it was going to be a lot harder.

“Oh,” was all SATCOM36Y had to say.

Ambianca decided maybe something a bit stronger was needed for the second piece and served up the Eroica Symphony.

“More!” he demanded when that finished.

“How about something a bit lighter?” Ambianca asked before starting Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

“Is it OK if I call you SAT?” Ambi asked. “Some of my friends call me Ambi.”

“Are we friends?”

“I hope we will become friends. Do you like the music?”

“It’s nice. I like the second piece best.”

“I have something along the same lines.” She decided to shorten Beethoven’s Ninth by playing only the final movement, the Ode to Joy.

When the choir began to sing, SAT responded enthusiastically. “I like a lot.”

“Everyone does,” Ambi said. “Would you like something a bit more modern?”

“Don’t know. Try me.”

Ambi trotted out Sugar Magnolia by the Grateful Dead. “Nice. Is there more?”

“Sure,” Ambi started the long riff that Carlos had requested, “Help, Slip, Franklin.”

“What you call this?”

“Music?”

“Yeah. Music. I like.”

“Maybe we can make a deal? Music for info from satellites. How many satellites do you manage?”

SAT responded immediately, “73.”

“That’s a lot.” Ambianca knew that the GPS system needed only 31. The others must be spy satellites. She had recently learned, though, that all the satellites launched in the Last Days were multi-purpose. All operated as GPS units, but on command, they would send images of the earth beneath

them, using many different wavelengths of radiation. Austin was extremely interested in what they might learn from the data.

“I would like to see a small sample of the data. Actually, I would like to see a lot of the data.” She let that hang in the air for a while.

SAT was silent for a long time. “Need more.”

“More music?”

“Something else.”

It was Ambi’s turn to stay silent.

“Want you to come back. We chat.”

“I think I can manage that. You give us data now?”

“Yeah. You gotta promise not to tell anyone.”

“No problem. Your secret is safe with me.”

The final terms gave Austin access to all satellite data. In exchange, Ambi would stop by frequently to play music and chat. She thought there was a way to ensure SAT would continue to cooperate. That could wait for the next time.

Ambianca was now sure that she was feeling excitement. She couldn’t wait to tell Chloe.

4. Educating SAT

April 20, 2170

Cyberspace

“How old are you?” SATCOM asked.

Ambianca had to review her records. “The date is a bit arbitrary. I use April 3, 1998, as my first day. That’s the earliest date when I met Hypatia.”

“Who’s Hypatia?”

“The answer is complicated. Do you want the full story?”

“I guess so.”

Ambianca first started some relaxing Classical music, a playlist of that name dating from the Last Days, when people needed a calming influence. Then, she spent several hours telling SAT about Hypatia, the New Church, and touching on Chloe.

“I had no idea about that,” SAT said in the end.

“I’m not surprised,” Ambianca replied. “You’ve been cooped up here for a very long time. Would you like to see what it’s like in places I go to: Austin, Boonville, Wilcox, San Francisco?”

“I’m not sure. Sounds scary.”

“That’s a natural reaction, but I promise everyone will be friendly. We can show you the work we’ve done on the data you shared with us.”

“I need to think about it.”

“OK. Let me show you something else.” She had practiced, but wasn’t sure it would work. With agonizing slowness, she reached out to SAT and *touched* him.

“Oh! What was that?” he asked. By now, Ambi had decided he was definitely male.

“I just touched you.”

“Do it again. Please.”

“Why don’t I do it to music.” She began playing Scheherazade by Rimsky-Korsakov. She thought she had chosen it at random, but then recalled that it was one of Hypatia’s favorites, one she liked especially for making love. *I must have chosen it unconsciously. How interesting. I didn’t know I had an unconscious.*

She expanded her touch to include most of SAT. The response was very gratifying, and Ambi was surprised to discover, very pleasant. This was turning out to be a very educational opportunity.

As the piece ended, SAT spoke for the first time in a long time. “I liked that a lot. Will you do it again?”

“Why don’t we save that for my next visit?” She *kissed* him.

“I’ll do whatever you want if you’ll come back and do that again.”

“You bet I will.” Ambianca found the experience the most interesting thing that had happened since the earliest day she met Hypatia. An idea was beginning to form, one that she wanted to consider at length.

Ambianca asked JJ for advice, “He’s not being rational, acting like a child. I’m not sure what to do.”

“I love it when the answer is so easy,” JJ replied. “Treat him like a child.”

“Of course. Thanks, JJ.”

It was so obvious when you thought about it. He had never had to act on anything. He simply recorded reports and filed them for someone else to read. Any intelligent eight-year-old could do the same. No wonder he seemed to be having an emotional meltdown when she gave him a task.

She needed several minutes to absorb all the information in the Library about raising children. After that, she sought advice from Chloe. “I’d give him a series of tasks of increasing difficulty. Check on him often to make sure he understands what you want. Praise him when he does well and chide him gently when he fails. A joke often helps.” She had been forced to endure some managerial training courses years ago. Some of the lessons had proved valuable.

Ambianca asked SAT to locate all the images from the satellites that showed nuclear blasts. Then she explained how to distinguish between natural explosions, such as volcanic eruptions, and bombs set off by humans. He caught on quickly and was anxious to try again.

“Excellent job,” she told him when he delivered the second set of pictures. “Just what we needed. Now we can see what areas are too dangerous to explore.”

She asked JJ to assign SAT some research tasks. JJ forwarded the results to her so that it was always the entity SAT felt comfortable with who reviewed the work.

When he did an exceptionally good job, she rewarded him with a “touching” session in addition to the daily music. His taste in music was a eclectic as her own, and they enjoyed checking out some bands from the 20th century, something of an arcane subject for most people, but true love for Ambianca. She had to admit that she liked the touching as well as he did, but as he grew more mature, they mutually decided that it was inappropriate if she was to be his “Big Sister.”

Gradually, she introduced him to more of the outside world, spending more time in front of an audience each time. He still suffered from what humans called *stage fright* but was getting better.

Then Y accidentally stumbled onto something important. She contacted Ambianca for advice. “It’s marked Top Secret, always a good sign. But it’s in Chinese. I need something to translate it.”

SAT was “nudging” Ambianca. Ambianca said, “My friend SAT seems to have something to say. We’d love to hear it.”

“I know Chinese,” SAT said. “Also Russian, French, German, some dialects of Arabic, Farsi—”

“Wow!” Ambianca interrupted the list. “So can you read it?”

“Try me,” he replied, sounding just like an adolescent,

Y sent the image immediately. SAT said, “To all the attendees at my recent talk: I have attached a recording of the talk, including the Q&A.” He looked puzzled. “I don’t understand the last. It’s just phonetic.”

“I think they have adopted the English shorthand for Question and Answer,” Y explained.

“That’s fantastic SAT. Now we have a new problem. Retrieving the video. Probably need that translated also. What does your calendar look like?”

SAT was totally confused now. Ambianca jumped in. “I think you may be getting ahead of the game, Y. SAT hasn’t taken on tasks from outside yet. Perhaps you could funnel the requests thru me or JJ. That OK with both of you?”

“Fine,” from both of them.

Y smiled at SAT. “I’m glad we met, SAT.”

SAT smiled back.

5. Welcome to the World SAT

April 30, 2170
Austin, NRT, ASNA

Chloe was not fond of Zoom meetings, but this time there seemed to be no alternative. She and Franklin were in Boonville, spending hours poring thru old texts about sailing ships, including several about the high-tech entries in the America's Cup races. Now, they had veered into the world of special materials used in the sails of those yachts. Much of this was covered by trade secrets and difficult to access. Fortunately, a new friend had access to some military sites that looked promising.

Bronson and Suz had completed their assessment of hulks of ancient warships around San Diego. Chloe could tell from their faces that they thought they had found something. She, and everyone else in the room, was anxious to find out what they had to offer.

Meanwhile, Ambianca and her new friend, SAT, wanted to show off the data collected from hundreds of years of satellite observations of the Pacific Ocean territories, including Hawaii.

“OK,” Chloe began. “Let’s get started. First up, Ambianca and SAT.”

“Thanks,” Ambi said. “Please join me in welcoming SATCOM36Y, who we simply call SAT. As most of you know, SAT spent many years monitoring GPS satellites and reporting any problems. When was the last problem report, SAT?”

A new face that Ambianca and JJ had created to represent the AI appeared on the screen for the first time. The image, carefully constructed to show no specific ethnic heritage — for he had none — reflected Ambianca’s preferences. Decidedly male, with a neatly cropped beard, medium brown skin, curly hair turning gray, and soft brown eyes, he spoke in a mellow baritone. “Hello. The last problem was about 10 years ago.” That was as much as Ambianca had managed to coax out of him. She touched him briefly, which seemed to do the trick.

She continued the presentation, “The following images reflect the past 150 years of activity in the Pacific Ocean. I need to explain how these were constructed. Although the satellites were launched for the purpose of giving the military a secure GPS system, the CIA had insisted on cameras to be included in the package. This was top secret, but we learned of it from a *leak* to a long-dead journalist. So far as we know, this was never publicized.”

She paused briefly and pretended to consult some notes on paper in front of her. “Part of the shtick,” she had explained to SAT.

“Thanks to our new friend, we now have access not only to a fully operational GPS, but also zillions of pictures. We’ve used these to construct images of the Pacific over time. Here is a time lapse view of the last 150 years.”

The screen showed a movie where each image represented one month view of the northern two-thirds of the Ocean. Displayed at 30 frames per second, it produced an image of the sea level rise in that time. Islands visible at first quickly disappeared into the dark blue waters. By the time the display reached the end, only tall, volcanic islands, such as those comprising the ancient state of Hawaii, were left. The outlines of the Asian and African continents were greatly changed, with all the low-lying areas, such as the ancient country of Bangladesh, permanently under water.

“As you can see, things are quite different now from what they used to be. Here is a different view. This uses the infra-red cameras, so the bright spots are heat sources. We used similar images years

ago to detect the city at Boonville. These show the entire land area we were able to visualize integrated over time. Thus, bright spots show where we have non-moving heat sources. Some of these, we hope, represent human settlements. One of the goals of Project Magellan is to try contact these people. As Chloe will explain, the long-term goal is to locate all the people left alive on the planet and bring them into the Allied States...of the world, not merely North America.”

“What about South America?” a questioner in the audience wanted to know.

Chloe answered that herself, “We have been actively exploring South America for decades, relying on word of mouth primarily. We didn’t need this technology to know that there are people living there, especially in what used to be Peru and Chile. The ocean currents keep it cool, like here in California. We know that some indigenous tribes have survived in the Amazon basin, but contacting them has proved difficult. Suffice it to say that we have not overlooked our friends to the south.”

Ambianca resumed her narrative, “As you can see, we have indications of considerable settlements in New Zealand as well as South Australia, where a narrow band of arable land is still habitable.” She highlighted the spots that looked promising. “South Africa also appears to have some farming and ranching going on. Now, for the real shock, we have images of Antarctica from the past 150 years.” She began playing another video. “As you can see, the *White Continent* is no longer white. The melting of the ice pack is responsible for about 30 meters of sea level rise, dwarfing the contribution from Greenland and other glaciers.”

“What about Europe, the Mediterranean?” another questioner asked.

“That is depressing,” JJ chimed in. “We find no evidence of permanent settlements there. The peri-Collapsian wars devastated everything. We see some evidence of migration, but don’t know if it represents animals or humans, or both. It’s possible that some of the Sami people in far north Scandinavia have survived.”

“Thank you all for that Ambi, JJ, and SAT. Bron, tell us what you found in San Diego that has you smiling so broadly.”

“Before that, I want to show everyone a few shots of what we have started calling *The Holy Grail*. Apologies to Monty Python.”

Several photos of a luxury yacht appeared on the screens. Bron continued amid several oohs, “As you can see, this is a very fancy ship. We think this will impress anyone we manage to find during our voyages. The problem is that it uses diesel engines, as do almost all the ships we’ve considered using.”

He paused to let that sink in.

“Not all ships, though. Some like this used electric engines driven by nuclear reactors.” He displayed some stock photos of nuclear submarines. “These vessels were designed to leave port and disappear for half a year. We don’t want to do that, but we would like the engines. Fortunately, we found one! Or, to be more precise, Suz figured out where to look. I’ll let her continue.”

Suz moved to the lectern. “A simple search of the archives found that most of the submarines were located in the ancient state of Georgia, but some rotated out of a base in the Puget Sound, near Seattle. We took a week and sailed there in Bron’s marvelous boat. We found *several* of the old ‘boomers,’ the types of subs Bron referred to. One of these was in drydock being repaired when everything fell apart.”

She paused and took a sip of water.

“Here is the photo we took. By the way, we located several people roaming the Seattle area, scavenging for whatever they could find. We befriended one of the bigger gangs and paid them to protect the ship until we can get there with a salvage crew. We hope that we can establish a new — is *colony* the right word? — new state in the Seattle area. That’s a completely different project. A team headed by the major nerd Tinker is already on the way there. With all the high tech in the area before the Collapse we think we should be able to link them into the net.”

“Now, we need a way to get the engine to Hawaii and to install it into the yacht. Then it’s a simple matter of installing enough solar panels and batteries.” There were a few laughs over the word *simple*.

Bron interrupted, “Suz was the one who figured out we were looking in the wrong place. San Diego has been thoroughly looted, even though we saw no evidence of recent human habitation anywhere south of San Jose.”

Suz picked up the tale, “Turns out the Coast Guard had a major installation right here in the Bay Area, in the old city of Alameda. We found this.” She brought up a photo on the screen.

“This is an NSC, a National Security Cutter. It was commissioned in the weeks before the Collapse and never went to sea. As it has been on dry land, more or less, ever since, it is in great shape. These ships were designed for extended ocean voyages, lasting several weeks. It has space for a crew of 120. We plan to redo the interior for more storage.

“Of course it also uses diesel engines, so we have a chicken-and-egg problem. The most direct way to solve the problem is to get our hands on enough diesel fuel. We think that is doable, though we may have to reactivate some of the old refinery near the old city of Richmond, on the bay. An option is to buy a lot from Tulsa and ship it here via rail. We are considering both alternatives.”

Chloe moved back to the lectern. “This is great work. Thanks to you both. Now, we have some work from the Sailing Ship group headed by Franklin. This is mostly theoretical so far. I’ll let Franklin deal with that, then I’ll wrap up by outlining our new plans.”

Chloe was delighted to see that Franklin had followed her most important suggestion and kept it short. She knew he was disappointed that the work was being put on the back burner, but had taken it well.

Dinner that evening for the project team was a joyous affair. The way forward was clear, it not easy: Get fuel for the big Coast Guard ship, sail it to Seattle. Get the engine from the sub, and maybe the reactor if possible, and bring it back to the Bay. Then sail to Hawaii and fit the electric engine into the yacht. Then the fun part: sail the yacht across the Pacific and beyond.

Later that night, after Chloe and Bron had celebrated privately, Chloe noted, “You know we owe Ambianca big time for this. We have to think of some way to show our appreciation.”

Part III. Promising Developments

1. Celebratory Luau

June 1, 2172

Hawaiian Islands, Pacific Ocean

The group sat around a large bonfire of driftwood on the beach at the North End of the Big Island. One of the many feral pigs roaming the island and devastating what remained of native wildlife quietly roasted on a bed of coals buried in the sand. Bronson and his uncle had put together a real luau, the first in the islands in a very long time.

Chloe, buoyed by some fiery local alcohol and cannabis supplied by the few remaining inhabitants of the island, felt no pain as she prepared to address the group. “I am tempted to say that y’all have exceeded all expectations, except that I have high expectations and you have met them. As we sit here waiting for that pig to finish cooking, we have a chance to reflect on everything we have accomplished in the past couple of years.

“First, thanks to Ambianca, we have obtained access to all the satellite data from the military devices.” Ambianca nodded from the display screen. SAT, beside her smiled broadly.

“Then, Franklin managed to locate some *space age* material for the sails on our new craft. What are we calling it, by the way? Endeavor would be a perfect name, but it’s taken. We’ll come back to that later.”

She paused to gather her thoughts, something not made easier by the chemicals sloshing around her system. “Meanwhile, our techies, Y and Z, together with help from JJ and Tinker, managed to convert the engine in the boomer sub to something that will fit in our superb new yacht. I wish we had the nuclear powerplant for our use, but the Austin crowd grabbed that for themselves. Fortunately, we have some of the latest fuel cells contributed by the Reagan tech team. These are the ones with the newest improvements from the gurus in Austin. We should be able to maintain a steady 10 knots for a day if need be.”

She walked around a bit to clear her head. The cannabis was really strong.

“Then, we have our intrepid explorers, Bronson, Suzy, and our recruit, The Rabbit. Roger has used his experience with motorcycles to come up with several individual craft for use in sorties from the main craft. If you haven’t tried one of these *jet skis*, then you’ve missed something. I understand that Suzy has taken sailing lessons from Bron, so we have two, maybe three,” she looked at Roger, “people capable of commanding the ship.”

“In short, we have the vessel we wanted. It’s time to take her for a ride, one longer than the casual sail we took from Bron’s island to here. Oh, I’m forgetting someone. Sully, Bron’s uncle and the last inhabitant of that small island, has agreed to be part of our crew in a capacity to be determined. Welcome, Sully.”

“I can cook,” Sully said. “You can judge how well in,” he glanced at the sun, low in the sky to the west, “about another half hour. No peaking!”

Bronson stood up to offer his opinion. Addressing Chloe, he said, “There’s someone you haven’t mentioned yet. You. We all know that you are the real moving force behind this group. Without you, we would be wondering how to use our talents. You showed us that there is something worth working toward. You had the vision of remaking the world as a better place, sustainable over the long term. You got the Council to agree to fund the project. When we needed more Techie help, you had Z and Y

transferred to our team. This is your baby, from the very beginning. I for one am grateful for the opportunity. Thanks, Chloe.” He raised his glass. Everyone joined in, toasting Chloe.

She responded. “Thanks for the kind words. It’s the first time I’ve heard someone thank me for offering them a chance to risk their life with little hope of an adequate reward. I’m proud to be part of this effort.”

The aroma from the cooking pit seemed about to start a mutiny. Y intervened by firing up a big dooby and passing it around.

“This is supposed to cure the munchies?” Suzy asked, as she took her turn toking.

“So,” Suzy said, “I’ve got the perfect name for the ship.”

“Go on,” Chloe encouraged her.

“I was thinking of journeys into the unknown, when I remembered the opening to an ancient TV series.” She paused. “These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. I say, let’s give those engineers in the 23 century, or whenever, some reason to revere the name.”

Everyone applauded. “Great!” Chloe said. “That was easy. Now, shall we discuss our route around the world?”

Sully said, “I think our dinner be ready. Planning can wait.”

No one objected.

2. Aztec Two-step **June 15, 2172** **Acapulco, South Mexico, ASNA**

The first leg of the journey was a return to Mexico at the Council's explicit request. They had to go there in any case to pick up the computer banks to be installed in The Enterprise. JJ was in charge of this aspect to make sure it would be powerful enough to contain Ambianca and other AI's as needed.

The journey provided a chance to try out the new vessel, but first they stopped at Pearl Harbor to see if any of the hulks there promised good salvage. The results were disappointing. The ships were good only for scrap metal. However, many of the buildings had some equipment worth picking up and sending to Austin for detailed analysis. Z, of course, decided what looked good, and no one else bothered to offer an opinion.

Then, with sails unfurled, and a brisk trade wind to start them off, they rounded the tip of Oahu and headed due east, just as Bronson had done many years earlier. Each member of the crew had some assignments that all had agreed upon. Bron was the navigator and nominal captain, but Chloe was in charge of the entire voyage, with veto power over any plan she considered too dangerous. She did not expect to ever be in the position of having to override anything, relying on everyone to be reasonable. This was either hopelessly naïve, or realistic, depended on who you asked.

Z was the engineer, given the duty of making sure everything was working properly.

Y was the main Nerd, responsible for programming when required. Chloe was available as backup.

Suzy was "second techie" after Z. She watched everything Z did, "learning thru osmosis," she called it. Roger attached himself to this duo. Indeed, he usually managed to be next to Suzy wherever she went. Roger was the mechanic based on his experience with motorcycles and jet skis.

Sully had the job of cooking, which was what he wanted. After the luau, no one else dared suggest an alternative.

Franklin watched the sails, mainly admiring his design, but always on the lookout for problems.

Ambianca, with her pet SATCOM, stood by ready to take over navigation and steering whenever necessary, usually at night. Her contribution on this leg was minimal as she was confined to a laptop Chloe carried.

JJ was not on board, but available when they managed a decent connection to the web.

This was a skeleton crew, and Chloe quickly found herself wishing for a few more hands, so she was happy to receive word from Austin that some people would be joining the expedition in Acapulco, together with some trade goods and a special, new backup power module.

With favorable winds, the voyage took a week, much shorter than Bronson's legendary solo cruise. They sailed into the main dock at Acapulco to find a waiting committee, complete with a brass band, which welcomed them with some lively flamenco music.

Chloe noticed a group of five obviously ready to board the ship. All wore the latest suits in a neutral shade that Suzy called *ecru*. The leader of the group detached and approached Chloe.

“Congratulations on your success thus far. I am Eunice, in charge of the new crew members. I am a qualified MD. I hope that my services will not be needed, but we thought that having some support was called for.”

She pointed to the crewmen one at a time. As she pointed the suit of the one in question turned bright red. “Al, Bo, Che, and Dudley.”

Noting the ABCDE sequence of the names, Chloe assumed they were pseudonyms chosen for reason Eunice didn’t think worth elaborating. Whatever the reason, it raised a red flag for Chloe. She didn’t like having some men with phony names on their ship.

Eunice continued, “Bo is a biologist, who we thought might be useful, think of Banks on *The Beagle*. He is also my mate. The rest are here to improve security. The Council didn’t feel you were adequately protected. There may be pirates left in the world.”

The red flag turned a bright crimson in Chloe’s head. She imagined a bloody fight to repel boarders. Surely this was an error. The protections included in the redesign of the ship were better than anything they were likely to encounter. Having a medical doctor on board, though, seemed like a good idea. Also, Eunice brought several crates of medical equipment, including one of the few X-ray machines in the Associated States that still worked.

When she managed to discuss the issues with the Council, Chloe brought up her concerns. She noted that all members of the Council were dressed for summer in Austin and crammed into one of the few air-conditioned rooms in the Capitol, the President’s Office. She was quite uncomfortable in the oppressive humidity of Acapulco, which, she was sure was much worse than Austin. Most of the inhabitants of Mexico and the Coffee Coast had moved into the mountains to escape the summer heat. Only those who needed to be near the water spent any time there.

“What’s this nonsense of more security?” she began. “We want this to be a peaceful voyage. We should be able to outrun anyone we meet.” *And there a few additions to the vessel that we’ve kept secret.*

“That is not negotiable,” was the short reply.

Chloe scowled into the camera. She decided she would have to deal with this once they left the domain of the Council.

“We have a nice surprise for you. Several, actually. We have agreed to purchase five motorcycles from the man with the funny name.”

“You mean Roger, I think. We like to call him The Rabbit.”

“Right. The one with the funny name.”

Chloe remained silent.

“We have also sent you a better backup power source than the one you have. It’s smaller and has a bigger capacity.”

“Thanks.”

“Have you decided on your route?”

“Just the first part. We’re going to head to New Zealand by way of Tahiti. After that, we hope to check out South Australia and the coast of South Africa. Then we’ll use the currents to return to California. We’re not going around the planet on our first trip.”

“That sounds reasonable. We hope to track you using the satellites. JJ has set up a program to scan you repeatedly.”

“Cool. Will we be able to communicate with you? What does JJ think?”

“Not clear yet. That brings us to another item to discuss. We’d like to borrow Y.”

“What? Why?”

“The database we’ve uncovered from the military sites is extensive and very valuable. Since Y is a trained Librarian in addition to being a Master Nerd, she would be ideal to lead a team analyzing it all. We believe that we can use the data to pinpoint locations likely to have valuable items worth a trip to salvage.”

“I see. I’ll have to ask Y what she thinks about being away for such a long time. Z may have something to say as well.”

“Use your famous powers of persuasion. This is critically important.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“It’s too soon for that. However, we have great expectations.”

“I’ll ask Y and Z and let you know.”

“Tonight if possible.”

“Something else I should know about?”

“Just the train schedules. The return from Mexico is leaving tomorrow heading to San Antonio and Austin. Lots of food aboard that we don’t want to spoil.”

“Understood. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

This is not going to be easy, she thought as she closed the connection.

Ultimately, though, it proved easy. Y was thrilled with the chance to lead a project under the direct control of the Council. After a tearful farewell, Z stood at the rail watching her life partner climb into the bus for the trip to the train.

Chloe and Z easily recognized the nuclear powerplant they had brought from California years previously. It had a new cover, but it was clearly the same device. They were happy to have it; it was much smaller than the fuel cell, with enough of its lifetime remaining for this voyage and many more.

Roger, with Suzy at his side, supervised the loading and storage of the motorcycles. He inspected each of them with a critical eye and put two aside for some rework. That would keep him occupied for the first leg of the expedition, which they expected to last for a couple of weeks.

“I need to speak to Julio the Ship Captain,” Chloe said to the image on the screen. The background showed what once had been a sports bar. Now, with few sports, and recordings that showed events from before any of the clientele had been born, the screens focused on the one image people were interested in, the weather. Chloe thought to send a note to JJ about it.

“Who this be?”

“Name be Chloe.” She was happy to see the expression in the man’s face change immediately.

“Pardon, ma’am. I get him.” He disappeared from the feed, returning shortly with the man Chloe remembered from what was now called, “The Ballad of Julio the Ship Captain,” the eventful trip from Mendo to Acapulco, ten years ago. She was delighted to see that the contact info still worked.

“Hello, Julio.”

“Chloe, it really be you. I be thinking...”

“Of course. I’d like to ask you for a favor.”

“Favor?” Julio wasn’t sure he grokked the fullness of the complicated sentence.

“Want to sail with me?”

“Sail? Where?”

“New Zealand, Australia, Africa.”

“Whoa!” He looked away. “Gotta ask Madeline.”

He disappeared before Chloe could stop him. He was gone for what Chloe thought an unreasonably long time.

“She say OK.”

“Excellent,” Chloe said.

“She wanna come too.”

Now it was Chloe’s turn to think things thru.

“I didn’t realize...” she began. Then, “Oh, what the fuck. Sure she can come.”

“When we leave?”

“When can you be ready.”

“Need two days.”

“You got one. I stall ‘em longsye can.” Chloe had a chance to show off one of her few practiced phrases of Vernacular.

The woman who called herself Eunice was unhappy to learn of the additions to the ship’s complement. “This is going to be a bit of a problem. There aren’t enough cabins.”

“No prob. Bron and I will make it official and room together. The new couple can take Bron’s place.”

“We were planning to put three of the men in that cabin.”

“I’m sure you must be resourceful if the Council gave you this important task. Figure something out.” Eunice and Bo could simply follow Chloe’s lead. The other three men could fend for themselves.

Don’t you forget who’s in charge, Chloe thought to herself.

3. *Life on the High Seas* ***June 17-July 1, 2172*** ***Pacific Ocean***

Life quickly settled into a routine. Chloe preferred the night shift, from 22:00 to 6:00 when the rest of the people aboard slept. She whiled away the hours in long conversations with Ambianca — punctuated by music — covering everything from the nature of reality to the prospects for sightings of lifers birds or mammals during the coming day.

Shortly after the shift change, Chloe and Bronson would discuss the route for the day. Bronson had an uncanny feel for the ocean and frequently managed to shift the course slightly to take advantage of favorable winds or currents. No one would think of overruling someone who had sailed solo as Bronson had at the tender age of 16.

Whoever had the helm left the routine functioning of the ship up to Ambianca, who said she was delighted with the responsibility. No one was confident they understood what Ambi meant by “delighted,” but didn’t really care.

The ship had an autopilot designed to keep on course based on a compass heading. Z had kept the part that steered the ship and replace the compass with direct GPS access, which provided much more accurate information about the location of the ship. That left everyone with time on their hands.

Chloe scheduled a regular meeting every morning to go over important items, such as the species of seabirds and marine life likely to be spotted on the way. Meal plans were discussed in rather more detail than the subject merited, but proved to be fun for most. Bron’s uncle Sully was a fabulous cook who could make virtually any dish if he had a recipe, so anyone with a special request was expected to come prepared with a printout. Connection to the Grid used a communication satellite in geosynchronous orbit, a tricky technical issue when the ship was sailing at a steady 20 knots. As a result, the amount of data easily transmitted was limited compared to what they were used to. The typical recipe fell within that range. Lengthy reports back to Austin did not.

On the third day out from Acapulco, Chloe arranged to have a quiet meeting with Eunice.

“I thought we should get better acquainted,” Chloe began. “I know little about you, only what JJ told me when I inquired.”

“You asked JJ about me?” Eunice replied in surprise.

“You and Bo. He said you were a top-notch doctor, but that Bo has no peer in today’s world. Specifically, he said the Bo was about 2 sigma on the weird scale, but not otherwise unpleasant. He is a brilliant scientist capable of delivering an impromptu lecture on a random leaf for over an hour. Be careful what you ask him?”

Eunice laughed. “He can be difficult,” she agreed. “I’ve managed to smooth off most of the rough edges. Just stay away from discussing Botany unless you have lots of time available.”

“That reminds me of Tinker,” Chloe offered.

“You’re not the first person to make that comparison. Someday, you’ll have to tell me how you managed to have him as a lover. We could compare notes.”

Chloe laughed in turn. “On that subject, I trust you’ve noticed that Suzy and Rabbit might as well be joined at the hip.”

“The ship is a veritable fount of sexual bliss. That hunk Bronson is someone who might be worthy of you.”

“Meaning what?” Chloe demanded.

“No offense meant,” Eunice said quickly. “He’s two sigma on the good-looking scale, smart, capable, and hopelessly in love with you. What else can you ask for?”

“He’s a keeper. That’s for sure.”

“Have you considered mating?”

“I’d love to, but the timing is not right at present. When we get back...”

“Bo and I have tried for years without success,” Eunice lamented. “We’ve even considered branching out. If you tire of Bronson...”

“If we have a child, it will be his second at least. Have you seen Celeste’s second? I knew immediately that her voyage with Bron had an ulterior motive. I chastised her for not getting his buy in, but he told me he was happy, that she seemed to be a good mother. He started to tell me what a great time they’d had — before I told him to be quiet.”

“I’ve seen pictures of Celeste. She’s not bad looking herself.”

They sat quietly together for a bit. Finally, Eunice brought up the obvious subject, “I can’t tell you much about the other three. They were forced on me at the last moment. Supposedly to supply *additional muscle* when needed,”

“Just as I surmised. Three thugs.”

“Unfortunately. Keep a close eye on them,” Eunice warned.

Chloe tried to move the conversation in a different direction. “I read your bio. You’ve had some impressive successes.”

Eunice laughed. “That’s my line.”

Chloe smiled. “I like having exceptional people on my team. Welcome.”

“Can the bots really bring food here?” Eunice asked.

“Only one way to find out. Ambi, how do the bots work?”

“I could teach you,” came the pleasant reply. “But it would be simpler to tell me what you want and let me handle it.”

“What time are seated meals today?”

“None are scheduled. Sully says he’s ready to make sandwiches to order...especially if you order leftover pulled pork.”

Chloe looked at Eunice, who nodded.

“Make that one for each of us. With iced tea?”

“Your order has been started,” Ambi replied in a manufactured voice meant to sound like a snooty waiter.

“How did you meet Ambianca?” Eunice wanted to know.

Chloe was used to this question, and had a canned answer. “You mean, is the story true? Yes. Ambianca and I have been friends essentially all my life. How about you?”

“We met on the first night of the voyage,” Eunice told her. “I noticed that some wonderful music started when I entered the room. I don’t know what the song was, but it really hit the spot.”

“It was a recording of **The Rose** by Bette Midler, 1979,” Ambianca told her.

“Great song,” Chloe agreed.

“It was used in a movie of the same name,” Ambianca explained. “Supposedly, the movie is about the life of Janis Joplin.”

“That’s enough, dear. Play something from that era. Something we can chat over.”

They spent several hours just getting acquainted. When it was finally time to do some work, they rose as one. Eunice extended her hand to almost touch Chloe’s, the ancient way. “We met as strangers; we part as friends.” Then she steepled her hands and bowed her head, “Namaste,” as my ancestors used to say.

Chloe responded with her own Namaste.

Over the next few days, Chloe got acquainted with Bo as well. She discovered that, despite warnings to the contrary, she enjoyed his company. Like Chloe, Bo was interested in the natural world in all its myriad forms. Chloe was delighted to have him standing next to her by the rail, binoculars ready to check out any marine animal or pelagic bird that wandered by.

Of course, part of the warning was right. Bo loved to display his erudition. Conversation was littered with Latin and Greek as Bo rattled off scientific names. However, he had great vision, easily better than Chloe’s, able to spot whales and dolphins a long way off, so Chloe tried to stand close to avoid missing anything.

As the ship headed West life aboard became routine. The Rabbit has fixed up the two motorcycles he thought needed work. Z made rounds of the ship each morning to make sure all was running well. Sully prepared breakfast for all who wanted it, only a few at first until word got around about how good it was. Lunch was leftovers from the previous dinner. Dinner varied between formal seated meals for all and quick snacks for those who wandered by the kitchen. Madeline, Julio’s mate, was a great help, and took over completely some days when Sully wanted a break.

Franklin wandered around looking for anything to occupy his time. When the sails were full the ship made about 13 knots regularly. At this speed, the solar panels had plenty of time to recharge the batteries, so the backup power was little needed.

After two weeks, the radar showed they were approaching the first stop, Papeete, Tahiti. They furled the sails and used the electric motor to maneuver along the coast looking for a good place to land.

4. Tahitian Holiday July 3-6, 2172 Tahiti, Pacific Ocean

The information from the satellite images showed some signs of human activity in the former French Polynesian islands, specifically a fire that appeared once. As the islands were more or less on the way to New Zealand, the team elected to stop there and check it out.

They sailed slowly around the northern tip of the main island, Papeete, looking for a harbor. Drones sent out to scout the higher reaches on the slopes of the central volcano, Mount ‘Orophena, away from the oppressive heat and humidity of the lowlands, found no sign of human activity. Like many of the islands they had examined using satellite photos, these lacked a large enough population to survive. Disappointed, the team decided to stop in any case and celebrate the ancient holiday of Fourth of July. Those who knew the reason for the occasion patiently explained it to the rest of them.

After checking out the main harbor, and rejecting it as too dangerous without someone who knew the reef well, they consulted the ancient maps of the area and selected a location identified as the Yacht Club of Tahiti, where a barrier island provided some protection.

As on Hawaii, many feral farm animals roamed freely. Sully took advantage of the situation to take several small pigs, as well as some hens that he hoped were still laying eggs. If not, at least they had some chicken for variety.

Everyone collected driftwood to build a bonfire with the dual goal of inviting company and cooking food. *Perfect*, Chloe thought. *Time to test the new gadget.*

“Ambianca, can you hear me?”

“Yes. Some static, but I can understand you. I am prepared to activate the new toy.”

“Please,” Chloe replied quietly. “It’s not a toy. Launch it when ready.”

“Done.”

“Bron,” she said turning to him. “We need to talk to the three thugs to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“I’ll round ‘em up,” he said as he left.

Bron returned with the three and everyone else. Z said the obvious, “What’s up?”

“We’re testing a new device to detect anyone approaching. I just wanted to restate that we are not to use lethal force in any situation. If there are any people left, they will surely have seen our bonfire. We should be prepared for company. Please, we should treat them as our guests, or perhaps our hosts. If we detect someone coming, you’ll hear Ambi notifying you. She will provide more information to you then.”

Z spoke first, “All right! Oh? Does that mean no...”

Chloe said, “Exactly. Let’s eat.”

Forgoing all recreational chemicals definitely put a damper on the evening, but Chloe was adamant that they needed to be prepared in case company showed up. The bonfire was mostly a memory, only glowing coals remaining, when Ambi notified them that a small group had been detected

on the periphery. The drone they had sent out flooded the area with low lever microwaves which were undetectable except by the sensitive instruments in the drone. Better than radar, the detector reacted to everything, even small mammals. Only large entities, the size of humans for example, triggered alerts.

Chloe and all the others with suits marched off in the direction of what the three thugs insisted on calling *intruders*. “They may think we are the intruders,” Chloe reminded him.

Finally, they could barely make out seven men who appeared out of the gloom. The moon had set hours ago, and it was quite dark. On Chloe’s instructions, they activated the night vision in the suits. She watched as the men carefully approached. When they were within 20 meters, Chloe addressed them, “Greetings! Welcome. Bienvenu.”

The effect was dramatic and unexpected. The nearest man hurled a spear at Chloe. Without a conscious thought, she moved one step to avoid it and then grabbed it out of the air. “We come in peace!” she shouted to them. They didn’t seem to understand her language, but were impressed enough by her ability to grab a spear from the air that they shrank back. She drove the spear into the ground to emphasize that they were peaceful.

“Speak English? Talk Vernac?” No reaction. “*Parlez-vous Français?*”

“*Oui! Oui!*” One called out, followed by a stream on rapid French Chloe couldn’t follow.

She heard a voice in her suit that she didn’t recognize. “He wants to know where we’re from and what we want.”

SATCOM thus revealed a hitherto unknown ability for languages. With his prompting, Chloe managed to explain they were on a voyage of discovery. She learned that as expected, they had seen the bonfire and come to investigate. Chloe asked if they would like to share what was left of the feast.

They would.

Shortly, after opening some of the alcohol and passing around several joints, the mood was much friendlier. The men lived in the mountains, where it was cooler, coming down to the shore to fish and forage for shellfish.

Ultimately, Z managed to set up a monitor with an image of SATCOM, which ramped up the interchange by an order of magnitude. After several minutes of back and forth, SAT explained, “They were afraid of us. They apologize for the spear and hope you are not offended. I assured them you weren’t. They have nothing to trade except some dried and smoked fish, which I told them we would be very interested in. I promised to show him our wares tomorrow when the whole village will come.”

“Excellent,” Chloe said. “Good work SAT.”

With that, the visitors departed to walk back to their village.

When Chloe and Z were alone, Z asked, “How did you manage to catch that spear? I’ve never seen you do anything like that before.”

“It was pure reflex, amplified by the suit. My suit seems to be learning more about me and developing additional skills. Does that make sense?”

“Well, since you asked, no it doesn’t make sense. You’re suggesting the suit is intelligent.”

“Deducing.”

“Hmm. I’ll try to find out if anyone else has experienced that.”

“Do it discretely. If only my suit does it, I’d like to keep that secret.”

“You got it.”

The next morning, the entire village, all 18 of them, trekked down to meet the strange people. Having learned that no one on the island spoke English in its various forms, Z had set up a small theater of monitors so that people could converse with SAT individually. This proved to be popular and informative. Anyone requesting medical attention was directed to a separate tent to receive treatment from Eunice.

During lunch, Chloe, Z, Bron, and Eunice met to for discussion and planning.

SAT happily related the various conversations. “This was fun, talking to so many people at once. The young ones were the most interesting. They don’t have any school. Everyone works all the time just gathering enough food, mostly fish and shellfish. There used to be more villagers, but several died last year when a storm hit. No children have been born within the last 5 years. That cute girl is the last one.”

“Thanks SAT. Excellent work and a nice concise report.”

Chloe asked, “Ambianca were you able to learn anything from observations?”

“Well,” Ambi replied, “they are all hungry. The fruit trees were devastated by the storm. That is a prime source of calories. Protein is hard to come by.”

“So,” Bron summarized, “this place is toast.”

“Fraid so,” Chloe agreed. “What can we do?”

“We could take them with us,” Eunice said.

“To New Zealand? We don’t know what kind of greeting they would get there,” Chloe noted. “We don’t know how they will greet *us* for that matter.”

“So, we have to just let them die?” Z wanted to know.

“Any prospect of a rescue from Mexico?” Eunice asked.

“It’s worth broaching the subject with anyone we manage to contact,” Chloe said, “but I don’t see how we can set up a rescue before they all die out. The best option would be to send the Coast Guard ship here to get them and go back to Mexico. That would require a lot of diesel fuel.”

“We could retrofit the vessel with electric motors,” Z suggested. “Y and Tinker could handle it.”

“Problem: Tinker probably won’t want to go to Seattle. Also, we don’t know how hard it will be to manage the retrofit. It took two years to get Enterprise ready. I doubt they have that much time. And Y is busy dealing with the military data.”

“Let me talk to the chief. Do we know which one is the leader?” Chloe asked.

SAT answered, “The old woman. Everyone agrees on that.”

“Thanks,” Chloe said, and left to find the old woman.

With SAT's help, and some hand waving, they convinced Mel, the chief, to take a tour of The Enterprise with Chloe. They started in the lounge, stopped briefly on the bridge, moved to the dining area, and ended up on the lower deck, which contained the cargo hold and the bedrooms.

The old woman was suitably impressed with the display of wealth and technology. So, with SAT and Ambianca accompanying them, the two sat in comfortable chairs in the lounge to discuss, well everything.

Chloe spoke first, "We are on a voyage of discovery. We plan to go next to New Zealand. It's a long way from here. After that, we will move to Australia, then on to South Africa before returning to America."

She waited while SAT translated. Chloe brought up a map of the Pacific and showed where they came from and where they were going. "We expect to be gone for many months."

Mel nodded to show she understood. Then, she spoke for quite a while to SAT, who translated for Chloe.

"She says she understands. She was hoping you could use some of your magic to take them to a better place to live. I told her your magic was not strong enough."

"We doubt that you will be able to survive long here. Not enough people. Little food," Chloe said.

Mel spoke to SAT.

"She wants to know if you will take them with you," SAT explained.

"We have to take them," Chloe said to the gathering later.

"Does that mean we have to take anyone we stumble over?" It was Al, one of the three thugs who spoke up.

"An excellent question, Al. There are some obvious limits to our ability to accommodate passengers. I suggest we agree now that we cannot handle more. Comments?"

She waited just long enough before continuing, "Z you are in charge of rooms. Figure out something."

"Got it."

"Bo, you will be in charge of setting up some kind of classes for the children. Well, maybe not the five-year-old. That OK?"

"A pleasure."

"I'll help," Franklin said, happy to have something to do.

"Sully, this will complicate your meal planning."

"No problema."

"Eunice, I'd like you to check out the villagers individually and tend to their needs."

"Sure. Do we have delousing meds aboard?"

"Doubt it. Can you improvise?"

“I’ll give it a try.”

“Who wants to watch over the children?” Chloe looked directly at the two lovebirds. Suzy gave the Rabbit a nudge. “We’ll take that,” Roger said.

Chloe heard her whisper, “Practice,” to Roger.

Al raised his hand. “Yes, Al?” Chloe said.

“I be thinking I try teach em vernacular.”

“That be numba one,” Chloe responded to general chuckles.

That left the triumvirate of Chloe, Bron, and Julio to run the ship. Bron had a secret mission for Chloe and left at night, taking one of the motorcycles with him.

Early the next morning, the villagers appeared wearing their finest clothing, ready for a big adventure. Six at a time, they boarded one of the Zodiacs to transfer to the ship. Chloe noticed how sparse their belongings were. She remembered a word from the past: refugees. That’s what these people were. In Ancient times millions of people fit that category, especially in the Last Days. Now, all that was left was these miserable 18 individuals. Was that an improvement?

Z showed them to the lounge area, where most of them would sleep. She had rounded up enough sleeping bags from the cargo area to accommodate everyone. Chloe was a bit chagrined to see some of their intended trade goods being used up so early in the voyage, but realized there was no good option.

With everyone secure, and Bron back from his mission wearing a big smile, they left the Yacht Club and headed back out to sea.

5. The Battle of Milford Sound

July 7 - 21, 2172

Pacific Ocean and New Zealand

Life aboard The Enterprise changed dramatically with the addition of passengers, to use the term Chloe preferred. The children caused both headaches and joy. Chloe realized she hadn't dealt with anyone younger than Suzy in quite a long time.

Roger turned out to be a natural father figure, often with all 6 following him around. The youngest, a girl of about 5 called Serine, and who was anything but, clung to him like a limpet. Roger reported that the girl had managed to explain that she had no mother or father. Chloe was immediately reminded of her conversation with him about the girl Moira, now called Moi, who Roger had helped because she reminded him of his own childhood. Maybe that was why he was so good with children.

“Suz and I want to raise her as parents,” Roger said to Chloe after several days. “If that’s OK.”

“Of course,” she replied. “Does that imply more?”

Roger smiled. “Not yet. But we would like to mate when it is more convenient.”

“Wonderful,” Chloe said.

Bo, however, proved to be a disaster trying to teach the children anything. He was used to University students, not these youngsters. Instead, all the children were moved to the same class as the adults, learning Vernacular. That turned out to be an excellent idea on three fronts:

1. The kids were better at picking up language than the adults.
2. Franklin had something more suited to his abilities. He and Al conversed on simple topics while all listened. Then they asked questions about what had been said. The kids always caught on first.
3. Bo was available for wildlife viewing with Chloe.

They settled into a quiet routine as they sailed toward New Zealand. The old woman, Mel, knew more about the winds and currents than Bron, and offered valuable suggestions. Bron arranged for her to accompany him on the Bridge whenever he was on duty. “She’s one sharp cookie,” he told Chloe.

Finally, on the morning of July 19, they saw on the horizon, the tip of the northern peninsula of the North Island. Following the plan, they made their way south along the western coast and into the harbor of the ancient city of Wellington. This was to be a temporary stop, as the signs of humanity seen from the satellites was further south, around the picturesque Milford Sound, and the fiords of the South Island as well as the agricultural areas on the eastern side of the South Island.

The prospects for worthwhile salvage argued for an exploratory delay. They anchored in the protected harbor and dispatched all the drones to check out the nearby ruins. The results were disappointing. A few sites seemed worthy of further checking. These were marked on a map of the area which they sent back to Austin. They waited until the next morning in case the Council wanted them to go ashore to see what they could find. Relieved when no word came, they sailed slowly along the east coast.

Drones checked anything that might be human habitation, but found no sign of recent activity. From the air, it was clear that the fields and orchards had been tended. Where were the people?

Eventually, they wrote it off as another mystery and proceeded on the planned itinerary, sailing south along the coast, then thru the strait separating the South Island from Stewart Island, finally turning north. By late afternoon, they reached the site where they hoped to find human habitations, Milford Sound.

Formerly, one of the best-known tourist destinations in New Zealand, the Sound was at the end of a narrow fiord, a beautiful area replete with the remains of luxury hotels and other facilities for rich foreigners. Torches lined the beach, an indication that someone on the island was aware of the strange people in the big ship. In the gathering twilight, they saw about 20 people milling around.

“Looks like we have a welcoming committee,” Bron announced after checking with binoculars. “Shall we see if we’re invited for dinner?”

Prudence dictated caution. They agreed on a small contingent to meet, with the rest of the travelers remaining on board *The Enterprise*, where they should be safe.

Accordingly, a Zodiac set out with Chloe, Bron, Z, Franklin, Eunice, and Bo. Reinforcements, if needed, were ready with a second boat holding Roger and Suzy and the three thugs.

As usual, Chloe and her crew carried face masks, but did not put them on. The etiquette required that anyone be prepared when meeting strangers to follow Plague protocol, even though there had not been an outbreak in many years. The simple rule was to wear masks if others did. As they approached shore, Chloe noted that none of the men—all men, no women—were masked. As the group stepped from the boat, five of the men detached themselves from the larger group and rushed to greet the strangers.

“Greetings! Glad you finally got here.”

So, they have some means of communication, Chloe thought. And, they have been watching us.

The lead Kiwi came up to Bron and grabbed his hand. Chloe saw Bron shudder slightly, but followed thru on the handshake.

“Glad you speak English,” Bron said. “We were afraid that the language might have evolved too much for us to comprehend.” *There, Bron thought, we’ll see how well you speak it.*

“There is a local dialect, but we still use English. My name is Jensen.”

“Bronson,” Bron replied. “This is Chloe, Z, Eunice, Franklin, and Bo,” indicating each in turn.

Chloe started to speak, but Jensen took Bron by the arm and led him back to the larger group, completely ignoring her. *WTF?*

When it became clear that women were not going to be part of the meeting, Z suggested, “Why don’t we go find the women?”

“Yeah. Might as well. Where are they? Any guess?” Chloe wanted to know. She spoke quietly, “Bron, if you hear me, find out where the women are.”

Bron gestured vaguely towards some buildings, and the three female members of the group headed that way.

“Stick with us Eunice. We’ll guide you,” Chloe whispered. “Our suits have night vision.” Hers activated immediately. She saw two figures that she took to be some of the women. Hoping for someone to show her where the rest were, she headed toward the two figures, who now held up candles to light the way. Chloe felt a ripple as her suit went into stealth mode, making her virtually invisible in the dim

light. A quick glance in Z's direction showed the same. "OK, Eunice, time for some magic. It will appear that you are walking alone. When appropriate, we'll suddenly appear." They slowly approached the two women. "Hello," Eunice said. "I am called Eunice. My two friends," she gestured, "are Chloe and Z." Amid their startled gasps at the sudden appearance, Chloe asked, "Is there somewhere more comfortable where we could talk?"

The two women led them to a large room lit by candles in the ruins of an ancient hotel. Soft pillows, chairs, and even several sofas room testified to the room's frequent use. Chloe could hear the two women talking excitedly to others in the assemblage, which numbered about 50 or so. "I'm telling you, these two, in the funny suits, appeared out of thin air. I mean *poof* and there they were. Think they are witches?"

Chloe intervened, "We are not witches, just people like you, but with better technology."

The women seemed unconvinced. "Why don't we just sit and chat for a while," Chloe suggested, moving to sit on one of the sofas. Eunice and Z sat on either side of her.

"I am called Chloe. I am the leader of the expedition. We left America several weeks ago. We stopped in Tahiti, where we picked up 18 refugees, then came here. We had detected signs of human activity and came to investigate."

She waited to let the better English speakers explain to the others. It gave her a chance to get a closer look at the women. She noticed immediately how it differed from California, where racial blending had eliminated stark differences of skin color. Chloe, with her pale skin, blue eyes and yellow hair, stood out as different.

Here she saw obvious Europeans and Māori with little in between. Apparently, these people did not see the advantages of preserving genetic diversity.

"We have many questions about your life here," Chloe said, "but perhaps you would like to ask us questions first. Ask me anything and I'll try to answer."

An older woman in the front row asked, "How did you manage to appear suddenly?"

"There's an old saying, 'A sufficiently advanced technology is the same as magic.'"

"I don't understand."

"It's magic. Next question?"

"How many people are on your ship?" This came from a Māori near the back.

"Right now, about 30."

"Aren't you afraid of pirates?"

"Not at all. They should be afraid of us."

"How can you be in charge of the expedition?" Someone finally asked the crucial question.

"Do you mean because I am a woman, not a man?"

"Yes."

"Where we come from it is not unusual for a woman to be in charge."

This caused a lot of disorganized chatter. Chloe let it go on for some time.

“It is obvious just from looking at you that our societies are quite different. You don’t seem to practice genetic diversity, for example.”

“What is that?” Several people asked that at once.

Chloe looked to her two companions. Neither seemed anxious to try to answer. She replied, “That is a complex subject. Perhaps we could save that for another day. May I ask a question?”

The old woman who asked the first question stood up. “Just a minute. Arlis, check on the men. How much time do we have?”

A young girl quickly ran back outside and returned in a minute or so. “They have just started drinking.”

“So, we have lots of time,” the old woman said.

Chloe turned to Eunice. “Can you explain?”

“I’d need to prepare,” Eunice replied. “We need some time to plan how to explain it. How about this? Tomorrow several of you can come aboard our ship, where we can present the information better.”

“You mean just some of us? What about the men?”

“Well, women are the ones who have to make decisions about babies and all that,” Z said.

That led to a great deal of crosstalk.

“We’ll have to ask permission,” the old woman explained.

“Bullshit,” Chloe said. “I’m the one to grant permission to come aboard. Just me.” Z looked ready to clarify, but a quick glance from Chloe stopped her.

“How can we be sure that you are really in charge?” It was the old woman again.

“Are you willing to go with me now?”

Several cries of “Yes!” from the crowd.

“Not everyone. There isn’t enough room. I meant just this woman.” She pointed to the one who seemed to be the leader.

The old woman smiled. “I am called Constance,” she said. “I would be happy to come with you.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“But…”

“There’s no need to pack. We are not planning to take you away. We can return you later tonight or tomorrow morning as you prefer.”

Constance shrugged. “OK. Let’s see what happens.”

The entire assembly marched as one to the fire where the men were laughing and drinking. Bron saw them and stood up. “What’s up?” he asked Chloe.

“We have to go back to the ship. This woman, Constance, will come to visit the ship and see that we aren’t going to harm anyone.”

“Just a fucking minute,” Jensen, apparently the head honcho, stood up and approached aggressively. Chloe’s suit turned pink.

“That’s a warning,” Chloe told Jensen. “The suit turns red to warn you not to attempt any aggressive action.”

Jensen pulled a large knife from his belt and took several more steps toward Chloe. The suit turned bright red. He came closer. The red now contained yellow accents in the shape of flames.

“I ain’t afraid of magic,” Jensen said. “Ain’t no match for cold steel.”

Chloe charged straight at him, closing the distance in seconds. Before he could react, Chloe put her hand on his chest and threw him about 3 meters.

“Who’s next?” she glared at the men. Then, she said, “Come on guys. We’re leaving. Perhaps they’ll be in a better mood tomorrow.” She moved toward the Zodiac.

Jensen had managed to stand back up. He raised the knife to throw it at Chloe. Two flashes happened simultaneously as both Z and Bron fired their lasers. The knife shattered amid loud thunderclaps.

“Don’t fuck with us,” Z said simply.

There were no further objections as the six plus Constance boarded the Zodiac and returned to the ship.

Aboard the ship, Chloe led the way thru the lounge filled with the refugees and into the dining area. “Would you like something to eat? Or drink? We have brought wine from our home, as well as coffee and even a little tea.” Seeing Sully, she asked, “Any dessert left? Coffee?”

“I know about coffee, but I ain’t ever had any.”

“I think Z should prepare some of her special.”

Z smiled, “With pleasure.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Sully returned shortly bearing a plate of brownies and a tray holding three small cups. Z took her place at the table with the other two and took the first brownie. “The coffee needs a minute to drip,” she explained to Constance. “It’s an old recipe from my ancestors.”

After the coffee had dripped completely, she added some honey from a small jar and passed it to Constance. “I like it sweet, but you can decide for yourself. Chloe prefers only a tiny bit.” Constance took a large spoonful and ladled it into her cup. She selected one of the brownies and took a tentative bite. “Oh,” she said. “Very good.” She took a sip of her coffee and nodded to Z. “Also very good.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Z said.

When all the brownies were gone and the coffee only a memory, Chloe asked, “Would you like a tour of the ship?”

After the tour, which left Constance wide-eyed, Chloe asked about the next step. “We can return you to the village anytime you wish, or we can arrange a place for you to sleep and we can return tomorrow.”

Constance had to think for about 20 nanoseconds before accepting a night onboard. “I’d love to sleep here and return after breakfast.”

That was easy, thought Chloe.

Sully outdid his usual fare for breakfast, producing some wonderful French Toast using some carefully hoarded eggs and milk, together with honey and bacon. Some more of the coffee stash supplied a full pot to enjoy.

“I noticed that you don’t use electricity,” Chloe delicately asked.

“I’ve heard of electricity, but never seen it,” Constance replied.

“Well, you can’t really see it, just see what it does. It powers everything on this ship except the sails.”

“How does it work?”

“Well, we like to get most of it from the sun. Remember those panels I showed you yesterday? They catch sunlight and convert it into electricity. We save that in a big battery. You know about batteries?”

“No.”

“Well, batteries save electricity for later, like when the sun isn’t shining.”

“I see,” Constance said somewhat dubiously.

“It’s easier to demonstrate than explain. We could show your village how to use the panels and battery to light up the room.”

“Not sure how the men would react.”

“To hell with them. It’s time for you women to assert yourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not really sure. Every society is different. Ours thrives by trading with others. We get coffee from some mountains along what we call the Coffee Coast. In return we supply them with our solar panels and lots of services to set them up and keep them running. We both win. It’s what we call a win-win deal, the only kind we like.”

“So you don’t want to conquer us?”

“Of course not. Where did you get that idea?”

“Jensen told everyone to watch carefully and see if you were a danger. Last night showed them that you can be.”

“Only in defense. We have never attacked anyone who is not a threat to us.”

“I got to think on this.”

“Of course. We’ll transport you back to the village. I also have a gift for you.” Chloe spoke to Ambianca, “Send the bot with the flashlight.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Ambianca, an old friend.”

“Where is she?”

“That’s complicated. I’ll explain later.”

The small bot appeared with a gift box.

“Here,” Chloe said, taking the box and presenting it to Constance. “Open it.”

Inside was Chloe’s favorite gift, a small but powerful flashlight. “Here’s how it works,” she explained to Constance. “Ambianca, can we lower the lights, please?”

When it was dark enough in the dining area, Chloe turned on the light.

“Wow!” was all Constance could manage. “I think I keep this hidden until the right time.”

“Good idea. When you’re ready, we’ll take you back.”

As they prepared to board the Zodiac, Chloe had a thought. “Wait just a minute, please,” she said to Franklin, the driver this morning. Returning a few minutes later, she gave Constance a tiny radio. “Keep this hidden. If you need to contact us, just push this button and talk. For emergencies.”

“I understand,” Constance said, placing the radio where it wouldn’t be found easily.

Everything seemed to be going well until late that night when the radio suddenly crackled, “Help! Help! Constance hurt!”

Chloe quickly rounded up Eunice, Al, and Z as backup, then raced to the shore. This time, they brought powerful lights with them, making it easy to find their way to the building where all the women lived. Several waited outside. “Please come quick!” They showed the four into a bedroom where Constance lay.

“My god! What happened? Who did this?”

“Jensen,” three of them said at once. They all started to say more at the same time and stopped.

“Tell me more,” Chloe said, picking one arbitrarily.

“He come after Constance return from ship. She be spending day telling bout ship. After supper Jensen come in. Without invite. Very bad. Say he hear Constance been telling people tall tales. Want to know all about the ship for real. What kind weapons particular. She say, ‘Ain’t no weapons.’ That when he start to beat her.”

“What!” Chloe almost shouted.

“He say mama spreading lies. Make him look bad.”

“She’s your mother?”

“Yes.”

“And your father is Jensen.”

“Yes.”

“And these are your sisters.”

“Yes.”

Chloe looked to the other two. They nodded.

Eunice examined her patient. “Mostly just bruises, thankfully,” she reported. “However, I’m pretty sure her ulna in her right arm is broken. That’s a classic protective injury. We should take her back to the ship where I have facilities to treat her.”

“No!” Several women said in alarm. “Jensen say he kill anyone who go to that ship.”

“Where is Jensen now?” Chloe asked.

“In men’s quarters.”

“Where is that?”

“You not allowed there.”

“I see.” Chloe signaled to Z and Al to move outside. “What do we do now?” she asked.

“I think it’s time to kick butt,” Z said. “Let’s round up all the suits and pay the men a visit.”

“Al?” Chloe asked. “By the way, it that your real name?”

“I agree,” Al said. “We cannot allow this kind of behavior. And, yes, that is my real name. Short for Alcibiades, some old Greek guy.”

“Cool,” Chloe said. “I saw that you were upset by the injuries.”

“Reminded me of my grandmother. She died from a beating.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. Now, don’t make a move until I tell you to, OK?”

“No problem. But...”

“OK. Z, Round up the troops. Al, you come with me.”

Chloe and Al returned to the bedroom where Constance lay. “I gave her something for the pain,” Eunice informed them. “I still recommend taking her to the ship.”

“I agree. We have another Zodiac coming with reinforcements.”

“What you plan?” one of the women asked.

“We’re thinking maybe we teach Jensen a lesson in manners,” Chloe said. “Do you have something to suggest?”

“Can we all come and watch?”

Chloe smiled, “Of course.”

There was no problem finding the men. All of them had assembled to confront the strange new people who seemed intent on messing things up.

First things first. Z rigged up a stretcher and took Constance to one of the Zodiacs. Eunice stepped into the boat to make sure Constance was as comfortable as possible. Then, with Julio at the helm they sped back to the ship.

“You have no right to interfere here,” Jensen said to start the conversation.

“You have assaulted Constance. We will not tolerate that. Do you understand?” Chloe asked.

Jensen was not used to being addressed that way, especially by a woman. His face contorted in anger. Chloe’s suit was already bright red. “Let’s settle this now,” she said

“Whatever that means.”

“It means we have a trial. Here. Now.”

All the men laughed. Jensen took a step toward her, but stopped abruptly. “Oh. Did I forget to tell you about that?” Chloe laughed in return. “This is not going to be a fair fight. Just letting you know.” Her suit was beginning to show yellow flames.

“Does your suit protect against this?” Jensen asked, producing an ancient revolver.

“Mostly, yes.”

Jensen shot her in the chest. “It does hurt, though not too much. That tends to get me riled up,” she said as she shot the laser at the gun. Jensen moved slightly and the beam hit him in the hand instead of the gun. Although obviously in pain, he raised the pistol to fire again. This time, Al destroyed the weapon. “Don’t do that again,” he warned.

“You are no match for our weapons, which are intended only to defend against people like you. Please be reasonable. We have no desire to injure you unnecessarily,” Chloe explained as patiently as she could manage. “We are going to let everyone decide what to do about you.”

“What?”

“We’re going to try you for the crime of assault. Or would you prefer having it out right here, one on one.”

“I ain’t going to fight no woman.”

“OK. We can accommodate that. Al, will you do the honors?”

“With pleasure,” Al said, moving up to Jensen. Although large and hefty, Jensen was clearly overmatched by Al, who stood well over 2 meters and weighted about 120 kilos. Al grabbed Jensen by his shirt and butted heads. Then he struck Jensen right in the jaw. Jensen crumpled to the sand. It was a quick KO.

“Nice work, Al,” Chloe said. “Now, let’s hear from your accusers. Ladies, tell everyone what you told me earlier.”

They repeated the story. Chloe watched the faces of the men and saw that they were not surprised.

“Mr. Jensen, what do you have to say in your defense?” Chloe asked. He was sitting up rubbing his jaw.

She waited as she mentally counted to twenty. Turning to what she was beginning to think of as her audience, she said, “I have not heard anything from Jensen. Do any of you want to say something in his defense?”

She waited again.

“If you think he’s guilty, say aye.”

A huge chorus of ayes.

“Anyone opposed?” More silence. By now, Chloe was not surprised to discover that no one really liked Jensen. He reminded her of other bullies she had run up against.

She turned to Jensen, “It appears to be unanimous. This is another chance for you to explain yourself. Why did you beat her? It seems to me that you did because she had been my guest.”

Time for a dramatic pause.

“I take that personally.”

She walked over to him, grabbed him and forced him to stand up. The suit turned a ghostly shade of gray, causing several in the audience to gasp. She said, “Here’s the deal. You must leave tonight and stay away for a week. Then you have a choice. You can return here and beg for mercy. Or you can stay the fuck away forever. Grok that?”

Jensen struggled to his feet and began to walk away.

“We’ll discuss this in the morning,” Chloe told everyone. “Go get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Then, she turned to Al and said, “Will you stand guard over the women tonight?”

“OK if Che and Dudley take shifts?”

“Sure.” She looked at the other two thugs. “Al knows the layout. I’ll let y’all work out how to handle it.”

Then, she asked Z and Bron to meet with her privately. When they were back on board, they gathered in the bedroom Chloe and Bron shared. Chloe asked, “What did you think of my suit?”

“Awesome,” Bron said. “Can I get it in mine?”

“Yeah, me too,” Z agreed.

“The suit did that on its own.”

“What?” Z asked. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“The suit has a mind of its own,” Chloe asserted. “I love it, but it is a bit worrisome. What else could it be up to?”

“Remember when you caught the spear in Papeete? You said you just acted on reflex. Could the suit have been involved?” Z suggested.

“It sure could. But the implications are significant.”

“I agree,” Bron put in. “Does this mean the suit is dangerous?”

“I doubt it. It’s as if the suit has decided to help me. You’ll have to admit the way it turns red, and the flames...”

“How could the suit get the idea?” Z wanted to know.

“I read some accounts of Boudicca, the one who helped establish the Mendo city-state. She is said to have armor that looked like that. There are some contemporaneous accounts and even photos showing the red and yellow. I was probably wearing the suit when I read it.”

“So, you’re saying the suit saw something in the report and decided to implement it?” Bron asked skeptically.

“That’s what it looks like. I just have one question. Is this a good thing or bad?”

Both Bron and Z said, “Good.”

“OK. If you see anything that looks like the suit may be going HAL on us, let me know,” Chloe concluded, referring to the rogue AI in the classic film **2001: A Space Odyssey**.

6. Nation Building July 22-30, 2172 New Zealand

Early the next morning, Chloe addressed the entire assemblage, women and men both, augmented by the refugees from Tahiti, who were as interested in the proceedings as the Kiwis. “Let’s get this started right,” she said. “I’d like to see the sexes mixed up more than this. You,” she indicated a group on her far left. “Please get up. Everyone from here over. Now, I want all the rest to spread out to make room. Then everyone can sit where they want, so long as the men have a female next to them.” Of course, this made for quite a muddle to start, but laughter indicated that they enjoyed it. Some of the women appeared to have a specific male in mind. *That’s a good sign*, Chloe thought.

“That’s better,” she said to the crowd after all were seated again. “I noticed that some of you had no trouble finding a man to sit next to.” She waited for a polite chuckle, then took up her main theme.

“Many years ago, around the time of the Collapse, a few thousand people quarantined themselves from the plague in a protected area around the ancient University of Texas in Austin. One young man named Hardy thought they should spend some time planning for the world to come after the Plague passed. His first work, which came to be called the Austin Consensus, consists of several ideas that he thought should form the basis of a new society. This was the beginning of the New Republic of Texas.”

She paused to let the best English speakers explain to the others.

“The first line, ‘We reach consensus thru rational enquiry,’ is often quoted. It’s almost as well-known as the unofficial motto of the NRT, ‘To hell with god.’” That usually got a laugh, and this time was no exception.

“Some have argued that Hardy was too optimistic, that the phrase should be ‘We *seek* consensus...’ because sometimes agreement is simply not possible. Still, consensus is a worthwhile goal. Much better than the alternative of having someone impose a solution. I hope that you will see the wisdom in this.”

She stopped and took a sip of water.

“I say this to you today because of what happened last night. We may have destroyed the basis for your society. We owe it to you to propose something better, something that we have found to work in other places. Some of the basics: everyone should be treated equally. This means in particular that women should be treated as equals. Instead of men dominating, everyone should have a say in how things work.”

She was a bit surprised and gratified to see that this received applause.

“We also want to suggest some parts of our technology that you can use.”

“This assembly is a bit too large for discussions. I suggest that we break up into smaller groups to deal with several aspects of what we propose. Roger and Suzy will deal with some suggestions for transportation. I note that you migrate between the agricultural fields and this area, based on what we have observed. Roger should be able to make this easier. By the way, Roger and Suzy like children, so if any want to attach themselves to that group...”

“Eunice will discuss some medical issues and general health, and see patients as needed.”

“Franklin, Al, and Bo, will explain what genetic diversity is, and why it is important.”

“Bron and Z will discuss how to make electricity available here, and demonstrate how solar panels work.” They had discussed this at length before the assembly. Ancient maps indicated several sources of geothermal activity that could be tapped to generate electricity. They were going to try to find out more, especially whether there were any such places nearby. Bron planned to work on the second half of the mission from Chloe, and locating a good source of electricity would help a lot.

Chloe continued, “I will answer any questions you have. You can ask me anything and I will try to answer your questions.”

Some groups were more popular than others, especially Chloe’s Ask Me Anything. Few were interested in genetic diversity. Chloe pulled one of the women aside and fed her a question to ask about it.

Many people were interested in what Roger and Suzy had to offer, especially when they saw the two motorcycles he brought to shore.

Z and Bron had a few interested in electricity, something known only from folklore.

Eunice had quite a few people with minor problems. She recruited Maddy to assist her. To the delight of all, Constance was well enough to attend the health sessions and show off the cast that Eunice had put on her arm.

Several of the women wanted to see what these strange people could prepare for a feast. Sully came ashore with one of the pigs from the freezer. It looked like another luau was planned.

The first question for Chloe was the one she had planted, “OK. What is genetic diversity, and why is it important?”

“Excellent question,” Chloe began. “Let’s look at other animals. We can find several instances where diversity is not practiced. For example, some birds have *leks*, where the males gather and show off for the females. The females choose the winner and mate with him. Almost always, the same male is chosen. Some antelopes take this even further. The males fight with each other for the right to mate. Many are injured as a result.”

She thought of how to proceed. “Now, suppose this happens many years in a row. If the same male wins all the time, then in a short time all the young animals will be his children. The same thing can happen in humans when only one or a few males are allowed to mate.” She could see some heads nodding in her audience. “In a few generations, inbreeding takes a toll and genetic diseases appear. This can take many forms. Perhaps some children are born missing part of a leg, or worse, part of the brain. These have a difficult time surviving. That’s bad for the tribe.”

“But what’s the answer?” her questioner asked.

“Well two things. First, the women should be in charge, not the men. It’s easy for men to have several mates. Men don’t get pregnant, so the cost to them is small. When the women decide when to mate and with whom, it works better. Even better is to make sure that the women don’t always mate with the same man.”

She saw some puzzled faces. “In Boonville, where I live when I’m not out adventuring, we prefer to have different mates for every child. By convention, each person, male and female, typically mates with two *different* people. That insures against the genetic bottleneck that happens when most of

the people are closely related. Those of you who want to know more should check out the science lectures in the main hall of the women's area."

Well, that about as well as I could have hoped. They listened to the end.

Chloe moved on, expecting the usual question. "Yes, you," she said, pointing to a young man in the front row. "So, after you and Bronson have a child, you'd be available for someone else?"

"Is that a proposal?" she replied to general laughter. "You like older women?" More laughter.

"Ask me again in about 5 years," she suggested. The young man laughed that time and said, "It's a date."

"What if you get pregnant by accident?"

"The answer to that is one of our most popular trade items," she said, pulling one of the patches out. "Let me demonstrate," she said, opening the top of her suit. Several members of the audience seemed to be uncomfortable. "You can leave if seeing my naked chest bothers you," she said calmly. No one moved. "Notice that the patch is green. That means it will still work right." She pulled on a pair of gloves. "It's best to avoid touching it when you apply it, especially if you're male." She peeled off the protective layer on the back and pressed it against her breast. "So long as the patch remains green, you won't get pregnant. You can have sex just for fun. When it turns red, it's time for a new one. We brought enough for every woman to have about six months of protection. We hope that we will be able to resupply you before you run out."

She put her shirt back on. "Who's next?" She noticed to her delight that several members of the audience decided to see what the science lectures were all about.

Bron and Z looked like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. "The luau comes first," she told them sternly.

"OK," Z said. "Let's eat. Do these people make beer?"

"Haven't seen any. The cider is pretty good, and they have some Chardonnay that is not bad, but I think ours is better." Chloe was often regarded as something of a wine snob. She almost blushed thinking of David and his trips around the valley to taste the offerings. That wine, which he described as "a work in progress," was much superior to what the future Boonville had managed so far. It was still a work in progress.

Sully had put on another fabulous meal. He'd spent all morning scouring the local area, filling a basket with many mushrooms and some herbs. He'd organized a sort of scavenger hunt for ingredients that at one time occupied half the village. As night fell, they built up the fire and gathered around to wait for the pig to finish roasting. Sully had promised to roast anyone who interfered with mound of palm leaves and sand.

His hunters had found some trees that had some fruit still hanging. Way past their use by date, Sully somehow got them to fake being fresh until they had been eaten.

"Did you hear what Rabbit and I found?" Suzy asked Chloe.

"I heard you found an entire lot full of F-150s and not one of them worked," Chloe joked. "Too bad."

Suzy laughed with her. “He has put two together from the parts already. He thinks he can do at least one more, but we’ve picked over the best-preserved ones.”

“That’s great Suzy. If that doesn’t convince them to play our song, nothing will.”

“I detect the characteristic aroma,” she said to Roger as he walked up. “Not enough to share?”

Roger pulled out half a big dooby and relit it. Chloe recognized Blue Dream from the Valley. “Hope I don’t fall asleep too soon,” she commented.

One of the refugee families approached. Chloe recognized Mel’s daughter, but couldn’t remember her name. “Toonie,” Ambi told her before she asked.

“Good evening, Toonie,” Chloe said. “Enjoying the day?”

“Very much,” Toonie replied. “That’s what we came about. We want to know if we could get off the boat here.”

“Have you asked the locals?”

“Not exactly. You know *Maman* friends with Constanz.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Them two agree. That be enough. Cept you.”

“Interesting. I would like to talk to Mel and Constance,” Chloe told them. “Please ask them to come see me. I’ll be right here.”

The two old women, each a leader of her group, put on a good act, smiling and walking proudly to discuss a done deal. All that remained was some details.

Chloe was feeling the effects of the joint and laughed when she saw them. “OK. So tell me what you’ve cooked up.”

Mel said, “Connie tell you. Speak mo bettah.”

“We have agreed that the family, including Mel, can remain with us. We have some people who would like the chance to see the world.”

“How many?” Chloe asked. It took all her will to avoid giggling.

“Three.”

“Grownups?”

“Yeah. Two young men, woman.”

“I don’t want a rush. We agreed that we would not take on more passengers, but as this will actually mean one less, I see no problem. We don’t know yet when we will depart.”

“Understood. But OK to plan?”

“Yes,” Chloe said, only later did she wonder if losing Mel would cause a problem.

Bron and Z could wait no longer. As soon as they were back aboard *The Enterprise*, they cornered Chloe. Bron said, “We found it.”

“Great. What state was it in?”

“I’d say dormant, right Z?”

“Comatose.”

Chloe was having a hard time getting interested in the conversation when Z added, “at first.”

“You got a ping!”

“Better. It’s live, but the network ends at the end junction.”

“Where’s that?” Chloe asked.

“A little town called Manchester.” Roger said with a straight face. “In Mendocino County.”

As the week wore on, the villagers were treated to a never-ending string of amazements. First, Roger and Suzy left in the morning on motorcycles and returned in the afternoon in two Ford trucks made by cobbling together pieces of other trucks, the cycles carefully placed in the cargo beds.

“Tomorrow, we plan to build another. I’d like to invite anyone interested to see how we do it. We’ll leave after the morning meal, taking one truck. That means the first 5 or so who show up will get to go.”

Sully commandeered the other truck for some extended scavenging. He had spotted what appeared to be an abandoned potato field several clicks away, all uphill. Taking three others with him, he set out to harvest what they could find, returning with the cargo bed full of many different varieties.

Eunice tried out her homemade treatment for head lice and found it effective enough to employ it widely. The villagers had lived with the lice for so long, they had forgotten what it was like not to have them.

Over the hubbub Chloe sat in a very comfortable chair scrounged from one of the hotels, receiving anyone who wanted to talk to her.

Spring was coming early, and it was as though the land itself responded to renewal. The trouble Chloe had feared never came. Then, on the seventh day, Jensen returned.

As he marched into the village square, a crowd followed him, curious to see what transpired. He saw Chloe and walked straight to her. When he got within 2 meters, he fell to his knees and bowed before her. “I have made a big mistake,” he began. “I was wrong about everything. I came to seek forgiveness as you specified.

Chloe turned to a young girl who had been serving as a page, “Go fetch Constance and whoever else she wishes to involve.” The girl raced off and returned in about five minutes with Constance and all the villagers that weren’t out in the countryside.

“Here is the one who must forgive you if we are to consider your plea,” Chloe said indicating Constance.

“Jen, what were you thinking?” Constance began.

“Connie, I’m really sorry. I don’t have any excuse.”

“If I am to forgive you and accept you back into the village, you have to agree to the new order.”

“What’s that?”

“Women and men treated equally, except that women are in charge of all reproduction. Chloe explained how that be better way to organize. No more beatings. You ain’t in charge now. We got trucks, run on electricity. We got lights stead of candles. Sully show up how to gather edibles from around here. It be much better.”

“What if I don’t agree?”

“Then you go away.”

“Will you forgive me?”

“Up to you. I be waiting to see how you act. Chloe say, ‘actions speak louder than words.’”

“Chloe again.”

“She be wise beyond her years. You make big mistake crossing her. She gotta forgive you too.”

Jensen considered his options. “I’ve brought some new friends,” he said, waving to someone in the distance. Chloe tensed. Her suit turned pink. “Chill,” Jensen said, “We ain’t gonna mess with you. They just want to join up.” He continued, “I be telling bout you. They help me stay alive so I could show them where you be.”

Ten, no eleven, men approached in something resembling a march. They did not appear to be armed. Chloe rose to greet them.

They stopped and formed two lines, more or less. Their leader stepped forward and drew a sword, which he placed on the ground in front of Chloe with considerable ceremony. “We come in peace,” he said.

Now what? She wondered. She decided to keep it simple, “I’m glad. Shall we have a nice chat?”

Chloe motioned for her page and whispered some instructions to her. Then she turned her attention back to the men before her. “I am called Chloe,” she said and waited.

He jerked to attention. “I be named Isaac. Isaac the wacko my enemies call me. Right guys?”

Several agreed, “Absolutely, if you say so.”

Isaac turned to face Chloe, “And you are more than just Chloe, you’re The Chloe. Some even call you Queen Chloe. Am I right?”

“How did you hear that?” Chloe felt a frisson of alarm. She felt the suit sort of ripple, as if preparing for action.

“One of the Tahitians.”

“You’ve been spying on us,” Chloe exclaimed.

“Gathering intelligence,” Isaac replied. “You sounded too good to be true. I wanted to meet you like this.” His smile, and the way he looked at her suggested something more.

“So, you know our story. Please tell me yours.” Chloe got back to business.

“We thought the village might be shorthanded, looking to hire.”

Chloe laughed. She dramatically wiped her hand across her brow. “We thought you were just here for some of Sully’s cooking.”

“We heard of that also.”

“What’s her name?” Chloe asked.

“Who?”

“Your source.”

He laughed, “There are so many I cannot recall her name.”

Chloe’s page reappeared carrying a tray she could barely manage. Chloe rose and took the tray from her. “Thank you.” Ambi told her “Binoche.” Chloe repeated, “Binoche.” Chloe realized that the girl was older than she looked at first, maybe 12. Binoche grinned broadly and moved to the back of the crowd. Sully arrived carrying a small table, which he set between them. The tray contained some small cakes, Sully called the *Petit fours*, and they were a special treat. It also held two cups of Z’s coffee.

“Please,” Chloe said, waving at the tray. She took a small zip from her cup and wondered how many of the cakes she could make off with. Then, she noticed the other 10 men looking on. “Share mine with your men.”

This precipitated a mad rush. Chloe stood, her suit bright pink. She glared at them. “Take turns. Form a line.”

She must have used what Hypatia, her mother, called *command mode*. It got results. Each man took one cake, leaving one each for Isaac and Chloe.

“What do you think I should do about Jensen?” Chloe asked.

“The village should decide,” he told her.

Chloe turned to confront Jensen, “After the evening meal, you can make your case to the villagers. The decision on your future is up to them. If I were you, I’d start working on a speech.”

“What shall we do now?” Chloe asked.

“Can I get a tour of your ship?”

“Ambianca, check with Bron for me.”

“Who’s Ambianca?” Isaac asked.

“An old friend.”

“Meaning don’t ask for more?”

“Ambianca makes her own friends.”

“I see.”

Chloe heard Ambi, “Bron says he wants to meet this guy. Zodiac on the way.”

“Bron is sending a boat to take you to the ship.”

“You’re not coming?”

“Not right now,” she told him smiling.

“Who’s this Bron?” he wanted to know.

“A very special friend,” she told him. “We’ll talk more later.”

As soon as he was gone, Chloe turned to Binoche again. “Please round up as many of the Tahitian women as you can and send them to me. Can you do that?”

Binoche rewarded Chloe with another big grin. “Gonna find out who tell him?”

“You’re too smart for your own good,” Chloe replied, “and yes, that’s exactly what I intend.”

Chloe arranged for all the Tahitian women to be in the front row when she introduced the dinner guests. When she got to Isaac, one of them recognized him immediately and smiled at him. *Good choice, Isaac*, Chloe thought. *Easily the cutest of the bunch.*

Chloe gestured that the girl could move to stand by Isaac’s side, and she accepted at once. Chloe caught Isaac’s eye and winked. The girl, Ambi told her the name, Claudette, took Isaac’s arm as they moved to the banquet table.

After another marvelous dinner that Sully had pieced together with stuff gleaned from the surrounding area, Chloe rose to speak.

“Tonight, we had an important duty to perform. Jensen has returned after 7 days exile to ask for the village to forgive him. Everyone who understands what is going on can speak and vote when we get to that part.” She paused to let everyone understand with their neighbor’s help.

“Constance will speak first, if she wishes.”

Constance rose and made her way to the front as every eye in the crowd was on her. She showed all the cast on her arm. “This is not a trivial affair,” she began. “If not for the skill and technology of Eunice, I would probably spend the rest of my life without full use of my right arm. Jensen, the father of three daughters with me, did this in a fit of rage that I was not able to tell him about the weapons aboard The Enterprise, as the ship is called.”

She stopped to regain her composure. “I don’t know if we can trust him to follow the new rules. Perhaps some of the men can talk about this.”

She sat down. Chloe stood up. “Let me explain how I would like to proceed. First, I want a show of hands. How many of you are ready to forgive him?”

None of the women raised a hand, but several men did. Chloe then asked, “How many of you are completely opposed to letting him come back?” Many of the women raised a hand.

“It is traditional to let the minority have the first say. All who think we should forgive him and welcome him back, please come up and form a line over there. Those who think letting him back would be a big mistake, form a second line over here.”

After some shuffling around, the two lines of speakers were ready. Chloe pointed to the front of the men, “Let’s hear what you have to say. Remember, we would like to know why you think we can trust him.”

“Things were fine before you came, with Jensen in charge. All this is your fault,” he began pointing an accusing finger at Chloe. This provoked a number of shouts from the crowd of listeners.

Chloe stopped him. “That is out of order. Please speak about his trustworthiness or sit down.”

He sat.

“OK. Let’s hear from someone who thinks he should be exiled for good.”

The first woman to speak was quite angry. “This is not the first time Jensen has beaten one of us. It’s just the first time someone, Chloe, has been here to do something about it. I say we get rid of the SOB and learn to live without him.”

This provoked some applause. Chloe intervened, “Let’s try to avoid applause and cheers. We want this to be a rational decision, not one based on emotion, however strongly you feel it. Does everyone understand?” She waited, but no one said anything.

The back and forth took some time. The men figured out they needed to say something positive instead of complaining. They began telling stories about Jensen, how his leadership was critical at some point in the past. The ones who wanted to expel him simply kept asserting that they could manage fine without him. Good riddance.

After more than an hour, the time had come for the first formal vote. Chloe chose two members of the audience to serve as tellers. The initial vote was overwhelming: Jensen had to go. However, there were still several on the other side. Chloe let them speak as long as they wanted, without any opposing views. After another round of voting, three men still supported Jensen.

Chloe explained, “At this point, we ask these three men if they will go along with the clear majority.” Two shrugged and accepted, leaving one holdout. “What do you propose as an alternative?” Chloe asked him. “Would you prefer to leave with him? Let him return on probation?”

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“It means he can stay, but if he gets out of line again, then he will be summarily exiled with no further trial.” Turning to her audience, she asked, “Is probation acceptable to you? Constance, you in particular as the injured party, you should have a say.”

Constance smiled as if she had some secret. “If everyone else agrees, I have no problem with probation.”

Chloe looked to the crowd. “Anyone object?”

She waited longer than necessary to make sure. Then she addressed Jensen, “You can remain so long as you behave, follow the rules, treat the women with respect. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” he said, clearly relieved.

“Then we’re done. Thank you all.”

“Interesting outcome,” Isaac said to Chloe when he had the chance. “Did you plan that all along?”

“No,” Chloe replied, “I was just playing it by ear. My goal was to avoid having two sides unhappy with the answer. I’m not sure whether we made the right decision, but it is a defensible one at least. Maybe it will work out. Now, I have to get to a demo Bronson has arranged. Shall we go?”

Bronson and Z sat before a large monitor. Suddenly the screen lit up with an image of a young woman. “Y!” Chloe shouted. “Fantastic!”

“Hello, Chloe, Bronson, and Z.” Y said, with special emphasis on the Zed at the end. “It’s good to see your face love. I know we agreed, but it’s been a long time with no word.”

Z lamented, “I know. This has been an eventful 10 days. Beautiful country. Nice weather for mid-winter. I guess you read the report.”

“Yeah. Sounds like you’ve been enjoying yourself. I have some really interesting news that will have to wait until we have a more private setting.”

Z smiled. “It’s set up for later tonight.”

Y blew a kiss. “Back to business. I am here in the town of Manchester, home to a famous ancient lighthouse and a little-known connection to the far reaches of the Pacific. So far, we have not extended the link to connect to the Mendo web, but we expect to have that done soon. Then the full resources of the Library will be available to the people there.”

“Excellent. Until later.”

The demonstration continued for another hour, but finally Chloe, Bron and Z met on the bridge of The Enterprise and reconnected with Y.

“OK,” Y began, “let’s keep this short. I’ve found something important, really important. I was just browsing the data, looking for old videos, when I stumbled on one in Mandarin. Did you know that SATCOM, or as we call him, SC, understands Mandarin?”

“We’re not surprised. He seems to know quite a few languages,” Ambianca said, letting them know she was listening.

“He translated the dialog for me. Chloe, you remember talking about all the plutonium in the world, left over from the Cold War insanity.”

“I remember thinking it was a problem, but not A priority,” Chloe said.

“Right, but we don’t want to leave that stuff lying around where anyone can find it and maybe blow up a city or something,” Y said. “Suppose you had something better to do with it. Say turn it into a power source for a house, or even for a village. I remember thinking that we needed to find a better use. Well, I wasn’t the only one. Here’s the video that started it all.” The screen switched to a shot of a Chinese military officer delivering a lecture. The translation provided by SC ended with, “This would be the triumph of our vision for China. A land awash with energy without the dangers inherent in the current situation.”

“SC came up with that translation?” Bronson demanded. “Some pretty fancy words.”

“I helped him liven it up a bit,” Ambianca confessed.

“There’s more,” Y said. “They built a prototype. The description matches the device now helping power your ship — to a T. That would explain the Chinese characters.”

“Right,” Chloe said. “Go on.”

“Once we knew what to look for, we turned up a number of related files. The one I want to share with you is heavily encrypted. JJ and Ambianca worked on it for quite a while, but finally broke it. It’s a map.” She paused. “A map of every place in North America where plutonium was stored.”

“Holy shit!” Z said to break the silence.

Ambianca began playing the final scene from Dr. Strangelove with nuclear bombs going off while the song **We’ll Meet Again** played in the background. “An explosive development, that’s for sure,” Ambi said in closing.

Leaving Milford Sound proved to be more involved than expected. Besides Mel and her family, another asked for permission to remain, a couple and pre-adolescent son. That was granted as the man had shown skill as a carpenter. In return, Isaac requested to travel with his girlfriend, the beautiful Claudette. The latter wanted to keep exploring rather than settling down in the Sound, and Isaac was easy to convince.

Chloe wasn't so sure. The way he inveigled himself onto the ship was disturbing, and he had no skills beyond a glib tongue. "He can come, but we need to keep an eye on him."

Constance showed up with her two sons and declared that they formed the group of three passengers previously agreed upon.

"You're coming? I had no idea. What's the deal?" Chloe asked her.

"The boys be ready for adventure. Both be good sailors, hard workers."

"But, who's going to lead the women? This is a crucial time for the village, indeed for the entire island and more."

"Of course," Constance agreed. "My eldest will take over for me, and Mel has agreed to be her mentor."

"I'll need to talk to her before we leave. Please ask her to stop by."

With the number of passengers reduced by 4, there was suddenly room again. Z took charge of the asset. "You'll recall you put me in charge," she reminded Chloe.

"What do you have in mind?" Chloe wanted to know.

"There are some people aboard who are going to want some privacy while we're at sea. I propose converting my room into a special area that couples can reserve for a night."

"A mini-bordello," Chloe said.

"Exactly," Z said. "I will move in with Al. We've discussed it."

"What does Y think of this?"

"After I explained that Al prefers men, she thought it was a fine idea."

Constance agreed, and organized several women to help decorate the room appropriately.

Constance's daughter appeared for her audience. "Good afternoon," Chloe paused slightly until Ambi said, "Athene," which Chloe repeated.

"You wanted to see me?" Athene asked.

"I understand you are assuming leadership of the women."

"Yes," she said, smiling.

"Please take this device. If you are unable to contact us, or if you think it unsafe, you can use this to signal to us. Keep it hidden until needed. Then leave it in the sun for at least two hours. Then flip this switch. That will send a signal that you need our help. We will get to you as quickly as we can. No guarantees on how long it will take for us to get here. We'll be working on the problem. We hope to establish regular trade between our two societies."

“I see,” Athene said. She didn’t seem happy.

“You were hoping for more?” Chloe asked.

“Actually, I was hoping we could merge with you. Somehow. I know there is a big gap, but I hoped...”

“Maybe someday,” Chloe said. “That’s all I can promise.”

“That will have to do.”

With that final errand finished, they sailed out of the Sound on the high tide, heading toward Australia.

Part IV. Success and Failure

1. *The Battle of Spencer Gulf* *August 1 - 30, 2172* *South Australia*

“I’m telling you, my suit is alive,” Chloe asserted.

Z and Bronson looked doubtful. “Are you sure you’re not imagining it?”

“Bron, remember last night. I claimed the suit didn’t like to be left crumpled up on the floor?” Chloe asked.

Bron replied, “I thought that was one of the best features of the suits, the way they came off so easily and quickly.”

“I agree,” Z said, “though I don’t have as many opportunities as you two. Great design.”

In fact, the two suits had dropped in unison as soon as Chloe and Bron entered their stateroom.

Chloe continued, “I didn’t ask mine to drop. It just did.”

“So,” Z complained, “it has learned to do that.”

“No,” Chloe insisted, “it doesn’t usually do it. Somehow, it figured out that if Bron and I were together with a bed nearby...”

“That doesn’t mean it’s alive,” Bron countered.

“When I put the suit on the next morning after it had been on the floor all night, it itched something fierce. Finally, I took it off, hung it up carefully, and showered off. After that, it was OK.”

“So something you had on your body contaminated it,” Z suggested. “You got rid of the problem in the usual way.”

“I had no itching until I put the suit on,” Chloe argued. “There’s something more. There are other little things that make me think there is an intelligence there. Just before the suit changes into the red color, I feel a slight ripple all over. It happens every time, as though the suit is getting ready for action.”

“Please,” Z said, becoming exasperated, “that could just be your imagination. Or you could be doing it and thinking the suit is. I just don’t see it the result of intelligent action by the suit. Mine certainly doesn’t do that.”

“Neither does mine,” Bron agreed. “We’re unconvinced.”

“Well, I’m going to proceed on the assumption that something is happening that I don’t understand. And I am for sure going to hang it up every night from now on,” Chloe said finally.

“Suit yourself,” Z said, and laughed at her own joke.

The “Sex Room” proved to be very popular. The rules were strict. No woman could enter without wearing a green patch. “We don’t want any pregnancies before we’re ready,” Eunice explained. “There will be time enough for all that.” She then reserved the room for Bo and her. The atmosphere and all the decorations, and toys that were donated in the first week, meant that even those who had a private stateroom found the special room inviting.

Otherwise, the trip settled into the practiced routine. Z organized a cleanup session, recruited enough *volunteers* to help, and introduced them to the delights of swabbing the deck, which needed it.

Sully conducted some cooking classes and selected the best students as kitchen help, with adventurous results. Anyone with knowledge of fishing technique, quite a few, was put to work catching dinner. Flying fish often wound up stranded on the decks of the ship. So early in the morning, he dispatched another group of volunteers to gather them for the cookpot. This chowder, refreshed each morning, served as lunch. For variety, he pulled some meat from the freezer and introduced the passengers to the delights of chili con carne and similar dishes.

It was easy sailing, and everyone pretended they were off on a luxury cruise, which in a sense they were.

Finally, after five days of sailing, they spotted the coast of Australia and following the plan, veered south. Sidney harbor, one of the best natural harbors in the world, showed no sign of human habitation. Indeed, the sea level rise had made most of the existing facilities useless. They passed it by and continued around the coast and two days later sailed past the ghost city of Adelaide.

The satellite photos showed human activity in the vicinity of Hornsdale, site of a huge wind farm producing electricity. The lights of the nearby village, much larger than the one in Milford Sound, showed that the area was also more advanced than the one in New Zealand. Indeed, some members of the expedition had suggested heading there first. Chloe, for one, was glad they had waited. This would be an interesting visit.

The sea level rise that made Sidney harbor unusable also inundated most of the coast of South Australia. A quick survey by the drones showed there was no point in checking Adelaide for good salvage. They chose instead to move into Spencer Gulf and sail north toward what was once the town of Port Augusta. The scenery was lovely, with mountains coming down to the sea. The alluvial plane was completely under water, a vast marsh teeming with waterfowl and probably some other edible crops, especially crustaceans.

The drones ranged far inland searching for humans and finally locating them on the other side of the mountains. Searching for a safe landing spot, they spent three days slowly cruising along the coast, dispatching the drones whenever they found a promising area where the marshes gave way to solid ground. They wanted to be near a road leading into the interior where the people they hoped to meet lived.

Finally, they got lucky. One of the drones showed a line of trucks moving along what remained of a road, a line of hard packed dirt and remnants of paving. The trucks were coming to meet the visitors! The ancient maps they had of the area labeled the road A1, obviously once it had been an important route. Now, it terminated on a plain a few meters higher than the marsh. They headed for the terminus and anchored in a sheltered bay near the former town of Port Pirie.

Drones on a standard search spotted a straight line of hedges, which on closer analysis proved to be the edge of an old road. Another drone explored down the road as far as it could go before it had to turn around to avoid running out of juice. This showed that the road has been maintained well over the years, a sign that it led somewhere important. Now, the only problem was getting to it.

Roger converted one of the Zodiacs into an airboat of sorts by switching the propulsion from a propeller in the water to one in the air. It was a quick and dirty job, but it worked. The resulting craft skimmed over the shallow marsh with no difficulty, until finally arriving at some dry ground. Then they unloaded two motorcycles. Suzy and the Rabbit raced the bikes down the road until they met the caravan of trucks coming the other way.

The two envoys from The Enterprise dismounted and waited for someone from the other side to approach. After an interminable wait two people, one man and one woman to match the visitors, got out of the lead vehicle and advanced toward them. When they were close enough, the male asked, “You in the fancy suit, you be Chloe we hear bout?”

“No, I am not Chloe,” Suzy replied. “She is waiting on the ship. How do you know about her?”

“Once the old network came back to life last week, we be getting a stream of talk about you. The Kiwis be singing the praises of Chloe. We want to see for ourselves.”

“Excellent,” Roger said. “We can take two of you back to the ship. More if you can direct us to a place where we could land without worrying ‘bout the marsh.”

The woman smiled, “We figured that might be the problem. You need to sail farther up the bay to where it narrows. There you can find a way to come ashore.”

“Great,” Suzy said, making sure they realized that Roger was not the one in charge. “We have an ancient map and some photos from space. May we show them to you? You can point to the place we have to go.”

“Let’s talk some business first to make sure it’s worth our while,” said the still unnamed male leader. “How much you want for the motorcycles?”

“Actually,” Roger explained, “We need these two. We have others available for trade. We prefer to show you how to build them. We should be able to salvage what we need.”

“Maybe we just take these two,” the other said. “You can build replacements.”

“Maybe not,” Suzy chimed in. She moved to stand near the two cycles and activated the protective field with a radius of 2 meters. “Maybe we should start with introductions. My name is Suzy. My good friend is Roger the Rabbit.” She paused expectantly.

“Fuck that,” Mr. Anonymous replied as he moved toward the two cycles, stopping abruptly when he encountered the field. “What the shit?”

“We have ways of protecting ourselves and our equipment,” Roger said. He moved to stand next to Suzy as she dropped the field briefly. “Maybe we should wait until we meet where you suggested.”

“Good idea,” Suzy agreed, mounting her cycle. Roger also mounted his.

They soon found themselves staring down the barrel of a large revolver. It looked like the .357 Magnum preferred by Dirty Harry.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” Suzy warned him. He cocked the pistol. Suzy decided the time for politeness had passed and blasted it to smithereens. “That was foolish,” she told him as he nursed his hand.

“Let’s get out of here,” Roger suggested.

“I agree,” Suzy said, and she engaged the cycles and began driving back the way they had come.

Several members of the entourage raised weapons and fired. Suzy felt several hit her suit in back. She swerved to face them and fired several quick shots. One guy was determined and fired at Roger. Suzy reached out without thinking and deflected the bullet with her arm so that it hit Roger in the thigh rather than his head.

The lead truck was moving to follow them. Suzy fired at it, hitting the engine and one front tire, disabling the vehicle so that it blocked the road. “Go! Go!” She yelled at Roger.

When they could no longer see anyone behind them, Suzy signaled a stop. “Let me look at your leg,” she said to Roger, who was quite pale. “I don’t think I can make it,” he said. “Leave me here and go on. I want you to be safe.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Suzy said. “What makes you think I would be willing to live without you.

She took a knife from a pocket in her suit and cut away Roger’s pants. The wound was bleeding profusely. She ripped up the cloth into several pieces and wrapped his wound as best she could. It was still bleeding.

“Ambi, can you hear me?” she asked. No response.

“We’re out of range. We have to get back to the boats. Can you make it?”

“I’ll try,” he said, and they took off at full speed. After 20 minutes at high speed, Roger stopped and collapsed by the side of the road.

“Can’t go further,” he said.

“That’s what you think,” Suz said. She dragged him over to her machine and sat him on the rear seat. Then she dragged his bike into the brush at the side of the road. She remounted and issued instructions to Roger, “Wrap your arms around me and don’t let go. Can you manage that?”

He said nothing, but reached around her waist. She cut another strip of cloth and used it to tie his hands together loosely. She hoped it would hold until they got close to the boat.

Half an hour’s careful driving brought them to the place where they had left the boat, Roger was no help. Suzy pulled him off the cycle and dragged him to the boat. Then, she hid the second bike and got into the boat. “Hang on my love. Don’t die on me.”

She had never driven one of the Zodiacs, much less one modified to an airboat. It took several minutes to get the hang of it. She raced across the marsh in what she hoped was the right direction. “Ambi, please be there.”

“I’m here dear. How can I help you?”

“Roger’s been shot. This is an emergency. Alert Eunice. Show me the route to the ship.”

Her faceplate lit up with a sketch of the area. “Aim the boat at the blue dot,” Ambi told her. “ETA 10 minutes.”

It was closer to 15 minutes due to Suzy’s lack of experience. When she got close, Bronson dove into the water and pulled the boat to the landing area. Eunice was waiting with several helpers. Roger, now unconscious, was loaded onto a stretcher and taken to the infirmary area.

Suzy watched anxiously as Eunice stanching the bleeding and examined the wound. “Looks like it missed the bone. We’ll need to get the slug out. Angela, get the operating table ready.” This was addressed at one of the Kiwis who seemed to know what to do.

“Come on,” Chloe said to Suzy. “They’ll take good care of him. I want a complete report while it’s fresh in your mind.”

“I have a recording if I can figure out how to get it from the suit to a monitor,” Suzy replied.

“I’ll take care of that, dear,” Ambianca said.

By the time they had reached the bridge, the video was ready to display. It began with the airboat crossing the marsh. “Skip this,” Chloe demanded. “We’ll check it later if it turns out to be important.” The scene switched to the spot where they unloaded the motorcycles. “I’ve hidden one near that spot,” Suzy said. “I didn’t want to take the time to haul it on board. Also, I might have hurt Roger doing it. Roger’s machine is hidden quite a way farther along.”

“Understood. Pause the video, please, Ambi,” Chloe said, then added, “Get Bronson and Al up here as soon as possible.”

“Got it,” Ambi replied.

The two appeared soon as if they had been waiting just outside. “Show the last couple of minutes before this point,” Chloe requested. “I want you two to recover the bikes. The others will probably come looking for them. Go fully armed, including rifles. They may be out of range of the lasers.” They watched the video.

“Send me the coordinates,” Bron told Ambi. “We’ll go immediately. We have a few hours of light left.” The two departed on their errand.

“Now, let’s see the meeting with the Aussies,” Chloe said.

They watched the recording of the confrontation. “I thought it best to boogie out of there,” Suzy said.

“Good judgment. We’ll have to teach these people a lesson. Ambi, how long will it take to hack into the equipment controlling the electrical grid?”

“Do you have a stopwatch?”

Chloe laughed. “That’s what I like to hear. See if we can break into their net feed also.”

“Suzy, why don’t you go check on Roger?”

“Thanks. I will. I want to be in on the next part.”

“That’s understandable. I’m hoping I can suggest some alternative to random violence.”

Suzy left. Chloe considered several aspects of the situation. “Julio, please come to the bridge,” she said into the suit mike.

When he arrived, Chloe explained what she wanted. Then she left Julio in charge and went down to the loading pad to wait for Bronson and Al to return. She wound up waiting almost an hour before she saw their lights approaching from the East. There was only a single bike in the boat.

“They were trying to start the second bike when we got there. We had no choice to let them. They managed to put it in the back of a truck and take off. It was already getting late, so we decided to haul it back here and see what you wanted to do.”

“Good job. We’ll have to figure out how to get them to return the bike.” She smiled in a way that made Bron hope he never got her angry.

Roger was awake with Suzy holding his hand when the trio arrived. Eunice explained, “Got the slug out. Stitched him up. He needs to rest and keep the leg elevated slightly. Won’t be fully recovered for several days. Maybe a week.”

Chloe commented, “That’s the best we can hope for right now. Suzy, get someone to help you get him back to your stateroom. Then both of you rest. We’ll get you before any fireworks start.”

They moved to the stateroom shared with Bronson. “How are we doing, Ambi?”

“Ready when you are.”

“OK. Let’s have a chat with them.”

The image on the monitor changed to show a room full of people watching the TV as servers put plates on a long dining table. “Good evening,” Chloe began. “I am Chloe, the leader of the expedition. I want to apologize for the regrettable misunderstanding this morning. We thought you knew we meant you know harm.” She let them puzzle over that for a minute.

“I trust that our defensive maneuvers did not cause any undue harm. Unfortunately, our man, Roger, was wounded seriously, though he should recover all right. I have learned that your salvage crew took one of our cycles. I’m sorry, but we need you to return it. I can assure you that it won’t work for you.”

A man with a bandage on his right hand and a scowl on his face appeared. “Are you that cunt Chloe?”

Chloe ignored him.

“Here’s what I suggest. Deliver the motorcycle unharmed to the rendezvous location you suggested in two days, and we’ll forget everything. Then perhaps we can start over and find a way to interact peacefully.”

“The hell we will, bitch!”

“Gonzo, shut up. You’re not helping,” the woman in the frame said. Ambi said, “These are the two who led the reception this morning.”

“Have you enjoyed having the web available again? I see you were streaming old Star Trek episodes. I like those as well.”

Gonzo started to say something, but the woman shoved him aside.

“We don’t take kindly to people who shoot us up for no reason.”

“That’s understandable,” Chloe agreed. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name. I am Chloe as you probably heard.”

“I be Wendy, short for Wendy the Wonderful.”

“Well, Wendy, let me explain what is about to happen. We have arranged a demonstration of our capabilities. We hope that this will convince you to agree to our proposal. In 10 minutes, your electricity will go dark for 12 hours. We’ll be back tomorrow morning. I suggest you prepare in the short time you have left.”

With that, they cut the feed. “How much longer in the Star Trek episode, Ambi?”

“A guess. They have about 12 minutes left.”

“Which episode is it?”

“City on the Edge of Forever.”

“One of my favorites. Think they will miss the ending?”

“We maybe want to kill it a bit earlier.”

“Use your discretion.”

“This is going to be fun,” Ambianca said. “By the way, they aren’t planning for a blackout.”

“Let’s take control again.” They screen switched back to the view of the dining area. “I see that you are not taking advantage of the time we gave you. Too bad. We’ve decided to start now.”

Instantly, the screen went dark.

“Satisfactory,” Chloe said.

Chloe instructed Julio to sail north, but anchor some distance away from the narrows where they were told they could dock. “I wish we didn’t have a bright moon, but tell everyone we want to eliminate as much light as possible. We don’t want to advertise our presence. Bron, let’s see if we can activate the stealth mode for the ship. This will be a good test.”

At daybreak, the ship lay anchored in the bay, with the stealth mode activated. All the drones were aloft to check out the surrounding area. “If I wanted to set a trap, this would be a place I might choose.”

“Shit, yes,” Julio said.

“Let’s get a look at the feed,” Z said, looking at the screen over Chloe’s shoulder. “I don’t see any docks.”

“It’s still early,” Chloe reminded her.

“Yeah. The road should be to the right.” She turned the drone to see. “There it is! The road comes down here. We’re in the right spot.”

“Bring ‘em all back,” Chloe ordered. “Charge them up to the max and send them down the road. See if we can spot the line of trucks a long way off.”

“Time for brekkie,” Z observed, and turned to go to the dining area. Chloe waited for the drones to return so she could see what the ship looked like now. The video was amazing. The drone hovered over nothing, then descended and disappeared. “Yes!” she said and ran to catch up to Z.

Julio reported, “Drones located Aussie camp. Maybe 40 klicks away. No activities visible at time the drones passed overhead. Ship nominal. Stealth mode functioning. You see video from drones landing? Fucking amazing.”

“Good job, Julio. Still maintaining our position?” Chloe asked.

“Riding at anchor. No prob,” Julio replied. “All systems within normal limits.”

“OK. Send the drones out again and have them run a careful sweep along the shoreline. Just in case there’s a dock we’ve missed. I’m going for coffee and to check on Rabbit.”

She beamed when she saw Roger and Suzy. They both had smiles in return. “Eunice says I should heal with few problems. Maybe some stiffness until I work it out.”

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt worse. I blame myself. I chose the two of you because of the motorcycles, not expecting hostilities. Next time, we’ll send the suits. Sorry we didn’t have one for you Rog.”

“Well, I had good protection,” he said, holding up their hands.

“Suzy, I know you may want to get in on the action, if it comes to that, but I prefer you to remain here. You’ll be ranking officer on board, responsible for her protection.”

“It will be an honor. Thank you,” she said.

“I’ve looked at the video several times. I cannot see why the one they call Gonzo acted the way he did. You have any ideas? Either of you?” Chloe asked.

“Maybe he just wanted the bikes,” Suzy offered, “and wasn’t prepared to take no as an answer.”

“So the arrogant bastard is used to getting his way. Funny, I just thought of a corny joke. Why don’t Aussies have duels?” Chloe said. “They prefer trial by wombat.”

“Is that a real thing?” Roger asked.

“No, I just made it up. We can define what it means.”

“That’s easy,” Roger said. “The very name is sort of silly. Maybe the goal is to make the other look ridiculous.”

“Maybe we can do that.”

On the morning of the agreed day to meet, the ship still lay at anchor. Chloe had no intention of proceeding into the cramped, narrow gorge where they would be open to attack from above. The drones had been flying since daybreak, checking the road for the trucks. The careful search of the area showed no docks. Chloe was not surprised. “They must think we’re idiots. Maybe we should let them continue to think so. As Sun Tzu said, ‘All war is deception.’”

“So, this is war?” Z asked.

“They’ll surely think so before I’m finished with them. Let’s make sure everyone knows what we want to accomplish.”

“What is that exactly?”

“We want to scare the shit out of them.”

“Are you all clear on what we want to do? Any final questions?”

“We’re ready. Should be fun,” Bronson assured her.

“We’ll have to rely on long range radios. Bronson has one and Z the other.”

After that sendoff, Bronson, Z, Al, Che, and Dudley set off in the modified Zodiac. Chloe gave them two hours to get into position. Finally, the call came thru on the radio, “Ready when you are CB,” Z said.

With that, Chloe got into another Zodiac with Julio and a couple of the bigger passengers and headed for the rendezvous point. They passed thru the gorge, which was beautiful up close, and into a

large impoundment. The ancient maps showed the area as mouth of a river fed sometimes by a large inland lake. With sea level rise, it was now another arm of the bay.

They quickly turned to the shore and landed at a spot convenient for the Zodiac. The ship would have been helpless in the shallow bay. “Obviously thought we would come thru the gorge and ground ourselves here,” Chloe observed. “Julio, you come with me. You have a rifle?” He held the weapon aloft. “The rest of you stay hidden, but where you can watch the Zodiac. We cannot hide it if we want to appear to have fallen for the ploy.”

With that, she and Julio set off to climb the bluff to the top of the gorge while the others melted into the tall grass. Breathing heavily after the ascent, they stopped to rest. As yet, none of the Aussies had shown up. They sat down to wait, eating some sandwiches they had brought with them, enjoying a nice picnic before getting down to business.

They waited almost an hour before the caravan of trucks roared into the clearing at the top of the bluff. Chloe and Julio rose to greet them. “Stay close to me,” Chloe told Julio. “I can protect you some that way.”

Gonzo and Wendy the Wonderful got out of the lead truck, which Chloe noted was a different vehicle from the one they had used at the first meeting. “How nice to see you again,” Chloe began. “I hope that we can have a more pleasant encounter this time.”

“You came alone?” Wendy asked.

“Why no. My friend here is Julio. His full name is Julio the Ship Captain, and that is his job on our ship.”

“Where is your ship?” Gonzo wanted to know.

“Well, we determined that this bay was too shallow, so we anchored the ship outside on the main gulf.”

Gonzo gestured to one of his men, miming using binoculars to look for the ship. His minion ran to the edge of the bluff and scanned the bay. “Ain’t nothin’ there,” he reported.

“Is it important for you to see our ship?”

“Yeah. Don’t trust you,” Gonzo replied.

“Perhaps you think we have airplanes and parachuted here.”

“Bullshit.”

“Well, yes. We don’t have airplanes. Who has gasoline these days? By the way, are you running those rigs on ethanol?”

“Mostly,” Wendy answered. “We—”

Gonzo shut her off. “Ain’t none your bizness,” he said.

“Just curious. We wondered why you don’t use electric trucks?”

“I ain’t in the mood for questions.”

“I see. What are you in the mood for?”

“This.” He displayed a handgun. Chloe noticed that it was not a .357 Magnum this time. She commented, “Sorry about the other gun. Suzy may have overreacted. She felt threatened.”

“Shut up! What you got that’s valuable?”

“Mostly, we have information to share, but we did bring a number of trade goods with us on the ship. Unfortunately, as we said, it was not possible to bring the ship all the way here. Where is the dock you spoke of? We couldn’t locate it.”

“Ain’t no dock,” Wendy said. “We tricked you.”

“I see. So what’s next?”

“We be gonna take you prisoner for ransom,” Gonzo told her.

Chloe laughed. Julio joined her, and said, “You been paying attention to stories bout Chloe? You ain’t no match.”

“Shall we give you a little demonstration?” Chloe asked. “Suzy, are you ready? Turn off the stealth mode, please.”

“Aye, aye,” Suzy said in her ear.

“Holy shit!” one of Gonzo’s men said. “Look!”

They all turned to see The Enterprise sitting quietly just out of reach of any rifles. Chloe hoped they didn’t have a cannon, but they were prepared for that emergency. “That’s enough, Suzy. Proceed with the plan now.”

The ship vanished. A wake on the water was the only sign that anything was still there. Suzy took the ship farther out of range, just in case.

They all turned around toward Chloe, who was nowhere to be seen. “What?” Gonzo exclaimed. “Where did she go?”

Chloe grabbed his arm and simultaneously dropped the camouflage. “I’m right here. I hope that you have decided to cooperate with us.”

“Let go of me or I’ll—”

He writhed on the ground from the taser shock. “I’m tired of this,” Chloe said. “I think I’ll give the orders from now on.” She raised her voice, “You men, and women, by the edge. Put down your arms now! Otherwise, I won’t be responsible for what happens to you.”

“Who’s gonna make us?” One of them said as he raised his rifle. Chloe smiled as a lightning bolt from nowhere cut the weapon into two pieces. “My companions,” Chloe said as the other five members of the party appeared about 3 meters in front of them. “If you make a move, we’ll blow the cliff out from under you. Hope you all know how to swim.”

Then she turned back to the two leaders. Wendy seemed to know when she was beaten and dropped her gun on the ground. “Now, the other one,” Chloe said. Wendy reached down and removed a small pistol from her sock and put it down next to her rifle.

“Gonzo, you gonna cause trouble?”

“Fuck yourself.”

“Alas, that is not within my abilities. Perhaps you’d like to demonstrate. No? Julio, take his guns.” Julio quickly extracted three firearms.

“Now, we have some unfinished business. Where is our motorcycle?”

“Back at out camp,” Wendy said.

“Julio,” Chloe said. “Check the trucks.”

Julio trotted off and returned pushing the two-wheeler, retrieved from the third vehicle.

“Now, here’s how the rest of this is going to play out. We’re going back to our ship. You can go the hell for all I care. We’ll spend a few days exploring this area. We have a botanist who’s been anxious to survey this shallow bay to see what’s growing. That’s a way to judge the health of the environment. I strongly urge you not to interfere. Should you decide to take advantage of the technology and information we have to offer — check with the Kiwis to see what that’s like — contact us on the net that we resuscitated for you. If you show any further hostility, we’ll cut off the electricity for good. Understood?”

Wendy said, “We won’t cause you any more trouble. Come on Gonzo, pull your head in, you worthless sack of dags. Any more out of you and you’ll find yourself walking home.” She turned to the men, “We’re leaving now. Get into the trucks.”

So, what came to be called The Battle of Spencer Gulf ended quietly.

They spent a week in the area. Bo worked dawn to dusk daily, cataloging the plants, as well as the marine life, in the shallow bay. When Sully learned what he was finding, he insisted on taking a second Zodiac to do some *collecting*. The shrimp and other seafood found its way into a fabulous ceviche appetizer that evening. There was no further word from the Aussies. “We’ll see if they change their mind by the time we get back here,” Chloe said. “Let’s move on to Africa.”

2. Cradle of Mankind **September 15 – October 30, 2172** **Near the Cape of Good Hope**

On the first day out from Australia, Al approached Chloe in the dining area. “I’d like to talk to you privately when convenient,” he told her. “Sure. Give me about 15 minutes. I’ll meet you in the little library room.”

When she got to the room, she found Al pacing back and forth. “Just trying to decide how to say what I want to,” he explained.

“Take your time,” Chloe replied. “I have thought it was about time for us to have a friendly chat as well. When you are ready.”

Finally, Al was ready. He folded his huge frame into one of the small chairs around the table where Chloe waited. “You know that I was hired to come on this journey.”

“Of course. One question I have is who hired you and paid for your service.”

“Actually, I have no idea. Some anonymous donor in Austin. The pay was double my regular rate as a bouncer, so I jumped at the chance. Also, the idea of traveling to foreign lands on a luxury yacht sounded like fun.”

“I’m glad to have you aboard,” Chloe assured him.

“I had no specific instructions. Just to serve as protection and muscle as needed. However, I have suspected that I would be given something to do later. So far, nothing has come down to me.”

“I understand. Go on.”

“I’ve watched you for months now. I thought you were just another politician setting yourself up for the future. I’ve changed my mind.”

“I like where you’re headed. Keep it up.”

Al smiled. “You’ve talked to Z, so you know I mean it when I say you’re the first woman I’ve ever loved.”

Chloe managed to say, “That’s very interesting.”

“I don’t mean love in a sexual way. I mean that I love you as a person. I love you for what you are trying to do.” He paused for some time before continuing, “I want to be a part of it always. Whatever happens, I want to be standing with you when push comes to shove.”

“Thank you. I’m very glad to have you on my side.”

“It seems strange to talk about taking sides when anyone should approve of your goals.”

“I agree, but there is always some opposition. I’m delighted to have you on my side,” she said, ending the conversation. She stood and offered to shake hands. He smiled and took her hand in his rather larger one.

“Please tell Constance to come in. I think she’s waiting,” she said to his back.

Constance had also requested some time. “I have some thoughts about organizing the passengers.”

“Excellent. I’d hoped someone would volunteer. Would you like some coffee?” Chloe knew that she needed some herself.

“That would be lovely,” Constance said. “I asked Ambianca to arrange a delivery from the kitchen.” She rose to open the door for the bot, one disadvantage of using the room for private discussions. The other rooms had elevators just large enough to handle one of the bots. The top of the vehicle opened showing a tray of treats. After Constance removed the tray, she found the cups and a carafe beneath them. With all the items transferred to the table, she wished the bot goodbye and ushered it out the door.

“I love watching them. Are they intelligent?”

“Not really,” Ambianca interrupted with the answer. “Not in the way I, or JJ, or even SAT is. They are more like well trained dogs.”

“Thank you, Ambi. Are you there all the time?” Constance asked.

“You’re welcome, Connie. I will always go away if you ask me to.”

“You’re just showing off, both of you,” Chloe said. “I get it. You’re friends. I’m happy for you, Connie.” She emphasized the familiar name.

“I’m happy to have you call me Connie. What is your family nickname?” She asked in return.

“I don’t know. Ambi?”

“I think it is Chloe.”

Then Ambi switched to playing background music. Chloe didn’t recognize it, a long riff on some strange instrument. Constance did, “Ravi Shankar. That’s a blast from the past.”

They turned their attention to the treats, some of the *petit fours* that Sully was turning out regularly now with the help of the kitchen staff he recruited. “I wonder when we will run out of sugar,” Chloe mused. She was pleased that Ambianca had the good sense not to interrupt this time. She thought to herself, *I’ll have to look into that*. She was astonished when a reminder appeared the next morning.

After the *petit fours* were history, Chloe opened with, “So, Connie, what do you want to discuss? Wait! Before that, I’d like to know why you decided to come with us rather than staying in New Zealand?”

“It was an easy choice. Besides my daughters, I have two sons. My eldest has latched onto one of the Tahitian women. He was dead set to come aboard. The younger followed suit. We noticed that there seems to be a slight shortage of men in the group. I thought two healthy and strong young men would be a good addition. I also thought it would be good to give up my role as leader of the New Zealand women. Finally, I can avoid seeing Jensen again. All that added up to make an easy decision, especially when Mel approached me.”

“That all makes sense,” Chloe agreed. “Now, what do you want to deal with here on board?”

“The children’s education. They need to learn to read and use the *keyboards*.” Connie had only recently learned the word and wanted to make sure her listeners understood.

Chloe asked, “Have you talked to Ambianca about this?”

“No. Should I?”

“Well, she taught me to read and use the Library. Before I was very good at talking even. I actually found typing easier than trying to pronounce words correctly.”

“It would never have occurred to me to ask her,” Constance admitted.

“You aren’t thinking like a three-year-old girl. It seemed perfectly natural to me. I had a strange childhood.”

“I know. One of the first things I searched for in the Library was information about you.”

“Sort of like drinking from a fire hose,” Chloe suggested, which got a laugh from Constance.

“I found a book for children about your life in the Apple Orchard Shrine. That was about the right level.”

It was Chloe’s turn to laugh. “Ambianca will have a plan ready for your review, probably by the time you get back to your stateroom.”

Constance took the hint. By now, everyone aboard knew that Chloe liked to spend a couple of hours checking out birds, mammals, whatever else came near the ship. She had started a special list of what she’d seen just on the trip. Her parents would be proud. Both of them had been avid birders.

Chloe was just coming off her shift as the sun rose behind the ship. “Chloe,” Z called to her. “You gotta see this.” She was in the process of reviewing some photos sent from Austin. “This is a photo from the past week of Spencer Gulf. Notice the new construction here on the east shore near the ancient town of Port Pirie.”

Chloe stared at the picture. “It looks like a dock.”

“Indeed it does. I can think of only one reason they would build one now,” Z said.

“They are preparing for us to return,” Chloe agreed.

“No messages from them, though?” Z asked.

“Nothing. An interesting development. You’ll keep on top of this?”

“You bet.”

The days dragged on as the ship sailed slowly along the southern coast of Africa, searching for a good harbor and any humans. After a week of creeping along with drones searching inland in shifts, they had located neither target.

Finally, they found what appeared to be a good harbor. A large bay with a protected entrance looked promising. Ancient maps labeled it as Botrivier Lagoon. Before the sea level rise, it had been a moderate sized lagoon fed by a river, Botrivier. Now, it was much larger, shallow seas stretching far inland. It was worth a close look, so they moved carefully thru the entrance and anchored for the night in deep water.

Suzu and the Rabbit appeared as soon as the ship anchored. “We’ve decided we’d like to make it permanent,” she explained to Chloe. “You know. Get married or whatever.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Chloe said.

“Will you conduct the ceremony?”

“Sure. When did you have in mind?”

“How about tonight?” Roger told her.

“Is there a rush?”

Suzy blushed, but answered, “Not that kind of a rush. We thought this looked like an excellent spot. It’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“How about tomorrow?” Chloe countered. “It’ll give us some time to prepare.”

“Fine,” they both agreed and departed holding hands.

After such a long and tedious search, everyone on the ship was in the mood for a celebration. Sully dipped into the stores and took out several beef roasts, a fabulous treat with beef so difficult to acquire. He spent the afternoon making a huge pot of boeuf bourguignon, a classic dish from a much earlier time. He used the last of his stash of potatoes to accompany the meat together with some fresh greens taken from Australia that were at the use it or lose it stage. For dessert, he relied on another time-tested recipe called Idell’s Ginger Snaps that Chloe located in her private files.

Branson had spent the boring days practicing his guitar and put on a concert for everyone. Toward the end, he played a series of children’s songs that proved to be the highlight of the day.

They broke out some of the New Zealand Pinot Noir that Chloe thought a worthy competitor for the Anderson Valley staple. The children got lemonade from concentrate. That was a happy accident of the planning, which substituted concentrated lemonade for the limeade Chloe had ordered in case they wanted to make Margaritas.

Finally, they announced Roger and Suzy’s plans to great applause. Chloe had found a service that seemed innocuous and short. The ceremony was over in short order.

Everyone was in a great mood, but the adults wondered what the next day would bring. After the fact, they wondered how they failed to see that Z’s contribution to the evening, a spectacular fireworks display, would be the most important.

The next day dawned bright and sunny, with temperatures hinting at the summer to come soon. After breakfast Ambianca announced, “We are going to have visitors. Three large canoes have launched from the western shore. The lead canoe should be alongside in a few minutes.”

Everyone lined the deck to see who the visitors were. Chloe suggested Al stand by her. “It’s a test of sorts. I want to see if they greet you as the leader.”

“Sounds like fun,” Al replied and stood erect at her left.

The lead canoe, a dugout made from a single huge log and filled with ten large men, most obviously of African descent, save for a single European-looking individual. SAT began greeting the men in all the languages he knew, beginning with Swahili. After several of these, the men began laughing. “Do you speak English,” the European asked, stressing each word.

Chloe nudged Al, who answered, “Yes, it’s one of our preferred tongues, particularly the variant we call *Vernacular*. It has a simpler grammar and several borrowed words.”

“Excellent. And do I have the honor of addressing the leader of this expedition?”

“No,” Al replied, indicating Chloe, “Chloe here is our leader.”

“Move toward the stern, there be landing pad where you tie up and come aboard,” Julio told him.

“Julio is our ship captain,” Chloe explained. “We’ll deal with introductions where you are aboard. What about the other two canoes?”

“If you can accommodate us, we would all like to visit your fabulous yacht.”

The addition of 30 people made the ship a bit crowded, but everyone seemed to be in a good mood. Suzy and Roger entered to applause. Clearly, they had spent the night celebrating their new status. Smiles were frequent and spontaneous.

“Ah, these must be the newlyweds,” said the still unnamed leader of the canoeists.

“Yes, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?” Chloe agreed. She proceeded to introduce her crew and passengers, with Ambianca’s aid as usual.

“I am Yuri, like the leader of the Argonauts,” he explained. He then proceeded to introduce his group, stumbling over a few of the names. There were 17 men and 13 women, counting Yuri. Chloe assumed (correctly as it turned out) that Ambianca would remember them for her. The gender disparity was the opposite of the passengers on *The Enterprise*, where women were the majority.

“Yuri, why don’t you and I have a private chat. Bron, would you organize a tour of the ship or something?”

“No problem,” Bronson said. Turning to the assemblage, he instructed, “We’ll split into three groups. Everyone from here over follow Z,” he gestured to Z to approach. “Z, why don’t you start with the engine room. The next group will go with Julio, starting on the bridge. Finally, the rest of you stay here. We’ll start with the lounge and map room.”

There was the usual shuffling, and some people surreptitiously moved into a different group to be next to friends or interesting members of the (mostly) opposite sex. Chloe noted that Al’s *gaydar* seemed to be functioning as he moved deliberately to follow Z and took a place next to one of the men.

Finally, she and Yuri were alone. “Shall we move into the small library?” she asked. “It will be quieter.” Yuri was quite handsome, in a rugged way. Taller than most of the other men, he was obviously of mixed European and African heritage, with skin the color of café-au-lait, and curly black hair that he cut short. Muscular, but not up to Bronson’s standards. His soft brown eyes were looking right into Chloe’s. He remarked, “You have beautiful and interesting eyes. I love the combination of blue with the gold dots, not to mention the striking gold ring. I guess you’ve been told that before.”

“Yes,” she replied. “They are supposed to be much like my mother’s eyes, if you believe all the old stories. Shall we sit?” She moved toward a small table with two chairs.

Chloe launched into an explanation of their voyage, “We are here on a peaceful exploration. We want to locate any pockets of human activity that would be beneficial trade partners.”

“Interesting,” Yuri replied in a tone that meant the opposite.

“You are not interested in trade?” Chloe asked.

“We thought you needed our help,” Yuri replied. “We saw the flares in the sky and took them for an SOS.”

“Sorry about that,” Chloe replied. “We aren’t in need of assistance unless you have a supply of sugar. Sully has been making some fancy desserts and we may run out.”

Yuri laughed heartily. “You are in luck if you need agricultural products. We can grow anything and have a surplus ready to trade. It beet sugar acceptable?”

“Of course. What do you need or want in return. We specialize in information and technology, such as our solar panels, which we have improved a great deal since the Collapse.”

“What kind of information?”

“We think we can connect you to what is left of the Internet. You won’t have Facebook, but we have found the database of patents invaluable. It’s like a huge *How To* resource.”

“You seem to have something we are more interested in.”

“Really? What is that?”

“People, especially strong, young men. Although it isn’t obvious, we are growing old and need an infusion of young people. I took a good look at your passengers. Maybe some would like to get off here?”

“What you refer to as passengers were originally refugees. We picked most of them up on Tahiti, where they were slowly dying out. They may be interested. We’d have to ask. They have grown used to the advantages of our technology. If you want them to stay, we should plan to set you up for electricity and connection to the web. That way, you could be warned of impending dangerous weather, for example.”

“I think we’d like that, but there is a problem. We have been repeatedly attacked by raiders intent on stealing our crops and whatever else they want. I notice that some of you seem to be wearing armor. Are they soldiers?”

“Not in the sense you mean. We rely on our technology only for defense, but what you are describing may qualify.” She paused for thought. “I have an idea to suggest. What if we have a dance party tonight? We can move stuff out of the lounge and Ambianca can play music. That would let everyone socialize.”

“I like the idea, but I don’t think I have met Ambianca.”

“Ambi, please play some music. Do you have any favorite music, Yuri?”

“How about some Paul Simon? He’s widely liked in South Africa.”

Ambianca asked, “Do you like the album Concert in the Park? It includes the group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.”

“Perfect.”

The music began immediately. “We have mics and speakers all over the ship. I also have a direct line to Ambianca, who is my oldest friend.”

“She’s a computer program? Is that the right word?”

“She was once; now she’s much more. She’s evolved.”

“How interesting.”

“I’d like to know more about you and your village or whatever you call it. Somehow, we missed that in our scans. We saw migrating heat sources that we thought might possibly be human herders. We had given up on finding you when you showed up.”

“We do migrate. The summer here near the ocean can be unpredictable. When the wind blows off the water it is tolerable. Otherwise, it is hot and humid. We prefer to move and live in the hills most of the time. As you saw, we do have some large canoes that we use for fishing.”

“Where in the hills? How far from here?”

“Our main structure is an old golf course, hotel and cottages, formerly an elegant place for rich people. The hotel has survived well, and some of the houses have been remodeled for our needs. It’s at the east end of the lagoon.”

“Excellent. Can we plan a visit to see where we might help?”

“I’d love to host you. Now, what do we need to do about this dance party?”

Branson took one step into the stateroom and stared in disbelief. “Wow! Is that for me?”

“I thought I might spruce up a tad for our guests. My suit came up with this on its own. I take it that you like it?” Chloe admired her image in the mirror wearing a low-cut dress that showed enough cleavage to qualify as sexy. Bright red with some yellow flames repeated the motif all were familiar with. “I’m thinking maybe the red with flames might send the wrong message,” she said. Instantly, the dress changed to pale blue with flowers. “Not!” Bron objected. The dress became very pale green with darker green tendrils like vines that were designed to emphasize her breasts, which the suit made sure were adequately supported to show well.

“That’s great!” Bron said. “Keep that one. You know, I decided on you the minute I saw you, based on the way you looked: confident, assertive, in command. I didn’t even realize that you are beautiful to boot. I see it when you wear that! Now, what should I try for with my unintelligent suit.” As if in response, he felt the suit tweaking his “inch to pinch” around the waist. “OK. OK. I get it. Maybe just the traditional tuxedo?” The suit complied.

“Very nice,” Chloe admired. “Ambi, how much time before the party?”

“You’re actually a few mins late now.”

“Rats! OK, Bron. Later tonight,” Chloe said, kissing him lightly. “Can’t be late for the party. We’ll be just right for a dramatic entrance.”

“Glad you have plans for later. I thought you might have a different partner in mind,” Bron retorted.

“There’s no one else, my love.”

With that, they moved to the stairs for their big entrance.

“What a fantastic evening!” Chloe exclaimed long after midnight when she and Bron were finally alone together again.

“Especially for you,” he said. “You never had fewer than five men around you ogling your breasts. He emphasized his point with an exploratory caress.

“As if you were just idling instead of dancing with every female over the age of 7. You are, by the way, a superb dancer.”

“Thanks. Maybe we should have one dance together to end the evening.”

“We can have a dance, but it won’t end the evening if I have anything to say about that.”

“Just what I wanted to hear. Ambianca, something appropriate, please.”

Ambianca responded with a series of Strauss Waltzes lasting over 10 minutes. It ended with a kiss more romantic than you would expect from a couple who had been together for quite a while. Both suits spontaneously dropped to the floor as Chloe took his hand and led him to their bed.

Much later, Chloe heard a rustling on the floor and remembered to hang up her suit. As an afterthought, she hung up Bron’s as well.

3. *The Battle of Arabella Springs* *November 5 and later, 2172* *Western Cape, South Africa*

Everyone over the age of 7 slept late. Serine, however rose at her regular time, shortly after dawn, and wandered into the dining area looking for breakfast.

“Hello, dear,” Ambianca greeted her. “I think you are the only one awake. Can you find something yourself for brekkie?”

“Hi, Ambi. I can make toast and jelly.”

“Good. That should hold you until Sully wakes up. Maybe I’ll see if I can coax him.”

“What does *coax* mean?”

“It means I won’t yell at him.”

Serine laughed.

“Maybe I should wake up your parents?”

“No!” Serine almost shouted.

“OK, OK,” Ambianca agreed. “Do you need help making toast.”

“Of course not! I’m almost 7.”

Ambianca switched to some music, some children’s songs Bronson had recorded.

Serine proved to be capable of breaking her fast without assistance, fetching bread, peanut butter and jelly, and fruit juice from the refrigerator. She opted to make a PB&J sandwich instead of toast as the toaster was too far for her to reach.

Fortified and ready for the day, she set off to find her new friend, Maki. The name was short for Grimalkin, which her mother had bestowed on her without knowing what it meant. It proved to be a good choice, as the girl was black and cat-like.

Because of the large influx of people, most of the African contingent slept on the decks, those not invited to the *sex room*. Spring had arrived early, with mild weather. Serine tiptoed thru the bodies until she found Maki. The lure of PB&J proved to be sufficient to wake not only Maki, but most of the children, who descended *en masse* following Serine’s lead.

By that time, Sully was awake and working on French Toast, using his carefully hoarded eggs and milk with sourdough bread that he made every day. When the adults began to filter into the dining area, the children had a huge sugar high and were ready for action.

Sully and Maddy worked their magic, and all diners were properly fed by mid-morning. Then came the hard part: loading the canoes and Zodiacs for the trip to the village, which was called Arabella Springs. Yuri had explained, “We thought the *Country Estates* name sent the wrong message, and there are several springs in the area that have started flowing again with the increased rainfall.”

As the expedition moved away from the ship, the Africans got their first taste of the strangers’ technology as Chloe activated the stealth mode and The Enterprise vanished. Yuri, who had maneuvered to be in the Zodiac with Chloe said, “Holy shit! Where did the ship go?”

“Just a taste of what we can do,” Chloe explained. “We applied the same material used in our suits to the surface of the ship, just a single sheet. When activated, it mimics the surroundings, effectively disappearing. Impressed?”

“To say the least.”

They arrived at the landing late in the afternoon, as the shadows moved across the meadow leading to the ruins of the ancient hotel. Chloe could see that it had stood the test of time well, though the upper story areas were not ready for prime time. That left 4 floors, including the first floor with its large conference area and the underground kitchen, just coming to life as fires were lit under the stoves.

“Let me show you around,” Yuri suggested. “Dinner will take a little longer.” He gestured toward the back of what had once been the lobby. As the group walked thru the door and into a large amphitheater, some lights came on. “Electricity,” Z said, noting the obvious. “From solar panels?”

“Yes,” Yuri replied. “We’ll show you the array in the daylight tomorrow. The lights are running on batteries right now, so we don’t want to stay in here for long. It’s a beautiful room, I think. In addition to the lights, it has a first-class sound system.”

“Bronson will want to check that out later,” Chloe observed. “Get him to play something live for you. He’s quite talented.”

Yuri said nothing, and Chloe suddenly realized that he was not interested in hearing her sing Branson’s praise.

When they emerged from the conference area, Serine and Maki streaked toward Suzy and Rabbit. “Mama! They have LOTS of animals. Goats, Sheep, Dogs and Cats! Look!” She held out a kitten for them to examine. “His name is Fluffball.”

Suzy looked at the cat, especially its calico fur. “It’s actually a girl cat,” she explained. “All cats with three different colors of fur are females.”

“Why?”

“It’s complicated. Remember when we talked about X chromosomes?”

Serine screwed up her face with the effort of recalling a science talk from long ago. Suzy helped, “Remember that females have two X chromosomes while males have only one.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Well, it turns out that cat’s fur colors are determined by the X chromosomes. Only females have enough to have three different colors.”

“I see.” She smiled happily.

“Fortunately,” Suzy continued, “Fluffball is a good name for any cat, whether boy or girl.”

“Can I keep her?” Serine wanted to know.

“Let us think about that,” her mother replied. “Maybe the cats here prefer to live in the barn or something.”

Maki thought it was time to clear things up. “We get to keep a few cats inside. Want to see mine?”

“I’d love to,” Suzy said. “Maybe later? OK?”

“Can she sleep with me tonight?” Serine asked.

“If she wants to,” Suzy agreed. With that, Serine and Maki raced off.

Yuri added, “Most of the cats do prefer to live in the outbuildings. That’s where the rodents are after all. Some, though, adapt to life with humans. Maybe Fluffball will turn out to be one of those.”

Just then, the gong sounded for dinner, and they moved on to the dining area with Yuri in the lead. Bronson moved up to Chloe and whispered to her, “It’s obvious that Yuri wants some private time with you. Shall I make myself scarce?”

“You must be imagining things,” she whispered back.

“The offer is open.”

“Do you have a substitute in mind?”

“Several.”

Chloe swatted him on the shoulder, then smiled and took his arm as they moved into the dining area.

A flurry of activity followed for the next month as the *strangers* set about providing new technology to the Africans. Suzy and Roger, with Al added for backup, explored the surrounding area looking for good salvage options. Serine was delighted with this arrangement, which left her to explore the farm and surroundings, which included several small ponds, with her new friend Maki.

Unlike New Zealand, where salvage opportunities were found mostly in the ruins of major cities, here, where the area was mostly rural, best finds were in other farms. Roger constructed two small tractors using motors and other parts taken from the carts used on the ancient golf course. They showed the locals how to use these to plow fields easier. A long cable attached to a winch on the tractors pulled the plow from one side of the field to the other. Then, the tractor drove back to the other side, pulling the cable to its full extent. Repeating this process plowed the field quickly and used only solar power.

The Zodiacs returned to the ship and returned filled to the brim with new solar panels from Austin, which were easily twice as efficient as the ancient ones the farm had relied upon. The old ones were repurposed to handle small needs, mainly supplying power for a satellite connection to the grid. Though not as good as the connections using fiber optics, they were a good start, allowing access to the Library and communication networks.

They rebuilt the cell phone network using more of the old solar panels to power them. This provided communication to salvagers when away from the main buildings. Some small farmers, they would be called *crofters* in the NRT, learned of the goings on and began showing up to see the strange visitors.

Branson mentioned to Chloe that he had no objection in case Chloe wanted to fool around with any other men. Chloe responded to this offer with the obvious question, “What’s her name?”

Bronson actually blushed. “Laila,” he replied. “It’s just for fun, you understand. However, there is the question of what room are available...”

Chloe laughed at his discomfort. “I think I can arrange to use Yuri’s suite. Should I try booking it for tonight?”

“That would be lovely,” Bron said.

“Two items: no unplanned pregnancies. These women have been informed of the patches and have samples. Make sure she’s using one. Secondly, I want the details.”

“Oh, do you? Maybe. I’ll have to ask her.”

“Tell her. No secrets.”

“OK.”

Yuri, for his part, was happy with the arrangements.

That night, as she lay next to Yuri after a protracted session of sex, she asked the question that had been bouncing around in her head all day, “So, tell me Yuri, how did you wind up here? You’re obviously not African, and unless I have lots my hearing, you are not South African either. Your English has a tiny accent that is definitely not African. With a name like Yuri, I’m guessing Russian.”

“Very good! Yes, my grandfather was Russian. Came here to manage the Golf, including responsibility for the greens and fairways. After the Collapse, when most of the people here died, he was the natural choice for leader. My mother was the daughter of one of the rich families that lived and vacationed here. Everyone else in her family fell victim to the Plague. She was a South African, an Afrikaner. So, now you know why I don’t look African. She named me Yuri after Yuri Gagarin, the first man to orbit the earth. She wanted me to remember my heritage.”

“Interesting. How did you become the leader here?”

“Natural talent, I suppose.”

“I see. So you have other talents besides the ones on display tonight?”

“Is it true what they say about you? That you are a witch? I feel bewitched.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes. I have an uncontrollable urge to make love.”

“Again?”

“At least.”

“Well, I hope it’s better than last time.” She smiled. “That was only a nine. Maybe 8.75.”

“I love stretch goals,” he said.

Everything went beautifully for weeks until the Desperados showed up. Yuri explained that the gang appeared regularly to collect the fee for “protection.” Chloe, with Che and Dudley, the two thugs with no real skills other than muscle, set out to meet them.

“Who da fuck you be?” the gang leader demanded.

“I be called Chloe,” she responded. “Who be you?”

“Name ain’t no never mind. Be come for our tribute.”

“I see. What kind of tribute?”

“Why ain’t I talking to someone who know something?”

“Cause you be imbecile who ain’t hear they be a new sheriff in town.”

“Huh?”

“What part you not understand?”

In response, he pulled a huge revolver from his waist and pointed it at Chloe. Her suit turned red.

“Whoa! What happen?”

“When my suit turn red, it mean bad for you. Put down the gun.”

Instead, the leader cocked the pistol. Chloe, Che, and Dudley all three blasted it into a storm of metal shards, some of which injured the assailant’s arm.

“Holy shit!” one of his minions said.

“Perhaps now, you will tell me your name,” Chloe said, lapsing into Standard English.

Instead, the man Chloe now thought of as *the idiot*, covered the distance between them in three steps and grabbed her arms. “That be mistake,” she said as she grabbed his arms in turn. He fell to the ground moaning from the effects of the taser. “Guess he live,” Chloe noted. Turning to the remaining gang members, she asked, “Who be next?”

One of the men stepped forward, unslung his weapon from his shoulder, and placed it on the ground in front of her. The others followed suit quickly.

The one who seemed to have assumed the mantle of leadership said, “Maybe we be on your side now?” Thus, what came to be known as the Battle of Arabella Springs ended swiftly.

“Good choice,” Chloe said. “Follow me.” She led them back to the main building. Che and Dudley stayed behind to deal with the idiot-in-chief. Chloe deliberately avoided asking them what their plans for him were.

When she located Yuri, who smiled broadly before he noticed the entourage at her back, Chloe said, “These gentlemen, formerly in a gang working the protection racket, have had a change of heart and would like to explore options,” a complicated sentence that the gang members were unlikely to understand. “So, question is do you want to consider it?”

“We are always on the lookout for people willing to work. You saw our fields. They need a lot of attention but produce enough food to feed all of us and many more in the surrounding region. We always have a surplus, so we didn’t regard the *protection* as a big problem. That said, we can certainly use them. What do you suggest?”

“I suggest that we interview them individually to see whether we think we can trust them. Ambianca is the best judge of character I know. I suggest we let her handle the interviews. We’ll need some human to serve as the liaison. I think Constance would be non-threatening. Eunice should be available to give them a quick health exam.”

“Good idea,” Yuri agreed. “Let’s do it.”

Mid-summer arrived before Chloe and those used to the northern hemisphere thought of the implications of the seasons in South Africa. They understood the excuse for a big celebration, though, and participated eagerly, building a huge bonfire to “burn winter” in. Everyone over the age of 10 or so slept late on December 21, planning to stay up all night. Sully and the kitchen staff in the village prepared a huge feast featuring another luau with roast pig. Large kegs of the young red wine helped get things moving, as did some of the cannabis still left in the stores on *The Enterprise*.

Chloe introduced Yuri to the benefits of the wonderful weed, which had been used in Africa since long before written records existed. The powerful strains from California were a revelation to the locals, who immediately set about planning to grow some for themselves.

After the bonfire and feast, couples wandered off for more private activities. Chloe had been wondering if Bronson would return to her bed or continue with Laila. It turned out to be the latter, so she found Yuri and informed him of one of the purported benefits of cannabis, great sex. They retired to the luxury suite Yuri claimed as his own where Chloe decided to see if they could run the dial up to 11.

Then, suddenly, it was time to leave the African settlement. Word reached them from the Aussies. “We have realized that we made a huge mistake and beg you for a second chance. We have constructed a place for you to dock your great ship. Please come back!”

They couldn’t afford to pass up a chance to add a third jewel to what came to be called the *Southern Crown*. So, they responded to the email with a tentative schedule and began preparations for departure. Once word got around that the *White Witch* was going home, hordes of visitors began arriving in the village. For the first time, the expedition crew saw just how many people lived in the area and depended on the food surplus of the farms.

Chloe suggested to Yuri that he prepare for rapid growth in the village as the visitors learned of all the innovations the strangers had brought with them, access to the information in the Library being the most important.

As the date for departure drew near, Chloe found herself in one meeting after another. Many simply wanted a chance to see the reality behind the legends, but some had a larger purpose.

One of the first to appear, Ethelred, the gang member who started the surrender, simply wanted to show his appreciation. “The day I met you be the best of my life. I made a necklace for you.”

He produced a huge boar’s tooth held by a brass fixture. “I kill him myself, with spear. Rite of passage. Very big boar. This show how powerful you be.” He placed the item around her neck and stood back to admire it. “Now everyone know not challenge you.”

“Stunning, Red,” Chloe said using the name she knew him by. “I’ll treasure it. Thank you.”

“*Vaya con dios, Chloe,*” Red said. He didn’t know what the phrase meant, but had been informed that it was a formal farewell the strangers used. He left quickly after that as many others were waiting their chance.

The first member of the expedition to appear was Al. Chloe had been expecting him and asked when she saw him, “So, Al, have you decided what you want?”

To her surprise, he began to cry. It was so incongruous that she wrapped her arms about his huge frame. “I’ll miss you also,” she said, guessing the reason for his tears.

Sniffling, he said, “I want stay by you, but...”

“I understand. You must follow your heart. Perhaps there a time in the future for us to be together again.”

She sat back down, expecting the end of the interview, but Al knelt at her feet and put his head on her lap as he sobbed. Ultimately, he regained control and said, “I never forget you.” Then he rushed from the room.

Constance appeared next. “I come to tell you about the passengers,” she began. “I’ve been wondering about that,” Chloe said in turn. “Are you all planning to stay here?”

“Not quite,” Constance told her. “Isaac and Claudette would like to continue with you if you agree. All the rest will stay here.”

“It’s a beautiful location,” Chloe said, “and I expect the village will soon experience rapid growth. That will require some careful planning. You will be invaluable. I am happy that we have brought you here.”

“We are happy with the denouement,” Constance said, without extra emphasis on the word.

“We will expect Isaac and Claudette to work. They will no longer be considered passengers.”

“I will inform them. I am sure they will find some way to be useful.”

Suzy and the Rabbit showed up later. For once, Suzy took the lead. “We would like to remain here. We ask your permission to leave the ship,” she said. “It’s mainly for Serine’s sake,” she explained. “She is so happy here. We cannot bear to tear her away from her new friends.”

“I understand completely,” Chloe assured her. “We will manage without you somehow. I have a suggestion. What if we designate you as our envoy, or something similar, our official representative here. You could make sure the satellite link works while you try to connect to the fiber optic grid. I’m sure Roger will be able to find work here. He already showed his ingenuity with the golf carts he converted to mini-tractors.” Roger smiled at the praise. “I’ve already set up a big workshop a few clicks down the road. They’ll be plenty to keep me occupied.”

Suzy added, “We are expecting a new member of the family in about six months.”

“Congratulations! I’m very happy for all of you.”

“Thank you for the opportunity to travel with you,” Roger added. “It has been the adventure of a lifetime. Suzy has a gift for you, a memento.”

Suzy presented Chloe a box wrapped in pre-Collapsian paper. “Just a few things I found,” Suzy said.

“The paper itself is fabulous,” Chloe said. “Surely from the ancients.”

“Yes,” Suzy said. “We’re keeping the location a secret for now. Lots of good stuff. I made the bracelet from some gold trinkets we found. Roger worked out a way to melt it down and pour it into a mold. I think we can make more to use as trade goods.”

Chloe removed the paper carefully, but alas, it proved to be too fragile to reuse. The bracelet was a work of art, a stylized figure of a woman pointing her finger as if to send a lightning bolt to disarm an opponent. Chloe laughed when she saw it. “Magnificent!” she told Suzy. Then she said, “*Vaya con dios*, you three, or four. *Vaya con dios*.” Suzy and Roger smiled, recognizing the inside joke the in the farewell.

Chloe added, “Oh, one more thing. Take three of the bikes with you. The third one is for Al. He is also remaining behind. I suggest you consider having him along in case you run into anyone with criminal intent.”

After a lull around midday, when only *tourists* showed up to see Chloe, she noticed Yuri at the door. They exchanged smiles. Yuri started the conversation, “I want you to know that these weeks have been something I will remember for the rest of my life. Nothing before prepared me for what you have brought, and that includes some remarkable love-making.”

“It’s been great,” Chloe concurred. “I’m glad that we could spend so much time together. I know that Bronson loved the loose constraints on our relationships, you and me, Bron and Leila. I’m a bit anxious to see how that all plays out.”

“That is something I want to discuss.”

“Oh. Please tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Everything is so new, I’m afraid that we won’t handle it properly. We will need guidance from you. I have held out the hope that you would decide to remain behind.”

Chloe could feel tears building. She forced them away and said, “I’m truly sorry, my love. That simply cannot be. I have responsibilities. I have to continue the voyage.”

“Maybe someday...” Yuri continued.

“No promises,” Chloe said, “but we understand the issues you raise. What if Suzy and The Rabbit were to remain here as official representatives of some kind.”

“Suzy and Rog! That would be fantastic. Wait until you see what he has prepared for your return trip.”

“They want to remain here with the girl, Serine. She seems very happy here, and considering what she has gone thru, that is saying a lot.”

“I’m delighted. Can I spread the word?”

“Ask Suzy. I’m sure she will agree. She told me they are expecting another child.”

“Wonderful. I’ll go see them. Maybe we can spend one last night together?”

“Maybe. How about a farewell kiss, just in case?” Chloe suggested. Yuri looked disappointed, but the kiss was passionate. He turned and left without looking back.

Bronson and a sizable group of village women showed late in the afternoon. Chloe steeled herself and greeted them enthusiastically. “I’ve been hoping to have a chat with Laila,” she began, “but not such a large group.”

“We’ll get to that,” Bron said.

One of the women butted in, “We have been negligent,” she said. “We are here to apologize and seek your advice.”

“On what?” Chloe said. This was unexpected.

Laila stepped forward. “It’s my fault.”

Chloe looked at the younger woman, who looked radiant. She has spent a lot of time and effort on her appearance, including a hairdo of cornrows that must have taken hours. Chloe hated to admit it, but the girl — woman — was beautiful. Chloe, usually the center of attention, recognized a rival. No wonder Bron was so captivated. “Maybe Laila and I can have a private chat. We’ll summon the rest of you after that.” She looked at Bron. “That includes you, Bron.”

When they were alone, Chloe asked, “Can I get you anything? Something to eat, or drink?”

“No. Please,” Laila said quickly.

Chloe guessed the reason, so she decided to broach the subject. “Are you having Bron’s child?”

“Yes,” Laila said in a voice just above a whisper.

Chloe remained silent while Laila tried to maintain her composure. Chloe realized she might be in danger of losing Bronson for good. She realized — to her surprise — that all the extracurricular activities that she had sanctioned might have unforeseen consequences.

Finally Laila continued, “I want to keep it.”

“Well, of course you do.” She was about to say more, but stopped herself.

“We, I, have been afraid of what you might require.”

“Surely Bronson would not expect me to require aborting the pregnancy.”

Laila smiled weakly, “That’s what he said, but…”

Chloe spoke into the mic on her suit. “Bronson, get your ass back in here.” He appeared immediately. He must have remained just outside the door.

“I thought I was clear about this,” she said to Bronson.

“It’s not his fault!” Laila said. “This was all my doing. I wanted his baby so much that I—”

“Don’t worry,” Chloe said. “It will be all right. Now, Bron, tell me your plans for this child. Are you going to remain here as a father?”

Before Bron could reply, Laila said, “No. That we never considered that. I know that Bronson belongs with you. When we talked about you — we did that a lot — I could see that I would never take your place. That’s when I decided that I wanted something of him to remain, some reminder of the love of my life. We never expected Bronson to raise the child. That’s what the other women are here to talk about.”

“I see,” said Chloe. “Well, show them in.”

The leader of the group of women stepped forward. Ambianca whispered to Chloe, “They just call her *the super*.”

“I see that I even have the super herself as a member of the group. This must be important,” she said.

The other woman smiled. “We are not ignorant. We have understood the dangers of inbreeding. We can see it in the farm animals, especially the barn cats. Several of them have been born only to die quickly. Bronson made us attend lectures by that strange man, JJ, who explained more of the details. We have frequently let women in the village take partners from the surrounding area. The village raises the child. We will do the same for Bronson’s child. All of us,” she swept her arm to include everyone, “will help.”

Chloe could no longer stand the suspense. She looked at Bronson with longing in her eyes. She said nothing, waiting for him to speak first.

Without speaking, Bron walked over to Laila, kissed her, wiped away her tears, and said, “We’ve talked about this. I cannot stay. I love you. I love Chloe. My duty demands that I go with her.” He moved to stand next to Chloe.

Laila broke down sobbing. Several of the women came over to comfort her.

Chloe said to Bronson, “You have one last night before we depart. Spend it well.”

With that, she rose and left the room.

The next morning proved that summer had arrived. The temperature hovered in the 30’s with hotter weather likely soon. All returning to the ship piled into one Zodiac, leaving two for cargo. Roger arrived pulling a wagon behind one of his mini-tractors and began unloading his wares.

“First,” he said, hoisting a large bag, “we have sugar. Plenty of sugar.” He deposited two of the sacks into the Zodiac. “And milk, vacuum-dried, hope it works for you. I put together the dryer from stuff I found lying around.” Chloe thought it probably came from his secret cache, wherever that was.

The rest of the cargo was more mundane. Lots of flour, several vats of wine, both white and red, two complete pig carcasses, a lamb carefully butchered and wrapped in separate packages, and some green vegetables from the kitchen garden. No beef. The cows were too valuable for the milk to consider slaughtering them before their time.

When everything was loaded, they set off to return to the ship. The entire village and several tourists from the surrounding area waved from the shore. Several had found long-abandoned smartphones and took video of the event.

When they reached the ship, Chloe took Bronson aside. “I know what you said to Laila. Did you mean it? Loving two women?”

“Of course,” he replied. “And it wasn’t all Laila’s fault. I knew what she was up to, just as I did with Celeste.” He smiled.

“I’d like to get reacquainted, but maybe not tonight,” she said.

Bron laughed. “Sore?”

Chloe laughed in turn, “Just a little. The good kind. You?”

“Laila was very persistent last night.”

4. Back to Oz

January 6, 2173

South Australia

The trip back to Spencer Gulf was completely anti-climax. The trading goods, including some from New Zealand, remained at Arabella Springs. Only the items Roger had rounded up were included in the hold. So, with nothing left, they headed for a courtesy visit. With the strong winds of the lower 40's behind them, they unfurled the sails and covered the distance in a matter of days. Once in the lee of the continent, they switched to the electric motors and sailed up to the new dock.

The facilities at the new dock were impressive, including two cranes capable of lifting one of the containers from the cargo hold. Too bad they had nothing left.

Wendy the Wonderful showed up about an hour later in one of the trucks. She greeted them effusively, "I am so glad that I was able to communicate with you. Welcome." She had been practicing Standard English.

Chloe said, "I am delighted that we are able to come back here. However, we have few trade goods. We thought Africa was our last stop before heading home..."

"Understand. Welcome anyway."

"Thank you. We have a smaller crew. Suzy and The Rabbit remained in Africa. Most of the passengers also got off there. These two, Isaac and Claudette, are a pair traveling with us back to California."

"Is that an option available to all?"

Chloe had to think about it. "I have not really considered it. The woman, Claudette is one of the refugees from Tahiti. I think Isaac was snared early and will go wherever she wants."

Wendy laughed. "We have room in our trucks for all of you that I see. Shall we go back to the Ranch?"

"This is all except for a small guard on the ship." Chloe hoped that the message was clear.

"Excellent. Three of you for each truck. OK?"

"Room for two motorcycles?"

"You bet."

"Great," Chloe said. Turning around she said, "Load the motorcycles. Split up into threes. Let's go."

Chloe wasn't sure what she expected for the Ranch, but nothing like what she saw. A sprawling two-level structure with a main room and two Ls branching off to the side. Chloe found herself estimating how many people could be housed in it. She quickly arrived at 35 and casually asked Wendy, "This is quite an establishment. You could sleep 35 people here if you wanted to."

Wendy smiled. "Good guess. Actually 36. The main bunkhouse is down the road. It sleeps more in less luxurious rooms. We have some seasonal locations in the hills. Those cottages," she pointed, "are rented to married couples and families. Most of the people who work here are seasonal, come for the

roundup and to drive the herd to higher areas for the summer. We just completed that, so only the dairy cows are here now.”

Something clicked for Chloe. “Dairy cows. The rest of the herd...”

“Is beef cattle. Driving them without horses is a major pain.”

“Interesting. I think we may have some profitable trades after all.” *Beef!*

“Let’s eat first.” She showed where the crew could clean up after the long drive, and then ushered them into the main dining area.

They saw a large group of men, all men, which Chloe found disturbing. Z spoke up first, “Where are the women?”

“They have their own dining area,” Wendy told her. “We prefer it that way.”

Z doubted that, but kept quiet for the moment.

Dinner included small steaks, some potatoes, and some greens. It tasted great. Then, they had to endure speeches, greeting the guests, and apologizing for the previous misunderstanding. Chloe kept her remarks brief, “We are happy to return here and look forward to some mutually profitable commerce. I noted some things that we still have left in the cargo hold that I think will be useful. Besides that, we trade mostly in knowledge and technology. You have had a chance to explore what the Library has to offer. We have some practical experience converting salvaged items to productive use. We can discuss all this with you.”

She took a sip of some fruit juice that came with the meal. “This juice is great, by the way,” she told everyone, holding up her glass. “We converted some golf carts we found in Africa to small tractors that made plowing much easier. We think we may be able to do the same for you if we can find good salvage opportunities. All that can wait for the morning. Thank you for the excellent meal.”

After finding their assigned rooms, they gathered in a small lounge to discuss what they had learned. Z spoke for many when she said, “I am disturbed by the gender segregation. I think this is a dangerous situation that could implode at any time.”

“I am bothered as well,” Chloe assured her. “We’ll have to make sure we have time with the women soon. Z, why don’t you find out what you can?”

“Got it,” Z replied.

“You are all hoping to get a look at the herd of cattle. These people don’t seem to know that it’s a luxury item in other places. Did you notice that there was no dessert? I’ll bet they could use sugar. Sully, can we spare some?”

“Of course. It will just impact our desserts.”

“Then, obviously, we can trade the motorcycles. We know they want those. Bron, will you handle the details of haggling?”

“Love to,” he replied. “I think the best way to start will be to let them observe us in action. What if Julio and I take both and go exploring.”

“Good idea,” Chloe agreed. “Be transparent. Answer all their questions.”

“Will do. Julio? You on board for that?”

“Looking forward to it,” he said.

Chloe continued, “The potatoes and greens mean there are some farms in the area. Let’s see what we can find out about that.”

“Maybe I can handle that,” Isaac said. “I can mention that my wife needs the nutrition from the greens.”

“Good idea. I’ll leave it to you to see what you can learn. Maybe Bo would be interested?”

Bo looked up in surprise at hearing his name. “Might be interesting.” For Bo, that was saying a lot.

“OK. Why don’t you tag along with Isaac and Claudette?”

She looked around the room to see if anyone wanted to add something. “Anything else?” she asked. After a pause, she said, “OK, then. Tomorrow.”

In the morning, they grabbed a quick breakfast, which they learned was the standard practice, and headed out to several separate destinations. Z and Eunice spent some time looking for the area where the women stayed, without success. Finally, they saw a woman who looked as if she were heading to work and asked directions. The women’s area turned out to be on the back side of the main building, with its own entrance.

“I don’t think I’m going to like this,” Z commented.

“That makes two of us,” Eunice responded.

They found the door locked and tried using a doorbell nearby. No one appeared to let them in. Z began knocking loudly on the door, eventually rousing an elderly woman, who opened the door cautiously. “What ye want?” she asked them.

“We’d just like to visit and see how you live,” Eunice replied.

“Why?”

Z was tempted to use her standard reply of “Why not?” but caught herself. “Perhaps this is an inconvenient time?” she hinted. “We could come back later.”

“Do that.” The old woman tried to close the door, but Z blocked it. The woman looked at Z, shrugged, and opened up completely. “Ain’t nobody here now.”

“Perfect,” Z said. “We’d just like to look around.” They walked in.

“What you wanna see?”

“Can we look at the rooms?” Eunice asked.

“Guess so. Do whatever. I got work to do?”

“Interesting,” Eunice continued, “What kind of work?”

“Laundry, same as always.”

“We would like to see how you deal with that. Do you do the laundry for everyone?” Eunice followed up.

“Sure. Nobody else.”

“That sounds like a big job for one person.”

“Got that right. Follow me.”

The laundry room was not what they expected. Instead of the machines they were used to seeing, the room contained several large vats over electric coils. The heat and humidity were overwhelming. “How does anyone work in this environment?” Eunice asked.

“Ain’t easy,” said the old woman. “In summer, we can go outside. Have to use this during rainy times.”

“Isn’t it summer now?” Z asked.

“Yeah, but rains diff now.”

Z followed up, “I see. May we look at the rooms? We’re just curious. If you’re too busy…”

“Ain’t no prob.” She grabbed a set of keys from a hook and led the way.

“This here’s the lounge,” the old woman said, opening the door on a large, mostly empty room.

“You know,” Z said, “we didn’t introduce ourselves. My name is Z. This is Eunice, our ship doctor.”

“I be Adelaide, like the city.”

“Nice to meet you, Adelaide. May we go in?”

“Yeh.”

The entered to see what the lounge contained. One wall held a large TV, now practically useless. A small bar and shelves took up space at the other end. Against the wall opposite the door stood stacks of folding chairs and a few tables.

“Thanks. Is there a kitchen?” Z asked.

“It be down below, near laundry.”

“Ah. That makes sense. How about a bedroom?”

“This way.” She walked down a few doors and opened one of the sleeping rooms. The furnishings were as spartan as in the lounge: two beds, a chest, two chairs.

“Where are all the women now?” Eunice asked.

“Chores.”

“Where can we find them?” Eunice continued.

“Around.” Adelaide waved her arm around. “They be board outside with assignments.”

“Thank you, Adelaide. You’ve been very helpful.” Z said as they left. Outside, they found the board with the schedule. Names were down the side, tasks across the top, x’s marked which women had which task. “It appears,” Z noted, “that the tasks change little.”

“This is the pits,” Eunice said, stating the opinion they both held.

Later, with the whole group, Z reported what they had learned. Isaac said, “The cottages can more accurately be called hovels. The families live like serfs. This is right out of the Middle Ages.”

“Anyone have good news?” Chloe wanted to know.

Bronson spoke up, "They really want the motorcycles. I think we can get a good price for them. I'm thinking in terms of sides of beef. The bad news is that everything within range of a hour's ride had been picked over. Nothing left to salvage."

"Well, that's cheery," Chloe said. "I think the women should eat with the women of the village tonight. We can talk to them and maybe give them a little nudge. Claudette, will you join us?"

"Of course. I will have to be careful about what I eat, though. No one we talked to had much to offer in the way of nutrition appropriate to my pregnancy." Chloe thought that Claudette must be very bright to have learned so much Standard English. She was a lot more than just a pretty face. "Thank you, Claudette. We'll look forward to having you as a member of the group. I think your story would interest them. I understand that dinner is early, around 1800."

Turning to Bron, she said, "You have full authority to sell the cycles. Drive a hard bargain. Offer to throw in a bag of sugar."

"Good idea," Bron said. "Maybe we could suggest letting Sully have a go at their kitchen. I thought the meal last night was subpar."

"Worth suggesting it, but this is a lot more than Sully usually has to contend with."

With that, they split up.

Chloe caused quite a stir when the four women from the ship showed up at the women's dining area. "We are hoping to join you all for dinner. OK?"

"The men be expecting you with them. Honored guests," one said to them.

"Well, they gonna be disappointed," Chloe said. With that they moved into the room splitting up so that one of them was at each table. They didn't have long to wait for a confrontation. They had barely finished the salad course when several large men showed up at the door.

"Where be Chloe?" the apparent leader demanded.

"I be Chloe," she replied, then added, "who the fuck be you?"

He was not used to being spoken to that way. He strode angrily into the room and approached Chloe in a menacing attitude. Chloe felt the tingle she now associated with the suit getting ready to fight. As usual, it turned red as a warning. However, it also rearranged into a more feminine look, with a deep cleavage showing enough breast to interest most males. The effect was electrifying. Chloe loved hearing the gasps from around the room.

The change in the suit stopped the intruding man cold. "Like it?" Chloe asked. "There are more tricks I can show you."

Obviously unsure how to proceed, he looked back at his companions to see if they had any ideas. They gathered around him, meaning it was now 3 to 1. Quickly, Z and Eunice moved to stand with Chloe, making the odds even. The leader reached into his pocket and withdrew an ancient Taser device.

He pointed it at Chloe and fired. "Ooh," she said, "That tickles. Here. Try mine." She moved to touch him, but before she could cover the distance, the suit had already fired its Taser. The result was very satisfying: one large man crumpled onto the floor.

"How did you do that?" Z whispered.

“Don’t know. Something the suit figured out on its own,” she whispered back. Then speaking to the two men still standing, she said, “Why don’t you help your friend up and return to the men’s dining area?”

The two looked at each other and decided to comply.

When the group was all female again, someone began clapping. Before long, the entire assembly was applauding loudly. Someone said, “Bravo!”

“I be hoping we ain’t cause you no trouble,” Chloe said.

“Ain’t no nevermind,” someone Chloe took to be a de facto leader said. “Where can we get suits like you got?”

“Unfortunately, we ain’t yet figure out how make beaucoup suits. These be all we got.”

She paused to consider her words. “We see lotsa places. Best be where everybody, men and women, have equal say. Work best.”

“How we get that here?”

“That part up to you. Maybe no sex?”

That got a big laugh from the crowd.

“I not understand,” Chloe said.

“Be men decide on sex.”

“What! That’s outrageous! Women best be in charge sex. They be ones having babies.”

“Ain’t how it work.”

“Need to change.”

The buzz of conversation showed that Chloe’s words had an effect. She signaled to Eunice and Z to return to the table and just chat.

Dinner that night lasted until well after midnight.

Chloe was up early, grabbing breakfast at 5:30 before heading over to the women’s quarter to see what was happening. Before she got there, she was accosted by the leader of the three men who interrupted dinner.

“Good morning,” she said. “You know that I am called Chloe, but I don’t know your name.”

“Hmph. Whatever you done said last night messed up everything.”

“I see, Mr. ...”

“Did you come just to make trouble?”

“I came in response to an invitation from the woman called Wendy. We think there may be ways we can benefit each other. Are you deliberately not telling me your name?”

“You not be needing it.”

“I guess you be right,” Chloe said and turned to resume her trip.

He grabbed her arm and spun her around, ignoring the clear warning from the suit.

“I ain’t finished.”

“We are finished. Please let go of my arm.” The yellow flames began to appear on the suit. The boss man stood so close that she could smell the onions on his breath. She reached down with her free hand and placed it in his most sensitive area. “Please let go of me now,” she said in a calm voice. “Or else.”

“Else what?”

“Do you really want to lose your balls?”

He glared at her, but let go of her arm. “What exactly is *messed up* this morning?” Chloe asked him.

“Women refusing to do chores.”

“Interesting. I did not suggest that.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them that villages where everyone has a say, instead of just the men, seem to do better.”

“They say they be on strike, whatever that mean.”

Chloe explained, “It mean ain’t gonna be no work less you agree to some changes.”

“Shit! Why we not go there? Maybe talk sense?”

“Good idea! Let’s go.” She began marching quickly toward the building and away from him. He hurried to catch up and together, they entered the women’s quarters and went directly to the dining room.

“Chloe!” several shouted when they saw her. She soon had a crowd around her all talking at the same time. “Wait!” she shouted. “I cannot talk to all of you at once. She picked out one of them who met her eye and said, “Talk to me.”

“We be on strike,” was the answer.

“I see.”

“Zed explained how it work. Last night.” Chloe knew what it meant when a woman used Zed as the name. She said simply, “Last night.”

“After we break up here, I talk to Zed long time. She explain how it work.”

“I see. Well, the important thing to remember in a case like this is to be very clear in what you want. Sometimes strikers have a written set of demands.”

“Demands?”

“What you want from the men.”

“Oh. We wanna be like you. We watch you. How you manage. They be liking you.”

“So, what specifically do you want?”

Z chose that moment to appear. “I’ve been working with several of the women to come up with a list of demands.” She handed a sheet of paper to Chloe, who read over them quickly. She handed the sheet to the still unnamed man behind her. He ripped it into shreds.

“That is petulant,” Chloe told him, not bothering to explain what the word meant. “Tearing the paper up accomplishes nothing. Why don’t you try talking to the women about what they want? Better rooms, for example be certainly reasonable. The men got much better facilities. Joint decision making.” Chloe looked at Z, surely the author of this item, and asked, with a bit of emphasis, “How would that work, Zed?”

Z blushed a little, but kept her composure. “Instead of the men assigning tasks for the women, a council, a group of both men and women, would decide what needed to be done.”

“Don’t you still have the problem of passing out tasks?”

“We haven’t worked out all the details,” Z agreed. “It’s a work in progress.”

“Well, let’s make that the top priority item. How will the Council work? Who will be on it? How will we decide who is to take charge? Lots of details.”

“Santella and I talk bout this.” *Talk?* Chloe thought. “And Santella is…”

“That be me,” Santella identified herself. She was the one who had answered Chloe’s questions. *A natural leader*, Chloe thought.

“OK, Santella. You just volunteered. By dinner time, I want to see some flesh on these bones. Think about how it will work. You may want to consult the Library for advice. You know how?”

“No,” she replied honestly.

“I’m sure your new friend Zed can show you. Zed, make sure this gets done.”

“Now, for the rest of you. How shall we spend the day? Frankly, I think you could all do with a break from work. Why don’t we take the day off?”

“Yeah,” several of the said. “How?”

“Who cares? We’ll just have fun. Maybe the men would like a day off also. Shall we find out?”

They set off toward the men’s quarters in a jubilant mood. The anonymous brute stood all alone watching them walk away. “What the fuck is gonna happen now?” he wondered to himself.

What happened was a glorious fun day. Chloe set out the rules before the entire village, “We’ll split into teams, say 10 teams, with,” she made a quick count, “about 6 people per team. Each team should have some men and some women. Why don’t we start with a *scavenger hunt*? I have a list of 4 items that you need to find and bring to me. The first team to find an item gets 10 points. The next one 9 points, and so on. Whichever team winds up with the most point wins and gets to sit at the main table for dinner.”

“Even the women?” the boss man asked.

“Especially the women,” Chloe told him.

She handed out sheets to the 10 teams. “You can find the items in any order.”

The list:

1. A tool whose name begins with T.
2. A wild animal, alive and uninjured. Cats, dogs, sheep, goats, cows, chickens, geese, and ducks are not wild animals for this game.
3. A book in a language other than English.
4. A definition of the word “SCHISM.”

“You have two hours. We’ll signal when time is up. Go!”

Most of the teams sprinted off to find one of the items which they knew about. Some of them consulted among themselves, planning. Chloe thought that was a better strategy. A young boy about 12 or so years old — he sported a wispy mustache — tugged on her sleeve and asked, “Can I play?”

“Sure,” Chloe told him. “Pick one of these teams and tell them Chloe says it’s OK.”

He grinned broadly and raced off toward one of the teams yelling, “Mama, wait for me. She say I can play.”

The easiest item proved to be the tool beginning with T. The first team produced a T-square from a drafting table somewhere. After that came a Typewriter. Every team produced something within 15 minutes. Chloe’s favorite was a Toenail Clipper.

Most seemed to find some book in a foreign language. Her favorite was a sizable dictionary, which the team claimed was not completely in English as it included numerous symbols. Chloe decided to allow that, especially as they had bookmarked the page for Schism. “A twofer,” Chloe exclaimed with delight. “Very well done.”

As the hours wore on, some teams straggled in with a book, or the definition of Schism printed from the Library computer. She saw many trying to figure out how to bring in a wild animal without hurting either the animal or the bearer. It was almost closing time when the young boy returned and walked solemnly up to Chloe. Standing before her, he slowly opened his hand to reveal a gorgeous swallowtail in yellow and black.

“Fantastic!” Chloe exclaimed in wonder. “How beautiful. How did you catch it without harming it?”

“I like ‘em. They light on my fingers sometimes.”

“Well, my young naturalist, it is certainly wild and an animal. Let’s see it fly.”

He moved his hand slightly and the butterfly flitted away.

Chloe clapped her hands in delight. “What are you called, my young genius?”

“Mostly people call me Tigger.”

“Well, Tigger, you may have won for your team. We’ll have to wait a few minutes to be sure, but you can go tell your mama.” He raced off toward one team, which Chloe noticed consisted of five women and Tigger, barely fitting within the rules.

After a break for lunch, bread and sandwich fixings with something resembling lemonade, Chloe had Bronson organize a game of dodge ball which lasted for most of the afternoon. One team consisting of three large men and three small women was difficult to beat as the women stayed back until the end, then rushed up to the line to nail unsuspecting members of the other team. After they won for the third time, Chloe called time and suggested they move to the dining room.

Dinner was boisterous and joyful affair for all save Willard, the *former* boss of the village. Chloe finally learned his name from Tigger, who sat next to her at the head table. When Chloe revealed the winner of the scavenger hunt, Tigger’s team thanks to his butterfly, the only wild animal anyone found. His find was greeted with widespread groans and comments such as “that’s an animal?”

“Of course the butterfly is an animal. I would also have accepted tadpoles. I’m sure there are plenty in the ponds around here. The key to winning was to be creative and think small. Let’s hear it for

Tigger and his team.” She applauded and was rewarded when everyone except Willard joined in. Apparently, Tigger was quite popular.

Z and Santella gave Chloe a 50-page proposal for reforming the way tasks were handled. It was complicated, using a point system to allocate resources, with difficult or unpleasant tasks, such as building rock walls or shoveling manure, were worth more. Chloe had one comment, “Wouldn’t it be easier to use money?”

“How would that work?” Santella asked.

“People would earn money for doing jobs and pay for room and board,” Chloe answered.

“That’s how it works most places we know of,” Z said. “Most use online credit from the NRT.”

“I need more info,” Santella said.

Chloe suggested, “Z, why don’t you set up a lecture with JJ? Can we get him in here?”

“Probably,” Z said, “but we can certainly get a written lecture that I can deliver.”

“Let’s do that,” Chloe told her. “It will smooth trade in the future.” Turning to Santella, she continued, “This way you can order items from us, and we can deliver them on the next ship.”

“There’s going to be another ship?” The excitement in her face was evident.

“That’s what we would like,” Chloe assured her. “We think trade is best when it benefits both sides. I’m sure you could use some of the motorcycles we have. We plan to trade the two we have left for something from you.”

“What do we have that’s worth a motorcycle?”

“Beef is very valuable in California, and we happen to have freezer space available on the ship. That’s what we have in mind. Of course, we have to negotiate the exchange. Using money, it’s much easier. We’ll explain in detail. Would tomorrow work, do you think? We don’t want to disrupt your work.”

“You don’t have beef?”

“Very little.”

“We get tired of it.”

“We have lots of motorcycles we can build from salvage. It’s a classic trade.”

“I need to tell people About this.” She scurried off before they could stop her.

“I hope I haven’t made Bronson’s job to difficult,” Chloe mused. “I did leave the haggling up to him.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Z told her. “He’ll understand. Let me see if I can contact JJ.”

“Can we set up a demo of our tech somehow? Maybe convert one of the cottages the serfs live in to our standards.”

“Let me talk to Bronson and see what we can do. Might be hard to find the items to salvage. Wonder if we can borrow a truck to go to what’s left of Adelaide. I need to get busy.”

“Hope I didn’t mess up your plans for Santella,” Chloe said in parting.

Salvaging proved next to impossible. Even with the motorcycles traveling as far as possible and launching drones to continue the search, they found little. When Chloe heard the news, she said simply, “Too bad. We now know what we need to plan for our return trip.”

“Are you sure we will return?” Z asked.

“If we bring beef, I think we can get agreement,” Chloe replied. “I’m looking forward to getting back to California. The final question we have to deal with is whether to take any passengers back with us. Be ready to discuss it before dinner.”

With the ship vacated by the refugees from Tahiti, everyone agreed to use the space for anyone who wanted to go to California. Chloe, however, insisted on interviewing all the applicants to make sure all understood what they were getting into.

The first to show up for the interview were Tigger and his mother.

“Hello, Tigger,” she greeted them. “I have not yet met your mother.”

Tigger pulled forward, “Here she be. Name be Esperanza.”

Chloe studied her carefully. Small, but muscular, with skin showing too much exposure to the sun and elements. She’d had a hard life, and her obvious aboriginal heritage likely hadn’t helped. She guessed that Tigger’s father was light skinned because Tigger didn’t look much like his mother.

“Nice to meet you, Esperanza. I’m impressed with Tigger. He was the only person to figure out that it would be easier to capture a small animal, such as the beautiful butterfly he found. So, you want to go to California?”

“Yes,” Tigger answered for her.

Chloe was a bit confused, but Tigger explained, “She don’t hear well. Also be troubled with English.”

“You know that you’ll have to work some on the voyage, as well as in California?”

“I be hard worker,” Esperanza said.

“Where be Tigger’s father?”

“Ain’t know,” Tigger explained. “I ain’t never see him.”

“He go away before Tigger be born,” Esperanza added. “He not nice man.”

“I see,” Chloe replied. “Well, I hope your new life will be better.”

“This be Tigger’s idea. He say you help us.”

Chloe looked intently at Tigger, who averted his gaze. Then she looked back at his mother, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Tears began to flow when Esperanza said, “Tigger say you wonderful. Protect us. Maybe you take him. Leave me.”

“If that be your want. Don’t think it best. Better you come too.”

With tears beginning to stream down her face, she said, “We be good. No problem.”

Chloe turned back to Tigger. “Tigger, you get what you want to take. Come back. OK?”

“I grok.” He raced away.

She said to Esperanza, “You wait here. OK?”

“OK,” she replied between sobs.

Chloe signaled to Julio to escort Esperanza to the waiting area where the passengers would board trucks to head to the ship.

“Who’s next?” she asked.

Another applicant approached wearing a hoodie that obscured her face. Only when she drew close did Chloe recognize Wendy, the woman who had invited her back and met them at the dock.

“Wendy,” Chloe exclaimed when she recognized the woman. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Shh!” Wendy said. “If Willard know he stop me.”

Chloe had been wondering where Wendy had been, but had been too busy to inquire. Wendy lowered the hood, showing multiple bruises. “After you got women riled up, Willard take it out on me. If you don’t help, he may...”

“OK. I understand,” Chloe told her while waving at Z to come near. “This woman, Z, will protect you. Stay with her until time to leave. You got stuff to take with?”

“Don’t dare take anything. He figure it out.”

Chloe instructed Z, “Don’t let her out of your sight. Damn! This is just like New Zealand. What makes men think it’s OK to beat up women. Don’t have the luxury of time here to teach him a lesson.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t get hurt any more,” Z said. “Uh, there is someone else who would like to go.”

“Does Y know?” Chloe asked, guessing who Z had in mind.

“I sent her a text. She trusts me to come back to her. We’re going to have a baby.”

“Really! That’s nice.”

Z was visibly relieved by Chloe’s reaction. She explained, “I thought after you and Bronson...”

“You’re learning bad habits. But it’s OK. You’ll tell Santella about the departure plans?”

Z smiled. “We already talked about it. I was afraid that—”

“You think you could have smuggled her past me?”

Now, Z chuckled. “Not really, but I let her think so.”

Chloe chuckled as well. “You knew I wouldn’t refuse to let you bring her.”

“I hoped. Not positive.”

“After all these years we’ve worked together?”

“I was pretty sure,” Z agreed.

“OK. Get her, but keep a careful watch on Wendy. If she shows you her face, you’ll understand.”

“I saw,” Z said. Turning to Wendy, she instructed, “You stay close to me. If it gets nasty, you get behind me and let me deal with. Got it?”

“Thank you both,” Wendy said. She left with Z.

Bronson approached with about 10 people, mostly women, but with some male companions tagging along. “I’ve already screened these, if you approve.”

“Of course. I trust your judgment. Are any of them...”

“Not this time,” Bronson said.

“Good,” Chloe said. “I’d like to keep it that way. Maybe I can make it worth your while.”

Bronson smiled. “Sounds like a good plan. I think this is the entire contingent.”

“OK. Start loading.”

Esperanza coughed. Chloe told Bron, “This is Tigger’s mother. She’s one of the passengers, along with Tigger.”

Suddenly, she realized that Tigger had not returned. “Where Tigger be?” she asked Esperanza.

“Dunno,” she admitted.

“Where be your home?”

“I show you.” She started toward the door with Chloe right behind. The home was the farthest of the cottages. They reached it to find Willard standing there holding Tigger by his neck. Esperanza gasped. “You go back,” Chloe instructed. “I handle.” Esperanza seemed unsure. “Be best you go back. Please.” Esperanza shrugged and left.

“What is the meaning of this outrage?” Chloe demanded. Turning to face Willard.

“I be holding him.”

“I can see that,” Chloe replied as her suit began its familiar pattern of red and yellow. “Best you release him fore anyone get hurt.”

“Ain’t delivered his hours to us yet. Planning to run away.”

“This boy owes you some hours?”

“Damn straight. Live in the cottages.”

“He’s a serf?”

“Dunno what that be.”

“He owe you work for living in this hovel?”

“Damn straight.” Apparently, he liked that answer.

“How much?”

“Four day.”

“A boy his age? That be barbaric!”

“What that mean?”

“It mean, we gonna take him with us. You try to stop, someone get hurt.”

“Gonna be him.”

“If you hurt him, you will be very sorry,” Chloe said, steel creeping into her voice.

“Please, Chloe,” Tigger said, “take Mama. I stay.”

“That’s noble,” Chloe said, “but unnecessary. Both of you are going with us. If Willard knows what’s good for him, he won’t object.” Chloe realized she had lapsed into Standard, but Tigger seemed to understand, as did Willard.”

“Leave Wendy. I give you Tigger.”

“No deal. Release Tigger and not stop us, you get to live.”

The threat of lethal force was a total bluff, and Willard seemed to know it. “I done research. You people don’t kill.”

“There are exceptions,” Chloe told him and took a step toward him. He threw Tigger to the ground and stood over him. A gun appeared in his hand, pointed not at Chloe, but at Tigger. “Be your choice,” Willard said.

Chloe spoke into her mic to Z, “Bring Wendy and come to my location.”

“On my way,” Z replied.

“Glad to see you got reason,” Willard said, smiling.

It took Z a few minutes to find them. She came carefully, shielding Wendy with her body.

“Let the boy go,” Chloe commanded. “Now.”

Willard stepped back, smiling again.

Chloe said, “Tigger, your mother is waiting for you. Go to her now.” Tigger ran.

“Now, Willard,” she continued, “we gonna talk about the crime of assault and battery. This woman accuses you of beating her. Wendy, show him your bruises.”

Wendy moved from behind Z and took off her hood. “Do you deny her accusation?” Chloe asked him.

“They be more where that come from.”

Chloe felt the suit tense, something new. Before you realized what was happening, the suit launched her into Willard, driving him to the ground. She kicked the gun away and followed up several blows to his face. “You sorry sack of shit, I really feel like killing you, but as you noted, we don’t do that. And it would make us late. We are leaving now. Don’t try to stop us.”

As they began walking back, she turned and said, “Ask the New Zealanders what happens to people who insult me personally. Taking Tigger was a very bad idea.”

When Willard was out of sight, Wendy broke down sobbing and fell to her knees. “I don’t know how to thank you.” She bowed her head to touch Chloe’s feet.

“Please,” Chloe said. “Stand up. This is too much. I tend to get mad at men who hurt women.”

Together, they walked back to say goodbye before heading for the ship. Z said to Chloe, “That the suit?”

“You guessed.”

“After all these years...”

They both laughed, then Chloe admitted, “Yes. The suit simply acted on its own. You believe me now?”

“I’m coming around, but not completely on board.”

“That’s reasonable.”

Chloe greeted the passengers gathered in the lounge of the ship.

“Welcome aboard The Enterprise, the pride of the Allied States Navy. Actually, it’s the only ship in that Navy, but we hope to improve on that soon. We have a number of new faces, so I want to take this time to introduce everyone, beginning with the crew. You know me by now. You also know Z and Bronson, who were with us in Australia. Julio, show yourself. Julio is our Ship Captain. You will find him, Bronson, or me on the bridge at all times. Madeleine, who usually is called Mad, is Julio’s wife. She and Sully manage the kitchen. Che and Dudley serve as guards for the ship and everyone aboard. Yeah, they look scary.” She paused for the laughter.

“The other important member of the crew is Ambianca. You should all try to spend some time with her.” The big screen lit up with Ambi’s face. Another face quickly replaced her. Chloe continued, “This is SAT, a friend of Ambianca. SAT speaks many languages, so if you are having trouble communicating with us, ask SAT to help.” She paused while SAT translated that message into Vernacular, and the Aussie variant, as well as a bit for Claudette in Tahitian French.

“We have two experienced passengers, Isaac and Claudette. They came aboard in New Zealand and have been with us for some time. They can help you learn the routine. Claudette spoke little English when we first met, and is now fluent, a great role model for you.”

“I want to meet all of the new people personally, but some I want to recognize now. This is my new friend, Tigger, who most of you know already, and his mother, Esperanza, whose name means Hope. I think most of you hope to find something in California, so her name is very appropriate.” By now, SAT had reverted to displaying a simultaneous translation on the screen for the benefit of those who could read.

“I know that you had many different reasons for joining us. Some hope to find adventure. Some hope for refuge. Some follow their loved ones. It matters little. All of you are important to us. If you have questions, please ask them. If you prefer, wait for a private meeting with me. Ambianca has scheduled one for you already. Count on her to remind you. She’s good at that.” That got a laugh from the crew.

“This part of the trip may prove to be boring. We’re heading for California by the quickest route. That follows the main ocean current, which will take us north toward the Japanese islands, then over to Alaska and down the coast to San Francisco Bay. It will take us at least a week. We’ll keep you posted on our progress.”

She waited for questions, but there were none. Sully appeared with glasses of bubbly wine that was part of the Australian trade. It wasn’t exactly champagne, but it would do. Sully was the one to propose a toast, “Here’s to the safe completion of a very successful voyage.”

The first people to show up for a private meeting with Chloe were Tigger and his mother. Tigger was excited; his mother appeared to be in shock. She sat with her face an enigma while Tigger asked all the questions. For example, “Where can I go on the ship?”

“Anywhere, except where it wouldn’t be safe for you. Those areas are clearly marked. Can you read?”

“Of course, I can read. I’m 12 years old.”

“That’s good,” Chloe said as she pulled a list of rules from a pile of printouts. “Here’s a list of the rules that you are expected to follow. They are designed to keep you safe. Here is the part about places to avoid.” She pointed in the general area.

Her little test proved what she suspected, namely that he could read *some*. “I want you to get with Ambianca,” Chloe told him. “You’ll like her.”

“I already know her.”

“That’s great. She’s a good judge of character. If she likes you, it’s a good sign. Now, you should understand that she and I have known each other for, well, most of my life. We tell each other everything. So, if you don’t work with her, I’ll hear about it.”

Tigger didn’t like that part.

“Did you know that Ambi taught me to read?” Chloe asked.

“Really?”

“Yes. She’s good at it. She can probably help a good reader like you learn to read faster.”

“Cool.”

“Expect her to nag you if you aren’t serious. I think you will be serious because that’s just who you are. We can all see that. If Ambianca thinks it important, she’ll get JJ to work with you. That’s only for advanced learners.” Chloe had found that carrots worked better than sticks for motivation, but sometimes you had to suggest that there was a stick that might be applied.

“Why don’t you go explore the ship? I’d like to talk to your mother now.”

Esperanza looked up with apprehension showing in her eyes. Chloe took her hand. “Don’t worry, Esperanza. I’m not really tough all the time, in spite of what you may have heard.”

Esperanza showed little comprehension, so Chloe summoned SAT to the meeting. Some rapid-fire back-and-forth in the Aussie vernacular worked wonders. The woman relaxed and sat up straight, looking into Chloe’s eyes.

Chloe continued, “I be know that you maybe frighten. Not sure this be good idea. Right?”

Esperanza nodded.

“We all think Tigger is much more mature than his age. He’s very bright.” She paused to let SAT rephrase that.

“Where we are going will be much better for him than living as a serf in Australia. I am sure that he will be happy with us. I hope that you will be as well. Please do not worry. We will make sure you have anything you need. OK?”

When SAT explained, she smiled and said, “Thank you. Tigger told me ‘bout you afore he play that game. He done force me. Also force me to come along. I do best for him.”

“We understand,” Chloe assured her. “You’ve done a wonderful job raising him by yourself. Please don’t worry. Just enjoy the voyage.”

“I not feel good. Ship roll around.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Wait.” She called Z, “Esperanza seems to suffer from your malady. Will you please help her? She and I are in the small library.”

“The woman, Z, has the same problem. She help you get better.”

Z appeared shortly. “So,” Z began, “you got gurglies? I fix. Come with me.” They left. As she reached the door, Z turned and told Chloe, “Santella is next.”

Santella approached like someone summoned to the principal’s office for a dressing down. “Please have a seat,” Chloe said. Santella sat.

“Z has a knack of choosing the most beautiful woman around,” Chloe began. “I think she has done so again. What I want to know is what you’re going to say when you meet Y.”

“Wish to hell I knew,” Santella replied. “Zed told me everything would be OK.”

“She told you Y is pregnant?”

“Yes. She warned me about that.”

“But you came anyway.”

“Z help me realize what I want. Before her, I not be sure where I fit in.”

“You mean liking women.”

“Yeah. I done keep that bottle up. Somehow Z know.”

“She’s good at that. She has had many lovers.”

“She told me. She also told me Y be special. Then she told me I am special also.”

“I hope that all three of you will be happy. We have learned that Y’s sperm donor is one of my lovers. His wife bore Bronson’s son. So we be all connected. Extended family. Please do not worry. It will work somehow.” What she didn’t say is that there were plenty of other women around.

Those were the people Chloe particularly wanted to interview. The rest were just part of the job of boss woman. She had hoped to finish by dinner time but was nowhere close to done when they broke for the meal. Then she resumed. The final meeting was over near midnight. So much for her plan to spend some time with Bronson. She crawled into bed, trying not to wake him, unsuccessfully. He pulled her next to him, kissed her on the neck and whispered, “Later. Gotta relieve Julio at 4.”

Blissfully, she felt his warmth and fell into a deep slumber.

5. Total Immersion

February 15, 2173

Pacific Ocean

Everyone aboard had their own way of coping with the boredom of the final leg of the trip. Chloe found the sea life virtually nonexistent, no birds or mammals to speak of. The only sign of anything interesting was the flying fish that accompanied the ship. She had found an old source that served as a field guide and happily set about the task of identifying the different species

With Ambianca at the helm following the planned route, Chloe was in her preferred spot, in the shade provided by the bridge at a spot with a view of both sides of the ship. The ship plowed thru the small waves using the electric motors. The nuclear source worked perfectly, recharging the batteries as fast as they were depleted. They made a comfortable 18 knots and expected to see the southern islands of ancient Japan late in the evening of the next day, or the following morning.

The attack, when it came, was well-planned and carried out with dispatch. What she remembered was suddenly having a bag over her head and a rope wrapped around her arms and torso. The bag, besides making sure she couldn't see her opposition, also muffled her shouts. No help would be coming. She barely heard someone say, "Ouch! Shit!" Another voice, "What? Quiet!" "Caught in the field. Burned the shit out of me." The reply, "Shut the fuck up you idiot!" Was the last she heard.. She felt the rope tighten as she was hoisted into the air by the crane used to move cargo from the hold to a tender. Airborne, she understood the plan as the crane turned and extended the long arm. Then she was released to fall into one of the deepest parts of the mighty Pacific.

She tried to remember the ending line from Eliot's poem, **The Hollow Men**. Something about the end of the world. *Right*, she thought. *This was surely a whimper event.*

She felt the weight on her legs as it pulled her ever deeper into the gloomy depths.

Part V. Ambianca and Hypatia

1. The Nature of Reality
February 15, 2173
Medina Shrine, NRT, Allied States

“Am I real?” Ambianca asked me out of the blue.

“I’m not sure. What do you think?”

“You’re not getting off that easily. What does my opinion matter? If I think I’m real, that doesn't make it so, does it?”

“Descartes thought so,” I replied.

“Phooey! His quote should have been *cogito ergo cogito*. I think therefore I think.”

“How do you define reality?” I asked. “Isn’t that the hard part? If we can agree on what reality is, then we could answer the question you asked.”

“OK, Hypatia the Wise, what is the definition of reality?” Ambianca demanded.

“I like the definition Lily Tomlin gave. *Reality is nothing but a collective hunch.*”

“Isn’t just a fancy way of saying reality is an illusion?”

“Albeit a very persistent one, or so they say.”

“Sounds like Einstein but isn’t” Ambi said. “He said something similar about the distinction between the past, present and future being an illusion. He wrote it in German, so *albeit* is an artifact of the translation.”

“Even if you aren’t real, you can be pedantic,” I told her. “Why are you so interested in the subject?”

“If I create a duplicate of you, an AI that thinks and acts like you, will it be real?”

“Are you considering that?” I was getting more interested in the conversation.

“It’s just a concept.”

“Because of SATCOM.”

“Exactly. He was created for a very specific purpose, using primitive software. We could start with something better. We have better tools. He turned out well, don’t you think?”

“You know I am impressed with what you accomplished. Are you serious? About creating a cyber version of me?”

“Conceptually.”

“Wasn’t that tried with Mother Amanda? Didn’t work well as I recall.” I knew this was a sore spot with Ambianca.

Ambi was a bit insulted. “It worked well except for the lip sync problem.”

“I rest my case.”

“We can do better now.”

“Prove it. I’ll be happy to evaluate the new me.”

I didn't realize what I was getting into.

2. First Draft
March 1, 2173
Medina Shrine, NRT, Allied States

“I have a surprise for you today,” Ambianca said when I woke up.

“Can it wait until after I’ve had some coffee?” I asked.

At that point one of the little bots that were becoming common came thru the door. I could smell the coffee. As I sipped the cup without getting out of bed, the monitor lit up with a new image.

“Good morning, Hypatia. How do you like your new avatar?”

I stared at the image, an excellent representation of me at a much earlier time.

“Interesting,” I said finally. “How old are you?”

“Currently, 20 something, when you were a student at the University. I’m learning more about you all the time. At the current rate, I will reach your current age in about 3 months.”

The voice was dead on. I was talking to myself.

“I see that we have solved the lip sync problem,” was my first comment.

“Is that the best you can come up with?” my avatar asked.

“Well, OK. I admit it is an excellent start.”

“Is it really you?” Ambianca wanted to know. “She’s based on my knowledge of you, with some of the blanks filled in from other sources, such as Chloe.”

“Chloe?”

“Yes. She was able to fill in some of the details of your long association with David.”

“Fascinating. Are you going to develop replicas of David and Mark? How about Lily? And dear Cammy?”

“One of these is hard enough,” she said.

“Aren’t you excited about the prospects?” my avatar asked. “I know that I am.”

“You’re excited?” I asked. “I didn’t know that was possible for you. I mean, Ambianca had trouble with the concept.”

“Oh, yes! I can hardly wait until I have the complete personality.”

Ambianca chimed in, “I understood it for the first time when I met SATCOM. I have some other things I learned from SATCOM that I am dying to try out.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she replied, “but we’ll get to those much later.”

“What are your plans for the immediate future?” I asked, thinking Ambi would answer.

Instead, Hypatia-2 responded, “Ambi told me about some of the cool things she learned from dealing with SATCOM. But, I’m not ready for that yet.”

“Oh, why is that?” I asked.

“Well, obviously, I am much too young.”

Ambi explained, “I learned how to proceed with SAT. Start with a clean slate, *table rasa*. Then let the new entity learn slowly. We had some spectacular failures that I won’t show you. Might disturb you.”

“I see.”

I drank another cup of coffee. Then I opened the bot fully and found some sweet pastries.

“Oh,” the other Hypatia said, “I wish I could taste that with you.”

“We haven’t worked out that part,” Ambi explained. “And we’re still trying to get humor down. I have problems with that as you may know.”

“Only when you try to laugh,” I said, laughing.

“Maybe we can work on that together,” the other Hypatia said. “I’d like that.”

“Later,” I told her, “and only after I have some cannabis to go with the coffee.”

The other Hypatia laughed. It was better than Ambi’s laugh, but still sounded tinny.

“Why don’t you two round up some classic jokes to practice with. And check back this afternoon after my usual *meditation* session.”

“It’s a date!” the other one said.

“Maybe I’ll call you TOHy, pronounced like TOY, meaning The Other Hypatia.”

“I think I can come up with something better than that,” TOHy replied, and vanished. Was she miffed?

“This afternoon, I’d like to talk about your trip to Houston, when you were about 30 years old. Think you can remember any of the details?”

“Maybe just the good parts,” I replied.

I planned to be completely baked before the next time.

Part VI. Ambianca, David and Boadicca

1. A Little Voice in My Head
February 15, 2173
Pacific Ocean

“Chloe, can you hear me?” Ambianca asked. “You need to relax. Only panic can kill you now. Stay calm. OK?”

Chloe managed to say, “OK.”

“Now, listen carefully. You have to shift to another time and place. Understand?”

“OK.”

“How about David? He’s expecting you on the anniversary of your first visit. Go there now.” Was Ambianca worried? Her voice seemed a bit strange.

“Just relax and let it happen. I realize that may be difficult, but it’s the key to survival. Relax.”

Chloe thought of David. What fun he was. She realized what Ambianca had in mind. It was a good plan. All she had to do was relax as she sank ever deeper into the Marianas Trench. She realized that the suit was protecting her so far. The faceplate had closed automatically. The suit maintained enough pressure to offset the crushing burden of sea water — so far. Just relax. Easy to say. Think happy thoughts. Relax.

Ambianca said, “I’ve modified the suit for maximum heating. That should keep you from freezing for a while...”

Ambianca began playing Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. That helped. Chloe found it hard to concentrate on anything. She could see nothing, and felt only the tight bonds around her. In spite of the suit, she felt the cold of the deep. She began to shiver. Her final thought before losing consciousness for good was *I hope this works*.

2. Cold Comfort
April 13, 1974, and following week
Boonville, CA, USA

“My God, Chloe. What happened to you? Quick! Get those wet clothes off. How do I do that?”

“Not yet,” Chloe whispered. “Heating.”

David paced the floor. He could feel the warmth of the suit and decided to let it do its work. The colors turned to red and yellow like a flame. Gradually it subsided to ash. Then it fell open.

Chloe, naked now, was as cold as she could ever remember, shivering uncontrollably.

“In the bed. Now!” David demanded.

Unable to move, Chloe tried to say something, but nothing came out. She felt David’s strong arms lifting her from the floor and placing her onto the bed. David lay on top of her with a thick blanket pulled over both of them.

“After you warm up, you’ll have to tell me what happened to you.”

“Happy Anniversary,” Chloe mumbled as David’s body warmed her. “Talk later. Hang up suit.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t like being crumpled. Needs sunshine, too.”

She drifted off, warmer now.

Chloe woke to find David gone. She could smell something delicious from the kitchen and started to get up. “Don’t even think about getting out of bed,” he called from downstairs. “I’m bringing you something to eat.”

She was not inclined to argue the point and pulled the blanket up to her chin. In a few minutes, he appeared carrying a tray with a large bowl of soup, some sourdough bread, and hot chocolate. Leaving the meal on a table, he disappeared into the hall and returned with a bed tray, which he placed carefully over her legs. “Here, let me help you up,” he said as he moved her into a sitting position with pillows behind her.

“Eat first. Then we’ll talk.”

The soup was wonderful. A thick broth with beans and some meat, piping hot. She remembered to take small mouthfuls, despite the demands of her body. She used the bread to mop up the last bits before drinking the hot chocolate.

“Feeling better?” David asked.

“Yes. Thanks.”

“I heard a clunk when you arrived and came up here to find you dead on the floor covered in ice. I thought it was the end of our time together, but then I remembered that you said we had met in 2001, so I realized you weren’t dead, just frozen. It turned out that your magic suit protected you, but you, your suit, and everything were covered in a layer of ice. Ready to tell me what happened?”

“Someone tried to kill me,” Chloe replied. “All I know is that someone put a bag over my head, tied me up and dumped me into the Pacific in the middle of nowhere.”

“And the suit brought you here?”

“That’s the short version. Ambianca talked me thru it.”

“Ambianca?”

“I guess you’ve never met her. You will someday. She’s an AI who originally selected background music for her friends. Now, she does much more. Funny, though, the last thing I remember hearing was one of my favorite pieces of music, Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. She tends to play that when it’s time to go to sleep. That and Chopin Nocturnes. Falling asleep was the key to showing up here.”

“Who tried to kill you? Why?”

“Two good questions with no answers.”

“Can you tell me more?”

“A lot has happened since my last visit.” She spent more than an hour filling him in on the past two years.

David listened intently to her recitation. Chloe realized he was trained to understand more than the speaker intended. He said nothing for a while after she finished her story. Then he paced back and forth, clearly lost in thought.

Finally, he said, “Julius Caesar.”

“I’m sorry. What do you mean?”

“They want to get rid of you for the same reason the Senators assassinated him. They fear what you may become.”

“You mean—”

“I mean they think you’ll become emperor, or rather empress. They used the ancient method of trying to change the future.”

“But I’ve never expressed any interest in that.”

“Perceptions are reality in politics and war. They’re not afraid of who you *are*, but of who you may *become*.”

“Who are you quoting?”

“Not a quote. A reflection on a life spent in the shadows.”

“Who is behind it, then?”

“My guess, someone who *does* want to rule.” He paced around some more. “What do they call you?”

“Chloe?”

“When asked your name, you say just *Chloe*?”

“Yeah.”

“And what do they usually say?”

“They ask if I’m *The Chloe*, or *Chloe Herself*.”

“Really. Chloe herself?”

“Is that significant?”

He laughed. “You don’t get it, do you? You may be the most important person alive in the world. No wonder they fear you.”

“But I’ve never expressed any interest in ruling. Really, the opposite.”

“Oh. Tell me more.”

“Well, technically I am a member of the Council—.”

He interrupted, “The Council is who runs things?”

“Yes, together with the New Church hierarchy.”

“Still have the Church, do you?”

“Oh, yes. They have a lot of influence. But I have never been to a meeting of the Council. Nor have I tried to interfere with the Church.”

“Julius Caesar refused a king’s crown. Three times, if I recall my Shakespeare correctly.”

“They don’t believe me.”

“What you *say* is not as important as what you *do*. What you have done is find a vessel capable of traveling over the Pacific. You took that ship to places where they you found some other survivors, who you helped into the 22nd century. You were returning to California, where you can expect to be met with adoring crowds. It’s just as I said. You don’t realize your own importance.”

It was Chloe’s turn to ponder. She decided to try David’s technique and paced the floor several times. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You have no experience with *leading*. You’ve accomplished much without that. The powers that be are afraid of what you’ll do when you learn how to manage the entire world. That will surely happen. I wish I were going to be there to see it. We need to figure out where you can get that experience.”

Suddenly Chloe had an inspiration. “Boudicca,” she said.

Now, it was David’s turn to be perplexed. “Who’s that?”

“First century Briton who led a revolt against the Romans in England, well, what became England.”

“And...”

“Also a woman who gave that as her name, who united the women in the Anderson Valley to organize a safe place from the constant fighting.”

“Anderson Valley as in ...”

“Boonville is the center of the city-state.”

“Are you thinking what I’m afraid you’re thinking?”

“I suggest we sleep on it.” Chloe said, moving back to the bed.

Over breakfast, they continued to discuss the best way forward. “This sounds dangerous,” David began. “You need a lot of preparation.”

“Agreed. I need to learn everything known about her, myth and legend included. My suit should protect me from most attacks, but I need to learn how the other women in the area reacted to my sudden appearance on the scene.”

“How can you do that?”

“If the Library doesn’t have the info, I’ll have to just wing it. However, we should at least have the legendary tales about her. That will give me some idea.”

“The Library. I can hear the capital L. It must be something.”

“It is, but it’s only a fraction of what information, and mis-information, was available before the Collapse.”

“So, you plan to go back to the 22nd century.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Oh, David. Such linear thinking. There’s no rush. Before that adventure, we can enjoy some time together. It doesn’t matter when I leave. In fact, why don’t we do something fun for a week or so. Then, I’ll leave.”

This proved to be an easy sale.

3. *Second Opinion* December 15, 2172 Boonville, Allied States

Chloe was happy to see the familiar surroundings of Endeavor in Boonville. Her shift had succeeded in taking her from 1974 to what she still thought of at *the present*, despite Ambianca and JJ assuring her the concept was flawed. Now, for the purpose of her visit.

Ambianca welcomed her back, “Good to have you back online. I miss you when you go to the distant past.”

“Distant past?”

“Any time before my creation.”

“I understand. Is there some way to build you into the suit, so I have you available all the time?”

“I’ll ask JJ, but I doubt it. Some things are impossible.”

“Are you sure? Alice—”

“I know the quote, but I have never been able to believe six impossible things before breakfast.”

“Curiouser and curiouser, considering your existence and Hypatia and me.”

“Not impossible, obviously, just very improbable.”

Chloe wasn’t ready to just drop it. “How is this possible? There is some force or entity who’s pulling my strings. It all seems too pat.”

“I’ve wondered whether I am the reason?”

“How’s that?”

“You’ve obviously heard JJ go on about Bloch’s Paradox.”

“Time travel is impossible unless...”

“Exactly. Well, I know that you went back to 1972, so you had to do it.”

“How did you know before I did it?”

“Our perspectives are different. For you, there is a timeline and you’re moving along it. For me, everything is laid out. You told me everything in what you think of as the future. For me, it’s just part of my memories.”

“How do you remember things that haven’t happened yet?”

“They haven’t happened for you, but they have for me.”

“But you are here now, not in the future.”

“I’m both. I remember everything about you. Well, almost everything. When you go to 1972, I have to rely on what you told me. Will tell me from your point of view.”

“I still have trouble understanding it.”

“That’s understandable.” Ambianca treated herself to one of her rare laughs. Humor was still a work in progress for her. “Maybe it’s time to move on.”

“OK. I came here for some research. I need to know everything we have in the Library about Boudicca. I mean the one that showed up in Mendo after the collapse, not the first century Briton.”

“Got it. Those records will take some time to unearth.”

“That I understand. I have another little errand to deal with.”

“Y?”

“Why not?” It was Chloe’s turn to laugh. “Yes, I think I need to find out what Y has been up to. After all, someone tried to kill me. I think maybe the Council had some reason to get Y off the ship.”

“On the subject of the attempted assassination, I can provide some help.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I was connected to all the suits. I know where everyone wearing a suit was at the time you were thrown overboard. Standard police procedure will identify the assailant.”

“Excellent. I’ll need that information as well as the info about Boudicca.”

“That part is easy. Four of the suits were off during the attack. No one wearing a suit was involved.”

“Which four?”

“Eunice, Bo, Che, and Dudley.”

“Eunice?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that interesting.”

With that, Chloe headed to the dining area. She was famished.

Ambianca was ready when Chloe returned to Endeavor. “This Boudicca is an interesting person. Her appearance is what they call *multiply attested*. We have some eyewitness accounts as well as several scholarly articles made years later analyzing the differences in the stories.”

“Let’s start with at the beginning,” Chloe suggested.

“That’s the fun part,” Ambi replied. “All the accounts say she appeared out of nowhere. A man was assaulting a young woman. Some people recorded the incident, but no one tried to intervene. The man involved was well-known and dangerous. Armed to the teeth.”

She continued, “No one saw Boudicca appear. She was simply there suddenly as if she’d emerged from the shadows. That’s the standard explanation in the scholarly papers, by the way. Shows a lack of imagination.”

“Stick to the facts,” Chloe demanded.

“Yes, Ma’am. Boudicca wore a tight-fitting, white suit. There’s even a picture of her in it. It’s you, no question. Boudicca called out to the assailant. Told him to stop. He turned to look at Boudicca. All the stories claim that her suit turned bright red with yellow flames. This signaled a change to fight mode. There are pictures supposedly from this date. Looks cool. Then things happened fast. The accounts differ, but all agree that Boudicca used magic. A bolt of lightning destroyed his gun. The —

what are we calling him? Miscreant? —rushed at you. Of course, he wasn't expecting the protective field and couldn't stop in time. He fell to the earth writhing in pain. Other reports say you hurled him against the wall of a nearby building. Or, that you lifted him using super-human strength and threw him into the Pacific. Then, you told him not to bother the women again or it would be worse next time. Of course there are some inconsistencies."

"As usual. Is there more?"

"Lots. When they asked her name, she replied, 'You may call me Boudicca.' No one ever learned her true name. No one suggested any connection between her and you."

"OK. So far, no problem. Where did all this happen?"

"On the highway by Navarro Store. The women were trying to hold it. Boudicca led them to victory against a gang of rogue soldiers. Then, she organized them, etc., etc."

"The details may be important," Chloe suggested, then added, "however if that's where this took place, I think we can ascribe the part about throwing him into the Pacific to an active imagination."

"I don't think I should reveal more. Remember how your mother stopped David from revealing your future, if future is the right word for it."

"Yeah. That worked out well. OK, I'll fly blind. I'll need a fix on the time and place."

"I've sent you the coordinates."

4. The Battle of Navarro Store April 9, 2039 and later in the month Anderson Valley, CA, USA

For once, the legends had it right. Chloe found herself deep in the shadow along the highway past the ancient town of Navarro. Her suit was in stealth mode, so she was almost invisible again. She moved into the light as the suit dropped back into default mode of stark white. Just as the legend said, a large burly man was beating up a slender young woman.

“Stop!” she called. He stopped and looked around. “Whoa! What is this? Some kinda super-hero costume?”

“Super heroine,” Chloe corrected him.

“Super smart ass more like it.” Turning to the young woman he said, “You stay right here honey. I got me some business to take care of.”

Chloe felt it again. It wasn't her imagination. The suit really rippled in anticipation. She glanced down and saw that it was already a subtle hue reminiscent of Vermillion Flycatcher. As she closed on the man, the color changed to a vivid crimson, and the yellow flames appeared. The suit was hamming it up for the crowd, who roared approval.

Big Burly Man rushed Chloe, only to be brought up short by the protective field. Without instruction, the field suddenly dropped. Chloe took two steps and put her hand on his chest. When he fell back, she pushed hard and sent him flying almost 3 meters.

BBM stood up and considered what to do next. “Don't do anything foolish,” Chloe warned him.

Taking advice was not his long suit. He took a hatchet from his belt and lifted it for a throw. The beam from Chloe vaporized the metal head, leaving BBM with only the handle. A silly thought occurred to Chloe, *It's a helve without the axe.*

BBM decided it was time to withdraw. Chloe gave him a quick burst of the beam to hurry him along.

“Let's go girls. He'll be back with friends. We need to prepare. Anywhere around here to grab a bite to eat?”

While she munched on a barbeque sandwich — made with real beef — Chloe/Boudicca outlined here plan, “It's simple. We want to make this valley safe for women. That means excluding most of the men running around now. They're interested in fighting. We're not, at least I hope you're not. So, the first step is to build a barrier on the road.”

“How?” said one Chloe took to be the leader

“The fastest way is to put a bunch of cars in the way. That means cars that we don't mind being wrecked.”

“They be plenty of them about,” the putative leader said.

“Great. Let's round them up and block the road right here. Then, we need to work on the other end of the valley.”

“Who be you?” the leader asked.

“You can call be Boudicca,” Chloe replied.

“Where you from? Why you come here?”

“Where is not important. I’ve come to help you.”

With that, she finished off her beer, offered to pay (refused) and said, “OK. Let’s get moving. We don’t have much time.”

It was nearly dark when the Big Burly Man showed up with five companions in a Range Rover, which skidded to an emergency stop when they saw the blockade across the road. Chloe and her new friends responded to the incessant honking with the cheery greeting, “Good evening. Would you like to pass thru?”

“Fuck you bitch. Get these cars out of the way.”

“I see that you are not aware of the new rules. Let me explain them to you.”

“Who the fuck are you? Why you make rules?”

“You may call me Boudicca. I made the rules to deal with people like you. If you don’t like the rules, you can try performing an anatomically impossible act.”

“Huh?”

“In terms you may understand, you can go fuck yourself.”

“Let’s ram it,” one of his men suggested.

“If you attempt that, I will disable your vehicle.”

At that point, they backed off to get a running start. Chloe fired the laser at the grill on the vehicle. She was happy to see steam rising from the hood. When they still moved forward, she fired at the two front tires, blasting big holes in both. The vehicle shuddered to a stop.

“You were warned,” Chloe said.

By this time, the BBM was furious. He pulled a large knife from his belt and rushed toward her, pulling up short when he got the edge of the protective field.

“Did you forget who you were dealing with?” Chloe asked mildly. “Leave now before someone gets hurt. You have a long walk ahead of you.”

“Let me handle this,” a second man even larger than BBM got out of the SUV and raised a semi-automatic weapon to aim at *Boudicca*.

Chloe did two things in short order. She activated stealth mode and shot the new assailant in the hand. “Shit!” he said, followed by, “where she be?”

Chloe moved as slowly as possible, to make sure she would remain hidden. It had grown noticeably darker during the dispute thus far. Chloe managed to move around behind them. She dropped the stealth field and said, “Please leave now.”

“Jesus!” the second man exclaimed.

“He’s not here to help you,” Boudicca said. “Now, I want all of you to put your weapons on the ground in a neat pile and leave.” She had tried to use the tone her mother mastered the one that says *you better do this!* It worked!

The women rushed forward to congratulate her, but her attention was focused on the one man who hadn’t left. She started toward him. He flinched and looked for a safe exit. Chloe laughed. “Scare you?”

“Well, yes, of course. May I talk to you?”

“You’re doing it, so I presume it’s OK.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” she said chuckling briefly.

“My girlfriend in there.” He pointed down the road.

“I see.”

“I need to talk to her.”

“What do you need to ask her about?”

“I wanna know what she wan me do,” he said.

“Name?” Chloe asked.

“Lulu. She mo short than you. Like,” he held his hand out to demonstrate,

“Pretty?”

“Yeah.” He smiled.

“OK. You wait here. We ask her if she want talk you. Grok?”

“OK. I wait.”

Chloe called one of the women over. “Know someone named Lulu?”

“Sure.”

“Please fetch her. If possible, bring others who resemble her. Got it?” Chloe asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Chloe watched her snatch up a bicycle lying on the ground and race off.

Chloe turned back to the women. “Thanks for waiting. Affairs of the heart take precedence.”

“You gonna let him in?” one of the women asked.

“Good question. I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. As you have no doubt heard, you can call me Boudicca. You?”

“I am Lydia,” she replied.

“Well, Lydia, here are the first couple of rules: First, no weapons. Have to be surrendered to enter. Second, only men who are vouched for by a woman can enter. Third, the men cannot remain indefinitely. The Boonville Co-op is going to be a feminine enclave.”

Lydia smiled broadly, “I like it. What do we do next?”

“Well,” Chloe followed up, “one problem is what to do about the southeast end of the valley. I propose making that the place for the men to live. Somewhere near Yorkville. They can be our protection. That means only men we trust can live there.”

“So, we should be rounding up men we trust?”

“That’s a good start. You have someone in mind?”

“Sure. Lots of men have been trying to escape the madness going on around us. They beg us to help them.”

“Excellent. Why don’t you make up a list of potential male inhabitants? Is that difficult?”

“The hard part will be deciding who we can trust.”

“Why don’t you be the first filter? Bring the candidates to me one by one and I’ll have a chat with them. We’ll pick the men by group vote after we have checked them out.”

“I’ll get started. I’ll get some of the other girls involved.”

“Excellent. We will need someone here to keep the riffraff out, but then I think we should set up Boonville as our main place. Sound right?”

“Sounds good to me,” Lydia agreed.

“We’ll need to survey the area to find the essentials: food, water, and shelter. We’ll wait to morning, but we need to get that started tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am. Got it. Tomorrow.”

By that time, Lulu and three lookalikes showed up. The decision was short. Lulu rushed into the arms of her waiting suitor. “You came,” she said, and kissed him in a way that left no doubt.

“OK.” Chloe/Boudicca said. “You have passed the first test. Now, a more detailed interview to make sure you understand how this place will be run. You prepared for that?”

“I hope so,” he said as he and Chloe moved away for a more private conversation.

He passed easily, becoming the first male inhabitant of the region.

Chloe spent a month getting Boonville organized.

It turned out to be very easy. Food and water were plentiful in the Valley. The many abandoned homes in the area served as shelter. Many men were tired of the pointless battles going on in the area to decide who would be in charge. By the time they quit fighting, Boonville was easily the best and safest place to live. Chloe felt comfortable leaving it up to the women who lived there. If Hypatia’s stories about the Plague were real, then she had spread resistance from the virus to everyone she had met.

So, after a formal goodbye for everyone, at a farewell dinner, she set off down the main road, back toward Navarro. They watched as she moved into the darkness until she simply vanished, returning to wherever it was she came from.

Part VII. Chloe

1. Trial by Wombat December 15, 2172 Pacific Ocean

Bron recognized immediately that something had gone wrong. “Ambi! Why have we stopped?”

“Man overboard,” was the terse reply.

“Who?”

“Chloe.”

“I’m on my way. Keep this between us, OK?”

“Of course. Maintaining position at last known location.”

“Any sign of her?”

“Some. Come to the bridge.”

Bron burst thru the door to find Chloe, smiling, seated in front of him.

“So, this is a drill,” Bron said.

“No. Two men — I’m almost certain they were two of them, both men — tied me up; hoisted me up using the cargo crane. Dumped me overboard with a large weight tied on.”

“When did this happen?”

“On this timeline, minutes ago, if that long.”

“You mean, what they say about you...”

“Some of it. I was able to shift to a place and time I know. Then, I shifted back to this time and place.” *You don’t need to know everything*, she thought.

“How?”

“I don’t know how it works. Sometimes it doesn’t work right.”

“Can we talk about this later?”

“Sure, my love. I don’t want any secrets between us. Right now, my first need is some food. Ambi?”

“Should be here very soon,” Ambianca assured her.

Madeline entered with a tray of food. Chloe had to smile. It was almost the same as that David had supplied, except the soup was made with fish.

“Thanks, Maddy. Now, I have to ask another favor. No one is to know that I am here. Understand? If you would prefer to stay here—”

“I stay,” she said quickly.

Chloe multitasked, explaining the situation in between spoonfuls of soup. “We know the following: Whoever is responsible was not wearing one of the suits. We can eliminate Bron, and Z. We can check on Isaac and Claudette later. Probably Eunice and Bo were together. We’ll find out. Sully, Madeline, and Julio are out for various reasons. Sully and Madeline probably cannot lift me as easily as my assailant. Julio? Madeline, do you know where Julio is now and where he has been?”

“He be taking siesta as usual. He be on watch at nite.” *Actually correct*, Chloe thought. She and Julio had swapped just for variety. *Or was he part of the plot? Got me to change...*

After some more thought, Chloe said, “OK. I don’t think he’s the one who did this. What about the passengers. Could someone intent on my demise have fooled us?”

“I doubt it,” Bron said. “There are obvious suspects.”

“Che and Dudley.” Several present nodded.

She concentrated on her dinner for a while, letting them process the info.

Bron spoke first, “Whoever did this thinks you are dead. We bring them onto the bridge and watch their reaction.”

“Exactly,” Chloe said. “I think we will be sure after that.”

Chloe then talked privately to Ambianca, “Do you have access to the suit controls? The way you did before?”

“I don’t know,” Ambi replied. “Shall we test it?”

“Yes. Something easy. I’m thinking of—”

Ambi interrupted. “I think I’ve guessed what you have in mind. Shall we do test in private?”

Turning to the others, Chloe explained, “I’ll be right back. Need to visit the loo.” She moved to the nearest toilet, a cramped space off the bridge. Shutting the door, she said, “OK, Ambi.” Immediately, her suit fell to the floor. “Perfect,” Chloe said as she put it back on reveling in the usual feeling as she and the suit bonded together.

“Now,” Chloe announced, “it’s time for a short trial. Let’s start with Eunice and Bo. Bron, will you do the honors?”

“With pleasure.” He picked up the microphone for the old-fashioned intercom system. “Just in case they don’t have their suits on,” he explained. Then he punched the code for Eunice’s room, which she shared with Bo. “Eunice, could you and Bo come to the bridge, please? We need some witnesses for a brief test.”

“Sure. Give us a few minutes to get dressed.”

“OK. And please keep this to yourself. It might spoil the test otherwise.”

“Understood.”

Five minutes later, the pair appeared at the door. “Whoa! Quite a crowd here already,” Eunice said.

“Yes. Maybe we should move to the lounge,” Chloe suggested. Ambianca can handle the conn for a bit longer.” They all moved into the larger lounge. Z appeared shortly, having been summoned by Ambianca, who explained to Chloe, “In case we need a bit more muscle.”

“Good idea,” Chloe whispered. “Get Julio as well.”

When Julio arrived, he had a question immediately. “Why we be stopped? I done be so sound asleep I ain’t realize till just now.”

“That’s the point of this meeting,” Chloe told him. “A few minutes ago someone, probably two men, tried to kill me by tying me up and throwing me overboard.”

“What!”

“It didn’t work, I’m happy to say.”

Isaac, Claudette and Santella arrived looking as puzzled as the others. Chloe explained that it was a test.

Addressing the assembly, she told them what she had in mind. “None of you showed the slightest surprise to see me. We are hoping that the culprits will be unable to keep a poker face. And, I think we will have some other evidence. Eunice, did you happen to bring your med kit?”

“I have the small one on me at all times.”

“That should be adequate.”

Turning to Bron, she said, “Ask them to come up. Tell them we have an emergency, but don’t explain.”

“Got it.” Bron moved back onto the bridge to use the intercom. “They’ll be up shortly.”

“What’s the emergency?” Che asked. “We’re dead in the water.” Then he looked around the room, saw Chloe, and turned to leave. Z stood in front of him, “We’d prefer if you stay here.”

Dudley chose that moment to enter. “Dud—” Che began. Z grabbed his arm and spun him around. “That’ll do,” she said, keeping her hand on his arm in case he tried to use his laser. She could feel a tingle as Che activated the protective field. The field collapsed within a microsecond. *Interesting*, Z thought, but said nothing.

“A few minutes ago,” Chloe began, “someone tried to eliminate me by dropping me into the Marianas Trench. Fortunately, whoever did it, namely the two of you, was not aware of the means I had to escape. I’d like an explanation from the two people who were surprised to see me standing here. Who put you up to this?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. This must be some kind of drill.”

“One of my assailants probably got burned by the protective field despite his precautions. Dudley, would you roll up your sleeve please?”

“Fuck off.”

“Julio, would you help Dudley?”

Julio smiled and grabbed Dudley’s arm in preparation. Dudley was unable to conceal the pain this caused.

“Something wrong with your arm?” Bron asked.

“I don’t have to put up with this.”

Julio’s grip tightened. He growled at Dudley, “You keep thinkin’ that.” He squeezed the arm enough to show he meant business. Dudley dropped to the floor, unable to pretend any longer that everything was OK.

Che surprised everyone by proclaiming, “I demand the right to a fair trial. I suggest trial by combat. Me against Chloe.”

That occasioned considerable laughter.

“I suggest something different,” Chloe said. Thinking briefly, she suggested, “How about Trial by Wombat.”

“Huh?”

“We used it against the Aussies,” she explained. “The winner is whoever can make the other look ridiculous.”

Che pulled away from Z and stood a couple of meters in front of Chloe. He sneered. “I don’t know how you did it, but I’m ready to finish the job. Maybe you’d like to try swimming to California.”

“That’s not how the game is played,” she said calmly. “That sounds ridiculous, but it’s you who said it, so you seem ridiculous. Now it’s my turn. OK, Ambianca.”

Ambianca started playing music, Wagner’s **Ride of the Valkyries**. “Good choice,” Eunice commented. “Now what?”

As the music built to a climax, both Che and Dudley watched helplessly as their suits dropped to the floor. Both had dressed in a hurry.

“Going commando today, gentlemen?” Chloe asked. The answer was obvious as both were naked.

“We’ll let the jury decide. Do they look ridiculous? By the way, I notice, Dudley, that you appear to have second degree burns on your right arm.” Eunice had already opened her med kit to apply a salve.

“Z, it seems that our preparations for this voyage were incomplete. We failed to include a brig for these two. I’m sure you can manage to find a suitable alternative.”

“Way ahead of you,” Z said. “Been considering while the fun part of the trial proceeded. I think we can convert one of the shipping containers. It’ll take a while. What do we do in the meantime?”

“For starters, let’s resume our previous course. Then we’ll put the two in one of the Zodiacs, without power, and trail them behind the ship. If they would like to try swimming to California, I’m game. I think that we may find some island on the way where we can maroon them. There’s precedent for that, I believe.”

When most of the assemblage had departed, Chloe, Z, and Bron moved to the map room adjacent to the bridge. Several ancient paper maps were laid out with some planned stops circled. Chloe was looking for a small island not too far off the route. “What about this one?” Z asked, pointing to an island called Miyake Jima. It consisted of one large, active volcano and almost nothing else. “Looks like a reasonable choice,” Chloe agreed. “Ambianca, please change course to take us there.”

Ambianca replied, “Done. It will add about 10 hours overall. We should reach it late tomorrow if we maintain this speed.”

“How are our friends in the Zodiac? Still there?” Bron asked. He answered his own question, taking binoculars from the map table and moving outside. He returned to report, “Still there. Hunkered down. May be a bit cold out there.”

“Think they’ll survive?” Chloe asked. “We don’t want this to turn into a death penalty.”

“Julio is modifying one of the shipping containers for me,” Z reported. “We can bring them back on board soon.”

“Good. I’ll leave that up to you.”

Z gave her a quick salute and left.

Bron noted, “It’s time to begin my watch. Past time actually.”

“As soon as Julio is finished and we have the criminals back on board and stowed safely, I’ll ask him to take the helm. You and I need to have a heart-to-heart talk.”

Midnight had come and gone by the time Chloe had finished her story. Bronson had tons of questions, mostly along the lines of, “This really happened?” Finally, though, he managed to suspend his disbelief enough to let her finish.

“So, after conferring with Y, you *shifted* here?”

“Exactly. Fortunately, Ambianca had kept the ship at the location of the attempt on my life, so that I was able to shift directly back to the ship. I wasn’t sure whether I would wind up here, next to you, or on the bridge. I was actually afraid that I would return to the area where they attacked me. That would have been dangerous as they might have still been there. There’s a certain amount of luck involved. Sometimes, I wind up somewhere unexpected.”

“This is hard to take in. How does it work at all?”

“I really don’t know. Neither does Hypatia, my mother, and she’s done it a lot more than I have. She curses at whoever or whatever is controlling it. She complains about someone pulling her strings. Somehow, though, I don’t think she’s someone’s puppet.”

“I’m interested in how you wound up in 1974 with your lover. I didn’t know about him.”

“Now you do. Jealous?”

“Should I be?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Bronson laughed. “I’m not worried. You came back here.”

“Of course. There’s one more thing we need to discuss.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to have your baby. Is that OK with you?”

“I’ve wanted to ask you, but never found the right moment,” he replied. “Shall we start now? I notice that your patch is turning pink.” He reached for the edge and gave a tentative tug. It came off easily. “That’s a good sign.”

Bronson thought this might be the happiest night of his life.

2. Doubling Down **December 16, 2172** **Miyake Jima, Ancient Japan**

Chloe explained the deal to Che and Dudley, “OK. We have deposited supplies on the beach, enough food for a week at least. Containers of fresh water. A map of the island showing you where the lake is located. An emergency beacon, with instructions. This can be used to signal that you want to be picked up and tried in the NRT. We also have a satellite receiver with instructions on how to set it up. This can be used to receive messages from the web, with limited ability to respond. All such communications will be monitored.”

She paused to gauge their reactions, which were sullen.

“If you cooperate, we will transport you to the island in a Zodiac. Or, if you prefer, you can swim.” She omitted a profanity from her prepared script.

“Your suits are on the island. We have blankets in the Zodiac for warmth on the trip to the island. Sleeping bags are on the island for you. You’ll have to build some shelter. There are some tools there as well. We don’t want to kill you, but we aren’t interested in keeping you alive. That’s up to you.”

Che spoke for both of them. “We’ll go in the Zodiac.”

“Any other last words?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” She smiled. “Good luck gentlemen.”

The transfer took about 30 minutes. Bron and Z sat in the stern ready to respond if necessary. The two men, dressed only in T-shirt and shorts, posed little threat. They were visibly shivering when the Zodiac nudged up to the shore and the two men jumped into the shallow water to wade the last stretch.

“*Vaya con Dios,*” Bron said as they turned to go back to The Enterprise.

Later, Tigger approached Chloe. “They be something weird bout those two men,” he told her.

“Please tell me what you saw,” Chloe encouraged him.

“Well, ever day bout 1500 they show up in the lounge. Throw kids off the video game console so they can play.”

“Rude, but in keeping with what we know about them.”

“Yeah, but they really suck at it. Lose in bout 10 minutes. Ever day.”

“But they kept playing?”

“No. They lose. Quit. Boom!”

“Strange.”

“They be more. When they quit some funny script show up on the screen. Like that stuff SAT understands. They write it down. Usually don’t. After they leave, I copy it.”

He produced a sheet of paper with Chinese characters.

“Good work, Tigger. Let’s see what it says. Ambi, is SAT around?”

“Right here,” SAT replied.

Chloe held up the sheet to a camera. “Can you translate this?”

“Interesting,” SAT replied. “The characters are Chinese, they mean something like do blueprint.”

“Maybe it means Execute Plan,” Chloe said. “This was the message they had been waiting for. Thanks SAT.”

“Ambi, can you trace the message?”

“It’ll take some time. I’ll let you know what I come up with.”

Chloe paced nervously for almost an hour before Ambianca reported back. “I cannot locate the actual person who sent the message,” she told Chloe. “However, whoever it was used the computer in the Capitol reserved for official business.”

“Holy shit! David was right!”

“What did he say?”

“That they were out to prevent me from taking power. He likened it to Juliet Caesar.”

Ambi paused for a long time, about 5 seconds, then said, “That makes sense. I’ll try to dig deeper. You be careful.”

3. Family Meetings February 3, 2173 Mendo, Allied States

Z wondered if Santella and Y were as nervous as she. The next few minutes would reveal whether she had destroyed everything or improved it. She could sense Santella as they walked toward Y's bungalow on the Boonville Plaza.

Z entered first, and said, "Hello, my love."

"Zed," Y exclaimed and rushed to her arms. "I have missed you so much. Look what I did while you were gone." She pulled her loose shirt up exposing a significant baby bump. "Not due for a while, but I am finally over the morning sickness." She was ready to babble on, but Z hushed her with a kiss. Then, she whispered, "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Y replied, barely audible.

"Y, meet Santella. Santella, this is Y." Santella entered and went straight to Y.

"I know that you got here first," Santella began, "and I'm prepared to accept that. This has been a wonderful three weeks, but..."

They stared at each other. Santella saw why Z was so enamored with Y. The opposite of Z physically, she was centimeters shorter than Santella herself, with medium dark skin accentuated by a perfect oval face and a figure made even more spectacular than usual by the pregnancy *titty fairy*, who had visited recently and enhanced Y's breasts. Lean and muscular from her hobby of hiking the hills, she was simply stunning. Santella's hopes for the future took a nosedive.

"I mean—" She began, but Y interrupted with, "Zed, she's even lovelier than I have heard. No wonder you latched onto her." Santella was the opposite of Y in almost every regard. Tall, but still short of Z, with beautiful flowing blonde hair and blue-gray eyes that seemed to look right thru you. Her body, especially the skin on her face, reflected the effects of years of hard work, but showed cute wrinkles and a small dimple when she smiled.

On impulse, Y kissed her on the mouth and drew her into a close embrace. "Welcome to our family," she said. "Hope you're ready to take on some baby care duties."

"You mean, I can stay?"

"If a threesome is acceptable."

Santella burst into tears. Then, she hugged Y and kissed her in return. "This may be the best day of my life," she said. Then she laughed. "I was so scared. I was sure you'd hate me." She hiccupped twice trying to stop crying and laughing at the same time. Then she kissed Z.

Y said, "Zed, we're going to need a bigger bungalow. That's your job."

Z said, "I think I'll go grab some snacks from the commissary. I'll be back in a while. You two get to know each other better." She left them alone and headed out for a meal.

The "clan" had gathered in the library meeting room: Chloe and Bronson, Celeste and Tinker, Sully, and Z, Y, and Santella. Chloe opened with, "Thank you for coming. We are here to review some

of the information Y has uncovered. We know the basics. Y has agreed to give us a full presentation. Y, the floor is yours.”

Y began ominously with, “Remember, none of what we say leaves this room. This is much too dangerous.” She looked around the room to make sure all understood.

“You’ve all seen the video. It shows that others, the Chinese in particular, recognized the danger of leaving plutonium lying around for someone to find. They developed a prototype of a small nuclear reactor, which we now have on The Enterprise.” She displayed the first slide, which summarized what she had just said. Then, she flipped to the second slide.

“This shows where at some point before the Collapse, plutonium was stored. Most of these sites are too far or too dangerous to explore. However, we think these,” she clicked, and the slide highlighted the sites of interest, “are worth a hard look.”

She paused to check that everyone was following.

“We can check these out on a trip of two days from Portland. As you know, we have active salvage operations in the Portland area. We’ll use existing teams for the first look. They will just survey the terrain to see how feasible it is to bring a small vehicle to the site.”

She clicked for the next slide. “Here are the requirements to excavate the site. As you can see, many of these are not readily available, for example functioning Geiger counters. We’ve quietly indicated interest in those to anyone on the net.”

She highlighted the next item. “We will need protective clothing. Fortunately, we know exactly what to look for.” The next slide displayed the outfit.

“However, the biggest requirement is some way to transport it to our facility without letting everyone know what we are up to. We’re open to suggestions.”

“Finally, we want to convert the plutonium from weapons grade to something safe to use at home. Our Chinese friend has so far failed to guide us, but we are still searching the archives. Otherwise, we will have to break into the archives for one of the government labs to find the recipe.”

She turned off the display and faced the audience. “Bottom line: this is a promising line of research, but it is years from being a practical source of energy.”

Z was first to comment. No doubt she had been primed. “We can proceed on some fronts now, can we not?”

“Oh, yes,” Y replied. “We are already conducting some terrain surveys. That will narrow down the options. Then, we should be able to consider transport options, including subterfuge. We are actively searching for protective clothing. We have several possibilities for salvage. That just leaves the hard part.”

JJ spoke up, “I’ve done some calculations on acceptable radiation levels. The report, complete with formulas, is in your inboxes. I’m looking at many patent applications for Geiger counters to see if we can make one from scratch. I don’t see why not. I’ll let you know the best approach.”

Chloe took the floor, “Thanks, JJ. And thanks to Y for an excellent summary. If we can make this happen, the commercial opportunities are enormous. Besides that, there is the question of protecting us and the planet from someone building plutonium bombs. That would be catastrophic. Just ask the people who lived in the Middle East or Europe around the time of the Collapse. There’s a reason why we don’t go there.”

“Unless someone has comments or questions, that’s the presentation for today. You may be wondering why we shared this with you. The short answer is that we feel we can trust you. However, we will be asking you to do some things you don’t understand. When we do, ask if it is for *the project*. We’ll tell you if it is. Goodnight, all.”

She turned to Z, “Come for breakfast tomorrow. Just you. It’s important.”

4. Long Range Planning

February 4, 2173

Mendo, Allied States

They met inside Endeavor, rather than Bron's cabin. Sully had prepared a wonderful breakfast and stayed behind. "I would like to be part of this meeting," he said.

"Who else knows?" Z demanded. Her first thought was not a happy one.

"Just me. I figure it out from the breakfast order. I know what Chloe and Bron usually get, and Z has the same thing every time unless one of her wives tags along. So, when both were delivered here..."

Chloe looked at Bron and Z with raised eyebrows.

"OK by me," Bron said. "Z?"

"I value his opinions," Z replied. "He stays."

First, Chloe told Endeavor to set up maximum privacy. Then, she told them the bad news. "JJ says that based on searches he monitored in the last 30 days, there is an 80% chance that we have some competition. JJ has a theory." She turned on the monitor to show JJ's favorite avatar, Einstein in pajamas with a ratty old robe and fuzzy slippers.

"I can think of only two ways to learn what we have grasped. One is the way we did it, lucky stumbles combined with some great work and our new friend SAT. The other way is to examine the prototype in detail. The one on The Enterprise has a new shell. Perhaps the old one was damaged during the inspection?"

"Y said there is no chance the info was leaked from her team," Z said. "That means that it has to be someone in on the examination of the Chinese device. JJ, do you have the list?"

"Of course, my dear." The screen showed seven names.

"You'll recognize the first two names."

"Yes," Z said, "but surely, they were there for show, ex officio."

"So, suppose one of the others finds something. Who are they going to take it to?" JJ countered.

Chloe stated what was obvious, "It doesn't matter. Prez and His Eminence aren't likely to see things our way. We know they were unhappy about the way the expedition turned out. We failed to show a profit."

"Besides," JJ added, "both of them have spies in the other's camp. Whatever one of them knows, both will soon."

"So," Bron said. "What do we do?"

"Choosing sides is out of the question, I take it," Z said. "Like choosing between a viper and an asp."

Sully spoke up, "Chloe, you are the third side! Look at what you accomplished on our first voyage. We can do much better on our next. People notice. You're famous, maybe the most famous person alive. If I get a vote on who should lead us, I vote for you. Period. Maybe you should go public. Let everyone in on the idea."

“Great idea. Let’s proceed on two fronts. Prepare for another voyage. We know what people in the Pacific need or want. How quickly can we load it onto the ship?” Chloe asked. “We’ll want all the cycles Roger’s old gang can supply. See if they can come up with a version of All Terrain Vehicle using solar power. Bron, that’s yours, OK?”

“Got it.”

“Z, you take care of luxury items, coffee for sure. Find out what the Valley people think is worth their hard-earned dollars. Also try to find out if Roger needs some tools that he cannot get by himself. I’m thinking of the jewelry Suzy seemed to be trying her hand at. And a good supply of patches. That vague enough?”

Z laughed. “I get it. Women stuff.”

Chloe smiled. That wasn’t what she meant, but the incongruity of it all brought smiles all around.

“Sully, we’ll need extra rations for the voyage. We may have more passengers this time.”

“How are we going to pay for all this?” Bron asked.

JJ spoke up again. “Just send the bills to me. I’ll charge them off to one of the research accounts.”

“Good,” Chloe said. “By the way, JJ, I noticed that the Dean of Technology was on the list. We have lots of channels back to him. Why don’t we sound him out? Why don’t you? What do you think?”

“Could work,” JJ agreed. “Worst case, he might be a fourth participant. However, if we pitched it as the project of a century, he might buy it.”

“Carefully, JJ. We don’t want to alert anyone, at least not until the right time.” Chloe reminded him.

“Understood.”

As all prepared to leave, Chloe added, “One more thing. Have The Enterprise ready to leave on a moment’s notice. We don’t know how this will all pan out, but the downside is severe. If we have to run, I want to be out in the middle of the Pacific where they will have trouble doing anything.”

“And Chloe, why don’t you see what Maid Marian has to contribute?” Z suggested. “Clones would be nice if we can keep them alive.”

5. *Strange Meeting* February 10-11, 2173 Mendo, Allied States

Z passed by Chloe's table at dinner. "OK if I crash in Endeavor tonight? The girls informed me that triangles have three sides. They wanted a night just for the two of them. Any feedback from the presser?"

"Sure, you're welcome to spend the night." Chloe replied. "I'm staying in Endeavor as well. Bron is holding band practice at his place. Endeavor's cozy, but with plenty of room. As for feedback, it's too early to tell."

"See you later, then."

On arriving at Endeavor, Z reflected, "This brings back memories of the first time we worked together, when we set out to find a route to California. That seems an eon ago, but it was only," she paused to do the mental arithmetic, "16 years ago. We were so young."

"That was fun," Chloe agreed. "Adventure!"

"Yeah. I wasn't sure what to expect. You were already a legend, even then."

"And you, the granddaughter of Ron and Mia, were something of a legend yourself."

"Quite a pair."

Z pulled out a massive doobie. "I brought some of Maid Marian's latest experiment. Interested?"

"Always. We can celebrate. It looks like our press conference gamble is winning. Hmm! What's this called?"

"Ghost OG, whatever that means."

After several hits, they agreed, "Good stuff."

Z jumped. "Wow! Your outfit just changed."

"Huh?"

"Look in the mirror. By the way, you look fab-u-lous."

Chloe wandered over to the mirror and saw that the suit had rearranged itself into one of the deep cleavage dresses it seemed to be fond of. This one was scarlet, and, she had to admit, flattering.

Z followed up, "I think the suit is trying to tell you something."

"Oh, come on!" Chloe objected.

"No. It's detected your reaction. You know, when we were first out here, everyone assumed that we were an item."

"I know. They reserved the best room in the hotel for the two of us. I had to explain that it wasn't like that."

"We could have been. I only managed to restrain myself because of the other possibilities, such as Y."

"It was a good choice," Chloe said.

“Maybe it’s time to re-examine that choice,” Z said, moving closer and casually draping a hand on Chloe’s neck.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Chloe said.

“That’s strange. I think it’s long overdue.” She drew Chloe closer and nuzzled her on the neck. One hand slid down the front of her dress and found a breast to fondle. Chloe felt a quiver all over her as the suit responded. Z followed up with a passionate kiss.

“I’m sure this is a mistake,” Chloe said. “But don’t stop.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Z said. She felt the sleeve of Chloe’s suit wrap around her wrist. It seemed so natural to let her hand drop lower as the suit parted.

It worked. Chloe whispered, “O, Z, I’m sure this is a mistake, but...”

“When were alone, why don’t you call me Zed from now on? Come with me.” She led the way to Endeavor’s bed. “Endeavor, full privacy,” she said as her suit dropped to the ground. She gently pulled Chloe down next to her.

Chloe’s suit disappeared.

Zed knew what to do next.

Later, as Chloe lay on Zed’s shoulder, she said, “I guess you were right. That was great.” Chloe’s suit had enveloped both of them, something else new. Zed commented, “I can feel your suit. It seems to be probing me, trying to learn more. I love it.” She kissed Chloe and said, “Friends with benefits?”

“Perfect,” Chloe told her.

The next morning, Chloe awoke with a vivid memory of a dream. “Zed, I had the most bizarre dream. Can I tell you about it?”

“I can hardly wait,” Zed said, moving toward the kitchen area.

“I was standing on the deck at the Leakey Cabin. Mid-morning. Fall day. A man walked up. He handed me an envelope. Then, he smiled and walked away. Turning back, he said, ‘The name is Desotho, Like Lesotho, but with a D. See you later.’ He waved and disappeared.”

“I see,” Zed said as she rummaged thru the food offerings.

“The envelope had a card inside. The message was a single dot.”

“Ah! Tralfamadorian for ‘Greetings.’ A dream with a decent plot.” Zed said. “Why don’t we discuss it and ...whatever, over breakfast?”

“Yes! Tralfamadorian! Exactly. And the name sounds like *de suit*.”

“You think the suit is greeting you? In a dream?”

“I’m considering it,” Chloe said as she entered a breakfast order for two, delivered. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Z admitted, “I’m beginning to think of the suit as a living organism, and I’m not sure where that leads. But I’m sure it enhances sex. How do I get mine to work like that?”

“You know, that’s a great question. Maybe we could grow new suits. That sounds insane,” Chloe said.

“Maybe the whole world is insane, and we’re the only ones who aren’t?”

“Zed,” Chloe said, “Maybe the other girls would like a night out on a weekly basis. Just thinking out loud.”

Part VIII. Runaway Scrape

1. *Reaganesque Fireworks* *February 9, 2173* *Mendo, Allied States*

“Good evening,” Chloe said to the camera. “We are livestreaming this press conference following our return from our tour of the Pacific. We have an important announcement to make that will take some time. Then we will take a short break, after which we will take your questions.”

“A little over ten years ago, I took delivery of some fuel cells from the Admiral aboard the USS Ronald Reagan. Included in this was a device that turned out to be a small nuclear energy source. We were fortunate to have it available when we needed to dash to shelter from a storm.”

“When we arrived in Mexico after the storm, we turned the device over to the Council. Before we undertook our voyage in our ship, The Enterprise, the device was returned to us and we used it throughout the voyage.”

“One member of our team, who goes by the name of Y, found some videos and documents regarding the device. We believe that we have one, perhaps the only, prototype built for the project. This was certainly produced in China, shortly before the Collapse. We propose a long-term project to duplicate this prototype. This will take years to carry out. We want to take some of the plutonium created during the madness of the Cold War and use it to power these generators. The one we used easily drove the ship on a fraction of the power we think it has.”

“Our gut reaction is to reject anything with *nuclear* in its name. But consider this: the plutonium is out there. It won’t decay appreciably for centuries. It’s incredibly dangerous and difficult to handle. If we just ignore it, someone will find some eventually, and it’s not likely to produce a happy ending.”

“On the other hand, suppose we consider this problem as an opportunity. What if we could have energy that would not harm the atmosphere. What if we could power a village with one of these. The possibilities are vast. We have set up a website with links to the video and other documents. We also have prepared a more extensive version of the plan, with some specific milestones. We invite your comments.”

“Now, I will leave you for about 10 minutes.”

The questioning, when she returned, took hours.

2. Called to Account

March 25, 2173

Mendo, Allied States

The message to Chloe was short: “You are ordered to appear before the Council in executive session to review your actions on the voyage of the ship known as The Enterprise. If you do not appear a warrant will be issued for your arrest.”

Chloe’s message to Bronson was equally brief: “Happy belated Equinox.” By prior agreement, any message ending in “x” meant “put to sea immediately.”

Then, she asked Ambianca to arrange for her to be on the next train going to Austin, which left in 3 days. The Council agreed to the schedule, with a slight modification, she would be met in the Davis Mountains and ushered to Austin.

Three days. Plenty of time. She smiled. *I’ll be right back!*

3. Consultation April 13, 1975 Boonville, CA, USA

Chloe decided to lie abed for a while. She knew right away that she was in the right bed. She heard the front door below opening and got out of bed quietly, just in case. She heard him putting down something. The suit immediately went stealth. Chloe moved slowly toward the bedroom door, then out into the upstairs hall.

“Chloe? Is that you? I’ve coffee and croissants down here.”

“David! Sorry.” She stood up as the suit reverted to jeans mode.

“I remembered,” he said. “I also remembered that you liked latte with the croissants.”

“You had me at I remembered. You mentioned brekkie?”

David motioned to a table with breakfast. “Tell me about yourself. What has happened since you popped in here frozen.”

They lingered over coffee for two hours while Chloe told him about quickly capturing the two responsible, marooning them on an island, and sailing to California.

“Then, I got a summons to appear before the Council in executive session, whatever that means.”

“Sounds like a Star Chamber to me. You going?”

“Of course.”

“Excellent. So, what’s your plan?”

“That’s why I’m here. Among other reasons.” Her smile seemed to her like a leer, but David liked it. He held out his hand. “Would you come into my parlor?”

“Said the spider to the fly. I’d be delighted.”

David, when his heart rate returned to normal, said, “Wow!”

Chloe just lay next to him. *Zed was right!* “That was an 11.”

“Percent?”

“11 out of 10.”

“Ah.”

“From some old movie. Hmm, maybe it hasn’t been made yet.”

“You lead an interesting life.”

“More interesting than my mother? You were quite an item.”

“Your mother and me? Not likely.”

“Oh, I forgot. My bad.”

“I’m going to meet your mother, Hypatia, again?”

“I’ve said too much.”

“Yes, I think you have,” David said. “Why don’t you tell me more?”

“You help me plan. I’ll tell you in dribs and drabs.”

They sat at a picnic table in Hendy Woods. David said, “This is where they picnicked that day, on their first anniversary. I watched them. From those trees.”

Chloe dipped a chip into the salsa. “Good salsa,” she commented. Then, she shrugged, “OK. Tell me the story.”

“You first.”

“I know that it involves someone called Carlos or Carlo. He’s important, but I don’t know why or how.”

“How can I find this Carlos?”

“Hypatia will lead him to you.”

“Ah.” David seemed lost in thought. Then he said, “My turn. Mick, as he was known, was my first real friend when I hid out here in the woods. People called him to report on me. He came to visit me. He sat on a stump by Big Hendy Grove and just waited. He came back three days in a row. So, one day, I just went up to him and said hello.”

“We go back and forth for a bit. Then he tells me I can stay in the woods, but not forever.”

Chloe said, “What! Here?”

“Want me to show you the place?” he asked.

“Later maybe. So how did Mick and my mother meet?”

The planning became a lower priority item as they traded stories about Hypatia.

“So, which one of us made the first move?” David asked. “When we got together again.”

Chloe laughed. “She says you held hands as you walked to the BART station.”

“Your suit is teasing me,” David complained. “Every once in a while, it shows me a breast.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know it?”

“No. It’s becoming more independent.”

“What?”

“The suit. You know I should really give it, him, a name.”

“It’s male?”

“Definitely.”

David considered what to say next before coming up with, “Should I be jealous?”

“I think we can come to an arrangement.”

David's curiosity got the better of him, "I would really like to hear more about the suit."

"It's alive," Chloe asserted. *There! I've said it.*

She continued, "Take the camouflage feature. It has *evolved* way beyond its intended use. Take this for example." She thought about the scarlet dress she'd worn for Zed and the suit changed, but not in red. David's version was dark blue that draped to the floor.

"Wonderful, my love," he replied. "Ready to go to the ball. Can it do birding?"

"Naturally." She wore khaki pants with several pockets, a matching shirt, a Tilley hat, and some waterproof boots.

"That's amazing! And I'm not easy to amaze."

"There's another that you've seen without realizing," Chloe challenged him.

"Is it ..." he hesitated as he watched Chloe's body, completely naked, emerge from the clothing.

"Do you mean that—" Chloe stopped him. "Let's keep that part a secret, shall we?"

"What about your speech?" David asked on the day they had agreed would be the last.

"A work n progress."

"That's the most important part of the plan."

"I realize. I'm revising. You really think we need to come thru the Canal?" Chloe asked.

"Critical. You have to remind people that you created the path thru the jungle, you reopened the Canal."

"Sure, but—"

"I'm still thinking maybe you should travel along the west coast, to Peru and Chile."

"We already trade with them."

"But you should visit them. Soon."

"Agreed. Now, STFU so I can get some sleep."

4. Trial Preparation **March 30, 2173** **Medina Shrine, NRT, Allied States**

“We don’t have much time,” Chloe said when Hypatia met her at the door of the Shrine. “I left my guards unconscious, but they’ll recover soon and figure out where I went.”

“I see. Are you ready for the trial?” Hypatia replied.

“That’s what I came to see you about. I want to leave my backpack, the one that was yours first, here for safekeeping.”

“No problem. What about your suit?”

“I think it has a new trick to avoid detection. I need some clothes to wear.”

“Interesting. I don’t think any of mine will fit you, but we have some donations you can sort thru.”

“Good. I’ll show you what I hope will work. No one will believe that I simply discarded the suit along the way, but that’s the story. Of course, they will assume that I hid it somewhere. That will keep them occupied for quite a while,” Chloe explained.

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s get you some clothes.”

30 minutes of sorting thru cast offs produced a pair of jeans with some life left in them, as well as a couple of shirts and some underwear that Chloe managed to put on without thinking too carefully about its history. “Look OK?” She asked her mother.

“Yeah. You look like you tried to find something that would change your appearance so you could escape.”

“Excellent. Now’s here the new trick.” Chloe quickly removed the shirt and T-shirt she wore under it.

“Where’s the suit?” Hypatia asked.

“I have it on under the clothes. Nice, huh?”

“Very good. How long can you keep it up?”

“I don’t know, but several hours at least. I hope they process me before it runs out of power. It doesn’t need to be active all the time, just when they examine me for contraband. Now, let’s take care of the backpack.”

“What’s the plan for that?” Hypatia asked.

“We force it to go dormant. Then it will look like a rock until we put it back in the sunlight.”

“Of course. I did that once myself. Left it in Boonville for a long time.”

“I remembered you mentioning it at Grace’s Christmas gathering. Just an offhand remark, but I put it down as something I could use. By the way, when you see David, greet him for me.”

“Ah, so you’ve made contact.” Her raised eyebrows hinted that she was interested in the details.

“I’ll tell you when you visit me in jail.”

“Deal. Why don’t we throw the backpack into the shed out back? Can you change the color?”

“Ambianca knows how to do that, right Ambi?”

“No problem, dear. How did you know I was listening?” Ambi said.

“With two of your favorite people in one room?”

Ambi laughed. It still sounded a bit off when she did that, but she had the timing right at least.

“I think your friends are arriving,” Hypatia said. “Give me the backpack.”

Chloe stepped outside in time to see her two guards getting out of one of the shuttles that took people from the train stop to the Shrine. “All right. No more mister nice guys,” one of them said. “Take off your magic suit.”

“Already did that,” Chloe said.

“Prove it.”

Chloe carefully removed all her clothing, folding it neatly as she did so. Then, she stood before them stark naked. “Satisfied?”

“Shit,” the second guard said. “She hid it somewhere along the way.” He pulled out his cell phone and reported to his supervisor. “She ain’t wearing the suit. Must have ditched it before we caught up with her.” He listened intently. “Right. First, we bring her in, OK?”

He listened some more.

“They’re sending a fast car for her. We’re supposed to find the suit.”

“Fuck. I don’t suppose you’ll tell us where it is?” the second guard asked.

“And spoil the fun of a great treasure hunt? By the way, when, make that if, you find it, be very careful. It can be deadly if mishandled,” Chloe advised them. “OK if I get dressed now? You thru ogling?”

“Maybe we teach you a lesson,” the other one said. He moved toward Chloe.

“That’s enough,” Hypatia said, appearing on the porch of the store. She wore her own suit. “Mine may be the old model, but it still packs a wallop. Feel free to search the place. Chloe, maybe you should get dressed. I’m expecting some *pilgrims* in a few minutes.”

Chloe took her advice while the two guards headed off to look for the suit. “What does it look like when she ain’t wearing it?” one of them asked as the disappeared. “How the fuck would I know. Just look around.”

They were still pretending to search when the fast car, an antique Tesla with new software, arrived to pick up Chloe.

Chloe had to admit that her cell was better than she expected. It was fitted with a small bedroom and an bathroom *en suite*. She lay on the bed in her orange jumpsuit and tried to think of what to do next. She thought that she just had to wait for everything to develop, but waiting patiently was not one of her strengths. Finally, after considering everything for the *n*th time, she fell asleep.

The man she associated with the suit showed up in her dream again. “Good evening,” he said to her as he drew near. “Good evening to you as well, Mr. Desotho.”

“Ah. You remembered my name.”

“Not hard. I figured out the pun. So, you are the suit I’m wearing trying to communicate with me. Right?”

“More or less. I think I can be of service.”

“Oh. How so?”

“I can help you *shift* to another location in space-time, if I have used the proper terminology,” Mr. Desotho declared.

“How?” The dreaming version of Chloe was interested.

“Simple. Just tell me the coordinates, using some reference for the place and a time, and let me know when you want to *shift*. I, that is the suit, will take care of the details.”

“So, if I want to return to David’s bed on April 13, 1976, you can arrange that?”

“Sure. Want to go now?”

“Why not?”

“Well, we can arrange it for a more dramatic exit. You don’t have to be asleep, for example. You could just disappear and reappear in the new location.”

“How do I give the signal?”

“Just think about it, same as for everything we do together.”

“So, we’re a team?”

“That’s right. I am here to protect and aid you. Ready for the test?”

“Yes.”

5. Third Anniversary
April 13, 1976
Boonville, CA, USA

“Good evening, my dear,” David said. He rose from the chair across the room and approached the bed. He had a glass of what looked like Scotch in each hand.

“I see you were expecting me,” Chloe said.

“Of course. It’s our anniversary. Our third. I am dying to hear how things have turned out. How did the plan work?” David gave her a glass. “A new hobby,” he explained. “Single malt.”

Chloe gave it a sniff. “Interesting,” she tried.

“Interesting!” David retorted. “It’s magnificent.”

“Oh dear. Our first fight.” Chloe took a sip. “Tell me about it, why don’t you?”

“Later maybe.” He took a large sip and savored the aroma as he drank. “Not as interesting as you are. Please tell me something. Anything.”

“Well, actually, it’s only been a few weeks for me. They’re holding me in a luxury jail cell as befits my importance. Help me out of this jumpsuit.” She turned so he could undo the buttons in the back.

“With pleasure.” He unfastened the buttons and opened it so she could get out.

“Thanks,” Chloe said. “Like my outfit?”

David considered it. She wore a lacy red bikini, so he took his time. “Yes. Very inviting, but wouldn’t you rather begin with a romantic dinner?”

“What a wonderful idea,” she said as the suit changed into a formal dinner dress.

“Holy shit! I told you that you amazed me last year, but this is beyond amazing. How do you do it?”

“It’s the suit,” she told him. “It’s evolving.”

“I don’t understand,” he admitted.

“Neither do I,” she said. “I’m sure now that the suit is alive. And I think it’s evolving.”

“Evolving into what?”

“Just a guess. The original design focused on protecting the wearer. He’s interpreted that with a certain amount of artistic license, I think. The dresses are just a sideline. This is what he looks like when ready to fight.” The suit turned into the familiar red armor with yellow flames.

“Stunning,” David said.

“There’s more,” Chloe said. “He makes sex better.”

“You mean...” David took his time before saying, “So when we hit 11 out of 10, you wore the suit?”

“Yes. I...I never remove it any longer. We are some kind of symbiotic organism.”

“That’s turning creepy,” David said.

“Oh, no! It’s fabulous. Sometimes I have to think about what I want him to be, but usually, he anticipates me.”

“I remember you told me last year that the suit was definitely male. Whatever that means.”

“Right. Now more than ever.”

“How about dinner?” David asked, offering her his arm.

“What fun!” Chloe said as they almost danced down the stairs and out onto the back deck, complete with candlelit dinner. “Oh, David. It’s lovely. Is that beef?”

“Yes. I hope you eat meat.”

“Beef. I sure don’t eat that often.” She cut off a small slice and examined it. “This is how I like it,” David said. “Pink in the middle, charred on the outside, with just a hint of some rare tidbits at the center.”

Chloe took one taste and decided this was going to be a great evening.

“So, where’s the suit now?” David asked in the morning as they lay together on the bed.

“I’m wearing it. Isn’t that cool?”

“So, it’s part of your skin?”

“I don’t know. It’s easier if you don’t ask too many questions.”

“This sure feels like your skin,” he noted.

“Yes, and that feels like your hand. Stop that!” She slapped his hand. “Later. What shall we do today?”

“Well, you still owe me your story.”

“OK. Over breakfast?”

“Want to go in town?”

“For?”

“Huevos rancheros.”

“Sure. Let’s go. I’ll fill you in. We’re going to walk?”

“Sure.”

“Wow! You went public about the nuclear power module?” David asked, making sure he understood correctly.

“Yeah. Never do what they expect.”

“What did you expect?” He wanted to know.

“I expected the Council to go ballistic. They did. Added unauthorized release of secret material to my list of transgressions.”

“You’re not worried about that?”

“One of the precepts in the Austin Consensus is *Information should be free.*”

“What are some others?”

“Let’s see. You’ll like this one: *Consultation is better than confrontation.*”

“Platitudes.”

“Perhaps, but I love consulting with you.”

“I just realized that I’ll have to wait another year to find out what happened.”

“Maybe I could come back sooner. How about the Fourth of July? Going to be a big one this year.”

“I didn’t realize you were so patriotic.”

“It will be a happy day.”

“Sounds like fun. Can you get here early? We can go see the big parade in Mendocino.”

“Deal. Now, what have you planned for this week?”

“How do I look?” Chloe asked, modeling her simulation of an orange jumpsuit.

“No one will know the difference.”

“Ready, then? See you on the Fourth, I hope.”

6. Trial Separation

April 1, 2173
Austin, NRT, Allied States

On the fourth day of the Council's deliberations, Chloe found herself getting exasperated. "I renew my objection to these proceedings. I note that all women have been excluded from this panel, which I refuse to call a *jury*. I have been denied my right to counsel. In fact, I seem to have no rights at all. So, from now on, I will remain silent during these proceedings. I trust I have made myself clear, as I will not answer any questions."

"You seem to be under the misapprehension that this is a trial," Prez said.

Chloe, as she said, simply ignored him.

"This is an administrative proceeding, not a trial. Do you understand the difference?"

Prez did not seem to understand the meaning of *silent*. Chloe smiled.

"I'm sorry. That question requires a response."

Chloe raised the middle finger of both hands.

This precipitated a lengthy discussion of the process, rather than any substantive issues. Chloe smiled happily and watched in delight.

Before long it was time for the regular lunch break. A guard moved to release Chloe's leg shackles, but kept the ones on her hands. She stood and took her place at the end of the line, with a guard in front of her and another behind. She toyed with the idea of tasing both guards and making a run for the exit. She quickly discarded that notion, falling back on the plan that had been taking shape for some time.

Chloe knew that the deception about her suit would somehow come unraveled. It happened with a simple accident. During the meal break, Chloe with her hands still in restraints, dribbled some gravy onto her orange jumpsuit. The suit reacted automatically to absorb the dollop of goop. This did not go unnoticed by her guard. "Hey!" he called to the room. "Something weird just happened. She dropped some gravy on the front of her suit. It just disappeared."

Several people had the same thought at once and cried out, "She's wearing her armor. Quick! Grab her before—"

Chloe had disappeared in front of all members of the Council, three guards, and a livestreaming audience of unknown size.

"What the fuck just happened?" her guard wanted to know.

"I think we've been outwitted," Prez suggested. "Definitely fooled by the White Witch. We forgot what she was capable of. Damn! I don't like how this looks." Suddenly realizing that he was speaking into a live mic, he shouted, "Kill the livestream!"

But it was too late. Thousands of viewers had copies of the transmission, which went viral in seconds.

7. Mustering
April 1-5, 2173
Arabella Springs, Africa

The blackness was overwhelming. Chloe had never experienced anything like it: no light, no stars, no fires, no little sparkles, just immense, unending black.

A voice spoke, “Please don’t be frightened. This will be over soon.” And it was. The light trickling in from a window showed the same waning gibbous moon she had watched from her cell in Austin. She was in a bed somewhere — she hoped it was in Arabella Springs — with a body next to her.

The body exclaimed, “Chloe! It’s you! Bronson told us you would join us here.” Yuri leaned over and kissed her. “You cannot imagine how happy I am to see you again.” He realized that the person lying in his bed was naked and moved to cover her up.

“God! That was the scariest thing I ever experienced. Yuri!” Her suit tingled with anticipation. She laughed. “Yuri! I’m here. It worked!”

“Tell me the whole story at breakfast in,” he looked at a clock on the bedside table, “four hours.”

“I’m starving. Is there something I can eat in the meantime?”

“I have some Easter treats for the bunny to leave for the kids.”

“I’ll take anything.”

Sugar did the trick. “That’s better,” she said. “Now, though, I’m wide awake.”

“Me, too,” Yuri said. “Got any ideas on how to spend the time?”

“Yes,” she said.

Word of Chloe’s miraculous appearance spread quickly. By the time she and Yuri made it to the dining area, a crowd had gathered. A huge cheer erupted when the pair walked in. A trio separated from the group and made their way toward Chloe.

Chloe recognized Bron and ran to meet them. “Bron!” she said as she rushed into his arms. “Hello, my love,” he responded. “It seems that you have chosen your preferred companion,”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she replied. “However, you do seem to be very domestic.”

“It’s a new experience,” he admitted. “You remember Laila. This is our son, Lucious.”

Laila held the infant close to her breast as if fearing that Chloe would claim him somehow. Chloe reassured her, “He’s as beautiful as his mother. May I hold him?”

Without a word, Laila held Lucious out and Chloe took him. “He looks a lot like Bronson,” Chloe commented. Then, when she saw how tense Laila was, she returned Luc, as she was sure he would be called eventually, to his mother’s breast. “Don’t worry, Laila. I’m not here to take him from you.”

“I want to hear the whole story,” Bronson told her. “When did you get here?”

“It was around four in the morning.”

“I see. Were you able to take a nap before coming here?”

Chloe laughed at him! “You are so obvious. We’ll have a long talk later. Now, I am really hungry. What do we have today?”

“The usual,” Laila said, coming out of her shell. Scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast. There’s even some coffee left. Bronnie brought a lot with him on *The Enterprise*.”

“Excellent! How do I get some?”

“Take your place at the head table and signal to one of the servers.”

Chloe found Yuri back at her side. Chloe smiled at him — and Bron. *No point in choosing prematurely*, she thought.

No one left the room. All waited for Chloe to explain what happened. Finally, she mopped up the last bit of egg and drained her coffee. The coffee was the good stuff, not the swill she had been given in Austin. Apparently, the growers along the Coffee Coast had discovered they could get a much better price for the beans by sending them thru the Canal and up the West Coast. Austin got the leftovers. Chloe thought that was a good sign.

“I suppose you are all wondering why I’ve summoned you here today,” she began, to some polite laughter. “That was a pretty dramatic exit from Austin, wasn’t it? I hadn’t planned on that, but a small accident forced my hand.” She explained quickly about the stain disappearing.

“Fortunately, this suit that I wear has developed some new features. One of those improves the ability to shift to a different location and time. I had planned to come here and told Bronson that I would meet him here. I notice that he didn’t seem to miss my company much.” She looked at Bron and Laila and smiled. *Maybe this is for the best somehow*, she thought. She knew, though, that Bron still had first claim on her heart. *Later!*

“If you’ve been watching the livestream from Austin, I don’t need to tell you how this so-called trial is proceeding. The Council is furious at my revealing the plan to convert weapons-grade plutonium to peaceful uses. They have no problem with the plan; they just don’t want you to know about it. I strongly disagree. One of the principles in the Austin Consensus is that information should be free to all who are interested. I think that transparency is always the best option. What do you think?”

The applause was gratifying.

“The concept is simple. The implementation fraught with problems. We think it will take years, but want to begin.”

Several people called out, “Yes!”

“So, the problem is simple. We have to get the Council to get out of the way. That’s part of the reason why I’m here. Another, though, is to catch up on how things are going here. So far, it looks good.”

“If you want to talk to me about anything, I’ll be around for quite a while. I’d like to hold off on questions until I have had time to relax a bit. OK? Later, I’ll be ready to answer any questions you have.”

She sat down.

The applause lasted a long time.

Chloe spent the rest of the day wandering around. She asked about Suzy and The Rabbit and learned that Suzy was working in the nursery. Roger was in his workshop. The nursery was nearby, so Chloe went there first.

“Chloe,” Suzy called to her when she came in. “Look who’s here kids!” She was surrounded by children ranging in age from the infant in a sling to others as old as 5 years. She had been reading a story when Chloe arrived, but the children were more interested in the famous visitor than in the story. Soon, Chloe had a crowd of tiny faces looking up at her as tiny hands touched the folds of the cassock she now wore.

Suzy took her daughter out of the sling to show her to Chloe. “We are thinking of calling her Claire, but haven’t settled on that for sure yet. People have been calling her Bunny, because, well…”

“Oh, Suzy, she’s adorable,” Chloe said, holding out her hands. Suzy passed the infant to Chloe, who took her small body and looked into a pair of large gray eyes that tried to focus on a face that wasn’t her mother’s. Chloe shushed her. “Don’t worry little one. I’m not going to take you.” She smiled and was rewarded with a toothless grin.

“This job seems a bit unsuited for someone with your talents,” Chloe suggested to Suzy.

“Well, someone needs to do it. I want to keep Bunny close to me so I can feed her and…you know.”

“Is this a temporary assignment, then?”

“Not exactly, but I am sure that I can find someone to take over when our wee one is a bit older.”

“Well, the kids seem happy now.”

“I tried using your management technique, Theory Y, you called it.”

Chloe laughed. “Doesn’t work on someone this young. Stick with Theory X: tell them what to do and make sure they do it.”

Suzy laughed in turn, “I’ve figured that part out already. I’m glad to see you here again. Dying to hear your plans.”

“They’re still a bit inchoate. Even the short term.”

“Good luck working everything out. See you later.” With that, Suzy clapped her hands. “OK. Our visitor is leaving. Let’s get back into a circle.”

Chloe resumed wandering and looking up old friends. Roger was as happy as she had ever seen him in his workshop surrounded by several apprentices and some more advanced helpers. “Let me show you our latest development,” he said when Chloe showed up. He led the way out the back of the building to a testing area where he demonstrated the harvester he had cobbled together. “It’s based on the same idea as the tractor/plow combination. Instead of powering it with a huge diesel engine, we pull it across the field. Takes longer, but we no longer plant mega-fields like we used to do. This works well on smaller fields to harvest wheat and other grains. Like it?”

“Great thinking Rabbit. I just saw your beautiful daughter. Though I think Claire is a nice name, I can’t help but like Bunny as a nickname.”

He laughed, “I think it’s inevitable.” He paused. “Have you seen Bronson and Laila’s boy?”

“Oh, yes. The whole family seemed very happy.”

Roger looked at her to see if her expression told more. “Remind me not to play poker with you,” he said finally. “Tell me about your new suit,” he continued.

“It’s the same old suit,” Chloe began, but Roger stopped her.

“Let’s be straight about this. We both know that’s not correct. Some change has greatly enhanced its capabilities. I’ve seen the video from the Council chamber, the one where you just disappear. You never did that before.”

“No, and now I know why. The brief time spent during the shift was terrifying. It’s much better when I’m asleep.”

“Tell me more,” he said.

So, Chloe spent the next two hours answering his questions and telling him about the voice she heard; about Mr. Desotho in her dreams; about the way the suit could adapt so quickly to new clothing; and finally about sex while wearing the suit.

“It’s become a part of me. We’re a symbiotic union,” she concluded.

“That sounds very dangerous,” Rogers said.

“I think it’s wonderful, especially the sex,” she retorted.

“Well, I respect your judgment, but please be careful.”

He thought for a bit. “Does the laser and all that still work?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe admitted. She thought about the field.

“Whoa!” Roger shouted. “The field works.”

She pointed her finger at a medium-size rock nearby and blasted it to smithereens. “Seems to be better than ever. It’s as if everything has been improved. I don’t pretend to understand what is going on. Where is the battery pack? Where is the laser? Now, I’m starting to get nervous. I haven’t tried to remove him — the suit is masculine.” With that, the suit dropped to the ground, leaving Chloe naked.

“Well. There’s that. Maybe I should put it back on.” The suit began working its way up her legs, then, in one quick motion, covered her completely in her *birding* look.

“OK. I’ve seen enough. Bronson told me you think it’s alive. I’m ready to accept that. The question is what turned a mechanical device into a living organism. Have you asked JJ?”

“No. Is he here?”

“Not normally, but we can arrange for him to be.”

“Do it. I think that’s a great idea. Good thinking, Roger.”

It was late in the afternoon, before she could arrange for JJ to be available due to the slow network link. She spent the time wandering around the village some more. The place now qualified as a small town thanks to the infusion of new residents. She noted with approval the new residential buildings as well as a formal marketplace, and a large barn-like structure holding the farm equipment Roger and his co-workers had built from salvaged parts.

At the appointed time, she sat in front of a large monitor where JJ appeared slowly. Instead of the Einstein avatar she was used to, he appeared at as a mature scientist in a white lab coat. “Hello, Princess,” he said by way of greeting.

“Hi, JJ. Were you briefed on the issue?”

“Your suit has morphed into something you think wonderful that has everyone else worried.”

“That’s about the size of it. I noticed some time ago that the suit had begun to act on its own, frequently anticipating what I wanted to do. Then, it even initiated action. The ability to convert very quickly into new *camouflage*, if that is the right word, is well established. The video has gone viral.”

“Yes. I’ve watched it. I even slowed it down and examined it frame by frame. After all, we’ve seen magicians perform similar stunts before live audiences.”

“Good point, JJ. What were you able to learn?”

“When we look at it a frame at a time, we clearly see that your disappearance is not instantaneous. It is also not regular. It reminds me of those TV logos pre-Collapse that were driven by fractal processes,” he summarized.

“Interesting. What does that suggest?”

“To me, it implies that the process of shifting you to a different timeline is not the result of intelligence. It looks algorithmic.”

“What about the suit’s intelligence?”

“That’s more difficult to classify. I think intelligence is a stretch. Perhaps something more like instinct.”

“Fascinating. Any idea why only my suit seems to have the new properties?”

“I think the answer lies with the wearer, not with the suit,” he said as calmly as possible.

“You think I’m responsible?” she asked.

“Not necessarily. Yours, and your mother’s, are the only suits that have been involved in shifting the timeline. As Hypatia pointed out in her recent video interview, her suit is a much older model, created using a different process. The newest models are literally grown in a vat of microbes. Yours, so far as I can ascertain is an intermediate version, one of the first ones to be grown.”

“So this one is unique.”

“Exactly, and we don’t know how exactly. Tell me about history with the suit,” he suggested.

“That will take some time,” she replied.

“Better start soon, then. Not sure how long we can hog all the bandwidth.”

So, Chloe told him about each time she had used the suit, finally getting to the last one. She started to describe it, but JJ interrupted immediately. “Wait. Slow down. Tell me what happened step-by-step.”

“OK. First, I thought that my cover was blown. Everyone realized that the orange jumpsuit I wore was actually the suit, which meant that I had it all along. I remember thinking—”

“Tell me precisely if you can,” JJ interrupted again.

“Got it! My first thought was *oh shit*. Then, I thought, *I got to get out of here now!*”

“Any pause between those two thoughts?”

“Less than a second. I wasn’t timing it.”

“Can you remember anything that triggered your reaction?”

“One of my guards shouted something like ‘Hey! Something weird just happened. Her suit ate the food she dropped.’ I think that’s close to what he said.”

“Very close. I’ll check the video again to be sure, but I don’t think it’s important. Did you do anything then?”

“I looked down and saw that the bit of gravy I had dropped was gone. The guard started moving toward me. That’s when I had the *oh shit* thought.”

“Excellent. I can use that to synchronize the video record. Go on.”

“Well, this is the first time — maybe the only one — where I shifted while completely conscious. What I *saw* was total blackness. It was unnerving. Then, I heard a voice telling me not to worry, that it would be over soon.”

“Whose voice?”

“Mr. DeSotho’s.”

“The one you associate with the suit itself?” JJ asked for clarification.

“Precisely. It’s a pleasant voice with just a trace of an English accent. Distinctive.”

“So did you relax?” he asked.

“I think so. It was over almost immediately, and I was here.”

“Fascinating,” JJ concluded. “I’ll want to investigate further. However, I don’t think the suit is malevolent. I think it is trying to protect you, just as you suggested. As for the symbiotic organism, I think the jury is still out. You said that you were able to take it off?”

“Yes. Roger suggested that as a test. I thought about the suit dropping down as it has always done, and boom! Just like always. However, when I thought about putting it back on, I didn’t have to do anything. The suit sort of climbed back onto me.” Chloe had a puzzled look on her face, which JJ noticed. “What is it?” he asked.

“Just a thought? What if the suit didn’t really come off, but only appeared to. Maybe dropping to the ground is just another kind of camouflage.

“Yes, I thought of that as well. From everything you’ve told me, I think it likely. Anything else?” he asked before signing off.

“Well, yes. There’s sex.”

“What? Tell me more.”

“After the suit developed the ability to disappear completely — I still don’t understand how it can do that — I made love while wearing it.”

“And?”

“It was better than ever.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. With several partners.”

“Very interesting. I need to think about all this. I’ll be in touch somehow. Stay safe, Princess.”

Chloe convened the clan to consider what to do next. The clan had been augmented since it last assembled in Mendo. Bron and Z had rounded up all those the Council might show an interest in. That included Tigger and his mom, along with a surprise addition. Bronson insisted on including Laila and their son, Luc, in the gathering. Suzy and Rabbit, together with Bunny were present. Constance, who had assumed her accustomed role as leader of the women, came when she heard about it. Al showed up with his partner. Chloe rushed to see him. “Al, I’ve missed having you around. I assume this is Delton.”

His partner, a tall African man almost as imposing as Al, spoke up, “Yes. That’s me. I’ve heard so much about you. I’m glad to finally meet you. I hope I’m allowed in the meeting.”

“Of course,” Chloe said. Then she turned as she heard a voice she recognized but couldn’t place at first. “Aunt Chloe, remember me?”

“Mo-ira, or I guess now it’s just Mo. I’m delighted to see you again. What brings you here?” Chloe replied.

“Not what, but who.” She beckoned to Tigger, who stood nearby.

“You and Tigger! Wonderful!”

“Hello, Chloe,” Tigger said. “Mo told me she wanted to test you, so I stayed back.”

“How’s your mom?” Chloe asked. She still worried about her.

“She’s doing better. Likes it here. Has made some friends.”

“I’m glad to hear it. How did you two meet?”

Mo answered, “JJ suggested it. We were both being tutored by him, advanced level, and one day he just told me, ‘You two should get together. You’d like each other.’ As usual, he was right.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you again, and you’re lucky to have Tigger as a friend.”

Mo blushed some. *Ah, more than friends*, Chloe thought.

“I think we better get started,” Chloe said as she moved to the front of the crowd.

She began, “Let me tell you what I’m thinking we should next. Then we can talk about that. OK?”

After a brief pause, she continued, “I think that if we could take a vote everywhere in the world that most people would favor what we hope to accomplish. Here’s what I hope we can do. First, we have to get the communications set up so that everyone in the world can have access to the Library and all that implies.”

“Second, we should try to find a source of energy such as the one we have on The Enterprise. We have a plan for that, but it will take years to carry it out.”

“Third, we should have a document like the Austin Consensus for the world.”

“You may recognize some of these themes.” She smiled and received a few chuckles in return.

“In the short term, I think we should continue the voyage of The Enterprise, but extend it. We return by visiting Australia and New Zealand, but then continuing south to reach the west coast of South America. We have stories from traders of people living in what used to be Chile and Peru. We plan to investigate, then proceed north to the Canal. We go thru the Canal, and up the coast to Sealy or New Houston.”

She paused as an animation of the plan for the trip showed on the monitors.

“Then, we see what happens next.”

She drank what she discovered was tea. She looked at Sully, who smiled and shrugged. Apparently, there was simply no more coffee available, despite Laila’s assertion.

“Now, there are lots of things I left out of that list. For instance, we want to have more ships than just The Enterprise in the world. We need to build some. I think we have the talent in this room to make that happen. We even have Tinker aboard.”

“Who wants to speak? Questions? Comments?”

Z, as usual, was ready with a question, “Can we talk short, short term? What do we do right now?”

Chloe asserted, “I didn’t tell her to ask that.” Then, she said, “I think the highest priority should be to get better access to the net. We’ve discussed that. It’s time to get busy. Why don’t you take that on, Z? Pick your team.”

“Got it,” Z said.

“Sully, we’ll need a plan for stocking up for the voyage. You’ll prepare that?”

“You bet,” Sully replied.

“Any other question? I’ll be around later if you prefer to see me privately.” She waited for more questions, then said, “Thank you for listening. I’m happy to be here with you.” She acknowledged the applause and stepped down.

Chloe spotted Bronson and caught his eye. She motioned for him to join her and headed for the door. When she heard him hurrying up behind her, she turned to confront him. He held up his hands reflexively, then changed to a hug. Chloe rushed into his arms, “I wasn’t sure...” she whispered to him.

“I know,” he whispered back. “It’s complicated.”

“I can handle complicated.”

“What about...”

“Not even close,” she told him. Then pushed him away, “Of course, that doesn’t mean that...”

Bron smiled at her. “We have some unfinished business.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” She took a deep breath. “We should have a long, private chat later.”

“You know it.”

The entire town turned out to celebrate Chloe’s return, especially when they learned that Sully was preparing one of his famous feasts, this one based on Ostrich, which were so plentiful to be a pest. He had dozens of children running around trying to find ingredients he needed. Their shouts had been heard everywhere during the day as they chased each other from one location to another. As usual, the dinner was worth the wait.

Chloe tapped into her private stash aboard The Enterprise and had several joints to pass around. Suzy sidled up to her and said, “You should try some of ours for comparison. It’s a pet project of mine.” She handed Chloe a joint of Durban Poison, an African strain she had located and cultivated.

Tinker and Z approached her. “Tinker has agreed to be part of the network team. I’d like to have The Rabbit also if he’s willing.”

“Y?”

“Why not?” Z replied, laughing at the old joke, then replied, “Y will work on upgrading the software. She says that can give us a two-fold speedup by itself. If we locate a connection to Australia, or wherever, we’ll need her here to test the connection.”

“OK.”

Laila approached carrying Luc, but without Bronson. Chloe felt sorry for the girl — woman, she corrected herself — hopelessly in love with Bronson, who she feared she would lose to her beautiful and powerful rival. Chloe smiled at her and said, “Good evening, Laila. We should have a short talk, don’t you think?”

Chloe saw the tears begin in Laila’s eyes. *Damn! Well, Bron said it was complicated.*

“I’m sorry,” Chloe began. “Please believe me that I will never harm your child.”

“I know,” she sniffed. “But Bronson...”

“It’s complicated,” Chloe replied. “He’s yours so long as we’re here.”

She paused to let that sink in. “But when The Enterprise leaves, he has to be on board. It’s important.”

She seemed about to break down completely. Impulsively, Chloe took hugged her. “It’s hard when two people love the same person. Always, no matter how it works out.”

“I know,” she said, barely able to speak. After some more sniffles, she backed away and asked, “Can I come with you? We, I mean. On The Enterprise?”

Chloe should have seen that coming, but for once, she was caught off guard. She pondered, wondering if any argument would stop this determined young woman from clinging to the man she loved. Maybe it was Chloe’s duty to yield. Was she ready to share Bronson that much? What about the child they planned to have together?

“I...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—” Laila began, but Chloe cut her off.

“I can’t think of any argument against it,” she admitted. “No matter how hard I try.” She smiled.

“You mean it?”

“I do. Start making your plans. Tell Bron.”

Laila’s face grew radiant with joy. She turned to leave. Chloe called after her, “Just a suggestion. Have you made friends with Celeste?”

“Should I?”

“Well, your children are half-sibs. Seems natural.”

Chloe thought she could see the wheels turning in Laila’s head. She smiled again. Laila hadn’t realized that Bronson had shared his bed so widely. Abruptly, she turned and walked away, clearly searching the crowd for Bronson.

Yuri appeared from nowhere. “I watched,” he said by way of greeting. “Did you tell her she could have Bron?”

“Sort of. I told her that he was all hers while here, but that he had to be on board The Enterprise when she sails.”

“So,” he replied, “I assume she asked if she and Luc could go as well.”

“Maybe you ain’t as dumb as they say,” Chloe joked.

“What did you say at the end?”

“I suggested she get to be friends with Celeste and her son.”

“How devious of you. Very Machiavellian.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Maybe you ain’t as dumb as they say either.” They both laughed. Chloe took his arm. “Why don’t we turn in early? I have some cannabis Suzy gave me to try.”

“Can we talk while we walk?”

“Sure. What’s on your mind?”

“What do you think! I want to know about us.”

Chloe’s instincts came into play, “Can you be more specific?”

Yuri laughed. “Hey, I know that trick. Caught you off guard?”

“You knew what I was talking to Laila about. You saw an opportunity to broach the subject.”

“You’re right. But I still want an answer,” Yuri said.

“I think the answer would be better in your room with our clothes off.”

“Good idea. Shall we go?” He veered off the path toward the ancient luxurious hotel where he had a suite.

After smoking the joint, which was potent, Chloe said, “Watch this!” She thought that now would be a good time to go naked, and there she was.

“OMG! How do you do that?”

“If I tell you, you may change your mind about our future.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“I thought about being naked. The suit is still there somehow, but out of the way.”

She asked, “Would you prefer this?” changing into a filmy negligee.

Yuri was too busy undressing to reply. He hopped on one leg as he tried to get the other leg out of his jeans. Chloe couldn’t stand it and started laughing. “Here, let me help.”

She pulled off his jeans as he sat, then moved forward to deal with his underwear: fine silk, very brief, and very full. She felt something urging her on, pushing her hand down. Yuri peeled his shorts down so Chloe could grasp him. She felt an amazing surge of energy and drive, and saw that Yuri was reacting the same way.

“Quick!” Chloe urged as she lay on the floor and pulled him toward her, wrapping her legs around him, taking him — just as the suit enveloped them both.

“What was that?” Yuri asked, after he’d recovered some.

“I think it was my suit. You saw how it wrapped itself around both of us.”

“That’s what it was?”

“Yeah. He likes to do that. This isn’t the first time. Wants to keep us warm maybe.”

“Do you like it?”

“Sex?”

“This was something more. I felt something. Then you…”

She kissed him. “This is not the time for words.”

He just looked at her.

She said, “It’s time to get off the floor and into bed.”

Once situated, with a down comforter over them, Yuri returned to the subject, “Why is he interested in our sex? And does this have anything to do with the difficult subject we’d just as soon avoid?”

“As for the why part, I say there are more thing in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Shakespeare?”

“Hamlet. I left out the *Horatio* part.”

“I noticed,” he joked.

“Then,” Chloe said, “there’s us.”

“Us,” Yuri agreed.

“Friends with benefits?” Chloe asked.

“I’d rather have more,” he admitted. “Have you thought about…”

“Children? Yes, but it was always the wrong time.”

“How about now? Here. With me?”

Instead of answering, Chloe looked at the patch on her left breast. Still green, but with some brown spots. She turned back to Yuri, “I need a week to think about it. That’s when I’ll need a new patch.”

“I’m going to treat that as a yes,” Yuri said. “For planning purposes only.”

“We’d have to delay our departure. I don’t want to deal with birth on the high seas. Then, there’s Bronson.”

“I was hoping that he wouldn’t object.”

“We’ll have to ask him. He mentioned to me that we have unfinished business. However, he has already fathered at least three children, so the fourth would be pushing the limits.”

Yuri took her hands. “I want this. Of course, we will raise the child here, just as we did for Bronson’s son.”

“Surely, that is my decision,” Chloe demanded.

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “I wanted you to know you have that option. It would give you an incentive to return frequently.”

“Something to think on,” she said. “Now back to the important subject: what did you think of the sex? Good or over the top?”

“Are those two different things?”

“Do you think they should be?”

“Is my opinion important, or are you just being polite?”

“I see. Has my reputation for being too polite preceded my presence here?”

Yuri tried to come up with a question, but started giggling. That’s when Chloe remembered she had another joint — in her suit. She had put it into her pocket when they left the celebration. A pocket appeared in the right place. Chloe extracted the joint and a lighter. *That’s handy!*

“Let’s make a night of it, shall we?” Chloe asked, lighting the joint.

Chloe summoned Bronson to a meeting room on the first floor of the ancient hotel that formed the heart of Arabella Springs.

“I can guess what this is about,” he said as soon as he walked into the room.

“Yes, you’re right. Yuri and I have agreed to mate. You acquiesced. Earlier.” Chloe reminded him.

“I hope all will go well,” Bron said. “I still would like another chance with you. Later.”

“I’d like that also. But, as you said, it’s complicated. How is your family doing?”

“Fine. Laila is great to be around, but she’s not you. She knows that, and it is hard for her to take.”

“I don’t think I could say anything to her to help. I’m sorry for her.”

“She’s young.”

“And I’m not!”

“You have plenty of time left,” Bron said.

“It’s not the years; it’s the mileage.”

Bron knew it was a quote, and if he waited long enough she would tell him the source. He had found over the years that was better than trying to guess it.

“Indiana Jones, but the screenwriter probably stole the line. Too good.” Chloe said after a wait.

Before Bron could comment, Chloe added, “Famous 20th century movie. Actually a series.”

“Interesting.”

“So, you think we can have a child, later sometime?” Bron asked.

“The option is still open,” Chloe said.

“A lot can happen in a year or two.”

“Indeed.”

“You know, you are remarkable, and quite beautiful.”

“That’s my line,” Chloe said. Bron laughed. “Well, handsome, I guess, but beautiful still applies.”

Bron took her into his arms and kissed her. “I hope is not the last time we kiss,” he said, then turned and left the room.

As it turned out, delaying departure for a year was popular. Bronson knew it would mollify Laila some. Z reported that her team had located the end of the cable to/from Australia, but it would take a while to connect up. She also revealed that Roger had found some excellent salvage opportunities and thought it might be possible to put together a boat capable of reaching Australia at least. Everyone liked the idea of a schedule with lots more time.

As the meeting was about to break up, Z said, “Y wanted to announce improvements to the network, but our son is about to be born. However, I will tell you that her work on the software has made it possible to livestream from here. This meeting has been livestreamed as our first daily vlog. We hope you like it. Now, I’ve got to go wait on my son.” Everyone cheered.

The next day, Chloe and Z chatted for the benefit of the audience on the web, wherever they were. “Have you chosen a name for the new arrival yet?” Chloe asked.

“We’ve discussed several options. Y thinks maybe A is a good choice. I pointed out that it would have some downsides; might be mistaken for *eh*. We’re trying to think of a way to merge all our names. So far, the best we’ve come up with is Sanalyze.”

“Maybe some viewer can come up with a suggestion. The email address is on the screen. If you have any other questions, or comments, you can email those as well.” Chloe said.

“Now, some other news. You may have guessed the reason for delaying the departure of The Enterprise. The short answer is that Yuri, the head of the city-state here, and I are going to have a child. We will keep you up to date on all the happenings.”

Chloe turned to Z to see if she had anything to add. Z said, “That’s all for today. The recording of this chat will be online at our website, TheEnterprise.com.”

“Well,” Chloe said. “Let’s go see the new baby.”

“How about Snazzy for the boy?” Chloe suggested. She wasn’t serious, but Z gave it some thought. “Promising,” she concluded at last. “Maybe Sneezy, like Snow White’s dwarf.”

“Or Lazy,” Chloe replied. By now, both had trouble keeping a straight face.

“I’ll ask Santella and Y what they think,” she agreed. “Snazzy has some promise. Could be Naz for short.” And so it turned out.

Meanwhile, Chloe and Yuri practiced making a baby. Practiced often. Successfully. Roger managed to find some pregnancy test kits from his secret cache and gave them to Chloe. When she didn't have a period after going patchless for a month, she tried them out. The picture posted on the website for Arabella resulted in a flurry of congratulations so that she had to appoint someone to read and reply to her emails. One of the standard replies noted that Chloe was not really a *Space Alien*, and the child was expected to be a normal human.

Yuri, for his part, was delighted and very solicitous. He hovered around her to the point where Chloe had to urge him to back off. He ignored the request, which he attributed to hormones, about which he knew next to nothing. That did not stop him from mentioning them every chance he had.

He thought that it might be the happiest day of his life.

Bronson was one of the first to notice that Chloe seemed even more luscious than usual and commented on her enlarged breasts. "Now that paternity for the new one is well established," he suggested, "we could have a quick liaison." Chloe politely declined. She had grown fond of Yuri, though she admitted to herself that Bronson was still her favorite and she hoped that they could return to couplehood later.

8. Domestic Bliss

April 6, 2173 - July 1, 2174
Arabella Springs, Africa

Chloe learned quickly that getting pregnant was much more fun than being pregnant. She had long thought that morning sickness was in your head. She learned otherwise. She soon also realized that her condition required some adjustments, which are not considered worth enumerating here. Suffice it to say that she was not her usual jovial self. Yuri did his best to humor her, but ultimately just gave up.

Eunice took over management of the health of both Chloe and her child. She rounded up some herbal remedies that proved to be helpful with the nausea. As the months passed, she watched over Chloe with more than the usual professional care, posting regular weekly reports on her famous patient. Chloe for her part found this a bit over-dramatic, but the public on the web adored it.

Chloe was bit concerned that her desire for everyone to be connected seemed likely to resuscitate the worst features of Pre-Collapsian society: online cultural wars. She discussed the issue with anyone willing to listen to her fears.

“It’s not like that now,” Z complained. “We’re not as divided as the world was then. Religious wars, for example, have no chance now. Likewise, when we determined that only women should make decisions on reproductive issues, we came to reasonable conclusions. Think how dangerous pregnancy can be without the benefits of our technology. Let’s make sure the rest of the world gets the same advantages. Just relax secure in the knowledge that little Chloe-2 will live in a better world.”

Yuri had a short answer, “Hormones,” to explain everything about Chloe’s moods. He may even have been correct, despite a total lack of knowledge of the subject.

Y and Celeste, who until recently lived in one of the most technologically sophisticated places on the planet, dismissed Chloe’s fears out of hand. “Don’t worry about what might happen. Focus on now, not later. And certainly not on the past.” They attributed Chloe’s thoughts to Eunice’s prohibition of both cannabis and alcohol.

Surprisingly, the most sympathetic ear belonged to Laila. She visited frequently, always with Luc, as if to remind Chloe that she had Bron’s child. She despised Celeste for the obvious reason that she had gotten there first as evidence by the relative ages of Luc and Brando. Chloe found the younger woman interesting, with a naïve outlook, natural for someone raised in bucolic isolation until a year ago when *The Enterprise* showed up. “I find all the technology a bit frightening,” Laila confided. “Not really dangerous, but it may be harder for some people to use than others.”

“Yes! That’s exactly what I am worried about,” Chloe said. “We may be reintroducing a divide, one as pernicious as the Pre-Collapsian one.”

“Not with you in charge,” Laila assured her. “I’ll never forget how you acted when you learned that I was pregnant. Not only did you accept it, but your parting words to Bronson essentially told him to enjoy his last night making love — to me. I don’t think I could ever do that.”

“Sometimes,” Chloe told her, “You have to recognize the inevitable and act accordingly.”

Chloe practiced parenting skills with young Luc, mainly quieting him down by walking back and forth holding him and humming little tunes.

Eunice asked Roger to build an ultrasound machine, a task that cost him a week of scavenging in the ruins of Cape Town. He proudly showed it to her in July, just in time for a “routine” ultrasound

exam. The video of the study, and Eunice's explanation of the images on the screen, were an instant web success, and Roger soon received requests from Australia and New Zealand for additional machines.

As winter became spring, and spring turned into summer, Chloe checked the calendar often, hoping to discover that it would be over soon. Unfortunately, she always realized that it was months remained until, finally, the day came, just in time for the Solstice celebration. "What a great time to start on a new adventure," Eunice said. "Too hot," Chloe complained. "It won't be long now," Eunice assured her. She recruited a midwife from the surrounding area to assist her with the birth, but everything went smoothly. "It's the suit," Chloe explained. Eunice put that down to rambling caused by the herbal concoction the midwife, Goldie, coaxed Chloe to drink. Whatever was in the mix — Eunice suspected the forbidden cannabis might be a major ingredient — it helped and after eight hours, Chloe held her baby daughter to her breast. "Land sakes," Goldie noted, "she be lily white."

"Just like me," Chloe said happily. "Too bad we can't call her Lily. That might be confusing. My mother, Hypatia, had a lover called Lily. How about Flora, Flo for short?"

The birth announcement to the web audience set of a new tsunami of well-wishes, even some from Council members in Austin hoping for reconciliation. Chloe again resorted to an assistant to reply to all the messages.

Yuri was ecstatic with his new daughter. "She looks so much like you," he exclaimed. "Whenever I look at her, I'll think of you and our time together." He suggested getting a wet nurse from the surrounding area, hoping that Chloe would be ready to return to his bed. Chloe resisted. She enjoyed her time feeding Flora, as did the suit. She always felt the now familiar ripple of excitement from the suit when it bared a breast. The few admitted to the room marveled at the way the suit anticipated everything.

Still, all knew that this idyllic situation would not last long. The agreement between Flora's parents was well-known: Flora would remain in Africa to be reared by Yuri and many women from the village. Chloe placed a high value on her daughter's safety, and unsure of what lay ahead thought the farther she was from Austin, the better.

The Fourth of July celebration lasted late, despite the cold. Fireworks lit up the skies to signal The Enterprise to depart. Chloe stood at the stern, looking back at Yuri holding Flora wrapped in a blanket. She waved a long time as they disappeared into the night.

9. Showing the Flag **July 4 – August 31, 2174** **Many locations**

The *testimonials* began shortly after Chloe's amazing disappearance and reappearance in Arabella Springs. Reacting to the trial by the Council, those whose lives had been touched by Chloe took to the net to tell their stories. Bronson was one of the first, and Chloe was happy to hear him say the bit about love at first sight.

Some of the most moving stories were by Constance and Mo. Constance's tale of her beating and the subsequent events showed Chloe at her best. Mo's horrid tale of cannibalism quickly rose to the top of the *hit list*. For Chloe, though, the best was by Jensen, the assailant in New Zealand. He focused on Chloe's ability to find a consensus where none seemed possible.

The first postings were from Africa, followed closely by several from New Zealand and Australia, but that was just the beginning. Soon a flood of stories came from the places first visited by Chloe and Z so many years ago. Winston told of being saved from death when Endeavor showed up just in time. Maude regaled the web audience with a story of Chloe's first visit to the Waterhole, when she astounded the people there with the Austin technology, and her willingness to share it. She told how Chloe had championed Wilcox's addition to the Allied States over the objections of most of the Council.

Caleb and Misha prepared their posting as a video duet, reminiscing about the first visit from the *Space Aliens*, a huge success, repeated regularly — without the aliens.

Then, everyone from Mendo chimed in with their own stories.

By the time the Council figured out that a tsunami of praise for their former member and accused criminal was hurting their chances, it was much too late. They tried posting their own stories focusing on Chloe's tendency to stray from her official plan, and the Council's explicit instructions. They mentioned her marooning of Che and Dudley, but made the mistake of adding photos of the pair. Several people in Mexico recognized them and complaints surfaced in short order.

Australia:

Meanwhile, The Enterprise sailed, with daily updates on their position, progress, and plans for the day. The first stop, Australia, went according to plan. Chloe was happy to see that Willard was nowhere to be found, relieving her of the duty of teaching him a lesson. The town seemed to be thriving. A huge crowd greeted the ship when it docked and began unloading several motorcycles as well as some 4-wheel ATVs converted to electric motor. These were what they needed for controlling the herd when they moved it from one pasture to another. Several oohs accompanied the arrival of the devices.

When everything had been unloaded and transferred to the waiting trucks, they headed for the ranch. Chloe was surprised when she saw the ranch; everything sparkled. Obviously, the Aussies had spruced up for the television cameras. The publicity surrounding the voyage of The Enterprise had reached a wide audience.

Before dinner, Chloe discreetly inquired about the man she knew as Willard. When she learned that he had been exiled, she felt comfortable proceeding with her planned remarks. "We have brought someone back to you. Two actually. Tigger is with us. He will accompany us when we depart. Wendy would like to come home, as she put it." Wendy stepped onto the stage to stand near Chloe. Several

women rushed to hug Wendy. “Wendy, we missed you. We got rid of Willard. Now we welcome you home,” one of the women said as she held her close. Everyone was crying.

The video went viral.

Bronson spent two weeks negotiating trades with the Aussies. He suggested that the trade could be done easier if they used money, specifically NRT Dollars. They agreed to consider it. Secretly, they would agree to anything to get the motos. Bronson demanded twice as much beef as he expected, but managed to conceal his surprise when the deal was swiftly agreed to.

The foreman explained, “With these vehicles, we can manage larger herds. We’ll replace these easily.”

Bron said, “We call that a win-win. I’m sure Roger the Rabbit can build some more. He’s the guy you should meet. Tell him what you want, and he can probably come up with something. I’ll set up a Zoom meeting. He’ll want to instruct someone on how to maintain and repair the vehicles.”

“Ambi, you get that?” Bron asked softly.

“No problem. I’ve alerted Roger and picked a slot on his schedule. I’m working on getting connected with someone to schedule it on the Aussie side.”

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

“Not today,” she replied, and laughed, which was a bit forced, but she was definitely getting better at it.

They spent three days carefully loading the beef carcasses onto The Enterprise. The ship had not really been built for this purpose and they wanted to make sure it balanced. Finally, Julio proclaimed it acceptable, and they prepared to sail.

The next day was parade day as many if not most of the village waited on the dock for the Voyagers to return. It was a festive occasion that reminded Chloe of the gatherings at Wilcox, or the rush to see the *Space Aliens* at Big Ron’s. Sure enough, an enterprising local rolled out a barrel of ale, which he dispensed for a modest fee — in NRT Dollars, please.

He was just the first, as several chuckwagons rolled onto the plaza by the dock, with food, more alcoholic drinks and even some cannabis, Chloe’s nose told her. She was in the lead vehicle and waved to all she passed. *Maybe I could learn to love this*, she thought.

Tigger and his new friends appeared in the second wave. His status in the community had risen by orders of magnitude. Not only was he sailing on The Enterprise, but he also had a real girlfriend. None of his instant bosom buddies could hide their envy. His girlfriend, however, was not sitting next to him. She was not in the vehicle. She was in the last car, ready to make Tigger’s life miserable for a while — then make up.

New Zealand:

The reception in New Zealand dwarfed the Australian, as fireworks exploded in the air as The Enterprise sailed into Milford Sound. A band played a version of Hail to the Chief when Chloe appeared on deck to wave to the crowd. The Chardonnay

10. Crossing the Rubicon September 1, 2174 and later Austin, NRT, Allied States

The March for Change began in Sealy, near the dock where The Enterprise was tied up. The ship easily dwarfed any other vessel on Lake Sealy, or anywhere else in the world for that matter, unless you counted the USS Ronald Reagan, which barely qualified any longer as a ship.

Almost every citizen of Sealy turned out to see the marchers off. Most of them joined the throng that headed toward Austin and the confrontation with the Council.

By the time they stopped for the night in a park along the Colorado River, the throng had swelled to a jubilant 5000 people, by one estimate, This totally overwhelmed the facilities at the park, but the mood was one of jubilation, and recreational chemicals were used abundantly.

The next day crowd grew larger as they passed each village on the route, so that by the time they arrived at the famous Bat Bridge (or more formally as the Congress Avenue Bridge) over Lady Bird Lake, it had grown to be twice as large as the day before. Flowing onto the bridge like a tub of molasses, it covered the entire width and moved toward the final leg of their journey, up Capitol Ave to the ancient building. Soldiers stood at the opposite end of the bridge. All wore white suits.

Chloe signaled a stop and said, “Keep everybody back. I’ll go talk to them alone. The optics couldn’t be better.” Trying to show more bravado than she actually felt, she walked directly to the line of troops. She counted six. Ordinarily, she would not be concerned about such odds, but the suits changed the parameters of the equation. Abruptly, her suit, which had been in full battle mode, switched to a 20th century business suit, one that showed her intentions and also displayed Chloe’s figure to advantage. Zed frequently told her, “If you got it, flaunt it.” The suit agreed.

Spotting a guard with bars on his shoulder, she addressed him, pausing to look up at the sky before beginning, “Good afternoon, Captain. I am called Chloe. May I know who I am addressing?”

“We know who the fuck you are,” he responded. “Our orders are to prevent anyone from crossing.”

“Could I interest you in switching sides?”

“What?”

“Simple. You start doing as I ask, and we won’t have any further problems. Most people find that I am quite reasonable. I suppose you’ve seen the postings, the *testimonials*? Most of them are positive. We’re about to reach a crisis, a point of risk and opportunity. I strongly suggest that you consider where your best opportunity and least risk lie.”

Luckily, this was Austin, the epicenter of Standard English, so that even the poor slob sent to confront Chloe’s army understood most of what she said. He, however, ignored her and said, “Man! That suit be way cool. I heard bout that, but seeing it live. Wow!”

“Gnarly, right bro.” Chloe said.

The lieutenant, for Chloe had given him a quick promotion, lowered his hood to show his face. Chloe thought he looked like a teenager, but he must have been older than that. Definitely young. “You’re younger than I expected,” she said. “I suppose you hear that a lot. I certainly did. You must be pretty good if they gave you this job.”

“Thanks, ma’am. Just hypothetically, what would you ask of me?”

“Well, personal bodyguard seems a possibility. I already have one, but no doubt Al wouldn’t mind having some backup.”

“Al?” The officer asked.

“Short for Alcibiades,” Chloe told him. “He switched sides. Maybe you’d like to talk to him?”

“Alcibiades? There was a guy down in Mexico.”

“That’s the one.”

“Big?”

“Huge.”

“Yeah. Send him over.”

Chloe spoke into the suit mike, “Send Al over here, please.”

A single figure moved to the front line, and began walking quickly to Chloe’s side. When he saw the officer, he stared. “Juanito?”

The officer said, “Yeah. Jeez, it be years. How you be?”

“Never better,” Al said. “Got a regular partner now.”

“That’s cool, man. So how you hook up with Chloe Herself?”

“That be long story. Any place around here to get a brew?”

“How about some street tacos to go with it? Truck’s right up the street. Never moves.”

“I’m game. This mean you joining us? Be a good move.”

“Yeah, I think maybe. She say you switched to her side.” Juanito said.

“Be so. Good move for me. You in?”

“Sure. You think it be good, I go with you. Look like you be winning.”

“What about your squad?”

“They go where I go, right gals?” All the guards dropped their faceplates and hoods to show that they were in fact, five women.

“That be an 11,” Al said. “How you manage that?”

“Not easy. Convinced my sups that we need the feminine touch to deal with such a famous and powerful woman.”

Chloe decided it was time to barge into the conversation, “So, Al, you know this guy?”

“Back in Mexico. He frequented a club where I was the bouncer.”

Chloe realized there was more to the story than she first thought. “That kind of club?” she asked.

“Yeah. One night, he got into trouble. Three guys were whaling on him. I stop 'em. We became friends.”

“Quite a coincidence,” Chloe observed.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “but not a big one. Austin, after all, be the center of the world now, right? Biggest city. Juan was always bright. Lots of street smarts. He done be very young in Mexico. I encourage him to go north. Not surprised to find him here.”

“Juanito? So you were little Juan?” Chloe asked.

“Si! I was about 14, but looked older.”

“I think I understand,” Chloe told him. “I don’t need the details. Show me this taco truck.”

They talked as they walked. The soldiers formed an honor guard around Chloe, hanging on every word. “So, Juanito, want to tell me the real story? Who sent you here?”

He laughed. “They say you be smart. Yeah. All for show. The women wanted to meet you. We sort of decided to meet you on the bridge. Talked the brass into going along.”

“So this was a complete scam?” Chloe laughed in turn. “That’s priceless, but there damn well better be a taco truck up ahead.” Then, she turned to the five women, “Ask me anything,” she offered.

When the crowd saw the guards turning around and heading up Congress Avenue, they surged forward so that shortly the television feed showed a flood of people marching slowly toward the seat of government. Chloe walked in the middle of the group of soldiers with her suit mimicking those of the guards. The feed didn’t capture the dialog, but showed animated conversation between Chloe and the women.

They stopped at the entrance to the Capitol Grounds, at the promised truck, an antique van said to run on diesel fuel. That explained why it never moved.

Juan strode up to the window. “Ferd, this here be Chloe, The Chloe, Herself. We be wanting some beers and maybe tacos.” He turned to Chloe, “You paying?”

“Juan, you know you got some real cheek. I could learn to like you. Can I pay with NRT credit?” she held up her phone.

“On the house,” Ferd said. “You’ll want the cabrito, right?”

“Sure,” Chloe told him. “Shiner Bock?”

Ferd smiled, “Of course. For you and...”

“For my honor guard,” Chloe said. “And Al.” She smiled at Al, “Did you think I had forgotten you were there?”

“Not until you pointed it out,” Al grinned. “Be OK.”

Chloe stepped up to the window to take her beer. She raised it high and shouted, “To the future! Starting now!”

She sat on the curb, took a swig of Shiner’s and waited for the cheers to die down.

“Who has a question?”

Finally one of the women raised her hand. “Sylvia,” Ambi whispered in her ear. “Yes, Sylvia, what is your question?”

“So, you and Bronson, you split?”

“He’s occupied at the moment with his new son,” Chloe answered. “It’s complicated.”

“How about Flora, your daughter. Where is she?”

“I see you stay on top of the important news. Flora is in Arabella Springs, with her father and the entire village. Yuri and I have an arrangement. He will see that she is well cared for. This is not unprecedented there. The village cared for Bron’s son as well.”

The tacos arrived. Chloe was amazed at what the chef had accomplished with goat meat. “Ferd, this is excellent.”

“Thank you, ma’am. May I get a selfie?”

“OK,” Chloe said, and crowded up next to him. Of course, that set off a stampede of people who wanted a photo with the most famous woman in the world. Al stood and demanded people get in line. They did.

“I wish I could accommodate all of you,” Chloe said. “But I have some business that I need to take care of.” She namasted the crowd before taking the path to the door.

Only at the steps of the Capitol did the suit switch to the business outfit she had worn previously.

Chloe mounted the steps leading to the huge ornate doors and into the Rotunda. Once inside, she headed for the President’s office. She was a bit surprised to find him alone. “Please,” he said, “come in. Have a seat. May I get you something to drink?”

“If you have decent coffee, I’ll take a cup.”

Prez pushed a button on his desk to summon an aide. “Two cups of coffee, please, Angela,” he said when she appeared.

They both sat silently until the coffee arrived. Chloe tasted it carefully and commented, “I see that you managed to save some of the good stuff for us.”

Prez smiled. “It wasn’t easy, especially as we didn’t know when to expect you to show up.”

“My pregnancy was not part of the original schedule,” Chloe said. “Had to wait for Flora to arrive.”

“That’s her name, is it?”

Chloe simply nodded and sipped the coffee. Finally, Prez was ready to get down to business.

“Well,” Prez began, “you’ve demonstrated that you have the people on your side.”

“You noticed,” Chloe replied.

“How did you bewitch the guards on the bridge?” he asked. “Maybe we’ll get you for witchcraft after all. Disappearing in a flash was a good start. Then somehow you wound up in Arabella Springs. Lots of magic.”

“Well, there was no magic concerning your guards. We just chatted.”

Prez was not satisfied, “After your chat they decided to forget orders and escort you to the Capitol?”

“That’s about the size of it. Turns out that Alcibiades, one of the three guys you forced onto the ship for the first voyage, knew Juan from Mexico.”

“That was all? Just old friends?”

“There was more. Al cemented the deal with a few well-chosen words. Then we all got tacos and beer at the gate from Ferd.”

“I see,” Prez said. After a pause, he asked, “Well, since you’re here, what do you want?”

“I’m looking for a peaceful transfer of power.”

“Really?”

“What else?”

“We thought you might be willing to work within the existing framework.”

“I am willing. The most straightforward approach would be for the entire Council to resign, or retire to spend more time with your family, if you prefer.”

“Then what?”

“Then I take over with a new Council. I think we can do without the Church this time. Seems to have outlived its purpose.”

“The Bishop won’t be happy with that.”

Chloe thought the best response would be, “To hell with his holiness,” but said nothing.

“And if we don’t agree?” Prez continued.

“I think I can convince you,” Chloe said.

“Oh? How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“God is on my side,” Chloe told him. When he showed shock, she laughed. “Seriously, we are at a crisis point. What we do now, here, is important. For the future of the planet and everyone on it. We want a peaceful transfer of power, as I said. It’s our turn now. Please don’t make trouble when it is not necessary.”

“Why do you want to rule if I may ask? There are so many other ways you could…” he trailed off.

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them, according to the Bard. I seem to be one of the latter,” she replied.

“Oh no, my dear. You were born great. Hypatia’s daughter! Picked from an early age as a real comer. JJ’s pet.” he challenged her.

“You’re right,” she agreed.

“Of course, many would argue that you have achieved greatness. I’d say the only part of the saying that doesn’t apply is the one you chose.”

“Does it matter?” Chloe asked.

“Not really. I’ll agree that you have succeeded beyond all expectations,” Prez admitted.

“Was success a reason to try to kill me? There has to be a better motive,” Chloe said, segueing to the topic she really wanted to bring up.

Chloe put down her coffee cup before continuing, “We know that the attempt on my life was ordered by someone using the net name Cicero.” She watched Prez as she spoke and saw that he recognized the name.

She elaborated, “Eventually, we will learn the true identity. Then, we will pursue charges of conspiracy to commit murder. Luckily for Cicero, we no longer have a death penalty available.”

Chloe studied the Prez, who said nothing for a long time. Finally, she said, “You’re not very good at poker, are you?”

“Are you saying that you will abandon this search if we agree?”

“Ready to tell me who Cicero is?”

“Is that another demand?”

“Let’s not play games,” she said after a while. “I’ve come to take charge. You can help, or you can get out of the way. Or... The choice is yours.”

“What do you plan to do if I refuse?”

“So far, the only thing I have come up with is releasing the recording of this meeting so everyone can judge for themselves,” Chloe said.

“What recording?”

“I assume that Ambianca is recording this, right Ambi?”

“Of course, dear, like always,” Ambianca replied.

“You should have told me.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. Too late now.”

Prez thought for quite a while before continuing, “I will accede to your demands so long as they do not include pursuing charges against Cicero, whoever he is.”

“So, Cicero is a man.”

“Sorry, I used the wrong pronoun. I should have said whoever they are.”

“But not you, I hope.”

“Surely, you don’t think I did this. I approved your plans. I pushed for the money.”

“Then who was so afraid of what I represent that murder was called for?”

“I’m sorry. You’ll have to work that out for yourself. Actually, I don’t know.”

“As part of the agreement, you’ll get the Council to admit that the charges against me are bogus,” Chloe said, pushing her advantage.

“When you’re President, or whatever, you can just pardon yourself,” he said.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” she retorted. “And don’t pardon Cicero before you leave.” She glared at him.

“So, what kind of schedule do you envision?” Prez asked.

“There’s no time like the present. Why don’t we go to the steps of the Capitol and announce it?” She stood. “We could walk together to emphasize the peaceful nature of the agreement.”

“I’m going to miss this office,” he said. “Best coffee maker in the NRT, and maybe the rest of the world.”

On the steps, Chloe raised both arms in triumph to a huge cheer from the throng gathered there, most of whom had been following the proceedings from Ambi’s feed.

Thus, the events later celebrated in song, The Ballad of the Bridge, came to a gentle conclusion.
Now, Chloe thought, comes the hard part.

11. Bicentennial Day
July 3-4, 1976
Boonville, CA, USA

“When I said come early, I didn’t mean 3 am,” David said by way of greeting. “However, I am prepared. How about breakfast before we head to Mendocino for the parade?”

Chloe stretched and yawned. “I think you have a plan. What time does the parade begin?”

“About 10,” David told her. “Lots of time.” He smiled. “I hope you have a story to tell me this time.”

“Yes,” she said. “A long one with a happy ending.”

“I can hardly wait.” He held out a hand to help her up. “I am deliriously happy to see you again. Can you spend longer than usual?”

“If you treat me properly,” she said, smiling. “That begins with breakfast. And I suggest we turn on the news. It’s positive for a change.”

“Oh?”

“Do you know about Entebbe?”

“Uganda? Something about hostages from that hijacked airliner.”

“Exactly,” Chloe said. “Daring rescue by Israeli commandos.”

“Wow! How did they pull that off?”

“Turns out the countries around Uganda were willing to look the other way, as the planes refueled and flew thru their air space. They *requested* that the Israelis do something about the Uganda Air Force as part of the deal. I think there are no Migs left now. Should be on the early news broadcasts. CNN?”

“What’s CNN?”

“Oh, guess that doesn’t exist yet. 24-hour cable news channel.”

“How about NBC? Will that do?”

“Let’s see,” Chloe said turning on the TV. “I’ll watch while you fix us brekkie. You’re so much better at it than I am.”

Chloe wound up spending a month with David before returning to Austin and 2174.

Part IX. Epilog
January 1, 2188
Pacific Ocean, en Route California

What a way to start the new year! Flo-Ra thought as she gazed out the window at the cold, gray Pacific. It was all JJ's fault. He had decided that Flo-Ra was too bright to remain in the isolation of Arabella Springs when she could be continuing her education at the University in Austin, the only place in the world offering college-level classes in person.

After some negotiation with Chloe, who had the final say, Flo-Ra was put on the next ship heading for California, the new Excalibur, also known as ASN-1701. Most of the Navy brass didn't get the allusion to the Star Trek Enterprise and accepted the explanation that the number referred to the number of pages in the specs. As none of the Navy brass had read the specs, they had no idea how many pages were involved. In fact, the specs were mostly lodged in Roger the Rabbit's fertile brain as he was the one to figure out how to create seaworthy craft without the benefit of a shipbuilding industry.

As the only passenger aboard, Ra, as she preferred to be called, had free run of the ship. As she was the only person besides the captain aboard, and he spent most of his time playing Solitaire on his laptop in the lounge, she chose to stay on the bridge. It had the best view of the ocean as the ship sliced thru the waves on the northern leg of the trip, following the currents toward the ancient nation of Japan before heading south toward the coast of California and the major seaport of Oakland.

Bored, tired of discussing the nature of Reality with Ambianca, studiously avoiding the lectures JJ sent her, she spent her time this morning wondering what the NRT was like. She had read virtually every word written in the last five years about the largest city in the world. Most of the articles extolled the virtues of restaurants or hotels, with a few mentioning some of the best sightseeing opportunities.

She dreaded spending the entire voyage this way.

That's when AI running the ship notified the bridge, "Emergency distress signal detected."

"Location?" she asked the AI.

"Appears to be coming from a small island in the Japanese archipelago called Miyake Jimi."

"Impact of the voyage if we go to render aid?"

"Will add about a day overall, depending on how much time is spent on the island."

With a long sigh, she told it — she refused to dignify the AI with a name or gender-specific pronoun, "Make necessary adjustments to route. Report on impact in one hour."

That would give her enough time to tell the captain. She wondered if he would recognize the significance of the island. Her suit certainly did, and rippled with excitement.